

THE COMMITMENTS OF JESUS' BAPTISM

Luke 3:21-22

(NIV) "When all the people were being baptized, Jesus was baptized too. And as He was praying, heaven was opened²² and the Holy Spirit descended on Him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: 'You are my Son, whom I love; with You I am well pleased.'"

INTRODUCTION

Sadly, some submit to believers' baptism with little evidence they have ever truly submitted themselves to Christ as Lord and Savior. There's a tale of a train robbery in the days of the Old West. When the bandit reached the seat of a pastor, the passenger pleaded, "You wouldn't rob me, a preacher, would you?" The bandit asked, "What church are you with?" "I'm a Baptist," the minister replied. The robber put his gun in his left hand and held out his right hand to the minister. "Put it there, Pastor. I'm a Baptist, too."

Years ago, a Philadelphia congregation watched as three 9-year-old boys were baptized to testify of their commitment to **Jesus Christ** as their Savior and Lord. Not long after, this church sold its building and disbanded due to a dwindling membership. One of these boys was Tony Campolo, who is now 83. He has served Christ as a pastor, sociology professor, author, and public speaker. Reminiscing on his early days as a Christian, Tony Campolo writes, "Years later when I was doing research in the archives of our [American Baptist] denomination, I decided to look up the church report for the year of my baptism. There was my name, and Dick White's. He's now a missionary. Bert Newman, now a professor of theology at an African seminary, was also there. Then I read the church report for 'my' year: [It read] 'It has not been a good year for our church. We have lost 27 members. Three joined, and they were only children.'"

This true story illustrates that it's not the *breadth* of how many people a church baptizes that is most important, but the *depth* of the experience of **Jesus Christ** among those who are baptized. Some are baptized with few life-changing results. Others embrace Christ in a life-transforming commitment by their baptism. This morning, we want to examine the commitments involved in **Jesus'** own baptism.

I. JESUS' COMMITMENT TO BE OUR SAVIOR

"When all the people were being baptized, Jesus was baptized too." Christian thinkers have wrestled for centuries with the question, "Why did Jesus go to John to be baptized?" John performed 'a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins' (**Luke 3:3**). But **Jesus** was "without sin" (**Hebrews 4:15**). An overview of **Jesus'** life as a whole helps us to answer this question. In everyone's life there are defining stages, certain pivotal moments, upon which our life turns. This is true of **Jesus'** life, as well. **Jesus'** first pivotal moment was His visit to the Temple in Jerusalem for the Passover Festival at age 12, on the verge of Jewish manhood, when His immersion in Scripture in preparation to become a "son of the law," a Bar Mitzvah, helped to crystallize His awareness of His unique identity as "the Son of God" (**Luke 1:35; 2:41-49**). By the time, "He began his ministry, Jesus was about thirty years old," **Luke 3:23** tells us. This means at least 18 years must have passed in which **Jesus** gained increasing awareness of His Divine identity and purpose in life. Yet, nearly everyone else saw Him as just a village carpenter of Nazareth (**Matthew 13:54-56**). Obediently; patiently; **Jesus** awaited a sign from God His Father before presenting Himself to the world as the "Savior, who is Christ ['the Messiah] the Lord," as the angel announced at His birth (**Luke 2:11**).

When John began his ministry in A. D. 26 as the Messiah's forerunner prophesied in **Malachi 4:5-6**, sparking an unprecedented movement back toward God ("repentance") throughout the land, **Jesus** recognized this as the sign He'd sought. He knew His hour had almost come. John's ministry then continued for about six months before **Jesus** believed God His Father summoned Him to launch His public ministry. Because John's ministry served as **Jesus'** call to action, **Jesus** knew the first step of His own ministry must be to identify Himself with the people in their quest to be right with God by presenting Himself for baptism.

Luke omits the details supplied by **Matthew 3:13-15**, written before Luke's Gospel, "Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. ¹⁴ But John tried to stop Him, saying, 'I need to be baptized by You, and yet You come to me?' ¹⁵ Jesus answered him, 'Allow it for now, because this is the way for us to fulfill all righteousness.' Then he allowed Him to be baptized." **Jesus** knew the prophecies of **Isaiah 53** concerning the sufferings that would be required of Him as the Messiah to atone for our sins and to secure our salvation from God's judgment; including **Isaiah 53:6** (NIV): "We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way; and the LORD has laid on Him the iniquity of us all." **Jesus**, therefore, did not submit Himself to baptism to symbolize His own need to be cleansed of sin, but as our representative who would take upon Himself "the iniquity of us all" to cleanse us from our sins!

But there was also a more personal element to **Jesus'** baptism. By this act, **Jesus** publicly committed Himself to obey God's laws and to fulfill God's will for His life, *wherever God might lead Him and whatever God might ask of Him*. **Jesus** honored His baptismal commitment throughout His earthly life, as He testified in **John 5:30**: "I can do nothing on My own.... I do not seek My own will, but the will of Him who sent Me." Again, in **John 12:49**, **Jesus** declared: "For I have not spoken on My own, but the Father Himself who sent Me has given Me a command as to what I should say and what I should speak." **Jesus** said He had even committed Himself prior to His birth in Bethlehem to carry out the will of God His Father in fulfilling the responsibilities of becoming our Savior. In **John 8:42** : "Jesus said to them, 'If God were your Father, you would love Me, because I came from God and I am here. For I didn't come on My own, but He sent Me.'" Early Christians called baptism a "sacrament" in honor of **Jesus'** own baptism. In Latin, *sacramentum* was a Roman soldier's oath of faithful devotion to his Emperor and absolute obedience to his general. By being baptized, the first generations of Christians took a public oath of faithful devotion to God, and of absolute obedience to their Savior to be commanded by **Jesus** as their "only Master and Lord" (**Jude 4**), *wherever God might lead them and whatever God might ask of them*.

A member of a motorcycle gang who'd been visibly on the road to Hell was radically converted to **Jesus Christ**. The next Sunday, he did the one thing he knew he should do as a follower of **Jesus**: he went to church. This was a large church and nobody in that church knew him. But he wanted everyone to know he had a new Master, so he walked down the main aisle to the second row of pews to take a seat. All the people stared at him because he looked the part: big, burly, bearded, long hair, black jacket, and tattoos. During the announcement time the minister made an appeal for nursery workers. He said, "We need someone to work in the nursery." But no one would volunteer. He asked a second time, "We really need someone to go be with our kids." But no one would volunteer. This cyclist prayed, "Lord, I want to do what You want me to do. If You want me to go work in the nursery just have the preacher ask a third time." The preacher then said a third time, "Please, we need someone to work in the nursery this morning." The cyclist raised his hand, nodded his head, and started toward the nursery. Immediately, 50 mothers followed him, suddenly inspired to honor their commitments to serve God where He most needed them!

II. GOD THE FATHER'S COMMITMENT TO HIS SON

"And as He was praying, heaven was opened ²² And a voice came from heaven: 'You are my Son, whom I love; with You I am well pleased.'"

Our sermon of five weeks ago, "The Very Human Childhood of the Son of God," brought out the need for the Son of God to accept human limitations, by virtue of His human birth, or He could not die in behalf of the human race. **Philippians 2:6-8** (NLT) explains the Son of God set aside the use of His own Divine attributes to submit Himself fully to the Father's will. "Though He was God, He did not think of equality with God as something to cling to. ⁷ Instead, He gave up His divine privileges; He took the humble position of a slave and was born as a human being. When He appeared in human form, ⁸ He humbled Himself in obedience to God and died a criminal's death on a cross." Only as one who is fully human, who "has been tested in every way as we are, yet without sin" (**Hebrews 4:15**), could **Jesus** fulfill the life of obedience to

God as "the last Adam" and undo the harm done to the human race by "the first man Adam" (**I Corinthians 15:22**). **Hebrews 2:17** (NLT) clarifies, "[I]t was necessary for Him to be made in every respect like us, His brothers and sisters, so that He could be our merciful and faithful High Priest before God. Then He could offer a sacrifice that would take away the sins of the people." We confessed weeks ago that these are deep mysteries that no one can fully explain, but we can accept God's word by faith that this is what happened.

Luke places the most emphasis upon **Jesus'** very real humanity of all the Gospel writers. This may be why Luke alone mentions "He was praying" while being baptized. At this moment, **Jesus** is publicly embracing His responsibilities as the Messiah. As any human being undertaking what seems to be an overwhelming task, **Jesus** needs assurance. He appeals to God His Father for absolute certainty He's not misunderstood anything about His Divine identity as "the Son of God," and it is truly God's will for Him to carry out the responsibilities of the One born to be the "Savior, who is Christ the Lord" (**Luke 1:35; 2:11**).

God the Father's response to this earnest appeal of His Son is astounding! **Mark 1:10** employs an intense Greek verb that means "to split in two": "As soon as He came up out of the water, He saw the heavens being torn open." **Jesus** then heard the unmistakable voice of His Father booming at Him through the torn fabric of the skies, "You are My Son, whom I love; with You I am well pleased." "You are My Son" is drawn from **Psalms 2:7**: "I will declare the LORD's decree: He said to Me, 'You are My Son; today I have become Your Father.'" Jews understood these words applied to their promised Messianic King on the day God publicly acknowledged Him as His chosen Messiah. "With You I am well pleased" is drawn from **Isaiah 42:1** (ESV): "Behold My servant, whom I uphold, My chosen, in whom My soul delights." **Isaiah 42** begins God's description of His Suffering Servant that culminates in **Isaiah 53**. Even while His Father is assuring **Jesus** He is God's anointed King to defeat death, the darkness of sin, and the Devil, His Father reminds **Jesus** His weapons of victory are not power and glory but suffering and a Cross!

On the basis of God His Father's unimpeachable authority, **Jesus** receives unmistakable assurance He is exactly whom He believes He is, and the ministry He now undertakes is exactly what God wants Him to accomplish. God His Father knew days would soon come when "not even His brothers believed in Him" (**John 7:5**), and at the height of His ministry, "His own people," His closest associates and friends from childhood, would try "to take custody of Him; . . . saying, 'He has lost His senses'" (**Mark 3:20-21**, NASB). **Jesus'** confidence was put to the test even more than the pastor who was approached by an endearing older member of the congregation. She wept over his decision to leave that church to lead another church. She moaned, "Things will never be the same." The minister tried to console her by saying, "Don't worry. I'm confident you will get a new pastor who is better than me." She continued to sob and replied, "That's what the last three pastors have said, but they just keep getting worse."

III. THE TRINITY'S COMMITMENT TO OUR SALVATION

"And as He was praying, heaven was opened²² and the Holy Spirit descended on Him in bodily form like a dove." Because **Jesus** "gave up His divine privileges; . . . took the humble position of a slave and was born as a human being" (**Philippians 1:7**), He needed to rely upon the Spirit of God to accomplish the work of God, as we do. John the Baptist adds this insight, found in **John 3:34** (MEV), into the extent to which God's Spirit empowered **Jesus** to accomplish His crucially vital ministry: "For He whom God has sent speaks the words of God, for God gives the Spirit without measure to Him."

The Greek text does not say **Jesus** saw "a dove" that descended on Him "in bodily form." He saw "the Holy Spirit" descending upon Him "like a dove"; meaning "dovelike in gentle manner or graceful appearance." The modern association of the Holy Spirit with a dove was unknown in the Biblical world. Here is what is striking about this passage. Not only does **Jesus** receive God His Father's overwhelming endorsement as He embraces His public ministry, but God the Holy Spirit visibly and tangibly descends upon Him to empower Him to carry out His daunting tasks. The full Trinity is thus involved in the momentous effort

to rescue us from everlasting ruin and to restore us to everlasting life. **Genesis 1:2** (NIV) describes "the Spirit of God" as "hovering over the waters" to initiate our world's original Creation, when we were made "in the image of God" (**Genesis 1:27**). The Hebrew word translated "hovering" appears just once more in the Old Testament: **Deuteronomy 32:11** (NIV)—"like an eagle that stirs up its nest and hovers over its young." In **Luke 3:21-22**, we find these same three elements present—God's Spirit, birdlike manner, and water—at the moment **Jesus** initiates the "new creation" to fully restore us to God's image and save us from the ravages of sin. **II Corinthians 5:17** (NKJV) is wondrous: "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new."

CONCLUSION

It's tough to live a life focused on serving **Jesus**. From every direction, something or someone clamors for our attention. A distraction first draws our eyes. The next thing we know, we've swerved off the road of living for Christ and are pursuing yet another detour that consumes our time and energy. Some years ago, a Chicago youth pastor came up with a clever idea to keep his missions' group on track. Concerned that the balmy beaches of Florida—the site of their upcoming evangelism trip—might lure the teens from their purpose, he fashioned a cross from two rough pieces of lumber. Just before they climbed on the bus, he showed it to the group. He announced, "I want all of you to remember that the whole purpose of our going is to glorify the name of Christ, to lift up the Cross—the message of the Cross, the emphasis of the Cross, the Christ of the Cross. So we're going to take this cross wherever we go."

The teenagers looked at one another, a little unsure of his plan. But they agreed to follow along and dragged the cross on the bus. It banged back and forth in the aisle all the way to Florida. It went with them into restaurants. It stayed overnight wherever they spent the night. It stood on end while they ministered on the beaches. At first, lugging this unsightly cross around embarrassed the kids. But later, it became a point of identification to them. This cross served as a constant, silent reminder of who they were, Christ's followers, and why they had come to Florida. They came to regard carrying it as an honor and a privilege.

The night before they were to return to Chicago, the youth leader handed out two nails to each of these kids. He told them if they wanted to commit themselves to what this cross stood for, they could hammer one nail into it and keep the other nail with them. One-by-one, these teen drove their nail into the cross. About 15 years later, one fellow—now a successful stockbroker—called his former youth leader. He told him that he still kept that nail with him in his desk drawer. Whenever he would find himself losing his sense of focus, he would look at the nail and recall the cross on the beaches in Florida. It would remind him of what should be at the core of his life: his commitment to **Jesus Christ** as his Master!

We will probably not hear God the Father say to us, in essence, what He spoke to **Jesus** at His baptism, "You are my son (or daughter), whom I love; with you I am well pleased." We will probably not hear God speak anything audibly to us, as He did to **Jesus**. But in **Matthew 25:21** (MEV), **Jesus** promised that if we fulfill our commitment to carry out God's will for our lives, our Heavenly Father will say to us one day in Heaven: "Well done, you good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a few things. I will make you ruler over many things. Enter the joy of your master."