

The Meaning of Baptism
(Exegetical and Theological Implications from Romans 6)

By
Daniel L. Akin
President
Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary

Introduction

Few doctrines are more central to the life and identity of the people of God than baptism. It inaugurated the public ministry of the Lord Jesus (Matt 3:13-17) and is at the heart of the Great Commission (Matt 28:16-20).¹ In the book of Acts believers in the Lord Jesus Christ were “baptized immediately” (Acts 2:38,41; 8:12-13, 36, 38; 9:18; 10:47-48; 11:16; 16:15,33; 18:8, 2:16), even if a church was not gathered (Acts 8:36,38; 9:18; 16:33).² The New Testament has no category for a believer in Jesus Christ who has not been baptized. As G.R. Beasley-Murray ascerts, “From references to baptism in Paul’s letters it is apparent that he assumes all believers in Christ have been baptized....Since baptism existed prior to Paul’s conversion, it is reasonable to view it as coexistent with the inception of the church.”³

Historically, believers baptism appears in the very first Confessions of our forefathers, the evangelical wing of the Anabaptists. Balthasar Hubmaier spoke to it in 1524 in *Eighteen Dissertations Concerning the Entire Christian Life and of What It Consists* in proposition 8, and Michael Sattler listed it as the first of the seven articles of *The Schleitheim Confession* of 1527.⁴ The fact is one will look in vain to find a major

¹ It is clear from the Scriptures that the baptism of Jesus is unique, and should not be equated with New Testament believers baptism.

² Thomas R. Schreiner, *Paul Apostle of God’s Glory in Christ* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2001), 371.

³ G.R. Beasley Murray, “Baptism,” *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, eds. Gerald Hawthorne, Ralph Martin and Daniel Reid (Downers Grove: IVP, 1993), 60. Murray’s work *Baptism in the New Testament* still stands as the classic treatment on the subject of baptism. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962). The thief on the cross (Luke 23:39-43) is an exception that proves the rule. He was incapable of being baptized. He also lived and died prior to Acts 2 and the birth of the church. However, Mark Dever makes the point that “Based upon Acts and the letters, it seems this [baptism] was the universal practice of the New Testament Christians.” (Mark Dever, “The Doctrine of the Church,” in *A Theology for the Church*, ed. Daniel L. Akin [Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 2007]).

⁴ William L. Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith* (Valley Forge: Judson, rev. ed. 1969), 18-31. On the import of baptism in “The Schleitheim Confession”, see Daniel L. Akin, “A Expository Analysis of the Schleitheim Confession,” *CTR* 2.2 (1988) 354-56.

Baptist Confession that does not include the doctrine of baptism.⁵ It is interesting to note, however, that the discussion most often revolves around the proper candidate (a believer) and the proper mode (immersion). The meaning of baptism does not garner nearly as much ink, which may contribute to much of the confusion and strange ideas being bantered about at the present. It may be the discussion taking place at the International Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention over the proper administrator and the relationship, if any, of the doctrine of baptism to the doctrine of the eternal security of the believer.⁶ It may be the discussions, now on hold, at Bethlehem Baptist Church in Minneapolis, Minnesota and at Henderson Hills Baptist Church in Edmond, Oklahoma, that have considered allowing persons not baptized as believers by immersion to become members of their local church, something taught by John Bunyan and D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, and also practiced for some time by a number of liberal churches in North Carolina.⁷ It may be the view espoused by former Southern Baptist, Andy Stanley, that all that matters is the “time” of your baptism, that you were a believer. Neither mode, administrator, or location is of any consequence.⁸ It simply needs to be public and

⁵ Ibid., passim.

⁶ The policy requiring baptism to be administered by a “like faith and practice” church that affirms the doctrine of eternal security was approved by the trustees of the IMB in Nov. 2005.

⁷ See John Bunyan, *Differences in Water-Baptism, No Bar To Communion* (1673); Mark Dever, “On Believers Baptism by Immersion as Essential for New Testament Churches,” The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary Gheens Lectures, February 2002; Nathan Finn, “Baptism, Church Membership, and the Baptist State Convention of North Carolina.” This article was written June 29, 2006 and may be accessed at “The Fullness of Time” blog (nathanfinn.blogspot.com). The websites at both Bethlehem Baptist Church and Henderson Hills Baptist Church have extensive documentation concerning their rationale for considering a change in their baptism policy.

⁸ See Andy Stanley’s sermon, “Baptism-Whats the Big Deal?”, Feb. 26, 2006. Stanley at one point misrepresents *baptizo* as meaning “washed.” The word is universally recognized as having “immersion” as its primary meaning. This may explain why, in part, he is not worried about how and where but when you are baptized. Hence, “I don’t think [immersion] is such a big deal.” It should be noted that the idea of a “washing” is not completely foreign to baptism biblically and historically. Both Ephesians 5:26 and Titus 3:5 convey the concept. Historically, both the catechism of James Boyce and John Broadus speak of a washing or purifying significance in baptism.

A Brief Catechism of Bible Doctrine (J.P. Boyce, 1874), Baptism questions 4-6

Q. What does the use of water in Baptism represent?

identify one with Jesus. It may even be a treatise on “How to increase baptisms at your church” by Rick Warren, with the theme of “Nike baptisms,” which means we just do it.”⁹

There is actually no systematic treatment of baptism in the Bible. There is no central or definitive text(s) as we have, for example, with the doctrine of Christology.¹⁰ However, all is not lost. In Romans 6:1-14 the apostle Paul continues his development of the doctrine of justification which he began in 3:21. Responding to a number of questions, real or created as a rhetorical device, the relationship of justification to sanctification receives attention beginning at 6:1 and extending through 8:39. It is here, in Romans 6, that Paul expounds upon our identification and union with Christ. In developing his argument, he brings to the discussion the doctrine of baptism. It is the evidence of, or perhaps better, the signification of 1) identification and 2) union with Christ. John Stott correctly asserts, “The essential point Paul is making is that being a

A. The washing away of our sins by the cleansing influences of the Holy Spirit.

Q. What does the act of immersion represent?

A. The union of the believer with Christ in His death.

Q. Do the Scriptures assign this union as a reason why we are to profess Christ by immersion?

A. They do; they tell us that it is on this account that we are buried with Christ by baptism unto death.

A Catechism of Bible Teaching (John Broadus, 1892) Lesson XI, question 4

Q. What does this signify?

A. The water signifies purification from sin, and the immersion signified that we are dead to sin, and like Christ we have been buried and risen again.

Still, it is the case that the word *baptizein* means “to immerse, immerge, submerge, to dip, to plunge, to inbathe, to whelm” (xiii). The classic treatment of this remains Thomas Jefferson Conant, *The Meaning and Use of Baptizein* (Grand Rapids: Kregel 1977, rpt. from the 1864 edition). Conant’s conclusion on the matter is worth noting: “The word *Baptizein*, during the whole existence of the Greek as a spoken language, has a perfectly defined and unvarying import. In its literal use it meant, as has been shown, to put entirely into or under a liquid, or other penetrable substance, generally water, so that the object was wholly covered by the inclosing element. By analogy, it expressed the *coming into a new state of life or experience*, in which one was as it were inclosed and swallowed up, so that, temporarily or permanently, he belonged wholly to it” (188).

⁹ Rick Warren *Ministry Tool Box*, Issue #267, July 12, 2006. Pastor Warren also notes in this issue another article entitled “40 Ways to Increase Baptisms in Your Church.”

¹⁰ I have taught for years that there are four foundational text for building a biblical Christology. They are John 1:1-18; Phil. 2:6-11; Col. 1:15-20 and Heb. 1:1-3. This approach is reflected in the chapter on “the person of Christ,” in *A Theology for the Church* (Nashville: Boardman and Holman, 2007). It is edited by the author of this paper.

Christian involves a personal, vital identification with Jesus Christ, and that this union with him is dramatically set forth in our baptism.”¹¹ James Boyce believed the rite also contained a doctrinal component of confession. He spoke of baptism as, “the initiative rite of His [Christ’s] Church, is an act which involves the very formulary which accompanies it, profession of doctrinal belief.”¹² Dever asserts, “such testimony should occur in the context of a believing community, whose responsibility it is to test the credibility of the profession.”¹³ Spurgeon saw a similar connection, but drew attention to the witness or testimony aspect of our public immersion in water. He said,

What connection has this baptism with faith? I think it has just this, *baptism is the avowal of faith*; the man was Christ’s soldier, but now in baptism he puts on his regimentals. The man believed in Christ, but his faith remained between God and his own soul. In baptism he says to the baptizer, “I believe in Jesus Christ;” he says to the Church, “I unite with you as a believer in the common truths of Christianity;” he saith to the onlooker, “Whatever you may do, as for me, I will serve the Lord.” It is the avowal of his faith...baptism is also to the believer a *testimony of his faith*; he does in baptism tell the world what he believes. “I am about,” saith he, “to be buried in water. I believe that the Son of God was metaphorically baptized in suffering: I believe he was literally dead and buried.” To rise again out of the water sets forth to all men that he believes in the resurrection of Christ.¹⁴

Believing there are vital and even necessary implications for a Bible doctrine of baptism orbiting about Romans 6, I will highlight and briefly discuss seven implications for this doctrine that can be drawn from a careful examination of this passage. It is my hope that a greater appreciation for the meaning of this wonderful ordinance and doctrine will be the outcome.

¹¹ John Stott, *Romans* (Downens Grove: IVP, 1994), 174.

¹² James P. Boyce, *Three Changes in Theological Institutions: An Inagural Address* (Greenville: C.J. Elford’s Book and Job Press, 1856). Available online at www.BaptistTheology.org.

¹³ Dever, *A Theology for the Church*.

¹⁴ C.H. Spurgeon, “Baptismal Regeneration,” *Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*, Preached June 5, 1864.

1. Baptism signifies that we are now identified with the Man of life, not the man of death. (5:12-21) The context of Romans 6 is important for a proper understanding of baptism. Paul has just drawn the remarkable contrast between the Man of life, Jesus Christ, and the man of death, Adam. The one to whom you belong counts for everything. Beasley-Murray notes that in Romans 5 we see Christ as our substitute. In Romans 6 we see Christ as our representative.¹⁵ From the man named Adam flows sin, death to all men (vs. 12, 14, 17), judgment and condemnation (vs. 16,18). From the Man called Jesus Christ one receives the free gift of justification (vs. 15, 16, 18), righteousness (v. 17, 19), life (v.17) and grace through righteousness to eternal life (v.21). It is to this transfer of identification that our baptism gives witness. Douglas Moo summarizes well this aspect of the soteriological transaction:

Paul has shown how God's gracious act in Christ, when appropriated by faith [5:1-2], puts people into a new relationship with God and assures them that they will be saved from wrath in the last day. What has this to do with life in this present age? Anything? Everything.¹⁶

Romans 5, therefore, paves the way for Romans 6. Identification with the Man of life is transformative. It alters one's identification, practice and destiny. Such a radical break with our past requires a bold declaration of our transfer of allegiance. It demands a public declaration that we are now united with the Man of life and done with the man of death. Baptism appropriately serves to highlight this new reality and realm of existence. John Piper notes, "There is something about this open ritual of new-found faith that makes clear where a person stands

¹⁵ Beasley-Murray, "Baptism," 62.

¹⁶ Douglas Moo, *The Epistle To The Romans*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 350.

and what he is doing... One of the great things about this text [Romans 5:20-6:4] is that it shows that, if you understand what baptism portrays, you understand what really happened to you when you became a Christian.”¹⁷ Baptism testifies to our new identity. We are now identified with the Man of life.

- 2. Baptism means we can no longer continue delighting in sin, because we are now dead to sin. (6:1-2)** Michael Green in commenting on baptism says, “Baptism means death to the person I once was, self-centered, unforgiven, alienated from the life of God. Goodbye to all that.”¹⁸ But is that true? Is that what God intends? Paul addresses the issue by raising three questions, real or hypothetical, in verses one and two. Affirming that “where sin abounded, grace abounded much more” (5:20), he recognizes it is possible to argue that “more sin means more grace.” Thus he responds, “What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound” (6:1)? His response is quick and clear: “Certainly not!” How shall we who died to sin live any longer in it” (6:2)? The gospel of grace does not empower sin, it executes sin. “Eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord” (5:21) has as one its results a death, a termination with the previous life, the life of sin. Tom Schreiner points out, “the grace that believers receive is so powerful that it breaks the dominion of sin. Grace does not simply involve forgiveness of sins; it also involves a transfer of lordship [signified by baptism], so that believers are no longer under the tyranny of sin...believers cannot continue in sin, because they have died to sin (v.2). Dead people cannot

¹⁷ John Piper, “What Baptism Portrays,” Sermon, May 25, 1997. Preached at Bethlehem Baptist Church in Minneapolis, Minn.

¹⁸ Michael Green, *Baptism* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1987), 49.

continue to practice sin.”¹⁹ Corley and Vaughn add, “Justified people are of such a nature that continuance of sin is excluded. They are people who have died to sin. Therefore, their relation to sin has been broken. They have been released from its power and influence, and it is morally impossible for them to continue in it...Believers baptism is a symbolic representation of this death to sin.”²⁰

Baptism means a new and different relationship concerning my affections for sin. The “old me” loved sin, but the “new me” hates sin. The old me has been executed in baptism, never to live again. Once alive to sin, I am now dead to sin. Baptism declares I am new in identification with the Man of life and, therefore, I am dead in my affection for sin. I love the former, and I am repulsed by the latter. Baptism is my declaration of this new allegiance. I have turned from sin in repentance, dead to its penalty and passions. I have turned to the Man of life in faith. He is now my life, my passion. Baptism again witnesses to this decisive break with what I was. It testifies now and eschatologically to what I am and will become.

3. Baptism most clearly identifies us with Christ in His death. (6:3)

We now come to the heart of Paul’s argument concerning the blessings of baptism. Beasley-Murray notes that the structure of verses 3-4, “is reminiscent of the terms of the primitive kerygma cited by Paul in 1 Cor 15:3f, ‘Christ *died* for our sins...was *buried*...has been *raised*...’²¹ He goes on to state that baptism by immersion is “the kerygma in action.”²²

¹⁹ Tom Schreiner, *Romans*, ECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 298-99.

²⁰ Bruce Corley and Curtis Vaughn, *Romans* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976), 74-75.

²¹ Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament*, 127.

²² *Ibid.*, 133.

Arguments over whether Paul has in mind Spirit baptism or water baptism are unnecessary. Moo sees water baptism being taught and is correct in what he affirms. He says, “it seems clear that Paul alludes in vv.3-4 to water baptism, but baptism is not the theme of the paragraph nor is it Paul’s purpose to exposit his theology of baptism. Baptism, rather, functions as shorthand for the conversion experience as a whole.”²³ However, I believe a more fully accurate assessment is that of Schreiner who argues,

The reference to baptism is introduced as a designation for those who are believers in Christ. Since unbaptized Christians were virtually nonexistent, to refer to those who were baptized is another way of describing those who are Christians, those who have put their faith in Christ. Thus Paul is saying here that *all Christians* have participated in the death and burial of Christ, for all Christians had received baptism. To posit that the baptism mentioned here is simply metaphorical (Dunn 1988a: 311) or baptism in the Spirit (Lloyd-Jones 1973) rather than water baptism is incorrect. Moo (1991: 376) observes rightly that Paul normally uses the verb βαπτίζεν (*baptizein*, to baptize) to refer to water baptism (1 Cor. 1:13, 14, 15, 16 [twice] 17; 12:13; 15: 29; Gal. 3:27). Roman Christians would have inevitably thought of water baptism since it was the universal initiation rite for believers in Christ. Moreover Paul probably loosely associated baptism with water and baptism by the Spirit (1 Cor. 12:13), since both of these occurred at conversion. Thus any attempt to distinguish between Spirit baptism and water baptism in Pauline writings goes beyond what Paul himself wrote...it would never have occurred to Paul that baptism in water could be separated from baptism in the Spirit.²⁴

Bob Stein makes a similar, and I would add, compelling case, when he says

In the New Testament conversion involves five integrally related components or aspects, all of which took place at the same time, usually on the same day. These five components are repentance, faith, and

²³ Douglas Moo, *Romans 1-8*, WEC (Chicago: Moody, 1991), 371.

²⁴ Schreiner, *Romans*, 306-07. Schreiner makes the same argument in *Paul*, 376.

confession by the individual, regeneration, or the giving of the Holy Spirit by God, and baptism by representatives of the Christian community.²⁵

Baptism as a shorthand for conversion? In certain context yes. Baptism as only this shorthand? Clearly no. Baptism as vital union with Christ? Yes. Baptism exhausted by this meaning? Again, clearly no.

In verse three Paul raises a fourth question: “Or do you not know that as many of us were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death?”

Several observations can be made that impact a number of aspects of biblical baptism.

First, there is a knowledge component to the doctrine. There is doctrinal content which we should both know and understand about our baptism. This is problematic for those who baptize infants, especially the infant.

Second, Paul takes for granted that the Romans to whom he is writing have been baptized. As Moo says, “Paul signifies that what he is saying has a basis in what the Roman Christians already know about baptism and Christian experience.”²⁶ That there might be an unbaptized believer in Jesus Christ would be an oxymoron to Paul.

Third, “baptized in Christ Jesus” means immersion into Christ. It affirms my full union and identification with the one in whom I now exist and have my very being. Galatians 3:27 beautifully complements this truth when Paul writes, “For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ.” Such language is an additional argument for immersion as the proper mode of baptism.

²⁵ Robert H. Stein, “Baptism and Becoming a Christian in the New Testament,” *SBJT* 2.1 (Spring 1998) 6.

²⁶ Moo, 375-76.

Fourth, our immersion into Christ Jesus is an immersion “into His death.” Jesus Christ died to sin “once for all” as verse 10 makes clear. This death to sin was decisive and climatic. It is never to be repeated. There is no need. Karl Barth wonderfully grasps the magnitude of this truth in his *The Epistle to the Romans*:

To be baptized means to be immersed, to be sunk in a foreign element, to be covered by a tide of purification. The man who emerges from the water is not the same man who entered it. One man dies and another is born. The baptized person is no longer to be identified with the man who died. Baptism bears witness to us of the death of Christ, where the radical and inexorable claim of God upon men triumphed. He that is baptized is drawn into the sphere of this event. Overwhelmed and hidden by the claim of God, he disappears and is lost in this death. The death of Christ dissolves the Fall by bringing into being the void in which the usurped independence of men can breathe no longer. It digs up the invisible roots of visible sin, and makes Adam, the man of the ‘No-God’, a thing decayed and gone. Beyond this death the man who asks that he may continue in sin (vi. 2) and be like God lives no longer. He is dissolved by the claim of which God makes upon him.²⁷

Barth then draws on Luther whose insight and rhetoric is simply too priceless to pass by,

‘Your baptism is nothing less than grace clutching you by the throat: a grace-full throttling, by which your sin is submerged in order that ye may remain under grace. Come thus to thy baptism. Give thyself up to be drowned in baptism and killed by the mercy of thy dear God, saying: “Drown me and throttle me, dear Lord, for henceforth I will gladly die to sin with Thy Son”’ (Luther).

Barth simply concludes, “This death is grace.”²⁸ Baptism as an immersion, most clearly identifies the believer with Christ in His death, His once and for all death

²⁷ Karl Barth, *The Epistle To The Romans*, trans. By Edwyn C. Hoskyns (London: Oxford University, 1980 rpt.), 193.

²⁸ Ibid, 194.

to sin. Michael Green, an Anglican, does not neglect the self-evident meaning: [Baptism] is not only incorporation in Christ. It is union with him in his death and resurrection. Baptism plunges us into the dying and the rising of the Lord Jesus, and this aspect is particularly clearly emphasized by full immersion.”²⁹

Fifth, baptism into Christ has implications for where I am baptized and by whom I am baptized. First Corinthians 12:13 teaches that, “By one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free...” Those who are baptized into Christ Jesus now identify with both Christ as their head and also His body. Such an identification is to be public and witnessed by the body of Christ, e.g. a local visible body of believers. As Schreiner says in commenting on 1 Cor. 12:12-13, “Those who belong to Christ (v.12) are baptized into his body (v.13).” This is not to ignore that in Romans 6, “The focus of the text is on incorporation into Christ, not into the church.”³⁰ Still, the trajectory of the text would point to baptism being administered by the visible body of Christ as normative. Missionary expansion and accompanying baptisms like those found in the book of Acts should not be viewed as the pattern once local churches are established. To follow any other model is to introduce a disconnect of the believer from the head and body with whom he or she now identifies. Green sees this aspect of baptism and notes,

It is important to stress this corporate side of baptism. Nobody is meant to be a Christian on their own. We belong to one another, and the mark of belonging is baptism. That has an important message for us in our local churches. Baptism is not a solitary thing, marking me out as a Christian on my own. It is a corporate thing, making us part of the Body of Christ,

²⁹ Green, 49.

³⁰ Schreiner, *Romans*, 308.

with all the privileges, partnerships and responsibility which that entails.”³¹

To this R. Albert Mohler Jr. would add,

the common experience of believer’s baptism is central to the unity and identity of the church. In Ephesians 4:5, Paul writes of the church as constituted by “one Lord, one faith, one baptism.” In 1 Corinthians 12:13, Paul reminds us: “For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free, and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.” Thus baptism is presented as a necessary act of obedience to Christ that marks the believer’s incorporation into the church as the Body of Christ. Put simply, the New Testament has no concept of an unbaptized Christian, much less an unbaptized church member.³²

Stan Norman amplifies this truth further,

To identify with Christ is to identify with his people. Our union with Christ also brings union with his body, the church. A believer cannot be united with the Head of the body without simultaneously being united with the body....Baptism thus signifies the inclusion and union of the candidate into the body of Christ.³³

However, it is at this point that the most persuasive argument may be that of Mark Dever, who ties the issue both to the fidelity of Scripture and to the issue of obedience. He writes,

This brings us to the...more important matter which must not be overlooked-fidelity to Scripture. If baptism is not essential for communion and church membership, it effectively becomes a matter of individual judgment. The desire for doctrinal inclusiveness and unity in the Spirit ironically reduces obedience to a matter of subjective preference. Some, like John Bunyan, have argued that disobedience to a command of Christ, especially when done in ignorance, represents a mere lack of light to be borne with more than it represents a disciplinable offense, or a sin.

A sin can consist of either an action or an intention. Certainly the intention to disobey God is sin. But a disobedient action toward God is also a sin even if the individual does not intend to sin. The Bible teaches clearly that there are unintentional sins. Intentions are an important consideration in the nature and gravity of a sin, but they are not the only consideration. One of the effects of sin is to stupefy the sinner, to dull and darken the faculties. So those dwelling in sin

³¹ Green, 52.

³² R. Albert Mohler Jr., “The Biblical Basis for the Baptist Vision of the Church (as a Body of Baptized Believers)”, (*The Baptist Messenger*, July 11, 2006).

³³ Stan Norman, *The Baptist Way* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 2005), 134.

are said to dwell in the darkness, but that darkness does not ameliorate one's guilt. In the parable of the sheep and the goats in Matthew 25, Jesus teaches with stark clarity that obedience to God does not lie in the eye of the beholder, unless the beholder is God himself. Many goats thought they had lived righteous lives, but Jesus says they have not.

How then do we know what God considers obedience? By his own self-revelation. There is no other sure and certain guide! If Christ has commanded Christians to be baptized, then countermending that instruction, or substituting mere intention, even sincere intention, does not serve him best. His glory is most displayed in the church when baptism guards both the regeneracy of church membership and the consistency of the church's corporate witness. If we understand that Christ commands the church to baptize only those who repent and believe, then it seems clear that a biblically faithful church is a Baptist church.³⁴

Beasley-Murray would wisely, and pastorally, add:

The question not infrequently has been raised, "To which church does baptism give entry: to the local universal church, to the visible or the invisible church?" The question is essentially modern. It would have been inconceivable to Paul. The church is the visible manifestation of the people of God, whose life is "hidden with Christ in God" (Col 3:3). Baptism is a visible act with a spiritual meaning; it is therefore well adapted to be the means of entry into a visible community of God's people *and* the body which transcends any one place or time. How to give satisfactory expression to the outward and inward elements, alike of baptism and of the church, is a perpetual pastoral problem; that dilemma, however, challenges believers to reform themselves according to the Word of God rather than to accept laxity of doctrine and practice.³⁵

4. **Baptism further identifies us with Christ in His resurrected life. (6:4-5)**

Going down into the water, being submerged in a watery grave, beautifully depicts our death to sin and union with Christ in His death. However, there is a wonderful corollary to our death because of our union with the Man of life. He was buried in death and gloriously raised in resurrection life. Because we are in Him we too are raised unto resurrected life. Indeed our text affirms:

1) just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father so are we

(v.5);

³⁴ Dever, *A Theology for the Church*.

³⁵ Beasley-Murray, "Baptism," 64.

- 2) we should, like our head, walk in newness of life (v.5);
- 3) united together in the likeness of His death, certainly we also shall be in the likeness of His resurrection (v.6).

Emerging from the waters of death, I now testify and give witness publicly of the resurrection life I now share in union with Christ. E.Y. Mullins in “Why I Am a Baptist,” points to this aspect when he writes, “submersion is a symbol of spiritual death and burial. Emergence from the water is a symbol of resurrection from the dead. Thus the form of the ordinance, immersion, is necessary to express the spiritual meaning. To destroy the form is to destroy the meaning.”³⁶

The two predominate Baptist Confessions of our day both emphasize this important truth as well. **The Abstract of Principles (1859), Article XV** states:

Baptism is an ordinance of the Lord Jesus, obligatory upon every believer, wherein he is immersed in water in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, as a sign of his fellowship with the death and resurrection of Christ, of remission of sins, and of his giving himself up to God, to live and walk in newness of life.

The Baptist Faith and Message (2000), Article VII, likewise affirms: Christian baptism is the immersion of a believer in water in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. It is an act of obedience symbolizing the believer’s faith in a crucified, buried, and risen Saviour, the believer’s death to sin, the burial of the old life, and the resurrection to walk in

³⁶ E.Y. Mullins, *The Axioms of Religion* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1997), 274.

newness of life in Christ Jesus. It is a testimony to his faith in the final resurrection of the dead.

And hear also **The Baptist Catechism**, written by Benjamin Keach in 1693, Question 97:

Q. What is baptism?

A. Baptism is an ordinance of the New Testament instituted by Jesus Christ, to be unto the party baptized a sign of his fellowship with him, in his death, burial, and resurrection; of his being ingrafted into him (Rom. 6:3, 4, 5; Col. 2:12; Gal. 3:27); of remission of sins (Mk. 1:4; Acts 2:38, and 22:16); and of his giving up himself unto God through Jesus Christ, to live and walk in newness of life (Rom. 6:3,4).

John Murray is correct when he affirms, “Death to sin is not itself an adequate characterization of the believer’s identity; it is basic and it is the fundamental premise of the argument. But death to sin is but the precondition of that life which is the final issue of grace (cf. 5:15, 17, 18, 21). And baptism as signifying union with Christ (vs.3) must mean also union with Christ in his resurrection and therefore in his resurrection life.”³⁷

5. **Baptism affirms that we are no longer enslaved to sin for that man is now dead. (6:6-7)** Paul now develops the doctrine of sanctification as the normal and expected result of union with Christ through baptism. Again the knowledge component of our union, practice and destiny is noted. We know that the old man was crucified, put to death, that the body of sin might be done away with...And

³⁷ John Murray, *Romans*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968), 216.

why? So that we should no longer be slaves, captives, of sin. My former self is dead and gone by virtue of my immersion into Christ. Again Schreiner states well our new status:

Those baptized into Christ, by virtue of sharing his death and the promise of his resurrection, have died to the power of sin (6:2). The “old person” (*palaios anthropos*), the person we are in Adam, “has been crucified together” with Christ (Rom 6:6; cf. Gal 2:20). Thus, the body dominated by sin has been stripped of its power (*katargeo* in Rom 6:6), and believers are now freed from the dominion that sin exercised over them when they were in Adam.³⁸

Stott understands this similarly and puts it well, “...*our old self* denotes, not our lower self but our former self, ‘the man we once were’ (NEB), ‘our old humanity’ (REB), the person we used to be in Adam. So what was crucified with Christ was not a part of us called our old nature, but the whole of us as we were in our pre-conversion state.”³⁹

Having then died to sin by virtue of my baptism into Christ, I am no longer a slave to sin but a son under grace (v.14). Baptism signals and signifies my new Master who is Christ. Having died to sin in baptism, I, the new man in Christ (2 Cor. 5:17), am now freed from sin. This freedom is immediate as to sins penalty, progressive as to sins power, and eschatological with respect to sins very presence. Kent Hughes notes simply but correctly, “as Christ did not serve sin, neither must we...if one’s life has not changed and if there is no impulse for further change toward Christ, he or she is very probably not a Christian.”⁴⁰

³⁸ Schreiner, *Paul*, 258.

³⁹ Stott, 176.

⁴⁰ R. Kent Hughes, *Romans* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1991), 124-25.

Baptism declares that I can serve sin no longer, for that “I” is dead.

Formerly a slave to an evil and wicked master, death by baptism unto resurrection life has freed me from that tyranny. This I also confess in my baptism.

6. **Baptism provides an eschatological confidence that the life I have in Christ is a life that will never end. (6:8-10)** Verses 8-10 are eschatological in focus, revealing that there is an important connection between the doctrines of baptism and the doctrine of eschatology. Debate exists over whether Paul has in view our resurrection at the parousia or our present experience of new life in Christ. The language seems to point to the future and the parousia, and yet as Moo notes, “this future life of resurrection casts its shadow into the believer’s present experience.”⁴¹ What I will become in the future has already begun in the present.

United with Christ in His death and resurrection, I confess in baptism my confidence of a future resurrection, the kind of life which I have already begun to enjoy. Verse 9 amplifies this truth. Again there is an emphasis on the knowledge I should have concerning this aspect of my union with Christ. Christ has been raised once and for all. He will never die again. Death’s dominion was crushed by His resurrection from the dead. Verse 10 further reiterates the climatic nature of this event. “He died to sin once for all.” In stark contrast, “the life that He live, He lives to God.” Robert Mounce beautifully captures the victory note of the text, “Christ’s resurrection broke forever the tyranny of death. That cruel master can no longer exercise any power over him. The cross was sin’s final move; the resurrection was God’s checkmate. The game is over. Sin is forever in defeat.

⁴¹ Moo, *Romans*, WEC, 395. *The London Confession of 1644*, Article XL notes the eschatological dimension when it states, “so certainly shall the bodies of the saints be raised by the power of Christ, in the day of resurrection, to reign with Christ.”

Christ the victor died to sin “once for all” and now lives in unbroken fellowship with God.”⁴² This life then is perpetual, never-ending. As Corley and Vaughan point out, “The believer’s confidence that he shares in Christ’s resurrection life rest on the knowledge that Christ is alive forevermore.”⁴³ The implication of this is significant in my judgment. Because I am as united with Christ in His life as I am in His death, I have the security and certainty of a life that will never end. Murray says it well: “There can be suspension or interruption of participation in Christ’s resurrection life or reversion to death in sin no more than can the fact of Jesus’ resurrection be negated or repeated...because of union with Christ in his resurrection the newness of life which this union involves for the believer is as definitively abiding as is the resurrection of Christ.”⁴⁴ In other words is there within the act of baptism, a declaration of my eternal security, of my preservation in this resurrection life? I believe the answer is yes. United with Christ in baptism I too died to sin once for all. United with Christ in baptism, I too emerge from the realm of death unto a new life both in quality and quantity, a new life that will not, that can not end! This is decisively driven home in verse 11 and following which leads to our 7th and final implication.

7. Baptism is the basis for my daily mortification of the flesh. (6:11-14)

The “likewise” of verse 11 draws attention to an additional connection between Christ and the Christian. As Christ has died to sin, we who are united to Him in baptism must reckon, consider (pre. imp.) ourselves likewise dead to sin. Again in Paul the indicative is the basis for the imperative. We are truly new in Christ

⁴² Robert Mounce, *Romans*. NAC (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1995), 152.

⁴³ Corley and Vaughn, 76.

⁴⁴ Murray, 223.

through baptism, but we are not totally and completely new just yet. John MacArthur states it well, “New birth in Christ brings death to the sinful self, but it does not bring death to the temporal flesh and its corrupted inclinations until the future glorification.”⁴⁵ We must daily appropriate and live in the reality of the truth that we have died to sin. Dead to sin, I am now alive to God in Christ Jesus our Lord. Believing this to be who I truly am as witnessed by my baptism, I will not let sin reign (pre.imp.) in my body by obeying its lust, its passions, its desires. Further, I will not present (pre. imp.) the members of my body as instruments of unrighteousness to sin, but I will present them to God...as instruments of righteousness. My baptism will serve as a reminder, a memorial if you like, to inspire and motivate me in my pursuit of this righteous life. This is how it must be, for sin shall not have dominion over me, indeed it cannot; for I am not under the law which kills and enslaves, but under grace which gives life and freedom. Spurgeon saw the beauty of this truth and captured it superbly in his sermon, “Baptism-A Burial.”

If God has given to you and to me an entirely new life in Christ, how can that new life spend itself after the fashion of the old life? Shall the spiritual live as the carnal? How can you that were the servants of sin, but have been made free by precious blood, go back to your old slavery? When you were in the old Adam life, you lived in sin, and loved it; but now you have been dead and buried, and have come forth into newness of life: can it be that you can go back to the beggarly elements from which the Lord has brought you out? If you live in sin, you will be false to your profession, for you profess to be alive unto God? If you walk in lust, you will tread under foot the blessed doctrines of the Word of God, for these lead to holiness and purity. You would make Christianity to be a by-word and a proverb, if, after all, you who were quickened from your spiritual death should exhibit a conduct no better than the life of ordinary men, and little superior to what your former life used to be. As many of you as have been baptized have said to the world,- We are dead to the world, and we have come forth into a new life. Our fleshly desires are henceforth to be viewed as dead, for

⁴⁵ John MacArthur, *Romans 1-8* (Chicago: Moody, 1991), 325.

now we live after a fresh order of things. The Holy Spirit has wrought in us a new nature, and though we are in the world, we are not of it, but are new made men.⁴⁶

Beasley- Murray notes in the act of baptism, “the actions of stripping off clothes for baptism and putting on clothes after baptism affords a symbol of “putting off” the old life without Christ and “putting on” the new life in Christ, and even putting on Christ himself (Gal 3:27; Col 3:9, 12)...In baptism, therefore, the Lord appropriates the baptized for his own and the baptized owns Jesus Christ as Lord and submits to his lordship.”⁴⁷

Conclusion

John Stott in speaking of our union with Christ, talks of “the logic of baptism.”

Following a methodology similar to the one followed in this paper, he identifies “eight steps or stages” in Paul’s argument in Romans 6. I believe they are right on target, and provide a fitting summation of our study of this text and its implications for biblical baptism.

1. We died to sin. This is the foundation of Paul’s thesis. How can we live in what we have died to (2)?
2. The way in which we have died to sin is that our baptism united with us with Christ in his death (3).
3. Having shared in Christ’s death, God wants us also to share in his resurrection life (4-5).
4. Our former self was crucified with Christ in order that we might be freed from sin’s slavery (6-7).
5. Both the death and the resurrection of Jesus were decisive events: he dies to sin once for all, but he lives continuously unto God (8-10).
6. We must realize that we are now what Christ is, namely ‘dead to sin but alive to God’ (11)
7. Being alive from death, we must offer our bodies to God as instruments of righteousness (12-13).

⁴⁶ C.H. Spurgeon, “Baptism-A Burial,” *Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*, Preached October 30, 1881.
⁴⁷ Beasley-Murray, “Baptism,” 61.

8. Sin shall not be our master, because our position has radically changed from being ‘under law’ to being ‘under grace’. Grace does not encourage sin; it outlaws it (14).⁴⁸

Baptism then, as Erickson notes, “is a powerful form of proclamation of the truth of what Christ has done; it is a “word in water” testifying to the believer’s participation in the death and resurrection of Christ (Rom. 6:3-5). It is a symbol rather than merely a sign, for it is a graphic picture of the truth it conveys.”⁴⁹ This truth is our union with Christ. This is our existence by virtue of our immersion in the Man of life. This is what the right doctrine of baptism will rightly convey. This is the doctrine we must teach and proclaim.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ Stott, 168-169.

⁴⁹ Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 1110.

⁵⁰ Let me also commend a very fine overview of the doctrine of baptism by Thomas White, “What Makes Baptism Valid?” This paper may be accessed at www.BaptistTheology.org. *An Address on Baptism* by James H. Cuthbert, delivered June 11, 1854 can also be consulted with much profit (Charleston: James, Williams & Gitsinger, 1854). Cuthbert’s successor as pastor of Wentworth-Street Baptist Church was Basil Manly, Sr. Cuthbert said baptism was “that ordinance which constituted the initiatory step of your public entrance into the Christian life” (7). He is spirited in his criticism of infant baptism and his affirmation of immersion. He notes the mode, appointed and sanctioned by Christ, “cannot be a point of *indifferency*” (21).

Appendix: A suggested sermon outline for preaching on baptism from Romans

The Meaning and Purpose of Baptism

Romans 6:1-11

- | | |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------|
| I. <u>Baptism declares our separation from sin.</u> | 6:1-2 |
| 1) I will not continue in sin. | 6:1 |
| 2) I will not live in sin. | 6:2 |
| II. <u>Baptism declares our identification with our Savior.</u> | 6:3-5 |
| 1) I identify with His death. | 6:3-4 |
| 2) I identify with His life. | 6:4-5 |
| III. <u>Baptism declares our mortification of the old self.</u> | 6:6-11 |
| 1) I am loosed from slavery to sin. | 6:6-9 |
| 2) I am alive for slavery to the Savior. | 6:10-11 |