

Growing a Christian Family

Welcome to the Family!

For Parents Whose Child
Is About to Be Baptized

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*To Ray and Kate,
who brought me into God's Family,
and to
Kathryn Elizabeth,
our precious new gift from God.*

Contents

Introduction	7
1. The Greatest Gift You Can Give	9
2. A Birth in the Family	15
What is baptism?	15
Why is baptism necessary?	19
3. Why Baptize Babies?	22
The question of infant baptism	22
The origin of infant baptism	25
4. Two Important Questions	30
How do you do it?	
(The question of immersion)	30
What if it doesn't work?	
(The question of rebaptism)	32
5. Two Tips	35
The sponsors	35
The service	37
6. Baptism: For the Rest of Your Life	39
Letter to Sponsors	45

Introduction

The birth of a child marks a critical passage in the lives of most couples. Marriage and commitment, goals and values, life purpose and self-identity all stand at a challenging cross-road. The future fills with exciting and fearful possibilities as a new character enters the family stage. And no matter how easy or hard the transition into parenthood may seem to the couple, one thing is certain: The new parents' lives will never be the same.

As the curtain rises on this unexplored phase of life, most new parents find themselves critically reexamining their faith along with their values, dreams, and goals. And no matter how many parenting classes they've attended or how many books they've read on the subject, most parents feel a sudden inadequacy and a twinge of helplessness mixed with the joy of bringing that precious bundle home from the hospital. Many find themselves vulnerably admitting their need for help and reaching out for the first time in years to God, the church, and/or anyone else who will offer guidance and loving support.

At this critical time of questioning and searching, the church has a great opportunity to strengthen and sustain the family's life in meaningful ways. Through the gift of baptism God offers a powerful resource for nurture and growth.

Baptism is God's gift of acceptance and belonging. It is more of a message than a ceremony. In baptism God says to every child: "Welcome to My family. You belong!" To every parent God says: "This child being entrusted to you is My child. Remember that always, and raise him/her to know just who and whose they are!" To some parents God may be using the event of a baptism to say "Welcome back!" and to chal-

lenge them to a more active and involved participation in the life of the church. And to every congregation God is saying: "Take care of this precious gift. Do everything in your power to see that he/she grows up to know My love!"

This book is a short study of the meaning, power, acceptance, and grace of Christian baptism. It is written (1) to encourage and challenge new parents to look closely at the meaning of the sacrament for them; (2) to lead parents to explore the gifts God waits to give them and their child through the family of faith; and (3) to help parents through this special time in their lives, leading them toward becoming the best, strongest, most loving models of the Christian life they can possibly be for their child.

1

The Greatest Gift You Can Give

*A cry in the night
a child is born
pushed and churned and squeezed and pulled
stolen from the muffled black security of one world
and thrown into the harsh gasping helplessness of another.*

*Gone is the warmth, the dark subdued quiet
gone the lifeline, the water, the cushioned home
where heartbeat, motion, and silence
enveloped existence in safety.
Pushed and churned and squeezed and pulled
into the blinding foreign brightness,
into the world of piercing noises, of rough hands,
of grasps and gasps of breath
and aloneness.*

*Some say all of life is a search for the womb,
a race from those who drug us out of the safety,
a journey through the harsh struggles of life and breath
to return and rest at last in the womb of timelessness
with the One who first called us
into being*

The Future Is Now

The pain, the push, the grasp, the cry—and suddenly the future is now. Your child is born, and life can no longer be the same. It is apparent. You are a parent. You are no longer

your own. A child belongs to you, and you belong to a child.

The pain fades into awe as you realize for the first moment that God has shared with you a glimpse of the Creator's image. You have been part of a miracle. You have been allowed to share in the ecstasy of creation!

You are now a partner with God in a journey that will take you where you've never been before. It is a journey that will bring you to explore your world in a new way, one that will lead you into the depths of your own mind and self.

God has given you a child and has entrusted to you one of the most sacred privileges and responsibilities a human can know. To care for another, to raise another person to adulthood, to bring another human being up to know the meaning of life, of love, and of God's grace—this is your call. And it is as frightening and exciting a call as you'll ever experience.

The World Your Child Will Face

The world that your child will face will be one of change, churning, and wonder. It will be a world vastly different from the one that nurtured your childhood. It will be a world of changing structures and challenged values. Where it has taken hundreds of years to add to the basic pool of knowledge in the sciences, information in this new world is doubling every five years or less. Where you grew up in a world with an economy revolving around production and industry, your child has entered an age that will place more value on information and services. There is a dramatic difference between today's society and the one of your youth. Your child is apt to face pressures and ethical struggles in grade school that you didn't face until high school or beyond.

What kind of a world will your children see as they grow into adolescence? What will be their major struggles as they enter adulthood? What kinds of challenges will today's children encounter as they prepare to start families of their own?

One thing is certain: In these first formative years of your children's lives they need every good resource available to help

them grow up to be the strong, loving, caring adults you want them to be. They will need to be equipped in the best ways.

But what can you do to prepare them? What can you give them to assure that they will start out in the right direction? How can you give them the resources to grow into the future and to face it with strength, courage, hope, and faith?

As a new parent you are no doubt as full of questions as you are of joy. You are excited about the beautiful gift God has given you, but you know that it is not going to be easy. You want the best for your child, but you may not be sure where to start. You want to give your child the keys to a life of meaning and fullness, but where can you turn?

The Bible tells us that life finds its greatest meaning and fullness when it is centered on the love of God in the person of Jesus Christ. And that's where the Christian parent starts—with the source of all love.

Baptism: The Beginning

Jesus Christ is the foundation for a life of true love, joy, meaning, and fullness. And baptism is the beginning point of that life with Him.

Christian baptism is the starting point of a *life lived in relationship* with God through Christ. It is the beginning of a life tapped into the greatest resource available to the world. In baptism your child's life is plugged into the source of God's love and power. Your child is adopted into a large and wonderful family and is promised a rich inheritance. Your little one is brought into a caring community that promises to stand by you and with you as you begin the tremendous task of raising a child in this changing world.

Baptism is the starting point of the Christian life. Like the fertilized egg cell that attached itself nine months ago to the mother's womb and found a place to grow, your child's Christian existence begins in baptism as the precious little life is attached to the womb of Christ's body on earth—the church. Within this womb of love and fellowship the new Christian

life will find spiritual nourishment and a place to grow. Attached to this womb, your precious child will have a chance to develop and mature, becoming all that God intends him or her to be.

In baptism God *claims* your child and *names* your child. Through water and the Word your child is set aside as belonging to God's family and marked and sealed with the cross of Christ. Through God's grace your child is named an inheritor of all the good gifts the loving Creator has to give. Baptism is the first step in a life-long relationship with God. It is the beginning of the process of growth that can bring a person to find true meaning in love and life.

No Hocus-Pocus

Baptism is not magic. It is not an automatic "fix" or an eternal fire insurance policy that God slips into our back pockets when we aren't looking. Baptism is not a religious ceremony or ritual to guarantee that the child will remain a lifelong Christian. It will not place an aura of protection around your child. It is no guarantee that the child will grow up to be an angel or have a nicer disposition or less messy diapers. Baptism is not a magic spell. It is a gift.

Baptism is a visible sign of God's invisible gift of acceptance, forgiveness, adoption, and love. It is as simple and as complex as that. In the Lutheran church, baptism is understood as a *sacrament*: a special act commanded by Jesus, given with a physical element, and a means by which God gives us grace, acceptance, forgiveness, and love. Baptism is God's totally free gift to us. And yet it comes to parents with some important implications and instructions.

Planting Seeds

In baptism God plants the seeds of faith in a young life. God does the planting, but as the seeds are sown, God assigns the parents the task of being good gardeners. They are to nur-

ture and water the seeds of faith. They are to fertilize and prune the young plants just when they need it. They are to see that the seeds get all the support and protection they need until the day when the new plants can stand by themselves and produce beautiful fruit on their own.

In baptism God attaches the fertilized egg of a new spiritual life with all its wonderful potential to the womb of your marriage. But that's not all that happens. With this gift comes a serious and important responsibility. It is a call and charge for you to take good care of the child, to love and support each other, and to make your home the healthiest environment possible for your child's physical *and* spiritual development.

In baptism God also attaches the fertilized egg of your new family to the womb of the Christian community and calls on the whole church to be a healthy, nourishing environment where your family can grow together to know God's forgiveness, love, and power.

A New Life in Your Hands

God has placed a new life into your hands. You are the best tools to give this new life a meaningful, vital, and loving world and to shape it into a caring, maturing young adult. Through your attitudes, your actions, your words, and your life you will be showing your child what it means to live as God's child. The way you live, love, and interact within your family will shape the person your child grows up to be. Your words and deeds from today on will have a powerful impact on how he or she will grow to look at life, love, families, and God.

You have a tremendous responsibility. You are shaping a human life. And in doing this, you are shaping the world.

God has given you this gift as a trust. At birth God placed your child into the love and care of your family. From that day on, God counts on you to bring the child up to know love, to live love, and to understand what it means to belong to the Creator of the universe. It is an awesome task. But you will

not be alone. In baptism God also reminds the members of the whole Christian family that they have a responsibility too. They are to be there for you.

The Greatest Gift

As you looked at that peacefully sleeping little face through the glass window in the hospital on that first night, what was going on in your mind? What were your dreams, hopes, and aspirations? What promises did you make in the depths of your heart for that child? What gifts did you want to give?

The greatest gift you can give your children is to provide a loving, nurturing home where they can grow up to see *in you* an example of the love of their Creator. If your children can come to know the meaning of God's love through you, they will have the strength and resources to make it through all the changes that the future can throw at them. If they see the love and peace of God in you and come to know Jesus through you, they will grow up with a strength and power that will carry them through all their future struggles and decisions. And their lives will have a deeper value and meaning.

This book is a short review of the meaning and fullness that Christian baptism brings. Read it as an investment in the life and future of your child.

Thought Time

What hopes or dreams do you have for your child's future?

What actions can you begin today to help bring these dreams closer to reality?

What promises have you made to yourself or to God since the birth of your child?

What could stop you from keeping those promises?

What is one thing you can do today that will help you to keep those promises?