

Week 44

Water Baptism

Key Verse

Romans 6:3-4 Or do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus have been baptized into His death? Therefore we have been buried with Him through baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life.

+ Introduction

Imagine you could jump into a time machine and zip forward to Second Baptist Church in the year 3021 AD. Things might be very different then! Our church might meet in another location. The language might be hard to understand. Worship music might be played on new instruments. Scripture would certainly be read, but who knows whether it would be from books or tablets or something completely new! (Yes, this all assumes the Lord does not return before 3021 (See lesson 39)!

Despite the many things that could change over the next thousand years, there are two signs that would instantly let you know you are at church: Water Baptism and the Lord's Supper.

These two essentials of church life will never go away. Sometimes they are called "sacraments" because there is a "mysterious" quality to them.¹ More often, they are called "ordinances" because they are considered ordinary practices Jesus commanded His churches to follow. In this lesson, we will discuss baptism. Next week, we will discuss the Lord's Supper. Together, these make up the signs or "ordinances" Jesus gave to mark His churches in every place and every age until He returns.

+ Water Baptism is a Powerful Sign

Signs are everywhere. Traffic signs, street signs, billboards, and business markers fill our environment. People have their personal signs, too: bumper stickers, logos, tattoos, "hook 'em" horns, and Aggie rings. All of them communicate something—often without words. Granted, some of these signs immediately connect people with similar thoughts, values, or attachments. But are these signs truly powerful?

Some signs are powerful because they activate a response. The red octagonal street sign causes most people to press the brakes and stop their cars. A certain black billboard with a little beaver in a red hat causes people to exit the highway dreaming of beef jerky and cinnamon toasted pecans!

But baptism does not work like those signs. According to the Bible, baptism does not cause a response; rather, baptism is a response to God's work in a person's life. The power of baptism is in God's hands. In our church, we sometimes explain that baptism is like a wedding ring, a symbol of a relationship that began before the wearer put it on. The ring does not make a person married, but it is an outward visible sign to all who see it that this person is married to another. Baptism is God's powerful sign that someone belongs to Him through faith in Jesus Christ. Let us consider four ways baptism is a powerful sign.

a. The power of immersion and humility.

The word "baptize" is an untranslated Greek word (from *baptizo*), meaning simply "to dunk in water."² It is an immersive sign. A person can make the sign of the cross in a matter of seconds. They can throw up a "hook 'em," "gig 'em," or "sic 'em" sign in even less time. Those signs show loyalty, but they do not involve the whole person like baptism does.

Whenever we see baptism in the Bible, people are completely immersed in water (Acts 2:41; 8:12; 10:47-48; 16:32-33). Jesus modeled how it works by being "**baptized by John in the Jordan**" and then by "**immediately coming up out of the water...**" (Mark 1:9, 10, emphasis added). If the Jordan River does not clue us into a full immersion experience, coming "up" and "out of the water" should. Immersion signals that a person's whole life has been affected by God's work.

Baptism also shows humility³ since a person cannot dunk himself or herself in water (there are other Greek words for "to dive into water," see John 21:7). John the Baptist understood this when Jesus came to him for baptism. John said, "*I have need to be baptized by You, and do You come to me?*" (Matthew 3:15). Nevertheless, Jesus did not "self-baptize" or turn around and baptize John; He humbly allowed John to baptize Him "*to fulfill all righteousness*" (Matthew 13:14—more on this below). Baptism depicts a person's humble recognition of surrender and obedience. It depicts a whole life surrendered to God's authority and covered by God's gracious love.

b. Powerful because Jesus was baptized.

Children love to imitate grown-ups. They play "teacher" and "doctor's office," "jet-pilot" and "race-car driver." Role-playing is critical for a child's development. Similar to developmental child's play, Christian baptism imitates Jesus' baptism (Matthew 3:13-16; Mark 1:9-13; Luke 3:21-22). Let us consider how.

When Jesus says he was baptized by John to "*fulfill all righteousness*," He is saying something powerful (Matthew 3:15). He is saying that His baptism meets God's righteous standard. It was a perfect moment—one of the few perfect moments in all creation history. God attested to this by opening the heavens, sending the Holy Spirit onto Jesus, and saying aloud, "*This is My beloved Son, in Whom I am well-pleased.*" (Matthew 3:16-17). No one else can claim such perfection—even though God's righteousness demands it.

But because Jesus was baptized in this way, every Christian's baptism *"in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit"* (Matthew 28:19) hearkens the power of His perfect moment in the Jordan. Christians do not believe their baptisms will open the heavens, but they know they are called to be like their Savior Jesus, and that begins with imitating His powerful baptism moment.

c. Powerful because Jesus commanded it.

When a powerful person gives a command, people obey. Legend has it that when the kings of Persia wanted a cold drink, runners would dash into the mountains to gather a cup of snow and bring it back before it melted! People who understand true authority recognize that ultimately everyone and everything must obey Jesus (Matthew 8:9; Philippians 2:10-11). Even winds and waves obey Jesus' commands (Mark 4:41), how much more should the people who follow Him? But Jesus does not command people to fetch Him snow; He commands His followers to be baptized.

Jesus commanded His followers to *"make disciples, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit"* (Matthew 28:19), so every time a Christian is baptized, Jesus' powerful authority is being recognized.

d. Powerful because it points to God (1 Peter 3:21; Ephesians 4-5).

We have already seen the power of the Triune God on display when Jesus was baptized in the Jordan. Other passages reveal that the sign of baptism always points to God's power at work to change a life. Let us look at three:

The first Christians were baptized at Pentecost (Acts 2:41). The Apostle Peter preached a sermon, and here's what happened next:

ACTS 2:37-39, 41 *Now when they heard this, they were pierced to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, "Brethren, what shall we do?"³⁸ Peter said to them, "Repent, and each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit."³⁹ For the promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off, as many as the Lord our God will call to Himself...⁴¹ So then, those who had received his word were baptized; and that day there were added about three thousand souls.*

Notice that this passage begins with people being *"pierced to the heart"* (literally *"cut in the heart"* Acts 2:37). What pierced or cut them? God did. Compare what happened to their hearts with what God promised to do in Deuteronomy:

DEUTERONOMY 30:6 *Moreover the LORD your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your descendants, to love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, so that you may live.*

God had done something powerful to change these people by piercing their hearts.

Consider also what Peter says to the crowd after commanding them to be baptized in Acts 2:39: *"the promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off, as many as the Lord our God will call to Himself."* The "promise" (i.e., of repenting, being baptized, forgiveness of sins,

and receiving the Holy Spirit) is predicated on something God does: calling people to Himself. So, baptism always points to God's powerful work to change a life.

A second passage connecting baptism to God's work is 1 Peter 3, where it says:

1 PETER 3:18-21 *For Christ also died for sins once for all, the just for the unjust, so that He might bring us to God, having been put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit;¹⁹ in which also He went and made proclamation to the spirits now in prison,²⁰ who once were disobedient, when the patience of God kept waiting in the days of Noah, during the construction of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were brought safely through the water.²¹ Corresponding to that, baptism now saves you – not the removal of dirt from the flesh, but an appeal to God for a good conscience – through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who is at the right hand of God, having gone into heaven, after angels and authorities and powers had been subjected to Him.*

Many people get twisted around this passage because, on the surface, it appears to say baptism saves (the exact opposite of our point in this lesson). However, in the context, Peter is comparing baptism to Noah's ark (i.e., "corresponding to that..."). He is saying that baptism does not wash away sin any more than Noah's ark washed away sin. Instead, baptism points to Christ, who "died for sins once for all" (1 Peter 3:18). Baptism is an appeal (literally a "response, or answer"⁴) to God and His power to bring us to Himself, raising Christ from the dead and subjecting every other powerful thing (i.e., angels, authorities, etc.) under Him. Even in a tough passage, we see that baptism is a sign of God's power.

Scripture reveals a third link between God and baptism in a beautiful statement from Ephesians:

EPHESIANS 4:4-6 *There is one body and one Spirit, just as also you were called in one hope of your calling;⁵ one Lord, one faith, one baptism,⁶ one God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all.*

Just as we saw at the baptism of Jesus in the Jordan, the fullness of one God in three Persons (i.e., "one Spirit...one Lord...one God and Father") is over, in, and through the sign of baptism. Baptism is a most powerful sign because of who it points to and who is pointing through it.

✦ The Sign of a Christian

If baptism is a powerful sign, we must ask, who is this sign for? Who are the proper candidates for this immersive, humbling, Christ-imitating, Christ-obeying, God-pointing sign? As we saw in Acts 2, baptism is clearly a sign for people who have entered a relationship with God through Christ. In fact, everyone baptized in the "name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit" in the Bible is already a professing Christian. This means several things for church people today.

a. A sign – not a ceremony

Since baptism is a sign of something God has already done in a person's life, then baptism has zero ceremonial value. Ceremonies—like graduations and weddings—recognize accomplishments

AND formally impart official status. Baptism cannot do this since God is the only one who can impart the status, “saved by grace” on a person’s life (Ephesians 2:8-9).

Baptized Christians do not have special status over unbaptized Christians. All they can say is that they have obeyed Jesus’ command and imitated Him. For this reason, baptisms are typically short and simple, but highly worshipful events. Gathering family and friends to view and celebrate a baptism is great, but obeying God is the most important thing.

b. A sign – not a step toward salvation

Just as baptism has no ceremonial value, it also has no “cash value” with God toward salvation. God purchases Christians for salvation with His own blood (Acts 20:29), and there is nothing a Christian can add to sweeten the deal. If anything, baptism is more like a “receipt” Christians can furnish to show what God has done for them.

Since baptism alone does not influence God to save, there is no reason for a non-Christian to be baptized until he or she has repented and believed the Gospel. Baptism without saving faith is like a receipt without a transaction: meaningless. In the Bible, baptism is not a step toward faith, or a “down payment” on faith. It is an act made “*in faith*” (Ephesians 4:4-6; Colossians 2:12)

c. A sign – not a sin-washing solution

As we saw earlier, baptism does not wash sins away any more than Noah’s ark does (1 Peter 3:20-21). Baptism signals Jesus Christ as the “once for all” sin-bearer who cleanses our conscience before God (1 Peter 3:18). This means that even when Christians commit sins, they do not need to be “re-baptized” to get right with God. Instead, Christians should confess their sins to one another (1 John 1:9), remind each other of God’s forgiveness through Christ (2 Timothy 2:11-14), and put to death whatever sin is lurking in their hearts (Romans 8:13).

At our church, we often say it like this, “make sure your baptism is on the right side of your salvation.”

✦ A Sign Pointing to the Past, Present, and Future

We have already seen that baptism is a sign pointing to God’s work in a person’s life. We must say more about this because Scripture says so much about God’s saving work! If you could choose three words to describe the way God views a Christian, they would be: “united with Christ.” His death was your death. His life is your life. This concept is richly painted in the Gospels, where Christ commands His disciples to “abide” in Him (John 15:1), all the way to Revelation, where a voice from heaven tells John to write, “*Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on!*” (Revelation 14:13). To be a Christian is to be both “*in Christ*” and to have “*Christ in you*,” united (Romans 8:1; Colossians 1:27).

No passage of Scripture declares this spiritual union better than Romans 6, and no sign depicts it better than baptism:

ROMANS 6:3-7 *“Or do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus have been baptized into His death? ⁴ Therefore we have been buried with Him through baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. ⁵ For if we have become united with Him in the likeness of His death, certainly we shall also be in the likeness of His resurrection, ⁶ knowing this, that our old self was crucified with Him, in order that our body of sin might be done away with, so that we would no longer be slaves to sin; ⁷ for he who has died is freed from sin.”*

This passage tells us that baptism points to a past, present, and future reality for everyone united with Christ (Romans 6:5).

- a. **Past:** Baptism depicts Jesus’ death and burial (going under the water)⁵. Christians are united to Jesus in His death, so their old sinful lives are “done away with.”
- b. **Present:** Baptism depicts Jesus’ being raised to life after death (rising from the water). Christians are united to Jesus in His life, so they now have “newness of life,” and they are currently “freed from sin.”
- c. **Future:** Baptism depicts Jesus’ resurrection (coming up out of the water). Christians are united to Jesus in His resurrection, so they can look forward to someday being physically resurrected just like He is.

These staggering past, present, and future benefits are active for every Christian and baptism is the only sign that communicates such rich truth.

+ Conclusion

Scripture reveals that water baptism is a powerful sign for Christians pointing to their past, present, and future united with Jesus. For most people hearing this lesson, baptism was exactly that. Praise God for using that moment in your life as a powerful sign pointing to Him!

Often you will hear the pastor say that baptism is “raising your flag for Christ.” It is a way to say I have made a choice to identify with Jesus and am not ashamed of the Gospel. The other powerful thing about baptism that people sometimes do not realize is they get to preach a sermon without ever using words. Baptism is a picture of what has already taken place in your heart. It does not save you, but it is a picture of the salvation that has taken place in your life. Therefore, without using any words you can to testify of the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus which is the foundation of your salvation.

+ Sources

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¹ In the early church, the Latin word "sacramentum" was chosen to translate the Greek word "mysterion." Mystery in Greek refers to "something hidden," or a "secret." See Gregg R. Allison, *Historical Theology*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011, p. 611. In both Water Baptism and the Lord's Supper, the "hidden" or "secret" work of God in people's lives is declared or revealed publicly. Today, most Protestants avoid the word "sacrament" because of the way Roman Catholics use the word to mean "visible ceremonies as the means by which certain graces are to be conferred on men" (<https://www.newadvent.org/cathen/13295a.htm>). However, according to Scripture, God's grace is not conferred by works or ceremonies of any kind (Ephesians 2:8-9).

² <https://www.biblestudytools.com/lexicons/greek/nas/baptizo.html>

³ See Dr. Ed Young, "Baptism Explained," <https://youtu.be/nyMatw6Up30>

⁴ <https://www.netbible.org/bible/1+Peter+3>

⁵ In the Bible, water is often a symbol of death (Genesis 6; Psalm 18; Jonah 2:5).