

## **Baptism and the Lord's Supper**

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# Baptism and the Lord's Supper

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*Thabiti Anyabwile &  
J. Ligon Duncan*

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*Baptism and the Lord's Supper*

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We believe that baptism and the Lord's Supper are ordained by the Lord Jesus himself. The former is connected with entrance into the new-covenant community, the latter with ongoing covenant renewal. Together they are simultaneously God's pledge to us, divinely ordained means of grace, our public vows of submission to the once crucified and now resurrected Christ, and anticipations of his return and of the consummation of all things.

—THE GOSPEL COALITION STATEMENT OF FAITH

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[Anyabwile] sat across the table with Matthew, a creative, inquisitive, free-spirited twenty-five-year-old. He'd come into the restaurant as breezy and bright as the warm Caribbean day outside. Just a few minutes late, he smiled and casually apologized for any inconvenience he'd caused.

Taking up our menus, I wondered to myself what lay ahead in our conversation. Though he'd been attending church for nearly a year, I wasn't sure exactly where Matthew was spiritually or what his questions for me would be. No sooner had we ordered our meals and returned the menus to our waitress then Matthew turned to me and said, "So, I have a lot of questions."

"Wonderful," I replied, relieved that I wouldn't have to drag any conversation out of my young friend. "What's on your mind?"

That day Matthew asked me lots of things. Many of his questions dealt with themes such as God's glory and anger with sinners, the reliability of the Bible, the resurrection, the exclusivity of Jesus, and the future. For nearly two hours we enjoyed a really wonderful exploration of the Bible's teachings on these topics.

But near the end of our conversation, I grew concerned that Matthew, while asking great theological questions, was failing to deal with the more personal heart of the matter. So I asked, "Matthew, what will you do about your sin?"

He gulped, slightly taken aback, and replied, "I hope Jesus has taken care of them." Then he proceeded to tell me how six months earlier he had come to accept Christ as his Savior and Lord. At the end of his story, he said, "I want to join the church, but I'm not ready to be baptized."

Matthew had come to a point many Christians sometimes reach. He had come to understand the gospel and to rely upon Jesus for his salvation, but he had not yet come to understand just what that had to do with the local church. In other words, he had not come to see that the Lord gave two ordinances or sacraments for marking both his ini-

tiation into the Christian life and his ongoing fellowship with Christ. In giving these ordinances to the church, the Lord provided “visible words” that communicate the believer’s union with Christ in his death, burial, and resurrection (baptism) and the outworking of that union, namely, continuing fellowship with the Lord (the Lord’s Supper). Both, then, become not just ordinances to be obeyed but also means of grace for our strengthening and enjoyment until Christ returns.

## Baptism

I live in a country where many people have come to believe that only the “near perfect Christian” may be baptized. Some have come to attach so much importance to baptism that the ordinance no longer applies to the “regular Christian” who experiences imperfection and struggles with sin. They assume that delaying baptism is the appropriate path for most Christians. During our lunch, Matthew expressed these beliefs.

I realize that Christians in many other places in the world make precisely the opposite error. They assign very little importance to baptism. Baptism may be a rite you undertake “when you’re old enough” or an unimportant exercise left optional to each believer. It’s a box checked off the spiritual to-do list and basically forgotten.

Christians may fall into either error: assigning either too little or too much importance to baptism. In doing so, we risk losing the beauty and richness of a command that Jesus himself instituted and that Christian churches have celebrated for nearly two thousand years. The solution is to embrace a biblical understanding of baptism that immerses us deeply in the gracious and efficacious work of our Lord Jesus Christ on behalf of sinners.

### *What Is Baptism?*

In the most basic terms, baptism is a sign and a seal. As the Westminster Confession of Faith puts it, baptism “is a sign and seal of the covenant of grace, of [the believer’s] ingrafting into Christ, of regeneration, of remission of sins, and of his giving up unto God, through Jesus Christ, to walk in newness of life” (28.1).

A sign is a symbol pointing to a greater reality or idea. Baptism is “a neon light flashing ‘Gospel, Gospel, Gospel.’”<sup>1</sup> When the church practices baptism, she testifies to the death, burial, and resurrection

of Jesus Christ and signifies the sinner's union with Christ in all he did and accomplished on our behalf.

But baptism (and the Lord's Supper too, for that matter) is also a seal:

The sacraments are not only signs that point our attention back to Jesus Christ as presented in the gospel and thus remind us of his grace offered to the whole world. They are also seals, which assure us that God's grace and promise are given to us in particular. This word "seal," when used in the context of the Reformation, referred to the wax imprint that marked a document as official and legally binding. In this context, Baptism is the seal whereby God takes the general promise of the gospel and applies it to us in particular. In the ancient world, the same word also referred to marks on the body—brands or tattoos which functioned as a mark of ownership. We are "marked" by Christ's death and resurrection, as witnessed both by baptism and the Lord's Supper.<sup>2</sup>

A ruler or king might affix his seal to an official edict or law. Correspondence received from a magistrate or influential person would bear the imprint or seal belonging to his office or family. Or a slave might bear the markings of his owner. Recipients and the public would thereby recognize the bearer of such a seal or marking as belonging to its owner.

In baptism, God places his mark upon the one baptized. The repentant and professing Christian receives the seal of heaven's ownership. God speaks to us in baptism: "This one so marked or sealed belongs to me."

In modern evangelicalism, people often speak of making a "public profession of faith." That phrase has come to be associated with things such as responding to altar calls, praying certain prayers, or signing response cards. In general, these actions focus on what we say to God. Unfortunately, many of these practices leave us thinking solely about what we say, not realizing that God wishes to speak of his love to his people. And they make what we say the decisive action or speech. But the Bible strongly supports none of those practices. The apostles and the early church, however, did have a way for repentant sinners to make a public profession, to signify their faith in Christ while receiving the seal of God's salvation—baptism.

Thabiti Anyabwile and J. Ligon Duncan

### *The Beauty of Baptism*

The beauty of baptism may be observed by considering what baptism signifies, for baptism wonderfully associates the believer with the many riches found in Christ.

#### The Atonement of Christ

First, baptism visibly portrays the atonement that Jesus accomplished. Redemption and the remission of sins are central to Christ's work and therefore central to the meaning of baptism:

When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your sinful nature, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, having canceled the written code, with its regulations, that was against us and that stood opposed to us; he took it away, nailing it to the cross. And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross. (Col. 2:13–15)

In baptism, we are reminded of our Lord's own baptism on our behalf. The Savior taught, "I have a baptism to be baptized with, and how great is my distress until it is accomplished" (Luke 12:50 ESV). When overly ambitious disciples requested to sit at his side in his kingdom, Jesus humbled them by replying, "You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or to be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?" (Mark 10:38 ESV). The cup the Master drank was the cup of the Father's wrath against sin. The distressing baptism he endured was the baptism of the cross where he made propitiation for the sins of the world (1 John 2:2).

Baptism reminds the church and the individual Christian of Jesus' cross, where Jesus took away and nailed our sins and where Jesus' triumph becomes our triumph. Baptism reminds us that Christ has suffered our judgment and made peace with God for us.

#### Union with Christ

Second, baptism represents the sinner's spiritual union with Jesus in his death, burial, and resurrection.

What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? By no means! We died to sin; how can we live in it any longer?