

ONE BAPTISM

Ephesians 4:1-6

July 21, 2019

Today we are wrapping up a 3-week series on Baptism. Two weeks ago, we took a look at the baptism of Cornelius and his Gentile family/friends in Acts 10. We learned about “Who Should Be Baptized and Why?” Last Sunday, Pastor Eric helped us dig into Romans 6 and we asked the question: “What is the meaning of Baptism?” He urged us to take a look back at our own baptism as a sort of “mile marker” in our own faith journey. Looking back at our own personal baptism, reminds us that our relationship with sin has changed; we count ourselves dead to sin. We are now called to walk in the newness of life under the Lordship of Jesus Christ. If you missed either of these sermons, there are audio/video links available on our website.¹ Or, you can pick up a written transcript out in our Fellowship Hall. Today, we are going to take one more look at baptism. In fact, we’re going to focus on just one thing: “ONE BAPTISM.” NOT just one person’s baptism and not just baptism as the one thing. We’re going to focus on this 2-word phrase, “ONE BAPTISM.”

Before reading this transcript any further, please stop and read Ephesians 4:1-6.

ONE BAPTISM calls us...

1) to be baptized in a public, church-wide celebration. In ways, this is similar to our public celebration of the Lord’s Supper. Communion would lose so much of its significance if we only practiced it in the privacy of our own homes. But we celebrate the communion we have in Christ TOGETHER, when we partake of the one loaf and drink the cup together. With baptism, rather than contemplating the symbolism of the bread and juice, we contemplate the symbolism of the water. We have the opportunity to hear people’s Christian testimony, and to observe this step of obedience to Christ. And, we celebrate together an important step in a fellow Christ-followers’ faith journey!

Our Efree Statement of Faith summarizes baptism well: “...The Lord Jesus mandated two ordinances, baptism and the Lord's Supper, which visibly and tangibly express the gospel. Though they are not the means of salvation, *when celebrated by the church* in genuine faith, these ordinances confirm and nourish the believer.”² Let’s pay special attention to the phrase “when celebrated by the church.” As a pastor, there is a question that I get from time to time: “Is it okay to have a PRIVATE baptism?” The way I try to answer this question, is by explaining that baptism is not only an act of PERSONAL identification with Jesus Christ. Baptism is also a CORPORATE identification with the Church family. Every believer is baptized “into one body.”³

1 Corinthians 12:12-13 describes it this way: “Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts form ONE BODY, so it is with Christ. For we were all baptized by ONE SPIRIT so as to form ONE BODY—whether Jews or Gentiles, slave or free—and we were all given the ONE SPIRIT to drink.” Now, these verses are describing for us, what the Holy Spirit does on the day of our salvation. When He comes to dwell within our individual lives. But these verses also call us to recognize, that on the day of our salvation, something else happens: we become a part of the ONE BODY. In other words, when someone is baptized in water, it’s not ONLY an outward demonstration of their personal, inward, spiritual change. It is also a demonstration of spiritual affinity. It’s a picture of our mutual connectedness and solidarity through Christ. All of us who are together in Christ, have TOGETHER died to sin, have TOGETHER been buried with Christ, and have TOGETHER been raised to new life. So, baptism is NOT just a private, individual act; it has a corporate dimension to it. It teaches us and reminds us of our ONENESS as the Church of Jesus Christ. This is why it is healthy, EVEN NECESSARY, for the church to gather together to witness and celebrate each other’s baptisms.

¹ Visit www.efcbemidji.org/media and click on the various links.

² Taken from Article 7 of the EFCA Statement of Faith.

³ Consider Galatians 3:26-29.

Baptism is an excellent reminder to all of us, that the Christian life is not meant to be lived in isolation. Each believer ought to seek out a God-honoring Christian church and participate in it actively. This is why so many churches tie baptism in, with church membership. These two really do go hand-in-hand in many ways. Now, our church, the Evangelical Free Church of Bemidji, does NOT require baptism for membership.⁴ As much as we strongly recommend baptism for every believer, we recognize that a local church is made up of people who believe in Jesus, NOT of people who have been baptized. In other words, what we are saying is that “as important as baptism is, it is secondary to the importance of faith.”⁵ That said, throughout the New Testament, Christians are identified BY their baptism. Ephesians 4:3-5 call us to, “Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; one Lord, one faith, ONE BAPTISM.” Those 2 words at the end, “one baptism” refer to the water baptism that publicly “identifies all believers as belonging together.”⁶

Baptism is a clear and powerful symbol of our shared union with our ONE LORD, Jesus Christ. Our ONE FAITH is clearly displayed through the symbolism of ONE BAPTISM. It’s not even a question of whether we LIKE each other. Take a look at the person sitting next to you. If they are a fellow Christ-follower, you are NOT required to like them. It doesn’t matter if we agree with them on every point of theology. The important thing to know is that we share in ONE BAPTISM. We agree on Christ; on His death/burial/resurrection. We have committed our lives to the same Savior/Lord. And, in so doing, we have committed our lives to one another. (Whether we like each other or not. Of course, I hope we like each other, or will at least learn to like each other!) The fact is, it doesn’t even matter that we have never met the millions of other Christ-followers around the world. There is ONE BAPTISM that unites us, across all ethnicities and all generations.⁷ We are instantly included as a part of the Christian community from the moment of our salvation. So let me be clear, water baptism doesn’t cause us to become part of the Christian community, but it does publicly declare that reality. It officially celebrates the current reality that the one getting baptized is already a part of the ONE BODY.⁸

This brings us to the 2nd major point of today’s message: ONE BAPTISM calls us...

2) ...to embrace our essential unity. ONE BAPTISM is a unifier; at least, it’s meant to be. Sometimes it divided believers. There’s common saying that many Christians, including myself, appreciate: “In Essentials Unity, In Non-Essentials Liberty, In All Things Charity.” The challenging thing, of course, is in determining just which things are essentials and which are non-essentials. As the Efree Church of Bemidji, we often talk about “majoring on the majors and minoring on the minors.” But, once again, we still need to discern which things are major and which things are minor.

As a local church, we choose to hold many of the details around baptism loosely. We aren’t going to fight or divide over the timing of baptism or over the mode of baptism. We deem these to be non-essentials. We choose to practice charity and love, over and around most of the broad spectrum

⁴ There is no official verse or command from Jesus that Christ-followers must become a member of a local church. But, a good case can certainly be made for it. And I would urge every believer to pursue membership with a local church for at least two reasons:

1 > For your own personal spiritual formation and accountability.

2 > For the corporate health and vitality of the local church.

⁵ Consider the Criminal on the Cross, for example, in Luke 23:39-43.

⁶ *The NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1989.

⁷ This union brings a unity among us that far exceeds any unity brought by race or nation, etc. In other words, Christian baptism represents a ONENESS that lasts into eternity. Our ONE BAPTISM lasts into eternity; it lasts longer than the bond between blood relatives, longer than the one flesh bond between husband/wife. Baptism represents our immersion into the eternal body of Christ. It’s intriguing to remember Jesus words in Matthew 12:48-50, “He replied to him, “Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?” Pointing to his disciples, he said, “Here are my mother and my brothers. For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.” And, in Matthew 22:30, Jesus teaches that, “At the resurrection people will neither marry nor be given in marriage; they will be like the angels in heaven.” One could argue that our connection as brothers and sisters in Christ surpasses and outlasts all of our other relational connections. One author writes, “even cultural distinctives, as beautiful as they might be, are trivial in comparison to the union God’s people share.” (Tabletalk magazine article regarding Galatians 3:28 by Aaron L. Garriott, August 2019, p. 19.) This is why a Christian White Man and a Christian African American Man can be closer than blood relatives. It’s why a Christian Caucasian Woman can be a genuine Sister in Christ to a Christian Native Woman.

⁸ It’s kind of like the wedding reception that we are having for Albin/Annelise. They reality is that they officially got married in June, but our church body is going to celebrate the reality of their marriage in July. That is happening next Sunday, July 28th.

of baptismal practices.⁹ Lest anyone think that this is just a convenient “cop-out” or a nice-sounding platitude, I’d like us to review a little piece of church history.

Church history reveals that, over the years, various differences of opinion over baptism have led to some extreme conflicts between Christ-followers. For example, consider the story of a man from the Anabaptist tradition named Balthasar Hubmaier.¹⁰ Back in the 1500s, he was thrown in prison in order to pressure him to change his belief about infant baptism. He resisted infant baptism even though his contemporaries insisted that he embrace it. However, even though he was tortured on the rack, his conscience would not allow him to recant. He was eventually tried for heresy and convicted. He was then executed by burning.¹¹ He was executed for opposing infant baptism and for teaching from his own convictions about believer’s baptism.

In fact, at one point in church history, this fierce debate over baptism, led to the execution of THOUSANDS of Christ-followers. Believers supported the execution of other believers because of their so-called heresy.¹² As Christians, this was NOT our finest hour. Historical incidents like this, should help us to better understand and appreciate today, why it’s important to “major on the majors and minor on the minors.” This part of church history is not only extremely sad but it is also an unfortunate irony. Baptism is intended to depict our ONENESS; to unify believers through our shared commitment to Christ, not to divide us. Not to cause us to execute one another.

It’s interesting to note another time in church history. Way back in the 100s, 2nd century Christians recorded some of their initial opinions about how baptism should be done. It’s instructive for us to consider THIS history as well. We actually teach about this in our baptism class. A good case can be made for baptism by immersion. We find support for it, in the meaning of the Greek word baptizo and from the descriptions of baptism that we find in the New Testament.¹³ On the other hand, questions about immersion can be raised. We should be forthright in acknowledging that the NT does NOT insist on baptism by immersion or by any other means for that matter. Although immersion SEEMS to have been the norm, it was not considered mandatory.

A practical example in the early church is found in a writing called, “The Didache.”¹⁴ It’s an early Christian document and it suggests this: “Concerning baptism, baptize in this way. Having first rehearsed all these things [the central truths of the Christian life, i.e. a baptism class], baptize in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit in running water. But if you do not have running water, then baptize in other water; and if you cannot in cold, then in warm. But if you have neither, then pour water on the head three times in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.”

Therefore, we can see from THIS early example of church history, that there really was quite a bit of “wiggle room” regarding the particulars of baptism. They had a preferred plan but they didn’t get too uptight about certain particulars.¹⁵ Therefore, even though some of us may hold some strong, personal convictions about the particular “hows” and “whens” of baptism, let’s learn a lesson from church history. May we choose not to repeat the division and infighting. Rather may we pursue a course that magnifies and promotes God’s glorious gift of baptism and the new life in Christ that it symbolizes. Let’s celebrate our ONE BAPTISM; our shared union with Christ, which is demonstrated so beautifully in the waters of baptism.

As we mentioned earlier, today we have a baptism service and all-church picnic out at Oak Hills Christian College lakefront. Our church has 3 guidelines for anyone being baptized today. The 1st guideline is that you...

⁹ We do choose to embrace the essential unity of our ONE BAPTISM. We baptize in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. And we do insist that the Bible’s clear teaching is that baptism is not a means of salvation. We are saved by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone.

¹⁰ “BAL tha sar, HUB my er”

¹¹ See notes on p. 189 of *Believer’s Baptism*, B&H, Nashville, TN, 2006, edited by Thomas R. Schreiner and Shawn D. Wright. Also https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Balthasar_Hubmaier

¹² Gregg R. Allison, *Sojourners and Strangers*, Crossway, Wheaton, IL, 2012, p. 329.

¹³ For example, note Acts 8:38-39 where Philip and the eunuch go “down into the water.”

¹⁴ “DID a k”

¹⁵ Consider also Paul’s tone in 1 Corinthians 1:13-17 and its surrounding context.

1. Inform one of the pastors (BEFORE the day of the baptism). Therefore, if you have not yet told me that you want to be baptized today, we'll need you to wait until our next baptism service. We are hoping to have our next baptism either in a pool or perhaps even a baptismal tank. We'll let you know once that is officially on the schedule. The 2nd guideline is that you...

2. Attend the baptism class.¹⁶ In this class, we go over what the Bible teaches about baptism. We cover the who, what, where, why, and when. We just offered this class over the past 2 Sundays. And we will likely offer it again sometime this fall or winter. The 3rd guideline is that you...

3. Write out your testimony (of how you came to faith in Jesus). This does not need to be some deep theological treatise on the efficacy of Christ or anything like that. This is just a simple explanation, in your own words, of why you chose to trust in Jesus as your Savior and why you are now following Him as your Lord.

We have 6 people being baptized today! There are 5 women and 1 guy. They are various ages and they are each going to share their own personal story of how God has been at work in their lives. You do NOT want to miss this folks! God has given us some great weather today. It's in the low 70s and partly cloudy with only a 10% chance of rain. But, regardless of the weather, even if it starts to rain or the horse flies start biting, it's so important that MANY of us gather to celebrate these baptisms as a church body. Not just so that we can formally recognize the public declaration of their faith, but also so that we can cheer them on!¹⁷ Let's encourage these fellow believers in this important milestone of their faith journey! Today we are going to celebrate our ONE BAPTISM in Jesus Christ. God's marvelous grace through Jesus Christ will be demonstrated once again!

*This sermon was preached at the Evangelical Free Church of Bemidji
on July 21, 2019 by Pastor Jerry R. A. Johnson*

¹⁶ Here's an interesting video related to the question, "Should Baptism Be Spontaneous?"
<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/video/should-baptism-be-spontaneous/>

¹⁷ Consider the inspiration we find as we hear the testimonies from the "Hall of Faith" in Hebrews 11.