

Baptize Jesus? • Luke 3:21-22

The New Testament was originally written in Greek and was soon translated into Latin and eventually into hundreds of other languages. For hundreds of years we have had English translations so we can read and understand the Bible in our own language. However, something interesting happened when the Bible was translated into English. Our English Bible still uses a certain Greek word because it has always been too controversial to translate into English. The Greek word is *baptizō* which is usually pronounced “baptize” in English.

It is strange that something that was so very important and unifying to Christians in the New Testament has become so divisive among Christians now in later centuries. Some denominations teach that if a child is not baptized and dies that child immediately goes to hell. Other denominations teach that baptism is no longer important or necessary in modern times. Those churches won't practice baptism even if you want to be baptized.

While most churches around the world baptize babies by sprinkling, the Orthodox churches of Greece, Russia and elsewhere baptize babies by total immersion. Since the Second Vatican Council the Roman Catholic Church has officially adopted baptism by immersion as the “preferred mode of baptism” for adults.

There are so many differences and such strong opinions on the subject of baptism that it is difficult for many people to read or study the Bible with any degree of openness or objectivity.

Perhaps we can be helped by recalling a story from the biography of Jesus. We will look at it from Luke's gospel although it is so important that it is either repeated or referenced four times in the New Testament, once in each of Jesus' biographies in the four New Testament Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Here is what it says in Luke 3:21-22:

When all the people were being bap-

tized, Jesus was baptized too. And as he was praying, heaven was opened and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: “You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.”

Let's check out four observations about this short story. The first observation is that Jesus' baptism was public. There may well have been thousands of people there to witness it. They had not come to witness the baptism of Jesus. They had come to hear the preaching of John, the Prophet. He was the great and charismatic leader of his day. People thronged to him from villages and cities so they could hear what he had to say. They came to repent of their sin and to publicly demonstrate their repentance by being baptized by him.

For some unstated reasons, Jesus was last in line. Maybe it was because he wanted to let others decide for themselves. Maybe it was because he didn't want to distract from the ministry of John. Remember, at this point most people didn't know who Jesus was. He had not done his miracles yet of changing water to wine or raising the dead or making the blind to

see or walking on the water. He was still an obscure and unknown private citizen.

But John knew him. When Jesus stepped up and requested baptism John was stunned. He knew Jesus didn't need to repent. It seemed strangely inappropriate for Jesus to stand last in line and to undergo a public ritual of baptism in the Jordan River.

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The second observation is that it was a physical baptism. You may think that is so obvious that it shouldn't even need to be mentioned, but it seems important to mention. While this was an intensely spiritual experience it was also a physical act and how it was done was important.

Jesus was baptized by immersion in the Jordan River. We know it was the Jordan River from Matthew and Mark. The Jordan River is the main river through the nation of Israel. It is not an especially beautiful river nor is it a very attractive river. Then and now it is nicknamed the "muddy Jordan" because of erosion that turns the water brown. I assure you that it was not an especially desirable place to be baptized.

We know for a number of reasons that this baptism was by immersion. That means that Jesus was put completely under water. That was the way Jews baptized in the first century. In those days Jews didn't baptize themselves; for them baptism was a rite of initiation for converts to Judaism. It symbolized the repenting of their sin, leaving their old religion, having their sins washed away and then rising up out of the water into new life as a Jew.

We also know that the primary meaning of the Greek word *baptizō* is to immerse, to plunge or to dip. You can look it up in any Greek/English dictionary. And we know from the wording of the story in Matthew and Mark that the record reports that "*as soon as Jesus was baptized he went up out of the water.*"

So, it was public and it was physical . . . and it was spiritual. There was a clear and direct connection between the physical and the spiritual experience. This was a powerfully spiritual experience ("spiritual" being a reference to the immaterial part of us all—to the spirit or soul). But it's not just that Jesus' spirit or soul was involved in this. It was spiritual in the sense that it was a transaction with God. Luke tells us in Luke 3:21 that "*as (Jesus) was praying, heaven was opened.*" The indication is that Jesus was praying during his baptism. He was probably praying before, during and after his baptism. He was in direct communication with God. Even though there may have been thousands of eyes and ears watching and listening, this was most about him and God. It was as if Jesus had an audience of One.

What Jesus' body was doing on the outside represented what his soul was experiencing on the inside. On the outside the water may have been muddy, his hair may have been soaking wet, there may have been the splash of water and perhaps a gasp of air . . . but inside there was an indescribable spiritual encounter with God the Father himself.

What happened next was stunningly supernatural. Luke 3:22 tells us that "*the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased."*

It seems to me that what we have here is something that is too wonderful, too intimate to describe in words. The closest our understanding can come is the emotions a parent feels in a son or daughter's best behavior. It may be graduation from high school, getting a college degree, giving birth to a baby, receiving an award or performing some heroic act. As a father, I know that fabulous feeling from my own children. It's that glorious moment of putting parental arms around your child and saying out loud, "I love you so much! I am so proud of you!" And when those words are spoken, even though they are intended for the ears of a son or daughter, no parent cares if the whole rest of the world hears what was said.

That is the way God the Father felt when Jesus was baptized. He was so pleased, so delighted, so proud of his Son that he broke the sound barrier between heaven and earth and said out loud for his Son and anyone else to hear, "*You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.*"

I don't know if Jesus had previous hesitations. I don't know if he thought the water was too cold or too dirty. I don't know if he felt a little embarrassed or stressed by the crowds of people or the way he looked. If he had any of those normal concerns, they all vanished away with the realization that he had so fully pleased his Father God.

What happened was public, physical, spiritual and supernatural. But it was also the beginning of a whole new chapter of Jesus' life. He was 30 years old and nothing would ever be the same again. This act of obedience and pleasure to God brought the full approval of the Father on Jesus and his mission. This was the launching of Jesus' public ministry.

There was a sense in which nothing more should be said. It is as if we have peeked into the supernatural, as if we have experienced the holy, and there is nothing more to be said. But we have questions that beg for answers.

The first and most obvious question is that, as good and as great as it was, why was Jesus baptized? Baptism was a symbolic act. It represented cleansing from sin. That's what everyone knew it to mean. Oh, it's not that a dip in water could cleanse sin from the soul, but it showed on the outside what a person wanted and showed what God was doing to forgive sin on the inside.

Except Jesus wasn't a sinner. Jesus had never done anything that needed to be forgiven. Jesus was morally perfect while fully human. If anyone did not need to be baptized, it was Jesus.

So, the reason Jesus was baptized must have been different. And it was different. Jesus was changing the meaning of baptism. From that point on it would mean identification with the gospel.

Let me explain that. The gospel of Jesus Christ is defined in this way later in the New Testament in 1 Corinthians 15:3: “. . . *that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day. . .*” Baptism would symbolize more than repentance; it would symbolize the means of salvation. It is a wonderful picture. Just as Jesus died on the cross, was buried and rose again, baptism portrayed the gospel through saying goodbye to sin, being buried in water and rising again to new life in Jesus Christ. Jesus was changing the meaning of baptism to publicly demonstrate what he was going to do. This was his public commitment to us, to the cross and to our salvation. God the Father was pleased and proud of his Son because he was willing to give his life in obedience to God and to save sinners.

So why was Jesus baptized? He was baptized to show what he was going to do and to commit to people then and to us now.

In our culture, an engagement ring is the symbol of commitment to marry. It's not yet marriage, but it is a public physical symbol of a commitment

to unite your life together to someone else. The giving and receiving of the ring is an occasion for great celebration and excitement.

Jesus' baptism was like his engagement ring for us. He showed to everyone that he was so committed to us that he would literally give his life for our eternal salvation. It was such an exciting and important occasion that God burst the boundaries of heaven to make that wonderful announcement!

But this begs one more question: What does Jesus' baptism say for us today? Is it just a story from long ago or does it call for a response from us today?

There are some very good general principles for us to learn that come out of this story of Jesus. There is the principle that public recognition of God is important. Faith should not be kept a secret. It is not just something private between an individual and God; it is something that should be shared with everybody else.

Another principle is that physical actions on the outside express our commitments on the inside. If we say on the inside that we are committed to God then we ought to behave on the outside in a way that reflects that commitment.

In this story we also find the principle that spiritual experiences are important and wonderful and transforming.

A fourth principle is that there is nothing better than knowing that God loves us and is pleased with us.

But there are some very specific lessons we can learn from

Jesus' baptism, too. First, if baptism was important for Jesus then baptism must be important for us, too. In Matthew 28:19-20 Jesus clearly expected his followers to be baptized. Baptism is put in the same category with knowing and obeying all that Jesus commanded. If anyone is truly a follower of Jesus then baptism cannot be considered optional or unimportant. If baptism is important to Jesus, it has to be important to us.

Knowing that, we realize that if Jesus was willing to be baptized for us then we ought to be willing to be baptized for him. His baptism predicted the gospel of his death, burial and resurrection. It

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was like the engagement ring of promise. On the other hand, our baptism affirms and acknowledges the gospel of his death, burial and resurrection that have already happened. We are on the other side of it. Our baptism is like a wedding ring symbolizing our permanent relationship with him.

If we are to be baptized, let us be baptized as Jesus was baptized. Jesus was baptized in public, by immersion, as a physical, spiritual and supernatural experience. Except, many of us will say, I was already baptized as a baby. That was the spiritual commitment of my life.

That is an important consideration. Once again, I would suggest comparing to Jesus. He was circumcised and dedicated to God when he was eight days old. That was a wonderful religious rite decided by his parent. However, Jesus didn't have any choice. When he was a 30 year old man he decided for himself to add his adult baptism to what his parents had done when he was a child. I think the same principle can be applied to Christians today who choose to be baptized by choice just as Jesus was baptized by choice.

At Wooddale Church we encourage and promote believer's baptism. We don't say a lot about it and we never pressure anyone to be baptized as a believer, but we do provide frequent opportunities for people to be baptized like Jesus.

Baptism does not make someone a Christian any more than wearing a wedding ring makes a person married. It is a symbol that publicly tells everyone, "I belong to Jesus Christ!"

I have a personal challenge for you. If you have not been baptized as a believer in Jesus Christ let me suggest that you seriously consider being baptized like Jesus. Pray about it, as Jesus prayed. Discover for yourself what an important spiritual experience baptism can be for you.

Imagine being baptized like Jesus and having God say:

"You are my (child), whom I love; with you I am well pleased."

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