

BAPTISM

Baptism is a sacrament practiced by virtually all branches of the Christian church. It's very important.

Even today, people want to have their children baptised.

It often means that when a couple turns up for baptism with their child there are friends and family with them too - that normally are not part of your church.

And very often - not part of any church.

You can tell them a mile away - they are all dressed up as if they're about to go clubbing...

Maybe that's because they *are* going to party afterwards.

Or maybe because their idea (or memory) of church is that everyone needs to get dressed up to the nines.

Anyway, Baptism is an important sacrament.

But how many of us remember our baptisms?

Unless we were baptised as adults...

I don't know what year I was baptised.

I don't know for sure where it took place.

And I don't know who did it.

Not much of a memory!

And not only that, how many of us understand what baptism is?

Why do we do it?

What is it for?

What is the meaning of this thing?

I think many of us baptised people (even those of us who have seen umpteen baptisms) would struggle to write an essay on that...

Two things nearly stopped me from becoming a minister - baptism and Margaret Thatcher.

Back in the day when I seriously considered becoming a minister I had a problem. I didn't agree with infant baptism. Despite the fact that it is practiced by most of the church around the world it seemed illogical. The Baptists surely had it right.

When you are old enough and want to declare your faith - that is when you should be baptised. What is the point of baptising tiny babies that don't even know what is going on?

So I thought I should do my training at University and apply to be a Baptist minister.

That's when Thatcher came in to my picture.

This was in the days of student grants - when education was free.

She was Prime Minister and decided that anyone who had had a student grant would not be given a second. And I had once been to college after school. It meant that though I had been accepted for University and handed in my notice at work, I wouldn't be able to get a grant to go. I would have to fund the course myself – which was impossible.

The only way round it, was to be accepted as an official candidate by a church. Then that church would help fund the course. The Baptists wouldn't do that for me. They didn't know me.

The only church body that could do it was the Church of Scotland, as I had always been in that Church.

I had to pass a three day selection school test to become accepted.

But I didn't believe in infant baptism. If I told them *that*, I would be rejected as a minister.

After much mental wrestling and prayer I went forward with the old 'do a deal with God' routine.

I decided I would be completely honest with the church if asked about baptism but I wouldn't bring the subject up! At least it might buy some time...I would have nearly six years to decide what I believed about baptism.

As it turned out, eventually as I continued to study the subject, my beliefs changed.

I began to see that believers baptism and infant baptism were two ways of looking at the same subject from a different angle and to some extent were two equally valid perspectives.

Believers baptism is about **our response to God** – our decision to accept Christ – our decision to be part of the church – and so on.

Infant baptism focuses on **God's promises to us**, to love and accept us, and to invite us to be part of the family of faith unconditionally – in other words, **before** we make any response.

God loves us anyway.

God loves us before we love God back.

God loves us before we even know there is a God.

God loves us before we can respond to God.

God loves us before we can do anything to deserve that love.

Believers baptism focuses on our grasp of God.

Infant baptism focuses on God's grasp of us.

But whoever's getting baptised, and whatever age they are, here's a good question on baptism .

Is baptism **the** moment of belonging or is it a **sign** of belonging?

Does Baptism "make" us part of God's family or does it "announce" to us that God includes us in God's family?

If you believe the first – that Baptism **makes** us part of God’s family, then baptism becomes a requirement of life with God now and in the life to come. It means that Baptism is very important indeed, and there are still some Christians today who say that if a person is not baptized, they will not enter heaven.

But there’s a lot of problems with this idea.

It means that God refuses to accept or bless someone who isn’t baptized, and even if that were true it seems very harsh on unbaptised children. How can they be blamed (and why should they suffer) if their parents don’t arrange for them to be baptized? It’s hardly their fault!

It means that God’s love is dependent on someone in a church putting water on someone else. If God only loves us when we are baptized, then God didn’t love us before and God doesn’t really love us unconditionally.

It also means that something is happening that God never does – the taking away of our freedom to choose who we will be, if baptism means we are members of the church – like it or not.

So for a variety of reasons I don’t believe that baptism forces us into being part of the church, or determines whether God will accept us.

For me baptism is an outward sign of the great truth that we are loved by God and called to belong to God.

It’s a sign that we are loved beyond our deserving, and a promise that God wants to share in our lives.

Baptism is a sign of belonging.

Just as when a couple turn up at a church to be married they are not entering into a relationship – they already are in a relationship. The marriage is a celebration and sign of what has already begun.

In the same way, baptism is the sign of God’s care for a person (maybe a very small child), but that love and care from God began at the moment of their birth. Baptism doesn’t **make** God love someone – it’s a sign of the love that is already there.

So you just might want to ask: *Does anything actually happen?*

Baptism is not some kind of magic spell.

The quickest answer is just to say No.

But it’s not that great an answer, because, God’s blessing on us is a tricky thing to measure.

Take our other sacrament, Communion, as an example.

There are times when we participate in the Communion meal and nothing appears to be happening and there are other times when we will feel particularly close to God. God blesses us and draws close to us in different ways. Often, at the time we aren’t aware of how God may be strengthening us or leading us.

Just because we don’t feel anything it doesn’t mean that God is silent or ignoring us.

I want to ask one final question on this.

What is the water all about in baptism?

What is it supposed to symbolise?

Some people would say water is essential to life and water is a sign of life.

Others would say that the water stands for washing and the cleansing of sin.

Now that second idea is one emphasis that some churches place on baptism which I don't think is helpful - the idea that baptism stands for the removal of sin.

With this idea, the water of baptism is cleansing us from our faults and transgressions. This means that even a small baby is having his or her sins removed in the sacrament.

In the church of England the vows of baptism involves answering questions like; *"Do you reject the devil and all rebellion against God?"* and *"Do you repent of the sins that separate you from God and neighbour?"*

Now I think that part of the gospel message has to do with forgiveness.

And I agree that we are all sinners (every one of us) – and even children are not perfect. We **do** need God's forgiveness.

Its not that the idea of forgiveness is not important – its just that I don't think that this is really what we are doing at baptism.

The first thing we need to say to anybody (far less a small baby) is not that *"You are a sinner!"*

We may be sinners but that's not the most important thing about us - in God's eyes at least.

Also I don't think Gods love and forgiveness is limited only to people who have been baptised.

And I don't think baptism is some kind of inoculation system, that makes some people superior to others.

Water is a basic sign of life.

For me the water is a sign of the life we can have in relationship with God.

And baptism is a sign of our identity.

After Jesus was baptised and he came out of the water, he became aware of God speaking to him.

And the message was this: *"You are my own dear son. I am pleased with you."*

It turns out that Jesus' baptism was all about *his* identity.

It is here that God speaks to him, just to remind him of who he is.

Well that's all very well for Jesus. You see, he's someone special.

No wonder God is pleased with Jesus...

But there's something here that we have to grasp if we are ever to understand the good news of the gospel.

What God says to Jesus, God also says to us.

To us, God says this; *"You are my beloved daughter. You are my beloved son. In you I am well pleased."*

And we think that can't be true.

Because we don't deserve that praise. We don't deserve the title.

And we are right. We don't deserve that praise, that acceptance and that love. But God offers us this anyway – even though we don't deserve it.

The words God spoke for Jesus, are now changed to include us.

Our baptisms are a time for us to be reminded of who we truly are.

The words Jesus heard are God's words for us.

"You are my beloved son. You are my beloved daughter."

This is what God thinks of you and me.

This is our identity. We are beloved children of God.

This is God's word to us –

we who say so much and do so little,

we who foul up again and again

we who make promises to God that we don't keep,

we with all our secrets and lies and bad habits,

we who seem to have so much in our lives to clean up

we who are certainly sinners.

All of this is true and God knows who we are through and through.

But God's first words to us are not to condemn or criticize.

God's first words to us are to say that we are God's children and we are loved.

Despite all that may be wrong with us - this is the most important thing about us in God's eyes.

And if we can hear these words to us from God, and let them sink in, it changes everything.

Isaiah 43:1-7

Luke 3:15-16, 21-22

January 10 2016