



Baptism Meaning and Symbols

The Waltham Group Churches

As your child or a close family member prepares for an upcoming baptism, you'll want to familiarize yourself with the most common baptism symbols. This way you can celebrate the baptism, choose a fitting gift, and help older children understand the symbolism surrounding the items.

Familiar Symbols Used in Baptism

There are five universal symbols of baptism: the cross, a white garment, oil, water, and light. Other familiar symbols include the baptismal font, scriptural readings and prayers, and godparents. These symbols represent the philosophies and teachings of the Christian religion and the traditions and rituals of an individual church and its congregation. Baptism is one of the sacraments of the church, and babies being baptized are welcomed as members of the Christian community. It is part of the Christian faith that once a baby has been baptized, he or she becomes a member of the family of God.

The Cross



The cross is a universal symbol of Christianity. Making the sign of the cross over a child during the baptism invokes God's protection and asks for entrance into the body of the Christian church. You will find this symbol in many Christian rituals as well as in Christian churches. The cross is also a symbol of Jesus' crucifixion. Jesus' death was his sacrifice to clear the sins of all mankind. The cross is one of the most familiar of all Christian symbols.

White Clothing

White is the colour of purity and wearing a white garment during baptism symbolizes that the person being baptized now has a clean slate in the eyes of God. Christians believe everyone is born with "original sin" which is only washed away

through baptism. The white garment symbolizes that the baptized person is now clothed in the mantle of God and will start a clean life in His eyes and in the eyes of the church.

The Oil



Oil is another baptismal symbol of the Holy Spirit. Of course, oil also symbolizes the Holy Spirit during other sacraments and religious gatherings. During a baptism, the baby is anointed with oil, and oil is mentioned several times in the Bible as a symbol of bringing the person and the Holy Spirit together. Holy oils are used during baptism to strengthen the faith of the anointed. They also symbolize the gifts of the Holy Spirit.

Baptism Water



Water is the Christian symbol of divine life as well as a sign of purity and cleansing from sin. The outward sign of baptism is the actual pouring of the water on the head while reciting the words, "I baptize thee in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit." The cleansing quality of water is considered something that can purify a person from the outside. The holy water signifies that life is given to man by God and is a symbol of His grace. Water also recalls the gospel, John 3: this 1-6, "... unless a man is born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God..."

The Baptism Light



Light as a symbol of baptism is represented by the passing of a lighted candle from the celebrant to the godparents. The candle represents moving from death to life

in Christ. Light, like water, is essential to the survival of life because, without the light of the sun, nothing would exist on earth. In addition to being a symbol of the genesis and vitality of life, the candle is a symbol of Christ as "the light of the world" and the Christian faith. When this candle is burning, religious faith is present.

The Dove



In baptism, dove symbolism depicts the Holy Spirit. According to the Bible, when Jesus was baptized, the heavens opened, God spoke and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in the form of a dove. The dove affirmed Jesus as the Chosen One. This miraculous event demonstrates the loving union

between the three aspects of the Christian Trinity: God the Father, Jesus the Son and the Holy Spirit. The dove symbolizes peace between God and human beings as well. When the Holy Spirit appeared as a dove at Jesus' baptism, this showed that God (through Jesus) would pay the price for the sins of humanity so humanity could ultimately be reconciled with God.

The Baptismal Font



The traditional baptismal font holds the water used for the baptism. It symbolizes the baptismal streams, rivers, or pools of water in centuries past, like the River of Jordan where Christ was baptized by John the Baptist. According to a particular denomination's tradition, the child is either immersed or

dipped in the water in the font or water from the font is sprinkled or poured over the baby's head. Baptismal fonts are made of stone, metal, wood, or marble and have usually been present in the church for generations.

Scriptural Readings and Prayers

The scriptural readings during a baptism are taken from the Old and New Testaments of the Bible. They celebrate God's word and call for a renewal and profession of faith. The readings also recall Christ's baptism and the symbolic meaning of this which is to die to self and be raised from this death as Christ was raised after the crucifixion.

The prayers during the baptismal ceremony beg freedom from sin for the child and ask for Christ's protection, blessings, mercy and grace on the child, the parents, the godparents, the family, and the congregation.

Membership Into the Church Community



A baptism represents a rebirth and union with Christ and through this, the child gains entrance into the membership of the church. The church community's members represent the holy body of Christ. The congregation gathered bears witness to the child's baptism and welcomes the baptized into Christ's holy church and the company of God.

The Godparents

The tradition of godparents is to help the parents raise the godchild in the Christian faith. The godparents are chosen by the parents, and their role in a baptism ceremony varies. In some churches, a godparent will hold the baby during the baptismal rite, but in others, godparents stand with the parents to support them and bear witness to the ceremony. For some cultures, godparents hold an honorary title, while in others, godparents take their roles seriously and involve themselves in many aspects of the child's life.

Using Symbols in Baptism

All the symbols are important to traditional church baptism ceremonies although the details of their use may vary. The only symbol that a parent or relative is responsible for is dressing the child in a white garment before the baptism or providing such a garment for use after the baptismal sacrament. Of course, your child may receive several cross ornaments or jewelry items from family and friends, but you may want to have one for your baby to wear during the religious ceremony itself.

You can use these items to teach older children about the symbolism surrounding the sacrament of baptism. A baptism symbol worksheet can be a helpful tool for this kind of lesson. Alternatively, you can make a scrapbook with all the symbols, with pictures from the baptism ceremony, to teach the child who was baptized about it several years later.

Part of the Fabric of Christian Faith

The symbols of baptism are closely interwoven into the Christian faith and rituals. Some of these symbols can also be found in many other sacraments of churches rather than just during a baptism ceremony. They are reminders of the beauty of traditions preserved through generations.



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