

♦ TIMES OF CHANGE ♦
TIMES OF CHALLENGE

*When Your
Child Is
Baptized*



RON DELBENE

with

MARY & HERB MONTGOMERY

To us a child is born.

—Isaiah 9:6 RSV

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When Your Child Is Baptized



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When Your Child is Baptized

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Cover Design: Nelson Kane

Book Design: Jim Bateman

First Printing: May 1991

ISBN: 0-8358-0638-3

Printed in the United States of America

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Few life events touch us so profoundly as the birth of a child. I know this from experiencing the birth of my son, Paul, and three and a half years later, that of my daughter, Anne. I also know it from the many new parents I have had the privilege to meet in my ministry and whose children I have baptized.

Along with helping you prepare for baptism, this book points out the important role you play in the spiritual development of your child—a development that begins in infancy with the experience of being loved. No one can believe for another person, just as no one can love for another person. However, as parents you plant the seed that makes it possible for your child to grow in faith and love.

At the baptismal ceremony, your child will be welcomed into the family of God. The community of believers in your church will promise to guide and sustain you as you pass your beliefs on to the child that God has entrusted to your care. May the baptism of your child be a time of blessing and great joy not only for you but also for all those who gather to celebrate this special occasion.

Ron DelBene

Editor's Note: The stories in this book are true. Personal names and some details have been changed to protect the privacy of individuals involved.

Let There Be Love

*Children are a gift from the Lord;
they are a real blessing.*

—Psalm 127:3, TEV

Carrie was a young, first-time mother who came to see me about having her infant son baptized. “Before Tyler was born, there was so much I didn’t understand about love,” she said. “It used to be that when I gave of myself, I expected something in return. With Tyler, though, I just give without thinking about what I’m going to get back.”

The love that Carrie has for her son—and that other parents have for their children—lays the foundation for emotional and spiritual development. In order for children to become people who love others and who love God, they need the experience of being loved. Love is best nurtured in the family where children have their first sense of belonging. At baptism, they are welcomed into a larger family, the family of God that promises to nurture them in faith and support them with prayers.

Before becoming a parent, you probably believed you would never feel anything but tenderness for your baby. To be forever loving is not easy however—especially if you have a baby who cries without end and seemingly has no need to sleep! It is not uncommon for mothers and fathers to have moments—or even extended periods—when they doubt their fitness as parents. Love is a complex emotion, and it is natural that resentment and irritation at times intrude on the warm, caring feelings. It is important that you accept your negative feelings and find constructive ways to deal with them.

Although parenthood has its frustrations, they are outweighed by the joys and satisfactions of guiding an infant to responsible adulthood. The child who has become a part of your family is someone with whom to share the fun and the flowers, the heartbreak and the hope that are a part of this world. Through sharing and celebrating life together, you will come to a deeper understanding of God and what it means to be fully alive. You will enable your child to understand that God is love and that when we love, we know what God is like.

Parents, enjoy your children
be in joy with them
look into their eyes
be with them
be for them.

Be relaxed with your children
be unworried
be carefree
have fun.

Don't be afraid
of loving them too much
of making mistakes with them
of being wrong
of apologizing.

Then your children
will love you
and you will love them
and love covers up our faults.

—David P. O'Neill
*What Do You Say to a Child When
You Meet a Flower?*

Just the Way You Are

"What then will this child become?"

—Luke 1:66

"I was always Daddy's little boy," the shy woman in her mid-twenties told me. "When I was born, he was hoping for a son who would have been named Carl . . . after him. That's why I was named Carla."

Like all new babies, Carla came into the world eager for life and with a need to be loved. But her earliest memories were of being rejected by her father through no fault of her own.

Perhaps the most spiritually nurturing thing we can do for our children is to let them know that we love them just the way they are. If we have girls, we do not complain that they were not boys, or the other way around. If our children are shy, we do not wish them to be more outgoing. If they are short, we do not regret that they are not tall. Beyond knowing they are accepted as they are, children need to understand there are no strings attached to our love. We love them when they are fussing as well as when they are smiling, when they misbehave as well as when they are obedient.

Our task as parents is not to redesign children but to bring forth the goodness that is in them. During their growing up years, children too often get the message—both spoken and unspoken—that their worth depends on being friendly, staying out of trouble, and being achievers. If children get only conditional love that is withdrawn as soon as they fail to live up to expectations, they are likely to be insecure and yearn for approval.

Another damaging aspect of conditional love is that it fails to prepare children to understand the God of unconditional love. This is the God who loves them in spite of their shortcomings or failings. This is the God who loves them not because of how they look or for what they accomplish, but simply because they are. By respecting our children, we prepare them to respond to God with gratitude for who they are as God's creation.

*It was you who created my inmost self,
and put me together in my mother's womb;
for all these mysteries I thank you:
for the wonder of myself,
and the wonder of your works.*

—Psalm 139:13-14 JB

Hand-Me-Down Parenting

Let all that you do be done in love.

—1 Corinthians 16:14

Having a child baptized is often a family tradition. Sometimes a baptismal gown is handed down from generation to generation. This adds meaning to the ceremony and builds a sense of family heritage. Just as baptismal gowns are handed down, so too are parenting skills. Although being a parent is one of the most important jobs in the world, it is one for which we get almost no formal preparation. Instead, we train on the job with a strong tendency to parent the way we were parented.

When Rob and his wife Linda were planning their son's baptism, Rob said, "In my growing up years, my parents encouraged me to think for myself—even in matters of faith. They made me feel I had a right to my opinion and could be honest about my feelings. That's the way I want to raise my son."

Rob's comment reminded me that if our parents were honest and affirming, chances are good that we will treat our own children the same way. If they were fault-finding or abusive, we are likely to continue that pattern unless we make a determined effort to behave otherwise.

Take from your upbringing those practices you want to continue in your family. If prayers were said before meals in your childhood home, if discipline was fair, and if praise was freely given, you have a good example to follow. But if there were negative aspects to your upbringing, replace them with practices based on love and what seems right for your family. Ask yourself these two questions.

- How can I be the kind of mother or father I would like to have for a parent?
- How can I create the kind of home I would like to grow up in?

Your answers will help you decide what to accept and what to reject from your own upbringing. Your home is where the groundwork is laid for your child to think of God not as a cold, harsh judge but as a kind, compassionate parent.

*If children live with criticism,
they learn to condemn.
If they live with hostility,
they learn to fight.
If they live with ridicule,
they learn to be shy.
If they live with tolerance,
they learn to be patient.
If they live with praise,
they learn to appreciate.
If they live with security,
they learn to have faith.
If they live with acceptance and friendship,
they learn to find love in the world.*

Author Unknown

Praying with Your Child

I will give thanks to you, O Lord.

—Psalm 108:3

At baptism our church family welcomes new members into its midst with love and prayers. Even though infants are not yet able to participate in worship, their membership makes them a part of the prayers we offer each time the congregation gathers. At an infant baptism, the hope is that one day the young child's prayers will unite with those of the other believers. But for this to happen, the child has to be taught to pray and to see prayer as an important part of life.

Whenever parents and grandparents ask me how to pray with children, I suggest that they simply talk to God. That's what prayer is: talking to God from your heart. Long before your baby understands your words, the warmth with which you say them communicates tenderness and love. I still remember holding my own children when they were infants and feeling so overwhelmed with love that all I could say was "Thank you. O thank you, God."

No doubt there are times when you too are filled with love to overflowing. Let that overflow be a prayer of thanksgiving or blessing that you pray aloud. When you put your child down for a nap or for the night, say a simple blessing such as "May God fill you with love and peace as you sleep" or "Hold (name) in your arms, Jesus, as you did the children of long ago."

As your child learns to talk, make up simple prayers. Those about everyday happenings have the most meaning: a grandparent's visit, a new pet, a hurt knee, a disappointment. Children are richly blessed when they are introduced to a personal God who cares about every aspect of their lives and is available to them anywhere and at any time. But to pray only in child-like terms can give the impression that prayers are just for children and that when they grow up they will have no need to pray. In order for children to become prayerful people, they need a model just as they need a model for other behavior.

Meals are a good time for children to see adults praying. If your family is not comfortable making up prayers, say a short,

memorized prayer, then invite each person to add something: "Please guide me in a decision about work." "Thank you for a happy birthday." "Be with Grandpa as he recovers in the hospital."

At bedtime, say your own night prayer aloud at your child's bedside. For example: "Thank you, God, for this day with (name)" or "God, today was a long, hard day with (name). Help us both as we try to make our home a happy place tomorrow." If you have not previously been comfortable praying in this manner, who better to practice with than your child? By revealing yourself through prayer, you and your child develop a kind of spiritual partnership.

Family Rituals and Baptism

You will have joy and gladness.

—Luke 1:14

When children are infants, it is hard to believe they will ever be grownups. And when they are grown, it is a stretch to remember what it was like tending to 2 A.M. feedings or keeping up with curious toddlers or saying goodbye to kindergartners starting school. Sometimes I look with amazement at my own two children who are now young adults and say to them, “Can you believe that you once fit in the kitchen sink?”

When Paul and Anne were infants, one of my more vivid memories is the ritual of bathing them in the kitchen sink. These many years later I still recall the window over the white porcelain sink and the yellow tiled counter covered with a thick towel ready for their dripping bodies. (Today we are warned to turn down the water heater and be extra careful that children don’t turn on the hot water faucet and get scalded.) Following the bath came the ritual of massaging them with oil. To this day, the smell of baby oil calls forth the most pleasant of memories for me.

I also remember how important it was for Eleanor and me to have the children with us when we ate a meal. Before they were big enough for the high chair, they sat in a baby carrier in the middle of the table. Of course, there were times when we waited to have dinner until they were in bed so we could have some time alone, but in our day-to-day living we tried to eat meals as a family.

Thus in recalling my own children’s infancy, the words *bath*, *oil*, and *table* come to mind. They are also words that help me understand the historical concept of the family as a little church. About the time of the Reformation, many writers called the family an *ecclesiola*, a diminutive form of *ecclesia*, which is the Greek and Latin word for church. This word in turn comes from the Greek verb *eccaleho* meaning “to call together.” So it is that the words were used to mean that both the church and the family were a people called by God to be together.

The family rituals of bathing, using oil on the body, and being together at the table are preparations for baptism and for belonging to the church community. Throughout the ages, these rituals have been used as initiation rites for people entering the church. Symbols of bath, oil, and table are frequently referred to in scripture. Today there is a growing movement in some churches to use oil for making the sign of the cross on the forehead of the newly baptized person. Afterwards the congregation shares in communion. This is a way of inviting Jesus into our hearts and into our lives and taking our place in the larger body of Christ that includes all baptized people.

Baptism and Your Faith

We also believe, and so we speak.

—2 Corinthians 4:13

Harriet and Martin are typical of many young couples. Although they were married in the church, their attendance at Sunday services was irregular at best. Both of these bright and talented young people had a great deal to offer in many areas of church ministry, but their careers and active social life seemingly left them too busy to become involved. Even though they were church members, they had little contact with the people or the activities of the church.

One day Harriet and Martin made an appointment to see me. From the happy look on their faces, I wasn't surprised when Harriet said, "We're going to have a baby."

"So we want to talk seriously about the church," Martin said. "Now that we're going to be parents, we want to get more involved."

Harriet laughed. "I guess we want to get a head start while the baby is still inside me. That way we'll be ready when it's time for baptism."

For couples like Harriet and Martin, the birth of a baby provides a focus and a new beginning for their spiritual life. But for another couple, Steve and Barbara, becoming parents simply sent their spiritual roots deeper and enhanced their place in the faith community. They had been active members of the congregation ever since their marriage. Sincere and creative, they contributed to their church in a variety of ways. When their son Benjamin was baptized, the congregation embraced him as one of their own. Now a lively, curly-headed six-year-old, his greeting to me is often an enthusiastic, "You baptize-ed me." As if I would forget!

Each time I baptize a child I am filled with awe and reminded of the scripture that tells us: "See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are" (1 John 3:1). Baptism makes a public declaration that we are born as children of God; it is an outward sign of an inward grace.

Do you identify with Harriet and Martin who drifted away from the church for a time? Or are you more like Steve and Barbara for whom the church was an important part of their married life? Possibly you find yourself somewhere in between.

Wherever you are in your spiritual life, the baptism of your child is a time to review your faith and what it means to you. It is an opportunity to reflect on what the church teaches and on the personal beliefs you want to pass along to your child. On the day of baptism, you give witness to your faith before God and before the church community that promises to help you nurture the spiritual development of your child.

Baptism and Its History

"Let the little children come to me."

—Mark 10:14

"What is baptism, anyway?" Jason wanted to know. This young father had come with his wife to make plans for their daughter's baptism. "I'm going along with this because it's something you do when you belong to a church, but I really don't know what it means."

I liked Jason's frank admission about what he didn't know. My sense is that many people have gaps in their knowledge about baptism, but for various reasons they don't want to admit it. To understand the sacrament as we celebrate it today, it is helpful to know something about the history of the ceremony and the religious heritage out of which it grew.

From the Old Testament we learn that ceremonial bathing and anointing were signs of holiness which, along with fasting and prayer, were part of priestly initiation and consecration. Among the consecrated were the prophets who spoke out against the evils of their time and foretold the coming of the Messiah. Jesus was that Messiah. After the faithful had waited many generations for his coming, he arrived as a baby, born in a stable. As the time for Jesus' public ministry drew near, John the Baptist urged people to be baptized. He regarded baptism as a purifying act that washed away the sins of those who repented and had a change of heart.

Jesus himself was baptized by John. This public act began Jesus' ministry of giving to us what had been given to him by God, whom Jesus called Father. The total emptying of himself for humankind was fulfilled in his death and resurrection.

After the Resurrection, those people who followed Jesus and believed in his teachings gathered together into the church. The Christians in the early church came to recognize baptism as that special external sign of their participation in the death and resurrection of Jesus and their desire for and acceptance of membership in the church community.

For the early Christians, initiation into the church was a major undertaking. Applicants had to prepare for several years

before they could be baptized and celebrate the Lord's Supper along with the rest of the believers. Although the early church was mainly for adults, the New Testament refers to men and women being baptized with their households. Naturally children would have been included.

As Christianity spread, the practice of infant baptism became more common. Because infants are incapable of accepting God's gift of grace for themselves, parents and sponsors do it for them. Baptism is the public declaration that a baby is born as a child of God and through the sacrament is welcomed into the body of Christ. In infant baptism, it is the family commitment of faith that the church celebrates. Older children and adults personally accept God's gift of grace and commit themselves to Christ. Whatever the age of the person being baptized, the ceremony is meant to be a joyous occasion in which a child is welcomed into the household of God by the church family.

The Symbols and the Ceremony

I will pour out my spirit on all flesh.

—Joel 2:28

Water is the dynamic symbol of baptism. Without water we could not have life, and its use in baptism symbolizes the new life we have in Jesus Christ. Water is used in all Christian baptisms, but the way it is used varies according to the denomination. Baptism by immersion was a common practice in the early church, but it was not the only way that people were baptized. Nowhere in the gospels does it say that immersion is required for entrance into the kingdom of heaven. The Greek word for baptism is *baptizo*, meaning to wash or moisten, which is consistent with pouring or sprinkling—methods of baptizing that were also used in the early church.

Whether we are sprinkled, immersed, or have water poured upon us, the reality is the same: the acceptance of Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior and a commitment to live a life of service in his name. Just as we are brought to a maturing life in the water of our mother's womb, so too the water of baptism is symbolically the new womb of life for our growth in Christian maturity. Through birth we become physical members of the human family, and through baptismal birth we are initiated into membership in God's family.

In some congregations, the rite of baptism includes the sign of the cross on the forehead with the oil of chrism. This sweet-smelling mixture of olive oil and balsam is symbolically used to seal the child with the gifts of the Holy Spirit.

A white garment is also used in some baptismal ceremonies. In the early days of the church, young and old alike wore a white robe for a period of time following their baptism. The robe reminded the community that the new Christians were clothed in Christ and that they shared his life. Today that custom is often symbolized by placing a small white garment,

or a white cloth, over the infant's baptismal gown. This is a reminder of our call to live simply and sinlessly.

Light is a symbol found throughout scripture. Jesus tells us "you are the light of the world" and "let your light shine before others" (Matt. 5:14, 16). In some baptismal ceremonies, parents, godparents, or family members who are witnessing the baptism are given a lighted candle. The candle symbolizes Christ—the light of the world—and is a reminder that the light of Christ has entered the child's life. The flame symbolizes the flame of faith that will burn throughout the life of the newly baptized child.

Understanding the symbols of baptism adds richness to a ceremony that has its roots deep in our Christian heritage. Many pastors are receptive to including symbols not customarily used in their church if the parents request them and involve themselves in planning the ceremony.

Choosing Godparents

Let your light shine before others.

—Matthew 5:16

“I just don’t know what to do about choosing a godparent for Jeffrey,” Joy admitted as we sat in my office talking about baptism. “Some people say, ‘Oh, just pick a friend.’ My mother suggested a relative. What does it really mean to be a godparent, anyway?”

This is a question I’m often asked by parents. “Joy,” I said, “is there someone in the church or in your family who you feel is living according to the values you believe in?”

She thought for a moment and then said, “Both my husband and I really admire Midge and Bobby Miller. As you know, they’re active in church, but more than that, they seem to live their faith every day. Midge was very supportive during my pregnancy, and it would be great to have her and Bobby involved in Jeffrey’s life.”

I agreed that the Millers sounded like a good choice and went on to explain that the tradition of having godparents (sometimes one or three, but generally two) goes back to the early church. In times when parents commonly died before a child grew up, godparents promised to rear the child in the faith. Also, baptisms were often private events, and godparents were needed as witnesses.

Now that parents almost always live long enough to raise their own children, and baptisms are usually witnessed by the church community, the role of godparents has changed. The godparents you choose for your child should be role models for Christian living, and they should agree to help you in your task as a Christian mother and father. Today the important consideration in choosing godparents is not how they are related to you and your child but how close they are in their relationship with God.

Celebrating Baptism

*She calls together her friends and neighbors,
saying, "Rejoice with me."*

—Luke 15:9

Baptism can take little more time and attention than the ceremony itself. Or, with some creative thought and time spent in preparation, it can be a major event in the life of your family and an important step in your faith journey. These are some suggestions for making your child's baptism a joyous and memorable occasion.

- If it is possible to select readings or prayers for the baptism, arrange with your pastor to do so. Having a member of the family act as reader helps personalize the ceremony.

- Ask a grandparent, other family member, or friend to embroider a wall hanging that includes the date of baptism and the baby's name. Hang this in your baby's room as a reminder of your commitment to raise your son or daughter as a child of faith.

- If your family has a baptismal or christening gown that has been passed down for generations, have your baby wear it.

- Make a baptismal garment that is used symbolically in the ceremony. The garment should be white and can be decorated with baptismal symbols (cross, flame, dove). A simple way to make the garment is to cut a 20-inch diameter circle of material with a smaller 6-inch diameter circle cut out of the center. Bind the raw edges with bias tape and embroider, iron, or glue on baptismal symbols. The garment easily slips over the baby's head at the proper time during the ceremony and symbolizes the new life received in baptism. A small white cloth can be used in place of the white garment.

- Decorate a candle to be lighted during the baptismal ceremony. Use a candle large enough to be decorated with the baby's name, baptismal date, and symbols. On the anniversary of your child's baptism or on birthdays, light the candle as part of your family's celebration.

- Write a letter to your child in which you talk about your feelings and what baptism means to you. Keep the letter in a

safe place until you feel it is time for your child to read it. Perhaps his or her confirmation or marriage would be a good time.

- Compose a family prayer to be read just before or after the baptismal ceremony.

- If you have other children, tell them what will happen at the ceremony. Explain the meaning of the water and any other symbols that will be used. Involve your children in the ceremony as much as possible.

- Share your joy. Plan a baptismal celebration.

A Parent's Prayer

Dear God, on this joyous day of baptism
as I bring my child to you,
I think of all the past times
when I was too young to speak for myself,
so my parents spoke for me.

Now I am older. I am the parent,
and it is my turn to speak.
Thank you, God,
for all the mothers and fathers
who have come before us
with their hopes, their dreams.

As I bring my child to you,
I ask for the blessings all parents seek.

Bless this child for whom I speak now.
Bless our family in the struggles of daily life.
And bless the members of the church
who welcome my child
into a community of faith and love.

This is my prayer, in Jesus' name. Amen.

Friends and Relatives Who Helped Us Celebrate

Baptismal Record

_____ ,

child of

_____ and _____

was born on _____

in _____

and was baptized on _____
(day, date)

at _____
(church)

(city, state)

The godparents are

The celebrant was _____

***Then tell the next generation
that God is here,
our God and our leader,
for ever and ever.***

—Psalm 48:13-14 JB

About the Authors



Ron DelBene has been doing spiritual direction and leading programs in the areas of prayer, spirituality and personal development since 1963. Ron holds a Master's degree in Theology and a Doctor of Ministry in Spirituality and Organizational Systems. He has done additional post-graduate work in education, psychology, and counseling. He is an author, poet, artist and Episcopal priest. He was an assistant professor of theology, director of a campus ministry center, and national consultant in religion for an education division of CBS.

Since 1980, Ron's organizational system's leadership has been primarily in churches, empowering them in understanding their mission, goals and structure for effective and creative ministry. Ron and his spouse, Eleanor, reside in Trussville, Alabama, and have two grown children and two grandchildren.

Mary and Herb Montgomery are full-time writers who have created numerous books and educational projects to help both children and adults grow in faith. The Montgomerys live in a Minneapolis suburb.

If you found encouragement for your journey from this booklet, please consider a donation to The Hermitage, a nonprofit 501(c)(3) corporation devoted to providing opportunities in personal and professional growth and direction.

