

The Discipleship Commitment of Baptism (Mat 28.19-20)

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Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. ¹⁷ And when they saw him they worshiped him, but some doubted. ¹⁸ And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹ Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Mat 28:16-20).

Introduction

Our study of membership from 1 Timothy 3 led us to the study of baptism in 1 Corinthians 12 and Acts 2. From these passages we have been finding dots of truth, and placing them on a canvas where a fairly clear picture of membership in Christ's local church has become apparent. One thing that has come into view is the fact that a commitment to discipleship is included in the membership commitment of baptism. Today, my goal is to briefly expand on the relationship of discipleship and baptism. This takes us to the Great Commission of Matthew 28.

The immediate context of the commission is the sad truth that all the disciples forsook Jesus at the time of His arrest and crucifixion. Although the eleven forsook Jesus, He never forsook them, not for a moment. So, when God raised Him from the dead, He sent some women to the disciples to confirm His resurrection, and to tell them to meet Him in Galilee. We pick up the narrative at the point of their meeting with Christ according to His command (Mat 28.16-17): **Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. ¹⁷And when they saw him they worshiped him, but some doubted.** At this meeting Jesus gave them the Great Commission that closes the book of Matthew: **Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹ Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.** This is a truly great commission that can be explored from many angles. Reflection on it from the angle of baptism gives us this title: "The Discipleship Commitment of Baptism." We can divide our thoughts on this subject in following ways: the imperative that underlies the discipleship commitment of baptism, and the implications that explain the discipleship commitment of baptism.

I. The imperative that underlies the discipleship commitment of baptism

To guide our thoughts, we can ask and answer some focus questions.

A. How many imperatives (verbs of command) are present here (in 19-20)?

From past study, you may be ahead of me with your answer and may be thinking that there is only one imperative (**make disciples**). That is correct.

B. What is the word "go" if not an imperative?

It is a subordinate verb that depends on and "hangs with" the main verb, which is the command "to make disciples." Often, subordinate verbs like this one (go) are translated with an "ing" ending. That is the case with baptizing (v. 19) and teaching (v. 20). Now there is a sense in which you could think of four imperatives here: go, make, baptize, and teach. The dependent verbs take on the force of the independent verb. However, if we translated that way, we would miss the core duty (**make disciples, v. 19**); the reader would not recognize its central place; the core would become blurry. That would be the case in a fourfold sermon outline as well. Instead, we need to stress the fact of a single imperative to get its full force and to feel the true weight of the other action words.

C. What can we say about the translation "go" with its commanding force?

It does not have an “ing” ending because *it stands alone* as a dependent verb *without leading into a dependent clause*. Nothing is immediately attached to it; there are no attachments like we have with baptizing and teaching. “Baptizing them into the name...” and “teaching them to observe...” are dependent clauses that the dependent verbs introduce. The first verb, “Going,” however, has a blank after it (nothing is attached; there is no clause). It is unusual and so it makes sense to translate it in the imperative (go) because it depends on the imperative quality of the main verb. We can supply: “go proclaiming the gospel.”

D. What is the relationship between the main verb and the three dependent verbs?

This is an important question to answer clearly because the interpretation of this classic text rests on the relationship “make disciples” and the three subordinate verbs (going, baptizing, and teaching). We can illustrate this relationship by using a three-dimensional object. Picture a cube turned slightly so we can see three sides. On each side, we can write a word ending with “ing” (going, baptizing, and teaching). Now, what label might we give to the entire cube? What might we call the entire cube? Yes, the label comes from the imperative; we can call this the “make disciples” cube. We can call it the great *teaching* commission from beginning to end.

What does this show us? It shows that going, baptizing, and teaching are simply different ways of viewing the same thing. Each dependent verb gives us a distinct perspective regarding the command to make disciples. The apostles make disciples by *going* to the nations *with gospel proclamation*, by baptizing people that repent (Lk. 24.47-48) and by teaching them how to live by all of Christ’s commandments. Therefore, baptism is a component of disciple-making.

II. The implications that explain the discipleship commitment of baptism

The way that we draw out implications about baptism from the Lord’s great resurrection proclamation is by a) inferring to the time between, and by b) inferring to the opposite.

A. Inferring to the time between

Jesus orients His commission to the apostles and their work in the history of redemption. On His authority as Sabbath Lord of the church, He gives the apostles a work to do *to the end of age*. The temporal scope of their work causes us to emphasize two things. First, the timeframe indicates that their teaching is the foundation for the church for the time between the comings of Christ, and we have that foundation in the NT. Second, the apostles are not only foundational for the church age, but also representative of the work of pastors in the church. That is why it is helpful to think of them as apostle-pastors that pave the way for pastors who are not apostles but who teach the apostolic word of the NT. This is why 2 Timothy 2.2 is so helpful because in this text Paul tells us that the apostles hand the gospel over to ministers like Timothy who entrust it to faithful men who, in turn, teach others also: **what you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men who will be able to teach others also**. Therefore, as apostle-pastors pass off the scene they leave their work in the hands of pastors of local churches. Accordingly, baptism is a local church ordinance administered by pastors once its foundation is in place.

B. Inferring to the opposite

On this point, we are simply meditating on the mission of the apostles and noting that it implies the mission of the church. In this connection, we can *orient our thinking to the active side of baptism that the text implies*. Baptism is an act of obedience that receives the call to discipleship. The outward washing sign involves embracing that call, submitting to it, and committing oneself to it. This is the core of the discipleship commitment in baptism in which we commit ourselves to the gospel, to being disciples, and to receiving the teachings of Jesus from the hands of pastors in Christ’s church. From this we get four sub-implications.

1) Baptism is a commitment to the gospel

Receiving baptism is receiving the message preached by disciplers who go forth proclaiming good news to the end of the age. It is a commitment to obey the gospel.

2) Baptism is a commitment to being disciples

The obverse of making disciples is being disciples. Of course, it is a gospel sign through which God gives His testimony. However, it is our testimony also. Pointedly, it is a discipleship commitment in which we each say, "I will be a disciple; I will work at learning the gospel."

3) Baptism is a commitment to receiving the teachings of Jesus

In this washing ritual, we promise to receive instruction in all the teachings of Jesus with an accent on His exposition of the Ten Commandments. So, the entirety of life is under His instruction. Furthermore, this comprehensiveness has its roots in the universal Lordship of Christ. It means to surrender all to the blessed Savior.

4) Forcefully, baptism is a commitment to learning under authority in Christ's church

The matter of submission to authority saturates the text. A submissive spirit is fundamental in the Christian life. In baptism, we submit to the authority of the triune God (being baptized into the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit). Being washed, we submit to the Lordship of our risen Sabbath King who is head of the church as head over all things (Eph 1.22). Therefore, in baptism we commit ourselves to the authority of God's apostles and pastors. So, by extension to the time between, embracing baptism means embracing the authority of a local expression of Christ's church with duly appointed pastoral leadership. It is a commitment to receive instruction about what Jesus taught and how His (NT) teaching relates to the OT. It is that, but much more than that because it includes guidance in how to observe and obey the commandments of Christ. This gives a distinct nitty-grittiness to pastoral work: **preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching** (2 Tim 4.2).

Accordingly, we can see why pastors have the job of teaching, reproof, rebuking and exhorting the Christian family in a prayerful, wise, and reasonable way; and why Christian family members have the job of receiving instruction, reproof, rebuke, and exhortation in a willing, practical, and cooperative way.

Conclusion

Thus, the sign of baptism reminds us of God's promises in the gospel and it calls us repeatedly to covenant renewal. Baptism is not just for new converts; it reminds us of our basic commitment to the gospel, to be disciples under the authority of Christ our Sabbath Lord, and therefore under the authority of His church.

Hence the injunction to Timothy applies to us all: **Do your best** [Study, KJV] **to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth** (2 Tim 2.15). Timothy was first a student under Paul's instruction, then he became a pastor-teacher. As a pastor, he was to continue to be a student. His studentship is a model for all of us as disciples of Christ within His church: do your best to be a worker who has God's approval for how you handle His holy word. That, in summary, is the discipleship commitment of baptism.

May the Holy Spirit enable us to show true submission as disciples who learn the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ, and who learn how to live by it to the glory of the triune God, amen!