

## Baptism

### 1 Peter 3:21-22

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Guess what I am going to start my message with today? Pictures of our new daughter Madeline Grace! Her name, by the way, was chosen because Madeline is the English form of Magdalene. Mary Magdalene was a very devoted follower of Jesus and our number one goal is that Madeline would be the same. It also ties to one of my heroes, C.S. Lewis, who taught most of his career at Magdalene College of Oxford. It was there on those grounds that he had his famous walk with Tolkien that led him to Christ. So it comes from Mary Magdalene and C.S. Lewis, and it sounds cute too.



Our series and church calendar wonderfully intersect today on the subject of baptism. 1 Peter 3:21 is about baptism and in two weeks we have our annual Lake Michigan baptism service, a highlight for us every year. We are going to tackle what 1 Peter says first and then talk more broadly about baptism. My goal is for many of us to put baptism higher in our faith values than it currently is. I also want to make sure baptism isn't too high where it could possibly confuse the true nature of the gospel. So for many baptism will go up and for a few baptism will come down.

*"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." (1 Peter 3:21-22 ESV)*

Peter introduces baptism here but we see that he was aiming for this in the previous verses. Those verses are some of the most difficult to understand in the New Testament. However, the analogy he is making is not. If you look back to verse 20, Peter refers to Noah, the flood, and the ark. You likely know the biblical story of the worldwide flood of judgment. Only Noah and his family survived or were saved. How? They built an ark by God's direction. The ark saved them. The water represented judgment and death. The ark represented liberation and salvation for Noah and his family. Peter, why are you bringing up the flood, the ark, and baptism?

He says that baptism corresponds to this. While we don't have time now, Bible students here would recognize this as biblical typology. A type is something in the Old Testament that is analogous to something which fulfills it in the New Testament. The tabernacle and the holy of holies and the ark of the covenant and the Day of Atonement were all types, or foreshadowing of the greater reality coming in Jesus and the new covenant. Peter says the ark, the water, and the eight people saved by it were types or foreshadowing of New Testament, new covenant baptism.

Just to make a quick note in case the concept of baptism is entirely new to you, baptism goes back to Jesus himself who was baptized by John the Baptist in the Jordan River. Baptism by God's design is about identification. John the Baptist's baptism was a baptism of repentance. Multitudes came confessing their sins and were baptized. Jesus was baptized by John for a different reason. He had never sinned so there was no repentance needed. Rather, he was baptized to identify with sinners; to meet us in our point of greatest spiritual need.

After his resurrection, Jesus would re-commission baptism's role with these very famous words, *"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 observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age."* (Matthew 28:19-20) We are baptized in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. That means in new covenant baptism we are identifying with God. It is a Christian baptism. A baptism as a Christian identifying with God's saving work through Jesus on our behalf. So Jesus was baptized to identify with us and we are baptized to identify with him.

### **Baptism's Importance - Too High**

Still, there was and is confusion about the role of baptism in salvation. It was clearly very important. The very first sermon preached after the Day of Pentecost by Peter elicits this response:

*"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?' 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.'" (Acts 2:37-38)*

From the beginning, faith in the gospel of Jesus was presented along with baptism. Can you see the delicate balance of this? Becoming a disciple of Jesus is by faith alone in Jesus' complete and finished work for us on the cross. Baptism publicly identifies you as a disciple of Jesus. Wonderful. Yet how easy it would be to see what identifies you as a disciple as the thing that makes you a disciple. This is placing baptism too high. This is the fallacy that Peter addresses and why he brings up the ark and the water. What actually saved Noah? The water didn't save him. His ticket stub from Ark Cruises didn't save him. What saved him? The ark saved him.

Listen again to Peter, *"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."* (1 Peter 3:21)

Baptism in water is like Noah on the water. What got Noah through the water was the ark and we are saved *"through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead."* (1 Peter 1:3) You could read this *"Baptism...now saves you,"* and it would be the opposite point Peter is

making. Baptism itself is not the means to salvation. We are saved through Jesus. Baptism isn't the ark, Jesus is the ark. To think baptism saves you is to focus on the external, which he calls, *"the removal of dirt from the body."* But the external is not the point of baptism. It is the internal, which he calls, *"the appeal to God for a good conscience."* It's what baptism means internally that matters. It is the sinner responding to God's grace with an appeal in baptism to internal change, a new heart to love God and follow Jesus, and obey out of a pure conscience. Why is he making this point? Humans love to make symbols salvific and often the sign of salvation is mistaken as the source of salvation.

"Still today, of course, people think that outward acts like coming to church and receiving communion somehow make them acceptable to God even if their hearts are guilty of evil. It is curious how people who rarely attend church still want....church weddings, and Christian funerals. Peter's attitude rejects all such ideas in principle." (I. Howard Marshall, *I Peter: The IVP New Testament Commentary Series*, p. 131.)

Is any one of us thinking that baptism or taking communion today or being a member of our church or being married or buried in a Christian ceremony MUST mean that we are under the grace of God as a Christian? Anyone thinking that I am saved because I was baptized? That would be putting baptism far higher than it should be. It doesn't save and the water just gets you wet. It is the internal reality of baptism that matters most—my trust in Jesus and his saving work; my heart appealing to God for the change of life that comes from my change of heart.

This is what is so fundamentally flawed in branches of Christianity that subtly or overtly teach baptism as salvation. They make baptism the ark instead of Jesus. Some teach that while you may believe in Jesus, you are only truly saved when you are baptized. Others see baptism as salvific and the concerned parents will baptize their infant as soon as possible to make sure they are under grace. There is no teaching in the Bible that says baptism by itself saves us. The consistent call is to faith in Jesus and baptism as the first act of obedience. To elevate baptism to a cause of our salvation is to deny salvation by faith alone. It makes an act of obedience the cause of our salvation instead of its first effect. Don't make baptism too important or it undermines and confuses the gospel as salvation by faith alone.

Why make that point? Lest any of us here step into eternity trusting in our baptism. That will not gain us entrance into heaven or eternal life. God might say, "No, you just got wet." What or who is your faith resting in?

### **Baptism's Importance - Too Low**

While I run into people who think baptism is too important, my observation is that too many don't think it important enough. We have somehow disconnected baptism from salvation in ways that contradict baptism's role in Scripture.

- *"Repent and be baptized."* (Acts 2:38)
- *"So those who received his word were baptized."* (Acts 2:41)
- *"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."* (Acts 8:12)
- *"And as they were going along the road they came to some water, and the eunuch said, 'See, here is water! What prevents me from being baptized?'"* (Acts 8:36)

- *"And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and he regained his sight. Then he rose and was baptized."* (Acts 9:18)
- *"And he commanded them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they asked him to remain for some days."* (Acts 10:48)
- *"Crispus, the ruler of the synagogue, believed in the Lord, together with his entire household. And many of the Corinthians hearing Paul believed and were baptized."* (Acts 18:8)
- *"On hearing this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus."* (Acts 19:5)

Let's go back to The Great Commission a moment: *"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 observe all that I have commanded you."* (Matthew 28:19-20) The action verb of importance there is "make disciples." The rest explains how. Baptize them and teach them. Right there in the summary of what being a Christian is all about we have the important role of baptism and teaching.

You might say, why didn't Peter address the issue of professing Christians living for years and NOT being baptized? I suspect there are two reasons. The first is that this is mostly a problem with second and third generation Christians who make a profession of faith but for some reason don't get around to being baptized. The second reason is that New Testament Christianity didn't conceive of professing Christians refusing to be baptized.

"There is presently probably the largest unbaptized population of professing Christians in the history of the church. And for most of them it isn't really something they are too concerned about." (John MacArthur, "The Case for Believer's Baptism: The Credo Baptist Position," [www.gty.org/Resources/Print/articles/a360](http://www.gty.org/Resources/Print/articles/a360)) He goes on to give five frank reasons professing Christians are not baptized:

- *Ignorant* – not taught or wrongly taught
- *Proud* – refuse to be humbly obedient
- *Indifferent* – not considering obedience important
- *Defiant* – unwilling to obey
- *Unregenerate* – no concern to honor Christ in this way

All of these reveal too low a concern for the priority of baptism as identification with Jesus and the first act of obedience.

I am not hiding my point here, am I? I don't want anyone to trust in their baptism for salvation and there should not be any professing Jesus without being baptized. Are you a professing Christian? Have you been baptized? If not, why not? I want everyone here to profess Jesus as Savior and be baptized in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

## **Pastoral Thoughts on Baptism**

I wish everything about baptism was simple and easy. It is not. So let me add some pastoral thoughts here.

### **So what is baptism exactly?**

We practice what is known as believer's baptism or Credo-baptism. We believe the teaching and example of the New Testament is a baptism following a profession of faith. It is an initiation into the Christian life. The mode we practice is immersion in water. We baptize in water because the New Testament church baptized in water. We immerse because the Greek word for baptism means, "To dip; to immerse." The language of the New Testament

indicates water sufficient for baptism, like the Jordan River or the Eunuch with Phillip who said, 'See, here is water! What prevents me from being baptized?'" (Acts 8:36) They went down into it. Even 1 Peter 3:21 suggests this as he says people mistake it for washing dirt off the body. Immersion as a mode is the only mode to do that.

The big thing in baptism is identifying with the saving work of Jesus in his death and burial (pictured in going under the water) and resurrection to new life (pictured by coming out of the water). This is known doctrinally as union with Christ. When he died, I died with him. When he was buried I was buried with him. When he was resurrected, I was resurrected with him. I am in a spiritual union with Jesus that connects me with the saving work of Jesus for me.

If I could illustrate it this way, now that we have another daughter, the BabyBjörn Baby Carrier becomes a part of my life again. It allows me to carry her around with me and it leaves my hands free. Where I go, she goes. Where I sit, she sits. The carrier unites her with me and me with her (see example of the dad modeling it in the picture below).



Baptism, by God's design, symbolically does the same. It spiritually symbolizes my union by faith with Jesus in his death, burial, and resurrection. This is where the classic definition of baptism comes from—an outward sign of an inward change. Jesus commanded it. The Apostles modeled it. We follow their words and example.

### **What about young children who profess faith?**

This is one of the most difficult challenges for us. Why? It is more difficult to discern that inward change which baptism outwardly reflects. Further, the testimony of second and third generation Christians like me is that when you are baptized too young to remember it, it actually undermines assurance of faith later on. For this reason, many fine denominations and churches set a minimum age when children are allowed to be baptized, normally between ages 10-12. We have not made a rule here at Bethel, but we do make strong recommendations that parents be patient. My church growing up had the rule of age 12. That's when I was baptized and personally I am thankful for that age as I can remember my baptism. It is a meaningful memory in my life.

Sometimes parents betray baptism as too important by urging their kids toward it out of a latent fear that if they are not baptized, maybe they aren't saved. That's bad theology. I think too often when kids can say or repeat the right words we think they are ready to be

baptized. My daughter is two and can sing much of the *Frozen* soundtrack by heart. Kids can say words from memory.

The goal is a credible and mature profession of faith along with evidence of genuine Christian heart change. As you know my story, I prayed to receive Jesus many, many times as a boy. Which one began my Christian walk, I'm not sure. How do we know with children when faith is real? The same way we know with adults—when the root of faith is showing the fruit of faith. I would encourage parents to not be in a hurry and wait for consistent evidence of gospel fruit. Your kids may, like me, thank you some day for having patience with it.

Also, please don't be offended if the church encourages you to wait. In my opinion, it's better to wait and be sure rather than baptize a child who is unregenerate but later, as an adult, looks to their baptism for false assurance.

### **What is it like to be baptized?**

It's a very simple ceremony. You get in the water with the pastor and you are usually asked something like, "Do you trust in Jesus Christ as your personal Lord and Savior?" If you say "I do," then the pastor says, "Upon your profession of faith, I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit." They usually have you cross your arms over your chest and they dunk you under the water and bring you up out of the water. That's it! You're baptized! Check out a short recap video of our 2014 Lake Michigan baptisms at this link: <https://vimeo.com/102389681>

We see baptism as celebration. We are celebrating what God has done in your life. Over the years we have baptized people from many backgrounds, many journeys. Here's where I'm at. I just want people to profess Jesus as Savior and be baptized in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. If you have professed Jesus for a long time but haven't been baptized, I care way more *that* you are baptized than *when* you are baptized. If there's been a gap of years, we are not here to judge. We are here to baptize.

We have had people who were baptized as children in other faith backgrounds be baptized again by immersion. The consistent word I hear from them is that it is a meaningful moment in their spiritual life.

So I want to ask you, if you have not been baptized, why not? Are you a professing believer in Jesus Christ? Have you "Björned" by faith in his death, burial, and resurrection?

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