

Understanding Baptism

Scripture: Selected Scriptures

Code: 80-57

The Lord has left only two ordinances for the church, the Lord's Table and baptism. We teach much about the Lord's Table because we come to the Lord's Table very often and we speak of its meaning very often. But largely, the subject of baptism is untouched, and perhaps even in my own case, I've been unfaithful in maintaining a balance so that you would understand the significance of baptism and its meaning. Frankly, it is somewhat of a non-issue in the church today. We don't hear very much about it.

It has been years since anyone has written a book emphasizing baptism. It has been years since I have heard any preacher or any teacher emphasize baptism. Radio/television kinds of religious programming give no thought to baptism. Grace to You, our daily radio program, is the only radio program in America that puts baptismal services on the air, and we broadcast the baptismal services here periodically across the nation. But there doesn't seem to be much concern about baptism. Largely, it stems from the fact that there seems to be such a wide diversity of opinion about what it means and how important it is that everybody has sort of relegated it to an archaic, antiquated sort of ecclesiastical-discussion level, and there's little concern for its spiritual importance.

I would even go a step further, not only considering somewhat the rather indifferent attitude toward baptism, but I would say that it is probably true that the greatest number – the majority of people who call themselves Christians have never been baptized according to New Testament baptism. Probably the majority of people who claim to be Christians have not been baptized according to New Testament baptism. I can't necessarily verify that, but that's a perception that I think may well be accurate. Frankly, there exists an unbaptized church, and it includes some of you. Some of you perhaps have never even seen a baptismal service, not coming on a Sunday night when this platform is dramatically changed and the parts that are under me go up on a hydraulic lift and reveal a baptistery here as we will do tonight as we do every Sunday night now. Some of you have not only not been baptized, you've not even experienced a baptismal service.

I would like to take this thinking a step further and also say that I believe that this failure to take baptism seriously in the church, a failure to follow baptism biblically in the church, is very likely at the root of some of the immense problems in the church because it betrays people's unfaithfulness to the simple direct commands of the Lord, and the bottom line question is: If you cannot be obedient in the matter of the simple act of baptism, which the Lord has specifically commanded every believer to do, is that not indicative of a less-than-obedient life? Which explains a lot of things about the weakness of

the church in our day.

When Jesus said, “Go into all the world and make disciples, baptizing them,” when He said that He gave a command to the church to baptize. Clearly, that is the great commission. When the Holy Spirit said, “Repent and be baptized,” Acts 2:38, He gave a command to the individual believer to be baptized. Christ commands the church to baptize, the Holy Spirit commands the individual believer to be baptized, and when all 3,000 who believed on the day of Pentecost were immediately baptized, they set the example for the church. So we are under the commanding words of Christ as a church to baptize. We are under the commanding word of the Holy Spirit as individuals to be baptized, and we follow in the line of the pattern and example established on the day the church was born when every believer was immediately baptized.

Now, as clear, as unmistakable as these scriptures are, there is still a widespread noncompliance to this simple command. Now, let’s get it down to where it really fits us. There are only five general reasons why a person who professes Christ would not be baptized. Okay? Reason number one: The person is ignorant, does not have the benefit of proper teaching, has been ill taught about baptism or not taught at all. It is possible that ignorance could be the reason. You just have not been properly taught. A second reason is that some people are proud. It becomes a matter of spiritual pride not to be baptized. You say, “How so?” Because you have gone so long without a proper New Testament baptism and to be baptized would be a public confession of a long term of disobedience or a long term of ignorance, and such would then be a humbling experience.

One would be greatly humbled stepping into the baptismal waters to say, “I know I should have been baptized but I have been disobedient for years.” Some people are not willing to be humble and they’re not willing to admit their disobedience and they’re embarrassed to acknowledge the failure in this area, and it’s really a form of spiritual pride, and as I noted a few weeks ago, they would rather be ashamed at the judgment seat of Christ than before the church.

A third reason why some people would not be baptized is because of indifference. They’re indifferent. In other words, they just can’t be bothered. They understand it. They’re not against it. They may believe in it. It’s just not important, it’s not a priority. They never get around to it. It’s – they’re not able to come when they have it. They have to go somewhere when the preparation takes place. They always get their hair done on Saturday and who wants to get it messed up on Sunday night? It just is not a major issue. It’s indifference.

Ignorant, proud, indifferent. There’s a fourth reason why some people don’t want to be baptized. Let’s just say they’re defiant. They just flatly refuse. They rebel. Usually it’s connected with the fact that if they did it, it would be hypocrisy and they know that. They rebel against baptism because they’re courting sin in their life, and they’re not about to get up in front of a congregation of people and publicly acknowledge their submission to the lordship of Jesus Christ and the joy of knowing Him

when they're harboring sin in their life. It's their hypocrisy that makes them defy the command to be baptized, and when you see a person who refuses to be baptized, it is either ignorance, pride, it is indifference, or it is defiance.

Or there's one other possibility: they're unregenerate. They're not really a Christian at all, and so there's no moving of the Spirit of God to compel them to obedience. They have no desire to make a public confession, they just want to hang around the church, be thought of as Christians, but that's not genuine, and they're not about to stand up in a public place and affirm the reality of their faith in Christ, which is not a reality at all.

So if you have not been baptized, you fit into one of these categories or another, and you need to ask yourself the question: If I have not been baptized, is it because I don't understand its importance? If that's the case, you will leave this morning have eliminated that option and you will be left with the remaining ones. Am I indifferent to its importance? Am I proud? Am I being defiant because of sin in my life? Obstinate toward God, unwilling to obey? Or is the truth that I'm not really a Christian at all and I have no particular desire to be baptized because I have no particular compulsion to confess Jesus publicly?

Now, to help us understand what we need to understand about baptism, I want to pose several questions and then endeavor to answer them from the Word of God, all right? Question number one: What is baptism? When we talk about baptism, what are we talking about? Let's assume we don't even know what we're talking about. Let's start at square one: What is baptism? Simply this, from a physical viewpoint: It is a ceremony by which a person is immersed, dunked, or submerged into water. That's what it is. It is a ceremony by which a person is immersed, dunked, or submerged into water. That's what baptism is. That's the physical act of baptism

Now, there are two verbs in the New Testament which affirm this simple definition of baptism, and we're only talking about the actual act or ceremony itself, not its meaning – we'll get to that in a moment. The two verbs that are used in the New Testament are bapt and baptiz. Bapt is only used four times. It always means to dip, to dip into, to dip into to dye, D-Y-E, and so in all those cases, it means to submerged or immerse – to dip into. A stronger word than bapt, an intensive form of bapt is baptiz, from which we get baptize. Baptiz is used many, many times in contrast to the four times that bapt is used. The more intensive word is used many, many, many times. It always means to dip completely and is the word to drown, totally submerging, immersing, dunking into water.

The noun that is used is baptismos, and baptismos, always, in the book of Acts, refers to a Christian being immersed into water. So linguistically, the terminology always refers to immersion or submerging in water. In fact, baptism became a technical term for immersion so that it was transliterated rather than translated – to translate means to give the meaning, to transliterate means to take the pronunciation of a word from one language to another without giving its meaning. In other

words, baptiz became baptize. That doesn't give it the meaning, the meaning is immerse, and you could take every use of bapt, baptiz, baptismos, and translate it immerse immersion because that's its meaning. But because it has become a technical term for the ceremony of immersion, they transliterated it out of the original and left it baptize. Even in English, that word has come to mean immerse or plunge into water.

You could go through the entire New Testament and wherever you found the word "baptize" translate it immerse and you would have the meaning properly understood. So every New Testament use of these terms – bapt, baptiz, baptismos – either requires, demands, or permits a translation of immerse or immersion. In fact, this is so obvious and so airtight that even John Calvin, who really is at the heart of the Presbyterian church that sprinkles rather than immerses, even John Calvin said, "The word baptize means to immerse," I'm quoting. "It is certain that immersion was the practice of the early church." That's what the word means, that's what they did.

Further, it is interesting to understand that the verbs, bapt and baptiz are never used in the passive sense – never used in the passive sense. In other words, water is never said to be baptized on someone. Did you get that? Always someone is baptized into water. Never is water baptized on someone, such as sprinkling, pouring, or putting water on your finger and dabbing it on someone's head. Never is water baptized on someone; always someone is baptized into water. Baptism always means an immersing, submerging, dunking into water.

Now, the New Testament occasions on which baptism occurs support this very obvious meaning. Let me give you a few illustrations. In Matthew chapter 3 and verse 6, we see the ministry of John the Baptist, and we'll say more about it a little later. But talking about John the Baptist, it says the people were coming out to him – verse 6 – and they were being baptized by him in the Jordan River. They were being baptized in the river. In fact, he was way out in the wilderness by the river as the place that was necessary for baptism. Obviously, if they were baptized in the river, they had to be immersed. You don't need a river if you're just going to dab a dot of water on someone's forehead or pour a little on them in some way.

Verse 16, it says after the baptism of Jesus, after being baptized – verse 16 – Jesus went up immediately from or out from the water. Jesus had been down in, He went out from, and so again we note that John baptized in a river. Jesus was in that river and came out of that river.

Now, the gospel of Mark chapter 1 speaks further regarding the ministry of John and says the same thing. "All the country of Judea" – Mark 1:5 – "were going out to him and all the people of Jerusalem and they were being baptized by him in the Jordan River." You don't need to be in the river if all you're doing is sprinkling. John's gospel chapter 3 and verse 23, here again referring to the ministry of John the Baptist, a very important statement, John 3:23. It says, "And John was also baptizing in Aenon near Salim" – which is along the Jordan River – "because there was much water there." Why

did he need much water? Because he had multitudes of people who needed to be submerged into water. Much water was essential for baptism.

Then we go to the book of Acts chapter 8, a familiar story of Philip and the Eunuch. Philip preached Christ, the eunuch believed, and as a result of his faith, he said, “What prevents me from begin baptized?” Down into verse 38 after his confession of faith, Philip ordered the chariot to stop, they both went down into the water, Philip as well as the eunuch, and he baptized him. He immersed him, he submerged him. He dipped him into the water. “And when they came up out of the water,” there again the implication is absolutely crystal clear that this is a submerging ceremony in which a person goes down into the water, is then dipped into the water, dunked into the water, immersed into the water, lifted back out.

Now, one other note on this technical matter of what is baptism is this: Only immersion fits the reality of which baptism is the picture – only immersion fits the reality of which baptism is the picture. The reality is that the believer at salvation is united with Christ in His death and resurrection. Only immersion symbolizes death, burial, into the water, and resurrection of new life coming out. Only immersion maintains the picture, the image of the reality baptism signifies.

Now, just as a footnote, there are some baptisms in Scripture that we’re not going to talk about this morning. One is the baptism with the Holy Spirit into the body of Christ. First Corinthians 12 tells about it. Another is the baptism of fire, the fiery judgment of God on unbelievers. Revelation 20:15 tells about it, and by the way, John the Baptist in Matthew 3:11-12 prophesied both of those when he said that there was one coming greater than him who would baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire. We’re not going to talk about Spirit baptism, we’re not going to talk about fire baptism in judgment, all we want to focus on is water baptism – this wonderful ordinance.

Now, water immersion is commanded of every believer, and it is very important not only for its own sake – because it demonstrates one’s obedient heart – but because of the picture that it presents. You see, baptism is a teaching aid. Baptism is an object lesson. Baptism is a physical analogy of a profound spiritual reality, and any student of Scripture knows that God likes to teach with symbols, pictures, illustrations, parables, and analogies. In fact, you go back to the Old Testament – follow my thought on this because it’s very important. You go back to the Old Testament, and you will note that God gave them many pictures, many ceremonies, many object lessons. All the major events, for example, of the history of Israel were commemorated by some kind of object lesson, some kind of memorial, and all of the major spiritual truths were basically illustrated by some kind of symbol, some kind of analogy, some kind of picture, and these basically were for teaching aids.

For example, let’s say you have a couple of little children in the family, they’re ages 5, 6, or whatever, they have a little brother. On the eighth day after that little brother has been born, it is time for the family to circumcise the little brother, and so their little brother is circumcised and the older brother

and sister say, "Daddy, why do you do that?" That is precisely the purpose of that ceremony, to pass on spiritual truth to the next generation, and the spiritual truth is this: There is innate in us sin. It is in our nature, and all we can do is procreate sinners, and so man at the very point of his procreative organ must recognize that he produces wickedness and is in desperate need of a spiritual cutting away, cleansing, and so what you have, you say to your children, is a demonstration of how the heart and the soul of man needs desperately the cleansing from sin.

When a little child would go with mother and father to the temple and see the bloody animals being sacrificed, they might say, "Mother, why do they do that?" To which the mother would reply, "Well, you see, our sins demand death, and so someone, something must die for sin, and God has graciously permitted us to offer an animal to die in our place, and so this is a picture of the substitute." And then that parent could say, "And someday God is going to send the real Lamb, the final substitute, and all these other sacrifices will be over with. But sin is so bad that it brings death, bloody death." A little child standing in the temple would literally be shocked at the hundreds and thousands of animals being slaughtered and would get a vivid picture of the sinful sin of one's life and the ramifications of that sin. And when God established the Passover, a little child would say, "Why do we do this?" The father would say, "To remember that God is our great deliverer and that He delivered us from Egypt."

Everything they did was a teaching tool to produce a godly generation. That's how spiritual truth was passed on, in vivid terms. Beloved, all of those ceremonies are gone. With the ending of the old covenant, all those pictures are gone, and the Lord only left us with two: the Lord's Table and baptism. They must be His two most important pictures. The Lord's Table is a physical picture of the death and sacrifice of Christ, and baptism is a physical picture of the death and burial of the new birth that occurs when one puts his faith in the Savior. It is an object lesson. It is a visual representation of a spiritual reality. That is the meaning of baptism.

Now, let me talk a little bit about what has been the history of baptism. That's the second question. Where does it come from? How did we get it? Where did it start? Well, we go back before the New Testament, and God had His people, Israel, and they were the people who received the law, the promises, the prophets, the covenants. They were God's people. They worshiped the true God, they had the true revelation of the true God. But there were a lot of other nations around them called Gentile nations, and frequently the Gentiles would want to identify with Israel. They would want to worship the true God in the true way. They would want to become Jews, as it were, not racially, that's impossible, but religiously, spiritually. So they would desire to enter into Judaism.

In order for a Gentile to do that, he was therefore called a proselyte, and so they developed a system of proselyte induction into Judaism. It had three parts, okay? This is where baptism first appears in the traditions of Judaism related to Gentile proselytes. This is where baptism really begins to appear in this matter of proselyte baptism, Gentiles coming into Judaism.

Now, the proselyte ceremony had three phases, and I think these are fascinating, listen to them. There was milah, tebula, and corbin – milah, tebula and corbin – and each Gentile proselyte coming into Judaism with a heart to worship the true God would go through these stages.

Number one, milah, this was circumcision – circumcision. No matter how old the men were, they were circumcised. Why? This unique sign of the people of God was to demonstrate that they were sinful at their very nature level, that they were sinful at the very level of their life organ. In other words, sin begets sin, as in Adam, all died and the whole race was polluted, and so they were circumcised as a confession that they had an innate depravity that needed purging and cleansing and was thus symbolized by that purging, cleansing act of circumcision. So a Gentile was affirming his root sinfulness, not just superficial acts of sin but a very nature that was defiled and could only produce defiled beings. A great admission for a Gentile to make, that was milah.

The second stage was tebula. Tebula was immersion into water. Having been circumcised, the Gentile proselyte was then immersed in water. Why? Because they said it identifies a Gentile as dying to the Gentile world. The old life is dead, the old life apart from God, apart from the promises of God, apart from the knowledge of God, apart from the truth of God, that is dead and he comes forth a new person with a new life and a new family and a new relationship to the true God. And so they said nothing illustrates that better than immersion, and so it was in proselyte Gentile immersion that baptism first appeared in redemptive history.

The third step was corbin, and this was an animal sacrifice. There was circumcision, immersion, and sacrifice, and when the animal was sacrificed on the altar, the blood was sprinkled on the Gentile, on the proselyte, symbolizing – follow this thought – that he needed cleansing for his daily sins. Not only did he need cleansing for his wicked nature but for his daily sins, not only for his sin as depravity but his sins as conduct. So the major note in this proselyte ceremony was an admission of sinfulness at the nature level, deep down, and at the behavior level on all the actions of life and the desperate need to die to all of that and rise in a new family with a new relationship to the true God. So that's where immersion got started, and it symbolizes the death of the old and a new life.

Now, let's follow its history a little bit. This is fascinating to me. The last Old Testament prophet that comes into the world is John the Baptist, and his job as the forerunner of Christ is to come and make the people ready for the coming of Christ. How is he going to do that? Well, he knows that the coming Christ will be holy. He knows that the coming Christ will demand righteousness. So he preaches repentance and holiness and righteousness, and he calls everyone to repent for the kingdom is near, repent for the King is coming, turn from your sin, and then he baptizes them as an illustration, as a visible symbol of that inward turning.

Now, follow this, this is amazing. So here comes John the Baptist, asking Jews to be immersed in water. This is a humbling thing because in the mind of a Jew, he's a child of the covenant. In the mind of the Jew, he doesn't need to be brought through some kind of proselytizing ceremony to be inducted into the people of God. But the fact of the matter is the people were flooding out to John, according to Matthew 3, and they were being baptized in large numbers willingly. Why? Because they were admitting that Jewish though they were racially, they had been disobedient, ungodly, sinful, and apostate in terms of a right relationship to God and they, too, needed to be washed, they need to have something die, and they need to be brought into a new relationship with God.

So John preached repentance, he preached righteousness, he preached holiness, he called for people to turn from iniquity to holiness, and he immersed them in the Jordan River as a visual symbol of what was going on in their repenting hearts. No better outward symbol could be found than immersion to testify to an inwardly transformed heart. That's a perfect illustration. There's also a cleansing, a washing symbolized, and so John came with that wonderful baptism, that wonderful picture of a repenting people, and that's why – Acts 19:4 – Paul says, “John baptized with the baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe on Him who was coming after him,” that is, in Jesus. So he called the people to believe in Jesus and then to turn from sin and turn in faith to Christ and to symbolize that in a willingness to publicly affirm that they needed a washing, they needed a transforming, they needed to die as to the old and rise to live in new life even though they were Jews, and when they did that, that is remarkable. It isn't particularly remarkable that a Gentile would do it, it is amazing that a Jew would do it and shows the true repentance of their hearts.

So all who submitted to the baptism of the Jordan River by John were confessing their sinfulness and that they were worthy of death and they were worthy of burial and pleading to walk in a new life, and that death, burial, and resurrection were symbolized in that baptism. It marked the turning point of a sinful Jew who wanted to be ready to face his Messiah, and he wanted to be associated with the others being baptized as a penitent people, forgiven and ready to receive the Savior.

And so there was John doing that, and on a very special day in the midst of his wonderful ministry, a marvelous thing happened. Verse 13 of Matthew 3 says it: “Then Jesus arrived from Galilee at the Jordan, coming to John to be baptized by him.” Amazing. John is baptizing all these multitudes of repentant people who are acknowledging, “We should die and we need a new life,” and all that is going on, and all of a sudden Jesus comes. John knew who He was because on a prior occasion, John had said of Him, “Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.” He knew He was the Messiah, he knew He was the Lamb of God, the Savior, the coming One, though later in his ministry he had doubts planted in his mind. At this point, he has already affirmed Christ as the Lamb of God. He knows He's not a sinner. He knows He doesn't need to repent. So why in the world does He want to be baptized?

So when Jesus comes and wants to be baptized, verse 14 says, John tried to prevent Him and he said, "I have need to be baptized by You and do You come to me?" "How can I, a sinner, baptize a sinless one? You should baptize me." It was absolutely unthinkable to John the Baptist. He knew Jesus. He knew His divine identity. He knew He was the Lord's anointed. He knew He was the spotless, sinless Lamb, and he could not understand how Christ could possibly confess sin when He was already the perfect, sinless Son of God. So he tried to stop Him.

But Jesus – in verse 15 – answered him and He said, "Permit it at this time for in this way it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness." Then He permitted him. What did He mean by that? What a statement. To fulfill all righteousness. He says, "It's necessary, John, and it's necessary in fulfilling all righteousness."

Let me ask you a question. How did Jesus fulfill the righteousness of God? Well, you could say He lived a perfect life. That didn't fulfill it. How did He fulfill the requirement of the righteousness of God? How? By dying on a cross. So whatever Jesus' baptism means, it is somehow connected to His fulfilling all righteousness, and therefore it is somehow connected to the act in which He did that when in righteous wrath, God poured out vengeance on the Lord Jesus Christ, and in His perfect sacrifice and sin-bearing death, all righteousness was then fulfilled, and a righteous God was satisfied and able to impute righteousness to believing people. All righteousness has to be fulfilled at the cross; therefore, the baptism of Jesus Christ is somehow connected to the cross. I think so. I believe that's right. And I believe that baptism was a symbol of His death and resurrection .

The proselyte baptism, the proselyte was saying "I'm worthy of death for my sin. I want a new life under the true God." The baptism of John the Baptist, a Jew, saying, "I am worthy only of death for my sin and for my apostasy and for my failure, I deserve to die, I want to rise in a new life and be ready for the Messiah." The symbol of death and resurrection fits perfectly the fulfilling of all righteousness, which Jesus desires to do, and thus I believe His is a prefiguring of His own death and resurrection. Therefore, it has the same symbolic meaning as our baptism on this side of the cross for it pictures His own coming death and resurrection as our baptism pictures His death and resurrection past.

This can be verified rather easily with two verses in the gospels. In Luke chapter 12 verse 50, listen to what Jesus said. By the way, it wasn't long before His final trip to Jerusalem. He was discussing matters with the disciples, and in Luke 12:50, He says this – I'll quote it to you. He says, "I have a baptism to undergo." Isn't that an interesting choice of words? Why didn't He say, "I have a death to undergo?" Why didn't He say, "I have a sacrifice to undergo?" Why didn't He say, "I have a self-giving to undergo?" Why didn't He say, "I have a crucifixion to undergo?" He said, "I have a baptism to undergo and how distressed I am until it is accomplished." No, He viewed His death as an immersion, as a dying and as a rising again, and beautifully prefigured in His own baptism.

In Mark chapter 10 verse 38, Jesus said to James and John who wanted to sit on the right and left in the kingdom, He said, "You don't know what you're asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink?" Listen: "Or to be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?" Why didn't He say, "Or to be killed with the death which I am to die?" He spoke in the picture terms. He saw His death as a baptism because it was analogous to being immersed. He was immersed into death, burial, and He came forth in resurrection. So I believe that when Jesus looked at His baptism and said it's to fulfill all righteousness, He was saying, "My death and resurrection will fulfill all righteousness, and I will give a symbolic demonstration of that great baptism yet to come."

So in submitting to baptism, Jesus prefigured the purpose for which He came, which was to die for sin, bearing the sins of the world. He did die bearing sin, and then to be buried under the waves of divine judgment, then to rise again in new life. And His baptism, beloved, in Judea was but a shadow of a far more solemn baptism in Jerusalem soon to come. It was necessary – it was necessary.

So even Christ's baptism was a picture of death, burial, resurrection of His own death, burial, resurrection. So in that sense, it is the same as our baptism, which also figuratively pictures His death, burial, and resurrection and our union with Him in that. And by the way, beloved, please – this is another compelling reason why you cannot understand Christian baptism any other way than as immersion. Nothing else fits the picture. Sprinkling, pouring, dotting someone's head with a spot of water does not demonstrate death, burial, resurrection, does not demonstrate total cleansing, washing, and is not humbling. Whereas water baptism is very humbling and thus it should be.

And so first proselyte baptism, then the baptism of John, then the baptism of Jesus – what followed after that? Jesus began to baptize. Having been baptized, according to John chapter 4 verse 1, the Lord was making and baptizing more disciples than John. Jesus began a baptizing ministry. You say, "Well, what did His ministry of baptism signify?" It, too, signified that sinners who believed in Him were affirming that they needed to die and be buried to the old and rise in newness of life. And, of course, in the mind of Christ, He saw in that His own death, His own burial, and His own resurrection. After He died, after He rose again, He then gave the command, "Go into all the world and make disciples baptizing them." Proselyte baptism, baptism of John the Baptist, baptism of Jesus, baptism by Jesus, and then Jesus commands, "You go and you baptize." That's the first step in making disciples.

And the early church comes along, 3,000 believed, 3,000 were baptized. Absolute continuity, and always baptism, the beautiful picture of the death of the old, the resurrection of new. It finds its ultimate fulfillment in the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Question number three: What is the theological significance of Christian baptism? And I've already alluded to this, I had to in the points previous, but let me crystallize it. What is the theological

significance of Christian baptism? What is the spiritual significance of Christian baptism? What is it really depicting? Is it just the death, burial, resurrection of Christ? No. Listen carefully to what I say. When you, as a believer, are baptized by immersion into water, you are demonstrating not just the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ, but you are demonstrating your union with Christ in that death, burial, and resurrection. Do you see that?

For whom did Christ die? For you. Whose sins did He bear? Yours. For whom did He rise? You. You. Paul says, "I am crucified with Christ" – right? Galatians 2:20. "I died in Him, I was buried in Him, I rose in Him to walk in newness of life." That's the spiritual significance. A person being baptized is giving a spiritual truth physical form or making it into an object lesson. The moment you put your faith in Christ, you become a Christian. By a supernatural, sovereign, divine, spiritual miracle, God puts you in Christ and you die at the cross and you rise to walk in newness of life.

You're just instantly in Christ in His death, resurrection, and you become new in Him. That's the message. That's the point here. Even in 1 Corinthians 10:2 where it says, "All Israel was baptized into Moses," all it means is they were immersed into solidarity with Moses. He was their leader, and as God poured out direction to him, they, being under his leadership, were immersed into the blessing and the working of that direction. It means solidarity with something. You have been immersed into Christ. This is such a beautiful theme in the New Testament, with the epistles. Galatians 3:27: "For all of you who were baptized," that doesn't mean water, but all of you who are immersed into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ and it's symbolized in water.

In Colossians chapter 2 verse 12, "Having been buried with Him in baptism," it doesn't mean water there, it means you were literally immersed into His death and you were raised up, it says. "You have been made alive together with Him having forgiven us all our transgressions." It's the immersion into Christ's death, immersion spiritually into His burial. The immersion into His resurrection so that we die and He lives in us and Paul says, "I am crucified with Christ, nevertheless I live yet it's not I but Christ lives in me. I die in Him, I rise in Him."

And perhaps the most explicit passage of all, Romans 6, "Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ," that's not water baptism there, that's immersed into Christ, "have been immersed into His death, therefore we have been buried with Him through baptism into death in order that as Christ was raised from the death through the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life." We are dying with Him. We are buried with Him, and we rise with Him, immersed into Him, and though those passages are not referring to water, it is water baptism that symbolizes that spiritual reality, and when Peter says in 1 Peter 3:21 these words, he makes that distinction. He says, "Baptism now saves you." What baptism? "Not the removal of dirt from the flesh," not the water baptism, it is the spiritual union that saves you. "That is the washing of regeneration," Titus 3:5. "That is the washing away of your sins," Acts 22:16. But baptism is the symbol of it, water baptism.

Now, that takes us to question number four, and then one other one, and question number four is this: What is the relation of immersion to salvation? Some people say you have to be baptized to be a Christian. If you're not baptized, you're not saved. What is the relationship? Let me put it to you as simply as I can. The relationship of water baptism to salvation is the relationship of obedience to salvation. Having been saved, we enter into obedience. Baptism was the immediate and inseparable indicator of salvation. Why? Because salvation basically produces obedience, and so believers were obedient to be baptized. Day of Pentecost, 3,000 believed, 3,000 were baptized, 3,000 continued in the apostles' doctrine, prayer, fellowship, and the breaking of bread. No loss, 3,000 believed, 3,000 baptized, 3,000 continued. Everybody was baptized, everybody was baptized immediately. That's God's standard. That's God's command. The apostles insisted on it.

Now, listen carefully. It was not easy. You're talking on the day of Pentecost, about 3,000 people in the city of Jerusalem – where a few weeks before Jesus Christ had been crucified as a charlatan and a fraud and one who posed a threat both to Jewish religion and Roman authority. He was mocked and spit on and crucified as a false religious leader, and basically it was a matter of putting your life on the line to identify with Christ. So any Jew that was baptized on the day of Pentecost in the name of Jesus Christ was taking a bold step, alienation from the culture, alienation from the synagogue, alienation from family, alienation from everything.

The price was high and it was very simple. Nobody who was a half-hearted convert was going to be baptized. So the people that were baptized were the real Christians because they were willing to pay the price. That's why you have 3,000 believers, 3,000 baptized, 3,000 continued. Typically today you hear a guy say, "We had a great evangelistic rally, 3,000 were saved, 42 were baptized, and ten continued." Different. The cost of baptism then was very high, and people who weren't serious in their commitment to Christ weren't going to pay it. There was no way they were going to be alienated from their entire culture and perhaps lose their life. It was, therefore, the inseparable token of salvation.

So very often in the New Testament as you read, it uses the word baptism instead of saved because the way you knew someone was saved was because they were what? Baptized. If a convert was not willing to be baptized, there was little confidence in his repentance. If he was willing to be baptized, he paid a high price, revealed his true heart of repentance.

So when Jesus says, "Go out into all the world, make disciples, baptizing," what does He mean? He means bringing them to salvation, which is demonstrated in a willingness to be baptized and to pay the price of identification with Jesus Christ publicly. That's exactly what Romans 10 means when it says, "If you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord and believe in your heart that God had raised Him from the dead, you'll be saved." The believing is what saves, the confessing is what affirms the reality of that believing. And so when we talk about, for example, Acts 2:38 says, "Repent and be baptized for the forgiveness of sins," you say, "Well, does that mean your baptism, the water, washes

your sin?" No. When he says repent and be baptized for the remission of sin, he means that baptism is inseparable from salvation, and that's where it's demonstrated that your sins have been remitted or forgiven.

People say, "Do you have to be baptized to get into heaven?" Do you have to be baptized to get into heaven? The thief on the cross didn't. There may become exigencies which preclude baptism, but I'll tell you this: If you are reluctant to be baptized there is question about your willingness to be obedient, and an unwilling heart in the matter of obedience may well reveal an unregenerate person because Jesus said, "If you love Me you will" – what? – "keep My commandments," and He said, "How can you say, Lord, Lord, to Me and not do the things I say," and it starts with this simple command – simple command. One who refused baptism would be one who wouldn't confess Jesus publicly, therefore one whom Jesus wouldn't confess. Every treatment of salvation in the Bible makes clear that it's by grace through faith plus or minus nothing – no works, grace through faith. Baptism is simply the demonstrator of real faith and real transformation which issues in obedience and the first act of obedience was baptism.

Baptism does not make you holy. Baptism does not save you. Baptism does not secure you. Baptism does not provide some ongoing power. All baptism does is demonstrate your obedience and give you the joy of obedience and the blessing of obedience.

It could go like this – here's a possible way you could see it. A person comes into the water and says this: "I hereby confess in my willing submission to this divinely appointed ordinance my glad obedience to the command of my Lord and Savior. In this symbolic way, I show my identification with the one who bore my sins, took my place, died in my stead, was buried and rose again for my justification. As Christ went through the reality of suffering in death to secure my salvation, so by my immersion in water and coming out, I thus publicly declare my identification with my Lord in His death, burial, and resurrection on my behalf with the intention to walk with Him in newness of life." Now, that's a sample baptismal confession. No more beautiful, simple picture could be given than that.

Last question: Since baptism is so significant, since it is such a demonstrator of obedience, since it is such a beautiful picture, since it is the source of such joy and blessing, why is there so much confusion regarding baptism? Is the Bible confusing about it? Did it confuse you this morning, what the Bible said? It's not confusing. But there's an awful lot of confused people – an awful lot. You say, "Why?" Because if there's any one thing Satan wants to do in the life of a believer, it is shatter the pattern of obedience, and he wants to shatter it at the very beginning. And if he can make baptism so confusing that you ignore it, then he has started you on the path of indifference and disobedience.

This takes a pretty formal form sometimes. The Quakers, the Friends Church, the Salvation Army, Hyper-dispensationalists, all deny that baptism has any place in the believer's life. They reject it altogether. On the other hand, Churches of Christ say it saves you. You can't be saved without the

water, and if you just believe and don't get baptized, you'll go to hell. One errs on the side of grace, the other errs on the side of law. One ignores the command to obedience, the other ignores the salvation through faith.

And then there are the Mormons and they baptize each other for the dead – proxy baptism. It's not uncommon in one year alone for them to have three million proxy baptisms for three million dead people. And then the Roman Catholic Church introduced something that has really threatened the sanity of the church with regard to this ordinance. It's called "infant baptism." The Roman Catholic Church began infant baptism as a ritual of regeneration. You must understand that Roman Catholic theology teaches that water cleanses a baby from original sin and results in regeneration. They believe that. By the way, until the Middle Ages they immersed all the babies and then they started sprinkling them after that.

And Roman Catholic theology teaches that a baby dies, a baby that dies without being christened or without being baptized, sprinkled – get this – any baby that dies without that goes to the Limbo of the Innocents – upper case, that's a place – the Limbo of the Innocents – where they will live forever enjoying a natural bliss without any vision of God. And so they want to baptize every Catholic baby so that if it dies, it can go to a bliss that has the vision of God and not get stuck in the second-class category known as the Limbo of the Innocents. They believe literally that that baptism has the regenerative capability of ushering that baby into the presence of God.

Martin Luther, bless his heart, was strong on justification by faith but never disentangled himself from Roman infant baptism and the sacramentalism. In fact, he wrote a book called *The Small Baptismal Book*. 1526, he wrote it. He never shook the grave clothes of infant baptism, and he wrote the book which is the manual for the Lutherans on infant baptism. And he believed that baptizing a baby brought regeneration to the baby, cleansed the baby of sin, and when he was asked, "How can you affirm that if you believe justification by faith?" And he said, "Well, somehow a baby must be able to believe." Which was a bizarre kind of thing which showed the difficulty that he had in the disentangling.

Here's the prayer that the priest prays and the Lutheran clergyman prays at the baptism of an infant: "O Almighty, I invoke Thee concerning this child, Thy servant, who asks for the gift of Thy baptism and desires Thy grace through the spiritual new birth. Receive him, O Lord, and thus extend now the good to him who knocks that he may obtain the eternal blessing of this heavenly bath and receive the promised kingdom of Thy gift through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen." You're praying that the bath will save the baby.

Then the parents are drawn alongside, and the questions are directed at the baby and the parents are supposed to answer. "Dost thou renounce the devil and all his works and nature?" The parents reply, "Yes" on behalf of the baby. "Dost thou believe in God the Father and Jesus Christ His Son and

in the Holy Spirit and in the one Christian church?" The parents say, "Yes," whereupon the baby is baptized. Then the closing prayer: "The Almighty God hath begotten thee anew through water and the Holy Spirit and has forgiven thee all thy sins. Amen."

That is a travesty on New Testament teaching. There is nothing in the New Testament about babies being baptized. There is nothing in the New Testament about salvation apart from personal faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, which comes to one who understands the meaning of the gospel. There is no infant baptism in the Bible whatsoever. It isn't commanded, it isn't illustrated, it isn't done, it isn't there.

You say, "Why did they do it?" Early on, the Roman Catholic Church did it to secure everybody into the system. They wanted to wrap everybody into the system and so they baptized all the babies, made them quote/unquote "Christians," then they belonged to the church, they were under the control of the church, they were under the domination of the church. Even the Reformed view of infant baptism, which is a little different than this, which is the idea that Christian parents can baptize their babies and they become little members of the covenant which is confirmed at their time when they can recite the catechism properly, that, too, is rooted in this Roman Catholic system, and the idea was to embrace all the population under the power and control of the church.

Now, that leads me to another very interesting point. What obviously threatened the Roman church was a group of people who came along, a group of people who came along and said, "This is wrong, infant baptism is wrong. Baptism is only for Christians, it's only for believers. It's only for people who consciously put their faith in Jesus Christ, and that infant baptism matters for nothing—it is pointless, useless, it means nothing." And so they went around preaching the gospel during the Middle Ages, and they went around seeing people converted to Christ, and people being converted were then baptized and so they were called the "re-baptizers." Historically they're known as the "Anabaptists," ana being the Greek word for again. They were the re-baptizers.

It was such a serious thing that not only were they the object of the hatred of the Catholic Church, they were objects of the hatred of the Protestants who were still in a baptizing mode based upon the Catholic plan. They were still doing it the sacramental, old way with the infants, and they were so hostile – get this – that some of the Protestants even killed some of the Anabaptists. They kept control of their people by baptizing the babies. The Anabaptists were a threat to their power, too.

So during the Middle Ages, it was the Roman church baptizing infants. Afterward, even after the Reformation, it was the Protestants still baptizing babies threatened by the Anabaptists who believed only in believer's baptism. People ask me all the time, "Should I be re-baptized?" If you were not baptized according to the New Testament, if you were not immersed in water after a conscious commitment of your life to Jesus Christ after you became saved, then you need to be baptized, period, because whatever you did before was nothing. It was nothing. It's only for believers; it should

be done immediately.

Do I need to sum it up? Our Lord recognized baptism had a heavenly purpose. He understood that it was a God-ordained thing. In fact, is it Matthew 21:25? Yes. Jesus says, “The baptism of John, what source was it from? Heaven or from men?” And Jesus is affirming, “Hey, the baptism of John was from heaven.” He’s even affirming the heavenly source of John’s immersing baptism. In Luke 7 – just one other quick passage – Luke 7:29 says: “And when all the people and the tax gatherers heard this, they acknowledged God’s justice, having been baptized with the baptism of John, but the Pharisees and the lawyers rejected God’s purpose for them, not having been baptized by John.” Pharisees refused the baptism of John, which was the purpose of God. Baptism is still the purpose of God. To refuse is to refuse the purpose of God.

So if you haven’t been baptized, you can’t claim ignorance. Not anymore. You’re left with pride, you just don’t want to humble yourself, you don’t want to have people think you’ve been disobedient. Indifference, it’s not that important to you. Or defiance, you’re cultivating sin in your life and you’re just not about to be a worse hypocrite. Or you’re not a Christian at all.

Would you examine your heart? Beloved, I am convinced that much of the problem in the church today stems right from this root of disobedience that is manifest in the simple matter of baptism, and I am convinced that Satan has tried to confuse this issue for centuries, to make believers divert themselves from the simple, straightforward patterns of obedience which God has ordained. We must be obedient and so be blessed.

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