

## Baptism, a Mark of Discipleship

Matthew 28:16–20

Today we witnessed the reception of a family into the membership of this church. The parents publicly reaffirmed their faith in Christ and presented their three sons for baptism, taking vows to bring them up in the nurture and admonition of the LORD and to encourage them to profess Christ for themselves when they are ready.

Baptism with water is one of two sacraments Christ ordained for his church, the other being the Lord's supper. In baptism the Lord marks us as his own; in the Lord's supper he feeds us with himself as our true spiritual food, enabling us to live for his glory. *Baptism* marks the formal entrance into the covenant community, the *Lord's supper* the sign of continued fellowship with Christ and his people. The one is to be performed once, the other frequently.

Our Scripture text from the closing of the Gospel of Matthew is the key biblical text on baptism. Jesus says, "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age. Amen."<sup>1</sup> Here is our Lord's Great Commission to his church, given shortly before he ascended up to heaven. It is the church's marching orders until he returns in glory. Every faithful church will regularly reflect on this text and recommit itself to fulfilling it.

The Great Commission begins with Jesus' claim to be Ruler of heaven and earth, the Judge of the world. There can be no higher claim. Calvin reminds us that as we hear the preaching of the Word by Christ's ministers we should lift our eyes above the contemptible appearance of the man bringing God's Word and raise our eyes to the Master himself, by whose authority he preaches. As the church goes throughout the world, calling men and women to faith in Christ, we go not in our own authority but by the authority of him whom God has exalted and given the Name above every name, who sits at the right hand of the Father. You reject the message of Christ at your own eternal peril.

Observe three things. **First**, Christian baptism is administered in "the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit"—the one only living and true God. These divinely-inspired and carefully-chosen words expressly teach the doctrine of the *Trinity*: one God ("*the name*"—singular) in three distinct persons ("Father," "Son" and Holy Spirit"). In the original Greek each divine Person is in the exact same case (genitive); each Person is marked by the definite article. The same grammatical form is used for each Person, indicating their perfect equality.

---

<sup>1</sup> I disagree with the NKJV's putting the close quotation mark before "Amen" and believe it was spoken by Jesus.

There is *one* God, not three—that one God eternally existing in *three* divine *Persons*, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. If baptism is not administered in this express language it is *not* Christian baptism. Some cults and splinter-groups practice what they call “Jesus-only baptism”—evidence that they fail to “hear the church” (the words of our Lord in Matt. 18:17) and suppose that they have a more perfect understanding of the church’s Great Commission than the whole Christian church. But make no mistake: Christian baptism is Trinitarian. That is the God whom we worship—the only true God, eternally existing in three divine Persons. From eternity the Father determined to save a people and give them to his Son. The Son undertook to come to this earth and offer his life an atonement for the sins of his people. The Son sent the Spirit to call sinners to Christ, giving them a new heart to understand and receive the Gospel. All three Persons of the Trinity played an active part in our salvation. To God alone be glory!

**Second**, the church is duty-bound to teach those it baptizes all the commands of Jesus—“teaching them . . . all that I have commanded you.” This is part of the reason that baptism is to take place within the context of the church. I remember a number of years ago visiting someone at Sparrow Hospital. A young couple from our church who have since moved away was visiting too, along with the young man’s mother, who said she was a Christian but didn’t want anything to do with church. We were in the waiting area, and I was involved in conversation with another person when the young man’s mother leaned over and asked me if I had some water. My paper cup was probably a third full, so I handed it to her, and before I knew it, she used my water cup to “baptize” a man that she had been talking to! I turned around to hear her say, “I baptize you in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.” Right at Sparrow Hospital! Now a careful study of our text reveals that Jesus did *not* say, “Hey, one and all. You, whoever you are, hereby have my authority to go out and baptize anyone you please, at any time, whether you’re part of a church or not.” No! Notice who our Lord is talking to: the eleven apostles (Judas had already betrayed Christ and gone out and hanged himself). Jesus was not speaking to his disciples as private individuals but as the apostles whom he had ordained. And notice: he was not sanctioning hit-and-run baptisms! Baptism was in the context of the church’s commission to make disciples of all the nations—the church’s missionary mandate. Those who would be baptized would be those who had convinced the elders of the church that they were truly committed to being Christ’s disciples (or were presenting their covenant children for baptism in the same way that the saints under the old covenant presented their male seed for circumcision). There’s no pattern anywhere in the Bible for someone to bestow *on himself* the authority to administer baptism. There’s no pattern anywhere in the Bible for any *single individual* to authorize a baptism. Even I, as a lawfully-ordained minister of the Gospel and pastor of this church, need the

concurrency of our session to approve baptism. And there's certainly no pattern anywhere in the Bible to baptize anyone who does not want to stick around and be disciplined. If the church approves of someone saying, "I just want baptism, but I don't want to be part of the visible church," then something is sorely amiss. There's simply no biblical warrant for someone to say, "I want Jesus without the church."

Baptism is not an end in itself; it does not confer spiritual power, all on its own. Rather, baptism marks the beginning of *a life of discipleship in community with the visible body of Christ*. Teaching all Christ's commands is a lifelong process, not a onetime event. Baptism calls us to "walk in newness of life" (Rom. 6:4). As one OPC minister observed, "this newness of life involves gradual growth, not an instantaneous transformation."<sup>2</sup> This is why it is incumbent upon all Christians to *improve* our baptism—to recommit ourselves daily to Christ, whose name is upon us. Having observed baptism today is an excellent reminder for you to reflect on your own baptism and recommit yourself to Christ.

**Third**, notice the *central meaning* of Christian baptism: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them. . . ." What is baptism? According to Jesus, baptism is a *mark of discipleship*. This is its basic definition. "Make disciples . . . baptizing them." Consider this with me.

Though this is clear enough in the English, it is even clearer in the Greek, where the Great Commission is expressed in four verbs: "*go . . . make disciples . . . baptize . . . teach*." Of these four verbs, three of them are *participles*, and only one—the second: "make disciples"—is a finite verb. I have to get a bit technical here, but listen closely. This is important.

In English, *go* is a finite verb; *going* is a participle. One would never say in English, "I going." Rather, we would say, "I go," or "I am going" (supplying the state-of-being verb "am").

Jesus expressed the Great Commission in Greek as "*Going, therefore, make disciples . . . baptizing them . . . teaching them*." "Make disciples" is the finite verb, *the dominant verb of the sentence*. Grammatically, the finite verb expresses the dominant action, while the participles express concurrent actions. Note carefully: The primary action in the Great Commission is *not* "Go," but "Make disciples"! The Great Commission is *not* "Go, and as you go, be making disciples"—as if making disciples were secondary. Reduced to its bare bones, our Lord's Great Commission is: "*Make disciples, baptizing them*." "Make disciples" is the primary command, and as the church makes disciples, she is to baptize them. Put another way, one should not think, *I'm not able to go; therefore I'm not fulfilling the Great Commission*. All Christians are not called to go, as if leaving one's home

---

<sup>2</sup> Jeremiah Montgomery, "The Beauty of Christian Baptism" (*New Horizons*, Jan. 2025) ([https://opc.org/nh.html?article\\_id=1185](https://opc.org/nh.html?article_id=1185), accessed 3-16-26)

and ministering far away is the heart of the Great Commission; rather, the basic duty our Lord is calling us to do is to *make disciples*. What this means is that parents who are intentionally discipling their children are helping to fulfill the church's Great Commission. Bringing up your children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord is part of fulfilling the Great Commission. You do not need to feel like: *I was going to go into overseas ministry and help fulfill the Great Commission, but then I got married and had children, so I'm a Great-Commission washout*. Not at all! Remember, "*Make disciples . . . baptizing them*" is the heart of the Great Commission! With regard to adults we make disciples, and when the adult has indicated, "Yes, I am a disciple of Christ—I am his follower," then we baptize him. But in the case of little children being raised in the bosom of the church, we are endeavoring from their earliest moments to form them into disciples of Christ—our Great Commission duty. Little by little we are teaching them, by word and by example, to follow Christ. Children naturally follow their parents. When they play, they pretend to be adults just like their parents. They put on their parents' clothes and shoes and play house and pretend to say the things they hear their parents say. Children in Christian homes and Christian churches are intentionally being formed into *disciples* of Christ. From the time they come out of the womb, godly parents teach their children: "You, my dear child, are a gift from God. He gave you to me, and I am so glad. You are loved! And what I desire for you most of all is to give you back to Jesus, that he can make you all that you ought to be." Children of Christian parents have great advantages over the children of the world. They know their purpose in life is to follow Christ. That is what it means to be a disciple.

What is a disciple? *A learner, a follower*. That's the basic meaning of the word. Think of Jesus. He had *many* disciples—men and women who followed him wherever he went, listening to his teachings, hanging on to his every word, learning from him. There *was*—and *is*—no better teacher! Jesus was the long-promised Messiah of Israel. Tragically, when he came, he was rejected by the Jewish leaders, but "the common people heard him gladly."<sup>3</sup> The common people were naturally drawn to him; they wanted to learn from him. And out of his many disciples he chose twelve, whom he named apostles.<sup>4</sup> The church is built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets. The true church is apostolic. We can't all be apostles, but we *can*—and *must*—be *disciples*, that is, Christ's learners and followers.

Christian parents are called to disciple their children—that is, train them to be Christ's learners and followers. Is this not what every Christian parent truly wants for his own daughter or son? This is what was so eloquently expressed by the aged

---

<sup>3</sup> Mark 12:37 KJV, NKJV; Gk. ὁ πολὺς ὄχλος, *the large crowd* (in contrast to the antagonistic Jewish leaders)

<sup>4</sup> Luke 6:13

apostle John. He said, “I have no greater joy than to hear that my children walk in truth.”<sup>5</sup> No greater joy! Please, Lord, work in their hearts so that they walk in your truth!

If you want your son or daughter to be a success according to this world’s standards but are content that they want nothing to do with Christ, then there is something wrong with your priorities. Jesus said, “What shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?” I tell expectant Christian parents: The very best gift you could ever give your son or daughter is for them to hear the Word of God in your own voice, morning, noon and night, every day. God’s Word is not something that we are to think about only at church; it is to be something that we think about, talk about and hide in our heart every day of the week: “These words, which I command thee this day, shall be in thine heart: and thou shalt teach them diligently [to] thy children, and shalt talk of them when thou sittest in thine house, and when thou walkest by the way, and when thou liest down, and when thou risest up.”<sup>6</sup> That is a *Great Commission* duty!

All of us who have been baptized are supposed to be Christ’s disciples—his learners and followers. Becoming fully-formed disciples of the Lord Jesus is a lifelong quest, and I urge you to make this your lifelong goal. This should be a goal, not just for ourselves, but also for our children. “As for me, this is my covenant with them, saith the LORD; My spirit that is upon thee, and my words which I have put in thy mouth, shall not depart out of thy mouth, nor out of the mouth of thy seed, nor out of the mouth of thy seed’s seed, saith the LORD, from henceforth and forever” (Isa. 59:21). The things that are in our mouth are the things that are important to us.

In the language of the Bible, one’s “seed” is one’s descendants—one’s posterity. The Christian religion was intended to be spread organically through Christian families. Nature and experience teach us that parents know more than their children—at least at the beginning. A good parent who is a committed disciple of Christ knows that being a Christian is the best thing that could ever happen to one’s offspring. Jesus is “the way, the truth, and the life.” He said in the clearest terms that “no man cometh unto the Father, but by me.”<sup>7</sup> Was he right? He backed up his claim by doing *miracles*: restoring sight to the man born blind, feeding the five thousand by multiplying loaves and fishes—and the greatest miracle of all: rising from the dead after being crucified and murdered and buried for three days in a tomb cut out of stone. After his resurrection he was seen by witnesses who endured persecution and death rather than renounce what they knew to be true. He ascended to heaven at the Father’s right hand, where he will continue to reign till all his

---

<sup>5</sup> 3 John 4

<sup>6</sup> Deut. 6:6–7

<sup>7</sup> John 14:6

enemies are made a footstool for his feet. At the last day, he will sit and judge the living and the dead, assigning every man, woman and child who has ever lived either to heaven or hell at his command. Those who know and love him will be blessed in his beatific presence forevermore.

Christian parent, is this not what you want for your child? Do you not desperately pray, multiple times a day: “O Father, give my child a heart to know you—that is what I want more than anything else!” Is your son or daughter not a *disciple* of Jesus—a learner? Is this not what you are teaching to your child by your own example, every day, all week long, and in the company of his church as we gather for worship? If your child is a disciple—under your parental authority now, but hopefully someday by his own personal choice—then by what logic would you want to withhold from your young one the blessing of Christian baptism, the biblical mark of discipleship? Do you not want to declare to the world: “My child is a *Christian*—a disciple of Christ”? You do not want to be like some silly New-ager who won’t tell her son that he is a boy, and will wait until he is 18 to figure out for himself whether he is a boy or a girl! No! You inform your child of his gender, and you raise him as a Christian! That’s your God-given duty!

As a loving parent you want to give your child every benefit you can afford. Why withhold baptism? Do you not want your child to have the mark of Christ’s ownership upon her? As a lover of Christ you would give the Lord everything that he would want. Would you not give back to him the child he has given you? The biblical way a Christian parent gives his child to Christ is by presenting him or her for baptism. There are no waterless baby-dedications in the New Testament—none!

All of us who are baptized have been marked out as belonging to Christ. We are *his* disciples. We are not our own; we are bought with a price.<sup>8</sup> We belong to *him*—not to ourselves! If you are Christ’s disciple, then you want all your thinking to mirror that of your Master. *Your* knowledge is incomplete; on the other hand, *he* knows all things! He knows the end from the beginning. He knows how everything is going to turn out. What Jesus thinks about any particular thing is the right thing.

Paul says in Romans 6, “Therefore we were buried with Him through *baptism* into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should *walk in newness of life*.” There is our calling as baptized Christians: to walk in newness of life. In the words of a helpful article from *New Horizons*, “Discipleship is a lifelong process, not a onetime event. As a mark of discipleship, baptism is likewise a beginning. Like raindrops of a better world, baptism calls us to ‘walk in newness of life’ . . . this newness of life involves gradual growth, not an instantaneous transformation.”<sup>9</sup>

---

<sup>8</sup> 1 Cor. 6:19

<sup>9</sup> Jeremiah Montgomery, “The Beauty of Christian Baptism” (*New Horizons*, Jan. 2025) ([https://opc.org/nh.html?article\\_id=1185](https://opc.org/nh.html?article_id=1185), accessed 3-16-26). This article is strongly recommended!

There are “household” baptisms in the Bible. One example is the baptism of the Philippian jailer’s household in Acts 16, but there are others as well. Households in the Bible included children and servants. The word *household* has gotten changed since then. A household according to the U.S. Census might have only one person, but that would not have been a household according to the Bible! If you belong to Christ and are the head of a household, then all the members of your household should be baptized with you, so that you can truly say, “As for me *and my house*, we will serve the LORD.”<sup>10</sup> Amen!

---

<sup>10</sup> Joshua 24:15