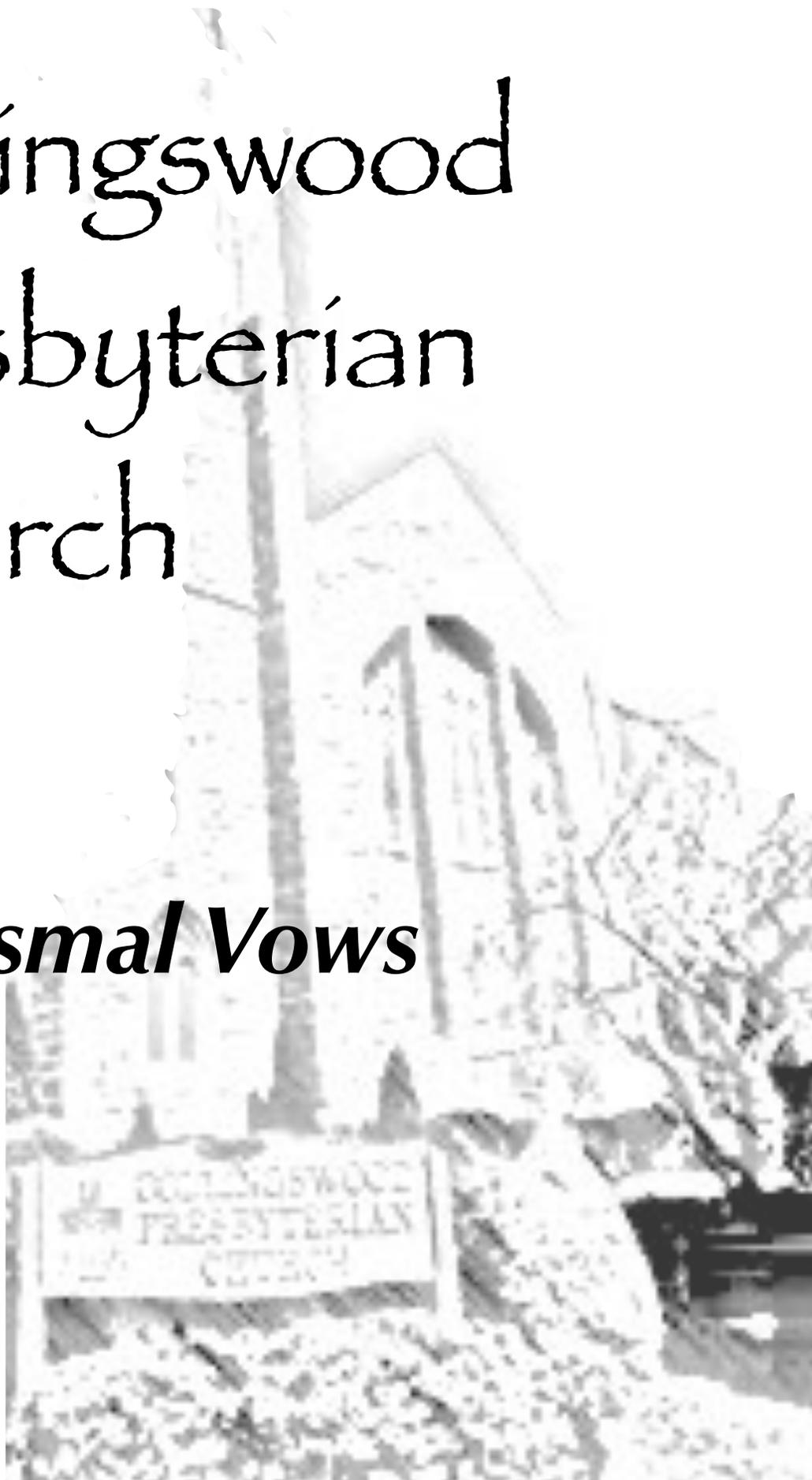


Collingswood Presbyterian Church

Baptismal Vows



Reformed Theology 101

Cynthia Rigby, ‘one of the great theologians of our time,’ lays out Reformed beliefs during an hour-long webinar

by Mike Ferguson | Presbyterian News Service

LOUISVILLE — The mystery of the Reformed faith is not that God is unknowable — it’s that the unknowable God, from the Reformed perspective, has made God’s Self known.

In an hour-long webinar created last week, the Rev. Dr. Cynthia Rigby, the W.C. Brown Professor of Theology at Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary, lays out that assertion along with other basic tenants of Reformed theology. The Presbyterian Mission Agency’s Office of Christian Formation and the Association of Presbyterian Church Educators put on the free webinar; a recording is available here.

During the webinar, Rigby, called by the Dallas Morning News “one of the great theologians of our time,” discussed six basic teachings of Reformed theology.

The sovereignty of God

Not a sparrow falls to the ground without God knowing it. Without God’s sovereignty, the reformer John Calvin said, life would be unbearable.

“It’s not that God causes things to happen,” Rigby said, “but that God is with us even when horrible things happen.”

Still, people of faith can well grow frustrated when problems persist over the years.

“Why isn’t God solving this? We have been praying the Lord’s Prayer for 2,000 years. Show us the money already, O God!” she said.

The sovereignty of God authorizes us to keep hoping, to keep pushing, she said, because “we have something better than a right — we have an identity,” she said, quoting Jacquelyn Grant in “White Women’s Christ and Black Women’s Jesus”: “When black women call Jesus Lord, they are saying the slaveholder isn’t.”

The goodness of Creation

We sometimes attach negative attributes to Creation and sex, eating good food and drinking good wine and otherwise enjoying this world, but “nothing could be further from the truth,” Rigby said.

“We believe everything was created good. That’s what makes the Fall more serious,” she said. “The good news built into the fabric of Creation is who we really are.”

The fact that Jesus did not sin makes him more human than we are, not less human. Jesus was tried in every way that we are, and we can hold one another accountable. “We can approach

each other and say, 'Hey Cindy, you aren't being who God made you. I insist you correct that behavior,'" she said. "We are laying claim to our created goodness."

The centrality of Christ

Before he was Abraham, Abram believed God, who "reckoned it to him as righteousness," according to Genesis 15. God's word is huge and it's ubiquitous, "even as it was present in Jesus," Rigby said. "Abram was saved through the same word we know through Jesus Christ," which has some implications for further interreligious dialogue, Rigby said.

When Rigby gets to heaven and sees her father, she'll also be glad to greet her Buddhist friend, "because Jesus was able to save him, too." She labeled Jesus a priest, judge prophet — and, to the poet Emily Dickinson, a "tender pioneer" who bushwhacks through the forest and claims victory over sin and death so we might live an abundant life.

The tenacity of grace

This is difficult to discuss, Rigby said, because there are few human analogies. Grace is unfathomable, but the theologian Barbara Brown Taylor has this story to help explain what grace is: A Yankee visits a southern diner and orders two eggs over easy with wheat toast and bacon. The plate is served with what is to the Yankee an unknown substance oozing out of every other item ordered. The customer asks about it, and the waitress replies, "Oh honey, those are grits. Grist comes whether you order it or not."

"Grace is like grits," Rigby said. "It comes whether you order it or not."

"We talk about gratitude and response, but we still fall into the pattern of thinking about grace transactionally, and we need work on that," she said.

Theologian Karl Barth notes that when Jesus says on the cross, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise," it's not clear he's speaking just to the criminal who asks him, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."

"Barth says, 'Aren't those thieves lucky? They participated in Jesus' life and death, and they get to participate in his resurrection.'"

The inseparability of word and sacrament

Christians are good at lifting up pairs of things that are simultaneously true, she said: Jesus is fully human and fully divine. We are at the same time righteous and sinners. The Trinity is one in three, three in one.

At the Synod of Alexandria in 362 CE, participants were warring about the Trinity. In the end, leaders told both sides they were right, "and people were mad about that, because they wanted a better answer," Rigby said. "The oneness of God and the three-ness of God are not in tension."

The PC(USA)'s Directory for Worship says word and sacrament are inextricably intertwined. Rigby pointed to a New Testament miracle as proof: Jesus lectured the 5,000, and then he fed

them. “The bigger miracle,” she said, “was this important man stopped talking long enough to serve lunch.”

The transforming work of the Holy Spirit

Reformed theologians get a “bum rap,” she said, for not caring enough about the work of the Holy Spirit. For Calvin, “the Holy Spirit sealed the deal on the truth of who Jesus Christ is and God’s benevolence,” Rigby said. “Without the Holy Spirit, we can know nothing.”

For Calvin, part of the work of the Holy Spirit is to help people know they are God’s Elect “so that they can live the abundant life God wants them to live,” she said. “Calvin said to treat everyone as though they are the Elect. That’s up to God, not us.”

The forgiveness of sins “is not only a possibility, but a requirement of Reformed theology, and there’s a lot of misunderstanding about that,” Rigby said. “If we could model forgiveness better, it could make a real difference in the world.”

And as we go out into that world, “remember we are part of the Reformed tradition,” Rigby said as a benediction to close the webinar. “To whom much is given, much will be required. We are all in it together as a community of faith.”

This Article: <https://www.presbyterianmission.org/story/reformed-theology-101/>

Webinar: <https://apcnet.org/project/basics-of-reformed-theology/>

The Waters of Baptism

“But their eyes were kept from recognizing him.” — Luke 24:16

By Philip W. Butin | Presbyterians Today

One of the main reasons for the lively discussion that surrounds the doctrine of baptism among contemporary Presbyterians is the historic Reformed conviction that, “the Holy Spirit claims us in the waters of baptism” (“Brief Statement of Faith”). In an age when serious Christian commitment is less and less in step with our society’s changing values, it is not easy to understand the precise nature and implications of God’s baptismal claim on us. Most of us no longer have any illusions that we live in a “Christian culture.” But that doesn’t necessarily mean we’ve embraced a new understanding of what it means to be God’s people that is adequate to the new situation in which we find ourselves.

A brief return to our Reformed roots helps clarify what is at stake. Centuries ago John Calvin identified God’s baptismal claim on Christians with his stirring words “We are not our own, but the Lord’s.” The crucial factor in the Christian life, he said, is that “we are consecrated and dedicated to God.” This means that, “we may think, speak, meditate, or do anything only with a view to [the divine] glory.” That is what the Second Helvetic Confession means when it explains that in baptism “the elect are consecrated to God.” More recently, that is also what “A New Brief Statement of Faith” means when it begins with the phrase, “In life and in death we belong to God.”

We are not our own. We are God’s people. We belong to God. As Christians, we are not at the mercy of the torrent of societal values and cultural trends swirling and changing around us. Instead, we are at the mercy of the gracious triune God, who claims us in the clear, cleansing waters of baptism.

Unpacking what it means for us to “belong to God” as American Presbyterians at the turn of the 21st century is a daunting challenge. But now more than ever it is crucial that we recover the historic Reformed connection between baptism and God’s claim in our lives as Christian believers. The following points may provide a beginning.

1. God’s baptismal claim on us is gracious and unconditional.

Regardless of our divergences on other issues, Presbyterians can certainly agree that baptism is all about grace. If we know anything that is distinctively Presbyterian, we know that God’s grace extended to us in Jesus Christ is prior to and calls forth our own response of faith. We know our relationship with God depends primarily on what God has done and only secondarily on what we may or may not do. As Presbyterians practice it, baptism is a powerful sacramental enactment of this truth. And because God’s gracious call precedes and evokes the human response of faith, it is normal for Christian parents who are active church members to present their children for baptism as infants or very young children.

The grace God extends to us in baptism is not the kind of “cheap grace” that Dietrich Bonhoeffer warned against. Through faith, grace is certainly free to us, in the sense that it is not earned or merited. But it was not free to God. Its price was the life of God’s only Son, Jesus. And on the human level, it costs us our own lives, which now belong unconditionally to God. Baptism acknowledges our intention to live as God’s people.

When Presbyterians speak of baptism as a covenant, we emphasize the multiple commitments involved. First and most basic, there is God’s commitment to us. Then there are the commitments the community of faith makes to us. Finally, and no less important, are the commitments we make to God, to our children, and to the church. That is why our Book of Order echoes Calvin’s own two-sided treatment of baptism’s gracious character when it says:

“Baptism enacts and seals what the Word proclaims: God’s redeeming grace offered to all people. Baptism is God’s gift of grace and also God’s summons to respond to that grace. Baptism calls to repentance, to faithfulness, and to discipleship. Baptism gives the church its identity and commissions the church for ministry to the world.”

Many contemporary Presbyterians may be a bit uncomfortable with the thought that God’s claim on us in baptism is unconditional. But it all depends on how we define “comfort.” The Heidelberg Catechism begins with the question, “What is your only comfort, in life and in death?” The answer: “That I belong—body and soul, in life and in death—not to myself but to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ . . .” It goes on to recount the wonderful comfort we can gain from the assurance that Christ forgives us, liberates us from evil, protects us, governs circumstances for our salvation, promises us eternal life, and gives us the will and the strength to live for God. Practically speaking, the point is that Christ has stood in our place, fulfilling all the divine conditions for our salvation, wholeness and future hope. Nothing we do or fail to do can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 8:38).

2. God’s baptismal claim on us is corporate and communal.

In many areas of American life the unbridled individualism that has long characterized our culture has now been tried and found wanting. However, it still lingers in many of the popular ideas we bring to church. Baptism is no exception.

Many of us still cling to cultural ideas of baptism as a source of grace that is subject to our personal schedules, opinions, demands, tastes and preferences. We may regard baptism as a private right that goes along with being listed on the church roll. We may even find ourselves assuming that in baptism God is at our disposal. With these individualistic assumptions it is difficult to appreciate the Reformed understanding of baptism as a sacred covenant in which we and our children are inseparably united as members to Christ and to the living community of faith by the Holy Spirit.

In contrast, a Biblical understanding of baptism underlines and profoundly reinforces its corporate and communal nature. Chapter 12 of First Corinthians emphasizes that together Christians constitute the Body of Christ and are individually members of it. In this same context the apostle Paul can say, “In the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body . . . and we

were all made to drink of one Spirit" (12:13). Baptism implies active membership in Christ's Body: the community of faith. The basic meaning of "member" is a part or limb. All this implies that trying to live the Christian life apart from the church is a contradiction in terms.

Baptism calls us to the kind of mutual caring and sharing that characterized the early Christians, and that made others say about them, "See how they love one another!"

3. God's baptismal claim on us is transforming and liberating.

Traditionally Presbyterians have understood the efficacy of the sacrament of baptism to be centered in the transforming power of the Holy Spirit. New Testament baptismal texts like Colossians 2:8–3:17 remind us that baptism initiates a lifelong process of transformation and liberation, both in the community of faith and in the individuals who belong to it. In that process we die to all that is evil in both our common life and our personal lives—as we are raised together to new life in Christ.

There is a troubling tendency in the church today to define liberation in terms that set it over/against personal transformation. Too often freedom is misunderstood as the right to follow some self-defined path to personal fulfillment on the assumption that the transformation of our desires, habits, values or natural tendencies is impossible.

Baptism calls us to hope in God for more. We baptize in the strong name of the Trinity. God is not only our Creator. In Christ, God is also our Redeemer. As the Holy Spirit, God is also our Liberator and Transformer. As Christians, we are not left to resign ourselves to the natural limitations and possibilities of our world, our culture or our individual tendencies.

The triune God who created the world is also actively at work in that world, to redeem and transform it according to the vision of the divine reign.

Through faith in this triune God, baptism calls us all to share in the ministry of transformation and liberation that is the work of the Spirit who lives in our midst. As we embrace this call in this life, we will find ourselves being personally and corporately transformed by the living God as we receive foretastes of that genuine freedom that consists in harmony with God's ultimate purpose for the whole creation.

This article originally appeared in the June 1995 issue of the Presbyterian Survey (now Presbyterians Today).

A complete baptism

What Presbyterians Believe: Living and dying in God's enveloping care

By Charles Wiley III

Presbyterians believe that baptism envelops our lives as Christians. As part of the covenant community, we baptize children as they grow into their faith. Believers are baptized as they make a decision to enter the covenant community and to follow Christ. When Christians die, we say that they have completed their baptism in death.

Why is baptism so central to our lives as Christians?

One way to answer that question is to consider the many dimensions of the meaning of baptism. When you ask, "What does baptism mean?" you will get a lot of answers. Baptism is

"dying and rising with Jesus Christ;
pardon, cleansing, and renewal;
the gift of the Holy Spirit;
incorporation into the body of Christ;
and a sign of the realm of God."

[from Directory for Worship, W-3.0402]

Dying and rising. Water gives life and water kills. We cannot live without water. And yet few things are as terrifying as being at the mercy of fast-moving, deep water. In baptism we speak of dying and rising with Christ. This is visually demonstrated in baptism by immersion, when we simulate going into the watery grave with Christ and coming up to new life in Christ.

Cleansing. In baptism we see the cleansing, the cleaning power of water. We experience daily the cleansing power of water with our food, our bodies, our things. In baptism we experience the cleansing power of the Holy Spirit. The practice of the pouring of water visually demonstrates the cleansing power of water.

Being gifted with the Holy Spirit. The Scriptures speak of the Spirit's presence as anointing. In some mysterious way, the act of baptism brings with it the anointing, the presence of the Holy Spirit. The practice of making the sign of the cross on a person's forehead or similar acts demonstrate the anointing power of water.

Being incorporated into the body of Christ. Baptisms are not private, but take place in the Christian community. You cannot baptize yourself. The practice of welcoming the newly baptized into the community visually demonstrates this incorporation. Sometimes when a young child is baptized, the minister takes the child away from the parents/sponsors and walks

through the congregation with the new member of the body. This shows that the primary relationship for this person is the body of Christ, not the blood relationships of family.

Seeing a sign of God's realm. When Jesus came along, echoing the prophets, that the day of the Lord had come, it signaled that his followers were to live in a new way. The waters of baptism communicate a newness of life, in which we repent of our old ways and turn and follow Jesus in a new direction.

We Presbyterians emphasize the covenant aspect of baptism. When we baptize infants we emphasize God's gracious movement toward human beings, connected to us, through Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit.

The most profound articulation of this covenant understanding of baptism can be heard in the words of the French Reformed Church baptismal liturgy:

Little one, for you Jesus Christ came into the world:
for you he lived and showed God's love;
for you he suffered the darkness of Calvary
and cried at the last, "It is accomplished";
for you he triumphed over death and rose in newness of life;
for you he ascended to reign at God's right hand.
All this he did for you, little one,
though you do not know it yet.
And so the word of Scripture is fulfilled:
"We love because God loved us first."

(Book of Common Order, Church of Scotland)

God loved us first. That is what we hold dear. Whether with a believer or a child, baptism enacts this enveloping love of God — the God who comes to us in Jesus Christ, who comes to us in the power of the Holy Spirit, a love that will not let us go. That is the story of Scripture, and that is the story of baptism, whether an infant in arms or a saint who is finally at rest.

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Questions

During the Sacrament of Baptism, the following questions will be asked of you:

The minister addresses parents presenting children for baptism: ***Do you desire that N. be baptized?***

The parent(s) respond: ***I do.***

M: ***Relying on God's grace, do you promise to live the Christian faith, and to teach that faith to your child?***

P: ***I do.***

M: (to Sponsors, if present) ***Do you promise, through prayer and example, to support and encourage N. to be a faithful Christian?***

The sponsors respond: ***I do.***

The minister addresses the congregation: ***Do you, as members of the church of Jesus Christ, promise to guide and nurture N. by word and deed, with love and prayer, encouraging her/him to know and follow Christ and to be faithful members of his church?***

The people respond: ***We do.***

Profession of Faith

Through baptism we enter the covenant God has established. Within this covenant God gives us new life, guards us from evil, and nurtures us in love. In embracing that covenant, we choose whom we will serve, by turning from evil and turning to Jesus Christ.

As God embraces you within the covenant, I ask you to reject sin, to profess your faith in Christ Jesus, and to confess the faith of the church, the faith in which we baptize.

M: ***Trusting in the gracious mercy of God, do you turn from the ways of sin and renounce evil and its power in the world?***

P: ***I do.***

M: ***Do you turn to Jesus Christ and accept him as your Lord and Savior, trusting in his grace and love?***

P: ***I do.***

M: ***Will you be Christ's faithful disciple, obeying his Word and showing his love?***

P: ***I will, with God's help.***

