

Baptism

at

First Presbyterian Church

414 Sunset Road

Wilson, North Carolina

252-243-3115

The history and meaning of baptism

Years ago, along the muddy banks of the Jordan River, a man named Jesus waded into the current and let a spirited prophet named John dip him in the water. Since that moment, following his example and his words, followers of Christ have *baptized* new believers with water. Like an invisible tattoo, each person of faith is marked. Some pour the water, some sprinkle the water, some immerse people in the water. The purpose and meaning of the action, though, are the same: initiation and welcome into the body of Christ.

Baptism is more than simply a human act. There is something mysterious about it, something about it that is beyond us, something holy. Baptism is a sacrament – one of two we recognize in the Presbyterian Church – the other being the Lord's Supper. While we do not believe there is anything magical about the act or anything supernatural about the water, we do believe that God is uniquely present with us in the midst of our actions. God blesses it. God acts through it. Our actions with water are but visible signs of an invisible grace, one that works through us and even beyond us.

In the Christian faith, baptism has great meaning and deep symbolism. Baptism is the sign and seal of our belonging to Christ. In baptism, we participate in Jesus' death and resurrection. We die to what separates us from God and are raised to newness of life in Christ. Baptism points us *back* to the grace of God expressed in Christ, who died for us and who was raised for us. Baptism points us *forward* to that same Christ who will fulfill God's purpose in God's promised future.

Baptism is the sign and seal of our inclusion in God's grace and our inclusion into the body of Christ, the church. Baptism unites the people of God with each other and with the church of every time and place. Barriers of race, gender, status and age are to be transcended. Barriers of nationality, history and practice are to be overcome.

The symbolism of baptism

The pouring of water at baptism reminds us of the waters of creation, of the flood and of the exodus from Egypt. Thus, the water of baptism links us to the goodness of God's creation and to the grace of God's covenants with Noah and later with the people of Israel. The water calls us to remember the voice of the



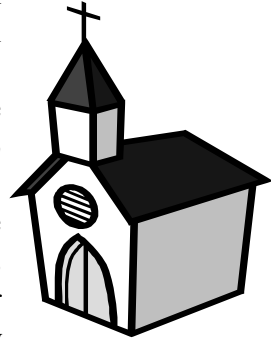
prophets, calling for “justice to roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.” The waters remind us of the eternal water that Christ offered. Thinking of the natural order, the waters of baptism remind us of the nourishing water that rains on the earth, the waters that break forth at every new birth, waters that clean our bodies and waters that quench our thirsts.

As an identifying mark, baptism signifies:

- recognizing the faithfulness of God
- washing away of sin
- feeling rebirth
- putting on the fresh garment of Christ
- being sealed by God's spirit
- being adopted into the family of the church
- knowing the resurrection of Christ.

Baptism in the Presbyterian/Reformed tradition

God's faithfulness signified in baptism is constant and sure, even when human faithfulness to God is not. Baptism, then, is received only once. The efficacy of the sacrament is not tied to the moment when it is administered. Baptism signifies the beginning of life in Christ, not its completion. God's grace works steadily, calling for repentance and newness of life, every day. God's faithfulness needs no renewal. Human faithfulness to God needs repeated renewal.



Presbyterians baptize both adults, as they make a profession of faith, and infants, who cannot. The baptism of children witnesses to the truth that God's love claims people before they are able to respond in faith. It claims them before they can begin to claim God. The baptism of those who enter the covenant upon their own profession of faith gives witness to the truth that God's gift of grace calls for fulfillment in a response of faithfulness.

When a child is presented for baptism, ordinarily the parent(s) shall be active member(s) of the congregation. The church Session may consider a request for the baptism of a child from Christian parent(s) who is/are active member(s) of another congregation. In baptism, a congregation, on behalf of the church universal, assumes responsibility for nurturing the baptized person in life and

faith. This takes the form of a pledge. The baptized believer or their parent(s) make vows that:

- Profess their faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior;
- Renounce evil and affirm their reliance on God's grace;
- Declare their intention to participate actively and responsibly in the worship and mission of the church.

As the child grows in the church, they are provided opportunities for learning and growing in the faith. By middle-school age, we provide a "confirmation" experience in which the child considers seriously their faith commitment and is encouraged to join the church as a professing believer in Christ Jesus.

Questions often asked:

"I've been baptized before. Do I have to be baptized again? (or "can I be baptized again?)"

- We recognize all baptisms with water, done in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit and administered by other Christian churches. If you have been baptized once, you do not need to be baptized again.

"Can I simply dedicate my child and wait on baptism until my child professes their faith in Christ?"

- We encourage parents to present their infants to be baptized, at a time when they feel appropriate. We have no order to "dedicate" children. As a parent, you may, of course, decide to wait till the child is at an age to profess his or her own faith for themselves.

“Can we do the baptism at our house?”

- Baptism is not a private affair, but administered in the presence of the community of faith.

“Can I take pictures?”

- Baptism is not a social affair, but a religious sacrament. We ask that you respect the occasion, and take photographs after the service when there will be ample opportunities.

“Is the water holy?”

- The water is not holy. There is nothing magical or special about the water. We affirm that God does special things with very common elements...and people!

What is the next step?

- Speak to the pastor and arrange a time and date for the baptism.
- In preparation of the baptism, the pastor or church officer will meet with your family to discuss baptism.
- Complete the enclosed form and return to the church office on the Monday prior to the baptism.
- The morning of the baptism, meet with the church session (governing body) a few minutes before worship to be officially welcomed, to receive a few gifts and to review the order of service.
- Following the baptism, invest yourself and your child into the life and ministry of the church.



Prepared with assistance from:

The Book of Order, Presbyterian Church (USA)

The Book of Confessions, Presbyterian Church (USA)

Notes from baptism materials from a variety of sources including, First Presbyterian, Wilson, White Memorial Presbyterian Church, Raleigh, Covenant Presbyterian Church, Wendell, NC.

May 2009