

# Baptism of Stillborn Babies? A South African Methodist Perspective

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## Abstract

Many rituals in Africa are deeply rooted in the cultural beliefs, traditions and indigenous religions of the continent. The rituals are guided by people's belief in their existence after death, and the role of the living dead or ancestors. These African rituals have been infused by Christian, Muslim and Western concepts. Death rituals and the mourning practices of Africans are varied because of the existence of so many religious and cultural practices on the African continent. Many African families will engage in one way or another in some cleansing rituals after the death of a loved one including a stillborn. In the Methodist Church of Southern Africa (MCSA), no records of stillbirth baptism are kept in the Church archives, nor is there any pastoral guidance or liturgy available to assist grieving families regarding stillbirth. It is questionable whether stillbirth baptism should be allowed, in light of the fact that there is no record whatsoever from either the Old Testament or the New Testament which allows for this rite of passage. It is also clear that stillbirth baptism does not have a theological base.

**Keywords:** stillborn; baptism; African; Methodist; grace

## Introduction

In the Methodist Church of Southern Africa (MCSA), there has been a notable increase in the number of parents who request that their stillborn babies be baptised. In reformed theology, baptism of the dead is neither a common nor an acceptable practice. Thus, these requests confront religious leaders with difficult decisions. The question is, how can ministers maintain theological and doctrinal integrity as well as pastoral concern for the grieving parents?

As yet, no guidelines are available to Methodist ministers on how to deal with requests regarding stillbirth baptism. To complicate matters even more, very little literature on



Studia Historiae Ecclesasticae  
<https://unisapressjournals.co.za/index.php/SHE/index>  
Volume 48 | Number 3 | 2022 | #10369 | 19 pages

<https://doi.org/10.25159/2412-4265/10369>  
ISSN 2412-4265 (Online), ISSN 1017-0499 (Print)  
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stillbirth baptism is available, especially from an African perspective. Even though the theological understanding of baptism is very clear (and needs no elaboration), church leaders struggle with these requests. A solution to this dilemma must be found, bearing in mind the psycho-social space in which the parents find themselves.

Another question pertains to the origins of such a belief, namely, that a stillborn baby “must” be baptised. It could be argued that it rests on a misinterpretation of some biblical texts, like 1 Cor. 15:29 where it says: “Now if there is no resurrection, what will those do who are baptised for the dead? If the dead are not raised at all, why are people baptised for them?” Another well-known text is John 3: 5 where it says: “No one can enter the kingdom of God unless if they are born of water and the spirit”. These and other texts might lead Christian parents to believe that without baptism, their unbaptised child is lost forever.

A further important issue among Africans is the idea that the living dead (ancestors) will not accept the child as their own. For some African Christians, it is important that baptism is administered before a child is to be buried to meet his or her departed forebears. Despite continuous education on the subjects of original sin, salvation, grace and baptism, people still insist on the baptism of the dead.

In this article, some issues pertaining to the baptism of stillborn babies will be examined from an African perspective, with specific reference to the MCSA as well as some insights from Scripture. It is concluded that the practice of stillbirth baptism is contrary to Methodist doctrine, but at the same time, the loss of a baby requires intense pastoral intervention and some form of rite or ceremony. Some guidelines for pastoral care, liturgy and a naming ceremony for stillborns are proposed.

## An African Perspective

### **Rituals**

Rituals in Africa are deeply rooted in the cultural beliefs, traditions and indigenous religions of the continent. They are guided by people’s belief in their existence after death, and the role of the living dead or ancestors. These African rituals on the continent evolved through the infusion of Christianity, Islam and modern changes. Ekore and Lanre-Abass (2016, 369–373) assert that life does not come to an end with death but it continues in another realm. Africans believe that, once a person dies, certain supernatural powers are conferred on them and give them the ability to bless or curse those in the world of the living. The other cultural belief is that both the living and the dead are part of the same family circle or community they were part of before they passed on. This is evident in that there are ceremonies held in memory of those who have departed and often most families would visit the graves of their loved ones to spend time in conversation about the world of the living and their wellbeing.

According to Dancy and Davis (2006, 187–211), death is a universal, natural, persistent and undeniable fact of life. Death impacts on the family and friends of the deceased, the magnitude of which often depends on whether the death was expected or unexpected. Therefore, “death rituals and the mourning practices of Africans are varied because of the existence of so many religious and cultural practices” (Koenig and Marshall 2004, 546).

African cultural beliefs and practices impact directly upon Christianity in Africa. Christian beliefs and practices have been reinterpreted in terms of African culture. With this in mind, it should be expected that Christian baptism could become encultured and transformed in terms of African culture. Many African families will engage, in one way or another, in some cleansing rituals after the death of a loved one, including a stillborn. These rituals are done not only to remove uncleanness or bad spirits left after somebody has died, but also for the benefit even of the deceased. One of the fundamental aspects of baptism is the aspect of cleansing, being washed in the blood of Christ. Baptism is often regarded as a cleansing ritual, and as such necessary for a stillborn.

### **African Understanding of Baptism**

Africa is confronted with severe illnesses and pandemics, such as malaria, tuberculosis, HIV-AIDS and most recently, Covid-19. Millions of people die annually on the African continent. As a result, many Africans are confronted with the question of life after death. Baptism, as portrayed by many pastors, preachers and ministers, is perceived as a vehicle or an access to receive eternal life or find a resting place with the creator God. This will lead to dealing with the understanding of what heaven is, specifically dealing with the concept of life after death.

In Africa, baptism involves a process of learning and growth that touches not only the newly baptised but also the entire Church. It does not only affect the candidate to be received into the stages of the Church’s life, but also the entire community of believers. A person’s life in the Christian community involves interactions and socialisation in the cultural context of the individual. Socialisation has always affected humanity, and thus for all human beings, the environment they live in gives them their identity which ultimately brings about the formation of a unique culture, tradition and liveliness that defines them.

Therefore, before beginning to talk about African understanding of baptism it is necessary to first understand the cultural beliefs, customs and traditions of the African people. Ancestral tradition, the veneration of deceased parents and forebears, constitutes a key aspect of African religions. In African tradition and culture, the belief is that the ancestors, having transcended the human realm, occupy a higher realm of existence and are equipped to bestow honours and blessings on the living members of their lineage. According to Kombo (2007, 192):

Ritual offerings are given in exchange for blessings from the ancestors. Africans believe that *Modimo* (God) acts through *Badimo* (ancestors) yet God is readily available to those in need. The normal way in which God acts is through the ancestors. The *Badimo* (ancestors) are known to be the intermediators.

“Conversely, neglect of a lineage’s ancestors can lead to misfortune, illness, and even death” (Olupona 2014, 28). “They have a strong influence on the community of the living. They are approached first before all important undertakings” (Krige 1974, 289). This is also done when someone is to be buried. There will be a moment where the family will visit the graves of those regarded as senior ancestors to be told of the death in the family and for the departed to prepare to receive them. All the necessary rituals will be administered in order to appease the ancestors to warmly receive the newcomer into the world of the living dead.

### **Communal Society**

The sense of belonging together, relatedness and the spirit of living in community are common factors in the upbringing of children. The spirit of Ubuntu is encapsulated in the understanding that whatever happens to one person, happens to the community, and whatever happens to the community happens to the individual. The well-known mantra of Ubuntu is “I am, because we are; and since we are, therefore I am”.

This shows that, for Africans, their attitude towards life is that of living in a community. The African way of life favours communalism (community or collectivism) above individualism. This is evident in that even African legal procedures emphasise the responsibility of the group rather than the individual, and that community rights are elevated above individual rights (Mönnig 1988, 308). The community, it seems, can be seen as the focal point and source of all spirituality. Unwavering respect of and obedience to adults, parents, seniors and any kind of other authority is expected. This implies a stratified, even hierarchical, structure underlying the society (Mönnig 1988, 322; Sidhom 1969, 106).

## **A Methodist Perspective**

### **Introduction**

In the MCSA, stillbirth baptism is not an option, as this rite is meant for the living. There is no evidence in Scripture of Jesus Christ or his disciples baptising the dead. Within the reformed tradition, salvation is not dependant on the sacraments, but on God’s grace. According to Methodist doctrine, God’s prevenient grace is not dependant on what people do. From this perspective, the unbaptised children of believers are also covered by the undeserved love and grace of God. In His freedom, God loves His people unconditionally. “Baptism is not salvation and all that it entails. It is the sign that points us to the benefits of Christ that we receive by faith” (Sproul 2011, 32).

In the MCSA, there are no records of stillbirth baptism. Despite ministerial formation and training in pastoral care, no pastoral guidance or liturgies are available to Methodist ministers to assist grieving families regarding stillbirth. There is very limited data available on stillbirth and very little has been written by theologians on the matter. Stillbirth is treated together with neonatal and miscarriage deaths, and receives very little attention.

Stillbirth baptism is a contradiction of accepted Christian doctrine and practice, specifically in the MCSA and the Protestant tradition in general. Church members are beginning to contradict the orthodox doctrine and understanding of baptism, under influence of traditional African beliefs and culture. The insistence that stillborn babies must be baptised, regardless of what constitutes Christian (and Wesleyan) doctrine, was the direct stimulus for this study. It is also clear that the practice of stillbirth baptism has far-reaching implications, including a misunderstanding of Scripture (e.g. 1 Cor. 15:29); but also fundamental Christian doctrines about salvation, grace, and eternal life.

### **Methodist Understanding of Baptism**

The MCSA believes that the sacrament of baptism was given to the Church by Jesus Christ. It is an outward sign of the new life that God offers to all people through the work of Christ and marks the entry of the person baptised into God's family, the Church. Baptism therefore proclaims God's grace and looks forward to life-long growth into Christ in the fellowship of the Church. It calls for the response of faith that is also a life-long process. In the case of believers, the initial profession of faith precedes baptism. In the case of infants, parents and sponsors who are believers promise to provide Christian nurture and to prepare the child for their personal profession of faith. In both cases, the person baptised will be supported by the faith of the Church (MCSA 2016, 13). John Wesley (28 June 1703 – 2 March 1791), a British cleric, theologian and evangelist, was the leader of a revival movement within the Church of England known as Methodism. He maintained that sacraments are vehicles for salvation, that is, the "means of grace" as alluded to earlier. Baptism recognises a person as a child of God's kingdom and sets their feet in the way of salvation. In baptism, God initiates the act of salvation and humans respond to God's activity. Baptism, as a sacrament, is an act of acceptance in which candidates recognise, receive and begin to participate in the grace-filled life that God offers. In the Methodist tradition, baptism is viewed as:

- **Entrance into the Church:** A person is initiated into the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church, enabling them to participate in the uniting bond throughout Christendom.
- **Sign of repentance:** An acknowledgement of sin and the movement towards the life of grace and reconciliation (Macquarrie 1977, 459). A "washing of a sin-stained life" that calls for the baptised to have a new beginning and orientation (Migliore 1993, 215).

- **Identification with Christ:** As a ceremonial act instituted by Christ (Matt. 28:19)
- **Holy Spirit:** The presence of the Spirit of Jesus Christ is what enables people to participate in the divine nature and life (Maddox 1998, 200), that is, to become true children of God.
- **Baptism and vocation:** Baptised Christians are called to participate in a life-journey of faith, commitment to Jesus' ministry and the beginning of His work.

### **Methodist Views on Prevenient Grace**

Wesley taught that God is gracious and God's grace has consistently and continuously been at work. Even though Scripture tells us that Christ commanded us to baptise all nations, God can save sinners without baptism. With God, there is free and undeserved grace that goes before us. There are many instances where God had saved sinners without them being baptised. This is even true with stillborns. Throughout history, stillborns might have been buried without being baptised, but this does not mean that they ran short of being "accepted" into the presence of God or being with the creator God, Who is merciful.

Further, Wesley asserted that the saving work of Christ begins with the first dawning of grace in the soul, which he called prevenient grace (William 1988, 41). This is very critical in understanding that baptism is not an "access card" into the presence of God. Wesley looked at what grace means before he dealt with the whole notion of prevenient grace. He maintained that grace is grace, a person does not have one kind of grace for one situation and another kind for some other situation. By the same token, God does not give His grace in bits and pieces. Harper (1983, 40) writes:

We define grace in different ways because of how we experience the grace on our end of the relationship. Grace comes to us at different stages in our spiritual pilgrimage, and it accomplishes different effects and evokes different responses. But it is all grace.

When Wesley spoke of prevenient grace, "he meant the grace of God which operates before our experience of conversion". It is his term for the grace of God that is active before we give conscious thought to God or our need for him. To use biblical language, it is the grace that comes while we are "still sinners" (Romans 5:8). In Wesley's theology, this action of grace is particularly important, and we need to work through it carefully (Shelton 2014, 314).

The doctrine of prevenient grace means that God takes the first step to redeem humanity. For Wesley, He allows this grace to operate in and through human consciousness. Additionally, prevenient grace is "leading grace". It is the operation of God that moves us to the place of repentance. Wesley indicated that there are three ways in which prevenient grace "leads" us. First, it creates in us our first sensitivity to God's will.

Second, it produces a slight, even transient conviction of having violated His will. Third, it causes our first wish to be to please God. Through these experiences, Wesley believed a person would be led to the place of repentance, which was itself a step along the way to full salvation (see Harper 1983, 42).

### **Methodist Understanding of Salvation**

According to Wesley, an order of salvation is rooted in the existence and recognition of original sin and God's response to it. Salvation from original sin begins with justification, continues in sanctification, and ends with glorification. Wesley observed that justification is the pardoning of our sin. It is making us righteous and just before God. Sanctification, on the other hand is the process of change in a believer's life from sinfulness unto holiness. It is also the process of becoming "more dead to sin", while becoming "more and more alive to God". It should be noted, however, that this holiness is the holiness of living and is distinct from the righteousness reckoned to us by God through Christ. The holiness that we receive from God through Christ cannot be improved upon or added to because it is perfect, absolute and effective holiness.

The other element in what Wesley saw in salvation is glorification. This is the result of our Christian life. It includes the changing of our mortal state to become "like him" (1 John 3:2). However, he saw glorification as changing not just the state of humankind but of all creation that had been corrupted by the fall of Adam. On that day, not only our salvation but the redemption of all the cosmos will be complete (Cramer 2012, 7). Wesley lived out his theology, fully integrating the justification he received by faith with the assurance he came to recognise in his spirit. He knew assurance not as an intangible idea, but as something he experienced. Wesleyan interpretation of grace moves beyond justifying to sanctifying grace. It is grace that draws us into perfect Christianity, which Wesley described as having a heart filled with the love of God and our neighbours.

### **Methodist Views on Stillbirth Baptism**

The MCSA officially does not practise baptism of or for the dead. The Church subscribes to the notion that everyone is created in the image and likeness of God, and that salvation is needed and can be attained by everyone regardless of being baptised or not. For Methodists, "prevenient grace" is delivered to humans before any decision or action is made by them. The rite of baptism is reserved for the living, both infants and adults.

In Romans 8:32 we read: "He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all – how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?" The sacrifice that Christ made covers everyone, including unborn and stillborn children. Baptism is not a prerequisite of getting access to heaven when we die. Wesley said that God's work of salvation is about all that God does to save us, starting with and primarily in this life. Baptism, according to Wesley, is the "ordinary instrument of our justification (Outler

1964, 321). It means for us, baptism is where justification begins for most of us, and that it is a sure and certain means of beginning God's justifying (and so sanctifying) work in us. It does not rule out that God may begin such work in us by other means.

## Some Scriptural Perspectives

### Introduction

Turning to Scripture, Matthew (28:19–20) records the Great Commandment: “Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and the Holy Spirit.” Jesus said we should go into the world and spread the good news announcing the message of God to one and all. Whoever believes and is baptised will be saved. Baptism is a symbol of Christ's burial and resurrection. Being submerged into water during baptism identifies us with Christ's death on the cross, His burial in the tomb and His resurrection from the dead. Baptism identifies the believer with the Godhead: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Baptism, in its earliest phase, was seen to be a rite that washed away moral dirt, which is why the early Christians connected baptism to moral transformation.

Baptism is meant to bring us in repentance to receive the forgiveness of sins. Otherwise, humanity shall have to face the righteous judgment of God. It points forward to the cleansing and indwelling of the Holy Spirit which Jesus would make possible. Nobody is so good that they do not need this, nobody is so bad that they cannot receive it. In every case, however, it must mark the start of a new life which involves moral change. The baptism of Jesus takes us much further. It was through this sacrament that He was anointed by the Holy Spirit. It was at His baptism that He perceived His status as Son and His role as Servant. It was here that He received His commission for a life of ministry. Christian baptism includes all these things, because, above all else, it unites our lives with that of Jesus. The New Testament does not spend a lot of time theorising about baptism. It makes it plain that the early Christians obeyed their Master and went about actually doing it. But in the course of the New Testament, there are many explanatory allusions to baptism. Here are some of them, and varied though they are, they all point decisively in a single direction (Green 2017, 45).

### Old Testament Ritual Washings

From the very beginning, water has been an important part of creation, a substance that is necessary for life as we know it, and something that defines many of the earth's boundaries and conditions. The river Jordan is always referred to as that boundary between earthly life and life eternal, and crossing it refers to the time of natural death. The water of life refers to the Spirit of God which moves and takes up abode in an individual in spiritual birth (Webb 2020, 3). The use of water as a means of purification or washing is widespread in religions of the world. It was common in the religious activities of the Greeks and Romans in the period surrounding the rise of Christianity. Sacred sites had fountains or another source of water to be used for the ceremonial cleansing of worshipers and officiants at the sanctuary. Particular interest attaches to



washing with water in initiation to the Mystery Religions, because some have associated these with the practice of Christian baptism. The Mystery Religions did occasionally express ideas of forgiveness, rebirth after a mystic death, eternal life, and illumination, but these ideas were associated with the ceremony as a whole and not primarily with purification by water. The latter was a preliminary preparation for the initiation and had the same purpose of ritual purification as in the other cults treated above (Ferguson 2009, 962).

### **New Testament Baptism**

The three different baptisms described in the New Testament are the baptism of John the Baptist, of Jesus and of the early Church as described in the New Testament and early Christian literature. Baptism did not originate with Christianity. Before the dawn of the Christian era, there was a form of baptism practised by the Jews which was known as “proselyte baptism”. It was performed on Gentiles who became converts to Judaism. After suitable instruction as to what was involved in making this great change, the converts were prepared for the actual ceremony that marked their transition from Gentile to Jew. The ceremony took place in three stages. First, for males, there was *milan* or circumcision. The second was *tebillah* or baptism by immersion in water. As the converts stepped out of the water they were called by the rabbis a little child just born anew. They were told that their past life was as completely gone as though they had died and had been buried. The third stage was called *corban* or sacrifice. An animal was sacrificed and some of its blood was sprinkled upon the converts (Gibbs 2012, 385).

Baptism makes us members of the body of Christ, “to be a holy priesthood” (1 Peter 2:5). By baptism, we share in the priesthood of Christ, in His prophetic and royal mission. Christians are “a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s people ...” (1 Peter 2:9). One of the transformational calls that the MCSA is proud of is the belief in the priesthood of all believers, where everyone is given the role of sharing this sacred responsibility. This anointing is a stirring reminder of the transcendent dignity conferred on people. By priesthood, both clergy and laity are called to offer and consecrate the bread and wine on behalf of those gathered and to actively participate by offering themselves, their gifts and sacrifices to God respectively.

The sacrament of baptism means participating in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Jesus went down into the river Jordan and was baptised in solidarity with sinners to fulfil all righteousness (Matthew 3:15). This baptism led Jesus along the way of the Suffering Servant, made manifest in His suffering, death and resurrection (Mark 10:38–40, 45). Through baptism, Christians are immersed in the liberating death of Christ where their sins are buried, where the “old Adam” is crucified with Christ, and where the power of sin is broken (WCC 1982, 1). According to Cullmann (1950, 70), “baptism is incorporation into the Church where Christ is present and where the once-and-for-all saving work of Christ is carried out in all who are responding and where conscious faith is born and communicated”. This means that baptism replaces circumcision as a sign of Christ and His gospel work. Cullmann further concludes that both adult and infant

baptisms are to be regarded as equally biblical. The essence of the act of baptism is, therefore, “the reception of a member into the divine covenant of the body of Christ in whom the covenant with Abraham is fulfilled”. With regard to baptism and the requirement of faith, Cullmann (1950, 46–48) reasons that “within the mortal life of the person baptised, that is of one who has been received into the Church of Jesus Christ; baptism is the starting point of something that happens”.

According to Machinga (2011, 13), the importance of baptism is formulated as follows:

It recognises a person as a child of God’s kingdom and sets his or her feet in the way of salvation. In baptism, God initiates the act of salvation and humans respond to God’s activity. Baptism, as a sacrament, is an act of acceptance in which candidates recognise, receive, and begin to participate in the grace-filled life that God offers.

Wesley taught that baptism is a good gift of God to the Church, a significant part of God’s plan of bringing people to salvation. When parents present their children for baptism, they avail those children of God’s grace. Wesley argued that participation in the sacrament of baptism is a part of a lifelong process of God working in our lives. Through his teaching on prevenient grace, Wesley emphasised that God’s gift, which is received through baptism, must be responded to in repentance and accepted in faith (Machinga 2011, 17).

## Pastoral Care and Liturgy for the Naming Service

### **Pastoral Care**

Refusal by religious leaders or pastors to baptise a baby is seen as an intentional devaluing of the baby’s worth. At this point, pastors are required to be pastoral in their approach to the situation instead of being academic. The duty of pastors is to comfort the bereaved mother and the entire family and not a moment for them to display their theological knowledge on the sacraments (Spong 2011). This may bring a sense of aloneness after stillbirth, intensifying and complicating grief and sometimes causing protracted grief and social withdrawal. Spong (2011, 206) writes:

Social reactions perceived as abandoning by providers, family members, or even partners usually result in tremendous stress on the woman, her family, and even the marital dyad as women suffer losses related to their sense of self. Few human experiences are as unnatural as giving birth to a dead baby, a death out of order, and survivor guilt is not uncommon. The mother, often plagued with self-doubt, wonders about her role in the baby’s death. She may also wonder about her worthiness as a mother to her surviving or subsequent children. Because women often experience their unborn babies as an integral extension of the self, to “abandon” the baby is to abandon the mother. To deny the baby’s worth is to also refute the woman’s worth. That implicit denial of her worthiness does not come without significant risk. Many women feel like failures, and sometimes, even killers.

Kolski, Berghuis and Myer (2012, 120) suggest the following 10 vital things to consider to assist the grieving parent and/or partner:

1. Receive appropriate medical care. It is advisable that as pastors, or caregivers, we encourage our members to follow medical assistance as prescribed to them and also to undergo a medical check-up.
2. It is encouraged to allow the grieving mother to actively participate in the discussions regarding the disposition of the stillborn, create an opportunity for the mother to see and hold the stillborn before any arrangement of a memorial, cremation or burial is done. This will allow the mother to start the process of letting go and begin with the grieving process. We need to educate and prepare the client for what to expect; process the client's emotions; provide supportive and encouraging feedback regarding active involvement in decision-making.
3. Allow the mother to describe the feelings that were experienced at the time of receiving the stillborn and how it has negatively impacted their lives. This will allow the mother to open up and be able to share their emotions, loss and frustrations and disappointment.
4. Complete screening tools to identify the severity of grief reactions. This will assist in referring the mother should any medical intervention be required.
5. Assist grieving parents to verbalise an understanding of their distorted cognitive messages regarding the cause of death that promote anger or hopelessness and its treatment.
6. Grieving steps leading to healing must be explained to the mother to reassure her that grief is personal and that everyone differs in the way they process grief.
7. Assist the grieving mother to verbalise any unresolved grief issues that may be contributing to guilt, depression, helplessness, or anger. Assist the mother in identifying and expressing feelings connected with the loss.
8. Assist in helping to move from self-blame to understanding that, some things are just not in our control. This could be done by assisting the client in developing coping strategies for her loss.
9. Create a support base for the family and inquire about the client's religious/spiritual beliefs and encourage them to use this resource for support; reinforce the client's use of faith as a source of comfort and healing.
10. Help the mother to verbalise hopeful and positive statements regarding the future. This will assist in identifying grief as a process; reminding them that there will be various intensities of emotions over time, and at times unexpectedly; validate the normalcy in a variation of feelings. Furthermore, to develop a plan for coping with those emotions such as open communication with support systems and devotion to spiritual discipline and prayer.

### **Proposed Naming Ceremony and Service**

The following is a proposed naming ceremony within a service, without a baptism ritual. The intention is to satisfy the spiritual needs of the bereaved family by means of

performing a ritual centred around the stillborn; without compromising theological and doctrinal integrity; and staying true to the Methodist ecclesial practice.

**Greeting:**

The minister greets the family.

Music for worship may be offered while the people gather.

The coffin may be carried into the place of worship in procession.

Opening hymn may be played/sung.

*The minister says:*

God of compassion, we are gathered here with ... (*and ...*), to honour this baby not able to be brought to the fullness of life we hoped and intended for *him/her*. We seek the comfort and knowledge of your love as given to us in Holy Scripture, in the gift of your child Jesus who dwelt and died among us, and in your presence with us, as we bless [and name] *him/her*, and commend *him/her* to your care.

**The Lord's Prayer may be recited:**

Our Father, Who art in heaven,

hallowed be Thy name;

Thy kingdom come;

Thy will be done;

on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread.

and forgive us our trespasses,

as we forgive those who trespass against us.

and lead us not into temptation;

but deliver us from evil.

For Thine is the kingdom,

the power and the glory,

for ever and ever.

Amen.

### **Sermon:**

Names are an incredibly important part of our identity. They carry deep personal, cultural, familial, and historical connections. They also give us a sense of who we are, the communities in which we belong, and our place in the world. This is why mispronunciations, misuse of our preferred/common names, or misgendering can negatively affect and possibly hurt and impact a sense of belonging.

John the Baptist was circumcised, as were Jesus and Paul (Luke 1:59; 2:21; Phil. 3:5). They all received their names on the eighth day according to tradition. Through the sacrament of baptism, Christians are received into the Church of God and receive a new “clan” name – that of “Christian” and it seemed to relate to the Sotho practice. They are separated from other people and religions because they wholly belong to Christ whose mark and ensign they bear. Baptism serves as a testimony that Christ will forever be their gracious God and Saviour and in Christ God will be their Father.

Our Heavenly Father has also given us a name by which we should be called, the name of Jesus Christ. In the early days of the Church of Jesus Christ, during the time of the apostles, the members of the Church were known by the name of Jesus Christ. The earliest mention is in the Book of Acts where they were called Christians (Acts 11:26). The importance of a name can never be underestimated, neither our earthly name nor the name of Jesus Christ.

Our earthly name is important. It defines us and binds families together by a family name. Temple ordinances make those feelings of unity and love permanent. The sacred name of Jesus Christ is important because it binds us to Him. We take His name upon us and follow Him. He, in turn, blesses us with the Holy Spirit.

Let us remind ourselves of your knowledge of this baby in the words of Psalm 139 (12, 14–15): “For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother’s womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful; I know that full well.”

People were bringing little children to Jesus to have him touch them, but the disciples rebuked them. When Jesus saw this, he was indignant. He said to them, “Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. I tell you the truth, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.” And he took the children in his arms, put his hands on them and blessed them (Mark 10:13–16).

**Naming:**

If the baby is not being named, the service continues with the prayers.

*The minister says:*

Holy Scripture teaches us that what is called into being, we know and remember through naming. In recognition of the place, this baby holds in our family and our hearts, in honour of the brief time *he/she* was embodied with us.

*The minister addresses the parents:* \_\_\_ and \_\_\_, have you chosen a name for your child?

*The parents answer:* We name him/her \_\_\_.

*The minister responds:*

[Name of child], we give you this name and do so in the Name of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Although your life was brief, you will be remembered as one belonging to the \_\_\_ family and as a gift shared with us all.

*The minister says:*

Let us pray.

God of wisdom and all compassion, you make nothing in vain and love all that you have created. In the midst of our many questions and our lack of understanding, we believe that little \_\_\_ is in your presence. We pray for the courage and strength to say “goodbye” before we had the opportunity to say “hello.” May you, O Lord, care for, love and nurture little \_\_\_ forever. Help us to endure and wait for the day when we will be reunited after we too obtain the fullness of your promises in the age to come, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

*The parents repeat after the minister:*

O God, creator of us all, give us the grace to honour and remember our baby \_\_\_. Let our love for *him/her* show forth in our lives. Sustain our trust in your unfailing love for *him/her* and for all children, born and unborn, who rest in the sacred mystery of your love. May we know your comforting presence as we gather our strength to go forth from this moment into our lives. This we ask through Jesus Christ our Saviour. Amen.

**Dismissal:**

*The minister says:*

Tender Shepherd of the flock, \_\_\_ lies cradled in your love. Soothe the hearts of *his/her* mother (*and father*), and bring peace to their lives. Strengthen their faith and give hope to their hearts.

We thank you too for the promise that what we see here in this world is not all there is, and for the hope of seeing him/her again because of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Increase our capacity to trust in your grace, even through our loss. Despite the emptiness that we now feel, we know that \_\_\_ is safe in your arms of love.

O God, help and comfort the parent(s) of \_\_\_ and each one who feels this loss sharply. Thank you for the people who hold and support them in both their pain and joy. Continue to show your grace to this family. And may your peace, courage, hope and light draw us all together in this hour. All this we pray in the name of Jesus, who died, and yet lives forever. Amen.

**For use with or by the parents:**

God of hope, we come to you in shock and grief and confusion of heart. We thank you for the love in which \_\_\_ was conceived. Help us to find peace in the knowledge of your loving mercy to all your children, and give us light to guide us out of our darkness into the assurance of your love. Amen.

**Blessing:**

*The minister says:*

The eternal God is your dwelling place, and underneath are the everlasting arms. May God bless us and keep us. May God's countenance shine upon us, and grant us peace and love. Amen.

**Conclusion**

According to Mbiti (2015, 119), it is now known that

death is not a complete destruction of the individual. Life goes on beyond the grave. Therefore, people combine their sorrow over the death of someone with the belief that that is not the end and that the departed continues to live in the hereafter having been afforded the gift of God's grace.

It is noted that the Bible is silent about what happens to unbaptised stillborn babies, and this makes people wonder about their ultimate place of rest (heaven). However,

believers can rest assured in the knowledge that Jesus welcomed children into a loving and gracious kingdom of God, without them being baptised.

Baptism does not grant us access to God's presence. The ultimate price (Jn. 3:16) was paid. God became the sacrificial lamb for the salvation of humanity and created order. The promise of God is unfailing and consistent. If a stillborn is not baptised, the promise of being with the Creator still stands, "And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am. You know the way to the place where I am going" (Jn. 14:3). No one will forfeit being clothed with Christ because God's will enable us to enter the kingdom of God and as Wesley put it:

- All people need to be saved;
- All people can be saved;
- All people can know that they are saved; and
- All people can be saved to the uttermost.

Bible verses like 1 Cor. 15:29 cannot be blamed for the confusion in which people find themselves. Despite diverging views on baptism through history, it is generally accepted that baptism of the dead, proxy baptism or baptism of stillborn babies is problematic. Neither Scripture nor major theologians nor Church traditions support such a practice.

No one has to be baptised to go to heaven or be accepted by God. However, we should submit ourselves to baptism if we are able. It is scriptural, God commanded that we should be baptised. But our baptism, the visible expression of what God has done for us, that is, God's grace, is not the saving power but it is rather the divine authentication of God's grace. The sum of the Scriptures teaches us that baptism is not our testimony to God about what we have done for Him, but rather baptism is God's testimony to us concerning his salvation promised, made possible, and applied by God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. The Word of God says "we are saved by grace through faith" and that is not of ourselves. We are admonished, "*Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you should be saved*" (Acts 16:31). It further commands baptism, but baptism does not save us from sin. Neither Holy Communion nor our faith can save us, only Jesus saves.

Meyers (1994, 27) writes:

The ordinary elements of water, bread, and wine allow us to encounter Christ in ways readily accessible to our senses. We meet Christ not in some abstract spiritual ways, but in these very tangible substances that by their use in worship permeate the very core of our being. An expansive use of these symbols helps us glimpse the infinite, incomprehensible, overflowing love of God in Christ Jesus.



This view will assist many of us to understand that the precious signs and symbols given to us over time through generations and history, help give us a theological understanding of how God is believed to act with humanity and the Church. We now know that stillborn babies may not be baptised, because the debt is already paid for them, and God's amazing grace has covered everything. Scripture says, "There is some basis for the hope that God has a method, not revealed to us, by which God works faith in the children of Christians dying without baptism" (Mark 10:13–16).

God is not bound by the means to the use of which God has bound us. That is to say, that while Christ has commanded us to baptise all nations, God can save sinners without baptism. God did so throughout the entire Old Testament. There is an all-encompassing Gospel pronouncement that "God was in Christ, reconciling the world (including the little children) unto Godself" (2 Cor. 5:19).

Stillbirth baptism does not have a theological base. The death or loss of a beloved infant before they are born is a difficult experience that would not be wished for any parent. It is therefore incumbent upon pastors, ministers and the laity to show great pastoral care, love and support to those individuals who are faced with this situation in their time of mourning or grieving.

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