

Guidelines for Baptism at Westminster Presbyterian Church

Approved by the Session on August 24, 2003

I. Theology

Presbyterians recognize two sacraments: Baptism and the Lord's Supper. A Sacrament is a sign accompanied by Christ's promise that we are forgiven, accepted, reconciled, adopted, loved, and regenerated as new creatures by a gracious Heavenly Father.

Baptism is a sign (water) accompanied by Christ's promises that in his death (signified by the water) you die, are cleansed, reborn, given the gifts of the Spirit, and are incorporated into his body, the church. This is done publicly in a covenant community. Here, the local church acts on behalf of the Church universal.

Theologically, baptism expresses several profound truths. First is God's promise that the person being baptized (the baptizand) has participated in Christ's death and now participates in Christ's new life; that his/her sins have been washed away, that the gift of the Holy Spirit now rests upon and in the baptizand, that the baptizand is incorporated into the Body of Christ through this particular church. Finally, this sacrament is a sign of the kingdom of God which has begun on earth but is not fully realized.

Baptism is administered after a person renounces sin and professes faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. In the case of infants, these vows are made for the child by a parent or other adult responsible for the child's welfare. Therefore the parent or guardian presenting the child must be a professing and practicing Christian.

In Baptism the congregation makes a promise to God and to the baptizand. "By baptism individuals are publicly received into the church to share in its life and ministry, and the church becomes responsible for their training and support in Christian discipleship." Confession of 1967 at 9.51. In the case of infants, "the congregation, as well as the parents, has a special obligation to nurture them in the Christian life, leading them to make, by a public profession, a personal response to the love of God shown forth in their baptism." Conf. of 1967 at 9.51.

Thus, God's promises come first and make possible the vows of the parents, the baptizand, and the congregation. These promises are made to each other and to God. This means the Session, the congregation, and the parents are charged with a special responsibility to help the baptized person grow into his or her baptismal vows. (B.O. W.3012-3014, W. 4.2001-03)

Our theology of baptism assumes that the baptizand will actually participate in the life and worship of Westminster and have the opportunity to experience and learn first-hand God's plan of salvation and God's ways in and through the Church.

Ordinarily, this requires a commitment to attend Worship and Sunday School and contribute as conscience dictates to the financial and human resource needs of the Church on a regular basis. (W. 3014) See Book of Order, W. 2.3000ff; W. 3.3601-08; W. 4.2001-03; 6.2001; G.5.0201-0301(c). Do we sometimes deviate from this? Yes, depending on the circumstances, but not lightly or simply for convenience.

II. Implications

To insure that the pastor and the Session has an opportunity to review the theological implications of baptism with the prospective baptizand (or parents), the following guidelines are adopted and will be followed unless the Session votes to suspend such guidelines on a showing of extraordinary circumstances.

1. Any person who has already received a Christian baptism is not eligible for re-baptism. Once baptized, always baptized, regardless of denomination. This is not subject to revision.
2. A child is eligible for baptism if one parent is an active member of Westminster and makes the appropriate promises for him/herself and for the child. If neither parent is active, then: (a) a grandparent or other close relative who is an active member of Westminster can bring the child to services and make promises both on the child's behalf and on the parents' behalf concerning the nurture and participation of the child in the life of the church; (b) at least one parent of the child supports the baptism; and (c) neither parent opposes baptism or regular attendance and participation by the child at Westminster.
3. Adult Baptizands (12 and older) will publically profess faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior and promise to participate, to the extent practicable, in the common life of Westminster. Such participation normally means attending worship, Sunday School, special programs, and contributing time and finances to the work of Westminster on a regular basis. Ordinarily, this profession will take place on the Lord's Day during the worship service. However, under exceptional circumstances, the Session may authorize that baptism may take place at other times or in other places. In each such case, care will be taken so that the congregation is represented by one or more persons.
4. Baptizands (or their parents) will give the Session adequate notice of their desire to be baptized (normally several weeks) to allow Session to take appropriate action both with respect to preparing the baptizand (or parents) and arranging for the administration of the sacrament. The pastor will communicate with the parents about the meaning of baptism. See letter attached.
5. Session reserves the right to authorize the administration of the sacrament to more than one person in a particular worship service. Session has the duty to deny baptism or to condition it in the event the baptizand (or parents) are unable or unwilling to receive the grace signified in baptism. Session is concerned that the baptizand and/or the parents understand the call to new life in community that baptism calls forth and feels it is unfair to a child to administer the sacrament if incorporation into the Christian life is not likely to follow. Under such circumstances, it would be better for the child to wait until he or she comes of age and can make an informed judgment concerning his or her own baptism.
6. Baptism is a sign of God's grace and love. But grace and love were poured out on a cross. Christianity without a cross is little more than a fair weather philosophy. The cross and resurrection are always held together, and they remind us that grace is a costly gift and one that calls us to responsibility and gratitude. Baptism commits us (and our children) to leave our nets and follow the Lord in season and out of season, to join with other believers in worship, love and service, to grow in the nurture and admonition of the Word. The Session, the congregation, the baptizand, (and parents) are God's partners in baptism.