

Baptism in One Spirit into the Lord's Local Church (1 Cor 12.12-13 pt2)

WestminsterReformedChurch.org

Pastor Ostella

May 27, 2012

For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. ¹³ For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body--Jews or Greeks, slaves or free--and all were made to drink of one Spirit.

Introduction

Two weeks ago, I defended the important duty of all Christians to join a local church noting that a membership commitment is significant because the church is the pillar and foundation gospel truth. Therefore, from the context of 1 Timothy 3.15-16, along with the principles of good order (1 Cor 14.40), mutual instruction (1 Cor 14.26), and submission to pastors (Heb 13.7, 17), we know that a public commitment with the pastor and flock of a local church is required of believers by the Lord Jesus. It is required so they can fulfill the practical obligations that rest on their shoulders as professing Christians. Some of these obligations are confessing a good confession, qualifying overseers, and submitting to a pastor's care.

Understandably, this public commitment of mutuality with a pastor and flock stands at the point of entry into membership in the church. In close connection then, last week, I gave support from 1 Corinthians 12.12-13 for the conclusion that entering the local church by water baptism dovetails with entering the local church by a public membership commitment. In this light, baptism and a membership commitment are parts of the same apple. Baptism is a commitment to discipleship under the Lordship of Christ and His headship over the church. It is therefore a commitment to pastors to be under their teaching authority (which according to Eph 4.11-12 means learning for holiness to the glory of God). Therefore, the baptism commitment is a membership commitment.

Now this week, I want to direct you to the same baptism-membership apple, but with emphasis on the phrase "in one Spirit" in 1 Corinthians 12.13. The title is "Baptism in One Spirit into the Lord's Local Church" and the outline has two points: its meaning in the context of 1 Corinthians 12, and its meaning in the context of salvation. In anticipation, let me say that we going will be swimming in some deep water, but it is life-refreshing water. So, let's dive in.

I. The context of 1 Corinthians 12 (for the meaning of baptism in one Spirit into the church)

In 12.12 we read, **just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ.** The Lord Jesus is like a human body. He is one body with many members, so, the church is in view, but it is defined by Christ. Because of Him (in union with Him), the many are one body. To confirm and explain the one body, Paul then says in 12.13, **For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body--Jews or Greeks, slaves or free--and all were made to drink of one Spirit.** In brief review, we should ask, why not take this verse to be referring to Spirit baptism that made them members of the true (universal) church with no reference to water baptism? In reply, we begin with the fact that all the references to the church in the Corinthian letter refer to the church in a given locality. So, how can we understand this verse in any other way than as a reference to the local church? How does it help us grasp Paul's reason for bringing up the body of Christ and the Spirit's work to think about the universal body (especially if you neglect the church to whom He writes this letter)? He addresses the reality of divisions in the local body of Christ at Corinth. He informs them that they are one body in their union with Christ. Therefore, their schisms are a serious contradiction of who Christ is and who they are in Him. That is so because being joined to Him brings them into a human body-like oneness.

Of course, none of this denies the reality of the universal church and the relationship that each local church sustains to it because Paul writes to the church of God at Corinth, to the body of Christ there, to that local church, in the context of all the saints throughout the world. That is plain in 1.2: **To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints together with all those who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours.** This shows that what he writes to this local church pertains in principle to all local churches because the people of God have a oneness in Christ. Accordingly, in this very context, Paul says to the Corinthians: **Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it** (12.27).

Therefore, because this baptism joins sinners at Corinth to Christ's body, to the local church in that city, the baptism is water baptism. At the least, we cannot exclude water baptism from the text. In all its other occurrences in the letter (1.13, 14, 15, 16; 10.2; 15.29) baptism refers to the ritual. How would we discern a shift to *waterless* Spirit baptism? That is similar to how we would discern the shift from the local church in all the references in the letter to the universal church (with no reference to the local church) in one text (12.12-31). Furthermore, and this is huge as a matter of interpretation consistency (hermeneutical consistency), the pattern of reasoning that removes water from 1 Corinthians 12 leads (by *reductio*) to the removal of the ritual from the NT church altogether. It proves too much.

We are thus encouraged to dive deeper into the text on the basis that water baptism was how these sinners became members of Christ's church at Corinth; it was the door of entry to the local church. Moreover, it is that door to the church because of Christ, because of union with Christ. Therefore, to understand the phrase **in one Spirit**, we have to keep this context in mind, namely, that the body in the spotlight is the local church (without denying reference to the true church) and the baptism is the water ritual. We also have an even larger context to keep in mind. To that we now turn.

II. The context of salvation (for the meaning of baptism in one Spirit into the local church)

Now, in turning our attention to the context of salvation, we are zooming out as far as we are able. That is, we are expanding our view so widely that it is like looking at Plymouth, Michigan not just on a US map or even on a world map, but on a map of the universe. We are aiming big. The text calls for the widest possible perspective on salvation to understand water baptism into Christ's local church *because this baptism is into union with Christ*. The big perspective has three points of reference that correspond to a threefold map of the universe, Michigan, and Plymouth. In this rough and ready analogy, I am referring to the plan, the accomplishment, and the application of salvation. To understand baptism in the Spirit into the body of Christ at Corinth, we need the largest possible context, which is the context of salvation planned, accomplished, and applied. I think you should be acquainted with the classic Latin terms that theologians use for these aspects of salvation. They are *pactum salutis*, *historia salutis*, and *ordo salutis*. In each reference, as you can see, the word for salvation, *salutis*, occurs.

A. Plan of salvation or the *pactum salutis*

The *pactum salutis* is the pact, covenant, or agreement regarding salvation between the members of the triune God before the beginning of the world. The key passages are John 17 and Ephesians 1.

1) In John 17, Jesus tells us that He came to this earth to fulfill a mission, one that He agreed to accomplish in obedience to the Father. The goal of this plan is the salvation of a people that the Father gave to the Son in the covenant of redemption: **you have given [me] authority over all**

flesh, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him [that is, given to me in our agreement before the creation of the world] (Jn 17.2).

2) In Ephesians 1, Paul identifies these “given ones” as God’s chosen people: **he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him** (1.4). It is important to note that our election according to this verse is **in him**. It is in union with Jesus Christ the Son of God who became the redeemer of God’s elect by becoming the God-man. He had to be truly and fully God and truly and fully man to save sinners. Now it should be obvious that being joined to Christ and His church in one Spirit in 1 Corinthians 12.13 is not speaking of this union of election or of the *pactum salutis* (that is, not directly).

B. The accomplishment of salvation, the *historia salutis*

From John 17, we learn that Jesus finished the saving work He came to do for the particular sinners God gave to Him in the plan of redemption before the foundation of the world (v. 4). Interestingly, *they were united to Christ in His death on the cross*; thus, Paul says, we died with Him (Rom 6.8). To be clear, our death was in union with Him in His death *on the cross*; we died with Him *back there in history in the accomplishment* of salvation when He bore our sins in His own body on the tree (1 Pet 2.24). Consequently, the Father’s plan of election (His plan for those united with Christ in the eternal covenant of redemption) was accomplished for them by their union with Him in His death, but neither of these aspects of union with Christ is in view in 1 Corinthians 12.13 (that is, again, not directly).

C. The application of salvation, the *ordo salutis*

This is sometimes called the existential or experiential union with Christ, because it refers to the order in which we receive the benefits of Christ’s work in our experience in our personal histories. In this connection, the apostle tells us that water baptism joined us to Christ in His death: **Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?** (Rom 6.3). So, we are brought full circle back to water baptism in one Spirit in our text in 1 Corinthians 12. Water baptism is an application of union with Christ. There are two considerations here that merit comment.

1) First, consider being made to drink of one Spirit, mentioned at the end of 12.13

This idea reaches back to the gifts of the Spirit (12.1-11). That *all* drink and that they all drink of *one* Spirit accents the unity underlying the diversity in the local church. Recall, that the Spirit gave the gift of saving faith and distributed the other spiritual gifts to all the saints in the church at Corinth. Central in the application of redemption (in the *ordo salutis*) is the baptism of the Spirit on the day of Pentecost, which is the historical-redemptive pouring out of the Spirit by Christ *to apply what the Father planned and the Son secured*. The Holy Spirit was promised to Jesus by the Father and was given to Him as the reward of His saving obedience. The Spirit is given to sinners by Christ in His messianic baptism as John announced. Now all in the church have the Holy Spirit and that is not altered by race or religion. Thus, there is to be no divisiveness in the body of Christ; it is a great sin against the Spirit given to all by Christ.

2) Second, consider being baptized in water into a local church

The parallel language of 12.3 and 12.13 (in the Spirit and in one Spirit) leads the way to the nature of the application of union with Christ being addressed. Our very ability to confess faith, to confess by faith in the heart that Jesus is Lord is due to the sovereign gift of the Spirit: **Therefore I want you to understand that no one speaking in the Spirit of God ever says, "Jesus is accursed!" and no one can say, "Jesus is Lord" except in the Holy Spirit** (12.3). That is, it is a gift that the Spirit gives that enables us to cease being mute and to speak up for Christ with saving faith.

In parallel, water baptism is the Spirit’s work that unites sinners to the body, which is Christ and His church (12.13). Understanding the place of the ritual in this context is a challenge

rich with blessing. What is the basic truth about water baptism that this text gives us? It informs us that water baptism is a means by which the Spirit *applies* our union with Christ. It is that as part of gospel proclamation and application in the lives of sinners in relationship to the new people of God.

Two thoughts merge: union with Christ (for all of the elect) and union with His body the church in a local context. *Entering a local body of Christ is union with Christ applied in the Spirit*, in the working of the Spirit now poured out on sinners in redemptive history according to the Father's plan and grounded in the Son's accomplishment. A sinner's water baptism is the work of the Spirit just as his confession of faith is the work of the Spirit. Thus, when someone believes in Christ and enters the church in the obedience of water baptism, this repentance-baptism is an act of God because it is a gift of the Spirit that brings lost aliens to membership in a local expression of Christ's church.

How can we make sense of this when we know that many people enter the visible local church in unbelief? Of course, not all the baptized into church membership are saved. That is undeniably true. However, we must understand that this text teaches the application of union with Christ by the outworking of the Spirit of God in our water baptism in a way that corresponds with the outworking of the Spirit in the confession of our faith. Therefore, we can draw a fundamental truth from this text: *when a person follows Christ in the obedience of baptism, that obedient act, that baptism by which he becomes a member of Christ's local church is due to the efficacious grace of the Holy Spirit giving gifts sovereignly to whom He wills.*

We are in deep water to be sure, but we are surrounded by lost treasures. Now it is time to swim to the surface, and to gather our thoughts with some implications and applications.

Implications and applications

1) A profound richness

Baptism comes to us in the context of salvation on a large scale and thus with a profound richness: water baptism is *in the Spirit*. It is not a "mere" ritual. Study of the doctrine of baptism (along with communion) goes hand in hand with the study of the church, worship, and what have been called the ordinary means of grace. Therefore, the baptismal entry into the local church, ordinary as it may be to the human eye, is an extraordinary means used by God in the accomplishment of His eternal purpose in Christ.

Notably, the passages that deal with union with Christ through our water baptism have a profound depth because they presuppose our union with Christ in His work in the history of redemption (the *historia salutis*) and behind that, they presuppose our union with Him in the agreement between the members of the triune God to save a particular people in union with Christ (the *pactum salutis*). What we do not want to miss in this study of something allegedly trivial is that the great reality that took place on the cross is being applied in the Spirit whenever a sinner obeys the command of Christ to be baptized and commit himself to Christ's local church.

2) Finally, do not forget that baptism is God's promise

To emphasize the fact that baptism is God's promise is to go beyond what we say in the sacrament to what God says. Accordingly, when Paul teaches that the Spirit water baptizes us, through human administrators, into Christ and into His local church (12.13), he is telling us that water baptism, as a symbol of the gospel, is a *sign* of efficacious grace.

When we capture the fullness of the sign, then we have a twofold foundation on which to preserve and promote unity in the church. On one hand, we are reminded of our commitment in

baptism to the church (**we were all baptized into one body--Jews or Greeks, slaves or free**), so no matter what diversity of gifts may exist among us, **all were made to drink of one Spirit**. On the other hand, we are reminded that our commitment to Christ and His church is due to the effectual working of the Spirit (**in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body**). This is an application of what Paul tells the Philippians: **Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling,¹³ for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure** (Phil 2.12-13). In the end, what we have here is an encouragement to promote the unity of the faith in bond of peace and do to so with a sense of fear, that is, with a sense of awe at the fact that God is working in us to will and work for His good pleasure.

Therefore, God's testimony of baptism stands over you all your days as a reminder of His promise that underlies your promise of obedience. That is part of what baptism symbolizes. In other words, you *will* obey, *He promises* that you will obey *by the Spirit's enabling* work. There are bumps and dips on the road of obedience, but the work He has begun, He will complete (Phil 1.6). Thus, being baptized, seeing others baptized, and meditating on the meaning of baptism are gospel assurances because they remind you that God promises to cleanse and sanctify you by His saving grace until you arrive safely to Zion, the beautiful city of God. That is why you can sing: "the hill of Zion yields a thousand sacred sweets before I reach the heavenly fields." That is why you can say and sing, "I confidently march to fairer worlds on high; I am bound for the promised land; I am bound for joy unspeakable and full of glory."

May we fall down before the majesty of God the Holy Spirit who has given us the gift of our obedience in baptism into the Lord's local church in application of the eternal covenant that Jesus accomplished in His death; may the Spirit enlighten our eyes to the depth of our union with Christ and may He deepen our love for the local church as one body with many members, for the glory of the triune God, amen.