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On the Proper Recipients of Baptism

II. What is Baptism?

Baptism Defined in the Scriptures

The Koine Greek word for baptism, βαπτίζω, occurs over 70 times in the New Testament, in addition to the many passages that correspond to baptism in the Old Testament. While a comprehensive study could be done on each occurrence of the word, for the sake of answering the question “what is baptism?” only a few in particular need to be considered. Thus, in this section, only those passages of scripture that are relevant to defining Christian baptism shall be analyzed.

We therefore observe the following in scripture pertaining to Christian baptism.

First, *baptism is commanded in scripture, by Christ*. This is most clearly seen at the end of Matthew’s gospel, before Jesus ascends into heaven. Our Lord says “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.”¹ Though there is much that could be said about the recipients of baptism from this verse (and it will be considered later on), we clearly see in this verse that baptism is commanded and ordained by Jesus. This is further confirmed in other places such as Mark 16:15-16, Acts 2:38, and Acts 22:16. We therefore conclude that baptism is a ritual both necessary and of great significance in the Christian life, not to be diminished or made light of, as it was commanded by our Lord. Failure to baptize and failure to be baptized are both alike sinful, as it is sin to refrain from doing that which God has commanded. This, however, raises the question “is baptism necessary for salvation?” and leads us to our second scriptural observation.

Second, *though baptism is commanded in scripture, it is not necessary for salvation that one be baptized*. The typical example in support of this concept is the thief on the cross. After acknowledging

1 Mt 28:18–19. (ESV)

his own sin and asking Christ to remember him in His kingdom, Jesus responds “Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise.”² Though this, by itself, is insufficient to prove that baptism does not save, it does prove that one can be saved without being baptized. It can, however, be clearly seen in Paul’s epistles, specifically Romans 4:11 and Colossians 2:11-12, that it is not baptism, but faith that saves us. This is proved in 1 Corinthians 10:2, when Paul warns the Corinthian church against idolatry. He reminds them that similarly to how they were baptized in Christ, the Israelites of old were baptized into Moses, yet punished in the wilderness. Therefore, though baptism is commanded, and therefore necessary, it is not that which saves us, nor absolutely necessary for salvation. What then does baptism accomplish? This is discussed in the following points.

Third, *baptism, though not the agent of our salvation, is a physical sign, seal, and assurance of it.* This is clearly shown in a variety of passages, such as Titus 3:5 and 1 Peter 3:21. When we are saved, we are washed clean of our sins, by the Holy Spirit, through the work of Christ, in His death and resurrection. Baptism, regardless of mode, so long as it properly involves water, correlates with washing. We therefore understand that just as dirt is removed from our body in the washing of baptismal water, so have our sins have been washed away by the Holy Spirit. It is therefore incorrect to understand that the apostle Peter spoke to the water itself being regenerative, but rather the inward reality of the Spirit’s regeneration that it represents. This is perhaps most clearly seen in the epistle to the Hebrews, which reads “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.”³ As was mentioned in the previous point, the waters of baptism are not that which save us, thus the hearts sprinkled clean are distinct from the bodies washed with water, yet the washing, which is undoubtedly baptism, functions as a sign and assurance of our hearts having been sprinkled clean. Thus the apostle Paul, when speaking of those who will not inherit the kingdom of God says “And such were some of you. But you were

² Lk 23:43. (ESV)

³ Heb 10:22. (ESV)

washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.”⁴ While the words “you were washed,” are fully realized in the washing and regeneration of the Holy Spirit, baptism corresponds to this, and thus functions in this instance as a physical symbol of the Corinthian church being cleaned from the sins mentioned in 1 Corinthians 6:9-11.

Fourth, *baptism unites us with Christ in His death and resurrection*. Thus, the apostle Paul writes “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.”⁵ Baptism then also represents a burial with Christ and a raising to walk with Him in newness of life. In the waters of baptism, the inward reality of death to sin and the old self, as well as new life in Christ, under grace, is shown. Just as we can be assured that our sins are washed clean when we consider our baptism, so too can we find comfort that the old self has been crucified with Christ and the new self is alive in Him.

This point is further shown in other examples of baptism throughout scripture. First, this is shown in the Noahic flood, which the apostle Peter links to Christian baptism.⁶ The flood in Genesis was God’s judgment upon the wicked creation, and brought death to the wicked, yet Noah and his family were saved. We see then, that the Noahic flood was a picture of God’s judgment of sin and prefigured Christian baptism. Second, we see baptism linked to the crossing of the Red Sea. As was discussed in a previous point, Paul describes the passing through the Red Sea as a *type* of baptism. As with Noah’s family, we see that the waters of the Red Sea were death to the Egyptians, but physical salvation for the Jews,⁷ further showing baptism to be a picture of judgment of sin. Finally, this is confirmed by the words of Jesus, who says “I have a baptism to be baptized with, and how great is my

4 1 Co 6:11. (ESV)

5 Ro 6:3–4. (ESV)

6 1 Peter 3:21 (ESV)

7 It should be stressed that in this type, we see physical salvation, not necessarily spiritual. In a sense, the Israelites were saved from the Egyptian army, yet, as the author of Hebrews clearly states, they were not saved in the spiritual sense, but hardened their hearts and were thus not allowed to enter into the promised land.

distress until it is accomplished! “⁸ Here Jesus speaks of His death, where He would take upon Himself the wrath of God, dying in our place as a sacrifice. Baptism thus reminds us of the judgment of God upon sin. When we “go through” the waters of baptism, we are not like the Egyptians or the people in Noah’s day who perished in the waters, but rather like the Israelites and Noah who were delivered from God’s wrath, because Jesus, in His baptism, took God’s wrath upon Himself in our place.

Fifth, *baptism identifies us with Christ and is the sign of admission into God’s church.* Paul, when emphasizing the unity of the Church, being one body says “For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For 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”⁹ Earlier in his epistle, Paul spoke of the Israelites being baptized “into Moses.” Baptism thus functions as an initiation and admission into a body. In the case of Christian baptism, this body is the Church, God’s covenant people. This functions in a twofold manner. First, it is *our* willful identification with Christ. In being baptized, we effectively proclaim to the world that we are identifying with Christ, thus the classic baptist description of baptism as “an outward sign of an inward reality” is therefore accurate. Second (and more importantly), baptism is how God marks His people as set apart. We see this clearly in the gospel accounts, where John the Baptist says “I baptize you with water for repentance, but he who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into the barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”¹⁰ Though much of this verse could be applied to prior points, we see clearly that Christ is ultimately the one who baptizes His people, though not with water, but with the “Holy Spirit and fire.” Christ Himself then, is the one who baptizes, and He does so with the Spirit and with fire.

8 Lk 12:50. (ESV)

9 1 Co 12:12–13. (ESV)

10 Mat. 3:11 (ESV)

The wheat (representing His people, chosen by God) are gathered into the barn, while the chaff (those who are unrepentant and therefore unsaved) are burned with unquenchable fire. Thus, it is in baptism (the baptism of Christ, that is) that we are set apart by God. As such, the sign of water baptism reminds us of just that.

Sixth, *under the new covenant, baptism has replaced and fulfilled circumcision as the sign of the covenant.* This particular point, being crucial to the reformed paedobaptist argument, will be further discussed in the following sections. However, we observe from scripture that baptism accomplishes what circumcision prefigured in the old testament. Paul, therefore writes, “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.¹¹ We see here a clear link between circumcision and Christian baptism. We receive the “circumcision of Christ” in our baptism, through our death with Christ and new life in faith.

We also see clearly that baptism replaces circumcision in the new covenant by analyzing two parts of redemptive history. We see in Exodus, that in order for a foreigner to partake of the Passover meal, he and all the males in his household had to undergo circumcision. In doing so, they were made “as a native of the land.”¹² In essence, under the old covenant system, one would have to effectively become a Jew, submitting to circumcision, in order to be saved and among the covenant people of God. This is not so under the new covenant. In the book of Acts, when the Holy Spirit falls on the gentiles, they are not commanded to be circumcised, but baptized,¹³ just as the Jewish converts were.¹⁴ Paul, in his letter to the Galatian church further proves this by condemning the gentiles if they accept circumcision. Under the new covenant, no longer is it necessary that one become a Jew to be in the

11 Col 2:11–12. (ESV)

12 Exo. 12: 48-49

13 Acts 10:44-46

14 Acts 2:41

covenant of grace, rather, it is now through baptism that we are admitted into the covenant people of God.

Christian baptism then, is accurately defined by the Westminster Confession of Faith, which states the following.

Baptism is a sacrament of the new testament, ordained by Jesus Christ, (Matt. 28:19) not only for the solemn admission of the party baptized into the visible Church; (1 Cor. 12:13) but also to be unto him a sign and seal of the covenant of grace, (Rom. 4:11, Col. 2:11–12) of his ingrafting into Christ, (Gal. 3:27, Rom. 6:5) of regeneration, (Tit. 3:5) of remission of sins, (Mark 1:4) and of his giving up unto God, through Jesus Christ, to walk in newness of life. (Rom. 6:3–4) Which sacrament is, by Christ's own appointment, to be continued in His Church until the end of the world. (Matt. 28:19–20)¹⁵

Having defined baptism according to the scriptures, we can now move into determining, who, according to the scriptures, should be baptized.

15 [*The Westminster Confession of Faith*](#) (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1996).