

Baptism Teaching Guide

Understanding the significance of Baptism



Introduction

This booklet is intended to serve as an instructional guide and reference for those presenting either themselves or their child for baptism, and for those who would like to study the meanings and purpose of baptism. Please use this to help in your study of this very important event.

As you read and study the following material, it will be helpful to keep the following definitions in mind.

a.) Sacrament— A sacrament is a holy regulation established by Christ in his church as a sign, seal, and outward display to those within the covenant of grace of the benefits they have from Christ's mediation. It serves to strengthen and increase their faith and all other graces in them; it obliges them to obey God and to witness to and cherish their love and fellowship with each other; and it distinguishes them from those outside the covenant.¹

b.) Covenant—a solemn agreement that binds the parties to each other in permanent defined relationships, with specific promises, claims, and obligations on both sides.²

Questions

1. *What is the Sacrament of Baptism?*

Baptism is a sacrament of the New Testament, ordained by Jesus Christ. By the act of baptism, a person becomes a part of the visible Church, for it is a sign and a seal of the Covenant of Grace for believers and their children. As a sign it proclaims God's forgiveness and our redemption in Jesus Christ. As a seal, God marks us as adopted children of our heavenly Father. It indicates our engrafting into Christ, our rebirth, the remission of sins, and our ability by the power of the Spirit to walk in newness of life.³ It is a sign of God's covenant and a means of grace.

2. *Does baptism have any relationship to the Old Testament?*

Yes! Old Testament scripture begins to unfold the doctrinal teachings that we associate with the New Testament, including baptism. For instance, the concept of faith begins to be revealed in Genesis 15:6 where we read that Abraham believed in God's promise and He reckoned it to him as righteousness. Thus, Abraham, as an Old Testament figure, was saved by God's grace through faith just as we are (see Romans 4). In Genesis 17:7, God calls this saving relationship that He established with Abraham an "everlasting covenant"—a covenant of salvation from generation to generation.⁴

The mark of this covenant of salvation with Abraham and his descendants was circumcision—a seal indicating Abraham's faith (Rom 4:11). Then, in Genesis 17, God tells Abraham that the infants born into his house were to be circumcised on the eighth day "throughout your generations". Why circumcision? In the Old Testament, to be 'uncircumcised' was to be 'unclean' (Isaiah 52:1). At that time, a man represented his family before the LORD, and circumcision represented a cutting off of uncleanness (symbolizing sin) through the shedding of blood (symbolizing sacrifice) by another person (symbolizing God) from the part of the body which represented the source of life.

3. *How are circumcision in the Old Testament and baptism in the New Testament related?*

Circumcision was outward sign of God's inward cleansing of the heart (Ezekiel 36:25-27). It was a sign of God's promise to Abraham that God would save His people by grace through faith. This promise has not changed from the Old Testament to the New Testament; only the sign has changed. In Colossians 2:11-12, Paul teaches that baptism is "the circumcision done by Christ" and has become the new sign of membership in the covenant.

A parallel exists with the Lord's Supper, which has replaced the Old Testament celebration of the Passover. Jesus gave the disciples bread and wine, representing His body and blood, shed for them, in place of the lamb that was eaten at Passover. As that is the new covenant meal, baptism is the new sign of covenant inclusion.⁵

4. *Does baptism save us?*

No. Just as circumcision by itself did not save an Old Testament believer, baptism itself did not save a New Testament believer. Rather, baptism is an act of setting apart—indicating the move from a worldly life to a holy life. Baptism is the outward evidence of an inward cleansing, or setting apart. We are saved by God's grace alone, through faith alone, and in Christ alone (Ephesians 2:8-10). With the case of an adult believer, such as Abraham, the sign testifies to the work of God to bring that person to faith. With infants, the sign testifies to God's covenant promises extended to the children of believers.

5. *Why do Presbyterians believe in infant baptism?*

Because infants as well as their parents are included in the covenant of grace and belong to the people of God. Every one of God's covenants in Scripture was made with parents and their children, and the sign of the covenant was extended to both. Although Abraham, an adult who came to faith, was

circumcised after his spiritual regeneration, his son Isaac was circumcised when he was only eight days old. This sign was given freely, and not based upon what either Abraham or Isaac *did* (i.e., express their faith); rather it was given to show God's faithfulness to His promise to Abraham.

It is the same with infant baptism. Parents are presenting their children for the sign that God will be faithful to bring believers and their descendants to saving faith. In the New Testament, believers were baptized along with their whole household (Acts 16:15).

Once the child comes to faith in Jesus Christ, the parents and church celebrate God's faithfulness to His promises. We do not re-baptize the individual, because there is only one baptism (Ephesians 4:5), and would make it seem as if their decision and not God's grace was the beginning of faith. The baptism of children witnesses to the truth that God's love and grace claims people before they are able to respond in faith. God's promises are for believers and their children (Acts 2:38-39), and baptism is a sign of incorporation into the covenant community distinguishing the children of believers and unbelievers.⁶

6. *What is the role of parents regarding infant baptism?*

Baptism does not assure the salvation of children. That is, baptism alone does not insure that a child will grow into a strong, faithful, God-fearing, loving person. It is God's grace that works in the lives of believers; present through the Holy Spirit's working in the reading of Scripture, preaching of the Word, the sacraments, and prayer. If the parents of baptized children instruct them in the Word of God, pray with them, and have them actively participate in the worship of God, they will be exposed to the grace of God. Both the church and the parents are to support and nurture the child in the faith.

7. *What about those adults who have never been baptized?*

The baptism of those who enter the covenant upon their own profession of faith in Jesus Christ witnesses to the truth that God's gift of grace calls for a response of faithfulness. Once instructed in the faith, that response is to intentionally identify yourself with the Church, the Body of Christ, by publically acknowledge your faith in Him and need of His mercy and grace and receiving the sacrament of baptism. Baptism is identification with Christ as well as identification with a particular congregation, and a time to claim the promises of God's covenant.

8. *What is the role of the church in baptism?*

The church's responsibilities include encouraging believing parents to present their children for baptism without undue haste but without undue delay, admitting to baptism (after appropriate instruction) those not yet baptized who come making a public profession of faith, placing all baptized persons on the appropriate rolls of the congregation, and making sure that those baptized are nurtured in understanding the meaning of baptism and the Lord's Supper. Most of all, the church is to surround both the individual and also the parents with support, encouragement, and prayers so as to guide that person in the Christian life.⁷

Conclusion:

As an individual, when you express a desire to be baptized you express a desire to claim the promises of God's covenant and to be publically identified with Jesus Christ and incorporated into His Body, the Church.

As a parent, when you bring your child before the congregation for baptism, you claim the promises of the covenant for them. As a family, you and the leadership and membership of Bellefield Presbyterian Church promise together to raise your son or daughter in the Lord in such a manner that your child may truly glorify God and enjoy Him forever.

Please study and discuss the Scripture references found in this booklet, or contact the church for more information.

References

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- ¹ Westminster Larger Catechism, Q. 162
 - ² New Geneva Study Bible, p. 30, Foundation for Reformation, 1995.
 - ³ Book of Worship, Chapter 3.2. See also Matthew 3:15; 28:19-20; Mark 10:38-40; Acts 2:38-47; Romans 6:3-11; Colossians 2:12; Genesis 1:2; Ephesians 4:4-6
 - ⁴ For more, see *What Christian Parents Should Know About Infant Baptism*. John Sartelle, Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co.
 - ⁵ See also Gen 17:7-14; John 3:5; Acts 2:39, 22:16; I Corinthians 6:11, 12:12-13; 2 Corinthians 1:22; Galatians 3:27; Ephesians 1:13-14, 5:14; Colossians 2:11-12; Titus 3:5
 - ⁶ Westminster Confession of Faith, Chapter 28.4; Westminster Larger Catechism, Q. 166; Book of Worship, Chapter 3.G.
 - ⁷ Book of Worship, Chapter 3.F.1, 3.G.2.

Note:

The Constitution of the Evangelical Presbyterian Church is divided into two parts:

(1) The Book of Order consists of three sections: the Book of Government, the Book of Discipline, and the Book of Worship.

(2) The Book of Confessions contains the Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms (Larger and Shorter).