

The Sign and Seal of Christian Baptism

Introduction

This morning, we're going to witness the baptism of _____. That's going to be a wonderful thing and we'll rejoice with him. But I want to remind us that in witnessing _____ baptism, we're also witnessing in a very real sense our own baptism. Paul says in Ephesians chapter four that there is only "one baptism" (Eph. 4:5). Therefore, whenever we witness a baptism, we're witnessing the very baptism in which we've all shared as baptized believers. We're witnessing all over again and from a different perspective our own baptism. So this morning, I want to take some time to remind us of the true meaning and beauty of baptism.

Compared to the Old Covenant, with all of its outward symbols and types, we could say that the New Covenant is far more "inward." This isn't to say that under the Old Covenant the heart didn't matter, but the Mosaic Covenant itself was external and "typological"; it pointed to the need for an inward transformation, but was not designed or intended to bring that transformation about. How, then, were the believers who lived under the Old Covenant saved? They were saved by faith, through grace alone, the same as we are. They were saved as the inward provisions of the New Covenant in Christ's blood were proleptically applied to them (proleptic: "the representation or assumption of a future act or development as if presently existing or accomplished"). But once the New Covenant was actually inaugurated through Christ's death and resurrection, all the outward symbols and types associated with the Old Covenant were rendered obsolete.

- John 4:21, 23 (cf. Phil. 3:2-3) — Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe Me, an hour is coming when neither in this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father... But an hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for such people the Father seeks to be His worshipers."

The New Covenant is not something outward or typological, but rather the inward substance to which the outward and typological Old Covenant was pointing. And yet for all this, there are two outward and physical ordinances (or sacraments) that are fundamental—and even essential—to our full participation in the blessings of the New Covenant. This is a reality that in our hyper-"spiritualized" and hyper-individualized Christianity, we're in constant, grave danger of minimizing. Not only are the ordinances of baptism and the Lord's supper outward, physical "rituals" (contra: "hyper-spiritualized") but they also assume ecclesiastical (church) authority (contra: "hyper-individualized"). We all need to be aware of how our unique cultural context has deadened us to the true meaning and significance of baptism and the Lord's Supper.

I. The Importance of Baptism

We're confronted with the essential importance of baptism first of all when God Himself sent John to baptize with water in preparation for the Messiah and the Messiah's kingdom.

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

- Luke 7:30 — The Pharisees and the scholars of the Law **rejected God’s purpose for themselves, not having been baptized by John.**

John’s baptism was preparatory. Because it was administered prior to Christ’s death and resurrection and the sending of the Holy Spirit, it couldn’t be administered in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit (cf. Acts 19:1-6; Mat. 28:18-20). It couldn’t yet carry all the weight of meaning that Christian baptism would carry. And yet John’s baptism is still intimately connected to Christian baptism as it’s forerunner and carried much of the same meaning.

- Mark 1:4 — John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

Not only did God command John to baptize with water, but it was even His will that Jesus should submit 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.”

What we see here is that water baptism was an essential, necessary part of Jesus’ identification with sinners—which helps us to see how essential and necessary baptism must be for the sinners themselves. Isaiah said that the Messiah would be “numbered with the transgressors” (53:12), 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 my baptism that I see visibly how the work of Christ, both in His life and in His death, was truly for me and on my 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. The water baptism of Jesus has played an exceedingly important 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, Jesus commanded the church to baptize with water.

- 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 the church by our King – Jesus Christ Himself. At the end of the day, this is why we baptize and are baptized – because it’s Christ’s clear command! But why would Jesus include baptism even as an essential, fundamental aspect of the Great Commission? Why does Jesus sanctify baptism by commanding that it be performed in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit? What is the real meaning and significance of baptism?

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

Under the typological Old Covenant, 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... 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 represent the inward 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.

We read in the New Testament 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 finally arrived.

Today, under the New Covenant, the true reality is here in 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 miracle it is to be so completely washed and cleansed that we’ve actually been made brand new people, born from above (or, born again). And what a miracle it is to be so completely washed and cleansed that we can 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 meaning and significance of our baptism.

The water of baptism is 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. It can no longer be a “type” because the substance is here. Rather than being a type pointing forward, baptism with water is now a sign—and even a seal—of that which is already accomplished.

- Acts 22:16 – 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 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*. And so intimate is the connection here that Peter refers to the inward reality by means of the outward sign – “Baptism,” he says, “now saves you”! Peter can do this because the water of baptism—and our full immersion in that water—is a divinely given and a divinely instituted sign.

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

Christian baptism is also a sign and seal of our vital—living—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 outward sign of an inward reality. As Christians, our union with Christ isn’t a mystical experience, but it is a theological reality—and mystery. 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 with him to a new life that shares even now in the power of His resurrection.

- 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? Do the waters of baptism symbolize Christ, so that being immersed in the water represents being immersed in Christ? This seems to lack any biblical warrant. Do the waters of baptism symbolize the earth in which a person is buried so that our immersion represents our burial and our being raised out of the water represents our being raised from death to life? This is closer to the mark. And yet there still doesn't seem to be biblical warrant for saying that the waters of baptism represent the earth in which a person is buried. As it happens, in the Old Testament water wasn't just a symbol of cleansing. The waters of the sea were a symbol of chaos, and destruction, and death, and so also of divine judgment (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 [which corresponds to the waters of Noah's flood]) **now saves you...**

What Peter's saying is that the waters of the flood are a type of the waters of baptism. Noah and his family passed through the waters of God's judgment safe in the ark and so they were saved "through water." Likewise, in this 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 into a new life lived in the power of the Spirit. So Peter can say that we, too, are saved through water. Baptism is the outward sign of the inward and invisible reality of our union with Christ in His own passage through death (through the waters of God's judgment), into life. So intimate is the connection here that Paul 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." Paul can do this because the waters of baptism—and our passing safely through those waters of judgment—are a divinely given and a divinely instituted sign.

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

Finally, baptism is the visible sign of our membership in the church of Jesus Christ.

- Acts 2:41 – Those who received [Peter’s] word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls.

Three thousand souls were “added to the Lord” (cf. Acts 5:14; 11:24), Luke says, by being added to His church—to the body of Christ—through baptism.

- 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*.

The one water baptism of which we have all partaken represents the fact that we’re all members of the one body of Christ—the church, and therefore individually members one of another (Rom. 12:5).

- 1 Corinthians 12:13 – 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 our cleansing from sin, 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 what we have done or what we are saying, but what God has done and what God is saying. This is what helps us to see the essentially “sacramental” character of baptism. I’m using the word “sacrament” in the sense of a holy and sacred visible sign and seal of an inward saving grace. If baptism was primarily about a “horizontal” public confession or proclamation of our faith, then how could we make sense of the Ethiopian eunuch’s baptism with only one witness (Philip, whom he would probably never see again) alongside a desert road (Acts 8:26-39)? Baptism represents not our initiative, but God’s initiative; not our word, but God’s word; not our action, but God’s action. This, again, is what helps us to see the essentially sacramental character of baptism, which is administered in the holy name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. And this also is what helps us to see why baptism is appropriate in the vertical and divinely initiated dialogue of external temple worship.

It’s in and through our baptism that God speaks to us and says: *I have saved you. I have cleansed your heart from sin just as surely as you’ve been immersed in these cleansing baptismal waters. I have united you with Christ in His death and resurrection just as surely as you’ve passed safely through these baptismal waters of death and judgment. 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 it is God who is speaking in our baptism by faith in His word and promise.*

And so we see what a wonderful gift baptism is, and how essential it is, not to our justification(!), but to our full participation in the blessings of the New Covenant. It's this wonderful reality that warns us of the peril of receiving baptism and then falling away from this baptism in unbelief. Better never to have received the sacramental sign of baptism than to receive this sign and fall away (cf. Heb. 6:4-8; 2 Pet. 2:20-21). This is why we need to be especially careful when it comes to the baptism of our young children. On the other hand, isn't it far better to receive the sacramental sign of baptism *and continue in the faith* than to reject God's salvation and remain under condemnation (cf. Lk. 7:30)?

We know that the gospel and baptism are not the same thing.

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

Jesus assured the thief on the cross (who had never been baptized): “today, you shall be with me in paradise” (Luke 23:43). This explains how we can encourage our children in saving faith, even as we have them wait, at times, to be baptized. On the other hand, 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 against assuming our salvation on the basis of our baptism—or for that matter on the basis of having prayed a “sinner’s prayer.” There’s nothing “magical” about either. Still, it seems 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 to say with the Apostle Peter and with Ananias: “Repent and be baptized for the forgiveness of your sins... Repent and be baptized and wash away your sins, calling on His name” (Acts 2:37-38; 22:12-16; cf. Rom. 10:9-10); or even: Repent and be buried with Christ by baptism into death, in order that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, you too might walk in newness of life (Rom. 6:4).*

Conclusion

As we submit ourselves to receive the sign and seal of baptism in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, by faith we hear—and even see—God speaking these words to us: *I have saved you; I have done it (sign). You are mine (seal).* What a wonderful and joyful assurance is given to all who have shared in this baptism in true repentance and saving faith!

* Peter and Ananias could both assume that their hearers were literate in the Old Testament Scriptures. Today, baptism may need to follow a brief period of instruction in the Christian faith.