

§ 12. Doctrine of the Church

Lecture 2

Baptism

Thank you for joining us in Defenders.

Last week we began a new locus of our course on the doctrine of the church. We introduced the subject of the sacraments or the ordinances administered by the church. Today we want to look more closely at the practice of baptism.

When you look at the biblical data concerning baptism it is remarkable how much of the New Testament data speaks to the issue of baptism. Just from the number of passages dealing with baptism in the New Testament, you could already infer that this is an extremely important practice in the New Testament church. The New Testament, indeed, opens with the figure of John the Baptist on the scene, who is proclaiming a baptism of repentance and calling people to be baptized in the Jordan River.

Let's look at Mark 1:4-5. Mark writes,

John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And there went out to him all the country of Judea, and all the people of Jerusalem; and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

So right at the beginning of Jesus' ministry you have this enigmatic figure of John the Baptist calling people to the Jordan to repentance and baptism for sin.

Significantly, Jesus himself was baptized. He was among those in Judea who went out to John the Baptist to submit to John's baptism. Matthew 3:13-17 record:

Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to John, to be baptized by him. 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, he went up immediately from the water, and behold, the heavens were opened and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove, and alighting on him; and lo, a voice from heaven, saying, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased."

So Jesus himself submitted to John's baptism before the commencement of his own ministry.

Thereafter Jesus continued the practice of baptizing others, interestingly enough. He, himself, was involved in carrying out a ministry of baptism. We wouldn't know this fact apart from a brief passage in the Gospel of John which John records in John 3:22-24. He writes,

After this Jesus and his disciples went into the land of Judea; there he remained with them and baptized. John also was baptizing at Aenon near Salim, because there was much water there; and people came and were baptized. For John had not yet been put in prison.

Here Jesus is carrying out a ministry of baptism contemporaneously with John the Baptist. John hadn't yet been arrested, and Jesus is carrying out a similar ministry of baptizing people at the same time as John.

Turn over to John 4:1-3, "Now when the Lord knew that the Pharisees had heard that Jesus was making and baptizing more disciples than John" – Jesus' ministry was becoming so successful that more people were coming to Jesus to be baptized than were coming to his cousin John. John then adds this parenthetical comment, "(although Jesus himself did not baptize, but only his disciples)." So he was apparently delegating the duty of baptizing to his disciples. Then John says, "He left Judea and departed again to Galilee." Here, again, we see Jesus' ministry of baptizing people, doing it through the agency of his disciples whom he had called to follow him.

When we turn to the book of Acts following Jesus' death, resurrection, and ascension, we discover that the practice of baptism did not disappear. Baptism was not something that simply belonged to that early time of the earthly ministry of John and Jesus; rather, baptism typically accompanied conversion in the book of Acts. When people came to Christian faith, they were baptized. So the practice of baptism continued in the early church.

Look at Acts 2:37-38, 41. This concerns persons who were converted through Peter's preaching at the Feast of Pentecost. Luke writes,

Now when they heard this they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, "Brethren, what shall we do?" And Peter said to them, "Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. . . . So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls.

So when people were convicted of the message of the Gospel, what they were supposed to do by way of response was to repent and be baptized in Jesus' name.

Look at Acts 8:36-38. This is the story of the conversion of the Ethiopian official who had been visiting Jerusalem and was on the way home, and Philip shares with him the Gospel. Luke writes,

And as they went along the road they came to some water, and the eunuch said, "See, here is water! What is to prevent my being baptized?" And he commanded the chariot to stop, and they both went down into the water, Philip and the eunuch, and he baptized him.

The response of the Ethiopian eunuch to Philip's sharing of the Gospel was to say, "Well, then baptize me now. Here's water." And Philip does baptize him.

Turn over to Acts 9:19a. This is the story of the conversion of Saul of Tarsus, a Pharisee and the chief persecutor of the early Jesus movement in Jerusalem. He sees a vision of Jesus on the Damascus Road which leaves him blind and helpless. He goes into Damascus and a Christian named Ananias comes to meet Saul and to carry out the Lord's instructions to Ananias. We read in Acts 9:17ff:

So Ananias departed and entered the house. And laying his hands on him he said, "Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus who appeared to you on the road by which you came, has sent me that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit." And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes and he regained his sight. Then he rose and was baptized.

Again, the immediate response to his conversion is to submit to Christian baptism.

Turn over to Acts 10:45-48. This is the story of Peter's preaching to the household of a Roman centurion, Cornelius. For the first time the Gospel goes to Gentiles – not to other Jews, but to actual Roman persons. In verse 45 we read:

And the believers from among the circumcised who came with Peter were amazed, because the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles. For they heard them speaking in tongues and extolling God. Then Peter declared, "Can any one forbid water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?" And he commanded them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ.

These Gentiles, hearing the proclamation of the Gospel, received the Holy Spirit and Peter says, “Why not proceed then with baptism? Can anyone prevent me from baptizing them?” No one can, so they are baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus.

This is the regular pattern over and over again in the book of Acts. Christian conversion is accompanied by baptism in the name of Christ.

In Galatians 3:27, Paul says this, “For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ.” Look how closely baptism is linked with Christian conversion in that sentence. “As many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ.” I think for these New Testament Christians it would have been unthinkable for a person to say “I believe in Christ – I am a Christian” and yet not submit to Christian baptism. That would have simply been incomprehensible. As many of them as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. Conversion and baptism went like hand in glove.

What then is the meaning of baptism? Let’s just look at three New Testament passages that speak to the question of the meaning of baptism. We’ll talk more about these later but I just want to get these passages out on the table at this time.

Romans 6:3-4, here 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, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.

Here baptism is an identification with the death of Jesus. We are said to be baptized into Jesus’ death and identify with his death on the cross.

Next, Colossians 2:12. Paul says, “You were buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the working of God, who raised him from the dead.” In Romans, baptism is into the death of Christ with a view toward walking in newness of life. But here in Colossians, it makes it explicit that baptism is not only an identification with Christ’s death, it is also an identification with his resurrection. He says that “you were buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him.” So in baptism we are identified not only with the death and crucifixion of Christ but also with his resurrection.

The final passage is 1 Peter 3:21. He writes, “Baptism, which corresponds to this, now saves you, not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a clear

conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ.” Here Peter says that baptism serves us, not as an external washing, but rather it is an appeal to God for a clear conscience.

Those are three critical passages about the meaning of baptism in the New Testament. What we will do next time is to begin to ask several probing theological questions about this biblical data with a view toward understanding the significance and the meaning of baptism. Until then, may God fill you and guide you with his Holy Spirit.¹

¹Total Running Time: 16:24 (Copyright © 2021 William Lane Craig)