

A Brief Theology of Baptism

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Preface

Baptism is one of the two sacraments (the other being the Lord's Supper/Communion) celebrated by Protestant churches throughout the world. The word "sacrament" literally means "to make sacred" and conveys the idea that God's grace is somehow displayed and conveyed to people whenever the outward acts of Baptism and Communion are done by the church.

Because we believe that the act of Baptism is one of the sacred acts of the church handed down to us by the Lord Jesus Himself, we take this task very seriously. The following is a brief outline of why, how and when we baptize. It is our hope that as you prayerfully read through this study guide, God will prepare your heart and mind to receive the abundant riches of the grace that is in Christ Jesus through the symbolic, sacramental rite of Holy Baptism.

God bless you as you read on!

In Christ,

Pastor Grant Clay

Why do we Baptize?

Prior to His ascension back to the right hand side of God's throne, the Lord Jesus gave His the Twelve Apostles a very special mission:

“Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. And when they saw him they worshiped him, but some doubted. 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.” – Matthew 28:16-20

The Apostles sought to obey this command by preaching the gospel and planting churches wherever they went (Acts 1:8). As people came to faith in Jesus Christ, the Apostles and church leaders would baptize them in the name of Jesus Christ (or the Holy Trinity as the later tradition teaches us). An example of this is the Apostle Peter in Acts 2, who after completing his sermon was confronted with a large crowd crying out to him saying: “What shall we do to be saved?” Peter answered by saying:

“Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself.” And with many other words he bore witness and continued to exhort them, saying, “Save yourselves from this crooked generation.” So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls. – Acts 2:38-41

Another example is found in Acts 16 when the Apostle Paul and Silas encountered the Philippian jailor:

Then he brought them out and said, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?” And they said, “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household.” And they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house. And he took them the same hour of the night and washed their wounds; and he was baptized at once, he and all his family. Then he brought them up into his house and set food before them. And he rejoiced along with his entire household that he had believed in God. – Acts 16:30-34

Therefore, in accordance with the teachings of Jesus and the pattern of the early church, we continue to baptize people as a means of making disciples and growing the church.

How do we Baptize?

Following the example of both John the Baptist and Jesus Himself, baptism was traditionally done by immersing believers in a large pool of water. However, as the church continued to grow and spread throughout the world large bodies of water were not always readily available. Therefore some traditions will sprinkle instead of dunk. Obviously with young infant children of believers, sprinkling is the only option for

Baptism. Whether one is sprinkled or dunked, the important thing is that we continue in obedience to the commands of Jesus and properly administer the sacraments of the church.

What does Baptism mean?

The meaning of Baptism can be briefly summarized in three ways:

- a) Symbolic dying & rising with Jesus Christ
- b) Symbolic cleansing & washing away of our sins
- c) Public entrance into & membership of the church of Jesus Christ

We will briefly examine each of these in turn:

Symbolic dying & rising with Jesus Christ

One of the key themes that drives the Apostle's understanding of the Christian life is being united to Jesus Christ through a spiritual conversion (which Jesus calls being born again in John 3). A spiritual conversion occurs when God's Holy Spirit opens our heart and mind to the gospel, enabling us to believe and confess Jesus Christ as Lord (John 6:65; Acts 16:14; Rom. 10:9-10; Eph. 2:8-9). Some traditions refer to spiritual conversion as a baptism in the Holy Spirit. Either way, once the Spirit of the living God dwells in our hearts through faith in Jesus Christ, we are considered converted or, as the Apostles teach us, in Christ. The act of Baptism then becomes a symbol of our participation in the death (we go down into the water the same way Jesus descended into the grave) and resurrection (we come up from the water just as Jesus came up from the grave) of Jesus Christ. The Apostle Paul describes this in Romans 6:

“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” – Rom. 6:3-4

And again in Colossians 2:

“In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead.” – Col. 2:3-4

Therefore, Baptism outwardly symbolizes the inward reality that we have died to our old self and have been raised to a new life with God.

Symbolic cleansing & washing away of our sins

Traditional Roman Catholic theology teaches that Baptism literally cleanses one from vestiges of original sin. For Catholics, there is real power in the water used by the Priest (which is why many people throughout history demanded to be baptized while on their death beds---the fear of facing God's judgment without first having been "cleansed" from their sins). While there are various interpretations among the many Protestant denominations of what the waters of Baptism mean, there is a general consensus that genuine faith in Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit, not the waters of Baptism, truly cleanses one from the corruption of sin. However, Baptism can be viewed as a symbol of the cleansing power of God who removes from us the stain of sin through Jesus Christ. Therefore, the Apostle Paul writes in Titus 3:

"But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that being justified by his grace we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life" – Titus 3:4-7

In like manner, the writer of Hebrews tells us:

"Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, 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" – Hebrews 10:19-22

Therefore, the literal "bath" of Baptism symbolizes the actual inward cleansing given to us through by God through Christ in the Gospel.

Public entrance into & membership of the church of Jesus Christ

The final mark of Baptism is public entrance into the church of Jesus Christ. Most local churches have a "membership process" in which people may join their particular church. While we highly value membership in the local church, the *primary* membership process that God requires of us is through Baptism. As we saw in the great commission Jesus gave the Apostles in Matthew 28, the way that He requires the church to make disciples is through the activities of *Baptism* and *teaching*. Therefore, we become disciples of Jesus and members of His universal church by being publicly baptized and obeying His teachings.

A Marriage Analogy

Perhaps an analogy would be helpful in making this point. When two young people fall in love, the typical way to finalize their relationship is by going through a public ceremony called a wedding. In some cases, the couple may have professed their love and commitment to each other prior to actually being married! However, it is not until they go through the *public ceremony* of a wedding that the rest of society recognizes them as

truly *married*. Marriage then is simply an *outward act of commitment* that reflects the *inward reality* of the love the couple has for one another.

Similarly, a professing Christian shows himself or herself to be a true member of Christ's body through the rite of baptism. Would it not be rather ridiculous for the young couple mentioned above to avoid getting married by arguing, "We don't need a wedding because we already married in our hearts?" In the same way, it would be nonsensical for Christians to avoid Baptism by arguing, "I am already a Christian in my heart, why should I get baptized?" Baptism and obeying the teachings of Jesus is the way we demonstrate the validity of our professed faith in God.

One last remark on this point: in the same way that a marriage commits and obligates us to one life partner---so Baptism commits and obligates us to Jesus Christ. Baptism is God's way of stamping and claiming us as His own; it is like wearing a badge saying that we are now officially "Christ's property".

Therefore, know that your Baptism is something that God takes *very* seriously. Do not enter the waters of Baptism lightly! Know that God will hold you to the vows you make on that day---and so will the church! On the flipside, "wear your Baptism" with great joy and honor. You belong to Jesus Christ! All the promises given in the Bible apply to you and the church you belong to. Therefore, go out and serve your God joyfully and live your life to His glory! Your Baptism gives you the unique identity of being one of God's special children (Rom. 8:31-39)

When do we Baptize?

The Protestant church has unfortunately had to live with deep divisions concerning *who* and *when* the church should baptize. While the Catholic and Orthodox wings of the church all practice the baptism of infants, the Protestant world is very mixed in its approach to infants and children

The two polarizing positions in Protestantism can be summarized as thus:

Infant Baptism

Infant Baptism teaches that believing (and only believing!) parents may present their children before God and the church for Baptism. They do so with the understanding that salvation is not accomplished through our own works or efforts, but is a gracious gift of God. Therefore, Baptism is the continuation of what circumcision was in the Old Testament. In the same way that Jewish parents were taught to identify their sons as members of Israel through circumcision, so believing parents dedicate their children to God by baptizing and raising them into the faith under the guidance of the church. While these parents do not believe that Baptism "saves their children", they trust in the promises that God makes to believing parents to bless their off-spring by bringing salvation to the next generation (Acts 2:39). Infant Baptism therefore anticipates and looks forward to the future grace of God.

Believer Baptism

Believer Baptism, on the other hand, teaches that only those who have verbally professed faith in Christ and shown evidences of genuine conversion may be presented for Baptism. This can include children of a young age or someone who comes to faith late in life. Either way, the only requirement is a prior experience of God's grace (read the story of Philip the Evangelist and the Ethiopian in Acts 8:26-40). Therefore, infants of believing parents are called to dedicate their children to God and promise to raise them in the faith in the hopes that one day their children will profess faith in Christ and be truly baptized. Believer Baptism looks back and celebrates the prior grace of God shown through their children's conversion.

Infant Dedication

Many parents who are biblically convinced that Believers Baptism is the proper response to God's grace will have their infant children "dedicated" to God. Infant Dedication does not guarantee salvation but is rather an expression of the parents' commitment to raise their children as "catechumens" (a term the early church used for those whom were not yet converted but were undergoing a process of being "catechized" [taught] the Christian faith). Infant Dedication, like Infant Baptism, presupposes that the parents are committed to their own faith, and to raising their children in the nurture and care of the church.

The Covenant Church's view

The Evangelical Covenant Church is unique as a denomination because it requires its licensed clergy to practice both Infant and Believer Baptism despite whatever personal convictions each pastor may have. For example, if a couple approached a local Covenant pastor about baptizing their newborn infant, that pastor could not dissuade them from doing so on the grounds that such a thing is "unbiblical". Rather, that pastor would be responsible to counsel and encourage that church family about their duties towards helping that infant grow into their faith by baptizing him or her in front of the church.

Therefore, it is crucial that you as a parent understand the biblical and theological foundations of Baptism and the various views on it so to enable you to make an informed decision.

Commitment to Christian parenting

Because of our high view of Baptism (whether for infants or professing believers), we *require* that parents who are choosing to either dedicate or baptize their children have a personal faith in Jesus Christ and be active participants of our church family. While the Covenant church is open to both modes of Baptism, we are *not open* to simply performing rituals for the sake of performing rituals. Therefore we take the high calling

of Christian parenting *very* seriously and expect that all and any parent who either baptizes or dedicates their children will be committed to attending weekly worship, active in Home Groups and the overall ministry and worship of the church.

Common Questions about Baptism

What about Re-Baptism?

We believe the New Testament teaches that there is one God, one faith, one Baptism (1 Cor. 11). Therefore we do not re-baptize believers. Instead, we encourage those previously baptized to re-affirm their vows through a process of sprinkling and re-committing themselves to God. However, in such cases when persons who have previously gone through some kind of baptismal ritual (perhaps as an infant or young child) and through prayer and study, come to the conviction that what they experienced was not true Baptism, then we would be glad to consider this their first baptism according to New Testament standards. In these cases, we do not push people in either direction (Baptism vs. re-affirmation of previous Baptism). Instead, we ask each individual to prayerfully study the issue and act in accordance with their conscience and personal convictions.

How old should children be before you can know for sure that their profession of faith is genuine?

Every child is unique and each case will be different depending on their age, experience and spiritual maturity. The key thing as a parent will be making sure that the child himself understands what it means to be a Christian and the significance of what Baptism means. Therefore, you as a parent will need to spend time talking with your child and discern with them (and a pastor, if needs be) on whether or not their profession of faith is genuine.

When should children partake in the Lord's Supper (Communion)?

Communion is open to all people who have professed faith in Jesus Christ and have been (ideally) baptized in His name. While we would not turn away a genuine believer from the Lord's Table, our preference would be that we serve baptized believers walking in faith and repentance towards Jesus Christ. Therefore, as a parent you will need to spend time talking with your children and discern with them whether or not they fully understand the significance of Communion and are ready to partake of the elements.

What if my child professes faith and is baptized at an early age and then later falls away in their teen or early adult years? Does their baptismal experience still count?

Our hope is as we disciple and lead our children to faith, baptize and teach them, that they will grow into fully devoted followers of Jesus Christ. However, there are times and seasons of life in which young people may turn away from their parents' faith. When such times occur, all we can do is pray and remind them of their baptism, the vows they

made and trust God to be merciful and that He will turn their hearts back to Himself. Part of Baptism is trusting that God will hold up His end as wellí because ultimately none of us stay in our walk with God by our own power, but rather His enabling grace.

Conclusion

The sacrament of Baptism is one of God's primary ways of conveying His amazing grace to His church. Being baptized is an exhilarating experience and provides the church with a concrete, visible way to not only make disciples as Jesus commanded in Matthew 28, but to also celebrate the wonderful gospel He has commissioned us to preach.