

OUR LIFE TOGETHER

LESSON SEVEN: LIFE TOGETHER - WHAT WE BELIEVE ABOUT BAPTISM

As we continue to work through the beliefs we teach at Christ Presbyterian Church, we will spend the next two sessions on the sacraments.

WHAT IS A SACRAMENT?

Simply put, a sacrament is a “mystery.” We use sacraments to enable us to understand and celebrate the “mysteries” of the gospel, revealed in Jesus Christ.

Because it is a “mystery,” there is a “mysterious” element to it! We do not have a perfect grasp of how God uses the sacraments. But we participate in them, with confidence that the Savior who gave them to us will use them for his glory and our good.

In our church and most Protestant churches, we believe Jesus ordered two sacraments: Baptism and the Lord’s Supper. This is in contrast to the Roman Catholic Church, which offers seven.

What then, is the meaning of the sacraments? We like to capture it this way: *sacraments are signs and seals of God’s gracious covenant with his people.*

As signs, they represent God’s grace in Jesus Christ.

A sign represents something else. When you see a piece of metal with an eight-sided red piece of metal on top, and the letters S,T,O and P on the red part, you are seeing a sign that tells you to stop.

Can all that metal and paint make you stop? No - but it represents the power of the state to ticket you and even arrest you if you ignore it. That visible item represents an invisible reality.

In the same way, Baptism and the Lord’s Supper represent what God has done for us in Jesus. They do not secure God’s grace - they represent God’s grace.

In Baptism, the water represents the cleansing grace of Jesus, whose blood washes away our sin.

Many also believe it represents the Holy Spirit, who leads the believer to a life of holiness.

In the Lord's Supper, the bread represents the body of Jesus, and the juice in the cup represents the blood of Jesus - given for our sins.

As seals, they confirm God's grace in Jesus Christ.

The word "seal" conveys the idea of ownership, authenticity, and security. When the seal is present, you can be confident the reality behind that seal is also present.

In ancient days, a king often had a "signet ring," with a symbol that represented his kingdom. He would write a letter, then dip his ring into wax and seal the letter by pressing the ring onto the letter. When you received the letter, you would know it was genuine by seeing the unbroken seal. Even in this culture, we know the "authenticity" of products by looking for seals on the packages.

The sacraments confirm that we are Jesus' own. Do they remind God? No. They remind us. We have a way of forgetting and doubting. But the sacraments renew our hearts in our knowledge of the grace of God in our lives.

Do we need the sacraments in order to be saved? No - but taking them is an act of obedience. We should pursue participating in them.

WHAT IS BAPTISM?

For the rest of this lesson, we will ponder Baptism. In the next lesson, we will learn about the Lord's Supper.

Several years ago, I read a book called "The Water That Divides." The authors grieved over the division that has resulted from different views about Baptism. We should grieve. But ultimately, a church must make decisions about who should be baptized, and how they should be baptized.

Let's start with a definition of Baptism: it is *a sign and seal of our union with Jesus*.

We have already mentioned the “sign and seal,” but what about union with Jesus?

In Matthew 28, as Jesus offers his “Great Commission,” he tells his disciples to go and make more disciples, *baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit...*

Who receives Baptism? Disciples do! To be baptized “in the name” of someone is to show your union with that person or persons. In Baptism, we use the sign of water to represent our union with Jesus, and to confirm that union with Jesus.

Paul affirms this in Romans 6. He is arguing against those who say, “We have Jesus, so let’s party! We have grace, so let’s do whatever we want!” He writes...

...don’t you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we may too live a new life.

In union with Jesus, we die to sin. In union with Jesus, we rise to a new life. Baptism represents this, and confirms this.

We do this with water. As we are washed in this way, we represent and confirm our hope that Jesus washes away our sins.

WHO SHOULD BE BAPTIZED?

This is the first question that divides believers. We believe “those who profess faith in Christ, and children of those who profess faith in Christ,” should be baptized.

“Infant baptism,” (or “covenant baptism”) is hard for many people to accept, because they have been raised in settings where it was not practiced and was even strongly opposed.

Here is my plea to you, with some awful humor: Don’t throw out the baby with the bathwater. Don’t throw babies out of this blessing, until you hear why we believe this practice is biblical.

Why do we baptize children? There is a long answer, and a short answer. Let’s start with the long answer. I offer you a sequence of four statements:

1. SINCE THE OLD TESTAMENT COVENANT WITH ABRAHAM, THE SIGN OF THE PARENTS' FAITH HAS BEEN APPLIED TO THEIR CHILDREN.

In Genesis 17, as part of the establishment of the covenant, God commands Abraham to circumcise young males at eight days.

Right away, we ask, "Why?" A covenant is a relationship that God sets up and guarantees, and a covenant is about many generations. God enters covenant with Abraham, but his heart is set on the generations that will follow.

2. IN THE NEW TESTAMENT, THE SIGN OF OUR FAITH IS BAPTISM.

In Colossians 2, as Paul recites his readers' history with Jesus, he writes,

In him you were also circumcised, in the putting off of the sinful nature, not with a circumcision done by the hands of men but with the circumcision done by Christ, having been buried with him in baptism and raised with him through your faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead.

There is much here, but you cannot miss the connection between Circumcision and Baptism. While many still circumcise young males for hygienic purposes, Christians do not circumcise for "religious" purposes. We baptize - males and females.

What is the sign that we have entered into a relationship with God? It was Circumcision. It is now Baptism.

3. THE NEW TESTAMENT IS THE FULFILLMENT OF THE COVENANT WITH ABRAHAM.

We read in Galatians 3:29, *If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to his promise.*

Do you remember this childrens' song?

Father Abraham, had many sons, and many sons had Father Abraham.

I am one of them, and so are you, so let's just praise the Lord!

We may not be Abraham's *physical* descendants, but we are his *spiritual* descendants, for we share faith in the same Savior that he anticipated, and we remember.

4. AS CHRISTIANS, WE HAVE THE SAME PRIVILEGE AS OLD TESTAMENT BELIEVERS.

In faith, Abraham's physical relatives circumcised their children. In faith, Abraham's spiritual relatives baptize their children.

If you are going to understand infant baptism, you have to understand the unity of God's saving ways, all through the Bible! In both the Old Testament and the New Testament, God saves through faith in Jesus Christ, and he gives a sign of that faith to his people...and their children.

Here is the short answer: why do I baptize children? *Because I am a child of Abraham.* I am saved as he was, and I have the same privileges he has.

BUT!!!

These claims meet with some strong objections...

OBJECTION #1: THE NEW TESTAMENT DOES NOT COMMAND INFANT BAPTISM.

That is true. But neither does the New Testament condemn infant baptism. It simply does not speak directly to the issue. Why?

For those who do not believe in infant baptism, it is because infant baptism was not done.

For those who do believe in infant baptism, it is because it wasn't even an issue.

Why was it not an issue? Think of it this way: many of the believers in the New Testament were Jews. They would have fully understood Abraham's significance in the history of salvation.

But what would have happened if, at the dawn of the New Testament church, the apostles had told people to stop applying the sign of their faith to their children? What would have happened?

We know: there would have been controversy, and that controversy, like other controversies, would surely have found its way into the pages of the New Testament.

But that did not happen. Does this prove infant baptism? No. But it does demonstrate this: the absence of a positive command is not the same as the absence of the practice.

We believe infant baptism would have been the normal and expected practice.

OBJECTION #2: THE NEW TESTAMENT RECORDS NO INSTANCES OF INFANT BAPTISM.

Once again, we cannot prove or disprove this decisively. But we do have instances of entire households being baptized.

* In Acts 16, Lydia believes in Jesus, and her whole household is baptized.

* Later in Acts 16, the Philippian jailer believes in Jesus, and his whole household is baptized.

Surely we can say these are recorded instances of household baptism, and we have every reason to believe this was the normal and expected practice. Is it reasonable to believe there was not even one infant or one little child in any of those households?

As well, early church history provides evidence that infant baptism was practiced and accepted in the earliest years of the church. In fact, the first recorded “objection” to infant baptism is from about 200 A.D. - by a church leader named Tertullian.

But why did he object? A new (and false) teaching had crept into the church - that if you sinned after your baptism, you were in trouble. So Tertullian was not arguing against infant baptism itself, but against any baptism until you were close to death. In fact, Tertullian taught that if an infant was near death, he or she should be baptized!

In the third century, Origen wrote, “The church received an order from the Apostles to give baptism even to infants.”

In the last lesson, we learned about Pelagius and Augustine. For all their disagreements, they recognized the long-standing practice and appropriateness of infant baptism.

The objections we hear to infant baptism did not arise until the 1500s, when, during the tumult of the Reformation, some sought not just to reform the Catholic tradition of infant baptism, but to reject it altogether.

OBJECTION #3: A CHILD CANNOT PROFESS FAITH, SO HE OR SHE SHOULD NOT BE BAPTIZED.

Pastor John Sartelle answers this objection well: “If you had lived in the Old Testament period, would you have applied the sign of salvation, circumcision, to your child?” The answer is yes! In those cases, the child could not profess faith, either.

But God knew that. Despite that, he commanded parents to apply that sign to their children, in the hope of the day when those children would profess that faith themselves.

OBJECTION #4: ROMAN CATHOLICS BELIEVE BAPTISM SAVES A CHILD, SO WE SHOULD NOT DO WHAT THEY DO.

To that I say, “Absus usum non tollit!” (In a class like this, you have to use Latin at least once. I’m sure that command is in the Bible somewhere!)

What does this phrase mean? “Abuse does not take away proper use.” Yes, we believe Roman Catholics have erred in their use of infant baptism. They teach such baptism secures salvation.

We do not believe this, and we do not teach this. Infant baptism saves no one. For that matter, adult baptism saves no one.

But “absus usum non tollit!” If a practice is abused, you do not simply get rid of it. You do it right. Wrong use by others is no legitimate barrier to right use by us.

OBJECTION #5: THERE IS NO BENEFIT IN BAPTIZING A CHILD.

We believe there is benefit. We view infant baptism as a privilege and a pledge -

* It is a *privilege* to bring our children into the covenant community. In Acts 2:38, where Peter calls on his listeners to repent and be baptized, he says the promise is for “you and your children.”

What a privilege! My children are not outsiders. They are insiders. They have been given the blessing of growing up as part of the covenant community. They are receiving an inheritance of faith that can enrich them eternally.

They may choose to reject that inheritance. Infant baptism does not guarantee salvation. As in Abraham’s day, some chose to run from the riches of Jesus. But what a joy it is, to see children in this community through the sacrament of baptism.

When we baptize our children, we say, “We believe they will be saved the same way we are - by grace, through faith in Jesus. May they rejoice in this privilege and receive this privilege!”

* Yet infant baptism is also a *pledge*. When we baptize infants, we ask the parents several questions, in which they commit themselves to raising their children in the ways of the Lord.

This is a visible, public pledge - made before God and people. As parents, we have a solemn obligation to do what we have promised. Will this sacrament spur us to faithfulness?

HOW SHOULD WE BAPTIZE?

This is the second of the two discussions about the “water that divides.” Mercifully, this one will be shorter.

At Christ Presbyterian Church and in the Presbyterian Church in America, we teach that baptism may be administered through sprinkling, pouring or immersion. We do not reject immersion - but we reject the belief that immersion is the only way to baptize.

Why do we teach this?

1. *BAPTISM REPRESENTS PURIFICATION BY WASHING.*

In both the Old and New Testament, water symbolizes purification. But how is that water

administered? Often, through pouring and sprinkling.

For example, in the book of Numbers, you find a whole lot of sprinkling going on. Read Numbers 19, and you will find at least four references to purification through sprinkling.

In Hebrews 9, which explains and expands upon the Old Testament sacrificial system, we read of the blood of sacrifices being sprinkled on people to make them clean.

The point? Not that immersion is excluded, but that immersion is not exclusive. The Bible is loaded with cleansing that does not include immersion. We need not say it is the only way.

2. THE NEW TESTAMENT WORD FOR BAPTISM CAN REFER TO WASHING.

For example, in Luke 11:37-38, the religious leaders criticize Jesus for not washing (literally, “baptizing”) before the meal.

What were they criticizing? That he did not immerse himself in a basin of water? No. The religious leaders just wanted Jesus to follow their handwashing ritual.

But could they have wanted Jesus to “immerse” his hands in the water? No. The “ceremony” called for pouring water over the hands, not immersing the hands.

For another example, in 1 Corinthians 10:1-2, Paul writes of the Israelites being “baptized” into Moses. He is writing about the crossing of the Red Sea. Were they immersed in the water? No.

The point again? Maybe “baptizing” can involve immersion. But we need not say it must involve immersion.

3. THE NEW TESTAMENT RECORDS SEVERAL INSTANCES WHERE BAPTISM BY IMMERSION IS HIGHLY UNLIKELY.

In Acts 8, the Ethiopian eunuch is baptized - by a desert road.

In Acts 9, 10 and 16, people are baptized in homes.

Could these have been immersions? In a desert? In a home of twenty centuries ago? It is hard to believe, and it makes it even harder to believe that we have a mandate to immerse.

The method of Baptism is not an issue in the New Testament.

Enough already! Why go through all of this detail?

In Presbyterian churches, we tend to meet a lot of Christians who have been well-schooled in the fundamentals of the faith, but who differ with us on Baptism. We believe you should understand the reasons for our practices, even if you do not agree with them.

Do you need to believe in infant baptism and sprinkling to join the church? No. You do need to be willing to let us do it, without causing, as C.S. Lewis would say, a rumpus. We do not want it to be “water that divides,” yet we will practice in accord with our persuasion.

In closing, I offer this challenge to anyone who struggles with what we teach about Baptism: would you carefully consider the evidence here?

Too often, I have discovered that people who oppose our position have not ever understood it, or just don't like the idea of it.

Can you set aside what you have learned and heard, and try to understand this persuasion and these practices?