

Title: Going Public  
Text: Matthew 28.16-20  
Theme: Baptism  
Series: Matthew #132  
Prop Stmt: Believers Baptism by immersion is the means Christ appointed for his children to publicly profess their commitment to him.

Read Text:

John (not his real name) was a bit skeptical when he first attended here with his wife. It was many months before he professed faith in Christ. Now it was his parents turn to be skeptical. They were upset that their son was not following the religious tradition he was raised in, and yet they could not deny the fact that his life, marriage and children were quite different, in a better way than that of his siblings. In fact, his marriage was better than theirs. Over time, they stopped harassing him on attending here, but drew the line on him being baptized. They argued that he had already been baptized. In fact, he could believe what he wanted, it seemed to be working for him, but if he ever got baptized, he would be cut out of the family. They would refuse to see him and he would not get a dime of inheritance, which in their case was a significant amount.

Several years ago I was teaching at a college in India during the day and preaching in the evenings. On Sunday morning, a local pastor asked me to assist him in baptizing believers who had professed faith in Christ. Some of these believers, like John, had been told that if they got baptized, they would be considered as dead to their families. Some were walking home that day to find all of their possessions on the side of the street.

What is it about baptism that is such a dividing line for so many? Is it really that big of a deal? Is it worth John being cut off from his family and losing out on a large inheritance? Is it worth the hardship of having to gather up your earthly goods and find a place to stay all on your own? Is it worth making people upset over? Is it worth being dogmatic about? After all, there are good people who differ about this, right? So, let's do this. Let's just look at what the Bible says about baptism, ok?

1. **Is Jesus issuing a command or just making a suggestion?** (19)

I have no interest in defending something that does not really matter. So, should we take the issue of baptism seriously or not? Is Jesus telling his disciples that baptism is a matter of take it or leave it, a suggestion if you feel like it, an optional religious ceremony, that in the end does not really matter? Or is this a command from the King?

Here are the final words of Christ that Matthew records in his gospel. Every word of Christ is the word of God. Everything that Christ said and everything that Christ did was a demonstration of his divine kingship. This has been the point of this gospel. Behold, your King! So, what does the King say? The King says that, "all authority in heaven and earth has been given to me." That makes it very clear that what Jesus is about to say is from the one who has absolute power and authority. Therefore, what Christ is about to

say is not an option to be considered or a good idea whenever you get around to it. This is a command. The command is to make disciples. The way you obey that command is by going, baptizing and teaching (discipling). Each imperatival participle describes an aspect of the main command. So, based on what Christ says, I would argue that we are to intentionally share the gospel with people. Those who respond to the gospel by repenting of their sins and trusting in Christ are to be baptized in the name of the Father, Son and the Holy Spirit and are to be taught how to think and live as a follower of Christ. That is what the text is saying. So, let's look at how the disciples understood this. Did they take this as a suggestion or did they understand this to be a command? Turn to Acts 2.

## 2. **How did the disciples carry this out?** (going, baptizing, teaching)

In Acts 2, we read that the disciples, and Peter, in particular, were sharing the gospel. Peter was addressing thousands of Jews who gathered in the Temple courts in Jerusalem and was telling them about Christ. The disciples did not wait for people to come to them, but rather they went to them. As Peter was telling them about Christ, a number of people believed in what he was saying and they asked Peter and the others what they should do about it. Peter responded, "*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 2.38) He goes on to say, "*For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself.*" (v.39) In other words, you need to repent, trust in Christ and be baptized now. Luke tells us that Peter continued to preach to them and he used *many words* to exhort them to save themselves from this crooked generation. That day there were about 3,000 people who "received his word" and were baptized.

Do not miss this now. A few weeks earlier during Passover, Jesus was crucified because the crowd demanded it. Do you think that God is going to overlook that? No! Back in Matthew 23.38, Christ warned of the coming destruction that was looming and made a distinct connection between their rejection of him and the impending disaster that did come in 70 A.D. Peter picked up on that theme in his sermon (Acts 2.36) when he said, "Let all the house of Israel therefore know for certain that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified." So, if you do not want to be identified as one of those who is condemned by God for this guilt, then you need to identify yourself as someone who is not of this crowd but who is a follower of Christ.

Right away we understand that becoming a follower of Christ (disciple) is a **personal** matter, but it is NOT a private matter. In other words, you have to conscientiously choose to become a follower of Christ. No one can follow Jesus in your place. No one can repent for you or believe for you. You are not saved on the basis of anyone else's faith. You have to believe. It is, therefore personal. But becoming a follower (disciple) of Christ is also a **public** matter. Be baptized! And how did the disciples understand this? Every person who believed was baptized and those who were baptized joined the church. Look at verse 42. What do you see? "*They devoted themselves to the apostles teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.*"

So, the command of Jesus to make disciples by going (and sharing the gospel), followed by baptizing them, followed by teaching them to observe what Jesus taught is exactly what the disciples did. And that part about teaching them to observe what Christ commanded was carried out in the context of the church. In other words, the disciples knew that they could not carry out the command to make disciples without the church. They not only did it on the birthday of the church (day of Pentecost), but they kept on doing it. In Acts 8, one of the early believers named Philip was talking to a man from Ethiopia about the gospel. The man from Ethiopia responded to the gospel and said, “See, here is water! What prevents me from being baptized?” And Philip baptized him. The same pattern is seen in Acts 10:48; 16:15; 16:33; 19:5.

Our view of becoming a disciple (follower of Christ) tends to be weak, anemic, deficient and incomplete. We tend to think that if a person at the end of a sermon or a lesson prays a prayer to trust in Jesus, that now that person is a disciple. And we have really confused even that aspect of it by describing the prayer as “a prayer to ask Jesus into your heart” (whatever that means). Now, it is possible that someone who prays to trust in Christ after hearing the gospel has now become a follower of Christ, but we are not authorized by Christ to assure them of that if there is no fruit. The authenticity of a personal decision to trust in Christ and follow Christ as a disciple will be evidenced by the public decision to be baptized and identify with Christ and his people and grow in the gospel. This is what Jesus commanded. We do not baptize people by immersion following their profession of faith because we are a “Baptist” church and this is just our personal view on this. There are some things that we do that are like that. We have Wednesday classes and children’s ministry. Do we have to? No. There is nothing in the Scriptures that command that. Would it displease God if we stopped them? No. Wednesday night classes are a convenience, they are not a conviction. Baptism is a conviction. Jesus did not present this as an option for you to consider and therefore, we do not treat it as an option. Every believer needs to do this, but, not because your church expects it. Every believer needs to do this because every believer needs to take the command of Christ seriously. There is no category for a believer who does not take the commands of Christ seriously.

The book of Acts is describing historically something that is taking place theologically. Our salvation can be described as justification. Justification means to be declared righteous. When I repent of my sin, my sin is credited to Christ. When I put my faith in Christ, the righteousness of Christ is credited to me. That is why repentance and faith are called conversion. Justification starts your life as a follower of Jesus Christ. Your life as a follower of Christ is described as progressive sanctification. You grow in Christ by practicing (or living out) what happened to you when you were justified. But, here is a huge, huge point! Justification produces sanctification. Sanctification does not produce Justification. Justification is by grace alone through faith alone in Christ and NOT on the basis of our works or merits. But, justification produces good works. The grace of the gospel gives faith that produces obedience. Baptism is an act of obedience that is generated (caused) by saving faith. We do not get baptized in order to be justified, but we are baptized as a means of telling others that we have been justified. Now, theologically there is a very clear distinction and yet necessary relationship between justification and sanctification. But, the way that it actually happens in time is that a person believes and

then is baptized. So, when the NT writers described people coming to faith in Christ, sometimes they talked about them repenting, or believing, or receiving the Spirit, or being baptized because these were all things that happened to them at their conversion.

Now, if you were to ask an early believer when he became a follower of Christ and he said, "*I was baptized on April 24.*" we might get a bit nervous, right? We would be tempted to think, "*oh no, I sure hope he doesn't think that getting baptized saved him.*" But, these believers understood that trusting Christ as Savior meant following him as Lord and one who truly followed Christ obeyed his commands and he commanded his followers to be baptized. They viewed getting baptized as being part of the conversion experience. Their trust was in Christ alone, and the evidence of this trust was their obedience to Christ. The bottom line is this: They did not put a question mark, where Christ put a period. They did not treat baptism as a trivial matter. Well, that brings up some other issues, because people have different practices when it comes to baptism, which can give people the impression that the Bible is not clear about it. Is that true?

### 3. **How are we to understand what it is?**

We understand that baptism is an ordinance, that is, it is a symbolic ceremony by which a person identifies himself/herself with the name they are baptized in. Jesus was baptized by John because Jesus publicly identified himself as being in agreement with the message that John was preaching. Baptism is a ceremony, like that of wearing a ring, getting a tattoo, putting on a uniform, getting your citizen papers, etc. Baptism is not a means of salvific grace. Baptism does not cause regeneration. Baptism is the public evidence of regeneration and justification. Every NT reference to baptism assumes faith on the part of the one being baptized. That is why we refer to baptism as believer's baptism. An infant cannot believe.

We are also to understand that baptism is related to salvation, but it is not necessary for salvation. The Philippian jailer heard the message of the gospel from Paul and Barnabas. He received the word and was baptized. If, before he was baptized, he had a heart attack and died, he would spend eternity with Christ because he had Christ. On other hand, if a person gets immersed in water but does not truly repent of their sins and believe in Christ, they have nothing other than the experience of getting wet. Baptism is a sign of salvation. It is the physical re-enactment of what happens when a person becomes a follower of Christ. Now, let's say that a man professes love and devotion to a woman and formalizes that by getting married, but refuses to wear a ring, refuses to be around her in public, refuses to talk about her, and refuses to be seen by her. Should we not question his profession of love and devotion? If he truly loves a woman as his wife, he will identify himself with her. So to, a person who claims to be a follower of Christ who refuses to follow Christ's command to be baptized has a difficult time explaining that he is following Christ, right?

The purpose of baptism is to publicly identify with Christ, therefore, the timing of baptism is following (often, but not always immediately following) when one trusts in Christ. Baptism is meaningless apart from professing faith. Getting baptized before you

profess faith in Christ is like wearing a wedding ring without getting married. You may hope to be married some day, but wearing a wedding ring without being married is false advertising.

The mode of baptism (immersion) illustrates the symbolism of baptism. The word itself means to submerge because immersion puts many of the theological realities of salvation on display. Now, the word to baptize does not exclusively mean to immerse. In ancient Greek literature, it clearly meant, “to immerse” about 90% of the time, when used in literature other than the Bible. Is it, therefore possible that the word to baptize when used in the Bible could mean to pour or sprinkle? It is hard to make that case. In fact, I do not think so. (2 primary reason) If the writers of the NT wanted to use a word that clearly meant to get wet without being immersed, they could have used other words, but they used a word whose primary meaning was to immerse. Also, the significance of baptism is best illustrated by immersion. How better can you display the death, burial and resurrection of Christ but through immersion? No other mode of baptism more clearly demonstrates the meaning of baptism than immersion.

We believe and practice what we call “Believer’s Baptism” because that is taught and practiced in the Bible. Believer’s baptism is different than infant baptism. There simply is no category in the Bible for infant baptism. Without getting into too much detail, infant baptism means different things to different groups. In some, like Roman Catholicism, infant baptism is believed to be a means of grace that washes away the original sin of the child. For others, like some (not all) Lutherans, it is a sign of infant faith in hopes that this infant faith will become actualized faith as the child gets older. For some Presbyterians, infant baptism replaces circumcision as a sign of the covenant. The child is being baptized as an expression of faith on the part of the parents and commitment to raise the child in the faith, prayerfully believing that the child will be confirmed in the faith when old enough to understand. I commend that desire! I love that commitment and resolve. That is good and right, but that is Christian parenting, it is not baptism. Some views of infant baptism are more confusing than others, but they have in common the fact that infant baptism is never taught, nor even implied in the Scriptures. I do not mean this harshly, but infant baptism is not really baptism and is not what Jesus told his disciples to do. So, what happened? How did this practice start?

#### 4. What happened?

I explored this a bit more in my recent series on Sunday night, but the bottom line is this. Infant baptism first appeared in the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> century and became normalized in the 4<sup>th</sup> century. People who practice infant baptism agree on this. It is not a matter of debate. But how could something like this become a normal part of church life, when there is simply no biblical support for this whatsoever? 1) People did not have Bibles. They were at the mercy of those who taught them. 2) The idea of separation of church and state is a radical idea and a fairly new one. Throughout the history of the world, most empires imposed the national religion from the top down. Such was the case with Rome. Initially Christianity was persecuted, then tolerated, then accepted and then imposed. That meant, wrongfully, that everyone born into the Roman empire was also born into the Roman church. Baptism

was co-opted as being the religious/civil ceremony that marked ones identification in the Roman church and empire, and so it was taught that infant baptism washed away original sin, which brought comfort to many parents since many more children died early. That is one of the major reasons why this is such an emotional issue. But there is more. As early as 391, the emperors said, “Whoever forsakes the holy faith and desecrates the holy baptism (which referred to infant baptism) through heretical superstition shall be excluded from human society.” If you practiced anything else, you would be banned.

Baptism was a matter of national identify. You had to be baptized in order to be marked as a citizen of the country. When the Reformation occurred, the Reformers rightfully recognized that infant baptism did not wash away original sin. They rejected this teaching, however, the magisterial reformers like Luther, Zwingli and Calvin used the power of the state to advance the cause of the church. So in places where Luther’s teaching on the gospel broke the grip of the Roman Catholic Church, Luther replaced the teaching of infant baptism as a means of salvation with infant baptism as a means of being identified with the new covenant like a seed of faith awaiting watering and growth. Luther’s view, which was right on many things was wrong on this. Calvin who famously argued for what is called the regulative principle of worship (which meant, if it is not in the Bible, you cannot do it) completely disregarded his own principle when it came to baptism. These men misunderstood the relationship of the church and the state. And because of that they imposed that wrong view upon the plain meaning of baptism. We must admit that while there is much to celebrate in the Reformation, there are some dark pages in her history as well. Some of those dark pages were when people who were able to read the Bible for themselves rediscovered the true meaning of baptism and were persecuted by both the Roman Catholic Church and by some of the Reformers. It is true that some people who practiced baptism by immersion believed heretical things about some other doctrines, which made it convenient to paint everyone with that brush, but infant baptism has been wrongfully practiced for centuries because it was redefined and codified by the church and then enforced by the state. So, finally...

#### 5. **Why is this command such a gift to the church?**

Here are 6 overlapping purposes of Believer’s Baptism:

##### **A. It is a re-enactment of the gospel.**

Baptism is a sign of forgiveness and cleansing. (Acts 2.38 and 22.16) Here is where the mode of immersion is so clear. A person who is immersed is getting a bath. When you take a bath, your body is cleaned up. Baptism re-enacts, illustrates, and symbolizes the cleansing of your whole being by Christ. The OT promised that this would happen in the New Covenant. So, when we witness someone getting baptized we are blessed because we get to hear and see the gospel again. We live to make disciples and when we witness people getting baptized we are witnessing the realization of our mission in life. This command is a gift to the church because...

##### **B. It tells us who is on our team.**

If you have ever played basketball or soccer, you know that it is very important to know who is on your team. Baptism is a public profession of repentance and faith. When I repent of my sin, I take off my old uniform. I renounce team Bob and I announce that I am on team Jesus by putting on a new uniform. Baptism is the putting on of the team Jesus uniform. We each have a responsibility to the team don't we. And you need to ask yourself and we need to ask one another if we are living in a way that reflects the heart beat of our team and our captain. Does your life reflect the uniform you have put on?

**C. It marks us as being united with Christ.**

We are on the same team because we are united with each other because of our union with Christ and we are united with Christ in his death, burial and resurrection. Baptism illustrates this. Like Christ died, we die. In Christ we die. In Christ we live. We are in Christ and we are in Christ together!

**D. It symbolizes the new life that we have now.**

For the believer, eternal life does not start when we die physically; it started when we surrendered our lives to Christ. Already we have been raised with Christ and seated with him. That is our position. Our inheritance in Christ is guaranteed.

**E. It symbolizes the gift of the Holy Spirit.**

1 Cor. 12.13 says that by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body. When you become a follower of Christ the Spirit's ministry in your life goes to new levels. You are indwelt by the Spirit. You receive the Spirit of adoption (Romans 8.15). You are baptized by the Spirit, meaning, you are placed (immersed) into the church, which is the body of Christ. Baptism illustrates this reality. Baptism does not cause these realities, but it illustrates them. Just as I am really placed into the water, I am really placed into the body of Christ. And finally,

**F. It points to the resurrection of our body and the new creation.**

Romans 6.5 says, *"For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his."*

John wrestled with the issue of baptism for quite a while. He claimed to believe in Christ, but knew that by getting baptized his parents would disown him and his dad was stubborn enough to make good on that threat. Eventually John got baptized. He claimed to believe the gospel before, and I think that he definitely grasped it intellectually. But it wasn't until he was willing to be baptized that we could call him a brother with confidence. And when he was baptized we knew we were truly family and he knew it too. And he needed it, because that day he lost part of his earthly family, but formally gained an eternal one.