

Baptism, the Church, and the Glory of Christ

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“Will the Last Baptist Please Turn Off the Water Heater on the Way Out? Baptism, the Church, and the Glory of Christ.”

Romans 6:1-11

“What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it? Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. We know that our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin. For one who has died has been set free from sin. Now if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. We know that Christ being raised from the dead will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. For the death he died he died to sin, once for all, but the life he lives he lives to God. So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.” (ESV)

A Loss of Baptist Memory

Families sometimes have little peculiarities about them that we all know about but none of us really talk about, and as a church family, we have some of those kinds of things too. We have a strange name, Ninth and O Baptist Church. As a matter of fact, many of us have to explain all the time what we mean when we say that we go to Ninth and O Baptist Church. As one new resident of Louisville said to me, “I’m so confused. I bank at Fifth Third Bank and I go to Ninth and O Baptist Church, and I don’t know what any of it means.” So you have to stand back and explain, “Well, the name Ninth and O Baptist Church originated when there was a Ninth Street and an O Street, and we were located there. We are not there anymore, but that is where we used to be, at Ninth Street and O Street.” And it is appropriate that we keep the name. We want to make sure that we know we are still the same people who gathered together in 1906, we are still the same people who continued to pass the faith down through all of these years, and it is worth having to explain why we are named this every once in awhile.

One of the remarkable things is that all across the country sometimes people treat the idea of a Baptist church in the same way we treat the name Ninth and O. It is where we used to be. However, the name “Baptist” reflects our heritage. There were a group of people who believed that baptism was worth fighting for, baptism was worth drowning for, baptism was worth being executed for, baptism was worth being separated from the

community for, and those are the kind of people from whence we have come. But we no longer really understand what that means.

This is one of the reasons why, when you look out across the country, you can see churches in which baptism has really become our Baptist version of a Bar Mitzvah. If you have not been baptized by the time you reach a certain age, something is wrong with you, something is wrong with your family, and there is great pressure to be baptized, whether or not you have ever come to know Christ. As a result, we have churches that will baptize unrepentant four-year-olds simply because the four-year-old understands, “I love Jesus, and I want to go to heaven.”

We have churches that will baptize people who continue to persist in unrepentant sin, who do not understand conviction of sin, simply because they agree to a certain number of facts. You can see this kind of downgrade when you have churches now that are discussing whether to make believer’s baptism by immersion optional so that there are some members of the congregation who have followed Christ in believer’s baptism, some members of the congregation who have been sprinkled as infants, and some members of the congregation who have had water poured over their heads as adults. In their view, baptism is simply a matter of the conscience of the individual.

There are some people, when they hear claims that Baptists have always made from the Scriptures throughout the centuries, claims that baptism is the immersion of a believer in water, who will act as though that is bigoted. When they hear Baptists saying what Baptists have always said, that it is not just the testimony of the individual that makes baptism, but that it is the testimony of the church, they will act as though that is arrogant and strange. Likewise, if you have a church that does not proclaim baptism as immersion, baptism as profession of faith, even if that church immerses an individual, and you tell them that it is not baptism, some people will act as though that is insane. They will act as though this is something novel. They will act as though this is something new. This is because for so long we have neglected who we are when it comes to this issue of baptism. We consider it to be something that is in our past, and that if we don’t talk about it, and if we don’t speak of it, then it is going to go away. As a matter of fact, we are living in a time where often I feel like asking, “Will the last Baptist left please turn off the water heater on the way out?”

The Apostle Paul’s Concern For Church Baptism

We need to understand, when we come to Romans and 1 Corinthians and 2 Corinthians and Ephesians and all of the places in the New Testament where the apostles are establishing the churches, how often they come back to the issue of baptism and how often they speak of baptism not as simply a past event in the life of a believer. They are continually reminding the congregations of baptism. Notice for instance what the apostle Paul is doing here in Romans. He speaks and presses the Roman church to engage with him in this Great Commission task not, after all, just to teach the nations but to baptize the nations. He points them to the issue of baptism. This is the way in which the church clarifies not just what we do in our baptisteries with water but who we actually are and what we actually do with our lives.

Notice first of all that when Paul turns to the Roman congregation he has already spoken to them of sin. He has spoken to them of human sin, and how universal sin is

among both Jew and Gentile, “For all of us are sinners.” He has spoken about the cross of Jesus and Jesus bearing death and bearing wrath in our place. He has spoken of this gospel. Now he turns to the Roman congregation, and he speaks to them very pointedly of sin. And he speaks to them especially in terms of baptism.

What Paul is doing is saying that baptism proclaims union with Christ in His church. Notice what Paul does. He says, “All of us.” He is speaking to the congregation, to an entire group of people who would be gathered together reading this letter, and notice what he says. He asks them this specific question, “What are you going to say? Are you going to say we are going to continue to live in sin?” And that is a reasonable question that someone might ask.

Someone sitting in the congregation is saying, “Let’s see if I have got this right. This is what Paul is saying. Paul says that when God punishes sin in Jesus that brings great glory to God because He is demonstrating His wrath in Jesus. Jesus bears wrath. Jesus is the savior from sin. This glorifies the name of Jesus and that means when I stand up and say ‘I was a liar, Jesus died for my life.’ Then that brings glory to Jesus. Well, let’s bring more glory to Jesus.”

Of course, some take this to the wrong conclusion: antinomianism. Some say, “I can lie some more. If Jesus taking sin for my adultery brings glory to Jesus, well, I have got yet more adultery to do. We can have more glory for Jesus.” Paul turns around and says, “Have you lost your minds?” He says, “Are you crazy?” He says, “Don’t you know: how can we who died to sin still live in it?”

Then Paul turns them to baptism and says, “Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized...” He speaks to the congregation as those who have been baptized. That is always the way the New Testament speaks to the church. It assumes that the church is made up of those who are baptized, so that Paul can say, for instance, “We have one Lord, one faith, one baptism” (Eph 4:5). You have Paul writing to the church at Colossae and he says to them in Colossians 2:12, “You were buried with Him in baptism.” He says, “Why are you arguing about circumcision? Why are you arguing about these things when you have the circumcision of Christ? You are hidden in Christ. You are buried with Christ. All of us were baptized into Christ Jesus.” In the New Testament, this is not simply an individual matter. However, that is often the way we speak of baptism. That is often the way people see baptism done or the way many of us even are counseled before we get into the baptistery.

For example, it is often described as you making a statement outwardly about an inward reality that you have experienced, kind of like a wedding ring. You wear a wedding ring in order to demonstrate and show that you are married. Well, there is a sense in which that is true but not exactly. Baptism is not like a wedding ring; baptism is like a wedding ceremony. It is the people of God gathered together and all of us are proclaiming something. All of us are saying something. And what we are saying is that we believe that this individual is in Christ. All the people of God gathered together are pronouncing and announcing, “This person is in Christ.” That is why we don’t do baptisms privately. We do baptisms gathered together with the people of God united together pronouncing this about this person. That is the way baptism always is in the New Testament.

John the Baptist, when he comes and begins his baptism of repentance down by the riverside proclaiming the gospel, proclaiming repentance, he is coming as a prophet,

speaking to the people, “Repent and be baptized.” He is not speaking just as some rag tag individual. He is coming with the authority of God Himself, filled with the Spirit, announcing, “Be baptized.”

Jesus, when He is raised from the dead and He gives the authority to baptize, He gathers His apostles together and says, “All authority has been given to me. I give that authority to you.” He gives authority to the apostles, who Paul says form the foundation of a church, so that Jesus is able to say when you come together as a church, when you make decisions under the lordship of Jesus Christ, you are doing so with the authority of Christ himself. After all, Jesus says, when He talks about the discipline and the order of His church, “Where two or three are gathered in My name there I am with you,” Jesus is not saying, “I am going to tell you this so you won’t be discouraged if you have a small Sunday School class.” He is speaking specifically in terms of the discipline of the congregation. When you come together as a congregation and when you act in the name of Jesus, it is just as though Jesus Himself is acting.

That is why Paul, when he writes in 1 Corinthians 5 about the man in the congregation who is in unrepentant sin, says to the congregation, “When you are gathered together, assembled in the name of the Lord Jesus, you act to excommunicate, to discipline this man, to put him out from the church.” What are you doing? You are delivering him over to Satan for the discipline of God. You are doing so with authority. Now, does that mean that anything the church does, it does with the authority of Jesus? No, only when the church is gathered in the name of the Lord Jesus.

If I decide to get up and say, “You know what, I saw our pastor walking past my house last night and he was wearing shorts. His legs are too skinny to be wearing shorts. It disturbs the children. I think what we need to do is discipline our pastor for doing that. Let’s come together and let’s tell him you will either stop wearing shorts in the neighborhood or we are going to excommunicate you from the fellowship of Ninth and O Baptist Church.” Even if I am able to persuade all of you to do that, and I show your picture up on the screen, it ought not to be that way. And if we vote to discipline him, we have done absolutely nothing. We have no biblical ground to discipline our pastor for that action. It is not a violation of Scripture. We have said nothing except that we are a church who refused to be ruled by Jesus.

If, on the other hand, our pastor comes up next Sunday morning and stands in the pulpit and says, “Guess what everybody. I have decided to leave my wife. I have found me a new wife, a pit boss out in Las Vegas, and she is going to be a great first lady of this congregation. If you think you love my wife, you will really love Sally Sue, and I am going to bring her in here next week.” When the congregation gathers together and after we have gone to our pastor, and say, “Pastor, you need to repent of this. You need to stop this.” If he persists and says, “No, I am not going to stop,” and the congregation then says, “Well, we are going to remove you from the membership of the congregation,” what have we done? Paul says, “If you are gathered together under the authority of the Word of God, you are assembled in the name of the Lord Jesus.” What are you doing? You are making a pronouncement to our pastor that he needs to hear as though it is coming from Jesus himself.

This does not just work on the back end of church discipline; this works on the front end of church discipline as well. The congregation acting together as it is operating under the lordship of Jesus, is pronouncing that this brother, who is coming professing

belief in Jesus Christ, will be raised with Jesus from the dead. This sister who is repenting of her sin will not be held guilty of the sin. Why? Because this brother and this sister are in Christ. If we immerse someone in that baptistery who does not know Jesus, we are saying nothing. But, if we gather together and baptize in that baptistery someone who is confessing Jesus, we are saying with the authority of the Word of God, “We recognize you as a believer and we are announcing that to you. It is not just that you are announcing something to us, we are also announcing something to you and we are announcing something to the world that we understand this to be what a brother in Christ, what a sister in Christ really is.” That is why in the book of Acts, whenever you have a marking out of the people of God it is “as many as believed were baptized.” The early Christian community is marking out. It is showing these are the boundaries of the church.

It matters, then, what the church is saying when it immerses someone in water. And it always has mattered. This is why the apostles, when they encounter some people who claim they were baptized, the apostles say, “Well, what kind of baptism?” And the people respond, “The baptism of John.” The apostles would then ask, “That is the baptism of repentance. Did you receive the Holy Spirit?”

To someone who comes into this church and says, “I was baptized by immersion on profession of faith in an LDS temple,” we are going to have to say, “The Latter Day Saints do not believe the gospel. They are not saying the correct thing about baptism. This was no baptism at all.”

If, in a much less extreme measure, someone comes in and says, “I was immersed in water. I was immersed in water by a congregation that believes the water itself creates the new birth, the water itself regenerates me;” then we have to say, “That is not baptism. Baptism marks out someone who is in Christ. Baptism does not put you in Christ. That is not baptism.”

If someone comes in and says, “I was baptized in a church that sprinkles babies and would also do any number of things, so I decided I wanted to be baptized by immersion;” then we need to say, “You may be saying something in that act, but the congregation was not saying something in that act. The congregation was not acting as the authority of Christ marking out the boundaries of the people of God.”

Paul writes and says all of us who were baptized were baptized where? You were baptized into Christ Jesus. Now, one of the things that we often want to do as contemporary people is to assume that this is some type of an abstract, generic reality. For the apostle Paul, this is not abstract at all. If you are baptized into Christ, if you participate with the Head, you participate with the body. As you are being baptized, you are being baptized into Christ, which includes what? You are also being baptized into His church, into His body. We are all announcing this together.

Baptism is not just into Christ. Notice what Paul says: baptism proclaims that you are united with Christ and His church. We are marking out that boundary. These are the people we recognize. This is why we don’t baptize babies. This is why we don’t baptize people who come in and say, “I am not ready to believe yet, but I want to be a part of this fellowship.” We don’t baptize them yet. They are welcome to be here, and we want our babies here. We don’t baptize them because they are not yet in Christ. And we mark that out with the boundary.

Baptism Proclaims Death with Christ

But, Paul says that baptism also proclaims union with Christ in His death and in His resurrection. The church is saying something in baptism, but what is it saying? He says, “Don’t you know that all of you who were baptized were baptized into His death?” Notice what he is saying here. He is saying when we are baptizing someone, we are speaking about judgment.

Water always represents in the Bible this coming judgment of God so that Peter is able to stand and say, “Just as the flood came and judged the old creation, judged the old world and a few people were brought safely through the flood, and all the way through to a new creation, ‘You have been saved through baptism’” (1 Pet 3:18-22). What is he saying? He specifically says it is not the baptism that saves you, it is an appeal to God for a good conscience. What are we doing in baptism? We are saying just as that flood poured over the old creation, wiped out the old creation, at the end of it humanity started all over again.

Just as Paul said to the Corinthians, the Israelites were baptized when they went through the Red Sea, all the way through and to the other end when they come to the Promised Land, just in that way you have been baptized (1 Cor 10). How? Because Jesus speaks of His crucifixion as a baptism. He consistently says, “I have a baptism that I am to undergo.” Jesus undergoes the waters of God’s wrath, the waters of the curse of death. He is judged. And when we are baptizing a sinner, what we are saying is, “We believe that this sinner has been judged in Christ,” which means that every baptism is all about repentance. “I’m coming into the baptismal waters agreeing that God has every right to wipe me away. I am agreeing that I am worthy of death. And not only am I agreeing with that, but the entire congregation is proclaiming that.”

However, not only that, as John the Baptist says, “I am going to baptize you with water. One is coming later who will baptize you with fire” (Matt 3:11). We understand that this one has already been judged. Just as when the flood came, God remembered Noah. He brought him through to the other end. We, in the act of baptism, are saying, “We believe this person through faith is united with Jesus in His judgment, in His death, in His burial. This person will not be abandoned by God. This person has already been abandoned by God. This person will not be put away to the grave ultimately. This person has already been put away to the grave. This person will not experience hell. This person already experienced hell at Golgotha hill 2000 years ago.” We proclaim this as a congregation when we are putting that person under the water.

This is specifically why Jesus, when He gives us the marking of baptism, gives us immersion. We go down into the water, and as some of you who are hydrophobic remember from the day in which you were baptized, that can be a traumatic experience. You are completely at the whim of the person putting you under the water. You have to trust that person as he is doing something we don’t naturally do. We don’t ask our friends, “Why don’t you come on over later and have a few diet cokes, and maybe you can hold my head under the water for a little while?” We don’t normally do this. We are put under the water, and we are trusting that pastor to lift us up out of the water.

What are we announcing individually and corporately? We are announcing that Jesus underwent the abandonment of God. He underwent the wrath of God. He was buried. He was placed in a hole in the ground, but God remembered Jesus. He was brought back from the dead. This person has already experienced that. This person may

be put into a grave one day. God will in Christ remember this person, and just as I am trusting you to lay me underneath this water where I can't breath, I am completely helpless and I am trusting that you will pull me back up. By faith I am trusting that when they lay me in the ground that you will pull me up through word of Christ. We are all announcing that together. Paul says, "Don't you realize if you have been baptized you have been baptized into death."

We had a lady at a church I served at one time who was not a member of the church. I was shocked because she was there all the time. She and her husband were active in everything. She was there every time that the doors of the church were open, but she wasn't a member of the church. And I said, "What's the deal with her?" Somebody said, "Well, she is a Methodist. She doesn't believe in anything that Methodists believe. She believes just like we do, but she won't be baptized." I said, "Well, why not?" They said, "It is kind of embarrassing because she has gotten to the point where she has been here so long and she goes to the beauty parlor. And she knows that she has a very sizeable bouffant hairdo, and she knows that when she comes up out of the water that is going to be a humiliating experience. Her hair is going to be all messed up. She is going to have to come out of the water looking like that." I said, "It is a humiliating experience. It is more humiliating than she knows. She is coming up out of that water as an executed criminal, not just as a lady with a messed up bouffant hairdo. She is coming up out of that water as somebody who has been judged in Christ, as somebody who has gone through the waters of death."

We are fishing a dead person out of that baptistery. That is what is happening in baptism. Paul writes and he says, "All of you who have been baptized have been baptized into His death. You have already experienced judgment, so why then would you continue in sin?" Why then would you continue to harp at one another, to bite at one another, and to refuse to forgive one another? If you are standing in your house and a pit bull is attacking your child, you are perfectly within your reason to take up a gun and to shoot it in the head. "Boom!" And it may be that you want to make sure that thing is dead, and you hear, "Boom! Boom!" But, if the neighborhood hears, "Boom! Boom! Boom! Boom!" somebody is going to come along and say, "I think the thing is dead." This is overkill.

When we are all baptized what we are saying is, "You know, in case we have any illusions, we understand we already announced that we are all sinners in here. And we have already announced that we all deserve the judgment of God. As a matter of fact, we already announced that everybody who is a member of this church deserves to be in hell. That is already clarified. We clarified it back in that baptistery. You deserve to be in hell and so do I. You have already been judged, so I don't need to do it. You have already been condemned, so I don't need to do it. And God has already in Christ announced whose side He is on, and that is that of Jesus Christ's. You are in Him. You are forgiven. You are found. You are received."

What Paul says is that baptism brings freedom. Notice what he says, "If you are dead, if your old man has been crucified with Him, it has been brought to nothing, you have already been set free. You have already been raised from the dead, then why would you live to sin? Why would you continue to live in sin?" What Paul is saying here is almost exactly the same thing that almost 2000 years later would be said by George Jones. "He stopped loving her today." Why? "Because he is dead. They put a wreath

on his door. They carried him away. He has no feeling for her because he is a dead man.” Paul says, “You walked with sin but now you are dead.” If you are dead that arrangement is already over with. You have been drowned in Christ.

There may come a day when I drop dead. My wife, Maria, may decide she is going to find somebody else. He may come into my house and throw away all my books and take down my Mississippi flag, and he may play golf or some such thing and fill the house with that. She may bring him into this church. You come up to her and you can say all kinds of things, but you cannot call her an adulteress. She will say, “The cricket chirps no more. He is gone. That little man is dead and in the grave, and I am perfectly free now to marry someone else.” You know, she is right. It might be tacky for her to do that, but it is perfectly legal to do that and she has every freedom to do that.

Baptism Proclaims the New Life in Christ

Paul says, “That is the same situation with you. You are not in that old arrangement anymore because that old man is now dead, so why do you act like you continue to still walk in it? You are now freed from that.” But, Paul doesn’t just say that to individuals. Paul says that to the church. It is your responsibility as the church to see baptism as something. It is not just that I reckon myself as an individual. We reckon ourselves dead to sin. We reckon ourselves crucified with Christ. We reckon ourselves raised into newness with life, which is precisely why in the New Testament baptism is not just some little thing that we do. Baptism defines who we are. We are the “submerging church.” This is who we are, what we do, what we mean when we say a Christian is someone who has walked with Jesus through the grave and into newness of life.

That baptistery tells you what Ninth and O Baptist Church believes about the gospel of Jesus Christ. That baptistery tells you what Ninth and O Baptist Church believes about the identity of the church. But, that baptistery is also an invitation. That baptistery says to any one of you in this room outside of Christ, “Come to believe in Jesus. You can be united with Him in His death, in His burial, and in His resurrection. There is no sin that cannot be forgiven. There is no death that can hold you. Jesus, having died once and for all, is never going to die again. If you will be found in Him you will have freedom.”

An Invitation

We will be glad to announce that, and announce that not just to this community, and not just to this church, but to all of the principalities and powers in the waters of baptism. There are some of you in this room who have never been baptized. There are some of you who attend this church but you have never followed Christ in baptism. Let me tell you, this is a matter of obedience to Christ. There are some of you who may have even found yourself in the membership of this church, but you realized the baptism that you received was no baptism at all. You were not a believer when you were baptized. You came to belief at a later time. What happened to you was a dunking in water. Some of you may say, “Yes, I was baptized in a church that did any number of things with water and I chose one of them.” You were not baptized. You did not have announced by

the congregation your crucifixion and resurrection with Christ. And there are many of us who will often say, “You know, I have kind of been here so long, it is a matter of pride.” This is not an optional issue. Jesus says, “Follow Me.” That means, “Follow Me through the water, too.”

But, it is not just an invitation to unbelievers. It is an invitation to all of us as believers to remember something, that in our baptisms we have already announced our hiddenness in Christ. We have already announced that all of us in this room found in Christ are really found in Him. So, why do I continue to persist in unrepentance? Why do I continue to persist in unrepentance as though I was still that man? Why do you continue to judge one another in this congregation as though you didn't already make it clear you are a crucified man, you are an executed woman, you are a drowned criminal? Let's remember after a hundred years, when we say we are Ninth and O, we are saying something about people we ought to be proud of, about people who gave a great deal, people who established a church, and people who stood by the faithfulness of Scripture and a heritage that we want to continue. And when we say that we are Baptists, let's remember we are not just talking about where we came from. We are talking about where we are going: to the glory of Christ.

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