

3rd of Easter, April 6, 2008 (Communion Sunday)
Second Baptist Church, Lincoln, NE; Robert C. Molby, Interim
Pastor

Believer's Baptism

Selections from Matthew 28:19; Acts 2:38; 16:29-34; Romans 6:3-4; and Colossians 2:11-12 (NIV); see # 688, "The Christian's Baptism" in The Hymnal for Worship & Celebration, Word Music, Waco, TX, 1986

Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit (Matthew 28:19).

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 (Acts 2:38).

The jailer called for lights, rushed in and fell trembling before Paul and Silas.

He then brought them out and asked, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?"

They replied, "Believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved—you and your household."

Then they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all the others in his house.

At that hour of the night the jailer took them and washed their wounds; then immediately he and all his family were baptized.

The jailer brought them into his house and set a meal before them; he was filled with joy because he had come to believe in God—he and his whole family (Acts 16:29-34).

Don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death?

We were therefore buried with Him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life (Romans 6:3-4).

In Him you were also circumcised, in the putting off of the sinful nature, not with a circumcision done by the hands of men but with the circumcision done by Christ.

Having been buried with Him in baptism and raised with Him through your faith in the power of God, who raised Him from the dead (Colossians 2: 11-12).

If you ask people of other churches and about Baptists as to what they are they will probably say something about the way they practice baptism. After all, that is how Baptists became Baptists because of the perceived emphasis upon Baptism and the way they do it. However, it was not emphasis upon the *mode* of Baptism—that is, whether it is done by sprinkling or pouring or immersion, but upon the *subject* being baptized. In other words, if you are being baptized—or when you were baptized, the focus was not on the amount of water being used to baptize you—the focus was upon you—the one being baptized! If you are being baptized—or when you were baptized, the focus was not on a beautiful baptistery or an ornate baptismal font—the focus was upon you—the one being baptized.

I was baptized when I was 16 years of age—and no offense against my pastor who baptized me or the church in which I was baptized, but I don't remember that personal focus as an individual and what was happening to me. The focus was more on what had already happened—that I had previously accepted Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior and that this act of baptism was simply a public witness of what had taken place when Jesus came in to make his place of abode. Something else I remember and that was "walking the aisle"; there was something more personal happening in me at that moment than there was in the actual baptism. And there is nothing wrong with that! I will say more about that later.

My stepbrother, Clifford Dean, was also baptized at that time; as was my brother and my father. Cliff and I were never very close. Not too long ago his mother—my stepmother, died. As we gathered together for the memorial service, Cliff remembered that time of baptism. It meant something special to him. He never forgot that moment in his life. What it meant I have never

known because we never talked about it other than at that moment. But something happened for him at that time that was important. I hold on to the meaning it had for him—whatever it was, because there was no other evidence of faith in Christ for him that I ever saw in his life. When Cliff passed away more recently I was called to do his memorial service. His remembrance of his baptism helped me through that service.

Another illustration that helps drive home the point I am making. Almost thirty years ago, in my faith journey, I found myself being the stated supply of a Presbyterian Church in Gallatin, MO. A young mother wanted to be baptized and then have her infant daughter baptized. As you know the mode of baptism was not by immersion—which I was accustomed to doing, and the baby was not to be dedicated but baptized, infant baptism, if you please—which also I was not accustomed to do; and they wanted me to do it—the Presbyterian Church of Gallatin wanted me to do it—and the Presbytery okayed it! What was I going to do, I who had been an American Baptist since I was 16 years old and an ordained American Baptist Minister for many years—who had never performed baptism by sprinkling must less baptized a baby—what was I going to do? That threw me into a dilemma as I had never been before or since.

I prayed long and hard about that. I called up the Presbytery and told them of the situation. Very wisely they referred me to another pastor—one who had come out of the Disciples of Christ background and now serving a Presbyterian Church. As you know the Disciples of Christ churches baptize by immersion like we do and they do not believe in infant baptism. I called him up and told him my dilemma. He carefully listened, asked a few questions. He told me that he went through the same struggles. He determined to honor the traditions of the Presbyterian Church and be a pastor to the people. I wanted to do that too. Then he said, “At the time of baptism the most important thing happening is not you doing the baptizing, or how you are doing it but what is happening between the person being baptized and God.” That’s what I needed to hear—what was happening between the person

being baptized and God! I was focusing on what was happening to me—the one doing the baptism. I needed to let the focus be on the person being baptized and what it meant to her—get my mind off of myself. We had a beautiful moment in the service of baptism in a Presbyterian Church in Gallatin, MO because that young mother had a genuine “aha” moment with God in her baptism.

Yes, I performed the infant baptism but that is another story to be told at a later time. It’s much like our baby dedication services where the parents make promises to raise that child in the teachings of our Lord Jesus Christ and be responsible to see that he or she knows to make a personal decision for Christ as their Savior and Lord.

Those two stories illustrate our beginnings as Baptists. Back in the early 1600’s two Englishmen, John Smyth, a clergyman, and Thomas Helwys, a layman, found themselves in disagreement with the Church of England. Though Smyth was a clergyman in that church, through his studies of baptism in the Scriptures he felt that the one being baptized should be aware of what was happening. It was impossible for an infant to know what was happening at the moment of baptism. His preaching was contrary to what the Church of England was practicing and the Church took exception to his teaching. The Church was going to take some kind of action against him if he persisted. Smyth felt that to be true to the Word he couldn’t do otherwise. In other words Smyth was saying that before a person is baptized he or she should be a believer in Christ who knew what they were doing. To escape the clutches of the Church of England, Smyth, along with Thomas Helwys, a layman, and a small group who felt the same way, fled from Gainsborough, England to Amsterdam, Holland in the winter of 1607/1608. That’s almost exactly 1400 years this past winter; and, yes, the winters were cold there just like they are here! It would take some brave souls to flee their comfortable and warm homes to cross the English Channel and re-start in Amsterdam, Holland.

Now, although Smyth and his followers were convinced that only believers should be baptized, none of them had been baptized as believers! All of them had been baptized as infants, and, of course, knew nothing of that experience. So Smyth first baptized himself—by pouring water on his head, and then he baptized the others in the same way! Their primary concern was not the way they baptized—pouring was the only way that they knew and had seen; their primary concern was upon the person being baptized!

It's that first concern upon the person being baptized, that has become known as believer's baptism. And behind that concern is another fundamental and basic idea—that of a personal and voluntary faith. The person being baptized should be able to make a free and voluntary choice for Christ. Baptism was a sign, therefore, that one had made a pledge to a new purpose—it was a visible statement that "Christ is Lord." When you are baptized it is your saying to all who see you being baptized, "Christ is Lord!" It's a public profession of faith in Christ!

Let's look at some scriptures—the same ones that John Smyth and Thomas Helwys and that small group that went to Amsterdam, Holland probably looked at.

Acts 8:12, But 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 8:36-39, As they traveled along the road, they came to some water and the eunuch said, "Look, here is water. Why shouldn't I be baptized?" And he gave orders to stop the chariot. Then both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water and Philip baptized him. When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord suddenly took Philip away, and the eunuch did not see him again, but went on his way rejoicing.

Acts 16:33, At that hour of the night the jailer took them and washed their wounds; then immediately he and all his family were baptized.

Acts 18:8, Crispus, the synagogue ruler, and his entire household believed in the Lord; and many of the Corinthians who heard him believed and were baptized.

These are only a sampling of Scriptures that we could look at and they are enough. What are those scriptures saying to us about baptism? They are saying that baptism was a voluntary choice and that men and women chose to declare that Christ is Lord in their lives and in their affairs! It was a public declaration, not behind closed doors or done in secret!

In our life time, and even before our time—the hymn of invitation has come to be a call to walk the aisle and make a public declaration that Christ is Lord. To some extent that has taken away from the act of baptism being the declaration that Christ is Lord. Many of our denominations and churches have unconsciously made “walking the aisle” to be a way of declaring “Christ is Lord;” overshadowing the act of baptism itself. To that extent baptism has been made anticlimactic in our contemporary life.

But basic to believer’s baptism is that idea of soul freedom that emphasized the personal and voluntary nature of faith to accept Jesus Christ as Lord.

It was sometime later in our Baptist history that Baptists concluded that immersion was the mode to be used in baptism. But the *mode* is not believer’s baptism. The *mode* does not say Christ is Lord—it is the *person* who in the freedom of his own conscience accepts Christ as his or her savior and declares in baptism that Christ is Lord! In our Baptist churches we have decided to use immersion as that expression. We could, if necessary, because of a health or physical condition, use another mode but before we use any mode the individual has come to the conclusion that Christ is Lord and Savior and has so accepted Him in that way. Soul freedom is basic to believer’s baptism, the kind that Baptists insist upon. You are competent to make that

decision for yourself, no matter your IQ, just as those people we read about in the Scriptures, just as Smyth and Helwys and their small group did, just as many, many thousands have done all down through the years.

On the first Sunday of the month we have chosen to observe the Lord's Supper. We have come to that time in our service today.

As we prepare for this let's turn to hymn # 324, "Come, Celebrate Jesus." Following the singing of the hymn you are invited to further prepare yourself silently by personal prayer, telling the Lord that you want to come to his table, or that you don't want to come. A prayer is written in the bulletin that you are free to adopt or make your own prayer. Let's sing: