



What do we believe
about:

Covenant Baptism?

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What is “covenant baptism”? Our *Westminster Confession of Faith* defines baptism as a:

“Sacrament of the New Testament, ordained by Jesus Christ, not only for the solemn admission of the party baptized into the visible Church (1); but also to be unto him a sign and seal of the covenant of grace (2), of his engrafting into Christ (3), of regeneration (4), of remission of sins (5), and of his giving up unto God, through Jesus Christ, to walk in newness of life (6). Which sacrament is, by Christ’s own appointment, to be continued in His Church until the end of the world” (WCF 28-1). And, “Not only those that do actually profess faith in and obedience unto Christ, but also the infants of one, or both, believing parents are to be baptized (7)” (WCF 28-4).

As with the Lord’s Supper, the *Confession* notes several very important strands woven into the meaning of baptism. We have numbered them in the paragraph; rewrite them below in *your own words*:

- 1) (1 Corinthians 12:13): baptism is the initiatory rite into membership.
- 2) (Romans 4:11): water represents the washing of sin by Christ’s blood
- 3) (Galatians 3:27): it is the sign and seal of His redeeming works

- 4) (Titus 3:5): it doesn't save but it is so representative of being saved as to be an accurate symbol of it.
- 5) (Acts 2:38): "Repent and be baptized" the water seals the washing.
- 6) (Romans 6:3-4): it is a reminder of our death and washing as part of being in Christ
- 7) (1 Corinthians 7:14): we see the covenant extended to our children.

In the PCA, we often receive men and women from different Protestant denominations and the Roman Catholic church. In each one of these, baptism means something *different*. So, at Christ Our Hope, what do we *not* mean by baptism?

1. It is *not* a simple event where someone confesses they now believe in Jesus Christ (like in Baptist churches).
2. It is *not* an event that wipes away original sin from a child (like in Roman Catholic churches).
3. It does *not* save the person baptized from his sins (like in some Protestant denominations).

Why, then, do we baptize? In common with other parts of Christendom, we do it because Christ commanded it:

*¹⁹ 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, ²⁰ **teaching** them to observe all that I have commanded you..."*

In the Reformed faith, we call it “covenant” baptism because it is the event that *visibly initiates* a covenant relationship with God. We normally think repenting of our sins and trusting Christ is the starting point of our covenant with God. And it is...mostly.

- What do you notice about the passage above? (Hint: look at the verbs.)

Or what about this from Acts 2:

*³⁷ Now when they heard this they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, “**Brothers, what shall we do?**” ³⁸ And Peter said to them, “**Repent** and be **baptized** every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.”*

- What is Peter’s response to their question?

Trusting Jesus is to enter through the Door (John 10:9), that is the only Way (John 14:6) to the Father. Like the thief on the cross next to Jesus, *all* that is required is faith in Christ. At the same time, this confession was never designed to be the *fullness* of what God intends for His children. In Matthew 28, disciples were “made” (that is, came to faith) and then brought into the church by baptism and then taught the most holy faith. Also, in Acts 2, Peter told the men to repent (that is, come to faith) and be baptized, that is, to join the covenant family.

- Entrance into the covenant of grace is the **event** and baptism / water is the **sign** that someone is in covenant with God through Christ.

This is the nature of being in covenant with God. Let's review a little...Remember that Reform theology is also called "covenant theology"? We call it this because it describes the kind of relationship God has with His people. Covenants have starting points. And, those starting points have signs.¹ Take some common examples of covenant starting points and signs:

- What's the visible starting point for a marriage? What's its sign?
- What's the visible starting point for a buying a home? What's its sign?

These are illustrations of what it means to be in a covenant: there is always an *event* and that event always has a *sign* or something that symbolizes the event and the commitment made.

On to baptism...When Peter is asked what to do in response to his sermon in Acts 2, he says: "Repent and be baptized." Right?

It **didn't** use to be this way.

- In former times, when God's people entered into covenant with God, what did they do?

¹ Signs are simply those tangible markers or reminders of the event.

Let's step through this from the Scriptures.

READ Genesis 12:2-3, 15:5-21 and 17:6-14

Abraham was the first who entered into an explicit covenant with God (*not* Moses). He was the first to be circumcised. The covenant with God was the event and his circumcision was the sign. The sign is both a *symbol* of God's promises and a *seal* of guarantee that He'd deliver.

- a. Circumcision and God's statements of promise were God's initiative *not* Abraham's. God did these to set Abraham and his offspring apart for Himself.
 - b. In Romans, Paul explains the new covenant we have in Christ is the final delivery of the promises God gave to Abraham: Romans 4:13-14, 15-17 (see also Galatians 3:7-9).
1. True children of Abraham were not ethnic but spiritual: Romans 2:27-28
- a. There were ethnic descendants who did *not* receive the promises: Esau (Romans 9:13; Achan: Joshua 7)
 - b. There were foreigners who *did*: Rahab (Joshua 6), Ruth
 - c. Ethnicity (or externalism) was never intended to be the criteria of being a true child of Abraham: Genesis 12:3; Jeremiah 9:25 (Rom 4:13)

- d. Covenant identification was for “all who believe and their children”: Gen 17:7; Romans 3:30; Galatians 3:7
2. Circumcision, the sign of covenant identification, represented **two** spiritual realities:

Reality #1: It visually represented faith (or “heart circumcision”):

READ Deuteronomy 10:12-16, 30:1-6

Therefore the sign was given to those who had faith:

Abraham (Genesis 15:6)

Reality #2: It visually represented God’s gracious choice of a people and His declaration to be their God *regardless* of their choice of Him:

READ Genesis 17:5-8, 10

Therefore, the sign was given to children of believers who had exercised *no* faith:

Abraham’s son: Genesis 17:10-14

Moses’ son: Exodus 5:24-26

You following? Reality #1: those who had faith.
Reality #2: the children of the chosen.

3. Jesus *changed* the sign **not** the realities it represents (remember Matthew 28:19-20).
- Since God had always marked His people with circumcision, wouldn’t you have expected Jesus to do the same?

- a. Circumcision pointed to God's provided **male blood** sacrifice which happened on the Cross:

Circumcision pointed *forward* so the need for *that* sign was no longer.

- b. Baptism pictures God's **washing** for all who believe (Titus 3:5; 1 Peter 3:20-21);

Baptism points *backward* and that sign will endure until Christ returns

- 4. Baptism² now symbolizes what circumcision symbolized: Colossians 2:11-12

¹¹ In [Christ] also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, ¹²having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead.

- a. Body circumcision *represented* heart circumcision in those who believed (Abraham), that is Reality #1.

² "Baptism" means sprinkling or pouring; it might refer to dipping. For: "sprinkling": 1 Peter 1:2; Heb. 9:13-14, 10:22, 12:24; Ex 24:8; Num. 19:20. "Pouring": Acts 2:17-18, 10:24; Is 32:5; Ezek. 39:39; Joel 2:28.

It *symbolized* heart circumcision (Abraham's & Moses' children) in children, that is Reality #2.

- b. Body baptism *represents* heart circumcision in those who believe, that is Reality #1.

It *symbolizes* heart circumcision (children of believers), that is Reality #2.

- 5. True children of Abraham (those who come to faith) no longer get the sign of circumcision but baptism:
 - a. This is **Reality #1** in Christ!
 - b. Examples: household baptisms: Acts 10:24, 16:15, 16:31-34, 18:18; 1 Corinthians 1:16
 - c. All who hear and believe: Acts 2:38
- 6. As in former times, the sign is given to children who have exercised no faith:
 - a. This is **Reality #2** in Christ!
 - b. The children of those who believe: Acts 2:39
 - c. The child of a believing parent: 1 Corinthians 7:14
 - d. The sign doesn't guarantee or presume an outcome; the sign is given because there has been a promise made – by God.
 - In the sacrament of baptism, God is saying "This one belongs to Me."

In those four verbs of Matthew 28 we have a precise summary of entering into covenant with

God. Baptism as a worship element is a wonderful means of God's grace to His people.

We are a Presbyterian church and that means we baptize people who come to faith *and* their children. We call this "covenant baptism."

John Calvin said, "God's sign, communicated to a child as by an impressed seal, confirms the promise given to the pious parent and declares it to be ratified that the Lord will be God not only to him but to his seed; and that he wills to manifest his goodness and grace not only to him but to his descendants even to the thousandth generation" (*Institutes*, 4, 16, 9).

For these reasons, the Reformed have never believed the argument that since baptism of infants is not explicit in the New Testament then it is not valid. It is not explicit because it is not needed.³

To baptize infants along with all who express faith in Christ is to join with Abraham in submitting to God's ownership of our children: that He might bless them in Christian homes, draw them near and save them.

³ Women taking the Lord's Supper are also not explicit!