“What does baptism mean, and why is it important?” It has been my experience in pastoral ministry that there are many misunderstandings about Baptism that are unnecessary. I believe that pastors can and should do a better job of teaching the congregations they serve about the meaning of a sacrament so important to the Christian faith. I will base my answers regarding Baptism on Scripture as illuminated by the teaching of John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, and the current doctrinal stance of The United Methodist Church.

First, Jesus was baptized and commands his disciples to baptize. The Gospels, in Matthew 3, Mark 1, and Luke 3, explicitly report the baptism of Jesus, and it is implied in John 1. Then, according to Matthew 28:18-20, “18 And Jesus came and said to them, ‘All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 19 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, 20 and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.’”¹ This Great Commission is the basis of Christian missionary activity and the clearest New Testament command, of which I am aware, to baptize.

In the book of Acts and in Paul’s letters, it is clear that the disciples obeyed Christ’s command to baptize. In Acts 2:38, following Peter’s sermon to the crowd and command to be baptized, a reported 3,000 persons are baptized and added to the church. One assumes that men, women, and children were included in this baptism of 3,000. Philip baptizes after preaching the Gospel in Acts 8:12. In 8:38, he then baptizes the Ethiopian eunuch. In Acts 10:48, Peter allows for the baptism of Gentiles after the Holy Spirit falls on them. In Acts 16:15, Paul’s ministry

¹ Matthew 28:18-20, NRSV
companions baptize Lydia and her household. After their miraculous release from prison in Acts 16:33, Paul’s companions baptize the Philippian jailer and his household. In Acts 19, those who had previously been baptized only in the name of John are baptized in the name of Jesus.

I will highlight three important statements regarding baptism made by Paul in his letters. Referring again to the baptism of a household, Paul relays in 1 Corinthians 1:16 that one of the few persons he had personally baptized was the household of Stephanus. This adds to the lists of passages explaining large groups or households who were baptized together. I will later explain how these passages play into Wesley’s defense of infant baptism.

As to the theological meaning of baptism, it is obvious from all of these references and from Jesus’ command to baptize that baptism serves as a rite of initiation into the Church. In addition, in Romans 6:3, Paul writes that when followers of Christ are baptized, we are baptized into Christ’s death. Therefore, in some way, baptism identifies the one baptized with the death of Christ. Then, in 1 Corinthians 12:13, Paul explains that followers of Christ are baptized into one body, the Body of Christ. This includes Jews, Greeks, slaves, and freepersons, breaking down the social and religious walls that previously separated these groups. This indicates the new radical type of fellowship that is to be expected in the Church.

Because it is instituted by Christ, along with the Eucharist, baptism is considered a sacrament by the Roman Catholic Church and by the majority of Protestant churches. In his sermon, On Baptism, John Wesley defines a sacrament as, “…instituted by Christ, who alone has power to institute a proper sacrament, a sign, a seal, pledge and means of grace, perpetually obligatory to all Christians.”2 Wesley cites the Anglican definition of a sacrament in his sermon, The Means of Grace, as “an outward sign of an inward grace.”3

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Wesley calls baptism “the initiatory sacrament which enters us into covenant with God.”4 He equates baptism, as an initiatory rite, with circumcision in the Abrahamic covenant.5 In support, Wesley cites Colossians 2:14, in its context of 2:11-2:14, in which Paul associates circumcision with baptism. The gender inclusiveness of baptism contrasted with male circumcision is obvious. Lydia and other women in the New Testament were baptized, so, unlike male circumcision of the old covenant, the initiatory sacrament of baptism is open to both men and women.

The role of baptism as the initiatory sacrament of the Church raises four primary questions. First, what specifically does baptism accomplish regarding sin and cleansing? Second, is baptism synonymous with the new birth? Third, because the Bible is the primary authority for the faith of United Methodists, is the baptism of infants biblical? Fourth, is there a preferred mode of baptism in the biblical text?

As to what baptism accomplishes regarding sin and holiness, Paul connects baptism, justification and sanctification. After listing various sins, he writes in 1 Corinthians 6:11, “And this is what some of you used to be. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God.” Paul does not make the washing synonymous with justification and sanctification, but for Paul, the three are connected in some way. Wesley explicitly taught that baptism washes “away the guilt of original

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4 (Outler 1964, 319)

5 (Outler 1964, 322)
sin by the application of the merits of Christ’s death.”

The United Methodist doctrinal statement on baptism entitled *By Water and the Spirit*, states, “When we receive baptism, the forgiving, cleansing, saving power of God is applied to our individual lives.”

Regarding the new birth, there is great potential for misunderstanding the meaning of baptism in infants and adults. Anecdotally, I am aware that some parents in the congregations I have served, whether active members or only loosely connected with the church, have understood baptism to be a once-for-all saving act for their infants. In other words, they have believed that once their infant was baptized, he or she was guaranteed eternal life regardless of any future decision of the infant, once grown.

Repeatedly, the teaching of the New Testament emphasizes the life of discipleship, the act of following Christ, and not a reliance on baptism for salvation. The Protestant doctrine of justification by faith holds that we are saved by God’s action in our lives as we respond to God in faith, not by our own works. Nothing in the New Testament teaches that baptism, alone, justifies an individual or that baptism is necessary for salvation. Baptism is commanded by Christ and should be the normal, or ordinary, practice of all Christians, but we are not justified by baptism.

Wesley taught that the new birth is not synonymous with the baptism of an adult. In speaking of baptized adult, Wesley expressly states, “And, first, it follows that baptism is not the new birth: they are not one and the same thing.” Even if a church or denomination practices only adult believer’s baptism, the baptism of an adult does not effect the new birth. Baptism is

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6 (Outler 1964, 321)


8 (Outler and Heitzenrater 1991, 342)
the outward sign of an inward grace, and if the inward grace has not been received by the one being baptized, the outward sign does not necessarily produce it.

Is the baptism of infants biblical? Wesley devotes the last half of his sermon *On Baptism* to defending the baptism of infants. He lists 12 points in his argument, and I will briefly mention a few here. Like all humans, infants are guilty of original sin, and this makes them proper subjects to be cleansed of original sin in baptism. Infants have a right to participate in covenant with God. Baptism is the new circumcision which was performed on infants of the old covenant. The apostles baptized whole households, and it is reasonable to assume that these households included children (Wesley devotes two similar points to emphasizing this argument). In agreement with Wesley, *By Water and the Spirit* argues in favor of infant baptism from tradition that infant baptism has been the normal practice of the majority of Christians throughout Christian history. It is important to note that adults who lack the cognitive ability to make a personal profession of faith have the right to be baptized. Those baptized, both adults and infants become members of The United Methodist Church.

Wesley did teach that the baptism of an infant does effect the new birth in the infant. However, the infant must grow to develop an active personal faith in Christ in order to be

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9 (Outler 1964, 324)
10 Ibid. 324
11 Ibid. 325
12 Ibid. 326
13 (Felton 1997, 28)
15 (Outler and Heitzenrater 1991, 342)
justified by faith. This may happen at confirmation when the child has grown to 12 or 13 years of age or before or after. Scott Jones observes that Wesley, living in a culture in which nearly all infants were baptized, placed emphasis on the need for the new birth.\textsuperscript{16} Langford acknowledges the “tension” felt by Wesley, and points out that Wesley stressed the remedial action of repentance and affirmation of baptism by those having been previously baptized.\textsuperscript{17}

Of utmost importance is that the baptism of the infant \textit{does not} secure salvation for the infant if the infant, becoming older, does not one day respond to God’s justifying grace in a personal way. \textit{By Water and the Spirit} is clear that “The United Methodist Church does not accept either idea that only believer’s baptism is valid or the notion that the baptism of infants magically imparts salvation apart from active personal faith. Pastors are instructed by the \textit{Book of Discipline} to explain our teaching clearly on these matters, so that parents(s) or sponsors might be free of misunderstandings.”\textsuperscript{18}

Lastly, the mode of baptism is not contested by United Methodists. The United Methodist Church allows that baptism be performed by immersion, pouring, or sprinkling. This is consistent with Wesley’s teaching.\textsuperscript{19} Jones points out that Wesley believed John the Baptist baptized so many individuals in the River Jordan that he could not have immersed all of them. Instead, Wesley believes that John may have baptized by pouring or even casting water on them.\textsuperscript{20} More importantly for United Methodists, enough water should be employed in baptism

\begin{footnotes}
\item \textsuperscript{16} (Jones 2002, 260)
\item \textsuperscript{17} Langford, Thomas A. Practical Divinity: Theology in the Wesleyan Tradition, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1983, 39.
\item \textsuperscript{18} (Felton 1997, 30)
\item \textsuperscript{19} (Outler 1964, 319)
\item \textsuperscript{20} (Jones 2002, 261)
\end{footnotes}
that the community is aware that water is being used, as water is the material symbol of the sacrament.\textsuperscript{21} Wesley was aware of Jewish baptismal practices, and it should be noted that Jewish baptism was generally thought of as immersion. The \textit{miqvaoth}, ritual baths, were large enough to allow for immersion for this reason.\textsuperscript{22}

In my ministry, I prefer to immerse adults who have responded to God in repentance and faith because of the symbolic power of immersion, and I believe that this was the most common practice of the apostles. I will gladly practice infant baptism by sprinkling (my infant son was baptized this past Sunday March 13, 2011). I wholeheartedly agree with Wesley that infants have a right to enter into covenant with God through the initiatory sacrament of baptism. I will also carefully and clearly teach all parents, sponsors, and congregations I serve that the baptism of an infant must be accompanied by the repentance and faith of the infant when he or she grows older in order for the infant to appropriate the justification granted by God in baptism.

Baptism is the sacrament of initiation in the Church. It is commanded by Christ, although not necessary to salvation. All persons desiring to follow Christ have the right to be baptized. This includes children and adults who lack the cognitive ability to make a personal profession of faith. During the baptism of a child, it is the vow and responsibility of parents, guardians, and the local congregation to nurture the child in the way of Jesus. Finally, when any person possesses the capability of making a personal profession of faith, this profession is necessary for the new birth to be a reality in the person’s life in order for the person to receive justifying, or saving, grace.

\textsuperscript{21} Ibid. 261

Bibliography


