

“Baptized Into Christ”

The Sixth in a Series of Sermons on Galatians

Texts: Galatians 3:26-4:7; Zechariah 3:1-10

Paul’s gospel is the public placarding of Christ crucified (Galatians 3:1)—the proclamation of the death of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of our sins, and the affirmation of our Lord’s perfect obedience in fulfilling the demands of the law of Moses. Justification (our right standing before God) and the gift of the Holy Spirit, the promise which God made to Abraham, both come to God’s people (Jew and Gentile) through faith alone (“hearing with faith”). They cannot be earned by works of law. Defending this gospel in the face a serious challenge is the reason why Paul sends this letter to the Galatians.

Paul was instrumental in the founding of a number of churches in the Galatian region, and now, soon after he had left the area, a group of false teachers known as the Judaizers began to infiltrate these churches. Paul says these false teachers were “spying” on those Gentiles exercising their freedom in Christ, trying to prove that Paul’s gospel leads to licence (the abuse of grace). The Judaizers were Jews who had come to believe that Jesus was Israel’s Messiah, but they also insisted that Gentile converts to Christianity must submit to ritual circumcision, keep certain aspects of the dietary laws, and obey the law of Moses in order to be justified. These conditions were added to faith in Jesus.

The epistle to the Galatians is the Apostle Paul’s response to this very difficult situation. Paul expresses his astonishment and his anger at the seeming ease and speed at which the Judaizers were able to throw the Galatians into confusion by introducing their false gospel which is, as Paul says, no gospel at all. Paul’s response to the Judaizers begins with a stern warning to the Galatians—if anyone comes and preaches a gospel different from the gospel that he had previously preached to them, the one preaching such a thing was to be considered anathema (accursed).

Paul defends his apostolic office on the ground that the gospel he has been preaching to all the churches was revealed to him by none other than Jesus Christ. Since this gospel reveals we are justified by the merits of Christ, and not through any merit or works of our own, Paul points out that justification must come through faith in Christ, and not through our works. Paul explains that the promise God made to Abraham in Genesis 12, 15, 18, is fulfilled in Jesus Christ (the promised seed—3:16). This promise was given and ratified before God made a subsequent covenant with Israel through Moses at Mount Sinai. Paul reminds his hearers that one purpose of the law is to expose our sin, so that we flee to Jesus Christ for forgiveness. In fact both covenants (Abraham and Moses) point to Jesus Christ and his saving work.

With this in mind, we pick up where we left off previously (vv. 15-25). The Apostle moves on from discussing the fact that the promise God made to Abraham is not nullified by the law later given to Moses, to a discussion of baptism in Galatians 3:26-3:29. Paul is speaking of all true children of Abraham (Jew and Gentile) when he states in verse 26, “*for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith,*” re-stating the point he in verse 25, which we considered, last time—“*but now that faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian [the law].*”

By speaking of both ethnic groups (Jew and Gentile) as “sons” of God, Paul is making an important point in his argument against the Judaizers, namely, that sons, even adopted sons, are legally entitled to receive an inheritance from their father. In this case, both Jew and Gentile are sons of God through faith in

Christ, and therefore both heirs to the promise since both are the legitimate children of Abraham. It is Jesus Christ who unites Jew and Gentile into one body through faith alone. But it is the Judaizers who instead seek to divide Jew from Gentile. This explains, in part, why the so-called “gospel” of the Judaizers, divides along ethnic lines those whom God has joined together in one body (the church).

Because they misunderstood the both the purpose and the relationship of covenants God made with Abraham and Moses, the Judaizers were attempting to reverse the course of redemptive history. Despite their claims to the contrary, these Judaizers were not defending true Israel by insisting that Gentiles submit to circumcision and obey certain aspects of the ceremonial law. This denied the sufficiency of Christ’s saving work! Furthermore, in the New Israel—the mystical body of Jesus Christ which is his church—Jew and Gentile are both accepted upon the basis of Christ’s redemptive work, received through faith alone, and not through human obedience to the law. In their zeal, the Judaizers were preaching a false gospel, and in doing so, dividing the people of God, the true Israel, which is Christ’s church.

In verse 27, Paul introduces the subject of baptism—which is the new covenant replacement of circumcision under the old covenant. In doing so, Paul connects baptism to union with Christ. “*For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ.*” Paul regards baptism as “the rite of initiation into Christ, that is, into union with Christ.”¹ Baptism marks our entrance into Christ’s church as the visible sign and seal of an invisible spiritual reality—regeneration by the Holy and the forgiveness of sins (by the shed blood of Christ). While baptism is not the cause of regeneration—this is the work of the Holy Spirit in applying to us the saving benefits of Jesus Christ—baptism is the sign and seal of regeneration and the forgiveness of sins. Through faith in the promise God makes to his people, the one baptized is to be regarded as regenerate and as though their sins have been forgiven. Rejecting the idea of baptismal regeneration—nevertheless until demonstrated otherwise—Reformed Christians do believe where the sign is present (water), those things signified (regeneration, forgiveness of sin) are present. Baptism is much more than our testimony to the fact that we have believed.

Paul speaks of baptism in the sense of being “baptized into” Christ, or being “baptized so as to become a member of” Christ. For Paul, baptism is the “putting on of Christ” as one puts on new, clean clothes. Baptism affirms the baptized person’s new spiritual identity—they are new people by virtue of their union with Christ. The metaphor of a change of clothing associated with regeneration and the forgiveness of sin comes directly from the Old Testament. One thinks of Isaiah 61:10 (“*I will greatly rejoice in the LORD; my soul shall exult in my God, for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation; he has covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decks himself like a priest with a beautiful headdress, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels*”), or Zechariah 3:3 (from our Old Testament lesson), “*Let them put a clean turban on his head. So they put a clean turban on his head and clothed him with garments.*”² When one is baptized into Christ, they are said to put on Christ and are clothed in his spotless robe of righteousness. They no longer stand before God in the filthy rags of their own sinfulness and pitiful attempts at good works. The baptized’s identity has changed.

There are four important points which arise from Paul’s introduction of baptism. First, there is no such thing as an “unbaptized Christian,” in the New Testament—except for the thief on the cross, who is the exception rather than the rule. The crucified but repentant thief will be in paradise with our Lord even

¹ Fung, Galatians, 172

² See Fung, Galatians, 172.

though he was not baptized. As Augustine correctly said, “it is not the absence of baptism which damns, but the despising of baptism.”

Second, according to Paul, baptism is regarded as the sign and seal of the righteousness of faith (Romans 4:9-12). In Colossians 2:9-12, Paul points out that baptism replaces circumcision. A knife-cutting ritual (circumcision) is replaced by a water-ordeal (baptism) anticipated by Noah’s deliverance from judgment by the Ark and the waters of the flood (cf. 1 Peter 3:18-21), as the Israelites passed safely through the waters of the Red Sea in the Exodus, and then through the waters of the Jordan as they entered the land of promise (cf. 1 Cor. 10:1-4). That baptism was applied to children of believers is clear from texts such as 1 Cor. 7:14, and from the numerous household baptisms which occur throughout the New Testament (cf. Acts 16:14-15, 31-34; 1 Cor. 1:16). The faith which unites us to Christ (of which baptism is a sign and seal) indicates that the one who is baptized is said to be clothed in Christ. “Paul mentions baptism here because he is about to emphasize the oneness of those who are in Christ (v. 28, where the ‘all’ of v. 26 recurs): the visible sign of this oneness is not faith but baptism; the oneness with Christ that is symbolized in baptism is the basis for the oneness in Christ.”³

Third, Paul is speaking of “water” baptism. There is no need to pit water baptism against “Spirit baptism,” as the one (baptism in water) is a sign and seal of the other (baptism in the Holy Spirit). Paul puts these two things side by side in Titus 3:5—“*He saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit.*” This fits with Paul’s declaration in Ephesians 4:5, “*one Lord, one faith, one baptism.*”

Fourth, baptism is closely connected to faith, ruling out the Roman Catholic notion of baptism being efficacious simply by virtue of the act itself—i.e., *ex opere operato*. Faith is mentioned fifteen times in Galatians and baptism but once, no small point. As one commentator reminds us, “from the standpoint of the practice of baptism in apostolic times, faith and baptism were not necessarily two distinct experiences separated by a period of time but two inseparable, almost co-incident parts of the one single experience of transition from the old to the new.”⁴ Faith in Christ, and the sign and seal of faith, baptism, are inseparable in the New Testament. One who exercises faith in Christ must be baptized as the sign and seal of the benefits of Christ and as the means of entrance into Christ’s church. And should that person have children, the teaching of the New Testament is clear that children are presented for baptism upon the profession of faith of the head of the household—Lydia and the Philippian jailer come to mind (Acts 16)—and not when the child passes a fictional “age of accountability,” and decides to follow Jesus.

In verse 28, Paul moves from discussing baptism to continuing his earlier point about Christ’s saving work serving to bring Jew and Gentile together into one body—Christ’s. “*There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.*” Paul places three of the most diverse and problematic groups together to make his point. In Paul’s time, it was customary for a pious and God-fearing Jew to give daily thanks to God that he was not a Gentile, a woman, or a slave.⁵ In Christ, there is no difference in status between Jew and Gentile, male or female, slave or free. In Christ, we are all one, members of his body and united through faith and baptism. The social and racial distinctions of the old covenant are removed in the New.

³ Fung, Galatians, 174-75.

⁴ Fung, Galatians, 174.

⁵ Bruce, Commentary on Galatians, 187.

A number of people have attempted to use the apostle's list to justify androgynous sexuality in which there is no essential gender difference between male and female (the ancient gnostics) or the ordination of women to the office of minister of word and sacrament, or to the office of elder, as those in churches advocating women's ordination attempt to do. This text does not say that the roles assigned to each gender elsewhere by Paul no longer apply. All we need to do is look to Paul's exhortations to women in 1 Timothy 2:12. This text does clearly affirm that men and women are on equal footing before God—as are both Jew and Gentile, slave and free man. Racial, gender, and socio-economic factors are not to divide us since Christ has died to bring all of us together into one body.

In verse 29, Paul summarizes several of his earlier points. *“And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise.”* Those who are united to Christ through faith alone, belong to Christ, and since Christ is the true seed of Abraham, all who are Christ's are also Abraham's true seed and therefore, heirs to all the blessings of the promise. In the new covenant, baptism replaces circumcision as the sign and seal of covenant membership (cf. Colossians 2:11-12). By insisting upon undergoing circumcision and obedience to the law of Moses as a means of justification, the Judaizers were not only basing the promise on obedience to law, and denying the importance of faith, they were driving a wedge between Jew and Gentile, and this when Christ's sacrificial death for sinners was, in part, designed to unite these two groups into one body (Ephesians 2:11-22). It is Christ who unites diverse ethnic and cultural groups into one body. It is heresy and sin which divides us!

Through faith in Christ both Jews and Gentiles are justified, both are heirs to the promise, both recipients of the gift of the Holy Spirit and both groups once baptized into Christ, “put on Christ.” Now Paul goes on to discuss, in more detail, the benefits of being the adopted children of God in verses 1-7 of chapter 4. In the opening two verses of chapter 4, Paul elaborates a bit further on what he has just announced: *“I mean that the heir, as long as he is a child, is no different from a slave, though he is the owner of everything, but he is under guardians and managers until the date set by his father.”* Paul uses the terms “heir” and “child” to describe the believer's relationship to God. In verse 29, the heir stands in relationship to Abraham. But in Galatians 4:1, the heir stands in relationship to God. To be a child of Abraham through faith is roughly equivalent to being a child of God, and an heir to the full inheritance. If Gentiles can be legitimate children of Abraham, they are also children of God.

To start with, the heir is a child (literally an “infant”). Until one grows up and reaches maturity, they do not receive any benefits of the estate. The heir, while still an infant, is really no better off than a slave, although in reality “he owns the whole estate [everything].” The heir, in this case, is not yet in possession of his inheritance since his father does not yet feel that it is time for him to come into full possession of it. But that time will come. The child will grow up and reach maturity.

In verse 3, Paul applies the analogy of heir and an estate to the situation at hand. *“In the same way we also, when we were children, were enslaved to the elementary principles of the world.”* The Greek term translated “elementary principles” is *stoicheia*, which probably means something along the lines of the “rudimentary principles of morality and religion, more specifically the requirements of legalism by which people lived before Christ.”⁶ When we were children, we were enslaved to the basic “principles of the world.” A number of commentators have tried to argue that this word refers to “angelic powers” or

⁶ Fung, *Galatians*, 174-75.

cosmic forces.⁷ But as one commentator notes, the direct connection of this with immaturity, as well as the fact that the law is an instrument of bondage, would support the argument that the reference is more likely referring to, “elementary imperfect teaching....To accept the Jewish law or some equivalent system is to come under slavery to some imperfect doctrine. But if *stoicheia* denotes elemental spirits, then it has to be explained how submitting to the regulations of the Jewish law is tantamount to being enslaved by these spirits.”⁸

The “basic principles” of the world (a synonym for “this present evil age”—cf. Galatians 1:4) is the notion that we can be declared righteous before God based upon merit or rewards earned through obedience to the law. As understood by modern Americans, the *stoicheia* would be something along the lines of “good people go to heaven and bad people go to hell.” Since Americans believe that people are basically good, it is common to believe that everybody goes to heaven, notorious evil doers excepted. Paul, on the contrary, teaches that all people are sinful and under God’s condemnation. Only those in Christ are given eternal life and the forgiveness of sins—contrary to modern notions of universal human “niceness.”

Paul’s thought is often eschatological (looking ahead to final things) as evident from verses 4 and 5. *“But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons.”* When the fullness of time came, our freedom from slavery also came in the person of Jesus Christ, who became flesh for the express purpose of “redeeming those under the law.” The result of his saving mission was that all those in Christ (whether we be Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male or female) receive the full “rights of sons.” All of those in Christ receive the full inheritance to which they are entitled. When the right time comes, our Father deems us to be of age (mature) and thereby ready to receive the estate we already own by virtue of election, but to which we have not yet been granted title.

This inheritance comes about with the coming of Jesus Christ. This is why Paul states in Galatians 1:4 that we are “rescued from the present evil age,” because with the coming of Jesus Christ a new age of redemption—including freedom from the curse of the law—has finally arrived. The new age of redemption has come, while the present evil age, and its basic principles of works righteousness is passing away. We are rescued from sin by a rescuer, Jesus Christ. We do not overcome sin by our own good works.

Paul also reminds us some of the basic facts of the gospel. Jesus was “born of a woman,” and he was “born under the law.” These assertions are both important to Paul’s argument. First, it is much better to speak of Christ’s virginal conception, rather than his virgin birth. The birth itself was perfectly normal. Christ’s supernatural conception was the act of God the Holy Spirit, not the birth. Though our Lord knew no sin (2 Corinthians 5:21), when Paul says he is born of a woman he is referring to the fact that Christ had a true human nature which he took from his mother, Mary. Although he is the Son of God and second person of the Holy Trinity, in his incarnation, Jesus Christ is every bit as human as are we.

Second, Jesus was also born “under the law,” meaning that he was born under the law of Moses. Our Lord was under direct subjection to the law, which he would subsequently fulfill in its entirety, by obeying its every command in thought, word, and deed. Since Jesus was born under the law, requiring perfect obedience to its obligations, and since his death is said to remove the curse of the law, Jesus

⁷ See the helpful discussion in Bruce, *Commentary on Galatians*, 193-194.

⁸ Fung, *Galatians*, 190.

Christ is the redeemer, that one who came to die for the guilt of all of our sins, and the one who fulfills the requirements of the law. Christ fulfills the law through his active obedience, while in his passive obedience he dies upon the cross, bearing in his own body the curse of the law for our sins. As Paul makes perfectly clear throughout the Book of Galatians, the merits of Christ's life and death become ours through faith alone, not through faith *plus* works or through faith *plus* circumcision.

Since we are the fallen children of Adam by nature, we only become children of God through adoption, which is one of the principle fruits of justification by faith alone. We enter into union with Christ through faith alone and once we clothed in his perfect righteousness and united to him by the Holy Spirit, all of which are signed and sealed to us in our baptism, we are said to be "sons" and legitimate heirs to all of the covenant promises of God, which constitute our inheritance. Paul is probably drawing from the Greek conception of adoption, which was also part of Roman law. An adopted child becomes a legitimate heir to the family inheritance. But there are Old Testament echoes here too, as in Hosea 11:1, when the prophet speaks of Israel as a "child" and a "son." As members of the New Israel (Christ's church), all those in Christ are the true sons and daughters of God and heirs to the promise.⁹

In verse 6, Paul makes a direct connection between the inheritance, and the gift of the Holy Spirit. "*And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, 'Abba! Father!'*" Note: there is also a similar connection between Christ's incarnation to redeem us from the curse of the law, and the gift of the Holy Spirit. The way in which Paul speaks here—"because you are Sons...God sent his Spirit into your hearts"—seems to imply that sonship and justification precedes the gift of the Spirit. But we ought be careful not to read this as though we are aware that we are justified *first*, and only then receive the Holy Spirit later, even though this is the logical order of things.

Once justified through faith alone, all Christians are adopted as Sons (daughters). We are also indwelt by the Holy Spirit, which as Paul says is sent "into our hearts." The term "heart" [*kardia*] was understood to be the organ of thought as well as the seat of the emotions, enabling Christians to cry out "Abba, Father," an intimate family expression drawn from Aramaic. As Jesus, the true and natural son, can cry out "Abba, Father," so too we as adopted children indwelt by the Holy Spirit can now approach God in the same way. We who were once far off and estranged from God, have been brought near (Eph. 2:12-13).

In Galatians 4:7, Paul sums up his basic point; namely that the Galatians are no longer children, they have grown up, or at least should have. "*So you are no longer a slave, but a son, and if a son, then an heir through God.*" Every believer in Jesus Christ is no longer a slave to sin, nor to the elementary principles of works righteousness which are passing away. Instead, with the coming of Christ, a new eschatological age has dawned in which we are redeemed from the curse of the law, given a new and right standing before God (justification) through faith alone, adopted as sons and daughters, made heirs to all the blessings of the promise, and given the gift of the Holy Spirit.

How then, could the Judaizers offer anything remotely this comforting and assuring? Their gospel, if true, marks a return to the days of slavery—Israel's bondage in Egypt and captivity in Babylon. The Judaizers would take us back out into the desert of Sinai, and return us to types and shadows, when Jesus as the Pillar of Fire and the provider of heavenly manna is leading us to the heavenly city along the narrow road. No wonder Paul is utterly amazed that the Galatians were so quickly and easily seduced by such kind of false teaching.

⁹ Bruce, Commentary on Galatians, 197-198.

What application can we draw from this section of Paul's letter to the Galatians? Paul introduces two new themes in our text. The first of these centers in the importance and meaning of baptism. Those of us who come from evangelical and fundamentalist backgrounds tend to get a bit nervous when the discussion of baptism heads in the direction that Paul takes us here. For Paul, baptism is the initiatory rite marking our entrance into Christ. To be baptized, Paul says, is to "put on Christ," as we would put on a garment. In this case, the garment is the robe of Jesus Christ's perfect righteousness. Baptism is not incidental to the Christian life, it marks the beginning of the Christian life and is our public identification with Christ—not coming forward during an altar call! Paul would be shocked that so-called evangelical churches would act like baptism was not required, or that baptism was incidental to church membership and the Christian life. Paul cannot conceive of the Christian life apart from baptism! He certainly sees baptism as very much more than our personal testimony to regeneration.

Even though many react negatively against the Reformed doctrine on this point, because it supposedly smells of Romanism, we need to put our prejudices against Rome aside for a moment and take a look at what Paul actually says. Paul does not teach that the water of baptism regenerates—as Rome erroneously teaches—but he does teach that baptism is a sign and seal of a real but invisible spiritual reality, namely regeneration and the forgiveness of sins. We cannot see that the blood of Christ has washed away our sins. We cannot see the Holy Spirit give us the new birth. But we can see the water of baptism. As surely as we have the water applied to us in this Sacrament—by faith—we believe that the blood of Christ has similarly washed away our sins and that the blessed Holy Spirit has given us the new birth! When the sign is present, so too, by faith, we believe the thing signified is present.

As the baptized people of God, we are heirs to all of the promises that God has made to Abraham, namely, justification, the gift of the Holy Spirit, and adoption as the sons and daughters of God. When we have doubts, are struggling with sin, or with matters of faith, let us look to our baptism, where the promises of God are visibly displayed for us to see each and every time someone is baptized.

Also, let us not overlook the second point that Paul makes to us as the adopted children of God—we who are by nature children of wrath and under God's curse, can now draw near to God in intimate fellowship. As Jesus prayed, "Abba, Father," so can we! When we are clothed in the righteousness of Christ, God cannot turn us away even as he cannot turn away his own dear Son. Through faith in Jesus Christ, signed and sealed through baptism, all of the riches of heaven and the blessings of eternal life are ours. God has sealed that promise to us in baptism! He has clothed us in Christ!

Whenever we come to the table of the Lord to receive Christ's body and blood through faith, we pass a baptismal font on the way. That is not accidental. In baptism, as in the Lord's Supper, the promise of the forgiveness of sin and eternal life which are made to us in God's word, are now manifest for us to see. We come to the Lord's table, boldly and without fear, seeking good things from our heavenly father, bread from heaven—not judgment or a stone. Though we were once strangers and foreigners, we are now God's dear children, because we have been baptized into Christ. We can cry out "Abba, Father," for through the blood and righteousness of Jesus Christ, God our judge, has now become our heavenly father and our friend!

Amen!