

A Celebration of Baptism

by John Piper

John Piper's sermon emphasizes the significance of baptism as a symbol of repentance and faith in Christ, marking entry into the new covenant community.

Scripture: Matthew 28:19, Mark 1:14, Romans 6:4, Romans 9:7, Galatians 3:7

Topics: "Baptism", "Repentance"

Description

John Piper delves into the significance of Christian baptism, tracing its origins from John the Baptist to Jesus and the early church. He emphasizes that baptism symbolizes repentance and faith in Christ, representing a turning from the old life to align with Jesus. Piper highlights the distinction of believer baptism, rejecting infant baptism and emphasizing that only those who believe should receive this symbol of entry into the spiritual Israel, the Church.

Transcript

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Acts 2:36-42

Just before Jesus came on the scene "preaching the gospel of God, and saying, 'the time is fulfilled, the Kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe in the gospel,'" (Mk. 1:14,15), another man, John the Baptist, had been preparing the people of Israel by calling them to repent, turn to God in faith and obedience and be baptized. What did the baptism of John mean?

It meant that the Messiah has arrived; he will be gathering a new people for himself; the mark of this new people is not Jewishness but repentance and faith. Therefore Jews should not say to John's demand for repentance: "But we have Abraham as our father and we bear the marks of circumcision, the sign of the covenant." What counts in the new people is not who your parents are but whom you live for; and therefore a new symbol for the new covenant people is given, baptism; and it is given in John's ministry only to those who repent and believe. In other words by calling all Jews to be baptized John declared powerfully that physical descent does not make one part of God's family, and therefore circumcision which signified a physical relationship will now be replaced by baptism which signifies spiritual relationship. And so John the Baptist lays the foundation for the New Testament understanding of baptism which we in the Baptist tradition today try to preserve.

Jesus himself accepted baptism from John in order to identify himself with John's teaching and with this new people of faith. Jesus' disciples picked up John's practice and baptized as a part of Jesus' ministry (John 3:26; 4:2). Then at the end of his earthly ministry Jesus commissioned the church to "make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit" (Mt. 28:19).

Several weeks later the apostles preached their first sermon to the Jewish people gathered for Pentecost in Jerusalem. Peter closed with these words: "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is to you and to your children and to all that are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him." Following in the footsteps of John the Baptist and in obedience to their Lord's command, the apostles call the nation of Israel to repent and to signify that repentance through baptism. And the promise that they hold out is not merely for this generation but for their children also and not only for those near but those who are far away. It is for everyone who hears and responds to the call of God. Forgiveness of sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit is offered to all who turn to follow Christ and go on to express that transformation in baptism.

So we can see how the ordinance of Christian baptism began with John the Baptist, was accepted by Jesus at the beginning of his ministry, was practiced by his disciples, was commanded by the Lord after his resurrection and was offered in the early church to all who would repent and believe in Jesus Christ. And we can see the meaning it attained. It was a sign of repentance and faith in Christ as the Savior and Lord of a new people. Baptism symbolizes conversion to Jesus. It represents a turning from the old life and an alignment of ourselves with Christ. As St. Paul put it, "We are buried with him by baptism into death so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we to might walk in newness of life" (Rom. 6:4). It symbolizes death to the old, unbelieving way and the coming alive of a new person who trusts and obeys Jesus.

One of the things that makes our view of baptism distinct is that we do not think infants should be baptized. The reason is that, on the one hand, infants are not capable of repentance or faith; and, on the other hand, the notion that a person should inherit the blessings of a Christian or be considered a Christian by virtue of his parents' faith is contrary to New Testament teaching. The most credible and respectable defense of infant baptism says that just as in Israel circumcision was given to eight-day-old infants, so in the church baptism should be given to infants of Christian parents. Now we argue that there is a correspondence between circumcision as a sign of the covenant with Israel and baptism as a sign of the new covenant. We believe, namely, that just as circumcision was administered to all the physical sons of Abraham who made up the physical Israel, so baptism should be administered to all the spiritual sons of Abraham who make up the spiritual Israel, the Church. And who are these spiritual sons of Abraham? Galatians 3:7 says: "So you see it is the people of faith who are the sons of Abraham." Since the only way to enter the true Israel of God, the Church, is by repentance and faith in Jesus Christ, therefore the symbol of that entry should only be administered to those who believe. Believer baptism bears witness to the teaching of John the Baptist (Mt. 3:9), Jesus (Mt. 21:43) and the apostles that "not all are children of Abraham just because they are his descendants ... and it is not the children of the flesh who are children of God" (Rom. 9:7,8). A very important change has occurred in the way God forms his people. In the Israel of old God formed his people through natural offspring. But in the Church, the true Israel, God is forming his people not by natural kinship but through supernatural conversion to faith in Christ. Yes, there is a correspondence between circumcision for the Israel of old and baptism for the Church. Both symbolize membership in the covenant community. But there is also a crucial difference. With the coming of John the

Baptist and Jesus and the apostles, the emphasis now is that the spiritual status of your parents does not determine your membership in the covenant community. The beneficiaries of the blessings of Abraham are those who have the faith of Abraham. These are the ones who belong to the covenant community and these are the ones (in line with Old Testament practice) who should receive the sign of the covenant.

Therefore, what we celebrate in baptism today is the mighty work of God in the hearts of children and adults to bring them to repentance and faith in Christ. When we ask if Jesus is their Savior and Lord we celebrate the eternally important truth that they have received him for their own. When we baptize them in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit we celebrate the involvement of the whole Godhead in their conversion and their new relation to each person in the Trinity. When we immerse them in the water we celebrate the death and burial of Jesus Christ for our sins. When we raise them up out of the water we celebrate the resurrection of Jesus and their participation in it. And when they walk out of the baptismal waters we celebrate the newness of life in love and joy that Jesus gives.

My prayer is that the baptismal candidates themselves and everyone who witnesses their baptism will experience a rekindling of love to God for all he has done for us in making us part of the new covenant people through repentance and faith.

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