

INTRODUCTION

People of God, today is the First Sunday after the Epiphany, and that means this day is marked out as the day we remember Jesus' baptism. As you know, we take baptism very seriously here at Christ the Redeemer Church. We believe the Scriptures to teach *that Baptism is a sign and seal of God's promises to be our God and the God of our children; of our cleansing from sin; of our dying to the sinful nature and rising to newness of life; of our mystical union and ingrafting into Christ by the Holy Spirit; and of our welcome and citizenship in the household of God, the Kingdom of Heaven.* In other words, we believe the words of St. Peter when he taught that baptism saves.

Now, I know that it is common practice in many churches during a baptism service to hear the pastor tell you about how baptism doesn't save. In fact, some pastors, some reformed and presbyterian pastors will even go to great lengths to tell the congregation that baptism means absolutely nothing and that it most definitely doesn't do anything. It is only a public profession of your faith, we are told.

Now look. I understand the sentiment behind saying these things. People do not want to think about salvation as being automatic or some mechanical thing. We don't want to make guarantees that just because a person is baptized, they are automatically going to go to heaven, even if they turn out to be an unbelieving God hater.

By downplaying the meaning and efficacy of baptism people are essentially trying to protect God against his own promises. Peter says, *Baptism now saves you.* Jesus says, *whoever believes and is baptized will be saved.* But we say to God, "You don't mean that." Because we are trying to preserve God's reputation against those who are baptized and then later fall away.

So we have to do a whole bunch of theological gymnastics in order to come to the place where we strip the bible of the theology of baptism, and reduce it down to a mere empty symbol which doesn't signify or seal anything. It just becomes a for a person to profess their faith in Jesus.

But I believe that if we look carefully at the Bible we do not find anywhere the idea that baptism is a public profession of one's faith in Jesus. In fact, we find quite the opposite, that baptism is God's public profession about you.

UNSPOKEN ASSUMPTIONS

Now before we go there, and provide a positive teaching about baptism, I think it important for us to briefly unpack some common unspoken assumptions that have crept into the church and has confused us about the meaning of baptism. Because, more often than not, it is often the unspoken assumptions which have the greatest effect on our doctrine and practice.

So, there are a number of unspoken assumptions that need to be addressed in order to come to understand why a person would believe that baptism doesn't do anything, and that it is just a profession of faith.

FAITH, NOT WORKS

The first is, people have a theology which is deathly afraid of doing good works, lest they be seen as contributing to their salvation. So, we become convinced before we even read the Scriptures about baptism that baptism doesn't do anything. We are saved by faith alone, and not by works, we say. And since we believe that baptism is a work, baptism can't save.

But to say that baptism is a work of man, and therefore does not do anything, is wrong. Baptism is not a work of man. Baptism, along with the Lord's Supper, are the gifts of God for the People of God, that are to be received by faith. We believe we are saved by grace through faith, don't

we? Well, the word grace is just another word for gift. God gives us the gift of baptism, which is received by faith to save us.

Acts 2:38 says - *“Repent and be baptized everyone of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.”* Therefore, by being baptized you are not actively doing something, but rather, you are receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit and the forgiveness of sins.

And in Titus 3:5 Paul specifically says that baptism is not a work, but it is the pouring out of the mercy of God upon you.

⁴But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, ⁵he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, ⁶whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, ⁷so that being justified by his grace we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life.

The reference to the washing of regeneration and the renewal of the Holy Spirit being poured out on us has been universally acknowledged from the earliest days of Christianity to be referring to water baptism.

Therefore, if God saved us by baptism, which is by his mercy and not because of works done by us in righteousness, baptism cannot be considered as a work.

PHYSICAL/SPIRITUAL DIVIDE

Another unspoken assumption that distorts our understanding of baptism is that God does not use His creation to effect salvation, or, God does not use physical things to effect spiritual things. A common assumption is that God works unmediated on the soul, that there is nothing physical or creational that God uses to accomplish spiritual realities. And so, water baptism cannot effect spiritual salvation, they say.

But if we were consistent with this then we would have to say that the tree of Life didn't really confer eternal life. We would have to say that God doesn't use a man and a woman to make a baby who has a soul. Or that the Holy Spirit uses the preaching of the gospel to call people to Himself. In fact, we would have to say that God could not have effected the salvation of the world by having a man die on a cross to save souls, if God does not use physical things to effect spiritual realities.

Now, those are just a few examples which I think illustrate the truth that God does, and often does, use the physical creation to effect spiritual realities.

Underlying this assumption is of course our old friend Gnosticism, rearing his ugly head once again. Gnosticism along with secularism want to maintain a strict division and separation between the physical and the spiritual. But there is no separation of the spiritual world and the physical world. They are united together. So when somethings happen in the physical world it effects spiritual realities, and when somethings happen in the spiritual world it effects physical realities. That is what the Bible teaches.

So God can and does use physical means to accomplish spiritual ends. Thus, Paul says in 1 Corinthians 10, that in the wilderness Israel ate the same spiritual food and drank the same spiritual drink, referring to the manna and the water from the rock, which Paul says, was Christ.

SPIRIT BAPTISM

Another assumption, based upon all these previous assumptions is that references in the Bible to baptism aren't actually references to water baptism. Why? Because Romans 6 tells us that baptism does something. *"Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ have been baptized into His death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into*

death.” So according to Romans 6, baptism unites a person to Jesus Christ and his death. That doesn’t sound like nothing.

So what are the assumptions among those who would tell us that baptism in Romans 6 is not water baptism? Well, they say they first of all, we are not saved by works. Baptism is a work, they say. Also, the physical world cannot effect the spiritual world, so water baptism cannot do anything at all to effect salvation. The baptism spoken about in Romans 6 cannot be referring to water baptism, it has to be referring to the baptism of the spirit.

But the Baptism of the Spirit is Water Baptism. As we already saw in Acts 2:38 and Titus 3 - the Holy Spirit is given as a gift in water baptism, and it effects spiritual realities, such that a person can have their sins forgiven in the waters of baptism, and be brought into the regeneration, and be renewed by the Holy Spirit. Jesus even says a person is born again through water and the spirit.

And besides all that, we read in Ephesians that there is only one baptism, therefore the claim that there is another baptism, a spirit baptism that is something other than water baptism is wrong.

POSITIVE TEACHING

Ok. So now that we have handled some of the common assumptions that lurk behind the scenes which distort us from understanding the scriptures teaching about baptism, let us now look at a few things from our lessons today and learn what baptism in fact does do.

Let us first look at Luke’s Gospel. Luke tells us that our Lord Jesus was baptized by John in the Jordan River. *And as he was being baptized, he was praying, and the heavens were opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in*

the form of a Dove, and a voice came from heaven saying, "You are my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased."

TRINITARIAN EVENT

Here we see first of all that baptism is a Trinitarian Event. God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, are all present in water baptism. The Father was speaking. The Spirit was descending. And the Son was receiving.

Now, because Scripture teaches that we are united to Christ, we can and should see that what is true of Christ is also true of us as well. When we are baptized, all three persons of God are present at our baptisms as well. According to 1 Peter 1:2, we should believe that at our baptisms we are called according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, in the sanctification of the Holy Spirit, for obedience to Jesus Christ and for sprinkling with His blood.

The manifestation of God's foreknowledge and love for us is manifested to us in our baptisms. The plan of God to sanctify us and set us apart from sin and unto holiness is manifested in the Holy Spirit given to us. And our obedience to Jesus Christ is seen in the Son being sent forth from the water to begin his ministry.

HEAVEN AND EARTH UNITED

Secondly, we see that that at Jesus's baptism that the heavens were opened, and the Spirit Descended upon Jesus. What this tells us is that the long await reunion of Heaven and Earth happened at Jesus baptism. On the second day of creation, God created a water barrier between heaven and earth. Interestingly the second day is the only in which God did not call good. Indicating that it was his intention to one day make it good by removing the water barrier and rejoining heaven and Earth.

As Jesus was baptized, that reunion started to take place. It was of course made complete on the cross. And because there is an inseparable connection between Christ's baptism and His crucifixion, we can attribute the blessings of one to the another. Which is what Paul does in Colossians. In chp. 1 he says – *“For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.”*

So Paul says that the union of all things in heaven and Earth happened at the cross.

But he then says in Colossians 2 ⁹*For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily,* ¹⁰*and you have been filled in him, who is the head of all rule and authority.* So he starts out this section in a similar way as he did in Col, 1. Then he says, ¹¹*In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ,* and the circumcision of Christ is referring here to His crucifixion. But then he relates that to what? Baptism, saying, ¹²*having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead.*

You may have got lost in some of those details, but the point is that the union of heaven and earth took place at the cross, which we are united to in baptism.

But we are also united to Christ in His resurrection in our baptisms. Therefore, we can see that our baptism is our entrance into heaven in Christ where we sit with him in cosmic rule over the rulers and the authorities and principalities and powers and thrones and dominions, and above every name that is named, not only in this age, but also in the age to come, as Paul says in Ephesians 1:19-20.

RECEIVING THE SPIRIT

Thirdly we see that in Jesus Baptism, as He received the Spirit, so too do we receive the Holy Spirit at our baptisms as well. Jesus promised to send the Holy Spirit to His people. And we see on Pentecost after the Holy Spirit comes to his apostles, they then proclaim the good news of the forgiveness of sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit for anyone who repents and is baptized. Throughout the rest of Acts we do in fact see some variation about when people received the Holy Spirit. Some were baptized and then received the Spirit. Others were baptized but the Spirit was delayed from coming upon them until the Apostles laid hands on them. Others had received the Spirit and then were baptized. And then others were baptized and then had hands laid on them and then they received the Spirit.

Now the point here is that we should assume that there is a connection between the person receiving the Holy Spirit and their baptism. Christ received the Spirit at His baptism, we are united to Christ at our baptisms therefore we receive the Spirit who was poured out upon us in the washing of regeneration and the renewal of the Holy Spirit.

And that means that if we have the Holy Spirit at our baptisms that we are to walk by the Spirit, as the Apostle Paul states. We are not to walk in the flesh, we are not to walk according to the old Adam in the lust of our flesh. But we are to walk according to the fruit of the Spirit – *love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. For those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.*

ADOPTION AS SONS

Fourthly, related to receiving the Holy Spirit is our status as Sons.

For Paul says in Romans 8:

¹⁴For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. ¹⁵For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, “Abba! Father!” ¹⁶The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, ¹⁷and if children, then heirs— heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him.

Paul tells us that if we have received the first fruits of the Spirit at our baptism, and if we are reckoned as Sons then we also have the promise of the redemption of our bodies. Romans 8 also says: *¹⁹For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God. ²³And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. ²⁴For in this hope we were saved.*

So linking the two concepts together, our walking in the Spirit and against the desires of the flesh is that inward groaning of the Holy Spirit in us who is eagerly awaiting for our full adoption as Sons, the redemption and resurrection of our bodies. And thus, we will be glorified in Him, provided we suffer with him, by walking in the Spirit, and putting to death the deeds of the flesh. This is what we have been called to in our baptism, and what we are promised. This is what it means to be a son, and to have the spirit cry out to God, saying Abba, Father.

Being a Son is also related to being an heir and a king. The Son of God inherits all the Father’s wealth and kingdom in order to rule over it. As Psalm 2 says, “*You are my Son today I have begotten you. Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage, and the ends of the earth as your possession.*”

And, as it says in Rev. 5

*“Worthy are you to take the scroll
and to open its seals,
for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God
from every tribe and language and people and nation,
¹⁰and you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God,
and they shall reign on the earth.”*

We were ransomed by the blood of Christ when the blood of Christ was sprinkled upon us in baptism, and we therefore have been made a kingdom and priests to our God, and we shall reign on the earth.

Therefore having received the Spirit of Adoption as sons at our baptisms and we have the promise of inheriting all things in Christ and ruling with him as well, and the seal of our hope of the resurrection of the Body, we rejoice to be called sons of God.

ACCEPTED

And finally, when Jesus was baptized, and the Spirit came upon Him, he heard the Father’s voice of acceptance and approval over him, saying,
“You are my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased.”

Because of our union with Christ, the Father’s words acceptance and approval and pleasure, our spoken over us as well. God looks upon each one of us in love. We too are beloved sons in Christ. God is pleased with us too, just as much as he is pleased with Christ. God looks upon you in joy and love and acceptance, and he is not at all disappointed in you. Because you are in Christ. God sees you as you are in Christ who is perfect and holy and blameless and beautiful and glorious and who has won the victory. And this is exactly how God the Father looks upon each one of you as well. You are God’s Beloved Son, in whom He is well pleased.

CONCLUSION

So in conclusion, we see that the Bible doesn't teach that nothing happens in baptism, nor that baptism doesn't mean anything. We see that the Bible teaches us that all who are baptized are united to Christ. We are brought into the Trinitarian Family and love of God in baptism. Heaven and Earth are united in Christ at is baptism, and therefore we are one with Him and have free and total access to God now because of our baptism. We are given the Spirit of God to assure us of our resurrection bodies, and to help us walk in the Spirit. We have become adopted sons in our baptism, and are therefore heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ. And we are also ruler with Christ over the earth. And finally in baptism we are accepted and beloved of God in Christ.

May God grant us the eyes to see and the ears to hear and the hearts to believe everything our Lord confirms to us in the sacrament of Baptism, so that we can believe in his promises made to us in the waters of baptism, and be saved. Amen.