

Galatians 3:27-29  
"The Significance of Baptism"  
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Earlier this week, Barbara Walters on the ABC program 20/20 had an interview with Elizabeth Taylor. The purpose of the interview was to look at Miss Taylor's impressive collection of jewelry, the estimated value of which is between 80 and 150 million dollars. During the program, we learned that although Miss Taylor bought much of the jewelry herself, much of it was also given to her by former husbands, especially Richard Burton. Richard Burton showered her with spectacular jewels, including the famous Krupp diamond, the 16th century Taj Mahal diamond necklace, the King Farouk bracelet, and a pearl necklace once owned by Queen Mary Tudor of England. No doubt when Richard Burton rained these jewels upon Elizabeth Taylor, he intended them as tokens of his love for her. Yet Elizabeth divorced Richard twice but kept the jewels. She divorced him, but she kept the jewels which were meant to be tokens of his love for her. Do you see the irony there? The contradiction? The frustrated purpose?

When a husband gives his wife something valuable as a token of his love for her, and then she comes to love and appreciate the token more than she does him, then the gift has failed its intended purpose. Yes, the gift is meant to give the wife

pleasure in and of itself, but its primary purpose and greater purpose is to serve as an illustration of the husband's love for her and an assurance to her that he does indeed love her. The gift is not meant to be primarily an end in itself. It is meant to serve a greater purpose beyond itself.

Beloved, Christ has given His Bride, the Church, the jewels of baptism and the Lord's supper. These are His sacraments, holy ordinances which He Himself instituted as outward means to communicate to us the benefits of redemption. Their intended purpose is to be signs and seals of the love of Christ for His Church as revealed in the gospel message. As signs, they symbolize the gospel message. As seals, they are guarantees of God's love. They are meant to be valued, but not as ends in themselves. They are meant to serve a greater purpose beyond themselves.

The church errs which does not value these jewels. And the church errs which values these jewels as ends in themselves.

There are churches which do not value these jewels. The most extreme form is found in those churches which do not practice either baptism or the Lord's Supper. Though they are not common, there are such churches. They argue, We have baptism with the Holy Spirit, so why do we need baptism with water? And we feed upon Christ spiritually in our hearts, so why do we need to partake of the Lord's Supper? And we have the gospel promise in the preaching of the word, so why do we need any visual symbols of that gospel promise? Well, the simple answer

to this is that we need the sacraments because Christ says we do, and He knows what we need better than we do. Christ says we need the physical and visual sacraments as signs because our understanding is weak and as seals because our faith is weak.

Churches that totally reject the sacraments are rare. There are less radical ways to devalue the sacraments that are more common. A church has an infant baptism service, and they see it as no more than a public dedication of the child to God. Well, it is that, but it is also so much more. A church has an adult baptism, and they see it as no more than the person's public identification with the church. Well, it is that, but it is so much more. Baptism is not primarily a human statement but a divine statement. It is a sign and seal through which God points us to Christ and the gospel and salvation. It is God's declaration regarding the one baptized that salvation is his to claim through faith in Christ. It is a means God uses to strengthen the faith that comes from hearing the gospel message.

It is an error to undervalue these jewels entrusted to us by Christ. It is also an error to value them as ends in and of themselves apart from the blessing of Christ and the working of His Spirit. This is the error illustrated by Elizabeth Taylor's divorcing Richard Burton but keeping his jewels, continuing to value them but no longer as tokens of his love and affection. We misunderstand and overvalue our baptism with water if we think it is going to save us in and of itself, if we think we are going to heaven simply because we have experienced this ritual. We should not look at our baptism as our salvation but as a pointer

to Jesus Christ and the salvation that is found in Him. Baptism is not meant to be the object of our faith but rather the means of strengthening our faith in Christ. Baptism points not to itself but to Christ.

Suppose my wife asked me to take her to Memphis, so I got in the car with her and drove north to interstate 40 where a sign with Nashville on it points to the first entrance ramp and a sign with Memphis on it points to the second entrance ramp. And I stopped the car at the Memphis sign, and said, "Well, here we are. The sign says Memphis." That sign is important because it tells me which ramp to take to go to Memphis. But I have misused the sign if I confuse the sign with the destination it points to. That is the same basic mistake we make when we focus our faith on our baptism. Our baptism is meant to be a sign that points not to itself but to Jesus as Savior.

Let's now look at our Scripture reading for today and let us seek with God's help to interpret it without either overvaluing or undervaluing our baptism with water. And I believe the key to this is our understanding the relationship between baptism with water and baptism with the Holy Spirit. John the Baptist said regarding Jesus,

Mark 1:8

8 "I indeed baptized you with water, but He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

Like John the Baptist, I can baptize with water, but only Jesus

can baptize with the Holy Spirit. Jesus sends His Holy Spirit to apply the saving power of Jesus' redemptive work to the hearts and lives of those whom God has given Jesus to save. Scripture repeatedly represents this as Jesus' pouring out the Holy Spirit down from above. For example, Titus 3:5-6 says,

"... not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to [God's] mercy He saved us, through the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit, whom He **poured** out on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Savior ..."

So the imagery is that Jesus sends the Holy Spirit down upon us from above like water being poured out upon us. When the Holy Spirit comes upon us, He baptizes us into Christ, which means He immerses us into Christ, He establishes us in a permanent covenant union with Christ. This understanding of baptism with the Spirit is consistent with the common usage of the Greek word **baptizo** in ancient Greek literature, which often refers not to temporary dipping but to permanent immersion. This word is often used to refer to shipwrecks and drownings. It is even used a few times to refer to the soul as immersed in the physical body. So in salvation, we are not temporarily dipped into Christ; we are permanently immersed into a covenant union with Christ. And to be immersed into union with Christ is to be immersed into union with His saving work as well. It is immersion into forgiveness, immersion into death to sinful living through the power of the cross, and immersion into the newness of a righteous life through the power of Christ's

resurrection.

Now this is not what baptism with water does, but it is what baptism with water points to and promises. It is baptism with the Spirit which actually results in the salvation promised in the gospel to all who believe. And baptism with water is a sacramental sign and seal of that gospel promise.

We can see that these verses in Galatians are talking about the spiritual reality of salvation because verse 26 mentions the instrumentality of faith.

Galatians 3:26

26 For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus.

When the Holy Spirit comes down upon us to communicate to us the benefits of the redemption work of Christ, He works faith in us and thereby unites us to Christ in our effectual calling. Effectual calling is the work of God's Spirit whereby, convincing us of our sin and misery, enlightening our minds in the knowledge of Christ, and renewing our wills, the Holy Spirit persuades and enables us to embrace Jesus Christ, freely offered to us in the gospel. The Holy Spirit saves us through the instrumentality of faith in the gospel message.

Also, this passage mentions the results of our salvation. Look at verse 27:

Galatians 3:27

27 For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ.

The figure of being clothed with another conveys the idea of taking on the nature and character of that other person. This verse is talking about the transformation into the image of Christ which begins at our salvation.

This passage also talks about our becoming sons of God, and that occurs at salvation:

John 1:12

12 But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe in His name:

So this passage in Galatians is talking about the salvation experience associated with baptism with the Spirit. Baptism with water points to this salvation experience but should not be confused with this salvation experience. In fact, baptism with water can occur at a different time from baptism with the Spirit. We know this happened in Acts chapter 10 in the salvation experience of the household of Cornelius. They were baptized first with the Holy Spirit, and then with water:

Acts 10:44-48

44 While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit fell upon all those who heard the word.

45 And those of the circumcision who believed were astonished, as many as came with Peter, because the gift of

- the Holy Spirit had been poured out on the Gentiles also.
- 46 For they heard them speak with tongues and magnify God.  
Then Peter answered,
- 47 "Can anyone forbid water, that these should not be baptized  
who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?"
- 48 And he commanded them to be baptized in the name of the  
Lord. ...

In Acts chapter 8, we have the example of the Samaritans who were baptized first with water and then with the Holy Spirit. Now the Samaritans' overall experience was unique because it involved the inauguration of the new covenant age at Samaria, which was a unique event. Yet even today it is possible for a person to be baptized with water at one point and yet not experience baptism with the Spirit until some time later, though not for the same reason this occurred in Acts chapter 8 at Samaria.

So what Paul is doing here in Galatians 3 is describing the salvation experience which our baptism with water signs and seals or points to and promises for all who believe in Christ but does not in and of itself accomplish.

Now Anna Grace is not old enough to believe in Christ. She has not yet reached what we call the age of discretion. This is the age when one is old enough to receive the outer call, old enough to hear and understand the gospel message. We baptize her now because the promises of the covenant belong to her. Look at verse 29:

Galatians 3:29

29 And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise.

In this age, baptism with water is the sign and seal of the covenant God made with Abraham. In the previous age, circumcision was. And even though circumcision was the sign and seal of the righteousness which comes by faith (Romans 4:11), it was given to the covenant children as infants before they could exercise that faith. There are reasons for this.

First, the children of the covenant are a part of God's people, not a part of the pagan world. The little lambs as well as the adult sheep are a part of God's flock under the care of the Good Shepherd.

Isaiah 40:11

11 He will feed His flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs with His arm, and carry them in His bosom, and gently lead those who are with young.

This means that from their earliest days, we can teach our children to pray to Jesus as their high priest. We can bring them to participate in worship. We can teach them to sing, "Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so." We can rightfully expose our covenant children to those outward and ordinary means which God has entrusted to His church and which God uses to give and strengthen faith. They, like

Timothy, have the privilege of knowing from infancy the Holy Scriptures which are able to make one wise for salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus.

Second, the children of the covenant have the promises of the covenant. God has promised, "I will be your God and the God of your children. Believe, and you will be saved, you and your household. For the promise is to you and to your children."

Based on these promises, we pray that they will have the faith which first dwelt in us their parents. We rejoice that they are already shoots on the olive tree of Israel where the sap of God's good grace is flowing, and we pray that they will bear the fruit of faith and never be broken off the tree as a covenant breaker.

This is our prayer for all in the church, whether they are baptized as covenant children or professing adults: May they bear the fruit of faith and never be broken off the tree as covenant breakers. For the covenant people are reconciled to God, if indeed they continue in the faith, grounded and steadfast, and are not moved away from the hope of the gospel (Colossians 1:23).

You see, the baptism of Anna Grace is very precious, but it is not an end in itself. It points beyond itself to Jesus who baptizes with the Holy Spirit. It is not an end but a beginning and the foundation for bringing Anna Grace up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord. And we pray with expectant hope that all that is symbolized and promised in her baptism with water will be abundantly realized in her life by the grace of God that is found in Christ Jesus. Anna Grace is now publicly identified

with God's people. And we look forward to her claiming in faith all that has been promised to her today through her baptism with water.