

A close-up, top-down view of a hand reaching up from underwater. The hand is positioned in the lower center of the frame, with fingers slightly spread. The water is dark and turbulent, with many small, white-capped ripples and bubbles surrounding the hand. The lighting is dramatic, highlighting the texture of the skin and the movement of the water. A silver watch is visible on the wrist.

**WHAT WE BELIEVE
ABOUT BAPTISM**

commongroundchurch
sea point

WHAT WE BELIEVE ABOUT BAPTISM

Getting baptised in water is the first step of obedience for a person who has committed their life to Christ. Here is why: Jesus and the early church leaders commanded that all believers must be baptised in water as a form of initiation into the adventure of following Christ. See Matthew 28:19, Acts 2:37-38, and Acts 10:48. We do not get baptised because we feel like it, but rather because we take Christ's leadership seriously. Baptism is how we visibly reflect what has happened on the inside and is in many ways the way of declaring your faith in Jesus with its multifaceted symbolism. This document firstly outlines our basic beliefs on baptism and our practice of it. In addition, there are two appendices exploring questions around "baptism and membership" as well as a deep dive into why we don't subscribe to infant baptism.

WHAT BAPTISM SYMBOLISES

BAPTISM REPRESENTS PUBLIC ALLEGIANCE TO CHRIST.

Although choosing to follow Christ is a deeply personal decision, it is not a private matter. Jesus instructed us to go public with our choice (Mark 8:38). Baptism reflects our allegiance to the King of the Kingdom of light that we have now been transferred into (Mark 16:16).

BAPTISM REPRESENTS CLEANSING FROM SIN.

In Acts 22:16 it says "Get up, be baptised and wash your sins away, calling on his name." Baptism displays the spiritual cleansing from the guilt of sin that we have received as a result of Jesus' death.

BAPTISM REPRESENTS THE DEATH OF OUR OLD LIFE.

Romans 6:4 says that 'we were buried with Christ in baptism'. Baptism reflects an inward decision to die to 'the old you' that rejected and ignored Christ's leadership over your life. Baptism is a break from your sinful past.

BAPTISM REPRESENTS UNION WITH CHRIST IN NEW LIFE.

Baptism also reflects how we were united with Christ in his resurrection. We have a new life. 'If anyone is in Christ, they are a new creation. The old has gone, the new has come.' (2 Corinthians 5:17, Galatians 3:27).

FOUR COMMON REASONS CHRISTIANS OFTEN GIVE FOR NOT BEING BAPTISED.

1. I was sprinkled as an infant.

Infant sprinkling is not what Jesus speaks of when he says that we need to get baptised.

Infant sprinkling may have been meaningful to the parents, but it has no spiritual benefits in the life of an infant according to the Bible. Baptism in the Scriptures always, with no exception, follows a person's choice to trust in Christ. Infants are not capable of making this choice. If you want to know more about this, the second half of this document explains much more about our understanding.

2. I will do it when I feel God telling me to do it.

We agree totally! But has not God already told us to do it in the Scriptures? When we wait for some personal message from God to do it, we dangerously elevate our own thoughts and emotions over what God has spoken so clearly in his Word. Isn't that a kind of disobedience?

3. I see my confirmation, catechism, or some other moment as my public profession of faith, and thus don't need to 'duplicate' this with baptism.

It is true that many believers stood up in front of a congregation and made a public profession of faith, often with much intent and sincerity. While this moment is often very meaningful and God-honouring, it is not what Scripture calls us to in terms of baptism. While confirmation/catechism is a membership moment in front of a congregation, indicating that somebody is ready and informed about the matters of membership. Baptism is something different - a profession of having entrusted your life to Jesus and becoming a believer.

4. I agree with what you're saying about believer's baptism, but my parents would be really upset if I got baptised again.

Although we understand the complexity of this reality and we are not in any way trying to cause relational strain, nor undermine or disrespect others' beliefs, the reality is that Christ's call to be first in your life will result in many sacrifices and tough moments of followership. In Matthew 10: 37 Jesus says "Anyone who loves their father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves their son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me." We would encourage you to sensitively but courageously consider the call to follow Christ in obedience.

GETTING BAPTISED

Once you have repented of your sins and put your trust in Jesus to give you the gift of salvation, we suggest you speak to your small group leader or an elder about getting baptised. It can happen anywhere, at any time, and any Christian can baptise you. It is also a great opportunity to invite friends and family.

Usually, before getting baptised, a person should be prepared to give some basic background to their story of coming to faith, simply as a helpful profession of their faith commitment to Christ before those present.

This proclamation usually includes the circumstances leading to faith, briefly describing the moment or journey of placing faith in Jesus, and the difference he's already made to the person being baptised. Most importantly, however, this profession includes a clear declaration of faith that Christ is the Lord and king of the person's life.

WHAT MAKES A BAPTISM LEGITIMATE?

For a number of reasons, some people may wonder if their baptism was legitimate. Some wonder because their baptism was such a long time ago. Others wonder because they had such a long lapse of faith after their baptism. Others tend to confuse an important 'coming of age' ceremony with baptism and wonder if it was or was not their baptism. So what makes for a so-called legitimate baptism?

There are essentially only 2 ingredients for baptism to have the basics of what the scriptures describe:

First, is faith in Christ. Baptism isn't about personal moral performance, but trust in Christ as saviour and king - before much or any transformation happens. One should not get baptised by coercion or social momentum, without faith in Jesus' work on the cross. This does not mean that a person has a perfect understanding of all the complexities of the gospel, but rather a genuine belief that Jesus is whom he says he is in his word and did what the word says he did on the cross.

Second, submersion under water in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. As mentioned, sprinkling doesn't seem to do justice to the original word 'baptizo'. A real submersion by another believer who baptises in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit is the second ingredient for baptism. Baptism is legitimate when; a person is submerged* underwater because of their obedience and faith in Christ, whom he says he is in his word, and that he did what the word says he did on the cross.

One need not get baptised a second time if the above two ingredients were present. Rather, our baptism should be a reminder of God's covenant commitment to his children, even when they doubt. Once baptised, a person may have had a lapse of faith at some time. This too should not serve as a reason for a second baptism. Their baptism should rather serve as a wonderful reminder of the fact that it's Christ's faithfulness, and not our faith, that saves us. When Christ saves us by faith, we may wonder, doubt or even run, but Christ remains faithful. We need not get baptised again if we were once saved, just like we ought not to ask our parents to call us their kids; even if we doubt them at times - our identity remains.

(*As a church we believe in, love, and are committed to doing full immersion baptisms, but the amount of water/ mode of baptism is not what makes the baptism real. If someone gets baptised as an adult, after becoming a believer, and had water poured over them, this is still a form of baptism. It is not the mode of baptism that is important, but rather a genuine faith which makes it spiritually significant.)

APPENDIX 1: WHAT ABOUT BAPTISM AND MEMBERSHIP?

Is an adult believer's baptism a prerequisite to membership in Common Ground Church Sea Point? The short answer is: yes. We believe baptism to be the expression of faith in Jesus, and faith in Jesus is the marker in the New Testament of a covenant relationship with God and his people.

This being said, we do not consider someone who lands differently from us on the exact nature of baptism to be someone outside the covenant community and not a member of God's universal church, and so based on this we would also welcome in those who are conscientiously and theologically convinced of infant baptism. What we mean by this is we would not refuse membership to someone who has rigorous theological reasons for their infant baptism position that they have grappled with and feel that their conscience is bound by these convictions. We say this because we recognize the fact that we don't want to break fellowship over this matter. Although it is an important building block issue that a church needs to practice one way or the other, believers' baptism is not a central tenet of the Christian faith.

This person is distinct, however, from someone who has either never been baptised under any definition or has been infant baptised or sprinkled but has not actually interrogated their position and is holding onto it out of tradition, parental respect, or ignorance. A person in this position would be pastorally journeyed with and hopefully, recognize the need to get baptised by immersion as a professing believer, say yes to this step of obedience and then be welcomed into the community as an official member.

As leaders, we will always teach and encourage all followers of Jesus to get baptised in obedience to Christ - even if they have been following Christ for some time. Despite the meaningful moments of christening and/or confirmation that one may have had, we will continue to encourage this step. Baptism is motivated by obedience to Christ and his Word. Therefore, the leadership finds conviction for adult believers' baptism, not primarily in past experiences or even positive sentimental feelings, but from what Christ has told us to do, and what he has modelled for us. Therefore, discussions with leaders on the topic will never discard the significance and meaning of previous commitment experiences, but will always revert back to finding conviction in what Scripture teaches.

Those who are welcomed into membership who have not been believers baptised but are conscientiously and theologically convinced of their infant baptism position would be welcomed as part of the family under the following understandings:

1. They are entering a community with a different conviction on baptism and they are saying yes to joyfully submitting to that leadership team, working together to maintain the unity of the local community and not being divisive by teaching or trying to shift others in the community to their view. If this is not going to be possible, we would lovingly ask this person to rather join a church with leaders they can submit to and flow with.
2. Because their position is different to that of the leaders of this community there are limitations to leadership involvement in our church family as a divided leadership is detrimental to the health of a local church. We believe it would be difficult and unkind to be asking leaders to teach and uphold doctrines that they do not subscribe to and it would have effects on our discipleship culture.

APPENDIX 2: WHAT ABOUT INFANT BAPTISM?

As mentioned earlier, we do not believe that infant baptism is the same thing as a biblical, believer's baptism. That is why we ask people who have been baptized as infants to consider being baptized as a believer. We do not see it as one's re-baptism, but rather as one's first baptism – the first biblical one at least. This excellent chapter explains why we see it like this.

AN EXCERPT FROM 'BAPTISM AND YOU' BY ROB WARNER

Chapter 7 - What about young children? Jesus blessed children

In Mark, there is a story of people bringing little children to Jesus for him to place his hands on them (Mark 10:13-16). They were looking for more than an affectionate caress – they were seeking God's blessing.

The disciples reacted in their usual manner: wrongly. Their intentions were to protect Jesus, and they tried to do so by rebuking the parents. Presumably, in ruling out this parental audience, they explained that Jesus was too busy or too important to be bothered with young children. Immediately, Jesus rebuked his followers and made space for the children. Throughout his ministry, he emphasized the value of children and the lessons we can learn from them, especially about living faith.

In some churches, children always seem to be an intrusion. They have to sit still, keep quiet and switch off, with nothing to contribute and no moment in the service which makes much sense to them. The church has all too often slipped into the disciples' prejudice and assumed that God and true religion have no time for children. Jesus rejected out of hand the notion that God is only for grown-ups.

THE BAPTISM DIVIDE

At the time of the Reformation, the newly emerging Protestant churches had to decide what to do about baptism. The state church Protestants decided to retain the Roman Catholic practice of infant baptism. Four main arguments were offered: the tradition of the church, which had practised infant baptism for many centuries; the household baptisms of the New Testament; the covenant parallel between circumcision and infant baptism; and the symbolism of prevenient grace – that is, the grace of God which reaches out to us long before we respond to faith.

The independent Protestants rediscovered the practice of believers' baptism, and as a result, experienced persecution by Roman Catholics and state church Protestants alike. The most extreme penalty they faced was death by drowning, based on the perverse notion that since they were so keen on the water they might as well be treated to a lot more of it. In those days, therefore, to be baptised as a believer was extremely dangerous. You were only baptized as a believer if you were absolutely convinced that it was the right thing to do. These baptists rejected each of the state church arguments as fatally flawed: tradition has no authority when it contradicts the plain teaching of Scripture; there is no evidence that the household baptisms included young children; the parallel between circumcision and infant baptism is not found in the New Testament, but was developed later to justify a later and unbiblical church tradition; and the prevenient grace of God is expressed supremely and definitively at the cross of Christ rather than in a sacramental act unknown to the first Christians.

Far from pointing people towards saving faith, baptists saw infant baptism as profoundly misleading, whether in its Roman Catholic or state church Protestant form. Right across Europe, people assumed that they were Christian individuals who were living in Christian countries. They placed their hope not in personal, saving faith in Christ, but in the 'works' righteousness of infant baptism: 'I was baptized as a baby in church, so I am obviously a Christian, by birth and by baptism.'

THE CIRCUMCISION DEBATE

The first Christians were Jewish, and when Gentiles began to join the church, there was a great debate. Some Jewish believers said that the Gentiles should be circumcised and keep the Law of Moses. Others, including the apostle Paul, thought that all the Gentiles had to do was believe in Christ. He was convinced that far from helping Gentile Christians, the circumcision party were distracting them from the glorious gospel of salvation by the grace of God alone rather than by human effort.

This debate is a continuing undercurrent in the New Testament. It takes centre stage in Acts 15, when the Jerusalem Council agrees to a policy on Gentile converts, and in Paul's letter to the Galatians when Paul tackles the impact upon a young Gentile church of some visiting Jewish preachers who were insisting that circumcision was a requirement for every male convert. In Acts 15 the Judaizers speak first and make their case succinctly: 'The Gentiles must be circumcised and required to obey the law of Moses' (Acts 15:5).

Peter, Paul and James all contribute to the debate that follows. They all develop the same theme, which Peter sums up in these words: 'We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are' (Acts 15:11). If the first Christians had practised infant baptism, they could have disposed of the case for circumcision with a simple argument. The Jews, they could have said, practise circumcision, but among us Christians, it has been replaced by infant baptism. Game, set and match. The fact that this line of argument is never used, either in Acts or in the New Testament letters, can only lead us to one reasonable conclusion. The covenant parallel between circumcision and infant baptism was never mentioned in the New Testament because the first Christians did not develop such a parallel. The first Christians did not practice infant baptism and saw no need for a direct, sacramental replacement for circumcision.

The key contrast in Acts 15 is not between two outward acts, but rather between the outward act of circumcision and the inward response of saving faith. In a similar way, when Paul speaks of a new circumcision, he contrasts the Jewish practice – 'circumcision done by the hands of men' – with the inward transformation of Christian salvation – [the circumcision done by Christ'. This 'Christian circumcision', Paul explains, is the putting off of the sinful nature; (Colossians 2:11). The contrast is between the outward act of conformity in the Old Covenant and the inward reality of transformation which depends upon personal, saving faith in Christ. Baptism in the New Testament is not the new circumcision. When the first Christian believers were baptized, it was a public sign of an inward reality: they had already entered into the new, inward and spiritual relationship with Christ, by putting their trust in him as Saviour and Lord. Those who have been circumcised inwardly, by faith in Christ, are then eligible for the outward act of baptism as a believer.

When Paul wrote 1 Corinthians, there was a great deal of confusion at Corinth about mixed marriages where only one partner had been converted. Some wondered whether they should divorce their non-Christian partner. Paul said that they should stay with them unless the unbeliever took the initiative and demanded a divorce. Others were concerned about how God saw their children. Paul assured them that their children were 'holy' (1 Corinthians 7:14). Paul doesn't go into any detail, but he seems to be indicating that where one of the parents is a believer, their children are included within the covenant of love until such a time as they are able to make up their own minds about whether to live as a believing Christian.

The striking thing, once again, is the complete absence of any reference to infant baptism. If it had been the normal practice of the first Christians, Paul would surely have mentioned it in this debate. He could have said to the worried parent: 'You can be sure that God looks upon your children favourably because the church was willing to baptize them.' The complete absence of any mention of infant baptism in the New Testament, especially in moments of great debate and controversy over circumcision and the status of children, can only lead to one logical conclusion. The first Christians never mentioned infant baptism because they never practised it. The only baptism they knew and encouraged was the baptism of believers.

HOUSEHOLD BAPTISMS

Defenders of infant baptism often refer to the occasions when we are told that a household was baptized. There are several household baptisms in the New Testament, including the following:

- Stephanas (1 Corinthians 1:16; 16:15)
- Cornelius (Acts 10-11)
- Lydia (Acts 16)
- the Philippian jailer (Acts 16)
- Crispus (Acts 18).

In three of these cases, we are explicitly told that each member of the household was converted. Paul describes the household of Stephanas as 'the first converts in Achaia' (1 Corinthians 16:15). Baptism was not something imposed upon everyone else when Stephanas, the head of the household, became a Christian. They were all baptized because they were all converted. Similarly, we are told that Crispus and his entire household believed in the Lord. Luke reinforces the New Testament pattern by adding that many Corinthians subsequently became believers and were then baptized (Acts 18:8).

The baptism of Cornelius' household concluded a remarkable sequence of events. First, he had been promised that Peter's message would make a wonderful impact: 'you and all your household will be saved' (Acts 11:14). Second, while Peter was still preaching, the household members were converted. Third, they were filled with the Spirit and began to speak in tongues and praise God. Fourth, Peter gave the instruction that they should be baptized with water since God had already baptized them with the Holy Spirit. Baptism of the household is followed by conversion and Spirit baptism.

Two Philippian households were baptized: Lydia's and the jailers. In Lydia's case, we are told nothing about the other members of her household. The fact that she was a businesswoman makes it extremely likely, according to the customs of the day, that she was either single or widowed. She certainly offers hospitality to Paul and his team without any mention of a husband.

In the jailer's case, there is a violent earthquake around midnight which throws open the doors of the jail. Fearing that his prisoners must have escaped, the jailer is on the brink of killing himself when Paul calls out to reassure him that they have not run off.

This leads to Paul preaching in the middle of the night to the jailer and 'to all the others in his house' (Acts 16:32). When Paul has finished, the jailer washes their wounds. And then the jailer and his family are baptized. There are spiritual and practical preconditions for these baptisms. In spiritual terms, the jailer's family must hear the gospel and respond in faith before water baptism becomes a relevant option. In practical terms, the family members are not capable of hearing and believing for themselves, but do so in the middle of the night, and are awake enough to be baptized in the small hours.

We should be careful to recognise some important details in these incidents. First, we are not told even once that a young child was present in any of these households. To establish the practice of infant baptism on an argument from silence is very rocky ground indeed. Second, in every instance where we are given details about the household members, everyone who is baptized has already come to faith. Third, most if not all these households would have contained servants. If every household member was baptized automatically when the head of the house converted, then baptism would have been imposed not only upon any children who were present but also upon every slave, irrespective of their age. Elderly relatives would presumably have been treated in the same way.

There are three fundamental problems with attempts to interpret household baptisms as a justification for infant baptism. First, it is an argument from silence, since we are never once told of young children being baptized in the New Testament. Second, if it proves anything, it proves too much, since if the first Christians did baptize the entire household automatically upon the conversion of the head of the house, not only young children but also slaves and elderly dependants would have had baptism thrust upon them, irrespective of their own religious convictions. What Luke reports, where there are several conversions in a home, is that every member of the household who comes to faith in Christ is then entitled to be baptized as a believer, and it is only natural for them to be baptized together. Third, such an interpretation flies in the face of the unambiguous teaching and practice of the New Testament Christians, since all the direct evidence we have points exclusively to the practice of believers' baptism.

To build a case for infant baptism upon silence and speculation is to build upon sand. Infant baptism simply cannot be found in the pages of the New Testament. It is, in the view of believer-baptizing Christians, a lamentable misrepresentation of biblical data. Only the familiarity of later church practice has made infant baptism seem plausible. The case just cannot be made from the New Testament. If infant baptism was practised and important among the first Christians, they would have told us so. As it is, the custom lacks biblical credibility. It is a classic instance of human tradition overriding the clear teaching and practice of the Bible. And the tragic result is generations of people who have been convinced that they are fully paid-up Christians, by birthright and infant baptism, without any need for personal, saving faith and a life of discipleship.

INCLUDING CHILDREN

Christian adults have an awesome responsibility towards children. Jesus warned us in the gravest possible terms not to treat them badly. If we cause them to stumble, God's severe judgement is upon us (Matthew 18:6). Whatever our convictions about infant baptism, all Christians need to learn how to affirm and include children as part of today's church. We find it so easy to bore children out of the church, so we must make it an urgent priority to make the church a boredom-free zone and genuinely user-friendly for children and teenagers.

This responsibility to protect children from stumbling rests on parents first, and then on the whole church. On Sunday mornings our children hear about love, forgiveness and faith. But do they hear a different story during Sunday lunch? Love can be usurped by gossip, forgiveness by criticism, and faith by cynicism and unbelief. Children can quickly learn that Jesus taught the positive way of love, but Christians often prefer the negative way of legalistic religion. We teach our children more by who we are than by what we say. Sadly, by the time they reach their teenage years many children have become professional critics, well-schooled in the destructive art of finding fault with everyone.

Being around Jesus was immensely inspiring, but also hugely enjoyable for much of the time. The disciples may not have known what he was going to do next, but they were confident that he loved them and wanted the best for them. We need to cultivate that kind of experience for children, both at church and in the Christian home. Christian parents who are too busy to spend time with their children are just too busy. Buying them presents is no substitute for the best gifts of all: giving them your availability, support and love. Don't let your children down.

As for baptisms, I like to see children not just present but in the best seats, sitting around the baptistry for a close-up view. As they hear the testimonies, see the immersions and recognize the deep joy expressed by those being baptized, it helps them to grow into a personal faith and prepare for the great day of celebration when they will be baptized. By avoiding infant baptism, we protect children so that they can enter into the full, New Testament privilege of believers' baptism at the right time in their lives.

Children cannot be made to regenerate through prayers of thanksgiving and dedication. Nor can they be obliged to become Christians later as a result of promises that adults made on their behalf in their infancy. Salvation is by faith, not works. And every individual's free will must be respected at all times – true conversion simply cannot be imposed upon anyone.

What, then, is appropriate for babies? We give thanks to God for the gift of new life. We pray for God's blessing upon their lives and for God's protection in a world that can sometimes become difficult and dangerous. We pray for the parents, that they will grow into the astonishing responsibilities of parenthood.

We also pray that the parents, supported by the church, will bring up their children in the knowledge of God and his ways. And we pray, above all, that the child will grow into personal, saving faith, trusting in Jesus Christ as their Saviour and Lord. That's a wonderful and rich combination of prayer for any child. It's a great privilege to honour and bless children in such thoroughly biblical ways. We will not baptize children, but we will bless them gladly – just as Jesus did.

What if my parents disapprove?

The Bible instructs us to obey our parents in childhood and then to give them lifelong respect. The answer to this question partly depends on the age of the person faced with parental disapproval. If you are under 16, my advice is to wait until you are older. If you are 16 or older, I would encourage you to raise the issue with your parents and explain your thinking, being careful not to get into an argument if they react negatively.

Clara's parents were devout Anglicans. She was worried that her baptism as a believer might seem to them to be a rejection of her upbringing. She kept putting off the conversation, but eventually, she felt she could wait no longer and had to talk it through with them. To her surprise, they were absolutely delighted. 'The most important thing to us is that you are living as a committed Christian,' they explained. "If a different denominational setting is helpful to you, that's no problem to us at all.'

Charles' parents were more hostile. They needed reassurance that this was his settled decision, and not something forced upon him by some kind of cult. A visit from a couple of church leaders was enough to put them at their ease, and so we were able to go ahead with the baptism without any legacy of ill-feeling in the family.

For Amanda, the problem was not her parents, but her own insecurity. She had always been a very vulnerable person, having struggled with eating disorders for many years, and was deeply fearful of rejection by her parents. We therefore

decided that it would be unwise to take forward the possibility of her being baptized until she was feeling much stronger in herself. Because of her particular personal needs, the most important thing for Amanda was not a quick baptism, but long exposure to a loving and supportive fellowship.

Megan's father showed no flexibility at all. Stubbornness was probably a family trait. Megan was definite that she wanted to be baptized. Her father was just as definite that such behaviour was appalling. His denomination was the only true church, and he would certainly not attend his daughter's baptism. Megan was in her 20s and more than old enough to know her own mind. She made the choice to be baptized despite her father's objections, convinced that she was obeying Christ by being baptized. Given the choice, she was determined to put Christ first. However, going against her father's wishes did not mean that she had to reject him, so she made a special effort to be gracious and loving, patient and appreciative toward her father.

As an adult, she demonstrated her affection for her father not through unthinking and unconditional obedience, but by continued demonstrations of loving respect and appreciation, even when he didn't make it easy.