

## **What do Methodists believe about Baptism?**

I'm a bit nervous about this one! I could give you the low down on what Methodists are supposed to believe about baptism or I could recognise the reality that modern Methodists have a range of views about what it means and how and when it should take place. The fact that I was baptised at nineteen in the sea by a Pentecostal pastor and a Methodist local preacher will help you to see that I am probably not the best person to whom such a question should be addressed. With that confession out of the way, however, here goes....

Methodism has always recognised two ways in which baptism can be administered. It can be given to infants or to believing adults. Overwhelmingly, the norm has been to baptise children. John Wesley used the elements of the Quadrilateral, about which I wrote recently, (scripture, tradition, reason and experience) to justify infant baptism. He appealed to scripture with its examples of household baptism; to tradition by tracing the practice back to at least the second century and from there back to apostolic times; to reason by arguing that it was a replacement for Jewish circumcision which was carried out on the eighth day and to experience by saying that it had served the Church well for seventeen centuries.

John Wesley lived and died a clergyman in the Church of England. From Anglicanism he derived strong views on baptism. It was more than symbolic. He believed that through it a child was "cleansed of original sin, initiated into the covenant of God, admitted into the membership of the church, made an heir of the divine kingdom, and spiritually born anew." Later on that person would have to come to a point of conscious acceptance of Christ for themselves. The baptism was really a preparation for the personal faith that would follow.

Nowadays Methodism has rather distanced itself from any idea that at its baptism an infant is spiritually born anew and cleansed of original sin. Indeed, later on Wesley wrote "Baptism is not the new birth; they are not one and the same thing." He did not want anyone to think that they were going to heaven just because they had been baptised. In one of his sermons he wrote "Lean not on the staff of that broken reed, that ye were born again in baptism."

We should be clear then that baptism does not save anyone. We call it a sacrament which means that it is an outward visible sign of God's grace at work. As such, properly understood, it is a very powerful evangelistic proclamation. Our Gospel says that a person is saved by grace through faith. The whole point of grace is that it is undeserved. We can never build up enough merit to earn our own salvation. The initiative has to come from God. When we see a helpless little one in its mother's or father's arms at the front of the church we see a powerful demonstration of the grace of God. God loves that child even though, as yet, that child has done nothing whatever to deserve that love. Jesus laid down his life on the Cross to save one who as yet does not even know his Name.

Through baptism the child is admitted into the family of the church. The parents ideally promise to give him or her a Christian upbringing and the congregation promises to encourage this and all children in its care in the ways of God. Usually in mid teens, the church asks a young person to declare their own personal faith in what

we call confirmation and they are then received into the full membership of the church. Thus what was begun at baptism is brought to completion.

Infant baptism comes in for its share of criticism. Congregations tend to get a bit cynical when people they have never seen before appear to “book the church” for a “christening”, make promises about giving the child a Christian upbringing and then neither they nor the little one are ever seen again. It sometimes seems as if we are being used as staging for a social event.

On the other hand we should not judge infant baptism by cases where it is abused. Think of the opportunity that baptism affords a conscientious pastor. It provides a wonderful opportunity to explain the gospel message behind the sacrament and it gives the church the right and the responsibility to follow up the contact in years to come. Many of our congregations are getting better at this, remembering birthdays, holding cradle roll services and doing all they can to see that the child is invited to Sunday School and other activities in due course.

Of course some of you reading this will not be convinced. For you baptism is something that should follow conversion as a declaration of personal faith and an act of obedience. It should identify with the death, burial and resurrection of Christ as you go down into water, be totally immersed and come up into new life as a believer. Some of you who are parents would prefer not to have your children baptised in infancy so that at some future point they might have the experience of believers’ baptism. The Methodist Church understands this. It is happy to baptise any adult who professes faith in Jesus Christ. It will not baptise a person a second time because that would be to say that the first ceremony was not properly valid but if an adult wants the opportunity to publicly declare their faith then that is easily provided in the form of the confirmation service.

So, whether as an infant or an adult believer, baptism with water in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit is what counts. We do it because Jesus told us to. We must try not to fall out about the details.