

**what happens in baptism?**  
a pamphlet for parents of infants

will you baptize our baby?

why do we baptize?

what does baptism mean?

*This resource is an introduction to what baptism means in the Presbyterian Church. The pamphlet has been organized in a question-and-answer format to respond to the frequently asked questions that ministers receive from families.*

## 1 What is the purpose of baptism?

God has long ago pledged love to all creation (Genesis 1:31; Genesis 9:9-17). Having your baby baptized does not cause God to pledge love; God already loves your child.

When we baptize, we are reminded, celebrate and respond to God's pledge (covenant) of love and care for us. Through the sacramental act of baptism and the vows that you as parents and the congregation make, God's presence becomes more understandable and real to us. In baptism we are engaged, by our vows, to be instruments of God in the child's growth. The act of baptism provides tangible assurance of God's love towards us. Baptism signifies union with Christ and the church.

## 2 What is a sacrament?

The word "sacrament" comes from the Latin "sacramentum", meaning "vow". We reserve the word sacrament for two special ways (baptism and the Lord's Supper) in which we experience God's grace, pledge (vow), and love to us.

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<sup>1</sup> 1 John 4: 19, "We love because he first loved us."

<sup>2</sup> In western Christianity, 5 major traditions, broadly speaking, have been developed. In chronological order they are: Roman Catholic, Anglican, Lutheran, Reformed and Anabaptist.

A sacrament involves not only words, but engages our senses too; it is a rich way to know God's grace. A sacrament involves a sign (baptismal water) and an "action" — presenting, receiving, naming, baptizing and the making of promises. The sign points to an inward and invisible reality: God's pledge and nurture of us and God's continuing presence in the person of the Holy Spirit. The "action" engages our senses, establishes new relationships and calls us into a new way of life affecting our behaviour.

Sacraments are not magic! Participating in a sacrament does not cause God to begin loving us.<sup>1</sup> Rather, a sacrament is an opportunity for us to acknowledge the reality of God's presence and love in our lives. We do so by responding to God's claims and publicly committing ourselves to God and God's ways. In no way is baptism a condition of salvation.

### 3 How many sacraments are there?

The Reformed Presbyterian tradition<sup>2</sup> recognizes two sacraments: baptism and The Lord's Supper. Our tradition asserts that only actions which Jesus specifically commanded us to do are to be known as sacraments. For example, "*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.*" (Matthew 28:19–20, NRSV) In passages such as 1 Corinthians 11:24–25, we are provided instruction concerning The Lord's Supper.



## 4 Can my child be baptized if I am not a member of the church?

The Presbyterian Church in Canada practices that at least one parent must be a believer or communing member of a congregation in order for a child to be baptized. For further exploration, see The Book of Forms (our church constitution) 110.4, The Shorter Catechism #95, and The Westminster Confession of Faith 28.4.

**Why do we take this position?** Baptism is different from a marriage or funeral, because the relationships that are established at baptism are not only between God and the child, but also involve vows taken by parents and congregants. Baptism has three foci:

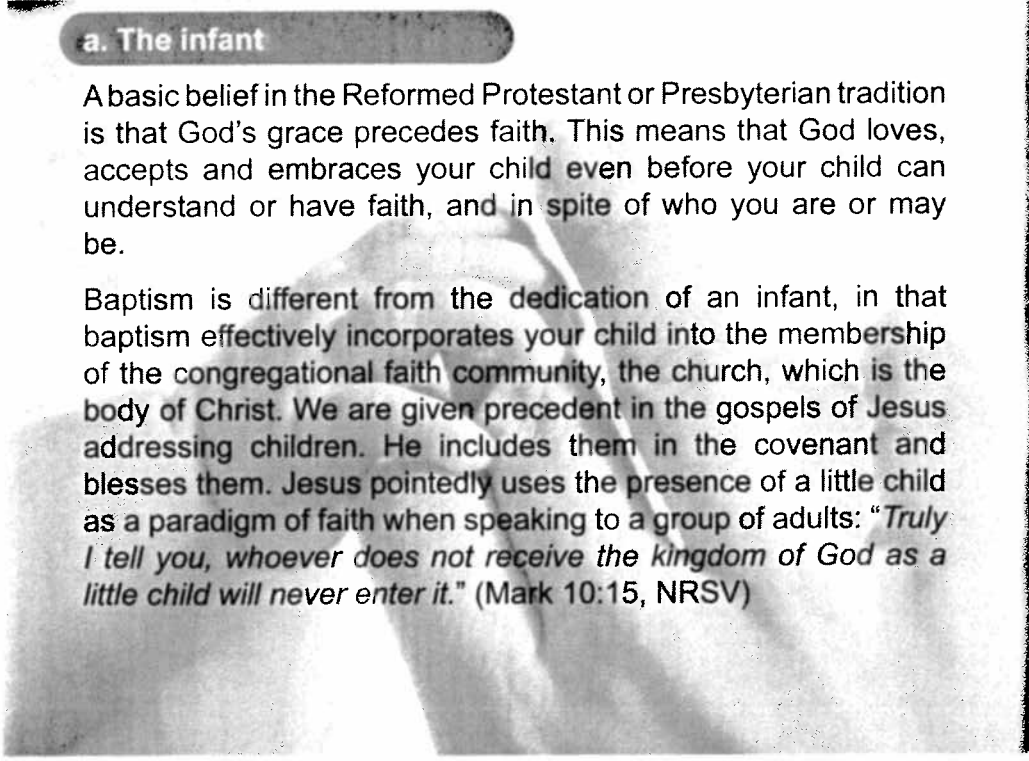
- a. The infant or person.<sup>3</sup>
- b. The parents who bring the child for baptism.
- c. The congregation in which the baptism takes place.

To understand baptism, we must understand the roles of all three foci.

### a. The infant

A basic belief in the Reformed Protestant or Presbyterian tradition is that God's grace precedes faith. This means that God loves, accepts and embraces your child **even** before your child can understand or have faith, and in spite of who you are or may be.

Baptism is different from the dedication of an infant, in that baptism effectively incorporates your child into the membership of the congregational faith community, the church, which is the body of Christ. We are given precedent in the gospels of Jesus addressing children. He includes them in the covenant and blesses them. Jesus pointedly uses the presence of a little child as a paradigm of faith when speaking to a group of adults: "*Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.*" (Mark 10:15, NRSV)



## b. The parents

The vows taken by the parents reflect an awareness that the child is a gift of God, and that God's love has been pledged to us and to the child even before we can know it. Vows are made as a grateful response to God. In the vows, parents commit themselves to helping their child know God's wonderful love that the baptism signifies and to respond as a disciple to that love. This is why we require at least one parent to be a member of the Christian church. It makes sense to expect that the parent or parents who are promising to bring their child up in the Christian faith have, themselves, professed that faith.

The poet John Donne wrote, "*No man is an island.*" This phrase reminds us that our actions and faith impact the child God has entrusted to our care. This is exactly what is involved in the baptism of the child. Just as a child relies for physical survival on mother, father, nurse and doctor, so, too, the child relies on parents and others for spiritual birth and nurture.

Vows taken by the parents and members of the congregation are similar. These vows stress the responsibility of parents and the congregational community to teach the truths and duties of the Christian faith and, by prayer, instruction, and example, bring the child up in the knowledge and love of God and the church.

Those who "stand in" for the infant, by taking vows, of which an infant has no remembrance or comprehension, must "stand by" until the infant comes of age. At this time, out of his or her own free choice, he or she "confirms" or says "yes" to the vows made by the parent(s) years before. This confirmation normally occurs after the child/youth completes a public profession of faith class.

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<sup>3</sup> When persons old enough to confess faith are baptized, we call it Believer's Baptism. Believer's Baptism is the only baptism considered valid by one faith tradition referred to as the Anabaptists (e.g., The Baptists and Mennonites).



### c. The congregation

The members of the congregation also make a vow or promise. Research has shown that one of the key factors contributing to children staying connected to the faith community throughout their life cycle is significant relationships with adults in their church, other than their parents.\* A responsible congregation creates an environment, and acts as a school of faith, in which a child can grow in the grace and knowledge of God.

### 5 What is expected of the parents?

Parents are expected to help their children by "prayer, instruction, and example" to know and love God, revealed in Jesus. Parents need to provide means for their children to build a relationship with God. Just as parents plan to expose their children to school and other extracurricular activities, such as sports or music, so, too, parents, in taking baptismal vows, are promising to be deliberate and purposeful in introducing their children to Christian faith.

Parents need to provide means for their children to build a relationship with God. Pause at bedtime and mealtime to teach your children to pray. Encourage your children to speak to God in prayer, either by leading in prayer or contributing words, phrases or sentences (e.g., "Thank you God for...").

Take your child to worship, Sunday school, mid-week groups, Vacation Bible School or summer church camps. At home and at church, children should be introduced to and surrounded by resources that assist them in learning more about God. Children should be given their own Bible and frequent access to biblical storybooks, audio, visuals, and interactive games to assist them in learning more about God.

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\* Search Institute. *Mainline Protestant Adults: Their Significant Religious Influences*. Minneapolis, MN: 1998.

Thinking intentionally about the vows you are making means being alert in seizing a moment to teach your child about honesty, forgiveness, compassion, sharing and how to deal justly with others. The best way to teach is by example. Children are quick to pick up any behaviour that says, "*Don't do as I do, do as I say.*" Therefore, the best way to teach your children is through being a faithful servant of Christ, yourself.

Vows taken at baptism do not include indoctrination nor forced love. God does not want any other kind of love and worship than the kind that is freely given. This should be how we love in all of our significant relationships.

Just as duties and obligations exist in marital and family relationships, so, too, are they present in our relationship with God. We are asked, for instance, to be responsible stewards of the earth's resources and to share our plenty with others. Responsible parenting needs to teach these duties, but care must be taken not to foster a relationship with God based only on duty or obligation. We would not want to base any relationship on those terms alone.

## **6 What is expected of the congregation?**

Although the primary responsibility for faith education lies in the home with the parents who take the baptismal vows, the congregation supports and supplements the education you do in your home.

The congregation supports you through educational opportunities for both you and your child. The congregation provides additional opportunities for your child to learn of God in the company of other children at Sunday school. It also provides ways for you as parents to grow in your own understanding of the Christian faith, so you can improve teaching in the home.

7

## What are the roles of the three members of the Trinity in the sacrament of baptism?

*"... I Baptize you in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit."*

We believe that God the Father is the Creator, Sustainer and Ruler of all that lives.

We profess Jesus as Saviour, whose death and resurrection, represented in baptism, reconcile us with God.

By the power of the Holy Spirit, God acts through baptism. The Spirit continues to remain with your child as a guiding presence.

The Spirit works through you, as parents, through the minister(s), leaders and members of the congregation who know and love your child, so that the child grows to love God and to live in accordance with God's way.

8

## What is the significance of water in baptism?

Water is a rich and basic symbol that carries with it a number of reminders — life, cleansing, and refreshment.

Its most basic reminder is of life and death. It indicates that we want the children to reject a way of life that separates them from God, one that is spiteful and self-centred, and instead live a life that is loving, giving, compassionate, and concerned for justice — the kind of life best exemplified by Jesus.

Water is a reminder of cleansing or washing. Baptism signifies your child's start of the new life in Christ and the promise of the washing away of sin<sup>4</sup>, through forgiveness, throughout the rest of his or her life.

Water is a reminder of refreshment. We actively seek our refreshment in the struggle of life. In baptism, we are reminded that wherever we find refreshment — in the physical environment, in ideas, in relationships, in public and private experiences — this refreshment is a gift of God and evidence of God's presence. God's refreshment of us is everywhere and in every place. Responsible parenting can use each day to identify and reflect on God's presence and gifts.



Water is placed on top of the child's head to signify that what is being done involves the whole being of the child — mental, physical, emotional, and relational. The water is often placed on the child's head in the shape of the cross.<sup>5</sup> This reminds us of the extent to which God's care extends to each individual. We are to emulate this kind of loving. The symbol of the cross also reminds us that dying to our old self is costly, but, like Jesus, we too are raised to new life.

## 9 What is the significance of giving the child a name?

In baptism, the minister asks, "*By what name shall we call this child?*" When the parent(s) give the name, the minister says, "*(name), child of the covenant, I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.*" In this way, we recognize that God has called your child individually by name. The child is known and is important to God. It also signifies that this child is given to you, in trust, and that you are responsible to God for your parenting and the child's growth.

## 10 Should we have sponsors or Godparents?

In our Presbyterian tradition, we understand the congregational family to "parent-in-God". The congregation takes an active and supportive role in befriending and encouraging your child's growth in faith.

While we don't formally recognize named persons as "Godparents", to involve such persons is an option. The purpose of sponsors or "parents-in-God" is that they will assume a special interest in your child, assist you by giving added support and encourage you to be accountable in fulfilling the vows you take. (Note: "Sponsors" or "Parents-in-God" have no legal standing in law. If you wish to ensure legal guardianship for your child, it is necessary to make a will.)

<sup>4</sup> Sin can be described as that which separates us from God.

<sup>5</sup> In ancient times, slaves were branded literally with their master's name. As Christians, we proudly receive the image of the cross to remind us that we belong to God. It is the symbol of God's love for the whole world and us, and of the victory over death.

## 11 Shouldn't a person be old enough to understand what is happening before being baptized?

Some Christians (e.g., The Anabaptist tradition) believe that only persons capable of understanding and professing their faith in Christ should be baptized. This is called "Believer's Baptism". Nowhere in the scriptures does it explicitly state whether children should or should not be baptized.

In response to the teachings of scripture, the Reformed tradition, along with Roman Catholic, Anglican and Lutheran traditions, baptize infants because it allows its members to:

- respond to God's gracious love that was pledged to the world and accept that grace precedes faith
- publicly celebrate God's gift of a child
- declare their intention to gratefully assume their responsibility to bring up the child to know God and to love the church
- experience the assurance of God's presence and the support of a caring congregational family in their parenting.

## 12 Will God love my child if he or she isn't baptized?

Yes! Some parents fear that until a child is baptized, he or she is somehow not fully acceptable to God. There is nothing in scripture that teaches or even hints at this. Our doctrinal statement, The Westminster Confession of Faith, states clearly that salvation is not dependent on baptism (Chapter XXVIII, Article 5).

The scriptures are full of the message that God loves your child no matter who you are, or what you do.



## The Sacrament of Baptism (Infant)

During the service of worship in which the baptism of your child will be celebrated, the following questions will be asked of you as the parents, of the sponsors or Godparents, and of the congregation.

### To the parents:

In presenting this child for Baptism:

Do you confess your faith in

- God as your Heavenly *Father*,
- *Jesus Christ* as your Lord and Saviour, and
- the *Holy Spirit* as your Sanctifier and Helper?

Do you promise, in dependence on Divine Grace, to teach this child the truths and duties of the Christian faith, and by prayer, instruction, and example, to bring up this child in the knowledge and love of Christ and of his church?

### To Sponsors or Godparents:

Do you as Sponsors of this child, in so far as circumstances present themselves, promise to fulfill these vows?

The Minister adds a blessing:

*"The Lord bless you and your child and give you grace to faithfully perform these vows."*

### To the Congregation:

Do you, the members of this church, receive this child as a responsibility from the Lord, and do you promise to play your part in the Christian education and upbringing of this child?

At your child's baptism, we encourage the congregation to present to your family a Christian growth candle, which is to be burned on each anniversary of the baptism. It provides a yearly occasion to recall the baptism and to reflect on God's presence in all the experiences of life. Family and friends may wish to give gifts that assist in the Christian nurture of your child. The congregation also supports you in the growth and development of your child through its Christian Education programs.

We thank the Rev. John Henderson, St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church, Newmarket, Ontario, for permission to use his pamphlet as a guide for this resource.

## Resources



**The Vine Helpline** recommends the following resources about the Reformed (Presbyterian) understanding of baptism:

"Baptism", Living Faith: A Statement of Christian Belief, Section 7.6 [p. 20]

"The Sacraments: Baptism", Being a Presbyterian In Canada Today, Stephen A. Hayes, [pp. 24-26]

"Dedication of Infants and Children", Acts and Proceedings of 113 General Assembly of The Presbyterian Church in Canada 1987, [pp. 245-246]

"Policy re Baptism", Acts and Proceedings of 113 General Assembly of The Presbyterian Church in Canada, 1987, [pp. 245-246]

Shorter Catechism, [Question 95]

The Book of Forms, [Section 110.4]

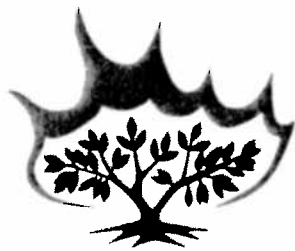
Westminster Confession of Faith, [Chapter 28.4]

The New Presbyterian Catechism, [Question 79-82].

Acts and Proceedings of 127 General Assembly of The Presbyterian Church in Canada 2001, [p. 249]

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