

## § 12. Doctrine of the Church

### Lecture 4

#### Baptism as an Ordinance

We have been talking about the nature of baptism – is it a sacrament or is it an ordinance? Last time we looked at arguments in favor of the view that baptism is a sacrament, a means of grace by which one is born again spiritually, united with Christ in his death and resurrection, and incorporated into his body, the church.

Today we want to look at an alternative understanding of baptism. This alternative views baptism as an ordinance, not as a sacrament or special means of grace. We'll look at two arguments in support of the view of baptism as an ordinance.

1. Those who think of baptism as an ordinance rather than a sacrament remind us that *Christian conversion and initiation in the New Testament is a process* – a process that involved, first of all, repentance and faith, then receiving the Holy Spirit, and finally water baptism. Conversion is inward. Initiation is outward. Initiation is the public identification of the believer with the Christian church – with the body of Christ. It is a sign, as it were, of the inner work that has taken place in conversion. The key to conversion is baptism of the Holy Spirit. When a person is regenerated by God, when the Holy Spirit comes into him, he is baptized in the Holy Spirit and is born anew to spiritual life and eternal life. So the key to conversion will be baptism in the Holy Spirit. The key to initiation into the Christian church, however, is water baptism. So Spirit baptism is the key factor in conversion. Water baptism is the key factor in initiation into the Christian faith.

So what makes a person a Christian on this view is not water baptism. That is a matter of his public initiation. What makes him a Christian is that inner work of the Holy Spirit – that work of regeneration that has made him born anew to eternal life.

Let's look at some passages in support of this understanding.

First, 2 Thessalonians 2:13-14. Here Paul is recalling his experience of sharing the Gospel with the Thessalonian believers. He says,

But we are bound to give thanks to God always for you, brethren beloved by the Lord, because God chose you from the beginning to be saved, through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth. To this he called you through our gospel, so that you may obtain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Notice the elements in their conversion that are here described. First of all there is God's election. Paul says, "God chose you from the beginning to be saved." Then there is God's calling. Paul says, "To this he called you through our gospel." Then there is faith. He says that through "belief in the truth" they have been saved. And then, finally, regeneration in

the Holy Spirit: he says, “sanctification by the Spirit.” So all of the essential elements of conversion are there: election, calling, the response of faith, and sanctification by the Holy Spirit. There is no mention whatsoever of water baptism. It is these elements that are sufficient for conversion and being a Christian.

Look over, similarly, at Galatians 3:1-5, then also verse 14. Paul says,

O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you, before whose eyes Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified? Let me ask you only this: Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law, or by hearing with faith? Are you so foolish? Having begun with the Spirit, are you now ending with the flesh? Did you experience so many things in vain?—if it really is in vain. Does he who supplies the Spirit to you and works miracles among you do so by works of the law, or by hearing with faith?

Then in verse 14 he says, “the blessing of Abraham might come upon the Gentiles [in Christ Jesus], that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith.”

In Galatians we again have these essential elements to conversion. There is preaching. Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified before the Galatians by Paul and the apostles. There is faith. He says, “You received the Holy Spirit by hearing with faith.” Then there is the reception of the Holy Spirit. He refers in verse 2 to receiving the Holy Spirit and then also in verse 14 “receiving the promise of the Spirit through faith.” So the preaching of the Word, the response of faith, and then the receiving of the Holy Spirit make a person a Christian.

Now, naturally these persons who had become Christians were then baptized. It would be unthinkable for a genuine, regenerate Christian to refuse the act of initiation and refuse to be baptized. So Paul can go on to say in Galatians 3:26-27, “for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ.” So they are sons of God, children of God, through faith. They were then all baptized, of course. Therefore all of them who were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. The two went like a hand in a glove.

Turn over to 1 Corinthians 1:13-17. Here Paul is reminding the Corinthians of his behavior among them in preaching the Gospel. He writes,

Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul? I am thankful that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius; lest any one should say that you were baptized in my name. (I did baptize also the household of Stephanas. Beyond that, I do not know whether I baptized any one else.) For Christ did not send me to baptize but to preach the gospel, and not with eloquent wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power.

Without wanting in any way to depreciate the importance of baptism, I think it is undeniable that baptism clearly did not lie at the heart of the Gospel for Paul. This wasn't the main concern that he had. He preached the cross of Christ faithfully. People responded. Then he may or may not have baptized some of them. Baptism clearly wasn't at the heart of the Gospel message for Paul.

Turn over then to 1 Corinthians 6:11. This is one of the verses to which the sacramentalist appeals as a baptismal verse to show baptismal regeneration. Paul describes the various sins of the unrighteous and then in verse 11 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 washing here is interpreted by the sacramentalist to be a reference to baptism. But there is no reason to take it that way. The washing here is not talking about the physical washing you have in water. It is talking about spiritual cleansing, right? "You were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of Christ through the Holy Spirit." So this is a spiritual washing or cleansing that takes place.

It is not enough to appeal to the phrase "in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ" to prove that this is a baptismal verse. You will recall that the sacramentalist points out that people were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, and he takes that as evidence that this is a baptismal verse. But the problem with that argument is that the expression "in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ" is not just a baptismal formula. For example, look at Ephesians 5:20. Here Paul says, "Always and for everything giving thanks in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to God the Father." This is a verse which has nothing to do with baptism but uses this phrase "in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ." Another example would be 2 Thessalonians 3:6: "Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep away from any brother who is living in idleness and not in accord with the tradition that you received from us." Here Paul issues a command "in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ." It has nothing to do with baptism.

So when he says, back in 1 Corinthians 6:11, that "you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God" there is no reason to think that this is a baptismal verse. This is talking about a spiritual cleansing or washing. It is the Spirit who does this. So this would be consistent with what we said about the inner regeneration through the Holy Spirit that takes place in conversion.

What about Romans 6:1ff? Again, this is a passage on which the sacramentalist heavily relies to show that in baptism we are united in Christ's death and resurrection and therefore come to be members of his body. Well, it seems to me that the person who defends baptism as an ordinance can plausibly say that what we have here is a

metaphorical description of baptism. Paul says in verse 3,

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.

He uses the metaphor of burial and rising again to describe what happens in baptism. This isn't a literal burial with Christ but metaphorically speaking we are buried with him in the waters of baptism. So this serves a symbolic function. It is, as I say, an outward sign of this spiritual reality.

You will remember that impressive list I read last time from G. R. Beasley-Murray about all of the blessings that are ours in virtue of baptism. Well, the point that the person who thinks of baptism as an ordinance wants to make is that all of these same blessings are ascribed simply to faith. They are all the result of faith. Beasley-Murray himself recognizes this. On page 272 of his *Baptism in the New Testament* he has this to say, "[I]n the New Testament, precisely the same gifts of grace are associated with faith as with baptism." The same gifts of grace that are ours in virtue of being baptized are ours in virtue of our faith. Then Beasley-Murray begins to enumerate these.

Forgiveness, cleansing and justification are the effect of baptism in Acts 2:38, 22:16, 1 Corinthians 6:11; in 1 John 1:9, forgiveness and cleansing attend the believing confession of sin, while the doctrine of justification by faith in Romans 3-4 scarcely needs citation. Union with Christ comes through baptism in Galatians 3:27 and is accorded to faith in Ephesians 3:17. Identification with Christ in his death and resurrection is rooted in baptism in Romans 6:3ff, Colossians 2:11f; faith alone is in view in Galatians 2:20, and in Colossians 2:12 faith is the means whereby new life is gained in baptism. Participation in Christ's sonship is bound up with baptism in Galatians 3:26f, since it becomes possible through union with Christ; but in v. 26, faith is explicitly mentioned as the means whereby sonship is possible, and in John 1:12 faith alone is in view. Membership in the Church, the Body of Christ, is through baptism in 1 Corinthians 12:13, Galatians 3:27ff; while it is quite certain that in the New Testament Church membership would have been normally dated from baptism (the Acts [of the Apostles] shows that exceptions were for a time possible), faith is so strongly the hallmark of the Church that it can be called 'the household of faith' (Galatians 6:10), and union with Christ is, as we have seen, through faith. The Spirit is given through baptism according to Acts 2:38, 1 Corinthians 12:13, but to faith in Galatians 3:2, 14. The new life of the Spirit is given in baptism according to Titus 3:5, John 3:5, but to faith in John 1:12-13. The inheritance of the kingdom is for the baptized in John 3:5 but for

faith in Mark 10:15, John 3:14-18, 5:24, 20:31. One New Testament writer makes the summary statement, 'Baptism saves you' (1 Peter 3:21); another makes the yet more characteristic assertion, 'By grace you have been saved through faith' (Ephesians 2:8); the former asseveration had to be qualified by the writer, but the latter stands luminously self-evident!<sup>1</sup>

In that lengthy passage, I think you can see that all of these wonderful blessings and graces that are ours in virtue of being baptized are said to be ours in virtue of our faith in Christ. I think the reason for this is simply that conversion and baptism follow each other so closely in the New Testament as conversion and initiation that they are described as one process. You could ascribe these blessings either to one half of the process or to the other half of the process. They are united. It would be unthinkable that there would be born again, regenerate Christians who would refuse to be baptized and would therefore not have undergone initiation. So all Christians, having been duly baptized, could ascribe these wonderful blessings that are theirs in virtue of their conversion and initiation by ascribing them either to baptism or to the fact that they have had saving faith in Christ.

In summary of the first point: conversion and initiation in the New Testament involved repentance and faith, reception of the Holy Spirit, and then water baptism. These are, as I say, like a hand in a glove. The one is the outer skin of the inner life and animation wrought through the Holy Spirit.

Next time, we'll continue our discussion by looking at a second argument in favor of viewing baptism as an ordinance of the church. Until then, may God keep you and guide you.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>G. R. Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1973), pp. 272-73.

<sup>2</sup>Total Running Time: 21:11 (Copyright © 2021 William Lane Craig)