

BAPTISM: THE DIVINE MEMORY AID

Matthew 28:19-20; Acts 2:38-39

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May 16, 2009

SCRIPTURE

Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, {20} and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Matt 28:19-20 NRSV).

Peter said to them, "Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. {39} For the promise is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him” (Acts 2:38-39 NRSV).

MESSAGE

From time to time all of us have trouble remembering things. Because of this, many find it useful to employ some sort of learning aid that can jog the memory such as a key word or poem or vivid picture. Technically, such a learning aid is called a mnemonic device. (But who can remember that?)

When you were a child, how were you taught to remember when Columbus sailed to America? “In Fourteen-hundred ninety-two, Columbus sailed the ocean blue.” Or what about predicting the next day's weather? “Red sky at night, sailor's delight, red sky in morning, sailors take warning.” These are examples of mnemonic devices.

Knowing how forgetful we are, God has given us baptism as a kind of mnemonic device; a Divine memory aid. Whenever we witness baptism we are reminded of what it means and are commended to live out that meaning in our daily lives.

Our younger son, John, who lives in Phoenix, was up on a visit when one Sunday he noticed the banner above the northeast exit from our sanctuary and on the banner there is an oil lamp, a cup and a shell. At first he thought it was a representation of the Trinity and so with his usual wry wit he asked me, “Dad, I understand God the Spirit and God the Son, but who is God the Clam?” And so I had to explain that the lamp represented the Word of God, the cup represented the Lord’s Supper and the sea shell represented baptism as it has for nearly two thousand years. (A few years ago we gave out shells as tokens as part of our annual renewal of baptism service in January.)

Now if you look more closely at the banner there is a triangle in the background and this does indeed represent the Trinity. An even closer look reveals three drops near the shell and these are to remind us that we are to be baptized in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. But this still does not tell us what it means.

The vast majority of Christians around the world use this ritual with water called “baptism” to represent entrance to or identification with the Church. Many churches will place a baptismal at the physical entrance to the sanctuary to remind believers, as they gather for worship, what baptism means. Through baptism we are numbered with the visible community of God’s people.

The word “baptize” is taken from an ancient Greek word that meant “to immerse.” If you took a rock and placed it under water you could say you baptized the rock. Over time, the word baptize came to be associated with the water itself, since water was usually involved when something was immersed. When ancient Jewish scholars translated the Hebrew Bible into Greek they used the word baptize to mean cleansing with water. Then by the first century A.D. it also had the meaning of pouring water over something or someone. The early Christians adopted the word baptize and also added a new word “baptism” which was the experience of being baptized. They associated it not only with cleansing but also the death and resurrection of Christ and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit who join us to the Body of Christ which is the church.

If you are a Presbyterian or Reformed Christian, then you also associate baptism with the sign of the covenant and follow the biblical example of conferring this sign on believers and the children of believers. A covenant is a relationship based on promises. Our covenant with God includes the Lord’s promise to bring the full measure of redemption upon the one who trusts in him.

Jesus commanded his followers to baptize but did not explicitly describe how baptism was to be done, other than in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Early Christian art depicts Jesus being baptized by John with water poured from a shell. A first century Christian document called *The Didache* reveals that the early Christians had a pragmatic approach as to the method of baptism and no single way was designated as the right and only way to do it.

Over time, some churches preferred to sprinkle as it seemed to best represent cleansing from sin (Lev 16:14-14; Ezek 36:25; Heb 10:22). Some preferred to immerse as it seemed to best represent death and resurrection (Rom 6:4-5; Col 2:12). And some preferred to pour as it seemed to best represent the outpouring of the Holy Spirit who joins us to the Body of Christ (Acts 1:4-5; 2:17; Joel 2:28; 1 Cor 12:13). But baptism, no matter how it is done, symbolizes all of these ideas.

At first it may seem odd that these three ideas: forgiveness of sins, death and resurrection, and joining the church, are all connected with baptism. But each one conveys the sense of newness. If you are forgiven then you have a fresh start. If you are resurrected you have a new life. If you join the church you have a new family.

A favorite story of mine, which I have told before, is worth repeating. William P. Barker tells of a situation that took place years ago involving a machinist at the Ford Motor Company who became a Christian and was baptized. After his baptism he desired to right his many wrongs. He had been stealing parts and tools from Ford for many years. The morning after his baptism, he took all of the stolen tools and parts back to his employer. He explained his situation and recent conversion to his foreman and asked for forgiveness.

This was unprecedented. Mr. Ford, who was visiting a European plant, was cabled concerning all the details of this matter with a request for his response. Mr. Ford immediately returned a cable with his decision: "Dam up the Detroit River, and baptize the entire city."

Of course, the power of baptism is not in the water itself but in the grace of God. By the grace of God through faith in Jesus Christ we can receive the benefits of God's promises not just on one day but any day and every day. We can have a fresh start. We can be assured of eternal life. We are included in the family of God. Baptism reminds us of this and so much more.