



# **THE MEANING OF BAPTISM**



**GETTYSBURG CHURCH OF THE  
BRETHREN**

# INTRODUCTION

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The Brethren have always taken seriously the Great Commission:

“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 and teaching them to obey everything that I command you and remember I am with you always to the end of the age.” Matthew 28: 19-20.

As the Great Commission is fulfilled, people become members of the Church of the Brethren and experience fellowship and growth together in relation to God through Jesus Christ.

In the Church of the Brethren members are received by baptism, transfer of membership, and reaffirmations of faith. This document focuses on baptism by providing a synopsis of the Gospel story, the biblical and historical foundation, its meaning, the four ordinances of the Church of the Brethren, reflection questions, and what to expect on the day of baptism.



## THE GOSPEL IN A NUTSHELL

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**Creation:** In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. His creation was full of life, purpose, and beauty. Humankind was made in the image of God, reflecting His character, caring for His creation, and living in a loving relationship with one another and God. God did not create a chaotic mess - it was intentional, purposeful, relational, and “very good.” God was close to the people, and this closeness with Him is what He desires from every one of us.

**Rebellion:** Despite God’s goodness, love, and care, humankind rebelled against God. Adam and Eve chose to disobey God’s instructions, fracturing our relationship with God. This introduced death, sin, and separation into the world. This rebellion continued with each passing generation, leading to endless idolatry, injustice, hate, brokenness, and sin. Our perspective on God shifted to something that He is not, and we all suffered because of our rebellion. Things were no longer as they once were - they were no longer “very good.”

**Redemption:** Despite the relationship being severed, God did not abandon us. Through Israel, God started a plan to bless everyone around the world. This plan culminated with God manifesting in the flesh as Jesus Christ, fully God and fully man. Jesus lived amongst us, without sin. He revealed God the Father to us. And, as a punishment for our rebellion, he took our penalty. Rising from the dead, Jesus conquered sin and death. He opened the way of reconciliation, forgiveness, and renewal. For those who accept Jesus and his sacrifice, they are accepted into God’s Kingdom.

**Renewal:** The story does not end with redemption, because God, through the Holy Spirit, is still working toward full restoration. One day, all things will be made new. The creation that is tainted by sin will be restored, and we will have a complete relationship with God forever.





## THE MEANING OF BAPTISM

Baptism is a symbol for the individual who has committed to Christ. And it has meaning for the church community of that individual.

Candidates for baptism should be instructed in Christian belief, including the history, beliefs, and practices of the Church of the Brethren. Baptism is practiced by Brethren by triune immersion and is for people mature enough to understand the meaning of choosing to follow Jesus Christ. This is what the Brethren call a Believers' Baptism. Brethren believe that:

- Baptism is a response to God's saving act through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ
- Baptism is an act of obedience to the teachings and example of Jesus Christ. Jesus was baptized, and the New Testament calls all who believed to be baptized.

## THE MEANING OF BAPTISM

- Baptism is a symbol of cleansing in new life. It is an outward sign of an inner experience. There is a new creation, a new birth. “So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new.” 2 Corinthians 5:17.
- Baptism is a public witness to the covenant relationship with God.
- Baptism is an initiation rite into the church, the body of Christ. To believe in Jesus Christ means to believe in his church and to be part of it. Baptism is the moment of entering the church and of resuming responsible membership.
- Baptism is an ordination into the ministry. All people, as they join the church through baptism, are called to minister through their lives and the work of their neighbors in the world.
- Baptism is a beginning. It is understood not as something completed but as the start of Christians’ pilgrimage of faith





## THE FOUR ORDINANCES

The Church of the Brethren has four ordinances, or practices, that are central to our faith and tradition. These are practices that were ordained by Jesus and practiced by the disciples and are a visible portrayal of our faith.

### Baptism

Baptism is regarded as a covenant between God and a Christian, symbolizing a believer's commitment to Christ and a deeper commitment to the faith community. The Church of the Brethren uniquely practices triune immersion baptism, in which an individual is immersed three times, face-forward, in the names of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This approach is derived from the Great Commission in Matthew 28:19 and emphasizes obedience to Jesus' commands.

Through baptism, believers publicly declare their repentance, renewal, and decision to live a life guided by Jesus' teachings. It is considered both a transformative spiritual act and a binding commitment to walk in fellowship with the Church and serve God's mission on earth.

## Love Feast & Communion

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The Love Feast is a deeply meaningful ordinance celebrated as an act of worship, fellowship, and reflection. It is modeled after Jesus' Last Supper with His disciples (John 13). At this Last Supper, Jesus washed his disciples' feet, ate supper with them, desired to draw them closer into the fold of His love, and offered the symbolic bread and cup.

The Church of the Brethren celebrates this act of worship once or twice a year. During this time, each member goes through self-examination, attempting to reconcile any discord within the church. Afterwards, we wash one another's feet or hands, enjoy a meal together, and quietly share communion. During the time of communion, we share the bread and cup, reminding us of Jesus' gift and renewing our commitment to follow Jesus' example of sacrificial love.





### Feet Washing

Feet washing is an act of humility, service, and love that is central to the Love Feast but also stands as an ordinance of its own. This practice arises directly from John 13:3-17, where Jesus washed the feet of His disciples and instructed them to do the same for one another. Through feet washing, believers embody Jesus' example of servanthood and equality within the Christian community.

This practice is both humbling and transformational, reminding participants of their call to love and serve one another with the same humility and grace that Jesus demonstrated. It is a visible expression of mutual care and unity within the body of Christ.

## Anointing

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Following the instructions of the New Testament, the Church of the Brethren practices anointing. Anointing is the prayerful, loving application of oil on someone in spiritual or physical need. Folks frequently ask for anointing before surgery or serious illnesses. However, people have increasingly asked for anointing for grief, emotional turmoil, or broken relationships.

Anointing can be done during a service or in a more personal setting, like at home or with a small group. Anointing often accompanies a time of confession and the pastor or deacon applying oil three times to the forehead, symbolizing the forgiveness of sin; the strengthening of faith; and the healing of body, mind, and spirit.



## BASIS FOR BAPTISM - OLD TESTAMENT

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- **Ritual Washing:** Ancient Israel went through ritual washings in a mikveh, which is a full ritual bath. While these washings are ritual, they serve as important public health guidelines in the absence of modern medicine and refrigeration. In the same manner as the ritual washing, baptism washes away the things that may do us harm, the impurity of our sins. Key Texts: Leviticus 15, Numbers 19, Exodus 30:17-21
- **Crossing the Red Sea:** In Exodus, Israel was held as slaves in Egypt. But Moses led them from slavery and Egypt to a new life in the Promised Land. During this journey, God established a new covenant and gave Israel a new identity as it passed through the parted waters of the Red Sea. Similarly, we receive a new identity as we enter and leave the baptismal waters. Key Texts: Exodus 14, 1 Corinthians 10:1-2
- **Noah & the Flood:** During the time of Noah, the land was filled with people who did and thought about evil things. God regretted making humankind and desired to wash away the sin and evil that was on the earth, saving just one family. Just as the flood waters washed away evil, baptism is the mark of a good conscience toward God. Key Texts: Genesis 6-8, 1 Peter 3:20-21.
- **Joshua & the Jordan River:** As Israel was ending their 40-year journey through the wilderness, they were about to enter the land that God had promised them. But to enter this land, they must cross the Jordan River with God's guidance. As they crossed the Jordan River, they entered a new land - just as baptism is an outward symbol of entering God's kingdom. Key Texts: Joshua 3
- **Prophetic Imagery:** In Ezekiel, the water brought on cleaning and renewal. For us, baptism represents inward cleaning and renewal, symbolizing the past, present, and future work of the Holy Spirit in regenerating us in Christ. Key Texts: Ezekiel 36:25-27




## BASIS FOR BAPTISM - NEW TESTAMENT

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- **Jesus' Example:** In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus was baptized by John the Baptist. However, Jesus' baptism was not for repentance, since Jesus did not sin; it was to "fulfill all righteousness." Jesus' baptism was the beginning of His public ministry, which was affirmed by the voice of the Father and the descent of the Holy Spirit. Key Text: Matthew 3:13-17
- **Jesus's Command:** After Jesus rose from the grave on Easter, he spent 40 days teaching his disciples. Before Jesus rose to heaven on Ascension Day, he gave one final command to the group of disciples:

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 and teaching them to obey everything that I command you and remember I am with you always to the end of the age.  
Matthew 28: 19-20.

- **Early Church Practice:** Throughout the book of Acts, the Disciples would baptize those that have accepted and committed their lives to Jesus, including an Ethiopian eunuch, the house of a Roman Centurion, and a jailer in the city of Philippi. Key Texts: Acts 8, Acts 10, Acts 16
  - **Union with Christ:** Baptism unites an individual with Jesus' death and resurrection, carrying deep spiritual and transformative meaning. Key Texts: Romans 6:3 & 4; Galatians 3:27; Colossians 2:12
  - **New Identity:** Baptism does not just mean spiritual transformation; it also means a new identity as an individual enters a community of faith. Key Texts: 1 Corinthians 12:13; 2 Corinthians 5:17
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## **BASIS FOR BAPTISM - CHURCH OF THE BRETHREN**

In 1708, Alexander Mack and seven like-minded individuals went to the Eder River in Schwarzenau, Germany. One of the seven, randomly chosen, whose identity has remained anonymous, would baptize Mack, and Mack would baptize the others. This baptism was for the remission of sins and the receiving of the Holy Spirit.

These eight individuals took a considerable risk by being rebaptized. All had been baptized as infants and, through their action, had “separated” themselves from the government-established churches of the time. This small group of individuals was given the name “anabaptists” because of their choice to be “rebaptized.”

By the 1720s, almost all members of the Church of the Brethren had immigrated to the United States, specifically to the Philadelphia area in Pennsylvania. The first Church of the Brethren baptism in the United States took place in Wissahickon Creek, near Germantown, PA, on December 25, 1723.

Even though many churches have a baptistry in the front of the sanctuary (instead of baptizing in rivers, streams, lakes, and ponds), for more than 300 years, the Church of the Brethren has continued the tradition of a triune, Believers' Baptism.





## WHAT TO EXPECT

Baptism is a joyful and celebratory day for you and for the church community. Feel free to invite friends and family to this special occasion. Nevertheless, you will be surrounded by people who are excited and care for you.

Before the church service begins, a member of the pastoral team may briefly talk with you, confirming your decision to be baptized. The deacons of the church will also assist the pastoral team throughout the entire baptism service, typically with physical arrangements like preparing the baptistry. At a point during the service, you will be asked to leave the worship service to change into clothing more suitable for baptism (e.g., clothes that can get wet), and it may include a robe, signifying the dignity and beauty of the occasion. As the time for baptism approaches, you can provide a few words or thoughts to the congregation.

## WHAT TO EXPECT

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At the beginning of the baptismal service, the minister will say the following:

“Today, you are being received into this community of faith and the Church of the Brethren. As part of the whole church of Jesus Christ, we offer you our rich heritage and invite you to share fully in our life and mission.

As you are received into the Gettysburg Church of the Brethren, we intend to be a true family of faith to you. We commit ourselves to be for you a loving fellowship; to be a means of grace in your life; and to offer opportunities for worship, study, and service. One of the happiest times in our life as a church is when people choose to become members. We welcome you with joy.”

There may be circumstances in which private baptism is appropriate. If you would like to explore this possibility, please speak with the pastoral team.





## WHAT TO EXPECT

The minister performing the baptism will already be in the baptistry and help you in and out. The minister will instruct you to kneel in the water. Your hands can be clasped in front of your chest, placed on your legs, or used to cover your nose. At this time, the minister will ask you a series of questions, which are, along with your responses, below:

Minister: Do you believe that Jesus is God's son, and do you receive and trust him as your Savior and Lord?

You: I do

Minister: Will you turn away from all sin, and will you endeavor by God's grace to live according to the examples and teachings of Jesus?

You: I will.

Minister: Will you be loyal to the church, upholding it by your prayers and your presence, your substance and your service?

You: I will.

## WHAT TO EXPECT

The minister will place a hand behind your head and a hand on your forehead or covering your nose. The minister will gently dip your head forward, immersing your head three separate times, while you bend at the waist. During this time, the minister will say:

“[Your Name], upon your confession of faith made before God and these people, you are baptized in the name of the Father [Dip 1], and of the Son [Dip 2], and of the Holy Spirit [Dip 3].”

After you clear your face and hair of water from the final dip, the minister will place hands on your head or back, praying:

“O God, we are thankful for the commitment made today by [Your Name]. May (he/she) experience your forgiveness, acceptance, and peace. Send your Holy Spirit upon [Your Name] to guide and empower. Enable [Your Name] to walk in newness of life, using (his/her) gifts in praise to you and in service to others. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.”





## WHAT TO EXPECT

The minister will extend a hand or a hug of Christian fellowship, speak a word of blessing, and assist you in leaving the baptistry.

Once you have dried off and changed, the congregation will also welcome you, saying:

“With joy, we receive you as part of this congregation. With you, we renew and reaffirm our vows of faith. We promise to surround you with the love and encouragement that will enable you to grow strong in compassion, vigorous in service, and sure in the way of Christ.”

The minister may end the service with a blessing, like:

“May the blessing of God be upon all who have made new and renewed commitments this day. And may we go forth together in service, glorifying God’s name, and responding to our neighbors’ needs. Amen.”

# CONCLUSION

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In summary, our faith journeys are woven from personal experiences, growth, and reflection on God's enduring grace. As we consider the significance of baptism and our commitment to Christ, may we continue to seek understanding, deepen our relationship with God, and embrace our place within the broader story of faith.



## YOUR JOURNEY

Each one of us has a unique story or journey to this point in our lives. We have learned and experienced various things, and those things make us who we are today. And throughout that time, God has shown us His mercy, grace, and love. While there is so much more to our lives and so much more God can and will do for us, our personal stories are part of His story.

- What does baptism mean to you? Why are you considering it?
- Have you placed your faith in Jesus Christ and your Lord and Savior?
- How has your relationship with God grown or changed over the last year?
- What do you understand about the significance of baptism in the Bible?
- Are you ready to publicly identify with Jesus and live as part of the Church?
- What questions or concerns do you have about baptism?





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