

One Lord, One Faith, One Baptism

SERMON · Covenant and Doctrine · 14 January 2018 (the Second Sunday after Epiphany)

Ephesians 4:4-6 (quoted)

John 10:9 (quoted)

Romans 6:3-4 (quoted)

John 3:5 (quoted)

Psalms 23:1-6

Numbers 11:23-30

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be now and always acceptable in thy sight, O Lord our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

Today we will meditate on the fascinating theme, ‘One Lord, One Faith, One Baptism.’ This is the third time in the last three years that I am preaching on baptism during this service; however, I plan to present an altogether different perspective to you today. I would urge all of you to read again the passages read to us from the Old and the New Testaments, all of which contain rich pointers to the theme, as you reflect on this sermon during your quiet times. This theme is all about one God, one faith, and one baptism.

Turn with me to Ephesians 4:4-6. 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 case 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 foundation, Paul places all the 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 head of that body stands the one Lord, Jesus Christ, one with the Father and the Holy Spirit. Read from the top downward, the same passage argues from the doctrine of the one true God — Father, Son, and Holy Spirit — down to the unity in faith and hope of the believers.

What keeps the faithful united is the hope in the promise of an eternal existence in Christ's New Creation. When we reflect on this passage from Ephesians, we see the progression a person goes through before he or she becomes a believer. 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.

Paul underlines the fact that we are one because there is one Spirit, one Lord, one Father. And he says we are one because God is one, and therefore we should express and experience that same oneness and unity in our community. So too, God has given us a unity in the body of Christ, and we are to be diligent to preserve that unity.

Moving on to the subject of baptism, since there are different ‘baptisms’ referred to in the New Testament, it can be a little confusing when we read of the ‘one baptism’ Paul speaks of. The word baptise always means ‘to submerge or immerse’ (Strong’s Concordance, G907). So, when baptism is discussed, it involves a person being wholly submerged into something else, something Divine. It also implies that a change has taken place: those who are baptised are changed, transformed people. Baptism, therefore, is the door Jesus spoke of, and He identifies Himself with that door. A believer becomes one when he or she is immersed deep in Christ. This is explained in Romans 6:3-4: “Know ye not, that so many of us as were baptized into Jesus Christ were baptized into his death? Therefore we are buried with him by baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life.”

Anyone applying their mind casually — I say casually — to the topic of baptism may conclude that there appear to be two types: a physical baptism and a spiritual one. One is literal, done in water; the other is metaphorical, accomplished in the Spirit. One without the other will not touch the spiritual life of a person. Let us recall what Jesus said to Nicodemus: “Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God” (John 3:5). Jesus did not say water or Spirit, but water and Spirit, pointing to a single process of baptism.

If we take a Christological view of baptism, we find that every Christian understands the basis of salvation to be found in Christ’s sacrificial death on the cross. He rises on our behalf to redeem us. In the cross of Jesus, we too must die and be raised with Him, that we might 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. That explains what Paul wrote to the believers in 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 all humanity, Jews and Gentiles alike, as the Bible tells us. We have no right to

choose who should receive the baptism of the Spirit, as we see in the story of the two men mentioned in Numbers 11:23-30.

Let us shift gears and look at Psalm 23, and examine whether this song has any relevance to our subject, one God, one baptism. It is perhaps the most popular and recognisable psalm among the hundred and fifty psalms of the Old Testament; most of us can recite it by heart. I have also preached on Psalm 23 before, from a different perspective — as David's own testimony to the Lord's faithfulness throughout his life, a hymn of confidence picturing the Lord as the believer's Shepherd, King, and Host. But have you ever considered that this Psalm can also be read as a picture of the whole journey of Christian initiation — through Baptism, Confirmation, and Holy Communion, and onward to our final salvation? Read this way, the Shepherd Himself stands for Christ, our one Lord and God. The pasture becomes the Scripture on which the believer feeds, the place where the soul finds rest and strength. The still waters point us to baptism, where sin is put to death and a new creature is raised up. The rod and the staff, which guard and guide the sheep, speak of the ongoing guidance of the Holy Spirit, keeping us safe along a sure path. Let us walk briefly through the Psalm, verse by verse, and see how each line speaks into our theme today.

The first declaration in the Psalm, “The LORD is my shepherd,” ties in with what Jesus said: “I am the good shepherd: the good shepherd giveth his life for the sheep” (John 10:11). It teaches us, as individuals and as the corporate body, the Church, that first of all we must become the sheep of the Good Shepherd. King David, the author, seems to have foreseen the sacramental mysteries and proclaimed them in this Psalm.

The second declaration is “I shall not want.” The divine wealth will be given in its fullness to the newly baptised; those who receive the Body of Christ will no longer hunger.

“He maketh me to lie down in green pastures” is the third assertion. The green pastures are the nourishment from the word of God, which nourishes the hearts of believers and gives them spiritual strength and perseverance. The place of pasture may be likened to the Paradise from which we fell, but to which Christ leads us back, establishing us by the water of rest, baptism.

The next declarations read, “he leadeth me beside the still waters. He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.” The waters refer to baptism, the

resting place where sin is removed, the soul is cleansed, and the person is born again as a righteous believer.

The Psalm then moves on to the other sacraments, Confirmation and the Holy Eucharist, and finally to salvation. Perhaps we will study Psalm 23 in full detail at some future, more opportune time. It is sufficient to say here that this Psalm of the Old Testament was a prophecy of the New Covenant of Jesus Christ. The Shepherd would come and lead His sheep into pastures of abundance, rescuing them at the end of time to Paradise. The Lord fights against the powers of evil, triumphs, and prepares His people through the sacraments. Let us pray:

God of new life, You seek to recreate people with 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 baptized 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.