



# Diversity in Baptism

Eduqas A level R.S. G1A Christianity Theme 4A

## Key Concepts:

- The practice of infant baptism since the time of the early church was part of Augustine's (4th-5th c. CE) argument for **original sin**: it was clear that infants did not sin; they have inherited sin, otherwise baptism would be irrelevant.
- Baptism is a sacrament, which Augustine defined as 'an outward and visible sign of an inward and invisible grace.' Baptismal water is used by God to save.
- Baptism therefore saves a baby from **damnation** (**John 3:5**) but there is, of course, still the need to grow in the Christian life.
- Augustine said that infant baptism is therefore like the **removal of a disease**; one is left in a weakened condition; this weakness is remedied by Christian growth and other **sacraments**.
- Huldrych Zwingli (15th-16th c. CE) was a Swiss reformer who believed that the Bible is the sole source of truth. He too believed that the practice of infant baptism goes back to the Early Church (Acts 16:15;33).
- Zwingli rejected sacramental views: God alone saves, with or without water.
- He supported infant baptism on the grounds that it replaced **circumcision** as a sign of the **covenant** (Colossians 2:11-12), Christ welcomed children (Matthew 9:13-14), and that it is an occasion for parents to make **pledges**.
- 20th century theologian Karl Barth supported 'believer's baptism': baptism only following a profession of faith - usually by **full immersion**. (Acts 8:35-36)
- All of the baptisms described in the New Testament occur after a profession of faith.
- At the time of the reformation, those who practised believer's baptism were called '**Anabaptists**' (lit. 'baptise again'). Rebaptism was condemned at the Council of Trent in 1547.
- As Anabaptists viewed infant baptism as **unscriptural**, they did not see themselves as baptising 'again'.
- Barth stressed that it is the person of Jesus is the sacrament of God (the outward sign of an inward and invisible grace) - not any ritual of the church.
- Barth criticised the Church for always wanting to attain to more power than it has, for trying to mediate God's grace. Sacramental theology represents the attempt to **control** salvation and therefore replace God.
- Baptism for Barth is symbolic representation of salvation having already taken place in a believer's life. It is a **human response** to God.
- Churches which practice believer's baptism today usually require a profession of faith prior to the act.
- Churches that practice infant baptism require promises from parents and others to raise the child in the faith until they '**confirm**' their faith as adults.

## Key arguments/debates:

All Christians see commitment as a part of the baptismal act; those practising infant baptism believe that the community and parents offer that commitment until the child can do so themselves. This is why sponsorship/godparenting is highly esteemed. These Christians attack believer's baptism as being too individualistic. However, those practising believer's baptism see their position as scriptural and even that infant baptism is a form of child abuse - forcing beliefs. Furthermore, they reject sacramental theology as ancient superstition.

Many Christians believe that baptism is a symbolic act since it is clear that Jesus saved people apart from baptism (Like 23:32) and that there is simply no scientific evidence of original sin or a metaphysical change in an infant's being. Sacramentalists assert, however, that God has chosen to work through some physical elements despite modernist, metaphorical or literalistic approaches to the Bible.

## Key questions:

- To what extent is Christianity about the individual? The community of faith?
- What role does family and the community play in each baptismal practice?
- Does saying baptism, is 'just a symbol' rob it of deep meaning for Christians?
- Can baptism be both a sacrament and a symbol?

## Key quotes:

*'...the gift of baptism...was ordained against original sin...'* (Augustine)

*'...circumcision was given to the Hebrews, therefore baptism ought not be refused to the children of Christians.'*  
(H. Zwingli)

*'In the sphere of the New Testament, one is not brought to baptism, one comes to baptism.'* (K. Barth)

## Key words:

Original sin | sacrament | damnation | John 3:5 |  
disease removal | Circumcision | covenant |  
pledges | full immersion | Anabaptist |  
Unscriptural | control | human response |  
confirmation