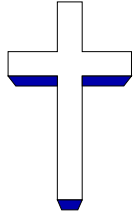


# HOLY BAPTISM



Baptism is a very serious matter, not only for those who are about to be baptized, but for all of us who have been baptized, because *“baptism is full initiation by water and the Holy Spirit into Christ's body, the church, and the bond which God establishes in Baptism is indissoluble.”* We each, therefore, have responsibilities to God and to one another; but in order to better understand those responsibilities, it is

important that we examine the origins for the practice of baptism, its historical shape, as well as our understanding of the meaning of baptism.

## Scriptural Foundations for the Practice of Baptism

Christian baptism is firmly rooted within the ministry of Jesus Christ. The evangelists, Mark, Matthew and Luke, each record at the beginning of Jesus' public ministry the account of his baptism, wherein Jesus is anointed with the Holy Spirit and is acknowledged by God as God's beloved Son. The evangelists have also recorded Jesus' teaching along baptismal themes throughout the gospel narrative. In John 3.1-15 an emphasis is placed on the necessity of a *“new birth by water and the Spirit.”* In Mark 10.33-40 and in Luke 12.50, Jesus relates baptism to his suffering and death, and Matthew records the command that was given to the disciples by the risen Christ to go into all the world baptizing people everywhere in *“the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.”*

That baptism became a universal practice by the apostolic church from very early on is certainly attested in the Acts of the Apostles and in the New Testament letters, as well as in the writings of the early church Fathers; and the Christian church has continued to practice this sacrament of initiation throughout its history.

## The Historical Shape of Baptism

Up until the fourth century the initiation of new Christians involved a threefold rite, **“baptism, confirmation and eucharist,”** and it took place only at Easter and Pentecost. The Orthodox Church continues this practice today and administers the entire threefold rite to infants. In the West, however, these three aspects of initiation became separated and independent authority concerning church membership has been granted to each of them. Within Western christianity a recent movement has tried to reunite these three aspects of initiation, and an emphasis on

administering the rite on special festivals and celebrations within the life of the community (eg. Easter and Pentecost) has been made.

Infant baptism became the normal practice from the middle of the fifth century and was common practice in some areas as early as the third century. Although there is no specific scriptural authority for administering the sacrament to infants, it has been suggested that the practice is implied by such passages as Matthew 19.14, Acts 16.33, and 1 Timothy 2.4. The practice of baptizing infants has not always, however, been accepted as valid. From the sixteenth century to the present various Christian groups began to refuse to baptize infants, and re-instituted the “believer's baptism.” When the expressions “infant baptism” and “believer's baptism” are used it is necessary to keep in mind that the real distinction is between those who baptize people of any age and those who baptize only those who are able to make a confession of faith. The difference between infant and believer's baptism becomes less sharp when it is recognized that both forms of baptism embody God's own initiative in Christ and express a response of faith made within the believing community.

## Baptism is a Sacrament

Baptism is a Sacrament, and the Prayer Book defines a sacrament as *“an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace, given to us by Christ himself as a means whereby we receive this grace, and a pledge to assure us thereof.”* In other words, a sacrament is first of all a visible and symbolic action, but more importantly, it is a visible sign which was instituted and given to us by Christ in order to signify an inward gift of grace. Grace is God's loving and accepting favour and goodness towards us, through God's grace our sins are forgiven, our minds are enlightened, our hearts are stirred, our wills are strengthened. Through God's grace we who are imperfect and unworthy are made worthy. God's grace is an unearned and unreserved gift from God, the receipt of which is made manifest in the sacramental life of the church.

## The Outward sign

The outward and visible sign in baptism is the water in which the person is baptized in *“the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.”* In baptism water is at once both symbolic of death and new life. On the one hand, according to Genesis 7, the sin laden earth was destroyed through flood, and on the other hand, in Genesis 1, the Spirit of life hovered over the primal waters. Furthermore the people of God were saved by passing through the Red Sea while the Egyptians were destroyed in it (Exodus 14). These thoughts are picked up by

the church, which presents baptism as “dying and rising” (Romans 6); as “birth into a new life” (John 3); and as a “new creation” (2 Corinthians 5).

## The Inward Gift of Grace

What actually happens with the sacrament ultimately remains a mystery. Many theologians have attempted to describe the precise nature of that mystery, but a consensus has never been reached.

- We believe that, through God's grace, in baptism we are united with Christ and with the people of Christ in a new humanity in which the barriers of division, whether of sex or race or social status, are transcended.
- We believe that in baptism we are immersed in the liberating death of Christ, where our sins are buried and the power of sin is destroyed.
- We believe that in baptism we are raised, here and now, into a new life in the power of Christ's resurrection, and we are confident that we will also ultimately be with Christ in a resurrection like Christ's for eternity.
- We believe that God's Spirit is at work in the lives of all people before, in and after baptism. We believe that the Spirit nurtures all baptized Christians within a fellowship of witness and service, to proclaim the gospel and to live in faith and hope, until the final deliverance when we will enter into eternal life to the glory of God.

In baptism, through God's grace we are thus mysteriously cleansed from our sin and created new. We are grafted into the power of Christ's resurrection in union with Christ, with one another, and with the church in every time and place. We are empowered by God's Holy Spirit to fulfil God's purpose for us, to love God and to love one another, with a love that knows no bounds.

## The Implications and Responsibilities of Baptism

In the past 30 years in this country only 25% of those baptized within the Anglican Communion were ever confirmed in their faith. Baptism should not be simply something we have done for the sake of having it done. Just as marriage is more than a wedding so the Christian life is more than a baptism; baptism is only the beginning of our growth in Christ. The practice of infant baptism emphasises both the corporate faith of the Christian community and the faith that the child shares with its parents. Yet we have failed as parents; we have failed as a church; we have failed as the body of Christ to provide our newly baptized members with the nurturing support that is not only our responsibility to them, but as well our responsibility to God.

As parents:

- Do you renounce Satan and all the spiritual forces of wickedness that rebel against God?
- Do you renounce the evil powers of this world which corrupt and destroy the creatures of God?
- Do you renounce all sinful desires that draw you from the love of God?
- Do you turn to Jesus Christ and accept him as your Saviour?
- Do you put your whole trust in his grace and love?
- Do you promise to obey him as your Lord?
- Will you by your prayers and witness, with God's help, do all in your power to support your child in their life in Christ?
- Will you be responsible for seeing that your child is nurtured in the faith and life of the Christian community, and is taught to read scripture and to worship God both at home and in the life of the community?
- Will you help your child to become confirmed in the Christian faith, and will you bring your child to share in the sacrament of the Holy Eucharist as soon as your child is ready?

As parents you must ask yourselves “why do I want my child to be baptized?” and if you do not feel that you are prepared to accept the responsibility of keeping the promises made in baptism, then baptism should be postponed until you can keep the promises, or until your child is old enough to make his or her own decision about baptism.

For those who are seeking baptism in later life, it is important that you confess the faith and profess the intentions listed above on your own behalf. The responsibility of the church to uphold in prayer, nurture and support, all those who are newly baptized as they grow in the Christian faith, remains a crucial aspect of our common life together, regardless of the age at which one seeks the benefits of the sacrament of baptism. Yet where infant baptism is concerned there is another consideration that has not yet fully been explored.

If we truly believe that baptism is “full initiation into Christ's body the church,” then as sponsors we must all pray for the newly baptized; we must also teach them by our example and witness to worship God; we must nurture them in the faith, enabling them to participate fully in the life of the church, granting them access to and appreciation of all its rites and responsibilities. Baptism as incorporation into the body of Christ points, by its very nature, to the eucharistic sharing of the body and blood of Christ and as long as we continue to separate those who we have sponsored in baptism from full participation in the eucharistic life of the church, we have not fully appreciated and accepted the consequences and meaning of baptism.