



A People Set Apart: Baptism (Acts 2:36-41)

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KingsWay Community Church

I want you to think about an important question with me. Why does our church exist? Some answer by pointing to our felt needs. The church exists to provide a buffet of spiritual services – a sense of belonging, emotionally engaging worship, opportunities for meaningful volunteerism, personal growth and development – for consumers who will take their business elsewhere if we fail to deliver.

Some answer by pointing to social needs in our community. We're here to relieve poverty, comfort the hurting, support childhood literacy, combat sex trafficking, and seek the welfare of the city through a variety of well-staffed programs. Some answer by pointing to moral decline in our culture. We're here to conserve Christian values amidst a crazy world.

How you answer the question, "Why does the church exist?" will have a profound effect on your attitude toward the church and how you evaluate the church. Must they play your preferred style of music? Accommodate your ideal weekend schedule? Provide a public platform for your gifts? Make you feel welcome and cared for? Say things you agree with and avoid things you don't? What does a faithful church look like? It all depends on why we exist. What's our fundamental purpose? What would you say?

If you open God's Word and listen to what he has to say, one answer, one priority, one concern looms over all others. It's the highest mountain, the summit by which every other peak is measured. The church exists to make much of Jesus. 1 Pe 2:9, "But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light."

Brother and sisters, we do not exist for our sake – our comfort, our desires, our cravings, our wants. The church exists, KingsWay exists, because God is on a mission to ravish the world with the splendor of his beauty. We exist for Jesus' sake. We exist so that the worth of our Redeemer, the weight of his glory, might be magnified and made visible in the eyes of a world that desperately needs to see Jesus is better.

Matthew 5:14–16, "You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light



to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.”

Jesus is on a mission is to make his glory known. So he says to the world, “Look over there. Do you see those people? Do you see that local church? That’s what I’m like. Their words, their affections, their actions, reflect my glory. Their existence, their corporate life, their unity, their relationships – with all their imperfections – is a testimony of my power to save. I want you to know me. So look at them. Watch them. Listen to them.”

The most loving thing God could do for a world that desperately needs to know Jesus is show them exactly where to look to see Jesus. And he gets that done by gathering his people into distinct, identifiable communities where the people of God are clearly distinguished from the world. That’s what church membership is all about. It’s not a structural, western imposition on organic, spiritual relationships. It’s an essential expression of our mission.

In fact, distinguishing his people from the world is so essential to God’s mission in the world that he hasn’t entrusted that work to us as individuals. He’s given that responsibility to his authorized representative on earth, the local church. A true local church is a body of baptized believers associated together for the worship of God and for carrying out Jesus’ commission to disciple the nations. It’s characterized by three things: the right preaching of God’s Word, the right administration of the sacraments, and the right maintenance of corporate holiness through discipline.

And Jesus charges us as a congregation in Matt 16 to publicly affirm who is part of our number and who is not so that the world knows exactly where to look in order to see Jesus. If that’s a new concept for you, go back and listen to Caleb’s sermon last Sunday on the church’s authority. Or pick up a helpful book on the subject. Allow me to recommend two in particular. *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church*, by Mark Dever, and *The Rule of Love*, by Jonathan Leeman.

Maybe heard Caleb and thought, “Man, I’m really struggling with all this talk about the church’s authority because I’ve been hurt by the church in the past,” please don’t let that experience drive you away. Jesus died for his church and loves his church – not because she’s perfect but because she’s his.

So instead of running to the golf course or ranting online, go back to Scripture and with help from someone like Jonathan Leeman, study what God actually says about the church’s authority, what it looks like and doesn’t look like, why Christ is glorified when



we submit ourselves to a local church through membership, asking her to affirm and oversee our profession of faith.

Bottom line, the world needs to know where to look to see Jesus. And Jesus uses the local church to set his people apart from the world. So how do we do that? Our public judgment, saying to the world, "Look here if you want to see Jesus!" begins with baptism. Acts 2 shows us exactly how baptism works.

V. 36 picks up on the Day of Pentecost, at the end of the Apostle Peter's first sermon. He's just finished preaching the gospel, the good news that Jesus is the long-awaited Messiah who died on the cross to rescue us from sin and the death we deserve and give us life! "Let all the house of Israel therefore know for certain that God has made him both Lord and Christ," Peter declares.

But that's not how the Jewish people treated Jesus. They rejected him. Like all of us, they rebelled against his divine authority. So Peter not only asserts the deity of Christ. He also points to the essence of human sin. V. 36, this Jesus who is Lord and Christ "you crucified!" Every wrong thing we think, feel, or do is a similar rejection of his authority.

And in that moment, the risen Lord gave Peter's hearers a precious gift. It's called the conviction of sin. They didn't remember no one is perfect or we all make mistakes. They felt the weight of their guilt before the Judge of all the earth. V. 37, "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?'"

It's the cry of a soul awakened. You know you're not right with God. You know your sin has separated you from him. You feel guilty, and no matter how hard you try, you can't find relief. You can't find life. It's a good thing, friends, when we despair of saving ourselves. It's the gate through which you must pass if you are to trust the only One who can. "Brothers, what shall we do?"

If crucifying Jesus was the wrong response, what's the right response? V. 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.'" I want to answer three questions about baptism this morning: (1) What is baptism? (2) Who should participate in baptism? (3) What happens when you're baptized?

1) WHAT IS BAPTISM?

“Repent and be baptized,” Peter says. To repent means to turn away from your sins. To renounce and forsake them. To humbly confess them to God not as an exercise in self-atonement, but as a cry for mercy.

Why is repentance a necessary response to the gospel? Because you can’t have the world and Jesus. You can’t hold fast to sin and hold fast to Jesus. Repentance means turning away from sin, from trusting people and things besides God, to give you life, for the sake of turning toward Jesus, trusting Jesus, to give you life. And yet Peter doesn’t say, “Repent and believe.” He says, “Repent and be baptized.”

The word “baptize” means to dip or immerse. In the New Testament, it meant to go under the water and come back up out of the water. For example, we read in Jn 3:23, “John also was baptizing at Aenon near Salim, because water was plentiful there...”

So why would Peter say that if you want to become a Christian you must repent and be baptized? It’s because baptism is how faith in Jesus goes public. And that’s the first answer to our question – what is baptism?

A) Baptism is a profession of faith in Christ

Why do the apostles sometimes tell people in Acts to “repent and believe” and other times to “repent and be baptized”? Because God says more than trust Jesus. He says express your trust in Jesus in this way. He’s ordained the substance of our confession – believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. And he’s ordained the form of our confession – rise and be baptized.

Embracing both the substance and the form are a necessary for obeying Jesus. Don’t just have faith in Jesus. Express your faith in Jesus in a specific way. As Peter says in 1 Pe 3:21, baptism is “an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ.”

Going under the water and coming up out of the water itself doesn’t save anyone. We are saved through repentance and faith. Not baptism. But if you’re a Christian, the outward action of baptism is an expression of an inward spiritual reality. It’s a public profession of faith in Christ.

B) Baptism is a picture of union with Christ

Notice Peter doesn’t just say in v. 38, “Repent and be baptized...” He says, “Repent and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ.” Why does he say that? Because the faith we

express through baptism brings us into intimate spiritual union with Christ such that his life becomes our life, his story becomes our story.

The apostle Paul describes as much in Rom 6:4-5. “We were therefore buried 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. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.”

Have you ever wondered why the Lord commands us to be baptized and not to climb Mt. Everest? The Lord ordained baptism as the way we go public with our faith because it’s a powerful symbol of two things. When we go under the water, it’s a symbol of dying. Baptism declares that when you become a Christian, you die to the guilt and power of sin. It is as if you died when Jesus died because all the saving benefits of his death have become your own, including, as Peter says in Acts 2:38, the “forgiveness of your sins.”

The Apostle Paul makes this connection explicit in Acts 22:16 when he quotes Ananias: “And now why do you wait? Rise and be baptized and wash away your sins, calling on his name.” Does going under the water and coming out of the water literally take away our sins like some sort of magical rite of purification? No. It’s an expression of faith, one of the ways we call on the name of the Lord. Yet what happens as a result of our faith in Christ? He removes our sins as far as the east is from the west!

So what does coming up out of the water symbolize? Being raised to new life in Christ because Jesus didn’t remain dead! He rose from the grave. Death couldn’t hold him. Sin couldn’t master him. In the same way, all who have been united to him by faith have been freed from the guilt and power of sin to walk in the newness of life – a life that will one day include an immortal body. Because Jesus rose, we too will rise.

C) Baptism is a sign of the new covenant

How did the Lord set his people apart from the world before Jesus’ death and resurrection? How did he command the Israelites to identify themselves as his people? By keeping the Mosaic law under the terms of the Old Covenant, including observing the Sabbath and (if you were male) being circumcised. The circumcision was a malediction of sorts – in the same way part of my body has been cut off, may I be cut off from all the blessings of relationship with Yahweh if I fail to keep his law.

From the very beginning, circumcision of the body also symbolized the required circumcision of heart, a spiritual consecration to the Lord’s priorities and purposes.

Sadly, when we look back on the history of Israel, what do we see? Time and again, those who had been circumcised in their body failed to circumcise their hearts. So God promised to establish a new covenant with his people where he would do for them what they had repeatedly failed to do themselves.

Ezekiel 36:26–27, “And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules.”

Jeremiah 31:33–34, “For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, ‘Know the LORD,’ for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the LORD...”

It made total sense under the Old Covenant to tell fellow members of the people of God, “Know the LORD,” because being part of the ethnic people of Israel didn’t mean you were right with God. That changed in a radical way with the New Covenant! God’s people were reconstituted by the internal work of the Spirit. Now we are identified, set apart from the world, not by a physical mark in our bodies but by a profession of faith in Christ expressed through baptism.

So baptism is like circumcision in that the physical act functions as a boundary marker. It publicly identifies someone as part of the people of God. But baptism is unlike circumcision in that it is not an expression of future hope, a desire that one day someone will trust Jesus. It is an expression of present faith, a sign that someone already trusts Jesus, that God has already given them a new heart through the regenerating work of the Spirit.

That’s why Peter says in v. 38, “Repent and be baptized...and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.” Turning away from sin, being united to Christ, receiving the blessing of forgiveness, and being indwelt by the Holy Spirit are inseparable under the terms of the New Covenant. So we don’t baptize people hoping they will follow Jesus. We baptize people who have committed to obeying Jesus in the power of the Spirit. Gal 3:27, “For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ...”

In summary, baptism is a profession of faith in Christ, a picture of union with Christ, and a sign of the new covenant that marks the people of God off from the rest of the world.

2) WHO SHOULD PARTICIPATE IN BAPTISM?

Look at v. 39. “For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself.” Phrases like “for you and for your children” or “all who are far off,” allude the prophecy from Joel 2 Peter quoted earlier in v. 17. “And in the last days it shall be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh,” young and old, rich and poor, black and white, Jew and Gentile.

Does that mean all will be saved therefore all should be baptized? No. The promised gift of the Spirit is reserved (v. 39) for “everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself.” In context, the call Peter’s referring to is not the universal invitation of the gospel from Isa 45:22, “Turn to be and be saved, all the ends of the earth.” It’s not a general call. It’s an effectual call. It’s the word of the Gospel, applied by the Spirit, that causes those the Lord has purposed to save, to respond to him with repentance and faith.

In context, those “whom the Lord our God calls to himself” in v. 39, are those who experience the grace of conviction in v. 37. It’s those who choose to save themselves “from this crooked generation” in v. 40 by receiving or trusting the word of the gospel in v. 41. In other words, baptism is reserved for those who make a credible profession of faith because the realities it signifies are only true for genuine Christians.

So if you think you’re a Christian, does that mean you should be baptized! Maybe. Did you notice no one in Acts 2 (or anywhere else in Scripture) baptizes themselves? That’s incredibly important. Why? Because baptism is more than a personal profession of faith in Christ. It is the church’s public affirmation of your profession. It’s the way we say to a watching world, “As best as we can tell, this one is a follower of Christ.”

Does that mean we should force a professing Christian to navigate some sort of probation period where we agree to baptize them only after a multi-year period of obedience? No. Baptism isn’t an eagle scout badge given as a reward for good behavior. Peter summoned those who were convicted of sin to immediately respond by professing their faith in Christ through baptism.

However, there is another ditch on the opposite side that gives people a false assurance of salvation by baptizing them too quickly. Friends, I can’t tell you the number of times I’ve heard someone who grew up in the Bible belt tell me, “Well pastor, I was baptized at age 6, but I don’t think I really became a Christian until I was 16, or until I was 26.”



Does God delight to save 6-year-olds? Absolutely. But when someone is 6 years old, it's hard to distinguish a supernatural response to the gospel from a natural desire to do whatever everyone else is doing or what they think their family wants them to do. It's an area we must exercise biblical wisdom, especially since the recorded baptisms in Acts are adults coming out of a pagan or Jewish context where the family influence was completely *against* following Jesus.

Does that mean we shouldn't baptize anyone under 18 if they're growing up in a Christian home? Of course not. It does mean we should be very, very careful about giving a young person a false assurance of salvation – not just for their sake, but for the sake of protecting our public witness to the gospel. There are young men and women who grew up in our church, were baptized here as children, but when they entered high school began making their own decisions, it became clear their profession of faith wasn't genuine.

So if a child comes up to me and says, "Pastor, I want to be baptized," what do I say? I say, "It sounds like God is working in your life. That's exciting! Let's talk." Why do I say that? Because I believe v. 39. "The promise is for you and for your children." And in our subsequent conversation I'm going to ask important questions like, "What is the gospel? What does it mean to repent of your sins? Do you understand what it means for God's people to hold you accountable for following Jesus and vice versa in an age-appropriate way? Is the authenticity of your profession something members of our church besides your mom or dad can recognize and celebrate?"

We don't have a minimum age for baptism at KingsWay because Scripture doesn't set one. Though in my pastoral experience, and as a father of three, I think it's often best to wait until the teen years, though there are certainly exceptions to the rule. In most cases, the risks associated with baptizing a child too quickly, causing significant, spiritual harm by giving a false assurance of salvation, far outweigh the disadvantages of baptizing a child too slowly, especially when parents are faithful to celebrate evidence of God's work in their lives every step along the way.

No matter how old someone is, we only baptize those who have received the word of the gospel, who have placed their faith in Christ and committed to obey him accordingly.

3) WHAT HAPPENS WHEN YOU'RE BAPTIZED?

Remember baptism isn't an option. It's not a suggestion. "Repent and be baptized" is a command. It's an act of obedience to Christ. It's how we announce to the church and



the world, “I’m going to follow Jesus.” It’s how we nail our flag to the mast, put on the team uniform, and take an oath of citizenship in the kingdom of God, so to speak.

And there’s always blessing when we choose to obey the Lord! He often uses baptism to strengthen our assurance of salvation because it’s an objective, visible reminder of what Christ Jesus has done for you! You have died with Christ. You have been raised with Christ. Who you are has fundamentally changed. You’re no longer a slave to sin. You’re a child of God. A deeper assurance of those realities is a precious gift and often accompanies baptism.

And yet baptism isn’t merely about what you’re doing. It’s just as much about what the church is doing. It’s the initial way we exercise the corporate authority Jesus has given us to identify someone as one of Jesus’ disciples, to publicly recognize Christians in the eyes of a watching world.

Look at v. 41. “So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls.” Added to what? Added to the church in Jerusalem, added to the visible, local expression of the body of Christ. That makes sense when you stop and think about the spiritual reality baptism represents.

When you’re united to Christ, who else are you united to as a result? You’re united to his body because you can’t be united to the head (Christ) without also being united to the body (the church). 1 Cor 12:12–13, “For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body...”

It’s striking in Acts 2:41 how Luke describes church membership as a spiritual reality created by baptism. He doesn’t say, “So those who received his word were baptized, and then from that number, 3,000 people later became members of the church.” They received the word. They were baptized. And that meant 3,000 were added to the church. In other words, you could say, “Three thousand souls were added,” OR you could say, “Three thousand souls received his word and were baptized.”

What’s the implication? The mere presence of faith in Christ is insufficient for church membership. That faith must be professed in the way God requires because God has tied the church’s public judgment to the public sacrament of baptism. You can think someone is a Christian. They may very well call themselves as a Christian. But Jesus has not given us liberty to create a different front door for the church.



In Matt 28, he commands us to make disciples by baptizing them. Baptism is how God has charged us as a congregation to publicly welcome his people into the family of God. It is disobedient to Scripture and profoundly unwise to treat baptism and membership as two separate things. If we baptize them and then postpone church membership, we're basically saying, "We're thrilled to recognize you as a member of the body of Christ, but we're not going to hold you accountable for following Jesus. We're happy to affirm your profession, but we're not going to oversee it."

You won't find that sort of distinction anywhere in Scripture. People are baptized and the same people are added. It harms an individual Christian when we separate them. It's not good for our witness to the world. And it reinforces our tendency to PRIVATIZE a sacrament that is fundamentally corporate.

It's why I'm thrilled all three of the women getting baptized this morning are formally joining our church next Sunday. But in a critical sense, our spiritual responsibility for their lives doesn't begin next Sunday. It begins this morning because baptism and membership are two sides of the same coin.

CONCLUSION

I love how Luke says v. 41 that three thousand "souls" were added. We're not talking people on a list in the church office. We're talking about the care of souls. A soul is precious thing, something Jesus is eager to care for. And you will not experience the fullness of his plan to care for you apart from membership in a local church enacted through baptism.

Baptism is a precious gift of grace, brothers and sisters. It's not an optional rite. It's not a badge of honor for super-Christians. **It's the church's public affirmation of a profession of faith signifying a believer's entrance into covenant relationship with God and his people.**

If you believe you're a Christian and have never been baptized and become a member of a local church, take the opportunity today to talk with me or one of the other elders. Right now, however, I want us to pray for the folks who are about to be baptized.