



Baptism – What is it?

Baptism (whether as an adult or as an infant, by a lot of water or by a little) is:

1. *An Act of Divine Initiative.* Baptism is not something we do for God. It is something God does for us. To ask whether a baptized infant knew what he or she was doing is the wrong question. It is more important to ask whether God knew what God was doing. And what God was doing was incorporating or adopting the baptized person into the community of faith. If children are “of the Kingdom of God” as Jesus said, why would they not be members of the church? The baptism of an infant, totally dependent on parents, family, and community is a powerful dramatization of the initiative by which a loving and gracious God reaches out and embraces us, not because we deserve it, but because God knows we need him to, whether we are infants or adults.

2. *An Occasion for Commitment.* Our baptismal liturgies make plain that the baptism of an infant calls for commitment on the part of parents and church. It’s not that either the parents or the church are making promises as a kind of proxy for the child. Both parents and congregation are making their own serious commitment to maximize the opportunities for the promise inherent in the baptism of a baby to come to fulfillment as the child develops through the various stages of maturation – a process that arguably should never end.

REMEMBER YOUR BAPTISM

1. *An Act of Faith.* No matter how serious parents and congregation are in their commitments, there is no guarantee that their desires and efforts will accomplish a totally positive outcome. Thankfully they frequently do, but sometimes they don’t. Not even God can guarantee the hoped-for outcome because of our human propensity to make bad choices – and who among us has not done that? Not even Jesus had a 100% success rate with the disciple band! This is no basis for discouragement. Our call as parents and church is to be faithful.

2. *An Opportunity for Recollection and Renewal.* When we receive new members into the life of the congregation, the liturgy we use invites the incoming members to “remember your baptism and be thankful.” A better invitation – and we paraphrase the liturgy in this way - is to “remember always that you have been baptized, and be thankful.” The church can excommunicate you, the church can withdraw my license to preach, but nobody can withdraw our baptism. The church cannot and does not try to do so.

Nor can we “undo” our baptism. We can live in denial of its promise, by our waywardness, but we cannot cancel out the Divine grace by which it embraced us in the first place.

In essence, we are saying that nobody needs to be re-baptized. Our baptism is a gift from God, given as an expression of his grace, and whenever we have the opportunity to share in the celebration of the Sacrament of Baptism, an appropriate exercise on our part is to reflect on how faithfully we are living out the gracious gift of our own baptism – to remember who we are, and whose we are - and to open our lives afresh to a new outpouring of the grace that has “brought us safe thus far” and that “will lead us home” (Amazing Grace, UMH # 378).

Go forth into the world to embrace and to live out your baptism – in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

-Harold Henderson, Senior Pastor March 2009