

## STUDY 1

# Transforming Baptism<sup>1</sup>

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The title for this Ministry School is taken from Romans 6:3: ‘Do you not know that all of us who have been *baptized into Christ Jesus* were baptized into his death?’<sup>2</sup> Actually, Paul’s subject is not baptism, which in Romans is only mentioned in this verse and the next, but our death to the guilt of sin. At the same time, baptism seems to be an assumed background for all that Paul is saying, that is, he is speaking to people who could remember their baptism.

At this point there may well be a problem. It could be that we will immediately read back into this passage memories of a baptism which is not what Paul had in mind at all. Most of us will automatically assume that Paul is referring to water baptism. But is he? It is, at least, worth asking the question and we may be surprised at the possible answers. One reason why we should ask the question is Paul’s statement itself: ‘all of us . . . have been baptized into Christ Jesus . . .’ This certainly appears to say more than that we have gone through a ritual (with which *we* are familiar) by which we entered ‘into Christ Jesus’ (εἰς Χριστὸν Ἰησοῦν, *eis Christon Iēsoun*). Probably none of us would be happy with that association. So if water baptism is in mind there will doubtless need to be a lot more said.

But let us start from another angle. Within the larger context of Romans 6:1–11, Paul sees the effect of being baptised into Christ Jesus as being an extraordinary transformation of a believer (also 1:16; 3:25–26; etc.) from one who is hostile to God and to all that he is about into one who loves God (Rom. 8:28). Whatever it is, this baptism is a wonderful matter.

## A LITTLE MATTER OF SEMANTICS

Clichés abound in Christian discussions and they are certainly present here. So let me try to set out the parameters of this discussion.

There are four words possibly used for ‘baptism’ in the New Testament.<sup>3</sup> First there are the verbs βαπτίζω (*baptizō*) and βάπτω (*baptō*). *Baptō* can quickly be discounted from the discussion since it is only used three times and then only for the

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<sup>1</sup> This title has been taken from a proposed title for an as yet unpublished book by Adrio König.

<sup>2</sup> All scripture quotations in this study are from the New Revised Standard Version or are my own translation.

<sup>3</sup> One other related word occurs, but it is only used as a title for John, i.e. ‘the Baptist’, ὁ βαπτιστής (*ho baptistēs*).

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dipping of items into something: a finger into water (Luke 16:24), bread into a dish (John 13:26) and a robe into blood (Rev. 19:13).<sup>4</sup> *Baptizō*, on the other hand, is much more widely used, though its range of meanings should make us careful in how we define it<sup>5</sup> or even how we translate it. It occurs twice in the canonical books of the LXX,<sup>6</sup> once of Naaman ‘immersing himself’ in the Jordan (2 [4] Kings 5:14), where it is parallel with ‘wash’ (λοῦσαι, *lousai*) in verse 10. Also it is used in Isaiah 21:4, which has ἡ ἀνομία με βαπτίζει (*hē anomia me baptizei*), ‘lawlessness overwhelms me’, though English translations have ‘fear makes me tremble’ (NIV), or ‘horror has appalled me’ (NRSV) and so on, all following the Hebrew text. A metaphorical use appears in the New Testament, for example at Luke 12:50, ‘I have a baptism with which to be baptized, and what stress I am under until it is completed!’ Otherwise, within the New Testament it is used of the rite of water baptism, by John the Baptist and by Jesus’ disciples, and later within the Christian context (so some of the references in Acts). It is also used for regular ceremonial washings in a Jewish context. In this instance a ‘literal’ translation would seem absurd, as in Luke 11:38, ‘The Pharisee was amazed to see that he first *was not baptized*<sup>7</sup> before dinner’. The word is also used with reference to the promised outpouring of the Holy Spirit: ‘He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit’ (Luke 3:16; etc.) and also, as I have indicated, to the situation where a person is to be overwhelmed, evidently by suffering, in Mark 10:38–39.

There are two nouns for ‘baptism’ used in the New Testament, and neither is used before the New Testament: βαπτισμός (*baptismos*) and βάπτισμα (*baptisma*). They differ grammatically in that *baptismos* refers properly to the act of ‘baptism’, while *baptisma* refers to the result of the act, so that it is used for the institution of baptism, the rite with all it means. *Baptismos* is used on four occasions only: Mark 7:4, Colossians 2:12, Hebrews 6:2, and 9:10. Mark’s reference is to the ceremonial washing of cups and pots, while Hebrews 6:2 and 9:10 almost certainly refer to Jewish practices. The use in Colossians 2:12 needs to be examined to see whether it definitely refers to Christian baptism at all. The full passage reads:

For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily,<sup>10</sup> and you have come to fullness in him, who is the head of every ruler and authority.<sup>11</sup> In him also you were circumcised with a spiritual circumcision, by putting off the body of the flesh in the circumcision of Christ;<sup>12</sup> when you were buried with him in baptism, you were also raised with him through faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead (Col. 2:9–12).

It may be that Paul is referring to Christian baptism, but we should note the context, where he is arguing that all our fullness is ‘in him’ (Christ). Do we need circumcision? You were circumcised in *his* circumcision. Do you need to be raised from the dead? You are a participant in *Christ’s* resurrection. So could it be that the question being asked is: Do you need baptism? You have been buried with Christ in

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<sup>4</sup> In the LXX, βάπτω is used sixteen times, but never of a person either dipping himself or being dipped.

<sup>5</sup> For example, Polybius (2nd Cent. BC) uses βαπτίζω of soldiers wading breast deep and of the sinking of ships (G. Abbott-Smith, *A Manual Greek Lexicon of the New Testament*, T. & T. Clark, Edinburgh, 1937, p. 74) and Josephus speaks of the crowd of pilgrims ‘flooding’ Jerusalem at feasts (D. W. B. Robinson, *The Meaning of Baptism*, Evangelical Tracts and Publications, Beecroft, 1958, p. 8).

<sup>6</sup> And twice in the Apocrypha, at Judith 12:7 and Sirach 34:30, both of which refer to ritual washings.

<sup>7</sup> The verb is passive.

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*his* baptism (and even then, in the light of Mark 10:38 and Luke 12:50 we might ask to which baptism Paul was referring). At least the possibility is there.<sup>8</sup>

Looking then at the uses of *baptisma* along with *baptizō*, we discover that most of the uses of the words in the gospels refer to the baptism administered by John the Baptist, with many uses of the verb being found in John's 'name', 'the one who baptises', and a few references to the promise of Jesus baptising with the Holy Spirit and the reference to Jesus' and the disciples' coming suffering (i.e. his and their deaths). One extra element needs to be noted, though, and that is that John's gospel speaks of Jesus (actually his disciples) baptising (4:1–2), but this is not a reference to the promised baptism with the Spirit—which occurs in that gospel in chapter 20—but to Jesus following the line taken by John the Baptist (cf. Mark 1:4, 14–15).

Christian baptism starts with Pentecost<sup>9</sup> and it is the book of Acts which gives us most information. Here, however, a principle emerges which may surprise us and it is that baptism is: (i) administered in the context of Jews (or half-Jews) believing in Christ; or (ii) where Gentiles come to faith it is the baptism administered by John which sets the pattern. As I see it, Acts provides no example of a wholesale water baptism of Gentiles.<sup>10</sup>

Other than 1 Peter 3:21, all other references to baptism are by Paul and these provide a fascinating commentary. There are the references in Romans 6, which I have referred to above, and then a larger number in 1 Corinthians. I will return later to 1 Corinthians chapter 1, but the other references in that letter are somewhat unclear. Chapter 10 says that Israel of old was 'baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea'. Chapter 12 speaks of being baptised 'in the one Spirit . . . into one body', while chapter 15 gives us the strange statement about those 'who receive baptism on behalf of the dead'. There is the reference to 'one baptism' in Ephesians 4:5, which in context cannot simply be taken to mean you should only be baptised once, but that there is only one transforming baptism, as there is only one body, one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith and one God and Father of us all, since the command is to maintain the unity which the one Spirit has brought. The final reference is to Colossians 2:12, to which I have referred above.

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<sup>8</sup> Also, the manuscript evidence is ambiguous, with both *baptismos* and *baptisma* being used.

<sup>9</sup> See Robinson, *The Meaning of Baptism*, p. 3.

<sup>10</sup> I am not certain whether any significance of this has been noted but, in this context, the references to baptism in Acts are as follows: **Acts 2**, they all were Jews (or Proselytes). **Acts 8**, these Samaritans were the other 'half' of original Israel—see Ezekiel 37:15–23. **Acts 8**, the Ethiopian eunuch was one who: (i) had been 'to Jerusalem to worship', meaning he was either a Jew or a Proselyte; and (ii) given the place of the story in Acts, was *not* a Gentile, otherwise the account of Cornelius loses its significance. **Acts 10**, Cornelius was a Gentile, but we should also note that he was a 'God-fearer' who followed the Jewish hours of prayer, and he was familiar with 'the message [God] sent to the people of Israel'—which included the ministry of John the Baptist—and Peter's explanation of his action of baptising Gentiles is strictly in terms of the ministry of John the Baptist. **Acts 16**, Lydia, also a 'God-fearer', was baptised, as was the gaoler and his family—he may be an exception to a rule, if there is one. **Acts 18**, refers to the Corinthians being baptised, though there is the preceding connection with Crispus, the leader of the synagogue, a name to which Paul refers in 1 Corinthians 1:14. **Acts 19**, these 'disciples' were almost certainly Jewish.

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### THE HEART OF THE ISSUE

It is the language of Paul in 1 Corinthians 1 which demands our attention:

What I mean is that each of you says, 'I belong to Paul,' or 'I belong to Apollos,' or 'I belong to Cephas,' or 'I belong to Christ.'<sup>13</sup> Has Christ been divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?<sup>14</sup> I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius,<sup>15</sup> so that no one can say that you were baptized in my name.<sup>16</sup> (I did baptize also the household of Stephanas; beyond that, I do not know whether I baptized anyone else.)<sup>17</sup> For Christ did not send me to baptize but to proclaim the gospel, and not with eloquent wisdom, so that the cross of Christ might not be emptied of its power.<sup>18</sup> For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God (1 Cor. 1:12–18).

The context shows us that there are divisions within the church at Corinth and that they focussed on the ministries of various men, in particular Paul himself, Cephas and Apollos.<sup>11</sup> What stands out is not just the names of three men but also the inclusion of 'Christ' in the list in verse 12. While the nature of a group claiming to belong to Christ is puzzling, as they would all no doubt do the same, Paul's comment in verse 13 does move into a slightly clearer area.<sup>12</sup> 'Has Christ been divided?' The answer must be a resounding 'No!'<sup>13</sup> Neither was Paul crucified for them and they were not baptised into the name of Paul.

Certain things have to be assumed at this point in the letter, but they are indirectly explained later. I suggest that we might see this explanation rising in chapter 12. But first we must see that, by introducing the question of baptism, Paul does so only to put it in its place. Paul did baptise, but only a few people; Crispus, Gaius and the household of Stephanas. Crispus was probably the former leader of the synagogue mentioned in Acts 18:8, while a case can be made out that Gaius was the Titius Justus referred to in Acts 18:7, in which case he was a 'God-fearer' and so associated with the synagogue in Corinth.<sup>14</sup> Paul's gratitude to God that he baptised so few seems to indicate that 'who baptised whom' quickly became of significance in the church and that Paul wanted none of that. His task was preaching the gospel and to mix that up with baptism or techniques of 'rhetoric' (a word, *λόγος*, *logos*, of wisdom, v. 17) would have emptied the cross of Christ.<sup>15</sup>

The transforming power does not lie in the rite of baptism but in the cross of Christ and, in particular, in 'the word of the cross' (v. 18, note the contrast with the 'word' of v. 17). By 'the word' (*logos*) is meant the whole expression, including its rationale, of the cross of Christ. That expression involves a person being gripped by the work of the cross and understanding it and so proclaiming it. As such, the word of the cross is the *revelation* of the cross at every point, to the speaker personally, to his mind and so then to his hearers. And it is powerful because as a revelation it is the action of Christ

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<sup>11</sup> Almost nothing can be said with certainty about these divisions; see Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1987), pp. 55–9 for a summary of the issues.

<sup>12</sup> See Gordon Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, p. 60.

<sup>13</sup> This has to be determined from the context. Only one manuscript, P<sup>46</sup>, makes the answer definite.

<sup>14</sup> F. F. Bruce in Gordon Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, p. 62, n. 71. If this is so, then it would affirm (by no means 'confirm') my sense that New Testament water baptism was particularly, though not exclusively, associated with Jewish believers.

<sup>15</sup> The addition of 'of its power' in the NRSV, RSV and NIV is not supported by the Greek text, even if, with the support of verse 18, it is the sense.

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through the Spirit. It is, then, the power of God. To include water baptism in the proclamation is to add a human element to what is totally the action of God.<sup>16</sup>

### **HAS CHRIST BEEN DIVIDED?**

Later in this school, there will be a session given to the topic: ‘Baptism as Incorporation into the Body of Christ’. The implications of this are immense, as we will see, and I do not want to anticipate details from that session. But I do suspect that the language of 1 Corinthians 12 does go towards answering Paul’s question in 1 Corinthians 1:13.

His question was not, ‘Has the church been divided?’ since he has already noted that it is. But in asking if Christ has been divided he is surely noting what he will later explain, that the believers are ‘in Christ’. To speak of the believers is to speak of Christ, since they are his body: ‘Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it’ (1 Cor. 12:27), ‘in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body’ (1 Cor. 12:13) and that body is Christ (v. 12). Christ and his body are one.

There is a sense in which using the word ‘Christ’ affirms this, and hopefully some of that will also come out in later sessions, but we should at least here note that ‘Christ’ is a word which is technically an adjective meaning ‘anointed’ and is the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew ‘Messiah’. While the anointed one was a particular person, he was far more, for he represents and so expresses the truth of the people of God.<sup>17</sup> As he is, so are we in this world.

But we can go further. When we were baptised into Christ Jesus we were baptised into his death. It was *his* death that was effective because he is the Christ, Jesus. We speak of a substitutionary atonement, which is totally correct, but why is the substitutionary atonement effective? The answer is that it was because the substitutionary atonement was *vicarious*.<sup>18</sup> What he did *for* his body, he did *as* his body. If we now walk in newness of life, it is because his resurrection life is our life.

We can also, then, say more concerning the body of Christ into which the Spirit has brought us. He immersed us into the one body so that we now see ourselves not as

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<sup>16</sup> Mention should be made of Mark 16:16, ‘The one who believes and is baptized will be saved; but the one who does not believe will be condemned’. There is no certainty that Mark wrote this, or any of the other two endings associated with his gospel. For a brief summary of the issues of the long ending of Mark, which R. T. France says has ‘something of a “secondhand” flavour and look[s] like a pastiche of elements drawn from the other gospels and Acts’, see R. T. France, *The Gospel of Mark: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 2002), pp. 685–8. There is a danger in building an argument on a single text and especially on a text in a highly doubtful passage, but also on a text which, superficially at least, contradicts other clear statements in the scriptures.

<sup>17</sup> See my paper, ‘Jesus the Messiah: Messianic Truth’ in the 1998 Pastors’ School, *The Message of God and the World*.

<sup>18</sup> In *The Things We Firmly Believe* (NCPI, Blackwood, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 1986, p. 105), Geoffrey Bingham incorporates a paragraph of mine:

*The Vicarious Theory.* This view is an extension of the substitutionary theory. It sees the work of Christ on the Cross as achieving all that the substitutionary theory has expounded. But it goes further in that it sees that the substitutionary theory leaves the work of the Atonement as apart from man and his need. In effect, the substitution of Christ for man need have no result in man. However, the principle of the Atonement was that when Christ died on the Cross, the sinner himself died. Christ’s death was the sinner’s death. In this way, not only is the conscience of God satisfied, but also the conscience of the believer.

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individuals but as persons, by which I mean here that if we regard ourselves as individuals we are doing so over against others, in distinction from them. But if as persons, then we do so by seeing ourselves in union, in relationship with others and in particular with our head. This is surely Paul's point in 1 Corinthians 12:14ff. Christ is not divided so divisions within his body are a contradiction in terms.

This leads us further still, since the language of 'the body of Christ' need not be taken in isolation. Of course the imagery of hands and eyes and so forth makes sense on its own, but 'the body' has a wider connotation:

Wives, be subject to your husbands as you are to the Lord. <sup>23</sup> For the husband is the head of the wife just as Christ is the head of the church, the body of which he is the Savior. <sup>24</sup> Just as the church is subject to Christ, so also wives ought to be, in everything, to their husbands.

<sup>25</sup> Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, <sup>26</sup> in order to make her holy by cleansing her with the washing of water by the word, <sup>27</sup> so as to present the church to himself in splendor, without a spot or wrinkle or anything of the kind—yes, so that she may be holy and without blemish. <sup>28</sup> In the same way, husbands should love their wives as they do their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. <sup>29</sup> For no one ever hates his own body, but he nourishes and tenderly cares for it, just as Christ does for the church, <sup>30</sup> because we are members of his body. <sup>31</sup> 'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.' <sup>32</sup> This is a great mystery, and I am applying it to Christ and the church. <sup>33</sup> Each of you, however, should love his wife as himself, and a wife should respect her husband (Eph. 5:22–33).

In this section the link is made between body, church and bride. What is deeper, the body of Christ, his bride, is indissolubly joined to him (v. 31). Whatever human aberrations of this we may see around us, this fact remains that when we were baptised into Christ Jesus we were joined totally to our bridegroom. All we await is the consummation of this when what is true now is fully revealed and freed to be expressed, without hindrance, in the new heavens and new earth.

Christ's intention in the atonement was to cleanse his bride (v. 25–27; cf. Ezek. 16:9; 1 Cor. 6:11). The goal of this cleansing is the bride 'holy and without blemish'. These words translate the same Greek words found in Ephesians 1:4 (ἁγίους καὶ ἀμώμους, *hagious kai amōmous*), where our being 'holy and blameless' is the purpose of the Father who chose us in Christ for this before the foundation of the world. Thus Robert Jenson on Jonathan Edwards:

'To this I say, that the Son is the adequate communication of the Father's goodness . . . But yet the Son has also an inclination to communicate *himself*, in an image of his person that may partake of his happiness: and this was the end of the creation, even the communication of the happiness of the Son of God . . . Therefore the church is said to be the completeness of Christ.' It is as and only as a factor in the plot of the triune God's inner life, that God has a need to overflow . . . Edwards is beautifully simple: 'The end of the creation of God was to provide a spouse for his Son Jesus Christ, that might enjoy him and on whom he might pour forth his love . . . ' [H]eaven and earth were created that the Son of God might be complete in a spouse.'<sup>19</sup>

In Ephesians 1:22–23 Paul makes the same point. Christ's lordship is for the church which is his body. And as his body, which we have seen is his bride, she is the

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<sup>19</sup> Quoted in Robert W. Jenson, *America's Theologian: A Recommendation of Jonathan Edwards* (Oxford University Press, New York, 1988), p. 42.

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fullness of him who fills all in all. Without her, he has no fullness.<sup>20</sup> It is not that he is deficient, but that God has so determined himself that the bride will fulfil the purpose of the Father for his Son. The Son of God will be *complete* in a spouse.

### **INTO WHAT, THEN, WERE YOU BAPTISED?**

Were Paul to pose this question to us, rather than to the Jewish disciples of John the Baptist, our answer must surely be that we were baptised into Christ Jesus and so we are now in Christ! Truly our baptism was a burial service, as Romans 6:4 shows. Our baptism is the formal declaration that we have died and were buried with Christ. Reports of our death were by no means exaggerated. But forensic as that may be, the point is that we are dead because we are in Christ Jesus. But given all that has been said, that must mean that as ‘our old man’<sup>21</sup> was crucified (Rom. 6:6), we are now in Christ and as such are the new creation. The wording of 2 Corinthians 5:17 is dramatic: ‘if anyone [is] in Christ, new creation’. We might say, there is (the) new creation! The old has passed away—it has been buried—and now has been repristinated as ‘new creation’! Our baptism into Christ was no less transforming than that. But as the ‘new creation’ (*not* as a gathering of many little individual new creations) we have been baptised into our true identity as the bride of Christ. We are in him as his body, his bride, his fullness, the Father’s purpose for his Son. We have been immersed into him. He has ‘overwhelmed’ us with his eternal transforming love and so we have come to our fullness in him.

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<sup>20</sup> Could it be that gnostic or pre-gnostic notions of *plērōma*, ‘fullness’, are not so much a background for this as a counterfeit of this?

<sup>21</sup> Our ‘old self’ may be partly in mind, but Paul wrote, ‘our old man’ and the reference is clearly to Adam (so Rom. 5:12–21) and our participation in him. But now we participate in Christ.