

What Did You Vow at Baptism?

Dedication, the Organization, and the Baptism Christ Commanded

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I. A Question Answered Aloud

Every baptism in Christian history has been performed with a formula, and the formula Christ gave names three Persons: "baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Matt. 28:19). For most of Christian history that was the whole of it—God named, the candidate immersed. Since 1985, candidates at Watchtower baptisms have answered a second question aloud, and that question names an organization. This essay sets the two vows side by side: what Jesus commanded baptism to be, what the Watchtower's own questions have said across the decades, and what it means that the wording keeps changing.¹

II. The Watchtower Arrangement in Its Own Words

In Watchtower teaching, baptism does not save and does not wash away sin; it is the public symbol of a prior private act, the candidate's *dedication*—a personal vow to Jehovah to do his will forever. The candidate studies, answers the elders' questions from the organization's publications, makes his dedication in private prayer, and symbolizes it by water immersion at an assembly. Just before immersion, he answers two questions.

From 1985: "On the basis of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, have you repented of your sins and dedicated yourself to Jehovah to do his will?" and "Do you understand that your dedication and baptism identify you as one of Jehovah's Witnesses in association with God's spirit-directed organization?" The second question, the Society teaches, is a natural acknowledgment: Jehovah has always worked through an organized people.²

III. A Vow That Kept Being Rewritten

An unchanging God might be expected to receive an unchanging vow. Instead the questions have been revised repeatedly. The 1956 form asked whether the candidate recognized that dedication identified him "as one of Jehovah's witnesses in association with God's organization." The 1985 revision added "spirit-directed." In 2019 the two questions were rewritten again, and "spirit-directed" quietly disappeared, leaving "Jehovah's organization." Each version was answered aloud by thousands of candidates as though it were the fixed condition of salvation. A vow that requires periodic editing by its beneficiary is not the baptism of Matthew 28; it is a membership oath under revision control, and the direction of the edits—toward and then partly away from the organization's self-description—tells its own story.³

IV. Who Entered the Promise in 1985

The 1985 change was not cosmetic. Whatever the exact earlier wording, the effect of the developed second question was to place the organization inside the baptismal formula itself, so that the vow no longer ran simply between the person and God. The timing deserves notice: the wording was firmed up in the years when the Society was formalizing its disassociation policies, and a vow that names the organization converts every later disagreement with the organization into apostasy from the vow. Baptism, the door Christ opened to God, was quietly fitted with a second doorkeeper—and the person being baptized was rarely in a position to notice that a human institution had written itself into his promise to God.⁴

V. What Baptism Actually Is

The New Testament's baptism does things the Watchtower's symbol cannot. It forgives: "Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins" (Acts 2:38). It saves: "Baptism... now saves you" (1 Pet. 3:21). It buries and raises: "we were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, so that... we too might walk in newness of life" (Rom. 6:4). None of these is a symbol of a prior private act; the act of God is in the water. That is exactly why the formula names God and only God—the candidate is being joined to the Father, through the Son, in the Spirit, not enrolled in anything less. The fuller case that baptism accomplishes rather than merely pictures is

made on this site's sacraments and baptism pages; here the point is narrower and sharper. Because baptism is God's act joining a person to God, no human corporation may write itself into the words, any more than a witness at a wedding may insert his own name into the vows.⁵

VI. The Vow You Actually Made

Here is the pastoral heart of the matter, for the reader who answered those questions in a stadium years ago and now fears that leaving the organization means breaking faith with God. Read your vow again, and separate its parts. What you promised God—repentance, dedication to His will, acceptance of salvation through His Son—is holy and binding, and every Catholic renews exactly those promises at every Easter Vigil. Nothing on this site asks you to retract a word of it. What the second question added was not God's requirement but the organization's, and an addition to Christ's formula binds only as far as the authority of those who added it—which is the very question examined on the authority page.

Leaving a publisher is not leaving God. If anything in your baptism reached heaven, it was the part Christ instituted, and that part the Catholic Church has always honored wherever water and the triune name are truly meant. Whether a given Witness baptism was valid in the Church's eyes—whether the triune formula was used and truly intended—is a question weighed carefully when a person is received, and the answer is often kinder than the convert expects. But the deeper reassurance does not wait on that determination. The God you dedicated yourself to is the God who "so loved the world that he gave his only Son" (John 3:16), and He did not need an organization's clause to hear a repentant heart. What you meant, He received. What men added, you may lay down.⁶

Endnotes

1. Matthew 28:19 (RSV). Scripture quotations, unless noted, are from the Revised Standard Version.
2. The 1985 questions: *The Watchtower*, June 1, 1985, p. 30.
3. The 2019 revision: *The Watchtower* (study edition), May 2019, the study article on baptism, in which the second question no longer contains "spirit-directed." Earlier forms appeared in *The Watchtower* of 1956 and 1973.
4. On the disassociation arrangements of the same period, see this site's discipline page and its timeline of the shunning policy.
5. Acts 2:38; 1 Peter 3:21; Romans 6:4 (RSV).

6. John 3:16 (RSV); *Catechism of the Catholic Church* §§1239–1240, 1256, on the minister, matter, and form of valid baptism.

For Further Reading

Catechism of the Catholic Church, The Sacrament of Baptism, §§1213–1284. Free online at <https://www.vatican.va>.

Early Christian Doctrines, by J. N. D. Kelly—baptism in the first centuries.

Should Babies Be Baptized? and *Symbols, or Sacraments?*, on this site—what baptism does in the New Testament.

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"Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit."

—*Matthew 28:19*

Ad maiorem Dei gloriam
To the greater glory of God

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A Note on Authority

This essay represents the author's articulation of *the Catholic understanding of baptism and the assessment of the Watchtower's baptismal vow*, drawing on Scripture, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, the Church Fathers, and the major theological tradition. It is offered as a personal defense, not as an official statement of the Church's teaching. Where this defense is fortunate enough to align with the magisterial teaching of the Church, the credit belongs to the tradition that formed it. Where it falls short, the responsibility is the author's alone.