

Of Baptism

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Date: 14 January 2018

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[0 : 00] In Acts chapter 9, we read at verse 18, And he took me there fell from his eyes as it had been scales, and he received sight forthwith, and arose, and was baptized.

Now, some of you will be aware, we've started the next section of the biblical basis behind our church's confession of faith. And we come this morning to the basis behind chapter 28, which is entitled, Of Baptism.

Now, we've preached many times, of course, we've looked many times at different aspects of baptism, whether it's been on occasion of a baptism, or whether we've looked sometimes a couple of years ago in the monthly meeting of the difference between, or the different emphasis between full immersion, or strengthening, or whatever.

So, we're trying to keep it as straightforward as possible today. I'd just like us to think about what baptism is, and what it is not. What baptism is, and what it is not.

Now, some of you will know that it is described in our church's confession of faith as a sign and seal of, firstly, of the covenant of grace, secondly, of a person's ingrafting into Christ, thirdly, of regeneration, fourthly, of remission of sins, and fifthly, of the persons being given up unto God through Jesus Christ to walk in newness of life.

[1 : 23] And it also sounds very complicated, and very deep when you say it like that. But really, all of this complicated language, it does kind of unpack into greater simplicity.

The covenant of grace, number one, is simply really God's dealings with man since the fall. It's the gospel, and it's all the ways in which under the Old Testament, all the systems of sacrifice, all God's dealings with the patriarchs, with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, with Moses and the law and King David and all the prophets.

That was all the covenant of grace. And so, it's a sign and seal of this covenant of grace, of God's mercy, of his dealings with men. That's all it means. And ultimately, that's expressed in the gospel. That's what the covenant of grace is. It's God's free gift to us. Engrafting into Christ, which is the second point, is effectively the same as the last point, which is being given up unto God through Jesus Christ to walk in newness of life.

It means becoming a Christian. It means being a Christian, living out the Christian life. If you belong to Christ, your life is bound up with him, and consequently, it has changed, it has transformed.

[2 : 31] And that's all these things mean. Being engrafted into Christ, and walking in newness of life in Christ, it sounds very deep, and it sounds complicated, but it means being a Christian. Becoming a Christian, and living and walking as a Christian.

On the subject of remission of sins, which, again, baptism is a sign and seal of, we all know that the physical water does not wash away the spiritual and actual reality of our sins.

Even if it was meant to do that in a physical sense, and what our Baptist friends might say, that's why you need full immersion, because you plunge under the water. That's the only way it's symbolized being washed.

But, you know, if you and I were physically dirty, and we were going to have a bath, and we filled the bath, and we said, right, I'm going to get in the bath, and we got in the bath, just plunged out, once came back up and jumped out the bath, it wouldn't be that much cleaner.

Now, if we actually stayed, we stayed and washed, and properly used soap, and spent some time actually washing in the bath, that gets the physical dirt off. But a quick plunge, once something ate, and once up, and then you get out the bath, you're not much cleaner than you were physically.

[3 : 41] How much less can it ever do anything spiritually? So whether we're talking about a weak sprinkle, or whether we're talking about through immersion, it is a symbol of, a sign of the remission that says, physical water does not wash away the spiritual reality of our sin.

It does not take away the actual sin. It is a sign, an outward demonstration, a seal, a sign in the same way as you, you sign your name at the bottom of a letter, or you sign your name on a check, you are transmitting your identity onto that piece of paper, or onto that document.

You say, you put your name, you print your name, and then you sign it. And when you put your signature, you are transmitting your identity onto that document. And that is what God is doing onto the person.

He is transmitting his identity. He is putting his name upon that person. Because when they're baptized, they're baptized in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost.

And that was to wash away their sins. It symbolizes the washing away of sins. It's a sign, an outward demonstration. It is not the actual washing away.

[4 : 52] It doesn't do the washing. It is a sign that the washing either has been or is going to be done. That it already has taken place or that it's going to take place.

Either way, a commitment of the Lord to that fact. It doesn't do the remitting of sins. It is a sign of the remitting of sins.

But the most complicated term amongst all that we've read here is undoubtedly regeneration. You know, if it's a sign and seal, regeneration, what does that mean?

How are we going to come down with regeneration with regard to baptism, particularly from a Reformed Protestant point of view? What do we mean by baptism being a sign or seal of regeneration?

Well, again, once you begin to unpack these terms, they're not as scary and complicated as initially they've signed. Regeneration means new birth, you know, new beginning, new life.

[5 : 51] If you think about it, you know, when the Bible talks about these are the generations from Abraham. Abraham began Isaac, Isaac began Jacob and so on. That's meaning by generations, births, that new people are generated from their parents.

They are born, they are conceived, they're born from their parents. These generations, these birthings, then in course of time, they grow up, they have babies of their own and so another generation is brought forth.

It is generated, it is birthed. So, regeneration, it simply means rebirth, new birth, it means, you know, literally being born again, regenerated.

regenerated. Jesus said, remember to Nicodemus, in John chapter 3, verses 3, and again at verse 7, he said, except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.

Marvel not that I said unto thee, he must be born again. Baptism is a sign of regeneration, not because that's what baptism is all about.

[6 : 52] They'll say, oh yeah, baptism is a regeneration, and this is a regeneration, it's all bound up with the baptism, and so on. That's not what baptism is all about. It is a sign of that regeneration, because that is what Christianity is all about.

That's the thing we're going to get. Baptism is one part of Christianity, and Christianity is all about being born again, and being saved, and being regenerated by Christ.

It's not because this is what the water, and this is what the waters are all about. They are a sign of something that Christianity, Christ the gospel, is all about.

A born again, new relationship with Christ. It's all about him. That is why it is called, you know, Christ, Christ, Christianity. That's why his name is central to the word.

It's all about Christ. Baptism is a sign of that relationship with Christ, and all that the relationship involves.

[7 : 59] In the same way, as I've used the illustration in the past, you know, if you happen to be married, you wear a ring on your finger, that is a symbol. It's a sign of all that the relationship involves. Are you right together?

Are you home together? Are you children? You might have, and all the, you know, commitments you have, mortgages or bills, but all the life, all the years, it's all about that single, little symbolic gold band, that you wear on your finger.

It might not, as the case may be. The marriage does not consist in that symbol, but it is a symbol of something else. Your relationship with Christ does not consist in your baptism.

Some people were saved, of course, without being baptized. The thief on the cross is a case in point. And some people who were baptized were not saved. We know that when we think of Simon the sorcerer, almost certainly was not saved.

And others, Ananias and Sapphira, had obviously, or presumably, been baptized before they became followers of the disciples. And, you know, they, as far as we know, literally dropped dead outside of a state of grace, having lied to the Holy Ghost.

[9 : 06] So, it's not a guarantee of anything. The outward symbol does not itself convey the reality, but it is a sign of that relationship with Christ, and all that the relationship involves.

All these things are encompassed, and envisaged, in the ultimate fulfillment, that relationship, which is ultimately fulfilled in Christ, which baptism begins.

Because, in Christian terms, it is only ever a beginning. I'll say that again. In Christian terms, baptism is only ever a beginning.

Now, that is true whether we believe in infant baptism, you know, at the beginning of a child's life, or whether we take the Baptist view that it's only full-grown adults who are able to profess their faith, eventually, you know, be immersed, and then that's then baptized.

But they would still say that that was the beginning of their converted Christian life. So, it is only ever envisaged as a beginning. Now, obviously, you could say there's a sense in which it is an end.

[10 : 14] It's an end to the old life, if you were, you know, in so far as it's the end of your, perhaps your old religion, or lack of it. Indeed, when a person converts from another religion, or a Hindu, or a Muslim, or whatever, becomes a Christian, you know, their families or their former co-religionists will probably put up with their new fad, or their new faves, as they see it, that they're going through, you know, tinkering or toying with the teachings of Jesus, and they'll maybe try and persuade them out of it, and they'll try and be nice to them about it, until such time, as they themselves get baptized.

Once they get baptized, they're seen as having crossed the line. They're seen as that point of demarcation, of that commitment to Christ. It's no longer just a fad. It's no longer just a fade.

They're actually committed to this new teaching, and that is the point when persecution will probably become serious. They pass the line between experimentation, and on to commitment. It indicates they've left behind the old religion, and the false gods and prophets behind them, and persecution, as we say, is like they've become more serious beyond that point.

So you could say it marks an end of an old way, an end out of a state of unbelief, or an end of an old religion, or whatever, but that's the end of that which has gone before.

[11 : 36] In Christian terms, in terms of the converts, Christian life, baptism is only ever a beginning. This is one reason why it is not to keep on being repeated.

Indeed, the Church's Confession of Faith stipulates in paragraph 7 of this chapter 28, the sacrament of baptism is but once to be administered to any person.

Now this is something even our Baptist brethren would agree with. The reason they baptize people a second time or more is not because they think people should be baptized lots and lots of times, but because as far as they are concerned, the person's previous baptism didn't count.

They don't accept infant baptism, or sprinkling, or whatever the case may be. They don't regard that as a genuine baptism. So even though they would say, oh no, you're going to be plunged, you're going to be immersed, but they still would say, yeah, we'll plunge you again next week, and yes, we'll immerse you again the following month.

They would still say that once you've had what they would see as a real baptism, it should still only be once, and it should be at the beginning of your converted life. In Christian terms, baptism is only ever a beginning, and one is not meant to keep on going back and back to the beginning time and time again.

[12 : 57] That is what Scripture teaches us. We go to Hebrews, for example, chapter 6, that we've often made reference to in the past, these opening verses. Therefore, leaving the principles of the doctrine of Christ, it doesn't mean forgetting about Christ, it means moving on, let us go on unto perfection, and that doesn't mean sinlessness, it means rather, if we go to the end of chapter 5, strong meat belongeth to them that are of full age.

It means going on to maturity, not laying again the foundation of repentance from dead works and the faith of the Lord God, of the doctrine of baptisms, and of laying on of hands and of resurrection of the dead and of eternal judgment, and this we will do if God permit.

You shouldn't forever be laying the foundations. You shouldn't be forever, you know, getting my pies, and this stuff, and again getting rebaptized again, and then starting again and going back to the beginning. Once you're being baptized, once you start, you begin, having laid on the foundation,

you begin to build.

For it is impossible for those who were once enlightened and have tasted of the heavenly gift and were made partakers of the Holy Ghost, and have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the world of God, if they shall fall away to renew them again unto repentance, seeing they crucified to themselves the Son of God of flesh, and put him to an open shame.

You don't lay again and again the same foundations. You don't keep re-laying them. You lay the foundation, the one and only foundation, as Paul wrote to the Corinthians, 1 Corinthians chapter 3, and verses 11 and 12.

[14 : 34] For other foundation can no man lay than that is laid, which is Jesus Christ. Now if any man build upon this foundation, gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, stubble, every man's work shall be made manifest, for the days shall be cleared.

That's the idea, that's what you do with a foundation. You build on the foundation, and you build upwards. We're not to keep on always going back to the start.

You know, we're going back again to this Hebrews, which we see in chapter 5, and it says, verse 12, For the time you ought to be teachers, you have need that one teach you again, which be the first principles of the oracles of God.

You become such as of need of milk, and not of strong meat. For everyone that uses milk is unskillful in the world of righteousness, for he is a babe. But strong meat belongs to them that are of full age, even those who by reason or use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil.

And then he says, Therefore, leaving the principles of Dr. Christ, let us go on unto perfection, go on unto maturity, to full age, and not to be, as Paul describes unsquare, you know, in his second letter to Timothy, he says in chapter 3, verse 7, he says, And they be those who he criticised are ever learning and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth.

[15 : 58] You know, sometimes people can make a virtue of saying, Oh, well, we can't know these things. We've got to be ever learning. We've got to be always discovering new things. That's fine as long as it's an upward journey of maturing and growing in grace and the knowledge of Christ.

There is always more to learn. But you don't stay forever at the infant kindergarten stage. You don't stay forever in nursery. You've got to grow in the knowledge of the Lord to develop, to mature, to progress.

Regeneration, being born again is of the essence of Christianity, of new life in Christ. Baptism is a sign of that new life, that new beginning, that new life beginning to start.

Hence, it is a sign or seal of regeneration. Sounded complicated when you begin to read, but that's all it means, of a new beginning in Christ. Now, we've made reference in passing to the position of Baptist believers and their position is that nobody should be baptized who cannot first testify to having been regenerated or not again.

So they would say it's something only to be undertaken. Baptism should only be undertaken by professing believers. Now, that is undoubtedly some scriptural justification, some of the foundation for the Baptist position.

[17 : 21] Partly because, when the apostles come with the gospel to people, it's the first generation that's ever heard it. So, of course, all the people that are receiving it and hearing it are almost without exception.

They're all people who are able to hear it, able to take the decision for themselves. They profess their faith to get baptized. But then, there are still hints, for example, the Philippian jail who's baptized with all his household.

Lydia and all her household are baptized as well and almost certainly some of the time that's going to include children. But there is some, certainly, some biblical foundation for the Baptist position.

At the other extreme, which we haven't talked about so far, but it's that we should know these things so that we know what to avoid. At the other extreme, there is, for example, the Roman Catholic belief that the act of physical baptism by a priest with the water and so on is what regenerates you. That if you have been baptized, then that is you born again. That's what they would say. Now, this is part of the difficulty that the Roman Catholic Church, for example, would tend to use the same phrases that we would use in a Bible-believing church.

[18 : 36] They would talk about being born again. They'd talk about being regenerated. They'd talk about, yeah, it's being baptized and so on. But they mean something quite different by it. If somebody would ask have you been born again or have you been, you know, have you been

regenerated and they'd say, oh yeah, I mean, baptized and believed.

Oh yes, I was baptized. And that's all they mean by it. There is this belief, this doctrine of that particular church that if you are physically baptized, that's you a Christian.

That's you already a believer and to be regarded as such. And of course, that's not what happens at all. There's no biblical foundation for that at all. That is quite simply a heresy.

You don't find that happening in the Bible that people who have no thought or anything of Jesus and they get baptized and somehow magically the water and the words together change their lives.

No, they don't. This is not magic we're talking about. This is not something which of itself transforms a person. It is a sign, a seal of transformation.

[19 : 37] It is a sign, a seal of regeneration. The biblical position is that baptism signifies, is a sign of new birth, new life in Christ, regeneration.

But it is not itself that life. Now that's it. Bearing in mind what baptism is and what it isn't. It's a sign and seal of that life but it is not itself that life.

In the same way as people were to say and the disciples said when they were making a replacement for Judas at the beginning of the Acts of the Apostles and they said right, we're going to choose one who's been with us from the very beginning since the days of the baptism of John.

And that's where people usually counted Jesus' ministry from, from the times baptized by John the Baptist. But what does it say about John the Baptist at the beginning? In John chapter 1 in verse 6 it says, there was a man sent from God whose name was John.

The same came for a witness to bear witness of the light that all men through him might be made. He was not that light that was sent to bear witness of that light.

[20 : 49] He himself was not that light. And people ask him, say, well are you the Christ? He said, I'm not. He says, well are you Elijah? Are you that prophet? You know, what are you? Or are you, what are you?

He says, I'm not. I'm not on the voice of one crying but hear you the way of the Lord. He was not the light that he was sent to bear witness of the light. Baptism is a statement of beginning as it was for Paul.

We read, remember, in verse 18, immediately there fell from his eyes as it had been scales. He's able to see again. He received sight forth with the arose and was baptized.

Now remember, he hasn't eaten or drunk anything for three days. You might think, oh I'm ravenous, I better get something to eat and drink then I'll get baptized. No. God comes first. First of all, he has to dedicate himself completely to this Jesus who has changed his life, who has spoken to him from heaven.

It is the beginning of his Christian life. This point of baptism, just as it was. In his case, so it is for the rest of us. You know, in the same way as if, let's say, you've got a 60-year-old or whatever, army recruit, signs on the dotted line, first day at the barracks, and he fully intends to be signing up for a career in the army.

[22 : 03] He intends to be embarking on a full military career. And that's fine. That's what he plans to do. But his signing up is not itself that lifelong military career.

That has yet to be lived out and experienced and fulfilled. Now, 40 years later, when he's served in lots of different places of conflict and got a chest full of medals and they promoted up through the ranks and so on, and he's ready to retire, then he can say, yes, I began, that's my military career. It's fulfilled, it's completed. And they'd say, well, when did it begin? Well, it began on that day when I signed on the dotted line as a weak 16-year-old, you know, on my first day.

And that was when it began. Yes, that's when it began. But that wasn't his full career. The signing on the first day indicates the beginning. It indicates the intention to undertake the career.

It's the start of it. But it is not itself the military career. That has yet to be lived out and experienced and fulfilled. Likewise, of course, we've taken the example of marriage already, you know, the young couple's wedding day is not itself the marriage.

[23 : 19] marriage. It is the marriage ceremony. And you can't have the marriage itself without the ceremony to begin. But it is not the marriage. It is a commitment to begin, to undertake from here on, from this day forward.

All that marriage will entail. But it's all ahead of that. It is yet to be lived out and experienced and fulfilled. And it will have been done so ultimately only, sadly, or ironically, but logically, with the death of one another's part.

That's what they undertake to do is to be faithful to each other until God shall separate them back again. And the proof, the evidence of that marriage having been fulfilled will only be on the day that one of them actually dies.

And then they'll be able to say, yes, that was our marriage, faithful unto death, that was it, fulfilled. Up to that point, 20 years, 30 years, sometimes, ridiculously, even after 40 years or more, people break their vows.

They prove unfaithful. Celebrities are especially bad at it, but ordinary people do it too, especially if they think it's become trendy or whatever. They break their vows, they prove unfaithful, perhaps they deserve it and they walk out or they engage in adulterous relationships or whatever.

[24 : 40] And when they do so, they prove that they did not do what they set out to do, what they undertook, what they committed to, what they promised, they became vow breakers.

And it may often be so likewise with baptism. The promises are made, the commitment is undertaken, the sanctity of the bond in Christ is affirmed, but because iniquity abounds, the love of many shall wax cold and the waters of baptism and the solemn vow become a mockery.

Yes, we go for a wee while, like pliable in Pilgrim's Progress. They want the promise of the celestial city, but when the snow of the spawn comes, well, it's a bit too much to take.

Or when things get difficult, or when problems arise, oh well, we can't keep going. I didn't think it was going to be like this. Yes, but think of all the ground you've come. Think of how far you've travelled.

Are you going to turn back now? Is it going to all be for nothing? Look at all the experience you've gained. Look at all you've been through. Ah, yes, but it's too much now. Well, you've got to recognise, you get to a stage where what are you actually going to gain by turning back and going back to all the years and saying, well, okay, it was a mistake to take this walk in the road.

[26 : 00] I wish now I hadn't. I wish I'd just carried on my life without embarking on this road. See, that's what people are effectively saying when they walk away from such commitments. Whether it's a marriage, whether it's baptism, or whatever, they say, well, I wish I hadn't done this.

Or they might try and justify it and say, oh, well, yeah, that was right for me for that time, but we don't know my life has changed, but I want to take a different road now. Well, if you take a different road from the Lord and His grace and His salvation, there's only one way that different road is going to lead.

And when the sanctity of the baptismal vow is broken, whether thou taken on our behalf when we were infants, which we grew up into or not, as the case may be, when the sanctity of that vow is broken, it's either because love has waxed cold or the faithfulness or the commitment has not been fulfilled by those promising, and so the solemn vow becomes a mockery, just an outward performance.

But it ought not to be so. It ought not to be so in baptism, and it ought not to be so in any such solemn undertaking.

If the vows are to be kept, yes, then they must first be made. Don't let anything that I've said diminish the fact and the importance of beginning.

[27 : 24] The recruit must sign on the dotted line if he is to have his military career. The couple, if they're to have a golden wedding in 50 years' time, they must begin. They must have their wedding day.

The soul, if he or she, is to go on with Christ and come into him and live out the fullness of a life in Christ, they must begin with the waters of baptism. That commitment must first be made, and if the commitment is to be fulfilled, it must first be undertaken, and if the sanctity of the bond is to be maintained faithful to the end, then it must somewhere first begin to be sent out in faith.

For this is a sign and seal, not only of regeneration, new birth, of new beginning, but of the covenant of grace. Grace.

What does grace mean? Gratis. Free gift. That's what it means. God's free gift. That free gift is not about our strength.

It's not about the strength of our own personal faith, but about the strength and faithfulness of a personal God. that is what we read.

[28 : 39] Going back to Hebrews again in chapter 10, verses 22 and 23. Let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.

Let us hold fast the profession of our faith without wavering, of our faith without wavering, for he is faithful that promise.

That's the strength of our relationship. That is the strength and faithfulness of the bond. It's not the strength of our personal faith, but the strength of a personal God who is faithful.

Baptism is always going to involve faith, whether it is the faith of the person himself, professing, or the faith of parents or others expressed on behalf of an infant child, which, despite what some may say, is a thoroughly biblical concept.

We can look at that another time. We have done it in the past. Thoroughly biblical principle. Either way, it's always going to involve faith and that is why we begin.

[29 : 51] We make that start. Baptism is only ever a beginning. Our faith is secure. It is only secure because our God is himself so faithful.

And that is why his children will always succeed right to the end. They will always continue to the end. They will always be faithful unto death because they are in his heart elect and precious.

And he himself is faithful he himself that. It is not because our faith is strong but because our God is himself so faithful.

That is why his children succeed. That is why they continue to the end because ultimately our baptism is not about us.

It is all about him. Let us pray. it is not so■■■.