

Means of Grace: Historical Views of Baptism

Let us begin with prayer.

Father, we commit our lesson to You. Dear Father, we thank You that Your Word teaches us everything we need for eternal life and godliness, Lord. Teach us from Your Word about the ordinances that You have given to Your Church. Lord Jesus, may we have clear understanding. May we serve You better in our local congregations as a result. And we will give You thanks and praise through Jesus Christ our Lord and Savior, Amen.

We will start by thinking about the historical views of the sacraments. We looked at some classical definitions and biblical teachings where we compared the Word and sacraments as far as similarities and dissimilarities. Then we talked about sacraments being signs and seals of salvation. And then we saw what baptism and the Lord's Supper have in common. We are ready to do a cursory look at some of the most important historical views of different branches of the Christian church concerning the sacraments in general.

The Roman Catholic Church's definitive comments were given in statements made at the Council of Trent from 1545 through 1563. According to official Roman Catholic teaching, there are seven sacraments. I am quoting from the recent *Catechism of the Catholic Church* on page 341. If you do not have that document, you probably should get one. It is up to date and being used around the world now. The seven sacraments are baptism; confirmation; the Eucharist, their name for the Lord's Supper; penance, for sins committed in the Christian life; the anointing of the sick, sometimes called extreme unction; holy orders, not for all people, only for some; and likewise, matrimony is not for all. Those undertaking holy orders, for example, would not be married in Roman teaching. So the seven are baptism, confirmation, the Eucharist, penance, the anointing of the sick, holy orders, and matrimony. A second thing to note, and an important one, is that they are necessary for salvation according to Rome. Rome is viewed as the institutionalization of grace, and Rome dispenses grace through the Pope, through the bishops, and through the priests. And the vehicle is the seven sacraments that supposedly embrace the faithful from birth to death in the arms of the holy mother Church.

One might ask, "Does Rome say all seven are necessary for salvation?" Of course not. One need not be married. One need not partake of holy orders. So it would be the first five: baptism, confirmation, the Eucharist, penance, and the anointing of the sick. Grace is conferred by the rite itself. Rome's teaching is actually more complicated than this, and it does have to do also with the disposition of the recipient. But part of their teaching is that grace is conferred *ex opere operato*, by the work worked, by the performance of the work.

We would take issue with Rome as far as the number of the sacraments. We would say there are two. We would say they are important, and even could construe them as a means of grace, properly understood. But we would beg to differ with Rome concerning the absolute necessity of the sacraments for salvation. And we would deny that grace is conferred by the rite itself.

According to Lutherans, the two sacraments are efficacious. So there is a strong emphasis on objective. They are effective, and yet faith is necessary for right acceptance. It is not hard to see these two things are in tension, and indeed this notion of tension, of seeming contradictions, is very common in Lutheran theology. Its source is Martin Luther who rejoiced in these mysteries. So the sacraments are considered efficacious, and yet faith is necessary for right acceptance at the same time.

We need to say two things here about the Zwinglian view. First of all, Zwingli was not as Zwinglian as his theological successors. He had a higher view than that of Zwinglianism, although his view is not as clear as that of Rome or Luther or Calvin. Nevertheless, this much is plain: Zwinglianism, as it has developed historically, holds that baptism and the Lord's Supper are merely human actions. They are things that we do. The understanding is not that God is working in some way. They are human actions of testimony, as in the case of baptism. It is our testimony of the Lord's saving us, or our remembrance of the Lord's death in the Lord's Supper. I would say that baptism and the Lord's Supper are those things, but that they are not fundamentally those things. They are fundamentally the Gospel enacted. They are fundamentally what God does, and then our response takes meaning in light of God's more important action in the ordinances. But again, I would disagree with Rome and Lutheran theology that the sacraments are efficacious in the strong sense that they say. And yet I would disagree with Zwinglianism. Perhaps as I summarize the Reformed view, the differences will come more to light.

The purposes of the ordinances, of the sacraments, according to the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, Chapter 27, paragraph 1, are these: "Sacraments are holy signs." That means symbols and seals. It is the notion of a guarantee, a promise of the covenant of grace. That is, they first of all have to do with God and His promises of salvation and His grace granted to us. They are "immediately instituted by God." That is what makes a sacrament a sacrament: the fact that in the new covenant, Christ instituted the two sacraments. That is why we would reject the five so-called sacraments of Rome. "Sacraments are holy signs and seals of the covenant of grace, immediately instituted by God, to represent Christ and His benefits." That means they are visible Words. They represent Christ and His benefits. They depict the Gospel. They are God's promise to us and are "to confirm our interest in Him" as we respond to God's visible words. "As also, to put a visible difference between those that belong to the Church and the rest of the world." So these signs distinguish the Church from those who do not profess faith in Christ. "And solemnly to engage them to the service of God in Christ according to His Word." Many good things are said in that statement.

It has been asked, "What is the meaning of the word 'interest' in this expression, 'and to confirm our interest in Him?'" The meaning is to ratify—to confirm—the fact that we belong to Him. It is that strong sense. And again, this confirmation comes from God, and we receive it when we respond in faith. So it is divine initiative and promise to which we respond. It is like the Word again. It is the Word, but this time acted. And when we respond to the Word of God by faith, God does what He promised to do.

Again quoting the confession "There is in every sacrament a spiritual relation or sacramental union between the sign and the thing signified." It is the Word of God that establishes this union. We do not make it up. Christ is the one who gave the New Testament sacraments. There is in every sacrament a spiritual relation or sacramental union between the sign and the thing signified. That is, baptism and the Lord's Supper have everything to do with the Gospel, with the benefits of Christ's work. And by virtue of the Word, there is a relation between those two. "Whence it comes to pass, that the names and effects of the one"—the thing signified—"are attributed to the other." It is a very good statement. It helps us understand how Scripture could say, "baptism now saves you," or "be baptized for the forgiveness of sins." It is not that the rite in itself actually accomplishes that, but rather that there is such a union between the sign and the thing signified that the one could stand for the other. This is not to belittle the ordinances, but rather to establish them under God and His Word and to be able to say in what sense they are indeed means of grace.

Let us move on to efficacy. "The grace which is exhibited in or by the sacraments rightly used is not

conferred by any power in them.” Assumed here is that grace is conferred. There are means of grace. So this is not a denial of the same, but it is carefully qualifying that statement. “The grace which is exhibited in the sacraments or by them rightly used is not conferred by any power in them.” It is explicitly rejecting the Roman notion that the ordinances are conveyers of grace by the mere performance of the act at the hands of a priest. It rejects the sacerdotalism, the teaching that grace is bestowed only by the hands of bishops who consecrate priests, so that they become ministers of grace in a sense of offering up Christ in Mass. It rejects that notion. Grace is not conferred by any power in the sacraments. Neither does the efficacy of a sacrament depend upon the piety or intention of him who administers it. If you were to find out 10 years after you were saved and baptized that the person who baptized you was an apostate Christian and really no Christian at all, would you need to be re-baptized? No, because it is ultimately Christ who is the baptizer and not the human minister. Otherwise, we would have to keep track all of our lives of these people you know that did these different functions for us, and we would be in jeopardy. No, God has not tied His grace to human merit in that way. In fact somebody could even have bad intentions in preaching the Gospel. Apparently, in Philippians 1, Paul said the very thing was happening: “Some preach Christ out of envy and strife,” he said. Others are emboldened to preach because Paul is suffering for Christ in prison. Regardless, he says, “I praise the Lord that the Gospel is being preached.”

In Galatians 1 Paul expresses his anger about another gospel being preached. So it is not the motivation of the preacher that is the telling thing in the end for the apostle Paul. It is the purity of the Gospel message. If the true Gospel is preached, it is sad if it is preached from bad motives or evil intentions. Can you imagine preaching the Gospel from bad intentions? Or administering the ordinances with bad intentions to make points or to show oneself holy. It certainly is twisted. Nevertheless, the efficacy of the sacrament does not depend on the piety or intention of him who administers it, but upon the work of the Spirit, even as the efficacy of the Word depends upon the work of the Spirit. In Church history, there have been cases of unsaved people preaching the Gospel and others being saved. We should not really be surprised, because God’s Word is powerful unto salvation, as it is the sword of the Spirit, and the Spirit does the work. “But rather upon the work of the Spirit and the word of institution, without the Word there is no sacrament, which contains together with a precept authorizing the use thereof, a promise of benefit to worthy receivers.” Is the *Confession* ascribing efficacy to the sacraments? Yes. But it is carefully distancing itself from an institutionalized view of grace, as in the case of Rome, from Donatism, which says only worthy ministers are able to be used of God to administer grace. This is not true. He uses even the unworthy and He uses the worthy on bad days. And I might say also that the Lord has a sense of humor.

Most preachers will go ahead and preach if they are sick, unless they cannot stand up. You feel kind of obligated to do it. And anybody who has preached for some years can remember giving the Gospel or preaching God’s Word to edify the saints in a condition in which he could hardly stand up. He could not think clearly. I can think of one particular case in my life, in which I was hurting in the pulpit. I could hardly keep my thoughts, one after another, clearly. And I think the Lord just poured the Holy Spirit out to glorify His name and put me in my place, and just showed me who the minister with a capital M is anyway. Afterward I walked to the door of the church and was relieved to be done, thinking that I had accomplished nothing. And that was true, but the Lord accomplished it. People asked about salvation, others indicated they had grown spiritually, and that this is exactly the Word that a friend needed, and on and on. It was most remarkable and it caused me to praise the Lord.

I will tell you when to be careful. When you think much of the job you are doing in the pulpit, watch out because that is just all flesh. The Lord does not need that, and the Lord may give you zero fruit to

humble you. He may bring you back to the place where you ought to be in the first place, and that is as a minister of the Gospel who remembers how he was saved and in whom he is trusting for any spiritual fruit. God is good.

From the *Westminster Confession*, “There are only two sacraments ordained by Christ our Lord in the Gospel; that is to say, baptism and the Supper of the Lord, neither of which may be dispensed by any, but by a minister of the Word lawfully ordained.” That last concept we will be back to in a little while. I would agree with it, although it is hard for me to produce chapter and verse to say it. I would agree with it not because of Sacerdotalism—not because these are the only dispensers of grace or anything like that. But rather I would agree with it for the sake of good order in the Church, because I am nervous about the youth director having the so-called Lord’s Supper in the church basement with potato chips and Pepsi and you know everybody just wants what is right in his own eyes. And here we have all kinds of things going on. No, we do need to do things decently and in order. Under that concept I would agree with this principle, that it is ordained ministers who ought to administer the sacraments.

So why does it have to be a minister of the Gospel to maintain order? Could order not be maintained by other responsible spiritual persons, say ruling elders and so forth? Again I will be frank and say I cannot point to chapter and verse. Or I have seen some that are appealed to for this, and they do not seem to do the job to me. Some case could be made for it under the concept of order, along with the notion that the ministry of the Word has been entrusted by the Lord to the ordained ministers of the Word, and that this is a function of the ordinary ministry of the Word. I would not condemn those who would see otherwise and maintain order and maybe carefully allow some divergences. But I have told you I am happy to be a Presbyterian; this is one of the reasons. It is for the sake of order that we have something like this.

Let us move on to talk about baptism as a means of grace. In terms of institution, the Lord Jesus Himself instituted Christian baptism. Matthew 28:18-20 says, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.” What a statement. “Therefore, go and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always to the very end of the age.” Here our Lord, on the basis of His universal authority, commissions the Church to evangelize, by implication, and disciple, as is explicitly mentioned, the nations. This commission should be seen in light of the theology of the whole Scriptures, in light of biblical theology as the outworking of God’s promise to Abraham in Genesis 12:3, which says, “All peoples on earth will be blessed through you.” Paul uses it in that way in Galatians 3. Furthermore, the Church is assured of eventual success because of Christ’s promised presence: “I am with you always to the very end of the age.” So the reminder of His authority and His presence should strengthen us to do the task of world evangelization and disciple-making, and a part of that is administering Christian baptism. Christian baptism, therefore, is a part of the discipling ministry committed to the Church by its Lord. There is nothing controversial there, but here we hit a controversial subject. And I would admit that good men and women disagree. So with that charitable attitude on my part, I am sure you will return me the favor even if we agree to disagree. I would respect that.

In terms of mode, Dr. Jones has said something here worthy of quotation: “So far as the outward action is concerned, baptism is a washing with water, symbolizing inward cleansing and spiritual renewal according to the common biblical imagery involving water.” I will not turn to those now, but it is indeed correct. In these various passages, different washings and so forth are spoken of in terms of spiritual cleansing. Since Christ did not command the Church to administer baptism by one particular mode—I understand Baptists will disagree and say, “He surely did, because the word “baptism” itself means to

immerse.” I will take issue with that in a moment, but my understanding is that since Christ did not command the Church to administer baptism by one particular mode, it is adequately performed by immersion (I accept it as a valid mode of Christian baptism), sprinkling, or pouring. John the Baptist predicted in each of the four Gospels that the Messiah would baptize the Church with the Holy Spirit. Jesus rehearsed John’s prediction in Acts 1:5 and fulfilled it in the second chapter of Acts. The mode he used was pouring, according to Acts 2. You will say, “Oh, but that was spiritual baptism.” I grant you that, but is the imagery not significant?

Hebrews 9:12 speaks of various Old Testament baptisms. And verse 13 indicates that these included sprinkling. So it would be hard for me to say that the word “baptism” means “immerse,” if sprinkling is regarded as one of the washings, some translations say. My point is this: it is the word “baptisms.” Hebrews 9:10 says “washings.” It is the word “baptisms.” And one of these in the context that is spoken of is sprinkling. In verse 13 it says, “...the blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer sprinkled on those who are ceremonially unclean, sanctify them so that they are outwardly clean.” He is going to talk about the blood of Christ and its greater efficacy, of course. But in so doing, he mentions one Old Testament washing, this time a sprinkling. It is hard to thereby claim that “baptism” means immersion. These references disprove the claim, at least to my satisfaction, that the words for baptize mean “to immerse.” If the word “to baptize” means “to immerse,” then how could Jesus pour out the Holy Spirit on the Church and have it be considered a baptism?

The same is true of Luke 11:38 where *baptizo* is rendered. The word meaning “I baptize” or “to baptize” is rendered “wash.” Luke 11:38 says, “But the Pharisee, noticing that Jesus did not first wash before the meal, was surprised.” This does not refer to a bath. The Pharisee is not criticizing Jesus for not bathing before the meal, for not immersing Himself in water before the meal. He is rather criticizing Him for not washing His hands before eating, according to Jewish custom as set forth in the tradition of the elders.

So apparently a washing of the hands could be expressed by the word meaning “to baptize.” Baptists have sometimes argued for immersion from the record of baptisms in the New Testament. You will sometimes hear every baptism was an immersion. Well, look at them carefully. I am not sure if the record will really bear that weight. Millard Erickson gives an example in *Christian Theology* on page 104. “Upon hearing the good news,” referring to Acts 8, “the Ethiopian Eunuch said to Phillip, see here is water. What is to prevent my being baptized? Then they came up out of the water,” it says in the text. Erickson uses this to prove that he must have gone down in the water and been immersed. Such an argument is hardly convincing, however, for if the example cited proves immersion, then it proves that both Phillip and the Ethiopian were immersed. “They came up out of the water.” You know the baptizer did not baptize himself. In fact, the text merely says that Phillip and the Ethiopian stood in a body of water, and when the baptism was done they came out of the body of water. Now, he may have immersed them but it does not say it. We are not told the mode. The text does not indicate the mode of the Eunuch’s baptism. Do you understand what I am saying? It merely says they stood in the water and they came out of the water. It does not speak of the individual being baptized coming up out of the surface of the water after being dunked. If it says that, it teaches too much, because then they both were dunked, and that is not what was indicated. Rather Phillip was baptizing the Ethiopian treasurer.

So it does not really prove immersion. It is not impossible that there was an immersion, but it does not prove it. In Ephesians 4:5 Paul teaches that there is one baptism. We have looked at that passage before, the great unities of the Christian Church. “There is one Lord, one faith, one baptism.” Churches would do well—this is my application now—to affirm the unity of the body of Christ by accepting the baptisms of other believing churches. I would suggest in any of the modes and not insisting on re-

baptism for church membership. Re-baptism seems to run counter to the teaching that there is one baptism. Not two or three.

Here is my appeal for Church unity in this regard, and again you could turn me down and we will still love each other, Lord willing. But if I were a PCA pastor in a certain locale, and let us say you are a Baptist, and you come to my town and there is no other believing church in that town. I would teach infant baptism from the pulpit, and I would try to persuade you, in your home, to have your children baptized. If I could not persuade you on the authority of the Word of God to do that, then I would certainly receive you as a member in good standing in this church. I am not ruling a church by myself, but if the elders were with me in this, presumably. Your profession of faith in Christ would be the only criterion for church membership, in my understanding. And I would furthermore not exclude you from the fellowship because you did not agree with me on infant baptism, and I would furthermore baptize your children upon profession of faith, according to your wishes. That is the best I can do as far as promoting the unity of the Church. However, it is a Presbyterian Church. It has its doctrine. I have been preaching that publicly and in the homes. But if I cannot persuade, I will not try to coerce your conscience or drive you away. I would ask my Baptist friends to return the favor. So, here are the Peterson boys who have been baptized as infants. Growing up, moving to your town and you are the pastor or the pastor's wife, and it is the only believing church in that town. I hope my boys would go to your church. Now, I would expect you to teach believer's baptism from the pulpit. I would expect you, being a good Southern Baptist or whatever other stripe you are of a minister of the Gospel, to teach it in the home. But if you could not persuade my sons on the basis of the Word of God—there is no other basis of persuasion as far as I am concerned, for the Christian ministry—then I would ask you to respect their baptism, which they regard as valid, as a valid Christian baptism and receive them into your membership.

Think about it. I think an application of the notion of the unity of the Christian church, of that concept, applied specifically here to baptism, would serve well in light of what looks like biblical data on mode that is not as clear cut as maybe we sometimes have thought. I can understand somebody having a preference for mode. I could understand that. But I do not see how we could exclude, in the name of the Scriptures, any one of those three modes of Christian baptism. If you disagree with me, please do not let it interfere with our fellowship.

It is often asked, "Are the passages in Hebrews 9 the strongest that would support sprinkling as a mode?" The roots of it are in the Old Testament. Working with the symbolism, that there is sprinkling and so forth in the last days that is promised by the Lord, and then seeing Christian baptism as a fulfillment of those new covenant promises, certainly the new covenant is a fulfillment of those promises. Baptism is a part of the new covenant. So the case for sprinkling would rely upon Old Testament new covenant language now fulfilled. Without doubt it is fulfilled according to Hebrews 8 and Jesus' words at the Lord's Supper at the last supper where He instituted the Lord's Supper: "This cup is the new covenant in my blood." Then some of the indications in the New Testament, like in Hebrews 9 where the word "baptism" is used to refer to Old Testament sprinklings, and then especially the fact that the New Testament does not command a particular mode. So the thought would be that the imagery of cleansing with the sprinkling of water would be as good as the imagery of cleansing with the sprinkling of blood under the old covenant, as blood was applied and it was definitely sprinkling, to the book and the people and the holy things and so forth. Again, I am not arguing that is the only way. I might even have a personal preference for pouring, for example, because of what Jesus did at Pentecost, but it is not even worth mentioning.

Another good question is what is the Greek word in Matthew 3:16 when Jesus was baptized. It is *baptizo*, the word for baptize. I would say Matthew 3:16 is a possible reference to *baptizo* being used to speak of immersion, but it may be the same notion as in Acts 8, merely saying Jesus came up out of the Jordan. You ask, “Does not Matthew 3:16 pretty conclusively demonstrate baptism by immersion?” I do not think so. Could it be read to indicate that? Yes. It could be read to indicate that Jesus was under the water and His coming out was the conclusion of His baptism or something. I am not saying that John the Baptist says he came up out of the water here, either. Although it does not say he did not come up out of the water. But it could be read as this: as soon as Jesus was baptized, as soon as the act was performed, whatever mode was used, then Jesus walked out of the Jordan River Himself, not speaking of John. I think that both are possible readings of it. So it seems to me that it is not conclusive that He was dunked. But again good people will continue to disagree, I am sure.

I will mention a couple of books on what Church history has to contribute to this discussion. And here the debate rages hotly. Two writers who come to mind are Joachim Jeremias, and the other is Kurt Aland. Two are German writers, and their titles have something to do with Christian baptism. They have engaged in lively debate. Both, as a matter of fact, were in communions that practiced infant baptism, but they disagreed as to the practice of the early Church. So the data is there, and they will go back and forth, and the one thinks Jeremiah taught this and the other says no. It is illuminating to say the least. But both in articles and books, those are two of the most important historical sources. I might mention too, the outstanding book by the Baptist scholar George Beasley Murray on Christian Baptism. He makes a powerful case.

What is my opinion of the fact that very regularly we have in the Scripture references to bodies of water, as in quantities of water? How do you perform a baptism when such would not be necessary merely to sprinkle? The comment might be made that Israel is a very dry country and that you go for quite a while without hitting water. I would say it does seem to me to make it a hard case to see immersion in Acts 16 with the Philippian jailer and his family being baptized in the middle of the night. It seems hard to read immersion there, to get them to a sufficient body of water, but perhaps it is not impossible. And remember, I am not opposing immersion per se. I would baptize somebody by immersion if they so desired it. Although I should be a completely honest man and say I would not if they regarded it as the only valid means of Christian baptism. That would cause me some difficulties.

These debates will not be settled now, that is sure. Let us go on and talk about the significance of Christian baptism. According to 1 Peter 3:21, baptism now saves you. My comment is it does not actually affect salvation, but signifies it. More specifically, baptism signifies salvation in terms of two major aspects: union with Christ and the forgiveness of sins. Remember the Great Commission said, “...baptizing them into the name.” That is, I take that to mean unto relation with the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. I see baptism thus signifying union with the Trinity in that Great Commission.

In Romans 6 we learn that baptism signifies union with Christ in Jesus’ death and resurrection. So specifically, His saving events are mentioned in that context. In Galatians 3:27, here is a good place to show what we said earlier. Remember I had said, “There is in every sacrament a spiritual relation or sacramental union between the sign and the thing signified. Whence it comes to pass, that the names and effects of the one,” the thing signified, “are attributed to the other,” the sign. So it is in Galatians 3:27, reading from verse 26: “For you, you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. For all of you who are baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ then you are

Abraham's seed and heirs according to the promise." Here, baptism signifies union with Christ, and it is linked to adoption. You are all sons of God through faith in Christ, for all of you were baptized into Christ. And it is linked also to the Abrahamic covenant in verse 29: "If you belong to Christ then you are Abraham's seed."

I would say most profoundly Christian baptism speaks of union with Christ, and because He is the mediator, that involves union with the Trinity. Perhaps this explains why baptism in the book of Acts is in the name of Jesus. It is shorthand for baptism into the name of the Trinity.

Baptism also signifies forgiveness, as we have seen in Acts 2 and Acts 22. It says, "Be baptized for a remission, for the forgiveness of sins." I will close with Colossians 2:11: "In Him you were also circumcised"—It is significant that the readers are Gentile Christians.—"in the putting off of the sinful nature. Not with the circumcision by the hands of men, but with the circumcision done by Christ." Notice Christ is the circumciser. That is interesting. He is the minister here of the Old Testament sacrament. "In Christ you were circumcised, not with a physical circumcision but with a spiritual one." When did this happen? Verse 12 says, "...having been buried with him in baptism and raised with him through your faith in the power of God who raised him from the dead. When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your sinful nature, God made you alive with Christ." Here the meaning of Christian baptism overlaps the meaning of spiritual circumcision. They both speak of the putting off of the sinful nature. In other words, they both speak of the forgiveness of sins.