The History of the words 'baptism' and 'christening'

Many Christians feel very strongly about the importance of using the word 'baptism' and may see the word 'christening' as a dumbed-down, popular term which does not capture the full theological and spiritual meaning that 'baptism' does. Baptism is one of the treasures of the Church, a simple yet beautiful rite which brings new birth. Baptism speaks of passing through the waters of trials, of dying and rising with Christ, of spiritual cleansing. At the end of a baptism, candidates are made part of the family of the Church, they begin a new life. Churchgoers may find the word 'christening' does not capture any of this for them. It feels shallow and is primarily associated with cakes, dresses, presents, parties. All these may be good, but they are not what really matters in baptism.

When I began my PhD research I wanted to investigate the history behind these words and what the linguistic differences between churchgoers and non-churchgoers may tell us about some of the other things which divide us. Might we understand one another better if we understood one another's language more clearly?

I don't speak Old English or Middle English (I'm a theologian not a language scholar!), so I began my studies around 1500, at which time the language is becoming recognisably modern. I looked into the words used to refer to baptism prior to this and was interested to see that 'christening' has linguistic roots going back into Old English (the first reference in the Oxford English Dictionary is from Bede in 890), whereas 'baptism's' roots in the English language are not as recent, it first appears in Middle English (the first reference to it in the OED is from "Piers Plowman", in 1377).

In the phase of the English Language known as 'Early Modern English' (about 1500-1710) I found that 'christen', at the start of this period, usually meant 'Christian', but was also used to refer to the sacrament making someone a Christian (that is, baptism). This shows how closely the ideas of baptism and being a Christian were at this time: with just one word to refer to both, the ideas were inseparable. 'Christened' was particularly likely to be used of an adult who had converted from another faith, since they were being 'christian-ed', made into a Christian. 'Christened' was also almost always used to describe an actual instance of a baptism occurring (as opposed to theoretical discussion of baptism). In the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries 'baptism' was usually used to refer to the sacrament as a theoretical idea, in theological discussions or in Bible translations. This is why 'baptism' feels more biblical to Christians today, because it is the word chosen in the Tyndale and later in the King James version of the Bible. The Middle English translation of the Bible by Wycliffe, in 1382, however, was happy to speak of Jesus being 'christened' by John in the Jordan.

At this stage of history women, people from lower ranks of society and those without a university education used 'christening' much more than 'baptism'. Conversely, men, people from higher social ranks and those with a university education used 'baptism' more. Clergy were particularly striking in that they hardly ever used 'christening', perhaps partly because

much of their writings were theological or biblical rather than practical, but maybe even at the time of the Reformation clergy had begun to have negative associations with 'christening', seeing it as a popular word and not quite theologically 'correct'.

After 1570 the new word 'Christian', derived more closely from the Latin and which came over with the continental influence of the Reformers, took over from the Old English word 'christen' and the two concepts were divorced. After this time, by the end of the seventeenth century, a small minority of radical Reformers and puritans began to complain about the word 'christening', seeing it as not true baptism. Most people, however, gradually began to use both words interchangeably.

A study of the records of the Old Bailey trials in the eighteenth show that the people speaking in court as witnesses, as victims of crime or as defendants (the majority of whom were from lower social positions) used 'christening' much more than 'baptism', over ¾ of the time. At the same period the lawyers, professional witnesses and those taking notes about the trial proceedings also used 'christening' more than 'baptism', but less so than for those in lower social positions, about 2/3 of the time. Meanwhile the chaplain of Newgate prison used 'baptism' well over 95% of the time.

As we move into the first part of the nineteenth century, however, we see a shift. The lower social orders (witnesses, victims and defendants in the trials at the Old Bailey) continued to use 'christening' about ¾ of the time, or just a little less, so they were now using 'baptism' very slightly more than earlier. The lawyers and professional witnesses, however, suddenly shift massively over to use 'baptism' more than 'christening', over 60% of the time. 'Baptism' has become the word which it is proper for the higher social orders to use in formal situations such as in court. This split between the higher and lower social orders widens in the second half of the nineteenth century. Meanwhile clergy continued to almost completely avoid using 'christening' in all the places I studied their language. From the point of view of the 'ordinary' people, the clergy's language seems to be an extreme version of the language of the elite.

In the twentieth century, I found that this avoidance of the word 'christening' amongst clergy began to extend to lay churchgoers, too. Meanwhile, in secular contexts, 'christening' was used more in informal settings (such as on twitter and in the tabloid newspapers) and 'baptism' was used more in formal settings (such as in the broadsheet newspapers and in parliament). Google's search trends reveal that in Britain 'christening' is searched for much more than 'baptism', whereas in America this trend is reversed.

So, from the point of view of ordinary, secular British people, 'christening' is associated in their minds with a friendly, informal form of religion, one which they feel they can relate to. 'Baptism', meanwhile, is associated with American religion, with formality, with religious fervour and maybe even extremism. The use of these words in figures of speech is telling. 'Baptism' is almost always a negative and frightening thing, as seen in the figure of speech 'baptism of fire'. 'Christening', meanwhile, is happy and celebratory, as in 'I christened my new house with a glass of wine!'

Christians have good reasons to have some wonderful associations in their minds with the word 'baptism', but they should remember that, when speaking to those who do not have this churchgoing background, they may find their conversation partner has very different associations in their mind. Using 'baptism' to them will not communicate anything about washing away sins, celebrating new life or joining the church. Instead they will inadvertently communicate a kind of formality and stiffness. By using 'christening' to them, we are not communicating a lack of seriousness about religion, but rather a joyousness and celebration.

I do not believe that Christians should be afraid of using 'christening'. It is time we re-appropriated this ancient and spiritually rich word back into our language, and in doing so re-connect with our culture and enable us to speak more clearly with them again. To be christened means to become a Christian, a little Christ, and this is surely something to celebrate and embrace.

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