

# **TEN QUESTIONS ABOUT BAPTISM and answers for parents**

Ayanda and Joe meet the minister one afternoon. "We want to have our baby christened," they say. "Will you do the christening for us?"

"Let's plan to meet and talk about it first," he says.

Perhaps that makes them wonder: Why does the minister want to talk about it first? Is he hesitating to baptize our baby? Would he not want all babies to be baptized? Shouldn't all babies be baptized?

This leaflet seeks to answer these and other questions about baptism that parents may wonder about.

### **1. What is the difference between “baptism” and “christening”?**

There is no difference. To “baptize” means to “immerse in, or wash with, water” in a religious rite. To “christen” is a term some people use: it means to do the same thing to a person in the name of Christ. But the word the Bible uses is *baptism*.

### **2. Where does the practice come from?**

Long before Jesus’ time Jews used to bathe or wash in water as a religious rite. This was to make them clean, not just outwardly but in a ritual or religious sense, so that they could take part in acts of worship.

Then, probably by Jesus’ time, Gentiles who became Jews also underwent a special bathing. First a man and his sons were circumcised to mark them as adopted children of Abraham and so members of the chosen people. Then the whole family (both the parents and their children) all bathed in water, in a ritual act to wash away their unclean heathen past.

When John the Baptist came on the scene, he went about declaring to the Jews: Even though you are Abraham’s descendants, in God’s eyes you are sinners just like the heathen. *You too*, like them, need to confess your sins, be baptized and mend your ways. Do so now, because God’s reign is at hand (Matthew 3:1-12, Luke 3:1-9.)

### **3. What does Christian baptism signify?**

From the Baptist Jesus and his disciples took over the practice of baptism (John 4:1-2). But Christian baptism is different from John’s in that it is “into Christ Jesus”, in whom we are truly forgiven and washed clean of all our sin (Acts 2:38, 22:16, I Corinthians 6:11, Galatians 3:27, Ephesians 5:26, I Peter 3:21).

Indeed the New Testament states that through baptism God

- baptizes us with his Spirit (Mark 1:8, John 1:33, Acts 2:38, 11:16);
- washes away our sin and sets us free from our old selves;

- raises us to new life with the risen Christ (Romans 6:1-14, Colossians 2:12-13), giving us new birth as children of God (John 3:5, Titus 3:5);
- incorporates us into the Body of Christ, the Church, the community of the new covenant (I Corinthians 12:13);
- declares us free from the power of death, from which God will raise to life with Christ (Romans 6:3-11).

#### **4. Does the rite of baptism itself accomplish all this?**

No. Baptism is just a sign; in itself it can do nothing. But when we believe in the gospel and understand the sign as a visible expression of the gospel, then *God uses it to do what it signifies*. It ceases to be just a sign and becomes a *sacrament*. That is, *when we respond to the Word and baptism with faith in Jesus Christ*, God uses them to apply to us all that Jesus did for us in dying and being raised for us.

This means that a person coming to be baptized must come with faith in Jesus Christ. That is why any adult who applies to be baptized must first be asked, and answer, the question:

*Have you truly opened your heart to Jesus Christ, put your faith, your trust, in him and, turning away from sin, surrendered your life to him as Lord?*

#### **5. But what about children?**

But babies or very little children cannot understand all this and are too young to have faith. So why do we baptize them? Many of those who ask this question have been led to think of baptism as merely a person's own act of confessing that he or she has come to conversion and faith. But we are not the chief actors in baptism: God is.

God's action began already with the covenant made with Abraham and his children: "I will take you to be my people and I will be your God" (Genesis 17:7,13, Exodus 6:7, Leviticus 26:12, Jeremiah 11:4 etc.). This was "an everlasting covenant"; Jesus did not replace it, but renewed it (I Corinthians 11:25). In its new form all Christian believers are adopted as Abraham's children and so as God's people (Gala-

tians 3:6-9). And baptism, the baptism of *both* sexes, replaces male circumcision as the sign of the covenant (Colossians 2:11-12, Gal. 3:27-29).

God's covenant was with all of Abraham's offspring who would keep the covenant, and applied already from their infancy (Genesis 17:7-14). The new covenant does not disadvantage children because they were born after Christ: it too includes the children of believers. The apostle Peter declared,

Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you *and for your children...* (Acts 2:38-39).

(He could not have meant "your children when they grow up in years to come", because he thought that "the last days" had come—see Acts 2:17). Similarly Paul declared that through the faith of even one parent a child is included among the saints (1 Corinthians 7:14). Hence the Epistles address the children of Christian families as already "in the Lord" and members of the Christian community (Ephesians 6:1-3, Colossians 3:20).

True, the New Testament reports no example of an individual child being baptized. But it does report the baptism of whole "households". This term embraced everyone living in a house, including the children (e.g. Genesis 7:1, Joshua 7:14, I Samuel 22:16,19, Acts 11:14, 16:15,31-34, I Corinthians 1:16).

Nor did Jesus exclude the children. He specifically stated that the Kingdom of heaven belongs to little children (Matthew 19:14, Mark 10:15, Luke 18:16); indeed "whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a little child shall not enter it" (Mark 10:15, Luke 18:17 cf. Matthew 18:3f.). How paradoxical, then, that whereas Jesus wanted adults to become like children to enter into the Kingdom, some Christians insist on children becoming adults before they can be baptized! If children are citizens of the Kingdom and indeed models for those wishing to enter the Kingdom, how can we deny them baptism as members of the covenant community? How can children be

citizens or heirs *of the Kingdom* and be excluded from being full members *of the Church*?

## **6. How then does baptism apply to a little child?**

We need to understand that the effect of baptism is not limited to the day it happens. A Jewish boy receives circumcision only a week after being born, even though it too is an outward sign of an inward spiritual change (Deuteronomy 30:6, Jeremiah 4:4, Romans 2:28f.). This is because it has all his future life in view. Likewise infant baptism has the baby's whole future in mind. Baptism works for the whole of one's life: past, present and future. It washes us clean from all our sins, whether past or future—so long as we grow up to be faithful to Christ and do not turn away from him.

Thus baptism does not save the child automatically. It offers and promises salvation to the child by bringing him or her within the covenant. But the promise is subject to the child's appropriating that salvation by coming to personal faith. Mere outward circumcision did not make one a true Jew: one had to have a circumcised heart (Romans 2:28f.). Likewise a child who is baptized needs to come to faith and live out that faith in obedience to Christ as Lord and Saviour. If that fails to happen, the baptism is not validated. It then accomplishes nothing, just as the baptism of an adult who is not really a believer accomplishes nothing—unless and until he or she comes to faith.

## **7. Does baptism need to be right under water?**

"To baptize" transliterates a special form of a Greek word that meant "to dip in, or under". The special form of the word meant "to immerse, bathe, drench or wash" as a religious act. Does baptism then require a person to be plunged under water?

The washing with water is, as we said earlier, a *sign* of what happens in a person spiritually. So long as it does clearly signify a spiritual washing, therefore, the amount of water does not really matter. It is like Holy Communion: no one thinks

that to be a true sacrament Communion has to be a full meal, as it was at first (I Corinthians 11:21-22).

Clear written and archaeological evidence already from the end of the 1<sup>st</sup> century or the beginning of the 2<sup>nd</sup> shows that the Church baptized by pouring water as an alternative to immersion. But even in the New Testament it is difficult to imagine every baptism as a full immersion. Where in the jail at Philippi would Paul have found a pool big enough to immerse the jailer and his family (Acts 16:33)?

### **8. Where can baptism take place?**

Part of what baptism means is acceptance into the covenant community, the family of God, the Church. Through it, Paul says, people of every race and class are united together into one body (I Corinthians 12:13, Galatians 3:26-29, Colossians 3:11). To symbolize this, baptism takes place in the congregation. This also enables the members of the congregation to welcome the new member and offer friendship and support to the parents, especially in teaching their child about Jesus.

Only in special circumstances will a minister baptize a child at home instead of in church. Even then, other members of the congregation should be present, to symbolize that the child is being baptized into the Church.

### **9. What actual vows you need to take?**

During the service three solemn questions are put to the parents:

- 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? (The Apostles' Creed is then said.)
- Do you undertake to continue faithfully in the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, in the breaking of bread and the prayers?
- 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 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?

It is with parents who can sincerely declare "I do" to all these questions that the baptism of their children can go ahead.

## **10. What about Godparents?**

By their faith parents (or those at the head of the household in which a child actually lives) link a child to the family of God. So they must confess their own faith at their child's baptism and promise to bring up the child in the faith.

At the same time the parents may 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 faith and way of life. So they too should be not just good friends but believing, practising Christians. Godparents can take a vow that they will help the parents in this way.

### ***And so...***

All this means that parents bringing a child for baptism must ask themselves whether they can take the vows sincerely. That is, they must seriously ask themselves:

- Have we yet taken the step of opening our own hearts to Jesus Christ and letting him become our Lord and Saviour?
- Are we baptized, faithful, practising members of the Church ourselves?
- Can we sincerely promise to bring up our child in the Christian faith and way of life by our teaching and our own example?

For only on this basis can children come to be baptized and be brought up in that faith and practice.

These are the questions the minister needs to help you think through. Can you honestly say "Yes" to them? If you cannot *yet*, it is important for you to wait until you can. For only when your own relation with God as parents is right, can your

child's baptism mean what it should mean. But the minister, the Elders and other Christians are there to help you find your way to God and come into that relationship with him. (They would love to share their faith with you.)

What if you do not come into this relationship with God, however? It would then be better for the baptism to wait. For a baptism on the basis of vows taken insincerely will mean little in the meantime. Indeed it may well disadvantage your child by leading him or her to think of Christianity as something one need not be serious about. In any case be assured: the fact that your child is not baptized will not mean that God loves him or her any the less. God loves all children!

On the other hand for those who *can* say a sincere *Yes* to all the necessary questions here is a model prayer they can use:

O God, thank you that through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ you forgive us our sins.  
Thank you that through the Holy Spirit and our own baptism and faith you have made us your children.  
Thank you also for the gift of our child.  
Help us to share our faith with him/her,  
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.