

## Fundamentals of Our Faith from the Beginning

### Understanding the Church: The Ordinance of Baptism

Two key questions: Is there a connection between baptism and local church membership?  
Who has the authority to baptize?

#### 1. Romans 6:3-7

- a. Our baptism is “into Christ”—we are immersed in and united to Him.
  - b. This union means that we belong to Him as His people, and we belong to one another as His people—we are the family of God.
  - c. Baptism is *not* what makes this union happen; it is what signifies this union—in other words, baptism is a *sign* of our union with Christ *and* with Christ’s body.
  - d. When a person is baptized, it is a public declaration that this person has died with Christ, has been raised with Christ, has “newness of life” in Christ (is regenerate), has been united to Christ, and has been united to His body, the church.
  - e. Among other things and at a minimum in reference to the church, baptism is a sign of our membership in the universal body of Christ so that when we baptize someone, we are saying, “This person belongs to Christ **and** to His Church.”
- We **are** saying that baptism is a person’s public declaration of faith in and life in Christ *and* a declaration of belonging to Christ and His body.
  - We **are** saying that one cannot belong to Christ without belonging to Christ’s body.
  - We **are** saying that baptism is a *sign* of membership in the universal, eschatological church and that this truth is an eternal reality.
  - We are **not** saying that this is all that baptism is—it is much more.

#### 2. 1 Corinthians 12:12-26

- a. Paul’s instruction here must be kept in its local Corinthian church context:
  - i. 1:2, “**To the church** of God which is **at Corinth**...”
  - ii. 10:24, “Let no one seek his own, but that of his neighbor.”
  - iii. 11:17-18, “But in giving this instruction, I do not praise you, because **you come together** not for the better but for the worse...when **you come together as a church**, I hear that divisions exist among you...”
  - iv. 11:26, 33-34 “For as often as **you** eat this bread and drink this cup... so then, my brethren, **when you come together** to eat, wait for one another...so that you will not **come together** for judgment.”
  - v. 12:4, 7, 11 “Now there are a variety of gifts, but the same Spirit...but *to each one* is given the manifestation of the Spirit **for the common good**...but one and the same Spirit works all these things, distributing to each one individually...”
  - vi. 12:12, “**Because** the body *is one* and yet has many members, and **all the members** of the body, though they are many, **are one body**, so also is Christ.”
  - vii. 12:13-16, “**Because** by one Spirit **we were all baptized into one body**...for the body is not one member but many. If the foot says, ‘Because I am not a hand, I am not a part of the body...it is not any less a part of the body.’”
  - viii. 12:18, “But now **God has placed the members**, each one of them, **in the body**...”
  - ix. 12:26, “And if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it...”

- b. Though the Corinthians were certainly made to be a part of the universal body, this is not Paul's point—he is speaking of their membership in one another.
- c. Their baptism signified their immersion into the body of Christ **and** their connection to one another **and** their commitment to one another (i.e. “do not say you do not need the hand or the hand does not need you; you belong to one another and have duties to one another as body parts just as your baptism signified”).
- We **are** saying that baptism is a sign of membership in the universal body.
- We **are** saying that this membership makes us feet and hands with the corresponding duties of life together in a local body of Christ.
- We **are** saying that baptism signifies this union *and* is a declaration of this covenant commitment to the local body with whom Christ has joined us—the person is saying, “I am a part of you and need you and will share myself with you as the Spirit determines.”
- We have been saying this each time we have baptized someone, and many have responded to baptism and membership because we have been saying it.

### 3. Colossians 2:11-14

- a. Our spiritual circumcision, the cutting away of our flesh, is done by God through Christ—He was cut off for us.
  - b. Baptism corresponds to heart circumcision as the new sign of the New Covenant.
  - c. Baptism is clearly a sign; it is not the substance, i.e. it is not what makes us alive or forgives our transgressions or makes us to be a part of the people of God but *signifies* these things.
  - d. It is for those who believe—it is “*through faith* in the working of God.”
  - e. Just as circumcision was the initiating sign of Old Covenant belonging, so baptism is now the initiating sign of New Covenant belonging—it signifies the new birth into Christ and into the people of Christ, the church.
- [“You must be born again...for that which is born of the flesh is flesh...”]
- We **are** saying that baptism is *the* sign of our spiritual circumcision of the heart.
  - We **are** saying that just as circumcision signified membership in the covenant community, so baptism signifies membership in the New Covenant community.
  - We are **not** saying that baptism is the same as circumcision but that baptism has correspondence to circumcision as the initiatory sign of covenant belonging.
  - We **are** saying that when we baptize someone, we are affirming that he has been born again into this covenant union with Christ and with Christ's people.
  - We **are** saying that this belonging is not an abstraction but is meant to be experienced in the flesh and blood relationships of local church community.

#### 4. Matthew 16:13-19; 18:17-20

- a. The authority given to Peter is **not** the establishment of a papacy but is apostolic authority given to the church through gospel proclamation (cf. John 20:23).
- b. The kingdom of heaven must be entered (cf. 3:2; 18:1-6), and this kingdom is directly connected to the church, "...upon this rock I will build my church."
- c. The keys are related to opening the church to confessors or closing the church to false confessors, i.e. receiving, denying, or removing (cf. 18:18 with 1 Corinthians 5:2, 13 and John 20:23).
- d. This authority is given to local churches by way of baptism, reception into membership, participation in the Lord's Supper, and removal from membership – "tell the church...if he refuses to listen even to the church...whatever you bind...whatever you loose...where two or three have gathered together in My name..."
- e. Local churches are those who gather in Christ's name to do all that Christ has commanded his church to do – this cannot be abstracted; there is no "universal church" to do these things.

[This was a key difference between the Reformers and the Roman Catholics—the Reformers denied a universal authority centered in the Papacy.]

- f. Baptism (or baptismal testimony) at the front entrance and removal at the back are part of what it means to exercise the power of the keys by local churches – no universal authority exists for this.

- We **are** saying that these keys have been given to local churches to bind and loose by way of baptism, by reception into membership, by participation in the Lord's Supper, and by church discipline.
- We **are** saying that the Pope does *not* have these keys as *the* representative of the universal (catholic) church.
- We **are** saying that no individual has been given the power of these keys, and no one should act as an independent representative of the universal church by baptizing apart from a local church.

[It should be borne in mind that the one doing a baptism **is** making a declaration; he is using the power of the keys to say, "This person is a Christian."]

- We are **not** saying that baptisms done outside the church are necessarily invalid but that they should not be done this way and that we should reform our practices.
- We are **not** saying that a person must be re-baptized when received into a new local church—like circumcision, baptism follows the believer; and when the local church receives them, they receive and affirm their baptism along with their testimony.

### **Views of baptism for those who hold to Believer's Baptism**

1. Baptism is simply a person's public declaration of faith in Christ, identification with Him as one of His disciples, and a commitment to follow Him. [This may be the most common view among modern Evangelicals who are not Reformed in their theology, that is, among those who deny God's election and deny covenant belonging.]
2. Baptism is a person's public declaration of faith in Christ, identification with Him as a disciple, a commitment to follow Him, and a sign of his membership in the universal church but has nothing to do with belonging to or commitment to a local church.
3. Baptism is an act that involves the Triune God, the local church, and a believer. In baptism the Lord declares that all of the blessings of redemption and covenant union belong to the one who truly believes and is being baptized; the church publicly affirms that this person's testimony is credible and that he is a member of Christ's body and, by extension, the local body; the person being baptized publicly declares his faith in Christ, identification with Him as a disciple, a commitment to follow Him, and membership in and commitment to the church, and especially to this local church family.