

A Statement on Baptism Culver Palms Church of Christ

Christian baptism is a gift from God to all of those who would follow Jesus Christ. Baptism is an ancient practice, extending back to our Lord Jesus who was himself baptized in the Jordan River. The physical act itself is simple enough; to baptize is to dip or immerse one in water (from the Greek *baptizō*, literally “to put or go under water”). However, for all its simplicity, baptism is an amazingly profound action as well as one that has, through the long history of the Christian faith, received many different interpretations. As in all things, when it comes to baptism, the Culver Palms Church of Christ strives to submit itself to God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ by conforming our beliefs and practices to the witness of the Holy Bible, the ancient and inspired words of God’s prophets and apostles.

The witness of Scripture regarding baptism is substantive and beautifully evocative and a careful reading of the Bible makes clear that baptism is important, integral and essential to Christian life. The most basic truth about baptism is that Jesus himself was baptized (Matthew 3:13-17). His baptism is where God publically recognizes Jesus as his Son and sets on him the Holy Spirit; from there Jesus witnesses to God’s rule, living in service to people, undermining religious hypocrisy and social injustice, and giving himself up for all (Acts 10:36-40; Mark 10:42-45). Since Jesus calls all people to follow him (John 12:24-26; 1 Corinthians 11:1), it is proper to understand his baptism as an example for all of us. To be baptized is to follow in Jesus’ steps, trusting that God will take us through the cross out of the open tomb and into his presence.

But Jesus is more than our example and baptism is more than following Jesus. In becoming flesh, Jesus, the Son of God, took upon our humanity in order to redeem humankind from sin and death (John 1:1-18; 2 Corinthians 5:18-21). His life, death and resurrection are our salvation. In baptism, we take upon ourselves Jesus Christ, joining ourselves to his sinlessness and his deathlessness (Colossians 2:9-15). From before the time of Jesus, baptism involved repentance (turning from sin and toward God; see Luke 3:1-18); but in the name of Jesus, baptism betokens a transformation from being lost in sin to being alive in Christ, a sharing in the death and resurrection of Jesus: going beneath the water we die to ourselves and are buried; coming up from the water, we are raised to newness of life (Romans 6:3-5). This is the work of Christ, his saving us and his transforming us.

Baptism is thus hugely important. It is important as *the* step of conversion, where we are identified with Christ, given his status as child of God and where God sets upon us his Holy Spirit (for examples of conversions, see Acts 2, 8, 9, 10-11, 13, 16, 18, 19). We have un-paralleled access to God, with Christ interceding for us to him and his Spirit articulating our deepest needs (Galatians 3:27-4:7; Romans 8). But baptism is important also as a lasting sign of that conversion to us and to the world. It reminds us that we are set free from slavery to sin and death and calls us to put aside sinful ways and the fear of our mortality. And baptism is a lasting reminder that we have been raised with Christ, our life is secured with him in God’s presence, and it calls us to set our mind on things above, to live as God’s children, witnessing the rule of God and embodying the love, virtues and peace of Christ (Colossians 2-3).

Baptism is an act we undertake only in as much as it is an act of submission and reception. It is submission in that we surrender our will to God's will. It is reception in that we receive the good gifts God gives us as his children. In light of the evidence of Scripture and in contrast to infant baptism, this means baptism is undertaken by an individual who trusts God enough to surrender his or herself to the Lordship of Jesus Christ. In baptism, we yield ourselves; we do not assert ourselves. This is important to say because the claims of Scripture about baptism are very bold; in one place, we are told that baptism "saves us" (1 Peter 3:21) and in another that "it is the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit" (Titus 3:5). We should not call baptism our work and, much more importantly, we should not rely upon it as our own accomplishment or mark of a self-preservation in this life, or the one to come. Baptism, in all that it does and all that it signifies, is a gift from God because it orients us to Jesus, not to ourselves.

Not the least of the great things about baptism is that since it unites us with Christ it also unites us with all Christians. And as it reorients us to Christ, it reorients us to each other. As those identified with Christ, we have surrendered our ethnic, gender, economic, and geographic distinctions; we are one in Christ Jesus, who is all and in all (Galatians 3:26-29; Colossians 3:11; 1 Corinthians 12:13). Christ tears down dividing walls so easily erected by humankind and he makes us one (Ephesians 2:14). For this reason, it is especially lamentable that people who call on the name of Jesus Christ cannot easily point to baptism as a sign of their unity, whether because they interpret baptism differently or because they practice it differently. In the light of these human-created divisions, we cherish baptism not because it makes us distinctive but because it reminds us that God makes us one with our fellow believers, calls us to live as one with each other, and holds us accountable to that calling (Ephesians 4:1-6).

We recognize that not all have had the same type of baptism as what we profess and that many may not accept all aspects of what we say here. We do not presume to judge our fellow believers who were baptized as infants or in some other fashion because we recognize God alone is the Judge and Savior (Jude 24-25). We respect that people are ultimately answerable to God alone according to their own conscience and convictions (1 Corinthians 4:5). We also recognize our own limitations and we invite all to study the Scriptures with us and to endeavor together with us to follow Jesus (Acts 18:24-28). Nevertheless, as a church family with the responsibility of encouraging and instructing one another, it is vital that we strive to hold a common witness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. In as much as baptism is so intricately associated with our accepting and conforming to that Gospel, we must also make every effort to hold a common teaching about baptism. So, while we acknowledge within our fellowship individuals who hold to their baptism by a different mode, in particular infant baptism, and we value their gifts and service, we as the Culver Palms body collectively endorse, teach and support the understanding of baptism expressed in this statement.

In summary, as part of our accountability to God and in the example of the Bible, the Culver Palms church professes boldly and with passion these things about baptism because we want all people to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and thereby to participate fully in the divine life of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.