

Baptism: The Sign and the Thing Signified

Titus 3:3-7

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We need constant reminders. We don't learn something once and then know it forever. We so easily and quickly forget. We have to learn something and then learn it again and again and again until it is worked into the very fabric of our being. We need constant reminders, and God has given them to us.

We need to remember the atoning, sacrificial death of Jesus. God has given us a reminder. It is called the Lord's Supper.

1 Corinthians 11:23-26

- 23 For I received from the Lord that which I also delivered to you: that the Lord Jesus on the same night in which He was betrayed took bread;
- 24 and when He had given thanks, He broke it and said, "Take, eat; this is My body which is broken for you; do this in **remembrance** of Me."
- 25 In the same manner He also took the cup after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in My blood. This do, as often as you drink it, in **remembrance** of Me."
- 26 For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death till He comes.

We need to remember our Lord's death. We also need to remember our Lord's glorious resurrection from the dead. God has given us a reminder. It is called the Lord's Day.

Matthew 28:1-6

- 1 Now after the Sabbath, as **the first day of the week** began to dawn, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary came to see the tomb.
- 2 And behold, there was a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord descended from heaven, and came and rolled back the stone from the door, and sat on it.
- 3 His countenance was like lightning, and his clothing as white as snow.
- 4 And the guards shook for fear of him, and became like dead men.
- 5 But the angel answered and said to the women, "Do not be afraid, for I know that you seek Jesus who was crucified.
- 6 "He is not here; for He is risen, as He said. Come, see the place where the Lord lay."

Acts 20:7

- 7 Now on **the first day of the week**, when the disciples came together to break bread, Paul, ready to depart the next day, spoke to them and continued his message until midnight.

We remember our Lord's death and our Lord's resurrection by partaking of the Lord's Supper on the Lord's Day.

The term "Lord's Supper" occurs in only one verse, 1 Corinthians 11:20, and the term "Lord's Day" occurs in only one verse, Revelation 1:10. In both verses, the same Greek word translated "Lord's" is used. These are also the only two verses

in which that particular Greek word is used. From the English, you would think that this Greek word translated “Lord’s” in these two verses is a possessive noun, but it is not. The Greek word used in these two verses is an adjective. In secular Greek, this adjective was a technical term meaning “imperial” and it was usually used in reference to the Roman Caesar. So the Lord’s Day and the Lord’s Supper are the imperial Day and the imperial Supper which belong to the true Lord of the universe, the Lord Jesus Christ. He and not the Roman Caesar has all authority in heaven and on earth.

Lord’s Day worship and the Lord’s Supper are frequent reminders, regular reminders, repeated reminders. There is a third memorial, a third sacred reminder which occurs less frequently, a third sacred reminder which we observe on a more sporadic basis. That is baptism.

Of what does baptism remind us? The Lord’s Supper reminds us of Jesus’ death. The Lord’s Day reminds us of Jesus’ resurrection. Baptism reminds us that the resurrected Jesus has ascended into heaven and now pours out His Holy Spirit upon His people to apply to them the saving power of His death and resurrection. We are reminded of this every time we baptize a person and thus solemnly admit him or her into the visible church.

Under the old covenant, the sacrament of initiation was the bloody ritual of circumcision. The symbolism of circumcision was appropriate for that age. Think about the nature of the ritual of circumcision for a moment. Think about how it was done,

and I think you will agree that circumcision was an apt symbol for a forward looking faith in a coming Seed Redeemer. Circumcision symbolized the forward looking faith in a coming male descendant of Abraham who would redeem all the true children of Abraham from their sin. The price of that redemption would be a bloody ordeal of judgment, a cutting off of the flesh. The symbolism of circumcision was fulfilled through Jesus, the true Seed of Abraham and the divine Word who became flesh and dwelt among us. The symbolism of circumcision was fulfilled when Jesus was cut off in judgment by dying the shameful and painful, the bloody and violent death of the cross.

Now that the atoning work of Jesus has been accomplished, we need a new sacrament of initiation. That, of course, is baptism with water. Baptism with water points to the current work of Jesus. Jesus is right now applying to His people the saving efficacy of His death and resurrection. The resurrected Jesus is now in heaven at the right hand of God the Father. He is sovereignly sending His Holy Spirit down from heaven to apply that saving power to His people on earth. The hymnist referred to that saving power as the double cure:

Rock of Ages, cleft for me
Let me hide myself in thee;
Let the water and the blood,
From thy riven side which flowed,
Be of sin the double cure,
Cleanse me from its guilt and pow'r.

The words were a little different when I was a child. Back then the words were,

...

Be of sin the double cure,
Save from wrath and make me pure.

I'm not sure why the words were changed. Both versions mean basically the same thing. "Cleanser me from [sin's] guilt and power." "Save from wrath and make me pure." The saving work of Christ has a double efficacy which affects both our legal state and our moral condition. Regarding our legal state, we are forgiven, we are cleansed from sin's guilt, we are saved from divine wrath. Regarding our moral condition, we are delivered from sin's lordship over us, we are cleansed from sin's power, we are in the process of being made pure. Jesus sends down His Holy Spirit to apply His atoning work and effect this double cure.

Baptism with water symbolizes this sending down of the Holy Spirit. John the Baptist said,

Mark 1:7-8

- 7 ... "There comes One after me who is mightier than I, whose sandal strap I am not worthy to stoop down and loose.
- 8 "I indeed baptized you with water, but He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

Water is used repeatedly in Scripture as a symbol for the Holy Spirit, and baptism with water symbolizes the spiritual cleansing of salvation. Thus Ananias said to the converted Saul of Tarsus:

Acts 22:16

16 'And now why are you waiting? Arise and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on the name of the Lord.'

Baptism with water is important, but we do need to remember that baptism with water is the sign and seal and not the thing signified and not the thing sealed. Baptism with the Spirit is the thing signified and sealed. Baptism with the Spirit is that which actually saves, not baptism with water. The minister, like John the Baptist, can pour out only water, but Jesus pours out His Holy Spirit. Jesus, through the ministry of the Spirit, baptizes or immerses His people into a saving union with Himself. To be in covenant union with Jesus is to be immersed into a state of forgiveness - Acts 2:38. To be in covenant union with Jesus is to be immersed into the power of His death, which makes us die unto sinful living - Romans chapter 6. To be in covenant union with Jesus is to be immersed into the power of His resurrection, which makes us live unto righteous living - again, Romans chapter 6.

Let's look at our passage for today and see what it says about baptism with the Spirit. Verse six says that God the Father pours out the Holy Spirit upon us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Savior. I have been talking about Jesus' pouring out the Spirit, but here we are reminded that the Spirit proceeds from both the Father and the Son. Our text says that the Father pours out

the Spirit through the Son. That is, God the Father is able to pour out the Holy Spirit upon God's people because Jesus has already died for God's people. The Holy Spirit applies the atoning work of Jesus to the people Jesus died to save. The Holy Spirit comes down upon God's people like water from heaven and puts them into covenant union with Jesus.

This result is a salvation which affects their legal standing. We see this in verse seven, which says that we are justified and made heirs. Justification is a legal concept. It means to be declared legally righteous. Here is how our catechism defines justification:

“Justification is an act of God's grace wherein he pardoneth all our sins and accepteth us as righteous in his sight, only for the righteousness of Christ imputed to us and received by faith alone.”

We are justified. This means that our guilt is legally washed away and we are legally clothed with the righteous standing of Jesus Christ.

Verse seven also says that we become heirs. That too is a legal concept. If we are in covenant union with Jesus, eternal life is our legal inheritance. Paul expressed this concept this way in his epistle to the Galatians:

Galatians 3:27-29

27 For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ.

- 28 There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.
- 29 And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise.

The Holy Spirit unites us to Christ and this affects our legal standing, as we have seen in verse seven. This covenant union with Jesus also affects our moral condition. Verse three describes our moral condition in our fallen state:

- 3 For we ourselves were also once foolish, disobedient, deceived, serving various lusts and pleasures, living in malice and envy, hateful and hating one another.

Then God through Jesus poured out the Holy Spirit upon us, and we were washed. Just as baptism with water washes our bodies, baptism with the Spirit washes our heart and soul. Paul is here talking about washing away the old sinful heart condition and the sinful lifestyle which resulted from it. The Holy Spirit effects this spiritual washing through regeneration and renewing. Regeneration refers to that initial impartation of spiritual life to those who were dead in trespasses and sin. Through this instantaneous act of sovereign grace, the power of reigning sin is broken and the heart is newly inclined toward obedience and holy living. This is a definitive break with the old sinful way of life. It is a new birth, a new creation, a spiritual resurrection from the dead.

After the instantaneous act of regeneration comes the ongoing work of renewing. Renewing is the progressive work of sanctification which follows regeneration. The Holy Spirit enables the Christian to die more and more to sinful living and to live more and more to righteous living.

Baptism with water is important. Through baptism with water, we identify ourselves and our children with Christ and His people. Through baptism with water, we distinguish ourselves and our children from the world. Through baptism with water, God symbolizes the legal cleansing and spiritual life which He gives to all who believe in Jesus. Through baptism with water, God says to us, The promise is to you. The promise of salvation is ours, but we will realize and experience that salvation only as we look to Jesus in faith, only as we rest upon Him alone for our salvation.

Here is the limitation of baptism with water. The thing symbolized by baptism, which is salvation, is ours only through faith in Jesus.

We need constant reminders. We have had a reminder today. We have been reminded that in our natural fallen state, we are spiritually soiled with the legal pollution of guilt. We have been reminded that in our natural fallen state, we are spiritually dead with a death as real as the dry, lifeless condition of the desert sand. We have been reminded that our only hope is to look to Jesus to pour out His Holy Spirit upon us. The Holy Spirit cleanses as water washes away filth. The Holy Spirit gives life as water brings the dead desert to life. As we look to Jesus in

faith, He sends down His Holy Spirit to wash away our guilt and to impart spiritual life to our souls. As we look to Jesus in faith, He pours out His Holy Spirit to apply to us the saving power of His saving work.

Remember the baptisms you witnessed today. And look beyond them to the gospel message of grace which they symbolize. Pray that God will use these baptisms together with the preached word to strengthen and confirm your faith in the Christ who baptizes with the Holy Spirit. Pray that through Christ's blessing and the Spirit's working that you will experience the spiritual reality that lies behind the symbolism. Pray that God will give you the gift of faith, which is the human experience of covenant union with Christ. Pray that God will strengthen your faith, which is the human experience of a more abundant outpouring of the Holy Spirit.