

Baptism as Gift of God

by Steven Chambers

From the beginning of the church, Christians have understood baptism to be the central element of their faith uniting all believers and joining them to Christ: *one Lord, one faith, one baptism* (Ephesians 4:5).

Jesus' ministry began with his own baptism and the call for those who follow him is articulated in Matthew's gospel: "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. And remember I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Matthew 28:19–20).

To be baptized into Christ means also to be baptized into his body, the church. It is generally agreed throughout the world church that baptism is always both into a local church and the church in its widest sense, the catholic (universal) church. We are baptized by a particular church into the one church.

In baptism, we receive a gift, the gift of God's gracious love, unmerited and free-flowing. Ecumenical discussion emphasizes that this gift is not preliminary to something else. It is significant in itself.

We receive baptism, the gift, from another person. We cannot baptize ourselves; it is a communal action. In the United Church, the minister baptizes on behalf of the congregation. The congregation participates through its presence, its witness, and by expressing its willingness to support the one being baptized. Baptism is foundational to this kind of community, another dimension of the gift from God.

Baptism is a gift that we engage in life through a relationship with Christ, who came that we may have life, and have it abundantly (John 10:10b). As a gift, baptism firmly establishes a relationship with Christ: "...For in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:26–28).

The person baptized enters the relationship with Christ and this relationship calls forth a response. In the case of children, the nurturing of parent(s), other family members, and the congregation are all a part of encouraging the gift to live and grow. They are part of the call to respond.

The gift of baptism is our new relationship with Christ. It is the gift of God's love for us, for the world, and for the activity of God in that world. To make



that gift come to life, we respond in faith. Faith is not oriented to ourselves, but rather is focused on the gracious, loving gift and the Giver. Baptism calls forth faith; our lives are changed and we affirm a new priority: the way of Christian life.

Adapted from Leslee Alfano, Noelle Bowes, and Rick Garland, eds., *Leap in Faith: A Confirmation Resource* (United Church Publishing House, 2004).