

THE CHURCH AND BAPTISM: WHY WE DO WHAT WE DO

Baptism and Christianity are inseparable. The New Testament Scriptures elevate baptism's importance and emphasize its place. Indeed, the holy Scriptures make baptism obligatory upon all who would be followers of Jesus Christ. Before we explore more deeply its meaning and purpose, let us survey the Bible's witness to Christian baptism.

- ▶ It is an essential component of salvation in Jesus Christ. (Mark 16:16; Acts 2:38; 1 Peter 3:21)
- ▶ The great commission makes baptism inseparable from being a disciple and essential to the church's mission. (Matthew 28:16-20; see also John 4:1)
- ▶ Baptism is a constituent to Christian unity. (Ephesians 4:4-6; Galatians 3:3,4)
- ▶ This is a sacrament of identification with Jesus and his death and resurrection. (Romans 6:3,4; Galatians 3:3)
- ▶ Jesus himself was baptized, and this is a pivotal and formative Trinitarian event. (Matthew 3:13-17)
- ▶ Faith in Jesus Christ and baptism are fundamentally related. (Acts 8:12, 36-38; 16:14, 15, 31-33; 18:8)
- ▶ As a gift of divine grace, baptism is a means by which the Holy Spirit unites one with the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:13)
- ▶ Spiritual circumcision is effected by baptism. (Colossians 2:11,12)
- ▶ Baptism is linked to cleansing from sin and to new birth. (John 3:5; Acts 2:38; Ephesians 5:26,27; Titus 3:5)

This survey of the Bible's teaching should make it clear that all who would be or who are Christians ought to be baptized. Although churches debate and discuss the fine points of baptism's meaning, virtually no church group disagrees that baptism is necessary for the Christian. By means of his great commission in Matthew 28:19-20, Jesus has obligated the church to baptize and the disciple to be baptized "until the end of the age."

This being said, what is baptism's meaning and significance for the Church and individual believers? While entire volumes have been written in answering this question, in keeping with our purposes we can but summarize the historic thinking of the Church.

Baptism is the sacrament of initiation into union with Christ's death and resurrection and incorporation into His body, the Church. It signifies God's grace which forgives our sins, gives us new birth, seals us with the Holy Spirit, and unites us to the body. As a sign, the sacrament points

beyond itself to the grace of God in Jesus Christ. As a means of grace, it is the act of God upon the adherent through the agency of the Church using the sign of water.

In baptism the multifaceted scope of salvation is displayed. The “God side” of salvation is signified as the sacrament points to and conveys grace. By God’s doing, one is justified, regenerated, sanctified, and incorporated into the Church. Salvation is at God’s initiative by God’s means in Jesus Christ.

The “human side” is marked by response and reception. In matters of salvation, one cannot save oneself but is the beneficiary of God’s gracious working. As grace works upon and in an individual, he is brought to respond with repentance and faith. He then receives the gift of salvation by faith. Accordingly, one does not baptize himself, but must be baptized signifying that salvation is by grace and not by works.

The “Church side” of salvation has too often been trivialized in western, Protestant Christian thinking and practice. By commanding baptism, Jesus made the Christian community, the Church, spiritually essential to a person from the very outset of his/her spiritual life. The Church baptizes in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It is an agent of God’s work, not the author of the work. In its agency, the Church celebrates and welcomes the grace of God in a particular person even as it accepts and initiates that person into the covenant community.

“Covenant” is an important dimension of our baptismal understanding. God initiated many covenants in the past. Each had its place and its sign in the divine outworking of salvation. The New Covenant promised through the prophets and effected by Jesus Christ also has its covenant sign. As circumcision signified the Abrahamic covenant, marked the boundaries of the covenant community, and initiated one into it, so baptism functions in the Church. The Apostle writes, “And in him you were also circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, in the removal of the body of flesh by the circumcision of Christ, having been buried with him in baptism...” (Colossians 2:11,12).

To be baptized is to be marked with the sign of the New Covenant and to be initiated into the household of faith. Unlike the old sign, baptism marks both male and female as fully members of and participants in the covenant.

The fact of a covenant provides one reason for infants to be baptized. In the past, God granted the benefits and the sign of the covenant community to the children of parents who were themselves covenant members. As Colossians tells us that baptism is in continuity with and yet supercedes the prior sign, baptism is appropriate to the children. Additionally we note that while the New Testament does not explicitly mention the baptism of infants, we read of whole households being baptized. In the antecedent Jewish proselyte baptism, the rite included all members of the proselyte household regardless of age.

The concept of grace provides a third reason for baptizing children. Some object that children are not capable of faith. But baptism is not a sign of the adherent’s faith, neither is it dependent upon the developed rationality. It is rather a sacrament of God’s grace. Faith is present in the parents and in the church, and grace is present in that God has already begun a good work in the child. Baptism brings the infant into a new relationship with the Church, thus granting even more grace that this boy or girl may grow up and choose for him or herself to remain in the covenant into which he or she was baptized.

This does not negate the necessity of faith nor of choice by the child. But we raise our children as insiders to the covenant who hopefully will always trust Jesus as their Savior and will choose for themselves to stay in the covenant fold. Much like the way we raise our children as insiders in our families, we raise the children as insiders to the faith.

Having such an emphasis both in the text of the Bible and in the Church's theological thinking, two errors must be stridently avoided. First, baptism should not be relativized or made incidental to the Christian life. God has chosen to make it a necessary and an essential constituent to Christian Discipleship. To treat it as optional, secondary or tertiary is to resist the teaching of the Bible and to resist God's will.

The second error is to make baptism more than it is. It is a constituent of God's salvation, not the entire gift. Standing alone without God's forgiveness and regeneration and without the human response of repentance and faith, or separated from the covenant and the community of which it is a sign, baptism is a weak reed upon which to lean.

Someone has said, the New Testament knows nothing of an unbaptized Christian, which is true. One might add, neither does it know of a "simply baptized" Christian. Baptism holds the promise of a great and amazing grace, and it demands of us the entire cost of discipleship.

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