

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 parents of the child who is to be baptized will come forward (1) to reiterate their adherence to our *Covenant of Communicant Membership*, (2) to affirm our *Covenant of Baptism*, and (3) to devote their newborn child to the Lord in the sacrament of baptism. Afterward, the communicant members of our congregation will rise to affirm the following vow of reception: *“Do you, the communicant members of this congregation, receive this child into your fellowship and promise to pray for him/her, and to help and encourage the parents as they seek to bring him/her up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord?”*

The Institution, Nature, and Purpose of Baptism

A sacrament is a holy ordinance instituted by Christ, in which symbols and actions signify and confirm the reality of Christ and the benefits of the covenant of grace (Rom. 4:11). A sacrament becomes a means of grace for believers only by the working of the Holy Spirit, in connection with God’s Word (Mt. 28:19-20). Sacraments also serve to distinguish the true Church of God from the ungodly world. Presently, under the New Covenant, there are two sacraments: Baptism and the Lord’s Supper.

Baptism is a sign and seal of union with Christ, of newness of life in Him, and of cleansing from sin through His blood. Baptism cannot regenerate or justify a sinner. Rather, it reinforces the baptized person’s need for spiritual cleansing, and provides comforting reassurance of God’s promise to save all who repent and believe in Christ. Believers, looking back on this declaration of God’s faithfulness in their baptism, will find that it serves “to strengthen and increase their faith, and all other graces” (LC 162). By contrast, baptized persons who neglect or abandon God’s covenant are reassured of greater judgment (Lk. 12:48; Rm. 3:1-4; Heb. 6:7-8; 2 Pet. 2:20-22).

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” (Acts 2:39). In doing so, they reaffirmed the inclusion of all believers in God’s “everlasting covenant” with Abraham, wherein God promised “to be God to you and your descendants after you” (Gen. 17:7; Gal. 3:29).

Parents of baptized children must prayerfully and diligently disciple their children in the doctrines and duties of Scripture (Deut. 6:7; Eph. 6:4; 2 Tim. 3:15), trusting in their faithful covenant God to bless His ordinances (Jer. 32:39; 1 Cor. 3:5-7), and submitting themselves wholeheartedly to His sovereign will (Rm. 3:3-4; 9:15-16).

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 God’s Triune name. The only alleged

scriptural example of *re-baptism* 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 prepare Israel for the Messiah’s arrival (Mk. 1:2-4; Acts 13:24). 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 as part of 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 1st 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.), so the Apostles employ the verb “to baptize” (*baptizo*) to signify the act of washing *in general*, without implying a *specific* manner of applying the water.

There is clear biblical warrant for baptism by sprinkling or pouring. After introducing the “various baptisms” of the Old Testament in Hebrews 9:10, the Apostle mentions “sprinkling” no less than three times in the ensuing context (vv. 13, 19, 21). The *outpouring* of the Holy Spirit upon the Church at Pentecost entailed their being “baptized with the Holy Spirit” (Acts 1:5-8). Peter identifies this event with the prophecy of Joel 2:28, “I will pour out My Spirit on all flesh” (Acts 2:17) and 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). In both cases, God’s covenant people were saved *from* the deadly immersion experienced by His enemies. While baptism by immersion is not *required* by Scripture, it is a valid mode of Christian baptism.

Baptism’s lifelong gracious effect *begins* when the baptized person exercises saving faith in the promises held forth in his or her baptism. It then *continues* as a source of blessing throughout the Christian life (1 Pet. 3:21). These blessings are neither guaranteed to *all* baptized persons (Rm. 9:6), nor limited to the precise *time* of their baptism, and may occur long *afterward*, particularly for those baptized in infancy.

When observing the baptism of others, we ought to reflect upon the privileges and responsibilities of our own baptism. 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.