

THE MEANING OF WATER BAPTISM

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Scripture Reading: Matthew 28:18-20

Today we will focus our attention on the meaning of water baptism. This sacrament was instituted by Jesus Christ right before He ascended into heaven. At that time He said to His disciples, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age." Those words are recorded in Matthew 28:18-20.

When Jesus Christ commanded His followers to baptize people from all nations, He did so for a reason. This afternoon we will use a few moments to try and understand what that reason was. We will look at both the meaning of baptism and the reason why it is important to be baptized as a Christian.

First, let's talk about the meaning of baptism. And I would like to begin by stating that I believe water baptism, for the Christian, is a public proclamation. When Emily and Joan and Pang Tyan Rwei (胖天瑞) and Lyiou Hwa Ping (劉華平) and Yang Syou Kwun (楊秀坤) are baptized today, they will be making a public proclamation.

Now I believe that this is important to point out, because there are many people who think that baptism is more than a public proclamation. Some people believe that a person receives salvation from their sins and becomes a Christian at the time they receive water baptism. But I find no Biblical support for that point of view. In the New Testament examples where people were baptized, the order that we find is that baptisms followed people's decisions to accept God's salvation. Acts 2:41 says that those who accepted the message of salvation were baptized. In Acts 8 the apostle Philip was preaching to a eunuch from Ethiopia. After hearing the gospel, the eunuch asked a question which is recorded in Acts 8:36. He asked, "Look, here is water. Why shouldn't I be baptized?" Then in verse 38 we see that Philip baptized the eunuch. But I believe that the eunuch had believed before he was baptized. In fact, in the margin of my Bible I am told that some manuscripts of the Bible record Philip saying in verse 37, "If you believe with all your heart, you may (be baptized)." And then the eunuch answered, "I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God." It was after he made a profession of faith that he was baptized.

Water baptism is a public proclamation of something that has already happening. This is also true with the sacrament of Holy Communion. 1 Corinthians 11:26 says, "For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until He comes." Christ does not die for us when we receive communion. Rather, when we receive communion, we are proclaiming that He has died for us. The same logic also exists with water baptism. When we are baptized with water, we proclaim that something has happened to us.

So if baptism is a public proclamation, then what are we proclaiming when we are baptized? Bible teachers have different ways of answering this question. But I believe that when we are baptized with water, we are proclaiming that we have entered into a covenant with God. There are two parts to this covenant, and both parts are very important.

The first part of the covenant deals with God's blessing of salvation upon our lives. God has offered to save us from sin through the sacrificial death of Jesus Christ on the cross. When we decide to accept this salvation, we enter into a covenant or contract with God. God promises to save us in three ways. First, He forgives us from the sins we have committed in the past. We call this justification. Second, He gives us strength to have victory over sin on a daily basis so that we can become holy or godly people. We call this process sanctification. And third, He prepares a place in heaven for us to go to when we leave this earth, a place completely free from all the influences of sin. We call this experience glorification, because we will be living in a glorified state, having bodies that will not decay in an environment free from evil. Through justification, sanctification, and glorification God saves us. And saving us in these three ways is the main blessing we receive from the covenant that we have with God.

The second part of the covenant deals with our responsibility to be a blessing to people from all nations. The covenant we have with God not only guarantees we will receive a blessing, but it also demands we become a blessing to other people. We live, not to just enjoy the blessing that God gives us, but primarily to share the blessing with other people.

So just before I baptize Emily and Joan, I will ask them two questions. The first question will be, "Have you received Jesus Christ as your personal Savior and Lord, knowing that your sins have been forgiven, and that you can trust in Him day by day to overcome temptation, and that someday you will go to heaven to live with Him forever? The second question will be, "Since you have trusted in Jesus Christ as your Savior and Lord, do you intend to serve Him by sacrificing yourself to help people from all nations know God?"

When Emily and Joan answer yes to these questions, they will be making a public proclamation that they have entered into a covenant relationship with God. The length of the covenant or contract is forever.

Now I must say something about the Holy Spirit. According to the Bible, this two part contract that we have with God is totally dependent on the work of the Holy Spirit. Without the Holy Spirit, there can be no covenant relationship between God and us. The Holy Spirit is the One who enables us to enter into this covenant in the first place, and He is the One who enables us to be faithful to the covenant forever. The Holy Spirit moves in our hearts, making us see our need to receive salvation. The Holy Spirit is the very force behind our salvation. And the Holy Spirit is the one who empowers us to become a blessing to people from all nations.

Jesus said, "John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit." When Emily and Joan entered into a covenant relationship with God, the Holy Spirit was poured out upon them. Jesus baptized them with the Holy Spirit, and their water baptism will be a proclamation of this fact. Because Jesus has baptized them with the Holy Spirit, they can now experience justification, sanctification, and glorification. And because Jesus has baptized them with the Holy Spirit, they now can experience the power needed to be a witness to people from all nations.

Some people will argue that being baptized with the Holy Spirit is an experience that comes some time after salvation. But when I read the Bible, I see the Holy Spirit is involved in every part of my covenant relationship with God. Romans 8:9 says that "if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Christ." I believe every Christian is baptized with the Holy Spirit, because I believe the Holy Spirit is essential for every part of the Christian experience.

Emily and Joan, you can be assured that, when God saved you through the blood of Jesus Christ, He also baptized you with His Holy Spirit. You can now draw upon the power of the Holy Spirit to live the Christian life. And He will always provide you with at least one gift that you can use to help people from all nations to know about the blessing you have received.

So when you proclaim that you have entered into a covenant with God, keep in mind that everything about your covenant relationship with God is made possible through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Now, in conclusion, I will say a word about the reason why we need to be baptized. One obvious reason is to obey God. Jesus instituted this sacrament. He commanded His disciples to do it. So our participation in water baptism can be considered an act of obedience.

And water baptism is also a source of encouragement and strength for the one being baptized as well as for those who witness the baptism. A private decision to enter into a covenant with God can be strengthened by making a public proclamation. God's decision to save us from our sins was not kept private. Christ's execution was a public execution. While Jesus hung on the cross, God proclaimed to all people that He was very serious about keeping His part of the covenant. And we should also be willing to proclaim publicly that we have decided to keep our end of the agreement.

So Emily and Joan, tell the world that you have decided to receive the blessing of salvation; and tell the world that you have decided to take up your cross and follow your Lord so that others may also be blessed. Your public proclamation may encourage others to make the same decision you have made. It will help those who have made the decision in the past to remember their covenant with God. And it will help you in the future when hard times come your way. You will remember what you said in front of God and men, and you will be encouraged not to give up. May God bless you as you take this step of obedience.