



A reflection on a baptism

By Sally Nelson

This post is a copy of an article by Sally Nelson. It raises some really significant points around what we think about baptism and disability. After the article there are some discussion questions to help explore these further.

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Reflecting on a real situation often encourages us to inspect our true convictions, and to reassess things we have never previously questioned. I recently 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 in ministry.

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 churches a variety of cultures existed regarding the two key practices of baptism and communion. For example, some allowed children to receive communion, while others preferred not. Moving between two churches with different views showed us that problems can arise when you move either a child or someone with learning difficulties from a church that permits receiving bread and wine to one that doesn't. They may not understand why things are different.

I want to focus on baptism and not communion in this article, but I mention it to illustrate the key question of how we understand, and put into practice, the concept of the body of Christ, which I believe has profound implications for those with learning difficulties. 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 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 of 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 truly understand the commitment of faith to which she was called?
- How could she profess her faith? She is verbally unable to tell her story and she can't read or write. If I had asked closed questions in the tradition of profession of faith, her 'best' word under pressure 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?

These matters were resolved as follows.

We decided that 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 missing 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.

During the service we asked others to speak of the faith they saw in her. One was a teacher from her school, 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 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 will be supported by this fellowship in her commitment to Jesus. She is a part of our small church in every way. 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.

I offer this in the hope that it might help others. I have written more about my general thinking on baptism in a chapter in the recent festschrift for Chris Ellis, *Gathering Disciples*.

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Discussion questions:

- Have you experienced any similar church services that have been shaped to accommodate particular disabilities or other requirements?
- Imagine being at Sally's daughter's baptism service, as it is described. What would your reaction be - how would you feel?
- In a 'typical' baptism service, the individual expresses their faith. What is your reaction to Sally's statement that her daughter's faith was 'demonstrated and articulated by the *body of which she is also a part*'?
- Rather than a testimony and statement of repentance, this baptism involved looking for evidence of faith in other ways. What might that idea add to the way we typically prepare people for baptism?
- If it were suggested that this did not properly constitute 'believers' baptism', how would you respond? Are there alternatives to a verbal statement of faith? How do we congregationally discern faith in candidates without such disabilities?
- Are there other parts of church life that this article prompts you to think we should approach in a more creative and inclusive way?"