

Sermon on Baptism

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Introduction

This is not a lecture or an essay on baptism; it is a sermon on baptism. And a sermon offers a fitting form for baptism because baptism is a worshipful declaration and a celebration of Christian identity.

I would like to start with a definition that attempts to synthesize the message of Scripture about baptism.

What is baptism?

It is a command of Jesus in which followers of Jesus who have repented of their sins and trusted Jesus for salvation are immersed in water as a sign that they are united to Jesus in his death, burial, and resurrection.

Notice that baptism does not receive its meaning from church tradition or from denominational practice or from its function as a religious ritual. Baptism is about Jesus. Jesus gives baptism its meaning. It is his command. It is his death for our sins and his victory over the grave that fills baptism with significance and glory. Therefore, we baptize because of what Jesus has commanded and because of what Jesus has done as we declare all that it means to us.

In what follows, we will break that definition into four parts and show the biblical basis for each part.

1. A command of Jesus
2. In which followers of Jesus
3. Are immersed in Water
4. As a sign that they are united to Jesus in his death, burial, and resurrection

1. A Command of Jesus (Matthew 28:18-20)

18 And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 19 Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, 20 teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

Many people correctly identify this passage as the Great Commission. Jesus does give a commission to the church in terms of a command to make disciples of all the nations. But many people miss that the command to make disciples also contains a two-part formula for what makes a disciple. We make disciples by (1) baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and (2) teaching them to observe all that Jesus has commanded. In

other words, a disciple of Jesus has been baptized into the Triune name and been taught in such a way that they follow all of Jesus' commandments. Have you ever pondered the fact that baptism is part of what makes a disciple a disciple? The evidence from the early church supports identifying baptism as a core part of discipleship because there really is no evidence of such a thing as an unbaptized disciple in the entire early church (except the thief on the cross).

It is also important to note that baptism is a naming ceremony. Most people can catch the reference to the Trinity: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. But notice that Jesus does not say baptize them into the names (plural) of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, but the name (singular). Baptism is a naming ceremony in which we are now identified by the singular name of the Trinity in which we are baptized.

In some cultures, people will take on a new name after they get baptized. They believe that the name their parents gave them is not as important as the name they receive when they become born again.

It is a beautiful expression of the identity-shaping meaning of baptism. But it is also true that you need not feel the obligation to take on a new name when you get baptized because this text says that in a certain sense it already takes place at baptism. Jesus taught that baptism is a naming ceremony because we were baptized in the singular name of the Triune God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This name is a constant reminder of your identity—you are part of the family of God. You now belong to him. Our God claims you as his own and you joyfully claim him as your own.

The first part of the definition focused on the fact that baptism is a command from Jesus and part of what makes a disciple a disciple. It is a naming ceremony in which we celebrate our identity as belong to God as part of the family of God.

2A “In which followers of Jesus”

The next part of the definition seeks to identify the people that should be baptized. Some churches would say that infants are the proper recipients of baptism, but we are persuaded that believers in Christ are the recipients of baptism in the New Testament. Consider the following passages and note the order of repent/believe followed by baptism.

Acts 2:37-38

37 Now when they heard this they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, “Brothers, what shall we do?” 38 And Peter said to them, “Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Acts 8:12-13

12 But when they believed Philip as he preached good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women. 13 Even Simon himself believed, and after being baptized he continued with Philip.

Acts 9:17-21

And laying his hands on him he said, “Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus who appeared to you on the road by which you came has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.” 18 And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and he regained his sight. Then he rose and was baptized; 19 and taking food, he was strengthened.

Acts 10:47-48

Then Peter declared, 47 “Can anyone withhold water for baptizing these people, who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?” 48 And he commanded them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ.

Acts 18:8

8 Crispus, the ruler of the synagogue, believed in the Lord, together with his entire household. And many of the Corinthians hearing Paul believed and were baptized

This last text is significant because many people who practice infant baptism would acknowledge that there is no explicit example of infant baptism in the New Testament, but it could be implied in the household baptism texts in which a household is baptized. The logic is that there could have been infants included in the household that were also baptized. The problem with this logic is that this text does not say that Crispus believed in the Lord and then his household was baptized. It says that Crispus and his household believed. Those who were baptized are those who believed.

Further evidence for believer’s baptism comes in 1 Peter 3:20-21, which shows a parallel between baptism and Noah’s ark.

2B. “Who have repented of their sins and trusted Jesus for salvation

1 Peter 3:20-21

when God’s patience waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was being prepared, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were brought safely through water. 21 Baptism, which corresponds to this, now saves you, not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ,

Peter looks at what was happening in the days of Noah. It looked like darkness and chaos had won the day. But God was patient. He was ready to forgive. He made a way of salvation (the ark). And he waited. Only eight people were willing to receive the ark of salvation, but God still

saved all eight of them. Even in the midst of spreading darkness and coming judgment (the waters of death), God's mercy still shone as eight people were saved.

Peter is saying that it looks dark today. Thick darkness is spreading, eternal judgment is coming, but—praise God—he is still rich in mercy and perfect patience and he has provided a better way of salvation today. Jesus is the ark.

In fact, the text is very emphatic. Peter says that baptism in water “corresponds” to the ark. The word is *antitupos* from which we get the word *antitype*. The symbolism at work here is not a random analogy or an interesting parallel that Peter made up. The correspondence is between prototype and antitype. In other words, the ark was a picture that requires a reality to come that provides the greater fulfillment of the picture. The picture of Noah's ark as something that saves from the waters of judgment has been fulfilled by Jesus as the ark that people enter and experience salvation from the waters of judgment.

Therefore, what does it mean that eight people “were brought safely through water” ([1 Peter 3:20](#)). The word *through* is a little ambiguous in English. It does not mean that they were saved *by* the water. No, they needed to be saved from the judgment waters. Noah and the other seven were saved *from* the water *by* the ark.

In the same way, the judgment of God's wrath is coming. We can only be saved from the waters of God's judgment, by being in Christ—running to and resting in all that Jesus has done as the ark of atonement. We run to Jesus and the door is shut and we are safe from the flood of wrath and judgment coming upon the world.

That is why Peter can say, “baptism now saves you” (v. 20). What does he mean? He does not mean that the act of baptism saves you magically or automatically. He emphatically shuts that sheep gate in verse 21: “Not a removal of dirt from the body.” In other words, the physical act of washing does not save.

Jesus saves, not baptism. Baptism saves only as part of “an appeal to God for a good conscience through the resurrection of Jesus Christ” (v. 21). The word for *appeal* is a request or plea that believers can make for a good conscience on the basis of Christ's work (death and resurrection). So what does a believer do at baptism? Answer: *Believers at baptism ask God—on the basis of the death and resurrection of Christ—to cleanse their consciences and forgive their sins*

We make an appeal in baptism, saying, “Cleanse my conscience from all my sin through the death and resurrection of Christ. I believe that I am saved only by what he has done. He alone can bring me through the waters of judgment. This is my only hope.” Once again this dynamic supports believer's baptism, because infants cannot make this appeal when they are baptized.

The first two parts of the definition looked at baptism as a command of Jesus given to believers in Jesus. The third part of the definition now looks at the meaning of the word baptism.

3. Are immersed in water

The word baptism does not mean sprinkling or pouring with water. It means to be immersed in the water or submerged under the water. A few texts are important for establishing this meaning in context.

Matthew 3:16

16 And when Jesus was baptized, immediately he went up from the water.

We observe that if Jesus had to come up from the water, then it means that he was under the water.

Acts 8:35-39

35 Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning with this Scripture he told him the good news about Jesus. 36 And as they were going along the road they came to some water, and the eunuch said, "See, here is water! What prevents me from being baptized?" 38 And he commanded the chariot to stop, and they both went down into the water, Philip and the eunuch, and he baptized him. 39 And when they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord carried Philip away, and the eunuch saw him no more, and went on his way rejoicing

John 3:22-23

22 After this Jesus and his disciples went into the Judean countryside, and he remained there with them and was baptizing. 23 John also was baptizing at Aenon near Salim, because water was plentiful there, and people were coming and being baptized.

John 3 is a helpful text as well because baptism required a place where water was plentiful. You do not need a lot of water if you are going to sprinkle or pour, but immersion requires a plentiful amount of water.

This third part of the definition requires an explanation. Why is immersion important for the symbolism of what baptism means? What does immersion symbolize? It is a sign of Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection.

4. As a sign that they are united to Jesus in his death, burial, and resurrection

Romans 6:1-4

"What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? 2 By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it? 3 Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? 4 We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life."

In the context of Romans and the entire New Testament, it is not baptism that unites us to Christ. Faith unites us to Christ. What does baptism do? Faith unites us to Christ and baptism

symbolizes that union. That is why it is important that believers are baptized. If baptism is a symbol of union with Christ and we are united to Christ by believing in Christ, then baptism should be given only to believers.

Why do we stress that baptism is a sign? Romans 6 is the best text for describing this symbolism. Baptism into water is a sign or symbol of something - namely "baptism into Christ Jesus" (v. 3). And baptism into Jesus is baptism "into his death" (v. 3). The next verse says by baptism into Christ's death we are also buried with Christ (v. 4). But the imagery does not stop at burial. We do not stay under the water and drown. Those who are baptized into his death and burial are also united to Christ in his resurrection. As Christ was raised from the dead, we too walk in newness of life on the other side of the watery grave.

Baptism is the promise of the gospel in physical form. The promise has become three-dimensional. You see the promise physically enacted. You see it. You feel the water. You are saying and symbolizing that you belong to Jesus completely - from head to toe!

We do not put our faith in baptism. We put our faith in Jesus—his death and resurrection has decisively and definitively dealt with the problem of sin and judgment. Baptism is a sign or symbol in the same way that a ring is a symbol of being married. In a wedding, the bride and the groom exchange vows and then exchange rings: "With this ring I thee wed." The exchanging of rings does not make the marriage in the ultimate sense, but in the symbolic sense.

Peter can say "baptism now saves you" (1 Peter 3:21) in the same way that we can say the exchange of rings makes you married. But this happens in a context, right? If a man secretly slips a ring on a woman on the street that does not make them married. In the same way, if someone falls into the baptistery, he or she is not baptized and suddenly united to Christ.

The exchange of rings happens in a certain context (exchanging vows and commitments of marriage). The rings symbolize that covenant commitment. In the same way, baptism only saves when someone responds with faith to the promises symbolized and embodied in baptism.

Conclusion: A Call to Follow Jesus

After walking through what the Bible says about baptism, I hope you can see why I said in the intro that baptism does not get its meaning from church tradition or from denominational practice. Baptism is about Jesus: his command, his death for our sins, his burial, his victory over the grave.

The early church knows nothing of an unbaptized Christian. What if you have not been baptized? Let's say you were in a wedding ceremony and you have already taken your vows. Now here comes the moment to exchange the rings. The groom freezes when he remembers that he left the rings at his house in all the rush to get to the church. Does that mean that they should postpone the rest of the ceremony? No. Does it mean that the wedding is off and the marriage is invalid? No. They are still married. But there is something missing and it must be rectified quickly.

In the same way, perhaps you have not been baptized by immersion as a believer. Does that mean you are not a believer? Does it mean that you are not heaven-bound and that your faith is invalid? No. But something is missing. And I call you to rectify that as soon as you can. Jesus gave you baptism as a sign that you belong to him - like a wedding ring that you wear. The question is, "why would you not want what Jesus gave you to remember that you belong to him?"