

Baptism and the Lord's Supper

In the Gospels Jesus gives us two signs to be observed until he returns: the Lord's Supper and Baptism. These signs are called sacraments because they are sacred moments through which God works to strengthen the faith of God's people. They are signs marking God's covenant relationship to those God loves and they are also seals guaranteeing that God's promises will be kept.

The sacraments are signs and seals of God's covenant.

A covenant is an agreement and the covenant God makes with His people is so important that it is nearly impossible to correctly understand the Bible without covenantal language.

The sacraments of the Lord's Supper and Baptism highlight God's initiative to enter into covenant relationship. In the Lord's Supper we are reminded of the steps God initiated to save us through Christ's body broken and bloodshed. In baptism we emphasize God's promise and initiative to act on our behalf and not the faith-response of the one being baptized. The sacraments drive home the one-sided nature of the covenant. God makes AND keeps the covenant. Our response to the sacraments is gratitude and service. As we deepen in our awareness of God's grace revealed and sealed to us we live lives of obedience, taking up the call to follow Christ as one of his disciples.

Baptism is God's action and activity. The individual is baptized. Baptism is a passive term -- something that is done to the one baptized, something received. God initiates, the one being baptized only receives the grace and promise given. When viewed as a sign and seal of the covenant, baptism is not a testimony to the faith of the one being baptized. It is not test of devotion or a demonstration of faith. Baptism is a sign and seal of God's promises and a reminder that God is a covenant making and a covenant keeping God.

The Reformed tradition holds that on the basis of the faith of believing parents the infant is received as a "member" into the covenant as part of the faith community. The community embraces the covenant in the name of the infant being baptized. The language we used is that of engagement. The child is engaged to confess faith in Christ as that child grows in awareness and understanding so that he or she can embrace the covenant for themselves.

When we understand the corporate people of God receiving the promise of the covenant for the entire community, including the infant, we still must consider the eventual confession of faith of the child. As an infant, the child has not yet confessed his or her faith nor received the benefits of the covenant on his or her own account. It is still necessary to call for faith and repentance.

We do not believe in baptismal regeneration – the belief that salvation is given in and through baptism. Salvation is by God's grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. For this reason, the Reformed tradition gives due emphasis to the eventual confession of faith on the part of the one baptized. We believe that the Spirit of God comes to complete the regenerating work promised in baptism. At this point of conversion our baptized children are saved. In this way we bring together the person's faith-response with God's initiative of establishing a covenantal relationship with the child.

Part of the celebration of Infant baptism is the anticipation of the day in which the infant, by his or her own accord, will respond in faith to God's covenant. Baptism looks to the future, expecting the profession of faith of the individual that is baptized. We might say that upon making the profession of faith, a child of the church is ratifying and fulfilling what is promised at baptism. A promise without fulfillment is an empty promise.

While the parents and congregation together accept the gift of God's grace for the infant, there is also a significant commitment on the part of the parents and the congregation to see that the promise of the covenant fulfilled. We pray and encourage all baptized children to make their own personal confession of faith in Jesus Christ at an appropriate age. As a congregation we insist on teaching and discipling

our baptized children. We must teach about the importance and the significance of baptism and the covenant that God makes with us. It is imperative that we carefully nurture the baptized to prepare them to receive Jesus by faith.

Often it is asked, “Where in the New Testament are we commanded to baptize children?” While there are many ways to answer this question, it is a wrong question. The Old Testament maintains overwhelming continuity with the New Testament, and continuity ought to be the default assumption. The question should rather be, “Where does the New Testament command us to stop applying the covenant sign to children of believers?” Since we have not been commanded to stop applying the covenant sign to the children of believers we should not stop. (The Old Testament sign was circumcision, the New Testament sign is baptism.)

Why should we celebrate the promise of God’s covenantal care by baptizing infants?

- Because the promise exists: It has been made by God.
- Because it is a sign of the covenant that is a reality by God’s grace and election.
- Because both the parents and the church are responsible to fulfill the implications of the covenant in the life of the child.
- Because it is the seal marking us with God’s promise.
- Because of God’s command.
- For the proclamation to all nations of the Gospel of God’s love.
- Because in the celebration of infant baptism the parents and the faith community, the Church, commit themselves to participate in God’s mission of making disciples.

Why emphasize the confession of faith?

- Because this gives the person baptized as an infant the option to say “yes” or “no” – to personally respond to God’s promise of salvation in Jesus. It is by God’s election and through the grace-filled operation of the Holy Spirit that anyone is able to say “yes” to God’s covenantal promises.
- Because the child has the duty and right to freely seek the benefits of his or her baptism, and appropriate them to his or her own life.
- Because the grown child now can respond personally to God’s covenantal initiative.
- Because the infant, once grown, commits him/herself to God, to the church, and to God’s mission to the nations.
- Because the child, the parents, and the congregation in the act of profession of faith, celebrate and give thanks for the fulfillment of a promise made years before in baptism.
- Because the fulfilled promise is sealed in the heart of the child by the Holy Spirit – and is sealed in the hearts of the congregation.
- Because public confession of faith in Jesus Christ is commanded by God.

What about infant dedication?

Infant or child dedication is often a tradition in congregations that do not hold strongly to the covenant. We believe that there can be value in the commitments we make to dedicate our children to the Lord and we certainly do not want to discourage this practice. Parents who do not hold to infant baptism are given the option of not baptizing their infant(s); however, a service of public dedication will not be offered as an option. Parents can explore opportunities to dedicate their children by speaking with a pastor or an elder.

What about baptizing adult believers?

While infant baptism has been the primary understanding and practice within the Reformed tradition it has never been at the exclusion of Adult Baptism. We take the command in Matthew 28 to mean that all God’s people should be baptized as a sign and a seal of God’s covenant promise. For those who grew up outside a faith community this will happen when they make their confession of faith in Jesus.

With new faith in Christ, we encourage the new adult believer to be baptized. In the case of an adult converted when grown, the two parts – the promise and the fulfillment of baptism – are joined in a single act at the same time. In this case we celebrate baptism and confession of faith simultaneously.

When children who were not baptized as infants begin to explore faith and baptism we encourage the following:

- **Discern Understanding and Maturity.** Children can confess faith in Christ when they are very young but they will likely not be able to contemplate the significance of the baptism until they are older. It is important for children to understand the meaning of the sacrament and also have enough maturity to understand the significance of this act of obedience. The process for preparing for baptism should instruct and encourage yet this process is a stretch for those who lack developmentally the ability to comprehend.
- **Discern Independent Thinking.** It is not uncommon for those who were baptized during their pre-teen years to feel a need to be "re-baptized" when they are older. At times group pressure plays into the decision to be baptized as a child and memories of the events are often fuzzy at best. Once a young person has the capacity for reasoning and for more independent thinking they are more likely to embrace the significance of their confession and baptism.

The following are current baptismal practices at Cedar Hills:

1. Baptism administered, if possible, at a time and place of public worship.
2. Parent/Guardian requesting baptism for a child/infant up to the age of Faith Quest must be a member of Cedar Hills
3. Pastor or Elder presides over the sacrament – utilizes significant portions of 'The Office for Administration of Baptism' from current or prior versions of the RCA Liturgy.
4. Elder participation in baptism including gift of cradle cross and certificate of baptism.
5. Water administered by various modes of application.
6. Newly baptized individual is presented to the congregation.
7. Baptisms to be performed on 4th Sundays unless a special request is received and approved.
8. Pre-baptismal study or meeting with parent/guardian by the Pastor or Elder who will perform the baptism with various tools available according to the situation
9. Elder's approve all baptism requests
10. Greeting of newly baptized and parents at back of church after service.
11. Believers only may join the baptismal party during the questioning
 - Non-believers are invited to join after the questioning – to be determined by the pastor or elder meeting with the family
 - Specific Spiritual Mentors (godparents) allowed upon request. Additional explanation of Spiritual Mentor added when they are part of the baptismal service.

The Elders are responsible to administer the sacraments in keeping with Scripture and our Reformed traditions. The Elders may reconsider the guidelines outlined here based on unique or unforeseen circumstances.