

Baptism and Salvation

Mark 16:9–20

This morning we have witnessed a baptism. A covenant child presented by his parents was baptized in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The name of God—God’s mark of ownership—was placed upon this little lad. He was formally received into the visible church. What is the meaning of his baptism? Does baptism *convey* salvation, or is it a *sign* and *seal* of salvation? It is an appropriate time to consider this from the Scriptures.

Our text this morning covers some of the events that followed our Lord’s resurrection. Significantly, in this section we hear him saying, “Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature. He who believes and is *baptized* will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned.” Note our Lord’s reference to baptism. We want to look into this.

These words are known as Christ’s Great Commission, his marching orders for the church to spread his gospel throughout the world. The Great Commission is found in slightly different form in the three synoptic gospels—Matthew, Mark and Luke—and the book of Acts. Listen to our Savior’s words in the other synoptic gospels and in Acts.

Matthew: “All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.” (Matt. 28:18–20).

Luke: “... and that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in His name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. And you are witnesses of these things” (Luke 24:47–48).

Acts: “But ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you: and ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth” (Acts 1:8).

The wording is somewhat different in each account. Why? There are three different human witnesses: Matthew, Mark and Luke. Moreover, Luke recorded the Great Commission in two different contexts: his gospel that bears his name, and the book of Acts, his history of the early church. There is no disharmony or contradiction between the witnesses. Putting the words together we have something like this: “All authority has been given to me in heaven and on earth. Therefore, go into all the world. Make disciples of all the nations, beginning in Jerusalem, Judaea, Samaria, and on to the uttermost part of the earth. The Holy Spirit whom I will send is going to empower your witness. Baptize disciples in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Preach the gospel to every creature,

offering repentance and remission of sins in my name. He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned.”

We can be sure that the sovereign Holy Spirit who inspired the Scriptures was careful that nothing was left out. The Scriptures are complete. As Peter expressed it, God’s divine power “has given to us *all things* that pertain to life and godliness” in his holy Word.

But we do need to briefly consider, are these words truly a part of Mark’s gospel? Some Greek texts—and some English versions—put verses 9–20 in double brackets, indicating that the editors do not consider them to be a part of Mark’s gospel, but a later addition. The *Reformation Study Bible* helpfully observes that “these verses were cited by writers *from the late second century* and are found in the *majority* of existing Gk. manuscripts of Mark’s gospel”; yet, sadly, it concludes that “it appears most likely the the gospel of Mark originally concluded at v. 8.”

The Westminster Confession of Faith, one of the doctrinal standards of our church, teaches that “The Old Testament in Hebrew . . . and the New Testament in Greek . . . [were] immediately inspired by God, and, by his singular care and providence, *kept pure in all ages.*” The Westminster divines asserted not only the divine *inspiration* of the Holy Scriptures, but also God’s sovereign, providential *care* over the text from ancient times—care that insured that what the church possesses is “pure” and “authentic” (genuine). One of the two major manuscripts that form the basis of what is called the Alexandrian text would not be discovered for almost two hundred more years, and there had to be two or more witnesses to establish the text. Were the Westminster divines misinformed? Did the church in 1647 not yet possess the authentic text of Holy Scripture? Would the true text of God’s holy word not emerge till after 1844? I cannot believe this to be the case. I am moved by the fact that the words of our text today are found in the *majority* of New Testament manuscripts. In fact, the whole Byzantine tradition—Scriptures that were in use in the Greek-speaking churches—contains the words of our text today. This is strong evidence that what we have read is indeed genuine and part of the text of Holy Scripture. Christian, your God has providentially preserved the text of his word against the onslaughts of heretics and deniers. God did not need to be rescued by the textual critics of the late nineteenth century. What we have read today is indeed God’s holy word. What does it teach concerning baptism? Hear again the words of our Lord, “He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned.” Let us consider two points, first,

1. Two responses: belief and unbelief

Our Lord had said, “Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature.” The gospel is the good news of Christ: that he *died* for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was *buried*, and that he *rose* again according to the Scriptures (1 Cor. 15). This is the good news that is to be preached every week

to the people of God. Mark says, “Preach” (κηρύξατε, announce as my heralds). As the church goes into the world, its ministers are to announce the gospel with divine authority, as those entrusted with the message of the divine King. Luke uses the same word: repentance and forgiveness of sins are to be “preached” (κηρυχθῆναι), that is, heralded to all nations (πάντα τὰ ἔθνη, all people groups). The gospel is indeed the message of the King; whoever does not receive this message rejects it to his own peril.

So the church is to proclaim the gospel; that is its primary message. Let there be no mistaking. The gospel is not something that is to be tacked on to a message about something else. The church’s primary message is not about politics or changing the culture. It is not about happy marriages or strong families. It is not about diversity or social justice. It is not about the end times. The church’s primary message is the *gospel*. The church is to go into all the world and preach the gospel. The gospel—the good news of Christ—is to be the focus of every sermon. If a sermon does not clearly present the gospel, it falls short of God’s intention. It leaves its hearers bereft of the message of salvation. It gives the false impression that the saving work of Christ is a secondary matter—not really all that important. It thus misrepresents Christ, leaving the impression that his saving work is nonessential, that there are other ways to get to heaven than through Christ.

So as ordained ministers go throughout the world they are to proclaim the *gospel* as heralds of the living God—the God with whom we have to do, the God before whom we will all one day stand. The church is to go into all the world and preach the *gospel* to every creature. And Jesus teaches, “He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned.” Here are two responses to the gospel: belief and unbelief.

Now the Bible has a lot to say about belief. God does not save anyone against his will. He sets before us the options and calls upon us to make a choice. As he says through Moses, “I call heaven and earth as witnesses today against you, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing; therefore *choose life*, that both you and your descendants may live” (Deut. 30:19). All human beings, with the exception of the severely mentally incapable, have the natural ability to understand the gospel intellectually. Yet natural ability is not enough. Faith is an act of the will in addition to the act of the understanding. True faith requires *assent*, to be able to say to God, “I gladly obey!” Because of Adam’s fall, man has wholly lost the ability to will any spiritual good. He loves his sin and does not want to submit to God. By his own strength he cannot convert himself or receive the gospel.¹ No one can come to Christ unless the Father draws him by his Holy Spirit. But the person who is born again by the Holy Spirit gladly comes to Christ. He

¹ Westminster Confession of Faith 9.3, *Trinity Psalter Hymnal*, 925

says, “I know that I am a sinner, but I forsake my sins and resolve to obey Christ, every moment of every day—forever. I am Christ’s.”

The Lord sets before us two responses: the person who believes and is baptized, in contrast to the person who does *not* believe. Here are two responses; the one is the response of faith, of belief, the other is the response of unbelief. Here are two individuals, both are sinners, both are equally underserving. One believes; the other does not believe. The one has a right attitude toward God; he recognizes his divine authority and desires to obey him and glorify him. The other does not recognize God’s authority, he does not want to submit to him, and does not want to work for his glory. He does not want to pray, “Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven.” He wants to run his own life. He’s working for the advancement and furtherance of *his* kingdom, not God’s.

In the gospels we have the story of the Pharisee and the tax collector. In the words of Jesus, “Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, ‘God, I thank You that I am not like other men—extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I possess.’ And the tax collector, standing afar off, would not so much as raise his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me a sinner!’ I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other” (Luke 18). The Pharisee was a proud man. He wasn’t so much praying to God as to himself, a fact that Jesus takes note of (“The Pharisee stood and prayed thus *with himself*”). He gloried in the fact that he was not like other men; he didn’t commit the gross sins of extortion or adultery; he did not cheat other people as the tax collectors of his day were notorious of doing. He did not see himself as unjust but as deserving of salvation. The Pharisee was a sinner, but he did not want to acknowledge it.

On the other hand, the tax collector *knew* that he was a sinner. He knew that he lived for self: he cheated people, he cared not about God. Both men were equally undeserving, but one came in humility—evidence of the Holy Spirit’s regenerating work. The tax collector knew he could not glory in his personal record, which was only negative. Since he could not say, “I have always and only lived a life worthy of commendation,” his only hope was God’s *mercy*. His prayer was eloquent only because of its brevity and focus: “God, be merciful to me a sinner!” He could not save himself—of that he could be sure. But he had scriptural warrant to believe that God was merciful. (“The Lord, The Lord God, *merciful* and gracious, longsuffering, and abundant in goodness and truth,” Ex. 34:6). The tax collector appealed to the unchanging character of God. He reasoned, *If I have to prove that I have always and only lived a life of perfect obedience, I have no hope. But I know from the Scriptures that God is merciful; that is my only hope.* And Jesus assures us that the tax collector went home “justified”—in scriptural language, forgiven for

his sins, credited with the perfect righteousness of Christ. In other words, Jesus was saying that this disreputable tax collector, because of his response of faith, was on his way to heaven. Amazing!

And so it is with us. His promise is “He who believes and is baptized will be saved.” Believing is linked with baptism. The word *and* implies the sacrament of baptism: baptism with water. It doesn’t say, “He who believes, having been baptized,” that is, believing, as a response to the prior regenerative work of the Spirit within. The Spirit’s work of regeneration is necessary; Jesus taught that “unless one is born again, he cannot *see* the kingdom of God”—that is, see it with the eye of faith, something that can only be done through the new nature. But in the present case Christ promises, “He who believes and is baptized”—that is, receives water baptism.

In the case of an adult making a profession of faith, the order is, he believes and is baptized. In the case of a covenant child, it is the believing parent or parents who are operating on the principle, “As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord,” who present their child for baptism. As our form for baptism acknowledges that “The time of the outward application of the sign does not necessarily coincide with the inward work of the Holy Spirit which the sign represents.” The covenant child could be *already* born again; such as was the case with John the baptist, who was born again in utero. The covenant child could be born again *at the time of his baptism*; or he could be born again *subsequent* to his baptism. The church’s prayer is that all our covenant children come to a true faith in the Savior.

The Bible promises, “Train up a child in the way he should go: and when he is old, he will not depart from it” (Prov. 22:6). This is what Christian parents do. Yet children have a mind and will of their own, and it is the case that sometimes covenant children are stubborn and go astray. A number of years ago Norma and I attended the wedding of a young lady who had been active in this church. Her parents loved the Lord and lived the example of Christ before all their children. Some years later we heard that this young lady had left her husband and run off with another man; she no longer attended church or served the Lord. The other day we spoke by phone with this woman’s younger sister. She told us that her sister has cut off all communications with her family; she refuses to acknowledge that her breaking of her marriage vows was sin. Heartbreaking!

Here, then, is the contrast: “He who believes ... he who does not believe.” Which person are you? Have you come to God by faith, or do you refuse to come? Do you recognize God’s divine authority over your life, or do you want to run your own life? Finally, there are

2. Two destinies: salvation and damnation

Hear, once again, the text in full: “He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned.” Note that there are two

destinies: being saved, and being condemned. A lot of things in God's world are binary, and this is one of them. There are the Creator, and the creature. There are two sexes, male and female; two marital roles: husband and wife. In the book of Proverbs there are the wise and the fools. There are two types of worship: false and true. There are two responses to the gospel: belief and unbelief; two conditions: saved and lost. Likewise, there are two destinies: salvation and damnation. Scripture knows no third alternative, a place of temporary suffering where people go who haven't satisfied for the punishment due to their sins.² The only one who can satisfy for your sins is the perfect "Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29). "None other Lamb, none other Name, none other Hope in heaven or earth or sea, none other hiding place from guilt and shame, none beside thee!"³ If a sinner dies without having received satisfaction for the punishment due to his sins through Jesus Christ, he is lost forever. There is no second chance. Jesus taught, "He who believes in the Son has everlasting life; and he who does not believe the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him" (John 3:36)—two destinies: everlasting life or everlasting wrath!

Jesus told the story of the rich man and Lazarus. "There was a certain rich man who was clothed in purple and fine linen and fared sumptuously every day. But there was a certain beggar named Lazarus, full of sores, who was laid at his gate, desiring to be fed with the crumbs which fell from the rich man's table. Moreover the dogs came and licked his sores. So it was that the beggar died, and was carried by the angels to Abraham's bosom. The rich man also died and was buried. And being in torments in Hades, he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham afar off, and Lazarus in his bosom. Then he cried and said, 'Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus that he may dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am tormented in this flame.' But Abraham said, 'Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, and likewise Lazarus evil things; but now he is comforted and you are tormented'" (Luke 16). Two destinies: comfort and torment!

What will be *your* destiny? Will you be forever comforted in the presence of your Savior, to whom you have committed yourself in true faith? Or will you go to the place of everlasting torment, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth? Jesus ended his Olivet discourse with these words, "These will go away into

² "Q. 1381. What is Purgatory? A. Purgatory is the state in which those suffer for a time who die guilty of venial sins, or without having satisfied for the punishment due to their sins" (Baltimore Catechism, <http://www.baltimore-catechism.com/lesson37.htm>).

³ *Trinity Psalter Hymnal* #264

eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life”⁴—binary, two destinies: eternal punishment, eternal life.

At the beginning of this sermon we asked the question, Does baptism *convey* salvation, or is it a *sign* and *seal* of salvation? This is a very important question. The biblical answer is that water baptism does not save a person; only Christ can save, and he saves only those who come to him in true faith. Baptism is a sign and seal of the salvation freely purchased by Christ.

Today you have heard the gospel—the good news of Christ’s salvation. There are two responses: belief and unbelief; and two destinies: salvation and damnation. May God grant us all the grace to come to him in true faith—faith in his Son, our sin-bearer, the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

⁴ ESV, translating κόλασιν αἰώνιον ... ζωὴν αἰώνιον—the same adjective is used for both *punishment* and *life*.