

Baptism of Adults and Infants



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Baptism - What it isn't, What it is

What it isn't

Baptism is not a Naming Ceremony.

Because the child is named during the ceremony, the idea has developed that the purpose of baptism is to give the child its name. However, this is not correct. There is an aspect in which the child is given a name, but that is only in the respect that the child is given the name or identified with Christ. Hence the term "Christen". In the past it has been considered that baptism or christening is to "Christianise" the child or declare the child a "Christian". This aspect of baptism has lost usage in the church today because of the wrong connotations associated with the name.

Baptism does not Save the Child or Make the Child a Christian.

The Roman Catholic Church teaches that the rite of baptism saves the child, or makes the child a Christian. This idea is termed "Baptismal Regeneration". The Reformers (Luther, Calvin and others) taught, correctly, that this idea was not supported in the Bible. Salvation is by the grace of God and is appropriated by faith, that is, believing God, particularly concerning God's testimony about his Son Jesus Christ.

Baptism does not Guarantee the Salvation of the Child

When we see what baptism is, it will become clearer, but for now, suffice to say, that baptism (that is being sprinkled with or immersed in water) of itself does not guarantee the salvation of the child. It is a rite which admits the baptised person into the church. It symbolises much but it does not of itself achieve salvation.

What it is

There is much confusion over exactly what baptism is and there are many opinions even within the Reformed tradition of Christianity. This is sometimes because the rite of baptism contains within it much symbolism. Some think the rite of baptism is so closely bound to that which it symbolises that what can be said of the one can be said of the other. Unless this is kept in mind, (and this is not always easy to do) confusion can occur.

Meaning of the Word

Our English word 'baptise' comes from the Greek word **bapti,zw**, 'baptizo'. *Some have said that it always means to immerse, and therefore to be baptised one must be immersed in water. In fact the Greek word has a far wider range of meanings than just 'immerse'. In Hebrews 9:10 baptizo is used to refer to the Old Testament washings and sprinkling of the blood of the sacrifices. It is also used in Mark 7:4 & Hebrews 6:2 to refer to ceremonial washings. The Reformers*

associated the idea of being cleansed by the sprinkling of blood of the sacrifices with being washed by the blood of the Lamb and so concluded that sprinkling was a valid, if not preferred method of baptising a person.

Meaning of the Act

There is no definition of the act of Baptism given in the New Testament. However, there are many descriptions of what being baptised is associated with and from these we can derive a picture of what was the purpose of being baptised and what symbolism was contained in the act of baptism.

Baptism of Repentance

The first baptism we see in the New Testament was that of John the Baptist. John called the Jews to repent, and be baptised for the forgiveness of sins. He was 'the voice of the one crying in the wilderness', the one who was to 'prepare the way of the Lord' and prepare the people of God for the coming of their God, so they would not come under his judgement. John called the Jews back to obedience to the covenant God had made with them through Moses. What was unusual about John was that he baptised the Jews. Baptism was a rite reserved for Gentiles who wanted to convert to Judaism. They had to be circumcised and they also had to be baptised, which symbolised cleansing or purifying. The Jewish leaders objected to being asked to be baptised because they believed they did not need to be purified. They were the people of God and were not unclean like the Gentiles. John told them they needed it desperately, because of their disobedience to the covenant. Submitting to John's baptism was a sign of the repentance that had taken place in the heart. It was a sign that you agreed with God's judgement and an acknowledgement of your need of forgiveness. It also symbolised the reception of the forgiveness promised for those who repented.

Baptism – A Statement about Jesus

The first instance of Christian baptism is when Peter called upon the Jews to "Repent and be baptised, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins" (Acts 2:38). It was accompanied with the promise not only of forgiveness but the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Peter called upon the Jews to change their mind concerning Jesus. They had condemned him as a blasphemer. Now Peter tells them they must acknowledge Jesus not only as the Christ who God had promised to send, but also as the Lord of Life. This was a radical change of heart. Jesus was now the one they



would trust for salvation and obey as Lord. To acknowledge him as Christ and Lord was to depend that he could indeed save them from the wrath of God when he judged the world, and that they must obey him if they were to please God. This was a radical thing for the Jews who had looked to the LORD their God and him alone for salvation. They could only do this if they believed Jesus was God, otherwise it would be idolatry.

To be baptised in the name of Jesus was to completely identify with him and declare that you were his follower completely. It was also to become one of the company of believers. It differentiated you from all the other Jews who had rejected Jesus as the Christ. It was a clear "us and them demarcation", between those who believed Jesus was Lord and those who didn't.

Baptism of Initiation

In the beginning in Acts, baptism was something that was done to those who declared that they acknowledged Jesus was Christ and Lord. In being baptised they became one of the company of believers. This is seen very clearly in the account of the conversion of Cornelius and his household (Acts 10-11) and also the disciples of John the Baptist in Acts 19. Cornelius had received the Holy Spirit, yet it was considered necessary to baptise him with water (Acts 10:47). It was because God had given him the gift of the Holy Spirit in the same way as he had given it to the Jews, that the Gentiles were deemed acceptable to become part of the body of believers. Only a clear indication that Cornelius (a Gentile) was acceptable to God just as the Jews were, would have inclined the Jews to accept a Gentile into the hitherto Jewish Christian Church. This is also made clear in the objections raised by the Jews in chapter 11 and Peter's answer to them. . In being baptised with water the Gentiles became a part of the company of believers. In Acts 19, these disciples had been baptised by John, but to receive the promised Holy Spirit (become a Christian), they had to be baptised in Jesus name. To be baptised was to become a part of the company of believers in Jesus, one of Jesus disciples. Jesus himself commanded in Matthew 28 that going, the disciples were to make disciples, baptising and teaching.

As of the spread of Christianity continues, those who believed in Jesus were baptised. They became part of the assembly of God's people. Though it increased in number in many different locations, it is always spoken of as 'one people of God'. Even though there were many 'churches' or assemblies throughout Palestine, Luke can refer to the 'Church' (i.e. **one church**) **throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria enjoying peace (Acts 9:31).**

Baptism of Unbelievers

In the New Testament, unbelievers were not interested in being baptised. They did not want to be identified with Jesus or his followers. There was no advantage for them in doing so and there was some danger, first from the Jews and then from the

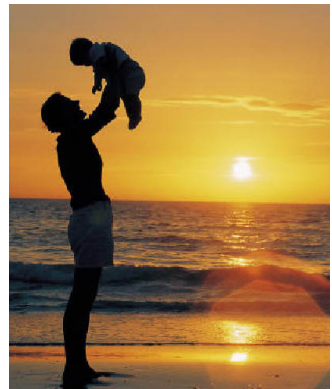
Romans. Only those who wanted to follow Jesus as Christ and Lord were prepared to be a part of "The Way" (Acts 9:2; 19:9; 19:23; 24:14, 22). Only those who confessed Jesus as Lord could be baptised by the Church, and there was only one church into which you could be baptised. As Christianity became more and more influential and gained a foothold in places of influence and authority, the lines of demarcation became blurred. When Christianity was declared to be the religion of the Empire, many who were not believers in Jesus Christ sought out church membership so as to be a full member of society. This carried on right through the Roman Empire, the Middle Ages and even through the Reformation. To be a citizen of Europe, one had to be baptised.

Baptism of Convenience

One of the reasons baptism has lost its significance today is that as the West became more and more Christian, there came a time when everyone born in the nation was baptised. It became a national and then a social demarcation. Nationally, you were either part of a Christian nation (ie received Christian baptism) or a Hindu or a Muslim etc. Baptism signified not only a change in beliefs but a change of nationality. Socially, if you were not baptised you lost social acceptability. It became a reflection of your moral and social standing.

Baptism Today

Why would I want to be baptised or have my child baptised? Being baptised is not necessary to be socially acceptable today, though in some circles, it is still seen as a rite of passage into family, religious or social acceptance. Some still consider it a part of the social fabric, however there is no commitment to believe in Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord.



To be faithful to the Biblical idea of baptism, more and more Protestant churches will not baptise a person unless he or she has made a sincere commitment to Jesus as Saviour and Lord and an informed confession of trust in Jesus. Baptism then, initiates them into the body of believers in Christ, the local Church. One might say, that when you declare that you want to be a disciple or follower of Jesus, you are baptised by and into the company of disciples to be disciplined (taught in a caring environment) by the disciples. The idea of becoming a Christian and not being baptised into the church, the body of Christ, is totally foreign to the Biblical teaching.

To be your God and the God of your Descendants (Genesis 17:7)

God has created the family and has instituted it as the basic unit of society for the benefit of men and women, and the care and nurture of children. In both the Old

Testament and the New Testament, God's promises to his people are to them and their children. (Deuteronomy 30:6; Isaiah 65:23; Jeremiah 32:39; Ezekiel 37:25; Acts 2:39) Just as God dealt with his people as a people, and as families, in the Old Testament, he continued to do so in the Church. Parents are to bring children up in the fear and admonition of the Lord (Deuteronomy 6:1-9), and children are to obey their parents as it is right and pleases the Lord (Eph 6:1). In Acts, on a number of occasions we are told that a believer in Jesus Christ is baptised, along with all their household. This may mean that all those in the household did make individual professions of faith, but it is more likely that it reflects the way God dealt with families. God's plan is that parents are to live the reality of trusting in Jesus in all aspects of their lives, and children born to believers are to be brought up as disciples of Jesus Christ, learning to trust him from a very early age. The testimony of many who are raised in Christian homes today is that they cannot remember a time when they did not trust in Jesus. The idea that a child should not be taught, but left "to make up his own mind" is also foreign to Biblical teaching.

Why Baptise my Child?

It is within this context that Christian parents bring their children to the church to be baptised into the company of believers, to be discipled by the parents as well as the church. The responsibility of discipling a child to be a follower of Jesus Christ is an awesome one; a responsibility which none of us is up to. However, God does not leave us alone to this task. This is one reason he brings us into the company of a caring Christian community. The teaching of the parents and the church is made real by the example of the parents and the church. The parents must take their charge seriously, as must the church. Jesus has warned us that "if anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a large millstone hung around his neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea. (Matthew 18:6). The parents and the Church must present teaching and a fellowship which draws the child to Christ, not drives it away.

Baptising a child is similar to baptising an adult, except whereas the adult makes their own profession of faith in Christ as Lord and saviour and desires to be a disciple of Jesus, the father as the head of the house declares that he and his household will serve the Lord (Joshua 24:15) and that he will disciple his children as followers of Jesus. The child is baptised into the company of believers to be discipled as a follower of Jesus. As the child grows and is taught to believe in Jesus, the faith that they have as a child is a faith that is taught, but it is real. There will come a time when their faith matures into an adult's faith. They will trust in Jesus as an adult as they own him as their own Lord. In many ways this is similar to the experience of an adult believer (Though we are reluctant to admit it). (They said to the woman, "We no longer believe just because of what you said; now we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this man really is the Saviour of the world." John 4:42) We even talk (as

does the Bible) of spiritual children, spiritual fathers, of being spiritually mature and immature and of growing in the Lord.

Does Baptism have any Relevance to Unbelievers or their Children?

Since the Biblical idea of baptism is initiation into the church to be disciplined by the church to become a follower of Jesus, someone who does not believe in Jesus may desire to find out more about what it means to be a Christian, a follower of Jesus, before they pursue baptism for themselves or their children.

When someone is baptised they or their parents make solemn promises before God. Even if they cannot see any reason to take these promises too seriously, God takes them very seriously. Good counsel for those who do not trust in Jesus and who do not really want to become his followers is that it would be better not to be baptised or have their children baptised. Rather it would be good to talk to a mature Christian about what it means to follow Jesus.

A desire to have your child accepted by God and acceptable before him is a strong natural desire of parents. To accomplish this for the child, as for an adult, requires more than a few drops or even a great quantity of water. It required the death of God's Son, Jesus Christ, who paid the penalty for our sin. His sacrifice made it possible for us to be reconciled with God. The invitation is for all who desire to be forgiven and become a part of the family of God to trust in the death of Jesus and commit your life to follow him as your saviour and Lord. Having made this commitment, baptism takes on great meaning and significance personally and for the church. Without this commitment, baptism is just wetting the body with water. At best it becomes an empty ritual. At worst it mocks God's word to us and incurs his judgement.

What Baptism Symbolises in the Life of the Church

One is a believer in Jesus as Christ and Lord (Acts 2:38; 41; 8:12; 19:3-5)

Acceptance into the people of God (Acts 10:47, 48)

It symbolises being baptised by the Spirit (Acts 11:16; 1 Corinthians 12:13)

Union with Christ (Romans 6:3-4; Galatians 3:27)

Unity in Christ (1 Corinthians 1:13-17)

Circumcision of Christ - putting off of the sinful nature (Colossians 1:11-13)

Washing away our sins (Acts 22:16)

Seeking a clear conscience before God - reconciliation before God. 1 Peter 3:21)



A Final Word

Baptism is spoken of as a sign. It points to or reminds the believer of the promises of

God to all who trust in Jesus as Christ and Lord. Like any sign it derives its importance from what it points to.

Let me illustrate -

If I am lost in the desert and I come across a sign that says "you are here" that does not help at all. The sign is worthless. However, if I come across a sign that says, "Oasis 2 km", then I could say the sign saved me. Of course it is not the sign but what the sign points me to that saves me. For the sign to be useful to me I had to believe it and go to the oasis where I could get food and drink to nourish my body, which is what really saved me. If I don't use the sign it is worthless and will not save me.

Baptism as the means of admission into the body of believers, admits me to the place where I will be taught about Jesus and where I will hear the Word of God and fellowship with other believers. If I do feed on the Word of God and obey it, if I am nourished by Christ and the fellowship of other believers, I will be saved and grow as a Christian. If I ignore Christ to whom baptism points me, the baptism is of no use to me. In fact, in that case baptism becomes a source of judgement to me. If I have the blessings of being taught the Word of God and having the fellowship of believers and yet ignore them and turn my back on them, I will be judged harder than if I had never heard.

Promises, Promises

Here are the baptismal promises of the Presbyterian Church in their traditional form:

Q *A and B, do you put your trust in Jesus Christ as your Saviour, and do you seek to serve him faithfully as your Lord?*

A **Yes, we do.**

Q *Do you bring N to be baptized with the prayer he/she will come to faith in God by trusting Jesus as his/her Saviour and accepting him as his/her own Lord?*

A **Yes, we do.**

Q *Do you promise to teach N to trust in the Lord Jesus and rely on his death and resurrection for forgiveness and new life?*

A **Yes, we do.**

Q *To the Church family: Do you as their church family promise to support A & B as they teach N about Jesus; do you promise to set before him/her a faithful example of godliness; and to encourage him/her to put his/her trust in Jesus Christ and to grow in faith and love?*

A **We do.**

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