

RMPC
Worship: Its Purpose and Practice
Week 10: Baptism in Public Worship
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The Purpose of the Series and Today's Topic

1. We have been spending this quarter in a class on the Meaning of our Liturgy. Our purpose is to walk through why we do what we do when God gathers us on the Lord's Day. There are a variety of practices in the church in the matter of public worship. The question is why does Rincon include a call to worship, invocation, prayers, corporate confession, pronouncing of the promise of forgiveness, songs, preaching, benediction.
 - a. Very important to know why – otherwise we are just blindly following a pattern and do not receive the benefit of it.
 - b. Over all, it is designed to remind us of the Gospel – That we are sinners before God, redeemed by Christ, fully accepted to God through Jesus sacrifice alone, and now glad worshippers.
2. Today we come to the practice of baptism. In many ways, it is the hardest practice to talk about.
3. Why is baptism controversial?
 - a. History: This has been controversial since the time of the Reformation. Who is to be baptized? How? With what effect? There were leaders present at the time of the Reformation who thought that Luther and Calvin did not go far enough. They wanted to reject all the history of the church. They said that all previous baptisms were invalid. They were called "Anabaptists" (re-baptizers)
 - b. Training: It is not uncommon for people raised in believer's baptism churches to be taught about the error of baby baptisms, and for such churches to reject the baptism of a child as having any validity. Usually, critics of infant baptism lump all practices of infant baptism together as the same. (However, they are not the same. Presbyterians do not believe the water of baptism affects anything in the child. It signifies the Gospel and "seals" the promise. Lutherans, Anglicans, and Roman Catholic believes it regenerates or confers grace.).
 - c. Sentiment: People get attached the sentimentality of baptism. Believer baptism is bound up with the meaning of a conversion. Child baptism are related to the fact that babies are cute, and when they are dressed in special

clothes and smile at their baptism, the congregation becomes attached the baptism, but for the wrong reasons.

True baptism is a serious act on behalf of God, signing and sealing the promises of the Gospel to the believer and their children. It is about God as Judge, the reality of sin, the grace of God in Jesus the Savior. It brings the child into holy influences of the visible church, and makes them more accountable before God for their response to the Gospel when they come of age.

4. Baptism is especially significant for me. I have been a practicing Credo-Baptist for 34 of 36 years of ministry. 2 years ago, I came to affirm covenant baptism of children of believers for the first time.

That change of conviction involved more than twenty years of thinking about many different issues in the Bible and how it is to be understood. Changing my understanding of baptism was the last domino to fall in a series of new conclusions about the Bible, the ways of God in salvation, the church, how God works through creation, and the sacraments.

Simply put, my theology today is far more in line with the classic doctrine of the Reformation, and not with the Baptist tradition.

5. My conclusion about baptism is not an open and shut case. I do not think either side has an open and shut case. But I have come to believe in the baptism of the children of believers to signify and seal the promises and gravity of the Gospel to them.
6. Finally, as part of this introduction, I acknowledge that what I am offering is not a simple argument. Sometimes credo-baptists say that the complexity of the argument for paedobaptism shows it is wrong. I would only note that the question of how the OT relates to the NT and the practices of God's people after the coming of Jesus is complicated. The most difficult passages in the NT deal with this. See Galatians 3-4, Romans 4, and Romans 9-11.
7. So I will present the key conclusions from Scripture that brought me to this change and then, at the end, I want to talk about the meaning of baptism as we practice it here at RMPC. I cannot cover everything, but will hit the highlights.

The Big Questions

1. To set aside all prejudice, I think we begin with a question that does not assume either position. That question is this: ***What was the meaning of baptism as understood by the first Christians?***

- a. The answer to that question is not as clear as you may have been led to believe. What is often said is this, “The NT is so clear. People believed and were baptized. How can you refute that?”
 - b. In fact, it is not clear. There are 11 recorded baptisms in the NT, only 3 of individuals. 5 are of households. The rest are of large groups.
 - c. The real question is how to make sense of that? Why did Luke record 5 household baptisms without explanation? Why only 3 individuals? What did baptism mean to the people of that day?
2. The only way to answer the first question is to ask the 2nd question: ***Do we start reading the Bible in Matthew or in Genesis?***
- a. The first Christian’s Bible was the OT. They interpreted their life and the person of Jesus from the OT. They did not yet have Matthew, Acts, or James.
 - b. Starting with Genesis means that the language and ideas and theology that formed the thinking of the earliest Christians was the language of the OT. They knew what priests were and what they did. They understood sacrifices, cleansing, the temple. They knew what circumcision and covenant and law meant.
3. This brings me to the third question to be answered: ***Are the OT and NT one story of God’s grace for one people of God?***
- a. For years, I read my Bible with the assumption that “everything is different in the NT.” What we know and experience in salvation is way beyond whatever David and Abraham knew. I believed Abraham did not have the Holy Spirit, that David was not justified or adopted.
 - b. The accent was on discontinuity – the NT was, from that point of view, so different from the OT, that there was not much in the OT to be gleaned, except prophecies about Messiah, Israel, and the Psalms and Proverbs.
 - c. Early on I had been taught that God had a different purpose for Israel, that the church was distinct in every way. I read the OT to learn about God’s promises to Israel, but not for God’s purpose for the church.
 - d. But what if that is not how Paul and Peter and James and John saw it? What if it is not how Jesus saw it? What if the accent is on continuity, from promise to fulfillment? What if ***the OT and NT are one story of God’s grace for one people of God?***

- e. For the last 20 years, I have been learning that the Bible is one story about one Savior and one people of God. Believers in all of history experience the same salvation in every detail as any other believers at any other time of history. There is one church in all of history.
 - f. The OT lays the groundwork and gives a shadow-like revelation. The OT creates a dimly lit room. Everything that is part of God’s saving plan is there – all the benefits of Christ’s work are present and experienced by OT believers – but we do not see clearly because the lights are not turned on.
 - g. The NT turns the lights on. Now we see clearly. Nothing new is added to the room. Redemption is now accomplished, not merely promised. ***The accent is on continuity.*** The distinction is that in the coming of Jesus, God has given his final revelation of grace, and the dimly lit room is now in the full light of God’s incarnate Son.
 - h. So, we can expect to find common patterns, common themes, overall plans and promises in all the Bible. Those patterns are how the early church interpreted everything. Their Bible was the Hebrew Scriptures.
4. So, let’s go back to the original question and restate it. If the Bible is one story and God’s plan and work of redemption is the same in all times, but brought to fulfillment in Christ – ***how did the first Christians understand baptism? what is the meaning of baptism considering the OT storyline, considering one story, one salvation, one plan? Is baptism related to the OT?***
- a. As an aside, let me note that this way of interpreting the Bible – what theologians would call “redemptive-historical” – is the way the church understood the Bible since the apostles. This is not new.

MAJOR THESIS, to be proven

1. When we look at *how God planned and executed the salvation of his people, we find that God worked through covenants, not just with individuals, but with households/families, with parents and their descendants. And that pattern begins in Creation.*
2. ***In short, “to you and to your household” is woven into the entire fabric of the OT, beginning with creation.***

CREATION, COVENANT, AND HOUSEHOLDS

1. Gen 1:26ff records the creation of male and female, on the 6th day, after God had created the rest of the cosmos and made the earth a suitable place for man to live in. He blessed and gave to Adam and Eve two commands at creation:
 - a. Subdue. God created man and woman as image bearers. This means that they represented him by ruling in his place on the earth.
2. Fill. God's purpose was for his rule to extend to all the earth, beginning at Eden, through procreation. "BE FRUITFUL AND MULTIPLY.
3. Biblical theology scholars would state it this way: God made image bearers to represent his rule, beginning in Eden. That rule over the earth would be extended to the entire earth through their descendants.
4. We also note that God made a covenant with A and E. Under the law of one prohibition amid a plentiful garden, he made a covenant, the violation of which would bring death to A and E and their descendants.
5. **Notice: Covenant, blessing, descendants, the whole earth.**

FALL, COVENANT, and HOUSEHOLDS

1. Adam sinned and brought ruin to himself and all his descendants. A broken covenant brought death to him and all who were born of him (there is debate about the mechanism for this whether it was seminal or federal, but that is a subject for another discussion).
2. Immediately after the fall, God's gave his first promise of the Gospel in Gen 3:15.

I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel."
(Gen. 3:15 ESV)
3. This is what theologians call the first example of the covenant of grace. There are no conditions for man to fulfill. God will do this by himself.
 - a. There will be enmity between the children of the serpent and the seed of the woman.
 - b. One of her children, the seed of the woman, would crush the head of the serpent and reverse the effects of the Fall. Thus, God would re-establish his kingdom through the household of Adam and Eve. It is significant, and shows the continuity of OT and NT, that this is cited in Romans 16:20 as being Christ.

4. Gen 4-11 tells the story of the conflict between the children of the serpent and the seed of the woman. Sin brought ruin to God's image bearers – and they bore children after their fallen image. Their children no longer extended God's kingdom but extended the kingdom of darkness. This was so dominant that the earth became filled with violence (not filled with the kingdom of God as God created man and woman to do).
5. After the flood, Noah becomes another "Adam" – called to fill the earth through his descendants. See Gen 9:1.
6. **The pattern of covenant and descendants continues.**

ABRAHAM, COVENANT, AND HOUSEHOLDS, Gen 12-17

1. After Noah's descendants filled the earth, God chose one branch of the human tree to be the lineage for the promised seed. In Gen 12. God chose Abraham and his descendant to fulfill the promised seed of the woman. ESV refers to "offspring" when it speaks of A's descendants.
2. He said that through A's seed, all the nations will be blessed, the earth will be reclaimed for the kingdom of God. This is filling the earth as God ordered in Creation. Notice: promise to A and his descendants.
3. In Gen 15:6, Abraham believed the promise and was justified. He was as justified as we are. He was as regenerate as we are. He was as adopted as a son as we are – God's way of saving has always been the same. The dimly lit room was filled with the same blessings we now see clearly. Redemption always by grace through faith.
4. We also find that God made his purpose and promise official. He and Abraham entered a covenant with a ceremony in which the parties to the covenant sacrificed an animal to seal the deal. But in this case, God alone walked between the pieces of the sacrifice. This means he promised to take to himself all the obligations for fulfilling the covenant even in the face of it being broken. This is also the covenant of grace. See Gen 15:17.
5. When we come to Gen 17, God finalized the covenant with Abraham and gave him a sign and seal of the covenant – circumcision.

And I will establish my covenant between me and you and your offspring after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you. ⁸ And I will give to you and to your offspring after you the land of your sojournings, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession, and I will be their God." ⁹ And God said to Abraham, "As for you, you shall keep my covenant, you and your offspring after you throughout their generations. ¹⁰ This is my covenant, which you shall keep,

between me and you and your offspring after you: Every male among you shall be circumcised.¹¹ You shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you.¹² He who is eight days old among you shall be circumcised. Every male throughout your generations, whether born in your house or bought with your money from any foreigner who is not of your offspring,¹³ both he who is born in your house and he who is bought with your money, shall surely be circumcised. So shall my covenant be in your flesh an everlasting covenant.¹⁴ Any uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin shall be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant." (Gen. 17:7-14 ESV)

- a. It was with Abraham and his descendants – v. 7
- b. It was permanent – v. 7, 13
- c. It was spiritual – v 7, God/ people. This is the covenant formula, which carries through all the way to Revelation 21. This shows complete continuity.
- d. It was universal. The focus here is on the land, but the land was a down-payment for the whole earth – v. 8. Ps 37:11 and Matt 5:5 show this is what was meant. In Rom 4:13 tells is that A thought he would be heir of the world. This point, for me, overthrew all my interest in Palestine and Modern Israel's right to it. The point of God's plan was never a small piece of geography but reclaiming the whole earth as he planned in creation.
- e. It involved the shedding of blood. Shedding blood is part of atonement and sacrifice.
- f. It was a sign on genitalia – having to do with procreation. Adam bore children after his image. i.e. sinners. God would put away the old man and bring about the new creation> The OT understood circumcision as pointing to more than the cutting away of a piece of flesh. See, for example, Deut. 30:6
- g. Paul says, in Romans 4:11, that circumcision was a sign and seal of the righteousness God gave him by faith. This is very important. It is not a sign of Abraham's faith, but of God's gift of righteousness, part of the covenant of grace.

... circumcision was clearly a rite that had spiritual significance, Deut. 10:16; 30:6; Jer. 4:4; 9:25,26. Louis Berkhof, Systematic Theology.

- h. It was to be placed upon 8 day old boys. Children were included in the people of God before they could exercise faith.

- i. It was serious. Failure to do so meant they were not part of the covenant community. V 14. This begins to define the covenant community as believers and their children. What defines the boundaries of the covenant community is not regeneration, but who God brings into the covenant. The covenant community is a mixed multitude. There is no “pure church” ever.
 - j. It points to Christ (Gal 3; etc)
6. Here we find patterns developing even farther:
- a. There is a covenant with Abraham and his household/offspring to bless all nations.
 - b. For the first time, God gives a sign and seal of the covenant. The sign is about the objective realities of God’s covenant of grace. It represented new creation, death of the old man, blood shed for the sinner on whom it was done.
 - c. It was not about A’s faith. Or the baby’s faith. The household was circumcised, adults and baby boys, as their mark of entry into the covenant people of God based on the objective promises of God.
 - d. It defined the people of God by the mark of the covenant, meaning there would always be a mix of true faith and no faith in the members of the people of God.
7. Note: The objectivity of the sign moves us away from thinking of the sign as having some power. It also moves us away from making everything about us and our experience. Our tendency is to bring God into the story of our lives. Rather, the story is about God and how I am read into his plan.

This changes everything. I began to change in this way a few years ago. I began to do funerals, weddings, and baptism as primarily about Jesus in his life, death, and resurrection – his love for and sacrifice for his bride – and to note that the wedding or funeral or baptism was our reading the person/couple into the larger story of God’s redeeming purposes.

OT GENERATIONS, HOUSEHOLDS, DESCENDANTS

1. This pattern continues in the OT. The OT repeats continuously the covenant of God “to you and to your children.” It speaks repeatedly of the covenant faithfulness of God to generation after generation. The household is integral to the saving purpose of God. Some examples:

- a. Passover. Ex12:24-27, was given to adults and their households
- b. Law: Ex 20:10, honoring the household was part of the Law, including the observation of the Sabbath.
- c. Even the promises of the New Covenant, which we believe is fulfilled in Christ, included the descendants: Isa 54:13; 59:20-21; Ezek 37:24-25

"And a Redeemer will come to Zion, to those in Jacob who turn from transgression," declares the LORD. ²¹ "And as for me, this is my covenant with them," says the LORD: "*My Spirit that is upon you, and my words that I have put in your mouth, shall not depart out of your mouth, or out of the mouth of your offspring, or out of the mouth of your children's offspring,*" says the LORD, "from this time forth and forevermore." (Isa. 59:20-21 ESV)

OT PATTERN AND CONCLUSIONS

1. Starting in Genesis, God's covenant purposes, in grace, have always been to and through households. This was the purpose of God in creating families in the first place.
2. Circumcision was objective, about the promises of God – not about the faith of the circumcised person. Children of covenant adults were members of the covenant people of God and received the sign and seal of the promises of the covenant.
3. The question then is how would the NT believer, who was read into the story of redemptive history from the beginning, have understood baptism?

OT PATTERN AND THE MEANING OF BAPTISM

1. Considering this was the pattern for the Jews for 2000 years, how would the first hearers have understood these words?
 - a. And Peter said to them, "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. ³⁹ For the promise is for *you and for your children* and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself." (Acts 2:38-39 ESV)
 - b. This was after a sermon that was telling the story of redemption in the OT, now fulfilled in Jesus.
 - c. I think the hearers would simply have heard this as the Abrahamic covenant. The promised seed (Jesus) was given, but the pattern of the covenant continued – to you and to your children. But now the offer of the Gospel was to the nations.
2. This begins to make sense of a significant set of descriptions of baptism: household baptisms. This was the pattern from the OT, "to you and y=to your household." And

why else would Luke/Paul have spoken of household baptism without the need to explain?

- d. ¹³ And he told us how he had seen the angel stand in his house and say, 'Send to Joppa and bring Simon who is called Peter; ¹⁴ he will declare to you a message by which you will be saved, you and all your household.' (Acts 11:13-14 ESV)
 - e. And after she was baptized, and her household as well (Acts 16:15 ESV)
 - f. "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household." (Acts 16:31 ESV)
 - g. (I did baptize also the household of Stephanas. Beyond that, I do not know whether I baptized anyone else.) (1 Cor. 1:16 ESV)
3. I think these types of verses indicate that the "household" nature of the covenant was not done away with in Christ. Rather, the pattern continued and was expanded more explicitly. God works the advance of the Gospel and the call of his elect, in part, through parents and their children – i.e. through covenant families. (It is significant that church growth studies names this "biological growth" and it has been a major pattern for new conversions.) The NT is silent about the pattern because there would need to be specific abrogation to end it.
4. Baptism, then, is the post-new-covenant sign and seal of the promises of the Gospel. It is done on behalf of God, signifying the covenant of grace consummated in the life, substitutionary death, and resurrection of Jesus. It does not show *my* profession of faith but *God's promise* in Christ to all who believe.

FURTHER CONSIDERATIONS

Let me address a few further considerations. We cannot cover everything. But holding to a covenant baptism question can make sense of NT passages. Everyone has to explain things that do not fit. Covenant baptism provides reasonable interpretation for all NT passages about baptism.

- 1. I think there are other reasons for seeing baptism as parallel to OT circumcision, for including children of believers in the visible church.
 - a. The household nature of the covenant make sense of Paul's words in 1 Cor 7: For the unbelieving husband is made holy because of his wife, and the unbelieving wife is made holy because of her husband. *Otherwise your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy.* (1 Cor. 7:14 ESV)

This is OT language about consecration, setting someone or something apart for God. Holy here means “marked for God.” Children of one believing parents are “marked for God” in contrast to children of unbelieving parents who are unclean.

- b. The meaning of baptism and circumcision are the same: “As circumcision referred to the cutting away of sin and to a change of heart, Deut. 10:16; 30:6; Jer. 4:4; 9:25,26; Ezek. 44:7,9, so baptism refers to the washing away of sin, Acts 2:38; I Pet. 3:21; Tit. 3:5, and to spiritual renewal, Rom. 6:4; Col. 2:11,12.” (ML Class notes, David Van Drunen). If two things mean the same thing it is likely they are the same. The difference is baptism is the mark after the final sacrifice has been offered and blood is no longer required.
 - i. Col 2:11-12 most clearly links up circumcision with baptism, and teaches that the Christ-circumcision, that is, circumcision of the heart, signified by circumcision in the flesh, was accomplished and is parallel to that which baptism signifies. Christ fulfills the meaning of circumcision as new creation.
 - ii. Paul preaches the meaning of baptism to adults. These were first generation converts, and their baptism followed faith. But we would also preach the meaning of baptism to a child who is old enough to understand it. It would be a call to true faith.
 - iii. The passages which explain the meaning of baptism in the NT do not focus on the faith of person baptized but on the person and work of Christ. Nowhere are we told “Your baptism is your witness to your faith.” Always we are told that baptism signifies the work of Christ for us, the fruit of that work to us. It preaches without words.
- c. Circumcision is no longer the entry point to the people of God. It was tied to being a Jew. Paul protested any “Judaizing of the Gospel,” i.e. making becoming a Jew a prerequisite to faith. Anyone of any ethnicity or race may come to Jesus as they are. Baptism is the sign and seal of the Gospel to them.

2. What about the purity of the church? This is a significant question.

- a. First, paedobaptists are not indifferent to the purity of the church. Faith must be professed and validated by life for someone to become and remain a communing member of the church.
- b. Second, we believe that the visible church is never pure. It is always a mixed company. The most rigorous expressions of credobaptism would find the same. The visible church is still the church. Only God sees those who are truly

his. The means of upholding the purity of the church is not baptism but discipline.

- c. Third, we believe that children of believers are brought into the covenant and made part of the people of the covenant through baptism. That does not mean they are regenerate. It means they are objectively marked by God and distinguished from the world. They come into the holy privileges of life in a local congregation, which is a temple of the Holy Spirit. They hear the word preached and taste the powers of the age to come. They are then accountable to respond to the meaning of their baptism (which is the Gospel) when they come of age. If they renounce the Gospel, they break covenant and show they are not regenerate.
3. What about immersion? The word baptize does not necessarily mean immerse. It is used in a variety of contexts to refer to washing, sprinkling, pouring. Though we could argue for immersion as a mode from some of the passages in the NT, none of the examples in the NT of baptism *require* immersion.

CONCLUSION

Summary: I believe that there is sound reason to believe that the first century Christians, the first believers, understood the Bible as one plan and promise of God in salvation by grace alone, that God worked his purposes through households, that children of believers were to be given a sign and seal of their entry into the obligations of the covenant people, and that sign is now baptism.

God makes his covenant with believers and their children. He includes our household and as done so since creation. Therefore, children are a heritage of the LORD.

God gives a sign and seal of the covenant, a visible display of the meaning of the covenant. This sign and seal always speaks of cleansing, new creation, and union with Christ. In the OT it was circumcision. In the NT it is baptism.

The practice of baptizing the children of believers is a high and holy act, signifying the realities of God's eternal covenant of grace through the blood of God the Son incarnate upon a child. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are marked upon the child. They, their parents, and the church enter covenantal obligations to the Gospel.

The practice of baptizing the children of believers is a clear confession of the centrality of the church as the first family and the nuclear family as the second family. Children are brought into the covenant community.

THE PRACTICE OF COVENANT BAPTISM AT RMPC

So, what does this mean about the meaning of baptism, especially the baptism of our children, at RMPC? This is important for all of us, so that we do not take this lightly by habit or by sentiment.

1. Parents should be prepared and understand the meaning of baptism and the obligations that fall to them with their covenant children. They should not rest in baptism, but in Christ and diligently train their children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord. This means explaining the meaning and calling their children to the Gospel as signified in their baptism.
2. Parents will confess their faith and take vows before God. The congregation will take vows before God.
3. Baptism marks the child with the sign of the covenant of grace – it is God’s appointed means to do so, seen by God, and significant in God’s eyes.
4. Baptism is objective. It “preaches” the cleansing power of Christ’s blood, the washing away of our sins by him, and the new creation he brings to all who trust in him.
5. Baptism places on them the name of Father, Son, and Spirit – setting them apart for God. Holy and solemn thing.
6. Baptism means that the child is now under covenant obligation to God because he has been signed with the visible display of the Gospel of salvation through Christ alone. Baptism does not regenerate. It does obligate. That child’s unbelief is covenant breaking. There is greater accountability.
7. Baptism also obligates the parents to instruct the child in the Gospel. Parents are called to raise their children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord. This cannot be delegated. It is opposed to the individualism which says, “every child needs to decide their own path.”
8. Baptism brings the child of believers into the visible church. The visible church is composed of believer’s and their children. It does not include unbelievers of age.
9. Therefore, covenant baptism is done amid the church, and not in someone’s backyard with their friends and family.
10. Therefore, we ask parents to confess their faith, why they acknowledge the need of the Gospel in their child, and why the church promises to be part of the preaching of the Gospel in the child.

a. 2 Tim 3:15 is the intended outcome for covenant children:

But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it ¹⁵ and how from childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. (2 Tim. 3:14-15 ESV)

11. Members of the congregation make the best use of baptisms by reminding themselves of the Gospel, of the meaning of their baptism, and of the holiness of the church.
12. Baptizing the children of believers does not remove our call to take the Gospel to those outside of Christ and covenant households. The church is fully committed to take the Gospel to those who have not yet heard of Christ, to offer to them the free grace of God through Christ crucified.