

Re-membering Baptism

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Published by CMP, a ministry of the Presbyterian Mission Agency, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), Louisville, Kentucky.

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Printed in the U.S.A.

Meet the Writer

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Introduction to *Being Reformed: Faith Seeking Understanding*

Reformed and Presbyterian Christians are people of faith who are seeking understanding. From the beginnings of our Reformed tradition, Presbyterians have realized God calls us to explore ways the Christian faith can be more fully known and expressed. This vision has driven concerns for the education of people of all ages. Presbyterians have been big on providing resources to help us delve more deeply into Christian faith and the theology that gives our living tradition its distinctive heritage.

This *Being Reformed* curriculum for adults is one expression of the desire to open up what it means to be Presbyterian Christians in the world today. Our purpose is to enhance, enrich, and expand our insights. We want Presbyterians to grow in understandings of elements that are foundational and significant for their faith. Encounters with theology, church, worship, spirituality/discipleship, and social righteousness will guide our ways.

These studies engage our whole selves. We will find our minds moved by new ideas, our emotions stirred with responses of gratitude, and calls for action that can lead us in different life directions. Heads, hearts, and hands will be drawn into the joys of discovering what new things God is calling us toward.

We invite you to join this journey of faith seeking understanding. Celebrate the blessings of our Reformed and Presbyterian tradition of faith. Be stimulated and challenged by fresh insights that will deepen your understandings. Find a stronger commitment to the God who has loved us in Jesus Christ.

To the Leader

The authors of *Being Reformed: Faith Seeking Understanding* emphasize essential Reformed theological principles that relate to our lives of faith. These sessions will help you lead a group into the theology and thoughts inspired by the challenging and interesting articles in the participant's book.

You might choose simply to begin the session with the prayer that precedes each session in the participant's book, then reading through the articles together, stopping when you or a student wishes to comment or raise a question. You could then close the session by discussing the questions at the end of the session and encouraging the group members to do the spiritual practice.

Unfortunately, that style of leading does not meet the needs of every kind of learner. The session plans encourage group leaders to try some new things to light up the hearts and minds of more people. Most teachers teach the way they like to learn. Choosing one new activity during each session will stretch you and open a door to someone who learns differently than you. Over the weeks, you will notice what your group enjoys and what they are unwilling to do. Let that, rather than your preferences, be your guide as you prepare to lead.

These session plans are designed to encourage group participation. Discussion and sharing create community and provide practice that all of us need in expressing our faith and wrestling with our questions. When asking questions, get comfortable with some silence while group members contemplate a response. Resist the urge to fill up the silence with your words.

If your group members like to talk, you might not be able to ask every suggested question. Also it will make a difference in your group session if group members have read the articles prior to the session. If you find it necessary to read from the participant's book during the group session, choose the passages that convey the core ideas.

You are more than a dispenser of information. In your role as group leader, you cooperate with God in the formation of faith and in the transformation of lives. You are the lead learner, modeling a way that faith seeks understanding. You are not trying to cover a lesson, but to uncover truth. Pray for yourself and your group members, prepare your session, relax, and enjoy!

May God bless your faithfulness!

Remember Your Baptism

Scripture

Mark 1:1–11

Main Idea

This session introduces the topic for the course, Christian baptism, through a discussion rooted in Jesus' own baptism. It reminds us that baptism is the ultimate sign of God's faithfulness. Participants will explore the significance of their own baptism and the theological implications of baptism for the church.

Teaching Points

This session invites learners to consider:

1. The link between their baptism and Jesus' baptism.
2. Baptism as a theological concept, which is packed with significant theological themes.
3. Baptism as a reminder that repentance is a continuing, lifelong process.

Resources Needed

Bibles

Participant's books

Pitcher with water

Large bowl with small rocks

Copies of your congregation's baptismal liturgy

Newsprint and marker

Hymnals with the hymn "Baptized in Water"

Leader Prep

The Sacrament of Baptism raises several critical theological themes, including repentance, the cleansing of sins, dying and rising with Christ, engrafting followers into the body of Christ, sealing or marking the baptized person as one of God's own, and accepting one's call to Christian service. Elements of these themes will be presented throughout this series.

Dr. Byars's use of the word *cherish* in his discussion of the importance of remembering one's baptism offers us a rich metaphor for thinking about the potential effect of one's baptism on the faithful. We may or may not remember the moment of our baptism, especially if we were baptized as infants, but baptism symbolizes a life-altering relationship with God that ought to be cause for celebration. Encourage participants to share their experiences of and thoughts about both the practice of baptism and its ultimate meaning. Be prepared for a wide variety of responses, both in the sorts of personal experiences that are shared and in the depth of understanding evident in the group.

The discussion of sin and repentance is a critical theme in this session. The fact that baptism happens only once in a person's life may lead some group members to overlook its lifelong implications. The sections "For the Forgiveness of Sins" and "Lifelong Repentance" in the participant's book address the importance of connecting one's continuing spiritual life with one's baptism. It is God's continuing grace that enables us to live faithfully. This truth will provide a basis for a rich discussion of ways in which we experience God's continuing presence.

Consider framing your teaching throughout this course around the background knowledge you discover in early discussions. As you lead, strive to strike a balance between presenting new material and engaging in theological reflection on known themes.

Place the large bowl with small rocks in the center of the meeting space. You will pour water into the bowl at the beginning of each session. The rocks can be gathered from around your church or obtained from an arts and crafts supply store. At the end of Session 6, each participant will remove a rock from the bowl as a reminder of his or her baptism. For Head, you will need a copy of a liturgy for the Sacrament of Baptism. This liturgy can be found beginning on page 403 in the *Book of Common Worship*. Consider inviting an accompanist to help lead the singing of the hymn in Depart.

Leading the Session

Gather

- Ask each participant to find a partner (preferably someone he or she does not know well), introduce themselves, and share a little-known *fun fact* about himself or herself. Allow a few minutes for this sharing and then ask each person to introduce his or her partner to the group, including the fun fact in the introduction.
- Ask: *Why did you choose to participate in the course?*
- Pour water into the bowl with the rocks before praying together the prayer in the participant's book.

Head

- Divide participants into pairs to discuss the question: *What do you remember or know about your baptism?* After a few minutes, give each pair an opportunity to share highlights of their discussion with the entire group.
- Invite each pair to discuss the questions: *What memories do you have of other baptisms? What elements of celebration were included in the baptismal event?* After a few minutes, give each pair an opportunity to share highlights of their discussion with the entire group.
- Read Mark 1:1–11. Ask: *What are the key elements in the story?* List the responses on a sheet of newsprint.
- Distribute and review copies of the baptismal liturgy together. Ask: *What are the key elements in this liturgy?* List the responses on a sheet of newsprint.
- Compare the two lists of key elements, noting similarities or connections between the Bible story and the liturgy. Call attention to the quote on page 7 of the participant's book that states: "When we remember our own baptisms, they are inevitably linked to the baptism of Jesus." Ask: *What does this statement mean to you?*
- Review the sections of the participant's book with the headings "For the Forgiveness of Sins" and "Lifelong Repentance." Ask: *What are the key ideas in these two sections? What insights did you gain? What surprised you as you read?*

Heart

- Dr. Byars states that “at the beginning of his ministry, Jesus had signaled his solidarity with sinners by lining up with the penitent and joining them in the waters of baptism.” Ask: *What feeling does this idea generate for you? How do you respond to the idea that Jesus is present for you even if you sin? How might the church be more effective at sharing this message with those outside the church?*
- The participant’s book includes a strong emphasis on sin, pointing out that many citizens of the twenty-first century don’t like the language of sin and sinner. Ask: *How do you respond internally to being called a sinner? Do you take it seriously? Does it offend you? How do you assess the true need for repentance and forgiveness? Is it real or something one can accept or dismiss at will?*
- Ask: *How might the link between baptism and confession/pardon be made more significant in our worship? When do we have an opportunity to reflect on our baptism (and confession and pardon) outside of worship?*

Hands

- Brainstorm ways the congregation can enhance the celebration of baptism. Ask: *What can we do to celebrate baptisms and baptism anniversaries of members of our church family?*
- Challenge a volunteer to obtain the date of each participant’s baptism and create a chronological chart listing the dates. Seek commitments to remember each person’s baptism anniversary with a card or contact.
- Encourage participants to research the baptisms in their families. What records do they have in family Bibles, certificates, and photographs to learn more about their family’s connection to the Sacrament of Baptism?

Depart

- Ask: *What is the most important discovery you made today? How has your understanding of baptism grown or changed because of your reading or our discussions?*
- Read or sing together “Baptized in Water” (*Presbyterian Hymnal*, no. 492).
- Close with prayer.

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Remember Your Baptism

Scripture

Mark 1:1–11 One of the accounts of Jesus’ baptism at the hands of John the baptizer.

1 John 1:10 This verse testifies to the universality of sin.

Acts 22:1–16 The story of Paul’s conversion, leading to his baptism.

Prayer

Holy God, you surround us with your generous mercy all our lives long. Help us to embrace this gift with all our hearts, and to be strengthened by it as we struggle to show your rule in our lives and in the world. We know the needs of our lives. We need your love, forgiveness, reconciliation, and new life. May we find your good gifts to us as giving life to us, even as in the waters of baptism. We pray for the sake of Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, forever. Amen.

Introduction

The baptismal service in the Presbyterian *Book of Common Worship* includes a charge to the congregation: “Let us remember with joy our own baptism . . .” The services for Reaffirmation of the Baptismal Covenant make the same charge: “Remember!”

Some of us actually recall our baptisms, because we were old enough to know what was happening and to fix it in our memory. Others have no memory of the occasion, and we are uncertain how to take the charge to “remember” our baptism. Does our baptism lack something if we have no memory of the moment?

Do you remember your birthday? None of us can actually recall being born, but we know that we were, in fact, born! What we “remember” on our birthday is that we were born on a certain day of a certain year into a specific family, and that the fact of our birth is cause for celebrating the gift of our own life. So it is with baptism. It does not matter when we cannot recall the event. Maybe we have family stories, or a baptismal certificate stored away somewhere.

Maybe your family is like the one in which a grandfather writes a letter to each of his children and grandchildren on the anniversary of their baptism, recalling the occasion. Maybe you were given a baptismal gift: a candle to relight on the anniversary, an embroidered towel used at the font, a cradle cross, or a card sent to honor the occasion. Maybe you have only a faded family memory or an entry recorded in the archives of a congregation.

Martin Luther, in times of great trial, reminded himself that he was baptized, and it caused him to take heart. Baptized as an infant, he had no firsthand recollection of the moment, but he *remembered* it: he cherished the fact of it. This is what it means when the minister says to the congregation, “Remember your baptism, and be thankful.” Cherish the fact of it, and let the certainty of it strengthen your confidence that God has been, is now, and will be faithful.

Jesus’ Baptism

“In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan” (Mark 1:9). Though all four Gospels tell of Jesus’ baptism, none of them describes exactly how it was done. The Gospel writers were not writing for later generations. They presumed their readers required no detailed descriptions. It may be that Jesus was submerged in the water, or it may be that the frescoes and other early artistic renderings of the event accurately depict him standing in the water while John pours water over his head. The earliest baptismal pools would have been adequate for this purpose.

The Didache, a second-century document, offers options: Running water is preferred—cold if possible, but warm will do. If you have neither, then pour water on the head three times, “in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.”

Old Testament rites for purification probably served as precedents for John’s baptism. One requires that a person bathe the body in water (Leviticus 14:9), while another uses the image of sprinkling clean water (Ezekiel 36:25). While the Greek word for baptize can mean to dip or immerse, it can also mean simply “to wash.”

All four Gospels testify that, at Jesus’ baptism, the Holy Spirit descended upon him, and Matthew, Mark, and Luke all report a voice from heaven, identifying Jesus as “my Son, the Beloved.” At this very beginning of Jesus’ ministry, Scripture records the presence and interaction of Spirit, Father, and Son. In the early church, the baptism of Jesus served as the model for Christian baptism, and Jesus

himself directed the disciples to “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 . . .” (Matthew 28:19).

When we remember our own baptisms, they are inevitably linked to the baptism of Jesus. In our baptisms, we are drenched in and washed by the Holy Spirit “so that your sins may be forgiven” (Acts 2:38). *Sin* is not a word that comes easily to twenty-first-century folks! We recognize human beings are fallible and

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often fall short of an ideal, but we are more accustomed to the use of psychological language when people take a wrong turn.

However, sin is something other than fallibility, or a maladjustment to be treated with therapy. Sin is not a problem just for bad people, who sell drugs to kids or commit carjackings. Even well-adjusted people are sinners. Sin might be described as a virtue pushed too far. It is no sin to want to make a life for oneself in the world, to take care of those we love, or to be proud of whatever group we come from. Virtue becomes sin when we and our group and the systems that support us push to guarantee our (or the group’s) welfare at the expense of others. One of the symptoms is that we don’t even recognize it.

For the Forgiveness of Sins

The Gospel of Mark tells us “John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins” (Mark 1:4). People from all over Judea heard about John’s ministry in the desolate Jordan River country and flocked to hear him preach. His searing words struck home, and they felt deep regret for their sins and the sins of the whole community. They lined up to be baptized, earnestly seeking a sign of God’s forgiveness.

The fact that John the baptizer was baptizing those who repented in order that their sins might be forgiven raises puzzling questions when we consider Jesus’ baptism. Was Jesus a sinner? Did he answer John’s call to repent? Was he baptized for the forgiveness of sins? That does not fit our understanding (or the Bible’s understanding) of Jesus. The letter to the Hebrews declares that Jesus was “without sin” (Hebrews 4:15), and this has always been the belief of the church.

Jesus’ entire ministry testifies to the fact that he was not embarrassed about associating with sinners. He reached out to those

whom his society considered to be sinners and outcasts, breaking taboos by sharing meals with them even though his enemies used this against him. When he was crucified, Jesus suffered a death the

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Old Testament considered to be a curse (Deuteronomy 21:22), which meant that even in his dying, he was lumped with sinners. This should come as no surprise. At the beginning of his ministry, Jesus had signaled his solidarity with sinners by lining up with the penitent and joining them in the waters of baptism. He

deliberately took his place alongside all of us—not to approve of the brokenness that distorts our lives and our life together, but to extend a hand to sinners. It is the sick, not those who are well, who need a physician.

God acts in baptism to assure us that God is strong enough, determined enough, and gracious enough to relieve us of the burden of our sins, and will go wherever necessary to find us and heal us, just as Jesus did. Indeed, the Apostles' Creed, drawing upon the New Testament, testifies that he even “descended into hell” (1 Peter 4:6). Our baptism purifies and cleanses us—not to entitle us to feel smug or superior to others, but to be mindful that we are all in debt to God's gracious mercy, which is always in search of those who are far off. This is the gift that we cherish in remembering the fact of our baptism.

Similarly the church—all the baptized taken together—is immersed in the life of the world. Baptism is a different kind of cleansing. It is not about isolating the baptized for the sake of guarding our purity, but that we may contribute to the blessing of “all the families of the earth” (Genesis 12:3). As in Jesus' life, it involves taking risks.

Lifelong Repentance

What about sins committed after baptism? Among the first Christians, the issue of post-baptismal sins posed no problem, because it was not presumed that repentance ended with baptism. Repentance was understood to be a permanent fixture of the Christian life.

However, as early as the late second century, some believers began to advocate delaying baptism for fear that it marked forgiveness only for past sins. They intended to postpone it until old age had caused passions to fade and appetites to mellow. Eventually the Roman Catholic Church instituted the Sacrament of Penance (confession to a priest followed by absolution) as a remedy for post-baptismal sins. The Reformed and Presbyterian tradition recovered the earlier conviction that repentance was not a once-in-a-lifetime occurrence, but marks the whole Christian life.

Baptism identifies the Christian life as to be lived under grace, continually and joyfully dependent on the astonishing mercy of God, exhibited in Jesus Christ. Being baptized does not immunize us from our humanity, as though we could be forever exempt from the forces that disfigure human life and relationships. Luther observed that, while we are forgiven, we are, at one and the same time, sinners. One status does not exclude the other. The distinct identity of the baptized is that we know ourselves to be both, and throughout our lifetimes we both confess our sins and thank God for the pardon already given in the cross.

The Christian discipline that calls for a lifetime of self-awareness that leads to repentance is represented in public worship by the Prayer of Confession. In the Reformed tradition, the Prayer of Confession is normally located early in the service, as preparation for hearing the Word and for the Lord's Supper. We confess our sins not in an attempt to qualify for pardon, but because we know ourselves already pardoned. We do not confess in craven fear, or expecting to win some concession from God because we have put on a humble face. Our confession is made in confidence that God is for us, not against us, and baptism is the sign that that is so. "You have been marked as Christ's own forever."

Sometimes it seems as though the sins mentioned in the Prayer of Confession have nothing to do with us. Even though those who know us best might have another opinion, it is well to remind ourselves that our communal confession is offered not only for ourselves, but for all the people who belong to the church but are not

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present, or who don't go to church at all, and for all the people who have no idea that they have anything to confess.

The confession is followed by a Declaration of Forgiveness, boldly stated, because the mercy of God is not a matter for uncertainty. Our confidence rests on Christ crucified, risen, and ascended for us.

Every service of confession and pardon is intimately related to our baptism, and might well be led from the baptismal font. "Remember your baptism, and be thankful!"

Spiritual Practice

Research your own baptism and the baptismal dates of closest family members, to discover baptismal anniversaries. Mark them on the calendar and celebrate them. Research the names of persons who were baptized in your church within the last two years and commit to praying for them by name.

Questions for Reflection

How does your church record the names and dates of baptisms that take place in your congregation?

How might the link between baptism and confession/pardon be made larger and more evident in your congregation?

When do members of your congregation have the opportunity to reflect on baptism (and confession and pardon) outside of worship?