



a baptism primer.

what is baptism?

a visible promise.

One common way that many early Christian thinkers, and later Reformers, described baptism was by calling it a “visible promise.” Just as hearing the Scriptures offers God’s promises to us through our ears, the act of baptism holds out the promise of God’s grace in Christ to us visually. *So, what exactly does picture of baptism promise us?*

united to Christ

In baptism, God portrays, promises, and seals to us our union with Jesus Christ (Galatians 3.27). All who are baptized are “in Christ” – this is their new identity. We are united to Jesus in his death and in his resurrection (Romans 6.3-11). Our identity is not derived from our own past, but from Jesus’ past, which is our future. What happened to him has happened to us; what he has accomplished belongs to us. He gives us a new identity that we spend the rest of our lives “living into” (Colossians 3.9-10).

united to Christ’s body

Incorporation into Christ also means incorporation into his body, the church (Acts 2.41, 27; I Corinthians 12.13).

cleansing: water makes us clean

Baptism signifies spiritual cleansing, and comes to us a God’s gift and promise which we receive by faith. (cf. Acts 22.16; Hebrews 12.22). Baptism represents the sprinkled blood of Christ which cleanses us and establishes us in covenant with God.

new life in the Spirit: water gives us life

When we enter the body of Christ by baptism we enter the realm of the Spirit (the Spirit of Christ dwells uniquely in the body of Christ). The Spirit allows us to find those places and discover those gifts that allow us to make our contribution to something much larger than ourselves. The gift of the Spirit is a gift of spiritual energy (e.g. breath, wind – cf. Ezekiel 37) and intimate personal communion with God (Romans 8.26-27).

a new mission: bearing God’s name in the world

Jesus was baptized by John the Baptist, who anointed him as Messiah, to begin his ministry of proclaiming God’s coming kingdom (Matthew 3.13-17; Mark 1.9-11; Luke 3.21-22; John 1.29-34). Baptism is an act of making us Jesus’ disciples, calling us to engage ourselves in the mission of the triune God (Matthew 28.19).

the heidelberg catechism.

what is a catechism? what is the Heidelberg Catechism?

A catechism is a teaching document, written in question-and-answer format, that is used by families and churches as an aid to pass on Christian faith. The Heidelberg Catechism was written in Germany, between 1559 and 1576, at the request of Elector Frederick III. In the 500 years since its' writing, it's endured as a deeply helpful expression of historic, orthodox Christian faith, and has been used widely throughout the different branches of the Christian family, all over the world. The section of questions and answers on baptism are especially rich aids to our grasp of what God promises to us in baptism...

Question 69. How does baptism remind you and assure you that Christ's one sacrifice on the cross is for you personally?

Answer. In this way: Christ instituted this outward washing and with it gave the promise that, as surely as water washes away the dirt from the body, so certainly his blood and his Spirit wash away my soul's impurity, in other words, all my sins.

Question 70. What does it mean to be washed with the blood and Spirit of Christ?

Answer. It means to have forgiveness of sins from God, through grace, for the sake of Christ's blood which is shed for us in his sacrifice on the cross, and also to be renewed by the Holy Spirit and sanctified as members of Christ, so that we may more and more die unto sin and live in a consecrated and blameless way.

Question 71. Where does Christ promise that we are washed with his blood and Spirit as surely as we are washed with the water of baptism?

Answer. In the institution of baptism where he says: "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." "The one who believes and is baptized will be saved; but the one who does not believe will be condemned." This promise is repeated when Scripture calls baptism the water of rebirth and the washing away of sins.

Question 72. Does the outward washing with water itself wash away sins?

Answer. No, only the blood of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit cleanse us from all sins.

Question 73. Why then does the Holy Spirit call baptism the washing of rebirth and the washing away of sins?

Answer. God has good reason for these words, intending to teach us that the blood and Spirit of Christ wash away our sins just as water washes away dirt from our bodies. But more important, God intends to assure us, by this divine pledge and sign, that the washing away of our sins spiritually is as real as physical washing with water.

Question 74. Should infants, too, be baptized?

Answer. Yes. Infants as well as adults are in God's covenant and belong to God's people. They, no less than adults, are promised the forgiveness of sins through Christ's blood and the Holy Spirit who gives faith. Therefore, by baptism, the sign of the covenant, infants should be received into the Christian church and should be distinguished from the children of unbelievers. This was done in the Old Testament by circumcision, which was replaced in the New Testament by baptism.¹

liberti church



¹ material in this primer adapted with permission from teaching notes from Rev. Dr. Scot Sherman, and from Michael Green, "Baptism: Its Purpose, Practice, and Power," as well as Dr. James Brownson, "The Promise of Baptism"