

Whitton Avenue Distinctives

Week 2: Baptism

Introduction

Baptism is a much-contested issue among denominations. Baptist, Anabaptist, Church of Christ, Pentecostal, and other denominations believe only those who profess faith in Jesus Christ should be baptized, though they disagree over issues like the necessity and mode of baptism. Likewise, denominations that baptize infants dispute the meaning of this rite. The Lutheran church teaches that “when an infant is baptized God creates faith in the heart of that infant.”¹ Presbyterian and Reformed churches do not believe that the act creates faith in the child’s heart but acts as a sign and a seal of their inclusion in God’s covenant community.² The Roman Catholic church teaches that the faith of the church replaces the faith that the child lacks and that the act of baptism necessarily brings about spiritual regeneration for the infant.³

From these brief descriptions alone it is clear that studying every distinct view of baptism would be a dizzying endeavor. So our approach will simply be to walk through the New Testament’s teaching on baptism and share the interpretation of the text our church takes. Along the way we will address questions such as:

- What does baptism mean?
- Who should be baptized?
- Is baptism necessary for church membership?
- When is an appropriate age for baptism?

As we walk through these texts, let me emphasize that baptism itself should no more excite us than a random wedding ring found on the ground should excite us. What excites us is not the thing itself but what it represents. Baptism ultimately represents the believer’s union with Jesus Christ—his death, resurrection, and reign. This union is a work of the Spirit and is realized through the believer’s faith in Jesus. So the only reason to get excited about baptism is if we are excited about being one with Christ—our sins forgiven because of his death, eternal life born in us because of his resurrection, and our reign with him in the kingdom of God secure because of his defeat of sin, Satan, death, and the world. If our

¹ <http://www.lcms.org/faqs/doctrine#baptism>

² Westminster Confession of Faith, Chapter XXVIII

³ http://www.vatican.va/archive/ccc_css/archive/catechism/p2s2c1a1.htm
<http://www.catholiceducation.org/en/culture/catholic-contributions/the-sacraments-of-baptism-and-confirmation.html>

hearts rejoice in these truths, we will rejoice in this beautiful portrayal of that reality called baptism.⁴

An overview of the New Testament teaching on baptism

The Gospels

The Baptism of John

“In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” ... Then Jerusalem and all Judea and all the region about the Jordan were going out to him, and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.” (Matthew 3:1-2, 5-6)

John’s baptism was a baptism of repentance, rich with Old Testament significance. The wilderness and the river Jordan played significant roles in Israel’s history, especially in their days leading up to entering the Promised Land. John’s prophetic call to repentance outside of the religious establishment of temple worship and animal sacrifice suggested that the kingdom of God would not come through the existing religious leadership.

Those who chose to be baptized by John were declaring that they longed for the coming of God’s perfected, eternal kingdom and were turning away from their sins to prepare themselves for its coming.

“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.”
(Matthew 3:11–12)

John anticipates the King who will bring the kingdom of God, making clear that the more significant baptism to be experienced would be that with the Holy Spirit, not simply with water. This references Joel 2:28-29, which promises an outpouring of the Holy Spirit on all God’s people in the last days, giving further emphasis on the end-times kingdom of God that John was announcing.

⁴ “Baptism with the Spirit inaugurates us into the life of union with Christ. Baptism with water marks this outwardly... Repentance, water baptism, the forgiveness of sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit are seen as correlative aspects of the one reality of entrance into Christ, and thus into (the fellowship of) the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit (Mt. 28:19).” Sinclair Ferguson, *The Holy Spirit*, p. 195

The fact that our church of Anabaptist heritage could agree with this statement by a Presbyterian (with whom we disagree on the mode and recipients of baptism) communicates the common ground we can share with others amid our disagreement.

“He said therefore to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits in keeping with repentance. And do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ For I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham. Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.”

And the crowds asked him, “What then shall we do?” And he answered them, “Whoever has two tunics is to share with him who has none, and whoever has food is to do likewise.” Tax collectors also came to be baptized and said to him, “Teacher, what shall we do?” And he said to them, “Collect no more than you are authorized to do.” Soldiers also asked him, “And we, what shall we do?” And he said to them, “Do not extort money from anyone by threats or by false accusation, and be content with your wages.”” (Luke 3:7–14)

This interaction informs our understanding of baptism at two key levels. First, John clearly signals that the day of relying on genealogy have come to an end. Being sons of Abraham means nothing for “the axe is laid to the root of the trees.” Family affiliation means nothing when it comes to baptism, only personal repentance and bearing good fruit.

This gives particular challenge to the Presbyterian and Reformed views that conceptualize the children of believers as “covenant children” whose baptism is the sign and seal of the covenant just as circumcision was in the Old Testament. This view assumes a great degree of continuity to the covenants, whereas John’s words seem to suggest discontinuity, a shift in how God deals with whole families in his covenant community.⁵

Second, though this is by no means the main thrust of John’s words, this text gives a helpful guide to parents regarding when their children who confess faith in Christ might be prepared for baptism. John’s charge to “bear fruits in keeping with repentance” required a certain degree of maturity and development. Those seeking baptism had an understanding of how their possessions and work would be impacted by their repentance and new orientation to the kingdom of God.

Again, this is not the main point of the text, but the text does give parents a helpful paradigm to think through in considering whether their children have the understanding, independent thinking, and maturity to take this step of obedience.⁶

⁵ Throughout this study I will interact most with the Presbyterian and Reformed view, since I believe it has the strongest Biblical foundation of all the other views and since our church largely embraces the Reformed understanding of the gospel.

⁶ This has led one church to encourage parents to not press for baptism for their children until the age of 11. Certainly some children younger than 11 show great maturity and other children should wait longer. <http://www.hopeingod.org/sites/hopeingod.org/files/documents/Why%20Wait%20for%20Baptism.pdf>

The baptism of Jesus

“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, immediately he went up from the water, and behold, the heavens were opened to him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming to rest on him; and behold, a voice from heaven said, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.”” (Matthew 3:13–17)

Leon Morris wrote of this scene, “Jesus might well have been up there in front standing with John and calling on sinners to repent. Instead he was down there with the sinners, affirming his solidarity with them, making himself one with them in the process of the salvation that he would in due course accomplish.”⁷

“Jesus said to them, “You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or to be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?”” (Mark 10:38)

Jesus refers to his impending death for sinners as his baptism, a connection that will have great significance as the New Testament writers work out the meaning of baptism.

“And Jesus came and said to them, “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, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”” (Matthew 28:18–20)

Baptizing new believers—just as John the Baptist and Jesus’ disciples baptized the first followers—is a central component to the Great Commission that still defines the church’s mission. Though we do not have time to develop this, it must be pointed out that both the Great Commission and Jesus’ baptism share two of the most explicit references to the Trinity in the New Testament. The Father, Son, and Spirit each play a distinct role in saving God’s people, and this is reflected in the declaration to be given at baptism.

The main verb of the commission is to “make disciples,” and this is clarified by two participles: baptizing and teaching. This gives us deeper insight into the nature of baptism. It is an initiation into the people of God, the effects of which are worked out as new believers learn from mature believers how to live in obedience to Jesus. This solidifies why we believe that baptism should only be administered to those who have a credible testimony of repentance from sin and trust in Jesus Christ. It also explains why we see baptism as a necessity for church membership, as it is Christ’s commanded means of enfolding repentant sinners into the church family.

⁷ Quoted in Michael J. Wilkins, *Matthew* (NIVAC Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 140-141.

Acts

“And while staying with them he ordered them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the promise of the Father, which, he said, “you heard from me; for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.”” (Acts 1:4–5)

Jesus leaves no doubt to the nature of John the Baptist’s promise of the mightier one coming after him who would “baptize you with the Holy Spirit.” This promise would be carried out through the risen and ascended Christ’s pouring out of the Holy Spirit on his people at Pentecost.

“Let all the house of Israel therefore know for certain that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified.”

Now when they heard this they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, “Brothers, 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 will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself.”” (Acts 2:36–39)

“So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls. And they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.” (Acts 2:41–42)

Peter’s first sermon ended with a call for response echoing that of John the Baptist and Jesus: repent, believe, and be baptized. Note again that those who responded thus engaged in the life of the church—doctrine, fellowship, communion, and worship. This again should give guidance to the question of age for baptism.

“And the eunuch said to Philip, “About whom, I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?” Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning with this Scripture he told him the good news about Jesus. And as they were going along the road they came to some water, and the eunuch said, “See, here is water! What prevents me from 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. And when they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord carried Philip away, and the eunuch saw him no more, and went on his way rejoicing.” (Acts 8:34–39)

The Ethiopian eunuch’s urgent desire to be baptized and Philip’s willingness to baptize a new convert creates a necessary tension with the previous emphasis on caution in not baptizing children too soon. We should not, in the name of caution, squelch a child’s sincere desire to follow Christ in obedience by being baptized. Clearly this account is of a grown man, yet the spirit of “What prevents me from being baptized?” should be appreciated and encouraged by church leaders.

“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 so 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 taking food, he was strengthened.” (Acts 9:17–19)

Again we see an example of one baptized almost immediately after his conversion. As with most of these accounts in Acts, this should not be used to create rigid policies.⁸ Most of these situations involve highly unusual circumstances, such as God telling Ananias in a vision that he was sending Saul to him. With that being said, the immediacy of Saul’s baptism should not be lost on us as we consider baptizing adult converts.

“And the believers from among the circumcised who had come with Peter were amazed, because the gift of the Holy Spirit was poured out even on the Gentiles. For they were hearing them speaking in tongues and extolling God. Then Peter declared, “Can anyone withhold 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. Then they asked him to remain for some days.” (Acts 10:45–48)

Notice that, unlike other accounts in Acts, the pouring out of the Holy Spirit occurred before the new believers were baptized. This clarifies that the events of repentance, belief, filling with the Spirit, and baptism should be understood as components of a single initiation into relationship with God, not discrete and disconnected experiences. Thus baptism should be seen as naturally connected to one’s profession of faith in Christ. Yet the fact that these Gentile believers were Spirit-filled without being baptized calls into significant question the teachings of groups like the Church of Christ who believe that baptism is absolutely necessary for salvation.

The Letters

“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, 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. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. We know that our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin. For one who has died has been set free from sin. Now if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him.” (Romans 6:1–8)

⁸ See especially the messiness of the transition from John’s baptism to baptism with the Holy Spirit in Acts 19:1-7

This may be the most significant passage about baptism in the New Testament. Paul explicitly links our baptism with our union with Christ in his death and resurrection. The language of being “buried...with him” taps into the historical components of the gospel message: “that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures” (1 Corinthians 15:3–4).

The remainder of Romans 6 emphasizes the practical implications of our baptism. Our union with Christ means that we are dead to sin through his death and alive to God through his life. The Christian life is one of working out in real time the truth of our baptism. As we fight sin, seek daily forgiveness through Christ, and experience the beginnings of new life while still in this world, we are realizing our union with Christ.

Thus we should approach baptism as a deeply significant experience that portrays this spiritual reality and will be a signpost for the entirety of our Christian life.

“What I mean is that each one of you says, “I follow Paul,” or “I follow Apollos,” or “I follow Cephas,” or “I follow Christ.” Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul? I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius, so that no one may 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 anyone else.) For Christ did not send me to baptize but to preach the gospel, and not with words of eloquent wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power.” (1 Corinthians 1:12–17)

Those who practice infant baptism look to “household baptisms” such as this and that of the Philippian jailer’s household in Acts 16:31–34 as biblical evidence for infant baptism. Yet this is an argument from silence at best, as is the baptist contention that there were no infants baptized in these situations. Perhaps what should be learned from Paul’s words is that the gospel is the priority to the Christian life and ministry, not baptism. We should be hard pressed to break fellowship over baptism when the cross of Christ is the real central feature we share in common.

“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. For the body does not consist of one member but of many.” (1 Corinthians 12:12–14)

Scholars debate whether this references the spiritual reality of our baptism or actual water baptism. Either way, the significant point is that baptism into Christ is the equivalent to baptism into Christ’s body. We cannot separate the concept of baptism from Christian community, in which we learn to follow Jesus’ commands.

“See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ. For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, and you have been filled in him, who is the head of all rule and authority. 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. And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross.” (Colossians 2:8–14)

The Presbyterian/Reformed view connects circumcision and baptism with this verse. But notice that this speaks of spiritual circumcision, “made without hands” and the reference to the “circumcision of Christ” is a reference to his death, hence the connection with baptism as a sign of burial with the crucified Christ (rather than as a replacement of the sign and seal of physical circumcision).

“For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit, in which he went and proclaimed to the spirits in prison, because they formerly did not obey, when God’s patience waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was being prepared, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were brought safely through water. 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 good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers having been subjected to him.” (1 Peter 3:18–22)

In what way does baptism save us? As a display of trust in the gospel of Christ (“an appeal to God...”). It is not the water or even the rite of baptizing that saves but the faith in God for salvation that is represented by the rite.

Conclusion

–What does baptism mean?

Baptism is an outward display of our spiritual union with Jesus, specifically his death and resurrection. This is a union we experience by the Holy Spirit’s work through our faith in Jesus.

–Who should be baptized?

Those who profess faith in Jesus Christ should be baptized in obedience to Jesus’ command.

–Is baptism necessary for church membership?

Baptism is the initiating, public display of our union with Christ by faith and thus our inclusion into the family of God. So baptism should be required for membership in a local church family.

This should be heavily qualified by an affirmation that some denominations share our convictions about union with Christ by Spirit and faith without sharing our convictions about baptism. We must keep the gospel of Christ central, not baptism. We can enjoy Christian fellowship with all who have professed faith in Christ even if our differences regarding baptism have implications for church membership.⁹

–When is an appropriate age for baptism?

Every child is different and should be treated individually based on indicators like independent thinking, identity apart from parents, maturity, and understanding of adult life. In general the 11-13 age range is a typical coming-of-age time during which baptism should be encouraged. That is not to say that baptism at an earlier age should be forbidden for very mature children. However, a common experience in churches where young children are baptized is the desire for re-baptism when the child reaches teenage years. This is typically due to a sense that the childhood decision was compliance with parents rather than an independent decision. Such a situation can be avoided by showing caution until the child reaches a point of observable maturity in life and faith.

⁹ This is particularly challenging for those from a Presbyterian or Reformed background. A Baptist could join a Presbyterian church without agreeing with their stance on baptism, since Presbyterians also baptize adult converts and would view the Baptist's baptism as valid. Yet the reverse would not be true, since Baptists hold that baptism should take place after a person's profession of faith in Christ, not before it, and would not view a person's infant baptism as valid. At Whitton Avenue Bible Church we require members to be baptized after their conversion, which means re-baptism for those baptized as infants. We welcome into fellowship and church life (but not membership) those who feel conscience-bound not to take this step.