

Baptism Health Warning

Easter Sunday 2018



Ann and Robin have just done a wonderful thing in being baptised.

For all us watching and witnessing, their baptism acts as a reminder and re-presentation of our own baptism, or it may speak to the yet to be answered call to enter into baptism ourselves?

Baptism is the Jesus specified response to faith in the saving work of Jesus on the cross and its vindication in the resurrection. Baptism is where we really step up and put our lives into God's hands through Jesus.

But let's ask a question, a question many people ask today about all sorts of things?

How safe is baptism?

I am not talking about the water and short-term lack of oxygen or temperature issues but what baptism brings to our life.

If we were to do a risk assessment of baptism, would any health warning need to be applied? When people bring themselves or their children for baptism should they be aware of any risk of danger?

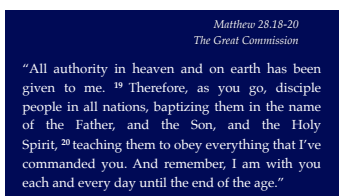
Q: What do you think?

Q: Do you think baptism in Christ has the potential to make life difficult, uncomfortable, dangerous or worse – thus forming a health risk?

Or on the other hand:

Is baptism only a way of receiving God's grace through Jesus Christ without any risks whatsoever?

A few weeks ago I was reflecting on Jesus' 'Great commission' found at the end of Matthew's Gospel.



“All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹Therefore, as you go, disciple people in all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, ²⁰teaching them to obey everything that I've commanded you. And remember, I am with you each and every day until the end of the age.” (NIV)

What struck me was the sequence of this commission:

1. Step 1: “Make disciples of all nations.”

The apostles were to begin by teaching people from every people group how to live in God's Kingdom as Jesus taught and modelled. There is lots of that happening inside the church and around it. Christian schools and children's ministries are very involved in this. A great deal can be achieved by advocating Jesus' teachings and training people in them. Whole nations can be discipled and it works!

2. Step 2: “Baptise in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit”.
You have just seen that happen.

Q: Why might baptism not be Step one?

A: I suggest the answer to that and whether baptism is actually safe is found in step 3.

- Step 3 is the target zone and it's not going to be easy, good, satisfying, but not easy.
- Step 3 is about mature faith, devoted love and deep worship of God in Christ.

3. Step 3 is "Teach them to observe all that I have commanded you."

Do you notice the language changes here? In Step 3 people are instructed in authority to obey the commands of the Lord. The words 'obey' and 'commands' are serious words.

Not many people are born with a like for obeying or being given commands by people in authority. That is too confronting, too difficult, altogether uncomfortable. 'No thank you' is the natural response.

People prefer to have tips, options, information, helpful suggestions, or inspiring ideas and insights. Jesus shows a beautiful way to be human and calls us to learn his way. That is more what discipleship offers as coaching in the way of Jesus.

Then comes an amazing day when something shifts inside. Something moves in our heart to the point where we really, really, really want to live in, for and through Jesus, even if it were to hurt or be very costly.

It's the day we fall in love with Christ. As John Wesley said it: The heart is 'strangely warmed'.

It's the day when we discover Jesus as one worth dying for.

That day is when we desire life in Jesus with all its challenges more than we desire life without him.

We desire Jesus more than life as we know it.

Here is the issue:

In Jesus's own words, to love Jesus is to obey him but we cannot do that in our own strength. We cannot love God through the selfish weakness of our flesh. The four gospels bring us accounts of how those who wanted to tried and failed, Peter, James and John with the others. They wanted to love Jesus but they failed again and again.

I found on-line that various people had listed the commands of Jesus. They ranged from numbering 49 through to 120! I suspect there are different notions of what constitutes a command.

Here are some significant ones. Remember these are commands, not just inspirational suggestions or virtues:

- Love God with all your heart.
- Love one another.
- Love your neighbour.
- Love your enemy.
- Forgive each other without ceasing.
- Don't worry – trust in God for your needs.
- Remember the poor.
- Don't judge others.
- Pray.

Q: So why baptism?

What happens in baptism at Step 2 that prepares disciples for obeying the commands of the Lord at step 3?

A: Baptism is where we die to anything that might prevent us obeying those commands.

- Baptism is where we allow ourselves to be symbolically buried in death killing all that is not of God.
- Baptism is where we proclaim and act out our rejection of our current life as it is rooted in selfishness and sin.
- Baptism is where we say we prefer to die obeying Jesus's commands rather than live without being obedient to him.

We do this out of loving desire for God and, and, in faith that as we die with Christ we will live with him. If we share his death to self we will share his Resurrection.

In fact as we die with him in living out our baptism his resurrection life becomes our life. As we die and live with him his promise grows as reality and we remember not merely as if overcoming forgetfulness but as a fresh experience as he promised; "I am with you each and every day until the end of the age."

Conclusion:



So what do you think; Is baptism safe?

- Is a confrontation with our own death what the world considers safe?
- Is submitting ourselves to the commands of a man who himself died badly safe?
- Do you really want your children to love God more than they love you?

I think these are the health and safety warnings that need to be applied to Baptism if we are going to appreciate what Jesus intended through baptism. They need to be clearly recognised and understood.

Q: So why do we do it?

A: Jesus said it this way: to live we need to die. Unless a grain of wheat falls it does not produce fruit.

A: Paul said it like this:

- Slavery to God in the righteous commands of Jesus is freedom.
- Freedom in sinful rebellion or simply neglect of God is death.
- If we die with him, we will live with him.

Baptism is the necessary, beautiful, costly, dangerous step Jesus calls his disciples to. It's not safe, but it is good, very good.

We come to baptism in the light of the Resurrection as an anticipation of our own resurrection, or 'Step 4'. This is God's Promise in Jesus that we celebrate in anticipation and get to sample in present experience.

If we die with him, we will live with him.

The Lord is Risen!