

Re-thinking Baptism

By Michael S. Horton

Part 5 of a 6-part series on Worship

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Here's a question for you: What are the top 5 things that are necessary for your Christian growth? Go ahead, say it out loud. Of course, the rest of us won't be able to hear, but that's OK. What would make the list of the 5 most important aids to Christian growth? Prayer? Evangelism? Bible study? Fellowship? Christian service? Time and time again, I've asked that question in evangelical circles and heard all of these answers--wonderful and good answers, but the glaring omission was the mention of the sacraments. We hardly hear about the sacraments these days at all, much less do we see them as essential to our growth in Christ.

And yet, baptism and the Lord's Supper are, in Scripture, linked to our salvation itself. Through these two sacraments God gives us the grace that he promises in his Word. That's right. Baptism and the Lord's Supper are means of grace. Not mere symbols, but means of grace.

Now, before you start thinking, "Gee, this sounds like a Catholic view of baptism and the Lord's Supper," let me assure you that the view of baptism that I'm presenting is the traditional Protestant doctrine. In spite of the gradual movement of this great biblical sacrament to the periphery of the church's life and thought, it still occupies that same important place in the Bible itself and requires us to recover its grand place in our own day. Now the focus of this address is on Christian baptism. The word baptism comes from the Greek word "baptidzo," which means "to dip, to wash, or to sprinkle." In fact, the word was used in ancient times to refer to immersing someone or something. But the same word was also used to refer to watering one's lawn or plants. That's why it's impossible to argue for one mode of baptism on the basis of the word itself. What's important in this matter is what God does through this sacrament, in fulfillment of his promise to wash us from our sins. One of the important distinctions over the centuries of reflection on baptism is between "the sign" and the "thing signified." In baptism, the sign is water. You can put your finger in it, you can drink it, you can play water polo in it. The water in baptism is no different from the water in from the tap. But water--the sign--is not the only thing involved in baptism. There is a convergence, a meeting, of Word, Spirit, and Sign, and the result is baptism. Through the Word of the Gospel, the Spirit connects this washing with water somehow to a real inward cleansing and regeneration. So, in baptism, normal water becomes sacred water, as the waters of the Red Sea, though normal water, became a means through which God redeemed his people from slavery in Egypt.

Just look at the biblical evidence for this view of baptism. The connection between the sign--water, and the thing signified--that is, the actual cleansing by the Holy Spirit, is very close in Scripture. Mark 16:16 reads, "He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved." When Ananias healed Paul, after Jesus had given the apostle his commission, Ananias said, "And now what are you waiting for? Get up, be baptized and wash your sins away, calling on his name" (Acts. 22:16). Paul himself declared, "Don't you know that all of us who were baptized in Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life" (Ro. 6:3). To Titus, he writes, "He saved us, not because of righteous things we have done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us

generously through Jesus Christ our Saviour, so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life" (Tit.3:5-7). The illustration I just gave a moment ago, comparing the waters that saved Israel from Pharaoh to the waters of baptism, is actually not original with me. Paul uses it in 1 Cor. 1-4: "For I do not want you to be ignorant of the fact, brothers, that our forefathers were all under the cloud and that they all passed through the sea. They were all baptized into Moses in the cloud and the sea. They all ate the same spiritual food and drank the same spiritual drink; for they drank from the spiritual rock that accompanied them, and that rock was Christ."

Then there's that thorny question about baptizing those little rug rats. What do we do about infant baptism? Isn't it just a hold-over from Roman Catholicism that Protestants just can't seem to shake off? First, let me say that I was raised in evangelical Bible churches and when I ran into people who baptized infants, I just assumed that they probably didn't even read their Bibles. Maybe the weren't even really Christians. It was a shock to me to learn that many of the greatest defenders of biblical orthodoxy in this century all believed that this was a biblical doctrine, so I began to listen to their arguments. After a lot of arguing and wrestling with the Scriptures, I finally gave in to a point of view I was sure I would never hold.

Now, what does that mean? Absolutely nothing. There have been people who have had just the opposite experience. Growing up in Lutheran or Reformed churches, they came to believe that the Scriptures did not teach infant baptism, so our experience doesn't determine anything. But it should cause you to at least pause for a moment and ask, "What makes so many Bible-believing Christians embrace infant baptism as scriptural?"

Why Baptize Infants?

We should baptize our children because...

1. God has brought us into a covenant of grace and although not all members of this covenant will persevere (i.e., they are not elect), they enjoy special privileges of belonging to the covenant people of God. This was true of Israel (the church in the Old Testament), and the New Testament simply applies this to the New Testament church (Hebrews, esp. 4:1-11 and 6:4-12; Dt. 4:20 and 28:9 with 1 Pet. 2:9,10; Gal. 6:16; Hos. 2:23 and Is. 10:22 with Rom. 9:24-28).
2. Even though bringing someone under the protection of God's covenantal faithfulness does not guarantee that every member possesses true, persevering faith (Heb. 4:1-11), but that does not mean that it is unimportant as to whether a person is in Christ and his covenant of grace.
3. Children were included in the covenant of grace in the Old Testament, through the sacrament of circumcision, and in the New Covenant (called the "better covenant"), God has not changed in his good intentions toward our children (Ac. 2:38, 35) and circumcision has been replaced with baptism (Col. 2:11). Therefore, our children must be brought into the covenant of grace and united to Christ through baptism as the people of God in former times were brought into the covenant through circumcision.
4. The children of unbelievers are unholy, but the children of believers are set apart unto God. This is a distinction not only of the Old Testament (see the Passover, Ex.12:1; also the distinction between the "house of the wicked" and the "house of the righteous," especially in the Psalms), but is continued in the New Testament as

well (1 Cor. 10:2). How are they marked or distinguished from unbelievers? By the sign and seal of the covenant.

5. Household baptisms in the New Testament are common (see esp. Acts 16:15, 33; 1 Cor. 1:16), and when the jailer asked how to be saved, Paul replied, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved--you and your household." We are told that this same night "he and his family were baptized" (Ac.16:31-33).

6. There is an unbroken record in church history of the practice of infant baptism. Although tradition is of a secondary value, it is especially important here for this reason: We know for a fact that the earliest Christians after the death of the apostles were practicing infant baptism, with the command of those who were trained by the apostles themselves. Where was the debate, assuming these immediate successors to the disciples were departing from the apostolic practice?

7. Baptism is the work of God, not man. It is not a sign of the believer's commitment to God (which would, therefore, require prior faith and repentance), but the sign and seal of God's promise to save all who do not reject their baptism by refusing to trust in Christ. For the nature of baptism, see Mark 16:16, Acts. 22:16; Rom. 6:3; Tit. 3:5. The reason these references are to those who have first believed is that the first converts, obviously, were adults when they believed, but they evidently baptized their children. The same was true of Abraham, who believed before he was circumcised, but then had his children circumcised as infants.

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