

§ 12. Doctrine of the Church

Lecture 3

Baptism as a Sacrament

We are talking about the doctrine of the church. Last time we looked at some of the biblical data concerning baptism. Today we want to raise some serious theological questions about the nature of baptism.

The first and foremost question that needs to be addressed is this: Is baptism a sacrament or is it an ordinance? You will remember how a sacrament differs from an ordinance. A sacrament is literally a means of grace. It is like a channel through which God's grace comes to you, much in the same way that water might flow through a pipe. On the sacramental view we receive God's saving grace via baptism. Baptism serves to mediate God's grace to us. By contrast, on the view of baptism as an ordinance, baptism serves merely as a symbolic function. It is a sign of some act of God's grace that can be quite independent of that sign. It is not baptism then that accomplishes the reception of God's grace. It is merely a sign or a symbol of it.

Today we want to look at the case for thinking of baptism as a sacrament. This would be the case that would be presented by, for example, Roman Catholics or Lutherans or others who take a sacramental view of baptism. We'll look at two main points.

The first point that the sacramentalist will make is that *baptism is very closely linked with justification*. There is a tight connection in the New Testament between being baptized and being justified, which is, of course, the very essence of Christian salvation. Let's look again at Romans 6:1ff which is one of the key New Testament passages on baptism. Paul writes,

What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it? 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.

Notice here that, according to Paul, it is through baptism that we are incorporated into Christ's death. We are united with him in his death and then in his burial and then in his resurrection. The sacramentalist will say that this is not just some sort of a symbolic expression. This is what actually happens. We who have been baptized were baptized into Christ's death, being buried with him in baptism, and then raised from the dead so that just as Christ was raised, we, too, might walk in newness of life. The use of the passive voice in this passage – “you were buried with him into baptism,” for example – indicates that God is the active subject here. God is the one who has buried you in baptism. God has identified you with Christ by going through the rite of baptism. So

these are literally acts of God by which you are identified with Christ's death, burial, and resurrection.

Now turn over to Colossians 2:11-14. Here Paul writes,

In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of flesh in the circumcision of Christ; and 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. And you, who were dead in trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses . . .

According to the sacramentalist, this passage again shows our identification with Christ's crucifixion and resurrection through the act of baptism. It is by being baptized that we are identified with Christ's death and resurrection.

Now look at 1 Corinthians 6:11. Paul speaks here of sinners who will not inherit God's Kingdom, and he says, "And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God." The sacramentalist will claim that this is a baptismal verse. This is evident from the language of washing – "you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified" – and then also from the formula "in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ." The New Testament church baptized people in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. For example, look at Acts 22:16. Ananias says to Paul, "And now why do you wait? Rise and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on his name." There you have the idea of washing in baptism and calling on the name of the Lord Jesus.

So the idea of being washed in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ shows its connection with baptism. So does the mention of the Spirit of God because, as we shall see later on, Spirit baptism is linked with water baptism. The sacramentalist will say that when you undergo water baptism, you are also baptized in the Holy Spirit. So this verse teaches that in baptism you are given the grace that justifies and sanctifies you.

G. R. Beasley-Murray, who is a Baptist New Testament scholar, has written a very, very thorough book *Baptism in the New Testament*. In this book Beasley-Murray writes, "The inference cannot be avoided that the reality signified by justification and sanctification is apprehended *in baptism by faith*."¹ This statement is all the more remarkable in that it comes from a Baptist theologian who takes a sacramental view of baptism in the New Testament against what would normally be his own tradition.

¹G. R. Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1973), p. 166.

In fact, the sacramentalist will say no gift or power in the New Testament is not ascribed to baptism. It is really remarkable when you look at the passages on baptism in the New Testament how virtually every blessing and power that is the believer's is said to be ours in virtue of being baptized. Again, I quote from Beasley-Murray's book *Baptism in the New Testament*, he writes,

In the light of the foregoing exposition of the New Testament representations of baptism, the idea that baptism is a purely symbolic rite must be pronounced not alone unsatisfactory but out of harmony with the New Testament itself. . . . The Apostolic writers make free use of the symbolism of the baptismal action; but they go further and view the act as a symbol with power, that is, a sacrament. . . . The 'grace' available to man in baptism is said by the New Testament writers to include the following elements: forgiveness of sin, Acts 2:38 and cleansing from sins, Acts 22:16, 1 Corinthians 6:11; union with Christ, Galatians 3:27, and particularly union with Him in his death and resurrection, Romans 6:3ff, Colossians 2:11f, with all that implies of release from sin's power, as well as guilt, and the sharing of the risen life of the Redeemer, Romans 6:1-11; participation in Christ's sonship, Galatians 3:26f; consecration to God, 1 Corinthians 6:11, hence membership in the Church, the Body of Christ, 1 Corinthians 12:13, Galatians 3:27-29; possession of the Spirit, Acts 2:38, 1 Corinthians 6:11, 12:13, and therefore the new life in the Spirit, i.e. regeneration, Titus 3:5, John 3:5; grace to live according to the will of God, Romans 6:1ff, Colossians 3:1ff; deliverance from the evil powers that rule this world, Colossians 1:13; the inheritance of the Kingdom of God, John 3:5, and the pledge of the resurrection of the body, Ephesians 1:13f, 4:30.²

These are the gifts that are said to be ours in virtue of our baptism.

I think you'll agree that that's a pretty impressive list of blessings that are said to be ours in virtue of baptism. You can see the close link that exists in the New Testament between baptism and justification, sanctification, and all the rest that comes with salvation. So for that reason the sacramentalist will say that baptism is not a mere symbol. Look at all the things that it does; look at what God does to you through baptism! This is a sacrament; it is a means of grace.

The second point in defense of sacramentalism is that *baptism is also very closely linked with Spirit baptism*. Water baptism is linked with being baptized in the Holy Spirit. You will remember when we talked about regeneration, we saw that baptism in the Holy Spirit results in regeneration and being born again to new life. Whereas before a person was

²Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament*, pp. 263-64.

spiritually dead, after being baptized in the Holy Spirit he has the Spirit living within. Baptism is linked with being baptized in the Holy Spirit.

Look, for example, at Acts 2:38. This has to do with the response to Peter's preaching on the day of Pentecost: "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.'" This is very much like the verse we read previously [Acts 22:38] where Paul is told to rise, wash away his sins, and receive the Holy Spirit. Here "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 in order to receive the regeneration of the Holy Spirit one undergoes water baptism. This sets the pattern then for the rest of the book of Acts. One undergoes water baptism and thereby receives the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Not only do we have the book of Acts supporting this tight link between water baptism and Spirit baptism, but also a pair of passages in Paul's letters also seem to link these very closely. I'm talking about 1 Corinthians 12:13 and Galatians 3:27-28. In 1 Corinthians 12:13, Paul says, "For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit." Here Paul talks about being baptized by the Holy Spirit into the body of Christ and being made to drink of the Spirit (that is to say, receiving the Holy Spirit). So he connects Spirit baptism with being baptized into the body of Christ. Now look at what he says in Galatians 3:27-28, "For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus." Notice here the emphasis is the same. In 1 Corinthians 12:13, "Jews or Greeks, slaves or free," all are baptized into the one body. Then here in Galatians, again, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus." Whereas in 1 Corinthians 12:13 Paul is associating this with the Holy Spirit – "by one Spirit we were all baptized into the body of Christ. . . . [We] were made to drink of one Spirit," in Galatians 3:27, there is no mention of the Spirit. It is water baptism: "As many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ." So this shows the tight link between water baptism and Spirit baptism. Even if these are not identical, they are simultaneous or coincident. As one is baptized in water in the name of Jesus, one is baptized by the Holy Spirit into the body of Christ. This goes right along with what we have already seen: it is by baptism that we identify with the death of Christ, his burial, and his resurrection. So in water baptism one receives the baptism of the Holy Spirit and is incorporated into the body of Christ.

Finally, the last passage that we want to look at that closely connects water baptism and Spirit baptism is Paul's letter to Titus – Titus 3:5-7. There Paul says,

He saved us, not because of deeds done by us in righteousness, but in virtue of his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal in the Holy Spirit, which he poured out upon us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that we might be justified by his grace and become heirs in hope of eternal life.

Again, the sacramentalist will take this to be a baptismal verse in virtue of the mention of the washing. “He saved us . . . by the washing of regeneration and renewal in the Holy Spirit.” This is taken to be a reference to baptism. Notice what is obtained through this washing: regeneration, renewal in the Holy Spirit, and justification by grace so that we become heirs of eternal life. So this passage again shows the close linkage between baptism in water and Spirit baptism. It is by undergoing water baptism that we are baptized in the Holy Spirit, regenerated, and incorporated into the body of Christ.

I think you can see that on a sacramental view, baptism is really critical because it is through baptism that you receive God’s saving grace. The Scripture will even say, “Thus baptism now saves you, not by washing of dirt from the body but by an appeal to God for a clear conscience” (1 Peter 3:21). So we have regeneration and justification through the Holy Spirit occurring co-incidentally or simultaneously with our water baptism.

Therefore, baptism is just absolutely critical on the sacramentalist view in the process of becoming a Christian.

Next week we’ll look at the view of baptism as an ordinance. Until that time I wish you God’s greatest blessing.³

³Total Running Time: 21:46 (Copyright © 2021 William Lane Craig)