



Teaching Your Child about Baptism

Help your child understand the practice of baptism.

Introduction

The entire story of the Bible shows God's continuing effort to bring us back into the loving relationships for which we are created, back into relationship with each other, and particularly back into relationship with God. The Christian faith strives to help us move back into those relationships. Through baptism we are incorporated into the community of faith, initiating a process by which God works in our lives.

History of Baptism

Sometimes in baptism we refer to God's many mighty acts with water. These might include the water in the creation story (Gen. 1:1–10, 20–21); the flood in which God used water to destroy sin yet saved Noah and his family (Gen. 6–9); the river where Moses, God's choice of a leader for the Hebrews, was hidden (Exod. 2:1–5); the deliverance of the Hebrews from Egypt through the sea (Exod. 14:19–31); God's cleansing and setting apart leaders by sprinkling them with water (Num. 8:5–7); God's saving the Hebrews in the wilderness by providing water (Exod. 17:1–7 and Num. 20:2–11); the crossing of the Jordan River as the Hebrews moved into the promised land (Josh. 3:7–17); the

changing of bad water to good (2 Kgs. 2:19–22); the water for curing Naaman (2 Kgs. 5:14).

Christian baptism has roots in several Hebrew rituals. These rituals used water as a sign of cleaning and renewal. In the Gospels we read how John the Baptist used water as he urged the people to repent of their sins and to be made new again. Jesus voluntarily shared the burden of human sinfulness when he came to John to be baptized (Matt. 3:13–17; Mark 1:9–11; Luke 3:21–22). Later Jesus commissioned his disciples to go into the world and baptize those who would be his followers (Matt. 28:18–20).

The book of Acts refers to baptism twenty-one times. The first reference is in the story of Pentecost when Peter issues an invitation to baptism: "Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him" (Acts 2:38–39).

The very early baptisms may have been administered in the name of Jesus only. The church had not yet recognized the triune personality of God. We express

Christian churches use three modes of baptism—sprinkling, pouring, and immersion. The Scriptures lack specific information on how baptisms were conducted, so some believe that the early church used a variety of styles.

God as Trinity—God the creator/sustainer/parent (the Father); God who came in human form (the Son); and God ever present within us (the Holy Spirit). Today Christians baptize in the name of the one God, revealed in three ways.

The word “sacrament” is from the Latin word *sacramentum*, a sacred or holy act. Baptism is among the seven sacraments of the Roman Catholic Church. Protestant churches that recognize baptism and Communion as sacraments understand the acts as times when God offers the gift of unfailing grace or love to us, and through participation in the sacrament we accept that love.

Differences, but One

Christian churches use three modes of baptism—sprinkling, pouring, and immersion. Some churches offer adults and parents of infants a choice. The Scriptures lack specific information on how baptisms were conducted, so some believe that the early church used a variety of styles. The very early use of a shell as a symbol of baptism might be evidence that water was poured on the head of a person who was standing in or being held over water.

All three modes offer rich symbolism. In Ezekiel 36:25–27 sprinkling is a form of cleansing, and in Exodus 29:21 sprinkling is used for a person set apart for service to God. In Acts 2:17–18 God pours out the Holy Spirit. Baptism by pouring recognizes this outpouring of the Spirit. Romans 6:1–11 and Colossians 2:11–12 speak of our being buried with Christ in baptism into death and raised from the dead. Baptism by immersion symbolizes these words.

The age at which a person is baptized also differs among denominations. Churches that recognize infant baptism assume that God works in us through this act. This is significant because infants cannot contribute to their own salvation. It is important that a congregation at an infant baptism recognize the responsibility placed on them, as well as on the parents, to bring up the child in the faith. Baptism is the beginning of a faith venture, but adults must follow through. Churches that practice infant baptism usually have some sort of confirmation or membership class for youth to help them understand what God is doing through them. When the youth are ready to give their lives to God, they can confirm the vows taken for them at their baptism.

Adult baptism (or believer baptism) is an acknowledgment of God working through us. Adult and youth baptism usually mark the first time that the person has formally accepted Christ. We hear of more adult baptisms in the early church because the apostles were working in areas where Christ’s message was being proclaimed for the first time.

Baptism is an important part of the Christian church, and you will want to talk with your child frequently about it. Don’t wait for questions, but seize the opportunity when there is a baptism in your church. You can even connect baptism to water when you have a reviving drink on a hot day or when you take a refreshing dip into cool water. As a Christian parent, you have the responsibility to raise your child in the faith, and that does not mean leaving it to Sunday school teachers. Every day offers many opportunities to share your faith. Grasp them and use them!

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For More Information

Jeanne S. Fogle, *Signs of God’s Love: Baptism and Communion* (Philadelphia: Geneva Press, 1984).

Delia Halverson, *How Do Our Children Grow?* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 1999).

Delia Halverson, *Side-by-Side: Families Learning and Living the Faith Together* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002).

Ralph Milton, *The Family Story Bible* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996).

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Carol Wehrheim, *The Baptism of Your Child* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006).



Discussing This Topic with Your Child

Experiences for all ages

- Draw and discuss the symbols of baptism:

A shell with three drops of water. The shell represents the great waters of the world, and the three drops of water represent the Trinity.

A dove. According to the Gospels, a dove descended on Jesus at his baptism. The dove represents the Holy Spirit.

A pitcher or bowl of water. Water is life giving; we can not live without it. We also cannot live without God. Water cleanses us. When we have done some thing wrong and ask forgiveness, God forgives, which is like washing away the wrong with clean water.

- Make a bread cloth or place mats with baptism symbols (shell, drops of water, dove, pitcher, or bowl) to be used at your own table. Talk about the symbols as you drink water during your meal.
- Make a collage of pictures of water from magazines. Divide the pictures into these areas and label the areas:

Water gives life.	We cannot live without God.
Water cleanses us.	God forgives and cleans our wrongdoings.
Water refreshes us.	God refreshes us.
- Make a gift for someone who is to be baptized. Include a card that welcomes that person to the church family.
- Look at pictures of water and discuss how we use water, including how water is used in industry. Search on the Internet or go to <http://ga.water.usgs.gov/edu/photo-gallery.html>.
- Talk about God's plan for recycling water after looking at this Web site: <http://ga.water.usgs.gov/edu/watercyclehi.html>.

- Discuss clean water. Some people relate clean water to baptism for two reasons: (1) It takes clean water to wash something that is dirty. If we compare baptism to washing away sins, then we need clean water for it. (2) Clean water is essential for life. A right relationship with God is essential for our spiritual life.
- According to UNICEF, each year an estimated 1.5 million children under the age of five die from diarrhea because of unsafe drinking water and lack of sanitation.¹ Poor sanitation contributes to unsafe drinking water. (Count the water faucets in your house. Look for the maximum number of gallons per minute or gpm on your faucets.)
- Some people must walk miles each day for drinking water. In the United States, each person uses 80 to 100 gallons of water a day.² (Use a container to catch and measure the water running as you wait for hot water.)
- For more information and activities on water, go to this Web site: <http://ga.water.usgs.gov/edu/index.html>.

With young children

- Make a bookmark with a picture or drawing of water. Place it in the Bible at one of the Scriptures about Jesus' baptism. Hold the Bible and tell the story in simple words to preschoolers.
- Tell the story of Jesus' dedication at the temple when Mary and Joseph were thankful for their baby (Luke 2:22–38).
- Sit close to the front of the church when someone is being baptized so that your child can see what is happening.
- Give a simple explanation of infant baptism: "Baptism is when the parents and all those in the church say that they will help the child learn to love God and to do as Jesus taught."

1. http://www.unicef.org/publications/files/Progress_for_Children_No._5_-_English.pdf

2. <http://ga.water.usgs.gov/edu/qahome.html#HDR3>.

- If the child was baptized as an infant, look at pictures from that time and say, “We were so happy when we got you, and we wanted to teach you about Jesus and God. At your baptism we said that we knew that God was going to help you, and we said that we would help you too.”
- Give a simple explanation of adult baptism: “Baptism is when we say that we want to love God and do as Jesus taught.”
- Talk about the ways, in addition to baptism, that your church welcomes someone into the church family. Discuss opportunities for your family to welcome newcomers by talking with them, calling them by name, inviting them to Sunday school or other functions, for example.
- Create cinquain (pronounced “sin-cane”) poems about baptism. Use the guide below, centering each line on the page.

With elementary children and youth

- Elementary children can read the stories “Miriam Saves Her Brother,” “Special Food,” and “John Baptizes Jesus” from *The Family Story Bible* by Ralph Milton.
- On a map, find the Jordan River, where Jesus was baptized.
- After a baptism, visit the baptismal water and suggest that each of you touch the water and place it on your forehead, remembering the vows that were taken at your baptism.
- Review the baptismal vows for your church and explain any words that your child does not understand.
- If your church practices infant baptism or the dedication of a child, read any response that the congregation gives and tell your child that your church family has pledged to help him or her grow in faith.
- Explain that people who are baptized as children can later decide whether they want to accept the promises for themselves.
- Talk about the three ways of baptizing discussed in the essay. Explain the symbolism of these three methods.
- Line 1: Title/subject (Baptism)
- Line 2: Two words about the subject
- Line 3: Three action words about the subject
- Line 4: Four “feeling” words telling about the subject (these may end in “-ing”) or a four-word phrase about the subject
- Line 5: One word that means the same as the subject, or use “Amen” if the poem is in the form of a prayer
- Look at the songs and readings in the topical index in your hymnal under the subject “Baptism.”
- Learn some songs appropriate to baptism, such as “A Charge to Keep I Have,” “Here I Am, Lord,” “Take My Life and Let It Be,” “Let There Be Peace on Earth, and Let It Begin with Me,” and “Child of Blessing, Child of Promise.”

Discussion Questions for Parents

Take some time quietly by yourself to reflect on these questions.

- When were you baptized?
- If you were baptized as a child, what do you remember your parents telling you about your baptism? Do you have pictures you can share with your child?
- What would you like for your child to remember about his or her baptism?
- What meaning did baptism hold for you when you were young?
- What meaning does baptism hold for you today?
- After reading the essay, do you have any new thoughts on baptism?

Discussion Questions for a Group of Parents

- Discuss the biblical references in the essay. How do these relate to our baptisms today?
- Has anyone in the group had the opportunity to explain baptism to a child? If you are willing, share that experience with the group and what you learned from it. How would you do it differently? What worked? What didn't work?
- What baptisms have you witnessed that differed from those done in your church?
- What elements in the natural world remind us of baptism?
- What traditions does your church have, besides baptism, for welcoming a child or adult into the fellowship of the church?
- Read and discuss the baptismal vows of your church.