

How Important is Baptism, the Supper, and Church Membership?

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As you can see from the sermon title, our topics today are baptism, the Lord's Supper, and church membership. Why talk about these now? In two weeks we are having our annual Lake Michigan baptism service. Baptism is really important and we desire for every genuine believer in Jesus to be baptized in obedience to Jesus' command.

Besides gospel and biblical affinity, all three of these have something else in common; they can easily be made too important and made not nearly important enough. Error and heresy generally involve doing this very thing. We tend to think doctrinal error or heresy comes with a sticker on it saying, "*Believe this and go to hell.*" It never does. Down through church history, it has been the displacing of really important things by not quite as important things that has compromised the true gospel. Today I want to do a primer on each of these and put them, in terms of importance, where God puts them.

Let me begin with a true and sadly silly illustration of misplaced importance in the church. This is a true story. I'm telling it accurately. Many, many years ago here at our church, an obviously very troubled woman came into a prayer meeting. Her whole demeanor and look said life had been incredibly hard. We welcomed her and expressed care and concern.

The next Sunday she showed up at church and I talked with her briefly before the service. She surprised me when she pulled from her inside pocket an incredibly small dog. She explained that it was a therapy dog and she had a doctor's prescription for it. She put it back in her pocket. Then she went into the service.

A few days later a couple from our church met with me. They were exceedingly agitated and upset. I asked them what was wrong. They said, "*Pastor, did you know that Sunday there was a dog in church?*"

I said, "*Oh, yes. Actually I did.*"

They said, "*We can't have dogs in church!*"

The wife said, "*Pretty soon we will have chickens and pigs wandering around the church! You don't want that do you pastor?*"

The husband pulled out a picture of a Great Dane and shoved it my face and yelled, "*You don't want one of these in church do you?*"

It was surreal but I tried to calm them down. I told them the sad story of this woman's life. I said we were trying to minister to her. I said, "*Further, when I look at the ministry of Jesus he had many very troubled women come to him and each time he was kind and compassionate and don't you think if this is the way Jesus treated them that we should treat this woman with extra grace too?*"

They blinked a few times and then exploded at me, "*But we can't have dogs in church!*" They said they were leaving the church over it.

That's a true story. It's an extreme example of misplaced importance. Baptism, the Lord's Supper, and church membership often suffer the same fate. Let's make sure we get these three right. For some of you here, this means the time has come to be baptized. For some it means not taking the Lord's Supper in a casual manner. For some it means you need to set aside your "dog in church" excuses and join the church.

Baptism – Identify with Jesus

I am going to spend most of my time today on baptism. Let's look at a few key texts on baptism (emphasis added).

- "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." (Matthew 28:19)
- "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 2:38)
- "And he commanded the chariot to stop, and they both went down into the water, Philip and the eunuch, and he baptized him." (Acts 8:38)
- "And [Peter] commanded them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ." (Acts 10:48)
- "And now why do you wait? Rise and be baptized and wash away your sins, calling on his name." (Acts 22:16, from Paul's testimony)

There are many other passages. This is just a sampling. Especially noteworthy is Matthew 28:19, "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." These are the final words of Jesus on earth as recorded by Matthew. The key phrase is "make disciples." This includes evangelism and then the guidance and nourishment of that new disciple into maturity. This is the core of our mission. But right there in the mix is the need for new disciples to be baptized.

Why? Let's be clear. It's not to save them. The saving work is done by Jesus, not baptism. Salvation is by faith through grace. No religious ceremony or water can save anyone. You could be baptized in the Jordan River itself and still be lost. Personally believing in Jesus as Savior is the means by which the atoning work of Jesus on the cross is personally applied to my status before God. So baptism doesn't save. Then what is its purpose?

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*. Spiritually, 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 and that connects me with the saving work of Jesus for me.

Baptism both illustrates this and identifies us with Jesus. It is an initiation rite. A first step of obedience. When a foal is born, right away it begins to walk. It's shaky and unsteady but it takes its first steps. The newly believing person who has by faith believed and bowed to Jesus' lordship is baptized taking this first step of discipleship to identify with him. The word "baptism" means *going under something*. It's always been water. The Ethiopian Eunuch saw water and said, "See, here is water! What prevents me from being baptized?" (Acts 8:36)

So we baptize with water. Faith baptizes the heart in faith. Baptism identifies the sinner with Jesus. It is an outward sign of an inward change.

Making baptism too important

It saves me – baptismal regeneration

I have already touched on this but there are Christian denominations that teach that you aren't actually saved until you're baptized. Our response? Salvation is by faith, not baptism. If baptism saved, then salvation can't be by faith. That would be faith + baptism. One work that I do. The gospel doesn't allow for any human contribution.

It's all about the water!

While we affirm baptism by immersion, baptism isn't about the water or the immersion itself or even the mode primarily. A true baptism is about the heart and the Christian's joy in identifying with their Savior. Don't make baptism about the water.

There will be lots of baptized people in hell. Their body went under but their heart didn't. I say this because there is a lot of diversity out there with baptism. People use the same word but can mean hugely different things. How big a circle of inclusion can we draw with it? I'd suggest the same size circle God draws. In other words, who God welcomes into heaven and who he doesn't. They may be baptized slightly differently but if they believe in the true gospel, they are our brother and sister and we will spend eternity with them. We may not agree on the mode or timing but if they believe in salvation by faith in Christ and NOT by their baptism, that's probably a genuine brother.

We won't have conversations in heaven like, "So, how were you baptized?"

"The water was poured over me." Or, "I was dipped backward three times."
"Wait? What? How did you get in here?"

When baptism isn't important enough

I don't need to be baptized

Jesus commanded it. Can we delay obedience when Jesus is our Lord? No. You can when he isn't Lord and perhaps that is what is really behind the laissez-faire attitude people have to baptism. They will say, "But the thief wasn't baptized!" He was dying on a cross. If you are dying on a cross when you come to faith, we give you a pass on the baptism step of obedience. Other than that, be baptized.

I'm waiting until the time is right

The right time for obedience is always right now. Jesus commanded it. The Apostle Peter commanded it. The Apostle Paul modeled it. I would think for a true Christian, the chance to identify with him in any way would be joy. We should wish we could do it over and over. I think that at weddings now. I loved my wedding day. I wish I could do go back and do it again. I'm so happy to identify with Jennifer as her husband.

In two weeks we have a special opportunity to publicly identify with Jesus. Who here wants to do that? All the Christians say, "Me!" If you've been baptized already, we get to watch the folks get baptized, thinking to ourselves, "*That was awesome; I wish I could do it again.*" If you've never been baptized and believe in Jesus by faith, Jesus would be pleased by your baptism. What more reason do you need?

The Lord's Supper – Remembering Jesus

The church historically has identified two ordinances or sacraments—baptism and the Lord's Supper, which is also called communion. This was instituted by Jesus in the Upper Room the night before his crucifixion (Luke 22:7ff.). The early church practiced this from the beginning and Christians have ever since.

As with everything, there has been disagreement about the Lord's Supper. The Catholic view is that the elements become the actual body and blood of Jesus. The Lutheran view is that Jesus' presence is in and around the elements. Our belief is that the bread and the cup are symbols—powerful symbols through which Jesus spiritually nourishes us by spiritually reminding our souls of the gospel.

"For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, 'This is my body which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.' In the same way also he took the cup, after supper, saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.' For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes." (1 Corinthians 11:23-26)

What we see repeated with each element is *"do this in remembrance of me."* Jesus instituted communion because he knows our nature so well. We all have spiritual amnesia. Our minds and hearts are so weak and the importance of things can so easily fade.

How do we keep from forgetting or letting something important fade? We re-enact it. Couples celebrate the anniversary of their wedding; countries celebrate the anniversary of their independence; parents celebrate the birthday of their children. Christians celebrate who and what saved them from divine punishment forever; who and what granted them right and holy standing before Almighty God; the person who granted us forgiveness of sins and eternal life. If a child or wedding is worth celebrating and remembering, how much more the cross and Christ who redeemed us from eternal hell unto eternal life?

To take the bread is to re-enact and remember Jesus bearing our sin and guilt on the cross. To take the cup is to remind my soul that it was not the blood of bulls and goats that took away my sin, but the blood of the Son of God shed for me.

Eating and drinking is a lot like believing. To eat or drink something is to make it yours personally. Nobody eats for us. Nobody drinks for us. We must personally eat and drink just like with salvation. Nobody can believe for us. We must personally turn in faith to Jesus. Can it be too important? Yes, if you take it thinking it actually saves you. We aren't saved by communion anymore than we are saved by baptism. Baptism is Jesus' ordained way by which his disciples identify with him. Communion is Jesus' ordained way his disciples continue to remember him.

While some people make it too important, it's much more common in our circles to make it less than it is. We must be nourished over and over in the gospel. We need the gospel every day and the Lord's Supper regularly nourishes our souls.

We have communion the second Sunday of the month. We have it at other special times as well. Make it an important part of your faith rhythm.

Membership in a Local Church – *Loving (and Serving) Jesus’ Church*

Baptism identifies us with Jesus. Communion remembers Jesus. How does the church universal and local fit into this? We have to understand what Jesus was actually doing when he died. Was he saving me personally? That’s true only as I see myself as part of something much bigger that he was saving. What? The church.

- *"Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her."* (Ephesians 5:25)
- *"He is the head of the body, the church."* (Colossians 1:18)
- *"And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved."* (Acts 2:47)

We are saved individually but we must see our salvation as part of the larger humanity that Jesus is redeeming. To be a Christian is to be a part of the church universal—all people from all time who trust in Christ—the church.

Here’s a problem. I can’t fellowship with the global church. Only God is everywhere. What can I do? I can serve the universal church by uniting with a local church. This is why the apostles planted local churches. They are franchises of the global church. If you love the global church, how can you not love and serve the local church? Jesus serves both, as Revelation chapters 2-3 make clear.

Sometimes you hear people say, *"I love Jesus but hate the church."* That is impossible. Now normally what that means is they have had some bad experiences and so they hate certain Christians in a local church. But that’s problematic too.

To love Christ means I must love his church, not just generally or theoretically, but the local church and its people actually. Real, messy, prickly you-can’t-have-dogs-in-church people. How do I do that? By fulfilling the biblical calling to a local church. I don’t see any way of doing that without a real commitment, which we call membership. You just can’t obey many New Testament commands without having a group of people to whom you are highly committed.

- Use of gifts for the good of the body (Romans 12:4-8; 1 Corinthians 12:7-11)
- Ministry to widows in the assembly (1 Timothy 5:9)
- Spiritual accountability and church discipline (Matthew 18:15-20; 1 Corinthians 5; Galatians 6:1-2)
- Church leaders who know who their sheep are (Acts 20:28-31)
- Sheep who know who their shepherds are (Hebrews 13:17)

The New Testament assumed Christians would be in a local church, particularly in a day when you only had one in town. It helped that there was persecution so you were either in at great risk or you were out. There are no verses supporting casual attendance on weekends at local church services. Please show those to me if you know of any.

I want to urge you to join the church. Preferably Bethel Church, but if you can’t bring yourself to join here, go somewhere where you can join and serve joyfully.

Baptism. Lord’s Supper. Membership in a local church. All three of these relate to each other and flow from a faith commitment to Christ. If Christ is my Savior, I want to identify with him in baptism. If Christ is my Savior, I want to remember his atoning work and do so by prioritizing the Lord’s Supper. If Christ is my Savior, then I’m privileged to live in covenant community with a local body of fellow believers. We are not saved by any of these things but each of them is a precious gift from Jesus to us.

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