

# OpenTheo

## Q&A#60 Wittgenstein and Baptism

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### Alastair Roberts

Today's question: "What do philosophers like Wittgenstein and Rorty have to teach us about baptism and meaning?"

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## Transcript

Welcome back. Today's question is, what do philosophers like Wittgenstein and Rorty have to teach us about baptism and meaning? It's an unusual question, and I suspect that the questioner is reaching for some things in particular from me, but we'll see. Hopefully I'll scratch where they're itching.

When we talk about baptism, we will occasionally talk about what does baptism mean. We don't usually think very much about meaning within that context, though. And we think about the content of the meaning, but we don't think about how does baptism mean.

What is the philosophy of meaning that is implied within our theologies of baptism? What is the vision of meaning of the self, of its words and its actions? And that can be a helpful set of questions to ask. So I want to maybe step back a bit from the direct questions that we ask about baptism and think about how does baptism mean? What are we doing when we baptise someone? How is that functioning within the realm of meaning? There's a strong tendency for many people in the modern world to think about the self as what some have described as a hermit in the head. The self is this realm of this little

homunculus that exists within our brain, as it were, and acts out within our body, trying to express its internal meanings out into the world.

And the emphasis there is often upon words as names for things, words that represent things out in the world. And then we bring those together within sentences. And that approach very much thinks about our self in the head having some close internal meaning, some self-present meaning.

And then as we go out into the world, that becomes steadily veiled in different ways. And we struggle to express this internal meaning to other people. And that way of thinking is one that is often associated with certain theologies of baptism.

The theology of baptism for many people is associated with the expression of an internal state in a public forum. It's one of the reasons why the confession of faith as a testimony is such an important part of baptism for many people. It is the expression of your faith.

So your faith is this internal thing, this internal state of affairs. And baptism is your way of expressing that. And within the celebration of baptism, that leads to a particularly strong emphasis upon the expression of faith in the testimony.

That's often where the center of gravity ends up falling. Although the rite of baptism is the capstone of the event, it is the expression of faith, often seen within the giving of one's testimony, that is particularly important within that understanding. Because what you're doing is drawing a connection between this internal state and then this public expression of meaning.

Now, when you look at the confession of faith within that context, it's also interesting to notice what is involved. What is involved usually is a focus upon the individual internal states and how God brought those about. Now, we can think about these sorts of things in different ways.

If you're going to give a confession of one's faith, you could give a confession in the words of the church, expressing your concurrence with these confessions of faith that we see, for instance, within the creed. Or you could talk about God's work in the history of your family and other things like that. But often it's focused very much upon the individual.

And part of that, I think, is because of how we think baptism means. Baptism means by taking a private and individual state of mind and subjectivity and expressing that within the world, in the realm of public life. What does someone like Wittgenstein bring to this discussion? Well, Wittgenstein challenged in many ways the idea of this self that is trying to express itself within the world.

So you have these self-present meanings and then you have to express those outwards. And that's it gets more muddled at each stage and it's more complicated. So we come

into the world in according to certain understandings.

And he, Wittgenstein, uses Augustine as a conversation partner, a foil for his approach and points on this. We come into the world as people, as if we're people in a foreign country. We can't speak the language, but we have this internal language and we can speak to ourselves.

We have our self-present meanings. And then we're trying to bring those into the realm of public expression. So we have to learn public language, the sort of language that other people are speaking in order to take our internal meanings and express those outwards in the world.

And so you have this independent mental ease that exists within your head. And then you're trying to bring that into the realm of public language and language that is related to the external world. So there's a movement from internal to external.

But what Wittgenstein did was focus upon the externality of language in many ways. So we can focus a lot upon meaning and meaning as, let's say, if you're talking about a chair, a common philosophical example. When you think about a chair, you think you're thinking in terms of a dictionary definition and that's the meaning.

And so there's a correspondence between your use of the word chair and the abstract meaning and then that thing within the world. So the abstract meaning is something with four legs that you sit upon. Then there's a problem because a horse is something with four legs that you can sit upon.

Is a horse a chair? And that sort of struggle shows that it's very difficult to actually come up with a definition of this. We know what a chair is, don't we? But we struggle to define it. The more we try and define it, the more we find we're including certain things that we don't want to include and excluding other things that we really shouldn't exclude either.

And so the definition just does not easily work. We're struggling with this. And yet we know how to use the word.

And so there seems to be a tension that on the one hand, we do not know how to arrive at a definition. Now, I'm sure if you're writing a dictionary, you could write a definition for this if you were careful enough. But there is something about that definition that we struggle to arrive at.

And we don't seem to use the word on the basis of its definition, on the basis of having an internal state of mind, this particular abstract concept and then relating that out. It just doesn't seem to work that way. Rather, what we do is we know how to use the word.

And Wittgenstein focuses upon that. That's the important, that's where meaning is found in the use of the word, in our ability to use the word chair and know what to do with it.

That someone talks about a chair to me and I know how to go on from that, how to take what they have said and respond to it in an appropriate manner.

And so that's the meaning of the word. It's about this ability to play a game with it. Now, playing a game is a game is very much a language game.

It can be making a promise or it can be something like doing a transaction, whatever it is. But we use words within the context of these and it's a rule type process that you know how to follow the rules. You know how to play the game.

That's how games work. You know when you meet this word in this particular context, you know what to do next and you know how that is working. So language is not so much this scheme of reference from internal states to external reality, but it's this hurly burly of life and knowing how to play by the rules of different language games.

So meaning is not so much situated within the brain, within the internal states of the self, as it is situated within the real world context, within the context of actual day to day life, in our interactions, in our transactions, in our explorations of reality, all the different things that we are doing in the real world. And this takes the concept of meaning out from this very mental ease way of understanding things, where you have these mental states that you are trying to relate to the world. And this meaning is very much resident within the brain to meaning being something within the world, the way that things are played in these particular games of interactions.

And it also brings the body into things. So when you think about meaning, there are many things that we can do with our bodies that are meaningful, but not easily described in terms of linguistic meaning as we commonly understand it as that understanding of direct reference. When you make body, when you engage in body language.

And one of the things you probably noticed on my videos is there are often my hands are waving all over the place, because I think it's because YouTube chooses those scenes within the video that are most distinctive. And so it's the ones with my hands in the air. But those hand expressions are expressing meaning often in some way.

They can be expressing movement and something going forward, or it can be expressing something with force and intensity, or it can be expressing something higher or lower, whatever it is. These are parts of meaning too. It's ways that we act within the world using our bodies to do something with them.

And people know how to go forward from that. Once they've seen our body language, they can understand what we are saying to them. There is something about our bodies that communicate as well.

It's not just words pointing at things, but we do things with our bodies and we do things

with our words. And so this is a richer and more helpful understanding of language. Now, what does it have to do with baptism? You might be asking.

When I discussed baptism as it functions within many approaches, it is focused upon the individual state of mind being projected out into the world. And so the meaning exists primarily within the mind. So the meaning of my baptism is related to my internal state of mind and whether I truly had faith to be expressed within that public rite of baptism.

And that presents us with problems when we realise, well, my faith wasn't particularly... my faith was at a low ebb at that point, or I ended up falling back for many years after I was baptised. Was I really expressing something real? And that emphasis can often lead to doubts and to questions about what does baptism mean? Whereas if we think about baptism differently, if we think about baptism more in terms of the picture of language and meaning that Wittgenstein gives us, we have an understanding of meaning as present within the world. Not so much internal meanings being expressed outwards, but meanings being present within the world.

And our bodies are primary site of meaning. Our bodies are a site where from the very outset we are connected to networks of meaning and connection and relation and loyalty and all these sorts of things. Our bodies are a site of belonging that we need to respond to and inhabit.

This is a realm of life and we need to learn to live into that. Now we learn language, not so much as foreigners speaking mentalese within our heads and having to learn this foreign language of what everyone else is speaking around us. Rather, the internal self is developed out of the material of the external world in many ways.

So our bodies come first. The social world of language helps us to build our interiority out of that. And so our interiority is a folding back of language upon itself, this public language.

And then we take that into ourselves and then we can work out from that. And so it's learning language. Our parents speak to us long before we ever learn what those words mean.

That external act of speaking to us is something that is taken in and becomes part of us. It becomes the means by which we can learn to speak to ourselves. It becomes the means by which we can understand and speak of our experience.

And even our experience is contingent upon this in many ways. The ways that things are named within the world, the ways that the meaning impinges upon us of certain things and actions and mental states, whatever it is. These things, they derive their meanings from the outside in, not so much from moving from inside out.

And so when we think about baptism, where is the meaning of baptism? What is the

meaning of baptism? The meaning of baptism is not so much the internal state of grace being expressed out into the world. Rather, it's a more public meaning. It's a more public meaning that's associated with the life of the church.

It's associated with a meaning of how to go on. Once you've been baptised, the meaning of that is very much what happens next. Now, if some kids were just playing around with baptism and they were baptising their fellows when they were playing just this game of baptism, would that be a true baptism? No, it wouldn't.

And part of the reason why it wouldn't is because it's not functioning within the same sort of language game. It's not something that's being used in the same way. It's being used as a game, not as something that is a sacrament or a celebration of someone's entrance into the body of Christ and the visible church.

So when we celebrate baptism, it's like, what does it mean to celebrate a wedding ceremony? A wedding ceremony, is that primarily to be seen in terms of the internal state being externalised? Now, there's some extent, of course, that it's an expression of your love for another person. It's an expression of the way that you care about them and all these sorts of things and a bringing of that into a more public arena. You can talk about it in that way.

But is that what a wedding means or how a wedding means primarily? A movement from an internal state to an external reality? No, in many ways, a wedding means differently from that. It's something that is a reconfiguration of the social order after which everyone goes on differently. And so after a wedding, people cease to address the married couple in the same way.

No longer as just detached individuals, they are addressed as man and wife. The wife takes on her husband's surname. We have the way in which something becomes a sin now in a way, in ways that it wouldn't have been to the same extent before.

So adultery becomes a sin in relationship to that union in a way that it wouldn't have been before. We have all these other things that change in that moment. Certain things become licit.

So sexual relations between the couple are sanctioned in a way that they weren't before. And in every single one of these respects, people go on from that in a different way. There's a meaning to that event that's not merely about externalizing internal states, but a public action, according to which, that is used in a way that changes social relations.

And everyone goes on differently after it. And so part of what the meaning of a wedding ceremony is, is the way that people will talk about you differently afterwards. It's the way that you will live differently afterwards.

That is where the meaning is really located primarily, not so much in the externalization

of an internal state. It's like if someone is appointed to a high office and if everyone just, they were appointed to a high office and everyone just went on addressing them in exactly the same way as before. That would be a denial or an undermining of the meaning of what had just taken place.

Because the meaning is a public event. It's a public event that is not just internalizing or externalizing some internal state, but it is a means of reconfiguring the social order. It's used.

It's doing something. It's not just an expression of something. So how does this relate to baptism? What baptism means, how baptism means, is the way in which it reconfigures things.

That the person who has been baptized is treated differently from that point onwards. They're treated not just as someone who has personal faith, but who is unbaptized. Rather, they're treated as full members of the body, of the visible body of the church, admitted to the supper, addressed in a way that they are addressed by the virtue of their baptism.

They are addressed as those who are marked out as publicly a member of this body of people. And baptism isn't just about forming individuals and bringing them into this realm of the body of the church. It's also about the body of the church being formed itself.

As Augustine pointed out, that there cannot be a public entity, a visible entity, without the exchange of visible signs. The point of visible signs is not so much the invisible visible thing of the internal invisible state being externalised within the visible sign. No, it's the fact that a public entity finds itself, is constituted by visible signs.

Because without those, it could not be a truly public entity. And that's important, that when we celebrate baptism, it's about this body being formed. Now, like in the case of a new birth, every new birth is a reconstitution of the life of the family that the child is born into.

All these new relationships that are formed as this new child is born into the family, every one of those existing relationships is changed slightly. And there are new relationships that occur as a result of that new child. And with baptism, what we see is the meaning of baptism.

It's very much within this public arena. It's within the arena of the body as well. Our bodies are that site where we are first taken hold of by meaning, by public meaning, by the reality of a world of meaning.

And meaning comes to us from the outside in and we internalise it. And in the same way, the meaning of baptism comes to us from the outside in, primarily. It is something that is

performed upon our bodies.

Our bodies are re-situated within a public network of meaning. Our bodies are publicly related to the body of Christ, both as the church and as the resurrected personal body of Christ, his individual body. And so that reconfiguration of meaning is not just the expression of an internal state.

And what it means for me to have approached baptism rightly is for me to go on from that in an appropriate way. Now, what does that mean? If I've been baptised, if I've been married, for instance, what it means for that wedding ceremony means primarily by virtue of the fact that everyone goes on from it differently. Everyone lives differently in terms of that action, in terms of that ritual.

Everyone lives differently. People address the married couple differently. People treat them differently.

People treat them no longer just as two detached individuals who love each other. And it's not just that they have expressed their love. It's the fact that they are now in a new sort of bond with each other.

And you treat them differently on the basis of that. And that means that if you are one of that married couple, you have to live differently. You have to live in terms of that.

You have to go on from that action in a way that is appropriate. So the meaning is public. It's not this private expression of your internal state.

So every marriage being a unique bespoke entity expressing a distinct internal state. Rather, marriage or wedding ceremony has a public meaning and it calls for us to enter into that public meaning. And so the couple who have been married, they need to live faithfully.

Part of what the meaning of the wedding ceremony is, is that they go on from it appropriately. That they leave behind all others and cleave to their spouse. It means that they are faithful to their spouse through thick and thin.

It means that they are united to their spouse for the entirety of their lives. That's how the meaning of a marriage or wedding ceremony works. It's not so much in the expression of an internal state.

And that's very much what wedding ceremonies have become for many people. That it's the expression of your internal state. And that can be expressed very much in our emphasis upon each couple having their own vows.

And it can be seen also in the emphasis upon this highly elaborate celebration. That is primarily seen as an externalization, a public publicization of the love of the couple. And



so the meaning is to be found in the love.

And that, of course, as we've seen, causes all sorts of problems. It leads to an idea that your relationship doesn't mean anything anymore when that internal state no longer holds. It also leads to an understanding of marriage as just a piece of paper.

So you have this internalization of meaning that is expressed externally. But that external expression is just a dead letter. It's just a piece of paper.

Likewise, the real thing that matters in your baptism is your internal state of faith. And that's being expressed publicly. And baptism is, in many ways, just another piece of paper.

It doesn't really matter on that level. But yet, if meaning is to be understood as something that's primarily public, primarily seen in use and action and responding to things appropriately, then the meaning of baptism is a public reality. And that ritual matters considerably because that ritual is the means by which we enter into the full life of the body of Christ.

It's part of the means by which it's not just our private state of mind in relationship to Christ, but it's living out the life of a public body. And it's living that life out in a way that people will talk about you differently, will treat you differently, and you will act differently in terms of a meaning that is not just in your head that is being externalized, but a meaning that is out there in the world that has a claim upon you. You've committed yourself to that meaning, to living out and living through or working through that meaning.

And so baptism then becomes something that is far more challenging. Our bodies have been taken hold of by Christ in this public act of meaning, and we've been reconstituted in a set of social relationships in terms of that. Now, that doesn't mean that you're not going to be saved on the last day if you've not been baptized.

That's not what I'm saying. Rather, there is a public reality here, what it means to be part of the visible church, what it means to be someone who lives out the fullness of what Christ has won for us. That is seen very much in entering into the meaning of baptism, a meaning that is out there in the world, that I am baptized and then I go on from that in an appropriate way, not just as the expression of my internal states, but as someone who's entering into something and responding to something in an appropriate and a full manner.

Again, it's like adoption in that sense, that the adoption ceremony, it's not just the expression of internal states at the beginning of that relationship and those states of minds that existed at that point. Rather, it's a reconfiguration of public meanings, which calls for the parties involved to act differently from that point onwards. And so baptism,

like any other rite, can be hollowed out when it starts to be treated in a way that does not take seriously the need to go on from it differently.

So when we start to treat wedding ceremonies just as the expression of people's love for each other, this time of conspicuous consumption and an almost status symbol, then we cease to be able to go on from it effectively and it ceases to have public meaning. It becomes a means of personal expression. But the rite no longer has its true meaning.

Likewise with baptism, when there are lots of people baptized and there's no way in which they're really going on from that, that it's just a superstitious rite that's performed, the meaning of it changes. And so what we need to do is to consider how use is related to meaning, that the meaning of baptism is very much related to how we use it. And in a church where baptism is used in a way that does not relate it to its proper biblical use, which is the means of bringing us into the body of Christ and of us growing within that, when that ceases to be the way that baptism is used and baptism just becomes a superstitious thing that happens at the beginning of your life or at some point that is treated in a superstitious way, then baptism's meaning is undermined.

And so this pushes in different directions. This pushes against the indiscriminate baptism of infants. And it also pushes against the credo Baptist understanding, which is very often an implicitly Cartesian approach of internal meaning venturing out into public expression, rather than something that has a public meaning that calls upon us all to live differently in terms of it.

Now, there's a lot more that could be said about this, and I've missed a lot of things. I could say a lot more about how this highlights the significance of the body as the site, as a primary site of meaning. I could say a lot more about how it helps us to think about Christian formation, working from the outside in.

And I could say a lot more about the philosophical background for this and other things like that. But I hope this helps to get at some of the issues that the questioner is looking at. And I imagine there's a lot more that they're looking for.

But this will have to do for now. If you have any further questions, please leave them on my Curious Acat account. And if you'd like to support this and other videos, please do so using my Patreon account.

Thank you very much for listening. If you'd like to, if you found this helpful, please pass it on to your friends and others. And Lord willing, I'll be back again tomorrow.

God bless.