

A Theology of Baptism

Addressing the Significance of Baptism in Water

A Report of the Sydney Diocesan Doctrine Commission

The report has been prepared in response to Synod Resolution 14/14.

This Synod requests the Doctrine Commission to consider a theology of baptism with particular reference to the Scriptures and the Anglican formularies and to bring a report on this matter to the Synod at a convenient time.

From the speech in synod at that time, and from subsequent discussions with the mover of this motion, the key issue that prompted this resolution was the significance of baptism in water for Christian believers, and in particular the significance of Jesus' words in Matthew 28.

Introduction

1. The Doctrine Commission has previously considered the theology of baptism (with reference to the Scriptures and the Anglican formularies) in the context of its 1993 report on a proposed new baptismal service. The first two sections of the 1993 report (paragraphs 2-12) provide a helpful outline of the theology of baptism, and these paragraphs have been adopted verbatim as the opening sections of this report. The 1993 report, however, does not address the particular questions about the significance of water baptism that prompted synod resolution 14/14, and these questions will be examined in the final section of this report.

The Theology of Baptism in the New Testament

2. The first references to baptism in the New Testament concern the baptism of John. This was a baptism of repentance for Israel, which under the influence of Malachi's prophecy was expressed in terms of covenant renewal (Mal 3:1-4). True Israelites were those who were baptised as a sign of their repentance and their expectation of the coming Messiah.
3. Jesus' endorsement of John's baptism is clearly seen in his readiness to undergo this rite, for it was fitting "to fulfil all righteousness" (Matt 3:15). Jesus thereby identified with Israel who was in need of repentance, cleansing and the hope of a Messiah.
4. Although John baptised with water, he spoke of the coming Messiah as one who would baptise with the Holy Spirit and fire. Yet Jesus also authorised a water baptism ministry among his disciples concurrently with the ministry of John the Baptist. Although Jesus himself did not baptise people (John 4:2), the Fourth Evangelist makes it plain that water baptism was a sign of discipleship, whether of John or of Jesus (John 4:1).
5. Jesus' command to his disciples at the end of Matthew's Gospel to go and make disciples, baptising them and teaching them, is best understood against the backdrop of both John's and Jesus' water baptism ministries. Although the ascended Jesus came and baptised with the Holy Spirit (as prophesied by John), he did not make

water baptism thereby redundant. This is clear not only from the terms of the Great Commission, but also the practice of the apostles from the Day of Pentecost onwards.

6. John's water baptism signified discipleship, as did the water baptism of Jesus' earthly ministry. However, they were both signs of the gospel, of God's promises to Israel and the fulfilment of those promises in the person of Jesus. Both baptisms were covenantal, in that it was God's covenant promises to Israel which were to be fulfilled (John 1:31; cf. Mal 3:1-4). Similarly, the first Christian baptism on the Day of Pentecost was conspicuously covenantal (Acts 2:39), as was the context of Jesus' command in Matthew 28:18-20. Jesus' last command was for his followers to make disciples from all nations and baptise them in the name of the triune God. The preaching of the gospel would be the means of making disciples, and such discipleship would be signified by baptism. Like the water baptism of John the Baptist, Christian baptism is a sign of the gospel. John's baptism held out the promise of salvation through the Messiah, whereas Christian baptism is based upon the fulfilment of that promise. Christian baptism therefore looks back upon the completed work of Jesus and identifies the one baptised with the death and resurrection of Jesus (Rom 6:1-4). This concept of fulfilment is similarly seen in the apostles' testimony to the association of baptism with the forgiveness of sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:38-39).
7. Although water baptism is not essential to salvation, as Jesus' promise to the thief on the cross makes plain, it is an important sign of salvation. For it is through "the washing of water with the word" that Jesus has cleansed his church (Eph 5:26). Of course, no mere application of water is able to cleanse a person spiritually (1 Pet 3:21); that is the work of the Holy Spirit through the word. Yet significantly Paul describes this inward cleansing by the metaphor "washing of regeneration" (cf. Tit 3:5). Similarly, the writer to the Hebrews couples the inner and outer cleansings in his invitation to draw near to God "with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water" (Heb 10:22). Clearly the physical act of water baptism symbolises the spiritual act of inner cleansing. Our Catechism has rightly captured this symbolism in its definition of a sacrament as "an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace." Paul expected that water baptism would be the normal experience of all those who had become disciples of Christ (Rom 6:1-4; 1 Cor 1:13; cf. Acts 18:8; 19:5). Their spiritual incorporation into Christ could therefore be described as being "baptised into one body" (1 Cor 12:13) and this was symbolised and signified by water baptism.
8. Furthermore, the language of baptism is applied by both Peter and Paul to old covenant experiences of God's salvation (1 Pet 3:21; 1 Cor 10:1-5). For the apostles, baptism was descriptive of God's saving activity in continuity with his covenant promises of old, while also embracing the eschatological newness of the fulfilment of those promises in the person of Jesus. It is the continuity of covenant promise and fulfilment that explains the inclusion of children within the orbit of Christ's saving work, as members of the new covenant with their parents. Although it may not be proved that any of the household baptisms recorded in Acts actually included children, what is clear is that the household of faith which was defined under the old covenant was the same household that was baptised under the new (Acts 10:2; 11:14; cf. 16: 15, 31). The children of believers are holy (1 Cor 7:14), in distinction from those children who are unclean because their parents are

unbelievers. The children of saints are part of the saints (Eph 1:1; 6:1), and therefore should be identified with the same sign of discipleship as their parents. The gospel of God's grace is as inclusive of children under the new covenant as it was of children under the old (1 Cor 10:1-4).

The Theology of Baptism in *BCP* and the Thirty-Nine Articles

9. "Baptism," according to Article XXVII, "is not only a sign of profession, and mark of difference, whereby Christian men are discerned from others that be not christened, but it is also a sign of Regeneration or New Birth, whereby, as by an instrument, they that receive Baptism rightly are grafted into the Church...." What the Article affirms is that baptism is a sign of discipleship or profession, which properly belongs only to those who can be called Christians. However, baptism is also a sign of regeneration, in that those who are rightly baptised are incorporated into the church. They are now publicly recognised as members of Christ's Church, and baptism is the instrument whereby such recognition is conferred.
10. Although the Prayer Book embraced the concept of baptism as a ceremony of initiation or sign of entry into the church, it also saw it as a sign of divine covenant. It was God's movement towards mankind, rather than the reverse, which was given the emphasis. The Medieval Church had been more concerned with what baptism effected, than what it signified, yet the Reformers combined both, placing the emphasis upon God's grace towards us. Baptism, together with the Supper of the Lord, were "certain sure witnesses, and effectual signs of grace, and God's will towards us, by the which he doth work invisibly in us, and doth not only quicken, but also strengthen and confirm our Faith in him" (Article XXV).
11. Baptism and the gospel are therefore inextricably combined in the Prayer Book. It is the gospel which persuades us "of the good will of our heavenly Father towards this infant, declared by his Son Jesus Christ" (*BCP*, Publick Baptism of Infants). It is because of the gospel that those who are rightly baptised are incorporated into the church and "the promises of forgiveness of sin, and of our adoption to be sons of God by the Holy Ghost, are visibly signed and sealed" (Article XXVII). It is the gospel that allows the Prayer Book to declare "We yield thee hearty thanks, most merciful Father, that it hath pleased thee to regenerate this infant with thy Holy Spirit, to receive him for thy own Child by adoption, and to incorporate him into thy holy Church." This declaration is based upon the promises of the gospel and publicly identifies the one baptised as a member of God's family.
12. Discipleship is therefore expected of those who have been baptised, that they "shall not be ashamed to confess the faith of Christ crucified, and manfully to fight under His banner against sin, the world and the devil, and to continue Christ's faithful soldier and servant unto his life's end." However, such discipleship is only predicated on the presence of faith. The *BCP* manner of expressing this faith was by the candidates themselves if they were of age, and through the godparents if the candidate was an infant. It may be questioned whether or not the latter expression of faith is the most appropriate. Nevertheless, that baptism must take place in the context of faith is certainly the presupposition of the Prayer Book's understanding of baptism. It is noteworthy in this regard that in the Private Baptism of children, the sponsors do not have to declare anything in the name of the child to be baptised,

yet nonetheless, those who are present “call upon God” as a necessary prerequisite for the baptism.

Does Matthew 28:19 refer to baptism in water?

13. In our 1993 Report (as replicated above), the reference to “baptising” in Matthew 28:19 is taken to refer to baptism in water. The purpose of this section of the report is to examine whether this conclusion is warranted, particularly in response to arguments that “baptising in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” ought to be understood as being metaphorical in nature.
14. For example, in his posthumously published essay, “New Testament Baptism,”¹ Broughton Knox argues that Jesus’ reference to baptism in Matthew 28:19 is not speaking of water baptism, but is “a command to proclaim the news of the Messiah’s coming to the nations to make them disciples of the true God, to immerse the nations into the revealed character of God so that their whole way of life is changed and their cultures sanctified (cf. Rev 21:24).”² Similarly, Barry Newman (the mover of resolution 14/14) argues that the Greek verb *baptizō* carries with it the fundamental idea of “immersion” rather than cleansing, and that “to immerse someone with reference to the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit could imply to thoroughly engulf them, saturate them, with all that pertains to the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.”³
15. A number of arguments presented to support a metaphorical reading of Matthew 28:19 will now be noted and discussed.
16. First, it is argued that because the New Testament writers elsewhere use the language of baptism metaphorically, this should lead us to understand the reference to baptism in Matthew 28:19 as metaphorical. In response, while there are indeed metaphorical uses of baptism language in the New Testament (Mark 10:38; Luke 12:50; Acts 1:5; 1 Cor 12:13; Romans 6), this does not in itself determine Jesus’ meaning in Matthew 28, especially as there is no parallel in Matthew’s Gospel to the metaphorical statements made in Mark 10:38 and Luke 12:50.⁴
17. Second, it is claimed that the contrast between water baptism and Spirit baptism in Matthew 3:11 establishes a trajectory for Matthew’s Gospel that reduces the significance of water baptism and increases the significance of Spirit baptism. On the basis of this trajectory, it is then argued that it is unlikely that Matthew’s Gospel should end with an instruction about water baptism. In response, the nature of the contrast in Matthew 3 needs to be fully appreciated. The difference is not simply between water and Spirit, but who is able to perform the respective baptisms. John (like Jesus’ disciples) is not able to baptise people with the Holy Spirit. Only Jesus

¹ D. B. Knox, “New Testament Baptism” and “Addition to manuscript on baptism,” in *D. Broughton Knox, Selected Works Volume II: Church and Ministry* (K. Birkett, ed.; Kingsford: Matthias Media, 2003), 263–315.

² *Ibid.*, 278.

³ Barry Newman, “Biblical Baptism Revisited” (Unpublished Paper, n.d.), 9.

⁴ Moreover, the metaphorical uses of baptism language not only presuppose water imagery but sometimes allude to the experience of water baptism. For example, the reference to being baptised by one Spirit into one body in 1 Corinthians 12:13 needs to be read in the context of 1 Corinthians 1:13–16, which implies that all the Corinthians had undergone water baptism. In light of this, the reference to Spirit baptism in 12:13 likely carries with it an allusion to water baptism.

can do this (cf. Mark 1:8; John 1:32-33; Acts 2:33). The trajectory suggested is not demanded by John's words and it is clearly not what happens (as the water baptisms in Acts testify). The question, then, is whether Matthew 28:19 refers to water baptism or Spirit baptism. As it is Jesus alone who can baptise people with the Spirit (as John's words make clear), it is more likely that the disciples are being commanded to baptise new disciples in water, as they have already been doing (John 4:1), in the context of disciple-making.

18. Third, in support of the claim that Matthew 28:19 is a command "to immerse the nations into the revealed character of God,"⁵ Knox points out that Matthew 28:19 is the only occurrence in the New Testament of baptism into the name of the Trinity. By way of contrast, the references to water baptism in Acts and 1 Corinthians are always into the name of Jesus/the Lord Jesus. This fact certainly warrants an explanation, but its significance ought not to be exaggerated. The purpose of Matthew 28:19b is to make a statement regarding the nature of the God who has revealed himself in Jesus, rather than to give the disciples a baptismal *formula* per se. Thus, as Frederick Grant has argued, "the baptismal statement combines the disciples' inherited Jewish faith in God ('the name of the Father'), their new faith in the Son (i.e. Son of Man) and their experience of the Holy Spirit, the earnest of the New Age."⁶ Why then is there a difference in wording between Matthew 28 and the book of Acts? Several answers suggest themselves:
 - a. In Matthew 28, Jesus is speaking to a group not all of whom are certain about his divinity ("they worshipped him; but some doubted" [v. 17]). If Jesus had merely told his disciples to "baptise them in my name," it may have sounded like a usurpation. The baptismal framework of Matthew 28:19 makes explicit the Father-Son relationship implied by Jesus' words "all authority in heaven and earth is given to me," and also makes explicit the role of the Spirit. Even so, Jesus is the main focus of Matthew 28:18-20. He is the one to whom "all authority in heaven and on earth has been given" (v. 18), he is the one whose teaching is to be obeyed (v. 20) and he is the one who will be with his disciples always (v. 20). Therefore, that baptism into the triune name should be expressed as baptism into the name of Jesus is theologically unproblematic.
 - b. In Acts, the speakers are the apostles, preaching the risen Jesus: "God has made this Jesus both Lord and Christ" (2:36). Those who are baptised into the name of Christ are accepting the claim that Jesus Christ is God incarnate. Whereas in Matthew 28, Jesus reveals himself as one with the Father and the Spirit,⁷ the apostles present God to their listeners through the person of Jesus. This difference of focus accounts for the difference of terminology. Acts uses four different forms of words (cf. 2:38; 8:16; 10:48; 19:5), so we are clearly not hearing a precise liturgical formula.
 - c. While the early church was not troubled by the variety of baptismal terminology, it quickly recognised the appropriateness of Jesus' words in Matthew 28 for formal liturgical use. The earliest attested liturgical context

⁵ Knox, "New Testament Baptism," 278.

⁶ F. C. Grant, *The Gospels, Their Origin and their Growth* (New York: Harper, 1959), 150.

⁷ "The name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit," but not "in the name of the Father and the name of the Son and the name of the Spirit," which would require the plural "names" (W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison Jr., *Matthew*, ICC [Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1997], 2:685).

in which baptism is discussed is in the *Didache* (7:1-4), where Matthew 28:19 is quoted word for word. In *Didache* 9:5 the expression “baptised into the name of the Lord” is used, as it is in the book of Acts, in a non-liturgical context. However, it is clearly referring to the same act of baptism described in 7:1.

19. Fourth, Knox suggests that the words “to disciple,” “to baptise” and “to teach” are synonyms, and that they all refer to the apostolic task of bringing “the whole world into the knowledge of the true God.”⁸ This assertion draws weight from the observation that the three terms are clearly closely related and, doubtless, all serve the same end—to bring the nations to the knowledge of God. However, there is no reason to regard them as synonyms, either grammatically or conceptually. In fact, as Beasley-Murray argues, such a reading obscures the important theological fact that “the *kerygma* precedes the *didache*, the offer of grace before the ethics of discipleship.”⁹ In other words, preaching the gospel comes first, baptism and instruction second.
20. Fifth, Knox argues that Jesus commands that “the nations of the world are to be baptized.” As only “individuals can be the subjects of water baptism,” the “phrase ‘to baptize the nations’ is itself plainly metaphorical.”¹⁰ However, Jesus does not use the phrase “to baptize the nations.” Rather, his disciples are to disciple all “the nations” (*ta ethnē*), baptising and teaching “them” (*autous*). That the “them” are not identical with “the nations” is clear from the fact that “nations” is neuter and “them” is masculine. The “them,” therefore, must refer to individuals from the nations who respond to the gospel with repentance and faith.
21. Sixth, the claim is made that Paul’s remark that “Christ did not send me to baptise but to preach the gospel” (1 Cor. 1:17) indicates that he “regarded water baptism of no importance.”¹¹ It is further argued that it would be “inconceivable that Paul could have said this if the Lord had commanded his apostles in his last solemn commission to administer water baptism.”¹² In response, while Paul was clearly concerned by the Corinthians’ misplaced emphasis on their baptism, what was of “no importance” to him was *who* did the baptising (1 Cor. 1:13-15). Furthermore, his statement in 1:17 is a well-attested rhetorical device in Hebrew and Greek, labelled “idiom of exaggerated contrast”¹³ or “relative negation.”¹⁴ Biblical examples include Deuteronomy 5:3; Jeremiah 7:22–23; Mark 9:37; Matthew 10:20; John 12:44; Acts 5:4. The idiom is also common in contemporary English—e.g., “Christmas is not a time for gifts, it is a time for remembering Christ’s birth.”¹⁵ Paul’s words demonstrate that preaching was his primary business and that it was not an essential part of his personal apostolic ministry to baptise those who believed.

⁸ Knox, “New Testament Baptism,” 280.

⁹ G. R. Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament* (Exeter: Paternoster, 1972), 89–90.

¹⁰ Knox, “New Testament Baptism,” 281.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ James G. Carleton, “The Idiom of Exaggerated Contrast,” *The Expositor Series* 4, no. 6 (1892): 365–72.

¹⁴ C. Lattey, “The Prophets and Sacrifice: A Study in Biblical Relativity,” *Journal of Theological Studies* 42 (1941): 155–65.

¹⁵ See Jack Lundbom, *Jeremiah 1–20*, Anchor Bible 21A (New York: Doubleday, 1999), 488–89.

However, that the baptism of new believers was normal practice, seems clear from Paul's comments in 1:13-16 that the Corinthians had all been baptised.

22. Seventh, Knox suggests that it makes little sense to regard "our Lord's last words to his disciples" as an instruction "in the use of a liturgical formula."¹⁶ Rather, they were being commissioned to preach the gospel (cf. Luke 24:47; John 20:21). This claim, however, begins with an overstatement and concludes with a false alternative. As argued above, to the extent that Jesus' words can be considered a "formula" they are not a rigid one. The instruction to baptise is only one (secondary) element of his larger commission. Preaching the gospel of the risen Lord Jesus is essential to the great commission (cf. Matt. 24:14). Baptism with water outwardly signifies the Spirit-given repentance that initiates discipleship.

Conclusion

23. In conclusion, we find no reason to depart from previous reports of this Commission which have affirmed a reformed understanding of baptism as expressed in the Anglican formularies. The stimulus to engage at greater depth with the key text, Matthew 28:19, has served to sharpen the thinking behind this reaffirmation. It is our hope that this report will give confidence to ministers of the gospel to continue the practice of water baptism as we seek to make disciples of all nations.

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¹⁶ Knox, "New Testament Baptism," 280.