

## **ACTS 2.41-42: BAPTISM, BELONGING AND BREAKING OF BREAD**

*Chelmsford 1 November 2010*

This summer I was asked by the BU to write a new baptismal course as a follow-up to Alpha.

This I did, and all being well in the next few months the new Beta course will be available.

Alpha is the Greek equivalent of our letter A

Beta is the Greek equivalent of our letter B. I have therefore entitled this new Beta course **Baptism, Belonging, and Breaking of Bread** – I hope you like the alliteration.

Alpha first and foremost is about Jesus – about his life, his death, his resurrection

My Beta course is above all about the church – about baptism, belonging, and breaking of bread.

The fact is that you can't have Jesus without his church.

Years ago, people used to sing that "love and marriage go together like a horse and carriage" – so too does Jesus and his church.

Indeed, the apostle Paul once described the church as the bride of Christ – Jesus loves the church as a husband loves his wife – so if we love Jesus, we will also want to love his church.

Certainly, as far as the Bible is concerned, if we are serious about following Jesus, then we will be serious about the church – we will want to be baptised into the family of Jesus, we will want to belong to the family of Jesus, we will want to break bread with the family of Jesus.

Let me read to you two verses from the Acts of the Apostles which speak about baptism, belonging, and breaking of bread. In Acts 2.41-42 Luke tells us that after Peter had preached his famous sermon on the Day of Pentecost:

**"Many of them believed his message and were baptised, and about 3000 people were added to the group that day. They spent their time in learning from the apostles, taking part in the fellowship, and sharing in the fellowship meals and the prayers".**

Or as Eugene Peterson puts it in *The Message*: **"That day about 3000 took Peter at his word, were baptised and were signed up. They committed themselves to the teaching of the apostles, the life together, the common meal (lit. The breaking of bread) and the prayers".**

Notice three things:

1. **Baptism.** In the NT church there were no unbaptised Christians – people didn't wait years to be baptized – they got baptized as soon as they could. We see this here on the day of Pentecost. After Peter had preached his sermon, **"many... believed his message and were baptised"**. Baptism was a sign that they had put their trust in Jesus. Baptism wasn't a sign that they had got their lives together – rather it was a sign that they wanted to get their lives together. Baptism marked the beginnings of the Christian journey.

2. **Belonging.** In NT times belonging to the church went hand in hand with belonging to Jesus. It's a bit like birth: unless you were particularly unfortunate, when we were born, you were born into a family – parents, perhaps brothers & sisters, grandparents, uncles, aunts, cousins. So too when we are born again we are born into a family – the family of Jesus. We belong to one another – we are here to help one another grow, we are here to help one another survive. We see this on the day of Pentecost. The 3000 people baptised “**were added to the group that day**” – i.e. they joined the church.
  
3. **Breaking of Bread.** In NT times one of the key marks of belonging to the church was remembering Jesus by breaking bread and drinking wine. Somewhat surprisingly, they didn't take communion once a month as we do – initially they took communion every day – remembering Jesus was so important to them. We see this here: “**they spent their time... sharing in the fellowship meals**” – or as the NRSV: “**they devoted themselves to the breaking of bread**”.  
Incidentally, do notice the order in which things were done in NT days: people were baptised, they joined the church, and then they took communion. In those days, communion was called “**the Lord's Supper**” (1 Cor 11.20) – it was a meal for people who confessed Jesus as Lord, and in NT times the key moment when people confessed Jesus as Lord was baptism. No unbaptised people ever took communion – it would have been unthinkable.  
What's more, people had to be in a good relationship with their fellow brothers and sisters – the clear teaching of 1 Cor 11 is that in the early church it would have been unthinkable for people who didn't belong to the family, taking part in the family meal. That would have been not to discern the body of Christ (1 Cor 11.29) – and in turn that would have involved eating and drinking judgment upon oneself (1 Cor 11.29)!

Baptism, belonging and breaking of bread – these three things went together – these three things took place once people had decided to follow Jesus. And I dare to believe that what happened then, should happen now.

BUT, for reasons which I do not understand, for the most part this is not what happens in our church.

Or to be precise, this is not what generally happens to young people in our church. Something is going wrong. At our October leadership weekend we looked at our baptismal statistics – less than a quarter of those who are baptised in our church have been brought up in our church.

In other words, if you are a young person in our church, then – statistically speaking - the odds are that you will never be baptised into the family of Jesus, you will never belong to the family of Jesus, and will never take part in the family meal.

And yet many of those young people who are never baptised, who never join the family, who never take communion, claim to love Jesus.

The question is: how do we account for this apparent failure?

Here I am, the senior minister of CBC, writing a Beta course for the BU entitled **Baptism, Belonging and Breaking of Bread**, yet most of my young people do not appear to see the need to be baptised, to belong to the church, and to take communion.

In the light of this I want to ask a number of questions:

WHAT AM I DOING WRONG? WHAT PERHAPS IS MARTIN, MY YOUTH MINISTER, DOING WRONG?

- Are we as ministers putting undue pressure on young people, which is causing them in turn to run a mile from what otherwise they might do? Are we ministers wrong to apply the teaching of the Bible to young people today?
- Some people have said to me: Paul, you are to blame, because you have told young people they have to wait. It is true, that I have told 8, 9 & 10 year olds that they have to wait – but frankly if you are 12, 13, or 14, then you should certainly be thinking of being baptised. Indeed, I was baptised when I was 13 years old.
- Some people have suggested that we make too much of baptism, and so frighten off people wanting to be baptised. Is this true? Is a key reason for young people not being baptised the fear of having to give a testimony? Frankly, if fear were the issue, then I would ask people wanting to be baptised to write down what Jesus means to them, and then I would read their testimony on the day
- One or two people have suggested to me that we should hold 'trendier' baptismal services in the evening. I am very happy to consider holding baptismal services in the evening where the worship could be more contemporary in style – however, for me the key issue would be this: would young people then really ensure they bring friends and so fill the Meeting Place. Frankly I don't think it is too much to ask a young person to bring at least 30 people to church for their baptism

The truth is that your ministers would be willing to do anything to encourage young people to be baptised – provided we did not compromise with the fact that in baptism we are nailing our colours and saying to the world that we have decided to follow Jesus

OR ARE PARENTS PARTLY TO BLAME?

- Martin and I sometimes get the impression that some parents don't encourage their children to be baptised, to belong, and to break bread.
- Indeed, Martin and I have been told that some parents have actually forbidden their children to be baptised. 'You are not ready yet', some apparently say. As if

you can only get baptised once you have learnt to keep your bedroom tidy and are always back home by 9.30 in the evening.

OR ARE YOUNG PEOPLE THEMSELVES PARTLY TO BLAME?

- Is it that some young people don't believe the Bible should be our guide?
- Is it that some young people just don't understand the teaching of the Bible?
- Or is it that some young people are just being difficult?

Martin & I really want to know the answer to these questions – so we are going to put everybody into groups and ask you in these groups to give us your response!