

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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Series:	The Heidelberg Catechism		Pastor/Teacher
Number:	49		Gary L.W. Johnson
Text:	Romans 6:1-10		
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Baptism (Part I)

26. Lord's Day

Question 69. How art thou admonished and assured by holy baptism, that the one sacrifice of Christ upon the cross is of real advantage to thee?

Answer: Thus: That Christ appointed this external washing with water, (a) adding thereto this promise, (b) that I am as certainly washed by his blood and Spirit from all the pollution of my soul, that is, from all my sins, (c) as I am washed externally with water, by which the filthiness of the body is commonly washed away.

Matt. 28:19 Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: (b) Matt. 28:19 Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: Acts 2:38 Then Peter said unto them, Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost. Matt. 3:11 I indeed baptize you with water unto repentance: but he that cometh after me is mightier than I, whose shoes I am not worthy to bear: he shall baptize you with the Holy Ghost, and with fire: Mark 16:16 He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned. John 1:33 And I knew him not: but he that sent me to baptize with water, the same said unto me, Upon whom thou shalt see the Spirit descending, and remaining on him, the same is he which baptizeth with the Holy Ghost. Rom. 6:3 Know ye not, that so many of us as were baptized into Jesus Christ were baptized into his death? Rom. 6:4 Therefore we are buried with him by baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life. (c) 1 Pet. 3:21 The like figure whereunto even baptism doth also now save us (not the putting away of the filth of the flesh, but the answer of a good conscience toward God,) by the resurrection of Jesus Christ: Mark 1:4 John did baptize in the wilderness, and preach the baptism of repentance for the remission of sins. Luke 3:3 And he came into all the country about Jordan, preaching the baptism of repentance for the remission of sins.

Most Christians rarely give much thought to their baptism. It happened once, and we realize that it is somehow important, but is *significance*, not only when we were baptized, but even now in our understanding of the Christian life, rarely impacts us. What is Baptism? Is it merely a custom and rite instituted by the church to the end that it might express certain religious ideas? This is how many perceive it. This view has also made its way in the minds of many Christians who take little, if any, interest in the subject.¹ Baptism, however, is a God-given sign and has a rich and profound meaning. The decisive thing about Baptism has to do with what God does and grants. "Precisely because throughout the centuries, baptism has been directly connected with admonition, sealing, and

assurance, the institution of baptism is of primary importance, for here the question arises whether it is man who speaks or whether it is God who comes to meet man with His divine authority.”² Baptism is the initiatory rite of Christianity in the same way that circumcision was in the Old Testament. Is baptism important? There are two extremes to avoid when answering this question. One extreme is to so stress the importance of baptism that it becomes *the* essential thing in salvation. There are those even today who advocate salvation by baptism (baptismal regeneration).³ The second extreme to avoid is one that is very common among Evangelicals. The typical Evangelical church treats baptism as a rite of the church, a ceremony to go through, but hardly any emphasis is placed on it. Baptism is simply an external thing that is conducted as a way of making a public testimony. I consider this to be a very defective understanding of baptism. Calvin, the great Protestant reformer, articulated what I consider to be the Biblical understanding of baptism. He properly saw that salvation by grace alone through faith alone could never be conditioned upon an external ordinance. But he also rightly perceived that baptism is more than a mere ceremony. It does, *sacramentally* speaking, serve as a means of grace. The means of grace (preaching the Word, prayer, the Lord’s Supper and baptism) are not to be understood as acting EX OPERE OPERATO, but they are effective only to faith. We need to be aware of exalting the means of grace to the point that we more or less forget, as Warfield reminds us, that “the true agent of all gracious operations is the Holy Spirit Himself.”⁴ The grace of baptism is received by faith only, and apart from faith the sacrament becomes an empty and idle sign.⁵

I. THE PROMINENCE OF BAPTISM

A. In the Gospels

1. The role and function of John the Baptist (actually it is John *the Baptizer*), cf. Matthew 3:5-6; Mark 1:4-8; Luke 3:16; John 1:25, 31, 3:23, 26, 4:1-3. All of these texts speak of John baptizing.
2. The public ministry of Jesus begins with His baptism (Matthew 3:13-17). Jesus refers to His work as a *baptism* (Luke 12:50), and He declares in the Great Commission as part of His instruction, that disciples are to be *baptized* (Matthew 28:19).

B. The Book of Acts

1. Peter’s Pentecost sermon included the charge “be baptized” (Acts 2:38), and three thousand were baptized that day (Acts 2:41).
2. Philip baptizes the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:36-38). Paul is baptized (Acts 9:18), the house of Cornilius (Acts 10:47), the Philippian jailer and his family (Acts 16:33). Paul baptizes the disciples of John the Baptist (Acts 19:4).

C. The Epistles and Ethical Exhortations Based on Baptism

(Romans 6:1-6; I Corinthians 10:1-13; Ephesians 4:1-4; Colossians 2:13-15). These passages all have a common theme – because you have been baptized, confessing your faith in the Lord Jesus (the fundamental fact about baptism will always be its involvement with the death of Christ⁶). The Apostle in effect tells believers to live their lives in light of their baptism.

D. The Strong Statements

1. Acts 22:16 – Paul is told, “Get up, be *baptized*, and wash your sins away, calling on His name.”

2. Galatians 3:27 – “All of you who were *baptized* into Christ have been clothed with Christ.”

3. I Peter 3:21 – “And this water symbolizes *baptism* that now saves you also.”

NOTE: These texts do *not* mean that people acquire an interest in Christ by subjecting themselves to baptism. Each text has to be addressed in its context, but we may say with B.B. Warfield, “that by receiving baptism they indicate that they are in Christ, participants in the benefits of His death and resurrection; and these benefits are now sealed to them under the sanction of a covenant promise.”⁷

II. THE PLACE OF BAPTISM

We are told by our Lord Jesus Christ in a passage known as “the Great Commission” that we are to “go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you” (Matthew 28:19, 20). Baptism is here connected with one who recognizes and professes the Lordship of Christ. Discipleship should *never* be disconnected from the local church—it is the church’s responsibility to nurture and train new converts. “Baptized persons,” writes Murray, “are under the discipline of the church and therefore subject to censure in the event of delinquency.”⁸

III. THE IMPORTANCE OF BAPTISM

What is the most significant thing about baptism? What is it telling us? Contrary to popular opinion, baptism does not chiefly symbolize death, burial and resurrection with Christ. Union with Christ is its central point (Romans 6:3-6; I Corinthians 12:13; Galatians 3:27, 28; Colossians 2:11, 12). Baptism *signifies* the washing of regeneration and the sprinkling of the blood of Christ (John 3:5; I Corinthians 6:11; Colossians 2:11, 12). Baptism into the name of the Triune God means that we are baptized into union with, and discipleship of, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (John 14:16, 17, 23; John 17:20-23). “In Baptism there is a seal of God’s ownership.”⁹ This is the key feature of baptism. Contrary to the claims of those who insist that the word primarily signifies “to immerse.” This has become one of the most controversial subjects. Baptists argue that *only* baptism by full immersion is valid. They like to point to the analogy of burial and resurrection as well as the etymology of the Greek word BAPTIZŌ.¹⁰ The preoccupation with the analogy of burial and resurrection as implying immersion is arbitrary. Romans 6:3-4 is not speaking of how baptism *symbolizes* Christ’s death, burial and resurrection, rather Paul is stating how the believer experiences the reality of death, burial and resurrection in union with Christ. The *mode* of baptism is not the issue here. Immersion is a valid form of baptism, but so is sprinkling and pouring.¹¹

A. The Pledge of God

The sacraments were given by God to assist our infirmity. They serve as visible words (interpreted by the written Word and only in this conjunction) and serve a two-fold purpose.

1. Representation. Baptism represents our participation in the death, burial and resurrection of Christ. It represents the blessings of salvation and serves therefore as a pledge of God’s promise to us (cf. Acts 2:38, 39). It functions as a visible word, picturing and confirming the blessings of our union with Christ.

2. Presentation. Baptism also *presents* what it represents. This is how it serves as a *means of grace*. It is a pledge not only of God, but of faith. Faith does not create the sacrament, but it does receive the blessing that baptism pictures.

CONCLUSION: Baptism is not, in the first place, our testimony. It is God's Word of His blessing to us in Christ. Baptism is God's act, God's doing, God's blessing. It must be received by faith, and in that reception, baptism does serve as a testimony (a badge) to the world that we are Christ's. Let us therefore thank God that He has given us baptism. Let us each one, weak as we are, look with faith and draw encouragement from our baptism and live faithful lives because we have been baptized in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. I close with the appropriate remark from John Murray: "Depreciation of baptism insults the wisdom and grace of God and, more particularly, his faithfulness. He confirms to us the bond of union with himself by adding the seal of baptism, to the end that we may be more firmly established in the faith of his covenant grace."¹²

¹ Ultra-Dispensationalists, close cousins to traditional dispensationalists, outright reject water baptism altogether. "It is our firm conviction," declares Charles Baker, "that water baptism has no purpose of place in this present dispensation." *A Dispensational Theology* (Grace Bible College Pub., 1971), p. 553.

² G.C. Berkouwer, *The Sacraments* (Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1969), p. 90.

³ This is the position of the Roman Catholic Church. In this sacerdotal system, the sacraments do not merely signify grace, they actually confer it. They serve EX OPERE OPERATO as channels of grace. Baptism therefore is absolutely necessary to salvation. Baptism is called NECESSITAS MEDII since it is the means to eternal life. Cf. *The Christian Faith in the Doctrinal Documents of the Catholic Church*, eds. J. Neuner and J. Dupuis, Revised Edition (Alba House, 1981), p. 390.

⁴ B.B. Warfield, *The Plan of Salvation* (rpt. Simpson, 1989), p. 63.

⁵ Some people have asked me how I square this with my theology of infant baptism. If baptism can be administered only upon a profession of faith, then infants must be excluded. Space does not permit a lengthy response, but please see the *Heidelberg Catechism* (Question 74). Listen to the words of A.D. Orme: "Baptism is always a covenant between mankind and God . . . in infant baptism the believing parent promises before God to rear his child in the nurture and admonition of the Lord and to walk before it in holiness, obedience and exemplary piety. To ignore this obligation on the part of the parent is to treat the sacrament as magical or as mechanically doing what it symbolizes. As in the adult baptism, the ordinance must be united to faith. The parent promises to do his part as a Christian parent. He also promises in the child's stead to accept the Gospel and follow the Lord. It is interesting that those who reject infant baptism often have a ceremony in which they dedicate their children to God. Indeed, they should. I personally have regularly dedicated the children of those who could not accept the Scriptural authority of infant baptism in the conviction that some semblance of covenanting is better than no covenanting at all. One must not think, however, that dedication is just baptism without water. Though the same forms and words may be used as are used for baptism, it is not baptism. This is primarily because in infant dedication God says nothing apart from the general statements he has revealed in Scripture. In baptism, God speaks: 'I will save this child and I accept him unto my kingdom.' Consequently, in infant dedication the parent has nothing specific upon which to rest his faith other than the general promises of God." *God's Appointment with Men: A Christian's Primer On the Sacraments* (University Church Press, 1982), pp. 32-33.

⁶ Berkouwer, p. 119.

⁷ B.B. Warfield, *Selected Shorter Writings II* (Presbyterian and Reformed Pub. Co., 1970), p. 327.

⁸ *Collected Writings of John Murray II* (Banner of Truth Trust, 1977), p. 371.

⁹ *Ibid*, p. 372.

¹⁰ James W. Dale in his masterful study, *CLASSIC BAPTISM BAPTIZŌ: An Inquiry into the Meaning of the Word as Determined by the Usage of Classical Greek Writers* (rpt. P&R, 1989) convincingly demonstrates that the word primarily does not simply signify "to dip," rather, the term means: "Whatever is capable of thoroughly changing the character, state, or condition of any object, is capable of baptizing that object; and by such change of character, state or condition does, in fact, baptize it" (p. 354).

¹¹ Luther and Calvin, the two most principal figures in the Protestant Reformation, did not practice baptism by immersion but did allow for it as a perfectly legitimate mode of baptism. cf. Calvin, *Institutes* BK. IV, CH. XX, Sec. 19 and *What Luther Says I* (Concordia, 1959), p. 57.

¹² Murray, *op. cit.*, p. 375.