

Baptism: What It Is And Isn't – 6/14/26

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It's baptism weekend, and 18 people are getting baptized. 10 students and 8 adults. Which gives me a little more time to explain what baptism is and isn't. And that's important, because at best, *unbiblical* beliefs about baptism lead to meaningless rituals and empty traditions; and at worst, give you a false sense of assurance and lead you astray. It's important to know what God says.

So let's turn in our Bibles to [Ephesians 2:8-9](#).

I have three main thoughts this morning, starting with what baptism *isn't*.

1. Baptism is not a sacrament

At least not in the sense that the act alone is a “channel that mediates grace” and brings about salvation. That's a Catholic view, but not a biblical one. And I don't intend for this to be an *attack* on Catholicism, or any other religion, but an exposure of what's wrong and an explanation of what's right.

Catholics believe that “baptism is necessary for salvation, and that the act of baptism itself causes regeneration.” (Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 1200) In other words, it actually saves a person. Just by the very act. Apart from any faith.

Which is why they regularly sprinkle *infants*. And *call* it baptism. Because to withhold such a thing they say, would deprive a child of saving grace.

That's the Catholic idea of a sacrament. But it's not biblical, and it's not biblical baptism.

The Bible says that salvation is by grace alone through faith alone. God's unmerited favor to save our soul and make us whole, when we believe. When we put our faith and trust in Jesus. That's Ephesians 2:8-9. Indicative of several passages on that point.

The Apostle Paul is writing, and in the previous verses says that God raised us up even when we were *dead* in our sins. And then he tells us why and how in v8-9.

[8] For by grace you have been saved through faith. [Period. Grace alone through faith alone.] And this is not your own doing [this saving]; it is the gift of God [freely given and freely received], [9] not a result of works [tangible things we do; like getting baptized], so that no one may boast. (ESV) So that God alone gets the glory.

We're saved by grace alone through faith alone. Not works, and not faith plus works.

So baptism is not a sacrament . . .

• It's an ordinance

Because it was “ordained” or instituted by Jesus. And then reiterated by the Apostles and practiced by the early church. Together. Those are the three criteria for an ordinance. Jesus commanded it, the Apostles reiterated it, and the New Testament church practiced it.

And there are only *two* such commands, two such practices in the Bible, that fit those criteria. Baptism and Communion. They're the only two commands given by Jesus, reiterated by the Apostles, and practiced corporately by the church.

Like Jesus said in Matthew 28:19 – Go and make disciples, *baptizing* them and teaching them. It's a command. And the Apostles not only did it, but reiterated it. Like Peter who said, “*Repent and be baptized.*” (Acts 2:38) And as churches were planted, they practiced it. Like those in Corinth. (1 Corinthians 1:14-16) And before that, Samaria.

Acts 8:12 – *When they believed Philip as he preached good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women.* Baptized, to bear *witness* to God's grace, proclaim God's grace, not receive it. They already received it when they believed.

All of which makes baptism an ordinance, not a sacrament.

2. Baptism is not the same as Old Testament circumcision

Now, if you're thinking, “Da,” or “What does circumcision have to do with the price of tea in China?” bear with me. Because this is a huge issue in Christendom.

Baptism, as some people advocate, is not the same thing to the New Covenant – God's promise to save and keep us – as circumcision was to the Old. The Mosaic Covenant. And Abrahamic Covenant. There are similarities, but they're not equivalent.

And you need to know that, because that belief, that it *is* the same, is the basis for believing in and practicing infant baptism in mainline Protestant churches. Like Lutheran and Methodist churches. Presbyterian and Reformed churches.

But that's not so say that they believe the same as Catholicism. Both *practice* pedobaptism, infant baptism, but believe differently. Catholics believe that it actually *saves* a child, while pedobaptists, mainline churches, believe that it blesses a child.

Blesses them by “incorporating them” into the community of believers, and somehow contributes to their future salvation, to be confirmed later on by faith.

But that too is unbiblical. There's just nothing in the New Testament that even implies such a practice, and plenty that refutes it. And yet, God-fearing people like you and I, believe that it's not just a *good* thing to do, but necessary. Let me try to explain.

Infant baptism and those who hold to it say just as circumcision was a sign of covenant inclusion in the Old Testament, baptism is a sign of covenant inclusion in the New. And to some extent it's true. Baptism *is* a sign of our salvation. It *is* a sign of our participation in the New Covenant.

The problem is the next step. Those who believe and practice pedobaptism say that all infant children of believing parents should be *baptized* – which really means sprinkled once again; contrary to the meaning of the word – because all infants of Israelite parents were *circumcised*. And any adults among them as well.

Genesis 17:10-13 – *Every male among you shall be circumcised* [God said]. . . . [11b] *it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you.* [12] *He who is eight days old among you shall be circumcised. Every male throughout your generations, whether born in your house or bought with your money . . . shall surely be circumcised.* (10b-13a)

Young and old alike underwent the procedure, to signify and confirm their entrance and inclusion in the covenant community. The community of God's people.

That was the purpose of circumcision. It marked them, literally, and set them apart, as God's people. Regardless of their faith. Regardless. Because infants don't have faith.

And that's where the analogy breaks down. Because baptism in the New Testament isn't applied to the same people, nor done at the same time, nor practiced for the same reasons.

- **It's only for those who believe**

Baptism, under the New Covenant, is only applied to those of *faith*. Those who believe in Jesus. Those who trust him to save and keep them.

We saw it in Acts 8:12 – *When they believed . . . they were baptized*. Only the believers. And Acts 2:41. *Those who received his word, were baptized*. Nobody else. And Acts 18:8 – *Many of the Corinthians hearing Paul believed and were baptized*.

Indicating that baptism is only for those who believe. And those aren't the only passages that say or imply it. (Romans 6:1-11; Colossians 2:11-14; 1 Peter 3:18-22)

That's the first reason baptism isn't the same as circumcision.

The second, and closely related, is that . . .

- **It's done at a different time**

Baptism is administered at a different *time* than circumcision was. Not after someone is *born*, but born again. Not *before* someone believes, but after. Turn with me to Acts 2:39.

The verses I just cited don't say that the people were baptized and *then* believed. Or were baptized in *hope* they would believe. Or were baptized to bring them into the fold, share in the blessings, be a part of the community, and Lord *willing* believe.

No, they were baptized *after* they believed. A completely different *time* than those in the Old Testament were circumcised. Which rules out infant baptism as a matter of both principle *and* precedent. Precept *and* example.

And that includes the "household" baptism passages in the New Testament. Acts 16:15; 16:33; and 1 Corinthians 1:16. Two of those passages, Acts 16:15 and 1 Corinthians 1, include a statement or qualifier of *faith* on the part of the household. Which infants don't have. So you can't argue that they were baptized. And the third passage is inconclusive.

The same goes for Peter's statement in Acts 2:39. Where he says, "*the promise is for you and for your children*." The promise of forgiveness and the Holy Spirit. Advocates of infant baptism point to that verse and say, "See, infants should be baptized as well. The promise is for our children.

But that too has a qualifier. Because Peter follows it with, "everyone whom the Lord our God *calls* to himself." *The promise is for you and for your children* [he says] *and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself*. Calls to be saved. Which obviously is not all infants, because they all don't grow up and follow Christ.

Not only that, but two verses later it says – *So those who received his word* [believed his promise of salvation] *were baptized*. (Acts 2:41) Which once again, rules out infants. Because they don't receive anything but love and food.

So baptism isn't the same as circumcision because it's done at a different time, to those who believe.

And third . . .

- **It's practiced for different reasons**

Baptism isn't practiced for the same reasons as circumcision. Yes, both are intended to set us *apart* from the world, but circumcision marked a *limited* group of people, for a limited time. Ethnic Israel for the most part. And they were the primary *focus* of God's work.

But when Jesus came, that all changed. The scope expanded to the world. So that *baptism* marks those of *faith* for *all* time. Not those of lineage, not just *ethnic* Israel, but spiritual Israel. True Israel. Baptism marks *different* people for *different reasons*.

What's more, by virtue of circumcising *everyone* under the Old Covenant, the community was comprised of both believers and *unbelievers*. Those of faith, like Abraham, and those of lineage, like infants.

The church, on the other hand, the *New Covenant* community, is comprised only of believers. The New Testament knows nothing of a mixed bag. Nothing of believers and unbelievers comprising the family of God. And the mark, the outward identifier of such believers, is baptism.

It's the third reason that baptism is not analogous, not equivalent, to Old Testament circumcision. It's only for those who believe, it's done at a different time, and it's practiced for different reasons. And therefore shouldn't be applied to infants.

And third, having said what it isn't . . .

- **3. Baptism is an act of personal obedience**

In Acts 2:38 Peter didn't say, "Repent and get baptized if you want to." He said – *Repent and be baptized every one of you*. It's a command.

And *those who received his word* [those who believed in Jesus], did it. They *were baptized*, it says. (Acts 2:41) Which makes baptism an act of personal obedience. Obedience to God. Joyfully and eagerly doing what he says, for his glory.

If you've never done that, if you've never been baptized as a believer, make a commitment. And start working through the process today.

But if you're not a believer in the first place, you've never been saved, start there. Listen carefully and make a commitment to Christ.

Prayer – Father, use this teaching to solidify and clarify our beliefs. Our convictions. And use these baptisms to encourage those who know you, convict and convince those who don't, and lead others to get baptized themselves. For your glory and our joy.

You Are Loved