

Pastor James Rathmann

December 7, 2023

Baptism at RCD

What is Baptism?

At Redemption Church Denver we perform Baptism for two groups of people (1) new converts and (2) the children of believers. While we believe this pattern of baptism is expressed in scripture we also believe that interpretive differences surrounding this matter are not worth causing divisions among church members, therefore infant baptism, while encouraged and taught, is not required for full and active membership at RCD.

What is Baptism?

Christ himself calls the church to the practice of baptism as he sends the apostles out into the world to make disciples in the Great Commission.

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.

Baptism is part and parcel with the churches call to make disciples. To not practice baptism is akin to not calling the world towards obedience to Christ. But have you ever wondered why? It seems intuitive that we ought to proclaim the gospel, and call the world towards repentance and commitment to the risen Lord, but getting splashed with water as essential to disciple-making seems a bit... arbitrary.

In order to grasp baptism we need to grasp the biblical language of covenant, and covenant signs. In doing so we'll be able to see that far from being arbitrary, baptism is a glorious sign of God's covenant faithfulness shown in his loving pursuit of sinful people.

What is Baptism? Baptism is a sacramental sign and seal of the covenant of grace. So let's see what precisely that means.

Covenant of Works

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth by his Word (Gen 1:1). His Word brought structure, purpose, and meaning to all of creation. As his creatures, uniquely made in his own image, mankind was called to participate in God's creation in loving obedience to God our creator (Gen 1:27, 28). Just as God's word brought structure to the world in telling the sun to shine and the seas to stop right there, so too did God bring structure to our relationship with him in telling us to be fruitful and multiply, and demonstrate our obedience by not eating from that tree right there (Gen 2:17). The promise of our obedience was life, and the curse of our disobedience was death. This relational structure between God and man with promises and curses attached is called a covenant.

This initial covenantal structure is called the Covenant of Works.¹ By our obedience we maintain the requirements of the covenant and by our sin we break the covenant. The bad news is, in this covenantal structure our first father Adam disobeyed God, and plunged humanity into sin and death.

Covenant of Grace

But all of this takes place only by chapter three of the Bible which means there are a lot of chapters to go. The whole rest of scripture is the outworking of the Covenant of Grace. This is the good news that God did not abandon humanity as covenant breakers, which he justly could have done, but instead sought his people so that we might be restored to God. Right in the midst of pronouncing his curses for our covenant breaking, God inserts the seed form of this Covenant of Grace. Promising through the offspring of eve, the serpent would be crushed (Gen 3:15).

This seed form of the Covenant of Grace grows and takes shape throughout scripture. God narrows his focus to one man, Abram, to whom God promises blessing, land and, offspring (Gen 12:2-3), through which he will become a blessing to the whole world (Gen 22:18). The essence of the covenant is stated by God in Genesis 17:

Genesis 17:7 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.

The great promise of the covenant here is that God will be our God. Just as it was meant to be in the beginning, and within this covenant of grace we would be God's people. The scope of the covenant is not just Abraham alone but to Abraham's offspring after him. In the same way

¹ WCF 7.2

that the covenant of works was under the headship of Adam for his offspring, so too is this covenant under the headship of Abraham for his offspring.

Sign of the Covenant

To mark this covenant God gave to Abraham and to his offspring the sign of circumcision. Circumcision is described by God as the “sign of the covenant” (Genesis 17:11). The sign was to be given to all of Abraham’s male offspring, because this was the extent of the covenant promise stated above, “to you and to your offspring after you” (Genesis 17:7).

This sign did not do the saving work of the covenant, it did not create righteousness in the person who received the sign. We know this because Abraham was counted righteous by his faith alone before the sign of circumcision had been commanded (Gen 15:6, Romans 4:11). But it was a visible marker to Abraham and his offspring that the promises of God extended to these people so that when they were taken up by faith the benefits of this promise would be received. It is not a sign of the satisfaction of the covenant, but a sign of the covenant itself. The child of Abraham might therefore know that this promise of God to be their God belonged to them. Some, like Abraham’s son Isaac, took this up by faith and received its benefits, other’s like Abraham’s son Ishmael did not. Although both received the sign. The sign does not save, we are saved through faith alone.

New Covenant

This same covenant given by God to Abraham grows and develops as moral requirements of the covenant are described to Moses at Sinai, and the kingly reign which will fulfill this promise is given to the line of David. But finally the covenant is not just developed but fulfilled in Jesus Christ.

Jesus is the seed of the woman who crushes the serpent (Gen 3:15). And he is the second Adam who represents the people of God and fulfills the Covenant of Works on our behalf (Rom 5:17). He satisfies the requirements of the covenant by both fulfilling the requirement of perfect righteousness (Rom 5:19), and taking on the punishment due to our failures by his death (2 Cor 5:21). The wonderful news in Christ is, what we could not do because of our sinful flesh, God did for us by sending Christ (Romans 8:3).

You see the glory of God’s covenant of Grace is that he fulfills the covenant of works on our behalf. So that in Christ we receive the promise of eternal life. The previous covenant sign pointed to Christ, but since the bloody rite of being cut off to be brought in was fulfilled in Christ a new sign attends the New Covenant in Christ. Therefore it is no longer circumcision but baptism which the Lord requires as the sign of his New Covenant. Here we understand that the newness of the New Covenant is not a unique innovation but the fulfillment of all of God’s

covenant promises. That is why we see the New Covenant language in line with old covenant language and why we apply the New Covenant sign of Baptism as a more complete pattern of the Old Covenant, which was to you and your offspring. The New Testament reinforces this pattern by linking our understanding of the New Covenant in Christ with the patterns established in the prior covenants.

Baptism, Sign and Seal of the New Covenant

On the day of Pentecost, the Apostle Peter stands up and by the power of the Holy Spirit begins living out the great commission by calling his hearers to baptism and repentance towards Christ.

Acts 2:38-39 And Peter said to them, “Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. ³⁹ For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself.”

Peter calls his hearers to repentance and faith in the work of Christ which accomplished the forgiveness of our sins. Baptism stands as the outward sign of participation in this promise. And notice, the promise extends in precisely the same way that the promise originated, “For you and for your children, and for all who are far off.”

Paul writing to the Colossians makes a clear link between the spiritual reality of circumcision and the spiritual reality of baptism.

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.

How is it that this circumcision of Christ was accomplished? By our baptism. Paul is willing to link the spiritual reality of both of these signs, showing us that in his mind they point towards similar realities although from different temporal perspectives. Circumcision looked forward to the coming of Christ and Baptism looks back to the fulfillment of Christ. Since we see the New Testament writers utilizing Old Testament language to describe the New Covenant, and we see the New Testament writers linking the sacramental signs of the Old Testament to the sacramental signs of the New Testament we ought to expect their application to be the same unless instructed otherwise.

Put another way, because the promise of the Covenant of Grace has always been held out to believers and their children, and this has never been revoked anywhere in scripture. We ought to conclude that the sign of this New Covenant does not retreat in this particular area, but instead is held out in the same way that God always had only made more expansive in Christ.

Now you may be thinking, that all seems great, but isn't baptism a sign related to faith? Why would we apply a sign of faith to those who have not expressed faith? I completely understand this, and even love the symmetry of it. The difficulty however is that scripture doesn't seem to operate within this framework. Look at how Paul understands circumcision in Romans 4:11 referring to Abraham's circumcision he says.

Romans 4:11 | He received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised.

Circumcision itself is a sign and seal of righteousness by faith yet it is this very sign that is commanded by God to be applied to all of Abraham's male offspring at eight days old who of course then could not have expressed faith in any way. Therefore circumcision is a sign related to faith, yet is commanded to be applied to the believer and their offspring. We understand baptism to operate within this same pattern.

Regarding the Sacraments there are two common pitfalls I'll call objectivity and subjectivity. To err on the side of objectivity is to say that the sign is absolutely a marker of an objective reality. If you are baptized, then you are saved. This is of course not true for the adult baptism or the infant baptism. Faith is the essential ingredient to apprehend the promise of God. However the other pitfall is subjectivity. The sign is not a marker of what God has done but a declaration of my own faith. This is to reduce the sign to merely a public proclamation what is in the person being baptized.

The reality is, the sign is not of something God does irrespective of the subject receiving it, and neither is it merely a sign of what the person being baptized is giving to God. It is a sign of the the covenant. A covenant is not describing mere objectivity or mere subjectivity but a relationship. This relationship is from God to us and is received by us in faith. Therefore the sign of this relationship is given to us by God and is to be received by us in faith in the manner in which God determines. This manner, from the beginning of the covenant, is to you and to your children. Therefore the covenant is as objective as the water itself, but is only effective in so far as it is taken up subjectively by faith.

Therefore we practice infant baptism as an act of continued faith in the promise of God, the promise which is for you and your children. Therefore, those to whom scripture has given the promise, we ought not hinder their receiving the sign, in hope that this promise of God to them will be taken up by them through faith.

Practice of Baptism at RCD

At each baptism in our church we are reminded of the work done by Christ on our behalf and the secure promise that he offers to us. For those who may not remember their own baptism they are reminded through the baptisms of the church which they are a part of, and can with

confidence say the promises of Christ are mine to receive. It is our responsibility as a church to see to it that we take up this promise through faith.

If you are baptized at RCD you are not only receiving the sign of God's gift of salvation in Christ, but likewise incorporation into his people, the church. God's intention has always been not just for individuals but for a people organically united in him. Out of isolation into community, out of autonomy and into relationship with him. He is our God we are his people.

Promises to be affirmed by believing parents of a child to be baptized.

Promise 1: "Do you acknowledge your child's need of the cleansing blood of Jesus Christ, and the renewing grace of the Holy Spirit?"

Promise 2: Do you claim God's covenant promises in your child's behalf, and do you look in faith to the Lord Jesus Christ for his / her salvation, as you do for your own?

Promise 3: Do you now unreservedly dedicate your child to God, and promise, in humble reliance upon divine grace, that you will endeavor to set before him / her a godly example, that you will pray with and for him / her, that you will teach him / her the doctrines of the Christian faith, and that you will strive, by all the means of God's appointment, to bring him / her up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord?

Promises to be affirmed by an adult being baptized after conversion:

1. Do you acknowledge yourselves to be sinners in the sight of God, justly deserving His displeasure, and without hope save in His sovereign mercy?
2. Do you believe in the Lord Jesus Christ as the Son of God, and Savior of sinners, and do you receive and rest upon Him alone for salvation as He is offered in the Gospel?
3. Do you now resolve and promise, in humble reliance upon the grace of the Holy Spirit, that you will endeavor to live as becomes the followers of Christ?
4. Do you promise to support the Church in its worship and work to the best of your ability?
5. Do you submit yourselves to the government and discipline of the Church, and promise to study its purity and peace?

If you would like to pursue baptism for yourself or your child email:
elders@RedemptionDenver.com.

Further Resources:

1. Westminster Standards relating to baptism, Printed Below. 20 min
2. Kevin DeYoung lectures on baptism, [video 1](#) and [video 2](#). 2+hrs
3. Bryan Chapell, on Infant Baptism, [video](#) 13 min
4. [Document](#): "Infant Baptism at Redeemer Presbyterian Church," NYC. 10 mins
5. [Small Book](#): Bryan Chapell, *Why Do We Baptize Infants?* Also in Lobby of RCD.
6. [Medium Book](#): *The Case for the Christian Family*, Jared Longshore
7. [Big book](#): *The Case for Covenantal Infant Baptism*, Gregg Strawbridge, ed.
8. Infant Baptism described in a Scottish accent, Sinclair Ferguson, [Video](#) 3 min.
9. Debate on Infant Baptism, R.C. Sproul for, [video](#), John MacArthur against, [video](#).
10. Best video of an infant being baptized, [video](#).

Westminster Standards pertaining to Baptism:

- I. [Westminster Confession of Faith](#), Chapter 28 "Of Baptism"
 - I.1. Baptism is a sacrament of the new testament, ordained by Jesus Christ, a not only for the solemn admission of the party baptized into the visible church; but also, to be unto him a sign and seal of the covenant of grace, of his ingrafting into Christ, d of regeneration, e of remission of sins, and of his giving up unto God, through Jesus Christ, to walk in newness of life. Which sacrament is, by Christ's own appointment, to be continued in his church until the end of the world.
 - I.2. The outward element to be used in this sacrament is water, wherewith the party is to be baptized, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, by a minister of the gospel, lawfully called thereunto.
 - I.3. Dipping of the person into the water is not necessary; but baptism is rightly administered by pouring, or sprinkling water upon the person.
 - I.4. Not only those that do actually profess faith in and obedience unto Christ, but also the infants of one, or both, believing parents, are to be baptized.
 - I.5. Although it be a great sin to contemn or neglect this ordinance, yet grace and salvation are not so inseparably annexed unto it, as that no person can be regenerated, or saved, without it; or, that all that are baptized are undoubtedly regenerated.
 - I.6. The efficacy of baptism is not tied to that moment of time wherein it is administered; q yet, notwithstanding, by the right use of this ordinance, the grace promised is not only offered, but really exhibited, and conferred, by the Holy Ghost, to such (whether of age

or infants) as that grace belongeth unto, according to the counsel of God's own will, in his appointed time.

I.7. The sacrament of baptism is but once to be administered unto any person.

2. [Westminster Larger Catechism](#), Question 165 - 167

2.1. WLC Q 165. What is baptism?

2.1.1.A. Baptism is a sacrament of the new testament, wherein Christ hath ordained the washing with water in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, to be a sign and seal of ingrafting into himself, of remission of sins by his blood, and regeneration by his Spirit; of adoption, and resurrection unto everlasting life; and whereby the parties baptized are solemnly admitted into the visible church, and enter into an open and professed engagement to be wholly and only the Lord's.

2.2.WLC Q 166. Unto whom is baptism to be administered?

2.2.1. A. Baptism is not to be administered to any that are out of the visible church, and so strangers from the covenant of promise, till they profess their faith in Christ, and obedience to him, but infants descending from parents, either both, or but one of them, professing faith in Christ, and obedience to him, are in that respect within the covenant, and to be baptized.

2.3.WLC Q 167. How is our baptism to be improved by us?

2.3.1.A. The needful but much neglected duty of improving our baptism, is to be performed by us all our life long, especially in the time of temptation, and when we are present at the administration of it to others; by serious and thankful consideration of the nature of it, and of the ends for which Christ instituted it, the privileges and benefits conferred and sealed thereby, and our solemn vow made therein; by being humbled for our sinful defilement, our falling short of, and walking contrary to, the grace of baptism, and our engagements; by growing up to assurance of pardon of sin, and of all other blessings sealed to us in that sacrament; by drawing strength from the death and resurrection of Christ, into whom we are baptized, for the mortifying of sin, and quickening of grace; and by endeavoring to live by faith, to have our conversation in holiness and righteousness, as those that have therein given up their names to Christ; and to walk in brotherly love, as being baptized by the same Spirit into one body.

3. [Westminster Shorter Catechism](#), Questions 94-95

3.1.WSC Q 94. What is baptism?

3.1.1.A. Baptism is a sacrament, wherein the washing with water in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, doth signify and seal our ingrafting

into Christ, and partaking of the benefits of the covenant of grace, and our engagement to be the Lord's.

3.2. WSC Q 95. To whom is baptism to be administered?

3.2.1.A. Baptism is not to be administered to any that are out of the visible church, till they profess their faith in Christ, and obedience to him; but the infants of such as are members of the visible church are to be baptized.