

The Meaning and Purpose of Baptism

by the Rev. Grant H. Odhner

“Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Holy Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God” (John 3:5).

Jesus spoke to them, saying, “Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.” (Matthew 28:18-20).

When the Lord was in the world He instituted two rituals which came to be recognized by the church as important. He told His disciples to baptize people who believe in Him “in His name.” And He offered them bread and wine as His “body” and “blood” and said “do this in remembrance of Me” (Luke 22:19). In the New Church we observe these two rituals, Baptism and the Holy Supper, as sacraments. (“Sacrament” means literally “holy act.”)

Why did the Lord institute these sacraments?

The Lord’s deepest aim is to be joined with us in a covenant—a mutual relationship of love and faithfulness in which both parties find joy. He does not *force* this covenant on us because then it would not be mutual! Rather, He *invites* us:

“Come to Me, ...and I will give you rest.”

“Abide in Me, and I in you.”

And He promises to those who commit themselves to His way:

“I will come and receive you to Myself; that where I am, there you may be also.”¹

In dwelling with Him in a covenant-relationship like this, and being “one with Him,” we enjoy a sense of healing, wellbeing, fruitfulness, happiness—eventually peace and bliss! In this bond the Lord’s deepest wish is fulfilled!

The Lord instituted the sacraments to help in forming this kind of link with us.

Can mere acts of worship, like baptism, join us with the Lord?

In the final analysis, we don’t come into harmony with the Lord and become bonded with Him by acts of worship, but *by coming to think and love from Him and with Him*. This is a considered choice on our part and can be freely established only through time. We become this sort of person through many decisions, commitments, chosen life-patterns. Single acts, even ones as special as Baptism and Holy Supper, are formative, but not sufficient by themselves to determine our eternal character!

Still, the sacraments do have a special power to draw us closer to the Lord, and forge ties with Him. This, especially, is why they are “holy”—because they relate so directly to His deepest will and purpose—that we be joined with Him in love and faith.

¹ Matthew 11:28; John 15:4; John 14:3

The uses served by Baptism

The purpose of Baptism, then, is to help join us with the Lord. But we can identify three uses which Baptism can serve in accomplishing this.

The first use served by Baptism is to create an introductory link between a person and the Lord.

Of course, in an absolute sense the Lord is always linked with us. “In Him we live and move and have our being!”² Still He provides that human beings have a role to play in becoming conscious of Him, turning toward Him, and loving Him – and in helping others to do so. Human freedom lies in the fact that we must choose to approach Him ourselves, and take initiative in this. When we do this, He can in turn do things for us that He otherwise could not do, without violating our freedom.

So Baptism, whether sought by adults for themselves or by parents for their child, is one of the ways in which the Lord invites us to respond to Him. The link with the Lord through Baptism is established in two ways: 1) through the Word and the church; and 2) through angels.

Baptizing a person establishes an outer link with the Word and the church. We call this an *outer* link because the Word (which teaches Baptism) and the church (which carries it out) have a grounding in the world outside of us—in the physical book we call the Word and in actual people. As a result Baptism represents a link that is permanent and a matter of natural record. As such it is a link that can always be rekindled. Both the person and the person’s faith-family *remember* the act and its promise. That act stands as a *testimony* to what can take place through the Word’s truth. It stands as a door that is always there to be opened and entered.

Baptism also establishes an *inner* link with the Lord through angels. Through freely consenting to the Lord’s Baptism we allow Him to draw closer to us through angels, who recognize the sign of Baptism with us. These are not just any angels! The Lord always assigns to us angels who share a similar disposition, character, and belief (TCR 678, 680). In the case of a New Church baptism the angels are in the faith of the “New Heaven” (the heaven where the teachings of the New Church are received with joy and understanding). So they communicate to us their affirmative spirit—in a way that is able to touch our particular disposition.

This connection with angels can strengthen the atmosphere of faith around us. And once established the link can be easily activated. The result is that the Lord can ward off evil from us more quickly and surely; we can find readier support in our minds for doing the right thing; we can find quicker affirmation when in doubt; we can be inspired more easily with delight in the Lord’s way. (For people familiar with computers, Baptism is sort of like a “short cut” on our “desktop” or a “favorite places” link on our Web browser; once the pathway formed at Baptism is in place we can make quicker connection to heaven.)

So the *first use* served by Baptism is to establish pathways of communication. The *deeper use* is realized when we utilize those pathways, and come to know and acknowledge the Lord and follow Him. The *deepest use* follows when we are actually able to be joined with the Lord and enjoy the blessings of a heavenly life (i.e. when we are regenerated).

(By the way, the purpose of the Holy Supper is to help maintain and strengthen these outer and inner links with heaven as adults, to fulfill the purposes of Baptism.)

What does the actual Baptism accomplish?

² Acts 17.28

Baptism serves to imprint a sign on our spirits. As a physical act Baptism is little more than a brief sensation of water on the forehead and the sound of the words “I baptize you into the name of the Lord Jesus Christ.” Yet this act has power, over and above any conscious thoughts we may bring to it as a witness or participant. This is clear from the fact that it works even for infants. Think of it! For “little ones” the ritual sensations essential to Baptism are linked with countless other sensations! They hear the sound of the minister’s voice reading the Word, music, singing, the rustle of clothing and pages turning, the smells of mother and father, of candles, and untold other things. In the midst of all these sensations we may wonder how the ritual ones can be significant!

All our sense impressions, down to the very slightest, become memories. Yet although they are like a “needle in a haystack” among the abundance of impressions recorded, the sensations of Baptism are recognized by angels. They are like a sign or indicator to them that the person is able to be led as a Christian—and indeed like *this* or *that* kind of Christian. This sign is vital because it serves as a kind of invitation on our part for the Lord and His angels to be present. Because of this invitation, the Lord can use angels to minister to the baptized person in a way that He could not otherwise.

How, exactly, does the Lord establish the link with angels through Baptism?

Baptism works through something that the Heavenly Doctrine for the New Church calls “correspondence.”

“Correspondence” describes the relationship between the spiritual and natural worlds. Everything in this world—objects, physical phenomena, gestures—corresponds to something in the spiritual world (the mind’s world). Causes lie in the spiritual world; effects in the natural world. For example, our facial expressions are caused by our mind, by its emotions and thoughts. Our face (when we don’t make mental efforts to control it) corresponds to what we are feeling and thinking. By the same law everything in the natural world has its source in the spiritual world—and ultimately in the Lord’s mind.³

This is true of water. It corresponds to the Lord’s truth. In other words, water is actually an expression, on the outermost plane-of-existence, of Divine truth. More specifically, water corresponds to certain *characteristics* or *functions* of truth.

We can see this “correspondence” by comparing the role water plays in the natural world with the role truth plays in the mind. For example, water sustains and refreshes the body; truth does something analogous for the mind. Water cleanses our bodies; truth cleanses our spirits. Water breaks up, dissolves, and neutralizes toxic substances, and carries them away; truth has the same effect on selfish emotions, and false and worthless thoughts. Water regulates pH and also the temperature of things, both cooling things that are “too warm” and warming things that are “too cold”; truth regulates our minds and keeps them in proper balance. Our spirits rely on truth at every step of our formation and life, just as our bodies, and every living system in the natural world, rely on water in a myriad ways!

This intimate, organic connection between Divine truth and water suggests how applying water during a Baptism service to the forehead of a person can be a mechanism for imprinting a sign on a person’s mind, one that the angels can recognize. A child may be sensing and thinking of little more than water, but the angels with him or her sense feelings and thoughts about what the Lord’s truth can do for them. This synchronous connection—between water and the truths which baptize our spirits – enables the angels to be present more powerfully. The water serves as a vehicle that expresses

³ This doesn’t mean He is the source of evil; evil arises when something good from the Lord is abused or perverted.

and reflects so fully what the Lord intends, what is in the surrounding angels' minds, and what is in the minds of the adult worshipers!

Another symbolic meaning of water in Baptism

Water is sometimes mentioned as a destructive force in the Word. Think of the rain that “beat upon the house” in the Lord’s parable in Matthew 7. Truth can seem harsh when it opposes our wishes. It can be a struggle for us to obey what is true when a part of us is resisting it! These mental conflicts that we face in trying to live by the truth are called “temptations.” We cannot avoid these struggles and remain Christian! This is one reason why we follow the tradition of applying the water of Baptism in the shape of a cross on the forehead and breast.⁴ The cross symbolizes temptation. The forehead stands for the seat of our thinking, and the breast stands for the seat of our affections. These are what must be touched by the truth in order for us to withstand life’s trials and be reborn.

Baptism made effective

In forming an initial link with heaven Baptism offers us the potential for being guided more effectively by the Lord. Yet how strong can our link with the Lord become, if we never *actively cultivate* an awareness of Him? How well can He (and His angels) help us, if we do not regularly read or hear the Word’s truth and turn our thoughts heavenward? How can children benefit fully from Baptism if their parents do not live Christian lives and speak of its truths? Baptism is no guarantee of salvation. The angels who are with us by virtue of Baptism are gradually pushed away by us when we make bad choices over time. This can happen with young people as they “come into their own.” (Of course, at any time we can “repent,” i.e. work to establish new ties with heaven, through our efforts to resist evil and follow the Lord.)

The role of parents in Baptism

In the case of infant Baptisms, the Heavenly Doctrine speaks of parents (or guardians) who make promises for the child. They agree that the child will 1) “repent” and 2) “believe in God.”⁵ Since parents cannot really guarantee that a child will do these things, we presume that the intention is that they will make these two ideas and practices an important part of the child’s education.

Why are these two things specified? “Belief in God” is fundamental. How can we enter into a relationship and become allied with a God we do not know? Why is repentance mentioned? Baptism is closely associated with repentance in the Gospels. Repentance is the way in which we are “cleansed” from evil. The Heavenly Doctrine defines repentance as a process that involves: recognizing from the Word that there is such a thing as evil; looking at ourselves and seeing evil there; confessing it before the Lord; turning to Him for help in resisting it; stopping that harmful behavior and beginning a new life. The reason why parents are asked to teach their baptized child about repentance is that the church and heaven cannot be established in a person until they begin to recognize evil and flee from it. This must be a priority, and there are many things that parents can do to help children get started with this process.

By tradition we ask three questions of parents who are having a child baptized. One seeks affirmation of their belief in God. One asks for acknowledgment of their need to shun evils as sins against the Lord (to repent). The third question confirms parents belief in the Word. Truths from the Word are

⁴ This tradition is mentioned in *True Christian Religion* n. 682 and 685.

⁵ *True Christian Religion* n. 621:11; cf. 685

the “waters of Baptism!” Clearly, then, it is vital that parents make a commitment to instruct their child in the Word.

To sum up

Baptism stands as a *testimony* to individuals and to their faith-family of what can be. It stands as a door that is always there to be opened and entered, regardless of how we may have fallen away. It also establishes a new link with the Lord through angels. This link can help to strengthen the atmosphere of faith around us, enabling angels to ward off evil from us more quickly and surely, giving us readier support for doing the right thing, offering the potential for quicker affirmation when in doubt, opening us up to being touched with a sense of delight in the Lord’s way. The first use of Baptism is to establish these pathways of communication. But the deeper use and purpose is that we may go on to know the Lord, to follow Him, and finally to be joined with Him in heavenly love and wisdom, in innocence and peace, in the fullness of our Lord’s joy!

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