

TEN QUESTIONS ABOUT BAPTISM and some answers to help parents

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Joe and Mary Smith meet the minister one afternoon. ‘We want to have our baby christened next month,’ they say. ‘Will you do the christening for us?’

‘Well, let’s plan to meet and talk about it first,’ he replies.

Perhaps they wonder: Why does the minister not just say, ‘Yes, certainly’? Why does he seem to hesitate? Does he not want to baptize our baby? Does he not want all babies to be baptized?

This leaflet seeks to answer these and other questions you may be wondering about.

1. What is the difference between ‘baptism’ and ‘christening’?

There is no difference. To ‘baptize’ means to ‘immerse in water’ or to ‘pour water on’. To ‘christen’ means to do this to a person in the name of Christ. The word the Bible uses is *baptism*.

2. Whose idea was it in the first place?

In Jesus’ day Jews used at times to wash or bathe in water as a religious act. This was to make them clean not just in the ordinary sense but in a religious sense, so that they could take part in acts of worship. Possibly already by this time when someone who was not a Jew wished to become one, the Jews also asked that person to bathe himself. Three things were needed in such a step:

- the person had to have come to share the Jewish faith;
- a man and his sons had to be circumcised to mark them as now adopted members of the family of Abraham, because it had been Abraham and his family that God had chosen as his people and promised to bless;
- the whole family, of their heathen past.

When John the Baptist came on the scene, he went up and down telling the Jews that they were sinners in man, woman and children, bathed themselves in water to wash away the uncleanness God’s eyes just as much as non-Jews. Change your ways and be baptized, he said; this is urgent, because the Kingdom of God is at hand. (See Luke 3:1-9.)

From John the Baptist Jesus and his disciples took over the practice of baptism.

3. What does Christian baptism mean?

Jesus makes Christian baptism into something different. Because he died for our sins, we really are forgiven and washed clean of all sin. Christian baptism symbolizes this by washing us with water (Acts 2:28, Ephesians 5:26, I Peter 2:21).

Paul put it this way: in Christian baptism, he says,

- we are plunged under water to symbolize that we are drowned and so die with Jesus and are buried with him in the tomb; and
- we come out of the water again to symbolize that we are now beginning a new life with Jesus and in time to come will be raised to eternal life with him. (See Colossians 2:12, Romans 6:1-14.)

4. But what does Christian baptism actually do?

We have seen what baptism symbolizes. But what does it actually do? What difference does it really make?

We call baptism a ‘sacrament’. By that we mean that it is not only a sign or symbol: it actually does what it symbolizes—when received or responded to with faith. Thus Paul says that in baptism we are buried with Christ and raised with him *through our faith* in the God who raised him from death (Colossians 2:13).

This means that through our faith God uses baptism to apply to us what Jesus did for us by dying and being raised for us. By baptism, through faith, therefore:

- God washes all our sins away, and frees us from the past;
- God baptizes us with his Spirit, who gives us new birth (John 1:33, 3:5, Titus 3:5);
- we rise to new life with the risen Christ; and
- we are now God’s children and so members of the family of God, the Church.

5. What do we need to be baptized?

What we have said so far makes clear that before being baptized we need faith in Jesus Christ and commitment to his Church. That is why the minister must ask any adult who comes to be baptized:

- Do you believe in Jesus Christ and that he died for your sins?
- Do you accept him as Lord over your life?
- Do you promise to be a faithful member of his Church?

6. But what about children?

Why then do we baptize babies or little children? After all, they cannot understand these questions, and they are too young to have faith.

The question really is: Are the children of Christian believers inside or outside God’s family?

God promised his forgiveness and blessing not to isolated individuals but to his family, to his Church as a community. It is as members of that family or community that individuals share in that forgiveness and blessing. All believing, practising Christians are members of that family. Now the children of such Christians are in turn united to their parents in their own families. This means that through their parents such children are united also to the wider family of God—so long, of course, as they are not old enough to reject that wider union and do so. (Some of the letters of the New Testament for this reason address the children as already members of the Christian family. See Ephesians 6:1.) Baptism is therefore proper for such children: it recognizes them as members of the family of God because their parents are members.

It is true that the New Testament gives us no clear example of a child being baptized. But we know that when a non-Jews came to be was admitted to the Jewish faith, they and their whole households, including all their children, were baptized. In the same way the New Testament tells us about the Christian baptism of whole 'households', and the term for 'household' was one that included any children in it (Acts 11:14 and 10:47-48, 16:15,31-34, I Corinthians 1:16).

So also the apostle Peter states when speaking about baptism and the gift of the Holy Spirit: 'The promise is for you and your children' (Acts 2:39). And Paul says that children who have Christian parents are also 'holy' or 'saints', that is, are also Christians themselves (I Corinthians 7:14).

7. But what wrong have babies done?

We have said that baptism washes us clean from our sins. But how can that make sense in the case of babies?

We need to understand that what baptism does is not tied to the day it happens. It works for the whole of one's life, past and future. My baptism washes me clean from all my sins, past sins and future sins—so long as I do not turn away from faith in Christ. A baby, then, is baptized with an eye to the future. It is the same as with circumcision for a Jewish boy: he receives circumcision one week after being born, with an eye to the whole of his future life.

8. Do we need to go right under the water?

The word, 'to baptize', comes from a word that in Greek originally meant 'to drench' in water. Some people therefore ask whether in baptism a person should not be plunged right under the water.

The washing with water is, as we said earlier, only a symbol of what happens inside of a person. So long as it clearly symbolizes washing, then, the amount of water does not really matter. It is like Holy Communion: no one thinks that you have to eat a whole meal at Holy Communion for it to be a true sacrament.

There is clear evidence from as far back as the second century or even a little earlier that the Church baptized by pouring water as an alternative to immersion. But it is difficult to imagine even all the people baptized in the New Testament as being plunged right under water. Where, for instance, would Paul have found a pool in the jail at Philippi big enough to baptize the jailer and his family by immersion (Acts 16:33)?!

9. Where can baptism take place?

As we have said, part of what baptism means is that through it a person is accepted into the Church or the family of God. As Paul puts it, the wonderful thing is that through baptism people of every race and class are united together in one body (I Corinthians 12:13).

It is right, therefore, for baptism to take place in the congregation in order to symbolize this. The other members of the congregation can then also welcome the new member and offer their friendship and support to the parents in teaching the child about Jesus.

Only for special reasons will the minister baptize a child in the parents' home. Even when that does happen, a few members of the congregation should also be there to symbolize that the child is being baptized into the whole Church.

10. What about Godparents?

What we have already said makes clear that it is the parents who link the child to the family of God. They are responsible for the child. They must therefore be the ones who confess their faith and promise to bring up the child in the faith.

At the same time, because we share God's love and work together for him in his family, it is a good thing if the parents invite others to stand with them at the baptism as 'godparents'. Godparents are meant to help the parents bring up the child in the Christian way of life. So they should also be believing and practising Christians. Godparents can also take a vow that they will help the parents in this way.

And so...

All that we have said means that parents have to ask themselves three questions:

- Have I yet taken the step of opening my heart to Jesus Christ and letting him become my Saviour and Lord?
- Am I a faithful member of his Church?
- Can I promise to bring up my child in the Christian faith and way of life by my own example as well as by my teaching?

Perhaps you feel that you cannot honestly say 'Yes' to all these questions...yet. If that is so, you will understand why it is important for you to wait until you can. For only when your own relationship with God is right, can your child's baptism mean what it should mean and be what it should be. The minister and other Christians will help you to find your way to God and come into that relationship with him. They would love to share their faith with you.

But what if you do not come to this relationship with God before your child is old enough to take the vows himself or herself? Then it would still be better for the baptism to wait. For any baptism now based on vows that you do not take sincerely will mean little in the meantime. In fact it is likely to be more to your child's disadvantage than advantage. It may well lead your child, in time to come, to think that Christianity is something one does not need to be serious about! And be assured: the fact that your child is not baptized will not mean that God loves him or her any less! God loves all children!

On the other hand if you can say a sincere 'Yes' to these three questions, you can say the prayer on the next page.

Dear God,

*Thank you that my sins are forgiven through Jesus Christ.
Thank you that you have made me your child through the Holy Spirit.
And thank you for giving us the gift of this child of ours.
Help me to share my faith with my child,
so that he/she will come to know and love Jesus,
learn how to serve him in the world
and live with him forever.
In Jesus' name. Amen.*