



**Baptism Training**  
**Kingsway Community Church**

## **Baptism**

Many people say many things about baptism.

In truth there are many opinions around as to what baptism achieves or symbolises. All I can give is my own opinion about baptism and what it means, though in saying that I believe my perspective makes the most sense of the biblical data related to the subject...

The story, oddly enough for many people, begins not with Jesus, but with Israel in slavery in Egypt. The main character here, apart from God himself, is an Israelite named Moses. Moses is saved when his parents place him in a basket in the Nile river instead of killing him as was commanded by the Egyptians at the time. He is saved by going *through the water to freedom*.

Moses himself later leads the nation of Israel out of Egypt in the famous Exodus story. They miraculously cross the Red Sea by a miracle of God and escape the Egyptian army. They escape *through the water to freedom*. This, of course, is the controlling event in the Jewish tradition, which they continue to celebrate even today at the Passover.

Later Joshua leads the Israelites into the Promised Land through the Jordan River – they pass *through the water to their inheritance*.

These events may find their origin in the fact that at creation in Genesis 1, God's Spirit hovered over the waters, and God separated the waters (Gen 1:6-10) in the process of creating new life. So, creation itself could be said to have begun with a kind of baptism – *through the waters to life*.

Moreover the story of Noah is all about God's restoration of his creation to goodness. The Flood was a punishment for the evil that the world had fallen into, but of course God saves some people in the midst of that evil. How? Through the Flood. Noah and his family went *through the water to restoration*.

We should see our baptism, then, as not being a strange idea that the early Christians invented, but rather as a part of the greater story of God's creating and restoring creation.

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John the Baptist recognised this, and seeing his role as preparing Israel for the coming New Covenant God would make with them, he began to baptise those Israelites who came to him as an act of repentance – *through the water to the New Covenant*. And of course Jesus, the one who would lead people into the New Covenant, was himself baptised by John in order to fully identify with those who he had come to save.

It is no surprise to us, in retrospect, that Jesus' life came to a crescendo in his death and resurrection during the *Jewish Passover*. That is to say, when the Jews celebrated the time when Moses led Israel through the water (water was a symbol of chaos and death) and out the other side, Jesus himself went through death and out the other side to new life. He embodied God's redemption of people from slavery, but this time it wasn't from slavery, it was from sin and death itself. Jesus' death and resurrection marked a *New Exodus*.

But Jesus' death and Resurrection also look back to creation and the story of Noah, when the world came through the waters to find new life and restoration. Jesus, in his baptism and resurrection, brings the world to new life and restoration – he brings *New Creation*.

Thus for the early Christians, and indeed for us, baptism is not merely a symbol of us being Christians, it is directly related to God's creation, his restoring the world from evil, his redemption of Israel from slavery, and ultimately the death and resurrection of Jesus himself. In baptism we identify with Jesus' death and resurrection in going under the water (dying) and coming up again (rising). Thus we identify with Christ himself.

This is what Paul seems to believe in the New Testament;

*<sup>3</sup>Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? <sup>4</sup>We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. (Romans 6:3-4)*

In short, we die with Jesus the Messiah, and come through death with him into newness of life. *Through the water into new life with Jesus as Lord.*

So baptism is not merely a ritual we perform in order to publically state our faith (although this is certainly one aspect of it) – it is so much more! Baptism was, for the early Christians, associated with being 'born again'. Why? Because with Christ you have died, and with Christ you have risen! Going into the water and coming out again is the *symbol* of that death and new birth. A symbol? Yes! Symbols, or signs, point to a greater reality, something much larger.

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For Old Testament Israel this sign was circumcision – it was the sign that you were in the family of God, that is, the people of God. But of course circumcision was only for men. Christians on the other hand use baptism as their sign (see Colossians 2:12 for the comparison), the sign that you are in the family of God! This sign is not limited to any one gender or race, but is now available to all people. When we are baptised, like Israel in the OT, we are being brought into the covenant people of God.

Being part of God's people is about saved from sin and death (into eternal life) as in 1 Peter 3:12. But it is also about finding new life in the story of God himself. Just as Creation, Noah, Moses and Israel were baptised into God's own story, so too does Christian baptism become the mode of entry into God's own story, in which you are a part of the script.

At this point it is helpful to quote Tom Wright;

*In particular, we can now see why Christian baptism involves being plunged into water (or having it poured over you) in the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The point is that the story which baptism tells is God's own story, from creation and covenant to new covenant, with Jesus in the middle of it and the Spirit brooding over it. In baptism, you are brought into that story, to be an actor in the play which God is writing and producing. And once you're onstage, you're part of the action. But the story is moving forward, and it would be far better to understand where it's going and how to learn your lines and join in the drama. Through the water to become part of God's purpose for the world.<sup>1</sup>*

Just like God saved Israel from slavery in Egypt (through the waters) in order that they might be a light to the nations of the world, so too has God saved us from the slavery of sin (through the waters of baptism) in order that we might be that same light to the world.

So when we are baptised we are symbolising our own death and new birth in and with Christ, and our coming to be a member in the family of God<sup>2</sup>, in order to be part of God's purpose for the world, his plan to restore all things as they were before sin.

So in conclusion, baptism;

- 1) Is the identification of ourselves with Christ's own death and resurrection;
- 2) Symbolises our entry into the family or people of God;

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<sup>1</sup> Tom Wright, *Simply Christian*, (London: SPCK, 2006), 184. Much of the above material has been developed from Wright's perspective in this book (esp. pp. 182-184).

<sup>2</sup> Being in the family together regardless of any social or cultural factors (race, gender, social standing etc.) seems to be the focus for baptism in passages such as 1 Corinthians 12:13, Galatians 3:27 and Ephesians 4:5).

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- 3) Symbolises our part in the story of God, from creation, through Noah, Moses and Israel up to John the Baptist and of course climaxing in Jesus, with the promise of the future restoration of God's creation;
- 4) Symbolises our dying to sin and death, and rising to become part of God's purposes for the world.