

taking a step forward into baptism

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Scripture Passage Acts 2:38

You have just witnessed earlier in this service people being baptized. So now we want to explain and outline why we do this, what we believe about baptism and its practice in our church. You are a congregation that listens well. This morning I am going to ask for the best from your listening ear. I will seek to teach with accuracy and clarity and I ask you to meet me in that.

Some questions we need to address:

Why do we call ourselves a Baptist church?

Why do we baptize by immersion?

What does baptism mean?

Is baptism really necessary or just some kind of optional extra?

There may be some aspects of what I say that may stretch you beyond what you have normally thought, even as a member of Vancouver Chinese Baptist Church, so I appeal to you to listen carefully. Please grasp what I am saying and perhaps more important, also what I am **not** saying!

In about 25-30 minutes, I will give you an invitation and a challenge. If you say you are a follower of Jesus and have not taken the step of baptism, you are invited to come forward and affirm your decision to take that important step and I will tell you why you need to do this.

This morning we seek to outline the practice we choose to follow as a Baptist church.

I am also well aware that we have people here at VCBC who are Christians. You love the Lord and you have not yet been baptized. Allow the Word and the Spirit to prompt you to take the step towards baptism.

What I want to suggest to you is that we have somewhat casually disconnected baptism from several key aspects of a normal Christian life and both baptism and our Christian living would be strengthened if we would re-connect them.

We need to re-connect baptism with our initial decision to follow Jesus.

Without any hesitation, we declare that the only thing that reconciles us to God, brings us to peace with God is the work of the cross. Francis Schaeffer talks about the gospel being **Christ +**

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nothing! We fully agree with that.

If we just stay there, then baptism can be regarded as an optional extra. It is something that many Christians then regard as elective, something of a personal preference.

While we fully agree that baptism does not make you a Christian and we will never say that if you are not baptized you are not a Christian, we need to see that within the teaching and practice of the New Testament, while baptism is not the gospel, the gospel is no more/no less than the declaration of the cross. Baptism is part of the kerygma or the proclamation of the gospel.

When the gospel was proclaimed, the fact that people needed to come and repent and respond to Jesus Christ, this proclamation or the kerygma included the call to baptism.

Acts 2:38

38 Peter replied, "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."

What does it mean to be a Christian? Well, if we reduced it to the most basic definition, we could say it is being a follower of Jesus. So if we say we are seeking to follow Jesus, we cannot escape the reality of baptism as a step of discipleship.

Jesus began his earthly ministry by being baptized.

Matthew 3 — he did this to fulfill righteousness, to identify with us in our humanity.

Matthew 3

13 Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to be baptized by John. 14 But John tried to deter him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" 15 Jesus replied, "Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness." Then John consented. 16 As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. 17 And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased."

Jesus finished his earthly ministry with the command to go teach and baptize.

Matthew 28

19 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, 20 and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."

This command was clearly understood and practiced in the New Testament.

Acts 2

40 With many other words he warned them; and he pleaded with them, "Save yourselves from this corrupt generation." 41 Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day.

When we separate baptism from following Jesus as a disciple and see it as optional, I would suggest that we may weaken both baptism and our discipleship.

Acts 8 – story about Philip meeting a man in a chariot. He is reading from the Old Testament, but does not know who is describing, so he asks Philip for some help.

32 This is the passage of Scripture the eunuch was reading: "He was led like a sheep to the slaughter, and as a lamb before its shearer is silent, so he did not open his mouth. 33 In his humiliation he was deprived of justice. Who can speak of his descendants? For his life was taken from the earth." 34 The eunuch asked Philip, "Tell me, please, who is the prophet talking about, himself or someone else?" 35 Then Philip began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus.

It says, he told him the good news about Jesus. Then the next verse.

36 As they traveled along the road, they came to some water and the eunuch said, "Look, here is water. What can stand in the way of my being baptized?"

That verse only makes sense if telling him the good news about Jesus also meant he told him about being baptized.

When we see baptism as a first and early step in following Jesus, we strengthen both our baptism and also our personal discipleship. Baptism is connected to saying we love Jesus.

John 14:15

If you love me you will keep my commandments

John 15:10

If you keep my commandments you will remain in my love.

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Do you need to make this reconnection in your spiritual pilgrimage? You have taken the first step to follow Jesus. What's next?

We need to reconnect baptism with life transformation.

This first step takes us on the road of following Jesus, and stretched ahead of us are miles of transformation. Baptism is a statement about our serious commitment to a life of complete transformation.

Baptism is more than the initial confession of Christ. It is the declaration and assertion that we are engaged in a life of transformation, in which the old is fully gone, the new has fully come. Nothing is more powerful than a person who comes to the act of baptism, strips off their old way of life, whatever that was, steps into the water and rises to walk in newness of life.

Romans 6

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.

We are declaring this person has decided to follow Jesus in every aspect of their lives. As the old gospel song says, I have decided to follow Jesus. No turning back. No turning back, and everyone can witness this.

1 Peter 3:20-22. A difficult passage on the surface. Background is the story of Noah and the ark.

20 ...God waited patiently in the days of Noah while the ark was being built. In it only a few people, eight in all, were saved through water, 21 and this water symbolizes baptism that now saves you also--not the removal of dirt from the body but the pledge of a good conscience toward God. It saves you by the resurrection of Jesus Christ, 22 who has gone into heaven and is at God's right hand...

But we just said, baptism does not save us, so what might this passage mean?

Let me suggest we turn the word 'save' just a little, and we say, baptism keeps us safe. When we are faced with some temptation, some enticement that might make us drift off from staying on course. When we remember our vow in baptism and what it means, baptism keeps us safe. Our baptismal vow reminds us of a

commitment irrefutable we made. It keeps us from morally or spiritually straying off course.

All of us will come to a moment when we are tempted to wander. We may not know the time or date when we accepted Christ. We may be fuzzy about when this happened. And in the fog of that moment, we begin to question its reality. But we cannot forget. We cannot deny. We cannot let go of the day and the time when we stripped off our clothes, put on a robe and stepped down into the water. We were bent back for a moment as though we were in a grave, but then strong hands lifted us up again.

Baptism as a cherished experience etched in our mind in those moments and days when we question and doubt.

It is our unforgettable reminder that we have made a commitment to Christ to follow him always and in every circumstance. In days or times of doubt and hesitation, we cannot forget the fact that we got wet!

Baptism is closely connected to behaving like a Christian.

We need to reconnect baptism with the life of the Spirit.

This is also an area where we need to walk very gently.

One of the unfortunate separations we make is the disconnect, or so we assume, between baptism by water and baptism, and the life of the Spirit.

That teaches us that when we respond to the truth of the Gospel, God responds to us with the gift of the Spirit. Every Christian receives the gift of the Spirit.

Acts 2:38
38 Peter replied, "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.

Is this a separate or a later event? I would suggest, NO. It is all part and parcel of the same movement of God towards us and our response to him. Our mistake is that we make these events too linear, and also we have separated them chronologically, often by many years. Conversion, then years later baptism. Years later again understanding the life in the spirit. This is our

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mistake. Rather we need to regard them as one synergistic experience. We need to reconnect them rather than disconnect them.

The life and power of the Spirit is not an optional course for potential charismatics. It is something to be taught to every Christian preparing for baptism. As you receive Christ, and in your baptism, the Spirit is at work in your life.

Ephesians 4 – declares 7 unities

4 There is one body and one Spirit-- just as you were called--5 one Lord, one faith, one baptism; 6 one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.

Is the baptism referred to of water or of the spirit? I would ask, why disconnect them if we would reconnect them and we might rediscover fresh power in their synergy?

The baptism of Jesus declared the coming and the power of the Spirit. Baptism in his name can do no less.

We need to reconnect baptism with life in the church.

Old custom in preparation for wedding services was the reading of the banns. When Harriet and I were married, our banns were read in the local parish church. The idea was that there would be people there in the community who would know us, and they would know if either of us were already married, or if we were free to get married.

Reading of banns is no longer legal, but the idea embedded in it was one of community witness.

Baptism is a community event. A public witness to entering a changed life within a community of faith. It is like the reading of your wedding banns.

1 Cor 12 – section about the church being a body.

13 For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body-- whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free-- and we were all given the one Spirit to drink.

Our tendency is to say this refers only to baptism by the spirit, and the body refers to the mystical body of Christ. This avoids some issues, and in doing so it spiritualizes the entire process. It does not earth it in daily life. The movement of God is not towards mysticism, but always towards incarnation.

I would suggest to you that every Christian in the NT churches in Rome, Corinth, Ephesus, Philippi, who read these words, would automatically think back to the day in which they were baptized in water and also knew the power of the spirit. And in that act of baptism they were being initiated and welcomed into the local company of Christians, there were real faces who watched them, who smiled at them, who shed tears as they heard their story, who listened to their escape from sin and the tentacles of evil, who opened their arms and embraced them and welcomed them into the church.

We cannot leave this truth in some mystical world. In addition to knowing the baptism of the spirit, we also have to get wet. In addition to being part of the mystical Body of Christ round the world, we need to see the smiles and the welcome of brothers and sisters. We need to earth this act in the local church.

To disconnect or separate baptism from the visible community of the local church is to weaken both.

Summary

I ask you to walk very carefully with me. I am not saying that if you are not baptized, you are not a Christian. I am not saying that you are some second class Christian. I am appealing to us to acknowledge that in the New Testament which we accept as giving us our practice as Christians, baptism was understood as your initiation, your welcome into the community of the church. Baptism is closely connected to our belonging to the community of faith.

We have disconnected baptism from some core biblical practices, so the appeal must be to consider, what would happen if we were to re-connect the powerful experience that baptism is with these core practices so that calling ourselves a **BAPTIST** church is more than having a label? Rather it is an authoritative statement for us about what it means to follow Jesus. About how we live this new and transformed life. About the life and the power of the Spirit at work in us. And a powerful statement about who we are as a church.

Baptism is the call of discipleship. It is a statement about the ethical and moral demands of the cross. It is a witness to a spirit-endowed

and a spirit-filled life. It is an invitation to take our place in a dynamic community of people called the church.

Is this the next step you need to take as a follower of Jesus?

Reflection Questions

1. **Read Matthew 3:13-17. Why did Jesus choose to be baptized if he fully was the Son of God? Why did John not wish to baptize him? How do you think John felt about baptizing Jesus? Jesus says that he did this “to fulfill all righteousness”. What might this mean?**
2. **If you have been baptized, when did that take place? What made you decide to be baptized?**
3. **Did anything in the sermon help to deepen your understanding of what your baptism means?**
4. **If you say you are a follower of Jesus and have not been baptized, can you say why you have not taken this step? What would prompt you to take this next step?**
5. **Tom Cowan’s message said that we have “disconnected” baptism from at least 4 things. What were they? Do you agree with him? What happens when we make these disconnections? How might these experiences be renewed if we re-connected them with baptism?**
6. **Reflect on the passage in Acts 8:26-39. What was the man reading? Why might he not know who it is talking about? What role does Philip play in the story? It simply says, he preached the good news about Jesus to him. What do you think he told him? The next verse (verse 36) introduces the question of baptism. Was this part of the good news?**