

This booklet has been written specifically for parents. It also is appropriate to give to the sponsor(s) from the congregation or to godparents. (Note: The term *godparent* is unfamiliar to some United Methodists. Traditionally, a godparent is a witness to the baptism particularly, the godparent declares the Christian faith and promises, along with the parents, to nurture the child toward profession and life as a Christian disciple. Godparents should be practicing Christians, but they do not have to be members of the parent's church.)

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Dear Parents:

This is a time of singular importance for you and for the church. We give thanks to God for the gift of life, and we rejoice with you, the parents, in the birth or adoption of your child. As you come seeking baptism for your child, you will be standing with your child before God and in the presence of the community of faith—the church. Baptism is a time of enacting a covenant and making promises. In and through this initiatory act, God will express and convey God's grace and love to your child, now and forever. You will profess your faith and will promise to raise your child to live a Christian life. The church will respond with its faith and promises.

The pastor will take your baby and sprinkle or pour water over him or her as a sign of the good things that are given and are yet promised. "Through the Sacrament of Baptism we are initiated into Christ's holy church. We are incorporated into God's mighty acts of salvation and given new birth through water and the Spirit. All this is God's gift, offered to us without price" (*The United Methodist Hymnal*, page 33, Number 1).

One of the early Church Fathers said, "Christians are made, not born." None of us becomes Christian by natural inclination, birthright, or inheritance. We all come to the baptismal font and to faith singing, "Just as I am." But none of us can remain faithful without giving ourselves to a lifetime of change, nurture, and growth. God's gift of baptism begins a rebirth in your child. Throughout the New Testament, baptism, is compared to birth and rebirth. In baptism, "by his great mercy he has given us a new birth...like newborn infants" (1 Peter 1:3; 2:2).

THE BEGINNING OF A LIFELONG JOURNEY

To speak of baptism as rebirth is to say that God is doing what God did before in our birth. Our present state is only the beginning of what God intends for us.

We are talking here about a continuing process, a lifelong pilgrimage with God, something that is celebrated one day in the church yet takes a whole life to finish. From the beginning, the church has spoken of baptism not as a momentary ritual but as a lifelong process of conversion and growth. The ritual of baptism is a miniature picture of what our whole life looks like under God.

Every day, from the day of our baptism on, we turn to God asking to have finished in us what was begun at our baptism. We never get too old or too smart or too religious not to let go and let God do God's creative work in us. Daily we must be reborn. Daily we die to our old self so that a new self can come forward. Every morning, life is a resurrection. Daily we wake up to God, wondering what new surprises await us.

A FAMILY NAME

When we were born, we were given our family name. On the day of our birth, we had no idea what that name meant; what all it included; what relatives, responsibilities, traditions, gifts, tasks it might entail. Nevertheless, we were as much a member and participant in our family as we would ever be. What remained was for us to grow, day by day, into an increasing, broadening awareness of what that name meant for us and our life. We have learned what it means as we have shared meals with our family, been instructed in family traditions and values, and observed older mem-

bers of the family as they went about living their lives. In a thousand big and small ways, we grew into our families, increasingly affirming and becoming for ourselves what had been given to us at birth.

In the same way, when we are baptized—at whatever age—we are given the name *Christian*. We are recognized as members of the family of God and are made heirs to God's gracious gifts in Jesus Christ. The child cannot know all that the name *Christian* implies or demands. Nevertheless, on the baptismal day, your child is given everything he or she will ever need to be God's beloved child. What remains is for the child to grow, day by day, through countless conversions, repentings, discoveries, and rebirths into an increasing awareness of what this name really means for living the life of faith.

GOD'S GIFT

All of this comes about as a gift of God. Unfortunately, when we speak of baptism, we often speak first about the parents (your questions, promises, understandings, commitment), or else we discuss the child (the child's age, questions, decisions, understandings). But this misplaces the action of baptism. The chief actor, promisor, and doer of baptism is not the parent or the child, but God—more specifically, God working through the church and the sacraments given to the church by God.

In baptism, God acts to enlarge God's family by adopting, claiming, and naming us as God's children. We cannot join a family; we must be adopted into it. Joining the church, the family of God, is the same. We do not so much join the church as we are joined to the church. God acts to save us because we—on our own, at whatever age—cannot do it for ourselves.

We forget this truth about the faith. It seems more reasonable to assume that we can earn God's love through right actions, right beliefs, right decisions, or right feelings. We often present the Christian faith as an achievement, a goal, or an attainment of sincere and struggling sinners who are trying to get right with God. But this is not the good news of the gospel. In an early baptismal hymn, new Christians were told: "You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, ... God's own people" (1 Peter 2:9).

We are God's very own people, not because of who we are or what we have done, but because of who God is and what God has done. When the Christian faith is presented as something we do, something we decide, some good work of ours, baptism—particularly the baptism of infants—is meaningless. Obviously, little babies cannot decide, think, feel, or do things that would qualify them for such good deeds. But when our salvation is seen as something God does—God's gracious gift to us—then infants surely can be the recipients of that gift. Throughout the Bible, God saves the helpless, the lonely, the needy. What is more helpless, needy, and dependent than a little baby!

Every time an infant is baptized, the church is saying in effect, "This baby, at age six months, is like us at age six years or sixty years—so far as our salvation is concerned." We are always dependent upon God to do for us what we cannot do for ourselves. In baptism, God claims us and adopts us and promises to bring us home—all as a gift. This is grace. And it is amazing!

OUR RESPONSE TO GOD'S GIFT

God gives this gift in ways that we can understand. God uses water, mothers, fathers, the family, the church to convey the divine life to us.

So when your growing child asks, "Who am I?" you can, from this day forth, say, "You are in God's name, royalty: God's very own, claimed, named, chosen, and ordained for God's serious and joyful work."

In baptism, the church confidently and boldly reaches out for your child and says to all the world, "This child is a child of God; this one is God's own, bought with a price, claimed from the beginning of creation." Later, there will be occasions for your child to respond, to say yes, to accept the gift personally. But that yes is a response. The beginning of it all, the condition that enables our responses is God's strong, clear, visible yes to us in baptism. Your child's later yes to God, in words and in daily life, is a continual, lifelong living out of the implications of God's prior yes in baptism. When your child—or any one of us who has been baptized—feels cast adrift, fearful, uncertain, or insecure, let your child remember his or her baptism and take heart.

The true responsibility of baptism is not so much on the infant who is being baptized as upon the church through whom God is doing the baptizing. The church is given the baptizing mandate: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you" (Matthew 28:19-20). Baptism, especially infant baptism, has little meaning outside the presence and promises of the church. Baptism is a gift. We, the church, must be instruments of that gift. We are the congregation of the gifted who are commanded to pass God's good gift on to others, especially to our children.

Baptism is much more than mere infant dedica-

tion, more than a time for parents to dedicate their children to God. That takes the action away from God. When children are baptized, the parents and the church are dedicated as instruments of God's love and grace so that our children might grow in grace.

All of our family devotions, involvement with children in worship, youth ministry, sermons, confirmation classes, altar calls, the Lord's Supper, and church fellowship gatherings are part of the church's continuing baptismal work, all part of the gift. That's why our children must be included fully in the total life of the church.

New Christians learn what being "incorporated into God's mighty acts of salvation" (*The United Methodist Hymnal*, page 33, Number 1) means in the same way we learn what it means to be in a human family: We share in the sacred meals of the church (Holy Communion or the Lord's Supper), fellowship gatherings, the Sunday worship, and church school. We observe older Christians and the way they go about living their lives. We say yes on one day, and on many successive days, to all the promises that we as parents and the church make on behalf of our children when we bring them to baptism.

As the pastor baptizes your child, we are saying: "We are baptizing you and receiving you into the church. God loves you and has great plans for your life. But you will need the rest of us to tell you the Story. From time to time, we shall need to remind you who you are and to keep you in God's family. We shall ask some of our members to guide you and watch over you as you grow in faith. All of us promise to adopt you and to be your brothers and sisters in Christ." (See *The United Methodist Hymnal*, page 35, Number 8 and page 37, Number 11.)

The promises of baptism, the responsibilities placed upon the participants, the word of grace, the loving action of God, the demand for lifelong response are the same for all, regardless of the age of the one who is baptized. So, at whatever age we come to those graceful waters, we rise from darkness to light and from loneliness to community. As fragile and dependent as a newborn baby, we need the love and warmth of God's human family. It is our prayer that your child may keep saying yes, keep accepting the gifts and the name, until the name *Christian* will one day be claimed as his or her own.

Looking forward to that day, you now stand before God and the people of God. Because your child cannot know all that must be done and said to be a Christian, you will take certain actions in your child's behalf. Ponder seriously the vows you assume and the profession you make.

"Will you nurture [*your child*] in Christ's holy church, that by your teaching and example [*your child*] may be guided to accept God's grace..., to profess...faith openly, and to lead a Christian life?" (*The United Methodist Hymnal*, page 34, Number 5).

Entrust your child to God's grace. Stand, knowing that God's grace and love are sufficient, that God will keep the divine promises made to you and to your child at baptism.

Through baptism we acknowledge and celebrate with you your child's entrance into the community of faith and into the reign of God. "With God's help we will proclaim the good news and live according to the example of Christ. We will surround [*your child*] with community of love and forgive-

ness, that *[your child]* may grow in...trust of God, and be found faithful in...service to others. We will pray...that *[your child]* may be [a true disciple who walks] in the way that leads to life" (*The United Methodist Hymnal*, page 35, Number 8).

This booklet was written by Bishop William H. Willimon, when he taught at Duke Divinity School, Duke University, Durham, North Carolina.