

SESSION 5

BAPTISM

Membership Question Addressed

4. Do you promise to support the Church in its worship and work to the best of your ability?

INTRODUCTION

We learnt in Session 4, that God has given the sacraments as “*signs*” pointing to how he saves by grace through faith, and “*seals*” that confirm the reality of salvation in a person. We also learnt that when faith in the Gospel accompanies these sacraments, God uses the sacraments to communicate his grace to us, and strengthen our wills to persevere in faith. The two sacraments he has left the church are **baptism**, which is an *initiation* into the church, and the **Lord’s Supper** which represents a *continuation* in the church. This session will explain baptism, and the next session will explain the Lord’s Supper. We will look answer two broad questions today. *Firstly, what is baptism*; and *secondly, who is baptism for*. By learning this, we will be able to embrace and utilise one of God’s key means of giving us grace, faith and strength:

WHAT IS BAPTISM?

Baptism, which involves sprinkling, pouring or immersion in water in the name of the Trinity (**Matthew 28:19**), is a “*sign*” of **union with Christ** in his death, burial and resurrection (**Romans 6:5**, “*For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his*”). It is a “*sign*” that for those with faith in Christ, just as Christ has died, been buried, and risen again, so being “*in Christ*”, they too have died, been buried, and have risen to new life, leaving their old life of sin behind. Therefore, baptism signifies two things. *Firstly, cleansing from sin*; and *secondly, inclusion among God’s people*⁵⁹:

Cleansing from sin

Almost every culture and religion on earth has some kind of cleansing ritual. It’s interesting to note that most of these rituals predate our understanding of germ theory. Which means that, even before we understood the dangers of “*uncleanness*” at a microbial level, instinctively, we had a sense that there was something “*unclean*” about us. In the Bible, our sinfulness before a

⁵⁹ The following section follows closely Ken Golden “Presbytopia: What it means to be Presbyterian” (UK, Christian Focus Publications, 2016), pages 99-106.

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holy God, is described as “*uncleanness*” (e.g. **Leviticus 5:2-3, 10:10, 13:3, 15:18, Luke 11:39-41, 2 Corinthians 6:17**). Hence, in the Old Testament, God commanded the priests to wash before entering the Tabernacle and Temple (e.g. **Exodus 30:17-21, 2 Chronicles 4:6**), the Levites to be sprinkled with the “*water of purification*” (**Numbers 8:5-7**), and the use of water to “*cleanse*” people from diseases (**Leviticus 14-15**)⁶⁰. Now, in the New Testament, in **Hebrews 9:10**, refers to these rites as “*various washings*”. The Greek word there is *baptismois*, from where we get the word “*baptism*”. And, it says that those “*baptisms*” pointed forward to “*the blood of Christ*” (**Hebrews 9:14**) that truly “*cleanses us from all sin*” (**1 John 1:7**). Ritual cleansing was insufficient to cleanse us from our sin. Jesus had to shed his blood in our place for true cleansing to take place. Now that he has died, and risen again, those who believe in Christ can, “*draw near*” to God “*with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from a evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water*” (**Hebrews 10:22**)⁶¹. Baptism is a picture of how Christ decisively cleanses us from all our sin.

Inclusion among God's people

But, more than just cleansing, baptism is also a picture of your **inclusion among God's people**. In the Old Testament, the sign of inclusion was circumcision (**Genesis 17:10-11**, “*This is my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and you and your offspring after you: Every male among you shall be circumcised. You shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a **sign of the covenant** between me and you.*”). However, circumcision, signified both **blessing** and **curse**. Just as the foreskin was cut off, so if the recipients did not keep their part of the covenant, that they too would be “*cut off*” (e.g. **Exodus 4:25**). So, those who were circumcised in the flesh were exhorted to embrace the reality of their circumcision by “*faith*”. They were exhorted to have “*circumcision of the heart*” (**Deuteronomy 30:6; Jeremiah 4:4, 9:25; and Romans 2:28-29**). Yet, Israel's history is littered with the failure to keep God's covenant.

Where Israel failed, Jesus succeeded. Through his perfect life, he was the only one who kept God's covenant perfectly. And yet, he was “*cut off*” in the place of God's people. In **Colossians 2:11**, the Apostle Paul speaks about the “*circumcision of Christ*” which refers to his bloody death on the cross (**Colossians 1:22**). He was “*cut off*”, so that all who repent of their sins, and have faith in him, may be included among God's people.

⁶⁰ Additionally, in **Ezekiel 36**, purification is connected to rebirth (**Ezekiel 36:25-26**, “*I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh*”). This is a prophecy that God's cleansing will bring God's people “*new hearts*” and “*new spirits*”, in other words, “*new life*”.

⁶¹ Another purpose of “*washing*” in the Old Testament is to remove “*evil*” from among God's people (e.g. **Isaiah 1:16**, “*Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your deeds from before my eyes; cease to do evil*”) - in other words, washing is also a picture of repentance. That is why in the New Testament, baptism is closely associated with repentance (e.g. **Luke 3:3**, “*a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins*”; **Acts 2:38**, “*Repent and be baptised every one of you...for the forgiveness of your sins*”; **Acts 3:19**, “*Repent, therefore, and turn back, that your sins may be blotted out*”).

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That's why, in **Colossians 2:11-12**, Paul says, *"In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead."* Here Paul is saying that those who have faith in Christ, have been circumcised because Christ was "circumcised" i.e. "cut off" on the cross.

And he goes on to say that these also have been *"buried with him in baptism"*. Paul shows us here that **circumcision correspond to baptism**, and that it replaced circumcision as a covenant sign. Bloody circumcision points forward to the death of Christ, while bloodless baptism points back at that same death. We no longer need a bloody sacrament, because Christ has shed his blood once and for all. Consequently, in **Luke 12:50**, Jesus says, *"I have a baptism to be baptised with, and how great is my distress until it is accomplished"* equating "baptism" with what circumcision pointed to, his death on the cross! With Jesus' coming, circumcision has been done away with, and baptism is now the sign and seal of the covenant (**Matthew 28:19**, *"Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit"*). Baptism marks people as belonging to God, but, as per circumcision, physical baptism must be accompanied with the inward reality of faith.

WHO IS BAPTISM FOR?

Who then is baptism for? All Christians believe that baptism is for those who believe in Christ (**Acts 2:38**, *"Repent and be baptised every one of you in the name of Jesus"*). However, there is a disagreement among brothers and sisters in Christ, about whether or not the **children of believers** should also be baptised alongside their parents (**Acts 2:39**, *"the promise is for you and for your children"*). Our church, and the majority of the church over the last 2 millennia believes that baptism is for believers *and* their children⁶². Here are three reasons why⁶³:

Firstly, **God has always saved people by grace through faith**. Whether in the Old Testament, or the New Testament, God's plan to save his people from their sins, was always by grace through faith, not works. Abraham, the father of the Jewish people, it says in **Genesis 15:6**, *"believed the Lord"*, and God *"counted it to him as righteousness"* (c.f. **Romans 4:1-3**). That is why Paul says in **Galatians 3:7**, *"the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham"*. Whether in the Old, or the New Testament, God's people are saved the same way, through the gospel: *"by grace... through faith... not a*

⁶² You do not need to believe in the baptism of believer's children in order to join this church. All you need is to have repented of your sins, believed in Christ and shown evidence of conversion. However, infant baptism is an incredible blessing that God has given his people, and we do hope that you'll be able to at least have an appreciation of its beauty.

⁶³ The following section follows Peter Kemeny, "Why do we baptise infants?" at <http://www.goodnewspress.org/infant-baptism.html> accessed July 25th, 2017.

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result of works” (**Ephesians 2:8-9**). That’s why, Paul calls the church, “*the Israel of God*” (**Galatians 6:16**, allusion in **1 Peter 2:9-10**), the “*real circumcision*” (**Philippians 3:3**), and “*Abraham’s offspring*” (**Romans 4:16**). We have far more in common with the Old Testament saints than we often think. Paul says that their lives were recorded as “*examples for us*” (**1 Corinthians 10:6,11**) this side of the Cross.

Secondly, **God has always administrated his grace through Covenant**, whereby **the offspring or children of believers are included**. Basically, a “**covenant**” is God binding himself, by an oath, to keep his promises to his people⁶⁴. In the Bible, there are a series of covenants that are part of what theologians call the one **Covenant of Grace**⁶⁵. All these covenants consistently involved *both* believers and their children^{66 67}:

Covenant with Noah	Genesis 6:18 , “ <i>But I will establish my covenant with you... your sons, your wife, and your sons' wives with you.</i> ”
Covenant with Abraham	Genesis 17:7 , “ <i>And I will establish my covenant between me and you and your offspring after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you.</i> ”
Covenant with Moses	Exodus 20:6 , “ <i>but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments.</i> ”
Covenant with David	2 Samuel 7:12 , “ <i>When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come from your body, and I will establish his kingdom.</i> ” Ezekiel 37:24-27 , “ <i>My servant David shall be king over them... they and their children and their children's children shall dwell there... it shall be an everlasting covenant</i> ”
New Covenant	Isaiah 59:21 , “ <i>...this is my covenant... my words that I have put in your mouth, shall not depart out of your mouth, or out of the mouth of your offspring...</i> ” Jeremiah 31:31-34 , “ <i>Behold, the days are coming... I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah... they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest...</i> ” Jeremiah 32:39-40 , “ <i>I will give them one heart and one way, that they may fear me forever, for their own good and the good of their children after them. I will make with them an everlasting covenant...</i> ” Luke 1:50, 22:20 “ <i>...his mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation... This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood.</i> ”

⁶⁴ Mark Jones, “What is a Covenant?” at <http://www.ligonier.org/learn/articles/what-covenant/> accessed July 26th, 2017.

⁶⁵ This is the covenant that God makes with his people after the fall, to save them from their sins (see **Genesis 3:15**).

⁶⁶ With regard to the “New Covenant” in **Jeremiah 31:31-34**, which is quoted in **Hebrews 8:8-12**, some want to exclude believer’s children from the New Covenant asserting that there is a change in the nature of the Covenant because in the New Covenant, “*they shall all know me(God)*” (**Jeremiah 31:34**). However, it must be noted that this knowledge to the “least of them”(**Jeremiah 31:34**). In the parallel passage to **Jeremiah 31:31-34** in **Jeremiah 32:39-40**, the “*everlasting covenant*” is also for “*the good of the children after them*”. Hence, while the nature of the Covenant may have changed, the **genealogical nature** of covenant continues.

⁶⁷ Others point out that **Jeremiah 31:34** seems to say that there is no longer a need for mutual instruction to “*know the Lord*”, also implying that children are no longer in the New Covenant. As mentioned, **Jeremiah 31:31-34** is quoted in **Hebrews 8**. Hence, this negation needs to be taken with **Hebrews 5:11-14**, and **10:24** that maintain that mutual instruction is still needed! Given the broader context of the presentation of Jesus as the greater High Priest, it is better to interpret this in view of the mediatorial role of Jesus. Moses was a “*teacher*” of Israel (**Deuteronomy 4:1,14; 6:1; 5:31; 31:19,22**). The Levites, priests and prophets were also “*teachers*” (**2 Chronicles 17:7-9; Ezra 7:10; Jeremiah 32:33**). In the New Covenant, these roles are unnecessary because Christ mediates God’s will directly to His people. New Covenant teachers do not mediate relationship with God, but rather assist believers in realising the direct access to God they already have in Christ (**Ephesians 4:11-14**).

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In other words, the children of believers have always been part of the covenant community. In the Old Testament, they were present in the gatherings of the covenant people (e.g. **2 Chronicles 20:13**, “...all Judah stood before the LORD, with their **little ones**, their wives, and **their children**”; **Joel 2:16**, “Consecrate the congregation; assemble the elders; gather **the children**, even **nursing infants**”). Jesus received children as being part of the “kingdom of God” (e.g. **Luke 18:15-16**, “Jesus called them to him, saying, ‘Let the **children** come to me... for to such belongs the kingdom of God”). Paul says that even if a child has one believing parent, that child is “holy” (**1 Corinthians 7:14**, “...they are holy”). And, in Ephesians and Colossians he addresses children as members of the church, along with their parents (e.g. **Ephesians 6:1**, “Children, obey your parents in the Lord...” and **Colossians 3:20**, “Children, obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord”).

Thirdly, the **sign and seal of the Covenant is applied to the whole family**. In the Old Testament, the sign and seal was circumcision (**Romans 4:11**). It was applied to Abraham, *after* he believed, but to his children *before* they believed (**Genesis 17:10-13**). In the New Testament, we know baptism replaces circumcision (**Colossians 2:11-12**, “you were circumcised... having been buried with him in baptism...”). And because the New Covenant is “more excellent than the old” (**Hebrews 8:6**), baptism now includes non-Jews, and females (**Galatians 3:27-28**). On the day of Pentecost, the Apostle Peter said, “Repent and **be baptised** every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for **you** and for **your children** and for all who are far off...” (**Acts 2:38-39**). He introduces baptism with the same three categories that God used introducing circumcision: **Acts 2:39**, “you... your **children**... all who are **far off**”, and **Genesis 17:10-12**, “you... your **offspring**... any **foreigner**”.

In light of this “genealogical principle”, it should not surprise us that there are so many household baptisms recorded for us in the New Testament (e.g. **Acts 16:14-15**, “...she was baptised, and **her household** as well...”, **Acts 16:30-33**, “...he was baptised at once, he and all **his family**”; **Acts 18:8**, “Crispus... believed in the Lord, together with his entire **household**.... and were baptised”; and **1 Corinthians 1:16**, “I did baptise also the **household** of Stephanas...”). Some point out that children are not explicitly mentioned in these household baptisms, but that is besides the point. “Household baptisms” show us that the genealogical principle continues (**Acts 16:33-34**, “he was baptised at once, **he and all his family**.. he rejoiced along with his entire household that **he** had believed in God”)!

Hence, because of the consistency between the Old and New Testaments, the continued inclusion of children in the New Covenant, and the parallels between circumcision and baptism, we believe that baptism is for believers *and* their children.

CONCLUSION

Two things to do, in light of understanding baptism:

Firstly, let baptism accompany your faith. If you are from a non-Christian background, and have embraced Christ by faith, then be baptised in obedience to God. Receive his blessing of grace, and persevering faith. If you have young children, have them baptised too. When they are older, watching other child baptisms, they'll ask you, "*What does this ritual mean?*" (e.g. **Exodus 12:26**). You can explain that God is putting his mark on this child, setting him apart. You can go on to remind the child that they themselves had been graciously baptised as a child. How then should they respond to God's grace? By believing the gospel for themselves. Baptism points them explicitly to their need for faith in Christ!

Secondly, let faith accompany your baptism. If you are from a Christian home, and you were baptised as a child, let faith accompany your baptism to make it effectual. In the Old Testament, the Jews were exhorted to not just be circumcised in the flesh, but to also be circumcised in the heart. That is, they were exhorted to believe God, and to let faith accompany their circumcision (**Deuteronomy 10:16**, "*Circumcise... your heart, and be no longer stubborn*", and **Romans 4:12**, "*...not merely circumcised but who also walk in the footsteps of the faith...*"). In a similar way, you are to let faith accompany your baptism. Believe in the gospel, in response to his amazing grace. Make a profession of faith to the church, and become a communing member of the church. Let faith *continue* to accompany your baptism. This is how it becomes a channel of God's blessing. Every time you witness a baptism, let it remind you of your own, and let it cause you to believe afresh in the gospel. As mentioned in Session 4, Martin Luther, the great Reformer was often in doubt, depression or near-despair. When he was, he would remind himself, "*I am baptised! I am baptised!*"⁶⁸ He was letting faith accompany his baptism, and in so doing, God, by the Holy Spirit used the sacrament of baptism, to communicate grace, faith and strength to Martin Luther. He can do the same for you.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. Have you, and your children (if any) been baptised? Why, or why not?

⁶⁸ Cited at <http://www.christianitytoday.com/history/issues/issue-86/luther-daily-gift-of-new-life.html>, accessed July 20, 2017.