

"BAPTIZE THEM."

The Commands of Jesus, part 2, Matthew 28:19-20
Stonebrook Sunday AM, 1/7/24, Matt Heerema

Please open your Bibles to Matthew, chapter 28.

Baptism is one of the most important events and concepts in the Christian faith. Christians have understood baptism in several different ways throughout the centuries. At Stonebrook, we practice "believer's baptism" as an expression and testimony of our salvation through faith in Christ.

We would say that baptism is a command from Jesus, to be done by all who believe, as soon as possible after they believe. One key scripture on the command to baptize is:

Matthew 28:18-20 (CSB)

Jesus came near and said to them, "All authority has been given to me in heaven and on earth. 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, teaching them to observe everything I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

In 2020, Stonebrook affiliated with a group of churches who have a common statement of faith. We joined with them because we recognized a common mission, and common expression of belief. This affiliation is a bottom-up, not top-down arrangement. They don't impose anything on our church, rather we point at it and said, yes that's a good way of saying what we've always believed as a church.

Here how that statement of faith articulates baptism:

Christian baptism is the immersion of a believer in water in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. It is an act of obedience symbolizing the believer's faith in a crucified, buried, and risen Saviour, the believer's death to sin, the burial of the old life, and the resurrection to walk in newness of life in Christ Jesus. It is a testimony to his faith in the final resurrection of the dead. Being a church ordinance, it is prerequisite to the privileges of church membership and to the Lord's Supper.

Baptist Faith and Message 2000, VII

Some of you have asked about this language of baptism being a "pre-requisite" to The Lord's Supper, or communion. We'll get into this a little more next week, but the explanation isn't complicated.

- **Point 1:** All believers should be baptized as soon as possible after coming to faith in Christ.
- **Point 2:** Only believers should take communion.
- **Conclusion:** Those who take communion ought to be baptized.
- In other words: Saying that "Communion is for baptized believers" is really just a redundant statement.
- I don't think we pastors have ever explicitly taught on this point, but we've always held it. We've just never had a sermon or teaching focused on baptism as an opportunity to clarify it.

But really I'd like to focus today not on that, but rather on the definition: it is an act of obedience to Christ, symbolizing the believer's death to sin, burial of the old life, and resurrection to newness of life in Christ Jesus.

We see in Matthew 28 that Jesus commands baptism. So, being baptized is an act of obedience to Christ. To see that it should be done soon after coming to faith in Christ, let's turn to Acts chapter 2. On the day of pentecost, Jesus's church began. And it began with Peter preaching a powerful sermon to a crowd in Jerusalem. Acts 2 says that they believed his message about Jesus being the savior, and asked him "What should we do?"

Acts 2:37-38 (CSB)

When they heard this, they were pierced to the heart and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, "Brothers, what should we do?" Peter replied, "Repent and be baptized, each of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

So for the rest of the time, based on those passages, I'd like to address what the purpose of baptism is, who should be baptized, quickly summarize some other viewpoints on baptism, and answer some common objections or concerns.

If you are here this morning and you are a believer and you have been baptized, my hope is that you will be encouraged today as you remember your own baptism and are refreshed in its glorious significance and the profound things that it shows us.

If you are a believer and haven't been baptized, my hope is that you will see the need and purpose of baptism, such that you will obey Christ's command to be baptized, very soon!

If you are here this morning and are not a Christian, my hope is that you will come to see, by God's grace, the powerful realities that baptism symbolizes, and will embrace your creator God, and receive his gift of salvation, newness of life, rebirth from spiritual death, that is represented by this weird and wonderful ceremony.

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF BAPTISM?

1. Biblical way of professing saving faith

In our corner of the Christian family, maybe for only the last 150 years or so, we have developed some bad habits regarding professing faith. We've made it primarily an individual thing. We've made it primarily about things you think, and say.

One of the ways this has worked itself out is the idea of "the sinner's prayer"—that if you come to believe in Christ, you should pray a special prayer for salvation. This is a good thing to do, you certainly should cry out to God admitting that you are a sinner and need to repent. Might I suggest that you do this throughout your Christian life!

But the problem came in when people started viewing it as the only thing that needed to happen. "Believe? Great. Pray. Now you're in!" They're missing a piece. What did Peter say in Acts 2? Repent (there's the sinner's prayer), AND BE BAPTIZED. This is the biblical way of professing faith.

Baptism is a public statement of commitment to Christ and his Church, that puts the rest of the church on notice that we are claiming to be a believer, and should be treated as such.

Because it is the biblical way of professing faith, it should be done by all believers, soon after they profess saving faith, soon after they pray a prayer of repentance. Immediately if possible.

2. Physical symbol / testimony of the inward reality

Baptism is a powerful, physical symbol representing spiritual baptism / baptism of the Holy Spirit, i.e., regeneration ("the new birth"). You might say that baptism is sort of the ultimate "sermon illustration."

It is a reminder of Christ's death and burial, of our death to sin and burial with him, just like going under the water, and Christ's rising to new life and us rising with him, just like we come up out of the water.

The water also provides an image of spiritual cleansing and forgiveness.

3. A vivid, memorable, depiction of the spiritual reality

There's probably nothing more vividly memorable than being dunked in water in front of a bunch of people! It is a helpful way to lock in this moment in time into your mind and heart!

And by the way, from now on every time you watch a baptism, you get to remember that moment, and call to mind the joy of being a new believer!

And this is not just about you and benefits it brings you, everyone who has been baptized has that same experience! Your baptism reminded or will remind other believers of their baptism and will encourage them and bring them joy!

It benefits all who see it. Believers are reminded, and seekers are inspired. Everyone gets a chance to remember Christ's work and rejoice. Everybody wins. Baptism services are some of my favorite times in the church. It's one of the biggest problems we see with two services, and why we're attempting the baptisms between services! Stay alert for those and stick around or come early to make sure you don't miss out on this encouraging time.

4. Obedience to Christ

Finally, most importantly, Christ commanded that we be baptized in Matthew 28, as an entry into our life of discipleship. Obeying Christ's commands is what our faith is all about! It is appropriate that our faith walk begins with an unmistakable act of obedience to him.

WHO SHOULD BE BAPTIZED?

The quick answer, from Matthew 28, is "disciples" – those who have placed their faith in Jesus and desire to follow him. A person should demonstrate a clear understanding of the gospel message, as well as a committed faith in Christ, before being baptized.

How old should they be? How long should they have been demonstrating that understanding and faith? Age and length of time demonstrating those things are less relevant considerations. Different families have different convictions on "how ready" kids are. But be careful with the reasoning: "how genuine is it"? This is a difficult thing to judge. But some things to look for: There will be a noticeable love for Jesus, a noticeable interest God's Word, and a noticeable sorrow of sin present and spirit of repentance, a desire to pray to God in Jesus's name, and a desire to be together with God's people in the church.

Regardless of age, it is a "discipleship issue" from there. Baptism is the beginning of a lifetime of learning to follow Christ. We in the church need to help one another as we grow, make mistakes, repent, and learn (this is what we mean by disciple one another).

Who should do the baptizing?

Another quick note is about who can do the baptizing. We believe that any baptized believer (there's the redundant statement again) can baptize another. Jesus's command in Matthew 28 to make disciples, baptizing them and teaching them is a recursive command that goes out to every Christian, not to some specially authorized Christians like pastors or priests.

We pastors are always happy to baptize, but I think its a better picture of the church for a new believer to be baptized by the one who has been helping them along in their faith, when possible.

WHAT ARE THE OTHER POSITIONS?

Here is an overly-brief synopsis of the three other major understandings of baptism. I want to talk about them so that you will recognize them when you see them.

0. Credo-baptist (believers baptism) - our stance.

1. Reformed paedo-baptism (infant baptism)

- Presbyterians, Reformed Churches
- Actually relatively close to Credo-baptists
- Saying "you are part of the covenant community" but not necessarily saved.

2. Baptism saves you (even as an infant)

- Protestant formulation: God saves by Grace alone, and has ordained baptism as a means by which sins are forgiven. (Lutherans, Anglicans, Methodists)
- Roman formulation: Baptismal regeneration, the act of baptism releases from original sin and places into a state of grace

3. Baptism is required for salvation

- Baptism is for believers only, but is required for God to enter into the covenant with us

If you have more questions about where these positions come from, or if you want to know more specifically why I believe these are not correct positions, from the scriptures, I'd be happy to talk afterward.

OBJECTIONS

"I was already baptized as an infant."

With respect to the other positions above. As I hope I've shown, the Biblical teaching on baptism is that it is to be given to disciples of Jesus, it is an act of obedience to Christ by the one being baptized as a way of responding to the gospel message.

My counsel to someone who was baptized as an infant, as I was, is to follow the Bible's teaching, and the Bible's examples of Baptism (all of which show baptism being given as a response of faith), and follow Christ's commands to be baptized once you are his disciple.

I have seen hundreds of believers follow through with this as adults, probably dozens of which, including myself, who were baptized as infants, be blessed and encouraged and refreshed in their faith.

"I'm afraid of what others will think."

This could take a few forms. A very few of us present here today could be seriously persecuted by family members back home for being baptized. For many of us the idea of being baptized in front of a crowd is simply an intimidating idea. May I ask a simple question: whose opinion do you fear more, the crowd? Or Christ's?

For those of you intimidated by the idea of doing something in front of the entire church, let me simply assure you that the only thoughts going through our minds will be joy, love, and support. You will be encouraging your brothers and sisters in Christ and will not be embarrassing yourself in the least.

For those of you legitimately fearing a threat from those at home, let us commit as a church to pray for courage and God's help in this important step of faith and obedience to Christ.

"I've been a believer a long time and haven't been baptized, and now it's awkward."

This is really just a reframing of the previous question, and the answer is the same, what are you fearing? Embarrassment? I've already mentioned, don't need to fear that here.

Jesus told a parable in Matthew 21:28-29. -

"...A man had two sons. He went to the first and said, 'My son, go work in the vineyard today.' "He answered, 'I don't want to,' but later he changed his mind and went. Then the man went to the other and said the same thing. 'I will, sir,' he answered, but he didn't go. Which of the two did his father's will?"

Even late and faltering obedience is pleasing to Christ.

CONCLUSION

In humility, we realize that this issue has divided the church for hundreds of years. But, again in humility, we can have some confidence in the purpose and place of baptism in a believer's life. And with all boldness, all Christians recognize the command of the Lord Jesus to be baptized with water as an expression of faith in his saving work!

I recognize that there are a number of questions, concerns, and possible objections to what I've talked about here. My hope is that, if you are a believer in Christ, and a part of our church family, and have not yet been baptized that you will be very soon. I'd love to talk about that with you, so please get in touch with myself or one of the other pastors, or the office and we'll get it set up!

If you are not a believer in Christ today, I hope today's service has shown you the core of our faith: that we are sinners, who are dead in our sin and rebellion against God: as dead as someone who would be buried, underwater, but that through faith in Christ, we have been raised to new life like being raised out of the water, have been cleansed from all our sin and guilt and shame of our former life, just like water cleanses the body. And my hope is that you'll join with us in the family of the church. If this is you today, I'd also love to talk.

Lets pray!