

## Changing Kingdoms...*the meaning of baptism*

By Remy Diederich

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This morning I want to talk about something that many people are confused about in the church...something that many people have even ignored and that is...baptism. Baptism is fascinating to me because Jesus and the apostles treated baptism as a non-negotiable part of the faith experience yet many people today wouldn't bat an eye if baptism was never mentioned again because it's just not relevant to them. It seems archaic and like a meaningless ritual that they can easily do without. Maybe that's how you feel about it.

So my goal today is to help us restore, not only an understanding of baptism but, *a sense of urgency*...a sense that we've neglected something very important and central to our faith and we need to do all we can to make it non-negotiable once again.

### Rites of Passage

Now baptism is what we call a *rite of passage*. I'm will give you a lot of scriptural teaching in just a minute on baptism but right now I want to spend a little time talking about what a rite of passage means. A rite of passage is a ritual that we perform to celebrate or at least commemorate transitioning from one status in life to another.

There are all kinds of transitions that we observe...birth, graduation, marriage, and of course the final passage is death. For each of these we transitions we have a ritual or "rite" that brings closure to *what was* and opens the door to *what is to come*.

For example, when most people turn 18 they not only graduate from high school but they also graduate from the care of their parents where they move on to college or live on their own and get a job. (At least that's what most parents hope for!) And we celebrate that transition with a ritual called a *commencement service* at their school (commencement meaning "to begin") and then we follow it with a graduation party, right? We take time to mark and celebrate that moment because that child is moving from one world to another and we deem that as significant.

I remember sitting in my room the day of my high school graduation and crying for a moment as the realization hit me that I would *never* experience high school again. It's not that I enjoyed high school that much. It was just the finality of it all. It was like something was dying that day. I knew that I could never go back. I spent eighteen years being a kid with no transitions but this was very real and very final. And it's that sense of death and finality that is at the heart of a rite of passage. It's like you go through a one-way door with no return entrance. There is no going back and that's why rites of passages are celebrations but also very *sobering*. So, I think there is something very important, even *sacred* about taking time to mark the moment where we transition from one life to another.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> In fact, I think that's one of the many problems that with couples living together without the rite of marriage. A line needs to be drawn in the sand where you declare to the world that you *were* two independent people but you have now merged your lives to become one new person. It brings closure to your lives of independence – a death - and releases you to become "one flesh" as the Bible talks about. As long as a couple lives together without marriage there is an awareness that either one can still back out.

I learned about the importance of rites of passage the hard way. When I was about two months away from graduating from the University of Minnesota I got a call from the admissions office and they told me that I was still missing a class and I couldn't graduate until I took that class. I said, "What about the graduation ceremony?" And they said I had two options. "You can go through the graduation ceremony and then take the class. Or you can take the class in the summer and come back in December to go through the ceremony."

Well, I didn't like either option. I didn't want to go through commencement until I finished my classes. I knew it would detract from the moment knowing that I still had a class to take. But I didn't want to come back in December either. That seemed to be anti-climatic. It would be old news by then. So I just had them mail me my diploma. It was disappointing but I tried to justify it in my mind by telling myself that it wasn't a big deal. Graduation ceremonies are just an old-fashioned ritual where you get dressed up in a silly robe and pointy hat and walk across a stage in front of a bunch of bored relatives in a hot auditorium. No great loss.

But, do you know what? I have always regretted that I skipped commencement because I never got the sense of closure that I think I needed. I worked hard for four years and spent thousands of dollars and then just went right into the work world without my rite of passage. And that was a mistake. I've always felt like I was missing something. (Thankfully, when I graduated with my Masters I did go through the ceremony and it was extra meaningful to me.)

I don't know the psychology of it but I really think there is something about how God has wired us that makes rites of passage important. Just like your umbilical cord has to be cut to separate you from the world of your mother's womb and release you to the world outside I think we all need rites of passage to help us separate ourselves from the past and release us into our future.

And I think that's true in the spiritual realm as well. That's why Jesus gave us the rite of baptism to help us mark our passage from the kingdom *of this world* and into the kingdom *of God*. And if we neglect that ritual I think we are missing something spiritually and we will live to regret it. We will always carry a lingering sense of loss. Let me explain this a bit more.

If you've been tracking with me this summer I've been talking about the kingdom of God that Jesus brought to earth. When Jesus came to earth he brought an alternative kingdom with him and plopped it right down alongside the kingdom of this world. And now we've got two worlds to choose from... two options before us. The kingdom of this world has to do with *what pleases us*. It has to do with pleasing *our desires* for power and wealth and control and pleasure – even at the expense of other people.

But the kingdom that Jesus brought has to do with pleasing *God's* desires. And so his kingdom focuses on worshipping God and developing godly character and joining God in his mission to restore everything that's broken in this world. Therefore we have two very clear choices before us. Jesus invites us to reject the kingdom of this world and enter his kingdom and if we do that he tells us to mark it with a rite of passage... which is baptism; where we immerse ourselves in water to symbolize our change of kingdom allegiance. Very simple but very symbolic.

Well, I want to take the rest of my time here this morning to give you some biblical background for what I'm talking about. If you open up your bulletin I laid out six types of baptisms that are mentioned in the Bible and I want to walk you through each one. As you'll see, the meaning of baptism evolved a little from the first baptism to the last one mentioned. And like I said, my goal today is to can restore the meaning and value of baptism and return it to being non-negotiable for us.

### **Jewish Baptism**

First I want to show you that baptism was not unique to Christians. Like most things in the early church baptism came from the Jews. History tells us that baptism had three primary meanings for the Jew...<sup>2</sup>

1. They would be baptized whenever they felt the need to be purified from sin or to prepare themselves for an act of service. For example, priests would often be baptized before they did their duties in the temple.
2. They were baptized to cleanse themselves in preparation for the coming Messiah. In fact there was one group of Jews that baptized themselves every day just in case the messiah came that day...they wanted to be ready.
3. Gentiles (non-jews) were baptized when they converted to the Jewish faith.<sup>3</sup>

### **John's Baptism**

The next baptism we see in the Bible is John's baptism. And John's baptism carried almost the exact same meaning as Jewish baptism. You see, we can tell that it was an act of purification because Mark tells us...

*John came, baptizing ... and preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Mark 1:4<sup>4</sup>*

And we can tell that John's baptism had to do with preparing people for the messiah because John the Baptist said...

*The reason I came baptizing with water was that he (Jesus) might be revealed to Israel. John 1:31<sup>5</sup>*

Now, it's interesting to note that baptism was so important to Jesus that he insisted on being baptized by John. Listen to this...

*Then Jesus went from Galilee to the Jordan River to be baptized by John. But John didn't want to baptize him. "I am the one who needs to be baptized by you," he said, "so why are you coming to me?" But Jesus said, "It must be done, because we must do everything that is right." So then John baptized him. Matthew 3:13-15*

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<sup>2</sup> To learn more about Jewish baptism visit these websites... <http://www.bebaptized.org/Jewishroots.htm> and <http://www.wildolive.co.uk/>

<sup>3</sup> *The building of the mikveh (baptism pool) was so important in ancient times it was said to take precedence over the construction of a synagogue. Immersion was so important that it occurred before the high Priest conducted the service on the Day of Atonement, before the regular priests participated in the Temple service, before each person entered the Temple complex, before a scribe wrote the name of God, as well as several other occasions. Ron Moseley, Ph. D., <http://www.bebaptized.org/Jewishroots.htm>*

<sup>4</sup> *Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him (John) in the Jordan River. Matthew 3:6*

<sup>5</sup> *John's baptism was a baptism of repentance. He told the people to believe in the one coming after him, that is, in Jesus. Acts 19:4*

If Jesus felt it was important to be baptized, do you think it might be important for us to be baptized? Jesus got baptized because it was *the right thing to do* or to “fulfill all righteousness” as another translation says. Jesus didn’t set himself above or apart from this rite of passage. He embraced it as his own and insisted that he be baptized just like everyone else.

### Jesus’ Baptism

So there was Jewish baptism. There was John’s baptism. But Jesus also baptized people...did you know that?

*After this, Jesus and his disciples went out into the Judean countryside, where he spent some time with them, and baptized. Now John also was baptizing ...and people were constantly coming to be baptized. John 3:22-24*

So Jesus and John were both baptizing people.<sup>6</sup> But how was Jesus’ baptism different from John’s? Well, people were baptized by John in preparation for Jesus. But Jesus’ baptism was associated with being filled with the Holy Spirit.

We see this distinction in the book of Acts where Paul was preaching to the Corinthian church. Paul realized that some disciples had only been baptized with John’s baptism and not in the name of Jesus and so he clarifies things for them...

*Paul found some disciples and asked them, “Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?” They answered, “No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit.” So Paul asked, “Then what baptism did you receive?” “John’s baptism,” they replied. John’s baptism was a baptism of repentance. He told the people to believe in the one coming after him, that is, in Jesus.” On hearing this, they were baptized into the name of the Lord Jesus. When Paul placed his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came on them, and they spoke in tongues and prophesied. Acts 19:2-5*

When Jesus was baptized the Spirit descended on him like a dove. It appears that God blesses people with his Spirit in baptism.

Now, not only did *Jesus* have people baptized, he made sure that his apostles continued the tradition. Just before he left the earth he said...

*Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age. Matthew 28:19,20*

I want you to notice something in this statement because it answers some questions that I’ve had about the relevance of baptism in our culture today. That’s something that I’ve struggled with...wondering if baptism is culturally outdated and irrelevant. But if you look here, there’s a *time factor* mentioned as well as a *culture factor*.

How long are we to make disciples and baptize? *Until the end of the age*...Jesus is with us to perform these things until the end of the age. And in what culture is this valid? Just the Jewish culture? No, we are to make disciples *of all nations* which means every culture. My point is, baptism isn’t tied to the first century or to the Jewish culture. Baptism is tied to Jesus’ command to make disciples which is

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<sup>6</sup> Although, John 4:2 tells us that Jesus did do the baptizing himself.

for *all* people for *all* times. So as long as we are making disciples - no matter where we are or what year it is - we should be baptizing people who decide to follow Jesus.

### Early Church Baptism

Let's take a look at the nature of baptism in the early days of the church. After Peter preached his first sermon this was the response of the people...

*Brethren, what shall we do?" Peter said to them, "Repent, and each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; ... Those who accepted his message were baptized, Acts 2:37,38, 41*

And later in the book of Acts it says...

*Philip went down to a city in Samaria and proclaimed the Christ there...when they believed Philip as he preached the good news of the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women. Acts 8:4-6, 12*

It's interesting that Luke notes that it wasn't just men being baptized - that was the custom of the Jews. It shows us the radical change Jesus brought with him in gender roles and dignifying the spiritual side of women.

Now, baptism had always carried with it an idea of death and resurrection. But in the early church baptism told the story of *not only* the person dying to an old life and living a new one but it told the *specific* story of Jesus' death and resurrection and how the two are intricately and mysteriously related. Listen to how Paul put it...

*We were ... buried with him (Jesus) through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead ..., we too may live a new life. If we have been united with him ... in his death, we will certainly also be united with him in his resurrection.*

*For we know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin-- because anyone who has died has been freed from sin. Romans 6:4-7*

Paul is saying...look, this isn't just some one dimensional religious act of dedication. When you go down in the waters of baptism you are spiritually linking arms with Jesus in *his* death resulting in a spiritual reality for you that enables you to die to sin. And when you come out of the water another spiritual reality takes place that empowers you to live a new life. There is a spiritual transaction that takes place as you identify with the death and resurrection of Jesus through baptism.

So, if you have seen baptism as meaningless and irrelevant... are you sure you want to pass that up? Do you really want to take the chance that baptism is a meaningless ritual? For the early church it was a profound spiritual experience often accompanied by being filled with the Spirit verifying that something significant was taking place spiritually.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Baptism also symbolized to the church that they were being joined to the faith community. *The body is a unit, though it is made up of many parts; and though all its parts are many, they form one body. So it is with Christ. 13 For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body...* 1 Corinthians 12:12,13. So that tells us that baptism is not merely an individual event. It's not just about you and Jesus. It's a *community* event. That's why it's important that we all attend a baptism if we can because we, the church, are welcoming these people into the fellowship of believers.

## Your Baptism

Now let's talk about *your* baptism. I'll close today by recapping some of the things I've said and without apology give you seven reasons why I think you should be baptized.

1. *You should be baptized to obey Jesus.* If he told us to do it, we should do it.
2. *You should be baptized to follow the example of Jesus and the early church.* I like the thought that I can share in the same experience as Jesus and every one of the early church disciples. The continuity of experience over the centuries is powerful.
3. Even if your infant baptism meant something to you and your parents, getting baptized again is *a great way to affirm or complete what your parents set in motion.* Some people strongly disagree with this. They think that getting baptized a second time discounts the first time. I think it's a personal decision. If you want the experience of being baptized to confirm your faith, you should do it.
4. *You should be baptized to dramatize what's happened in your life* – that you have crossed over from the kingdom of this world into the kingdom of heaven. That you've been cleansed of your sin and that you've died with Jesus to sin and now live a new life. I think the act of baptism actually helps actualize (make real) these things in your life.
5. *You should be baptized as a way of going public with your faith.* Some of you have never openly declared your faith and identified yourself with Jesus. You are a closet Christian! Baptism is your way of saying, "I'm following Jesus and I'm not ashamed of it."
6. *You should be baptized to identify yourself with fellow believers.* It's your way of saying that you join yourself – not only to Jesus but – to the faith community and you want to be held accountable.
7. And finally, I think you should be baptized because *it enables you to share a common experience with your church community.* At Cedarbrook we pride ourselves on diversity of background and experience. That is, indeed, something to celebrate. But I think it is also good to have common experiences...experiences that we all share in together.

### A note on confirmation:

At Cedarbrook, we don't automatically confirm people at the end of a class. Confirmation is a declaration of authentic faith. Confirmation isn't something done to you. It's something you must do when the time is right. For people that were baptized as infants and don't want to be re-baptized, they are welcome to share their faith commitment without being baptized.

### Details for those being baptized/confirmed at Cedarbrook Church:

- Write out a paragraph about your decision to follow Jesus and/or why baptism/confirmation is important to you. I will have you read this before you are baptized/confirmed.
- Send the paragraph to [pastor@cedarbrookchurch.net](mailto:pastor@cedarbrookchurch.net) at least three days before the baptism.
- Invite your friends and family to the baptism/confirmation.
- You are welcome to have someone special baptize you or stand with you as you are baptized.

- If you are being baptized, wear shorts and t-shirt. Ladies, please wear a swimsuit under your short and t-shirt.
- Bring a towel and change of clothes.
- If you have any special concerns about the baptism/confirmation please don't hesitate to express them. We will work to find a solution that is acceptable to you.

Your Statement of Faith:

As you prepare your paragraph to share, please include in it when or how you came to faith in Jesus.

Just make it natural. If it was me I'd say something like:

"I grew up in the church but never understood what they were talking about. It wasn't until a college Bible study where it all came together. I finally understood that Jesus was God and he wanted to be involved in every aspect of my life. I want to be baptized to accept his offer of salvation, receive his forgiveness and commit my life to him."