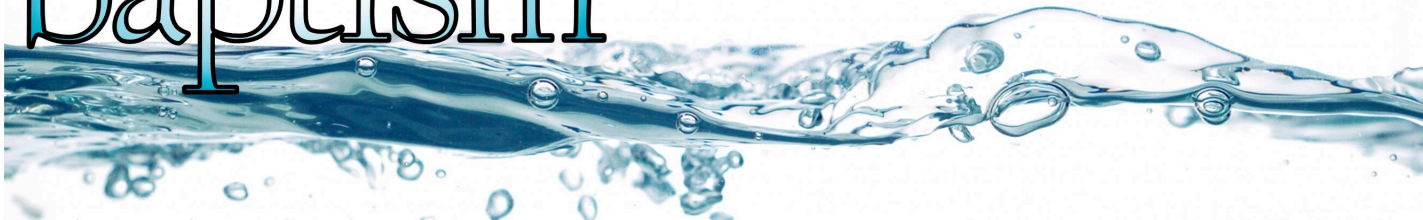


# baptism



## Cordova Community Church



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## The Purpose of a Teaching Position<sup>1</sup>

A teaching position serves to articulate the convictions of the Cordova Community Church leadership on a particular doctrine or practice. This paper on the topic of baptism is useful for:

- 1. Those who have never been baptized.** This study will help you see the importance of baptism. If you have never been baptized, we hope this document will help you to see your need to “demonstrate your devotion” to Jesus Christ by being baptized.
- 2. Those who have been baptized, but not by immersion.** From time to time we have potential partners who were baptized by sprinkling, usually as infants. This paper will help you see why we baptize by immersion. It also explains why we don’t baptize infants. We urge you to read the paper and consider adult baptism. If you choose not to be immersed at this time, we still welcome you. We ask only that you respect our teaching position and not be divisive.
- 3. Those who have been baptized by immersion.** It is our prayer that this study will give you new insights into the mystery, beauty, simplicity, and significance of this demonstration of devotion.

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<sup>1</sup> This teaching position has been developed by the leadership of Cordova Community Church with many revisions, editions and prayer. A starting place for our study was a sermon preached by Max Lucado at the Oak Hills Church on Nov. 12, 1995 and again on Feb. 12, 1997. Unless otherwise stated, all scriptures quotations designated are from THE HOLY BIBLE: NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION. Copyright 1984 by International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan Publishing House. All rights reserved. Scripture quoted by permission.

## Baptism: The Demonstration of Devotion

Christians participate in two God-ordained rituals that celebrate what God has done for us: communion and baptism. Communion is celebrated on a regular basis and baptism as a one-time declaration of a lifetime of devotion to God. This study will consider the second of these two events: baptism.

The human mind explaining baptism is like a harmonica interpreting Beethoven: the music is too majestic for the instrument. No scholar or saint can fully appreciate what this mysterious moment means in heaven. Any words on baptism, including these, must be seen as human efforts to understand a holy event. Our danger is to swing to one of two extremes: we make baptism either too important or too unimportant. Either we deify it or we trivialize it. The challenge is to let the pendulum stop somewhere between the two viewpoints. This is done by placing it where it should be: at the foot of the cross.

Baptism is like a precious jewel—set apart by itself, it is nice and appealing but has nothing within it to compel. But place baptism against the backdrop of our sin and turn on the light of the cross, and the jewel explodes with significance. Baptism at once reveals the beauty of the cross and the darkness of sin. As a stone has many facets, baptism has many sides: cleansing, burial, resurrection, the death of the old, and the birth of the new. Just as the stone has no light within it, baptism has no inherent power. But just as the stone refracts the light into many colors, so baptism reveals the many facets of God's grace.

Once a person admits his sin and turns to Christ for salvation, some step must be taken to proclaim to heaven and earth that he is a follower of Christ. Baptism is that step. Baptism is the initial and immediate step of obedience by one who has given God control of his life. So important was this step that, as far as we know, with the exception of the thief on the cross, there is no example of an un-baptized believer.

The thief on the cross, however, is a crucial exception. His conversion drives dogmatists crazy. It is no accident that the first one to accept the invitation of the crucified Christ has no creed, confirmation, christening, or catechism. How disturbing to theologians to ascend the mountain of doctrine only to be greeted by an uneducated thief who cast his lot with Christ. As far as what we know from Scripture, here is a man who never went to church, never gave an offering, never was baptized, and said only one prayer. But that prayer was enough. He has a crucial role in the gospel drama. The thief reminds us that though our dogma may be airtight and our doctrine dead center, in the end it is Jesus who saves. Does his story negate the importance of obedience? No, it simply puts obedience in proper perspective. Any step taken is a response to salvation offered, not an effort to earn salvation. In the end, God has the right to save any heart, for he and he alone can see the heart.

The exception noted concerning the thief on the cross illustrates the truth of Romans 10:9-13. This passage affirms that in trusting, believing, confessing your belief in Christ and calling out to Him there is salvation.

<sup>9</sup> That if you confess with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. <sup>10</sup> For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved. <sup>11</sup> As the Scripture says, "Anyone who trusts in him will never be put to shame."<sup>12</sup> For there is no difference between Jew and Gentile — the same Lord is Lord of all and richly blesses all who call on him, <sup>13</sup> for, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." (Romans 10:9-13)

The exceptions to the norm in Scripture remind us that ultimately God alone determines the recipients of his grace. The fact that God chose to make this exception should not be dismissed. It is a critical confession of our recognition of His sovereignty. But his sovereignty is equally honored when we understand the exception to be just that, an exception. The fact that it is an exception suggests that there is also a “norm” that applies in most situations.

## Following Jesus

When a person commits his life to Jesus he commits to following Jesus wherever he leads. Jesus was born into a Jewish family and received the rite of circumcision as did every male Jewish child (Luke 2:21). When God determined it was time for his Son to begin his public ministry Jesus approached John for water baptism. At the moment of Jesus’ baptism the heavens opened. The Spirit of God descended upon Jesus in the bodily form of a dove. The voice of God declared, “You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased” (See Luke 3:21-22 and Matthew 3:13-17). Even though Jesus received the rite of circumcision as a child, he received baptism as an adult. The act of baptism launched his ministry. The importance of baptism is noted by what God did in sending his Spirit and announcing his approval.

John was calling people to a baptism based upon repentance for the forgiveness of sins (see Luke 3:3). Although Jesus had no sin and nothing for which he should repent he still considered water baptism a necessity to “fulfill all righteousness” (Matthew 3:15). If the sinless Son of God believed water baptism was that important why would one desiring to be a disciple of Jesus hesitate to follow Jesus by doing the same (Matthew 28:18-20)?

In the New Testament, baptism was no casual custom, no ho-hum ritual. For Paul the act of “calling on the name of the Lord to be saved” included the act of baptism. At his conversion, Paul is told:

“And now what are you waiting for? Get up, be baptized and wash your sins away, calling on his name.” (Acts 22:16)

The Apostle Paul’s high regard for baptism is demonstrated in his own life experience and his teachings. In Romans 6:3-4 Paul taught...

“Or don’t you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life. (Romans 6:3-4)

Please understand it is not our effort that saves us. But baptism is the act that symbolizes how we are saved--the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus. The invisible work of the Holy Spirit is visibly dramatized in the water as we are buried with Christ through baptism into death and raised up to live the new life.

In I Peter 3:21 we see that Baptism is first and foremost my appeal and promise to God.

And baptism, which this (*Noah's flood*) prefigured, now saves you—not as a removal of dirt from the body, but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ... (1 Peter 3:21, NRSV)

From these passages it is clear that this appeal is vital. Baptism separates the tire kickers from the car buyers. In baptism the sinner is appealing to Christ for cleansing and is promising Christ to be a faithful follower. And God graciously responds. We desire a clean conscience and a new start. God grants that request as we make our appeal in baptism. We desire new life and God gives us new life. Note also that the power for the cleansing and the believer's resurrection to new life is not found in the water but in God's activity as the result of the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Baptism is a vow, a sacred vow of the believer to follow Christ. Just as a wedding celebrates the fusion of two hearts, baptism celebrates the union of sinner with Savior. Do the bride and groom understand all of the implications of the wedding? No. Do they know every challenge or threat they will face? No. But they know they love each other, and they vow to be faithful to the end. Baptism is the believer's wedding ceremony, uniting him with Christ. When a willing believer enters the waters of baptism, does he know all the implications of the vow? No. Does she know every temptation or challenge? No. But both know the love of God and are responding to him with the promise of beginning a "new life."

"That plunge beneath the running waters was like a death; the moment's pause while they swept overhead was like a burial; the standing erect once more in air and sunlight was a species of resurrection" (Sanday and Headlam, "A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans," in *The International Commentary*).

This is a holy event. Baptism is not to be taken lightly. The event is a willing plunge of the body and soul into the promise and power of Christ. The ritual of washing signifies our admission that apart from Christ we are dirty, but in Christ we are pure. The ritual of burial signifies that we are willing to die to sin and self and that we can be made alive again because of him. (Martin Luther referred to baptism as death by drowning.) Baptism effectively seals our salvation, uniting us to him and his body. Christ's death becomes my death. Christ's resurrection becomes my resurrection. There is no indication of an un-baptized believer in the New Testament church.

Let us now turn our attention to specific questions that have been raised in regard to baptism.

## 1. Which is more appropriate, to baptize babies or to baptize people who are old enough to make a personal decision?

Obviously there are bright, godly people of both persuasions. But it seems clear that in the New Testament baptism is a willing pledge made by those who are old enough to recognize their sin, mature enough to comprehend the significance of the death of Christ, and independent enough to commit to him.

It's important to note that there isn't a clear reference to a baby being baptized in the whole of the Bible. Every time baptism is mentioned, it is preceded by belief or faith.

A good example is in Acts on the day of Pentecost—

<sup>37</sup> When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, "Brothers, what shall we do?" <sup>38</sup> Peter replied, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit... <sup>41</sup> Those who *accepted his message* were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day (Acts 2:37-41)

And Colossians 2:12--

...having been buried with him in baptism and raised with him *through your faith* in the power of God, who raised him from the dead. (Colossians 2:12)

We are never told to be baptized and then believe, but to come to belief, to trusting faith, and then display that decision by associating ourselves with Christ in baptism. Baptism is the expression of a believing heart. This decision requires significant levels of maturity. Jesus was circumcised as a child but chose water baptism in obedience to God to begin his ministry. He also baptized those wanting to be his followers (John 3:26).

It is appropriate to dedicate a baby (though more appropriate to dedicate the parents.) At Cordova Community Church we do this. On a regular basis we offer parents of newborns an opportunity to come forward with their children for prayer and consecration. But these are dedication ceremonies, not baptisms.

## 2. What if I was baptized as an infant? What should I do?

First, you should be grateful that you had parents who cared enough about you to set you apart for God. Because of their devotion, you have an opportunity to complete their prayer by willingly submitting to adult baptism. Adult baptism is not a sign of disrespect for what your parents did. In fact, it can be seen as a fulfillment of their prayers and confirmation of their efforts. Be thankful for the heritage of concerned parents, but don't be negligent of your responsibility as an adult to make your personal pledge toward God in baptism. Several who are now partners with this church were sprinkled (as an act of baptism) as infants and then, upon coming to a personal faith, were baptized as adults. God has led you to this point and we pray that you will take this important step as soon as possible.

### 3. I have been baptized, but not by immersion.

All the Greek dictionaries of the New Testament define the Greek word “*baptizo*” as immersion. The symbolism of immersion is compelling: As you are submerged in water, Christ covers you with the pool of his grace until every inch of your self is clean. Buried in a watery grave, covered from head to foot with God’s love, you are washed clean by the blood of Jesus. If you have any questions or concerns about this aspect of baptism, we would welcome the opportunity to visit with you.

### 4. How much do I need to know in order to be baptized?

You need to realize only that you are a sinner and that Jesus is your Savior. As you grow in Christ you’ll learn more about baptism. You’ll learn that embodied and represented in baptism is the gift of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:38); commitment to the church (I Corinthians 12:1); and being clothed with Christ (Galatians 3:26), to name a few. It is helpful to read the book of Acts and try to determine what the candidates in the first century knew before they were baptized: the three thousand baptized on the Day of Pentecost in Acts 2; the Ethiopian Official in Acts 8; the jailer in Acts 16; and the conversion of Paul in Acts 22:16. In each case there was an innocent faith and an immediate response. Let's take a quick look at each of the events:

What did they understand at Pentecost?

God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ.” (Acts 2:36)

How did they respond?

Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day. (Acts 2:41)

What was the message of Philip to the Ethiopian?

Then Philip began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus. (Acts 8:35)

What was his response?

As they traveled along the road, they came to some water and the eunuch said, "Look, here is water. Why shouldn't I be baptized?" And he gave orders to stop the chariot. Then both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water and Philip baptized him (Acts 8:36-38).

What did the jailer understand?

He then brought them [*Paul and Silas*] out and asked, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" They replied, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved — you and your household." (Acts 16:30-31)

How did he respond?

At that hour of the night the jailer took them and washed their wounds; then immediately he and all his family were baptized. (Acts 16:33)

What did Saul know before he was baptized?

*[Ananias]* stood beside me and said, 'Brother Saul...The God of our fathers has chosen you to know his will and to see the Righteous One and to hear words from his mouth...And now what are you waiting for? Get up, be baptized and wash your sins away, calling on his name.' (Acts 22:14-16). He got up and was baptized (Acts 9:18).

Do you see some similarities? The message and the response are consistent. The message is Jesus and the response is voluntary. It was a simple faith in Christ and an immediate response to faith in baptism.

**5. Could it be possible for someone to be baptized without making a commitment to Christ?**

Absolutely. Some may be baptized out of peer pressure, parent pressure, or even as a good luck charm. There is the extreme case of Emperor Constantine marching his troops through a river and claiming that they were all Christians. There are those who, upon reflection, decide that they had no idea what they were doing the first time. But now that they understand what God did for them, they want to say "thank you" in baptism. Such a decision is personal, for only you know your heart.

**6. Does it matter where I was baptized?**

No. If you were baptized in a baptistery, a lake, a swimming pool or in any other body of water, that doesn't matter. What is important is that you knew that you were a sinner and Jesus was your Savior.

**7. Does baptism itself have the power to save people?**

The answer to this is a resounding "No!" Scripture is abundantly clear that only Jesus saves. The work of salvation is a finished work by Christ on the cross. Baptism has no redemptive powers of its own. There is nothing special about the water, nothing holy about the river or pond or baptistery.

Tragically, some people believe they are going to heaven when they die just because a few drops of water were sprinkled over their head a few weeks after their birth or because they went through some ritual of baptism. They have no personal faith, have never made a personal decision, and are banking on a hollow ceremony to save them. How absurd! If baptism were a redemptive work, why did Jesus die on the cross? If we could be saved by being sprinkled or dunked, do you think Jesus would have died for our sins? If your faith is in the sacrament and not the Savior, your trust is in a powerless ritual. This leads to another question.



## 8. What if a person is not baptized? Can he be saved?

This question is best answered with a question. Why isn't the person baptized? Let's consider some possible answers:

### 1) "I never understood baptism."

Perhaps you were never instructed to be baptized. Maybe you've never been challenged to consider the issue. That's entirely possible. If this is the case, we urge you to give thought to what God says about baptism. This doesn't negate your faith or your heritage up to this point. Part of maturity is an openness to understand new areas of the Christian walk.

### 2) A second reason for not being baptized is "I don't want to because I do not think it's necessary."

Let's analyze this response for a moment. God humbles himself by leaving heaven and being born in a feed-trough. The God of the universe eats human food, feels human feelings, and dies a sinner's death. He is baptized in obedience to His Father. He is spat upon, beaten and stripped naked, and nailed to a cross. He takes our eternal condemnation on himself in our place. He then offers salvation as a free gift and asks that we say "yes" to him in baptism and someone responds, "I don't want to. I do not think it's necessary." Such logic does not add up. Such resistance doesn't reveal a problem with baptism. Such resistance spells trouble of the soul. It reveals a problem of the heart. Such a person does not need a study of the sacrament. He needs a long, hard examination of the soul. This type of incongruity puzzled even Jesus:

"Why do you call me 'Lord, Lord,' and do not do the things I ask?" (Luke 6:46)

True believers not only offer up their sins for forgiveness, they yield their wills to Christ's control. Baptism is the initial test of the believing heart. If one won't obey Christ in baptism, what will they do when he calls them to obey him in prayer? Or evangelism? Or service?

The highest motive for doing anything is because God asks you to do it. The heart of a true believer says, "If you want me to be baptized in a pile of leaves, I'll do it. I may not understand every reason, but neither do I understand how you could save a sinner like me." If one is resistant on the first command, one might wonder if there has been a true conversion experience.

## 9. What about the believer who dies on the way to his baptism?

"What if I entrust my soul to Christ and a swarm of killer bees attacks me and I die?" The same question could be asked about any other answer given to the question, "What must I do to be saved?" If the answer to this question is, "Just say the Sinner's Prayer", then lightning could strike a person before he prays the prayer.

This question is not actually about baptism or prayer. The question is about the character of God. Would a God of love and mercy who has called you and given his Son to die for you reject you because of a curious sequence of events? No way. Would a God of mercy and kindness condemn any seeking soul? Absolutely not. Having called you and died for you would he cast you away because of events beyond your control? Inconceivable.

## **10. So then, is it possible for an un-baptized believer to be saved?**

Yes, definitely. God has the right to decide. Should every believer be baptized? Yes, definitely. God has commanded all to do so.

Baptism is bowing before the Father and letting him do his work. The moment is like that of the child entering the first grade. The young student does not enroll by virtue of his knowledge or merits. He simply requests, "I'm here to learn, will you teach me?" Baptism is like that—not graduation but matriculation. It's the presentation of the willing pupil before the Master Teacher.

## **11. Is there a connection between the gift of the Holy Spirit and baptism?**

There is a definite connection. First it is important to affirm that salvation is a work of the Holy Spirit. Whenever one is "born again" the Holy Spirit has convicted that person of sin (John 16:8). When a person is "born again" she has been "born of the water and the Spirit" (John 3:3-5). God accomplished our salvation "through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit" (Tit. 3:5).

Peter affirmed that the Holy Spirit is given to all who obey God (Acts 5:32). But when is the Holy Spirit given? Many passages shed light upon this subject. The first connection of Baptism and the Holy Spirit is recorded at the baptism of Jesus (discussed earlier). A second record is found in the gospel presentation after the resurrection of Jesus on the Day of Pentecost, recorded in Acts 2. In response to the question asked of Peter, "What shall we do to be saved" Peter declared, "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2:38). A third connection between the gift of the Holy Spirit and baptism is recorded concerning the gospel being spread to the Gentiles, represented by the conversion of Cornelius (Acts 10:1-11:18). In order to convince the Jews that God also accepted the Gentiles He sent the Holy Spirit upon the Gentiles in the same way He first sent the Spirit upon the Jews (cf. Acts 2:1-13 with Acts 10:44-46). Peter then commanded they be baptized in water (Acts 10:48).

A fourth passage may provide the clearest evidence of the connection between baptism and the Holy Spirit. The story is recorded in Acts 19:1-7. The apostle Paul arrived in Ephesus on a missionary trip where he found some disciples. He asked them, "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you first believed?" They responded that they had not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit (vs.2). When Paul heard that response he asked, "Then what baptism did you receive?" They replied, "John's baptism." This led Paul to command that they be "baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus." Having been baptized Paul laid his hands upon them and they received a miraculous manifestation of the Holy Spirit.

Whether the Holy Spirit was given just prior to water baptism (as in the case of Cornelius in Acts 10) or after water baptism (as appears to be the norm) it is evident that Scripture teaches a strong connection between water baptism and the giving of the Holy Spirit.

## Conclusion

Don't allow baptism to be something it is not. Apart from the cross it has no significance; it is just a dunk in the water. If you trust this to save you, you have missed the message of grace. Beware of dogmatism. No one this side of heaven can fully understand the majesty of baptism. Watch out for the one who claims to have a corner on the issue, including the authors of this document. We are not questioning your sincerity, your faith or your salvation. This is between you and God. We just want all to understand what the Bible says about baptism and trust that those who want to follow Christ will be obedient to his Word.

Don't prevent baptism from being what God intended. This is no optional command. This is no trivial issue. It is a willing plunge into the power and promise of Christ. Baptism is the first step of a believer. Baptism is a chosen means of God to dispense his saving grace.

Among his final words, Jesus commanded all who would be his followers to prove it, to make the pledge, and seal the deal in baptism.

Go and make followers of all people in all the world, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. (Matthew 28:19)

If it was important enough for Jesus to command, isn't it important enough for you to obey? And if it was important enough for Jesus to do, isn't it important enough for you to follow?

In baptism God signs and seals our conversion to him. For all we may not understand about baptism, we can be sure of one thing—it is a holy moment.

### **Making Arrangements for Baptism at Cordova Community Church**

1. A baptism can be arranged at a time that is convenient for you.
2. Baptisms may be performed by one of our ministers, small group leaders, or another Christian you prefer to do the baptism.
3. If you are willing, we would like each person give a video taped testimony. This is a very meaningful way to make a public profession of your acceptance of Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior and to let others share in your joy. We've included a few guidelines to help you prepare for your baptismal video.

## **GUIDELINES FOR YOUR BAPTISMAL VIDEO**

While a baptismal video is not mandatory, we want to encourage everyone baptized at Cordova Community Church to make a baptism video. Don't worry; we'll help you out with this. You'll need to follow these guidelines and then call the church office (901-881-6169) to set up a time to shoot the video. Even though it may seem like a frightening experience, we feel like it is a very meaningful way to make a public profession of your acceptance of Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior. And it's actually a fun process. Every time we have baptisms, there are people who hear these testimonies and say to themselves, "Wow, that's my story," or "God surely is at work in that guy's life," or "How can I know that awesome Savior myself?" Sharing your story this way is an amazing opportunity to impact many people. With that opportunity comes responsibility. Keep in mind the person who will be in church for the very first time, or someone who may be finally coming back to church. We want to remain sensitive to them without watering down the gospel.

So here are some things to think about while you prepare what to say: Think short; no longer than about a minute and a half. If you practice at home and it's longer than a minute and a half, call or e-mail us for help. You need to have your story short and down pat before you come to the meeting.

It may be helpful to outline your testimony like this

1. Introduce yourself (name, age, parents, how long you've attended CCC).
2. Describe your life before accepting Jesus Christ
3. Describe how and when you decided to accept Christ as your personal Savior. Was anyone tremendously helpful in your faith journey? What brought you to this point in your spiritual journey?
4. Describe how He has affected your life since then.
5. Your public profession (for example, "So I'm here today to publicly profess that Jesus Christ is my Lord and Savior.")

Even though you will not be able to read from your notes in the taping, it is best for you to write down your thoughts to prepare.

Please do not mention previous Christian denominations. (It's ok to mention if you were Jewish, Mormon, Muslim, Jehovah's Witness, or another religion.)

Please do not use this time as a platform for anything other than a public profession of your faith in Jesus Christ. For example, it is not a time to announce an engagement, or to clear your conscience, or to focus on a family member, or a friend, or Cordova Community... It is a time to proclaim the name of Jesus Christ and share what He has done in your life. This is a wonderful aspect of our jobs and we look forward to walking through this process with you!