

BAPTISM

Understanding the Sacrament of Baptism

“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 28:18-20

What is a Sacrament?

The word ‘sacred’ means something that is set aside for the worship of God or something worthy of reverence. It is related to the idea of ‘holiness’. Something that is ‘holy’ is something that is set aside (or set apart) for a special purpose. Holiness, in the sense of perfection, is only available to God, but holiness in the sense of being ‘set aside’ for a special purpose, can be said about many things. This does not mean the things or ceremonies have an intrinsic value in and of themselves. The water used in baptism for example, is just regular H₂O. However, when it is used as part of the ‘sacrament of baptism’, it is set aside to a special use and purpose. The ‘blessing’, like all blessings, has to do with our relationship to the God who blesses us, not an inherent change in the things themselves.

This is important to understand, lest we think that ‘holy water’ has some kind of magical properties. God allows us to use ‘common things’ for ‘sacred purposes’. Trusting in God is not magic, but the real means by which we experience the blessings that come from the heart of God for us! This is the Good News of the Gospel. God loves us and chooses to act in our lives. Sacraments reflect that relationship, they do not operate ‘in-and-of themselves’.

Two Sacraments

Since the Reformation, Protestant churches have recognized only two ‘sacraments’ in the Scriptures. Those two are baptism, and communion. In both cases, it is important to understand the meaning of those sacraments—the ‘why’ of ‘why we do, what we do’ in them.

Baptism

Originally, baptism was one of the ‘rites’ by which a person who had not been born a Jew, could become Jewish. There were a number of things that were necessary for a person who was not born as a Jew to do to become part of the Jewish Nation, and baptism was only one part, albeit an important part. The baptism practiced by John the Baptist that is recorded for us in the Gospels, was that ‘rite’ that signified several things in the process.

First, the washing of the water represented the washing away of our sins. Also, being fully immersed under water represented being born anew (you go under as one person, dying to that person, and are raised a new person with a new life). This was particularly important as part of the ‘rite’ by which someone not born as a Jew, ‘died’ to his old self (whatever nationality that might be) and was raised up a new person—a Jew!

Because of this latter understanding, John the Baptist’s message to the Jews that they needed to be baptized, was initially so offensive. They were born Jews—the people of God—they did not need to ‘become’ the people of God. However, the message John the Baptist had been sent to bring was precisely that! Being part of ‘the people of God’ was not a matter of natural birth, but of a spiritual birth. This is why Paul would later write that it was circumcision of the heart that mattered, not circumcision of the flesh (the first sign of a male baby being included in the ‘covenant’ God made with the Israelites, done of the eighth day after birth).

Jesus actually gives additional meaning to baptism for his followers when he instructed us to baptism in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit! That was not any part of the original meaning of baptism for the Jews, but it is an integral part of the meaning of baptism for Christians!

More Than One Baptism?

There are actually three things that Jesus referred to as his baptism, and this is an important thing to understand.

First, Jesus’ baptism by John in the Jordan river was recognized as a ‘baptism’. And as John noted at the time, since baptism is a sign of the washing away of sins, Jesus himself had no need, and indeed, Jesus should have been baptizing John, not the other way around (Matthew 3:13-15). However, Jesus insisted that this was fitting. How so? Here is one of the most important aspects of the meaning of baptism. Jesus took our place, in every way, as a human being (sinful as we are) and did for us, what we need to do. That was not only being baptized for the washing away of our sins (which Jesus didn’t need to do, but we do), but far more, by dying on the cross because of our sins (which he did not need to do for himself) and paying the price for our sins that we could not afford to pay. Because of this, our debt has been paid in full, and in Jesus, we have both died to sin, and also been raised unto eternal life! When we trust in Jesus (as he said), his sacrifice covers our sins, and just as he defeated sin and death in his resurrection, he will raise us up too, to eternal life. And this is not a metaphor, but a fact. Jesus really lived, really died, and really rose again (we serve a living Savior!) and so we have reason to trust that he can and will do the same for us! This is the Good News of the Gospel!

This brings us to the second thing Jesus referred to as his baptism. In Mark 10:35-40, James and John come to Jesus and asked him to name them as the ones who will be able to sit at his ‘right hand and at his left hand’ when he came into power in his Kingdom. Jesus’ asks them, “Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or to be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?” (Mark 10:38) The baptism Jesus was referring to

was the baptism in his own blood on the cross. Indeed, Jesus has stood in our place and paid the price for us. His crucifixion was both necessary and sufficient to atone for our sins! We can be very glad he endured this baptism for us!

And the third thing that Jesus called baptism was the baptism of the Holy Spirit. In Acts 1:4 & 5, Jesus tells the apostles not to go anywhere until they have received the baptism of the Holy Spirit. "... for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now." These three things are all called 'baptism', and each of them is represented in what we call baptism in the name of God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, for the sacrament of baptism is one that reminds us of the faithfulness of what he has done for us, not necessarily our response. It is not an act that 'operates in-and-of itself, but is a reminder to us of what God does for us—a 'sign' not a 'means' of grace.

Sign of Grace

What is the distinction here between a 'sign' and a 'means' of grace? During the Reformation, the Protestants insisted that Scripture teaches that we are saved by grace alone, through faith alone (Ephesians 2:8-9). That means God saves us through his grace alone (grace being unmerited favor) and we receive, or appropriate that grace through faith alone, not of any 'work' that we do. Baptism is not a 'saving act' but instead, a sign that we are trusting (having faith) in God's grace. Each person must come to that place where he/she decides for himself/herself to trust in the grace of God, but baptism is the sign that God's love and forgiveness for us has come to us before any of us were old enough to understand or respond to it. This is one of the reasons that we baptize infants and children as well as adults. We believe the sacrament declares the faithfulness of God, not that it is something that is a means of grace (for we are saved by grace through faith alone) but as a sign of God's grace to us. Like birth, baptism is something that 'happens to you'. When we 'submit to baptism' we are participating as a 'sign' of our faith in God's grace, not as a means of acquiring that grace.

This understanding of baptism is crucial to understanding what we are told in Ephesians 4: 4-6. "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, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all."

There is one Lord—Jesus Christ, one faith (Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life, no one comes to the Father but by me." John 14:6), one baptism (not the baptism of water, but the 'baptism' that Jesus submitted to for us all—in all of its parts), and one God and Father of all. God has done for us, in and through Jesus, all the things needed for our salvation; this is his grace to us, and we receive it by faith alone!

So Why Get Baptized?

First and foremost, because Jesus told us to! Obedience is a sufficient answer for faith! But it is also a sign, for us and to all, of the faithfulness and graciousness of God. Baptism, in proclaiming again that it is what God has done in Jesus Christ, reminds us of the penalty of sin, the price that was paid (so the justice of God is fulfilled, not canceled by grace, but paid by grace), and of the new life we receive that starts now and last for an eternity! Isn't that worth celebrating?

Baptized Once

While there were several things Jesus referred to as his baptism, we believe that baptism is a sign that should only be done once in your life. Why?

First, the faithfulness of God is what is being proclaimed. God is always faithful to keep his promises, even when we are not. We would not want to suggest in any way that this would need to be repeated. Like all of

Jesus' atoning work, this is not done to change God's mind about us, but for us to be able to change our minds about God! God is always faithful, therefore, once is enough!

Secondly, the Church throughout the ages has wanted to keep this 'sacrament' about proclaiming God's grace and not for it to become associated with the idea that we need to continually be coming to God to be baptized for the forgiveness of our sins. Jesus' death (his baptism in his blood) was both necessary and sufficient for the payment of our sins. We enter into that baptism through faith in what he has done. Baptism is a sign of that grace, not a means, so again, once is enough!

So, what is the appropriate thing to do to show (proclaim) to the world that we have accepted this wonderful grace of God? Our answer is—join the Church! Membership in the Body of Christ is the way we proclaim Jesus as our Lord and Savior! It is not a sacrament, because it is a living relationship with the living God! We are called to offer our lives as a living sacrifice, in grateful response to what he has done for us. This is why baptizing adults is associated with joining the church. Church membership is not a 'sacrament' but it is an obedience to the Lord's command, for he has called us to be part of the One Body of Christ.

What About God Parents?

Since baptism is *not* a means of grace, but a sign of God's grace that shows God's attitude about us (even before we are old enough to understand or respond to it—which is why we baptize infants), that does not mean that the community of faith—the church—has no role in baptism. In fact, the community of faith plays a vital role in the sacrament of baptism.

When a person is baptized, it is a community event. There are no "private" baptisms in that when a person is baptized, the community takes vows to support the person being baptized, to "know all the Christ commands" and to be a part of the community of faith that has already promised to do so. In that sense, every member of the church is a "God-parent" to the children that are baptized, and to every youth and adult who is baptized, they are brothers and sisters in Christ, who promise to teach and support those who are baptized.

As a result, the Presbyterian Church requires that in the case of an infant being baptized, that the parent (or close relative) be an active member of a congregation (it need not necessarily be the one where the baptism takes place), who will take those vows to make sure the child baptized is made an active part of a congregation that can fulfill those vows. In that case, the congregation performing the baptism is said to be baptizing on behalf of the congregation where the child will be attending. It is the one (parent, grandparent, or close relative) who is taking the vow to make sure the child hears and learns the good news themselves, so that he or she will one day be able to respond in faith, to the love of God which was for them from the beginning.

The Good News

This is the Gospel we proclaim whenever we baptize people—the grace, justice, and love of God that has come to us through Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, in whose name we, by obedience to his word, baptize those he has called to be his own!