

Families and individuals who approach us for baptism can come from many different places:

- Many come or bring their children because they have a deep, abiding faith in Christ and realize that baptism is important.
- Some bring their infants early in life because they have been told that if they don't get their child baptized, that child's soul is in danger
- Some bring infants because "it is the thing to do"; others because family is pressuring them
- Some families want us to baptize grand-children who are growing up in families that don't participate in worship—in the hopes that something spiritual may be imparted to the child
- Some approach us because they have never been baptized and now profess faith in Christ; others have been baptized but don't respect the baptism of their childhood and want to be "re-baptized."

For these and other reasons, we have prepared this paper, which we encourage individuals and families considering baptism to read and discuss with us. We will first present our understanding of baptism, and what it means for children/adults. Then, we will ask and answer a number of questions that have frequently been posed.

Command

Christians of many different traditions agree that the basis and authority for baptizing in water lies in the command given by Jesus Christ to His disciples and recorded by Matthew (28:18-20)

All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to observe everything I have commanded you. And surely I will be with you always, to the end of the age.

The Old Covenant Foundation for Christ's Command

Christ gave his command to baptize about 2,000 years ago. But Presbyterians believe that the real foundation for baptism lies in two ancient practices.

First, when God called Abraham (Genesis 12:1-2) to be the "father of many nations," he promised that through Abraham God would bless all nations. In order to designate Abraham's descendents as holy and special unto God, He gave Abraham the covenant of circumcision as a physical sign that the Jewish nation belonged to God. Jewish males were circumcised when eight days old. This ritual signified that they were God's Covenant people.

Later, God indicated that the outward sign of the covenant of His grace would be changed when, through the prophet Ezekiel He declared:

I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean. I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws. You will be my people, and I will be your God. (Ez. 36:25-28)

A second ancient practice that provides a foundation for our understanding of baptism is the use of baptism before/during the time of Christ. Many Christians think, instinctively, that baptism was “invented” by John the Baptist early in the gospel times. In fact the Jews had baptized Gentile converts well before the time of Christ. When a Gentile wanted to become part of the Jewish faith, he/she had to renounce his/her Gentile identity and, more importantly, un-cleanness. Jews would baptize the Gentile converts to show that they had “died” to their old way of life and were born anew into the Jewish faith. Ironically, although Gentiles renounced their old life in baptism, they were never invited into the synagogue and Temple, nor into the homes of Jews; they remained unclean, separated from the faith they claimed.

When John the Baptist entered the scene he added a new dimension to the practice of baptism: he baptized Jews. For the first time Jews, although chosen by God as his people, were called to renounce their lives of sin and to repent, to turn, back toward God.

As the early church was birthed, both Jews and Gentiles were baptized into God’s kingdom; both Jews and Gentiles were given equal access to Jesus Christ and to the new life that could be had in him:

Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off - for all whom the Lord our God will call. (Acts 2:38,39)

In him you were also circumcised, in the putting off of your sinful nature, not with a circumcision done by the hands of men but with the circumcision done by Christ. In baptism you were buried with him and raised with him through your faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead. (Colossians 2:11,12)

One of those listening was a woman named Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth from the city of Thyatira, who was a worshipper of God. The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message. When she and the members of her household were baptized, she invited us to her home ... (Acts 16:14,15)

The Meaning of Baptism

Baptism (like circumcision in the Old Testament), whether administered to an adult or a child, has one primary meaning: Through the symbol of water we declare that we can do nothing to bridge the gulf of separation that exists between us and our Savior Jesus Christ. It is through his death and resurrection that we are made clean and righteous in the sight of God, and therefore incorporated into God's family of faith.

What this means. . . *for Adults*

When an adult (never before baptized) is baptized, that person presents him/herself as a follower of Jesus Christ who has embraced Christ as his/her Savior and Lord. For adults the water is a symbol of a completed act—Christ is already the Lord of this person's life. The baptismal water does not make a person right in God's eyes; baptism is the sign, or symbol, of that salvation. Baptism, in the public worship of God, brings that adult into full membership of the church of Jesus Christ.

What is required, then, for an adult to be baptized in a Presbyterian fellowship? He or she must be able to:

- demonstrate that he/she has embraced Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior (you will be asked to share your faith journey with the pastor)
- indicate a desire to figuratively "plunge into the waters of baptism, thus dying to an old way of life, and being raised to follow Jesus for the rest your life"
- express a desire to be a participant in the church of Jesus Christ through worship, nurture and service

What this means. . . *for Parents and Children*

The baptism of infants is the predominate practice found in the Presbyterian Church. Presbyterians baptize the children of Christians who have shown through word and action that they follow Jesus and are active participants in the church.

When parents present their child(ren) for baptism we together engage in a "prefiguring act." The water remains a symbol (and not a saving act, or even an action that guarantees the future salvation of the child). Through baptism we are looking forward, parents and church, to the day when that child embraces and loves Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. The water we place on the forehead at baptism anticipates the saving cleansing of Jesus when that child believes and follows him. In the public act of worship we are welcoming the child into the covenant family of believers.

When a child is baptized in the Presbyterian Church, therefore, the faith of the parents is essential. The parent(s) must be able to:

- demonstrate that he/she has embraced Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior (you will be asked to share your faith journey with the pastor)

- indicate a desire to intentionally introduce this child to Jesus Christ in partnership with the church
- express a proven commitment to be a participant in the church of Jesus Christ through worship, nurture and service

The Responsibilities of Baptism

... for Parents

The parent makes a vow before God and the Christian Church:

- in dependence on the grace of God, to bring up this child in the nurture and training of the Lord.
- by God's grace to participate actively in the life of the church and to bring the child to church.

... for the Christian Congregation

In the Presbyterian Church the congregation also makes a vow before God and the Parents, which is why:

- a. baptism must occur, with only rare exception, in the public worship of the people of God, and
- b. in the Presbyterian Church, the only recognized "godparent" of the child is the congregation, who takes the vow.

By accepting the parents' vow and making its own vow in return, the church:

- Promises to accept the child into the family of faith
- Vows to love the child and provide opportunities for him/her to be nurtured in the Christian faith
- Is given opportunity, by the pastor, to make a special covenant of prayer for that child's salvation

Review ...

Presbyterians do not believe that baptism itself saves a person, that is, "makes us a Christian." We believe that baptism is a "sign" of God's grace that offers forgiveness for our sin.

Questions and Answers

Question: Do we allow "godparents" for the children?

Answer: While some families may choose to designate a godparent for their child, the Presbyterian Church, in its public worship, only recognizes the entire congregation making its vow to love and nurture the child in the faith, as godparent.

Question: Do we “christen” or “baptize?”

Answer: Roman Catholics use the word “christen,” which implies the act of making a person a Christian through baptism. We do not hold to that belief; the word “baptism” is biblical and descriptive for our purposes.

Question: What if only one parent professes faith in Jesus Christ?

Answer: As long as one parent professes clear faith in Jesus Christ and has made a strong commitment to His church, a child may be brought for baptism.

Question: May grandparents, whose children may be visiting from out of town, present their grandchildren for baptism?

Answer: Because we believe that baptism incorporates a child into the family of faith, we believe that baptism is to be practiced by the congregation where the child/family participates. If:

a. The family does not participate in worship, they need to locate a congregation near them where they may attend and petition that the child be baptized

b. The family does participate in a congregation, but that congregation does not practice/allow infant baptism, we may consider baptizing the child.

Question: Why baptize an infant when an infant cannot repent and have faith?

Answer: Circumcision was performed upon infants who could not repent and have faith, and circumcision has been replaced by baptism. Most of Paul's references to baptism do not mention repentance and faith (Rom. 6:1-11; 1 Cor. 6:11; 12:13; 2 Cor. 1:21; Eph. 5:25-7; Col. 1:13).

Question: May I be baptized again if I wish?

Answer: Since the Presbyterian denomination does not believe that baptism is a saving act, then being baptized once for life is adequate.

Question: What if I don't believe that my parents were believers and, therefore, they were unable to make Christian vows at my baptism?

Answer: This is still not grounds to be re-baptized. Salvation is a gift from God, by his grace (Ephesians 2:1-9); the application of water, and the proclamation of vow, does not

guarantee salvation. If you believe in Christ and have been baptized, then you are a member and participant in the family of God (the church).

Note: Please ask all family members/friends to refrain from taking pictures during a service of worship involving baptism. The pastor(s) will gladly meet you following worship for pictures.