

THE USES OF BAPTISM

a sermon by Rev. Michael Gladish
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Jesus said, “All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go, therefore, and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them into the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.” (Matthew 28:end).

The Lord who taught His disciples to be “wise as serpents and harmless as doves” was of course wiser than all. When, after the resurrection, He met the eleven on a mountain in Galilee, we read, “When they saw Him, they worshiped Him; but some doubted.” The Lord’s teaching about baptism was His response to this doubt. And it’s as true today as it was then: - there’s nothing like TEACHING something to help you LEARN about it and confirm it in yourself.

You see, baptism and teaching go together. First, baptism represents an introduction to Christian teaching that disciplines our own lives and prepares us for heaven. Then it is also at the heart of our effort to reach others, both for their sakes and our own, that we may continue to learn, and be confirmed in the truth so that our doubt is dispelled.

In fact, everything about baptism involves the knowledge of the Lord and the understanding of His Word. Water is a symbol representing truth: what water does for the body, truth does for the mind or spirit. The “washing” of baptism is simply representative - “a sign and a memorial” - of the spiritual washing that takes place when we apply the truth to our lives. Some churches require baptism by total immersion in the water. There’s nothing wrong with that, as the symbolism suggests a complete cleansing of every aspect of our lives, but it isn’t necessary since the mind governs the body anyway, and by washing the head we represent the cleansing of the mind through the knowledge and application of the Word. Some churches only baptize adults, which is a nice rule in that it recognizes the need for maturity on the part of the individual to accept the truth for himself, but again it isn’t necessary to restrict it that way since everybody needs the cleansing power of truth, whether it is fully understood or not. The Lord said, “Let the little children come to Me, and do not forbid them; for of such is the kingdom of God” (Mark 10:14).

The word, “baptize,” comes directly from the Greek of the New Testament where it means “to wash.” It is the same Greek word used to refer to hand-washing when people eat. So you can “baptize” your dishes at home. And you can baptize children. But when you observe a washing ceremony in church you’re not thinking of the natural uses, you’re thinking of the spiritual uses, namely the cleansing of the spirit in truth. So it is with all the symbolism of the Word: it’s all about life in very practical things but means something special with respect to spiritual things.

Jews in the Old Testament also “baptized” in a special ritual in the courtyard of the tabernacle where a huge brass “laver” was set up. It had a basin in the top for washing hands and spigots around the pedestal for washing feet before the Levites offered sacrifices on the altar there. Naturally they didn’t call what they did “baptism” because they spoke Hebrew, not Greek, but the Lord had commanded it and it served to represent spiritual purification just the same. The big difference between that or any other type of washing and the baptism that introduces to the Christian church is not in the water, or in the method used, or in what it’s called, or even in the

words uttered at the time, but it is in the use or purpose of it, that is, the particular spiritual state, the *will* and *understanding* expressed in the act.

This is why in the New Church we baptize again, even when a person has been baptized before in another church: although nominally the act is the same, and the words used are very similar, the whole sacrament has a different meaning *because the ideas behind it are different from those of any other church*. The doctrines of the Lord, the Word, Life and Faith are all new. And as the understanding is new the commitment is new suggesting a new outward covenant. Let two examples illustrate: if we enter into a contract or business deal we almost always shake hands on it; that is like a seal that secures it. Then if we change the deal or enter into another one we don't hold back from shaking hands again, but this time the handshake represents something new. Same handshake; different deal. Again, if a marriage breaks up and the innocent party in the divorce eventually finds a new partner, naturally he or she may want to get married again. It may be the same wedding ceremony, or very similar, as far as the ritual and words are concerned, but it is a totally new thing as far as the couple is concerned. So it is with baptism into the name of the Lord Jesus Christ in the New Church.

The idea that a new baptism should follow a new understanding, even though we do still worship the same Lord, is beautifully taught in the book of Acts, where Paul re-baptized some who had been baptized already by John: Paul and John both taught about the same Lord but Paul taught in the light of the resurrection with a new spirit, and people responded by coming to the water again (Acts 19:1-5). So in the New Church we have a completely new concept of the Lord.

Now you may have noticed that the text in Matthew requires baptism into the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, but we baptize into the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. This also is in keeping with the custom of the early church as mentioned in Acts because the Lord Jesus Christ IS the NAME of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. They are not three but ONE as the love, wisdom and power of God are one in His Divine Humanity. But why "into" His name and not just "in" it? For a minister to baptize in the name of the Lord would be to do so as His agent or representative, as illustrated by the phrase, "so and so sent me to do business with you "in his name." Ministers do this, of course, but that's not the point of the baptism. The point is to introduce the new member into the life and teachings of the Master, thus into the qualities represented by His name. "The Lord," we are taught, is a name particularly referring to the Divinely Human aspect of God, "Jesus" to His saving love, and "Christ" to the truth of His Word. The Lord Jesus Christ is the one God of heaven and earth, manifesting in personal Human form the love that created everything, the wisdom that alone can lead us to salvation, and the power of the Holy Spirit, "the Spirit of Truth."

Mention was made before of the way truth brings **discipline** into our lives. So a disciple is one who maintains the discipline of his master. The two words are variations of the same thing. Now as we are reminded of the spiritual significance of names and the qualities they represent, notice that the Lord commanded the eleven to "Go ... and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them ... (and) teaching them to observe all things that (He) had commanded"

The idea of a "nation" is that of people drawn together by a common land, common loves and uses, common needs and mutual support. So in the spiritual sense the term, "nation," represents the good, the affection that brings people together. But good is spoiled, weak and helpless

without the discipline of truth; it is likened in the Writings to the round knob of a sword hilt compared to the blade (TCR 86). Good without truth is like love without wisdom, heat without light, mere sentimentality, emotionalism; it is gullible, easily misled and abused, subject to the whims and fancies of every passing mood. It needs help. It needs protection. It needs guidance and control. All these things are provided by the knowledge, understanding and application of truth. Thus when the Lord told the disciples to “go to all the nations,” although He meant what He said, very clearly He did not mean it only in a literal sense! The message of the Gospel is to be taken to all everywhere who have the good that makes them receptive of the truth.

Does this mean that evil people are not worthy of baptism? No, the Lord baptized many who were known as sinners, but He knew that they were dissatisfied with their lives, that they had an inner longing to do better, and He appealed to that inner longing by offering them instruction and encouragement in the way how.

Plenty of times – we know – we hope and wish for better than we do. We want to live more useful, happy lives, to break the bonds of our selfish, worldly ways and enter into a more fulfilling state. But it is as if we are held captive by negative emotions. Doubt, fear, failure, criticism, misunderstanding, resentment, anger, foolishness, cynicism: these are just a few of the influences we face, not mere flesh and blood, as Paul said, but “principalities and powers” (Eph. 6:21), “ruling loves,” as the Writings say, that drag us down. How can we break through? How can we be changed? Not from ourselves, of course, but from the Lord who sees the good in us and reaches out to that good, to strengthen and sustain it, to give it the understanding and discipline we need. This is the purpose of baptism. This is the whole ministry of the Lord who came as the Divine Truth, the Word incarnate, to redeem and save all who have lost their way. Remember in Luke where He quoted Isaiah, saying,

“The spirit (that is, the truth) of the Lord is upon Me, because He has anointed Me to preach the gospel to the poor. He has sent Me to heal the brokenhearted, to preach deliverance to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to preach the acceptable year of the Lord” (Luke 4:18-19; Isa. 61:1-2).

The poor, the brokenhearted, the captives, the blind and the oppressed are all those who from the good that is in them recognize and acknowledge their slavery to the evils that are also in them and long to be set free (AC 4956-58). Baptism, all by itself, does not save or set anybody free, but what it does is establish and confirm the will to follow the Lord in learning and doing what He says that we may be set free.

When the will is so confirmed by a determined act that is so rich in symbolism, wonderful things can happen. For instance, the power of false and evil spirits upon us can be broken and a new association with angels who have an inner perception of the truths and goods of life can be established. This is so even for infants who can be deeply affected by the states of the adults around them: if we are unsure, unclear, undecided about the work of the Lord in our lives, how can we expect our children to have any confidence in His power? How can we hope that they will grow up in the sphere of angels, learning, knowing and fulfilling their truth? But when we are willing to stand up and be counted among those who in heart receive the Lord and look to Him for guidance, when we are willing to be washed and also to wash our children in the living

water of the Word, then we are making a commitment upon which the powers of the heavens can securely rest. So the Lord said, “He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned” (Mark 16:16). Please note: It is the belief that saves because the discipline of belief changes lives; baptism is the sign and token of that belief.

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It is at least interesting that when the Lord sent the disciples out, on different occasions He gave them different instructions. In our lesson this morning He told them NOT to go into the way of the Gentiles or into any city of the Samaritans, but rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. Later He told them to go to all the world, “and preach the gospel to every creature” (Mark 16:15). Again in Luke, He told them to go to “all nations,” but to begin at Jerusalem, waiting there until they received power from on high to go forth (Luke 24:47-49), which is what they did (Acts 1:8). All these things are symbolic.

When we first believe and are baptized we are not strong but we have a will to be strengthened. We are going to suffer temptations, but it is important not to go looking for trouble. We pray, “Our Father . . . lead us not into temptation” (Matt. 6:13); “sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof” (Matt. 6:34). The “way of the Gentiles” is the life of good without the knowledge of truth, you might say, “the good life” of natural things undisciplined by spiritual laws. How can we enter into this way of life and still honour the Lord? Cities of the Samaritans are the doctrines or beliefs of those who mix truths and falsities, not knowing the difference. How can we deliberately enter into such things and still honour the commitment of baptism?

Of course the Lord knows we will have setbacks and failures, so when He lists the signs that follow belief He notes especially that if we “drink any deadly thing, it will by no means hurt” us (Mark 16:18). But we can’t take this to mean that it doesn’t matter what we do, only that if we believe and are disciples He will lead us through temptations into spiritual life.

The lost sheep of the house of Israel are the remnants of genuine spiritual good in ourselves and in others to which the Lord can appeal when He calls us to the discipline of His Word. “Every creature” is everyone who is being “created” anew by the Lord. These all receive Him and are willingly baptized, not just with water but with the Holy Spirit and with Fire, that is, with the Spirit of Truth and Love.

When we begin our spiritual work “at Jerusalem” we begin with the doctrine of the Lord. We learn and understand the concept of repentance and forgiveness of sins. We stand as it were on a mountain (for Jerusalem was built on Mt. Zion) and we look down on the whole land below and around us – not as people full of pride and contempt for others but as people with the judgement and perspective and, yes, the power that comes from being granted a more elevated view of life. Indeed we look down on our own lower natures with the conviction and understanding that they must be subordinated, governed, controlled, and that they can be by the authority of God. So with God “all things are possible,” even grace and mercy to such as ourselves.

