

# OpenTheo

## Q&A#46 What Does Baptism Do For a Person?

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Today's question: "What does baptism do for a person?"

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## Transcript

Welcome back. Today's question is what does baptism do for a person? I'm going to have to record a podcast for mere fidelity within about 20 minutes, so I'm going to have to get through this fairly quickly. Baptism is a sign and seal of our membership in Christ.

It's a seal of the forgiveness of all of our sins. It's a seal of our membership in the body of Christ. It's a sign to the church itself of its members and of its identity in Christ.

Every single baptism recalls the church to its original baptism on the day of Pentecost and to what that means, the participation in the life of Christ, being members of his body, sharing in his spirit, etc. It's an entrance into new life. It's a sign to the world of our profession, a sign of who we are in Christ, and it's assurance throughout life of God's promises to us.

So I think about my baptism pretty much every day. On some level or other, the fact that I have been baptised comes to mind and I think about it. It's a significant fact.

It's a sign of God's promises, not just in a generic sense or to people in general or to Christians in general, but to me in particular. Now, the question of efficacy is an

important one here. I think there are a few examples that can help us to unpick the problems that we have here because the statements that I've made about baptism seem very strong.

The connection of baptism with regeneration, entrance into new life, the forgiveness of sins, justification and sanctification, and all these different things, that seems over the top. But there are a few examples that might help us to pick apart what is being meant here. First of all, when we talk about a wedding ceremony, what is the efficacy of a wedding ceremony? You could talk about a wedding as an entrance into a new, lifelong, loving union that is sexually exclusive, that is a place which is welcoming for children, and will, Lord willing, be blessed with fruitfulness.

Now, there are many people who get married, who divorce, who do not experience the full reality of all of that. And should we say then that a wedding ceremony is an entrance into a legal structure that could go either way? You might reject it, you might accept it, you might, it may end up being a lifelong union, or it may just end up being a hate, end up in a hateful divorce. Is that a fair way to speak about a wedding ceremony? No, it's not.

Because the point of the wedding ceremony is seen in the positive force of what is intended. It's seen in entrance into that lifelong loving union, not in an ambivalent thing that could go either way. Likewise with baptism.

Baptism is spoken of in a way that stresses what happens as we receive it properly. As we receive baptism properly, it is an entrance into new life. It's a seal of our participation in the body of Christ.

It seals to us the forgiveness of all of our sins. And so Paul and other people in the New Testament can make these very strong statements about baptism. That's not because baptism has a magical power.

No, it's because baptism has a proper force that it should have. And when it is received faithfully, it will have that force, it will have that meaning, it will have that effect. The problem is if it's not received faithfully, as it often isn't received faithfully, it will prove to be a source of judgment to us.

It won't bring us those blessings that it is supposed to bring us. And so faith is absolutely necessary to receive the sacrament in the correct way. It isn't going to work automatically in some sort of magical fashion.

The further thing to notice is it's like adoption. Adoption, where is the meaning and the force of adoption? Is adoption a statement about something that is already the case primarily? Or is it a statement about something that happens in the moment of adoption itself in a magical sense, everything happens at that point? No, the force and the

significance of adoption is mostly seen in what happens next, that that child for the rest of their life will have a loving family of which they are a true member. Now, in a situation where that child is adopted and then never actually enters into that household, never actually participates in its life, the adoption has not taken its effect.

There's been a violation of the very meaning of adoption. It's not that the adoption was carried out, but it just didn't take and that there's a sort of ambivalence to adoption. It couldn't go either way.

The point of adoption is to lead to that life and participation in a loving home. And so the prospective force of the sacrament is crucial. When we celebrate baptism, the whole force of it should be leading towards the future.

It's what happens next that matters. That this child, this adult, this convert is being baptised in order that they might enter into the fullness of life in Christ, that they might mature in that, that this might be the household that they belong to, the place that they find their belonging and their identity. And so if that's not happening, then baptism is being robbed of its force.

Baptism is not a zap in this moment in time that magically changes you into a different sort of person and then you hope you don't run out of grace gas and then have to top up somewhere down the line with penance or something like that. No, the point of baptism is that every single day from thereafter you can look back to this point as a seal of your identity and find confidence and assurance within that fact. And that every single day you live out that reality, that what has been sealed to you, the reality that you've entered into, would be something that is manifested in your life from that point forward.

The efficacy of a wedding is seen in a lifelong marriage. The efficacy of baptism is seen in lifelong faithfulness and growth in Christ. And so that is what we need to look for.

And that is what we should be aiming for, not emphasising an efficacy that is contained to that event itself. One of the strengths of the reform doctrine of baptism is the emphasis that the efficacy of baptism is not tied to the moment of administration. It's not about that single moment in time, rather it's about the whole of your life.

It's about that as the meaning and efficacy and the force of baptism. A further thing to notice, I've already compared baptism to adoption and to a wedding. In other respects it's like a coronation.

When the old king dies and the new king accedes to the throne, there is a coronation that comes after that. Now on certain occasions there can be someone who's the new king who has not yet had a coronation. Edward VIII was the king without ever receiving a coronation ceremony.

The coronation ceremony seals and confirms something that is on some level or other a

prior existing fact. It confirms the reality of your new status. It doesn't create that purely out of thin air, but rather it confirms something and seals something that is already the case, but also brings that into a new level of existence.

It's a way of entering into that reality. The king who accedes to the throne but never has a coronation has not truly entered into the reality of being a king. They've only partially done it.

Within the New Testament it's clear again and again that baptism is part of the way that we enter into the reality of Christ's salvation. It's how we are marked out as members of his body, participants in his church. Now there is some need to have a distinction between the visible and invisible church here because baptism is a purely, on one level it can be a visible sacrament.

Everyone, a lot of people receive this and many people do not enter into the reality of it. They do not receive it with faith in their lives. They do not live out that reality by faith over the course of their lives.

And so on that level we can talk about the visible church, but the true meaning, the true force of the sacrament is seen in the invisible church. The church where it is received by faith, where the objective force of the sign is not violated but has its true effect. And so everyone who receives this sign properly receives all the spiritual blessings that are sealed by that.

It's a very powerful thing. Now baptism is performed upon our bodies and our bodies are the very root of us. The body precedes volition, my choice.

The body precedes my subjectivity, my sense and my individual sense of faith and all these sorts of things. It precedes my agency, my actions. It's the basis of all my actions and within the New Testament Paul will speak about the body and its relationship to baptism in this sort of way, that through baptism our bodies are the limbs and organs of Christ.

We have been baptised into Christ and now our bodies, our limbs and our organs belong to him. The very root of our being, something that precedes our agency, something that precedes our subjectivity and volition is now Christ's. The very basis of our being, we belong to him and we're defined by him from now on.

So the basis of our selfhood has been plugged into the reality of Christ and from now on we need to live in such a way. Now many people talk about baptism as our act of obedience focused upon our agency or our decision for Christ focused upon our volition or an expression of our faith which is again focused upon our subjectivity but baptism goes deeper than all of this. Baptism is performed upon passive bodies.

Baptism, the very core action, the washing with water is something that is not performed

by us but is performed upon us and in that it declares something about the inner meaning of baptism which is that it claims us at a deeper level than all of those things that are associated with volition, subjectivity and agency. It's at the very level of the body itself. It's one of the things we see within the story of Christ, the focus upon the body throughout his story.

His story is focused upon his being conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary. He is circumcised and presented in the temple. He is baptised in the Jordan.

He is transfigured on the mount. He is crucified under Pontius Pilate, buried in the tomb, raised on the third day by the power of the Holy Spirit and caught up into heaven by that same spirit from whence he will return again bodily to judge the living and the dead and until then he's seated at God's right hand. So much of the story of Christ is focused upon his body, where his body is placed, something that even exceeds his agency in certain respects.

It's not a focus primarily upon his agency, although Christ's is involved throughout. He lays down his life and he goes to Sheol and all these sorts of things, but there's a focus upon the body as a charged significance and in the same way with us. Our body is the site that we need to focus upon.

Our bodies have been buried with Christ in baptism and in the burial of our bodies with Christ in baptism, our bodies are marked out for resurrection. We're in that liminal space, the grave, the place between death and resurrection and our bodies are in that realm of charged anticipation, a realm that has become charged with anticipation as a result of Christ's resurrection and so we are placed within that space. Now the body is also the basis of me, my selfhood in a very deep sense and this is not something we usually experience.

We usually experience our bodies as our site of action and agency, but our bodies are the very deepest place of our presence and we can see this in sexual relations or in the caress, the loving caress of someone who's ill within your family and if you just touch their body in a way, a gesture of affection or if you hug someone, it's an expression, an addressing of that person in their body. It's a significant act of touch that recognises that the self is not just up here, we aren't just ghosts inhabiting corpses but we are people who are our bodies and so addressing the person in the body is so important and God addresses us in our bodies. Our bodies are the temples of the Holy Spirit set apart for his presence and this is something we don't talk enough about in the church.

The body is the site of so many of our deepest struggles. Our bodies are our site of shame, the place where we feel the judgment of others so keenly. What we have done in our bodies or what have been done to our bodies, it's where we feel mortality, it's where we feel frailty, it's where we feel judgment and shame and all these sorts of things and in baptism, God claims our bodies, declares them to be his own, to be set apart for

resurrection, that no matter what other people have said about your body or done to your body, what you have done with your body, how you feel violated or that you have violated your body in some respect, God wants that body.

He wants you, he wants to set you apart for resurrection and in baptism, he seals that fact to you. He declares that this is not just a general fact, the truth of resurrection. The truth of resurrection is a fact about your body.

It's a fact about who you are. It's a fact that you need to take account of every single day as you struggle to live faithfully within the body and this is why Paul can talk so much about baptism in the context of sanctification because baptism is something that draws our attention to the true character of the body and how that relates to faithful living. Baptism is also something that plugs us into the story of scripture.

Why do we have this weird rite of washing with water anyway? Partly because it connects us with all these stories throughout the scripture. The story of Christ is the story of three baptisms, the baptism of Christ in the Jordan, the baptism of his death and his baptism of the church at Pentecost and in our baptisms, we are implicated in each one of those events so that our salvation is not just a fact about my private interiority but it's a plugging into the big story of what God is doing in creation throughout history and in redemption and in bringing all things together in his son and so baptism is not just about me. It's about plugging me into something so much bigger than me to make me part of this greater adventure, this greater story and so often when we talk about these events we talk about them as discrete events throughout history but the point of baptism is to show us that this is just one flood of God's redemption working through the whole narrative and into which we have become a part.

This is the music of scripture and our bodies are being caught up by that music in a sort of dance and baptism is that which catches us up within that. So now when we read the bible we're not just reading a story about something that happened to them back then but we're reading a story that is applicable to us right here right now that is about our bodies too that they were baptised in the cloud and in the sea. They're all baptised into Moses and we've been baptised into Christ.

These are our forefathers who are baptised into Moses. We are connected with them. Their story is a story about us too and so our pursuing pharaoh has been drowned in the red sea of Christ's death.

Christ has torn open the abyss of death so that we might walk through on dry land and become a new people on the other side and so all these statements about baptism connect us with a deeper story, a deeper thing that's happening throughout scripture and when you read the old testament, it's one of the things you'll see, you'll read the story of the creation of the world out of water, the division of the waters above and the waters beneath, the bringing of dry land out of water, all these sorts of things, the

waters flowing out of the garden and you'll connect that with baptism. It's a story about us too. The story of the flood as Peter talks about it that the story of the flood is a story of baptism.

It's a story of Noah being saved by the ark through the waters and there's an anti-type that now saves us, namely baptism. It's a story of the red sea crossing. It's the story of crossing the Jordan into the promised land.

It's the story of Elijah and Elisha and receiving the firstborn portion of the spirit of the prophet. So the church receives the firstborn portion of Christ's spirit as he ascends into heaven. The flip side of that event is the giving of the spirit, the descent of the spirit upon the church as its prophetic anointing and we participate in that.

It connects us with the stories of the priests and their initiation into priesthood. It connects us with Israel and all its different stories and its washings and its anticipation of a deliverance to come and it connects us with the event of Christ's death and resurrection, baptising us into his death and in anticipation of sharing in his resurrection. And so baptism does wonderful and mighty things.

It does these things by the power of the Holy Spirit and as it's received by faith, not as a sort of magical force that works automatically. And so every single day we should be living out the meaning of our baptisms, receiving by faith what God has given us in that event and not looking to that event as some sort of magical thing but seeking to confirm ourselves in a seal and a promise. A seal and a promise whose efficacy is found here and now as you look in your body, understand your body in a different way, see how it has been marked out for resurrection, as you understand your life as defined by new realities, as you read your bible in a new way.

All of these things are part of what baptism does for each one of us, part of what baptism does for me, part of what baptism does for you and unless we grasp some of this we're missing so many of the treasures that God has set before us. If you have any further questions please leave them on my Curious Cat account. If you would like to support my videos in the future please do so using my Patreon account and please tell your friends if you found these helpful.

Lord willing I'll be back again tomorrow and hopefully with another question to answer. God bless and thank you for listening.