

Affirming Baptism and Forming Faith

These discussion questions follow the sequence of the Affirming Baptism and Forming Faith document and may require four or more sessions. Facilitators should feel free to pick and choose the questions that are most relevant to their local context.

Introduction and Prologue

Introduction: Document Themes

Before jumping into a discussion of part 1 of the document, spend a few minutes reflecting together on the document themes listed in the introduction:

- a. Baptismal Identity
 - Describe your own sense of identity as a child of God.
 - What practices in your life have helped strengthen that sense of identity?
 - What is the greatest threat you experience to your sense of identity in Christ?
- b. Milestones
 - Looking back at your own life, name some of the milestone moments in the development of your faith.
 - What might the church do to highlight and celebrate faith milestones in the lives of its members?
- c. Expectant Urgency
 - On a scale of 1 to 10, how “urgent” is the formation and strengthening of members’ faith on the agenda of your church council?
 - What are some of the avenues your church uses to nourish the faith of children, youth, and adults?
- d. Lifelong Learning
 - How does the concept of continuing learning play out in your congregation?
 - What opportunities do adults have to continue to learn and grow in Christ?
- e. Holistic Formation
 - How would you describe “true biblical maturity”?

Prologue: Discerning Faithful Sacramental Practice in Contemporary Culture

- This document describes the sacraments of baptism and the Lord’s Supper as “indispensable gifts of God which not only express, but also form and nurture faith.” Share with the group how observing the sacrament of baptism does that for you. How does participating in the sacrament of communion help you express your faith?
- Have the liturgical practices around the sacraments changed in your church over the past decade? If so, how? Have the changes

contributed to a deeper, more meaningful celebration of the sacraments?

Part 1: Baptismal Identity

- 1.1 Baptism and the Grace of God
 - How does your church celebrate God's gracious work through baptism?
 - What benefit might there be for children and adults in becoming more intentional about making baptism a grand celebration?
- 1.2 Multiple Scriptural Images for Baptism
 - Take time to look up the passages cited here.
 - Which images of baptism seem new and fresh to you? How have you ordinarily thought about baptism?
- 1.3 Baptism and the Drama of Redemption
 - How would you describe yourself to someone who doesn't know you? How does your baptismal identity affect all of those facets and roles that make up "you"?
 - How does your communal baptismal identity affect who you are as a congregation and how you engage in doing God's work in this world?
- 1.4 Baptism as a Sign of Forgiveness & Lifelong Dying and Rising with Christ
 - Do you generally think of baptism as a gift—or as a calling?
 - How does the clothing imagery Paul uses in the Galatians and Colossians passages help you see baptism as both?
- 1.5 Baptismal Identity
 - If you were baptized as an infant, did your family tell you the story of that day? And did you treasure the story of that event as part of your new identity in Christ?
 - What specific ways might your family or your congregation highlight and celebrate the continuing blessings and benefits of the baptisms that take place in your church?
- 1.6 The Inclusion of Infants
 - This statement insists that covenant infants have a relationship with God. Do you agree?
 - Read the Scripture references given in the first paragraph of the statement; then develop a response to a question from a friend who belongs to a Christian tradition that supports believer baptism rather than covenant baptism.
- 1.7 Baptism as Ritual Action

- How does your church use ritual in a healthy way in its practice of baptism?
 - How are members—children and adults—called to participate in the sacrament in ways that nourish their faith and remind them of their own baptisms?
- 1.8 The Covenant Community in Baptism
- How does your congregation live out its vows, as a covenant community, made to infants and adults at their baptisms?
- 1.9 The Significance of Baptismal Identity in Contemporary Culture
- Young people today are encouraged on all sides to seek their identity in the things our contemporary culture offers. How might a greater emphasis on baptismal identity in our contemporary covenant communities counteract this pull?
 - Suggest some ways parents might work together with the congregation to make this happen.

Part 2: Affirming Baptismal Identity as a Lifelong Practice

- 2.1 Remembering and Affirming Baptism Throughout Life
- How can regularly remembering our baptism strengthen our faith both as individuals and as a church family?
 - What specific practices could a church implement to help members remember their baptism?
 - Reflect on the quote from the Belgic Confession Art. 34. How is our baptism “profitable not only when the water is on us and when we receive it but throughout our entire lives”?
- 2.2 Nurturing Baptismal Identity in Congregations
- How does recognizing our baptismal identity change our understanding of the purpose of the educational, service, and mission programs of the church?
 - This section lists a number of scripturally mandated congregational practices—prayer, learning, obedience, witness, fellowship, and service. Which practices does your congregation faithfully perform? Which disciplines are the most difficult to regularly put into practice? Why?
- 2.3 Milestones: Multiple Occasions for Publicly Affirming Baptism
- What does the term “milestone” mean to you? What purposes do milestones serve in faith formation?
 - How could celebrations of faith milestones help to remind us of our baptismal identity?
 - Besides profession of faith, what other faith milestones does your church currently practice?

- What other milestone celebrations would you like to see your church add to the milestones they already celebrate? Why?
- We tend to think of milestones as relating to a child's faith development. Which faith milestones could or should be celebrated in the life of adults?

2.4 Affirming Baptism in Many Cultural Contexts

- How does your church reflect the cultural context of your local community? Has this changed through the years?
- What faith formation practices from other cultures and denominations could your church incorporate into its worship life?
- How could your church learn more about faith formation practices in other cultural contexts?

2.5 Remembering and Affirming Baptism in Family Life

- Has your family or church ever celebrated your "baptism birthday"? If so, has the remembrance of your baptism added meaning to your baptismal identity? Explain.
- What other ideas could be used by families or churches to help remind and teach congregational members about the promises of baptism?

2.6 Affirmation of Baptism Instead of Rebaptism

- Has your church ever received a request for rebaptism? How did they respond?
- What reasons might a person give in requesting to be rebaptized?
- How can a church show its gratitude to the person requesting rebaptism and at the same time discourage the practice of rebaptism?
- Do you agree that rebaptizing can convey the three false impressions listed after the second paragraph? Why or why not?

2.7 Affirming Baptism in Contemporary Cultures

- How does the influence of contemporary culture twist the significance of our baptismal identity?
- We are called to be "in the world but not of the world." How can the church effectively fight the negative cultural influences on our congregations while at the same time encouraging its members to be salt and light to the world? Give specific examples.
- How does our baptismal identity shape the church's mission in society?

Part 3: Affirming Baptismal Identity through a Revitalized Public Profession of Faith

3.1 Public Profession of Faith as an Affirmation of Baptism

- How is public profession of faith practiced in your congregation?

- What benefit and impact has the practice of public profession of faith had in your own life and in the life of the congregation?
 - Explain the statement that public profession of faith is an affirmation of baptismal identity.
- 3.2 Public Profession of Faith of Children and Youth as a Milestone
- What purpose has public profession of faith served in the Reformed Christian community?
 - How can we help the ritual of public profession of faith be a memorable and encouraging event?
 - Which of your faith formation stories can encourage others? How have you shared it with others?
 - Explain the sentence, “there is no single age which the church is able to mandate for public profession of faith.” Do you agree? Why or why not?
 - Could there be other gates for admission to the Lord’s Table? If so, what?
- 3.3 Young Children and Public Profession of Faith
- What is the official position of the CRCNA on children and public profession of faith? What did Synod 1988 encourage? What is the four-step procedure that Synod 1995 outlined?
 - How are covenant children in your congregation encouraged to make public profession of faith?
- 3.4 Persons with Disabilities and Public Profession of Faith
- How are persons with disabilities in your congregation encouraged to make public profession of faith?
- 3.5 Public Profession of Faith and the Mission of God
- Take time to look at the Scripture verses cited here.
 - How can we more explicitly express the mission of God with our public profession of faith?
- 3.6 Public Profession of Faith and the Worship of God
- What liturgical moments resist the idea that a public profession of faith is a one-time stand-alone event?
 - Read Romans 1:12. How can we keep encouraging one another in the faith?
- 3.7 The Significant Role of Parents and Guardians
- What obstacles or distractions do parents face in the faith development of their children, youth, and young adults?
 - How can the church come alongside parents to encourage the public profession of faith of their children, youth, and young adults?

- 3.8 Public Profession of Faith and Lifelong Discipleship
- What discipleship opportunities are available in your congregation to those who have already made their public profession of faith?
 - How are spiritual disciplines being encouraged so that spiritual growth is stimulated?
- 3.9 Public Profession of Faith and Contemporary Culture
- Read the Scripture verses cited here.
 - Faith without works is dead. How does your congregation encourage faith and service to go hand in hand so that the whole person is formed after the pattern of Christ? So that we are a clear voice and transforming presence in the world?

Part 4: The Lord's Supper

- 4.1 The Lord's Supper, Baptismal Identity, and the Grace of God
- This paragraph affirms the relationship between the Lord's Supper and grace. For centuries Christians have struggled with the tension between receiving the sacrament as a gift of grace and wondering if one was worthy enough to receive it. How has this tension played a role in your life, and how have you sought to resolve it?
- 4.2 Multiple Scriptural Images for the Lord's Supper
- The Scriptures contain rich teaching concerning the sacrament. Which of these teachings do you tend to focus on?
 - Does this paragraph remind you of biblical teachings that you tend to overlook?
 - What benefits might you receive from widening and deepening your own awareness of biblical teachings concerning the Lord's Supper?
- 4.3 Nurturing and Feeding Our Spirit at the Table
- This paragraph begins by declaring, "We bring nothing to the table but the hunger for Life in its fullness that comes from thankfully receiving God's gift of grace." What does that look like specifically? What do you bring to the table?
- 4.4 The Life-Giving Imperatives for the Table
- This paragraph focuses on "life-giving imperatives." Is this phrase an oxymoron?
 - Describe situations in life where you have experienced "life-giving imperatives" or "life-draining imperatives." What distinguishes these?
 - Many Christians have experienced both of these extremes in communion practice. Have you? How?

- Are you able to receive Paul's instructions here as life-giving? If so, what helps you to live within the blessing of experiencing Paul's teaching in 1 Cor. 11 as truly "life-giving imperatives"?

4.5 Coming to the Table in a Hospitable and Healing Community

- Participation in communion is both a personal and a communal act. How do you focus on both of these dimensions as you participate?
- How do your worship leaders help or hinder you from keeping both of these dimensions in view?
- What might you do and what might your worship leaders do to strengthen your participation as a communal act?

4.6 Children and Others at the Lord's Supper

- Christians from various traditions have come to very different conclusions concerning the participation of children at the Lord's Table. Based on the summary of communion teaching in this document and your own understanding of such teaching, what factors should one keep in mind when discerning the place of children at the Lord's Table?

This document affirms that communion is a wondrous gift from our Lord to his body to nourish us in our walk with him. Which of the following statements most accurately describes your own perception of communion?

- Communion is an optional (and thus not necessary) addition to our faith nourishment, supplementing Scripture (and preaching), prayer, and the experience of corporate worship.
- Communion plays an important but not central role in our faith nourishment, an occasional supplement to our fundamental nourishment
- Communion plays a central role, alongside all other nourishments received through worship: Scripture reading, preaching, prayer, and praise.

What has shaped your perception? How has it been shaped by careful biblical study and how has it been shaped by unstated assumptions embedded in church experiences? Does this document confirm or question your perceptions?

Conclusion

- Read the Scripture verses cited.
- Take a moment to go to the beginning of the document and review the themes as found in the introduction. Which, if any, of your perceptions have been reinforced or reshaped?