

### Immersed

Last Wednesday was National Signing Day. If you are not a college football fan that means nothing to you. But if you are a college football fan you know that National Signing Day is the day when talented high school football players choose the colleges they plan to attend. The anticipation builds leading up to signing day and over the years the announcements have become more and more dramatic. This year one guy jumped out of an airplane (with a parachute) and when he landed he opened up his jump suit to reveal the jersey of his chosen team. Michigan held a star-studded event that included Derek Jeter, Tom Brady, Ric Flair that students waited in line 2 hours to attend. The sense of anticipation leading up to Signing Day is followed by a sense of relief since many of these athletes have changed their commitments in the months leading up to the big day. But once they sign on the dotted line, they are committed. You don't get to leave your options open. One of the best things you can do to keep a commitment is to go public with it. No one says, "Well coach, let's take this thing one game at a time and if I like it, I'll stay."

National Signing Day is a big deal especially in a culture that is characterized by commitment avoidance. We don't like to commit to anything. We want to keep our options open. If I commit to something, what happens if something better comes along? Millennials call this phenomenon FOMO - fear of missing out. Sociologists call it "the cohabitation effect." More and more couples are avoiding marriage and opting for living together. Studies show that divorce is not the biggest danger to couples who live together before marriage. However, couples who cohabit are generally less satisfied when they do marry. Part of the reason is because of what is referred to as the "sliding not deciding" mentality. Couples move from dating to sleeping over to sleeping over a lot to cohabitation in a gradual process that is not marked by rings or ceremonies or sometimes even a conversation. Couples bypass talking about why they want to live together and what it will mean. Women are more likely to cohabit as a step toward marriage, while men are more likely to see it as a way to postpone commitment. These conflicting expectations often lead to lower levels of commitment even after the relationship progresses to marriage.

What does this have to do with the church? In a cohabitation culture it is not uncommon to experience the cohabitation effect in your relationship with Jesus and His church. You believe in Jesus, you admire Jesus, you want to live with Jesus, but you have not yet committed to a monogamous relationship with Jesus and His people. You are keeping your options open. Jesus was clear, "You cannot *slide* into a relationship with me, you must *decide* to be My disciple." You cannot be a secret saint. You have to go public. So He established two essential practices by which we declare our allegiance and deepen our devotion to Him - baptism and communion. These two practices are called sacraments or ordinances depending on your tradition.

The word sacrament conveys an oath or vow. In the time of Christ, Roman soldiers took a vow of loyalty or sacramentum when they entered military service. Protestant churches like ours prefer the word "ordinance" as opposed to "sacrament" because a sacrament is usually defined as a "means of grace." It is easy then to assume that by doing these things I earn God's grace. But we know God's grace is neither earned nor deserved. When we participate in the sacraments we

put ourselves in a position to receive God's grace. For example, I can flip a light switch but I can't provide electricity. I can turn a faucet but I can't provide water. Zaccheus, Bartimaeus, the woman with the issue of blood, they all put themselves in the path of Jesus and received His grace. That is what we do when we get baptized and partake of communion.

Protestant churches refer to ordinances because these two practices were ordained or commanded by Jesus not as a way of earning His grace but as a means of remembering and celebrating His work on our behalf. Baptism and communion are public demonstrations of gratitude for the gift of God's grace.

Baptism must be understood against the historical backdrop of Jewish water rituals. In Jesus' world, ritual washings or ablutions were part of life. There were many kinds of baptisms:

- Proselyte baptism - People who converted to Judaism were baptized to symbolize their immersion into a new way of life.

- Ritual baptism - ceremonial washings. There were specific rules for washing before meals and during religious observances. Priests washed their hands before and after sacrificial offerings. These water rituals signified the importance of moral and religious cleansing. When someone was defiled and considered ceremonially unclean they were required to wash. Of course OT washings were done continuously. NT baptism is done once and for all.

- John's baptism - the baptism of John was unique and served as a wake-up call to the Jewish people to cleanse themselves in anticipation of the coming of the Messiah.

- Pagan baptism - the Mithras cult would slay a bull mount it on a grill then initiates would stand under it to be immersed in the blood of the bull.

At Fellowship, we are not Baptists but we are baptistic in our practice of baptism. In other words, we believe that baptism is appropriately practiced by those who give a credible profession of faith in Jesus Christ. We practice baptism by immersion for a couple of reasons. First, it was the way it was done by the early church. The Greek word "baptizo" means to plunge or dunk or immerse. The passages that deal with Jesus' and John's baptism spell out the fact that this practice was done where there was "much water." You don't need much water to sprinkle so the assumption is that they were immersed.

Furthermore, immersion is a symbol of our union with Jesus Christ in His death, burial and resurrection. Ro. 6:3-11. (Thursday's reading). Baptism clearly portrays dying to the old way of life and resurrection to a new kind of life. Baptism by pouring or sprinkling clearly misses the symbolism here.

Jesus told His disciples to "Go, and make disciples, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit." When Peter finished preaching on the Day of Pentecost, the people asked him, "What shall we do?" He said, "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."

Baptism does not save you but it was commanded by Jesus and practiced by the church from the very beginning of Christianity. To say you are a follower of Christ but to refuse to be baptized is contradictory. This is why we ask every covenant member if they have been baptized. Not to satisfy our requirements but to give you the opportunity to publicly identify with Jesus Christ and get in the way of God's grace.

Communion is sometimes called the Lord's Supper or the Eucharist. Each term represents an important aspect of this sacrament. When we use the word "communion" we emphasize the fellowship we have with Jesus and one another. Last week Kurt told us that one of the characteristics of the first Christians was that they had "all things in common." They held to a common teaching, they enjoyed common meals, they even shared common resources with one another. They were family. There are two things that we cannot do alone - be married and be a Christian. We are bound together by a common meal - the body and blood of Christ.

The Lord's Supper (or the Lord's Table) - commemorates the Last Supper Passover meal that Jesus ate with His disciples.

The Eucharist emphasizes thanksgiving and the joyful celebration of God's work on our behalf. The word "Eucharist" is the Greek word meaning to give thanks. In the Catholic tradition the Eucharist is viewed as a sacrifice upon an altar. In Protestant tradition we believe that the death of Christ was a one-time event and His shed blood is all-sufficient for our sins. Jesus died once and for all and is not sacrificed over and over again. In our tradition, communion is seen as a memorial meal by which we commemorate the death of Christ on our behalf. 1 Cor. 11:23-26.

Every time we take communion we recognize the work of Jesus in the the past, present and future.

1. It is a reminder of the death of Christ for our sins in the past.
2. It is a present reminder that we should repent of our sins and consider ourselves dead to sin.
3. It reminds us of our future destiny as the people of God gathered at the Marriage Supper of the Lamb when we will experience the Kingdom of God in all of its fullness.

A relationship with Jesus Christ is likened to a marriage of sorts. In Eph. 5 Paul offers sound advice to husbands and wives and then says, " This mystery is great; but I am speaking with reference to Christ and the church." Eph. 5:32. A wedding is a public proclamation of our love and loyalty to one person.

Thirty-eight years ago Jana and I stood in front of a couple hundred witnesses and publicly stated that we were dying to our old lives as single people and beginning a new life together as husband and wife. Little did Jana know that day that she was trading the attention of all other men for the inattention of just one man! I'm glad she did. Marriage has gone out of style at about that same rate that baptism has.

"I don't know why we need a license - we love each other."

"I don't know why I need to get baptized - Jesus knows how I feel about Him."

"I don't know why I have to be a member. I don't need to be on a roll."

You may be surprised to learn how important a public demonstration of faith is to Jesus.

"Therefore everyone who confesses Me before men, I will also confess him before My Father

who is in heaven. But whoever denies Me before men, I will also deny him before My Father who is in heaven." Mt. 10:32-33

"If you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved; for with the heart a person believes, resulting in righteousness, and with the mouth he confesses, resulting in salvation." Ro. 10:9-10

Public confession is not the means of salvation but it provides convincing evidence of our salvation. When someone trusted Christ and confessed Him as Lord, knowing that persecution was sure to come, that individual gave evidence of genuine salvation. Those who are truly saved are eager to confess Christ. Can you imagine a young man saying to his fiance, "I don't want to stand up in front of a bunch of people and say 'til death do we part.' I mean, what if I change my mind? Besides, if I say that in front of a bunch of people then every woman there will know that I am no longer available." One of the best things you can do to keep a commitment is to go public with it. The commitment-maker experiences a kind of freedom that commitment-avoiders will never know. Commitment eliminates options. "The man who makes a vow makes a commitment with himself at some distant time or place." G. K. Chesterton. In the act of commitment, I bind myself to that future moment.

But if we push the marriage analogy even farther we would acknowledge that just saying "I do" to your spouse or to Jesus is not the end of the matter. In order to maintain the intimacy in a relationship we have to recommit ourselves to our beloved. That's what communion is all about. Baptism is a one-time declaration of our love for Jesus. Communion is the ongoing expression of my love for Him.

You may be here today and are just cohabiting with Jesus. You may be dating the church. I would encourage you to stop sliding and decide. Do what these people are about to do.

Today is Signing Day at Fellowship. We are going to give some people the opportunity to publicly declare their allegiance to Christ. Then we are going to have a ceremony where anyone who wants to can recommit to Christ. These two public ceremonies are called baptism and communion. They are essential practices for those who choose to do Life Together.