

BAPTISM in a PRESBYTERIAN CONGREGATION

If you attend a Presbyterian church for very long, you are certain to see someone baptized. Perhaps you have been baptized yourself, and have grown up knowing deep meaning in this ceremony. Perhaps Presbyterian Baptism seems strange to you. You may not have been accustomed to seeing infants baptized, or to seeing our form of Baptism. Perhaps you have never had the opportunity to study the meaning of Baptism at all. Whatever your experience, this booklet is designed to acquaint you with what this Sacrament means in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).

Baptism is one of the two Sacraments shared by the whole Church of Jesus Christ. Presbyterians agree with most other Christians that Baptism is a Sacrament given to the Church by Jesus Christ. In a sense, the Sacraments are the Word of God made visible. Reformed theologian Karl Barth calls them "eventful witnesses" to the truth of the gospel. Christ has appointed material things – water, bread, and wine – not only to symbolize spiritual truths, but also to seal and apply those truths to believers.

The visible sign in Baptism is the washing with water, which signifies our cleansing, our regeneration, and our being made new by the saving work of Jesus Christ. The sealing is the work of the Holy Spirit in an individual, in which that person is marked as God's child. Baptism is performed in the name of the triune God -- Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

In many Presbyterian Churches, the baptismal Font is placed close to the Pulpit and Table. Persons to be baptized stand near the Font for the Service of Baptism. When an infant or child is baptized, the Pastor, an Elder, and the child's parents, one holding the child, gather at the Font. Baptism is always administered by an ordained Minister. Many Pastors take babies into their arms during the act of Baptism. Normally, the Sacrament takes place in the presence of the gathered congregation as a part of corporate worship.

CONCERNING FORM

There are two forms or modes of Baptism -- immersion and sprinkling or pouring. Each of these forms seems to have good Scriptural backing, and is deeply meaningful to millions of Christians.

Sprinkling is the form of Baptism practiced by the vast majority of Christians down through the ages, and it is the form employed in Presbyterian churches. Symbolizing our cleansing from sin, it has its roots in certain Biblical expressions:

I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean . . . And I will put My Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in My statutes.

Ezekiel 36:25, 27

Just as Jesus at his Baptism was anointed by the Holy Spirit, so are we at ours. There is no second "Baptism by the Spirit", as some other churches teach.

Presbyterians also recognize the validity of total immersion, the other form of Baptism. The symbolism of immersion, based largely on Romans 6, is that of dying with Christ to sin and rising with him to new life. Immersion is a biblical form of Baptism, and we accept into our membership, without requiring our form of Baptism, all those who have been immersed and who continue to adhere to their baptismal faith. In general, we accept as permanently valid the Baptism of any person baptized in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

CONCERNING INFANT BAPTISM

In company with most of the major Christian bodies in the world, Presbyterians baptize the infant children of believing members. Our reason is theological. We baptize infants because the covenant of God with God's people – made first through Abraham and Sarah, renewed at various times, and brought to fruition in Jesus Christ – includes the new Israel, the new people of God, the Church of Jesus Christ. In the Old Testament, it is clear that children were considered to be heirs of the Promise, a part of the covenant people of God (Genesis 12:1-2; 17:7). On the day of Pentecost, Peter preached:

Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is to you and to your children and to all that are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls.

Acts 2:38-39

Traditionally, Baptism is the New Testament equivalent of circumcision, just as the Lord's Supper is the New Testament equivalent of the Passover. When we present our children for Baptism, we do so because we believe they already belong to God by virtue of God's covenanted mercies. In the words of *The First Westminster Directory of Worship*: . . . the promise is made to believers and their seed; and the seed and posterity of the faithful, born within the church, have, by their birth, interest in the covenant, and right to the seal of it, and to the outward privileges of the church, under the gospel, no less than the children of Abraham in the time of the Old Testament. . . . They are Christians, and federally holy before Baptism, and therefore they are baptized.

In addition, Professor A. B. Rhodes has written:

Inasmuch as the religion of the Old Testament and Judaism centered in the family, it would have taken a special revelation from God to have caused the early Christians to withhold Baptism from their children.

At the Baptism of an infant, there are four parties involved: (1) the infant -- tiny, helpless; (2) the parents, who reaffirm their Christian faith and take upon themselves the vow to raise their child in the nurture and love of God; (3) the congregation, which acts as

godparent and stands symbolically with the parents, joining them in their vow; and (4) God. If God's Holy Spirit were not actively present in Baptism, it would all be mere symbolism, beautiful but not potent. But we believe God is present, confirming God's promise.

At Baptism, we claim and believingly receive the covenant promise and grace of God. Parents lay hold of this promise and grace in faith, and respond by pledging to give Christian love and nurture to their children. Therefore, infant Baptism is not merely an act of dedication. It is also the claiming of God's covenant promise and God's grace. It is expected that at the appropriate age – usually somewhere between twelve and fifteen – baptized children will come before the Session, or governing body, of the church and confirm for themselves the vows their parents made in their behalf. They profess Christ, accept the call of Christ to be disciples, and, after study, become full adult members of the church. This process is called “confirmation.”

The question is often asked, “If faith is required for Baptism, why should we baptize infants who are obviously incapable of faith?” This question ignores the profound truth that the significant aspect of Baptism is not the believer's faith, nor even the faith of believing parents, but God's prior grace. For both children and adults, the fundamental aspect of Baptism is the grace of God. Our Baptism depends not upon our faithfulness, but upon God's faithfulness. We Presbyterians believe that God acts to place the stamp of loving approval upon our infant children. We baptize our children because they, with us, are heirs to the covenant of God's grace.

WHAT HAPPENS IN BAPTISM?

From time immemorial water has been used for cleansing. In the religious realm water came to be used as a symbol of cleansing and purification. The water which is poured on our heads in Baptism does not really cleanse us, but Christ in his death for us on the cross cleanses us. The water is a sign that points to this cleansing; the reality is that we are made clean by the mighty act of God in Christ. In Baptism we receive the fulfilled promise of the Holy Spirit, to make us a new creation in Christ.

Something happens in Baptism. It is not merely playacting. Sacraments are symbolic, but they are also more than symbols. Sacraments partake of the reality to which they point.

Baptism does not make a person new. It is not a bit of magic performed by a Minister. When a believing person confesses faith in Jesus Christ and is baptized, God honors that confession and receives that person into Christ's Church. The moment of Baptism is not necessarily the moment when this occurs. Baptism signifies and seals our acceptance into Christ's body, the Church. But only God can know the exact time when a person becomes "a member of Christ." We also realize that post-baptismal sin is a fact. No human being is ever sinless, not even redeemed people, but baptized people remain Christians if their faith and obedience are honest.

It is said that Martin Luther, in his hours of deepest discouragement -- in those dark times when he wondered if he were saved, and if life had any real meaning -- would recall to himself one renewing fact: *Baptizatus sum*, "I have been baptized!" For Luther, and for all believing members of Christ's Church, that is enough. By our baptisms, we testify to the world that we are Christ's people. In our Baptism, we are marked as God's own forever. We will have our rough days; the storms of life will beat upon us; temptations will assail us; and sometimes we will fall. But ever and always, we have been baptized, and we belong to Christ.

From A Declaration of Faith, PC(USA)

We believe that in Baptism
the Spirit demonstrates and confirms God's promise
to include us and our children in God's gracious covenant,
cleansing us from sin,
and giving us newness of life,
as participants in Christ's death and resurrection.
Baptism sets us in the visible community of Christ's people
and joins us to all other believers by a powerful bond.
In baptism we give ourselves up in faith and repentance
to be the Lord's.
For both children and adults, baptism is a reminder
that God loves us long before we can love God.
For both, God's grace and our response to it
are not tied to the moment of Baptism,
but continue and deepen throughout life.

CERTIFICATE OF BAPTISM INFORMATION

FULL NAME OF CHILD _____

NAME PREFERRED FOR ACT OF BAPTISM (Usually First and Middle Name)

DATE OF BIRTH _____

PLACE OF BIRTH _____

(City)

(State)

(Zip)

FATHER'S NAME _____

(First)

(Middle)

(Last)

MOTHER'S NAME _____

(First)

(Middle)

(Last)

WHERE ARE YOU CHURCH MEMBERS? _____

HOME ADDRESS _____

TELEPHONE NUMBER _____

DATE OF BAPTISM _____

TIME OF WORSHIP SERVICE _____

OTHER INFORMATION _____
