

TRUST ME

The Sacrament of Christian Baptism



Tri-City Covenant Church

Tri-City Christian Academy

Somersworth, NH

603.692.2093

Have you ever been to a wedding where the heavens opened and a voice declared the couple “husband and wife”? Few of us have. Beautiful as they are, most weddings are quite mundane. Yet when Jesus talks about marriage, He describes it as something that God does: “What God has joined together, let no man put asunder” (Matthew 19:6). The voices heard at a wedding are human voices, but when it’s all over, God has created a new family.

Baptism is like marriage in this respect. A minister says the words and pours out the water, but when the water dries God has created something new. Baptism is not something we do; it’s something done to us. This is clear from the way baptism is performed. In the Old Testament, unclean Israelites usually bathed themselves to become clean (Leviticus 15:5, 6, 7, 8, etc.). When John began baptizing, however, multitudes went to be baptized in the Jordan (Matthew 3:6; Mark 1:5, 8, 9). Nothing is more important about baptism than recognizing that it is God’s work and not ours.

This might sound mystically spooky, but in one sense it’s a common experience. When a salesman makes a sale, his entire company is committed to fulfill the contract. The salesman’s actions are the actions of the company. A minister baptizes because Jesus commanded it (Matthew 28:18-20), and like the salesman, his actions are the actions of his master. God baptizes when His representatives baptize.

Saying “I do” isn’t “just talking.” Saying “I do” at a wedding obligates a man and woman to a lifetime of faithfulness as a husband or wife. Placing a crown on a man’s head isn’t a fashion statement. It makes him a king. What does a man get when he receives a crown? He gets more than a new piece of headgear. He receives authority, power, a realm, privileges, great responsibilities, and, if you believe Shakespeare’s Henry V, many sleepless nights. He may end up a good king or a bad king, but the fact that he receives a crown makes him a king regardless. In the same way, baptism is not just water. When God baptizes us, He gives us the gift of baptism, which means the gift of authority, the promise of an inheritance, great privileges, large responsibilities, intense oppositions.

Above all, God gives Himself in baptism. Baptism is in the Name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (Matthew 28:18-20). When God marks you in baptism, He commits Himself to be your God. He is no longer God-at-a-distance, or God-in-general. He commits Himself, and all His wisdom, power, authority, justice, goodness, and truth to be God-for-Bill or God-for-Judy. If you are baptized, God has promised to be God-for-you.

When He gives Himself, He gives us a new life. Every one of us comes to baptism with baggage from the past, and with hopes or fears concerning the uncertain future. Everyone comes to baptism as part of an inner group or a set of groups. Before you were baptized, you were a member of a family, ethnic group, nationality, perhaps some prior religion. Everyone comes with some idea of how he relates to the world as a whole. We are who we are in these four dimensions – because of our past, our future, our in-groups, and our relations to outside groups.

In baptism, God makes us new in all four dimensions. Whether God baptizes us as infants, children, or as adults, He gives us a new past, and hope for a new future. He makes us members of a new in-group, and equips us for a new stance toward the outside world. According to the Bible, there are “four corners” to the world. When God baptizes, He recreates your world to the four winds of heaven.

Our names embody our past. We share our surnames with our parents, grandparents, great-grandparents and back into the forgotten centuries. Our first names are also rooted in the past, given by our parents. In baptism, we are given a new name, the

name of the Triune God into which we are baptized. We are given the family name "Christian."

With that new name comes a new past. Paul tells the Gentile Corinthians that the Hebrews who came from Egypt were "our fathers" (1 Corinthians 10:1). Once we're baptized, the story of Adam, Abraham, Jacob, Moses, Joshua, David, Elijah, Jeremiah, Nehemiah, and Jesus becomes our family story. Specifically, the story of Jesus becomes our story. Paul says that those who are baptized share in Christ's death and burial, so that they can share in His resurrection life (Romans 6:1-7). Once you're baptized, that becomes your story: "I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me" (Galatians 2:20).

Whatever you've done in the past, whatever petty bitterness you harbor, whatever horrific crimes you've committed, is all washed away. You are given a new life-story. After you're baptized, you can tell it as a repetition of the story of Jesus, a story of death and new life. Israel's story began with slavery in Egypt, but after the "baptism" in the Red Sea (Exodus 14; 1 Corinthians 10:1-4), the story took a new turn. It became a story of deliverance, conquest, and abundant life. Your story may begin, "I was a drug addict and an adulterer," but after baptism it takes on a new ending, "but then Jesus rescued me." This is what it means to be "baptized for the remission of sins": You have a new past – clean and spotless – through God's work in Christ, which you receive in baptism.

When names identify us with a past, they also identify us with an in-group, with a family, a nation, an ethnic group. Everyone can roughly guess the family background of a person named Hernandez or Schwartz or Dupre. The name we receive in baptism identifies us with a new in-group, the in-group of the church, which is the body of Christ. Through baptism, the Spirit makes us members of the one body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:12-13). Through baptism, the church becomes our primary family. The members of the church are "brothers," a family that eats together at a common table. In baptism, we are identified as citizens of a new empire, the empire of Jesus, whose capital city is in heaven.

Membership in the church is not like membership in the Kiwanis or a college fraternity. Being a member of the body of Christ means sharing what He has to give (Himself!) and also sharing a life with other members of the body. Eyes alone see, but they see for the whole body, and the whole body shares in the sight of the eyes, the hearing of the ears, the thought of the brain, the pumping of the heart. Each baptized member of the body of Christ contributes to the health of the whole body, as each uses his or her particular gift for the benefit of all. Baptism ordains you as a priest, charged with the duty of maintaining the house of God, which is the church.

Baptism not only gives us a new past and a new ancestry, a new family and a new national identity. It also promises a new future. Names come from the past, but they direct us into the future. Names are like commands, which set out a path for us. When we receive the name "Christian" in baptism, we are given a new future. All the promises given to Abraham become our inheritance, since baptism identifies us with Christ, the seed of Abraham (Galatians 3:28-29). Abraham was promised the world (Romans 4:13), and this promise is given to us in baptism. God said that Abraham's seed would bless all the nations of the earth (Genesis 12:3), and that is promised to us in baptism.

Names are the labels we bear before the world outside our own group. The name “Christian” that God gives in baptism not only identifies you as a member of the church, but also identifies you before the world. When God gives this name, He is commanding you to be faithful as a witness for Jesus in the world, whatever the persecution that may result. Jesus described his death as a “baptism” (Mark 10:38-39), and every baptism is a call to share in the cross of Jesus.

For Jesus, the cross was not an instrument of defeat, but of victory. Through His suffering, He cast out the “prince of this world” (John 12:31). So also, as we share in Christ’s death in baptism, we become “more than conquerors through Him who loved us” (Romans 8:37). Baptism not only ordains us as priests, but crowns us as kings and enlists us as warriors who serve in the armies of the Lord of hosts. Clad in the armor of God, we fight confident of victory, because our baptism also promises a glorious future in Christ.

Baptism gives all this as surely as a crown gives a kingdom and a ring gives a spouse. God gives new life in four dimensions in baptism. He gives Himself to us, and He promises to keep giving Himself to us. He gives us a new past, and promises a new future; He gives us a new family, and commissions us to disciple the nations.

It seems too good to be true. How could a little water remake us in all four dimensions? Some people don’t believe it. Some baptized kings rule badly, and some priests worship idols. Some are remade in four dimensions, believe God for a time, and then fall away. Some never really believe at all. For such people, it would be better never to have known the truth (2 Peter 2:20-22), because they didn’t respond with faith.

At times, we can’t, or don’t, want to believe it. We want to do something, anything, to achieve this renewal. But all God requires is that we believe, and live consistently with that belief. God says simply, “Trust me. I erase all the evil of your past, and give you the history of Jesus as your personal history. I tear you from all perverse loyalties and communities to bring you into the family of God. I wash away all fears of the future, to give you hope. I send you out to the world as my disciple and witness. I do all this with a little water and a few words. Don’t figure it out. This is what I do. Trust me, and live your baptism.”

ESSAY BY REV. PETER J. LEITHART

For more information contact:

*Tri-City Covenant Church or Tri-City Christian Academy
150 West High Street
Somersworth, NH 03878
Telephone: (603)692-2093
Email: tclark@tcca-nh.com*