

# FAQs about Baptism, Membership, and Salvation

by Dr. Gayle C. Felton and Peggy Sewell

**Note:** Please also see [FAQs on Membership and Records for the 2005-2008 Quadrennium](#)

**Q: Does The United Methodist Church now have an accepted understanding of baptismal theology and practice?**

**A: Yes.** Our church's position is expressed in the services of the Baptismal Covenant (especially Baptismal Covenant I) in *The United Methodist Hymnal, 1989*, and *The United Methodist Book of Worship, 1992*, and in [By Water and the Spirit: A United Methodist Understanding of Baptism, 1996](#). All of these have been approved by the General Conference — the only body that can speak for the whole denomination.

**Q: What does United Methodism fundamentally believe about baptism?**

**A: Baptism is a sacrament.** In a sacrament, God uses common elements — in this case, water — as means or vehicles of divine grace. Baptism is administered by the church as the Body of Christ. It is the act of God through the grace of Jesus Christ and the work of the Holy Spirit.

**Q: What is the difference between infant baptism and believer's baptism?**

**A: In infant baptism, God claims the child with divine grace.** Clearly the child can do nothing to save himself or herself, but is totally dependent on God's grace, as we all are — whatever our age. In believer's baptism, the person being baptized is publicly professing her or his own decision to accept Christ. Believer's baptism is an ordinance, not a sacrament. United Methodists baptize people of all ages who have not previously received the sacrament. Even when the people being baptized are believing adults and are ready to profess their faith, our emphasis is upon the gracious action of God rather than upon the individual's decision.

**Q: May we have our baby dedicated instead of baptized?**

**A: No.** The theological understandings of the two services are very different. Dedication is a human act — something we pledge or give to God. Baptism is a divine act, a pledge and gift God gives to us. Baptism includes vows of dedication, but chiefly it celebrates what God is doing and will do.

**Q: Isn't it better to wait until they are older and let our children decide for themselves whether or not they want to be baptized?**

**A: No.** 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. As parents, we make many decisions — in matters of health, safety, education, for example — for our children. 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.

**Q: How about christening?**

**A: Christening is not a separate or different service; it is the same as baptism.** The use of the term *christening* for the sacrament probably comes from two sources: *chrism* is the word for the anointing oil traditionally used in baptism as a sign of the sealing by the Holy Spirit; second, in the past, children were sometimes actually given their (Christian) names in baptism. In our current ritual, parents are not asked for the name of the child, but the pastor does baptize with that name and without using the family or surname. This meaning of *christening* is expressed, for example, in a ceremony for the naming of a ship. Unfortunately, the term *christening* has been used sometimes in our history as a way of diminishing the significance of infant baptism or of indicating that it is something different from and less than the baptism of an adult. This view is completely inconsistent with the Wesleyan understanding as expressed in *By Water and the Spirit*, the Services of the Baptismal Covenant in our hymnal and book of worship, and *The Book of Discipline*.

**Q: Is sprinkling the only way that United Methodists baptize?**

**A: No, our church has always offered to people being baptized and to the parents of infants the choice of sprinkling, pouring, or immersion.**

**Q: May I be baptized again if I feel the need?**

**A: No, baptism is an act of God, and God does it right the first time.** Our side of the covenant relationship with God will need recommitment and reaffirmation, but God always remains faithful to the divine side.

**Q: How can I "remember [my] baptism and be thankful" when I was baptized as a baby?**

**A: What we are called to remember in reaffirmation is the gift of God's grace, not a particular event.** Through appropriate remembrances and celebrations, our children can be enabled to "remember" their baptism as much as they "remember" their physical birthday.

**Q: May a person who has not been baptized participate in Holy Communion?**

**A: Yes, our church does not seek to close God's Table,** although the historic and normal Christian order of the sacraments is baptism first — as birth into the family — and Communion following, as continuing nurture at the family table. Pastors and congregations reach out and encourage those who partake at the Table to share fully in the life of God's people, including coming to the font after appropriate preparation.

**Q: Should every baby be baptized?**

**A: No, the baptism of a baby assumes that the child will be nurtured and formed in the faith at home and at church.**

**Q: How do we express our own decisions to be Christian disciples if we have already been baptized as infants?**

**A: In services of profession of faith and confirmation before the congregation,** we respond to God's grace by repenting of our sins, declaring our faith in Jesus Christ, and becoming professing members of the church.

**Q: Does baptism mean that I am saved?**

**A: No, salvation is a lifelong process** during which we must continue to respond to God's grace. Baptism offers the promise that the Holy Spirit will always be working in our lives, but salvation requires our acceptance of that grace, trust in Christ, and ongoing growth in holiness as long as we live.

**Q: Do I have to be baptized in order to be saved?**

**A: No, but baptism is a gift of God's grace to be received as part of the journey of salvation.** To refuse to accept baptism is to reject one of the means of grace that God offers us.

**Q: How can I recommit myself to Christ when I have had a powerful spiritual experience?**

**A: Confirmation and profession of faith are only the first of our affirmations of faith.** As we experience God's work in our ongoing lives of discipleship, we can express our commitment through participation in services of baptismal reaffirmation (Baptismal Covenant IV).

**Q: Does baptism make me a member of the church?**

**A: Yes, baptism is the act of initiation and incorporation into the universal church of Jesus Christ, The United Methodist Church,** and the local congregation, as our ritual makes very clear.

**Q: Is there more than one category of church membership, according to *By Water and the Spirit*?**

**A: Yes, all people who are baptized become baptized members.** Those who are baptized at an age at which they are capable of professing their faith must do so and become professing members as well (they cannot choose to be baptized members only). Those baptized as infants or young children do not become professing members until they are able to profess their own faith.

**Q: Does this mean that little children can vote and hold office in the church?**

**A: No, the governance of the church and other such matters will be the privilege and responsibility of professing members.** A similar distinction operates in secular government: Children become American citizens when they are born, but they cannot vote or hold office until later in life.

**Q: Will our church start counting baptized members and regain the membership numbers we have lost in the last several decades?**

**A: No.** While other records will certainly be kept, only professing numbers are to be counted in statistics of church membership.

**Q: How will our system of rolls and record keeping be changed?**

**A new system of record keeping designed by the General Council on Finance and Administration will go into use in January 2005.** These new records and forms are in accord with actions of the General Conference regarding our theological understanding of baptism and membership. The most salient changes are the development of a "Record of Faith Journey" for each member and of a "Permanent Church Register. "

**Q: What is the difference between "full member" and "professing member"?**

**A: The difference is the distinction between an institutional orientation and a communal orientation.** To be a "full member" is something anyone can be in any secular (or volunteer) organization. Being a "full member" usually means simply that "I have joined the institution; I have paid my dues." To be a "professing member" is to make a statement of commitment and participation in a community of disciples. Being a "professing member" expresses continuing action both within the faith community and in the world. It is a statement about an individual's ongoing relationship and commitment to God and the church through Jesus Christ.

**Q: Is a "baptized member" and a "preparatory member" the same thing?**

**A: No. "preparatory members" are people the church views as candidates for membership.** That category includes "baptized children and youth of the church eighteen years of age and under who are not full members, and other persons who have been enrolled in confirmation preparation." (*2000 Book of Discipline* ¶ 229.2 ) "Baptized members" communicates our sacramental understanding that in baptism people "are initiated into Christ's holy church." ("Services of the Baptismal Covenant," Service I and II)

**Q: Why does The United Methodist Church so understand baptism, membership, and salvation?**

**A: United Methodism stands in the historic heritage of the Christian faith through the ages and, specifically, in the legacy of John Wesley.** Wesley was an Anglican priest. As a result, United Methodism has inherited a "high" understanding of the church, the sacraments, and other aspects of worship. Wesley was also an evangelical revivalist. As a result, United Methodism emphasizes the necessity of conversion, personal relationship with Christ, and witnessing to others. Neither of these aspects alone represents who we are. As United Methodists, we hold the two together in our baptismal theology and practice and in our broader understanding of how God works in our lives for salvation.

*Dr. Gayle C. Felton and Peggy Sewell prepared this Q & A for the General Board of Discipleship. Local church leaders and other entities of The United Methodist Church are urged to make use of this information in teaching and forming a deeper appreciation and understanding of the sacraments. The church's official paper on baptism, **By Water and the Spirit: A United Methodist Understanding of Baptism** is available online.*

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