

Buried with Christ in Baptism

June 24th, 2012

Colossians 2:8-15

"¹¹In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, ¹²having 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."

In the past year, we have been trying to stress and focus our energies on the mission that Jesus entrusted to His followers:

"¹⁸All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

Part of this mission involves baptizing. The risen, all-authoritative King Jesus invokes His authority and promises His presence with us to the end of age to make disciples of Jesus, *baptizing* them. So this is not a small, insignificant thing! It's not as though Jesus is making a suggestion here: "Hey, it's no big deal, but if you have a chance, maybe think about getting baptized, and maybe baptize some others too?" It's not a suggestion! Jesus commands that His disciples demonstrate their commitment to following Him, that they identify themselves with Him and His people, through baptism. So, for the sake of our faithfulness to the mission, we better have clarity on this issue of baptism, right?

And in my nine years in this church, because of the testimonies of those who have been baptized as well as conversations with those considering being baptized, I believe we have a lack of clarity on this. We leaders bear some responsibility here; I don't think we've instructed you very well or consistently on this subject. So I'd like to make a step towards correcting that today, both to give instruction and to help us celebrate more intelligently with Brian and Carol and Vanessa.

The three questions I'd like to consider are, what is the meaning of baptism? Who should be baptized? And when should a person be baptized? This is just a primer, but I hope it will be helpful.

What is Baptism?

So what is the meaning of baptism? What does it represent, what is the purpose of it? I should make really clear up front that baptism isn't an act or event that saves anyone from their sin. This is an error that is made mainly, but not only, in the Roman Catholic Church: the belief that the waters of baptism have saving, justifying power in and of itself, apart from faith in the one being baptized. That's not true, and it's very harmful and destructive to believe or advance such a teaching.

Being baptized is not necessary for salvation (I'll make a clarification about that later). We know that from a lot of places in Scripture, but you can see it here in Colossians:

"²¹And you, who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, ²²he has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him, ²³if indeed you continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel that you heard..."

Because the record of your sin-debt was placed in the hands of Jesus and nailed to the cross (2:13-14), sinners can have that record cancelled, can be clothed with the righteousness of the sinless Son of God, can be reconciled to the God whom you have offended, be adopted in His family, if you *have faith* (not, if you believe plus...). ***In Him*** you have been filled (given fullness, made complete, 2:10).

Not Salvation, but a Symbol of Salvation

So, baptism doesn't save. What is the point, then? Baptism is an outward, visible, public demonstration of our union with Jesus in His death, burial and resurrection. Look at verse 12 "...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." Baptism isn't what saves or unites with Jesus, but it's an outward expression of faith: "through faith in..." (more on this phrase later).

When the person baptized goes down into the water, it's a picture of the old, rebellious, hardened, apathetic, hostile heart of a sinner going down into the grave and being buried. Coming up out of the water pictures being raised with Christ to walk in newness of life (Romans 6:4). The old, hardened, apathetic heart has been replaced by a new heart, one filled with warmth and affection and desire and hope and admiration and trust and obedience to Jesus. It's a symbol of the new birth: "¹⁷Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come" (This is why we baptize by immersion, because it pictures this transformation so dramatically).

Baptism does not cause that transformation; it depicts what has happened in a sinner's life, "through faith in the powerful working of God." Baptism expresses that faith visibly, the way a wedding ring visibly expresses and represents a marriage. When a man says, "With this ring, I thee wed," he doesn't mean that putting the ring on the finger is what makes someone married. It shows and symbolizes the covenant of marriage and the vows that have been made. So it is with baptism: the "vows" of being in covenant with Jesus are faith and repentance, and baptism depicts that visibly.

Who Should be Baptized?

Now, who then should be baptized? The united answer of our elder team is, only those who have faith in Jesus; those who are disciples of Jesus (Matthew 28:19). But there are many godly, evangelical, Bible-believing individuals and churches who do not share this conviction with us. They believe that baptism is for those who have come to Jesus in faith, "and the infants of one, or both, believing parents."

To put it as simply as possible, those who embrace infant baptism would say that there appears to be in the New Testament a correspondence between circumcision and baptism. Just as circumcision was given as a sign to the "children of the covenant" in the Old Testament, so baptism -- the new sign of the covenant -- should be given to the "children of the covenant" today. And in making this argument, they often appeal to this text in Colossians:

"¹¹In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, ¹²*having been buried* with him in baptism..." So you see the connection between circumcision and baptism: "You were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands...having been baptized..." There is much more to say about this point than I can say now, but let me tell you the main reason why I am not persuaded by this argument.

First, the text here is clearly not talking about the physical act of circumcision, which was given to all male infants, without regard to faith in the infant. But Paul isn't talking about that; he is talking about a circumcision made without hands, a spiritual circumcision. That's the parallel: not baptism and the physical act of circumcision, but baptism and the spiritual circumcision of the heart. So the connection between physical circumcision and baptism is tenuous, because Paul isn't referring to the physical act of circumcision.

"Through Faith..."

The proponents of infant baptism doesn't adequately address (in my estimation) the big difference that exists between how people became a part of the covenant community in the Old Testament, and how that happens today in the church. Being counted among God's covenant people does not happen now (as was the case with Israel) by being born into a particular family or ethnic people. Entry into the *new* covenant community, the Church, does not happen biologically, but by new birth

and faith in Christ. That is what Paul says about baptism here in our text: "¹²having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him *through faith in the powerful working of God...*"

Those two words, "through faith," are the defining explanation of *how* we are buried and raised with Christ in baptism. And that is not something infants experience. Faith is a conscious experience of the heart yielding to and embracing the work of God in Christ. Infants aren't capable of that, and therefore infants are not fit subjects of baptism. Paul shows the same way of thinking about baptism and faith in Galatians 3: "²⁶In Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. ²⁷*For* as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ."

The word "for" is clearly creating a very close link between faith, baptism, and putting on Christ: Since you were baptized into Christ, therefore you are all sons of God through faith. This isn't true of infants. You simply cannot say of an infant, "In baptism, you showed that you are a child of God through faith. You cannot say, "As many infants as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ (cf. Ephesians 4:24, Romans 13:14). And that is why we believe that only believers in Jesus -- and not their children -- should be baptized "into Christ".

If your baptism was not "through faith" -- if it was not an outward expression of inward faith -- then it was not a baptism. And I would urge you to consider these texts, weigh the arguments (and there are more!), and ask the Holy Spirit about whether you who have been "baptized" (try not to be offended by the quotation marks) as infants should acknowledge that it was not a baptism and submit yourself to baptism "through faith." I'm not saying you're not a Christian, but I don't think this is something you should lazily ignore (well, if I'm not going to go to hell over this, why bother?). This is not essential, but it is important, as the Great Commission demonstrates.

When Should You be Baptized?

Finally (and briefly), when should a person be baptized? If, as we have seen, baptism is an expression of faith in Jesus, if it symbolizes union with Jesus in His death and resurrection and the reality of one being a new creation in Christ, then baptism should occur at the time a person believes. Baptism identifies us with Jesus and His people, it is an initiating act, representing the start of one's Christian life.

We see that play out through the book of Acts, as the early church acts out the mission Jesus charged them with, you repeatedly see the apostles calling those who have trusted in Christ to be baptized: "⁴¹So those who received his word were baptized..." (cf. 8:12, 8:36, 9:18, 10:47, 16:15, 16:33, 18:8, 19:5, 22:16).

So it's vital to stress that baptism does not save people, but there is something alarming about a professing follower of Jesus who has not or will not submit to baptism. The wedding ring doesn't make one married, but if you asked Michelle at the church picnic why she wasn't wearing her wedding ring and she said, "I don't really like wearing my ring out in public," I think that's a little shady. I'd be wanting to hack your email and get a record of your texts, you know what I mean?

In the same way there is something unsettling about you if you're saying, "I'm in Jesus, I'm among the covenant people, I am a member of the church, a follower of Jesus, a new creation, but I haven't publicly identified with Him as He commands His followers to do." Unless you're prepared to show me biblically how I have erred in my understanding of what the Scriptures say regarding baptism -- to show me biblically why your infant baptism was in fact a legitimate baptism in Jesus' eyes -- then you're walking in active, willful disregard of a clear command of Jesus...and that is not a safe place to be.

I don't want to be harsh here, because it's at this point where I think we have really lacked understanding on baptism. So many times I hear, "Yeah, I do trust Jesus, I'm committed to following Him, I've given

Him my life, but I don't feel like I am ready..." Ready for what? To never commit a sin again in your life post-baptism? We won't be sinless until we meet Jesus in glory (1 John 3:2). If that's you, please hear me say (in love), get over yourself! What we're celebrating in the baptismal waters is not how awesome you are, how far you've come, how well you are living, how much you have climbed the ladder of sanctification. It's about you being saved by the grace of God, through faith alone and in union with Jesus, because of *His* work, not yours!

If "not feeling ready" means, "Not ready to give my life to Jesus, not ready to trust Jesus and His work in saving me from the wages of my sin, not ready to follow Him as Lord in the strength that He supplies, and to make myself accountable to a local Body of believers who can care for me and correct me when I'm walking out of step with Jesus, so that I might better honor Him with my life," then you're very wise to not go under the waters of baptism. But if that is where you are, you shouldn't call yourself a Christian, you shouldn't be a member of a church, and you shouldn't be taking the Lord's Supper.

Baptism is a line in the sand, marking off who are *around* the people of God from those who *part* of it. It's not to be entered into lightly. The call to be baptized presses a person to wrestle with whether they are really committed to following Jesus. I remember the struggle myself. But I know that when I was ready to say all that, I was convicted from Scripture that I needed to be baptized to express that.

The three who will be before you have counted the cost of following Jesus. They have tasted and seen that He is good. They're trusting in His mercy to save and sustain them. That's why they are getting baptized. If you stand with them in faith commitment but have not been baptized "through faith", please consider these Scriptures, and commit to obeying Jesus in this way real soon, not because I say it, but because Jesus commanded it. And not to earn God's favor, but as an expression of your love for and allegiance to Him "paid it all" for you.