

Baptism into Death for Newness of Life (Rom 6.1-7)

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What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? ²By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it? ³Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? ⁴We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. ⁵For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. ⁶We know that our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin. ⁷For one who has died has been set free from sin.

Introduction

We come today to another rich text on water baptism: Romans 6.1-7 that speaks of “baptism into death for newness of life.” I will discuss this text under two headings: baptism is an application of union with Christ in His death, and baptism is an application of union with Christ in His death for newness of life.

I. Baptism into death: baptism is an application of union with Christ in His death

In 6.1-3, we have four questions: **What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? ²By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it? ³Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?** These questions contain truths that introduce and support the conclusion of 6.4. Baptism surfaces in the fourth question.

1) The first question takes us back in thought to Romans 5, especially 20-21: **Now the law came in to increase the trespass, but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more, ²¹so that, as sin reigned in death, grace also might reign through righteousness leading to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.** With these ideas in mind, Paul is interested in what we might say about sin, grace, and baptism: **What shall we say then** (“then” is an arrow pointing back; “say” looks forward to 6.1-7)?

2) The second question is: **Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound?** The underlying problem is, interestingly, the marvelous truth that although the law caused sin to increase, nonetheless, **where sin increased, grace abounded all the more (5.20).** From the question, we get an idea of the wrong thinking to which Paul is responding. The main opponent reasons that grace opens a wide door to lawless living. To this, Paul gives a decisive reply: in no way, God forbid (v. 2a, “**By no means!**”). The apostle recoils with abhorrence at the idea. His negation is decisive and emphatic. The idea that grace leads to greater sin by excusing sin is both a fundamental contradiction and a radical absurdity, but Paul elaborates because saints must battle with sin.

3) The third question is in 6.2b, which begins Paul’s argument against the notion of a license to sin: **How can we who died to sin still live in it?** The implied answer is that we cannot continue to live in sin if we have died to sin because death and life are contradictory and cannot coexist: if we died to sin then it is impossible that we continue to live in it (it can never be as it was). This leads to the next question and from there to the meaning of baptism in this context.

4) So, the fourth question of 6.3 *introduces baptism in relationship to death*: **³Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?** What Paul presents is something that the readers should know about baptism, namely, that baptism is into Christ Jesus *and* therefore into His death. He is beginning to support the truth of our death to sin by validating the fact of our death. Know this, he says, since baptism brought you into union with Christ, then it also brought you into union with His death. The first part of verse 4 reiterates the notion of being baptized into Christ and into His death, and it helps us understand it: **We were buried...with him by baptism into death.** Burial is the seal of death; it confirms the reality of death as a pungent human degradation due to sin. Thus, Paul states that we died with Christ, and for emphasis, our death with Him is confirmed (metaphorically) by the seal of burial. In other words, it is certainly true that we died with Him. Thus, 6.3 and 6.4a state the same truth forcefully. We have come to an important step in the tight reasoning of Paul on this subject, and we should

remind ourselves that he is aiming to validate the claim that we died *to sin*. To arrive there, he starts with the fact that *we died with Christ in His death*. 2

This raises the “when” question: when did this death occur? Since it took place **with him** (6.4a) and since it involves union with **his death** (6.3), then it occurred when Jesus died back in the past outside the gates of Jerusalem (a rock bottom truth that is often denied, so note that he is not saying that we did not die with Him until something happened many years after His death; we died with Him in the past). However, Paul also factors our baptism into the equation: in 6.3 (without the question mark), he affirms that **all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death**, and in 6.4a, he affirms that we were buried with Him **by baptism into death** (6.4a). So, not only do we have union with Christ in history (*historia salutis*, union with Him in His accomplishment in the past), but we also have union with Christ that is effected **by baptism** in our personal histories (the *ordo salutis*, union with Him in application in our lifetimes). Therefore, baptism is a means by which God gives us the benefits of Christ’s death: by baptism, God brings our union with Christ to realization during our journey through life. Baptism is into Christ’s death, that is, into the benefits of His death in their application to us, and it does this in a particular way that supports the claim Paul is driving at, namely, that those in Christ have died because they died with Christ. Thus, we have our first main point: baptism is an application of union with Christ in His death.

The argument is almost complete. The next thing that Paul needs to do is explain (clarify, articulate, unfold) how baptism supports *not just our death but our death to sin* (so that we can no longer continue to live in sin). He arrives at this explanation (clarification) in the conclusion of 6.4. This brings us to our second main point: baptism for newness of life.

II. Baptism is an application of union with Christ in His death *for newness of life*

To see this point, we have to read 6.4 in its entirety: **We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life**. The whole verse is the conclusion. Paul concentrates on a specific benefit of union with Christ in His death that God gives to us through baptism (**by baptism**). That specific benefit is that we might walk in newness of life. The translation “might walk” should not throw us off track (an initial difficulty yields a profound truth). It does not indicate potentiality or mere possibility. That is ruled out by the fact that this walk in newness of life is produced by the same power and majesty of God that raised Jesus from the dead: **just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life**. The translation “might” indicates that this new walk was still future when Christ died, but it was God’s sure purpose in His eternal plan to save particular sinners, and He secured this sure purpose for them in the death of Christ. Thus, our new life was not only something purposed by God, but it was also something produced by the glory of God in all His power and majesty, *and importantly, God did this through baptism*. So, baptism opens the door to newness of life as an act of new life. Therefore, baptism is produced by the glorious power and majesty of God. To illustrate: picture a house with a door. The house represents newness of life. The door is the entry way into the house, as part of the house. Therefore, producing the house (of new life) includes producing the door (of baptism). Baptism is an aspect of new life, an action of a living being; he must be made alive, made new, to receive baptism in truth. Accordingly, *baptism is an application of union with Christ in His death as part of God’s way of fulfilling His purpose of giving us new life*. In this context, Paul presents a number of things that confirm this understanding of baptism in relationship to new life.

1) First, in 6.5, newness of life by resurrection power goes with death with Christ: **For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his**. We have been united with Him in a death like His: our death is spiritual, death to sin; His is physical (and of course for sin to bear its punishment). Therefore, because His death and resurrection are parts of the same whole, then we certainly also have a resurrection like His. That

is, the resurrection power (of giving life to a physical corpse) is the power that raised us from spiritual death and brought us through the door of (obedience in) baptism into a new life. 3

2) Second, in 6.6, our sin nature was crucified with Him (metaphorically, it died with Him in His crucifixion). The purpose was to render it powerless in our experience so that we would no longer be under the lordship of sin: **We know that our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin.** We are thereby able to begin to live a new life by (the obedience of) baptism, an action of a person who is no longer enslaved to sin.

3) Third, in 6.7, the confirmation continues: **For one who has died has been set free from sin.** If we died (bringing the body of sin to nothing) then we have been released from sin's dominion. Well, we did die. Union with Christ in His death on the cross has been applied to us in the gift of our baptism (v. 4), so, baptism is the action of a person who has been set free from sin. Baptism does not give us freedom from bondage and death. That is impossible because the dead cannot act (the dead cannot manifest qualities of life) and the slave to sin cannot obey the Lord. Therefore, baptism is union with Christ applied, and thus it is God's gift of new life and freedom.

4) Fourth, Paul's words later in 6.17-18 confirm this interpretation that baptism is an application of union with Christ in His death *for newness of life*: **But thanks be to God, that you who were once slaves of sin have become obedient from the heart to the standard of teaching to which you were committed,¹⁸ and, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness.**

The thought unfolds like this: thank God for His work (**thanks be to God**), thank Him for what *He* has done. This is His doing: that you who were once slaves of sin have become obedient from the heart to the gospel preached to you with authority (**obedient from the heart to the standard of teaching to which you were committed**). By this obedience, you became slaves of righteousness. How did God bring you to heart obedience to the gospel (17) and to becoming slaves of righteousness instead of slaves to sin (18)? He loosened the bonds of sin; He set you free. His eye diffused a quickening ray that caused your chains to fall off and your heart to be free.

Now note how easy it is to factor baptism into this picture an overlay from 6.1-7. The thought unfolds like this: thank God for His work. This is God's doing: that you who were once slaves of sin have become obedient from the heart *in the obedience of baptism* according to the gospel preached to you with authority and commanding baptism (as Jesus taught in the Great Commission, Mat 28.19-20 and Peter taught on the Day of Pentecost, Act 2.38-39). In other words, *your obedience from the heart in baptism is God's doing*.

Again, this is saying that your baptism is a means by which God brings your union with Christ in His death to realization in your life by giving you heart obedience to the gospel and its command to be baptized, by giving you the desire to pledge obedience of life from deep in your conscience (1 Pet 3.21), and by giving you the obedience of baptism through faith (Col 2.12).

Accordingly, in Romans 6.4, baptism is a fruit of new life that flows from union in the death of Christ. Baptism is a means, an instrument in the hand of God, by which the benefits of union with Christ in His death are applied to us in our need as bond slaves in a profound bondage. It is impossible for man to break this bondage. It can only come about by the resurrection power, glory, and majesty of God enabling this free act of obedience. To bring this spiritual life into existence, it took the kind of power that God exercised in raising Jesus from physical death. Who can bring a physically dead person, a corpse, to life? Can any man do this? Can the person who is dead bring this to realization? To ask these questions is to answer them: no man can do this, especially not the dead person himself. Likewise, it takes divinely applied resurrection power to raise the spiritually dead who are bond slaves in sin. Who can bring a spiritually dead person, a spiritual corpse and slave to sin, to new life and freedom from sin? Can any man do this? Can the person who is dead in sin and a slave to sin bring this to realization? To ask these questions is to answer them: no man can do this, especially not the dead man, not the enslaved man himself. If a physically dead person can raise even a finger toward life, then he

was not dead. If a slave to sin can make some move of will or faith toward God and toward freedom, then he is not a slave to sin. However, the record is clear for all to read: fallen man is in an unbreakable bondage to sin, a bondage that is also a death. Nothing less than God's gift of new life and freedom can remedy the situation. Man's life under the lordship of sin and death must be shattered before he can do any good whatever (none does good no not one, Rom 3.12) including the significant good of obedience in baptism. He cannot go to God to receive newness of life and freedom from sin. He must be set free from sin for newness of life to go to God in the obedience of baptism through faith.

By grace, according to the eternal covenant, and by the accomplishment of Christ in history, God gives the gift of new life and freedom through baptism, *by giving baptism as an act of life and as an act of obedience*. Thus, when a dead slave to sin obeys God in baptism and pledges the obedience of a new life, and does both in truth from the heart, he does so by God's gift in application of His plan accomplished by Christ. That is the gospel of our baptism. Baptism is hardly some ordinary, secondary, and meaningless external ritual. God is at work in it with sovereign power and amazing grace that superabounds where sin abounds.

Concluding remarks

1) To be sure, many anomalies exist.

People are baptized without faith and there are professing believers who think (by false teaching) that there is no requirement of baptism or communion for the church; this is truly weird teaching. Still, the point stands firm as gospel-good-news: when someone obeys the command of Christ to be baptized, if this is from the heart (Rom 10.9-10) with faith (Col 2.12) in the Lordship of Christ (1 Cor 12.3, 13) and in submission to Christ for discipleship (Mat 28.19-20), then that baptism is a free act of a person who has been set free by the power of God. Thus, that faith, that submission to Christ, that obedience, that baptism is the work of God in application of what God planned for the people He gave to Christ in the eternal covenant of redemption. Moreover, it is an application of what Jesus secured for them when He died on the cross in their place. What God planned and Jesus secured is what the Spirit applies, namely, the setting free from sin that comes to expression in the free act of obedience in baptism as part of the newness of life that we have by grace as God's gift.

2) Baptism is both sign and seal

So, in baptism, we obey the gospel and pledge obedience to walk with the Lord in newness of life. At the same time, our baptism is God's sign and seal. It is His promise (as a gospel sign) with an exclamation point (as a gospel seal) that He will enable us to walk with Him in newness of life all our days. The breach with sin is radical; God will complete what He has begun.

3) Here you have motivation to pursue holiness striving against sin.

This is great motivation to renew your baptismal pledge of obedience because you know that you have been set free from enslavement to sin. The life and freedom you have is by the power of God that applies the saving work of Christ to you, it is by the resurrection power of the glory of God in all His attributes. So, you are truly free from sin and you are truly free for righteousness; therefore, be who you are: a free person. Consider this to be the gospel truth, rejoice in it, and do not let sin rule in your life. Instead, present your very body (mind, emotion, will; your all) as a living sacrifice to the Lord Jesus (Rom 12.1-2); present yourself to God and all the members of your body as instruments of obedience that leads to righteousness (Rom 6.16). That is your reasonable and living worship!

May we fall down before the majesty of God and the glory of His attributes; may the Holy Spirit burn the truth of the saving power of grace deep into our souls; may He teach us about our union with Christ in His death and resurrection and how He applies it to us by giving us the obedience of baptism for newness of life; may we therefore count it so and present ourselves, body and soul, to the glory of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, amen.