

The work of the theologian is to consider Biblical narrative: Old and New Testaments; the context for the practice of infant baptism; what is said in general and specific about baptism over all; as well as the practice of the early church – as a reflection of the first teachings from the first generation of the church.

Acts 16:14-15, 29-33

### “God Chosen”

other sermon resources include: “*A United Methodist Understanding of Baptism*” by Mark C. Trotter; and “*By Water and the Spirit: A United Methodist Understanding of Baptism*”

We baptize infants! Really!

We don't christen our babies; nor does the United Methodist Church "dedicate" its children.

Much of the confusion around infant baptism could be put to rest if pastors and others would teach with clarity about what this sacrament is and what it's not.

After taking time with his minister about baptizing his infant son, one father expressed: “We are not pretending that our son, Josiah, is making a choice today. This baptism does not excuse Josiah from his need, as he becomes old enough, to repent of his sin, to trust in the blood of Christ, and submit every area of his life to King Jesus. Nor does it guarantee that he will definitely go to heaven or get God's approval regardless of what choices he makes as he grows up.”

So what did this father learn that made him comfortable about infant baptism? We're talking about a Dad who has friends who practice a different tradition they call “believer's baptism,” which is to wait until for the individual is of age to make that choice on his own.

Let's go back to the first covenant family, back to Abraham. One of the important lessons for the Church comes from the sacred sign of the old covenant: circumcision. Throughout the ages God has worked through *families*. In the old covenant, babies even younger than Josiah joined the people of God through the ritual of circumcision.

When a Jewish male infant was eight days old, the covenant from God was marked by ceremony and distinct signs. *God chosen!* Children in infancy enter God's covenant before they reach an age where they can make their own choice. And this is important to hear: They were God-chosen from the beginning – as are we all!

John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist Church, argued that infants and children are not only acceptable candidates for baptism, but that it can be demonstrated biblically. Like circumcision, baptism is a sign of the *covenant relationship* in which children are included.

Let's read how Paul, the great New Testament theologian, moved naturally into infant baptism: [SEE Acts 16:14-15, 29-33]

<sup>14</sup>One of them was Lydia from Thyatira, a merchant of expensive purple cloth, who worshiped God. As she listened to us, the Lord opened her heart, and she accepted what Paul was saying. <sup>15</sup>She was baptized along with other members of her household, and she asked us to be her guests. “If you agree that I am a true believer in the Lord,” she said, “come and stay at my home.” And she urged us until we agreed...

<sup>29</sup>The jailer called for lights and ran to the dungeon and fell down trembling before Paul and Silas. <sup>30</sup>Then he brought them out and asked, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?”

<sup>31</sup> They replied, “Believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved, along with everyone in your household.” <sup>32</sup> And they shared the word of the Lord with him and with all who lived in his household. <sup>33</sup> Even at that hour of the night, the jailer cared for them and washed their wounds. Then he and everyone in his household were immediately baptized.

We are told by Luke that two new believers, Lydia and the Philippian jailer, were baptized along with other members of their household!

Now that’s an incredible statement! The entire household could have included children, infants, servants and slaves! Were they saved prior to being baptized? Had they all entered into a vital relationship with Jesus Christ through repenting of their sins? It’s not realistic to think that everyone in the household surrendered to Jesus Christ. No, the whole household was baptized based on the new faith and the new identity of the leader of the household!

It’s this new direction as those who have moved from death to life, from darkness to light through faith in Jesus Christ that brings a new *identity* to the head of the household! Both Lydia and the Philippian jailer, as responsible leaders of their households, offer their families to the Lord! They repeat that cry of Joshua in the promised land near the end of his life: **If you refuse to serve the LORD, then choose today whom you will serve. Would you prefer the gods your ancestors served beyond the Euphrates? Or will it be the gods of the Amorites in whose land you now live? But as for me and my family (house), we will serve the LORD.** (Joshua 24:15)

They embraced a new way of life and so much more – for themselves and for their families! “Yes! We are followers of Jesus, God’s Savior to the world!”

We learn from the early church fathers that from the earliest times, children and infants were baptized and included in the Church. There is distinct evidence that infant baptism was clearly practiced in the second century. That would not have happened had it not been practiced within the first century! And if you need biblical authority to this ancient tradition, some scholars cite Jesus’ words, “Let the little children come to Me...for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs.” (Mark 10:14)

Let me be clear here: We’re not pretending that an infant who is baptized is making a personal profession of faith as part of the sacrament. “The United Methodist Church does not accept ... the notion that the baptism of infants magically imparts salvation without an active personal faith.” We make a pledge that the child will be nurtured and guided into a new life with this new identity that separates them from the ways of the world (or the flesh) so that he or she will come to claim the faith of the Christian Church!

The United Methodist Church sees the covenant of baptism, even infant baptism, as a vital part of your spiritual journey!

Keep in mind, the Bible tells us that we are born in sin, “for all fall short of the glory of God.” John Wesley taught that in baptism a child was cleansed from the *guilt of original sin*. This is the sin nature, the perversion of our human nature attached to us at birth that causes our rebellion from God. Through infant baptism we are granted forgiveness of our original sin by the grace of God – but this doesn’t mean we will live perfect or sin-free lives.

Although Wesley affirmed the grace of God with infant baptism, he also insisted upon the necessity of adult conversion. So the child who reaches the age of understanding right from wrong, good from evil is accountable to answer God’s grace expressed in his or her baptism with

repentance and faith! Without a personal decision and commitment to Christ, the baptismal gift is nullified.

Infant baptism for Wesley was part of **the lifelong process of salvation**. He saw our spiritual rebirth as a twofold experience in the normal process of Christian growth – to be received through baptism in infancy and through commitment to Christ later in life. Salvation includes both 1) God's initiating activity of grace and 2) a willing human response.

Prevenient grace is what we call the influence of God to turn our hearts to Him. Born into sin, we are turned away from God. We are self-centered, not God-centered. But God has not abandoned us. In fact, God graciously and continuously seeks to bring us into a loving relationship for which we were created, to make us into the persons that God would have us be. To this end God acts preveniently, that is, before we are aware of it, reaching out to save humankind. Since God is the only initiator and source of grace, all grace leading up to my “acceptance” is prevenient in that it precedes and enables any movement we make toward God.

Let me describe prevenient grace in my life as I understand it:

- I remember a silly prayer that was answered when I was nine years old and played small-fry basketball. At a time-out and our team behind, I said a quick silent prayer that we might win – and we did!
- I remember two near drowning accidents and a potential life-threatening bike accident from which I was saved from danger and death!
- That I was reminded of this continuously, I credit to prevenient grace: the influence of the Holy Spirit in my life nagging or nudging me to surrender to Jesus Christ.
- Everyone will have different experiences from their life that lead to a decision of justifying faith.

Again, God-chosen! God is the covenant keeper and covenant maker! Even when we didn't want Him, though we would neglect and reject Him, God would endure our suffering, our intolerance, and patiently wait for us, wooing us – as a lover pursuing his beauty!

We could say that we are marked and claimed by God through baptism! He had called me His own! He was teaching and inspiring me before I was aware of Him! And 20 years after my infant baptism I confirmed my place in the covenant with what I call a real "born-again" experience when I invited Jesus into my life and I confessed to the Father that I would live for Him!

Through infant baptism God extends a promise to you – awaiting your acceptance and confirmation. And He keeps after you – if you'll notice. This influence of God, this work of God in your life is what John Wesley described as prevenient grace.

I came to believe that God had a plan for my life and it wasn't hard to look back across my past to see how He had prepared me for His calling on my life.

I like to believe that infant baptism confirms the reality of God's love and grace, the activity of the Holy Spirit in the lives of our children. The bible puts it like this: **God has put His seal of ownership on us and has given us the Spirit as His guarantee.** (1 Corinthians 1:22)

That's a descriptive definition of God's grace in our lives: "He has put His seal of ownership on us!" The sacrament of baptism becomes the "outward, visible signs of an inward, spiritual grace"; the visible symbol of the spiritual promise of God; the "seal of God's

ownership."

Now I want to be sure you hear this rightly. God is the One who initiates our salvation. God is the actor at this point! He's wooing you, arousing your attention to Himself! There is no response you can make without His previous influence surrounding you; without His prevenient grace. But you, too, have an obligation – freely choosing Him, freely surrendering to Christ, freely trusting and serving your loving God!

And so with baptizing infants, it's not our parents or the infant being baptized who are the chief actors; baptism is an act of God *in* His Church and *through* His Church!

The following story comes from Jessica Miller Kelley who tells about the influence of the Church and the role of grace from the Church, as God's representative in spiritual formation:

### **The Case for Infant Baptism** – Jessica Miller Kelley

Ten years ago, I never would have thought I would baptize my children as infants. In the Disciples of Christ tradition in which I was raised, a voluntary confession of faith was very important. People came forward (often in their older elementary or early teen years, if they were raised in the church), answered affirmatively the question "Do you believe that Jesus is the Christ, the son of the living God, and do you accept him as your Lord and Savior?" and were baptized a few weeks later.

When I started attending an Episcopal church during my junior year of college, infant baptism was one of the harder things for me to accept. The decision to follow Christ should be made by each person themselves, when they are of an age to cognitively do so, I thought. The decision to start a journey of faith was a personal one that should not be made on someone else's behalf, I thought.

Over time, however, I realized that – for those raised in the church – the journey of faith did not begin at the time of that voluntary, public confession. A child's Christian life begins so much earlier, when parents read them Bible stories and pray before bedtime, and when Sunday school teachers and others nurture them as part of the faith community. Cognitive belief in certain doctrines, such as Jesus' messiahship, takes one's faith to a new level, beginning a significant new leg of the lifelong Christian journey, but it is not really the beginning, nor is it a point of arrival.

After years of learning Bible stories and songs, praying, attending Vacation Bible School, etc., I made my confession of faith and was baptized at age nine. But there was no time that I remember NOT believing. Like many who grew up in the church, I did not have a "conversion experience" to speak of, but rather it just felt like time to publicly acknowledge the belief in Christ that had been nurtured in me for years. Several years after that, I entered a new stage of my faith journey, in which my relationship with God became much more "real" to me. And there were other periods of intense spiritual growth, and on it goes...

Part of our problem with baptism is that we have a narrow view of its meaning. We view it from the perspective of a human response – as opposed to the grace and work of God!

Infant baptism rests on the understanding that *God prepares the way of faith* before we request or even know that we need help! The sacrament, then, is a powerful expression of the reality that all persons come before God as no more than helpless infants, unable to do anything

to save ourselves, dependent upon the grace of our loving God.

In summary: Infant baptism is a covenant expression of the highest priority! We know that this baptism doesn't magically pass on salvation apart from an active, personal faith! The baptism of infants is properly understood and valued when the child is loved and nurtured by the faithful worshiping church and by the child's own family who is expressing a born-again relationship to Jesus Christ!