

CHAPTER 29 – BAPTISM

The Significance of Baptism

1. *Baptism is an ordinance of the New Testament instituted by Jesus Christ. It is intended to be, to the person baptized, a sign of his fellowship with Christ in His death and resurrection, and of his being ingrafted into Christ, and of the remission of sins. It also indicates that the baptized person has given himself up to God, through Jesus Christ, so that he may live and conduct himself 'in newness of life'.*

(a) ***For whom is baptism significant?*** “To the person baptized”. Although baptism does have a significance for the world and the church, its primary significance is for the one who is being baptized. This is necessary because there are several examples in Acts of baptism taking place privately, that is, not in the context of a church gathering (8:36-38, 9:17-19, 10:47-48, 16:31-34). Although the latter is appropriate, it is not necessary. Today there is too much emphasis on baptism being just a public confession before the world.

(b) ***What is the intention of baptism?*** It is both a message from God to the one being baptized, and a response to God by the one being baptized.

- 1) *A sign from God* – God declares, and so assures the one being baptized, that he is united with Christ in His death and resurrection (Romans 6:3-5, Galatians 3:27, Colossians 2:12, see also Matthew 28:19, 1 Corinthians 1:13-16, 10:2), because baptism has the idea of being united with someone in leadership over the person; and he has forgiveness of sins through Christ, symbolized by baptism as a washing with water (Acts 2:38, 22:16). Baptism does not accomplish this, but is an outward sign that this has happened.
- 2) *A commitment by the baptized* – Baptism also symbolizes our saving response to the Gospel, that we have submitted to the demands of the Gospel, in order to live a new life in Christ (Acts 2:38, 1 Peter 3:21). Thus baptism takes on the character of a covenant ceremony between God and the one being baptized.

The Subjects of Baptism

2. *The only persons who can rightly submit themselves to this ordinance are those who actually profess repentance towards God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, being willing to yield obedience to Him.*

(a) ***Various opinions.*** There are two basic views, that of baptizing those of any age including infants, and that of baptizing only believers. Each of these are again divided into two so that there are four views:

- 1) *Baptismal regeneration* (sacramentalism), which logically requires infant baptism. This is the view of Catholics, and many Lutherans and Anglicans, and it declares that all who are baptized are born again.
- 2) *Reformed baptizers of infants* (non-sacramentalism), by which infants are baptized but it denies that they are automatically born again. Presbyterians and Congregationalists take this view. They argue from God’s covenant with Abraham that, because the covenant of grace belongs to believers and their children, and because baptism = circumcision, therefore believers and their children ought to be baptized as they were circumcised.
- 3) *Reformed Baptists*, who only baptize believers of whatever age. They agree with the unity of God’s covenant dealings with His people in both Old and New Testaments, but deny that baptism is exactly equivalent to circumcision, emphasizing that there are important differences in covenant administration.

- 4) *Non-reformed Baptists*, who also will only baptize professing believers. They deny the fundamental unity of the Bible, making a fundamental difference between Old and New Testaments.

(b) **Biblical teaching.** The Confession clearly states that there are three (connected) qualifications for being baptized – a profession of repentance, a profession of faith, and a willingness to obey. Note the following evidence that it was only such who were baptized in the apostolic church:

Acts 2:41 – On the Day of Pentecost “those who received his word” were baptized.

Acts 8:12-13 – In Samaria it was only when they believed Philip’s preaching.

Acts 8:36,38 – The Ethiopian believed the gospel Philip preached to him.

Acts 9:18 – Paul was baptized when his blindness was removed, a symbol of salvation.

Acts 10:47-48 – Cornelius and his household received the Holy Spirit as the evidence of their repentance (11:18).

Acts 16:15 – Lydia was baptized, having paid attention to what was said by Paul.

Acts 16:33 – All in the Philippian jailer’s family that were baptized had heard the word of the Lord (v. 32).

Acts 18:8 – Not only Crispus, but all his household “believed” in order to be baptized.

Acts 19:5 – The Ephesians disciples believed in Paul’s message about Jesus (v. 4).

The Biblical teaching is therefore very simple and clear.

(c) **Answers to Reformed baptizers of infants.**

- 1) The following texts are used to try to justify the practice of infant baptism:

Matthew 19:13-15 – As Spurgeon noted in his famous sermon on Baptismal regeneration, this is bringing children to Jesus, not to the baptismal font!

Acts 2:39 – The promise is of the Holy Spirit, who is not given to “your children” because they are children, but to all their descendants who are called by God and thus given repentance and forgiveness (v. 38).

Household baptisms – Cornelius, Lydia, Philippian Jailer, Stephanas (1 Corinthians 1:16, 16:15). The question of the presence of infants ought not to arise. For example, when we read that Cornelius “feared God with all his household”, if there were infants we would automatically exclude them.

1 Corinthians 7:14 – If the infants of believers are given a kind of covenant holiness that gives them a right to be baptized, then why not the unbelieving husband as well? Rather this verse deals with the legitimacy before God of such a marriage in the context where believers were tempted to divorce.

- 2) The argument from the covenant of grace. Both Reformed baptizers of infants and Reformed Baptists believe there is a ‘covenant of grace’ = God’s purpose to save a people for Himself in all ages, which finds its fulfillment in the successive covenants in the Bible. But the Reformed baptizers of infants specifically identify the covenant of grace with the Abrahamic covenant. Then they argue that because the Abrahamic covenant was made with Abraham (as a believer) and his seed, therefore the covenant of grace is made with believers and their seed. Both steps in the argument are faulty. *Firstly*, the Abrahamic covenant is not identical with the covenant of grace. The covenant with Abraham promised the land of Canaan (Genesis 15:18-21); the covenant of grace a glorious eternal inheritance. *Secondly*, the Abrahamic covenant was not made with believers and their seed, but with Abraham and his seed. And the true seed of Abraham is not believers, but Christ Himself and all those who are joined to Him by faith (Galatians 3:16,29).

The Mode of Baptism

3. *The outward element to be used in this ordinance is water, in which the believer is to be baptized in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.*”

4. *Immersion, that is to say, the dipping of the believer in water, is essential for the due administration of this ordinance.*”

(a) **The outward element to be used** - “water” (Acts 8:36,38). Although water has many uses, it is specifically its use in cleansing that is relevant to baptism. Paul was called to symbolically “wash away your sins” in baptism (Acts 22:16, see also 1 Peter 3:21). So the water in baptism is a symbol of cleansing from sin.

(b) **The Name into which one is to be baptized** - “the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit” (Matthew 28:19). By the use of the Name of the triune God, the one being baptized is pronounced to be identified with, or in union with (literally baptism “into” the Name) God, and so being His disciple (note the arguments in 1 Corinthians 1:12-15, 10:2). It is often pointed out that in Acts baptism is always ‘in the Name of Christ’ (see Acts 2:38, 10:48, 19:5). This may mean ‘according to Christ’s command’, ‘upon His authority’ (Acts 2:38). But is there really such a great difference between being baptized in the Name of Christ, or in the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit? To be united to Christ is to be united to the triune God. To be a disciple of Christ is to be a disciple of the triune God. Christ is the mediator through whose work we come to know God. To be baptized into Christ’s Name means that we become specifically ‘Christian’ disciples.

(c) **The action to be performed with water** - “immersion” or “dipping of the believer”. The Confession does not state that a person who has been baptized by sprinkling or pouring, and not by immersion, is not baptized. Rather, it is only essential to the “due” = proper, fitting, or suitable, administration of the ordinance. But the mode of baptism is not irrelevant, because all of God’s commands must be obeyed, including baptism by immersion. Note the following evidence that this is the Biblical teaching:

- 1) *The meaning of the word translated “baptize”* – It means to ‘immerse, submerge, die, plunge, bathe’. A sinking ship is ‘baptized’! Note that when the word ‘baptize’ is used symbolically it refers to some overwhelming experience, whether sufferings to be endured (Mark 10:38-39, Luke 12:50), or the Holy Spirit to be received (Matthew 3:11, Acts 2:1-4).
- 2) *The New Testament practice* – Jesus was baptized by John “into” the river Jordan (Mark 1:9). It is specifically noted that He came up “out of the water” (v. 10), not just away from the river. Exactly the same words are used of the beast rising up out of the sea = coming to the surface (Revelation 13:1). John baptized specifically where there was much water (John 3:23). Although the Ethiopian eunuch must have carried water for drinking, enough to sprinkle on his forehead, it was only when they came to a pool of water that he requested to be baptized. It is explicitly stated that they went down into the water, and came up out of the water (Acts 8:36-39).
- 3) *The symbolism of baptism as burial* – In Romans 6 Paul answers the objection that the teaching of justification by faith will make for carelessness in obedience. The basic truth about a Christian is that he has “died to sin”, and to enforce this he appeals to baptism. Baptism symbolizes death to sin and rising to new life with Christ. He also introduces the thought of “burial” with Christ so that baptism is not just a cleansing, but a total immersion. The burial of Christ is an essential part of the Gospel (1 Corinthians 15:4), both showing His full identification with His people, and the fact that He had really died. Baptism shows us that we are fully identified with Christ, and that we really have died to sin. See also Colossians 2:11-12.