

What's the Big Deal about Baptism?

Psalm 29; Mark 1:4-11

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One of my theology professors in seminary was quite a controversial figure. He was often charged with being a theological liberal. Now I had some liberal professors, but the late Dr. Dale Moody was not one of them. Some of you knew him; he preached in our church on several occasions. He was more like a Texas evangelist with a lot of fire and brimstone, except he was brilliant. In class he always read out of his Greek New Testament, which was more than intimidating, the same Greek New Testament he would use to beat students who asked foolish questions. I never made a sound in his class! Dr. Moody's systematic theology book is titled *The Word of Truth*. When the publisher did a second printing of it, they asked him if he wanted to make any change to the title. Dr. Moody quipped, "Yes, let's change it to *The Word of Truth... Without any Mixture of Error*."

Dr. Moody says that baptism used to be far more dramatic than it is today. To begin with, the early church baptized outside at the ocean's edge and at sunup. That would be a little nippy today. The baptismal candidate would face west, where it was darkest. The darkness symbolized the darkness of Satan's reign over the earth. Facing westward the candidate would say aloud, "I renounce thee, Satan, and all thy service and all thy works." In some places that statement would be followed by the new Christian symbolically spitting in the face of Satan. Then he or she would be turned eastward to face the rising sun, lowered into the water and raised, born again to walk in the newness of life (Moody, *The Word of Truth*, p. 313.).

In the early church, baptism was a big deal. It was a big deal in 1609 when a group of English Separatists moved from England to Amsterdam and started a new church. The pastor, John Smyth, baptized himself as a believer. Then he baptized Thomas Helweys and about 40 others, creating the first Baptist church. Baptism was such a big deal to them that they came to be known as the Baptists. Baptism was for those Christians a dividing line; it was the proverbial line in the sand. "Yesterday I was this," it said,

“but today I face a new direction. I have a new focus. I have a new Lord of my life. And I will never go back to what I was yesterday.”

Today, of course, we’ve moved baptism inside and to an hour that is a bit more agreeable. Blake and I are both glad it was inside today! No, we don’t spit at Satan any more, but let me tell you something that has not changed. Baptism is still a line in the sand. Baptism is still a visible way of saying, “Yesterday I was this, but now I am this. And I pledge before heaven and earth that I will never go back.” Baptism is our vow before God and the people of God that we will do our best to be a faithful follower of Jesus. That is a big deal.

Baptism appears to have been a big deal to Jesus. Matthew, Mark, and Luke describe his baptism in detail. The heavens opened. A dove descended upon Jesus. And a voice from heaven proclaimed, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.” Even John, who leaves out many of the details of Jesus’ life, refers to his baptism by John the Baptist.

Have you ever wondered why Jesus was baptized? He didn’t need to renounce Satan’s rule over his life. He wasn’t in darkness. He had no need to spit in the face of Satan. Mark doesn’t record this, but Matthew does. In Matthew, John the Baptist resisted baptizing Jesus, saying that he needed to be baptized by Jesus. But Jesus insisted and said this: “Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way *to fulfill all righteousness.*” Those are important words: to fulfill all righteousness. That’s what baptism meant for Jesus. His baptism was an act of righteousness. It was his act of obedience. It was evidence of his desire to live his life for God. As such, Jesus’ baptism became a model for the Christian community. That is why we say we “follow” him in baptism. Just as he was baptized, so we too are baptized as our desire to live for God. That, I say, is a big deal.

What’s the appropriate age for baptism? Christian denominations are all over the spectrum here. Our tradition withholds baptism until one is old enough to understand and request baptism for himself or herself. But what age is that? Here’s how I deal with this when a child requests to be baptized. If a child is 9 or 10 years old and requests to be baptized, that is perfectly normal. That’s the age when children often become inquisitive, and it’s natural for them to be inquisitive about baptism. The important questions are, “Do they really understand enough to be baptized? Do they really know

what they're getting into?" And of course, the answer to those questions is usually "no." Most of us didn't fully understand what Christian faith is or why we were being baptized. Most of us still don't. I'm certainly still learning. So I tell parents that I don't expect children to have a complete understanding of Christian faith. *Their desire to please God is important enough.* Their simple desire to live for God is important. So it is appropriate to affirm what a child does understand and then help him or her to grow into a deeper understanding. That's why it's so important to have children involved in Sunday School and other church activities. They are growing into their understanding of Christian faith.

Let me tell you about a baptism that was very memorable for me. I told the Rutherfords about this Wednesday night at dinner. They know this family. The family lives in Madison now, but they were members of my church in Birmingham. They have a daughter named Rachel. Her cognitive level was about age five or six. She was a teenager and in our youth group. Rachel told her mother that she wanted to be baptized. Her mom came to me, and we set a time to talk with Rachel. She was a beautiful girl, eyes wide, face full of expression. She didn't understand the incarnation of Jesus Christ. Strike one. She couldn't explain Jesus' vicarious expiation of sins. Strike two. She didn't understand the role of the church in the eschatological plans of God. She couldn't even tell me how many books were in the Bible. But she had this: she had a desire to please God. That simple desire to please God trumped everything else.

Here's what happened. The baptistery in that church is high. It was concealed by a curtain at that time. Rachel and I got into the water. The curtain was opened. I said a few words about Rachel and then plunged her beneath the waters of baptism. She came up spitting and sputtering and shaking her head. At first there was a mild chuckle from the congregation. Then it started with one youth sitting in the youth section. He started clapping. Then all the youth started clapping. It spread across the entire congregation. Then they stood to applaud a simple girl who had a desire to please God.

By any measure, that is a big deal.

Let me say one other thing about baptism. The Apostle Paul makes this point in the book of Romans. He uses life and death language. He says that baptism is a kind of death. I don't want that to scare our children

because we don't *really* die when we're baptized. But baptism is a kind of death where we say to something in our life, "You are now dead. From this moment onward, I will live in a new way and for a new purpose."

This also happened in my church in Birmingham. One of the most active and faithful couples in the church came to see me to inform me that they were getting a divorce. He was a deacon. They were both in the choir. She was on the search committee to called me there. I was dumbfounded. They explained that he had had an extramarital affair and that it was a pattern of inappropriate behavior on his part. She had had enough. It was over. After 35 years of it, she could take it no more. They divorced.

He began to work on himself with a competent therapist. After many months of therapy and deep soul searching, he came to see me. He had been to the beach, he said. He described how he walked into the surf and stood before God. He pledged to live a new life, to renounce what he had been and what he had done. He let that die. Then he lowered himself underneath the water and rose a new man. About a year later they remarried and are married to this day. Kelly and I saw them in October.

By any measure, that is a big deal.

It was a big deal for the early Christians standing at the ocean's edge at sunup. It was a big deal to the early Baptists in Amsterdam. And it was a big deal to me 43 years ago. Our baptisms were a reflection of the desire of our heart, our desire to please God. You may be able to explain Jesus' vicarious expiation of our sins. Congratulations. But I think our simple desire to please God is more important. So take a moment to remember your baptism, if you can. Was it in a church baptistery like this one? Was it in a creek? Can you feel the water? The flutter of your heart? Do you remember your desire to please God? That's a big deal.

Closing Prayer

Lord, we are humbled today. We are humbled by the power of Christian faith to turn us in a new direction, to redeem us, to save. We remember our simple desire to please you. Amen.