

“Baptized Into Christ”

Texts: Galatians 3:26-4:7

Paul's gospel is the public placarding of the saving work of Jesus Christ. As such, the gospel is centered both in the death of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of our sins and in our Lord's perfect obedience to the demands of the law of Moses. Thus justification (a right standing before God) as well as the gift of the Holy Spirit, along with all the blessings of the promise that God made to Abraham, come to God's people (Jew and Gentile) through faith alone, not by works.

Paul had been 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 had begun to infiltrate these churches. Paul says these false teachers were even "spying" on those who were exercising their freedom in Christ, trying to prove that Paul's gospel leads to licence. The Judaizers were Jews who had come to believe that Jesus was Israel's Messiah but who also believed 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.

The epistle to the Galatians is the apostle Paul's response to this very difficult situation. Paul expresses both his astonishment and 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 has been to argue that if anyone comes and preaches a gospel different from the gospel that he had previously preached to them, they were to be considered anathema. Paul has defended his apostleship and the fact that the gospel he has been preaching had been revealed to him by none other than Jesus Christ himself. Paul has argued that justification comes through faith alone, and not by works, since we are saved by the merits of Christ and not by any act of our own. Paul has pointed out that the promise God made to Abraham is fulfilled in Jesus Christ and that one purpose of the law is to expose to us our sin so that we flee to Jesus Christ for forgiveness. For Paul, the sum and substance of the Christian faith is Jesus Christ and his saving work, not Moses and obedience to the law.

Picking up where we left off previously, Paul moves on from discussing the fact that the promise is not nullified by the law, to a discussion of baptism in Galatians 3:26-3:29.

26 You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, 27 for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. 28 There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. 29 If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise.

Paul is speaking of Jew and Gentile when he mentions that all of those who are trusting in Christ, through the means of faith, are all sons of God. Paul will elaborate a bit more on this point in the following verse. By speaking of both 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 both are now heirs to the promise since both groups are the legitimate children of Abraham through faith in Christ. 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 and Gentile. This explains, in part, why the efforts of the Judaizers to divide what God had joined together in one body, were seen to be

so utterly destructive by the apostle.

In effect, the Judaizers were trying to reverse the course of redemptive history. Despite their claims to the contrary, they 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. Hence, the Judaizers were not only preaching a false gospel, but in doing so they were dividing the people of God, the true Israel, which is Christ's church. Their zeal was utterly misguided and therefore utterly destructive of Christ's church.

In verse 27, Paul introduces the subject of baptism. In doing so, Paul directly connects baptism to union with Christ. In Paul's mind, baptism is "regarded as the rite of initiation into Christ, that is, into union with Christ."¹ Thus it is baptism which marks our entrance into Christ's church since baptism is the visible sign and seal of an invisible spiritual reality, namely regeneration and the forgiveness of sins. While the rite of 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, hence the Reformed reject the notion of baptismal regeneration—nevertheless, baptism is a sign and seal of regeneration and the forgiveness of sins. Therefore, 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.

Paul also 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 regarded as a “putting on” of Christ, who is thought of as a garment enveloping the believer and symbolizing his new spiritual existence....The metaphor is probably derived from [the Old Testament] where the figure of changing clothes to represent an inward and spiritual change was common, a theme which is found in Isaiah 61:10 [“he has clothed me with garments of salvation”] and Zechariah 3:3, [“I have taken away your sin, and I will put rich garments on you.”]²

Thus when one is baptized into Christ, they are said to put on Christ and are believed to be 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.

There are a number of important points which need to be made here about baptism. First, there is no such thing in the New Testament as an "unbaptized Christian," except for the thief on the cross, who is an exception rather than the rule. The crucified but repentant thief will be in paradise with our Lord even though he was not baptized. It was Augustine who said, "it is not the absence of baptism which damns, but the despising of baptism." According to Paul, baptism is regarded as the sign and seal of the righteousness of faith (Romans 4:9-12). Baptism is seen in Colossians 2:9-12, as the replacement of 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

¹ Fung, *Galatians*, p. 172

² Fung, *Galatians*, p. 172.

Israelites passed safely through the waters of the Red Sea in the Exodus and through the waters of the Jordan as they entered the land of promise (cf. 1 Corinthians 10:1-4). That baptism was applied to children of believers is clear from texts such as 1 Corinthians 7:14, and from the numerous household baptisms which occur throughout the New Testament (cf. Acts 16:14-15, 31-34; 1 Corinthians 1:16). To be baptized into Christ, is to “put on Christ.”

Second, Paul is clearly speaking of "water" baptism here. There is no need to pit water baptism against "Spirit baptism," as the one (baptism with water) is a sign and seal of the other (baptism in the Holy Spirit). It is Paul who put these two things side by side in Titus 3:5, "*he saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit.*"

Third, 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* [by virtue of the work performed]. 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.”³ Thus faith in Christ, and the sign and seal of that 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.

This means that it is faith which unites us to Christ (of which baptism is a sign and seal) so that 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.”⁴ This explains Paul's declaration in Ephesians 4:5, “*one Lord, one faith, one baptism.*”

In verse 28, Paul moves from discussing baptism to continuing his point about Christ's saving work serving to bring Jew and Gentile together into one body—Christ's. To do this, 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 thanks to God on a daily basis that he was not a Gentile, a woman or a slave.⁵ But, 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.

A number of people have attempted to use the apostle's list to justify an 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 and to the office of elder as some in certain churches advocating women's ordination have lamely attempted 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. But 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

³ Fung, *Galatians*, p. 174.

⁴ Fung, *Galatians*, pp. 174-75.

⁵ Bruce, *Commentary on Galatians*, p. 187.

socio-economic factors are not to divide us since Christ has died to bring all of us together into one body. This is Paul's point, nothing more, and our egalitarian friends will need to look elsewhere to find a text which supports their views on gender and headship.

In verse 29, Paul now summarizes a number of his earlier points. 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. Under the New Covenant, baptism replaces circumcision as the sign and seal of covenant membership (cf. Colossians 2:11-12).

Therefore, the Judaizers, by insisting upon returning to circumcision and obedience to the law of Moses as a means of justification, were not only basing the promise upon law, and therefore, denying the importance of faith, but 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 united diverse 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.

1 What I am saying is that as long as the heir is a child, he is no different from a slave, although he owns the whole estate. 2 He is subject to guardians and trustees until the time set by his father. 3 So also, when we were children, we were in slavery under the basic principles of the world. 4 But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, 5 to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons. 6 Because you are sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, "Abba, Father." 7 So you are no longer a slave, but a son; and since you are a son, God has made you also an heir.

Paul now elaborates a bit further on what he has just announced: "What I am saying is that . . ." Here, Paul uses the terms "heir," "children" and "sons," to describe the believer's relationship to God. In verse 29, the heir stands in relationship to Abraham, but here in Galatians 4:1, the heir stands in relationship to God. Thus 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. Therefore, the heir, while still an infant, is really no better off than a slave, although in reality "he owns the whole estate." 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. When we were children, we were enslaved to the basic "principles of the world." The Greek term underlying the NIV's phrase, "principles of the world," 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 A number of commentators have tried to argue that this word refers to “angelic powers” or 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

Thus the “basic principles” of the world (or even better, “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. But Paul's doctrine, on the contrary, is that all people are sinful and under God's condemnation. Only those in Christ are given eternal life and the forgiveness of sins. This goes totally against the grain of modern egalitarianism.

That Paul's thought is largely eschatological is evident in verses 4 and 5. When the fullness of time had come, our freedom from slavery had also come 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. Thus 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 can argue back 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 trust in the 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 now 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. It was Christ's conception that was the supernatural 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 we are.

⁶ Fung, *Galatians*, pp. 174-75.

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

⁸ Fung, *Galatians*, p. 190.

Second, Jesus was also born “under the law,” meaning that he was born under the law of Moses. Thus 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 bear the curse of the law, Jesus Christ is therefore, 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. This means that 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 benefits of Christ's life and death become ours through faith alone, not through faith and works or through faith and circumcision.

Unfortunately, the NIV obscures the meaning of the phrase, “the full rights as sons,” which is better translated as “adoption” as sons. 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 are clothed in his perfect righteousness and united to him by the Holy Spirit, we are now said to be “sons” and, therefore, rightful 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 is no doubt that there are Old Testament echoes here as well, for in Hosea 11:1, the prophet speaks of Israel as a “child” and a “son.” As members of the New Israel, all those in Christ are the true sons and daughters of God and heirs to the promise.⁹

In verse 6, Paul now makes a direct connection between the inheritance, and the gift of the Holy Spirit. Paul also makes a direct 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. We should be careful not to separate this order temporally as though we are aware we are justified first and then receive the Holy Spirit later, even though this is the logical order of things.

The point is that all Christians having been justified through faith alone are, therefore, adopted as Sons. They are also indwelt by the Holy Spirit, which as Paul says is sent “into our hearts.” The term “heart” [*kardia*] is 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 (cf. Ephesians 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. Thus the believer in Jesus Christ is no longer a slave to sin and 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 as attractive as that? Their gospel, if true, marks a return to the days of bondage in Egypt and captivity in Babylon. The Judaizers would take us back out

⁹ Bruce, Commentary on Galatians, pp. 197-198.

into the desert of Sinai, and return us to type and shadow, when Jesus as the Pillar of Fire and the provider of heavenly manna is leading us to the heavenly city along the narrow road. This certainly explains Paul's utter amazement that the Galatians were so quickly and easily seduced by them.

What application can we draw from this section of Paul's letter to the Galatians?

There are two new themes introduced by Paul 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 connected to the robe of Jesus Christ's perfect righteousness. Thus 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!

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!

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.

Let us also not forget the second point that Paul makes here—namely as the adopted children of God—we who are by nature children of wrath and under God's curse, not his promise of blessing, can now draw near to God in intimate fellowship. As Jesus prayed, "Abba, Father," so can we! For 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, don't forget that we pass a baptismal font on the way. That is not accidental. For in baptism, as in the 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 judgement or a stone. Though we were once strangers and foreigners, we are now God's dear children. We now 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!