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#107 Baptism: What happens? Should we baptise infants?

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Ask NT Wright Anything - Premier

What happens at baptism? How does John's baptism of repentance differ from Christian baptism? And what does Tom think of infant vs believer's baptism? Justin asks the questions and NT Wright responds.

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Transcript

the ask nty anything podcast. Hello and welcome back this is Justin Briley and the show brought to you as usual in partnership with N T right online SBCK and Premier unbelievable where I'm head of theology and apologetics. Well today on the show addressing your questions on baptism.

What happens at baptism? How does John's baptism of repentance differ from Christian baptism? And what does Tom think of that old chestnut infant versus believers baptism? We'll get to all of those on today's programme. Thanks to JLDY's in Ghana who said massive thank you to the team for helping us to understand and grow our faith in Christ Jesus. I'm amazed at the depth of wisdom and knowledge from Tom.

Guess it's true that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. Keep doing the good work of the Lord. Thank you so much.

Great to know we've listeners in Ghana and that was left as a rating and a review on our Apple podcast. So wherever you get your podcast from, if you can rate and review us, it helps others find out more about the show. You can also do that at askntyight.com. Now of course just recently we've been seeing the awful side of Ukraine being invaded by

Russia.

And when I next sit down with Tom to ask more questions in forthcoming shows, I'm sure we'll address that crisis. I know many of you are praying and doing what you can at this time. I will be hosting a special edition of Unbelievable, looking at the crisis this weekend.

So do check that out on the Unbelievable podcast if you'd like to watch or listen to that show. And by the way, you can book for Unbelievable the conference 2022 on Saturday the 14th of May right now. We're going to be live from the British Library in London, but you'll be able to attend from anywhere in the world online.

Our theme is God Unmuted. We're helping the church to find its authentic voice again. We often hear your questions here on the show around living in a divided, politicized society, Covid, cancel culture, progressive versus conservatives, identity politics, all in our news feeds frequently as well.

So how do we respond in grace and truth to all of that? That's what we're going to be looking at in this year's conference. Some wonderful speakers going to be joining us as well. Alistom McGrath, Lisa Fields, Glenn Scrivener, Sharon Dierichs, Joseph DeSouza, John Wyatt, Phil Vischer and Sky Jatani and more guests to be announced plus your ticket gets you a place at our evening big conversation live event the same day.

We'll be bringing renowned brain psychologist Dr Ian McGill Christ, opposite Christian, neuroscientist Sharon Dierichs for a conversation on the mind and its master going to be a great day and a great evening. Find out more at unbelievable dot live and that link with today's podcast as well. For now on to your questions.

Well, welcome back to today's edition of the show. Today we're looking at your questions on baptism. We were looking at the other end of life on recent shows but this time looking at often what happens at a very young age but often at an adult age for other Christians depending on your theology of baptism.

So we've got some general questions and very specific questions on today's show. Before we leap into them Tom, I'm assuming you were baptized as a child. Would that be correct? Yes, yes I was.

Yes and has that the choice you've made for your children as well along the way? Yes, all four of our children were baptized as infants and all our six grandchildren have been baptized. Indeed, the grandsons I baptized all of them myself, all four of them. Oh, what a lovely privilege to have that.

We'll come to a question on infant baptism a bit later on but let's start just with more of a general question. This one from Matthew in Laden in the Netherlands who says in previous episodes you've answered some questions about baptism from specific angles. I

want to ask a more general but in a more fundamental sense though what happens at baptism? I grew up thinking of it as a symbol that communicates to the world that you decide you want to die to your sin and live for Jesus with as a consequence that you're not supposed to baptize infants because they can't decide that but from what I've heard and read from you I've started to think this might just be a small part of something bigger that's going on in baptism.

What would be your summary of what happens at baptism? Wow, it's a huge question and not an easy one. There isn't that much in the New Testament about it partly because the New Testament writers, especially Paul, seem to take baptism for granted. They know that the people that they're addressing have been baptized and then they can explain a bit about what that now means but there's no passage which lays it all out in the sort of way that we might want.

I think one of the things which has impinged on me as I've been working with St Paul particularly over many years now is that Paul sees baptism as concretely expressing a truth about the whole church, that the whole church are the new Exodus people. There's a lot of Exodus symbolism about coming through the water so that we are leaving behind the world of slavery, in this case slavery to sin and we are on the way to the promised inheritance which is God's new heavens and new earth. This is therefore about a concrete definite community.

It's not simply about people's souls, it's not simply about their religious interiorities. It's about the marking out of a community. That of course is what people were reacting to in particularly the 17th century when some of what we now think of as Baptist movements were really getting going because they had seen so much formal church going where the whole population had been baptized and it didn't seem to have any effect on them living as Christians either in their behavior or in their faith or whatever.

People said no, no, no, what matters is we need to be baptized now as adults because now we really mean it. Of course then you run into the same problems that when you have a church composed of people who have been baptized often as young adults but as adults you have the same problems of discipline and of people falling away etc. As in my tradition or the Roman tradition and most others actually to be fair in the history of Christianity we've always had that problem and here's the thing Paul had that problem as well in 1 Corinthians 10.

He talks about people who have come into the family but haven't figured out what it's all about yet and their jolly will need to because they are part of the family but they're not actually reflecting what the family is supposed to be about. So the two things which anchor baptism, one is the Exodus and John the Baptist will come to him in another question I think. He was clearly doing a symbolic Exodus when he was plunging people into the River Jordan.

The other thing is the death and resurrection of Jesus. Jesus himself spoke about his death in advance as a baptism with which I have to be baptized and it says to James and John can you be baptized with the baptism I'm going to be baptized with seeing it already in terms of dying and rising a personal new Exodus going through the waters and out the other side into freedom. When we then put that together and say what's going on I think every baptism is the whole church saying this is who we are because of Jesus death and resurrection we are God's new Exodus people and within that we welcome this person, these people be their young or old into this family.

It's a reaffirmation of what the whole family is like is about and that constitutes us again, reminds us again of who we are like the family all getting together for a great celebratory meal. We go away knowing and feeling and believing that we're part of something larger than ourselves that has a past or present and a future that we are wanting to be part of and it reinforces the ways that that family then is supposed to live. So that's for starters there's plenty more as well.

I have to mention the Holy Spirit but the Holy Spirit clearly is part of that whole deal. Absolutely. I mean and there's more that we could draw out and we're going to come again to the infant baptism question in a moment anyway but let's talk about John's baptism which obviously introduces some of the Gospels as well and both Joshua in Chicago, Illinois and Doug from Kentucky have similar questions on this.

Josh says, "What do we know about the purpose of John's baptism for his followers? The modern Christian tradition that I was raised in emphasized our baptism as symbolically choosing to take part in the death and resurrection of Christ. Would I be correct in assuming that John's baptism would not have had this emphasis? What then would have been the spiritual or symbolic significance for John's followers?" And then Doug again asks, "Did the act of baptism begin with John or were others baptizing before him?" And secondly, "What was the meaning of John's baptism of others? Did baptism hold the same meaning prior to Jesus' death and resurrection? Unless I'm way off track which I think is often the case, baptism in the Christian faith today is being baptized in Christ which obviously wasn't going on prior to his death and resurrection thanks for your wisdom." So very similar questions there. Firstly though, was baptism generally something happening in the Jewish world before John? There were various different Jewish rights of washing, etc.

And indeed it looks as though the settlement at Qumran which is down near Jericho where, similar to where John was baptizing, they had certain rituals of washing. It's as though people in the days of John the Baptist and Jesus, what we loosely call the second temple period, were hoping and longing and praying that God would fulfill his ancient promises and restore Israel to being the people that they were really meant to be. Of course, most of the Jews by then was scattered around.

Most of Israel was scattered around the world and there was simply some from the tribes of Judah and Benjamin and some Levites in and around Jerusalem and in Galilee, not very many, but some. And some of them were clinging on to this hope. And so the washing was about repentance, picking up from Deuteronomy 30 that if you turn again to the Lord of all your heart, then he will do the great thing, the great redemption that we're waiting for.

But for John, it looks as though it's very explicitly tied to the Old Testament narratives about Abraham's family going through the waters of Exodus. The waters are symbolic, but John says, "Don't say to yourselves, 'Oh, we've got Abraham for our Father because God can raise up children of Abraham from these stones.'" So you've got John retrieving the Old Testament narratives, which of course Jesus himself does, and the gospel writers in describing the transition from John to Jesus make that clear. This is part of this whole movement.

It's not forget everything that's gone before. Forget the Old Testament, forget Israel's history, and now let's do something quite different. It's very much the fulfillment of that.

And then through Jesus' own words and then through obviously Jesus' own death and resurrection, the church picks it up and now focuses it on Jesus' death and resurrection. So that Romans 6 is all about that. This is who you are.

You are people who have died with them as I have been raised with them. Therefore, this is how you must now live. And Colossians 2 says pretty much the same as well.

And in Galatians 3, Paul makes it a remarkable feature of his teaching about unity. The one family of Abraham, now shaped by the Messiah, is if you've been baptized into the Messiah, you have died and been raised with him. Therefore, you are all one in Messiah Jesus.

So baptism accrues these different meanings which come rushing together. But it's all about what Jesus himself chose to do and say that Jesus knew that what he had to do in going to his death was a Passover moment, the Passover moment. This was the new Exodus.

So it's to be people of the new Exodus shaped by the death and resurrection of Jesus in dwelt then by his spirit that comes through very powerfully in 1 Corinthians. And therefore, being God's people for the world, God's Christ shaped spirit dwelt people for the world. How much more can we build into it? But something like that.

Final question is really just coming down to that question you've already addressed briefly on infant baptism. Levi from Seattle in Washington says I was raised with Pido baptism, infant baptism being an end and all and be all in regards to baptism. However, later in life, my teen years in particular, I decided to take the plunge again.

My grandfather was quite upset and called me an anabaptist, really no clue what that meant at the time. Now as an adult, I find myself adhering to infant baptism so much that I baptised my first child in secret, fearing my ex-wife, son's mother would no longer want to be married. Well, I find myself in a new marriage with a wonderful new daughter.

And in this marriage, I've also taken on two girls as my own. Yet I still want them to be baptized. I don't know if that's out of sheer stubbornness or me wanting to let God know that these children belong to him.

So there's a few questions here from Levi. The first of which is simply what are the arguments for and against infant baptism? Are there valid arguments for believers baptism? What is the Jewish view of baptism also? And is it incorrect to me to want to baptise my whole house? And he says for your information, my new wife who professes faith says if that is what I feel called to do to baptise them, then she won't stand in the way, but not to stand in the way if they want to be baptized later. Anyway, that's sort of the personal circumstances of Levi.

But why don't we start with the big question, I suppose, about infant versus believers baptism? Yes, I would say as most Anglicans would, that actually all baptism is believers baptism because belief is actually not an isolated individual thing. I don't believe in a little box or by myself. Yes, I have my own particular take on things, but the great creed say we believe.

Belief is something that actually we do together. And of course, you can't slide by and say, well, most people do, but I'm actually crossing my fingers on this one. The corporate nature of the creed is always an invitation to make this faith one's own, which is something that has to go on and on and on because very few people understand and affirm every article in the great Christian creeds from an early age and sustain it throughout their lives.

It's belonging to the family which is shaped by this faith so that all baptism is about that, it's about belief. Now, from that point of view, then when we baptise a child, when I have baptized my own grandchildren, for instance, and children and grandchildren, what we are saying is not, I think this child actually already believes therefore that's all right. But we believe and we are going to live our lives and construct our family and do what we do.

Please, God, because it's very difficult to do, but to try to do it in such a way as to embody and reflect that so that they will grow up with the atmosphere that these things make sense that they can believe and trust in God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. I grew up in a family like that didn't talk much about our faith, but it was kind of taken for granted. So from an early age, it all made sense to me and still does make sense.

I think that's really important about how the children within a family who have been

baptized, what the assumptions are. It's not simply, "Oh, now let's wait until your eight or ten or fifteen or something," and then see what you decide because everything that the family does will condition them to what they're likely to decide. So it is, of course, difficult and especially when, as with Levi from Seattle, there's been a change of spouse and new family members coming in.

And then I think it's up to the people who are caring for them, pastorally, to sit down with them and pray with them and think about what is the wise thing to do in that case. Clearly, it's right though to say that if you have been baptized, you cannot get rebaptized. Baptism, by definition, is something that only happens once.

So if you say, "Well, now that I'm a teenager, I want to go and take the plunge again," what you are therefore saying is that whatever was done to me when I was a child wasn't baptism, which actually is a bit of a slap in the face for those who were prayerfully bringing you to God and claiming the promises of Jesus over you. So I think we have to be very careful and sensitive there. Of course, there is a natural reaction against just the, "Oh, let's get the child done," which still happens in many circles, sadly.

But even then, remarkably, and I've seen this again and again, God honors promises even when most of the people involved don't know very much about what's happening. And I would rather leave it to the sovereignty of God than leave it to the energy or insight of the particular people. That's not a great argument, but that's part of where I would start to address these huge and difficult issues.

What about the fact that Levi feels the urge to see his whole household baptized? Is that something that you understand that you would say, "Yes, that's the fact." Yes, I think that is a thoroughly Christian and New Testament-ish instinct. I mean, the Philippian jailer, it's midnight, the walls are falling down. There's been an earthquake.

He's about to kill himself. Paul says, "Don't do that. We're all here.

Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved." And he is baptized. He and all his household. And we're not told that there were little children there, but it looks as though this is the whole lot.

This is wife, children, quite possibly servants as well. And this is a way of saying, "We are now going to be these people." So a wonderful book by a man who is a missionary to the Messiah in Kenya called Christianity Rediscovered. And you may know that book, Justin.

You may remember the name of the author because it's just slipping my mind at the moment. Is it Donovan? I've got a favor. That's right.

Vincent Donovan. And he talks about living with them a particular Messiah tribe. And at a certain point, the chief saying to him, "We have heard what you've said.

We've watched you, how you live. We are going to become Christians." And he at once starts to say, "Well, of course, these people are ready, but I know those ones aren't." And the chief saying, "You don't understand. We are going to do this if it's going to be anything.

It's all of us." And that, I think, is a very profound humane and new testament instinct. Yes. Yes.

Perhaps there's something about our individualism that comes out in the concept of, "We got to leave it to each individual to decide." Whereas actually that kind of mindset didn't exist so much in other cultures today or in the past. And there is this silly idea, which people still have today, that the average person walking about in the modern Western world is in the kind of neutral space able to decide at any moment between different worldviews. Whereas if we know anything about anything, we know that there are massive cultural pressures on all of us.

So if we don't decide, we are simply going with the flow. And Paul says, "No, do not be conformed to this world that be transformed by the renewing of your mind." And that's very much a baptismal theme. It's been really helpful to get your thoughts on this whole area.

Thank you very much, Tom. And for anyone who's wondering themselves about baptism, obviously it is down to each individual's conscience with what direction they go. But I hope you've found these thoughts at least helpful on today's show.

We'll be back again with more questions next time. But for now, thank you very much, Tom. Thank you.

[music] Thanks for being with us on today's edition of the show. And if you want more from the program, do register at AskNTRight.com. Feel free to ask a question once you get the link having registered. Until next time, have a good week.

And next time, we're going to be looking at whether we can lose our salvation. Someone wants to know what about the fact that I just don't feel worthy to be a disciple of Jesus. Could I think that I'm saved? But not be.

And what about those that Jesus says, depart from me in Matthew 7? I'll be asking your questions to Tom as usual. And just a final reminder to go to unbelievable.live to register for ticketing for unbelievable the conference in May, helping you to take God off mute in your life. Again, the link is unbelievable.live and it's with today's podcast.

Thanks for being with us and see you next time.

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