

A STUDY – PAPER FOR PARENTS PREPARING FOR THE BAPTISM OF THEIR CHILD

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The purpose of this paper is two-fold. It is, first, to talk about the meaning of infant baptism in a way that is both contemporary and yet responsible to the tradition of the Christian Church. Many entire books have been written on just this subject, so it would be hopeless to try to be totally comprehensive in this brief paper; however, hopefully the points put down here will shed some light on the subject and stimulate discussion. Moreover, it must be clear that this is not the final word on baptism, nor is it what folk must absolutely believe in order to have their child baptized. There is no such hard and fast consensus about baptism among Christians or even United Methodists. Nevertheless, it is important for parents to do some serious thinking about the meaning of baptism and to look at the implications of the sacraments. This paper will enable that if it does its job.

Secondly, this paper will list some of the baptismal instructions given to parents and pastors in the Discipline of the United Methodist Church.

I. What Does It Mean?

Let's clear the air by mentioning a couple of things that baptism is not. Baptism is not an act of social respectability done to please grandmothers or because "everybody else has their babies done." We can certainly understand that someone can have many doubts about the significance of baptism and still decide to present their child for baptism. However, social respectability and other people's expectations are not very sound bases upon which to enter a relationship that calls for a certain amount of commitment on your part.

Also, baptism is not magic. Baptism does not guarantee that your child will never be sick or throw tantrums, or that s/he will grow up to be a Senator. More importantly, baptism does not mean that God will love your child more than s/he would otherwise. J.C. Wynn says:

Much superstition comes from the mistaken belief that if the child were to die before being baptized he would remain unsaved. There is no basis for this superstition in the Bible or in the main-stream of Christian theology. The love of God is too great, too merciful, to be funneled through the liturgy of the sacrament of Baptism.

The Christian faith does not understand God as an old meany who punished children because their parents didn't get them to the church on time. This may be stated rather bluntly, but sometimes such fears remain unspoken or even unconscious. It is important

for us to get them out in the open and see clearly how incompatible they are with our knowledge of the love of God. Thusly, these submerged fears lose their power.

Neither is baptism a “spiritual, heavenly or eternal” ritual that has nothing to do with everyday life. What it concerns most directly is how what could be called “eternal truth” becomes real in everyday life. To demonstrate this I will outline six points concerning baptism.

- a. Baptism is a sign of God’s grace. While baptism does not regulate God’s love, it is a sign or symbolic demonstration of the love and acceptance of the child by God or Ultimate Reality. One of the reasons we practice infant baptism is because we believe that God loves us, and that we are of great worth as persons, even before we can do anything to earn that love or worthiness. We also believe that if we fail to realize any measure of success or status in anybody else’s eyes, still we are of importance as persons and loved by God.

The implication of this for parents is that you are responsible to love and accept your child even if s/he does not measure up to your expectations. Your child does not have to earn your love, s/he is special as is. Your child needs and has a right to the security provided by our special attention, interest, physical demonstration of affection, recognition, approval, praise, and consistency in discipline. (All of this is well discussed by Thomas Harris in “I’m OK, You’re OK”, a book that would be invaluable for any parent to read.) This book does not mean that you avoid discipline, but it does mean, that no matter what, your child remains valuable, loveable and special.

- b. Baptism is an entrance into the church-community. Upon baptism, your child immediately becomes a preparatory member of this congregation and of the church universal. Of course, s/he himself/herself will have to decide later whether to maintain this church relationship. However, this aspect of baptism points to more than membership in the institutional structures of the church. The church is first and foremost, people who have a particular tradition and who attempt to realize a certain style of life together. This life together is characterized by a willingness to share feelings, hurts, joys, ideas, and beliefs with other people, and by a common dedication to the kingdom of God. Entrance into the church-community implies learning to be (1) open and sharing rather than closed and defensive, (2) concerned about the needs of others rather than brutal and insensitive, and (3) open to change as a result of interaction with others rather than parochial and reactionary. A child learns this approach to life through relating with fold who embody it.

- c. Baptism is a pledge of responsible parenthood. This point emphasizes that it is the parent's responsibility to communicate the love of God to your child through your own love and to enable the sort of group relationships that will foster the sort of approach to life mentioned above. It also refers to responsible material provision for the child, which many feel has implications for family planning. Material provision, however, never takes the place of time and attention. Massive over-time checks do not take the place of being a relaxed and interested parent. Baptism should be a time for both parents, and particularly the father, to evaluate their work schedule and how they spend their time. If such an evaluation results in lesser paychecks, it should also be a time to evaluate a family budget.
- d. Baptism includes an affirmation of faith and a pledge "to live before this child a life that becomes the gospel" on the part of the parents. The importance of this is that a parent cannot be a good parent unless s/he continues to grow as a person himself/herself. This includes taking care of yourself physically, intellectually, and psychologically. Parenthood means that you give a lot of yourself to your child, but giving does not mean that you let your own lives depreciate and become empty. Eric Fromm has identified two types of giving:

The most widespread misunderstanding is that giving is "giving up" something, being deprived of, sacrificing. Giving is impoverishment; it is painful to give.

Really, giving can be the highest expression of potency. In the very act of giving I experience my strength, my wealth, my power. This is an act of joy. I experience myself as overflowing, spending, alive, hence as joyous.

This applies not only to you as individual parents, but as a couple. You should talk about how an addition to the family will affect your life together and make adequate preparation for time with just the two of you when you can talk, have fun and continue to romance one another.

- e. Baptism includes a recognition that the child is not a piece of property. You do not own your child. The responsibility of parents is to raise their child in such a way that s/he has the capacity to be a self-directed, responsible adult, not so that s/he will be a carbon-copy of mom and dad. It is sometimes difficult to know the difference between appropriate authority and inappropriate authoritarian control; however, the first step is to recognize that your child is not a poodle dog, nor a plastic model to be assembled, but a young person.

4.

The mother who, seeing her newly born baby for the first time, says “my child, the doctor” is a standard joke, but it is also a real danger. A child is not a means for parents to realize their own thwarted aspirations in life. Sometimes subtle and hidden pressures can be applied by parents, even when they don’t realize it themselves. A helpful technique is for parents to openly examine their desires for their child, to talk together about how to set limits on harmful pressures, to be open with their child about their own feelings, and to thoroughly communicate through word and deed if s/he disagrees s/he will still be loved.

Discipline is not purposed to push a child into your mold, but to protect him from dangers which s/he is not aware of. As you discipline your child, make sure the dangers are real ones, and attempt to explain the dangers to your child so that s/he will understand the reasons for the restrictions as much as possible. Your concerns, as a parent, are for your child to grow up as one who can judge the consequence of his/her actions and make decisions responsibly even when you’re not around to shout “Don’t” or order “Do.”

- f. Baptism is a time when the church accepts its share of responsibility for the nurture of your child and when it celebrates with you. Church members accept responsibility for taking an active interest in your child both individually through personal attention and collectively through provision for Christian education and other activities. Baptism is also an act of thanksgiving and celebration. The whole church shares in the parent’s joy and it is good for folk to get a chance to greet the parents and “meet” the child after the service.

II. Disciplinary Instructions

- A. Before baptism, the pastor “shall diligently instruct the parents or guardians regarding the meaning of the Sacrament and the vows which they assume.” Plan to spend some time with the pastor. This means the pastor should be contacted well in advance. Also it may not always be possible or advisable to celebrate baptism at the specific time you have in mind; thus, the date will be determined jointly by pastor and parents.
- B. “it is desired that one or both parents or guardians shall be members of the Christian church or that sponsors who are members shall assume the baptismal vows.”
- C. “This Sacrament should be administered in the church in the presence of all the people in a state hour of worship.” Baptism is a worship service of the Christian church and not a private ceremony. Unless medical or other seriously unusual reasons dictate otherwise, the parents should plan on the service taking place during Sunday morning worship.

5.

D. Parents or guardians will receive a certificate of Baptism which clearly states that the child is enrolled as a preparatory member of the United Methodist Church.

E. No fee or payment is given to the pastor administering Baptism.