

Waypoints

Navigation Landmarks for Faithful Travelers

Part 1: The Sacramental Way

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On August 4, 1993, my 41st birthday, I climbed the highest mountain in Portugal. Mt. Pico is on one of the nine Islands that compose the Azores archipelago. We set out for the summit at midnight with no lights – we depended solely on the light of the full moon.

The climb was strenuous. Rocky terrain, steep inclines, loose footing. Looking up, we could not see the top of the mountain. But our way was clearly marked by carved granite mileposts strategically placed along the only safe route up. In the darkness and early morning haze, we could barely see the next marker, and then the next, successfully guiding us all the way to the “little peak” at the top of the mighty volcano. Those mileposts were waypoints.

For travelers who own GPS handheld navigation systems, a “Waypoint” is the latitude and longitude of a significant location. This information is particularly useful on unfamiliar terrain.

We have waypoints for traveling on our faith journey also. The basic doctrines of our faith serve as waypoints for believers navigating through life. A clear grasp of these doctrines keeps us “on the right track” as we grow in the faith and serve as faithful followers of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Today we begin a 7-part sermon series at FV called “Waypoints.” During the series we will set these foundational doctrines as our granite markers, keeping us on the right track as we navigate our faith journey. These are the seven doctrines we will investigate:

- October 15 What the Sacraments Are
- October 22 What Humanity Is
- October 29 Who Jesus Christ Is
- November 5 How We Are Saved
- November 12 What the Church Is
- November 19 Where Authority Is
- November 26 What the Kingdom Is

BAPTISM

We begin today with an examination of the Biblical teachings about Baptism and the Lord’s Supper. Let’s look first at Baptism.

Baptism is the “Drama of our decision to follow Christ.” It is our public profession of faith, a first step of participation in the church and identifying with Jesus Christ. We can compare baptism to an experience familiar to all of us: marriage. At a wedding ceremony, a couple stands before a group of witnesses and exchanges rings. The rings are symbols of the

ending of their lives as single people, and the beginning of their new life in a profound, lifelong commitment.

Similarly, in baptism, a new Christian stands before others and is immersed in water. The ceremony does not make the person a Christian any more than a ring makes a person in love. Rather, the ceremony is an outward symbol full of meaning — marking a milestone in a person’s spiritual journey that has led him or her to sincere faith in Jesus Christ and reception of God’s grace. And just as a marriage ceremony suggests a new beginning (as a married couple, committed to begin a new life together), baptism symbolizes an end to the old “BC” way of life, and the beginning of a new way of life as a committed Christian.

If we are to grasp the richly varied meanings associated with baptism, we need to study several key passages in the New Testament.

1. Matthew 28:18-20: Here, Jesus, after his resurrection, sends his followers into the whole world to help others become his followers too. Baptism signifies a person’s commitment to be a follower of Christ.

2. Acts 2:38-41: Again, baptism is associated with a person’s decision to believe Christ and follow him wholeheartedly. It is also associated with repentance, which means a change of heart and mind, a turning around to go in a new direction.

3. Romans 6:4-14: This is one of the key biblical passages on baptism. It compares baptism to burial and resurrection. One is immersed under water, signifying dying and being buried with Christ, and one comes up out of the water “to walk in newness of life.”

4. Ephesians 4:1-6: Here, baptism reminds us of our unity with all other Christians. Tragically, sometimes we tend to use baptism as a dividing rather than unifying theme, arguing over whose form of baptism is correct, etc. At the Fellowship, we try to avoid these kinds of debates, believing that the outward forms are less important than the inward meanings.

5. I Peter 3:18, 21-22: This passage brings out the natural role of water in cleansing, but it emphasizes that the physical act of applying water isn’t the point. The point is the response of the sincere conscience toward God.

Baptism is a rich symbol. If a wedding ceremony is important because of the milestone it marks in our lives, how much more important is the baptism ceremony signifying a profoundly important spiritual milestone in our lives — our decision to live sincerely and wholeheartedly as a committed Christian!

So what does it mean theologically to be baptized? Historically, baptism represented participation with Christ in his triumph over Satan; it symbolizes our death and resurrection with Christ; it illuminates the forgiveness and erasing of past sins; and it suggests regeneration or rebirth. Historically, the baptism ceremony signified that a believer had become a member of the body of Christ, the Church.

Church leaders of the past have explained the meaning of baptism in a variety of ways. Their unique perspectives can be helpful in deepening our understandings of baptism. According to **Teilhard de Chardin**, baptism dramatically portrays the mighty act of God in Jesus Christ manifesting God’s involvement in the human struggle. Christ’s obedient life and death reveal the agonizing cost of God’s involvement. But Christ’s resurrection demonstrates hope. It shows that, despite the seeming futility of life resulting from wars, natural catastrophes, and injustice of all kinds, the creation is progressing toward an end that has ultimate value—that, as it says in the hymn, “This Is My Father’s World,” “though the wrong seems oft so strong, God is the ruler yet.” Thus baptism symbolizes God’s rule over the whole natural order.

Fundamentally, the meaning of baptism is rooted in the baptism of Jesus. There two things happened. Jesus identified himself, and he was identified from outside himself as God's beloved. This means that those who approach baptism must decide how to respond to who Jesus is. Yet the meaning of baptism is not just rooted in Jesus' baptism in the Jordan, but his death on the cross. It symbolizes the participation of Christians in the death of Jesus Christ.

Centuries of theological debate have been spent attempting to distinguish between the outward form of the symbol of baptism and its inward meaning. Too often, churches and denominations allow the form of baptism to divide them with each claiming to have the "right" or the "truly Biblical" form of the ordinance. But they miss the most important meaning of the symbol, which is our inherent unity as believers in one Lord. Baptism should unify Christians, not divide them.

And consider this (this is difficult to comprehend). In the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament, the symbol participated in the reality it signified. For example, the name of a person was the person. So an injury to the name was an injury to the person; a blessing on the name was a blessing on the person. So to be baptized in the name of Jesus was to be baptized into Jesus himself, to belong to him, and to be incorporated into the very sphere of his personal being. For the earliest Christians, to be baptized into his death was to actually participate in the death of Christ. To rise from the waters of baptism was to participate in the resurrection of Christ, rising to walk in newness of life (Romans 6:3-4).

How can we deepen the experience of baptism in our day? First, Baptist historian E. Glenn Hinson (one of my seminary professors) suggests that we need to understand that baptism entails a vow by the believer. "Vow" was the meaning of the early Latin word, *sacramentum*. Every time we take the Lord's Supper, we are to remember our baptismal vow and renew it. Every celebration of the Lord's Supper should be a revival for the believer.

In the rite of baptism, we symbolize our belief in the Creator and Sustainer of all things and our confidence that in God's hands, all things—including our own lives—will fulfill some ultimate purpose of God. With that confidence, we vow to direct all our energies toward making this life as meaningful as possible. In essence, when we enter the waters of baptism, we vow to take our lives seriously and to work toward the fulfillment of God's ultimate purpose.

As Baptists, it is especially critical to understand God's role in baptism. From God's side, baptism entails a pledge or assurance. In baptism, God declares that we now begin to see the ultimate meaning of the whole order and partake of that meaning. Baptism symbolizes our sharing in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ, which affirmed the ultimate value of the whole created order and manifested God's participation in it. In baptism, we are reminded that the present chaos and confusion are transient because God is involved in all aspects of our lives and in the life of the world.

When you witness the baptism this afternoon, remember your baptismal vows and be thankful.

THE LORD'S SUPPER

The Lord's Supper (Communion) is a "sermon to the eye." Among other things, it commemorates Christ's death on the cross for us, our union with one another and communion with Christ, the New Covenant confirmed to us in Christ's sacrifice and victory

over death, and His promised return. We look forward in hope to the great Feast with Christ in heaven.

All believers in Christ who come with repentant hearts and commitment to the unity of the Body are welcome to participate. Children should have clear understanding and preparation before participating. Communion is a vital part of our Sunday morning worship every week.

The Lord Supper is the name most often used in Baptist settings. However, the meal is also referred to as the **Eucharist**, from a Greek word meaning “thanksgiving,” and **Holy Communion**. Like baptism, the Lord’s Supper is an ordinance in which we participate because Christ ordained that we do so. While baptism is a decisive, one-time event marking a believer’s entrance into a new life with Christ, the Lord’s Supper is repeated frequently, symbolizing the sustaining of that new life. Baptism denotes the beginning of a new relationship; the Lord’s Supper is a means of maintaining the relationship between Christ and the church.

The observance of the Lord’s Supper by early Baptists included preaching and prayers; an exhortation to humility and reverence; discussion of the spiritual qualifications of those participating in the Supper; blessing, breaking, words of institution, distribution and reception of the bread; a similar procedure for the cup; and concluded with a prayer of thanksgiving, an offering, and a hymn. Personal faith and a godly lifestyle were the stated requirements for participation.

In 1833, the New Hampshire Confession, written by Baptists of that state, was the most widely disseminated declaration of faith of the Baptists in America. It described “the Lord’s Supper, in which members of the church by the use of bread and wine, are to commemorate together the dying love of Christ; preceded always by solemn self-examination.”

Today in Baptist settings, the practice of the Lord’s Supper and the ritual that surrounds it is typically very simple. The reading or recitation of the words of institution from scripture are the common element. Otherwise, the practice varies widely in Baptist life today.

Baptists have generally emphasized the memorial nature of this ordinance. Congregations here in America followed the lead of their English forebears in viewing this rite as a solemn reenactment of the Last Supper. Yet there is considerable encouragement today for Baptists to enlarge their understanding of the Lord’s Supper. Fundamentally, the meal is eaten in remembrance of God’s action in Christ on behalf of humankind. But this remembrance is a recalling of a past event in such a way as to make its power operative now. It represents Christ’s sacrifice or self-giving in a way that draws the power of that gift into the inbreaking of God’s realm in the present moment. In other words, it is a way of making the reality of God’s saving act in Christ newly present for each generation. With Paul, the Supper also points toward the consummation of God’s realm in the future. Thus the meal is both representation and anticipation.

This meal is also an act of thanksgiving for God’s action through time on behalf of humanity. Hence it is called the Eucharist, which means “thanksgiving” or “gratitude.” When we come to the table, we are reminded of the ways in which God has journeyed with us and our faith communities in the past, especially in the gift of Jesus Christ, who suffered on our behalf. We also give thanks for everything God will accomplish in the future.

In Baptist life today, new emphasis is being given to the bread and cup as signs that point to Christ’s presence in the gathered community. Like baptism, the Lord’s Supper is a public act to be experienced along with other Christians. Only in rare cases, like those of illness or

other confinement, should the supper be served in private. While we do not believe that the bread and the wine or juice become the literal body and blood of Christ, we declare that Christ is spiritually present with us when we come to the table. In this sense, the Lord's Supper can be a means through which God's grace is experienced in a special way in our lives and in the life of our faith communities.

The communal nature of this meal also signifies the banquet to come when all will feast at Christ's table. As our sisters and brothers in the United Church of Christ affirm, the invitation and call to the Lord's table celebrate not only the memory of a meal that is past but an actual meal with the risen Christ that is a foretaste of the heavenly banquet at which Christ will preside at the end of history. The visible breaking of the bread and pouring of the wine also announce the costliness of Christ's sacrificial life and of the discipleship to which all are called.

Finally, this ordinance calls Baptists to ministries of justice and reconciliation through which physical as well as spiritual bread is made available to all. Thus we come to the table aware that Jesus broke bread for a hungry multitude on a hillside as well as for his disciples in an upper room. In the midst of his offering of spiritual food, he also offered physical sustenance as he fed, healed, and exorcised demons. In many churches, the Lord's Supper is followed by an exchange of words and gestures of peace, demonstrating that the meal is a foretaste of God's shalom, as well as by collection of a love offering for the needy.

So it is true that the Lord's Supper commemorates the last meal Jesus ate with his disciples. But it is more—much more. Our individual lives and our life together as the people called Baptists can be enriched as we expand and deepen our understanding of this ordinance. To be united with Christ in this meal is to be united with the members of Christ's body all around the globe. Thus our prayer should be that we become what we eat—the body of Christ broken and given for each other and for the world.

In bread, wine, and water, God comes to us. This loving and gracious Spirit leavens the bread, fortifies the wine, and stirs the waters in ways we cannot predict or control. We sense its power in our own way, feel it in our own bones, hold it in our own hearts. Yet we come together, friends and strangers alike, in cathedrals and huts, by rivers and fountains, in skins of every hue. We need this bread, this wine, this water. We need them to open us to each other and to the world. We need them to open us to grace...God's grace for the journey we travel together as the body of Christ.

Prayer at Baptism:

**Eternal God,
When nothing existed but chaos,
you swept across the dark waters and brought forth light.
In the days of Noah,
you saved those on the ark through water.
After the flood you set in the clouds a rainbow.
When you saw your people as slaves in Egypt,**

you led them to freedom through the sea.
Their children you brought through the Jordan
to the land which you promised.
In the fullness of time you sent Jesus,
nurtured in the water of a womb.
He was baptized by John and anointed by your Spirit.
He called his disciples
to share in the baptism of his death and resurrection
and to make disciples of all nations.
Pour out your Holy Spirit,
and by this gift of water, call to our remembrance
the grace declared to us in baptism.
For you have washed away our sins
and call us to live rightly
with you and our neighbors throughout our lives,
that dying and rising with Christ
we may share in the coming of your realm to earth.
Amen.