

April 3, 2005  
College Baptist Church

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### **Baptized into Christ Jesus**

Romans 6:1-11

#### Affirmation #9: The Ordinances

*"We believe that the Lord Jesus Christ has committed two ordinances to the local church, baptism and the Lord's Supper. We believe that Christian baptism is the immersion of the believer in water into the name of the triune God. We believe that the Lord's Supper was instituted by Christ for commemoration of His death. We believe that these two ordinances should be observed and administered until the return of the Lord Jesus Christ."*

From the beginning of the year up until the Easter season we had been studying together on Sunday mornings the doctrinal statement of the Baptist General Conference, one affirmation at a time, and we were up to the 9th Affirmation, on the Ordinances, with an extra Sunday added in to think about one other increasingly important doctrine, the theology of the family.

Today we return to that 9th Affirmation, because it deals with both of the ordinances that were instituted by Christ, but we only took time last month to address the ordinance of the Lord's Supper. We'll celebrate that ordinance again this Sunday, as it's our custom to do on the first Sunday of every month. But today I'd like to focus our study of Scripture on the other ordinance that Christ gave the church by way of specific command, and we'll also want to think what kind of relationship these two ordinances have to each other.

Let's just say first, right up front, about baptism that this has at various times in the history of Christ's church been an issue of some contention, and, because of the eclectic makeup of the congregation here at College Baptist, this may be among the most contentious of the Affirmations in this whole list of 12. I think there is probably some good news in that.

There is far more room for Christian unity and commonality of purpose among believers who dispute about whether baptism ought to be administered by immersion or by aspersion (sprinkling) or who disagree about whether baptism ought to be administered to adults who believe or to infants on the strength of their parents' belief than there ever can be among those who differ about the authority of the Word of God, or the deity of Christ, or the regeneration of the sinner by grace through faith.

Baptism is a sign or an expression of a reality. These other more fundamental things are the realities themselves. I don't mean to diminish the importance of baptism as a command of Christ, by making that distinction. If baptism weren't important there wouldn't be contention over it, and there wouldn't be Baptist churches! But baptism, as a sign, and as an expression, is important derivatively and interpretively. We have to leave room for some disagreement. But it's especially important that we understand and agree about what it is that baptism does express, and how it does that.

A rose expressed by any other name will still smell as sweet, but only if it's genuinely a rose. And if it is a rose, we ought to be as careful as we can to hear what Jesus calls it -- and be very careful not to confuse the world by using expressions for it like dandelion or stinkweed as if the forms of expression we use just don't matter at all. What we say to the world by our baptism -- or by our not being baptized -- makes a great deal of theological, doctrinal difference.

So I want to begin this morning with the most important question, and the clearest of all the questions to answer: What does baptism communicate? What is the reality that we are commanded by Christ to express in our baptism? The answer to that comes out in just about every text that refers to baptism in the New Testament, but our passage this morning in Romans 6 is one of the extensive of them. So that's where we'll start.

The second question is utterly crucial, too: How does baptism work to portray and communicate this reality? Does it make it happen? Or does it just symbolize something? This is related to a question that several people have asked me after we've said together the Nicene Creed on occasional Sundays. Do we really believe in "one baptism for the remission of sins"? Does baptism save us? Does baptism actually wash our sins away, the way it seems the creed says? That sounds very sacramental!

The answers to those two questions touch on issues that are theologically fundamental. If we have to sacrifice some unity to defend the truth of the Bible's answers to those two questions, the sacrifice in the interest of truth will be worth it.

But next, when we turn our attention to the sentence about baptism in the Affirmation, there are two more questions where we can afford to throw the balance of truth and unity in the other direction. The statement reads, "We believe that Christian baptism is the immersion of the believer in water into the name of the triune God." Here are at least two questions that that sentence answers. One is the question there in the meditation from Spurgeon (the last one): by what mode should we best express the reality that baptism is supposed to express? Like Spurgeon, the Affirmation gives the Baptist answer to that question, which also turns out to be the most historical and traditional answer to the question: Christian baptism is the immersion of the believer in water. I want to explain and defend that Baptist answer, but I also want to try to explain as well where and why the alternative modes of pouring and sprinkling originated.

The other question the sentence answers is also there in the meditation: Who should express this reality by being baptized? There are some traditions that say baptism is the New Testament equivalent of Old Testament circumcision and so it should be administered to infants very soon after they're born so that they'll be brought into the New Covenant of the people of God the way circumcision brought children into the people of Israel and identified them as part of the family of Abraham. Again, I want to explain and defend the Baptist answer to that question, which is that baptism should be administered, as the Affirmation says, to believers, which would mean that infants, who can't be accountable yet for faith, would not be the proper subjects of baptism until they are old enough to consciously give themselves by faith to Christ.

I defend the Baptist answer to these two questions because I think it's the most defensible answer. That's why I'm in a Baptist church. But at the same time, in the case of these two questions, I also want to say that our disagreements with Christians who interpret their way to different answers from Scripture are not as threatening to our unity in Christ as the first two questions. In this case, if we have to yield some of what we take to be the truth for the sake of our unity in Christ, for many of our common purposes that sacrifice in the interest of unity will be worth it.

Finally, as a way of turning our attention toward the Lord's Table that is spread for us this morning, I want to close by answering a fifth question, what do baptism and the Lord's Supper have to do with each other. Of all the things that Christ might have explicitly ordained as things to be observed until he returns, why these two?

Again:

1. What is the reality that baptism expresses?
2. How does baptism do its work? Does baptism actually accomplish the remission of sins? Or does it just depict it?
3. What mode of baptism expresses that reality most clearly?
4. Who is baptism meant to be administered to?
5. What do baptism and the Lord's Supper have to do with each other? Why did Christ single these two things out?

There are surely plenty of other questions that some of you might raise, and I hope we get the chance some time to talk individually or in a class about those other questions. But time is short, and the statement of the Affirmation in our own particular context seemed to me to bring these five to the top for now. So let's look at them in the light of the Bible.

Romans 6, as I said, gives as clear and unmistakable an answer to the question of what baptism portrays as any text I know, so let's open our Bibles there again and listen to Paul's argument. There are half a dozen or more texts that describe baptism in the New Testament. Colossians 2 in our Call to Worship this morning is one of them. 1 Peter 3:18ff is another. And of course there are several references in the Gospels to the baptizing work of John the Baptist and of Jesus' disciples. All of these texts do what Paul does here in Romans 6 and locate baptism right at the boundary line between sin and grace.

Paul has just got finished describing the condemnation and judgment that sin brings down on our lives, and then he points to the grace of God as the only solution for our sin. So now he has to ask, if grace is so good and sin is what prompts God to give us that grace, shouldn't we sin all we can so that we can get more of God's grace? And his answer is emphatically, No.

In Christ, we died to sin, because we were united to him in his death. And baptism is the portrayal of that shared dying. (6:3) "All of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death." Going under the water, "We were buried with him by baptism into death." 6:5 says "we have been united with him in a death like his." 6:6 says "our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing." 6:8 says it again: "we have died with Christ." Baptism is a picture of our burial with Christ, and the death of our old self in his death.

Does that mean that after baptism, or even because of the death of our old self in its union with the death of Christ, we aren't going to sin any more? That doesn't seem to be what Paul is saying here. He doesn't say we'll never sin; he says we can't still "live in" it. The moment our faith lays hold of God's grace extended to us in Christ, sin isn't our home any more. We don't "continue in" it any more. We are captured by a desire to live someplace else.

The pattern of sin in our lives is broken because we have a new love and a new master. 6:6 said "the body of sin is brought to nothing," in the sense that we're "no longer enslaved to sin." 6:14, down a bit further, echoes that, saying, "sin will have no dominion over you" since you are under grace. We still have sin in this world to wrestle with, but now we've got the power of grace and the promises of God to fight back with, and those are weapons that can win.

So Paul says "consider yourself dead" (6:11), and "don't let sin reign" (6:12), and "don't present your members to sin as instruments for unrighteousness" (6:13). He's completely aware that the battle with sin goes on. Chapter 7 is full of his anguish about that fight. But now we fight with hope because we have a desire for something better than sin, and we have weapons of faith that keep sin from getting the upper hand, and we have been raised to newness of life in Christ, just as Christ was raised from the dead.

Baptism says all of that to a watching world. Just as importantly, it says that to ourselves. As we go under the water, we display how our old self that once was in love with sin has been put to death in the death of Christ, and buried with him in a death like his.

But we don't just die. We don't go under the baptismal water and stay there. We come back up out of the water and display the newness of resurrection life. 6:9 says "death no longer has dominion over him." If we are united with him then death no longer has dominion over us either.

Colossians (2:12) said the same thing in our Call to Worship: "having been buried with him in baptism, in which we were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead.

That is clearly the picture that baptism draws. A burial and a resurrection that expresses our being united with Christ in his historical death and resurrection. This is how he defeated sin and came to newness of life. This is how we understand our hope of overcoming sin and enjoying eternal life together with him.

The second important question then is: how are we united with Christ so that we're in this connection that baptizes us into his death and puts to death the old self that was enslaved to sin? How are we united with Christ so that we're in this union that allows the glory of the Father that raised Christ from the dead to raise us up, too? How does baptism unite us with him in a death like his so that we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his?

Does the water somehow do the work so that without baptism we have no hope of eternal life? Do we believe in one baptism for the remission of sin, as the Nicene Creed says? Does Peter mean it when he says (in 1 Pet 3:21) that "baptism, which corresponds to [Noah's being carried through the water in the ark], now saves you"? What exactly does baptism do?

One Baptist pastor had an answer to that question that Kristi G is likely to appreciate. His church had a problem like ours with bats that infested it. So he baptized them all and made them members and he never saw them again except on Christmas and Easter! Maybe baptism just turns people into inactive members.

Paul's answer to that question is very consistent. In Rom 5:18, he says that this act of righteousness on Christ's part leads to justification and life. How does Paul understand our participating in Christ to lead us to justification? By faith alone! Col 2:12 that we just quoted from the Call to Worship says it again: "having been buried with him in baptism, we were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead." In Galatians 2:20, he says, "I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live but Christ lives in me, and the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God." Baptism does whatever it does by uniting us to Jesus Christ by faith.

I say that this question is important because there are Christian denominations that teach that there is an actual regenerating effect in coming in contact with the water of baptism itself. The water, they believe, is a means of grace that actually washes away the problem of original sin and accomplishes a person's salvation. This is why the Roman Catholic church is so concerned to baptize the church's infants at the earliest opportunity, even still in the womb if a stillbirth is appearing likely. And the instructions to the priest, or if necessary the nurse, say that if the water only touches the hair, or the blankets or the clothes, and doesn't pour over the body, the cleansing of original sin doesn't happen. When in doubt, they'll even baptize a second time.

But Peter, who comes as close as any biblical author to offering some support for that interpretation, stops and corrects that mistake. "Baptism," he says, "now saves you, *not* as a removal of dirt from the body" (as though he might be taken to mean that the water itself accomplishes anything), but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ." Baptism, he was quick to say, saves you only if and when it serves as an appeal to God for the power of the resurrection. It saves you by the faith that it puts into expression. His words are the equivalent of Paul's when he says, "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord (that is, who appeals to the Lord in faith) will be saved.

Think by way of comparison of the analogy of another expression of uniting. When a bride and groom stand at the front of a church and say to one another "with this ring, I thee wed," can we say that putting a ring on the other person's finger makes you married? There is a sense in which the answer is, Yes. No sooner is the ring on the finger than the pastor says "I now pronounce you man and wife." The ring sealed the deal. The ring tells the whole world from this day forward that you're united to this partner for life. Putting the ring on the finger made you married.

But in another sense, that's not really what made you married. You couldn't walk up to someone on the street, throw a ring onto their finger, and say, Ha! you're married to me now! It's not the ring that does it. The ring is symbolizing and expressing the love and commitment of the heart that actually does it. It's the willingness to say "I do" that does it.

The same thing applies to baptism. Do we believe in one baptism for the remission of sin? Yes. There is a one-time putting on the ring of Christ, called baptism, that unites you to him, and that entitles you to all the heavenly goods that he thee endows. But we don't believe that the physical elements and symbols of the ceremony do the work of our remission of sins.

More accurately, the gospels speak each time it uses the phrase, of a "baptism of repentance for the remission of sins" (Mk 1:4; Lk 3:3; Ac 13:24; 19:4). We believe that faith unites us to Christ, and that the grace of God to which faith says "I do" accomplishes the remission of our sins. Baptism is a symbolic expression of the heart's appeal to God, that declares and seals our union with him the way a ring does in a wedding ceremony.

Can a person be in a lifelong relationship of faith, united to Christ, without ever being baptized? Hypothetically, the answer is yes, of course. Just as a couple could live together in a common law marriage in complete faithfulness, without ever exchanging rings in a formal wedding ceremony.

But, if you have been saying no to baptism, stop and consider: When a groom says, Let's get married in a public ceremony with the rings and everything, and the bride says, No, let's just live together, the groom may have some legitimate reason to wonder why his bride might be afraid of the public acknowledgement.

Baptism isn't just a human convention. We call it an ordinance because God designed it, and Christ ordained it, and Christ commanded us to "go and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit."

More quickly than to the second two questions that the statement of the Affirmation might prompt: What is the mode of baptism? (Should we immerse? Should we pour? Should we sprinkle?) And to whom should we administer it? (To adults? to infants? to anyone?)

To the question of mode, Baptists respond: we immerse. The word "*baptizō*" in Greek means "to immerse." Wherever baptisms are described in the New Testament, individuals went down into water rather than having water brought to them to be poured on them. If the point of baptism is to depict the burial and resurrection of Christ, Baptists would observe that of all the modes the church has employed, immersion certainly draws the most vivid picture.

Even history is on the Baptist side of this debate. Historically, baptism was almost universally practiced by immersion for the first thirteen centuries after Christ. Wherever we traveled in Asia Minor last summer, the oldest baptisteries we saw were large, tub-sized enclosures, big enough to hold a person's whole body. The first recorded instance of a sprinkling came in the 3d century in Africa to accommodate some people who were bedridden and unable to come to water. Even that, the bishops of Africa said, didn't qualify as a real baptism at the time. The first recorded instance of a pouring came in the 8th century, when the Pope allowed the validity of the pouring mode, but only in cases of an infant in imminent danger.

Even a Roman Catholic defense of affusion and aspersion acknowledges that: "The most ancient form usually employed was unquestionably immersion. This is not only evident from the writings of the Fathers and the early rituals of both the Latin and Oriental Churches, but it can also be gathered from the Epistles of St. Paul, who speaks of baptism as a bath (Ephes., v, 26; Rom., vi, 4; Tit., iii, 5). In the Latin Church, immersion seems to have prevailed until the twelfth century. After that time it is found in some places even as late as the sixteenth century. Infusion and aspersion, however, were growing common in the thirteenth century and gradually prevailed in the Western Church."<sup>[1]</sup>

The classic modern defense of infant baptism was written by a man named William Wall in 1720, and he wrote that: "'Calvin, was I think the first in the world, that drew up a liturgy that prescribed pouring water on the infant, absolutely, without saying any thing of dipping. It was (as Mr. Walker has shown) his admirers in England, who, in queen Elizabeth's time, brought pouring into ordinary use, which before was used only to [serve] weak children. But the succeeding Presbyterians in England, about 1644, when their reign began, went farther yet from the ancient way; and instead of pouring, brought into use, in many places, sprinkling; declaring, at the same time, against all use of fonts, baptisteries," etc.<sup>[2]</sup>

My Presbyterian friends like to joke that since we Baptists don't think a baptism counts until the body goes in all the way until the head is under, that it must be the top of the head that really counts, and that's what they baptize. But I'm going to go on charitably enjoying Christian unity with them and also arguing that the Baptist mode of baptism has the best defense both biblically and historically going for it.

As for who should receive baptism, the earliest sure evidence of administering the rite to infants seems to be in the late 2d century when Tertullian comments that some people are doing that, but it just wasn't right. Later in the 3d century it seems to have taken greater hold and persisted in church practice ever since, with various groups from time to time dissenting from the practice of the Roman church by limiting baptism to persons old enough to express faith.

The Baptist conviction, as declared in the affirmation, is that, since the reality that baptism expresses is so emphatically a uniting with Christ by faith, the administering of it should be limited, as it seems to be in the Bible, to people who are old enough to have come to a conscious faith in the promises of God through Jesus Christ, and who are ready to profess that faith in a public way.

Those denominations that argue in favor of baptizing infants ("paedo-baptism"), rest their conclusion on an interpretation of baptism as an extension or continuation of Old Testament circumcision, coming to fulfillment in the New Covenant in a way that both males and females could take part in the sign of the covenant.

The Heidelberg Catechism of 1562, that combines the convictions of several branches of the Reformation, from Luther to Calvin to Melancthon, asks the question, Are infants also to be baptized? Its answer says:

"Yes; for since they, as well as their parents, belong to the covenant and people of God, and both redemption from sin and the Holy Ghost, who works faith, are through the blood of Christ promised to them no less than to their parents, they are also by Baptism, as a sign of the covenant, to be ingrafted into the Christian Church, and distinguished from the children of unbelievers, as was done in the Old Testament by Circumcision, in place of which in the New Testament Baptism is appointed."

The text of Colossians 2:11 from our Call to Worship seems at first to support that same substitution when it refers to baptism as a circumcision without hands. But look more closely at that connection. Paul is not making baptism itself the counterpart of circumcision. Circumcision is now paralleled by a spiritual act of circumcising the heart--of cutting away the old body of flesh (Rom 6 - "body of sin"). Then in the next verse he calls baptism the outward expression of that inward work of Christ. Baptism can't be the new circumcision without hands, because baptism isn't a ceremony that is done without hands. The new circumcision is the work of faith that Christ performs in the heart, and baptism is a sign and seal of that faith.

In a similar way, John the Baptist came in Matthew 3, arguing against the Pharisees who said, we're circumcised; we have Abraham for our father! When he introduced baptism as a sign of belonging to God, he was specifically arguing that the sign the Pharisees received when they were infants was not one they could rely on. Instead they were going to need a new sign that didn't have anything to do with belonging to a covenant family by birth but that had everything to do with belonging to a new covenant family by faith.

Again, then, I'm going to go on charitably enjoying Christian unity with my paedobaptist friends, and also arguing that the Baptist interpretation of whom to baptize has the best defense both biblically and historically going for it.

5. What do baptism and the Lord's Supper have to do with each other? Why did Christ single these two things out?

[Meditation at the Communion Table]

[\[1\]](http://www.ourcatholicfaith.org/sacraments/baptism.html) < <http://www.ourcatholicfaith.org/sacraments/baptism.html> >

[\[2\]](http://www.reformedreader.org/rbb/benedict/baptism.htm) < <http://www.reformedreader.org/rbb/benedict/baptism.htm> >