



## Christianity: The Basics — Baptism

Very often, people talk about how certain things are *just* “symbolic” or *mere* “social constructions”. I find this attitude very puzzling, because as far as I can tell, pretty much everything worth caring about is symbolic and socially constructed.

Symbolism is about the excess of meaning, about how something means more than it first appears. The 1975 film *Jaws* is about more than a giant shark terrorising New England beachgoers. Wedding rings are more than bits of dense, ductile yellow metal, beaten into short, hollow cylinders. Social construction is about the sharing of meaning, about a common vision, common values. It is what makes possible traffic signs and peace treaties. It is what makes language possible, and love.

There is nothing trivial—no *justness*, no *mereness*—to socially constructed symbols. A world in which all meanings are literal and all things are only as good as their practical functions is not one worth living in. Christians have always known this. It is fundamental to the Christian way of seeing the world that there is more here than meets the eye, that things are not just as they seem. And this is why we have *sacraments*: sacraments are signs, not in the sense that Post-It notes are signs, but in the sense that a kiss is a sign. When we kiss somebody, we are not just reminding them of our affection, communicating something to them easily and equally expressible in words. The kiss is itself the embodiment and consummation of this affection. Sacraments do not just show or say something, but accomplish it.

Baptism involves water and the Trinitarian formula: *I baptise you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit*. Of course these days, we have white frocks and candles and vows and all sorts of things, most of which also brim over with significance. But the essential ingredients of a baptism are pretty basic. Water and the name of God. Basic, in more than one sense of the word. These elements are not incidental, of course: baptism would not be a very good sign if they were. But what do they signify? What does baptism accomplish?

Baptism is a kind of drowning. We don't tell parents this, when they come to us with their precious newborns, but it's true. There are other ways to talk about baptism—as a washing or cleansing, for example—but these descriptions tend to undersell the gravity of the thing. Baptism is a kind of drowning, a cleansing so complete that it is a kind of death. It is also like death, and not like bathing, in its *one-off*-ness and in its permanence.

Baptism is a kind of death, then. Specifically, it is Christ's death: the New Testament tells us repeatedly that we are baptised *into* Christ, and thus into his death and resurrection. One of the drawbacks of not performing baptisms by immersion is that we don't get to witness the dramatic enactment of plunging into the waters of baptism, and rising again into new life.

Baptised into Christ's death and resurrection, we are in this new life, dead women and men walking, and therefore, free. Free, that is, from the egocentric insecurities that lie at the bottom of our basest instincts, our insistence to assert ourselves and our desires, even at the expense of others. Indeed, as St Paul observes, baptism also relativizes all our previous sources of identity, those group alignments—our nation-states, our ethnic groups, even our families—from which we derive our comfort and self-esteem, again often at the expense of those who are different from us: there is, St Paul saith, neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female. These divisions, which give rise to the most deadly and mundane sins—racism, sexism, xenophobia, and other forms of prejudice—(these divisions) fall away because in our baptismal death and regeneration, we have our identities redefined. We are not our own but Christ's, his Body, raised by God the Father in the power of the Holy Spirit, to participate in that shared life of eternal self-giving that is the very essence of God.

Go figure: water and the name of God go pretty far.



Grigory Gagarin. *Baptism of Christ.*

There is, of course, an element of aspirational over-statement here. Every individual Christian life and the history of the Church is marked by a conspicuous failure to live up to our baptisms. We are called to live impossible lives. And while, for some, this leads to despair, it should not. There is nothing to fear from failure *per se*, only from rising again. Death and resurrection is kind of our thing.

Also our thing is mutual support. Christian lives are not meant to be lived individually, but corporately. We are *baptised*: the verb is passive; we do not baptise ourselves. The idea that we should only be baptised if and when we fully understand what it is that we are doing is just a misunderstanding of baptism, and indeed, of the Christian life. We never fully understand what it is that we are doing, not me, not you, not the Pope, not an infant brought before God's people to be God's people. In

this we are the same. And so we stand—shoulder to shoulder; arms linked; ready to pick each other up and dust each other off should ever we fall; ever having each others' backs—we stand and walk together, live together this impossible life of giving up our lives for the sake of the world.

Jonathan Jong

The St Mary Magdalen School of Theology

<https://www.theschooloftheology.org/posts/essay/christianity-the-basics-baptism>



### **Suggested Discussion Questions**

1. We now commonly baptise infants, sometimes even of nominally Christian parents. In the past, Christians sometimes delayed baptism—sometimes until the end of their lives—because they didn't want to sin after their baptisms. What's wrong with these views?
2. Baptism in most Christian traditions also involve anointing with oil. What does this signify?
3. This essay ends with a note about our responsibility to each other. Godparents and sponsors have special roles in most baptism services. What does this tell us about the responsibility of a godparent or sponsor?