

Baptism: Hope and Responsibility

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Date: 14 July 2019

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[0 : 00] Let me just read a few words from one of the passages we've read already from Romans chapter 6. Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death? We were therefore buried 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.

Now later this morning we're going to be baptizing someone. Well I'm not going to be baptizing someone. Derek is going to take that part of the service. We're going to be baptizing Neil and Day's son, Murdo. So I thought it would be helpful simply to think a little bit about the significance of baptism as it's represented within the New Testament. Now this isn't going to be a comprehensive lecture on baptism. That would take an awful long time and I'm going to try and not talk for too long. All I'm going to do is to talk about a couple of the aspects of significance that's associated with the ritual or rite of baptism within the New Testament and particularly by the Apostle Paul. Now both of these aspects that I want to think about which I've entitled Hope and Responsibility. Both of these aspects are associated particularly with an element of the significance of baptism that we ourselves perhaps often overlook. And this is particularly connected to the way that baptism is represented by the New Testament writers as representing something about the believer's identification with Jesus. Now perhaps one of the helpful ways to begin thinking about this is just to think about the word baptize itself. The word baptize originally wasn't a technical word, it didn't originally refer to a particular rite or to a particular practice. It was just a particular form of a verb that was associated either with immersing things in liquid or sprinkling liquid onto things. So the verb was simply a verb about effectively dunking or sprinkling. And because of those associations it came to have two particular functions if you like. It was often used of washing where you would immerse your hands or you would sprinkle water on your hands to cleanse them. That's one of the associations we're often very aware of ourselves and that's obviously fairly prominent within the New Testament's representation of baptism. Baptism is associated with cleansing. But the other aspect of the significance of baptism that we're perhaps less aware of is that the same set of words, because they were connected to the idea of immersing or sprinkling, were also commonly used in connection with dying things, not things that are dying, but with textiles where you would immerse textiles in particular dyes and they would take on the properties of that dye. Or you would sprinkle textiles or spray particular liquids onto textiles and they would take on the properties.

So that the language of baptism also comes to have a connotation of identification, a connotation of the fact that when things come into contact they become entangled with each other.

Something that is true of one thing becomes shared with the other, becomes communicated to the other. They become entangled or they become united to each other. This is actually a very prominent element within the Reformed tradition that this particular denomination is part of. But it's something that has quite widely slipped out of the common imagery within more contemporary evangelicalism. We don't talk perhaps as much as we should about union with Christ, about the emphasis that we find brought out in the passages before us, that the believer is united to Jesus. And in that union our lives and the life of Jesus becomes entangled. So that it's not simply the case that Jesus does something for us from which we benefit when we trust him.

[4 : 59] But it's that our lives and the life of Jesus have become entangled so that he is united to himself, all that we are, with all of its failings and deficiencies and lacks. And he is united to us all that he is with all its perfections. Baptism represents that. And when we read Paul in Roman 6 it's clear that that is what's in his mind. Not solely the imagery of baptism as something that represents cleansing, but the imagery of baptism as something that represents union.

We have been baptized into Christ Jesus. And the way that Paul talks about this baptism is that unlike this morning when water will be sprinkled on myrtle and that water afterwards can be wiped

off with a towel, this particular implanting into Jesus is one that definitively transforms. Now the right itself, that's simply an outward representation of that reality.

But the reality itself is one that leaves an imprint on us. And that's what I want to talk about this morning. So baptism, hope and responsibility. And our two titles are really taken from the two passages or are associated with the two passages we looked at. So first of all let's turn to Roman 6 and to think about baptism and hope. And the hope that I think is particularly represented in Roman 6 is the truth that the prospects and possibilities for our lives rest on something, on someone outside of ourselves. That the prospects and possibilities for our lives are not defined by ourselves, by our abilities, capacities, performances, by our pasts, our histories, but that the prospects and possibilities for our lives are defined rest upon the reality of the identity of Jesus Christ. Look at the language again that Paul uses. We've read it a couple of times but let's read it again. Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into

Christ Jesus were baptized into His death? We were therefore buried 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. 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. We know that our old self, or that's literally our old man, was crucified with Him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin. For one who has died has been set free from sin. Now if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will live with Him.

We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again. Death no longer has dominion over Him. These are amazing words because in these words Paul says, your reality, our reality, is one that's defined by the identity and by the story of Jesus.

[8 : 54] And again, not simply as something that has been lived and done for them from which they benefit, but as something in which they have come to participate because it's a story to which they have been united. Again, this is one of those passages that doesn't really read well, the way that we often read it, the way that we often limit our ways of talking about the atonement to particular ways of thinking about Jesus doing something for us. This passage speaks of Jesus death as something to which we have been united, as something in which we participate, and as a way of speaking about Jesus' resurrection as something to which we have been united and in which we participate. Paul effectively says to us, who died on Calvary? And the answer to that is that

Jesus died, but I died. Who rose on the third day? Jesus rose, but I rose. And in time that resurrection will be manifest fully when my body is raised from the dead and shares in the perfection of his life.

It's the language of identification with the story of Jesus that for Paul is associated with this incredible new possibility and prospect that I can live not as a slave to sin, but as someone who has died to sin and been raised into newness of life, that I can share in the life of Jesus. Perhaps the most radical place where Paul expresses this is in Galatians chapter 2, where he says, I have been crucified with Christ, and now it's no longer I who live, it's Christ who lives in me. Now it's very clear, you know, when you read Paul's wider writings, it's not that Paul feels like he's been effaced from existence. He still writes to people as Paul, and he still writes to people addressing them by their names. So it's not that the people to whom he writes or he himself have been sort of obliterated from existence, and everything has become this amorphous thing. There are ideas like that out there in other religions, but it's not the idea that Paul has. Paul's language is that I live, but it's no longer I who lives, it's Christ who lives in me. My whole identity has been redefined by the one to whom I'm united. His story has become my story. His backstory has become my backstory, and his future has become my future.

And why is that hope? Well, it's hope for Paul because it means that those futures are no longer limited by those deficiencies and weaknesses, failings, powerlessnesses that are part of our being, part of our flesh. Shall we go on sinning? He says, no, because we've been united to the one who has died and been raised. We've been redefined, re-identified.

We will be raised with him, Paul goes on to say. That's the hope, that's the prospect. The prospects for our lives, for each of us, are not governed by our past. They're not governed by our intelligence. They're not governed by our own cognitive abilities. They're not governed by our capacity to live obediently to God. They're governed by the history, by the identity of Jesus.

[13 : 09] His story is now our story. His future is now our future. Baptism, the act of applying water to this child, signifies that great reality. It signifies the reality that the hope for each of us, the hope

for murder, lies outside of murder. It lies in the person of Jesus.

So if any of us are here this morning and perhaps we're feeling a sense of despair, because our own lives have not turned out the way that we thought they would, because we've come to realize that we ourselves are just powerless to deal with those sins in our lives, because we feel perhaps that we've blown it, that we've failed, that we've taken our testimony and thrown it away.

As we watch the act of baptism later this morning, it's a reminder to us that our futures are not ours to lose, that our futures are Christ's future. So if you're here this morning with that sense of despair, the act of baptism, even apply to someone else, preaches something to you. It preaches to you that our hope lies in Jesus Christ, and not just in something that Jesus has done for us, but in Jesus himself. I use a lot of cliches, my own cliches. So there's a lot of things that I say a lot of the time. And this is one of them, because baptism is associated sometimes with the imagery of clothing. Sometimes you find the language of baptism occurring very close to the image that the calling of the Christian life is to take off our old man, or to put off our old man, and to clothe ourselves with Christ. So here's the point. The prospects of our lives is that we can live in fellowship with Jesus the King, because we have clothed ourselves with Jesus the servant, and because we enjoy the prospects and the future of that servant. It's an encouragement to us.

It's also a challenge to us, because if any of us are here this morning and we feel that actually that we're in pretty good shape, then this is a reminder that our own goodness, our own righteousness will never suffice. That's the lesson that Paul in the chapters prior to Romans 6 has learned.

Paul used to think that he had done everything right. So when we read in Philippians 3 of Paul's former life, it's a life that he describes as something in which he did everything right.

[16 : 04] I came from a good family. I was righteous. I was zealous. I kept the law meticulously. But when he encountered Jesus, he realized that all of these things were just idols. They had no capacity to truly deliver him from the power of sin that really affected and marked his whole constitution, his whole flesh. Deliverance is mine only in Jesus. That's the recognition that Paul has in Philippians. That's why he says to live is Christ and to die is gain.

So for those of us this morning, as we watch the act of baptism, this is the first reminder that it's a declaration of hope, a declaration that is at once a comfort, but a challenge, to ask us where our hope lies. And for a moment just to think about a murder himself and about his parents, the act of baptism is one in which his parents are reminded, are invited to declare something that they will rear murder to know through his life and that this community, this church, will have a responsibility to remind Mirdo off day after day that his own prospects, his own hopes, must lie outside of himself, that he will never be the captain of his own destiny, that he must never be the captain of his own destiny, the key to his own future, that his key will always be Jesus because Jesus is the key. So that's the first thing then, baptism and hope. Secondly, baptism and responsibility. And this is from 1 Corinthians chapter 12, which is the second of the passages that we read. Now there's a couple of things that

I want to notice before we look at some of the details of this text, and we're not going to take too long over this. The first is the language that Paul uses in verse 12, because it's very easy to pass over something. For just as the body is one and has many members and all the members of the body, though many are one body, so it is with Christ. That's a very interesting turn of phrase, because he doesn't say just as the body is one, so it is with the church, or just as the body is one, so it is with the Christian community. He says just as the body is one, so it is with Christ.

Now this is effectively an outworking of what we've just seen in Romans 6, that the identity of the believer and the identity of the community of believers are derived from Jesus himself, participate in Jesus himself, so that when we look at the church we're not simply looking at a bunch of people, but we're looking at Christ himself. When we're looking at the body of Christ, we're looking at Christ. Paul's language there, just as the body is one, so it is with Christ.

The second interesting thing requires us to go back a little bit. You don't need to go back, I'll just walk you through this. But this language of oneness that we find here throughout this chapter is language that actually has run through not only this, but also the preceding chapters, right back to chapter 8, where Paul speaks about the fact that there is one God, one Lord, and one mediator between God and men, Jesus Christ. Now the interesting thing about that passage, that's 1 Corinthians 8.6, is that the language of oneness that Paul uses there really picks up on one of the classic statements of divine monotheism, of the uniqueness of God from the Old Testament, a passage that's known as the Shema within Jewish tradition, Deuteronomy 6, where Israel is told,

Hero Israel, the Lord your God, the Lord is one. So worship the Lord your God with all your heart and so on. The Lord is God, the Lord is one. And when Paul speaks about the oneness of the body in this chapter, it's as part of a long spell in 1 Corinthians, where he's been saying to believers, you are united to God in Christ. You are united to the one God through the one mediator. You have been made to drink of the one spirit. That's represented in one loaf from which you eat, one cup from which you drink, because the unity, the oneness of the church is a function of the union of that church to its God, and that God is one God. The oneness of God is shared with the church. Now of course Paul's writing to people who are evincing a lack of unity.

[21 : 35] He's writing to people who are competing with each other for honor and status. He's writing to people who are neglecting the needs of each other. He's writing in other words to a community that doesn't embody unity the way that it should. But what he doesn't say to them is, you need to sort your unity out so that you can finally be one. What he says to them is, you are one because you're united to the one God through the one Savior, through the one mediator. You've been made to drink of the one spirit. So start manifesting, start embodying the oneness which is really yours because of your union with God. And that's what we see worked out here in the imagery of the diverse body that Paul uses. It's a very common image of course, and it's a very, it's an obvious image to use. Bodies are complicated things. They have many parts, and those parts all perform different functions. They all look different. But one of the key things with this image that Paul is using is that it allows him to speak about the fact that we are naturally, and I want to qualify this word in a moment, we are naturally drawn to certain parts of the body that are attractive and engaging. We are naturally drawn to handsome faces. We are naturally drawn to perfect teeth. We are naturally drawn to muscular figures. We've been, now I'm going to qualify that word naturally in just a moment, we've been rewatching the Marvel Cinematic

Universe movies, The Avengers Cycle. And for those who don't know what that is, it's fine, I won't explain it. It's a superhero series. But here's the thing with that series, we love them.

Most people, not everyone, most people love these kinds of films because they're full of strong people who can do incredible things. They're full of handsome people, beautiful people.

Captain America has perfect hair and perfect biceps. Scarlett Widow has a beautiful face, and so on and so forth. Certain people are cast to be the superheroes because they look fantastic.

They're portrayed in particular ways because we're naturally drawn to those. And here's the key.

Paul recognizes that our natural attraction to such things can cause us to place more value on one than the other. And he says, that's wrong. That thing that is natural is actually sinfully natural for you. It's part of your fleshly constitution. You judge people according to the flesh. That's the language that Paul uses repeatedly. It's sometimes masked in our translations because the word flesh is sometimes retranslated as sinful nature, which captures the negativity that Paul often associates with it. But the word flesh itself is really important because what Paul effectively is saying is that this is part of your constitution. This is part of the way you're made up.

[25 : 00] You're made up to value people who are strong, handsome. It's in your flesh. It's in your bones. It's in your neurology. And Paul says, for the Christian, for the Christian church, that's something that we need to recognize and that's something we need to set ourselves against. We need to deliberately, deliberately, intentionally re-evaluate people, not according to their impressive characteristics or lack thereof, but according to their union with Jesus, according to their union with Christ, and according to the fact that that is linked to God's choosing and placing of them in the church.

So what does he say? For in one spirit we were all baptized into one body, Jews or Greeks, slaves or free, and all were made to drink of one spirit. We were all baptized into one body. It's baptism, again, that Paul goes to. And in the passage that follows, he speaks about the different parts of the body and particularly the parts of the body that we're not attracted to, that we don't place value on. He's writing to people who are competing for honor, competing for status. You want to be a smile.

You want to be a hand, but you're an eye and you resent the fact that you're not a smile or you're an ear and you resent the fact that you're not something else. And he says to them, your body is made up of parts, many of which are covered, many of which are not on display. And we need to recognize that those parts are as valuable as every other part. Few of us, I think, watch the Avengers movies and think Chris Evans, who plays Captain

America, he must have a fantastic liver. But he must. And this is the point, is that everyone is dependent upon parts of their bodies that are less, obviously, appealing, significant, valuable than

other parts. I gave a lecture on this. I've been doing some work on one of the aspects of the work I do at the moment is on autism and the church. And this has been a big theme for me in my work. Because, again, one of the realities of autism is that autistic people often don't evince the kinds of qualities that other people, social qualities, that other people tend to place a premium on. So they tend to interact with people socially in a different way to the way that most people interact with each other. And that means that other people often don't find them quite as, and I maybe put this in scare quotes, they don't find them quite as likable as they find other people. They sometimes find them difficult. In many cases, their behaviour can be challenging, in more profound cases. In other cases, they just don't necessarily fit in or conform to the kinds of social expectations that we have. So I've been looking at the kind of language that Paul uses here and applying it to that to think about how the church ought to think about autism and autistic people, both for adults with autism in perhaps less extreme, even hidden forms, if you like, but also for people with more severe, more profound autism. And this material is absolutely key because it highlights that our instinct is to make value judgments in their own way. Our instinct is to say someone is valuable because they're handsome, because they're witty, because they're a great speaker, or because they're a good company, or because they perform Christian identity extremely well. And Paul says, you are baptized, they are baptized. We've been baptized into one body. Their value resides in the fact that they are united to Christ. And from that value, they are an essential and necessary part of the church. I gave a lecture in the States a couple of months ago, and I had PowerPoint there. I could probably have brought this today, but I wasn't well enough organised. But I put up a picture, and it was one of these idealised pictures, from the 50s, of a happy, beautiful family going to church. Probably in America, but that's not a judgement on anyone. Happy, beautiful family going to church. Their smiles were perfect, their skin was perfect, they all looked like they were having fun. Not necessarily the kind of reality that families will experience on a Sunday morning, trying to curral the children into church. But the point is that it's a myth, it's not the reality. And so I put up the next picture, was the cover of Grey's Anatomy, which is, you might not like this detail, but it's one of these images that shows a face, but also the skin peeled back to show what's under the face. And here's the point of application. Paul effectively says that's what we need to recognise that the church is. The church is not an airbrushed picture of perfection, where everyone conforms to a particular social expectation. That's a gutless church. The church is the complexity of a body, with its innards, with its parts, with its bits that aren't as attractive or as likable as others. And there's a challenge to each one of us to value the others in the church, not because they agree with us, not because they look like us, but because they're united to Christ by the Spirit. That's an absolutely vital point, because again, this is something I was taught when I went through the Free Church College here, and it's always stuck in my mind, that we so often define our Christian unity, either by the performance of identity that agrees with how we think the Christian life should look, or what we think Christians should look like, or by agreement in theological principles. But the truth is that we are united to every believer who is united to Christ, whether we like their doctrine, whether we like their lifestyle or not. That's not a reason not to argue over those things. In fact, it's more of a reason to argue over them. But we can't overlook the fact that we are united to them, and that they are every bit as valuable and as precious to the church as we are, or as those who conform to our image of what a Christian should look like. So baptism is not just a hope, it's a responsibility, and one that devolves upon each one of us. So I'm going to close with this, and I've gone on slightly longer than I meant to, so I'll do this very quickly, which is simply to say that what we celebrate in baptism is not ultimately the testimony of our faith, the testimony of the fact that we are believers. What we celebrate in baptism is Jesus, and is who Jesus is. One of the things I haven't done today is to talk about why we baptize children. That's an argument for another time. It's not an argument for this morning, or a conversation for this morning, because not everyone believes in that. But often people talk about baptism as if what it is is a testimony to your faith, a testimony to the fact that you are a believer, that you have put your faith in Jesus.

[33 : 24] Baptism is a testimony to His faith. Baptism is a testimony to His goodness, and to the fact that all that we are doing in our faith is laying hold, not just of what He has done for us, but laying hold of Him, because it's not simply that He gives us hope. He is our hope. And what we are called to do in faith is not simply to trust in what He has done, but to trust in Him. What we are called to do in faith is not simply to receive what He is giving us, to receive Himself. Baptism as a sign is a sign that our hopes, our prospects, our possibilities are grounded not in us, in ourselves, in our cognitive capacities, in our intellects, in our abilities, nor in our pasts, but they are grounded in

Jesus Christ, in His past, in His power, and in His future. Amen.