



What We Believe About Baptizing Infants and Children

Rev. Mark Feldmeir, Senior Pastor
Rev. Amy Stapleton, Executive Pastor
Rev. Dr. Felicia George, Associate Pastor

1. Sacraments are God's gifts of love to us and our response of love to God

Baptism is one of two sacraments we celebrate in the United Methodist Church. The other is Holy Communion. The term, sacrament, is taken from the Latin *sacramentum*, which was a Roman soldier's pledge of allegiance.

A sacrament is God's pledge of love and faithfulness to us, and our responsive pledge of love and faithfulness to God. When we participate in communion and baptism we are affirming how much God loves us and our desire to love and serve God.

2. Does someone have to be baptized to be saved?

Believer's Baptism is practiced in some Christian traditions. A person is baptized when they are old enough and aware enough to accept Jesus as Lord and Savior and pledge their lives to him. In these traditions baptism is a sign to all of this faith commitment. In some of these traditions a person is required to be baptized in order to be "saved" and/or become a member of the church. The responsibility of baptism in these traditions rests almost entirely on the person being baptized.

In our Christian faith tradition, as United Methodists, we believe salvation is a lifelong process toward wholeness of body, mind and spirit, during which we must continue to respond to God's grace. While some people can remember a date and time when they first said "yes" to God's grace through Christ and pledged their lives to following Jesus, many Christians can't point to a single event but rather a gradual unfolding of their understanding of, and response to, God's grace and love toward them.

Salvation, becoming whole, is a process that God initiates and is continually working in us. It requires our ongoing acceptance of God's love and grace, as we understand it, our trust in Christ, and our willingness to grow in our Christian discipleship as long as we live.

Because we believe God is at work in our lives long before our awareness and acceptance of it, baptism signifies this "pre-known" working of God in our lives and offers the promise that the Holy Spirit will always be working in us.



Unlike *believer's baptism*, which requires an individual's knowledge and acceptance of God's grace and love, we affirm baptism as something God does in and for us as part of the journey of salvation. As infants and young children this working of God can, and does happen, without personal awareness or consent. Just because we personally are not aware of it does not make the work of God any less powerful or meaningful.

We believe unbaptized persons, like baptized persons, are loved by God and that God's grace is operative in their lives. We don't believe an infant, child or adult person who dies without having been baptized is condemned or outside the love and salvation of God.

3. Baptism is like a drama with many actors

When an infant or child is presented for baptism there are many people involved in the event:

- **God** – who loves, accepts, and delights in this child and promises, through the Holy Spirit, to be with him/her through life's journey and eternity.
- **Family** – who pledges to do everything they can to raise their child in a way that will lead them to someday accept the Christian faith as their own and live as a disciple of Christ.
- **Pastor** – who, through the act of baptism, represents the expressions of God's love and grace and invites the community of faith to respond.
- **Community of Faith** – pledges to act as mentors, guides, and the family of faith that will do everything it can to support the parents and the child in his/her spiritual formation including Children's Ministry, Youth Ministry, Confirmation Class and opportunities for ongoing spiritual development.

4. To make firm: How Confirmation relates to Infant Baptism

When someone is confirmed, they are "making-firm" the baptismal vows that were made on their behalf by others. This is an intentional act of professing one's own faith in Christ and accepting responsibility of their own faith journey within the life of the congregation.

Most confirmands are youth between the ages of 11 and 14, who have been nurtured in the church since their baptism as an infant or young child. The church offers a deliberate time of preparation for youth to be confirmed.

During confirmation class, our young people learn about the meaning of Christian faith, the history and teachings and The United Methodist Church, and an explanation of the baptismal and membership vows they will be professing.



5. Are there any reasons why baptizing a child should be delayed?

We understand baptism as a means of God's grace toward a child. This grace is to be nurtured in them primarily through their parent(s) and/or sponsors. The role of these adults in the life of a baptized child is so important that if a parent or sponsor (godparent) cannot or will not nurture the child in the faith, then baptism should be postponed until the commitment and opportunity of Christian nurture is possible.

Baptism means a person is received and welcomed into the church, the body of Christ. The questions asked of parents and sponsors, when their infant or child is baptized, are asked on behalf of the infant, and also on behalf of themselves. Those who cannot or will not answer these questions affirmatively, for themselves in good faith, are not yet ready to support another in a journey toward discipleship to Jesus Christ, and so are not able to enter the covenant relationship entailed in baptism.

6. Is it okay to be re-baptized?

We offer baptism to people of all ages who have not previously received Christian baptism in any form. We do not re-baptize those who have already received Christian baptism in any form because we believe baptism is primarily an act of God, and God does it right the first time.

Our side of the covenant relationship with God will need regular opportunities for recommitment and reaffirmation, but God always remains faithful to the divine side of this drama.

7. Do we “dedicate” babies in the United Methodist Church?

No, because the theological understandings of infant dedication and baptism are very different. Dedication is a human act — something we pledge or give to God.

Baptism is relational. It is a divine act, a pledge and gift God gives to us. The baptism of infants includes the reaffirmation of the vows of the baptismal covenant by parents, sponsors, and the congregation, but mostly it celebrates what God is doing and will do in the life of the infant.

Again, once the child reaches the age of confirmation they will be given the opportunity to profess for themselves the faith that was professed by their parents, sponsors and church on their behalf.



8. Is it better to wait and allow our child to decide for themselves?

That's always a parent's prerogative but we would support infant baptism because, just like other decisions we make on behalf of our children (in matters of health, safety, education, for example), we believe this decision is no less important.

We no more wait for our children to decide about being in the family of God than we wait for them to decide if they would like to be a part of our human family.

Of course, they may later reject what we have done for them, but this possibility does not relieve us of the responsibility to do all that we can for them spiritually, as we do in other aspects of their lives.