

Beginnings and endings

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [February 8, 2012](#) issue



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After 48 years as a minister of word and sacrament in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), I will retire at the end of January. I have tried not to become caught in the "oh-my-gosh-it's-the-last-time-I-will-do-this" syndrome, and I succeeded until Epiphany Sunday, a day when our church celebrates baptism. Infant baptisms may be the best part of being a minister. For one thing, I love babies. Although my wife and I had five of them, the truth is that I had never been around an infant until she delivered one. I recall feeling a powerful sense of wonder and awe when I held that first baby, and I have not forgotten that feeling. When that baby was born, fathers were an unwanted nuisance in the birth process. We were relegated to the fathers' waiting room, where we chain-smoked and read old *Field and Stream* magazines. When our fifth child was born, however, it was a more enlightened time. Fathers were active participants and were allowed to be present in the delivery room. Now I think back to those births and look forward to baptisms. Each time I hold an infant, I remember old Simeon holding baby Jesus in the temple and saying, "O Lord, lettest thou thy servant depart in peace for my eyes have seen thy salvation" (KJV). It isn't salvation I'm holding, of course, but I'm holding a child, and that child is future and hope.

Some of the babies are dressed in gowns that are family heirlooms; some wear corduroys and sweaters; one little boy wore a miniature white tuxedo complete with bow tie. Parents are worried that their infants will do something embarrassing, which they almost always do: they wriggle, scream for their parents, burp and throw up,

smile beatifically at the minister, survey the congregation like royalty, and grab the minister's glasses or nose. In my tradition, the minister says the child's name followed by, "You are a child of God, sealed by the Spirit in your baptism, and you belong to Jesus Christ forever," to which one two-year-old recently responded, "Uh-oh." It was an appropriate response, I thought, because beyond its attendant humanness, and the simple cuteness of the baby, is a stunning theological affirmation. God loves us apart from anything we have done or neglected to do; God loves us apart from our theological sophistication or lack of it; God loves us when we are weak and vulnerable and totally dependent; God loves us not because of anything about us other than the fact that we are, we have being and we bear within us the image of the One who created us. It is enough. It is worth celebrating.

Later that week I was present at the bedside when a church member died—a vital, bright, successful businessman who loved his family, fine wine and good food. His wife and family made the difficult decision to remove life support when there was no hope for recovery. We held hands around his bed and stumbled through the 23rd Psalm. I thanked God for the man's good life and commended him to God's care, then we watched as two ICU nurses, with great sensitivity and dignity, removed life support tubes.

In the midst of a flurry of retirement activities, I have been given reminders of what church is about and what ministry is, and I am grateful.