

Sam Storms
Bridgeway Church
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The Battle over Baptism (1) **Romans 6:3-4**

I can still vividly remember that day in April of 1960 when I was baptized at the First Baptist Church in Shawnee, Oklahoma. I don't remember a time when I didn't believe in Jesus, but I do recall that my faith seemed to come alive in an incredibly powerful way during a week of evangelistic meetings at the church. As was expected of Southern Baptists, I walked down the aisle and publicly confessed my trust in Christ. I was baptized two nights later along with several others who had come to saving faith.

It's incredibly strange that among all the controversies that have plagued the Christian church in its now 2,000 year history, none have been as vitriolic and divisive as those surrounding the two ordinances of the church: Baptism and the Lord's Supper. My purpose in this message and the one next week is to talk only about baptism. Perhaps at another time I can address the Lord's Supper. But there is no denying that the most severe and divisive controversy has focused on baptism.

Today I want to address *five questions* regarding baptism. First, what is the meaning of baptism? Second, what is the mode of baptism? Third, what are the qualifications for baptism? How might one know if he/she is ready to be baptized? Fourth, why is it that we at Bridgeway will baptize only believers in Jesus? Why do we oppose so-called "infant" baptism? Fifth, should people who were baptized as infants be baptized again, or is phrasing the question in that way misleading? Next week we'll take up the most controversial of all questions relating to baptism: is water baptism necessary for a person to receive the forgiveness of sins and be saved?

What is the Meaning of Baptism?

What does baptism mean and why does it play such a prominent role in the life of the Christian and the Church? Baptism is a sign, which is to say it signifies something beyond itself. It is a pointer that directs our attention to several important truths.

First, baptism is designed to direct our attention to the source and cause of our salvation: the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus. We are not saved because of or through baptism but because of and through Christ and what he did for us. When people witness a person being baptized they should immediately think about the way salvation has been obtained for us.

The living Christ was crucified for our sins. He was then buried in the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea. He was finally raised from the dead and entered into a new and glorious phase of life. In other words, *baptism in water is a visual enactment of the gospel itself*. The gospel is the good news of what God did in and through his Son, Jesus Christ, to obtain for us redemption and forgiveness of sins. The Jesus who lived a sinless and perfect life on our behalf, was crucified where he suffered the judgment and wrath of God we deserved. The sufficiency and adequacy of his atoning death was confirmed when God raised him from the dead unto a new life.

So, when you watch someone who is alive be immersed or buried beneath the waters of baptism, only then to be raised up out of the water, you are witnessing the gospel. You are seeing with your eyes and hearing with your ears what God did for sinners in Jesus.

Second, baptism is a visible picture of the believer's death in Christ's death as well as his/her resurrection in Christ's resurrection.

In other words, baptism is a picture of the believer's *identification or union with Christ*. It's more than simply a statement that I belong to Christ. It is a statement that I am "in" Christ. I am united with Christ. My life has no meaning or purpose apart from Christ. We are one. I in him and he in me. This is Paul's point in Romans 6:3-4,

“Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized **into** Christ Jesus were baptized **into** his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism **into** death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life” (Rom. 6:3-4).

When Christ died, he died our death. Baptism declares and signifies our identification with him in it. Look again at the three-fold use of the word “into”. The word is designed to highlight our union with Christ so that what happened to him is reckoned by God as having happened to us. We are united to him spiritually so that his death becomes our death. But when we are baptized we don’t stay buried beneath the water. We are raised up out of the water as new people, pointing to the glorious truth that his resurrection life has become ours as well.

Paul says much the same thing in Colossians 2:11-12 – “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, 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” (Col. 2:11-12).

Third, baptism is also the way in which a Christian says: “I am a new creation. The person you saw step into the waters no longer exists. He/she has been created anew by the power of the Holy Spirit. The person who emerges from the waters is governed by new affections and a new power.” In other words, the person who is baptized is making it known that he/she has, by God’s grace, taken on a **new identity**. “I am not the man/woman you once knew. He/she has died to the world and its ways. He/she is alive to God and his kingdom.” In other words, in baptism we say, signify, and symbolize our faith in Christ. Faith unites us to him and baptism symbolizes that union.

Fourth, baptism is a physical representation of what happens spiritually in the life of one who trusts Christ. In the waters of baptism, literal dirt is washed from the physical body. This symbolizes or illustrates the washing of spiritual dirt from the soul. Just as water cleanses a garment of a dark stain or blemish, so the Holy Spirit, through the blood of Christ, cleanses our hearts and minds and spirits from the stain of sin and guilt. Several texts make this clear. Here are two:

“And now why do you wait? Rise and be baptized and wash away your sins, calling on his name” (Acts 22:16).

“But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he 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, whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that being justified by his grace we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life” (Titus 3:4-7).

Fifth, baptism is the Christian’s **public pledge of allegiance** to Jesus. To be baptized “in the name” of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit points to a change of ownership. It is a visible and vocal declaration that he/she now **belongs to Christ**. It is an individual’s statement for all to see and hear that from this point on he/she is devoted to Jesus and is determined by his grace to follow Christ in all of life. Water baptism is the way in which a follower of Jesus makes it known that he/she is not of this world, that he/she is governed by a new system of values and beliefs. Although the Christian is a citizen of an earthly state, his/her ultimate allegiance and dedication is to Christ and his kingdom.

What is the Biblical Mode of Baptism?

Here at Bridgeway we **immerse** the Christian in water. That is to say, they are submerged under the water and then brought up out of it. We do not sprinkle or pour water over the head of the believer. Why? There are three reasons.

First, most now agree that the word “baptism” in Greek means to dip, plunge, or immerse. The practice of sprinkling or pouring only emerged later in the first few centuries after Christ as infant baptism became more widespread.

Second, there are several accounts of baptism in the NT and they typically speak of people going down into water to be immersed. We see this in Acts 8:36-39 –

“And as they were going along the road they came to some water, and the eunuch said, ‘See, here is water! What prevents me from being baptized?’ And he commanded the chariot to stop, and they both went down

into the water, Philip and the eunuch, and he baptized him. And when they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord carried Philip away, and the eunuch saw him no more, and went on his way rejoicing” (Acts 8:36-39).

This makes more sense if they were going “down into the water” in order to immerse or submerge him, not to sprinkle him. We also read in John 3:23 that John the Baptist “was baptizing at Aenon near Salim, because water was plentiful there, and people were coming and being baptized.” If all you need is enough water to sprinkle, what’s the point of saying that “water was plentiful there”?

Third, baptism by immersion more clearly portrays our identification with Christ in his death, *burial*, and resurrection.

Are you “Ready” for Baptism?

Many times people say to me, “Sam, I’m just not ready for baptism.” The obvious implication in their words is that they believe they must do something to prepare themselves for baptism. They must rid their lives of some bad habit or recurring sin. They must seek the forgiveness of those they’ve sinned against. They think that before they can be baptized they have to make considerable more progress in the Christian life. They have an idea of baptism that God intended it only for people who would stand up under the most rigorous scrutiny. In other words, they think of baptism as an ordinance designed for people who have it all together, or at least sufficiently “together” that they are now qualified. The qualification, so they reason, is their responsibility.

It’s a bit like a minor league baseball player who is told by the team manager that he’s not “ready” for the big leagues. He still needs to work on his hitting. And his defensive skills could use some work. And once he gets those things functioning at a higher and more effective level, he still has to grow up emotionally and be certain that he’s mentally prepared for the pressure of playing in the major leagues.

Such is how many think of baptism. But it is bad thinking, unbiblical thinking, and we need to rid ourselves of it once and for all.

I’m not saying that anyone, regardless of their spiritual loyalties, should be baptized. What I am saying is that when it comes to the person who is born again and believes in Jesus as Savior, only God can make you “ready” for baptism. And he’s already done it! ***The moment you trusted Christ as Savior God “readied” you or “qualified” you to signify your union with Christ in water baptism.*** Whatever moral preparation you think is needed before you get baptized has already been achieved by Jesus. Whatever obedience to God’s law that you think must be achieved before you get baptized has already been accomplished by Jesus on your behalf.

The apostle Paul put it this way in his prayer for the Colossian church: “May you be strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy, giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in light” (Col. 1:11-12).

The point is this: ***you can’t do anything to get yourself “ready” for baptism; you can’t do anything to “qualify” for baptism. Jesus Christ has already done it all. Your “readiness” is not your righteousness, but his righteousness imputed or reckoned to you by God through faith in Jesus.*** Your “qualification” to be baptized in water is that you are trusting Jesus as the only truly “qualified” person who ever lived.

So, if you are holding back or delaying your baptism because you think you have to improve your life first or you have to do something to make God proud of you or at least stop doing the things that make God ashamed of you, you have failed to understand the gospel. The gospel is the good news that God has already done everything to qualify you and make you ready through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. When you were united to Jesus by faith, you were instantly and fully qualified and made ready for baptism.

Now, in saying all that I don’t intend to suggest that you are to do nothing in preparation for baptism. It’s important that you understand what baptism means. It’s important that you aren’t trusting in baptism but in Jesus’ death and resurrection on your behalf. So, yes, it’s crucial that you are ***instructed*** sufficiently in the meaning of baptism that it becomes a significant event both for you and everyone who bears witness to it.

But if you are trusting Jesus as Lord and Savior, you are as ready and qualified as you will ever be. Waiting five years or ten years will do nothing to improve your readiness or increase your qualifications. Christ has already done that for you and nothing you do can improve upon it.

A Defense of Believer's Baptism

Why do we at Bridgeway believe that *only believers* should be baptized in water? Why am I a "credo-baptist" rather than a "paedo-baptist" (the term "*credo*" comes from the Latin which means "I believe," hence baptism for believers only; the term "*paedo*" comes from the Greek word for infant).

Before I answer that question, it may be helpful to briefly explain why some Christians baptize their infants. The primary reason comes from their understanding of the relationship between Old Testament circumcision and New Testament baptism.

In the Old Testament, male infants were circumcised as the outward sign of entrance into the covenant community of Israel. This did not guarantee their salvation, but marked them out as recipients of the external blessings of a national covenant into which they were introduced by physical birth.

Christian baptism, so goes the paedo-baptist argument, is the New Testament counterpart to Old Testament circumcision. It does not guarantee the salvation of the infant, but sets them apart as children of covenant parents who are thus included in the external blessings and responsibilities of the people of God. Baptized infants are thus "under the umbrella," so to speak, of God's new covenant blessings. Parents of the infant pray that he/she will personally receive the blessings of salvation in Christ which baptism signifies. They hope and trust that baptism is the foreshadowing of what will take place when their child personally embraces Jesus as savior. This is closely related to the idea that God deals not merely with individuals based on personal faith but with corporate entities based on covenant promise.

Paedo-baptists also appeal to what they call "household" baptisms in the New Testament (see Acts 16:15,33; and 1 Cor. 1:16). Surely, they contend, there must have been infants in these households. Infants of Christian parents, therefore, were made recipients of water baptism.

Why am I not convinced by this? Very briefly, for these reasons.

First, the narrative examples in the New Testament portray baptism as being administered only to believers. See Acts 2:41; 8:12; 10:44-48; etc.

Second, baptism is portrayed in the New Testament as a symbol of the beginning of spiritual life (Gal. 3:27; Rom. 6:3-4; Col. 2:12), as well as "an appeal to God for a good conscience" (1 Peter 3:21). Unless one is prepared to predicate salvation and spiritual life to unbelieving infants, or suggest that they are capable of making a conscious appeal to God for a good conscience, it would appear that baptism is restricted to those who consciously trust Christ.

Third, baptism is consistently portrayed as inextricably tied up with (conscious) faith and repentance (e.g., Acts 2:38,41; 8:12-13,36; 10:47-48). This is especially the case with Colossians 2:12 (see below).

Fourth, in all examples of so-called "household" baptisms the broader contexts make clear that only "believers" were baptized. Look at the story of the conversion of the Philippian jailer:

"And they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house. And he took them the same hour of the night and washed their wounds; and he was baptized at once, he and all his family. Then he brought them up into his house and set food before them. And he rejoiced along with his entire household that he had believe in God" (Acts 16:32-34).

It's quite clear that members of the "household" were old enough to hear and understand "the word of the Lord" spoken to them (Acts 16:32; thereby excluding infants) and old enough to understand what it meant for a person to

believe in God and thus have reason to rejoice because of it (Acts 16:34; thereby again excluding infants; see also John 4:53).

As for 1 Corinthians 1:16, we see in 1 Corinthians 16:15 that the "household" of Stephanas, whom Paul baptized, "were the first converts in Achaia" who "devoted themselves to the service of the saints." Some have also appealed to Peter's sermon on the Day of Pentecost. There we read:

"Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself. . . . So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls" (Acts 2:38-41).

As for the "children" in v. 39, they are at least old enough to be "called" by the Lord. And then, as if to confirm it, Luke records that "those who *received his word* were baptized" (Acts 2:41). There is no indication that those who were too young to respond to the "call" of God and too young to "receive" God's word were baptized.

Fifth, we must take into account the nature of the New Covenant inaugurated by the death and resurrection of Jesus and one way (although there are many) in which it differs from the covenant God made with Abraham.

We read in Hebrews 8:11 of one of the chief characteristics of the New Covenant and those who are members of it – "And they shall not teach, each one his neighbor and each one his brother, saying, 'Know the Lord,' for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest" (Heb. 8:11).

During the time of the Old Testament, the people of God were a *mixed community*. That is to say, Israel was composed of both believers and non-believers. Not everyone who was circumcised in his flesh was circumcised in his heart. Again, this simply means that not everyone who received the physical sign of the old covenant was born again or regenerate.

This is why members of the nation Israel had to be exhorted to "know" the Lord. But under the New Covenant we encounter an entirely different situation. *Every member of the New Covenant is a believer. Every member of the New Covenant has been born again.* Notice what our author says: "*they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest*" (8:11).

This promise that every member of the new covenant will experience personal and first-hand intimate saving knowledge of God is one of the main reasons we don't baptize infants at Bridgeway Church.

We must remember that God's covenant with Israel was *theocratic* in nature. Israel was not only the people of God; Israel was also a *political entity*. Therefore, all those who were circumcised physically were members of the covenant community whether they ever came to saving faith or not. That's not true in the New Covenant. Only those who come to saving faith are members of the new covenant community.

To say that every member of the New Covenant knows the Lord doesn't mean that there aren't in our midst people who claim to know Christ but don't. But those who are genuinely saved and genuinely members of the New Covenant are all born again and justified by faith in Jesus.

As noted above, paedo-baptists say that since in Old Testament times circumcision, as the sign of the covenant, was applied to all, even though many never came to saving faith, baptism, as the sign of the New Covenant, should be applied to all, even though many who are baptized will never come to saving faith.

But the New Covenant differs significantly from every biblical covenant that preceded it and thus the analogy breaks down. Unlike in the OT, *everywhere in the NT we read that members of the New Covenant are born-again, justified believers in Jesus.* Therefore it is only to them that the ordinance of baptism is applied. *Members of the New Covenant are those who have the law of God written on their hearts; they are those who belong to God in a relationship of personal intimacy; they are those who know God; they are those whose sins have been forgiven. That is why we do not baptize infants at Bridgeway. Infants who have not as yet trusted Christ for salvation are not members of the New Covenant.*

Sixth, I can't help but notice the absence in the New Testament of any explicit portrayal of an infant ever being baptized.

But let's look again more closely at Colossians 2:11-12 – “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, 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.”

Contrary to the paedo-baptist argument, the New Testament counterpart to Old Testament circumcision isn't baptism; it's regeneration or the new birth. Or again, it is spiritual circumcision of the heart, not water baptism, that corresponds in the New Covenant to Old Covenant physical circumcision of the flesh. [By the way, even if one were to concede that water baptism is the New Covenant counterpart to Old Covenant circumcision, the former is consistently predicated on the faith of the individual, unlike the latter. Indeed, this is the very point of Colossians 2:12.]

Water baptism is a sign of the circumcision of the heart and the new life and cleansing from sin that it brings. ***The sign of the New Covenant isn't baptism, but spiritual circumcision or regeneration or the "cutting away" of the heart of flesh, of which water baptism is an outward, symbolic expression.***

But more important still is Paul's reference to "faith" in v. 12. This personal, experiential trust in Christ is what differentiates entrance into the New Covenant from entrance into the Old Covenant. During the time of the Old Covenant infants obviously did not receive circumcision “through faith.” Personal faith was not necessary for membership in the Old Covenant. But Paul now says that it is only “through faith” that an individual is united with Christ in his death, burial, and resurrection. It is only “through faith” that an individual enters into the New Covenant and experiences its blessings, and that is something an infant cannot do. Simply put: if baptism is “through faith” it must be a personal, conscious act, an act of which infants are not capable.

Should those who were “baptized” as Infants be “baptized” again?

One of the questions I'm often asked comes from Christians who were raised in a Presbyterian church or perhaps a Methodist or Episcopalian church where infant baptism was practiced. The question they ask is this: “I was baptized as an infant many years ago. Isn't that good enough? Should I be baptized again now that I am a believer in Jesus?”

I hope this doesn't offend those of you who fall in this group, but infant “baptism” is not biblical baptism. In other words, the religious ritual to which you were subjected in which water was sprinkled on your head is not biblical, Christian baptism. Baptism is what happens in water when a Christian, a believer in Jesus, declares publicly his/her faith in him as Lord and Savior. Therefore, if you were “baptized” as an infant you were not truly “baptized”. ***To be baptized as a believer in Jesus is not to be baptized “again”. It is to be baptized for the first time.***

Please don't think that I'm being critical of your parents who had you sprinkled as an infant. I'm quite sure they meant well. They did it as an expression of love for you and in faithfulness to what they believed was biblical. But their love and sincerity do not transform it into genuine biblical baptism. For there to be a biblical baptism there must be conscious, personal, saving faith in Jesus.

So my strong word of encouragement to those of you who were sprinkled as an infant but have not been baptized since you became a believer in Jesus is that you obey God's Word and come forward to be baptized.