

One Body, One Baptism

A Sermon for the Evening English Service, 20 January 2019

Scripture Readings: Old Testament, Amos 9:5-12; Psalm 115; Epistle, Ephesians 4:1-6; Gospel, Matthew 16:13-20.

Many a time, pastors and preachers find themselves in the predicament of having to preach on the same subject more than once to the same congregation. The theme prescribed for today by the Church of South India is 'One Body, One Baptism', and this is the fourth time I have preached on the subject of Baptism during the Evening English Service in this church. The challenge each time is to present the same topic from a different perspective. I will make an attempt here, and offer some thoughts for you to develop further, as you see fit.

The most quoted biblical passage for this theme is Paul's Epistle to the Ephesians, chapter four, verses one to six, read to us a little while ago. The key verse for us to consider is verse five, 'One Lord, one faith, one baptism', which is fairly clear from a literary perspective but carries a weight of teaching that needs elucidation. I am sure almost everyone present here has been baptised, perhaps as an infant or as an adult. Therefore, before I delve into the topic, let me ask you a question: what does baptism mean to you?

I am aware that it is not easy to answer this question. However, we must seek the answer from the Bible, and nowhere else. The simplest answer one might give is to say that baptism is an option available to us to shed our sinful nature and be born again as a new person in Christ. Though correct in principle, this cannot be the complete answer. Consider the fact that Jesus, God the Son, without any sin, was Himself baptised before He began His ministry on earth; the parallel to that in our own lives is the fact that many of us were baptised as infants, the only sinless state in a person's progression through life, in the arms of our parents or godparents.

For Jesus, it was an act of obedience and a public declaration of His absolute faith and commitment to God the Father. Baptism of Jesus therefore set an example for us, to lead a life of faith and obedience to the commands of Christ, and to declare publicly that we are followers of Jesus Christ. For infants, it is no different, except that the parents and godparents make a public commitment to bring the child up in obedience and commitment to the teachings of Jesus Christ. A child may reaffirm this commitment at Confirmation, at an appropriate age, when he or she is about to enter life as an independent individual.

Turn with me to Ephesians 4:4-6 at this stage. Paul could not have been more explicit in proclaiming monotheism, the belief in the existence of a single God, while at the same time implying God's Triune nature, as God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. My own reading of Paul's line of thinking is that he builds his assertion of a single God from the bottom upward. Let us read Ephesians 4:4-6: "There is one body, and one Spirit, even as ye are called in one hope of your calling; One Lord, one faith, one baptism, One God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all." At the foot of this pyramid, Paul places all believers in Christ, baptised in the Spirit. Moving upward, we see the believers in unity forming a body, which is the Church, and at the very top we have the Head of the universal Church, the one God, Jesus Christ. Read from the top downward, we find Paul arguing from the doctrine of the one true God — Father, Son, and Holy Spirit — down to the unity in faith and hope of the believers.

'There is one body', says Paul. The reference to body should not be understood of our physical body; the body here is the universal Body of Christ, the union of believers, in short the Church of Christ. Unity does not just happen; we have to work at it. Differences among people can easily lead to division, but this should not be true in the Church, the Body of Christ. Instead of concentrating on what divides us, we should remember what unites us: one body, one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God. In the light of this, it is important for us to understand that the members of the Body of Christ are not identical, nor equally gifted. The question this raises for us is whether we have learnt to appreciate people who are different from us. Can we see how their differing gifts, or the lack of them, and their differing viewpoints, can help the Church as it does the work of God? Let us learn to enjoy the way the members of Christ's body complement one another. Paul puts it well in 1 Corinthians 12:12-13: "For as the body is one, and hath many members, and all the members of that one body, being many, are one body: so also is Christ. For by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body, whether we be Jews or Gentiles, whether we be bond or free; and have been all made to drink into one Spirit."

What keeps the faithful united is the hope of the promise of an eternal existence in Christ's new creation. Jesus said, "I am the door: by me if any man enter in, he shall be saved, and shall go in and out, and find pasture" (John 10:9). I want to argue that the door one passes through is the sacrament of baptism.

Coming to the question of baptism itself, Paul wrote in Colossians 2:12-14: "Buried with him in baptism, wherein also ye are risen with him through the faith of the operation of God, who hath raised him from the dead. And you, being dead in your sins and the uncircumcision of your flesh, hath he quickened together with him, having forgiven you all trespasses; blotting out the handwriting of ordinances that was against us, which was contrary to us, and took it out of the way, nailing it to his cross." That may sound a little complicated, but the point at its heart is that we are already redeemed by Christ's sacrificial death on the Cross. Baptism, therefore, is a symbol of Christ's death, burial, and resurrection; our entrance into the water during baptism identifies us with Christ's death on the Cross, His burial in the tomb, and His resurrection from the dead.

Taking a Christological view of baptism, every Christian understands that the basis of salvation is found in Christ's sacrificial death on the Cross; He rose again on our behalf, to redeem us. In the cross of Jesus, we too must die, and be raised with Him; we then appropriate His grace through the instrument of faith. This is the very essence of Christian belief. This theology drives us to recognise the essential need for personal conversion: it is a great work of God's power, changing the human heart and infusing life into our dead spirits. This is what Paul meant in writing to the believers at Ephesus about 'one baptism': he was reminding them that, regardless of their background or nationality, they all served the same Lord, shared the same faith, and had experienced the same baptism. This sacrament is available to the whole of humanity, to Jew and Gentile alike, as the Bible tells us. We have no right to choose who should receive the baptism of the Spirit.

God has chosen us to be Christ's representatives on earth in the light of this truth, and Paul challenges us to live lives worthy of the calling we have received — the awesome privilege of being called Christ's very own. This includes being humble, loving, gentle, patient, understanding, and peaceful. People are watching our lives; the question before us is whether they can see Christ in us. How well are we doing as His representatives?

God of new life, You seek to recreate people in holiness, justice, peace, and equality. We thank You for the institution of Baptism, through which we may be touched by You and transformed by You. Grant us grace that we who are baptised in Christ may realise that we are clothed with newness through the merits of Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, One God, now and forevermore. Amen.