

Re-membering Baptism

Introduction to <i>Being Reformed: Faith Seeking Understanding</i>	3
Introduction to <i>Re-membering Baptism</i>	4
Session 1. Remember Your Baptism	5
Session 2. Through the Waters	11
Session 3. Death and Resurrection	17
Session 4. He Will Baptize with the Holy Spirit	23
Session 5. “You did not choose me but I chose you”	29
Session 6. Initiation into the Church	35
Suggestions for Further Study	41

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

When we remember our own baptisms, they are inevitably linked to the baptism of Jesus.

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

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.

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

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.

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?