

## ***Infant Baptism: Putting Their Vows into Practice.***

**By Melodie M. Davis**

**I**t wasn't easy for me to present my first daughter for infant baptism in the Presbyterian church where I am now a member.

I'll never forget the radiance and tears on the faces during the first infant baptism I witnessed. But during a picture-perfect baptismal service on Sunday you can't see the ways the members of the church put the vows they make concerning that child into practice on Monday. That was something that helped me begin to appreciate infant baptism.



I grew up in a devoutly Anabaptist home (Anabaptists believe only in adult, or "believers' baptism"). I remember asking my parents why we didn't attend the nearby Methodist church instead of driving six miles to a Mennonite church. One of the reasons given was "They baptize infants there."

My father in particular was privately apprehensive about his granddaughter being baptized. Since they live 600 miles away, there was no crisis over whether my parents would attend. It was just too far, and perhaps it was best.

Later I showed my dad a copy of our pastor's thoughtful baptismal sermon. I thought she had done a masterful job of emphasizing the dedication of the parents and congregation to the child, so it stung a little when Dad said, "Well, this is all right, but when Michelle grows up, she'll want to decide for herself to be baptized."

I can understand where he is coming from. Then why did I ever become a Presbyterian in the first place? At the time we didn't have children, but were hoping to start a family soon. I learned for the first time about the whole teaching of God's grace extending to us even before we are born and of the seriousness with which many Presbyterians take their vows to help nurture children in the faith. I learned how Presbyterians view baptism as a symbol of being in a covenant relationship with God, and how children have been included in every covenant that God made with people, from Old Testament times through household baptism in the New Testament.

The Presbyterian church I belonged to earlier was in another state, and my husband had been willing to give up his Lutheran membership to join the small, close-knit fellowship there that we had attended together for five years. It wasn't so much that I wanted to become a Presbyterian as that I wanted to join this particular bunch of people who had covenanted together to be a church. Anyway, I felt the most important thing was for my husband and me to belong to the same church. So we were happily received on profession of faith, even though I wasn't sure I was 100-proof Presbyterian. Our minister assured us that most newcomers feel this way.

But when it came time to bring the flesh of my flesh, my first-born child, to the baptismal font, my eyes were brimming from more than motherly joy. Was I doing the right thing? As our 4-month-old sweated and squirmed that muggy August Sunday in her dress (borrowed, ironically, from my father who wore it as a baby in the style of the day--but not for christening), I thought, "Babies are a little too young for this whole business."

An Anabaptist accepting infant baptism for her daughter might be compared to a Presbyterian attempting to give up or renounce as unimportant the concept of God being a God of grace. In the 15th and 16th centuries Anabaptists (the name literally means re-baptizers, not those against baptism, as some mistakenly think) died horrible deaths as martyrs for holding fast to their beliefs in the rightness of believers' baptism. I had to ask myself, By accepting infant baptism was I rendering their deaths meaningless?

Even though they had been officially baptized by the state church as infants, Anabaptists believed it was more appropriate for an adult to decide to be baptized to make a public, symbolic statement of being in covenant relationship with God.

This was a little of the theological, cultural and emotional baggage I carried to the baptismal font that August day. But I felt comfort from knowing that the officiating minister understood my background and focused on the commitment of parents and congregation. As she thrust our daughter up high for the customary walk around the room, inviting everyone to see this new person they had vowed to nurture, I felt a sense of relief that we really weren't in this parenting thing alone: Here were people saying, at least in theory, that the faith development of this child was also their responsibility, that parents aren't the only influence on children, and that maybe other members would supply some of the needs we were not gifted to provide.

Perhaps what most of all has made me come to appreciate infant baptism is how I've seen Presbyterians putting their promises into practice. Tangible things, like helping us in and out of the car with all our diaper bags and paraphernalia, assisting our two children at church potluck suppers, providing nursery care, offering free baby-sitting, bringing in meals after each of the children was born, assuring us it was OK to hurry home after church parties or potluck suppers and leave the cleaning up to others. Words like "You go on home--I remember how it is with small children" fill me with as much gratefulness and blessing as any benediction. I hope to return the favor some day.

The help goes beyond the earthy, practical things to seeing that there are church school classes for our children from as early an age as we want them. The 3-year-old already seems to sense what it means to belong to the family of God through the church school materials and teaching provided for her.

Our 18-month-old now constitutes a class of one, and at first I felt guilty that I was taking the teacher out of a stimulating adult discussion just to watch our child. But as I see my toddler develop a very special liking for and relationship with this older woman, I realize that maybe I'm the one who needs a chance for stimulating discussion, away from a toddler's world for that hour on Sunday morning. And maybe this teacher needs the treasure of a small hand clasped in hers, and the sweet eyes that smile "I like you."

I also hope, and believe, that other church members pray for our children-- and all the children of the church--as part of fulfilling their vows made at baptisms. So often the teen and young adult years don't go smoothly, and in some families there are many crises. It is prayer that sees parents and children through those rough years--not a few nice sentences now and then, but frequent, fervent, intercessory prayer for a particular child and his or her parents. My faith is renewed as I see many of these same teens later develop a faith and place of their own in the church.

Anabaptists and Presbyterians can agree that, whether a child is baptized or simply "dedicated" as an infant, the goal is nurturing mature, faithful believers. Prayer, church school education, helping out harried parents in the little things--these are ways adults can live out the vows they make each time a new baby is joyfully baptized.

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### **"God Claims Us Before We Are Able to Respond"**

Both believers and their children are included in God's covenant love. Baptism, whether administered to those who profess their faith or to those presented for baptism as children, is one and the same sacrament. The baptism of children witnesses to the truth that God's love claims us before we are able to respond in faith. The baptism of those who enter the covenant upon their own profession of faith witnesses to the truth that God's gift of grace calls for fulfillment in a response of faithfulness.-- *New Directory of Worship approved by the 1984 General Assembly for study*