

**“A Better Question”**  
**Luke 3:15–17, 21–22**  
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One of the questions I have been asked most often as a pastor is, “Do you have to be baptized?” Sometimes it is a theological question, as in, “Does salvation depend upon baptism?” Other times the concern is more pragmatic, “Do you have to be baptized in a certain way (by immersion, when you are old enough to make a faith decision for yourself) to be member of this church?”

I usually provide a lengthy response to either form of this question, which will not surprise those who know me... I did write a dissertation on baptism. I have wisdom I need to impart... But ultimately, I say “no” in some qualified way.

In Baptist theology, baptism is not salvific. It is our personal trust in God’s grace through Christ that saves us. Baptism is a symbol of this trust, but if a person were to trust God and not make it to the waters of baptism, do we really think he/she would not be included in God’s love?

In like manner, in churches like ours, while we offer baptism, we do not require people raised in other traditions to be rebaptized our way at our time. Not only would it be an insult to other parts of the body of Christ; it would be a kind of Baptist hazing, a way of saying, “It’s not required for salvation, but you can’t be a member of our church unless you do it our way.”

So, no, we don’t have to be baptized, but this is the wrong question, or at least not the best question. In light of the story we have read today about Jesus’ baptism especially, this is not the question to ask. There is a better question, a much better question.

We know the basic story that three canonical Gospels tell briefly, apologetically, with a measure of embarrassment, though John doesn’t even mention baptism explicitly but rather makes a vague reference to the Spirit descending on Jesus. Luke simply says, “Now when all the

people were baptized, and Jesus also had been baptized, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, ‘You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.’” It sounds like an afterthought, “Oh yes, and that happened.” Why would Scripture be so apologetic?

There are two reasons. First, during Jesus’ life, and even at the time scripture is developed, there is disagreement about who the central figure is, Jesus or John. For John to have baptized Jesus could seem to place the priority on John. Second, John is practicing a baptism of repentance, as in repentance from sin, and according to tradition, Jesus is tempted like us in all ways but without sin. So, why would he need to be baptized?! All of this leads scholars to conclude that this story is based on an actual event. No one in the church would make it up!

But why does Jesus submit to baptism? “To fulfill all righteousness,” he says in Matthew’s version of this story (3:15), to do what is right for all God’s children, to identify with the people for whom he enters this world, lives, dies, and is raised. Jesus will not cut any corners or claim any privileges anywhere along his path of suffering love. He does what is required and lives in solidarity with the common sufferers and sinners he has come to redeem. So, in the words of our hymn, he goes down to the waters like soldier, scribe and slave. He doesn’t cut in line; he is baptized last! His humble submission provides a sign of things to come throughout his life and ministry.

So, the question for us is this, “If Jesus approaches baptism and everything else in this way, and he is our Savior and Lord, why would we try to find a way out and ask questions like, “Do we have to?” A better question might be, “Why would we not want to be baptized?”

The early church would embrace this question. They valued baptism highly. They didn’t require it simply as a hoop to jump through, they understood what it involved — immersion not just in water but in a whole new way of being — and they knew that how we begin this way is critical. So, baptismal candidates had a one-to-three-year process of preparation that included textual study, spiritual discipline, and service to others. Friends and family members had to confirm that the candidate had changed due to genuine faith before they could be baptized.

It was a rigorous process I am not proposing we reclaim fully, but there was wisdom behind this work. The early church realized that how we begin a journey has a profound effect on how we travel it. In our culture, in most settings, very little is required at baptism, and in turn, very little is expected afterward. Church has become a consumer-driven organization shaped by desire and convenience, not service.

I will never forget a break-out session years ago connected to a Key Leaders Conference at Ridgecrest. Cecil Sherman led our small group that year, and in his first presentation, he described the ministries churches need to develop today, especially with children and youth, to attract and keep young families, and he talked about the value of having a Family Life Center, aka, Jesus Gym. In the second presentation, he talked about our central calling to make disciples of Jesus, how we are about service to others, not self-interest.

At this point, a colleague astutely said, “Dr. Sherman, I appreciate what you have said in both presentations. How do we put them together? How do we begin by catering to self-interest and end up with sacrificial service?” There was a long silence, then a turning of the question back to the group, always a good professorial move... and there was some discussion but no answer because there wasn’t one.

To be certain, young families have many needs, including those for Christian nurture, and addressing them is a part of faithful ministry. But it is very easy to be so focused on what I get out of this that I never get around to what I can give to others. This church takes these issues far more seriously than most. Even though most of our preparation of young people and adults may not be directly connected to baptism, we offer a great deal of teaching, spiritual formation opportunities, and avenues of service. And our people take all of this seriously. But the shift to self-interest is a cultural trend no church can avoid completely.

Numerous commentators have talked about President Carter’s humble service to others throughout his life, including his work on Habitat houses after his presidency and his willingness to sleep on cots or even floors with co-workers on projects. Can we imagine any public leader today doing that? The path of humility and service has gone out of favor in this land, and we are much the worse for this change.

The church is not immune. And while it doesn't all hinge on baptism, our approach to baptism presents a lens through which to view our larger challenge, and it launches us on a particular trajectory.

But there is another reason why it is better to ask, "Why wouldn't we want to be baptized?" Not only is this a logical way to begin the journey of following a humble servant; there is a rich blessing here we don't want to miss. Baptists shy away from the word "sacrament" and speak of baptism as a form of witness or testimony, a way of proclaiming our faith in God and dedicating our lives to following Jesus, which it is. But it is also an experience of grace which the word "sacrament" conveys. Our testimony is a response to grace, what God has done through Christ in our lives, and there is grace in the ritual itself.

We asked why Jesus chose to be baptized when it didn't seem like he had to be. It was partly to fulfill all righteousness, to identify with us; but it was also an experience of blessing and affirmation for him. The voice from heaven says, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." In *The Cotton Patch Version of Luke and Acts* Clarence Jordan translates, "You are my dear Son; I'm proud of you (p. 23)."

Does Jesus need this kind of blessing and affirmation? If he is fully human, he does! He is about to face three great temptations in the wilderness, not isolated tests to be resolved once and for all, but signs of the ways his character and identity will be challenged all the way to the cross. When he is challenged to be someone other than who he is, when people want to make him a king or political zealot, when he is ridiculed and his life is threatened, it will be helpful to remember a day when God's calling and love were so clear. He knows who he is, and he knows he is loved, but when he is beaten down the most, and he is beaten down, this deep sense of affirmation will help sustain him.

We all need this kind of affirmation and blessing — from our families, from our friends, from God. Some people spend their entire lives seeking a blessing from a parent they never receive. We have a relative who never received a blessing from his parents. They judged and ridiculed him because of his identity, because he was gay. When he lost his business, the one thing he had to be proud of and hold up to his

parents for affirmation, he tragically took his own life. The absence of a blessing can be debilitating.

But in the church, we have the power to bless in many ways, especially through sacred rituals like baptism. To be more precise, we have access to God's blessing and can serve as a vehicle through whom others can receive it. Why would we not want to experience that?

I remember my baptism well, though it was nearly fifty years ago. I had not been raised in the church but wandered in as a teenager with the normal spiritual curiosity of adolescence, a particular interest in the Jesus story after I had seen *Jesus Christ Superstar*, and a desire to confirm or deny my next-door neighbor's claim that there were some good looking girls in his youth group. I did confirm...

Anyway, my interest in faith and baptism was genuine. In fact, the pastor's statement to me was, "Don't do this unless you have to." It may seem odd, but he took seriously what was involved, the decision to follow Jesus. I did have to, I had a deep sense of conviction. The day of baptism confirmed my conviction. The people who had nurtured me in faith were there, the signs of God's love were all around me, there was a deep sense of blessing and affirmation that I will never forget, that will always carry me, even when I am discouraged or feel threatened.

In our reading from Isaiah, God says to Israel, "I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine." God says something like this to us in baptism. Why would we not want to experience that?

There are, of course, many reasons people choose to be baptized, not all of them deeply spiritual. It can be a matter of fulfilling expectations, a desire for community, or a way to get the bread and juice. A former colleague made a profession of faith as a child at VBS because he was cutting up with a friend and about to get in trouble. Going forward was his escape, but the pastor knew why he came, and did not baptize him immediately.

The good news is baptism is not our only opening to grace. As the Spirit falls on some after baptism in our reading from Acts, God's offer of blessing and purpose is extended throughout our lives. But why would we not take advantage of God's offer in baptism?