

## 1 Trinity 12 – 2 Corinthians 3

St. Paul says that God has made him an able servant of a new covenant. He distinguishes this new covenant from the old covenant. Here, Paul is explaining the difference between the law and the gospel. The law is the old covenant, which doesn't work unless we are obedient. The old covenant, which God gave to his people Israel with the Ten Commandments, was never meant to give them life. It was meant to teach them not to sin against God, to show them how sinful and unclean they were, and to guide them to seek their righteousness in a better covenant. This better covenant is called the new covenant.

But this isn't because it didn't exist until after the law was given. No, the new covenant was given all the way back in Genesis chapter three, right after Adam and Even fell into sin. God promised to send a Savior who would crush the head of the serpent, rescuing poor sinners from Satan's power. God promised Abraham that in his seed all the nations of the earth would be blessed. Abraham believed this promise, and God counted it to him as righteousness (Gen 15). And as a sign of this covenant given to Abraham, God gave the sign of circumcision to show that it would not be accomplished by man at all (Gen 17). This covenant, given centuries before Moses handed down the Ten Commandments, is the new covenant. It is new, because it is the covenant of Christ. He is the mercy of God, who is new every morning. He makes all things new. He gives new life by his Holy Spirit. The law – the old covenant – couldn't do this. The letter written on tablets of stone could only make demands. But the Spirit calls us through the gospel – the new covenant – to give us life.

But don't be mistaken about the old covenant. The old covenant was certainly glorious. It came down from Mount Sinai with great clouds and thunder. The glory of God was so great that it terrified the people. And even today, the law serves as a servant of God's wrath, punishing those who disobey. Don't murder. If you murder, then you will forfeit your life. Don't commit adultery. Don't slander your neighbor. Don't use God's name in vain or trust in your own powers. God still has a way of bringing judgment down on these crimes, even in this life. Both those who commit them as well as those who are victims of them can feel the force of the consequences. If more people obeyed the law, then there would be less trouble and more order and outward peace.

But would there be peace with God? Would there be eternal life? If there were such a law that could give us these things, then our righteousness would come through the law. No, the law has always been and continues to remain the old covenant. Because whether it is the glory of fire and thunder from Mount Sinai or the glory of wrath from a civil judge or a strict father, the law cannot give you a good conscience. It can't give you peace within, no matter how disciplined you are. Its glory must pass away to make way for the true glory of the gospel. Christ, whose own Spirit engraved the law on the tablets of stone, is himself the chief cornerstone and rock of our Salvation who offered himself by his own eternal Spirit, shed his eternal blood, and gives us eternal life through his eternal Word. This is the new covenant. No one is worthy of this. No one is worthy to preach it or receive it. But God gives us this ability to believe and confess his new covenant. That is how Christ gives us confidence in God.

The old covenant was only a sign of the new covenant, just like circumcision was a sign of God's promise to Abraham. As the old sacrifices performed by the priests and the old distinctions between clean and unclean animals were signs of the atonement Christ would give to make

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purification for our sins, so circumcision was a sign made with hands, which pointed to the covenant made without hands. By pointing back to the promise and faith by which Abraham was declared righteous before God, it also pointed forward to the fulfillment of that promise in Christ who is our righteousness. This is why St. Paul says the following in Colossians chapter 2:

In Him, that is, in His body, lives all the fullness of the Deity. And in Him, Who is the Head of all rulers and powers, you are complete. In Him you also were circumcised, not by human hands but by putting away the sinful body by the circumcision of Christ, since in baptism you were buried with Him and raised with Him through faith produced by the power of God, Who raised Him from the dead. (Col 2:9-12)

Baptism is the circumcision made without hands. As a baby boy's foreskin was cut off at eight days old, so now all baby boys and girls, men and women, are welcomed into this new covenant, which is not made with hands but sealed by the Holy Spirit himself. Now, let us discuss what baptism is so that we can further understand the great glory of this new covenant.

What is baptism? Baptism is not simple water only, but it is the water comprehended by God's command and connected with God's Word. This command and Word of God is recorded for us in Matthew chapter 28, where Jesus tells his disciples to make all people disciples by baptizing them and teaching them. Baptism isn't some magic potion. It also isn't merely a symbolic ritual. Baptism is God's Word joined to the washing of water, which the Holy Spirit uses to give us a new birth and a new life (Titus 3:5).

The word baptize simply means to wash. It is from the Greek word *baptizo*. Sometimes it means to immerse in water. But it depends on the context. Often it simply means to make wet. At the beginning of the seventh chapter in Mark's Gospel, the Pharisees criticize Jesus' disciples for eating without washing their hands. Mark then goes on to explain that the Jews would insist on washing, or baptizing, other items, such as cups, huge wine jars, brass pans, and even dinner tables. Those who argue that a baptism isn't a baptism unless you are fully immersed in water are typically the same people who say that baptism doesn't itself do anything. They see it as only a symbolic washing made with hands. So in order to get the full symbolism, we need to dip people completely under the water. Now, it certainly isn't a bad custom to baptize in this way. After all, the water does teach us that we have been buried with Christ. Our old Adam has been drowned (Rom 6). The worldwide flood and the ark where God saved Noah and his seven relatives was a foreshadowing of baptism. As Peter says, baptism, which corresponds to Noah's ark and the flood, now saves you, not by washing away the filth of the flesh, but by guaranteeing a good conscience before God through Jesus' resurrection (1 Pet 3:21). But again, the law cannot give you a good conscience. It is only the gospel, the power of Christ's resurrection, that does this through the water. The water is simply the physical instrument the Holy Spirit chooses.

If we get bogged down by how much water needs to be used, then we are focusing on how much our hands can do, and we miss the point of God's promise. It is a washing, God's washing, the washing in which the Holy Spirit gives us new life and new birth. And this promise of baptism is all over in the Old Testament. It is often indicated by the act of sprinkling. In Exodus 24, Moses establishes God's old covenant with Israel by sprinkling the blood of the

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sacrifice onto the people. In Leviticus 16, the blood of the atonement was sprinkled on top of the Mercy Seat or Atonement Covering. This was all the old covenant. But in Isaiah 52, the beginning of that great prophecy about Jesus' atoning death, the prophet says, "He will sprinkle many nations." And in Ezekiel 36 God promises a new covenant in which he would sprinkle clean water on us, putting his Holy Spirit into us, and replacing our hardened hearts with softened hearts. So as much as the Bible uses the image of drowning sin and being buried with Christ, it also uses the image of being sprinkled with the blood of Jesus and with clean water. It is therefore useless for us to argue over whether someone needs to be fully immersed or simply sprinkled or made wet. What Jesus commands and teaches is that one is born again (born from above) through water and the Spirit (John 3). St. Paul calls it simply the washing of water with the Word (Eph 5).

Baptism is God's covenant, or testament, with us. It is his new covenant. We should not treat it like an old covenant. If you were baptized into the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, then this was God's work. And you don't need to repeat it. Did Jesus need to repeat his baptism in the Jordan? Did he need to walk to Calvary again and hang on the cross again? The priests had to make sacrifices day after day in the temple. But Christ's sacrifice was once and for all. This is why we don't offer up the body and blood of Jesus as a sacrifice to God, as if our hands can participate in what he has already accomplished. No, we simply hear the words of his covenant, believe his testament, eat his body and blood, and confess his saving death. And we do this as often as we can, not because it isn't enough, but because our Savior told us to. So we simply receive and confess the eternal life the Holy Spirit gives us. And he continues to give it. He gives us hearts to believe. He opens our lips to confess. He does all things well without any assistance from us.

Those who say that baptism doesn't save us are treating baptism like an old covenant. This is why they often insist that those who have already been baptized in the name of the Triune God get baptized again. They say you need to be sincere. But they are missing the point. Baptism is what God uses to give us faith. The Holy Spirit works through his Word to give us the sincerity we can't find within ourselves. Jesus doesn't say that unless you get wet with water and commit yourself to the Spirit to show that you have been born again, then you cannot enter the kingdom of God. No! He says, "Unless you are born again by the water and the Spirit you cannot enter the kingdom of God." Paul doesn't say, "Hearing the Word comes from faith." No! He says, "Faith comes from hearing the Word." Being baptized, hearing God's Word, eating and drinking the body and blood of Jesus, being absolved of your sins – these are not the works of your hands. These are not old covenants. These are the New Testament in Jesus' blood, shed for you. These are the Spirit giving you faith and life, comforting you with the assurance that your sins are forgiven and that you may live before God with peace and a good conscience.

Our Gospel lesson is a simple lesson. Jesus comes into the area of the Decapolis where they bring to him a man who can't hear and can't speak properly. Jesus then made some signs to teach what he was about to do. He put his fingers into the man's ears, showing that only the Finger of God, not the hands of men, can open his ears. He then spit, showing that out of him flows the water of life. And he touched the man's tongue, again showing that the Spirit of God causes our tongues to confess. He then looked up to heaven, showing that he has been sent by

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the Father. He sighed, showing that the Holy Spirit intercedes for us with sighing too deep for words (Rom 8:26). And then he spoke in the native tongue of the people, “Ephphatha!” which means, “Be opened!” Then just like that, the man began to speak correctly.

Here Jesus unveils for us a vivid picture of what he did for each of us when he baptized us. He opened our ears and loosened our tongues. Your little baptized children who are still learning to confess their Savior have already had their ears opened and their tongues loosened by the voice of him who saved us all by his blood.

This is the power of the gospel. It is the power of Christ. He has done all things well. He has fulfilled what the law was unable to fulfill. He has loved perfectly, healed with perfect compassion, shown perfect mercy, all the way to his perfect sacrifice on the cross. And his resurrection reveals the glory that outshines everything.

This is the new covenant we have in the gospel and the sacraments of our Savior. It is the Lord’s doing, and it is marvelous. Though the world might see it as simply a story of a man who died and was reported to have been raised, though scoffers and skeptics might call it simple water or simple bread and wine, the glory of this new covenant outshines any works of our own hands. Because by it, we have confidence toward God through our Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.