

TUESDAY JULY 27, 2004

Repentance, Reform & Baptism

Over the past few days I have been doing some thinking about baptism. I come from a Reformed/Presbyterian background and spent the first 20-some years of my life in churches that practiced infant baptism (the Protestant flavor of it). Of course these churches also practice adult baptism when an unbaptized person becomes a believer. Several years ago my wife and I moved to a new town and, because of a lack of Reformed alternatives in town, began to attend Baptist churches. Needless to say, these churches practice adult baptism. I have had exposure, then, to both of the predominant modes of Protestant baptism and feel that I have a pretty good understanding of each of them.

One thing I am not clear on is the role of repentance in baptism when it comes to baptizing adults (even in the Reformed system). Allow me to explain.

In the Reformed churches, baptism is not as easily achieved as in the Evangelical churches. This would be a typical chain of events in a Reformed church if an unbaptized person were to become a believer.

- Person becomes a Christian.
- Attends Catechism or Profession of Faith classes for several weeks and months.
- Indicates an interest in being baptized and making a public profession of faith.
- Presents himself before the elders for an interview where they can determine whether or not he is truly a believer.
- Assuming he is approved by the elders, he then simultaneously professes his faith and is baptized.
- At this point he is considered a member and may also partake of the Lord's Supper.

In the evangelical churches the process is quite different. There is some variance but I believe this is typical:

- Person becomes a Christian.
- He is now eligible to participate in the Lord's Supper.
- He indicates a desire to be baptized.
- Presents himself before the elders or pastor for a short interview where they ensure he knows what baptism means and that he professes Christ.
- He is baptized.
- After baptism he is eligible for membership. Some churches will allow someone who was baptized as an infant to have membership, but the majority will not.

In the Evangelical churches baptism is regarded as something one should do with almost no knowledge of what it is all about. It is a first step of obedience once one has made a profession of faith. Those who later wish to be

rebaptized saying that they didn't even know what they were doing at the time (something I have heard several times) are missing the point. While baptism is generally a prerequisite for church membership, it often is not for partaking of the Lord's Supper.

A striking difference between the two systems is the necessity of showing true repentance and a changed life before baptism may be performed. In many Reformed churches several months may elapse between the time a person becomes a believer and his subsequent baptism while classes are completed and so on. During this time it will usually become quite obvious whether or not that person has truly become a believer. While professing to be a Christian is easy enough to do, displaying the fruits of the Spirit and showing a life of repentance is more difficult. On the other hand, in evangelical churches people are urged to be baptized almost immediately after professing Christ. There may not have been time for these people to begin to show whether they made a true conversion and whether they have begun to reform their behavior.

Let's consider a few short examples:

1) A pastor meets someone in a restaurant one evening and their talk turns to what they believe. The pastor shares his testimony and some verses of Scripture with the other man who is convicted of his sin. He prays then and there, asking God to forgive him and placing his faith in Him. He asks to be baptized the next Sunday.

2) A pastor meets someone in a restaurant one evening and their talk turns to what they believe. The pastor shares his testimony and some verses of Scripture with the other man who is convicted of his sin. He prays then and there, asking God to forgive him and placing his faith in Him. He asks to be baptized the next Sunday. As they continue talking, the pastor finds out that this man is a practicing homosexual.

3) A pastor meets a couple in a restaurant one evening and their talk turns to what they believe. The pastor shares his testimony and some verses of Scripture with the couple who are convicted of their sin. They pray then and there, asking God to forgive them and placing their faith in Him. They ask to be baptized the next Sunday. As they continue to talk, the pastor finds out that they couple is living together, though they are not married.

In any of these cases, should the people be baptized the next Sunday?

In the Reformed churches they would generally not be baptized. The instruction they received in the time leading up to their baptism would likely either convict them of their sinful lifestyles or would harden them and drive them out of the church. Failing this, the elders would bar them from baptism until they repented of their sin.

In the evangelical churches these people may well be baptized (I have seen examples of this in evangelical churches). The church would not expect new Christians to show repentance and changed lives in so short a time and would baptize them on the basis of their confession, not on the basis of ongoing "proof" of the genuineness of their confession.

So here is the big question: are repentance and reform necessary prerequisites to baptism? Should people who live blatantly unchristian lifestyles be barred from baptism until they repent and reform?

I will have to put a lot more thought into this one, but initially I believe that the church should protect baptism. Rather than baptizing anyone who asks, it seems that the church should try to ensure that the people are genuinely Christian before performing baptisms. Repentance is as much an expression of faith as baptism is and should be treated equally (at the very least).

WEDNESDAY JULY 28, 2004

Baptism: Sacrament or Ordinance?

Today I am going to carry on the discussion of baptism that I began yesterday. Or more correctly, I will begin it again. Yesterday I asked some questions that were of a rambling nature rather than being presented logically. Today I am going to try to bring a more systematic approach to the different views of baptism. Time does not allow me to do so exhaustively, but at the same time I will try to avoid painting a mere caricature of the different approaches.

One question that arose in the discussion was whether baptism is a sacrament or an ordinance. Therein lies one of the main differences between Reformed baptism and the “baptist” form of baptism that most evangelical churches practice. Reformed churches consider baptism to be a sacrament whereas Baptist churches regard it as an ordinance. The same holds true of the Lord’s Supper. I am going to present a couple of definitions for each of those terms. The first is from Miriam-Webster’s and the second from Dictionary.com.

Ordinance:

1 a : a Christian rite (as baptism or the Eucharist) that is believed to have been ordained by Christ and that is held to be a means of divine grace or to be a sign or symbol of a spiritual reality b : a religious rite or observance comparable to a Christian sacrament

1. An authoritative command or order.
2. A custom or practice established by long usage.
3. A Christian rite, especially the Eucharist.
4. A statute or regulation, especially one enacted by a city government.

Sacrament:

1 a : an authoritative decree or direction : b : a law set forth by a governmental authority;
specifically : a municipal regulation

2 : something ordained or decreed by fate or a deity

3 : a prescribed usage, practice, or ceremony

Christianity. A rite believed to be a means of or visible form of grace, especially:

- In the Eastern, Roman Catholic, and some other Western Christian churches, any of the traditional seven rites that were instituted by Jesus and recorded in the New Testament and that confer sanctifying grace.
- In most other Western Christian churches, the two rites, Baptism and the Eucharist, that were instituted by Jesus to confer sanctifying grace.
- A religious rite similar to a Christian sacrament, as in character or meaning.

The significant difference between the two terms is God's role in the act. When viewed as sacramental, baptism is more than an act of man - it is a means by which God conveys grace. When viewed as an ordinance, baptism is the testimony of the person being baptized. While it points back to an act of God in the person's life, God plays no role in the baptism - it is an act by a man (usually a pastor) performed on a man (the person being baptized).

I will look briefly at the different views of baptism, first discussing the Reformed view and then turning to the Baptist view.

SIGNS & SEALS

We can get a Reformed perspective on the word sacrament through the Westminster Confession which reads "Sacraments are holy signs and seals of the covenant of grace, immediately instituted by God, to represent Christ, and his benefits; and to confirm our interest in him: as also, to put a visible difference between those that belong unto the church, and the rest of the world; and solemnly to engage them to the service of God in Christ, according to his Word."

Two important things we need to notice here. First, sacraments are *signs*. This means that they point to something other than themselves. Think of an exit sign that points towards a door. The sign itself is not the exit - it merely points the way to the exit. Similarly a sacrament points to something

greater. Sacraments are also *seals*, which means that God signifies that the person receiving the sacrament has the quality it signifies. So the seal points back to the sign. An illustration of a seal is a diploma. I will quote from Bob Burridge:

When someone receives a diploma upon graduation, the diploma certifies that he has completed the course of instruction as recognized by the faculty and board of the institution granting the degree. If a person forges a diploma or has misrepresented himself to the institution, the certificate does not make him qualified in the field it represents. It would be a serious crime and offense to the institution to make such a false claim. Similarly, someone who wrongly receives a sacrament offends God and does not bring the blessings promised upon himself. Instead he calls down the wrath of God upon himself for his false claim. But when a child of God receives the sacrament rightly administered by God's prescription he receives that blessing which is represented by the sign upon the authority of God who instituted it.

In this sense we say that a sacrament is a means of grace. It does not convey the grace by its outward application. But God uses the sacrament, when rightly applied and received, as a means by which he dispenses his grace to the recipient.

BIG WORDS

Let's turn back to the Westminster Confession.

There is, in every sacrament, a spiritual relation, or sacramental union, between the sign and the thing signified: whence it comes to pass, that the names and effects of the one are attributed to the other.

The grace which is exhibited in or by the sacraments rightly used, is not conferred by any power in them; neither doth the efficacy of a sacrament depend upon the piety or intention of him that doth administer it: but upon the work of the Spirit, and the word of institution, which contains, together with a precept authorizing the use thereof, a promise of benefit to worthy receivers.

I am going to introduce two words that describe two different views on the sacraments.

Sacerdotalism - This is the view that the Roman Catholic Church holds to. In this view the sacraments have the power to actually convey the blessings they signify. So the sacrament has the power to confer the grace which it signifies. This is the view the Reformers fought against.

Memorialism - This is the view of the vast majority of Protestant churches, including most Baptist and evangelical churches. In this view the sacraments have no real power, but are merely memorials, object lessons, which teach something about God. This view arose in opposition to the Catholic view.

THE REFORMED POSITION

The Reformed position stands apart from these two views. As the Confession said, there is a sacramental union (or spiritual relationship) between the sign and the thing signified. So when a sacrament is properly administered, there is a real and effectual promise attached to it. The effect that will be derived from the act will be from God alone. This is not to say that baptism removes sin or conveys salvation, but it is to say that there is some spiritual advantage to being baptized. Similarly, there is a spiritual advantage to participating in the Lord's Supper. More than merely signifying something, baptism actually conveys something.

Because of the sacramental nature of baptism and Lord's Supper, Reformed churches traditionally try to ensure that they are properly administered. This means that, based on the Biblical example, only church officials (pastors and elders) may administer the sacraments. They strive to ensure that only those who Biblically qualify for them are included. Improper administration of the sacraments is considered blasphemous.

THE BAPTIST VIEW

Having briefly examined the Reformed view of baptism, let's take a quick look at the Baptist view. As we have stated already, Reformed theology refers to baptism as a sacrament where Baptist theology refers to it as an ordinance.

Here is a typical statement of what Baptist churches believe about baptism (as found at the Web site for the Canadian Convention of Southern Baptists):

Christian baptism is the immersion of a believer in water in the name of the Father the Son and the Holy Spirit. It is an act of obedience symbolizing the believer's faith in a crucified buried and risen Saviour, the believer's death to sin the burial of the old life and the resurrection to walk in newness of life in Christ Jesus. It is testimony to his faith in the final resurrection of the dead. Being a church ordinance it is prerequisite to the privileges of church membership and to the Lord's Supper.

Baptism, then, is not a means by which God conveys grace, but is a testimony of a person who has believed. It is a sign, but not a seal. Where sacraments revolve around what God does, ordinances revolve around what man does and what God *did*. I am going to quote David Heddle who studied this topic just a few weeks ago: “When reduced to merely an ordinance, baptism and communion are no longer about what God does, but what man does. There is nothing supernatural occurring, as if the supernatural realm were off limits to the Creator of the universe, God merely observes as we commemorate His work. An ordinance is actor-centered.”

MY VIEW

So where do my beliefs lie? I guess since I have taken the time to write all of this I should identify what I believe. So here goes. As a Reformed believer attending a Baptist church I struggle with this on an on-going basis. I have trouble viewing baptism as a mere ordinance. It may come from the Word or even from the way I was raised, but reducing baptism to anything less than a sacrament, a means of grace, just does not seem right. But I continue to struggle with it. At this time I cannot definitively say what I believe.

Sources:

- (1) <http://www.challies.com/archives/articles/repentance-refo.php>
- (2) <http://www.challies.com/archives/articles/baptism-sacrame.php>