

Baptism

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[0 : 0 0] Well, we're in a series right now where we're asking what do we do in worship and why do we do what we do in worship? And the answer last week and this week for what we do in worship is that we administer the sacraments.

And the answer to why we do what we do in worship is because Jesus told us to. So last week, Neil talked to us about the Lord's Supper and this week we're looking at the sacrament of baptism.

Now if you've been a Christian for very long or been around the church or know anything about church history, you know that the sacraments is one of the most divisive topics in all of history.

For hundreds and hundreds of years, people, Christians, different types of Christians have been so divided by talking about the sacraments, by the Lord's Supper and baptism. So of course, Protestants disagree with Roman Catholics about what the sacrament means and what it does, but even amongst Protestants, Protestant and Protestant, we don't all agree about what the sacraments mean, what they do, and why we do it.

We have them. So at times it can be very contentious. And there probably are people here who have slight differing views about the sacraments, even among people in our own congregation, and that's okay.

[1 : 1 3] Why is this? The Bible says a lot about the sacraments, and it says a lot about baptism especially. It has so many different angles and sides and spectrums and nuances.

If you were following carefully along in the four readings, we just read, you'll notice that in one of the readings it said that the Israelites were baptized into Moses in the cloud and sea.

That's baptism. And then in another reading in 1 Peter, it said that when Jesus died, he went down and preached to the prisoners from Noah's day, but Noah was saved with his family from the waters, and this corresponds to baptism.

So what in the world? What does that mean? These are difficult texts because there's a lot in the Bible that says a lot about baptism, and there are a lot of nuances. So it's not surprising from our human perspective that we can't fully grasp it because the sacraments are mysterious.

The sacraments have a mysterious nature about them, and so it makes it difficult to talk about them in really clear ways all the time. But the sacraments are beautiful.

[2 : 2 6] The sacraments are beautiful gifts that God has instituted. And tonight, talking about baptism, I think we can't make everything clear about baptism.

We can't discuss all the aspects of baptism, but what I think you'll see hopefully by the end is that baptism is fundamentally and ultimately trying to answer for us the question, Who am I?

Baptism answers for us the question, Who am I? So we'll look at three things. First, baptism is a sacrament. Second, baptism is an initiation.

And third, baptism is an identity. So first, baptism is a sacrament. Now the first passage we read was from Romans chapter 6. And the problem in Romans chapter 6 that Paul is addressing is basically this.

If the gospel is true and if Jesus Christ really does all the work, all the work that we could never have done for us in grace, then why in the world should I care about the way I live?

[3 : 25] Why should I care about actually trying to be holy or righteous if it's all grace, all the way down? And Paul is addressing this question and we're not, our aim is not to address that question tonight.

But it's interesting that he says, he asked us to think about baptism in light of that question. And he says that Jesus was died, Jesus died that he was buried and that he was raised and that in baptism we died, we were buried and we were raised with him.

So immediately Paul is saying baptism is a sign of what the allogen is called, the doctrine of union with Christ. In other words, that everything that happened to Christ Jesus, people who have faith in Christ Jesus get all of those benefits.

You live like Christ, you died with Christ, you were buried with Christ and you were raised with Christ. Those are yours. You were united to Christ. And Paul connects that and says baptism, if you're baptized, that's a sign of union with Christ, of getting the things that Christ got.

In other words, he's connecting the sacraments directly, at least baptism here, to the gospel. He's saying what does the sacrament signify? Jesus Christ, the gospel for you, that's exactly what it signifies.

[4 : 37] Now what's a sacrament? What's a sacrament? A sacrament, we've traditionally defined it, is a sign and a seal of God's covenant of grace, but that really just throws the definition back a layer because then you ask, well, what in the world is a sign and seal of God's covenant of grace?

It's not the easiest language to parse. And this is because the word sacrament is not found anywhere in the Bible. The word sacrament comes from the Latin word sacramentum, and sacramentum just means mystery.

And that's why John Calvin, one of the reformers in the 1500s, in one of his famous books, he instead of writing sacraments a lot of the time, so he'll just write the word mystery.

So he'll say the mystery of the Lord's Supper, the mystery of baptism, because that's what sacrament means. It means mystery. And it specifically means mystery as defined by the Bible. So what's the Bible's definition of mystery?

Well, the Bible's definition of mystery is not something like a Swedish crime novel. It's not, you don't know what's going to happen. It's a big mystery. Bring in the police, kind of a thing.

[5 : 47] The Bible's idea of mystery is that something that has been previously hidden has now been revealed, has now come to light. Or in other words, the idea of mystery is that there's a visible manifestation of an invisible reality, a visible appearance, a visible manifestation of an invisible reality, something that you couldn't see with your physical eyes, your embodied eyes, but that's been revealed to you in some unique, special way by God.

So this, when you think about it like that, it makes the language of signs and seals a little bit easier to understand. What's a sign? Well, you know what a sign is? You use them all the time.

We used them up here on the screens today. Think about it in terms of the Bible like this. God flooded the earth in the book of Genesis and then he came and promised to Noah, I'm not going to do that again, ever, until the end of time.

And what did he do to make sure that you remembered that he promised it? He stuck what he calls a sign into the sky, a rainbow. A rainbow is a sacrament.

A rainbow is an Old Testament sacrament. It's a sign and it's a seal of the promise God made to nature that he would not do that again to nature.

[7 : 08] So it's a sign and it's also a seal. What's a seal? A seal is not the fish that sits on rocks and claps and stuff. It's a seal is taken from the old concept, the ancient Near Eastern concept that you see in any movie in the Middle Ages.

Somebody here was telling me that lawyers still do this. The idea of, it's the image of taking a piece of wax and putting it on a letter and putting down your stamp on it and sealing it, right?

That's what it's meant by a seal. And in the ancient Near East, a ruler could seal an official document or a covenant, a promise, an agreement in all sorts of ways.

He could give away his signet ring to a person. In Jerusalem a lot of times you would seal an agreement or contract or covenant by taking off your shoe and exchanging shoes.

This was a seal at the gate of Jerusalem. These are seals, signs and seals. You get the picture. A seal makes something official, permanent, approved, assured, final.

[8 : 13] It's guaranteed, it's done. It's making, it's putting a visible image onto something that's been spiritually, invisibly promised, something you can't see with your eyes.

So it's a sign and it's a seal of a covenant. So what are sacraments? Sacraments are visible, tangible, physical, embodied signs of the gospel, assurances, signs.

The gospel acted out in physical form. In the New Testament, in Romans 6, in fact, we're given hints of two official sacraments that we, this is common knowledge, but that we celebrate and that's the Lord's Supper and baptism.

We believe that Jesus Christ instituted two sacraments in the New Covenant, New Testament era, but theologians throughout all of history, including in our tradition, have always recognized a broader definition of sacrament and looked into the Old Testament and seen a plethora of sacraments as we've defined it.

The first two sacraments in the Old Testament commonly recognized are the tree, the two trees in the Garden of Eden, the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

[9 : 32] These are signs of covenant promises of blessing and curse. Other sacraments in the Old Testament are Aaron's rod, the manna that came down from heaven, but more importantly than any of those probably is the Passover, which corresponds to the Lord's Supper in the New Covenant and circumcision, which corresponds to baptism in the New Covenant.

So briefly, just to close out this point, I just want to give you three things to remember as you think about what a sacrament is and just to kind of summarize and make clear. The first is this very briefly.

A sacrament is God instituted and that means it's objective before it is subjective. Okay, so what do I mean by that? Well, John Calvin said it this way, sacraments first are God's promises to us, God's gifts to us before they are our confession to God.

So the sacraments are first objective. They're God instituted. They're first visible promises from God to us before subjectively. Secondly, they are acts of confession to God.

You see, the objective is primary over the subjective. They contain both a visible and an invisible element. So what's the visible element of a sacrament?

[10 : 54] Well, water, bread, wine, anything like that. Those are the visible elements of a sacrament. But the water and the bread and the wine don't contain grace in themselves as material.

There's no grace inside of the water or in the bread. Grace, this is a mistake that's been made a lot throughout history, but grace isn't a thing.

You can't touch grace. You can't taste grace, except for metaphorically. And that's what's happening in the sacraments. Grace isn't in the water as a material or in the bread or wine.

Instead what's happening is that there's an invisible reality in sacraments. And that God has given an invisible promise to go with the visible aspect of sacraments.

And he gives it in 2 Corinthians 122. God has put his seal on us talking about the covenant and the sacraments, the Holy Spirit, the invisible guarantee of the gospel that's being pictured in the visible sacraments.

[11 : 58] So there's a visible aspect and an invisible aspect. And then thirdly and finally, the sacraments, which are the gospel, make sense.

They make sense because they treat the whole person. They treat all of who you are.

We need more than just words. We need physicality. We are embodied persons, embodied spirits. And so first the gospel comes to us in word form.

The call comes from the word of God. It's a call. It's spoken. And secondly, the gospel then comes to us in physical form in the sacrament.

Indeed, it's spoken to us by God in these institutions. And that makes sense because we're embodied spirits. So we need things that are embodied to help make sense of us of things that pertain to the spiritual.

[12 : 56] Okay, so that's a sacrament. Baptism is a sacrament. And baptism, to focus more closely on baptism, is an initiation.

Baptism is an initiation. So our theologian of the night tonight, I suppose, is John Calvin. I have a quote again from him. Baptism, he says, is the mark of initiation where we are admitted into the fellowship of the church that being engrafted into Christ in his body, we may be accounted as children of God.

Now, we've already said that circumcision in the Old Testament is the foundation of the idea of baptism in the New Testament. And we saw this in the second passage we read from Colossians chapter 2, verses 11 to 14.

And in that passage, Paul says that in Christ you were circumcised. But he's not talking there, and he explains this about a literal flesh circumcision.

He's talking about a spiritual reality, the circumcision of the heart. And what he's saying is that Old Testament circumcision was always about pointing to something else, something invisible, something that even a person who was circumcised or part of the circumcised people of Israel needed, a circumcision of the heart, to be cut in the heart and changed all the way through.

[14 : 15] There was always that physical thing was always pointing to an invisible need. And he parallels it in that passage directly with baptism. This is just like baptism.

The baptism is a physical thing that corresponds to a spiritual need that's pointing outward and saying you need also a spiritual reality, a spiritual washing by the spirit that corresponds to this.

So Paul makes very clear that he connects circumcision with baptism in the New Testament. And this makes sense. Even though circumcision can be a hard topic to talk about, it makes sense because in the Old Testament, in the Hebrew Bible, covenants are not made, they are only cut.

So anytime you read in the Old Testament, it says, and God made a covenant with Abraham or Moses or David, literally what it actually says is, and God cut a covenant with Abraham, Moses, David.

It doesn't use the verb made, it uses the verb cut, but we've translated it that way most of the time in English. But it says cut. And so you can see pretty clearly exactly why when you cut a covenant, you need blood.

[15 : 30] That's what is being signified, is that covenant promises are made in blood. And circumcision was the perfect covenant sign for that. It's bloody, it's messy.

And the point was that everyone remember in the house of Israel that it was always about something to come, a blood sacrifice that was to come, that was in the future, an ultimate spiritual reality that had not yet taken place.

That was always the point. Blood had to be shed for the covenant to be fulfilled. Now in New Testament sacrament, baptism is not bloody, it's not painful.

Well, it's a little bit painful maybe for an infant, but not too bad. But it's clean and it's refreshing. And the question is why?

What's the difference? And St. Augustine, one of the early church fathers said it like this, in the Old Testament these covenant signs or sacraments pointed forward to a future salvation.

[16 : 32] But in the New Testament, in the New Covenant era, our sacraments point backwards to a salvation accomplished. You see, in other words, the Old Testament idea of sacrament and circumcision looks forward to the man of power who will undergo the ultimate knife, the man who must ultimately be cut.

This small thing of circumcision was just a sign of an ultimate cutting, the man of power who had to be killed. And it was always looking forward to that.

Whereas in the New Testament, in baptism, we look backwards to the man who was cut, to the man who went under the ultimate knife. They had to see blood coming in the future, and because the blood has been now shed, we see water.

You see? But there's even more to the story, because water throughout the whole of the Bible also simultaneously signifies both judgment and purification at the very same time.

So the next two passages we looked at were 1 Corinthians 10 and 1 Peter 3. In 1 Corinthians 10, verse 2, it says that the Israelites were baptized into Moses, in the cloud and in the sea.

[17 : 48] Now what in the world does that mean? We talked about this last semester when we were looking at Exodus 14. The Israelites were baptized into Moses. It's talking about the event that took place at the Red Sea.

When Israel crossed the Red Sea, we read the passage at the beginning of the service, Israel literally went under the water. The walls of water erected around and over them, and Israel went under the water.

You see, the water became an instrument for them, an instrument to move them from the state of slavery to the state of freedom, a new community.

You see? And the question is, why in the world is it that when Pharaoh and the Egyptians went under the water, it crushed them? It became an ultimate instrument of judgment, whereas for Israel it became an ultimate instrument of salvation.

And the answer is one thing, Israel had a mediator. Israel had a mediator. They had Moses. They had Moses standing there, and God told him, raise up your hands, and part the waters.

[18 : 48] Moses was the covenant mediator of that baptism. It was the baptism as an instrument of grace and mercy for Israel, and it was a baptism of judgment and death for Pharaoh.

And the only difference was that Israel had a mediator, a covenant mediator, a go-between, between them and God. The third passage from 1 Peter 3, 18 through 22, which is, I'm not about to go into it too much, it's one of the most difficult passages in the New Testament.

It's very confusing. I mean, I might know what it means, but I'm not sure, and nobody else in history is exactly sure either.

It sounds like it says that when Jesus died, Jesus went to hell to preach the gospel to the prisoners from the age of Noah who died in the flood and to potentially set them free.

And that's been a popular interpretation throughout history. What I actually think it's saying is that the gospel of Jesus' death was preached to those in Noah's generation before the flood that they were given an opportunity to repent, but only Noah and his family, the eight, were saved.

[20 : 05] But the point is this, this corresponds to baptism. You see, just like with the Red Sea, the flood is simultaneously a judgment and a salvation or a purification.

Water is playing both roles. For those that the gospel was preached to beforehand, water became the ultimate instrument of death, the ultimate judge. It was a drowning, but for Noah who entered into an ark, a mediator, he and his family were saved.

And Peter is connecting that directly to the gospel. It's the same exact idea that's present in the gospel and present in New Testament baptism. So just briefly to end point to the other four statements about the way to think aspects of baptism very briefly, and then we'll move to the final point.

First, what this teaches us. Baptism is the pronouncement from God to humans that the waters of judgment because of Jesus' Christ's death have become for us the waters of life.

But was once only judgment, drowning, has now because of Christ become the water of life. That's what baptism is symbolizing and signifying. These waters are purifying because of his death.

[21 : 23] One of the early church fathers named Ambrose, who was Augustine's teacher, he said that when Jesus went into the water, he didn't go into the water at his baptism to be purified, but to purify the waters for us so that they may no longer be waters of judgment.

Secondly, baptism is an initiation or an entrance into fellowship. And this entrance into fellowship into a new community, a new group of people marked by the gospel is for believers and for children of believers.

This entrance into this fellowship is by both profession of faith and the sacrament and the sacrament for the children of any believer that professes faith.

Let me just, Neil did this last week, so I feel like I can do it without it being too annoying. But let me just read to you from the Westminster Confession very briefly because Neil did it.

The efficacy of baptism is not tied to that moment of time where it is administered. So the efficacious, the effectiveness of baptism is not tied to the moment of being baptized at all.

[22 : 41] In other words, it's saying baptism doesn't save you. The physical act of baptism doesn't save you. But it's a sign of the grace that's promised, offered and conferred by the Holy Spirit to anyone, whether infants or not, God has determined that grace belongs to each in their appointed time.

Okay. Now look, why do we think? I have no doubt that there are people here tonight that don't agree with that. But why does our tradition, why do we think the Bible teaches that? Very briefly, the covenant has always been for adults and for the children of the adults that are part of that covenant, ever since the very beginning.

It's never been any different. And we don't think that in the New Testament that's changed. And a reason we don't think that is because in Acts chapter two, at the end of Peter's sermon, after he's delivered this beautiful speech, this beautiful sermon about the works of Christ.

He says in Acts two, 38, be baptized for the promise is for you and for your children and for all those who are far off or outside your gates or sorry, for all those who believe.

Now is he simply talking there that the promise is for you and for your children in terms of children who believe, who profess, who are old enough, some minimum age to profess faith? And the answer is no.

[23 : 56] Why? Because this is a quote, this is a quote from Genesis 17 where God instituted the sacrament of circumcision in the Old Testament.

And the sacrament of circumcision in the Old Testament was for every single boy that was eight days old. It was prior to any age of being able to profess anything.

You see he's quoting from Genesis 17 and showing that there's a continuity, that this is for believers and for their infants, for their children. First Corinthians seven just very briefly says that the children of believers are holy.

Now what does that mean? Does that mean that they're literally perfect and righteous and made holy in Christ? Absolutely for sure. No, holy there is the, just simply means set apart.

In other words, the children of believers are set apart. In other words, they're marked off. They're members of this covenant community. Just right here, the local church, meaning that we are distinct from the communities of the world.

[24 : 58] We are a distinct body and that's what baptism is marking. One of the problems is that if you limit the sacrament of baptism, if you restrict baptism to only those who can publicly profess faith, there are all sorts of difficulties that that causes.

But one of the ones I'll just mention that you can ponder over is that it becomes very difficult to understand God's intentions for severely mentally disabled in a congregation that don't have the ability to ever profess faith.

So there are another, a number of other things to think about. But let me just close that little point by quoting from a, Herman Bovingt who says this, infant baptism is beautiful.

He writes, the father loved the world. Christ is an atoning sacrifice for the whole world and he shed his blood also for children.

And the Holy Spirit who conceived Jesus and Mary's womb was granted to Jeremiah, David, and John from the very first moment of their existence. God has access to every heart and he is not hindered by age or youth.

[26 : 13] Just as children are partakers of the condemnation and Adam without their knowledge, so they are again received unto grace in Christ that they cannot actually believe in Christ.

They can be regenerated or made new and thereby also receive the capacity to believe in Christ. So point three before, this means that baptism is totally passive.

That's what's being highlighted in baptism is total human passivity. So just think about baptism for a second. The Lord's supper, you're active, you're taking, you're eating, you're being called to remember, to think, you're being called to do all sorts of stuff, to get up, to profess.

See, the Lord's supper is the sacrament of activity, but baptism is the sacrament of passivity and that's why infants are so perfect for it because they display so perfectly the passive nature of that sacrament.

In baptism, you're called to die, to lay back and be helpless, not to move, to have the water poured over you. You don't do anything.

[27 : 21] It's a sacrament of total passivity which corresponds later to the sacrament of activity and that's why it makes so much sense that it's both for those who profess faith in Christ and for their children.

And lastly, baptism is a call. It's an initiation into a covenant community and that means it's a call. In Romans 6, Paul connected it directly to the call to walk in newness of life.

See, if you've been marked out for the people of God, then you're being called in baptism to walk like Jesus did in newness of life.

Okay, thirdly and finally, we have to hurry briefly. Baptism thirdly and finally and briefly is an identity. Now, every single person in this world is looking for identity markers in their life.

You need affirmation. Every single person needs affirmation. You need to be told from the outside, by somebody that you adore, I adore you. And Tolkien put it best in the Two Towers when he said, the praise of the praiseworthy is above all rewards, we're made to be adored by somebody we adored.

[28 : 36] And that's how God instituted it. When Jesus Christ was baptized, the Father came from heaven and spoke and said, this is the Son, my beloved, and I adore him.

And what Paul is saying is that baptism is the sign of union with Christ, which means that when you believe in profess faith in Christ, what baptism is trying to tell you is that everything that is being spoken of the Son is also spoken of you.

So it's literally the Father saying, this you are the daughter, the Son, my beloved. It's true of you as it was true of Christ.

That's what baptism is signifying, is our union with him. I preached a sermon on Jesus' baptism recently and I use this story, but I'll use it again because it's incredible.

Joseph Merrick was a 19th century man. A film was made about him in the mid-20th century called The Elephant Man. Joseph Merrick was a man that was incredibly diseased, tumors all over his body, incredibly deformed human being.

[29 : 46] And he was a member of a freak show, a traveling circus in the 19th century. He did not know how to speak. He was brutally beaten daily.

This is all a true story. A man named Dr. Weber in England rescued him out of that life and taught him how to speak, gave him a room and a hospital to live in.

And on one occasion, Dr. Weber asks Joseph Merrick to come to his house for tea, afternoon tea. And Merrick's never been invited to afternoon tea.

Never been invited anywhere. And he goes to afternoon tea with Dr. Weber and his wife, who are fairly wealthy English people. And at one point, Merrick pulls out a picture of his mother.

And Dr. Weber is really interested in this because Weber wants to know, does she look like you? Did you have this disease because of her? Because he's a doctor. He's interested medically.

[30 : 42] And she didn't. She was a beautiful woman. But Joseph looks back down at the picture and says this, if only my mother could see me now, I was such a disappointment to her.

If she could see me now with such lovely friends, maybe she would want me. You see, every single human needs an identity marker.

And there are traditionally three ways that you can get your identity. One is you can get it entirely from the outside. That's the traditional and ancient way, which looks into your role in the community to know who you are as a blacksmith, as a magistrate, as a father, as a husband, as a brother.

This is who I am. These are my roles, right? The other, the modern way is that you turn completely inside and you say, I don't need any identification affirmation from the outside.

I can do it on my own. All I need is my own self-esteem. I can turn inward and figure out who I am, and I have enough self-worth, self-value to have my own identity in myself.

[31 : 46] But neither of these ways are completely satisfactory because both of them are based on turning outside yourself in such a way that you're dependent on the definitions of the cultures, successes and failures to know who you are.

So when you lose at something, when you don't get that girl or that guy, when you don't get that job, when X, Y or Z fails you, it crushes you if that's the way you base your identity in life, completely on your role in society or on your own self-esteem or something like that.

But there's a different way. And that's the way that turns upward and says, I'm created by a personal God. I'm called. I'm given a mission.

This is my life. And Joseph Merrick was desperate, desperate for external affirmation in a way that none of us might ever know. He had a mother that failed him.

And what he needed more than anything is what we all need. If you look only to aspects outside of you, other people, your job, your role in society, for the affirmation for your identity, then ultimately that at some point is going to crush you.

[32 : 51] But the upward way, the upward way is different because turning to God for that, turning to God to know who you are grounds every other aspect of your life and keeps your identity secure.

And we'll close with this to come back to the Westminster Confession, the Westminster Larger Catechism. The Westminster Larger Catechism, to connect all this to baptism, has the most obscure command, ethic in the Catechism about baptism.

And it says this, there's a needful but much neglected duty to improve your baptism. What in the world? This is the confession of our church.

What in the world does it mean to improve your baptism? It's a very obscure way of speaking. But all it's saying is this, is that when you see somebody else baptized, you're asked to recall your baptism.

Maybe you can't remember it, but you know what it was like. You're asked to recall it. And what it's saying is that it wants you to understand baptism as your identity marker.

[33 : 55] In other words, every time you see a baptism, it's a reorientation, a remembrance of your vow, a call to be once more who you've been marked to be in the sacrament of baptism.

This is why, last thing, Martin Luther is very famous for in the time of the Reformation, all over his journals and writings and stuff that whenever he was tempted, whenever Satan came to tempt him, as he would always write, that he would turn around and yell, get behind me, Satan, I am baptized.

This was, is all over his writings. I am baptized. I'm a baptized one. Now, what he's saying there, of course, is that I am one of, this baptism signifies for me, I'm one of Christ's.

I'm signed and I'm sealed. In other words, baptism is a mark of assurance and it's an identity marker for us in a world that wants you to get your identity from all sorts of other places that will crush you.

Our baptism is the imprimatur, the seal of the King. Let's pray. Father, we thank you for the sacraments. They're so hard to understand sometimes, but we know that these divine mysteries are beautiful gifts and so we ask, Lord, that you would help us to improve our baptism by looking to it and remembering it and recalling the gospel tonight.

[35 : 18] I'm going to pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.