

Why Baptism?

A BRIEF INTRODUCTION TO BAPTISM AT GRACE



Why Baptism

Grace Community Church is blessed with spiritual diversity. Our folks come from a wide variety of religious and church backgrounds, while some have no history with church at all. One of the most confusing and often divisive topics can be why we baptize, how we baptize and especially who we baptize. This short paper will explain our approach. At the end there are several resources you can use for further study and information.

Why We Baptize?

From Genesis on, God made a Covenant of Grace with his people. In the ancient near east, a covenant was a sacred promise and pact where commoners would pledge loyalty and payments to a ruler in exchange for rights and protection. If a commoner failed to keep his promises he could face exclusion or even death. In the Bible God adopted that cultural practice but also adapted it. He unilaterally pledges to carry the burden of relationship graciously, and he takes the penalty of any failure upon himself. As a response to such mercy, God then also outlines covenantal responsibilities for his people.

Throughout biblical history, God's covenant was offered not only personally and individually but was always extended to the entire family of believers. Rituals and ceremonies were typically part of ancient covenants. In the Old Testament, God chose circumcision as the ceremony and sign of his promise. It symbolized the separation (or cutting away) of his people from the values and practices of the world (holiness) and his setting them apart for special treatment (grace). Since circumcision was a bloody practice, it also pointed to some form of sacrifice being necessary for the cleansing of sin. Circumcision confirmed that the cost of repairing and insuring relationship would be his burden and not ours. The human side of the pact was a call to continually trust God's character and promises.

In the New Testament, the covenant remains the same and is further developed as Christ came to bear the penalty for any failure and to achieve a righteousness he would gift to his people. But, while the covenant promise remained, the symbol and ceremony changed (just as the Lord's Supper replaced the Passover). Instead of blood, water would now be the symbol of the covenant relationship between God and his people. Jesus' blood was entirely sufficient for the forgiveness of sins and met all the requirements of the sacrificial system of the Old Testament. Therefore the shedding of blood is no longer needed. Additionally, baptism is far more

inclusive, allowing for Christ's work on behalf of women and Gentiles to be more clearly stated.

As a sign and seal (reinforcing and strengthening) of the covenant, Baptism is commanded and functions in several ways:

- It marks and identifies a person as being part of God's promises and community. The individual's faith is strengthened and others see their connection to Christ;
- As in the Lord's Supper, there is a supernatural and mysterious promise of and infusion of grace and blessings to the one baptized;
- It signifies and assures us of our being washed of sin and guilt and given the support and power of Christ;
- For parents baptizing their young children, it is a demonstration of their trust in God's promises on their behalf;
- For believers, it is an outward sign of salvation and inward transformation;
- For children, it is an outward sign of the child being included in the covenant promises and church community.

Because we believe baptism is a vital part one's faith journey, we require that members be (or have been) baptized. However, we do not require complete agreement with all the details of our understanding or that a person be baptized in our particular church or tradition. We also do not believe baptism is required for salvation or that the sacrament saves a person (which is by faith through grace alone). A child who is baptized will still one day have to possess his or her own personal trust in Jesus as savior. At that time, their baptism and the promises their parents were trusting will have come to fruition as he or she becomes a believing member of the church.

Who We Baptize: Infants and Adults?

In Genesis 17:12-13 God tells his people to circumcise their infant males as a sign of his "everlasting covenant." These infants bore the sign that represented God's promises and his relationship to the whole family by faith (Romans 4:1-12). Paul then tells us in Galatians 6:15 that the physical, "bloody" sign of circumcision had been done away with: "For neither circumcision counts for anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation." It was replaced with a circumcision "of the heart" (Romans 2:29). Paul explains this more fully in Colossians 2:11-12 "In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ. 12 Having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead."

In Acts 2:38-39, the author uses “covenantal language” to express the power and importance of believers and their families being baptized (compare Genesis 17:9-14), “And Peter said to them, ‘Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. 39 For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself.’”

It is important to note that the promise was always, from Genesis on, based upon God’s faithfulness and not our own. So, a child’s baptism is based on the faithfulness of God, not the faith or good works or intentions of the parents. For that reason, we do not refer to baptism as a “dedication” of the child to God based on the parent’s promises. Instead we see it as a sacrament where we are receiving the promises of God to treat our children with special grace and spiritual blessings. Even when a new adult believer is baptized, it is not based upon their faith but God’s faithfulness. During the sacrament, we ask the baptized or their parents to offer a profession of faith and vows to reflect that truth.

This perspective also explains why we do not “re-baptize” people. Our faith will change and waiver, but God’s character and promises never do. Whoever has been baptized, regardless of their age and understanding, still stands solidly upon God’s faithfulness rather than their own.

In summary:

- God used circumcision as a mark of his covenant on his people and their entire families. This was based upon God’s promises and faithfulness, not their own.
- Baptism is the new, non-bloody mark offered to the same covenant people and their families.
- People who come to faith in Jesus need to be baptized, if they’ve not already been baptized, and are invited to have their children who are not yet at the “age of reason” baptized.

How We Baptize: Sprinkle, Pour or Dunk?

“Baptism” is a term used in scripture in a variety of ways, not only as a sacrament, and has many meanings. We believe that whatever mode is chosen (sprinkling, pouring or dunking), it is valid and effective. However, Grace’s usual methods of baptism are sprinkling or pouring which we believe are rooted in the Old Testament and symbolize purification (Eg., Ezekiel 36:25-27; Psalm 51:7; Acts 22:16; Titus 3:5). After studying scripture for yourself, if you feel convicted about a particular mode of baptism, we invite you to discuss it with one of our pastors to see how we can accommodate your conscience.

Freedom

Although we are convinced that “infant baptism” by sprinkling or pouring is biblical, we recognize and appreciate others’ convictions and practices. Membership in our church does not require that one agrees with every part of our position. The particulars of baptism are considered a “non-essential” and unity remains central. Our members are committed to resisting divisions within our congregations and between us and other churches. In order to further protect that unity, we do expect members to respect our position and trust our leadership.

1 Corinthians 12:13, 21b, 25:

“For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body... The head cannot say to the feet, ‘I don’t need you.’ ...So that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other.”

Further Reading

Theologian B.B. Warfield’s explanation:
<http://reformedliterature.com/warfield-christian-baptism.php>

“Baptism” by Francis Schaeffer

Read Questions 69-74 in the Heidelberg Catechism

R. Scott Clark’s explanation (professor at Westminster Seminary -- a longer, more theological approach) <http://clark.wscal.edu/baptism.php>

Additional Quotes and Passages

Read Romans 4:9-12 and remember that Baptism has replaced Circumcision as the Sign and Seal of the Covenant.

Romans 4:9-12

Is this blessing then only for the circumcised, or also for the uncircumcised? For we say that faith was counted to Abraham as righteousness. 10 How then was it counted to him? Was it before or after he had been circumcised? It was not after, but before he was circumcised. 11 He received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised. The purpose was to make him the father of all

who believe without being circumcised, so that righteousness would be counted to them as well, 12 and to make him the father of the circumcised who are not merely circumcised but who also walk in the footsteps of the faith that our father Abraham had before he was circumcised.

Baptism is a “sign” which God has given his people, marking them out as his, and a ‘seal’ binding them indissolubly to him and pledging them his unbroken favor...

We have believed in the Lord Jesus Christ and God gives us this sign as a perpetual witness that this faith is acceptable to him, and as a seal, an abiding pledge, that he will always treat it as such. He who has been baptized bears in himself God’s testimony and engagement to his salvation...

Baptism therefore symbolizes not merely the cleansing of our sins but our consequent walk in new obedience. This, let us never forget, is not only symbolized for us but sealed to us, for baptism is given to us by God as an engagement on his part to bring us safely through to the end. In receiving it, we receive upon our persons the seal of his covenant promise.

Under this encouragement we are daily and hourly and momently to work out the salvation thus sealed to us, in the blessed knowledge that it is God who, in fulfillment of his pledge, is working in us both the willing and the doing.”

- B.B. Warfield

Ezekiel 36:25-27

I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. 26 And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh.

27 And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules.

Psalm 51:7

Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean;
wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.

Acts 22:16

And now why do you wait? Rise and be baptized and wash away your sins, calling on his name.

Titus 3:4-6

But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, 5 he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, 6 whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior.

If you have questions about any of this, please arrange to talk with us by calling the office at 828-891-2006.

GRACE

Grace Community Church
495 Cardinal Road, Mills River, NC 28759
828-891-2006 www.graceinfo.org