

# UNDERSTANDING BAPTISM<sup>1</sup>

Baptism has been practised by the church from the day of Pentecost onwards. (Acts 2:38-41)

## WHAT DOES IT SIGNIFY?

Baptism is a sacrament of grace *ie* it reflects God's initiative, not our own. This is seen in the fact that a child or adult never baptises him or herself but is a passive recipient of the act.

### **1. Baptism signifies union with Jesus Christ**

Jesus became a man, died upon the cross and rose again from the dead so that we might be unified with him in an intimate relationship by faith. Baptism is our way of signifying that when Jesus died, the penalty for our sin and our slavery to it died with him. Baptism also signifies that in Jesus' resurrection the individual has the sure prospect of an identical resurrection on the last day. In this way we are *baptized into Christ*.

In Romans 6:2-5 it states

*We died to sin; how can we live in it any longer?*

<sup>3</sup> *Or don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?*

<sup>4</sup> *We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.*

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<sup>1</sup> This is based on John Stott's paper, 'The Evangelical Doctrine of Baptism'. *The Churchman* 112 Vol.12 1998, pp 47-59

<sup>5</sup> *If we have been united with him like this in his death, we will certainly also be united with him in his resurrection.*

## **2. Baptism signifies the forgiveness of sins & the end of the old life**

As a water ritual, baptism has obvious connotations of cleansing and purification. This is a vivid way of understanding forgiveness as a comprehensive removal of our old rebellion & slavery to sin .

After Paul meets Jesus on the Damascus road, Ananias calls on him to

*“Get up, be baptized and wash your sins away, calling on his name.”*

(Acts 22:16)

## **3. Baptism signifies the gift of the Holy Spirit & the start of the new life**

Added to forgiveness of sins is the gift of the Holy Spirit to God’s people. In Acts 2 those who heard about Jesus’ death and resurrection and realised that they were sinners in need of salvation, asked Peter what they should do

<sup>38</sup> *Peter replied, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit."*

(Acts 2:38)

The reception of the Holy Spirit is the basis of a Christian’s union with Christ and the means by which we are being transformed into his likeness. (2 Cor 3:17,18)

## **4. Union with Christ means incorporation into the Body of Christ, the Church**

As Ephesians 2 makes clear, peace with God means peace with others who are 'in Christ'. In a baptism we welcome a 'fellow citizen' (v19) of the kingdom. This is the reason we do not have private baptisms, but public ones whereby the congregation stands with the baptized one and prays for him or her.

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## ***THE EFFECT OF BAPTISM***

The classic definition of a sacrament is '*an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace*'. It is vital that we understand rightly the relationship between the outward and the inward elements of baptism.

Two common views of this are:

- That the sign automatically conveys the gift, *i.e.* that union with Christ always occurs as the baptism occurs.

or

- That the sign has no effect whatsoever, *i.e.* that the baptism is a bare token that conveys nothing of the gift.

Neither of these represents the evangelical doctrine of baptism. Our view is that the sign of baptism serves as a pledge or title to the gift of new life in Christ. It doesn't convey the gift but points to an inheritance that must be received by faith.

In the Old Testament, the covenant or agreement between God and Abraham's descendants was signified by circumcision on the 8<sup>th</sup> day. The Israelites still had to have faith in God to receive all the blessings of that covenant, but circumcision served to remind them

that they had a unique inheritance in the Lord. In the new covenant established by Christ, baptism replaces circumcision. It is a sign and pledge of all that is promised us in Christ when we believe.

### **When do you receive this inheritance?**

In the case of an adult Christian getting baptized, the sign points to an inheritance already claimed by faith (*ie* it points backwards – as with Abraham and his circumcision. Romans 4 explains this in depth).

We baptize the children of believing parents because they are born into the new covenant. To all the adults who came in repentance for baptism in Acts 2, Peter stated, “*The promise is for you and your children, and for all who are far off – for all whom the Lord our God will call.*” As such, the children of Christians are ‘holy’ or set apart (1 Cor 7:14). Their baptism points to the privilege of growing up inside a family and church community that knows and trusts the Lord Jesus. They have a great inheritance that must still be received by faith one day if they too are to know those blessings. If and when they do this is up to the Lord and his calling. It may have occurred before the baptism, during it or well afterwards. The infant baptism service is a bold commitment by the parents and godparents to raise the child to know the riches and responsibilities of new life in Christ.

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A *Confirmation Service*, usually held in the individual’s early teens, allows him or her to publicly and personally ‘confirm’ all that was claimed on his or her behalf as an infant.