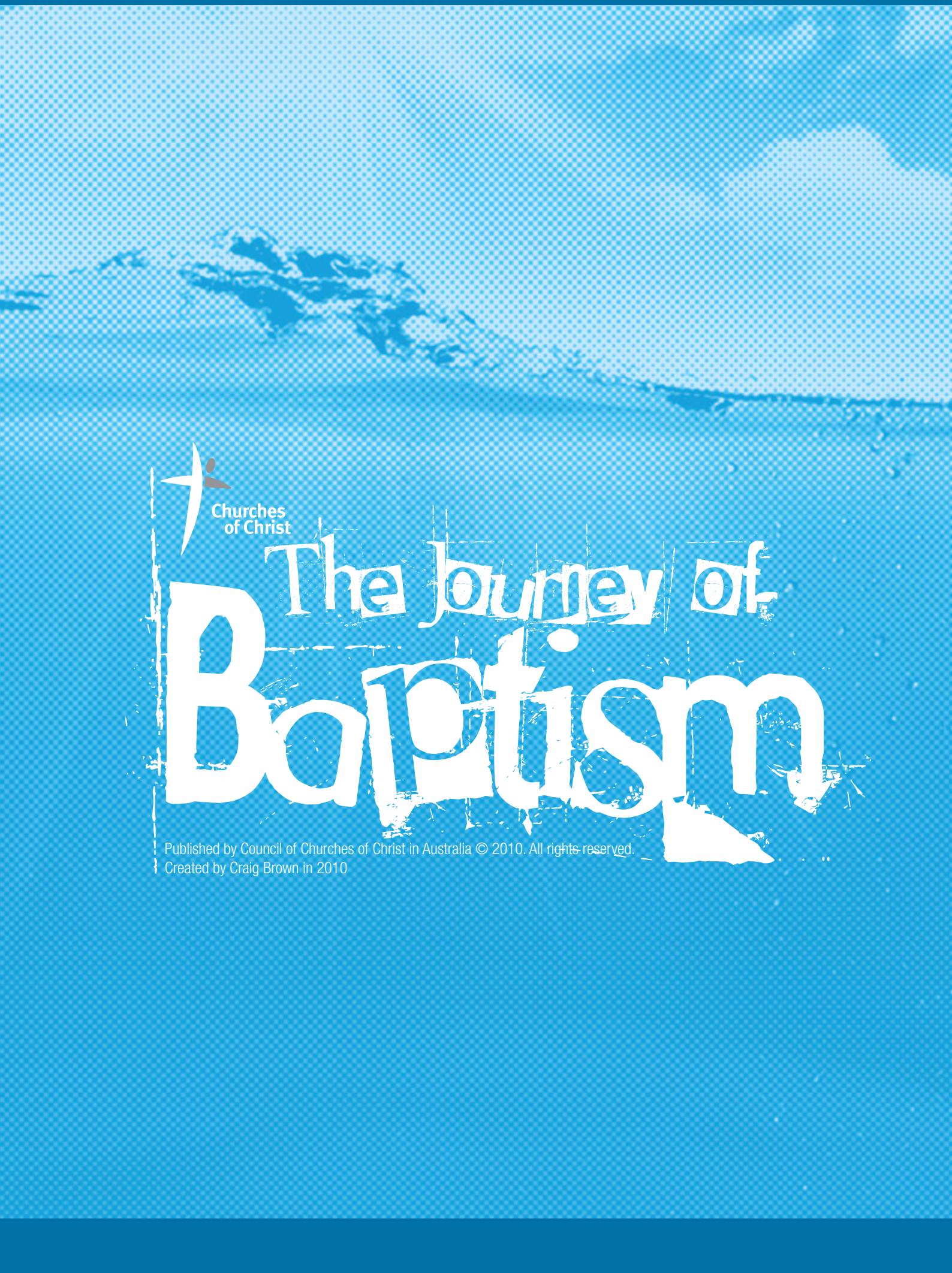

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The Journey of Baptism

The Starting Point

INTRODUCTION

The imagery of journeys and quests is important in popular culture. Film series such as ***The Lord Of The Rings*** and ***Harry Potter*** have popularised the idea of individuals growing through the themes of community and journey. These two themes suggest that an individual's potential to complete a journey or quest is improved when they are part of a community that shares the same values.

So, what does this have to do with baptism?

In baptism, we have joined with a like-minded community who share that goal of being Christlike. The words commonly spoken as a person is baptised ***(I baptise you in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit)*** also remind us that community is central to God's nature. Baptism is a significant marker on your journey to ***be like Jesus***. It is not a marker that says, ***"I've made it"***. Nor is it restricted to the past, having no impact on our present or future. Baptism both speaks to our community and challenges us to go out into that community.

As you read this, we encourage you to think about your journey: is it leading you closer to Jesus? Is baptism an important part of that journey? Why is that? Why not? The following – we trust – will help you to better understand baptism and the journey you are on.

A WORKING DEFINITION OF BAPTISM:

Baptism is an act of immersion that represents Christ's death and the death of our old life of going our own way. As we come out of the water, it represents Christ's resurrection and our own resurrection into a new journey of following and imitating Christ.

SOME MORE BASICS ABOUT BAPTISM

The word baptism comes from the Greek word ***baptizo***, which means to ***immerse***. Churches of Christ baptise by immersing a person in water. However, there is another level to the word baptism: **to be immersed in the things of God and overwhelmed by the power, love and faithfulness of God**. This is a key message of baptism[1].

For many, their baptism occurred in a packed church service. They descended the steps of the baptistry into the water where a church leader awaited them, spoke about the meaning of baptism, and then baptised them. They would emerge, blinking and spluttering, to the encouragement of a smiling congregation. It sounds simple enough, right?

Some, however, see baptism as daunting, or even scary. Baptism is a moment of faith that should be shared with family and friends and celebrated with much joy in recognising the work of God's Spirit in our lives[2]. The more you understand baptism, the more you can celebrate it, and the less daunting it will seem.

BAPTIZO = IMMERSE

1 Penny Galbraith, Water Dreaming, Ringwood Church of Christ, pg 1
2 Ibid

Questions

Baptism is significant marker on your journey to be like Jesus. What other 'markers' have been important to you as you reflect on your journey with Jesus?

As you think about baptism, what would you like to understand more about it?

Why be Baptised?

OBEDIENCE TO CHRIST AND IDENTIFYING WITH HIS EXAMPLE

We don't want you to think about obedience in the sense that baptism is something that you ***have to do***. Baptism is an action that signifies the grace of Jesus in your life. To get baptised just because "you have to" could make it a mere religious ritual. In the New Testament, Jesus disapproved of such empty obedience. In fact, He came to ***replace automatic responses to rituals*** with ***a living relationship with Him***. Baptism becomes a continuing journey of ***relating to*** and ***obeying*** Christ.

When we decide we want to make a decision to follow Jesus by living as he lived, we should consider ***how*** Jesus lived, spoke and interacted with God and others. When we conclude that Jesus' way of living is the optimum way to live, we will follow his example. Following the example of Jesus is a great way to begin to describe what ***obedience*** is about[1]. Obedience is a living relationship with Jesus, not a set of actions that we perform out of habit. Baptism, therefore, is part of that obedient, living relationship with Jesus.

Jesus' baptism is an example we can broadly follow. Jesus' baptism is, of course, different to ours: we are not having our claim to be the Messiah confirmed! Jesus' baptism was done out of obedience to God and to identify with the people around Him. These reasons are applicable to us, and echo throughout this booklet.

READ **Matthew 3:13-17;Mark 1:9-13; Luke 3:21-22**

Questions

? How do you feel when you read the word 'obedience'?

1 Penny Galbraith, pg 6

Questions

What would you say is the main reason for you to get baptised as you consider baptism?

Based on the verses regarding Jesus' baptism, what do you think motivated Jesus?

Why be Baptised? (cont)

OUTER SYMBOL OF AN INNER TRANSFORMATION

Baptism is a key symbol within Churches of Christ. A symbol (a more 'religious' word is ***sacrament***) simply means: **A visible action representing God's grace in our life**. One of the statements we are making by being baptised is that our life is being immersed in Christ, that His grace and love is flowing over us, just as the water flows over us.

COMMITMENT TO THE FAITH COMMUNITY

We in the industrial world are rediscovering the value of being part of a ***tribe*** or ***community***. Indigenous cultures have long understood this. We all need to belong. One of the most important things that we do when we enter into a relationship with God is to connect with others who have the same passion[1]. In baptism, not only do we acknowledge that we 'belong' to Christ, we also acknowledge that we 'belong' to the community of God: the church. The New Testament view of church is that it is not just a building; it is a vibrant community where we learn about God, tell the stories of Jesus as He appears in our own stories, and are equipped for God's mission in the world.

If we are serious about this journey then we will be serious about exploring how we can be involved in the church.

READ 1 Corinthians 12:12-27

Questions

? How do you feel about the phrase 'In baptism…we also acknowledge that we belong to the community of God: the church.'?

1 Penny Galbraith, pg 10

When you think of the church, what image first comes to mind?

The apostle Paul here describes the church as a 'body' – what do you think are the advantages of thinking of the church in this way?

Am I Ready To Take the Plunge?

DO I BELIEVE IN JESUS CHRIST AS LORD?

In the teachings of Jesus, He is not claiming to be just a good person, or a wise spiritual leader, or even the best of the best spiritual leaders. His claim is that He is God, that He is Lord of all. He speaks as Lord, as the supreme authority on what it takes to live a fulfilling life, both as an individual and as part of a community.

READ

Read Matthew 16:13-28

Questions

Jesus asks Peter who the crowds think he is, then asks Peter the same question…so, who do you think Jesus is, in your own words?

AM I COMMITTED TO A LIFESTYLE THAT DISPLAYS THAT BELIEF?

Jesus' Sermon on the Mount fleshes out the idea of lifestyle. In it, Jesus' main theme is that you cannot follow Him without that decision spilling over into action. The inward shift of our primary loyalty[1] (from self, or peer approval, or wealth) to Jesus has a visible impact on our lifestyle (such as loving our enemies, turning the other cheek to hostility, not worrying etc).

Baptism is not a guarantee that we will live perfectly. What it symbolises is that we are deciding to walk this journey with Jesus. At times we might wander down other paths, but we can always seek to go back to the journey with Jesus. Baptism is a physical reminder of our commitment to Jesus.

READ

Read Matthew 5-7; Romans 12:1-2

1 Often referred to as "lordship" – who is Lord of our lives? Us, our needs, or Jesus?

Questions

Matthew 5-7 contains a lot of teaching, and can be overwhelming to read in one go. Jot down three areas from these chapters that you think are particularly relevant to your journey at the moment.

In Romans 12:1-2, Paul urges the Romans to keep uppermost in mind God's mercy. How does this make you feel?

Am I Ready To Take the Plunge? [cont]

DO I BELIEVE THAT MISSION AND MINISTRY FLOWS THROUGH (AND BEYOND) THE LOCAL CHURCH?

DO I BELIEVE THAT I HAVE A ROLE TO PLAY IN THAT?

In the journey with Christ we find that we are part of a church community. ***What do we think of the church?*** Do we believe that a church is simply a building? If so, then our ministry will be limited. Buildings are static and unfeeling. If we believe that the church ***is the Body of Christ animated by the Spirit of Christ***, then everyone who is a part of the Body is capable of ministry, and is needed in ministry. If you believe that, then you have a role to play in the church as part of the Body of Christ.

Baptism, therefore, is an individual expression of faith but one that connects us to a community travelling on the same journey.

READ Romans 12:3-8

WE HAVE DIFFERENT GIFTS, ACCORDING TO THE GRACE GIVEN US.

Questions

? What do you think that Paul means when he writes each member belongs to all the others (12:5)? How does this relate to your baptism?

As you are on the journey of following Jesus through baptism, mission and ministry, what responsibilities do you have with regards to your gifts? (12:6-8)

WHAT IF I HAVE BEEN CHRISTENED AS AN INFANT OR BAPTISED PREVIOUSLY?

This is best left up to a conversation between you and your church leaders. Historically, some movements have baptised by immersion those who were christened as infants. As you consider baptism in a Church of Christ, we would actively encourage you and your leaders to remain open to the options that best match your desires, God's Word and the practices of your church.

If you were baptised as a child in another Christian tradition, some key questions to ask are: ***Do I remember it? What did it mean to me? Did I understand what I was doing?*** If you can't remember being baptised, then there is may be a case for you to be baptised in a Churches of Christ tradition. Again, this depends on individual circumstances and conversations with church leaders.

HOW DO I KNOW THAT I AM READY?

A common objection to baptism is **"I'm not ready yet"**. On one level, this is acceptable. If you are still unsure that you want to follow Jesus as Lord, then it is not the time for you to be baptised. Declaring Jesus as Lord is an important step – the most important of your life – and one that you should be sure of, without the added 'pressure' of baptism.

However, if you are confident that Jesus is your Lord and Saviour, and you still feel unready, then it's time to explore those feelings. With a trusted leader or friend, consider the following points:

READ Acts 8:26-40; 9:1-17

Questions

Neither the Ethiopian or Saul (later Paul) were Jesus followers for a long period of time. Do you think they had any concerns about being baptised?

What might have they been?

Why do you think they got baptised?

ARE YOU NERVOUS ABOUT THE PUBLIC NATURE OF BAPTISM?

This is understandable. However, your baptism will go a lot quicker than you imagine! Sure, it is public, but keep in mind a couple of important things:

a) everyone watching you will be ***encouraging you***; and

b) for those watching who have been baptised, it will be an ***encouragement to them***. For those who haven't been baptised, it may also help them as they consider baptism.

You won't be alone. Some of us are not 'public' people, but the presence of God's Spirit and community will assist you.

You may be asked to share your journey publicly. If you are worried about speaking in public (it could be a few words or a longer version of your journey), write it down and practice what you want to say. Your church leaders can coach you on how to cope with nerves and public speaking…especially as they have experienced the same feeling themselves!

The biblical writers linked what we confess verbally to visible actions. In Romans 10:9 Paul writes: ***That if you confess with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord", and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved.*** By expressing what is in our hearts, we deepen our faith – just as the ***act*** of baptism can deepen our commitment to what we believe.

WRITE Write down your story about your journey with Jesus.

Am I Ready To Take the Plunge? [cont]

DO YOU FEEL THAT YOU ARE BEING SET TOO HIGH A STANDARD?

Guess what? Nobody's perfect. Baptism doesn't put you on a higher level from which any slip is judged more harshly. The meaning of baptism reminds us about ***who*** we are connected to: Jesus, and His death and resurrection. One of the key points of Jesus' death and resurrection was to stand in our place, to pay the penalty for our sins and to bring us into a growing relationship with God. Grace flows through Jesus' life, death and resurrection, and into our baptism. When we stray in our journey with Jesus, baptism reminds us that we are immersed in grace, and that forgiveness can be ours.

READ Romans 3:21-26, 8:37-39 ; 1 John 1:8-10

WE ARE MORE THAN CONQUERORS THROUGH HIM WHO LOVED US

Questions

Romans 3:21-26 contains a lot of "theological" and complex language. In essence it means that we all fall below God's standards at some point (3:23) but that ***God has out of sheer generosity…put us in right standing with himself. A pure gift. He got us out of the mess we're in and restored us to where he always wanted us to be. And he did it by means of Jesus Christ*** (the Message).

Do you think it surprises God that we slip up? Do you think this changes after baptism?

What does it mean to you that you cannot be separated from God's love? (Romans 8:37-39)

What is the promise made to us in 1 John 1:9? How does this fit with the idea of God's grace and forgiveness?

Am I Ready To Take the Plunge? [cont]

DO YOU FEEL THAT YOU DON'T KNOW ENOUGH ABOUT JESUS?

You're right. You probably don't know enough about Jesus. Don't feel discouraged. Go to someone in your faith community who's been a Christian for ten years and ask them the same question. Then ask someone who's been a Christian for twenty years…then thirty…and you will find that they still need – and want – to know more about Jesus. **Needing to know more about Jesus is a sign of a growing disciple.**

How do you go about growing in the knowledge of Jesus? There are many ways, but the basis of a growing knowledge of Jesus (by knowledge, we mean a deeper relationship with Jesus rather than knowing facts about Jesus) is through spending time in the Bible, communicating with Jesus (prayer) and sharing your journey and your values (mission and justice). Ask someone in your faith community if they can help you develop a way of journeying closer to Jesus.

READ Ephesians 3:14-21

Questions

? Do you think you could adapt Ephesians 3:14-21 as your own personal prayer?

? Are there some areas about Jesus, faith or church you still have questions about? What are they?

ARE THERE ASPECTS OF THE CHURCH THAT YOU'RE NOT SURE ABOUT?

Communication is vital in church life. The journey towards baptism should allow you to ask questions. Your questions come from a valuable perspective, especially if you are new to church. Sometimes people who have been in the one environment stop seeing the quirks of that environment until someone new asks questions.

WHAT DO I DO WITH MY 'OLD' LIFE?

People may refer to your journey of baptism as a "new life" or a "new beginning", which suggests there is an 'old life' being left behind. What does the church and the Bible mean when they talk of new beginnings?

Firstly, once you have come to follow Jesus you ***have*** changed: ***Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation: the old has gone, the new has come!*** (2 Corinthians 5:17). Your primary loyalties in life have shifted, and your inner being is transforming, impacting your actions over time.

What is being left behind is behaviour that does not reflect Christ's character. The Bible calls this ***repentance***. This can sound hard to do, but the reality is that you are not on your own, the Holy Spirit helps you: ***You, however, are controlled not by the sinful nature but by the Spirit…*** (Romans 8:9).

What it ***doesn't*** mean is that you leave behind your old friends, your family and other relationships. Your behaviour in these relationships may change, but your 'new life' will lose credibility if your old relationships don't experience the difference.

Questions

Are you comfortable with what you are being called to leave behind as you follow Christ in baptism?

What Does Baptism Look Like?

WHY IMMERSION?

As we've said, the Greek word in the New Testament indicates that immersion was the most common method of baptism. Churches of Christ practice baptism by immersion, not because of the meaning of a Greek word, but because immersion connects with the meaning of baptism.

Paul links the life and death of Jesus with baptism in Romans 6:3-5:

Or don't you know that all of us who were baptised into Jesus Christ were baptised into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life. If we have been united with him like this in his death, we will certainly also be united with him in his resurrection.

As we go under the water, it symbolises Christ's death and our own death to the old life of going our own way. As we are raised out of the water, it symbolises Christ's resurrection and our own 'resurrection' into a new journey of following and imitating Christ.

SHOULD IT HAPPEN IN THE CHURCH BUILDING? CAN I BE BAPTISED ELSEWHERE?

There is no biblical preference about where a baptism should occur. John the Baptist baptised Jesus in the Jordan River (Mark 1:9); the apostles baptised in Jerusalem (Acts 2:41); Philip by the roadside (Acts 8:36,38) and Paul was baptised in a home (Acts 9:18). The key is that baptism is linked to belief in Jesus and a determination to journey with him, not where it occurs.

For many, if their church has a baptistry, they will get baptised there. Others may prefer a setting like a river, a lake or beach. The main thing is that you want people to witness your baptism and hear the words explaining it. More people than you think will want to attend your baptism. So, keep in mind questions like: ***is the location accessible? Will people be able to see and hear the baptism? Does the location include or exclude people's participation?***

Questions

? How do you feel about being immersed?

Do you understand what the symbolism is behind immersion?

Romans 6:1-4 to help you along.

What do you want your baptism to look like?

What is important in a baptism service?

PUBLIC WITNESS

Baptism is not about drawing attention to yourself, but declaring to others that you are following Jesus. It's a declaration that Jesus has made a transformational impact in your life and you are on a journey to be like Jesus.

Baptism is a public display of what has happened to you ***internally***, which underlies ***Romans 10:9*** (belief in our heart leads to a physical declaration) and ***Matthew 7:24*** (discipleship is about living out Jesus' words). There is another aspect to being baptised, as mentioned earlier: it reminds those witnessing your baptism of their own baptism, encouraging them to keep on their journey. Your baptism can also invite others to join on the journey of discipleship as you have.

Baptism is a symbol or, if you like, a picture of Christianity. Packed within the frames of that picture are important elements of what being a disciple of Jesus is all about: faith, community, obedience and new life[1].

CHURCH INVOLVEMENT

In some Churches of Christ, baptism is a first step before you can enter into 'official membership' of your church. 'Membership' is an old fashioned word in some ways. To some, membership implies rights and privileges. In Churches of Christ it ***should*** mean ***an active participation in the mission and ministry of the church***.

Therefore, having a representative from your church participate in your baptism indicates that they are committed to supporting you as you explore what your contribution to the mission of Christ will be.

WORDS

Symbols are important, but if people don't grasp the meaning then symbols mean nothing. The words explaining what you're doing will be important; as will parts of the Bible being read out, as will the words of the person baptising you. As they call you to respond, and you answer, these words will flesh out the meaning of baptism for those watching, some of whom may not be familiar with these Christian symbols.

Depending on your church's practice, there may be opportunity for you to briefly tell your story of your journey with Jesus ('testimony').

WHO PERFORMS THE BAPTISM?

This will vary from church to church. Some churches prefer that a member of the ministry team or eldership perform your baptism. Others will allow someone who has made a significant impact on your journey to perform your baptism. This is best discussed with your church leadership.

1 Galbraith, pg 1

Now That I'm Dry, What Now?

This is not the end of the journey. Baptism is a significant milestone, and one that you will recall often. In the Bible, significant events were given physical expressions. In the Old Testament, for example, when the Israelites crossed the Jordan River into the Promised Land, they marked that event in their journey by erecting a 'memorial' altar from stones taken from the Jordan (Joshua 4:7).

Jesus wanted his disciples to remember his life, death and resurrection. To help their (and our) memory, he instituted the Lord's Supper (or communion – Luke 22:14-19). The Bible portrays these physical actions as a "fresh remembrance" – the memory and participation in these actions encourages us afresh in our journey with Jesus.

As you emerge from your baptism, you have made an important step along the path of growing closer to Christ. You have indicated in a powerful way that you want to identify with Him, the community of the church, and its mission and ministry in the world.

The following are steps you can take in partnership with your church that will help you grow on your journey with Jesus:

- Identify your gifts and abilities and develop them for ministry;
- Explore how you and your church can engage in and support mission;
- Join a small group in your church that focuses on discipleship, mission and supports each other;
- Ask questions about your prayer life, your reading of the Bible and other ways you can grow relationally closer to Jesus, and
- Be aware of opportunities to represent Christ in your relationships and your community, including areas of injustice and poverty.

Baptism is a significant step on your journey with Jesus, and one that we congratulate you for taking. It is our prayer, and the ongoing prayer of your faith community, that you keep journeying strongly with Jesus.

THIS IS NOT THE END OF THE JOURNEY...

Questions

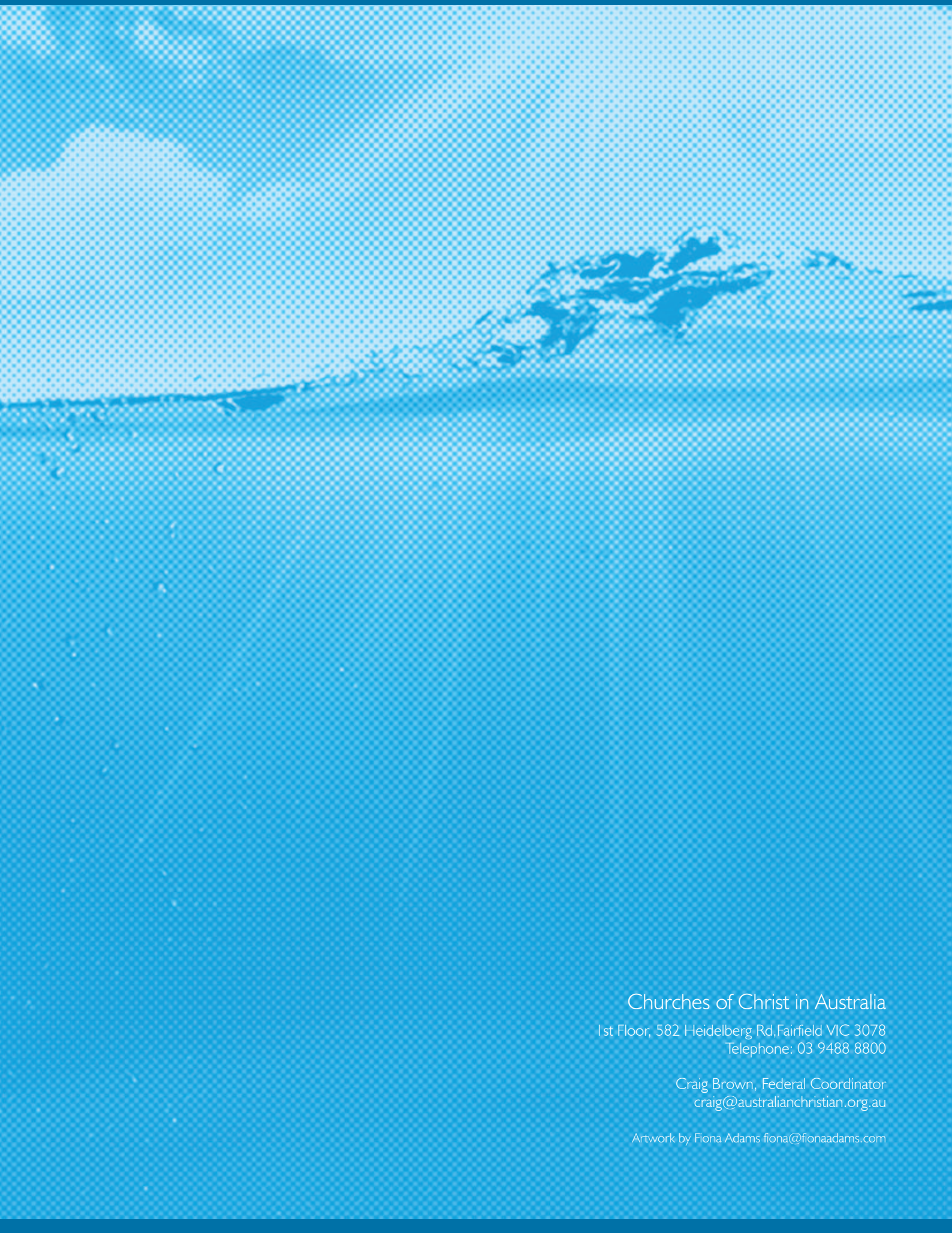
What areas in your journey with Jesus do you want to focus on?

Have you sensed that you have some talent or giftings in a particular area?

What can you do to explore that sense?

Have you got someone you can talk to that can help you in developing the areas of prayer, Scripture reading, mission and justice in your life?

The Journey of Baptism



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