

Why “Born of Water” in John 3:5 Is Probably Not a Reference to Baptism

(adapted from John Piper, “What Happens in the New Birth?” Pt II, 12/2/2007)

Here are several reasons why I think the reference to *water* in John 3:5 is not a reference to Christian baptism...

1. There Is No Mention of Baptism in the Rest of the Chapter

First, if this were a reference to Christian baptism and it were as essential for new birth as some say it is, it seems strange that it drops out of what Jesus says in this chapter in telling us how to have eternal life. Verse 15: “Whoever *believes* in him may have eternal life.” Verse 16: “Whoever *believes* in him [will] not perish but have eternal life.” Verse 18: “Whoever *believes* in him is not condemned.” It would seem strange, if baptism were that essential, it would not be mentioned along with faith.

2. Baptism Does Not Fit with the Analogy of “The Wind”

Second, the analogy with the wind in verse 8 would seem strange if being born again were so firmly attached to water baptism. Jesus says, “The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.” This seems to say that God is as free as the wind in causing regeneration. But if it happened every time a baby is sprinkled, that would not seem to be true. In that case the wind, would be very confined by the sacrament.

3. Baptism Does Not Fit with Jesus’s Scolding of Nicodemus

Third, if Jesus is referring to Christian baptism, it seems strange that he would say to Nicodemus, the Pharisee in verse 10, “Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things?” That makes sense if Jesus is referring to something taught in the Old Testament. But if he is referring to a baptism that will come later and get its meaning from the life and death of Jesus, it doesn’t seem like he would have scolded Nicodemus that a teacher in Israel does not understand what he is saying.

4. Water and Spirit Are Linked in OT Promises of a coming New Covenant

Finally, that same statement in verse 10 sends us back to the Old Testament for some background, and what we find is that water and spirit are closely linked in the New Covenant promises, especially in Ezekiel 36:25ff. This text links “water” with cleansing from sin, not baptism.