



BAPTISM

Covenant Church of Naples | PCA

There have always been strong disagreements over the understanding and application of baptism within the church. We realize these differences often come from a conviction and sincere desire to obey the word of God. Covenant church seeks where possible, to maintain unity among our church family. With that in mind, you are not required to observe or adhere to our belief and practice regarding baptism. Our views on baptism are not requirements for church membership. However, the understanding of baptism is important as it shapes other theological conclusions regarding our Christian faith. The following cannot be a full understanding or explanation of the matter at hand. If you have any questions or concerns about baptism, or other beliefs we hold, please reach out to the pastoral staff at Covenant Church so we can discuss the matter with you. Our hope is to faithfully submit to the word of God in all areas including baptism. Our biblical convictions and beliefs (doctrine) are all contained in something called the Westminster Standards. You can access this free of charge here: <https://www.pcaac.org/bco/westminster-confession/>

WHY DO WE BAPTIZE?

We baptize out of obedience to Jesus command given to the disciples before his ascension to the Father. "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, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Matthew 28:19-20)

WHAT IS THE MEANING AND SIGNIFICANCE OF BAPTISM?

At Covenant church, we often refer to baptism as a "sign" and "seal" contained within God's covenant with his people. This may be new terminology for you, and it is used to help understand the significance of baptism. A sign is something that points to a greater or other true reality beyond itself. Baptism as a sign, signifies our union with Christ in his death, burial and resurrection (Romans 6:3-5). Baptism identifies us with the visible church as one who belongs to God. It is not, however, primarily a focus on what the baptized individual has done, committed to, professed etc., rather it witnesses to God's commitment to us through grace. This commitment of God is best explained as covenant. Baptism is a sign and seal of covenant union with Christ (Galatians 3:27-29; Isaiah 44:1-5). As a seal we understand it to be a tangible witness of God's promises being kept through Jesus Christ to us. A seal can be understood much like an official stamp or mark that conveys the ability and authority to carry out the promises made by that covenant. Much like a king who uses his ring dipped in wax to seal an official document. Another example of a seal is a wedding ring that signifies promises of love, care, fidelity, honor, etc.. We see baptism as a sign and seal clearly in Romans 4:9-12. Baptism signifies, seals, and demonstrates our entrance into the covenant of grace and admission into God's people.

WHOM DO WE BAPTIZE?

We recognize all Christian baptisms, whether adult, infant or child with water in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit and we do not “re-baptize” these individuals. We do baptize men, women and children who make a credible profession of faith. We celebrate these baptisms, rejoice and welcome these to the benefits, watchful care, instruction and government of the church. We also baptize the infants and children of believing adult members.

WHY DO YOU BAPTIZE INFANTS AND CHILDREN WHO HAVE NOT YET MADE A PUBLIC PROFESSION OF FAITH?

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The simple answer to this question is that (1) while we firmly believe this is not an issue over which Christians should divide, yet (2) we are convinced that both the Bible and early church history support the practice of household baptism, which includes infants and young children. Following are some of the factors that have led us to this conclusion.

BIBLICAL RATIONALE

It is the belief of the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA) and of Covenant Church that God’s covenant of grace (His promise to be our God and have us as His people), in a mysterious way that we cannot quite grasp, extends to the children of believers. Such children, we believe, therefore have a right to the covenant sign, which in the New Testament is baptism (in the Old Testament the sign was circumcision). Following is a detailed reasoning of why we, at the request of those who share our beliefs on this matter, will baptize infants, as well as other children in a believing household who have not yet made a profession of faith.

In the New Testament, baptism replaces circumcision as the sign of the covenant.

- Colossians 2:11-12 teaches that baptism is the full expression of circumcision. The covenant of circumcision required that the infant male be circumcised as a newborn infant (Genesis 17:12), and this covenant was to be an *everlasting* covenant (Genesis 17:13). Physical circumcision is clearly no longer in effect (Galatians 6:11-18), but the covenant it represents is still in effect (Romans 2:29). The new outward sign of this “everlasting” covenant with believers and their children is baptism (Colossians 2:11-12). Therefore, we believe it follows, then, that baptism is to be administered to the children of believing parents.
- Acts 2:38-39 describes baptism with virtually the same language and terms with which Genesis 17:9-14 describes circumcision. The promise connected with baptism in Acts 2:38-39 explicitly includes the children of believers, as did the promise connected with circumcision in Genesis 17:9-14. No mention of a required age or profession of faith is made with respect to such children.
- As circumcision was a requirement for the Old Testament household (Genesis 17:10, 12-13), so, we believe, was baptism for the New Testament household (Acts 16:15, 31-33; 1 Corinthians 1:16). Never once are children said to be excluded from a household baptism, except in the case of the Ethiopian eunuch, who obviously had no children.
- There is no biblical command given for believers to cease the application of the covenant sign with their children.

In the New Testament, believers' children were regarded as members of the covenant community.

- In Luke 18:15-17, Jesus said that God's Kingdom belongs to little children (from the Greek *brephe*, which literally means "baby" or "infant").
- In Ephesians 6:1-4 and Colossians 3:20-21 Paul addresses children (from the Greek *tekna*, meaning "child") as believers in Christ. He speaks to them as he would any saint, regardless of age.
- In 1 Corinthians 7:14 Paul refers to the children (*tekna*) of believers as "holy" (meaning set apart for God). The word translated "holy" (*hagia*) is the exact same word used elsewhere by the apostles in reference to believers (translated "saints" – see Ephesians 1:1, for example). The New Testament assumption, then, is that children of believers should be regarded and treated as believers unless or until they prove themselves to be covenant breakers.
- In 2 Timothy 3:15, Timothy is said to have known the Scriptures from infancy (*brephe*).
- In Luke 1:15, John the Baptist is said to have been filled with the Spirit, "even from his mother's womb".
- The New Testament suggests nowhere that the sign of the covenant (previously circumcision, now baptism) is to be withheld from the children of believers until they make an informed profession of faith in Christ.

Our position on infant baptism does not reflect a belief that baptism itself saves a child.

In order to be saved, a child must possess his / her own personal faith in Jesus as Savior and Lord. The initial seeds of faith may or may not be in chronological union with the time of baptism. When a child professes faith at some point after baptism, that is the time in which the baptism and all that it signifies takes full effect. Until that time, the child's baptism is regarded as the sign of the child's inclusion in the church community (and all its benefits, except the Lord's Supper) by virtue of his / her parents' faith and the promise of God to be "their God and the God of their children."

HISTORICAL RATIONALE

While the Scripture does not speak specifically to the baptism of infants in the early church, there is Biblical suggestion as well as historical evidence that household baptism was practiced at that time.

- Irenaeus (a disciple of Polycarp, who was a disciple of the apostle John) speaks of infant baptism as a universal practice in the early church.
- Tertullian (end of 2nd century) acknowledged the universal practice of infant baptism.
- Origen (2nd and 3rd centuries) spoke of infant baptism as the common practice of the early church.
- These things being the case, were household (and consequently infant) baptism not the New Testament church practice, then the conclusion must be made that a full reversal of the early church's practice occurred immediately following the death of the last apostle. Because there is neither biblical nor extra-biblical evidence indicating so much as a debate about this issue in the first or second centuries, such a reversal is extremely unlikely. We conclude this in large part because there is a wealth of documentation about virtually every other theological debate and/or alleged "heresy" in the early church.

OUR ATTITUDE ABOUT HOUSEHOLD BAPTISM

We encourage household baptism at Covenant Church, *but do not require it* of those who cannot accept it. To us the biblical and supporting historical teaching seems clear, so we do encourage Covenant parents to have their children baptized. However, parents who are not convinced of our position are *not* required to have their children baptized in order to be fully active and fully received church members, and will not in any way be pressured to do so. This is an issue about which we are happy to disagree without it being any hindrance at all to full Christian fellowship. We will under no circumstance make this “non-essential” issue an essential one.

SUMMARY:

WHAT DOES CHILD BAPTISM SIGNIFY?

- *An outward sign of God’s promises to the children of believers.* According to Scripture, baptism signifies the promise of God that He will give His Spirit to believers and their children. We take this to mean two things: First, that the child will be exposed to the work of the Spirit as he / she is raised in a Christian home and church where the Word of God is taught and lived. Second, that the child’s parents can look expectantly to God for the salvation of their child, as the child is brought up in the ways of God.
- *An outward sign of the child’s inclusion in the community of faith.* Like circumcision, in Scripture baptism represented the child’s inclusion in the church community. By virtue of his / her baptism, the child becomes a “non-communing member” of the church, and is entitled to all the benefits of a full church member, except (1) the right to receive the Lord’s Supper, which first requires a credible profession of faith in Christ, and (2) the right to vote as a church member.
- *An outward sign of Jesus’ heart for children.* Through child baptism the entire church community acknowledges Jesus’ statement that the kingdom of God belongs to little ones. Jesus regularly included little children and babies in His fellowship.

WHAT CHILD BAPTISM DOES NOT SIGNIFY.

Baptism does *not* signify that the child is instantaneously saved upon baptism. There is no “magic” that takes place in this sacrament. The child’s salvation will be secured, as far as his / her parents and church are concerned, at the moment in which the child is converted to Christ through faith and repentance, not at the moment of baptism.

PARENTAL PROMISES AT COVENANT BAPTISM.

At Covenant we encourage parents to study and take very seriously the promises they make at the baptism of their child. Along with the sacrament comes a solemn responsibility for parents, as well as the entire church family, to cooperate with the Spirit of God in the child’s spiritual upbringing. Following are the promises parents will take at baptism, along with explanations of each promise. Before bringing their child before the congregation for baptism, parents are asked to examine each promise to make certain they can assent to it with a clear conscience.

PROMISE 1: “Do you acknowledge your child’s need of the cleansing blood of Jesus Christ, and the renewing grace of the Holy Spirit?”

In saying “yes” to this question, parents acknowledge that their child can only be saved by God’s grace through faith in Jesus Christ. The child is not a “Christian” by virtue of having Christian parents, or by virtue of being active at the church. The child must possess his / her own faith, something that will occur only when the Holy Spirit draws the child to God through faith in Christ.¹

PROMISE 2: “Do you claim God’s Covenant promises in your child’s behalf, and do you look in faith to the Lord Jesus Christ for his / her salvation, as you do for your own?”

In saying “yes” to this question, parents acknowledge that God has made specific promises to them as Christian parents regarding their child, and they will claim these promises with reasonable hope that their child will be given the gift of faith, and in so doing will turn from sin and to Jesus.

PROMISE 3: “Do you now unreservedly dedicate your child to God, and promise, in humble reliance upon divine grace, that you will endeavor to set before him / her a godly example, that you will pray with and for him / her, that you will teach him / her the doctrines of the Christian faith, and that you will strive, by all the means of God’s appointment, to bring him / her up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord?”

In saying “yes” to this question, parents commit themselves, in reliance upon the grace of God, to give their child to the Lord,² and raise their child according to God’s instruction. This means first that they will be careful to live a godly and upright life, according to the teaching of Scripture, as an ongoing example to their child.³ Second, this means that they will regularly pray for their child’s salvation and Christian growth, and that they will teach their child how to pray beginning at infancy and continuing throughout life. Third, this means that parents will teach their child the Scriptures and the truths of the Christian faith in the home, and will not view the church as the chief means for their child’s spiritual training, but merely as a reinforcement to the training that they will do in the home. Parents also commit to creating a home environment that breathes the air of the Gospel. One of the most significant practices parents can model for their children is that of regular confession and repentance within the family.

² 1 Samuel 1:27-28 27 I prayed for this child, and the LORD has granted me what I asked of him. 28 So now I give him to the LORD. For his whole life he will be given over to the LORD.” And he worshiped the LORD there.

³ 1 Timothy 4:16 Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers. (This command is directed toward church leaders, but it applies to those who lead their children in the home also.)