

BAPTISM

Chapter Thirteen

How Understanding Water Baptism Defines the Personality of a Local Church

It always breaks my heart to see children get such a difficult beginning in life. Sometimes I think certain children would be better off to be born without parents than with the parents that conceived them. These parents have few moral values and little, if any, faith in God. These kinds of parents can barely sustain themselves let alone raise children to believe in God and live for Him. It is tough for children to make it in life when even their parents have no moral compass to guide their decision-making.

It has been said that a child learns most of the values of his whole life by the time he is five years old. **How you begin is important.** This is also true of a decision to be water baptized. Unless there is a depth of understanding regarding the way a decision to be water baptized connects to the values of the Christian life, and how that new life is to be lived, that believer will begin his new life with a serious spiritual handicap. Many local churches have such shallow teaching regarding water baptism, and teaching about the local church, that *newborn* Christians hardly are able to survive when they begin with such shallow roots in their commitments to Christ. Like *foxes in the hen house*, carnality is bound to run rampant in these kinds of local churches.

“¹² For we commend not ourselves again unto you, but give you occasion to glory on our behalf, that ye may have somewhat to *answer* them which glory in appearance, and not in heart. ¹³ For whether we be beside ourselves, *it is* to God: or whether we be sober, *it is* for your cause. ¹⁴ For the love of Christ constraineth us; because we thus judge, that if one died for all, then were all dead: ¹⁵ And that he died for all, that they which live should not henceforth live unto themselves, but unto him which died for them, and rose again. ¹⁶ Wherefore henceforth know we no man after the flesh: yea, though we have known Christ after the flesh, yet now henceforth know we *him* no more. ¹⁷ Therefore if any man *be* in Christ, *he is* a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new. ¹⁸ And all things *are* of God, who hath reconciled us to himself by Jesus Christ, and hath given to us the ministry of reconciliation; ¹⁹ To wit, that God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them; and hath committed unto us the word of reconciliation. ²⁰ Now then we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God did beseech *you* by us: we pray *you* in

Christ's stead, be ye reconciled to God.²¹ For he hath made him *to be* sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him" (II Corinthians 5:12-21).

The truths of II Corinthians 5:14-15 define the intended outcomes of proper teaching regarding water baptism. Teaching a person about the meaning of water baptism is like teaching a child his alphabet. Letters connect to vowels. Vowels connect to word structure. Word structure forms sentences and sentences communicate meaning and ideas. However, without the basics of the alphabet, the latter things are never accomplished. Water baptism is intended to be the transition from a believer's *position* "in Christ" to *practice* of the *Christ-life*. There are three central phrases in II Corinthians 5:14-15 that define the practical lifestyle of a person who genuinely understands his decision in water baptism.

"For the love of Christ constraineth us"

"For the love of Christ constraineth us - We have the love of God shed abroad in our hearts, and this causes us to love God intensely, and to love and labor for the salvation of men. And it is the effect produced by this love which συνεχει ημας {"constraineth us"}, bears us away with itself, which causes us to love after the similitude of that love by which we are influenced; and as God so loved the world as to give his Son for it, and as Christ so loved the world as to pour out his life for it, so we, influenced by the very same love, desire to spend and be spent for the glory of God, and the salvation of immortal souls. By the fear of God the apostles endeavored to persuade and convince men, and the love of Christ constrained them so to act."¹ Words in { } added

"[B]ecause we thus judge, that if one died for all, then were all dead"

Undoubtedly, Christ died for all sinners, not merely a select few, as the Calvinists would falsely contend. Therefore, because Christ died for all sinners, all sinners "were dead in trespasses and sins" (Ephesians 2:1). Jesus propitiated God's wrath "for our sins: and not for ours only, but also for *the sins of the whole world*" (I John 2:2). Universal condemnation required the universal propitiation of God's wrath. The idea is that apart from the redemptive work of Jesus Christ and His free offer of salvation, every individual in the world had a sealed destiny of eternal death and separation from God and were without hope in this world (Ephesians

¹ *Adam Clarke's Commentary on the Bible* - II Corinthians 5:14, SwordSearcher Software 6.1

2:12). However, “in Christ” through salvation, every believer is united presently and immediately to the “blessed hope” and the “new creation,” opening a door of opportunity to live supernaturally empowered by the indwelling Holy Spirit of God. However, the “born again” believer is not to waste this supernatural potential on selfish pursuits and worldliness.

“And *that* he died for all, that they which live should not henceforth live unto themselves, but unto him which died for them, and rose again.”

Water baptism is a decision that connects the believer to a radically different way of living. The self-sacrifice of the incarnate Son of God in paying the price of our redemption demands the highest form of self-sacrifice from the believer in living the gift of his new life “in Christ.” The intent of this verse is not that we simply give the Lord Jesus our *spare time*. The intent of this verse is not that we add Jesus to our own plans for our life. The intent of this verse is that we abandon our own personal ambitions and plans for our life and add the totality of our existence and potential to the plan of God. That is the decision to which water baptism connects the believer. Anything less is a life of selfish ignorance of both from what you were saved and to what you are saved. If we understand II Corinthians 5:15 correctly, then this takes the believer beyond the failure of mere ignorance to outright rebellion against the Lordship of Jesus Christ. Complete surrender to Jesus is what defines walking “in newness of life” (Romans 6:4).

¹ Behold, what manner of love the Father hath bestowed upon us, that we should be called the sons of God: therefore the world knoweth us not, because it knew him not. ² Beloved, now are we the sons of God, and it doth not yet appear what we shall be: but we know that, when he shall appear, we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is. ³ And every man that hath this hope in him purifieth {*present active indicative*} himself, even as he is pure. ⁴ Whosoever {*present active participle=habitually*} committeth sin {*habitually*} transgresseth also the law: for sin is the transgression of the law. ⁵ And ye know that he was manifested to take away our sins; and in him is no sin. ⁶ Whosoever abideth in him {*habitually*} sinneth {*linear present active indicative*} not: whosoever {*habitually*} sinneth {*linear present active articular participle*} hath not seen him, neither known him. ⁷ Little children, let no man {*habitually*} deceive {*present active imperative*} you: he that {*habitually*} doeth {*present active participle*} righteousness is righteous, even as he is righteous. ⁸ He that {*habitually*} committeth sin is of the devil; for the devil sinneth {*linear progressive present active indicative, “the devil has been sinning from the beginning”*} from the beginning. For this purpose the Son of

God was manifested, that he might destroy the works of the devil. ⁹ Whosoever is born of God doth not {*habitually*} commit sin; for his seed remaineth in him: and he cannot sin {*present active infinitive* – “*he cannot keep on sinning*”}, because he is born of God. ¹⁰ In this the children of God are manifest, and the children of the devil: whosoever {*habitually*} doeth {*linear present participle*} not righteousness is not of God, neither he that {*habitually*} loveth {*present active participle*} not his brother” (I John 3:1-10).

There are a number of spiritual factors accomplished in the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ that every believer must understand in order to be saved “by grace through faith.” These spiritual factors of the finished, redemptive work of Jesus Christ are what define the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Can someone believe something that he does not understand? If they have no understanding of the basic aspects of Christ’s basis of their redemption, have they then believed what they do not understand? If a person cannot articulate an elementary understanding of redemption, how then can he look backward in testimony through water baptism to something that he does not understand and something he probably does not have – SALVATION? Herein is the ultimate shallowness of a dumbed-down Christianity that fills our local churches with unregenerate people. Is there then any wonder why this kind of *Christianity* is fruitless? We have created hundreds of local churches filled with water baptized *one-two-three, say it after me* people with professions of faith that are lacking in any real understanding of the Gospel. Then, we ask them to evangelize using the same methodology that brought them to their own false profession of salvation. Show me a professing *Christian* who cannot explain his own salvation and I will show you a lost man. We find this reality in Christ’s explanation of His parable regarding the *sower*, the *seed*, and the *soils*. Notice in this text how critical it is to genuine salvation to *understand* the doctrine of salvation. Notice also that there needs to be an understanding of a genuine biblical response to the Gospel; **repentance** of sin and “dead works,” **belief** in the Gospel, **confess** Jesus to be God, **call** on the Name of Jesus to be saved, **receive** the indwelling of Jesus in the Person of the Holy Spirit. It is in a careful examination of the salvation decision where a biblical examination begins to insure a biblical decision in water baptism.

¹⁹ When any one heareth the word of the kingdom, and understandeth it not, then cometh the wicked *one*, and catcheth away that which was sown in his heart. This is he which received seed by the way side. ²⁰ But he that received the seed into stony places, the same is he that heareth the word, and anon with joy receiveth it; ²¹ Yet hath he not root in himself {*no depth of*

understanding}, but dureth for a while: for when tribulation or persecution ariseth because of the word, by and by he is offended.²² He also that received seed among the thorns is he that heareth the word; and the care of this world, and the deceitfulness of riches, choke the word, {*no genuine repentance and therefore no disconnect from worldliness due to misunderstanding*} and he becometh unfruitful.²³ But he that received seed into the good ground is he that heareth the word, and understandeth it; which also beareth fruit, and bringeth forth, some an hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty” (Matthew 13:19-23).

Our beliefs and practices are the determining factors in defining our individual personalities. When we join ourselves individually to another person or group of people, we begin to formulate a *corporate personality*. This is true of a husband and wife relationship, an immediate family relationship, an extended family relationship, and even a local church relationship. A corrupted *corporate personality* of a local church is certainly generated by the shallow presentation of the Gospel, a shallow and insufficient understanding of the Gospel, and a shallow understanding of the commitment to Christ testified to through water baptism.

The *corporate personality* is shaped through something called the *corporate ethic*. A *corporate ethic* is the influence of the beliefs and practices of every individual within the group upon all other individuals within the group. There are those within any group that extend higher levels of influence than do other individuals. These individuals are the leaders in formulating the *corporate personality* of the group. These individuals do not need to be officially recognized by the group as the group’s leaders. They simply take these leadership roles based upon the dominance of their own personalities in their influence upon the group. This is why a local church must officially choose its spiritual leaders according to biblical criteria and officially put those leaders at the forefront of their *corporate ethic*. This is an extended aspect of Congregational Government in maintaining its *corporate ethic* in order to affect its *corporate personality*.

What defines the *testimony* of your local church? A testimony is your *reputation*. We might say it like this, if someone were to describe you, your family, or your local church in one sentence, what would that sentence be? We must be careful in answering this question not to answer it according to what we *want* that sentence to say. We must be real and honest about what that sentence is in reality. That *testimony* is the *corporate personality* of your local church.

The reality of this one sentence description of the testimony of any local church is also an established reality to how others in a community view the reality of what it really means to be a “born again,” water baptized, discipled of Jesus

Christ. In most cases, a bad testimony can be traced back to a false decision and a broken vow to God regarding that person's understanding of water baptism.

The best way to discover the answer to this question is to ask it to others outside of the local church. When we ask this *question*, we must take into account any limited exposure to individuals within the *corporate entity* of the person answering. If the individual's exposure to the *corporate entity* is limited to a good or bad testimony of one individual, his answer will be affected accordingly. If the individual's exposure to the *corporate entity* is limited to a good or bad testimony of one point in exposure to the group, his answer will be affected accordingly. If the individual answering the questions has a bias towards any individual within the group or a doctrinal bias towards the group, his answer will be affected accordingly. Perhaps there is no better text in Scripture that defines God's *intended* testimony of every local church than that of Acts 2:42-47. In these few verses of Scripture, we find *the way it ought to be*.

“⁴² And they continued stedfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers. ⁴³ And fear came upon every soul: and many wonders and signs were done by the apostles. ⁴⁴ And all that believed were together, and had all things common; ⁴⁵ And sold their possessions and goods, and parted them to all *men*, as every man had need. ⁴⁶ And they, continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, did eat their meat with gladness and singleness of heart, ⁴⁷ Praising God, and having favour with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved” (Acts 2:42-47).

The word “favour” in Acts 2:47 is from the Greek word *charis* (khar'-ece). This Greek word is usually translated *grace* in our KJV Bibles. The basic definition of the word *charis* is “the divine influence upon the heart, and its reflection in the life.”² Therefore, the word cannot be disconnected from the supernatural workings of God through the lives of His “born again” children. **A good testimony does not come by accident. A good testimony happens by purpose.** A decision to be water baptized is God's intended connecting link to this ongoing supernatural dynamic of spiritual empowerment through habitually dying to the “old man” and habitual, total, absolute yielding to the indwelling Christ. A good testimony will happen *by purpose* only by this truly biblical way. The *purposing of this outcome* is the ultimate decision in water baptism.

² *Strong's Greek Dictionary*, SwordSearcher Software 6.1

“¹ Brethren, if a man be overtaken in a fault {*a side-slip, fall, or failure in judgment*}, ye which are spiritual {*living in the supernatural enabling of the indwelling Spirit of God through His filling*}, restore such an one in the spirit of meekness; considering thyself, lest thou also be tempted. ² Bear ye one another’s burdens {*sharing in the weights and trials of life*}, and so fulfil the law of Christ. ³ For if a man think himself to be something, when he is nothing, he deceiveth himself. ⁴ But let every man prove his own work, and then shall he have rejoicing in himself alone, and not in another. ⁵ For every man shall bear his own burden. ⁶ Let him that is taught in the word communicate {*provide sustaining material support*} unto him that teacheth in all good things. ⁷ Be not deceived; God is not mocked: for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap. ⁸ For he that soweth to his flesh shall of the flesh reap corruption; but he that soweth to the Spirit shall of the Spirit reap life everlasting. ⁹ And let us not be weary in well doing: for in due season we shall reap, if we faint not. ¹⁰ As we have therefore opportunity, let us do good unto all *men*, especially unto them who are of the household of faith” (Galatians 6:1-10).

Every local church is like an individual family in the whole congregation of Israel. The fact that every local church is comprised of “born again” believers who are all priests before God is unique to the New Covenant under the High Priesthood of Jesus Christ. Every individual within a local church family is also united by water baptism in a covenant agreement to live for Jesus as His disciple. This unity in our New Covenant agreement through water baptism is very specific in both its degree and in its responsibilities. Water baptism is the *entrance level* decision in becoming a disciple of Jesus Christ. Salvation is not the entrance level decision to discipleship. If we confuse these two decisions, salvation is *top loaded* with hundreds of “works” expectations. This would completely contradict salvation by grace alone through faith alone. Christ gives numerous expectations of those who decide to become His disciples. These disciple expectations are not part of salvation, but should follow genuine salvation.

“²⁵ And there went great multitudes with him: and he turned, and said unto them, ²⁶ If any *man* come to me, and hate not his father, and mother, and wife, and children, and brethren, and sisters, yea, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple. ²⁷ And whosoever doth not bear his cross, and come after me, cannot be my disciple. ²⁸ For which of you, intending to build a tower, sitteth not down first, and counteth the cost, whether he have *sufficient* to finish *it*? ²⁹ Lest haply, after he hath laid the foundation, and is not able to finish *it*, all that behold *it* begin to mock him, ³⁰ Saying, This man began to build, and was not

able to finish.³¹ Or what king, going to make war against another king, sitteth not down first, and consulteth whether he be able with ten thousand to meet him that cometh against him with twenty thousand?³² Or else, while the other is yet a great way off, he sendeth an ambassage, and desireth conditions of peace.³³ So likewise, whosoever he be of you that forsaketh not all that he hath, he cannot be my disciple.³⁴ Salt *is* good: but if the salt have lost his savour, wherewith shall it be seasoned?³⁵ It is neither fit for the land, nor yet for the dunghill; *but* men cast it out. He that hath ears to hear, let him hear” (Luke 14:25-35).

Therefore, the *corporate personality* of any local church is not merely defined by a regenerate membership all individually baptized by immersion. The *corporate personality* of a local church is defined by a regenerate membership all individually baptized by immersion, **which covenantally connects them to the mutual responsibilities of being disciples of Jesus Christ as defined in Luke 14:25-35**. Like salt that has lost “his savour,” apart from this mutual level of commitment to Jesus Christ, any local church “is neither fit for the land, nor yet for the dunghill,” but rather to be “cast . . . out” as worthless for the purpose for which she is intended. If these responsibilities of a local church member are not detailed at the time of his instruction regarding the purpose of water baptism, it is little wonder that many local churches have degenerated into nothing more than *Country Clubs for the Saints*. The reason for this corruption is the failure to define the expectations of being a disciple of Jesus Christ to which all believers are connected when they decide to be water baptized.

Water baptism is an important step towards spiritual maturity. There is no magical conference of grace through the ritual. However, someone must communicate the level of commitment expected of the baptismal candidate preceding the ritual of water baptism. The fact that many people do not realize the expectations of Jesus regarding their decisions to become disciples is an age-old problem. We need only read John chapter twenty-one to see that this problem of misunderstanding responsibilities included seven of Christ’s chosen twelve. Judas Iscariot had already betrayed Christ, leaving eleven of the original twelve. Seven of the remaining eleven Apostles return to being fishermen and begin to abandon what Jesus had trained them to do. In John 21:2-4 we read, “² There were together Simon Peter, and Thomas called Didymus, and Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, and the *sons* of Zebedee {*James and John*}, and two other of his disciples {*possibly Andrew, Peter’s brother who was also a fisherman, and perhaps Philip*}.³ Simon Peter saith unto them, I go a fishing.⁴ They say unto him, We also go with thee.” The problem that we find in John chapter twenty-one is not unique to these seven disciples of Jesus Christ. The problem is common to all disciples of Jesus Christ

just as is the common solution to this common problem given in John 21:15-19. This text is not just about Peter. This text is about every believer that has made a decision to be a disciple of Jesus Christ.

“¹⁵ So when they had dined, Jesus saith to Simon Peter, Simon, *son* of Jonas, lovest thou me more than these? He saith unto him, Yea, Lord; thou knowest that I love thee. He saith unto him, Feed my lambs. ¹⁶ He saith to him again the second time, Simon, *son* of Jonas, lovest thou me? He saith unto him, Yea, Lord; thou knowest that I love thee. He saith unto him, Feed my sheep. ¹⁷ He saith unto him the third time, Simon, *son* of Jonas, lovest thou me? Peter was grieved because he said unto him the third time, Lovest thou me? And he said unto him, Lord, thou knowest all things; thou knowest that I love thee. Jesus saith unto him, Feed my sheep. ¹⁸ Verily, verily, I say unto thee, When thou wast young, thou girdedst thyself, and walkedst whither thou wouldest: but when thou shalt be old, thou shalt stretch forth thy hands, and another shall gird thee, and carry *thee* whither thou wouldest not. ¹⁹ This spake he, signifying by what death he should glorify God. And when he had spoken this, he saith unto him, Follow me” (John 21:15-19).

Although Peter is the primary character in the scene before us in John chapter twenty-one, he is just one of many with the same problem. We could spend a great deal of time explaining the details of this portion of Scripture. However, the point is simple – a baptismal decision to become a disciple is not the same as actually doing what you have committed to do. Each of us has been like Peter at some point in our lives and we, as did Peter, will probably be there again one day. However, we do not need to let past failures defeat us today. We can ALWAYS begin again! I John 1:9 tells us God is the God of *new beginnings* and a *new beginning* is always available to us.