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(PCANZ)  
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A Synthesis for  
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With the development of the Four Streams of Ministry by the Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa New Zealand in 1999 and the introduction of the options for providing ministry in parishes in one of these four streams, there have been many areas of ministry that are now undertaken by lay ministers and licensed elders. The people in taking on roles in Ministry Teams then have the responsibility for leading worship, mission outreach and pastoral care of parishioners. As part of this responsibility they are required to learn new skills to be equipped and enabled to undertake these roles. One of the main duties, previously sly the sole domain of Ordained clergy, are those of administering the Sacraments.

Many parishes, even without a Local Ministry Team, are also appointing Serving Elders to be licensed as Communion Elders, to administer Holy Communion and Elders licensed to Baptise. As a result training seminars and workshops need to be held to provide an understanding of these sacraments, the subordinate standards as contained in the Book of Order and the Westminster Confession<sup>1</sup>, the history of Baptism and its place in the life of the church, as well as the significance for those who participate.

The following material covers the topics that would need to be covered in these workshops:

### 1. What is Baptism?

Baptism is the first rite of passage experienced by most Christians. For Roman Catholics, Orthodox Christians and many Protestants, baptism often occurs within a few days or weeks after birth. Christian baptism marks the entry of an individual into the Christian community.

Baptism is one of the celebrations or key events of the church called sacraments, which are seen as signs of divine help or grace needed in order to fully live according to Christian demands. Christian sacramental rites of passage parallel Christ's life and show how Baptism and Holy Communion link a Christian's life to Christ's life and example, accepting assistance through the Holy Spirit to live their life according to his ideal.

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<sup>1</sup> See Appendix One

Paul describes in the letter to the Colossians (Col. 2:11-12) the significance of baptism; as a spiritual counterpart to circumcision it is the new sign of the old covenant between God and the people of God.

*In him also you were circumcised with a spiritual circumcision by putting off the body of the flesh in the circumcision of Christ. When you were buried with him in baptism, you were also raised with him through faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead.*

The outward sign of the covenant was circumcision; the cutting away of the foreskin on Jewish male infants, representing the cutting away of sin, whereas Christian baptism for both male and female infants is a reflection of the same covenantal relationship, with the use of water to wash away sin. The water that is used during the ceremony symbolises both cleansing from sin and the living, flowing waters of new life in Christ. Baptism therefore is the foundation of Christian life.

Various passages of Scripture have led to differences in practice and belief among the various Christian Denominations. Regardless of how baptism is carried out, however, the uniting factor is the use of water as a sign and agent of spiritual cleansing.

Therefore Christian churches practice baptism in the name of the Trinity, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, in accordance with Jesus' instructions to his disciples: "Go and teach all the nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." (Matt. 28:19)

Some groups, such as Eastern Orthodox Christians, provide baptism in the manner of the early Christians, by total immersion in water, as do the Baptists for adult baptism. Roman Catholic baptism usually involves the pouring of water over the head of an infant. Other churches baptise by sprinkling the infant with water or by the minister dipping his or her fingers in water and placing them on the child's head.

Protestant denominations (apart from Quakers and Christian Scientist, who do not baptise), usually view Baptism as necessary for salvation.

*The man who believes in it and accepts baptism will be saved; the man who refuses to believe in it will be condemned. (Mark 16:16)*

*No one can enter in the God's Kingdom without being begotten of water and Spirit. (John 3:5)*

*Repent and be baptised every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. (Acts 2:38)*

Some churches baptise so that believers can receive the Holy Spirit, while others baptise because they believe that the person who is cleansed by the water is also cleansed spiritually by God's grace or power.

Since Christian adult baptism can be a sign of conversion – that is, of the turning of a person's life toward Jesus Christ – the baptism of adults throughout Christian history has been preceded by a long period of introduction into the faith. Before the baptism of a child, a baptismal conversation takes place with the parents and/or supporters, who will later on in the child's life, introduce them to the faith. The parents in answering for the child, must confess their faith in God, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

Christians believe that by being united with Christ through baptism they are also united with all other Christians. Through baptism a community is created that goes beyond all natural boundaries of nations, cultures, races, social classes and gender. According to Paul;

*All of you who have been baptised into Christ have clothed yourselves with him. There does not exist among you Jew or Greek, slave or freeman, male or female. All are one in Christ Jesus. (Gal. 3:27-28)*

Baptisms were often referred to as Christenings, or the occasion of naming an infant. The custom of bestowing a name on the newly baptised child dates from early Christian times, when a person took a new name at baptism. The new name was the name of a saint who was to serve as a model and inspiration during the life of the person baptised.

Some Protestant denominations have rejected the 'Catholic and Orthodox' practices of baptising infants, because their belief is that a person cannot enter the church until he or she is old enough to make his or her own declaration of faith in Jesus Christ. Baptists in particular view this rite of passage as giving people participation in the mission of Jesus – through baptism, every believer in effect becomes a priest, required to bear witness to Jesus.

## 2. Scriptural References that support the Doctrine of Baptism

The Bible contains passages of scripture which prove a Biblical Imperative for welcoming Children into the church.

The Gospel according to Mark 1:9-11, tells the story of the baptism of Jesus:  
*In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptised by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased'.*

And in Mark 10:13-16, we read that -

*People were bringing little children to Jesus in order that he might bless them; and the disciples spoke sternly to them. But when Jesus saw this, he was indignant and*

*said to them, "Let the little children come to me; do not stop them ; for it is such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it" and he took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them.*

Baptism therefore is Christ's gift. It is the sign by which the Spirit of God joins people to Jesus Christ and incorporates them into his body, the Church.

In his own baptism in the River Jordan by John the Baptist, who was Jesus cousin, Jesus identified himself with humanity in its brokenness and sin along with all the other people who sought the same baptism from John. Jesus baptism was completed in his death and resurrection. By God's grace, baptism plunges us into the faith of Jesus Christ, so that whatever is understood to be of the nature of Christ may be called ours, by our joining God's family as brothers and sisters of Christ. By water and the Spirit we are claimed as God's own and set free from the power of sin and death. By being claimed by God we are given the gift of the Holy Spirit so that we may live as witnesses to Jesus Christ, to share in his ministry in the world and grow to maturity, to wait with hope for the day of our Lord Jesus Christ's return.

The authority to baptise was granted by Jesus when he said; "Go to people everywhere throughout the whole world and make them my disciples: baptise them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit; teach them to obey everything that I have commanded you; and I will be with you always, to the end of the age." When people became Christians they were baptised – which means, made new in Christ. In those first days, in Israel, and a little later on in Asia Minor they were baptised with water. This was a symbolic act that showed they had died to their old way of life; and rose to a new way of life – life in Christ – a way of life made possible by Jesus through his teaching and example – a life lived for others – life "in Christ."

This way of life, life "in Christ," has certain identifiable results for us: we enjoy life to the full and can cope successfully with all life's ups and downs; therefore we are able to achieve the full potential of which we are capable; we release the unimagined power we have within us, for the total enrichment of our own lives and for the similar enrichment of the lives of others. This is something of the nature of "life in Christ" – of which baptism is a sign, and when it is entered into in sincerity and truth, it is also a seal, of this new life in Christ.

Because of the very strong sense of family in the Hebrew religion and culture, children in a family were seen to be entitled to the same privileges as their parents. So, a Jewish boy, at age of seven days, was circumcised and through this ritual he was incorporated into the nation of Israel, the chosen people of God – not

because he could profess loyalty to the nation, he was only seven days old; but, because he had been born into a family who professed loyalty to Israel. Therefore, from the first days of the Christian Church, parents who were themselves initiated into the new way of life, "in Christ", naturally, sought this same privilege for their children also, so parents who have been baptised now bring their children to be baptised into the Church of Jesus Christ so that they too can receive the love and care of that community of faith.

Parents bring their infants, supported by family, friends and members of the worshipping congregation to a Service of Worship which then includes the Baptism as the ceremony of initiation into membership of the Church of Jesus the Christ. This is a public occasion, where vows are made by the parents, supporters and the congregation.

3. The debate regarding infant baptism and adult baptism / Total immersion v. sprinkling. (Luke 3: 15-17, 21-22)

Jesus was baptised by dipping in the Jordan River by the prophet we know as John the Baptist

*"Now when all the people were baptised, and when Jesus also had been baptised and was praying, the heaven was opened and the Holy Spirit descended upon him like a dove, and a voice came from heaven: "You are my beloved Son, with you I am very pleased."*

The sacrament of Baptism, has over the centuries become a contest between differing opinions and interpretations among the denominations of the Church, the Body of Christ. Points of difference have hinged on whether adult baptism or infant baptism is the valid practice, and whether sprinkling or immersion is the valid way to enact the sacrament. Though it is disturbing that some think that either way needs to be validated in any way. When some believers claim to hold the only "valid" doctrine and practice, it nearly always leads to a diminishing of God's love from its position as the greatest gift of the Holy Spirit.

Arguing about the right or wrong way to be baptised leaves the debate open to becoming rather silly, whereas it would be wiser to be inclusive of each person individual preference and a willingness to incorporate various viewpoints.

Some may say that they need concrete evidence from the New Testament that infant baptism was practised in the Early Church. Saying that where it states that whole households were baptised there is no mention that any of them were children. Whereas others argue that there is no evidence that the people of the New Testament did not practice infant baptism.

Some have argued over the actual meaning of the word *baptism*, saying its true meaning is 'to immerse under the water', which is a primary meaning of the word. Others argue that there are many references in Greek literature where *baptizo* is used for washing dishes, bathing, the washing of a baby, and the ritual washing of hands before performing sacred rites. Some also claim that those pre-Christian Jewish sects that practised many baptisms (like the Essenes) used only small amounts of water for their ritual washings.

There is merit on both sides of the debate as both those who support adult baptism by immersion, and those who practice baptism of infants by pouring water over the head, have some sound Biblical grounds, as well as other information from the era of Jesus, to support their position. Neither side can be written off or be patronised as unreasonable. Maybe it would be better if we affirmed the advantages in both points of view and allowed the Holy Spirit to lead us.

#### 4. So why choose total immersion?

When baptism by total immersion is practised it can be a dramatic "outward and visible sign" of that saving grace by which one dies with Christ and rises into the new creation. Many young people are drawn to this graphic symbolism. It is the kind of drama which still speaks powerfully to them in this twenty first century. It is also a very public way of declaring one's faith and commitment to become a member of the faith community. It is a choice often taken by those who have newly converted to Christianity, who have not been baptised previously as infants.

#### 5. Why do we baptise infants by pouring, sprinkling and the sign of the cross then?

When the baptism of an infant by pouring water is practised, it can also be a most wonderful "outward and visible sign" of that saving grace which precedes all our vows or righteous deeds. The infant has nothing to offer except its vulnerability. In Hebrew Scripture it is recorded that the sprinkling of blood – as on doorposts, was seen to be a sign of purity, and God's protection. God is there for her/him before the child can know it or respond to it. Grace is proclaimed in all its glory. It is the loving decision of faithful parents to bring their child for baptism, to be welcomed into the community of faith and to commit themselves to a Christian upbringing for their child.

There are however some perceived difficulties with both forms of baptism. Some Christians have some reservations about customs that may at times make them wary of the practice of both forms of baptism.

In the case of adult baptism, either by immersion or pouring the key emphasis is placed on human repentance and vows; when the grace of Christ which seeks us,

calls us, heals us, should be the primary focus. Sacraments celebrate God's free, generous grace, not "correct" human doctrine or even a "worthy" repentance. *By grace you are saved, through faith. It is not your doing but the gift of God.*

In the case of infant baptism, either by pouring, sprinkling or dipping emphasis is placed on the vows of parents, supporters and the congregation. It is the prior saving grace of Christ at work for this child which should be the primary focus. This is evident in the words of the Declaration of Baptism as contained in the Baptismal Liturgy<sup>2</sup>.

*"Little child, for you Jesus Christ come 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 child, though you do not know it yet. And so the word of Scripture is fulfilled: 'we love because God loved us first.' "*

For the Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa New Zealand, the most usual form of baptism is by pouring of water over the head of the candidate, infant or adult, with the signing of the cross on the forehead. However, occasionally a previously unbaptised person asks for baptism by immersion, so arrangements for that to happen can be arranged. Either way the sacrament is a celebration of the grace of God in Christ Jesus our Saviour.

However wherever infant baptism is practised, the parents sometimes appear to be perfunctorily meeting a social expectation to "have the child done" rather than displaying any spiritual discernment on the matter. When they make arrangements to have their child baptised they should be made cognisant of the serious commitment they are making when they, godparents and/or sponsors make the vows about the upbringing of the infant. Members of the congregation may also express unease about what appears to them to be the degrading of the sacrament by some parents who seem to display no intention of being active members of the church. Such unease maybe why some church members choose to dedicate their children instead of having them baptised, delaying the sacrament until the child has reached the age of discernment. Maybe we need to disregard the presence of parental shortcomings as long as in each baptism the free grace of God is the primary emphasis.

We move onto shaky ground when any doctrine or practice regarding the sacraments takes precedence over the dramatic setting-forth of the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. Grace is the key: God's unearned and unearnable, generous and regenerating, love for all sinners!

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<sup>2</sup> Book of common Order of the church of Scotland, St Andrew Press, (1994) p 89

What does our Baptism mean for each of us?

Through our baptism we die with Christ and are reborn into a whole new life. We are incorporated into the body of Christ. We are called and enabled to imitate Jesus, to follow his example. We don't need a detailed rule book in order to know how we should act in each situation of our lives, for in Baptism, we have the companionship of the Spirit of Jesus who is our wisdom, our reason and our guide showing us how to follow him. Christ was not spared the costs of being God's Servant, for immediately after his baptism Jesus was tempted in the wilderness. His baptism didn't guarantee him a smooth path through life; nor does it guarantee us a smooth ride. In fact, our baptism will cost us, for those who are faithful are expected to live the life of service that Jesus did.

We also have our baptismal font centrally placed in our sanctuary, not tucked away out of sight, to be brought out only occasionally. As we witness baptism ceremonies in worship we are reminded again and again that baptism is just the beginning of our call to follow the One who is God's faithful servant. The Spirit we received at our Baptism continues to urge and encourage us on God's path – right up to the present moment. When we were baptised, it was with the name we would carry for the rest of our lives, our identity and mission were fixed – we were named "beloved" and called to follow the path Jesus walked. Over the course of our lives our identity and mission have matured, as we have tried our best to serve God.

One of the main reasons that the Presbyterian Church conducts the Baptism of Infants is because it requires the public confession by believing parents to include their infant in the life of the community of faith, the Church. Jesus' baptism was public – a public ritual for all people who are called to live their Christian calling in public ways. Just as there is little that is private about our vocation to follow Christ. We may not always feel it, but our baptismal faith assures us that we are God's children and that God loves us and takes delight in us. We don't have to work our way to intimacy with God. Through our Baptism we already live in relationship with God, through the relationship we have with the Church. We are beloved children of God, graced to live a new life which God has shared with us through Christ Jesus.

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## APPENDIX ONE

The Westminster Confession of Faith - A Subordinate Standard of the Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa New Zealand contains the following chapter regarding the Sacrament of Baptism

### **CHAPTER 28 - Of Baptism**

I. Baptism is a sacrament of the New Testament, ordained by Jesus Christ, not only for the solemn admission of the party baptized into the visible Church, but also to be unto him a sign and seal of the covenant of grace, or his ingrafting into Christ, of regeneration, of remission of sins, and of his giving up unto God, through Jesus Christ, to walk in newness of life: which sacrament is, by Christ's own appointment, to be continued in his Church until the end of the world.

II. The outward element to be used in the sacrament is water, wherewith the party is to be baptized in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, by a minister of the gospel, lawfully called thereunto.

III. Dipping of the person into the water is not necessary; but baptism is rightly administered by pouring or sprinkling water upon the person.

IV. Not only those that do actually profess faith in and obedience unto Christ, but also the infants of one or both believing parents are to be baptized.

V. Although it be a great sin to condemn or neglect this ordinance, yet grace and salvation are not so inseparably annexed unto it as that no person can be regenerated or saved without it, or that all that are baptized are undoubtedly regenerated.

VI. The efficacy of baptism is not tied to that moment of time wherein it is administered; yet, notwithstanding, by the right use of this ordinancy the grace promised is not only offered, but really exhibited and conferred by the Holy Ghost, to such (whether of age or infants) as that grace belongeth unto, according to the counsel of God's own will, in his appointed time.

VII. The sacrament of Baptism is but once to be administered to any person.