

# THE MEANING AND PRACTICE OF BAPTISM

Rev. Dr. Bill Jones

Membership in The United Methodist Church begins with the Sacrament of Baptism. Baptism symbolizes the initiative God takes in bestowing upon us grace and mercy. It celebrates our complete dependence upon God. Through the sacrament we accept God's gift of grace and yield our lives to the leading of the Holy Spirit.

Baptism has other implications. The Apostle Paul spoke of being baptized "into Christ" (Rom. 6:3). He may well have had in mind that we are partakers of the grace of Christ through baptism, as well as being initiated into the fellowship that had its origin in Christ. As far back as the Old Testament times, as Gentiles converted into Judaism, baptism has been regarded as an entrance into the community of faith, the Church. "Those receiving the Sacrament are thereby marked as Christian disciples and initiated into the fellowship of Christ's holy Church."

We are baptized into Christ's universal Church, not into a particular denomination or congregation. It is for this reason that we are baptized only once and that our baptism is recognized by most other denominations. United Methodists, therefore, acknowledge the baptism of other Christian churches. Those persons who transfer their membership from another denomination into our church are not rebaptized.

The United Methodist Church baptizes persons of all ages. Baptism may be administered by sprinkling, pouring, or immersion. Infant baptism symbolizes in a unique way our utter dependence upon God. It gives us one of our best insights into the true meaning of baptism at any age, because neither the infant, nor we, by our own works, can earn God's grace. In a free act of outpouring love, God's grace is bestowed upon us. God accepts us.

When infants or small children are baptized, their parents or sponsors praise God for this marvelous grace made known in Jesus Christ and make the vows on their behalf. They pledge to bring them up in the Christian faith, to teach them the Holy Scriptures, to train them to give respectful attendance upon the public and private worship of God, and to keep them under the ministry and guidance of

the Church. When the children reach the age of confirmation, they affirm the vows that were made in their behalf at their baptism.

The following questions and answers serve to illuminate further key points about the Sacrament of Baptism in the United Methodist Church.

### **What is the Meaning of Baptism?**

- Baptism is a sacrament. This means that baptism is a means of grace, a way through which God's grace, love, forgiveness, and acceptance flow to us.
- Baptism is one of the two sacraments in The United Methodist Church. The other is the Lord's Supper.
- In The United Methodist Church, we believe that baptism is something that God does—not what we do. Baptism signifies God's love for us and acceptance of us.
- Baptism is not magic, nor does it save us. As a sacrament, it is something very real. It is a sign of God's activity, not just a symbol.
- In and through baptism, we are claimed by God and by God's people. Those who receive Baptism are "marked as Christian disciples and initiated into the fellowship of Christ's holy church." Baptism marks the beginning of our journey of faith.
- As their part of the sacrament, parents and congregation promise to nurture the person in the faith using the vows and commendation of the Baptismal Covenant.

### **What are Three Images for Baptism?**

1. *Baptism is the door to the church.* It is the sacrament of initiation. It signifies entering the community of faith, the church. Once persons have been baptized, they are members—no matter what their age.

2. *Baptism is a gift of God's grace.* We do not earn it. All we need do is accept it. Through baptism we are adopted into God's family, called the church.
3. *Baptism is also a cleansing,* a symbol for the forgiveness of sins and rebirth. Water is for cleaning, for making pure. Baptism is for the forgiveness of sins. It marks the transition from the old life of sin and into the new life of faith in the community of God.

### **How do we United Methodists baptize?**

- ***Immersion*** ("dunking"): This is probably the form that John the Baptist used in baptizing Jesus. Paul refers to this form in the symbolism of dying with Christ and rising with Christ (Romans 6:3-10). The water represents the grave. The symbolism is dying and being buried (in the water) and then rising (out of the water) into a new life. This is the form Baptists churches (and some others) use.
- ***Pouring:*** The symbolism here is of the pouring out of the Holy Spirit that John the Baptist referred to (Matthew 3:16). This form reminds us that baptism is God's act, God's gift to us. Lutherans use this form.
- ***Sprinkling:*** This practice of cupping the water in the hand and placing it on the head has its roots in the Old Testament. Moses used the practice of dipping a branch of a hyssop plant in blood or water and sprinkling it. This was for the forgiveness of sins (the same language John the Baptist used for his practice of baptism). This sprinkling was also associated with bathing or washing away guilt. Baptism by sprinkling is based on this understanding from the Bible (Numbers 19:18-19; Psalm 51:7-12). Sprinkling is for the forgiveness of sins.
- The United Methodist Church affirms and uses all three forms. We do not believe that the form or the amount of water is the important thing. The water is a symbol—a symbol for what God is doing in our lives. That is why we most often use sprinkling. It is most convenient.

### **Whom do we baptize?**

- In The United Methodist Church, we baptize infants and persons who are older. Infant baptism is the clearest symbol of a free gift. Small children do nothing to earn God's love or acceptance. It is freely given by God and freely received by the one being baptized.
- Persons who are baptized as older children, youth, or adults add a new dimension. They are choosing for themselves to accept God's love.
- Some denominations allow baptism only for persons old enough to choose. In The United Methodist Church, we affirm the importance and power of baptism for both infants and for persons who are making the choice themselves.
- No child is too young for baptism.

### **Is Baptism necessary for salvation?**

- No. God's grace is sufficient. God is with us from the beginning. God does not wait for us but goes before us.
- Baptism is the moment when we celebrate the grace present from birth and realize grace fully present in the one who is baptized.
- Baptism does not save; God saves, and none are beyond the reach of God's care.
- Baptism calls us to respond to the grace given to us by living a Christian life. God's presence is real, but it must be realized and accepted in order to transform our lives.
- What happens in Baptism will need to happen during the course of a lifetime. Each day we commit ourselves to living into our baptism.

### **Can we be baptized more than once?**

- No. If baptism were only a symbol of our faith as humans, then we might need to repeat the act when we fall short of what God wants of us.

- But baptism is God’s gift to us. It cannot be taken away nor improved upon. What God does through baptism does not need to be repeated.
- We may experience special times when we choose to rededicate our lives to Christ. In those times, we are reminded, “Remember your baptism, and give thanks!” Confirmation is one of these acts.

### **What is the role of parents in Baptism?**

- In the case of infants and children, the parents are asked to respond—not on behalf of their child, but for themselves.
- In the baptism vows, parents are asked to commit themselves to modeling a lifestyle of Christian discipleship that will give their child every opportunity to grow in the faith.
- It is the responsibility of the parents to keep a child under the ministry of the church.

*The officiating minister will ask these questions to the parents or other sponsors:*

On behalf of the whole Church, I ask you:

- Do you renounce the spiritual forces of wickedness, reject the evil powers of this world, and repent of your sin?
- Do you accept the freedom and power God gives you to resist evil, injustice, and oppression in whatever forms they present themselves?
- Do you confess Jesus Christ as your Savior, put your whole trust in his grace, and promise to serve him as your Lord, in union with the Church which Christ has opened to people of all ages, nations, and races?
- Will you nurture these children in Christ’s holy Church, that by your teaching and example they may be guided to accept God’s grace for themselves, to profess their faith openly, and to lead a Christian life?

### **Who should participate?**

- This is a family occasion, and any members of the family present are invited to stand with the parents while the child is baptized.
- Godparents are not required in The United Methodist Church. However, it is an option that is available. Godparents serve as mentors or friends in faith linking children to their baptisms and helping them to grow in their faith.
- A godparent is one more caring adult in a child's life—a person who continues to make a faith connection with the child even when he/she moved to other congregations.
- Godparents are asked to accept the same vows extended to parents.

### **Why do we need to be baptized in front of others?**

- Baptism brings us into the church. It makes us a part of the community of faith. It is not important that someone be baptized in a church building, but it is important that someone be baptized in the presence of the church (the people, the congregation).
- In the baptism service, the congregation makes certain promises. The whole church commits itself to nurture this new member of the family with a *Congregational Pledge*:
  - Members of the household of faith, I commend to your love and care *this child*, whom we this day recognize as a *member* of the family of God.
  - Will you endeavor so to live that *this child* may grow in the knowledge and love of God, through our Savior Jesus Christ?
  - With God's help we will so order our lives after the example of Christ, that *this child*, surrounded by steadfast love, may be established in the faith, and confirmed and strengthened in the way that leads to life eternal.

### **Isn't faith in God important in Baptism?**

- We believe that even infants have a form of faith—trust—and that they are not capable of rejecting God. Later, when they are capable of accepting or rejecting God, people who are baptized as infants can choose to make a public profession of the faith into which they were baptized.
- Faith in God is important, but how can a baby have this faith? Faith is important at the time of baptism. And the faith of the one being baptized is important, but not necessarily both at the same time.
- When we baptize a baby, faith is present: the faith of the parents or sponsors, who bring the child and pledge to raise the child in the faith, and the faith of the congregation, who receive the child and who pledge to help raise the child in the faith. The child is surrounded by faith. Later, the child will be given an opportunity to respond in faith to what God, his or her parents, and the congregation have done. Confirmation is an example of this.

### **What is the relation of Baptism to Church Membership?**

- When a child is baptized he or she is placed on the baptized membership roll of a local United Methodist Church and remains a baptized member of the church until he or she becomes a professing member which requires the answer of faith of the baptized person made visible in a service of profession of Christian faith and confirmation using the vows of the Baptismal Covenant.

### **What is Confirmation?**

- The practice of confirmation is tied to infant baptism. The churches that practice infant baptism also have confirmation. The churches that do not practice infant baptism do not practice confirmation.
- When we baptize a small child, who cannot fully understand what is being done, it is important to provide an opportunity later for the child to respond in a personal way. This opportunity is called confirmation (literally, "to make firm that which was done before" at baptism). The

confirmation service is the opportunity to publicly proclaim and profess the faith into which we were baptized. The confirmation class prepares us to do this.

- Here at ***Williamsburg United Methodist Church*** confirmation classes are held for sixth graders on Sunday mornings during the regular Sunday school hour beginning in September and continuing to May. Confirmation Sunday is held on Pentecost Sunday (50 days after Easter), usually in May or June.