

Water of Life

- spirituality, community and an understanding of baptism

IMMERSED IN GOD

God as relational

The German theologian Karl Barth says, 'Trinity is the Christian name for God.' The Orthodox theologian, Metropolitan John Zizioulas of Pergamon says, 'The being of God is a relational being: without the concept of communion it would not be possible to speak of the being of God'.¹

- There is no true being without communion. Nothing exists as an "individual" conceivable in itself". Communion is an ontological category.
- Communion which does not come from a *hypostasis*, that is, a concrete and free person, and which does not lead to *hypostases*, that is concrete and free persons, is not an "image" of the being of God. The person cannot exist without communion, but every form of communion, which denies or suppresses the person, is inadmissible.

John Zizioulas' ideas have been commented on as follows:

"The Person is otherness in communion and communion in otherness." In other words, the person exists only in relation to the other. The implication of this concept of personhood in understanding the Trinity is profound. It speaks volumes of how one can speak of God as being three persons – Father, Son and Holy Spirit – yet being one at the same time. As Zizioulas says, "God is not first One and then Three, but simultaneously One and Three." Therefore, God is an unbreakable *koinonia* where "otherness is not a threat to community." By understanding the Trinity in this manner we see a deep relationship that exists between the three persons, a communal relationship of love, and a relationship that is "permanent and unbreakable." But is this a closed community, which is inaccessible to humanity or the rest of creation? As Elizabeth Johnson speaks of a God that is not a "self-contained or closed divine society," but is "capable of immense hospitality who calls the world to join the feast," Zizioulas likewise sees Christians as able to participate in this personal relationship.

The person exists as God exists. Full personhood entails a communion with other persons, which is inclusive and at the same time values the other "for their uniqueness and differences." This is a far cry from thinkers such as Jean-Paul Sartre who viewed humanity as "condemned to be free." In contrast Zizioulas claims humans were not condemned to be free, they are instead meant to be a part of a greater whole, a community in which salvation is possible. As we shall now see, Zizioulas's thought on the Trinity not only has important implications for humans, but also for the larger created order.²

Patristic understanding of Trinity says something fundamental about ourselves as persons 'Full personhood entails a communion with other persons which is inclusive and at the same time values the other for their uniqueness and

¹ See John Zizioulas 'Being and Communion', he is an Orthodox theologian working out implications of patristic understanding of trinity for today

² Extract from paper on web: <http://www.freewebs.com/koinonias/koinonia.htm>



difference'³

Sin distorts, rupturing the relationship with God that in turn has ruptured all other ways of relating and knowing. Being and relating no longer one as man becomes (dis)orientated around self. Fallen means we can no longer relate properly – to God, ourselves, each other, the world. To be saved or salvaged from fractured, broken way of relating is to become part of the whole again, to be brought back into the wholeness of *shalom* where the whole of creation is brought back into right balance and relationship.

Salvation means a profound change in our way of being, perceiving and relating, we become fully relational being again, participating in the relationship that is God, - Father, Son and Holy Spirit, learn a new way of relating to God, ourselves, others, and the world around us; to enter into the dance of the trinity with all creation.

Mystery of participation in Christ

Being 'immersed in God' is equal to being 'In Christ'. We are given a new identity, position, place, belonging - out of fallen/corrupted/sinful nature - into Christ:

'Therefore if anyone is in Christ, they are a new creation,
the old has gone and the new has come'
(2 Cor. 5:17) ⁴

Koinonia of Holy Spirit

In the New Testament the Greek word for "communion," is *koinonia*. This term gave expression to the type of relationship that Christians experienced with their God as revealed in his son Jesus. *Koinonia* also expressed the type of relationships the early Christians shared with one another.

'We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard,
so that you also may have *koinonia*
(life together from a new way of relating) with us.
And our *koinonia* (new way of relating)
is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ'
(1Jn 1:3)

To be 'in Christ' is to be 'in the body of Christ' – we do not exist as an 'individual' if we become part of this new way of life as dynamic relationship, we are saved into a body – where unity is expressed in diversity:

'So in Christ we, though many, form one body,
and each member belongs to all the others'
(Rom 12:5)

'...for you are all one in Christ Jesus'
(Gal 3:28)

³ Metropolitan John (Zizioulas) of Pergamon, *Communion and Otherness*, http://www.orthodoxresearchinstitute.org/articles/liturgics/john_zizioulas_communion_otherness.htm (Accessed: 2nd October, 2003). See also P. A. Fox (Ed) '*God as Communion*', John Zizioulas, Elizabeth Johnson and '*The Retrieval of the Symbol of the Triune God*' Collegeville Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2001

⁴ Cf also Rom 6:11; 8:1; 1 Cor 1:2; 1:30; Eph 1: 11, 13

‘Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is one part of it’
(1Cor 12:27)

In 1927 Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote, ‘The church is Christ existing as community.’⁵ Fourteen years later writing from prison:

“Faith is participation in this being of Jesus (incarnation, cross and resurrection). Our relation to God is not a “religious” relationship to the highest, most powerful, and best Being imaginable – that is not authentic transcendence - but our relationship to God as a new life in “existence for others” through participation in the being of Jesus. The transcendental is not infinite and unattainable tasks, but the neighbour who is within reach in any given situation.... The church is the church only when it exists for others....”

DEEP ENCOUNTER

Being baptised

- **Crisis and threshold**

It has been said that, from the point of view of the New Testament, there are only two crises in the life of the Christian, ‘baptism’ and the *Parousia*. This observation puts the whole subject of baptism into true perspective. It removes it from being viewed simply as a religious rite and reveals it as a dynamic encounter with the power of God.

On the day of Pentecost the crowd who heard Peter proclaiming that Jesus was the Messiah responded to his words with the cry, “What shall we do?” He replied,

“Repent, and be baptised every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.”
(Acts 2:37-38)

These words make it very clear that the early Christian community saw ‘baptism’ as the threshold across which every person had to cross if they were to become part of the church. As Foakes Jackson observed, ‘it is an unquestionable fact that from the very first baptism was considered absolutely necessary for every person who entered the Christian community’.

- **Waters that divide**

The subject of baptism is not one about which anyone can be complacent. Its waters are indeed waters that divide. Spiritually and practically, as we shall see below, the baptismal waters are the point at which an individual is cut off from the ties and the hold that ‘this world’ has upon them. The break is complete; their bridges are burnt behind them. From the moment of their baptism onwards they stand apart as different, citizens of heaven.

⁵ D Bonhoeffer *‘The Communion of Saints’* 1927



Down through the centuries and still today, that single radical act has on many occasions been enough to precipitate the ultimate witness; 'the baptism in blood' (martyrdom).⁶

All Christians stand together in agreement in believing that when people respond to the gospel they enter the church through the act of baptism.⁷ However, baptismal waters have not only been the point of division between the Christian and the world, but historically, few things have divided the Christian church to the extent that the issue of baptism has. In fact tragically, on occasions in the past, Christians in there thousands have even been tortured and executed by other Christians over differences about baptism. Baptism has been, and remains, a focus of dispute because, as we have seen, the New Testament clearly presents it as the primary act of a person's response to God; the step that integrates people into the body of Christ. It is because it is such a crucial issue with regard to the faith and practice of the church that Christians have held such strong differences about it. The roots of the conflict are over matters such as:

- The nature of the church
- The relationship between the church and the state
- The effect of 'original sin'
- The power of the act; a 'sign' or a 'sacrament'
- The necessity of the practice in the age of the Spirit
- The manner of administration; effusion or immersion
- The words of the formula; 'Father, Son and Spirit' or 'the name of Jesus'

These differences, and others, have emerged because of historical debate and circumstance. They are clearly significant and important questions, and most of them will be touched on as we continue our discussion. However, in order to answer them, and to draw our personal conclusions about the subject, it is essential to have as clear a picture as possible as to the New Testament understanding of baptism.

Studying the subject of baptism today is a humbling experience. Every group of Christians has much to learn. When we view the matter historically and theologically we can understand the differences more clearly and each has much to gain from the other. When we view the matter biblically, the New Testament teaching is nothing short of awesome, and every Christian has so much still to learn and practice.

▪ **Meaning and method**

Words we know are complex things, with their meaning depending both on their origin and the way they are used; this is especially apparent in a subject like 'baptism'. Our English word 'baptism' is simply a transliteration of the Greek word *baptizo*. In ancient Greece the word *baptizo* would be used with a range of senses. It is mistaken to try reducing and simplifying the understanding to just one sense:

⁶ In the Celtic tradition there were seen to be three baptisms; green baptism (xxx), white baptism and red baptism (martyrdom)

⁷ Quakers and Salvationists do not however practice and 'ritual' of baptism in the way that other Christians do.

- **'To dip'**: like a piece of linen being dipped into a vat of dye
- **'To plunge'**: like a brazier plunging hot steel into water to temper it
- **'To immerse'**: like a shipwreck immersed under the sea
- **'To overwhelm'**: like alcohol or sleep overwhelms a person
- **'To swamp'**: like refugees swamp a city that they flee to
- **'To wash'**: like washing oneself or one's clothes clean

These uses are fascinating and instructive, but we must be careful not to be too literalistic in the way we interpret *baptizo*. Rather we should respond to the over-all impact of the word. We have here a very strong word, with an emphasis on its *effect* as much as on any the nature of any particular action⁸.

When the word 'baptism' is used in the New Testament it is speaking about a physical event in which a declaration and encounter with God is taking place. The medium was clearly water and the experience was obviously overwhelming:

- The argument for 'immersion' is probable on the basis of Jewish practice, and in Christian practice linked with dying and rising with Jesus;
- The argument for 'effusion' is possible if there are parallels with messianic anointing and outpouring; and in Christian practice with it often being more convenient.

In studying the subject of baptism the initial and central debate is not about its *means* (how it is done) but about *what it means* (its spiritual impact). It is the truth that it communicates and the reality that it imparts that is essential. All other questions must be resolved in the light of these. Historically this has not been the case.

Pagans and Jews

▪ Pagan rites

Baptism seems to burst upon the pages of the New Testament as an entirely new phenomenon, but this is not so. The biblical writers do not explain it because it was a well established practice in the ancient world to which the new covenant gives a fresh interpretation and a whole new meaning. However, it is neither in the Hebrew scriptures nor the intertestamental writings that we have to start, but rather among the pagan rituals of the mystery religions of the Middle East.

The mystery religions offered the initiates *soteria*, salvation. Not just physical salvation from the evil forces that were believed to inhabit this world but eschatological salvation in a blessed immortality beyond death:

- The cults of Isis and Serpias had baptismal rites which were said to make the initiate ritually clean from the defilement of their life in the material world and to prepare them for communion with the deity

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- Some see no need for the physical act of baptism; "I've been dry-cleaned!"
- Some emphasise the meaning of the word as in the Greek Orthodox church where the baby is immersed beneath the water three times ("In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit")!



- The cult of Mithraism had a baptism rite called the *taurobolium* in which the initiate was led into a dark chamber and then a bull was slaughtered above them so that they were drenched in its blood; stimulating a spiritual experience said to give rebirth and cleansing

These baptisms are of course far removed from biblical baptism. They are only concerned with ritual cleansing, not moral cleansing, essential to Christian baptism. But they show how the language of baptism was widely understood in the Mediterranean world and was linked with the idea of salvation and unity with deity. Christian baptism makes exactly the same point.

▪ Hebrew lustration

The Hebrew scriptures make important reference to ritual ablutions and these must play some part in the background to the New Testament understanding of baptism. They were linked to sacrificial worship:

- The High Priest bathed before entering the Holy of Holies on Yom Kippur
- The people were to wash after contact with any physical uncleanness

However, as with all Hebrew rituals they only had power if they were linked with faith and repentance, they were visual representations of inner attitude. But the only hope that the Hebrews had for a once-for-all complete cleansing lay in the eschatological future in the fulfillment of:

- Zechariah's prophecy that a 'fountain would be opened to cleanse the house of David from sin and uncleanness' (Zec 13:1)
- Ezekiel's prophecy that the Lord would 'sprinkle clean water upon his people' and put within them a new heart and spirit (Ezk 36:26)
- Malachai's prophecy that God would refine people with fire and fullers soap (Mal 3:2)

▪ Proselyte initiation

Jewish proselyte baptism was called *tebilah*. It is very uncertain when this practice began, and there have been questions raised as to whether it could have had any substantial impact on the thinking that lay behind Christian baptism. However, evidence from rabbinical discussions in the Mishnah suggests that proselyte baptism was established a hundred years before the Christian era. By that time it was one of the three essentials for entering the Jewish community, along with circumcision and sacrifice. By 130 CE there were a few Jewish groups who argued that baptism alone was sufficient for a proselyte.

It is interesting that because Jewish proselyte baptism is not ever mentioned in the Hebrew scriptures, the rabbis had to look for precedents. Some Hillelite rabbis argued for the *tebilah* on the basis of Exodus 14:21-30; Moses leading the Israelites to safety through the Red Sea was baptism. Proselyte baptism was by total immersion, and it was said to make the person 'born anew' (ritually holy). The change of personhood for the proselyte was said to be so total and radical that the rabbis argued, theoretically, that such a person could marry their mother or their sister without committing incest! It emphasised the complete reversal of the old order giving new life under the yoke of the covenant.



Finding precedents for the practice of baptism back in the Hebrew scriptures was also an issue for the early Christians. It is interesting to see how they approached it: -

- Paul uses the same argument as the Hillelite rabbis linking it with the crossing of the Red Sea (1Cor 10:1-6)
- Peter uses the imagery of the salvation of Noah and his family in the ark during the flood in Genesis 7:1-22 (1Pet 3:20-22)

It is interesting that they do not use the story of Naaman who dipped himself into the Jordan seven times (2Kg 5:14); surely the perfect baptismal story! The fact that they don't, and comparing it with the stories they do choose should tell us something important about the New Testament understanding of baptism.

▪ **Essene preparation**

The Essenes, that radical messianic puritan Jewish movement with their important centre at Qumran, had dramatic ideas about baptism. Like the Pharisees they had their roots in the Hasidim of the Maccabean era and placed strong emphasis upon keeping the Torah. In breaking with the Temple they could no longer sacrifice and so they emphasised ritual cleanliness. This led them to practice a number of baptisms at different stages of commitment.

They considered themselves to be in the vanguard of the last things, preparing the way for the Messiah (eg Isa 40:3). This preparation included baptism by immersion that had to follow sincere repentance to be effective. There had to be moral cleanliness; penitence was essential for one to be fit for the 'last days of the Messiah'. They saw water baptism as preliminary to the Messianic baptism of the Spirit in the last days. In very many ways they set the scene for John's baptism; which has led some to wonder whether in fact he spent some time with the Essenes when he was in the wilderness. We simply do not know.

▪ **John the Baptist**

When John stood on the banks of the river Jordan and declared, "Repent, be baptised, for the kingdom of God is at hand", he was vibrating the Jewish hopes of his day. He declared, like the Essenes in the desert, that the way was to be prepared for the coming Messiah (cf Isa 40:3). To him the path of preparation led directly through the waters of baptism.

We have already seen that baptism was no new concept or rite, with its roots in Mediterranean mystery religions and Judaism; what is new is the emphasis that John gives to it. The uniqueness of his baptism was in the uniqueness of his calling. However, imagine the shock for his Jewish audience. John is calling them to practice something only expected of proselytes! Natural born Jews they may be but at that moment they stood the other side of the baptismal waters from the Messiah.

John's baptism had two focal points:

- **Repentance:** this was inaugural; his baptism saw people make the transition from the condition and destiny of the unrighteous to that of the righteous. 'Metanoia' demanded



radical changes in a person's moral life; John's call to the holy life was more far-reaching than that of the Essenes (cf Lk 3:7-14). In the baptismal waters human and divine elements combined to become effective; those who responded to the call to repentance were converted (changed) and assured of forgiveness and cleansing from sins.

- **Preparation:** this was eschatological; his task was primarily gathering people for the Messiah. This was the positive side of judgment; the dark side fell upon those who resisted. John challenged the notion that simply being Jewish gave one the right to inherit the kingdom of God. John's baptism was 'prophetic symbolism'; he highlighted the ethical demands of a righteous God and urged an immediate response on the part of the people. His call was to the nation as a whole; there was no escaping to the desert like the Essenes.

In preparing people for the impending eschatological event John's baptism was:

- A declaration of conversion; repentance
- A clear act of purification
- A seal of inner moral cleansing; forgiveness of sin
- A readiness for separation as the crisis broke
- A preparation for baptism of Spirit and fire

John's preaching had similarities to that of the Essenes, but there were clear differences:

- His preaching was more radical
- His eschatological expectation was more immediate
- His call to repentance more urgent
- His baptism more complete; once only

John appears to have more in common with Essene baptism than proselyte baptism; yet his whole work stands unique. In John the ancient practice of ritual lustrations are combined with a prophetic anticipation of judgment and redemption, in the medium of baptism. What he pioneered was not only embraced by Jesus the Messiah, but also by the church.

Baptism of Jesus

▪ Foundation

Jesus coming to John to be baptised is clearly a very important event to the Gospel writers; however, the whole event has often proved a major embarrassment to many New Testament scholars. Why does the sinless and divine Messiah participate in an act that is specifically available for those who are wishing to repent of their sin? Jesus' baptism is only a 'problem' if people fail to recognise the eschatological nature of John's baptism. Not only are there no difficulties with Jesus' baptism, but it provides an important foundation for our understanding of Christian baptism; though as we shall see it is also quite distinct. What is clear is that:



- Jesus was not being baptised for his own sins; for he is without sin
- Jesus was not a perfect human being adopted into the Godhead; the term 'beloved son' was an affirmation not an initiation
- Jesus was not suddenly coming to the realisation that he is Messiah
- Jesus was not presenting us with an 'ideal' of Christian baptism
- Jesus was not *simply* identifying with John's baptism
- Jesus was not primarily dedicating himself to the task ahead
- Jesus was not being 'baptised in the Holy Spirit' for he already had 'the Spirit without measure' (Jn 3:34)

In one way it should not surprise us that the baptism of Jesus often presents a problem to people studying the New Testament, because Jesus' baptism certainly presented a problem to John the Baptist himself (Mt 3:14)! However, Jesus' reply is clear, full of authority and instructive:

“Let it be so at once!
It is proper to fulfill all righteousness”
(Mt 3:15)

There is force and urgency in his words. The phrase, 'to fulfill all righteousness', is simply implying that his baptism is a divinely imposed duty; God required it. This becomes obvious, as we understand what his baptism is declaring; it is the dramatic opening moment of his public ministry, which is proclaiming central truths.

There can be little doubt that Jesus' baptism must have been a profoundly important moment to him personally. We can only imagine the joy, the encouragement, the fresh dedication, the sense of stepping over the threshold to begin his work in public, and probably so much more. While Jesus' personal feelings remain hidden from us, we can be bolder in discussing what the Gospel writers and Jesus himself saw as the clear significance of his baptism.

▪ Representation

‘Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to John, to be baptised by him. John would have prevented him ... Jesus answered, “Let it be so at once! It is proper to fulfill all righteousness”. Then he consented. And when Jesus was baptised, he went up immediately from the water’ (Mt 3:13-16).

In being baptised Jesus was giving clear assent and recognition to John's message, ministry and authority. John, as we have seen, was giving a clarion call to the people to be ready and prepared for the coming Messiah. He was setting the scene for Jesus to begin his ministry. It is important to remember that both Jesus and John began their ministries with almost identical messages, “Repent, the kingdom of God is at hand”; though Jesus' addition of the phrase, “The time is fulfilled” is very important. However, Jesus is doing very much more than just identifying himself with John's ministry; above all he is identifying himself with those people who are responding to John's preaching and being baptised by him.

The Hebrew scriptures make it clear that the Messiah is inseparable from the people; he is one with them. The Messiah identifies with their circumstances and their need. So when Jesus is mingling with the crowd on the banks of the Jordan, and then enters the waters to



be baptised by John, he is not doing this so much as an individual but as a *representative person*. As Messiah Jesus is 'mediator'; he represents God to the people and the people to God. He companies with sinners because it is the will of God; and he will do it throughout his public ministry. This is what is implied by the phrase, "It is proper to fulfill all righteousness"; this is what God requires.

As John proclaims his message Jesus stands identified with the common people who respond in repentance. He stands identified with them in contrast to those who heard John and in self righteousness did not respond. Standing with those who repent, he is the Messiah, especially as the Servant of Yahweh, to represent them before God. In the temptations, that are to follow so closely, it is not his Messiahship that is being challenged, but rather his choice as to how he would act as Messiah. What kind of Messiah would he be? Each temptation was designed to break his solidarity with the people he came to save. The Jews expected the Messiah to sweep away sinners, but instead Jesus identifies himself with sinners and enables them to be the first to enjoy the blessings of the new order.

Jesus represented divine sovereignty; in his baptism he consecrated himself to it and the way he would exercise it. It would be exercised in his life in both judgment and redemption.

▪ Inauguration

' ... suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, "This is my son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased"' (Mt 3:16-17).

Immediately after leaving the water 'the heavens were torn apart' ('ripped open', 'shredded'). The baptism of Jesus was an *eschatological event*; it was an *apocalyptic moment*. Here the Lord of Hosts was declaring that he was at work through his Anointed. This was no personal beatific vision; this was a declaration that the events of the age to come were breaking in, in the person of Jesus. The open heavens, the voice of the father, the descent of the Spirit, all indicates that the last things have dawned and that redemption is appearing. Prophetic and apocalyptic literature anticipated this moment:

- 'O that you would rend the heavens and come down!' (Isa 64:1)
- 'And the heavens shall be opened to him, to pour out the Spirit, even the blessings of the Father' (Test Judah 24:2)

The Spirit as a dove fulfils the declaration that the Spirit will be upon the king Messiah (Isa 11:2), and upon the Servant (Isa 42:1; 61:1). Both Spirit and Messiah belong to 'the age to come'. This is not baptising Jesus in the Spirit, for he already had the Spirit without measure. This is rather designating him as the bearer and the giver of the Spirit. The one who fulfils John's declaration, "He who is coming after me is mightier than me ... he will baptise you with Holy Spirit and fire" (Mt 3:11). It is the Spirit that enables the messianic task to be fulfilled. As at the beginning (Gen1: 2) the Spirit is present and hovering at the new creation. Here is divine intervention, the overthrow and downfall of the powers of darkness, the dawn of the new creation.



The words spoken by the heavenly voice echo two important scriptures:

- 'You are my son, today I have begotten you' (Ps 2:7)
- 'Behold my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights' (Isa 42:1)

These scriptures are linked with the word 'Beloved' (Gk *agapetos*). This title not only establishes Jesus as the Messiah and the Servant of Yahweh, but it also stresses his unique relationship with the Father. To that extent Jesus' baptism is clearly an acted prophecy.

The baptism of Jesus is a declaration of the Messiah embracing and fulfilling every eventuality, and the whole purpose of God, in both judgment and redemption. Jesus' baptism does prefigure his death, resurrection and redemptive act; but it does much more besides. Such an interpretation alone is too narrow for understanding both Jesus' baptism and Christian baptism, as we shall see. The baptism of Jesus must be seen as embracing and pointing towards the accomplishing of the total eschatological purposes of God. It initiated the new creation, seeing its fullness and fulfillment as its goal - nothing less than this.

▪ **Asymmetry**

Being both Messiah and therefore representative, the baptism of Jesus is closely related to ours. Jesus' baptism and Christian baptism touch at every point and yet stand different from each other. They stand joined but in asymmetry. Jesus' baptism is neither a prefiguring nor an ideal of Christian baptism; instead it sets into motion the total redemptive action of the end times. The baptism of Jesus is not a momentary event, but a whole history; it anticipates the end of the world and inaugurates the new creation!

The similarities and differences between Jesus' baptism and our own are quite striking; they highlight the unique and foundational nature of his baptism, and they present the powerful nature of our own:

- Outwardly we experience what he experienced; being immersed with water;
- Inwardly we express our total dependence upon him, receiving the fruits of the work he accomplished;
- He joined the remnant in his baptism, we join the church at our baptism;
- He identified with sinners at his baptism, we rise to join the saints through union with him at our baptism;
- He came to the people at his baptism, now we come to him at our baptism;
- He was proclaimed Messiah and Son of God at his baptism, we are adopted into relationship as 'sons of God' at our baptism; our sonship is rooted in the fact of his sonship, and our sonship is still to be perfected by him;
- He was marked out as the giver of the Spirit at his baptism, we receive the Spirit and are made anew at our baptism;
- He freely submitted in obedience to John's baptism, we freely cast ourselves in need and abandonment upon him at our baptism.

There is a connection at every point and yet there is a difference at every point.



Christian baptism

▪ Act of power

When a Christian is baptised it is not an act of symbolism, it is first and foremost an act of power! It is of course an act that is filled with the most beautiful symbolism and imagery; but these are not passive ideas, they are vehicles for encounter with the living God. At baptism expect something to happen! It is not a 'symbol' but an event! Not a 'sign' but a crisis!

Christian baptism is built upon the foundations, and has its focus, in the death and resurrection of Jesus:

“Do you not know that all of us who have been baptised into Christ Jesus were baptised into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his” (Rm 6:3-5)

“ ... you were buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the working of God, who raised him from the dead” (Col 2:12)

Baptism is an act that totally involves the individual in the events and consequences of Jesus' death and resurrection; down into death [submerged] rising into life (emerged) they are now part of the company of people of whom Jesus said:

“Very truly, I tell you, the hour is coming, and is now here, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live” (Jn 5:25)

“Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and anyone who lives and believes in me will never die” (Jn 11:25-26)

Baptism is an event in which the eschatological power of God, which raised Jesus from the dead, erupts into the life of the believer and engulfs them here and now.

In his death Jesus broke and destroyed the source and power of sin, so that the person who is baptised is set free from the grip of sin and the power of death (cf Heb 2:14-15). The principalities and powers no longer have any claim upon them whatsoever (cf Acts 26:18; Col 1:13). They have been 'delivered', they have been 'loosed'. The axe is laid at their roots; the impact of the past is cut off. If we had better baptism we would probably need less counseling.

Someone who has been baptised has been embraced by salvation:

- Like Noah and his family they have been saved like an ark upon a flood (Gen 7:1-22; 1Pet 3:20-22)
- Like Moses and Israel they have been rescued like a path through waters of destruction (Ex 14:21-30; 1Cor 10:1-6)

The power of the resurrection in baptism brings about a total change of circumstances. The person can never be the same again. They step from darkness into the light to be



overwhelmed by God's grace. Baptism is a dynamic encounter, an act of power and transfiguration!

▪ **Act of grace**

It has been said that, within the pages of the New Testament, there is no gift, or power or blessing from God available to the Christian, which is not at some place ascribed to baptism. All we have as believers is traced back to this one climatic event. The full redemptive work of Jesus and all the extravagant goodness of God becomes ours through baptism:

- Forgiveness of sin (Acts 2:38)
- Cleansing from sins (Acts 22:16; 1Cor 6:11)
- Union with Christ in his death and resurrection life (Gal 3:27; Rm 6:1-11; Col 2:11-12)
- Participation in Christ's sonship (Gal 3:26-27)
- Consecration to God (1Cor 6:11)
- Membership of the body of Christ (1Cor 12:13; Gal 3:27-29)
- Receiving the new life of the Spirit (Acts 2:38; 1Cor 6:11; 12:13)
- Regeneration (Titus 3:5; Jn 3:5)
- Power to live according to God's will (Rm 6:1-11; Col 3:1-11)
- Deliverance from evil powers that rule the world (Col 1:13)
- Inheritance of the kingdom of God (Jn 3:5)
- Promise of the resurrection of the body (Eph 1:13-14; 4:30)

It is into this place of blessings and abundance that the person who is baptised steps as they leave the waters of baptism. This again is the fruit of the resurrection of Jesus and above all an act of grace.

▪ **Act of faith**

The physical act of baptism itself, without faith, is of no significance or consequence at all. If you get baptised without faith the only thing that happens is 'you get wet'! We have seen that baptism is to be an event of power, we are to expect something to happen; but this will only be the case if it is an act of faith. It is a 'matter of faith from start to finish' (cf Rm 1:16-17).

Biblical faith is no mere acceptance of a set of religious propositions. It has Jesus as its object, the response of the whole person to him as Lord. It is a proclamation of our total identity with the truth (God's character):

'... if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God has raised him from the dead, you will be saved. ... So faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the word of Christ' (Rm 10:9,17)

This saving faith finds its source and origin in the preaching of the gospel; the truth about Jesus grips the mind and emotions of the individual through the power of the Holy Spirit. This truth only then becomes a reality in their lives as they accept it and then confess and declare it. Baptism is a public declaration:



- To oneself
- To God (that I accept the saving gift of Jesus)
- To other Christians
- To the watching world
- To spiritual powers

It is 'coming out'! It is nailing our colours to the mast in Jesus' name. This humble yet courageous stand brings a person to the place of being able to receive all God's blessings in Christ. Here the outward act reveals inward commitment, life can flow. Anything else is a powerless lie.

Because faith is the key, and faith is brought into being by hearing, it is vital that we consider the content of the gospel that we preach. When we think how little so many Christians experience of the power and blessings of God at baptism, it suggests that the message they hear is inadequate and mediocre. Little happens because little is expected to happen. The more we preach and teach for faith the more significant the encounter at the waters of baptism will be. Powerful experience at baptism is dependent upon powerful proclamation.

Stepping into the baptismal waters in faith is to turn one's back on self-centeredness, to abandon personal ambition for its own sake and to become shipwrecked on God. Overwhelmed by, and immersed in God, dead and buried in Christ, yet eternally alive.

▪ **Act of outpouring**

Just as the Spirit hovered over the waters at the first creation, so the Spirit hovers over the waters at the new creation. Baptism is the place where the Spirit of God is encountered. As the water overwhelms so the Spirit is outpoured. The New Testament sees no distinction between baptism in water and baptism in the Spirit. From the very earliest period of the church baptism was understood to involve being immersed in both water and Spirit:

'Peter said, "Repent and be baptised every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit"' (Acts 2:38)

Baptism by 'effusion' declares the anointing / outpouring of God's power. At his baptism Jesus is marked out as the one who is the giver of the Spirit. Christian baptism is the fulfilling of the promise of John the Baptist about Jesus, "The one who comes after me will baptise you in Holy Spirit and fire" (Mt 3:11).

This is the biblical pattern:

- Sometimes the outpouring of the Spirit could precede the immersion in water (cf Acts 10:44-48); but these were simply two dimensions of one experience
- The reality of the Spirit at baptism was often dramatically evidenced by the manifestation of tongues and prophecy (cf Acts 10:46; 19:6); fulfilling Joel's prophecy (Joel 2:28-29)



- The call was to be ‘born of water and of the Spirit’ [Jn 3:5]; fulfilling Ezekiel’s prophecy that spoke of God washing with water and putting his Spirit within individuals (Ezk 36:25-26)
- It is receiving the Spirit that distinguishes Christian baptism from John’s baptism; John himself recognised that this would be the case (Mt 3:11), and it is dramatically illustrated in Paul’s encounter with the disciples in Ephesus, “Have you received the Spirit since you were baptised?” (Acts 19:1-8)
- The whole notion of ‘Christian’ (‘little Messiahs’ or ‘anointed ones’; cf Acts 11:26) implies the anointing of the Spirit at baptism

It is only by the Spirit that the benefits of God’s grace can be received at baptism. It is the Spirit that provides the power and dynamism in the waters. There is nothing ‘magical’ about the water, such an idea would be abhorrent to the New Testament writers; the effects are due to the presence of the Spirit of God. When baptism is simply made a symbolic act, expectation of power is removed, faith weakened and the experience often limited because the Spirit has little freedom to move creatively. We must inspire the expectation of powerful encounter.

▪ Act of joining

Baptism is often spoken about as the means of ‘church membership’; this it clearly is. However, the implications of such an observation will depend upon your understanding of the word ‘church’. However, if it is simply a local, organisational and parochial concept then it will erode the truth and experience of baptism, if church is organic and cosmic it will be a different story. It reminds us that there is only *one* church.

At baptism we are joined in union with Christ; we are united with him at all points (cf Rm 6:4; Col 2:12; Eph 2:6; Phil 3:10). Baptism places us ‘in Christ’, which is baptism into his ‘Body’ (1Cor 12:13). The ‘Body of Christ’ is the corporate expression of himself; it is the called out ones, the church. To often the personal aspects of baptism are emphasised at the expense of the corporate; which are primary. Baptism is first and foremost a collective experience, becoming part of the people of God; it is out of this that our individual experience finds its place. The Body is both Christ and the believers together (see 1Corinthians 12); the head and the limbs are an inseparable whole. The church is the corporate Christ of whom the risen Jesus is the head; it is both visible and invisible, on earth and in heaven. So baptism is a spiritual transaction that incorporates the believer into the body of the risen Christ by the Spirit, it is also a visible action in water that incorporates the believer into the visible community of God’s people.

To emerge from the waters of baptism is to put oneself into both the discipline [learning together] and the responsibility of the community of faith. From now on the individual plays their part in the whole. Here they learn and receive teaching, here they lead and take responsibility. Mutuality is the theme. The local outworking of corporateness is recognised as being but part of the global and cosmic whole.

▪ Act of transformation

The baptism of John was to produce ‘fruits of repentance’ (Mt 3:8). Christian baptism was to produce the ‘fruit of the Spirit’ (Gal 5:22), the character of the one in whom they had been joined. In baptism the flesh has been crucified with its passions and desires (Gal



5:24); the old nature has been stripped, and a new nature given after the image of its creator (Col 3:9-10). The 'ought' of the Law has become the 'can' of the Spirit (Rm 7:24-25). In putting on Christ we put on his character (Col 3:12-13). The act of sanctification becomes a visible and tangible reality; we are being re-reflexed for all to see.

Therefore, Christian baptism is a complete break with the past, and abandonment upon the life of God with the thrill of a certain though uncharted future.

▪ **Act of expectation**

Christian baptism, like John's, is essentially eschatological. In being baptised 'into Christ' we are baptised, not simply into his Body, but into his resurrection Body. Baptism is entry into the eschatological order of the new creation. By his death and resurrection Jesus conquered the powers of evil, in baptism believers share in that victory. In being raised, Christ is the first fruits of the new creation, in baptism the believer is united with him and so is certain to rise and reign with him. As in the words of an early Christian hymn:

'If we died with him,
we shall also live with him.
If we endure we shall also reign with him.'
(2Tim 2:11)

The central fact is that baptism proclaims hope and expectation! We are part of the corporate resurrection body of Christ; the work of the Spirit is already forming the fullness of that body. The ultimate nature and destiny will be revealed at the 'parousia'.

Children and Baptism

▪ **Troubled waters**

The questions about baptising children are indeed troubled waters. This has always been the single most contentious issue in the whole debate about baptism. It is clear that there have been questions about it since the earliest centuries of the church. Historically, the matter was made increasingly complex when whole nations began to view themselves as 'Christian' and established a 'state church'; this inevitably paralleled church membership with citizenship. In these circumstances the baptism of infants became obligatory in order for them to become full citizens of that society. While we still live with the consequences of those times we will exclude them from our discussion and concentrate simply on children from Christian families.

The New Testament is a missionary document with a burden to proclaim the gospel to an unbelieving world. All Christians agree that for adult believers repentance and faith are to be demonstrated by baptism. Its teaching on baptism understandably focuses on adults who respond to Jesus in faith and want to become part of the church. It simply does not address the all-important question, "*What do Christian parents do about their children?*" In attempting to answer this question two broad and highly conflicting approaches have emerged:

- **The 'believer baptists'** who believe that no person should be baptised until they are capable of exercising personal faith in Christ and until they have publicly confessed that



faith; they argue there simply is no clear biblical or early historical evidence to the contrary and that later practice of child baptism is error

- **The 'infant baptists'** who believe that the new born children of Christian parents should be baptised as soon as it is practicable after their birth on the promise that the parents will bring them up in the faith; they argue that this has been the practice of the majority of churches throughout church history and that the biblical, historical and theological arguments are compelling

There is no simple direct evidence that decides the issue to the satisfaction of everybody. Decisions about the baptism of children from Christian families are made on the basis of indirect evidence and the believed inferences of scripture and early historical statements. There is of course no such thing as uninterpreted evidence, so we shall try to be as fair and objective as possible as we look at the various points of view from the New Testament text, the early church fathers and the theological background.

▪ Household baptism

In the book of Acts there are a number of references to whole households turning to the Christian faith; that of Cornelius (11:14), Lydia at Philippi (16:15), the jailer Philippi (16:33) and Crispus (18:8). Paul also refers to the household of Stephanas (1Cor 1:16) and the house of Onesiphorus (2Tim 1:16; 4:19). It is of course vigorously debated as to whether or not these acts of baptism included young children or not.

Luke continually stresses that the entire household was baptised; 'all'. There is no impression that any members of the family were excluded. It is argued that the Hebrew background to the word 'house' always included the children of the family when used in a religious context. The head of the house was said to set the pattern for everyone else to follow. Because of the eschatological force of the gospel it is argued that no family would have been divided.

In trying to assess this evidence we would make the following observations:

- The force of the word 'all' is clearly strong, there is no suggestion that any member of the family is excluded
- When Luke writes these accounts he also refers to those who respond hearing the word, receiving the Spirit, speaking in tongues and rejoicing (cf 10:44-48; 16:34 etc.) clearly infants are not able to be included in this, so one cannot force the meaning of 'all' to include them; it would not have been so understood by the early readers
- We surely cannot be certain that Luke and Paul are using a Hebraic sense of the Greek word *oikos* ('house'), to emphasise the presence of children
- When Paul refers to the household of Stephanas (1Cor 16:15-16) he speaks of them devoting themselves to working for other Christians, would this imply children also?
- The idea that families would not be divided by baptism does not accord with Luke 12:51-53 where Jesus is clear that the gospel is often a sword that separated parents from children

The argument that 'household baptism' included children is far from proven. The idea of whole families turning to God in response to the gospel with everyone sharing in baptism as a declaration of faith and statement of solidarity is very persuasive. However, we simply have no evidence that children were, or were not, actually baptised on these occasions.



We cannot be certain that it would have been the case, especially where scripture as a whole seems to link baptism with a personal confession of faith; but what about the faith and faithfulness of the parent on behalf of their children?

▪ **Jesus and children**

The fact that Jesus welcomed and blessed children who were brought to him and rebuked those who hindered them is clearly important (cf Mk 10:13-16; Mt 19:13-15; 18:3-6; Lk 18:15-17). It is beyond question that there is something very significant about children and spirituality in the teaching of Jesus. Statements such as, 'to such belong the kingdom of God' and 'except you become like little children you cannot enter the kingdom of God' [one of the hard sayings of Jesus] cannot be dismissed as lightly and treated as sentimentally as many people have done. They present a relationship between children and the experience of God's blessing and salvation than many have been prepared to admit.

In trying to assess the evidence we make the following observations:

- These words of Jesus need to be given much more significance than 'believer baptists' have often been prepared to do;
- Both 'infant baptists' and 'believers baptists' have been influenced by the arguments for 'original sin' in their teaching and practice on baptism; the words of Jesus about children raise serious questions as to the significance of traditional thinking about 'original sin';
- Infant baptism is said to deal with original sin in a child, while believer baptists deny children full church membership also because of unrepented sin; both views are mistaken;
- Whether the blessings of Jesus upon children can be described as 'baptism without water' is far from certain;
- Whether the actions of Jesus form a basis for bringing children into the church today and blessing them by baptism is unproven;
- There is no clear evidence that these stories of Jesus and children were used in the New Testament church as a basis for, and during the practice, of infant baptism; this does not seem to be the natural understanding of the text.

These are key scriptures in the discussion about what Christian parents do about their children, but fail to provide conclusive evidence for infant baptism. But do they prove the case against it?

▪ **Fathers and children**

We would hope that the matter of baptising children could be solved by looking at the teaching of the earliest Christian 'Fathers' of the church after the close of the New Testament era. It is hoped that they might give us some clue as to what the apostles taught about children and baptism. The earliest 'Fathers' to address the matter were: -

- **Justin Martyr** (c 150) said that he could name, 'many, both men and women, who were disciples from childhood to Christ, remaining pure at the age of sixty or seventy years'. This does not explicitly state baptism, though many argue it is implied. It certainly does not conclusively prove infant baptism before the year 90.



- **Origen** (c 200) said that, 'The church has received a tradition from the apostles to give baptism even to little children'. How much further back we can go is a matter of dispute. Some argue that Origen's father and grandfather were Christians so infant baptism must have certainly been practiced as early as the year 150. Others argue that Origen only heard of the idea later in his life while in Caesarea. If the apostles did say this it could be referring to children who had faith very young, rather than newly born infants. One is simply guessing. The force of these words will depend upon the New Testament evidence for the practice.
- **Hippolytus** (c 230) quoted in the Apostolic Tradition (xxi. 4), "And they shall baptise the little children first. And if they can answer for themselves, let them answer. But if they cannot, let their parents answer or someone from their family."
- **Tertullian** (c 290) refers to the baptism of little children placing too much responsibility on the sponsors, adults with responsibility for them; therefore, except in emergencies, it should not be encouraged. He says, 'let them come when they are older'. Some argue that here he is referring to the children of non-Christian families and is not contesting the principle of infant baptism in the Christian home.

Trying to assess the evidence we make the following observations:

- It shows that the question as to what Christian parents do about their children was a reoccurring one in the post-apostolic era
- A clear and coherent statement on the subject does not come through
- There were pastoral difficulties suggesting the issue was not fully worked out
- There may well have been variety of practice in different churches
- Clearly children were being baptised, but whether they were infants or simply quite young children who had personally and freely expressed faith in Jesus is far from clear

▪ **Covenant ideas**

Probably the strongest case in favour of infant baptism is the one based on a covenant theology. It argues that throughout history there has been a single covenant of grace between God and his people, and the conditions of enjoying its blessing have always been the same - faith in the promises of God. This approach argues a strong continuity between Israel and the church, as the people of God throughout history. On the basis of this idea analogies are drawn between baptism and circumcision, and reference is made to the practice of proselyte baptism that was known to include children.

- **Circumcision** was the requirement of infants born into all Jewish homes and adults joining the faith. Baptism is seen as a fulfillment and a replacement; bringing an end to circumcision (cf Rm 3:25-31; Gal. 3:26-29; Eph 2:11-22). Because baptism is seen to flow naturally from the idea of circumcision it is argued that it must therefore apply to all infants of Christian parents; being 'only right and natural'
- **Proselyte baptism** in later Judaism clearly included young children along with older members of the family when they converted to the faith. Added to this there are also examples of 'foundling children' of pagans being baptised to ensure that they would be able to be truly established among the covenant people



Trying to assess the evidence we make the following observations:

- This approach highlights the important themes of the continuity and embrace of the family and community as the people of God and the blessing that flows among them
- It touches the relationship between the continuity and discontinuity which exists between the Hebrew scriptures and the New Testament
- Clearly the concept of covenant within scripture flows between the testaments as a unifying theme; however, the New Testament also draws clear distinctions between the original and the new covenants
- That circumcision and baptism are not the same thing is most strongly suggested by the fact that circumcised Jews stood at the other side of the baptismal water in John's ministry and on the day of Pentecost; circumcision is not part of the Gospel, baptism is, and is demanded of everyone, including those who are circumcised
- Trying to parallel circumcision and proselyte baptism with Christian baptism fails to recognise its unique eschatological power and declaration, Christian baptism is entering the 'life of the age to come', not simply a covenant people

The decision we make on the basis of the above will not depend upon simple biblical statements, but from our approach to reading and interpreting the text as a whole. The differences are deep, subtle and far-reaching. This is probably the main reason why there is no obvious resolve to the debate between the 'believing baptist' and the 'infant baptist'.

▪ **Oil and water**

We have chosen the phrase 'oil and water' to make two concluding points:

- There is much we can say about children and baptism which can 'pour oil on troubled waters' in this debate; as we hope to show the differences between the two positions do not have to be very great
- There is still, however, one basic difference over baptism, whether or not confession and faith on the part of the individual concerned is essential which cannot be fully resolved and must remain, like 'oil and water', separated

These concluding comments, of necessity, have to be personal, but I hope helpful in showing how I have tried to resolve the competing arguments about what Christian parents should do about their children. I am, myself, a passionately committed 'believer baptist'; I simply cannot escape the conviction that baptism in the New Testament is inseparably linked with personal commitment expressed in a confession of faith. I cannot see how this can be fully reconciled with 'infant baptism'. However, I have serious problems with the practice and interpretation of 'believer baptism' in many cases. I also believe that 'infant baptists' are affirming things about children which are profoundly biblical and which 'believer baptists' usually neglect. Let me make what I see to be the essential points:

- On the basis of Jesus' statements like, 'to such belong the kingdom of God' (cf Mk 10:14), it seems clear that children are in the kingdom of God until or unless they choose otherwise;
- On the basis of Paul's statement, that an unbelieving husband/wife is made holy through their believing partner, and that otherwise 'your children would be unclean, but



as it is, they are holy' (1Cor 7:14); it is clear that children in a Christian family have a unique experience of God's grace;

- It should be the expectation of Christian parents that their children will become Christian and live their lives as disciples of Jesus; it should be the exception for this not to happen;
- The child in a Christian family has to personally choose to be a disciple of Jesus; they have to decide to embrace the blessing, it is not automatic, it will in fact probably be a series of both unconscious and conscious decisions as they are growing up;
- We should treat children from Christian families as both believers and fully part of the church; which will include their participation in breaking bread
- We will expect children to 'confirm' their faith in baptism when they feel they wish to, with no pressure, as a declaration of their faith; the church must be clear they fully understand what they are doing;
- We must also give children the freedom not to become disciples of Jesus if that really is their choice;
- There is no necessity for 'infant baptists' to baptise in order to deal with original sin or because they believe the child is somehow outside the church
- There is no validity for the 'believer baptists' to treat the children of Christian parents as unbelievers until they are saved.

In practice there should be very little difference in the way 'infant baptists' and 'believer baptists' treat their children, and in their beliefs, hopes and expectations for them. In both cases parents have faith for their children, in both cases they look for their faith to be confirmed in their children's faith. *The only real difference is the point at which they apply the water!*

Is baptism ... ?

▪ Really necessary?

The experience of many Christians is such that the question, 'Is baptism really necessary?' is an important one. There are those who have come to living vibrant faith in Jesus but for various reasons have never experienced baptism. Is their conversion valid? Some Christians, like the Quakers, believe the outward act is not necessary in the age of the Spirit.

When we read the New Testament we have to say that there is nothing there that suggests that it is possible to be a Christian without being baptised. In fact, quite the opposite; for example Peter speaks of 'baptism which now saves you' (1Pt 3:21). The whole tenor of the teaching on salvation is that baptism is the means by which it is available; this is confirmed by New Testament scholars and theologians who make statements such as:

- 'Baptism was the means of salvation and necessary for salvation' (Schlier)
- 'You receive nothing from baptism without faith, you receive nothing from faith without baptism' (Cremer)
- 'Faith without baptism is like a disembodied soul, ... to believe while dispensing with the act of believing is an act of docetism' (Richardson)



These strong statements, while appearing to present the New Testament emphasis, are clearly overstating the case; the scriptures present a broader picture. When the Spirit came on the day of Pentecost we cannot be certain that each of the 120 had previously been baptised, but they all received power. Life is more complicated than the formulations of doctrine. At the end of the day Spirit and faith are where life is found, and the Spirit blows where he wills. Abraham was saved through faith not circumcision (which only had value as a sign of faith). It has been well said that, 'the person who has faith, but cannot obtain a sacrament, has Christ: but the person with the sacrament and no faith has nothing' (Wotherspoon). In Paul's teaching faith receives the gift *in* baptism and faith is the key to life *after* baptism. God desires faith and baptism; but faith alone is enough. But this fact must never undermine the incredible gift baptism is. God has given the sacraments to us for our good and we should receive them gratefully. As a converted Jew, N Levison puts it so well:

"At this distance of time it is possible for some to argue that baptism is not necessary for becoming a Christian. That may be all well and good for some people, but for a Hebrew Christian it is a very important matter, for they are cast out from their own people when they confess their faith in Christ, and thus they need to have assurance that they are incorporated into the new Israel, for that is in part what Christianity means to them. Their reception by baptism into the church, the Body of Christ, gives them a sense of continuity with the past and a new relationship with God through the new covenant"

The Baptist scholar GR Beasley-Murray concludes the matter:

"It behoves us to make much of baptism. It is given as a trysting place of the sinner with their saviour; those who have met him there will not despise it. But in the last resort it is only a *place*: the Lord himself is its glory, as he is its grace"

▪ Special words ?

Much has been made of the words that are used when someone is baptised. Is the validity or significance of baptism affected by the words spoken? What do we know about the practice in the early church?

It is interesting that Matthew's gospel concludes with a clear command to 'baptise in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit' (28:19), and yet when we read through both Acts and the epistles there is no evidence that that formula was ever used. It appears they were not used as a baptismal formula until the 'Didache' (c 135), and when Eusebius (c 300) quotes the Matthew passage he omits them, people have argued they were added at a later date. However, there is no manuscript evidence that supports this.

The simple fact appears to be that the writers of the New Testament had no interest in presenting us with a formula for baptism; and we don't know that there was one. Their concern is to emphasise the *relationship* that baptism brought about. The early Christians were baptised 'into Christ' (cf Gal 3:27). Even the words of Matthew, 'in the name of', were not stressing authority but 'in relation to'. Their words of baptism simply state what is happening to the person being baptised; they are becoming part of the Body of Christ.



When we baptise we should be declaring the truth not following a formula. People who insist that a particular form of words misunderstand the purpose of the words. People who try to invalidate someone's baptism because certain words were not used are in gross error, and are undermining real faith. People who argue that only certain formulas have power are into magic not truth.

When people are baptised, they are baptised into Jesus, and all that he has done for them. They are baptised into living relationship with the Godhead, the source of all things. Their baptism has validity on the basis of their personal faith, because of what Jesus has done and through the power of the Spirit. The words should endeavour to declare the truth, but the reality is dependent upon faith not a formula.

▪ For the dead ?

Over the years a great deal of debate has surrounded the difficult words, which Paul wrote in his first letter to the Corinthians:

‘Otherwise,
what will those people do who receive baptism on behalf of the dead?
If the dead are not raised at all, why are people baptised on their behalf?
(1Cor 15:29)

The fact that so many different interpretations have been given to these words by biblical scholars is evidence of their difficulty. However, there are probably only three approaches, which are likely to be possible:

- It may simply be referring to the experience of normal Christian baptism
- It may be referring to an unusual vicarious baptism for believers who have died before being baptized
- It may be referring to the baptism of someone who has come to faith as a result of the testimony of a dying Christian

Besides these possibilities there are certain criteria of interpretation that need to be followed:

- The expression, ‘those who have been baptised’ must refer to the recipients of Christian baptism
- The phrase, ‘for the dead’ points to a class of dead, presumably Christian, who had an interest or connection with the living
- The words, ‘we also’ (v30) suggests an action in which either Paul or his companions were associated with

The belief that it refers to normal Christian baptism has a great deal of support. It involves repunctuating the verse to read, “Else what shall they do who are baptised? It is for corpses if the dead do not rise”. However, there are criticisms of the way the text is being handled and translated.

The belief that it refers to vicarious baptism springs from the belief that there was a Jewish idea of praying for the dead; but there is nothing like this suggested in the New Testament.



What would be its theological purpose? It borders upon magic. It involves a complete misconception about baptism that is an active not passive act.

The belief that it refers to the baptism of someone who has come to faith as a result of a Christian who is dying or has died in the hope of being united with them at the resurrection, stresses the phrase 'for the sake of'. This approach would suggest the translation, "Else what shall they gain from it, they who are baptised for the sake of the dead, if the dead do not rise?" So the baptism is in the hope of resurrection, not an attempt to remedy some deficiency. This would certainly capture the spirit of the New Testament more accurately.

TAKING THE PLUNGE

Exercise:

- What questions and issues does this teaching on the subject of a New Testament understanding of baptism raise for you?
- Today people are seeking, journeying, tasting and seeing, moving towards the truth. In the light of this how do we understand faith commitment – believing and belonging – and the New Testament teaching on baptism?

'Shipwrecked on God!

'Shipwrecked on God! All else forsaken,
All hope of help from every source has fled;
T'is then, and only then we find the rock
Beneath, that wrecked our keel and stranded us on God.'

'Shipwrecked on God! With naught but Christ remaining;
I find him life and breath, environment - Yea ALL.
I've ceased from all my trying and my toiling;
I've entered into rest to toil no more;
He lives his life while I abide within him,
And now 'for me to live is Christ', for evermore.'

From '*Voice in the Wilderness*' magazine Oct-Dec 1966



Questions

1. What do you think the phrase 'in Christ' implies as far as a Christian's spiritual experience is concerned?
2. What do you think makes Christian baptism in the New Testament so distinctive and important?
3. Is it important that we encourage people seeking faith towards a dramatic experience such as baptism, in a spiritual culture that is sensitive to people questioning and journeying?

Reading and Resources

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