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Q&A#83 Peter Leithart and Me on Baptismal Efficacy: Do We Disagree?

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Today's question: "I just finished Leithart's *The Priesthood of the Plebs*. It was one of the most stimulating books I have read in a long, long time. I also have recently watched some of your videos on baptism. How does your thought relate to his? I may be misreading Leithart, but he emphasizes baptism working *ex opere operato* and seems to say that baptism is salvific for all those baptized. This seems to stand in contrast to your statement in "Does Baptism Save Us?" at 13:28 that not every person baptized is saved and brought into the realities you are speaking of. Perhaps I am misunderstanding one or both of you. Or perhaps you have disagreements with Leithart. Either way, I would enjoy hearing you talk about his book and how your understanding of baptism compares and contrasts with his."

See my earlier video on baptism here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zcRrSinoggs>.

Within the video, I mention Peter Leithart's books 'The Priesthood of the Plebs' (<https://amzn.to/2Q3455v>) and 'The Baptized Body' (<https://amzn.to/2SrausE>).

If you have any questions, you can leave them on my Curious Cat account: <https://curiouscat.me/zugzwanged>.

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Transcript

Welcome back. Today's question is, I just finished reading Peter Leithart's *The Priesthood*

of the Plebs. It was one of the most stimulating books I have read in a long, long time.

I also have recently watched some of your videos on baptism. How does your thought relate to his? I may be misreading Leithart, but he emphasizes that baptism works *ex opere operato* and seems to say that baptism is salvific for all those baptized. This seems to stand in contrast to your statement in *Does Baptism Save Us?* that not every person baptized is saved and brought into the realities you are speaking of.

Perhaps I'm misunderstanding one or both of you, or perhaps you have disagreements with Leithart. Either way, I would enjoy hearing you talk about his book and how your understanding of baptism compares and contrasts with his. The book in question is Peter Leithart, *The Priesthood of the Plebs*.

It is truly a superb book. It's based upon his PhD thesis, which he did in Cambridge under John Milbank, and it is an incredibly stimulating treatment of the subject. He has also written this book, *The Baptized Body*, which is again a discussion of questions of baptismal efficacy and other things like that.

I would recommend this for a more popular audience and his *The Priesthood of the Plebs* for those who want a more scholarly and detailed treatment of the subject. *The Priesthood of the Plebs* has at its heart the paradigm of baptism into priesthood that we see within the Old Testament. So for instance, if you go to Exodus chapter 40, as Moses and his sons are set up for priesthood, we read, you shall anoint, speaking to Moses, you shall anoint the altar of the burnt offering and all its utensils and sanctify the altar.

The altar shall be most holy, and you shall anoint the labor and its bastion and sanctify it. Then you shall bring Aaron and his sons to the door of the tabernacle meeting and wash them with water. You shall put the holy garments on Aaron and anoint him and sanctify him that he may minister to me as priest, and you shall bring his sons and clothe them with tunics.

You shall anoint them as you anointed their father that they may minister to me as priests, for their anointing shall surely be an everlasting priesthood throughout their generations. And so this is a paradigm that we find alluded to in the New Testament for baptism. If we go to something like Hebrews 10, we read, therefore brethren, having boldness to enter the holiest by the blood of Jesus, by new and living way, which he consecrated for us through the veil, that is his flesh, and having a high priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience and having our bodies washed in the blood of Jesus.

where the Holy Spirit is being washed with pure water. We see similar things in Galatians 3, I think it's verse 27, when he talks about as many of those who have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There's a sort of clothing, an investiture.

And so baptism is conceived of in part according to the analogy of priesthood. Priesthood is one of the cases in the Old Testament where we do have a baptism-like ceremony, and it baptizes people into the task of priestly ministry. And so Peter Lighthouse explores this as a paradigm and argues, among other things, that it helps us to respond to Roman Catholic claims about priesthood.

It also enables us to understand something about baptismal efficacy, which is where this question comes in. So when we think about baptism into priesthood, the Levitical priests were baptized into their ministry, and that works *ex operae operato*. It's not a matter of some symbol of an inner state or anything like that.

Rather, this is something that has an objective force. When Aaron and his sons are baptized and invested for their role, they immediately enter into that role. There is something about that ceremony that works.

By the very performing of the ceremony, they are set apart for their ministry as priests. Now, that is something that people can struggle to understand from a certain understanding of, a more evangelical understanding of baptism, where it's very much about my individual state. And baptism points to that.

And so baptism gets its validity from my state of heart. So my faith is what gives baptism its efficacy and its validity. And so when this paradigm of priesthood is spoken of, it brings in a more sociological paradigm for thinking about these sorts of things.

So when we think about our ceremonies more generally, whether that's anointing for priesthood and setting apart investiture and priesthood or investiture for some other office, maybe as mayor or something like that, or we think about something like marriage, these things work in an almost, by the very performing of the ceremonies themselves, they have their effect. So when you've gone into a church as two single people and gone through a marriage ceremony, wedding ceremony, and you come out the other end as a married couple with all sorts of things being morally appropriate now that were not morally appropriate when you first walked into that building, something objective has changed. And that objective thing is not ultimately contingent upon some hidden state of heart.

It's something about the ceremony itself performed properly with intent that it has that effect. And so Peter Lighthouse is drawing attention to this, that this is something about the way that baptism works, that baptism is not just about some inner state that is represented in some, symbolized in some objective ceremony. And that I think is an important point.

He makes a number of arguments along this line that I think help to clarify what exactly he's arguing and what he is not. So he talks at considerable length about the nature of the person, because identities are formed not just in some private interiority, but in our

participation in narratives and stories, in belonging communities, all these sorts of things and roles that we have. And these become part of what we are, how we live these things out.

Thus, what is ontologically fundamental is not the naked eye laid bare by stripping away layers of accidental cultural clothing any more than God is the bare minimum of deity that remains after we peel off his attributes, word and works. Rather the ontologically fundamental self, what makes me uniquely me is a combination of the roles, stories, actions and events of my life. The individual and his world are not hermetically sealed from one another, but mutually defining.

Thus, while it is true that I am a husband, it is equally important to see that I am a husband. Husband is not an accident in hearing in an unmarried self, but one of the roles that make up my identity. Importantly, I'm a husband because I have gone through the ceremony of marriage.

Operative ceremonies thus by placing us in new roles, vesting us with new clothes and imposing new sets of obligations and rules affect an ontological transformation, a change in who we are, who we think we are and who others think we are. Baptism clothes us as priests and those clothes remake the man. When we think then about a ceremony such as marriage or baptism then, it changes us.

It forms us into new people. It forms us into new people, not by some magical reconfiguration of the heart, but by putting us in new roles, in new stories, in new identities. So when we are baptized, we are connected with this deep story that goes back to the very creation.

We are baptized like the Israelites were baptized into Moses. We are those who like Elisha are crossing through the Jordan, succeeding after the ascended prophet who has gone before us. We are those who like the priests are being appointed for office.

We are those who like Naaman are Gentiles going down into the water of the Jordan to wash away the leprosy of sin. We are those who are entering into the promised land like they did under Joshua. And in all these ways, we are becoming part of a big story, the story of Christ as well, baptized in the Jordan, appointed for his ministry, baptized in his death, baptized in that, or his baptism that he performs in the day of Pentecost as well.

And so all of these things are now part of our story. We're knit into this. And also he points out that individuals are bound up with this larger community of the church.

Now the church would not exist apart from visible signs. And this is one of the things that Augustine points out that visible signs, as he thinks about, is not merely some opposition between invisible interiority being expressed in some visible exteriority as a secondary thing, some deterioration from what is more primary. Rather, his point is that

communities cannot exist without visible signs.

And so these visible signs are those things within which a community finds its life. Likewise, the club as club exists only in and through these institutions and practices. Likewise, theoretically, any number of individuals may sincerely believe that Jesus is Lord without forming a church.

The church as a recognizable human community exists only in her common confession of Christ, obedience to the word, liturgical practices, fellowship and mutual aid, and formal and informal procedures of correction and forgiveness. If the spirit dwells in the church as church, he dwells in the people constituted by these practices. Baptism is one of the practices without which the church does not exist.

Initiation is thus not so much a doorway through which one passes into the house as the first act of membership and therefore the first contact with the spirit who circulates through the body. Baptism into the ecclesial priesthood that is the house therefore also confers the arrow bone, the earnest of the spirit. Finally, we may consider the relation of baptism to salvation.

Salvation is not an entity, substance or power that floats free of persons in concrete situations. Rather, salvation is adjectival. Persons, communities and in a sense, the non-human creation are or will be saved.

A saved person is one who redeemed in Christ from sin and death, lives as Christ created him to live, walking with God, submissive to his rule. A saved people consists of the redeemed whose communal life is conformed to the new covenant under the Lord Christ. Salvation in its fullest sense is eschatological.

Only at the end will death be swallowed up in victory and God's will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Yet because the church is on the path towards this eschatological consummation she anticipates to the extent that she conforms to the will of Christ, the final piece of that kingdom. Yet because the church is on the path towards this eschatological consummation.

Okay. The church as a concrete historical community is thus not merely the means of salvation, but the already partially realized goal. And so what he's talking about here, we've first of all understood that human beings are not just detached interiorities that have a second level of social construction.

They're part of these communities. Rather as persons, we are bound up with these stories, bound up with these communities and these roles that we're within. And so to be a husband is something about who you are.

It's something primary to your identity. It's not something that is secondary and something that is pasted on top of something that's more fundamental, some private

interiority that's detached from all of this. Indeed, our interiority is something that's formed from the outside in.

We are given language, we are given structures, we're given identities and roles and a place within the world out of which we can articulate what it means to be a self in that place. The self is not some detached entity that precedes my existence in relationship, my existence in particular roles, my existence in particular offices. I understand myself in terms of these things.

And so this is an important part of his argument here. What he's trying to point out is that the self is not something that can be reduced to an interiority and then seeing these things as exterior things that are not really connected to the true reality of the human self. Rather baptism or marriage or these other operative ceremonies are things that have at their heart something that is integral to the human person.

These are not, when we think about a proper sort of anthropology, it leads to an understanding of rights and ceremonies that are not merely external. And so there is an objective efficacy to these rights. These rights genuinely change who I am.

And that is important in the case of baptism. So for me to be baptized is a change in who I am. I become a different person when I've been baptized.

And that shocks many people because they think of the true person as purely interior, but the true person is exterior too. I become a different person if I go through a wedding ceremony and I become a different person when I go through the ceremony of baptism. As I go through the rite of baptism, I become a baptized person.

I become a member of the body of Christ, a visible part of the visible church. Now, how does this all relate to what I've been arguing? I believe that this, what Peter Lighthouse argues, is quite right. I quite agree with it.

But I think there's a certain point we need to go further. He's pushing against a way in which we've had this very subjective understanding of human identity, a form of human identity that detaches the true self from the self as defined by roles, by offices, by membership in communities, by these exterior things, and has a very strong external, internal opposition. But what I'm trying to emphasize is that the meaning, well, a couple of things.

The meaning of rites like baptism or marriage is not purely contained within those rites themselves. There is an elocutionary force to something like a marriage ceremony, a wedding ceremony. A wedding ceremony is not merely about that moment itself, that two people are joined together in that specific moment.

That happens. But the elocutionary force of a wedding ceremony is joining two people together for life. It has a promissory force, and its efficacy is something that is bound up

with what happens next.

And that, I think, goes a bit further than what Peter Lighthouse is saying. Peter Lighthouse's argument, which I entirely agree with, focuses upon the objective union that is formed at that period of time, and what that everything else being defined in terms of that. But there is that elocutionary force as well.

So when I've been baptized, I have genuinely been made a part of the priesthood of the visible church. I've been brought into that reality. But, and this is a very important but, what the efficacy of baptism means has a great deal to do with what happens next.

Am I going to live out that reality, or am I going to abandon it? Am I going to be an unfaithful priest, or am I going to be a faithful one? And the point of baptism is not just to make people priests in an objective sense. Rather, it's to bring people into the newness of life of the body of Christ as they live out of that life. And so people are brought into that community, that community where the spirit dwells in baptism, that this is part of our entrance into the community, not merely in order that we might just have an objective status and rest in that, but that we might live it out.

And in the same way, I've given the example of adoption, that we are adopted, and the adoption objectively changes our status. We become a different person when we're adopted. That moment you are adopted, you are a new person.

You're a member of a new family. You have a new name. You have new relationships.

You have new siblings. You have new parents, and you have a new place in the world. You have become a new person.

But yet, there is an objective force in that sense, a legal external force, but then there's also this need to live out that identity, to follow that up with what happens next. So the meaning of adoption is not merely that moment where things objectively change. You're objectively reconfigured as a person.

Rather, the meaning is primarily found in every day relating to your new adoptive parents as mother and father. And other people treating you in that way. And giving that, as it is faithfully lived out, it has its proper force.

And so if we're thinking about baptism purely in terms of, it is my subjective state that gives baptism its force, we're missing something important. We're missing what Peter Lighthouse highlights about the objective force of a performative, of operative ritual. On the other hand, if we think purely in terms of the performative force of an operative ritual, we can lose sight of the need for us to live these things out.

And that being part of the efficacy of the right. The efficacy is the way that we live out the meaning of what has occurred. So I don't think we're in any fundamental

disagreement here.

I think it's a difference of emphasis. Peter Lighthouse is focusing very much upon a certain form of evangelical understanding of baptism that is very prevalent. And he's challenging that, focusing very much upon the operative force of the operative efficacy of rights.

Whereas I'm focusing upon what happens beyond that. That we're not given baptism merely in order to create people who are in an objective sense, priests, whether they're faithful or not. No, the purpose of baptism, it's elocutionary force.

What it is intended to perform, what it is intended to create, is living members of the body of Christ. And to be living members of this body of Christ, to participate in the life of the spirit, in the rights of this community, which again, highlights the fact that salvation is not just something that's interior. Salvation is partly realized in the life of the visible church, as it faithfully lives out what Christ has declared it to be.

And as the spirit works within it to produce Christ's image, as we faithfully live that out, that is what the purpose of baptism is. Baptism is creating that community, not just a community that is visible, the visible church in the lowest common denominator sense that these people just so happened to have gone, had this right, and they're part of the club, even if they're not really acting in any way that's conforming to what is proper to that reality. And so the difference here is a difference of emphasis, but the emphasis I think that both of us have is important.

Peter Lighthouse's emphasis is very important to push against a certain subjectivization of baptism, that it's purely my faith that gives baptism its meaning, and baptism has no objective force. If baptism has no objective force, then it does not have the promissory force that we need it to have. Baptism should be approached as a promise that I can take hold of for the entirety of my life, that I can depend upon this, that God has said something in baptism, and I can lay hold of that and find comfort and assurance within that.

And it's also something that has changed me. I've become a new person in this, and I have new responsibilities, a new sort of belonging, a new sort of calling and identity, and that is a great assurance and challenge, but it is not in itself enough. What is needed, what is called for is faith in responding to that in an appropriate way.

And that is what baptism has as its primary and highest end, producing that life of faith and belonging and communion with Christ and with our brothers and sisters in his body. And where that is lost sight of, we can easily reduce our understanding of baptism merely to people on a membership role, as it were, and that is a severe problem. I think this is one of the problems in certain communions, not least my own in the Church of England, that have treated baptism very much as something that you give to children

willy-nilly without consideration of whether they will be raised in the life of faith.

And this is something that has deep consequences for the efficacy of baptism. When baptism comes to be seen purely as an objective thing, merely focused upon that particular ceremony and its operative force, what it has created, there can be a sort of approach to baptism that's superstitious, that sees within baptism some sort of magical force within that event itself, rather than seeing the efficacy of baptism as being related to what happens as we live it out by faith. And so the danger of focusing purely upon the operative efficacy, the operative force of these sorts of rites and their efficacy in the objective sense and bringing us into new roles, communal identities, things like that, the danger in that is that it can leave us in a more superstitious understanding because we're not thinking about the efficacy of how we live this out in the long term.

And that's where I want to place the emphasis upon. So what Peter Lighthouse says is a very important word against those who would purely subjectify as baptism and leave us with not much of a promise to hold on to. That baptism just becomes something that depends upon our faith itself.

And our faith is weak and our faith is frail and our faith is fluctuating. And that's not much of a comfort as it should be. Baptism just is an externalization of some interior state.

But then if baptism is purely external, there's another problem. One of the things that makes marriage efficacious, what makes language, what makes all these external things efficacious is as we take them into ourselves. And so having the external force of this efficacious rite is important.

But the point is to take that in and then to live it out. And that is where I want to place the emphasis. And so when we talk about baptism into the visible church, we are talking about something that should have as its effect the fullness of life in participation in the body of Christ, in communion with him.

And where that is lost, something very important has been removed from the picture. And this, I believe, is something that certain contexts need this word very, they really need this word. Whereas other contexts, I think the context into which Peter Lighthouse is writing, it needs that challenge, the challenge that baptism has an objective force.

But that objective force is not merely an ambivalent thing that you're being baptised into priesthood and you could be faithful, you could be unfaithful, but the important thing is that you're being baptised into priesthood. No, the point of baptism is that you're baptised into priesthood in order that you might be a faithful and beloved member of God's house and live out that reality in his house for the rest of the days of your life, that you might belong as a beloved son. And where that is lost sight of, then I think baptism becomes considerably reduced in what it should be.

And so we need to hold both aspects of this. We need to recognise the anthropological points that Peter Lighthouse makes. And we need to recognise that the external realities are very important and they impinge upon the internal reality.

And the internal reality is built out of that. That is spot on and it's very important. But we also need to recognise the importance of living out.

For that right to have its efficacy, to have its proper purpose, it needs to be lived out for the entirety of our lives. I highly recommend that you read Peter Lighthouse on this subject. There's a lot that he says that develops this thought.

I would recommend priesthood of the plebs and the baptised body. Both of these books are worth reading. I'll leave the links for those below.

Lord willing, I'll be back again tomorrow with some further thoughts. Thank you very much for listening, for your time. If you would like to ask me any questions, please do so using my Curious Cat account.

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