

§ 12. Doctrine of the Church
Lecture 5
Baptism as an Ordinance - Continued

We've been talking about baptism as an ordinance of the church. Last time we saw that those who believe that baptism is an ordinance argue that all of the spiritual blessings that are attributed to baptism are also attributed to faith alone. The second argument that is often given by those who defend a non-sacramental view of baptism is that when you look more closely at the New Testament, you find that water baptism does not necessarily coincide with baptism in the Holy Spirit. Remember that for the sacramentalist these are co-incident. It is in water baptism that one is baptized in the Holy Spirit. These happen at the same time. That is why water baptism is a sacrament – a means of grace. You are baptized in the Holy Spirit when you are water baptized.

But the New Testament doesn't bear that out. Let's just look at some examples of baptism in the New Testament. First, let's begin with John the Baptist's baptism and then the baptism as practiced by Jesus himself. In those baptisms, the Holy Spirit was not received. The Holy Spirit was not given through John's water baptism or in the baptism that Jesus himself administered. The Holy Spirit was promised only at Pentecost and in post-Pentecostal experience.

The sacramentalist will respond by saying that this was a unique situation. It was only after Pentecost that the Holy Spirit was given. These baptisms were all pre-Pentecostal and therefore of course John and Jesus' baptism was unique in not conveying the Holy Spirit. But notice that when Jesus gives the Great Commission to the disciples to go out into all the world and preach the Gospel, he commands them to teach all that he has commanded them, baptizing people in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. So it is a continuation of the baptism that Jesus was carrying out during his ministry, and the disciples probably thought of this practice in exactly the same way. It is an external sign of repentance and faith.

Let's turn now to the baptism of the Holy Spirit that does occur at Pentecost in Acts 2. In Acts 2 we read the story of how the Holy Spirit came upon the New Testament church. Notice that this did not occur in the context of water baptism. The twelve disciples, and those with them, were not being baptized in water when the Holy Spirit came upon them. It was quite apart from baptism.

The sacramentalist will say that this situation is unique because the disciples had already followed Jesus. Perhaps they had already been baptized during his ministry. So there was

no need for them to be baptized again. But even if that is true, the point remains that Spirit baptism didn't take place in conjunction with water baptism for these disciples.

Now we skip ahead to Acts 10:43-48. This is the story of the preaching of the Gospel by Peter to a Roman centurion named Cornelius and his household. Notice that the members of Cornelius' household, upon hearing the Gospel, are baptized in the Holy Spirit prior to their water baptism.

While Peter was still saying this, the Holy Spirit fell on all who heard the word. 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.

Here we see that these persons, upon hearing the Gospel and believing it, received the Holy Spirit, and then water baptism followed as a subsequent act. They are not simultaneous.

The sacramentalist will say that this was an exceptional circumstance because this is the first reception of the Gospel by the Gentiles. It was to show that the Gentiles are also acceptable to God as well as Jews. Granted. But once again we see that water baptism and Spirit baptism don't coincide.

Let's look now at the case of the Ephesian disciples in contrast to Apollos in Acts 18:24-19:7.

Now a Jew named Apollos, a native of Alexandria, came to Ephesus. He was an eloquent man, well versed in the scriptures. He had been instructed in the way of the Lord; and being fervent in spirit, he spoke and taught accurately the things concerning Jesus, though he knew only the baptism of John. He began to speak boldly in the synagogue; but when Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they took him and expounded to him the way of God more accurately. And when he wished to cross to Achaia, the brethren encouraged him, and wrote to the disciples to receive him. When he arrived, he greatly helped those who through grace had believed, for he powerfully confuted the Jews in public, showing by the scriptures that the Christ was Jesus.

While Apollos was at Corinth, Paul passed through the upper country and came to Ephesus. There he found some disciples. And he said to them, "Did you receive

the Holy Spirit when you believed?” And they said, “No, we have never even heard that there is a Holy Spirit.” And he said, “Into what then were you baptized?” They said, “Into John’s baptism.” And Paul said, “John baptized with the baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in the one who was to come after him, that is, Jesus.” On hearing this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. And when Paul had laid his hands upon them, the Holy Spirit came on them; and they spoke with tongues and prophesied. There were about twelve of them in all.

Notice the similarity between Apollos and these Ephesian disciples. They only knew the baptism of John the Baptist. They had not been baptized in Jesus’ name. But the Ephesian disciples were compelled to be water baptized – to be re-baptized – because John’s baptism was not adequate. But in the case of Apollos they did *not* re-baptize him, did they? He knew only John’s baptism, but they didn’t baptize him in the name of the Lord Jesus. Why not? The difference is that Apollos was “fervent in Spirit.” He had the Holy Spirit. He was regenerate. But the Ephesian disciples hadn’t even heard that there is a Holy Spirit. Therefore, they needed to submit to water baptism in Jesus’ name. It was the presence of the Spirit that made the difference in whether or not a person was a genuine, regenerate Christian. This shows that the key to being a Christian is the presence of the Holy Spirit in a person’s life.

The sacramentalist would respond that in Acts 18:25 when it says that Apollos was “fervent in Spirit,” that is not a reference to the Holy Spirit; it just means that Apollos was zealous – he had a spiritual disposition just as, for example, in Romans 12:11 Paul says, “Never flag in zeal, be aglow with the Spirit, serve the Lord.” The problem with this response is that Romans 12:11 does refer, I think, to the Holy Spirit. Similarly, Acts 18:25 is talking about a person who is filled with the Holy Spirit. That was the case for Apollos. So both of these – Romans 12:11 and Acts 18:25 – are talking about the presence of the Holy Spirit in a person’s life. This shows that it is the presence of the Holy Spirit that is the key to being a Christian. Notice, moreover, that when the Ephesian disciples did receive water baptism they did *not* receive the Holy Spirit in the act of water baptism. It was only *after* they were baptized in water and Paul laid hands upon them that they then received the Holy Spirit.

Look now at Acts 9:17-18. This is the story of Paul’s own conversion.

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, and took food and was strengthened.

Here, again, Paul first receives the Holy Spirit and then he is water baptized. They are not co-incident. Water baptism follows Spirit baptism.

Look at Acts 8, which is the reception of the Gospel by the Samaritans. Acts 8:4-8, 14-17:

Now those who were scattered went about preaching the word. Philip went down to a city of Samaria, and proclaimed to them the Christ. And the multitudes with one accord gave heed to what was said by Philip, when they heard him and saw the signs which he did. For unclean spirits came out of many who were possessed, crying with a loud voice; and many who were paralyzed or lame were healed. So there was much joy in that city.

Now when the apostles at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God, they sent to them Peter and John, who came down and prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit; for it had not yet fallen on any of them, but they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. Then they laid their hands on them and they received the Holy Spirit.

This is so strange a passage that it is difficult for any view of baptism to understand! What you have here is people who believed in the Gospel, they were baptized in water in the name of the Lord Jesus (this was an authentic Christian baptism), but they didn't receive the Holy Spirit until the apostles came down from Jerusalem and laid hands on them. Whatever interpretation you take of this unusual circumstance, the undeniable fact is that water baptism in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ was not co-incident with their reception of the Holy Spirit. Spirit baptism came later in this case, after water baptism.

In summary, when you look at the book of Acts carefully, what you discover is that Spirit baptism *never* coincides with water baptism! *Never*! There isn't one case in which water baptism and baptism in the Holy Spirit are co-incident. Rather, baptism serves as the culmination of a person's act of faith. It is the climax of a person's conversion to Christ.

We might compare in this regard 1 Peter 3:21. The author says, “Baptism . . . 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.” Baptism now saves you as an appeal to God for a clear conscience. Baptism is an expression of the believer's faith. It is his appeal to God. Baptism is an act of calling upon God. So baptism is not a means of grace. It is a means of faith. It is an expression of a person's faith in Christ and his being

initiated into the Christian faith. Baptism on the ordinance view, then, is not God's gift to man, rather it is man's calling out to God – an appeal to God. It is placing one's faith in him.

To summarize this second point then, water baptism doesn't necessarily coincide with Spirit baptism. In the book of Acts, it can come before, it can come after. There is no suggestion that by being water baptized you are baptized in the Holy Spirit and regenerated. So baptismal regeneration just doesn't have any support, it seems to me, in these instances in the book of Acts. Coupled with the first point that we talked about last week that all of the blessings attributed to water baptism are ours in virtue of faith alone, it seems to me that the view of baptism as an ordinance makes the best sense. It is the culmination of a person's conversion-initiation; an expression of that initiation into the Christian faith that is a sign of the inward conversion that has already taken place.

Next time we'll look at the question of who should be baptized – a question that also divides Christians. I look forward to being with you again next Sunday.¹

¹Total Running Time: 18:34 (Copyright © 2021 William Lane Craig)