

# THE SACRAMENT OF CHRISTIAN BAPTISM

*“Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.” Amen. Matthew 28:19-20*

## General Announcement

Our congregation will be observing the sacrament of Christian baptism during this morning’s worship service. Following the ministry of God’s Word, the candidate for baptism will be invited forward to profess his faith in Christ by publicly affirming our *Covenant of Communicant Membership*. A list of these vows is located inside the front cover of *The Book of Psalms for Worship*.

After the membership vows are taken, the congregation will rise to affirm a vow of reception: *“Do you, the members of this congregation, receive this person into your fellowship and promise to pray for him, and to help and encourage him in the Christian faith?”* The minister will then pray for God’s blessing and perform the baptism in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

## Institution, Nature, and Purpose

A sacrament is a holy ordinance instituted by Christ, in which symbols and actions signify Christ and the benefits of the covenant of grace (Rom. 4:11). A sacrament becomes a means of grace only by the working of the Holy Spirit in those who receive it by faith, in connection with God’s Word. The sacraments of the New Covenant are two: Baptism and the Lord’s Supper.

Baptism marks a person’s solemn admission into the visible church of Jesus Christ. It is a sign and seal of union with Christ, of newness of life in Him, and of cleansing from sin through His blood. It cannot regenerate or justify a sinner.

Larger Catechism #165 reminds us that through baptism “the parties baptized are solemnly admitted into the visible Church, and enter into an open and professed engagement to be wholly and only the Lord’s.” The baptism of a believer implies God’s ownership of his entire life – setting apart all that he *is* and *has* for the glory and service of Christ – including his children. Christ’s apostles, therefore, baptized professing believers along with their households (Acts 16:15), declaring that “the promise is to you and to your children” (Gen. 17:7; Acts 2:39).

The Bible speaks of “one baptism” (Eph. 4:5), which is to be performed only *once* by a lawfully ordained minister of the gospel, into the Triune name of God. A valid Christian baptism must never be repeated.

The only alleged example of *re-baptism* in the New Testament occurs in Acts 19:1-6, when the Apostles encounter Jewish believers in Ephesus who had previously received John’s baptism of repentance in the Jordan River. John’s baptism was a special ordinance to help Israel prepare for the arrival of the Messiah. It was not identical to Christian baptism into God’s Triune name (Matt. 28:19). For this reason, the Apostles required these disciples to receive Christian baptism in connection with their admission into the Christian church.

The only outward, physical element to be used in baptism is water, which is best applied by sprinkling or pouring. It is true that the Greek verb “to baptize” (baptizo) originated centuries before our Lord’s birth in connection with the concept of immersion. However, there is no compelling evidence that it carried this exclusive meaning in the common Greek language of the 1<sup>st</sup> century, when the New Testament was written. Just as the English verb “to ship” once signified a specific mode of transportation (a seafaring vessel) and now refers to transportation by any means (ground, air, etc.), even so the Apostles employ the verb “to baptize” (baptizo) in reference to the act of washing in general, without implying a specific manner of applying the water.

Scripture provides reasonable grounds for baptism by sprinkling or pouring. After introducing the “various baptisms” of the Old Testament in Hebrews 9:10, the Apostle makes reference to “sprinkling” no less than three times in the ensuing context (vv. 13, 19, 21). Our Lord describes the *outpouring* of the Holy Spirit upon His Church at Pentecost as their being “baptized with the Holy Spirit” (Acts 1:5-8). Peter later identifies this *outpouring* with the prophecy of Joel 2:28, “I will pour out My Spirit on all flesh” (Acts 2:17). He then links it with the command to “be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ” (v. 38).

Other Bible passages associate baptism with Noah’s household (1 Peter 3:20-21) and Israel at the Red Sea (1 Cor. 10:1-4), both of which were actually saved *from* the deadly immersion experienced by God’s enemies. While baptism by immersion is not required by Scripture, it is a valid mode of Christian baptism.

The gracious effects of baptism are not limited to the precise moment in time when it is administered. In fact, every baptized person should regularly reflect on the reality of his or her baptism, especially when witnessing the baptism of another person. Larger Catechism 167 states,

The needful but much neglected duty of improving our baptism, is to be performed by us all our life long, especially in the time of temptation, and when we are present at the administration of it to others; by serious and thankful consideration of the nature of it, and of the ends for which Christ instituted it, the privileges and benefits conferred and sealed thereby, and our solemn vow made therein; by being humbled for our sinful defilement, our falling short of, and walking contrary to, the grace of baptism, and our engagements; by growing up to assurance of pardon of sin, and of all other blessings sealed to us in that sacrament; by drawing strength from the death and resurrection of Christ, into whom we are baptized, for the mortifying of sin, and quickening of grace; and by endeavoring to live by faith, to have our conversation in holiness and righteousness, as those that have therein given up their names to Christ; and to walk in brotherly love, as being baptized by the same Spirit into one body.