

Meeting With Christ

Practical and Exegetical Studies on the Words of Jesus Christ

Yves I-Bing Cheng, M.D., M.A.

Based on sermons of Pasteur Eric Chang

www.meetingwithchrist.com

BAPTISM (1): A SACRAMENT OF UNION

1Corinthians 6:17

Today, I would like to begin a series of lessons on the meaning of baptism. I am often distressed to see that there are Christians who have been baptized without really knowing what it is that they were doing. And some of these people thought that this was some way of joining a club, a sort of ceremonial rite into a club.

The question of baptism

For those of you who do understand what baptism means, you will be able to refresh your mind and to consider again what exactly you did in relation to God. What did you do on that day when you were baptized? What does it mean, today, for you who have been baptized? Is it something of the past or does it have a meaning for us now? There is also the question that we hear regularly, 'If you are not baptized, are you really a Christian or not?'

So these are some of the questions that we want to look at in this series on baptism. I will try to discuss it in a very simple way. Whenever it is possible, I will try to avoid any kind of technical terms so that everybody can easily understand.

I would like you to know also that there is a strong difference of viewpoint among Christians on the subject of baptism. My personal view of baptism happens to be more in line with what is called the 'Baptistic' position. But keep in mind that there are other views, which are also recognized by other evangelical churches. And in these lessons, I will stress the fundamentals rather than the differences.

A sacrament of union

In our lesson today, I am going to give you the definition of baptism in one sentence. Then my task will be to elaborate it so that it becomes meaningful to you. What is baptism? **Baptism is a sacrament of union.** Baptism is a sacrament of union. To say it in another way, we can say that baptism is a covenant of union. Now for the moment, I would like you to pay a special attention to the word union. It is a union with whom? It is union with Christ of course.

The best way to understand this is to compare baptism with a wedding. So what happens to you in the baptism is that as you enter into baptism, you are entering into a covenant of union with Christ. It is like marriage. When 2 people get married, they enter into a covenant of union with one another.

This comparison of baptism with a wedding does not come from my own thinking. There is a strong biblical foundation for that comparison. Let me just give you some Scriptural evidence of this.

United with Christ

In 1Corinthians 6:17, we read, *But he who is joined to the Lord is one spirit with Him*. Just think carefully on these words. He who is joined to the Lord becomes one spirit with Christ. The person who is joined to the Lord Jesus experiences a union such that he becomes one spirit with Him, much in the same way than the union between the husband and the wife in which the couple becomes one flesh. When were you joined to the Lord if you have ever been joined to the Lord? Officially, you were joined to the Lord in baptism. Remember what I have just said. Baptism is a sacrament of union, union with the Lord Jesus.

The word ‘joined’ in this passage, *...he who is joined to the Lord...*, is exactly the same word that is used in Matthew 19:5 in the original where it refers specifically to the union of marriage. This verse in Matthew 19:5 says, *... For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and **be joined** to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh*. This verse speaks of the husband and wife being joined together in marriage. He is *joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh*. And that same word, *to be joined to*, is used in 1Corinthians 6:17 to speak of the union of the believer with Christ.

In Romans 6:5, we are said to be united with Christ in baptism in His death. Romans 6:4-5. In v. 4, Paul says, *Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death...* Then in v. 5, we read, *For if we have been **united together** in the likeness of His death...* So through baptism, we are being buried with Christ. And in this death with Christ, *we have become **united with Him*** (joined to Him) *in the likeness of His death*. Do you begin to see in what sense baptism is a sacrament of union?

Here is another passage. Ephesians 5:21-33. This whole passage is about marriage. It is a passage that is often read out at people’s wedding. It says, *Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord, and, Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church...* And then in the middle of this passage about marriage, we suddenly find a reference to baptism. So in v. 26, we read, *that He might sanctify her (i.e. the church), having cleansed her by the **washing of water** with the word...* This *washing of water* is a clear reference to baptism. You are being cleansed of your sins by the water of baptism. So right in the middle of this passage, we have this reference to baptism. And then, five verses later, in v. 31, we find exactly the same verse that we read in Matthew 19:5: *For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh*.

In fact, there are many passages in the Bible that speak about the Lord Jesus as the bridegroom of the church. You see this for example in 2Corinthians where Paul says, *... for I betrothed you to one husband, that to Christ I might present you as a pure virgin*. The church has a husband, and it is Christ. And consequently, the believers who belong to the church, have been individually united with Christ.

So we see that this picture of the wedding is used again and again in the Bible to speak of the Christian being united with Christ. And one aspect of this union finds its symbol in baptism.

The notion of covenant

Having said this, now that we have established the relationship of baptism with the wedding, it becomes important that we consider the meaning of the wedding. Is such a ceremony really important? Can’t 2 people become husband and wife without going through a marriage? The universal answer to this is NO. You cannot become husband and wife without marriage.

But why not? Because the marriage is not just a ceremony. It is also a covenant. By covenant, we mean that there is a sort of a contract with one another, a committal to one another. So that where there is no such covenant, when there is no such contract between these 2 people, then their love has not become concrete. It has not been materialized in a distinct transaction with one another. But can we say the same thing of baptism, that you are not united with Christ until you are being baptized? We will come to that in a moment.

When I speak of a covenant and of a contract, I don't necessarily mean that 2 people have to go to church to get married. What is required is something concrete that proves that they have become husband and wife. They will be required to sign a declaration of marriage. This can be done in a church setting or in a registry office. The idea is that the government is not going to recognize you as husband and wife until they receive a declaration of marriage signed by the couple.

It is interesting that in both cases, either you get married in a church or in a registry office, it is required that you have at least 2 witnesses present. And these witnesses are also required to sign the declaration of marriage. Why the witnesses? Because they are there to testify that this covenant has been established, between the husband and the wife, in front of them.

Symbol or cause?

So marriage makes 2 people to become husband and wife. Here is where we find a fundamental difference between Catholic theology and Protestant theology on the subject of baptism. The Roman Catholic Church will say that the act of baptism itself causes regeneration and therefore makes you to be united with Christ. This position derives from their belief that a sacrament has the power to convey grace apart from the faith of the person participating in the sacrament. That's why the Catholic Church teaches that children should be baptized and that baptism is necessary for salvation.

Protestants hold a very different view. We believe that baptism is the outward sign of inward regeneration. So yes, baptism is a covenant, a covenant of union. But it is only the symbol, not the cause, that we have entered into a covenant of union with Christ. It is the objective sign to show that we have decided to follow Jesus in His death and in His resurrection.

Contrary to marriage in which a couple is not considered as husband and wife until the very day they get married, baptism doesn't cause you to be united with Christ. The significance of baptism is not limited to the precise moment and action of being immersed in the water. Rather, baptism represents the whole process by which the gospel comes to the person and that person accepts it by faith. The commitment to follow Jesus begins in the heart and baptism is the outward expression of what has already taken place inside of you. The commitment which started in the heart now becomes concrete and real as it is established in front of witnesses in baptism.

This means that we, Protestants, believe that baptism is **not** a condition for salvation. Otherwise it would be much like saying that circumcision is necessary for salvation, an idea that the apostle Paul opposed very strongly in his letter to the Galatians.

Remember this incident on the cross. To the criminal who was hanging on the cross besides Jesus and who said, *Lord, remember me when You come into your kingdom*, Jesus said, ... *today you will be with Me in Paradise*. Did he get baptized? No. Did he go to heaven? Yes.

However, understand that the Lord commands all believers to be baptized. No one is going to argue against that. It would be very difficult to explain how a person can be genuinely saved and not be baptized if he is physically able to be baptized. How can a person honestly be saved if he refuses to obey His Lord's command to be baptized? My point is this: a person who truly believes will not refuse

and will not wait to follow His Lord in baptism. Your action must be consistent with what happens at the level of your heart.

We can see now that baptism is not just any kind of ceremony. It is not just a feeling, but also a definite committal, a covenant with Christ. It is the symbol that we are beginning a new life of union with Christ as our Lord and Savior.

Comparing baptism and wedding

Let's look more deeply into the meaning of baptism by comparing the union in a wedding with the union with Christ in baptism.

First of all, just like in a wedding in which 2 persons commit themselves to one another because of their mutual love, so in baptism we commit ourselves to Christ because of His love to us and we want to express our love to Him. Now, you don't marry somebody that you just happen to like. You must really love this person to the extent that you are prepared to share your life with that person. And so are the Christians too in relation to Jesus. We don't commit ourselves to Jesus just because we happen to like Him but because we want to share our life with Him forever.

Also, like the wedding, baptism is a proclamation. It is a declaration. I show to everybody by this action that I love this person. I declare before all the people who are present at my baptism, and before heaven and earth, that I am entering into a covenant of union with Christ. Before all these people and all the spiritual powers, I declare this day, that I love Jesus and that I have committed myself to Him.

It also means that because I have declared my commitment to Him, I am also prepared to break the ties of my old way of life. That is true of an ordinary marriage. When you get married, your life is no more the same as it used to be. You are now entering into a new kind of life. It is a life of intimate partnership with someone else. Your spouse has a say in whatever you do and decide. And so when I am baptized, I am saying that I have now completely broken with the old way of life of sin. I am breaking my ties with the self-centered life that I used to have. I am now entering into a new life of communion with Christ.

In a marriage, when there is true love between the 2 people, you can see that one puts the interests of the other person first in front of his or her own interest. That is where there is true love. And so we, as Christians, we say in baptism, 'From now on, the interests of the Lord Jesus are in front of my own interests. He is the one whose interest is central to my heart.'

Again, just like in a wedding, because the 2 have now become united, one doesn't just go there and the other goes here. From now on, where the one is, the other will be. They will go together wherever they are. They will share their interests together. What kind of marriage is this if the couple is never together? One person stays here and the other person stays there. You want to be together! You want to have fellowship together. You seek to help one another through thick and through thin, through hardship and through joy. And so it is the same thing for the Christian. The true Christian is one who is always in fellowship with the Lord Jesus. He delights to commune with the Lord Jesus in prayer. In baptism as in marriage, we say, 'For better and for worse, I will follow you Lord Jesus. For richer or for poorer, Lord, I will be with you.'

Then, in a wedding, we have a ring. What does it mean? What does the ring symbolize in a marriage? It is a pledge. It is the symbol of the pledge by which we say, 'I will always be with you.' When we are baptized, the Lord Jesus gives us a present too. He gives to us the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is God's pledge to us. When the Lord gives us the Holy Spirit, He is saying to us, *I will never leave you nor forsake you*. We find these words of God both in the OT and in the NT. As I said earlier,

the Holy Spirit does not necessarily come on the exact day of baptism. In fact, the experience of regeneration should normally precede baptism.

Baptism is not a wedding

So in this lesson, I compared baptism to the wedding. But I don't want to conclude without mentioning the fact that baptism is not a wedding. The parallel lies in the fact that they are both covenants of union. But our union with Christ is far more complicated than the union between 2 people. There is a major difference that we need to be aware of.

You will notice that when you go to a baptism, the actual sign is different. You see a person being immersed in the water and being lifted out of the water again. You don't have that in a wedding. Why do we do that at baptism? Because of the existence of sin. Sin was that which stands between God and us, and makes this communion, this union together so difficult. Not only difficult, it was impossible. The great problem with this union is that sin has first to be removed. And this is what the Lord Jesus had to do on the cross. Because He loves us, He wants to join us to Himself. In order to achieve this, He has first to remove the barrier. And that barrier, He has to remove by His death.

When you are immersed into the water, it is the symbol that you are prepared to die to sin, i.e. to turn your back on sin. Your whole old way of life is now over. And as you now rise up from the water, you are entering into a new life of righteousness. So baptism is not a symbol that we have joined a religion. NO, we have not joined any religion. We have now declared that we have turned away from sin to righteousness, from darkness to life.

A comforting union

We have gone very simply through this first lesson on the meaning of baptism. I hope it is clear enough for everyone to understand what it means. It is a big spiritual step just as the union of a wedding is a major step in the life of any person. For those of us who now belong to Christ, let us always remember what this means. Let us remember what are our privileges and our responsibilities.

When you are in difficulty, always remember this: Jesus loves you. You have been united with Him, and He is going to care for you. You can trust that. Never be doubtful about that. He sees your tears. He knows you are sad. Bring your concerns to Him and you will find out just how He cares for you. In this union with Christ, let us learn to live to glorify Him so that He may truly have joy in us and that we have joy in Him.