

CHAPTER 6

SIGNIFICANCE OF BAPTISM

This question is perhaps the most important in the whole subject of baptism; its answer will affect one's view of both the mode and the subjects of baptism.

Traditional Reformed Understanding

WCF 28:1, WLC 165, WSC 94

Here is the list of the various significances of baptism mentioned in WLC 165:

- 1) Ingrafting into Christ
- 2) Forgiveness of sins by his blood
- 3) Regeneration by the Holy Spirit
- 4) Adoption as God's children
- 5) Resurrection to everlasting life
- 6) Admission to the visible church
- 7) Engagement to be the Lord's

The Westminster standards link baptism to the covenant of grace, and combine many of the individual significances found in Scripture. All these significances are positive or beneficial. These significances are grouped and studied below in the following sections.

Ingrafting into Christ

This point, union with Christ, is taken by John Murray as the central meaning of baptism (*Christian Baptism*, p. 6).

The Scriptures mention this aspect of baptism often, especially in connection with Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection.

Rom 6:3-6, εἰς *eis*: into, union with Christ; or unto, identification with Christ

1 Cor 12:12-13, *eis*, into Christ's body

Gal 3:27-28, *eis*, into Christ

Col 2:11-12, dat. αὐτῷ *auto*, with him

Some would maintain that all these passages refer to spiritual baptism, not to water baptism. Yet even in that case, it seems that the significance of spiritual baptism should be maintained in water baptism.

Regeneration and Forgiveness of Sins

These passages link baptism to purification and cleansing:

Significance of John's baptism

Matt 3:6 (= Mark 1:4 = Luke 3:3), "Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River."

John 3:25, "An argument developed between some of John's disciples and a certain Jew over the matter of ceremonial washing."

Verses which speak of forgiveness as a washing

1 Cor 6:11, "And that is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God."

Titus 3:5, "He saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit."

Perhaps John 3:5

General understanding of various "washings" in the time of Christ

(Cf. previous chapter on history of baptism)

NT passages concerning Christian baptism

Acts 2:38, “Repent and be baptized, . . . that your sins may be forgiven.”

Acts 22:16, “be baptized and wash your sins away” (but note that Paul saved already, 9:5-6)

Col 2:12-13, “having been buried with him in baptism, . . . He forgave us all our sins”

Heb 10:22, “having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water”

1 Pet 3:21, “and this water symbolizes baptism that now saves you also—not the removal of dirt from the body but the pledge of a good conscience toward God”

Regeneration by the Holy Spirit

1. The same term, *baptizo*, is used for both events.
2. The two are linked in John 1:33 = Acts 1:5 = Acts 11:16, which passages compare John’s baptism with water to Christ’s baptism with the Holy Spirit.

John 1:33, “I would not have known him, except that the one who sent me to baptize with water told me, ‘The man on whom you see the Spirit come down and remain is he who will baptize with the Holy Spirit.’”

Acts 1:5, “For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.”

Acts 11:16, “Then I remembered what the Lord had said: ‘John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.’”

3. Some passages can be interpreted to refer to either water or Spirit baptism.
Examples:

1 Cor 12:13, “For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body, . . . and we were all given the one Spirit to drink.”

Gal 3:27, “for all of you who were baptized into Christ have been clothed with Christ”

4. The baptism of the Holy Spirit may refer to regeneration, which would imply that all believers in all dispensations have received it (cf. Rom 8:9).
5. On the other hand, it may refer to a special outpouring of the Holy Spirit in preparation for the kingdom; cf. Acts 2:17 (referring to Joel 2:28-31). In this latter sense, this sign confirmed the message of the apostles (as in 2 Cor 12:12; Heb 2:4).

Acts 2:17,

“In the last days, God says,
I will pour out my Spirit on all people.
Your sons and daughters will prophesy,
your young men will see visions,
your old men will dream dreams.”

2 Cor 12:12, “The things that mark an apostle—signs, wonders and miracles—were done among you with great perseverance.”

Heb 2:4, “God also testified to it by signs, wonders and various miracles, and gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will.”

Initiation into the Visible Church

Baptism was linked by Christ to discipleship, Matt 28:19.

Baptism was a prerequisite for church membership; e.g., Acts 2:41; see previous chapter, sect. 8.

Acts 2:41, “Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day.”

Parallel Significance of Baptism and Circumcision

The church in the NT continued to have an initiatory rite, baptism instead of circumcision.

[see in the previous chapter on the history of baptism—Christian baptism]

The NT links the significance of circumcision with that of baptism.

Col. 2:11-13, “In him you were also circumcised, in the putting off of the sinful nature, not with a circumcision done by the hands of men but with the circumcision done by Christ, having been buried with him in baptism and raised with him through your faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead.

“When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your sinful nature, God made you alive with Christ.”

Cf. heart circumcision in Rom. 2:28-29:

“A man is not a Jew if he is only one outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical. No, a man is a Jew if he is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code. Such a man’s praise is not from men, but from God.”

OT circumcision shares the same meaning with NT baptism—union with God and his people, cleansing from sin, regeneration, and the covenant of grace in general.

Gen 17:10 = covenant

Gen 34:14-17, union with God’s people (intermarriage)

Exod 12:44, 48, required to eat Passover

Deut 10:16, regeneration, love for God (cf. vv. 12-13)

Deut 10:16, “Circumcise your hearts, therefore, and do not be stiff-necked any longer.”

Deut 10:12-13, “And now, O Israel, what does the LORD your God ask of you but to fear the LORD your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and to observe the LORD’s commands and decrees that I am giving you today for your own good?”

Deut 30:6, regeneration, love for God

Deut 30:6, “The LORD your God will circumcise your hearts and the hearts of your descendants, so that you may love him with all your heart and with all your soul, and live.”

Josh 5:7-9, cleansing from defilement

Josh 5:7-9, “So he raised up their sons in their place, and these were the ones Joshua circumcised. They were still uncircumcised because they had not been circumcised on the way. And after the whole nation had been circumcised, they remained where they were in camp until they were healed.

“Then the LORD said to Joshua, ‘Today I have rolled away the reproach of Egypt from you.’ So the place has been called Gilgal to this day.”

Jer 4:4, regeneration, cleansing heart; = washing heart in v. 14

Jer 4:4,

“Circumcise yourselves to the LORD,
circumcise your hearts,
you men of Judah and people of Jerusalem,
Or my wrath will break out and burn like fire
because of the evil you have done—
burn with no one to quench it.”

Jer 4:14,

“O Jerusalem, wash the evil from your heart and be saved.
How long will you harbor wicked thoughts?”

Jer 9:25-26, uncircumcised in heart; to know and love God in heart, cf. v. 24

Jer 9:24-26,

“But let him who boasts boast about this:
that he understands and knows me,
“That I am the LORD, who exercises kindness,
justice and righteousness on earth,
for in these I delight,”
declares the LORD.

“‘The days are coming,’ declares the LORD, ‘when I will punish all who are circumcised only in the flesh—Egypt, Judah, Edom, Ammon, Moab and all who live in the desert in distant places. For all these nations are really uncircumcised, and even the whole house of Israel is uncircumcised in heart.’”

Since baptism is practiced in the NT dispensation, circumcision no longer is necessary.

Circumcision “perpetual” in Gen 17:13

Circumcision now optional, 1 Cor 7:18-20

1 Cor 7:18-20, “Was a man already circumcised when he was called? He should not become uncircumcised. Was a man uncircumcised when he was called? He should not be circumcised. Circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing. Keeping God’s commands is what counts. Each one should remain in the situation which he was in when God called him.”

Circumcision ruled out as a spiritual work in case of Gentile Titus

Gal 2:3-5, “Yet not even Titus, who was with me, was compelled to be circumcised, even though he was a Greek. *This matter arose* because some false brothers had infiltrated our ranks to spy on the freedom we have in Christ Jesus and to make us slaves. We did not give in to them for a moment, so that the truth of the gospel might remain with you.”

Baptism’s Underlying Significance

1. Theologians have always wrestled with the biblical data, trying to find a single unifying significance that would encompass all the points above.
2. Recent discoveries of ancient Near Eastern treaties have provided the basis for a possible solution (cf. Meredith G. Kline, *By Oath Consigned*, 1968).
 - 1) Ancient suzerain-vassal covenants often were accompanied by an oath and a covenant ritual, especially on the part of the vassal.
 - 2) The covenant ritual usually involved the slaying of animals, with imprecations on the one who should break the treaty obligations.
 - 3) Perhaps the expression “to cut a covenant,” כָּרַת בְּרִית *kārat b^erît*, originated with this idea.

- 4) The OT gives two clear examples of this practice:

Gen 15:9-21, God's covenant with Abraham

Jer 34:18, 19, Jerusalem's covenant with her slaves

Jer 34:18-19, "The men who have violated my covenant and have not fulfilled the terms of the covenant they made before me, I will treat like the calf they cut in two and then walked between its pieces. The leaders of Judah and Jerusalem, the court officials, the priests and all the people of the land who walked between the pieces of the calf."

- 5) The ritual often pictured the sanctions of the covenant, usually the curse for disobedience, perhaps the blessing for obedience.
- 6) Vassals who assumed the covenant also assumed it for their subjects, who were thus bound to the suzerain's terms.

3. The Abrahamic covenant, as well as the Mosaic covenant, demanded loyalty to Jehovah's ordinances.

Gen 18:19, "For I have chosen him, so that he will direct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD by doing what is right and just, so that the LORD will bring about for Abraham what he has promised him."

Gen 26:5, "because Abraham obeyed me and kept my requirements, my commands, my decrees and my laws."

4. With this background, it is more apparent that the sign of circumcision was the covenant ritual, graphically picturing the sanctions of the Abrahamic covenant.

Sanctions for obedience

Regeneration

Cleansing from sin

(perhaps) Deliverance through the promised seed, through Abraham's natural progeny

Sanctions for disobedience

Especially, the cutting off of the people from God (cf. the negative connotation in Exod 4:24-26)

Jesus Christ fulfilled the sanctions pictured in circumcision: he received the sanctions for disobedience, and he conveys to us the sanctions for obedience.

(Cf. Kline's interpretation of Col 2:11, "the circumcision of Christ," taken as an objective genitive, referring to his Passion; while this interpretation is possible, it seems that the subjective genitive is better, referring to the circumcision of the heart which Jesus performs on us through the Holy Spirit)

Col 2:11, "In him you were also circumcised, in the putting off of the sinful nature, not with a circumcision done by the hands of men but with the circumcision done by Christ." (NIV)

Col 2:11, "In whom also ye are circumcised with the circumcision made without hands, in putting off the body of the sins of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ." (KJV)

5. Likewise, the new covenant of Jer 31, Ezek 36, and Heb 8, demands obedience for blessing—the life of faith.
6. The NT sign of baptism also signifies the sanctions of the covenant of grace, as spelled out in the Abrahamic and new covenants.

Sanctions for obedience

Cleansing from sin

Baptism of the Holy Spirit

Sanctions for disobedience

Death; cf. Mark 10:38-39; Rom 6

Mark 10:38-39,

“You don’t know what you are asking,” Jesus said.
“Can you drink the cup I drink or be baptized with the
baptism I am baptized with?”

“We can,” they answered.

Jesus said to them, “You will drink the cup I drink
and be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with.”

Divine judgment

Again, Jesus fulfilled the sanctions pictured in baptism. By assuming the covenant curses, he secured its blessings for those united to him.

7. This understanding of the significance of baptism harmonizes all the various Scriptural passages into one concept, which in turn corresponds to ancient practice.
8. If this correspondence is correct, the underlying significance of baptism is that we place ourselves and those under us (children, in the NT) under the obligations of the new covenant. God has commanded that all people do this. Baptism would therefore symbolize our obligation to accept the blessings available through faith and obedience, and the curses resulting from disobedience and rebellion.

Efficacy of Baptism

This doctrine is related to the view of the efficacy of the sacraments in general; see above, “The Efficacy of the Sacraments” in ch. 4.

Roman Catholic view—forgives original sin; saves

Lutheran view—similar to RC; recognizes faith

Reformed view—(see next point below)

Zwinglian view—symbolic only; no grace conferred

Reformed view of the efficacy of baptism

WCF 28:5-6. Here the Confession states that, while it is a sin to neglect baptism, yet baptism is not required for salvation, nor does it guarantee salvation.

“5. Although it be a great sin to contemn or neglect this ordinance, yet grace and salvation are not so inseparably annexed unto it, as that no person can be regenerated or saved without it, or that all that are baptized are undoubtedly regenerated.”

“6. The efficacy of Baptism is not tied to that moment of time wherein it is administered; yet, notwithstanding, by the right use of this ordinance the grace promised is not only offered, but really exhibited and conferred by the Holy Ghost, to such (whether of age or infants) as that grace belongeth unto, according to the counsel of God’s own will, in his appointed time.”

Paragraph 6 states that, when rightly administered, baptism offers, exhibits, and confers spiritual grace, on these conditions:

- 1) The person baptized is elect.
- 2) The time of blessing is not tied to the time of baptism (though it is possible).
- 3) Methods to obtain blessings are employed later (cf. WLC , which speaks of “improving” our baptism).

With these conditions, the Westminster standards reject the idea of automatic baptismal regeneration.

Reformed view in the light of ancient covenant rituals

- 1) Baptism confers no promise or blessing other than that received through faith (this point would be true at least in the case of adults).
- 2) Baptism places one in God’s covenant community, and obligates one to keep God’s new covenant.
- 3) For the elect, baptism seals the blessings of the covenant; for the nonelect, it seals the curses of the covenant.