

No Boasting in Baptism Romans 4:9-12

This morning I want to talk about something that puts more Christians in danger of eternal judgment more than almost anything else. Please notice that I said it puts Christians in danger of eternal judgment—not that it puts Muslims or Jews or Buddhists or pagans—Christians. What I am referring to is the practice of baptism in Christian churches. What we believe and what we practice concerning baptism is one of the most mixed up and potentially dangerous beliefs in all of Christianity. And because we all come from a wide variety of backgrounds, it is well worth our time to make sure we get this right. If you recall, we jumped to Romans chapter four because there Paul explained Genesis 15:6. We will continue where we left off in chapter four.

⁹ Is this blessedness only for the circumcised, or also for the uncircumcised? We have been saying that Abraham's faith was credited to him as righteousness. ¹⁰ Under what circumstances was it credited? Was it after he was circumcised, or before? It was not after, but before! ¹¹ And he received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised. So then, he is the father of all who believe but have not been circumcised, in order that righteousness might be credited to them. ¹² And he is also the father of the circumcised who not only are circumcised but who also walk in the footsteps of the faith that our father Abraham had before he was circumcised.

In verse five of this chapter Paul made it very clear that works will never bring about the righteousness of Christ. *However, to the man who does not work but trusts God who justifies the wicked, his faith is credited as righteousness.* Righteousness does not come by works and in this section Paul makes it clear that righteousness does not come by circumcision. Continuing to use the prime example of Abraham, Paul explains when righteousness was credited to him. Was it before or after his circumcision? It was before. This is vitally important because if he was given righteousness after he was circumcised, you could make a case that circumcision was necessary for salvation, but since circumcision came after, this proves that it is not necessary.

Let me give you an outline of the events of Abraham's life. If you recall, in Genesis 12 Abraham was 75 years old when he was Promised Land, that he would become a great nation, a great name, all that nations blessed through him.

In Genesis 16 Ishmael was conceived by the Egyptian maidservant, Hagar, and we are told that Abram was 86 years old when Ishmael was born. Since the events of Genesis 15 precede chapter 16, we know that Abraham could not have been more than 85 years old and perhaps less. All that we do know is he was at least 75 years old and no more than 85 years old. And what happened in Genesis 15? We read the famous declaration in verse six: Abram believed the Lord and he credited it to him as righteousness.

Finally in Genesis 17 we read about Abram's circumcision. His name was changed from Abram to Abraham and we are told that he was 99 years old. Therefore, if Abraham was 99 years old when he was circumcised and no more than 85 years old when he was justified, we know that the Lord credited righteousness to him at least 14 years before his circumcision. This is why Paul

reached the conclusion that he did in verse ten. *Under what circumstances was it credited? Was it after he was circumcised, or before? It was not after, but before!*

The OT rite of circumcision is certainly not equivalent to the command to baptize all new disciples, but there are strong similarities. In Colossians 2:11-12, Paul drew a parallel analogy between circumcision and baptism. *In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of flesh in the circumcision of Christ; and you were buried with him in baptism in which you were also raised with him through faith in the working of God, who raised him from the dead.*

In Romans 4, the main point that Paul was making is that circumcision was a work of the flesh. It was a way of earning righteousness. Circumcision placed an obligation upon God to credit his righteousness. But if circumcision came at least 14 years after Abraham received righteousness, then, as he wrote in verse eleven, circumcision did not cause salvation but rather it was a sign of salvation. This is the way we understand the Bible's teaching on baptism—it is not a work. It does not obligate God to do anything. It is incapable of earning righteousness for us. Therefore, it would be appropriate to substitute the word *baptism* for the word *circumcision* in this passage.

⁹ *Is this blessedness only for the **baptized**, or also for the **unbaptized**? We have been saying that Abraham's faith was credited to him as righteousness.* ¹⁰ *Under what circumstances was it credited? Was it after he was **baptized**, or before? It was not after, but before!* ¹¹ *And he received the sign of **baptism**, a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still **unbaptized**. So then, he is the father of all who believe but have not been **baptized**, in order that righteousness might be credited to them.* ¹² *And he is also the father of the **baptized** who not only are **baptized** but who also walk in the footsteps of the faith that our father Abraham had before he was **baptized**.*

Can circumcision bring salvation? Likewise, can baptism earn a person salvation? We declare definitively that baptism does not earn any amount of righteousness for a person. But the majority of those sitting here this morning come from backgrounds where baptism is a form of works. I want to show you how various groups all who all claim the title of Christianity have serious errors in their view of baptism.

The first is the ELCA. Before I give examples, let me be clear about something. By using these different denominations as examples, I don't mean to diminish their good work or paint them as evil institutions. I don't mean that you should write them letters or throw stone at their buildings. Despite the false teaching, I am certain there are true born again people in all of these churches. However, if baptism is linked with salvation, then we have a false gospel. Such false gospels are particularly dangerous because they are disguised as Christianity and are such a prominent part of their ministries. Furthermore, if I presented these various views on baptism and did not mention the denominations associated with them, most of you would know who I am referring to anyway, so why beat around the bush and pretend we don't want to name names. That would be like me telling a story about a friend of mine, but I didn't want to share his name for the sake of anonymity. Then I proceed to tell you that my friend works as a pharmacist and enjoys playing the bass during worship service and has a wife named Sheila. If I gave that much detail,

everyone would know I was talking about Chris Eisermann. In the same way it would just be silly to talk about these various details regarding baptism and not mention them by name.



Both of the following quotes come directly from the website of the ELCA.

*In Baptism, and it can be seen more clearly in infant Baptism, God freely offers his grace and lovingly establishes a new community. It is in Baptism that people become members of Christ's Body on earth, the Church.*¹ This states that the baptized person becomes a member, not of a local church, but of the universal church, therefore, they are considered a genuine believer. The next quote makes this more clear.

*In the Sacrament of Holy Baptism, water and God's promises connect the one who is baptized with the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This sacrament is an outward sign of our salvation and God's unbreakable promise to us of forgiveness and new life in Jesus Christ.*²

In other words, if you are baptized, you have an unbreakable promise that guarantees that you are saved and have a place reserved in heaven. Anyone who depends on baptism for their salvation is identical to the Jewish person who depends upon circumcision for their righteousness. This view turns baptism into a type of magical potion. If you say the magic words and use the holy water you magically turn the person into a Christian. It doesn't matter if they understand it or not or believe it or not—they are given an unbreakable promise of salvation.



Next, I want to examine Roman Catholicism's teaching on baptism.

*Since baptism removes both the guilt and the punishment due to Original Sin, delaying baptism until a child can understand the sacrament may put the child's salvation in danger, should he die unbaptized.*³

You may or may not be aware of this next fact.

*Any baptized person can baptize another. In fact, when the life of a person is in danger, even a non-baptized person—including someone who does not himself believe in Christ—can baptize, provided that the person performing the baptism follows the form of baptism and intends, by the baptism, to do what the Church does—in other words, to bring the person being baptized into the fullness of the Church.*⁴

Once again we see how baptism is viewed as a form of magic. If anyone can sprinkle water on anyone else, then it is nothing more than a magical incantation. Lutherans and Catholics would never call it magic but might say that it is a mystery beyond our understanding but the reality is that it is a form of magic.

The Catholic belief is nearly identical to that of the ELCA. In fact, the ELCA and the Roman Catholics have agreed that their beliefs of justification—which is what we are talking about here—the same justification we have been studying in Romans for the past two weeks—their views of justification are so close that they were able to sign a joint agreement in 1999. The

section on baptism reads: *We confess together that in baptism the Holy Spirit unites one with Christ, justifies and truly renews the person.*⁵ The World Methodist Church also signed this joint declaration in 2006.

Next we'll take a brief look at the baptismal beliefs of the Church of Christ. Since the Church of Christ does not have a unified doctrinal statement, it can be a little harder to pin down their beliefs. We start with a historical sketch.

Well known past church of Christ leaders David Lipscomb and E.G. Sewell wrote "Baptizing them into the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit puts them into the enjoyment of all the blessings to be received in Christ, the blood of Christ, the remission of sins, the fellowship of God.... baptism is essential to entrance unto Christ. Water is the medium through which in baptism, we pass from a *state* of sin and condemnation into a state of acceptance and favor with God."⁶

Also, from a statement of faith from a local Church of Christ: *We believe that those accepting Christ should repent of their sin, confess their faith, and be baptized (immersed) into Him, and in doing this will receive forgiveness of sins and the promise of eternal life.*⁷ You probably know that the CoC differs immensely in that they do not baptize infants and they insist on an expression of faith in Christ. However, their addition of baptism as a necessary part of faith and repentance turns baptism into a work of righteousness. Instead of being justified by faith in Christ, we are justified by faith in Christ and water baptism.



Finally we will take a quick look at the LCMS—the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod. Even though we don't have any local LCMS churches, it is important to understand their beliefs.

*Although we do not claim to understand how this happens or how it is possible, we believe that when an infant is baptized God creates faith in the heart of that infant. This faith cannot yet, of course, be expressed or articulated, yet it is real and present all the same Those who have been baptized, but who no longer believe, will not be saved.*⁸ This is an interesting belief—that baptism creates faith in the infant. First of all I don't know of a single verse that would support



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this belief. Second, if baptism “creates faith” in an infant, what does baptism do for an adult or older child? Does it create faith in them as well, or is it symbolizing the faith already present? If they say that it is a symbol, then they hold to two very different reasons for baptism—one which creates faith and one that symbolizes faith. At least we would be in agreement with them that baptism itself does not save—that faith in Christ is necessary. On that we are united.

In contrast to all of these, let me remind you of the belief of our denomination and our local church. This is from the seventh article in our Statement of Faith.

We believe that the true church comprises all who have been justified by God's grace through faith alone in Christ alone. They are united by the Holy Spirit in the body of

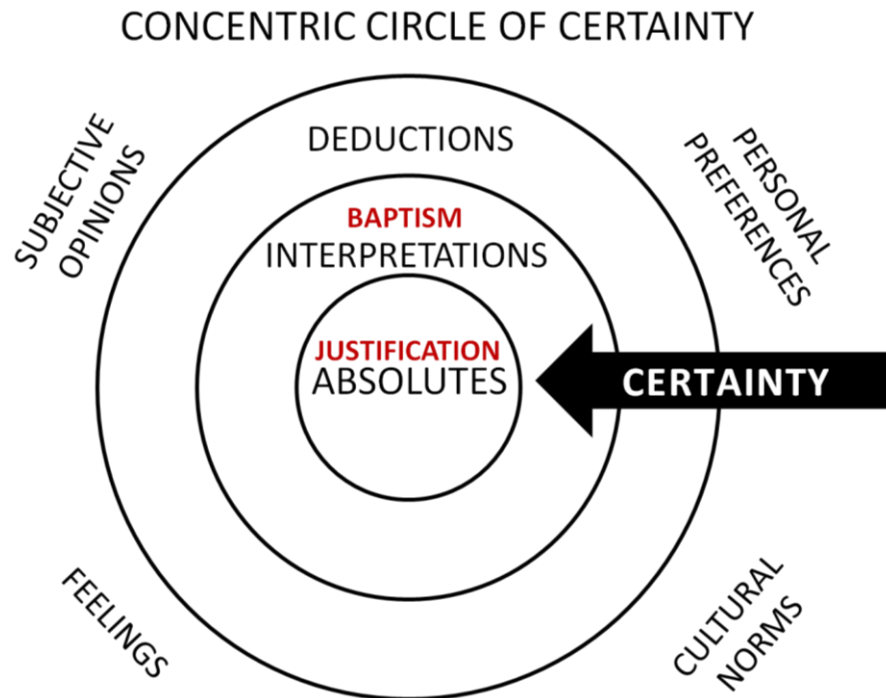
*Christ, of which He is the Head. The true church is manifest in local churches, whose membership should be composed only of believers. The Lord Jesus mandated two ordinances, baptism and the Lord's Supper, which visibly and tangibly express the gospel. **Though they are not the means of salvation**, when celebrated by the church in genuine faith, these ordinances confirm and nourish the believer.*

Notice how clearly it is stated that baptism not a means of salvation. I want to show you a quick volley of Scriptures that demonstrate that saving faith comes prior to baptism.

- **Those who accepted his message** were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day. Acts 2:41
- **But when they believed Philip** as he preached the good news of the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women. Acts 8:12
- **Simon himself believed** and was baptized. And he followed Philip everywhere, astonished by the great signs and miracles he saw. Acts 8:13 (Note: Simon's faith, baptism and filling of the Holy Spirit were all counterfeit. Despite all of this, he was destined for hell (v. 20) and "captive to sin" (v. 23).)
- "Brother Saul, the Lord—Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you were coming here—has sent me so that you may see again and **be filled with the Holy Spirit.**" Immediately, something like scales fell from Saul's eyes, and he could see again. He got up and was baptized. Acts 9:17-18
- **The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message.** When she and the members of her household were baptized... Acts 16:14-15
- They replied, "**Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved—you and your household.**" Then they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all the others in his house. At that hour of the night the jailer took them and washed their wounds; then immediately he and all his family were baptized. The jailer brought them into his house and set a meal before them; **he was filled with joy because he had come to believe in God—he and his whole family.** Acts 16:31-34
- Crispus, the synagogue ruler, and his entire household **believed in the Lord;** and many of the Corinthians who heard him **believed** and were baptized. Acts 18:8
- and you were buried with him in baptism in which you were also raised with him **through faith** in the working of God, who raised him from the dead. Col. 2:12

In each example, faith always came before baptism. And what does that remind you of? Abraham's saving faith came before circumcision. In his case, justifying faith came fourteen years before circumcision but in these NT examples, justifying faith came only an hour or less before baptism, but the point is to note that faith always came prior to baptism. Just as circumcision was a sign or symbol of justification by faith, so baptism is a symbol of justification by faith. One reason that baptism has been equated with salvation is due to the fact that all of the early converts in the NT were baptized after their conversion. The symbol was so prominently linked with the fact of salvation that some people believe they are one and the same. As one commentator put it, "while baptism with water was the expected symbol for conversion, it was not an indispensable criterion for salvation."⁹

Let me illustrate this with my Concentric Circle of Certainty. Most of you have seen this before because I think it is a helpful paradigm for distinguishing subjects like baptism. In the middle of the circle are absolutes—all beliefs that are absolutely central to salvation. We would place justification by faith in the very middle but we would put baptism in an outer circle. As our statement of faith says, it is “not a means of salvation.” But most of the denominations I have mentioned want to move baptism into the center circle and equate it with justification.



I hope you see why a correct understanding of baptism is so important. Countless people—tens of millions in the U.S. alone—are trusting in their baptism as assurance of their salvation, whether they were baptized as infants or as adults. I am guessing that most of us have been at funerals where baptism is the primary, and sometimes the only criterion by which the deceased is guaranteed a place in Heaven. This is a dangerous false teaching and if anyone here had been led astray at one time, I trust that you are no longer.

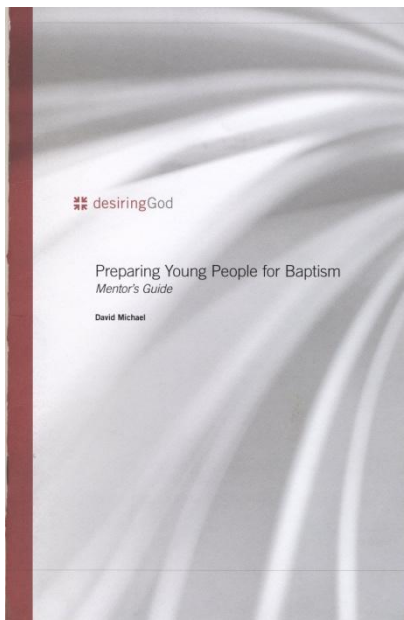
But lest any pride enter into this subject and we feel superior to all other denominations, understand that we can be prone to our own fatal errors. For example, have you heard a preacher say this? “If you want to get saved this morning, pray this prayer with me...Now, if you have just prayed that prayer and you really meant it, you have been saved this very day. You can write the date in your Bible. You are now a Christian.” Countless people have been led to believe that they are saved because they prayed a prayer. Do you see, trusting in that prayer is no different that trusting in your baptism.

If we can’t trust baptism as a mark of conversion, how can we know if a person is saved? Let me ask you this—how many have seen the wind? You can’t see the wind, but you can see the effects of the wind—blowing leaves and tree branches swaying in the wind. In the same way, you can’t see a person’s conversion. I can’t peer into another person’s soul and see their justification, but

Jesus said we can know by our fruit. Every good tree will bear good fruit and every bad tree will bear bad fruit. But is it a good tree because it bears good fruit? No, for if you say that good works makes a person good or righteous, then we have fallen right back into works based righteousness. A person is a "good tree" because they have been saved by faith alone in Christ alone. Then the evidence of their salvation will be their good fruit. Do you see—everyone is a tree. Everyone has branches and everyone has leaves, but only the believer has genuine good fruit. But what about the trees with no fruit? John the Baptist said that the ax is already at the root of such trees ready to be cut down and thrown into the fire. That is supposed to scare us, by the way. It is a warning to make sure that you are in the faith.

Furthermore, this circle of certainty can help us know where to be unified with others or where to separate. For example, we practice what is often called believer's baptism, that is baptism is reserved for those who have believed in Christ alone for salvation. Some who practice infant baptism but do not equate it with salvation—such as the LCMS—are much closer to our beliefs than those who practice believer's baptism but link it with salvation. Even though they practice infant baptism, they would place it in the outer circle and not equate it with justification by faith. Therefore, we would be more unified with a church that practices infant baptism but does not equate it with salvation than we would be with a church who practices believer's baptism but also requires baptism for salvation.

Finally, let me ask where you stand on this belief. Have you placed your faith in Christ alone for your justification and salvation? If not, today could be the day of salvation for you. How did Paul and Silas answer the jailer's question when he asked, "What must I do to be saved?" "Believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved."



If you have been born again, have you been baptized in obedience to the Lord Jesus? If not, why not? What about your children? If you have reasonable confidence in their salvation, are they ready to be baptized? We strongly encourage families to wait on baptizing their children until they have a more complete understanding of the Biblical significance of baptism. If we baptize them too young or without sufficient understanding, then we run the risk of having them "trust" in their baptism instead of trusting in Christ. If you feel one of your children are getting close to being baptized, we ask that parents pick up a copy of the booklet titled, *Preparing Young People for Baptism*. Once you have worked through this booklet and feel your child is ready, let me know.

Rich Maurer
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¹ <http://www2.elca.org/communication/brief.html#sacraments>

² <http://www.elca.org/What-We-Believe/New-or-Returning-to-Church/Dig-Deeper/Baptism-Lutheran-view.aspx>

³ http://catholicism.about.com/od/beliefsteachings/p/Sac_Baptism.htm

⁴ Ibid

⁵ Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification by the Lutheran World Federation and the Catholic Church, section 4.4, #28.

⁶ http://www.wfial.org/index.cfm?fuseaction=artgeneral.article_3

⁷ <http://www.viroquachurchofchrist.com/uploads/1/3/4/8/1348701/eldersstatementofbeliefandfaith.pdf>

⁸ <http://www.lcms.org/pages/internal.asp?NavID=2608>

⁹ The Expositor's Bible Commentary, Acts