

The Baptism of a Child: A Study Guide for Parents and Sponsors



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Question and Notes

Why did you decide to have your child baptized? Why is it important to you or to your family?

Have you been present for a baptismal service? What do you remember?

Were you baptized? What do you remember about it? Or What have people told you?

Preface

Congratulations! You have welcomed a child into your family, and you have made the decision to have your child baptized. Baptism is one of God's great gifts, a gift meant for all people. But baptism is also a covenant, a special and very serious promise. It is important that you have some basic understanding of baptism before your child is baptized.

There are many guides to baptism available, including some excellent resources for United Methodists. *By Water and the Spirit*, the official baptismal teaching of The United Methodist Church, will be given to you along with this guide. You are encouraged to read it and ask the pastor any questions you might have.

This guide does not replace *By Water and the Spirit*. It has a different goal. *By Water and the Spirit* is an official church teaching. This guide has a more limited purpose: to prepare you for your child's baptism. It follows the order of service for baptism that will be used when your child is baptized. The guide is divided into six short sections. Each section matches a part of the baptismal service:

Introduction to the Service
Presentation of Candidates
Renunciation of Sin and Profession of Faith
Thanksgiving Over the Water
Baptism with Laying on of Hands
Commendation and Welcome

At the back of this guide, you will find a copy of the baptismal service. You can refer to it as you read along.

This guide assumes that you will be making the baptismal vows for your child. If your child is old enough to make the vows on her or his own (you and the pastor will decide this together), you will receive an additional guide for your child.

Please read this guide before you meet with the pastor for prebaptismal counseling. In the margins of each section are questions to think about. Jot down answers to these questions. If you have additional questions or concerns, be sure to write them down so that you remember to discuss them with the pastor. Bring this guide, your answers, and any questions or concerns you have to the prebaptismal counseling session with your pastor.

Normally prebaptismal counseling is one session, but if you or the

How have you seen children involved in the church where your child will be baptized? Is there a Sunday School for them? A youth group for older children? Do they assist in worship? Try to imagine what your child will be doing in this congregation in 2, 5, and 10 years.

pastor discover issues that need further discussion, additional counseling may be needed. It is better to work through such issues than to rush into baptism with lingering doubts.

If all this sounds a little like getting ready to be married, that shouldn't surprise you. Baptism has a lot in common with marriage. There are promises or vows; there are witnesses; and there is an act that will affect your child for a lifetime. But there are also important differences. Not everyone marries, but United Methodists believe all are called to be baptized. More importantly, God will be faithful to this covenant always, even if you or your child struggle with keeping the promises you make during the service.

Introduction to the Service

We celebrate baptism as a response to hearing Scripture and the sermon. Baptism is not a separate service for United Methodists. It is part of our regular worship. We believe that baptism is not just about the relationship between God and your child. It is also about your child becoming part of the church. Except in very rare circumstances, we do not celebrate private baptisms.

The introduction to the service is short, but it is important. The pastor reminds the whole congregation that baptism is about four things: initiation, incorporation, new birth, and gift. In baptism, “we are initiated into Christ's holy church.” That means baptism is the beginning of your child's belonging in the church. Your child will become a baptized member of the congregation and of The United Methodist Church. But we also believe that your child's baptism begins your child's journey as part of the whole church: Catholic, Orthodox, Episcopal, Lutheran, Presbyterian, Pentecostal, Non-denominational, past, present, and future.

Baptism is also about being “incorporated into God's mighty acts of salvation.” In Jesus Christ God is saving the world. Baptism means your child is part of that work. It means your child now has a role to play in God's work. Sharing God's love with others, caring for our neighbors, and watching out for our brothers and sisters in Christ are things everyone who has been baptized is meant to do.

One of Methodists' favorite ways of talking about this is to say in baptism we “are given new birth.” Maybe your child is only a few days or weeks old. Birth is still so new for you! But new birth means that in baptism your child is now called a child of God. No matter how old your child is, from now on his or her life is life as one of God's children. Like incorporation, new birth means your child has a

calling, a role to play, a life to lead. God loves your child already, and as your child lives leads his or her life, she or he will discover more and more the joy of God's life.

“All this is God's gift,” we say, because we do not believe that anything we do, even baptism, earns God's favor or love. Baptism itself is God's gift to the church and to everyone who is baptized. It is a gift meant to be used by us, but it is always a gift.

Presentation of Candidates

Will others be baptized at the same time as your child? Do you know them or their parents?

Your child may be the only one baptized during the service, or there may be others also baptized. The pastor decides how often to baptize. You and the pastor will discuss this at your counseling session. In either case, a member of the congregation will present your child for baptism. This is a way for the congregation to say, “We stand with you as your child is baptized.”

Again, baptism is not just about your child and God, or even about you, your child, and God. Baptism is about the whole church celebrating God's gift and welcoming this new brother or sister in the name of Jesus Christ. At several points during the service, the congregation will accept responsibility for your child's baptism and life in Christ. This is the first of those points.

Renunciation of Sin and Profession of Faith

We now enter into the heart of the service. The pastor first will ask you a series of questions. Then the pastor addresses the congregation. Finally, everyone joins together in the Apostles' Creed. Let's take a look at each of these parts.

If your child is not able to answer for him- or herself, the pastor will ask you four questions. You are responding for yourself, but you are also giving answers for your child. You, the congregation, and the whole church will be responsible for telling your child about these promises as she or he ages. But even if your child can never understand what happened at her or his baptism, we still believe that God will be faithful to the promises everyone makes that day.

The four questions that the pastor will ask you are very important. The first asks you to “renounce the spiritual forces of wickedness, reject the evil powers of this world, and repent of your sin.” Evil is the very opposite of God; it is, in the end, really nothingness. But like a black hole it has remarkable power. It leads to wickedness, sometimes in very awful ways. All of us have done things or looked away when

others have done things that take us away from God. This is sin. Baptism is about new life in God, so we turn our backs on evil and sin.

Have you ever had to stand up to someone who was doing something wrong? What made you decide to do so?

The second question asks you to “accept the freedom and power God gives you.” You do not need to rely on your own strength to reject evil. God gives us what we need to live as we should. And God calls us to stand up against “evil, injustice, and oppression,” and not just when they hurt us.

What is your favorite Bible story about Jesus? Be sure to tell your child at some point!

The third question is about Jesus Christ. You will be asked if you trust Jesus more than anyone else, even yourself. Without Jesus Christ, there is no point to baptism, the church, or our Christian faith. United Methodists, along with Christians of every age, believe that Jesus is God's Son, fully God and fully human. We believe that Jesus came to earth to bring God's salvation, that he died on a cross for our sins, and that he rose again at Easter. We believe that all people need his love and grace.

Which of these four questions challenges you the most?

The fourth question asks you to promise to raise your child in the church. Whether you stay in this congregation or move across the globe, you are promising to bring your child to church regularly, every week. You are promising to teach your child about Jesus and about following him. You are promising to live as an example of how to follow Jesus.

This fourth question should be a little intimidating; it asks a lot of you. Maybe you do not know a lot about the Bible. Maybe you don't feel up to the task to teach your child about Jesus. And all of us have moments that are not good examples for our children. But we do not ask you to do this on your own. The congregation also makes a promise to give your child examples of how to follow Jesus. The congregation promises to pray for you and your child. They promise to teach your child about Jesus. So if you have difficulty bringing your child to church every week, or you don't know what to teach her or him, ask the congregation for help.

After the pastor has asked you and the congregation these questions, everyone will join together in the Apostles' Creed. The Creed is a summary of basic Christian beliefs. In many churches for many centuries Christians have professed the Apostles' Creed at their baptism. Later on you should help your child to memorize the Creed.

The Apostles' Creed has three major parts, so the pastor will ask you and the congregation, “Do you believe in God the Father? Do you believe in Jesus Christ? Do you believe in the Holy Spirit?” Christians believe in one God who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit: the Trinity.

When your child is baptized, the pastor will baptize in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

We do not merely “say” the Apostles' Creed; we *profess* it. This means we acknowledge that the Creed is true. It also means that we commit ourselves to living in ways that show that the truth of the Creed matters to us.

The “Renunciation of Sin and Profession of Faith” is the last part of the service in which you have an active role separate from the congregation. Your actions in this part pave the way for the baptism that follows.

Thanksgiving Over the Water

What do you have to be thankful for today?

The first and most important response all people should have to God's grace is gratitude and thanksgiving. Before baptism we give thanks to God and tell of God's mighty acts of salvation. The prayer is addressed to the Father, but it also recalls the work of God in the Son, Jesus Christ. And the thanksgiving includes one request, for the Father to pour the Holy Spirit on the water and on your child. So, like the Apostles' Creed and the baptism, the thanksgiving is addressed to the Trinity.

What's your favorite Old Testament story? Be sure to tell your child one day!

Christians believe that God is the one who delivered Israel from slavery in Egypt and who raised Jesus Christ from the dead. The Old Testament is just as important as the New Testament. We also believe that God never rejects God's creation. So we begin our thanksgiving with God's creation, and we talk about Noah, and the Red Sea, and crossing the Jordan. If you don't know these stories well, go back and read them for yourself. Read Genesis 1, Genesis 6-8, Exodus 14, and Joshua 3.

The waters of baptism symbolize the waters of creation from Genesis 1, the waters of cleansing from Genesis 6-8, the waters of freedom from slavery in Exodus 14, and the waters of the promise of new life in Joshua 3. But we baptize because Jesus was baptized (see, for example, Mark 1) and because Jesus commanded his disciples to baptize (see Matthew 28:16-20). And Jesus calls his crucifixion and resurrection a baptism (see Mark 10:35-40).

That means that baptism is for your child, also, a kind of dying and rising again. It is hard to think of a child dying, though, sadly, many children do die in this world because of illness or neglect or other circumstances. But the symbolic dying of baptism is not a cause for alarm or sadness; it is the joy of giving up a life that would lead away

from God. And we only do this because we believe that Jesus' resurrection is for all. Baptism is “dying and being raised in Christ” together, not apart from each other.

The last part of the thanksgiving is a request for the Father to pour out the Holy Spirit. The Spirit bears God's gifts to us. And at baptism your child receives the Spirit as the pastor baptizes him or her.

The thanksgiving at baptism is very similar to the Great Thanksgiving, the prayer at Holy Communion. This is not an accident. Baptism and

How often does your congregation celebrate Holy Communion? Do children receive Communion?

Communion are the two sacraments of The United Methodist Church. Holy Communion is first and foremost for those who have been baptized. When your child has reached the age when she or he can consume solid food, you should begin bringing your child forward with you to receive communion.

Baptism with Laying on of Hands

The actual act of baptism happens pretty quickly. The pastor will address your child, saying, “*Child*, I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.” During this part, the pastor will “administer” water three times to your child.

“Administering” water can happen in one of three ways: the pastor may sprinkle water on your child's head; the pastor may pour water over your child's head; or the pastor may briefly immerse your child in the water. The last is uncommon and usually is done only with older children or adults. How the pastor will administer water to your child is a discussion for you to have with your pastor. However, you should encourage your pastor to use as much water as possible.

Immediately after the baptism, the pastor and others, if desired, will lay hands on your child and pray. The prayer asks the Holy Spirit to lead your child in the way of Christian discipleship. Baptism is not just a one-time event. Like a wedding, it is the beginning of a new life. We baptize people with the expectation that they will seek to follow Jesus as his disciple for their whole lives.

The pastor will then introduce your child to the congregation as a new sister or brother in Christ, giving the congregation a chance to celebrate your child's baptism.

Commendation and Welcome

The final act of the baptismal service is for the pastor to charge the congregation with caring and loving for your child. In Christ we *Which*

discover that, as children of God, we have received brothers and sisters beyond what we could possibly imagine (see Luke 18:29-30).

The congregation again takes responsibility for your child's growth in Christ, this time specifically as a member of The United Methodist Church. Here, all (including you!) renew their own baptisms by promising again to participate in the congregation where your child is baptized. This is very important. Following Christ is not an abstract ideal. It happens in real places with real people. As long as you and your family are members in a local congregation of The United Methodist Church, you will be expected to be active in five key ways.

First, by your prayers. Praying for the church, for the ministries and the other members, shows that we are committed to allowing God to work in our midst.

Which of these five ways do you find easiest? Which do you find hardest? Talk to your pastor about how you can make use of your gifts and grow as a disciple of Jesus Christ.

Second, by your presence. Attending worship weekly, joining a small group or study group, helping with a mission project: all of these are ways to live according to the baptism of your child.

Third, by your gifts. There is no discipleship without sacrificial giving: giving in ways that do not benefit you directly. Your gifts include your talents, abilities, and connections, as well as your financial resources.

Fourth, your service. Following means doing. We are all servants in God's household. You may serve by helping with a missions project or by cleaning or serving on a committee or singing in the choir. There are many ways to serve.

Fifth, your witness. Witness means telling others about Jesus Christ. You share your witness by how you live and what you say. Pledging your witness does not mean that you will be asked to browbeat people with tracts and threats of hell. It means you will truthfully tell others what God in Christ has done for you and for the world. Sometimes, that means waiting for an opportunity; other times, it means seeking out an opportunity to tell others.

Your child may not be able to fulfill any of these pledges yet, but you can begin to set an example for your child by doing them for yourself. And you can expect your congregation to do the same thing.

Conclusion

Baptism is the unrepeatable beginning of a journey of a life of Christian discipleship. There are many people involved: you, the congregation, your pastor, and, of course, your child. But we believe

that God is the one who acts in baptism. God gives us the gift of baptism. God sends the Holy Spirit. God claims us as children. God forgives us for the sake of Jesus Christ. And God frees us from sin to respond freely to God's love and mercy.

All praise be to God the Father, through the Son Jesus Christ, who with the Holy Spirit lives and reigns forever!