

THE CELEBRATION OF THE SACRAMENT OF BAPTISM

Introduction:

Baptism is a sacrament in which the whole gathered community of God has the joy of observing and participating. In baptism, we make vows and receive promises. The Lord gives us the great privilege as a covenant community to pray for our covenant children and their parents.

Instruction about the Baptism:

Before observing the Sacrament of baptism, it is appropriate to take time for some instruction regarding the institution, nature, use, and ends of this sacrament. Let us note some of these things.

1. The Sacrament of baptism was instituted by the Lord Jesus Christ Himself.
2. Baptism is a seal of God's promise of grace, of our union with Christ, of the forgiveness of sins, of regeneration, adoption, and eternal life;
3. The water in baptism, represents and signifies the blood of Christ, which takes away the guilt of sin, both original and actual; and the purifying power of the Spirit of Christ which wars against the dominion of sin, and the corruption of our sinful nature;
4. The baptizing, or sprinkling and washing with water, signifies the cleansing from sin by the blood and for the merit of Christ, together with the putting to death of sin, and the rising from sin to newness of life, by virtue of the death and resurrection of Christ;
5. By baptism, we are solemnly received into the visible church, distinguished from the world, and united with believers. All who are baptized in the name of Christ, do renounce, and by their baptism are bound to fight against the world, the flesh and the devil.

Christians recognize that they are all sinners, but also that they have been delivered from God's wrath by faith in Christ. In baptism, they come to receive God's promises, to give public profession of faith, and to make vows of allegiance to Him.

Baptism is both a sign of God's blessing to those who obey and a mark of God's curse to those who disobey. The water of baptism points to both salvation and judgment. This is illustrated in the example of Noah and his family being saved by means of the water and the unbelieving world being judged by the same means.

Baptism marks a person with the covenant sign to set them apart for God's purposes in His world. The mark requires us to live by faith in Christ and reminds us that God's grace will sustain and preserve us until He brings us home. Baptism signifies God's promises of forgiveness to all who will believe. They must look to Christ and rest completely on Him.

Whenever we observe a baptism, we are admonish to look back to our own baptism, to repent of our sins against our covenant with God, to stir up our faith, and to improve and to make good and right use of our baptism, as the covenant seal between God and our own souls.

Questions to the Baptismal Candidates:

In the case of believer's baptism, candidates come before the whole church to make a public profession of faith by affirming the following declarations and promises. In doing so, they enter into a solemn covenant with God and the body of Christ, His church.

1. Do you acknowledge yourselves to be sinners in the sight of God, justly deserving His displeasure, and without hope except in His sovereign mercy?
2. Do you believe in the Lord Jesus Christ as the Son of God, and Savior of sinners, and do you receive and rest upon Him alone for salvation, as He is offered in the gospel?
3. Do you now promise, in humble reliance upon the grace of the Holy Spirit, that you will live in a way that honors God and becomes followers of Christ?
4. Do you promise to uphold the church in its worship and work to the best of your ability?
5. Do you submit yourselves to the government and discipline of the church, and promise to practice and promote its purity and peace?

Invitation to the Parents:

In the case of infant baptisms, parents will be invited to come with their children to the front of the church along with any other family members. The elders of the church are also invited to join the family.

Admonition to the Parents:

Parents who present their children for baptism know themselves to be sinners. They know the complete sufficiency of Christ's finished work on the cross and they have come to fully embrace Him. They realize that their children have the same damnable nature as themselves, but they also recognize that the Lord Jesus Christ Himself welcomed little children into His presence, embracing and blessing them, saying, "*For of such is the kingdom of God*" (Mark 10:14)

Believing parents, as those in the Old Testament, have the sign and seal of God's covenant placed on their children for they know that their children need the same grace as they do for life and salvation. The Bible teaches very clearly that God works with families. Covenants are God's promises to His people, where He says, "*I will be your God, and you will be my people*". This covenant promise is to our children as well. He marks them as members of His church.

This mark is called "the character indelible", which is invisible to us, but remains eternally visible to God. This mark encourages parents to trust God and reminds them to teach, nurture and admonish their children to embrace the grace of God in Jesus Christ.

God is both covenant maker and keeper. He is faithful from one generation to another. Abraham believed God and rested in His covenant faithfulness. God made a covenant with Abraham and his seed, that is, Christ and those who are in Him by that same faith Abraham expressed.

Abraham marked his children with the sign of circumcision. For centuries God's people were marked in this way. To Abraham's offspring and the generations that followed, the sign and the seal of the covenant was applied to every male in circumcision throughout Old Testament history. It was a mark and call to live faithfully before God who marked them. Likewise, the children in the households of New Testament believers were given the sign of the promise in baptism.

While the outward sign of the covenant changed from circumcision to baptism, the subjects and administration, did not. In fact, it broadened to include women and non-Jewish peoples. It is in this context of covenant relations that Paul reminds believers that their children are set apart to God by virtue of the parent's faith (1 Corinthians 7:14). We have every reason to believe God will be faithful to these children.

Abraham's blessing was to his sons and many generations down through time (Gen. 12). We baptize our children because of the precedent set by God through Abraham to circumcise his sons as a sign of the covenant God made with him. Baptism is a sign that God's grace will sustain and preserve us until He brings us home. We baptize our children believing God will show Himself faithful to His promises.

The New Testament is indicative of the same practice in the case of the household baptisms of the converted Lydia and the Philippian jailer (Acts 16). Because of the promise to believers and their children, these children are to be set apart for God and His purposes in the world. Covenant children by right of birth and adoption have this mark applied to them. The inclusion of children in God's promise, yet to be fulfilled in their lives, makes the day of baptism a solemn day, a day of rejoicing.

Baptism is not just a naked symbol, but indicates the promises of God, on which we can completely rely. These promises are given to all those who believe, so that as their children come to faith, they may receive all those things which are signified by the sign given. Such things include: our union with Christ, forgiveness of sins, regeneration, justification with God, adoption as sons, and eternal life.

Sprinkling with water in baptism signifies the application of Christ's blood to take away the guilt and corruption of sin, and to raise believers to newness of life by virtue of His death and resurrection.

The children, by baptism, are solemnly received into the visible church, distinguished from the world, and united with believers. This mark is also the sign of God's promise to fill their souls with the Holy Spirit and empower them with gifts for ministry in His kingdom.

By virtue of being children of believing parents they are made members of the church, because of God's covenant promise, but this is not sufficient to make them continue members of the Church. When they have reached an age of discretion, they become subject to the obligations of the covenant: faith, repentance, and obedience. They then make public confession of their faith in Christ, or become covenant breakers, and are subject to the discipline of the Church.

We do not believe that the sign when administered automatically conveys the grace it indicates, but that grace may be present before, during, or after the sign is given. We trust, however, that this is a momentous occasion in the lives of these children, because what is given them in baptism is the outward sign of God's magnificent promises—the sign of the new covenant of all those who are in Christ.

It is only proper for parents to be exhorted to consider the great mercy of God to them and their children and to bring up their children in the knowledge of the Christian faith, and in the nurture and admonition of the Lord. It is also appropriate to make plain the danger of God's wrath to parents and their children, if they are negligent. This is a serious matter and requires a solemn promise to carefully perform the following duties as a parent:

1. Teaching your children to read the Word of God;
2. Instructing them in the practice and principles of Christianity, as contained in the Old and New Testaments, and which are well summarized in the Westminster Confession and Catechisms, which I recommend for your assistance in this important duty.
3. Praying with and for your children;
4. Setting an example of godliness before your children; and laboring by all the means God has given to bring them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord.

Declaration of the Covenant Promises:

Hear now the covenant promises of God! *"For to you is the promise, and to your children, and to all that are afar off, even as many as the Lord our God will call to Himself. And I will establish my covenant between me and you and your descendants after you throughout their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and your descendants after you. Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved, you and your household"*(Gen. 17:7; Acts 2:39; 16:31)

Questions to the Parents of Infants:

1. Do you acknowledge your child to be a sinner in the sight of God, justly deserving His displeasure, and without hope except in God's sovereign mercy?
2. Do you believe in the Lord Jesus Christ as the Son of God, and Savior of sinners, and do you rest upon Him alone for salvation, as He has offered in the gospel?
3. Do you acknowledge your child's need of the cleansing blood of Jesus Christ, and the renewing grace of the Holy Spirit?
4. Do you claim God's covenant promises in her behalf, and do you look in faith to the Lord Jesus Christ for her salvation, as you do for your own?
5. Do you now unreservedly dedicate your child to God, and promise, in humble reliance upon God's grace, that you will aim to set before her a godly example, that you will pray with and for her, that you will teach her the doctrines of the Christian faith, and that you will strive, by all the means God has given, to bring her up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord?

Questions to the Congregation:

Congregations also take vows in baptism such as the following: Do you as a congregation undertake the responsibility of assisting these parents in the Christian nurture of this child baptized in your presence?

Our prayer for all those baptized is that God will deliver them from the way of sin and death, open their hearts to grace and truth, fill them with His life-giving Spirit, keep them in the faith and communion of His holy Church, send them into the world as witnesses to your grace and love, and preserve them until they arrive in their heavenly home. Instead of driving us to discouragement, though, this should drive us to the gospel. It is the gospel believed every day that is the only enduring motivation to pursue progressive sanctification even in those times when we don't seem to see progress. That is why I use the expression "gospel-driven sanctification" and that is why we need to "preach the gospel to ourselves every day."

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