

11. We believe in water baptism by immersion at an age of accountability.

(Transcript of message preached by Pastor Rick Minett on May 29, 2005 at Grace Community Church)

“Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan to be baptized by him. And John tried to prevent Him, saying, ‘I need to be baptized by You, and You are coming to Me?’ But Jesus answered and said to him, ‘Permit it to be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness.’ Then he allowed Him. When He had been baptized, Jesus came up immediately from the water; and behold, the heavens were opened to Him, and He saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting upon Him. And suddenly a voice came from heaven, saying, ‘This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased’” (Matthew 3:13-17).

The subject of water baptism has been the subject of debate throughout the centuries. Some say it is necessary to salvation, others say it is not. Some say that it is an ordinance of the Church, others say it is not. Some say that is done by sprinkling, others say it is done by immersion. Some say the purpose of water baptism is this or that, while others proclaim a differing theology. So is it any wonder that so many people are confused about this subject?

It reminds me of the little church in East Texas that was having a water baptism service on a Sunday afternoon down at the local river. During the service a drunk stumbled in the river and ended up standing next to the preacher. The preacher turned to him and said, “Sir, are you ready to find Jesus?” And the drunk replied, “Yes Mr. Preacher, I am.” With that, the preacher dunked the man under the water and pulled him right back up and said, “Have you found Jesus?” The drunk wiped his eyes and said, “No Mr. Preacher, I haven’t.” So the preacher dunked him under a second time and then pulled him up. “Now my brother, have you found Jesus?” And the drunk said, “No Mr. Preacher, I haven’t.” By this time the preacher is both frustrated and embarrassed because everyone is watching, so he dunked the drunk under for a third time and this time held him under for over 30 seconds. When he brought him out of the water, the preacher asked him in a harsh tone, “Now my brother, have you found Jesus?” The old drunk wiped his eyes, tried to catch his breath, and looked at the preacher and said, “Are you SURE this is where He fell in?”

Just in case someone might be wondering, when we are baptized—we aren’t looking for Jesus. So what are we doing when we are baptized?

We Are Walking In Obedience To The Commandment Of The Lord

Water baptism wasn’t conceived in the minds of a bunch of ancient preachers who wanted to come up with a plan to initiate a little revenge on some unfriendly church members. Man didn’t initiate water baptism, God did! In the Matthew 3 passage, John hesitated to baptize Jesus and when he did, Jesus said to him, *“Permit it to be so now, thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness.”* One of the ways that we, as Christians, fulfill the righteousness of God is through water baptism. Jesus said that our love for Him is measured by our obedience to Him. *“If you love Me,”* Jesus said in John 14:15, *“keep My commandments.”*

So the next question that must be answered is this: Is water baptism a commandment? In Matthew 28:19-20 we are told to *“Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all the things that I have commanded you...”* Sounds like a commandment to me, doesn’t it you? And then in Mark 16:16, Jesus said, *“He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned.”* Again, sounds like a commandment to me, doesn’t it you? And what about Acts 2:38? Simon Peter stands before the vast crowds gathered in Jerusalem at the birth of the church and he proclaims, *“Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.”* That doesn’t sound like a suggestion, does it?

In Acts 8, we find the wonderful story about an Ethiopian eunuch that is led to the Lord by Philip. And as soon as divine revelation explodes in his soul and he is saved, the first thing he says is, *“See, here is water. What hinders me from being baptized?”* (Acts 8:37). And Philip makes sure the Ethiopian eunuch understands the gospel he has received and then they walked into the water and Philip baptizes him.

And what about the Apostle Paul? In Acts 22, we find him standing before an angry mob in Jerusalem giving his testimony, telling how he persecuted Christians until he was on his way to Damascus and when a great light from heaven shined on him he heard a voice that said, *“Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?”* He goes on to tell how he was converted to Christ, but the light was so great he was blinded by it and he was led to Damascus by the Spirit of the Lord. There was a man named Ananias who came to him, prayed over him and Paul received his sight. And then he said, *“And now why are you waiting? Arise and be baptized...”* (Acts 22:16). So the first thing Paul is told to do after his conversion is what? Be baptized!

And do you remember the story about the Philippian jailer in Acts 16? Paul and Silas are taken to the house of the Philippian jailer after he accepts the Lord as his personal Savior and all the members of his house are then saved. And verse 33 says, *“And immediately he and all his family were baptized.”*

What about Gentiles who are saved in Acts 10 at the house of Cornelius? As soon as they are saved, Simon Peter says, *“Can anyone forbid water, that these should not be baptized who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?”* And he commanded them *to be baptized in the name of the Lord...”* (Acts 10:47-48)

Those are just a few of the Biblical examples that clearly demonstrate to us that water baptism is not only a clear mandate of the Lord, but it’s also an ordinance of the church. It isn’t a suggestion! It isn’t an option! If you are saved and you have not been baptized in water, my question to you is: Why? There is nothing preventing you from being baptized and God expects you to be baptized, so follow His command and you will discover the joy that comes through surrender and obedience.

A few years ago, Paul Harvey wrote in “Guidepost Magazine” about his water baptism experience. He said that even though he had received almost every reward one could receive for broadcasting he still felt empty inside. But then one summer he and his wife were in a little town called Cave Creek, Arizona. It was Sunday morning so they decided to go to this little church in the town. There were only 12 people present. He said he had previously asked the Lord to come into his heart while praying in a hotel room, but he still felt something was missing. And when the preacher got up and announced his sermon was on baptism, Harvey said, “I yawned. But as he started talking about it I found myself interested. He talked about the symbolism behind it and how it symbolized the complete surrender of one’s life to Jesus Christ and how there was nothing really magic in the water, but there was this cleansing inside that took place when you yielded yourself to Jesus.”

Paul Harvey went on to say, “Finally, when he came to the end of his sermon, he said, ‘If any of you have not been baptized in this way, I invite you to come forward and join me here at the pulpit.’ And to my surprise I found myself going forward. The preacher had said there was nothing magic in the water, yet as I descended into the depths and rose again I knew something life changing had happened—a cleansing inside out. No longer did there seem to be two uncertain contradictory Paul Harveys—just one immensely happy one. I felt the fulfilling surge of the Holy Spirit in my life. The change this simple act made in my life is so immense as to be indescribable. Since totally yielding to Him in baptism, my heart can’t stop singing. Also, perhaps because baptism is such a public act and because one’s dignity gets as drenched as one’s body, I discovered a new ease in talking about my beliefs.”

We Are “Outwardly” Expressing What Has Happened To Us “Inwardly”

There are some denominations that are based almost entirely on the premise that a person is saved by the means of water baptism. I respect their opinion and their hunger for the things of God, but I respectfully do not believe they are right. I believe, based on the whole of Scripture that water baptism is an outward sign of an inward work. It’s a sign, a symbolic act if you please, through which we are publicly declaring to the world that we have died to self and we are now beginning a new life in Christ. It’s a statement of faith that I am a new person with a new life!

Baptism affirms how Jesus saved us in the first place through His death and His resurrection. It reminds us of the fact that since He died for us and then returned to life, we can die to our “sin-slavery” and receive new life in Him. By trusting Him—He delivers us, redeems us, and gives us a new beginning. Romans 6:4-5 says, “*Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life. For if we have been united together in the likeness of His death, certainly we also shall be in the likeness of His resurrection.*” Water baptism doesn’t save us, repentance of sin and faith in Christ saves us.

A classic example of this truth would be the thief on the cross next to Jesus at Calvary. As you know, there were actually two criminals hanging on crosses next to Jesus at Calvary. One of them blasphemed Jesus and told Him, “*If You are the Christ, save Yourself and us.*” But the other criminal rebuked him and said, “*Do you not even fear God, seeing you are under the same condemnation? And we indeed justly, for we received the due reward of our deeds; but this Man has done nothing wrong*” (Luke 23:40-41). So he admits his sin, confesses it and then says this to Jesus in Luke 23:42, “*Lord, remember me when You come into Your kingdom.*” And Jesus replied, “*Assuredly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise*” (Luke 23:43). He was saved because he repented and placed His trust in Jesus, not because he was baptized in water—because it is obvious that he was not. So water baptism doesn’t save us, repentance of sin and faith in Christ saves us, but that doesn’t mean baptism isn’t important. It’s critically important because it confirms to both the world and to us what has happened in our heart. It’s a statement of faith—my old life is behind me and I’ve begun a new life in Christ. It is a testimony, a “picture-sermon” if you please of what God has done in your life.

There is a great story about a man who worked at Ford Motor Company back in its early days in Detroit. One day he was saved and then he followed the commandment of the Lord and was baptized. After his baptism, he was convicted over the fact that in years past he had stolen parts and tools from Ford Motor Company, prior to becoming a Christian. So the next day he brought back all the tools and parts, explained how he had just been saved and baptized, and asked for forgiveness. Word about this reached Henry Ford who happened to be in Europe at the time. He was asked for his response. He wired this message back: “If that’s what happens when a person is baptized, dam up the Detroit River and baptize the entire city.”

We Are Letting Our Light Shine

This little light of mine, I’m going to let it what? Shine! And that’s not just a children’s song, that is a powerful biblical principle. In His Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said, “*You are the light of the world. A city that is set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do they light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all who are in the house. Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven*” (Matthew 5:14-16). Light doesn’t shine to be seen, it shines so that others might see. And in our case, it shines so that others might see that something is different in the life of a believer.

As a boy, my friends and I would oftentimes go out into the woods and spend the night camping out. But I was always very careful if we took off exploring at night to stay close to one of the other boys because I discovered that it was very easy to get totally disoriented in the woods in the dark. And on a few occasions I found myself lost. But what do you do when you are lost in the woods in the dark? What do you look for? You look for light! I would continue walking until I saw light, and once I saw light, I headed straight towards it hoping that it was our campfire. Likewise, people without Christ in their lives are walking in the woods and whether they realize it or not, they are lost. And the only way they are rescued from their “lostness” is by discovering light and being drawn to the light. That’s our responsibility. Philippians 2:15 tells us that even though we walk in the midst of a “crooked and perverse generation” we are to “*shine as lights in the world.*” The NIV says we are to “*shine as stars in the universe.*” One candle,

even a small candle like you find on a birthday cake, will impact darkness. One person standing up for Christ will impact darkness. One person inviting another person to church will impact darkness.

A young boy was standing on the beach and as the waves washed in the starfish, he picked up one at a time and threw it back into the water. A man walked by and saw what he was doing and said, “Son, I appreciate your efforts but you might as well give up. The tide will wash in millions of starfish; you’ll never make a difference.” The little lad picked up another starfish and threw it back in the ocean and said, “Maybe that’s so, but it made a difference to that one.” Your light may not light up all of Houston, but if you’ll let it shine—the rays will touch the heart of someone, that’s for sure. And one of the best ways that you can let your light shine is by giving a public testimony of the inward work of the Spirit in your life as you follow the Lord in water baptism.

Years ago when our church was located on Indiana Street and I was new to the church, I baptized a man named Ike Stemmer. Ike was about 65 years old at the time and had rededicated his life to the Lord and wanted to be baptized. So one Sunday at the close of the service I baptized this big fellow—all 6’3”, 275 lbs. It almost caused a tidal wave when I put him under. And there are two things I’ll never forget about that morning. One was how heavy he was since I was barely able to get him up once he was under the water; and two, once I brought him up I’ll never forget the amount of men out in the congregation that were wiping tears from their eyes. For some reason, the witness of this man touched the heart of the men in the congregation. And recently one of the men in our church told me, “Pastor Rick, for years I was away from the Lord. But one Sunday I came to church, the first time I had been in church for a long time, and you baptized a big fellow named Ike Stemmer. When I saw that man surrender his life like that, when I saw that he was willing to lay aside his pride and be a bold witness for the Lord, it touched my heart in a powerful way. I sat there and cried, and that morning I dedicated my life to Christ.” And I’m proud to say that this man is still serving the Lord to this day, all because another man was willing to let his light shine.

So what are we doing when we are baptized? First of all, we are walking in obedience to the commandment of the Lord. Secondly, we are “outwardly” expressing what has happened to us “inwardly.” Thirdly, we are letting our light shine. In closing, let me share with you these six summary points:

1. Water baptism doesn’t save you; repentance and faith in Christ saves you.
2. Water baptism is a very important symbolic act because it testifies to the world that you have given your heart to Christ and have chosen to follow Him. Again, it’s an outward sign of an inward work.
3. Water baptism is a commandment, not a suggestion or an option. If you are saved and you have not been baptized, there’s only one question to be asked: Why? Jesus said that if you love Him you will keep His commandments.
4. The word baptism means to be immersed. A study of baptism in the New Testament, beginning with the baptism of Jesus Himself, finds the candidate immersed in water completely and not sprinkled.
5. Though baptism can be done privately for certain reasons, it is best done publicly because it is such a strong and powerful testimony to family and friends.
6. People who are baptized in water need to be old enough to understand what they are doing and why they are doing it. Scripture doesn’t give us a specific age requirement because the “age of accountability” varies from person to person.