

The Two Baptisms: Water and Spiritual

According to the apostle, baptism is the key step in the sinner's experience of redemption (Rom. 6:3-4). Before baptism, he is in Adam; after baptism, he is in Christ. But, as I have said, the question is, which baptism are we talking about?¹

First there is water baptism, and then there is spiritual baptism. As John the Baptist declared:

I baptise you with water for repentance. But after me will come one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not fit to carry. He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor, gathering his wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire (Matt. 3:11-12).

And again:

I baptise with water... but among you stands one you do not know. He is the one who comes after me, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie... Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world! This is the one I meant when I said: 'A man who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me'. I myself did not know him, but the reason I came baptising with water was that he might be revealed to Israel... I saw the Spirit come down from heaven as a dove and remain on him. I would not have known him, except that the one who sent me to baptise with water told me: 'The man on

¹ Which baptism? Isn't there only one baptism? After all, as the apostle told the Ephesians: 'There is... one baptism' (Eph. 4:4-5). If the apostle meant water baptism, then these verses rule out infant baptism, do they not? How and why? All agree that the baptism of the New Testament was the baptism of believers by immersion. Even the most fervent infant-baptiser must agree that believers were baptised by immersion in the New Testament. So if Eph. 4 means that there is only one water baptism – and there is – then infant baptism cannot possibly be right, can it? But do the verses mean that there is only one spiritual baptism? The context would certainly seem to favour the thought of spiritual baptism. See D.Martyn Lloyd-Jones: *Knowing the Times...*, The Banner of Truth Trust, Edinburgh, 1989, p138.

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whom you see the Spirit come down and remain is he who will baptise with the Holy Spirit'. I have seen and I testify that this is the Son of God (John 1:26-27,29-34).

And just before Pentecost, Jesus addressed his disciples thus:

John baptised with water, but in a few days you will be baptised with the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:5).

And Peter, rehearsing what had happened in the house of Cornelius:

As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit came on them as he had come on us at the beginning. Then I remembered what the Lord had said [he used to say – NASB]: 'John baptised with water, but you will be baptised with the Holy Spirit'. So if God gave them the same gift as he gave us, who believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I to think that I could oppose God? (Acts 11:15-17).

As Paul explained, this spiritual baptism is how we experience redemption:

We were all baptised by one Spirit into one body – whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free – and we were all given the one Spirit to drink (1 Cor. 12:13).

And this baptism brings us to God:

For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit. Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow-citizens with God's people and members of God's household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit... There is one body and one Spirit (Eph. 2:18-22; 4:4).²

Spiritual baptism can only be that direct and sovereign act of the Spirit in regenerating the sinner, leading him to faith in Christ, and so bringing him out of Satan's realm into the kingdom of Christ

² Although baptism is not mentioned in these last extracts, linking them with the others, the deduction is fair. By spiritual baptism we are brought to God, and by spiritual baptism we are formed into a dwelling for God, a spiritual temple. Spiritual baptism is the key.

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(Col. 1:13), even into union with Christ himself. It is the very experience about which the Lord Jesus spoke so dogmatically to Nicodemus:

I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again... I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. You should not be surprised at my saying: 'You must be born again'. The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit (John 3:3-8).³

And there is another point. Spiritual baptism cannot be performed by a minister. It is something completely outside and beyond any man's power to perform. Water baptism is a human baptism; spiritual baptism is not. The truth is, Christ is the only minister who can baptise in this sense, just as he is the only one who can circumcise spiritually. He does so directly by his Spirit. Paul tells the Colossians:

In [Christ] you were also circumcised, in the putting off of the flesh, not with a circumcision done by the hands of men but with the circumcision done by Christ, having been buried with him in baptism and raised with him through your faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead (Col. 2:11-12).

As Calvin commented on the passage:

[Paul] explains still more clearly the manner of spiritual circumcision – because, being buried with Christ, we are partakers of his death. He expressly declares that we obtain this by means of baptism.

Calvin, of course, meant water baptism, water baptism as a sacrament, and he was clearly speaking of baptismal regeneration by water. As he went on to say:

When he says that we are 'buried with Christ', this means more than that we are crucified with him; for burial expresses a continued process of mortification. When he says that this is done through means of baptism, as he says also in Romans 6:4, he speaks in his usual

³ See my earlier accommodation of these words. As you can see, it was no accommodation at all.

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manner, ascribing efficacy to the sacrament, that it may not fruitlessly signify what does not exist. By [water] baptism, therefore, we are buried with Christ, because Christ does at the same time accomplish efficaciously that mortification, which he there represents, that the reality may be conjoined with the sign.

Calvin was wrong. John Gill got it right. Speaking of the circumcision ‘which is that of the heart, in the spirit’, he declared:

Every man, though he may be circumcised in the flesh, is uncircumcised in heart, until he is circumcised by Christ and his Spirit – which is done, when he is pricked to the heart, and thoroughly convinced of sin, and the exceeding sinfulness of it, when the callousness and hardness of his heart is taken off and removed, and the iniquity of it is laid open, the plague and corruption in it discerned, and all made naked and bare to the sinner’s view, and when he is in pain on account of it, is broken and groans under a sense of it, and is filled with shame for it, and loathing and abhorrence of it. Now this is effected not ‘by the hand of man’... as outward circumcision was. This is not done by... ministers of the gospel, who at most are but instruments of regeneration and conversion... but by the Spirit of God... ‘Buried with him in baptism’. The apostle goes on to observe how complete and perfect the saints are in Christ, that they are not only circumcised in him in a spiritual sense, and the body of the sins of their flesh is put off, and removed from them... but that they and all their sins were buried with Christ.

So, there is a water baptism and there is a spiritual baptism. We must not confuse or collate the two. Many do, with calamitous effect.⁴

The question is: which baptism is spoken of in Romans 6:3-4? Is it water baptism or spiritual baptism? Whichever it is, it is effectual. What is more, it must be spiritual baptism (even if – if, I stress – water is involved) for it brings the sinner into Christ. The question then comes down to this: Is it water baptism which produces

⁴ Many Reformed teachers, past and present, not, as I have just shown, excluding John Calvin, the Westminster Confession, the advocates of the Federal Vision, as well as Baptist Sacramentalists, hold to baptismal regeneration by water (see my *Infant Baptism Tested* pp8,38-39,48-65,150-154; *Baptist Sacramentalism: A Warning to Baptists passim*).

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spiritual baptism, or is it spiritual baptism with no thought of water? Enormous consequences hang on the answer.

Wright was unequivocal: Paul is speaking of water baptism. And we know what Wright understood by ‘baptism’ in this context – that is, water baptism – and by its significance, what it ‘embodies and symbolises’: water baptism unites the one baptised to Christ. In what follows, while there is much chaff, there is some wheat:

Membership of the church⁵ begins with a single action which speaks dramatically of what believing and belonging is all about: baptism... We ought to know the story by now. Jews, ancient and modern, have told it every year and in graphic detail: the story of how God rescued them from Egypt. He brought them through the Red Sea and led them through the wilderness into the promised land: through the water to freedom.

The story itself began, interestingly, with the leader, Moses, being rescued as a little boy from the reedy edge of the Nile River, after his parents had placed him there in a waterproof basket rather than kill him as they had been ordered to do. Moses had to go through (on a small scale) the rescue-through-water which God would accomplish through him later on. After Moses’ death, it happened again: Joshua led the people through the Jordan River and into the promised land at last.

These stories look back even further. Creation itself took place, according to Genesis 1, when God’s great wind or breath or Spirit brooded like a dove over the waters, and when God separated the waters into different places and called dry land to appear. Creation itself, you might say, began with an exodus, a baptism: through the water to new life.

So we shouldn’t be surprised when we find that one of the best-known Jewish renewal movements took shape as a new-exodus movement, and a crossing-the-Jordan movement. Jesus’ cousin John believed it was his calling to get people ready for the long-awaited moment when Israel’s God would fulfil his ancient promises. He called people out into the Judean wilderness to be baptised (the word means literally ‘plunged’)⁶ into the Jordan River, confessing their sins: through the water into God’s new covenant. They were to be the purified people, the new-covenant people, the people ready for their God to come and deliver them.

⁵ Membership of *Christ!* This is what Paul asserts in Rom. 6:3-4.

⁶ An excellent admission by an infant baptiser, a bishop in the Church of England which sprinkles babies.

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Jesus himself submitted to John's baptism. He was identifying with those he had come to rescue, fulfilling the covenant plan of his Father. And as he came up from the water, God's Spirit descended on him like a dove, with a voice from heaven declaring that he was God's true Son, Israel's Messiah, the king. Jesus saw his kingdom-movement as starting with that symbolic new-exodus⁷ action.

But he also saw it pointing to the action with which his ministry would reach its climax. He spoke on one occasion about having 'a baptism to be baptised with' – and it became clear that he was referring to his own death. As we saw earlier, he chose passover, the great Jewish exodus festival, as the moment to act symbolically to challenge the authorities, knowing what was bound to happen next.

Jesus' own baptism and his carefully planned last supper both point back to the original exodus (the coming-through-the-water moment), point behind that to the original creation itself, and finally point on to Jesus' death and resurrection as the new defining reality, the moment of new covenant, new creation. And to achieve that renewal it was necessary to go, not just through the water and out the other side, but through a deeper flood altogether. All the multiple layers of meaning that were already present in baptism were now to be re-centred on the event of Jesus' death and resurrection: through the water into God's new world.

That is why, from the earliest Christian sources we possess, Christian baptism is linked not just to Jesus' own baptism, not just to the exodus and the first creation, but to Jesus' death and resurrection. Paul, in one of his earliest letters, speaks of being 'crucified with the Messiah' and coming through into a new life; and in his greatest work (the letter to Rome) he explains that in baptism itself we die 'with the Messiah' and come through to share his risen life. The spectacular, unique events at the heart of the Christian story happen to us, not just at the end of our own lives and beyond (when we die physically and, eventually, when we rise again), but while we are continuing to live in the present time.⁸ through the water into the new life of belonging to Jesus.

That is why, from very early on,⁹ Christian baptism was seen as the mode of entry into the Christian family, and why it was associated with the idea of being 'born again'. Of course, not everyone who has

⁷ I fail to see the allusion here.

⁸ I agree with Wright here. The resurrection in Rom. 6:3-4 is the believer's experience now. The apostle is not referring to the final resurrection.

⁹ Wright was referring to the Fathers here – or he ought to have been, if he wasn't!

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been through water-baptism has actually known and experienced for themselves the saving love of God in Christ sweeping through and transforming their lives.¹⁰ At various points Paul has to remind his readers that they have a responsibility to make real in their own lives the truth of what happened to them in baptism.¹¹ But he doesn't say that baptism doesn't matter, or that it isn't real. People who have been baptised can choose to reject the faith,¹² just as the children of Israel could rebel against YHWH after having come through the Red Sea. Paul makes that point in 1 Corinthians 10 and elsewhere. But they can't get unbaptised: God will regard them as disobedient family members rather than outsiders.¹³

In particular, we can now see why Christian baptism involves being plunged into water (or having it poured over you)¹⁴ in the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The point is that the story which baptism tells is God's own story, from creation and covenant to new covenant and new creation, with Jesus in the middle of it and the Spirit brooding over it. In baptism,¹⁵ you are brought into that story, to be an actor in the play which God is writing and producing. And once

¹⁰ This is the place where all sacramentalists – apart from those who are prepared to say that using water absolutely does produce the regeneration – draw back. Yet the texts they are referring to all state unequivocally that the baptism in question infallibly joins to Christ. Without exception, all who are baptised in the sense meant by the apostles are joined to Christ. Why do these sacramentalists dilute the texts? Is it because experience shows the shakiness of their claims?

¹¹ Where?

¹² Not those baptised in the sense meant by the apostles.

¹³ This is where the rubber hits the road; this is where we meet the disastrous consequences of sacramentalism. According to Wright, those who are water baptised – or sprinkled – may show that they are unregenerate, but they are still in 'the family'. As I wrote in my *Infant* (p98): 'No wonder the term "lapsed Christians" has to be invented to cope with this body of so-called "unregenerate Christians". What is an unregenerate Christian? Lapsed? They never were Christians in the first place! But they have been repeatedly assured throughout their childhood that they are. They have been received and regarded as such. And all the time they were anything but. This dreadful – literally, full of dread – possibility is reason enough to abandon the practice of infant baptism'. The equivalent could be said of those baptised by Baptist sacramentalists; and it should be said to them!

¹⁴ Oh?

¹⁵ Wright, I remind you, meant water baptism.

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you're on [the] stage, you're part of the action. You can get the lines wrong. You can do your best to spoil the play. But the story is moving forward, and it would be far better to understand where it's going and how to learn your lines¹⁶ and join in the drama through the water to become part of God's purpose for the world.¹⁷

That's plain enough! But is it right? Is the apostle speaking of water baptism in Romans 6? Wright had more to say on the matter, broadening it. Speaking of water baptism, he asked:

What has baptism to do with justification by faith, the promises to Abraham, and the revelation of God's righteousness, as set out in Romans 3:21 – 4:24?¹⁸

And he answered his question thus:

It was always dubious, in view of the combination of the same themes in Galatians 3 – 4, especially Galatians 3:23 – 4:7, to set apart faith and justification on the one hand, and baptism and the Spirit on the other... Baptism and Spirit speak of a new covenant, new exodus... constituting the liberated ones as God's true people, sets before them the inheritance to which they must now make their way, and promises them the presence of God, in the person of the Spirit, to guide and strengthen them on the journey.¹⁹

Again:

Romans 6 is quite remarkable, when you think about it. Within twenty-five years of the crucifixion, Paul had already worked out [he had been given it by revelation (1 Cor. 11:23; 15:3; 2 Cor. 12:1-6; Gal. 1:1,11-20; 2:2; Eph. 3:3,5)!] this astonishingly deep and detailed theology of what it means to go through the waters of baptism, linking it to the exodus, to creation, to new creation, and in particular to Jesus'

¹⁶ A highly significant statement. 'Conversion', in Wright's scheme, has been replaced by becoming 'an actor in the play' and 'learning your lines'. Coming (much) closer to home, there is a great deal of 'coaching' sinners into 'faith' these days. Those who run introductory courses (and I am thinking of other courses, far better courses, than Alpha – but not excluding it) and Bible studies for unbelievers ought, at the very least, to be aware of the exceedingly serious consequences of spoon-feeding them so that they can 'learn their lines', and so be counted converts.

¹⁷ N.T. Wright: 'Believing and Belonging' (ntwrightpage.com).

¹⁸ Wright p27.

¹⁹ Wright p35.

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own death and resurrection. Therefore, says Paul... Jesus' dying and rising... happened to us in baptism. Paul doesn't hold back here: he doesn't hedge and say 'as if'. He simply says: 'You died with Christ in baptism and you were raised with him through the waters into the new life of belonging to Jesus'... If you've been baptised, you have in fact died with Christ and risen with him... Baptism is the ground on which we stand linked to Jesus.²⁰

Here we have it. This is Wright's case. Baptism, water baptism, is the hinge of Romans 6. The sinner is brought into Christ, into redemption, liberty through dying with Christ and rising with him – and all this is accomplished by water baptism. But while I agree that in such passages as Romans 6:3-4 and Galatians 3:23 – 4:7 (and 1 Corinthians 12:13; Colossians 2:11-12; 1 Peter 3:21) it is wrong to divorce baptism and the spiritual benefits of the new covenant, we must be crystal clear as to which baptism we are speaking of. Going astray here constitutes a disaster of enormous magnitude.

Here we reach the critical divide. Many, while striving with might and main to avoid the sacramental, nevertheless think that Paul was speaking of water baptism – but as a symbol of what has happened spiritually in the believer's experience. Others, and this includes Wright, are sure that the apostle was referring to water baptism as a sacrament; in other words, regeneration by water baptism, baptismal regeneration. My position is that, while I fully accept that water baptism is a symbol of the believer's inward spiritual experience, the baptism Paul was speaking of is spiritual baptism – with no thought whatsoever of water. He was not speaking of a symbol in Romans 6:34, nor was he speaking of a sacramental water baptism, but he was speaking of spiritual baptism by the secret operation of the Holy Spirit.

I will, however, look at all three. First, water baptism as a symbol.

²⁰ 'N.T.Wright on Word and Sacraments: Baptism' (downloaded from reformedworship.org).