

WHAT IS BAPTISM

A drunk stumbled along a baptismal service on Sunday afternoon down by the river. He proceeded to walk down into the water and stood next to the Preacher. The minister turned and noticed the old drunk and said, "Mister, Are you ready to find Jesus?" The drunk looks back and says, "Yes, Preacher. I sure am." The minister then dunked the fellow under the water and pulled him right back up. "Have you found Jesus?" the preacher asks. "No, I have not!" says the drunk. The preacher then dunks him under for quite a bit longer, brings him up and says, "Now, brother, have you found Jesus?" "No, I have not." The preacher in disgust holds the man under for at least 30 seconds this time brings him out of the water and says in a harsh tone, "Friend, are you sure you haven't found Jesus yet?" The old drunk wiped his eyes and said to the preacher "No... but are you sure this is where he fell in?"

In Acts 2:38, Peter said to the crowds, "Repent and be baptized every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit."

In the New Testament we see many examples of the importance of Baptism: In Acts 8:38 the Ethiopian Eunuch was baptized by Philip. In Acts 9:18 Saul was baptized by Ananias. In Acts 10:48 Cornelius and his family was baptized by Peter. But what is Baptism?

1. A POWERFUL ACT OF OBEDIENCE –

In being baptized we are following the example of Jesus who Himself was baptized as an example for us in order to “fulfil all righteousness” (Matt 3:13). We are also following His command:

Matt 28:19 Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, 20 and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.

In baptism faith and obedience come together. We are saved by faith in Jesus Christ, but faith is different than just belief. True faith is not simply believing something but, as James points out, it is acting and moving forward based upon that belief.

1 John 2:3 We know that we have come to know him if we obey his commands... 6 Whoever claims to live in him must walk as Jesus did

In the Mark account of the Great Commission, Jesus said:

Mark 16:15 Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation. 16 Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned

Jesus is not saying here that baptism is essential for salvation. He is saying that belief must be more than simply intellectual agreement. True faith is belief plus action.

How many people remember where they were and what they were doing on the morning of September 11, 2001? There are some events that happen in our lives that become etched forever in our memory. They are turning points, things we remember and hold onto long after they have happened.

When husbands and wives struggle in their marriage – their wedding and their vows become, or should become, an anchor point for them – a reminder that they have made a commitment and they can work it through. Their wedding is a marking point in their life.

When pastors feel like throwing in the towel because of discouragement or disagreement, the marking point of their calling and ordination reminds them that it was not man who called them to the ministry but God himself – and until God calls them out of the ministry they need to keep at it. It's not that something "magical" happens at a wedding or your calling, but they do serve as significant marking points in one's life because they sort of establishes who a person is.

This morning, I want to suggest that baptism is one of those marking points in a persons life. It is a "turning point." Baptism does not save you but baptism is a significant milestone.

Not to be confused with the Greek word BAPTO, the clearest example that shows the meaning of BAPTIZO is a text from the Greek poet and physician Nicander, who lived about 200 B.C. It is a recipe for making pickles and is helpful because it uses both words. Nicander says that in order to make a pickle, the vegetable should first be 'dipped' (bapto) into boiling water and then 'baptised' (baptizo) in the vinegar solution. Both verbs concern the immersing of vegetables in a solution. But the first is temporary. The second, the act of baptising the vegetable, produces a permanent change. When used in the New Testament, this word more often refers to our union and identification with Christ than to our water baptism. Christ is saying that mere intellectual assent is not enough. There must be a union with him, a real change, like the vegetable to the pickle!

In being Baptized people get pickled! They are acting in obedience declaring their union with what Jesus has commanded them to do. When we are obedient to Jesus and His will for our lives it unlocks God's grace in us and we often find our faith leaps forward. Obedience is God's love language! This is why a simple act of obedience can change your life.

Paul Harvey wrote in Guidepost Magazine about his own baptism. He said that even though he had received almost every reward for his broadcasting ability that he still felt empty inside. One summer he and his wife were on vacation. Sunday morning came and they decided to go to church. They went to a little church nearby and there were only 12 other people present. He had believed in Jesus, but he had never gone forward in a church service. One night he had prayed in his hotel room and asked Jesus to come into his heart, but he felt that there was still something that was missing. He said that the preacher got up and announced that his sermon was going to be about baptism. Paul Harvey said, "I yawned. But as he started talking about it I found myself interested. He talked about the symbolism behind it, and how it symbolized the complete surrender of one's life to Jesus Christ, and how there was nothing really magic in the water. But there was this cleansing inside that took place when you yielded yourself to Jesus."

He went on to say, "Finally, when he came to the end of his sermon he said, 'If any of you have not been baptized in this way, I invite you to come forward and join me here at the pulpit.'" Paul Harvey said, "To my surprise, I found myself going forward. The preacher had said there was nothing magic in the water. Yet as I descended into the water and rose again I knew something life changing had happened - a cleansing inside out. No longer did there seem to be two uncertain contradictory Paul Harvey's, just one immensely happy one. I felt the fulfilling surge of the Holy Spirit in my life."

Paul Harvey went on to say, "The change this simple act made in my life is so immense as to be indescribable. Since totally yielding to God in baptism, my heart can't stop singing. Also, perhaps because baptism is such a public act and because one's dignity gets as drenched as one's body, I discovered a new unself-consciousness in talking about my beliefs."

2. A PUBLIC DECLARATION –

Baptism is a public declaration of your faith in Christ. It is an outward demonstration of an inward reality. It is publically declaring whose side you are on. Baptism shows your willingness to identify with Christ's death, burial and resurrection. As you are baptized you are establishing for yourself and before others the significance of Christ's death on the cross, His burial in the tomb, and His resurrection from death.

Col 2:12 having been buried with him in baptism and raised with him through your faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead

Going down into the water symbolizes our death. We are dying to self. In baptism you are declaring publically that you no longer call the shots and that God is in control of your life. It is, in essence, a funeral. It is an act of faith in which we testify, both to God and to the world, that the person we were before is dead and buried, and we are raised as a new creation in Christ.

2 Cor 5:17 Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!

Colo 3:3 For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God.

When we physically die, in a sense we are just catching up with our baptism. -- Evangelical Catechism. Christian Faith in the World Today

When the Gospel was first preached on the island of Barbados, several accepted the invitation to be baptized. When they arrived at the water for the baptismal service the women were dressed in nightgowns and the men in striped pajamas. The missionaries were afraid this might be misunderstood and urged the candidates to change their clothes. They refuse. The missionaries allowed it reluctantly and decided to be sure this didn't happen the next time. Before the next baptismal service, the missionaries attended a funeral and noticed the corpse was dressed in pajamas. It was explained, "We believe when a person dies, he goes to sleep, so we are buried in our sleep wear." Then the missionary understood. The baptism had been explained as a burial and the candidates wore their burial clothes.

Making a public declaration of faith is a powerful thing. When you are baptized you are saying before the church that you are willing to be held accountable. E.g. woman and Central Baptist.

Even more than this, it is declaring where you stand to those in the spiritual realm. Very often people that plan to be baptized come under spiritual attack. "In the early days of the church, baptism was a declaration that the believer was definitely identifying himself with that group of people who were called Christians and were despised and hated. To be a Christian meant something. To identify yourself with those who were called Christians meant persecution, maybe death; it meant being ostracized from your family, shunned by friends. And the one act which was the final declaration of this identification was BAPTISM.

As long as a man gathered with Christians, he was tolerated, but when once he submitted to baptism, he declared to all the world, I BELONG TO THIS DESPISED GROUP, and immediately he was persecuted, hated, and despised. In baptism, therefore, the believer entered into the fellowship of the sufferings of Christ. A person might be a believer and keep it strictly a secret and thus avoid unpleasantness and suffering, but once he submitted to public baptism he had burned his bridges behind him. . .” E.g. the baptizing of Muslims in Kuwait.

3. A PERSONAL COMMITMENT –

Baptism is not just looking back to the time you received Christ but also looking forward and making a decision to live for Christ. While going down into the water symbolizes our death, coming up from the water symbolizes new life and power.

Rom 6:4 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 If we have been united with him like this in his death, we will certainly also be united with him in his resurrection. 6 For we know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin-- 7 because anyone who has died has been freed from sin.

Years ago a machinist at Ford Motor Company in Detroit became a Christian. He responded to the invitation and was baptized. As the Holy Spirit began renewing this man he became convicted of his need to make restitution for some parts and tools he had stolen from the company prior to becoming a Christian. So the next morning he brought all the tools and parts back to his employer. He explained how he had just been baptized and asked for his foreman’s forgiveness. This was such an amazing turn of events that Mr. Ford, who was visiting a plant in Europe at the time, was cabled with the details of the matter and asked his response. Mr. Ford immediately returned a cable with his decision: “Dam up the Detroit River, and baptize the entire city.”

We have been set free from sin to serve Christ and to live for Him. In recognizing our position in Christ we seek to live for Him.

Col 3:1 Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. 2 Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. 3 For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. 4 When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.

That is the meaning of Baptism. As we close I have to address the issue of how we do baptisms. I recognize that we as a church have people from many different denominational backgrounds and faiths. Why do we believe in baptism by immersion. To understand this you have to understand where the practice of Baptism came from and how it has been practiced historically. You may not know this but Baptism was not the idea of the church. More than 200 years before Jesus there was a group of Jews called the Essenes. They lived on the South East shore of the Dead Sea in a place called Qumran. Part of their faith was to ceremonially immerse themselves (baptize) in water. When John the Baptist started his ministry (before the public ministry of Jesus) he also used baptism as a sign of repentance. When Jesus came He took this method and gave it to the church. The early church practiced baptism by immersion.

Later when Christianity became the state religion of Rome, baptism was changed to the sprinkling or pouring of infants.

During the reformation different groups adopted different practices. Some groups like the Reformed church kept the idea of infant baptism by sprinkling. When a person comes of age and receives Christ into their hearts often they will then share that testimony publically which is like what we do at baptisms.

Other groups like the Mennonites adopted the idea of believer's baptism but some within that family still baptize by pouring. They changed the meaning but not the mode of baptism.

So what is the right way? In asking people to be baptized as adults by immersion we are not trying to say that other expressions are not meaningful. If you were baptized as an infant we want to honour your parents for making that decision.

As a church, we see that baptism by immersion reflects the way Jesus was baptized. It is a clearer picture of the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Gen. William Nelson, a Union general in the Civil War, was consumed with the battles in Kentucky when a brawl ended up in his being shot, mortally, in the chest. He had faced many battles, but the fatal blow came while he was relaxing with his men. As such, he was caught fully unprepared. As men ran up the stairs to help him, the general had just one phrase, "Send for a clergyman; I wish to be baptized." He never had time as an adolescent or young man. He never had time as a private or after he became a general. And his wound did not stop or slow down the war. Everything around him was left virtually unchanged—except for the general's priorities. With only minutes left before he entered eternity, the one thing he cared about was preparing for eternity. He wanted to be baptized. Thirty minutes later he was dead.