

Baptism into the Lord's Local Church (1 Cor 12.12-13)

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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. ¹³For 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

Today, my purpose is to continue the theme of local church membership. This will *set the stage* for consideration of the connection of membership to communion in the Bible study. My emphasis is on the means of entry into the church, and from that, the meaning of membership. Last week, from 1 Timothy 3.15-16, I presented the means of becoming a member in Christ's visible local church, which is by a public commitment to be His disciple within the care and under the authority of a local church. In this message, from 1 Corinthians 12.12-13, I will present a different angle on the means of becoming a church member, which is the commitment of baptism to be the Lord's disciple within the care and under the authority of a local church. My title is "Baptism into the Lord's Local Church" and the outline will follow a question and answer pattern beginning with "What is the context of the baptism into one body mentioned in 1 Corinthians 12.13?"

I. What is the context of the baptism into one body in 1 Corinthians 12.13?

The answer is twofold: the gifts of the Spirit and the body analogy.

1) The context is the gifts of the Spirit (12.1-11)

In 12.1, the word "gifts" is supplied by the translators: **Now concerning spiritual [gifts], brothers, I do not want you to be uninformed.** Thus, literally, he says, "Now about spirituals, brothers, I want to give you some information." He is talking about spiritual things or we may say, "Spirit things." Even to say, "Jesus is Lord" is a Spirit thing. It is a matter of the Holy Spirit without which, without the Spirit's gift, no one can say these words: **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). In the natural state as fallen bond slaves in sin, no one can make this confession. Of course, this means to make it genuinely from the heart. Thus, spiritual life begins with the enablement of the Spirit causing us to cease being mute and to speak up from the heart for Christ. On this deep-rooted foundation (rooted deep in saving grace), Paul turns his attention to other gifts of the Spirit, namely, to varieties of gifts that he lists in verses 8-10. These things of the Spirit (miracles, tongues, etc), are also sovereignly given.

In context (12.1-11), the apostle emphasizes two important principles: a) all the gifts are for the common good (v. 7), as in 14.26, they are for mutual upbuilding: **Let all things be done for building up.** b) The second principle is that all the variety comes from the same Holy Trinity (12.4-6: the same Lord, the same Spirit, and the same God). Then, in the rest of the chapter, he gives special attention to the work of the Spirit. Therefore, in the plan of redemption, the Spirit has the special and distinct work of applying the salvation the Father planned and the Son secured by His death. Thus, we have the summary of verse 11 where Paul stresses both the unity and the sovereignty of the Holy Spirit, **All these [gifts with all their variety] are empowered by one and the same Spirit, who apportions to each one individually as he wills.**

2) Furthermore, the context of baptism in 12.13 is the body analogy of 12.12 that extends from 12 to 26: **For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body.** He adds immediately that he is referring to Christ: **so it is with Christ.** We

expect Paul to say, “So it is with the church,” but unusually and surprisingly, Paul states that Christ is one body with many members and all the members are the one body. He merges Christ and His people (the church) in this way stressing the union of His people with Him. The focus is on Him: *He is comparable to a human body, but in a particular way: in the bond that He has with His people and that they have with Him.* So, in the flow of thought going forward to 12.26, the apostle discusses our interdependence with Christ and one another. Therefore, the work of the triune God (12.4-6) produces a people joined to Christ as one body in Him and thus as a unity with diversity. Accordingly, **Jews or Greeks, slaves or free** are one body without division in Christ (12.13b).

II. What is the one body into which all are baptized?

It is the church, i.e. the local church is the body of Christ, the one body into which the Corinthians were incorporated by baptism. This is a common interpretation within reformed thought on this text, but not so common outside of it, so, it needs support.

1) First, Paul identifies the church at Corinth as the body of Christ. Speaking to them, he says, **Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.**²⁸ **And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healing, helping, administrating, and various kinds of tongues.**(12.27-28). He identifies his readers, the members of the local church at Corinth, in personal terms as the body of Christ *and* as the church (v. 28).

2) Second, all seventeen uses of the word church in this letter clearly speak of a local church. For example, Paul tells them about his ministry **in every church** (4.17) and notes what they do when they **come together as a church** (11.18). Granted, some commentators see an exception in 12.27-28 because Paul says, **God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets** and so forth. To be sure, apostles and prophets have a ministry that serves the church in the time between the comings of Christ and, therefore, they minister to the true church down through the centuries, they serve in the universal church. However, it is unmistakable that they were given to the churches: they served the church at Jerusalem (Acts 15.4), there were apostles and prophets in the church at Antioch (Acts 13.1), and Paul, the apostle, labored for years in the churches at Corinth, Ephesus, Philippi and other places where he appointed local elders.

Accordingly, in the book of Ephesians, Paul outlines the place of apostles and pastors that sets the structure for how his ministry will be replaced in the future by local elders in all the churches. Thus, Paul taught Timothy and instructed him to teach what he learned to faithful men who, in turn, will teach others also (2 Tim 2.2). They represent the generations of pastors given to care for the church in the post-apostolic time.

Furthermore, as we saw last week, it is the *apostle* Paul who outlines good behavior in the house of God, the church, in 1 Timothy 3.15-16. The good behavior concerns how to fulfill the practical obligations of confessing a good confession, qualifying overseers, and submitting to owned ministers of the word. In turn, these things imply the Christian duty of making a public covenant of membership in a local church. Thus, in many ways, apostles were appointed for the good of the church at Corinth, the local churches of the apostolic era, and the local churches of today. Of course, their ministry to local churches is inseparable from their ministry to the true church composed of all the elect of all the centuries. The point that we are not to miss is that Paul is speaking in 1 Corinthians 12.12-28 of the body of Christ, the church, the true and universal church if you will, *in its local expression at Corinth.* He speaks to them in the context of the whole church when he says, **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** (1.2).

3) Third, on the notion of a local body, Paul's words about unity relate sharply to the divisions that existed in the church at Corinth. Unity was compromised by divisions over leaders (so Paul argues that he baptized only a few of the Corinthians, 1.12-16). Unity was compromised also by divisions when they gathered as a church at the Table (11.22), and it was compromised regarding the differences of gifts among the church members. The matter of gifts was big at Corinth; too big. It went to their heads and left them in a state of zeal without knowledge. Therefore, Paul's reply in chapter 14 has a strong emphasis on instruction as far more important than possessing any gift. Upbuilding in the truth is what the gifts are for; miss that and you miss everything about gifts.

Thus, returning to the context of 1 Corinthians 12.13, the one body into which the people of Corinth were baptized is the local church; they were members individually with distinct gifts of great variety, but they needed to know that underlying the differences is the fact that in their union with Christ they have a fundamental union with each other. In this context, the divisions among them are radically sinful and they contradict who Christ is: for He is one body with many members like a human body. Thus, that is what you are as a local expression of His body: you are one in Him with diversity of gifts, and as Jew, Greek, slave or citizen. The church as the body of Christ has a strong rubber meets the road quality to it (see the like-mindedness of Phil 1.27).

III. What is the baptism (in one Spirit) that effects entry into the body of Christ?

To answer the question: the baptism is water baptism for at least two reasons.

1) First, it is water baptism because the baptism brings us into the local church.

This line of thought depends on the fact that we demonstrated earlier that the body into which we are baptized is the body of Christ, the church in a local expression. Once we identify the body of Christ as a local manifestation of the universal church, then it follows intuitively that the baptism by which we come into it is water baptism. This is baptism as a door of entry into the new covenant community that was anticipated by John's water baptism of repentance and adopted for the church by Peter on the day of Pentecost (Lk 3.3; Acts 2.38).

2) Second, if the ritual is not here, then there is no NT ordinance of water baptism.

That may sound a bit dramatic, but if we believe that there is no water in this text because it refers to Spirit baptism that joins believers to the true body of Christ (or in parallel texts because baptism washes or saves, or unites to Christ), then to be consistent, we are left with no doctrine of water baptism for the life of the Christian church. We have no way to move forward from the Gospels and Acts on the subject of a baptism ordinance. This approach is expressed by the dispensationalist, L. S. Chafer, in his *Systematic Theology*: "Where the results of the baptism are such as could never be accomplished by a mere ritual baptism, it is evident that reference is being made to a real or Spirit baptism" (VI, 142). Commentators of this persuasion typically get their doctrine of a water ritual for the church from the Great Commission, but that leaves them susceptible to the claims of hyper-dispensationalists who deny a place for water baptism altogether. To make a long story short, consider this argument: if baptism into Christ cannot refer to water baptism in 1 Corinthians 12.13 (and Rom 6.4, 1 Pet 3.21, and so forth) then it cannot refer to water baptism in the Great Commission because the language is the same in each: "baptism into." Jesus refers to baptizing into the name of the triune God (Mat 28.19) and thus into the name of the Son, which equates with baptism into Christ (Rom 6.4) and into His body (1 Cor 12.13). Likewise, believing "into" the name of the Son equates with believing "into" the Son in John 3.18. There is much to chew on in this *reductio* argument (which means that removing

water from 12.13 proves too much), but the first point stands on its own two feet: water baptism is in view because the baptism brings us into the local church (cf. B. Murray, *Baptism*, 169).

Conclusion

1) Points of overview

It should be clear from this brief look at the NT ordinance of baptism that there is much more to the symbolic ritual than what first meets the eye. Paul brings it up in reply to divisions. It is a sign of Christian unity, of the profound unity of Christ who is like a human body that is one body with many members. Baptism is a sign of unity as a gift of the one Spirit that goes with His gift of our faith confession and our possession as a community of various gifts. We confess Jesus in the Spirit (12.3) and we are baptized in the Spirit (12.13). These things go together: we confess Christ as Lord in baptism in the Spirit. For salvation per Romans 10.9-10, we must believe in the heart what we confess with the mouth. Baptism is a central place where we make this confession because it is an act of repentance in which the baptized come confessing their sins (Mat 3.6) and pledging a new life of good behavior (1 Pet 3.21). Furthermore, because this confession is in the Spirit (1 Cor 12.3) then baptism is a symbol of efficacious grace (as we also learn from Rom 6.4). We profess, promise, and covenant to live a new life by the enabling grace of God.

2) Baptism and the membership commitment

In this context, the commitment of baptism is one in substance with the commitment of membership by which people become members in a local church. From the significant ought passage in 1 Timothy 3.15-16 coupled with the principle of good order for mutual instruction (from 1 Corinthians 14.26, 40), we know that a public commitment with the pastor and flock of a local church is required of believers so they can fulfill the practical obligations that rest on their shoulders, namely, the obligations of confessing a good confession, qualifying overseers, and submitting to ordained ministers of the word. This commitment necessarily stands at the point of entry into membership in the church.

Thus, entering the church by baptism dovetails with entering the church by a public commitment of mutuality with the pastor and flock. These are two sides of the same coin. On one side is baptism and on the other side is the membership commitment.

Moreover, baptism, Peter tells us is a pledge, a commitment we make of good behavior (1 Pet 3.21, 16) that connects with commitment to the Lordship of Christ in 1 Peter 3.22 (**Baptism, which corresponds to this, now saves you, not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ,²² who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers having been subjected to him**). This gives a baptism context to Spirit's work in our confession of the Lordship of Christ spoken of by Paul in 1 Corinthians 12.3 and confirms the point that we should conjoin 12.13 with 12.3.

The commitment we make to the Lordship of Christ in baptism goes hand in hand with our entry into the local church by baptism. This has to be a commitment to Christ and His church because Christ, according to 12.12, is His church. He speaks of the human body-like oneness of Christ and His church in its manifestations as local churches. Again, the local church at Corinth is His body, His church, on earth in a particular setting and the local church gathered here this morning is His body in a particular setting.

3) The efficacy of baptism

Therefore, the doctrine of Christian baptism that emerges from OT washings and John's baptism through transitional phases in the Book of Acts is a multifaceted ritual of the NT church that, along with communion, represents the gospel work of the Spirit. Water baptism is a means

by which union with Christ in His death is applied in the lives of people in slavery to sin. The water does not save; nothing is automatic. The efficacy of baptism is in the work of the Spirit through the gift of faith.

4) Matters of a practical nature

Thus, in practice, people join the church by baptism with confession of faith and commitment to the local church. If they relocate, then they join the church by confession of faith and commitment to the local church without being re-baptized. There is no re-baptism because, on God's part, baptism is His promise for the confirmation of our faith; it is "His covenant." Granted, there are anomalous situations that arise because of sin, bad teaching, carelessness, human error, and so forth, but the relation of baptism to church membership is sufficient to guide good conduct in the household of God. The implications are clear: the pledge and confession of faith that we make in baptism includes a commitment to Christ and His church. Consequently, baptism, on our part, is a commitment to discipleship under the authority of the triune God (Mat 28.18-20). Thus, we can sing: "in baptism I have turned, my life in sovereign hands, to serve within His local church by His commands." Baptism is a commitment to discipleship under the Lordship of Christ and His headship over the church; and it is therefore a commitment to the authority of pastors, on Christ's authority, to be disciples for holiness to the glory of God.

May we fall down before the majesty of God the Holy Spirit who has given us a variety of gifts beginning with the gift of our very confession that Jesus is Lord; may the Spirit deepen our love for the church in its local expressions as the body of Christ, one body with many members; may He impress upon us the importance of good order in the church for the good of all, and for the glory of the triune God, now and forever, amen.