Taking Baptism Seriously

by J.I. Packer

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Preface To The Series

The Anglican Agenda series of publications aims to open up current questions that call for thought, discussion, prayer and decision among members of the Anglican Church of Canada at this time. The series is sponsored by the Essentials movement, which seeks all-round renewal of life and strength in the Anglican Church, and its writers are Anglican Church personnel speaking out of their loyalty to the Church and their acute sense of its present needs. It is hoped that the series will spark deep personal reflection and group discussion within and between parishes, so that we all may be better prepared for the difficult and demanding era into which, as it seems, our Church is now entering.

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First, let us get clear as to what we are talking about.

Baptismal Basics

At the close of his ministry on earth, Jesus Christ our Lord prescribed two rites which his disciples were to maintain on a permanent basis after he had left them.

Number one has the form of a celebratory meal and was actually instituted in the course of a Jewish Passover feast. It is called the Lord's Supper, or the Eucharist, or the Holy Communion, and is to be regularly repeated. Right from the start the apostolic communities seem to have celebrated it every Lord's Day (Sunday, that is), and at other times too when believers were together in worship (see Acts 2:42, 46, 20:7, 11; 1 Cor. 11:20-34).

Number two, which the risen Jesus included in his Great Commission to his apostles, has the symbolic form of a complete, comprehensive body-wash. The Saviour prescribed distinctive wording ("in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit") to go with it, but the action itself was already in use as part of the process of receiving non-Jewish proselytes — converts, we should say — into the Jewish community. Also, John the Baptist, Jesus's cousin, had earlier imposed baptism as a token of response to his ministry — a sign, that is, of full-scale personal repentance and forsaking of known sin in preparation for the imminent appearance of the Messiah. Baptism, a term taken from Greek that means "washing," was already the established name for the procedure; the person administering it was called the baptizer, now baptizing; and in Jesus's day its symbolism of being cleansed from present defilement in order to make a wholly new start in life was undisputedly understood.

The essence of baptism in practice seems to have been that its subjects were brought to water and then either literally submerged for a moment or metaphorically immersed by having water poured over their head as they stood in or by the water, upright. Whether both methods had an equal place in Jewish practice or in John's ministry, and whether, if one was standard rather than the other, which it was, and whether Jesus specified one of these methods, we are nowhere told, nor does it seem to matter. In both usages, the symbolism of first going under water as a sign of saying good-bye

to the style of life one is renouncing, and then coming up from under as a sign of starting a new life-pattern, is clearly expressed, and that evidently is what is important. The washing symbolism shows that this commitment is conceived within the frame of an absolution from the past that sets one free for the new beginning. The rite is thus one of termination, initiation and commencement. In the nature of the case, therefore, it should only ever be administered to a person once.

The fact that Jesus commanded these two rites shows that for him they were important. Evidently he saw them as a pair designating the Christian life first in its beginning and then in its continuance. As he presented them to the disciples, both, as we shall see, point to, celebrate, and serve to solidify the unique Spirit-and-faith bond with himself that is the believer's umbilical cord, so to speak, linking him or her with the life in Christ that begins here and is enjoyed in its fullness hereafter. Union and communion — intentional and experiential fellowship, that is — with the risen, reigning Christ, who is our sin-bearing redeemer, sovereign Lord, Friend and Brother, our help and our hope, and with his Father who is our heavenly Father by grace and adoption, is the essence of true Christianity; and it is this supernatural life, based on God's precious promises and ongoing love and sustained in us by the Holy Spirit, that these two ritual actions signify, symbolize and seal.

Taking its cue from Christ, the Christian church has always seen baptism and the Supper as matters of major concern, and has developed three distinct ways of referring to them, each of which highlights an essential point about them.

First: the earliest post-apostolic theology, like the New Testament, was written in Greek, the Roman Empire's common language, and Greek theology called these rituals *mustēria* (mysteries). The use of this word frames everything to which it applies with two thoughts: that this is knowable only by revelation, and that this is knowable only up to a point, for there is more to it than our finite minds can grasp. Here, both rites indicate the revealed reality of the God who is *there,* and the Christ who is *there,* and the heaven that is *there,* and the new life that is *there:* realities that, though invisible, are eternal, realities that the gospel message calls us to recognize and interact with, and realities to which our two rites are God-given signposts, both invoking the certainty of sense-experience to assure us of the realities that correspond.

The answer to question 75 in the Heidelberg Catechism, a classic Reformation document, models for us the thinking that this should evoke within us in the case of the Lord's Supper.

> Christ has commanded me… to eat of this broken bread and drink

> of this cup in memory of him, and thereby has given assurance: first, that his body was… broken on the cross for me, and his blood shed for me, *as sure as* I see with my eyes the bread… and the cup…; and, further, that with his crucified body and shed blood he himself feeds and nourishes my soul to eternal life, *as sure as* I take and taste the bread and cup…

As sure as is the key phrase here, the hinge phrase, we might say, on which the thought turns. So we may truly say that in thus ministering assurance the Supper truly functions on the principle that seeing is believing — in other words, that contemplating and actually consuming the sign confirms confidence that one is sharing in the thing signified. And with baptism it is similar: remembering, or being reminded of, one's baptism as a fact of one's past confirms the believer's certainty of being dead and risen with Christ in the present, and hence of being called here and now to live out the new life that God has imparted, making a difference in the world by being different from the world — a matter about which we shall have more to say in due course. In this way the two rites, viewed as *mysteries,* visible disclosures of God's saving work through Christ both past and present, accentuate their recipients' *assurance* that God has his grip on their lives.

Second: from early on, the Latin-speaking churches of the Western Roman Empire called these rites *sacraments,* the commonest label for them today. *Sacramentum* was a word borrowed from the army, where it signified the soldier's solemn oath pledging full loyalty to the Roman Emperor, under whose banner he was enlisting. When Christians took the word over, the analogy shifted; the oath was now understood to be God's, a promise guaranteeing salvation to everyone who receives Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord, professes penitent faith and commits to be fully faithful to God throughout life. This profession, though vital in itself, was seen as responsive and therefore derivative, and thus of secondary importance compared to God's own pledge.

So Article 25 of the 39, the sixteenth-century Anglican declaration of faith, says:

> Sacraments ordained of Christ be not only badges or tokens of Christian men's profession, but *rather* they be certain sure witnesses, and effectual signs of grace… by the which (God) doth work invisibly in us, and doth not only quicken, but also strengthen and confirm our Faith in him.

Rather is the word here that indicates primacy of importance.

And then Article 27, applying the above with Anabaptist sects in view, affirms:

> Baptism is not only a sign of profession, and mark of difference, whereby Christian men are discerned from others… but it is also a sign of Regeneration or new Birth, whereby, as by an *instrument,* they that receive Baptism *rightly* are *grafted* into the Church, the promises of forgiveness of sin, and of our adoption to be the sons of God by the Holy Ghost, are visibly *signed and sealed;* Faith is confirmed, and Grace increased by virtue of prayer unto God.
>
> [italics mine]

Note here the legal background being drawn on, which is often overlooked. A *seal,* as in Paul's writings and in legal dealings today, is a solemn confirmation of the authenticity and binding force of a stated promise. An *instrument,* here as in many sixteenth-century documents, is not a tool or piece of apparatus, as we twenty-first century readers might suppose, but a legal document, a deed of conveyance, establishing someone's right to possess, or privilege to enjoy, some specified benefit (in this case, a sharing in the authentic life of union with God that belongs to the real church, pictured here horticulturally as an *ingrafting,* on the model of Paul's image in Romans 11:17-24). Note too that *rightly,* (*rectē* in the definitive Latin version) means, not "with ritual correctness," but "as one should" in personal terms. The 1604 addition to Cranmer's Prayer Book Catechism, still part of the 1662 Prayer Book, explains:

> What is required of persons to be baptized?
>
> Repentance, whereby they forsake sin; and Faith, whereby they stedfastly believe the promises of God made to them in that Sacrament.
>
> Why then are Infants baptized, when by reason of their tender age they cannot perform them? [i.e. cannot yet repent and believe]
>
> Because they promise them both by their Sureties [i.e. godparents, parents, sponsors]; which promise, when they come to age, themselves are bound to perform.

Thus the language of *sacraments* highlights and guarantees God's promise of saving action for the future, linking this with the responsive promise of a life of repentance and faith that individuals are required to make at their baptism and renew every time they come to the Lord's Table.

Third: over the centuries, the baptism of infants as a name-giving routine, followed in due course by passive, uncomprehending, non-communicating attendance at the Lord's Supper, now renamed the Mass, became standard; the need for the responsive commitment of faith and repentance was lost sight of, and the idea spread throughout the Western world that both

sacraments automatically conveyed the blessing they signified, simply by virtue of being correctly administered. Reacting against this superstitious sacramentalism, some Protestants dropped the word *sacraments* in favour of *ordinances,* sometimes expanded into the phrase *covenanting ordinances.* Theologically, there is gain here, for *ordinances* proclaims the reality of divine command, and *covenanting* goes to the very heart of what the rites signify. A covenant in Scripture is a comprehensive mutual promise and bond of goodwill and loyalty between two parties; the generic formula is, "I am yours and you are mine;" among human relationships, the prime example is marriage; Jesus spoke of the cup of wine at the Supper as "the new *covenant* in my blood," harking back to Jeremiah's prophecy in 31:31-34 and pointing forward to his substitutionary sacrifice for sins, shortly to take place; and God had said to Abraham long before, when instituting the initiatory rite that was baptism's predecessor, "This my *covenant,* which you shall keep…. Every male among you shall be circumcised" (Gen. 17:10). The word covenanting thus speaks of the two-way street of pledged unity, fidelity and tenacity — that is, love — that shapes the saving relationship between God, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, and man, the penitent believer. It is in these terms that God's bond with us and ours with him should finally be explained.

So far, we have bracketed baptism and the Lord's Supper together as a pair, which indeed they are. From now on, however, baptism will be our exclusive concern.

Baptismal Behavior

This essay reflects the conviction that Anglicans of all schools of thought have at least this in common: they do not take their baptism seriously. We may affirm that Baptism is important, and give it a large place in our theology, but we do not think or pray or talk much about it as a defining factor in our Christian identity. Rarely do preachers highlight baptism (when, outside a baptism service, did you last hear a sermon on the subject?), and when they do they rarely get excited about it, or press us to have it constantly before our minds. This seems particularly to be so in churches in which, as in our own, infant baptism is the rule. Baptisms are usually slated for Sundays, but in a way that makes them feel like perfunctory inserts into services that are otherwise dealing with more important business. An observer from another planet might well conclude that for present-day Anglican adults their baptism was a sideshow in the dim past, eminently forgettable, rather than an event of continuing centre-stage significance for their Christian lives today.

Contrast with this the way in which in the second century, when Christianity was still technically illegal and open to official persecution at

the local magistrate's whim, the baptism of converts was managed. It was programmed as one of the high spots of the Easter celebration, itself the highest spot of the Church's year. At Easter, following on from three years of catechesis — graded instruction, that is, on the truths that Christians live by, and how one should live by them, and what current errors about faith and life must be discerned and avoided — one by one, the neophytes, having professed faith convincingly before the congregation, would be stripped naked, immersed three times, reclothed in white, which they were to wear for a week, welcomed into the congregation as full members at last, and admitted to the Lord's Table to share in their first Holy Communion. Three anointings of them with oil would punctuate the ceremony: the oil of exorcism, to banish malevolent spirits; the oil of thanksgiving, to celebrate the convert's new life in Christ; and a repeat of the oil of thanksgiving by the Bishop, with prayer for the Holy Spirit's empowering throughout that new life. Big deal? Yes, surely, and an occasion that no neophyte was ever likely to forget. For that person, the ceremony would have had the same sort of significance as England's coronation service has for the royal person at its centre. That service signalizes, celebrates, and expresses prayer for, the new reign, just begun; it voices thanksgiving, joy, and hope as the nation embraces its new era, marked by this public recognizing and formal enthroning of its new monarch. It is a solemn landmark event, and so is baptism as described above.

Is it a great ceremonial occasion, then, that I aspire after when I speak of taking baptism seriously? No; I mean, NO; and I ask the question only to dismiss that idea as decisively as I can. I have nothing against ceremonial, as long as it expresses and reinforces what is already in the heart; but it is what *is* in the heart that I am concerned with, rather than anything else. You could have been baptized in the full second-century manner (it continued in essentially this form till at least the fifth century, and Eastern Orthodox baptism, for infants as well as adults, still embodies a good deal of it); it could now be one of your cherished memories, or cherished certainties about your upbringing; and still you might not be taking baptism seriously in biblical terms. Historically, baptism has been administered in many different situations, and in many different ways: to adults and young children and babes in arms; by pouring, sprinkling, and immersion; publicly, as part of a main Sunday service, or as an open-air occasion by a river, or by the sea, with some or all of the congregation present, or privately, as a family affair, either in church out of service times or in homes or hospitals; and amid a wide variety of theological beliefs as to what was actually taking place; but none of the methods, beliefs, or circumstances ensures that the baptism will be taken seriously, either by the witnesses or by the person being baptized.

So what do I mean by taking baptism seriously? My interest is in the dif-

ference that understanding our baptism should make to us, and I now offer a three-point biblical analysis that will, I believe, properly set this forth.

Baptismal Theology

❧ ***First point: note how baptism is presented in Jesus's Great Commission.*** As Matthew reports it, what we call the Great Commission followed straight on from the risen Saviour's momentous declaration: "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me." "Go therefore" (he continued) "and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you" (Mt. 28:18-20).

"Make disciples" is a single Greek word, matching in meaning our own increasingly current use of "disciple" as an umbrella term for nurture. But what does that mean? Well, a disciple is essentially one who learns, that is, accepts instruction from somebody else, and a nurturer is one who gives the instruction needed for growth. A friend of mine wrote a book, boldly titled *Go Make Learners,* in which he argued that the central baptismal commitment is to spend one's life learning from Jesus through his teaching servants, as the apostles themselves had spent their three previous years learning from Jesus in the flesh; and that this commitment explains why, in Christianity's earliest days as recorded in Acts, those who professed faith in Christ were baptized immediately, rather than being made to wait for further instruction about discipleship before thus displaying their new allegiance. I think he was right on both counts. Baptism was then to be the converts' first step in the process of being discipled, as Jesus's own words ("make disciples… baptizing them… teaching them…") seem naturally to indicate and recommend.

But before being a response to Christ from the one being baptized, baptism should be seen as an embodied divine promise that is at the same time a call and a claim from all three persons of the Trinity. The phrase "in the name of" does not mean "on behalf of," or "as the agent of," or "with the authority of," as is sometimes supposed. Literally, as the ESV margin shows, it is "*into* the name of," and it comes from Matthew's original world of law, banking and business, where its context was transfer of ownership. We speak similarly when we deposit money or register property "in(to) the name" of someone else, who is to possess and use it henceforth. So, when the baptizer says that he baptizes "in the name of" the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, what he is announcing is that the person being baptized is being made over — designated, consecrated, given up — to the holy Three as his or her joint-owners, and so is being brought, as we might say, under new management. The blessings that this under-water-and-up-from-under

ritual visibly signs and seals — that is, displays as really real and personally offered — are for those who thankfully embrace the fact that now they belong to the Father as his adopted children, to the Son as his purchased possession, and to the Holy Spirit as subjects for his ministry of transformation. This is baptism's *covenanting* aspect, for this is precisely what baptism declares.

❧ ***Second point: note how baptism is woven into Paul's account of our union with Christ.***

When Paul, having triumphantly affirmed that the reign of God's grace overcomes the reign of sin and death, asks: are we to continue in sin so that grace may abound? his explosive negative answer involves baptism, as demonstrating our union with Christ in his death and resurrection.

> Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life (Rom. 6:3-4).

In Colossians he speaks to his Christian readers (strangers to him, as were the Romans) as those who had undergone what he calls a spiritual circumcision by means of this union.

> In him (Christ) also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead. And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses (Col. 2:11-13).

In both passages he appeals to the under-and-up ritual as representing the two aspects of our union with Christ, the deepest dimensions of our saving and eternal relationship with him.

Paul's understanding and exposition of salvation — "in and through Christ," as we regularly say — involves him in constant oscillation between two thoughts which, though inseparably connected, cannot be reduced to one. This to-and-fro mental movement, without which the fullness of salvation could not be expressed, is marked by Paul's use of prepositions, in the following manner.

When the apostle focuses on the new relation to God that the gospel proclaims — reconciliation and justification, pardon and peace, forgiveness

and adoption — he speaks of these things as becoming reality for us *through* and *on account of (dia)* our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us — that is, *on our behalf (huper)* and *in our stead (anti)* — and then rose, returned to glory, reigns now, and will one day return to earth to raise us if we have died, or to transform us if we are still living, for our final blessing and everlasting enrichment. What Paul is after in this is a clear-headed recognition that formerly, when we existed without Christ, we were ruined, guilty and lost, and that every element of the salvation we now and will for ever enjoy we owe to him.

When however Paul speaks directly of the Christian's new life according to the gospel, he always presents it as life *in (en)* Christ (101 times, no less) — that is, life lived in connection and union with Christ — and as life *with (meta)* Christ (16 times) — that is, life lived in conjunction and communion with Christ. What Paul seeks to induce here is a clear-headed recognition that it is the risen, reigning, accessible, active Christ, now with us and within us in the power of his resurrection life through the Holy Spirit, who has made us into what we now are, so different from what we used to be, and who continues remaking us, rendering our character more and more like his own. Paul wants us to know what has happened to us through our faith-union with Christ: namely, that within our unchanged personal identity the power that made the world has made us into new creations (2 Cor. 5:17), terminating our old, self-centred, naturally sinful mode of existence and, to borrow Paul's elegant horticultural image, grafting and implanting us into our risen Lord plugging us into him, as we might less elegantly put it — with new desires, new powers and new joys directly resulting. In terms of Paul's spiritual ontology, which tells us how God who brought about this change sees and knows his own handiwork, we have been co-crucified and co-resurrected with and in Christ (see Gal. 2:20; Eph. 2:5-6; Col. 2:11-13).

This change is precisely what the under-and-up ritual of baptism symbolizes; so this is the *Christ-centred* aspect of the sacrament.

❧ ***Third point: note how baptism relates to the church.***
Integral to Paul's gospel was an account of the church, and basic to this, constantly implicit if now here explicit, was the distinction between the universal church, the one world-wide fellowship of believers in Christ as such, and the local church, the particular band of believers who meet and organize themselves in a particular place and in a particular way in order to live out together the true churchly behaviour-pattern, and thus to be a sample, specimen, and demonstration in miniature of the organic life of the church universal. That church Paul pictures as the one multinational, multicultural, global, worshipping, serving, loving, labouring, suffering, growing, outreaching body in which everyone is personally united to the Lord Jesus

by the Holy Spirit, and of which the Lord Jesus is now the eternal head. The unity of that church, which follows from all its members being thus united to Christ, has what we may call a horizontal as well as a vertical dimension: being linked with Christ, and thus committed to love and serve him as our loving Saviour and Lord , all we who believe are also thereby linked with each other, and thus committed to love and serve each other as our brothers and sisters in the Lord's family. All three key images of the universal church in Ephesians are corporate images in this sense, namely the building, body and bride of Christ. Or think of a bicycle wheel: within its rim each spoke is separately and directly linked to the hub, and via the hub linked to all the other spokes, thus constituting a single functioning unit. It was in this way that Paul thought of the church.

It should not surprise us, then, that Paul, clearly anxious that no local church should ever forget, or fail to grasp, what it really is and is really meant to be, opens his exposition of how the one church, made visible in the many churches, should "walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called," by listing seven components of the church's oneness in Christ. And in this list we find, after one body, one Spirit, one hope, one Lord and one faith, and before the final item, one God and Father, "one baptism" (Eph. 4:1-6). What point about baptism is Paul making here? Peter O'Brien answers that question well. "There is only one baptism because there is one Lord Jesus Christ in whom believers are united, one body into which all Christians are incorporated. Those who have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ (Gal. 3:27)." Paul's overall teaching on baptism, O'Brien adds, "does not make sense unless the notion of spiritual union with Christ… is in view" (*Letter to the Ephesians,* Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans and Leicester, UK: Apollos, 1999, p.284). And spiritual union with Christ means incorporation into the one world-wide society that is his building, his body and his bride; a society to which some fully belong, while others do not, but remain outside it; a society which, in its overall visible aspect, no matter how much it is criss-crossed by internal division, has a single universal entry rite that all acknowledge, marking off all its adherents from all non-members — namely, Trinitarian baptism. This is the *church-centred* element of baptism's significance.

Baptism and Babies

Why adults who profess faith in Jesus Christ as their Saviour, Lord, teacher and leader, should be baptized is now clear. Jesus himself directs that all such be given the sign, symbol and seal of the eternal bond with himself, and with the Father and the Holy Spirit, that is now theirs. This will be a means of grace to them, assuring them of the mercy that has embraced them and keeping them conscious of the reality and ramifications of union

and communion with Christ. True, someone who has been baptized on profession of faith may yet prove not to be a genuine believer at all (see, for example Acts 8:13-34; 1 Cor. 10:1-12), but the discovery of a rotten apple need not negate the goodness of the good apples that surround it. But a question remains: why baptize babies, who cannot understand any of these things? By what warrant do Anglican churches make infant baptism the rule? On what grounds can Article 27 affirm, as it does: "The baptism of young Children is in any wise to be retained in the Church, as most agreeable with the institution of Christ?" How can the fittingness of infant baptism be vindicated, when the New Testament neither clearly instances it nor clearly commands it?

The answer, in brief (whole books get written on this subject!), is that all through the Bible we see God treating parents and their dependent children as a single spiritual unit, involving the infants with their parents in the covenant community in a way similar to that in which the children of Canadian parents are in solidarity with them as junior Canadian citizens from the moment of their birth. As these junior Canadians should be taught by their parents and other mentors to appreciate and in due course exercise their citizenship, so the children of Christians, having been publicly dedicated to God and publicly received into the church fellowship in which their parents already share, should then be brought up to enter consciously and wholeheartedly into the life in and with Christ that has thus been, symbolically and in sign form, made over to them. In other words, they should be led to personal faith in Christ. As Archbishop Usher wrote long ago, I only "have the profit and benefit of them" (the promises, rights and privileges given me in baptism) "when I come to understand what grant in Baptism God hath sealed unto me, and actually lay hold on it by faith." The Prayer Book directs that when baptized infants, now grown into young people, know the contents of the Catechism and give credible evidence of having laid hold of God's grant by personal faith in Christ they should be confirmed (that is, blessed by the Bishop as the believers they now claim to be) and welcomed with all the congregation's other adult adherents to the Lord's Table.

Baptismal Living

Few of us, I suspect, ever think about our baptism when it comes to shaping our lives, and certainly the attitudes and commitments that Christians should develop can be formed in us without our baptism entering our mind. Nonetheless, just as wearing the uniform helps members of the armed forces to remember that, being in the services now, their first loyalty is to their country and their first task is to obey the orders of their superior officers, so remembering that we have been baptized helps us to keep our Christian commitment before us in sharp focus. Martin Luther tells us that in his

frequent bouts with the devil and what he saw as devil-inspired temptations, he would often think *baptizatus sum* (I have been baptized), and this thought would keep him steady and on track. The same, surely, should be true of us. In particular, there are three principles of discipleship to Christ that the enemy of our souls constantly encourages us to forget, which remembering our baptism will help to keep vivid in our minds.

❧ ***First: baptism reminds us about our identity.***
Do we know, and do we remember, who we are?

Our identity is the shape of our conscious selfhood. It is formed by the impact on us of our relationships, our circumstances, and our success or otherwise in our creative endeavours, whatever these may be. The Christian's identity is to be formed by our relationship to Christ as our Saviour, Lord and God, our teacher, brother and friend, the relationship into which baptism, as a sign and symbol, brings us. Looking up in adoration, looking ahead in anticipation of glory, and looking around in order to serve others in love for the Lord's sake, must increasingly become the disciple's expression of his or her identity, and our baptism commits us to be disciples lifelong. As disciples, we are saved sinners of whom grace has laid hold, whom Jesus our Redeemer is now, shepherd-style, leading home; privileged persons, whose deathday will in truth be a third birthday, following on from our natural birth as babies and our new birth as believers. As each of our first two births led to a widening of experience and an increased measure of joy, so will our third. A Christian's death is promotion, not tragedy, however early in life it comes; mourners weep for themselves and those left behind, but not for the one who has gone ahead of us. D.L.Moody said, memorably: "Some day they'll tell you Moody's dead. Don't you believe it! that day I'll be before the throne; I'll be more alive than I've ever been." As Christian poet Robert Browning wrote, "the best is yet to be;" as Christian prose writer George MacDonald said, "if we knew what God knows about death, we would clap our hands." The life that awaits us will be better than anything we have experienced so far. Thinking of our baptism, which speaks of us following Christ through death into resurrection life, will keep these aspects of our Christian identity vivid in our hearts.

❧ ***Second: baptism reminds us about our sanctity.***
Are we clear, and do we bear in mind, that God both calls us to, and empowers us for, holiness here and now?

To believers, baptism proclaims the supernatural reality of union with Christ in his death; which means that, though sin as the anti-God energy that it essentially is remains present in our system, its dominion over us is broken, so that we can effectively resist it, in a way that previously we could not do. "We know that our old self was crucified with him in order that the

body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin" (Rom. 6:6, cf. vss. 2-3). Our co-resurrection with Christ, which our baptism also proclaims, then means that as "the life he lives he lives to God," "so also you must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus" (6:10-11). "Now that you have been set free from sin and become slaves of God, the fruit you get leads to sanctification and its end, eternal life" (6:22). So "present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and your members to God as instruments for righteousness" (6:13). Our personal life has thus been supernaturalized; the risen Lord, our holy head, and the indwelling Spirit, our holy enabler, lead us now into the disciplines of mortifying, that is, resisting and progressively killing, sin (see Rom. 8:13; Col. 3:5), and of developing and practising the holy habits that God's law and Christ's example both prescribe (see Gal. 5:22-23; Eph. 4:20-5:2). Thinking of our baptism will keep our nose to this particular grindstone also.

❧ ***Third: baptism reminds us about our loyalty.***

Is loyalty to our Lord Jesus Christ a driving force in our lives?

Loyalty is a blend of gratitude, admiration, a sense of indebtedness, and appreciation of ongoing love and care. Loyalty to Jesus Christ is basic to discipleship, and as the soldier's uniform is a public commitment of loyalty to the nation and its causes, so the knowledge that we have been baptized should weigh with us as our irrevocable commitment to Jesus Christ and his cause in this world. Uncompromising faithfulness to Jesus in opposing the world, the flesh and the devil, and in standing steady and strong for him in all situations, is what our baptism requires of us. Does this mean becoming counter-cultural? anti-conformist? unpopular? viewed as a rebel? penalized for our faith? Sometimes, yes; this is par for the Christian course, as the New Testament makes very plain. But loyalty to Christ requires that we seek to make a difference by being different, and as in baptism the Father, the Son and the Spirit pledge loyalty to us, so we the baptized must see ourselves as having pledged our loyalty to Christ categorically, without any ifs and buts, and as committed here and now to live out that loyalty every day of our lives. Our uniform, so to speak, has been given us and put on us, marking us out as, in the Prayer Book phrase, Christ's soldiers and servants; we wear it permanently, and must never in any way dishonour it. Remembering our baptism will constantly remind us that this is so.

So the question presses: how seriously do we take our baptism? Over to you, now, for your answer.

Questions for Study and Discussion

1. How much has your baptism meant to you over the years? How often has it been in your mind? What effect has it had in shaping your life?

2. What relation do you see between the rite of baptism and the Christian's personal faith?

3. In what sense is a person's baptism their entry into the church?

4. How would you recommend that those baptized in infancy should be discipled?

5. "Remember always that Baptism represents unto us our profession; which is, to follow our Saviour Christ, and to be made like unto him; that as he died and rose again for us, so should we, who are baptized, die from sin, and rise again unto righteousness, continually mortifying all evil desires, and daily increasing in all virtue and godliness of living" (Baptismal Service, BCP). What impact does this statement make on you?

6. What, if anything, should a congregation do to maintain awareness of the significance of baptism?