

## **“On Baptism”**

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Last weekend, I was in New York City, visiting three old friends. One of them is a man named Tim, whom I met while at Brandeis University about twenty years ago. Tim is a fencer. While at Brandeis, he was on the All-America team. Later, he went to three Olympic games. In 2008, he was part of the US saber team when it won a silver medal. In the last few years, he’s tried to make fencing a more popular sport and he’s opened up his own fencing club on the upper west side of Manhattan. I visited him there after a training session ended and before he had to speak to a parent of kids he’s coaching. He said that the father was thinking of taking his kids out of fencing because “they had no future in the sport.” Tim thought that was bad because kids learn valuable lessons from competing, even if they don’t win. They learn how to work hard, how to compete, and even how to lose.

Then Tim said something very interesting. He said that kids needed to “marry their sport.” He said that if kids want to succeed in sports, they have to have a “deep love” for the sport. They have to enjoy it, but it has to be more than just enjoyment. After all, there are times when training will be hard work and the kids won’t feel like doing it. But their involvement in sports can’t just be hard work and duty. They have to love what they are doing. This “marriage” to their sport involves love, commitment, and perseverance.

I think that’s really a beautiful picture of what marriage is. Marriage isn’t just about romance. It’s not just about feelings. It involves commitment and hard work. It’s about deep love that doesn’t wax and wane with all the difficult and demanding circumstances of life.

This year, I’ve thought a bit more about marriage and marriage ceremonies, because I was able to perform my first wedding this year. That meant I had to think a lot about what I wanted to say and how the ceremony would go. I also had to think about what I would tell the young couple I was marrying.

Now, today I’m not actually going to be talking about marriage. The topic today is baptism. But this is why I begin with marriage: Baptism is a lot like a marriage ceremony. Baptism, like a wedding, is an initiation rite. It begins something new. Baptism, like a wedding, indicates a change of status. In the case of a wedding, the status changes from single person to part of a one-flesh union of man and woman. In the case of baptism, the status is from a son or

daughter of Adam to a son or daughter of God. In other words, baptism should indicate that a person has gone from being a non-Christian to a Christian. And the reason that I think baptism is like marriage is that when you become a Christian, you are part of the bride of Christ, the church. In a metaphorical sort of way, you marry Jesus. And that leads me to this thought: Baptism, like a good wedding ceremony, is symbolic. It represents some profound and great truths. It is a picture of the gospel and it is an outward demonstration of what God has done in a person's life.

This important for all of us to understand. For many of us, this message may not seem relevant, since we have already been baptized. But think about this: You will be talking to people who haven't been baptized. You know people who were baptized as infants in the Catholic Church. You may have children or grandchildren who haven't been baptized yet. As you try to engage people in conversations about Jesus (and I do hope you will try to do that), people may ask questions about baptism. If you know the meaning of baptism, you will be able to help your children, grandchildren, and perhaps even your non-Christian friends understand the Christian faith better.

If you're here today and you haven't yet been baptized, this message is very relevant for you, of course.

So, let's begin. I'll present my message today in four parts. The first part is about the origins of baptism. The second part will look at what Jesus said regarding baptism. The third part concerns the meaning of baptism. And in the last part, I'll explain who should be baptized and why.

So, part one: Where did baptism come from? We don't read about baptism in the Old Testament, yet the four Gospels all feature John the Baptist toward the beginning of their stories. John, Jesus' cousin, was baptizing Jews in the Jordan River, but we're not really told explicitly the meaning of baptism. To understand, let's read a bit of how Matthew describes John in his Gospel. Let's turn to Matthew 3 and read the first six verses:

<sup>1</sup> In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea,  
<sup>2</sup> "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."  
<sup>3</sup> For this is he who was spoken of by the prophet Isaiah when he said,

"The voice of one crying in the wilderness:  
'Prepare the way of the Lord;  
make his paths straight.'"

<sup>4</sup> Now John wore a garment of camel's hair and a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. <sup>5</sup> Then Jerusalem and all Judea and all the region about the Jordan were going out to him, <sup>6</sup> and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.<sup>1</sup>

John was a prophet. He fulfilled the role of the one Isaiah wrote about (in Isa. 40:3). He said, "Prepare the way of the Lord." He was getting people ready for the coming of Jesus and Jesus' ministry. And his odd appearance and diet reminds us of the prophet Elijah, who urged people to turn from worshiping idols and turn back to the one true God. When he baptized people, they confessed their sins. They were turning back to God.

That information gives us some hints about what baptism is. But we need more information. It will help us to know this: At this time, when Gentiles wanted to become Jews, they had to undergo a purification ritual that involved washing their whole bodies in water, such as in a river. At least, that's what later Jewish texts say. If that is the case, perhaps this practice found its roots in stories like 2 Kings 5:1–14, in which a Gentile, Naaman, a commander of the army of Syria, is cleansed of his leprosy in the Jordan. Outward conditions like leprosy are often signs of our inward problem of sin. People like Naaman could enter into the people of God if they trusted in God and were cleansed by him. Jewish people thought that Gentiles were unclean; if they wanted to be part of Israel, they had to be cleansed in water.<sup>2</sup>

What's interesting is this: John the Baptist is telling Jews that if they want to be part of God's kingdom, they need they need to be washed of their sins and they need to repent. That means there is no such thing as a person who is born into God's kingdom or God's family. In order to enter in to God's people, one must make a conscious decision to turn to God.

We see that in the next few verses. John tells some Jewish religious leaders that they are not children of God. Let's read verses 7–10:

<sup>7</sup> But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism, he said to them, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? <sup>8</sup> Bear fruit in keeping with repentance. <sup>9</sup> And do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father,' for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham. <sup>10</sup> Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV).

<sup>2</sup> See Lev. 11–17; Num. 19:11–22.

When John tells the Pharisees and Sadducees—two important sects of Jews—that they are a “brood of vipers,” he means that they aren’t children of God, but they’re children of the serpent. In other words, they are associated with Satan. He tells them to repent and not to assume that because they are biologically related to Abraham, the ancestor of the Israelites, that they are truly children of Abraham. The Bible says that Abraham’s true children are those who have faith in God. Even Jews have to repent and come to real trust in God in order to be reconciled to him.

This probably didn’t go over very well with those Pharisees and Sadducees. And it doesn’t go over very well with many people today. The notion that we are dirty and need to be cleaned in order to become part of God’s people strikes at our pride. But the truth is that all of us are contaminated by sin, which is not just the wrong things we have done, but a power that is at work within us, causing us to desire to do wrong things. We need the power of God at work in our lives to change us.

And that leads me to my next point: John’s baptism isn’t really a Christian baptism. It lacks one important aspect. John himself was not able to forgive people for their sins. And he certainly wasn’t able to give people the Holy Spirit, the third person of God who dwells within Christians. John’s baptism anticipated Jesus’ coming, but Christian baptism looks back to what Jesus has done for his people. Even John himself acknowledged this much. Look at verses 11 and 12:

<sup>11</sup> “I baptize you with water for repentance, but he who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. <sup>12</sup> His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into the barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”

John told anyone with ears to hear that the one who came after him, the Lord Jesus, was greater than him. Jesus is the one who could baptize people with the Holy Spirit. Jesus is also the one who will judge everyone who has ever lived, “the quick and the dead.”

So baptism is about cleansing from sin. And it seems to have its roots in the Jewish practice of cleansing Gentile converts. John the Baptist indicated that anyone who is truly part of God’s kingdom needs to be baptized. And he seems to indicate that these people also need to be baptized by the Holy Spirit.

That’s where baptism comes from. Now, what does Jesus have to say about baptism?

Well, he doesn't actually say a whole lot about baptism. But he does include baptism in some of his final comments to his disciples. Let's turn to the end of Matthew's Gospel to see what he says. We'll look at Matthew 28:16–20:

<sup>16</sup> Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. <sup>17</sup> And when they saw him they worshiped him, but some doubted. <sup>18</sup> And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. <sup>19</sup> 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, <sup>20</sup> teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

This passage is known as the "Great Commission." Jesus gives his disciples instructions. They are supposed to make disciples of all nations—of Jews and Gentiles. A disciple literally means a "student," but it's more personal than that. Disciples are followers of Jesus. They are students of Jesus. They are friends and brothers and sisters of Jesus. They come under his rule and reign willingly, lovingly, and obediently. And Jesus tells his disciples to make more disciples. How does that work? They do that through evangelism, through telling others the gospel, which is the good news of who Jesus is and what he has done for his people.

Part of evangelism is telling people that they need to follow Jesus' teachings. So Jesus says that part of making disciples is "teaching them to observe all that [Jesus has] commanded" the original disciples. Another part of making disciples is "baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." Notice that there is one name used for the three persons of God. This verse is one that demonstrates that God is one Being (one name) and three Persons (three distinct personalities referred to as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit). God is a Trinity.

What's interesting to know is that that the English word "baptism" comes from the Greek word *baptizo*, which can mean "wash" or "purify," but also means "plunge" or "dip" or "immerse." When the Bible was translated into English, the earliest translators transliterated this Greek word and therefore made a new English word, "baptize." This may be because the earliest translators of the Bible into English practiced infant baptism through sprinkling water on babies' heads. If the Greek word means to "plunge" or "immerse," then it's convenient not to translate the Greek word in that way. It's better to transliterate it, obscuring the meaning of the original word. At any rate, the original Greek word implies immersion, and since John baptized in a river, and other baptisms seem to have occurred in bodies of water, it seems that immersion is the best

way to baptize someone. As we'll see, baptism through immersion best captures part of the meaning of baptism.

Before we move on to that, we should see the connection between disciples, teaching, and baptism. In order to demonstrate the connection, I'll quote from New Testament scholar Andreas Köstenberger:

Jesus' command to his followers to make disciples of all nations and to baptize and teach them clearly presupposes that the recipients of baptism and teaching are of sufficient age and maturity that they can consciously choose to be baptized and be instructed in the principles of the Christian faith. . . . Infants are unable to repent or exercise personal faith in Christ in any meaningful sense and should therefore not be the subject of baptism judged by Jesus' "Great Commission."<sup>3</sup>

That's important, because it's hard to see how Jesus' commandment to baptize disciples applies to infants. And many Christian denominations teach that the infant children of believers should be baptized. However, apart from faith in Jesus and repentance from sins, baptism is meaningless. Anyone can be sprinkled with water, or immersed in water. But that doesn't mean that person has put his or her trust in Jesus, has been cleansed of sin, has received the Holy Spirit, and has turned away from a life of sin.

Jesus commanded his disciples to make disciples who are taught and baptized. That means all true Christians should be baptized. But what is the meaning of baptism? Let's look at another picture of baptism, found in Paul's letter to the Romans. We'll look at Romans 6:3–11:

<sup>3</sup> Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? <sup>4</sup> 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.

<sup>5</sup> 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. <sup>6</sup> We know that our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin. <sup>7</sup> For one who has died has been set free from sin. <sup>8</sup> Now if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. <sup>9</sup> We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. <sup>10</sup> For the death he died he died to sin, once for all, but the life he lives he lives to God. <sup>11</sup> So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.

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<sup>3</sup> Andreas J. Köstenberger, "Baptism in the Gospels," in *Believer's Baptism: Sign of the New Covenant in Christ*, ed. Thomas R. Schreiner and Shawn D. Wright, NAC Studies in Bible and Theology (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2006), 24.

Here, Paul is arguing that Christians should not continue to live lives of sin. Their lives shouldn't be dominated by sin. Why? Because when we become Christians, our old life has died and we have a new life in Jesus. What that means is that we have been immersed into Jesus. Our lives have been subsumed or absorbed into his. We are united to him. When he died on the cross, it's as if our old selves died. When Jesus rose from the grave in his resurrection body, it's as if we were raised at that point, too. His death is our death, and his resurrection is our resurrection, because we are united to him.

And this death and resurrection is best pictured by baptism through immersion. When someone is baptized, it's not only a picture of being washed. It is also a picture of death and resurrection. The person being baptized goes down into the water, illustrating that their old life has died, and they are raised back up, which is a picture of a new life being raised in Christ. So baptism isn't just an initiation rite. It isn't just a picture of forgiveness. It is a picture of a change of status, from an old life to a new life.

Baptism is also the language of receiving the Holy Spirit. In 1 Corinthians 12:12-13, Paul writes,

<sup>12</sup>For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. <sup>13</sup>For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit.

Here, Paul says there is one body, the body of Christ. And all who are baptized into Jesus—who are united to him, whose lives are plunged into him—have received the Holy Spirit. Similarly, in Galatians 3:27, Paul writes, “For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ.” And he says the same kind of thing in Ephesians 4:4–6:

<sup>4</sup>There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call—<sup>5</sup>one Lord, one faith, one baptism, <sup>6</sup>one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.

It's hard to tell in some of these verses whether Paul means baptism to refer to union with Christ and receiving the Holy Spirit or water baptism. I like what another New Testament scholar, Tom Schreiner, writes about this. He says, “In my judgment, Paul would have been initially puzzled if we asked him, ‘Do you mean Spirit or water baptism in these verses?’ He would reply, when he

understood the question, ‘Both.’”<sup>4</sup> The reason Schreiner says that is because in the early church, as we see in the book of Acts, certain events happened more or less at the same time: repentance and faith, reception of the Holy Spirit, and water baptism. Ideally, these all happen at more or less the same time.<sup>5</sup>

I should also point out that it’s possible to be saved apart from water baptism. The famous example, of course, is the thief on the cross, who died before he could have been baptized. Of course, that’s an unusual circumstance and we don’t want to make exceptional cases become the rule. But the point is that water baptism itself does not make anyone reconciled to God. There’s no magic to it.

The biblical view of baptism is opposed to the view taught by the Roman Catholic Church. They teach that baptism automatically grants grace to the recipient *ex opere operato*, which is a Latin phrase that means “by the work performed.” I’ve encountered people in this area who have some nominal Catholic background and have asked if we baptize infants. I even recently had a friend who asked about churches because he was interested in having his infant daughter baptized. I asked what he thought that accomplished. I don’t think he really had an answer. However, to his credit, he was thinking of having his daughter raised in a church environment so she would have some moral grounding. Yet baptizing an infant doesn’t actually do anything.

This leads me to the fourth issue I wanted to address today, the issue of who should receive baptism. The truth is that baptism should be reserved for those whose lives have been changed by God. Baptism might come immediately after that time, or for various reasons, some Christians may wait a while to be baptized. Regardless of the exact timing, baptism should be reserved for people who have been transformed by God, those who are regenerated or “born again.” That’s what we find in Colossians 2:11-13:

<sup>11</sup> In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, <sup>12</sup> having been

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<sup>4</sup> Thomas R. Schreiner, “Baptism in the Epistles,” in *Believer’s Baptism: Sign of the New Covenant in Christ*, ed. Thomas R. Schreiner and Shawn D. Wright, NAC Studies in Bible and Theology (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2006), 74.

<sup>5</sup> “When we recall that in Paul’s day virtually all were baptized immediately after putting their faith in Christ, we grasp that both Spirit baptism and water baptism were part and parcel of the complex of saving events that took place at conversion. When people are converted, they are baptized in water and the Spirit, and confess Jesus as Lord (Rom 10:9). Those who see a reference only to Spirit baptism and exclude water baptism put asunder what God meant to be joined together.” *Ibid.*, 75.



buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead.<sup>13</sup> And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses,<sup>14</sup> by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross.

That's a tricky passage, but what Paul is saying is that Christians have had their hearts "circumcised" by Jesus. In other words, Jesus has performed heart surgery on us. Paul is using "circumcision" in a metaphorical way. And the people who have been changed by Jesus are buried with him in baptism and raised with him. Christians are people who were spiritually dead, living in "uncircumcised" flesh and have been made alive in the Spirit. Again, the way that Paul uses "baptism" here seems to indicate both receiving the Holy Spirit and also water baptism. Water baptism alone does not save anyone.<sup>6</sup>

Some who practice infant baptism believe that since in the Old Testament infant male Israelites were circumcised, infant children of Christians should be baptized. This has a lot to do with how people view the covenants in the Bible. These people often appeal to Acts 2:37–39, which is part of what happens at the day of Pentecost. After Peter gives a rousing sermon to his fellow Jews, this is what happens:

<sup>37</sup> 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?"<sup>38</sup> 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.<sup>39</sup> For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself."

When Peter says, "the promise is for you and your children," those who baptize infants hear an echo of Genesis 17:7, when God says to Abraham, "And I will establish my covenant between me and you and your offspring after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you." But those who say this verse in Acts supports infant baptism don't read the whole passage carefully. Who can repent and be baptized? First of all, we see at the end of verse 39: "everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself."

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<sup>6</sup> See also 1 Pet. 3:21, which says, "Baptism, which corresponds to this [Noah and his family being saved from the flood on the ark], now saves you, not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a good conscience." Water baptism alone doesn't save. That would be "a removal of dirt from the body." But faith that Jesus can make one clean ("an appeal to God for a good conscience"), later pictured in water baptism, saves.

This is another way of saying, “everyone whom God saves.” Earlier, in his sermon, Peter quoted Joel 2:32 (in Acts 2:21), which says, “And it shall come to pass that everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.” The people who call on the name of the Lord are the people whom the Lord calls to himself. And so Peter is telling his audience, “the promise is for you”—in other words, everyone present, this generation. It is “for your children”—for succeeding generations of Jews who call on the name of the Lord Jesus. And it is “for all who are far off”—Gentiles. Everyone, regardless of ethnic status, religious background, and generation or age who calls on Jesus in faith can be saved through repentance and faith, the baptism of the Holy Spirit, which should then be pictured in water baptism.

Why is it necessary for people to call on the Lord Jesus to be saved? Because he was baptized for us. First of all, at the beginning of Jesus’ public ministry on earth, he was baptized by John the Baptist. That’s odd, since Jesus had no need to repent and he didn’t need to be cleansed of his sin, because he didn’t have any. But Jesus told John that it was necessary “for us to fulfill all righteousness” (see Matt. 3:13–16). Jesus was baptized not because he was a sinner in need of cleansing. No, but he was identifying with sinful people whom he would make righteous. This is what Jesus did when he died on the cross. He didn’t die for his own sin, but for ours. In fact, Jesus called his own death a “baptism.” This is what he says in Luke 12:50: “I have a baptism to be baptized with, and how great is my distress until it is accomplished!”<sup>7</sup> When Jesus was “baptized” on the cross, he was plunged into the depths of God’s wrath for our sin. And he absorbed it. He was regarded as dirty so we could be made clean (see 2 Cor. 5:21). And he gives us the Holy Spirit, who cleans us up on the inside, changing our desires.

So, if you are a Christian today, you should be baptized. If you haven’t been baptized yet, what are you waiting for? I would urge you to see me and be baptized.

Let me go back to the marriage metaphor. Some people wonder why they need a marriage ceremony, when they already love each other. The marriage ceremony doesn’t cause love or a life-long commitment to one another. But the ceremony is a way of declaring publicly that two people are committing to become one flesh “for richer or poor, in sickness and in health, till death do us part.” The couple declares before a cloud of witnesses, including God and all who are present at the ceremony, that they are committing to each other for the rest of their lives.

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<sup>7</sup> See also Mark 10:38.

In a similar way, when you get baptized in front of a congregation, you are promising God that you will follow Jesus forever, no matter where he leads. You are publicly proclaiming your new status as a Christian to the congregation. You are inviting them to hold you accountable, to keep you on the right path if it looks like you're straying. Sure, you don't need the ceremony of baptism to be saved. But you should desire to make your faith public. I think there's something very powerful about ceremonies. They seal a commitment that has already been made. They mark a no-turning-back moment.

For those of you who have already been baptized, let me ask you, "How is your marriage going?" I'm talking about your marriage to Jesus. Are you living a life of "deep love," of commitment? Is that commitment visible? Do you have evidence that you are united to Jesus now? You know, I don't need my wedding pictures to remind me I'm married. Every day, I live with my wife. In a similar way, I shouldn't have to look back to my baptism to know I'm a Christian. I should live with Jesus every day, even if some days I feel like a negligent, distant spouse.

If you're not living out that relationship with Jesus, what are you waiting for? Be committed to Jesus. Be committed to his bride, the church. If kids are married to a sport and therefore practice for hours, if sports fan are married to their favorite team and spend a great deal of time and money and emotional capital on that team, you who are married to Jesus should make his church a priority in your lives.