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The gospel and baptism

Matthew 28:19-20

May 7, 2023

Text

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.”

Prayer

Introduction

Brenton was a lost soul.

He had battled drug addiction and in 2019, he had just suffered a relapse.

And so it happened. On a February night, high on drugs, and angry with God, he entered the Central Baptist Church in Conway, Arkansas.

But this visit was not for worship.

He had broken into the church and was on a mission of destruction. He broke laptops, cameras, other electronic equipment. When it was all said and done, Brenton had done an estimated \$100,000 in property damage.

He was arrested, but the first ones to show him grace were the church he had tried to destroy.

Pastor Don Chandler said, “You can’t preach grace for 50 years without practicing it, especially in front of your whole church ... This was a young man who had made some mistakes. He was on drugs and alcohol when he did what he did. But he was redeemable.”

Brenton was facing a maximum of 20 years in prison, but the church advocated for him and he was given the option to go to a faith based recovery program. It was in that program that this man trusted in Jesus.

The break-in happened in February of 2019. In September of 2019, Brenton was baptized.

At the same church he'd once vandalized.

picture

A sinful person saved by grace and receiving baptism.

Baptism is our topic today. And I do this for two reasons. First, because baptism is Biblical and a command of Jesus which inherently makes it worth talking about. And secondly, we've had this in the bulletin for the last few weeks, but we are doing baptisms at the end of this month, on Sunday, the 28th. And especially for people who are believers in the gospel and have never been baptized, this message is an encouragement to join the other people getting baptized in a few weeks. And to participate in this ordinance that is so important to Christ's Church.

Baptism is a subject that has a rich tradition within the church and which has, at times, been the source of heated division.

Baptism in Christendom

The importance of baptism is almost universally agreed upon within Christendom. But from that common starting point, churches have diverged on nearly every aspect of baptism. Questions which have been at the forefront of the historical debate have included:

Who can be baptized?

Is it for believers or for believers and their children?

Who can do the baptizing?

Does it have to be an ordained minister or can others from within the church or the biological family baptize?

How should the baptism be administered?

Should a person be dunked in water? Or sprinkled with water? Or should water be poured?

Is there anything special about the water itself?

What words are said during baptism?

I read a story last year year about a Catholic Priest who realized that he had said the wrong words for over 20 years. He was supposed to say “I baptize you in the name of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.”

What he actually said was “We baptize you.”

In the eyes of the Catholic Church, those baptisms are not considered valid.

Is there any formal preparation for the baptism?

Throughout history, some churches have had various requirements such as fasting, or confirmation classes before being baptized.

What does the baptism signify?

Is it the cause of our being born again? Does it wash away sin?

What happens spiritually when a person is baptized?

Does it save us? Does it help save us? Do we receive the Holy Spirit in baptism?

And there are many other questions. Just about the only thing that all churches agree on is that baptism involves water.

And we won't have time to answer all of those questions today. As I said in the beginning, baptism is a subject which has been debated throughout the history of the church. Where books which are hundreds of pages long have been written which discuss the history, the theology, and the practices of baptism.

But I want to begin with a couple of general comments on the practice.

Baptism is important.

At the end of the Gospel of Matthew, the risen Jesus commanded his disciples to:

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.”

Baptism is important to Jesus and it should be important to his Church.

At this church, we teach and practice believer's baptism. That is the idea that in order to be baptized, a person must give a profession of faith that Jesus Christ is their Lord and savior in whom they have placed their faith.

The other major side of the baptism discussion are churches who practice infant baptism. I know many people in this church were raised in churches that practice infant baptism.

Bridge

Today, I want to focus on three things. Why we practice believer's baptism, how we do baptism, and why all Christians should be baptized.

I. Why we practice believer's baptism

The case for believer's baptism.

There is not one single text in the Bible which explicitly calls for the baptism of infants.

I'll say that again.

There is no text in the Bible which explicitly says that babies ought to be baptized or for that matter, that anyone who cannot profess to believe in the gospel should be baptized.

In Acts 2:14-36, the Apostle Peter gives his Pentecost sermon. In that sermon, Peter is talking about the death and resurrection of Jesus, and his exaltation which was prophesied in the Old Testament. Peter also talks of how the Old Testament looked to a time when God's Spirit would be given to God's people.

Verse 37 picks up with the people's response to Peter.

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?"

The people are asking how they should respond to the gospel that Peter has just preached

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."

Repent and be baptized.

That order is important.

It's not be baptized and then maybe in a few years, you'll hopefully repent.

Now the Book of Acts chronicles the activities of the early church and the pattern we see in Acts is that a response of faith precedes baptism.

Acts 8:12-13, the Apostle Philip has preached the gospel and people have believed:

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 9:18, following the conversion of the man we know as the Apostle Paul:

18 And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and he regained his sight. Then he rose and was baptized

In Acts 19:4-5, the Apostle Paul is sharing the gospel in Ephesus:
And Paul said, “John baptized with the baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in the one who was to come after him, that is, Jesus.”⁵ On hearing this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus.

And there are other examples but that’s the pattern and I would argue that’s always the pattern in the Bible.

A person has faith, believes in the gospel and baptism is a response to an internal faith.

Household baptisms

One of the common arguments for infant baptism is that in the Book of Acts, there are sections where we see household baptisms. There are four such household baptisms in Acts and there’s one more referenced in First Corinthians. In those passages, a person comes to faith and they are baptized and the passage mentions that their household was too.

The argument assumes that there must have also been babies in some of those homes and so that is demonstrating infant baptism.

None of those passages specifically say that there were infants or children. A person could counter argue, that those passages also don’t say that there weren’t any children or infants.

That’s true. But I think the more significant point when considering household baptisms is the fact that none of the passages point to one person coming to faith and the rest of their family also getting baptized against their will as unrepentant and unregenerate nonbelievers.

I’ll quote a couple of passages, but it’s a consistent pattern.

In Acts 16, we learn about a Philippian jailer who asks Paul and Silas what he must do to be saved.

Acts 16:30-31

“Sirs, what must I do to be saved?” ³¹ And they said, “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household.”

So does that mean if this man comes to faith, his entire household will also come to faith?

Is the text saying that if this man believes, then his whole family will believe because he believed?

No.

Next couple of verses:

” ³² And they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house. ³³ And he took them the same hour of the night and washed their wounds; and he was baptized at once, he and all his family (Acts 16:32-33).

A person could still look at this and argue that the whole household got baptized because the father became a Christian.

But the key is verse 34:

³⁴ Then he brought them up into his house and set food before them. And he rejoiced along with his entire household that he had believed in God.

The most plausible interpretation is that his household believed and that was the source of their rejoicing. It was not because he had a family of unrepentant people who opposed the gospel who received a no faith baptism that they're rejoicing in a gospel that they don't believe in.

That just doesn't make sense.

Acts 18:8 talks of the household of a man named Crispus being baptized.

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.

Once again, the passage says that his household was baptized but it also said that his entire household had believed in the gospel.

That's the pattern that we see in Acts. In Acts 2:41, we see believers responding to the gospel in faith:

⁴¹ So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls.

Even the household baptism passages point to household being baptized after having responded to the gospel in faith.

All of the passages we've discussed I would argue point to a consistent pattern in the New Testament of having faith in the gospel and being baptized as a result of that faith.

Baptism is never done as a precursor to faith that a person might one day have. And there are no texts which say that baptism, apart from faith, carries any salvific value.

Something else I find interesting about household baptism is the fact that people don't actually observe that today. People might advocate for it but if someone joins a church who teaches baptismal regeneration, no one expects that their spouse, their teenage kids, their live in older parents are all going to get baptized too, if they don't have faith.

We come to our second point.

How we baptize

And the best place to begin is by talking about the word baptism.

Our english word Baptism comes from the Greek word baptizo which means to immerse or submerge.

That's the word that gets used in the New Testament to describe baptism and that's why we practice baptism by immersion.

Greek has words for sprinkle or pour water. Those aren't the words that were used in the Bible.

We baptize anyone who will give a free profession of faith in Christ. When I say a free profession, that it is them saying it of their own free will. We're not here to coerce someone who might not actually be a Christian to say that they are. We only want to baptize people who believe in Jesus as Lord and savior.

We baptize in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit because that is the triune formula which Christ gave to the apostles.

Quoting again from the end of the Gospel of Matthew

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,

So there you see both the command to baptize and the triune formula of baptism. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Third point.

What baptism does

The practice of baptism predates Jesus giving the command to be baptized.

During the ministry of Christ, John the Baptist had a ministry where he was the forerunner to Jesus and where John baptized with a baptism of repentance.

But John the Baptist didn't invent baptism. Before he was born, baptism was being practiced. When a non-Jewish person - a gentile - converted to Judaism, they made him or her get baptized.

And if you go back further, while you don't have baptism in the Old Testament, you do have various washing rituals both for ordinary people

and for the priests which were meant to prepare a person for various religious activities.

Especially in a book like Leviticus, there's this strong emphasis on cleanliness and purity. All of that was meant to show the purity which a holy God requires.

In Exodus 19, before the giving of the Ten Commandments as part of the covenant with Moses, the Israelites were told to wash their garments.

There are also Old Testament passages which seek a deeper, Spiritual cleansing from God.

In Psalm 51, as David reflected back on his terrible sin of having an affair with a married woman, he prayed to God for cleansing.

**¹ Have mercy on me, O God,
according to your steadfast love;
according to your abundant mercy
blot out my transgressions.
² Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity,
and cleanse me from my sin! (Psalm 51:1-2)**

**⁷ Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean;
wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow. (Psalm 51:7).**

David sought that cleansing. Baptism is a symbol of sin being washed away. It does not literally wash sin away. Only the blood of Christ can do that, and he does it by the means of having faith in him. And when you believe in the Lord Jesus, you are saved in that moment.

Water baptism is also a symbol of the Holy Spirit.

One of the great Old Testament passages which talks about the cleansing which comes from God is found in Ezekiel 36. It's a passage that looks forward to the new covenant time when the Lord will symbolically wash his

people and be the one who enables his people to follow him through the empowerment of the Holy Spirit.

²⁵ I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. ²⁶ And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. ²⁷ And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules.

Some people take this to mean that baptism is the cause of a person receiving the Holy Spirit. This goes too far. You receive the Spirit the moment you come to faith in Christ.

Ephesians 1:13-14 says:

¹³ In him you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, ¹⁴ who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory.

So baptism isn't the cause of Spiritual rebirth. Rather, it is a symbol of Spiritual rebirth. Just like how baptism is not the cause of our faith, but is a symbol of our faith.

Coronation

King Charles III did not become the king of England yesterday. Like me, I'm sure that most of you woke up at 2 in the morning to kickoff the coronation coverage. The coronation is symbolic and ceremonial. But he's been the king for almost 8 months now.

Baptism isn't what saves you or makes you a Christian. But it is the symbol and ceremony for one who has believed in Jesus and who is saved.

So baptism is a symbolic washing away of sin, it is symbolic of a born again believer receiving the Holy Spirit.

Baptism is also a symbolic death and resurrection in Christ.

Romans 6:4-5:

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.

⁵ For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.

By the way, Romans 6 is another reason why we practice baptism by immersion. It's a symbolic burial and resurrection.

As Jesus died and rose, when we believe in him, the death he died to sin is credited to us as if we were dead to sin, so that we can have the promise and hope of Christ's resurrection to life. Baptism itself points us to the gospel.

Galatians

Now we've been in the Book of Galatians for all of these weeks where Paul is continually talking about salvation by faith, justification by faith and not by works. If we have to be baptized, is that a work?

No.

Because the baptism is not the thing that's saving you.

It's not necessary for salvation, but it is necessary for being obedient to the command of Christ.

Baptism is a symbol of that.

Excuses

We're just about out of time this morning.

I want to close with a couple of things.

I said this in the beginning. May 28 is three weeks from today. It's Pentecost Sunday. Pentecost Sunday is the day when the Lord first poured out his Spirit on his people. In the early church, there is evidence that this was a popular time to do baptisms.

If you've never been baptized but consider yourself to be a Christian, I want to encourage you to get baptized. If anyone wants to get baptized or wants to talk about baptism, I'd love to talk to you.

And this is where I want to close.

I've heard various excuses throughout the years as to why people haven't gotten baptized.

I wanted to just address a few of those.

One, since it doesn't save you, that means you don't have to do it.

Yes you do. Jesus commands it.

Two, I'm afraid of water.

We aren't doing this in the ocean. You're tall enough to stand up in the baptismal and I'm strong enough to make sure you don't drown.

Three, I don't want to get my hair wet.

Wear a swim cap.

Four, I'm too old.

You're never too old to be obedient to God.

Five, I'm embarrassed.

I can appreciate that. I really can. There might be different reasons why a person would be embarrassed. Maybe you've never gotten baptized and you're at an age where you feel like you should have by this point but never got around to it and now you think you'll look really silly.

I can appreciate that.

It's not a good reason to not get baptized but I'm just saying I personally can appreciate that.

In Luke 9:26, Jesus said:

whoever is ashamed of me and of my words, of him will the Son of Man be ashamed when he comes in his glory and the glory of the Father and of the holy angels.

If you're someone who hasn't been baptized and you do feel embarrassed about that fact, come talk to me. I promise you I'm not going to recoil in disgust that you haven't done it. The fact that you didn't do it in the past is something you can't change. But you can do something about it on May 28.

Part of the purpose of baptism is that it's a public proclamation to the world that you identify as a follower of Jesus Christ. If you've waited this long and finally do it, people aren't going to judge you. People will think it's so great that you're finally doing it now. You ever see those news stories at graduation time about some like 90 year old who finally is finishing up her college degree? People love those stories.

Don't let stage fright be a reason to not get baptized. Don't let pride be a reason to get baptized.

Six, God hasn't told me to get baptized yet.

It's the devil who's telling you not to get baptized and to disobey Jesus' command!

You don't need a divine prompt to do something that Jesus universally commands of his church.

You have God's word and that tells you to do it.

Seven, "it doesn't apply to me."

It applies to all Christians.

Yes, there is the thief on the cross in Luke who's promised heaven. Yes there are death bed conversions of people who might not have the opportunity to be baptized. But that's not the same as a professing believer who's simply dragging their feet living in willful disobedience.

Eight, "I just don't want to."
Once again, it's a command of Christ for all Christians.

Nine, what if the water is too cold.

It's like a jacuzzi back there. It's almost luxurious to be in this baptismal.

Ten, what if the water is too hot?
It is honestly a treat to be in this baptismal. It is the most perfectly temperate water that I've ever been in.

Eleven, what if you drop me?

Twelve, I'll do it next time.

Why then and not now?
As Nike used to tell us, just do it.

There's no excuse.
If you've never done it, let's get it done.