



*Taking the Gospel into All of Life*

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## **A United Methodist Understanding of Baptism**

### ***Baptism – a Sign of God’s Life-Giving Love***

Baptism is the sacrament of initiation and incorporation into the body of Christ. In baptism water is applied to a person by sprinkling, pouring, or immersion in the name and power of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Baptism was given to us by Jesus and is an outward and visible sign of God’s life-giving love for us. It is a washing with water that signifies and proclaims the forgiveness of sin and new life possible through Jesus Christ.

The word sacrament is the Latin translation of the Greek word *mysterion*. From the early days of the church, baptism was associated with the mystery that surrounds God’s action in our lives. That means that at best our words can only circumscribe what happens, but not define it. We cannot rationally explain why God would love us “while we were yet sinners” and give his only begotten Son (Jesus) that we should not perish but have eternal life. That is the most sacred and unfathomable mystery of all. We can experience God’s love and grace at any time and in any place, but in the sacrament of baptism God routinely shows up.

### ***God Initiates a Covenant***

In baptism we are responding to God’s initiative. We do not choose God. He chooses us. God initiates a covenant with us, and invites us to respond in faith.

The word *covenant* is a biblical word describing a relationship based on promises of mutual love and devotion. In the Bible, God took initiative in choosing Israel to be a people of his very own and gave them a special mission in the world. Israel’s response was a life of faithfulness. The baptismal covenant calls us to a similar relationship with God made possible by the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

### ***Baptism Incorporates Us Into the Church***

From the beginning, baptism has been the door through which we enter the fellowship of the Church. Baptism publically declares our incorporation and we respond in faith with a commitment to follow Jesus alongside the other members of the Body of Christ – the Church. It’s within this faith community that God calls us to live out and support one another in our Christian journey. Baptism commissions us to use our gifts to strengthen the Church and to transform the world.

### ***A New Identity in Christ***

We receive our identity from others, from the expectations of friends and colleagues, from the labels society puts upon us, and from the influence of family. To become Christian is to receive a new identity. You no longer allow others to tell you who you are. Christ now claims you and instructs you. A Christian is one who has “thrown off the old-self and put on Christ.”

Baptism celebrates becoming that new person and outwardly identifies us as a follower of Jesus. Through a washing with water, an anointing with oil, and a laying on of hands, baptism marks us and claims us as a child of God and heir to the Kingdom. This mark is an indelible reminder and a tangible sign of God's love and claim upon our life, forever.

Christians have also understood the baptismal covenant in light of Jesus' baptism. At Jesus' baptism, God said: "This is my son." While Jesus' relation to God as Son is unique, for Christians baptism means that God has also chosen us as daughters and sons, and knows us intimately as a parent. So the most important thing about us, our true identity, is that we are now sons and daughters of God.

### ***Baptism does Not Save Us – God Does!***

Baptism in itself does not save us. It is a sign of the saving process that God through Jesus Christ is initiating in our lives. Baptism invites us to a heartfelt response of faith that leads to a living relationship with the one who does save – Jesus Christ. We must personally receive and embrace God's love and forgiveness being expressed and proclaimed in baptism in order to be justified and birthed into new life in Christ.

### ***Why we Baptize Children and Infants – A Witness to Prevenient Grace***

From the earliest times, children and infants were baptized and included in the church. As scriptural authority for 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). However, a more consistent argument is that baptism, as a means of grace, signifies God's initiative in the process of salvation. John Wesley preached "prevenient grace" – the ever-present love of God that works to draw us to God's self, regardless of our age, our actions, or even our awareness of God. The baptism of children and their inclusion in the church before they can respond with their own profession of faith is a vivid and compelling witness to God's prevenient grace.

### ***Baptism Is Forever***

Because baptism is a sacrament of God's grace signifying a covenant that God has initiated, it does not need to be repeated. God is forever faithful. However, there may be times where we feel prompted to renew our part of the covenant and recommit our lives to Christ. At such a time, instead of rebaptism, it is most appropriate for us to reaffirm our baptismal vows in the ritual of Reaffirmation. This is a public ritual that recalls our baptism and God's unconditional, unending love for us and allows us to once again respond in faith and renew our commitment to following Jesus.

### ***Baptism Is the Beginning, Not the End***

You have heard people say, "I was baptized Methodist," or "I was baptized Presbyterian," which could imply that in baptism they got their religious identity papers and that was the end of it. But baptism is not the end. It is the beginning of a lifelong journey of faith that is about much more than which church we attend. Ultimately, baptism is about being a child of God and becoming a lifelong follower of Jesus Christ. Through baptism, God invites his children on a journey of discipleship, empowers them with the Holy Spirit, and sends them out to make other disciples. Baptism does not just have benefits for the individual but for all people as the one baptized is claimed and empowered by God through the Church for the redemption and transformation of the world. So it is that baptism looks forward with "a vision of a world recreated and humanity transformed and exalted by God's presence" in anticipation of the end of the age when Christ will come in final victory ("By Water and the Spirit"). Together the baptized, young and old, journey and work in the power of God towards this great vision.