

Study 14. We love signposts (baptism and Lord's supper)

Big idea: baptism and the Lord's supper are visible reminders of the invisible truths that give us life

You could spend an entire session talking about either of these topics. So I've given you extra questions than normal - you can speed through both, or pick one to focus on, or do it over two weeks.

Opening activity

What do these signs represent?

Print out some pictures of street signs (the stranger the better) and get the group to identify the meaning. Alternatively you could go the other way - giving them an assignment to design a new street sign based on a complicated warning ("danger: learner driver school ahead", etc). Another idea would be to start the session by playing Pictionary or Taboo.

Part 1 – Baptism

Were you ever baptised? Do you remember it?

The word baptism is an Englishification of the Greek word "to put under or go under water" or "wash". You might "baptise" a plate while you are washing up. It can also be used metaphorically to describe an intense experience, or used in a more technical sense to describe religious washing ceremonies.

The difficult thing about baptism in our day is that everyone thinks they know what it is about (standing up in front of your friends and telling them about your decision to become a Christian). But this may not be exactly what the Bible thinks baptism is all about. Because the English word is only ever used in religious connotations it might be helpful to get back to basics - the word suggests something to do with water, and the rest we need to work out from what the New Testament actually says.

Read Acts 8:26-40

- What do we learn here about the physical act of baptising someone?
- Does the baptism change anything about the Ethiopian's spiritual state?

Read Ephesians 4:5

- Do you get the sense that baptism is a once for all thing, or an ongoing ritual?

Read Matthew 28:19

- What does baptism "in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" mean?

In these passages we are trying to pull out some simple things about baptism -

1. That it involves water (the amount doesn't seem to be that important),
2. That it is something that is done to you (the Ethiopian doesn't baptise himself)
3. That it involves words of some kind (it is done in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit"

4. It is only done once (there is one Lord and therefore one baptism according to Paul)
5. We do it to people who are believers in Jesus (it isn't magic, it doesn't *make them* saved).

We might think of baptism like a wedding ring: it's an important symbol which represents a union, and I wouldn't want to lose mine. But putting my wedding ring on your finger will not make you magically married to my wife, and if I lost my wedding ring it wouldn't make me divorced (at least, not automatically!)

Read Romans 6:3

- What does the physical sign of baptism point towards?

To be "in Christ" or "with Christ" is a very common New Testament metaphor for what theologians call our "union with Christ". Just like when you get into an airplane - your destiny is bound up in the destiny of that plane. If it crashes, you crash. If it lands in Adelaide, you will land in Adelaide.

- What are some of the results of being buried with Christ in his death?

When we go down into the water we are symbolising our death - to sin, and to our old self. That's why baptism is often linked with repentance: Acts 2:28-39.

- What are some of the results of being raised with Christ?

When we come up out of the water we are symbolising our new life. The new life includes all God's covenant blessings:

- In Christ, we are guaranteed the forgiveness of sins (Acts 2:38)
- In Christ, we are guaranteed the gift of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:38)
- In Christ, we are guaranteed inclusion in the church (Rom 12:5, Acts 2:41, 22:16, Eph 4:5, 1 Cor 10:2, Acts 19, 1 Cor 1:13)
- In Christ, we are guaranteed the hope of future resurrection (Romans 6:4)

- Does baptism point to something that we do or something that has been done to us?

It is true that most of the baptisms recorded in the New Testament follow closely after someone deciding to follow Jesus:

- The first followers in John 4:1
- The people who accepted Peter's message in Acts 2:38-41
- Simon the Sorcerer, the Ethiopian eunuch and Philip's other converts in Acts 8.
- Saul in Acts 9:18.
- Lydia and her household in Acts 16:15
- The prison guard and his whole family in Acts 16:33-34
- A bunch of Corinthians including Crispus, his whole family (Acts 18:8) and Gaius (1 Cor 1:14)
- Some followers of John the Baptist (Acts 19:4)

So if we *only* had Acts we might conclude that baptism was about marking a decision (leaving aside the question of whether any of the families mentioned above had children in them and if so what their "decision" was). However taking the New Testament as whole, it seems that baptism is not really a symbol of the decision itself, but a symbol of Christ's death and resurrection.

- Who can be baptised?

Baptism reminds us of the blessings of being one with Christ. And so anyone who is *in Christ* can make this symbol their own. You don't have to be an Anglican. You don't have to know the Bible backwards. If Jesus is your Lord and saviour then all the blessings that baptism represents are yours.

So what about babies? The Bible doesn't say what age you should be baptised, so Christians are fine to baptise their children or to wait until they are old. (The faith of children being raised as Christians is real faith as far as Jesus is concerned, even if they are still growing in their independence from their parents: Matthew 19:14). When we baptise children we pray that they will grow up to know Jesus as their Lord, and so we are baptising them in faith. See mountainstreet.media/2014/09/remember-your-baptism/ for more on infant baptism.

- If someone was baptised in another church but only later comes to a personal understanding of the gospel, should they be rebaptised?

This is where what you think baptism is pointing towards is important: if baptism is about declaring your decision then obviously the first baptism wasn't real. But if it's about what Jesus has done then our answer is different.

In Anglican churches, if you've already been baptised in another church we won't rebaptise you. Provided the baptism was in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, it doesn't matter if a Catholic Priest sprinkled you before you knew what it meant. The thing it points to (Jesus' resurrection) is real, even if you've only recently come to understand what it means.

Read Romans 6:2

- How can remembering our baptism help us persevere as a Christian?

Part 2 – the Lord's supper

Read Leviticus 4:13-21

- Why do they lay their hands on the animal before killing it?
- Presumably God could have given these people a less messy way of asking for forgiveness. What are the benefits of a system like this?

Read Leviticus 17:11

- Why is blood an effective mechanism for forgiving sins?
- If someone in ancient Israel asked their pastor "how can I be sure that the Lord has forgiven my sin", what could they say?

We're trying to fill out the concept of "blood" as a means for the forgiveness of sin. Blood is, in a sense, an arbitrary choice - the only reason it works is that it is given by God for this purpose. It reminds us of the costliness of forgiveness, but also the legal certainty of it. It would be unjust for God to punish someone twice for sin which had already been paid for in this way.

Read 1 Corinthians 11:23-26

- Who invented the tradition of the Lord's supper?
- What does Jesus mean by "this is my body" and "this is the new covenant in my blood"?
- How often should we share the Lord's supper?
- Like baptism, the Lord's supper is a visible sign of an invisible truth. What does the Lord's supper point towards?

Read 1 Corinthians 11:27-34

- What abuses of the Lord's supper are being addressed by Paul here?

- What does “discerning the body of Christ” mean here (verse 29)?

Many commentators suggest that the “body” being referred to here is the church - to share in his meal without regard for his church is just plain presumptuous. It might also refer to discerning the presence of the risen Christ in his church - treating the meal as more than just an opportunity to eat, but as a spiritually significant symbol.

- What is going on in verse 30? Is this a general rule (that if you abuse the Lord’s supper people will start dying)?

It requires great spiritual insight to be able to attribute particular suffering and death to a particular cause, and it’s probably wise to be careful drawing too many conclusions ourselves based on this - Paul is an apostle, and we are not. See Luke 13:1-5.

- What are some of the different ways you have seen the Lord’s supper celebrated at different churches? What are their strengths and weaknesses?
- Who should take part in the Lord’s supper? Who shouldn’t?

Prayer ideas

Thank God for these signs and the things they represent.