

Baptism at Emmanuel Church



This pamphlet is an introduction to the Sacrament of Baptism as it is practiced in the Episcopal Church and in this congregation. It is intended to address some of the basic questions that adults and families may have as they consider whether to be baptized or to have a child baptized.

Emmanuel has long been noted for its "Open Door" policy, not just with respect to the church being open daily. The statements made below represent an ideal that not many persons can meet all at once. We ask that you read the pamphlet, but we also promise to work with you with respect to individual faith and family needs.

The Meaning of Baptism

Baptism is the formal initiation of a person into the Body of Christ -- the Church as it has existed now for nearly 2000 years. It is a sacrament, that is, a ritual where an outward and visible symbol (in this case water) represents a special moment of God's graciousness. The water which is used in the sacrament symbolizes a dying to this life and a resurrection to a new life, focused on Jesus Christ as Lord. As first practiced, baptism involved full immersion in a pool as a sign of this dying and rising, and many congregations are reviving this custom for adult baptisms.

In a society which is increasingly secular, baptism has been returned to its once prominent role in the Church's life. Baptisms are celebrated publicly, and take place during the regular Sunday services. The expectation is that individuals who come to the Church for baptism have or are making a substantial commitment to the life of their local congregation.

What Baptism is Not!

Many of our notions about baptism have come down to us from a time when church membership was ubiquitous in America, a time when the privileged place of the Church in society led to a sort of complacency about its meaning.

Baptism is not simply a rite of passage to welcome a newborn into a family and community. It is not a nice ceremony that "needs to be done" for a child (no matter how much a beloved grandparent or other relative insists). It is not an excuse to invite family members and friends for a nice party. It doesn't need to be done by a certain time in order to make use of a family heirloom baptismal gown. When understood as part of the substantial commitment to the life of the Church, all of these can make the sacrament more meaningful, but they are not sufficient reasons in and of themselves.

When Should Someone Be Baptized?

Reading through *The Book of Common Prayer*, it is clear that the service of Holy Baptism is intended to be used primarily for adults. Where there are provisions made for infants and small children, they appear as exceptions to the norm. This reflects a society where church membership is no longer an expectation, and therefore where more and more people are joining the Church as adults.

For hundreds of years baptism has been offered to infants and young children, and most baptisms at Emmanuel are of such. However, the sacrament is only offered in the context of families and godparents who will commit themselves to bringing up the child in the Christian faith, including regular participation in worship and education.

Baptism and Salvation

Baptism is also about salvation. By salvation, the Church means the process by which we are forgiven and freed from the burden of our sinfulness, so that we may change our lives and achieve unity with Christ. Ultimately this uniting will be completed in Heaven, but we believe that the Church must work to bring the Kingdom of Heaven here to earth. Salvation, then, is equally about how we live now and what we hope to find at the end of our life and at the end of time.

So a person seeking baptism is seeking to become an active member in the work and fellowship of the universal Church as it is lived out in the local congregation. Our confidence about our eternal reward is confirmed by our present activity.

Preparing for Baptism

The process of preparing for baptism is called "catechesis." In the case of an infant or young child presented for baptism, the catechesis takes the form of basic instructions for the parents and godparents, so that they are reminded of the Church's teaching and the congregation's expectations. In the case of an adult, the catechesis can be done either individually or in a class with others who might be preparing for baptism or confirmation.

Everyone seeking for baptism should expect to spend some time preparing for it. The amount or extent of the catechesis will vary according to individual experience and need. The process will normally end with a rehearsal of the service and a chance to review the Baptismal Covenant as it is found in the Prayerbook. [Page 299ff.]

The Goal of Baptism

A baptized person becomes a minister of the Church, in the sense that the Prayerbook describes in the Catechism. Grateful for inclusion in the Body of Christ and making use of the gifts God has given them, baptized persons "come together week by week for corporate worship; and to work, pray and give for the spread of the Kingdom of God." [Page 856] This includes regular attendance on Sundays, a pledge of financial support for the congregation and participation in the fellowship, educational and service opportunities that the congregation supports, as well as participation in its management.

Choosing Godparents & Sponsors

Every person presented for baptism must have at least one sponsor, though the number and gender of the sponsors is often a matter of local or family custom. In the case of the baptism of an infant or a young child the parents are generally considered sponsors, though it is appropriate for Godparents to stand with them as sponsors. Though not legally bound as guardians in the case of tragedy, they nonetheless pledge their guarantee that the vows being made at baptism will be upheld. (Legal guardians are established by a proper Will, which will be discussed during catechesis.)

Godparents or sponsors, by virtue of the role defined for them in the Baptism Service itself, must be baptized persons who are active and faithful members of a Christian (not necessarily an Episcopal) congregation. Godparents are expected to be an example of Christian life and to pray for their godchildren, and suggestions for how these duties may be carried out are normally covered during the rehearsal session.

Baptisms in Emergency Situations

In the event of a life threatening emergency (especially around childbirth itself) please call the priest, if at all possible. If not, any baptized person may perform a baptism by sprinkling water over the head and saying the words, "I baptize you in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit."