

BAPTISM

Report of a Sermon preached by

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I don't believe that I have ever before in my life preached a sermon just on the subject of baptism. The reason is, when one preaches on baptism, one becomes involved in details of ceremonial which aren't terribly important and easily finds himself drawn into controversy with other Christians who differ from him on these little details. And I would just as soon not get drawn into them. I have much more important things to do in the pulpit than preaching on these issues. But I feel constrained by the Holy Spirit to speak this morning on the subject of baptism. After years in the ministry, I guess one sermon on baptism is not out of order. I see that there are certain spiritual problems concerning baptism that need to be addressed.

There is a problem that I am becoming more and more aware of, of Presbyterians who are made to feel guilty, made to feel that there is something lacking in their relationship with the Lord, because of some of the things they hear from friends in other denominations. There are those who feel that maybe they weren't baptized properly because they were sprinkled and not immersed. There are others, sometimes the same people, who are made to feel that there is something wrong with the fact that when they were baptized they were infants, they were not yet believers. Maybe their friends in other denominations are right when they tell them that their baptism didn't take and they really are still unbaptized. This gives a feeling of guilt, creates a problem of conscience, and makes some feel that they're not really right with the Lord as they should be. And it is important, from time to time, for the sake of these brethren, to take a look and see just what the Scriptures do say.

There is another spiritual issue involved in baptism affecting some other people and that is this: there is a wrong view of baptism which I have found quite common among Presbyterians (I hope not among any of us), a wrong view of baptism so seriously wrong, that anyone who holds to it, so long as he holds to it, cannot possibly enter Heaven.

Now let's take a look at this subject with these two problems in mind and let me begin by saying something about the MODE OF BAPTISM: that is, should we sprinkle or should we immerse? Now one searches the New Testament and fails to find a single verse which says directly and explicitly that you must use one mode or the other. There are certain verses from which one may draw inferences for one view or another. A great stress is put, by certain people, on the fact that a number of times when people were baptized, they went down into the water. Both the baptizer and the baptized went down into the water (though that doesn't seem to lead to the conclusion that they both got immersed). Actually this is quite consistent with the description of baptism in early Christian literature, and also the pictures of early Christian baptisms on the walls of the Catacombs, which show two men standing waist deep in water, one with a shell or a bowl pouring water over the head of the other. They were both down into the water.

Some would argue by inferences from certain aspects of the meaning of baptism. For example, baptism includes among its many meanings identification with the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus, and they would say that that meaning is best expressed by immersion. (Though it is also expressed, perhaps not so graphically, by sprinkling which indicates sprinkling with the blood of Jesus.) On the otherhand, another aspect of the meaning of water baptism is that it is a sign

of the Baptism with the Spirit, and we are never dipped into the Spirit but the Spirit is poured out upon us.

Well, what should we say about this lack of explicit instructions on mode in the New Testament? One thing that we ought to say is that mode is not of the essence of baptism. If it were essential that one mode or the other were to be followed, then the Lord would have given us more clear instructions. Baptism is the application of water in the name of the Trinity and I would think that no matter which mode is used, it should be regarded as valid Christian baptism and it ought not be required that anyone be rebaptized on account of mode.

We believe that the Scripture is sufficient. We believe that the Holy Spirit has said all things that are necessary for our salvation and our obedience. But if the Holy Spirit has not spoken directly and explicitly to us in the New Testament, then where has He spoken? Could it not be that the Old Testament sheds some light on this? Here we see an interesting clue if we turn to John, chapter three, verse 25: “Then there arose a question between some of John’s disciples and the Jews about purifying.” It says that they are discussing purifying. Now, as you read on, you will find that what they are discussing is the baptism by John the Baptist and the baptism by the disciples of Jesus. These baptisms are spoken of by the Apostle John as purifyings, thus indicating that they stand in the tradition of Old Testament purifying ceremonies. Now turn back to the book of Numbers in the Old Testament, chapter 8, verse 7. This verse explains how the purifyings were to be performed: “And thus shalt thou do unto them to cleanse them: sprinkle water of purifying upon them...” Throughout the Old Testament, without exception, purifyings were always by sprinkling, never by immersion. Now, since the baptism of John the Baptist and the baptism of Jesus and His disciples were viewed as purifyings, then they were by sprinkling. And the reason that the Holy Spirit did not need to specify in the New Testament that one purifies by sprinkling is that He has already said that in the Old Testament.

Now turn to Hebrews chapter nine and verse ten, which is speaking of Old Testament ceremonies and ordinances: “Which stood only in meats and drinks, and divers washings. . .” The word “washings” here is a form of the Greek word *baptizo*, which is usually transliterated by the King James as “baptize.” In other words, if they had followed the same principle that they used elsewhere, they should have translated this: “Which stood only in meats and drinks, and divers baptisms...” The purifyings of the Old Testament were baptisms. The baptisms of the New Testament were purifyings, and therefore, you see, they are all by sprinkling for that is the mode that the Spirit has commanded since the Old Testament.

By the way, it is significant to note that since the word “baptism” is used explicitly here of Old Testament purifyings by sprinkling, the argument is very obviously fallacious that says that the word “baptism” means “to immerse.” The word baptism does not mean “to immerse” and it is here clearly used of sprinkling.

Well, let’s say something next about THE ADMINISTRATION OF BAPTISM. Whom should we baptize? Now one thing upon which we are all agreed, I think, is that no adult, no person capable of conscious faith in Christ as Saviour and Lord, should be baptized if he is not a believer. No unbeliever, as such, should be baptized. Baptism of those capable of belief must only be of those who are believers, and the Scriptures are clear about that.

What should we say about the baptism of the infant children of believers? One finds in the New Testament various references to the baptism of households. It does not say explicitly that there were or were not infant children in these households. Here again one finds a certain silence in the New Testament.

One might wish at times that some place in one of Paul’s letters he had said, “Now you wrote to me about whether or not we should baptize children and also how much water we should use in our baptisms, and this is my judgment...” It would have been very helpful if Paul had treated this, but he did not. And this would indicate, for one thing, that these were matters of common agreement

in the early church because of something in their common background, and also that whatever the Spirit has said is sufficient.

But if the Spirit has not spoken in the New Testament specifically on this, where has He spoken? Here again, He has spoken on this matter in the Old Testament. For one has got to notice the clear connection that the Scriptures draw between circumcision in the Old Testament and baptism in the New Testament. These two are often spoken of together and indeed in the book of Colossians, chapter two, verses 11 and 12, the Apostle Paul tells us that baptism is, “the circumcision of Christ.”

There were two great sacraments under the Old Covenant. There was Circumcision and there was the Passover. They were both bloody sacraments. Now in the upper room on the night that He was betrayed, Jesus ate the Passover feast with His disciples. And when He had finished eating this feast, He pushed aside the bloody lamb and took the bloodless bread and cup and transformed the bloody Passover into the bloodless Lord’s Supper, with wine representing blood but without blood actually being used, to indicate that the blood shed once for all at the Cross of Calvary is sufficient, and no longer should blood be shed. In the same way, the bloody Old Testament rite of circumcision has been transformed into the bloodless New Testament sacrament of baptism; sprinkling with water signifying the sprinkling of the blood of Jesus Christ, with no blood being used because blood was shed once for all on the Cross of Calvary.

Now let me make to you a serious confession – I was once a Baptist. (I guess there are worse things I could have been than that!) And I believed, as I had been taught, that Presbyterians knew that the Bible taught baptism by immersion but they didn’t want to be that biblical because they were squeamish about getting wet.

And I thought that Presbyterians knew that you couldn’t baptize babies, but they had inherited this tradition from the Roman Catholics and they would rather hold to their Roman Catholic tradition than be biblical.

And I felt that I had a very good argument against infant baptism. Infant baptism is a sign of justification by faith – a sign and a seal of justification by faith. Now an infant is not capable of believing. A sign of justification by faith administered to an infant who is incapable of believing is a meaningless ceremony and therefore ought not to be performed. And I felt, as many others feel, that this is an ironclad argument. But I was shattered one time while studying for an adult Bible class I was teaching in a Baptist Church. I was to teach on the subject of Abraham and I was studying the fourth chapter of the book of Romans and I came to verse eleven, “And he received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had yet being uncircumcised. . .” Now here Paul says specifically that circumcision is a sign and seal of righteousness or justification by faith, and it struck me as I read this that after God commanded that Abraham be circumcised, he commanded that Abraham’s infant sons down generation after generation were all to be circumcised on the eighth day. Here is God commanding a sign and seal of justification by faith to infant children who are incapable of believing! Now, I had always felt that one should not administer this sign and seal to infants because they were incapable of believing and I felt that this was an ironclad argument. But there must be something wrong with it, because it obviously doesn't carry much weight with God! He commanded the sign and seal of justification by faith be given to the infant children of Abraham.

Paul is arguing here that Abraham was a believer when he was circumcised and therefore circumcision is a sign and seal of his justification by faith. And I thought about the order in the book of Genesis: first, there was an adult believer, Abraham; then he received the sign and seal of justification by faith; circumcision; and then the sign and seal was administered to his household. And I realized I saw the same pattern in the Book of the Acts: first, there are adult believers; then they receive the sign and seal of justification by faith, baptism; and then this sign and seal is given to their households.

Now I had long argued in this way: “I want to see an explicit New Testament commandment to baptize children of believers if I am to baptize children of believers.” But I see now that God gave an explicit commandment in the Old Testament that the sign and seal of justification by faith is to be administered to believers and their children. And unless there is an explicit, specific New Testament reference changing that principle, what right do I have to withhold the sign and seal of justification by faith from the infant children of believers?

Parents, Christian parents, believing parents, have no more right or option to say, “Shall we have our child baptized or not?” than believing parents under the Old Covenant had a right to say, “Shall we have our child circumcised or not?” On both mode and administration the New Testament does not speak explicitly and directly but it points us back specifically to the Old Testament where the Spirit has spoken sufficiently for our instruction.

Our Baptist friends talk about “New Testament Christianity,” it’s one of their favorite slogans – and praise the Lord for “New Testament Christianity,” it’s a wonderful thing. And I can tell you only one thing that’s better than “New Testament Christianity” and that’s “Whole Bible Christianity,” reading the New Testament in the context of its setting in the Old Testament!

What about the MEANING OF BAPTISM? At the next service this morning, a couple is going to come and present their child for baptism and she will be baptized here. And I will tell them what I have told parents many times before: “As your child grows up to understand that she has been baptized, you should say this to her: ‘Before you were old enough to know God, God knew you. Before you were old enough to love God, God loved you. And He loved you in a very special sense because He put you in a Christian home where you would grow up hearing the Gospel. Before you knew God, God loved you and out of His love He made an offer to you: if you would receive His Son by faith. He would cleanse your heart from sin. And He not only made you this offer but sealed this offer with a sign of the offer in the waters of your baptism. As truly as water cleanses dirt from the body, so truly will God cleanse your heart from sin if you believe in Jesus.’ You are to explain this to your children. Tell them that they have been baptized with a sign of God’s offer, ask them to receive the promised Saviour.”

When they do receive the gift, they do not need to be rebaptized. They have not denied their original baptism but, to use the language of the Larger Catechism, they have “improved” their baptism. Until they believe, the baptism is a sign and seal of salvation offered and it is meaningful whether the child becomes a Christian or not. The offer is genuine whether or not the child believes. (God commanded the circumcision of Ishmael as well as of Isaac.) But when the child believes, then it becomes a sign not only of salvation offered, but of salvation offered, received, effectually given.

There were two meanings of circumcision in the Old Testament. One, was that it was a sign of cleansing: God’s promise to cleanse from sin, and also our obligation. Moses in the book of Deuteronomy, preached to those who that had been circumcised, reminding them of their circumcision, and said, “Now, circumcise the foreskins of your hearts.” Circumcision also had another meaning and there are those who argue, I think rightly, that it was the primary meaning. In circumcision, there was a cutting and it was a sign that if you do not believe, God will cut you off from His people. So circumcision signified both the promises and the threats of the Covenant.

Likewise, in the New Testament. Baptism, as we have seen, is a sign of God’s cleansing but there is also a threat. Peter, in First Peter three, speaks of the water of Noah’s day, water which lifted up the ark and was a means of salvation to those within the ark, that same water was a means of judgment and death to those outside the ark. And Peter equates this with the water of baptism which to some is a sign of salvation but to others, who do not believe, it is a sign of their condemnation.

A great problem which the Old Testament prophets faced over and over and over again was the problem of the man who was trusting for his salvation in the fact that he had been circumcised. “I have been circumcised, therefore, I am one of God’s people. Therefore, God is honor bound to protect me, to take care of me.” And the prophets had to speak constantly about this and insist that

circumcision offered no absolute guarantees, but indeed, for the man who did not believe, for the man who did not enter into the Covenant promises, circumcision was not a guarantee of his safety but a sign that he would be cut off.

There are those today who are trusting for their salvation in the fact that they have been baptized. “When I was a baby, my mother took me to the church and I was done.” (I don't know how many times I've had people call the church office, usually people who aren't church members, and say, “I want to have my baby done.” I feel like saying, “How? Rare, medium or well?” The same people always want their babies “christened.” The word “christen” reflects the pagan idea of name-giving ceremony, that you become a Christian by having a Christian name given to you. In a couple of cases I've gotten to the point where I've said to the parents, “We christen battleships and we baptize human beings: which is your child?”)

But people feel, “I have been baptized, my name is on the church rolls; therefore, I am a Christian, therefore I am going to Heaven.” And they are trusting not in Jesus but they are trusting in their baptism and they have the same problem as these people to whom the Old Testament prophets spoke. These people need to realize that for them, their baptism is not a sign of their safety but a sign of their condemnation.

One must not trust in baptism. One must not trust in anything that he has done or in any works of man but only in Jesus who died for us. Baptism is a sign that God offers us a Saviour and promises to cleanse us if we believe in Him, if we stop trusting in anything in ourselves – even in our baptism – and put all our trust in Jesus alone. Then we will be cleansed from sin. But until we come to that point of renouncing all self-trust and self-effort and put our trust in Jesus alone, then our baptism is sign of our condemnation.

A pastor I know was once calling on a man who was not a converted person. He frequently attended the church where this man pastored, he had lived in that town all his life and indeed, years before as an infant, he had been baptized in that very church. He was showing the pastor around his house, and the pastor noticed a framed certificate on the wall and he turned to the man and he said, “What is this?” “Oh,” the man said, “that's my baptismal certificate. I was baptized in our church, you know!” The pastor said, “Ah, your baptismal certificate. Very good! Tell me, when are you going to cash it in?”

“When are you going to cash it in?” It's a sign that a promise is offered to you. When are you going to claim the promise? When are you going to receive the Saviour that is offered to you? That may be God's word to some that are here this morning: baptized, but your baptism is a sign of your condemnation until you turn and personally put all your faith and trust in the Lord and the Saviour who died for you.

Let us pray. “Oh, Lord our God, help us to believe and to obey with all our hearts all the teachings of Scripture. Give us, Lord, no pride in the correctness of our details of ceremony in contrast to others of like faith with ourselves. But assure our hearts insofar as we have really been obedient to your Word. And, Oh Lord, we pray for those that are baptized but lost, that they might in this very hour come and put all their trust in Jesus, cashing in their baptism and receiving the Saviour offered. For Jesus sake. Amen.”