

The Following Excerpts are from the book, [“Preparing for Baptism in the Episcopal Church”](#)  
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## What is Baptism?

*Holy Baptism is full initiation by water and Holy Spirit into Christ’s Body the Church. The bond which God establishes in Baptism is indissoluble. (BCP, p. 298)*

Thus baptism is defined in the Book of Common Prayer, the liturgical book of The Episcopal Church. But what does this mean? If we were to dissect this statement, we might point to the word “initiation” as being of obvious importance. We might also be drawn to the word “full.”

The Episcopal Church claims that baptism is **full initiation**. Nothing else is needed for membership. Any baptized person, regardless of age, ability, gender, ethnicity, or any other human characteristic, is fully a part of the church. Thus baptism should not be entered into lightly or without preparation. God is the agent in baptism; God originates this initiation. It is God who establishes the bond. God is the actor here. Through baptism, people are bound to God and God will not let go. Ever. In fact, that bond, made by water and the Holy Spirit, is “indissoluble.” It cannot be dissolved. We say that God is faithful. Even as believers, we act unfaithfully toward God all the time. But God never loses faith in us.

**Baptism is the result of God’s grace**, the unearned favor of God. People enter into baptism, or choose to have their children baptized, because they have yearned for God and have begun turning to God in Christ. This turning is the beginning of what Christians call conversion, a process in which both God and the seeker take an active part. But make no mistake; it is God the Holy Spirit who confers new life.

**Baptism is also a sacrament.** In fact, according to the catechism found in the Book of Common Prayer (BCP, pp. 845–862), it is one of two that Jesus initiates. The other is the Eucharist. A sacrament is an outward and visible sign of inward and spiritual grace. The outward and visible sign of baptism is the water along with the words of the triune formula. The inward and spiritual grace conferred by

baptism is nothing less than union with Jesus Christ. And this union encompasses birth into God's family, forgiveness of sins, and new life in the Holy Spirit. And for centuries, people have been willing to take the plunge.

## **Why get Baptized?**

Baptism is never about getting one's feet wet or testing the waters. As Bishop Michael Curry has said, whether the priest sprinkles water on a baptismal candidate or dunks her in a river, baptism is nothing less than full immersion into the power of the Holy Spirit. Why would anyone want to do that?

To choose to be baptized is to choose to enter deeply into a life in Christ. And this means to enter into the mystery of Christ's death and resurrection. Even though the baptism service itself might take place in a beautiful church on a glorious spring morning, the church teaches that through baptism one must actually die to one life in order to be born into another. Those baptized die to a life that is not centered on Christ, so as to be born anew into one that makes no sense without the love of Christ.

The Christian life is about more than a set of values. It is about believing that Christ conquered sin and death. It is about the assurance that comes with having a savior who has suffered the worst the world has to offer, has overcome death, and has risen to respond in love. The Christian life is about more than getting into heaven. It is about choosing to love others each day because God first loved us, and because all people are God's beloved.

The Christian life is about feeding the hungry, finding the lost, comforting the bereft, healing the broken, setting free the oppressed. The Christian life is about making a difference in the world each day. It is about loving God and loving one's neighbor—and one's neighbor turns out to be everybody. The Christian life demands all of one's being. And the Christian life makes sense out of all of one's being. Choosing to be baptized is to choose to be transformed by love over and over again for a lifetime. And beyond.

## **The Creeds and Ancient Practices**

Choosing to be baptized is also to take on a particular set of beliefs. Creeds are statements of belief; in fact, the word "creed" comes from the Latin *credo* or "I

believe.” The Episcopal Church uses two creeds in worship: the Apostles’ Creed and the Nicene Creed. The Nicene Creed was developed at the Council of Nicea in 325 and is a sophisticated theological statement about basic Christian tenants. The Apostles’ Creed is more ancient, its very name deriving from a story that the first apostles themselves each wrote a line. What is known about the Apostles’ Creed is that it is not only a statement of belief, but also an ancient baptismal formula. In the early church, a Christian baptism might have looked something like the following:

*Having spent several months or even years of instruction in the Christian faith and practices, an adult would be ready for baptism. On the day of the baptism, the converts would first be taken to a baptistry adjoining the main worship area. There, they would be asked about their belief, “Do you believe in God the Father?” They would respond with the formulaic lines that they had been taught, but which also encapsulated the theological understanding of the first person of the Trinity. Having answered, they would then be submerged into the water. They would then be asked, “Do you believe in Jesus Christ, the Son of God?” Their affirmative response would be followed by a second submersion. Finally, they would be asked, “Do you believe in God the Holy Spirit?” and upon answering with the last part of the creed they would undergo a third submersion. Then the newly baptized would each be clothed in a clean white garment as a sign of new birth, and led in procession to the church where the community would already be gathered in prayer. There they would be welcomed and immediately join in the celebration of the Eucharist, receiving communion for the first time.*

Even have spent up to three years in instruction in the Christian faith, the newly baptized did not consider themselves mature Christians. Rather they, and the community of believers, knew that they would continue to grow into the full stature of Christ. They were practicing Christians—followers of Christ who practiced every day. Then, as today, what follows baptism is lifelong formation in the Christian faith as a disciple of Jesus.

## **Baptism of Adults**

There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all. ... But each of us was given grace according to the

measure of Christ's gift. The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ. —Ephesians 4:4–7, 11–13

It is easy to be a member of The Episcopal Church and think that baptism is primarily for infants or very young children. Many adults in the church were themselves baptized as infants, and one can certainly grow up in The Episcopal Church without ever witnessing an adult baptism. However, while baptizing infants and young children may seem the norm in The Episcopal Church, both tradition and the theology of the Book of Common Prayer show a preference for adult baptism.

After all, those first baptized in the name of Jesus were mostly adults. Scripture does contain stories of entire households being baptized, which presumably would have included people of many ages, as the early Christians were spreading a new faith in the world. But the majority of converts were adults who had heard the preaching and teaching of the first apostles and were inspired to commit themselves to the new life offered by Jesus.

Today, many adults come to baptism because they are seeking meaning. Sometimes an important life event, such as the birth of a child or an experience of tragedy, compels a person to ask questions such as “What is my life about?” or “Where is God in all this?” A person can slowly or suddenly discover a hunger for God, and may yearn for a life that, as the apostle Paul describes, can be lived “with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.” (Eph. 4:2–3)

In The Episcopal Church, an adult preparing for baptism is called a catechumen. This word, coming from the Greek *κατηχούμενος*, means one being instructed. From ancient times it was understood that adult converts to the Christian faith should undergo a period of instruction and immersion in the principles and practices of the faith before being baptized. As baptism is initiation into the Christian faith, it is sensible that a time of education precede the baptism. One ought to know and understand what kind of promises one is going to make. But baptism is also a response to conversion, and conversion to faith in Christ is God's

action. Part of baptismal preparation is becoming more deeply aware of God's work in one's life. Instruction also happens through experience, and in particular the experience one has within a Christian faith community. This process of instruction and experience is formally called the catechumenate, although not every Episcopal church uses this term.

## **Being a Disciple**

Adult baptism is about becoming a disciple, a follower. Being a follower of Jesus comes with certain responsibilities. Jesus is clear in his teaching that there is an ethic for his followers, which is most clearly expressed in what is known as the two great commandments: Love God with all your heart and soul and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself (Matthew 22:37–40, Mark 12:29–31, Luke 10:25–28). Preparing for baptism is not just about learning the words of the creed, or becoming familiar with how a congregation worships. It is about being formed in the faith, and beginning to absorb “Christian understandings of God, human relationships, and the meaning of life...”<sup>1</sup> Christian formation includes learning the Christian story, practicing prayer, worshipping in community, and exploring one's gifts for ministry. Christian formation continues after baptism, as the newly baptized encounters the mystery of faith again and again. Christian formation is, in fact, lifelong. Baptism is full initiation, but living into one's baptism takes a lifetime. Being a Christian is not just about going to church or holding certain values. It is a way of life. In its best practice, it is a way of life that brings love, hope, and a holy purpose to everyday life.

## **Baptism of Children**

*O God, you have taught us through your blessed Son that whoever receives a little child in the name of Christ receives Christ himself: We give you thanks for the blessing you have bestowed upon this family in giving them a child. Confirm their joy by a lively sense of your presence with them, and give them calm strength and patient wisdom as they seek to bring this child to love all that is true and noble, lovable and gracious, excellent and admirable, following the example of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen. (BCP, p. 443)*

Choosing to have one's child baptized is a question of faith. Not only journey with many unexpected twists and turns, and the Christian life is also full of surprises.

The Book of Common Prayer assumes that faithful parenting comes with the “gift and heritage of children.” Children are to be nurtured “in the knowledge and love of the Lord” and the community of faith prays that parents are afforded the grace to bring their children up to know, love, and serve God. (BCP, pp. 429, 423)

Parents are encouraged to bring their child to the congregation to be welcomed, as soon as possible after adoption or birth. This welcoming can be formal, using the service “A Thanksgiving for the Birth or Adoption of a Child” (BCP, 439–445), which is distinct from baptism. This rite can also be used in the hospital or home. Support for the family in their life in Christ has already begun as the congregation prays that God will confirm the parents’ joy. Thus, even before a child is baptized, parents and the faith community alike anticipate the gifts that come with a life in Christ.

Parents seek baptism for their child for a variety of reasons. Some do it out of a sense of tradition or family expectation; some do it out of a desire for their child to have a vibrant life of faith; most do it out of love. Most parents choose baptism because they want something good for their child. When asked what they hope the result of their parenting will be, parents respond that they want their children to grow up to be responsible. Caring. Happy. Concerned for others. Compassionate. Able and willing to make good choices. Loving. Parents who seek baptism for their children have a sense that being part of a community of faith will help them raise their children to be all of these things.

And they are not wrong. To enter into Christian baptism is a choice; and in the case of infants or very young children, it is a choice that parents are making for their children. Like choosing what music to play in the nursery, or what foods to introduce their children to, or what activities to enroll them in, baptism is a parenting decision. Ultimately, it is about how to raise a child, and parents who choose baptism are choosing to raise their children with an active faith life. The faith life of any parent is unique. Thus, how any parent envisions spirituality as part of her or his child’s life differs. Yet, when several different parents bring their children to an Episcopal church on a given Sunday for the sacrament of baptism, they will all meet within the same community, at the same font, for the same ritual.

## Why Baptize a Baby

With an understanding that baptism is a choice, and a commitment to a new life in Christ, and that the initiation includes promises that are made, and that the Book of Common Prayer shows a preference for adult baptism, why do we baptize infants in The Episcopal Church? After all, the catechism, or teaching, of The Episcopal Church states that at baptism individuals are required to renounce Satan, repent of sins, and accept Jesus as Lord and Savior (BCP, p. 858). Infants can do none of these things. So the obvious question is, why are infants baptized at all? Why not just bless them and allow them to make a choice about their baptism when they are older? The answer is really twofold.

First, infants are baptized so that they can be full members of the community of faith, the Body of Christ, and can grow up being formed by that fellowship and sharing in all the benefits. Children are honored as complete human beings in The Episcopal Church, and they are considered worthy of “citizenship in the Covenant” (BCP, p. 858), that is the sacred agreement between God and God’s people. But it is perhaps even more important to remember that God acts in baptism. Never underestimate the power of God. We may think that an infant has neither understanding of what is happening in the baptismal rite nor any capacity to make the required promises. But we have no idea how God is acting in that child’s life. Children are born with a physical body, an emotional and psychological make-up, and a spirituality as well. Whether as adults we can perceive it or not, children enter this world with a relationship with God and God is already working in their lives. It is the Christian belief that all human beings are created in the image of God. Even infants have a faith life. To deny this, or to assume that they need to be of a certain age or ability to engage in a life of faith, is to treat them as less than fully human. What infant baptism is not is some kind of divine protection system. God loves all of God’s creation and all of God’s creatures, including each human being, whether baptized or not. While some parents may fear that an unbaptized child who dies will not go to heaven, this is simply not the teaching of The Episcopal Church (see “A Brief History of Baptism,” pp. 10–14).

Parents who choose to have their infants or young children baptized often articulate that at some level they see baptism as a form of protection. Even adults might approach baptism with this idea in mind. Baptism is really not about holy fire insurance. Rather it is about how one lives every day. The focus of the

baptismal rite in the Book of Common Prayer 1979 is about making disciples. It is about being a follower of Christ.

## **WHAT PARENTS AND GODPARENTS PROMISE**

Parents and godparents are asked to make significant promises on behalf of a child they are sponsoring for baptism. First and foremost, these adults are asked to make two very significant promises about the life of the child they are to present: Will you be responsible for seeing that the child you present is brought up in the Christian faith and life? Will you, by your prayers and witness, help this child to grow into the full stature of Christ? If nothing else, these two promises make it clear that baptizing a child is about entrance into the Christian life and that the role of parents and godparents is to raise this child in the faith.

The first promise is about responsibility.

An infant cannot make choices about what forms her; she is dependent on the adults around her to make those choices. Having chosen to have a child baptized, parents then take on the first responsibility for teaching her about a life in Christ and providing those experiences that will form her faith. This includes bringing her to the gatherings of the faith community for worship, fellowship, and teaching. Parents and godparents live out this promise when they introduce a child to the stories of the faith, share with her the teachings of Jesus, and teach her about Christian faith practices such as prayer, generosity, and service to others.

The second promise commits parents and godparents to practicing their own faith.

Like any of the rest of us, children learn by doing and are formed by the environment around them. Practicing prayer in the home, such as grace at meals and bedtime prayers, is one way to witness the love of Christ to a child. Reading Bible stories together, celebrating Christian holidays in the home, following the seasons of the church year, and practicing charity together are all ways that adults can witness to the love of Christ and help a child grow in faith.

Being part of a community of faith is important as well. Very young infants can absorb the sights and smells and sounds around them. Bringing children to worship exposes them to the beauty and practice of ritual. Participating in church activities also introduces a child to her extended Christian family.

The baptism of a child is an opportunity for the parents and godparents to deepen their own faith as well.

During the baptismal liturgy, parents and godparents renew their commitment to Christ by renouncing Satan, repenting of their sins, and turning to Jesus as their Savior. All of this is done surrounded by the community of faith, who witness these promises, pray for the parents and those about to be baptized, and commit to supporting them in their life in Christ.

This is why baptisms most often occur during the principle Eucharist on a Sunday (or feast day) and it is inappropriate for a non-emergency baptism to take place privately—so that all those participating know they are surrounded by a loving community that enjoys with them the promises and challenges of the Christian life.