

# On Baptism

## *Critical Words of Jesus:*

Matthew 28:18-20

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Bethany Church

Wesley J. Gabel

Sometimes you write things and then think better. I named this series *Critical Words of Jesus*. Am I'm talking about the negative or critical statements of Christ? Am I talking about essential statements of our Lord and implying that others aren't essential? I am ambiguous, and it is exactly that kind of ambiguity that we address today. Certain statements of the Bible are ambiguous, yet I don't think the Holy Spirit is thinking better since he gave us statements through the pens of the apostles. There must be divine reasons for each ambiguity.

Baptism carries some ambiguity that has resulted in much debate and division. A family of denominations, named Baptist, derives their name from their dissent and deviation from infant baptism. At least two denominations, Salvation Army and Friends (or the Quakers) do not practice baptism with water. Thus, is water baptism a practice we should embrace? How should it be done? What does it mean? Is infant baptism legitimate and beneficial? If so, what is a godly and scriptural response to those who insist differently?

First, baptism is a foundational teaching of the Church. The writer of Hebrews identified instruction about *baptisms* as part of their Christianity 101. There were four teachings that laid a foundation of repentance and faith for people to build on (Hebrews 6:2). Baptisms were one. These baptisms may have included various baptisms of the Jewish community, the baptism of John the Baptist, baptism into the name of Jesus, and baptism of the Holy Spirit.

Jesus included baptism in his three-fold command to disciple all nations. He told them in Matthew 28:

***Going, disciple all nations, baptizing them into the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, teaching them to obey every single thing (all whatsoever) I command you.***

This is my word-for-word translation of the Greek. I use the English noun *disciple* as a verb since the term *disciple* in Greek is both a noun and verb. *Disciple* is the main verb and *going, baptizing* and *teaching* are the complementary verbs that tell us how to *disciple*. Notice that there is no preposition in front of all *nations*. Jesus did not call us to disciple *from* all nations. He commanded us to disciple all nations. Jesus describes *baptizing* as one of three actions critical to disciple all nations. *Baptizing them into the name* of the triune God is an essential part of Jesus' strategy. The term *them* in *baptizing them* refers to all nations. How do you baptize all nations into the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit?

Have you noticed how difficult it is to live your faith in a locker room or among certain friends? Other settings actually encourage discipleship. Each year at Red Rock Camp, youth and adults report how easy it is to live dedicated to Christ in that setting; and then they tell how difficult and painful it is in their own communities. Although we are individually responsible for our behavior and thoughts, the Bible does not buy American individualism. Throughout the Bible, the innocent suffer with those judged, and sinners prosper with those blessed. However, eternal judgment is different. In Matthew 25, Jesus describes all nations gathered before the king in final judgment. People are separated like sheep from goats, based on their individual actions. Eternal judgment is personal rather than communal. However, water baptism, though personal, is a social event. It is communal. In his teaching on eternal judgment in Matthew 25, Jesus did not mention baptism. In Mark 16, Jesus says to his disciples:

***Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation. Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned.*** (Mark 16:15-16, NIV)

In this context, Jesus speaks of belief and baptism in regard to individual salvation – “whoever believes and is baptized will be saved.” Baptism is to accompany belief; however, condemnation is reserved for whoever does not believe. Baptism is not mentioned. Salvation does not hinge on baptism. It hinges on belief, even as Paul writes to the Ephesians:

***For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast.*** (Ephesians 2:8-9, NIV)

Faith is the only means by which we embrace the gift of salvation. The Bible notes four separate times (Genesis 15:6, Romans 4:3, Galatians 3:6 and James 2:23) that God credited Abraham’s faith as righteousness. God credited Abraham’s faith, not Abraham’s circumcision, which was a personal, intimate but social, sign of his devotion to God. Moses, on his return to Egypt, nearly died from neglecting to circumcise his son (Exodus 4:24). Circumcision was a *faith act of identity*, and so is baptism. We are baptized into a name and so identified.

Although faith is the key to salvation, and the Holy Spirit is the mark, seal or imprimatur of our salvation, baptism is both the *public witness* and *divine confirmation* of our salvation. In baptism we publicly identify with Jesus Christ. We publicly identify with his death and judgment for our sins, and we publicly identify with his life and relationship to God. In baptism, we publicly join God’s family through Jesus Christ. However, it is also a divine confirmation, for in baptism we simply follow Christ’s command and receive this gift of cleansing. It is a gift of cleansing. Even as water cleanses the outward body, something happens within. When Ananias prophesied over the repentant and newly healed Rabbi Saul, he said:

***And now what are you waiting for? Get up, be baptized and wash your sins away, calling on his name.*** (Acts 22:16, NIV)

Can there be any question that the Apostle Paul experienced an inner cleansing at his baptism? God worked powerfully in this simple act of faith and obedience.

Baptism, then, is a witness to the nations as well as a divine confirmation of our salvation. We baptize the nations as we bring the people within the nations to faith and public identification with Jesus Christ. Tremendous cleansing is experienced personally and socially. All nations experience cleansing as we baptize people within them.

To the question, "Is water baptism appropriate today," I can only answer, "Yes, it is God's strategy to disciple all nations." To the question, "Does baptize mean to immerse, pour or sprinkle," I must answer, "Yes." In the New Testament, the Greek term *baptize* describes all three things. For example in Mark 7:4, Jewish people ritually baptized or anointed their hands, cups, kettles and dining couches. You can imagine that they didn't immerse or pour water on their couches, they sprinkled them. When the 3,000 were baptized in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost, the topography suggests that they were anointed since immersion of that number would have required larger sources of water than available. Truthfully, the Bible does not emphasize a method. What about infant baptism?

Do infants suffer the consequence of sin? Are they subject to death? Then they also are in need of the salvation of Jesus Christ. Are infants, children and the retarded who can voice no faith excluded from the kingdom of God? Does the family of God have no little ones? When the disciples excluded little ones from Jesus' blessing, he rebuked them and said, "To such as these, belongs the kingdom of God" (Matthew 19:14, Mark 10:14, Luke 18:16). Indeed, until the 20<sup>th</sup> century, all but a small fraction of the Christian church included infants in baptism. Even as household baptisms are mentioned in the New Testament (Acts 16:15, 31-33; 1 Corinthians 1:16), infant baptism was the common practice of Jews at that time. When pagans converted to

belief in God, the entire household was baptized into the Jewish (old) covenant and then all the males were circumcised. As the Apostles proclaimed the new covenant, they would have needed to explain why they changed the practice of baptism if they excluded those physically and mentally unable to confess faith.

Understand, then, that while some of our devout Christian brothers and sisters sincerely disagree with us, we encourage baptism of entire households, including infants, when the parent or parents, as sponsors are devoted to Christ. It is a powerful witness to the salvation of Christ and an invitation and opportunity for the Holy Spirit to occupy and purify each life.

However, when the parent or parents live in public defiance to Christ commands, whether they live in sin or in separation from Christ's church, baptism then multiplies the judgment they bring on themselves and their children. For such an act defames Christ and profanes the name of God. We the Church share that guilt if we are complicit. The Apostle Paul (in 1 Corinthians 11) observed that many people were sick and had died because they had abused the Lord's Supper. How much do we suffer from the abuse of baptism?

Since our baptism, many of us have filled our souls or temples with idols. We have grieved God's Spirit and defamed our Lord's name and embodied the tempter's deceptions. As the Lord turns us in repentance back to himself, many have been led to be re-baptized or to reaffirm their baptism. We were unfaithful to our baptism, yet truly God remained faithful to it in drawing us back.

Whether it is baptism of adults, of infants or the renewal of baptism, I encourage you not to argue over it, but to welcome, celebrate and use this amazing gift. Believe and be baptized. Remember your baptism and give thanks. Cleanse your temple of any idol, so that Christ lives unhindered in you through your faith and brings honor to your heavenly Father. Amen.