



TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Sermons

Baptism and the Working of God

Colossians 2.11-13

David Anguish

Introduction

My experience is that it does not take long in a conversation about baptism with someone outside our fellowship to hear the charge that, in saying one must be baptized to be saved, we are teaching salvation by works.

There are multiple responses we can make to that charge, but Colossians 2.12 gets to the heart of the matter: when we are baptized, we are in that action appropriating the benefit of the working of God, who raised Jesus from the dead, to raise us to new spiritual life.

We continue studying this passage as part of our survey of Colossians and because it deepens our understanding of baptism, depth we should consider for the sake of our own faith.¹ In part 1, we noticed Jack Cottrell's "opinion [that] a good case can be made that Colossians 2:11-13 is the most important New Testament passage concerning baptism" and his reasons for that conclusion:

One reason this passage is so important is because it most explicitly identifies baptism as the specific time when a sinner is buried with Christ and raised up with Him. Another is because it most explicitly spells out the distinctive roles of faith and baptism in the reception of salvation. Also, it clearly indicates that insofar as baptism is a work, it is a work of God. Also, it gives us the only New Testament teaching on how to relate baptism and circumcision. Finally, it supplements and completes the teaching on salvation found in its parallel passage, Ephesians 2:1-10.²

In part 2 of our discussion of this text, we will focus on the second and third of Cottrell's reasons: (1) the distinctive roles of faith and baptism in receiving salvation; and (2) the nature of baptism as a work of God.

Buried and Raised Up in Baptism—Reviewing Part 1

Connecting baptism with circumcision—an idea I'll explore more in part 3—Paul reminded the Colossians that when they were baptized, they "put off the body of the flesh, ... having been buried with him in baptism" (2.11-12). As Cottrell observes, the participle translated "having been buried" "shows that this act of baptism *precedes* or is at least simultaneous with the act of spiritual circumcision in verse 11" (Cottrell, 123). He continues: "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).

But the burial is only part of the process. Paul also affirms that baptism is the time when we are "raised with" Christ (2.12). His point is that we are not only dead *to* sin after baptism, we also have a way out of the problem of being dead *in* sin, the spiritual state in which we have existed from the moment we became sinners. Paul makes the same point Jesus illustrated in the prodigal son parable—that the one who was dead had been made "alive again" (Luke 15.24), having "passed from death to life" (John 5.24). In view of this truth, how can we possibly doubt that what happened at baptism "is the most significant thing that has *ever* happened to us" (Cottrell, 125)? And Paul says it happened in our baptism!

Faith is Required and Cannot Be Separated from Baptism

We should acknowledge and take seriously the fact that some, having seen "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), have expressed the point in such a way as to claim that (a) baptism is the most important step we take in receiving salvation, and /or (b) it is a ritual act or work that saves without regard to faith and repentance on the one side and faithful living on the other.

The related ideas in (a) and (b) above often lead to the charge that we who emphasize the necessary connection between entering the state of being saved and baptism are teaching "baptismal regeneration," defined by James Orr a century ago as "the idea that baptism is the instrumental cause of regeneration, and that the grace of regeneration is effectually conveyed through the administration of that rite wherever duly performed."³ But if that is the view some have about baptism, the middle phrase of Colossians 2.12 serves to show its error and emphasize what really occurs: "in which you were also raised with him *through faith* in the powerful working of God."

Just as he does in Galatians 3.26-27, Paul teaches that faith is the means of salvation and baptism is the time and place where being in the state of salvation begins. Faith and baptism are complementary, not in conflict. To say we are baptized and raised with Christ *through* faith

shows that going through the motions of baptism is not a true baptism *unless* the one being baptized has faith in his heart. There is no magical power in the water or the act itself. Baptism without faith is a futile dipping in water.... Without faith the person's spiritual state after baptism is no different from what it was before (Cottrell, 126).

This is different from baptismal regeneration which says that "the proper application of baptism automatically produces regeneration even in the absence of faith on the part of the recipient" (Cottrell, 126-127). While Paul is teaching that regeneration, new life, occurs *during* baptism, he is clear that this occurs *only* if faith (and repentance—see Acts 2.38) is also present. That condition also rules out the efficacy of infant baptism, for it is only sinners who are capable of exercising true faith who receive the benefits bestowed at baptism. Infants are incapable of believing, an act that is always preceded by some evidence, however imperfectly it is evaluated; thus, it is futile to baptize them.⁴

What Kind of Faith is Required?

It is evident from Paul's teaching that the faith of which he speaks is not "just faith," that is, "just believing." Rather, it has a definite and specific content, as the latter part of the middle

phrase in Colossians 2.12 makes clear: "... through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead."

The noun, "working" (ἐνέργεια; *energeia*) means "the state or quality of being active, *working, operation, action*." Bauer notes that in the New Testament, it is used "always of transcendent beings."⁵ Here it refers to "actual activity or active working" (Cottrell, 127), not just to God's divine power.

The specific activity in view in verse 12 is the work of God to raise Jesus from the dead. In this text, as we see in verses 13-14 which follow, Paul does what he often does and connects the resurrection and crucifixion as two parts of the same event. But his emphasis on the resurrection in verse 12 goes beyond the idea of the atoning death to set aside sin. Paul says the faith that saves affirms an actual resurrection of Jesus to defeat his enemies and secure eternal life. The idea is reminiscent of Romans 4.25 where he also connects death and resurrection and specifies the latter's necessity for justification: "... Jesus our Lord, who was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification."

Conclusion

Take a moment to let what we have studied sink in; it adds a layer of understanding about baptism that takes us beyond the surface level debates in which we often become entangled.

Colossians 2.11-13 also reminds us that in our teaching we need to emphasize that baptism is not a separate part—and certainly not the most important part—of our response to God's initiative of grace. It shows that baptism is a picture and expression of faith in the most significant work God has done in history.

Finally, as we reflect on it, it adds a layer of confidence that we need to reinforce our faith in tough times. What God's power did for Jesus, and then for us in our baptisms, it will continue to do.

www.davidanguish.com

Notes

¹ Paul apparently thought so, too; his teaching here is part of his response to a heresy the Colossian believers were facing.

² Jack Cottrell, *Baptism: A Biblical Study* (Joplin, MO: College Press Publishing Company, 1989), 121.

³ James Orr, "Baptismal Regeneration," in James Orr, ed., *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, Accordance electronic ed., version 2.5. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1915 [print version: vol. 1: 397]). For an extended response to this and other misunderstandings of teaching on the essentiality of baptism, see my sermon, "Is That What We Are Saying? Answering Some Questions About Baptism." A link to this sermon is located on the "Sermons and Class Notes" page of my website under the heading, "Some Things We Should Believe" and the subheading "Baptism" (sermon # 5). The URL for the website page is <https://www.davidanguish.com/sermon--class-notes.html>.

⁴ Cottrell observes that "Lutherans have attempted to avoid this conclusion by pointing to the unique doctrine of infant faith: infants *can* believe, and God implants faith within them when they are baptized" (Cottrell, 132).

⁵ Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, ed. Frederick W. Danker, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 335.