

Baptism: The Gateway to the Church, Part 1

Selected Scriptures

it's time to reestablish the truth about the membership of the local church. Who are its members? What is the local church made up of? I guess it goes without saying that the church is made up of Christians, believers who have been regenerated by the Holy Spirit. The church consists of born-again followers of Christ, true disciples of our only Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

Sure, I know there are false professors who attend church, but they aren't the church. There are lifeless branches who are superficially attached to the vine. But there's no vitality in them, is there? They aren't the church. Those are the tares among the wheat. They are the profane mixing in among the sacred. They are the pretenders hiding out among the sincere worshippers. The tares, the profane, the false, they don't do such a good job at helping us to fulfill, to carry out the

mission that God gave us to do here on the earth, do they? They undermine it. They run counter to it.

And that is one of the reasons why Jesus gave the church ordinances to practice until he returns. Some call them sacraments. It's an okay word. As long as you don't have the Roman Catholic definition of conferring grace in your mind, sacraments is an okay word. It's just talking about an outward symbol that gives, that gives expression to an inward reality, inward spiritual reality. We call them ordinances.

And he gave two ordinances that define and protect the fellowship. Baptism is an initiation sacrament, and communion is a preservation sacrament. Baptism is the ordinance that provides entry into the fellowship by defining what a true Christian is. And communion is the ordinance that preserves and protects the fellowship by calling Christians to live consistently with the life and sacrifice of Jesus Christ.

Well, we're going to talk about communion next week because we're going have an opportunity to celebrate the Lord's Table

together. For today, we want to get some clarity on the ordinance of baptism, the ritual that provides entry into the church.

Jesus instituted the ordinance of baptism after he had risen from the dead, just before he ascended into heaven. In Matthew 28:18-20 Jesus said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 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 do, to observe all that I've commanded you. And behold, I am with you always to the end of the age."

We all know that as the Great Commission, right? That's the charter statement of Christ's church. It defines our mission and clarifies our purpose here on earth, and the single imperative in that Great Commission, the one command, make disciples. The word, go, is a participle. It's called a participle of attendant circumstance for all you grammarians out there, and it picks up the mood, there, of the great, of the, the main verb, go and make disciples.

So it sounds like a command, but the main verb points us here to a disciple-making task. And that task requires two activities, baptizing and teaching. You know, since, since I've come here, we've talked a lot about the church's duty to teach its members. We keep hammering that over and over and over. That's where we started last fall, going through Ephesians 4:1-16. That teaching ministry of the local church is the fundamental task of leadership because that's how the membership becomes equipped to do the work of the ministry, right? That's not unfamiliar to you.

What we haven't talked about very much, and listen, what I find is an all too often neglected and trivialized aspect of local church life is the indispensable ritual by which a person enters the local church. Baptism is the very gateway to the church, and we need to treat it with the dignity and the importance that's demanded by our Lord's Great Commission. Inasmuch as we need to emphasize teaching, and we do need to, need to emphasize baptism, too.

It's troubling to see how many churches, to see how many Christians, individual Christians, are either ignorant of or indifferent to the ordinance of baptism. Frankly, baptism has fallen on some hard times. And that goes hand-in-hand with the lack of clarity in this country and around the world about the Gospel. When there are so many false gospels cluttering up the evangelical landscape, as an ordinance that pictures the Gospel, I guess it makes sense that baptism would be distorted too.

There are some today who baptize each other just as individuals, one guy baptizing the other guy in a backyard swimming pool or a beach or whatever. They're completely apart from the corporate gathering of the local church, totally independent from any duly constituted church authority. Some churches trivialize baptism, relegating it to like some kind of a family thing, like a family rite of passage, fathers and mothers baptizing their kids in the pool, and it's a big family celebration.

Is that what it is? One kid made a mockery of baptism by running, jumping, and making a cannonball into the baptismal pool. What's up with that? To his credit, the pastor said that

was the first and the last time that would ever happen. He said that on the video, but his congregation was laughing hysterically. Not good.

Steven Furtick, a Southern Baptist pastor, has been criticized recently for profaning baptism. He uses baptism as a metric of his success, his church's success. The more baptisms recorded each year, the more evidence of success. His Elevation Church in Charlotte, North Carolina, is making a run at a new record of baptisms per year. In a report obtained by the NBC affiliate in Charlotte, North Carolina, Elevation Church went from 289 baptisms in 2010 to 2,410 in 2011. Took a little dip in 2012 to 689, but it was back to 3,519 for the first eight months of 2013.

Furtick called those numbers "nothing short of miraculous," and he explained the phenomenon as a fresh outpouring of the Holy Spirit on his church. And he would have gotten away with it, too, if it hadn't been for them meddling kids. Someone leaked a document written by Furtick, called *The Spontaneous Baptism's How-To Guide*. Actual title. Turns out the Holy Spirit

was using the principles of crowd psychology and group dynamics to create this revival.

To achieve high baptism numbers for your church, you're going to need about a hundred or so volunteers to form a number of different teams. Got a celebration team, a registration team, dry changing team, host team, tank team, wet changing team, media team, and VHQ team take care of your volunteers. For example, the celebration team is made up of people who are planted in the audience. These are insiders. They're planted in the audience, planted at the doors, in the hallways, and using crowd psychology, conformity, group dynamics, that celebration team encourages people to go forward, to get up out of their seat and go forward.

Here's a quote from the how-to guide. I've got a copy in case we're interested in trying to do this here. Here's what it says, quote, "Fifteen people will sit in the worship experience," not a service, an experience, "worship experience and be the first ones to move when the pastor gives the call. Sit in the auditorium and begin moving forward when Pastor

Steven says go. Move intentionally through the highest visibility areas and the longest walk.” End quote.

Furtick stations people at the doors telling them to quote, “Smile, clap, showing people you're excited that they came forward.” End quote. Another 30 to 60 people are in the halls to, says here, quote, “create a critical mass as people are moving through the hallway toward registration area.”

Evidently, this contrived spontaneity works. People love to follow the crowd. They love to do what their peers are doing. And they plan on an average of between 30 to 45 seconds to baptize each person. This includes entry into the baptistery, the announcement of their name, baptism and exit. As one reporter observed, writing for the newspaper, quote, “Think of the room in terms of a NASCAR pit stop. Quick in and quick out.” End quote. And poof, 3,000 baptisms per year.

Listen, whatever your view of baptism, that’s clearly making a mockery of Christian baptism. Beloved, no Christian should treat baptism in such a trivial fashion. Baptism is not a



gimmick. It is not a metric of success. Baptism is a holy ordinance, and it ought to be respected, treated with dignity and honor. We can start to honor the ordinance of baptism today by understanding it, and that's what we hope to do right now. We want to understand the significance of baptism as the initiation rite, the initiation ritual by which the redeemed enter into the fellowship of the Christian Church.

So let me give you a little outline to follow for this morning. We're going to ask and answer four questions about baptism, which is, which are going to help us understand, as you can see in your bulletin, the definition, the implications, the demonstration, and the function of baptism. The definition, implication, demonstration, and the function of baptism.

Let's start at our first point, the definition of baptism. What is baptism? Where'd it come from? What is it, where'd it come from? Simple question, right? The word, baptize, comes from the Greek verb *baptizo*, and you could turn to Matthew Chapter 3. We'll get there in a moment, but turn to Matthew Chapter 3 because that's where it's first used in the New Testament.

*Baptizo* comes from an even shorter verb. It's built off an even shorter verb, *bapto*, *bapto*, and *bapto* means to dip, as in dipping a bite of food into a sauce. That's the word used when Jesus dipped the morsel of bread on the night of his betrayal. "He dipped his morsel into the sop," John 13:36, "and he gave it to Judas Iscariot." That morsel was dipped in the sop, and it was, it was soaked. It was immersed.

*Bapto* was also used of dipping a garment into dye and, and dying a fabric. In Revelation 19:13, Jesus is clothed in a robe stained with blood. That's the word *bapto*. The fibers of the fabric had been fully saturated in the staining liquid, in this case the blood.

Now, the word baptize, *baptizo*, that's an even more intense word than the word *bapto*. Back in the classic era about 500 years before Christ, *baptizo* originally referred to the sinking of a ship, or, or drowning or perishing at sea. To be baptized meant to plunge to your death in a watery grave, like going down to Davy Jones' locker.

That, that root concept, *bap, baptizo*, that root concept, the association with immersion, in water, saturation even with water, that remained with the word *baptizo* into New Testament times, and it means, just as we understand it today, to immerse, to plunge. Sometimes it takes on a tone of ritual washing head to toe, but it's a thorough washing.

We first find the word *baptizo* used in the New Testament in association with John the Baptist. All four Gospels feature the preparation ministry of the forerunner. It's Matthew 3 and Luke 3, and then Mark 1 and John 1, all of them talking about John the Baptist's preparation ministry. He came as the forerunner to the Messiah, baptizing the people getting them ready for the Messiah ministry.

Take a look at Matthew chapter 3, Matthew 3:1-6. Says this, "In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea, 'Repent for the Kingdom of heaven is at hand. But 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.' Now John wore a garment of camel's hair and a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locust and wild honey. Then Jerusalem and all Judea and all the region about the Jordan were going out to him, and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan confessing their sins."

Stop there. In preparation for the Messiah's ministry, for the Messiah coming, preaching, John called the Jews to repent and be baptized. They could no longer trust in what had previously defined them, that is their, their Jewish heritage, their culture in the Mosaic law, their external demonstrations of righteousness like Sabbath-keeping, dietary observance, sacrifice. He was calling them to disassociate themselves with all those external marks of fidelity to God and admit that they were nothing more than a Gentile.

You have to realize, folks, what John was doing was absolutely radical. He was telling Jews that they had to identify with Gentiles in order to participate in the messianic program. They had to declare publicly that they were a defiled

people in need of a full and complete washing away of their defilement.

There were many, many Jews, as it says here, many who submitted to John's baptism. But not everyone. Not everyone. For some Jews, John's baptism was just too much to handle. Luke 7:24-30 records that. Jesus taught about the significance of his cousin's preparatory ministry, and in verse 28 of that section, this is what Jesus said, Luke 7:28. He says, "I tell you, among those born of women, none is greater than John. Yet he who is the least in the Kingdom of God is greater than he."

John the Baptist was the greatest of all the Old Testament prophets. He came just before Jesus' coming, and he had the highest revelation to speak and point to Jesus Christ. That made him the greatest. And yet the infant in the Kingdom of God is greater than John the Baptist. Why? Because he understands the fullness of salvation. He understands the fullness of what John pointed to. Verse, says in verse 29, Luke 7:29, where all the people heard this, and the tax gatherers, too. They declared God just, having been baptized with the baptism of John.

You get it? They were humble, repentant. But verse 30, “the Pharisees and the lawyers rejected the purpose of God for themselves, not having been baptized by him.” Hmm. Interesting how it's the religious establishment, the old guys, those with a lot of skin in the game, those who had invested a lifetime building their positions of influence in Judaism, for them, John's baptism was a total offense. You mean everything in my former life, everything I've done? You can't affirm any of it?

But for the humble of heart, their eyes were open to the righteous judgment of God represented in John's baptism. “God opposes the proud, but he gives grace to the humble.” That's John's baptism. Just a brief look.

It was based on Gentile proselyte baptism, and both Gentile baptism and John's baptism, they signified an end of an old existence, as in a death, and the beginning of an entirely new life, an entirely new existence. Those proselytes separated forever from their heritage, forever from their history, their people, their religion. Baptize, baptism, symbolized their,

their cleansing from that former defilement. And the proselyte then embraced the culture and the religion of Is, of Israel, embraced Israel's God. John's baptism did the very same thing. Very same thing. Preparing Jew and Gentile alike to meet the Messiah. So when Jesus commanded us to make disciples, to baptize them into the fellowship, those elements were already present in that ritual.

Now, just a footnote. John 3:23 says that John chose to baptize at the Jordan River because "water was plentiful there." That's one reason we know the mode of baptism is full immersion in water, not sprinkling. Because if it were sprinkling, and if John were just sprinkling everyone, he wouldn't need a river. He'd just wandered the streets of Jerusalem and Judea with a bucket, sprinkling water on the faces of everybody who's repenting, right? You need a river. Because the river had the waterflow to bring people down into it.

There's a continuity in the concept of baptism, running from proselyte baptism to John's baptism to Christian baptism. It's continuity running all the way through there. Baptism pictures the end of an old life, washing and cleansing from

defilement, and the beginning of an entirely new life. Death, burial, and resurrection, that picture is painted best by immersion into and emergence up from water.

We already read Matthew 28:18-20, but go ahead and turn there just quickly, there at the end of Matthew, Matthew 28, and I just want to point out a couple of things to you there. In Jesus' Great Commission, you're very familiar with this, I know, but Jesus said, "Go, therefore and make disciples of all nations," and then the two things, "baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit," and number two, "teaching them to observe all that I've commanded you."

Now, you understand that's not a suggestion from our Lord. That's not like a good idea of maybe something you want to try in your church, another way of doing church. That's not that. This is his command. And every new convert to Christ must submit himself to the Lord's baptism and to his teaching.

The call to discipleship, as you can see there, "go and make disciples of" what? All nations, right? The call to



discipleship transcends national interests, cultural backgrounds, your ethnicity, your geography, all of it. None of that matters when it comes to learning the universal, transcendent truth of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Christian discipleship transcends it all.

Jesus commands us to do two things with these disciples. We're to baptize them and we're to teach them. And these disciples, to become disciples, must be of a mind to learn from Jesus. Disciples are learners. They are lifelong followers. They're devoted to Christ, to his teaching, to his ways.

Notice there's content involved in that Great Commission. In both baptizing and teaching aspects of disciple-making, there is content involved. We baptize them, what does it say there, "in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit." You know what that is? Trinitarian language, which means a person coming forward as a candidate for baptism, that person needs to understand the Gospel well enough to apprehend the triune nature of God. That's deep stuff.

Now notice I said, apprehend, not, comprehend. New converts aren't theology professors. We get that. But they do need to understand the Gospel well enough to make some basic affirmations and some basic distinctions. The convert has to have a basic grasp both of the unity of God, that God is one in essence, as well as the three distinct persons of the Godhead, distinguishing Father from Son, Son from Father and Spirit, and Spirit from Father and Son.