

# Baptism and the Lord's Supper<sup>1</sup>

Pastor Aaron Boyd – August 2019

I am writing this short paper for our church family at DPC to discuss the relationship between the two sacraments, or ordinances, that Christ gave his church: Baptism and the Lord's Supper.

## 1. A Changed Invitation

Most of you will be aware by now that in the recent "Union and Communion" teaching series at DPC we indicated that we intended to change our public invitation to the Lord's Supper to include a reference to water baptism – that is, we were going to invite to the Lord's Supper Christian believers who had been baptized with water either as adults or as infants. We used this new invitation to the Lord's Supper for the first time on July 7<sup>th</sup> 2019, when I said the following:

*"DPC's elders invite to the Lord's Supper all those who love our Lord Jesus and trust in his death in their place on the cross, and who have given public expression to their love and trust of our Lord Jesus by being baptised, and by being committed to a local church"*

The precise wording of this invitation may change from time to time, but the inclusion of baptism will remain the same. I know that making this change to our invitation has raised real questions and concerns for some of you. Some are wondering whether we are making some invented human rule, something other than faith in Jesus, a requirement for participation in the Lord's Supper. So why have we made this change? Why the expectation that in normal circumstances baptism should precede admission to the Lord's Supper? Well let's turn to God's Word.

## 2. A Biblical Pattern

**Matthew 28:18-20:** In his Great Commission our Lord Jesus called on his people, until he returns, to "make disciples of all nations." We are to carry out this task of making disciples by doing three things: "going", "baptising", and "teaching." The clear implication is that a disciple of Christ has not been fully "made," in the way that Christ commissioned, until they have been baptised, as a public and visible sign of their hidden and invisible union with Christ and his people by faith. Of course, baptism does not save a person but it is clearly part of their discipleship. Also, once they have become one of Christ's disciples they are to be "taught to obey everything that Christ commanded" which I presume would include his command to observe the Lord's Supper until he comes (Luke 22:14-20). It seems clear that in the normal pattern of Christian discipleship baptism should precede the Lord's Supper.

**Acts 2:37-42:** In Acts 2:37 – 42 it becomes apparent that this is how the Apostle Peter understood Christ's commission. In Acts 2, Peter proclaims the gospel, the crowds ask what they should do to appropriately respond to the gospel, and in verse 38 Peter says:

*Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins*

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<sup>1</sup> Some of this paper's content has been shaped by a paper Rev. Neil Chambers wrote for Bundoora Presbyterian Church.

It's interesting that Peter does not say: "Repent and *believe!*" but "repent and be *baptised!*" Of course, that's not because baptism is a *substitute* for faith, but because in Peter's understanding when someone converted to Christianity, baptism and faith were so tightly entwined that the words could basically be seen as synonymous.

It was only when the new believers had repented and been baptised in water as Peter commanded that they were added to the number of the church (v. 41) and included in the 'breaking of bread', that is, a fellowship meal that would have included the Lord's Supper. Once again, it seems that the regular biblical pattern is that baptism should precede the Lord's Supper.

**Romans 6:1-4:** I include this passage simply to make the point that it was not just the apostles commissioned by Jesus in Matthew 28 who assumed that all those professing faith in Christ should be baptised. The Apostle Paul, in writing to Christians in Rome, a long way from Jerusalem, also assumed that all the believers in Rome would be baptised – baptised as an outward visible sign of their union with Christ and his people.

**1 Corinthians 1:10-17; 11:17-34:** In 1 Corinthians 11:17-34 Paul gives some extended teaching to the Corinthian believers on the Lord's Supper, as a result of their abuses of the Lord's Supper, and the presumption from Paul in 1:10-17 is that all the Corinthian believers are baptised. The fact that Paul did not personally baptise many people does not mean that he thought it was unimportant. His assumption is that all of them would have been baptised by someone, and in light of the New Testament pattern it is reasonable to assume that they were baptised close to their conversion and prior to participating in the Lord's Supper.

In light of all this I think there is reasonably clear biblical evidence to suggest that in normal circumstances a Christian should be baptised prior to sharing in the Lord's Supper.

### 3. A Theological Order

The reason this biblical pattern exists is that the two sacraments instituted by Christ are supposed to serve different purposes in the life of his people.

Baptism is a one-off rite of initiation that is a sign and seal of our union with Christ and his people. Baptism was given by Christ to offer a public and visible sign of the *one* person being united with the *many* of the body of Christ.

The Lord's Supper is an oft-repeated rite of renewal that is a sign and seal of our communion with Christ and his people. The Lord's Supper was given by Christ to offer a public and visible sign of the *many* being united in the *one* body of Christ.

If the Lord's Supper can be thought of as the family meal, the meal of those who are members of Jesus' household by faith in Him, then baptism can be thought of as the public door of entry into Jesus' household.

You have to be part of Jesus' family to share in this meal, and you are known to be part of Jesus' family through confessing faith in Jesus and being baptised. This is paralleled in the life of Israel where circumcision (a rite of initiation/union) was required before participating in the Passover (a rite of renewal/communion) – Exodus 12:48.

For this reason believing and baptism have gone together from the beginning, and being baptised (our union with Christ) and sharing in the Lord's Supper (our communion with Christ) have gone together from the beginning.

#### **4. An Historical Practice**

While we are to be Bible based in our approach to church life, it is worth noting that the link between baptism and the Lord's Supper is not a novel idea. It is the historical practice of churches throughout the ages. The Didache, a Christian training manual written in the late first or early second century, says this: "But let none eat or drink of your Eucharist [i.e. Lord's Supper] except those who have been baptised in the Lord's Name." (Didache 9:5).<sup>2</sup>

After the Reformation, churches reaffirmed this practice in their doctrinal statements. The First London Confession of Faith (1646) by Baptists declares that believers "ought to be baptized and after to partake of the Lord's Supper" (Article XXXIX). The Westminster Larger Catechism (1647) used by Presbyterian and Reformed churches states in question 169 that the Lord's Supper is offered to "communicants", which assumes they are already baptised and in formal communion with a church. This stance is reflected in the code of the Presbyterian Church of Victoria, which requires that believers be baptised prior to partaking of the Lord's Supper (3.24.2; 3.26.1). Today, this view is still church law for both the Church of England (Canon B15A) and the Episcopal Church in America (Canon I.17.7).

#### **5. A Pastoral Encouragement**

Of course I know that in our contemporary Christian culture the relationship between believing and being baptised has become a bit disordered and confused.

I know of people who thought that their parents had had them baptised as infants, because they had always participated with them in church, but when they asked their parents they were told that baptism was not something they had got around to.

I know of people who have become Christians while at University, and because the Christian Union is not a church, they don't ordinarily baptise people when they believe (they don't want to offend churches who have rules about who can baptise). And so new believers can remain unbaptised for many years.

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<sup>2</sup> This is not to endorse all the content of the Didache but it demonstrates the practice in question.

I know of parents who have been committed to believers' baptism but have then found themselves attending a church that practices infant baptism, and so there is less focus on being baptised as an adult – and it gets overlooked.

I know of people who have been Christians for so long, experiencing the internal reality of baptism in the Spirit, that they see no need now for the external sign of water baptism, and feel that getting baptised now would lack substance for them, would be somewhat artificial, and that they would only really be doing it to please people (and that is a spiritually dangerous way to live the Christian life!).

What we are saying by including the reference to baptism in our invitation to the Lord's Supper is that if for whatever reason you, a believer in Jesus, are not yet baptised, you should get baptised as soon as practicable. You should seek to bring your Christian life and experience into conformity with the pattern for discipleship that Christ ordained, that the apostles observed, and that Christians have always practiced.

There are at least two reasons for this.

### **1. Baptism is commanded by Christ**

The disciples were told to baptise those who became disciples of Jesus through their ministry. It is what Jesus expects – that His followers are baptised into the name of the Father, Son and Spirit, into His name as the one through whom they come to know and confess God as Father, Son and Spirit. Jesus desires us to share in the Lord Supper but he also desires us to be baptised. It is always good for a disciple who confesses Jesus as Lord to obey the commands of Jesus their Lord.

### **2. Baptism is a spiritual encouragement**

Martin Luther said: "Baptism is once administered, and always remembered." God intends your baptism to serve as an assurance to you throughout your life that you are indeed saved through faith in Christ, that you belong to Christ, and you are to live for Christ. You can look back to your baptism for assurance of forgiveness through trusting Jesus, or, as Paul uses it in Romans 6, a reminder that you are now to live for Jesus having died to your old way of life.

Please don't diminish the value and helpfulness of the visible signs and seals that our Lord Jesus has given us. There is a tendency to do that. We think that if we know the internal spiritual reality, we don't need the external physical sign. But the external physical sign is a reminder that being a Christian is not just a personal and internal matter, but a public and corporate matter.

All those who have genuine faith in Christ belong to his universal invisible church, but they are called to give expression to their belonging to Christ's universal invisible church, by belonging to a local visible church, and that local visible church, because they are not "mind readers" or "heart readers", must have particular practices of visible admission – profession of faith, baptism, and church membership.

Therefore we are convinced that it is helpful for DPC to restore what we see as being the biblical connection between baptism and the Lord's Supper. This is helpful for our understanding of baptism and helpful for our understanding of who we are as a church. So if you are a believer who is not yet baptised we would encourage you to be baptised for your own sake, and for the sake of the unity and maturity of our church.

I know if you have been a confessing Christian for ten or twenty or thirty years baptism will have a different significance for you than if you had believed and been baptised immediately. But sometimes it is good for us to do something just because Jesus has said it should be done, even if it does not fit neatly within own personal narrative.

It is also worth noting that requiring baptism before receiving the Lord's Supper is helpful for children in the church. It reminds them that they need to have made a formal commitment to Jesus before they share in his meal. This ensures they have a conversation with their parents and their pastor, which provides great opportunities for discipleship. For those children who have already been baptised as infants, this scenario would be played out with a Profession of Faith. In either case, it provides children with a spiritually significant 'rite of passage' before they join with other believers at the Lord's Table.

On a final practical note, I am aware that some people in our church are reticent to get baptised, or do a Profession of Faith, because they don't like public speaking and fear sharing their testimony. If that is how you feel let me assure you that you do not have to give a testimony to be baptised, or to do a Profession of Faith and become a member of DPC, you simply need to confess your faith by saying: "I do" to the official questions.

If you have questions, or would like to talk about baptism and/or getting baptised, please come and talk to me in person, or email me at: [aaron@darebinpc.com.au](mailto:aaron@darebinpc.com.au).

In Christ,

Pastor Aaron