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Presentation Transcript
What Is Baptism?
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Today's title is *What Is Baptism?* It's the first in a series on this topic.

There are several answers to the question, "What is baptism?" Let's start with this one. Baptism is a fundamental teaching of the Bible. Let's go to Hebrews 6, verses 1 through 2.

Hebrews 6:1-2 – *Therefore, leaving the discussion of the elementary principles of Christ, let us go on to perfection, not laying again the foundation of repentance from dead works, and of faith towards God, of the doctrine of baptisms, of laying on of hands, of the resurrection of the dead, and of eternal judgment.*

If we look at the context of these two verses, Paul is dressing down the Hebrews because they didn't understand the fundamentals of Christianity. One of those is baptisms. Notice the plural form. Today we're just going to talk about one of them – water baptism. There are others. Nonetheless, he's telling them they're immature and that they should know the fundamentals. So how important is baptism?

Well, just to illustrate, I was talking with a woman once who was baptized when she was thirteen in one of the mega-churches here in town – not the biggest one. I don't want to point a finger at anybody. That's not the point. She was asking me some elementary questions about Christianity and I began to realize that she didn't have enough to go to even start moving forward in her life with God. I enquired about her baptism – how it all started for her. She said, "I got baptized with a group of friends because everyone was doing it and I wanted to get in." Remember, she was thirteen. I asked, "Did you understand what baptism means?" She said, "I didn't then and I don't now." So she's being as honest as she possibly can be. She genuinely wanted help. But I was wondering, "How did that happen?" Somehow, she was run through the process that that church used to teach people about baptism. Because she was young, and had very poor parental support, and possibly, poor pastoral support, she never absorbed the meaning, if she was taught anything. And the

result of that was that she floundered spiritually ever since. She had no foundation on which to build her relationship with God.

Have you ever been out in deep water swimming, and you get tired, and then, finally, you begin to reach the shore, and you feel the bottom? Now you have something solid to stand on? She didn't have a bottom to stand on. Now, I'm not saying that it's too late for her. At some point, it *will* be, because we all run out of time eventually in this life. So it's important to know the fundamentals. And her relationship with God, because she didn't know them, had been inhibited by a lack of understanding for a good part of her life. Jesus said that our foundation needs to be built on Him – not on what we want, or what we think, or what we do, or what others want, or what others think, or what others do.

The doctrines Paul mentions there in Hebrews 6 are some of the foundational teachings we all need if we're to advance spiritually. Speaking of one those, by the way, how much do you know about the fundamental doctrine of Christianity – the resurrection of the dead. When will it happen, who is going to come up in it, etc.? Just a question for you. You know, when people encounter things like that, that they're not familiar with, the natural tendency is to say, "Oh, that feels uncomfortable. Let's try to forget about it and move on. Let's just go with whatever anybody else is doing," and kind of fit in with the rest of the crowd. That doesn't cut it. Paul said that people who don't know the fundamentals are spiritually immature.

Okay, that's one answer for the question, "What is baptism?" It's a fundamental teaching of Christianity. What else is it?

Well, baptism is the rite that God uses to specify that a person has become a part of the body of Christ – the church. After the election for the President of the United States, the winner, by law, is not the President until he takes the oath of office. That doesn't fit too well when a President is incumbent and wins, but if he's newly elected, then he is not President. The old President is still the President until he takes the oath of office. In a similar way, baptism signifies membership in the body of Christ, the church. We may have been going to church for a long time, we may have been praying and reading the Bible for a long time, we may have had a relationship with God for a long time, He may have guided us by His Spirit for a long time, but our membership in His body – the church of Christ – is not official until we're baptized. So it's a marking of a point in time – from this day forward. I was baptized on December 13, 1964, around 5 pm. That's when I became an official part of the Church of God.

Can we see this in scripture? Well, let's look at an example in the Bible of that occurring. Let's go to Acts 2, starting in verse 36. Notice that this is some instruction from Peter to new believers. It's right after the church started on the Day of Pentecost – most everything was new. The brothers and sisters were, at that time, imbued with the Holy Spirit. And Peter goes out into the street and preaches a powerful sermon to all those who heard the

commotion. He explains to them that God had sent Jesus to save them and they crucified Him. Let's pick it up with that. Verse 36:

Acts 2:36 – *Let all the house of Israel, therefore, know for certain that God has made Him both Lord and Christ – this Jesus, whom you crucified. Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, “Brothers, what shall we do?” And Peter said to them, “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ, for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.”*

So repent, be baptized in the name of Christ, your sins will be forgiven and you'll receive the Holy Spirit – the Holy Spirit being the mark by which people are noted as members of the Church. Then he says in verse 39:

V-39 – *For the promise is for you and for your children, and for all who are far off – everyone whom the Lord our God calls to Himself.* Notice that the Holy Spirit comes into us at baptism. That's the mark of a Christian.

V-41 – *So those that received the word were baptized* – it says in verse 41 – *and there were added that day about three thousand souls* – added that day to the church. It's what we do to become a part of it officially.

Okay, what else is baptism? There are six elements mentioned in scripture that comprise baptism. Let's look at those six elements.

One is *immersion in water*. The word *baptize* in your Bible means *immerse*. There's a passage early in John's gospel – I won't quote – where it explains that John was baptizing over Jordan at a place where there was a lot of water. So this isn't about sprinkling or pouring or dabbing. It's about immersion. Immersion means something, as we're going to see as we continue. So that's the first element of the six – immersion.

The second one is that *God's name is invoked*. It's done in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit – by the authority of, or in the name of Jesus Christ – for the remission of sins.

The third one is *laying on of hands* – another fundamental doctrine of the church. Do you know about it? Well, in cases of ordination, coronation, illness, setting apart for special roles, those setting apart put hands on the person being set apart during prayer. It's a simple thing.

The fourth this is *prayer* itself. This prayer was conducted at baptisms in the New Testament by ordained people.

The fifth one is *faith*. Faith is a part of the whole process – faith on the part of the one praying and faith on the part of the one being prayed for.

And then the sixth element, of course, is the *receipt of the Holy Spirit*. Let's look at an illustration that demonstrates this and other things, as well, in Acts 8, verses 14 through 17.

Acts 8:14-17 – *Now when the apostles, who were at Jerusalem, heard that Samaria had received the word of God, they sent Peter and John to them, who when they had come down, prayed for them, that they might receive the Holy Spirit – for as yet, he had fallen on none of them; they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. Then they laid hands on them and they received the Holy Spirit.* So these people were baptized in Samaria in the name of Jesus, but they didn't receive the Spirit. So James and Peter went there, and they prayed for them, and laid hands on them, and they prayed for them in Jesus' name, and then they received the Holy Spirit. So it's all a part of the package. Were you baptized? Did you also have hands laid on you? Was it done in Jesus' name?

So there's all six elements – immersion, one; two, with all the right names of God; three, the laying on of hands; four, prayer; five, faith; and six, the receipt of the Spirit.

By the way, do you know how far it is from Jerusalem to Samaria? It's thirty-five miles in a straight line. Now, remember, that was a four-mile-an-hour world. It was a long way by foot. So that should tell us something about how important it was for them. The apostles thought it was *so* important that baptism be done a certain way, including the name of the Holy Spirit, as well as Jesus' name, and the laying on of hands, that they made a very long trip by foot. You'll notice that the Holy Spirit didn't come until the conditions occurred.

Baptism is a fundamental teaching. It's a rite. It designates entrance into the church. There are certain elements that must be present there. What are the requirements beside the ones we've already seen? What do we have to do? Do you have to be a certain age? Do you have to have a certain amount of information? Were there steps that they had to go through or hoops that they had to jump through? Well, actually, there's only *one* requirement – an attitude – an attitude of repentance. But that attitude causes other things to occur. And it causes *us* to do other things. But let's look at that attitude before we talk about what it causes us to do.

What is repentance? Well, if you look back at the scripture we read previously, when Peter told the people they should repent, we can see from the Louw & Nida Lexicon, the word *matanoeo*, means to change one's mind or purpose. So it's a change of heart. It's a change of one's mind or purpose. Let's amplify that just a little.

There's a lot in the Bible about repentance, but let's look at one of my favorites in Acts 26, starting in verse 9. He says:

Acts 26:9 – *Indeed, I myself thought I must do many things contrary to the name of Jesus of Nazareth.* That was before he was converted. Here, Paul is defending himself before the Roman king, Agrippa. He’s on trial, accused by the Jews. He’s explaining how he changed from a Christian hater and a devout Jew to a Christian. *This I also did in Jerusalem. And many of the saints I shut up in prison, having received authority from the chief priests. And when they were put to death, I cast my vote against them.* So he was responsible for the death of many Christians. *And I punished them often in every synagogue and compelled them to blaspheme. And being exceedingly enraged against them, I persecuted them even to foreign cities. While thus occupied, while I journeyed to Damascus with authority and commission from the chief priests, at midday, O king, along the road I saw light from heaven, brighter than the sun, shining around me and those who were with me. And when we all had fallen to the ground, I heard a voice speaking to me, saying in the Hebrew language, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me? It’s hard for you to kick against the goads.”* That term *goads* is in reference to the sharp spines that they used to put on the back of the harnesses of the animals that they used to pull things. So, if they kicked against it, then they would be hit by those sharp goads. So it was a difficult thing for them. So He’s saying, “Paul, you’re just very stubborn. And you keep kicking against the goads.” *And I said, “Who are you, Lord?”* – kind of an oxymoronic question, isn’t it, but he’s confused. *And He said, “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. But rise, and stand on your feet, for I have appeared to you for this purpose – to make you minister and a witness, both of the things which you have seen and of the things which I will yet reveal to you. I will deliver you from the Jewish people as well as from the Gentiles, to whom I now send you.”* Wow! He’s taking the biggest public enemy of the church and turning him into a Christian. It happened in one fell swoop – in the blink of an eye. Then He says, “*...to open their eyes*” – that certainly probably had meaning to Paul, as he stood there blind – “*in order to turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sin and an inheritance among those who are sanctified by faith in Me.*” There are lots of people today that don’t believe that there is any such thing as sin. They’re just an organism that runs according to a genetic programming. But that’s okay. They still need forgiveness of sin.

So Paul is here talking about how he was on his way, walking on a road, with singleness of mind, out to persecute those that worshipped Jesus. And in a blinding flash, his whole life was turned back from that goal to become one of those he was persecuting. God led him to repentance – a complete change of outlook and goal – of purpose and focus. And his mission was to be God’s instrument to call many others to repentance – to a change away from self and toward God – to accept Christ’s sacrifice for their sins, and to be forgiven, and to draw close to God, instead of running away from Him – to *repent!* That’s what it means.

For most of us, it isn’t as dramatic as it was for Paul. But it is a *commitment* to follow Jesus Christ – to walk as He walked, to live as He lived, to live for Him and not for self, to give up our ways and begin thinking God’s way. A lot of us think we know what that means, but

what we don't realize is that, in the intervening two thousand years, human nature, in all the people who are Christians, has been working very hard to get away from doing what God actually wants us to do. And so the Christianity that we see today, abroad in the world, is significantly watered down from the gospel that Jesus brought. But, at any rate, repentance is a change of heart. It's an attitudinal change that causes others changes to take place in our lives.

So this is where the meaning of immersion in water comes in. In the Bible, water is the symbol of the Holy Spirit. And where the Spirit goes, cleansing and purity follow. Sin can't endure in the face of the Spirit of God. It has to leave. And the immersion – the going down in the water – symbolizes burial. You can't live very long under water. In Romans 6, and verse 3, he said:

Romans 6:3 – *Do you not know that all of us, who have been baptized into Christ Jesus, were baptized into His death? Therefore, we are buried with Him, through baptism, into death – that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so, we also should walk in newness of life.*

Now there are several layers of meaning there, but the most immediate, and the one pertaining to us today, most specifically, is that, once we come up out of those waters, we have given up our old way of life, and we're to walk in a new way of life – day by day, step by step. Down under the water, the old person dies, and up out of water, washed clean by the Holy Spirit, the new person rises. Baptism – your death and burial and resurrection to a new way of life.

So baptism is a type of what will happen to us when we are resurrected to Spirit life with God, also. There's going to be a resurrection to life and a coming alive again, so to speak – more on that later, however.

But, when we come up out of that water, does that mean we're perfect? No. It means we have turned around and are now heading the right way. But we have a long way to walk before God perfects us. And He does that *as* we walk and by the walk that we're walking.

How much do you have to know then? What hoops do you have to jump through? If we're going to live for God, we need to know what that means, behaviorally and attitudinally, don't we? So we need to know what to repent of, so to speak. What change are we supposed to make? Just saying that you're going to give your heart to the Lord, or walk as He walked, that doesn't really cut it. How do learn how Jesus walked? Well, we learn that by reading the Bible, primarily. Do you do that? We learn it by the example of other people who are walking the walk – although you have to be careful there, because God provides two examples for us – good ones and bad ones. We learn, sometimes, from sermons. We can learn that way. There are many ways that we can learn.

I was talking to a teenage girl once – the daughter of friends, who were visiting for the weekend. They were visiting for the specific purpose of hoping that I could engage their daughter, because she was having some problems. Who better for her to see than a minister who is also a therapist? I think that’s what her parents were thinking about. At one point in our discussion, she brought up the issue of baptism. She had talked to her parents about this previously, of course – her father was a minister, too – but, at her age, she needed to reach out to other caring adults besides her parents – and also peers – to discuss this topic. In our discussion, I asked her why she wanted to be baptized. She said that she wanted to be a part of the body of Christ. She knew that baptism was the thing that you had to undergo in order to be a part. She believed the biblical doctrines to be true. She was convicted in her heart. So that was very good. And I asked, “Are you willing to give up your life for Christ the way He gave up His life for you – to completely turn to Him and follow Him all the rest of your life?” And she said, “I think I need to think about that one some more.” Well, that’s a completely appropriate and honest answer for her. She grew up in the church. She was familiar with all the beliefs and traditions, but she had lived a long time without having made that decision. And now her mind was maturing toward adulthood, she’s understanding the nuances better, and she’s realized that she needs to get more serious about it, if she’s going to make a lifelong commitment, on which will hang her hope for eternal life.

So it’s a fundamental teaching. It’s a rite that signifies membership. It involves an attitude – repentance. And it is something else, as well. And here is where I think people get confused sometimes. We hear people talk about living for God, or giving their heart to the Lord – sort of soft, fuzzy terms. And it can be very emotional. I’m not saying those terms are wrong terms, but I’m just saying that emotion is not all there is to it. You know, a lot of people like it to be indistinct and ill-defined, so that they don’t have to be held to anything specific, but let’s read in Luke 22:19. This is the night before Jesus died at the Passover service.

Luke 22:19 – *He took bread, and gave thanks, and broke it, and gave it to them – to the disciples – saying, “This is My body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of Me.” Likewise, He also took the cup after supper, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in My blood, which is shed for you.”*

What’s a covenant – a *new* covenant? It’s not the covenant of Moses and it’s not the covenant of Abraham. It’s not the covenant that God made with Adam and Eve. It is a covenant, but it’s not that covenant. It’s a new covenant. It’s a binding, legal agreement between each one of us and Jesus Christ. Now, in a covenant, both parties promise to do certain things. That’s the deal. “If you do this, I’ll do that.”

So what is it that Jesus is going to do? Jesus promises to apply the penalty of His own death to our sins, wiping out the death penalty that was on *us* – to forgive us, to die for us so that we can live, even though we have broken God’s Law and are under the death

penalty. And what do we promise, then? Well, we promise to die, too – to die to our way of life and to become *His* servant – to live the way *He* wants us to live – no longer a slave to sin, but a slave to Jesus Christ. It's kind of like that old Bob Dylan song. You're going to have to serve somebody. Maybe it's the devil, or maybe it's the Lord, but you're going to have to serve somebody.

So what's it cost to be in the Church of God – the body of Christ? Well, it costs your life now in order to gain life with God eternally later.

Okay, that's a bit about baptism. We're going to continue this series next time. We're going to talk more about what it means to repent and what it is that we have to give up, which way we have to walk, and which way we have to stop walking. The title is *Dead Men Walking* – a bit of a clue there for you.

We publish every two weeks on Thursday afternoon, so check back then for the rest of this series.