

## Dealing The Death Blow To Sin: The Meaning And Purpose of Baptism

### Romans 6:1-14

**Introduction:** 1) 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). 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). The New Testament knows nothing of a believer in Jesus Christ who has not been baptized. Interestingly, one will look in vain to find a major Baptist Confession that does not include the doctrine of baptism.

2) 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. I have taught for years that there are four foundational texts for building a biblical Christology. They are John 1:1-18; Phil 2:6-11; Col 1:15-20 and Heb 1:1-3. However, all is not lost. In Romans 6:1-14 the apostle Paul continues his development of the doctrine of salvation which he began in 3:21. (sin was covered in 1:18-3:20). Now, responding to a number of questions (4 in vs. 1-3), real or created as a rhetorical device, the relationship of justification to sanctification receives attention, beginning at 6:1 and extending through 8:39. Here, in Romans 6, Paul expounds upon our identification and union with Christ. In developing his argument, he brings to the discussion the doctrine of baptism and our death to sin. Baptism is the evidence of, or perhaps better, the signification of the believer’s 1) identification and 2) union with Christ in His death, burial and resurrection.

As we consider the relationship of baptism, union with Christ and our putting sin to death, I want to highlight 7 truths that can be drawn from a careful examination of this passage. These 7 concepts are grounded in the reality that 1) You know who you are in Christ, 2) You consider yourself dead to sin and alive to God and 3) You present yourself to God as an instrument of righteousness. It is my hope that a greater appreciation for the meaning of baptism and our new life in Christ will be the outcome.

**I. 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 these 14 verses. 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. In Romans 5 we see Christ as our substitute. In Romans 6 we see Christ as our representative. From the man named Adam flows sin, death to all men (vs. 12, 14, 17), judgment and condemnation (vs. 16, 18). From the Man 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). There is a great transfer of identification.

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. I am now connected, united, with Christ!

**II. Baptism Means We Can No Longer Continue Delighting In Sin, Because We Are Now Dead To Sin. 6:1-2**

Michael Green says, “Baptism means death to the person I once was, self-centered, unforgiven, alienated from the life of God. Goodbye to all that.”<sup>1</sup> But is that true? Is that what God intends? Paul addresses the issue by raising three questions, real or hypothetical, in vs. 1-2. Affirming that “where sin abounded, grace abounded much more” (5:20), he recognizes it is possible to argue that “more sin mean more grace.” Thus he responds, “What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound” (6:1)? His response is quick and clear: “By no means!” [“Certainly not!”] How can we who died to sin still 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 of its results a death, an execution, 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 continue to practice sin.”<sup>2</sup> Justified people are people who have died to sin. Their relation to sin has been broken. It is morally impossible for them to continue in it ... Believers baptism is a symbolic representation of this death to sin. Union with Christ signified in 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 is my declaration of this new allegiance. I have turned from sin in repentance, dead to its penalty and its passions. I have turn to the Man of life in faith.

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Green, *Baptism* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1987), 49.

<sup>2</sup> Tom Schreiner, *Romans ECNT* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 298-99.

He is now my life. He is now my passion. I live for Christ! Baptism witnesses to this decisive break with what I was. It testifies now and eschatologically to what I am and also, what I will become.

### **III. Baptism Most Clearly Identifies Us With Christ In His Death. 6:3-4**

We now come to the heart of Paul's argument. Verses 3-4 should remind us of 1 Cor 15:3f, 'Christ *died* for our sins ... was *buried* ... has been *raised* ...' "Baptism by immersion" is the gospel in action, the gospel as a motion picture!

Arguments over whether Paul has in mind "Spirit baptism" or "water baptism" are really unnecessary. Paul never would have thought to separate the two.

Bob Stein makes a compelling case for this 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 confession by the individual, regeneration, or the giving of the Holy Spirit by God, and baptism by representatives of the Christian community.<sup>3</sup>

In verse 3 Paul raises a 4<sup>th</sup> question: "Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death?" The he drives home the argument when he says, "We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death ..."

Several observations can be made at this point that impact a number of aspects of biblical baptism. I note five.

1) 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. It is problematic for the infant too. This is probably problematic for the

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<sup>3</sup> Robert H. Stein, "Baptism and Becoming a Christian in the New Testament," *SBJT* 2.1 (Spring 1998) 6.

baptizing of very young children as well, at least in a number of instances. The only proper candidate for baptism in the New Testament is a believer who understands the gospel and trusts Christ in an informed and conscious decision.

2) Paul takes for granted that the Romans to whom he is writing have been baptized. That there might be an unbaptized believer in Jesus Christ would be an oxymoron to Paul. He could conceive of no such creature!

3) “Baptized in Christ Jesus” means immersion into Christ. The Greek word *baptizo* means to immerse, dunk, submerge with the related idea of identification. Believers baptism by immersion in identification with Christ is Bible baptism. This act 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.”

4) Our immersion into Christ Jesus is an immersion “into His death” (v. 4a). Jesus Christ dies 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, a German theologian with whom I often disagree, 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. ... 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.<sup>4</sup>

The great reformer Martin Luther adds:

‘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).

Baptism as an immersion, most clearly identifies the believer with Christ in His death, His once and for all death to sin. It plunges us into the dying and the rising of the Lord.

5) 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 it should be witnessed by the body of Christ, e.g. a local visible body of believers. Nobody is meant to be a Christian on their own. We belong to one another, and one mark of belonging is baptism. Baptism is not a solitary thing, marking me out as a Christian on my own. It is a corporate thing, marking us as part of the Body of Christ, with all the privileges, partnerships and responsibility which that entails.

#### **IV. 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

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<sup>4</sup> Karl Barth, *The Epistle To The Romans*, trans. By Edwyn C. Hoskyns (London: Oxford University, 1980 rpt.), 193.

gloriously raised in resurrection life. Because we are in Him we too are raised unto resurrected life. [Read vs. 4-5] Note that our text affirms:

- 1) just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father so are we (v. 4);
- 2) we should, like our head, walk in newness of life (v. 4);
- 3) united together in the likeness of His death, certainly we also shall be in the likeness of His resurrection (v. 5).

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.”<sup>5</sup>

SEBTS affirms 2 Baptist Confessions of Faith. Here what both say about Baptism.

#### **The Abstract of Principles (1859), Article XV**

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 to God, to live and walk in the newness of life.

#### **The Baptist Faith and Message (2000), Article VII**

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 Savior, the

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<sup>5</sup> E. Y. Mullins, *The Axioms of Religion* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1997), 274.

believer's death to sin, the burial of the old life, and the resurrection to walk in newness of life in Christ Jesus. It is a testimony to his faith in the final Resurrection of the dead.

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."<sup>6</sup>

V. **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. Sanctification means simply to grow in Christ-likeness in its progressive sense. "We know that our old self was crucified, with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing" ... And why? "So that we would no longer be enslaved, [captives] to sin" (v.6). My former self is dead and gone by virtue of my immersion into Christ. Baptized into Christ, by virtue of sharing his death and the promise of his resurrection, I have died to the power of sin (6:2). The "old person," the person we are in Adam, "has been crucified together" with Christ (Rom 6:6; cf. Gal 2:20). As v. 7 affirms, the body dominated by sin has been stripped of its power through death with Christ and I am now free from the dominion that sin exercised over me when I was in Adam. I have "been set free from sin."

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<sup>6</sup> John Murray, *Romans*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968), 216.



Having died to sin by virtue of my union with Christ, I am no longer a slave to sin but a child under grace (v. 14). This theme is developed in Romans 8:14-17. My new Master 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 sin's penalty, progressive as to sin's power, and eschatological with respect to sin's very presence. Kent Hughes notes correctly, "as Christ did not serve sin, neither must we ... if one's life has not changed and if there is not impulse for further change toward Christ, he or she is very probably not a Christian."<sup>7</sup>

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.

**VI. Baptism Reflects 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. What I will become in the future has already begun in the present. Note how v. 8 puts it, "Now if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him.

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 "with him" (v. 8). Verse 9 amplifies this truth. 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: "For the death He died He died to sin, once for all." In stark contrast, "but the life that He lives, He lives to God." Christ's resurrection broke forever the tyranny of death. That cruel taskmaster of sin can no

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<sup>7</sup> R. Kent Hughes, *Romans* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1991), 124-25.

longer exercise any power over me. The cross was sin's final move; the resurrection was God's checkmate. The game is over. Sin is forever defeated. Christ the victor died to sin "once for all" and now lives in unbroken fellowship with His Father, and so do we! Our confidence rests on the knowledge that Christ is alive forevermore. 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. 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 cannot, end! This is decisively driven home in vs. 11-14 which leads to our 7<sup>th</sup> and final implication.

**VII. Baptism Is The Basis For My Daily Mortification Of The Flesh. 6:11-14**

These verses contain 4 powerful imperatives that reveal the proper response of all who now "walk in newness of life" (v. 4) by virtue of a resurrected life (v. 5) in union with Christ.

The "so you also" that begins 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 consider, reckon (pre. imp.) ourselves likewise "dead to sin." Again in Paul the indicative is the basis for the imperative. We are truly new in Christ 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."<sup>8</sup> 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" (v. 11). Believing this to be who I truly am as witnessed by my baptism, I will not let sin reign (pre. imp.), be King (!), in my body by

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<sup>8</sup> John MacArthur, *Romans 1-8* (Chicago: Moody, 1991), 325.

obeying its passions, its lusts, its desires (v. 12). Further, (v. 13) I will not present (pre. imp.) the members of my body as instruments of unrighteousness to sin, but I will present (aor. imp) 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 as verse 14 makes plain sin will 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 new life. Our fleshly desires are henceforth to be viewed as dead, for 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.<sup>9</sup>

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

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<sup>9</sup> C. H. Spurgeon, "Baptism-A Burial," *Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*, Preached October 30, 1881.

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.”<sup>10</sup>

**Conclusion:** John Stott in speaking of our union with Christ, 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 truths:

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 us with Christ in this 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).

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<sup>10</sup> 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).<sup>11</sup>

Baptism “is a powerful form of gospel proclamation 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 graphic picture of the truth it conveys. This truth is our union with Christ. This is our existence by virtue of our immersion in the Man of life. We are not who we once were, so we must not live as we once lived. Go then, and live as new men and women. For that is who you are!

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<sup>11</sup> Stott, 168-169.