

# Baptism at Westminster

An Overview of Presbyterian Church (USA) beliefs about Baptism.



## Why do we baptize?

**Baptism is the sign and seal of our incorporation into Jesus Christ.**

In his own baptism, Jesus identified himself with sinners—yet God claimed him as a beloved Son, and sent the Holy Spirit to anoint him for service. In his ministry, Jesus offered the gift of living water. Through the baptism of his suffering and death, Jesus set us free from the power of sin forever. After he rose from the dead, Jesus commissioned his followers to go and make disciples, baptizing them and teaching them to obey his commands. The disciples were empowered by the outpouring of the Spirit to continue Jesus' mission and ministry, inviting others to join this new way of life in Christ. As Paul wrote, through the gift of Baptism we are “dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus” (Rom. 6:11).

## What do we believe about baptism?

**Baptism is...**

### **“A Reservoir of Meaning”**

The Sacrament of Baptism holds a deep reservoir of theological meaning, including: dying and rising with Jesus Christ; pardon, cleansing, and renewal; the gift of the Holy Spirit; incorporation into the body of Christ; and a sign of the realm of God. The Reformed tradition understands Baptism to be a sign of God's covenant. The water of Baptism is linked with the waters of creation, the flood, and the exodus. Baptism thus connects us with God's creative purpose, cleansing power, and redemptive promise from generation to generation.

### **A Sign of God's Covenant**

Like circumcision, a sign of God's gracious covenant with Israel, Baptism is a sign of God's gracious covenant with the Church. In this new covenant of grace God washes us clean and makes us holy and whole. Baptism also represents God's call to justice and righteousness, rolling down like a mighty stream, and the river of the water of life that flows from God's throne.

### **A Seal: God's Gift of Grace, Means of Grace, and Call to Respond to Grace**

Baptism enacts and seals what the Word proclaims: God's redeeming grace offered to all people. Baptism is at once God's gift of grace, God's means of grace, and God's call to respond to that grace. Through Baptism, Jesus Christ calls us to repentance, faithfulness, and discipleship. Through Baptism, the Holy Spirit gives the Church its identity and commissions the Church for service in the world.

### **The Bond of Unity in Christ and Christ's Church**

Baptism is the bond of unity in Jesus Christ. When we are baptized, we are made one with Christ, with one another, and with the Church of every time and place. In Christ, barriers of race, status, and gender are overcome; we are called to seek reconciliation in the Church and world, in Jesus' name.

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### Baptism is...

#### God's Covenant of Love for Believers and Children

Both believers and their children are included in God's covenant love. The baptism of believers witnesses to the truth that God's gift of grace calls for our grateful response. The baptism of our young children witnesses to the truth that God claims people in love even before they are able to respond in faith. These two forms of witness are one and the same Sacrament.

#### A One-Time Thing – God's Grace is Sufficient!

God's faithfulness to us is sure, even when human faithfulness to God is not. God's grace is sufficient; therefore Baptism is not repeated. There are many times in worship, however, when we may remember the gift of our baptism and acknowledge the grace of God continually at work in us. These may include: profession of faith; when participating in another's baptism; when joining or leaving a church; at an ordination, installation, or commissioning; and at each celebration of the Lord's Supper. Baptism marks the beginning of new life in Christ. The new way of life to which God calls us is one of deep commitment, disciplined discernment, and growth in faith. The gifts of the Holy Spirit, given with and through Baptism, equip and strengthen us for the challenges of Christian faith and life.

## The Church's Responsibility for Baptism

The congregation as a whole, on behalf of the universal Church, is responsible for nurturing baptized persons in Christian life. The session may designate certain members of the congregation as sponsors or mentors for those who are baptized or for their parents. When a young child is presented for Baptism at least one parent (or person exercising parental responsibility) should be an active member of a Christian church, normally the congregation in which the baptism takes place. The session may consider a request to baptize a child whose parent is an active member of another church. If the session approves such a request, it should communicate with the council of the other congregation and notify them when the Sacrament has been administered. Those presenting children for Baptism will promise to nurture and guide them until they are ready to make a personal profession of faith and assume the responsibility of active church membership.

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