

BAPTISM: MY FAVORITE PART OF WORSHIP

I get a lot of comments from folks about what they like best about our worship services. Let me tell you what mine is. My eyes moisten, my voice cracks, and my hands clap at the baptisms that go on at Windsor Road. Some folks enter the waters of baptism having just initiated their faith in Christ. Others come who have been believers for a while out of obedience to the Lordship of Christ. Baptism is an important act of submission to God. It is a declaration of faith in Christ. It communicates to the world in a very graphic way that I am under the management and direction of Jesus. It signifies in very vivid colors that I have been washed, declared righteous, and forgiven by the blood of Jesus.

A GRAPHIC REMINDER

When I doubt my faith and relationship with God I can turn to the day I was baptized as a reminder that my faith does not rest on my emotional feelings but on the fact of the Cross. Paul said:

"Have you forgotten that when we became Christians and were baptized to become one with Christ Jesus, we died with him? For we died and were buried with Christ by baptism. And just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glorious power of the Father, now we also may live new lives." (Romans 6:3-4 NLT)

Let's say that I came home one night and said to my wife, Sarah, "Honey, are you sure we own this house? I just don't feel like we own this house! I'm beginning to doubt whether or not we really bought this place! And while I'm at it, are we married? I mean, really? Did we tie the knot? I'm feeling unmarried. Am I? Are we?" Now, assuming Sarah isn't rolling on the floor weeping in laughter at these insecurities (or wondering what kind of model glue I've been sniffing), she's probably going to respond like this: "Well, honey. I really think that we do own this house. See these papers. You know, the ones that say "mortgage" on them? They have our signatures on them. I understand how you may feel. But the fact is, we own the house. You can be assured. Everything is all right. It is settled. As to your question about our marriage: look at this video tape. It should jog your memory. In fact, you don't even have to look at the tape. Just look at the ring on the third finger of your left hand. That is a graphic and visible reminder to you and everyone else that you are married. Now, please . . . take out the garbage!"

God gives the gifts of baptism and communion¹ to remind us that our salvation is not based on our ability to keep the commands but Christ's ability to keep his promises. Law says, "Achieve." Grace says, "Believe." Law says, "Attain." Grace says, "Atone." Law is about my efforts. Grace is about Christ's promises. If Grace could sing it would be the song, "What can wash away my sin? Nothing but the blood of Jesus." Or, "On Christ the solid rock I stand, all other ground is sinking sand." Isn't God good?

A GOSPEL PROCLAMATION

At Windsor Road, we have a baptistery tank holding a huge bath of heated water about 3 ½ feet deep. Our baptisms at WRCC are by immersion because that's what we see

happening in the Bible. "Baptize" in the New Testament is the Greek word βαπτίζω (bapteetso) and it literally means "to immerse or to dip." In Mark 1:5, those baptized by John the Baptist went "in the Jordan River" (as opposed to beside it or near it). Mark 1:10 says that when Jesus was baptized he came up "out of the water." In Acts 8:38-39, both Philip and the Ethiopian official "went into" the water and "came up out of the water." When you read Colossians 2:12, you can see the immersion image of baptism. "For you were *buried* with Christ when you were baptized. And with him you were *raised* to a new life because you trusted the mighty power of God, who raised Christ from the dead." (Colossians 2:12 NLT)² Whenever you see a baptism, you see a reenactment of what Christ did to save your soul. You are buried with Christ. You are raised with Christ. Jesus identified with us by his baptism and we are instructed to identify with Him in ours. Some folks prefer to be baptized outdoors (a pool, a pond, a lake, an ocean, a river, a stream, etc.) and that's perfectly all right. You just need enough to get you under. Someone once quipped that baptism by immersion means to hold 'em under 'til they bubble!

I don't do all the baptisms at Windsor Road. Neither does our staff. The Bible infers that the only qualification it takes to baptize someone is being a Christian. This is why both men and women, preachers and non-preachers, mothers and fathers, husbands and wives, married and non-married can baptize . . . if they are Christians! Specifically, the person who is responsible for leading you to Christ or mentoring you in Christ is—to me—the most ideal person to perform your baptism. For me, that was Roy Blackmore at East Tulsa Christian Church in May 1972. He was my preacher but he also led me to the Lord.

Baptisms in the Bible occurred at different times and so do ours. Some occur on Sunday morning and I prefer that best because more people can enjoy them. Others occur during the week when your small group can be there or with your family present. I had someone call me up one Friday night and said, "Randy, can I use the baptistery on Saturday morning?" I said, "You bet!" You see, when you believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God; when you believe that He died and rose again; when you believe that all authority has been given to Jesus and that He is the Sovereign God of this universe; when you surrender your life to His will and trust Him to take you to heaven—then, you are ready to be baptized. In the New Testament—especially from Acts—it is clear that the occasion for baptism was when one put his or her faith in Christ. One believed, repented, confessed, and was baptized into Christ. You put on your wedding ring on your wedding day. Now, for one reason or another, there are times when some didn't share wedding rings on their wedding day. Perhaps 1, 5, or 20 years later they realize they need one. It's never too late to wear a wedding ring.

A JOYFUL ACT OF OBEDIENCE

When you were first taught about Jesus you may not have been told these things about biblical baptism. Well, it's never too late. Those who have accepted Christ need to follow through on Christ's command to be baptized out of a desire to be obedient to Him. Jesus explained the Great Commission of making disciples by going, baptizing, and teaching (Matthew 28: 19). One would anticipate a blessing from God in association with baptism, if for no other reason than obedience. We are asked to act out or dramatize a core truth of Christianity: "I have been crucified with Christ and it is

no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me!" (Galatians 2:20) Don't ever view baptism as a "have to" sort of thing. Think of it as a "want to" expression of faith. And don't ever think of your baptism as your ticket into heaven. Max Lucado once wrote: "Please understand. Symbols are important. Some of them, like communion and baptism, illustrate the cross of Christ. They symbolize salvation, demonstrate salvation, even articulate salvation. But they do not impart salvation." (Lucado 1996, 50) Baptism is not about you. It is about what Jesus has done to you.

GETTING YOURSELF READY

If you haven't been baptized, I'd like you to think about it. First, you need to make sure you understand why you are doing what you are doing. You need to believe that Jesus is your CEO. You need to believe that whatever He says, goes. Don't wait! DO IT NOW! Baptism demonstrates and celebrates our decision to follow Christ. It is a joyful proclamation of Jesus. It is a celebration of His goodness. You'll want to think of any family members or friends to invite to your baptism. What a wonderful way to share Christ! Pray and read these Scriptures before your baptism: Acts 2; Acts 8:26-40; Romans 6; & 1 Peter 3:18-22.

If you get baptized at the church, you will want to wear something you don't mind getting wet beneath the baptistery robes. The one who baptizes you will enter the water first and help you enter safely. Please stand as far to the front of the baptistery as possible. You will be asked to repeat Peter's confession of faith based on Matthew 16: 16, "I believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God." The one who baptizes you will then say, "I now baptize you in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen." The one who baptizes you will guide you as you are dipped into water going backwards. Help that person help you by relaxing and keeping your knees bent! Then, you'll come out of the water! Congratulations! You've been baptized into Christ!

Before you leave, we'll ask you to fill out a decision card for our records in the office. And we'll also ask you to wash and dry the baptistery robe for someone else's use!

William Willimon once said, "When you join Rotary, they give you a handshake and a lapel pin. When you join the church we throw you in the water and half drown you. Ponder that. Whatever signing on with Jesus means, it means that we will not do just as we are, that change is demanded, daily, sometimes painful turning and detoxification that does not come naturally. . . . *Baptism is a one time event that takes our whole life to finish.*" (Willimon 1992, 32) Well said! In baptism, we proclaim what Christ has done, and having "stripped down and splashed about," we see what He will make of us!

¹"Do this in remembrance of me." (1 Corinthians 11:25 NLT)

²By the way, the earliest reference to a mode other than immersion, and the only one before the third century, is found in a document called the Didache (di-duh-kay). This document, which of course should not be viewed as equal to the Bible, permitted pouring as a last resort. See Everett Ferguson's *Early Christians Speak*.