



Baptism & Body

Baptism signals that we want to follow Jesus, but it does not finish the job of making us disciples. We must 'watch over and walk with' to do that

Reflecting on the baptism of her daughter, who has severe and complex special needs, Sally Nelson explores how we understand the concept of the church as the body of Christ

Reflection on a real situation allows us to inspect our true convictions and perhaps reassess things we have never previously questioned.

In 2018 I baptised my 19-year-old daughter, who has severe and complex special needs. Some friends asked me to write about the baptism in case it is of use

to others who are facing such decisions.

A child of the manse, our daughter has attended church since she was two weeks old. As a family we have been members of five different Baptist churches during her lifetime (of these I have been in pastoral charge of two). At each she has been welcomed into the fellowship as fully as possible, for which we have been grateful.

In these five churches a variety of cultures and opinions existed around the practices of baptism and communion. For example, some allowed children

to receive communion, while others preferred not; some saw attendance at communion as a 'test' of commitment; others did not. When our daughter was about seven, we moved from a church that accepted children at communion to one that didn't. I often wondered what she made of this change, since she could not understand the theological reasons but had to accept the different practice. Children raise one set of 'commitment' questions; those with learning disabilities, another.

However, I want to focus on baptism, not communion, in this article. The key question is

how we understand, and put into practice, the concept of the church as the Body of Christ, which I believe has profound implications for those with learning disabilities. Is the Body of Christ a group of *individuals* who self-selectively coordinate themselves, or is it the *integrated* body of a Person?

As she grew older, our daughter's delight in attending church and joining in worship became evident. The question of baptism and membership became pressing for us. There was never any issue about, or objection to, her baptism in our fellowship but I was anxious to think responsibly through the practical and theological implications.

First, the practical matters, which were the least difficult. She is wheelchair-dependent with physical hypersensitivity. Our church meets in a school and has no baptistry. We considered the options of the swimming pool and of hiring a baptistry (and a hoist!) and decided against both on the grounds of her dignity and the possibility of causing her pain. Pouring water over her would have been another option, but her hypersensitivity made that seem unkind. In the end we settled for sprinkling as the only compassionate way.

What about her cognitive, and speech and language, difficulties? Normally a baptismal candidate can profess his/her faith either by testimony or by standard responses: she could do neither. Here several more questions arose, of relevance to baptistic communities.

- *Did* she understand the commitment of faith to which she was called?
- *How* could she profess her faith? She is verbally unable to testify, and she can't read or write. If I had asked closed questions in the tradition of profession of faith, her 'best' word when nervous is 'No'—not the ideal response when asking if Jesus is her Lord and Saviour.
- *How* could she publicly commit herself to the community of the baptised, this local church?

These matters were resolved as follows.

We decided the cognitive reception of her faith was not, and could not be, a prohibitive issue. There is plenty she can't understand, but she is evidently able to enter the spirit of worship within our community, and she has a heart of gold, hating to see anyone in pain. She thus satisfies Jesus' summary of the commandments: love God and love other people. Had even this level of demonstrable faith been harder to discern because of greater cognitive damage, I still think, on reflection, that I could not have denied baptism to faithful members of the community if the Body of Christ metaphor is taken seriously.

She cannot use spoken language, so during the service we asked others in the body to speak of the faith they saw in her. One was a teacher from her school, also a church member. The other was

my husband, who sat with her at the front and gently 'interviewed' her, talking about church and Jesus and love (she is able to say 'yes' and 'no' accurately, if not stressed). As a whole congregation, we reaffirmed our baptismal promises together and she was a non-verbal part of that reaffirmation: here truly was the Body of Christ.

One of the church leaders helped me to sprinkle the water (something we'd practised at home so that it wasn't a surprise) and to pray for her. Our church secretary presented her with a fine purple Bible (her favourite colour) on behalf of the church, which she brings proudly each week, like everyone else, though she cannot read it.

We had plenty of music, which she loves; a quiz about water and an offering for Water Aid (to connect water with life in a practical as well as a spiritual manner); a lunch for everyone afterwards. Our small fellowship swelled to three times its normal size, with many non-believers present because they loved her. Jesus was glorified.

I believe this baptism took seriously our corporate life as the body of Christ—and in a manner that is truly baptistic.

Her faith was demonstrated and articulated *by the body of which she is also a part*, and she would be supported by this fellowship in her commitment to Jesus. She was a part of our small church in every way.

the Body of Christ is incomplete without the weak, foolish and despised (1 Cor 1: 26-28)
- and perhaps we should examine how we 'gatekeep' joining and belonging

We did this baptism *together*: it was not about an individual's statement or commitment, but about the life of this community of baptised believers, increasing the membership of the body.¹

Three observations, seven years on

Seven years on, and our daughter is 26. In September 2023 she moved to a young adult setting 25 miles away and so she is no longer part of the church in which she was baptised. Physically she has deteriorated and the staff, although willing to take her to church, find that getting her ready for 10:30 on Sundays is impossible: she takes several hours to 'fire up'. I have often thought about the wonderful day of her baptism and reflected on its meaning for her now. I do not believe she has 'left' the Body (indeed, she is still a member and held in prayer and love), and I have three observations.

First, the individualism prized in our society is illusory

Much within our health, education and welfare systems (and indeed wider culture) is predicated upon personal independence, as if that were the gold standard of being human. In fact we have all been unavoidably and totally dependent upon others – each of us was born small and vulnerable, unable to care for ourselves or make decisions; and as we age this may be true again.

During the pandemic we reconnected experientially with our human need for others. Theologically we are created to be in relationship: it was never good to be alone (Gen 2:18), and God is a covenanting, relational God. Baptism is an act by and into the community, not simply a personal decision for Jesus.

Further, Baptists believe they 'watch over and walk with' one another in covenant community. Being in a local church is not just 'our' choice: we're called by the Lord into a community and our commitment is deeper than for a club or society – it is to one another, not to the organisation's focus (like gold or politics).

Second, baptism is not an event but signals a chosen journey

It is a transitional rite, and the baptised person becomes part of a baptised Body. Like a turnstile at the park, the gate won't let us go back. We can't be unbaptised, and we enter a corporate exploration of the Way of Jesus. Logically, we can't individually 'un-Body' ourselves!

At times, too, we may have to support other parts of the Body that are damaged, diseased, or amputated. Augustine 'got' this: he described church as a 'mixed body' (*corpus permixtum*). The church is not perfect but a community of people at different places in their commitment (he spoke of wheat and weeds from Matt 13: 24-30). Baptism signals that we want to follow Jesus, but it does not finish the job of making us disciples. We must 'watch over and walk with' to do that.

My third observation is that our churches do not make the journey beyond baptism easy for someone like my daughter

We do not watch and walk equally well with all people. It is not her fault that she hasn't got the physical ability to be there at 10:30, nor that she finds a 30-minute sermon yawningly dull. Baptists are often cerebral, assuming cognitive ability and that everyone can participate in church meetings and projects.

What if you can't? Are you 'in', or not?

Yet the Body of Christ is incomplete without the weak, foolish and despised (1 Cor 1: 26-28), and perhaps we should examine how we 'gatekeep' joining and belonging. Some will speak of centred or bounded sets; these categories may be helpful in management circles, but neither sounds to me like the Body of Christ, which is a beautiful, coherent unity of diverse parts, characterised by baptised commitment.

Are you an elegant limb or a broken toenail? Who let you choose? Which part of your body is most important? Put like this, we realise that we are not yet the Body of the crucified Christ that we are called to be.



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This article is based on A Reflection on a Baptism, which appeared in the *bmj* (Baptist Ministers' Journal), in October 2018

¹ I have written more about my general thinking on baptism in a chapter in the festschrift for Chris Ellis entitled *Gathering Disciples*. See page 41 for more information on this resource.