



Wesleyan Roots

What Makes United Methodism Distinct

PARTICIPANT HANDOUT



Unit 1: God's Grace Goes Before Us

Session 3: The Covenant of Christian Baptism

A Baptism Unlike Any Other

The first baptism I presided over as a pastor was an unusual one. I have never had another quite like it. I was serving three churches in a rural setting when I received a phone call from a retired man, whom I will call Bill. "Pastor, you don't know me. I'm related to Jane Doe in one of your churches and my wife and I are hoping you can come out to our house and meet with me. The doctors tell me I'm dying of cancer and I have never been baptized. Would you come out and talk to me about it? I'm not able to come to you."

After checking with my church member who confirmed that Bill was indeed a relative, I made my way at the appointed time to the house of this older couple. The lady greeted me warmly and ushered me into the bedroom where Bill was propped up on pillows. Thus, we began a series of weekly visits during which we talked about life, death, regrets, fear, and faith. We talked about what it meant to be a Christian. We also talked about baptism in depth, about its meaning, the liturgy of the service, and the promises made by the congregation and the one receiving baptism, as we all experience the grace of God together during baptism. We talked about God's love, and about how Bill could embrace baptism even as an older man facing death.

About six weeks later, 10 members of my congregation, including the couple related to this man, accompanied me to the house one Thursday evening. This time the man sat in the living room. We sang a hymn, I read some scripture and prayed, then together we made promises to God and one another using the baptismal liturgy from The United Methodist Hymnal that I had typed out and printed. I baptized Bill that night, and he took the vows of membership in The United Methodist Church even though he had never been in our church building. All of us present, including his wife and son, celebrated Holy Communion together. Bill was only present in the sanctuary of his local church one time, and that was for his funeral just a few weeks later.

1 For those wanting to remember and renew their baptismal vows, the United Methodist Church offer a service of baptismal affirmation. Many congregations offer this on an annual basis in January. See "The Baptismal Covenant IV: Congregational Reaffirmation of the Baptismal Covenant." The United Methodist Hymnal. Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 1989. Pp. 50-53.

Baptism as a Sacrament

Baptism is an outward act that recognizes God's inward action of transforming the identity of the one receiving baptism to that of "Christian." It is one of two sacraments in the United Methodist Church, along with Holy Communion. A **sacrament** is a sacred sign-act pointing to the presence of God in a unique way. In other words, God is present with us through the Holy Spirit in a special way during the sacraments of baptism and Holy Communion.

In baptism, we symbolically participate in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, we become part of Christ's universal Church, we are renewed in spirit, and our sin is symbolically washed clean. This last point is primary for Christians in some denominations for which baptism is first and foremost the washing away of sin. It is important to note that for United Methodists, there is more going on here than the washing away of sin. After all, Jesus was baptized, and the Christian tradition teaches that Jesus was without sin.

Baptism is Primarily God's Action

God's prevenient grace is active in the sacrament of baptism because God already loves and accepts the one being baptized. In Bill's case, God's prevenient grace nudged Bill to reach out to me and the congregation I served, seeking information about baptism.

United Methodists believe that baptism is a once-in-a-lifetime experience.¹ The United Methodist Church accepts baptism from other Christian traditions, although not all other Christian traditions accept baptism from the United Methodist Church. We believe there is no need to baptize a person more than once because baptism is primarily God's action. Likewise, United Methodists baptize people of all ages: adults, youth, children, and infants. We do this because baptism is primarily God's action of grace on our behalf. God is the one who initiates baptism; the pastor officiates in that he or she administers the water,

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but the baptism itself is God's action. Although the majority of Christians in the world baptize infants and young children, I understand that some Christian traditions do not.² I encourage those who were raised in Christian traditions that practice only the baptism of adults to consider the practice of baptism in the ancient church when "entire households" were baptized together. For example, in Acts 16:15,33, we see both the household of Lydia and the household of the Roman jailer being baptized together. And in 1 Corinthians 1:16, Paul reports that he baptized the household of Stephanas. Scholars tell us this was likely to have included all men, women, children, infants, and servants in the household.

Baptism Includes Promises We Make

Baptism is also the point at which God, the one receiving baptism, and the congregation of Christians in a local church enter into a covenant relationship (a holy relationship), one with the other. God has promised all of us a relationship through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and has empowered us by the Holy Spirit that we might grow in our faith throughout our lives.

The one receiving baptism in the United Methodist tradition enters into the baptismal covenant by taking some important vows. Bill promised to renounce the spiritual forces of wickedness, to reject the evil powers of this world, to repent of his sin, and to accept the freedom and power God was giving him to resist evil, injustice, and oppression in whatever forms they presented themselves. He then confessed Jesus Christ as his Savior, promised to put his whole trust in God's grace, and to serve Jesus Christ as Lord in union with the church which Christ has opened to people of all ages, nations and races.³ But the promises didn't stop there. The congregation then entered into the baptismal covenant by reaffirming their rejection of sin and their commitment to Christ. Together they promised: "With God's help we will proclaim the good news and live according to the example of Christ. We will surround Bill with a community of love and forgiveness, that he may grow in his trust of God, and be found faithful in his service to others. We will pray for him, that he may be a true disciple who walks in the way that leads to life." United Methodists do not generally practice private baptism. That is why ten members of the church were present at Bill's house that night, so they could take the covenantal vows of the congregation to support and pray for Bill.

In the case of infants and young children, parents and/or sponsors take vows on behalf of the child in which they promise to do all they can to bring up the child in such a manner that he or she will one day be able to make a profession of faith in Jesus Christ and take the vows of church membership for himself or herself. When that child reaches the age of consent, he or she is encouraged to participate in an experience of confirmation, during which the young person will confirm the vows made on their behalf at their baptism. It is a sacred responsibility of a congregation and pastor to offer a well-planned and executed confirmation experience for young people so that they, too, may make their own profession of faith in Jesus Christ.⁴ The confirmation process in a local church is one of my favorite times of the year because as the preaching pastor, I have a chance to interact on a weekly basis with young people who are considering a life-changing decision. I have the privilege of maintaining contact over the years with a number of these individuals and am blessed to see the fruit that has been produced from their lives of faith.

Next time you witness a baptism in The United Methodist Church, I encourage you to think about the covenant relationship being established. Think about the promise of God's grace, the promises of the one being baptized (or the parents/sponsors), and the promises of the congregation. These promises, faithfully upheld through the power of the Holy Spirit, are transformative for all of us who claim the name "Christian."

Marsha Engle Middleton

2 The Roman Catholic Church baptizes infants and young children, and the majority of Christians in the world are Roman Catholic. The United Methodist tradition concurs with this practice.

3 *The United Methodist Hymnal*, page 34.

4 *The United Methodist Book of Discipline*, Par. 226.4

United Methodist Identity Points:

- Baptism is an outward act that recognizes God's inward action of transforming the identity of the one receiving baptism to that of "Christian."
 - Baptism is a sacrament in the United Methodist Church during which God, the congregation, and the individual receiving baptism (or their parents or other family) enter a covenant relationship with one another.
 - Baptism is primarily God's action of grace on our behalf, and it is because of this that United Methodists baptize persons of all ages, including infants.
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Questions for Reflection and Discussion:

- Have you been baptized? If so, were you an infant, a youth, or an adult?
 - In your understanding, what does it mean to be baptized?
 - If you have been baptized, how do you think it has helped to shape your identity as a Christian? If you have not yet been baptized, do you think it would make a difference in how you understand your identity? Why or why not?
 - In what ways do you think entering into a covenant relationship with God and a local church at baptism can help an individual in their Christian journey?
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