

**First Christian Church (Lawrence, KS)**  
**Dr. Barry M. Foster**  
**April 23, 2023**

*The Shape of Our Worship*  
**“Understanding Water Baptism”**

Romans 6:1-14 (NIV)

*6 What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? 2 By no means! We are those who have died to sin; how can we live in it any longer? 3 Or don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? 4 We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.*

*5 For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly also be united with him in a resurrection like his. 6 For we know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body ruled by sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin— 7 because anyone who has died has been set free from sin.*

*8 Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. 9 For we know that since Christ was raised from the dead, he cannot die again; death no longer has mastery over him. 10 The death he died, he died to sin once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God.*

*11 In the same way, count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus. 12 Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its evil desires. 13 Do not offer any part of yourself to sin as an instrument of wickedness, but rather offer yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life; and offer every part of yourself to him as an instrument of righteousness. 14 For sin shall no longer be your master, because you are not under the law, but under grace.*

Colossians 2:9-12 (NIV)

*8 See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the elemental spiritual forces of this world rather than on Christ.*

*9 For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form, 10 and in Christ you have been brought to fullness. He is the head over every power and authority. 11 In him you were also circumcised with a circumcision not performed by human hands. Your whole self ruled by the flesh was put off when you were*

*circumcised by Christ, 12 having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through your faith in the working of God, who raised him from the dead.*

[Slide 1] *Opening*

Good morning, church! We're nearing the close of this sermon series on "The Shape of Our Worship," but we have a few more pieces we need to put together before we leave it. Our topic this morning is baptism: specifically, the Christian rite of water baptism. Two questions spring to mind—one obvious, and one not so much.

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The first question, the obvious one, is: *What does water baptism have to do with worship or with our worship service?* A lot actually. Many of you will recall that just recently we began our worship service with a baptism. It was perfectly fitting, for reasons I'm going to unpack in a bit. But if you've read your New Testament, especially the book of Acts, you'll recall that the Bible includes accounts of numerous baptisms that did not happen during a worship service. For that matter, if you've read your Friday emails over the past year, you'll recall that we had pictures of a couple of baptisms that didn't happen during worship or in the baptismal in the sanctuary. The connection of baptism and worship isn't one that requires us to perform baptisms during worship service, though that is possible and can be quite meaningful. The connection rather has to do with the significance of baptism, its meaning and its function within Christian faith and the practice of the church, and how that corresponds to what we do when we worship.

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That leads us to our second question, which is actually a set of related questions: *What is water baptism, and what does it signify? What meaning does it hold for Christians? Why does it matter? What happens during baptism?* Those are important questions. And what I've discovered is that there are many people in the church today, including people who grew up in church and have been baptized, who recognize that baptism is associated with being a Christian, but don't really understand what it is, why we do it, or what it means. So, correcting that situation is our goal for today. But if we're going to answer those questions about the meaning of baptism, we have to begin by asking a few more basic questions.

[Slide 4] *Why do we baptize?*

Let's take our questions in reverse order, starting with the basic questions about water baptism: who, what, where, when, how, and why.

The “why” question is, “*Why do we baptize?*” Scripture gives us three reasons for the church to baptize: (1) We have the example of Jesus, who submitted to baptism by John in order to fulfill all that God required of him. Though he was without sin, Jesus identified with us as sinners in order to model for us what was necessary to be right with God. Matthew 3:13-17 tells us:

*13 Then Jesus arrived from Galilee at the Jordan coming to John, to be baptized by him. 14 But John tried to prevent Him, saying, “I have need to be baptized by You, and do You come to me?” 15 But Jesus answering said to him, “Permit it at this time; for in this way it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness.” Then he permitted Him. 16 After being baptized, Jesus came up immediately from the water; and behold, the heavens were opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending as a dove and lighting on Him, 17 and behold, a voice out of the heavens said, “This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well-pleased.”*

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(2) We have Jesus’ command, given to the church in the Great Commission:

*18 And Jesus came up and spoke to them, saying, “All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. 19 Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, 20 teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.”* (Matthew 28:18-20)

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(3) We have the example of the early church. In the book of Acts, we see repeatedly that the church followed through with what Jesus had commanded. Those who responded to the gospel with faith were baptized in water. In fact, the only place in the New Testament where we see Christians who are not baptized is in Acts 19, where Paul found some disciples in Ephesus whose understanding of the faith was deficient. Once they were properly instructed, however, they were immediately baptized. The first Christians understood that water baptism was the initial step of obedience for those who wished to identify with Jesus as his disciple. It was the mark of all of those who were part of his church.

If all we had in the Bible about water baptism were these three things: Jesus’ example, his command, and the example of the early church, that would be enough for us to practice water baptism as a rite of the church. Even if we didn’t know anything else about it, including why God wanted us to do it, or what it signified, those three things would be reason enough for us to continue baptizing people. But fortunately, the Scriptures have a lot more to say about baptism.

[Slide 7] *Who gets baptized?*

Let's go now to the "who" question: "*Who gets baptized?*"

The consistent answer to this question in the New Testament is: "believers." That is, people who are old enough to respond to the offer of the gospel with a conscious personal decision to repent and the mental capacity to believe. Usually this indicates adults in the New Testament, though it could also include children who were old enough to make an informed and intelligent decision. We have no examples in the New Testament, or in the earliest church, of infants being baptized. That was a practice that started many years later, for reasons that are not supported by the biblical teaching.

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But someone will say, "*What about Acts 16:33? Didn't the Roman jailer's 'household' include infants?*" Those who practice infant baptism often appeal to this passage and argue that since the household would include children and infants, baptism was appropriate for them. They rightly describe the extensive nature of the Roman household, which could include extended family, slaves, and even business partners. They also rightly note that Acts 16 indicates that all who were in the household were baptized. However a closer examination of the passage does not support their conclusion. Let's look quickly at the context.

Paul and Silas are in prison. An earthquake has shaken the prison, and the jailer is afraid that the prisoners have escaped. Paul calls out to him not to kill himself, and the jailer responds in amazement with his question, "*What must I do to be saved?*" Then follows this paragraph (Acts 16:31-34):

*31 They said, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household." 32 And they spoke the word of the Lord to him together with all who were in his house. 33 And he took them that very hour of the night and washed their wounds, and immediately he was baptized, he and all his household. 34 And he brought them into his house and set food before them, and rejoiced greatly, having believed in God with his whole household.*

According to this account, all of those who were a part of the household heard Paul and Silas explain the gospel; all of them responded by believing; and then all of them were baptized because they had all responded with repentance and faith. Nothing in the context indicates that infants were baptized; on the contrary, everything in the context affirms that those who were baptized were adults (or older children) who were capable of understanding what the apostles were preaching, and who had responded by repenting and believing their message.

[Slide 9]     *Where should I be baptized?*

The “how” and the “where” questions can be taken together. “*Where should I be baptized?*” has an easy answer: “*Wherever there is enough water.*” In Acts 8, the Ethiopian eunuch who is listening to Philip explain to him about Jesus as they are traveling on the road, suddenly blurts out, “*Hey, here is some water, what’s preventing me from being baptized right here?*” So they stop the chariot, get out, and Philip dunks him right then and there. Anywhere with some water was fine—because there’s nothing magical about the water itself.

It is interesting, though, to see how the early church developed. We have a small book, a sort of church manual, written in the late first century or early second century, known as *The Didache*, which means, “*The Teaching.*” This ancient document includes a section on how to baptize people. Because this document is quite early, but was written after the publication of the books of the New Testament, it provides good evidence of how the early church interpreted the directives of the New Testament. Here’s some of what it says about baptism: (1) Candidates were to be immersed in running water if it is available, in still water if it is not. (So a creek or river was best, but a pond or a pool or a tub would be fine.) You might like this as well: they were to be baptized in warm water—if cold was not available. (!) (2) If it was not possible to immerse the person, then water was to be poured on the head three times.

[Slide 10] *How should I be baptized?*

This document from the early church shows us that they practiced immersion as the proper way to baptize, but understood that there could be times when a different way would be necessary in order to accommodate some special circumstance. Why did they immerse? Well, the Greek verb, *baptizō*, which is the word used in the New Testament to describe the action of baptizing, means “I dip,” or “I immerse.” The word was used in common Greek to describe a smith plunging a sword into water to temper the steel, or immersing cloth in a tub of dye so that it was fully submerged. And in the biblical examples we have that describe the act of baptism, the participants “*came up out of the water,*” indicating that they had been submerged in the water (Acts 8:38-39; Matthew 3:16; Mark 1:10).

Other forms of baptism have been used in the church’s history (pouring, sprinkling), but immersion is the practice that best accords with the biblical form, and that is what our church holds. But we acknowledge that the form of baptism is less important than the reality of baptism, and we recognize, as the second-century church apparently also did, that there may be times when a different mode is necessary.

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There's another part of the "how" question that relates to our worship, and really, to the heart of the Christian faith. That same early document, *The Didache*, also prescribes that water baptism is to be done according to the Trinitarian formula recorded in Matthew 28:19— "*in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.*" This is an important note for several reasons: (1) It indicates that the language in Matthew was understood by the early church as the appropriate wording for baptizing believers. (2) It demonstrates that the early church understood that Matthew's language was formulaic and not merely a suggestion. (3) It demonstrates that there is very early evidence that Christians believed in the Trinity (whether or not they could explain it), since this formula has become part of their liturgy and expresses an essential aspect of their faith.

[Slide 12] *When should I be baptized?*

What about the "when" question? When should a person be baptized?

The New Testament consistently points to water baptism happening soon after someone professed faith in Jesus Christ. Sometimes it was almost immediate, as we see happening when Philip preaches in Samaria and when Peter goes to Cornelius' household (Acts 8:35-39; 10:44-48). In Philippi, Paul and Silas didn't even wait until morning to baptize the Roman jailer and his household (Acts 16:25, 33-35).

In later centuries, the church developed lengthy waiting periods before baptism in order to instruct the converts in Christian faith and test their sincerity. It's easy to understand the motives of church leaders here—they wanted to make sure that someone was genuinely converted before admitting them to the fold. Unfortunately, though they likely had good intentions (I'll give them the benefit of the doubt), this pattern may have actually inhibited people from coming to faith, and stripped baptism of the power God intended for it to have in the life of a believer.

The revivalist tradition in America over the past two centuries tended to separate water baptism from the decision to believe, which led to a diminishing of the value and importance of baptism among many Christians. Instead of viewing baptism as an important step of discipleship, some Christians and churches began seeing baptism as a nice experience if you wanted it, or as merely ceremonial.

We encourage anyone who comes to Christ, or who has been a believer but hasn't been baptized, to follow through with water baptism without undue delay. We recognize that immediacy is not absolutely mandated by the Scriptures and that it is important to verify the sincerity of a person's conversion before baptizing someone. Nevertheless, we take the New Testament seriously—which considers

baptism very important. As I said, there are no examples of believers in the New Testament who are disciples of Jesus but remain unbaptized. If you haven't been baptized, it's not too late, even if it's been years since you came to faith.

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What about children? When is it appropriate for children to be baptized? We do not have a set minimum age for children to be baptized, but we do ask parents to review with their child his or her commitment to Jesus Christ before being baptized. We want to ensure that the child understands what he or she is doing, so that they are not simply copying what they see someone else do, or doing what they think their parents want them to do. If a child is old enough to understand what it means to give his or her life to Jesus, and they are sincere in wanting to be baptized, we will take them through some teaching similar to what you are hearing today, and then they can be baptized. If a child is uncertain, or if the parents aren't sure that the child is ready, we'll just wait until we have a clearer picture of the child's understanding.

[Slide 14] *What is the meaning of water baptism?*

Now let's get to the question of meaning: What is baptism? What happens in baptism? Here is what we can say, based on what the New Testament teaches.

(1) *Water baptism is a formal, public affirmation of my faith in Jesus Christ, a sign of my repentance and faith commitment to Christ.* We can see this in Peter's conclusion to his first sermon on the Day of Pentecost: *Peter said to them, "Repent, and each of you be baptized 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). Peter ended his sermon with a call for all who were listening to respond to the offer of salvation by taking a conscious step of acknowledging Jesus as Messiah and Lord, to "call on his name"—that is, to acknowledge him as God, the only one who could save them—and to signify that they had affirmed their faith in Jesus by being baptized in water.

Baptism does not equal salvation, nor does it bring about salvation; salvation comes when we repent and put our faith in Jesus. That step of faith is then followed by baptism as the sign that we have chosen to identify with Christ.

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(2) *Water baptism is a picture of the cleansing of forgiveness.* After Saul met the risen Jesus on the road to Damascus and was blinded, his companions brought him into the city. Ananias comes to him at the direction of the Lord and tells him: *"The God of our fathers has appointed you to know His will and to see the Righteous One and to hear an utterance from His mouth. For you will be a*

*witness for Him to all men of what you have seen and heard. Now why do you delay? Get up and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on His name.”* (Acts 22:14-16).

The apostle Peter, in his letter (1 Peter 3:21), says a similar thing when he refers to baptism as an appeal to God for a clean conscience. When I call on the name of the Lord Jesus, affirming my faith in him as Messiah (King) and my Lord, I am saying that I recognize that I am in need of forgiveness; that salvation is by grace—it is God’s free gift; and that I enter salvation through faith (Ephesians 2:8-9). Baptism represents my formal acknowledgment of these things, and my appeal to God to cleanse me from the sins of my former life.

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(3) The passages we read this morning (Romans 6:1-7; Colossians 2:12) show us one of the most important truths about water baptism. *Water baptism is a declaration of my break with my former way of life and a picture of my union with Christ.*

Paul’s explanation in Romans 6 is a powerful picture of what happens when a person comes to Christ, and even though baptism by itself doesn’t save anyone, this passage helps us understand what salvation really looks like. Paul describes water baptism as a spiritual drama in three acts: water baptism symbolizes being united with Christ in his death, his burial, and his resurrection. Act 1: I am united with Jesus on the cross—my sins are placed on Christ; I am dead to my old life. Galatians 2:20 says: *“I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself up for me.* Act 2: I am united with Jesus in the tomb (represented by the water)—my former life is buried, not to be resurrected. Act 3: I am united with Jesus in his resurrection—when I come up from the water, my new life begins in the power of the Holy Spirit. Now I am able to live free from the power of sin as I begin to follow Jesus. I begin to see the fruit of repentance as I leave behind my old life and take up my new life. I begin to learn how to walk with Christ, how to turn away from what I was in order to live in the power of what I am in Christ.

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Jesus never instituted empty religious rituals. Baptism is not an empty ceremony: the power of God is present in baptism. But it’s not magical; it’s not something that happens to us while we’re just passively going through the motions, waiting for God to make me do what is right. In baptism, we signal that we are separated from our former life; the “old me” is dead and buried; the “new



me” is alive in Christ. But Paul is clear in Romans 6: we have to consider ourselves dead to sin and walk in the new life that is ours in Christ.

And once again, baptism is a picture of that. We don’t baptize people by dousing them with water balloons when they least expect it. (“*Surprise! Now you’re baptized—you’re a brand new person! Welcome to church!*”) No—baptism is something I submit myself to; I am acknowledging my need, appealing to God for cleansing, and affirming that I have turned away from my former life to take up this new life of intentionally and actively following Jesus Christ.

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(4) That leads us to the next piece of the puzzle: *Water baptism is my pledge to follow Christ in obedience and faith.*

I think a good picture for thinking about baptism is that of an engagement ring. An engagement ring represents a promise, a promise to marry. It says, even though I’m not yet married, I now live as someone who is promised to someone else. I’m off the market (!). I’m not looking around anymore. When I get baptized, I am saying, I am promised to Jesus Christ. I belong to him, and I’m not looking around any more to see who else is out there offering a different life to me. I am pledging my life to him, and baptism is the sign that I have done so.

That’s why baptism in the New Testament was the mark of “joining the church.” It was how you signaled that you had promised to follow Jesus as Messiah and had chosen to identify with the body of believers who were following Jesus. That’s the whole significance of Luke’s language in Acts, where he often speaks of being baptized “*in Jesus’ name.*” It’s not that he’s unaware of the Trinitarian formula that we saw in Matthew’s gospel. It’s that Luke is emphasizing what it means to be identified as a disciple—I am identifying myself as a follower of Jesus and recognizing him as my God, my Lord, my Savior. That’s what the Bible means by the phrase “*in Jesus’ name*”—I am identifying myself as a disciple who calls on Jesus’ name when I call on God.

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(5) That brings us to the final point about the meaning of baptism: *Water baptism is a testimony to the world and to the church, and a reminder to myself that I belong to Christ.*

This is the value of public baptism. This is why the church normally conducts baptism with witnesses from the church. There are times, in certain places, certain cultures, where believers are not baptized in public, because doing so is the equivalent of signing their death warrant. But even when baptism is done in secret, there is someone from the church to acknowledge that this person who is

being baptized has pledged to follow Christ. When I am baptized, my testimony is that I no longer belong to the world—and the world recognizes that I no longer belong to them. By having someone from the church present, he or she represents the body of Christ, which recognizes that I *do* belong to them.

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Back to our opening question, then: *What does water baptism have to do with worship or with our worship service?*

Well, as we've just seen, water baptism is a powerful statement for both the church and the person being baptized that he or she belongs, that we are all part of the same body of Christ. Water baptism gives the church the opportunity to affirm to a new believer that he or she is welcome and wanted. When someone is baptized, especially when it's done as a part of worship, it's like the whole family celebrating a loved one's engagement, or the birth of a new baby: we are welcoming the new addition to the family.

Baptism is also encouraging to the church as a whole. It's a reminder that we are not simply here to have nice services, but to share the life-giving truth of the gospel so that people can have their lives transformed. It's a motivator for continuing to evangelize those who don't yet know the Lord and to disciple those who are newer in the faith.

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Not only that, but this spiritual drama that baptism portrays for us helps us keep in mind what it means to be a Christian. It is so very easy for us, especially if you've been coming to church for a long time, to settle into a routine of showing up for worship and setting our hearts and minds on auto pilot. We sing the songs (or grumble inwardly if we don't like them), we listen to the sermon (or critique it), talk to some friends and go home. We've done our spiritual duty for the week.

Baptism reminds us that being a Christian, following Jesus, has a beginning point—the recognition that I needed saving. God offered me hope by inviting me to a cross, where I reckoned myself dead to who and what I was. It has a follow-up point where I said good-bye to that old life and buried it when I was baptized. And it has a consequence that flows directly from the first two points: I came up from the waters, ready to live for Jesus in a new life, a different life, a life that is characterized by living according to God's word in the power of the Holy Spirit. That is what it means to be a Christian; that is what discipleship looks like, what living for Jesus looks like. And that is what our worship is shaped like—a reminder that we are not playing religious games or putting on interesting meetings. We are

here to be changed, transformed—alive from the dead through the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus by the power of the Holy Spirit who lives within us.

If you have more questions about water baptism, or if you would like to schedule a time to be baptized, please contact me or Pastor Jacob or one of the elders. I would also encourage you to attend our Foundations course, one of the Pastor's Classes, when it comes around next, where one of the sessions covers this area of baptism and has some additional information.

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*Transition to communion*

*[Worship team, if you would begin making your way to the platform . . . ;  
those who are helping to serve communion please join me in the front . . .]*