

Baptism

What It Means and Why It Matters

Introduction

Before the pandemic, I preached on the church ordinance of the Lord's Supper. This morning, I will be preaching on the church ordinance of Baptism. Now, some of you may be thinking, "What is an 'ordinance?'" Simply put, an ordinance is an action that Christ has ordained for the church. I do not have time this morning to go into the different positions held by other churches on the ordinances of the church. Suffice it to say, though, that all churches agree that baptism and the Lord's Supper are actions ordained by Christ for the church.

So, what is baptism? **Baptism is the believer's public declaration of faith in Christ for salvation through immersion under water. All throughout the New Testament, baptism is associated with a believer's initial act of faith and conversion.**

So, what does baptism declare?

Exposition

I. Through Baptism, the believer declares that they have been cleansed of their sins by Christ.

This truth is most likely the one that Christians assume about baptism. Baptism parallels many types of ritual cleansings found in the Old Testament and the gospel (as practiced by devote Jews). Yet, there are significant differences between the Christian practice of baptism and those "ritual cleansings." Unlike the ritual cleansings, the water of Christian baptism is not understood to have any spiritual cleansing properties. As we will see in a few moments, spiritual cleansing is pictured in baptism, but it is enacted by the work of the Holy Spirit.

So, let's consider one passage that ties baptism to the cleansing of sin. **Acts 2:38-39**, which reads, "Peter replied, '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. The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call.'"

A key to this passage is understanding the relationship between repentance and baptism. While many have misunderstood this passage to teach that baptism is necessary for the forgiveness of sins, they have failed to understand the nature of baptism.

In **Acts 2:38**, baptism is essentially understood to be an act of faith that works with repentance to bring about the forgiveness of sin. In other words, it is repentance and the faith expressed in baptism that results in the forgiveness of sins, not the baptism itself.

On this matter of baptism and the forgiveness of sins, F.F. Bruce writes,

It would indeed be a mistake to link the words 'for the forgiveness of sins' with the command 'be baptized' to the exclusion of the prior command to repent. It is against the whole genius of biblical religion to suppose that the outward rite could have any value except insofar as it was accompanied by the work of grace within.

Bruce continued, stating,

In a similar passage in the next chapter (3:19) the blotting out of the people's sins is a direct consequence of their repenting and turning to God; nothing is said about baptism, although it is no doubt implied (the idea of an unbaptized believer does not seem to be entertained in the New Testament). So here (Acts 2) the reception of the Spirit is conditional not on baptism in itself but on baptism in Jesus' name as the expression of repentance (*and faith*).

This understanding of baptism in relationship to faith is reinforced in **1 Peter 3:18-22**, where Peter says

For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God. He was put to death in the body but made alive in the Spirit. After being made alive, he went and made proclamation to the imprisoned spirits—to those who were disobedient long ago when God waited patiently in the days of Noah while the ark was being built. In it only a few people, eight in all, were saved through water, and this water symbolizes baptism that now saves you also—not the removal of dirt from the body but the pledge of a clear conscience toward God. It saves you by the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who has gone into heaven and is at God's right hand—with angels, authorities and powers in submission to him.

Unlike some church traditions that believe that baptism works “ex opere operato” (meaning “from the work worked”), the apostle Peter understood baptism to be an act that **often takes places at the moment of faith**. So, what was often happening in the early church is that as people were hearing the gospel and wanting to pledge their allegiance to Christ, they would express their desire to be baptized. As Peter would say, it was the “pledge of a good conscience toward God,” or in other words, an act of faith. The baptismal waters themselves did not save the people. But rather, through the act of baptism, the people were taking a step of faith, declaring their trust in Jesus. This saving faith could be expressed in other ways as well. It was not exclusively tied to baptism. However, it was often tied to baptism, which is why Peter makes this point here in 1 Peter 3:18-22.

So, baptism does not bring about the cleansing of sin, but rather, it vividly portrays the cleansing work of the Holy Spirit in conversion. Through baptism, the believer declares that they have been cleansed of their sins by Christ.

II. **Through Baptism, the believer declares that they have been united to Christ by faith.**

When a person is baptized in the name of Jesus, they are declaring that Jesus is their Lord and Savior. As one scholar wrote, “Baptism into the name of Jesus implies ownership, as when money is deposited into a bank ‘into the name of’ a certain person.” Two passages make this reality clear: Romans 6:3-10 and Galatians 3:27.

Romans 6:3-10 says,

Or don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? ⁴ We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.

⁵ For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly also be united with him in a resurrection like his. ⁶ For we know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body ruled by

sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin—⁷ because anyone who has died has been set free from sin.

⁸ Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. ⁹ For we know that since Christ was raised from the dead, he cannot die again; death no longer has mastery over him. ¹⁰ The death he died, he died to sin once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God.

Galatians 3:26-27 says, “So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.”

Baptism declares that in His life, death, and resurrection, Jesus Christ is our representative. It declares that by faith we have become partakers in Jesus’ work, not that we contributed to His work, but rather that we have benefited from His work because it was done on behalf of those in union with Him.

Baptism makes a clear declaration that we belong to Christ, and this declaration was so strong that at the point of baptism a believer’s public association with Jesus would often result in persecution. One could check out Jesus and maybe even attend church without much recourse in the first century, just as long as you were not baptized, but once you publically declared that you embraced all that Christ did on your behalf, once you declared that you believed that Jesus lived, died, and rose again for you, then you were subject to persecution.

But such a thing is not limited to the early church. Listen to this report from the Christian church in Syria:

“Glory to Jesus!” She shouts, raising her arms high. Water drips from the sleeves of her white dress as she walks through the green water of the swimming pool.

Tens of people gather around the pool, clapping their hands and shouting for joy along with her. She is the first new believer baptized on a sunny Sunday morning in Lebanon; 15 others are in line behind her, waiting to be immersed.

Sixteen baptisms in one morning in the Middle East is a very special moment for this young Syrian church of members who come from the Middle Eastern Druze religion (a religious minority in the Middle East combining beliefs from Judaism, Christianity and Islam).

“Of course, God works everywhere and among all people, but I see the start of a revival amongst the Druze (*drens*) and the Kurds in Syria,” says David*, pastor of the church.

Revival in Syria is not unlike revival anywhere else in the world. It means new converts, new churches, new leadership and the baptizing of new believers.

“In my city, we now have four churches of mainly new believers,” Pastor David says. His congregation of 60 is the smallest church of the four. Also, elsewhere in Syria, former Druze and former Muslims are turning to Christ in significant numbers.

One after another, the men and women walk down the pool stairs to be baptized. The pastor shortly prays and then baptizes them, gently pushing them backward under the water. Each believer emerges to the sound of loud applause and a warm embrace as they step out of the pool.

With all 16 baptisms finished, the group erupts in worship:

“I have decided to follow Jesus/I have decided to follow Jesus/ I have decided to follow Jesus/ No turning back, no turning back.”

The song is familiar to Christians around the world. But in Syria, the words take on new meaning. In this Middle Eastern country, their decision to follow Jesus comes with great costs. If or when their conversion is discovered, these new believers could lose their family, friends, their job, even their life.

Following Jesus will turn their lives upside down.

“The world behind me, the cross before me/The world behind me, the cross before me/The world behind me, the cross before me/No turning back, no turning back.”

Believers in Syria know that becoming a Christian means leaving their old life, their old world, and their old religion behind them. And before them, is a cross—a symbol of persecution.

It is no wonder that Jesus said what we find recorded in **Matthew 10:32-33**: “Therefore, everyone who will acknowledge Me before men, I will also acknowledge him before My Father in heaven. But whoever denies Me before men, I will also deny him before My Father in heaven.”

This passage has often and wrongly been interpreted to refer to a private altar call at the front of a church service, but no such thing existed for hundreds of years in the Christian church. Instead, the way that people would publicly profess their faith in Christ was through baptism. Through baptism, they went public with their faith in Christ. They were telling the world, “I have been united to Christ by faith.” Thus, through baptism, we declare that we belong to Jesus! We vividly acknowledge him in his life, death, and resurrection.

III. Through Baptism, the believer declares that they have been incorporated into the church.

Two passages demonstrate the relationship between baptism and incorporation into the church: Acts 2:41-42 and 1 Corinthians 12:12-13. In **Acts 2:41-42**, we read, “Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day. They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.” In **1 Corinthians 12:12-13**, we see, “Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts form one body, so it is with Christ. For we were all baptized by one Spirit so as to form one body—whether Jews or Gentiles, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink.”

These two passages should tie baptism to the local church. Baptism is the believer’s declaration that the body of Christ is their family. It is their home, which was purchased for them by the very blood of Jesus Christ.

Conclusion

In baptism, we are declaring through obedience and submission to Christ that we are trusting in Him alone for the cleansing of our sins, that we belong exclusively to Him, and that we are members of His Body, the church. Considering these truths about baptism, I have three brief points of personal application for us this morning: 1) **Baptism should be taken seriously**, 2) **Baptism should be observed joyfully**, and 3) **Baptism should be remembered frequently**.

Have you placed your trust in Jesus? Have you publicly declared your faith in Jesus?