Baptism

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Several months ago, during our most recent round of congregational surveys, one of the suggestions I received was that I preach a series of first-principles sermons from the book of Acts. Sadly, I haven't been as dedicated to those Acts sermons as I ought to be, though I hope to return to the series sometime in this month or the next.

This morning, though we're not going to work our way through another sermon by Peter, we're going to examine a subject that lies at the heart of the study of first principles—the subject of baptism. For many of us, this is an extremely familiar subject. However, it's important for several reasons. First of all, though I'm sure that there are people here this morning who have heard countless sermons on baptism, there may well be those who cannot remember having heard any. Second, for those of us who have been baptized into Christ, Bible teaching on baptism is an important reminder that we can be assured of our salvation. Finally, it reminds us of the importance of teaching the lost about Jesus and equips us to do that teaching. For the next little while, then, let's consider the topic of baptism.

What Is Baptism?

As is my custom, let's begin this morning by defining baptism from a Scriptural perspective. I think it's always important to define terms before studying any subject—that's probably the lawyer in me leaking out—but this is especially important when it comes to baptism. Lots of people use the word "baptism" to describe lots of different practices. Sometimes, those practices are identical to Bible baptism. More usually, they aren't, so what the Bible says about baptism does not apply to them. We need to clear up all that confusion before we can figure out what we ought to do.

First, Bible baptism involves **IMMERSION IN WATER.** For evidence of this, let's look at Acts 8:36, 38. Here's why this passage is important: If we were to look up baptism in an English dictionary, or ask people on the street what baptism was, we would come up with a variety of answers. Some might agree that it was immersion in water. Others, though, would describe baptism as the act of pouring or even sprinkling water on another. It is true that the English word "baptism" can be used to describe all of these activities, but in the Bible, baptism only ever refers to immersion, to being completely submerged in water. We could establish this simply by looking at the Greek word *baptizo,* which is translated in our Bibles as "baptize", but only ever means immersion. However, most of us aren't Greek scholars, and neither are our friends and neighbors, so it's preferable to establish this point by looking at passages that establish that Bible baptism involved immersion.

This text is one such passage. If Philip believed that sprinkling was enough to baptize the eunuch, why didn't he sprinkle a few drops on his head from the water supplies that the eunuch surely had for his journey through the desert? If the eunuch had learned from Philip's teaching that pouring would have been sufficient to baptize him, that also could have been accomplished without leaving the chariot. Instead, the eunuch's baptism requires Philip and the eunuch to stop the chariot, get down out of the chariot, go down into the water, baptize, and then come up out of the water. Those facts don't fit sprinkling. They don't fit pouring. Instead, they show that Philip immersed the eunuch in the roadside pool.

Second, Bible baptism demands the immersion **OF A BELIEVER.** There are many places in Scripture that show that only believers are baptized. One such is Acts 8:12. The repeated Biblical pattern is that a man or woman hears the preaching of the gospel, believes the gospel, and obeys the gospel through baptism. Never in the Bible do we see someone baptized who does not believe. Sadly, departure from this Biblical pattern is all too common in the religious world around us. It is perhaps more common for people who do not believe to be baptized than it is for believers to be. I refer, of course, to the custom of infant baptism. As we'll see in a moment, nothing in the Bible even teaches that infants need to be baptized, but even if that were not so, infants are not qualified to be baptized.

I know this from personal experience. I remember very clearly when my Zoë and Mark were infants. At the time, I was, and indeed still am, sure that they were the smartest, best-looking, most wonderful children ever to be born. However, even my eyes didn't see a single scrap of evidence that either one of them believed in Jesus. There is no such thing as an infant who is capable of faith. If baptizing that unbelieving infant is effective, why don't we start waylaying the passers-by outside, dragging them into the baptistery, and holding their protesting heads under the water? Simple—we all know that we can't turn people into Christians against their will. Why, then, would we try that with infants?

Third, Bible baptism is carried out **IN THE NAME OF JESUS.** For instance, look at Acts 19:5. To understand why this is important, we first need to understand the way that the Bible often uses the word "name". Sometimes, it does refer to an actual name, but more often, it refers to authority, as when police say, "Open in the name of the law!" They are claiming that their search warrant or whatever has given them authority to go into a private residence without an invitation. When the Bible talks, then, about being baptized in the name of Jesus, it's talking about being baptized by the authority of Jesus, and a baptism that Jesus has not authorized is not a Bible baptism.

Here's why this is important: When we consider all of the different baptisms that exist in the religious world today, we might be tempted to shrug our shoulders and say, "Well, as long as everybody loves Jesus, it's all fine, right?"

Not exactly. The act of baptism itself does not have any intrinsic power or merit. It's just dunking somebody in water and getting them wet. What makes baptism effective is the power of Jesus behind it. In effect, what Jesus is saying is, "I'm the King. If you want to receive My favor, have yourself immersed in water, and I will give it to you." If we don't do what Jesus has commanded, we are rejecting His authority, and we cannot hope to receive His blessing.

Finally, Bible baptism is **FOR THE FORGIVENESS OF SINS.** This idea is expressed most famously in Acts 2:38. For some reason, this clear, simple idea has come in for all kinds of attack. There are probably millions of people in the United States today who would deny that baptism is necessary for forgiveness of sins. They would say that all we have to do is believe in Jesus, and maybe pray the sinner's prayer, and that's sufficient.

To some extent, these people have a point. Belief is essential for our salvation. There are many places in the Bible that teach that truth, and I would never deny it. I would likewise affirm that we must repent of our sins and confess Jesus as Lord if we want to be saved. Those are things that the Scripture teaches too, and we have to obey if we want to be under the authority of Jesus. However, just as the word teaches belief, repentance, and confession, so too it teaches baptism as necessary for the forgiveness of sins, and we must come to our baptisms with that understanding. If we aren't immersed while seeking the blessing that Jesus has promised, we're doing nothing more than getting wet.

Jesus and Baptism

In a few minutes, we're going to turn our attention to the Lord's Supper and once again share in that sacred meal that Jesus instituted on the night of His betrayal. Before we do that, though, it seems appropriate for us to consider what Jesus had to say about baptism. There are several different places in the gospels where our Lord discusses the subject, but the longest such discussion appears in the third chapter of the book of John, and we'll spend most of our time there.

Jesus raises the subject of baptism in response to the appearance of **NICODEMUS.** Read with me from John 3:1-3. The opening verses of this text present us with an odd contrast. Nicodemus is a very important Jew indeed; in fact, John 7 presents him as being one of the Sanhedrin, the 70 most powerful men of the Jewish nation. However, this powerful man, who is something of a combination of a Congressman and a Supreme Court justice, comes to Jesus by night, presumably so that no one will see him doing it. Most probably, Nicodemus didn't want to deal with the political repercussions of being known as a disciple of Jesus. Much like Joseph of Arimathea, who was also a member of the Jewish high council, Nicodemus chose to keep his beliefs secret.

Nonetheless, his first words to Jesus make clear that he accepts the Lord as his Teacher. I get the feeling from the text that Nicodemus is working his way around to asking a question, but before he finishes his windup, Jesus interrupts him with a strange statement. Only people who have been born again can enter the kingdom of heaven.

This odd comment begins a discussion of **WATER AND THE SPIRIT.** Let's look now at John 3:4-6. Nicodemus thinks Jesus is talking about physical birth, is baffled by this, and asks for an explanation. Jesus, in turn, defines what it means to be born again. It means that one must be born of water and the Spirit. Because being born again and being born of water and the Spirit have the same effect—they enable one to enter the kingdom of God--we can conclude that they are the same thing, and that Jesus here is describing the necessity of baptism for salvation.

John himself provides us with a further explanation of this concept in 1 John 5:6-8. There is one difference in this text. John adds blood to the John 3 duo of water and the Spirit, but it's obvious why Jesus didn't bring up the element of blood Himself. Jesus hadn't yet died, and the fact that His blood was necessary for salvation was a mystery carefully concealed from, among others, the devil himself. Once Jesus died, John could tell the whole story.

The comparison that John is making here is to trial procedure under the Law of Moses. According to the Law, for a fact to be accepted as true, at least two witnesses, but ideally three, had to testify to its truth. Here, John lists three witnesses that testify to our salvation. The first of these witnesses is the Holy Spirit, which speaks through the truth of the word. The Spirit testifies that we have met the conditions that God imposes on all who seek His grace. The second witness is the water of baptism, which testifies that we have been immersed in it. The third witness is the blood of Jesus, which testifies that His death paid the price for our sins. Together, the three proclaim that we have been born again.

That's the straightforward reading of this text, but there are lots of people who would disagree with me about what I've just said. Instead, they will claim that John 3:5 contains two births, not one. The first, they say, is the birth of water, the natural birth, and the second is the birth of the Spirit, which does not involve water at all. There are at least two serious problems with this argument. First, it ignores the logical equivalence between being born again and being born of water and the Spirit. Being born again and being born of water and the Spirit are the same event.

Second, the natural childbirth process is never described in Scripture as being born of water. By contrast, there are at least fourteen different verses in the New Testament, not counting this one, that connect water and baptism. As always, we need to understand Bible words in Bible ways. If the Bible frequently connects water and baptism, we need to make that same connection, rather than forcing a connection between water and natural childbirth that the Bible does not make. Indeed, when John himself speaks of natural childbirth in John 1, he describes it as being "born of blood", which, as those of us who have seen a childbirth can testify, is an extremely accurate description!

Jesus concludes His remarks on being born of the Spirit with a discussion of **THE WIND.** This appears in John 3:7-8. It's evident from Jesus' words here that Nicodemus is as confused as he can be. Nicodemus thought he knew everything he needed to know about entering the kingdom of heaven, but Jesus is telling him something completely different, that basically, salvation depends on taking a ceremonial bath. To help him, Jesus compares being born of the Spirit to the wind. He identifies three characteristics of the wind: First, Nicodemus doesn't control the wind. Second, Nicodemus can experience the wind. Third, Nicodemus can't understand the wind.

So too it is with baptism. We experience our spiritual rebirth when we are baptized, but we do not control the conditions of that rebirth, and it operates in ways beyond our understanding. Here, I think we get to the core difficulty that people have with baptism for forgiveness of sins. They want to control the conditions of their salvation, and they want it to make sense to them. They don't understand why God would require baptism for the forgiveness of sins, and so they write that requirement out of the Bible in favor of requirements that do make sense.

I'll admit it. In some senses, the requirement of baptism is an arbitrary requirement. We can talk about baptism as a cleansing or as being buried with Christ, but in the final analysis, baptism is something we have to do because God said we have to do it. It could have been anything. If God had wanted to make praying the sinner's prayer or jumping through a purple hoop a condition of our salvation, He could have done that. But He didn't. He chose baptism. We can get upset about that and make excuses, or we can do what He tells us to do and be freed from our sins.

Before the Lord's Supper, then, let's reflect on these things. Let's remember first of all the death of Jesus on the cross, where He shed the blood that bears witness to our salvation. Let's remember His mercy in instituting a plan for our salvation that, even if it doesn't make sense to the wisdom of man, is effective for our salvation nonetheless. Finally, let's remember that the essence of baptism is humility, and ask ourselves whether we humbly offer our lives to Him.

Effects of Baptism

During the final portion of our time together, let's spend some time exploring the effects of baptism. We certainly don't have enough time to study everything that the word reveals about what baptism accomplishes, but we can look at some of the high points. First, the Scripture teaches that baptism **SAVES.** In this regard, let's consider 1 Peter 3:21. As I may have mentioned before, this is one of Lauren's favorite litmus-test verses. Whenever she picks up some new paraphrase or translation of the Bible, the first thing she does is turn to 1 Peter 3:21. If 1 Peter 3:21 reads "baptism saves", the text is at least correct enough to produce obedience to the gospel. If it reads anything else, and there are many versions of 1 Peter 3:21 that do NOT say this, then the text is not to be trusted.

Clearly, the devil has been hard at work when it comes to this passage, but if we are only willing to unlearn what we think we know and look at the text, the truth will emerge. It's so simple that it almost defies my ability to explain it. If we want to be saved from our sins, it is obedience to the gospel in the act of baptism that will save us. Conversely, if we refuse to be baptized for the forgiveness of our sins, we cannot be saved. Both of those things are evident in the plain language of the verse, and I don't know how the Holy Spirit could have said it any more clearly than this.

Second, baptism **WASHES AWAY SINS.** This point emerges from Paul's account of his own conversion in Acts 22:16. In this passage, we start to get an inkling of why God chose baptism as the final step in the plan of salvation. When our bodies are sweaty and dirty, we intuitively know what we have to do to get clean. We have to bathe ourselves. That will wash away all the dirt and grime. Likewise, when we have become spiritually unclean because of our sins, we need to do the same thing. We need to take a bath and wash the sins off. Of course, sins aren't susceptible to soap and water. Baptism works not because the water in the baptistery is magical, but because when we are baptized, we call on the name of the Lord Jesus. That doesn't mean that we're shouting His name as the preacher dunks us under. That sounds like a good way to drown, not to be forgiven of our sins! Instead, we make that appeal to Jesus by the act of baptism itself. It is the means that He has designated to ask Him to use the authority that He has to cleanse us from our sins. Saul of Tarsus went down into the waters of baptism still stained with the sins of his persecution of the church. He came up out of the baptismal waters as free from sin as a newborn baby. If we do the same, our sins are washed away too.

Third, baptism **CLOTHES WITH CHRIST.** Consider with me Galatians 3:27. In context, here's the point that Paul was making. 2000 years ago, clothes were a very important marker of personal identity. People from different nations dressed in distinctive ways, so that everyone could tell at a glance which group they belonged to. Even today, this is true. We make different assumptions about a man dressed in a business suit than we do about a man in a yoked shirt, cowboy boots, tight jeans, and a belt buckle the size of a dinner plate. Our clothes make a statement too.

What Paul wants us to understand here is that the act of baptism changes our identity irrevocably. Before our brethren in the first century were baptized, they identified themselves in all kinds of different ways. They were Jews, they were Greeks, they were slaves, they were free, they were male, they were female. However, when they were baptized, all of those different identities were replaced with a single one. First and foremost, they were all Christians. From now on, their identifier wasn't supposed to be the clothes they wore. It was supposed to be the godly conduct of a disciple of Christ. For us too, baptism marks the beginning of a new life. We aren't the people we used to be. We're Christians.

Fourth, baptism **BRINGS NEAR TO GOD.** The Hebrews writer points this out in Hebrews 10:22. Before we explore this text, though, we first must appreciate that drawing near to God is actually a frightening idea. There's a sense in which the common perception of God as the kindly grandfather in the sky is accurate, but that portrayal is certainly incomplete. God is also the awe-inspiring Judge of all, a being so holy that He cannot abide evil in His presence. As long as we remain in our sins, we cannot come to Him, and if we do appear before Him in a sinful state, as on the Day of Judgment, He will surely destroy us for our presumption. We need to fear and respect God like we would a wildfire.

However, the Hebrews writer tells us that we can come to Him confidently, boldly, in the full assurance of faith. How is that possible? How can we unclean mortals possibly dare to approach the Holy One? Simple. Our hearts have been sprinkled with the blood of Jesus and our bodies have been washed by the waters of baptism. Once we have been granted the right to approach Him, that right always remains. That's why Christians who have fallen away don't need to be re-baptized. Instead, they can approach Him and seek forgiveness for their rebellion in the same way that any disciple seeks forgiveness for sins—through prayer. However, we cannot draw near unless we have been baptized first.

Finally, baptism **JOINS TO THE LORD'S BODY.** Paul says so in 1 Corinthians 12:13. This passage appears in the midst of a discussion of spiritual gifts, so it could give rise to a complicated discussion of the Holy Spirit, but we're going to sidestep that discussion for now and focus instead on the idea that everyone who is baptized is baptized into the body of Christ. This is a slightly different idea than we've seen before. Baptism marks the beginning of our individual discipleship, it joins us in a new relationship to God, but it also joins us to one another. Every person who is baptized for the forgiveness of sins joins the Lord's church, regardless of what the sign says out in front of the church building where they're baptized. That doesn't mean that the Lord is pleased with the practices of every congregation that practices Bible baptism, any more than He was pleased with every church in the first century, but those people still belong to Him.

For us, this means that baptism is a symbol of the unity we share as a congregation. The men and women of the Joliet church aren't merely my friends or associates or acquaintances. They are my brothers and sisters in Christ, and in many ways, we have more in common than I do with my non-Christian flesh-and-blood brother. We are bound together by a common birth, and we are responsible before God for treating one another like a spiritual family.