

“Baptism & the Lord’s Supper”
Romans 6:1-11; 1 Corinthians 11:23-26

Clifton Baptist Church
August 23, 2026

We are in the middle of a sermon series here at Clifton called “Church Matters.” And this morning we are considering the matters of baptism and the Lord’s Supper. As we begin this morning, I want to take a little more time than usual here at the beginning to gather up some of what we have already seen in the last few weeks about the church. I think this is important to do at this point, because unless we see how baptism and the Lord’s Supper relate to other aspects of the church, we won’t fully appreciate the meaning of these practices or the right way to practice them.

So I’m going to ask you to dig in with me here for a few minutes as we consider where we’ve come so far. And if it helps in terms of expectations for listening, you can think of this as point one of my sermon. We have seen from Ephesians that the church comes into existence in the world by the supernatural work of God, in which He sets His merciful love on people who were spiritually dead and deserving of His wrath, but now have been made spiritually alive with Christ through faith. And as God unites sinners to Jesus through faith, all the benefits of Christ’s saving death and resurrection become theirs: the forgiveness of sins, freedom from the enslaving power of sin, and the gift of eternal life.

Furthermore, as God unites individuals to Christ through faith, this also unites them to each other as fellow members in Christ’s body. As fellow citizens in Christ’s kingdom. As fellow stones in God’s temple. And fellow members in God’s family.

All of that is a supernatural, spiritual reality, that God brings about by the working of His Holy Spirit in the lives of individual people. And so in a sense all of that glorious saving work which creates the church, in its essence, is invisible. New spiritual life and faith in Christ and union with Christ and our union with each other through Christ are not things that you can *directly* see and feel and touch. In and of themselves they are invisible, spiritual realities.

The fact that this is the case, has led some people historically to refer to this spiritual community as the “invisible” church. What they are acknowledging with that label is that these supernatural, spiritual realities that make someone a member of Christ’s universal church are not things we can directly see.

However, what we also see from the Scriptures is that when these supernatural, spiritual realities create this community of people who have been made spiritually alive with Christ, that community . . . and the new spiritual life of that community (their love for God and love for each other) . . . are to be made visible to the world. The invisible church is to be made visible. Now, how is that to be done?

Last week, I tried to take a step in this direction by arguing that membership in the universal church should be lived out through membership in a local church. This is one of the ways the invisible church becomes visible. Those who have been made alive with Christ through faith are to gather themselves into identifiable, local congregations . . . local communities . . . who commit to live out their faith together in accountable relationships with each other as fellow Christians.

In so many ways, I would argue, this is really the assumption of the entire New Testament in the way that it is written and the instructions given for living as followers of Christ. I think you would be hard-pressed to obey several of the clear commands of the New Testament if you are not living in relationship to and accountability to a local church. Commands like don't neglect to meet together. Submit to your leaders. Leaders, watch over those entrusted to your care. Confess your sins to one another. Forgive each other. Serve each other.

And, most directly, as it relates to the authority that Christ has given to local churches in the world, we see in Matthew 18 that Jesus has given local churches the authority on earth to publicly declare who belongs to Christ's church and who does not.

This authority is what Jesus refers to in Matthew 16 as "the keys of the kingdom." And in Matthew 18, right after explaining the steps a church should take to remove someone from membership who claims to be a Christian but is living in persistent, unrepentant sin, Jesus declares that He is present with His church in the exercise of that same authority of the keys of the kingdom wherever two or three are gathered in His name.

It's important to understand in Matthew 18 that the "two or three that are gathered in Jesus' name" and the authority Jesus is giving them to speak on his behalf in the world are not just two Christian friends at a coffee shop who agree on the best flavor of latte. In the context of Matthew 18, it is a local church (which at a minimum must contain two or three) agreeing on whether an individual should be regarded as a member of Christ's church or not in light of their confession of the gospel.

Now, local churches exercise this authority *in light of* their own faithful confession of the gospel revealed by God in His Word, just as it was revealed to Peter in Matthew 16, that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God.

So this is NOT an absolute authority. This an authority derived from a church's own true confession of the revealed gospel. There are such things as "false churches" who deny this gospel though they claim to speak for Christ. So it is not an absolute authority. It is subject to Christ and His Word.

NOR is it the authority to *make* someone spiritually new, or spiritually unite someone to Christ. That's God's work through faith. The church does not have the power or authority to do that. Nevertheless, local churches have the authority to publicly affirm that spiritual reality, as representatives of Christ and His gospel on the earth, based on that individual's profession of faith.

And it is precisely here where I want to consider with you the meaning and practice of baptism and the Lord's Supper. Because what we see is that Jesus gives these visible signs to the church as a way of publicly declaring . . . publicly affirming . . . who is a disciple of Jesus and therefore a member of Christ's church . . . and to do so in a way that visibly displays the glorious spiritual realities that make this true. And so these signs become a part of how the invisible church is made visible.

So with all of that in mind let's consider the meaning and practice of baptism and the Lord's Supper.

BAPTISM

We will start with baptism. I'm going to give you a summary statement, but then I'm going to walk through this phrase by phrase:

In baptism, an individual publicly proclaims his or her faith in Christ, and a church affirms that individual's profession of faith, by immersing a believer in water as a sign of his or her union with Christ, forgiveness of sins, and new spiritual life.

1. An individual publicly proclaims his or her faith in Christ

First, in baptism, an individual publicly proclaims his or her faith in Christ. We read earlier from Acts 2, where the apostle Peter proclaims the saving death and resurrection of Jesus to the crowd gathered in Jerusalem. Peter finishes with this statement in Acts 2:36:

Let all the house of Israel therefore know for certain that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified."

And then we read:

Now when they heard this they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, "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.

Verse 41:

So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls.

Three thousand individual people received Peter's word and were added to the church in Jerusalem that day. What word did they receive? Peter's proclamation of Jesus as both Lord and Christ. That Jesus is the Savior and the King, who provides the forgiveness of sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit to those who repent (who confess and turn from their sin) and turn to Christ as the Lord and the Savior of the world. Peter only mentions repentance here, but what we see through the rest of Acts is that repentance and faith are two sides of the same coin that are always assumed to go together. That's why the required response to the gospel is sometimes simply stated as repentance, sometimes it is simply stated as believing, and sometimes both. It's because they always go together.

And here, Peter declares that this personal, individual repentance and faith in Christ is to be publicly made known through baptism. Whereas repentance and faith are invisible responses of the heart, baptism is the visible sign that publicly declares that individual response.

Listen to what Peter says elsewhere in a letter that he wrote to churches in 1 Peter 3:21-22:

Baptism . . . now saves you [there you go, baptism saves you. But then, as if he realizes that statement might be misunderstood, he clarifies what he means by that], not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, 22 who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God...

In other words, it's not the physical act itself of being dipped in water that saves anyone. But it is what that act represents, namely, appealing by faith from the heart to God for a clean conscience. Appealing to God for the forgiveness He has provided and promised through the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Salvation is through faith. But water baptism then is the public act and sign that has been commanded by Jesus through which an individual proclaims that faith.

So, if you have repented of your sins and you are trusting in Jesus as Lord and Christ to forgive your sins and save you from the judgment you deserve, God's Word says that you should proclaim that faith by being baptized.

In baptism an individual publicly proclaims his or her faith in Christ.

2. A church affirms that individual's profession of faith

Secondly, in baptism a church affirms that individual's profession of faith. Maybe this is an aspect of baptism that you haven't thought as much about.

But baptism is not *merely* an individual's own proclamation of his or her faith.

It is that. But it's more than that. One of the things that makes this clear is that we don't baptize ourselves! Bobby Jamieson, in his helpful little book *Understanding Baptism*, says it like this:

You don't baptize yourself; there are always two parties involved. And both parties say something to each other and to the world. People tend to think that baptism is a symbol that people can simply choose to place upon themselves, like deciding to buy a shirt at the store and then wearing it in public. . . . In fact, the New Testament presents a fuller picture . . . (6).

Who is given authority to affirm an individual's profession of faith? This is why I took the time earlier to review the authority of the local church to declare who is a member of the church of Jesus Christ. Based on Matthew 16 & 18, and other texts like 1 Corinthians 5 and 2 Corinthians 2, it is local churches, communities of Christians who gather in Jesus's name, that are given authority to make a pronouncement on a person's faith.

In Jesus' Great Commission at the end of Matthew's Gospel, Jesus declares that He has been given all authority in heaven and on earth, and therefore his disciples are to go and make more disciples of Christ, baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and teaching them to observe all that Jesus commanded. And then what does He promise? "And behold, I am with you always to the end of the age."

Jesus' promise to be "with" his disciples as they go and baptize sounds a lot like what? Matthew 18:20: "For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them." There you have my authority to proclaim my gospel and make disciples, visibly marking them off from the world through baptism, and pronouncing them to be members of my church.

And the fact that Jesus will be with His disciples to the end of the age in this mission to go and make disciples shows this is not just for that first generation of disciples, but for the church to the very end of the age.

What about those instances in Acts where an individual baptizes another individual and there doesn't seem to be any local church involvement? For example, Philip baptizes the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8 while he is on his way back to Ethiopia from Jerusalem. What's happening there? I would agree with those who see this as frontier missions type of situation. Acts actually tells us that Philip met this man on the road to Ethiopia in the "wilderness." In a "desert place." And there was no church in Ethiopia to baptize this man. And he did profess faith in Christ. So what is Philip to do? He should baptize him, because there is no church there to do so. But this is the exception, rather than the rule. Ordinarily, it is local churches who have the authority to baptize.

3. By immersing a believer in water as a sign of his or her union with Christ, forgiveness of sins, and new spiritual life.

In baptism, an individual publicly proclaims his or her faith in Christ, and a church affirms that individual's profession of faith . . . [how?] . . . by immersing a believer in water as a sign of his or her union with Christ, forgiveness of sins, and new spiritual life.

Why is it that Baptists think immersion, the plunging of an individual under the water and then bringing them back up, is essential to the act of baptism? Wouldn't it be fine, and maybe a little more convenient, to just sprinkle people with water?

The first thing I would say to this is that the Greek word "bapti/zw" means to dip or immerse.

Secondly, while sprinkling may capture the imagery of cleansing, which is certainly a crucial part of the imagery of baptism, portraying the forgiveness of our sins and being set apart to live unto the Lord (again, not the removal of dirt from our skin but the cleansing of our consciences through forgiveness), nevertheless, sprinkling fails to capture the way this cleansing happens. Namely, by dying to sin and rising to new spiritual life by our union with Jesus Christ in His saving death and resurrection from the dead. We see this most clearly in Romans 6, where Paul just assumes that believers in Jesus have been baptized. And that this baptism pictures our union with Christ in His death and resurrection. Romans 6:4:

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.

The beauty of baptism is not only does it give the church a God-ordained, visible sign for marking the church off from the world, it is a sign that so wonderfully displays the glorious, invisible reality that creates the church. Namely, spiritually dead sinners being made spiritually alive in union with Christ through faith.

In baptism, an individual publicly proclaims his or her faith in Christ, and a church affirms that individual's profession of faith, by immersing a believer in water as a sign of his or her union with Christ, forgiveness of sins, and new spiritual life.

Baptism is a one-time sign that is to be applied to a believer upon his or her profession of faith. In this regard, it is the visible sign of entry into the church of Jesus Christ. Just as we saw in Acts 2. Those who receive Peter's proclamation of the gospel were baptized, and were "added" to the church in Jerusalem. This is why, here at Clifton, we require baptism for those who desire to join the church.

THE LORD'S SUPPER

Baptism is one of two visible, new covenant signs that Christ has given to the church. If baptism is the one-time, entry sign of membership in the new covenant community, the Lord's Supper is the ongoing, repeated sign of that membership. The ongoing sign of our continued faith, our continued participation in the benefits of Christ's death, and our continued unity as fellow members in Christ's body, and our continued hope in Christ's return. So here is my attempt at a brief summary description of the Lord's Supper, and again, we will walk through this in each part:

In the Lord's Supper, a church partakes of the bread and cup together as a sign of Christ's sacrificial death for our sins, our ongoing faith and participation in the saving benefits of Christ's death, our unity as fellow members of Christ's body, and our hope in Christ's return.

A church partakes of the bread and cup together . . .

I want to begin by say that in the Lord' Supper, a church partakes of the bread and cup together . . .

In 1 Corinthians, the apostle Paul address the Church in Corinth regarding the way they are "celebrating" the Lord's Supper. They are not doing it rightly. Some of them are being characterized by self-indulgence and drunkenness while others are not getting anything at all. And this behavior was cutting at the very heart of what the Lord's Supper was supposed to display, because one of the key aspects the Lord's Supper was supposed to represent was the church's unity. We'll come to that in a moment.

But one of the things that is significant to note here is that Paul indicates it was the whole church coming together to take the Lord's Supper. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 11:18, "When you come together as a church, I hear that there are divisions among you." And at several other points Paul mentions them "coming together."

Now the church in Corinth was not coming together in a good way. But one thing this does reveal is that the context in which they celebrated the Lord's Supper was the whole church gathering.

So the Lord's Supper should be celebrated by the church, as a church. This is not an individual thing to do at home. Or with your family. Or with your small group. Or as a special

element in your wedding ceremony. In the Lord's Supper, the church partakes of the bread and cup together.

We are also glad to have visiting members of other gospel-believing churches celebrate this meal with us. Clifton Baptist Church is not the only local expression of the church of Jesus Christ! And therefore we are glad to display our unity with believers outside of our congregation as long as they are also baptized members of a local, gospel-believing church. Nevertheless, that celebration should take place in the context of a gathered congregation.

Now what does this sign communicate? At least four things:

1. Christ's sacrificial death for our sins

First, the church partakes of the bread and cup together as a sign of Christ's sacrificial death for our sins. This helps us to understand why Christ commanded the church to partake of these particular elements in this meal.

In the last supper that Jesus shared with His disciples, we are told this in Luke 22:19-20:

And [Jesus] took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, "This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me." ²⁰ And likewise the cup after they had eaten, saying, "This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood."

So Jesus identifies the broken bread with his body that would be given for the salvation of His disciples in death. And Jesus identifies the wine poured from the cup with the blood that he would shed for the salvation of His disciples in death.

It is surely not a coincidence that this last supper Jesus shared with his disciples was a Passover meal, in which Israel would remember the great salvation that God worked for them, when he brought them out of their slavery in Egypt and delivered their firstborn sons from death, by providing a lamb to be sacrificed in the place of their firstborn sons, even as every firstborn in Egypt was put to death. The sons of Israel were spared only because a lamb was sacrificed in their place.

And every year for centuries, according to God's command, Israel called this salvation to mind with the Passover meal. And now Jesus was declaring that salvation was coming again for God's people. But this time in a far greater way. Not just salvation from their political enemies or earthly slavemasters. But salvation from their sins and the eternal judgment they deserved from God Himself. And this salvation would come, not through the sacrificial death of an animal, but through the sacrificial death of God's own son in the place of sinners.

"This is *my* body, given for you. This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in *my* blood." And just as Israel had eaten the Passover to call to mind the great deliverance that was theirs by the sacrifice of a lamb, so now the church was to eat bread and drink the cup to call to mind the great deliverance we have received by the sacrificial death of Christ for our sins.

Jesus is not saying that the bread and cup are his actual body and blood. He is speaking symbolically. The bread is not his body any more than the cup “is” the new covenant. The bread and the cup represent his body and blood, which institute the new covenant. In other words, they are visible signs that call the reality of Christ’s saving, sacrificial death to our minds in a meaningful and tangible way. A death that forgives our sins and grants us peace with God.

When Jesus refers to the content of the cup, he refers to it as the “fruit of the vine.” Certainly in that historical context it was wine. But it would seem the most significant aspect of the symbolism is not necessarily the alcoholic content of the wine per se, but the blood-red juice of the grape from which it was made. “This is the new covenant in my blood.”

So whatever the fermentation, we drink the blood-red “the fruit of the vine” from the cup, and we eat the broken bread as a sign which calls to mind Christ’s sacrificial death for our sins.

2. Our ongoing faith and participation in the saving benefits of Christ’s death

Second, we eat and drink as a sign of our ongoing faith and participation in the saving benefits of Christ’s death. The apostle Paul says this in 1 Cor 10:16:

The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ?
The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ?

In this sense, eating and drinking the Lord’s Supper is a way for us to express our ongoing faith in Christ’s sacrificial death and *therefore* our ongoing participation in all the benefits that we receive because Christ has died in our place and we are united with Him by faith: the ongoing forgiveness of our sins, the ongoing peace and reconciliation we have with God, and all of the saving promises that are ours because of Christ.

When we become a Christian we don’t then leave the gospel behind as we move on to other things. We continue to live by faith in Christ who loved us and gave Himself for us. And the Lord’s Supper is a visible, tangible reminder of this gospel AND our ongoing dependence on Christ through faith.

As we consider the ongoing and repeated nature of the Lord’s Supper, it may be helpful to note at this point why we believe here at Clifton that baptism should be a prerequisite (a previous requirement) for welcoming someone to celebrate the Lord’s Supper. This implication flows from how these signs function. Baptism is the entry sign of union with Christ, whereas the Lord’s Supper is the ongoing sign of our participation in Christ and all the benefits of His saving death.

And just as baptism is not only an individual’s decision, but must involve the affirmation of the church. So also, taking the Lord’s Supper should not only be an individual’s decision, but is subject to the affirmation of the church . . . an affirmation which is given initially through baptism and being received into the membership of a local congregation, and in an ongoing way through our corporate celebration of the Lord’s Supper together.

This is the same pattern we see in Acts 2, where Peter calls people initially to repent and be baptized, and then those who are added to the church devote themselves to the apostle's teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of the bread, and the prayers.

So In the Lord's Supper, a church partakes of the bread and cup together as a sign of Christ's sacrificial death for our sins and of our ongoing faith and participation in the saving benefits of Christ's death.

3. Our unity as fellow members of Christ's body

Third, In the Lord's Supper, a church partakes of the bread and cup together . . . as a sign of our unity as fellow members of Christ's body. The apostle Paul says this in 1 Corinthians 10:17:

Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body,
for we all partake of the one bread.

Here again we have an indication that the Lord's Supper is a corporate activity, that should be celebrated in the context of a gathered congregation. Not that we literally have to find a loaf of bread large enough for all of us to eat from it, but that we are eating together as a sign of our common salvation and common union with Christ, which therefore unites us to one another.

At the same time, this unity that is visibly pictured through our eating and drinking together should be lived out in real relationships with our fellow members.

This is why Paul will say one chapter later in 1 Corinthians 11, "When you come together as a church, I hear there are divisions among you . . . When you come together it is not the Lord's Supper that you eat." In other words, the unity pictured by your eating and drinking the Lord's Supper together should be displayed . . . should be lived out . . . in your actual relationships with one another. In this sense, the Lord's Supper also serves as a regular reminder and opportunity for us to examine our relationships with our fellow believers and discern if we need to seek forgiveness or reconciliation in any way in order to maintain the unity of the body in the bond of peace.

4. Our hope in Christ's return

Finally, In the Lord's Supper, a church partakes of the bread and cup together as a sign of our hope in Christ's return.

Paul says this in 1 Corinthians 11:26: "For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes."

When we celebrate the Lord's Supper, we look back at what Christ has done once and for all by His sacrificial death for our sins, we look to the present as we continue to trust and rely on the grace of Jesus Christ for all of our present needs, and we look to the future, because our crucified and risen Christ has promised to return and to feast with His people when the Lord's Supper is fulfilled in the eternal kingdom of God.

Brian Vicker puts it like this, and I will close with this:

The gospel that proclaims Jesus' death also proclaims his resurrection, making the Supper not a memorial service in remembrance of the dead, but a remembrance of the dead and buried Jesus who rose from the grave and who is coming again. The constant interaction of the past, present and future is nowhere more evident than in the Lord's Supper. The death and resurrection of Christ guarantees the future and transforms the present as believers are reminded through the interpreted symbols that their lives are not just an endless loop of days; the One who gave himself for his people abides with them and is coming again for them (In *The Lord's Supper: Remembering and Proclaiming Christ until He Comes*, 338).