



So You Are Thinking About Having Your Infant/Child Baptized?

*Here You Will Find What We Believe,
Why We Believe and Practice It
As United Methodists*

By Bass Mitchell



Introduction

Since you are reading this booklet on infant/child baptism, you must have an interest in the topic. Most likely it is because you have questions about or perhaps you are considering it for your children.

This booklet is a resource that might help you answer



some of your questions and address some of your concerns about infant baptism. It will seek to show the meaning of infant baptism and why it is a part of many churches today.

It is strongly suggested that you read and discuss it with your spouse. Also, you should arrange a meeting with your minister to discuss this and ask any further questions you may have. There is a space provided at the end of the booklet for you to jot down questions or anything

you would like to ask your minister when you meet.

We will meet with our pastor:

Date _____

Time _____

Place _____

Here write down any questions you may wish to ask your minister or any thing you might wish to explore.

We Believe in Baptizing Children

Someone allegedly asked Mark Twain, "Do you believe in infant baptism?" He is said to have responded, "Believe in it? I've SEEN it!"

We United Methodists have seen infant baptism and we believe it. Why?



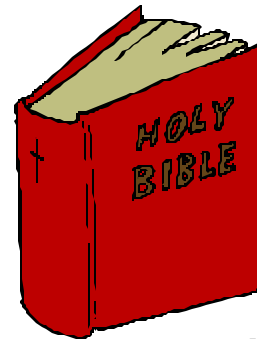
United Methodists are not the only ones who do. Catholics, Presbyterians, Lutherans, Anglicans, United Church of Christ and many others do as well. It has been a practice of the church for many centuries. So it's not something we created ourselves.

John Wesley, who we see as the founder of the Methodist Church, belonged to the Church of England - the Anglican Church. Wesley, being a good Anglican, practiced infant baptism. So this practice came over into our church from this

tradition. But that tradition was based on much older ones back to the early church and biblical teachings, as well as our understanding of key Christian doctrines like grace.

What About the Bible?

Some point out that we are not told in the Bible specifically to baptize children. That is true. But

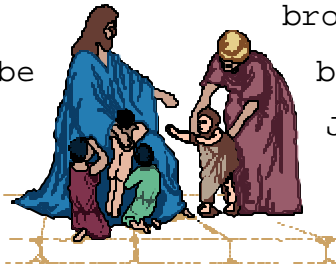


there is also no biblical text that prohibits it. What we do know is that according to Jewish authorities it was common practice to baptize proselytes (converts to Judaism and then Christianity) and their children when they embraced the religion of Israel or the Church. So we see in the Book of Acts whole families like that of the Philippian jailer, Lydia, and Cornelius were baptized and surely

children must have been included in that. We do know that from early church fathers like Justin Martyr and Irenaeus that children were being included in baptism. So it has been a practice for a long time.

I think one key passage is the one where the disciples think that Jesus is too busy to be bothered by little children whose parents have

brought them to be blessed by Jesus. But Jesus rebukes his disciples and says, "Let the little children come unto me, for such is the kingdom of heaven." In other words, the kingdom is for children too! They are also included in God's family.



Whenever I hear this story, I think about a little four year old girl who came with her parents for Communion.



They would kneel and hold out their hands, and so would she; and the mother would put the child's hands down, because she was too young to receive. One Sunday, the same scenario presented itself, when the little girl stood up on the communion kneeler, and said in a very loud voice, "But I want Jesus, TOO!" And from that time on she received Jesus through the Communion.

Children need and want Jesus too. And on that day so long ago, he embraced them and blessed them. In Baptism Christ continues to embrace children, blessing them, making them without any doubt a part of God's family. Every child that's born is born

into a family of some kind. When infants are baptized, it is a way of affirming that they are born into God's family.

There are other biblical precedents for this. In the Bible we read about the rite of circumcision that was performed on infant males at eight days old. Circumcision was a way of showing that they, too, were a part of God's people, heirs to the covenant and promises of God throughout history. So before they could comprehend it, they were included. Baptism is a kind of Christian circumcision. It is a way of showing and saying to little ones both male and female that they are loved and adopted by God into God's family.

I like these words from the Baptism of a child liturgy of the Uniting Church:

Little child, for you Jesus Christ has come, has lived, has suffered; for you,

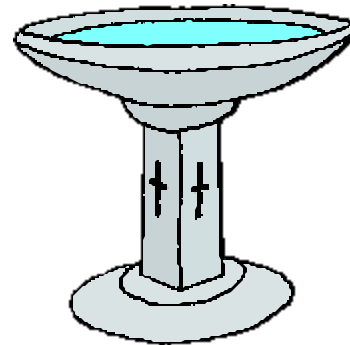
he has endured the agony of Gethsemane and the darkness of Calvary; for you, he has uttered the cry, 'It is accomplished!' For you, he has triumphed over death; for you, he prays at God's right hand, all for you, little child, even though you do not know it.

It's Really About Grace

But the greatest reason we baptize infants is our understanding of God's grace. Nothing, for us, shows the

true nature of God's grace better than this sacred act. You

see, grace is God's unmerited, unearned favor and love. We can do nothing to earn it or deserve it. Infants represent this so clearly - for they have done nothing and can do nothing to earn what's being done to them and for them. To baptize them is a reminder to us that



all our lives, even before we know who we are or who God is, we are surrounded by the grace and love of God. So the baptism of infants puts the emphasis on God, what God does, not on what we do, for we can do nothing to earn God's grace. God has already given it. Baptism makes infants of us all.

**But Shouldn't They
Be Old Enough?**

But shouldn't they be old enough to understand what's going on and make this decision for themselves?

I grew up in a denomination that believed this. It's often called "believer's baptism." In fact, I was not baptized as an infant but when I was about 12 years old.

Does this mean that God's grace could not and was not working in my life until I could believe it or understand it?

To the contrary, God's grace surrounded me even

before I was born and afterwards through loving parents, grandparents, family, friends, teachers who loved me and who began to show me God's love, preparing me to be able to respond to that love and grace.



I do not understand air. But it has surrounded me since I was born. It has filled my lungs each second and enabled me to live. Whether I understand it or not, whether I admit it or not, I am greatly indebted to air.

God's grace is like the air. It surrounds us. We cannot escape it.

When we are created, that is the grace of God.

When we took in that first breath of air and each one afterwards, that's God's grace.

When our parents and grandparents love us, that's God's grace working through them in us.

When we grow, eat, play, work, love, discover a talent, learn right from wrong, or learn new things, all is due to God's grace. For what have we done or could we do to deserve life and all its blessings? Nothing!

Every second of our lives we are surrounded by God's grace and are beneficiaries of it. We can ignore it, fail to acknowledge it, but it impacts our lives anyway.

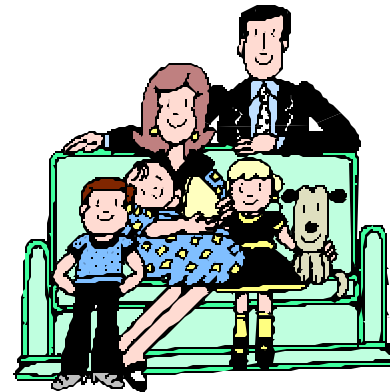
God's grace is so powerful, so much a part of our lives that it is not dependent upon our understanding of it or our acknowledgment of it.

If we cannot be baptized until we understand baptism, then perhaps none of us could ever be baptized. I certainly did not understand it at age 12. I'm not sure I understand it today, at least not fully. I do not think I will ever fully comprehend it.

And if baptism is dependent upon our

understanding, then could mentally challenged persons ever be baptized? But doesn't God love them, too, accept them as surely as any of us?

Many of you have children, grandchildren, nieces and nephews. You love them, don't you? But do they understand your love? Do they appreciate it and acknowledge it all the time? So why love them? Why not wait until they can understand you love them and respond with appreciation? Because that's not love, is



it? Love doesn't have to be earned. It can't be. You just

love them anyway, and hopefully one day they will understand this and appreciate it and give love back and to others. How much more is God's love for us! God just keeps on loving us, even though we do not

understand this love and certainly do not always show appreciation, in the hope that someday we will understand and will respond.

We believe God's grace is beyond full understanding and is not dependent upon our understanding (thank God). When a little baby needs a bath, you don't ask him if he wants one or understands the concept of shampoo and soap, do you? You bathe him and one day he will understand. In infant baptism God washes us clean. And hopefully we will grow to better understand that.

We baptize infants because we place great emphasis on God's grace, not our actions or our beliefs or our understanding. Even before we were born, before we are able to believe, God's grace is actively working in our lives. Baptism of infants vividly shows that.

Confirmation

But our response, our belief is also very important.

United Methodists, as do most denominations that practice infant baptism, have something



called "confirmation." Confirmation is when a person (often an older child but

sometimes an adult) who was baptized as a child takes a series of classes on what it means to be a Christian. Then the person "confirms" or acknowledges and accepts that for himself or herself. It's really a way of affirming all that their baptism meant and still means for their lives.

You could say it this way. I was born into a certain family - the Mitchell Family. I had no say so in that. It's just the way things are. I was loved, nurtured, corrected, treated like a Mitchell. In time I had to

make a decision about whether or not I would accept or confirm the values and beliefs of that family in which I was born. I could even, if I chose, reject that family and separate myself



from it (though in very real ways I would always be a Mitchell). Likewise, in infant baptism we are born into God's family and treated and nurtured as a child of God. In confirmation we confirm for ourselves that family - with its values and beliefs, we make them our own or we can reject them.

But let me add that confirmation, like baptism, is still more a beginning than ending. Martin Luther said once that baptism is something we do in church one day, but it takes the rest of our lives to fulfill. I believe that. Each day of our lives we need to confirm our baptism, grow in grace and

knowledge of God. So baptism, confirmation, these are not just one time events, they are ongoing experiences that we will seek to understand and live out all our lives.

But They Won't Remember It

Let me address something else. One of the arguments I often hear against infant baptism is that the infant cannot remember it.

How many of you remember being born? What? No one? Me either. But we are still living, still enjoying the benefits of being born, of being alive. Though infants may not remember their baptismal birth into God's family, they are still living, still able to enjoy the blessings of that birth.

I have here a picture of myself soon after I was born. Handsome young lad, wouldn't you say? My parents showed me this picture and others like it, telling me the story about my own birth, how sick

I was, how they thought they might lose me, how they prayed for me, and then how I got better and how they gave thanks to God. I do not remember any of that, but through their stories and pictures I could remember it in a way. It became real to me.

My friend Stephen gave the best response to that I have ever heard:

One of our shut-ins talked to me during a visit about



her baptism. She went into detail about what people were wearing, how the church was decorated, the number of persons in attendance. I assumed she had been baptized as an older child or even an adult. When I made a remark to that effect Eleanor said, "No, I was only a few months old. But my parents, my Godparents and other church members told me about my

baptism so often that I 'remember' it now." I would argue that Eleanor's memory of her baptism, a memory given to her as a gift by those who presented her to the Lord that day, are as strong, as vivid and as meaningful as that of someone who was baptized as an adolescent or an adult. Memory of the personal "experience" of baptism is not nearly as important as one's appropriation of the importance of baptism for daily life...

One of the things I try to do when children are baptized is make sure there are lots of pictures taken and even a video made if possible. These are then later used to show and teach the children who they are and what this means.

Other Concerns

The Parents. First, there is something about infant baptism that bothers me...parents who wish to have their children baptized but

who themselves lack commitment to Christ or the determination to truly rear their children as Christians. Infant baptism has become just a social event that looks good in the baby photo album. I tell parents who are thinking about this for their child that they are giving their child to Christ and promising to rear the child as a child of God. Some of them look quite surprised at hearing that.

The Church. Second, when a child is baptized, it's not just the parents who are promising to rear the child as a Christian. Read the baptismal ceremony in the United Methodist Hymnal (page 8). It has a portion for us to affirm our responsibility for helping nurture children. For we, too, in a spiritual sense become their parents. Do we provide the kind of support and nurture they and their parents need?

A Common Misunderstanding.

Third, it is a frequent misunderstanding that because United Methodists practice infant baptism, we do not practice baptism on confession of faith. That's not true. We encourage and welcome any person at any time to make a confession of faith in Christ and that person will be baptized. In fact, we will even baptize them in whatever manner they wish - from sprinkling, pouring, or immersion.

So we practice...

Infant Baptism:

Baptism --> nurture --> faith (confirmation) - Discipleship
and

Believer/adult baptism:

Nurture --> faith --> baptism -->Discipleship

Both come out to the same end - discipleship!

No Condemnation. Fourth, we do not condemn our brothers and sisters who may believe and practice baptism

differently than we do. It is one and the same baptism and one and the same Spirit at work in all of us. We are in the same family - God's family.

Conclusion

I have come to love baptizing infants - and wish more of you would provide some more infants for us - (this got a host of giggles, especially from the widows) because it speaks so powerfully to me of the grace of God, that even little helpless newborns are loved, cherished, accepted as God's own children even before they can even say the word "God." But then it's up to me, to you as the community of faith, and to their parents to see to it that they learn to say "God" and love God and serve God, and confirm in their own hearts and hear with their ears that they, too, are the beloved children of God with whom God is well pleased.

In the United Methodist Book of Worship there is a song we sing when a child is baptized. I think it says well what I've tried to say,

"God Claims You"

*Little child, God claims you,
God helps you, protects you,
and loves you, too.
We this day do all agree
A child of God you'll always
be.*

*Little child, God claims you,
God helps you, protects you,
and loves you, too.
We your family love you so,
We vow to help your faith to
grow.*

*Little child, God claims you,
God helps you, protects you,
and loves you, too.
We are here to say this day
That we will help you on your
way.*

*Little child, God claims you,
God helps you, protects you,
and loves you, too.
And if you should tire or cry
Then we will sing this
lullaby.*

*Little child, God claims you,
God helps you, protects you,
and loves you, too.*
---Stanley M. Fare

