

Sunday, April 21, 2024

Handout - Lesson #8

Systematic Theology: Baptism and Ecclesiology

Chapter 15 of *Word, Water, and Spirit*

I. Introduction

II. Three Points:

A. The Objectivity of Baptism

1. Baptism as a Sacrament

- a) What are sacraments? The Westminster Confession of Faith says, "Sacraments are holy signs and seals of the covenant of grace." The Confession goes on to say that the sacraments are instituted by God "to represent Christ, and his benefits." The sacraments represent Christ. They are the objective, visible revelation of God. God speaks audibly in his preached Word and visibly in his sacraments.
- b) How many sermons are part of a morning gathered worship service at Proclamation? At least two and sometimes three (or more). We hear God's Word in the sermon and we see his Word in the Lord's Supper. If there's also a baptism, we see God's Word in baptism. Baptism is a visible sermon. Baptism is the objective, visible revelation of Christ and his benefits.
- c) "Baptism is not a stage created by God for man to profess his faith in Christ. Baptism is the opposite - it is the revelatory stage by which God heralds his covenant promises and trumpets the gospel of His Son." So, who defines baptism? God. God defines the sacrament of baptism.

2. Circumcision and Baptism

- a) God gave circumcision to Abraham, not vice versa. God gave circumcision to Abraham and called it "a sign of the covenant" (Gen. 17:11). Circumcision symbolized the cutting off of the Seed to come, the One who would suffer on behalf of God's people. It symbolized the cutting away of the foreskin of the heart. In other words, it symbolized

the effectual calling of the believer. Circumcision was the objective, visible revelation of the coming Messiah and his redemption. It was a visible sermon.

- b) The same is true of baptism. As a sacrament, it objectively and visibly preaches Christ and his redemption. Baptism points to the crucifixion of Christ and his baptism in the wrath of God. It points to death, burial, and resurrection of the believer unto new life - new creation - in Christ. Baptism is the objective, visible revelation of Christ and his redemption. It is a visible sermon.

3. The Audible and Visible Word

- a) When a Roman Catholic priest opens the Bible and reads from the book Romans, is he reading the Word of God? Or did it cease to become the Word of God because the priest belongs to an apostate church? It is still the Word of God. Its objective character does not change. The Scriptures are not defined by the one who reads them. The Word of God is defined by God Himself.
- b) Philippians 1:15-18 - “Some indeed preach Christ from envy and rivalry, but others from good will. The latter do it out of love, knowing that I am put here for the defense of the gospel. The former proclaim Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely but thinking to afflict me in my imprisonment. What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed, and in that I rejoice.”
- c) Christ is proclaimed in baptism. When a Roman Catholic priest reads the Scriptures and then administers baptism with water in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, the congregation sees a valid baptism. The congregation sees a sermon. Such a baptism is the objective, visible proclamation of Christ and his redemption. Baptism proclaims Christ.

4. Objective versus Subjective

- a) Many Christians view baptism as being primarily or exclusively subjective in character. For example, *The Baptist Faith and Message 2000* says:

“Christian baptism is the immersion of a believer in water in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. It is an act of obedience symbolizing the believer’s faith in a crucified, buried, and risen

Saviour, the believer's death to sin, the burial of the old life, and the resurrection to walk in newness of life in Christ Jesus. It is a testimony to his faith in the final resurrection of the dead..."

- b) If this is how you view baptism, then you view baptism as being primarily or exclusively subjective in character. Its validity depends on your faith. But the Bible teaches that baptism is not your word to God but God's Word to his people. Baptism is not a proclamation of your subjective faith. It is the objective proclamation of Christ and his benefits. Baptism is not defined by you and your faith. Baptism is defined by God and his covenant faithfulness. The point of baptism is not your subjective profession. The point of baptism is God's objective promise.

B. The Catholicity of the Church

1. "I believe in...the catholic church"¹

- a) There is one catholic (or universal) church. Why? Because there is one body of Christ. As Paul says in Romans 12,

"For just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others" (vv. 4-5).²

2. The Visible Church

- a) Who is part of this one catholic church? Our Confession defines the visible church in this way:

"The visible church, which is also catholic or universal under the gospel (not confined to one nation, as before under the law), consists of all those throughout the world that profess the true religion; and of their children: and is the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ, the house and family of God, out of which there is no ordinary possibility of salvation" (WCF 25.2).

¹ When we confess The Apostles' Creed at Proclamation, we include a note in our worship guide that says, "The word catholic with a lowercase 'c' means 'universal' and refers to the true Christian church of all times and all places throughout history, which belongs to Christ alone."

² See also 1 Cor. 10:17; 12:12; Eph. 4.4.

3. Apostasy

- a) On this side of heaven, is any church absolutely perfect and pure in its profession of the true religion? No. This is why the Confession goes on to say,

“The purest churches under heaven are subject both to mixture and error; and some have so degenerated, as to become no churches of Christ, but synagogues of Satan. Nevertheless, there shall be always a church on earth, to worship God according to his will” (WCF 25.5).

- b) Both individuals and organized churches can be broken off from the visible church (Romans 11:18-22; Revelation 3:9). For example:

“And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write: ‘The words of the first and the last, who died and came to life. “I know your tribulation and your poverty (but you are rich) and the slander of those who say that they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan” (Revelation 2:8-9).

4. The Roman Catholic Church

- a) As an institution, the RCC does not profess the true religion. The RCC is like the Jews in Revelation 2:9 who failed to profess the true religion and therefore were outside of the visible church. The Reformation happened because Luther and others realized that the RCC was not teaching the true religion.
- b) At the same time, recall what the Confession says about the visible church. Who constitutes the visible church? Those who profess the true religion and their children. This means that there may indeed be Christians in the RCC who have been saved despite the teachings of the RCC.
- c) In sum, the visible church (those who profess the true religion) is within the RCC, but the RCC is not itself formally or institutionally a part of the visible church.

5. Salvation

- a) If there are genuine believers in the RCC, by what means have they been effectually called? The only way to be saved is by faith alone in Christ

alone by God's grace alone. The Holy Spirit effects this salvation through the use of the Word of God.

- b) Does God draw people to Himself within the RCC only through the audible Word? No - God draws people to Himself through the audible and visible Word. Since baptism derives its meaning from God through His objective revelation, then God can effectually call sinners even through the apostate ministry of the RCC.
- c) For those people who are converted under the ministry of the RCC, it is not the voice of the apostate church and its wrong theology of baptism that they hear. They hear the voice of Christ speaking in the Scriptures and he defines what baptism means. God uses both the audible and visible Word to draw sinners to Himself even in the RCC.

C. The Constituent Elements of True Baptism

1. WCF 28.2 - "The outward element to be used in this sacrament is water, wherewith the party is to be baptized, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, by a minister of the gospel, lawfully called thereunto."
2. When a minister of an apostate church - the RCC, in this case - reads the Word and then proceeds to baptize an infant with water in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, is such a baptism valid? Yes, because all of the elements are present. Ultimately, it's not the minister but God who validates baptism.
3. Why should only a minister of the gospel administer baptism?
 - a) First, God gave baptism to the church. God didn't give baptism to you or to me. He gave it to the church as the rite of initiation into the visible covenant community. So, baptism is not to be administered apart from the context of membership within the local church.
 - b) Second, within the local church, God calls ministers to preach and proclaim his Word, both audibly and visibly. God has called ministers to be "stewards of the mysteries of God" (1 Corinthians 4:1). Ministers have been called by God to administer baptism.

III. Conclusion

- A. To accept Roman Catholic baptism is not to cave to the pressures of ecumenism at the expense of the truth or to give legitimacy to an apostate church.
- B. To accept Roman Catholic baptism is to recognize:
 - 1. The objectivity of baptism as God's authoritative covenantal revelation;
 - 2. That a person is baptized into the name of the one triune God, not into the name of any particular church;
 - 3. That there is one catholic church and one baptism;
 - 4. That God ultimately administers baptism.

IV. Summary of Lessons 4-8

- A. Lesson #4 - Baptism is a means of grace. Baptism is a means of grace because God's grace - His redemptive favor - is found in Christ. God objectively reveals himself in Christ through Word and sacrament, the audible and visible revelation of God. But remember that there are no neutral encounters with God and His revelation. Baptism is therefore either a means of grace or judgment. The difference between grace and judgment is the absence or presence of faith in Christ.
- B. Lesson #5 - Baptism is a sacrament, a sacred sign and seal of the covenant of grace. As a sacrament, baptism reveals Christ and his benefits. Keep in mind the relationship between the sign and the thing signified (what theologians call the sacramental union). The RCC and others confuse the sign and the thing signified. Zwingli and others radically separate the sign and the thing signified. The Reformed church recognizes that the sign and the thing signified are distinct but not separate.
- C. Lesson #6 - Christ instituted baptism in the Great Commission. A proper baptism is performed by a minister who employs water and the baptismal formula, "I baptize you in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit." All who are baptized are visibly and sacramentally united to the crucified and risen Messiah. All three modes (immersion, pouring, and sprinkling) are biblical. The meaning of baptism is not dependent on the amount of water but on the Word of God which defines baptism.

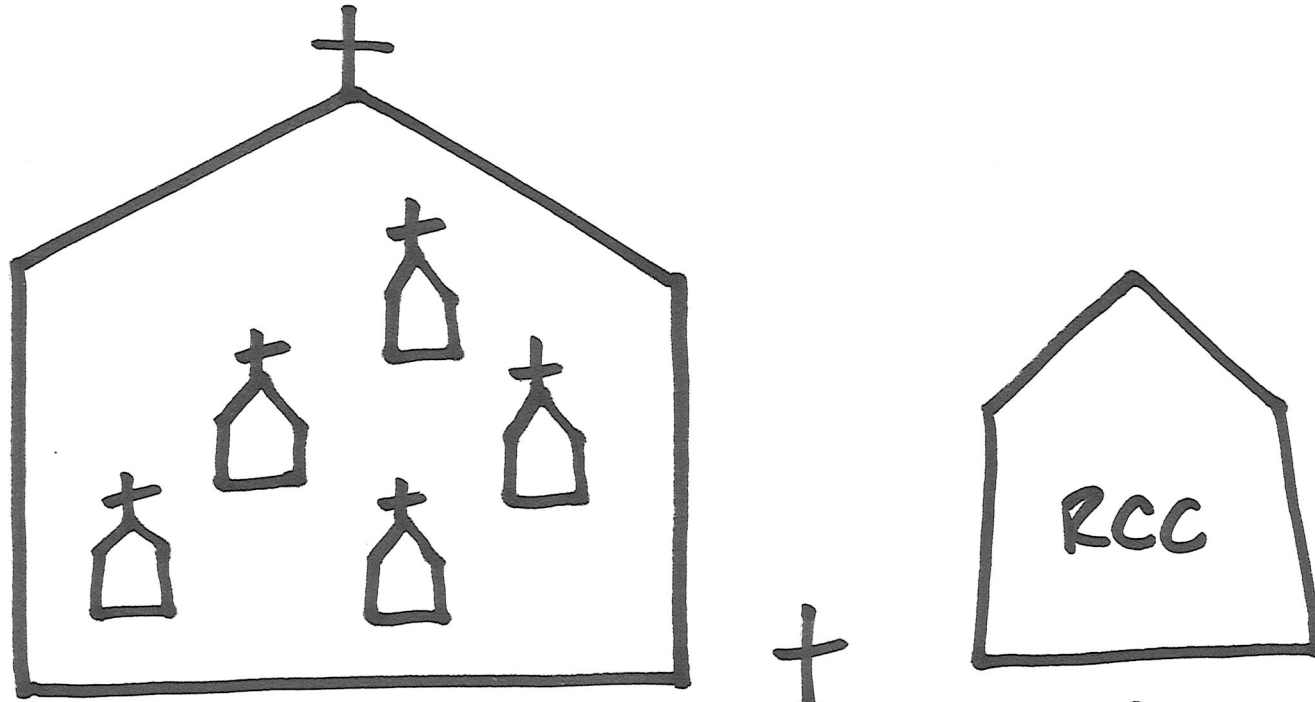
- D. Lesson #7 - The recipients of baptism are adults who make a profession of faith and their children. This understanding is founded on both the Old and New Testaments and is grounded in God's covenantal dealings with his people. The administrative ground of baptism is not a profession of faith. The administrative ground of baptism is God's covenant promise to believers and to their children.
- E. Conclusion - God not only preaches through the audible Word, but also through the visible Word. God preaches through Word and water and the Spirit sovereignly and effectually calls believers. God announces through Word and water that the Seed of the woman has come and has been cut off in his bloody crucifixion-circumcision and has drowned in the waters of God's wrath. God also announces through Word and water that His risen Son has now baptized not only the church but the entire creation in the Holy Spirit, a baptism of Spirit and fire. For those who refuse to believe, the baptism of Spirit and fire is one of condemnation and judgment. But for those who look to Christ by faith, this baptism of Spirit and fire is one of cleansing, purification, and new creation. Word, water, and Spirit preach the gospel, the good news of redemption in Christ.

V. Looking Ahead

- A. April 28 - Blessings to the Children
- B. May 5 - Blessings to the Parents
- C. May 12 - Blessings to the Congregation
- D. May 19 - Q & A

The Visible Church

Institutionally



Materially

