

Infant baptism—it's all about grace

The baptism of a baby signals that God acts on our behalf even before we are able to respond.

By Tom Walker

The overstuffed shoebox lay long forgotten in a closet in my mother's apartment. When I opened the box, out poured letters recording four years of correspondence (1958–62) between my parents and an adoption agency. Four years before I was even born, my parents were hard at work preparing a place for me. Even before I received my name, before I was baptized in our small Presbyterian church, before I could respond with the words “I love you,” my parents cared for me. In that shoebox was a history of love and grace that preceded any action on my part.

This discovery has given me an image to share with parents in the congregation where I am pastor. Baptism is the church's celebration of the fact that God has “shoeboxes” for all of God's adopted children, meaning all of us. In infant baptism we visibly proclaim the central tenet of our Reformed faith: God's grace toward humanity.

When we baptize an infant, we testify that God's grace acts on our behalf before we are capable of responding. The child plays no role except to be there, and must later be told what happened. Baptism is a clear presentation of work being done on the child's behalf, for no other reason than that the child is loved—by the parents, by the congregation and, most important, by God.

In infant baptism we testify to the world that God acts lovingly and graciously on our behalf before we have a chance to respond. This testimony reminds us that we are loved in spite of our brokenness. In a culture steeped in the symbols of self-help and individual achievement, the practice of infant baptism provides a clear and practically unambiguous visual image of God's grace.

Thomas W. Walker is pastor of Palms Presbyterian Church in Jacksonville Beach, Fla.

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QUICK Q&A about infant baptism

Does infant baptism make the baby a Christian?

Technically, no. God's grace is the saving action. Infant baptism is a witness to that grace but does not hold magical powers to save. Thus, we do not believe that unbaptized infants are either doomed or saved. Salvation is the work of God.

Why is baptism done as part of a worship service?

The child's parents and the congregation make promises to nurture the baptized child in the Christian faith.

Is anything expected of the child?

In promising to share with the child the good news of God's grace in Jesus Christ, the parents and congregation hope that the child eventually will come to trust in those claims and promises and publicly profess Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior.



A VISIBLE REMINDER OF GOD'S LOVE: Aliko Galloway, right, pastor of Kwanzaa Community Church in Minneapolis, baptizing Alexis Renee Sanders (held by elder Arneuwel Benefield)

Christ's body, the community of faith. The basic meaning of "member" is a part or limb. All of this implies that trying to live the Christian life apart from the church is a contradiction in terms.

Baptism calls us to the kind of mutual caring and sharing that characterized the early Christians and made others say about them, "See how they love one another!"

3. God's baptismal claim on us is transforming and liberating.

Traditionally Presbyterians have understood the efficacy of the sacrament of baptism to be centered in the transforming power of the Holy Spirit. New Testament baptismal texts like Colossians 2:8-3:17 remind us that baptism initiates a lifelong process of transformation and liberation, both in the community of faith and in the individuals who belong to it. In that process we die to all that is evil in both our common life and our personal lives—as we are raised together to new life in Christ.

There is a troubling tendency in the church today to define liberation in terms that set it over against personal transformation. Too often freedom is misunderstood as the right to follow some self-defined path to personal fulfillment on the assumption that the transformation of our desires, habits, values or natural tendencies is impossible.

Baptism calls us to hope in God for more. We baptize in the strong name of the Trinity. God is not only our Creator. In Christ, God is also our Redeemer. As the Holy Spirit, God is also our Liberator and Transformer. As Christians, we are not left to resign ourselves to the natural limitations and possibilities of our world; our culture or our individual tendencies.

The triune God who created the world is also actively at work in that world, to redeem and transform it according to the vision of the divine reign.

Through faith in this triune God, baptism calls us all to share in the ministry of transformation and liberation that is the work of the Spirit who lives in our midst. As we embrace this call in this life, we will find ourselves being personally and corporately transformed by the living God as we receive foretastes of that genuine freedom that consists in harmony with God's ultimate

purpose for the whole creation.

Philip W. Butin is co-pastor, with his wife, Jan Butin, of First United Presbyterian Church in Fayetteville, Ark. He served formerly as president and professor of theology at San Francisco Theological Seminary and is the author of several books on the Reformed tradition and Christian theology.



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