

FAITHFUL TO THE WORD

Systematic Theology Series

ECCLESIOLOGY

The Doctrine of the Church

One Body, One Lord, One Faith, One Baptism, One God and Father of All

UNIT 6: THE ORDINANCE OF BAPTISM

The Sign, the Subject, and the Significance

Lesson 17

BAPTISM AS A NEW COVENANT ORDINANCE

A Sign, Not a Sacrament — The Protestant Baptist View

Baptism does not create what it confesses. It publicly declares and seals what the Spirit has already accomplished in the heart of the one who goes into the water.

“Or do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus have been baptized into His death? Therefore we have been buried with Him through baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life.”

Romans 6:3–4, NASB 1995

Key Texts: Matthew 28:19; Romans 6:3–4; Acts 2:38, 41; 8:36–38; Colossians 2:12; 1 Peter 3:21; Galatians 3:27

“I write so that you will know how one ought to conduct himself in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and support of the truth.”

1 Timothy 3:15, NASB 1995

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Introduction

Unit 5 established the governance structure of the local church. Unit 6 turns to the first and foundational ordinance that is administered within that structure: baptism. The transition is not merely sequential in the outline; it is theologically organic. The governance convictions of the elder-led congregationally accountable model and the baptismal convictions of the Baptist tradition grow from the same root: the Progressive Covenantal reading of the new covenant's nature and membership. The new covenant community is defined by the universal personal knowledge of God among all its members; therefore the church's membership is constituted of those who personally profess saving faith; therefore the sign of entry into that membership is administered to those who personally bear the new covenant reality. Governance and baptism are two expressions of the same ecclesiological conviction, and the congregation that understands one will understand the other more deeply for the connection.

Baptism is among the most contested doctrines in the history of Christianity, and the contests have not been merely academic. Men and women were executed in the sixteenth century for holding and practicing believers' baptism by immersion; the Anabaptists who refused to submit their infants to the state church's baptism were treated as dangerous subversives by both the Protestant and Catholic establishments of their day. The Baptist tradition's insistence on believers' baptism by immersion as the only baptism warranted by the New Testament is not a theological novelty; it is a conviction with deep historical roots and a costly institutional history. The current lesson examines the foundational question of what baptism is and what it is not, before Lessons 18 and 19 address the specific questions of who should be baptized, in what mode, and what baptism declares and displays.

The distinctive Baptist vocabulary of "ordinance" rather than "sacrament" is the single most important terminological choice in the entire doctrine of baptism, because it captures in a single word the fundamental theological conviction that separates the Baptist understanding of baptism from every tradition that understands baptism as an instrument of saving grace. To call baptism an ordinance is to say: this is a rite ordained by Christ, a genuine means of grace through which God works in the life of the one who receives it in faith, a visible word that proclaims the gospel with enacted power, and it is not a vehicle through which saving grace is automatically conveyed to the recipient by the act of administration. The sign does not create what it signifies. The water does not wash away sins; Christ's blood washes away sins. The immersion does not unite the believer to Christ; the Spirit's regenerating work unites the believer to Christ. Baptism declares, seals, and publicly affirms what the Spirit has already accomplished; it does not accomplish those things independently of the Spirit's work.

The lesson moves through the definition of baptism, the theology of the ordinance-sacrament distinction, the positive content of what baptism is and does, the refutation of baptismal regeneration, the Great Commission's baptismal mandate, and the New Testament's consistent pattern of believing reception preceding baptism. This foundational lesson prepares the ground for the more specific arguments of Lessons 18 and 19, which will address the proper subjects and mode of baptism and the full range of what baptism declares and displays. Throughout, the tone is the tone of theological conviction combined with pastoral care: baptism is a matter of significant theological weight, and the Baptist conviction about it is held firmly and argued carefully, but it is held in the recognition that the faithful Christian who holds a different view is not an enemy but a brother, with whom we share the apostolic deposit at its center even as we disagree about the form in which its covenant sign should be administered.

I. BAPTISM DEFINED

The Immersion of a Professing Believer in the Triune Name

A. A Formal Definition

Baptism, as this series understands and teaches it, is the immersion in water of a professing believer in Jesus Christ, administered in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, as a public declaration of that person's faith in Christ, identification with His death, burial, and resurrection, and formal entry into the visible covenant community of the local church. Every element of this definition carries theological weight that the full treatment of the doctrine across three lessons will unpack: the immersion (the mode, which Lesson 18 will address in detail), the professing believer (the proper subject, also Lesson 18's concern), the Trinitarian name (the authorization from Matthew 28:19), the public declaration (the confessional and testimonial character of the ordinance), the identification with Christ's death, burial, and resurrection (the theological content of Romans 6:3–4, examined in detail in Lesson 19), and the entry into the visible covenant community (the ecclesiological significance that connects baptism to the church's governance and membership as Unit 5 established it).

The Trinitarian name in which baptism is administered, "in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit" (Matthew 28:19), is not merely a liturgical formula; it is the theological authorization and the covenantal context of the entire baptismal act. Baptism is performed in the name of the triune God because the covenant it seals is established by the triune God: the Father who chose the community of the redeemed in eternity past, the Son whose blood established the new covenant in which the baptized person is being received, and the Spirit whose regenerating work in the baptized person's heart is the reality that the ordinance declares. The Trinitarian name means that baptism is performed on behalf of and in the authority of the One who commanded it, and that the community receiving the baptized person is the community that belongs to and is constituted by the triune God.

The public character of baptism is integral to its definition and is frequently underemphasized in contemporary practice. Baptism is not a private spiritual event between the believer and God, to be performed in the privacy of a hospital room or a backyard pool without the gathered community's witness and participation. It is the covenant community's corporate celebration of new life in Christ, the public testimony of the baptized person to the watching world that the God of the gospel has transformed her, and the congregation's corporate affirmation that it receives the new believer into the covenanted membership of the body. The Acts 2:41 sequence, "then those who had received his word were baptized; and that day there were added about three thousand souls", assumes a public, communal, celebratory event, not a private administrative procedure. The recovery of baptism's public, congregational character is one of the most practically important aspects of the doctrine's renewal in any congregation.

B. Ordinance, Not Sacrament

The distinction between ordinance and sacrament is the most important terminological distinction in the entire doctrine of baptism, and it is a distinction that has been worth defending at considerable theological and institutional cost throughout the history of the traditions that have insisted on it. The word "sacrament," in its dominant Roman Catholic and many Protestant uses, carries the connotation of a rite that conveys saving grace by virtue of its proper administration, what medieval theology called *opus operatum*, "the work worked." In the

sacramental understanding, the grace is in the rite: the baptismal water, properly administered by an ordained minister with the right intention, conveys the grace of regeneration, forgiveness, or covenant membership to the recipient, regardless of the recipient's faith or spiritual condition. The grace operates through the sign, not through the faith of the recipient.

The Baptist use of "ordinance" is a deliberate and precise theological alternative to this sacramental understanding. An ordinance is a rite ordained by Christ, its authority derives from His command, not from any inherent power in the elements or the act itself. It is a genuine means of grace, the Spirit works in and through the administration of the ordinance to strengthen the faith of the recipient, to confirm the covenant promises to the believing heart, and to form the covenant community in its shared identity. But it is not an automatic vehicle of saving grace, the grace does not operate through the ordinance apart from the faith of the recipient, and the ordinance administered to one who lacks the faith it requires is a sign without its signified reality, a declaration whose content is absent in the one to whom it is made. The grace is not in the water; the grace is in the Spirit's own sovereign work, to which the ordinance bears witness and which the ordinance publicly declares.

The practical implications of the ordinance-sacrament distinction are as significant as its theological content. If baptism is an ordinance rather than a sacrament, then the question "was this person truly baptized?" is answered by whether the person was immersed in water in the Trinitarian name following a credible profession of personal faith, not by whether the ceremony was performed by an ordained minister with the correct liturgical intention. The validity of baptism depends on the reality it declares (the candidate's personal faith and new covenant membership), not on the institutional pedigree of the officiant. This Baptist conviction has significant ecumenical implications: it means that baptism performed outside the formal structures of the Catholic or Anglican hierarchy can be fully valid, because the validity of the ordinance depends on the Spirit's work in the baptized person and on the faithfulness of the administration to Christ's command, not on the institutional lineage of the administrator.

II. WHAT BAPTISM IS

The Positive Content of the Baptist Understanding

A. *A Visible Portrayal of the Gospel*

The most fundamental positive description of what baptism is comes from Paul's exposition in Romans 6:3–4: "Or do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus have been baptized into His death? Therefore we have been buried with Him through baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life." The language is unmistakably enacted: baptism is described as burial with Christ in His death and resurrection to new life, a visible enactment of the gospel's core narrative in the physical experience of the baptized person going under the water and coming up out of it. Lesson 19 will examine this passage in full detail; at this stage it is sufficient to note that Romans 6:3–4 presents baptism as a visible portrayal of the gospel, an enacted proclamation of death, burial, and resurrection that the mode of immersion performs with a physicality and a vividness that sprinkling or pouring cannot achieve.

As a visible portrayal of the gospel, baptism is what the Reformers called a "visible word", an enacted declaration of the same good news that the preached word declares audibly. When the congregation gathers to witness a

baptism, it is not witnessing a ceremony; it is witnessing the gospel proclaimed in physical form. The person going under the water is enacting the death of the old self, the death to sin, the burial of the old life, and the person coming up out of the water is enacting the resurrection to new life in Christ, the emergence of the new creation that 2 Corinthians 5:17 describes. The baptism is a sermon preached with the body rather than with words, and its text is the same as the preacher's: the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ and the believer's personal participation in those events through faith and regeneration.

The visible-word character of baptism gives it a significance for the congregation's worship and witness that the contemporary church frequently underestimates. When baptism is reduced to a brief, semi-private ceremony appended to the end of a regular service, three minutes at the conclusion of a Sunday morning gathering, attended by a few family members and little congregational engagement, the visible proclamation of the gospel that baptism enacts is effectively muted. The congregation that celebrates baptism as a full and central act of its corporate worship, that gathers in its entirety to witness and affirm the new believer's covenant entry, that treats the baptismal service as one of the most significant gospel proclamations it will make in a given season, is a congregation that understands baptism's character as a visible word and is leveraging its gospel power with the seriousness it deserves.

B. Public Confession, Covenant Entry, and Obedient Response

Baptism is also a public confession of faith, the most direct and the most unambiguous declaration that a person can make before the gathered community of God's people and the watching world that she belongs to Jesus Christ. The confession that Peter calls for at Pentecost in Acts 2:38, "Repent, and each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit", combines repentance, baptism, and the reception of the Spirit in a single apostolic instruction. The baptism is the public, enacted expression of the repentance that Peter has called for; it is the moment at which the internal reality of conversion finds its external, communal, visible expression. The one who is baptized is saying, before God and the watching community and the wider world: I belong to Jesus Christ. I have died with Him and risen with Him. My life is no longer my own.

Baptism is the entry into the visible covenant community of the local church. In the New Testament, the sequence of Acts 2:41, "then those who had received his word were baptized; and that day there were added about three thousand souls", is the consistent pattern: the reception of the word (personal faith), baptism (the covenant sign of that faith), and the addition to the community (membership in the visible church) are presented as a single, unified event. Lesson 11 of this series examined at length the ecclesiological significance of this sequence for the doctrine of regenerate church membership. Baptism is not merely a personal spiritual event; it is the public act through which the covenant community formally receives the new believer into its fellowship, and the new believer formally enters the covenanted obligations and privileges of membership. The New Testament nowhere envisions baptism without subsequent church membership, or church membership without prior baptism; the two are bound together in the apostolic pattern.

Finally, baptism is an act of obedience to Christ's explicit command. Matthew 28:19–20, the Great Commission, is not addressed only to the apostles or to the church's professional ministry; it is the charter of the whole church's mission: "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you." The command to baptize is embedded in the commission to make disciples, and the one who has become a disciple is expected to be baptized

as the first and most basic expression of the obedience to Christ's commands that the Commission envisions. Baptism is not optional for the follower of Jesus; it is the commanded first step of the publicly committed disciple. The believer who indefinitely defers baptism after genuine conversion has not yet taken the first step of the obedience that genuine discipleship requires.

III. WHAT BAPTISM IS NOT

Against Baptismal Regeneration

A. Baptism Does Not Regenerate

The most important negative statement about baptism is the one that most directly challenges the sacramental traditions' understanding: baptism does not save. It does not regenerate the recipient, does not wash away sins in any ultimate sense, and does not confer saving grace by the act of its administration. Salvation is by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone, and baptism is the sign that follows and declares this salvation, not the instrument that accomplishes it. The Baptist's conviction about this is not a minimizing of baptism's significance; it is a maximizing of the gospel's sufficiency. The gospel is sufficient to save without baptism; Christ's blood is sufficient to cleanse without water; the Spirit's regenerating work is sufficient to unite the sinner to Christ without the act of immersion. To claim that baptism saves, or that it contributes to salvation, or that it completes what faith alone has begun, is to add a human institutional act to the perfect and sufficient work of the divine Savior. This the Baptist tradition has consistently and rightly refused to do.

The Roman Catholic doctrine of baptismal regeneration holds that the sacrament of baptism effects the remission of original sin and the infusion of sanctifying grace, regenerating the recipient *ex opere operato*, by the work worked, regardless of the recipient's faith. The Lutheran doctrine, while rejecting the Catholic sacramental framework in many respects, retains the conviction that baptism effects regeneration in infants through the faith given in the act. The Churches of Christ hold that baptism is necessary for the forgiveness of sins and that one is not fully saved until baptism has been received. Each of these positions, despite their significant differences from one another, shares the conviction that baptism is in some sense an instrument of saving grace, that something happens in the water that could not happen without the water. The Baptist's consistent response to all three is: the water cannot do what only the blood of Christ and the Spirit of God can do.

The exegetical case against baptismal regeneration draws on the New Testament's consistent pattern of faith preceding baptism. In every instance of baptism in the book of Acts, the sequence is the same: the gospel is proclaimed, the hearers believe, and the believers are baptized. Acts 2:41, "then those who had received his word were baptized", presents the receiving of the word (faith) as the precondition of baptism, not its result. Acts 8:12, "but when they believed Philip preaching the good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were being baptized, men and women alike", presents belief as the explicit ground of baptism. Acts 10:44–48, where the Holy Spirit falls on the Gentiles before they are baptized, causing Peter to ask "Can anyone forbid water for these to be baptized who have received the Holy Spirit just as we did?", presents the Spirit's regenerating work as preceding and grounding the baptism, not following it. The New Testament's consistent pattern is faith, then Spirit, then baptism, not baptism, then Spirit, then faith.

B. The Hard Cases and the Clear Pattern

The New Testament texts most commonly cited in support of baptismal regeneration require careful examination. Acts 2:38, “Repent, and each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit”, is sometimes read as making baptism a condition of forgiveness. The Greek preposition *eis* (translated “for”) can bear either a prospective meaning (“in order to obtain forgiveness”) or a retrospective meaning (“because of forgiveness already received”). The retrospective reading is supported by the pattern of Acts itself, everywhere else in Acts, faith and Spirit precede baptism, and by the analogy of Matthew 3:11, where John’s baptism is described as “for repentance” (*eis metanoia*), clearly meaning “on the basis of repentance already occurred.” The Acts 2:38 *eis* most naturally carries the same retrospective force: be baptized on the basis of the repentance you have just been called to, and in connection with the forgiveness that repentance receives.

First 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”, is perhaps the most directly supportive text for baptismal regeneration. Peter says baptism saves. But he immediately qualifies what kind of saving he means: not the removal of dirt from the flesh (a physical act accomplishing nothing spiritual by itself) but “an appeal to God for a good conscience.” The salvation Peter describes is not the initial regeneration of the soul by the Spirit but the ongoing assurance and covenant commitment of the believer who has appealed to God in the act of baptism. The salvation is “through the resurrection of Jesus Christ”, the ground is the resurrection, not the water; the water is the appeal, not the instrument. Peter’s statement, read carefully, is an argument for the ordinance’s genuine significance, not for its regenerative efficacy.

The most decisive single counter-evidence to baptismal regeneration is the case of the thief on the cross (Luke 23:39–43). This man, dying beside Jesus, made no confession before a congregation, received no baptism, participated in no covenant ceremony of any kind. He simply said, “Jesus, remember me when You come in Your kingdom” (verse 42), and Jesus replied: “Truly I say to you, today you shall be with Me in Paradise” (verse 43). The thief was saved, immediately and completely, without baptism. His case does not make baptism unimportant; it demonstrates with absolute clarity that baptism is not a condition of salvation, that saving grace is not withheld from those who cannot be baptized, and that the Spirit’s regenerating work and the saving grace of Christ are in principle independent of the ordinance that publicly declares them. The Baptist has no need to explain away this text; it says exactly what the Baptist doctrine of baptism requires it to say.

IV. THE GREAT COMMISSION AND BAPTISM

The Command, the Pattern, and the Urgency

A. Matthew 28:19–20 as the Charter of the Church’s Baptismal Practice

The foundation of the church’s baptismal practice is not a theological inference but an explicit dominical command. Matthew 28:18–20, the Great Commission, is among the most significant texts in all of Scripture for the doctrine of the church, and its baptismal mandate deserves careful grammatical analysis. “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 the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and

lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.” The grammatical structure of the Commission is often misread: the main verb is not “go” but “make disciples” (matheteusate), a single aorist imperative. The other verbal forms, “going,” “baptizing,” and “teaching,” are participial, describing the means by which the disciple-making is accomplished: by going, by baptizing, and by teaching.

The grammatical structure means that baptizing is not an optional add-on to disciple-making but one of the two means by which it is carried out. Disciples are made by baptizing them (incorporating them into the covenant community through the visible sign of the new covenant) and by teaching them (forming them in the whole counsel of God through the ministry of the Word). The disciple-making commission is incomplete without both: a community of people who have been baptized but not taught is a community without theological formation; a community of people who have been taught but not baptized lacks the visible covenant commitment and communal entry that baptism effects. The Commission envisions a community formed by both the ordinance of entry (baptism) and the ongoing ministry of the Word (teaching), and the church that omits either has not fully fulfilled the mandate.

The Trinitarian formula of Matthew 28:19, “in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit”, is the earliest and most authoritative account of the baptismal formula, and its Trinitarian structure gives baptism its deepest theological grounding. The baptized person is being received into the community of the triune God, the community that belongs to the Father, that has been purchased by the Son, and that is indwelt by the Spirit. The “name” (singular) of the three Persons expresses the one divine being in three Persons; the baptized person is not merely joining an organization but being formally received into the covenant community of the one God who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This Trinitarian dimension of baptism’s meaning is rarely given its full theological weight in contemporary pastoral practice; recovering it is part of recovering baptism’s full theological significance as the new covenant sign of the community that belongs to the triune God.

B. Baptism Is Not Optional

The Great Commission’s baptismal mandate establishes, as clearly as a dominical command can, that baptism is not optional for the genuine follower of Jesus Christ. The contemporary evangelical culture’s casual dismissal of baptism, the believer who defers baptism indefinitely after conversion because she does not feel ready, or because the timing is never quite right, or because he regards baptism as an institutional formality that adds nothing to the spiritual reality he has already received, is a dismissal of a specific and explicit command of the Lord whose name she bears. The Lord who said “All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth” is the same Lord who said “baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.” The authority behind the commission is the authority of the risen and reigning Christ, to whom all authority in heaven and on earth belongs.

The argument that baptism is unnecessary because the spiritual reality it declares has already been received misses the point of the command. The Lord does not command baptism as a means of receiving what faith and regeneration have not yet accomplished; He commands it as the public, communal, covenant expression of what faith and regeneration have accomplished. The believer who says “I am already saved; I don’t need to be baptized” has confused the sign with the reality and concluded that because she has the reality, she does not need the sign. But the Lord does not offer that option. He commands baptism as the form in which the public profession and covenantal entry of the new disciple is expressed, and the disciple who indefinitely declines that form is declining a specific act of obedience to the Lord’s explicit command. The pastoral challenge is not to minimize the gospel

by requiring baptism for salvation; it is to maximize the disciple's obedience by insisting that the Lord's command be taken seriously.

The urgency of the New Testament's baptismal practice is striking. In Acts 2:41, three thousand people are baptized on the day of Pentecost, the same day they receive Peter's word. In Acts 8:36–38, the Ethiopian eunuch sees water and immediately says "What prevents me from being baptized?" and Philip baptizes him on the spot. In Acts 16:33, the Philippian jailer and his household are baptized the same night they believe, "in that very hour of the night." The New Testament's pattern is not careful deliberation about the timing of baptism; it is immediate, joyful, undeferred obedience to the Lord's command. The contemporary Baptist practice of extended pre-baptism counseling periods, carefully scheduled baptism Sundays, and extended discernment processes before baptism is administered may reflect a legitimate concern for the integrity of the profession being made; but it should not allow the institutional prudence of the reception process to smother the urgent, joyful, undeferred character of baptism in the apostolic pattern.

V. THE NEW TESTAMENT PATTERN

Faith Before Baptism in Every Case

A. *The Apostolic Evidence*

The New Testament's pattern of baptism, faith first, then baptism, is not established by a single text that might be open to alternative interpretations but by the cumulative weight of every baptismal narrative in the entire book of Acts. Acts 2:41: "then those who had received his word were baptized." Acts 8:12: "but when they believed Philip preaching the good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were being baptized." Acts 8:36–38: the Ethiopian eunuch, responding to Philip's preaching from Isaiah 53, says "I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God" and is immediately baptized. Acts 10:44–48: the Spirit falls on the Gentiles as they hear the gospel, and Peter authorizes their baptism because they have already received the Spirit. Acts 16:14–15: Lydia, whose heart the Lord opened, is baptized with her household, the household baptism that will require fuller treatment in Lesson 18. Acts 16:31–34: the Philippian jailer believes and is baptized the same night. Acts 18:8: "Many of the Corinthians when they heard were believing and being baptized." The pattern is relentless and unmistakable: hearing the gospel, believing the gospel, being baptized in response to the gospel.

The significance of this cumulative pattern cannot be overstated. The New Testament's baptismal narratives are not a small, specialized body of evidence that might be explained away by appealing to exceptional circumstances; they are the primary record of how the apostolic church administered baptism in every recorded case, across multiple cultural contexts, multiple apostolic figures, and the full chronological span of the book of Acts. The argument that the New Testament's pattern of faith-then-baptism is merely incidental, that it reflects the circumstances of a missionary frontier where only adults were available as baptismal candidates, and that infant baptism would have been practiced had the circumstances allowed, is an argument from silence that requires the reader to supply a practice that the text nowhere describes and to explain away a pattern that the text consistently presents as normative.

The New Testament's pattern also establishes the inseparability of the proclamation of the gospel and the administration of baptism. In every case, the gospel is proclaimed, the hearer responds with faith, and baptism

follows immediately as the public enactment of that faith. Baptism is never administered apart from the gospel proclamation that grounds it; the baptism derives its meaning from the gospel it declares, and the gospel proclamation produces the faith that baptism seals. The separation of baptism from the gospel proclamation that the church's institutional routinization of the ordinance sometimes produces, the person who is baptized without having heard the gospel clearly, or without having been called to genuine repentance and faith, is a departure from the apostolic pattern that violates the ordinance's most fundamental character. Baptism is the gospel enacted; it requires the gospel proclaimed as its indispensable companion.

B. The Texts That Seem to Challenge the Pattern

The most significant challenge to the faith-then-baptism pattern comes from the household baptism narratives of Acts: Cornelius and his household (Acts 10:44–48), Lydia and her household (Acts 16:14–15), the Philippian jailer and his household (Acts 16:31–34), and Stephanas and his household (1 Corinthians 1:16). The paedobaptist argument draws on these narratives to suggest that infants must have been present and baptized along with the believing household head, establishing a pattern of covenant household baptism analogous to the Abrahamic covenant's circumcision of the household.

The Baptist response to the household baptism narratives is that the texts themselves do not warrant the inference that infants were present and baptized. In the case of Cornelius (Acts 10), the narrative specifies that the household gathered to hear Peter's preaching (verse 33), that the Spirit fell on all who heard the word (verse 44), that they were hearing Peter speak and "speaking in tongues and exalting God" (verse 46), activities that presuppose personal faith and conscious response, not infancy. In the case of Lydia (Acts 16), the text does not specify the composition of the household, and the argument from silence that infants must have been present is not exegetically compelling. In the case of the Philippian jailer (Acts 16), verse 34 specifically says that the household "rejoiced greatly, having believed in God", the rejoicing and believing are attributed to the whole household, again presupposing personal faith rather than infancy. The household baptism narratives are consistent with the faith-then-baptism pattern; they do not establish a departure from it.

The textual evidence is addressed more fully in Lesson 18, which examines the proper subjects of baptism in detail. The point at this stage is that the New Testament's pattern, faith, then baptism, in every recorded case, is not overturned by the household baptism narratives but is consistent with the most natural reading of each one. The Baptist's confidence in the faith-then-baptism pattern is not a confidence held against clear counter-evidence; it is a confidence grounded in the cumulative, consistent, unambiguous testimony of the baptismal narratives of the book of Acts, which present personal faith as the ground and precondition of every administration of the covenant sign.

VI. THE BROADER THEOLOGICAL CONTEXT OF BAPTISM

Covenant, Sacramental Theology, and Ecumenical Engagement

A. Baptism in the Covenant Theology Debate

The doctrine of baptism cannot be fully understood apart from the covenantal theology that grounds it, and the Baptist's understanding of baptism cannot be fully understood apart from the progressive covenantal framework

that the series has been developing since Lesson 6. The new covenant, as Jeremiah 31:31–34 defines it, is characterized by the universal personal knowledge of God among all its members, a characteristic that the Baptist reads as requiring that the covenant sign (baptism) be administered to those who personally bear the covenant reality (regeneration and personal faith). The argument is not primarily about baptism; it is about the nature of the new covenant itself. The Baptist administers baptism to believers only because the Baptist believes the new covenant community is constituted of believers only, and that the sign of entry into that community should correspond to the reality it declares.

The Reformed tradition's sacramental theology, represented by the Westminster Confession and the Three Forms of Unity, understands the sacraments as signs and seals of the covenant of grace, not merely symbols that represent a reality already fully present, but means of grace through which God genuinely works to strengthen and confirm the faith of those who receive them. The Baptist agrees that the ordinances are genuine means of grace and not mere symbolic ceremonies; the disagreement is about how the grace operates and who its proper recipients are. The Reformed sacramentalist argues that baptism both represents and seals the covenant grace to the recipient, including infant recipients in covenant families; the Baptist argues that baptism represents and seals to the believing recipient the grace she has already received through faith, but that it cannot represent and seal to an infant what the infant has not yet received, because the sign's meaning is constituted by the reality it declares.

The ecumenical significance of the baptism debate is considerable. In the contemporary Protestant world, the question of baptism is one of the most visible markers of confessional identity, and it is one of the disagreements most commonly cited as a barrier to close fellowship between Baptist and paedobaptist Christians. The Baptist who has worked through the covenantal and exegetical argument for believers' baptism with the seriousness this series has brought to it is equipped to engage the paedobaptist's argument with genuine respect and genuine intellectual engagement, not dismissing it as obviously wrong but engaging it as the carefully argued position of genuinely serious theologians whose commitment to Scripture is not in question. The disagreement is about how to read the covenant's structure and the baptismal narratives' pattern, and the reading that this series has consistently argued for is the one it believes is most faithful to the whole counsel of God.

B. The Significance of Baptism for the Church's Life and Mission

The doctrine of baptism is not merely an internal theological debate about the proper administration of an ecclesiastical rite; it is a doctrine with significant implications for the church's life and mission that deserve pastoral attention. When baptism is understood and practiced with the theological seriousness and the public, corporate, celebratory character that the New Testament envisions, it becomes one of the most powerful gospel proclamations in the church's regular repertoire, a visible, enacted sermon on the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, performed in the body of a specific named person who has personally encountered the living God and been transformed by His grace. Every baptism, properly understood and properly celebrated, is an evangelistic event: the watching world sees a person being buried with Christ and raised to new life, and the gospel's power to transform human beings is displayed with a directness and a vividness that no verbal proclamation alone can achieve.

The connection between baptism and the church's evangelistic mission is direct and practical. The church that takes the Great Commission's baptismal mandate seriously, that actively proclaims the gospel, that calls its hearers to repentance and faith, that baptizes those who respond without unnecessary delay, is a church that is

constantly refreshing its membership with the new life that genuine conversion produces. The regular celebration of baptism in the gathered assembly is itself a form of discipleship: the members who witness a baptism are reminded of their own covenant entry, renewed in their commitment to the covenant community and its mission, and strengthened in their faith by the visible evidence that the gospel is still producing the new birth in their own day and in their own community. The ordinance of baptism, faithfully practiced, is not merely a private spiritual event for the individual being baptized; it is a gift to the whole congregation and a witness to the watching world.

The discipline of pastoral preparation for baptism is also a significant dimension of the ordinance's significance for the church's life. The baptism candidate who has been carefully prepared, who understands what the ordinance means, who has given a credible account of his or her conversion and faith, who has been received into the congregation's covenanted fellowship, is a candidate whose baptism declares what it is intended to declare: the genuine new covenant reality of a life transformed by the Spirit of God. The pastor and elders who invest the time and pastoral care in the preparation of baptism candidates are not creating bureaucratic obstacles to the ordinance's administration; they are honoring the ordinance's significance by ensuring that it declares what it is meant to declare, in the life of a person who genuinely bears the reality the sign represents.

VII. BAPTISM IN THE LIFE OF THIS CONGREGATION

Conviction, Practice, and Celebration

A. *Baptism as a Corporate Act of Worship*

The final section of this lesson turns from the theological to the pastoral and from the doctrinal to the practical, asking what all of the foregoing theology looks like in the life of a specific congregation that takes its baptismal convictions seriously. The first and most important practical implication is that baptism should be treated as a corporate act of worship, not as an individual spiritual event administered by the pastor to a candidate in the presence of a few family members. When the congregation gathers to celebrate a baptism, it is gathering to witness and affirm the gospel's most visible enacted form, a person's public declaration that she has died with Christ and been raised to new life in Him, that she is entering the covenant community of the redeemed, and that the life she now lives is the life she will live in the company of the people whose Lord she confesses. The congregation is not a passive audience for this declaration; it is an active participant in it, the covenant community that is receiving the new member and that affirms by its presence and its voice that the declaration is consistent with what the community has observed in the candidate's life.

The practical consequence of treating baptism as a corporate act of worship is that the congregation's gathering for baptism should have the character of a celebration, the corporate joy of the covenant community welcoming new life, acknowledging the Spirit's work, and proclaiming the gospel together in its most physically immediate and visually compelling form. The solemnity appropriate to the occasion is not the solemnity of a funeral but the solemnity of a wedding: a profound and weighty joy, the celebration of a covenant enacted in the presence of God and His people, the public expression of a transformation that has cost everything and gained everything. The congregation that gathers for a baptism with this sense of the occasion will find that the ordinance forms them as well as the candidate, that witnessing the gospel enacted in the body of a fellow member is one of the most powerful instruments of spiritual formation available to the gathered community.

The pastoral preparation that precedes baptism, the candidate's presentation of her testimony and her understanding of the gospel to the elders, the congregation's opportunity to affirm the credibility of the profession, the formal reception of the new member into the covenant community, is part of the corporate character of the ordinance. The baptism is not complete until the new member has been received by the congregation through the right hand of fellowship, not because the fellowship is what makes the ordinance valid, but because the ordinance's ecclesiological dimension, its character as the entry into the visible covenant community, requires the community's active participation in the reception. The congregation that receives a new member through baptism is making a covenant commitment to that member: to preach the Word faithfully to her, to administer the ordinances to her, to provide pastoral care, to pray for her by name, to pursue her in discipline if she drifts, and to bear her burdens as she bears theirs. Baptism is the beginning of that covenant, not the end of a conversion process.

B. The Unit Ahead

This lesson has established the theological foundation for the two lessons that follow in Unit 6. Lesson 18 will address the proper subjects and mode of baptism in detail: the case for believers' baptism as the only baptism warranted by the New Testament, the refutation of the paedobaptist argument from the Abrahamic covenant, the lexical and symbolic case for immersion as the proper mode, and the charitable acknowledgment that faithful Christians hold different convictions on both questions. Lesson 19 will explore the full range of what baptism declares and displays: union with Christ in His death and resurrection, cleansing from sin, the declaration of new identity, and formal entry into the covenant community.

Together the three lessons of Unit 6 constitute the most practically immediate doctrinal unit of the series, the unit that most directly shapes what this congregation does when it gathers for a baptism, how it prepares candidates for the ordinance, what it teaches its members about the covenant sign they have received, and how it celebrates the ongoing work of the Spirit that produces new believers in its midst. The theology of baptism is not abstract doctrine to be studied and shelved; it is the living, enacted proclamation of the gospel that the congregation performs in the body of every new believer who goes into the water in the Trinitarian name and comes up out of it as a member of the covenant community that belongs to the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Unit 7 will turn to the Lord's Supper, the second and ongoing ordinance that the new covenant community celebrates as the regular renewal of its covenant with the Lord who purchased it. But the theology of the Lord's Supper cannot be fully appreciated without the theology of baptism as its foundation: baptism is the entry into the covenant community; the Lord's Supper is the regular renewal of the covenant into which baptism has admitted the believer. The two ordinances belong together as the two enacted proclamations of the gospel that Christ has given His church, the one that celebrates the beginning of the new life, and the one that regularly renews and strengthens it. To them both be the honor of faithful, serious, joyful administration, to the glory of the God who ordained them and who works in them for the formation of His covenant people.

“Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.”

Matthew 28:19–20, NASB 1995

Theological Terms and Definitions

Ordinance	The Baptist designation for baptism and the Lord's Supper, emphasizing that these are rites ordained by Christ whose authority derives from His command. Distinguished from the sacramental understanding by its insistence that the grace does not operate through the elements or the act apart from the faith of the recipient. The ordinances are genuine means of grace working through faith, not automatic vehicles of saving grace working <i>ex opere operato</i> .
Sacrament	The term used by Roman Catholic, Orthodox, and many Protestant traditions to describe rites understood as channels or instruments of saving grace. In the dominant Catholic understanding, sacraments operate <i>ex opere operato</i> , by the work worked, conveying grace by their proper administration regardless of the recipient's faith. The Baptist tradition rejects this understanding while affirming that the ordinances are genuine means of grace operating through faith.
Ex Opere Operato	Latin for 'by the work worked.' The Roman Catholic doctrine that sacraments convey grace by virtue of their proper administration, regardless of the recipient's faith or spiritual condition. The primary target of the Baptist's insistence on 'ordinance' rather than 'sacrament.' Rejected on exegetical grounds: the New Testament consistently presents faith as the instrument through which saving grace is received, not the act of baptism or any other rite.
Baptismal Regeneration	The doctrine held by Roman Catholics, some Lutherans, and Churches of Christ that baptism effects regeneration, that something happens in the water that produces the new birth, the forgiveness of sins, or the infusion of saving grace. Refuted by the Baptist tradition on the basis of: (1) the NT's consistent faith-then-baptism pattern; (2) the thief on the cross (Luke 23:43); (3) the cases in Acts where the Spirit is received before baptism (Acts 10:44-48); and (4) the sufficiency of Christ's blood and the Spirit's work apart from any human institutional act.
Visible Word	The Reformation-era theological description of the sacraments or ordinances as enacted proclamations of the same gospel that the preached word declares audibly. The term captures the communicative character of the ordinances: they address the congregation through sight and physical experience, not through sound alone. Baptism is a visible word because the immersion physically enacts the gospel narrative of death, burial, and resurrection.
Great Commission	Matthew 28:18-20: Christ's command to the church to make disciples of all nations by going, baptizing, and teaching. The grammatical analysis of the Commission shows that 'make disciples' (<i>matheteusate</i>) is the main verb, with 'baptizing' and 'teaching' as participial descriptions of the means. Establishes baptism as non-optional for genuine disciples and as one of the two primary instruments of disciple-making alongside the teaching of the Word.
Acts 2:41	The primary text for the apostolic baptismal sequence: 'Then those who had received his word were baptized; and that day there were added about three thousand souls.' Establishes the faith-then-baptism-then-addition pattern that is the New Testament's normative sequence for conversion, covenant entry, and church membership. The receiving of the word (personal faith) precedes baptism; the baptism precedes the addition to the community.
Household Baptisms	The baptismal narratives in Acts involving whole households: Cornelius (Acts 10), Lydia (Acts 16:14-15), the Philippian jailer (Acts 16:31-34), and Stephanas (1 Corinthians 1:16). Sometimes cited by paedobaptists as evidence for infant baptism within covenant households. The Baptist response: each narrative describes the household hearing the word, believing, and/or responding with evident personal faith; none requires the inference that unbaptized infants

	were present; and the jailer narrative explicitly attributes both faith and rejoicing to the household as a whole.
1 Peter 3:21	Peter's statement 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.' The verse's saving claim is immediately qualified: the salvation is not the physical act (not the removal of dirt) but the appeal to God (the faith expressed in the act), and it is grounded in the resurrection of Christ, not in the water. The Baptist reads this as describing baptism's genuine role as a covenant appeal, not its regenerative efficacy.
Covenant Sign	The visible symbol that marks membership in the covenant community. In the old covenant, circumcision was the covenant sign, administered to male infants of covenant families. In the new covenant, baptism is the covenant sign, administered, on the Baptist reading, to those who personally bear the new covenant reality of regeneration and faith, in accordance with the new covenant's defining characteristic that all its members shall know the Lord personally (Jeremiah 31:34).

Practical Application

A. For the Mind: What Must We Believe?

We must believe that baptism is a genuine ordinance of Christ, ordered by His command, grounded in His authority, and administered in His name, whose significance is neither trivialized by treating it as a mere symbol nor inflated by treating it as an instrument of saving grace. The Baptist understands baptism as a genuine means of grace operating through faith, a visible word of the gospel, a public declaration of covenant membership, and an act of obedience to the Lord's explicit command. This rich, multidimensional understanding of baptism is neither the minimalism of the tradition that treats it as optional and insignificant nor the sacramentalism of the tradition that treats it as saving in itself.

We must believe that baptism does not save, that the water does not wash away sins, that the immersion does not regenerate the soul, and that the ordinance's significance depends on the Spirit's prior work in the heart of the one who goes into the water. This conviction is not a minimizing of baptism's importance; it is a maximizing of the gospel's sufficiency. The blood of Christ is sufficient to save; the Spirit's regenerating work is sufficient to unite the sinner to Christ; baptism publicly declares and seals what the Spirit has already accomplished, and its significance is proportional to the significance of what it declares, the most important thing that has ever happened to a human being.

We must believe that the Great Commission's baptismal mandate is not optional for genuine disciples of Jesus Christ, and that the New Testament's urgent, undeferred, faith-preceding pattern of baptism administration is the standard to which the congregation's practice should aspire. The contemporary evangelical culture's casual attitude toward baptism, treating it as an optional step in the spiritual journey that can be indefinitely deferred without consequence, is a departure from the apostolic pattern that the Lord's own command does not authorize.

B. For the Heart: What Must We Feel and Desire?

We should feel a renewed wonder at the ordinance of baptism, a wonder that does not diminish with familiarity but deepens with theological understanding. The person going into the water is enacting, in her own body, the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ. She is publicly declaring, before God and the watching community and the wider world, that she has been transferred from death to life, from darkness to light, from the kingdom of Satan to the kingdom of God's beloved Son. That is not a ceremony; it is an event of cosmic and eternal significance, performed in the humble medium of water and a human body and a simple profession of faith in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.

We should feel a pastoral desire for every member of this congregation who has not yet been baptized as a believing adult to take the step. Not because baptism saves, it does not, but because Christ has commanded it, because the apostolic pattern presents it as the immediate and joyful response of those who genuinely believe, and because the covenant membership that baptism enacts is the structural form of the Christian community that the entire governance unit has described. The unbaptized member of the congregation is a member who has not yet taken the first step of the obedience that genuine discipleship requires; the pastoral desire for her to take that step is a form of love for the wholeness of her covenant life.

We should desire for every baptism in this congregation to be celebrated with the theological seriousness and the corporate joy that the ordinance's significance deserves: a full congregation present and participating, a candidate

well-prepared and clearly confessing, a pastor administering with pastoral care and theological weight, and a community receiving a new member with the right hand of fellowship and the covenantal commitment that reception requires. This is what a faithful celebration of baptism looks like, and this is what every member of this congregation deserves to witness and participate in whenever the ordinance is administered.

C. For the Hands: What Must We Do?

- Read Romans 6:1-11 this week with specific attention to the baptismal theology of verses 3-4. Note how Paul uses baptism as the theological ground for his argument about the impossibility of continuing in sin: the person who has been baptized into Christ's death is a person who has died to sin and whose life is now hidden with Christ in God. How does this argument presuppose the personal faith of the one being baptized? How does it describe baptism as a visible proclamation of the gospel's death-burial-resurrection narrative?
- If you have not been baptized as a believing adult, speak with the pastor or an elder this week about the baptism preparation process. Not to schedule a ceremony but to begin the conversation about what the ordinance means, whether your understanding of the gospel is sufficient to constitute the credible profession that believers' baptism requires, and what the next steps in the preparation process look like. The apostolic urgency of the New Testament's baptismal pattern is a pastoral invitation to take the step without unnecessary delay.
- Reflect on your own baptism. When were you baptized? What did you understand about the gospel at that time? Was the baptism preceded by a credible profession of personal faith? Was it celebrated publicly and corporately, or administered in a more private setting? Bring your reflection to a conversation with an elder or the pastor, not as a source of anxiety about the past but as a means of deepening your current understanding of what the ordinance you have received means and what it demands of you now.
- Pray for those in this congregation who are currently in the process of preparing for baptism: that the Spirit would deepen their understanding of the gospel, confirm the genuineness of the faith they are professing, and produce in them the eager, joyful, undeffered responsiveness to the Lord's command that the New Testament's baptismal narratives consistently display. Pray that their baptism, when it comes, would be a genuine visible-word proclamation of the gospel that builds up the congregation and witnesses to the watching world.
- Think about someone in your life, a family member, a friend, a coworker, who is not yet a believer. Pray for them specifically this week in connection with the baptism lesson: pray that the Spirit would bring them to the repentance and faith that precede baptism in the apostolic pattern, that they would hear the gospel clearly, believe it personally, and be baptized into the covenant community of the people who belong to the triune God. The Great Commission's baptismal mandate is not only an instruction about how to administer the ordinance; it is a vision of the mission that the ordinance serves, the making of disciples from all nations who are gathered into the community of the redeemed through the sign of the new covenant.

Key Texts: *Matthew 28:19; Romans 6:3-4; Acts 2:38, 41; 8:36-38; Colossians 2:12; 1 Peter 3:21; Galatians 3:27*

Study and Discussion Questions

Opening Question

- When you were baptized, what did you understand about the meaning of what you were doing? Did anyone explain the theological significance of the ordinance to you before or after your baptism? Looking back, was your preparation adequate, and what would you want every person preparing for baptism in this congregation to understand that you may not have understood at the time?

Observation Questions (What Do the Texts Say?)

- Read Matthew 28:18-20. What is the grammatical main verb of the Commission (verse 19)? What are the three participial forms that describe how the main command is accomplished? What does the grammatical structure imply about the relationship between baptizing and making disciples? What authority does Christ claim in verse 18, and how does that authority grounding of the Commission affect the weight of the baptismal mandate?
- Read Romans 6:1-7. What question does Paul pose in verse 1, and what is his response in verse 2? How does Paul use baptism in verse 3 as the theological ground of his response? What does 'baptized into His death' mean? What does 'buried with Him through baptism into death' mean? What does the purpose clause of verse 4 ('so that as Christ was raised ... we too might walk in newness of life') specify about baptism's goal?
- Read Acts 2:37-41. What response does Peter call for in verse 38? What sequence does verse 41 describe ('those who had received his word were baptized; and ... there were added about three thousand souls')? What three events are described in this sequence, and what does their order imply about the relationship between faith, baptism, and church membership?
- Read Acts 10:44-48 and 1 Peter 3:21 together. In Acts 10:44-48, what had already happened before Peter authorized baptism (verse 44)? What was Peter's logic for authorizing baptism in verse 47? In 1 Peter 3:21, how does Peter qualify the claim that 'baptism now saves you'? What is the 'it' that saves (verse 21b), and what grounds the saving (verse 21c)?
- Read Luke 23:39-43. What did the thief say to Jesus in verse 42? What did Jesus promise in verse 43? What does this passage demonstrate about the relationship between baptism and salvation? How does it function as evidence against baptismal regeneration?

Interpretation Questions (What Does It Mean?)

- The lesson argues that 'ordinance' is a more precise and theologically accurate designation for baptism than 'sacrament,' because it captures the Baptist conviction that grace operates through the faith of the recipient rather than through the act of administration. Is this terminological distinction practically significant, or is it primarily a polemical marker? Could a sacramentalist and an ordinance-advocate agree on the practical administration of baptism while disagreeing about the terminology?
- The lesson argues that the Acts 2:38 preposition *eis* ('for') is retrospective ('because of forgiveness already received') rather than prospective ('in order to obtain forgiveness'). Is this exegetical argument convincing? What specific contextual and grammatical evidence supports the retrospective reading? What is the strongest argument for the prospective reading, and how would you respond to it?

- The lesson presents the thief on the cross as 'the most decisive single counter-evidence to baptismal regeneration.' Is this argument as decisive as the lesson claims? How do proponents of baptismal regeneration typically respond to the thief on the cross, and is their response adequate?
- The lesson argues that the New Testament's consistent faith-then-baptism pattern is not merely incidental to the missionary frontier circumstances of the apostolic period but is normative for all subsequent baptismal practice. The paedobaptist responds that the pattern is incidental and that infant baptism would have been practiced if circumstances had allowed. How do you assess this disagreement? Is the paedobaptist's argument from silence persuasive, or does the cumulative weight of the Acts narratives establish a genuine normative pattern?
- The lesson identifies baptism as 'a visible portrayal of the gospel' and a 'visible word.' How does this description of baptism's function change the way you think about the congregation's responsibility to administer and celebrate it? If baptism is a gospel proclamation, what does a poorly prepared, privately administered, theologically thin baptism communicate? What does a well-prepared, publicly celebrated, theologically rich baptism communicate?

Application Questions (What Does It Demand of Us?)

- The lesson argues that baptism is not optional for genuine disciples of Jesus Christ, pointing to the Great Commission's mandate and the apostolic pattern of urgent, undeferred administration. Does this congregation's current practice of preparing and scheduling candidates for baptism reflect the New Testament's urgency? Is there a risk that the legitimate concern for the integrity of the profession being made has been allowed to create institutional delays that suppress the joy and urgency of the apostolic pattern?
- The lesson describes baptism as a corporate act of worship that deserves to be celebrated with the full congregation present and participating. How does this congregation currently celebrate baptisms? Is the ordinance administered in a context that gives it the theological weight and corporate joy that the lesson describes? What specific changes to the congregation's practice of baptism would bring it more fully into alignment with the lesson's description?
- The lesson argues that each baptism in a faithful congregation is an evangelistic event, a visible sermon on the gospel's power to transform human beings. Who in this congregation's wider community, unchurched family members, neighbors, friends, should be specifically invited to witness an upcoming baptism? How might the congregation's understanding of baptism as a gospel proclamation reshape its approach to the evangelistic opportunity that each baptism represents?
- The glossary's discussion of 'visible word' describes baptism as addressing the congregation through sight and physical experience rather than through sound alone. How does this communicative character of baptism shape what the pastor or elder should say at the moment of administration? What verbal accompaniment to the physical act most fully exploits baptism's character as a visible word, both for the candidate and for the watching congregation?

Prayer Focus

Begin by reading Matthew 28:18-20 aloud as the commission that grounds this congregation's entire baptismal practice: '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 the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.' Pause on the first sentence: 'All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth.' This is the one who commands baptism. Not a religious innovator, not an ecclesiastical tradition, not a denominational convention, the risen and reigning Lord to whom all authority in heaven and on earth has been entrusted. The command to baptize is rooted in the authority of the One who conquered death, who sits at the right hand of the Father, and who has promised to be with His people in the making of disciples until the end of the age. Let that authority shape the urgency and the seriousness with which this congregation approaches the ordinance He has commanded.

Pray for those in this congregation who are currently preparing for baptism, or who are genuinely converted but have not yet taken the step. Pray that the Spirit would confirm in them the reality that baptism declares: genuine regeneration, genuine repentance, genuine faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. Pray that their preparation would be thorough enough to ensure that the ordinance they receive is a true declaration of a genuine new covenant reality, that the visible word of their baptism would say what it is intended to say, because the reality it declares is truly present in their hearts. Pray for the elders and pastor as they prepare candidates: for wisdom in examining professions, for pastoral care in the preparation process, and for the joy of presenting well-prepared candidates to the congregation for the covenant celebration of their baptism.

Pray for the congregation's understanding of and engagement with the ordinance of baptism. Pray that the members of this community would receive the theology of Unit 6 with the same eagerness that the Bereans received the apostolic teaching, examining the Scriptures to see whether these things are so, bringing their questions and their convictions into contact with the arguments this series makes, and growing in the depth of their understanding of the new covenant sign that they themselves have received. Pray for those members whose understanding of their own baptism may be theologically thin, who were baptized without adequate preparation or who have never reflected deeply on what the ordinance they received means and demands. Pray that this study would be the occasion of a renewed understanding and a renewed covenant commitment for them.

Pray in thanksgiving for every baptism that this congregation has witnessed and celebrated in its history. Give thanks for the men and women who have gone into the water confessing faith in Christ, and whose lives have subsequently been the visible demonstration of the gospel's power to transform. Give thanks for the specific baptisms whose memory is most vivid to the longest-serving members of this congregation, the stories of transformation that the ordinance has enacted and that the congregation has witnessed over the years. Give thanks that the same gospel is still producing the same new birth in the same sovereign Spirit, that the pattern of Acts 2:41, receiving the word, being baptized, being added to the community, is still the pattern by which the Lord is adding to His church those who are being saved.

Close with a prayer of dedication: that this congregation would be faithful to the Great Commission's baptismal mandate, proclaiming the gospel with the urgency and the clarity that produces genuine faith, administering baptism with the theological seriousness and the corporate joy that the ordinance deserves, and receiving new members with the covenant hospitality of a community that knows it is adding to the blood-purchased possession

of the triune God in whose name the baptism is administered. To Him alone be the glory, in every proclamation of the gospel that produces faith, in every immersion that declares the death and resurrection of His Son, and in every new member added to the covenant community that He is building until the day when the Great Commission is complete and the great multitude of Revelation 7:9 is gathered before the throne and the Lamb.

“Now to Him who is able to do far more abundantly beyond all that we ask or think, according to the power that works within us, to Him be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations forever and ever. Amen.”

Ephesians 3:20–21, NASB 1995

Key Texts: Matthew 28:19; Romans 6:3–4; Acts 2:38, 41; 8:36–38; Colossians 2:12; 1 Peter 3:21; Galatians 3:27

Soli Deo Gloria
To God Alone Be the Glory

FAITHFUL TO THE WORD

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