

## Baptism Teaching Prayzone 27<sup>th</sup> May 2018 John B

### Nicodemus visits Jesus John 3:1-17

We've just heard about the new spiritual birth as children of God that happens as we become a Christian.

And it's baptism, which connects both the water and the spirit that Jesus talks of- that is the biblical sign of this new birth, with the blessings of forgiveness, the Holy Spirit and being grafted into the church –. It's what we call a sacrament – i.e. the outward sign of this invisible grace –

It is the normal biblical step to take as we become Christians – it's not a golden rule –since there are places in the Bible where people are not baptised but are promised to be saved but it is normative.

John Stott has written a really helpful paper about what baptism is all about:

1 **Baptism signifies 'union' with Christ.** Going under the water we identify with Jesus death on the cross, in that it signifies the end of the old self; and coming up again we identify with Jesus' resurrection as the birth of the new person.

*Romans 6:3* Paul talks of us being 'baptised into Christ'. Since the church is the body of Christ, it naturally follows that this is also point of becoming a member of the church.

2 **Baptism signifies the forgiveness of sins.** Before Jesus came on the public scene, John the Baptist was busy baptising people in the river Jordan as a sign of their repentance, their turning back to God's ways. He said that Jesus would be coming to baptise with the Holy Spirit –

We might have expected that with that, the watery component of baptism would have ceased. And yet repentance and water are

still part of the process of becoming a Christian. That's why we use water it's washing clean. Acts 22:16, Paul is told by Ananias after his conversion: "get up, be baptised and wash your sins away, calling on Jesus name"

### 3 **Baptism signifies the gift of the Holy Spirit.**

Not only was Jesus anointed with the Holy Spirit at his own baptism, in many cases of conversion and baptism recorded in the book of Acts, the Holy Spirit is clearly given at the same time – just as we have already heard from that Pentecost sermon of Peter's:

Repent and be baptised, 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.

It's relatively straightforward to see how baptism fits into the equation of becoming a Christian when you come to faith as an adult.

Jesus says *whoever believes in me and is baptised shall be saved* (Mark 16:16)

And there are lots of examples in Acts of the Apostles where this happens, for example Philip with the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8) So, churches who only practice adult baptism may be quite right!

But what do we do about children raised in Christian households? Basically, the Bible does not give us clear direction on what to do.

But, even though historically we have devalued baptism by baptising children without much question, most of the mainstream churches of the world continue to practice infant baptism because it has a really good **biblical** foundation. Let me share with you the evidence for why ...

### 1 Jesus welcomed the little children, laid his hands on them and blessed them (Mk 10:13-16)

He imparts his grace to children before he expects them to stand up and declare their faith in him as an adult might. You can see today the naive but wonderful way that children are attracted to Jesus – and clearly have a belief in him. Even though it is very hard to pin down or for them to articulate, we'd be hard pushed to say that they have no faith.

### 2 In the early church, we find that whole households or families were baptised.

It's not conclusive, since we don't know how old the people present were, but we know that Cornelius and his household in Acts 10 and the Philippians jailer and all his family in Acts 16 were all baptised, and it's highly likely that included children.

### 3 'Covenant theology'.

The concept of covenant promise and blessing to God's people runs all the way through the Bible from the old covenant or Testament and into the new. In our individualistic culture, and because we are not Jews, we've lost sight of the way in which God deals with us as a people.

In Genesis God made his first covenant promise with Abraham - that he *and all his offspring* would be blessed. The sign of that covenant was circumcision and on the day that Abraham was circumcised he also circumcised any male in his household who was eight days old or more.

The new covenant that Jesus instituted, of which we are part - which promises forgiveness of sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit and our adoption as God's children - fulfils but doesn't replace God's covenant with Abraham. Which is why St Paul can write this in Galatians 3:27: *For all of you who were baptised into*

*Christ clothed yourselves with Christ... If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise."*

And just as circumcision is the sign of old covenant membership and the seal or pledge of covenant blessing – from 8 days old - so it is that baptism is the new covenant sign - thankfully painlessly available for both genders!...

Churches who baptise infants belonging to believing parents, do so confidently because these children most definitely belong to the new covenant people of God and so it is perfectly right that they are marked out as such by receiving the sacrament of baptism, the outward sign of the invisible grace.

**But it isn't waving a magic wand.** No one is suggesting that just because you are baptised you are automatically a Christian and saved forevermore.

It is an outward sign – and it is the heart change that matters most to God – whether a child or an adult –which means if nothing else we are generous with one another if we have different views about infant baptism. Each church just wants to create a framework for people to grow in their discipleship, and in the Anglican Church baptising children is our way of doing that.

But if it isn't automatic, neither does it mean that the sign of baptism *conveys nothing* when an adult or a child of believing parents is baptised.

I recall one of the early images I was taught about infant baptism, which I think still stands, that we are given a signed cheque from God at baptism (though we barely know what these are they are any more) a promissory note of blessing, which we simply have to cash in.

**John Stott writes “baptism does not convey these blessings to us but conveys to us a right or title to them, so that if and when we truly believe, we inherit the blessings to which baptism has entitled us.”**

So, just as with the Old Covenant, we need to inhabit or appropriate the grace given to us...

When does that happen if infants are baptised? (And for that matter, what happens when adults with learning difficulties are baptised?)

We simply do not know, but recent work on children’s spirituality, of which Victoria Yates has studied, shows how children can have faith at a much earlier age than we might expect. And even if they do not express that as an adult might, we can pretty sure that Jesus knows what is in their heart, and will honour that faith.

So, it is reasonably argued, not only can we justifiably consider baptised children as clearly as belonging to the church family and treating them *as if* they are Christians – many of them will *be* Christians, renewed children of God, as soon as they begin to inhabit the promises of the new covenant for themselves from even a very early age .

These reasons for infant baptism, are also very good arguments to support our decision to welcome baptised children of any age to receive bread and wine of communion, so if you’re a parent and haven’t received one already please do take a leaflet about it home today – there’s important material in there for you to read and respond to. You’ll also read there about confirmation – which remains a great opportunity to encourage people to make public that they have appropriated their baptism blessings and are committed to being a Jesus follower - as well as the benefit of having a Bishop, as a representative of the wider church family pray for you too.

To conclude:

Baptising children to households who believe is a perfectly justifiable biblical practice.

We mark them as members of the new covenant people of God, and set them on the start line of their faith journey, believing that they are Christians at whatever point they claim or appropriate or inhabit their baptism and all the blessings of the new covenant God gives.

But we’re now going to celebrate our place as God’s children now with the amazing words of this song taken from Paul’s letter to the Romans – I’m no longer a slave to fear, I am a child of God.

If that isn’t something you feel you can sing with confidence, maybe you can ask God the Father to help you take a fresh step into your own baptism right now, however old you were when that happened...