

#Foundational Beliefs: The Meaning of Baptism

Matthew 3:1-6

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We preachers preach on a lot of topics like family, coping with certain issues like fear, depression. We preach about the hot social issues of our day. Yet some times even though a person has been a member of the church for years, if they were asked to explain the meaning of a practice like baptism, many would struggle with an explanation. So we continue in our foundational sermon series. Please stand for the reading of the gospel.

Reading of Matthew 3:1-6

John the Baptist preached the “kingdom of heaven has come near...” He called for the people that believed his message to respond to God in a particular way. So lets consider the meaning of baptism and why it is such a key foundational belief for us.

What is the meaning of baptism? Baptism is sign. Matthew 3:2, 13.

The action of baptism is a sign of God’s grace that is extended to us as abundant as the rivers and streams that are over flowing our area. We see this in chapter 3:2 where the scriptures says John was preaching the kingdom of heaven is near. John **called for anyone** who believed what he was preaching to respond in special way. **John said “repent” or turn away from sinfulness and then be baptized.** Matthew 3:13 describes how as John was baptizing people and Jesus came near to John, John himself wanted Jesus to baptize John. Jesus was the presence of God coming near and when he came near to John, John responded to his presence by desiring to be baptized.

If we ask what is the meaning of baptism then the answer based on

these scriptures is that baptism is a sign about something sacred God is doing for us that we cannot do for ourselves.

1.) Baptism is a sign that God's grace is coming to us. We don't come to God, God comes to us. We don't find God, he really finds us. We don't wait for God is waiting for us to come to Him.

When you are lost and someone saves you it is because they came to you to lead you out of the forest in which you were wandering around trying to find your way. I read yesterday about a woman and her husband have been missing for seven weeks. She was just recently found in the woods surviving on a small daily amount of trail mix and water. She needed someone to find her because she was lost. Baptism is a foundation belief for our lives because no matter what condition we find ourselves in God comes to us.

2.) Baptism is a sign we belong to God. When John preached God's kingdom was coming near people had a decision to make. They could reject God's offer and keep living the way they were or turn from their pursuit of sin and receive what God had to offer. But going into those baptismal waters was accepting the new identity that they belong to God. Baptism reminds us we are God's people. It's God way to restore His original purpose that God created us in his image. Our lives are to speak and do as God would speak and do with love and justice and mercy - that's our I.D.

3.) Baptism is our action we take to join God's church; not a local congregation but I mean God's universal entire church. When John was baptizing in the Jordan river, he was bringing people into God's movement, the people of God. Baptism is the door way into being a part of the family of faith or what we often call the body of Christ, the church.

Pastor Richard Denton has said to me that baptism is a sign of our

entry to be a part of God's church, and that the baptismal font that we actually have up here ought to be at our main entrance. It should be there as a sign that baptism is our entry into the true church of God.

Illustration: Signs tell us things. This time of the year yard sale signs are every where telling us where can get a good deal on clothes, dishes. Next Saturday, the Mt. Carmel church will have their yard sale. They have put signs around the area. Signs tell us beware of the dog. Signs tell us to do not enter.

John Wesley the key founder of the Methodist denomination once defined baptism a sacrament as "an outward sign of inward grace..." (Means of Grace, 16:188) (p.27) No matter how we have been baptized, baptism is a sign telling about what God has done for us.

Who can be baptized? Adults & infants/young children can be baptized. Acts 16:15, 33.

But many of us know that not all Christian denominations and Christians agree on who can be baptized. So we might be asking as Methodist who can be baptized. **The identity of baptism is for anyone, adult or children.** In the New testament there was primarily adult baptism because Christianity was new. There is no question that in the gospels those accounts of baptism are adults. In the gospels there are no instructions by Jesus to baptize children.

But the reason why we as Methodist baptize infants is because in the book of Acts we find stories that when an adult was converted to faith in Christ they were baptized and their entire household. The head of the house was baptized and the rest of the family. Acts 16:15, describes when a woman name Lydia was converted she and her entire household was baptized. In that same chapter is the more well known story of a jailer who was converted to the

faith and he and his entire household or family were baptized. 30-33, and The Apostle Paul also remarks in 1Corinthians 1:16 that he baptized a man named Stephanas and his household.

Since serving in the Methodist church I have been reminded that infant baptism was the norm of the church for centuries. I have also been exposed to an understanding about infant baptism that is really powerful. It has been said that **infant baptism is a great reminder that we all come like children/infants dependent upon God.**” (By Water and the Spirit, p.28)

Ephesians 2:8-10 teach us that **“we are saved by grace through faith, not of works or of ourselves lest anyone should boast.”**

Who should not be baptized? Those lacking repentance. Acts 2:38

A Good question to also asked is who should not be baptized? Are we Methodist just so loose with baptism that any one can be baptized?

The answer to that question as it applies to adults would be that anyone who is unwilling to turn away from their sinfulness should not be baptized. John preached “repent and be baptized.” The Apostle Peter preached the same in the book of Acts 2:38. Before a person is baptized they need to know who Jesus is and what sin is and why we need to be rescued from sin. If a person is shared the truth about the various forms of sin and how it exist in our lives and they are not willing to renounce that living and turn away from it, then they are not ready to be baptized. Remember baptism is a part of our new identity and if we are not willing to walk away from our old identity of sin, then we are not ready for baptism.

Part of our guidelines or worship liturgy in our hymnal for calls for a person to renounce sin, use their freedom and power God gives

to resist sin in what ever form they present themselves. (The United Methodist Hymnal, p.34)

No repentance - no baptism.

Young Children or infants should not be baptized if they are not going to be raised in a home or have someone in their life who will consistently be able to teach them the faith and keep them in the connection of the church. It would be better for them to wait when they on their own and can respond to the message of Jesus Christ.

Baptism is such a foundational belief because it reminds us of the grace of God that is seeking to free us from our sins, not giving us freedom to remain in our sins.

What is the difference between baptism and dedication? Gift and giving. Acts 2:37-38, Acts 16:15, 33.

This is why we as Methodist do not practice child dedications. The question will often come up what is the difference between baptism and dedication? I believe the difference is between the meaning of gift and giving. When we dedicate something it is a gift we are offering. It is something we are in control of and are doing. When we dedicate a child to the Lord we are saying here Lord, you can have our child we want this child to come to faith in you.

However, baptism is receiving from God grace given to us. After all we cannot really give anything to God when everything belongs to God anyway. What we can do is accept out of our free will his presence that through grace and truth empowers us to live this life in sync or in tune with His will. We baptize an infant accepting God grace is over them now and looking forward to the day when they themselves will confirm God's gift of forgiveness and new

life.

**Can we be saved without being baptized? Yes Ephesians 2:8-9,
Numbers 14:26-29, Numbers 1:3.**

Some times there is the debate about can we be within God's grace if we have not been baptized? Lets just acknowledge up front that not all Christian denominations agree in how to answer this question. We as Methodist would say yes, baptism is not necessary to be within God's grace.

The water is a sign of God's grace but what transforms lives and souls is God's gift of salvation; not water. The gospel of Luke tells us in chapter 23:43 that the dying thief on the cross with Jesus didn't get baptized; but Jesus said "this day you will be with me in paradise."

Some might ask, well what if a child was never baptized or even still born? Children are under grace they always have been. Read in the Old Testament where even people under the age of twenty were exempt from punishment when God's people rebelled. Numbers 1:3 describes how any one under the age of 20 were not even counted in the census. Numbers 14:26-29 describes how when God was punishing an entire generation for rebelling, he did not include anyone 20 years or younger.

God is a God of love holding those accountable who only truly can be accountable. A couple years ago I remember reading in Time Magazine how neurologist are beginning to realize that that the human brain doesn't reach full maturity until the early 20's. The article highlighted the puzzlement we sometimes have of why we as adults did some crazy things in our youth we would never do later, and its partly because our brains were not fully developed to comprehend what was at stake. The Old Testament passages remind us of that truth.

I have heard stories of when teenagers are killed in a car wreck that might even be the result of them drinking, there can be speculation and questioning whether God would punish them to hell or what about the teenager that commits suicide?

I believe the Old Testament passages reminds and teaches us God understands the heart and nature of the young and how vulnerable they are. It's no wonder Jesus rebuked his own disciples for hindering the children from approaching him.

Is it right to be re-baptized? No, reaffirmation. John
One last question that also surrounds baptism is what about being re-baptized. What do you do if a person was baptized as an infant they even went through confirmation where they confirmed or affirmed their baptism but then they strayed away from God and then want to get their life back on track with him. What do you do if they want to be re-baptized? What do you say if they what the experience if nothing else of walking into the baptismal waters as an adult? Is it right to be re-baptized. The answer we hold as Methodist is no.

The reason for that answer is a very important one. The answer of re-baptism is calling into question that the first baptism didn't take. Was it a dud? Was it like the fire cracker that got wet and wouldn't explode? The problem was not on God's end. God's grace never fails. We may break our end of the agreement, we may not fully understand everything but God is clear about his end. Since baptism is a sign of grace, God's grace never fails.

Rather than being re-baptized we are called to re-affirm our baptism. We are to confess again our sin and renounce the ways evil that led us away from God and recommit to follow in the ways of Christ.

Consider scripture like John 20, 21 and Acts 1-2. Those are

scriptures that describe how Jesus handled the disciples after he had risen from the grave. They describe what Jesus did with these same disciples that broke their promises and ran out on him. Jesus did not have them re-baptized. None of the disciples were re-baptized after their fall.

- They renewed their following of him.
- Jesus renewed his instructions for them, the disciples prayed together and waited for renewed power from God through the Holy Spirit; but there was no re-baptizing.

Being re-baptized is like trying to remarry the person we separated from as if it's the first time all over again. It's impossible. You can renew your wedding vows; but you cannot pretend like you were never married before.

Baptism is a foundation belief that is to play out in lives every day. Bishop Willimon once told the story that when he was in high school and would go out with his buddies, the last thing his mother would say as he was heading out the door was "Remember who you are." She meant remember you carry our name and a Christian.

- Everyday remember your baptism and remember how to live with those we love and those we find it difficult to get along.
- Remember your baptism is to live that repentance or turning from wrong is a daily calling by God.
- Remember your baptism whether you're a leader, a member or the pastor.