

BAPTISM

Baptism is a milestone – a key event that acts as a marker. For the early church baptism was a quite simple.

Peter on Pentecost said to the crowd repent and be baptized and 3000 were baptized. (Quite possibly in the pools in the temple that the Jews used for ritual cleansing.) Acts 2

The Ethiopian eunuch in his chariot came to see the OT fulfilled in Jesus. He realized Jesus was God and put his trust in him. He was baptized in a pool by the road. Acts 8:26-38

The Roman jailor was so convicted by the earthquake at midnight that opened the doors of the prison that on hearing the good news about Jesus he and his household were baptized that very night. Acts 16:16-40

For Jews and Gentiles alike when they came to see that Jesus was God, that he had died and risen again, and they believed in him, trusted in him for new life. Repented is the word used. Orientated life towards following Jesus. Become Christian. Very next step in that journey was baptism. Now these were people who knew God – they were God fearers but needed to understand the new thing that God had done in Jesus. Not too long after the early church started to see people come to faith who had no understanding of God at all. So the early church started baptism classes - some of them extensive. It was a way of combating heresies that were very common. Often baptisms were held on Easter Sunday. Baptism was normally by immersion or by pouring water over head.

But even though there was teaching and instruction it was still quite simple. If you became a Christian, then you demonstrated your faith in Jesus by baptism. This step of baptism was clear sign that you were a Christian, not just a casual seeker, or someone interested in spiritual things, but someone who was convinced in who Jesus was and what he had done, and were making a life time commitment to follow him.

The step of baptism often came with a cost - you were identifying yourself as a Christian and as being part of the church community and in doing so you were often at odds with the State and therefore subject to persecution. Being baptized was not something you took lightly. It could cost you your life – as it still does today in some countries. There was no thought of a Christian who was not baptized.

Context today

Today we have a quite different context. We have a whole variety of church denominations, and a variety of teaching on the subject of baptism. It is one of the things that divides churches. Baptism has become separated from conversion and so it is all a bit messy and complex. There are basically 3 streams of teaching.

- Catholic teaching/ sacramental teaching that baptism is the means by which we receive God's grace. So it is really important to baptize infants, because if you don't they are not in heaven.
- Reformed teaching / covenantal position says that baptism is a sign of the covenant and replaces the OT circumcision. They also baptize infants because in doing so they come under the covenant of God until they can choose for themselves.
- Baptist teaching is that baptism is symbolic of what God has done in our hearts and can only be done by believer.

Because we have a variety of church views on the matter, we have people from all different backgrounds today in church. Some have been "sprinkled" as a baby in the Catholic church so consider themselves saved from that point on. Some have been christened in Anglican/Presbyterian church and then might have been confirmed as a Christian as a young adult. Some are from Salvation Army background where baptism is not normally practised at all. Some of you will have been Christians since a young age and you can't really put your finger on a time when you did not believe. Some of you will have had no church background or not be even sure if you have been christened/sprinkled as a baby. Some of you might have been baptized in JW or Mormon "church."

The Bible is quite clear that we become Christians by faith in Jesus Christ, and faith alone. So because of this and because the issue of baptism has caused so much division and dispute over the years, this church quite a number of years ago decided to not make baptism a divisive issue. So if you are a follower of Jesus, you can become a partner regardless of whether you have been baptized or not. In the end each of us has to search the Scriptures and make up our own minds on what we believe God is saying concerning baptism.

Three Challenges

One. Some of you here today have been coming along to church here. You believe in Jesus and your life is now facing God. The next step for you is baptism. In baptism you are publically declaring that you are a follower of Jesus. Christianity is not a private matter. You are identifying with Jesus, his death and resurrection as you go under water, and rise again. You are vividly showing that you have been washed clean from all the past. Baptism is the next step in a lifetime of following Jesus. If you have been baptized as a Mormon or Jehovah's Witness, it is not same as baptism as a Christian because their beliefs are so different from biblical and historical Christianity that it is not Christianity at all. Even if you were christened as baby, if you come to faith, as an adult the next step is baptism.



Two. For those of you who have been Christians for many years and have not been baptized as a believer you are loved and welcome in this church. You are not regarded in any way as second class. You might have followed Jesus for a very long time, love him and exhibit the fruit and gifts of the Spirit in your life. But I have two thoughts for you to ponder.

The example of Jesus.

Why did Jesus get baptized by John? He did not come to faith the week before. He had no sin that he needed to turn from. In fact John says to him "You don't need to be baptized. I should be baptized by you." Jesus said he needed to, to fulfil all righteousness. Most commentators say what he was meaning was he was identifying with us, as sinful humans and so I identify with people by being baptized with them. John's baptism was about repentance: about turning from what is wrong and trusting in God. The challenge is if it were good enough for Jesus, then as followers of Jesus we should do the same. Jesus humbled himself and identified with our sin. In baptism we humble ourselves and identify with Jesus.

Your example to new believers

If as you read the Scripture and see that coming to faith and baptism are linked then what do you say to a new believer who comes to faith. They look at you as a mature believer and they read the Bible and can't see anything about babies being baptized but know that you have not been baptized and ask well, why should I do this. I am not questioning your faith, or your parents actions, but I believe you need to consider being baptized to set an example of what normal Christian practise is for them. While you might have made a commitment to follow Jesus many years ago, it is never too late to testify to his grace. That is what we do in communion every time we take it and it is what we do in baptism. We declare that our life is in Jesus Christ and his death and life

Three. For those of you who have been baptized, maybe many years ago when you took a simple step of obedience, the challenge is. "Are you still taking those simple steps of obedience?" "Are you still in love with Jesus as you were back then. Are you still hearing his voice? Baptism was the first step in a life of obedience and an easy one. But 10, 20 30 years on, are you still listening to Spirits' nudge and taking those steps of obedience and of faith. Baptism is a mile stone, but it is only the start of the journey of faith and obedience.

Conclusion

The OT story of Naaman the commander of neighbouring army to Israel is found in 2 Kings 5. He had leprosy and heard that Israel had a prophet so he went to him. Elisha the prophet didn't even come to the door to greet him but told him to wash seven times in the Jordan river. Naaman got in a huff about this and stalked off. He thought that there were nicer rivers in his own country and he wasn't going to do this. He knew that having a bath would not get rid of leprosy. But his officials went to him and said. "Sir, if the prophet had told you to do something very difficult, wouldn't you have done it? So you should certainly obey him when he says

simply, 'Go and wash and be cured!' " So Naaman went down to the Jordan River and dipped himself seven times, as the man of God had instructed him. And his skin became as healthy as the skin of a young child's, and he was healed!"

We don't get healed or saved when we get baptized. But what I am saying is Naaman needed a simple obedient faith to follow this instruction. As he did, he received God's blessing. I wonder how often we have heard the prompts of the Spirit and pride and intellect have got in the way. We start thinking of objections. "God I can't do that." "How embarrassing." "What would people say?" "But what happens if I pray for that sick person and nothing happens." "What if I speak that word of prophecy and it is wrong. Sometimes we need to drop our intellectual arguments and our pride and follow God. We can over think things at times. We can fail to do the simple things by simply trusting and obeying.

Milestones are markers of a journey. As you reflect on this year, are you moving forward in your faith journey?

Are you continuing to move towards Jesus? What is the next step God is asking you to take in your journey. Is baptism something else that God is asking you to do?

Download or listen to this message at:

www.icbc.org.nz

REFLECTION + DISCUSSION

What view of baptism did you grow up with?

If you have been baptized, what was your experience of this time? Was it significant?

What is the hardest step of obedience you have ever had to take?

How can we maintain our "first love" and keep that simple walk of stepping out in obedience and trust?



CENTRAL BAPTIST

LOVE GOD : LOVE OTHERS