

TAKING THE LID OFF

A close-up photograph of a hand lifting the lid of a glass jar filled with red jam. The jar is on a light blue surface. The background is a soft, out-of-focus light blue.

RE-BAPTISM

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THINKING THROUGH A SUBJECT
WE RARELY TALK ABOUT

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INTRODUCTION

A friend of mine once worked for a well-known cake manufacturer. Nigel was a legal executive, whose role was to ensure that his employers were never sued under the trade description act. I recall him wrestling with a particular issue:

“How much fruit must a bun contain before it can be called ‘a richly fruited bun’?”

It is one thing to go into a café for a tea and a bun and notice that the currants are a bit sparse - few of us would complain. But what if it were advertised as ‘a richly fruited bun’? How many pieces must it contain to warrant such a description? For most of us, such issues are irrelevant, but for Nigel's employers they were crucial. A few lost law cases could put them out of business.

But how would we fare if we had to defend our label of **Christian** baptism under the trade description act? Could we give adequate and reasoned argument that what we do in practice and intention fits the name, especially when other churches in our town may be using the same label for something that appears entirely different?

In today's church anyone who even questions the validity of another's baptism runs the risk of being labelled divisive. Many ecumenical studies today start off with the assumption ‘all forms of baptism are valid Christian baptism’. They begin with the task, not to question different baptisms, but to find a way of accepting them, and living with the differences. Whilst this may be a commendable aim from the point of view of seeking Christian unity, I think it is a mistake. It is an error of definition whereby a thing is defined by its

name not by its content. It is as if my friend solved the bun problem by naming all buns 'richly fruited' irrespective of whether they had two currents to rub between them.

Throughout the church many people now accept that: 'If you call it Christian baptism then it must be Christian baptism.'

But you cannot make a plain bun a richly fruited bun simply by calling it one. Somewhere along the line, content must be allowed to influence the definition more than the name we might give it. The labels on our local fruit stall may be placed wrongly, and the sign saying 'coxes £1 a kilo' may be stuck on the peaches or potatoes; but there is a basic rule, if it doesn't look, taste, feel and smell like an apple then you can be pretty sure it is not an apple.

The subject of re-baptism is rarely openly discussed. In spite of the fact that it happens more often than we might care to admit, the issues surrounding it tend to be swept under the carpet or spoken of in huddled corners. But neither is the subject of baptism itself discussed. When I have broached the possibility of considering some of the problems that we might have concerning it, I have rarely found anyone who wants to do so. In some instances, I have known other ministers refuse to talk about the subject, or to change the conversation as soon as they have been able to.

The reason for such reluctance is not hard to find. There is almost universal disagreement among churches as to what constitutes valid baptismal practice. In an age when doctrinal disagreement is widespread, baptism clearly leads the field as the doctrine with the highest number of different viewpoints. Many of these are not arrived at from biblical and theological study, but are the result of unquestioning acceptance of different denominational traditions and practices. This applies no less in the newer churches and streams as it does in the older ones. New doctrines and traditions are often made and established in a decade or two.

Most books on baptism take one of two approaches. The older one, still continued by many evangelical, charismatic and New Churches, is what might be termed the 'Pistols at dawn approach'. Two protagonists approach each with the conviction that one is absolutely right and the other absolutely wrong. There can be no ground given and none lost, no compromise and no reconciliation. The only possible outcome is defeat for one and victory for the other. In these books, views are not set forth for discussion but for confrontation and battle.

The other approach appears to have gained ground since the publication of The World Council of Churches Faith and Order Paper No. 111, Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry, 1982. On page 3 it states: "The inability of the churches mutually to recognize their various practices of baptism as sharing in the one baptism, and their actual dividedness in spite of mutual baptismal recognition, have given dramatic visibility to the broken witness of the Church. The need to recover baptismal unity is at the heart of the ecumenical task as it is central for the realization of genuine partnership within the Christian communities."

For the forty years since the above paper was published, there has been a determined attempt by many of the larger and older denominations to reconcile differing views of baptism and to come to a place of mutual recognition. This has been particularly true of Baptists and Anglicans, and is reflected in books and reports coming from them. The result of this has been a veering toward the statement referred to above, 'If you call it Christian baptism then it must be Christian baptism'.

This stance reflects the prevailing mode of thinking that exists in the world, which denies that truth can be absolute, and embraces the concept that we can both be right even if what we believe is mutually contradictory.

This little booklet is an attempt to do something different. Rather than either trying to set forward one position and argue for it, or on the other hand trying to reconcile differing positions, the task we have undertaken is to expose many of the differences, particularly noting the perspective of those who have felt it necessary to undergo re-baptism, a larger segment of the Christian community than is often admitted.

As we do this, we are going to read a number of stories about people being re-baptised. We will use some of these as illustrations and relate them to the arguments that we will consider, but we will leave some with little comment. Re-baptism happens more often than we might imagine, and sometimes the reasons and practices appear quite silly. On the other-hand sometimes re-baptism is done in response to the wrong baptismal practices that churches carry out in the first place. Sometimes, the situation has been made more difficult by ministers and churches being too lax or too rigid in their baptismal practices.

The stories have not been chosen because we agree or disagree with them, but are used in order to cover a wide range of situations. All names and details of people in these stories have been changed. Most are based on actual situations I have known, either specific to one person, or reflecting the typical situation of a number of people. A couple have been substantially altered and include hearsay, but still reflect situations I have come across.

It is not my aim to try and sort out the matter of re-baptism, and for some of you it may be that you end up more confused than ever. That is fine. If we are persuaded that the practice of baptism is confused and confusing, it may be the trigger we need in order to seriously start examining just what the bible teaches, why God has given it to us, and why we have departed from that.

Ruth's story

Ruth had been a Jehovah's Witness for four years before she met Aileen. They had been good years, with new friends who had been able to answer many of her questions about life and death and faith. The highlight of that time for Ruth had been when she was baptised along with hundreds of others, at an annual convention held at one of the large London stadiums.

Ruth's life had changed dramatically, to the extent that a year after her, her husband Bill became a Jehovah's Witness as well. Together they began exploring their new beliefs, trying to adapt their lifestyle to the teachings which they received. One teaching was that it was wrong to celebrate birthdays and so Ruth had stopped sending cards on those occasions.

However, she had a close friend that she still wanted to keep in touch with and she decided that rather than sending her a birthday card, she would try and find a notelet with some verses from the Bible on it that she could send instead. She had noticed that there was a shop in town which sold religious items and so decided to pop in. It was there that she met Aileen.

Aileen was one of the counter assistants in the shop and as Ruth and her husband were browsing through the cards, she had walked over to offer them help. Ruth explained the situation and found that Aileen fully understood. Apparently her husband had become a Jehovah's Witness and she herself had been on the point of doing so when they had both had an encounter with Jesus Christ and had become Christians.

Over the next few weeks Ruth and Bill set themselves to explore and test what Aileen told them. They began attending the church that Aileen went to, and eventually came to the place where they decided to leave the Jehovah's Witnesses in order to join with Aileen at her Church. The minister at the church felt he should check out Ruth and Bill to make sure that they had understood things aright, and that they had actually been converted to Christ.

He was fully satisfied, and in line with his church's teaching, he suggested that they should be baptised. Bill was quite happy for this but Ruth had misgivings.

Ruth explained that she had been baptised by full immersion just a couple of years before.

She realised that some of her understanding may have been wrong and that those who had baptised her had shared in those misunderstandings, but, and she was very clear on this, all of those involved had been sincere and she believed that God had accepted the baptism as a genuine act of faith.

The next few weeks were very difficult ones for all involved. The minister would not budge – Ruth must be re-baptised. Eventually, against her conscience Ruth agreed. She was baptised but found little joy in it, and her Christian life became one of struggles and uncertainty, and she gradually slipped into a form of churchgoing where she seemed unable to regain the vital spark of life that she had when she first encountered Jesus.

SO WHAT IS THE PROBLEM?

In his book 'Baptism Its Purpose, Practice and Power', Michael Green said:

"Rebaptism is wrong because it cannot be done."

"Baptism is ever to be remembered but never to be repeated."

However, anyone like Ruth in our first story, would probably find that virtually every Christian church would want to re-baptise her. The argument they would give would be that Ruth's baptism was not Christian Baptism. No one would be able to deny that it was a baptism, but, they would say, it was not a Christian one.

In spite of Michael Green's emphatic statements, he, along with virtually all of his ministerial colleagues in the Church of England would not only have re-baptised Ruth, but would have insisted on doing so. But it would not only be the Church of England who take this stance. In Ruth's story the church was an independent Pentecostal church, but she would probably have found the situation to be similar whatever the denomination.

So what makes one baptism correct and another unacceptable? And why are some baptisms repeatable and others not? If, for instance, Ruth had been a practicing Orthodox Jew she would have undergone regular baptisms. For a Jewish woman, baptism comes round once a month following her time of menstruation. In the time of Jesus there were many baptisms practised, some of which would have been carried out on a daily basis. Mark 7:4 records Jesus speaking about the tradition of the Pharisees of regularly baptising various kitchen utensils.

Every time we have a bath or shower we baptise ourselves and hopefully that will happen more than once in our lives. No one would contemplate validating baptisms carried out by children at play in the garden pool, even if they performed all the right actions and said all the right words. Baptism must involve something more than what can be seen and heard outwardly.

When we want to look at the issue of re-baptism, it therefore becomes crucial to define exactly what we are talking about. Is it Christian baptism and what is it that distinguishes it from other baptisms? The fact that I had a bath this morning or that I might have joined in the games in the pool with my children, does not disqualify me from undergoing Christian baptism. Where does the line cross over from something that looks like, and may indeed be baptism, but which falls short of being Christian baptism.

I would want to agree with the statement: “Baptism is ever to be remembered but never to be repeated” if it was re-stated: “**Christian** baptism is ever to be remembered but never to be repeated”. For the issue is not whether it is possible or permissible to have two baptisms, we can have hundreds of baptisms in different types and forms, but whether we can have two Christian baptisms.

Our problem therefore is quite specific, and as part of it we need to define what is Christian baptism and what is not? Although our problem is specific, it is not simple. It would be more simple if we could wipe out 2000 years of the Church’s history and practice, as possibly most of the teaching and understanding that permeates our thinking has come from this, and is deeply entrenched in tradition rather than the bible. This is equally true of the more recent charismatic, Pentecostal and New churches as it is of the old denominations. Any practice only needs a very short while before it can become established as a tradition.

Eunice’s story

Eunice was a Baptist. In her early forties, married with a teenage son and daughter she had recently experienced a renewal of her spiritual life. Sandwood Baptist Church, where she was a member, had changed from a sleepy, somewhat liberal, village chapel with about thirty members, to a vibrant charismatic church which now had a hundred or more people coming regularly.

It was the nineteen seventies and the wind of the Spirit was blowing through many similar congregations up and down the country. One of the particularly exciting things at Sandwood, was what was happening in the local schools. In a year or so there had been about forty teenagers converted and filled with the Spirit, and many of them had been baptised in water by full immersion.

Eunice was thrilled. But she was also bothered. She recognised something in the young people who were coming into the church that had been entirely absent in her own teenage years. She could see an obvious faith and a relationship with Jesus that was real. Whilst there was no question that she now knew that for herself, she had doubts about whether that had been the case when she had been their age. Sure she had attended church, and equally sure she had believed in God. That is to say she believed that God existed, but probably little more than that. She had been baptised at the age of eighteen but now began to question why. Most of her friends had been baptised at that time, and she had simply gone with the flow. It had been a conscious decision; it had been the Baptist thing to do; it seemed right and in line with everyone else, but she now doubted that it had anything to do with following Jesus.

Eunice began to share her doubts with some of her friends in the church. What makes baptism valid? If, as most of them believed, infant baptism was incorrect because it did not involve personal faith on the part of the child being baptised, could so called believers' baptism be valid if the person was not actually a believer, and they were eighteen rather than just a few months old.

After some time of wrestling with the issue, Eunice came to the conclusion that she needed to be baptised again. She approached a couple of the church leaders and put the matter to them. Having reviewed her spiritual walk, she had come to the conclusion that the recent spiritual renewal had in fact been her conversion. Although she had believed in God for most of her life and had been a member of a church wherever she had lived, she now recognised that she had not been a Christian. Surely that meant, she concluded, that she now needed to be baptised. A little to her surprise and also to her relief, the leaders agreed, and a short while after, a very joyful Eunice was baptised.

WHAT IS IT THAT MAKES CHRISTIAN BAPTISM CHRISTIAN BAPTISM?

Paul was faced with this issue when travelling in Asia Minor. On arriving at Ephesus he met some disciples. In conversation with them he discovered that they had been baptised in water but not in the Spirit. On the basis of what they told him and using his own judgement in the situation, Paul concluded that their baptisms were not Christian baptisms. So he baptised them again and laid hands on them to receive the Holy Spirit.

This is the only recorded case in the New Testament of a group of believers who were baptised twice. Whilst they were referred to as disciples (and it is the same word here that is generally used elsewhere) they had not received the Holy Spirit, which made Paul question the nature of their discipleship.

He discovered that they had been previously been baptised with John's baptism but had not been initiated by baptism into Christ. Now we know quite clearly what John's message and practice was, and it is worth setting it out in order that we can see what might have been lacking:

1. John's followers believed in God.
2. They were repentant sinners.
3. John preached that his followers should believe on the Messiah who was to come at a future time.
4. John identified and acknowledged Jesus as that Messiah.
5. John identified Jesus as the one who would deal with sin.
6. John identified Jesus as the one who would baptise in Holy Spirit.

We are told that the purpose of John the Baptist's ministry was to prepare the way for Jesus' ministry. Such indication as we have in Scripture of what John taught and said and preached, would seem to confirm that he sought to do this conscientiously. John faithfully taught the key elements about Jesus, but in his lifetime they were not fulfilled. The work of Jesus the Messiah as both the Lamb of God and baptiser in Holy Spirit, though clearly anticipated, were still future. This is really the principle difference between John's declaration of Jesus and that of the post-Pentecost disciples. What John proclaimed was not changed by what followed, but fulfilled.

At the end of Acts 18 we are told that Apollos was preaching at Ephesus and at that time, he only knew John's message, which he

preached eloquently and diligently, and that he was a man mighty in the scriptures. Apollos was taken under the wing of Aquila and Priscilla who fully expounded the Christian message to him, after which Apollos travelled from Ephesus to Corinth. As far as we can tell, not long after Apollos left Ephesus, Paul came on the scene. It was at that time and in that context that Paul met this group of disciples.

It is of course possible that they had had no contact with Apollos. However, from someone and from somewhere this group had heard John's message. As Paul affirmed to them, John had preached and baptised unto repentance, saying that his hearers should believe on him who was to come. Disciples of John knew that they were not living in the present good of what John preached. Theirs was a discipleship that lived in anticipation of the coming Messiah.

When we look at the list of things John taught and did, we see that the principle difference is one of timing, not of content. John said that it was still to come, whereas Paul said that it had come. Understood in this way the conversation about the Holy Spirit makes much more sense. Paul asked them whether they had received the Holy Spirit since they believed and they replied 'we have not heard that the Holy Spirit is'. Many commentators interpret this to mean that they had not heard of the existence of the Holy Spirit, but that surely cannot be the case. From beginning to end the Old Testament is full of references to the Holy Spirit, and in John's ministry the thing he said about Jesus more than anything else was that he was the one who would baptise in Holy Spirit. The whole expectation of the Messiah was centred on the fact that when he came he would usher in the age of the Spirit. The response of the disciples to Paul needs to be understood as 'We have not heard that the Holy Spirit is (now available)' rather than 'We have not heard that the Holy Spirit is (in existence)'. This is a perfectly acceptable and sensible way of understanding the Greek.

This would then seem to be much more in line with Paul's following action, for he didn't go on to explain about the Spirit (surely necessary if they had no knowledge of His existence), but he simply laid hands on them in order that they might receive Him who was now available. But Paul did not only lay hands on them to receive the Holy Spirit, before he did that he baptised them in the name of the Lord Jesus, even though they had previously been baptised by John.

What was the difference between these two baptisms? They were both based on a belief in the one true God; they both involved an element of repentance; they both pointed to Jesus as Saviour, Messiah and Baptiser in the Holy Spirit. As we indicated earlier, the one clear difference is that one was based on 'Him who will come' and the other on 'Him who has come'. In other words, in Christian baptism, there is a key difference between living in anticipation of promise and living in the reception of promise.

This would particularly have been understood by Jewish believers, who knew that possession of the Promised land had been held in anticipation for centuries, but had only been received following the crossing of Jordan with Joshua. The baptismal crossing with Joshua resulted in reception of the promise, whereas their baptism into Moses in the cloud and the (Red) sea, had been the point at which they left their old lives of slavery behind, but where they had not yet taken hold of their inheritance of the land.

As illustrated by Eunice's story, there looks to be a case for differentiating a baptism that is based on future hope, from that which sees hope and promise fulfilled, and is therefore fully Christian in that Christ has come. Regardless of the age of the person being baptised, can a baptism be considered Christian baptism, if it is only based on the hope of, rather than the reception of, God's promises?

Ted's story

Brother Ted had an interesting Christian walk. Baptised as an Anglican when a baby, he had become a Christian in his teens in a Baptist church, where he had then been baptised as a believer by full immersion.

At university he had come across a new type of spirituality that embraced both charismatic experience and the discipline of a life centered round a liturgical pattern. He not only decided to join the Roman Catholic Church but also to respond to the calling of life as a monk.

In order to test out that the call was from God, Ted decided to spend some time as a guest at a nearby monastery. He loved it and knew that this was what he wanted to do with his life.

He decided to take things slowly and began attending a Catholic church near his home. He was delighted to discover that it had a charismatic group attached to it and quickly made friends amongst the other members. On one occasion he went with the group to a communion service. Ted looked forward to this new experience. But before the priest began, recognising that Ted was a new face, he quietly asked him if he was baptised. Ted gave a quiet chuckle and explained that actually he had been baptised twice, once as a baby in the Church of England and again as a believer in a Baptist church. The priest also gave a chuckle and said "Well I'm afraid you're going to have to be done a third time Ted, but this time as a Roman Catholic"

Ted did get baptised again and is now monk.

ARE WE BAPTISED INTO THE CHURCH OR INTO JESUS?

Not all people joining a Roman Catholic church are required to be re-baptised but it can happen. It is more likely to be the case in an Orthodox Church, though again this may vary from parish to parish. It is certainly not unknown in some Pentecostal churches.

Neither Quakers nor Salvation Army require baptism at any stage of joining their group or becoming a member of their corps. Strange as it may seem you could become a member of some Baptist churches without ever being baptised either.

It is disconcerting, that whilst the current trend among the older denominations is to work toward all baptisms being acknowledged as valid and equal in theory, in practice they are often treated as different. Current practice is also different from historical practice. In some situations, for instance, both Baptists and Church of England would have been stricter about the relationship between baptism and church membership. The Baptists would usually, though not always, have required a member to have been baptised as a believer, and sometimes the Church of England would have required baptism in a Church of England, and would not have accepted any form of non-conformist baptism.

What makes the situation even more confusing, is that in the present situation, many churches, including Orthodox, Roman Catholic and Church of England require those coming for membership to be confirmed as well as being baptised. Church of England Canon Law states "Christians from churches where confirmation is not performed by a bishop need to be confirmed by a bishop if they wish formally to be admitted into the Church of England."

This could mean in practice that the Church of England would accept Orthodox and some Roman Catholic confirmations, whilst Orthodox and Roman Catholic Churches would not usually accept Church of England confirmation.

For those who go to a free church or one of the independents, these things may seem strange and unnecessary, but many such churches would not accept any form of baptism that had been carried out when the person was an infant – that is, not at an age where they are able to profess faith for themselves. These things serve to illustrate the theological differences behind baptism. To varying degrees, some churches view baptism as the gateway into the church as well as into Christ. Also to varying degrees, some churches view themselves as the true church and therefore baptism into their church is essential.

But it is important to recognise that conversely, if a church believes that baptism is into Christ and consequently into the universal church, and not into a particular church, they may question what sort of baptism these other churches are practicing.

This section has not been intended to try and clarify the situation but to illustrate just how unclear it actually is. Hopefully this helps to show just how important it is to re-examine baptism from a biblical point of view and ask the question posed earlier – would a particular form and purpose of baptism fit the trade descriptions act if it were to be applied?

John's story

It was a surprise when John became a Christian. None of his family had ever been churchgoers; none of his friends had ever shown any interest in spiritual things and John himself was a committed drinker and gambler. It was even more of a surprise when after just a couple of months, John began preaching and speaking about his faith. The first thing that had happened after his conversion was that John started reading his Bible on a serious basis. It seemed to make sense and he wasn't shy about voicing his opinion which was often welcomed.

Some of John's new friends suggested that he stand for election to the Parochial Church Council of St. Marys (the church he had started attending on the basis that it was nearest to where he lived). John agreed, but then the vicar stepped in and suggested that if he wanted to do this, John should get confirmed and become a church member. Keen to move things forward, John complied, was confirmed and became a member of the P.C.C.

That summer John went on holiday to a Bible convention. The Bible expositions, coupled with some exorcisms and one or two healings fired him up. At the end of the week it was announced that there was to be a baptism by full immersion in the River Trent. John became convinced that he should be baptised along with the other half dozen people who had responded.

By any reckoning it was a great occasion. The river was near the town center and the hundred or so Christians from the convention attracted a number of onlookers. John was baptised and felt that for him this was a crossing over into something that was different from

his experience at St. Marys. One of the things that remained with him in the weeks afterwards was the memory of a well-dressed lady in her seventies who had responded from the crowd. She had walked into the river fully dressed – with some obviously expensive jewellery on – and had been baptised in the midst of much crying, laughing and some very loud hallelujahs.

Back at St. Marys, John shared his holiday experiences but was surprised at how coolly they were received. He struggled to settle in again, and not long afterwards he left the church and found a spiritual home with a small group of believers meeting in someone's front room. They were very open to anything that God was doing, and John found that he grew in his faith and ministry even faster than had been happening before.

One of the things which he enjoyed was the opportunity to meet different Christians from around the country, who often came and visited and ministered to the group. One of these, Sam, a friend of one of the members, was living in a small community in the North of England, where apparently God was moving in power and revelation. One of the things that He had apparently revealed was that the only valid baptism was that which was done in the Name of Jesus as opposed to in the Name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Challenged by this teaching, John set to and did a study of all the relevant Bible passages he could find. Sure enough, whilst Jesus had instructed the disciples to baptise in the Name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, apparently they had not understood that to mean that they should use a Trinitarian formula, but to recognise Trinitarian authority in Jesus. John did not rush into the matter, but the following year on yet another holiday, he came across a group who confirmed what he had been thinking and he was baptised again, but this time in Jesus' name.

IN WHAT NAME?

In the past, especially the last hundred years or so, there have been a number of Christian groups who have practiced re-baptism in the name of Jesus.

There are two issues involved here. The first is whether the teaching of the church which baptises in that way, does so on the basis of being a Unitarian church. Unitarian essentially means believing in a God who is One, not a trinity. Sometimes the God who is believed in, seems to be quite different from the God revealed in the bible, and may be considered to be the one God who is acknowledged in all faiths. This type of belief is most likely to be found in a church that is part of the Unitarians (with a capital U) and they are unlikely to require re-baptism. Baptisms of adults among Unitarians are quite rare and when they have ceremonies for children they tend to use terminology such as 'thanksgiving' and 'celebration for a new life'. The Unitarians are small in number and are not generally accepted as orthodox Christians.

But there are a large number of churches, especially Pentecostal Churches, who are unitarian (with a small u). Their specific beliefs may vary from group to group, but in the main they will hold to what is often called 'Oneness' teaching. This is based on a view of the Christian God that sees Him as one, not a trinity. In this view the one God is not triune but He manifests himself in the three forms of Father, Son and Spirit. All of the major Christian Churches would agree that this is an error. It is sometimes referred to as modalism (God appearing in different modes).

In spite of 'Oneness' teaching being recognised as erroneous, some of these unitarian churches have become accepted as part of the

mainstream, possibly because, they often emphasize the person and work of Jesus, and appear very evangelical. It tends to be the practice among these churches to insist on baptism in the name of Jesus rather than in the name of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Where someone comes to join them from a church which has Trinitarian beliefs, re-baptism in the name of Jesus is often a requirement before they will be accepted as a member.

The second issue is not related to Oneness or unitarian belief. It is where churches hold clearly to orthodox Trinitarian doctrine, but who believe that the correct wording to use at baptism is 'In the name of Jesus' rather than 'In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit'. Sometimes these churches will insist on re-baptism on the basis that, among other things, baptism may be considered valid or invalid purely depending on what words have been used. Occasionally it will also work the other way, insofar as a church will only accept as valid, a baptism that has been carried out with Trinitarian wording.

This is an interesting situation, particularly as those who hold a strong position one way or the other sometimes refuse to discuss it. Even a cursory reading of the book of Acts will clearly show that on the occasions when baptisms took place, the words all varied slightly and seem to indicate that the apostles did not use any formula. In a separate booklet I have discussed more fully whether Jesus intended the church to actually use a formula (whether Jesus or Trinity based), and it does seem to me, that from a biblical point of view, it is not possible to make a case for re-baptism based simply on what words are used at the time.

It may be that where the basis is undergirded by a view of God that might be considered heretical, the situation needs more serious consideration, but even here I don't think there is a simple one size fits all solution to the issue.

Peter's story

Peter was baptised by full immersion on the 25th June 1964, again on the 1st January 1978 and also on the 20th February 1982. It was not until the 12th May 2001 that it happened again, and finally for the last time (for Peter died shortly afterwards) he was baptised on the 6th August 2008.

Peter believed that baptism was really important, so much so, that if you backslid afterwards, it nullified your baptism and it was necessary to start again.

Peter had backslidden and come back to faith a number of times.

DOES SIN NULLIFY OUR BAPTISM?

At different points in the history of the church there have been diverse views on this matter. At one extreme it appears that some Christians during the fourth Century began delaying their baptism to as late in their lives as possible, because they believed that there was no forgiveness for post baptismal sin, but it has generally been considered that there was no biblical basis for the practice.

At the other end of the spectrum, after times of deep sin or even after denying Christ, some people have felt the need for re-baptism, but this seems to be based on felt emotional need rather than any teaching of scripture. It is perfectly understandable to feel the need of washing and being made clean after a time of backsliding and sin, but this need is met in the priestly ministry of Jesus, not from re-baptism. The answer to this felt need is repentance toward God and faith in what Jesus has done and continues to do.

Achmed's story

The believers were in a dilemma. Achmed had become a Christian at great cost. His family had rejected him, including his wife who had been unable to accept his new faith.

Achmed knew that in his culture, baptism was understood as the point of no return, and whilst he loved his family dearly, he knew that whilst he remained unbaptised, his family would cherish the hope that he would recant and so his brothers would try and keep influencing him.

The believers' dilemma was this. They agreed with Achmed that he should be baptised and they agreed also that it should be by full immersion. The problem was that their country was experiencing a severe drought and all of the pools and rivers were dry. A little water was still available from the wells but it was impractical and illegal to lower Achmed into one of those. After much prayer the church came to a conclusion. They dug a grave for Achmed in the sand outside and announced that he would be buried the next day.

After a night of prayer, they gathered together, one of the leaders bringing a small bucket of water from the well and another a traditional grave cloth to wrap around the body. They put the cloth in the bucket and left it for a few minutes to soak up all the water. They then placed it in the grave and Achmed lay on top of part of it, while the other part was wrapped over him. When no part of him could be seen the church leader said in a loud voice, "Achmed, I baptise you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit".

Neither friends nor foes doubted that Achmed had been baptised.

HOW MUCH WATER SHOULD BE USED IN BAPTISM?

Although many churches practice a form of baptism where very little water is used – not much more than can be conveyed on a finger-tip – there do not appear to be any who insist that it is important only to use such a minimal amount. When trends have appeared however, they have tended to be from more water to less, and a brief overview of these may be helpful.

Pre-Christian baptism was conducted in numerous forms, but the essence of it was normally the washing both physically and spiritually of an individual. The washing may have taken place in rivers or the sea but also often in specially built receptacles. The size of these varied and in many cases was unknown. The laver in the tabernacle at the time of Moses however was certainly large enough for the priest to wash hands and feet, and the sea of bronze in the temple built by Solomon, held over 40,000 litres – enough to clean a football team or two. When Jesus turned water into wine, the household baptismal pots which he used would each have held around 140 bottles of wine. They were not mere jam jars.

When John the Baptist began baptising, he did so in the Jordan, a large river, and in the springs of Aenon 'because there was a lot of water there'. The usual practise of baptising in rivers, lakes, hot springs or private baths continued until the 4th century, when some churches began to construct special baptistries, usually in a building set apart for the purpose, or in an annex to a church building.

Archaeological studies of these have shown that whilst initially they were large enough for people to get into, over the centuries the size became smaller. From the 15th century onwards they usually took the form of a basin on a stand (a font) rather than a pool.

A survey of paintings of the baptism of Jesus has also indicated that the earlier a painting, the more water is likely to be included. Late medieval art often shows John with a scallop shell of water and Jesus no more than up to his ankles in the river.

Architecture and art usually follow rather than precede practice. What we observe is a record of the trend, not the cause of it. In some circumstances the change may have been purely pragmatic. In this country up until the 15th century most baptisms would have involved plenty of water – either for immersion or for liberal affusion (pouring out). A more cautious, and drier, habit began to form, following the practice of making allowances for the health and safety of the weak and infirm. This gradually became the norm, and in some churches now forms the basis of their present day baptismal practice

The difference that exists between those who use large amounts of water and those who use very little is not usually theological on this point. There is a false dichotomy between ‘immersion’, ‘affusion’ and ‘sprinkling’ insofar as those that do not use liberal amounts of water would rarely argue a theological case for their practice or cite a biblical standpoint. It is much more likely that they have simply accepted a tradition which has emerged from practical rather than theological reasons.

A few Presbyterians have argued that immersion is unbiblical and that sprinkling or affusion is more correct. However, their argument is against a method rather than minimising the amount of water used.

Such evidence that we have, points to a liberal amount of water being used as normal in baptisms during pre-Christian times, the period of the New Testament and also the first few centuries of the Church. It is important therefore when considering differences between various church practices, that whilst there might be some measure of disagreement regarding the method of baptism, where only a minimal amount of water is used, it is generally by default or devolved practice rather than for theological reasons.

This issue could take us right back to my friend Nigel’s currant bun dilemma. A richly fruited bun had to be legally defined by the amount of fruit used, but can baptism be defined by the amount of water used? There are undoubtedly large numbers of Christians who have lingering doubts over their baptism and it certainly hasn’t helped the matter by some churches opting to use what appears to be minute amounts of water. As there is no theological or biblical argument that insists on only using small amounts, it is hard to understand why more liberal quantities are not used as a matter of course.

Quentin’s story

Quentin had been a major in the Green Berets and had seen active combat in the Far East. On leaving the forces he had married Jenny, they had both become Christians and Quentin had felt a call into the Anglican ministry. The training college was a small one on the West coast of England and Quentin and Jenny had managed to find a small cottage a stone’s throw from the sea.

The college where Quentin studied was too spiritually dry for this couple who had come to faith as mature converts, and they began to look around for somewhere to get some fellowship; a place that

would help their spiritual, as opposed to their academic, life. They discovered that a short way along the coast a local hotel owner was holding Christian meetings. It was just what they were looking for. Over the next few months Quentin and Jenny grew in their faith and in their assurance that God was working in their lives. Most of the other folk in the group were from House Church or Baptist backgrounds and when a local lad was converted, he was baptised in the sea.

Quentin and Jenny began to wonder whether they too should be baptised by full immersion, and they spent many evenings arguing and agonising over the matter. They were nearly decided, that in spite of their calling to the Church of England, believer's baptism was the next step for them to take.

A few days later Matt and Sue called in for a cup of tea. Matt was the chef at the hotel and often preached at the meetings there. He knew his Bible well and as Quentin and Jenny plied him with questions, his answers finally cleared up their last vestige of doubt. Having made the decision Quentin was not happy to wait. As a Green Beret he had been a man of action and he brought that same decisiveness to his faith. They discussed going out to the sea but it was late evening, and in the end settled for trooping upstairs to the bathroom where Matt baptised Quentin and Jenny in the bath.

A few weeks later Matt and Sue moved on, and a few weeks after that a visiting speaker came to the hotel where Quentin shared what had happened. With a sigh the visitor explained that they needed to be baptised again. There were two reasons. Firstly, there had been no witnesses and secondly there had not been enough water to ensure that they had both been totally immersed with no part of their body above water. It was daytime and the sea was there. Gathering a few friends around they went down to the beach and Quentin and Jenny were baptised again.

A TESTIMONY OF OUR FAITH?

If you have been baptised in a Baptist church or one of the New churches, the likelihood is that in the lead up to your baptism, you will have been told something along the lines of: 'Baptism is a testimony of your faith, an outward act declaring that you have become a Christian and it is a great occasion to invite all your friends and family.' I have studied baptism for very many years but so far I have been unable to discover where this concept of baptism as testimony comes from.

There is a clear difference between something where the purpose is testimony, from something where one of the incidental results may be testimony.

When I married my wife it did indeed let everyone know that I loved her and in that sense it was a testimony of my love, but that was not the purpose of the marriage ceremony. It was an incidental result of it. When we are baptised, it may indeed let others know that we are followers of Jesus, but there is no biblical basis for seeing that as the purpose or even part of the purpose of it.

When the apostle Paul was baptised there is no record of anyone being present other than Ananias. If testimony should have been a major part of the baptism, what a missed opportunity that was. The believers could have hired the local stadium, got in a guest apostle as the headline speaker and advertised it widely as: 'Leading Jewish persecutor converted!' Similarly, the Ethiopian eunuch held a position of great authority and his conversion could have made a huge impact, but he was baptised by a desert road with probably no more than his chariot driver in sight.

When Quentin and Jenny were re-baptised, part of the reason given was that there were no witnesses. On that basis the apostle Paul should have been re-baptised as well.

I am sure that most people would agree that it is good to be publically baptised and the more witnesses the better. However, to give that as the main reason (or even one of the reasons) for baptism or re-baptism, is misleading and may divert attention away from the true purpose of baptism.

The other reason that was given for Quentin's re-baptism was that there had not been enough water to completely submerge either him or Jenny in the bath. That may have been the case, as although the bath was a normal size, Quentin was actually a big bloke. This is an interesting situation. If the validity of a person's baptism can be nullified purely by the fact that not every inch of their body went under water, then possibly a large number of baptisms should be invalidated.

Even though the bible does not give specific instructions as to exactly how a baptism should be carried out, some believers teach that being fully immersed and laying down is necessary to fit the image of burial.

A PICTURE OF BURIAL?

Paul speaks of us being buried with Christ by baptism and some would understand this to mean that baptism is a picture or illustration of burial whereby the going down beneath the water and the coming up again is like the action of being buried and raised again. Certainly in our culture, where for many years, people were buried beneath the earth when they died, similarity of action can be

discerned and it may give us a helpful picture. The problem about pressing this imagery too far however, is that most of the burials recorded in the bible, including that of Jesus, did not take place in the way that we normally carry out burials.

After Jesus died, he was placed in a cave and a large stone was rolled across the front of it. Though not necessarily a universal practice, this was a fairly common method of burial. It was how Lazarus was buried and when we read the Old Testament stories of Abraham and the patriarchs we see them purchasing caves as family resting places for the dead.

In other countries and cultures different practices are followed for the disposal of the dead, including burning and laying on the surface of the ground under a pile of rocks. In Spain I remember seeing what looked like tiers of concrete or metal coffins stacked four or five high on top of each other in rows.

Going down and coming up again in water may have some pictorial similarity to burial in earth and resurrection from earth, but it bears little similarity to burial in a cave or being burned in a fire (which is now the most common method in our culture, and was also the fate of many of the early Christian martyrs).

A major problem about focusing on baptism as a sort of visual aid, as a picture of death, burial and resurrection, is that it restricts the value of the image to those cultures that do actually bury the dead beneath the ground. It also obscures the fact that Paul was saying that baptism in Christ actually accomplishes death, burial and resurrection and not merely that it shows a pictorial representation of it. In doing this, it is not dependent upon a particular form of baptism or of following an exact pattern.

James' story

James had become an Anglican late in life. His parents had been convinced atheists and James himself had never questioned what they had taught him. In his fifties, James went through a family crisis which caused him to try and find some emotional comfort in whatever place he could, and this had included visiting the local Church of England.

Martin the vicar, was a thoroughly nice, if somewhat unorthodox individual. He responded warmly to James, inviting him to play golf, and to join himself and his wife for small and select dinner parties. The conversation at these was sometimes slightly risqué and James often had the suspicion that there might be other parties which took the conversations a step further into actual practice. Martin explained that Jesus was a man just like us and that the task of the church was to rediscover humanity as demonstrated in Jesus himself.

The church was to be for the world, and not against it, and Christians were to be at the forefront of social and practical action. James started going along on a regular basis, and in the liturgy, the robes, the candles and the incense, he found a mystical spiritual element that had always been missing in his life. In Martin and his circle, he found an earthy friendship that had also been lacking. The total package appealed to James. On occasions he even thought that God might really exist, and he decided that he would join the club and become a member of the church.

Martin explained that there were a few formalities and asked whether James had been confirmed. He had not, and it turned out that he had never even been baptised. Rather than this being an issue for him, Martin seemed happy that this could give an opportunity for some proper church ceremonies. The church building was modern, built about forty-five years earlier for a Local

Ecumenical Project that had foundered almost from the start, and as such it had a baptistery suitable for full immersion. Shortly afterwards, James was baptised. This was followed immediately by a fairly wild party and three weeks later by a quiet confirmation service led by an elderly, just competent bishop.

A year later, James had to move to the South Coast because the company he worked for was re-locating. He was sad to leave, and in his final conversation with Martin had promised to try out some of the new local churches. Martin did however slip into the conversation that he should avoid any evangelical ones. James had no idea what that meant but determined to find out and, being of a slightly contrary nature, decided that he would visit a nearby Church of England that apparently fitted this category. The experience was different from anything he had ever come across before, and if it had not been for the fact that he received an invitation to lunch for the following week, he would probably never have returned.

As it turned out James went on an Alpha course, was dramatically converted to Christ and almost straightaway received a call to the ministry. He decided that he ought to put a few things straight and so explained to the minister that he had previously been at a church where the minister (nice as he was) did not appear to be a Christian and had certainly not believed that Jesus was God. James realised that he himself had not been a Christian either and nor did it appear were most of the other members of the congregation. James felt it imperative that he be properly baptised; that is by a believing minister, in front of a believing congregation and with himself in possession of true faith.

James request was declined. In spite of his conviction he agreed to drop the matter. James however lost much of his enthusiasm and never did take up the call to the ministry.

WHO CAN BAPTISE?

This question will receive quite a different response depending upon the stream or denomination that the answer comes from.

The bible does not give any plain teaching on this matter. The original instruction to baptise which came from Jesus, was addressed to the eleven disciples who had been with Him from the beginning. However, the baptisms that are recorded in the book of Acts were carried out by various people, including Philip, an evangelist, and Ananias, who is simply called a disciple.

Although Paul the apostle baptised people, when writing to the Corinthian church, he commented that he did not consider this to be a primary aspect of his calling. Although in practice, many churches only consider it appropriate for baptisms to be carried out by an ordained minister, generally speaking it is agreed that any baptism by any disciple of Jesus may be considered valid. The grey area tends to come when there are doubts about the Christian status of the person carrying out the baptism.

During the middle ages in England, it was not uncommon for midwives to baptise new born babies, partly on the basis that the infant mortality rate was so high. Although virtually the whole country would have held at least to a nominal Christian faith, the likelihood would have been that some, if not most of the midwives, had little or no substance to their belief other than popular traditions and superstitions. This was the era before the printing press, when bibles were still primarily hand-written and often only in Latin. Most of the common people would have had no direct knowledge of Christianity from the bible and few would have had a living faith in Jesus.

Today, in both Roman Catholic and Church of England practice, it is allowed that in emergency situations of life and death, baptisms can be carried out by people who are not themselves baptised or professing faith. The sort of scenario where this might happen is where a baby is born with no expectancy of survival, and where there is no priest available. In such a case, a baptism by a non-Christian nurse could be accepted, provided it was done with the intention that it is a true Christian baptism into the church.

Throughout history, there have been periods when the clergy have not been required to be converted. Through the novels of Jane Austin, we have become familiar with the 18th and 19th Century pattern of many families. The eldest son would inherit the estate and enter politics, the second son would join the army, the third son go into law, and the fourth son join the church as a clergyman. Whilst no longer a functioning pattern it does still happen that unconverted clergymen are accepted and appointed as ministers. For instance, in some parts of the present day American Presbyterian and Episcopalian churches, there would be a strong resistance to ordaining any to the clergy who held to the evangelical understanding of the need for conversion. For someone baptised in such a situation, especially if they themselves were unconverted at the time, it can create a dilemma.

In seeking to ascertain what constitutes Christian baptism, there would certainly be some sections of the church, which would have problems about giving that definition to a baptism where the person carrying out the ceremony was not themselves a Christian.

Sally's story

Standing no more than four feet ten inches tall, her slight frame twisted to the side as it had been since birth, Sally looked radiant. She glanced along the line of confirmation candidates to where the Bishop was praying for Mandy. "Receive the Holy Spirit".

She could just hear him and wondered whether he would be a man of his word and remember the special agreement that they had made beforehand.

Sally had been baptised as a baby and had come to a real faith at the age of five, now at fifteen she wanted to make a public confession of that, but could not persuade herself that confirmation alone was enough. She had attended the Church of England as long as she had been going to church and was very happy there. But somehow she knew that for her, the step she was taking now had to be something more than a confirmation of what had happened to her as a baby. Sally had made up her mind that she wanted to be baptised, even though as far as the church was concerned, she had already received baptism fifteen years earlier.

Sally was used to receiving a variety of reactions when speaking to people for the first time. Not many people manage to entirely ignore physical abnormalities in those that they meet, and Sally, born with a five foot six bone structure that had twisted to be eight or nine inches shorter, had spent her life coping with having an exceptional intelligence contained in a somewhat unusual body. Her keen mind and the strength of her conviction had been brought into play when she had met the Bishop on an earlier occasion. She had made her case and explained that it simply would not be good enough just to be confirmed.

The Bishop was now praying for the person next to her, and so far he had not deviated from the pattern that he had no doubt used many, many times before. But then he was standing before her.

With a gentle smile playing on his lips, he reached for the lapel microphone he was wearing and switched it off. With his other hand he pulled out a small glass flask of water and poured some onto his fingers. Reaching out to Sally he touched her forehead and in a clear but very soft voice he said, "I baptise you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit". He then switched the microphone back on, raised his voice to the level that it had previously been and returned to the pattern of the confirmation service.

Sally was confirmed along with her friends, but unbeknown to all but a few she had also received baptism.

Jason's story

Jason was a vicar's son. One of four children, he had been brought up in a godly family where he and his siblings all came to have a genuine faith in Jesus. His brothers and his sister all went to various universities where they all had similar experiences. Their faith was challenged, strengthened and finally matured into a place where it was truly their own and not just something passed on by their parents. At the culmination of this process they all re-examined the nature of their baptisms as babies and, even though they had subsequently been confirmed, they all decided that they wanted to be baptised as believers by full immersion.

Each had told mum and dad as it had happened, and on each occasion all the family had gathered at the appropriate church in whatever university town it was to take place. They had been good

occasions, and whilst dad had experienced some emotion at their departures from Anglicanism, he had made no secret of the fact that he was delighted with their growth as Christians.

Jason remained at home with mum and dad. Being of a more practical nature he had managed to obtain an apprenticeship as a plumber and was thoroughly enjoying the work.

But although of a more practical bent than his brothers and sister, he had no less of a spiritual enquiring mind than they. He too went through the process of being challenged, strengthened and matured, and like them he came to the conclusion that he wanted to be baptised as a believer by full immersion.

Dad was again delighted at the growth shown in his son's faith, but this time he was presented with a problem. He was the vicar at the church which Jason attended, and as vicar he could not countenance a request for re-baptism. He was faced with three choices; suggest his son leave the Church of England and find another church nearby which practiced believer's baptism, persuade his son that his understanding was wrong (especially difficult after the experience of the other children), or try and find some other compromise solution.

The church building had a full size baptistry and it was this that gave him the idea. Jason had not been confirmed yet. Why not confirm him with full immersion in water? It was after all confirmation of baptismal vows. Those who wanted to could view it as baptism, but officially it would simply be confirmation.

Some folk in the church were delighted, others expressed doubts and some of the fellow ministers in the town threw up their hands in horror at yet another level of confusion being added to the baptismal pile.

CAN WE BEND THE RULES?

One of the difficult areas over recent years has been the willingness of some Church of England clergy to bend the rules. The two stories above (with names and situations changed) reflect the situation with some Church of England clergy who are genuinely seeking to respond to living situations of faith, but in order to do so they are muddying the waters of baptismal thinking.

In our first chapter, we quoted Michael Green's statement that baptism cannot be repeated. If we are talking about Christian baptism, we are in absolute agreement with him. However, as we said earlier, the crunch point is how we define Christian baptism.

Within the Evangelical wing of the Church of England, perhaps the most commonly held interpretation is that baptism is the New Testament equivalent of circumcision*. Along with some Free Evangelicals, some Brethren, and many Presbyterians, there are clergy in the Church of England who are persuaded that this is the correct interpretation of scripture, but there also appear to be a number who are unconvinced about it but who nonetheless give it lip service as the default position. It is a convenient theory that gives a base for carrying out infant baptisms, and some who have a strong commitment to evangelism and outreach, see it as a good evangelistic tool which enables them to get into family homes in the Parish.

A problem can arise with some of clergy who are sympathetic to those who are persuaded that infant baptism is not valid, but because of their commitment to the Church of England, do not feel

able to publically express their position. In some circumstances, they therefore undertake pseudo-baptisms of adults previously baptised as infants. which they term as affirmation of baptismal vows with full immersion. Unfortunately some of those who receive this wet confirmation appear to treat it as baptism, and do not seem to be discouraged from doing so.

The potential harm of this practice is often underestimated. If the person who has undergone a pseudo-baptism moves on to another church, they may find that they put the minister or leaders of that church in an unenviable position. When two 'baptisms' have taken place they cannot by definition both be Christian baptisms. One or both of them must be considered invalid, a situation which is very hard to deal with without causing some level of upset and disagreement in the Christian community.

George Beasley Murray once expressed the view that there is no such thing as an unbaptised Christian in the New Testament. It may be equally added that there is no such thing as a twice baptised Christian, where both baptisms are understood as Christian baptism. When someone undergoes re-baptism and is baptised twice or even more times, there should be a clear understanding why the earlier baptism(s) are not considered to be valid Christian baptisms.

** This is a commonly held view among some evangelical clergy, though many do not realise that it is a comparatively recent importation into Anglicanism. It appears to have come from Pierre Marcell, a French Reformed theologian, in the late 1940's. Marcell was setting out a long held Reformed view, but one which had not been previously accepted by Anglicans. I believe that it is such a major issue that I have written another booklet 'Why Evangelical Anglicans Should Not Baptise Babies', which specifically shows the biblical and historical weakness of such a view.*

Bronwyn's story

Bronwyn had been converted during the Welsh revival in 1904. To those who knew it, there was no other experience of Christianity that was worth comparison. Some of those who looked back insisted that God had selected Wales because its language was to be the language of heaven. Some English people who had heard the old Welsh men and women pray, conceded that it might be true.

There were not many of them left when Geraint started a new series of meetings. The revival had finished over sixty years previously and most of those who had not died, had long grown cold. But Bronwyn was neither dead nor cold, and she was eager as ever to share the testimonies of her conversion and especially of her baptism.

"Imagine a warm Spring day" she began. "The trees were coming into freshness with leaves so bright and green that you felt some of them would go pop if they couldn't let out the life within them. Some of us felt like that. The Spirit of God had come down so mightily that I had seen old men turn cartwheels in the road just because they could find no lesser way to express what they were feeling. There were some mind you who didn't like it. Fierce faced men and women with arms so tightly folded that their hands went red as the blood stopped flowing.

It were Pastor Jones at the Chapel who came up with the idea. He had been a hard drinking miner before his conversion, but then he crossed the line as he put it and came out of the wilderness into the promised land. What Pastor Jones had suggested were that when

we baptised someone we should make it as real to the Bible as we could. Well we didn't have no wilderness and we didn't have no promised land, but there were the brook just outside the village. I were one of those eager to be done. Those who had been baptised previously went and stood on the far side of the brook, and those of us to be baptised were on this side.

It were as heaven opened. The sun shone through those leaves bursting with life, right onto the church group, whilst a cloud seemed to cover the village. Me and the other new converts had to walk out of the village, away from our families and some of our best friends. They all watched us; some grim faced but some with a longing inside, and suddenly as we reached the brook we came into the sunshine. The cloud were still over the village, but not over us. We almost ran into the water. But although the brook were only about ten feet wide it were waist deep in the middle. So we eased in and Pastor Jones and two or three others came to meet us. We confessed Jesus as Saviour, and the Pastor and the others plunged us into the water. When we came out, we came to where the church people was singing and praising God. And do you know, when we looked back to where we had come from, it were still covered in cloud, but we were in bright sunshine.”

Bronwyn let out a sigh, sad and yet full of joyful longing. “That were a proper baptism” she said.

SO WHAT IS PROPER CHRISTIAN BAPTISM?

Bronwyn told me her experience well over forty years ago. It sounded idyllic and just as many of us would like it to be, but we need to be realistic and recognise that such settings rarely happen.

When we see a fairy tale wedding such as happened when Prince William and Kate got married, we may be tempted to day-dream of such an event for us or for our children. But I recall Alan Bennet telling of his parents wedding. His father was employed by the old Co-operative Society and his request for a day off work to get married was turned down. On approaching the local vicar to ask for a wedding before he started work he was told that a legal ceremony could not take place before eight am. A compromise was agreed. Alan's father and mother, with two witnesses, arrived at the church at seven thirty, and all the non-legal parts of the ceremony were dealt with. Then at eight o'clock the vicar quickly carried out the legal part so that father could get off to start work at half-past. Although a world apart in setting and show, Alan's father and mother were not one wit less married than William and Kate.

One of the unfortunate things that has happened in the Church is that the focus of baptism has switched from the meaning and result of the act, to the act or ceremony itself.

It seems to me that an argument about whether a person is baptised or not because their big toe did not go under the water when they were supposed to be immersed, is plain silly. So too are many of the finer points regarding the words spoken or particular methods used. Also a person is no less or more baptised based on the level of feeling generated, than that is an indication of whether a wedding has taken place or not. The Orthodox church makes much of the comparison of baptism to a marriage and that is actually very helpful.

In a marriage ceremony, there is much that is tradition and much that is culturally based. There is nothing wrong with that. What needs to be identified is the element of the ceremony which actually constitutes the couple as married and what may be desired or preferable, but not essential. Being married is not the same as being unmarried. There is a difference. So too, a baptised person is not the same as an unbaptised person. What needs to be identified are the key elements, which differentiate between getting wet in a culturally or denominationally preferred manner and undergoing valid Christian baptism.

Some years ago when I worked as a market trader, many of the deals I did were sealed by a handshake. We never had written contracts. The guys I worked with were a friendly bunch and when we met we usually shook hands then as well. None of us ever confused the two actions. To someone watching, we might have been seen to shake hands twice, and they may have assumed that each act carried equal meaning. But to us they were very different. If we were doing a deal, a welcome handshake would have had no relevance whatsoever. But once we shook hands with the agreed intention of sealing our word, then a contract was made. They were both handshakes, but in a court of law they would not have been judged equally valid as a contractual handshake. The action would be defined by the understanding and intention behind it, and the subsequent consequences following it.

This is the nub of the matter. An act is not simply defined by what happens in that act, but also by the intention that accompanies it. If I slap my wife around the face in anger, that is totally different than giving her a slap because she has fainted and the medic I telephoned told me to do it to bring her round. To an onlooker, the actions may have seemed identical, but the intentions were not.

I would suggest that we have probably mistaken many baptismal acts for Christian baptism when they have been nothing of the sort. In observing the action, we have assumed and read into it, a content that was not there, and often not intended to be there either.

The statement which we noted at the beginning, ‘If you call it Christian baptism then it must be Christian baptism’, which has increasingly become an accepted position, makes about as much sense as one of my market trader colleagues insisting that I had bought a van load of goods, because I gave him a morning handshake. It was a handshake, but without the full intention of a transaction accompanying the action. No contract was made and no deal done. Baptism, that is **Christian** baptism, needs to be primarily understood in terms of the **transaction** rather than simply the action.

The important transaction that takes place in a wedding ceremony is the agreement between husband and wife that they are henceforward permanently joined as one unit. When marriages fail, it is probably because of the failure to live in the reality of that transaction, rather than the finer points of the ceremony which accompanied the transaction. So too in baptism. The key defining element is the inward, permanent, covenantal and spiritual union with Jesus Christ, and a present receiving of the promises of God. The form of the ceremony, though not without some importance, is secondary. A baptised life is the subsequent ongoing one, which is lived in the state of being both contractually and actually joined to Jesus, and in the good of all that union brings.

When we looked at the one biblical example which we have of disciples being re-baptised, and we examined the difference between John’s baptism and Christian baptism, the main thing missing under John was the present reality of what he spoke about.

His baptism was more similar to an engagement than to a marriage. It contained promise, hope and expectation, but unfulfilled promise, hope and expectation.

When we consider the possible need or validity of re-baptism, whilst it may be necessary to consider the particular elements and method of the first ceremony, the most important thing to consider is our actual union with Christ in his death, burial and resurrection.

It is possible to be married and not to live in the good of the union that was made in the marriage ceremony, and it is also possible to have been validly baptised but not to know all that brings, and hence not to be living in the reality of that. What is needed in such circumstances is not re-marriage or re-baptism, but a good fresh start and to live in the benefits of what we already have.

But if what we have entered into with Jesus is more like an engagement than a marriage, perhaps with hope and desire but not fulfilment, then we may need to re-examine not so much the form, but the purpose, intention and result of what we have previously been through. In such cases a real Christian baptism may be just what is needed.