

We are a congregation committed to the worship of God, and to following the mission given to all Christians by Jesus Christ. At the close of Christ's ministry -- recorded in the 28th chapter of Matthew in the New Testament -- Jesus passes on to his followers the commission to baptize and teach "all I have taught you" to everyone in His name. Baptizing and teaching about Jesus go together. Jesus forever bound those two tasks into one. One without the other is insufficient. We at Crossroads are serious about baptism and about education in the faith following the baptism. And we encourage all who would come forward to be baptized to accept the same level of commitment, for themselves and for their children.

### **What is the ceremony of baptism?**

Baptism is an opportunity for a person or the parents of a child to make a public profession of their faith. Baptism is a sacrament, a sacred moment in which there is an outward act which signifies God's inward work of grace in the life of a person.

### **Who should be baptized?**

Anyone who confesses Jesus as their Lord and Savior can be baptized. Confession of your decision to accept Christ as your Savior is essential for anyone but an infant to be baptized. Infants can be baptized on the confession of their parents in proxy for their infant children.

### **What is Baptism?**

First, baptism is a sacrament. Simply put, a sacrament is a special ritual of the church that has, for many centuries, been enacted to establish and/or maintain a committed relationship to God and to God's son Jesus Christ. Protestants have two sacraments. They are Baptism and the Lord's Supper. The latter is sometimes called Communion or the Eucharist. Baptism is the sacrament that establishes the relationship with Jesus Christ; and the Lord's Supper, conducted periodically, maintains the connection between communicant and Christ. It is a little like a couple getting married. The marriage ceremony happens once, to establish the couple's life-long relationship with each other, but then, in a good marriage "I love you" is said repetitiously to remember and maintain the connection and commitment.

The word "baptism" comes from a New Testament Greek word that means to saturate, drench, immerse, or to wash. Ritual washing -- or some form of cleansing baptism -- has been used as a religious ritual by several ancient religions to signify purification -- a sign of a cleansing commitment to one's god. Judaism used it to for that purpose before the

birth of Christianity. The earliest Christians adopted the ancient model as a form of initiation into their new Faith in Jesus Christ.

As a ritual of initiation, then, baptism marks the initial stage of a committed relationship to Christ. It is not the final stage. No one can say, "Well, now I'm baptized, so I'm all set" any more than a couple can place wedding rings on each other's fingers and then sit back and consider all effort toward the relationship complete. The work has only begun! As in a wedding, the service, or the ritual marks the beginning of years of growth toward a more complete and fulfilling relationship -- in this case, with God. Without committed follow-up to actively provide for growth in knowledge, understanding and faith the actual baptism is largely without meaning, except to fulfill a cultural expectation and habit. If that's all it is, then baptism becomes more of a secular event than a holy event. Baptism at its most honest is a ceremony in which all the participants promise to make every *effort* to make the "wedding" between God and child-of-God work well. It is a serious contract.

We call it a covenant. A covenant means a contract, a testament or an agreement. Those words mean much the same. They all require commitment. Covenant is the same, but with one thing more. A covenant is a commitment *with feeling*.

For us, it began with Abraham in the earliest Old Testament times. God said, in effect, "I will be your God and the God of your children, and your children's children, on through the ages." Abraham, in effect, said, "Good! And we will be your people! Where do we sign?"

The sign, the signature or the indication, in those days was circumcision. All agreements in that era were made by males. The Christian era kept the same covenant, or agreement, to be God's people. The sign, or signature was changed from circumcision to baptism. Jesus and his cousin John (known as "John the Baptist") instituted the practice of water baptism, thereby bringing women into the contractual relationship in a real way. Circumcision was obviously a male contract. Baptism could be for males *and* females. Baptism is still meant to mark entry into a life of faithful relationship to the Lord. It is for all women, men and children of faith -- not just for males.

### **Is it right to baptize babies?**

Yes it is. There are, of course, good Christian denominations that think differently on this matter. There never has been a time when all Christians agreed on all matters concerning baptism. We don't have to agree on all matters to be Christians.

Our Christian Faith is centered in Jesus of Nazareth. Many of the most important Christian practices have their roots in the religion of Jesus, which was Judaism. Judaism was -- and remains -- the religion of the Hebrew people. Many of us have Jewish friends who feel a vital relationship with God.

The Hebrew people (the Jews, that is, including Jesus) felt that children, just as all adults, belonged in the agreement they had made to be God's people. Therefore, on the eighth day of a boy's life he was "written" into the basic contract. The infant boy was circumcised. He became what was called "A Child of the Covenant." In other words, he was officially brought in on the agreement that Abraham of old had made with God, to be God's people. It then became the responsibility of the parents and the community of faith, together, to raise that child in a way that would cause the covenant "to grow on him." The boy would eventually come to a time of maturity when he would become a man. Then a ceremony, called Bar Mitzvah, was conducted.

The Bar Mitzvah ceremony transferred the covenant of circumcision from parental responsibility to the young man's own full responsibility. In Bar Mitzvah the young man made the contract his own. Becoming a man meant taking on his own responsibility for a basic life-long contract to be one of God's faithful people. This is still the practice in the Jewish Faith. It is considered a very important day in the life of a Jewish young man and his family because this is the day he personally and publicly confirms the contract made for him in his infancy. That is where we get the word "confirmation" for our churches. When in his or her youth someone *confirms* the contract of baptism made for him or her in his or her infancy, it is called *confirmation*.

Some people prefer to wait until the children are older before they are baptized. That is called "adult baptism," or "believers baptism." The assumption is that the children need to be old enough to believe and to make their own decisions about faith before they are baptized.

Some parents prefer to dedicate their infants to God. That is similar to baptism, but not actual baptism. Later, then, they baptize the dedicated children when the latter become "adults." That is often done at age nine to thirteen. In a dedication service parents *present* a child *to* God. In baptism parents *receive* a blessing *from* God on the child's behalf. God offers to be our God. In baptism we receive that gift. Why should that great gift be delayed for a decade or more? In response to that gift we and our children "sign on" to be God's people.

We prefer a child be dedicated and then to be baptized after they have confessed their faith in Jesus Christ. This makes the experience real and memorable to the individual and we believe helps them as an anchor to their faith. If the family chooses to baptize their child we are willing to do so as an act of faith on the part of the family/

The Bible never says we should or should not baptize children. However, the weight of the Biblical evidence is that Jesus was careful to fully include children. He never excluded them. "Let the children come to me, and do not hinder them; for to such belong the kingdom of God." (Luke 18:16) When the apostle Peter called the people to be baptized at Pentecost he said, "For the promise is to you and to your children . . . everyone whom the Lord our God calls to Him." (Acts 2:39) Neither these nor any other passage proves the validity of infant baptism. They do suggest, however, that children and adults enjoy the same status in God's promises to us. So we, like Jesus, include the

children. Therefore, we baptize infants. We think it is important to mark that great commitment at the beginning of a child's life.

### **Is baptism essential?**

No. It isn't. *But* -- it is very important!

As a ritual, baptism is not required. God has ways of managing even when we don't go through all the steps we humans devise. To believe otherwise would suggest a limited God. Our church and most churches require the act of baptism for membership, however. Not for the magic of baptism, but because it suggests a commitment to faith in God.

God is not a stickler on ritual. We just cannot believe that God is going to cross off any of God's children or our children simply because some preacher didn't wiggle wet fingers over their foreheads. God is much more concerned about the content of our convictions than in particular rituals. Yet Jesus by his own public baptism demonstrated that it is important to stand before other believers and go through the process of declaring oneself on board with the community of believers. Baptism does that. Baptism is a serious obligation for people who are serious about their faith. But essential to enter heaven? No.

What is essential is that we be baptized in the Spirit, as Jesus so often says. To be saturated, drenched, immersed in the Spirit of Jesus Christ is what is necessary. We cannot avoid that if we mean for ourselves and our children to be God's Christian people.

### **How is baptism done?**

There are three common and ancient modes (methods). They are pouring, sprinkling and immersion. All three modes were practiced by the New Testament Christians. They are acceptable.

The least common is pouring. The person kneels and bows his or her head. Or the parents hold their baby in their arms, with its head held over a basin. The minister pours a small quantity of water over the head of the person being baptized. When this was done in New Testament times, it was often done at seaside. A shell (like the shell of a clam) would often be used to scoop up the water and pour it. As a result, one of the earliest symbols of the Christian Faith was the sea shell, often showing drops of water falling from it. In modern times a sea shell may be used, or a pitcher, or the minister simply scoops up water in his or her cupped hand and pours the water over the head of the person being baptized.

A much more common mode is immersion. A believer is lowered into a river or tank of water until he or she is totally under water. Sometimes it is done in a swimming pool.

After being lowered into the water the person being baptized is raised up again. This mode has the dramatic advantage of symbolizing one's burial of the former, sinful life to a raised or resurrected life. It symbolizes the washing away of the old life and rising to a new Christ-centered life. The person's "old self" is symbolically "buried" and then lifted to a fresh, new, cleansed life, centered in Jesus Christ.

Some groups insist that immersion is the *only* acceptable method, and if one hasn't been baptized by immersion then one has not been baptized at all. Our problem with such an insistence is that it makes the *act* something magical. It seems to tie the hand of God to one way of doing things. It limits God's options to one way of allowing people into the gracious relationship God offers. We believe the immersion mode is beautiful and meaningful, but not the one-and-only-way God can connect with a believer.

Another common mode is sprinkling. The minister places a few drops of water from his or her fingertips on the forehead of the person being baptized.

We believe each mode is valid but prefer immersion when possible. It has a practical simplicity that we like. We know that all three methods were used and accepted in the earliest Christian era. All three modes (methods) have validity to this day. God's Spirit can work in any of many ways.

Whichever the mode used, however, none is of any value unless there is coupled with it a willingness to be *immersed in the Spirit of the Lord*. That is the real commitment we make in baptism.

The act is always accompanied by what is called the "Trinitarian Formula." The Trinitarian Formula contains the words "In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit." In the last verses of Matthew, chapter 28 Jesus told his followers to baptize people "in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit." And we do. We are baptized in Christ's name, and then we take on his name: "Christian." It means "Christ-follower."

### **Who should baptize?**

The Bible does not specifically lay down any requirement but the New Testament examples all describe an official who performs the ceremony (John, Jesus, his disciples). Given this, someone in a position of leadership or authority in the church (an elder or pastor) is recommended.

### **Should we have sponsors?**

Technically no. However, some families want sponsors, so we sometimes do have them. You may, if you want.

Years ago it was important to have sponsors. They were often called Godparents. Godparents were really a set of "backup parents" to be used in case of the premature death of the real parents of a child.

That practice used to meet a real need. People often died young, commonly leaving unfulfilled their declared responsibility to raise their children in the Christian Faith. Therefore, they had another Christian couple stand with them to make the same promises at the same time. Those sponsoring parents then were prepared to complete the fulfillment of the contract, if called upon to do so.

That is hardly ever a problem anymore. Life expectancy rates allow us the freedom to assume that one, and probably both parents will live for many years. Sponsoring backup parents are no long needed.

However, as we said earlier, some families like to have sponsors, and if they do, they may have them. We are glad to include sponsors. They may stand with the parents when we conduct the baptism.

### **Will you baptize a person at your church whose family does not attend Crossroads Church?**

In certain circumstances, the answer is "yes." We will consider doing this if at least one parent is an active member of a Christian church.

A baptism has little Christian meaning if the parents -- or at least one parent -- is not honestly connected to a good congregation somewhere. It helps us to have confidence that the child will be exposed to some good Christian education and Biblical teaching. It helps us to believe that we are baptizing a child for more than mere cultural habit. We want to satisfy and minister to the families we serve, but we also want to be true to our ordination -- to bring people to Jesus Christ.

Baptism is done at the discretion of the Pastor of our church under the direction of our Elder board.

### **May we have a private baptism?**

Baptism is not a private matter because being a Christian is not a private matter. One can be a Christian only in relation to other people. Baptism is a corporate experience. To join the "body of believers" it is important to be among the body of believers.

There are exceptions -- occasions when we will have a private baptism. In certain circumstances the minister may decide to baptize or dedicate a child as a means of

speaking to them about their commitment to bring this child into a relationship with Christ.

We will, of course, have private baptism in the event of medical emergencies. Sometimes a person who is dying realizes he or she (or his/her child) may never have been baptized and wants to get that taken care of before the death occurs. We don't think God requires that, but we understand the emotional need, and we can meet it. This happens most often when a newborn baby appears to be near death. We believe God's love and power to be large enough to allow a baby into heaven, baptized or not. As we've said elsewhere in this document, the ritual of baptism is important but not magically essential. It would be rather cruel of a loving, nurturing God to rule anyone out simply because he or she had not been put to water by a minister. When we baptize an infant in a hospital emergency situation, we know that we do it for the comfort of the loving parents and not because the baby needs it to receive God's welcoming, loving embrace. When someone is dying, it is no time for the minister to argue the theological issues. It is a time to be responsive and loving, and to go ahead and baptize.

However, under more normal circumstances we want to be more faithful to the sense of community that the Church is meant to be -- a corporate body, or gathering of believers into which we are baptized. Therefore we prefer baptisms to be in connection with congregational life.

### **Can I (or should I) be re-baptized?**

People sometimes feel the need for re-baptism when they reach a stage of life when Christ truly becomes important to them. They come to realize the significance of baptism and wonder if they should have it done over, now that faith is so much more important to them.

We suggest not. There is no magic in the act. The best baptism, as we have said before, is the baptism that saturates us in the Spirit of Jesus Christ. When that feeling happens it's good to simply know that the act of baptism that took place years before has "finally taken hold!" Give God thanks and praise for that, and go on from there to your new life in Christ and in service.

If you have any questions please be sure to set up a time to speak with Pastor Jim.

Thank you for taking the time to read this. If you would like to schedule a date for your baptism or your child's baptism/dedication, please contact Pastor Jim.