Baptism – Symbolic?

Pr FF Chong

Is baptism merely a symbolic ritual? Many Christians believe it is! Such a claim is unbiblical. It also denies baptism its rightful importance in God’s salvation plan. To answer the question fully, we have to first of all answer the following:

a. If baptism is symbolic? and if so what does it symbolise?

b. Did Jesus and the disciples treat baptism as a symbolic ritual?

c. How should the church correctly understand baptism?

Does baptism “symbolise” Jesus’ death, burial and resurrection?

Let us explain what being symbolic means. One entry in the Oxford dictionary lists that “it is used purely in terms of what is being represented” and that it is synonymous with “being figurative, metaphorical, suggestive…” Therefore calling baptism symbolic means that undergoing baptism is not essential since it is only a representation. A proponent of this claim may choose to be baptised to symbolise to the world that he has become a follower of Christ or by the same token, he may choose not to be baptised; after all, he says, it is only symbolic.

Since faith comes from the hearing of the word of the Lord (Rom 10:17), the claim that baptism is symbolic must be supported by biblical evidence. Proponents of symbolic baptism therefore base their argument on Romans 6:3-6; that baptism symbolises the death, the burial and the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Their argument however, is flawed —there is nothing in the passage to suggest that baptism is symbolic. In fact, Paul points out how a sinful person through baptism could become a new man having the nature of God. He carefully states that baptism joins (not just symbolically) a person into Christ’s death, which effectively destroys the old nature through Christ’s burial in baptism. With His resurrection emerges a new life.

Does baptism “symbolise” deliverance?

Some others base the symbolism of baptism on 1 Corinthians 10:1-5. Their rationale is built upon the account of Exodus: God’s salvation is epitomised in His deliverance of all those who crossed the Red Sea. This entire account is highly symbolic. In 1 Corinthians, Paul reiterated the providential care of God for His people with symbolism. The idea of “being baptised into Moses” is clearly a symbolic act denoting Moses’ deliverance of Israel through the power of God. In other words, none of the Israelites were physically baptised. In fact, in the Old Testament (OT), baptism is not once mentioned, let alone practised.

While it is right to say that “baptism” did not appear in the OT, the sequence of biblical events is such that the old is the shadow of what is to come (cf. Col 2:17; Heb10:1). In Exodus, Moses commanded the chosen people to slaughter a lamb for the Passover feast (Ex 12:5ff). At the time of Moses the lamb for the Passover feast was definitely not Christ. However, Paul clearly states that in essence Christ is the Passover Lamb in the New Testament (NT) (1 Cor 5:7). Likewise, in chapter ten of 1Corinthians, Paul elaborated on the past deliverance by the crossing of the Red Sea in Exodus to pre-figure baptism: the chosen were baptised into Moses. This prefigures we are baptised into Christ and further reinforces the biblical truth that without baptism, there is no deliverance.

How did Jesus and the disciples regard baptism?

Jesus and His disciples have never given the impression that baptism was a symbol. Instead, they consistently pointed out its efficacy — it is for the remission of sin. Sin is abstract; it cannot be seen with the naked eye. For example, a mother could not have seen the original sin of her child nor could the apostles. Nonetheless, they were prepared to baptise because they knew something spiritual would happen during baptism. The apostles confidently declared that baptism washes away sins:

“Repent, and let every one of you be baptised in the name of Jesus for the remission of sins” (Acts 2:38).

“And now why are you waiting? Arise and be baptised, and washed away your sins, calling on the name of the Lord (Acts 22:16).

A Correct Understanding of Baptism

The teachings of the Bible, in particular the doctrines of salvation, are never ambiguous. The messages of both Christ and the apostles have fully and clearly articulated the purpose of baptism (Mark 1:5:16; 1 Pet 3:21). Jesus instructed the disciples to preach and to baptise those who believe (Mark 16:15-16). “Believing” here is not simply about “knowing” Jesus is the Saviour and bearing this knowledge in mind. His word, which is the gospel (1 Pet 1:25), is power (Rom 1:16-17). It will save those who believe in the prescription — baptism—that Jesus had issued to deal with the sins of mankind. Simply put, if one believes in Jesus, one would naturally accept baptism for the forgiveness of sins.

While it appears that baptism as a symbolic ritual is now the mainstream belief in Christianity, we must ask ourselves whether this is consistent with the instruction of Jesus and the apostles. None of the passages commonly cited by the proponents of symbolism has any reference that baptism is symbolic. We must thus never reduce the doctrine of baptism to a mere symbol, severing it from salvation.
Elgin
Preacher Steven Shek was pastoring between 3rd and 15th February. He led various services, Religious Education (RE) teacher seminar, spiritual convocation and training. May the Lord remember his dedication!

Preacher FF Chong was pastoring between 20th February and 5th March. During this period he expounded our basic beliefs, exhorted and encouraged us to establish our faith. His sermons include “Noah Builds an Ark”, “Message to Zion, “The Life of Jacob”, and “Walking with Him”. In addition, he participated in a plethora of events including evangelism and youth fellowship, visitation, ordination of deacons, UK General Assembly (UKGA) meeting, and the Truth Research Committee meeting.

From 1st to 4th March we had a number of major events:

1. Ordination of Deacons: Br Tin Loi Shek was ordained as Deacon Stephen Shek and Sister Margaret Shek was ordained as Deaconess Priscilla Shek. The ceremony was conducted by Dn Silas Chan, Pr Steven Shek and Pr FF Chong. The event was witnessed by the local congregation, members from Edinburgh, Gifford Park, Newcastle churches, UKGA, and Elder Hsu and his wife.

2. The UKGA Meeting was held 2-3rd March 2015

3. Truth Research Committee meeting, Dn Chung Pong Chan and Pr Michael Chan exhorted with “The Hand of God” and “Let my Prayer be Set Before You as Incense” to expound the importance of prayer.

Praise be to the Lord, all these events have been accomplished. May all glory be to God!

Some London and Newcastle brothers and sisters observed the Sabbath with us on 3rd April. We bid farewell to Bro Elm Shek who has moved to Newcastle; may the Lord continue to guide his path!

Pr FF Chong and theological student Bro Daniel Liew were pastoring Elgin Church from 23rd May. A number of activities were planned for this trip—evangelism at two locations, youth fellowship, and sister fellowship. The main theme for the service was the “One True God”; it helps to strengthen and to consolidate our faith. Bro Daniel Liu exhorted with us the sermon “The star of Jesus” and led one bible study session. We were greatly benefited by their encouragement.

Edinburgh
We welcomed Sis Rebecca Ho who joined Edinburgh church after getting married to Bro Raymond Liu on 9th March. During the same week (9th—11th March), a seminar for church board members and sermonizers was held jointly with Gifford Park church. Pr FF Chong encouraged us from the book of Joel and on our church doctrines.

On 16th March, we held the National Married Couples Fellowship where over 130 members attended. Pr Steven Shek and Pr FF Chong shared on the topic of “Being Heirs Together of the Grace of Life” (1 Peter 3:7) so that couples could draw closer together and continue striving in the heavenly journey hand in hand. The day was also filled with activities including craft work and shoulder/hand massage and ended with a love meal. May God provide guidance to the members so they can continue supporting their spouse on this spiritual journey.

A fun fair day was held at church on 10th May where all the members participated in family friendly games. There was joy and laughter all round with members having the opportunity of winning prizes, coupled with an abundance of food available. When the sun came out, a mini-BBQ was promptly started. Thank God, the members really enjoyed the day.

During the month of May, Edinburgh Church held its annual hymnal evangelical service where the youth and adult choirs practised for many weeks to prepare for the event. A class of RE children were also involved this year and demonstrated courage to distribute leaflets for the first time. Many members took hold of the opportunity to preach the gospel to their friends and family and invited them to attend the event where the message of Everlasting Joy was shared with us through uplifting hymns of praise and words of encouragement from Pr Steven Shek.

Newcastle
The Fifth Adult Theology Training Course (ATTC) was held from 16th—19th February 2015, based on the theme “There is Life in the Bible”. The annual event was attended by over 100 members from all around the UK and Ireland. The speakers were Pr Johnny Liu, Pr Michael Chan and Pr Steve Hwang (USA) who alternated lessons between two classes.

A memorial service was held for Br AS Shek on 17th March. May God comfort and give peace to the bereaved family.

The Evangelical Planning Group (EPG) held its first gospel event of the year on 29th March on the theme “Spring of Life”. We welcomed eight new friends through our doors that were invited through personal evangelism or gate walking. A joint EPG Fellowship was also arranged with Sunderland church on 26th April.

To increase the members’ understanding of the church’s beliefs, a Members’ Training Seminar on the TJC’s Basic Beliefs was held on 12th—13th April with Pr Johnny Liu. On 27th April, the Sisters’ Fellowship organised a day trip to Leicester where the Newcastle and Leicester sisters enjoyed a day of edifying fellowship together, as well as fun and games.

Pr Steven Shek led the RE teachers’ training on 10th May to build up the skills of the local RE teachers.

Newcastle has recently added four new infants to its numbers: Tristan Tang, son of Br Eugene and Sis Michelle Tang; Abigail Lai, daughter of Br Alan and Sis Lily Lai; Josiah Lai, son of Br Tony and Sis Maisie Lai; and Luke Hagan, son of Paul Hagan and Sis Kerry Hagan.

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UK Church News

UK Church News

July 2015

“Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.” (Acts 2:38)

Thanks be to God, in March RE GAUK held an online meeting with each RE in charge. This summer’s National Students Spiritual Convocation NSSC theme is “One Hope”. It will be held in Sunderland (26th-30th July) and Portsmouth church (26th July – 1st Aug). Registrations have closed, so now is the time to join in the preparation through prayers for this event. We truly need the guidance of the Holy Spirit for all participants to be edified. May the Lord Jesus fill the helpers and the lecturers with His everlasting love and wisdom from above to teach this precious generation. May God bless the NSSC 2015!

Brother Daniel Chu is once again visiting the UK. This is going to be his last visit for the foreseeable future. We are sure the churches in the UK appreciate the time and effort he has put into training and counselling. May the Lord Jesus Christ continue to bless Brother Chu in his work for God.

For the edification of the “Teachers and Parents”: God taught Moses what to say and what to do (Ex 4:12, 15). Then Moses had to teach the Israelites (Deut 4:1). Then the Israelites were to teach their children and grandchildren (Deut 4:9). Teaching is not just from experiences, God teaches us through His law (Ps 94:12). As we are teaching, we must also continue to learn ( Isa 50:4). As our children and our students grow up physically, we should give them what they need in each season (Heb 5:12, 14; Lk 12:42). Speaking the truth and with love ensures that we provide the appropriate spiritual nourishment in their different stages of life and spiritual condition (1 Cor 3:1-2; 14:20). So we must remember to be humble and fear God, He will teach us (Ps 25:9, 12). Let us learn to teach: “I will instruct and teach you about how you should live. I will advise you as I look you in the eye” (NET) (Ps 32:8) and “I will counsel you with my loving eye on you” (NIV) meaning “God will teach us directly and personally!”
Sunderland

February

From 31 January to 1 February, Sunderland hosted the National Pre-Marriage Seminar, led by Pr Michael Chan. Nineteen soon-to-be-wed participants from around the UK gathered to learn about aspects of building a godly life with their spouses after marriage.

March

From 7 to 22 March, Pr Johnny Liu and theological student Daniel Liew visited to pastor the members in Sunderland. As usual, they participated in visitation work and led various fellowships and doctrine training during their time here.

On 21 March, we held a small-scale evangelistic service. Pr Johnny Liu spoke on the theme “He Leads Me”, and hymns of praise were presented by Harmony Choir. Thank God, He guided four visitors to attend the meeting. May He continue to lead our friends and truth-seekers, and bring them to salvation.

May

Pr Steven Shek made a special pastoral visit to Sunderland from 11 to 16 May, with a particular focus on religious education (RE). He delivered RE teacher training over the course of two evenings, looking at the practicalities of preparing and teaching a lesson. He reminded us that, as teachers, we should live in the presence of God at all times, and invite Him into our lesson preparation and delivery. We should also bring our students into the presence of God, and make them aware of this, so that they can learn to love and fear God. Pr Steven also took the opportunity to visit some of the RE students.

The 25th National Sister Fellowship was held in Sunderland from 18 to 19 May, with the theme, “The Role of Women”. We thank God for His grace: at least one sister from each church and prayer house in the UK, except Elgin, was able to attend the event. On the first day, 180 sisters attended; on the second, 70. The lecturers, Pr Michael Chan and Pr Johnny Liu, taught lessons on the relationship between Naomi and Ruth; being a companion to those in affliction; and also the different roles that women have at various stages of their lives, at church, at home and in society. We thank God for His grace and providence: before the event, it seemed that there was a shortage of available workers; however, this did not affect the event, which ran smoother than expected, and was filled with love and joy.

Leicester

On Monday, 27th April, the Sisters Fellowship in Leicester had the pleasure of hosting a visit from their counterpart from Newcastle. After a quick tour of Leicester, the sisters gathered in church for introductions, hymnal fellowship, a discussion on promoting marriage in the Lord, fun and games, and dinner. Thank God, we were able to nurture our relationship in Christ and the spirit of belonging to one family.

Elder Micah Choo from Sabah paid Leicester a visit on 2nd May, with his son, Bro Benjamin Choo and family. After a quick tour of the building, the local members took them out for dinner and visitation.

Brother Daniel Chu arrived in May to run a series of seminars for parents, RE teachers and youths. The first seminar took place in Birmingham on 28th May, followed by seminars in Leicester from 29th to 31st May. The emphasis this year was on developing an awareness of and making positive changes to our inner person. He talked about changing our own behavior instead of making demands on others and trying to control others. To this end, we need to allow the Holy Spirit to control our inner chaos, to fill us and to soften our hearts, so that we can speak the right words to guide our children. Changing ourselves with God’s help will have a positive impact on those we love.

London

We thank God for a very fruitful quarter.

By God’s grace we have held several RE and Evangelical Planning Group (EPG) training sessions led by Pr Michael Chan, Pr TK Chin and Bro Daniel Chu. We have learnt the importance of preaching and sharing the gospel with others and also how to teach and care for the younger generations.

During these months we said goodbye to some members. Sis Rebecca Ho married Bro Raymond Liu and has relocated to Edinburgh and Sis Tohko Kanzaki has left for Japan. However we welcome Bro John Lin (China) who is studying in London. We have also been blessed with two new-borns: Sis Lisa Kwok gave birth to baby Adam Parks and Sis Hua Xin Fan has given birth to a baby boy.

On 19th April we hosted the NEG Southern Region training where we studied the doctrine of baptism with members from other churches.

We held our annual spring spiritual convocation and evangelical services (24th—26th April). Our theme was: “Go and Make Disciples of all Nations” and “Teach them to observe all Things that I have Commanded you”. There were many visitors and truth seekers from various parts of the UK and we thank God that five people were baptised into the fold.
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“The repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.” (Acts 2:38)

The refurbishment of the first floor has commenced. The first floor will be used as a secondary chapel, library facility and conference hall.

On 30th May we held the ordination ceremony of Dn. Nehemiah Zhou and Dn. Ezra Chong. May God guide them and grant them wisdom to help London church grow and prosper.

Cambridge Prayer House

Cambridge Prayer house (CPH) was blessed this quarter with visitors from Manchester and as far as Kota Kinabalu (KK), Sabah!

Elder Micah Choo (KK), father of our Bro. Benjamin Choo, visited and led the Sabbath services on 11th April and 5th May to share the words of God and to have fellowship with us during his month-long stay at Benjamin’s.

Eight Manchester youths came to visit on 25th April and lodged at Bedford for the night. After dinner, we had fellowship with them around the dinner table to start with, and then an impromptu music fellowship, led by Andrea on the piano and June on the cello. En route to Cambridge to enjoy punting on the River Cam, lunch and sightseeing, we stopped at CPH for a brief visit. Thank God the rain stayed away for the duration of their stay!

On 25th May, CPH started its first fortnightly Sunday Bible study services, initially only in Bedford, to help support the members in the surrounding areas who have problem attending CPH Sabbath services. Since then, Bro. Duncan Shek of Milton Keynes (MK) has also taken turns to host as there are members and truth seekers in MK. The attendance could range from nine to potentially over thirty. May the Lord guide this piece of holy work and sustain the members’ burning zeal.

Thank God, starting in the summer term, we now have two RE classes—one for older children aged 6—9 years old and one for pre-school children. Furthermore, members have continued to have training from Preacher TK Chin on how to sermonise, with Preacher Michael, we had a very useful evangelism workshop which has kick started initiatives to preach the word joyfully in the Cambridge area.

We look forward to our convocation in July (11th—12th July) and ask that you continue to pray for the members and holy work in Cambridge.