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Baptism: Its Meaning and Purpose

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In compliance with Christ's command (Matt. 28:19), Christians have always practiced baptism with water into the Triune name of God, marking the incorporation of the person baptized into the church as Christ's Body (I Cor. 12:12-13).

However, widely differing ideas about baptism exist among professing Christians. Some claim that it automatically washes away previous sin; some think that children are regenerated by it. At the other extreme, there are those who say that baptism does nothing more than symbolize a person's own profession of faith in God's cleansing grace.

The former views see divine power inherent in baptism – yet place it at the disposal of the church. The latter view shifts orientation to man's action and sees God performing nothing through baptism itself.

The Reformed faith disagrees with each of these lines of thought, holding that the perspective of God's inspired word on baptism is not only contrary to them, but also much clearer than debates over baptism sometimes pretend. So let us ask, what is the meaning of baptism? And what purpose does it serve?

A Hint from Historical Precedent

Many aspects of new Covenant teaching cannot be properly understood apart from their historical background in the Old Covenant. The comment that Jesus is "the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" or the fact that the temple veil was torn in two when Jesus died upon the cross are examples. Likewise, the Lord's Supper celebrated in the New Covenant is to be seen in the light of the Old Covenant's passover celebration (Luke 21:15-20; I Cor. 5:7-8; 10:16-17; 11:20-29). What Old Covenant precedent might there be for baptism?

Paul answers our question and helps us understand the theological meaning of baptism by pointing us to its historical precedent in Colossians 2:11-12. "In Him you were also circumcised – in putting off of the body of the flesh – not with a circumcision done with

hands, but with the circumcision performed by Christ, having been buried with Him in baptism...”

Christians have been circumcised spiritually (not done with hands), and this circumcision has been accomplished by Jesus Christ himself. What is this circumcision? Paul explains immediately: “having been buried with Him in baptism.”¹ Figuratively speaking, Christian baptism is the circumcision performed by Christ. Accordingly, by examining the religious rite of circumcision practiced in the Old Covenant, we can understand the meaning and purpose of baptism in the New Covenant.

1. Like Circumcision, Baptism Shows that We Belong to God as His People.

Circumcision was the mark that someone belonged covenantally to God. It distinguished a person from the unbelieving, Gentile world: “when a stranger sojourns with you and would keep the passover to the Lord, let all his males be circumcised, then let him come near and keep it; and he shall be as one that is born in the land – for no uncircumcised person shall eat of it” (Ex. 12:48).

Likewise, baptism is the sign which distinguishes God’s people from the rebellious world today. The words of the Great Commission (Matt. 28:18-20) require Christ’s disciples to be differentiated from the world by baptism. It is the mark of conversion to Christianity. Those who “received his word” were baptized and added to the church (Acts 2:41). Setting us apart from a world dead in sin, baptism summons us to walk in “newness of life” (Rom. 6:4).

2. Like Circumcision, Baptism Symbolizes Purification from Defilement.

Man’s sinful condition is called “the uncircumcision of your flesh” by Paul (Col. 2:13). Circumcision symbolized a cutting back and removal of that sinful nature. Thus circumcision was figuratively applied to the lips (Ex. 6:12, 30) and especially the heart (Jer. 4:4). The ancient external rite was literally applied to the male genital organ as an indication that everyone comes into this world at birth as sinfully unclean and unacceptable in God’s sight. There can be no “natural” hope for man’s salvation. He must rely solely on the supernatural, gracious work of God in his behalf.

Likewise, baptism points to the need for the “remission of sins” (Acts 2:38). It assumes our spiritually dirty condition before God. Thus Ananias said to Paul after his conversion, “arise and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling upon His name” (Acts 22:16). Baptism

¹ Water baptism is but the outward sign of spirit baptism. It is, of course, the inward reality of the Spirit’s work (not its external symbol of water) that effects the regeneration and union with Christ spoken of in this passage (buried, raised, and made alive “together with Him”) – cf. Rom. 8:9; Eph. 3:16-17; I John 4:13.

teaches us that, as filthy in the sight of God, our only hope is in His cleansing grace (cf. I John 1:9).

3. Accordingly, Like Circumcision, Baptism Points to Righteousness Imputed by Faith.

Paul tells us in Romans 4:11 that Abraham “received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had while he was in uncircumcision, that he might become the father of all them that believe... that righteousness be imputed unto them.” Abraham’s circumcision was God’s testimony in Abraham’s flesh that righteousness cannot be merited by man’s natural efforts – that it must be graciously imputed to the helpless sinner. Abraham was reckoned righteous, therefore, only by trusting in God’s promise and provision – by faith.

This is also the divine testimony in baptism. Those who wish to be justified in the sight of God must “repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ unto the remission of your sins”; those who do so are *believers* in God’s *promise* (Acts 2:38-44). “Having believed in God” for promised salvation, the Philippian jailer “was baptized” (Acts 16:30-34). Like Abraham’s circumcision, the jailer’s baptism was a divine sign of justification (righteousness, salvation) by faith.

We must note well that the signs of the covenant, whether circumcision or baptism, – being God’s signs and ordained by Him – are God’s testimony to God’s gracious work of salvation. They declare the objective truth that justification comes only by faith in God’s promise. Circumcision and baptism are not an individual’s personal, subjective testimony to having saving faith for himself. God Himself commanded that circumcision be applied to those whom *He* perfectly well knew would *not* have saving faith in Him (e.g., Ishmael in Gen. 17:18-27).

Likewise, in plenty of instances hypocrites who are not true believers have been baptized (cf. Heb. 6:2-6; e.g., Simon Magus in Acts 8:13, 20-23).² Even in such cases the covenantal sign was not invalidated; its divine testimony remained true – objectively declaring by circumcision or baptism that defiled sinners (Ishmael, Simon Magus) need God’s gracious cleansing, that justification can come only by faith in His promise.

4. Most Comprehensively Then, Like Circumcision, Baptism Signifies Covenantal Union and Communion with God.

² Some might object that, while God knowingly applied a sign of the Old Covenant to unbelievers (Like Ishmael or Esau), this would be inappropriate in the New Covenant. They say new Covenant signs are only for those we have reason to think are believers (by their profession of faith). Such reasoning is well meaning, but nonetheless unbiblical. God the Son knowingly applied a sign of even the New Covenant to the unbelieving "son of perdition," Judas Iscariot (Luke 21:20-21; Matt. 26:23-29).

God said to Abraham “This is My covenant between Me and you... every male among you shall be circumcised” (Gen. 17:10), and the substance of God’s covenant promise to Abraham was “to be a God unto you and unto your seed after you” (v. 7). Circumcision placed Abraham and his children in a covenantal relation with God that the unbelieving world did not enjoy. It marked them out as enjoying God’s saving promise in this world – as those about whom God could say “you alone have I known of all the families of the earth” (Amos 3:2). Because of this gracious covenant, Abraham’s children had communion with God. They assembled in the very presence of God. (Ex. 26:22; 29:42-43).

Similarly, Paul says that those who receive the sign of baptism have been “baptized into Christ Jesus” and are “united with Him” (Rom. 6:3, 5). They enjoy covenantal communion with the Savior as His people (e.g., Rev. 3:20), being “by one spirit baptized into one Body” (I Cor. 12:13) – a relationship which cannot be claimed by those in the unbelieving world. God’s people today assemble together in the very presence of God, His angels, and Jesus the mediator of the New Covenant (Heb. 12:22-24).

Here we must take note again of a common misunderstanding of circumcision and baptism, one which arises from a more fundamental, underlying misconception of what it means to have covenantal, underlying misconception of what it means to have covenantal union and communion with the Lord. To be covenantally united with God, although intended by God to bring favor and blessing to His chosen people, carries *as well* the threat of judgment and curse. God’s covenants involve *blessing and cursing*, depending upon whether one is a covenant-keeper or a covenant-breaker.

We see this two-sided character of the covenant in both the Old Covenant (e.g., Deut. 27-28; Josh. 8:34) as well as the New (e.g., I Cor. 11:27-32; Heb. 6:4-8). It was just because Israel alone enjoyed God’s loving covenant that the nation had to be judged for its sins (Amos 3:2). Likewise, if the Laodicean church will not repent, it must be rejected (Rev. 3:16).

To be in covenant with God does not automatically imply eternal salvation – certainly not for covenant-breakers. Thus “they are not all Israel who are of Israel” (Rom. 9:6), and even in the New Covenant not all who publicly profess Jesus as “Lord” are savingly known by Him (Matt. 7:21-23). So then, the signs of circumcision and baptism definitely bring their recipients into *covenant* with God (and what they signify is intended as blessing), but they are *not* thereby personal *guarantees of salvation*, except for covenant-keepers. The covenant signs can also bring their recipients under God’s dreadful judgment.

5. Like Circumcision, Baptism is Designed to be Applied to Believers and Their Households.

It is evident from Genesis 17:7-14 that God designed the sign of the covenant to be applied, not only to the believing adult Abraham, but also to his seed, indeed his entire household – “every male among you,” whether born in the house, purchased as a slave, Jewish or Gentile. All those who were part of Abraham’s house were covenantally consecrated (or “holy”) to God in virtue of their connection with Abraham the believer. Accordingly, the Jews circumcised their sons, even as *children* (on the eighth day). Moreover, since Abraham was to be the believing “father of many nations,” not simply of the Jews (Gen. 17:4-6; 12:3), the covenant promise – and its sign of circumcision – were for converted Gentiles as well (Ex. 12:48-49; cf. Gal. 3:7).

Since baptism is the New Covenant equivalent of circumcision, and since circumcision taught that the children of believers are included under God’s covenant, and since our covenant-keeping *God does not change His principles* (Ps. 89:34; Matt. 4:4; 5:18; Rom. 15:4; Jas. 1:17), we would fully expect that baptism should be applied – as was circumcision – to believers and their seed or households. This theological inference is inescapable. Further, it is precisely what we find taught in the New Covenant scriptures themselves.

On the day of Pentecost, Peter preached the risen Christ as the fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecies and covenants. Declaring God’s good news to the Jews – whose self-conception for centuries had been in terms of the Abrahamic covenant (cf. John 8:33, 39) – Peter called on his audience to repent and be baptized. And Peter conspicuously couched his invitation in the structure of God’s promise to Abraham, which we saw above: “For the promise is to you [as believers] and to your children [your seed], and to all that are afar off [the Gentiles]” (Acts 2:39).

The children of believers are to be baptized, then, and addressed as members of the covenant community, the church (e.g., Eph. 1:1; 6:1); Jesus said, “to such [infants] belongs the kingdom of God” (Luke 18:15-16).

Paul teaches us that, just like the case of the Old Covenant believer Abraham, the entire household of a New covenant believer is covenantally consecrated (“holy”) to the Lord (I Cor. 7:14).³ Thus when Lydia became a believer, not only was she herself baptized, but “also her household” (Acts 16:14-15) – as was the “household of Stephanas” (I Cor. 1:16).⁴

The Mode of Baptism Reflects Its Theological Meaning

³ It is sometimes considered an argument against infant baptism that its supporting premises would lead to the baptism of believers’ spouses as well. From I Cor. 7:14 we see that such an inference is, indeed, quite Biblical. An unbelieving spouse of a believer should, unless resistant, undergo baptism since he/she is covenantally “set apart” by being in the believer’s household.

⁴ It is *reading something into* the text in these cases to say that members of the households were baptized on the basis of a personal profession of faith. Scripturally and strictly speaking, individuals were baptized *in virtue of* being in the household. The belief of household members is not left implicit in the Bible (cf. Acts 10:2, 44:48; 11:14; 16:31-34).

Our preceding discussion has illustrated how the meaning of Christian baptism corresponds to that of Old Covenant circumcision. Baptism is, for believers and their households, a sign of being in covenantal communion with God as His people (distinguished from the world), an objective divine testimony to the fact that sinners need cleansing from defilement and can be justified only by faith in God's gracious promise and work. The Biblical mode of baptism – sprinkling or pouring⁵ – symbolically fits this message.

In the Old Testament God foreshadowed the redemptive work of Christ through various rites involving the *sprinkling* of blood. Accordingly, Hebrews 9:10 speaks of certain ceremonial rites connected with the Old Covenant tabernacle – such as sprinkling the blood of bulls (v. 13; cf. Num. 19:17-18), sprinkling the book and people with blood (v. 19; cf. Ex. 24:6, 8), and sprinkling the tabernacles and its vessels with blood (v. 21; cf. Lev. 8:19; 16:14). And Hebrews 9:10 calls these external regulations which anticipated the redeeming work of the Savior “various *baptisms* [washings] imposed until a time of reformation.”

The New Covenant speaks of our salvation as the “sprinkling of the blood of Jesus Christ” (I Peter 1:2; cf. Heb. 12:24). And this redemptive work is aligned with our Christian baptism: “let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance, having our hearts *sprinkled* from an evil conscience and having our body washed with pure water” (Heb. 10:22).

Moreover, in the Old Covenant scriptures God promised the coming of the regenerating Holy Spirit in terms of *pouring* and sprinkling: “I will pour out My Spirit upon all flesh” (Joel 2:28-29). “I will sprinkle clean water on you... I will give you a new heart... I will put My Spirit within you to walk in My statutes” (Ezek. 36:25-28).

Accordingly the New Testament speaks of our salvation in terms of the “pouring out” of the Holy spirit: “Being therefore exalted to the right hand of God and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, He has poured forth this which you see and hear” (Acts 2:33; cf. 10: 44-45; 11:15-16). And this redemptive act is clearly called *baptism* by Jesus: “John indeed baptized with water, but you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days hence” (Acts 1:5; cf. Matt. 3:11; Acts 11:16; I Cor. 12:13).

Baptism by sprinkling or pouring, then, points to God's covenant wherein helpless, polluted sinners are sprinkled clean by the redemptive blood of Jesus Christ and renewed by the pouring out of the Holy Spirit. In harmony with what we have seen previously, baptism is a

⁵ Contrary to a mistaken but often heard claim, the Greek word “baptizo” does not necessarily (and at times cannot) mean to immerse. See the Septuagint (Greek translation) of Lev. 14:6, 51; Joshua 3:13, 15; Ruth 2:14; Dan. 4:33. Also see the New Testament at Luke 11:38; mark 7:3-5. It is highly unlikely that there was enough spare (non-drinking) water within the city of Jerusalem to immerse three thousand people on one day (cf. Acts 2:41). The use of the Greek word translated “into” in baptism accounts like Acts 8:38-39 cannot prove immersion (the word can legitimately be translated “to,” “unto,” “toward”) – unless it proves that the eunuch as well as Philip were immersed, since “they both went down into the water”! That baptism symbolizes being buried and raised with Christ (Rom. 6:4) does not require a visual picture for the mode of baptism – immersion down into water and emergence up from it; after all, Jesus Himself was not buried in a grave dug out down in the ground, but on a shelf in a cave. Furthermore, the immersionist “picture” does not also take account of our being “crucified with Him” – which is equally part of the passage (vs. 6).

testimony to salvation by God's initiative and promise, anticipated in the Old Covenant and accomplished through the New Covenant work of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit.

Efficacy of the Sacraments

Baptists take a *minimalist*, subjective view of baptism and the Lord's Supper, seeing them merely as "ordinances" (not "sacraments") which are nothing more than a memorial to the work of Christ, a testimony to the gospel truth and visible sign of a person's (subjective) faith in it. By contrast the word of God presents the sacraments as a true "*means of grace*" which, through the efficacious work of the Holy spirit, convey a blessing to believing recipients – those who keep God's covenant.

Notice how Paul speaks of the sacrament: "*The cup of blessing* which we bless, is it not the communion of the blood of Christ?" (I Cor. 10:16). The sacrament actually *does something* in this case *blessing* covenant-keepers; but Paul also realized that the sacrament carries a corresponding threat of *curse* for unworthy partakers (I Cor. 11:29).

Far from being superfluous, then, the sacraments intend to convey a distinct blessing beyond that provided by the word alone. In addition to being a sign of the covenant of grace, they also function as a confirmatory *seal* of it. Notice what Paul says: "And he [Abraham] received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had yet being uncircumcised" (Rom. 4:11).

The sacrament confirms or authenticates ("seals") that which it points to ("signifies"). It is God's reassurance to us that sinners are acceptable to Him by means of faith in His promise – parallel to the oath which God added to His word of promise to Abraham (cf. Heb. 6:13-19). This *reassurance* is provided, of course, only for those who truly keep God's covenant in faith.

At the other extreme from Baptist conceptions, there are *maximalist* views of the sacraments. Roman Catholicism sees the sacraments as necessary – not simply by God's precept and as conveying the distinct blessing of sealing God's promise, but as the very *means of salvation*. The elements of the sacraments are thought to be inherently efficacious in virtue of the church being the depository and dispensary of God's grace. Thus baptism works automatically to wash away previous sins and will bring its recipient salvation (*provided* such is not "blocked by mortal sin").

Lutheranism says that, when they are properly applied, the sacraments are *in themselves* efficacious to those who are *susceptible* to their blessing: this susceptibility amounts to faith in adults, but simple nonresistance in infants. Accordingly, baptism automatically regenerates infants.

Quite opposite of these ideas, the word of God teaches us that the saving grace signified by the sacraments exists prior to them and is not produced by them. That is, *the* saving benefit of the sacraments is available apart from *them* – thus they are not necessary for salvation.

Moreover, the efficacy of the sacraments resides *in the presence and work of the Holy Spirit* (not in the church or the elements or their proper administration). It is through His discriminating, divine agency that the sacraments accomplish their work (either blessing or cursing). Accordingly, they do not bless unworthy recipients.

When Peter speaks of baptism saving us, he immediately explains: “*not* the washing away of bodily pollution [external surface dirt], but the appeal made to God by a good conscience through the resurrection of Jesus Christ” (I Peter 3:21). Without a good conscience through Christ’s saving work, the external rite brings no saving blessing.

The sacrament brings blessing (rather than curse) when an inward, spiritual condition matches the symbolism of the outward act. As Paul said: “neither is that circumcision which is outward, in the flesh. But... circumcision is that of the heart, by the Spirit, not the letter – whose praise is not of men, but of God” (Rom. 2:28-29).

Conclusion: Baptism’s Testimony and Assurance

Given an understanding of the Biblical meaning and purpose of baptism, we can draw of few significant conclusions, things that should come to mind at the celebration of baptism (whether our own or that of others).

1. **Baptism issues an evangelistic call.** Like circumcision, it testifies that we are all born in sin and, as such, are unclean and unacceptable in the sight of God. Baptism also points to the mercy of God which washes sinners of their pollution and makes them graciously acceptable to Him through the sprinkling of Christ’s blood and regenerating outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Our only hope is in God’s gracious promise of redemption, received by faith. So baptism summons unbelievers to trust in the Savior.
2. **Baptism issues a sanctifying call.** Those who are baptized need to demonstrate that they are covenant-keepers, those who have living faith in the Savior and seek to serve Him with their lives. As with circumcision, this is true of adults just as much as with children! Baptism conveys blessing only to the faithful, whenever and wherever their baptism was administered. It must not be viewed as a magical rite by which to manipulate God. It only works to bring saving blessing when the recipient of the baptism responds to God’s claim upon his/her life with covenant-keeping faith and obedience.

3. **Baptism issues a call to covenant faithfulness.** If you are a believer, have you and *your children* been baptized? The signs of God's covenant are not optional, as though subject to our own imagined meaning or imagined value. To despise those signs is in itself to despise God's *very covenant* (cf. Gen. 17:10, 14; Ex. 4:24-26; John 6:53; Luke 22:20; I Cor. 10:16; 11:27). You need for yourself and your household to affirm and enjoy the privilege of standing in a covenantal relationship with God through baptism. He is the Lord of your family and claims your children as His own. You likewise need to live in every area of your life (family, vocation, finances, education, social relationships, recreations, art, politics, etc.) as someone who is under the mark of God's covenant and thereby responsible to obey the Lord at every point. Our lives are completely His.

4. **Baptism powerfully communicates comfort to the faithful.** Whether baptized as an adult convert or as a helpless child, the rite of baptism offers reassurance (whether at the time of administration or later) that God is a forgiving God and will indeed prove true to His promises to those who keep His covenant. There is in baptism not only a visual *reinforcement* of the gospel message, but more importantly a *confirming* (sealing) inward work of the Holy Spirit which strengthens our hearts in the condemning presence of sin, authenticating the unfailing promise of salvation from our covenant Lord. It is thereby truly a means of grace for us.

