Pastor Jim West
January 17, 2016
Acts:  What is Baptism?
Acts 2:36-38; Matthew 28:18-20

This morning we return to our journey through Acts, and once again we will turn to Acts 2:36-38, and we’ll also read Matthew 28:18-20. Please stand for the reading of God’s Word.

Acts 2:36-38
36 Let all the house of Israel therefore know for certain that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified.” 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?” 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.

Matthew 28:18-20
18 And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 19 Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in[a] 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.”

If you are visiting with us for the first time or you have been away for a while, we have been considering this monumental day in Jerusalem, the day of Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit came upon the disciples with power. The crowd that gathers is amazed to hear these Galilean followers of Jesus proclaim the mighty deeds of God in every language under the sun, though some think the disciples must be drunk. To speak to what they are witnessing, the Apostle Peter stands up and addresses the crowd with a powerful proclamation of the Gospel. He sums up his message in vs. 36 stating, “Let all the house of Israel therefore know for certain that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified.”

Luke tells us that thousands standing there in the streets of Jerusalem are cut to the heart…they are convicted that Jesus is the Christ, and they just had him crucified…so they cry out asking, “What shall we do?” In response, Peter gives two mandates and two promises. The first mandate is to repent. We saw last week that repentance essentially means to turn around, to change one’s mind and to return to the Father. It is to accept responsibility for our condition, to snap out of the lie and face the reality of our sin and it’s consequence in our relationships with God, others, and ourselves. And it is to turn away from the lie, turn away from our path of self-destruction, and to turn back to the Father who runs to us and restores us through the blood of Christ, who paid our debt on the cross that we might be reconciled to God and to one another.
This morning we will examine the second mandate and the first promise, which we find in the second half of vs. 38: “…be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins.”

Baptism is a universal practice for all Christians, but it is also one of the most debated practices of the Christian church. My goal this morning is to boil baptism down to its most essential components; to help you understand some of the varied perspectives of baptism; and then to address why baptism continues to be an essential and vital component for those throughout the world who are convicted by the Gospel and ask the question, “What shall we do?”

**HISTORY of BAPTISM**

To begin, let me provide a bit of history. The first place in the Bible that we see baptism happening in the way that we typically think of baptism is Luke 3, where John the Baptist is in the Jordan river, baptizing all who will repent, both Jew and Gentile, as a means of “preparing the way” for the Messiah. The word “baptize” comes from the Greek word *baptizo* which literally means to “dip, immerse, or submerge.” John the Baptist immersed repentant people in the Jordan river…and that’s typically what we think of when we think of baptism. Now…did baptism exist prior to the New Testament and John the Baptist? To some degree YES, but it was different, and it wasn’t called “baptism.” In fact, you won’t find the English term “baptism” in any English translation of the Old Testament. All twenty uses of that word are found exclusively in the New Testament, so “baptism” per se is an exclusively New Testament practice.

Nevertheless, the significance and practice of washing with water as a means of ritual purification was an ancient practice with the Jews that dates back all the way to the book of Genesis. The Apostle Peter draws a parallel to baptism in 1 Peter 3:18-22 that points all the way back to Noah. Here’s what he writes:

*For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit,* in which he went and proclaimed to the spirits in prison, because they formerly did not obey, when God’s patience waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was being prepared, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were brought safely through water. 21 Baptism, which corresponds to this, now saves you, not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers having been subjected to him.*

Peter helps us tie the practice of baptism in the New Testament with practical and symbolic references to the Old Testament. First, Peter says that NT baptism “corresponds” with the way Noah and his family were saved through water. Remember that the flood represented God’s judgment upon a sinful and corrupt generation, but Noah’s family and the animals of
creation were spared in the midst of the waters. Peter essentially says, “NT baptism points to
that, but it’s different.” The first difference is that the water of baptism is “not as a removal of
dirt from the body.” Peter is differentiating NT baptism from the OT practice of ritual
purification that was prescribed in Leviticus and practiced by the Jews for centuries.

We learn in Leviticus 8 that God regularly prescribed the priests to wash with water before
presenting sacrifices in the tabernacle. In Lev.15, God requires a man suffering from a bodily
discharge of some kind to wash in “living water” and then present a sacrificial offering to the
LORD in order to be cleansed and atoned for. The washing was both practical (so that
individuals and thus the whole community would not be infected with disease), and it was also
symbolic of the heart. So ritual washing was a physical act representing a desire of the heart to
be cleansed and restored in one’s relationship to God and His law, even as it was a practical act
of cleansing—not unlike the way we take a bath or a shower to get clean and to feel clean.

I don’t want to belabor the point here, but I do want you to notice the occasional OT
mandate to use “living water.” The point of using “living water” was to avoid using stagnant
water, which as you know, becomes a cesspool of contaminates, particularly when it’s hot
outside. The practice of using “living water” for ritual purification became a very significant
part of the Jewish culture, particularly in Jerusalem, where pools of “living water” called
“mikvah” were constructed not far from the Jewish Temple. You may recognize the “pool of
Siloam” where Jesus sent a blind man to wash in the gospel of John. The pool of Siloam was fed
by the Gihon spring through the use of aqueducts, so when Peter tells people to “be baptized,”
many were likely baptized by the apostles in the “living waters” of Siloam. The Gospel of John
also tells of Jesus healing a paralytic by the pool of Bethseda. It was thought that when the angel
of God stirred the water in that pool, the first person into the pool would be healed of his or her
infirmity. Again, the idea is that stagnant water was not as potent as “living water.”

With this history of ritual purification through the washing in living water in mind, consider that
Jesus refers to Himself as “living water” to the Samaritan woman in John 4. Jesus also invited
people to quench their thirst in Him in John 7 where he proclaims, “If anyone thirsts, let him
come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, “Out of his heart will
flow rivers of living water.”

So the imagery of living water, purification, cleansing, and eternal satisfaction for the thirsty are
all Old Testament contributors to the notion of New Testament baptism.

One last notable difference between the practice of OT purification and NT baptism is this: in
the OT practice of purification, you “dipped” yourself into the pool, or you washed your own
body with water. However, NT baptism is not something you can do for yourself. The idea is
that we submit ourselves to baptism. It is an act of surrender, which is why Peter says, “Be
baptized,” instead of “go baptize yourselves.”

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THE MEANING OF BAPTISM

Now, let’s look at the meaning of baptism. Peter defines what baptism means in Acts 2:28 when he says, “Be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins.” In its most basic sense, baptism marks our individual repentance and the forgiveness of our sins in the name of Jesus Christ. Why the name of Jesus Christ? Because only Jesus has the authority to forgive sins.

Remember what Peter writes in 1 Peter 3, “Baptism…saves you, not as a removal of dirt from the body, but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers having been subjected to him.”

Remember, Peter is comparing the salvation of Noah through the water of judgment with the salvation of believers through the water of baptism. In other words, we are not saved BY the waters of baptism, we are saved through our baptism, which in its essence makes an appeal to God through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, by whose sacrifice and authority we are saved and can enjoy a good conscience.

Remember that, according to the prophecy of Joel, only those who call upon the name of the Lord will be saved. So, baptism says in no uncertain terms, “Jesus is Lord, and I’m making my appeal to God in His name…I’m placing my trust and my hope for eternal life in Jesus. I will forever serve Jesus as my King as a citizen of His Kingdom.” We could spend hours plumbing the depth of how Jesus saves both now and at the end of our lives or this age, but suffice it to say that baptism in the name of Jesus states to the world, “I place my trust in Jesus for the forgiveness of sins and my salvation. I surrender myself to Jesus, who is my Lord.”

As we study the New Testament, there are other significant, helpful ways to think about our baptism, including our allegiance to Christ, our identification with Christ, our unity in Christ, our dying and rising with Christ, and our cleansing through the gift of the Holy Spirit.

CHANGING FLAGS in BAPTISM: When Peter tells the citizens of Jerusalem to repent and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ, he is challenging them not only to turn from their sins, but to identify themselves as those under the rule and Kingdom of their Messiah, King Jesus. In other words, its one thing to feel a certain way about Jesus, it’s quite another to go public with your commitment. The public sacrament of baptism was such a strong association with Jesus that they were mocked and called, “Christians” as an insult. That was a title the early believers were proud to live with…so much so that they were willing to suffer persecution and martyrdom as those who “belonged to Christ.”

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Charles Haddon Spurgeon, often referred to as the Prince of Preachers, said that up until the time he was baptized, he was afraid to confess Christ. Thereafter, he lost all fear of man and never again hesitated to boldly profess his faith. He likened his baptism to “crossing the Rubicon or burning the boats. No retreat was possible after that, nor have I ever wanted to go back to the world from which I then came out.” In countries where Christianity is illegal and/or severely persecuted, new believers risk their lives every day to be baptized in their bathtubs or in rivers in the dark of night. Baptism marks the point of no return for them…and it often costs them their lives. One day, our baptism may cost us more than we ever imagined as well.

IDENTIFICATION with JESUS in BAPTISM: The Reformed tradition emphasizes baptism as our identification with Jesus by drawing the parallel between baptism in the NT and circumcision in the Old Testament. In baptism we are identified with Jesus, even as circumcision identified the Jews with Abraham. Paul writes about this association in Colossians 2: For in Him all the fullness of Deity dwells in bodily form, «and in Him you have been made complete, and He is the head over all rule and authority; «and in Him you were also circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, in the removal of the body of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ; «having been buried with Him in baptism, in which you were also raised up with Him through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead. (Colossians 2.9-12). As we’ll see later in Acts, conversion in the first century often happened by households which would have been common in a society that thought in terms of “us” instead of the Western hyper-individualism that we are accustomed to that always begins with the word “I.” This emphasis on our communal identification with Jesus through baptism is one of the reasons the Reformed Tradition has so strongly embraced infant baptism. Just as Jewish families had their infants circumcised as their familial identification with the God of Abraham, so also Christian infants in the Reformed tradition are often baptized as the familial identification with Jesus Christ and His Church. Not all Christian traditions agree with infant baptism, but it’s important to know why certain traditions do… and this concept of baptism as the communal identification with Jesus is critical to that understanding.

UNITY in BAPTISM: Baptism (along with the Lord’s Supper) is a unifying sacrament that binds the universal church together as the Body of Christ. Paul writes, “For by one Spirit, we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free, and we were all made to drink of one Spirit” (1 Corinthians 12.13).

DEATH and RESURRECTION in BAPTISM: Paul tells also tells us that in baptism we symbolically participate in the death of Christ so that we might also participate in His resurrection. In Romans 6 we read, “Or do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus have been baptized into His death? Therefore we have been buried with Him through baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we
too might walk in newness of life. For if we have become united with Him in the likeness of His death, certainly we shall also be in the likeness of His resurrection, (Romans 6.3-6).

When we think about this aspect of baptism, we might imagine that the “old, faithless man” goes down into the water, representing our sincere repentance and the crucifixion of our former way of living and thinking. It is the “new man”, then, who arises out of the waters of baptism as one who is saved by Jesus, given a new identity…one who has been redeemed and is now a child of God. Does baptism accomplish this transformation? No. It represents this transformation, so beautifully described by the Apostle Paul when he writes, “I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.”

BAPTISM and the HOLY SPIRIT: Finally, baptism points to God’s work of regeneration through the power and presence of his Holy Spirit. I’ll cover this in greater depth next week, but let’s begin with what Paul writes in Titus, He saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit, whom He poured out upon us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that being justified by His grace we would be made heirs according to the hope of eternal life (Titus 3.5-7).

All throughout the New Testament, there is an association with baptism and the gift of the Holy Spirit as we read about here in Acts 2 when Peter says, “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.” However, we would be in error to assume a direct, linear correlation between baptism and receiving the Holy Spirit. As we’ll see as we throughout our journey through Acts, sometimes the Holy Spirit comes upon believers before baptism, and other times the Holy Spirit comes after baptism. There is always an association with baptism and the gift of the Holy Spirit, but it is not formulaic or linear in nature.

Now…on account of time, let me simply conclude with some gentle warnings about this subject of baptism.

WARNINGS CONCERNING BAPTISM

1) Be careful to NOT think of baptism as a prerequisite for salvation. I like the way my friend Hank Hanegraff says it, “While the mode of baptism is not essential to salvation, the mandate of baptism is essential to obedience.” Simply stated, to follow Jesus in obedience is to be baptized…He did not make that optional for us. Jesus led us by example by submitting Himself to baptism, and He made it clear in Matthew 28 that our job is to make disciples and to baptize them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Nevertheless, we are not to think of baptism as a prerequisite to salvation. When the criminal on the cross next to Jesus called him Lord in faith with repentant humility, Jesus promised his salvation that very day, and there was no need or possibility for baptism to come first.
Some may ask, “Why then should we bother with baptism if it’s not required to enter heaven?” The simple answer is this, “We undergo baptism because Jesus is our King, and baptism is a direct order from our Sovereign Lord.” Just as our willingness to undergo baptism reflects the condition of our softened hearts eager for salvation, so our unwillingness to undergo baptism may very well reflect hearts that are unwilling to yield to the Kingship of Christ. Jesus said, “If you love me, do what I have commanded you to do.” Baptism tells the whole world, “We love Jesus.”

2) Avoid theological polarization around the sacrament of baptism. If you like to wade around in the doctrines of the church, it won’t take you very long to get sucked into the Bermuda Triangle of baptism debates. Seminarians LOVE to debate infant baptism, immersion vs. sprinkling, and the salvific value of baptism versus the symbolic value of baptism. My advice is that, in most cases, you should avoid going there with people you disagree with. In other words, please do not bash the Catholics or the Baptists who might practice and interpret baptism differently than we do here at Colonial. Nothing good comes from such squabbles. Instead, work to preserve the unity of the church by finding the essential commonalities shared by all expressions of Christ’s body when it comes to baptism in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit for the forgiveness of sins in the name of Jesus Christ.

3) Do not overestimate the power of baptism, and do not underestimate the power of baptism. Here’s what I mean by that: we overestimate the power of baptism if we think that the sacrament somehow affects change upon the person being baptized in the sense that their baptism “saves them” or somehow “cleanses them” from sin. The saving and the cleansing happens through faith in the finished work of Jesus Christ. Only Jesus saves and only the Holy Spirit cleanses…the waters of baptism do neither. Baptism points to the power, it is not the source of the power.

However…We underestimate the power of baptism if we think of it as a photo shoot and a quaint tradition of the church. Something definitely happens in the sacrament of baptism that is very powerful, mysterious, and indelible. Reformed theologian Richard Platt writes:

There is, in every sacrament, a spiritual relation, or sacramental union, between the sign and the thing signified: whence it comes to pass, that the names and effects of the one are attributed to the other.

Reformed theology concurs with Scripture that there is more than meets the eye in the rite of baptism. Spiritual realities occur in conjunction with baptism, but the Scriptures do not explain in detail how baptism and divine grace are connected. So, Reformed theology speaks of the connection as a sacramental (i.e. mysterious) union.

Here’s the point: Jesus would have never commanded all believers to be baptized if there was not power, meaning, and value associated with that act. The truth is, however, that the Bible does not unpack all of that for us…it is, to some degree, a mystery. I will tell you that I personally believe something very powerful happens in baptism in the spirit realm. I am not alone in believing that baptism marks us with an invisible seal—almost like a certain tattoo marks those who have served in the Special Forces. If we had eyes to see what happens in the
spiritual realm, we would likely recognize the seal of Christ upon each person who has undergone baptism.

I have often heard or read stories of spiritual “power encounters” on the mission field when an evil spirit recognizes the baptized Christian as one who is “covered” or “protected” by the power of God. When our repentance and faith are sincere, when we undergo the waters of baptism, either as an infant or an adult, I think it is reasonable to believe that God marks us as His own. We are marked by His claim, His name, His grace, and His power on us. We can't see it...the world out there usually can’t see it...but there are others in the spiritual realm who can—I’m quite certain of that. In fact, I count on that seal of my baptism every time I step into a room or a country where evil is at work. No matter how daunting the situation, I muster up my courage and claim my identity: I am a baptized child of God, set apart by my baptism in the name of Jesus Christ, covered by His blood, empowered with His Spirit, and my soul cannot be touched by the flaming arrows of our Adversary. I am a loyal subject to my King, a citizen of the Kingdom of God, and therefore I am entitled to all the privileges and protection that are promised to me by my King and for those who serve Him. Thus I am not afraid...not because I am strong, but because the one who lives in me is stronger than the one who rules in the world. That’s all part of what it means to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ…it is anything but unimportant.

So...if you are convicted of God’s truth as found in the gospel of Jesus Christ...what should you do? Repent, be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. More on that last part next Sunday. Let’s pray.