



TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Sermons

Baptism Reconsidered

Colossians 2.11-13

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Introduction

For a time in a congregation where I served, all Sunday adult Bible classes studied the same subject; each course was recommended to and approved by our elders. As we neared the conclusion of one series, we announced that the next course would study baptism. One teacher, and several in the class he taught, objected. They argued that since we in churches of Christ know the subject of baptism very well, we should focus on other subjects.

At the time, my thoughts upon hearing their objection included noticing that I owned a 414-page book on baptism. If someone had written that much on the subject, might there not be something else we could learn about it?¹ Having continued my studies in the years since, I might now suggest they look at Colossians 2.11-13. Had they understood that text when they were immersed? If not, had they come to understand it since? Colossians 2 has not been emphasized as much as some other texts, but there is a depth to what Paul says about baptism there that we should seek to understand, especially in a world where, like the Colossians, we also encounter human philosophies that challenge belief in the authority of Jesus (Col 2.8).

In another book-length study of the subject, Jack Cottrell is even more emphatic about the importance of Colossians 2. "In my opinion," he wrote, "a good case can be made that Colossians 2.11-13 is the most important New Testament passage concerning baptism."² He gives five reasons for his conclusion.

1. Colossians 2 "most explicitly identifies baptism as the specific time when a sinner is buried with Christ and raised up with him."
2. It is most explicit in "spell[ing] out the distinctive roles of faith and baptism in the reception of salvation."
3. The text clearly "indicates that insofar as baptism is a work, it is a work of God."
4. It gives us the only New Testament teaching we have on the relation of baptism and circumcision.
5. The text "supplements and completes the teaching on salvation found in its parallel passage, Ephesians 2:1-10."

My focus in this discussion will be on the first of these reasons.

Buried in Baptism

Like Romans 6, Colossians 2 affirms that baptism is a burial with Christ (Col 2.12). What Paul implied in the phrase, “into his death” (Rom 6.3) he stated explicitly in Colossians when he said that the death and resurrection believers experience in baptism results in forgiveness: “And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses” (Col 2.13; cf. Acts 2.38; 22.16). However, that is not Paul’s *primary* point, in either Romans 6 or Colossians 2; rather, in both contexts, he was more concerned about new life.

In Colossians 2.11, he used the figure of circumcision to deepen the idea in the phrase “death to sin” in Romans 6.11. The circumcision in view is “made without hands.” In other words, it’s a spiritual circumcision that entails “putting off the body of *the flesh*,” Paul’s favored term for the old way of life (cf. Col 3.2, 5-6). “The body of the flesh” are the same as “our old self” and “the body of sin” in Romans 6.6.

The transformation Paul envisioned occurs “in baptism” (Col 2.12), “the time or occasion during which God bestows salvation upon the sinner” (Cottrell, 123). The aorist passive participle translated “having been buried” (v. 12; from συνθάπτω; *sunthapto*) “shows that this act (of baptism) *precedes* or is at least simultaneous with the act of spiritual circumcision in verse 11” (Cottrell, 123). That is, the spiritual circumcision by which we put off the body of the flesh occurs at the time of our death and burial in baptism.

But, as important as this shows baptism to be, we must not overstate Paul’s point. As always, his primary concern in Colossians 2 was Christ. We are “buried with *him* in baptism” and “raised with *him* through faith” (v. 12). The spiritual circumcision we experience is brought about “by the circumcision of *Christ*,” a phrase best taken to mean “a circumcision accomplished *by* Christ,” not performed “*upon* Christ” (Cottrell, 123). The transformation is something Christ does to and for us, not something we do ourselves. Cottrell summarizes:

The main point is that baptism is a *spiritual* burial into union with Christ, by virtue of which our ‘old self’ is given a deathblow and is left behind as in a grave when we are raised up with Christ into new life” (Cottrell, 123-124).

Raised Up in Baptism

Colossians 2.12 also affirms that baptism is the time when we are “raised with” Christ, another statement that echoes Romans 6 (cf. Eph 2.5-6; Col 3.1). But, again, the emphasis is different from what is stated explicitly in Romans.

In Colossians 2, Paul delineates two kinds of death. The first, discussed above, is death *to* sin. This reflects the reality that “the old sinful self is alive and well and in control until baptism in which it is put to death (or circumcised away) and buried” (Cottrell, 124). After baptism, a new self is raised to take its place.

The second kind of death is death *in* sin (v. 13). This reinforces the point made about being “dead in your trespasses” in Ephesians 2.1, 5, that sinners have existed in a state of spiritual death since the time they became sinners. This involves more than simply being under the penalty of death; it’s being in a state of death.

This reminds us that an integral part of the good news is the reality that God has done what is necessary to raise the sinner from the state of spiritual death. By means of the Spirit, he gives

life (John 6.63; 2 Cor 3.6 Acts 2.38; 5.31-32). This occurs when we are “raised with him” (Col 2.12) and are “made alive together with him” (v. 13; cf. Eph 2.5-6; Rom 4.17). Like the prodigal son, we who were dead are “alive again” (Luke 15.24), having “passed from death to life” (John 5.24). We can be confident of this, the most significant thing to have ever happened to us, because we can point to the exact time when it occurred: in our baptisms (Col 2.12; note the phrase “in which”).

Conclusion

To review, Colossians 2.11-13 adds depth to our understanding of baptism, showing that:

- The application of Christ’s saving work occurs when we are baptized.
- Sin has been handled—it has been killed.
- Baptism is not just a mark of membership, but the beginning point of the completely new life to which we’ve been called.

We can be sure of our accessibility to this remarkable change “through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the death” (Col 2.12). Accepting the truth of the evidence for Jesus’ bodily resurrection prepares us to appropriate the blessings of spiritual resurrection, the benefits of which were applied at baptism.

That confidence should sustain us when, like the Colossians, we face teaching that stands in opposition to the teaching of Christ.

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Notes

¹ The book I had in mind is G. R. Beasley-Murray’s *Baptism in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1973).

² Jack Cottrell, *Baptism: A Biblical Study* (Joplin, MO: College Press Publishing Company, 1989), 121. Even if one disagrees with his statement, the fact that someone would make it should lead us to study the text to see why he might say that.