

# **THE SACRAMENTS**

“Baptism”

Matthew 3:13-17

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## **Scripture Reading**

*Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to John, to be baptized by him. John would have prevented him, saying, “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?” But Jesus answered him, “Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness.” Then he consented. And when Jesus was baptized, immediately he went up from the water, and behold, the heavens were opened to him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming to rest on him; and behold, a voice from heaven said, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased” (Matthew 3:13–17, ESV).*

## **Introduction**

In my senior year at Amarillo High School, I took a class called Humanities. It was the first time I was ever exposed to philosophy, architecture, and art history. Maybe it was the subject material. Maybe it was the fact my teenage hormones were finally beginning to stabilize, and for the first time in my life, I could actually use my brain. But whatever the case, I found this course to be the most fascinating class I had ever taken. It made me fall in love with learning.

Every day my teacher Mr. Biggers would turn off the lights and lecture as he controlled a carousel projector that shone images of the greatest buildings, sculptures, and paintings of history. He unfolded the intricate ways that the history and ideas of a given culture were reflected in its art. Among many other artists, Mr. Biggers taught us about a man named Michelangelo, who, as it turned out, was neither a ninja nor a turtle **[Show IMAGE 1]**. Instead, this sixteenth-century genius from Florence, Italy, was and is probably the most celebrated artist who has ever lived.

I was so amazed by Michelangelo that I went to *Barnes & Noble* and bought books about his life and his art. I studied images of the Sistine Chapel ceiling, like *The Creation of Adam* **[Show Image 2]**. I read about the dramatic story about the conflict Michelangelo had with Pope Julius II, who commissioned much of Michelangelo’s art. I learned all that I could. I had a great knowledge and appreciation of Michelangelo’s art, but I wanted something more—I needed to see his work with my own eyes. After all, the Sistine Chapel ceiling was never intended to be appreciated by flipping through individual images on the pages of a book. It was meant to be experienced as a whole inside of the chapel itself **[Show Image 3]**.

So, the summer after my graduation, my parents and grandparents all chipped in and raised the money for me to go to Europe for a study-abroad art history course. I went, and on this journey, I was able to take the tour of the Vatican Museum, which concludes with none other than the Sistine Chapel. And here I finally got to witness first-hand Michelangelo's famous frescoes. More than simply viewing the paintings, I was able to catch the scent of the very room where the Catholic Cardinals gather to select the Pope. I felt the hard, wooden on the benches that have been in the same place since two centuries before George Washington was born. I listened to murmuring sounds of the international crowd that surrounded me, all while I craned my neck to view one of the most famous artistic achievements of the world. There was a time when I knew a lot about the Sistine Chapel, and that knowledge was important to me. But something changed that day, and now I had something deeper. I had *a sensory experience*.

One of the unfortunate things about in our modern age is that we tend to think of the gospel as merely a set of propositions, beliefs, and words. The gospel is certainly proclaimed by words. *But is there a way in which the gospel can be tangibly felt, smelt, and tasted with our senses?*

After all, there is a vast difference between knowing things about God, and viscerally, tangibly experiencing his goodness. Our embodied senses matter and they matter in our very understanding of the gospel. Today we will begin exploring the divinely appointed means through which our God has chosen to reveal his gospel in tangible, touchable, experiential means; means through which we not only intellectually know the goodness of the gospel, but rather *"taste and see"* that the Lord of the gospel is good (Psalm 34:8). These means of grace—Baptism and the Lord's Supper—throughout history have most commonly been known as *"Sacraments."* Sacraments are hugely important in the life of the church, but today they seem to be rarely taught upon and often misunderstood.

At Redeemer, we believe that *sacraments are gifts that Christ himself has given the church as tangible signs and seals, through which the Holy Spirit profoundly ministers to us and through which we are able to experience the reality of the gospel.*

Our confession of faith captures it this way: *"We believe that baptism and the Lord's Supper are ordained by the Lord Jesus himself. The former is connected with entrance into the new covenant community, the latter with ongoing covenant renewal. Together they are simultaneously God's pledge to us, divinely ordained means of grace, our public vows of submission to the once crucified and now resurrected Christ, and anticipations of his return and of the consummation of all things."*<sup>1</sup>

For the next two weeks, we are going to do a short, two-week mini-series on sacraments, and today we will begin that series by looking at the sacrament of Christian *"Baptism."*

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<sup>1</sup> From the Redeemer Christian Church Confession of Faith, which is adapted from the Foundation Documents of the Gospel Coalition.

## **Exposition**

Let's begin our exploration with simple question.

### **1. Why Do We Practice Baptism?**

We practice baptism because baptism is a practice that Jesus Christ himself ordained for people. For this reason, sometimes, the sacraments are referred to as ordinances, because they are practices that Christ himself ordained.

In Matthew 28:19, Jesus commands his disciples: ***“Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit”*** (Mt. 28:19, ESV).

The Church of Jesus Christ is called to make new disciples; to declare and display the gospel in such a way that people who don't yet believe in and follow Jesus might come to know and worship him.

And here is the amazing thing: century after century, when the gospel is faithfully preached, people are converted. When the word of God goes forth, it does not return void (cf. Isa. 55:11). As God created the heavens and the earth through the power of his word, so too, God creates new spiritual life when his word goes into the hearts of people.

When that happens – when people are converted and respond to the gospel with faith – the way we signify and celebrate this reality is through the sacrament of baptism.

As a church, we practice *“believer's baptism”* (also known as credo-baptism). In the book of Acts, the early church's practice of baptism is connected with conversion, repentance, and belief in Jesus (Acts 2:38, 41; 8:12; 9:18; 10:47-48; 16:15,33; 18:8; 19:5).

For this reason, if you believe in Jesus, you are to view baptism as *a blessing to receive, as well a command to obey*. *Christians* are people who believe in Jesus, trust in Jesus, and submit to Jesus as their Lord. Jesus calls his people to be baptized. Thus, baptism is a way we die to self and embrace the new life that comes in Jesus.

However, while we believe that baptism is an important and crucial act of Christian obedience, baptism itself is not the thing that saves us.<sup>2</sup> We are saved by grace alone, through faith alone (cf. Eph. 2:8). The foundation of our salvation is not a ceremony; it is a savior. So, to put it simply: *we not saved because we are baptized; we are baptized because we are saved*.

So with that said, I want to spend a little bit of time talking about the rich imagery of what baptism means and represents.

### **2. Baptism Represents Identity in Christ.**

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<sup>2</sup> Thus, Redeemer Christian Church does not hold to a view known as “baptismal regeneration.”

Let's go back into Matthew 28 one more time: *"Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit"* (Mt. 28:19, ESV).

The word "baptism" comes directly from the New Testament Greek word "βαπτίζω," which literally means "to immerse."<sup>3</sup> And when you are baptized as a Christian, you are not only immersed into water; you are immersed into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. You are immersed into a new identity.

You might still sin, but you are no longer a sinner. You might still live in a sin-fractured world, but you belong to the kingdom of God.

Baptism is a ceremony that says; you have been bought, purchased, and redeemed. God's name is on you for good. You have a new identity. The quality of our good works and worship do not earn or achieve this new identity for us. Rather, our identity in Christ is gifted to us by grace alone. As author Tish Harrison Warren writes, baptism reminds us, *"I am not primarily defined by my abilities or marital status or how I vote or my successes or failures or fame or obscurity, but as one who is sealed in the Holy Spirit, hidden in Christ, and beloved by the Father."*<sup>4</sup>

To know, believe, and rest in our identity in Christ is no small matter. Christian identity is a truth that empowers the Christian life; because who you believe you are determines what you do.

For this reason, the protestant reformer Martin Luther taught his followers that remembering your baptism was a fundamental spiritual discipline, by which we clothe ourselves in our identity in Christ. In fact, it is said that he encouraged Christians to embrace the habit of making the sign of the cross over themselves as the very first act of each new day before they even get out of bed. Now, typically, we think of crossing oneself as a Roman Catholic ritual. So, to hear Martin Luther of all people encouraging Christians to make the sign of the cross over themselves might surprise us. But for Luther, the sign of the cross wasn't a mystical ritual. It was a practical habit that helps Christians to remember, before I am anything else, I am a child of God.

This week my wife told me a Simon Peter story. Simon Peter Ritchie is our youngest son, who just turned four a few days ago. And he is a character.

Recently, we ordered a book of family pictures that we had taken over the course of the summer. My wife noticed that the book was lying in a place where it didn't belong, and she picked it up and thumbed through the pictures. As she did this, she noticed one of the pages was torn out of the book. So, she went to the most likely culprit in our home, who is definitely Simon Peter.

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<sup>3</sup> Benjamin J. Snyder, "Baptism," ed. Douglas Mangum et al., *Lexham Theological Wordbook*, Lexham Bible Reference Series (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2014).

<sup>4</sup> Tish Harrison Warren. *The Liturgy of the Ordinary: Sacred Practices in Everyday Life*. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2016), 20.

It turns out that, yes, Simon Peter was the one who ripped a picture out of the book. It happened to be a picture of himself, dressed in Spider-man onesie (Show 4SP as Spier-man). Kate asked Simon Peter why he ripped that particular picture out, and he said, “I took that picture, I rolled it into a scroll, and I put under my pillow *so that I can always remember who I am.*”

Now think about this for a second. Simon Peter is currently four years old. He was three when that picture was taken. He is not the most powerful being in the universe by a long stretch. But he chose to take a picture of him clothed in the identity of Spider-man and said, “That’s who I really am.”

We are a people who are weak and vulnerable in our own nature. We are prone to fail and falter. But if you are a baptized believer, you have been clothed in the identity of one who righteous and perfect and true. And when we remember our baptism, we are saying to the depths of our souls, “I am not my sin. I have been redeemed by my Savior. This is my truest identity. This is who I really am.”

### **3. Baptism Represents Belonging to God’s People.**

The world of the New Testament was a divided world. Jews were divided from Gentiles, and typically these groups hated one another. They couldn’t even share meals with one another or inter-marry between people groups. In the ancient world, your value and significance as a person were determined by your gender and social class.

Imagine living in that world, and then having a little Jewish rabbi named Paul come into your town and say the following words: “*For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus*” (Galatians 3:27–28, ESV).

And as radical of good news, this was to the ancient world, so too this truth is a healing balm to our divided world today. Through baptism, we can escape the prison-gang mentality of a world that wants to divide us on the basis of race, gender, and social class. We are invited to belong to a family that transcends the categories of political demographics. We have been grafted into the body of Christ that is the church. As Paul says again in his letter to the Corinthians, “*For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit*” (1 Corinthians 12:12–13, ESV).

As our identity is rooted in Christ, so too, we belong to the body of Christ.

This last year, our church was a part of four corporate worship services called “One in Christ.” These services were comprised primarily of four Amarillo churches that differed in race, age, social class, and geography. We were one of those churches. We came together. We worshipped with one another, and we talked about how the gospel has the

power to bring unity in our divided nation. And the thing that shocked us was how much these events seemed to capture the attention of the city. In fact, when we held one of those services here at Redeemer, the event made the front page of the newspaper (Show image of 5“One in Christ at RCC”).

This is an image of great hope in a world that is as divided as our is. It is a vivid display of the truth: *“There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call— one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all”* (Ephesians 4:4–6, ESV).

Baptism is a ceremony of induction into a kingdom of priests and a royal nation that transcends all tribes of men. It is a ceremony that says we acknowledge Jesus as king, and that our highest allegiance is to his kingdom.

#### **4. Baptism Represents New Life.**

Paul writes in Romans 6: *“Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his”* (Romans 6:3–5, ESV).

Here we come to what is probably the fundamental essence of baptism. It is a representation of our union with Christ. When we come into union with Christ, we are united with the very death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

This is why, when we baptize people at this church, we will ask them to state that believe in the truth of the gospel. When they step into the water, first, I will walk them through the words of the Apostles’ Creed. They will tell me, in the presence of the church, that they believe. I will say, “It is on the basis of this confession of faith, we baptize you in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.” And as I immerse them into the waters, I will say, “Buried with Christ in his death!” And when I raise them up from the waters, I will say, “Raised with Christ unto newness of life!”

And when this happens, the church shouts and rejoices, because rightfully so, this is a moment worthy of celebration and joy! It is a moment pregnant with the power of God.

Baptism is a sign of our union with Christ and the newness of life that comes through that union. It is a spiritually charged and empowered moment, wherein the Holy Spirit ministers to the person being baptized and the church at large.

#### **Conclusion**

So with all of this brilliant and beautiful imagery associated with what baptism means for us, we might do well with asking the question, “Why then did Jesus need to get baptized?”



We are baptized as a sign of our repentance and need for salvation. But could that be true of Jesus? No.

That is what makes Jesus's baptism so fascinating. When Jesus comes before John the Baptist, John immediately recognizes Jesus as one who is sinless. He thinks to himself, "I don't need to baptize Jesus; I need to be baptized by Jesus!"

And notice what Jesus says. He does not say, "I do must do this to express my repentance." Instead, he says, "it is fitting for [me] to do this to fulfill all righteousness" (Mt. 3:15).<sup>5</sup>

His baptism is a microcosm of his mission. He has taken on human flesh to live the righteous life we could never live in our own strength. He has embraced us in our weakness and brokenness. He empathizes with our suffering. He takes upon himself the penalty of death.

*Christ has identified with us in his baptism. Now, we can identify with Christ in our baptism.*

The Christian gospel tells us that when we come into eternity, we do not come before God on the basis of our good works. We come before him on the basis of Jesus's good works. We come before God in the name of the one into whom we have been baptized. It is only because we are "dressed in His righteousness alone" that we are "faultless to stand before the throne."

So Redeemer Christian Church, if you have been baptized, today, remember the power of your baptism. Remember that your identity is in Christ, that you belong to the people of God, and that you have been brought from death and into life through Christ! And if you have not yet been baptized, I want to call you to be baptized today!

AMEN.

### **Gospel Community Discussion Starters**

- 1. Have you been baptized? If so, what do you remember about your baptism? Why might remembering our baptism be a helpful spiritual discipline?***
- 2. In what way does baptism having our identity rooted in Christ? Why is "identity in Christ" such an important issue for Christians to understand?***
- 3. Read Gal. 3:27-28 and 1 Cor. 12:12-13. How should baptism break down social barriers with which the world tries to divide people?***
- 4. Read Rom. 6:3-5. What does this passage have to say about our union with Christ? What are some practical implications of this truth?***

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<sup>5</sup> Craig Blomberg, *Matthew*, vol. 22, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1992), 81.