

The Grace of Baptism (Acts 2:36-41)

Matthew Williams

During the Cold War, there was a label you wanted to avoid as an American. You wanted to avoid the slightest accusation of harboring communist sympathies, especially if you were an employee of the US government. It was an especially dangerous label from 1950-1954 when Senator McCarthy and his crew roamed the halls looking for someone to devour.

I doubt any of us experienced an identical fear this week. McCarthy came to a relatively swift end in the court of public opinion. However, I think all of us can relate to the fear of being “outed” or “discovered” for believing, saying, or doing something that other people – family, friends, or coworkers – strongly disapprove.

You don’t gain popularity points in most circles today by identifying as a follower of Christ. People get suspicious. The burden of proof falls on you to convince them you’re not one of judgmental Christians who insist right and wrong are not ours to define. You walk up to a group of strangers and silently wish, “I sure hope no one finds out I’m a Christian. Because...you know...they’ll probably think I’m weird and might not want to be my friend.”

Throw our natural fear of man into a culture that views religion as a private matter respectable people keep under wraps and you have a perfect recipe for anxiety over being “outed” as a Christian. It becomes really tempting to circle the wagons and hide in a Christian social bubble.

Friend, you are sorely mistaken if you think Jesus agenda in our cultural moment is to tiptoe into our circle and whisper, “Hey guys. Here’s the plan. Stay quiet. Lock the doors. Avoid eye contact. Do whatever it takes to not rock the boat, and I’ll come back before you know it.”

Matthew 5:14-16, “You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.” If you’re a follower of Christ, know this. Jesus is on a mission to make you visible.

His mission is to draw sinners like us to himself. And he gets that mission done by saying to the world, “Look over there. See that group of people? See my church?”



That's what I'm like. Their life is a reflection of my glory, my beauty, and my power to save. I want you to know me. So look at them. Watch them. Listen to them." 1 Peter 2:9-10, "But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people..."

Making Christians visible, clearly distinguishing his people from the rest of the world, is essential to Jesus' mission in the world, so essential, in fact, that he hasn't left that work completely up to us as individuals. He's given his authoritative representative on earth, the local church, responsibility for confirming who is part of his people and who is not, where the world should look to see Jesus and where they should not.

Matthew 16:19, "I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven." We don't get to independently affirm whether our profession of faith is genuine. Jesus knows the possibility for self-deception is too great. He's ultimately entrusted that responsibility to the church. It's our job to publicly affirm genuine professions of faith.

And that public act of mission-critical judgment, saying to the world, "Look here if you want to see Jesus!" begins with baptism. Matthew 28:18-19, "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..."

Our Sunday Matters sermon series looks to God's Word to answer the question, "How does God want us to worship him when we gather as a church?" One of the most important answers to that question is the careful and joyful practice of baptism. So let me give you a definition that draws from what the whole Bible teaches us on the subject and then let's see how it plays out in Acts 2.

Baptism is the church's public affirmation of a profession of faith signifying a believer's entrance into covenant relationship with God and his people.

Acts 2:36 picks up on the Day of Pentecost, at the end of the Apostle Peter's first sermon. He's just finished explaining from the Old Testament that Jesus is the Promised One. Jesus is the Messiah. He's our Savior King. Acts 2:36, "Let all the

house of Israel therefore know for certain that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified." Guys, you killed the Son of God.

And in that moment, on that day, the risen Lord gave Peter's hearers a precious gift. It's called the conviction of sin. They didn't remember no one is perfect. They didn't realize we've all made mistakes. They sensed in the depth of their soul the evil of their rebellion against the Lord. They felt the weight of their guilt before the Judge of all the earth. Verse 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?'" What shall we do?

Oh, that some of you listening to me right now would ask the same question. For that is the cry of a convicted sinner. That is the cry of a soul awakened. You know you are not right with God. You know your sin has separated you from God. You feel guilty, and no matter how hard you try to be good, you can't make it go away. It's a good thing, friends, when we despair of saving ourselves. It is the gate through which every Christian must pass if we are to ever trust the only One who can.

"Brothers, what shall we do?" Verse 38, "And Peter said to them, 'Repent...' To repent is to turn away from your sins. To renounce and forsake them. To humbly confess before God Almighty the depth and evil of your disobedience – not as an exercise in self-atonement, but as a necessary prerequisite to receiving his mercy.

You can't have the world and Jesus. You can't cling to your sin and have Jesus. It's one or the other, friend. Repentance means turning away from sin so in the same act we can turn toward him. Verse 38, "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins..."

1) WHAT IS BAPTISM?

The Greek word "baptize" means to dip or immerse. In the New Testament, it meant to go under the water and come back up out of the water. For example, we read in John 3:23, "John also was baptizing at Aenon near Salim, because water was plentiful there..." So why would Peter say that if you want to become a Christian you must repent and be baptized? It's because baptism is more than an outward sign. It's an outward sign of an inward reality.

A) A profession of faith in Christ

If someone asked you, Christian, “What must I do to be delivered from sin and the divine judgment my sins deserve,” what would you say? What did Paul say to the Philippian jailer in Acts 16:31, “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved...” So which one is it? Repent and be baptized or repent and believe? It’s both. Why? Because baptism is an expression, a public profession, of the faith in Christ through which we are saved. As Peter says in 1 Peter 3:21, baptism is “an appeal to God for a good conscience.”

Bobby Jamieson, “Baptism renders faith public; it gives the believer, the church, and the world something to look at. When you trust in Christ, you make that decision visible in baptism. This helps explain why the New Testament authors often speak of baptism in ways that could be taken to indicate that the blessings of salvation come through baptism itself. When they wanted to refer to conversion as a unified whole, the New Testament authors often deployed baptism as shorthand for the whole thing.”

Going under the water and coming up out of the water doesn’t accomplish anything absent repentance and faith. But if you’re a Christian, that outward action is an expression of a profound spiritual reality. It’s a profession of faith in Christ.

B) A symbol of union with Christ

Notice Peter doesn’t just say in verse 38, “Repent and be baptized...” He says, “Repent and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ.” Why does he say that? Because the faith expressed in baptism brings us into intimate spiritual union with Christ where his experience becomes our experience, his blessings become our blessings, his relationship with the Father becomes our relationship with the Father. We acquire his “name,” as it were.

The apostle Paul describes as much in Romans 6:4-5. “We were therefore buried 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. 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.”

Have you ever wondered why the Lord commands us to be baptized and not to climb Mt. Kilimanjaro, make a pilgrimage to Jerusalem, or some other way of demonstrating our faith? The Lord ordained baptism as the way we go public with our faith because it’s a powerful symbol of two things.

When we go under the water, it's a symbol of dying. Baptism declares that when you become a Christian, you die to the guilt and power of sin. It is as if you died when Jesus died because all the saving benefits of his death have become our own, including, as Peter says in Acts 2:38, the "forgiveness of your sins."

So what does coming up out of the water symbolize? Being raised to new life in Christ! Jesus didn't remain dead. He rose from the grave. Death could not hold him. Sin could not master him. In the same way, not just in the life to come but in our life right now, all who have been united to him by faith have been freed from the guilt and power of sin to walk in newness of life – a life that will one day include an immortal body. Because Jesus rose, we too will rise.

C) A picture of cleansing from the guilt of sin

In Acts 22:16, Paul reports the word Ananias spoke to him immediately after the Lord appeared to him on the road to Damascus. "And now why do you wait? Rise and be baptized and wash away your sins, calling on his name."

Does going under the water and coming out of the water literally take away our sins like some sort of magical rite of purification? No. It's an expression of faith, one of the ways we call on the name of the Lord. Yet what happens as a result of our faith in Christ? He doesn't turn a blind eye to our sin. He washes our guilt and shame away completely, removing our sins as far as the east is from the west.

Notice also that Ananias doesn't say "repent and believe." What does he say? "Rise and be baptized." Why? Because Ananias knows baptism is the means God has ordained for us to express our faith in him. In other words, God hasn't just ordained the substance of our confession – believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. He's also ordained the form of our confession – rise and be baptized. Embracing both the substance and the form are a necessary part of obeying Jesus.

D) A sign of the new covenant

How did Israelites before the coming of Christ identify themselves as members of God's people? They were circumcised. The act was a malediction of sorts – in the same way a physical part of my body has been cut off, may I be spiritually cut off from all the blessings of relationship with Yahweh if I fail to keep the law of his covenant with us. Circumcision of the body, from the very beginning, symbolized

the required circumcision of heart, a spiritual consecration to the Lord's priorities and purposes.

Sadly, when we look back on the history of Israel, what do we see? Time and time again, those who had been circumcised in their body failed to circumcise their hearts. So God promised to establish a new covenant with his people where he would do for them what they had repeatedly failed to do themselves. He would give them a new heart, enabling them to faithfully follow the Lord.

Jeremiah 31:33–34, “For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, ‘Know the LORD,’ for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the LORD...”

It made total sense under the Old Covenant to tell fellow members of the people of God, “Know the LORD,” because you could become a “member” of God's people simply by being circumcised. It didn't mean you were actually right with God. That changed in a radical way with the New Covenant. God's people were reconstituted by the internal work of the Spirit and are now identified NOT by a physical mark in our bodies but by a spiritual profession of faith in Christ through baptism.

Colossians 2:11–12, “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, having been 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...”

Baptism is like circumcision in that the physical act functions as a boundary marker. It publicly identifies someone as part of the people of God. But baptism it is unlike circumcision in that it is not an expression of hope that one day the heart will be circumcised. It is a present expression of personal faith in Christ made possible because our heart has already been circumcised by the regenerating work of the Spirit. As Peter says in Acts 2:38, all who are baptized enjoy the blessing of knowing their sins are forgiven and the Holy Spirit dwells within them.

Baptism is the initial sign of the new covenant by which we identify those who have entered the new covenant and embraced its ethical requirements. Galatians 3:27, “For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ,” fighting to obey Jesus in every area of life.

So what is baptism? It's a profession of faith in Christ, a symbol of union with Christ, a picture of cleansing from the guilt of sin, and a sign of the new covenant that marks off the people of God from the rest of the world. It's how those "whom the Lord our God calls to himself" (Acts 2:39) go public with their internal response to the Savior's call.

2) WHO PARTICIPATES IN BAPTISM?

Since the Bible speaks of repentance, faith, and baptism as a unified whole, the only people who should be baptized are those who have chosen to turn away from sin to trust and obey Jesus. It's a personal response to the conscious conviction of sin. Those to whom Peter extends the grace of baptism in verse 38 are those who are laboring under a deep conviction of sin in verse 37 and who are able to understand and respond to the declaration of the good news of the gospel in verse 40. In short, baptism is only for Christians because the spiritual realities it represents and signifies are only true of Christians.

So how should we decide if someone is ready to be baptized? We should only baptize someone who has a credible profession of faith. Did you ever notice no one in Scripture baptizes themselves? There's always more than one person involved. There's the person being baptized and the person doing the baptism. That's incredibly important to remember.

Why? Because baptism isn't just a public profession of faith in Christ. It is the church's public affirmation of a profession of faith in Christ. It's the way we say to a watching world, "As best as we can tell, this one is a follower of Christ." So if God calls us to only baptize disciples of Jesus Christ, what must we discern before we proceed? Is this person a disciple of Christ? Does this person have a credible profession of faith? Are they, as best we can tell, a genuine Christian?

Does that mean we should force a professing Christian to navigate some sort of mandatory probation period where we observe a multi-year pattern of faithful obedience to Christ and then agree to baptize them? No. Baptism isn't an eagle scout badge given as a reward for good behavior. Remember, Peter summoned those who were convicted of sin to respond by professing their faith in Christ immediately.

However, there is another ditch on the opposite side that gives people a false assurance of salvation. Friends, I can't tell you the number of times I've heard

someone who grew up in the Bible belt tell me, “Well pastor, I was baptized at (pick and age), but I don’t think I really became a Christian until (pick a later age).” Does God delight to save 8-year-olds? Absolutely. But when someone is 8 years old, it’s really hard to distinguish an individual response to the invitation of the gospel from a desire to do whatever everyone else is doing or what they think their family wants them to do.

Does that mean we shouldn’t baptize anyone under 18? Of course not. It does mean we should be very, very careful about giving a young person a false assurance of salvation – not just for their sake, but for the sake of protecting our public witness to the gospel. There are young men and women who grew up in our church, were baptized here as children, but when they entered high school or college and began to make their own decisions, it became clear their profession of faith was not genuine.

So if a child comes up to me and says, “Pastor, I want to be baptized,” what do I say? I say, “It sounds like God is working in your life. That’s exciting! Let’s talk.” And in our subsequent conversation I’m asking important questions like, “What is the gospel? What does it mean to follow Jesus?”

Peter’s hearers grasped the truth of the gospel in verses 14-36 before they experienced the conviction of sin in verse 37 and were urged to respond with baptism in verse 38. If you don’t understand what it means to “save yourself from this crooked generation” (verse 40), then I can’t tell whether you’ve actually “received” the word of the gospel (verse 41), and you’re not ready to be baptized no matter how old you are.

3) WHAT HAPPENS WHEN YOU’RE BAPTIZED?

A) You obey Jesus by going public with your faith

Baptism isn’t an option. It’s not a suggestion. Verse 38, “Repent and be baptized,” is a command. We don’t get to decide how we want to profess our faith. Jesus tells us how to profess our faith and it starts with baptism. It’s our initial act of obedience. It’s how we announce to the church and the world, “I’m going to follow Jesus.” It’s how we nail our flag to the mast, put on the team uniform, and take a public oath of citizenship in the kingdom of God, among other metaphors.



What we observe in Acts 2:41, "So those who received his word were baptized," isn't unique to Pentecost. It happens over and over again. Acts 8:12, "But when they believed Philip as he preached good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women."

There is always blessing when we choose to obey the Lord. Often, when we obey the Lord by being baptized, the Lord will use that experience to strengthen our faith in him and our assurance of salvation. Remember, baptism doesn't do anyone a lick of good apart from the faith. If faith is absent, you just got wet. End of story.

To the eye of faith, however, baptism provides an objective, visible reminder of what Christ Jesus has done for us. I have died with Christ. I have been raised with Christ. I am committing my life to following King Jesus. Who I am has fundamentally changed. I'm not longer a slave to sin. I'm a child of God. A deep, spiritual assurance of those realities is a precious gift, friends. It's why baptism is called a sacrament – a means of grace.

B) The church obeys Jesus by publicly affirming your profession

Baptism isn't merely about what you're doing. It's just as much about what the church is doing. It's the initial way we exercise the authority Jesus has given us as a church to identify someone as a disciple of Christ. It's how we fulfill the Great Commission because it's our job to publicly recognize Christians in the eyes of a watching world.

Bobby Jamieson, "Baptism is therefore a necessary though not sufficient criterion by which the church is to recognize Christians. It's not enough for someone to claim to be a Christian or for everyone in the church to think someone is a Christian; Jesus has bound the church's judgment to baptism. Jesus gave us baptism, in part, so we can tell one another apart from the world."

There is, however, a third result. A serious implication of that corporate affirmation of faith that I think we need to give more careful attention to as a congregation.

C) You are added to the body of Christ

Look at verse 41. "So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls." Added to what? Added to the church!



Acts 2:47 makes this crystal clear. “And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.”

When we’re united to Christ, which is what baptism symbolizes, who else are we united to as a result? We’re united to his body because you can’t be united to the head (Christ) without also being united to the body (the church). 1 Corinthians 12:12–13, “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. For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free...”

It’s striking in Acts 2:41 how Luke describes church membership as a spiritual reality created by baptism. He doesn’t say, “So those who received his word were baptized, and then from that number, 3,000 people later became members of the church.” They received the word. They were baptized. And that meant 3,000 were added to the church. In other words, you could say, “Three thousand souls were added,” OR you could say, “Three thousand souls received his word and were baptized.”

So does that mean we should do away with our membership class and make baptism the only requirement for church membership? If you’re baptized, you immediately become a church member, end of story? I don’t think so. I think there’s wisdom in taking a few weeks to help people understand what it means to be a member not only of the church universal, but our local church in particular. We’ll announce our next membership class in just a few weeks. However, I believe it is most unwise for us to treat baptism and membership as two separate things.

What is church membership all about? Agreeing to affirm and oversee our mutual profession of faith. It’s how we hold one another accountable for following Jesus. So when does that affirmation begin? When we baptize someone. Yet if we baptize them and then postpone church membership, we’re basically saying, “We’re thrilled to recognize you as a member of the body of Christ, but we’re not going to hold you accountable for following Jesus. If you actually want us to oversee your profession and not just affirm it, you have to do this second thing called joining the church.

You won’t find that sort of distinction anywhere in Scripture. People are baptized and the same people are added. It’s not good for the individual when we separate them. It’s not good for our witness to the world. And it reinforces our tendency to PRIVATIZE a sacrament that is fundamentally corporate.



Throughout the New Testament, Acts 2 included, baptism recognizes someone has been united to Christ and thus united to his body, which is why church membership language follows immediately on the heels of baptism. It's why I'm thrilled all four of the men and women getting baptized this morning are also joining our church next Sunday. In a very real sense, baptism and membership are two sides of the same coin.

CONCLUSION

Baptism is a precious gift of grace from the Lord, brothers and sisters. It's not an optional rite. Nor is it a badge of honor for super-Christians. It's a privilege and responsibility God gives to every church and every Christian. It's our public affirmation of a profession of faith signifying a believer's entrance into covenant relationship with God and his people. If you believe you're a Christian and have never been baptized, please take the opportunity after the meeting to talk with me or one of the other elders. Right now, however, I want us to pray for the folks who are about to be baptized.