

Baptism: A Biblical Imperative

"Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age" (Matthew 28:19-20, The Great Commission).

Baptism is an ordinance, but we prefer to call it a ministry of the church. Now the Great Commission - the greatest mission statement ever made, the epicenter of all that God wants to do in the earth, may seem an odd place to begin a study of baptism, but in fact it is the best place to begin.

In the Great Commission there are four action verbs: (1) go, (2) make disciples, (3) baptize, and (4) teach. Of these four, the verb that is expressed in the Greek imperative as a command is the second verb "make disciples."

Now, disciples want to become like their master. In other words, the heart of God wants to bring to the people of the world an opportunity to become like Him, to have His life reproduced and expressed uniquely in their own personalities and lives.

How do you make disciples of Jesus Christ? How do you reproduce the life of Christ in someone else's life? What are the grand strategies of God to reproduce His life in yours?

That's what the other three action verbs are for! First, someone must go and tell the world about the Lord. When an individual finds Christ as his or her personal Savior, the immediate next step is to be baptized in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The next step is for the person to begin to learn about the Kingdom of God so that, as the Bible says, the Spirit of the Lord works within that person transforming him or her into His likeness. This is "The Great Commission."

But why is something that appears to be as unimportant as baptism in the middle of that kind of enormous statement? In other words, isn't baptism just one of those little "rites" of the Church? Isn't it just one of the religious things that we do? So, how in the world does it fit into a statement of such overwhelming magnitude as "The Great Commission?" The answer is that it is not one of the "little" things that we do, but from the lips of Jesus Himself, baptism is one of the key strategies of God in your life.

As we'll discover in a moment, baptism was intended to bring the Church together in joy and celebration. Instead, it has often divided the Church over the course of centuries and has been the subject of "hot" debate between good people.

What Does the Bible Say?

Let's take a look at what the Bible has to say about it. Personal opinions of people or church "traditions" are not the source of Truth for those who have placed their trust in Christ and His Word. Let's find out what the Bible says about this thing called "baptism."

The Great Commission makes baptism one of those key ingredients of God's plan for the life of every person. Let's look at the character of baptism and find out why. Who should be baptized? How? When?

If the Great Commission is to go into all the world, preach the Gospel to every creature, baptize them in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and teach them all about the Word of God, then the answer to the question of who does the Lord want to have baptized is everybody.

Who Should Be Baptized

It is the Lord's desire that everybody come to know Him as personal Savior and respond to Him in obedience. But let's change the question slightly. Who must be baptized? The answer is that every one must be baptized who knows Jesus Christ as their personal Savior, who has come to a point where they have received the Lord into their lives,

asked for and received forgiveness from sin, and are made part of the family of God. The immediate next step after receiving Christ as Savior is to follow the Lord in the waters of baptism.

In the Book of Acts, the history book of the early Church, there is no record that anybody ever came to know the Lord without being baptized immediately. The concept that someone would receive Christ as his or her personal Savior and not be baptized is manifestly unscriptural! There is no such account.

Let's examine some biblical accounts of people who received Jesus Christ as their personal Savior. Let's see what happened to them. The eighth chapter of Acts records the story of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch. As they travel along in a chariot, the Ethiopian eunuch asks, "Tell me, what do I have to do to be saved?" He finds out and he finds the Lord. Watch what happens! Verses 36 to 38 record the following:

"As they traveled along the road, they came to some water and the eunuch said, 'Look, here is water. Why shouldn't I be baptized?' And he gave orders to stop the chariot. Then both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water and Philip baptized him."

The ninth chapter of Acts records the story of Saul of Tarsus. Remember that Saul was brutally persecuting Christians. He was on the road to the city of Damascus to do the same. A blinding light stopped him, he came into contact with Jesus Christ, and it changed his life.

"Then Ananias went to the house and entered it. Placing his hands on Saul, he said, 'Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you were coming here has sent me so that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit.' Immediately, something like scales fell from Saul's eyes, and he could see again. He got up and was baptized and after taking some food, he regained his strength" (Acts 9:17-19).

That's when he was born again! And he was then immediately baptized.

Now go to Acts chapter 10. This is the incident of Peter's preaching at Cornelius' home and as a result many people came to know the Lord. In verse 47 Peter says: "Can anyone keep these people from being baptized with water? They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have." It's a rhetorical question. They had found the Lord so he is saying with tongue in cheek, "OK, who's going to keep these people from being baptized!" Of course they're going to be baptized! They just found the Lord. That's the Great Commission. Go and be baptized! Verse 48 concludes: "So he ordered that they be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ."

Next let's look at Acts chapter 16 to examine an incident involving a woman named Lydia from the city of Thyatira. Let's pick up the narrative in verse 14:

"One of those listening was a woman named Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth from the city of Thyatira, who was a worshiper of God. The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message. When she and the members of her household were baptized, she invited us to her home. If you consider me a believer in the Lord,' she said, 'come and stay at my house.' And she persuaded us."

Notice that her immediate baptism after responding to the preaching of Paul is not even emphasized in the sentence. Baptism was an assumed act of obedience to the Lord following salvation.

Now the last illustration is found later in the same chapter. This is the story of Paul and Silas, who are in prison in Philippi, and a jailer who is in charge of the prison. An earthquake occurs at midnight and through it God releases Paul and Silas by opening the gates of the prison. In the confusion of the night, the jailer thinks they have escaped. Since the Roman penalty for a jailer who allows his prisoners to escape is the forfeiture of his own life, the jailer is going to kill himself.

But Paul and Silas do not attempt to escape and they say to the jailer, "Don't harm yourself! We are all here." The jailer responds with great curiosity about these people who are so different from any he has met before. Paul and Silas tell him about the Lord Jesus, and he receives the Lord in the middle of the night. Watch what happens! The narrative begins in verse 30:

"He then brought them out and asked, 'Sirs, what must I do to be saved?' They replied, believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved - you and your household.' Then they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all the others in his house. At that hour of the night the jailer took them and washed their wounds; then immediately he and all his family were baptized."

The purpose of this brief review of Acts is to point out that the Great Commission was being fulfilled and followed by the early Church. When people accepted Christ as their personal Savior, they were immediately baptized.

The Purpose of Baptism

There are two fundamental purposes of baptism. In exploring these purposes, it is helpful to understand that baptism did not start with Christianity. This was a common religious practice. Sometimes the baptisms were of water of a variety of different modes - sprinkling, immersion, etc. Sometimes they were of blood. People from various groups and movements often baptized themselves! The reason John got his name "the baptizer" was because he was doing something few people did! That is, he was participating in other people's baptisms.

In Christianity, baptism is not intended to be a private experience. When you found Christ as your personal Savior - that was an intensely private experience. But once you have entered the family of God, there is nothing private about it! You are part of this wonderful thing called the Church, the Body of Christ, brothers and sisters related together in God's family.

Almost everything of spiritual significance that happens to you after your salvation happens in connection with your family - the extended family of God. And that includes baptism. Baptism is an ordinance of the Church of Jesus Christ. John baptized people. People didn't do it on their own.

What are the two purposes of baptism? First, it is an individual public profession of personal faith in Jesus Christ and surrender to Him. This is why it is so important that a person be old enough to understand what is happening and to be able to make such a commitment to Christ. This is why our baptisms at Grace Church are so special. It's a mature person professing, "I know what I'm doing. And I want you to know, I belong to Jesus Christ. I'm surrendered to His will in my life." Such testimonies bring great joy and blessing.

Is the purpose of baptism for the baptized person's benefit or for the congregation's benefit? For whose benefit is the Bible's command for baptism? The answer is "for both." That's why the congregation of the church, the baptized person's extended family, must attend and participate when people are being baptized. This is for your benefit. It's a biblical command of God.

The second reason for baptism is often lost in the study of baptism, but it is both biblical and consistent with the history of New Testament Christianity. Baptism was the initiation rite into the fellowship of the local church of believers.

The concept of baptizing persons who have no commitment to joining an assembly of believers is not found anywhere in the Bible. Bishop Stephen Neill has said it this way: "The New Testament knows nothing of membership in the church" (the local assembly) "by faith alone, without this accompanying act of obedience and confession."

In the early Church, following the Lord in the waters of baptism was the official, public pronouncement that a person was a believer in Christ and was part of that wonderful

movement called Christianity. While there was much joy in this, there was also much personal cost as persecution often followed. Baptism was an "initiation ordinance" into the fellowship of the church.

There are still many places in the world today where an individual's baptism provokes persecution. In Communist countries there are often severe consequences to being baptized. In our culture, no one is persecuted because they are baptized, although they may have difficulty with some family members, depending on the family church background.

But baptism is the rite of initiation into the local church. In it a person is saying, "I am not just a 'lone ranger' for Christ. I am part of God's family." Such a person comes into a family of mutual commitment and love and relatedness to one other.

Baptism is required for Grace Church membership. Some who would like to be members refuse to be baptized. Why would the church require baptism for membership? Does baptism make you wiser in voting on a church budget? Does being immersed in the waters of baptism somehow contribute to the decision of who to call as your pastor, or in the exercise of other church membership decisions and responsibilities? Of course not!

Why, then, would Grace Church put an obstacle like this in the way of membership? The answer is that the Bible commands baptism for every believer as the first step of obedience to the Lord following salvation. Therefore, while worship and participation at Grace Church is open and available for everybody in the world, membership in the church is only for those who know the Lord and are surrendered to His will according to the Word of God. Such men and women are the core of what God is doing, and going to do, in the ministry of this church.

Membership is for people who love the Lord. Jesus said, "If you love me, you will obey what I command" (John 14: 15). Church membership is available to people who love the Lord enough to obey the Head of the Church, Jesus Christ.

The Meaning of Baptism

What is the meaning of baptism? To answer this question we turn to a wonderful passage found in Romans 6:3-5:

"Or don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life. If we have been united with him like this in his death, we will certainly also be united with him in his resurrection."

This passage encapsulates the meaning of baptism: the public identification with the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Identifying with the death of Christ is the death of your "old nature," your old life before you found the Lord. Identifying with the burial of Christ is your determination to put aside the things that are not of the Lord and put on the personhood of Jesus Christ. And identifying with Christ's resurrection is your new life in Him. When you found the Lord, you did not find a "way of living." You found life itself! And the resurrection of Christ is resurrection into new life for you.

Is Re-Baptism Ever Necessary?

Is it ever necessary to be re-baptized? Once you've been baptized, is it ever necessary to be baptized again? The answer is generally, "No."

The Bible does not teach that baptism is a way of rededicating your life to the Lord. You don't have to do this every two or three years. So, if you found Christ as your personal Savior and have made a public profession of your faith in the assembly of the saints, you never again need to be baptized. Are there some circumstances under which a person

should be re-baptized? Yes, there are. Let me suggest to you three. First, a person should be re-baptized if the first baptism was not a Christian baptism. Some people have been baptized as part of a cult group or other non-Christian group. Even if they were born again at the time, that is not a biblical baptism since baptism has its meaning in the context of the assembly of believers.

The second reason why a person may need to be re-baptized is if the baptism was not biblical in its character. Acts 19 relates an incident in Ephesus where some believers had been baptized, but they had been baptized according to John's baptism. John's baptism was a call to repentance and preparation for the Messiah but not a personal profession of faith in Jesus Christ as Savior. How could such a profession of faith be made since Christ had not yet come on the scene? Although these Ephesians had been baptized, they hadn't even heard about Jesus. They were asked, "Have you been baptized?" That's another way of asking, "Do you know the Lord?" They said, "Oh, yes, we've been baptized." They were asked, "Whose baptism was it?" And they answered, "John's." They were finally asked, "Well, how about being baptized with the Holy Spirit?" Well, they didn't know about the Holy Spirit. So these believers were re-baptized, only this time it was a Christian baptism.

What is "Christian" baptism? It's a profession of faith in Jesus Christ as your personal Savior. If you were baptized but at the time there was no acknowledgment on your part that you received Christ as your personal Savior, that is not a biblical baptism.

There's a third reason why a person may need to be re-baptized that could affect many of you, and that is if you were baptized before you found the Lord as your personal Savior, before you personally made a commitment to Christ.

If you were baptized as an infant in a Christian church, you ought to thank your parents for bringing you up in a Christian tradition. If anything ought to bring joy to the hearts of parents, it should be their child saying, "Mom and Dad, I have come to know the Lord as

my personal Savior and now, having found the Lord as my Savior, I need to proclaim that in the context of the assembly of believers, just as the Bible teaches. I want you to come and celebrate with me to see that what you started many years ago has now grown to maturity."

So if you were baptized before you found the Lord, you really were "dedicated to the Lord," not baptized in the biblical sense. You need to do what the Bible says. Once the Gospel has come to you and you found Jesus Christ as Savior, you need to be baptized "in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit."

The Baptism of Children

The preceding discussion raises the following question, "Should we baptize children?" The answer is "Yes" - when they have found the Lord as their personal Savior and can say so. While there is no magic number as to when the right time is to do this, our position is to wait until the child really knows what he or she is doing.

Because it's at the age of 13 that junior high school students begin to grow into adult maturity, the pastoral staff has determined that 13 would be a wonderful age for them to say, "I want to publicly profess that I belong to Jesus Christ."

Does this mean that Grace Church will not baptize anyone younger than 13? No. But baptism must always follow conversion to Christ.

Obstacles to Obedience

There are three reasons why some believers who love the Lord experience some reluctance to follow the Scriptures in the area of baptism. If you know the Lord as your personal Savior and have never been baptized after you found the Lord, which of these apply to you? One of them surely does. First, some people are fearful of embarrassment and they believe that baptism is "a child's experience" without dignity and respect. They are concerned that to get in that tank of water in that funny baptismal gown and be

immersed in front of a thousand people is embarrassing. "I'm a businessman," some say. "I'm 57 years old. What do you mean you're going to baptize me?!"

There is a price in following Jesus Christ, and the price begins with self-denial. Throughout history, there have been people who have watched what God has done, and then there are the people who have been part of making it happen. Grace Church is full of people who want to be part of making something happen for God and we are! And that begins with the kind of self-denial that puts Christ first. Embarrassment is simply another way of the devil saying, "Are you really going to have it God's way? Wouldn't you rather have it your way?"

The second reason for reluctance in following the Lord in the waters of baptism is family resistance. Some say, "I'd like to be baptized. I know the Bible commands it as the fulfillment of the Great Commission in my life, but I've got parents that will see this as a betrayal of the way they raised me."

We are genuinely sympathetic to this problem. We need to minister carefully and redemptively to parents. What needs to be said to them is, "I want to thank you for raising me in a Christian tradition. You are going to be so glad to know that I have made a commitment to Christ as my personal Savior. I want to build upon what you have started." Parents do not have to feel threatened or abandoned. But what if after much effort at understanding has been made, family resistance is so strong that there is no way to follow the Lord according to God's Word without their resenting it? The answer is that you must make a choice who you are going to serve.

There is a third reason why people are not baptized, and that is that they are just plain afraid. They say, "What am I going to say in my testimony?" People worry about what they are going to say. The answer to this kind of fear is to trust both the Lord, who will give you the words to speak, and the love and acceptance of your brothers and sisters in your extended family here at Grace Church.

The Believer's Response

If you know the Lord as your Savior and have never been baptized as a profession of that faith, what will be your response? In Luke 6:46, our Lord calls His people to responsiveness to His leading as He declared: "Why do you call me 'Lord, Lord,' and do not do what I say?" This is a penetrating question. The meaning of the Greek word "Lord" is the concept of Master. And what Luke says here is logical: "Tell me, why do you say I'm your Master, but you don't obey me?"

We look forward with great joy to assisting you in the baptism process.

Ready to Be Baptized?

Registration will take approximately 45 minutes to complete. You will be asked to complete a baptism Bible study during registration, so have your Bible handy before you begin.

1. Register to be baptized.
2. You will be contacted to review your testimony and/or provide any assistance you might want in writing it. Your baptism will be scheduled, in addition to setting up a short interview with a pastor and a time to record your testimony.
3. Invite your family, friends, neighbors, work colleagues, etc! This is a wonderful opportunity to expose many to the Gospel as they share in your special day.
4. Join us in praying that God will be honored and that people will be touched by your public testimony of faith in Jesus Christ.