

What we believe about baptism

We believe that baptism is a covenantal sign:

At Trinity, we understand baptism to be a *covenantal sacrament* established by the command of our Lord Jesus Christ. By *covenantal*, we mean that we understand both the Old and New Testaments of the Bible to be teaching a view of our relationship with God that is *covenantal*. Ever since God created Adam and Eve and placed them into the Garden of Eden, He has desired to have a relationship with mankind. This relationship is worked out by means of a *covenant*. The eternal God, who made the heavens and the earth and all that is in them, reaches out to us. He offers us a relationship with Him in which He makes great and awesome promises. In much of the Old Testament, God ordained that those He made these loving covenantal promises with should receive a sign to mark their inclusion in the covenant relationship with Him. This sign in the Old Testament was circumcision. We read in Genesis 17:1-14 about this covenantal sign:

“I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you and your descendants after you for the generations to come, to be your God and the God of your descendants after you. The whole land of Canaan, where you are now an alien, I will give as an everlasting possession to you and your descendants after you; and I will be their God.”

*Then God said to Abraham, “As for you, you must keep my covenant, you and your descendants after you for the generations to come. This is my covenant with you and your descendants after you, the covenant you are to keep: Every male among you shall be circumcised. **You are to undergo circumcision, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and you.** For the generations to come every male among you who is eight days old must be circumcised, including those born in your household or bought with money from a foreigner – those who are not your offspring.”*
(Genesis 17:7-12)

This outward covenant sign of circumcision marked the recipient as a member of the visible people of God in the Old Testament – the nation of Israel. However, the outward receiving of the sign did not automatically change the person on the inside. Whether the Israelite of the Old Testament was truly living in a loving relationship with God or not depended upon the inward reality of his heart. That is, receiving the sign of circumcision did not spiritually join the person to the Lord. It was a physical sign/ceremony that claimed the *promises* of relationship with the God of Israel. The outward sign was applied not only to the children and adults who accepted the covenant with God, but was commanded to be applied to male infants within each family of only eight days of age and those foreigners and household slaves who sojourned among them. For these youngest recipients of the outward sign, circumcision symbolized the parents’ trust that the Lord would one day join in relationship inwardly with their child and affirm the covenant promises to Him.

We understand that this sign, which was given to mark the inclusion of each generation in Israel into a covenantal relationship with God, was replaced in the New Testament era with the sacramental sign of baptism. The outward sign of baptism, like the outward sign of circumcision, symbolizes the *hope* of an inward, God-given change in the person, who is claiming the promises of a personal relationship with the Lord for himself (or on behalf of his infant).

The Disciples were instructed by Jesus in Matthew 28:19 to, . . . *make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.* . . . In the Book of Acts, chapter 4, verses 14-41, we have a record of Peter’s sermon at Pentecost and the instructions he gave to those who heard his proclamation of Jesus as Lord and Christ. The crowd gathered that day asked Peter and the other Apostles, *Brothers what shall we do?* Peter replied to them, *Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins, and*

you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. Clearly those who repent of their sins and turn to Jesus Christ as Lord, trusting in him alone for their salvation, are called to receive the outward sign of baptism, which symbolizes the person's new covenantal relationship, an inward work of the Holy Spirit.

This outward sign, like the Old Testament sign of circumcision, signifies the same spiritual need. That is, they point to an inward work which only God is able to accomplish. In Deut. 10:16, God addresses the hardness of heart (the body of the flesh) of his people when he commands, *Therefore circumcise the foreskin of your heart, and be stiff-necked no longer.* The circumcision God commands in this passage is a circumcision that can not be performed by human hands, so God announces and promises in Deut. 30:6, *And the Lord your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your descendants, to love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live.* The circumcision promised here is what is accomplished in the new covenant:

But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law in their minds, and write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No more shall every man teach his neighbor, and every man his brother, saying 'Know the Lord,' for they shall know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them, says the Lord. For I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more." Jeremiah 31:33-34

*Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols. **For I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh.** I will put my Spirit in you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will keep My judgments and do them.* Ezekiel 36:25-27

God has accomplished all this by the circumcision of Christ, our being *spiritually* baptized into his death and resurrection. The outward signs of circumcision and baptism signify the same *spiritual* realities, the need to have the pollution of our sin and guilt removed and replaced by new natures. The Old Covenant sign of circumcision is replaced by the New Covenant sign of baptism, because what was signified in circumcision is accomplished in being *spiritually* baptized into Christ. The Apostle Paul explained this correspondence between Old Testament circumcision and New Testament baptism in his letter to the church at Colossae when he wrote in chapter 2:8-14:

*See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ. For in him the whole fullness of the deity dwells bodily, and you have been filled in him, who is the head of all rule and authority. **In him you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, having been buried with him in baptism, in which you also were raised with through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead.** And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross.*

Paul is concerned in this passage to explain that we need no human traditions which differ from the Word of Christ. He is concerned that we understand that saving faith is an inward reality, *a circumcision made without hands*, accomplished by our being united to Christ in his suffering on the cross, his burial, and his glorious resurrection. Paul is speaking of the inward *spiritual* baptism believers receive when they are united to Christ by the Holy Spirit, which is *represented* by the outward sign of physical baptism. Water baptism signifies the promise of the circumcision of Christ and not in any way, shape, or form a work done by the person who receives it or administers it.

Because we understand baptism to be a sign and not a means of salvation, we recognize all Christian baptisms performed using the Trinitarian formula (in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit) as commanded by Jesus himself, whether received as an adult, a child, or an infant.

We encourage the baptism of infants when they are presented by believing parents or parent.

What about infants? We place the sign of the covenant upon our children just as the Old Testament believers placed the sign of the covenant upon their children. A common misunderstanding of baptism is that baptism signifies man's actions of repentance and belief. Baptism signifies the sovereign, electing grace of the Covenant God on our behalf – which redeems us from the power of sin and then brings us to true repentance and belief.

Just as God created a covenantal family with the Old Testament physical nation of Israel, which included infants, children, and adults, we believe he does so today in his covenant with the New Israel. In the New Testament, the Church is identified with God's people Israel:

Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone (Ephesians 2:19, 20).

This mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus (Ephesians 3:6).

Neither circumcision [being a Jew] nor uncircumcision [being a Gentile] means anything; what counts is a new creation. Peace and mercy to all who follow this rule, even to the Israel of God (Galatians 6:15-16).

Infant baptism signifies that the family who presents their child for baptism are trusting that the Lord will include their infant in the promises of his gracious covenant family. We understand baptism for infants to be a sacramental sign, claiming the benefits of membership for the child in God's visible covenant family. Receiving the sign of baptism does not bring with it cleansing from sin, or eternal salvation. Rather, it is, as was circumcision in the Old Testament, a means for loving parents (who have professed faith in Christ) to claim the gracious promises of the covenant with God for their children. They are trusting that the Lord will work inwardly upon the heart and life of their little child to the extent that one day that child will himself or herself come to profess faith in the Lord Jesus Christ for their eternal salvation. Baptism symbolizes all the benefits and advantages which belong to a child raised by a believing family. It represents outwardly the hope of a future inward reality.

We also understand that early in the history of the Church most of the believers in Jesus Christ came from a Jewish background, with deeply engrained devotion to the practice of placing the covenant sign of circumcision upon their children. Interestingly nowhere in the New Testament do we find any instructions at all prohibiting the baptism of little children. Christ himself is very concerned in fact that we do nothing to stand between little children and relationship with the Saviour. In Matthew 19:13-15 we read:

*Then little children were brought to Jesus for him to place his hands on them and pray for them. But the disciples rebuked those who brought them. Jesus said, **“Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these.”** When he had placed his hands on them, he went on from there.*

(The term little children in these verses is the term used in Jesus' day for extremely young children.) See also Luke 18:16.

We affirm that baptism, in the case of those who profess faith in Jesus Christ and in the case of infants whose parents are claiming the promises of relationship with God for their children, does not

bring about salvation or cleansing from sin. This is inwardly accomplished by Christ and the work of the Holy Spirit:

But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God (1 Corinthians 6:11).

However, we hold that when this sacrament is performed, grace really and truly is exhibited and conferred by the Holy Spirit, whether the persons are of age or are infants - as each one is entitled according to God's own will and at his appointed time.

We believe that baptism is to be administered to an adult, child, or infant only once.

Baptism is to be administered only once in the lifetime of a person in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, whether the person is baptized as an infant, as a confessing child or adult, or whether the water was applied by immersion, pouring, or sprinkling.

An example:

In order to illustrate our understanding of God's Word on baptism at Trinity, we can use a brief example. Suppose that a young married couple (we'll call them Matt and Angie) who were regular visitors to our services decided they wanted to become members of our church family. Matt, who grew up in a family who never went to church, has just become a believer in Jesus Christ and has never received baptism. His wife Angie was formerly a member of a Methodist church who was baptized as an infant and has already professed faith in Christ. This couple also has a three-month-old little girl named Elizabeth. As our pastor and ruling elders (the session) receives this family into membership, Angie will be accepted by a reaffirmation of her faith and responding publicly to our church's membership vows. Her husband Matt will be received by his public profession of faith in Jesus Christ, responding to our membership vows, and by receiving the covenantal sign of baptism. The couple's infant daughter Elizabeth will then be presented by Matt and Angie to be received into membership as a non-communicant member of the church and afterward receive the covenantal sign of baptism, as these young parents claim God's promises for the future of their little one as a member of God's covenant family. Our congregation also promises to support Matt and Angie in raising their daughter in the nurture and admonition of the Lord.

We hope this illustration helps, yet we realize that this may be a new understanding of baptism to you and that you may have many questions which are not addressed here. We would be happy to meet with you to discuss your concerns and to respond to your questions. We can also suggest many publications which address the covenantal view of baptism. Among these are:

Christian Baptism, by John Murray

The Case for Covenantal Baptism, edited by Gregg Strawbridge

Children of Promise; The Case for Baptizing Infants, by Geoffrey W. Bromily

The Westminster Confession of Faith