

The Meaning and Beauty of Christian Baptism

Introduction

Paul says in Ephesians chapter four that there is only “one baptism” (Eph. 4:5). Therefore, whenever we have the joy of witnessing a baptism, we’re witnessing the very baptism in which we’ve all shared as baptized believers. We’re not just witnessing the baptism of someone else; we’re witnessing all over again and from a different perspective the baptism that is our very own. In order that we might witness this baptism, then, with even more joy as the baptism that we all share in, I wanted to take some time this morning to be reminded of the true meaning and beauty of Christian baptism. As with all biblical truth, we haven’t fully understood baptism until we’ve seen its beauty. Let me go further. We haven’t fully understood God’s truth until we’ve assented from deep within us to its beauty. So when we ask about the importance and the meaning of baptism, what we’re really asking in the end is to see and understand its beauty.

I. The Importance of Baptism

We see the importance of baptism first of all in that God Himself sent John to baptize with water.

- John 1:33 — I myself did not know him, but he who **sent me to baptize** with water said to me...

Not only did God command John to baptize with water, but when Jesus came, our Lord and our Savior submitted Himself to this baptism.

- Matthew 3:14–17 — John would have prevented him, saying, “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?” But Jesus answered him, “**Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness.**” Then he consented. And when Jesus was baptized, immediately he went up from the water, and behold, the heavens were opened to him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming to rest on him; and behold, a voice from heaven said, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.”

There’s so much happening in this passage that we can’t talk about now because this is a topical and not an expositional sermon! But the main thing for us to marvel at here is that water baptism was an *essential, necessary* part of Jesus’ identification with sinners. Isaiah said that the Messiah would be “numbered *with* the transgressors” (53:12; cf. Lk. 22:37), and so Matthew tells us that without Jesus’ water baptism, this righteous will of God would have remained unfulfilled. We could say, then, that it’s in my baptism that I see myself as the transgressor that Jesus came to be numbered with. It’s in our baptism that we see visibly how the work of Christ, both in His life and in His death, was truly all for us and on our behalf. Finally, it’s specifically at this water baptism of Jesus that God anointed Him with the Holy Spirit and announced His good pleasure with His Son – and therefore His good pleasure with all His saving work that He was about to accomplish. Certainly, the baptism of Jesus has played a huge role in the history of redemption.

The next thing we see with regard to the importance of baptism is that Jesus (through His disciples) baptized those who followed after Him.

- John 3:22 (cf. 4:1-3) – After this Jesus and his disciples went into the Judean countryside, and he remained there with them and was baptizing.

And finally, before he ascended into heaven, our Lord and King Himself specifically commanded the church to baptize.

- Matthew 28:18-20 – And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

Baptism was given to us by our King – Jesus Christ Himself. At the end of the day, this is *why* we baptize and are baptized – because this is Christ’s clear command! But **why** would Jesus include baptism even in the Great Commission? **Why** would Jesus command that baptism be performed in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit? What is the real *meaning* of baptism?

II. The Meaning of Baptism – Sign of Cleansing from Sin

In the Old Testament, water was used as a means of ritual purification from various kinds of ritual defilement and uncleanness.

- Numbers 19:9-13 (cf. Lev. 14:8-9; 15:13; Num. 8:5-7; 19:19; Heb. 9:13) – The ashes of the heifer... shall be kept for the water for impurity for the congregation of the people of Israel; it is a sin offering... Whoever touches the dead body of any person shall be unclean seven days. He shall cleanse himself with the water on the third day and on the seventh day, and so be clean.

It was in light of this background of an *outward* cleansing from ritual defilement that God used the physical element of water to picture a deeper, *spiritual* cleansing of the heart.

- Ezekiel 36:25-27 (cf. Ps. 51:7) – I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules.

And now we come to the New Testament and read in John chapter three:

- John 3:25-26 (cf. verses 22-23) – A discussion arose between some of John’s disciples and a Jew over *purification*. And they came to John and said to him, “Rabbi, he who was with you across the Jordan, to whom you bore witness—look, he is *baptizing*, and all are going to him.”

It would seem that when John began baptizing in the wilderness, his baptism was understood in light of the Old Testament rituals of water purification, and so also in light of the “clean water”

that God had said in Ezekiel He would sprinkle on His people in order to radically change and cleanse their hearts. And yet we know that the baptism of John was still pointing the people forward to a reality that hadn't yet arrived. Today, under the New Covenant, the true reality is here in all its fullness, and even now this inward cleansing of our hearts is still sometimes described with the Old Testament imagery of washing with water in fulfillment of Ezekiel's prophecy.

- Hebrews 10:22 (cf. Eph. 5:26) – Let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.
- John 3:5 (cf. Titus 3:5-6) — Jesus answered, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.

What a glorious miracle it is to be so completely washed and cleansed that we've actually been made brand new people, born from above. And what a miracle it is to be so assured of this washing and cleansing that we can now draw near to God no longer with hearts that condemn us (1 Jn. 3:19-21), but with “a true heart in full assurance of faith.” It's this miracle that unveils for us the true power and beauty of our baptism. As Christians, the water of baptism is meant to be seen as an outward and visible sign signifying to us this inward and invisible reality of the *washing away of our sins* by the precious blood of Christ.

- Acts 22:12-16 – Ananias... said to me, “Brother Saul... why do you wait? Rise and be baptized and wash away your sins, calling on his name.”

We tend to spend most of our time trying to explain what Ananias didn't mean here. But then I wonder if we miss the true beauty of what he *did* mean. The Apostle Peter writes:

- 1 Peter 3:21 – Baptism... now saves you, not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Peter is clear that the literal waters of baptism do not magically save us. But Peter *is* saying that we're saved by what the waters of baptism *signify*. Baptism is an outward and visible sign signifying to us the inward and invisible reality of the **washing away of our sins** by the precious blood of Christ. So wonderful is the connection here that Peter actually refers to the inward reality by means of the outward sign – “Baptism,” he says, “now saves you”!

III. The Meaning of Baptism – Sign of Union with Christ

But if this wasn't already enough, there's more. Christian baptism is a powerful sign of the believers life-giving and fruit-producing **union with Christ**.

- Romans 6:3-4 (cf. Col. 2:11-12; Gal. 3:27) – Do you not know that all of us who have been **baptized into Christ Jesus** were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.

When Paul talks about being baptized *into* Christ Jesus, he's once again using water baptism as the visible sign of an invisible reality. As Christians, our union with Christ isn't a mystical experience, but rather a theological reality. It's from our union with Christ—our being “in Him”—that all the blessings of salvation are unceasingly flowing to us.

- Ephesians 1:3 — Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us **in Christ** with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places.

Paul says that so complete and so real is our union with Christ that we've even died with Him to sin and been raised up with him in His resurrection to a new life that shares even now in His resurrection life and power.

- Romans 6:6–7, 10–11 — We know that our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin. For one who has died has been set free from sin... For the death he died he died to sin, once for all, but the life he lives he lives to God. So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.

But how is it that we see in our baptism the sign of our union with Christ in His death, burial and resurrection? In the Old Testament, water wasn't just a symbol of cleansing. The waters of the sea were also a symbol of chaos, and death, and destruction (cf. Exod. 15:8, 10, 19; Ps. 18:16; 32:6; 69:1-2, 14; 144:7). So let's go back again and read in 1 Peter:

- 1 Peter 3:20-21 — [Christ was] put to death in the flesh but made alive in the Spirit, in which he also went and proclaimed to the spirits in prison, because they formerly did not obey, when God's patience waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was being prepared, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were saved through water. This [water] (or baptism, which corresponds to it) now saves you...

Look what Peter says! He says that the water of the flood is now also *our* salvation just like it was Noah's. Well, not technically. Actually, what saves us today is the water of baptism which Peter says *corresponds* to the water of the flood. Now what does the water of baptism have to do with the water of the flood? In the water of baptism and our immersion in it, we have a picture of our passing with Christ safely through death and judgment and all the wrath of God poured out—even dying ourselves with Christ only so that we might be raised with Him to a wholly new existence, no longer only “in the flesh” but sharing even now ourselves in the power and the glory of His life “in the Spirit.” Therefore, Peter says, just like Noah we also are saved through water. Our immersion in the waters of baptism and then our being raised up out of those same waters is an outward and visible sign signifying to us the inward and invisible reality of our union with Christ in *His* passage *through* death *into* life. And so intimate is this connection that Paul actually refers to the inward reality by means of the outward sign – We have been “buried with [Christ],” he says, “*by baptism* into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.”

IV. The Meaning of Baptism – Sign of Membership in God's Covenant People

Finally, and very much built on the things we've seen so far, baptism is the visible sign of our membership in the church of Jesus Christ.

- Acts 2:41 – So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls.

Three thousand souls were added to *what*? They were “added to the Lord” (cf. Acts 5:14; 11:24), Luke says, by being added to His church – to the body of Christ.

- Ephesians 4:4-5 – There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call—one Lord, one faith, one baptism.

Countless multitudes of Christians have been baptized, but there's only *one* baptism! And this one water baptism of which we have all partaken signifies the fact that by the inward baptism of the Spirit, we're individually members of the one body of Christ – the church.*

- 1 Corinthians 12:13 – For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit.

V. The role of Baptism in our Salvation

We see, then, in baptism the washing away of our sins, our union with Christ in His death and resurrection, and our membership in the church, which is Christ's body. But is baptism just a bare symbol and picture of these things? If so, then what are we to make of the language of Scripture? “Repent and be baptized... for the forgiveness of your sins.” “Rise and be baptized and wash away your sins.” “Baptism now saves you.” We have been “buried with him *by baptism* into death” We have been added to the church and made partakers of the one body of Christ in our one baptism. What is the meaning of this kind of language?

The *key* here is to see that baptism signifies not primarily what we have done, but primarily and first of all what God has done. We don't baptize ourselves. We submit ourselves to baptism – a baptism which is administered in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Baptism is not the sign of our work, but the sign of God's sovereign, saving work in us. Therefore, it's in our baptism that God speaks to us and says: ***I have saved you***. I have **cleansed** your heart from sin just as surely as your body has been cleansed by these baptismal waters. I have **united** you with Christ in His death and resurrection just as surely as you have passed safely through these baptismal waters. I have joined you to My **church** just as surely as you have partaken in this one baptism of all believers.

We don't compel God to speak. We simply acknowledge that God speaks in our baptism *by faith* in *His* word and promise. We remember that *Jesus* is the one who *commanded* us to baptize *in the name of* the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, and who immediately afterwards said to us: “And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

* It is here that we see that baptism is only legitimately administered under the authority of the local church and preferably within the context of the local church (Mat. 28:18-20; Eph. 2:20).

Do you see what a beautiful gift is the gift of baptism! When we were saved we didn't *see* our sins washed away, we didn't *see* ourselves united with Christ, and we didn't *see* ourselves transferred from Satan's kingdom into the church of Christ. But the fact that these are invisible realities doesn't make them any less *real*! And so God in His mercy, and kindness, and grace, has bestowed upon us a visible, physical sign of the awesome spiritual realities accomplished in our salvation.

The gospel and baptism are *not* the same thing. Paul writes:

➤ 1 Corinthians 1:17 – Christ did not send me to baptize but to preach the gospel.

Salvation and baptism are not *at all* the same thing. Jesus assured the thief on the cross (who had never been baptized): “today, you shall be with me in paradise” (Luke 23:43). Simon the magician was baptized, but later found to be still in “the gall of bitterness and in the bondage of iniquity” (Acts 8:13, 23). This is a warning to any who assume their salvation on the basis of their baptism—or for that matter on the basis of having prayed a “sinner’s prayer.” Apart from a true repentance and a true calling on the name of the Lord and crying out to Him for salvation, baptism will always remain nothing more than an empty ritual – and yet also an empty ritual that brings greater condemnation. I think of the words of the writer of Hebrews:

➤ Hebrews 6:4–8 — It is impossible, in the case of those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, and have shared in the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come, and then have fallen away, to restore them again to repentance, since they are crucifying once again the Son of God to their own harm and holding him up to contempt. For land that has drunk the rain that often falls on it, and produces a crop useful to those for whose sake it is cultivated, receives a blessing from God. But if it bears thorns and thistles, it is worthless and near to being cursed, and its end is to be burned.

This is not to say that there is no hope of salvation for all those who might appear to have denied their baptism. On the contrary! This is a warning and an exhortation to repentance and faith. “Brothers, what shall we do?” the Jewish people asked the Apostles. Peter said to them, “**Repent** and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins.”

➤ Acts 22:12-16 – Ananias... said to [Saul], “Brother Saul... why do you wait? Rise and be baptized and wash away your sins, **calling on his name.**”

In baptism, then, we hear God assuring us that our salvation is all a work of His grace from beginning to end – through our repentance and faith. When we submit ourselves to Christian baptism, we also testify visibly to our repentance from sin and our faith in Jesus Christ as our only Savior and Lord. Here's a warning against prematurely baptizing our children when we know how easy it can be for children to make a profession of faith simply on the basis of their parents' faith. Every profession of faith must be carefully “tested” – and perhaps this is in some sense uniquely true for children. There must be evidence of an awareness of sin and true repentance and a true calling upon the name of the Lord – though we can never infallibly see anyone's heart. And there must be an ability to confess these things and the truth of the Gospel

with one's own mouth (Rom. 10:9-10). As my children have at times requested baptism before it has seemed "time," I've simply encouraged them to keep their eyes fixed on Jesus, trusting in Him. I've given them the assurance of Scripture (not my assurance lest they put their confidence in my word) that if they have true repentance and are trusting in Christ, then God says they're His children and that he has given to them His salvation. I assure them that baptism is not the Gospel. Baptism is not salvation. The baptism of our children is a serious thing that must be handled with caution and care. And yet(!), as soon as it seems there is truly a "mature" and credible expression of repentance and saving faith coupled with an expressed desire to be baptized, then we see from the very meaning of baptism that baptism must certainly not be delayed! It seems to me safe to say that the place many have given to "the sinner's prayer" is given in the Bible to baptism. So instead of saying "Repent and 'pray this prayer' for the forgiveness of your sins" or "Believe and 'repeat after me' for the forgiveness of your sins", it would be better for us to learn how we can say with the Apostle Peter and with Ananias: "Repent and be baptized and wash away your sins, calling on His name."

Conclusion

As we submit ourselves to baptism in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, we hear God speaking these gracious words: I have washed you with clean water and cleansed you from all your sins. I have placed you in the closest and most intimate union with Christ so that in Him and with Him you may pass through the waters of death into a new and eternal life. I have joined you to my covenant people, the body of Christ. I have done it. I have saved you. What a wonderful assurance, and hope, and joy is given to all who have shared in this baptism in true repentance and saving faith!