

Pako Evening Service 27th November 2016

Scripture Reading: Rom 6:1-14; Mat 3:1-17; Sermon: "Washed in the blood of Christ and his Spirit"

Congregation, sometimes when I lead a Bible study or teach a senior Catechism class I start with a few trivia questions. For instance, "What's the difference between general and special revelation? What's special about special revelation? What are the four reformed confessions? What are the ecumenical confessions or creeds we use? Name the five solas or the five alones? Tell me the name of the three sacraments that we have?"

Now that last question may be a bit misleading but it is surprising how many people actually find three sacraments, the third one being profession of faith. Well let me just set you right, we only have two sacraments. They are the Lord's Supper and Baptism, and it's this latter one which is our focus this evening. We believe Scripture to teach that believers and their children should receive this one baptism.

Now if I were to ask you what was the greatest day in your life I dare say you wouldn't say it was the day you were baptized. Yet it is a great day, because when one is baptised, God is giving us a sign and seal that all the promises He has made in his word are Yes and Amen in Christ.

And that is true whether the person being baptised is an infant or an adult. And the promises contained in baptism can summarize by saying that, "as surely as water washes away the dirt from my body, so certainly does Christ's blood and Spirit wash away all my sins (cf Q & A 69).

This promise is so fundamental to baptism that it is mentioned six times in five questions and answers in the HC. In fact, the HC uses the word "wash" or "washes" 18 times when speaking of baptism. So the promise in baptism from God to his people revolves entirely around what Christ has done. It does not revolve around what I do in the first place.

People think that baptism is a sign of their faith or their parent's faith. It isn't, at least not in the first place. Baptism points us to Calvary! Interestingly, no one has this misunderstanding about the Lord's Supper. Most people understand the Lord's Supper to focus on what Christ has done at Calvary! Baptism is really no different! We are reminded and assured by this sacrament of Christ's one sacrifice on the cross that washes away all our sin! Of course, washing implies that something is dirty and it needs to be washed and cleaned!

Now there is no need for a clean baby to be bathed when they are baptized. But the dirt and muck that clings to us, even from when we are a baby is the pollution and filth of sin that covers us from head to toe. We're conceived in sin says Psa 51. We need to be washed clean. But please, it's not the water that washes our sins away! The water is merely an outward sign pointing to or symbolizing an inner washing done by Christ's blood and Spirit.

No ritual and no sacrament can ever remove our sins, no matter how holy the people and how solemn the ceremony or how many times we bless the water. Furthermore, some churches who believe that the ritual of baptism can take away sins so long as the right people perform the ceremony. We do not believe Scripture to teach this at all. And then finally, there are people who do not believe in the Lord Jesus, and who have no intention of bringing their child up in the ways of the Lord who still request baptism as though there is some magic about it!

I was once speaking to a celebrant who insisted that the Christian church should baptise any child or adult that wishes to be baptized. She claimed that it was a parent's or individuals right. It's amazing how some people can be so passionate and so sincere about something and still be sincerely wrong! It would be foolish to baptise just for sake of doing so and not understanding why.

If we did that then we would be giving parents a false sense of security, causing them to think that their child is safe in heaven when in actual fact, no one can get to heaven without faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. Furthermore, we would bring dishonour to God and distort the Gospel of Jesus Christ. So why baptise our children? To help answer that good question is to ask, "How does the Bible regard our children? Are children of Christian parents in Christ when they are born or in limbo until they make a decision?"

Now we don't presume that because our children are baptized that they are automatically saved. Presumptive regeneration is not something we hold to. Nor do we baptize infants because they are so nice and cute, even though they may be that. We baptize them because they are part of God's covenant people and in that sense regarded as Holy by God as 1 Cor 7:14 makes clear.

In fact, I would suggest that is also why children who die in child birth without baptism can be regarded as Holy – because they come from believing parents. In the OT, circumcision was the sign of belonging to the covenant. Abraham had to be circumcised and his male children, for his children also belonged [Gen 17:11-12], even those as young as eight days.

In the NT circumcision was replaced with baptism. And as Peter said in his Pentecost sermon, the promise is for us and our children! [Acts 2:39]. We baptise children of believers for they belong to God's covenant family. Baptism points all God's people to the wonderful reality that he will be their God and that he will be with them always and the proof is the wonderful work of His Son.

That doesn't mean our children don't need to profess their faith – they still need to do that! But profession of faith is a response to the gracious work of the Holy Spirit in their lives as they come under faithful teaching in their immediate family, parents and siblings and hopefully in the church. I wish to emphasize it a little. Baptism is not a statement we make to God, but a statement that God makes to us. And God has the right to make this statement to whoever he wants, yes even infants who cannot yet understand.

There is a danger that if we place too much weight on the fact that a person must be an adult for baptism, then we could be in danger of making it a work, and doubting God's promises as contained in Scripture. In baptism God speaks! This child or adult belongs to God's family and come under his promises. They belong to the community of his people. And through baptism God certifies that all his promises and mercies are for these recipients. So baptism is not a profession of faith.

Rather it is God's pronouncement and a sign of his covenant mercies. Those who say it should only be done to those who are old enough to believe in Jesus Christ have made this sacrament into a people-centered event and that is not what it is. And that is also why, this sacrament, similar to the Lord's Supper is only for those who believe. Don't ever just leave a baptism service and say, "well what a lovely service", or "a lovely baptismal dress." Let it be a reminder and assurance to us all that we have been saved by the one sacrifice of our precious Saviour.

Now the washing by blood that was shed on the cross, symbolized by the water, cleanses us from sin and the Holy Spirit makes us holy. And although these events have happened in the past, it also means obligations or responsibilities for the present. Our baptism places parents and the community of believers under an obligation to teach the truths of the faith to the infant. And let me add, the responsibility for this lies with the parents and not the church. The church hopefully will compliment what the parents teach, but it is the responsibility of the parents.

I mention this because in my previous congregation, we had parents who would not become members of the local church because session didn't place parents under discipline who sent their children to the local state school which they saw as the sea of iniquity! By not doing so, they saw the minister and the elders as co-conspirators and failing in our duty.

Now as much as I disagreed with them, we do have a responsibility as parents of children who have been baptized or as adults who have received baptism. And the obligation, responsibility is that we will teach our children to become more and more "dead to sin" and increasingly to "live a holy and blameless life which is only possible by the power of the Holy Spirit" (A 70). My baptism encourages me to live out or to make real, what I, in Christ, already am, holy and blameless before God. My baptism does not allow me to just keep on sinning as though it is of no consequence!

In Romans 6 Paul asks, "Shall we go on sinning because we know we are saved by grace anyhow? By no means! We died to sin; how can we live in it any longer?" And then Paul states it even stronger by saying, "Or don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?" He does the same in 1 Cor 1:12-13; "How can you possible say you belong to Paul or Apollos or to Peter? By your baptism you were once and for all identified with Christ". Again in Gal 3:27; "for all of you who were baptised into Christ..."

Martin Luther expressed it this way: "Baptism signifies that the old Adam in us is to be drowned by daily sorrow and repentance, and perish with all sins and evil lusts; and that the new man should daily come forth again and rise, who shall live before God in righteousness and purity forever."

Now someone may ask, "Where is the Biblical proof that we should be baptized?" We find the answer in several passages. The Great Commission in Mat 28:19, the Lord gave this charge to his disciples, "Go and make disciples, baptising them in the name of the Triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit." Some people think that Jesus' own baptism in the Jordan authorizes the church to baptise, but that would not be right. We baptize because the Lord told us to do so and it is a sign of his grace and mercy to us. Paul says a similar thing in Titus 3:5, "He saved us, not because of righteous things we

had done but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit..." Baptism is a sign of God's grace, mercy, and undeserved favour. God's mercy and gracious call, even before the foundations of the world is the ground for our salvation, and it is not our doing or anything we have done. In fact, all our good deeds done before our rebirth are like filthy rags.

Now in our Reformed churches we usually sprinkle a little water on the baby's forehead to indicate the sign of baptism. Our Baptist friends immerse people in water when they are baptised. I guess we could discuss it till the cows come home, but personally such a discussion is counter productive. We should not be tempted to think that the volume of water influences the effects of the cleansing.

Remember, only Jesus and his Holy Spirit can cleanse us. Ultimately, our heavenly home is not dependant on the water. We can only enter heaven if we are born again by being washed in the blood of Christ. That is when baptism has significance. That is when we can take comfort from the fact that God has given us this pledge that just as water washes dirt from the body, so too Christ's blood and spirit washes away our sins. Without that rebirth, we are already dead in our transgression and sins.

Lastly, what about our children who have been baptised when they were young and have not done profession of faith? Keep praying for them and keep challenging them. Remind them to respond to God's promises that he made to them when they were too young to understand. Remind them of God's promise that his one and only Son's death was sufficient to also wash them clean.

But please do it gently – it's the Spirit's work and we don't want people responding just to get parents off their backs or sessions. But it doesn't hurt to occasionally remind them, that [Mat 10:32ff] "...whoever acknowledges me before men I will acknowledge before my father in heaven ... who ever disowns me I will disown." So now that we hopefully have a better understanding of Baptism, we will can also say it was a great day. Amen.