

Sermon – Baptism of our Lord
Luke 3:15-22 and Romans 6:1-11
January 13, 2019

“Baptism in the Bible”

In Ephesians 4:4-5 Paul says “*there is one body and one spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called – one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all, who is over all and through all and in all.*” If only that were true - Google begs to differ and will guide you to websites that explain the differences among the nearly 43,000 Christian denominations – or “christianities” in the world today. This sad fact may be why Paul in Romans 8 described the Holy Spirit who knows our weakness and thus prays for his church “*with sighs too deep for words.*”

What separates us? The list would be long, but baptism, despite Paul’s insistence there could be only one, is near the top. In this series and by way of questions you raised, I wish to probe what the Bible says about baptism, infant baptism and why some churches delay baptism till what might be called a “*day of reckoning*”. Today we observe the Baptism of our Lord. But right away we’re presented with a challenge – Luke hints at the existence of “baptisms.” Verse 16 of our lesson quotes John the Baptist saying “*I baptize you with water. But one more powerful than I will come...He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.*” Are there three kinds of baptism – by water, Holy Spirit, and fire? Some churches would say yes.

It helps to gain some Old Testament perspective here, because in the Christian church, though we call baptism a “sacrament” we treat it much like a covenant. Covenant, which can mean “agreement”, “contract”, even “treaty” is best understood from the Old Testament as a unilateral action of God - God doing all the work, even if that work was intended to stimulate a human response. It’s a “promise.” In Genesis 8 God made a covenant with Noah using a rainbow of all things, promising never to flood the earth again.

In Genesis 17 God made a covenant with Abraham promising him descendants that would fill the earth, and as a visible (sort of) sign of that covenant all male babies in his family were to be circumcised. The most well-known covenant of the Old Testament is from Exodus 20, the Covenant of Sinai, in which God declared he would fulfill his promise to Abraham by giving his now numerous descendants their own land – with the provision those descendants keep a mere 10 commandments! Back to Luke and the first question – why was Jesus baptized?

Well, Luke doesn’t say, but Matthew does. Matthew records Jesus saying his baptism, which surely could not have been needed for the forgiveness of sins as John had been telling everyone else, was nonetheless “*to fulfill all righteousness.*” It was in other words to show that Jesus would live in the same sort of covenant relationship with God that his Father had with Israel for well over a millennia.

But what does the Bible say baptism is and does? Why does it appear based on Luke that there are, contrary to what Paul insists, different kinds of baptism? First, what is it? The baptism of John was a “water baptism”, a Greek word meaning “*dip or immerse in water*” or “*wash.*” John baptized to prepare people to receive a new message from God. Luke 3:10 says many people - possibly before but most likely after being baptized asked John “*what then should we do.*”

In Exodus 19, God had told Moses to have the people “*wash their clothes*” so that they’d be ready to gather at Mount Sinai, to hear from God. They would be entering into a new covenant with God, and washing signified their readiness, as did their words – Israel as one said “*everything that the Lord has spoken we will do.*” Baptism, or washing, was associated with a “new relationship.” John’s baptism was intended to ready people for “*a new relationship with God.*” What about our baptism – what does it do? Does the Bible ever say, as Luke suggests, that water baptism prepares but Spirit baptism completes our new relationship with God?

This is where the Bible is somewhat vague. After his baptism, Luke says “*the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form.*” Jesus was baptized with water, and simultaneously “*given the Holy Spirit.*” In Acts 8, baptisms are recorded in which apparently the Holy Spirit had not been given, and was prayed for later. In Acts 10 it appears as though the Holy Spirit came to people before they were baptized. But in every instance, baptism and the Holy Spirit are intimately linked. John spoke as he did about Jesus “*baptizing with the Holy Spirit and with fire*” simply because of the refining change baptism represents in a human life.

Christian baptism does not merely prepare us for a new relationship with God – it is the new relationship. To understand this, we turn to Romans 6. John’s baptism prepared people for Jesus. The baptism Jesus commanded his followers to receive in the name of the Triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, forgives sin and gives everlasting life to the person who believe its promises. Faith may prepare us for union with Christ, but baptism seals it – it is the means God has chosen to channel the saving work of Christ into a person’s life. There is, as Paul says, “one baptism.” There are no passages in the New Testament where baptism and union with Christ are not in view. If you have Christ, you have all that he has- the fullness of God lives in you.

In a sermon from 1519 on Romans 6 Martin Luther said “*the life of a Christian (is) nothing other than a blessed dying that commences with Baptism and continues until one is placed in the grave.*” Baptism is a burial then – with Jesus. Though called a “sacrament” baptism is a covenant –a unilateral promise from God. This is its promise - you have been placed in the grave with Christ, and just as God found him in his, he will find you in yours, and out of yours call you as he called his Son. “*There is one body and one spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called – one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all, who is over all and through all and in all.*” Yes, truly, in you. AMEN