

# What does my baptism mean?

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**Richard Dawson**

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Romans 6<sup>1-14</sup>

For many of us baptism has been an important step along the faith journey and certainly one which the church has emphasised as being important. But I wonder how many of us really understand the significance of our baptism and what it really means in terms of our on-going walk with Christ?

It is, perhaps, easy to view baptism simply as a kind of special joining ritual whereby we have to do certain things to belong to a special club but the Church has never viewed baptism as merely something we have to do to belong.

Baptism is much more than a joining ceremony. It is, for example, a sacrament, one of two which Reformed churches have retained from the Roman Catholic tradition and these were retained because they were the ones which could be identified as having been clearly established by Christ in the Gospels. A sacrament is an act of the Church which helps us to focus on a special aspect of the work of God. So under this definition our focus in baptism is not simply on the person being baptised but on God's work in bringing that person into a new relationship with God. In short a sacrament is a dramatic way of preaching God's Word to us which also seals the work Christ has done on our behalf. Baptism is also something that very definitely points the way ahead for every believer. It is, if you like, a picture of the true dynamic of the Christian life; a reminder of **how** we are to work out this mysterious life of faith which Jesus invites us all into. And baptism does this by calling the candidate to confess their faith and then to give themselves freely to the waters of baptism. This giving of oneself to God freely represents the true and on-going dynamic of faith. As we give ourselves to God so God can work in our lives to both free us from sin and to lead us into a new way of living our lives.

So I ask again, what does our baptism mean for us and in a short space of time I am going to give you three vital things it should mean.

In the first place baptism is a sign and seal of God's promise that he will make us holy. We are to become, with the Church, free from shame and condemnation. This is a picture of one of the central features of God's dealing with us. What does God want to do with us? God wants to cleanse us by setting us free from sin and by virtue of Christ's death on the Cross this is entirely possible. Baptism is a picture of this for us. It is not the reality of it. We are not clean simply because we've been baptised but we are clean by virtue of continuing to walk in the direction our baptism sets for us. And that direction is the one of sharing life with Christ. Our baptism

means that we are made clean by walking with Christ because He is already clean. As we are washed in the waters of baptism so we are washed through our relationships with Christ.

Secondly, my baptism reminds me of the high cost of grace and as such it raises for me an expectation of battle. Whenever we set out to achieve something one of the most important things we need to do is to have an accurate assessment of what the achievement will cost. How hard will it be? How long will it take? How much will it cost? Jesus says that anyone coming against someone else intending to make war must be very careful to work out whether the person they're going to attack has a bigger army. If they have a bigger army, says Jesus, start making peace in a hurry. When we come to faith we need to be clear about the size of the job and baptism tells us in no uncertain terms because our baptism reminds us again and again that God's dealing with us will entail a death, indeed, many deaths. Our baptism stands for the battle against sin which has scarred our lives and, indeed, the whole of Creation and it reminds us that we must join this battle but only as those who have Christ as their captain.

Now this might seem to be a really unattractive part of Christianity and I know many people don't like talk about death or sin but this is a huge part of the Christian story. We've already noted that baptism includes the promise of being clean. What now becomes clear is that this also entails a death. The death we remember in baptism is first and foremost Christ's death on the Cross but we are called, in baptism, to share in this death. How, then, are we to share in Christ's death? Baptism again provides the key. We share in Christ's death by submitting to His Word. As we learnt to obey God rather than the frantic cries of our own heart we put to death that which competes for our trust in God. Furthermore, and I will say a little about this shortly, in baptism we join a host of others working in the same direction. In baptism we join a peoples united to worship God and, as we all know, we are much stronger together than we are alone. Let us remind ourselves that this is not easy. We have an enemy who would see us give our loyalty to something else. There is a battle involved here.

Finally my baptism means that I have a good future no matter what life has brought or may bring. The Reformers were fond of describing sacraments as a 'sign and seal' of God's grace. Grace is the free unmerited gift of God. It is a word used to describe how God relates to us through Christ. Through Christ God bestows upon humankind gift after gift. 1 Peter 3v21 says "Baptism ... now saves you also – not the removal of dirt from the body but the pledge of a good conscience toward God. It saves you by the resurrection of Jesus Christ" In the language of the Bible, spiritual realities such as rebirth, renewal, forgiveness, salvation, and union with Christ are intimately associated with the rite of baptism. And, as Paul reminds us, **"Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life."** (Roms 6) Baptism is a conferring of life upon those who would be saved. It is an open doorway to God's mercy and grace and it not only provides the way but it illuminates that way as well.

The fact is, we cannot please God living independently from Him and even as born again believers our hope lies not in the fact that we've made a decision for Christ **but that Christ has**

**made a decision for us.** You see while our decision for Christ is important in that it constitutes a significant step towards God there is always the potential for us to decide against Christ in the future and, in fact, most of us do this on an almost daily basis. Most of us choose, quite often, to ignore the voice of the Holy Spirit and to go our own way even after we've become Christians. So if we place all our eggs in this basket of human decision we are actually building on sand. What really counts is that in our baptism we discover that God, in Christ, has made a decision for us! And this is what our baptism really means. It means 'we celebrate that in Christ God has made a decision for Richard or Fran or John or Ben!' We rejoice that no longer does the final say rest with human action or will and we remember that in every situation the decision Christ has made for us is always more important than my decision for or against God.

How can you say this Richard? How can you say that my decision against God doesn't count when it comes to God's love for me? I can say it because this is what the Scriptures say.

<sup>11</sup>The saying is sure: [says Paul]

If we have died with him, we will also live with him;

<sup>12</sup>if we endure, we will also reign with him;

if we deny him, he will also deny us;

<sup>13</sup>**if we are faithless, he remains faithful—  
for he cannot deny himself.** (2 Tim 2)

But this means also that we must remember that God's decision for us is also a decision against our wrongdoing and that we, in deciding for Christ, have said to God – I choose to let these bad things die – I choose, as it were, against myself.

All of our life with Christ has this shadow hanging over it – the shadow of our sin and propensity for being sinful. Our baptism means that despite this shadow we have a friend in God. We cannot run from the shadow but wherever the shadow might go God's reach is further. **Sin does not defeat God. God has defeated sin.**

In baptism we are made clean. In baptism we are confronted with death and are led to overcome it. In baptism we are confronted with grace and come into the inheritance of Christ.

Those of you who have not been baptised and believe – can I encourage you now to take this step of obedience and to obey Christ in this matter. AMEN