

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 weddings are, most 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 a marriage ceremony 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 you do; it’s something done to you. 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 yours.

This might sound 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 husband and wife. Placing a crown on a man’s head isn’t a fashion statement. 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. The ceremony of crowning makes him a king. 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 you, He gives you the gift of baptism. Like the crown of a king, baptism gives authority, a promised inheritance, great privileges, large responsibilities, and 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 God gives Himself, He gives you a new life. Every one of us comes to baptism with baggage from the past, as well as hopes or fears concerning the uncertain future. Before you were baptized, you were a member of a family, ethnic group, nationality, perhaps some prior religion. You come to baptism as a member of an in-group. Everyone comes with some stance toward the world as a whole. You are who you are in these four dimensions – because of your past and your future, because of the groups you belong to and your relation to outside groups.

In baptism, God makes you new in all four dimensions. Whether God baptizes you as an infant, a child, or an adult, He gives you a new past and hope for a new future. Whether you are baptized without knowing it, or baptized by profession of faith, God makes you a member of a new in-group and gives you a new position in relation to the outside world. According to the Bible, there are “four corners” to the world. When God baptizes, He recreates you and your world to the four winds of heaven.

Your name embodies your past. You share your surnames with your parents, grandparents, great-grandparents and back into the forgotten centuries. Your first names are also rooted in the past, given by your parents, perhaps the name of an honored ancestor. In baptism, you are given a new name, the name of the Triune God into which you are baptized. You 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 you’re baptized, the story of Adam, Abraham, Jacob, Moses, Joshua, David, Elijah, Jeremiah, Nehemiah, and Jesus becomes *your* family story. Specifically, the story of Jesus, which is the story of Israel and of humanity, becomes your 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 nurture in your heart, 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, 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 through the waters.” 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 you with a past, they also identify you with an in-group, with a family, a nation, an ethnic group. We can roughly guess the family background of a person named Hernandez or Schwartz or Dupre. The name you receive in baptism identifies you with a new in-group, the in-group of the church, which is the body of Christ. Through baptism, the Spirit makes you a member of the one body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:12-13). Through baptism, the church becomes your primary family. The members of the church are you “brothers,” and the church is a family that eats together at a common table. This is not only a family, but a city, a nation, an empire. In baptism, you receive your citizenship papers in 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, and as a priest you have a duty to maintain the house of God, which is the church.

Baptism not only gives you 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 you. Your name gives you something to live up to. When you receive the name “Christian” in baptism, you are given a new future. All the promises given to Abraham become your inheritance, since baptism identifies you with Christ, the seed of Abraham (Galatians 3:28-29). Abraham was promised the world (Romans 4:13), and this promise is given to you in baptism. God said that Abraham’s seed would bless all the nations of the earth (Genesis 12:3), and that is promised to you in baptism.

Your name is the badge you wear before the world outside your 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 commissions 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 to death, He cast out the “prince of this world” (John 12:31). So also, as you share in Christ’s death in baptism, you become “more than conquerors through Him who loved us” (Romans 8:37). Baptism not only ordains you as priests, but crowns you as a king and enlists you as a warrior in the armies of the Lord of hosts. Clad in the armor of God, you are to fight confident of victory, because your baptism 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 you, and He promises to keep giving Himself to you. He gives you a new past, and promises a new future; He gives you a new family, and commissions you to participate in making the nations disciples of King Jesus.

It seems too good to be true. How could a little water remake me in all four dimensions? Some people don’t believe it, even though they have been baptized. Some receive a new past, future, family, and commission, believe God for a time, and then fall away. Some never believe at all. Some are baptized as kings, but go through life defeated. Some are baptized as priests, but don’t lift a finger to serve the body. For such people, it would be better never to have known the truth (2 Peter 2:20-22), because they didn’t receive the gifts of God in faith.

Every baptized person has trouble believing it. At times, we can’t, or don’t, want to believe that God has done all this for us. We want to do something, *anything*, to renew ourselves. But all God requires is that you believe, and live consistently with your belief. God calls you to believe that “Christian” is truly your name, that it’s Christ behind you, Christ before you, Christ within, Christ outside. Baptism is God’s promise in water, God’s commission in water.

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 as if you are baptized. Because you are.”

For more information contact:

Oakwood Bible Church or Oakwood Christian School
260 Oakwood Avenue
Troy, NY 12182
Telephone: (518)271-0526
Email: jadok@aol.com

Essay by Rev. Peter J. Leithart

"TRUST ME"

The Sacrament of Christian Baptism

Oakwood Bible Church
Oakwood Christian School
Troy, NY