

Thinking about Baptism

The United Church of Canada's report on Christian Initiation, whose theological affirmations were adopted by the 28th General Council (1980), states:

“We affirm that the Sacrament of Baptism with water in the triune name (Father, Son and Holy Spirit) of God is the visible sign and seal of the Covenant of love of God, of incorporation into Christ, and of entry into membership in the Christian Church.”

That, stated in a brief formal way, is what our Church believes about Baptism. The following is an explanation of this belief.

Baptism is a response believers make to the Good News of the Christian Gospel. God loves you for who you are and for who you can become. There is nothing that will stop God from loving us and wanting the best for us.

It is in the life and teachings of Jesus Christ that we learn about the Christian way of living. Jesus revealed to us that God's love has no limit. Jesus upset the people of his day. His radical love and his commitment to justice caused people to resent his teachings. People became upset with Jesus and so they crucified him. Through the resurrection of Jesus Christ we learn that the forces of evil cannot conquer God's love. God would not let death and evil have the final say. God's love is stronger than death.

Baptism is one of the two sacraments that we celebrate in the United Church of Canada. Baptism is the sacrament of entry into the Christian community.

This makes Baptism a crucial moment in life. It is an occasion for the affirmation of faith in God through Jesus Christ and for the public declaration of a commitment to follow Jesus throughout all of life. It is offered to all who wish to make this affirmation and commitment.

The Baptism of infants is a daring extension of the offer of Baptism which was originally given to adults. It is appropriate only in situations where the faith and commitment of the parents is such that their children cannot conceivably be left out of this covenant relationship with God.

In these cases parents bring their children to be baptized so that from the beginning they may fully be members of the community of faith in which they will grow up! Baptism is the way folks have always become members of the Christian church.

But... this extension of the offer of Baptism puts a heavy responsibility on those who bring their children to Baptism — and on those who receive them.

Parent's Responsibilities

The responsibilities which fall upon parents who bring children to the Church for baptism arise from the fact that they are affirming their own Christian faith and promising to raise their child in this same faith. This promise is fulfilled by parents in the following ways:

1. By affirming the importance of Christian faith in their own lives and by seeking to grow in faith and to understand and share their faith.
2. By providing the child with a knowledge of Christian truths and duties, and with opportunities for both public worship and private prayer.
3. By being the kind of parent whose care and discipline will help the child to understand God's love and to experience it in both the home and the Christian community.

Thoughts to Ponder

“Do you truly desire for yourself what you are asking for your child?”

“Can you commit your child to anything more than you are committed to yourself?”

Congregation’s Responsibilities

The responsibility that falls upon the congregation arises from the fact that a baptized child is, by baptism, received into the church of Jesus Christ. The congregation promises at baptism, not only to receive the child, but to assist the parents in the Christian nurture of the child. This promise is fulfilled by the congregation in the following ways:

1. By affirming that worship belongs to everyone, of every age; and that children are an integral part of the worshiping community.
2. By providing Christian education programs for children and youth through which the congregation can strengthen and support the Christian nurture provided in the home.
3. By being another intentional Christian community, aside from the home, in which a child’s faith can grow, be understood and shared.

Thoughts to Ponder

“Are you willing to support the congregation as it seeks to fulfill its responsibilities for your child and all other children under its care?”

“Are you willing to affirm the importance of the community of faith by being a part of it with your child?”

Are there other reasons for Baptism?

In the minds of many people today there are “other reasons” for bringing a child to the church for Baptism. They are not, however, the right reasons.

Listed below are some of the most common “other reasons” which we hear; and a brief explanation why each is not the “right reason” for baptism.

1. TO GIVE THANKS FOR OUR CHILD’S BIRTH

Although thanksgiving is certainly a part of a Baptism service, Baptism is much more than this. There are services of “Thanksgiving after Childbirth”. If this is your only concern, then you should ask for such a service.

2. SO OUR CHILD CAN HAVE THE SAME OPPORTUNITIES WE HAD TO DECIDE ABOUT RELIGION

Baptism presupposes a decision already. And unless you, as a parent, have chosen the way of Christ for yourself you can hardly choose it for your child.

3. SO OUR CHILD CAN GO TO SUNDAY SCHOOL

Baptism is not a condition of attending Sunday School. No child is ever turned away because he or she is not baptized.

4. TO PROTECT OUR CHILD FROM GOING TO HELL IF HE OR SHE SHOULD DIE

This thinking is not the message of the Christian gospel. Any God who condemned children simply because they were unbaptized would not be the God of Jesus Christ!

4. SO OUR CHILD CAN BE MARRIED IN THE CHURCH
WHEN THE TIME COMES

In the United Church of Canada baptism is not a prerequisite for marriage in the Church. You should also realize that whether your child wishes to marry as a Christian or not will be his/her own decision when the time comes.

5. TO SAVE OUR CHILD THE EMBARRASSMENT OF BEING
BAPTIZED WHEN OLDER

Baptism should never be an embarrassment! If it is then its proper meaning is not understood. Adult baptism is not only the original form of Christian Baptism, it is a profoundly significant experience for the person who decides on his or her own to be a Christian.

6. BECAUSE WE BELIEVE IN GOD

Christians are not the only ones who believe in God. So do Jews and Muslims. Christian Baptism is only for those who will follow Jesus Christ in the community of his Church.

7. BECAUSE IT IS A TRADITION IN OUR FAMILY

Some families have a tradition of baptism without any active commitment to Christ and his Church. If this is the case, then the meaning of baptism has been lost and the sacrament is being abused.

8. THE GRANDPARENTS WOULD BE UPSET IF OUR CHILD WAS NOT BAPTIZED

It is difficult for us, even as adults, to deal with parental pressure. However, it is you, the child's parents, and not the grandparents, who must give him or her a Christian upbringing if baptized. The decision must be yours, no matter what others think or feel.

9. TO OFFICIALLY GIVE OUR CHILD A NAME

Your child officially receives his or her name when the birth is registered with the civil authorities. This is NOT what Baptism is for.

10. BECAUSE THE REST OR OUR CHILDREN ARE BAPTIZED AND WE CAN'T HAVE ONE LEFT OUT

If the rest of your family is already a part of the worshiping congregation, then indeed you cannot "leave this one out". However, if this is not the case, then in a very real sense, they have all been "left out"; and there is every good reason to avoid one more misuse of Baptism. Baptism is always baptism into a community of faith. It presupposes subsequent involvement with the community of faith.

11. TO GIVE OUR CHILD A GOOD START

If you follow through on the promises you will take at the Baptism of your child, then you will indeed give him or her "a good start". However, the ceremony on its own without the follow-through would only be a "false start".

If you are presently at a loss for good reasons for the baptism of your child but still want to pursue the matter, we encourage you to begin to attend Sunday Worship, if you haven't already and make this a regular family habit. It will help you as you seek to grow in your faith and to know the full life God wants for you.

Feel free to contact the Minister regarding any questions you may have. She will be more than happy to assist you.