

Introduction

It is already August 18. Next week is the church picnic and even more importantly, next week is baptism Sunday. We have at least three individuals scheduled for baptism. I get really excited about baptism! I get excited because of the work that God is doing around us replacing hearts of stone with hearts of flesh. I delight in seeing these newly converted disciples of Christ boldly declaring their allegiance to him in front of a watching world. But there is another side to baptism that is often overlooked. I am talking about the role of the church itself. The church, the local church, plays an important role in the ordinance of baptism. The individual being baptized is not the only person who makes a declaration. And as we prepare to observe this ordinance, I am going to do some teaching today on baptism as an act of the church.

It is going to take more than a single text to unfold for you the doctrine. We are going to start with Matthew 16. And that will be our reading of the Scripture together. Matthew 16:13-19.

[Read Text; Pray]

I. Matthew 16:13-19.

This is one of those texts of Scripture that stand out.

A. The Identity of Jesus takes center stage. In this text it is apparent that everyone around the district knew there was something amazing and astounding about Jesus. Even if they did not recognize his true identity, what they were saying indicates they sensed a certain greatness. Some were saying he was John the Baptist. Others thought he was Elijah or Jeremiah or another of the prophets.

But the disciples knew Jesus was greater than all of these. Testifying for the group, Peter declared, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." You are the Messiah, the heir to David's throne, and the very Son of God. This recognition and admission is imperative for all true followers of Jesus.

It matters who you think Jesus is. Some people say Jesus is a good teacher. Classical liberals who reject the authority of the scriptures believe that. So do Hindus and Buddhists. Others say he is a prophet. Among them are Muslims, who list Jesus as one of the prophets but who deny that Jesus is the Son of God. Some people admit Jesus is a worker of miracles. Among them are the Jews.

But true followers of Christ, whom Jesus himself owns as his disciples, know that while these identities are not inaccurate, he is much more. He is the promised redeemer and king; he is the Son of God. If you reject the deity of Jesus, you are not his follower. You are not a member of his church. You are not among the redeemed.

Jesus applauds Peter's bold and confident declaration. He says, "blessed are you Simon." Jesus also instructs the disciples that this recognition is something no one will possess unless it is revealed to him by God. If you own Jesus as Messiah and Son of God, it is ultimately attributable to God and his gracious working in you.

B. Following Peter's great confession, Jesus moves the focus from his identity to his enterprise. He shifts from his person to his work. Jesus declares that he is a builder. He is building a church, his church. Now we really need to work hard here to remove from our minds images of church buildings. The word which is translated here as "church" means assembly or gathering of people. Jesus is not talking about a building with a steeple. Ultimately the building metaphor points to the expansion of his family of followers. And Jesus' work of expansion revolves around and is founded upon a rock. To Peter and the disciples Jesus said, "Upon this rock I will build my church." This grace-given revelation and confession of Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God, is essential and basic to being a part of his assembly.

C. And yet for all those who will not believe and will not confess, this foundational element is not a limitation in the building program. Jesus expresses more than confidence here. He expresses his authority. He is determined. He is absolutely certain about the success of his building program. He says, "I will build my church, and the gates of hell will not

prevail against it." Jesus knows that he possesses authority over hell itself, and hell and the devil and all the forces of evil will not be able to withstand the determination of Jesus to build his church. With that fact in mind, it is astonishing but true that Jesus then takes this authority of his and entrusts it to the church he is building.

He says, "I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven." Keys lock and unlock doors. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus urged people to enter the kingdom through the narrow gate. He made it clear that not everyone who says to him, "Lord, Lord," will ENTER the kingdom of heaven. On the day of judgment, many will be told to depart. The kingdom is something that is to be entered or out of which people will be shut. So handing the keys to the disciples and to those who follow Christ after them means that entrance to the kingdom is entrusted to the disciples of Jesus.

The kingdom is to be expanded through the efforts of Christ's disciples in preaching the gospel. In the declaring of the gospel, they express who is in and who is out. Notice Jesus says, "whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven and whatever you loose shall be loosed in heaven." The literal sense conveyed by the Greek is that "whatever you bind on earth shall already have been bound in heaven," and "whatever you loose on earth shall already have been loosed in heaven." The point is that the disciples' authority is an expression of the will of heaven. By binding or forbidding; by loosing or permitting; these disciples bear the authority of expressing or declaring what already has been determined in heaven. Simply put, Jesus is saying that he is entrusting to his disciples the authority to express on earth what has already been decided in heaven.

Let me see if I can illustrate. An ambassador of the United States to North Korea has been instructed by the President what the will of the administration is. So he enters into talks with the North Korean ambassador in regards to missiles. He says if you will destroy your missiles, we will lift trade sanctions. But, if you do not destroy your missiles, we will intensify those sanctions. The North Korean ambassador says, we will not destroy our missiles. So the US ambassador, on the authority granted to him by the President, declares that the sanctions will be intensified. They will be bound. It was already decided by the President. The President of the US is

not going to say to the ambassador, “whatever you decide.” Rather, he will say, “I empower you to decide according to my will and my direction, and therefore what you decide will already have been decided by me.” Even so, the church, acting under the authority and according to the directives of heaven in its loosing and binding, is expressing what God has already decreed. Rightly related to Christ, the church that Christ is building has the authority of Christ to decree and act out in the name of Christ what he has already directed.

People should listen to the true church then, because she speaks for Christ. She speaks for heaven. Now, it should be obvious that just any church that speaks does not speak for God, but true churches do—those with a right confession of Christ by God’s grace. Many false prophets have gone out into the world. Many will claim to speak for God who do not. But those in the act of loosing and binding who speak faithfully according to God’s revealed will do in fact enact on earth what already has been enacted in heaven. The faithful church speaks on earth what God has spoken in heaven. One cannot, therefore, disregard the actions of the faithful church on earth, for it speaks for God.

This points to us the incredible responsibility of rightly and faithfully communicating the gospel. We must be clear. The gospel is first and foremost the gospel of God. It is God’s gospel. We are ambassadors for Christ and God makes his appeal through us to the world to be reconciled to God. And he has entrusted to us the binding and loosing according to this gospel. The church is responsible for marking out or binding those who do not respond to the gospel in repentance and faith and for marking out or loosing those who do respond to the gospel in true repentance and faith in the Lord Jesus as the Christ.

Let’s look next to . . .

II. Matthew 18:15-20.

A. These verses come on the heels of an important parable, the parable of the lost sheep. In that parable Jesus explains the way in which a shepherd will leave in safe keeping the 99 of his sheep who have not wandered off in order to go and search out the 1 that went astray. And when he finds it he brings it back with great rejoicing. Jesus declares that this is how it is with

his Father. His Father goes after lost sheep because it is his will that not one of the disciples of Jesus should perish. Moving then into verse 15, Jesus now explains how this rescue of wayward sheep works in and through his people.

[Read text]

Jesus is teaching that the Father preserves his sheep. He works through the church to preserve and keep them. Jesus outlines the steps here as to how to handle a wandering (an unrepentant) sheep. The sheep is part of the church, the assembly, the gathering. This is a professing believer. The professing believer is part of a body of believers that is joined together and is accountable for one another. If the brother sins and refuses to repent though confronted, first by an individual and second by a small group within the church, he then is to be confronted by the entire church, the entire assembly. "If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church." This is the final step. If he still persists in sin, by refusing to listen when the entire church confronts him, then cast him out. Let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.

Jesus brings back into his instruction the same principle he had declared in the context of building his church. "Truly I say to you, 'Whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.'" Jesus is emphatic here. Truly I say to you! And there is more. He repeats the principle of authority. "Again, I say to you." He is emphasizing the same principle with different words. "If two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done by my Father in heaven." The wording is the same of that in Matthew 16. What they bind shall have been bound by God. What they loose shall have been loosed by God. What the faithful body of believers enacts on earth is what God has already enacted in heaven. The actions of the body are serious because they are acts of God.

There is a second reason why the acts of the body are serious. It is because they are performed in the very presence of Christ himself. For where two or three are gathered in my name there I am among them.

This, brothers and sisters, is the church, the assembly, the gathering. When we gather in his name, he is among us. It is extraordinary.

The church is the assembly of believers gathered in the name of Jesus under the authority of heaven and expressing the authority of heaven. It bears the responsibility to deal properly according to God's will with people and their sin. Christ in their midst authorizes them to take these actions and request his action in regard to the exercise of his authority.

On a practical level of what does this mean for you and me, we learn from this text that the church is Christ's plan for addressing sin in the lives of his followers. It is his plan for rescuing wandering sheep. The principle is echoed in Paul's letter to the Galatians: "Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness... Bear one another's burdens." Paul also applied the teaching when he wrote to the Corinthians about the brother who was unrepentant about his immorality. In 1 Corinthians 5:2, Paul implored the congregation, "Let him who has done this be removed from among you." Church discipline is hard, but it is one of two central functions Christ has entrusted to the assembly. And it is for our good. It is how God as a caring shepherd pursues and preserves those who wander. Reconciliation and restoration are the goals.

In Matthew 16 and Matthew 18, we witness the reality of heaven's authority operating through the assembly of Jesus' disciples. In the first case it operates in the expansion of the church, the building of the body as men and women confess Jesus to be the Christ. In the second case it operates in the protection and preservation of the church, dealing with unrepentant sin in the body. But in both cases we see authority in the church for the purpose of binding and loosing—For putting out and bringing in—For affirming and dis-affirming those who claim to belong to the assembly.

Let's turn finally to . . .

III. Matthew 28:18-20.

A. Here we have the Great Commission passage. And when we look at it in light of the two texts in Matthew we have already seen, we will see it to be richer, deeper, and fuller than we might have recognized before.

[read]

The commission here is direct. This is the task of the disciples. As they go, they are to make disciples, to baptize them, and to teach them to do everything Jesus commanded. But we need to see two important aspects here that are bound up in the giving of the commission. They are in fact reiterations of what we have just seen in Matthew 16 and 18.

First, there is authority. Christ Jesus possesses all authority and he delegates that authority to His followers. Jesus declares to his gathered disciples his dominion authority. "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me." He brings together authority in heaven and earth just as he did in both previous texts. The church possesses the keys of the kingdom given by the authority of Jesus himself. Whatever the church binds on earth shall have been bound in heaven. As Jesus underscores his authority in heaven and on earth, it is the ground of his commission to his disciples to make other disciples, which also takes us back to the expansion or building of the kingdom. The authority possessed by Jesus he conferred to his disciples. They are his ambassadors to expand the kingdom through disciple-making. They act with his authority. They speak for him. They bind for him and they loose for him.

The second important aspect of the commission here is the presence of Christ. He was right in the midst of his disciples in Matthew 16 as they proclaimed him Messiah and he stated that he would build and expand his church upon the basis of the confession. In Matthew 18, Jesus looked to a future time when he would not be with his disciples physically but would be in their midst when they were gathered in his name as a church. And now on the verge of ascending to heaven, Jesus, having commissioned them to go make disciples, promises his authoritative presence with them. He to whom all authority belongs is with them always.

What Jesus says here in Matthew 28 comes against the backdrop of Matthew 16 and 18. Bobby Jamieson explains the connections well in his little book, Understanding Baptism. He writes, "The keys of the kingdom are for binding on earth what's bound in heaven, and loosing on earth what's loosed in heaven. This means that the apostles and gathered

churches both have the authority to make public a declaration or verdict on Jesus' behalf. Think about what a judge does when he pounds his gavel. He doesn't write the law. He looks at the evidence. And then he declares a public—and binding—verdict.

"This judge-like authority to make official declarations on heaven's behalf is something Jesus gives to gathered churches, not to individual Christians. Listen to Matthew 18:20: "For where two or three are gathered together in my name, I am there among them." Jesus is not talking to small groups here . . . Jesus is saying that his heavenly authority belongs to gathered churches. A church is a regular gathering of at least two or three people who testify to Christ's name. And Christ is present with such gatherings to authorize them to speak in his name."

B. So let's bring this down to baptism. In baptism Christ's church is vocal. It speaks in his name. It is the church which is authorized to baptize. Baptism is the initiatory ceremony by which believers are visibly admitted by the church into the visible church body. And so when a person is baptized, that person is not the only one speaking.

The one being baptized is definitely speaking. They are declaring that they are trusting Christ, that their hope is in him. they are turning from sin to obey Christ. But the church is also speaking. Commissioned and authorized by Christ, the church by its delegated authority is speaking on behalf of Jesus. The church is loosing and binding. It is rendering a judgment before the world that this person being baptized has been joined to the family, has been brought into the assembly; they are one of us.

Since baptism is performed by an individual we recognize that individual to be acting in behalf of the assembly, but the assembly is speaking. We speak to the one who is being baptized that we welcome you into the family. We speak to the world and say, this one is part of us. In the act of baptism, we portray visibly the truth and reality of the gospel. We affirm the person's profession, that as far as we can tell this person is a believer in Christ. And we testify by the symbolism of baptism that in Christ their sins are forgiven and washed away, that they have been united with Christ in his

death and resurrection, that they are a new creature in Christ and heir to all the blessings and benefits of his work. This is a glorious truth!

Conclusion

Our culture and generation is one of individualism in which people come and go as they please. They are beholden to no one but themselves. Baptism is one of the ordinances of the church which points up the fact that in the family of God, it truly is about family. In biblical baptism, no one baptizes himself. It takes at least two. And it is not only the one who is being baptized who is saying something. The one who does the baptizing is speaking as well. That is in fact what we have seen this morning.

When a person is baptized biblically, they are saying, "I am in. I have turned from a life of sin. I believe Jesus is the Christ the Son of God and I trust him for God's forgiveness. I commit myself to following Jesus."

At the same time, the church speaks. And since the church speaks, it does matter who does the baptizing. When you go to the store and buy groceries or clothes or even to the car dealership to buy a car, it really does not matter who the cashier is or who the salesman is. Any of these people are authorized by their company to transact business on their behalf. But it is different when it comes to baptism. Baptism is not for sale. And it is not something that is just up to you. It is authorized by Christ to be practiced by the church as a sign that communicates his own action. The church speaks on the authorization of Jesus himself to communicate on earth what has already been recognized in heaven.

Baptism by groups which do not preach the biblical gospel is not authorized by Christ. Baptism in unbiblical manners is not authorized by Christ. But where the gospel is faithfully preached and baptismal manners are faithfully followed, the church speaks on the basis of Christ's authority and communicates on his behalf. The new believer speaks to God and the church. The new believer declares his or her commitment to Christ and his church. The church speaks as well and it says we affirm your profession of faith; we welcome you into the assembly; we commit ourselves to you; we publicly identify you as a follower of Christ. We say to the world, "This one belongs to Jesus!" And this we get to do next week!