

# The Baptism Of Children

A Guide for Parents

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# CONTENTS

Introduction .....	4
Why We Baptize Children.....	5
Remember Your Baptism .....	15
The Baptism Service.....	19
Helping Your Child Grow in Faith.....	22

# INTRODUCTION

Congratulation! God has blessed you and entrusted you with one of his precious children. May your joy in this gracious gift continue throughout your lifetime.

During this busy time, planning your child's baptism is a wonderful chance to express your faith in God, remember God's promises to you and to your child, and affirm to your child that he or she is part of God's family.

Maybe you already know a lot about baptism, what it means, why it's important, and why we baptize infants. If so, you may want to browse quickly through the first chapter of this booklet and move on to the more practical sections that follow. On the other hand, reflecting once again on what the Bible teaches us about this wonderful covenant celebration is time well spent!

This booklet has been pulled together from four helpful sources:

- *The Baptism of Children* by Wilbert M. Van Dyk
- "Remember Your Baptism," *Reformed Worship* (no. 14) by Harry Boonstra
- "All in the Family," *Reformed Worship* (no. 14) by Bert Polman
- *Nurturing Your Child's Faith: Leading Your Child to the Lord's Table*

As these titles suggest, this booklet seeks to help you

- understand what the Bible teaches about baptism.
- find ways to remember baptism.
- make the baptism service a joyous, memorable occasion for all who participate.
- lead your child to a wholehearted acceptance of God's baptismal promises.

May God bless you richly as you celebrate the baptism and as you lead your little one to Jesus.

# WHY WE BAPTIZE CHILDREN

by Wilbert M. Van Dyk

Hundreds of children. Hundreds of baptisms. Hundreds of goose bumps. That's one chapter of the story of my ministry. Each time I baptize a child, my spine tingles. Why? Because of what I see happening in that sacrament.

Think of it. As a parent it's time for you to present your child for baptism. Your baby, dressed up for the occasion, lies in your arms—perhaps sleeping, perhaps wide-eyed with a wonderment known only to infants, perhaps loudly protesting the indignities of this invasion into a routine schedule. At any rate, your child is unaware of the profound thing that is about to happen.

The assembled congregation shifts position for a better look. And then, in my mind's eye, I see the hand of God reaching down through the roof of the sanctuary to the baptism font, to your baby's forehead. Ever so tenderly, God's hand rests on it. And then I hear God say: "This child of these believing parents is a child of my covenant and therefore belongs in the community of my people. I hereby certify that all my promises and mercies, which I have spoken to my people throughout the ages, are for this child too."

Awe-inspiring. A holy moment. God has spoken, sealing his whole covenant faithfulness to a baby who does not yet understand. God has publicly identified your child as a lamb of his fold. No wonder you respond by saying, "God helping us, we will do all we can to train our child for the Lord." And no wonder the assembled congregation promises to do its part in receiving, instructing, and encouraging your child within the fellowship of believers.

## IN BAPTISM GOD SPEAKS

It's essential that we see baptism as an act of *God*, not as *our* act. People didn't invent baptism. It was God's idea. Our Lord instituted baptism as part of the ministry of the church. In baptism, *God* acts. In baptism, *God* speaks. Baptism is not our profession of faith; it is God's pronouncement and a sign of his covenant mercies. Baptism is a statement that God makes to us. And God has a right to make his statement to whomever he wants—even to children who do not yet understand his words.

Let's explore that idea a bit further. Christians who say that baptism should be limited to those who are old enough to believe in Jesus Christ have turned baptism into a people-centered event. They claim that faith must come before baptism. And they view baptism as a human act, dependent on the personal and conscious decision of the person being baptized. According to that position, the believer is the one who is front-and-center in baptism.

Christians who claim that the children of believing parents also ought to be baptized see things differently. To them it is irrelevant that the child does not possess adult faith. They recognize that the primary voice in baptism is not ours toward God, but God's toward us. And why shouldn't God speak his promise to children who are not yet able to understand his words? We who are parents or grandparents, aunts and uncles, older brothers and sisters do not hesitate to talk to children, do we?

None of us thinks it strange that we as adults speak to children who do not understand our words and who are not capable of intelligent responses. Nor should it strike us as strange that in baptism God chooses to speak his love, promise, and grace to children who do not yet understand what it's all about.

## CHILD OR ADULT? THE PROBLEM

But is it *right*? Does God, in fact, choose to speak his promises in baptism to children? Or does God choose to limit his baptismal declarations to believing adults?

Here's the problem. Not a single Scripture text or passage proves the issue of child or exclusively adult baptism one way or the other. Nowhere does God come even close to saying, "You shall baptize the children of believing parents." Nor does God come close to saying, "You shall baptize only adult believers." The issue has to be weighed on the basis of conclusions that we draw from the history of the church, from Scripture, and from related themes. Let's explore these areas one at a time.

## CONCLUSIONS FROM HISTORY

Can we learn anything from the early church? Might Jesus or Peter or Paul have said something about baptism that, although not recorded in Scripture, lived in the memory of the early church and gave it a sense of direction?

In the first two centuries of church history there is no evidence that the question of child or adult baptism was even raised. Apparently it was not a problem. It did not become a problem until around A.D. 200. At that time a church leader named Tertullian argued, in his *Treatise on Baptism*, that children should not be baptized until they are a bit more mature. The very fact that Tertullian argued as he did demonstrates that the baptism of children was practiced before A.D. 200.

Tertullian's treatise sparked differences of understanding and practice that continue to the present day. Some, like Tertullian and Gregory of Nazianzus, argued against the baptism of children. Others, like Origen and St. Augustine, argued for the baptism of children. The most honest conclusion that we can draw from the history of the early Christian church is that the baptism of children was not an oddity that was introduced in later years; it was a part of the life and worship of at least *some* Christian churches from the beginning.

## CONCLUSIONS FROM SCRIPTURE

Although the Bible does not specifically command or forbid the baptism of children, there is a wide array of biblical material that should help us understand God's will in the administration of baptism.

### One Book

The starting point is the unity of the Bible. Although it has an Old Testament and a New Testament—totaling sixty-six books—the Bible is one. It has one divine Author and one central message of God's love for us in Jesus Christ.

The Old Testament people looked forward to the coming of God's promised Messiah. To help them look forward to that coming, the Lord gave his people explicit pictures of the future sacrifice of Jesus. These pictures all involved blood-letting. Circumcision, Passover, and animal sacrifice all pointed forward to the Lamb of God, whose blood would be shed as a sacrifice for our sin.

Because Jesus has now completed his great sacrifice on the cross, it's no longer necessary for us to circumcise infants, to celebrate Passover, or to sacrifice animals in the churchyard. In their place the Lord has given us other ceremonies, bloodless ones. In baptism we celebrate our entry into God's people through the washing away of our sin. But that washing happens through the pouring out of *Jesus'* blood, not our own. So water will do. Similarly, in the Lord's Supper we celebrate our fellowship with God, but not through our own sacrifice. We celebrate the feeding of our souls in the benefits of Jesus' sacrifice *for us*. So bread and wine are a sufficient reminder of how Jesus' body and blood are our spiritual food.

So, clearly, there are differences between the Old and New Testaments. Now that Jesus has come, baptism and the Lord's Supper have replaced circumcision, Passover, and animal sacrifice. But the same God who called Abraham to faith and obedience calls us to faith and obedience today. And just as God included Abraham and his family into God's people in the Old Testament, so God includes believers and their families into that same people, which in the New Testament is called the church.

Romans 4 and Galatians 3 tell New Testament Christians that when we believe in Jesus Christ, we actually become children of Abraham. That's unity! It's wrong for us to say that the Old Testament does not concern us today. What God said to Abraham and his family is still important for us and our families. To separate the Testaments so widely is to build a wall where God has not. The Bible is one.

## Covenant

One of the major themes that runs throughout the entire Bible is summarized in the word *covenant*. Covenant describes the way that God deals with sinful humanity. In general terms, a covenant is an agreement—but not an entirely equal agreement—between God and us. Because God is God, he takes the initiative in the covenant and sets its terms. In Genesis 17, God revealed those terms to Abraham: he promised to be faithful and called for Abraham and his children to respond in faith and obedience. God decided to include believers and their children in that covenant. Furthermore, God identified a particular ceremony that celebrated covenant inclusion. In the Old Testament that ceremony was circumcision.

Circumcision did not actually *make* a person a member of the covenant. As God made clear in Genesis 17, we enter into this covenant when either, like Abraham, we become believers; or, like Isaac, we are born to, or adopted by, believing parents. So circumcision was only a ceremony that *celebrated* the covenant relationship God had already established with his people.

God has never canceled that covenant first made with Abraham. It was not destroyed by the faithlessness of the people. It was not annulled in the coming of Christ. Its central features remain the same:

- God's promise to be faithful
- God's call for faith and obedience
- God's concern for believers and their children
- God's insistence on a covenantal sacrament

All of these are just as much a part of the New Testament church as they were part of church life under Abraham, Moses, and the prophets. God is still a covenant God, calling us to be his covenant people.

It is clear that children received the Old Testament sacrament. Genesis 17:11-12 records that God commanded circumcision to be administered to baby boys who were eight days old, as a sign of the covenant. For hundreds and hundreds of years, God's people understood that children of believing adults were included as members of God's community. That did not mean these children were saved. It did not take away their need to personally believe and obey. But they were included as circumcised members of God's covenant community.

Now, if God had wanted to change that pattern in the New Testament church, he would have clearly said so. But there is not a shred of New Testament evidence that God did so. *Nowhere does the New Testament alter the Old Testament pattern God set, by which children of believing parents were included as members of the covenant community.*

In fact, follow the New Testament pattern. The apostles went out to preach the gospel. They called upon unbelievers to repent of their sins, to believe in Jesus Christ, and to be baptized. And what happened, time and time again, when adults repented and believed? Acts 16:15, 16:33, 18:8, and 1 Corinthians 1:16 all speak the same language: they *and their households* were baptized. That's exactly the same pattern we find in Genesis. "Walk before me and be blameless," said God in Genesis 17:1. And then Abraham and his household were circumcised. "Repent and believe," said the apostles. And then believers and their households were baptized.

We cannot prove that children were part of these households. It's possible—though unlikely—that the Bible records only the conversions of people who were too old to have little children at home. But the pattern of the New Testament is the same as the pattern of the Old: when adults come to faith and obedience, they and the members of their family receive the sign of inclusion among the people of God. The New Testament believer who had grown up with the Old Testament way of thinking would certainly have assumed that children should receive the sacrament that marks them as lambs of Christ's fold.

But does the Bible really teach that baptism has now taken the place of circumcision? Yes.

In a rather complicated passage in his letter to the Colossians, chapter 2:11-14, Paul writes about the "circumcision of Christ," a phrase describing Christ's death on the cross. In that circumcision-death of Christ, writes Paul, we were included. In Christ our sins have been cut off and put to death. Paul continues, "[And you were] buried with him in baptism and raised with him."

It's difficult to sort out, but at the heart of that passage is this message: in his death and resurrection, Jesus brought the central meaning of circumcision and baptism together. They both picture the removal of our sins in the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. They both constitute a mark on our bodies with which God identifies us as members of his covenant.

Circumcision was meant for the children of believing parents. Through Jesus Christ, baptism now takes the place of circumcision. Therefore baptism continues to be for the children of believing parents as well as for new adult believers.

### New Testament Hints

Several other New Testament references demonstrate that God receives our children as his own. Acts 2:38-39 is part of Peter's Pentecost sermon. To his mixed audience, he said, "The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off." Significant, isn't it? God made a special point of reminding the New Testament church that his promises are not only for those old enough to understand. They are for little children as well.

Matthew 19:13-15 records the story of how Jesus took young children into his arms and blessed them. The disciples tried to shoo the parents and the children away. But Jesus prevented them: "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them." This passage has nothing directly to do with the baptism of children. Yet it illustrates the way in which Christ took to himself, and gave his blessing to, those who were not yet old enough to understand. If Jesus did this, what could possibly prevent him from taking our children to himself as well and promising them his blessing? And what could prevent us from celebrating that fact by baptizing them?

First Corinthians 7:14 tells us that the children of believing parents are holy. Should holy children be denied the sacrament of baptism? Only if God clearly and unmistakably says that they are to be excluded. But on the contrary, as we have discovered, God nowhere excludes children of believing parents from receiving the sign of the covenant.

### **Only Adults?**

What about the argument that there are many specific illustrations of adult baptism in the New Testament but not a single one of the baptism of children?

The New Testament church was a missionary church. Missionaries back then did the same thing that many do today: preached the gospel, called people to repentance and faith, and then baptized believers and their households. That is the New Testament story again and again. Because of its missionary context, the New Testament gives us lots of illustrations of new converts who were baptized as adults. But notice as well that it does not give a single illustration of a person who was brought up in the Christian faith who had to wait until adolescence or adulthood to be baptized.

### **Immersion, or Sprinkling?**

What about the argument that immersion (generally considered inappropriate for the baptism of children) is the only proper way to be baptized? The New Testament does not help us much with that one, does it? We really don't know whether Jesus, the Ethiopian eunuch, the three thousand Pentecost converts, or the believing households were sprinkled, poured upon, or immersed in their baptisms. So Scripture does not tell us that any of these methods is divinely required. Besides that, the quantity of water, or the extent of coverage, or the length of time in the water does not make any difference. What is symbolized in baptism is the washing away of sins. That can be illustrated just as appropriately by any of these means.

### **Only Believers?**

What about the argument that only believers should be baptized? After all, Scripture teaches that we should repent, believe, and be baptized. Again, this was, and still is, the pattern in a missionary setting: when people did, in fact, repent and believe, they and their households were baptized. But nowhere does Scripture say that *only* those who believe may receive the sacrament of baptism. And we may be profoundly grateful that it doesn't.

Think about how hard it would be to make the right decision if we accept this premise. Imagine a child born to Christian parents and brought up in a Christian home. At what age, or at what level of maturity or understanding, would that child qualify for baptism? Does a child of three have enough faith for baptism? A child of seven? Twelve? Eighteen? No. The voice that speaks in baptism is not ours, telling God that we have finally arrived at a point where we qualify for baptism. The voice that speaks in baptism is God's voice, sealing his promises to believers and their children and calling them to trust and obey.

In view of all the testimony of Scripture, the more relevant question is not, "Why do we baptize children?" but rather, "Why should we refuse children the sacrament of baptism?"

## CONCLUSIONS FROM RELATED THEMES

Both the Bible and the Christian church have identified several themes that are closely tied to baptism. These themes teach us more about the relationship of baptism to the children of believing parents.

### **Forgiveness**

One of these themes is forgiveness. In some passages Scripture specifically links forgiveness to baptism. For example, Mark 1:4 says, "John came, baptizing in the desert region and preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins." And Acts 2:38 commands, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins." Also, 1 Corinthians 6:11 relates baptism to cleansing: "You were washed, you were sanctified."

Some people conclude from passages such as these that children should not be baptized. Baptism speaks of forgiveness and spiritual cleansing. But small children are too young to repent of their sins, so they should wait until they understand what forgiveness is.

That conclusion suggests that forgiveness is an act of God that we must pry loose with our repentance. But that's incorrect. Forgiveness is not a commodity. God is not sitting in heaven with a box of forgiveness, waiting for us to pay the price of repentance. Rather, forgiveness is a part of God's nature. He is a forgiving God. In repentance we open the door of our heart to receive the forgiveness that God *has already declared available*. It's like this: a child who knows that her parents are not very forgiving will not be quick to say, "I'm sorry." A child who knows that her parents are ready to forgive will be far more likely to repent. So baptism can help children to repent.

In baptism God seals to us his forgiving self. If he chooses to do so, there is no reason why God shouldn't make that declaration to children who are not yet able consciously to repent. Baptism is not a sacrament of repentance but of forgiveness.

In fact, Acts 19:4-5 reveals a distinction between John's baptism and baptism in Jesus. John's was a baptism of repentance, and baptism in Jesus represents forgiveness and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Since children are, without their knowledge, participants in the sin of humankind, what could be more appropriate than to seal to them in baptism—also without their knowledge—God's promise to forgive them in Jesus Christ?

The relationship between baptism and forgiveness does not discourage the baptism of children. It recommends it.

### **Regeneration**

A second biblical theme often associated with baptism is regeneration. Regeneration means being *born again*. Titus 3:5 speaks of “the washing of rebirth.”

What is the connection between baptism and regeneration? It is not, as some people assume, that baptism regenerates us. Nor are we baptized because we have already been born again. The one does not cause the other. Rather, between baptism and regeneration there is a parallel—a parallel that helps us understand the one from our study of the other. For example, both baptism and regeneration are acts of God. Both depend on the work of Christ. Both are single events that make a difference for the future.

Many adults are born again. Many adults are also baptized. But nowhere does Scripture suggest that *only* adults are born again. Children can also be born again. Faith does not cause a person to be born again. Jesus makes clear in John 3 that being born again is the work of the Holy Spirit. It is rebirth that produces *faith*. We cannot believe unless we are first born again. Like our first birth, our second birth is not ours to control. Regeneration is our spiritual awakening, caused by God’s Spirit at work within our hearts. Like baptism, regeneration is not our move, but God’s move. And if God decides to effect it in children, who are we to say that it cannot be so? Since we wouldn’t think of forbidding God from regenerating children, we shouldn’t try to forbid God from speaking his baptismal promises to them either. So the parallel between regeneration and baptism does not discourage the baptism of children. It recommends it.

### **Faith**

The idea that the Bible most frequently associates with baptism is faith. How does what the Bible says about faith fit with the practice of infant baptism? I’d like to suggest an approach.

Romans 4 and Galatians 3 say that Abraham is the father of believers. It was with Abraham that God established his covenant. What, then, was the nature of Abraham’s faith, and how much credit did God himself claim for that faith?

Although Abraham’s faith was very personal, it was not a completely private matter. In some way, known only to God, Abraham’s faith had an effect on his son Isaac before he was born. Because of Abraham’s faith, Isaac was circumcised at the tender age of eight days, obviously before he had any conscious faith of his own. We may wish that God had required Isaac to believe before he was included in the covenant, but God didn’t. Instead, God said that Abraham’s faith was important not only for himself but also for Isaac. Soon after Abraham’s children were born, they were to receive the sign of covenant membership.

That means, of course, that it's possible for a person to be a member of God's covenant even before he or she can consciously enjoy all of its blessings. When Abraham believed God, he formally entered into God's covenant and immediately took on the joys and responsibilities of covenant life. With Isaac the situation was different. He formally entered God's covenant when he was born; later, as he grew in faith, Isaac personally accepted the joys and responsibilities of covenant life.

Baptism, like circumcision, does not guarantee that we will enjoy the life of faith with God's people. It only certifies that we belong *with* God's people. It promises us that all God's blessings are ours. It calls us, from as early as we can remember, to love the Lord and follow him. For these reasons we should baptize those who enter covenant membership through the faith of their parents in the same way as those who enter it by virtue of their own faith.

The relationship between faith and baptism does not discourage the baptism of children. It recommends it.

## PIECES OF A PUZZLE

When we begin to understand baptism as God's wonderful word of promise and ownership, then we also begin to sense the excitement that believers experience in celebrating this sacrament. The actual baptism itself is exciting. So is the way that it marks a starting point for the child, the parents, and the church.

In infant baptism God publicly places his covenant claim on the children of believing parents. It is God's plan that they should grow up in the Christian faith, blessed by Christian nurture. For the rest of their lives your children may know that from day one they belonged to the Lord, that they are part of the community of God's people, and that God has promised to forgive their sins if they will accept that promise with a believing heart.

As covenant children grow older, they must affirm the promises that were publicly sealed in their baptism. Think of baptism as a check that must be personally endorsed by a response of faith in Jesus Christ. Some people have used the example of national citizenship. A child receives citizenship at birth, without being consulted. Only later in life will the child be able to decide whether or not to exercise that citizenship responsibly. In the same way, baptized children are born into citizenship in God's kingdom. How they will respond to their citizenship in God's kingdom and to the promises that were sealed in their baptism is a decision they will face further down the road.

For your child who is baptized at an early age, baptism provides a constant reminder of the blessings and obligations of the covenant.

For us parents, baptism commits us to our responsibilities—God helping us—in raising our children. It's by means of our faith that our children are counted as members of God's covenant. And it's by that same faith that we must raise our children—God's children, entrusted to our care.

For the church, the baptism of its children means a joyful and affirmative response to the question "Do you, the people of God, promise to receive God's covenant children in love, to pray for them, to help care for their instruction in the faith, and to encourage and sustain them in the fellowship of believers?" It is within the church community that covenant members, growing from infancy to childhood to adolescence to adulthood, become increasingly aware of what it means to be called by the name of Christ.

The whole argument for baptism of the children of believing parents fits together like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. No one piece is the whole picture. All the pieces together provide the evidence that has convinced the largest part of the Christian church throughout history to administer baptism to the children of believers. Our argument for infant baptism is that there is no biblical reason not to baptize children and every biblical reason to extend it to them.

As the Heidelberg Catechism confesses in Question and Answer 74:

Infants as well as adults  
are in God's covenant and are his people.  
They, no less than adults, are promised  
the forgiveness of sin through Christ's blood  
and the Holy Spirit who produces faith.

Therefore, by baptism, the mark of the covenant,  
infants should be received into the Christian church  
and should be distinguished from the children of unbelievers.  
This was done in the Old Testament by circumcision,  
which was replaced in the New Testament by baptism.

# REMEMBER YOUR BAPTISM

by Harry Boonstra

I don't remember the hymns we sang, nor the Scripture we read, nor the sermon. But I do remember the baptism. The pastor spoke the ancient words: "I baptize you in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit." And then, "Mark, welcome into the church of Christ, into the family of God."

But on that particular Sunday the ceremony was not over. The pastor did something very unusual. He put both hands back into the water, then scattered and splattered the water over the congregation and boomed, "Remember *your* baptism!"

I wondered long about that phrase. How could I remember my baptism as an infant in the Netherlands? And why *should* I remember it? I seemed to be leading an acceptable Christian life without thinking very often about my baptism.

But the challenge stuck with me. I began to think more about baptism, particularly my own. I tried to remember.

## REMEMBRANCE

First I had to unpack that word *remember*. Remember Joshua? He had the people haul those twelve boulders out of the Jordan and put them up as a memorial. Why? There were two reasons: "So that all the peoples of the earth might know that the hand of the LORD is powerful" and "so that you might always fear the LORD your God" (Josh. 4:24). That kind of memorializing is close to what we mean by *remembrance* in baptism—much closer than the more typical use of the word in a simple sentence like, "Remember to get some more dog food."

*The word remember is a rich one, setting up a link between the past and the present.* What was or what happened *back then* moves us *now*, both in communal and personal memory. Of course, we do not repeat the past. We need not even reenact it. But the memory, the remembrance, the memorial unites us with the past, and in some way we become part of it. The memory of my mother's hands—covered with white spots as long as I can remember—peeling potatoes, darning socks, wiping tears with a red handkerchief, holding Dad's hand in the nursing home—the memory is nearly tangible and brings a host of images and reflections. In a similar way, the Vietnam War Memorial in Washington, D.C., with its seemingly endless list of names, restores memories of the horror of that war and connects us to that event. That's part of what remembering is.

*Remembering in Scripture frequently also has a public, celebrative note, which includes proclaiming and reciting.* God's people remember the past as they observe and celebrate it in ritual and ceremony—especially at the Passover, with its bitter herbs, roasted lamb, and retelling (reliving) of the exodus story.

*Remembering is sometimes linked to specific public action.* Remembrance of the past may give rise to outward repentance and acts of obedience, as mental and emotional reactions flow into physical action. Nehemiah 8-9 and Acts 2:14-47 give us two examples in which the call to remembrance brings responses of weeping, of sharing food, and of breaking bread together.

Something of that is what the preacher meant when he told us to *remember* our baptism. Perhaps he had read John Calvin, who stressed a similar remembrance: "As often as we fall away, we ought to recall the memory of our baptism and fortify our mind with it, that we may always be sure and confident of the forgiveness of sins" (*Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 4, xv, 3).

## A FLOOD OF IMAGES

When I began to remember and relearn what the Bible teaches about baptism, I was astounded at the breadth and depth of the teaching. Out of this wealth some clear images began to emerge.

**Water** is sometimes a means and a metaphor of chaos and destruction, as when it drowned the wicked of Noah's day and, later, Pharaoh's army. But more often water is a source of life, reviving the desert and slaking parched mouths. Water comes with cleansing power, both washing away dirt and bringing ritual purity. The homey, everyday water used for washing kitchen utensils and dusty feet, getting rid of grime and making us presentable—this same water hints at forgiveness and holiness.

**The River Jordan** is another watery baptism image with many ripples of meaning. A missionary who had traveled through Israel brought home a jug of water from the Jordan to be used in the baptism of her child. To me the gesture bordered on superstition, but perhaps this mother recalled the powerful metaphor of the Jordan. The water of the river that scoured Naaman clean from his leprosy can serve as a symbol of the washing in baptism. It can also serve as a symbol of a crucial passageway: in crossing the Jordan the people of Israel left behind forty years of desert and entered the promised land—as they renewed their covenant vows to serve the Lord. Later in Scripture, the Jordan takes on even more significance as we see John the Baptist preaching his fiery message of repentance on the river's banks, dunking Roman soldiers and other disreputable folk into its waters. We also read the account of Christ's baptism in the Jordan at the beginning of his ministry, as he demonstrates that he is one of us.

Every baptism is a reaching back to these scriptural roots—to the images of cleansing, of entering a new land, of repentance, of beginning servanthood. Christ was linked to us in his baptism, and we are *linked with Christ* in our baptism. Paul speaks of “put[ting] on Christ” (Gal. 3:27, RSV), perhaps as a baptized convert puts on a baptismal robe. And Paul hints at a mystery of baptism as we are “buried with [Christ],” sharing in his suffering and death and, as we emerge from the water, raised with him in his glory (Col. 2:12).

**Seal.** Elsewhere we read that Christ puts his seal of ownership on us (2 Cor. 1:22). A seal is like a signature to a letter. It’s a mark that confirms that the letter belongs to the one who signs it. Baptism brings us up-close, within hugging distance, and this link with Christ permits us to share in his power, in his grace, in his service.

**Renewal.** The mysteries that Jesus unfolded to Nicodemus will always remain mysteries, but the born-again newness “of water and the Spirit” (John 3:5) is pictured for us at the baptism font. Our baptism does not automatically regenerate us—but still, our baptism points to a new reality. As Paul says, “He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit” (Titus 3:5). This image of new birth by water cannot be nailed down with theological precision, but the sustaining, amniotic, life-giving symbol is wonderfully portrayed by the water of baptism.

**One Body.** Paul also uses this, his favorite image, in connection with baptism. “For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body” (1 Cor. 12:13). This living, vibrant variety-in-oneness body is enriched by each baptism. Young people from Christian homes do not “join the church” when making profession of faith. They are already part of the body and have been since they were baptized as infants. By the time they were five or six years old these children could remember, “I am a real part of these people in my church; I belong to them.”

Thinking about these images will help us enrich the celebration of baptism and will help us to be grateful for our own.

## WHEN DO I REMEMBER?

A friend of mine served a church in New York for four years. He called it a “dying” church. The average age of its members was sixty-three, and while he was there, my friend buried seventeen parishioners. He had no baptisms. That, he said, was the saddest of all—not only because there was no numerical growth, but because people were never reminded of their own baptisms.

*Every baptism is a reminder of our own baptism:* mine in a drafty country church in Groningen, yours in Toronto or Los Angeles. At that time God said, “You’re mine; I love you; you’re washed.” Then he welcomed us into his family, and suddenly we had a slew of brothers and sisters. Every time a Tom, Dick, or Mary is baptized, we say, “Hurrah! I’m baptized too.” We are reminded of God’s promises to us and of our pilgrimage of faith.

*The Lord's Supper is also a remembrance*, and here we see a wonderful merging of communion and baptism. Who joins in the Lord's Supper? Those who are baptized—those who have been claimed by Christ and who have responded in faith to that claim. And what do baptized folk commemorate and celebrate? We celebrate

- the death and resurrection of Christ in which we are joined in baptism.
- the cleansing power of Christ's blood and his forgiveness, which was attested in our baptism.
- the communion of God's people into which we were born and which our baptism made visible.
- sacrificial living, as symbolized in the baptismal pledges.

This clearly shows that our gathering around the Lord's table is a remembering and affirming of our baptism.

*We should also remember our baptism in our daily walk.* When Martin Luther was tempted, his conscience whispered or shouted, "Remember your baptism!" Baptized people belong to Christ, and Christ's people don't cheat or abuse or lust or covet. Also, baptized people belong to a community. So they think "us" instead of "me." How will my promotion affect my family? How will my leaving affect the congregation? Baptized people are pledged to daily love God and serve others. My work and my play, my church and my office-going, my voting and my shopping are all part of the across-the-Jordan pilgrimage that began at my baptism.

Reformed believers are not re-baptizers. One baptism will do us fine. But we do want to remember it often. We treasure it, we are shaped by it, and we live out of it every day.

# THE BAPTISM SERVICE

by Bert Polman

I hope and trust that the baptism of your child will be a momentous experience for you and your family. I also believe that it will be a significant event in the life of your congregation. Your sisters and brothers in the Lord are not just witnesses but active participants in this sacrament. Here are some suggestions for making the baptism more meaningful for you and your family—and for your church family as well.

## ROLE OF FAMILY AND FRIENDS

Baptisms should take place in church during the worship service, because baptism stresses that our faith is a covenantal faith. Baptism is not an individual but a “family” ceremony. And we New Testament Christians find our family of faith in the *church*.

During baptism, our local congregation represents that family of faith. But it is also very appropriate and meaningful to include your Christian friends and members of your family, such as grandparents, sisters and brothers, uncles and aunts, among others. If no immediate or extended family can be present, you can invite Christian friends to be meaningfully involved in the baptismal service.

While only Christ-believers should take an active part in the ceremony, do not exclude your nonbelieving family members or friends. Be sure to tell your pastor who they are, so that they can be warmly welcomed to the worship service and be thanked for their support in attending this festive event. Fellow Christians are glad when nonbelievers attend a worship service—it creates an opportunity to witness what their faith is all about.

## PARTICIPATION IN THE SERVICE

Most churches encourage parents to think about and help plan the baptismal service of their child. Check with your pastor to see how you can help to make the baptism as meaningful as possible to you, your family, the congregation, and later, to your child when you tell him or her about it. Since many churches plan well in advance, don’t wait until the last minute.

Here are a number of parts of the baptismal service that your family members or friends could lead:

- the confession and assurance
- Scripture readings (such as an appropriate psalm)

- the instruction part of a formulary
- the baptismal prayer
- other prayers

Here's a sample of just a few of the appropriate passages that a family member could read in relation to baptism. Your pastor or worship leader will be able to suggest others.

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Psalm 33</li> <li>• Psalm 46</li> <li>• Psalm 89:1-8, 15-17a</li> <li>• Psalm 91</li> <li>• Psalm 100</li> <li>• Psalm 103</li> <li>• Psalm 105</li> <li>• Psalm 107</li> <li>• Psalm 114</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Psalm 121</li> <li>• Psalm 139</li> <li>• Psalm 145</li> <li>• Isaiah 55</li> <li>• Jeremiah 31:31-34</li> <li>• Matthew 18:1-5, 10-14; 19:13-15</li> <li>• Acts 2:17-21</li> <li>• Romans 6:1-14</li> <li>• Romans 8:28-39</li> </ul> |
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Your child's grandparents might make excellent candidates to lead one of the parts of the service. Through their participation we see and celebrate God's covenant in action over several generations—in a fulfillment in Christ of God's promise: "I will establish my covenant between me and you and your descendants after you for generations to come."

You, as parents, will be asked in the baptismal questions to reaffirm your faith in God. It is appropriate that in some way the congregation joins you in doing so, either by saying a creed or in a song of faith. It's also appropriate for the congregation, as you and your child's extended family in Christ, to make a pledge of support. Some Christian traditions incorporate a more specific pledge of support from one or more persons—often referred to as "godparents." However, in the Reformed tradition the entire church body takes on the role of godparents for infants.

## BAPTISMAL VOWS

Many baptismal forms have a question/answer format for parents to use to reaffirm their faith and make their vows. If your church approves, you may want to consider recasting those important parts of the baptismal service by saying them in your own words. This lends a more personal, relational dimension to what you are doing. However, in doing so, be sure to carefully prepare beforehand what you are going to say, and check with your pastor to be sure you've got it right.

Here's one example of baptismal vows made by parents:

As we come to present [name] for holy baptism, we want to make a testimony of our faith and responsibility before God and you, God's people. We confess Jesus Christ as our Savior and Lord, and we denounce the devil and all his works. We accept the promises of God and affirm the truth of the Christian faith, which is proclaimed in the Bible and confessed in this church of Christ.

The congregation can pledge as follows:

As people of the Lord, we promise to receive [name] in love. We promise to pray for [him/her], to help care for the nurture of [his/her] faith, and to encourage and sustain [him/her] in the fellowship of all believers. God is our witness and our help!

## BAPTISMAL SONGS

You may want to suggest an appropriate song that the congregation can sing to celebrate the baptism of your child. The topical index of your church's hymnal will be a good place to start looking for one. Again, your pastor or worship leader will be able to help you choose a meaningful song for the congregation to sing.

Some family circles are blessed with musical talent. If yours is one of them, consider the possibility of one or more family members or friends singing or playing an appropriate baptismal song as well. This can be a very meaningful addition to the baptism, as long as it does not prevent the congregation from singing or saying its response as well.

## VISUALS

Many churches use baptismal banners to mark this festive occasion. Feel free to discuss this possibility with your pastor and/or worship committee. You may even want to enlist the help of family and friends in making a banner for the occasion.

# HELPING YOUR CHILD GROW IN FAITH

In your parental baptismal vows you're making some very important promises. How can you nurture your child's spiritual life to help him or her come to embrace God's promises that are signed and sealed in baptism? Here are some pointers to help you do that.

## STAGES OF SPIRITUAL DEVELOPMENT

At different ages children experience and articulate their faith in different ways. Parents need to take this into account as they evaluate the sincerity and depth of their children's spiritual life.

- **Toddlers** have a general idea of God and of who Jesus is. They experience God's love through their parents' love. They confess their faith through memorized phrases, simple prayers, and songs.
- **Elementary school-age children** begin to understand God's plan of salvation as expressed in the Apostles' Creed. They can relate the Ten Commandments to their own lives, and they can pray the Lord's Prayer with meaning. They experience God's love through teachers as well as parents. They can read Scripture and pray on their own. They can confess their faith in their own words.
- **Adolescents** are able to question their faith and to investigate its implications. They can understand the principal teachings of the confessions and know the contours of a Christian lifestyle. Their experience of God will be mediated through peers and mentors as well as through parents and teachers. They can verbalize their beliefs, doubts, and basic commitments.
- **Young adults** are able to summarize and give assent to the confessions. They have their own walk with God and experience it in community with others. They can evaluate and make long-term commitments. In their confession they can articulate their faith in Christ, their agreement with the teachings of the church, and their commitment to the responsibilities of adult membership.

## NURTURING YOUR CHILD IN THE FAITH

Parents can help their children on their spiritual journey by familiarizing themselves with the four Building Blocks of Faith—four statements that every church member, even the youngest among us, need to be able to say with confidence for our faith to grow:

### **I Belong**

I belong to Jesus and to his body, the church.

### **I Know and Understand**

I know the story of God's faithfulness, of which I am a part.

### **I Have Hope**

I have confidence, through Christ, in all of God's promises. God is making all things new, and he is using us to accomplish that.

### **I Am Called and Equipped**

I am called to work in God's kingdom, and I am equipped to do that work.

To learn more about the Building Blocks of Faith and how they work in your child's life and in the life of every believer, visit Faith Formation Ministries' [Building Blocks of Faith toolkit](#) online ([crcna.org/FaithFormation/toolkits](http://crcna.org/FaithFormation/toolkits)).

Here are some other key ways you can give your child the strongest possible foundation for a deep, lifelong faith to grow and thrive:

- show your children unconditional love
- model Christlike commitment and behavior
- confess your own faith in simple, concrete ways
- encourage your children to ask questions, and raise questions yourself
- take time for family devotions, gearing them to the developmental level of your children
- encourage active participation in devotions by inviting your children to read aloud, lead in prayer, initiate discussion, and suggest songs to sing together
- introduce your children to devotional books geared to their age level
- encourage children to express their doubts and concerns, and, with older children, express your own as well
- participate in worship, church education, and other church activities, and expect your child to do the same
- be careful how you express criticism of your church—voice it in a loving, committed way, and balance it with appreciation for what you find good and meaningful in the church
- if at all possible, consider enrolling your child in a Christian school. While financial costs of Christian schools and colleges are high, the “three-legged stool” of a committed Christian family, church, and school environment provides your child with the strongest recognition of the lordship of Jesus over all of life.

## RESOURCES FOR PARENTS

Excellent materials are available for helping parents nurture their children's spiritual growth. Those include

- A variety of tools available from [Faith Formation Ministries](#) ([crcna.org/FaithFormation](http://crcna.org/FaithFormation))
- [Home Crown Handbook for Christian Parenting](#) ([FaithAliveResources.org](http://FaithAliveResources.org))
- Blogs like [Building Faith](#) ([BuildFaith.org](http://BuildFaith.org))
- [Sticky Faith](#) resources for families
- children's story Bibles, such as [The Jesus Storybook Bible](#) or the [Spark Story Bible](#)
- children's songbooks like [Sing With Me](#), or any good collection of traditional or contemporary choruses, hymns, and Bible songs
- [devotional books](#), both for families to read together and for children to read on their own
- Sunday school materials, which often contain resources for continuing the learning at home.

## GO WELL: GO WITH GOD

We hope this booklet has been useful to you. Please contact your elder or pastor for more information about the baptism of your child. They will be pleased to speak with you further about this joyous celebration of God's enfolding of children in his love. May God bless you richly as you continue to lead your child in the wondrous ways of the kingdom.