



Worksheet 4: Baptism

The word 'Baptism' comes from the Greek word baptizo which means 'to dip' into water or liquid. A related word form, bapto, is used for dipping something into dye, and for drawing water. Baptizo may also mean 'to cause to perish by drowning'. The imagery is vivid. It is about being immersed, about changing colour, about life and death.



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The Significance of Baptism

Going under water and coming up signifies that a newly baptised person is incorporated into the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The person may be immersed in water or have water poured over them. The meaning is still the same. From this time forward, the person is a member of the one, holy, catholic (universal) and apostolic church:

- » the body of Christ,
- » the communion of the Holy Spirit,
- » people of God.

The Baptismal Service

The Uniting Church's Baptismal Service describes Baptism in this way:

Baptism is Christ's gift.

It is the sign by which the Spirit of God

joins people to Jesus Christ

and incorporates them into his body, the Church.

In his own baptism in the Jordan by John,

Jesus identified himself with humanity

in its brokenness and sin;

that baptism was completed in his death and

resurrection.

By God's grace,

baptism plunges us into the faith of Jesus Christ,

so that whatever is his may be called ours.

By water and the Spirit we are claimed as God's own

and set free from the power of sin and death.

Thus, claimed by God

we are given the gift of the Holy Spirit

that we may live as witnesses to Jesus Christ,

share his ministry in the world and grow to maturity,

awaiting with hope the day of our Lord Jesus.

(*'The Meaning of Baptism' from 'The Sacrament of Baptism and the Reaffirmation of Baptism called Confirmation' in Uniting in Worship 2, © 2005 The Uniting Church in Australia, p. 74*)



Note

This sheet is part of a series on theology in the 21st century. It is prepared for the National Assembly by the Working Group on Doctrine as a discussion starter for small groups, in congregations, faith communities or other settings. It may also be used for personal reflection. Low resolution copies of this sheet can be downloaded free of charge from the Doctrine website: www.assembly.uca.org.au/doctrine.

Scriptures

Biblical references to Baptism:

- Matthew 28:16-20
- Mark 1:9-11
- John 3:1-10
- Acts 10:44-48
- Romans 6:1-11
- 1 Corinthians 6:9-11; 12:12-13
- Galatians 3:23-29
- Ephesians 4:1-6
- Colossians 2:8-15
- Titus 3:1-8

Quotes

“Baptism... confers an identity at odds with the ways we are named and claimed by family, nation and ideology. Baptism is the constitution of a new people whose prior loyalties and allegiances are exposed, named, and radically reconfigured.”

(Debra Dean Murphy, *Teaching That Transforms: Worship as the Heart of Christian Education*, Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2004)

“[A]s we emerge from Christendom, the church must find a new identity as God’s peculiar people [by] again placing baptism at the heart of church life. This needs to be expressed in clear, energising theology, practised in life-changing rites and accompanied by careful, sensitive catechumenal [teaching] processes.”

(*Baptism—Life by Drowning*, <http://www.assembly.uca.org.au/doctrine/images/stories/baptism/lifebydrowning.pdf>, pp. 2-3)



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Acknowledgement of Baptism

The Uniting Church acknowledges that Christ incorporates people into his body by Baptism.

In this way Christ enables them to participate in his own baptism, which was accomplished once on behalf of all in his death and burial, and which was made available to all when, risen and ascended, he poured out the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. Baptism into Christ’s body initiates people into Christ’s life and mission in the world, so that they are united in one fellowship of love, service, suffering and joy, in one family of the Father of all in heaven and earth, and in the power of the one Spirit. The Uniting Church will baptise those who confess the Christian faith, and children who are presented for baptism and for whose instruction and nourishment in the faith the Church takes responsibility. (*Basis of Union* Para. 7)

Key themes

Baptism, Eucharist & Ministry (World Council of Churches Faith & Order Paper No. 111, 1982) highlights five key theological themes in the sacrament of Baptism:

- » “participation in Christ’s death and resurrection”;
- » “conversion, pardoning, cleansing” from sin;
- » reception of “the gift of the Spirit ... at work in the lives of people before, in and after their baptism”;
- » “incorporation into the body of Christ”; and
- » a manifestation of “a sign of the Kingdom of God and of the life of the world to come”.

Baptism occurs in the name of the Triune God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. This formula is agreed across the Christian church. In Baptism, we are enfolded into the life of God: Creator, Redeemer and Sanctifier.

Look at the back of a Baptismal Certificate to find out the denominations of the Christian church in Australia that recognise each other’s baptismal practice.

Questions

- » When and where were you baptised?
- » Describe the practice of Baptism in your congregation or faith community. What would be different if you placed “baptism at the heart of church life”? What would stay the same?
- » How are your “prior loyalties and allegiances” reconfigured by your baptismal identity?



Further reading

There are two significant papers on Baptism on the website of the Doctrine Working Group:

- » *Baptism — Life by Drowning*:
<http://www.assembly.uca.org.au/doctrine/images/stories/baptism/lifebydrowning.pdf>
- » *How do we Understand Baptism*:
<http://assembly.uca.org.au/doctrine/item/858-beliefs>

See also ‘Baptism and Related Services’ (*Uniting in Worship* 2, p.15ff). This section includes services for preparation for Baptism and services of the reaffirmation of Baptism.