



Hazelbank Presbyterian Church



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With every baptism we have some concerns and worries. Not necessarily to do with the service or the logistics of the service but as we look into the face of our little one, we have probably been wondering what does the future hold? While you have high hopes for the years to come, you can hardly fail to ignore of the dangers which every child must face in this world. There is so much sorrow and sin around - and so little apparent safety!

Hopefully in these few moments we have together and as we understand God's covenant promises to us, it will give you a source of confidence as 21st Century parents and even grandparents, because you can look to Jesus, the Son of God, for assurance.

Jesus said:

"Allow the little children to come to Me. Don't stand in their way, because the Kingdom of Heaven belongs to the likes of them."

Christian Baptism is one way in which you can bring your children closer to Jesus. This Sacrament involves solemn responsibilities as well as special privileges for parents. According to the teachings of our Church, Baptism is only for the children of parents who have a firm and life-changing belief in the Lord Jesus Christ. Why? Because it would seem daft for a parent to seek Christian blessings for a child, if that parent hasn't known these blessings for themselves in the first place! Such blessings include you becoming children in the Family of God and experiencing "Life in all its Fullness" which Jesus spoke about and which he gives to all believers, day by day, by the power of the Holy Spirit.

The Presbyterian Church endorses baptismal practices in the other mainline Christian Churches and so there is never a case for the rebaptism of a child who has joined a Presbyterian Church.

So what exactly is Baptism about?

Let's be absolutely clear first of all about some of the things baptism is not about! I'm sure that I don't need to tell you that Baptism has nothing to do with the giving of a name [or christening]. You've already done that some time after the child was born - and so the significance of this sacrament is much deeper and more spiritual than that. Baptism is not a mere family custom or convention either! Please don't think of it as 'the usual thing to do' with any new baby. Baptism is not just a rite of passage, about getting your child 'done.' Baptism is a sacred rite emphasized by the Lord Jesus Christ Himself which the Church celebrates in obedience to His Divine authority. What, then does it mean? First of all, in Baptism, you acknowledge that God claims your child to be His child, and, as Christian parents, you joyfully consent to that claim. You offer the life of your child to the Lord, believing that He accepts your gift.

Again, in Baptism, your child is recognised to be a member of the local Church family. It's as though he/she is brought into a spiritual greenhouse where the Church assumes the responsibility, along with parents, of caring for their spiritual growth and welfare. Once they

are old enough, the Church will gladly welcome your little one to Sunday school and to Sunday services and to all of the organisations that operate throughout the week. The aim of every church programme is to encourage children and families to become followers of Jesus, disciples, growing in wisdom and stature and in favour with God and with men.

In bringing your child for Baptism, you have good reason to expect that the Grace of God will become a reality for your child in some special way. It is a profound mystery how this Grace affects the human soul, but we believe that the Spirit of God can [and does] touch and renew our spirits in all kinds of ways. The mystery is even deeper and all the more precious in the case of an innocent and helpless little baby, who can't even speak yet! We read in Luke 1 that John the Baptist was filled with the Spirit from birth and it's quite clear that Jesus did not consider little children to be incapable of receiving spiritual things. He took them up in His arms, laid His hands upon them and blessed them. As parents, you may already have been praying that God will bless your child in all kinds of ways, and you can expect those prayers to be answered. In the same way, when you seek His Grace in Baptism you can expect a response. When the day for your child's Baptism comes round, you come to church to exercise faith in Christ on behalf of your child. There's a story in Mark's Gospel about four friends who brought a helpless paralysed man and laid him at Christ's feet?

When He saw 'their faith' Jesus blessed him and made him whole. In the same way, your act of faith in baptism can be a means of communicating His grace to your child. You have every reason to believe that 'according to your faith so shall it be done to you.' Let's have a brief look at God's Covenantal promises. Let me try to explain what I mean by that.

The basis of our baptismal practice is set out in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments. In Genesis chapters 12 and 17, we read an amazing story about God establishing an everlasting covenant [or binding agreement] with an elderly childless couple called Abram and Sarai.

His plan was to build a great nation, who would be the Family of God and so He made a promise in Genesis 12 that He has never revoked. That promise is that He would bless Abram *and his children – even those who were 'afar off'*.

The sign of this special covenant or relationship was circumcision, which was carried out on every male child on the eighth day of their lives, at a time when he was completely dependent on his parents and incapable of thinking or saying anything in relation to God. At that time, God made a promise to him – and we find that, hundreds of years later, on the Day of Pentecost [Acts 2], Peter told the crowd that the Promise was still intact.

“The promise is for you and for your children.”

So, God is eternally a God who imparts blessings to children of parents who are included in His Covenant Family. That is His declared choice – and it provides us with the basis for baptising children.

Note that we don't circumcise children according to the Old Covenant! We are not members of the Jewish Faith! No, as Christians, we follow the New Testament pattern and use baptism as the sign of the New Covenant. In Colossians 2. 9ff it is obvious that the old form of circumcision is replaced according to Paul by baptism as the new initiation into the covenant promise.

You can appreciate how Jews who became Christians would have wanted to include their children in the New Covenant that they had entered into through faith in Jesus, as they had in the Old covenant, – and we believe that this just happened as a matter of course in the early church. If this were not so, and children were not to be included in the New Covenant, then we would expect writers like Matthew or Paul to have explained to parents why this shouldn't happen. However, there is no such teaching in the New Testament and so it is reasonable to assume that Christian parents included their children in the New Covenant, just as they had done in Old Covenant days. It is completely appropriate for new believers who have ***never*** been baptised as children to be baptised as teenagers or adults. I have had the joy of baptizing a number new converts. This is a public expression of their love for Jesus.

I hope that this brief summery of biblical material helps you to understand our belief that the baptism of a child is completely in keeping with the revelation of God's nature as a God of Grace – a Grace that is so amazing that it touches the hearts and spirits of helpless, newborn children!! As parents, you love your little one dearly, and you will gladly do all in your power to take good care of them. You will provide food, shelter, clothes, education and everything at your disposal to ensure that they gets a good start in the race of life and is able to occupy a useful place in society. You will deny yourselves, if necessary, to provide everything for them and encourage full realization of their potential. God wants you to be equally ambitious for your child's spiritual welfare and so you need to be involved in their spiritual training. The things of the Spirit will feed the secret springs of your child's life, producing Christ-like character which will mould and shape their eternal destiny. Please realise that God is more anxious that your child should become a true follower of the Lord Jesus Christ than they should attain wealth, position or fame. The really good news is that God offers to enable you in your task of securing these eternal things for your child. So, make sure that you set a Christian example to your child! Let them learn about Jesus from your life and your lips! You can do this by becoming an active Christian and living each day in God's power, fulfilling your commitment to God and to each other in the covenant of marriage. In this way, you show your children that you really want to live God's way. Actions always speak loudest! Single parents, please note that only one parent is required to take vows at a child's baptism. You are especially welcome and our church will seek to support you in every way that we can. Plan that your child will grow up in a Christian atmosphere. Ask God to give you His supernatural resources so that your home is a Christian home. Very early on, your child will begin to take notice of the things they see and hear. Be especially careful about what you say. None of us is perfect. Please try to speak positively and don't criticise others too harshly.

Let your child see that you are concerned about God's Kingdom through your prayers and practical support and soon they will begin to catch the vision too. Try to have family worship times when you can read from God's Word together and offer simple prayers. This isn't easy and you may never have tried, but the baptism of your child could mark its beginning in your home. It's never too late to start and the blessings will last forever! There are lots of good books available that you could use and many of them are in our library out in the vestibule please feel free to borrow any of them! Your greatest privilege is to train your own children for the Kingdom of Heaven. Why leave it to someone else to bring your child to Jesus? Talk as naturally and honestly as you can about the things of God. Teach your little one to love the Bible by telling the old old stories. Teach them to think of God as Father, of Jesus as our best and most loving Friend and of the Holy Spirit as our helper and guide. Children of Christian parents often say, 'I never can remember a time when I did not love God and desire to please Him.' However, you can be sure that times of spiritual crisis will come to every child, especially during adolescence.

I'm sure you have heard the old phrase, "if you resolve to go hunting with your kids when they're young, you'll be less likely to have to hunt for them when they're older!" In other words invest time in them now. Encourage them in all that is good. Bring them to Church and our Sunday School as soon as you feel able. There is a crèche available every Sunday from 11.15am onwards. Try to show an interest in what they learn on Sundays. Reinforce the verses and lessons that are sent home. Teach your kids to love Church and to get involved as much as possible. Please come and worship together! There is no need to make Sunday a bore for your kids! It ought to be the brightest and happiest of the whole week. Try to make the Lord's Day a day of rest and re-creation. It should be a Feast Day. It is the day that the Lord has made, so let's all rejoice and be glad in it. Sundays can be fundays! The Baptism of your child will bring great blessing both for you and for your child. It's your chance to put your trust in the God who made you all for Himself. With joyful hearts you can bring your little one to the Lord and expect that He will accept your gift and begin to pour out His divine Grace. God has called you all to be part of His family, the Church. You belong here and have a part to play in the 'body life' which is at the heart of Christianity. If you come by simple faith in Jesus Christ and play your full part, your child will feel at home in church and grow up with a sense of belonging to God's big family. If not, then church will be just an other of the many 'optional extras' which lay claim to your precious time and energy. God's ultimate desire is that you may know and fulfil the plans and purposes which He has for you and your child. May they be as a tree planted in the house of the Lord, bringing forth fruit to His glory. May you have the joy of seeing them walking in the Truth, day by day and when the Journey of Life is ended, may you all have the joy of Life Eternal as an undivided family, forever with the Lord.

That's what we all look forward to!

Is that what you look forward to as well?