



THE PASTOR'S PEN

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The Ordinance (Sacrament) of Baptism

Last month we learned that the Christian Church has two ordinances (sacraments) and that they are baptism and communion. We also learned that Jesus commanded us to practice these ordinances in order that we might receive grace from God. So what does the Christian Church have to say about baptism? What does the Bible say about it? What is the purpose of baptism and is it even necessary in order for someone to be a Christian today? These are some of the questions that people discuss and unfortunately argue about in our times.

Our space is short and this will be a very, very brief look at baptism. Because of this, our focus will be on the meaning and the necessity of baptism rather than on the form or practice. With that boundary given, the first thing that we need to understand is that the Christian Church believes that baptism is an act by which we enter into the Church (with a big “C”), the Body of Christ, as opposed to a local congregation. In fact, without baptism, we do not biblically know how the gift and grace of salvation would be extended to us. Second, we need to understand that baptism is for “mature” individuals regardless of their chronological age. In other words, baptism takes place in response to the desire of the believer to become a part of the Church and their desire to become a disciple of Jesus Christ, no matter if they are six or one hundred and six years old. Because of this, baptism is considered to be a very personal matter. In fact, it is so personal that the baptism a person experiences is unquestioned by the congregation when a person comes to place membership in a local congregation. The validity of their baptism is considered to be between them and God. Third, in imitation of the act of baptism that we see in the pages of the New Testament, we follow the practice of immersion (submerging the person totally under water) in our congregations. This is a method we consider consistent with the cleansing rituals used by the Jews of the first century and it matches the descriptions given of the event in the Gospel accounts, the book of The Acts of the Apostles and in Paul’s Letter to the Romans. Fourth, we believe that baptism is a symbolic act of the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus and that, “...if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly also be united with him in a resurrection like his.” (Romans 6:5 NIV). Fifth, we also believe that baptism is preceded by faith and repentance, that it brings the filling of the Holy Spirit, that it washes away our sins and that it should be followed by a life where we do our best to be a living, active, learning disciple of Jesus Christ (Acts 2:37-38; 1 Peter 3:18-21; Matthew 28:19-20; Ephesians 1:3-14).

At this point though, some folks are likely to question if baptism is really necessary for a believer today. This is where the Christian Church differs from most Baptists, Pentecostals, “Non-Denominational” and “Community” type churches. The Christian Church believes that Biblically speaking, the answer is, “Yes, it is necessary for salvation.” Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Jesus, Paul and Peter all state the necessity of baptism for a believer. Over twenty-five passages of scripture back this position and belief. While baptism is necessary though, it is important to understand that baptism by itself means nothing. It is only when baptism is accompanied by faith, belief and repentance does it truly allow for the grace of God to work on an individual.

This means that baptism itself is not a “work,” it is a part of the salvation process. It is very important to note that nowhere does the bible ever call baptism a “work,” nor does it separate baptism from the salvation process after the death of Jesus. Baptism is an act of obedience. That is why Jesus was baptized by John.

When Jesus came to his cousin John and asked to be baptized, John at first said no. He did not think that Jesus needed to be baptized because he knew that Jesus was the Lamb of God that would take away the sins of the world. Yet Jesus persisted. Why? Because, as recorded in Matthew 3:15 Jesus said to John, “*Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness*” (NIV). Then John consented. Note that Jesus was repenting: Not because he had done anything wrong, but because He was putting the Father’s will first, before His own and obeying the Father in establishing His public ministry. He was completing or sealing that act of repentance with His baptism. When the act of His baptism was finished, then the Father and the Holy Spirit broke forth on the scene and the Father spoke His approval and acceptance of His Son. Yes, even Jesus Had to please the Father and enter into a right relationship with Him. Could God have done this in some other way? Of course He could, but the fact is He chose this way and He instructs us to do the same.

To give you an example of how baptism is involved in our salvation, think of our relationship to God like a marriage. In fact, marriage is an example that we see used over and over again in the Bible as a description for Jesus’ relationship with the Church. When a boy meets a girl and falls in love with her, a process has begun. She responds and they date or go through a courting time where their love grows. The next step in the process is that the boy proposes and the girl accepts. They become engaged and another change has occurred that affects both of them in many ways. Finally a marriage takes place and they become husband and wife.

Now the marriage did not make the boy and girl fall in love. The marriage did not cause them to plan a life together with similar goals and purpose. All of that was a part of the process that led up to the marriage that changed their relationship and established their family and their home. The marriage allowed and sanctified their union. The marriage was a public commitment to one another and the beginning of their new relationship. That marriage for the boy and the girl is exactly what baptism is for God and us. It allows us to belong to God and put us into a total and right relationship with Him. It did not make us love God, nor did it cause God to love us: He already did. It did not cause us to repent of our sins and chose to become a disciple. However, it did offer a way for us to find forgiveness and acceptance that allowed us to enter into permanent relationship with God, receive His grace and be made righteous in His sight. That is why baptism is so important to the Christian Church. We see it as what Christ did (Matthew 3), what He has commanded for His followers to do (Acts 2:37-38) and What He expects us to teach others to do in order to follow Him (Matthew 28) and become a part of the Church.

So what do you think that the Bible says about these matters? What passages, taken in the context of the New Testament, teach anything else? Take a look at the following scriptures and see what the Bible says about Baptism and Salvation: Matthew 3:13-17, Acts 2:37-38, 1 Peter 3:18-22, Romans 6, Colossians 2:12 and Titus 3:5. What conclusions can you draw? What questions do you have? Come to bible study on Sunday night at 6:30, let’s talk about it and see what there is to find.

Bible in hand,

James