

Types of Baptism

Baptism is one of the two sacraments which as members of the Reformed Tradition we use as fundamental signs and symbols of our faith. For us, as we frequently state, the water, bread and wine or juice, are the material signs of God's invisible grace. Within our tradition, the elements themselves are symbols of God's initiative, God's reaching out to humanity to claim and redeem us. And when you looked at the title of this sermon, you probably thought of the various ways in which this sacrament is and has been done within the various denominations over the centuries. This variation has indeed been the subject of many sermons, and beyond that the cause of many splits among believers causing the formation of many branches within the faith. When we come to the sacrament today, we recognize that the sacrament itself comes to us through the story of Jesus Christ and that narrative is drenched in precedents, images, and language coming from roots in the Hebrew Scriptures. Our understanding of baptism is not a new story as much as it is an opening out of an old story—one that began with God's choosing of Abraham and his progeny; and of God's choosing David and his royal Succession. In our tradition the baptismal sacrament we recognize was part of the commission given to the disciples as Jesus ascended; it was part of accepting discipleship. They were to go and as part of their making disciples, they were to baptize them, teaching them to obey what he had taught them. Christ did not give details about the method or conditions around the baptism, other than in the Great Commission found in Matthew, the Trinitarian Format of Father, Son and Holy Spirit is used. At the time of the first believers, all converts would have been adults, so the question of infant baptism would not have entered the discussion until much later, the question of river or font also would not have arisen until there were buildings in which to construct a font. So many of the issues over which congregations have divided were probably more over superficial matters than substantive ones, if true self-examination over the theology were undertaken. What is at issue is our understanding that the sacrament began when God choose to claim some individual on the human family tree and work with them toward the redemption of all of humanity. The basic understanding of the sacrament lies in God's claim upon us, and God's plan of redemption for all. In the gospel account of Mark we move forward in the narrative to the time of John the Baptizer who is an Elijah-like prophetic figure who points like an arrow to Jesus, identified as God's "son," borrowing an image from Hebrew Scripture. Jewish people would recognize and resonate with language about repentance, confession of sin, a heavenly voice, and the anointing of the spirit used in Mark's narrative. The baptismal waters provided by John, according to the testimony of Mark are a washing of repentance and the forgiveness of sins, powerful themes carried forward and developed in Christian proclamation and practice. None of that, however interesting it might be to discuss from an academic or historical point of view is what is at issue when we read the passage from the Book of Acts this morning. When this document was written by the author of Luke, the

faith that we know as Christianity was in its infancy. There were many narratives about Jesus, and there were many disciples who were following other prophets, including those who were disciples of the one known as John the Baptist in our texts. In this passage from Acts there were still many disciples of the martyred John the Baptist in the region. In our reading from Mark, this baptism of John described is way: "And people came from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins." They had heard and answered John's call to repent. They had been baptized by him and were presumably trying to live according to the Laws of the Torah, which Jesus had also followed. As part of the call to repentance that John gives, he proclaims that his call is one of preparation for the one who is more powerful than he is who is coming after him. Mark records him as proclaiming: "I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." In fact, the latter part of our reading from Mark describes Jesus coming to John to be baptized by him, with this water of repentance. Recognition of this event in the narrative of Jesus' life is why this is called Baptism of the Lord Sunday. Since our faith declares that Jesus was without sin, many stumble over this event. All three of the synoptic gospels describe the event, each a little differently, probably because of this. But in this act, Jesus was taking a stand with humanity, and in each of the gospel accounts, this stand taken with sinful humanity was given approval by the voice from heaven declaring: "This is my son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased. That Jesus came to earth to dwell among us demonstrating God's love for us, the depth of that love and the revelation of God's plan for our redemption was unfolded on the banks of the Jordan when Jesus was baptized by John. Yet when John the Baptist refers to two types of baptism before Jesus appears to be baptized, and when Paul questions some believers as he comes to Ephesus about what type of baptism they have received, they are not asking about the difference between immersion or sprinkling. They are asking about the effects the type of baptism they have received have had on the lives of those who have been baptized. And in some ways, perhaps we might need to revisit this question ourselves: how have our baptismal vows changed our lives? I know that many for many of us those vows were made for us as infants, but we made them for ourselves at confirmation. Within the sacrament of baptism there is a call for repentance and a second call for a rejection of things which are offensive to God and God's ways. In other words, part of what is being discussed as the two types of baptism in the passage from Acts are a baptism which merely recognizes wrongdoing and confesses it: a baptism of repentance; while there is a second baptism which comes with the indwelling of the Holy Spirit which brings about a change in the way of life, a transformation which in other places Paul will refer to as the becoming of a new creation. In our tradition we are only baptized one time, but there are times and places that we are sometimes called to remember our baptism. Perhaps what we are called to remember are the two original types of baptism—the baptism of true confession which leads to repentance and the inviting of the Holy

Spirit into our lives to transform them and illuminate them according to the guiding teaching of our Lord who came to reveal such love and redeem and restore us. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.