PREPARING
FOR BAPTISM

Becoming part of the story
of the people of God

Allan J. McNicol
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Foreword

Jesus began his ministry with the invitation, “Come, follow me!”
That invitation has echoed down through the centuries. Today, any church that is following Jesus’ call to make disciples will have its children at heart.

Will our youth have faith?
The question is a daunting one, yet it should provoke hope in parents and churches alike. There is no greater undertaking than encouraging and leading our youth to faith, hope and love, in becoming faithful disciples of Jesus.

Passing the faith to the next generation has always been a challenge. Tertullian, a church leader of the early third century, wrote, “Christians are made, not born.” In the early centuries of the church, the practice of catechesis (instruction) made Christian disciples. Candidates for baptism received instruction—lasting up to three years—in Christian faith and practice. In this manner believers were integrated into the full life of the church.

With the growth of the practice of infant baptism, however, the process of catechesis gradually disappeared. In later centuries, Protestant reformers began “confirmation classes” to instruct youngsters who had been baptized as infants in the meaning and practice of the Christian faith. This custom continues in churches that practice infant baptism. In confirmation young people who have reached an “age of discretion” confirm a faith decision made earlier by their parents. Although I do not support infant baptism I have profited from resources made available to those who are preparing for confirmation.

Until the last quarter of the twentieth century many Churches of Christ did give attention to preparing children for baptism. Youth were given instruction in the “fundamentals” of the Christian faith. For various reasons this practice has fallen into neglect.

In our confusing world, there is an urgent need for thoughtful teaching on
the meaning of being a disciple. Allan McNicol’s *Preparing for Baptism* is a welcome contribution aimed at addressing this need. The pages to follow come from the hands of a master teacher who is passionate about the task.

It is with honor and enthusiasm that I commend to the reader *Preparing for Baptism*. I believe that Jesus’ invitation to, “Come, follow me!” will reach a new generation through this volume. May it serve to teach and confirm Christian faith in the hearts and minds of those contemplating the momentous step of baptism. I pray that *Preparing for Baptism* will be used powerfully by the Father to further the name of Jesus and the work of the kingdom.

*Stan Reid*

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**Preface**

For almost twenty centuries, believers in Jesus have been taught that their obedient response to Jesus’ call comes to a climax in dying and rising with Christ in the waters of baptism. There are few occasions in life that we remember all of our days. Our baptism is one of them. Thus it makes good sense that we prepare ourselves appropriately for baptism.

This book is designed to prepare one to be immersed into the death of Jesus.

When you say you desire to be baptized, you are saying that you are mature enough to take on the full responsibility of life within the body of Christ, the church. To do so, it is a reasonable expectation that you will be well versed in the fundamentals of the Christian Faith.

You may ask rightly, “What should I know about being a Christian before I am baptized?”

This study provides the basics of what you ought to know when you undertake to
respond to God’s call in baptism. It seeks to explain why baptism is important not just in itself, but how it fits into the total reality of Christian faith.

This book may be used in classes preparing believers for the full responsibilities of discipleship. The focus of the study is the glorious story of the people of God which stretches from creation to the end of the era. We should understand that this is not just our story but God’s Story. Commencing with our baptism we begin to play a vital part in God’s Story. Our task, the central theme of the study, is to understand the Story, how we connect with it, and to come to know his ongoing will for today.

We trust that this brief study of six chapters will deepen your faith and stimulate you to praise and serve the heavenly Father and acknowledge the Lordship of Jesus Christ his son.

Finally I express my gratitude to those who have already used earlier drafts of this booklet in youth classes in churches in Granbury and Austin and their helpful responses. Special thanks to Karen Alexander, Dr. Libby Weed, and Christiana Worley for editing this work to speak more appropriately to young people; to Mel Ristau for his artistic skill in designing and formatting this booklet for publication; and to Renee Kennell for admirable service in word processing.

All English translations from ancient literature are by the author with the exception of scriptural quotations which are taken from the New International Version (NIV).

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Becoming Part of the Story

Concerning this salvation, the prophets, who spoke the grace that was to come to you, searched intently and with the greatest care, trying to find out the time and circumstances to which the Spirit of Christ in them was pointing when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow.

1 Peter 1:10-11
Our Story

When children are young, many parents establish customs which last for generations. We start with the story of a typical family who followed such a practice.

Every year this family would all pile into the family car and go to the seashore for vacation. The thrill of getting that first glimpse of the sea, walking on the beach, collecting shells, or fishing in a quiet cove became precious in family memories.

Based on this trip, family routines and rituals emerged. Some time during the second week at the seashore, this family would visit a wise old gentleman who lived in a small cottage nearby. He was a distant relative. As they responded to his "Come in!" they found him sitting in his favorite rocking chair. Dressed in well-worn slacks and a gray flannel shirt, barefoot as usual, he impressed them with his quiet dignity.

Often they would find him rocking slowly in the chair, his spectacles dangling lightly near the tip of his nose, a well-used Bible open in his lap. He always reminded them that the Lord was coming back some day and that he planned to live until then. Some of his long-time neighbors seemed to think that he might. His long, flowing, white hair and the kindly look in his eyes left the impression of great wisdom and gentle innocence.

After warm greetings and the exchange of pleasant words, the family members would coax him into telling stories from his experiences. Once he began, he could continue all afternoon. And such stories they were! Some he told over and over, but there were also new ones.

What an exciting and fulfilling life the old man had lived! His gift of memory enabled him to recall events from his life in a way that made them very real to those listening. An entire afternoon passed before anyone knew it. The old man's stories of joy and sorrow, wealth and poverty, good and bad, and life and death spoke vividly, especially to the young. Those listening felt as if they were truly sharing in the triumphs and tragedies of an earlier time, as well as finding deeper
meaning for their own lives.

Finding meaning for the present through stories from the past is similar to what happens in God's church, the body of Christ.

The church is a people of memory existing to remind one another and to tell others of the Story of God's faithfulness to His creation. This Story of faithfulness is found in the Bible. It centers on God's choice, out of all the peoples of the world, of one special people to follow him. In the beginning, the name of this chosen people was Israel. Years later, when other people came to learn about God and follow him as a result of the life of Jesus, they called themselves the church, the people of God.

The church can be compared to the torch that is lit every four years on Mount Olympus in Greece. This torch is carried by an athlete who runs with it for a while before handing it off to someone else. This process is repeated until, finally, the last athlete brings the torch to the site of the new Olympic games, and it is used to light the Olympic flame. As this flame is passed on from person to person, so the flame of the church is passed from generation to generation furthering the kingdom of Christ. Since Bible times, each generation tells to the next generation the Story of how God remains faithful to His creation from the past to the present.

It is time for you to receive the torch and to run with it.

This study is simple and direct. It will help you understand the Story of God's faithfulness to his people. These lessons will enable you to carry the torch boldly and to pass it on faithfully to others.

Our Story and God's Story

Each one of you has your own story. When you are given the torch and you enter into a more mature and responsible service to God and his people, your personal story will become part of God's greater Story. You will be connected with the plan of God for his people and the rest of his creation. God has shaped the lives of his people in this way for centuries and will continue to until the end of time.

The biblical scholar N.T. Wright helps us
to see how our own story blends together with God's Story for his people. To illustrate his point, Wright asks us to imagine the following situation:

Suppose a play, thought to have been written by William Shakespeare, has just been found. Through the years, the pages of the play have become dull and brittle, yet it is obviously the work of a genius. The play is in five acts. The first four acts fit together to form a masterpiece of language and message. But as the fifth act is read, it is discovered that, except for a few lines at the beginning and end, most of the pages have been lost. What should be done? Should the play be performed?

After carefully considering the problem, those in charge decide that the play should be presented. They hire the best actors, those skilled in the performance of Shakespeare. After reading the play carefully and coming to an understanding of its plot, the actors stage the play. By using their skill and experience, the actors are able to improvise the fifth act, thus bringing the play to a successful end.

According to Wright, this imaginary event demonstrates how our own stories can intertwine with the ongoing Story of the people God called to be his followers in Bible times. Using Wright's example, we can say that the first four acts of the Story of the people of God have already been performed. The record of these four acts is found in the Bible. We may identify these as follows:

**ACT ONE**

God, who is both demanding and tender, selects Abraham and his descendants to bring forth a special people for a special role: to be a model, or example for imitation, of what is best for the human family.

**ACT TWO**

God brings his people, the Israelites (descendants of Abraham), out of Egypt and guides them through many years in the desert.

**ACT THREE**

God gives his people a land and makes the descendants of Abraham (the Israelites) into a mighty nation.
ACT FOUR

God allows his beloved people, who have failed to remember his ways, to be punished by a foreign power (the Babylonians). Many of them are exiled to Babylon for seventy years. After the punishment is over, God allows some of his people to return to their homeland (Judah/Jerusalem) and rebuild what has formerly been lost. And when the people of God again fail to turn to him in worship, their merciful Creator does not give up on them.

ACT FIVE

The last act of this drama begins with the coming of Jesus Christ, who renews God's people by his faithful ministry, his sacrificial death, and his glorious resurrection. Though Jesus soon passes from the scene, he promises to return and in Spirit continues to remain among God's people. Those of us who pick up the torch are called to use it responsibly (to improvise through the fifth act). Therefore, we need to understand how we should live as participants in God's great Story.

What We Will Study

The beginning four acts have been played, setting the stage for the final act of God's Story. Jesus lived, died, and rose from the dead. He called disciples to follow him. His firm and direct message vividly portrayed in the four gospels shows what God expects of us.

As to the final act, the Bible gives us a small glimpse of how God's Story will be finished. We are told that Jesus will return to his people and the faithful will live in a renewed creation.

But what do we do in the meantime?

As we wait for God's Story to come to its appropriate conclusion, we become like the Shakespearean actors. All of God's people who have studied and learned from the earlier acts of the Story are invited to enter into the drama and contribute to its finish. This study will give us instructions for our role and our duties in the performance.

In the next chapter of this study, we will carefully review the first four acts of God's Story. Put simply, this is the story of God's
people in the Old Testament. In the third chapter we will give close attention to the fifth act. We will discuss how we are to connect and become involved with the conclusion of the drama as it unfolds. This is the story of the New Testament.

At the mid-point of the study, we will have completed the study of the basic outline of the biblical Story. With this in hand we will be ready to enter into the fourth chapter, where we will begin to understand how our lives of faith and obedience, including what happens in baptism (God’s work of our entrance into the people of God), blend into God’s story.

What is baptism? What has it got to do with God’s Story? Why should I submit to baptism, and why does baptism make a difference? We will give clear answers to these questions in this chapter.

Other questions, however, will remain. After we have become part of God’s Story, what do we believe and confess? What do we have to do and how do we know we are doing well? In the fifth chapter we will discuss how to live as a baptized believer in the body of Christ.

In the final chapter, we will review the Christian Story since the time of Jesus. This exciting Story will encourage us to remain faithful daily. Our hope is that this study will bring each of you to a deeper understanding of the Christian faith and to a greater appreciation of the wonder of God’s Story.

Questions for Reflection

1. Why is it important for people of faith to listen to those who tell them stories from the past?
2. What do we mean when we say the church is “a people of memory”?
3. Briefly state in your own words the key parts of the Story of the people of God.
4. Summarize the main idea of each of the five parts of the Story.
5. How can you today be a part of this great Story?
6. Why is it important that we know the end of the Story?
For early Christians the fish symbolized life found through identification with Christ in baptism while the anchor represented the hope for endurance in pursuing this new life.

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