# The Sacraments of the Church - Baptism

## Introduction

Last week we considered what a sacrament actually is and learned that it is taken from the initiation into the Roman army in which a soldier was given privileges and responsibilities. They were also branded with the number of their legion behind the ear. We saw that this concept of initiation was borrowed and applied in the church to the two ceremonies associated with or received as a consequence of initiation, namely, communion and baptism. Last week we considered communion; this week we will consider baptism.

### Baptism

All branches of the Christian Church accept baptism in some form as part and parcel of the process of salvation. In the early church, when somebody was baptised, they would take off their old clothes as they went into the waters of baptism, they would go into the waters naked, and then when they came out, they would be given a new, white set of clothes to wear. Modesty, of course, forbids us from continuing with this practice today.

The questions under dispute today are whether full immersion is required and whether it is legitimate to baptise children. For the form in which this sacrament was administered in the Early Church we can refer to the Didache:

1. Concerning baptism, baptise thus: Having first rehearsed all these things, "baptise, in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost," in running water;
2. But if thou hast no running water, baptise in other water, and if thou canst not in cold, then in warm.
3. But if thou hast neither, pour water three times on the head "in the Name of the Father, Son and Holy Ghost."
4. And before the baptism let the baptiser and him who is to be baptised fast, and any others who are able. And thou shalt bid him who is to be baptised to fast one or two days before.

This gives us the format of how the Early Church baptised but who did they baptise?

## Infant Baptism

Regarding infant baptism, those who argue that it has its roots in the New Testament do so on the basis of the following points:

1. It is not explicitly forbidden in the New Testament.
2. Acts 16:15, 33, 1 Corinthian 1:16, for example, suggest that whole households were baptized
3. In Colossians 2:11-12, Paul treats baptism as a spiritual counterpart to circumcision for New Covenant believers.

Historical origins of the practice are shady but by the third century it had become widespread. Origen and Augustine argued that, since Christ died for all, all should be baptised on the basis of a universal need to receive the grace of Christ. Tertullian argued, however, that baptism of infants should be deferred until they “know Christ”.

Karl Barth argued against this practice as follows:

1. It is without Biblical foundation. It only became normalised as a practice after the period of the New Testament.
2. It has led to the disastrous assumption that people are Christians as a result of their birth which reduces Christianity to a purely social phenomenon.
3. The practice of infant baptism divorces it from discipleship. Baptism is a witness to the receipt of and response to the grace of God – both of which are impossible for infants.

According to Augustine, baptism of infants remitted the guilt of original sin passed on from Adam. However, the individual would still have to respond to grace in order to deal with the disease of original sin. Thus, baptism was seen as part of the process of salvation rather than ‘an outward sign of an inward grace received’. Augustine assumed that baptism dealt with Original sin, but we know that only the cross can do that.

Zwingli rejected the Augustinian notion of original guilt and picked up the idea of baptism as Christian circumcision which conferred membership on the infant into the Church, just as, for the Jews, it conferred membership on the male child into the nation of Israel. Thus, Christianity was seen as more inclusive than Judaism because baptism was open to all regardless of race or gender. The real question here is, can someone enter the church on the faith of their parents. We allow children to take part in communion on the basis of their parent’s faith until they are of an age to choose for themselves. However, I believe wholeheartedly that baptism should follow faith and should not be carried out in anticipation of faith.

The Radical Reformation of course rejected all forms or approaches of infant baptism, arguing instead that baptism was to be administered when an individual showed signs of grace, repentance or faith. For those who follow in their wake, the sacraments are not ‘causative’ but rather ‘declarative’ and so baptism does not cause forgiveness of sins but signifies the forgiveness that has already taken place through grace and faith.

## Romans 6:1-10

Paul is very clear here. Our baptism, which is our initiation into faith, symbolises what happens to us as a result of coming to faith. We are baptised into the death of Jesus and therefore we die to our old life (Romans 6:3). When we come out of the water, we are resurrected with Christ into our new life (Romans 6:4, 11). Nowhere does scripture speak of baptism bringing cleansing from guilt and it is always shown as a response to grace received through which additional grace is imparted to the believer and which yields a new status of ‘in the body’ and ‘raised to new life’ for the believer.

Again, according to Paul, baptism is the means by which we enter into the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:13). It is the means that signifies membership of the church.

At the end of the first century, as more and more pagans came to faith, the leaders of the church became concerned that people were bringing in with them a lot of pagan ideas. To combat this, they set up catechumen schools which all new believers would have to pass through. Essentially, every new believer would have to commit to two years of Bible teaching at the end of which they would be tested on their understanding or catechism. They would then be allowed to be baptised and to take communion. Thus, they took these things very seriously.

## Our practice

So let’s consider our practice of baptism.

### Jesus was baptised

Matthew 3:1-2, 13-17

John the Baptist was by the Jordan River calling the people of Israel to repent – that is change their way of living so that it lined up with God’s plan for them. As an outward sign for everyone to see the choice they were making for their lives, John baptised them – that is, he took them into the water and dipped them under. This was to symbolise a death and resurrection – death to their old way of living and life in their new way of living. Thus, baptism symbolises outwardly a change that has gone on inside – a choice that has been made by the individual.

In the passage, John tried to prevent Jesus from being baptised as there was no need for this to happen: he was the Son of God! However, Jesus insisted so that everyone would be able to see that he was submitted to the purposes of God for his life. You see, this was the point at which he ceased to be the carpenter of Nazareth and became a Rabbi – a teacher to the nation. For Jesus, baptism symbolised this change. That is why God the Father affirmed him by saying ‘this is my beloved son in whom I am well pleased’.

For us, Jesus provides the perfect example. If he was willing to go through this ceremony to symbolise a change in his life, when we come to faith, we should do no other. This ceremony is a statement to everyone that a person’s life has changed direction and that they are willing to walk the next step of the journey hand in hand with Jesus.

### Death and Resurrection

I mentioned earlier that this ceremony symbolises death and resurrection, and so it. When Jesus died on the cross, he was buried in a tomb and, three days later, rose again from the dead. This is one of the fundamental tenets of our faith. As we saw, the Apostle Paul, in Romans 6, uses the symbolism of the death and resurrection of Jesus as an example of what happens to us when we are baptised. Essentially, it is like crossing a large, fast-flowing river.

If you were to come to such a river that did not have a bridge and you needed to get across to the other side, you would be quite reluctant to come back. In the same way, when we take the decision to be baptised, to follow Jesus through baptism, we are stating publicly that we do not want to go back to our old life – effectively we are dead to it and are now alive to a new life with Jesus.

All of this is symbolised through baptism.

## Practical Questions

**Is there anything special about the water we use?** No, it just comes out of a tap. It has not been blessed; it is not holy water. It is just normal water and there is nothing special about it.

**Do you have to be baptised in church?** People in the New Testament were baptised anywhere there was water. The important thing is what it symbolises.

**Why don’t we baptise babies?** Baptism of babies did not become commonplace until the 5th Century AD and, as we have already seen, came about as a result of a misunderstanding of the purpose of baptism. It has continued in some of the traditional denominations under the same guise ever since, but it is not something the more recent Christian denominations accept as valid any longer.

We believe that baptism is not a precursor to faith as it is in, for example, the Anglican church, but, rather, is the confirmation of faith expressed by the individual. It symbolises what has already taken place in the person’s heart and, since no baby can express such faith, we do not accept infant baptism as valid.

**Who should be baptised?** All believers. In other words, everyone who has come to faith in Jesus Christ as Saviour and King.