

Scripture Readings for January 6th, 2019

Eph 3:2-6; 4:1-6

² Surely you have heard about the administration of God's grace that was given to me for you, ³ that is, the mystery made known to me by revelation, as I have already written briefly. ⁴ In reading this, then, you will be able to understand my insight into the mystery of Christ, ⁵ which was not made known to people in other generations as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to God's holy apostles and prophets. ⁶ This mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus.

⁴ As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. ² Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. ³ Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. ⁴ There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; ⁵ one Lord, one faith, one baptism; ⁶ one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.

Gal 3:26-29

²⁶ So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, ²⁷ for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. ²⁸ There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. ²⁹ If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise.

Sermon: On Baptism

One obvious observation from just a glance at Church History is that the Church is made a hash of a lot of things! And one of those things is baptism. As you know, baptism was originally meant to *unite* a diverse group of people into one faith, it has now become the waters that *divide*.¹ Later in our service we will be baptising Maiya, (and it happens to be my first ever baptism!), so today is the perfect opportunity to preach on the topic of baptism.

We say that baptism is a sacrament, but what *is* a "sacrament"? "Sacrament" is Latin for the Greek word *mysterion*, which means "mystery" or "secret." In light of that, St Augustine described a sacrament as "a *visible* sign of God's *invisible* grace."² It's perhaps timely that today is Epiphany Sunday because "epiphany" means a "revealing" or "disclosure," something that was a secret or a mystery has now been made known or made plain.³ The ultimate sacrament is, of course, the incarnation: literally, "God made flesh" in Jesus the Messiah, the one who supremely reveals God's grace and love toward us.⁴ It

¹ Donald Bridge and David Phipers, *The Waters That Divide: Two Views on Baptism Explored* (Christian Focus, 2008).

² Alternatively, "Sacraments are an outward expression of an inner reality that God has generously done."

³ The two Epiphany lectionary readings are: Matt 2:1-12 and Eph 3:1-12; they both reveal the mystery of Jesus the Christ.

⁴ Col 1:26-27.

is this *revelation* that we celebrate on Epiphany Sunday! In the context of Church worship, however, the two sacraments are Holy Communion and Baptism. Now, for those of you who were raised Roman Catholic, you will have been taught that there are *seven* sacraments.⁵ Most Protestant churches reduce that list to the two I just mentioned - the ones Christ himself commanded his followers to do. Recall, at the Last Supper, Jesus told his disciples to re-enact that feast of bread and wine in remembrance of his death.⁶ And Matthew tells us the resurrected Jesus commissioned his disciples, saying: "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, *baptizing* them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you."⁷ As you can see, a feature of the sacraments is that through everyday things – bread, wine, and water – *God acts!* But don't mistake the bread, wine, and water as having some kind of magical powers - they don't! They are, however, *more than symbols and signs* because, through the sacraments, God's Spirit communicates *to us* and is present *with us*. The sacraments, therefore, have an emphasis on what *God has done and is doing*, together with our response. The *Living Faith* document summarises it this way: "Baptism and Holy Communion are visible expressions of the Gospel given as a means of *entering* and *sustaining* the Christian Life."⁸ Sacraments are also – as Theologian Alistair McGrath puts it: "conveyors of grace that strengthen faith, enhance unity, and reassure us of God's promises to us."⁹ So, as you can see, sacraments are very important!

Now let's focus on baptism. Christian baptism is the sacrament of *initiation into life in Christ*.¹⁰ It marks the beginning of the journey of faith and the discipline *that lasts throughout one's life*. The practice of baptism entails the person being immersed in water, or water is poured or sprinkled on him or her, in the "name" (or authority) of the Trinity: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It doesn't matter how much water is used – the meaning is the same! And note that because we baptise in the name of the Trinity, the person is being initiated into the World-wide Church, not simply the Presbyterian Church in Canada.

There are many rich images in the New Testament for baptism and *all* of them are important.¹¹ We are, after all, using metaphors to describe a profound mystery! I will simply mention four of them, and all of them are just as relevant for us today as they were in the 1st century. Baptism is described as a

⁵ The Roman Catholic church and Eastern church have seven sacraments: baptism, confirmation, Eucharist, penance, ordination, marriage, and anointing of the sick (or "extreme unction"). It is *not* that Protestants dismiss the merits of the other five; it is simply their connection to Jesus Christ.

⁶ See Luke 22:19; 1 Cor 11:23-25. (Paul's letter reveals this was indeed the *practice* of the early church - even before the Gospels were written.)

⁷ Matt 28:18-20a. Note this very early *trinitarian* formula in the practical life of the Church. Christ's commission concludes: "And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age" (20b). Jesus not only commanded baptism but he himself freely submitted to being baptized by John the Baptist (Mark 1:9-11). By this act, Jesus entered into solidarity with lost (sinful) humanity and he begins his life of costly love and service that eventually lead to his passion, death, and resurrection.

⁸ *Living Faith*, 7.5.1. (*Living Faith* is a 'subordinate standard' for the Presbyterian Church in Canada.)

⁹ A. E. McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction* (5th Edn, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 407-411. Moreover, when Christ returns, we shall no longer need sacraments, because we shall encounter that to which they now point.

¹⁰ See 1 Cor 3:23, 6:19; 2 Cor 10:7, Gal 3:27.

¹¹ See also the summary in *Living Faith* 7.6.

dying and rising with Christ.¹² The descent *into* water signifies the Christian's identification with the suffering and death of Christ, whereby the power of that sin has in the old way of life is broken, and the ascent *from* the water signifies participation in the new life in the Spirit based on the power of the resurrection. Baptism is also treated as a washing of the sin-stained life and God's forgiveness washes away the sin of those who truly are repentant.¹³ Those who are thus pardoned by Christ receive, in baptism, a fresh start in life and a new ethical orientation in God's kingdom. Baptism is also portrayed as a *rebirth* by the Holy Spirit.¹⁴ Another image of baptism is a *welcome* into a new community of promise, becoming members of a new family and citizens of God's new society.¹⁵

This latter point is important because, for Jews, the *sign* of their mutual covenant with God is – of course - circumcision. But in the New Testament, that sign was replaced by baptism.¹⁶ As we heard in our reading, Paul writes: "In Christ Jesus you are *all* children of God through faith, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are *all one* in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise."¹⁷ The shocking power of those inclusive words cannot be understated! They transcend the traditional barrier between Jews and non-Jews! Baptism is, therefore, the key sign of church unity within its obvious diversity of social status and ethnicity. Furthermore, just as it is nonsense to speak of being circumcised more than once, so baptism is a one-time act! As it says in Ephesians, "There is one body and one Spirit . . . one Lord, one faith, *one baptism*; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all."¹⁸

All this symbolism is very well, you may say, but why did I say at the outset that the Church has made a dog's dinner of baptism? That is because the *practice* of baptism still creates confusion, mainly because while many churches baptise babies, others will only baptise adults. Let's explore this for a moment.

In infant baptism, the decision to baptise is obviously made by the parents. The New Testament does *not* explicitly forbid this practice, and while it includes no specific references to infant baptism, there are texts that certainly suggests that possibility.¹⁹ More importantly, this practice was normal by the 2nd or 3rd century, and the widespread acceptance of the practice influenced later theological debates. When we baptise young children today, we are proclaiming that God's love is a sheer gift. It is a powerful expression of the fact that God loves us *even before* we begin to respond to God in love and trust.²⁰ Because of that, we *never* need to live in fear or guilt over the eternal salvation of an un-baptised

¹² Rom 6:3–4; Col 2:11–13.

¹³ 1 Cor 6:11. Repentance (Greek *metanoia*) means changing direction, or U-turn, toward God (cf. John's baptism).

¹⁴ John 3:5; Acts 2:38.

¹⁵ Eph 2:19; Gal 3:28.

¹⁶ See Col 2:11 – 13.

¹⁷ Gal 3:26–29.

¹⁸ Eph 4:4–6. Ideally, baptism should therefore be done in public, not private, as part of community!

¹⁹ See Acts 2:38,39; 16:15, 31–33 to recognise "household" baptism.

²⁰ 1 John 4:19.

child. However, infant baptism is a wonderful opportunity to publicly affirm that “God loves this child!”²¹ The family is responding to God saying, “We belong to God and God is journeying with us!” Moreover, a commitment is being made *in the parent’s faith* that the child will grow up within the Christian Faith Community, in the prayerful hope that the child will embrace that faith for themselves as an adult. Therefore, infant baptism is only the first step, a “down-payment,” so-to-speak, the second step is sometimes called a “Confirmation.” While Confirmation doesn’t have scriptural authority, the Reformers retained it in various forms and in the Presbyterian Church we call it an adult “Profession of Faith” or an “Affirmation of Baptism.” I think this is a good thing because we should always encourage people who want to publicly affirm their faith; it is a sign that the Spirit is at work in their life.

To help visualise this two-step process, I suggest we see the act of infant baptism as God’s gift of a signed, bank cheque to the helpless child. This emphasises *God’s* initiative and grace. Since baptism is a sign of the mystery of grace, the gracious things for us to do is simply “let the little children come to Jesus.”²² But we are also honouring the parents’ faith, and that of the wider Church Community, as together we pray and work for the day when the child responds and claims that faith for themselves. Until the person fills in their own name on the cheque, and “cashes it,” it remains in the parents’ trust.

Now let’s briefly consider adult baptism, or “believers” baptism – as it is sometimes known. Clearly, the decision to be baptised is made by the receiver, not their parents! This emphasises the *faith response* of the individual. It also stresses public confession and a personal commitment to the new way of Christ. Though certainly biblical, we should be aware of its dangers. Sometimes the sacrament of baptism becomes all about having a spiritual experience and thus the person under-plays *God’s* grace and initiative. Furthermore, adult baptism can become too *individualistic* and overlooks the fact we are becoming part of a global community and need to grow in faith within a specific congregation. Nevertheless, properly understood, adult baptism is a powerful experience.

Just so you know, since baptism is all about God’s grace, I am happy to perform both kinds of baptism. With adults I am happy to sprinkle water or do full immersion. But, for the reason I stated earlier, I will not re-baptise anyone! In conclusion, baptism has been an endless source of debate and division; don’t let it be! Instead, let baptism be the means of promoting unity, enhancing faith, and celebrating God’s goodness! And let’s not forget God is much bigger than our theological schemes and the quirks of Church History, because God is gracious. Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift! Amen.

²¹ As Roman Catholic theologian Karl Rahner put it.

²² Matt 19:14.