

I thought that it would be good for us to reflect on the meaning of baptism this morning in connection with the profession of faith and baptism of Hal Hodgson. And I thought we would do that by following the explanation of baptism given in Chapter 28.1 of our Westminster Confession of Faith. So I will begin by reading that paragraph.

“Baptism is a sacrament of the new testament, ordained by Jesus Christ, not only for the solemn admission of the party baptized into the visible church; but also, to be unto him a sign and a seal of the covenant of grace, of his ingrafting into Christ, of regeneration, of remission of sins, and of his giving up unto God, through Jesus Christ, to walk in newness of life. Which sacrament is, by Christ’s own appointment, to be continued in his church until the end of the world” (WCF 28:1).

One of the challenges with understanding baptism is that it is a symbol of so many different things. The Confession mentions the covenant of grace, ingrafting into Christ, regeneration, remission of sins and walking in newness of life. And on top of that some of these categories are not easy to understand. However, all of the categories mentioned in the confession refer to salvation in Christ from different perspectives. So for practical purposes, when you can’t remember all the different aspects of salvation that baptism points to, just think salvation in Jesus. Baptism is a sign and seal of salvation.

But all the different things that baptism a symbol of help us to see the richness of salvation and the richness thus of baptism. What I’d like to try to do in this sermon is explain as simply as I can, the different aspects of the meaning of baptism as outlined in this paragraph in the WCF.

The Confession says that baptism was “ordained by Jesus Christ.” That of course is important because that is what gives baptism its usefulness in our relationship with God. If baptism were something that human beings thought up, it would worse than useless because it would not have divine authority. Baptism is comforting and meaningful because it was ordained by Jesus. We administer it because he told us to. And whatever it means comes with his authority. The text where we read of Jesus ordaining baptism is Matthew 28:19 where Jesus said to his disciples and through them to the church, “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit....” That is Jesus’ command to the church. Whatever baptism means comes with Jesus’ authority.

The next thing that our Confession says about baptism is that it was ordained by Jesus “for the solemn admission into the visible church.” This point is also made by the verse that I just quoted. Jesus told the church to make disciples and to baptize those disciples. Disciples of Jesus are members of his church and receiving baptism is part of the way that a follower of Jesus is admitted into the church. Another verse that teaches this is 1 Corinthians 12:13 which says, “For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body....” The church is the body of Christ and baptism is a solemn admission into the visible church.

A communicant church member is someone who has publicly confessed their faith in Jesus and has been baptized. Baptism is a requirement for church membership. Baptism is a sign that a person belongs to Christ's church and no longer to the world. It is a sign of belonging to the triune God and to the people of God.

Chapter 27:1 of the WCF says of sacraments in general that they "put a visible difference between those that belong to the church, and the rest of the world." The visibility is not a mark that can be seen like a tattoo. It comes from the fact that sacraments are publicly administered. A baptized person has been publicly admitted into Christ's church.

Next the Confessions says that baptism is a sign and seal of the covenant of grace. The relationship between God and his people is a covenant relationship. That means that it is a formal relationship as well as a personal relationship – just like marriage is a formal relationship as well as a personal relationship. The formal part helps sustain the personal part. The formal part gives stability to the relationship. There are promises. There are requirements. And there are oaths – just as there is in marriage. Both parties make commitments to one another and those commitments are sealed with oaths and symbols. In marriage it is the ring. In the covenant that God makes with his people it is baptism and the Lord's Supper.

Now using the example of marriage is the best way to explain the covenant that God makes with his people, but they are not exactly the same because marriage is a covenant between equals and the covenant that God makes with his people is between un-equals – between God and his people. God makes the covenant with his people. He defines it and he establishes it. And we receive it and submit to it.

The covenant of grace is basically the gospel. God promises salvation in Jesus to those who believe and believers pledge themselves to living in obedience to God. Baptism is a sign and a seal of God's promises of salvation to those who believe and it is a sign and seal of our obligation to live the life of obedience. As a sign it reminds us that we are in this covenant relationship with God and as a seal it confirms to us the promises that God makes to us in the gospel. We can think of God's promises of salvation and be encouraged because in our baptism God has sealed those promises to us with an oath and a sign.

Hebrews 6 uses the language of God swearing an oath. Hebrews 6:17, "So when God desired to show more convincingly to the heirs of the promises the unchangeable character of his purpose, he guaranteed it with an oath....." That's what we mean when we say that baptism is a sign and a seal. It is a reminder of God's oath to save us if we believe in Jesus. Baptism is God's oath made to us by name. It is a confirmation of God's promise to us.

This is what God's covenant with us is for. It gives us security in our relationship with God. It is about knowing exactly where we stand with God – what he promises and what he requires. In Hebrews 6, where it speaks about God guaranteeing his covenant promises with an oath, we are told that the reason for God's oath is that "we who have fled for refuge might have strong encouragement to hold fast to the hope set before us.

We have this as a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul....” This is one of the great purposes of baptism – it is a seal of God’s promises to us to give us “a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul.”

So baptism is a sign that we are members of the visible church and it is a sign and seal of the covenant of grace. The next thing that WCF mentions is that baptism is a sign and seal of our “ingrafting into Christ.”

This is one of the images that the Bible uses to help us to understand salvation in Christ. When we believe in Jesus we are united to Christ just like a branch can be grafted into a tree. In John 15 Jesus speaks of himself as the vine and believers as the branches. That is a picture of how believers are united to Christ. The image of the body of Christ makes the same point. When we believe we become part of the body of Christ – we are united to Christ. In Galatians 3:27, Paul uses the phrase “baptized into Christ.” That is what the confession of faith means when it says that baptism is a sign and seal of our “ingrafting into Christ.”

The Bible often uses the term “in Christ” to describe the relationship of believers to Christ. For instance Paul in Romans 8:1 says, “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.” Because we are united to Christ we share in everything Jesus has done for us. When God looks at us, he sees us in Christ and because of that he sees us as if we had never sinned. We are one with Christ and because of that we share in his righteousness. “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.”

Eternal life also comes from being in Christ. In 1 Corinthians 15:22 Paul writes, “For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive.” By nature we are in Adam and so we share in the death that was the result of Adam’s sin. By God’s grace we are in Christ and so we share in the life that he obtained by dying on the cross for our sins and rising from the dead. In Ephesians 2:5 Paul says that God “made us alive together with Christ....”

This idea of being in Christ or being grafted into Christ is a very precious truth. It is somewhat challenging to wrap our head around because we are not used to thinking about being in someone else. But the Bible gives us analogies to help us to grasp what it means to be in Christ. We are in Christ like a branch is in a vine or a tree and we are part of the body of Christ. And the basic idea is because we are in Christ we share in all the blessings of salvation.

And baptism is a sign and a seal of that. As we saw from Galatians 3:27 we are “baptized into Christ.” As those who trust in Jesus we can think of our baptism and be reminded and reassured that we are in Christ. And we are meant to do that. Jesus has instituted baptism to strengthen our faith. Baptism is meant to encourage us. It is Christ’s intention that we think about our baptism and be reassured that we are in Christ and that therefore there is no condemnation for us and we are share in Christ’s life.

One of the key baptism passages is Romans 6:1-14. In this passage Paul works out the idea of being one with Christ for our life of obedience. In that passage Paul says that believers have been baptized into Jesus’ death. In some mysterious way we were in Christ when he died on the cross and baptism symbolizes that. Baptism is

a reminder and a confirmation that if we are trusting in Jesus, we shared in his death and we shared in his resurrection.

That in turn means that we died to sin and have been made alive to God. Baptism is a sign and seal of that. Verse 11 of Romans 6 says, "For you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus." Baptism is a sign and seal of that. Baptism reminds us that we are united to Christ in his death and resurrection and therefore we are dead to sin and alive to God. And that is why it is impossible for a Christian to just go on living in sin after believing in Christ. Those who are in Christ are no longer enslaved to sin. They have been set free from the power of sin. The new life that is in them means they are alive to God. It is impossible for such people to just go on living in sin. They will still sin, but they will hate their sins and fight against them and they will live lives characterized by obedience.

So, you see, baptism is meant to play an important role in our obedience. In the struggle against sin, do we just give up? Do we say, "It's no use because sin is too strong?" Do we think that we don't have to battle against sin because we are justified by faith and not by works? Paul says, "Think of your baptism." Your baptism means that you are in Christ and if you are in Christ you are dead to sin and alive to God. Paul says in Romans 6:12-13, "¹²Let not sin **therefore** reign in your mortal body, to make you obey its passions. ¹³Do not present your members to sin as instruments for unrighteousness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and your members to God as instruments for righteousness."

So, baptism is intended to be a great encouragement in the daily battle with sin. That is what we learn in Romans 6. When you're struggling with sin, - think of your baptism! That is what Paul is saying. You are no longer enslaved to sin because you died with Christ. You are no longer dead in sin because you rose with Christ and are alive to God. That is what your baptism tells you. Therefore, do not let sin reign. Present yourself to God as someone who has been brought from death to life. And in the power of that new life give yourself to obedience. Baptism is intended to be a help in the everyday struggle with sin.

So you see that being in Christ is a very important way in which the Bible speaks about our salvation and baptism is a sign and seal of that. If we are in Christ there is no condemnation for us. If we are in Christ we are dead to sin and alive to God. Being in Christ or being united to Christ is an important part of the way we are to think of ourselves as Christians and baptism is a sign and seal of that.

So we have looked at baptism as a sign of being a member of the visible church. We have looked at baptism as a sign and seal of the covenant of grace and of our ingrafting into Christ. Next the WCF says that baptism is a sign and seal of regeneration.

What is regeneration? Regeneration is the new birth. It refers to the moment we are brought from spiritual death to spiritual life. Before salvation we are dead in sin and when we are saved we are made alive in Christ. Salvation is being raised from the dead, spiritual speaking. Paul speaks of this in Ephesians 2 when he says in

verse 5 “[Even] when we were dead in our trespasses, [God] made us alive together with Christ.” That is what the word regeneration refers to. Before we are saved we are dead in sin. After we are saved we are spiritually alive in Christ.

Jesus alludes to baptism in this connection in John 3:5 when he says to Nicodemus, “Truly, truly I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.” He is talking about being born again which is about receiving new life. He speaks about being born of water and the Spirit. This is an allusion to baptism which is a sign and a seal of being born again. It is a sign and seal of the new life that we have in Christ.

Titus 3 also has a text which speaks of baptism in this way. In verse 5 Paul writes that Jesus “saved us, ... by the washing of regeneration and the renewal of the Holy Spirit.” That phrase washing of regeneration refers to baptism. Baptism is a sign and seal of our regeneration and so it can be referred to as the washing of regeneration. This does not mean that baptism actually regenerates us but it is a reminder and a confirmation that through faith we are regenerated by the Spirit of God.

Regeneration is a tremendous blessing. It is a very bad thing to be dead in sin. Death is separation from God. By nature, we are alive physically, but dead spiritually. To be dead in sin is to be under the wrath of God. It is to be enslaved to the sin that would eventually destroy us completely in eternal death. Death is awful. When we see a dead body, it is disturbing because death is such an awful thing. That is what we are spiritually before salvation. And then, through the preaching of the gospel God, breathes life into our dead souls. The powerful word of Christ is like the command of Jesus telling Lazarus to come out of the grave. And we are raised from the dead spiritually. We are renewed by the Holy Spirit. That is regeneration. And baptism is a sign and a seal of that. We are reminded and it is confirmed that as believers we have experienced the washing of regeneration, we have been born of water and the Spirit.

Baptism is also a sign and seal of the forgiveness of sins according to our Confession. The verses here are Acts 2:38 and Acts 22:16. Acts 2:38 is from Peter’s sermon on Pentecost, “Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins ...” Acts 22:16 is from Paul testimony. Paul tells of the time when he had been blinded by his meeting with the risen Christ and a few days later Ananias had appeared to him and said, “Rise and be baptized and wash away your sins....” These verses show that baptism is a sign and seal of the forgiveness of sins.

Once we understand this positive language, its meaning is wonderful. Baptism is a sign and seal of the forgiveness of sins through faith. If we do not have faith our sins are not washed away even if we are baptized, but if we do have faith we can think of our baptism and see it as a confirmation that our sins are washed away. What a comfort that is! The guilt of our sin is a heavy load. It makes us fearful. It gives us shame. We feel unclean because of what we have done and what we have failed to do. How awful sin is! Are you trusting in Jesus? Think of your baptism. It is a confirmation that your sins are washed away. You have been washed clean

from your sins because of the life, death and resurrection of Christ. As far as your standing before God is concerned, it is as if you have never sinned and as if you had lived a perfect life. Your baptism is a sign of the fact that your sins are washed away.

Finally, the Confession teaches us that baptism is a sign and a seal of our “our giving up unto God through Jesus Christ to walk in newness of life.” The Modern English edition of the Confession says that baptism is a sign and seal of our surrender to God through Jesus Christ to walk in newness of life.” The text that the Confession cites is Romans 6:3-4 which we have already considered in connection with ingrafting into Christ. Here the Confession focuses on the idea that baptism is a sign of our obligation to surrender ourselves to God through Jesus to walk in newness of life. Baptism is a sign and a seal that we are given new life in Christ. But closely connected to that is the idea that we are to live out the life that Jesus has given us.

This idea is part of the biblical idea of the covenant. One of the phrases that we run into again and again in the OT is the phrase “keep my covenant.” This is what God said to his people again and again: “You must keep my covenant. Deuteronomy 29:9 “Therefore keep the words of his covenant and do them, that you may prosper in all that you do.” In the OT, the sign of that was circumcision. In the NT, it is baptism.

Baptism is a sign and seal of many things. We have looked at some of them. We are solemnly admitted into the visible church through baptism. It is a sign and a seal of the covenant of grace. It is a sign and a seal of our ingrafting into Christ. It is a sign and a seal of regeneration. It is a sign and a seal of the forgiveness of sins. But all of these things place us under a tremendous but also a blessed obligation. We are to live the life that Jesus has saved us to live. Baptism is a sign and a seal of belonging to God. That means many blessings. But some of those blessings are obligations to surrender our lives to God and walk in newness of life.

When we think of our baptism we should be reminded not only what God has done for us, but also of the life that he calls us to live and enables us to live. It is an obligation. It is a command. It is a requirement, but it is also how we were created to flourish. True freedom in God’s world is submission to God. Romans 6, towards the end of that chapter compares being slaves of sin with being slaves of God. Those are the two options. We are born slaves of sin. That is a slavery that diminishes our humanity and leads to death. Salvation involves being delivered from that slavery and becoming instead slaves of God. That is a slavery which is the life we were created to live. We were made to flourish by being slaves of God. And baptism is a sign and a seal that we are slaves of God – that we have humbled ourselves and have submitted our lives to God.

It is therefore a reminder of our obligation to God. We are not free in the sense that the world thinks itself free. The world thinks itself free from God’s authority. It relishes its freedom not realizing that is in fact slavery to sin which is dehumanizing and destructive. The world is horrified by the thought of submission to God and his laws. And yet the reality is that it is through that submission that we are truly free to be all that God has created us and saved us to be. It is life as it was meant to be lived. It is wholesome. It is life-giving. And it honors God. And that is true human flourishing.

Baptism reminds us of that. It is a sign that we are not free to live as we please, but that we are under obligation to conform our lives to the wishes of our creator and redeemer. But what a glorious obligation that that is because our creator and redeemer loves us and is committed to our temporal and eternal wellbeing!

So, let us cherish our baptism. I have focused on the meanings of baptism because I wanted to remind us of how rich it is. It is all about salvation, but it is a sign and a seal of points to many of the facets of salvation. Jesus Christ has given it to us for our good – for our encouragement – for our comfort – also to nurture us in the life of obedience. So, let it be something that we think about often. May it be something that is very precious to us as he intended it to be.