

THE MEANING AND CHALLENGE OF BAPTISM

A Pamphlet for Parents

What is Baptism?

You have asked to have your child baptized (or 'christened', as some people call it). But what *is* baptism? Is it a special way of showing gratitude to God for the wonderful gift of a child? Or a special way of asking God to bless your child? Or something more than this? Why do parents need to make a public statement of faith and vows? And why in church rather than at home? These are questions people ask, and this pamphlet tries to answer them.

It helps to know a little about the background to Christian baptism. So let us begin by comparing four different 'baptisms' in history:

1. Baptism in Israel (Jewish baptism)
2. Baptism into Israel (the baptism of Gentiles converted to Jewish faith)
3. Baptism into the true Israel (John the Baptist's baptism)
4. Baptism into the Church (Christian baptism).

1. Baptism in Israel

The Old Testament already prescribed that the Israelites should wash or bath in water as a religious act. A person who had touched something that made him or her unclean in a ritual sense had to bath or wash, or be sprinkled, especially before joining in worship. A priest about to put on sacred clothes or take part in an act of worship had to bath first to ensure that he was clean in a ritual sense. (Exodus 30:17-20, Leviticus 15 and 16, Numbers 19:11-22.) As a result the prophets and psalmists came to use washing or sprinkling with water as a metaphor for cleansing from sin (Isaiah 1:16, Ezekiel 36:25, Zechariah 13:1, Psalm 51:7).

In the time of Jesus too Jews who had done anything that made them impure even in a ritual sense had to immerse themselves in water before entering the grounds of the Temple in Jerusalem. Special ritual baths were used. (The New Testament refers to this custom in John 11:55, Acts 21:24,26 and 24:18.) Archaeologists have uncovered the remains of almost 50 of these large ritual baths near the ruins of the south wall of the Temple. The Jewish sect at Qumran in the Judaeen desert, which hid the Dead Sea Scrolls in nearby caves, also practised such purifying ceremonies.

2. Baptism into Israel

In 63 BC Judaea became part of the Roman Empire. Many Jews then emigrated from Palestine and formed communities in various parts of the Empire. This brought them into contact with Gentiles, and the Gentiles learned about their faith and worship. By this time many educated Gentiles had come to question the old superstitious religions with their capricious, promiscuous gods like Zeus or Jupiter. The Jewish faith with its belief in one, holy God and high ethical standards appealed to some of them. So they began to attend services in the synagogues. The Jews called them 'God-worshippers' (e.g. Acts 13:16).

In time some God-worshippers wanted to go further than just sit in the back seats of the synagogue: they wanted to become full members of Israel. So the question arose: how then can Gentiles become Jews? Eventually three measures came to be prescribed:

- they had to accept the Jewish faith;
- a man and his sons had to be circumcised, as the sign of their inclusion in the covenant God had made with Abraham and his descendants (Gen.17:9-14); and
- one week later the whole family, man, wife and children, all had to be baptized (by immersion), in a ritual washing away their heathen uncleanness.

Paul speaks of the Exodus as a baptism. For in the Exodus God had liberated Israel from oppression by taking them through the sea, in what could be thought of as a collective baptism. Paul thus calls the Exodus a baptism into Moses (I Corinthians 10:1-2). The Exodus and the covenant God made with Israel afterwards on Mount Sinai was the cardinal event in the history of Israel that constituted it as the special People of God, under Moses. Jews already before Paul may well have used this idea of the Exodus as a baptism: they may have used it to justify and explain the baptism of each God-worshipper as sacramentally repeating the going through the Reed Sea to constitute him or her a member of Israel. In any case after circumcision a God-worshipper's old identity was regarded as dead, drowned in the water. He emerged as a member of the people of Israel, was given a new Jewish name and regarded as legally a one-day-old Israelite and was now entitled to share in all the benefits of the covenant.

The baptism of Gentile converts came to be practised some time in the 1st century AD and may have preceded John's baptism. In that case it would explain where John got the idea of a once-for-all baptism in contrast to the repeated Jewish ritual washings.

3. Baptism into the True Israel

God had made his covenant with Abraham and his descendants. Many Jews at that time therefore presumed that their relation with God was secure, just because they were descended from Abraham and circumcised. God had covenanted to save them, they believed, while the Gentiles would be damned. In effect these Jews were relying on their racial identity for God's favour.

John the Baptist, in the desert, denounced Israel in his day for its spiritual and moral corruption. He also condemned any such presuming on God's favour on the basis of race. No matter that you are Jews, he declared, your sins cut you off from God; just like the heathen you are under wrath and need to repent—and be baptized. For salvation depends not on any line of descent but on God's mercy and your repentance. Thus with a 'baptism of repentance', John sought to prepare a true people of God, a true Israel, for the imminent coming of the Messiah and the Kingdom of God. (See Luke 3:1-9.)

4. Baptism into the Church

According to John 3:22-26 and 4:1-2, Jesus, or at least his disciples, at first copied John in practising a rite of baptism. This would also have signified a call to believe and repent in anticipation of the coming Kingdom of God.

At Pentecost the apostles began to baptize again, as at the beginning of Jesus' ministry. Peter called the people to repent and be baptized for their sins, but *now in the name of Jesus* (Acts 2:38-41). This public baptism on the Day of Pentecost may well have taken place in the same large ritual baths near the Temple in which Jews washed or bathed and God-worshippers were baptized. Baptism in the name of Jesus was to cleanse repentant believers from sin, so that they received or were 'baptized in' the Spirit. This made them members of the Church as the true Israel.

This new baptism was given a new, Christian significance. Whereas the Exodus was the cardinal event that had constituted Israel as the People of God, the cardinal event that constituted the Church was the death and resurrection of Jesus. And Jesus himself had spoken of his coming death as a baptism (Mark 10:38-39, Luke 12:50). Paul therefore interpreted *Christian* baptism in terms not of going through the sea in the Exodus but of being united with Christ and going down with him into his death, being buried with him, and rising up out of the water in order to share in his resurrection. That puts behind us the old life dominated by sin. (See Romans 6:1-11, Colossians 2:12-13.)

Thus Christian baptism is the sacrament in which the Lord seals his covenant of grace with us. In it, through our faith, he gives his Spirit to us and so unites us to himself as the crucified and risen Lord. Thereby the Spirit applies to us what Christ did for us, washing away our sins, regenerating us with new life and making us members of the new Israel, the Church, and commissions us to serve him (Romans 6:3-4, Galatians 3:26-27, Colossians 2:12-13, John 13:10, Acts 22:16, I Corinthians 6:11, 12:13, Ephesians 5:25-27, John 3:3-8, Titus 3:5).

Baptism and Water

As we have seen, proselyte baptism was by immersion. And from baptism as immersion Paul derived the imagery of Christian baptism as a rite in which one goes down with Jesus Christ into his death, is buried with him and then rises up from the water so as to share in his resurrection. Must baptism then not be by immersion?

There is little doubt that at first Christian baptism was *normally* by immersion. But the word 'to baptize' had a range of meanings: 'to dip, immerse, drench, wash'. And a very ancient Christian manual from the first or second century AD, the *Didache*, tells us that pouring was used when there was not enough water for immersion. It is difficult to imagine even all the baptisms in the New Testament as having been by immersion. For instance, there would surely have been no pool in the jail at Philippi big enough for Paul to *immerse* the jailer and his family (Acts 16:33).

In any case the water is only a symbol of the spiritual cleansing that happens within a person. So long as it clearly symbolizes the washing away of sins, then, the amount of water does not really matter. After all Holy Communion was originally celebrated at a full meal. Yet no one maintains that for Communion to be a valid or effective sacrament, we have to eat a full meal now.

Baptism and Faith

Another question is this. God would not redeem the Jews merely because of something outward or physical like their bodily descent from Abraham. Would God then redeem us just because of an outward rite that wets our bodies with some water?

No, the rite of baptism cannot redeem us without repentance and faith. It is only 'in baptism...*through faith*' that we are buried with Christ and raised with him in baptism (Colossians 2:12). For strictly it is only God's grace, his unmerited mercy, that saves us. But how does God offer that grace to us? Through 'the audible word' of the gospel and 'the visible word' of the sacraments. Thus we are saved when we *by faith* receive the grace offered to us *in the word and the sacraments* (Ephesians 2:8). (By 'faith' Paul means believing in Jesus Christ and putting one's trust in him.)

For this reason the baptism of an adult begins with the basic question, 'Do you turn away from sin and put your trust in Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord...?' (Cf. Romans 10:9-10.)¹ Only if he or she can answer 'Yes, I do!', can that person then be baptized. Otherwise baptism would lack the repentance and faith that is essential if through it God is to lay hold of a person's life with saving effect; indeed the human side of it then threatens to be a sham.

Baptism and Children

'Christening' is just another name for baptism, used especially with children. But why do we baptize little children who are still too young to have faith or even understand what baptism means?

The New Testament records no explicit instance of the baptism of a child. So some Christians answer this question by saying, 'Only believers should be baptized, not children.' But there is much to be said on the other side.

The baptism of God-worshippers, which may well have served as a prototype that John's baptism and Christian baptism imitated, included their children. It is in line with this that the New Testament several times records the Christian baptism of whole households or families (Acts 11:14 cf. 10:47-48; 16:15,33-34, 18:8, I Corinthians 1:16). The equivalent Hebrew word for 'household' in the Old Testament quite clearly included all the children, even infants, in a family (see I Samuel 22:16,19). Likewise the Roman term *familia* included children and even slaves. Indeed Peter declared that what is given in baptism is 'for you *and your children*' (Acts 2:39). And Paul speaks of children being

'holy' or 'saints' (i.e. Christians) by virtue of a parent's faith (I Corinthians 7:14). Indeed the term may imply that they had been baptized in virtue of their parents' faith. Either way the text makes the point: the children of believers are to be seen as Christians. Some of the New Testament letters for this very reason address the children as already members of the Church and indeed 'in the Lord' (Ephesians 6:1, Colossians 3:20).

The basic reason for infant baptism then is this. God has made a covenant of grace not with individuals in isolation from one another but with the community of people called the Church. All believing, practising Christians in that community share in the covenant. Children, however, are united to their parents in the family unit. So long as they are not yet old enough to decide otherwise for themselves, then, the children of such Christians are included in that covenant community as part of the family unit. The covenant of grace is meant to embrace them. They are members in the body of people whom God has redeemed from the domain of darkness and brought into the kingdom of his dear Son—until they become old enough to commit themselves to Christ and so remain within the community by their own choosing (Colossians 1:13). That means they should be baptized. For baptism is the sacrament that accepts a person into the community of God's covenant.

Indeed the baptism of a small child is a powerful witness to the grace of God toward us. For it witnesses that God's grace towards us precedes our understanding and even our own choice. (See John 15:16, I John 4:19).

Thus baptism is also for children whose parents are believing, practising Christians and members of the Church. Then when they are old enough to respond to the gospel with faith themselves, they are called to profess that faith publicly (at 'confirmation'). If they do believe, they then *confirm* that their baptism has meaning and effect for them.

But part of the meaning of baptism is that our sins are washed away. How can that apply to a baby? Here we need to understand that 'the efficacy of baptism is not tied to that moment when it is administered' (Westminster Confession of Faith). Baptism applies to a person's whole life. In it God covenants with us that Christ's atonement will cleanse us from all sin, past, present *and future*, so that sin will have no final power over us—as long as we have come, *or will come*, to faith and then continue to walk with Christ.

Because baptism into Christ is also baptism into the Church, it normally takes place in church. Because it is the sacrament that accepts and recognizes a person as a member of the community of God's covenant, it should take place in the midst of that community, represented by the local congregation. At every baptism the whole congregation should take part and celebrate what God has given us all in our baptism. Only in exceptional circumstances may baptism be elsewhere.

Godparents

Godparents are not necessary for baptism. But parents are encouraged to invite suitable relatives or friends to be godparents. They should not think of this as a way to honour friends: instead *they should choose believing, practising Christians who will remain in contact with their child and actively help with his or her spiritual nurture*. (For this reason it is good if the godparents are from the same congregation as the parents.) The role of godparents is to help the parents bring up their child in the Christian faith and way of life. If the parents backslide, godparents have a duty to recall them to their original vows. And if anything happens to the parents, godparents have a duty to try to see that the child continues to have a Christian upbringing.

Such believing godparents can take their own vows at a baptism. This does not mean, however, that godparents can actually 'sponsor' a child for baptism, i.e. take the parents' vows, if the parents are unable to do so. Only adults who have the actual care of the child in place of the parents can do that.

Postponing Baptism

Children may thus be baptized by virtue of their parents being believing and practising Christians. But this means that not only because God demands integrity from us but also for the sake of your child it is better not to bring him or her to baptism until you yourself are ready and so can make the baptism meaningful and authentic on your side. It is mistaken to argue that all children ought to be baptized because Christ died for all. Baptism, like circumcision, is a rite that marks off and seals members of God's people. If the parents are not believing, practising members, the baptism of their children makes little sense. It is better not to baptize a child in such a case because the parents can hardly bring up their child as a Christian if they themselves are not Christians. Baptism is an ingrafting into the body of Christ, and a graft requires nourishment if it is to live.

Parents who do not yet fulfil the condition of faith in Christ and commitment to his Church should not see postponing baptism as to the detriment of the child. For without faith, without the vows being taken seriously and afterwards kept, baptism in any case has no saving effect. Indeed such a baptism can spiritually mislead the child. It is true that despite unconverted parents a child may later come to accept Christ and that this will then ratify his or her own previous baptism. But if baptized with unconverted parents the child will be tempted to adopt one of two dangerous attitudes:

- to assume that one is a Christian just by virtue of baptism and so fail to realize that one needs to be converted to Christ, or
- to take the parents' nominal Christianity as the norm and follow their example in regarding baptism, the Church and Christianity itself as things that one does not take seriously.

Some parents worry, 'But what if my child were to die unbaptized?' Baptism, however, is not a magical rite: water poured and words said over a child will not by themselves change or guarantee his or her eternal destiny. Christ alone has the power to save us: that power lies not in any rite itself but in him. The question, then, is whether you have put your trust in Christ and so whether your child will also. Jesus Christ also showed that children have a special place in God's heart, so you can entrust every child to his grace. God is not limited by his sacraments.

Some parents ask, 'But if my child is unbaptized, can he/she attend Sunday School later?' The answer is: Of course; any Sunday School will welcome your child. 'But will my child not be embarrassed when the other children go for confirmation?' You should not worry about that; the child can attend confirmation class and be baptized when its other members confirm the meaning and effect of their own baptisms with a public profession of faith. Today more and more teenagers are baptized when others confirm their baptisms in this way.

If parents do, or are asked to, postpone a child's baptism, they can, if they wish, in the meantime ask the minister for a special *service of thanksgiving and prayer* for the child. This can take place either at home or during a church service. (If it is in church, the parents can bring their child to the front for this.) This must not, however, be thought of as a substitute for baptism.

In Conclusion

All this means that the baptism of a young child can take place only on the basis of the faith of the parents, or at least one parent. As Scripture says, baptism is for those who have 'accepted the word' of the gospel and *their* children (Acts 2:41,39). The first step towards the baptism of a child, then, is for the parents (or at least one parent) to come to faith in Christ. So before you bring your child to be baptized, you need to ask yourself—in the words of the first question you would have to answer in a baptism service:

- Have you put your faith in Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord and so in God as your Father and in the Holy Spirit as your Helper?

A genuine acceptance of Christ as Saviour and Lord leads one to be active in one's Church. And baptism into Christ is at the same time baptism *into his Church* (I Corinthians 12:13). On both these counts baptizing a child presumes that at least one parent is a worshipping, active member of the Church—and so will bring the child up in the fellowship of the Church. Before you bring your child to be baptized, then, you also need to ask yourself the other basic question that would be put to you in a baptism service:

- Do you promise to give this child a Christian home? By your teaching, your prayers *and your own example*, will you guide him/her to know Christ as Saviour and Lord, to worship God, to walk in the Christian way, to remain a member of Christ's Church and to serve him in the world?

If you can answer both of these basic questions with a sincere 'Yes', then you should bring your child to be baptized. On the other hand if you cannot, then better postpone the baptism, until your side of it will be authentic, so that God uses it to good effect.

That does not mean that parents without the faith and active membership that baptism requires should think that they cannot have their child baptized. The gospel is also for them and their child! What it does mean is that it is up to them now to take the steps that are needed for the baptism to take place. The first such step is to get their own relation with God right; the second is to become practising members of the Church. Then it will make sense for them to bring their child for baptism; for then their side of it will be sincere and authentic—which, of course, baptism presupposes.

- So, if you have not yet accepted Christ into your own heart and life as Saviour and Lord, can we offer you fellowship and help on your way towards that step?

Endnote:

¹ Romans 10:9f. refers to the confession of faith made in response to a question like this at baptism in the churches under Paul's care. See also Acts 8:37. Modern translations of the Bible omit v.37 or report it only in a footnote, because the most ancient and reliable Greek manuscript copies of Acts lack it. But if not original, it was added to the text already by the second century AD. This means that it reports what was practised very early in another part of the Church.