

UNITED METHODIST CHURCH OVERVIEW OF BAPTISM

Who tells you who you are?

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 “put on Christ.”

Baptism celebrates becoming that new person. That is why the church’s ritual begins with putting off the old, renouncing sin and the evil powers of the world, and pledging our loyalty to Christ.

God Initiates the Covenant

We also believe that in baptism God initiates a covenant with us, announced with the words, “The Holy Spirit works within you, that being born through water and the Spirit, you may be a faithful disciple of Jesus Christ.” This is followed by the sign-act of laying hands on the head, or the signing of the cross on the forehead with oil. The word covenant is a biblical word describing God’s initiative in choosing Israel to be a people with a special mission in the world, and Israel’s response in a life of faithfulness. The baptismal covenant calls us to a similar vocation.

God Has Chosen Us

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 things about us, our true identity, is that we are now sons and daughters of God. That is why the introduction to the United Methodist Baptismal Covenant states, “We are incorporated into God’s mighty acts of salvation and given new birth through water and the Spirit.”

The introduction also says, “Through the Sacrament of Baptism, we are initiated into Christ’s holy church.”

Baptism Is the Door

From the beginning, baptism has been the door through which one enters the church. It was inconceivable to many that one could respond to God’s grace by reciting the renunciations, affirming one’s faith in Christ and loyalty to the Kingdom, without joining the fellowship of those who are committed to mature in that faith. As the “Body of Christ” in the world, baptism commissions us to use our gifts to strengthen the church and to transform the world.

Why Baptize Babies?

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 grace that works in our lives before we are

aware of it, bringing us to faith. The baptism of children and their inclusion in the church before they can respond with their own confirmation of faith is a vivid and compelling witness to prevenient grace.

Baptism Is Forever

Because baptism is a sacrament of God's grace and a covenant that God has initiated, it should not be repeated. However, God's continuing and patient forgiveness, God's prevenient grace, will prompt us to renew the commitment first made at our baptism. At such a time, instead of rebaptism, The United Methodist Church offers the ritual for the reaffirmation of baptismal vows, which implies that, while God remains faithful to God's half of the covenant, we are not always faithful to our promises. Our half of the covenant is to confess Christ as our Savior, trust in his grace, serve him as Lord in the church, and carry out his mission against evil, injustice, and oppression.

Baptism Is the Beginning, Not the End

You have heard people say, "I was baptized Methodist," or "I was baptized Presbyterian," which could mean that in baptism they got their 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. It makes no difference whether you were baptized as an adult or as a child; we all start on that journey at baptism. For the child, the journey begins in the nurturing community of the church, where he or she learns what it means that God loves you. At the appropriate time, the child will make his or her first confession of faith in the ritual the church traditionally calls confirmation. Most often, this is at adolescence or at the time when the person begins to take responsibility for his or her own decisions.

If you experienced God's grace and were baptized as an adult or received baptism as a child and desire to reaffirm your baptismal vows, baptism still marks the beginning of a journey in the nurturing fellowship of the caring, learning, worshipping, serving congregation.

What Is a Sacrament?

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 that we should not perish but have eternal life. That is the most sacred and unfathomable mystery of all. We can experience God's grace at any time and in any place, but in the sacrament of baptism we routinely experience that amazing grace.

—*From A United Methodist Understanding of Baptism* by Mark C. Trotter. Copyright © 2001 by The United Methodist Publishing House.