

Preparing for Baptism

A Guide for Baptismal Candidates

At Timberlake, we *love* the ordinance of baptism. It truly is one of the church's most profound joys to hear of God's saving work in the lives of others, and to see him adding souls to our midst. We're overjoyed that you are following Christ in this way and seeking to visibly identify with our risen Lord through baptism.

That said, we've put together a short guide that will help you prepare for this wonderful event. Since you've already indicated your interest in baptism and membership, here are the steps:

1. First, we want to take a moment and make sure you **understand the significance of baptism**. There are a lot of misunderstandings out there about baptism, so we want to help clarify it for you below. That's the first step in preparing for baptism.
2. The next step involves **writing out what we typically call a testimony**. This is a simple, three-paragraph statement of how the Lord saved you. If that's intimidating, or you don't know where to start—don't fret! We've given you some helps below.
3. Once you've written a first draft, you'll **email it to the pastor of the Sunday school class you're involved in**. If you're not yet involved in a Sunday school or ministry area, please send it to the church office and they will connect you with a pastor. The pastor will go over it with you and will answer any remaining questions you may have.
4. Finally, once your written testimony is complete, contact the church office to confirm the next available baptism date.

The Significance of Baptism

When it comes to getting baptized, we want to make sure you understand what you're doing. How would you describe its significance? In what follows, we're going to help you see that baptism is a declaration, and a symbol. It's a declaration of your allegiance to Christ, and it symbolizes your union with him. Let's unpack each of these in turn.

Baptism as A Declaration

When someone becomes a follower of Jesus, when they hear the good news of the gospel and believe in Jesus, the way they indicate this decision is through baptism. It's a public act that demonstrates to the world that you've repudiated the old life and chosen to identify with Christ (see Acts 2:37-41). It's a pledge of allegiance; an acknowledgment of Christ before a watching world. You've turned away from any other allegiances, and he has become your King. That's why the first thing Jesus says when it comes to making disciples is that they should be baptized (Matt. 28:19). Baptism marks you out as a follower of Jesus. It's a *declaration* that you belong to him.

Baptism as A Symbol

But, to be clear, baptism itself doesn't save you, change you or somehow turn you into a follower of Jesus. Instead, baptism indicates a change has already taken place within you through the gospel. In that sense, it's *symbolic*. Baptism testifies to a *present* reality—to something that's already true about you—that you are in union with Christ by faith (see Rom. 6). All that means is the great exchange has already taken place: Jesus took the punishment for your sin, and you've received all the benefits of his perfect obedience. Now, when God looks at you, he sees his Son. Your sins are forgiven, you have power to live a new life, and you belong to the new creation, all because of what Christ has accomplished for you. That's what it means to be in union with Christ.

Baptism beautifully symbolizes this union with Christ, both in his death and resurrection. When you go under the water, it symbolizes your union with Christ's *death* (Rom. 6:3). It shows that all God accomplished in the death of his Son has been applied to you. Christ absorbed all the Father's wrath for your transgressions. He took on himself the curses of the covenant. He experienced the wrath you deserved, so that you never will. It shows your sins have already been "washed away." This is the incredible privilege of all who are united to Christ's death by faith. And baptism points to the fact that you are, indeed, united to Christ's death.

Not only does baptism symbolize union with Christ's death, but also with his *resurrection* (Rom. 6:4). When you come up from the water, it shows his resurrection has been applied to you, too. It points to the fact that you now have resurrection power to live a new kind of life through the Holy Spirit. You're not spiritually dead anymore! You've been brought to life by God's grace. You're now sensitive to sin and hate it, when before you secretly loved it. You now long to be among God's people, when before you avoided them. You now eagerly desire to understand the Bible, when before it was unappealing. Your life is far from perfect, but you're headed in a new direction—in pursuit of Christ, your King—with your eyes fixed on the coming new creation. This is the incredible privilege of all who have been united to Christ's resurrection. And baptism symbolizes this glorious reality.

So, baptism is both a *declaration* and a *symbol*. It's your public declaration that you're a follower of Christ, and, as such, it symbolizes what God has already accomplished for you. He's bound you in love to his Son forever.

Writing Your Testimony

When it comes to the actual baptismal service, we ask all the candidates to write out and read a short version of their testimony. But why? Peter tells us that God has saved you for a reason: "that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light" (1 Pet. 2:9). This means God has blessed you this lavishly because he wants you to talk about it! So, baptism becomes your first opportunity to do just that: to verbally declare all God has done for you in Christ. It's a chance to thank the Lord for his steadfast love and to extol him in the congregation (Ps. 107:31-32). Will you be nervous? Of course! Will you stumble over your words? Maybe. But I can guarantee you this: as you share all the Lord

has done in your life, you will be a *tremendous* encouragement to our congregation. Polished or not, hearing of your conversion will bring profound joy to God's people, as it did for the early church (Acts 15:3). You'll be like David of old, who, after experiencing God's deliverance, called out: "Oh, magnify the Lord with me, and let us exalt his name together" (Ps. 34:2).

That said, most people have a few practical questions when it comes to writing out a testimony. We've anticipated a few of them below.

1. How long should your testimony be?

The general rule of thumb is to be long enough to relate God's work in your life, but short enough to avoid becoming a prune in the water! About three to five minutes is generally the sweet spot. In the answer to the next question, I'll give you a template for writing your testimony that consists of three simple paragraphs.

2. What should you include when writing your testimony?

We recognize that writing out your testimony of conversion may seem like a daunting task for a variety of reasons. How can you accurately capture all that God has done in only a few short paragraphs? Perhaps you're not sure how to make sense of your story. You may not have a "dramatic" conversion experience, or you might struggle to know when the Lord brought you to saving faith. Or, if you did have a more dramatic conversion experience from a life of sin, you may be wondering how much you should share. So, here is a basic, three-paragraph template, along with some ideas for what you could include in those paragraphs.

Paragraph 1: Describe your life without Christ.

You might include a few sentences about your upbringing and development. Did you grow up in a godly family or without much Christian influence? Try to keep the focus on your own spiritual condition apart from Christ. How did your sinful condition manifest? Were you self-righteous and moralistic? Were you rebellious? How did that sinful condition affect your attitudes, or actions, or relationships, or feelings? Note: you can interpret your life before Christ through the lens of Ephesians 2:1-3. Paul says there we were all dead in sin, no matter how "good" or "bad" we may have appeared on the outside. For example, "I grew up in church and considered myself a good person, but the reality was, as Paul says, I was dead in my transgressions and sins." "At the time, I thought I was living the good life when I went to all those parties, but in reality, I was just dead in my sin." In those statements, a moral upbringing is interpreted through Paul's words in Eph. 2:1-3.

Another helpful passage to consider when thinking about your life before Christ is Rom. 1:24-25. Paul says that God gave humanity over to its sin because of two reasons: because we exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and because we worshipped and served the creature rather than the Creator. In other words, he says our lives before Christ were characterized by deception and idolatry. We were deceived about ourselves and our lives, and we worshipped and served false gods instead of the true God.

- So, consider: what lies were you enslaved to before coming to Christ? (“I used to believe that I was too far gone, that God would never love me or forgive me.” Or, “I used to blame my sin on anything or anyone but myself. But I soon realized I was deceived. The Bible says that I’m ultimately responsible for my sin.”)
- Also, consider: what idols did you live for and serve? What motivated your life? What did you think you couldn’t live without? What were you willing to sin in order to get? (“I lived my life for the praise of people. I was totally enslaved to that idolatry, and it was miserable. I lived in constant fear, constantly comparing myself to others.” Or, “I used to worship my job. I worked so many hours and neglected my family, neglected church. I now see that was an idol in my life that kept me from truly trusting Christ.”)

When it comes to how much detail to include about your sinful condition, keep in mind the edification principle. Paul says that everything in the church should be done for the purpose of edification, which simply means to build up the church (1 Cor. 14:26). Paul shares a version of his own testimony in 1 Tim. 1:12-17, and he doesn’t shy away from talking about his previous sinful state. He gets specific, calling himself a “blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent” (1:13). He’s not afraid to self-indict, yet he doesn’t share grotesque or unnecessary details about how he persecuted the church. In Paul’s case, he shared his wretched condition to highlight the “overflowing grace” of his Lord (1:14), as well as Christ’s “perfect patience” with him (1:16). So, whatever darkness you share from your life before Christ, it should highlight the riches of his grace, like black velvet highlights the brightness of a diamond. Anything that highlights the glorious mercy of our Savior will be edifying to the body!

Paragraph 2: Describe (1) your conversion to Christ, and (2) the gospel hope you have today.

When writing this paragraph, consider the following questions:

- How did the Lord begin to convict you of your sin and draw you to himself? What circumstances led you to call out to him in faith?
- When was the veil over your heart removed, so that you understood the gospel (2 Cor. 4:4-6)? When did God make you alive together with Christ (Eph. 2:4-5)?
- What are you hoping in today? What are you trusting in today? This is a statement of your gospel hope!

As you consider these things, remember the Lord was behind every circumstance in his loving providence (Rom. 8:28). He kindly drew you and led you to repentance (John 6:44). And not only did he grant your repentance (Acts 11:18), but, like the prodigal’s father, he ran out to meet you, embraced you, and killed the fattened calf to celebrate your own decision to return (Luke 15:20-24)!

If you struggle to pinpoint exactly when the Lord saved you, don’t be discouraged! If you had faithful parents who taught you about your sin and the good news of Christ from an early age, praise God, and give him praise in your testimony! Paul was thrilled that Timothy was taught the Scriptures from his childhood (2 Tim. 3:15). The faith had been passed down to him generationally—from grandmother, to mother, to him (2 Tim. 1:5)—a tremendous blessing. God wrote your story in this way, and he made no mistake. You might say something to the effect of, “I know I was dead in my sin at one point in my life, because Paul says I was in Ephesians 2:1.

But from my earliest memories, I remember knowing that I was great sinner and that Jesus was a great Savior. I'm not sure when he brought me from death to life, but I know that today, I am alive and trusting wholly in the Savior." Beyond this, you may get some clarity when you ask yourself the following questions:

- At what point did you start hating the sin you used to love?
- When did you find power over enslaving sin habits?
- When did you begin to love being around God's people instead of thinking church was boring, or something you had to do?
- When did your faith "become your own," as in you began to take personal responsibility for what you believed, instead of just depending on what your parents said?

Paragraph 3: Describe why you want (1) to be baptized and (2) to join TBC.

Consider in this last statement sharing your excitement for baptism, and for joining TBC.

- Why do you want to be baptized?
- How has the Lord worked in your life through the people of TBC in particular?
- Why do you want to be a member?
- What are you most excited about when it comes to joining this church?

After you finish writing your testimony, please email it to the pastor working with you for review. After it's reviewed, he will work with you to secure a date for baptism.

Final Preparation Details

The baptismal service will be in the old auditorium (brick building). Please plan to arrive at the church by 4:30 pm for the 5:00 pm service. Please meet downstairs in the fellowship hall of the main church building and someone there will show you to the dressing rooms. You may wear the clothes you will be baptized in or bring them and change at the church. Clothes that will not retain much water work best (jeans are not good). Also, make sure to bring a change of clothes, two towels, a plastic bag for wet clothing, and a hair dryer if you so desire.