

Baptism

SCOTT HOEZEE

Words, water, wine, and bread. These simple, everyday elements are at the core of Christian witness and proclamation. We preach God's Word using the words of the pastor, but we back up the content of God's Word with the waters of baptism and with the bread and the wine of the Lord's Supper, but what is more common than water? Why do Christians think that this thing called baptism, in which a person's body comes into contact with ordinary water...why do we think that can do such extraordinary things? Today on *Groundwork*, we continue our look at the sacraments of the Church, and our focus will be on the sacrament of baptism. Stay tuned.

DAVE BAST

From Words of Hope and ReFrame Media, this is *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee, and this now is the second of three programs on the sacraments. Program one was an overview. This program will focus on baptism, and the third one will focus on the Lord's Supper; and we are glad for this entire series to welcome as a guest in our studio, Dave, Dr. Jim Brownson of Western Theological Seminary. He is a professor of New Testament there in Holland, Michigan; so, welcome back to the program, Jim.

JIM BROWNSON

Thanks; it is great to be here.

DAVE BAST

And great to have you, Jim. In the first program, we kind of talked about the sacraments in general, the meaning of the word, and a little bit about the number, the differences, and how different traditions count the sacraments.

JIM BROWNSON

Yes, and one of the things that we emphasized in that program is both the corporate nature of the sacraments...this is a group of Christians together and not just individuals; and there is also this objective promise of God that is an invitation to a response of faith; but here is where...and this comes to a head with respect to baptism...here is where some of the disagreements among Christians tend to come into focus, because one of the issues, with respect to baptism in particular, is...and this is technical terminology...but, is it a sacrament or is it an ordinance?

DAVE BAST

Say a little bit more about that. I mean, we talked about the meaning of sacrament; this outward sign of an inward grace and how the sign points to the promise of God, union with Christ; but what about ordinance? Elaborate on that for us.

JIM BROWNSON

Yes; ordinance focuses on the idea that baptism is ordained by Jesus Christ, or commanded by Jesus Christ. So, in a theology of baptism which focuses on ordinance, baptism is primarily obeying the command of Jesus; and the focus is particularly on the person baptized obeying the command of Jesus. In contrast, a sacramental theology puts the focus more on the promise of God; and yes, the promise of God always has to be received by faith, but the question is, what is centrally in focus in baptism? Is it our obedience or is it God's promise?

SCOTT HOEZEE

And that will come into focus when we talk about, particularly, whether or not to baptize infants; infants who don't know anything and cannot obey anything yet, as opposed to a believer who can. So, we will be talking about that, but one of the things you said is that, you know, these are indeed ordained by Jesus, and one of the reasons Protestants in particular, and Catholics and Orthodox, have two sacraments as opposed to the seven that the Catholics have is that we think these are the ones specifically ordered by Jesus; and the classic text there is, of course, Matthew 28; what we often call the Great Commission:

¹⁸Jesus said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit; ²⁰and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you."

So, that doesn't get much clearer than that, that Jesus says becoming a disciple and getting baptized go hand in hand.

DAVE BAST

In the triune name, interestingly, there; although in Acts there are often instances where they just talk about baptism in the name of Jesus. Is there a difference?

JIM BROWNSON

You know, interestingly, this is an issue over which some Christians also disagree. I think the majority of Christians tend to favor the Trinitarian formula: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; but there are some groups that are very drawn to this language in some specific baptisms. Now, I would argue it is a kind of both/and rather than an either/or. Baptism into the name of Jesus puts the focus, I think, in the right place, that baptism is part of union with Christ. When we are immersed in the water we are immersed into Christ; and when we come out of the water we come out to embrace the promise of a new life in Christ. So, there is a kind of Christocentric focus to baptism, but this is the promise of God made effective by the work of the Holy Spirit, and that is why I think most Christians really opt for the Trinitarian formula.

DAVE BAST

Interestingly, the very first mention of baptism in the New Testament isn't Christian baptism at all, it is John's baptism in preparation for the Messiah, but that is something different, isn't it? Most of us would say that is a different kind of rite or ritual from the sacrament of baptism?

JIM BROWNSON

Yes; and I think the core difference is that the New Testament always thinks about Christian baptism in terms of our union with Christ; and that is the piece that, you know... John's baptism is a baptism of repentance to prepare for the kingdom of God. In that sense, it is preparatory, but even in the book of Acts, there are at one place Christians who are baptized with John's baptism, but not with Christian baptism, and they have to be baptized. That is not regarded as sufficient, so clearly, the New Testament sees baptism into Christ as being something of critical significance, without which John's baptism simply isn't enough.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And that Christian baptism, then, the one into the name of Jesus or the triune God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—that is still, however, part of God's larger covenant relationship with his people. So, God founded a covenant with Abraham way back in Genesis 12, and some of the text there with circumcision as the sign of

the covenant; and of course, the covenant comes to its ultimate fulfillment in Jesus and in the New Testament. So, there is a connection; and Paul in places...particularly like Colossians 2...Paul makes it very, very clear that baptism is the successor to circumcision—that baptism is now, spiritually speaking, the mark of the continuing covenant. Again, Colossians 2 makes that very clear.

DAVE BAST

Right. Here is what he says: ⁹For in Christ all the fullness of the deity dwells in bodily form. (There is the incarnation. We talked about that in the first program.) ¹⁰And in Christ you have been brought to fullness. He is the head over every power and authority. ¹¹In him you were also circumcised with the circumcision not performed by human hands. (So, a sort of spiritual circumcision, Paul says.) Your whole self ruled by the flesh was put off when you were circumcised by Christ, ¹²having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through your faith in the working of God, who raised him from the dead. So, he seems to equate baptism and circumcision there, although it is a kind of emersion because he talks about being buried and raised.

JIM BROWNSON

Yes; you know, there are multiple dimensions to the imagery of baptism; sometimes immersion and sort of being buried and raised is what is in focus; other times cleansing is what is in focus; and so, there are different...

DAVE BAST

Sprinkling is mentioned...sprinkling with Christ's blood.

JIM BROWNSON

Yes; and the sprinkling...the pouring out of the Holy Spirit, you know...those are all sort of connected issues; but yes, this is a key text for those who want to argue for infant baptism, that infants were included in the covenant via circumcision, and baptism is clearly sort of equated with that in this text; and when you add to that the frequent references in the New Testament to households being baptized, then that starts to raise this issue where at least a significant part of the Christian Church has said this is something that infants should be in as well.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Well, and some of those texts and some of those stories are fascinating to look at, and in fact, we will look at those specifically, and we will do that in just a moment.

Segment 2

DAVE BAST

I am Dave Bast, along with Scott Hoezee, and our guest today, Jim Brownson. You are listening to *Groundwork*, where today we are talking about the sacrament of baptism, and we just opened the major question probably, in which Christians disagree with respect to baptism: Who should be baptized? Is it everyone—infants, only adults, only believers—so-called believer baptism—that is a big issue; and we have looked already at Colossians 2, where baptism is clearly equated with circumcision; and that would suggest that perhaps as infants were circumcised, at least just the boy babies, perhaps baptism should extend, as many in the Reformed Church believe, to infants as well.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And we can just note real quickly...just admit it up front...there is no ironclad proof text in the New Testament. Nowhere does Paul say...nowhere does Jesus say: Oh, and be sure you baptize your infants, too. It isn't there. It is inferred, and it is also theologically grounded in the consistency of the covenant; and you even get that... We mentioned in the first program that already on the day of Pentecost, the need to be baptized is clear, but Peter's exact words in Acts 2, starting in verse 36 are interesting: Therefore, let all Israel be assured of this; God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Messiah. ³⁷And when the people heard this they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the other

apostles, “Brothers, what shall we do?” ³⁸Peter replied, “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.” (And now, this verse 39 is the key.) ³⁹“The promise is for you and your children and for all who are afar off, for all whom the Lord our God will call.”

So, that is very consistent with circumcision in the Old Testament—that baptism...the promises contained in it—are for your children, too.

JIM BROWNSON

And of course, there are differing interpretations of this verse. Believer baptists tend to emphasize: For all whom the Lord our God will call...

DAVE BAST

Right.

JIM BROWNSON

And infant baptists emphasize: The promise is to you and to your children.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

JIM BROWNSON

So, where the stress falls in the verse is part of this whole controversy; but let me just sort of lay out briefly what are the kinds of arguments; and these are theological arguments; as you said, there is no proof text; so these are theological discussions that are ongoing, but here are a number of places where people who advocate for infant baptism want to say there is a connection between baptism and circumcision in particular. Both of them are rites of entry into the people of God, not just individually, but part of a corporate reality; both of them distinguish God’s people from everyone else.

DAVE BAST

Can I throw something in?

JIM BROWNSON

Sure.

DAVE BAST

A wonderful quote I came across years ago from one of the Reformed bishops in the 16th Century in England who said: The lambs, too, are part of the flock; and I think our Baptist brothers and sisters recognize that through their practice of infant dedication...

JIM BROWNSON

Yes, that is right.

DAVE BAST

These, too, belong to the Lord.

JIM BROWNSON

Yes; and you know, just another thing on that topic, a kind of sub issue where this debate gets rendered is...all right, let’s say you have a 2-year-old that dies in infancy. How sure...

DAVE BAST

Or toddler...toddlerhood.

JIM BROWNSON

Yes, or a toddler, you know. How sure can you be of their salvation? Some Baptists at least tend to say: Well, you are innocent until you reach the age of accountability; and people who believe in infant baptism say: Show me a text that says that, right? And so, part of what infant baptists want to say is: The ground of hope is not their innocence, the ground of hope is that they are incorporated into Christ, and baptism is the mark of that.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; the covenant.

JIM BROWNSON

Yes; so, both are rites of entry: baptism and circumcision; both distinguish God's people from others; both point to a deeper spiritual transformation—the cutting off of the foreskin part of the dedication of one's whole sexuality to God—baptism is the sign of one's incorporation into Christ; both are called a seal in the New Testament itself; and baptism in particular moves the early Church beyond Jewish ethnicity...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

JIM BROWNSON

That circumcision is so closely allied to. So all of those...

DAVE BAST

We might also add that it incorporates women—female children, too.

JIM BROWNSON

Yes, yes; right.

DAVE BAST

It is much more inclusive.

JIM BROWNSON

But I do think that a lot of the issue ends up being how much you emphasize and how important is the corporate dimension. If baptism is what I do, then I have to wait until I can really do it. If it is being drawn into something bigger than me, then it is a little bit easier to think about children involved.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Again, the consistency of God in that. That God's love affair with Israel, as somebody once wrote, was always a family affair; and although circumcision, as you just said, Dave, by definition could not include female children, baptism then becomes the more inclusive sign that, indeed, you are part of a new people, and that is a family generation-to-generation thing. It was so for Israel with circumcision; it is so for the Church now also in baptism. One thing there is absolutely no denying is the immediacy of coming to faith and getting baptized. The story we alluded to in the prior segment of this program of the jailor in Acts 16...you remember the story: God springs the apostles—Paul and others—from prison by an earthquake. The jailor assumes that they have escaped and he is going to be put to death, and so he is going to kill himself. They stop him, and then he says: What must I do to be saved? And they reply: Believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved; you and your household; and then they go home with him and immediately he and all his household were baptized...he and his whole household...that phrase gets repeated three times in this part. Well, that certainly sounds like a family affair. It sounds like everybody in the household, and we would assume therefore children, were baptized as well. Now again, that is an inference, but that is one of the passages that we often go to.

DAVE BAST

Well, just to play a little Baptist advocate here, it also says in that text that his whole household had come to believe. That is the very last phrase: He had come to believe in God, he and his whole household; so again, you could kind of go both ways if you are... It just seems to me that, as we have tried to stress, in a sacrament there is the element of promise and there is the element of response; and which one you tend to emphasize might determine how you would come out on this question.

JIM BROWNSON

Yes; I think that is certainly the case.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I think it is also important to point out, just briefly, that sometimes we talk about the difference between believer-only baptism and baptizing infants, but of course, in Catholic and Orthodox and Protestant churches that *do* baptize children and infants, we don't just baptize any old kid that we find on the street. We don't go around putting water into people's strollers as they walk by. We baptize the children of believers, because again, we believe they are incorporated in the covenant through their parents and through their family. So, it is not just infant baptism, it is the baptism of the infants of believers that is the key.

DAVE BAST

Yes; and I think one other little additional note we should emphasize: We also believe in believer baptism in the Reformed Church, because when someone is converted as an adult in a missionary setting or they haven't been baptized as a child or as an infant, obviously we rejoice and celebrate that sacrament along with our Baptist brethren.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And what is interesting about that, too, Dave, is that if you look in our churches at some of the liturgical forms we have traditionally used, we have one form for infant baptism, one form for believer baptism, but what God promises is the exact same in both; and so that leads to the question, whether you are 70, 25, or 6 months old, when you get baptized does anything happen? What happens in baptism? Let's close out the program by thinking about that next.

Segment 3

DAVE BAST

You are listening to *Groundwork*, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee, and we are joined by Dr. Jim Brownson on this program, focusing on baptism; and we were just talking about, Dave and Jim, what happens, if anything happens, in baptism? Is it merely a sign—something to jog our memories about Jesus—or does the Spirit...

DAVE BAST

Or merely symbolic?

SCOTT HOEZEE

Does the Spirit do something?

JIM BROWNSON

I do think that another way to talk about what happens is to ask where are we at? And I would say this is true whether it is an infant or a believer, they are just at the beginning; and they don't know a lot of what they are going to face. They are going to confront challenges, tests to their faith, some of them big-time challenges; and whether or not they will hang in there isn't a done deal; but the focus on baptism, I think, is on the

promise of God. It is something that we look ahead to. It tells us who we really are when we forget who we really are. It tells us, and as we remember it, we are drawn back over and over to that deepest and truest identity about ourselves; and that is what this notion of promise, I think, has. God says: This is who you really are, and this is who you are in the process of becoming.

DAVE BAST

Yes, you know, often people with respect to infant baptism will point to the problem of lots and lots of people who were baptized as infants and don't seem to have any interest in or connection to Jesus Christ whatsoever. A Catholic cardinal recently talked about the millions of baptized Catholics in Europe who are nothing; but that is also potentially a problem for an adult believer who is baptized. As you said, Jim, there is no guarantee.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; if you wait to baptize somebody until you are absolutely sure they will never turn their back on God, you will never baptize anybody because who knows? But what is interesting...one of the reasons we think that the power of baptism cannot be undone, and one of the main reasons we don't *re*-baptize somebody, even if they have been gone from the Church for 33 years, wandering, living a secular life and they come back, we still do not re-baptize because we think that God did something the first time that doesn't need repeating.

In one of the Reformed confessions, called the Belgic Confession, which emerged from the 16th Century...this Confession summarizes what we think the Bible teaches about baptism, and it says: In this way, God signifies to us that just as water washes away the dirt of the body when it is poured on us, so, too, the blood of Christ does the same thing internally in the soul by the Holy Spirit. It washes and it cleanses from its sins and transforms us from being the children of wrath into the children of God; and that cannot be undone, and it doesn't need to be repeated.

JIM BROWNSON

Yes; you know, I think the issue of re-baptism raises some very specific sort of questions, and I guess the point I would want to make is that it is not that baptism is always effective...now, to use the technical language...*ex opere operato*...just from the work itself regardless of whatever. No, baptism is a summons to faith; and if there isn't true faith lived out, that baptism...we have no assurance of that; but here is the irony about re-baptism: All right, somebody was baptized 40 years ago...lots of wandering, lots of disobedience, and then they come back to faith, here we have tangible evidence that the promise of God has actually proven itself to be true.

DAVE BAST

Yes, right; exactly.

JIM BROWNSON

So why, when you have the evidence that the original baptism was, in fact, effective—God's promise does, in fact, apply—do you have to do it over again?

DAVE BAST

Well, and one of the things that some churches are doing is encouraging people to remember their baptism, and even do that in front of the church.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And use water...

DAVE BAST

Yes; I was in a worship service and it was a beautiful thing; a young couple was joining the church. She had been baptized as an infant, he hadn't been. He was *immersed*—this was in a Christian Reformed Church. They brought in a tank and put it on the platform, and she ceremonially remembered her baptism and

participated in the water in that way, without being re-baptized, which was a beautiful, beautiful thing; because, as you say, Jim, it worked. I mean, God kept His promise and this person did come as an adult in response with the appropriate response of faith.

JIM BROWNSON

Yes; you know, I think what we need to say to folks is baptism is never to be presumed upon. You know, you never say: Well, I have been baptized so I don't have to worry about anything...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, it doesn't matter.

JIM BROWNSON

But, baptism is always a ground for hope...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

JIM BROWNSON

That, you know, granted I have messed up my life, I have gotten all mixed up, but this is who I really am and I can come back to this; and for parents who have baptized children who are wandering, and they don't...you know, who knows where they are and when they are going to come back to Christ, it does seem to me there is no ground for: Well, they are baptized so we know they are saved and don't worry about it; but there is ground for hope that the Spirit isn't done with them yet.

DAVE BAST

And maybe the last word here we ought to stress is the mystery of it all. We have used that term in connection with the sacraments. There is something deeply beyond our finite understanding, something that happens, but nevertheless that requires us to believe as well, and in the wonder of God's grace, this can be deeply nourishing for us of our own faith and our own hope for those whom we love.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Amen. Well, thanks for joining our *Groundwork* conversation. I am Scott Hoezee, along with Dave Bast, and our guest today, Dr. Jim Brownson. We always want to know how we can help you to dig into scripture, so, go to our website. It is groundworkonline.com, and you can suggest topics and passages for future *Groundwork* programs.

<https://groundworkonline.com/episodes/baptism>

Printed on July 14, 2025