



How do you become a member of the Episcopal Church? It's both very simple and deeply important. You become a member of the Episcopal Church by being baptized and then registering that baptism in the parish where you want to become a member.

You do not have to sign a statement that you believe "x" and "y" but not "z." You do not have to agree to tithe although that is certainly encouraged! You do not have to be confirmed, but what confirmation is and why you might choose to be confirmed is something we can discuss another day.

Baptism by water and in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit is all that is required to become a member of the body of Christ and a member in this Episcopal Church.

If you are baptized here at St. John's, your baptism is automatically registered in our Parish Register. When you are baptized here at St. John's or when you tell the priest that you want to become a member of St. John's and you were baptized at St. Swithan's Church in Swinthindale, you become a member of this parish. Your baptism, whether it occurred here or somewhere else or even within another denomination, is what makes you a member of the body of Christ and then this parish.

You are a child of God whether or not you are ever baptized. However, baptism, whether you were an infant or an adult, is a claim upon God recognizing and acknowledging that all that we are and all that we have comes from God who first loved us.

One of the major changes in the 1979 Book of Common Prayer was to put the Eucharist at the center of our weekly worship. Prior to the '79 Prayer Book, most parishes had Morning Prayer three Sundays a month and Eucharist once a month. The '79 Prayer Book reflects our theology – our way of talking about and understanding God- that the Eucharist is our primary means of remembering what God, through Jesus, did and does for us. The Eucharist both comforts us and it strengthens us.

Baptism is an integral part of the relationship between God and ourselves. In our reading from Genesis we are reminded that a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. God and water are related from the very beginning of our story. God speaks and the wind moves. God speaks and light comes into being. Jesus reminds us of this when he tells us that He is the light of the World.

Similarly, in our Psalm we hear the word "voice" over and over again. And we are called to ascribe- to give credit to- God in our worship and in our acknowledgment that God's voice is upon the waters, it can break the cedar trees or make Lebanon skip like a calf. God's voice is compelling even as it splits the flames or fire or makes the oak trees writhe. Our response is to cry "Glory" in acknowledgment that all we are and that all we have comes from God.

The baptism of John, referred to in our reading from Acts reminds us that there are two parts to baptism today. Yes, baptism is about repentance – about forgiveness and about turning our life to face God. Baptism is about the symbolism of being sprinkled or dunked or immersed in water signifying the washing away of sins. Water is critical to our life. We are mostly made up of water and without adequate safe water we will die. Water is from the beginning, from Genesis, chapter 1, verse 2.

Our interaction with water is critical to our well-being. We drink it, we play in it – and in the Bible we have the story of the waters being parted so that the Hebrew people could escape Pharaoh and his army as they fled Egypt. The first miracle of Jesus is when he turns water into wine at the wedding in Cana. We add water to the wine we use in the Eucharist, in part signifying the importance of water to our physical and our spiritual lives.

Another of the changes in the '79 Prayer Book is that baptism is most appropriately celebrated on Sunday during the regular worship service. Prior to that, it was not uncommon for private baptisms to take place, sometimes at the church, but often in a home. The change in our theology is that we, at the time of baptism, welcome the new member to the body of Christ and to our parish. Baptism is not something to be done in secret but rather as part of our normal and regular worship. And, indeed, in our Creed we say that we believe in one baptism for the forgiveness of sins.

Baptism is indissoluble. That is why, for us, if you are baptized with water and in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, you do not need to be "re-baptized" if you come to the Episcopal Church from another faith tradition that uses water and the words "in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit" are used. Baptism is not something that can be undone, although we can choose to ignore it should we so wish.

Baptism is about repentance- about forgiveness of our sins. Baptism is also about embracing God's love for us. God tore open the heavens and sent a dove to rest upon Jesus at the time of his baptism. God spoke – just as in Genesis and in the Psalm. "This is my beloved, with Him I am well-pleased." God speaks those words at every baptism. You – yes, you- are God's creation whom God loves and with whom God is well-pleased.

It is a lot to live up to.

We don't always do so well at our part of keeping God's teachings. One of the ways we often fall short is in our self- talk. When we call ourselves "stupid" or we use other derogatory words to describe our failings. When God tore open the heavens, God once again connected heaven and earth. God sought connection with us – not remaining aloof but rather reminding those present with Jesus at his baptism and with us at ours that we are beloved children of God.

Henri Nouwen wrote that:

One of the greatest dangers in the spiritual life is self-rejection. When we say, "If people really knew me, they wouldn't love me," we choose the road toward darkness. Often we are made to believe that self-deprecation is a virtue, called humility. But humility is in reality the

opposite of self-deprecation. It is the grateful recognition that we are precious in God's eyes and that all we are is pure gift. To grow beyond self-rejection we must have the courage to listen to the voice calling us God's beloved sons and daughters, and the determination always to live our lives according to this truth.<sup>1</sup>

In weeks like this past one with violence around the world, with people killing others because we don't all believe alike, it can be hard to see the other as one created by God and loved by God. There are some things that we simply don't understand and that remain a mystery however we conceive of God.

Whether we think those who took lives in France or elsewhere this week were justified or not, we can still choose how we will live. We can remember our baptism with the water, the recitation of the Trinity and that through baptism we have received the Holy Spirit.

One of the last acts of baptism in our tradition is the placing of hands upon the person to be baptized and the making of the cross on the forehead. The words spoken, then and now, remind us of God's promise: "You are sealed by the Holy Spirit in baptism and marked as Christ's own forever." I invite you to feel those hands upon you and the making of that cross on your forehead. I invite you to feel deeply inside yourself that you are Christ's own forever. Go now and live in accordance with all that God has given to you. Free gift. No charge. Just love and the words come down from heaven: You are my beloved. In you I am well-pleased. **Amen.**

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<sup>1</sup> <https://mail.google.com/mail/u/0/?pli=1#inbox/14ad34dbcb008738> (Jan. 10, 2014)