

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

Special Sunday: *International Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church*

Water - Thicker than Blood

(selected passages)

Introduction: Welcome to the club...

In some of the less settled regions of Africa, it is still the custom that when a boy of the Masai tribe reaches a certain age, he is given a spear and a shield and is told to kill a lion. This is his initiation into manhood. He either doesn't come back, or he comes back a man.

That is one of the more dramatic initiation rituals you might ever hear about. But initiations are common in societies around the world, including our own.

There are initiate rites into college sororities and fraternities, Masonic lodges, and inner-city gangs. 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.

So, when you join the Rotary club, you get a special handshake and a lapel pin. To welcome you into life in Jesus we dunk you underwater and half drown you.

This morning is a perfect day to bring a message about baptism, not only because we are baptizing a few people here today, but because there is a natural tie-in between baptism and persecution.

If you have ever wondered where Christians got the idea of immersing people, well, this is your lucky day. Because, to start off, I'm going to tell you where the idea of baptism came from.

Baptism Prior to Christianity

Washing for Old Testament 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 started way back in the Old Testament, long before Christianity, when God required priests to thoroughly wash prior to offering sacrifices.¹ Of course, hygiene might have had something to do with these washings, but they were mainly intended to symbolize moral purity before God.

The Jews lived with this link between priestly worship and washings for centuries. Then, it was carried over to people who wanted to convert from whatever they were to being Jewish. We call it *proselyte baptism*.

The Jewish Practice of Proselyte Baptism (washing)

These washings symbolized the commitment to moral purity of the one who was becoming a Jew. A partial washing wouldn't do. Only an entire bath was enough to make a non-Jew clean before God. And this was the practice for every non-Jew converting to Judaism in the years before Christianity.

A whole new development in the practice of religious washings came along when John, the son of Zacharias and Elizabeth, started baptizing.²

¹ Ceremonial washings were a common feature of ancient Greek religion, including Eleusinian and similar cults and Bacchic consecrations. In addition, Egyptian religion and the worship of Isis outside of Egypt, the eastern Mithraic cults, the Apollinarian games and the festival of Pelusium all included bathings of various sorts as part of their religious rituals.

² John never tried to organize a new group, or a different sect. He wasn't a militant rebel. He wasn't a militant rebel, but a prophet with an urgent message.

The Baptism of John

The purpose of John's baptism (Mark 1:4)

In Mark's Gospel, we read **[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

John's baptism was very different from proselyte baptism in that he was calling Jews - God's chosen people - to be baptized.

John said that Jews were every bit as much in need of outer and inner cleansing as Gentiles. Messiah was coming, so Jews needed to repent of their sins to prepare for His arrival. And nothing worked like baptism to symbolize that repentance and commitment to purity.

The manner of John's baptism

So, John's baptism was similar in purpose to proselyte baptism because both were concerned with purity. It was different in that John was calling Jews to be baptized. It was also different because John carried out his baptisms very differently.

Proselyte baptism was *self-administered*. That is, to be considered a Jew, the Gentile bathed himself. When someone came to John for baptism (active in the pursuit), they were to relinquish control and let him immerse them in the water (passive in the event).

Well, after John had been baptizing people in the dirty waters of the Jordan River for some time, the Lord Jesus approached John, requesting baptism. And, with some reluctance, John did baptize Jesus.

Jesus and Baptism

At His baptism, which launched Jesus' public ministry, God the Father spoke words of confirmation from Heaven.

And, during the early part of the Lord's ministry, He devoted time to public baptisms,⁴ giving the same emphasis John had given it: to call people to repentance and to prepare them to live as citizens of God's kingdom.

Then, over the last year and a half of His three years long ministry He went silent about baptism, saying almost nothing about it from that point forward.

We might expect, then, given the diminishing stress on baptism over the course of His ministry, He wouldn't place much stress on water baptism when giving final instructions to His disciples.

We would be wrong to expect that, because nothing could be further from the truth.

When we listen to Jesus give marching orders to His followers at the end of Matthew's Gospel, baptism was front and center.

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."

Note the company that baptism keeps.

Jesus linked it with the call to make disciples of people from every nation. He connected it to the priority of teaching disciples to obey all of His commands.

That's pretty heady company and it meant that baptism would play a major role in the lives of disciples through the ages.

³ See also Matthew 3:6-7; Luke 3:3.

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

We see that major role played out in the accounts we find in the book of Acts that show people coming to faith in Jesus.

The Record of the Book of Acts

Acts 2 - all who believed, baptized

In the second chapter of Acts, after the Holy Spirit was poured out on Jesus' followers on the Day of Pentecost, Peter preached a powerful sermon about Jesus. The response was amazing.⁵

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

Acts 8 - an Ethiopian, baptized

Later, Philip the Evangelist hitched a ride in the chariot of an official of Candace, the Queen of the Ethiopians, and told him about Jesus.

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

Acts 9 - Saul, baptized

Soon after that, Saul of Tarsus, a man who had been throwing Christians into prison and killing them, was blinded by God as he was about to enter Damascus to continue his persecuting ways.

A man named Ananias shared the Gospel with Saul (soon to be the Apostle Paul) and Saul believed.

Then we read, ***[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...***

⁵ At first, faith in Christ and the desire for baptism were the only requirements for being baptized. By the end of the second century, a probationary period was added to test the reality of the convert's experience.

Acts 10 - Cornelius, baptized

Right after that, Cornelius, a Roman Centurion who was a God-fearing Gentile-turned-Jew listened to Peter tell about Jesus, believed, and was saved, along with his whole Gentile household. These were the first completely non-Jewish people to become Christians.

Peter immediately recognized that this group of Gentiles had been saved just like that great crowd had been saved on the Day of Pentecost and knew exactly what to do next. ***[48] And he ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ.***

Acts 16 - Lydia and household; jailer and family, baptized

When Paul and Silas traveled to Philippi with the message of Jesus, a Jewish woman named Lydia trusted Christ. She was immediately baptized (Acts 16:15).

And, while still in Philippi, Paul and Silas were thrown into the city's dungeon for preaching Jesus. Around midnight, an angel of God sent an earthquake that opened the prison doors and unlocked the prisoners' chains.

Panicked, the jailer was about to commit suicide, figuring the prisoners had escaped. Paul assured him that they were all still there.

And when this jailer realized how he had been delivered from execution by Rome, he asked Paul about an even greater deliverance: ***[Acts 16:31] "What must I do to be saved?"***

Paul's response was crystal clear: ***"Believe in the Lord Jesus"***

So, the jailer and his household all believed in Christ - and were all baptized (Acts 16:25-34)

Acts 19 - Corinthians, baptized

When Paul went to the city of Corinth a man named Crispus trusted in Jesus. His conversion had a snowball effect, so that ***[Acts 18:8]...many of the Corinthians when they heard were believing and being baptized.***

Acts 19 - John's baptized (!) disciples, baptized

And then, in the city of Ephesus, Paul met some disciples of John the Baptist. These twelve men had all been baptized into John's baptism of repentance in preparation for the coming of Jesus but had not heard that Jesus had already come.

In other words, they had been baptized, but weren't Christians. So, Paul shared the Good News of Jesus with them and they instantly believed. And rather than allowing their former "John the Baptist" baptism to count, Paul baptized them "***in the name of the Lord Jesus.***"

No less a scholar than F.F. Bruce saw all this evidence from the New Testament and wrote, "*The idea of an unbaptized Christian is simply not entertained in the New Testament.*"⁶

Throughout the centuries since the New Testament was written, baptism has continued to be an important part of the experience of each generation of believers in Jesus.⁷

Mode of Baptism

Now, the Greek word we translate "baptize" (*baptizo*) actually means "*to immerse, to submerge.*" When describing a ship that had sunk or a person who had drowned, you would use the word for "baptize."

So, it's pretty well agreed that John baptized by pushing people all the way under the water and that the early church followed suit and generally baptized by immersion.

From earliest times, though, baptism by sprinkling or pouring was allowed in certain cases.⁸

⁶ The Book of the Acts, F.F. Bruce, p. 77. Likewise, Charles Ryrie wrote in Biblical Theology (p. 118) that the New Testament model was that new converts were baptized immediately (or as soon as possible) after conversion.

⁷ Significantly, no place in the New Testament gives directions as to WHO in the church is to perform baptisms.

⁸ The reformer, John Calvin, practiced sprinkling, but acknowledged that the word (*baptizw*) meant "immerse."

If no streams or large pools 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 was used to baptize.

For a few years, Northwest had a connection with a church in Uruguay, South America. On one trip, I watched as Pastor Alejandro baptized a man who was wheelchair-bound and who couldn't be placed in the lake where others were being baptized. Pastor Ale filled a 5-gallon bucket with lake water and dumped it on his head.

And, some years ago, physical limitations kept a woman who wanted to be baptized from getting into the baptistry here, so I (much more gently) poured water over her.

My point is to say that unless there was a compelling reason not to do so, the default mode of baptism has historically been immersion.⁹ But, I'm not going to argue with those who sprinkle or pour. The point is to be baptized. But, why? Why do we baptize?

First, a negative reason, related to eternal life.

The Significance of Baptism

Baptism - and the Gift of Eternal Life

The Bible is clear that salvation / eternal life is gained by grace through faith in the finished work of Christ on the cross.¹⁰ And the idea we find throughout the New Testament is that baptism is "an outward sign of an inward reality."

To be as clear as possible, being baptized adds nothing to a person's standing before God. And NOT being immersed in water detracts nothing from their eternal salvation.

⁹ 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.

¹⁰ Peter testified that the household of Cornelius had been purified by faith without any mention of baptism.

It is crucial to note that the one book in the New Testament explicitly written to tell us how to have eternal life - John's Gospel - includes no mention of baptism in any of its invitations to gain eternal life. If baptism is required for salvation, that is one glaring omission!

So, we are clear that baptism is *not* to prove or add or complete salvation. Why, then, would a Christian consider being baptized?

The first passage to shed light on this question is one we've already seen. Let's travel back to Matthew 28 and listen to Jesus again.

Baptism - A "Next Step" with Jesus Into Discipleship (Matthew 28)

When He spoke to His disciples up on top of that mountain in Galilee, He told them, ***[Matthew 28:19]"Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit..."***

There is nothing subtle about baptism. We put the person being baptized in a river, lake, or tub, shove them underwater, hold them down until they are completely sopped, and then pull them back up.

In places where there is hostility to the Gospel, baptism often prompts a not very subtle response by opponents.

In 1999, Todd Havekost and I spent a week teaching at a pastor's conference in the town of Nizhnekamsk, in the Republic of Tatarstan, a Muslim-dominant region of Russia.

It was a life-changing, eye-opening, vision-expanding time in all respects. Among the most impactful moments came at a dinner when I had a brief conversation with a pastor from a nearby Republic. (also ending with "...stan")

He told me through a translator that in his city a Christian's baptism is the point at which persecution begins.

I was learning that it is not simply being a Christian that prompts opposition from those opposed to the faith. It is being a committed, outspoken Christian.

And how do opponents know who is committed to Christ and who is going to be an outspoken Christian? Easy. It's the one standing over there, sopping wet.

This pastor went on to tell me that the radicals in his city first beat you up right after you get baptized.

Baptism is a declaration of commitment to Christ. It is our confession that we are citizens of another kingdom. Baptism is our pledge of allegiance to King Jesus.

Second, baptism serves as a graphic picture of God's work in saving a soul from an eternity separated from God.

Baptism - A Picture of the "death-to-life" Gospel (Romans 6)

[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 this passage, Paul wants us to consider two things at the same time: the passion of Christ AND water baptism.

The death-to-life journey of Jesus

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.

The soldiers who took Him off the cross gave His body to those who buried Him in the borrowed tomb of Joseph of Arimathea.

After He was laid inside, these followers left the tomb. It was sealed from the outside by a large stone.

That was on Friday. By Easter Sunday morning, everything had changed. The stone was rolled away. The Roman guards had scattered. The linen wrappings were evacuated. The tomb was empty. Jesus was alive. Death to life.

Paul says that Jesus' death to life journey foreshadows what God has done in saving every person who places their faith in Jesus.

Our death to life journey

Prior to trusting Him, we were spiritually dead because of sin. That precious part of each of us that relates to God wasn't missing. It 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. 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.

(Notice that in baptism, too, the person being baptized is active in pursuing baptism but is passive in the process. Just as in receiving the gift of eternal life, we tell God what we are asking Him for, but we contribute nothing to our salvation. It is all of grace.)

Baptism provides a complete picture of what God has done in giving salvation. Death to life.

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 now been made alive to God."*

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

Baptism is a ringing affirmation of the solidarity Christians enjoy with each other, a testimony to the unity of the Body of Christ.

Baptism - An Affirmation of Solidarity (Ephesians 4)

[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.

Diversity in the church

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 demographic and ethnic, political and linguistic.

Our own church has people of greatly varying levels of wealth/poverty, education, political persuasion, family of origin, and more.

Diversity is the rule in the church - and Jesus loves it that way.

But there is an overarching unity that is weightier than the diversity. One of the greatest of our Christian unifiers is baptism.

A great unifier

Every Christian has received the baptism of the Holy Spirit. That occurs the instant he or she believes.

And it is possible that part of what Paul has in mind in what he writes in Ephesians is this universal experience of the work of the Spirit in baptizing each of us into the universal body of Christ.¹¹

¹¹ 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.

It is more probable (I believe) that what he is mainly referring to is our common experience of having gone under the waters of baptism.

Common experiences unite us.

I'm not tech-savvy. But I have watched people who are can code meet, strike up a conversation and get along famously.

There is a connection when I find out that the person I'm talking to has traveled to Russia or Chile or India. The same is true if they tend a vegetable garden, like to read, or enjoy hiking and camping.

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."* and *"She's decided to follow Jesus. Just like me."* and *"That soaking wet 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 would say that water - the water of baptism - 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 this great adventure together.

So today, baptism speaks of acceptance by God - AND acceptance by the church.

We who make up the church say to those who come to be baptized, *"We're one with you. You are one of us. We've come up out of the water, too. We're together in this life of faith. We link arms."*

Conclusion:

Over the years, I have been surprised at some of the people who make up the confessing church. People I would never have let in - but whom God has chosen to let in. It seems that I am a good bit more discriminating than God.

He allows eunuchs and persecutors and serial murderers and misfits into His church. And each conversion is a miracle of an individual salvation. But each conversion is also a community miracle.

That is because each misfit and loser, each cool and not so cool person who believes, becomes a part of the invisible Body of Christ and is adopted into God's family.

Baptism gives witness to that unity - Spirit baptism ushering us into the life of the Spirit, and water baptism ushering us into the life of the church. ¹²

¹² From William Willimon's book, Peculiar Speech.