



Welcome to the Disciple Thumbnail Sketches handouts.

We hope you find this resource helpful to your ministry and to your congregation's members, visitors, and friends.

Copyright permission is granted for unlimited printing and photocopying of this PDF file for one year from purchase or 365 days.

For best results when duplexing, or printing two-sided, please print each topic separately.

Bible quotations are from the *New Revised Standard Version Bible*, copyright ©1989, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Please follow the page numbers provided below to output individual handouts.

Contents

| | |
|---|-------|
| Baptism | 3–6 |
| Being a New Member | 7–8 |
| Characteristic Beliefs of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) | 9–12 |
| Disciples History | 13–14 |
| The Lord's Supper | 15–16 |
| The Meaning of Church Membership | 17–18 |
| Our Church | 19–22 |
| Stewardship | 23–24 |
| Volunteering to Work with Children | 25–26 |



discipleshomemissions.org



chalicepress.com



DISCIPLES THUMBNAIL SKETCHES

Baptism

Dr. Robert D. Cornwall, Pastor,
Central Woodward Christian Church, Troy, Michigan

Water covers more than 70% of the earth's surface. Human adults are 50% to 60% water. We drink it and bathe in it. Space exploration missions look for evidence of water, because water is essential to the existence of life. As important as water is to life, it's not surprising that water figures prominently in the biblical story. It's a story that begins with the Spirit of God hovering over the waters of creation (Genesis 1:2) and ends with an invitation for God's creation to drink from the river of life (Revelation 22:12–17).

Whether it takes place in a gentle stream, a placid lake, in the lapping tides of the sea or more commonly in a church's baptismal pool, the Christian sacrament of baptism requires water as its indispensable ingredient. Although there are a variety of practices and beliefs about baptism within the Christian community, the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) practices believer's baptism by immersion. That is, a candidate for baptism is immersed in water upon confession of faith in Jesus Christ. In the Preamble to the Design, the guiding document of the Disciples movement, we read that it is "through baptism into Christ, we enter into newness of life and are made one with the whole people of God." Another document of the church makes this principle even clearer:

"Baptism is a public act by which the church proclaims God's grace, as revealed in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, through the use of a visible sign of God's gracious initiative and the human individual's response in faith. With other Christians we affirm that baptism is at once a divine gift and a human response." ("Word to the Church on Baptism," Commission on Theology, 1987).

Origins of Christian baptism

The contemporary practice of Christian baptism is rooted in ancient Jewish practice, including the baptism of John, who proclaimed a "baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins." Among those who came to receive this baptism was Jesus of Nazareth, who receives God's call to ministry as he is baptized (Mark 1:1–11). While there is little evidence that Jesus himself baptized followers, baptism quickly came to play a central role in the spiritual life of the early Christian church. The earliest converts in Acts were baptized upon their repentance and confession of faith (Acts 2:38; 8:12, 36–39). Sometimes baptism was administered in the name of Jesus (Acts 2:38; 8:16; 10:48; 19:5) and at other times in the name of the "Father, Son, and Holy Spirit" (Matthew 28:19–20).

Baptism is, according to the New Testament, a foundation stone of the Christian faith (Ephesians 4:5) and a sign of unity in the midst of great diversity (Galatians 3:27–28). It bears witness to the realities of death and it issues a call to new life in Christ (Colossians 2:12; Romans 6:3–6). It serves as a sign of repentance from sin and as an appeal to God for a clean conscience (1 Peter 3:21).

Disciples' practice reflects the meaning of the Greek word standing behind baptism. The Greek word *baptizo* can be translated as to dip, immerse, or submerge, and therefore candidates are brought to the waters of baptism and fully submerged.

If immersion describes the general practice of baptism among Disciples, the appropriate candidate has been assumed to be able to confess faith in Jesus Christ (Acts 2:38). Based upon what he read in Acts 2:38, Walter Scott, one of the early leaders of the

Disciples movement, spoke of a fivefold process of conversion: belief, repentance, baptism, forgiveness of sins, and receipt of the gift of the Holy Spirit. It was understood that the benefits of baptism were contingent upon confession of faith and repentance. Although this is the Disciples practice, Disciples affirm the baptisms of other Christian traditions, recognizing in them the fullness of God's grace.

Baptismal images

The biblical testimony to baptism contains a number of images that help define and enliven the practice of baptism. These include cleansing from sin, victory over death, forgiveness of sins, sealing with the Holy Spirit, and incorporation into the Body of Christ.

Cleansing from sin: Borrowing from the rites of purification and cleansing in the Old Testament, the early church saw baptism as a rite of cleansing. Consider Ephesians 5:26, which speaks of the church being saved by the “washing of water,” and Titus 3:5, which speaks of salvation coming through a “washing of regeneration.” Even the act of entering water is symbolic of cleansing and purification. Yet the cleansing that's envisioned here is not external, as if washing away dirt, but rather internal, symbolizing a cleansing of the heart and mind.

Victory over death: In Romans 6 Paul speaks of baptism as an act of burial. Even as Christ lay in the tomb three days, so the believer is buried in the waters of baptism as a sign of one's death to sin. Connected with this motif is the motif of new life. Even as one is buried in the waters of baptism, one is raised with Christ into a new life in Christ. In the second century, the fathers pointed to John 3:5 to define baptism as the means of new birth. Phrases such as new birth, second birth, and the womb were often used in connection with baptism. They connected new birth to other parts of the baptismal rite, including the stripping off of one's clothes before baptism, as a sign of the stripping off of sin. The act of entering the waters unclothed served as a sign of birth. Following their baptisms, the newly baptized received baby food—milk and honey—while taking their first communion. In each case the image is that of becoming a new person, having a new start in life (2 Corinthians 5:17).

Forgiveness of sins: Related to the images of cleansing and victory over death is the promise of

forgiveness: Repent and be baptized and you will be forgiven of your sins (Acts 2:38). John's baptism called for repentance and held out the promise of forgiveness. In Jesus' own ministry, forgiveness of sins stood out — not only did he preach forgiveness, he offered forgiveness (Matthew 9:2–8). This promise of forgiveness provides for freedom from that which separates us from God and from each other.

Sealing with the Holy Spirit: The Holy Spirit is integrally related to baptism. In each story of Jesus' baptism, the Spirit descends upon him in the form of a dove, symbolizing his calling. Peter suggested that with baptism came both forgiveness and the gift of the Spirit (Acts 2:38). The Holy Spirit is seen as the power of baptism (John 3:5; Titus 3:5). Over time, many Christians began to link this act of giving of the Spirit with an anointing with oil or chrismation and created a separate rite of confirmation. For Disciples, however, the sealing of the believer by the Spirit remains connected to baptism.

Incorporation into the Body of Christ: Baptism is the foundation point for church membership (Acts 2:37–42; 9:18ff), but it's more than a prerequisite for membership in a local congregation. Biblically, it is an incorporation of a person into the larger body of Christ, for as Paul put it, “for in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body — Jews or Greeks, slaves or free — and we were all made to drink of one Spirit” (1 Corinthians 12:13).

The baptism service

In the ancient church, baptism followed a period of instruction, and faith was a significant precondition for baptism. It assumed repentance, a turning away from evil in order to turn toward God. In contemporary Disciples practice there is no set format, except that candidates are immersed upon confession of faith, most often in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (Matthew 28:19–20). The expectation is that the candidate is old enough to understand the Christian faith and is ready to live accordingly. As in the ancient church, baptism usually follows a time of instruction or counseling sessions, where candidates are introduced to the Christian faith and encouraged to take up a life of ministry in the church. Having gone through this

period of instruction, the candidate will typically come forward the Sunday prior to baptism and make the “good confession,” that Jesus is the Christ and Son of the Living God, and one’s Lord and Savior (Matthew 16:16).

Although baptismal practices vary from congregation to congregation, baptism typically occurs as part of a worship service, often following the sermon and invitation hymn. As the service begins, the pastor (or another person charged with doing the baptism), will offer an explanation of what is about to happen, invite the candidate to reaffirm his or her faith, and with that candidate and pastor will enter the water, where the candidate is immersed in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The rite of baptism might be simple or complex. It may include litanies that invite the candidate to confess faith and renounce evil. After the baptism, the congregation may be invited to welcome and affirm the candidate. Special hymns may be used as well to bring a sense of celebration to the event. It’s likely that the candidate will be dressed in a white robe. With this event, a candidate becomes part of the body of Christ and is called to ministry in Christ’s church. Indeed, baptism not only serves as a point of entry, the beginning of a new life in Christ but is also an act of ordination into the priesthood of all believers.

SAMPLE



discipleshomemissions.org



chalicepress.com