

Baptism – Inaugural Spirituality
Part II: Paul – Identity with Christ
(Romans, I Corinthians, and Colossians)

“Baptismal spirituality is to always live in the pattern of Jesus’ death and resurrection.”

(R.Weber)

Introduction

It is Paul's discussions about baptism in his various letters that serve primarily as the basis for our understanding of the relationship between spiritual formation and baptism in the contemporary church. The Lukan narrative (Gospel of Luke and Acts) reveals that Paul personally experienced baptism in the context of his conversion.¹ The infilling of the Spirit and the miraculous healing of his blindness are accompanied by his baptism. By this action Paul sets himself in the broad stream of the early church's experience and practice as Luke defines it – repentance, conversion/forgiveness, baptism, and reception of the Spirit. Although these various aspects of a person's inclusion in the Kingdom are distinguished, they tend to be integrated into unified experience occurring over a relatively short space of time and accompany a person's recognized inclusion in the local expression of the Messiah's church. The inclusion of his call to service in this cluster of spiritual experiences deserves note.

We can also document from Luke's description of Paul's evangelistic preaching that baptism was part of that presentation.

- Lydia and her household (Acts 16:14-16)
- Philippian Jailor (Acts 16:31-34)
- Crispus at Corinth (Acts 18:8)
- John's disciples at Ephesus (Acts 19:3-5)

In his letters he sometimes references such preaching. In 1 Corinthians he notes that he only baptized a few.² It seems that people in that church perceived that they were somehow linked by baptism with the evangelist who baptized them and this was leading to division.³ So Paul reminds them that he only baptized a few and baptism was not the goal, but rather people's response to the Gospel. Given Paul's preaching and practice described in Acts, we should be careful lest we

¹ Acts 9:18; cf. Acts 22:16.

² 1 Corinthians 1:16-17.

³ Perhaps they considered such baptism as a linking with Paul such as disciples of John through baptism associated themselves with John, i.e. his disciples. If this is the case, then the fact there were Christians at Corinth associated with Peter and Apollos would suggest that they too had baptized some believers in the Corinthian church.

interpret his statement in 1 Corinthians as a devaluation of the importance of baptism in his theological or pastoral understanding. The situation in the Corinthian church is probably responsible for his expression.

In Galatians 3:26-28 Paul assumed that all believers in the Galatian churches were baptized and since he was the initial evangelist in the region, presumably he, along with Barnabas, was involved in some of these baptisms.

So we can assume, I think, that Paul taught and practiced baptism as part of his evangelistic and discipleship ministry, acting consistently with what we know of the practice of other early church leaders. We have no indication that his practice of baptism would differ from that of Jesus and John, being himself a Pharisee. He lived for a considerable time in Jerusalem, worshiped in the temple and thus would have used the *miqvoth* for ritual purification. Thus baptism for Paul would have been immersion. But what did he think this ritual signified and how did it advance the spiritual formation of believers, as well as contribute to his own role as evangelist and spiritual director?

Paul's Baptismal Theology

There is a methodological issue to address first. When Paul used the term *baptizw* and its cognates, is he using it literally to refer to the water ritual or is he using it metaphorically, to define some spiritual experience such as suffering (cf. Mark 10:38 and Jesus' metaphorical usage)? When we read, for example, Romans 6:1-14, should we conclude that Paul was using baptismal terminology literally or figuratively in this passage? On what do we base our conclusions?

- 6:3-4 – Paul seems to take a personal experience ("we who have been immersed into Messiah Jesus") and apply it quite specifically ("through this baptism").
- Given the general understanding and practice of baptism in the early church, why would Paul without explanation shift to a metaphorical use this terminology in order to help these Christians understand the transformative change their conversion has generated? John taught a specific connection between the commitments involved in baptism and ethical transformation. Why would Paul not follow suit?
- Apart from Jesus' teaching, we have no other evidence that the early church was using immersion in metaphorical ways.

I think then, that Paul is building on the water ritual and at the beginning of his comments in Romans 6 is appealing to this common Christian experience. He then begins to consider the

implications of this act that brings believers into identity with the Messiah's death, life and resurrection. I would suggest he does the same in his comments in Galatians 3.

Let us begin by considering 1 Corinthians 12:13. In the midst of a discussion about the nature of the church – its empowerment for service and its coherence through interdependency – compared to a human body, Paul reflects upon the initiation of people into that community.

For in one Spirit we all have been ritually plunged (baptized) into one body, either Jews or Hellenes, either slaves or free, and we have all been given one Spirit to drink.

The imagery is somewhat confusing, but capable of understanding.

Parallelism:

"in one Spirit we have all been ritually plunged/immersed -- into one body"

"one Spirit we have all been given to drink"⁴

- a. metaphor one – our ritual immersion (presuming Paul is referring to water baptism here) in water is the process by which we move into "one body", i.e. the body of the Messiah (vs.27). I think Paul here presupposes that conversion is the context for baptism (cf. 12:1-3). Our exact placement in that body is a matter of God's design, but regardless, our transference into the body of Christ contributes to its health and functioning. We are able to experience this because we are "in the sphere of the One Spirit." The preposition ἐν (en) + dative suggests location. While there is considerable debate as to whether this construction can indicate agency, this does not seem to be Paul's intent here. Rather, he seems to be indicating that it is a person's inclusion in the realm of the Holy Spirit that the ritual immersion in water represents, and this signifies our inclusion in the One Body.
- b. Metaphor two – our drinking of the One Spirit. We have ingested, swallowed spiritually, the One Spirit and this purifies us and empowers us for ministry in the body. Why does Paul use this imagery here? Perhaps it is related to the Lord's Table practices (eating and drinking the "cup of the Lord" 1 Corinthians 11:27) discussed in the previous chapter.

We are immersed in the sphere of One Spirit and the One Spirit is resident within us. Both externally and internally God's Spirit envelopes and energizes us. This mutual and simultaneous co-inherence is a significant part of Paul's theology of conversion and spiritual life. The first

⁴ The verb ποτίζειν, to make someone drink something, takes a double accusative – one object is the person and one object is the thing drunk. "He gave him water to drink." When the verb is passive, the personal object becomes the subject, and the other object remains in the accusative, still signifying the substance imbibed. "We have all been given one Spirit to drink." Cf. Blass, Debrunner, & Funk, 155.7 (page 86).

action, symbolized by our baptism, indicates our corporate linkage with the Spirit and other believers and the second emphasizes our individual re-creation by God. This new identity erases barriers of ethnicity and social status. (cf. 1 Cor. 6:11)

Galatians 3:26ff supports baptism's linkage (presuming again Paul reference is to this ritual and is not metaphorical) with oneness and the dissolution of human differences in Christ. It may be that chronologically this represents Paul's earliest written reflections about baptism. He affirms that a person's relationship with the Messiah – becoming a son of God – occurs through faith.⁵ The expression of that faith, at least in part, comes through the act of "immersion into Messiah (εἰς Χριστόν - *eis Christon*).\" Paul immediately qualifies this or explains it with the metaphor of "being clothed with Messiah.\" The water ritual gives visible expression to the faith transaction that unites us with the Messiah. This covenant relationship based in faith puts us into a whole new level of relationship with other Jesus followers – linking us with Abraham, and foreshadowing our reception of God's inheritance. This entire passage is saturated with Spirit language and so we have to assume that all of these spiritual transactions are linked with the placement of God's Spirit within the new believer. This is how Paul defines our status as “sons of God.”

I think that it is worth noting in the Galatian context, where Paul has been discussing the spiritual significance and limitations of circumcision, that he makes no explicit effort to show any relationship between circumcision and baptism. He never once, to my knowledge, states that baptism is in some sense the new covenant equivalent of circumcision.⁶ Rather, the fact that all believers are baptized, shows that circumcision as ritual no longer has any spiritual significance. Further he affirms consistently that Abraham's faith precedes his circumcision by a significant space of time.

This brings us to Romans 6:1-14. In the grand scheme of Romans, this section reflects upon the way in which our salvation in Christ frees us from the problem of sin and all its consequences. "We have died to sin" (6:2), i.e. we no longer are under the mastery of sin and have to respond to sin's power because we are outside of its influence, just like a dead person (Romans 7:1-6) is beyond any human influence. Paul's entry into his discussion about Christian ethics comes through his explanation of the significance of baptism.

⁵ Paul also uses a passive form in Galatians 3:27 – ὅσοι γὰρ εἰς Χριστόν ἐβαπτίσθητε, Χριστόν ἐδεύσασθε. As in 1 Corinthians 12:13 there is a sphere or location that a person enters through this process, defined by εἰς + the accusative. Also, note that all people, regardless of status, ethnicity or gender show their identity with Christ in this way.

⁶ Paul bases the status of Abrahamic sonship, which believers enjoy, upon their faith in the Messiah and the promise of the Spirit. Baptism signifies that this transaction has occurred.

What are some of the key theological ideas that Paul links with the baptismal experience?

- i. He uses the first person, suggesting that all believers, including himself, have experienced this ritual immersion and through this have demonstrated their inclusion in Messiah Jesus.
- ii. He links the various phases of this ritual with key aspects of Jesus' salvific acts – death and burial followed by resurrection unto "newness of life." Our baptism in some way demonstrates that our spiritual experience is now integrated with that of Jesus – crucifixion, death, burial, resurrection, new life.
- iii. This ritual is our statement that we have done with evil – "no longer serve sin" (vs. 6).
- iv. There is a strong emphasis upon the new creation that emerges through this conversion/baptism experience. Although the literal physical resurrection remains a future expectation, it is anticipated in the moral/spiritual resurrection that we experience now – the old person has died, and newness of life replaces it.
- v. The ethical implications are clear – we serve God and our bodies become instruments of righteousness. The language of kingdom and ruling signals that we have moved from the domain of sin to the domain of grace through this death—life transformation (vs. 11-14).

What does Paul not say?

- i. There is no sense that baptism is the means by which forgiveness or justification is secured. Rather baptism seems to be a ritual that affirms such is the case.
- ii. Paul focuses here on the personal changes that occur as an individual enters into this new relationship with Messiah Jesus, rather than the community perspective found in 1 Corinthians 12:13.
- iii. Paul does not argue for sinless perfection as an expectation, but rather urges serious intention towards goodness and holiness and deliberate rejection of sin.

Overall Paul's perspective seems to be that baptism marks the transition of a person from the domain of sin and evil, to the domain of God and the Messiah. The consequences of this transition and transformation – ethical, relational, salvific – are then elaborated. The ritual of baptism sits at the centre of all of this. The eschatological dimension also emerges clearly as Paul links this ritual experience with the ultimate hope of resurrection. It is a sign, witness and symbol of this expectation and new life.

We should also note that Paul discusses Abraham's faith at length in Romans 4. Again, he emphasizes that his faith preceded and had nothing to do with his "justification by faith." The

principle is clear -- baptism always presupposes personal faith which is the basis for our incorporation into the new covenant in Jesus' blood.

The other major text to consider is Colossians 2:9-15. Perhaps of all the Pauline baptismal texts this one is the most controversial. As Beasley-Murray reminds us, Paul introduces baptism as part of his polemic "against a philosophy fashioned in accordance with human traditions and the elemental spirits of the universe and not according to Christ (2:8)...They stand in no need of submission to Jewish ordinances, least of all to circumcision..."⁷ From this Beasley-Murray argues that Paul takes opportunity to provide clearer definition of his theology of baptism as outlined in Romans 6. As far as we can tell from the list of people Paul mentions in Colossians 4, this church primarily is composed of Gentile Christians.⁸

What does Paul mean by the "circumcision of the messiah" (vs.11)?⁹ I would suggest that this is a summary of what has been said about Jesus and Paul refers, through the metaphor of circumcision, to his death, i.e. the cutting off of his body in death. As we share in his circumcision, i.e. death, we too participate in the benefits, both cosmic and eschatological, of Jesus' death, who is the Creator of everything and the head of the church.

Those within the paedobaptist tradition consider this to be a cornerstone text supporting the identification of baptism with circumcision and thus demonstrating baptism to be an appropriate ritual for infants, in the same vein as circumcision. Those in the Believers' church tradition suggest, to the contrary, that circumcision in Colossians 2 is related to the crucifixion, the stripping away of the flesh in death. For believers, the circumcision without hands represents God's work in the conversion of the heart, not baptism. Christ performs this "spiritual circumcision" in the life of the believer through repentance and faith. The transaction is defined in vs. 13-15 and linked specifically with the death of Jesus Christ, the stripping away of his flesh (note the second stripping off is related to the removal of any power of authorities over Jesus (2:15). Baptism is then compared to our burial with Christ, signaling our death to trespasses and "uncircumcision of flesh", i.e. Gentile status and exclusion from the people of God. This interpretation compares circumcision to Christ's death, not baptism per se. The ritual of baptism expresses in dramatic event, the spiritual work that God's Spirit has already done, putting to death our life dominated by sin, and enabling us to enjoy life freed from the tyranny of sin.

⁷George Beasley-Murray, *Baptism*, 152

⁸ Perhaps Aristarchos, Mark, Jesus(Justus) are three Jewish Christians, "those being from the circumcision" (Colossians 4:10-11).

⁹ Luke narrated how Jesus was physically circumcised according to Jewish practice shortly after his birth (Luke 2:21). Presumably Paul is not making reference to his physical circumcision in Colossians 2:11.

Forgiveness comes through a personal relationship with Christ and this happens only as an individual is able responsibly to engage in this relationship. Baptism cannot be paralleled with circumcision in terms of age characteristics, because it requires the prior moral and spiritual engagement of the agent in the act of salvation.

In vs. 12 Paul defines our identification with Christ in burial which is linked with baptism. The following clause references Christ (*in whom also*, cf. the prior *in whom* in v.11.), indicating that a believer is also raised together with Christ, but this event is operative "through your faith in the power of God who raised him from the dead."¹⁰

As we reflect upon these various Pauline explanations and application of the baptism experience, what do we learn about its role in the spiritual formation of a person?

- Baptism marks a transition in a person's spiritual experience – through identification with Christ, and initiates serious, committed discipleship. The person has moved from the realm dominated by sin, to the realm dominated by grace.
- Baptism has ethical implications in that the person expressly rejects evil/sin and embraces good as defined by God.
- Baptism demonstrates a person's attitude of repentance and submission to Jesus as Lord – setting his or her life in the context of God's Kingdom, in identity with Jesus.
- Baptism expresses dependence upon God's Spirit to assist in spiritual living and life experienced in the realm of the Spirit.
- Baptism integrates the person into the faith community – insertion into and acceptance by the body, with all the privileges and responsibilities that go with this.
- Baptism declares the hope of involvement in God's ultimate plans – the eschatological dimension.

For those who have responsibility to oversee and guide the spiritual formation of people, we need to encourage people to see the whole range of spiritual implications that baptism has for their spiritual development.

¹⁰ Paul references something he terms "those baptized for the dead" (1 Corinthians 15:29). We are not sure what he means by this expression.

- How does Paul use the baptismal experience in his letters to foster the spiritual formation of the recipients?
 - Reminds people of their changed state and loyalties
 - The ethical implications of this – relationally and otherwise. Baptism speaks of purity.
 - Living in hope – being a messianic person
 - Living in the realm of the Spirit
 - Inclusion in the “body of Christ”, i.e. the community of believers.
- How can the repeated expressions of baptism in ministry contexts be used to for those witnessing such confessions of faith?
- If Paul links baptism to changed behaviour in Romans 6, how does this work today?
- Is there a relationship between baptism and calling?

Brief Note Re “Baptism for the dead” in 1 Corinthians 15:29.

Considerable controversy rages around Paul’s statement “Now if there is no resurrection, what will those do who are baptized for the dead (οἱ βαπτίζομενοι ὑπὲρ τῶν νεκρῶν) If the dead are not raised at all, why are people baptized for them (βαπτίζονται ὑπὲρ αὐτῶν)?” Anthony Thiselton in his commentary on 1 Corinthians¹¹ presents a concise overview of the major proposals for its interpretation. In his view the translation that best serves the context is “those who have themselves baptized (middle sense, not passive) for the sake of the dead (i.e. their dead relatives who have urged them to put faith in Christ so that at the resurrection they might be reunited).” As Christians die, the deathbed conversations with loved ones often includes the strong urging for those surviving to become Christians too. When the survivors do put faith in the Messiah, they have themselves baptized “for the sake of the dead” relatives whom they desire to reunite with at the resurrection. I think Thiselton’s conclusion is the most satisfactory explanation and avoid any idea of a sacramental sense to baptism.

¹¹ Anthony Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians, The New International Greek Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B.Eerdmans Pub.Co., 2000), 1240-1249.

Baptism: Drama, Grace and Inaugural Spirituality

Paul's Perspective

A. Introduction

1. Our theology of Baptism generally is based upon Paul's writings.
2. Paul personally when converted was baptized (Acts 9:18; 22:16).
3. His call to apostolic ministry occurs in the context of this cluster of spiritual events – repentance, conversion, baptism, reception of the Spirit and inclusion in the Messianic community.
4. Paul preached baptism and baptized some converts:
 - a. Lydia and her household (16:14-16)
 - b. Philippian jailor (16:31-34)
 - c. Crispus at Corinth (18:8)
 - d. John's disciples at Ephesus (19:3-5)
 - e. Galatian believers (Gal. 3:26-28)
 - f. Some concern about baptism (1 Corinthians 1:16-17)
5. No indication that his practice differed from that taught by Jesus.
6. As a former Pharisee he knew the Jewish purification rituals, particularly those connected with the *miqvoth* and Temple worship.

B. Paul's Baptismal Theology

1. Need to distinguish when Paul may use the verb *baptizw* and its cognate nouns/adjectives literally (the actual ritual) or figuratively (to represent the experience of suffering, for example, cf. Mark 10:38).
2. Is Paul's use of baptismal language in Romans 6:3-4 literal or metaphorical?
 - a. Paul is referring to a personal experience and expounding its meaning?
 - b. Focus is upon our identity with Christ and what are the implications of this identity.

C. 1 Corinthians 12:13

1. Context – discussion about the nature of the church
2. Imagery:
 - a. metaphor one – plunged in the sphere of the one Spirit (location).
 - b. metaphor two – drinking the one Spirit
 - c. emphasis on oneness that results, eradication of ethnic and social distinctions – one body.
3. Baptism defines our inclusion within the people of God, the church.

D. Galatians 3:26-28

1. Focus on unity created by our inclusion in the Messiah
2. When a person exercises faith in the Messiah, they become "sons of God."
3. The metaphor of "being clothed with Messiah."
4. Connection with the possession of the Spirit.
5. Note that in the Galatian context Paul never explicitly links circumcision and baptism.

E. Romans 6:1-14

1. Salvation in Christ frees us from enslavement to sin (6:2). "We have died to sin."
2. Paul used baptismal language to define the hope we have in Christ and to emphasize the ethical changes that must result from this identity.
3. The connection between death and baptism is significant, enabling Paul to argue that we no longer experience sin's rule. We are in the realm of grace.

F. Summary of Key Ideas in Paul's Theology of Baptism – transition and transformation

1. Uses first person, including himself in this common Christian experience.
2. Relates the imagery of baptism, i.e. plunging, to the death, burial and resurrection of Messiah Jesus and how our repetition of these experiences in baptism declares “newness of life.”
3. Baptism is the Christian's declaration of freedom from sin's domination.
4. Baptism signals new creation which has moral implications. The language of kingdom and ruling indicates the transformation we have experienced. Inclusion in the realm of the Spirit is important.
5. The ritual itself does not accomplish this, but it demonstrates what faith has already achieved.
6. Paul emphasizes both the individual and communal implications of being in Christ through the baptismal ritual.
7. Paul does not argue for sinless perfection, but rather a serious pursuit of holiness because of one's baptismal promise.
8. Eschatological dimension – moves us into the “age to come” and hope of resurrection.

How do we as pastoral leaders enable people to recognize the implications of their baptism?

G. Colossians 2:9-15

1. Paul is developing his apologetic against the false teaching in Colosse, which seems link to Jewish ideas.
2. In a series of five different metaphors (circumcision, burial and resurrection, removal of charges, stripping off clothes, and involvement in triumphal procession) Paul defines what Christ has accomplished. Probably in this he is answering the assertions of false teachers.
3. 2:11 – “circumcision of the Messiah” – refers to his death.
4. Some argue that Paul here compares circumcision to baptism. However, I would argue that he is not doing this. Circumcision refers to Christ's death. A Christian's circumcision with hands represents God's work of salvation in the life of the believer.
5. Baptism represents our death, our burial with Christ, signaling our death to trespasses and “uncircumcision of flesh”, i.e. our Gentile status. No longer are we separate from the people of God.
6. Baptism cannot be paralleled with circumcision because baptism follows a formal faith commitment on the part of a believer who is able personally to engage responsibly in this relationship.
7. The transitions that Jesus Messiah experienced through his death, burial, resurrection and ascension, bring various benefits to the believer. There are cosmic and eschatological.