

BAPTIZED INTO CHRIST



Colossians 2:6-15
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April 27, 2025

Today is a special service. We have a new portable baptismal tank here in the front. At the end of the second service several people will be baptized. This church was originally built with a baptistry at the very front, but that was taken out a very long time ago. Instead we have conducted baptisms in backyard pools. Some of you have attended these baptisms. Traditionally we have held these on the Sunday after Easter and sometimes in the Fall. But this has separated the baptism from the gathered congregation. I have had the pleasure of baptizing several people at Willow Glen Bible Church during their Sunday morning service. We are very pleased to now be able to conduct baptisms during our services here at PBCC.

In light of the significance of this moment I want to talk about the meaning of baptism. What happens when someone is baptized?

The apostle Paul urges the Ephesians to be

eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call—one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all. (Eph 4:3-6 ESV)

Paul states seven unities. Most we can easily affirm. *One Spirit, one Lord, one God and Father* of all. This affirmation of the Trinity, of God who is Three in One, is at the heart of the Nicene Creed, formulated during the first two Ecumenical Councils in the fourth century. It is affirmed by all five major branches of the Nicene Church: Eastern Orthodox, Oriental Orthodox, Church of the East, Roman Catholic, and Protestant. There is *one God* in three persons: *one Father, one Son, and one Spirit*. And we baptize people in the name of this triune God: in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

We affirm *one faith* and *one hope*, though some might have difficulty expressing exactly what those are.

The Nicene Creed states: “We believe in one holy, catholic and apostolic Church. We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins.” But when it comes to this *one body* and *one baptism* we are on shakier ground, especially as Protestants. The other four branches of the universal church are clear on their understandings of baptism. But Protestants are divided among themselves. The waters of baptism are waters that divide more than unite. Even the Baptists are divided among themselves: they agree on baptism but are divided on other matters—there are many baptist denominations. So not even one baptism ensures one church!

What does Scripture say about baptism? *Baptism* means dipping or immersion in water. There is only one instance of baptism in the OT. Naaman the Syrian leper, at Elisha’s command, immersed himself seven times in the Jordan River. He was healed: “his flesh was restored like the flesh of a little child, and he was clean” (2 Kgs 5:14). Baptism washed him clean. It was even like a rebirth as a little child. Though this is the only instance of baptism in the OT there are several other passages through water that illuminate the concept of

baptism.

Water can be beneficial or destructive. It can be comforting or alarming. Water can be very destructive, as we’ve seen in the storms and floods of recent years. Both Noah in his ark and Moses in his basket passed through the waters of destruction and were preserved alive. The same Hebrew word (*tebah*) is used for Noah’s ark and Moses’s basket, and for only these two objects. We are supposed to see the parallel. Furthermore, Pharaoh’s daughter named Moses (Heb. *Moshe*) “because I drew him out (*marshah*) of the water” (Exod 2:10)—water that her father intended to destroy all the Hebrew baby boys.

When God delivered the Hebrew slaves from Egypt he brought them through the waters of the Re(e)d Sea. He used the same waters to destroy Pharaoh and his armies that had held them captive. Paul even says that they “were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea” (1 Cor 10:2). God brought the second generation through the waters of the Jordan in flood stage into the Promised Land. These were the two defining moments in Israel’s birth narrative. God brought them through the waters out of their old life of slavery. He brought them through the waters into their new life of freedom. They passed from death to life.

Water is also beneficial for cleansing. Water cleansing rituals feature in the OT. Our women have learnt about some of these as they have studied Numbers this year. Moses washed Aaron and his sons with water at the entrance to the tabernacle as part of their inauguration to priestly service. A basin of water stood in the courtyard of the tabernacle, and later the temple, one of the seven items of furniture. Here the priests were to wash their hands and their feet before approaching the altar or entering the tent on priestly duty. This was especially so for the high priest on the Day of Atonement. Washing in water was part of ensuring their sacred status, their holiness, and therefore their ability to serve the Lord in a priestly capacity.

Washing the body in water was necessary for those who were ceremonially impure to move to a clean status. Banished beyond the camp they could now return to the camp and approach the sanctuary.

These water rites were required of Israelites. They were the people of God, because they were the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. They were to distinguish between the holy and the common, between the clean and the unclean. Their status as God’s people was signified by circumcision of baby boys on the eighth day. But what the Lord really wanted of his people was a circumcised heart and circumcised ears. A cut in the flesh could not accomplish this.

By the time of Jesus, ritual washing with water had become more prevalent. The religiously-devout Pharisees chose to live at the same enhanced purity level as the priests. This meant frequent baptisms, immersions in water of themselves and their paraphernalia. This was not prescribed by Torah, but was the “tradition of the elders” (Mark 7:1-5). Archaeologists have uncovered many pools used for such

baptisms. A Pharisee would go down into the water, immerse himself, then come up in a state of ritual purity.

Luke records how a Pharisee who had invited Jesus to dine with him was astonished that Jesus did not first wash before the meal (Luke 11:38). It is not that Jesus didn't wash his hands. Rather, he was not baptized; he did not immerse himself in a ritual bathing pool.

It was against this backdrop that John the Baptist, John the Baptizer, went down to the Jordan River. He was preparing the way of the Lord, announcing that the kingdom of God was at hand, and "proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins" (Mark 1:4; Luke 3:3). He was baptizing in the same place that the Israelites under Joshua had passed through the river to enter the Promised Land. Many Jews responded to John's call and were baptized. They formed a people who were prepared for the Lord.

This was a one-time baptism in contrast to the repeated baptisms practiced by the Pharisees. These Pharisees and other religious leaders saw no need to submit to John's one-time baptism.

Jesus himself came to be baptized, much to John's surprise. He identified himself with Israel. But there was more: his baptism was part of his inauguration into public ministry, an ordination, as it were. Jesus went down into the water. When he rose up out of the water the heavens were torn open, the Spirit descended on him like a dove, and a voice from heaven said, "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased" (Mark 1:11; Luke 3:22). In this Trinitarian moment Jesus was anointed by the Spirit to be the Messiah, the anointed one, sent by God to his people. Jesus entered the wilderness there to be tested by God and tempted by Satan. He defeated Satan by being faithful to God's word. He had a heart and an ear that were inclined to God and his word; he had a circumcised heart and circumcised ears.

After his death and resurrection, Jesus appeared several times to his disciples, who still could not understand why he had to suffer, die, and rise from the dead. In Luke's account, Jesus told them:

"Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance for the forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. And behold, I am sending the promise of my Father upon you. But stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high." (Luke 24:46-49)

At the beginning of his second volume, Acts, Luke picks up this thread as Jesus specifies the nature of his Father's promise:

"John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now." (Acts 1:5)

In Matthew's account Jesus told his disciples:

"Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." (Matt 28:19)

Ten days later, the Spirit descended on those gathered in the Upper Room in Jerusalem. Peter, filled with and empowered by the Spirit, gave his first sermon:

"this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men. God raised him up, loosing the pangs of death, because it was not possible for him to be held by it... Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the

Holy Spirit." (Acts 2:23-24, 38)

About three thousand people received his word as good news and were baptized. The church was born that day. Notice the close association between the preaching of the gospel, the good news, and its reception, followed by repentance, baptism, forgiveness of sins, and the gift of the Spirit. They all belong together as a package.

Jesus had told his disciples:

"you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth." (Acts 1:8)

But the apostles were surprised at the power of this witness to the death, resurrection, ascension, and enthronement of Jesus, whom God had made both Christ and Lord. This is this good news. This is the gospel: what God has done in Christ. The kingdom of God has come. There is a king installed on the throne over God's kingdom. The church expanded through the proclamation of this good news. The apostles were surprised by who received this good news and responded in faith. In each case this was followed by baptism. It is exciting reading through Acts, noticing who responds to the good news by receiving it in faith, followed by baptism. It is a steadily expanding circle of people:

- the half-breed people of Samaria, evangelized by Philip (8:12);
- the Ethiopian eunuch in his chariot, also evangelized by Philip (8:38). Under the OT law the eunuch was excluded from God's sanctuary; he was damaged, incomplete;
- Cornelius, the God-fearing Roman centurion and his household, evangelized by Peter (11:1);
- Paul in Damascus under Ananias (9:18, cf. 22:16);
- in Paul's evangelistic mission to Europe, Lydia and her household in Philippi (16:15), followed by the Philippian jailer and his family (16:33). Then in Corinth, Crispus the leader of the synagogue, his whole household, and many others (18:8).

In all these instances it was new believers who were baptized. Yes, it was believers' baptism, but more particularly it was baptism of new believers, of converts. Baptism was an initiation, an entrance into the kingdom of God.

So the church grew as a wider and wider circle of people received the good news and were baptized. At each stage the leaders in Jerusalem, first the apostles, then the elders, were unsure that God's family could stretch so far, that it could be so inclusive. Could it remain one? At the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15) it was agreed that Jew and Gentile alike were baptized into one Lord, one Spirit, and one God, in one faith and one hope, as one church. There was one baptism. But what was this baptism?

In his letter to the Colossians, Paul wrote on how to understand their baptism.

"Therefore, as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him, ⁷rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving.

⁸See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ. ⁹For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, ¹⁰and you have been filled in him, who is the head of all rule and authority. ¹¹In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, ¹²having been buried with him in baptism, in

which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead.¹³ And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses,¹⁴ by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross.¹⁵ He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him. (Col 2:6-15 ESV)

They had received Jesus as both Christ and Lord (2:6). This doesn't mean that they had received Jesus into their hearts. Rather, they had received the good news as just that: good news. They had responded in faith to Jesus crucified, dead, and buried, but raised up on the third day, and exalted to God's right hand. And they had been baptized as soon as they believed.

Paul expounds the meaning of their baptism (2:12-13). Their baptism represents a death and a resurrection. Their descent into the waters was a death, as Christ himself died and descended to the dead. Their ascent was a resurrection into new life, as Christ himself was raised. Indeed Paul is emphatic: you were *buried together with Christ, made alive together with him, and raised together with him*. Baptism is all about union with Christ, participating in him throughout his passage through death into the new creation.

Paul says a similar thing in Romans:

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. (Rom 6:3-4)

We are baptized into Christ, and specifically into Christ's death. We are then raised up into Christ's resurrection life.

Jesus's resurrection was a bodily resurrection, but into a different sort of body. It is a spiritual body as opposed to a fleshly body. It is a body totally infused and empowered by God's Holy Spirit. It is a body of the new creation. It is a body able to pass through the heavens, into the realm "not made with hands, that is, not of this creation" (Heb 9:11), into God's very presence. His body is the archetype of all future bodies for he is firstborn from the dead (Col 1:18; Rev 1:5).

We who are united with Christ in death and resurrection, as symbolized by baptism, continue in the physical bodies of this creation. The physical body that rises up out of the water is the same body that went down into the water. But our identity, our belonging, rise up into the new creation, in which our lives are hidden in Christ. We are no longer the same people who went down into the water. A death has happened, but also a resurrection.

This baptism is described as also a circumcision (2:11), but not the circumcision commanded for Abraham and all his male descendants. It is not a circumcision in the flesh, a cutting-off of a small amount of flesh, a cutting performed by human hands. What is needed is something much more radical. It is a putting-off of the entire body of the flesh. But whose body of flesh is put off here? It could be the believer's body, but we have not yet put off our physical bodies. The other option is that it is the mortal body of Jesus that was put off in death. The circumcision of Christ is therefore the removal of Christ's own body in death. He had a mortal body that was subject to death. Having put off the mortal body he was raised into a new-creation body, fully enlivened by the Spirit. Our circum-

cision made without human hands is then a dying to self so that we might be raised into new creation life, even though our physical body remains in the old creation. This is a circumcision that encompasses the heart, the ears, the will, the mind, every part of our being. This indeed was God's intent for his people Israel beyond their physical circumcision.

How does this happen without human hands? It happens through God's Spirit powerfully at work in us. It happens because if we are in Christ then we are a new creation (2 Cor 5:17). It happens because in baptism we have died to ourselves and risen into a new identity and life in Jesus, empowered by the Spirit.

When we receive the good news about Jesus as Christ and Lord, we give our allegiance to him. We transfer our allegiance from one realm to the realm where Jesus Christ is Lord. Two months ago I became a naturalized US citizen. I was required to swear a Naturalization Oath, in which I renounced all previous allegiance and swore "true faith and allegiance" to the laws and Constitution of the USA. It took me many years to get to the point where I could do this "without any mental reservation." During those years I thought much about allegiance.

Transferring our allegiance onto the Lord Jesus Christ has major implications. We are called to a very different way of life. Baptism signifies that we put off our old self as we descend into the water, and put on our new self as we rise up into the new creation. This brings a comprehensive change of orientation in identity, belonging, and lifestyle. No longer do we live according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world, the whole zeitgeist of the world. Henceforth we live according to Christ, which is a completely different way of living.

How do we maintain this allegiance? One way is by taking communion together regularly. I liken baptism to that Naturalization Oath I took, whereby I transferred my allegiance from one realm to another. That was a one-time action. I liken communion to the Pledge of Allegiance that is repeated periodically. Communion is a regular reminder of who and whose we are. We belong to Christ who has given his body for us and poured out his blood for us for the forgiveness of sins.

When we are incorporated into Christ, God forgives all our sins and transgressions. The record of those he has nailed to the cross. That record died with the death of Jesus. This is an act of generous grace. It is also part of the new covenant in which God promised to remember our sins no more. Baptism is a one-time washing.

Jesus died on the cross at the hands of ungodly men. The Jewish leaders rejected the Beloved Son whom God had sent to his rebellious people. But the death of Jesus led to the death of Death, for Death had no claim on him. The death of Death in the death of Christ! But this can lead to a misunderstanding: that Jesus died so that we not die. But in baptism we follow Christ in his death. We are baptized into his death and into his resurrection.

We have been united with Christ and now live according to Christ. The goal is that we become like Christ. We become like whom or what we worship. Our call to worship was from Psalm 115. The nations make idols with mouths that do not speak, eyes that do not see, ears that do not hear. Then comes the sobering line: "Those who make them become like them" (Ps 115:8). We have put off our old self and put on Christ so that we become like him, the True Image of God.

This baptistry should come with a warning label: these waters are deadly. Baptism is deadly. We go down into the water and die to our

old self. But the waters are also healing, for they cleanse. We rise up into the new creation. Our sins are forgiven because of our union with Christ.

Did I understand any of this when I was baptized 47 years ago, aged 18? No! I got baptized because I was part of two Baptist churches. I had come to personal faith seven months earlier, and felt it was time to take the next step of baptism. I knew very little of what baptism represents. I want those being baptized today and those who

will be baptized here in the future to have a better understanding than I did those many years ago.

We are baptized into Christ, and we are baptized into the body of Christ. There is *one baptism* and *one body*: those who are united with Christ in death and resurrection.

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