

# **Baptism at *Rivergate***

## **Policy**

### **BAPTISM**

Baptism is a sacrament. A sacrament is an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual reality. God gives the ceremony of baptism to the church to enable us to celebrate the voluntary union between a person and God, made possible by Jesus.

Baptism officially signifies membership of Christ's church. It signifies the union between God and his people. Ideally, this symbol should identify and unite all Christians.

Baptism is not a magic rite that turns people into Christians. (The Salvation Army and Quakers, for example, don't baptise anyone yet they are still Christians.) Baptism is something Christians do:

- in response to faith (Acts 8:34-38)
- and in obedience to Christ's command (Matthew 28:19).

### **What is the meaning of baptism?**

- 1) Baptism celebrates the voluntary union between a person and God, made possible by Jesus.
- 2) It indicates that they have repented and have become Christ's disciple. The book of Acts records Peter as saying:  
*"Repent and be baptised, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit."* (Acts 2:38)
- 3) Water is a symbol of the Holy Spirit in Scripture (Mark 1:8) and so baptism reminds us of the work of the Holy Spirit in bringing people to faith (Jn 16:8-11; Jn 3:5-6; Rom 8:9). Baptism reminds us that God pours his Holy Spirit upon all Christians (Jn 14:16).
- 4) The act of baptism signifies that a person has identified themselves with the death of Christ. Dying with Christ indicates the death of their sinful state. As such, baptism is both a burial service of the old (sometimes signified by being buried under the water in baptism by immersion) and it is also a celebration of being raised with Christ to a new relationship with God (signified by being raised up out of the water if being baptised by immersion). (Rom 6:3-5; Col 2:12)
- 5) The act of baptism also enables us the church to celebrate our own faith. The act of baptism re-enacts Christ's death and resurrection. It is a dramatic reminder of the Christian story which helps us affirm our identity as God's people.

- 6) The pouring of water at baptism symbolises that those who come to faith have had their sins washed away. (Acts 22:16b)  
They can say with Paul, “*Therefore, if anyone is IN CHRIST, they are a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!*” (2 Cor 5:17).
- 7) God's saving act in rescuing his people from the threat of death by drowning in water means that baptism celebrates God's saving act to us. Peter speaks of Noah being saved from the threat of water by God telling him to build an ark (1 Pet 3:18-22). Baptism can also be likened to people identifying with God's saving act when he led his people through the danger of the desert and through the threat of death posed by the Red Sea (1 Cor 10:1-2). Both of these saving acts of God point to the future saving act of Jesus Christ who died and was raised from death to save us from our sins and rescue us to God.
- 8) Being “in Christ” also means that the baptised person shares in Christ’s mission to the world (Jn 14:12; 16:7).

### **What are the promises and obligations of baptism?**

Candidates who come for baptism will normally be asked to answer these, or similar, questions:

*Do you, of your own free will, turn from your sins and from all that holds you back from God?*

*Will you cut the ties to all the spiritual claims upon you from other un-Christian religions and philosophies, and accept Christ as your only Lord?*

*Do you trust that Christ has died for you taking the blame for anything that would otherwise make you ineligible for life with a holy God?*

*Will you continue to develop your love for God, and learn to be sensitive to God’s Spirit speaking to you?*

*Will you work through the issues of faith honestly? Will you read the Bible often and let God teach you through it? Will you become a friend of God and share your thoughts with God in prayer?*

*Will you meet with God’s people regularly and join with them in living the lifestyle of Christ, the life of service, outreach and sacrificial love?*

## **Different churches baptise in different ways.**

Different church denominations baptise in different ways. Some baptise people only when they are old enough to make the decision to be a Christian in a responsible way as an adult. Other church denominations baptise infants.

There is no firm evidence of children being baptised in the Bible. We first hear about the church baptising infants in a written instruction from the great North African bishop Tertullian (about 203 A.D.) recommending people to stop doing so. Tertullian wanted those being baptised to be old enough to know Christ. He wrote: "*Let them become Christians when they are able to know Christ*" (*De baptismo* 18:5). However, the practice of baptising infants in Christian families has since become popular in some denominations. These denominations use the ceremony to celebrate the beginning of the spiritual journey of a child and to acknowledge that Christ has died for the child to make it possible for the child to be rescued back to God. Churches which baptise infants later provide the service of confirmation to enable a person to confess and confirm their personal faith in Christ when they are old enough to do so as a responsible believer. Confirmation can be thought of as the second half of the ceremony of baptism.

Churches also baptise in different ways. Some churches sprinkle water, an Old Testament action associated with making things ritually clean (Num 8:6-7; Ezek 36:25). Other churches pour water over the head. These churches highlight the washing away of sin aspect of baptism (Acts 22:16). Yet others baptise by full immersion which highlights both the washing away of sin and the dying and rising with Christ aspects of baptism (Rom 6:4-5).

Whatever your personal conviction as to the most correct way to baptise, it is wise to understand and respect the traditions of all Christian denominations. Failure to do this has caused tragic divisions in the church in the past.

## **Baptism at *Rivergate***

*Rivergate* normally encourages people to be baptised when they are of an age to understand its meaning and are of sufficient maturity to give the reasonable expectation that they will continue in their faith for the rest of their lives. For practical purposes, this age is considered to be when a person is approximately 16 years old. In saying this, *Rivergate* recognises that people can come to faith in Jesus Christ when they are children or may have been brought up in the faith since they were born.

When a child accepts Jesus as their Lord and Saviour before they are 16 years of age, testimony of them doing so should be shared publicly in worship where its news will be received with rejoicing. Once they are 16 years of age, they can be baptised.

### **The two options for children**

#### 1) Dedication

The intention to bring up a child within the life of the church and within a Christian family can be celebrated by a ceremony of DEDICATION, much like infant Samuel was dedicated in the Old Testament (1 Sam 1:21-28).

#### 2) Baptism

If Christian parents active in the life of the church wish their child to be baptised as an infant in a ceremony similar to that of infant dedication, this is also possible providing it is understood that this act of BAPTISM is the first half of the act of baptism which must later be completed by “confirmation” of the child once they are over 16 years of age.

### **Two options for those over 16 years of age:**

#### 1) Confirmation

If someone over 16 was “baptised” as an infant, this can be followed up with CONFIRMATION when the person chooses to own the faith for themselves when they are of an age to be independently responsible for their faith (over 16). Confirmation, confirms (or completes) the act of baptism.

#### 2) Baptism as an adult

If someone is over 16 and has not been baptised as an infant, (either receiving nothing as an infant or being 'dedicated' as an infant) they can be BAPTISED AS AN ADULT.

In practice, the service of infant dedication and infant baptism are nearly identical; and the service of Confirmation and Adult baptism are identical.

People can be baptised, dedicated or confirmed at the discretion of the Senior Pastor of *Rivergate* or as a result of a decision of the Board of *Rivergate*.

---oOo---