

ALL FOR JESUS

Message on Baptism

We are going to consider the subject of baptism this morning, in part because we haven't had any instruction on this subject for quite some time, and, in part, to provide some clarity to an issue that has been misunderstood and, to some degree, marginalized by many in the Christian community in recent years. Obviously, baptism is a big subject and cannot be adequately or comprehensively explored in one sermon, but I trust this instruction will be informative and useful, and that it will compel you to consider once again your connection to our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

I don't often preach topical messages—I feel much more comfortable preaching expositionally from a text of Scripture. But I thought it might be most helpful to approach this topic by asking those five familiar questions, “What, why, when, where, and how.” In so doing we will not be camping in any one passage, but will be looking briefly at a number of texts that I trust will shed light on this subject.

The first question, then, is “what is baptism?”

Actually, the concept of baptism evolved over the years. In the Old Testament, baptism was a ritual of a very private nature. A person who had somehow defiled him/herself would deal with the guilt by going to a pool or river or some other body of water and baptize themselves as a sign of personal purification. They were fully conscious that it was not the water itself that cleansed them—it was God and God alone, but their baptism was an outward sign of an inward reality. God forgave, and they were cleansed. Since water is a cleansing agent, baptism in water *symbolized* a cleansing from that sin.

Later, John the Baptist came along and introduced baptism as a *public* act, not merely a private ritual. It still symbolized a cleansing—a purification, but it became more specific. It didn't just have reference to repentance from sin and a recommitment to God's law, it also symbolized an *identification* with God's plan; namely that Messiah was on the horizon. God was about to break into history, He was about to do what all serious Jews had been anticipating for centuries, and they were saying in effect, “Bring him on, Lord. We're with you, and we're ready.”

After Jesus died and then rose from the dead, He commanded His disciples to make other disciples and baptize them in the name of the Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit (Matt. 28:19). It is apparent by their reaction and obedience to this command that their understanding of baptism had been significantly expanded. For the early church, baptism was the formal, public declaration that one was identifying oneself with Jesus Christ; that one was participating in His death and resurrection having died to one's old self and having become a new creature in Christ by faith (coming out of the water symbolizes a new birth); and that one's complete and undivided allegiance belonged to Jesus for all time.

In the first century the word “baptism”, in secular literature, was used to describe a process of dying cloth. That cloth was “baptized” into a vat of dye and would permanently take on the color of that dye into which it was immersed.

Christian baptism symbolizes that we have permanently taken on the “color” of Christ. His nature, His righteousness, His identity are now ours. We belong to Him. We resemble Him. We are new creatures, clothed with His righteousness. We are His brothers and sisters, according to Hebrews, heirs together with Him.

So, to answer the question, “What is baptism?” It is ***an outward sign of an inward reality***. We have died with Christ, we have been buried with Christ, we have risen with Christ, we have been forgiven by Christ, we have been cleansed by Christ, we have been joined to Christ, we have been seated with Christ in the heavenly realms. Everything about us has to do with Christ! Baptism is a way of publicly exclaiming, “I am not my own, I am Christ’s. Jesus Christ *is* my life.”

The next question is “Why?” Why be baptized? I’d like to give you two reasons. First, Jesus commanded us to be baptized. Actually, that’s all the reason we really need. If He told us to stand on our head for eight hours a day, that’s reason enough to do it. We belong to Him, therefore, we obey Him—He’s our Lord, our Master, therefore, we do what He says, period.

But there is another reason. In the New Testament when someone was converted to Christ, there is no record of them raising their hand, or filling out a card, or walking down an aisle, or praying the sinner’s prayer. They were baptized. *Baptism* has always been the way that Christ followers publicly *express* their commitment to Christ.

When people decide to get married, they don’t just move in together. They have a wedding. Few would deny the importance of that public ceremony. The couple’s commitment to love one another may have been made in private, but the public ceremony solidifies, solemnizes, and publicizes the nature of the commitment. It celebrates the fusion of two hearts and the merging of two identities.

Baptism is as essential to our commitment to Christ as a wedding is to a marriage, for it celebrates the union of our identity with Christ, and it publicizes that union.

We worked with Hindus in Africa. We knew several Hindus that had been converted to Christ. Some of them made their “decision” to follow Christ several months before they were actually baptized. They went to church, Bible studies, prayer meetings, etc., and their Hindu families did not seem to be particularly bothered or concerned by what they perceived as an interest in Christianity. After all, Jesus is one of Hinduism’s 336,000,000 gods. It’s perfectly okay for a Hindu to worship Jesus.

But the moment they were baptized, many of them were completely disowned and ostracized by their families. In other words, it was the baptism that proved to them how serious they really were. It proved that their commitment to Christ was exclusive.

That formal commitment to Christ is essential. Just as a wedding has an intrinsically powerful quality to it, so does baptism. And while I want to make it perfectly clear that baptism does *not* save you—“you are saved by grace through faith” (Eph. 2:8), I want to emphasize that in Scripture baptism is rarely ever separated from faith.

That’s because, again, baptism is an outward sign or symbol of an inward reality. And symbols are more important than we may realize. Baptism is a means by which our whole body gets into the act of commitment (Stafford, p. 123-124). And because it is a physical act, it is something that I can look back on, just like my wedding, as a reminder of the commitment I have made. It is an event that is saturated with significance.

You might find it interesting, as I did when I was studying for this message, that when baptisms are referred to in the New Testament, most often it is an allusion to the baptisms of old Christians which had occurred at some point in the past. The writer of Scripture is admonishing those believers to remember their baptisms—remember their significance and

let those memories be a spur toward obedience or a challenge for faithfulness or devotion. In other words, baptisms are *points of reference* in our life in Christ.

That's why we must never minimize or trivialize baptism. Listen to what Tim Stafford wrote in his book, *"Knowing the Face of God"*:

"I feel sure Paul would be shocked to learn that we have Christians in our churches who have never bothered to be baptized. (This is a greater sign of carelessness in the Christian life than church members who have never bothered to be married to their partners.) I feel sure he would be shocked at the casual way we fit baptisms between the anthem and the announcements and worry primarily that a baptism service will mean getting out of church late. If we carried on weddings in such a casual way, would we not expect marriages to suffer? Just so, our lack of concern for baptism makes love for Jesus suffer" (pp. 124-125).

Baptism, in the New Testament, is really consequential. It proves what Jesus really means to you, and whether or not you are all in with Him. As one famous author said, "Baptism separates the tire kickers from the car buyers" (Max Lucado).

The next question, is "When should Christians be baptized?" In the New Testament, when people were converted to Christ, they got wet, almost immediately after their profession of faith. In Acts we read about the conversions of many, and almost without exception that conversion is accompanied by the mention of their baptism. Consider these passages:

Acts 2:40-41—*"With many other words Peter warned them; and he pleaded with them, Save yourselves from this corrupt generation. Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day."*

Acts 8:36, 38—This is the story of Philip sharing the gospel with the Ethiopian eunuch, who, when he understood the Message, believed. Immediately afterward, ³⁶*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.*

Acts 9:18—Right after Saul's conversion on the road to Damascus, when God sent Ananias to the house to restore his sight, we read, *"Immediately something like scales fell from Saul's eyes, and he could see again. He got up and was baptized, and after taking some food, he regained his strength."* Are we to believe that Saul, who hadn't had anything to eat for three days since his experience on the Damascus Road, was baptized before he even had dinner? I think so. It was that important.

Acts 16:33, which talks about the Philippian jailer who was converted to Christ when he saw the reality of Jesus in Paul and Silas after the earthquake. The text says, *"At that hour of the night (This was after midnight), the jailer took them and washed their wounds; then immediately he and his family were baptized."*

I think you get the point. The Bible talks about baptism in the same sentence as it talks about faith. It was usually an activity that was performed immediately following one's confession of faith. And it was so important that it even took precedence over meals and sleep.

How different from most churches today. When we plan a baptism today we want to make sure the candidates have been initiated into the various doctrines and practices of the church. We make them take a class. We make them sign a statement that they are in agreement with the articles of faith. Some churches even make them get re-baptized if they haven't been baptized in a church within their own denomination.

I understand the rationale behind some of these practices. We want to be sure the person knows what they believe and what they're doing. But we must remember that in the New Testament baptism was the way to be initiated in the life of Christ and the church. People were saved and then got wet, all in the same day. Furthermore, baptism was the *immediate* response to one's confession of faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

The next question pertaining to baptism is "Where should a Christian be baptized?" In all but just a very few instances, the Bible doesn't have much to say about this question. We know they didn't have swimming pools. We know that there were no church buildings with built-in baptismal tanks or fonts. We do know that Jesus was baptized in a river. We know that the Ethiopian eunuch was baptized in a body of water, for the text says "they went down into the water," and, "came up out of the water." We do know that when there is a description given of the place, it seems to be a public place. A place where believers and non-believers alike could witness the event and see or hear the testimonies of those being baptized.

Baptism is intended to be a *public* declaration. The person who is baptized is saying to everyone, "My faith is not a private matter. It's not even a matter that's just between me and my loved ones or me and my church. I want to declare to the world that *"I have been crucified with Christ, and it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me"* (Gal. 2:20). I want them to know that I'm not the same person I was before I met Christ. I'm a new creature. Old things have passed away, all things have become new. And I want them to know that my allegiance belongs to Jesus—that whether I live or die, I am Christ's."

I want to deal with one other question this morning. It has often been asked, "What happens to me after I am baptized? Will I be different? Will I *feel* different? Will I have more love and more power in my walk with Christ?"

The way that theologians would pose this question is: "Is baptism efficacious?" That is, does God impart His grace or power through the act itself? Is baptism something like a supernatural jolt or a spiritual booster shot?

The answer to that is "no." The act itself is not efficacious. Again, baptism is an outward sign of an inward reality. The inward transformation has already occurred the moment one places their faith in Jesus Christ. That is the moment when the floodgates of God's grace have been opened and have been poured out on you. That is the moment when you become a new creature—when you have died to your self—your old nature, and you have been born again.

Baptism is the illustration of this transformation, and the manner in which it is celebrated and publicized. Again, we must remember that baptism is not a private matter. It is not just for the benefit of those being baptized. It is for those who witness that baptism. They will now look at that person differently.

Allow me to try to illustrate:

When we were living in Kenya we befriended many people who were from the Luya tribe. There is a ritual in the Luya tribe that is far too graphic to describe in detail in this setting, but is nonetheless a good illustration of how a public event can change the way people perceive and treat an individual.

Between the ages of fourteen and eighteen every male in the tribe is required to be circumcised. That circumcision is a public event—in fact it is an event which occurs every two or three years and is the single biggest event in their culture. The hype, the preparation, the build-up...is akin to the World Cup or the Super Bowl in our culture. Everybody in the

tribe is there, for this is *the* rite of passage, *the* point of reference by which that person's identity and status in the community is given.

The ritual is performed by someone who has supposedly received some supernatural ability to perform this procedure. It is done with a knife that is not cleaned nor sanitized as they carry out this procedure from one person to the next. And no anesthesia is used.

It is a traumatic experience, to say the least. That is why these young men spend months preparing themselves mentally and physically. Their destiny, their job, their status in the community rides on this one event. If a young man succumbs to fear and decides not to go through with this procedure, or if he so much as winces or groans as the procedure is being performed, he becomes, immediately, an outcast in the tribe for the rest of his life. He cannot live in the community, he cannot own land, he is disowned by his family, and he lives in shame for the rest of his life.

On the other hand, if he goes through the procedure in the prescribed way, his life changes completely. He is now a man, not a boy. He no longer plays boys' games. He no longer lives with his mother and father. He is given a home on the property. His mother no longer disciplines him or corrects him. In fact, his mother is not allowed to speak to him unless she is first spoken to. The mother is now her son's servant, which includes bowing to him when he approaches.

What has changed? Has the ritual itself effected any real objective change in these boys? No. They have the same appearance, the same voice, the same IQ, the same personality, the same propensities. Was there some sort of mystical quality that settled upon them that turned them from boys to men? No. It was a ritual. A symbolic rite of initiation into manhood.

And yet everything *has* changed. That event is the point of reference they look back on and cherish. Every single male Luya that I have ever met has said that it is the highlight of their life. It is the thing about their lives for which they are most proud, the thing from which they derive the greatest inspiration, and the thing in which they take the greatest pleasure.

I want to be very careful not to compare baptism to a cultural ritual. The point I want to make is that rituals can be a very significant point of reference in a person's life, including the perception of that person in the eyes of that person's peers and community.

It is my hope that people who are baptized will be honored accordingly. They will be given the respect that is due a child of God, who has been purchased by the blood of Christ and made an heir to the kingdom. Baptism is the point at which their identity is declared and celebrated.

And now comes the point of application. What about you? Are you a follower of Christ? If so, have you been baptized? If you have, I hope that it was a special, meaningful experience for you—one that you look back upon and cherish, just like you cherish your wedding.

But if you are a follower of Christ and have not been baptized, I would be remiss to ask you, *why not?* Is it out of fear? Fear of standing before people and giving your testimony? Is it out of embarrassment or shame? Don't forget, Jesus wasn't embarrassed or ashamed to hang on a cross naked for you, on one of the main roads outside of Jerusalem, where all the passersby would stare at Him and mock Him and spit at Him and jeer Him. He did that for you.

Have you not been baptized because you don't think it's that important—because you think it's optional for a Christian? I hope you've been convinced otherwise this morning. I like something else Max Lucado said: "Is it possible for an unbaptized believer to be saved? Yes, definitely. Should every believer be baptized? Yes, definitely."

Out of obedience to Christ, out of allegiance to Christ, out of love for Christ, I want to encourage you to do this as soon as possible.

- Fill out one of the pew cards
- Email Krista, Mindy, or me
- Talk to me after the service

ALL FOR JESUS Message on Baptism

Main Idea: In the New Testament, baptism was the immediate response to one's confession of faith in the Lord Jesus Christ as the outward sign of an inward transformation

What is baptism?

An outward _____ of an inward _____

For the early church, baptism was the formal, public declaration that:

One was _____ oneself with Jesus

One was _____ in his death and resurrection having died to one's old self and having become a new creature in Christ

One's complete and undivided _____ was his for all _____

Why be baptized?

Jesus _____ it

Baptism has always been the way Jesus-followers publicly _____ their _____ to Christ

When should Christians be baptized?

In the New Testament, baptism was the _____ response to one's _____ of faith in Jesus

Where should Christians be baptized?

What happens to a Christian *after* he/she is baptized?

Family Life Group Questions All for Jesus

Main Idea: In the New Testament, *baptism* was the immediate response to one's confession of faith in the Lord Jesus Christ as the outward sign of an inward transformation

1. Have you been baptized? If so *when* did you get baptized? *Why* did you get baptized? *What* did your baptism mean to you, looking back? If you have not been baptized, why not?
2. Are there any requirements for baptism? Is there a particular age when one is ready to be baptized? Does the New Testament give any insight into these things?
3. For many in modern day Christianity, baptism is either an afterthought or an option. How did it come to be this way? How do we restore the New Testament teaching on baptism in our practice?