

While I was a Pastor in Greybull WY in the 1990s, a friend whose daughter Brandy was in the same grade as my daughter Angela and a member of the Brownie Girl Scout troop I led, came to me asking if I would baptize her new baby once it was born. “Wait, your family belongs to the Lutheran Church” I objected. The Lutheran Church in Greybull was Missouri Synod. Sherri explained that she’d run afoul of the current pastor, who was not well liked, and was not going to allow him to baptize her new baby, but didn’t want to risk her child going to hell if the baby died before getting baptized. So, would I baptize the baby in the Presbyterian Church. I explained that yes, the Presbyterians would graciously authorize the baptism of the baby on behalf of the universal church, but that Presbyterians didn’t believe unbaptized babies went to hell, that’s not what happens with a loving God.

One of the understandings of baptism is that sin is washed away. But babies haven’t had a chance to “sin” yet. We can blame St. Augustine of Hippo in the late 4th – early 5th centuries for coming up with the idea of “Original Sin” meaning that even innocent babes needed to get baptized right away. Before that, the original pattern of baptism in the early church was for adults to be baptized. Often new converts would undergo a catechumen period, traditionally taking place during Lent, culminating with baptism on Easter Sunday. Baptism marked renunciation of evil, cleansing of sin, profession of faith to follow Christ, and reception of the Holy Spirit. Baptism has always been the way into church membership.

Although there are allusions to households getting baptized in Acts, in the late 2nd C. Tertullian argued against the “new” practice of infant baptism. When the Christian Church became institutionalized as the religion of Empire starting in the 4th century under Constantine, families became openly Christian, and infant baptism became more common.

Baptizing as early as possible was counter to another trend in the early and medieval church – delaying baptism as long as possible. Emperor Constantine the Great was baptized on his deathbed in 337 AD. If baptism is understood to wash away all your sins, then what about sins you commit after you get baptized? Well, those are harder to mitigate and were thought to be some kind of stain on your soul. So, if you put off baptism until you lived a full life and committed all your sins, then you could get baptized at the end of life and have your slate wiped clean – which is what Constantine did.

For churches that regard baptism as a sacrament, including the United Church of Christ, Lutheran, Episcopal, Presbyterian, Methodist, etc., the grace of God is at work in baptism, a visible sign of an invisible grace. If baptism is a sacrament, you don’t get re-baptized because that would be like saying God’s grace didn’t work the first time and God needs to try again. For Christians emphasizing individual response to God’s grace – yeah, God offers grace freely but a person has to grab hold of it and hang on – so, what if a person lets go of God’s grace? In some churches in the Southern United States, church members who fall away and commit sins, then

repent, come back and get re-baptized to have a fresh start. The theology in these churches emphasizes human response in baptism.

If baptism is to cleanse one of sins, and John the Baptist called for a baptism of repentance, then why did Jesus get baptized by John in the Jordan River? Wasn't Jesus without sin? That was apparently a question that came up even in the 1st c., because Matthew's gospel answers that question.

All three synoptic gospels describe Jesus' ministry beginning with his baptism by John. John's gospel doesn't have the river baptism itself, but the Baptist reports that he saw the Spirit come down from heaven as a dove and rest upon Jesus. The story of the Baptism of the Lord in the synoptic gospels is similar. In Mark and in Luke, the language from heaven declares “You are my beloved Son” while in Matthew's gospel there is a public declaration “**This** is my beloved Son” – either way there is a reference to Isaiah 42:1, regarded as a messianic passage.

Was Jesus God's beloved child before being baptized by John? For Jesus, getting dunked didn't transform him into something he wasn't before. Jesus' own baptism wasn't an **initiation** into God's family, but an **acknowledgment** of his identity. When followers of Jesus get baptized, are we being initiated into church membership, or are we being **acknowledged** as beloved children of God? The official language of the UCC says “baptism marks ... acceptance into the care of Christ's church, the sign and seal of God's grace and forgiveness, and the beginning of ... Christian faith and life.”

Notice the choice of words, it doesn't say acceptance into the **membership** of Christ's church, but acceptance into the **care** of Christ's church. Even though baptism and profession of faith are how you join a church. So, is baptism an initiation to get brought into God's family, or does baptism recognize us as already belonging, an acknowledgment? What's the difference? For those who believe that babies, children or adults who die without getting baptized are excluded from God's family, then baptism is the important **initiation** rite – you don't belong without it. For those who believe that people are God's children even before they get baptized, or even never get baptized, then baptism is an **acknowledgment** – officially welcoming someone who already belongs. That's my take on it.

Baptism in the name of Jesus has layered dimensions to it – it is not just cleansing from sin. The official statement by the United Church of Christ denomination is:

Sacrament of Baptism we share in the death and resurrection of Christ, and are incorporated into Christ's Holy Church. Baptism proclaims the faith of the Church. By the sign of water God cleanses from sin, renews life, and prefigures the reconciliation of all things promised in Christ. In baptism we are given the Holy Spirit as a pledge of this reconciliation. The same Spirit binds us to each other and joins us to Christ's ministry of love, peace, and justice.

American Baptists don't baptize babies (although they do have infant dedications). They also don't just sprinkle or pour water, but go for dunking or **full immersion**. Adult or **believers' baptism** symbolizes an intentional decision to follow Jesus, representing the death of one's old life and resurrection into new life with Christ. For American Baptists, baptism is considered an ordinance (a symbolic act) rather than a sacrament that grants salvation. Baptism follows a profession of faith, and since a conscious decision is supposed to be made with the person having some kind of faith understanding, babies and children are not baptized.

The traditional elements of Christian baptism are renunciation of sin and evil, affirmation of faith, and pledging to be a faithful member of the church. When an infant is baptized, the parents make promises on behalf of their child, promising along with the church community to provide Christian nurture until the child makes their own profession of faith.

What you may not know or remember is that the first part of the baptismal liturgy is to **renounce sin and the power of evil** and only then profess belief in God and make promises to follow Christ. The Presbyterian baptismal questions separate out at the beginning the renunciation of evil. A typical UCC question at baptism would be:

"Do you promise, by the grace of God, to be Christ's disciple(s), to follow in the way of our Savior, to resist oppression and evil, to show love and justice, and to witness to the work and word of Jesus Christ as best you are able?"

Christian Baptism begins with promises to follow Christ **after** renouncing evil and wrongdoing. The Christian life is not a “one and done” pledge to follow Jesus but repeatedly vowing and continually trying one's best to follow Christ. But the same is true of the renunciation of evil and sin – that's not just a one time declaration that I'm not going to do wrong any more, but making continual life choices not to sin, not to support evil in any form. Human beings face choices throughout life to go along with something even when you know it's wrong, or to turn your eyes away and pretend not to see evil when it happens... The journey with Jesus calls for continual commitments to reject sin and embrace God's truth. The Apostle Paul urges working out one's salvation with fear and trembling. Because one can fall from grace - Judas was one of Jesus inner 12 disciples who went rogue and became instrumental agent in causing Jesus' crucifixion. Don't be deceived by darkness claiming to be light, don't be like Judas.

Traditional Catholic moral teaching saw the three primary sources of evil: the world, the flesh, and the devil. Dom Hélder, the Brazilian archbishop and nonviolent activist, offered a model for understanding how structural injustice leads to greater violence, what he called the “spiral of violence”. While the Roman Catholic church for millennia emphasized the 2nd level, sins of the flesh, the evil in the world and evil personified by the devil were neglected.

Dom Helder defined “world” not as creation or nature, but “systems” - the ways that groups, cultures, institutions, and nations organize to protect themselves and maintain their power. Helder warned that this is the most hidden and denied level of evil. We cannot see it because we are all inside of it, and it is in our ego’s self-interest to protect the corporate deception. This is not personal sin, but corporate, system sin – the issue of social justice. George Orwell’s novel 1984 and other prophetic literature have warned about this kind of evil in the world. When people are fed lies as truth, when profit matters more than people, when power is unchecked and unjust, when violence is rationalized – this is evil.

Fr. Richard Rohr, writing for the Center for Action and Contemplation, expanded on Helder’s ideas about the Devil as the personification of evil. Rohr says “the devil” is *sanctified, romanticized, and legitimated violence*—violence that is deemed culturally necessary to control the angry flesh and the world run amuck. Any institution thought of as “too big to fail” or above criticism has a strong possibility of diabolical misuse... the large scale industrial corporations, the military and paramilitary groups, penal systems – especially when they’re run for profit, banking and crypto-currency corporations, multinational corporations outside the law, tax codes and business regulations that benefit the wealthy... When governments or institutions are above accountability or criticism, they can “get away with murder.” Any government or social structure that is corrupt, that excuses or denies violence or even perpetrates violence, that harms or murders its citizens, is evil, whether that government is located in Asia, Africa, the Middle East, Europe, South America or North America.

Echoing Dom Helder, Richard Rohr warns that if evil and institutionalized violence go unrecognized at the first level, then spiraling into the second and third levels of violence and evil are inevitable. *If we don’t nip evil in the bud at the level where it is legitimated and disguised, we will have little power to fight it at the individual or existential levels.*

It is traditional on the Sunday of the Lord’s Baptism to exhort church members to remember their own baptism, and to renew their baptismal vows. Remember that 1st part of the baptismal liturgy – repent of sin and renounce evil. Renounce not just personal evil “of the flesh” but evil in the world and evil manifesting as “of the devil.” Christians are not only citizens of heaven, but citizens in this world. Christians are accountable for evil in the society in which they live. In January 2026, in order to faithfully follow Jesus, you’d better start recognizing and renouncing and fighting against the world full of sin, wrongdoing, violence and all kinds of evil. Amen.