

Q&A: It is my biblical understanding that a person who is to be baptised is first to be a believer... Can you please comment?

Anonymous asks:



It is my biblical understanding that a person who is to be baptised is first to be a believer. Of their own free will they are to receive Jesus Christ as their personal saviour – A faithful, cognitive act.

Some churches conduct baby baptisms and, although the church admits that the baby is not consciously choosing Jesus Christ as their personal saviour, they claim that the baby is being baptised into the faith of his or her parents. I believe this is not a biblical truth, but rather a man made tradition.

Can you please comment?

Thanks

ps – not to be confused with dedications.

Thanks for the question – happy to respond. The one caveat being is that the whole infant-baptism/adult-baptism debate is long, emotive and the most constructive response at the end is usually to agree to disagree. This is true simply because Scripture does not have a clear definitive proscription or

prescription for infant baptism. For every verse that people point out emphasising baptism in the context of individual faith and post-conversion, you can find one that alludes to baptism in a covenantal context in which there are allusions to whole households being baptised etc. etc.

So I disagree with your biblical truth / man-made tradition comment. The scholarly considerations simply do not allow this distinction to be drawn, one way or the other.

I ascribe to and practice the baptism of infants. I was baptised as a child (also subsequently baptised in the Baptist Church in my teen years when I wanted to make my own confession (confirmation?) of faith and I was part of that community). My children were baptised as infants.

There are number of aspects to this issue that I believe provides a framework that is thoroughly consistent with Scripture. I can't be exhaustive, or even thorough here, but here are some brief thoughts.

1) The primary *agency* in baptism.

Historically (man-made tradition?) the primary agency was perceived to be the church. Hence the popularisms of being "baptised Catholic" or "baptised Anglican." Such a view embraces infant baptism as a way of including children in the right ecclesio-sociological fold. When people feel a need to confront infant baptism it is usually a confrontation with this framework. I do not subscribe to it.

A popular view these days is that the primary agency is the *baptisee*. In other words, a person comes to faith and therefore expresses that faith by being baptised. Baptism is therefore a symbolic act on the part of the new believer.

This view requires a believers baptism stance but not necessarily vice versa. A danger with this view of agency is that it can become highly individualistic. I know of people, who struggling with a recurring struggle against sins or

addictions, have been baptised a number of times as they respond to their series of “backslidings.” I do not subscribe to this framework.

For me the primary agency in baptism is God. In baptism, through the church and the witness of faith, by the Spirit of God someone is signed and sealed into the body of Christ, the people of grace. It is an act of covenantal obedience where that covenant is applied in some sense. This is not incompatible with infant baptism.

2) What happens at baptism?

There is the wide spectrum, of course, between baptism-is-completely-and-utterly-salvific to baptism-is-a-nice-but-not-necessary-witness-of-salvation. I hold that baptism *does* do something. It certainly has a dedicatory effect – the person is signed and sealed for salvation and membership of God’s people. And it also has a sacramental effect – a means of grace by which a person who continues strong in the faith can be considered to be walking in the grace of their baptism. It is something by which we are able to say, and hold onto the truth of: “I am a baptised person. By grace I am dead to all but alive to him. I belong to Christ, I am marked as his.”

This is not incompatible with infant baptism.

3) Who exercises the faith?

You rightly point out that infant baptism relies on what is sometimes called “vicarious” faith. The parents exercise faith on their child’s behalf. While this may seem strange to some I do not think so for a number of reasons.

a) It matches a covenantal view of baptism. In the spirit of “As for me and my house we will serve the Lord.”

b) It is actually an ordinary thing to do. After all Christian parents exercise faith on behalf of their children

all the time. They pray for them and with them – encouraging them to say Amen, or more, at the family table; teaching them to tithe their pocket money etc. etc.

c) Except in the case of baptism following clear adult conversion it is something that happens anyway. For instance, those who hold to believer's baptism must have a view on when a child's decision to follow Christ is "adult enough." At what age is the child's faith completely theirs and not their parents? What is the right way to respond to age-appropriate faith? I would argue that age-appropriate faith for an infant is complete dependency on their parents'!

4) As some have asked – is a child "a pagan in need of converting or a Christian in need of nurturing?"

Not sure if I like that popular phrasing. But it gets the point across. If I consider my child to be a part of the church, covered by God's grace, and endeavour to help them walk in this light – I cannot see baptism as askance to that.

Free will is not taken away – they may choose to continue to walk in that grace, or, as an adult, to leave the fold. But while I am answerable to God for their wellbeing I will look to them to walk under his grace.

Like I said, in the end, this is one of those agree-to-disagree questions. It is something I have wrestled with personally and have arrived at these conclusions. After all "Let the little children come unto me..." sounds more like the gospel than "wait until you're old enough" and, in the end, even for adults, it is only those who are like children to God who can enter his kingdom.

God bless.

R U OK? I wasn't.

Today is R U OK? Day. We've all seen the ads with Hugh Jackman. The concept is simple – take a moment to look your friend or co-worker in the eye and ask them “Are you OK?” It may not be necessary, but it does no harm. But it can do a lot of good, as my friend Sally Oakley, blogs, and asks “Well, are you?”



It is also rather poignant for me because a year ago today, I wasn't OK. On the afternoon of September 15 2010 I went to bed and couldn't stop crying. I call it my “crash.” It was “burn out”, a “nervous breakdown” – whatever you call it it was the fruit of mismanaging self-made expectations, working too hard, too long, not listening to my own body when it was sick, nor to my wife in her ever-present wisdom. Above all it came from forgetting the core purpose of my existence – to worship and glorify God through faith, trust and hope.

Last year I needed more than just the question (although that may have helped), I needed to heed the statement: “U R not OK.” But I didn't.

This is not the place to tell the details of the story.

Suffice it to say that there has been much grace from many people – not least of which was Gill, and Josh Skeat and many others at Connections and the Parish of Burnie teams who stepped up as I fell down. God, in his grace, switched off my brain and made me rest. He taught me how to worship again, in weakness and utter dependence. He met me through gardening, through sleeping, through moving concrete and walks on the

beach. He ministered to me through doctors and counsellors and the wisdom of those who are my leaders in the church. He ministered to me through the soothing truths of my wife's words and affections. I think I learned a lot.

I am now OK.

Some of you are not OK.

Some of you, if I asked the question would answer falsely – with bravado, or assurances, or caveats. Perhaps you need to hear a statement then: U R not OK – you have lost your first love, you are running on empty, that performance-giving stress is about to cause the fuse to blow.

If this is you. If you are where I was...

Please stop. Take the time-out now. Don't fall off the edge. Don't give an excuse. This must be your priority. Because a crash costs. It costs you. And it costs, very dearly, the ones who are near to you. Go to a doctor. Take some advice. Don't let the diminishing returns spiral out of control.

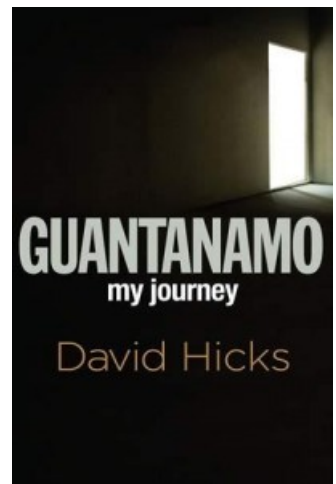
If you can't stop. If it's "too late" in some sense. Please hear this: even though you are not OK, *you*, as a person, are much much much more than OK. No matter how you feel. Or where you are at. Or what people are saying. This does not change God's love for you, his grace towards you. He is your refuge. You are safe there. Trust, simply trust.

Hear the heart of Christ, described as the servant in Isaiah 42:3

*A bruised reed he will not break,
and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out.*

Review: Guantanamo – My Journey

The controversy surrounding the detention of David Hicks at Guantanamo Bay by the United States government has waned. In the aftermath of 9/11 and the invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan – in that era when the War on Terror was a novelty, not a socio-political framework, when the soundbites were filled with Bush and Howard – it was another matter.



Do you remember the banners, the protests?
Do you recall how the Hicks factor played out in the political tumult of 2007, when he was plea bargained to freedom, but Rudd was elected anyway?

Yes, that David Hicks.

I wondered when he would speak out. There was a control order and a gag order in place when he was released. But the times, they have a-changed. And *Guantanamo – My Journey*, Hicks' own account of his life before and during his five-and-a-half year ordeal is well and truly published. I have found it a fascinating read. It is also the first ever official "ebook" that I have owned and read.

So what do I think? He writes with a precise and articulate tone. It is somewhat askance to the account of the lack of education of his early life – the school dropout jackeroo. I suspect a ghost writer, but then again he has a clear motivation to form his words well and tell his side of the story – to have his day in the media courthouse.

The big question of course is – was he actually guilty of

anything? Is this his own form of propaganda to play himself in a good light? He was self admittedly naive – some would say stupid – to imagine that joining militant organisations in Kosovo and Kashmir would not land him in some sort of trouble.

At times it feels like he is playing to a politically correct audience as he covers his adventures in a “I was just concerned for the oppressed” light. For sure I do not suspect that he was a terrorist in any way – but his declaration that “I have never killed anyone or attempted to. I have never hurt or injured anyone during my travels, nor did I try to” beggars a certain amount of belief; he joined a *military* organisation with no intention to use force?

He tells his story well, however, and I found myself caught up in the narrative – I was interested in his interest in Islam, and its later waning, his desire to travel, the way he described the internal struggles of his incarceration. I found myself trying to imagine the various scenes, to get some sense of the experience.

The second part of the book – the account of his detention – is well footnoted. It provides corroboration to his story and demonstrates clearly and convincingly the inhumanity of an American militarised bureaucracy. Even tonight, on the eve of the tenth anniversary of 9/11, I was watching Dick Cheney on the news declaring that the use of torture was justified and justifiable. I felt a surge of injustice.

The heroes I was looking for are there – Terry Hicks, the dogged father, Major Mori, the principled military lawyer.

I’m not sure if I put David Hicks in that category – while tenacious and amazingly robust, there is little heroism in his character – just much to be pitied and regretted and ultimately relieved about.

This is a sorry story. But it is still a story of our times. And it should be read.

Q&A: Do you “remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy”?

Anonymous asks: *G'day Will, Do you “remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy”? If yes, please explain why. If no, please explain why. God bless you my friend*

God bless you too.

You are of course quoting the fourth of the ten commandments.

To answer your question...

In short: Yes I do, because it is a life-giving command from the One who made me.

In long:

There is something essential to sabbath that inheres to who God is and who we are, made in his image. In the exposition of the 10 commandments in the Old Testament the sabbath commandment is given an explanation

Exodus 20:11 For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the sabbath day and consecrated it.

The seventh day is set apart to not labour but to *rest*.

Jesus of course sets the example for what this rest is – it's *not* about legalistically doing nothing. Consider Matthew 12:1-14 from among the many examples.

1 At that time Jesus went through the grainfields on the Sabbath. His disciples were hungry and began to pick some heads of grain and eat them. 2 When the Pharisees saw this, they said to him, "Look! Your disciples are doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath." 3 He answered, "Haven't you read what David did when he and his companions were hungry? 4 He entered the house of God, and he and his companions ate the consecrated bread—which was not lawful for them to do, but only for the priests. 5 Or haven't you read in the Law that the priests on Sabbath duty in the temple desecrate the Sabbath and yet are innocent? 6 I tell you that something greater than the temple is here. 7 If you had known what these words mean, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice,' you would not have condemned the innocent. 8 For the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath."

9 Going on from that place, he went into their synagogue, 10 and a man with a shriveled hand was there. Looking for a reason to bring charges against Jesus, they asked him, "Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?" 11 He said to them, "If any of you has a sheep and it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will you not take hold of it and lift it out? 12 How much more valuable is a person than a sheep! Therefore it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath." 13 Then he said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." So he stretched it out and it was completely restored, just as sound as the other. 14 But the Pharisees went out and plotted how they might kill Jesus.

In simple practical terms, then, it is appropriate to worship God, do good, uphold one another, and, generally speaking, participate re-creation on that day – these things are not "labour"! For this reason, even as someone who "works" on a Sunday, I would count that time as part of my sabbath-keeping as well as my "Day Off" (Monday!)

The truth that undergirds all this, of course, is that "the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath." The joy of salvation can be

described in many ways – from darkness to light, sickness to health, separation to restoration etc. – but it also includes a sense of from *toil* to *rest*. Perhaps we might consider it a reversal of the curse of Adam who went from the joyous work of the garden to the hard toil outside. Whatever the correlation, the truth is that Jesus is the Prince of Peace – he is our *shalom*, our wholeness, our easy-yoke, our lightened-burden, our rest, our *sabbath*.

Indeed, the culmination of this Christ-won sabbath is our big-picture hope – the goal of our eschatology. Many commentators look to the seven-fold structures of Revelation to demonstrate it's goal in (eternal/millennial?) sabbath.

It is therefore very appropriate for Christians to not set aside Friday/Saturday – the seventh day of the week – but Sunday, the first day of the *new* week – as a sabbath day to refresh one another and worship God corporately.

But the truth remains that Jesus is the Lord of the Sabbath, and my “remembering the sabbath” therefore also includes my seeking him every day of the week. I would therefore include my times of quiet, prayer, contemplation etc. – and my day off – in the mix of what it means for me, as a Christian, to remember the Sabbath.

Thanks for the question.

Hobart Coffee Rankings

[Update: In response to some feedback I have updated this post to include an experience of Pilgrim Coffee in Argyle Street. I was also asked to clarify what I meant by “purely subjective results”]

Having worked in the Hobart CBD for the best part of three weeks my coffee shop rankings are currently as follows.

Based on the purely subjective results of ordering “Give me the fattest, strongest, largest flat white that you can give me.”

1. **Villino Espresso | Pilgrim Coffee** – Both gave me a full-flavoured coffee that had adequate strength of taste and kick with no bitterness or burn. The temperature and texture was perfect for both. Villino’s hit the belly a little softer, Pilgrim have a better, larger venue. Equal first.
2. **Yellow Bernard** – A nicely balanced flavour but a bit too much froth. Very close to my work so they will be visited again.
3. **Jam Jar Lounge** Battery Point (coffee is sourced from Villino) – Very decent, nice and strong but a little over extracted.
4. **Oomph** Macquarie St – A little insipid in flavour – perhaps a little stale? Pleasant enough, but nothing spectacular.
5. **Dev’Lish** – Strong but very very bitter and landed like lead.
6. **Hudson** in Murray Street – I was shouted a “coffee” at a lunch meeting. The conversation was good.

Q&A: Terrorism takes

life.Christian martyr gives life... how can this be better worded?

Anonymous asks: *Coming up 9/11-“Terrorism takes life.Christian martyr gives life”. My question is how this can be better worded or used at that time?*

First of all, I'll take your quote as as a notion rather than a direct quote (a quick google didn't find anything). If it is a direct quote – let me know, for it's provenance may set some context that I'm not aware of.

Some quick thoughts.

It is helpful because

1. There is truth to it – a terrorist is the bringer of violence, a Christian martyr (in the ilk of Polycarp and many others across history and in recent times) reflect Christ by demonstrating the victory of God in with and through being the recipient of violence.
2. The word “martyr” literally means “witness.” A Christian martyr bore witness to Jesus by trusting in him even unto death. This witness is a proclamation that brings life, encourages others to turn to God who redeems and empowers to stand against sin and oppression. I think it was Tertullian who said “the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church” for the witness of faith in those who lost their life inspired faith in those who saw that witness. So yes, the martyr – the witness, brings life.

It is an unhelpful wording because

1. The word “martyr” has become semantically impoverished

and, with images of face-covered machine-gun wielding suicide bombers on TV, I would think it has become almost synonymous with “religious fanatic.” And so the average person would not see the distinction in the quote between “terrorist” and “martyr” but between “muslim fanatic” and “christian fanatic” and would take the phrase to simply be a “my religion is better than yours” polemic.

2. One persons terrorist is another persons martyr. Those who have perpetrated acts of terrorism are often described by this term by their followers. They would argue that it has furthered “life” – by some definition – in that it has furthered truth or justice as they see it.

Given all this I think a better phrasing would more clearly draw this contrast, and would emphasise Jesus – him which is being witnessed about, not the one doing the witness.

So perhaps:

“Terrorism: Death from violence. Jesus Christ: Life from death”

I’m sure someone could come up with something better though.

Q&A: Having just looked up Psalm 149.3 I came upon this... What do you make of it and

what is your opinion?

Anonymous asks: *Having just looked up Psalm 149.3 I came upon this item (<http://www.freedomministries.org.uk/masters/idiom11c.shtml>) What do you make of it and what is your opinion?*

OK. Psalm 149.3 in the ESV is this:

*Let them praise his name with dancing,
making melody to him with tambourine and lyre.*

On the face of it, the psalm looks like a reasonably ordinary song of praise. The simple phrase *Praise the LORD!* in the first verse echoes the very clear sentiments of the very next psalm (150) – *Let everything that has breath praise the LORD! Praise the LORD!* Psalm 150 seems to be a simple call to exalting God “for his mighty deeds.. his excellent greatness” (v2) and, like Psalm 149:3 calls us to “Praise him with tambourine and dance” (v4). The two psalms seem to go together.

The link that Anonymous references is to an organisation started by one Andrew Dobbin with the following agenda, taken from the sites *About Us* page,

Freedom Ministries was started in 1990 by Andrew Dobbin who at that time was living in Bushmills, N.Ireland.

He began to be concerned about the “infiltration” of pop-idiom music and other forms of entertainment into the Church, things which by their very nature tend to entertain rather than teach and edify.

The application of this to the psalms is made by Peter Masters (from the referenced page)

Some psalms refer to musical instruments which were not normally associated with worship at all, either in the Temple on feast days, or for accompanying psalms and spiritual songs. These other instruments were played on festive occasions and for enjoyment and recreation.

It is failure to identify these 'civil life' references that causes people to think that the Psalms condone a musical jamboree policy for worship.

With reference to Psalm 82, Dr. Masters continues:

The formula is the same as ever:- tambourines for national festivities and cultural dance, harp-like instruments for psalm-singing, and trumpets and cymbals used exclusively in the Temple orchestra under careful restraint for the sacrifices connected with these feasts.

And with reference to Psalm 149:3 he writes:

Psalm 149.3 is also quoted in support of today's pop-music activities, and is said to condone dancing in worship...

However, the question must be asked, is the psalmist speaking about acts of direct spiritual worship, or is he speaking about the cultural, recreational life of the nation? As we read through the psalm the answer becomes obvious.

The implication is that dancing and tambourines have no place in "direct worship" of the Christian kind.

This is classic overcategorisation derived from legalism. Let me point out

1. What on earth is "direct worship"? Can worship ever be "indirect"? Something is either worshipful or it is not! There's a false dichotomy here.
2. This false dichotomy arises, it seems, from a

correlation of “direct worship” with OT “temple worship.” This implies an equating of direct Christian worship with OT temple worship which is simply not the case. This fails to take into account not only the significant unfoldings in the covenantal life of God’s people from OT to NT it also simply an overrestriction of something general (“worship”) into something very very particular (the temple).

3. And finally, what on earth is wrong with “entertainment”? Yes, for sure, there is an inconsistency between facile or vapid entertainment that does nothing but amuse, and true expression of worship.

But God is a God of experience and expression – and worship rightly includes the entertainment of all our senses and the catching up of our whole being in bringing glory to God.

So pick up your tambourine and guitar (or pipe organ! – the beauty of which I am coming to appreciate despite the fact that you can’t pick it up!) and dance before the Lord. Let our whole being and all that we are praise his holy name.

Amen.