

Sunday, SEPT. 12

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BAPTISM SERVICE PLANNING GUIDE

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BAPTISM SERVICE PLANNING GUIDE

This guide provides a template resource to help pastors and worship leaders incorporate baptisms into a service or immediately following a worship service. Aspects of the planning process and elements of the service may need to be adjusted to fit the needs of a particular church.

4 KEY ELEMENTS OF A BAPTISM SERVICE

1. PREPARE

The decision to respond with a public profession of faith through baptism is a significant moment in the life of a new Christian, so we must plan ahead to care for them well as they take those steps. Preparing well to incorporate the baptism into a worship service eliminates potential distractions and provides a powerful testimony that encourages the congregation to praise God.

Suggested Preparation Sequence:

(Timeframes may be adjusted to fit service planning schedule)

- 1-2 months prior:
 - Decide on date to call for a response of baptism in service
 - Order baptism supplies (Suggestions included below)
 - T-shirts
 - Shorts
 - Towels
 - Men's underwear
 - Women's underwear
 - Sports bras
 - Combs
 - Hair ties
 - Hairdryer
 - Hair spray
 - Hair gel
 - Swim caps
 - Feminine hygiene products
 - Hairbrushes
- 3-4 weeks prior:
 - Decide at what point in the service the baptism(s) will happen. Beginning of service? End of service? Between songs? After service? Inside? Outside?
 - Begin recruiting your volunteer team. Your team may include:
 - Greeters: Responsible for receiving those coming forward, and getting them from auditorium to counseling area and back so that they do not have to walk alone.
 - Baptism Counselors: Responsible for talking with the candidate to discern if they understand the gospel and are ready to be baptized. These should be both male and female leaders in the church.
 - Coordinator: If baptizing during the service, this role will communicate between the worship leader/pastor and the counseling room to update on whether people are ready to be baptized.
 - Check-in: Responsible for matching counselees with counselors, maintaining accurate sign-in records, distributing paperwork, logging information for follow up.
 - Clothing Assistant(s): Responsible for distributing clothing & towels, helping people find open changing rooms, watching their belongings.



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- [OPTIONAL] Weekend prior:
 - Make an announcement that a baptism service will be held the following week.
- Week prior:
 - Review plan with worship/music team to answer any final questions.
 - Prepare how you will communicate the invitation to be baptized.
 - Set out supplies and prep changing rooms.
 - Print copies of baptism info/counseling sheets.
 - Send out necessary details to volunteers (arrival time, location, etc.).
- Weekend of:
 - Pray for God to soften the hearts of those He's calling to repentance and baptism.
 - Ensure that every baptism candidate is counseled with care and patience.
 - Record information for follow-up of anyone who comes forward (whether baptized or not). This should be done on site if possible.

2. CALL FOR RESPONSE

During the invitation, it's important to recognize that not everyone in the congregation may understand the biblical nature and purpose of baptism. Offering a concise explanation of what's about to happen both reinforces biblical teaching on baptism and calms fears of guests or new believers who may have never seen a baptism before.

[Template Explanation] *"In just a moment we are going to celebrate the act of baptism. Baptism is a picture of the gospel, and we do it to remind one another of the gospel when we gather together. There is nothing special about this water. It is not what saves you, but it is an outward sign of the inward work that Christ has completed for us, and the way an individual publicly identifies themselves as a believer in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. The act of baptism is a picture of the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus, as well as our own death to sin and resurrection to new life. So every baptism is a celebration of salvation."*

Don't stop at teaching people about baptism. It's critical to give people the opportunity to respond in obedience. By including a call for the congregation to make a decision at that moment, we lead each person to examine their own life in light of God's command.

Anticipate the excuses people make for not getting baptized. Taking a few minutes to walk through the answers to these objections not only gives the person who needs to be baptized time to consider their decision, it also equips your congregation to have a conversation about baptism with their friends. Following are a few of the more common objections to baptism along with a possible response (For additional questions related to baptism, please see the "Common Questions about Baptism" section at the end of this document.):



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- **Objection: “I’m not ready.” | Possible response:** *If you have trusted Christ, you are ready. Baptism is only the public profession of the inward reality, declaring to everyone watching, “I know that I’m a sinner and that I need Jesus. I’m ready to publicly proclaim that He is my Savior.” If you say you’ve accepted Him as Lord, you need to be ready to go public with that profession.*
- **Objection: “It’s not that important.” | Possible response:** *If God calls baptism important, it should be important to you. If you are not willing to obey God’s first command to you by taking this one small step, why do you think you’ll obey God in the other areas of your life? Disobedience is a terrible way to start your Christian life - the way to start your walk with Jesus is not by postponing what He’s clearly told you to do.*
- **Objection: “I was baptized as a baby.” | Possible response:** *Baptism as a baby was not really a profession of your faith, but a profession of your parents’ faith. And praise God for that! But you need to profess your own faith, which is why baptism is always presented in the Bible as a decision you make. Your parents baptized you as a baby, and it’s time to ratify their decision and declare your own faith in Jesus!*
- **Objection: “Well, it’s really inconvenient.” | Possible response:** *Please hear me in love, but that’s not really a factor once you grow to understand the Christian faith. Jesus Himself said that to follow Him was to take up a cross and die. Inconvenience isn’t a category you can bring to this decision.*
- **Objection: “But I don’t have a change of clothes!” | Possible response:** *Don’t worry, we have them for you! We’ve got all sizes, dark-colored T-shirts, towels and hairdryers – we thought of everything to allow you to take this step of faith.*
- **Objection: “But I came with people... they’re going to want to go eat after this.” | Possible response:** *You may not realize it, but the people you came with have been praying that you would take this step of professing faith in Jesus. I think they’ll wait! Or even better, ask them to come forward with you. Even if they won’t wait, I want to remind you of the importance of starting your walk with Jesus by obeying what He tells you to do right away. We’ll figure out how to get you home, it’s that important.*

Tell people specifically what to do and when. A person responding to the call to be baptized is probably already slightly nervous and emotional — don’t compound that by making them uncertain about what to do!

- *“I’m going to pray, and then when we stand to sing you step out of the row.”*
- *“When you step out, look for one of our volunteers with a lanyard or T-shirt. They’ll show you where to go.”*
- *“When you step out, head to the doors at the back of the sanctuary. Someone will meet you and show you where to go.”*



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3. COUNSEL

When someone decides in the service to come forward as a candidate for baptism, it's possible that they may not understand salvation and baptism as laid out in the Bible. Requiring that every respondent has an immediate conversation with a trained counselor ensures that each person being baptized can make a credible confession of faith. In other words, the candidate should be able to articulate the gospel and explain what baptism means and why they want to do it.

How do you effectively do on-the-spot baptism counseling?

- When a candidate comes forward to be baptized, have your check-in volunteer sign them in and match them with a trained counselor.
- Ask them to sit down one-on-one with the counselor in a semi-private area.
- The counselor should ask questions to discern the candidate's profession of faith. Examples include:
 - What made you want to respond today and come forward?
 - How is it that we are saved?
 - What does getting baptized mean to you?
 - What does it mean to follow Jesus?
- Optional recommendation:
 - If it becomes evident that they don't understand the gospel, share with them and ask them if they have ever surrendered control of their life and trusted in Christ for salvation.
 - The counselor may need to ask the candidate to put the decision on hold so they can talk more with a pastor over the next week.
- Ensure that a pastor/elder is available so that a counselor can involve them at any point for questions that are difficult.
- Ensure the candidate has provided contact information for appropriate follow up, whether they proceed with baptism at the time or choose to delay.

4. FOLLOW UP

The follow-up communication with someone who's just been baptized may be simple but it is a crucial step in their discipleship. After we celebrate their profession of faith with them, we must help them learn to live out the declaration they just made.

- **Week after:**
 - Make a follow-up call to each individual who came forward with an interest in baptism before the next weekend. The primary purpose of the call is to clarify the decision made and help with next steps.
 - Connect those who were baptized with a discipleship group or Sunday School class.
 - Connect those who weren't baptized with a pastor or church leader to continue the conversation about salvation and baptism.
 - Follow up with an email to anyone you cannot reach by phone.
 - Optional: Send a letter from the pastor that commemorates the date the person chose to respond in baptism.



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COMMON QUESTIONS ABOUT BAPTISM

What is baptism?

Baptism is the immersion of a follower of Jesus Christ in water in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. It is an act of obedience symbolizing the believer's faith in a crucified, buried and risen Savior. It also symbolizes the believer's death to sin, the burial of their old life and resurrection to walk in newness of life in Christ. It is a testimony to a believer's faith in the final resurrection of the dead. As a church ordinance, it is often a prerequisite to the privileges of church membership and to the Lord's Supper.

Who should be baptized?

Those who have trusted Jesus Christ as Savior should be baptized as a demonstration of one's obedience, identification with Christ, understanding of what Jesus accomplished on their behalf and one's desire to follow Him. (Romans 6:3-5)

Why should one be baptized?

Every follower of Jesus should be baptized because Jesus modeled and commanded it. Baptism demonstrates obedience and symbolizes identifying with Christ, dying to sin and self, and beginning a new life in Christ. (Matthew 3:13-17; Matthew 28:19-20; Mark 1:9-11; Luke 3:21-22; Romans 6:3-5)

How should one be baptized?

Immersion is the biblical picture of baptism based upon grammatical usage, Scriptural pattern and theological implications. The Greek word baptizo means "to dip, immerse or submerge." Additionally, the language and descriptions in many baptisms recorded in the New Testament indicate that the mode of baptism was by immersion. Finally, baptism by immersion is the best representation of death, burial and resurrection. (Matthew 3:13-17; Matthew 28:19-20; Mark 1:9-11; Luke 3:21-22; Romans 6:3-5)

When should someone be baptized?

Many New Testament followers of Jesus were baptized immediately after trusting Christ as Savior — that is, there wasn't a gap between when a person trusted Christ and when that person was baptized. (Acts 2:41; 8:36; 9:18-19; 16:14-15; 18:8)

Where should baptisms take place?

As an ordinance of the church, the administration of baptism belongs to local churches. Baptism should be celebrated by the assembled church, rather than a solitary observance on the part of individuals. While generally conducted as part of or in conjunction with a worship service, baptism may be celebrated outside the church building.

What happens after someone gets baptized?

Baptism is often an individual's first step of obedience following repentance and faith in Christ. Ongoing discipleship is important, and churches should prioritize helping people grow in their faith. Follow up with every person to make sure they understand what it means to follow Jesus and ensure they are connected with someone in your church who can continue to disciple them. (Matthew 28:19-20)



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Does a believer have to be baptized to go to heaven?

Baptism is not essential for salvation. However, baptism's importance and significance should not be minimized as a step of obedience and identification with Christ.

What if someone wants to be baptized but shows no evidence of salvation?

Prepare your pastors and baptism counselors to respond to these people by affirming their desire to be baptized and letting them know how glad you are to have this conversation with them. Explain to them that the act of baptism is just a symbol — it's meaningless if it does not represent authentic repentance and faith in their life. Let them know that they've taken a courageous first step, and you would love to talk with them a little more before they get baptized. Be clear that you are not saying "no," but simply "not right now."

At what age should a child be baptized?

While Scripture is clear that baptism is reserved for individuals who have placed their trust in Jesus Christ, the age at which someone should be baptized is not directly addressed in Scripture. Sometimes a child may not be ready to trust Christ or be baptized, but their comments and questions are signs that they are exploring what it means to become a follower of Jesus. It's important not to rush a commitment that a child is not ready to make, but it's equally important to encourage them in their journey of faith.

How should I respond to someone who says they were baptized as an infant?

Explain that baptism in the Bible is based on a personal decision to follow Christ. Therefore, being baptized as an infant is not really a profession of their faith, but a profession of their parents' faith. Celebrate and praise God for that, but also encourage them to declare their own personal decision to follow Jesus through repentance, faith and baptism. (For additional information, see the objections and possible responses under the "Call for a Response" section of this document.)

Shouldn't a class for baptism candidates be required to make sure their profession is sincere?

We should be concerned that everyone who comes forward to be baptized understands the gospel and the significance of what they are doing. We should have pastors and counselors available to talk with them. But baptism is the first step of obedience, not the sign of having reached a level of spiritual maturity. We should be equally concerned that we are not creating extra-biblical barriers to obedience.

Does a pastor or minister have to administer baptism?

While Scripture offers no explicit instruction or prescription regarding who may administer baptism, many argue that there is wisdom and prudence to have someone perform baptism who represents the congregation. In many instances this would be a pastor, but it does not have to be.

How do I call people to an immediate response of baptism?

At its core, the invitation to be baptized is a call to respond to Jesus by surrendering to His commands. Start by clearly articulating the gospel and how to respond in faith to that news. Don't assume even those who have grown up in church understand that. Explain the symbolic nature of baptism as a public symbol of a commitment to follow Jesus, in the same way that a wedding ring



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is a symbol of a marriage commitment. You may want to proactively address common objections to baptism. (See the “Call for Response” section of this guide for possible response to common objections about baptism.)

Is baptizing someone on the spot just a gimmick?

To be sure, immediate response baptism calls have been used as a gimmick by some churches. But we also know that baptisms recorded in the New Testament were spontaneous and immediate — that is, there wasn’t a gap between when a person trusted Christ and when that person was baptized. We shouldn’t discard the biblical pattern because some have manipulated or misused the practice.

Should baptisms be scheduled or spontaneous?

While scheduled baptisms are not forbidden in Scripture, neither are spontaneous baptisms explicitly commanded. However, the pattern observed in the Book of Acts suggests that believers were baptized immediately after trusting Christ as Savior. (See Acts 2:41; 8:36; 9:18-19; 16:14-15; 18:8) Still, there may be wisdom and value at certain times and in certain situations to wait and schedule baptisms.

Spontaneous and immediate response baptisms have been used by some churches as a gimmick. However, we shouldn’t discard the biblical pattern because some have manipulated or misused the practice.

Still, we need to be concerned that everyone who comes forward to be baptized, whether it’s scheduled or spontaneous, understands the gospel and the significance of what they are doing. Pastors and counselors should be ready and available to talk to baptism candidates, whether their baptism is scheduled in advance or whether they respond on the spot.

For more information, please see the baptism objections and possible responses in the “Call for a Response” section of this document.

EDITOR’S NOTE: *This guide was adapted from content and resources from the North American Mission Board, The Summit Church and The Baptist Faith and Message 2000.*