

Reading

These are the words of God:

16 Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. 17 And when they saw him they worshiped him, but some doubted. 18 And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 19 Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, 20 teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

(Mt 28:16–20)

Please sit.

In a few weeks' time, we will be baptizing people here at Christ Community, so Larry has asked me to explain what baptism is, and why as believers, we ought to do it.

Would you pray with me?

Pray

Father, help us to see and to savour the realities that are represented by baptism...

Intro

In a moment, I'm going to suggest three reasons to be baptized. But before we get to that point, there's a more basic question that needs to be answered.

What IS baptism?

If you have witnessed a baptism here or at a beach baptism, what you see is very simple. A pastor lowers someone into the water, and then immediately raises them up again. That's all that happens when we baptise someone.

So what exactly is going on, and why have Christians been doing it for two thousand years?

It's sometimes said that seeing is believing. Baptism helps us to see and to believe. It helps us to SEE something that might otherwise go unseen, and in seeing it, we are helped to believe.

My Dad understands this. My dear Dad has always been a fan of the football team Tottenham Hotspur.

And yes, it is called "football" and not "soccer". I know we've just had July 4th. You're all feeling very pleased with

yourselves. But your freedom does not entitle you to rebrand sports you did not invent. That's not the way this works. It is FOOTBALL.

Anyway, my Dad encouraged my sister and me to become fans of Tottenham Hotspur.

My Dad knew that in order to make us lifelong Tottenham fans, he had to do more than simply talk about Tottenham. He knew that seeing it for ourselves would make all the difference. Because seeing is believing, right?

Just to say, Tottenham are basically the Chicago Cubs before they won the World Series in 2016.

They have a proud history of playing the game with style, playing the game with panache, and playing the game without ever actually winning anything.

But then Dad took us to a game. So we could see for ourselves what he was talking about.

And then we really started to get it. The smell of cheap burgers and freshly minted programs. The river of blue and white hats and scarves, flowing down the Seven Sisters Road and into the stadium.

The rattling of turnstiles. The first glimpse of the floodlit green turf as we walked up the stairs to our seats. The sound of 35,000 people all focused on a football pitch only 300 feet long by 200 feet wide. And that was before the game even started.

My sister and I became lifelong fans of Tottenham. Because seeing is believing.

Baptism helps us to “see” a beautiful spiritual reality so that it captures our hearts.

Baptism helps us to “see” what it means for a believer to be united to Christ, to be washed clean by Christ, to be made new. So that we can enter God’s presence with no fear of condemnation whatsoever, with the deep assurance that we will be loved and protected by him forever.

Now I’m aware that for some baptism might sound like a very religious thing, and therefore not for you. All this talk of being washed clean.

But of course, you don’t have to be religious to know the feeling of being UNclean. We give it different names: We call it “guilt”, we call it “shame”.

Now there IS such a thing as FALSE guilt, FALSE shame - things we're not responsible for. I'm not talking about that. I'm talking about the guilt and the shame we experience because of the things we HAVE done - or ARE doing - that we know are wrong.

I don't know about you, but there are some things I did decades ago, and they still have the power to make me wince.

And we know there's no way of UNdoing or UNSaying things that have already BEEN done and BEEN said.

Baptism is a picture of Jesus' beautiful answer to the guilt and shame and fear of judgement that many of us experience.

I was a fan of Shakespeare's play Macbeth at school simply because it's the shortest of Shakespeare's tragedies.

You may remember the basic plot. Lady Macbeth wants her husband Macbeth to take the throne, so together they plot to kill the King.

There's this terrifying scene where, after the murder, Lady Macbeth sleepwalks.

And as she sleepwalks she compulsively rubs her hands together, over and over - these days, we'd call it "obsessive compulsive" - and it's like she's desperately trying to wash her hands clean.

She can see this blood on her hands, and no matter what she does, no matter how much she washes, she cannot get clean.

Because of course, this isn't real blood on her hands, it's a symbol of her guilt: her deep, moral uncleanness before God. Blood you can deal with, you can get that off with soap and water. But not guilt and shame.

It's seemingly unreachable by human hand, and she soon discovers to her horror that nothing she can do will ever get rid of it. She says, "What's done cannot be undone."

Now of course, most of us have not committed murder, but we do still face the same underlying problem. The guilt and shame for things we've done - its real, and we can't shake it.

What we've already done cannot be UNdone by trying to be a good person. So what do we do?

Again, BAPTISM is a powerful picture of the biblical answer to that question.

When Lady Macbeth's doctor sees her sleepwalking, and compulsively rubbing her hands together, he effectively says: I can't deal with this. This is above my pay grade. He says, "More needs she the DIVINE than a physician." In other words, a doctor can't cure her guilt. You can't medicate this away. Only God can deal with it.

Because of course, this isn't a physical problem, it's a spiritual one.

You need God Himself to come down to you, to deal with your guilt and your shame ON YOUR BEHALF. So that you can be washed clean, forever.

Do you realise that's exactly what Jesus does?

On the cross, he took all your guilt and shame upon himself. He took the judgement you would face, on your behalf.

And then GOD raised Him FROM death to life to demonstrate that his death on your behalf was truly effective. Your guilt and shame no longer has the power to drag you down to death and condemnation, because it has been dealt with by Christ.

Baptism is the public dramatization of that reality.

It is a visual aid to help us “see” what would otherwise be unseeable: namely, that a person who is united to Christ by faith is washed perfectly clean of their guilt and shame. Made new.

In fact, in a startling passage in First Peter 3:18, the Apostle Peter describes baptism as being like Noah’s ark. He says that those who put their faith in CHRIST to save them from the judgement of God are just like those who put their faith in the ARK to save them from the flood.

Being lowered into the water, and then raised from the water in baptism is a picture of the way that believers in Christ have passed safely through the judgement of God, just as the Ark passed safely through the flood.

Now, I don't want to assume that everyone here HAS put their trust in Christ. So can I plead with you to do that now, if you have not already?

Perhaps you hear me in much the same way as people heard Noah before the flood came. "I don't need your Ark. I don't see any sign of a flood. I'll be absolutely fine thanks."

But Jesus himself is very clear that there IS a judgement that is coming, and that you need to be on the Ark when that judgement comes. Jesus says you must "repent and believe" in him, so that when the judgement comes, you will not be swept away.

In other words, either you let Jesus pay for your sin and guilt, or you pay for it yourself at the final judgement. Those are the only options.

Baptism is what a new believer does to show that they have joyfully taken shelter in Christ.

Now why is being baptized so important? Isn't it just a symbolic thing, kind of a religious ritual, and not totally necessary?

Let me give three brief reasons why a believer ought to be baptized.

Because Christ commands you to do it.

Because it's how you PUBLICLY declare your faith in Christ.

Because it's how you commit to Christ's church.

So firstly, believers should be baptized...

1. Because Christ commands you to do it

After his resurrection, Jesus gave a command to his disciples. These are some of Jesus' last recorded words in the gospel of Matthew:

Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.

19 Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, 20 teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. (Mt 28:18-20a)

Remember what has happened shortly before this: Christ has been crucified, and three days later - as he Himself predicted multiple times - three days later he was raised from death.

So what are his followers supposed to do now? Verse 19: "Go... and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them..." So a vital part of "making disciples of all nations" IS BAPTISM.

This is one of the last thing he says to his followers before his ascension. So clearly, whatever else baptism is, it isn't

something we can overlook, or something we can maybe get around to at some point.

In fact, Jesus makes baptism a non-negotiable part of being one of his followers. He commands it.

That's the order of Mt 28 verse 19 and 20: You become a disciple, then you are BAPTIZED, and you seek to obey Him in every area of your life.

But here's an question for you. Why did Jesus himself get baptized?

Matthew chapter 3:

Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to John, to be baptized by him.

Now John understood that baptism is an expression of repentance, of turning away from sin. And John knew that Jesus had no sin to repent of, so why should Jesus be baptized? That's why John says to Jesus:

14 "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?"

Very good question. You see what Jesus says to him?

15 Jesus answered him, “Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to FULFILL ALL RIGHTEOUSNESS.” (Mt 3:13-15)

In other words, if Jesus shows us what a perfectly righteous human life ought to look like, then it was necessary for Jesus to be baptised.

He was showing us: if you want to live a life that is obedient to God, baptism is a part of it.

Now I could end the talk there - “Why get baptized as a believer?” Well, because Jesus says we must. If we want to be OBEDIENT to Christ, we’ll get baptized.

But let me give two more reasons why baptism is a vital part of following Jesus.

Secondly, Believers Should Be Baptized To Publicly Profess Their Faith In Christ

Time and again in the New Testament, when a person says “I repent of my sin and I believe in Jesus”, they are immediately and publicly baptized. There is a close connection in time between a person’s profession of faith, and their being visibly and publicly baptized.

So for example, in Acts chapter 2, Peter has been telling people to put their trust in Christ for their salvation. Many of his hearers want to trust Christ, but they don’t know how to do that. So they say:

“Brothers, what shall we do?” 38 And Peter said to them, “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.” (Ac 2:37b–38)

So what do they do? There’s no delay. Verse 41:

...those who received his word were baptized, and there were added THAT DAY about three thousand souls. (Ac 2:41)

In other words, as soon as a person puts their trust in Christ, they are baptized. It's a visible, outward sign that they HAVE put their trust in Christ.

Baptism is to a believer what a wedding ring is to a married person. As soon as we get married, we put on the ring.

In the same way, as soon as you are wedded to Christ, you get baptized.

Now typically, you don't put on a wedding ring years AFTER getting married, and you don't put on a wedding ring years BEFORE you get married.

I won't be putting a wedding ring on my little daughter's finger in the hope that it will in some way make it more likely that she will one day get married. That's not what a wedding ring is for.

Baptism is the same. In the New Testament, it happens at the same time as a person is wedded to Christ. Not years before, and not years after.

It is an outward sign that a person has put their faith in Jesus, not a sign that we hope they will one day do so.

Now in the Old Testament, the sign that you were one of God's people was circumcision, so there's a parallel between circumcision and baptism: they're both ceremonies that say "THIS person is one of God's people."

The Apostle Paul is clear about the connection between circumcision and baptism.

However, Paul is ALSO clear that the way a person becomes a member of the people of God is BY FAITH - not by our parent's faith, but rather by OUR faith.

His entire point in Philippians chapter 3 is to reject what he calls "confidence in the flesh". He says, I do not put any confidence in what *I* have *done* in the past, and I do not put any confidence in any religious or spiritual heritage I have *received* from my parents by birth.

No, what matters is faith in Christ. If you don't have that, you shouldn't be baptized.

Listen to Galatians 3, where you hear Paul making the connection between a person's faith and their baptism:

26 for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God,
through faith. 27 For as many of you as were

baptized into Christ have put on Christ. (Gal 3:26-27)

As far as Paul was concerned, when you see a person being baptized, you should assume that that person has “put on Christ” through faith.

Or take Colossians chapter 2, verse 12, where Paul says that those who have been baptized have “been buried with [Christ] in baptism” and have also been “raised with him THROUGH FAITH”.

Again and again, Paul assumes that baptized people are those who have first expressed personal faith in Christ,

It is an outward sign that shows a person’s inward union with Christ BY FAITH.

By being baptized, it’s like you are officially putting on the jersey of Team Jesus and saying, “This is the person I identify with. He’s calling the shots now. This is who I’m playing for.”

Just to say, in case it wasn’t already clear, baptism by itself doesn’t make you a Christian, any more than a wedding

ring by itself makes you married. There's nothing magic in that little piece of metal.

No, the ring - and baptism - is significant because of the reality it points to.

You are united to Christ by faith! Your former life is dead and buried with him! You have been filled with the Spirit and raised with him to a new life in which your sin no longer owns you or controls you.

Some professing Christians in Paul's day had been baptized, but they were still living lives that were much the same as the ones they were living before.

Do you not know [says Paul in Romans chapter 6] that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his DEATH? [in other words, we have died to our sin! It's buried!] 4 We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. [In other words, we no longer live as we used to live. We have been reborn in Christ.] (Ro 6:3–5)

This is why, incidentally, John the Baptist refuses to baptize many of the religious leaders of his time - because he knows that they have not yet turned away from their sin. He tells them that he won't baptise them until they "bear fruit in keeping with repentance."

Let me give one last reason why believers should be baptized. Very briefly: Believers should be baptized in order to commit to Christ's people.

3. To Commit To Christ's People

To pick up on the earlier analogy: when you are baptized, it's like you put on the "Team Jesus" jersey. You are acknowledging that you ARE now part of a TEAM. You're not trying to walk the Christian life on your own.

When a person is baptised, it's not as if the person doing the baptizing dunks someone in water, and then says, "Right, off you go. All done. Have a nice life." You are baptized INTO the church.

Baptism is the door through which you enter the church, and become a part of it.

That's because, when we are united to Christ, we're not only united to Him, we're united to His people.

Apparently, Justin Bieber was baptized in an NBA player's bathtub, there were only a few people present, and the man who did it said "That's the thing about baptism... it's not about where [you do the baptism], it's about why." But actually, the "where" IS significant TOO.

Because baptism is the means by which the church family welcome a person into their midst. So a baptism apart

from the church is kind of like a wedding without witnesses.

In fact, a baptism apart from the church is almost like a wedding without a bridegroom!

You'll know from the New Testament that the church is described as "the body of Christ". So when you are united to Christ, you are also - inevitably - united to CHRIST'S BODY, the church. You cannot have one without the other. If you commit to Christ, you're committing to the his body, the church.

Well, someone might say, am I committing in a general sense to the worldwide church - to ALL God's people EVERYWHERE? Or am I having to commit specifically to a local church? And the answer to that, I think, is yes! Both.

You cannot meaningfully commit to believers EVERYWHERE without first committing to believers SOMEWHERE.

Imagine if I said to you, oh I love everybody everywhere. I'm just a generally very loving guy. But you know very well that I don't love my own close family. You'd think, "He can't

possibly love everyone everywhere, if he doesn't even love those who are close to him." So it is with believers.

It's a great litmus test of our love, isn't it, to be baptized into a local church where we know we are called to love THAT GUY, and THAT GUY - people who can sometimes be quite hard to love. (I wasn't pointing at specific people by the way.)

And actually, when you think about it, the local church into which we're baptized, is the ONLY context in which we can really do the "one anothers" of the New Testament.

We're told to encourage one another, love one another, pray for one another, show hospitality to one another, confess our sins to one another - you can't confess your sins to all believers everywhere, it would be impossible. God's Word assumes that we will be doing these "one anothers" in the context of a local church.

Just like a marriage, baptism is two parties pledging themselves to one another in commitment and love: The believer commits themselves to the local church, AND the local church commits itself to the believer.

Well let me end with this.

I said at the start, that “seeing is BELIEVING”.

It’s not just that baptism enables us to “SEE” spiritual truths that would otherwise be invisible. It also helps us to BELIEVE them.

The theologian J I Packer puts it this way: “As the preaching of the Word makes the gospel AUDIBLE, so [baptism makes] it visible, and God stirs up faith by both means.”

Because seeing is believing, the act of baptism actually strengthens the FAITH of those who are baptized, AND also the faith of those who witness it.

Because it portrays, powerfully, what Christ has done for us.

It doesn’t just TELL us that someone has become a follower of Christ, it SHOWS us - visually - what that LOOKS LIKE.

And that visual dramatisation leaves a mark on us.

I don't think a Christian can experience or witness a baptism and be left unstirred, any more than a person can enter the water without getting wet.

Because baptism is the gospel made VISIBLE. And SEEING is believing.

Christ descended to the dead and was buried; we descended and were buried WITH him. Christ was raised to life; and we are raised to life WITH him.

Let's pray.