**Foundations (51 of 60) Baptism - RC Sproul**

Christians have baptized new converts ever since the New Testament era. But what's the point of baptism? Why do we do it? That's our topic on Renewing Your Mind. Welcome to the weekend edition of Renewing Your Mind.

Our teacher is the founder and chairman of Ligonier Ministries, Dr. R.C. Sproul. For the last several months, we've been studying systematic theology in a series titled Foundations. Today, Dr. Sproul continues this series by explaining the sacrament of water baptism.

Most churches teach that Christians should be baptized, but what are the benefits? Is it just a symbol, or is there a deeper significance to this sacrament? We'll hear the answer to these questions and more as Dr. Sproul explains how baptism serves as a promise from God. I wonder how many of you have been baptized one time or another in your life. I know there are many Christian communities that will not baptize people until they're adults and make a profession of faith, whereas many other Christian communities baptize babies shortly after they are born.

And so there are vast numbers of people walking around in America and in this world who have received the sacrament of baptism. I might come up to you and say, are you baptized? And you may say to me, yes. And then I might say to you, so what? What's the big deal about being baptized? And nevertheless, when we go to the New Testament, we see that Jesus commands His church to preach the gospel to every tongue and tribe and nation, to every living creature, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and the Holy Spirit.

Why? Why is baptism such an integral part of organized Christianity? What's its meaning? What's its origin? What is its significance? Well, I was talking to somebody recently who said he understood that baptism was that which was initiated and established by John the Baptist, and I tried to explain to him that there was not an exact identity between the baptism of John the Baptist and the New Testament rite that we celebrate in the Christian community. And he was absolutely astonished to hear such a thing, as if what I was telling him was off the wall, and I explained to him that I didn't know any New Testament scholar in the world who would disagree with the basic premise that there is a difference between the baptism of John the Baptist and New Testament baptism, and briefly, the difference is this. The baptism that John the Baptist inaugurated was directed specifically to the Jewish nation, and it was initiated during what we would call the period of the Old Testament.

And its significance in the New Testament is seen in this, that for centuries God had promised the future coming of the Messiah, and then when the time had been fulfilled for the Messiah to make His entrance into the community, just as the Old Testament had predicted, God sent a prophet out of the wilderness saying to the people of Israel, you know, to make straight the highway of the Lord and to prepare for the coming of the Lord's anointed. And that was John's message. John came out of the wilderness as a herald to proclaim the very nearness of the coming of the Messiah.

The axe is laid at the root of the tree, his fan is in his hand, I mean it's right around the corner. And the point is that he was saying to Israel, and you're not ready. Now, in between the end of the Old Testament and the beginning of the New Testament presumably, a practice emerged among the Jews called proselyte baptism.

And that was a baptism, a purification rite, a bathing that symbolized the cleansing of people who were considered to be unclean. And it was reserved for the Gentiles. During that period, if a person who was not a Jew, a person who was a Gentile, wanted to become a Jew, that person had to do three things.

He had to make a profession of faith in Judaism, if he was a male, he had to undergo circumcision, but in addition to that, he had to undergo this purification rite of proselyte baptism, because he was considered ceremonially unclean. And the thing that was scandalous about John the Baptist was he comes now to the Jews and tells them, you need to take a bath. You need to repent of your sins and get ready for the coming of the Messiah.

Repent and be baptized, for the kingdom of God is at hand. And this is what so outraged the Pharisees. They said, what do you mean? We're the children of Abraham.

We don't need to take a bath. John the Baptist is saying, God has now imposed this new rite of preparation for the Jewish people. Now, then the Messiah came.

And when the Messiah came, as we've already seen in our study of the Lord's Supper, Jesus instituted a new covenant. And in instituting a new covenant, which differed from the old covenant, He instituted a new sign of the covenant. Remember the sign of the covenant that God made with Noah? Whenever God would make covenants, He would give the people a sign that confirmed or ratified the covenantal promise.

And when God made His promise to Noah that He would not destroy the world again with water, He gave a sign to Noah. And what was the sign? The rainbow in the sky. So that God would say, anytime you see the rainbow, that's a reminder of My promise to Noah.

I think about that every single time I see a rainbow. I said, there's God's sign in the sky. Well, then when He incorporated the nation Israel and brought to Himself a family of people, a nation of people through which He was going to bless the whole world, and He entered into a covenant with these people, with Abraham and with his seed, He established a sign or a symbol that was visible outwardly of that covenant.

And the sign of the old covenant was what? Circumcision. Circumcision became the sign of God's promise. Now, did circumcision save anybody? A lot of people began to think that it did.

A lot of people thought, like the Pharisees, that if you were circumcised, that guaranteed you were saved. And that's what Paul labors in the early chapters of Romans when he said no, that the one who is a true Jew is not one who is simply a Jew outwardly because he bears in his body the sign of circumcision, but one who is circumcised inwardly in the heart. That's the one who is redeemed.

And then in discussing that, he anticipates some questions that people are going to raise. They're going to say, well, if the sign of the covenant doesn't save anybody, what good is it? Why be concerned about it? Why was God going to kill Moses when he failed to give the sign to his son? What's the big deal? Paul asks the question this way, what advantage then is it to be a Jew, that is to be marked and set apart with this sign? And what does he say? Much, in every way, because they had the oracles of God. Now, what's the apostle getting at? He said even though the sign doesn't save, does not mean that the sign is insignificant or meaningless.

It's like saying to me that a visible sign of a promise of God is meaningless. What an outrageously blasphemous sentiment that would be. And what the significance of circumcision was this, God said, here's My promise, and My promise, I'm entering into a covenant with you, that all who put their trust in Me will be saved.

And to illustrate that, I'm going to mark this forever in your body through the sign of circumcision, which confirmed the validity of the promise of God. Now, again, but the promise of God was not to be realized except through faith. But everyone who had faith then received the fullness of the promise, and the promise was underscored and dramatized by the outward sign.

Now, the point is this, in the New Testament, the sign of the new covenant is no longer circumcision, is it? And remember the big dispute that Paul had to go over with the Judaizers of his day who wanted to insist that all converts to Christianity be circumcised. And Paul said, I wish that these people who were teaching that would be circumcised, literally circumcised, because of what they don't understand. Don't you understand that circumcision was a sign not only of the promise of the covenant, but also of the curse of the covenant, where a person was saying, if I don't fulfill the terms of the old covenant, the law of God, may I be cut off from His presence.

And don't you understand that on the cross, Christ became a curse, and on the cross, Christ fulfilled all of the negative sanctions indicated by circumcision. And you want to get circumcised again? If you want to be circumcised again as a religious symbol, what you're saying is, I don't believe that Christ fulfilled the old covenant, and I'm going to go right back under the terms of the old covenant. And so Paul becomes vehemently opposed to the Judaizers who are going to deny the significance of the fulfillment of these Old Testament principles.

Now does that mean there is no continuity between the Old Testament and the New Testament? God forbid. We're still the children of Abraham. We're the Gentiles who've been grafted in like a wild olive tree onto the original branch, right, onto the original root, so that there is continuity between the Old Testament and the New Testament, but not identity.

Now in the Old Testament, the sign of the covenant was circumcision. In the New Covenant, the covenant sign is not the baptism of John, but the baptism of Jesus, where Jesus took this rite of cleansing and now identified it not with Israel, but with His new covenant. And so baptism replaces circumcision as the outward sign of membership or inclusion in the new covenant community.

Now again, just because a person is baptized does not mean that they have salvation. It does mean they have the promise of God, of all of the benefits of Christ, if and when they believe. Luther, for example, when he would undergo these intense, difficult sessions of being attacked by Satan, where he could almost see Satan, I mean, he said his presence was almost tactile, and he would throw inkwells at him and so on, and have all of these difficult seasons where he said he experienced what he called the unfecting of Satan, which means the unmitigated, unbridled, satanic assault against his soul.

And Luther said when he would be subjected to such a siege of Satan's accusations and so on, he would say out loud to Satan, be gone from me, I'm baptized. Why would he say that? What he was saying is this, I'm holding on by faith to the promises of God that are communicated to His people in this covenant sign, and God doesn't lie. Satan, you're a liar, I'm putting my confidence here, don't try to distract my attention away from the Word of God.

That's the significance of baptism. It is a dramatized Word. It is God's Word of promise to all who believe.

Let me turn your attention just briefly to Paul's letter to the Colossians. In chapter 2 of Colossians, beginning in verse 8, Paul writes these words, Beware, lest anyone cheat you through philosophy and empty deceit, according to the tradition of men, according to the basic principles of the world, and not according to Christ. For in Him, that is Christ, dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily.

And you are complete in Him, who is the head of all principality and power. In Him you were also circumcised with the circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the sins of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, buried with Him in baptism, in which you also were raised with Him through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead. You see what Paul is saying here.

He speaks of the circumcision not made with hands, and he sees this directly in the link here between the circumcision of the Old Testament and the baptism of the New Testament. Okay, so baptism is the new covenant sign. What does it mean? Obviously, part of its significance, or what it signifies, is our cleansing from sin.

In John's hands, it was a cleansing rite. But the reason why the baptism of John is not to be identified or equated exactly with New Testament baptism is because New Testament baptism signifies so much more than what John's baptism. All John's baptism really did was prepare people through cleansing them from sin.

And we need to be cleansed from sin, and the sign of our cleansing from sin is the sign of baptism. That's why you have the labor or the ritual of the use of water. It's a bathing symbol.

But what else does it signify? Buried with Him in baptism. We just read there that one of the crucial significances of baptism is what baptism does is it is the sign, in a sense, that indicates all of the benefits that we receive from Christ. It's a sign of our regeneration.

It's a sign of the Holy Spirit quickening us from the dead, from spiritual death, and making us new creatures. Not that the sign accomplishes that, but the sign is a sign of the work of the Spirit who does do the regenerating. It's the sign of our being baptized in the Holy Ghost.

Water baptism is not the baptism of the Holy Spirit, but it is the sign of the baptism of the Holy Spirit, that just as we are baptized with water, so God promises to baptize all of those who are in Christ with His Holy Spirit. Also, baptism indicates our participation in the death of Christ and in the resurrection of Christ. Again, the symbolism of being buried and being raised from the dead.

It's that promise. Christ is saying anyone who believes participates in the death of Christ. How? Well, more than one way.

One way I participate in the death of Christ is He wouldn't have had to die. If I were the only person that ever sinned in the world and God wanted to save me, Christ would have had to die, because my sins are imputed to Christ on the cross. And so, in a very real sense, I die with Him on the cross because my sins are punished on Him and in Him on the cross.

But not only that, there's more to it than that, that Paul frequently says that we are called to participate in the suffering of Jesus Christ, not by presenting our bodies as an atonement for our own sin. There's not enough value in my physical body or in my human life to make up for my sin. We've looked at that in the concept of the atonement, that it takes one who is sinless to satisfy the demands of God.

I'm not sinless, so I couldn't atone for my own sins, could I? However, I am still called to participate in the afflictions and the sufferings of Christ, not meritoriously, but in the sense of identifying with our crucified Lord and entering into His afflictions with Him and being willing to participate in His humiliation and in His suffering. And that's part of what baptism signifies. How many times does the Apostle Paul say that unless you are willing to participate in the afflictions of Christ, in the sufferings of Christ, in the humiliation of Jesus, you will not participate in His exaltation.

And yet the promise of Christ is this, to all who put their trust in Him, who follow Him, are His faithful disciples. They will be hated. They will be persecuted in this world.

They will be called upon to suffer and to enter into afflictions, and those afflictions aren't worthy to be compared for a moment, compared to the glory that God has stored up for His people in heaven. And so Paul is saying, remember that you are going to participate in the resurrection of Christ. You're going to participate in the exaltation of Christ.

You're going to join in all of the benefits that He receives. And the sign of that promise of your participation in the benefits of Christ is baptism. Baptism signifies your participation in His death and in His resurrection, in His suffering, in His humiliation, and in His exaltation.

Again, the rite doesn't communicate the benefits. What the rite communicates is the certainty of the promise of God to all who put their trust in Jesus. Now, of course, the most fierce controversy of baptism is who qualifies for it.

And there are churches who argue that only those who are adults and who make a conscious profession of faith can be baptized. That's the minority report historically. The majority report in the Christian world has been that just as the Old Testament covenant promise was given to Abraham and to his seed, so the New Testament covenant promise is given to believers and to their seed, and that just as the Old Covenant, the sign of the covenant was given to believers and to their children, so in the New Covenant, the sign is given to believers and to their children, because that's nowhere rescinded or repudiated in the New Testament in principle, and that just as baptism is a sign of faith, among other things, so circumcision was a sign of faith.

And we can't argue principally that because something is a sign of faith you can't give it to children. Again, the point is that neither circumcision nor baptism confers the faith. What it confers is the promise of God to all who do believe.

So, I think we would all agree that you don't have the benefits until you have faith, but you can have the promise of God of those benefits. Calvin would argue that the efficacy of the sacrament is never tied to the time that it is given. It may come before, during, or after the administration of the sign, even as was the case in circumcision.

But that's a matter for your further reflection. It's one that is not a simple one to deal with, but the main thing that we're trying to get across today is the significance of baptism as a meaningful promise of God, and its validity rests not upon the person who receives it, or on the person who administers it, or on parents or on anybody else. Its validity rests upon the character of the one whose promise it is, namely God.

You're listening to a lesson on baptism from Dr. R. C. Sproul on Renewing Your Mind, a reminder of God's holiness and His glory. Today's message comes from the series titled Foundations, an overview of systematic theology. Maybe you've been put off by the term systematic theology in the past.

Those words sound quite academic, but when we understand the orchestration of God's redemptive story woven through the entirety of the Bible, systematic theology comes alive. Today we're offering the entire Foundation series on DVD when you give a donation of any amount. Enter the classroom with Dr. Sproul as he teaches 60 lessons covering the spectrum of theology.

With each study, you'll understand how the Bible fits together in perfect harmony. You'll receive far more than a DVD series when you give a donation today. This limited edition also includes a CD-ROM containing all of the audio from the series, as well as a complete printable study guide.

This unprecedented offer isn't available anywhere else. The only way to get this DVD, CD-ROM, and the study guide is to contact us today. Call 1-800-435-4343, or if you prefer to give online, go to rymoffer.com. We're offering this comprehensive set today as a means of living out our calling.

Ligonier Ministries wants Christians everywhere to understand the holiness of God. Dr. Sproul is the founder and chairman of Ligonier, and his passion for God's glory is evident in every one of the messages in this series. When you request foundations, you don't have to watch the series in order.

Maybe there's a particular topic you're interested in, like miracles or the return of Christ. You can start at the beginning and watch all 60 messages, or you can watch the lessons that are especially relevant to you right now. The choice is up to you.

And it doesn't matter whether you watch the DVD or listen to the audio from the CD-ROM. You can use the printable study guide to follow along and take notes. Request the series titled Foundations, an overview of systematic theology, when you give a donation of any amount.

Please consider the value of this 60-part DVD series, along with the CD-ROM and study guide, when you determine the size of your donation. Call 1-800-435-4343, or give online at rymoffer.com. I'm Lee Webb. Catholics, Anabaptists, Lutherans and Reformed Christians disagree on the manner and meaning of the Lord's Supper.

Join us when Dr. Sproul explains these views next weekend, right here on Renewing Your Mind.