

Is Baptism Just a Symbol?

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I believe baptism is for the remission of sins, that one is born into the kingdom of God through baptism in Jesus's name, and that baptism is necessary in order to be saved. When I teach about baptism, what I sometimes hear in response is, "Baptism is important, but it's only a symbol. We are baptized because we are saved and not saved because we are baptized." But is baptism JUST a symbol?

In **Romans 6:1-4**, Paul asks

What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound? Certainly not! How shall we who died to sin live any longer in it? Or do you not know that as many of us as were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death? Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life.

Paul's teaching on baptism in **Romans 6** is, in part, a response to one of the criticisms of his teaching. From Paul's teaching, some people seem to conclude: if God gives more grace in response to sin, then we should sin more to increase God's grace. Or, to put it another way, "Sin is bad, but if I sin, God just gives more grace, so it's okay."

Paul vehemently denies this insinuation based on what we have experienced in Jesus Christ: "*How shall we who died to sin live any longer in it?*" In Jesus Christ, we experience a spiritual death: we die to sin. Our motivation to resist temptation and avoid sin lies in the reality that we are now spiritually dead to sin.

This death to sin occurs when we are baptized into Christ Jesus: "*Or do you not know that as many of us as were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death?*" (**Romans 6:3**). Paul asserts we are baptized INTO His death: prior to baptism, we are not "in" the death of Jesus. When we are baptized, we are baptized "into His death." So when do we die to sin? When we are baptized INTO Jesus which includes His death.

The baptism taught by Paul contains all three of the core gospel elements. We are "*buried with (Jesus) through baptism,*" we are "*baptized into His death,*" and we are "*raised...to walk in newness of life.*" Just like the central element of the gospel, baptism is a death, burial, and resurrection.

And remember, this entire line of reasoning stems from the question, "*How shall we who died to sin live any longer in it?*". Paul says I should no longer live in sin because I was baptized INTO His death. So I ask: Is Paul treating baptism as "just a symbol?" Now some people might be thinking, "Well, he does call it a symbol in verse 5." Yes, he does, so let's take a look at verses 5-7.

"For if we have been united together in the likeness of His death, certainly we also shall be in the likeness of His resurrection, knowing this, that our old man was crucified with Him, that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves of sin. For he who has died has been freed from sin" (Romans 6:5-7).

Notice the word "likeness" in verse 7. The Greek word means "figure, image, likeness, representation." Paul says baptism is a figure, a likeness, a representation of the crucifixion and resurrection. Is baptism a symbol? Yes. But is it JUST a symbol?

Although baptism symbolizes the core of the gospel, we should not conclude it is only symbolic: notice the use of the word "with."

- **Verse 4:** in baptism, we are "*buried...with (Jesus).*"
- **Verse 6:** in baptism, our old man is "*crucified with (Jesus).*"
- **Verse 8:** in baptism, we have "*died with Christ.*"

- **Verse 8:** because we have died with him in baptism, we expect to *“live with Him”* upon our resurrection from the dead.

The use of the word “with” implies a participatory event, not an abstract, symbolic ritual. Paul depicts baptism as more than a symbol of Christ’s death, burial, and resurrection; he depicts baptism as our participation in those consequential events.

Taking this a step further, notice where Paul situates baptism: he places baptism between our *“old man”* and *“walk(ing) in newness of life.”* He equates our *“old man”* with *“the body of sin”* in **verse 6**. Our *“old man”* is who we were before baptism. Our *“old man”* enters the waters of baptism in order to be crucified with Jesus and thereby freed from sin. What emerges from the water is a *“new man”* who *“walk(s) in the newness of life.”* So baptism is placed between the *“old man”* and the *“new man.”*

In addition, Paul describes the *“old man”* as a slave to sin. Our crucifixion with Jesus in baptism does away with *“the body of sin...that we should no longer be slaves of sin. For he who has died has been freed from sin.”* Once again Paul situates baptism in a crucial spot: he places it between slavery to sin and freedom from sin.

As I consider what is taught by **Romans 6:1-7**, here are a few key conclusions I draw from the text.

- Before baptism, I am outside of Christ -- I am baptized INTO His death, burial, and resurrection.
- In baptism, I am united WITH the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus -- I participate WITH Him and because Jesus died to sin, I die to sin in baptism.
- God situates baptism between death and life, between our old person and our new person, between slavery and freedom.

I enter baptism as a sinner, I emerge from baptism a saint, sanctified by the blood of Jesus Christ, raised to walk in the newness of life.