

The Splish Splash of God's Salvation: The Meaning of Baptism for God's Community



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What is Baptism?

When Jesus began his public ministry he sought out his preaching cousin John, who was out in the desert by the Jordan River baptizing people. Against John's protests, Jesus was baptized his cousin and Jesus heard the Father announce that He was pleased. But what is so important about baptism?

When the people in Jerusalem heard Peter say repent and be baptized, the practice of baptism took on new meaning. Many Jewish people of the first century practiced taking ritual baths. In fact, even on the day that Peter preached many in that large crowd on the way up to the temple, stopped at one

of the washing pools on the lower slopes of the temple mount provided for worshippers. But what is baptism really?

When Luke tells the stories of the first attempts to speak the gospel, places in Judea, in the deserts south of Jerusalem, up in the Samaritan Hills, or down on the coastal plain in towns of Joppa or in the cities like Caesaria, the resounding response to the good news of Jesus Christ is to accept that message through baptism. People in Jerusalem, Samaria, Joppa, Ethiopia—even Roman military officers embrace God's work by being baptized. But what is baptism?

When Paul writes to young congregations of believers throughout the Roman empire encouraging them remain steadfast in their faith or teaching them to live ethically pure and holy lives or chastising them for allowing dissension and disagreement to fracture their relationship to one another, he almost always does the same thing. He reminds them of the gospel of Jesus Christ and he reminds of their baptism. So what does baptism mean?

Today baptism seems to be sidelined from the front action of Christian proclamation and Christian living. For some this move comes as a way to ignore something embarrassing. Certainly there have been plenty of bruising debates about baptism that distort Christian witness. Indeed, argumentation about has brought death (for example, the Anabaptists in the 16th century) or fierce fragmentation (for example, the American frontier). And so it could be understandable to say that the best thing to do is just leave the whole idea alone.

Still others sideline baptism from the robust place it possessed in early Christianity and at other times in the church's life by making baptism almost a magical thing. Some Christians have taught, explicitly or implicitly, that just by saying words and placing a person in water that baptism itself becomes the way of salvation and life. Surely, baptism is vitally important; it is why we are exploring in this essay. But by creating a understanding that baptism does the saving, the power and role of baptism loses the vital source of life that God designed for it to play in transforming human beings.

Starting with God

One central idea addresses both of these "sidelining" tendencies. And this idea is the why we see the distinctive place that baptism held in early Christianity. Here it is: Baptism is only getting wet, a washing of

the body, unless we understand its connection to the person and message Jesus.¹ Whatever else we can say about baptism we must first begin with an understanding that it is the powerful and gracious action of God that is being brought upon a person through baptismal waters.

To say it another way, Christian baptism cannot be properly understood or practiced without making the connection between baptism and Christ. God is the active source. He is the One who ushers in salvation and works out transformation in our lives. Baptism is the witness of God's saving action toward us. So understanding the relationship between baptism and God's work is important. 20th century theologian Karl Barth helps to mark the distinction between the two:



“Baptism is holy and hallowing . . . [b]ut it is neither God, nor Jesus Christ, nor the covenant, nor grace, nor faith, nor the Church. It bears witness to all these as the event in which God in Jesus Christ makes a [person] His child and a member of His covenant, awakening faith through His grace and calling a man to life in the Church. Baptism testifies to a [person] that this event is not his fancy but is objective reality which no power on earth can alter and which God has pledged Himself to maintain in all circumstances.”²

And for Alexander Campbell, he would say nearly the same thing 80 years earlier focusing on the assurance that baptism brings of God's work:

“[Baptism] is also a solemn pledge and a formal assurance on the part of our Father, that he has forgiven all our offences – a positive, sensible, solemn *seal* and *pledge* that, through faith in the blood of the slain Lamb of God, and through repentance, or a heartfelt sorrow for the past, and a firm purpose of reformation of life, by the virtues of the great Mediator, we are thus publicly declared forgiven, and formally obtain the assurance of our acceptance and pardon, with the promised aid of the Holy Sprit to strengthen and furnish us for every good thought, and word, and work.”³

Thus baptism is more than symbolic, though it is a symbol. It is more than symbolic because it declares the good news of deliverance and announces the advance of God's kingdom. Baptism is the sign of God's action in the life a believing person that ushers one into Jesus Christ. It is an objective reality that assures persons of God's forgiveness and pardon. In short, baptism reflects the warp and woof of God's action as He weaves us into the tapestry of His story.

¹ This connection is a vital one as nearly every New Testament text on baptism makes clear. G. R. Beasley-Murray, in his comprehensive work *Baptism in the New Testament*, notes that “in every place except Heb. 10:22 it is unambiguously stressed that it is the Name of Christ, the resurrection of Christ, the Holy Spirit or the Word of God or of Christ that brings the new creation into being.” 265.

² Karl Barth, *The Teaching of the Church Regarding Baptism* (Wipf & Stock, reprint, 1948), 14.

³ Alexander, Campbell, *Christian Baptism: With It's Antecedents and Consequences*. (Bethany, 1853), 256.



Five Threads

What God does through baptism is rich in metaphor and mystery. No simple explanation or single idea can adequately capture its meaning. Scripture offers multiple images or themes regarding baptism. At first those themes can appear to be confusing, but woven together a theology of baptism offers much to sustain Christian identity and life.

One way to think of these themes is to consider each theme as a single thread within a tapestry. And like the varied threads that give texture and color and images within a woven work of art, each thread offers something distinct. Though related to each other, each particular thread

within the tapestry of baptism presents a particularly vibrant color and strength to the artistry and the usefulness of the work.

So to gain some insight about the tapestry of baptism we explore the individual strands or threads that comprise the New Testament's witness to baptism.⁴

Like the multiple strands of thread that are woven together to create a tapestry, so the biblical themes regarding baptism weave an array of meanings that sustain Christian identity and life.

1. Participation in Jesus' death and resurrection (Identity)

As the identifying mark of a God-oriented life, baptism is the way in which a person participates with Jesus' sacrificial death and resurrection. The language of 2 Corinthians 5:17 is helpful here. When we become identified with Christ we are a new creation. This new life comes through the reconciliation that God initiates through Jesus' death and resurrection.



Baptism marks this identification; it is "the acted parable of His death" and life.⁵ This new life and identity are wrapped up in the way of Jesus. Jesus relinquished all the glorious trappings of divine life, took on human form, endured death, was buried in a tomb, and then was raised to walk a new life. In participating in Christian baptism a person takes up the same path of relinquishment, obedience, and life characterized by God's values. Through baptism a person declares herself dead, and through immersion in water the old person is buried, and in the rising up out of the water, the person begins a new life.

James McClendon speaks of the narrative quality of baptism. He notes that baptism speaks first of all to Jesus' story — his commitment to God's agenda, a commitment that leads to death and resurrection. But baptism also speaks to our story — "as a brother or sister takes this step the narrative of his or her own life is brought out of obscurity, laid before God in repentance and faith, and decisively turned into God's new path in the company of the community."⁶

⁴ In 1982, the World Council of Churches published a paper called "Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry" (Faith and Order Paper No. 111). The paper served as an attempt to find a common ground for Christian people on the practice of baptism, the Lord's Supper, and church leadership. I am indebted to a subsection on baptism for framing the five threads presented here.

⁵ Barth, 18.

⁶ James McClendon, *Systematic Theology: Ethics* (Abingdon, 1986).

The importance of this identification is larger than the act of baptism itself. When a person comes to the church and asks for baptism, this request includes the commitment to a way of death. Indeed, as Jesus taught, “if any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me” (Mark 9.26). Baptism is a joyous thing, but that which precedes baptism is not joy, it is relinquishment.

Anyone who desires to follow the way of Jesus marks the beginnings of that walk through participating in baptism – an identification with Jesus’ death and resurrection. There were no “unbaptized Christians” in the earliest church!

Scriptures to Study:

Mark 8.34-35

Ephesians 2.5-6

Romans 6.1-11

Colossians 2.11-15

2. Cleansing and Remission of Sin (Hope)

The gospel message is first an imperative to alter our life’s direction to conform with God’s action and will. The word used for this change is a word often misconstrued and loaded down with all kinds of baggage. But it is an important word for a vital and life-giving challenge. The word is “repent.”

Interestingly, the word repent is really a word that means to change direction or to alter one’s course. And that is why it is so important. A person who desires the way of Jesus comes to a recognition that the current path of life is a path that leads toward despair. And that despair is deeply rooted in human frailty and sin. How does one find release from sin and mark the turning or change of direction for one’s life?

Going back to the teachings of John the Baptist in the Judean desert, the baptism he called people to was a baptism of “repentance for the remission of sins” (Mark 1.4). The word baptism itself is a Greek word that means “to wash.” It could be used to describe washing dishes or to mark the washing God does to the person who has chosen to alter or turn their life toward God’s agenda and leave a past life – in the past.

Of course, by washing we should reckon with the deep-down cleaning we humans require. The reformer, Martin Luther, uses strong, vivid language to strike home God’s action toward us. “Your baptism is nothing less than grace clutching you by the throat: a grace-full throttling,



by which your sin is submerged in order that [you] may remain under grace. Come thus to [your] baptism. Give [yourself] up to be drowned in baptism and killed by the mercy of [your] dear God, saying: ‘Drown me and throttle me, dear Lord, for henceforth I will gladly die to sin with [your] Son.’”⁷

Sounds like trying to bath a cat! Yet Luther understands well the radical movement or turning that repentance reflects and does not hesitate to note that we must relinquish ourselves to God’s work.

So baptism reflects God’s cleansing or washing action in our lives. As we might wash our clothes or our dishes, God washes our very being. He scrubs us clean and suffocates that which would destroy us in the waters of His Spirit. Thus baptism brings forgiveness of sin, pardon and release, and restores us to hope.

⁷ Martin Luther, as quoted by Karl Barth in *The Epistle to the Romans*, (Oxford University Press, 1933), 194.

Scriptures to Study:

Acts 2.38, 22.16

1 Corinthians 6.11

Hebrews 10.22

1 Peter 3.21

3. Receiving the gift of the Spirit (Ministry)

Speaking of God's Spirit introduces us to another thread in the tapestry of baptism. The witness of the New Testament makes a close connection between the practice of baptism and the presence and activity of the Holy Spirit. That connection is reflected both in the elements of baptism – water and Spirit – as well as in the reception of the Spirit. When a person is baptized it is not merely water, but the very Spirit of God that engulfs the candidate. And it is this act of baptism that marks the receiving of the Spirit of God as a sign of God's commitment. God will complete what he has started in Jesus Christ and in the church. The Holy Spirit's presence is the evidence of God's pledge to us.



Much confusion exists as to "how" the Spirit is received. And the witness of the New Testament itself offers different models. In some cases the arrival of the Spirit comes before baptism (Acts 10.47); in other occasions the Spirit comes after baptism (Acts 8.13-17). These earliest times of the church, however, gave way to the normative theology that is expressed in Paul: "For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body – Jews or Greeks, slaves or free – and we were all made to drink of one Spirit" (1 Corinthians 12.13).

That is to say, that Christian baptism – the one baptism of Ephesians 4.5 – uses water but it is also of the Spirit as well. When a person is baptized "in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Matthew 28.19) the Spirit is present as the agent of baptism as well as One who is received as a gift.

In receiving God's Spirit a person comes to have a part to play in the church's life. Not unlike the welcomed houseguest who comes with a gift to their host, the Spirit who comes to live within a person, brings gifts as well. And those gifts are not for the person alone. Such gifts are to be shared with others as an extension of Jesus himself to the world.

Scriptures to Study:

Acts 2.38-39

1 Corinthians 12

Ephesians 1.13-14

4. Coming into the community of God (Community)

Baptism also marks our solidarity with Jesus Christ and with believers – past, present, future. The practice of baptism is evidence of the oneness of the church. Through baptism a person becomes one with Christ and becomes a vibrant part of the people of God. Or, to use another phrase, our union with Christ in baptism marks our union with the whole body of Christ – a mighty testament to the oneness (or catholicity) of the church.



The apostle Paul drives this point home in the Galatian letter. He has become so identified with Christ that he can claim “I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me.” This intimate identification is rooted in the reality of what occurs with baptism.

This oneness with Christ is not a oneness between Paul and Christ, but the formation of a radically different community—a community that demonstrates unity and solidarity. As Paul will state a little later in the Galatian letter: “For in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ” (Gal. 3.26-28).

Another metaphor from the New Testament is the idea of new birth. Like a baby born into a family, baptism marks the birth—a birth that is from above. Jesus speaks in this way to Nicodemus in John’s gospel. “No one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit” (John 3.5).

Scriptures to Study:

John 3.1-17
Ephesians 2.18
Ephesians 4.1-6
Galatians 3.26-28

5. Initiation into God’s kingdom (Ethics)

God is at work in the world engaged in redemptive work among people and nations. This redemptive work by which God challenges the status quo of brokenness, greed, pride, and human despair, is marked by the announcement that God is present in our world, that God is transforming people to live in a community that witnesses an alternative vision in the world, and is at work bringing health and healing. The practice of baptism is the sign of a person’s allegiance to this alternative way of life.

Participating in God’s agenda requires repentance and the confessional engagement of the whole self in what God is doing in the world. It is a way of obedience. Baptism is the sign of that repentance and engagement. We no longer live to ourselves. We were dead but now we are alive to participate in an altered reality.

This new reality—God’s kingdom—is a way that is characterized what by Jesus himself taught and modeled. Luke’s gospel gives us a picture of this way as Jesus teaches in the synagogue: “The

Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor” (Luke 4.18-19). Or, for example, in the opening statements of Mark’s gospel: “Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, ‘The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news’” (Mark 1.14b-15).

Paul reflects on this new reality in his words to the Galatians: “As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew nor Greek, there is no longer slave or



free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus" (Gal 3.27-28). The historic distinctions that separate people—ethnicity, economic status, and gender—all assume a secondary value to the new way of Jesus.

However, participating in God's kingdom, begins with personal actions, choices, and attitudes. Consistently, throughout Paul's letters, when baptism is referred to, it is to call Christian people to living peaceably with one another, to exercise sexual and moral restraint, to act with integrity in business, and to honor family relationships. Baptism is not merely something that a Christian looks back to as an event in the past; baptism makes a lasting claim on the present. Our baptism marks us as God's people and as God's people we are called to live lives worthy of such a calling (Eph. 4.1).

Scriptures to Study:

Colossians 3.1-11

Galatians 3.26-29

Conclusion

I was baptized many years ago in a small, Oklahoma church by my father. What I knew as a child was quite limited. But I knew that God loved me and that I wanted to respond to that love. I also knew that God's love had been acted out in Jesus' life, death, burial, and resurrection. And that story was so compelling that I wanted to identify with it completely. And so I entered the waters of baptism.

Years have passed since then. I have come to know theological truth about baptism and I have come to know more Scripture. The practice of baptism creates a beautiful tapestry that is rich and full of meaning that informs the practice of faith. Even so, the quest to know God more fully goes on. The mystery of living out the Christian faith continues to take shape. I will never fully know or understand God. But because of the God's gift of baptism I can live with confidence. And with rich tapestry of Scripture's wisdom about baptism I find so much to give shape to my attempt to interpret the world.

And, of course, one more thing is for certain. The witness of my baptism, the proclamation of the gospel's truth in my life years ago still is still echoing today. For though baptism may be a one time event—a simple splash in a pool—in a person's life, the claim it makes on our hearts and the demand it makes of our lives, shapes us for all our days.

