

Augusta First Baptist Church  
August 12, 2007  
Believer's Baptism and the Mark of Christ  
The Baptist Myth Series

Romans 6:1-5

*NRS Romans 6:1 -5 - What then are we to say? Should we continue in sin in order that grace may abound? 2 By no means! How can we who died to sin go on living in it? 3 Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? 4 Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. 5 For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.*

Galatians 3:23-29

*Now before faith came, we were imprisoned and guarded under the law until faith would be revealed. [24] Therefore the law was our disciplinarian until Christ came, so that we might be justified by faith. [25] But now that faith has come, we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian, [26] for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. [27] As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. [28] There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. [29] And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise.*

The summer of 2002, is without parallel, one of the most memorable for the DeLoach family. On a sabbatical leave, we spent two months living in southwest England, along the coast of the Bristol Channel, overlooking the lights of Cardiff. One of my favorite diversions from my studies at Bristol University, was to drive to nearby villages and visit the parish churches. One such village, Stugumber, was the location of the mother church of our host church – Minehead Baptist Church. I say "was," because several years ago, the church folded – unfortunately, this is not uncommon for many of the village churches. Stugumber Baptist Church had a bloody history. During the 1600's, under the rule of Judge Jeffries, there was much persecution of Baptists and other "dissenters" from the Church of England. In 1685, the Baptist minister was caught preaching outside his approved area, and was sentenced to death at the White Swan Inn, along with two other members. They were forced to march about one mile up the hill, to an oak tree - called the Hedon Oak, (it was finally cut down just about twenty years ago) - and were promptly hung. Following the hanging, their bodies suffered the further indignity of being drawn and quartered. According to one of the former members, whose husband pastored the church before moving to retire in Minehead, the story was that it rained that day, and the blood from their bodies mixed into the stream. This same stream became a place of baptisms for many years during that church's life.

Another Baptist church, just down the road, also had a history of persecution. According to a published account in 1674, Broadmead Baptist of Bristol suffered terribly beneath the power and authority of the mayor and bishop. The church was not allowed to have any preaching of the gospel in their worship services. They could sing, but no preaching. Anytime they gathered for worship, there would be spies and informants reporting names of those in attendance. One such Sunday, according to the records, the authorities came in and found the church so "thronged that they could not get in." They threw women down, broke through a door on the other side and rushed in and took the preacher and several other members to prison. He was sentenced to six months. One of the other ministers who was already in prison died, after three weeks. It was reported that over 5000 attended the funeral which was more than anyone of that generation had ever witnessed at a funeral before. I quote: "Such honour have all his Saints."

Now that all the Baptist ministers were in prison or dead, the church set to work on coming up with a solution to hide those who felt called to preach in their worship services. Here is what they decided: They constructed a curtain on one end of their meeting house, that would enclose about fifty of the congregation. The rest sat outside the curtain and listened. One of the fifty, would be the speaker - hidden from view from the rest of the church, and whatever spies would attend - and he would stand and preach. The congregation had filled the stairs leading up to the curtained-off area with women and children, to prevent anyone from rushing through to discover the preacher's identity. When they recognized an informer or spy, they would stop the preaching portion of the service (which was illegal) and begin singing one of the Psalms (all this was prearranged before every worship service). Again, I quote from their records: "Which means the Lord blessed, that many times, when the mayor came, they were all singing, that he knew not who to take away more than another." When the mayor or other informants left, they would stop singing and the preacher would resume. Sometimes their services would be interrupted as many as three times in this way.

Why, you may ask, were these Baptists such a threat in the 17th century, that they incurred constant harassment, and many of their ministers and members were imprisoned and even executed? It was because the Baptists rejected infant baptism. They pointed out that nowhere in the New Testament do we have examples of infants being baptized. Baptists believed both then and now, that only a believer can choose baptism. The choice cannot be made for you – not by a parent, not by a minister, or by any other authority whatsoever.

As we conclude this series on the Baptist Myth or the Baptist Story, we do so by focusing on the historic Baptist distinction of Believer's Baptism. More than likely, if you were to ask someone what is unique about Baptists, baptism would be the first thing pointed out. It is because of the historic view of Believer's Baptism, that Baptists got their name in the first place. Today, some non-Baptists may consider our baptism quaint or quirky. But four centuries ago the rejection of infant Baptism could cost one their very life. Hard to believe isn't it?

To connect our Baptism with the death of those who proclaimed it four hundred years ago is Biblically appropriate. Baptism is deadly business.

In our text this morning, Paul takes seriously the deadly nature of baptism by writing: “Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? 4 Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death” (Romans 6:3-4). But baptism is also a pronouncement of freedom. Paul goes on to say: “Just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.” (Romans 6:4b-5)

In a wonderful scene from the movie “O Brother Where Art Thou” there is a baptism at a river. Blue Grass artist, Allison Kraus, sings in the background, and Delmar, one of the characters, impulsively plunges into the water for Baptism.

*Pete: Well I'll be .... Delmar's been saved.*

*Delmar: Well that's it, boys. I've been redeemed. The preacher's done warshed away all my sins and transgressions. It's the straight and narrow from here on out, and heaven everlasting's my reward.*

*Ulysses: Delmar, what are you talking about? We've got bigger fish to fry.*

*Delmar: The preacher says all my sins is warshed away, including that Piggly Wiggly I knocked over in Yazoo.*

*Ulysses: I thought you said you was innocent of those charges?*

*Delmar: Well I was lyin'. And the preacher says that that sin's been warshed away too. Neither God nor man's got nothin' on me now. C'mon in boys, the water is fine.*

Baptism, of course, does not “save you.” It is a two way claim – our claim on Christ and Christ’s claim on us. But Delmar was right on one level, baptism is the symbol that Christ has come to free us from our bondage, our enslavement.

This is why baptism by immersion is not just a silly old archaic membership requirement, like a secret fraternity initiation that one must go through in order to belong to “our church”. Baptism is an enactment of the Word of God. We repeat, the radical drama of what Jesus has done for us. Baptism is a public testimony, not only of the personal change in ones life, but the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus. Therefore, the act of baptism is not a private affair, but a public profession.

There are many ways to describe or define Baptists. There are nearly 70 different denominations or church groups that call themselves baptists. Cooperative Baptists, Alliance Baptists, Southern Baptists (there are 16 million), Fundamentalist Baptists, Liberal Baptists (there are two), Georgia Baptists, foot-washing Baptists, snake-handling Baptists, American Baptists, Northern Baptists, black Baptists, white Baptists, Progressive Baptists, Conservative Baptists and...well, you get the idea.

In American religious life, denominations just do not matter the way they once did. Many of you raised children in this very church, and now that they are grown, they go to Presbyterian, Catholic or Methodist churches. This morning, many within this worshipping community, come from non-Baptist churches. Denominations just do not mean as much as they use to.

Times are “a-changin,” as the saying goes, and during such days when institutions rise and fall with equal speed, what can we hold onto and say without reserve, “This is who we are.” Let’s return to the basics of why we call ourselves a church – a Baptist church: Because we are made up of individuals who have professed a faith and relationship with Jesus Christ, and have been baptized into His body, (the church) through immersion.

Baptism used to take on all sorts of forms. In the early centuries, professing Christians went through a rigorous period of preparation that lasted three years. One church historian notes, that in the early centuries, believers were baptized naked! They were given a clean white robe after they left the waters, and did not take another bath until the following Sunday. Before going under, the one administering the baptism would ask: “And what is your profession of faith?” To which the candidate would respond: “Jesus is Lord.” Jesus is Lord, is the oldest confession in Christianity. Those three words are life saving and life giving words. The candidates were then immersed three times: in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. It was a thorough dunking!

Without apology, we Baptists believe that if we are going to get baptized then it must be all the way. Baptism, *baptizo* - means to dip, plunge, submerge, or immerse. Romans 6:4: *“Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life.”*

Paul Duke, interprets these words of Paul, as an invitation to imagine our calling as an immersion – Go all the way!!! (Proclaiming the Baptist Vision: Baptism and the Lord’s Supper, Walter Shurden, editor. p. 22) Immersion as revolution is like approaching a swimming pool at the end of spring, dipping a hesitant toe into the water, and feeling its chill run up our leg. You and I know there can be no easing into this pool. One has to simply hold their breath, clamp tight the nose and jump in – feet first, head first, no matter. The call of Christ is a call to go all the way.

Truth be told, I wonder if we have domesticated baptism and have made it comparably tame. With our tiled tubs filled with heated water, and our clean white robes, we have inadvertently softened the whole baptismal experience. I have always wanted to baptize at a river. Oh sure, there are water moccasins out there, river water can be dark and murky, and you have to be careful lest you slip on a rock or get swept away by the current, but isn’t that the point? Baptisms are dangerous.

In Romans, Paul reminds us, that it is in baptism that we die – that is right – die! We die with Christ in death. We die to our sin. We die to living just for ourselves. We die and with equal drama, we are raised up to a new life.

We may not see all that drama taking place in our indoor baptisteries, but it is there. Even indoor baptisms are fraught with the unexpected. At least once a year, a small child may swim out to meet me. At least once a year, I will baptize someone bigger than myself, and the threat of the pool overflowing onto the choir looms large. Ask any minister: the best church stories often take place in the baptistery– wild, unpredictable, full of energy.

Baptisms are usually sloppy events, yet they are truly the most significant thing we do, both in the enacting and in the remembering. We are story telling the gospel every time we witness a brother or sister in the water. We remember the time we entered the river water, to tell others about what Jesus had done for us.

At the river we come together as one, surgeons and sanitation workers, housewives and hustlers, lawyers and loafers, CEO's and cashier workers– all stand on the same footing, the same shore, down at the river. Baptism does that – it makes us one with Christ. Nowhere else in this world or in this life, can we ever know that kind of equality. There is always a hierarchy– head of families, head of companies, head of religious opinions, and concerns, but, not at the river. We become one. It is an earthly symbol of an eternal reality. *“There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.”* (Galatians 3:28)

There at the river, we learn that we count. Baptism is about witnessing to a whole new way of life. C.S. Lewis said, “Becoming a Christian is not about becoming a nice person. It is about becoming a new person.” It is a sign of death and also a sign of birth. Through baptism we not only testify that we believe in Jesus, but we identify with him. The way Paul puts it in Galatians is, *“We clothe ourselves with Christ.”* (3:27) We are immersed into a new calling.

Baptism follows salvation, it follows faith, it follows belief. It comes after a commitment to follow Jesus Christ. I ask: shall we gather at the river?

“Shall we gather at the river.” I still remember hearing this hymn sung by the pastor's wife at my grandfather's funeral. To gather at the river, is to sing of death. But, it is not simply to sing of a time when our hearts cease and our lungs fill no more. It is to sing of when we cease to live for ourselves, and choose to live for God. Bill Leonard writes: “There is a river, full of little children and babysitters, holiness preachers and hungover parents, where sinners become saints and where the no-account people count after all.” (Proclaiming the Baptist Vision)

From the muddy waters of the Jordan, to rivers and creeks throughout this country, to the clear, nearly sterile waters of fiberglass pools, called baptisteries, people have entered the waters of baptism to testify and profess their faith in a man called Jesus. These waters are not chosen for us. Each, in our own time, must choose for ourselves, to gather at that river.

“At the river,” we claim and are claimed, and here at the table, we remember the claim.

At the table and at the river we learn that we count. And this will have to be good news enough, until that day when all God's people shall gather at the river that flows by the throne of God. Will you gather at the river with me? The place where you let the world know that you came to live for Christ and follow after him through the years. Will you join me at the River, those of you who have never professed your faith in Jesus but now know God is calling you to join him with the saints? Will you join me at the River, those of you who profess their faith in Christ – maybe have done so for many years – but have never entered into the baptism of immersion?

Baptism is not just a symbol. It is the symbol, a celebration of grace that as Jesus entered into the tomb of death and was raised up into God's resurrection. We die to the old way of doing things, the old way of living, and are raised up into a new way of living, a new way of relating, and a new way of being.

Well, shall we gather at the river?