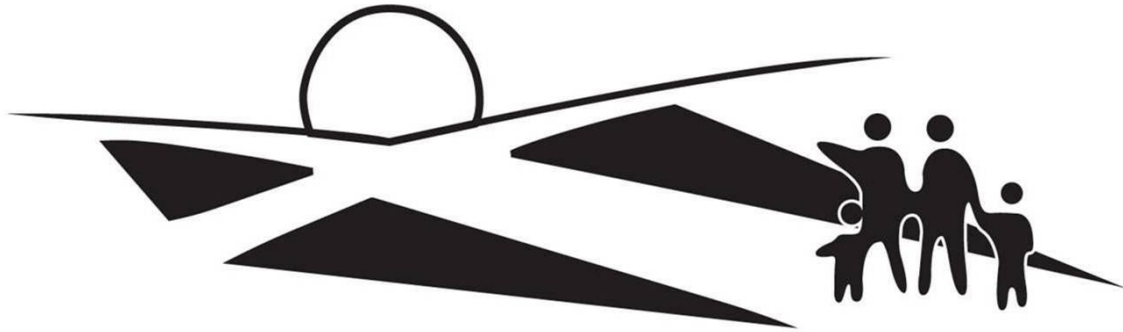


# Planning A Baptism



*A Family of Believers*

## **First Presbyterian Church**

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*“Go therefore 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 obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”*

Matthew 28:19-20

*“Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life.”*

Romans 6:4

In the sacrament of baptism, God gives us a gift. God confirms God’s promise to grant us a new and abundant life through the savior, Jesus, and assures us of God’s steadfast love. Through the sacrament of baptism we, as a community, welcome adults and children into our midst and promise to come alongside those being baptized to encourage them as they learn to answer Jesus’ call to follow him.

Baptism, like the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper, is celebrated in the context of a worship service. It is not a private rite, but a public celebration. Each time a person is baptized, the congregation gathered for worship has the privilege of resting in the assurance of God’s love and dedicating themselves to supporting one another in the journey of faith. When Jesus was baptized (see Matthew 3, Luke 3 and Mark 1) he heard our Heavenly creator proclaim, “You are my son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” In the same way, each time we celebrate a baptism, we remember our own baptism and how God gives us a new identity in Christ.

Our hope is the celebration of your Baptism will be a special day, and we want to do all we can to make it special. To this end we have prepared this booklet in the hope that it will help you understand and prepare for the sacrament of Baptism here at First Presbyterian Church.

# WHAT IS BAPTISM IN THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH (USA)

The Book of Order is part of the national constitution of the Presbyterian Church (USA) of which First Presbyterian Church Manitowoc is a member congregation. The following quotes from the constitution give a summary of our understanding of the sacrament of Baptism.

*"In Baptism, the Holy Spirit binds the Church in covenant to its Creator and Lord. The water of Baptism symbolizes 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 Israel. Prophets of Israel, amidst the failure of their own generation to honor God's covenant, called for justice to roll down like waters and righteousness like an everflowing stream. (Amos 5:24) They envisioned a fresh expression of God's grace and of creation's goodness -- a new covenant accompanied by the sprinkling of cleansing water. In his ministry, Jesus offered the gift of living water. So, Baptism is the sign and seal of God's grace and covenant in Christ. (Book of Order W-2.3003)"*

*"Baptism signifies:*

- a. the faithfulness of God,*
- b. the washing away of sin,*
- c. rebirth,*
- d. putting on the fresh garment of Christ,*
- e. being sealed by God's Spirit,*
- f. adoption into the covenant family of the Church,*
- g. resurrection and illumination in Christ."*

*(Book of Order W-2.3004)*

*"Baptism enacts and seals what the Word proclaims: God's redeeming grace offered to all people. Baptism is God's gift of grace and also God's summons to respond to that grace. Baptism calls to repentance, to faithfulness, and to discipleship. Baptism gives the church its identity and commissions the church for ministry to the world." (Book of Order W-2.3006)*

*"Baptism is received only once. There are many times in worship, however, when believers acknowledge the grace of God continually at work. As they participate in the celebration of another's Baptism, as they experience the sustaining nurture of the Lord's Supper, and as they reaffirm the commitments made at Baptism, they confess their ongoing need of God's grace and pledge anew their obedience to God's covenant in Christ." (Book of Order W-2.3009)*

# BAPTISM IN THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH (USA)

*By Harry G. Goodykoontz*

*Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary Louisville, Kentucky*

If you attend a Presbyterian church very long, you are sure to see someone baptized. Perhaps you have been baptized yourself, have grown up knowing deep meaning in this ceremony. Perhaps Presbyterian baptism seems strange to you. You may not have been used to seeing infants baptized, or to seeing our form of baptism. Perhaps you have never had a chance to study the meaning of baptism at all. Whatever your own experience this article is designed to review for you something of what this act does mean in our church.

Baptism is one of the two sacraments of the church universal. Presbyterians agree with most Christian denominations that baptism is a sacrament given to the church by Jesus Christ. "A sacrament is a holy ordinance instituted by Christ." The sacraments are in a sense the Word of God made visible.

Christ has appointed material things—water, bread, and wine—not only to represent spiritual truths, but also to seal and apply those truths to the believers. The visible sign in baptism is the washing with water, which signifies our cleansing, our regeneration, our being made new by the work of Christ. The sealing is the work of the Holy Spirit in the person, wherein he is stamped as God's child. Baptism is done in the name of the Triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

In many Presbyterian churches, a baptismal font is placed on the floor level, close to the pulpit. Persons to be baptized stand near the font for the service of baptism. When an infant is baptized, the pastor, an elder, and the baby's parents, one holding him, gather at the font. For the sake of order, baptism is always administered by an ordained minister. Normally the sacrament is administered in the presence of the congregation as part of the corporate worship.

## **Concerning Form**

There are two forms or modes of baptism, immersion and sprinkling or pouring. Each of these forms seems to have good spiritual backing; each of these forms is deeply meaningful to millions. Sprinkling is the form of baptism which has been practiced by the vast majority of Christians down through the centuries. The Presbyterian form, sprinkling or pouring, symbolizes our cleansing from sin. It roots in certain biblical expressions, such as Ezekiel 36:25, 27, "I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean...And I will put my spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes." (See also Isaiah 44:3-5; Joel 2:28-29; and especially Acts 2:1-4, 14-18, and 37-39.) Just as Jesus at his baptism was anointed by the Holy Spirit, so are we at ours. This the poured water symbolizes.

Presbyterians recognize the validity of another form of baptism, namely immersion. The symbolism of immersion, based largely on Romans, chapter 6, is that of dying with Christ to sin and rising with him to a renewed life. Immersion is a biblical form of baptism, and we accept into our membership, without requiring our form of baptism, anyone who has been immersed and who continues to adhere to his baptismal faith. In this ecumenical era, normally we accept as permanently valid the baptism of any person baptized in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Both forms have good spiritual footing, and both forms were practiced in the life of the early church.

## **Of Infant Baptism**

In company with most of the major denominations of the world, Presbyterians baptize the infants of believing members. Our reason is theological. We baptize infants because the covenant of God with

his people, made first Abraham, renewed at various times, and brought to fruition in Jesus Christ, also includes the New Israel, the new people of God, the church. In the Old Testament, it is clear that the children were considered to be heirs of the promise, a part of the covenant people of God (Genesis 12:1-2, 17:7). On the day of Pentecost, Peter preached, "Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is to you and to your children and to all that are far off, every one whom the Lord our God calls to him" (Acts 2:38-39).

Traditionally, baptism is the New Testament equivalent of circumcision, just as the Lord's Supper is the New Testament equivalent of the Passover. When we present our babies for baptism, we do so because we believe they already belong to God by virtue of his covenanted mercies. We believe that the visible church is composed of believers and their children. In the words of The First Directory of Worship of the Westminster Assembly, "...the promise is made to believers and their seed; and the seed and posterity of the faithful, born within the church, have, by their birth, interested in the covenant, and right to seal of it, and to the outward privileges of the church, under the gospel, no less than the children of Abraham in the time of the Old Testament...they are Christians, and federally holy before baptism, and therefore they are baptized."

In the New Testament the several references to household baptism would seem to indicate that infants were baptized, for normally there are infants in households. (See 1 Corinthians 1:16; 1 Corinthians 7:14; Acts 16:33; and Acts 18:8.) Further, in the time of Christ, when proselytes were received into the people of Israel, they were baptized along with their children.

The teaching of modern psychology about the significance of the first few years of life reinforces the concept of infant baptism. Many scholars believe that a child's basic attitude to the universe is formed in his first year of life. By the time he is a year old a child has learned either to trust or to distrust life. The child learns love, acceptance, and order long before he goes to school, or he has a difficult though not impossible time ever learning them. Horace Bushnell wrote in 1847, "...the child is to grow up a Christian, and never know himself as being otherwise." He meant that the child of believing parents should so grow up in Christ. His concept grew out of the doctrines of the covenant, and of infant baptism. It is enormously important to treat our children from the beginning as members of Christ's body.

At the baptism of an infant, there are four parties involved, (1) the infant, tiny helpless, a person to become; (2) the parents, who take upon themselves, after reaffirming their Christian faith, the vow to bring up their child in the nurture and admonition of the Lord; (3) the congregation, which symbolically stands with the parents and joins them in their vow—the congregation is godparent; and (4) God. If God were not actively present in his Spirit, it would all be mere symbolism, beautiful but not potent. But we believe God is present, confirming his promise. At baptism we claim and believingly receive the covenant promise of God. The child is baptized because of the covenantal promise and grace of God, grasped by his parents in faith and responded to in the obedience of the Christian nurture they pledge to give their child. Infant baptism is therefore not merely an act of dedication; it is also the claiming of God's covenant promise. The baby's church membership is affirmed.

It is expected that at the proper age, normally somewhere between twelve and fifteen, the child will come before the session and confirm for himself the vows of faith made for him by his parents. He professes Christ for himself; he accepts for himself the call of Christ to be his disciple.

The question is often asked, if faith is requisite for baptism, why should we baptize infants who are obviously incapable of faith? This question ignores the profound truth that the most significant aspect

of baptism is not the believer's faith, but God's "prevenient" (prior) grace. We have to accept the adult's word that he believes; in the case of an infant, we accept the promise of the parents and their renewal of faith. We do this in full expectation that the parents will engage in Christian nurture, that the child at the proper time will make his own profession of faith, and that God will honor his promise of the covenant. Apparently both with adults and with children, sometimes there is failure. While faith is essential for adult baptism, the fundamental aspect of all baptism is the call of God. Even our faith is a gift of God. Our baptism depends not upon our own faithfulness, but upon the faithfulness of God. "And since it is God's action which creates all human response to Him, no date can ever be set for the beginnings of a response of a particular kind" (Church of Scotland, report on Baptism, 1958). No man can say when or where the regenerating grace of God may take hold of a person and make of him a new creation. Calvin thought it could occur even in the womb! The fundamental point here is that it is not primarily what human beings say or do in baptism that matters. But what the Spirit of the Sovereign God does. We Presbyterians believe he may and does act to place his stamp of loving approval upon our infants. We baptize our infants because we believe they, with us, are heirs of the promise of the covenant of grace.

### **What Happens in Baptism?**

To be baptized is to be received into the house of God. To be in grafted into Christ is to be placed in his body, the church. We need to enter the church but once; when we are incorporated in Christ's church, we belong to it permanently; and with the help of the Holy Spirit, we grow into it quite naturally. Presbyterians do not believe that baptism is essential to salvation, nor do we believe that we are saved by baptism. We believe that the normal mode of entrance into the church is by baptism, but we recognize that not all genuine believers have been baptized. The baptized person is God's child. He counts us as his; he accepts us as his; in fact we are his. This is the basic meaning of "partaking of the benefits of the covenant of grace." God honors his promises which we claim at baptism. These promises boil down to one: I will be your God. Our God is one who saves his people. Baptism symbolizes the receiving of God's gracious love.

From time immemorial, water has been used for cleansing. Naturally, in the religious realm the water of baptism came to be used as a symbol of cleansing, of purification. The whole man is purified for life by the redeeming work of Christ. The water poured on our head does not cleanse us, but Christ in his death for us on the cross cleansed us from our sin. The sign of water points to cleansing; the reality is that we are truly made clean by the mighty act of God in Christ, specifically by the power of the blood of Christ. The Holy Spirit applies to us the work of Christ. In baptism we receive the fulfilled promise of the Holy Spirit, to make us a new creation in Christ. Something happens in baptism; it is not mere playacting. Sacraments are not mere signs; they partake of the reality of that to which the sign points. Our Presbyterian ancestors felt strongly that sacraments are not merely "naked and bare signs." The Scots Confession worded it, "The grace promised not only offered, but really exhibited and conferred by the Holy Ghost, to such as that grace belongeth unto."

Baptism does not make a person new. Baptism is not a bit of magic performed by a clergyman. It does more than point to the reality of God's saving power and merciful love. When a believing person confessed his faith in Christ and is baptized, God honors his confession and receives him into the church. The moment of baptism is not necessarily the actual moment when this occurs. "The efficacy of baptism is not tied to that moment of time when one becomes 'a member of Christ.' The Holy Spirit gives us the grace of God in Christ." The baptismal water is symbol of our cleansing. The sacraments are not only expressive of truth; they are also effective in making that truth a living reality. "By the right use of this ordinance the grace promised is not only offered, but really exhibited and conferred by the Holy Ghost."

It is said that Martin Luther, in his hours of deepest discouragement, in those dark times when he wondered if he were saved, and if life had any real meaning, would recall to himself one renewing fact, *baptizatus sum*, "I have been baptized." For Luther, and for all believing members of Christ, that is enough. By my baptism I have testified to the world that I am Christ's man. In that baptism he has marked me as his own. I shall have my rough days; the storms of life will beat upon me; temptations will assail me; and sometimes I will fall, but ever and always, I have been baptized—I am Christ's. In the archaic language of the Shorter Catechism, baptism signifies and seals "our engagement to be the Lord's." It is, indeed, entered into in deep faith and loyal commitment. Baptized in Christ, we become part of his body, wherein we are to serve him loyally.

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## BAPTISM INFORMATION FORM

**Name of Baptism Candidate:**

First \_\_\_\_\_ Middle \_\_\_\_\_ Last \_\_\_\_\_

If Infant: Parents' Names \_\_\_\_\_

**Mailing Address:**

Street \_\_\_\_\_

City \_\_\_\_\_ State \_\_\_\_\_ ZIP \_\_\_\_\_

**Contact Numbers:**

Home Phone \_\_\_\_\_ Work Phone \_\_\_\_\_

E-mail \_\_\_\_\_

**Birth Date of Baptism Candidate** \_\_\_\_\_

**Gender of Baptism Candidate** \_\_\_\_\_

**Birthplace of Baptism Candidate** (Hospital, City, County, State)

\_\_\_\_\_

**Current Church Affiliation of Baptism Candidate** (or Parents): \_\_\_\_\_

**Particular Sunday on which you hope the baptism will take place?** \_\_\_\_\_

**Sponsors/Godparents:**

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

**Grandparents of Baptism Candidate** (if you would like their names in the bulletin):

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

**Siblings of Baptism Candidate** (if you would like their names in the bulletin):

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