

The Meanings of Baptism in Colossians*

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Baptism has been a very important topic for the Stone-Campbell movement. People within the movement have argued about the mode and the timing of baptism and about nearly everything else that we can think of. But what we have not done, I think, is to give attention to the full meaning of baptism. We certainly have seen its function as initiation into the church, but often not much more. And so I undertake this study with the belief that the churches in this movement need to reclaim a fuller understanding and meaning for baptism than what we have had to this point. We can do that by looking at Colossians. Now if you have read Colossians lately, you may wonder “why, if we’re going to talk about baptism did you pick Colossians?” There are very few, actually one, explicit reference to baptism in the whole letter, so why look to Colossians? Well, there are lots of themes in Colossians that are intentionally related to baptism, that the writer of this letter intended readers to recognize. He expects them to hear references to baptism when they hear this language. And we are going to look through the letter today at various places where the writer of Colossians gives a push to his readers that says “Listen to what your baptism means.” And so, throughout this letter we’ll find places where he intimates that they should remember their baptism and *re-see* a fuller meaning than what they have given it. There are all kinds of citations of baptismal formulas and a number of images directly related to baptism in Colossians; so much so that one interpreter has said that you should see all of Chapter 2 verse 6 through Chapter 4 verse 6 as an extensive paraenesis related to baptism;¹ and indeed it is riddled with references to baptism.

Now, why would Colossians do such a thing? Whenever we read New Testament letters, it is important to figure out what the setting is because they are very contextual writings. They did not write theology for general consumption; there were certain problems and issues that the church faced. When Colossians is written the problem that the church faces has to do with some teachers that the writer is aware of who teach things he wants to reject. These teachers argue that

*This essay is a slight revision of a lecture presented as the 2011 Stone-Campbell Journal Lecture at the North American Christian Convention. The audio of the lecture can be found at <http://www.stone-campbelljournal.com/conferences-events/featured-audio/>.

Christians or people who have been in the church need to follow a set of rules in order to be fully Christians. They say these rules will bring real forgiveness from God and real relationship with God. These teachers say 'it is not enough that you have been baptized have been attending church. You need another experience. So you must follow these rules and then you will have this new and better spiritual experience; then you will know that you're really one of the people of God.'²

Colossians argues that those folks are wrong, and one of the central ways Colossians does that is to assure them that they already have forgiveness and relationship with God. They don't need anything else to have that relationship. He points to their baptism to say, "Look at what you received in your baptism. Whatever those teachers are promising you, you cannot get more spirituality or forgiveness or relationship with God than you got in your baptism. And more than that, even as we reject their rules, baptism itself should be our guide for the formation of our own Christian lives. A proper understanding of baptism can shape our own lives and spirituality." And so, from the beginning, this writer says "let's remember what happened on the day of our baptism."

This explication of baptism begins in Chapter 1. In 1:12-14, Colossians says "Giving joyful thanks to the Father who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of his holy people in the Kingdom of light. For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the Kingdom of the son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins." A great variety of language here talks about salvation. He mentions rescue, transfer, light and darkness, redemption, and forgiveness. All of those are different ways to talk about the same salvation. The New Testament uses many images to try to get across the full meaning of being taken into the people of God, the full meaning of what the death and resurrection of Christ brings believers. These images are quite different from the ways we sometimes talk about what salvation means. When New Testament writers talk about being rescued that means, in a sense, that you were helpless, somebody had to do something for you. They talk about transfer, your citizenship gets changed from one kingdom to another, you get a new passport, you belong in a new country.

Then this text says 'you have redemption.' The meaning of redemption is obscure today. Its basic sense was that a persons is buying something back, and in the first century it had a very specific meaning – the slave market. A slave usually became a slave because his or her city had been captured. Slavery was not racially based; slaves were simply the people who lost the last war. So, you could be bought

back by relatives. That is what redeem means, that you have been bought back. So again, you are rather helpless.

Then he says, 'you have been forgiven.' This is the image we think of most often when we think about salvation. Beginning with these images in verse 13, many interpreters of Colossians see pre-formed liturgical pieces used at baptisms. Thus, this language represents ways the early church understood baptism.

The images of salvation we just saw were part of the early church's developed formulas that passed on the meaning of baptism. Such formulas made sure that the baptized persons understood that all these things happened to them in baptism. While we may not hear references to baptism quite so clearly at this point, the original readers of Colossians probably did. Hearing these words to them would be like us just sitting around and hearing someone say, "And he took bread." Those who use this formula for Communion all know what that person was going to say next. All would all know the reference was made. That is the way this formula in 1:13-14 was for them. They knew it was a reference to baptism, just as people now know the formula in the Words of Institution points to The Lord's Supper. So, Colossians starts out by saying, 'remember what you got in baptism: redemption, rescue, new citizenship, forgiveness; all of that came to you at that moment.'

So the author of Colossians gets his readers started thinking about their baptism and then drops the subject for a few lines. But it comes up again explicitly in Chapter 2. Colossians 2:11-15 reads:

"In Him you were also circumcised with a circumcision not performed by human hands. Your old self ruled by the flesh was put off when you were circumcised by Christ. Having been buried with him in baptism in which you were also raised with him through your faith and the working of God, who raised him from the dead. When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made you alive in Christ. He forgave all our sins having cancelled the charge of our legal indebtedness, which stood against us and condemned us; he has taken it away, nailing it to the cross. And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross."³

Here Colossians identifies baptism as the moment that a person becomes one of God's people. It is the mark of the covenant. Just as being circumcised is the mark of the covenant with Judaism, so baptism is the mark that says "You have been brought into the people of God." And you do that through the re-enactment of the death and resurrection of Christ because in that re-enactment itself you participate in what it

means. You are identified with the death and resurrection of Christ. He says that baptism is where you come into contact with the power that raised Christ from the dead, and that same power now gives you life.

Colossians uses rather dramatic language. If it were not in the Bible we would be shocked when he says 'you were dead.' Few Christians today think of the transition between their life before baptism and that after it in such stark terms. Few think "before I was baptized, I was just dead. I was dead to God. Dead to myself. Dead to Everything." That is what Colossians says about life before baptism. Then at the moment of baptism God performs the same kind of work that God performed in the resurrection of Christ. God gives you new life. You are now raised with forgiveness because "you were dead on account of sin." And so now, when you have been forgiven, you have also been given life. And notice that all of this is done by God. So far you are the passive recipient. You were dead and God raised you. You were sinful and God forgave you. Just as God was the active one who raised Christ, so now God is the active one who raises you. And God does this through the cross and does it through the defeat of those who would keep us from our own relationship with God.

The last part of our reading has been controversial for a long time. Interpreters have struggled to discern what Colossians means when it talks about having this charge of our legal indebtedness cancelled; the charge that stood against us and condemned us. Many have identified it as the Mosaic covenant or as The Law of Moses. I think that is certainly wrong. Here the writer is not talking about the law at all, and the NIV does a wonderful job of translating this when it calls what gets nailed to the cross, "the charge of our legal indebtedness." The word used here is the same word that Luke uses when he says that a "decree" that went out from Caesar Augustus. What is against us in Colossians is the *decree of our guilt*. That decree has been nailed to the cross. It has been done away with. The same kind of imagery and language is used in other Jewish literature of that day to talk about angels bringing charges against people. Writers often envision that it was the job of certain angels to keep track of people, and then to report to God. They served as something like prosecuting attorneys and witnesses. They report on the ways people behave. The story at the very beginning of Job, of course, works in the same way. "Satan" comes to report on what he found out people were doing all over the world. By the time of the first century, people envision a whole troop of prosecutors, and they are bringing charges against people by pointing out their sins. This passage in Colossians proclaims that all those prosecutors have been overcome; they have been disarmed; they have been put on public spectacle; they have no power

to bring charges against you anymore. This is similar to what we hear in Romans 8, where Paul asks who is going to bring a charge against those that God is for? The implied answer is no one (v. 33). Colossians says the same thing here: there is nobody left to bring a charge, your guilt has been nailed to the cross; that piece of paper you signed that said you were guilty is gone, and those who would bring charges against you cannot do it anymore. So, you now have a secure relationship with God. With this established, the writer can assure the Colossians that they do not need those regulations designed to bring new spiritual experiences. The beings that the other teachers refer to have no power. Before the crucified and resurrected Christ, they are nothing.

So, the second time Colossians talks about baptism, it is again to give the readers this great assurance of what they have received. Not only have they been forgiven, but anybody who wants to bring a charge against them is overcome, is overpowered by what Christ has already done for them.

Colossians remains focused on the meaning of baptism, but switches to another image. In 2:13 Colossians has said “you were dead in your sins.” In 2:20-23 he uses the dead and alive image again, but changes its meaning substantially. He says,

Since you died with Christ to the elemental spiritual forces of this world, why as though you still belong to the world do you submit to its rules? Do not handle, do not taste, do not touch? These rules, which have to do with things that are all destined to perish with use, are based on merely human commands and teachings. Such regulations indeed have an appearance of wisdom with their self-imposed worship, their false humility, and their harsh treatment of the body, but they lack any value in restraining sensual indulgence.

Here the author speaks of having died with Christ. The image of dying and being raised with Christ is a baptismal image; baptism symbolizes Christ’s death and resurrection. The baptized person participates in Christ’s death and resurrection: “You died with Christ.” Through identification with Christ and his death, Colossians says, believers are freed from any powers that would impose barriers between them and God.

In v. 21 the author lists off the rules that the other teachers want to impose, caricaturing them. They don’t really say “don’t touch anything,” but he brings up and exaggerates the kinds of things that they want the readers to do. He tells readers not to worry about those rules. They do not have to listen to those kinds of regulations because

we died to all the things to which those rules are related. At baptism believers are cut off from that way of living. When we hear Colossians say that believers do not have to follow these rules, it may sound as though there are not a lot of rules that you do have to follow—but that is not really the case. He will get around to the rules you must keep, but they are going to be based on baptism and what baptism means. The demands he has in mind in 2:21 are simply those that come from the other teachers' teaching. He says consistently that believers do not need those things in order to be saved. Believers already have that full relationship with God; they already have that full experience with God. They do not need any other kinds of spiritual experience to be sure that they are members of God's people.

Immediately following his assurance that the readers do not need to observe the other teachers' commands, he tells them what they must do. At the very beginning of Chapter 3 he says, "so you have been raised with Christ." Just as you have died with Christ, so you are raised with Christ. This is all about baptism. At the moment of baptism you died and you were raised to new life. The the writer says something really surprising. He spent the first two chapters saying, "you don't need to have these great spiritual experiences, you don't need to go off and have visions of angels and the heavens and all that sort of stuff. Don't exert yourself trying to attain such experiences. Don't look up like that." But now in 3:1 he says, "Since you have been raised with Christ, seek the things above" (v. 1). Those first readers must have thought, "Wait a minute, you've been telling me this whole time not to do that, and now you say to do it? Now you say to look to the things that are above,"

where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Set your mind on things above, not on earthly things, for you died and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is your life, appears then you also will appear with him in glory (3:1-3).

So, you should set your mind on things above, but it has nothing to do with all those things those others teachers have been talking about. It has to do with remembering that "above" is the place Christ resides. You do not need experiences that come outside of Christ, you do not need anything other than Christ. What believers die to is, basically, this world. You died to the things of this world and now your life is hidden with God. You severed your connections with the things in this world. Since you died to this world in baptism, your life is no longer to be determined by the values of this world. This is similar to what we in Second Corinthians 5:16 where Paul says that even if you thought

about Christ “according to the flesh,” you do not do that any longer. Believers have a new way of thinking about the world; they perceive things in a radically different way than other people because we are Christians. Believers have adopted a different mindset. The values of the world around them cannot be theirs because they have become the people of God. Believers have that other citizenship; they are expected to live out an identity that is different from non-Christians. In 2 Corinthians Paul says believers must be different because “there is a new creation” (5:17). Believers live in, indeed are a part of, that new creation. The world believers inhabit is different than from the world of those around them. They have been given a new kind of existence through the death and resurrection of Christ, it is that existence that they now must live out. They must judge all things according to the new creation. Believers do not value things other people in the world value, they do not judge things by the criteria that other people judge them; they must live out of a whole other way of being because of who God has made them. “You died,” and when a person dies the rules of the place she used to live do not count anymore. What counts now is that she lives in this new life.

Colossians asserts that believers have now been identified with Christ and in that identification they not only live that new life now, but also look forward to appearing with Him in glory (3:4). Thus, they are given this new life now and promised that its culmination is in life with God after this. But notice the shift that has happened. It started in 2:20-23, but it is really in full force here. The first several passages we read were all celebrations of what believers have been given. They have been given new citizenship, they have been rescued, they have been redeemed, they have been transferred into a new kingdom, they have been forgiven. All those things come to believers from God. It all sounds as though it is a done deal, and that is pretty much what the author wants to say. He contends that, “You don’t have to worry, you’re in! You don’t need the things the teachers say you need.” But then we get to Chapter 3 and he says, “Oh by the way, it’s not quite finished.” While you can be confident and comfortable in your new identity and your assurance of salvation, there is work to be done. This work, which seemed so finished, now has an unfinished piece for believers to work on. Now, believers have not just been given new life, they have been told to act in ways consistent with that new life. “Set your mind on things above” demands that they act like they have received new life. Because of what believers have been given, they should think about those things where Christ is; they have this new life, so they must live it.

Believers have been given life with Christ, and this life is “in God.” Having life “in God” means that they have been brought into the sphere of the blessings of God. As later references to the Second Coming will show, Colossians thinks about this life “in God” as a new end time blessings from God. The New Testament writers speak of the end so often because they are all convinced that they already live in the last days, even if there are a lot more last days than they originally thought. Living in the last days means they live in a new era of God’s activity within the world. For New Testament writers, the last days started with the death and resurrection of Christ and they keep going for however long the world stands. And it does not matter how many last days there are. What matters is that God is present and active with God’s people in ways that God never had been before. That is what they mean when they talk about living in the last days.

Here in Colossians, believers are brought into these end time blessings. All the things he has been saying about being in the new kingdom, about being rescued, about being forgiven, they are all end time acts of God. They are all signals that this new era of God’s presence with God’s people had started. With this presence of God, they are told to “set your mind on things above.” But they are not left to accomplish this on their own. One of the signal blessings of the end time is the presence of the Spirit. So when they are told to set their minds on things above, they do not have to rely solely on their own will power to make that happen. In baptism they receive God’s spirit and are thus enabled to live for God. So, believers are empowered by God in these last days to be the people of God. While God empowers them, believers still must strive to live for God. Chapter 3 begins a whole section about how believers are supposed to live.

While Colossians tells readers in 2:20-23 not to list to the commands of the other teachers, in 3:5ff. the author gives them rules they must follow. These are the regulations Christians should live by, these are the rules exemplified in baptism. When he turns to ethical instruction, he does not leave behind baptism language. The whole section about proper living begins with the assertion that “you were raised with Christ. You died and your life is now hidden in God” (3:3). By using baptismal language to express the foundation for his exhortations, he says, “continue to live out your baptism. The commitments you made there should look like what I am about to show you. Genuine expressions of your baptism follow the precepts I am about to give you.”

The second paragraph in the ethical exhortations of Colossians continues use of the language of death and life. Colossians does not want the readers to get away from those dramatic meanings of baptism,

but now he gives them expression in an exhortation. Verse 5 says, “So since you died, put to death...” That is, be done with those things that should have been put to death. “Put to death whatever belongs to your earthly nature, sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry. Because of these, the wrath of God is coming” (3:5-6). He reminds them that they used to live in these ways in their former lives. The assertion that ‘you died’ has become an imperative. Those things they died to, must be actively gotten rid of. That death in Christ means that now they, in practice, must separate themselves from those behaviors of the old life. And notice he doesn’t let them off the hook, he says, “you used to live like that. Now quit it. That’s not who you are anymore. You are dead to that way of being.”

When we move to the next paragraph, he switches images. After staying so long with this death and life metaphor, he switches the image to one of putting on and putting off. Beginning in verse eight he says, “

But now rid yourselves of such things as these anger, rage, slander, filthy language from your lips. Do not lie to each other since you have taken off your old self with its practices and put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its creator. Here there is no Gentile or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarians, Scythians, slave or free, but Christ is all and is in all” (3:8-11).

The image of changing clothes was much more dramatic in the first century than it is today. In the first century there were rules about who could wear certain kinds of clothes. Certain social classes that were allowed to wear certain things that other people were not. There were also rituals that involved the changing of clothes to signify movement to a new stage of life. Very quickly the church picks up that language to talk about the meaning of baptism. The church talks about being clothed with Christ at baptism. In what most recognize as a version of the same baptismal confession found at the end of our reading here in Colossians, Galatians 3: 26-28 says that believers have been clothed with Christ and being clothed with Christ means they put on a new identity; that is now who they are to be. He says, “You are no longer your old self. You’ve taken off that identity, you’ve put it aside, and you have put on new clothing. You’ve taken on an identity that makes you another person.” Colossians says believers must take off that old self that participates in sin and put on this new self. Importantly, that new self is being renewed everyday by God.

Baptism is a moment that grants some things in their fullness, but it is also the beginning of a process. It is the beginning of the

process in which believers learn how to live out in the rest of their lives. Following baptism, believers have to begin living up to those blessings they have been given. They begin living up to their new citizenship. They begin living up to being in the Covenant with God and they are helped by God to do that. It is God who is enabling the believer to live out that new self.

In 3:12-13 Colossians says that in baptism believers have become “God’s chosen people, holy, loved.” Therefore you must “clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear each other and forgive one another if you have any grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you.” Again this passage begins by telling the readers who they have become, who God made them. They are God’s chosen people. They are people God has made holy. They are people that are loved especially by God. Given that identity and that status, what should they do? They should act like that is who they are. They should act toward others in the way that God has acted toward them. And so he says at the end of verse thirteen, “You forgive because that’s how God treated you.” The next verse is going to say “Love one another because God loved you.” So a basic thing baptism calls believers to do is to live in relation to others in the way that God has reached out to them. All the goodness and graciousness that believers see in God, they must begin to live that out in their lives.

We have seen many references to baptism in Colossians. Baptism is seen as initiation into Christ, but its meaning is not exhausted in the moment of becoming a Christian. Colossians argues that all of life is to be conditioned by baptism. The whole of the believer’s life is to be a living out of his or her baptism. Baptism, then, is a reminder of, and a participation in, the death and resurrection of Christ that makes a claim on the whole self of the believer. Baptism, certainly in Colossians, gives assurance of forgiveness and of continual relationship with God. At baptism, God commits to believers, makes them God’s elect, takes them into God’s family, takes them into God’s Covenant, and makes them citizens of God’s kingdom. And as God gives believers all those benefits, there is also the demand. Live out that gift of death to the old world in the way that you act now. Put on that new self, make it your identity. Live that resurrection life, and when Colossians talks about living the resurrection life he does not mean that believers have fewer problems. He means they do not evaluate things in the world the way everyone else does. Believers must see things through the lens of the cross and the resurrection.

This demand continues to challenge us always. This is the case partly because we live in a world that is still dominated by evil. It

is the case partly because that old self is still in us just a little. Eduard Schweitzer, a commentator on Colossians, put it this way, “In baptism the old Adam, that is the old self the sinful self, is indeed drowned, but the scoundrel can still swim.”⁴ This is where we find ourselves, and so we continue to struggle to live out the meaning of our baptism. Remembering that we have been given new life with God, we are able to live in the presence of God in our lives now. We have protection from anything that tries to get between us and God. And we have the promise of life with God in the time to come. And we also have the demand. Colossians says, ‘now that you have been given all those gifts, live the life that you have been given in baptism.’ Living that life is a life-long demand and a life-long gift.

¹ Jeffrey Peterson, “‘The Circumcision of the Christ’: The Significance of Baptism in Colossians and the Churches of the Restoration,” *Restoration Quarterly* 43 (2001): 68.

² There is extensive discussion about the identity of these other teachers and about the precise content of their theology. For a full discussion of the range of views and for the arguments in favor of the position taken here see Jerry L. Sumney, *Servants of Satan, False Brothers, and other Opponents of Paul* (JSNTSup 188; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), 188-213 and idem., *Colossians: A Commentary* (New Testament Library. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008), 10-12.

³ Translations of Colossians are the author’s own.

⁴ *The Letter to the Colossians: A Commentary* (Translated by A. Chester; Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1982), 202.