

The Means of Grace

Baptism: The Sacrament of the New Creation

¹ What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? ² By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it?

³ Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?

⁴ We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.

Romans 6:1-4

The Word: A Great Power ... for Good

The **Word of God is powerful**. There is no power in all the world like the power of the Word. We saw this last time with **preaching** and the other means the word comes to us through **reading** the Scripture, **singing** the Scripture, and **praying** the Scripture. This word is so powerful that it makes the blind to see, the deaf to hear, and the dead to come to life. As Jesus told his disciples to go and tell his cousin John, “**Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them**” (**Matt 11:4-5**).

It's a power that comes **from heaven**, not earth. It comes from God, not man. In fact, this power is in one sense God himself, for the Second Person of the Trinity is called by the Bible in many places—the *Word* of God. So when God's words attach themselves supernaturally to the Person of the Word, or when God's words are infused with the very Spirit of Christ, they cannot help but be a great power. Consider Jeremiah, “**Is not my word like fire, declares the Lord, and like a hammer that breaks the rock in pieces?**” (**Jer 23:29**). God told the same prophet, “**Because you have spoken this word, behold, I am making my words in your mouth a fire, and this people wood, and the fire shall consume them**” (**5:14**).

The power of the word is **on display in Isaiah**, “**For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven and do not return there but **water** the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and **bread** to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it**” (**Isa 55:10-11**). In this verse in particular, the power of the word is for **the good of the people**. It is likened to water

raining down on the earth, producing sprout from seed, giving bread to the eater.

Water and food are the two main things here. And these just so happen to be the contents of the two sacraments of the church: baptism and the Lord's Supper. Today, we are going to look at the first of these as we consider baptism as a means of grace.

Sacraments as Means of Grace

Last time, we looked broadly at the word as a “means of grace.” We defined the means of grace loosely as the ordained way God has established for the gathering of the elect, the edification of the saints, and the building up of His spiritual body. The chief means of gathering the elect is that of preaching, for preaching as a means has in mind first the saving of God's people. Now, the word preached, read, sung, and prayed also has the further purpose of edifying the saints and building up the spiritual body of the church. This is what we refer to as sanctification—the process of being made more Christ-like in this life.

But there is another means of grace that God has been pleased to use for these same sanctifying purposes. These are what the church for nearly as long as can be

remembered, has called “[sacraments](#).” Sacraments can be thought of as the “[visible](#)” word—particularly the word of the gospel, not the law. Let’s look at this word, as many Protestants don’t like it because they incorrectly think they are something evil made up by Rome.

“[Sacrament](#)” comes from the Latin, and the Bible was not written originally in Latin. The biblical word “[mystery](#)” (*mysterion*) is the Greek equivalent of the Latin *sacramentum*. “Mystery” appears many times in the Bible. The Latin Vulgate often translated “*mysterion*” as *sacramentum* ([Eph 3:3, 3:9, 5:32; Col 1:27; 1 Tim 3:16; Rev 1:20, 17:7](#)). For example, Ephesians 1:9 says, “[He made known to us the mystery \[sacramentum\] of his will.](#)” Whenever Paul uses the Greek term, he is talking about the gospel ([Rom 11:25; 16:25; 1 Cor 15:51; Eph 1:9; 3:3-9; 5:32; 6:11; Col 1:26-27; 2:2; 4:3; 3:16](#)). So a “sacrament” is in fact in the Bible—in the Latin translation.

So [what does it mean?](#) Originally “sacrament” was a [military term](#) describing the oath of allegiance and obedience that a soldier solemnly pledged to his commander.¹ This is interesting, since as we saw last time,

¹ [Leonard J. Vander Zee](#), *Christ, Baptism and the Lord’s Supper: Recovering the Sacraments for Evangelical Worship* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press (2004), 28.

“gospel” was also a military term in Greek usage that gave good news of victory to the citizens of a city after a battle had been won. Later, sacrament came to mean anything that is sacred or consecrated.² Tertullian (ca. 155-230 A.D.) was among the first Fathers to apply it to baptism.

Calvin provides a good **working definition** of a sacrament, “It is an outward sign by which the Lord seals on our consciences the promises of his good will towards us in order to sustain the weakness of our faith” (Calvin, *Institutes* 4.14.1).³ Very importantly, notice that when the sacrament is administered, **faith is** (as far as humanly possible to see) **already present** in the application of the sacrament.⁴ To put it another way, we receive the sacrament by faith.

Our conception of a sacrament is thus very different from **the Roman aberration** to the original view. They came to believe that sacraments work *ex opere operato* (literally, “**by the very fact of the actions being**

² **Michael Horton**, *Putting Amazing Back into Grace: Who Does What in Salvation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books 1994), 221.

³ **John Calvin**, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill (Philadelphia: Westminster Press 1960).

⁴ Note: Infant Baptists “presuppose” faith in the infant, though there is no visible evidence of it to the world. This is the doctrine of “presumptive regeneration,” which was upheld by the Christian Reformed Church in 1905 in the *Conclusions* of the Synod of Utrecht as being a faithful interpretation of the Infant Baptist Reformed Confessions.

performed”). In other words, they believe sacraments create faith, not strengthen faith, and all that has to happen is that the priest performs them. This runs contrary to the word of God, especially when you add in the fact that Rome has **seven official sacraments**: Confirmation, Penance, Extreme Unction (or Last Rites), Holy Orders (Ordination), Marriage, Baptism, and the Eucharist. For Rome, all that matters is that you do them.

The Two Sacraments of the Bible

A word here on why the Reformation taught **only two sacraments**. First, as Calvin shows, this was the view of the early church. He cites Augustine as an example, “[God] has bound together the society of the new people by sacraments very few in number, very easy to observe, very excellent in meaning. Such are baptism, consecrated with the name of the Trinity, and the communion of the Lord’s body and blood, and any other that is approved in the canonical Scriptures.”⁵

Second, they believed strongly that the sacraments had to be **1. Commanded by Christ. 2. Be allowed to be taken**

⁵ **Augustine**, *John’s Gospel* lxxx. 3 (MPL 35. 1840; tr. NPNF VII. 349). See also Augustine, *Letters* liv. 1 (MPL 33. 200; tr. FC 12. 252); *On Christian Doctrine* III. ix. 13 (MPL 34. 71; tr. NPNF II. 560). Cited in *Institutes* 4.19.3.

by all Christians. **3.** Be visible representations of the Gospel—signs by which God’s covenant and promise is sealed. **4.** The Word of God must precede or go before the sacrament, in other words Scripture must offer a visible sign and attach it to a promise of God.⁶ Think about Rome. **First**, they have many sacraments that are not commanded by Christ at all. Where is Extreme Unction in the Bible for instance? **Second**, some will never be able partake of marriage or become a priest. So this grace is only there for certain people. **Third**, some of them are not pictures of the Gospel. What does laying on hands on a priest have to do with a picture of Jesus’ work for us? **Fourth**, some of these aren’t visible signs of anything.

Instead, the Reformers **wanted all Christians to be able to partake** of the graces given by God to them in the visible Gospel. Because they meet all the criteria, **baptism and the Lord’s Supper** were those, following the early church, that fit that bill. They are **outward signs of the invisible gospel that produce inward graces in the hearts of believers**. One more point here before going to baptism. Some might think that we Baptists have no business

⁶ Calvin discusses this all in *Institutes* 4.14-19. It is a long discussion, but one that I think every Christian should read. It is rich and pastoral and even though I disagree with his take on baptism, very edifying and helpful.

calling these things “sacraments.” But this is simply historically untrue. For example, in his *Orthodox Catechism*, **Hercules Collins** has Q. 64. Seeing then that only faith makes us partakers of Christ and his benefits, from what does faith proceed? A. From the Holy Ghost, who kindles it in our hearts by the preaching of the Gospel, and other ordinances, and confirms it by the use of the sacraments. He then asks Q 65. What are the Sacraments? A. They are sacred signs and seals, set before our eyes and ordained of God for this cause, that he may declare and seal by them the promise of his gospel unto us, especially, that he gives freely remission of sins, and life everlasting, not only to his all in general, but to every one in particular that believes for that only sacrifice of Christ which he accomplished upon the cross. So while some have chosen not to use the word, it is clear that other Reformed Baptists have been completely fine with it. I follow in their tradition.

Two Kinds of Baptism: Sign and Thing Signified

Today, I want us to **think much about the grace of baptism.** To start, let me first **parse out what I mean by “baptism.”** In the Creeds we confess that **“there is one**

baptism for the remission of sins.” Notice that the Creed does not say “Baptism remits sins,” but that it is “for” the remission of sins. In this way, the early church was arguing, right with Peter ([Acts 2:38](#)), that baptism is *a sign* that points to the thing signified. The [sign is water](#); the [thing signified is forgiveness of sins](#). There is a sacramental union or mystery between the two, but they are not identical. Signs are not the things signified; they point to them. Recall that the same Peter said, “[Baptism, which corresponds to this, now saves you, not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ](#)” ([1Pet 3:21](#)). In this way, the waters of baptism do nothing in and of themselves, but they do signify to you the spiritual reality that comes when you repent and believe the Gospel.⁷

Another way to put this is that [when you are saved and regenerated, you are sprinkled](#) with the Holy Spirit (a form of OT baptism that particularly symbolizes cleansing; cf. [Lev 14:7](#); [Lev 16:19](#); [Num 8:7](#); [19:19](#); [Ezek 36:25](#); [Heb 10:22](#)), you are made clean. You are washed by his word for the first time. This is [the spiritual baptism](#)

⁷ For a wonderful little defense of this see [Paul J. Barth](#), “[Does Baptism Remit Sins?](#)” Purely Presbyterian (Sept 28, 2021).

that saves. This is the baptism that remits sins. Water baptism as a physical sacrament in some sense signifies and points to this inner spiritual reality that comes through faith alone. Repentance and water baptism are two of the **first good works** the Christian does in light of having received this inner baptism by grace alone. Good works always follow grace; they do not come before it. And yet, baptism is more than a good work, but in it God gives you this sign precisely so that you might know that the spiritual invisible reality is actually true. He seals the promise upon your heart through the sign so that you might be more certain of the invisible reality. IT is a means of grace. The visible points you to the invisible. **By grace you have been saved through faith. And this not of yourselves; it is the gift of God (Eph 2:8).**

A Biblical Theology of Baptism

What few realize or understand is just **how significant baptism is to the whole Bible**. It is found in many more places than just the Apostles or even John the Baptist telling people to be baptized. The following is **a biblical theology of baptism** that I hope will help you grasp the

grandeur of this theme, especially as it relates to the various covenants of Scripture—for the sacraments are profoundly attached to the covenants of the Bible—not just the covenant of grace in the NT.

*Baptism and Creation: Baptism as Consecration*⁸

Tertullian was a second century Christian who wrote one of our earliest treatments of baptism. He begins his inquiry into baptism by asking, “In what respect, pray, has [water] merited an office of so high dignity?” His answer, “Water is one of those things which before all the furnishing of the world, were quiescent with God in a yet unshapen state” (Tertullian, *On Baptism* 1, 3). He goes to site **Genesis 1:2** to begin his investigation of baptism. Genesis 1:2 says, “... the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters.”

Jerome was a fourth century Christian who translated the Bible into Latin. He calls us to “Sing the praises of water and of baptism. In the beginning the earth was without form and void ... The Spirit of God above moved, as a charioteer, over the face of the waters, and

⁸ For much more see **Douglas Van Dorn**, *Waters of Creation: A Biblical-Theological Study of Baptism* (Erie, CO: Waters of Creation Pub., 2009).

produced from them the infant world, a type of Christian ... that is drawn from the laver of baptism” (Jerome, *Letter LXIX.6*). The idea is that baptism is rooted in creation. Catholics,⁹ Anglicans,¹⁰ and even Reformed Christians¹¹ have all seen the waters of creation as prefigurements of baptism.

What is baptism symbolizing here at creation? Obviously, it can't have anything to do with sin, not yet. For, there are no people and sin has not yet been introduced into the world. The significance of baptism here is that of **consecration**. To consecrate something is to dedicate it to a special purpose or service, usually a religious purpose. This is exactly what God is doing with the earth through its baptism in the water at creation. This is clear in the word “**mikveh**” which is used in **Gen 1:10** to describe the “**gathering**” of the waters. Mikveh is the word Jews use for a **ritual bath or baptism**. In **Exodus 7:19** this “gathering” is translated as the “reservoirs” or “pools”

⁹ “Since the beginning of the world, water, so humble and wonderful a creature, has been the source of life and fruitfulness. Sacred Scripture sees it as ‘overshadowed’ by the Spirit of God: ‘At the very dawn of creation your Spirit breathed on the waters, making them the wellspring of all holiness.’ *Catechism of the Catholic Church* 2nd, Part 2, Section 2, Chapter 1, Article 1, Paragraph 2 #1218.

¹⁰ “We thank you, Almighty God, for the gift of water. Over it the Holy Spirit moved in the beginning of creation.” *Book of Common Prayer*, “Consecration of a Church”

¹¹ “The origins of baptism lie in Genesis 1:2.” J. V. Fesko, *Word, Water, and Spirit: A Reformed Perspective on Baptism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2010), 199.

of water. A Mikveh in Jewish tradition is a ritual bath in a pool of fresh water. As the figure of the dry land coming out of the waters shows you, it is of necessity an immersion.¹² God is setting earth apart to be the royal footstool of his throne (Isa 66:1; Acts 7:49). Creation depicts God's building himself a temple wherein he will take up residence and rule over the creatures he has made.¹³ The earth will become a holy place, set apart by God for holy use. Baptism is how God sets it apart.

We often use a different word than consecration, but it carries the same basic idea. That word is “sanctify.” To be sanctified is to be “set apart.” The NT closely associates sanctification and the water in Ephesians 5:26, “That he might sanctify [his church], having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word.” This meaning of baptism as something that sanctifies is related to the baptized object's nature as well as to its function. As to its nature, the symbol here is chiefly that of a new creation.

¹² Cyrus Adler, “Mikveh,” *Jewish Encyclopedia*. Jews refer to the baths of the priest into temple ministry (2 Chron 4:6) or tabernacle ministry (Ex 29:4) as mikvehs. The ceremonial idea comes from Lev 15:13, “When the one with a discharge is cleansed of his discharge, then he shall count for himself seven days for his cleansing, and wash his clothes. And he shall bathe his body in fresh water and shall be clean.” Fresh water could come from an ocean, a river, rain, snow, or a place created to hold any such fresh water.

¹³ See especially John Walton, *The Lost World of Genesis 1: Ancient Cosmology and the origins Debate* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2009).

What is God doing in Genesis 1? Obviously, he is creating. Baptism is the symbol of this creation. What is the symbol of Christians in baptism? It is that of a *new* creation. So in baptism, a person is being created anew for a unique, holy purpose. This purpose is directly related to the way they are to live and behave in this world, and since this is such a rich theme, we will take it up at the end of our story today.

Baptism and Eden: Baptism and Repentance and Forgiveness

After the Fall, we find the Jews telling us legends about Adam and Eve as it regards the mikveh or baptism. They have fallen into sin and have become despondent in their grief. What are they to do? How can they ever find forgiveness? Adam says to Eve, “You cannot do as much as I, but do as much so that you might be saved. For I will do forty days of fasting. You, however, arise and go to the Tigris River and take a stone and stand upon it in the water up to your neck in the depth of the river. Let not a word go forth from your mouth since we are unworthy to ask of the Lord for our lips are unclean from the illicit and

forbidden tree. Stand in the water of the river for thirty-seven days. I however, will do forty days in the water of the Jordan. Perhaps the Lord will have mercy on us.” And Eve walked to the Tigris River and did as Adam had told her. Likewise, Adam walked to the Jordan River and stood upon a rock up to his neck in the water.”¹⁴

Obviously, this story has false Jewish theology, for it appears to almost be a works based view of baptism. Also, we have no biblical record that Adam and Eve ever did such a thing. But we do have the River of Eden playing prominently in the story of our parents (**Gen 2:10-14**). Not only this, but one of the words chosen for the waters of Eden specifically relates to the idea of an ordeal, which I think The Fall certainly qualifies as.¹⁵ Whether our parents took the plunge or not, what is clear is that the Jews were attaching a particular meaning to this baptism. It is the meaning of **repentance** and **forgiveness**.

The NT identifies this meaning of baptism many times. You will remember that John the Baptist was baptizing for “**with water for repentance**” (**Matt 3:11**). And as we

¹⁴ *Vita Adam and Eve* 6:1-2, 7:1-2.

¹⁵ The word is ‘*ed*’. It is found in **Gen 2:6** and is usually translated as “mist.” For the discussion see P. K. McCarter, ‘The River Ordeal in Israelite Literature,’ *HTR* 66:4 (1973): 403-412.

heard a moment ago, Peter told the people listening to him during that first great Christian sermon, “Repent and be baptized every one of you ... for the forgiveness of your sins” (Acts 2:38). It is not that your water baptism takes away your sins (see 1 Pet 3:21), but that it points you to the one whose baptism does take away your sins. This refers to Jesus’ second baptism. For he told his disciples, “I have another baptism to undergo” (Mark 10:39; Luke 12:50). Therefore, most practically of all, anyone who wants to be baptized must repent of their sins, confess them, admit them, and turn from them by turning to Christ by faith, trusting that he will save you from the ever rising waters of sin and evil.

Baptism & the Flood: Baptism as Death and Resurrection

Rising waters of sin and evil? And what is this about Jesus’ second baptism? What was this second baptism of Jesus? It was his baptism into death and it caused him great distress. It was his baptism on the cross. Here we have explicitly stated the idea of an ordeal. Perhaps at no other point in the history of baptism does the ordeal theme become so prominent than in the days of Noah.

Remember, Peter tells us that Noah's flood is the antitype of Christian baptism (1Pet 3:20-21). So the Flood is a kind of baptism. We aren't making this up.

What happened in this baptism? **Many, many people died.** The waters not only reached up to their necks, the engulfed their very heads, submerging them in a torrent of overwhelming power and destruction. What a terrible cataclysm God wrought upon the surface of the earth on that day. The very depths of the seas spouted like mighty fountains and overwhelmed all living things upon the earth. This was the world's greatest ordeal up till now, and it will not be matched again until the great and terrible day when God will baptize the earth in fire.

Holy Scripture teaches us that this catastrophe came upon us because of the great wickedness that had covered the land. **People were not willing to repent** and seek God's forgiveness, thus he shut them out from the land of the living. But not all were destroyed. Eight people were brought safely through the ordeal, through the death and destruction in an ark that preserved them and kept them safe. Figuratively speaking, when they got off that ark and set foot on the holy mountain to offer a sacrifice, they had been raised from the dead. Thus, **baptism signifies death**

and resurrection. This too is the explicit teaching of the New Testament.

The book of **Romans** begins a great chapter on a Christ's duty to God with baptism. "Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life" (**Romans 6:3-4**).

Baptism and Abraham: Baptism and a New Kingdom

As we keep working our way through the OT history of baptism, we come to Abraham. **Abraham**, you say? When was he ever baptized? I'm not going to tell you that he was actually baptized other than perhaps figuratively speaking. **Yet, consider this old idea.**¹⁶ It pertains to the above mentioned Euphrates River. The Euphrates was the western (northern) boundary of the land promised to

¹⁶ This seems to have been a rather popular theme among commentators in the 1500s (such as Jesuits Cornelius a Lapide and Franciscus Ribera, as well as the Protestant Johannis Gagneus. See the citations by **Augustus Clissold**, *The Spiritual Exposition of the Apocalypse* Vol. II (London: Elbron Classics Replica of 1851 edition), 328-29. [This book is an 18th century commentary on the theology of Swedenborg, one of the original New Age heretics. However, he does cite many older commentaries such as those noted above].

Abraham ([Gen 15:18](#)). As he was coming from the east into the land, Abraham had to cross over this great river.¹⁷ Joshua associates Abraham's crossing of the river with the promises: "I took your father Abraham from beyond the River and led him through all the land of Canaan, and made his offspring many. I gave him Isaac" ([Josh 24:3](#)).

The curious thing about [Isaac and Jacob](#) after him is that both of them were told to return to the other side of this river to find their wives ([Gen 24:38](#), [25:11](#); [Gen 31:21](#)). They were then to cross over the river as their father Abraham did, and only then was the covenant confirmed to them. Given what we are going to see in a moment about the crossing over of the Red Sea and baptism, it seems to me that ancient interpreters are not far off the mark when they say things like the Euphrates was a type of baptism.¹⁸ This may very well be why the Jews picked it for the location of their story with Eve.

There is something significant here in terms of [the meaning of baptism](#). It is that [to gain entrance into the promise land](#), which serves as a kind of sanctuary and holy place with all of its blessings, one must first cross through

¹⁷ From east to west is always the direction people move to go into a biblical sanctuary.

¹⁸ For instance see [Lapide](#) in n. 16.

the waters. When we cross through the waters of baptism, we enter the new kingdom and the land. And we swear allegiance to a new king. It is curious that in the sentence immediately prior to the one I just read in Joshua, it says, “Long ago, your fathers lived beyond the Euphrates, Terah, the father of Abraham and of Nahor; and they served other gods” (Josh 24:2).

Fast forward then to the days of the early church and their baptismal pledges where the initiates did things like this: “At the time determined for baptism ... when the elder takes hold of each of them who are to receive baptism, he shall tell each of them to renounce, saying, ‘I renounce you Satan, all your service, and all your works.’ After he has said this, he shall anoint each with the Oil of Exorcism, saying, ‘Let every evil spirit depart from you.’”¹⁹ The early church was quite familiar with this idea of the transferring of kingdoms at baptism. If you want to serve a new God, you must first renounce the service and servants of the old one(s). Baptism symbolizes this transference of allegiance and entrance into a new kingdom. It is part of our “good confession” and a “clear conscience” talked about in the NT (1 Tim 6:12; 1 Pet

¹⁹ Hippolytus, *Apostolic Tradition* 21:6-10.

3:21).²⁰ The world needs to hear a message like this, because it is clearly being held within the ever tightening grip of the Evil One.

Baptism and Moses: Baptism and the Law

Moving on from here, we come to another baptism that the NT makes explicit. “All were *baptized into Moses* in the cloud and in the sea, and all ate the same spiritual food, and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank from the spiritual Rock that followed them, and the Rock was Christ” (1 Cor 10:2-4). The Apostle Paul identifies the water in the cloud and the water in the Sea as “baptism.” He then relates their crossing over with the food and water that they then drank, which was Christ.

Israel’s being baptized here was her being *baptized into the law of Moses*. This was never meant for them to be a means by which they would achieve salvation, for they had already been saved by grace in the Exodus. But their baptism was a means by which the law would become a new principle to guide them. This is why Paul

²⁰ Many church father’s rooted this renunciation in these two passages. See “*Renunciation of the Devil in the Baptismal Rite*,” <http://www.ccel.org/s/schaff/encyc/encyc09/htm/iv.vii.clxiii.htm>. The complete text of this is at the end of this sermon/paper.

immediately goes on to say that God was not “well pleased” (vs. 5), that they “desired evil” (vs. 6), that they were idolaters (vs. 7), that they engaged in sexual immorality (vs. 8), that they grumbled (vs. 10), and that their punishments and disobedience was written down for our sake on whom the fullness of the ages has come (vs. 11). Because they had been baptized and set apart, they were to obey the God who delivered them. They did not, even though Christ was the one guiding them and feeding them. Therefore, how much greater is our obligation and responsibility when we have been baptized into fuller and more highly realized promises in the one who was himself baptized for us in the flesh?

Baptism and the Priests: Baptism as Ordination and Clothing

During the life of Moses, baptism also became identified with his brother Aaron in Exodus 29:4. To me, it is probably the most immediately practical baptism in the Bible. “You shall bring Aaron and his sons to the entrance of the tent of meeting and wash them with water.” This washing is the same word used for

Bathsheba's bathing (2 Sam 11:2) and Naaman's baptism (2 Kgs 5:10). This is part of the priest's ordination ceremony. Upon completion of this ceremony, he could then begin all of his holy service to the Lord in the temple.

There is another part of this ceremony. Immediately upon being washed, he is to have the garments made for him put onto him (Ex 29:5). In other words, he was to be clothed with the royal robes of the priest. It is because of its direct relation to this ceremony that the Apostle Paul says, "For all of you who were *baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ*" (Gal 3:27 NAS).²¹ Perhaps it is from this very ceremony that the early church had the following rather bizarre sounding custom, "After [the renunciation of the devil], the bishop passes each of them on nude to the elder who stands at the water. They shall stand in the water naked. A deacon, likewise, will do down with them into the water ... no one shall take any foreign object with themselves down into the water."²²

Don't get hung up here; there is nothing sexual going on. Nor am I advocating we do this today. It is, at best, even

²¹ The ESV has "put on" rather than "clothed." "Put on" is the exact language used in Exodus 29:5. In fact the Greek word *enduō* is the same word used in both passages as is the Hebrew counterpart *labash*.

²² Apostolic Tradition, 21.5, 11.

from the OT counterpart, an inference. But it has a theological significance.

The idea is simple and can be viewed by looking once more at the idea of a River. Think of the old spirituals that talk about **crossing over Jordan** being like going to heaven (“**Deep River. My Home is Over Jordan. Deep River, Lord I Want to Go Over Into Campground**”). What can you take with you to heaven? Nothing, except what you remember and believe. Material possessions are meaningless there. They cannot help you.²³ Thus, when Elijah left this world, he crossed over the Jordan like Israel, but being taken up into a chariot of fire, his cloak fell to the ground (**2 Kgs 2:13**).

When he crossed over, he was **united to Christ** in heaven. And that is also symbolized in the baptism and

²³ I think about the **David Wilcox** song “Farthest Shore” in this regard:

We were there in the woods by the water
We left our packs up against that willow tree
We dove right in, keeping just what we were born with
Our Memories, Knowledge and Dreams
As I swam away from our possessions
I imagined that they were gone forever more
And for once I was glad that all I treasured
Would still be with me as I reached other shore.
So...Let me dive into the water,
Leave behind all that I've worked for
Except what I remember and believe
And when I stand on the farthest shore
I will have all I need

clothing ceremony. As it says about baptism, “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” (Rom 6:3-5). Union with Christ gives us the very life-blood we need to carry out what we have been commissioned to do. Thus, was the priest ordained into his ministry to serve the LORD for the next 20 years of his life. And this is why places like Romans 6 immediately discusses “offering” our bodies as “holy vessels” and “sacrifices” or why Peter talks about us being a “kingdom of priests.”

Baptism and David: Baptism as Foreshadowing

Though there are others we could look at,²⁴ the final person I want to identify baptism with is David. David knew a thing or two about baptism. While the closest thing we find to baptism in the actual Davidic covenant is probably the pouring of oil in the anointing of the king, his Psalms are full of rich imagery. “Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin!” (Ps 51:2).

²⁴ Especially Israel’s baptism at the miraculous river of Sinai (Ex 19:10) and its relation to the “kingdom of priests” language of the NT; the baptism of Israel when they cross the Jordan (Joshua 3-4); the baptism of Elijah and Elisha in the Jordan (2 Kgs 2:6-14), and the baptism of Naaman (2 Kgs 5:10-14) which is a predecessor of NT baptism of Gentiles.

“Save me, O God! For the waters have come up to my neck” (Ps 69:1). “He divided the sea and let them pass through it, and made the waters stand like a heap” (Ps 78:13). It’s as if in David, all of the great themes of baptism come to a confluence. And why not, he is the great king of Israel who foreshadows better than all the coming Messiah.²⁵

Christ’s and Christian Baptism: Fulfillment

Putting all of these things together we can begin to make some sense of Christ’s baptism and of Christian baptism and its application. As you will remember, Jesus was baptized in the Jordan in his first baptism. He did this

²⁵ Summing this up is Cyril of Jerusalem (*Catechetical Lectures* III.5), “But if any one wishes to know why the grace is given by water and not by a different element, let him take up the Divine Scriptures and he shall learn. For water is a grand thing, and the noblest of the four visible elements of the world. Heaven is the dwelling-place of Angels, but the heavens are from the waters: the earth is the place of men, but the earth is from the waters: and before the whole six days’ formation of the things that were made, “the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the water.”... The water was the beginning of the world, and Jordan the beginning of the Gospel tidings: for Israel deliverance from Pharaoh was through the sea, and for the world deliverance from sins by the washing of water with the word of God. Where a covenant is made with any, there is water also. After the flood, a covenant was made with Noah: a covenant for Israel from Mount Sinai, but with water, and scarlet wool, and hyssop. Elias is taken up, but not apart from water: for first he crosses the Jordan, then in a chariot mounts the heaven. The high-priest is first washed, then offers incense; for Aaron first washed, then was made high-priest: for how could one who had not yet been purified by water pray for the rest? Also as a symbol of Baptism there was a laver set apart within the Tabernacle.”

to fulfill all righteousness (Matt 3:15). What this means is that he was taking upon himself both the legal purpose of baptism in the priesthood as well as all of its symbolic meaning from the other baptisms. His baptism allowed him to enter into his high priestly ministry which began immediately after that moment and continued to his death on the cross as a sacrifice for sin. And it continues on into today. It is his obedience to this baptism, his obedience to God's law, and his obedience to go to the cross for our sin that saves us.

Our sacrament of baptism must never be viewed as that which saves a person, but rather as that which takes upon itself these many symbols and carries them out in light of the finished work of Christ on our behalf. As we see at creation, we have been consecrated and set apart for some kind of service in a holy place. Our bodies are those holy place, that temple, and they are washed just as by God in baptism and through the word of Christ. This is the new creation to which our baptism now points, as the sacrament is attached direction to the new covenant as the sign of the new creation. The same holds true for all else that follows.

As we see in **Eden**, baptism symbolizes **repentance and forgiveness** of our sins. Therefore, we should not continue to live in sin any longer. As we see in the **Flood**, baptism symbolizes **death and resurrection**. We have died to sin, how can we live in it any longer? We have been raised to life, and the life we live we now live to God. As we see in **Abraham**, baptism symbolizes our transference to **a new kingdom** and a new allegiance to a new king. Therefore, we should no longer live as those who live in darkness, carrying out the passions of the flesh. But let us live as children of light to belong to the light. As we see with **Moses**, baptism symbolizes a new relation to the law. It is not given as a burden, but people can make it a burden if by it they think they can merit God's favor. For it is a yoke that no one can bear, for its demands are impossible and it only threatens and terrorizes. As we see with the **priests**, baptism is an ordination that brings our new careers into the priesthood of believers (**1 Pet 2:5**), a kingdom of priests (**Rev 5:10**).

Romans 6 which begins with baptism makes this very priestly application to us. **“Do not present your members to sin as instruments for unrighteousness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from**

death to life, and your members to God as instruments for righteousness” (Rom 6:13). This is priestly language and temple language. And the NT is full of it. “Brothers, by the mercies of God, present your bodies as a living *sacrifice*, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship” (Rom 12:1-2).

Right now what I am doing is called “the priestly duty of proclaiming the gospel of God” (Rom 15:16). Something elsewhere called “a fragrant aroma” of gospel ministry. This is part of my calling in the NT temple. But you have your own holy calling and work. Consider prayer, which is the golden bowls full of incense in the very temple of God (Rev 5:8). Prayer is a holy calling, a priestly duty, something only those who have entered into the temple can carry out, for when others pray, unless they are praying for forgiveness first, God will not hear them. Their prayers fall on deaf ears.

Consider giving money to the church, the topic no sane pastor likes to talk about, but which is called “a fragrant offering, a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God” (Php 4:18). Sacrifices, even fragrant offerings, were offered by holy men. This particular sacrifice is for the benefit of God’s kingdom and the spreading of his name throughout

the earth using common means to do it. It is important and part of your baptismal duty.

Consider **suffering** on behalf of the gospel, something referred to as a “**drink offering poured out**” (**Php 2:17**) for those to whom your suffering will be of eternal benefit. We suffer today as a nation, yet again. Tomorrow we will forget. But no one forgets those saints that have gone before us, martyred for their faith because they were willing to stand for truth though it cost them their life. Foxe’s *Book of Martyrs* is one of the best-selling books of all time. It is a sacrificial calling that God gives to some, but all God’s baptized saints must be willing to suffer for the name of Christ. When they do, it is a holy duty.

And consider **doing good to one another**, which is called “**sacrifices pleasing to God**” (**Heb 13:16**). “**Therefore, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience**” (**Col 3:12-13**), because you have been baptized and it is now your duty, your calling, and your delight to do. These are the practical implications of the history of baptism. If you have not been baptized, consider why you have not been. For if you have trusted in Christ, he calls you to make the good confession in

front of many witnesses. It is how he disciplines the nations. It is his command.

Most of all, through these things I want you to see how [the Gospel of Jesus Christ is pictured in baptism](#), for this is how it is a means of grace. Going down with Christ in his death and being raised anew in his resurrection is what Paul told us baptism shows us. The death and resurrection of Jesus. The old man dying. The new man coming up as a new creation. That's the gospel. Baptism is a visible representation of that gospel and as such, it is the power of God. It is the power of God because it is the word of God made manifest to our senses. It is a mystery how this all works, but believing it is how we receive it.

Often during baptismal services, the preacher says, "[Remember your baptism.](#)" Why? Because in doing so, you are [remembering that once-for-all grace](#) that God gave to you when he granted you eternal life by the power of his Holy Spirit. Trust that this power is real. And think often on the many aspects of baptism that we have surveyed as we've looked at how it comes to us through the entire Bible. Baptism is a grace that goes back to the beginning of creation and its lasting effects will continue all the way into eternity for those who believe

the Gospel of Jesus Christ. What an amazing grace he has given to his people that they might know for certain that Christ died and was raised to life for them.

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