

# 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 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 can baptism not rather happen at home than in church? These are questions people ask, and this pamphlet tries to answer them and others.

It will help 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 (the baptism John the Baptist practised)
4. Baptism into the Church (Christian baptism).

#### 1. Baptism in Israel

The Old Testament already prescribed washing or bathing in water as a religious act. For instance, a person who had touched something that made him or her unclean in a ritual sense had to bathe or wash, 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 make him ritually clean. (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 Jews who had done anything that made them “unclean” 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 Judaean desert, which hid the Dead Sea Scrolls in nearby caves, also practised such cleansing 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, so that Gentiles learned about their faith and worship. By this time many educated Gentiles had come to question the super-

stitious pagan religions with their capricious, promiscuous gods like Zeus or Jupiter. In this situation the Jewish faith with its belief in one, holy God and its 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 wished 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 were 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);
- one week later the whole family, man, wife and children, all had to be baptized (by immersion), in a ritual washing away of their heathen uncleanness; and
- they had to offer a sacrifice.

In the Exodus God had liberated Israel from slavery and oppression by taking them through the sea. This and the covenant God made with Israel afterwards on Mount Sinai were the cardinal events in the history of Israel: they together constituted it as the special People of God, under the leadership of Moses. Being taken through the sea could be thought of as a collective baptism, and Paul actually calls it a baptism, into Moses (I Corinthians 10:1-2). This suggests that Jews made this comparison before Paul, to justify the baptism of God-worshippers and explain it as sacramentally repeating going through the Reed Sea to constitute them as members of Israel. In any case after circumcision a God-worshipper’s old identity was regarded as dead, drowned in the water. He emerged from it as a member of the people of Israel, was given a new Jewish name and was now regarded as legally a one-day-old Israelite entitled to share in all the benefits of the covenant.

The baptism of Gentile converts came to be practised some time in the 1<sup>st</sup> 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 made his covenant with Abraham and his descendants. Many Jews therefore came to presume that their relation with God was secure, just because they were descended from Abraham and circumcised. God had covenanted to save them, they believed—but would damn all the Gentiles. In effect these Jews were relying on their racial identity for God’s favour.

In the desert John the Baptist denounced Israel 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 wash away your un-

cleanness. For salvation depends not on any racial line of descent but on God's mercy and your repentance. Thus John sought with a "baptism of repentance" to prepare a true people of God, a true Israel, for the coming of the Messiah, who would bring judgement and the Kingdom, or triumphant reign, of God. (See Luke 3:1-9.)

#### 4. Baptism into the Church

Jesus joined the Baptist's movement and he, or at least his disciples, at first copied John in practising a rite of baptism (John 3:22-26 and 4:1-2). For them too this signified a call to believe and repent in anticipation of God's coming Kingdom.

At Pentecost the apostles began to baptize again, as they had 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 probably took 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, the true Israel.

This baptism had a new, Christian significance. Whereas the cardinal event that had constituted Israel as the People of God had been the Exodus, 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 in 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. Thereby the old life dominated by sin came to an end, and people were given a new life "in Christ". (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, making us members of the new Israel, the Church, and commissioning 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 Christian 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 early second century AD, the *Didache*, tells us that pouring was used when there was not enough water for immersion. Indeed 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. (See I Corinthians 11:21-22.) Yet no one maintains that for Communion to be a valid or effective sacrament, it has to be 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 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, or unmerited mercy, that saves us. How does God offer that grace to us? Through "the audible word" of the gospel and "the visible word" of the sacraments. So we are saved when *by faith* we receive the grace offered to us *in the word and the sacraments* (Ephesians 2:8). ("Faith" here means believing in Jesus Christ and putting one's trust in him.)

For this reason the baptism of an adult is preceded by the basic questions,

- "Do you put your faith and trust in Jesus Christ as your Lord and Saviour, in God as your Father and in the Holy Spirit as your Helper?" (cf. Romans 10:9-10)<sup>1</sup> and
- "Do you, with God's help, turn away from sin and all evil?"

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 undergoing baptism without such repentance and faith would be a sham.

#### Baptism and Children

What is "christening"? It is just another name for baptism that some people use,

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<sup>1</sup> 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 part of the Church. Cf. I John 4:15.

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 a child being baptized. So some Christians think the answer to this question is: “Only believers should be baptized, not children.” This is so especially if they have been influenced by the view that baptism is merely a confession of faith (in contrast to what we have explained above that it is and means). But there are strong arguments on the other side.

The baptism of God-worshippers, which may well have served as a prototype that both John's baptism and Christian baptism imitated, included their children. In line with this 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 baptism signifies and promises is “for you *and your children*” (Acts 2:39). He could not have meant “your children when they eventually grow up”, because he thought the last days had come (Acts 2:17). And Paul speaks of children being “holy”, or “saints” (i.e. Christians), by virtue of a parent's faith (I Corinthians 7:14). Indeed this may well 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 of believers 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 faith* 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 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 thus meant to embrace them too. 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 by virtue of their parent's faith—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 that baptism is also for children whose parents are believing, practising Christians and members of the Church. For baptism is the sacrament that accepts a person into the community of God's covenant. Then when the children 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 continues to have meaning and effect for them.

Indeed the baptism of a small child is a powerful witness to God's grace towards

us. For it witnesses that that grace precedes our understanding and even our own choice or decision to believe in God. (See John 15:16, I John 4:19).

Part of the meaning of baptism is that our sins are washed away. But 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.

Baptism into Christ is also baptism into the 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—and then members of the congregation should be present to represent the Church.

### Godparents

Godparents are not essential for baptism. But parents are encouraged to invite suitable relatives or friends to be godparents. This is not just a way to honour friends, however: *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 so that they cannot carry out their vows, 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 not yet ready to do so. Only when adults have the actual care of the child in place of the parents can they 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 yourselves are ready and can make the baptism meaningful and authentic. 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 being 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 attitudes that are spiritually dangerous:

- 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 do so. Jesus Christ in any case 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 along with others who confirm their baptisms in this way.

If parents postpone a child's baptism, or are asked to do so, 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. 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 of 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:

Do you believe and trust in Jesus Christ as your Lord and Saviour,  
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:

In bringing your *children* for baptism, do you promise  
to teach *them* the gospel and what *their* baptism means  
and by your teaching, your prayers and your own example  
to bring *them* up in the knowledge and love of God,  
so that *they* may put *their* trust in Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour  
and in due time make *their* own confession of faith?

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 part in 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 part in it will be sincere and authentic—which, of course, baptism presupposes.

If, then, you have not yet accepted Christ into your own heart and life as Saviour and Lord, can we offer you our fellowship in the meantime and help you on your way to getting your relation with God right and becoming a practising member of his Church?