

BAPTISM

Adapted from a Sermon by Rev. Patrick A. Rose

The purpose of baptism is not well understood in the world today. Some people view it in almost magical terms—as something which will automatically bring grace to the one who is baptized. Some people view it simply as something which ought to be done, but do not understand why. Others think of it as a nice custom, something traditional. Then again, other people see no real point in it whatsoever.

In the Heavenly Doctrine for the New Church the true purpose of baptism is revealed, so that people might enter with understanding into the true use of this holy sacrament. Baptism is, simply, the gateway to the Lord's church here on earth. It is the Divinely appointed means through which a person is to pass as he enters into the sphere and uses of the church.

When a person enters into the sphere of the church, whether as a child or as an adult, he or she is washed. That is what baptism is. To baptize means, literally, to dip in water or to wash the body. And so the forehead of the infant or adult has water applied to it in a ceremonial washing. This is an ultimate and vivid reminder of the necessity for that person to be spiritually washed—to be cleansed of his or her evils—by spiritual water, that is, by the truths of faith. At the same time, the words of baptism, which include the Lord's name, are pronounced, and the sign of the cross is made on the forehead and breast, to symbolize the fact that this person is now to acknowledge and worship the Lord. Therefore baptism is said to be a memorial—a solemn reminder—of the fact that a person entering the church is to be reformed by the Lord whom he is now to follow.

Baptism, though, is not simply a memorial. It is also a sign, equivalent in function to a badge or a uniform. It marks the person as a member of the church—so that he might regard himself, and be regarded by others, as someone who has entered into the church of the Lord on earth. At the same time, through the power of correspondences, this sacrament is a sign in the spiritual world that this person is now within the sphere of the church. Special angels are assigned to that person by the Lord. Through baptism he or she is brought under the influence of angelic societies whose function it is to lead him into the faith of the church. And this is most necessary. If a child or adult is to be taught the truths of faith, a great responsibility is placed either upon the parents of the child, or upon the adult himself. To help meet this responsibility, the strengthening sphere of angels appointed for this task is provided.

Nevertheless, baptism is not a magical thing. Simply applying water to the forehead and saying certain words doesn't effect anything. Baptism, simply as an external ritual by itself, has no effect. What does have an effect is the sphere of faith that should be present in this ritual. In the case of an adult, it is his desire to be instructed in the truths of the church, which, given expression in this sacrament, introduces him into the sphere of the church. In the case of a child, he is introduced into the sphere of the Lord's church through the sphere of those who surround him, primarily through his parents, for they have the prime responsibility of instructing the child in the truths of the church. Without the sphere of faith, baptism has no effect. Rather, it is a Divinely-ordained means by which a sphere of prayerful faith is expressed, focused, and strengthened, so that the one being baptized is surrounded and enveloped by that sphere.

Many people mistakenly think that the difference between somebody in the church and somebody not in it is that the former can be saved and the latter can not be. This is completely false, for the Lord loves all the people He has created, whether they belong to the church or not, and He works unceasingly so that all who wish to may enter heaven after death. Nevertheless, it is of the utmost importance that there are some people on this earth who have pure truth, directly from the Lord's Word itself.

Knowing the truth brings with it the obligation to obey that truth, so that evils of life might be removed. To know the Lord, to really know Him from the truths of the Word, carries with it the duty to follow Him in spirit and in life. The New Church has been called upon by the Lord to walk this special path, for the truth within the Heavenly Doctrine confers a special responsibility.

It is by baptism that a person is prepared to enter upon the uses and responsibilities of the church—immediately if he is an adult, later if he is an infant. He is prepared, under the Lord's auspices, to receive instruction in the truths of the Word. If a person later drifts away from the truth—ignoring the responsibility to which he has been called by the Lord, then the baptism comes to nothing. But if he is led, through the strengthening sphere of this holy sacrament, to both learn and to live the truth revealed in the Lord's Word, then its purpose is fulfilled. Thus, baptism has been instituted by the Lord to bear solemn witness to these responsibilities.

Those who have been baptized are called to learn truth from the Lord's Word and to fulfill this truth in the way we live. As the forehead is washed in baptism, so too the thoughts and intentions within our heads must be washed of evil. And the Lord's name, which is pronounced in baptism, must take on more and more meaning for us as the years go by, as we seek to follow the Lord by loving Him and doing His commandments. Only then do we become true members of the Lord's church on earth and are prepared by Him to one day enter His eternal kingdom of heaven.

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