

St. David's Presbyterian Church
St. John's, NL
"Why Baptism?"
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(Baptism of the Lord)

Many of us have many memories of baptisms. We remember babies being received into the community of faith. We remember individuals confessing their newly found faith in Jesus Christ. We remember, some of us, being at lakes and rivers and swimming pools where individuals were being baptized.

Baptism has a rich part in the church today. It is one of two sacraments we celebrate in the Reformed Church. It is a visible means of an invisible grace. But unfortunately it has also been a major division within Christian congregations.

Instead of being the beautiful initiation rite, where we are welcomed into the community of Jesus Christ, it has become a symbol of division. The Roman Catholics, and occasionally the Pope, tell us that it is the way of salvation for infants, when appropriately performed by a Roman Catholic Priest. The Baptists and Anabaptists tell us that it is only valid where there is an appropriate profession of faith, at an appropriate age (not too young, although we're not sure what that means), and only by full immersion. The Pentecostals tell us that an adult immersion water baptism is good and biblical, but the Full Gospel includes a baptism of the Holy Spirit accompanied by speaking in tongues according to Acts 2, and 19. And then there's the Salvation Army that does not practice water baptism at all, but claims that the baptism of the Holy Spirit happens when the confession of Christ and the repentance of sins takes place.

And so what do we Presbyterians do, when we hear of all this division, and judgment around who is performing "proper" baptisms? We acknowledge that baptism is about the grace of God coming to us long before we come to Him. We acknowledge that the act of baptism is valid in itself, that is, no matter where it was performed or by whom, God blesses the act of baptism, preferably in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, but recognizing that baptisms were performed in the Book of Acts, in the name of Jesus.

We receive infant baptism (paedobaptism) and practice it, on the basis of the household passages in Acts 16, both Lydia's household and the Philippian jailer, who most certainly had servants and likely had children of various

ages. We also acknowledge that the practice of infant baptism goes back to the second century at least and was common in the years following this. We realize that there has been a movement or movements since the 17th century to say that only adult immersion baptisms are “proper” baptisms. We’ve called them “Anabaptists” (re-baptizers) because they indeed often encourage or require a second baptism and a renunciation or tacit denouncing of the infant or child baptism.

I’ve personally had several Christians tell me that I am disobedient to God because I have not been immersed as an adult upon the profession of faith. Rather, I have publicly confessed Jesus Christ as my Lord and Saviour and confirmed the covenantal act of my parents baptizing me as an infant.

Some tell me that they only follow what the Bible says in regard to their bringing their children to the Church. They have had them “dedicated.” This is a way to bring them into the church until such time as they make their own decision. But as you know, or may be shocked to know, Jesus was not a Christian. He was a Jew. And his Jewish parents not only dedicated him at the temple, but also had him circumcised according to the Law of Moses. And Jesus was baptized as an adult, there is no question about that. Whether he was immersed or not is in question, particularly if you have seen the Jordan River. But again, he was not baptized because he needed to repent of his sins. The Scripture is clear in Hebrews 4: 15 “For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are, yet he did not sin.” (TNIV) So Jesus was not baptized because he needed the forgiveness of his sins, because he did not sin. Even John the Baptizer figured that out, because he knew this about the Lord. He even said to Jesus, “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?” (Matt. 3:14b) So beware, lest you say to yourself that you are simply following what Jesus had done to him. By the way, I’ve never heard any parent tell me they have had their child circumcised because Jesus was circumcised, as he was, according to the Law of Moses.

So the debate about baptism rages on. The Greek word *bapto* with the meaning “to wash or bathe” has to do with washings, usually ritual or ceremonial washings. This is probably where the rite of a bath or washing would precede the joining of a spiritual movement. The Greek word *baptizo* is the intensive of the word *bapto* and was connected to the dying of material or wool. This gives many the sense that baptism is only a complete

and thorough immersing of a person or object. Being in the water is one thing, and having water poured over you is another, and completely going underwater, and for how long is then another question. Which, or all of these adequately satisfies the meaning of *baptize* is still a question, as far as I'm concerned. If you know the Middle East, or have studied the history of the Middle East, you will know that water sources are not as plentiful as North America. Many times, it is unclear whether the water source is plentiful enough to allow a complete immersion of a person, as would take place in a lake or river here.

In any case, I try to keep my sense of humour through these discussions with other sincere and devout Christians. I tell a joke (that is not my joke) about immersion. A Baptist and an Anglican were talking one day (you can insert your two favorite denominations in place of these). The Anglican asked the Baptist whether it was okay to be baptized only up to the waist. "Oh no, said the Baptist, only a complete immersion will do." The Anglican then indicated was it okay if someone were just immersed up to the chest. "Oh no, said the Baptist, only a complete immersion will do." Then the Anglican asked if it were okay to baptize a person only up to their chin. "Oh no, said the Baptist, only a complete immersion will do." Then the Anglican said, "You mean you have to cover the head to complete the baptism." "Yes, said the Baptist, now you're getting it." "Oh," said the Anglican, "I guess that's why we only pour water on the top of the head."

I really do try to keep my sense of humour. Sometimes, in my less than gracious moments, if someone with a differing view of baptism from my own is telling me that I am not saved, I ask them if they were baptized as an adult by immersion. They say "yes." I then ask them if they were baptized in a tank or baptistery inside a church building. The large majority of the time, they say, "yes." At which point, I tell them that there were no baptisms in the Bible which took place in either a tank or baptistery, and therefore, biblically, their baptism is invalid. But I usually only use this argument after having been told that I cannot be saved if I believe the way I do. So please don't use this argument. It is an attempt to keep my sense of humour in the midst of such divisiveness.

It must be the work of devil to have taken such a beautiful event as baptism and turn it against the church. We all know people who have been baptized who have not followed through with professing their faith in Christ at an appropriate age. I have many Baptist and Anabaptist friends who tell me

that they know people who have been immersed as adults upon the confession of faith in Christ, yet have turned against the Lord and not followed God later in life. The baptism doesn't save you. The Lord Jesus Christ saves you. The relationship to Christ is what makes you the Christian not the baptism.

The Army has it right: the confession and repentance of one's sin is more important than the water ritual. The Pentecostals have it right: it is more important to be changed by the Holy Spirit and live a life pleasing to God, transformed by God, than the water ritual. The Roman Catholics have it right: it is the grace of God coming to you before you can even make a decision of your own to come. Yes, and the Baptists are right: looking at the Scriptures and being obedient to the Lord through the Scriptures is so important, repenting of your sins, choosing a life long commitment to Christ, and identifying with Jesus, going under symbolizing the death of Christ, and coming up symbolizing the resurrection of Christ is a beautiful reality to agree with as a believer. And we're right too. We receive others' baptisms, whenever and wherever they occurred. We call everyone into relationship to Jesus Christ, as Master, Lord and Saviour.

Jesus did die and was raised for us. His life, death and resurrection is for us. And we with our words and our deeds are to follow the Lord Jesus Christ with our whole hearts and lives.

But let's stop fighting about something which should be the invitation into the community of Jesus. I know how important it is to see someone profess Jesus Christ as their Lord and Saviour and repent of their sins. What is more beautiful than that? It is wonderful.

I've seen beautiful baptisms at lakes and rivers and swimming pools and Jacuzzis and in the ocean. Now most places in Canada, most of the year makes this an unlikely event. And we are a practical people as Canadians, not wanting any new believers to experience hypothermia. I've seen beautiful baptisms in tanks and baptisteries and in front of fonts and baptismal structures of all kinds, even a hot pool in a gorgeous setting.

The water symbolizes the water of life, the living water that John writes about in the Scriptures, symbolizing Jesus Himself. Let's agree with one another for helping people into that water, not fighting over it. Let's see

how many of us as a community of Christians in St. John's can agree together for helping others into Jesus' arms.

Let us pray.