

Baptism from a Presbyterian Perspective

by Rev. Shannon Pappas

Baptism is a transliteration of the Greek word *baptizo*, which literally means “to immerse.” Even during the first century, though, the word *baptize* had come to mean more than simply “to immerse” or to *submerge* in water. There are indications in the New Testament that this term had already taken on special religious meaning and significance (i.e. it referred specifically to a *religious rite*), which is why most English versions of the Bible do not *translate* the Greek word *baptizo* as “immerse” but rather as “baptize.” The Greek word *baptizo* is *transliterated* into English rather than *translated* into English in order to preserve its religious and even sacramental meaning.

Sacraments

The church understands baptism to be a sacrament. The word “sacrament” comes from the Latin *sacramentum*, which means “mystery.” The Greek word for *mystery* – *mysterion* – is found in the New Testament (particularly in Ephesians and Colossians) and refers there to Jesus, to the things of Jesus, to the gospel, to the good plan of God, etc. We refer to the sacraments (baptism and the Lord’s Supper) as sacraments because they are **holy mysteries** that we do not and can not fully understand but through which we believe God’s invisible grace becomes visible to us.

The great early church theologian Augustine (354-430) was the first to describe sacraments as “outward, visible signs of inward, spiritual grace.” The Roman Catholic Church has understood the sacraments to actually convey justifying (i.e. saving) and sanctifying grace. Protestant churches (among whom are Presbyterians), however, have generally understood the sacraments to be important *means* of grace only as they are received by *faith*. They are outward signs done by people to represent or symbolize the inward grace enacted independently and freely by God. Thus, the sacraments are not necessary for salvation; nor are they “magic” of any sort. Such understandings of or connections with baptism (i.e. that they have magic power in and of themselves or that through them God can be manipulated) are erroneous.

The Roman Catholic Church recognizes *seven* sacraments. Protestant Christians, however, only recognize *two* sacraments – baptism and communion (also known as the Lord’s Supper or the Eucharist). Protestants long ago settled on only these two sacraments 1) because Jesus told people to engage in these two activities, and 2) because these two activities are for *all* people and not just for certain people.

Background of Baptism

Baptism has its roots in the Jewish rituals of purification that were a part of worship at the temple in Jerusalem. Gentile converts to Judaism were also baptized (literally: *immersed*) as part of their initiation into the Jewish faith. John the Baptist baptized people in the Jordan River and his baptism was based on repentance and for the forgiveness of sins. Among the people that John baptized was Jesus, who himself was sinless and therefore did not need to repent or to be forgiven. Thus, the baptism of Jesus had a unique and broader significance than every other baptism, which we do not fully understand. Still, we do know that Jesus later sent out his own disciples to baptize people,

which they did. (It is interesting to note that the Bible never records Jesus himself ever baptizing anyone.)

Different Forms of Baptism

Regarding the modes of baptism (full immersion, pouring, and “sprinkling”), it may be argued that “baptize” in the NT had come to mean “to wash” or “to purify with water” as is indicated in places where “baptize” cannot mean “immerse.” (See Luke 11:38; Acts 1:5; Acts 2:3-4, 17; 1 Corinthians 10:1-2; and Hebrews 9:10-23.) Nevertheless, the primary form of baptism in the New Testament wherever and whenever possible was probably immersion, though all forms are equally valid today, at least among Presbyterians and most other Protestant and Roman Catholic Christians.

Significance of Baptism

Baptism is described by all Christians as signifying one’s initiation into Jesus Christ himself. Presbyterians, along with some other Christians, also understand baptism to signify a person’s initiation into the Christian *community*. Here are several of the metaphors and images through which the Bible portrays this initiation into Jesus Christ and also into the Christian community:

- 1) Dying and being raised to new life with Christ. (Romans 6:3-4) This is a particularly vivid image if/when a person is literally immersed in water and then raised out of the water.
- 2) The washing and cleansing of a sin-stained life (1 Corinthians 6:11), and more than that, forgiveness for the general Sin (i.e. sinfulness) of Adam in which we all participate (Romans 5:12-21). (This answers the question of some regarding why babies also need God’s grace.)
- 3) Re-birth and new life by the Holy Spirit. (John 3:5 and Acts 2:38) Baptism can be considered the beginning of this new life and also the beginning of the pilgrimage of discipleship, though still in its early stages and far from complete. (Matthew 28:19)
- 4) Incorporation or engrafting into God, Christ, God’s family, the church, Christ’s body, the Christian community, etc. (See Ephesians 4:4-6 and Romans 11:11-24.)

For these last reasons and because of God’s predilection to covenanting with His entire people as a *community* rather than only as individuals, Presbyterians believe that baptism should only be administered in the presence and context of the covenant community, and particularly the covenant community *while gathered to worship God*. Presbyterians understand baptism to be not a private rite or act but rather a public one – something to be shared by and in the greater Christian community. Baptism signifies one’s entrance into God’s visible covenant people.

Why do we baptize infants as well as adults?

- 1) There are several times in the book of Acts where entire “households” are baptized (e.g. Acts 16:31-34; Acts 18:7-8). Presumably there were small children and even infants in these households, and everyone was baptized. In these contexts, baptism is administered more broadly than just to those who professed faith in Jesus Christ.
- 2) Our Reformed theology recognizes that God frequently deals with families and even communities rather than solely with individuals. When Noah was saved from the flood, his whole family was invited with him into the ark (See. 1 Peter 3:20-21.) When Abraham was given the covenant sign of circumcision, he was commanded to administer it to all the male members of his house. (See Genesis 17 and Colossians 2:11-12) At the Red Sea it was all Israel (men,

women, and children) who passed through the waters (Exodus 14) in the great act of redemption that foreshadowed Jesus saving us and the sign of baptism. (See 1 Corinth. 10:1-2.)

- 3) We also take very seriously Peter's words in Acts 2:39 on the day of Pentecost: "This promise is for you and your children."
- 4) Moreover, the children of Christians enjoy privileges and perhaps even a status which cannot be ascribed to others. They are reckoned in some sense "holy" by God. (See 1 Corinthians 7:14.)
- 5) Next, there is a parallel between baptism in the New Testament and circumcision in the Old Testament, which was administered to infants and which was an outward and visible sign of the covenant God made with Abraham and his descendents (Genesis 17) apart from anything they had done, believed, or professed (i.e. before they reached an "age of understanding.")
- 6) Finally and maybe most important, infant baptism powerfully declares the sovereign grace and initiative of God. Infant baptism declares that God loves us before we ever love Him and that God's love for us is infinitely greater than our love for him. (1 John 4:10) We are fully dependent on God and God's grace. By His grace rather than our works are people saved. Thus, baptism is more about *God* than it is about the one being baptized. It is more about the promises and claims that God has already made than the promises and claims that parents (or the one being baptized) make at baptism. The baptism of infants shows that, like little children, we are helpless apart from the grace of God.

What do the baptism of infants and the baptism of adults have in common?

Both adult believers (adults and youth) and the children (including infants) of believers are included in God's love. Also, with both types of baptism, faith or trust in God is involved. In the case of adults, it is their own faith. In the case of infants, it is their parents' faith.

What is the relationship between baptism and salvation? Is a person saved" when or immediately after being baptized?"

This is a good question, a point of great confusion for some, and part of the mystery of baptism.

We believe that God is at work in the act and event of baptism through His Holy Spirit. However, we also believe that God's gift of salvation comes to us by grace *through faith*, which itself is also a gift from God. (Ephesians 2:8-9) Thus, the answer to the above questions are, No, a person is does not become "saved" or receive salvation *by* baptism or *through* baptism or *at* one's baptism.

At the same time, the lack of baptism does not preclude salvation, particularly for an infant. Rather, we believe that, according to God's grace and all that we can learn in Jesus' teachings, that anyone who dies in infancy will be saved by Jesus Christ through the mysterious working of his Holy Spirit.

What about being baptized a second time?

Presbyterians believe that baptism once is sufficient and that a person only ought to be baptized once. To be baptized a second (or third or fourth or ...) time calls into question the worth or effectiveness of God's gift of baptism the first time. Repeated baptizing also opens the door to misunderstandings about baptism such as 1) the false belief that one's salvation can be lost; or 2) the false belief that through baptism all of one's previous (but not future) sins are forgiven, which led the 4th century Roman emperor Constantine (who happened to be the very first Christian emperor) and others to put off their baptism until they were on their death beds.

So, baptism only once is sufficient. God is big enough to accomplish His purposes even through traditions that some may evaluate differently as the years ago. Even a spiritual awakening later in life or a fresh experience of the Holy Spirit does not necessitate a person being "re-baptized" or baptized again.

What constitutes a valid baptism?

Baptism in its most elemental sense is the simple, outward, physical applying of water to a person. This is done with hearts seeking God, trusting that God is at work through the waters of baptism. Presbyterians, like most Christians, baptize people in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit (Matthew 28:19), and we recognize almost any baptism done in the name of the Father, the Son, and Holy Spirit (including in the Roman Catholic Church, etc.). That is generally agreed to be the biblical standard, though there are instances in Acts (e.g. 10:48 and 19:5) in which people are baptized simply in the name of Jesus.

Presbyterians do *not* recognize baptisms administered by churches, sects, and organizations outside the umbrella of orthodox and apostolic Christianity such as the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (i.e. Mormons).

Presbyterians recognize baptisms to be equally valid regardless of whether water is sprinkled or poured on the one being baptized or that person is physically and completely immersed in water.

How does baptism differ from dedication?

Briefly, dedication is offering one's child to the Lord for God's holy purposes. Dedication is the public pledge *of parents* to raise their child as a follower of Jesus. Dedication emanates from human initiative and is about a commitment on the *parents'* part to love their child in the Lord whereas the *baptism* of an infant represents a reliance on *God's* initiative and trust in *God's* love for the child being baptized. Baptism acknowledges that God loved us before we loved Him and that we are wholly dependent on God's grace. Baptism represents more of a *response* to *God's* decision and mercy whereas dedication represents *one's own* decision and commitment.

Must the parents of children presented for baptism be members of the church?

The answer to this question is typically Yes, but there are exceptions. As noted above, Presbyterians understand baptism to be an act of the covenant community (i.e. the church). When a child is baptized, the members of the local congregation pledge to teach and make into disciples of Jesus the children we baptize. (Matthew 28:18-20) To ensure that the child is present through the years to those who have committed to participate in the child's spiritual nurture, it is imperative that *at least one parent* be an active, participating member of the church. This is the best way of ensuring that the child will be connected to the loving, teaching presence of those who have committed to help raise the child in the Lord.

The most common exception to the above is if a grandparent or other guardian has or has been ceded primary responsibility for a child's physical and spiritual care, and if that grandparent (or grandparents) is an active, participating member of the local church, then baptism is appropriate.

What follows baptism?

As baptism signifies the beginning of one's journey and life with God in Jesus, what follows baptism is growing in the Lord. For an adult, this means embarking on a life of faithful discipleship, spiritual growth, of seeking and following Jesus, obeying his commands, and seeking to bring glory to God in all things. For the parents of infants or small children baptized, this means intentionally and prayerfully raising one's children in the "nurture and admonition of the Lord." (Ephesians 6:4), which is consistent with the central passage of the Old Testament (specifically Deuteronomy 6), known as the *shema*:

4 Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. 5 Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. 6 These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. 7 **Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up.** 8 Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. 9 Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates.

Through parents' guidance, training, and modeling a life of love in Jesus Christ, and with the church community's support, encouragement and prayers, the hope is that baptized infants and children will grow to one day make their own personal and public profession of faith in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord, recognizing the significance of God's grace in his or her own life. Confirmation Class during adolescence is often when this happens, though our schedules for development, learning and transformation are not always in synch with God's Spirit and a particular person's heart.

How does the baptism relate to Communion (i.e. the Lord's Supper)?

It is our understanding that baptism is the means of grace and sacrament of *entrance* into God's covenant community and that Communion is the means of grace and sacrament *for* God's covenant community. Baptism is about entrance or initiation. Communion is about nurture, fellowship, and growth. Therefore, baptism typically precedes Communion. To that end, all (i.e. adults *and* children) who have been baptized into Jesus Christ are encouraged *after formal instruction and understanding of the meaning and significance of the Lord's Supper* to participate in the sacrament of Communion with the covenant community. It is a privilege and joy to do so.

Typical questions asked of adults being baptized and of parents when their infant is being baptized:

- 1) Who is your Savior and Lord? Do you trust him?
- 2) Do you renounce evil (i.e. repent of sin) and affirm your reliance on God's grace?
- 3) Do you promise to be a faithful disciple of Jesus Christ, obey his word, participate faithfully in the life of his church, and demonstrate his love to all people?

When an infant is being baptized, a question like this is also asked of the parents:

- 4) Do you promise to raise your child in every way according to God's Word and teaching him/her to trust, love, and follow Jesus?

What parents are saying when they bring their child to be baptized:

- That I trust Jesus Christ as my Savior and Lord and recognize that I am part of his community.
- That I intend to raise my child in the fellowship of the church and that I want my child, whom I love completely, to know exactly how much God loves him/her.
- That my hope and prayer is that my child will one day profess for himself/herself that "Jesus is Lord" and that my child will know God's love in a personal way.

Typical question asked to the congregation at the baptism of an infant:

Do you, members of this church and the broader church of Jesus Christ, promise to pray for _____, point him/her to Jesus Christ, and participate in the raising of the community's children for the glory of God? Do you?

What the congregation is saying when a child is baptized:

- That they will pray for your child; that they will serve in the church nursery, Sunday school and youth group; that they will live before your child in such a way that he/she will be encouraged to embrace, profess faith in, and follow Jesus. (The primary responsibility for raising a child to know, love, and obey God still, of course, belongs to the child's parents.)
- That they will support you as parents during the early, tiring years on through the stressful adolescent stressful years and beyond.

Typical question asked to the congregation at the baptism of an adult:

Do you, members of this church and the broader church of Jesus Christ, promise to pray for _____, point him/her to Jesus Christ, and encourage him/her in every way as a brother/sister in Jesus Christ and a member of your covenant family?

What the congregation is saying when an adult is baptized:

- That they welcome this person into their fellowship and family; that they will treat this person like a brother or sister; and that they will encourage the newly baptized person in his or her faith in Jesus and in his or her participation in the congregation's worship of God and ministry to the world.

Questions for candidates for baptism or his/her parent(s) to think about and discuss:

- 1) What has been your experience with baptism? What memories do you have about baptism?
- 2) What does baptism mean to you? How do you understand baptism?
- 3) Why do you want to be baptized? Or, why do you want to have your child baptized?

Logistics prior to baptism at First Presbyterian Church:

- Before a baptism is scheduled at FPCSM, the one to be baptized or their parents are asked to attend a baptism class for instruction about the significance and understanding of baptism.
- After the baptism class, a baptism may be scheduled for a particular worship service, typically on the fourth Sunday of the month at FPCSM. If a pastor from another congregation or a particular elder is requested, such should be indicated at the time a date is requested and the pastor will follow up.
- Because flash photography can be distracting in worship and move the focus from God to the one being baptized, flash photography during baptisms is not appropriate. Furthermore, lest baptism and worship become a show, the use of video cameras should be limited to one's lap (i.e. very subtle) or the back of the sanctuary. Family and friends who may be present should be made aware of these guidelines. ... Posed photographs re-enacting the baptism may also be done after the worship service.