

THEOLOGICAL ESSAY: The Ordinance of **Baptism** (NIV based)  
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Baptism is an ordinance that was established by Jesus Christ. He set the example that the church is to follow. Even though most churches practice baptism, there is a conflict in belief about what baptism accomplishes or signifies. It is important to have a correct biblical understanding of baptism. An incorrect understanding of baptism can lead to heresy and a loss of faith. Baptism is a symbolic act of obedience in which a new believer is submerged in water, to publicly signify the inward change that happened at conversion and to symbolically participate with Christ in His death and resurrection.

There are three main views on baptism. The first can be identified as the 'Roman Catholic View'. The Roman Catholic View holds that water baptism is a means of grace through which the sins of the person are forgiven; therefore, baptism is necessary for salvation (EWTN). This view is based on a few passages that seem to indicate that baptism is necessary for salvation. The second view of salvation is the 'Covenantal View'. This view states that baptism is the New Testament equivalent of circumcision, in which the person is brought into the covenant community, given the benefits of that covenant, and sealed in the covenant (Boyd 221). This view is based on their understanding of the Old Testament custom of circumcision and the correlation between the two in the Book of Colossians. The third view is the 'Believer's Baptism'. As already stated, this view holds that baptism is only an outward sign of an inward change. It is a symbol and nothing more. Believer's Baptism bases its belief on the consistent accounts of conversion and then baptism in the Book of Acts, as well as the lack of evidence to the contrary.

The origin of baptism in the New Testament began with the baptism of Jesus in Matthew 3:13-17. John the Baptist was baptizing people for the repentance of sins at the Jordan River when Jesus came to him to be baptized. "But John tried to deter him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" Jesus replied, "Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness." Then John consented. As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water" (Matthew 3:14-16a). Jesus' baptism had several purposes. It signified the beginning of His ministry, the approval of the Father, and the revelation that Jesus is God's Son (France 116-123). Also, Christ was baptized to set an example for His followers.

In Jesus' last words to His disciples before His ascension, He gave the Great Commission, ""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"" (Matthew 28:18b-19). There are two things to note from Jesus' words. First, it is a command that ties being a disciple with being baptized. After a disciple is made, they are to be baptized. This is a distinct order of events that is further emphasized in the Book of Acts. Second, baptism is an act of the disciples. They are performing the actual baptism, they are not baptizing in the Spirit or by Christ. Baptism is focused on the person being baptized and the baptizer. It is clear here that baptism is not an act between God and the person being baptized.

There are many conversions in the Book of Acts. The two main conversions that pertain to baptism are the Ethiopian eunuch and the Philippian jailor. In Acts chapter 8, Phillip encountered an Ethiopian eunuch that was reading the Book of Isaiah. Through Isaiah, Phillip led the eunuch to faith in Jesus Christ. The eunuch then asked Phillip, ""Look, here is water. Why shouldn't I be baptized?" And he gave orders to stop the

chariot. Then both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water and Philip baptized him” (Acts 8:36c,38). This passage is clear in the point that baptism comes after saving faith.

The second conversion in the Book of Acts is the Philippian jailor in Acts 16:32-33, “Then they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all the others in his house. At that hour of the night the jailor took them and washed their wounds; then immediately he and all his family were baptized”. This passage is important in showing that baptism is an act that follows conversion. On the other hand, those who advocate Covenantal Baptism use this verse to show that the jailor’s whole house was baptized into the covenant. This will be addressed later in the paper when the arguments for and against are discussed.

Baptism is addressed many times in the epistles, the most important being Galatians 2:27, Romans 6:3-4, and Colossians 2:12. The importance of these verses is that the argument is being made that those who were baptized had become one with Christ in His death and resurrection. “Or don’t you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death...” (Romans 6:3-4a). The point is being made that those who had been baptized had also become unified with Christ. This union did not originate in baptism but rather in their saving faith (Ephesians 2:8-9; Romans 6:23). Baptism is the symbol that true believers remember so that they can envision what happened at conversion.

Baptism is the act of a new believer that symbolizes his/her new faith and what happened at conversion. This view is most consistent with the biblical narrative. In the Book of Acts, baptism always follows salvation (Acts 8:36; 16:31-32). It also falls in line with the death of Jesus. Jesus’ death was sufficient for all salvation. There is no need to add anything else to His death that might save us. Baptism helps believers to outwardly proclaim and show the work that Christ has done in their lives. It illustrates the truth that we are dead and buried with Christ (Romans chapter 6). It is not a burden to be worried about, nor another rite that needs to be followed. In addition, it is a practice of the New Covenant. We are freed from underneath the law (Romans 8:2). There is no longer a need to follow the law so that we are kept in the blessings of the covenant community. The church is the body of Christ in which we enter in through the Holy Spirit, who joins us to the body (1 Corinthians 12:13). Baptism is the reminder of that fact.

There is no passage where the evangelist tells his listeners that they need to be baptized and then they will be saved. Proponents of the belief that baptism is necessary for salvation cite John 3:5 and 1 Peter 3:21; however, these two passages do not prescribe baptism as necessary for salvation. In John 3:5, Jesus is talking to Nicodemus, “I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit”. Jesus is not talking about baptism here. In the context of the passage, “born of water” refers to physical birth from the womb. Jesus is making the point that a person needs to be born again: from the womb and through the Spirit. This view is most consistent with the passage. Water was used in rabbinic language to refer to birth and procreation, and would have been the natural association for Nicodemus. He could not have “perceived an allusion to an as yet nonexistent sacrament. It is difficult to think that Jesus would have spoken in such a way that His meaning could not possibly be grasped” (Morris 191-193).

The second passage used is 1 Peter 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. It saves you by the resurrection of Jesus Christ...”. This is not

claiming that baptism saves a person. It has already been assumed in previous verses 1:2, 1:22, and 2:1, that the readers have an inner cleansing that originates in the work of the Holy Spirit and Christ. The discussion then turns to the outward expression of the inner purification. God's power and willingness to save are visually represented in baptism (Michaels 216). This then works in the believer to cleanse his/her conscience.

The biblical evidence for saving baptism is tenuous at best. There are only two verses in the entire New Testament that remotely seem to indicate that baptism imparts saving grace. We must keep in consideration the entire biblical evidence as well as other teachings of Scripture that may be contradictory, such as Ephesians 2:8-9, "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith -- and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God -- not by works, so that no one can boast". This passage clearly indicates there is nothing outside of faith that saves a person. The belief in saving baptism takes two verses of the New Testament, misinterprets them, and then ignores the testimony of the biblical narrative in the Book of Acts. There is little biblical reason to hold to the belief that baptism imparts saving grace.

Covenantal Baptism is based on the Old Testament system of circumcision and the correlation between the two in Colossians 2:11-12. According to the adherents of this view, baptism is a "sign and seal of an inward and invisible thing by means whereof God works in us by the power of the Holy Spirit... Like circumcision in the Old Testament, baptism makes us sure of God's promises... The act of baptism is both the means of entering into the covenant and a sign of salvation" (Erickson 1093). Indeed, in the Old Testament, circumcision symbolized the entrance into the covenant community. The problem with the covenantal understanding of circumcision is that circumcision did not depend on the inward belief of the person. Household members and slaves of Jewish people were circumcised regardless of their inner beliefs (Genesis 17:10-13,23) (Grudem 976). The writings of Paul make the distinction that true circumcision is completely different. "...Circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code" (Romans 2:29b).

This is where the correlation between circumcision and baptism falls apart. We do not enter into the community of God through circumcision or physical baptism, but rather through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. "For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body -- whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free -- and we were all given the one Spirit to drink" (1 Corinthians 12:13). God deals differently with the church than he did with the nation of Israel and the Old Testament saints. The church is a spiritual entity that is made up of all who believe in Jesus Christ. However, the nation of Israel was made up of Jewish people who were circumcised regardless of their faith and of Gentiles who wished to become a part of the community. Circumcision separated the nation of Israel from the pagan nations around it.

A correlation is made between baptism and circumcision in Colossians 2:11-12a, but people take the comparison farther than it is intended, "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...". The phrase "you were also circumcised" is not used to say that "you were circumcised in the exact same way as in the Old Testament". In fact, a clear distinction is made that this circumcision is accomplished by God rather than by men. "It is more likely that this circumcision refers to the conversion of the believers as they experience the powerful deliverance and salvific act of God" (Pao 164). This circumcision is not used to relate the fact that the believers are now a part of the

covenant community, but rather that they have been saved through the work of Christ and are now free of the old flesh. When baptism is referenced, it is used to show that they have become one in Christ's death and resurrection through the symbol of baptism.

The final argument for Covenantal Baptism comes from passages in which whole households were baptized (Acts 16:14-15,33; 1 Corinthians 1:16). This Covenantal View contends that the whole household was baptized whether they had saving faith or not. This then shows that baptism replaced circumcision in the New Testament. There is no evidence in these accounts to show that there were unbelievers in the household who were not saved and nevertheless baptized (Grudem 978). In fact, there is more evidence to show that the whole household came to faith. In the case of the Philippian jailor, Paul and Silas "...spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all the others in his house" (Acts 16:32), and he "...was filled with joy because he had come to believe in God -- he and his whole family" (v.16:34b). In the case of the household of Stephanas, Paul writes that "the household of Stephanas were the first converts in Achaia, and they have devoted themselves to the service of the saints" (1 Corinthians 16:15). It is clear from these verses that there is no reason to believe that there were unsaved people in these households that were baptized so they could become a part of the covenant community. Nor, do these passages show that the reason the saved people were baptized was so that they would be a part of the covenant community and its blessing. The passage demonstrates that the household was so overjoyed with receiving salvation that they wanted to be baptized to outwardly demonstrate what had happened inwardly.

It is clear from the evidence that the Covenantal View of baptism is different from the New Testament's understanding. The Covenantal View imports an inaccurate understanding of circumcision into the New Covenant practice of baptism. It is a new and wonderful work that God is accomplishing in the New Covenant. We believers are allowed to symbolize our salvation and identify with Christ's work in our baptism.

The main argument against symbolic baptism is that it has an extremely low view of baptism. That baptism is just a symbol that does not matter or hold any sway. Symbolic baptism could seem almost sacrilegious. In answer to this objection, three points will be brought forth: symbolic is still necessary, symbolic can still be sacred, and informality does not detract from baptism.

Baptism is still an important act of the believer that needs to be carried out, even though it is symbolic and does not affect salvation. Jesus commanded all of His disciples to be baptized in Matthew 28:19. Not being baptized is a direct disobedience to Jesus Christ; therefore, all believers need to be baptized. Just because it is not needed for salvation or entrance into the covenant does not mean that baptism is not important. Jesus commanded baptism for a reason - for the believer to publicly identify himself/herself as a follower of Jesus. This argument that symbolic baptism reduces the importance of baptism is almost a moot point because a desire to be baptized should automatically flow from being saved. In the biblical narrative, the person who was saved immediately asked if he/she could be baptized (Acts 8:36). This then should be the expectation for those who are saved. A symbolic baptism does not make it unnecessary or unimportant to be baptized.

Even though baptism is a symbol, it is still a sacred act that should be conducted with reverence. We participate with the death and resurrection of Christ in baptism (Galatians 2:27; Romans 6:3-4; Colossians 2:12). This is not something to be taken casually. We should not mock the work of Christ by being cavalier in baptism. Also, baptism is a public act that is a testimony to believers and unbelievers alike. It would be a poor

witness to act flippantly in baptism. It is also important to take into account the warning about communion in 1 Corinthians 11:29-30, "For anyone who eats and drinks without recognizing the body of the Lord eats and drinks judgment on himself. That is why many among you are weak and sick, and a number of you have fallen asleep". The Corinthians had taken communion in a cavalier and unworthy manner. God does not consider baptism in a similar manner. We need to be careful how we approach baptism.

Finally, being informal about a baptism is not necessarily bad. When people were baptized in the Book of Acts, they were baptized wherever the closest water source was available (Acts 8:36). There does not need to be a certain formula for baptism to happen. It does not need to be in a designated area with a specific person. A reverent baptism can be spontaneous and fit the situation.

Our view of baptism affects how we understand other important doctrines of the faith. As briefly mentioned before, our theologies regarding eternal security and salvation are affected by our view of baptism. For those persons who believe that baptism is necessary for salvation, they believe that their loved ones will not be saved if they are not baptized. This totally skews their ideas of justification and salvation. It also opens up the idea that there could be other things that are required for salvation, such as communion. For those of us who believe that baptism is symbolic, we can be assured that God has already justified and saved us. His work is not dependent on our action of baptism. We can be encouraged by baptism rather than worried about if it was efficacious.

Another area of theology that baptism affects is how we understand the other sacrament: communion. It is inconsistent to believe that baptism is symbolic, and communion conveys grace or vice versa. It is necessary to be consistent between the two doctrines. They are both symbolic, which gives believers confidence in their salvation and God's work in their life. However, if someone believes that both sacraments impart grace, the problem of security of salvation is compounded.

Equating baptism to circumcision can affect how we read the Old and New Testaments. Because baptism is symbolic and a new work of the New Covenant, we know that God worked in a different way in the Old Testament versus the New Testament. For those who believe that baptism is covenantal, it is a short step to see the church as a new Israel, or as Israel being the church. Baptism is not just a small unimportant belief. It is the intersection of various doctrines and ways of understanding the Scriptures.

Baptism is a very practical theology. There are many ways that it affects our Christian lives. First, our understanding of our personal baptism experience is very important. There have been many cases in which young children were baptized because they said that they believed in Christ, but once they were older, they realized that they had never truly been saved. They then have a conflict about whether they should be baptized again. Because baptism is just symbolic, the young believer can be assured that they can be baptized again.

Another practical application is for evangelists. They can be assured that there is nothing wrong in baptizing those who have just come to faith. Nor is it wrong to baptize them whenever it is convenient. There is no need to find an official church with a certain baptistery. Evangelists did not need to do that in the Book of Acts and we certainly do not need to in this age. This will give confidence to those who evangelize and perform baptisms.

In our ministries, it is important to have a firm understanding of baptism. For pastors, this is crucial. Every pastor should know if he is willing to baptize entire families, infants, or unbelievers. These situations will happen in ministry and we do not want to perform a ceremony that is contrary to our understanding of Scriptures. Also, as we teach others about baptism, we do not want to lead them astray and let them believe that their salvation is based on their experience in baptism. We need to be faithful to the Scriptures and stand firm in our beliefs.

In conclusion, baptism is a symbolic act of believers in which they publicly symbolize the change and salvation that have occurred spiritually within them. It is prevalent in churches today to believe that salvation is necessary for salvation or entrance into the covenant. These two views are not consistent with the biblical precedent and misinterpret Scriptures. Also, these views are based on a few select passages, and they disregard other relating passages and doctrines. It is important to have a biblically-correct view of baptism. It affects our views on other doctrines and affects how we view our personal salvation.

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