

A Letter to My Infant Son on the Morning of His Baptism

May 11, 2021 · Cambron Wright



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Dear son, my delight in these somewhat mystifying days,

Today you are going to be baptized. Are there words fitting for such an event? It is not every day that my son becomes my brother. It is not every day that I lay aside my claim as father and entrust my child to God. Soon, my dear friend Chris, a pastor like myself, will ask your mother and I questions, in front of the congregation. These will be haunting, demanding questions:

“Do you renounce the spiritual forces of wickedness, reject the evil powers of this world, and repent of your sin?”

“Do you accept the freedom and power God gives you to resist evil, injustice, and oppression in whatever forms they present themselves?”

And, most intimidatingly, *“Do you confess Jesus Christ as your Savior, put your whole trust in his grace, and promise to serve him as your Lord, in union with the Church which Christ has opened to people of all ages, nations, and races?”*

We will answer these questions, with trepidation, on your behalf—you who are only six months old, a baby only just coming alive to the joys and terrors of our brief and wonderful life.

And we will continue to say yes after this day, through the words we speak to you; may they be words of grace. We will say yes through the stories we tell you to give shape to your world; may they be beautiful and true. We will say yes by giving you to the community of Jesus called the church; we do not have the wisdom or the power to raise you alone. We will say yes in the prayers we pray for you, even though they may at times be feeble and sporadic. We will say yes through the rhythms and habits of our home and our life, through shared meals, tough conversations, through the laughter that only comes from love and truth. We will say yes at times by saying no; no to hatred and to ugliness, no to emptiness and to cynicism. This will be an annoying no that you will rebel against, but our prayer is that in time and through testing this *no* might come to light as a hidden *yes*.

By God’s grace, we will say yes for you, a yes that we hope will reverberate in the years to come, until its echo falls confidently and freely from your own lips.

Today Chris will ask what name is given to this child, and you will say James. Chris wishes. You were named James after me.

Today Chris will ask us what name is given to this child, and we will say: James Clay Wright. You were named James after my father and Clay after my mother's father. Our last name, Wright, is English, a common name, meaning one who creates. You did not get a say in any of these names. You might choose later in life to be called Jim like my Dad, or Jimmy, or J.C.—but the essence of a name is that it is given. We have no choice in it.

And today is very much like the day we gave you your name. Just as we did not ask your permission to be born, just as we did not ask your opinion on what to call you, we also did not give you a choice in this momentous event called baptism that will define your

identity and your purpose. Some of our fellow Christians find this idea unsettling; they believe that anything we do not choose for ourselves is an affront to our freedom, a slight to God's gift of free will, and an imposition on our inviolable self.

Though we love our brothers and sisters who think this way, it is, of course, nonsense. Baptism is the means through which God claims us; it is the sacrament where God declares, in dramatic fashion, "This one is mine. This is my child, my beloved, my delight!" Baptism is only grace, only gift. Why would we want to claim responsibility for what is God's alone? Baptism is what is done to us, for us, in us by God; it is nothing if we do it for ourselves. Whether we are six months or six hundred months old, God is the subject, we are the object. The waters make us like soft putty in the potter's hands. You can imagine God thinking, as he claims us and holds us in our baptism: *what beautiful life are we going to make out of this one?*

Son, the biggest lie you are going to have to combat in your life, because you are an American, is that you can be a self-made man. Throughout your life, everyone from Walt Disney to your well-meaning second-grade teacher to the president of the United States will tell you: James, you can do whatever you put your mind to, and you can be whoever you want to be. This will sound like sage advice, until you come to the difficult knowledge that you are limited and mortal, until you come to the realization that the *ability to choose* is far less valuable than *the wisdom and the power to choose what is good*.

Your baptism today will give you an adopted place in God's family, forgiveness of sins, life in Christ in union with the church, a sign that you are sealed by God's Spirit. But your baptism will also free you from the illusion of a self-made life. Your decision, your choice, your works, will not save you—like the man on the mat carried to Jesus by his friends, your parents, your grandparents, your church, even your three-year-old brother, will carry you to the baptismal font. We will bring you before the healing waters and before the living Word. It will be the faith of others that will bring you to faith and to the salvation faith brings. Baptism is wonderfully challenging to that collection of American prejudices known as "common sense" in this way. The grace that comes in baptism is not something you will earn for yourself, nor something you will receive for yourself. It is sheer gift, given only by God.

After we announce your given name, Chris will douse you with water and say, without fanfare or drama, the ancient words: "I baptize you in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit."

And so you will be claimed by the triune God, and claimed by the church, and your life will no longer be your own. You will spend the rest of your life evaluating whether or not this is good news. Your love and your work and your joy and your sorrow will not be your own. In giving you over in baptism, your mother and I and the church are binding you to a difficult life because it will be *shared*. It will be a life of sharing in the suffering of Jesus and in the cross, a life of sharing in the suffering of your neighbors, and even a life of sharing in the suffering of your enemies. This is of course the same as saying it will be a life of love. We do not do this lightly, or frivolously; if there were another way, we would offer it to you; we have not found another way. We who have been claimed by Jesus have come to believe there is no other way.

Son, the rest of your life will be a response to the grace given through these waters. The story of your life will be one of running away from their claim upon you, or a deepening embrace of the joy they bring to you. As your father, I hope beyond hope that you will come to know their embrace as intimately as you know mine, for they are the eternal embrace of your Father. No matter who you become or what you choose, the God of these waters will never remove his love from you. As you were loved into existence, so will you be loved even unto your death.

The great Dietrich Bonhoeffer says, "When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die." Today, Christ is calling you, and we are burying you in the waters—and Lord I pray we only bury you once—but there will be no going back. There is no undoing or repeating what will be done. There is no removing this branding by water. But the life that follows such a death, the Spirit that gives life to our spirit, the hope that when Christ comes, we will be like him, makes any death, even this one, worth enduring.

And so, my son and soon-to-be-brother, I pray that God makes me and your mother and this church able to be as Christ for you, until our yes to God today is yours tomorrow.

In the love of Christ,

Dad

Cambron Wright is an ordained elder in the United Methodist Church and serves as the pastor at Asbury United Methodist Church in Highland Heights, KY.



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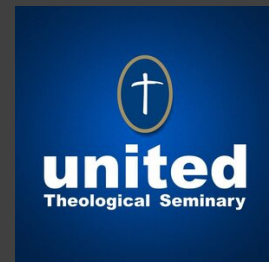
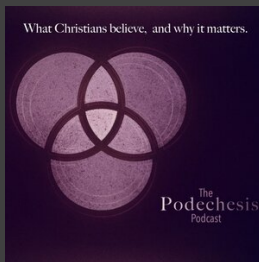
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