

B. The Ordinance of Baptism

1. The significance of baptism

The baptism with whose significance we are primarily concerned is not the Jewish ritual baptisms practiced by the Essenes (as witnessed to by the Dead Sea materials) or by the Pharisees (as witnessed to by the New Testament, Josephus, and the Mishnah). Nor are we primarily concerned with John's baptism of his disciples, or even with Christ's baptism of his disciples prior to His death, but rather with the New Testament ordinance of Christian baptism. And the question here is this: what is the spiritual significance, the meaning of this ordinance as God intended it? If it is a symbol, a sign, an emblem, a seal, a sacrament, a rite, a ceremony, then what does it symbolize, signify and seal spiritually?

Three lines of evidence are to be considered: (a) the significance as witnessed to by the New Testament; (b) the significance as witnessed to by various creeds and confessions; (c) the significance as witnessed to by various individuals.

a. The significance of baptism as witnessed to by the New Testament

Upon surveying the various instances of baptism in the New Testament, it appears that those that speak to the question of significance fall into five categories of meaning, four of which are outward signs of unseen spiritual realities, and one of which is an outward mark of profession.

(1) Baptism signifies union with Christ and with the benefits of His redemption

The ordinance of water baptism is so closely associated with that act of the Holy Spirit that savingly unites us, through faith, to Christ and to the benefits of His redemptive work, that both the outward baptism and the inward (i.e., Spirit) baptism are referred to by the same term BAPTIZO.

- (a) Romans 6:3-6 -- "Or do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus have been baptized into His death? Therefore we have been buried with Him through the baptism into death, in order that as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have become united with Him in the likeness of His death, certainly we shall be also in the likeness of His resurrection, knowing this, that our old self was crucified with Him, that our body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin"

This passage speaks of the justified man's death to sin (depravity). Here the question must be asked: Does water baptism instrumentally bring about either positional or experiential death to sin? If not, then the passage cannot be speaking of the ordinance of baptism, but must be speaking of the Spirit baptism. In such a case,