

Baptism

'For in Christ all the fulness of the Deity lives in bodily form, and you have been given fulness in Christ, who is the Head over every power and authority. In him you were also circumcised, in the putting off of the sinful nature, not with a circumcision done by human hands but with the circumcision done by Christ, having been buried with him in baptism and raised with him through your faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead' (Colossians 2:9–12).

What is Baptism?

IMPORTANCE OF SIGNS

What signs do we use in society and what do they mean? i.e.

- a handshake (meaning greeting, trust, friendship)
- a salute (meaning respect for authority)
- a wedding ring (meaning commitment and unavailability to others)
- a poppy (meaning remembrance of others' sacrifice)

Jesus gave us two signs to partake in.

These two signs, baptism and holy communion, are called 'sacraments'.

A sacrament is "an outward, visible sign of an inward, spiritual grace".

BAPTISM

What is baptism a sign of in each of these passages?

- Matthew 28:19
- Acts 2:38-39
- Romans 6:4
- 1 Cor 12:12-13
- Matthew 3:11
- Acts 2:38

Read Ephesians 4:4-5 which explains that we only get baptised once. We may not remember it, just like we may not remember all the details of our wedding day, but the important thing is that we know that it happened. Each time we see someone else being baptised, we remember that we ourselves belong to Christ and that He himself has given us this sign of baptism.

Often people ask about the validity of their baptism if they were baptised as a child. We affirm infant baptism. Nicky uses this helpful analogy – when you are baptised it is like receiving a cheque with 'forgiveness' written on it. When you come to a personal, conscious faith in Jesus Christ, this is the moment when you cash the cheque in. However, the cheque was always valid, even if you received it as a child.

There are two extreme views on the subject of what baptism is, what it means and what it does. On the one hand, some people believe that baptism works automatically, so that if you bring your baby to be baptised, then your baby is saved, and if your baby is not baptised, he or she is not saved. This view explains the urgency that was felt in the Middle Ages about getting a baby to baptism, because if the child died unbaptised he or she was thought to go straight to hell and could not then be buried in a churchyard. But if the child had been baptised and had not committed any further sin since then, the baby was considered to be safe in heaven. That is a kind of magical, mechanical view of baptism, which still lingers in our society today.

I know of one woman who was not herself a church-goer but was quite desperate about getting an early date in the diary for her baby's baptism on the basis that they would otherwise go straight to hell – even though she purportedly did not subscribe to the existence of heaven and hell.

At the other extreme are those who see baptism as merely 'a sign' or 'a symbol.' For this reason some do not baptise at all. They regard it as an empty sign which can be dispensed with.

Where does the truth lie? I want to argue that the biblical view does not lie at either extreme.

1. Baptism is a command of Jesus

Jesus himself was baptised by John the Baptist in the River Jordan (cf. Matthew 3:13). After his resurrection Jesus gave this commission to his disciples: 'Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe everything I have commanded you' (Matthew 28:19).

2. Baptism is a part of Christian initiation

From the day of Pentecost onwards the church has administered baptism. After Peter had addressed the crowd on the day of Pentecost, they 'were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, "Brothers, what shall we do?" Peter replied, "Repent and be baptised, 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".' (Acts 2:37–38). So, Christian initiation has three parts. The first part is what we have to do: repent and believe. Always in the New Testament baptism is connected with faith (eg Acts 16:31–33). Secondly, the verse instructs us, 'be baptised' – that is not something we do but something the church does to us. Thirdly, we will receive 'forgiveness' and 'the gift of the Holy Spirit.' That is what God does for us, and that is the third part of Christian initiation.

In the New Testament we find that these three are all part of Christian initiation but they do not always happen at the same time. In fact, in practice it is impossible almost to

synchronise them. In the case of the apostle Paul, there was a delay between his experience of the Spirit and his subsequent baptism. Similarly in Acts 10 Cornelius and his household were filled with the Spirit and then they were baptised. Meanwhile, the Samaritan converts had already been baptised when they were filled with the Spirit. Problems can arise when we try to synchronise these three events.

One church leader told me about a man who came to see him who had been baptised as an infant. He later had a conversion experience and went off to a Baptist church where he was re-baptised. He then came to the church leader and said, 'I am not sure that at the time I was rebaptised I was really converted but I think I am now, so I would like to be baptised again.' He was trying to make sure that his faith had come before baptism, which is not always possible to achieve. What matters is not when we were baptised but the fact that we have been baptised.

3. Baptism is a mark of entry into the church

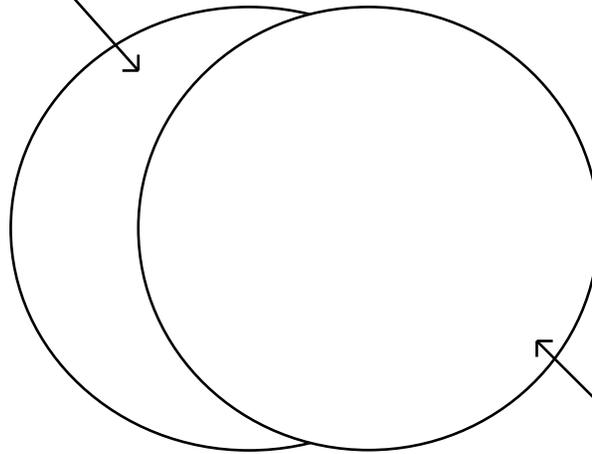
Thirdly, baptism is the mark of entry into the Christian church. In 1 Corinthians 12, Paul says, 'For we were all baptised by one Spirit into one body' (v.13). We are baptised into the church. There is a very important distinction between the church and the kingdom of God.

John Murray, Professor of Systematic Theology at Westminster Theological Seminary, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania wrote:

Those united to Christ in the spiritual bonds of effectual calling and saving faith [are] known only to God who alone infallibly discerns as well as determines who his people are [and yet] it is by divine institution that the church, as a visible entity administered by men in accordance with Christ's appointment, must admit to its fellowship those who make a credible profession of faith in Christ and promise obedience to him. To exclude such is to arrogate to ourselves prerogatives which do not belong to us and it is to violate the institution of Christ.

John Murray makes the distinction between the invisible and the visible church. Since the terms 'invisible church' and 'visible church' are not found in Scripture, perhaps it is better to distinguish between the kingdom of God (invisible) and the church (visible) as it exists on earth.

Church (entry by baptism)



Kingdom (entry by faith)

This diagram demonstrates that the way into the kingdom of God is by faith.

The way into the church is through baptism (diagram 1 & 2) It is possible to be a member of the church and not to be a member of the kingdom. There are people who have been baptised who have never come to faith in Jesus Christ and who are not part of the kingdom of God, but they are part of the church. Equally it is possible to be part of the kingdom of God and not to be part of the church. For example, Jesus said to the thief on the cross, 'Today you will be with me in paradise' (Luke 23:43). Despite the fact that the thief was never baptised and thus never became part of the church, he was part of the kingdom – he was saved. As Christians we are called both to enter the kingdom of God by faith *and* his church on earth by baptism.

4. Baptism points beyond itself

The great theologian St. Augustine described baptism as 'a visible form of invisible grace' and the Book of Common Prayer describes it as 'an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace.' So, what does baptism signify for us? It signifies three things. First of all, it signifies cleansing. Paul writes to the Corinthians of their baptism: 'you were washed' (1 Corinthians 6:11). Secondly, it symbolises incorporation into Christ. Paul writes that we are 'baptised into Christ Jesus' (Romans 6:3). He explains that we are baptised into his death and resurrection: we died with Jesus Christ, we were buried with Jesus Christ, we rose again with Jesus Christ. 'Having been buried with him in baptism,' we are 'raised with him through your faith in the power of God' (Colossians 2:12). Thirdly, baptism symbolises the seal of the Spirit: 'For we were all baptised by one Spirit into one body... and were all given the one Spirit to drink' (1 Corinthians 12:13). The water symbolises the receiving of the Holy Spirit.

Baptism by full immersion, where a person goes right down under the water, is a wonderful three-fold symbol. First, water is used for washing. The individual is visibly cleansed by the water. Secondly, the symbolic action of falling back into the water and then emerging echoes our dying and rising with Christ. Thirdly, the water itself represents the living water of the Holy Spirit (John 7:37–39).

Because of this powerful symbolism many churches baptise adults by immersion. Of course, there are good reasons why this method may not be appropriate for babies. For example, The Book of Common Prayer instructs: 'If the godparents certify that the child may well endure it, he shall dip it in the water, discreetly and warily,' but goes on to say, 'But if they certify that the child is weak, it shall suffice to pour water upon it, saying the aforesaid words...'

5. Baptism is an effective sign

Fifthly, baptism is an effectual sign: it affects what it signifies. The Western mind (often erroneously) tends to draw a distinction between the physical and the spiritual, advocating that it is possible to do physical things with no spiritual consequences. The Hebrew mind does not work like that, believing that what you do physically has spiritual consequences. That is Paul's point in 1 Corinthians 6 when he is talking about sexual intercourse. He says one cannot simply do it as an isolated physical act as it has inbuilt spiritual consequences. When a man has sexual intercourse with a prostitute, he unites himself with her spiritually (vv.15–17). All the way through the Bible the physical and the spiritual go together. Baptism affects what it signifies: the physical act has spiritual consequences.

Baptism is a gift of God given by grace, not presupposing any human merit. As a result, some so emphasise the efficacy of the sacrament in conferring grace upon an individual that they believe that the moment a child is baptised, he or she is saved regardless of anyone's faith. Whilst they rightly stress the grace of God, others rightly emphasise the importance of faith. They say that there must be clear unequivocal faith: what matters is the individual's response.

The Bible stresses both grace and faith. They are brought together in baptism. Baptism affects what it signifies, providing there is faith as a response. Let me give you an illustration.

Suppose somebody gives me a cheque for £10,000. The moment I receive that cheque (providing the person is worth £10,000), I can say, 'I am now richer. I am richer by £10,000.' But I am not yet richer because I have not cashed the cheque. When I go to the bank and cash the cheque, then I really am richer by £10,000. Baptism is like the receiving of a cheque. Faith is like the cashing of the cheque. We need both. The giving of the cheque is the equivalent to an act of God's grace. The cashing of the cheque is the equivalent to our response of faith.

As St. Gregory of Nazianzus said, 'Baptism is God's most beautiful and magnificent gift...We call it gift, grace, anointing, enlightenment, garment of immortality, bath of rebirth, seal, and most precious gift. It is called *gift* because it is conferred on those who bring nothing of their own; *grace* because it is given even to the guilty; baptism because sin is buried in the water; *anointing* for it is priestly and royal as are those who

are anointed; *enlightenment* because it radiates light; *clothing* since it veils our shame; *bath* because it washes; and *seal* as it is our guard and the sign of God's Lordship.'