

Understanding the Sacraments
Faith Presbyterian Church
Lesson 3: The Symbolism of Baptism

Opening Question: What does water represent to you? Why?

Summary of Lesson 2

- God relates to his people through covenants.
- Covenants include signs and seals that convey both blessing and curse.
- Circumcision was a sign and seal that conveyed passing through a knife. The righteous access life through the threat of death. The sinful are cut off from life by death.
- The knife killed Christ for you to have life.

What does water baptism symbolize?

- The Greek word for baptism typically means “dip” but a legitimate connotation can mean being “overwhelmed by something.”
 - When John the Baptist says, “He who sent me to baptize with water said to me, ‘Upon whom you see the Spirit descending, and remaining on Him, this is He who **baptizes** with the Holy Spirit.’”
 - The highlighted word “baptizes” is just the untranslated Greek word. A wooden translation of ‘dip’ here wouldn’t be sufficient: ‘dip’ with the Holy Spirit. The point is baptism can symbolize being overwhelmed.
 - The Spirit is “poured out” or “sprinkled” (Is 32:15; 44:3-5; Zech. 12: 10; Ez 36:25-27; 39:39)
- What did water symbolize in the Bible? The NT authors turn to the OT to explain the symbolism.

New Testament Authors Point to Baptism as Covenant Judgment

Noah’s Flood

1 Peter 3:20b-21a- *“in the days of Noah, while the ark was being prepared, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were brought safely through water. Baptism, which corresponds to this, now saves you*

1 Peter 3:21 speaking of Noah’s flood says baptism “corresponds to this” or is the antitype to this. Antitype means that it is the real thing that Noah’s flood symbolized.

- The dual sense of the flood is both judgment and preservation. Not all who passed through the waters of the flood were saved. Noah’s flood was a covenant judgment (Gen. 6:8)
- Those in Christ passed through the water. Those in Adam were condemned by water.
- Baptism like circumcision is a covenant sign/seal and has the dual sense of curse and blessing.

Exodus and the Red Sea Crossing

1 Corinthians 10:1-4 describes the Exodus Red Sea crossing as a baptism.

- The dual sense of the Red Sea cross is both judgment and preservation.
- Those in Christ passed through the water. The Egyptians were condemned by water.

In 1 Peter and 1 Corinthians, authors use the word baptism to describe passing through a judgment ordeal, while others were condemned by the water.

John the Baptist's Baptism

John the Baptist's baptism in the Jordan

- John could have chosen any number of places if all he needed was water. He chose the gateway to the Promised Land (crossing the Jordan parallels crossing the Red Sea)
- John was a messenger of the old covenant, calling Israel (not the world at large) to national repentance. He understood Israel to be in crisis. They were suffering the Mosaic covenant curses of Exile (Isaiah 40:3) because of their sin.
- He was not just calling for cleansing; he was calling for judgment. His baptism was preparing Israel for the coming judgment either of blessing or condemnation:

Matthew 3:11-12

[11] "I baptize you with water for repentance, but he who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. [12] His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into the barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

- Jesus' baptism will save and condemn corresponding to repentance.
- John's arrest by Israel's rulers ended his baptisms but also represented Israel's rejection of his call to repent. This was the event that prompted Jesus to begin his ministry near Gentile territory in Galilee (Matt. 4:12ff; Mk 1:14f; Luke 4:14; John 4:1-3).

John Baptizes Jesus

When Jesus passes through baptism waters, he was submitting himself to judgment. The divine judgment ordeal of the waters passed over him. It was like God passing through the severed animals in Genesis 15.

Jesus uses **baptism** as a metaphor to symbolize not cleansing or rebirth but the **covenant judgment** he'll face in the future on the **cross**.

- Mark 10:38 *"Jesus said to them, "You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or to be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?"*
- Luke 12:50 *"I have a baptism to be baptized with, and how great is my distress until it is accomplished!"*

Baptism as New Creation

To summarize:

- Noah's Flood: water judgment, Spirit hovered, dove present, Noah becomes new Adam.
- Exodus/Red Sea: water judgment, Spirit hovered like an eagle, Israel God's firstborn.
- Jesus' baptism: water judgment, Spirit hovered as a dove, Jesus declared Beloved Son.

We could add to this list creation:

- God's Spirit hovering over the waters, God creates Adam in his own image.

Baptism doesn't just symbolize judgment. It also symbolizes **new creation**.

- In fact, the flood and the exodus should be viewed as a foreshadow of new creation. The "baptisms" of Noah and Israel led them through death into a new life.
- The Christian life, likewise, begins with a baptism.

The prophets looked forward to a new creation. They used "water" imagery to refer to the Spirit's work. Throughout Isaiah 40-55, there is a close connection between the outpouring of the Spirit and the resulting new creation. Here is just a sample:

Isaiah 44:3

*[3] For I will pour water on the thirsty land,
and streams on the dry ground;
I will pour my Spirit upon your offspring,
and my blessing on your descendants.*

Water and Spirit are closely associated: Joel 2:28; Is. 32:15-20; Ez. 39:29. The Spirit in these passages is described as being "poured out."

The same type of imagery appears in the NT around baptism.

John 3:5

[5] Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.

The water of baptism did not make you born again, but baptism pointed to the life-giving (new life) work of the Spirit. In the next chapter, John tells us that while his disciples baptized, Jesus didn't baptize anyone. His task was to baptize with the Holy Spirit.

Romans 6:1-4

[1] What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? [2] By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it? [3] Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? [4] We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.

Titus 3:5-7

*[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, [7] so that being justified by his grace we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life.

In Acts 2:32-33, the Spirit is “poured out” at Pentecost.

Key connection: Circumcision in the OT also pointed to the new creation.

It signifies a new heart. Deuteronomy 10:16 “Circumcise therefore the foreskin of your heart, and be no longer stubborn.”

Why is a child circumcised on the eighth day? Sunday is the eighth day. It starts a new week.

This pattern continues into the New Testament.

- The Holy Spirit is poured out during the Feast of Pentecost.
- Pentecost is at the end of the Feast of Weeks (seven weeks, 7x7)
- It is the 50th day after Passover.
- Like circumcision, it is the start of a new day.
- Spirit, Baptism, Circumcision, and New Creation all are operating within the same symbolic matrix.

Circumcision and Baptism

We’ve already seen how baptism and circumcision represent the same truths. They are signs and seals of the covenant. They represent covenant judgment and new creation.

Covenant judgment explains why Paul makes a parallel between circumcision and baptism in Colossians 2.

Colossians 2:11–14

[11] 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. [13] And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, [14] by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross.

- The circumcision of Christ refers not to his circumcision as an 8-day-old baby, but rather to his crucifixion.
- Christ was cut off (circumcised) in covenant judgment.
- A Jew’s circumcision was a covenant marker that identified with a covenant judgment that had to happen on their behalf.
- A Christian’s baptism signified the same covenant marker that identified with Christ who suffered covenant death on their behalf.
- You were circumcised by God...having been baptized.

Compare the Covenant Language Used in NT with Covenant Circumcision in OT

Acts 3:25, You [Christians] are the **sons of the prophets** and **of the covenant** that God made with your fathers, saying to Abraham, 'And in your offspring shall all the families of the earth be blessed.'

Galatians 3:7-8, Know then that it is those of faith who are the sons of Abraham. [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."

Genesis 17:7-8, And I will establish my covenant between me and you and your offspring after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you. [8] And I will give to you and to your offspring after you the land of your sojournings, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession, and I will be their God."

The People of God from Old to New

John Sartelle in his booklet *What Christian Parents Should Know About Infant Baptism* asks three key question in light of the parallels between circumcision and baptism.

1. When a person believed in the God of Abraham and trusted in Him in the Old Testament, what happened?

He was circumcised.

2. What was the outward event that represented the clean heart in the Old Testament?

Circumcision

3. What was the outward sign that marked a person's entrance into the community of believers in the Old Testament?

Circumcision

"Now," he states, "let me ask you the same questions replacing the words "Old Testament" with "New Testament";

1. When a person believed the God of Abraham and trusted in Him in the New Testament, what happened?

He was baptized.

2. What was the external event that represented the clean heart in the New Testament?

Baptism

3. What was the outward sign that marked a person's entrance into the community of believers in the New Testament?

Baptism

"Where does the New Testament command us to stop applying the covenant sign to children of believers?' Unlike the clear teaching of the New Testament regarding the fulfillment of the ceremonial law, there is nothing that remotely suggests that the children of believers are being placed outside the covenant community with the coming of Jesus." Mike Glodo