



Baptism: The Demonstration of Devotion

Max Lucado

Christians participate in two God-ordained sacraments that celebrate what God has done for us: communion and baptism. Communion is celebrated on a regular basis and baptism as a one-time declaration of a lifetime of devotion to God. This study will consider the second of these two events: baptism.

The human mind explaining baptism is like a harmonica interpreting Beethoven: the music is too majestic for the instrument. No scholar or saint can fully appreciate what this moment means in heaven. Any words on baptism, including these, must be seen as human efforts to understand a holy event. Our danger is to swing to one of two extremes: we make baptism either too important or too unimportant. Either we deify it or we trivialize it. One can see baptism as the essence of the gospel or as irrelevant to the gospel. Both sides are equally perilous. One person says, “I am saved because I was baptized.” The other says, “I am saved so I don’t need to be baptized.” The challenge is to let the pendulum stop somewhere between the two viewpoints. This is done by placing it where it should be: at the foot of the cross. Baptism is like a precious jewel—set apart by itself, it is nice and appealing but has nothing within it to compel. But place baptism against the backdrop of our sin and turn on the light of the cross, and the jewel explodes with significance. Baptism at once reveals the beauty of the cross and the darkness of sin. As a stone has many facets, baptism has many sides: cleansing, burial, resurrection, the death of the old, and the birth of the new. Just as the stone has no light within it, baptism has no inherent power. But just as the stone refracts the light into many colors, so baptism reveals the many facets of God’s grace.

Once a person admits his sin and turns to Christ for salvation, some step must be taken to proclaim to heaven and earth that he is a follower of Christ. Baptism is that step. Baptism is the initial and immediate step of obedience by one who has declared his faith to others. So important was this step that, as far as we know, every single convert in the New Testament was baptized. With the exception of the thief on the cross, there is no example of an unbaptized believer. *

The thief on the cross, however, is a crucial exception. His conversion drives dogmatists crazy. It is no accident that the first one to accept the invitation of the crucified Christ has no creed, confirmation, christening, or catechism. How disturbing to theologians to ascend the mountain of doctrine only to be greeted by an uneducated thief who cast his lot with Christ. Here is a man who never went to church, never gave an offering, never was baptized, and said only one prayer. But that prayer was enough. He has a crucial role in the gospel drama. The thief reminds us that though our dogma may be airtight and our doctrine dead-center, in the end it is Jesus who saves. Does his story negate the importance of obedience?

No, it simply puts obedience in proper perspective. Any step taken is a response to a salvation offered, not an effort at salvation earned. In the end, God has the right to save any heart, for he and only he sees the heart.

A helpful verse to understanding baptism is 1 Pet. 3:21. “And that water is like the baptism which now saves you—not the washing of dirt from the body, but the promise made to God from a good conscience. And this is because Jesus Christ was raised from the dead.”

This promise is vital. Baptism separates the tire kickers from the car buyers. Would you feel comfortable marrying someone who wanted to keep the marriage a secret? Neither does God. It’s one thing to say in the privacy of your own

heart that you are a sinner in need of a Savior. But it's quite another to walk out of the shadows and stand before family, friends, and colleagues to state publicly that Christ is your forgiver and master. This step raises the ante. Jesus commanded all his followers to prove it, to make the pledge, by public demonstration in baptism. Among his final words was the universal command to "go and make followers of all people in all the world, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit" (Mt. 28:19).

In the New Testament, baptism was no casual custom, no ho-hum ritual. Baptism was and is "a pledge made to God from a good conscience" (1 Pet. 3:21 TJB).

The Apostle Paul's high regard for baptism is demonstrated in the fact that he knows all of his readers have been instructed in its importance. "You wholeheartedly obeyed the form of teaching to which you were committed" (Rom. 6:17).

Indeed, baptism is a vow, a sacred vow of the believer to follow Christ. Just as a wedding celebrates the fusion of two hearts, baptism celebrates the union of sinner with Savior. We "became part of Christ when we were baptized" (Rom. 6:3).

Do the bride and groom understand all of the implications of the wedding? No. Do they know every challenge or threat they will face? No. But they know they love each other, and they vow to be faithful to the end.

When a willing believer enters the waters of baptism, does he know the implications of the vow? No. Does she know every temptation or challenge? No. But both know the love of God and are responding to him.

Please understand, it is not the act that saves us. But it is the act that symbolizes how we are saved! The invisible work of the Holy Spirit is visibly dramatized in the water.

"That plunge beneath the running waters was like a death; the moment's pause while they swept overhead was like a burial; the standing erect once more in air and sunlight was a species of resurrection." (Sanday and Headlam, "A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans," in *The International Commentary*).

Remove your shoes, bow your head, and bend your knees: this is a holy event. Baptism is not to be taken lightly. The event is a willing plunge of the body and soul into the promise and power of Christ. The ritual of washing signifies our admission that apart from Christ we are dirty, but in Christ we are pure.

The ritual of burial signifies that we are willing to die to sin and self and that we can be made alive again because of him. (Luther referred to baptism as death by drowning.) Baptism effectively seals our salvation, uniting us to him and his body. Christ's death becomes my death. Christ's resurrection becomes my resurrection. There is no indication of an unbaptized believer in the New Testament church. Let us now turn our attention to specific questions that have been raised in regard to baptism.

1. Which is more appropriate: to baptize babies or to baptize people who are old enough to make a personal decision?

Obviously, there are bright, godly people of both persuasions. But it seems clear that in the New Testament baptism is a willing pledge made by those who are old enough to recognize their sin, mature enough to comprehend the significance of the death of Christ, and independent enough to commit themselves to him.

It's important to note that there isn't a clear reference to a baby being baptized in the whole of the Bible. Almost every time baptism is mentioned, it is preceded by some command for belief. A good example is Acts 2:38—"Change your hearts and lives and be baptized, each one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins."

We are never told to be baptized and then believe, but to come to belief, to trusting faith, and then display that decision by associating ourselves with Christ in baptism. Baptism is the initial step of a faithful heart. This decision requires significant levels of maturity.

It is appropriate to dedicate a baby (though more appropriate to dedicate the parents). At Oak Hills we do this. On a regular basis we offer parents of newborns an opportunity to come forward with their children for prayer and consecration. But these are dedication ceremonies, not baptisms.

2. What if I was baptized as an infant? What should I do? I have been baptized, but not by immersion.

First, you should be grateful that you had parents who cared enough about you to set you apart for God. Because of their devotion, you have an opportunity to complete their prayer by willingly submitting to adult baptism. Adult baptism is not a sign of disrespect for what your parents did. In fact, it can be seen as a fulfillment of their prayers. Be thankful for the heritage of concerned parents, but don't be negligent of your responsibility as an adult to make your personal pledge toward God in baptism. Several who are now members of this church were baptized as infants and then, upon coming to a personal faith, were baptized as adults. God has led you to this point and we pray that you will take this important step as soon as possible.

All the Greek dictionaries of the New Testament define the Greek word baptizo as immersion. The symbolism of immersion is compelling: just as a person lowers you into the water, Christ lowers you into the pool of his grace until every inch of yourself is clean. Buried in a watery grave, covered from head to foot with God's love, you are washed clean by the blood of Jesus. If you have any questions or concerns about this aspect of baptism, we would welcome the opportunity to visit with you.

3. How much do I need to know in order to be baptized?

You need to realize only that you are a sinner and that Jesus is your Savior. As you grow in Christ you'll learn more about baptism. You'll learn that embodied and represented in baptism is the gift of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:38); commitment to the church (I Cor. 12:13); and being clothed with Christ (Gal. 3:26), to name a few. It is helpful to read the book of Acts and try to determine what the candidates in the first century knew before they were baptized: the three thousand baptized on the day of Pentecost in Acts 2; the Ethiopian official in Acts 8; the jailer in Acts 16; and the conversion of Paul in Acts 22:16. In each case there was an innocent faith and an immediate response. Let's take a quick look at each of the events:

What did they understand at Pentecost?

"God has made Jesus—the man you nailed to the cross—both Lord and Christ" (Acts 2:36).

How did they respond?

"Those who accepted the message were baptized and about three thousand people were added to the number of believers that day" (Acts 2:41).

What was the message of Philip to the Ethiopian?

"Philip began to speak and...told him the good news about Jesus." (Acts 8:35).

What was his response?

"The officer said, 'Look, here is water. 'What is stopping me from being baptized?' Both Philip and the officer went down into the water and Philip baptized him" (Acts 8:38).

What did the jailer understand?

"(Paul and Silas) said to him, 'Believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved—you and all the people in your house'" (Acts 16:31).

How did he respond?

"At that hour of the night the jailer took Paul and Silas and washed their wounds. Then he and all his people were baptized immediately" (Acts 16:33).

What did Saul know before he was baptized?

“(Ananias) stood by me and said, ‘Brother Saul... the God of our ancestors chose you long ago to know his plan, to see the Righteous One, and to hear words from him...Now why wait any longer? Get up, be baptized, and wash your sins away, trusting in him to save you” (Acts. 22:14-16). “Then Saul got up and was baptized” (Acts 9:18).

Do you see some similarities? The message and the response are consistent. The message is Jesus and the response is voluntary. A simple faith in Christ and an immediate response to faith in baptism.

Could it be possible for someone to be baptized without even a knowledge of Christ?

Absolutely. Some may be baptized out of peer pressure, parent pressure, or even as a good luck charm. There is the extreme case of Emperor Constantine marching his troops through a river and claiming that they were all Christians. There are those who, upon reflection, decide that they had no idea that they were doing the first time. But now that they understand what God did for them, they want to say thank you in baptism. Such a decision is personal, for only you know your heart.

4. Does it matter where I was baptized?

No. If you were baptized in a Baptist Church or Pentecostal camp or in the lake at a family reunion, that doesn't matter. What is important is that you knew that you were a sinner and Jesus was your Savior.

5. Does baptism itself have the power to save people?

The answer to this is a resounding “No!” Scripture is abundantly clear that only Jesus saves. The work of salvation is a finished work by Christ on the cross. Baptism has no redemptive powers of its own. There is nothing special about the water. Nothing holy about the river or pond or baptistry.

Tragically, some people believe they are going to heaven when they die just because a few drops of water were sprinkled over their heads a few weeks after their birth. They have no personal faith, have never made a personal decision, and are banking on a hollow ceremony to save them. How absurd. If baptism were a redemptive work, why did Jesus die on the cross? If we could be saved by being sprinkled or dunked, do you think Jesus would have died for our sins? If your faith is in the sacrament and not the Savior, you are trusting a powerless ritual. This leads to another question.

6. What if a person is not baptized? Can he be saved?

This question is best answered with a question. Why isn't the person baptized? There are three possible answers:

1) “I never understood baptism.”

Perhaps you were never instructed to be baptized. Maybe you've never been challenged to consider the issue. That's entirely possible. If this is the case, we urge you to give thought to what God says about baptism. This doesn't negate your faith up to this point. Part of maturity is an openness to understand new areas of the Christian walk.

2) “I don't want to.”

Let's analyze this response for a moment. God humbles himself by leaving heaven and being born in a feed-trough. The God of the universe eats human food, feels human feelings, and dies a sinner's death. He is spat upon, beaten and stripped naked, and nailed to a cross. He takes our eternal condemnation on himself in our place. He then offers salvation as a free gift and asks that we say yes to him in baptism and someone responds, “I don't want to.” Such logic does not add up.

Such resistance doesn't reveal a problem with baptism. Such resistance spells trouble of the soul. It reveals a problem of the heart. Such a person does not need a study of the sacrament. He needs a long, hard examination of the soul. The incongruity puzzled even Jesus. “Why do you call me ‘Lord, Lord,’ and do not do the things I ask?” (Lk. 6.46).

True believers not only offer their sins, they yield their wills to Christ. Baptism is the initial test of a believing heart. If one won't obey Christ in baptism, what will he do when He calls him to obey him in prayer? Or evangelism? Or service?

The highest motive for doing anything is because God asks you to do it. The heart of the saved says, "If you want me to be baptized in a pile of leaves, I'll do it. I may not understand every reason, but neither do I understand how you could save a sinner like me." If one is resistant on the first command, one might wonder if there has been a true conversion experience.

3) "What of the ones who die before they have a chance? What if I entrust my soul to Christ and before I can tell anyone or arrange to be baptized, a swarm of killer bees attack me and I die?"

The answer to this question is found in the character of God. Would a God of love reject an honest heart? No way. Would a God of mercy and kindness condemn any seeking soul? Absolutely not. Having called you and died for you would he cast you away because of a curious sequence of events? Inconceivable. Is it possible for an unbaptized believer to be saved? Yes, definitely. Should every believer be baptized? Yes, definitely.

Baptism is bowing before the Father and letting him do his work. The moment is like that of the first grader entering the first grade. The young student does not enroll by virtue of his knowledge or merits. He simply requests, "I'm here to learn, will you teach me?" Baptism is like that—not graduation but matriculation. It's the presentation of the willing pupil before the Master Teacher. "I'm here to learn. Will you teach me?"

Conclusion

Don't allow baptism to be something it is not. Apart from the cross it has no significance. If you are trusting a dunk in the water to save you, you have missed the message of grace. Beware of dogmatism. No one this side of heaven can fully understand the majesty of baptism. Watch out for the one who claims to have a corner on the issue, especially if that person is in your mirror.

Don't prevent baptism from being what God intended. This is no optional command. This is no trivial issue. It is a willing plunge into the power and promise of Christ. Baptism is the first step of a believer. If it was important enough for Jesus to command, isn't it important enough for you to obey? And if it was important enough for Jesus to do, isn't it important enough for you to follow?

In baptism God signs and seals our conversion to him. For all we may not understand about baptism, we can be sure of one thing—it is a holy moment.

**Another consideration about the thief is that Christian baptism didn't exist when he met Jesus. Baptism represents the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus. Jesus was still living when he spoke to the thief. In fact, the thief died under the Old Covenant. Christian baptism would be introduced for the very first time when the church began fifty days later, on the Day of Pentecost. (Bridge Christian Church)*