

Orthodoxy: Baptism

New City Catechism Question 44: What is baptism?

Answer: Baptism is the washing with water in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit; it signifies and seals our adoption into Christ, our cleansing from sin, and our commitment to belong to the Lord and to his church.

“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 . . .” (Matthew 28:19).

Throughout Scripture, water carries many meanings. In Genesis 6, God sent a great deluge of water to cover the earth—water signified the wrath of God. In 2 Kings 5, Naaman was healed of his leprosy by washing himself seven times in the Jordan River—water signified purity and cleanliness. Without water, every living thing would die, so water also signifies life. When Jesus Christ returns to usher in the New Heavens and New Earth, a river of life will flow forth from the throne of God (Revelation 22:1). Jesus offered the Samaritan woman living water that would become a “spring of water welling up to eternal life” (John 4:14).

The sacrament of baptism displays all of these things that water signifies. It is a sign that God washes our sins away by the cleansing blood of Jesus Christ. Baptism signifies our adoption into the body of Christ—it unites us to Jesus (Galatians 3:27). Since baptism involves the physical washing of a person with water in front of the congregation, baptism also signifies that we belong to the visible church and are under the care of a pastor and other elders.

If we stopped here, it would be easy to come to the conclusion that baptism can be defined as an outward sign of an inward change. While this statement is true, it is not the only part of the sacrament of baptism. If baptism is only a sign, what makes baptism a sacrament—a mystery of grace? No grace is conveyed through participating in a memorial symbol of grace. The mysterious element of grace in baptism, the part that makes baptism a sacrament, is that baptism also seals the things that it signifies.

What does it mean that baptism is a seal? Viewing the sacrament of baptism as a seal means that it not only shows us the grace of God, but also allows us to claim God’s promise of salvation. This is how Peter worded it: “Baptism, which corresponds to this [the passage of Noah’s family through the floodwaters], now saves you, not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a good conscience” (1 Peter 3:21). This is strong language that Protestants sometimes struggle to deal with. I can’t count the number of times that I have heard pastors say, “We don’t believe that baptism saves you.” Are they in disagreement with Peter? Not if they properly understand how baptism is a sign and a seal.

When thinking about the sacrament of baptism, it is important that we don’t separate the sign from the thing that it signifies. This distinction from 1 Peter 3 sets Reformed theology in opposition to Roman Catholic theology. Peter very clearly states that “Baptism . . . now saves you.” However, if baptism were merely a sign, this statement would not be true, because it does not save us “as a removal of dirt from the body.” Instead, Peter argues, baptism saves us “as an appeal to God for a good conscience.” This is baptism as a seal, the basis for our claiming God’s promise of salvation.

Here is a simplified, concise explanation: “Baptism . . . now saves you, not as a removal of dirt from the body [the sign] but as an appeal to God for a good conscience [the seal]” (1 Peter 3:21, brackets mine). Both concepts of sign and seal are necessary for baptism to be fully realized as a sacrament—grace given mysteriously.

Praise God for showing us his grace in a way that we can see and feel! Praise God that we not only see and feel the grace, but also receive a foundation on which we claim God's promises! Thank you, Father of Grace, that we come to our baptism as unworthy, dirty sinners but are freely promised deliverance and purification.

Praying for Our Missionaries - Tom and Ann Austin MTW in Atlanta

Tom and Ann have been with Mission to the World since 1983. For over 14 years they served in Kenya, seeking to raise up leaders for the Church in Africa through theological education and leadership training. In 1999 they moved to South Africa where Tom became president of the Bible Institute of South Africa, an MTW partner institution. In 2005 he became an area coordinator for MTW in theological education and leadership training in Sub-Saharan Africa. Ann has served in Africa teaching Bible courses, chronological Bible storying, prison ministry, and a speaking ministry to Christian women, as well as ministering with Tom on his travels around Africa. Tom and Ann live in Atlanta and serve MTW's Global Training and Development team. GTD is a team of international missionaries committed to developing innovative strategies in learning and training for ministry skills, leadership development, and cross-cultural skills in order to meet the needs of the 21st-century Church around the world.

Pray for them to refreshed, encouraged, and strengthened for service each day in the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Christ Covenant Church - Re-Plant Update

When Covenant Presbyterian Church merged with Christ Church becoming Christ Covenant Church - PCA, we stated our desire to re-plant a church at 3100 Covenant Road. That desire remains at the heart of who we are as we do worship, life, and ministry together each week. We are a missional church.

We desire to glorify God by being an indigenous expression of church life where God places us, and we believe God is placing us eventually at 3100 Covenant Road. While we continue to wait on our Lord to move us forward in the mission of re-planting at Covenant Road, our waiting has two parts. In Part 1 we are waiting on the sale of the property at 1824 Barnwell Street before moving forward with renovations to the Sanctuary building and nursery building. We believe both of these are necessary before relocating to Covenant Road. We presently are approaching \$80,000 in our Building Fund. We need \$500,000 for our Phase I renovations. We have no present contracts on the property at Barnwell Street, but we do have some present interest.

Part 2 of our waiting is a waiting with mission. While we wait we want to biblical faithful acting and speaking as the presence of Christ in our community. We want to listen and learn and become a part of the community in this part of our city, so that we can proclaim the Good News, be the presence of Christ living out a fruitful biblical life and church for this community. In Part 2 we want to be focused on living, demonstrating, and offering biblical community to a lost world, not facilities. We want to take root in the soil of the community appropriately reflecting its culture. We want to make missional decisions rather than preferential decisions about re-planting in the cultural context of the community. We want to go beyond our preferences or attractional methods in intentionally biblical in our mission. We want to hear and obey Jesus' words to his disciples, "As the Father has sent me, I also send you." (John 20:21). Jesus is our sender. He sends us with the message of the gospel. And he sends us to love a people in our culture with our lives and words. We want to be biblically faithful and culturally relevant. But how is Part 2 being worked out presently? I'm glad you asked because that plan includes you!

The Session recently passed a Part 2 Plan for Re-Planting at Covenant Road. Parts of that plan are in place and practice, and parts of that plan are in the planning stage. Below you will find a brief outline of that plan. You will be hearing more about this in weeks ahead.

- ❖ Weekly Prayer Walks in the Covenant Community (ongoing presently)
- ❖ Meeting Neighborhood Pastors (ongoing presently)
- ❖ Monthly Block Party (first one in July)
- ❖ Monthly Ministry Together Project with a Ministry Affiliate in the Covenant Community (beginning in August)
- ❖ Weekly Morning Worship Service in Petersen Hall (beginning in August)

We do not want to be a church that simply moves locations when we sell the Barnwell Street property. We want to be our Lord's gathered people who are being sent in a movement of the gospel to do worship, life, and ministry together in the community around Covenant Road. Please be praying with us and planning to go with us in this work he has for his church.