

Understanding the Sacraments
Faith Presbyterian Church
Lesson 1: Foundational Beliefs and Baptism

Opening Question: What are your biggest questions regarding baptism?

We believe in objective truth. Two contradictory beliefs cannot both be equally true.

Presbyterians and Reformed Baptists share a lot in common about the practice of baptism (Compare the Westminster Confession of Faith, chapters 27-28 with the London Baptist Confession of Faith, chapters 28-29).

We join almost every Christian tradition in **agreeing** that:

- Baptism is essential,
- it a practice only administered by the visible church,
 - Baptism is the entry point to church membership
 - No one baptizes themselves. Recipients are passive.
- it represents our union with Christ

We **disagree** on two major points:

- Does baptism do anything? Is it only a sign or is it a sign and seal?
- Should believers baptize their children?

Both traditions affirm that **there is a right answer** to these questions and **God's Word** is the **source** for understanding that answer.

Baptists **forbid** ministers to baptize children of members. Presbyterians **require** ministers to baptize children of members. The question, of course, is: *Does God require it or forbid it?*

Some modern churches have **hedged** their bets. They will **not forbid** children to be baptized, **nor will they require** it. While this sounds magnanimous, it has led to deeper confusion among Christians. It has also shifted the role of baptizing from the responsibility of the church to the individual, personal convictions of the members.

What if a member is not sure what to believe?

- It is a valid Christian position for a member to follow the convictions of the church to which you belong, as you discern your convictions.
- It is also a valid Christian practice for the church to patiently guide young parents in developing convictions about God's truth.

We want, however, to agree that baptism isn't a matter of opinion. There is a biblical practice that we are called to follow.

Discerning the Right Practice: Prior Commitments

Whether we realize it or not, our understanding of the sacraments depends on other Christian beliefs. This lesson will explore some foundational beliefs that shape what we think about baptism and communion. Your convictions on these beliefs will make other Christian practices seem illogical or unbiblical.

Discerning Questions about Foundational Beliefs

1. Who does the work of salvation? Is redemption an act of God or a decision of the individual?

- **Romans 3:23–24** *for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, [24] and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus,*
- **Ephesians 2:5** *even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved*
- **Ephesians 2:8** *For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God,*

The Holy Spirit initiates the work of salvation by making you born again (regenerate).

- **Titus 3:5–6** *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*
- **John 3:5–8** *Jesus answered, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. [6] That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. [7] Do not marvel that I said to you, ‘You must be born again.’ [8] The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.”*

In light of these verses, can someone **be a Christian** before they can **credibly articulate** their **faith**?

Should we operate with the bias that the child of a believer is a Christian growing in his ability to articulate his faith? Or are we looking for a decision that they’ve made at a certain age where we can discern that their decision is credible?

Relevance: Baptism is the entry point into the church. We believe that the church should consist of Christian.

Many children of believers grow up proclaiming that there never was a day when they did not know Jesus as Lord. Most Christian parents long for their children to give this testimony.

- Should we tell our young children that they are not really Christian until they can make an authentic decision?
- Should we discourage them from praying to God as Father?

- Should the church exclude children because their faith is unconfirmed?

Matthew 28:19–20 *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, [20] teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age."*

This verse is sometimes used to say that churches are to only baptize "disciples," with the understanding that a disciple is someone actively following Christ.

But the command is not to baptize disciples, it is to make disciples. We baptize our children because we are in the process of making them disciples, following this command. Baptizing is the first step of making disciples of our children.

2. Does the church only consist of true believers or is it a mix of those who only appear to be Christians and true believers?

The church should strive for purity. Pastors and elders should make an effort to expose false believers and encourage nominal Christians toward genuine faith. The church, however, has always been a mixed body.

- Simon Magus (Acts 8:9-25, esp. 20-23),
- Hymenaeus and Alexander (1 Tim. 1:20),
- Those whom John described as "brothers" who commit a sin that leads to death, for whom one should not pray (1 John 5:16-17)
- Those who are visibly joined to Christ the vine but do not yield fruit, and therefore are cut off and thrown into the fire (John 15:1-10)

WCF 25.4-5

4. This catholic church hath been sometimes more, sometimes less visible. And particular churches, which are members thereof, are more or less pure, according as the doctrine of the gospel is taught and embraced, ordinances administered, and public worship performed more or less purely in them.

5. The purest churches under heaven are subject both to mixture and error; and some have so degenerated, as to become no churches of Christ, but synagogues of Satan. Nevertheless, there shall be always a church on earth, to worship God according to his will.

How is the invisible church distinguished from the visible church?

- Not primary vs. secondary
- Not unorganized vs. organized
- But "church as God sees it and church as we see it"

Parable of the wheat and tares: **Matthew 13:24-30**, explained in Mt. 13:36-43.

The servants in the parable ask if they should gather up the weeds before the harvest. The master responds:

- **Matthew 13:29–30** *But he said, 'No, lest in gathering the weeds you root up the wheat along with them. [30] Let both grow together until the harvest, and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, "Gather the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn."'*

What is the problem with the church that seeks to purge members who are not genuine Christians? How is this different from healthy church discipline? How would this apply to children who are professing faith but lacking a faith that can be confirmed credibly?

Were children included in the church?

- **Household baptisms:**
Acts 16:15 (Lydia and her household); Acts 16:31-33 (Philippian jailer and his family); 1 Corinthians 1:16 (the household of Stephanas); Acts 18:8 (Chrispus and his household); Acts 11:14 (Cornelius and his house).
- **1 Timothy 3:4** *He must manage his own household well, with all dignity keeping his children submissive,*
- **Ephesians 6:1–2** *Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. [2] "Honor your father and mother" (this is the first commandment with a promise),*
- **1 Corinthians 7:14** *For the unbelieving husband is made holy because of his wife, and the unbelieving wife is made holy because of her husband. Otherwise your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy.*

The Old Testament the fundamental social unit was the family, rather than the individual. Evidence seems to suggest this was true in the New Testament, as well.

T. David Gordon, *"since the New Covenant unlike the Old, includes women, slaves and Gentiles without any additional rites or cleansings, it would be surprising for it to exclude those included in the Old Covenant (children of believers) and would be even more surprising if it excluded them without any mention of the exclusion."*

3. Where does baptism come from? Does the Old Testament play a role in understanding the symbolism and significance of baptism?

It might appear that baptism shows up out of nowhere in the pages of the New Testament. Some have speculated that its practice and symbolism are derived from cleansing rituals of first-century Judaism or converts to Judaism. Little evidence supports this.

19th century German universities began the trend to view the Old and New Testament as representing two distinct religions. Their method was to derive doctrines only from the New Testament apart from the Old.

Yet when the New Testament authors seek to explain the symbolism of baptism, they frequently turn to the Old Testament for meaning.

- **1 Peter 3:20–21** *because they formerly did not obey, when God's patience waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was being prepared, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were brought safely through water. [21] Baptism, which corresponds to this, now saves you, not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ,*
- **1 Corinthians 10:1–2** *For I do not want you to be unaware, brothers, that our fathers were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, [2] and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea,*
- **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.*

The New Testament represents itself as in continuity with the Old Testament. We should be careful not assume the two represent different faiths.

1) Old Testament religion was not defined as outward, formal, or legal.

- **Jeremiah 4:4** *Circumcise yourselves to the LORD;
remove the foreskin of your hearts,
men of Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem;
lest my wrath go forth like fire,
and burn with none to quench it,
because of the evil of your deeds."*

Circumcision is never intended as merely an outward sign, but as a witness to an inward reality, the dedication of the whole life to the sovereignty of the Lord.

- **Deuteronomy 10:16** *Circumcise therefore the foreskin of your heart, and be no longer stubborn.*

2) The gospel was the same for Abraham and his children as it was for Christians today.

- **Galatians 3:8** *And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, "In you shall all the nations be blessed."*
- **Romans 4:16** *That is why it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his offspring—not only to the adherent of the law but also to the one who shares the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all,*

3) The story of the redemption told through the entire Bible is told through God's covenant with his people.

Next time we will explore how covenants hold together the one story of redemption.