

The background of the entire page is a photograph of a sunset or sunrise. The sky is a warm, golden-yellow color, with the sun partially visible as a bright, glowing orb. In the foreground, there are dark, silhouetted branches of a plant, possibly a tree or shrub, with some leaves catching the light. The overall mood is peaceful and contemplative.

Preparing for *Baptism* at Redemption



REDEMPTION
CITY CHURCH

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Introduction

The modern church is confused about baptism. Some churches sprinkle babies with water, some wait until a mature adult professes faith and immerse them into water. Others reject the practice completely. In the early stages of Redemption City Church this reality became more obvious when very few of our core members had a baptism experience that we agreed was optimal. People were baptized at summer camp or went anonymously to a large church miles away to get in at a baptism service. Some were sprinkled as small, professing children. Many had a baptism many years after conversion (if at all). Such was the beginning of this baptist church called Redemption City.

Recognizing the diverse history of our people and the general confusion about the process and purpose of baptism, the elders desire with this document to provide a starting place for discussions about future baptisms at Redemption City Church. Though we humbly began with less-than-ideal baptism stories we hope that this document will help us create a culture where baptisms are both frequent and meaningful to the life of the body regularly proclaiming our unity with Christ in his death and resurrection.

1. What is Baptism?

Rather than compare historic positions of various churches on baptism this guide simply expresses the understanding and vision of baptism at Redemption City Church.

Jesus's Headship and Example

In Matthew 3 (Cf. Mark 1; Luke 3) we see Jesus submit himself to a Jewish ritual washing which the Gospel writers call "baptism." To the Jews it was a way of acknowledging a need to be washed from a history of sin before coming into the presence of God among his covenant people. That is why John marveled that he should baptize Jesus instead of the other way, Jesus didn't need to be washed, but John did. However, Jesus came as the representative of a new humanity and began to redeem that humanity by symbolically washing away its sinful history before bringing them into God's presence by his death and resurrection.

The Disciples' Commission

After accomplishing that redemption Jesus sent his people out on a mission to carry this good news into all the earth. In Matthew 28:19 Jesus commands his disciples to make disciples and baptize them. Baptism is closely linked with conversion, entrance into the covenant community of redeemed humanity.

The Disciples' Obedience

We witness the obedience of the disciples to keep this connection in the book of Acts where preaching,

conversion, and baptism are repeated themes (1:5 2:38, 41; 8:12, 13, 15, 36, 38; 9:18; 10:47–48; 11:16; 16:15; 16:33; 18:8; 19:3–5; 22:16). The disciples took seriously the command to baptize professing believers. In that day it was a significant step of faith to publically profess faith in Christ, giving strong credibility to conversion. The disciples were eager to welcome new believers into the community of the redeemed.

A Better Covenant

Many in church history have claimed that baptism simply replaces circumcision as the entry sign into the covenant community. In the Old Covenant baby boys (and foreign male converts) were circumcised to become part of the people of Israel. Arguing from Colossians 2:11–12, these churches therefore baptize babies marking them as members of the visible church. This seems to create a level of continuity within the entire Bible, but fails to recognize the dramatic newness of the New Covenant.

The prophet Jeremiah looked forward in history to a new covenant (31:31–34) which would be far better than the one he saw Israel repeatedly fail to keep. Moses established the Old Covenant on Sinai, but he knew that Israel would not keep it. And the rest of the Old Testament shows that Moses was right. Throughout Israel's history, only a small number in the covenant community actually kept the covenant. Millions who had the sign of the covenant (circumcision) were not actually circumcised of heart (Deut. 30:6; Rom. 2:29), they were not true heart Israelites

(Rom. 9:6). But Jeremiah saw a new covenant where everyone in the community would be faithful to the covenant. The new covenant is a far better covenant (Heb. 7:22; 8:6).

So baptism does replace circumcision as a sign of the covenant, but it is a better covenant so something more changes than simply the sign. Nobody is born physically into the covenant so we don't give the sign to those simply physically born, but to those spiritually born into the community of saints (John 3:3), to those who have been adopted into the family of God (Rom. 8:15–17), to those who give a credible profession of faith in Christ (Acts 10:44–48).

The Meaning of Baptism

The word “baptize” literally means to immerse. It is a word commonly used to speak of dipping a cup under water to fill it up. Metaphorically, the New Testament uses the word to speak of immersing the new believer “in Christ.” When we are in Christ we identify with him completely, we are surrounded by him, filled by his Spirit, covered by his blood. We have been baptized into Christ.

We believe that the sacrament of baptism is a drama that brings these spiritual realities into a physical, tactile human experience. “Baptism and the Lord’s Supper make the church visible. They are the hinge between the ‘invisible’

universal church and the ‘visible’ local church”¹. The Apostle Paul speaks of three spiritual realities made visible by baptism: (1) immersion into Christ’s death and resurrection, (2) immersion into Christ’s righteousness, and (3) immersion into Christ’s body, the church.

Baptized into Christ’s Death and Resurrection

In Romans 6:1–6 Paul teaches that we who believe are united with Christ in his death and resurrection. Colossians 2:12 reiterates this point and adds that this is done through faith. Baptism doesn’t unite us, faith does. To say baptism unites us to Christ would be tautologically redundant. To be baptized is to be united. We have died to our old self in his death and we have been born to a new life in his resurrection. Water baptism brings this spiritual reality into our human experience by entering the water symbolizing death to self and being pulled up from the dead into new life.

Baptized into Christ’s Righteousness

Relatedly, Paul says in Galatians 3:27 (Cf. Romans 13:14) that we are baptized into Christ’s righteousness. When we rise to new life we are immersed in Jesus’s good works. It is no longer I who lives but Christ in me (Gal. 2:20). When God the Father looks at those who trust in Christ, he sees Christ his beloved Son in whom he is well-pleased. When we come up from the waters of baptism we are soaking

¹ Bobby Jamieson, *Going Public: Why Baptism Is Required for Church Membership* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2015), 142.

wet, covered from head to toe in his cleansing flood. It is noticeable to all who are watching that the believer is covered by what he has just been immersed into.

Baptized into Christ's Body

Lest we believe that this new life of faith and baptism are individual endeavors, Paul reminds us that “in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body” (1 Cor. 12:13). At conversion we enter into the body of Christ called “the church.” We become part of the people from all of history throughout the entire world who have been redeemed by the blood of Christ and sealed by his Holy Spirit. One day we will experience this diversely glorious reality when all things are made new in the new creation. But until then we try to bring as much of that reality to bear in this world as we can when we gather as local churches. Water baptism makes this glorious universal reality visible by being the sign of entry into membership of the local church.

Baptism isn't simply an opportunity for an individual professing believer to testify to his own faith, but also for the local church to affirm the believer's profession and welcome him into membership in the covenant community. Baptism isn't simply a ritual display of personal identification with Christ, but also, when the believer rises from the water, he rises surrounded by the body of believers of whom he is now a vital member, immersed into a new family of brothers and sisters.

Baptism and church membership go hand-in-hand. When you submit yourself to this glorious sacrament you display the spiritual reality that you have become one with Christ and his people, a local body anticipating the universal people of God.

2. Baptism Candidate Assessment

Though the New Covenant is unbreakable and pure, at this time only God knows with certainty who are true believers and who are hypocrites. However, Jesus has given authority to the church to make its best effort to determine who is in the eternal new covenant community and who is not (Matt. 16:19; 18:18). As we do this we are discerning a “credible profession of faith,” indicators that a professing believer has passed from death to life. Redemption City Church will assess each baptism candidate according to the following process to determine the credibility of his or her profession of faith.

1. Self-examination, prayer, counsel-seeking

We encourage everyone who desires to be baptized to spend some time examining his or her own heart in prayer along with friends who can speak wisdom into this decision. Here are some questions to consider (see Appendix 1 for additional examination questions).

- What have you repented of?
- What are you trusting in?

- How has God been guiding you to this point?
- What is God calling you to now?
- What has God changed in your heart and life?
- Who can affirm this work in your life?

2. Express interest (if child, to both the elders and the parents)

When the candidate desires to make his or her desire to be baptized known, he should express interest to a pastor (along with his or her parents if the candidate is a child still under parental authority). Be ready to explain briefly how God has brought this desire and who has given counsel to this point.

3. Identify witnesses

Seek out two or three people who will publicly testify to the credibility of the candidate's profession. These may be parents, friends, pastors, or teachers. A child should seek an additional witness beside his or her parents. These witnesses should be prepared to testify of the candidate's profession before the elders and potentially the entire church.

4. Elder Candidate Interview

After the candidate has expressed interest to a pastor, we will schedule a follow-up interview to discuss his or her understanding of the gospel, the meaning of baptism and church membership, and read through the church

affirmation of faith. Through this time of testimony and teaching we can begin to prepare the candidate for his or her role in the church as a valuable member of the body.

5. Elder Witness Interviews

A testimony in Scripture is established with two or three witnesses. Conversion isn't an individual experience. Baptism isn't simply a personal step of faith. We are saved into the body of Christ, people who serve with us, stand for us, lift us up, and keep us accountable. During this interview process, the elders will interview the witnesses brought forth by the candidate and call for the church to provide any further testimony regarding the candidate's journey of faith. Our goal is to corroborate the candidate's testimony and find someone willing to walk side-by-side with him at the baptism service welcoming the new member into the community of faith.

6. Baptism Service

At the baptism service an elder will introduce the candidate explaining the path he or she has taken to this point. Prior to the baptism the candidate will express to the church his desire to be baptized, share his testimony of what God has done through Christ and what Christ has done in him, and he will express a desire to serve in and be held accountable by the church.

Surely we are all at various stages along this path and so with wisdom we will determine the appropriate next steps for each individual. What is important is that the church—through its elders and other witnesses—is able to discern by the help of the Spirit the credibility of the candidate’s profession of faith.

Appendix 1 – Credible Profession Evaluation Questions²

What is a Christian?

How does one become a Christian?

What is the Gospel?

Why do you need Christ?

What did He do for sinners?

Why did He have to do that?

Who required Him to do that?

Could God have just forgiven us? If not, why not?

What is there in God the Father that required Him to punish his Son?

What was Christ doing on the cross?

Whom was He making a payment to?

What if He didn't make that payment?

Who are the only two persons who can pay for our sins?

If we pay for them, how long will it take?

When do you believe you first trusted in Christ?

² Questions from Ted Christman, *Forbid Them Not: Rethinking the Baptism and Church Membership of Children and Young People* (Owensboro, KY: Heritage Baptist Church), 2004, 21–22. These are simply questions to begin the evaluation, to aid in determining the credibility of one's profession, not a test looking for right answers. Depending on the candidate's background, some questions may be more relevant than others.

What specific sins do you need Him to pay for?

Which sins in your life have made you most aware of your need for Christ's atonement?

How do you feel about your sins?

After you realize you have sinned, when do you ask God's forgiveness for that sin?

Do you try to do that immediately or do you usually wait until the end of the day?

What do you say to Him?

What people has God used the most to show you your need for Christ?

Are there any sermons or Sunday school lessons that God especially used to convict you of sin?

What verses of Scripture give you the most hope and comfort?

Why do they give you comfort?

Do you believe that your life is changing?

In what ways is your life changing?

Has your attitude and behavior changed toward your brothers and sisters? In what ways?

How has your relationship changed with your parents? Are you more obedient to mom and dad than you used to be? In what ways?

How do you feel about going to church?

Do you ever get anything out of the sermons?

Do you ever feel that God is talking to you during the sermons? Could you give an example?

Do you ever find yourself praying during a sermon because of what you have just heard? Could you give an example?

When you see others (e.g. parents) observing the Lord's Supper, do you desire to be doing it with them?

Why do you desire to participate in the Lord's supper?

Do you ever pray during the day?

What do you say to God?

Do you read your Bible?

What do you get out of your Bible reading?

What sins do you presently struggle with the most?

Do your friends know that you are a Christian?

Do you want to be baptized? Why do you want to be baptized?

If others in the church along with your pastors feel that it's too soon for you to be baptized, how will you feel about it?

Appendix 2 – Frequently Asked Questions

Do I need to be “re-baptized”?

We see a very basic command in Scripture to make disciples and baptize them (Matt. 28:19), repent and be baptized (Acts 2:38). The most basic requirement for baptism at Redemption City Church is that a person has been first immersed into Christ and his universal body. Generally, if genuine faith has preceded baptism we see no need to be “re-baptized” even if that faith was very immature or there was a season of rebellion followed by genuine repentance.

While we see immersion as the preferred mode that most fully displays our immersion into Christ, we recognize that the church has historically accepted other modes if circumstances prohibited optimal practice of immersion surrounded by the church family welcoming the believer into fellowship.³ Some may have been baptized apart from a local church and its membership. Though not ideal, it may not be necessary to re-baptize.

We don’t want to spend inordinate time wrangling over the sign and instead delight in the reality of immersion into Christ. Each life is unique and requires special wisdom. If you need help discerning the appropriate steps for your journey, contact an elder who would be delighted to seek God’s will with you.

³ *Didache* 7:1–4

How much does a person need to know to be baptized into the church?

Baptism is an entry sign of birth into new life. We are all immature at our conversion and will experience many successes and failures along the journey. Most basically we expect every candidate to understand the gospel and his need for salvation. We want him to know he is entering into a family that he needs and that needs him. He should know the basic affirmation of faith that we hold as a church in a most simple form.

Beyond knowledge however, what is most important is a heart change. Has he been filled with the Spirit exhibiting seeds of joy, thanksgiving, and a submissive demeanor (Eph. 5:18–21)? Is he beginning to express the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22–23)? With this growing character the new believer will have a spirit willing to learn in order that he may grow into the doctrines of the church with the help of his brothers and sisters in Christ.

May my child be baptized?

Recognizing the emphasis on baptism in the Bible, many churches have sought to implement it resulting in two extremes: (1) blind immediate participation, (2) withholding to adulthood.

The first seeks to follow the immediacy of baptism following repentance as shown in Acts. However, this has often been done without discernment and often results in wrongly affirming a false profession (thereby inoculating a

professor against a true conversion). It also has tended to disconnect baptism from membership, failing to encourage the professing believer to submit to the authority of the church and its accountability.

To correct against this error, some churches withhold baptism completely until a child is apart from the authority of his parents and is able to express faith in his own circumstances. This can often result in discouraging a true believer who wants to be obedient submitting to the church and enjoying her means of grace for his own sanctification.

To balance these extremes, some arbitrarily choose an “age of accountability” around 12 before they will consider baptizing a child. We reject all three of these options and are willing to baptize a child considering the same criteria as anyone else. We will use wisdom to determine the profession of faith at any age in order to baptize as close to conversion as the church can discern while seeking to avoid blind assurance.

Scripture speaks of no means of keeping the church pure by withholding entrance from those who seem to have genuine faith. The only control for the purity of the church is discipline (Matt. 18:15–20; 1 Cor. 5:1–5). Any child baptized will also be subject to the discipline of the church as would any other believer.

We believe the same Spirit alive in Christ, the Apostles, Augustine, Luther, Calvin, John Piper, and every adult in the church can dwell in a child as well. Therefore we are

willing to consider baptizing a child who shows evidence of the Spirit's work in his life.

What do I do if my child is expressing faith in Christ?

Parents are vital in this process in teaching their child about Christ and his work of redemption (Eph. 6:4; Col. 3:21).

Parents can encourage a child in his faith by speaking affirmation for deeds done and words spoken which could only result from God's grace by his Spirit in the child. But a parent does not hold the authority to declare whether or not a child's profession of faith credible. That authority belongs to Christ and his church (Matt. 16:19; 18:18). A parent can (MUST!) lead their child to the cross, but he is unable to make the child embrace it with his life. A parent may cheer his child on toward faith, but it is the church that baptizes and welcomes believers into the community of faith. This partnership between parent and church must be held with much humility and care as both seek to grow a child's seed of faith into an abundant life in Christ. By all means encourage faith in your child, model faith for your child, practice faith with your child, and bring him before the church humbly willing to consider her counsel regarding the profession of your child's faith.

May I baptize my own child at home if he professes faith? May I baptize a person I just led to Christ?

We affirm wholeheartedly that parents have a unique responsibility and authority over their children. Fathers particularly are given the unique responsibility for the discipline and instruction of their household. Nobody will have more influence over a child than his father and mother (especially in how their marriage displays the gospel).

Similarly, you may have far more influence over a co-worker, neighbor, family member, or friend than the rest of the church does. Every believer is commanded to take the gospel to the world so quite often you will have a unique relationship with a person that you've led to Christ.

However, the authority to baptize doesn't belong to the parents or to the evangelist, but to the church, the entire body of believers that gathers regularly for worship, preaching, sacraments, and fellowship. The church, not parents or evangelists, has the authority to affirm or deny a profession of faith. These spheres of authority will commonly overlap so it requires much wisdom and humility to use the authority well.

That is not to say that a parent or friend may not be the one who performs the baptism. The authority resides with the entire church (all of its members), not just with its leaders. After a period of assessment by the church it may be beneficial for one of the witnesses to perform the baptism.

Doesn't the story of the Ethiopian Eunuch break your system?

In Acts 8:26–40 we see Philip meet an Ethiopian along the road reading Isaiah 53. Philip seizes the opportunity to proclaim the gospel and immediately baptizes the Ethiopian. This story appears to contradict most of what we have lined out in this document. Philip spends no time assessing the Eunuch. He baptizes him immediately and suddenly leaves him alone without any community.

We don't believe that this story is as contradictory as it first seems. Admittedly, we think God puts stories like this throughout Scripture to keep us from being too dogmatic about anything but the essentials. Yet, the story fits more than it first appears.

In the culture which Acts is set, it is quite spectacular that an Ethiopian would be reading the Bible and wanting to know more about the Jewish Messiah. He came to Jerusalem to worship the Jewish God. To make a profession like he did took a lot of courage when Acts has just shown us how professing Christ could lead to persecution. Additionally, Philip was sent to that particular place by an angel of the Lord. He was specifically looking for someone who would continue this commission of making disciples of all nations. To Philip, no more evaluation was needed. He was sending the gospel to Africa with the Ethiopian.

There is still the sticky situation of baptizing him and leaving. The eunuch was already on his way back to Ethiopia to serve as a court official to the Queen. He wasn't coming to Jerusalem but going away. Refusing to return may have cost him his life. That combined with the Spirit's clear guiding and his desire to take the gospel to the nations, Philip baptized the Ethiopian and sent him off.

This suggests that the normal pattern for baptism is that the church baptizes into the community upon affirmation of a credible profession of faith. Yet there may be extenuating circumstances when the ideal is practically prohibited. The eunuch wasn't going to a place where there was a church to join. But Philip set for him an example to repeat as people came to faith in Christ in Ethiopia. Our practice is to hold as close to the norm as possible and trust the Spirit to give us wisdom in unique circumstances.

May I take the Lord's Supper before I am baptized?

Baptism and the Lord's Supper are both signs that proclaim our unity with Christ. Baptism is the entry sign into the community and the Lord's Supper is a sign of reaffirmation of the community. One shouldn't participate in the Lord's Supper unless he has already been baptized into a local church.

A helpful parallel is marriage. The wedding is the entry ceremony into the covenant union. It marks the beginning of a covenant bond and that bond is reaffirmed every time

the husband and wife come together in the marriage bed. But that declaration of unity must not be engaged in without first the public proclamation of unity in the wedding. Similarly, we discourage participation in the Lord's Supper until one has been baptized into good-standing membership at a local church.