

## “Our Teaching on Baptism”

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3-26-04

That is what we are focusing on this week. Our second life purpose in the Purpose Driven Series is Fellowship. Sharing, belonging, eating, being needed, contributing—all warm and meaningful thoughts.

This morning in class we were discussing the different levels of fellowship.

1. Membership
2. Friendship
3. Partnership
4. Kinship

This morning in class, it was stated that baptism is one of the things we all share as part of membership. The elders and the preaching team thought that it would be good at this point to share with you our core teaching about the vertical and horizontal aspects of baptism. We do this in an effort to show how LRC is like and yet not like other faith communities. We are going to study for just a few minutes and then end with an encouragement to respond to what God is saying to you about fellowship in his church.

In the book we are reading, The Purpose Driven Life, Rick Warren points out that

“Healthy families have family pride; members are not ashamed to be recognized as a part of the family. Sadly, I have met many believers who have never publicly identified themselves with their spiritual family as Jesus commanded—by being baptized.”

Here Rick Warren is pointing out the horizontal nature of baptism. It is something we share together in common as a group of people, something that unifies us. In class we discussed Romans 6:3 -

“<sup>3</sup>Or don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? <sup>4</sup>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.”

Acts 2:41 also illustrates the horizontal nature of baptism: “Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day. “

So when we are baptized into Christ, we are participating in an act that joins us to the body of Christ here on earth. Warren's book also points out another horizontal aspect of baptism—that is, the proclamation to other believers and to the world that we are accepting God's salvation.

We do need to point out that Warren's teaching presents only this horizontal teaching and does not describe the other aspect of baptism. The Bible also teaches a very vertical aspect of baptism. Baptism is both a physical and visible act between mankind and God.

Acts 22:16 says, "And now what are you waiting for? Get up, be baptized and wash your sins away, calling on his name."

In Acts 2:38, Peter addressed the crowd with these words: "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."

Now washing away sins and receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit are things that happen between us and God. Those are salvation things between us and God. These are not things we can get here on earth or from the church, but only from God himself.

So baptism has a horizontal aspect of joining us to the body of Christ on earth and also a vertical aspect of belonging to God as part of our faith response in accepting his grace.

At Little Rock Church, we teach the importance in both the vertical and horizontal aspects of baptism. In our Foundations class and on our website, we use words like "immersion," "raised from the dead," and "essential." These words sound different from many of our friends in the Christian community when speaking about baptism.

1) Much of the Christian community would focus only on the horizontal part of baptism and have it act only as the way to join the church here on earth. This is often characterized by leading people to faith and then having baptismal services much later to signify their faith and joining of the body. Some even teach baptism as optional. If you asked them about their salvation, they would use language like "I was at such and such when I accepted Jesus" or "when I became a believer."

2) Other groups would focus primarily on the vertical event and have it only tied to the salvation experience. This might be characterized as being baptized as a baby or at a very early age and then later go through a ceremony to join the church. If you asked them about their salvation, they would use language like "I was baptized at 6 weeks and then at age 12 was confirmed into the church."

3) Some of us came from a background that seemed to put an over-emphasis on the act of baptism as the most important aspect of the faith response. If you asked them about their salvation, they would use language like "I was at such and such when I was baptized."

So while these teachings have similarities with what we believe and teach, there are also some differences.

Religion and theology can get very confusing and technical. It is often these differences and debates that frustrate and turn people off. And if you look closely, it is easy to see that religious groups tend to have elements of reaction built into their structures in response to their history or some over-emphasis by another group.

What we need to do is to try not to be reactionary, but just accept the Bible for what it says, obey it and teach it. At LRC we believe that this approach will encourage unity.

This is what we believe the Bible would have us understand about baptism. We need to put baptism in its biblical context and view it in relation to everything the Word says about salvation.

Ephesians 2:8 is only one of many passages that speak about grace and faith: “For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God.”

That is it. Grace is given. Faith is expressed. Salvation occurs. Every other verse speaking about salvation will somehow be tied to these two words: Grace and Faith.

Now there are a lot of other scriptures that tell us to do things to express our faith:

Luke 10:23 "Therefore everyone who confesses Me before men, I will also confess him before My Father who is in heaven.”

Acts 2:21 “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved”

Rev 3:20 Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me.

I Peter 3:21 “Corresponding to that, baptism now saves you, not the removal of dirt from the flesh, but an appeal to God for a good conscience--through the resurrection of Jesus Christ,”

II Cor 7:10 “Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death.”

Each of these Scriptures call on us to do something. To earn it? To deserve it? No! But to express our faith? Yes! None is more important than the other, but each one important to obey.

We also observe in the Bible an immediacy to baptism after a person comes to faith. This is illustrated on the first day of the church, when 3000 were baptized on the same day. Also, the Ethiopian leader was baptized on the spot, and the Philippian jailer and his family were baptized that night at midnight. The Bible always portrays baptism as an immediate and natural response to faith.

That is the way our teaching should be. Just like in the early church, when a person comes to faith, his or her response should be, “I believe, where’s the water?”

So let’s pause here! I pointed out differences earlier. Just what am I saying by that?

Am I saying infant baptism doesn’t count or matter? No! It was a great statement of faith by your parents. It is just not a time where you as the person being baptized can have a vertical faith event with God. Even though we don’t practice infant baptism here, we are not saying that acts of faith like this didn’t matter.

Am I saying everyone has to understand everything about baptism or line up with the same view on the point of salvation? No.

Point of salvation, timing of salvation—what an unfortunate distraction we have created by such discussion.

You know, I believe that salvation is a process that ends with baptism where you are saved and join the church at that exact moment. The entire chapter of Romans 6 describes how this ceremony of baptism is involved as a perfect alignment of God's gift of grace and our response of faith through our participation with Jesus in His death, burial and resurrection. It just makes such sequential and logical sense to me. But you might believe that salvation is a process that occurs the exact moment you believe and repent, and then you confess and are baptized as expressions or celebrations of your salvation. Isn't such debate really unproductive? Because it really doesn't matter what you and I believe on these particular matters regarding the timing of salvation.

What *does* matter is what God's Word teaches and our obedience to it. And the clearest thing we can agree on is that our response to grace is faith and that God commands the visible expressions of repentance, confession and baptism.

So as leaders of this church, it is our responsibility to make sure each member under our care is saved. That is why we require anyone wanting to join the Little Rock Church to be a baptized believer, a person that has come to faith on his or her own and expressed this by confession, repentance and baptism.

So let's get back to the purpose of fellowship and choosing to belong. We've looked at God's teaching on being saved and being a part of his body on earth. But there is another commitment that we all need to make in choosing to belong. That is choosing to belong to a specific body of Christ and all that entails.

Here at Little Rock Church we are not bashful about asking new people to our church to join us, to place membership here. That way you are choosing to belong. You are making a commitment to fellowship at the deepest meaning of the word, kinship. We have a specific process to join this local congregation called Little Rock Church. We ask you to attend a class called "Foundations" that explains what we believe and our purposes, and we ask that you meet with one of our elders to share your conversion experience and have a time where you can ask questions about our church. If you haven't done this, we are having one of these classes next Sunday after lunch.

So, we encourage people not only to unite with God and his Church on earth in faith and baptism, we also encourage people to choose to belong to a specific congregation.

So I will close by calling you to do this

- 1) If you are here and want to know more about Jesus and the salvation he offers to you,
- 2) Maybe you know the salvation Jesus offers but have never accepted it,
- 3) Maybe you have come to faith in God and believe Him to be the son of God, but have not obeyed his command to be baptized,

Would you come and do that today as Trey leads us in song?