

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

Water - thicker than blood

(understanding Christian baptism)

Introduction: Welcome to the club...

When a boy of the Masai tribe in Africa reaches a certain age, he is given a spear and a shield, sent into the bush, and told to kill a lion. This is his initiation into manhood. He either does not come back, or he comes back a man.

That is one of the more dramatic initiation rituals we might think of. But in truth, initiations into adulthood or into secret societies or into clubs are commonplace in societies around the world - including our own.

We find them in college sororities and fraternities, Masonic lodges, inner city gangs and groups of neighborhood kids.

If New Orleans wins the Super Bowl XLIV, head coach Sean Payton will be initiated into the ranks of Super Bowl winners with a five gallon Gatorade cooler getting dumped on his head.

Initiation rituals played significant roles in movies like **Divine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood** and **Dead Poets Society**.

If you have joined a group of some kind, there was likely an initiation process of some sort, even if you didn't have to go out and kill a lion or slay a dragon.

So, when someone joins the Rotary club, they are given a handshake and a lapel pin. To welcome someone into life in Jesus we dunk them under the water and half drown them.

It is in the vein of thinking together about initiations that we turn our attention this morning to the subject of baptism.

Over the years, I've known lots of people who have expressed curiosity about where we Christians ever got the idea of submerging people under the water as a religious rite.

Maybe you've had those wonderings.

- Why do we do it?
- What does baptism mean?
- Is it an initiation rite or is it something else/more?

Those are great questions! And, with this morning's baptisms in front of us, I can't think of a better time to look into the Bible to shed some light on the subject of baptism.

Let's first think about where the whole idea of baptism came from.

Baptism Prior to Christianity

Washing for Priests

It was not the church and it wasn't even John the Baptist who first came up with the idea of putting someone in the water for religious purposes.

It was God's idea. He first brought water to the table in the earliest era of Jewish history when He required priests to wash prior to offering sacrifices.

While hygiene might have had something to do with the practice, the washing was mainly to symbolize moral cleanliness before engaging in worshipping God.¹ Very early in the history of God's people, water came to be associated with cleansing, not only cleansing of the flesh, but also being clean before God.²

¹ Washing was required of any Israelite whenever there was ceremonial uncleanness.

² In the Old Testament book of 2 Kings (chapter 5), we find the story of Naaman, an Aramean afflicted with the disease of leprosy. To be cleansed from his leprosy,

After centuries of getting comfortable with this thought, baptism began to be practiced in the case of someone who wanted to become a Jew. We call it Jewish *proselyte baptism*.

The Jewish Practice of Proselyte Baptism

In the decades just prior to the birth of Jesus, full immersion washings were necessary for a Gentile who wanted to become a Jew.

These baptisms came to symbolize the purity of an individual before the Law as it signified a switch from the world of the Gentile to the world of the Jew.

Since the Jew considered the Gentile to be entirely unclean, it wouldn't do for him to undergo a partial washing. Nothing but a full bath would do to make a non-Jew clean before God.

So, when a Gentile desired entrance to the Jewish community, he would have to bathe himself entirely.

The next development in the symbolic meaning of baptism came with the ministry of John the Baptist.

Repent! The Baptism of John

The symbolism of moral cleansing was already in place, so when John cried out for people to be baptized, everybody knew that he was calling for them to clean up their acts - that is, to "REPENT!"

Mark's Gospel records that *[Mark 1:4] John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. [5] And all the country of Judea was going out to him, and all the people of Jerusalem; and they were being baptized by him in the Jordan River, confessing their sins.*³

he was required by the prophet Elisha to **dip** (same word used in the Greek translation of the Old Testament as is used in the New Testament to describe baptism) seven times in the Jordan River. In this way (by dipping), Naaman was literally cleansed from both his leprosy and from his ceremonial uncleanness.

³ See also Matthew 3:6-7; Luke 3:3

This is very different from and much more radical than proselyte baptism!

John was calling Jews, God's chosen people, to come for baptism. He preached that they, like the Gentiles, were unclean! Jews needed to be cleansed - internally and externally - just like Gentiles did!

Messiah was coming, so the need for the Jews to clean up their lives was urgent! And nothing worked as well to highlight that idea as baptism.

So, John's baptism was quite different from proselyte baptism. But there was also a difference in the manner John's baptism was administered, and the difference is significant.

Proselyte baptism was *self-administered*. That is, the Gentile bathed himself in order to be identified as a Jew. But, when someone came to John, they had to relinquish control and permit **him** to baptize **them**.

Those coming to John actively sought baptism, but they were passive in the actual baptism, allowing John to lower and raise them from the water.

John never tried to organize a new group, or a different sect. He wasn't a militant rebel. He was a prophet with an urgent message. And his only formal religious ceremony consisted of plunging men and women under the dirty waters of the Jordan River in baptism.

After John had been baptizing for some time, Jesus approached John. He wanted to be baptized.

John, knowing who Jesus was, couldn't believe this! He protested, *[Matthew 3:14]...I have need to be baptized by You, and do You come to me?"*.

Jesus insisted that His own baptism was necessary to *[Matthew 3:15] fulfill all righteousness*. Jesus submitted to John's baptism to publicly associate Himself with John's ministry of proclaiming the Messiah - which He Himself was!

During the early part of Jesus' ministry, He devoted some time to public baptisms.⁴ And, as He did so, He gave baptism the same emphasis John had given it: to call people to repentance.

But, as His ministry progressed Jesus had less and less to say about baptism. Over the last year and a half of His life He said almost nothing about it.

So, we might expect that with the diminishing stress on baptism through the course of His ministry, He wouldn't have placed much importance on water baptism as He gave final marching orders to His disciples.

Nothing could be further from the truth! The physical rite of baptism makes its way into a passage we have come to know and love as The Great Commission.

Baptism by the Church - in Jesus' Name

Jesus' Marching Orders

[Matthew 28:18] And Jesus came up and spoke to them, saying, "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. [19] Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, [20] teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age."

We are going to come back to this passage in a few minutes, but I at least want you to note the company that baptism keeps in these verses.

Jesus links water baptism with the missionary call to "Go" with the Gospel to all the nations, AND with the priority of teaching disciples to obey all that He has commanded. That's pretty heady company!

Contrary to what we might have thought after noting the lack of emphasis on baptism in the latter stages of Jesus' ministry, baptism was to play a major role in the lives of disciples through the ages.

We see that role played out immediately in the accounts we find in the book of Acts.

The Record of the Book of Acts

Acts 2 - all who believed, baptized

[Acts 2:41] So then, those who had received his word were baptized; and that day there were added about three thousand souls.

In the second chapter of Acts, all three thousand of those who had put their trust in Christ at Peter's preaching on that first Pentecost after Jesus' death were baptized.

Acts 8 - Ethiopian, baptized

[Acts 8:38] And he ordered the chariot to stop; and they both went down into the water, Philip as well as the eunuch, and he baptized him.

In Acts 8, an Ethiopian court official was saved in the desert when Philip, the evangelist, explained Isaiah 53 to him. As they passed a pond of water at an oasis in the desert, Philip baptized him.

Acts 9 - Saul, baptized

[Acts 9:18] And immediately there fell from his eyes something like scales, and he regained his sight, and he got up and was baptized;

In the ninth chapter of Acts, three days after Paul (then Saul of Tarsus) was converted, scales fell from his eyes, he regained his sight, arose from where he had been sitting in Damascus, and was baptized.

Acts 10 - Cornelius, baptized

One chapter later, Cornelius, a God-fearing Gentile (proselyte) was saved, along with his whole Gentile household.

⁴ We especially see this in John's Gospel: John 3:22-23; 3:26; 4:1-2.

Simon Peter saw that the Holy Spirit had fallen on these folks in the same way that the Spirit had at Pentecost (*[Acts 10:46]...they were speaking with tongues and exalting God*), so he said, *[47] “Surely no one can refuse the water for these to be baptized who have received the Holy Spirit just as we did, can he?” [48] And he ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ.*

Acts 16 - jailer and family, baptized

Over in Acts 16, a woman named Lydia trusted Christ as Paul explained the Gospel of Christ to her, and was immediately baptized (Acts 16:15).

In the same chapter and the same city, the Philippian jailer asked the famous question, *[Acts 16:31] “What must I do to be saved?”*

He had been about to commit suicide, fearing that the prisoners in his jail had escaped because of an earthquake from the Lord which opened all the prison doors. But Paul and Silas stopped him and explained the way of salvation, *“Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you shall be saved, you and your household.”* The jailer and his household all believed in Christ - and immediately they were all baptized (Acts 16:25-34)

Acts 19 - Corinthians, baptized

Over in Acts 18, the leader of the synagogue in the city of Corinth, a man named Crispus, trusted Jesus to forgive his sins. Following his conversion we read that *[Acts 18:8]...many of the Corinthians when they heard were believing and being baptized.*

One final example from Acts will suffice to show the centrality of baptism in the life of the early church.

Acts 19 - John’s (baptized) disciples, baptized

In Acts 19, Paul came upon some disciples of John the Baptist who had been baptized with John’s baptism (remember, that was a baptism of repentance to prepare them for the coming of the Messiah - Jesus!) but had not heard “the rest of the story” about Jesus.

When Paul found out that they were not Christians, he proclaimed the Gospel to them, which they readily believed. Then, rather than allowing their former baptism to “count,” Paul baptized them *“in the name of the Lord Jesus.”*

Theologian Charles Ryrie sees this mountain of evidence and says that in every salvation experience recorded in Acts, the new converts were immediately baptized.⁵ And no less a scholar than F.F. Bruce states, *“The idea of an unbaptized Christian is simply not entertained in the New Testament.”*⁶

The Record of Church History

To say the least, for much of the last 2,000 years, baptism has played a major role in the worship of the church.⁷

Church history confirms that in the early decades after the apostles passed off the scene, baptism was practiced as an act of initiation into the life of the church.

And how were people to be baptized?⁸

This discussion could get us embroiled in a lot of hot water, because certainly believers have differed as to the mode of baptism - but let’s jump in feet first!

Mode of Baptism

Through the centuries, three different types of baptizing have been practiced by the church: sprinkling, pouring, and immersion.

From earliest times baptism by sprinkling or pouring was allowed in certain cases.

⁵ Ryrie, *Biblical Theology*, p. 118

⁶ *The Book of the Acts*, F.F. Bruce, p. 77

⁷ Only the baptized could partake of communion.

⁸ Significantly, no place in the New Testament gives directions as to WHO in the church is to perform baptisms.

If no streams of running water or large amounts of water were available, or if the person was physically unable to travel to water or if the person was unable to be placed in water due to physical limitations, such water as was handy would be used to baptize.⁹

But from the beginning, unless there was a compelling reason not to do so, the default mode was baptism by immersion.¹⁰

In fact, the Greek word we translate “baptize” - βαπτίζω - actually means “to immerse, submerge.” When describing a ship that had sunk or a person who had drowned, you would use the word βαπτίζω.¹¹

In just a minute we are going to look at what the Bible says a Christian is saying when he or she agrees to be baptized. But before we look at that, I want to address one more issue with you.

Here it is: What is baptism’s relationship to salvation?

Baptism and Salvation

Some people believe that baptism is necessary to obtain eternal life. But the Bible is clear that salvation is by grace through faith in the finished work of Christ on the cross. It teaches that baptism is “the visible form of an invisible grace,” an outward sign of an inward reality.¹²

In a word, the act of being immersed (or sprinkled) in the waters of baptism adds nothing to a person’s standing before God. And conversely, NOT being immersed in water detracts nothing from their eternal salvation.

If is fascinating to notice that the one book in the New Testament that was written specifically to tell us how to have eternal life (the Gospel of John), never mentions baptism in any of its calls to salvation. If baptism is required for salvation, then this is a most glaring omission!

⁹ Cairns, *Christianity Through the Centuries*, p. 90

¹⁰ One of the earliest Christian writings we have, the *Didache*, records that immersion was the most widely used mode of baptism in the first century.

¹¹ Used metaphorically, βαπτίζω could be used to speak of being overwhelmed by life’s difficulties.

¹² Peter testified that the household of Cornelius had been purified by faith without any mention of baptism.

So, if baptism is not for the purpose of salvation, what is it good for? Why would a Christian consider being baptized? And what is a Christian saying by being baptized?

The first passage to shed light on this question is one we’ve already seen. Let’s travel back to Matthew 28.

The Significance of Baptism

Baptism - A Statement of Commitment (part of discipleship training)

[Matthew 28:18] And Jesus came up and spoke to them, saying, “All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. [19] “Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, [20] teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.”

The nature of baptism demonstrates discipleship. It says to a watching world, “*I have decided to follow Jesus.*”

We do nothing trivial when we baptize a person. We put them in a river or lake or tub and shove them all the way underwater, hold them down until they are completely sopped, and then pull them back up.

How does the world know who is baptized, who is the one who is now identified with Christ, who is serious about following Christ? Easy - “*He’s the one over there who is sopping wet!*”

In lands where there is hostility to the Gospel, baptism frequently signals the beginning of persecution.

Baptism is Colonel William Barrett Travis drawing a line in the sand at the Alamo, telling anyone who wanted to stay and fight to cross that line. It is a declaration of commitment to the Lord Jesus Christ. It is a confession that we are citizens of another Kingdom, one to which we are pledging allegiance by our baptism.

So, baptism marks out a person as a genuine, sincere Christ-follower.

But baptism does more. When you are baptized, you are giving testimony to the work of God in saving your eternal soul.

**Baptism - A Picture of the Gospel
(active passivity)**

[Romans 6:3] 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... (see Colossians 2:12)

In these verses, Paul wants us to consider two things at the same time: the passion of Christ AND water baptism.

Let's consider Jesus' passion - His death and resurrection. When the Lord was taken off the cross, He was undeniably dead. The scourging, coupled with the crown of thorns, coupled with the nails in His hands and feet, coupled with the difficulty of breathing, coupled with the sword in His side all contributed to His death.

Those who took Him off the cross proceeded to bury Him in the borrowed tomb of Joseph of Arimathea. After He was laid inside, His mourners left the tomb and it was sealed from the outside by a large stone.

By Easter Sunday morning, everything had changed! The stone was rolled away! The Roman soldiers had scattered! The linen wrappings were evacuated! The tomb was empty! Jesus was alive! Death to life!!

That movement - death to life - says Paul, parallels what God has done in saving every person who places faith in Jesus. Prior to trusting Him, we were dead and buried in sin's grip. That precious part of us that relates to God was dead. We were hopeless and helpless.

Then, we placed our faith in Jesus and, spiritually speaking, He made us alive. Baptism perfectly pictures this movement of spiritual death to life.

We see burial in the lowering of the person under the water. And then, after a couple of seconds (if all goes well...), the one who is doing the baptizing raises the person up, a picture of resurrection life. Baptism provides a complete picture of what God has done in giving salvation. Death to life.

And one more thing...

Baptism also pictures the "active passivity" that is involved in salvation. When a person requests baptism, they are actively seeking something. But, when it comes to the actual baptism, they are passive in the process. They are acted upon. They are baptized *by another*.

In the same way, any person who wants to be saved takes active steps to come to Christ. But, they realize that - in the final analysis - it is not they themselves who do the saving work. It is God who saves them. They are passive in the process, and are acted upon by another.

Thus, baptism is a dramatic and beautiful portrayal of salvation. The person who is being baptized says to a watching world, or to a watching church, *"I am a resurrected person. I was dead and have been made alive to God."*

The New Testament tells us that there is one more statement that is made when a believer is baptized.

The apostle Paul says that baptism is a ringing affirmation of the solidarity Christians enjoy with each other, a testimony to the unity of the Body of Christ.¹³

¹³ Paul hints at the idea in 1 Corinthians 12. In a context more concerned with the spiritual unity of the church, he mentions that *[1 Corinthians 12:13] by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free, and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.* - and he uses the vocabulary of baptism to emphasize that unity.

Baptism - An Affirmation of Solidarity (baptized into one Body)

[Ephesians 4:4] 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.

There is great diversity in the church. People from different backgrounds come together on Sunday mornings and at other times to worship and to pray, to serve and to learn.

The differences run deep, and we shouldn't ignore them. They are racial, ethnic, and linguistic. There are differences in politics and worldview. This church has people of greatly varying levels of wealth/poverty, education, and family of origin.

I could go on. Diversity is the rule in the church of Jesus Christ - and He loves it that way. But there is an overarching unity that is weightier than the diversity. One of the unifiers Paul lists is *"baptism."*

To what baptism is he referring?

Is it the baptism of the Holy Spirit, who is given to every person the minute he or she believes? Or is Paul referring to water baptism, which would have been a near universal experience for every first-century Christian?

While it is possible that he was referring to Spirit baptism (and I certainly won't say he wasn't!), it is just as reasonable to say that he is talking about the common experience of having gone under the waters of baptism.

Common experiences unite us. I'm not very good with computers, but I've noticed that people who are good with computers can meet, strike up a conversation and get along famously.

When I find out that somebody has traveled to Russia, tended a garden, or read The Lord of the Rings, there is a connection.

Christians who have been baptized watch other Christians get baptized and think to themselves, *"I remember when I did that. I know just what that guy is feeling. She's decided to follow Jesus. That kid is family."*

Family is a place where love flows. Family is where we learn so much of what life is really about. Our core values are shaped at home and family is the one group that will take you in when everybody else has thrown you out. Family is the place to which we retreat when there is nowhere else to go. As we have all heard, blood is thicker than water.

But, in light of our baptism and all that it represents, we in the church of Jesus Christ affirm that water is thicker than blood.

We are a family made up of death-to-life people who have decided to follow Jesus. And we're in it together.