

Naked Bible Podcast Transcript

Episode 1

Baptism: What You Know May Not Be So Recorded in 2012

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Episode Summary

Inaugural Episode: Introducing the series on understanding and misunderstanding baptism.

Everyone knows about baptism, right? What's there to think about? Turns out quite a lot. Christian traditions all have positions on baptism, but it is rare to find a coherent articulation of the topic that doesn't create theological dilemmas with other points of doctrine. Don't believe that? Then you need to listen to the Naked Bible Podcast's series on baptism, starting with this episode.

Transcript

Welcome to the Naked Bible Podcast! Today, for our inaugural podcast, we want to jump into the subject of baptism. The subject of baptism is a favorite of mine because it's a telling example of a point of biblical theology that virtually everyone would think they understand, but it's one that rarely gets close attention when it comes to the biblical text.

Now, I know what you're thinking: "Come on, Mike. Everyone knows about baptism. What's there to think about?" A lot, actually! And I'm not just talking about the debate about whether infants should be baptized or not or about how the mode of baptism is performed. What I'm thinking about goes a lot deeper than that. Christian traditions rarely examine the theological dilemmas that their own positions on baptism cause by creating tension with other points of doctrine. You may not believe that, but I think you will after we're through.

In this first section, I want to briefly define two terms so we're all on the same page. There are a range of viewpoints and associated jargon that come with the topic of baptism, so we need to cover them. First, there's what's known as "believer's baptism." That's the belief that only those who have first made a profession of faith in Christ as savior are proper candidates for baptism. Once baptized, believers become members of the church. One result of this view is

that only regenerated believers should be church members. The mode typically used in believer's baptism is dipping the recipient in water, but it could be sprinkling or pouring. The mode is, therefore, incidental, at least for this discussion. The key idea here is that the recipient of baptism has to believe before they are baptized.

The second option is infant baptism, which is also known as "pedobaptism." This is the notion that infants, before they are able to believe in Christ, should be baptized. The mode is nearly always sprinkling or pouring, although some Greek Orthodox congregations do immerse infants (quickly, I might add). The perceived purpose or effect of baptizing an infant varies. In Catholicism, this rite is thought to remove original sin and bring the child into the Church, the Body of Christ. This idea is often labeled "baptismal regeneration" by Protestants. That shouldn't be equated with salvation, though, regardless of what Catholics or Protestants might think on a popular level, since other sacraments and practices are necessary for salvation in Roman Catholic teaching. However, the removal of the sin nature removes the condemnation of Adam's sin from the baby so that if it should die, its destiny in heaven is secure.

Now, in Protestant or Reformed churches, the meaning of infant baptism varies. The baptized infant does not have the sin nature removed (like in Catholicism), but the infant is made a member of the Church. While Protestants don't want to sound Catholic, a Protestant minister is still likely to presume and teach that the baptism of an infant would have something to do with the infant's secure place in heaven should the baby die. More broadly, though, in Protestantism the relationship of infant baptism and salvation is pretty muddled, even within some very famous creeds. I'll show you some clear examples of that problem in later podcasts. A fair generalization might be that infant baptism supposedly starts the child on the "road to God," so to speak. The baptized infant is said to have been accepted into a covenant relationship with God or Christ, which has some connection to salvation in that Protestants of all stripes believe that the child will eventually "confirm" their baptism--since baptism is a sign of election, after all, just as circumcision in the Old Testament was (or at least that's presumed). In other words, Protestants link infant baptism to being placed in a covenant relationship with God.

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The problem, of course, is that many baptized infants grow up and do not believe, even though they are children of believing parents. This conscious or unconscious linking of baptism and election to covenant relationship, therefore, presents a dilemma in the case of those who don't confirm their baptism. It gives rise to questions like, Did the baptism not work? (Whatever that might mean.) Did election fail? Or maybe there's no connection between baptism and election, in which case, what exactly is baptism good for and why is it necessary? Or maybe the Calvinist idea of perseverance (the idea that the elect will, in the end, believe) should just be scrapped. But if that's the case, that also raises the question of the necessity of baptism. If an elect person will believe in the end, after all, baptizing

them as infants doesn't matter. It's usually at this point that Reformed parents or pastors will say something about baptism being needed for getting the baby into the Covenant in case it dies before profession of faith, or something like that. I really don't know how that reflects the Reformed idea of faith alone, but that question is usually avoided. These questions, really, are just the tip of the iceberg.

Less important for the theological meaning of baptism is the mode (that is, how it's to be done). We've already touched on that a little bit, but while we're introducing concepts here, we should say a few things about that, too. Baptism by immersion, again, refers to dipping the recipient under water to illustrate the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ. Baptists do that one, while Brethren churches typically dip the recipient three times (it's called "trine immersion.") They do it in the name of the Father, and then of the Son, and then of the Spirit. In the mode of sprinkling, the minister or priest dips his hand into the water and sprinkles it onto the head of the recipient of baptism, whether they're an infant or an adult. Pouring would be just what it sounds like: the recipient gets a lot wetter than he would if he or she was only sprinkled.

I think it's time for a challenge in our thinking about baptism. Let's start with this problem or this issue. Where in the world do various denominations get these ideas? While they would all say "the Bible," that can't be coherent, since there is so much divergence. In reality, these ideas come about on the basis of certain presuppositions brought to various passages and--here's where I get into trouble--sloppy thinking about the results. What I mean by the latter is that people are content to not examine where certain ideas lead, assuming that ideas can be held in theological isolation from other parts of theology. It really never ceases to amaze me how disconnected and incoherent the topic of baptism comes across in sermons, Sunday School teaching, and even theology books.

One example will suffice for the time that remains here in this first podcast. In Colossians 2:11-12, Paul tells us the following:

¹¹ In [Christ] also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, ¹² having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead.

Now, all positions on baptism rightly note that this passage has some connection between baptism and circumcision. Paul doesn't really tell us what that is, but that's okay. He tells us enough that should keep us from bad theology--but unfortunately, it hasn't. What I mean by that is that there's a connection between baptism and circumcision, okay. If there is a connection, then it seems reasonable to think that what we say about the meaning of one ought to be consistent with the meaning of the other. Sounds simple enough, but it's rarely

followed. Insisting on this consistency between the two items that Paul links eliminates common ideas, like baptism erasing the sin nature or baptism having something to do with the forgiveness of sin or that baptism guarantees anyone's eventual faith, since circumcision did none of those things, according to the Old Testament. The Old Testament is filled with episodes (even on a national scale) of Jews who were circumcised falling into apostasy. Their circumcision had no necessary connection to being believers. When circumcision was first commanded of Abraham (back in Genesis 17), all his servants had to be circumcised, too, whether they believed in Abraham's God or not. They weren't even asked! If circumcision (and, therefore, baptism) has nothing to do with the forgiveness of sin or faith, it can't be used as a basis for things like believing infants who die are in heaven because of their baptism.

It's not hard to press the presumed meaning of the connection between baptism and circumcision even farther. What about women? That question needs answering, since women were not circumcised in Israel. By the way, that isn't a silly thing to say, either, since Middle Eastern cultures even in modern times practice female circumcision. Since Israelite women were not circumcised, they either weren't members of the covenant community or membership in the covenant community was not exclusively linked to the act of circumcision. That issue would certainly affect how we'd look at the meaning of baptism.

I hope you can see that there is actually a lot to think about here. In the podcasts that follow, I'll be giving you answers to these (and other) questions that are rooted in the text of Scripture, not in a theological tradition. My focus over the next few podcasts will be infant baptism. After that's covered, we'll move on to some other things.