

## THE ARCHERS THREAD

### WHY IS ABBIE BEING BAPTIZED?

#### Introduction by Roger Godin

In the summer I got quite incensed about the natural assumption that Abby, (Abbie or Abbi!) would be baptized. Here was the classic scenario for a Thanksgiving Service instead - unchurchy parents, and a premature baby wonderfully healthy. So I wrote to the scriptwriters setting out possible scenarios - no response.

So in some frustration, for the first ever time I put this question onto a "blog" - the Archers "Message Board" -

*"Since neither Roy or Hayley seem to be churchy in any way, why is Abbie going to be baptized?"*

The result was astonishing with over 450 messages (few threads ever exceed 100). Despite a percentage of irrelevant messages, , it provides a remarkable *Vox Pop* of contemporary attitudes to Christian initiation and the place of the Church in society.

It effectively ended on 16th September with the following:

#### Message 453 -

*This thread "Why's Abbie being baptized?" seems to have wandered off into fantasy land!*

#### **Response:**

*- because the Scriptwriters like to fit as much god as they can in to as many episodes as they can.- the question is why?*

*My two theories:*

- 1. The writers have a list of rural endangered 'species' they are under orders to protect. (rural crafts, post offices, the WI and of course the C of E)*
- 2. The writers are all evangelical Christians bent on pretending that religion is a key essential of village life and that without daily God the whole village will slide into the murky Am.*

*"'nuff said?!"*

## Summary and Analysis by David Perry

*Within the first 260 contributions to the discussion, I found the following spread of participants:- 7 clergy, 8 active laity (some pretty heterodox but still attending church), 3 non-attending believers, four lapsed but sympathetic, 2 lapsed and hostile, 5 who have never believed anything of Christianity, 7 atheists, 2 agnostic and 8 where their stance could not be deduced from their contributions. 4 people dealt with Ambridge issues, chiefly whether the prominent role the C of E played out in the script was out of proportion to current social reality.*

*What follows are **QUOTES** from contributions (as written) - **Q**, **RESPONSES** to a contribution - **R**, and **ISSUES** brought out by me from the **Qs** and **Rs** - **I**. I have tried to be representatively selective and to identify the main themes. To recover the full content, put "Archers Message Board" into Google, click on appropriate link. When The Message Board appears click on the "discussion" option. To find the Abbie thread you need to go to where there are messages for 16<sup>th</sup> September and you will find it among the entries for that day.*

### INFANT BAPTISM AS SOCIAL NORMALITY

**Q** "Is a religious belief a requisite for asking to have one's baby baptised?"

**R:** Just because you're not a churchgoer, you don't have to be anti-church".

**R:** "We, The Archers listeners, don't get to hear the half of what goes on unless the scriptwriters want to make a point of something. Do we know that Roy and Hayley aren't churchgoers or believers? Maybe they both went to church once Abbie was out of danger to give thanks for her arrival and recovery.

Just speculating, but IMHO, as they've not been painted as anti church they'd do what's considered normal in a small village. Have a baptism which will be a reason for celebration throughout the whole village. It's normal life in a British village innit?

R: “How I wish this was true! The large congregations for Christenings in our church are always made up of the usual congregation + people we’ve never met before, and sadly never see again. We have a lovely church, and a smashing vicar who has never been known to refuse any request (the last Christening was of a child from over twenty miles away.

R: “Abby being baptised? Well it’s the done thing innit. Especially in country villages, its tradition. So is a church wedding. Its all to do with the cake, the frock, the family get together. Its just what folk do!!

Doubt if 'high faluting' religious beliefs come into it at all for the majority. Don't think Hayley and Roy discussed the religious aspects.

R: “Oh I'm sure that conformist Roy and Haley follow the state religion. They, like many just can't normally be @rsed to go to church.

R: “My granddaughter was Christened in a Catholic church, in Ireland, where she lives. Her parents aren't married, neither of them ever go to church, and the god-father doesn't go to church and has never been christened.

None of this bothered the priest. (I wasn't there, my ex-other half told me about it later.)

#### **BAPTISM FOR THE CHILD OR THE PARENTS? BAPTISMAL GRACE?**

Q: “a baptism is valid whether the parents believe or not. The vicar is doing something for the child, not the parents”.

R: “Some have their children christened because ‘it is the thing to do’”.

R: “It’s also an excuse for a party for many families” “It comes under a heading which is nowadays called ‘Lifestyle’. Meaning the parents’ life-style, not the child.”

Q: (First clergy intervention): “Sadly there is a sort of folk-lore about it;

it’s a spiritual MMR jab, and no child is safe without it... I’m just off to baptise 3 babies, all of non-churchgoers - a fairly normal Sunday. But I believe in grace, and would never deny baptism to anyone asking for it ....It’s for the child, not the parents/godparents”.

***I: is not his theology of grace simply inviting the christening of babies to be seen as giving a spiritual MMR jab?***

Q: “What about Jesus? “Well Jesus was 30 when he was baptised and every single biblical baptism was of grownups, choosing for themselves .... Christening is a church construct and has become more a rite of passage.”

Q: “I guess that the practice of christening babies dates back to when many died in infancy and was done to ensure that they would go to heaven.”

Q: “Baptism it seems to me as a lay woman is a sacramental welcome to the grace of the Christ for the child, and, from the congregation, an act of spiritual and social welcome to the living and gracious community of the Christ.

(I would not however describe baptism as a spiritual MMR jab, since it does not confer later immunities, sigh!).

I suppose you would call me a Pelagian heretic hedgewitch. I’m utterly doubtful of original sin, though I feel strongly about many of the sins we commit as humans in adult life.”

#### **THANKSGIVING AN ALTERNATIVE TO INFANT BAPTISM?**

Q: Some "more modern" Christians opt for a Thanksgiving Service for their baby, then the child can be baptised when old enough to understand what it's all about. I have to admit that this is what I'd prefer these days, if I was a young mum.

**I: Does ‘more modern’ contrast with ‘traditional’ and follow the contrast *between the post-Christendom outlook with the Christendom/ establishment outlook?***

R: "This "Thanksgiving" service somehow hasn't taken off - probably because people (usually grandparents!) feel it is a "second class" baptism. It's not. It gives parents an opportunity to thank the Creator for his gift to them"

Not second class at all - and it leaves the children free to make the promises themselves. I gather a lot of committed Christians ask for thanksgiving instead for that reason. But sadly it seems few churches know about this.

R: You're right when you say people see it as somehow second-class. I always offer a Thanksgiving when I know the family to be 'unchurched' (awful expression), but it's always politely rejected in favour of Baptism.

R: "As someone who takes their faith seriously, I find it quite upsetting when children are baptised and neither parents nor godparents seem to have a clue as to what it's all about. They seem to be very embarrassed and want to get away for the party as quickly as possible. I would feel far happier with a Thanksgiving Service. I feel this service is much more appropriate, and certainly not second best, with people not making promises they can't or have no intention of keeping. Baptism can come later, if the child or adult wants it. They can they enjoy the party afterwards!

If parents believe that baptising a child is the only way of ensuring it gets to heaven (a view not held by myself) surely this should be done at birth and not months later?

#### PAROCHIAL PRACTICE

Q: "I am a vicar of a rural church, in a parish where there are lots of baptisms (aka Christenings). To my mind it's not just about what the parents are willing to promise to do (ie bring the child up as a Christian) but about what the church promises to do to support them. In my church we have worked really hard recently to support younger families, to make services accessible, and to provide resources for enabling families to ex-

plore their faith together. The result? Although not all the families who come to me asking for their child to be christened end up taking amore active part in the church, many do, and find that they are glad to do so. What for many parents might start off as just doing 'the done thing' actually ends up being what it's supposed to be - the start of a lifelong journey of faith for them and for their child. Everyone who lives in my parish has a right to ask for baptism for their child - then it's up to me to make that experience one that will encourage them to seek out more, and then follow it up with good quality appropriate opportunities for finding that 'more'.

R: That is splendid, but I have never lived anywhere where the vicar had the time to follow through, he was so stretched covering several villages!

R: "Great to hear you are working so hard on young families and put so much into the preparation process. Would that more vicars did the same! I do wonder though whether you would find things even better if you offered first class thanksgiving services. I know everyone has a right to a baptism, but that does not mean you can't offer thanksgiving with less likelihood of making people make promises they have no intention of keeping. And it does leave the child free to make up own mind later. (In fact the Vicar does offer both but the thanksgiving is generally turned down in favour of baptism)

R: "Ooh, don't get me started on this one! We are required by Canon Law to baptize the child of more or less anyone living in our parish. I always visit the family at home, prior to the service, and ask why they have chosen to have their child baptized (when they do not attend church). Their answers, in order of frequency, are: I dunno really; its the right thing to do; we want to have the baby done; it's our church; I used to go to Sunday School. Is it any the wonder the Vicar of Ambridge is half round the bend?!

R: "Our clergy team struggled for years over baptismal policy. Should we 'do' no babies unless the parents came to church regularly? Should we do

'em all with no questions asked? Neither of these approaches seemed satisfactory.

We came up with a 'hurdles policy'. All requests were treated the same and everyone was invited to attend a class and church once. 90% did and eventually the church grew. But oh what trouble the aggrieved 10% caused! However we did well for publicity in the local newspapers and suddenly everyone knew that the Church of England was not the wimpish non-entity they thought it was.

R: "It seems a little like blackmail and coercion to me. At least before, the punters were coming of their own volition .

R: "Crowds came of their own volition to listen to Jesus but most of them drifted away of their own volition. Jesus presented a challenge "Take my yoke upon you". Baptism makes sense for those who are learning the Christian faith. Political and social pressures made the Church put the cart of baptism before the horse of instruction in the faith and the Christendom centuries led to a huge complacency with every baby being baptised at birth. That policy is now completely threadbare. In the third millennium the Church is trying to discover how to "get real" in sharing the faith and that must inevitably result in a challenge to "get real" being given to those who seek baptism either for themselves or for their babes.

R: "As the Established Church it is supposed to be available to the whole population; being judgmental isn't going to increase congregations. Who knows what small seeds may be sown when an apparently 'godless' family comes along.

R: "Canon law requires you as a priest in the C of E to baptise any child whose parents request it and live within the parish (or are on the electoral roll). There may be a small delay for preparation but it should still go ahead . The minister may not refuse although some evidently do.

R: "Interesting, I wish I'd known that when the local Rev refused to baptise my eldest unless and until we'd attended Sunday services for a minimum of 12 weeks.

*I: What can be realistically asked of the clergy and properly be asked of the local church as a whole? Is there an explicit duty of care laid upon the church for those it baptises?*

#### FROM A CONDUCTOR OF HUMANIST CEREMONIES

I meet many vicars and priests in my work - usually at a crematorium - and, for the most part, I think we all appreciate that each of us is a decent human being, trying to do the right and best thing for families - whatever that is. Indeed I now have a couple of local vicars who 'refer work' to me because they like what I do and if they come across people they feel will be better served by a humanist, they pass them over. And I do the same. It works very well and I wish it could be the norm across the country and I also wish that more of them would allow us to use churches (which to me are just beautiful buildings) as community facilities where humanist services could also be conducted. We don't scare the horses and we do allow time for prayer for those who have a faith.

I am myself uncomfortable with the Dawkins brand of atheism (he is a paid up humanist as well) - I don't like evangelical fervour of any shade or hue, but then I am a life long humanist and the daughter and granddaughter of same so I guess it is not the kind of 'big deal' to me that it might be to others. Respect for everyone is what life should be about really, that is my belief.

#### RELATING TO THE C OF E

Q: "When I asked her why she had her daughter christened, she said she felt it gave her daughter the option to be a member of the C of E or not.

R: "I think a lot of people think like this. Unfortunately, the baptism service is designed for people who definitely do want to be members (or for parents who definitely do want their child to be a member, until the child is old enough to 'opt out' for himself or herself). That's why the service includes commitments by parents and godparents that the child will be brought up to be part of the church and that parents and godparents will lead by example.

The truth is that everyone has the option to be a member of the C of E whenever they choose to. Baptism is not for opening the option, it's for deciding to make the choice. Hence, you can get baptised at any age (i.e. it's not something you have to have done when you're a child).

The service that keeps the option open (for the child) is the Thanksgiving for the Gift of a Child service. This service affirms God's love for the child and gives parents a public opportunity to give thanks, but does not commit parents or child to ongoing church membership.

Q: "You won't meet a more devout sceptic than me yet I'm a supporter of the C of E precisely because it doesn't demand blind, unswerving observance (though I do get worried about the evangelical lot). A bit of 'middle of the road' tends to do less harm to others who hold differing views, thinking of conflicts down the years. So, to me, having baby Abbie baptised is a good thing precisely because it doesn't actually sign her up to anything much. I can't be doing with the 'they're not real Christians if they don't go to church (like us)' brigade!

### THE FREEWILL AND RIGHTS OF THE CHILD

Q: "'Christening' is a disgusting imposition on the helpless to be included in a club with a hideous history without a 'buy or leave' -like being inducted into the mafia by proxy - the only uglier intrusion I suppose is circumcision. It's a despicable thing to do to a child. The nonsense that it is some essential sacrament without which you can't go to heaven has no basis in either the teachings of Christ or whatever John the Baptist was up to or anywhere in the bible.

R: "The Christian faith teaches that Jesus Christ is the incarnation of God - in other words, the expression in human form of all that God is. It is the duty of Christian parents to do everything they can to pass on their faith, and baptism, as early as practicable, is part of that. Whether the child in adult life carries on his or her Christian journey, is then for his or her free will to decide. Free will is not removed by baptism: it's a sacrament, not

a branding. We have the ability to understand what a sacrament is, if we want to.

In The Archers and real life contexts, if some residual faith survives on the part of two parents who are not necessarily heavily practising Christians, to the extent that they want their child baptised, that is a good thing in itself. The baptism the child receives is not downgraded because of any lack of degree of Christian practice or belief of their parents.

Q: "I was christened and taken to church while very young. The Churches know that if they are to perpetuate themselves they must impose their particular belief system on defenceless children.

R: Indeed -which is why the supposedly elective "sacrament" of confirmation takes place at between 12-14 when they like me are forced to comply by parents (as I was) and not by choice when they are truly free to decide - as adults.

R: "I not only don't object to children being introduced to religious teachings, I think it's probably impossible to understand the world that has been shaped by those teachings without such an introduction. My original point was to underline the difference between introducing inquisitive children to religion and solemnly enlisting babies into an organisation whose tenets and purposes they can't possibly understand. The infant at the centre of the baptism ritual is not being introduced to any teachings - it is being dedicated to a religion before it has any possibility of consenting to that dedication.

### CHRISTIANITY AS HERITAGE?

Q: "I was christened and sent to Sunday School every Sunday afternoon. I must say I really enjoyed it. We learned all the bible stories, which after all, even for those who don't believe, are part of one's education and general knowledge. And I just loved the hymn singing.

I also was taught all the old nursery rhymes by my mother, (which my

grandchildren don't seem to learn or read at all, too much tele, dvds, etc). I regard this childhood time as a valuable part of my general knowledge too. I am sad that my grandchildren won't know the traditional rhymes.

They certainly will be totally ignorant of the bible.

We also learned about the Royal Family, played with Coronation Coaches, had a commemorative mug for the coronation. My grandchildren will be told the Royal Family are outdated!

I am now an atheist and have no strong views on the Royal family. But I don't think my childhood religious teaching harmed or influenced me in any way, it was just part of a general education.

R: "I was also christened and sent to Sunday school (against my wishes). I think my parents shouldn't have done that - I learned nothing there which was of any use (that I didn't know already).

R: "It's true that Christianity is deeply intertwined with the culture of this and many other countries, and for that reason we have to familiarise young people with the tradition. But it's surely naive to imagine that this is all that's going on in baptism (I won't comment on Sunday School because it's not part of a RC upbringing so I don't really know what goes on there). If it's just part of our history, culture and general knowledge, why not just teach it that way the same as we do with other cultural subjects. Ceremonial dedication to a religious tradition, on the other hand, is less about introducing young people to that tradition than about perpetuating an orthodoxy that has little to sustain it other than tradition.

R: "So marriage is out as well I presume! And the traditional 'church' funeral?"

Your point is an interesting one, and will of course apply to all religions, every one has their traditions which have little to sustain them other than traditions."

R:" Perhaps I wasn't explicit enough. I meant the dedication of children

to something they can't possibly understand or consent to. Marriage is a ceremony consciously entered into by legally competent adults. I've heard the odd story about people being given religious funerals when they might not have wanted them but I think it's quite rare. If you're talking about non-believers consciously participating in ceremonies they don't believe in, all I can say is I wouldn't do it."

R: "Jesus said "go and make disciples, baptising them . ." I find it hard to believe that "disciple" means anything other than a person who has reached years of discretion and that all attempts to find infant baptism in the New Testament are special pleading from indirect "evidence". Baptism in the early Church required a conscious decision. Acts 5.14 and 8.12 speaks of "men and women" coming to faith and being baptised. There is no mention of children or babies.

Infant baptism became the norm at the end of the fourth century when Christianity became the undisputed religion of the Roman Empire. Unrepeatable baptism was a lynchpin of the system. Infant baptism settled a person's identity once and for all. After the zigzag consequences of Julian the Apostate, infant baptism of future rulers would give religious stability. The tradition continues in the England with heirs to the throne being baptised in infancy so there is no doubt that they belong to the C of E.

R: "Well, there is that problematic bit in John 3 "Unless a man be born again of water and the Holy Ghost, he can not enter into the kingdom of God." I suppose one could infer an unspoken exception for children, but the bare text doesn't excuse anyone.

I agree with you, though. If I were a Christian (I'm not, of course) I would be very sceptical about an entry procedure which didn't require the candidate to understand what they were joining; and doubly doubtful of a procedure that purported to introduce people who couldn't possibly understand what they were joining. When I took a more active interest in politics than I do now I was always rather surprised by the number of organisations who made 'members' without ever checking that the person who filled in the membership application and handed over a cheque for

their dues had the remotest idea what the party stood for!

**CONCLUSION:** *As I look through the message board dialogue I see one fundamental issue to be faced. It is simply this: Are we living in Christendom or post-Christendom? Are we content to be heritage based? - bishops in the Lords, subjects of her majesty, faithful to Hooker's ecclesiology or ought we to be adapting to living in a radically multicultural, multi-faith, multi-everything society in which every person has the right to choose the way that they live?*

*In 1970 the Church and State Report was published. The Memorandum of Dissent by Valerie Pitt needs re-reading in this time of "new expressions" and hopes of a "mission-shaped" Church.*

*Dare we accept Post-Christendom and emerge from our well-heeled but now down-at-heel ecclesiastical cocoon? DAVID PERRY*

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## BAPTISMAL INTEGRITY

Registered Charity 1067112

[www.baptism.org.uk](http://www.baptism.org.uk)

### Our Stance

A) Baptismal Integrity affirms the propriety, of baptizing the infants of practising Christian believers and also of deferring baptism until later years.

B) Baptismal Integrity affirms the relevance and value of the Service of Thanksgiving for the Gift of a Child.

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