



WHAT ARE THE SACRAMENTS?

THEME
7

PART
1

The Biblical Foundations of Baptism

SUMMARY

The practice of Christian baptism is rooted in the Old Testament. The use of water for ritual purification and washings anticipates the cleansing and forgiveness from sin which Christians associate with baptism. Jewish proselyte baptism may also be a model for baptism in the New Testament. Jesus' baptism by John indicated his identification with the people and his commitment to his work as Messiah. When early Christians were baptized in the name of Jesus they were being identified with him in his death and resurrection. This rite was seen as a sign and seal of God's covenant promises, now fulfilled in the death and resurrection of their Lord.

BASIC BIBLE REFERENCES

Ezekiel 36:22-32
Matthew 3:13-17;
28:16-20
Mark 1:4; 16:15-16
John 3:5
Acts 2:37-42; 10:34-48
Romans 6:1-11
1 Corinthians 6:11;
12:12-13
Galatians 3:26-29
Ephesians 4:1-6
Colossians 2:11-15
Titus 3:5
1 Peter 3:18-22

WORD LIST

Circumcision
 Covenant
 Faith
 Forgiveness
 Proselyte baptism
 Ritual purification
 Seal and Sign

Introduction

Most communities have special rituals and activities which convey to members something of what it means to belong to the group. So from the beginning of the church, Christians have practiced baptism and celebrated the Lord's Supper as sacramental actions. The Bible, however, does not define a sacrament or indicate the proper number of them. For this information we shall have to turn briefly to the history of the church.

In Roman culture the word *sacramentum* was used in at least two different ways. In the military it referred to the oath of allegiance soldiers swore to their leaders and their country. In the law courts it described a sum of money plaintiffs deposited with a priest to indicate their willingness to be humble before divine judgment. Picking up on these usages, the theologian Tertullian early in the third century used *sacramentum* to refer to a new Christian's commitment to Christ. This new allegiance began with baptism.

Later followers of Tertullian used *sacramentum* for other ritual acts and customs of the church. They thought of these actions as pointers to the divine mystery revealed in the gospel. By the early Middle Ages the number of sacraments varied widely from place to place. In the early decades of the thirteenth century, however, the Roman Catholic and

Eastern Churches set the number at seven. These seven are: baptism, confirmation, eucharist, penance, ordination, marriage, and anointing of the sick.

The first full treatment of biblical teachings on the sacraments was written by Augustine early in the fifth century. His views developed throughout the theological controversies in which he was engaged. Augustine said sacraments were “visible signs of divine things.” They are sacraments because “in them one thing is seen, another thing understood. What is seen has a bodily appearance, but what is understood has a spiritual fruit.” In short, a sacrament is a “sign of a sacred thing.”¹ A sign or symbol resembles that to which it points: water in baptism witnesses to inner cleansing from sin; the grains of wheat in the bread of the Lord’s Supper point to the many members of the body of Christ. An expressive “word,” however, must be added to the sign to explain what it means. The outward material element (water; bread and wine) and the clarifying word are both necessary to make a “sacrament.” When these two occur together, Augustine believed the symbol could effect what it symbolizes. The grace of God can become real through the sacrament when it is accepted by faith. The “water” in baptism conveys spiritual cleansing; the bread and wine in the Eucharist make real the power of Christ’s body and blood. The Holy Spirit gives the gift of faith so the divine “mystery” of the grace of God might be conveyed to those in the communion of the church.

Augustine’s basic definition of a sacrament was accepted and developed by medieval theologians. It was also accepted by the sixteenth-century Protestant reformers, Martin Luther and John Calvin. These leaders, however, challenged the whole sacramental structure of the Roman Catholic Church and insisted that the number of sacraments should be limited to those clearly instituted by Christ, namely baptism and the Lord’s Supper. We will learn more of these developments as we turn to consider these two sacraments in detail.

Old Testament Background

The roots of the New Testament practice of baptism are found in the Old Testament. These precedents may be seen in several practices carried out in the nation of Israel as well as in the importance attached to certain events. Many of these practices and events are associated with water, which is linked with a number of images. Water cleanses and thus can represent a washing and spiritual cleansing. Water refreshes and brings new energy, connecting one with the source of life. Water gives life and can represent the beginning of a new form of life. Water can also bring death and sometimes can refer to the chaos of creation before the world began (see Genesis 1:2) or to the river or sea of death from which there is no return.

¹ Augustine, *Letter* 138,7.

Several Old Testament passages associate water with these symbolic meanings. Various practices of purification involve the use of water for cleansing. This was needed when defilement had occurred. Water would cleanse impurities. This cleansing by water was part of Ezekiel's vision of God's restoration of Israel's national life from the corruption of sin. Read **Ezekiel 36:22-32**; see Psalm 51:1-2, 6-7. Ritual washings were also part of Israel's life. See Exodus 40:12-15; Leviticus 16:2-4. By the time of Jesus, these washings were still practiced. Note Mark 7:1-4. A Jewish sect in Jesus' day, the Essenes, practiced elaborate forms of regular ritual washings to purify themselves.

Water was used as well in Jewish proselyte baptisms. A Gentile who was converted to Judaism was required to be circumcised (if male), offer a special sacrifice in the Temple (while it remained), and undergo a ceremonial bath. These actions marked this person as entering into the covenant, accepting the Law given to the Jews at Sinai, and joining the Israelites by symbolically "passing through the Red Sea" and thus being delivered from death.²

The Baptism of John

The Gospels record the emergence of John the Baptist who preached and baptized in the wilderness of Judaea on the banks of the Jordan River. His proclamation had a note of authority, like the prophetic preaching of earlier centuries, and so John was regarded as a prophet. Read Mark 11:29-33. His message anticipated the "coming one" who would execute God's judgment and for whom John was preparing the way. Read Matthew 3:1-12; **Mark 1:4**. John urged repentance and a radical change of life.

John was known as a "baptizer." His baptism was administered to others and thus distinct from ceremonial baths, which people performed for themselves. It also had a future orientation relating to the "end times." When Luke described John's baptism (3:4-6) he cited the prophecy of Isaiah 40:3-5³ and so linked John's ministry to the coming reign of God. Those

2 A debate occurred between the schools of Rabbis Hillel and Shammai about the point at which a person actually became a Jew. Some members of the Hillel school maintained it was at this baptism (occurring seven days after circumcision) rather than with circumcision that the transition from Gentile to Jew occurred. See F.F. Bruce, *New Testament History* (New York: Doubleday, 1972), p. 156. The extent to which Jewish proselyte baptism influenced later Christian baptism has been much debated by scholars.

3 Luke's citation of Isaiah 40 follows the Greek (Septuagint) translation of the text. This accounts for the differences between what we read in Luke 3 and Isaiah 40 in our Bibles.

who repented and were baptized by John formed an end-time “people prepared” who would be ready for the Lord. Read Matthew 11:12-15; Luke 3:15-17. John’s baptism offended his contemporaries because it implied that even the people of Israel needed to repent and be forgiven before they could enter the kingdom of the messiah.

The Baptism of Jesus

The climax of John’s ministry was his baptism of Jesus. John proclaimed that while he baptized with water, the one coming after him, who is “more powerful” than John and beside whom John is most unworthy, would baptize with “the Holy Spirit and fire.” See Matthew 3:11; John 1:33. John’s baptism thus inaugurated a new life for those converted and assured them of forgiveness and cleansing from sin. It also anticipated the messianic baptism and the coming kingdom.

Jesus’ first public appearance was this baptism by John. Read **Matthew 3:13-17**. By submitting to this baptism, Jesus apparently identified himself with John’s message as well as with the people whom John was baptizing. In addition, the events surrounding Jesus’ baptism—the voice from heaven; the descent of the Spirit; the quotations from Scripture—all indicate that Jesus was beginning his life’s task. Read Psalm 2:7; Isaiah 11:1-2; 42:1; 61:1; Mark 1:10-11. We may also see Jesus acting as a representative person, identifying himself with the people of Israel and with the people as sinners.⁴ Thus his baptism marked the recognition of Jesus’ identity and his commitment to his ministry to come. It highlighted his willingness to obey God, even to endure suffering and death. And ultimately, it led to his vindication in his resurrection and ascension.

Baptism in the Book of Acts

A number of scenes in the book of Acts portray Christian baptism. Soon after Jesus’ followers began preaching the gospel of his resurrection, they began this practice. Their authority for doing so was Jesus himself. Read **Matthew 28:16-20**; **Mark 16:15-16**. The disciples were promised they would be “baptized by the Holy Spirit” and thus have the Spirit’s presence and power to enable their mission as witnesses to Jesus Christ. Read Acts 1:4-8. On the day of Pentecost the Spirit came upon the church in the midst of Peter’s preaching and a great crowd was “filled with the Holy Spirit.” Read Acts 2:1-13. This event brought about repentance and baptism for three thousand persons. Read **Acts 2:37-42**.

⁴ An important question about Jesus’ baptism is why he submitted to John’s baptism if this was a baptism for repentance and forgiveness of sins, which Jesus himself did not need. To see Jesus as identifying himself with the people and standing in solidarity with them as a representative person is one way to understand this. Jesus’ response in Matthew 3:15 to John’s reluctance to baptize him can be seen in this light.

Throughout the Book of Acts, several other incidents of baptism are described. These portray the baptism of adults who expressed their faith in Jesus before they were baptized. Peter's Pentecost preaching indicated that the promises of God's new covenant in Jesus Christ are extended not only to Jews but also to the Gentiles, and their children are included. In some cases, entire families believed and were baptized. See Acts 11:13-18; 18:8. As the church spread, Samaritans and Gentiles and an Ethiopian, a Roman, a Greek and a Philippian household were baptized with water and entered into the covenant community. Read Acts 8:9-13; 8:26-40; **10:34-48**; 16:14-15, 25-34.

As you will note in the texts cited above, the accounts in Acts associate baptism with the Holy Spirit. The normal pattern was the proclamation of the gospel message, followed by a response of faith and baptism as a sign of being joined to Jesus Christ and his salvation. This sign of God's covenant in Jesus Christ committed persons to live as disciples. Baptism was administered in the "name of Jesus Christ" or "in the name of the Lord Jesus." It is this "name" where the power of salvation is found. Read Acts 4:12.

But what did baptism mean to those early Christian converts? One scholar has put it this way:

One thing that is clear is that baptism marked a dividing line between the old and the new, between waiting for the messiah and finding him, between living with guilt and living with forgiveness, between being in a community of law and being in a community of love. For some the change was unexpected and unexplainable, especially when they found themselves with charismatic gifts like prophesying or speaking in tongues. For others the change was expected and explainable: it was the beginning of the end, the coming of the final time when God would establish his reign over the earth. But for all of them the change was real: being baptized brought a real change in their lives that they could not deny.⁵

Baptism in Paul's Letters

While there are not a large number of references to baptism in Paul's writings, there are several that are very significant. His most developed treatment indicates that in baptism a person is joined with Jesus Christ in his death and resurrection. Read **Romans 6:1-4**. Paul's thought sequence here, "*baptized* into his death . . . *buried* with him by baptism into death . . . *raised* from the dead," is parallel with another passage that outlines the basic

⁵ Joseph Martos, *Doors to the Sacred: A Historical Introduction to the Sacraments in the Catholic Church* (New York: Doubleday & Co., 1982), p. 165.

gospel message or kerygma. Read 1 Corinthians 15:1-4. Here the sequence is: “Christ *died* for our sins . . . was *buried*, and . . . was *raised* on the third day.” In both letters Paul implies that the cleansing and forgiveness of sins associated with baptism are related to the power of Christ’s death as confessed in baptism. The purpose and function and result of baptism are that one might have new life.

Now read **Romans 6:5-6**. The close connection between baptism and the death and resurrection of Christ is indicated by Paul’s statement that those who are baptized are “united” with Christ in a death and resurrection like his. The union of believers with Christ means they share in the power of Christ’s death over sin and in his victory over death in his resurrection. Baptism represents this union with Christ and the effects of his work. Now those who are baptized can be considered “dead to sin” in that Christ’s death has overcome the damaging power of sin. And, they are “alive to God in Christ Jesus” because the new life Christ brings by his resurrection is a new life to be shared by those who believe in Christ both now and in the future. Read **Romans 6:7-11**.

The key to salvation throughout Paul’s writings is faith. It is faith that leads to confessing Jesus Christ as Lord, of which baptism is a sign. Read Romans 10:9. According to Paul, passing through the sea in the Old Testament story of Exodus 14 was a figure of baptism. Read 1 Corinthians 10:1-4. Now believers are baptized into Jesus Christ and are thus incorporated into the church as the Christian community. Read **1 Corinthians 12:12-13**. Here baptism is closely associated with the one Spirit who makes the “body” (church) one as well. This oneness, attested to in baptism, cuts across all lines of nationality, or social standing (Jews/Greeks; slaves/free). Read **Galatians 3:26-29**; Colossians 3:11. Baptism is the common sign for all who have become “children of God through faith.” In the household of faith, all social distinctions are broken down and are irrelevant, for there is a unity in Christ which makes all persons one in Christ. Everyone receives the same baptism and participates in the same Spirit. This unity of the church’s faith is also expressed in the phrase, “one Lord, one faith, one baptism.” Read **Ephesians 4:1-6**.

For Paul baptism was a sign of faith just as circumcision had been a sign and seal of God’s covenant in the Old Testament. Read Genesis 17:9-14; Romans 4:1-12. Those who believe in Christ are the true descendants of Abraham; they receive God’s covenant promises. Baptism is a sign of the covenantal promises, as those who believe and are baptized into Christ are “clothed” with Christ. Scan Galatians 3; note especially verse 27. Believers receive a “spiritual circumcision” in baptism just as the circumcision of the flesh was the sign of the covenant for the descendants of Abraham.⁶ Forgiveness of sins is accomplished,

⁶ At the Jerusalem Council the early church struggled with the question of whether new Christians must be obedient to the Mosaic law and be circumcised. See Acts 15. The church’s decision was that circumcision was not necessary for Christians.

not by an outward physical act, but by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Believers share in this forgiveness by being “buried” with Christ in baptism and raised with him by the power of God. Read **Colossians 2:11-15**. Baptism is the sign and seal (Ephesians 1:13-14; 4:30) of the certain benefits of Christ for salvation given to those with faith. Baptism is by water and the Holy Spirit and sets one in the context of the believing community in the bonds of faith and love. Read **1 Corinthians 6:11; Titus 3:5**.

Johannine Literature

“Water” and “Spirit” are often found in John’s Gospel.⁷ Interpreters differ on the extent to which these various references may originally have been related to baptism. Water and Spirit are linked in Jesus’ dialogue with Nicodemus when Jesus insists one must be born of both. Read **John 3:5**. In the footwashing episode at the Last Supper a possible reference to inner, spiritual cleansing is suggested by Jesus’ reply to Peter. Read John 13:1-11; see especially verse 8. Water and blood are associated with the piercing of Jesus’ side when he died on the cross. See John 19:34; 1 John 5:6. At the end of John’s Gospel, Jesus commissions his disciples by giving them the Holy Spirit and thus “baptizes” them with the Spirit. Read John 20:22.

Other New Testament References

Allusions to Old Testament ceremonial laws are strong in the book of Hebrews, where a physical washing of the body is seen to have a spiritual counterpart, thus implying baptism. Read Hebrews 10:19-22. In 1 Peter, baptism is compared to Noah’s ark in which people were “saved through water.” But now the salvation to which baptism attests is not a removal of outward, physical dirt but is related to the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Read **1 Peter 3:18-22**.⁸ The resurrection of Christ gives baptism its efficacy and power.⁹

FOR FURTHER STUDY AND REFLECTION

Memory Bank

1. Born of water and the Spirit (John 3:5)
2. Baptism and newness of life (Romans 6:4)

⁷ For water see John 1:24-34; 2:1-11; 4:1-30; 5:7; 7:38; 13:5; 19:34. For Spirit see John 1:32-33; 3:5-8, 34; 4:23-24; 6:63; 7:39; 14:17, 26; 15:26; 16:13; 20:22.

⁸ Some have seen 1 Peter 1:3-4:11 as a baptismal treatise or instructions given to those newly baptized. See the references to a “new birth” (1:3), being “born anew” (1:23) and the sense that “now” new things such as joy and salvation are occurring (1:8-9; 3:21).

⁹ The New Testament does not suggest that water possesses any magical power as a sacrament. The emphasis is always that it is Christ’s name, the resurrection, the Holy Spirit, or the Word of God that effects the new creation.

3. One baptism and one Spirit (Ephesians 4:4-6)
4. Salvation by water and the Spirit (Titus 3:5)

Research

1. Review the article on “Baptism” in a Bible dictionary or biblical encyclopedia for further insights into the biblical bases for baptism.
2. Consult biblical commentaries on some of the verses that link “baptism” with the “Spirit.” Note any varying emphases among the different commentators.
3. Write a short exposition or interpretation of Colossians 2:11-15 in which Paul links Old Testament circumcision with Christian baptism. Reflect on the contemporary implications of this linkage.

Reflection

1. What is the value of knowing that Christian baptism has Old Testament roots?
2. Reflect on the ways in which you are reminded of your own Christian baptism and how these reminders strengthen your faith.
3. In what ways can churches strengthen an appreciation for the meaning and importance of baptism?