

Elder's Teaching Position on Baptism
Norway Avenue Church of Christ
December 15 2003

We have been asked to share with the congregation our belief about what Scripture teaches about baptism. For the last few weeks, we have prayed extensively as we individually and collectively studied with open hearts, and it is our desire to share with you the results.

Max Lucado writes "that the human mind explaining baptism is like a harmonica interpreting Beethoven; the music is too majestic for the instrument. No scholar or saint can fully appreciate what this moment means in heaven. Any words on baptism, including these, must be seen as human efforts to understand a holy event."

In I Corinthians 13 Paul teaches the Corinthians that they should desire the greater gifts and he showed them the best way to do that. He said, "*I may understand all the secret things of God and have all knowledge, and I may have faith so great I can move mountains. But even with all these things, if I do not have love, then I am nothing...Love never ends.*" The gift of knowledge and our ability to prophecy or teach are not perfect. We do not have perfect understanding. Paul said "*When we were children, we talked like children, we thought like children, and we reasoned like children, but when we became adults, we stopped those childish ways. There is a day coming when we will see clearly the ways of God, but now we only see dimly and know in part. We do know that faith, hope and love continue forever and the greatest of these is love.*"

So it is in love that we share our thoughts on the subject of baptism.

Where do we begin a study of salvation and baptism?

We begin and end with Jesus. Everyone's discussion on salvation should end and begin with our Lord. God promises us in scripture he would bring us the free gift of his cleansing, renewal, forgiveness and his presence. God's desire for the redemption of his people is in Jesus Christ, his son, our atoning sacrifice for the sins of the world. It is through the death, burial and resurrection of Christ in which we have the hope of fellowship with God and his Holy Spirit in our lives. As Peter said, "*Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men [and women] by which we must be saved.*"

Scriptural References: Ezekiel 36:24-32, Ezekiel 37:14, Jeremiah 31:31-34, Acts 4:12.

On what is our salvation based?

We believe salvation is both a promise and a free gift from God. It is his Grace that saves us through our faith. Faith is our response to Christ's saving work. Saved by faith is not the same thing as saved by faithful obedience. Salvation is never dependant on the

accuracy of human obedience, for all have sinned, and therefore cannot save themselves. Instead, a saving faith depends on Christ to do the work of redemption. Our obedience, then, is a response to the saving work of Christ, and not an attempt to deserve salvation or save ourselves.

Scriptural References: Ephesians 2

What is the role of baptism in the salvation process?

Baptism is an essential step in a faith response to what Christ has done. Our danger is to go to extremes on this issue: we placed too much importance on baptism, or too little. We fixate on it, or we trivialize it. Neither position represents a biblical view.

In baptism we have the opportunity to embrace the promises of God through the death, burial and resurrection of Christ. In a very real way, it is a chance to both participate in, and act out symbolically the redemption story. Baptism is when we declare before the world our faith in the power of Christ's resurrection. He beat death, and now we can too! It signifies the blood of Christ washing away our sins and it also connects us to the Holy Spirit. The importance of a believer's baptism cannot be overlooked.

Baptism is our humble expression of submission to God's plan, not an achievement meriting His divine favor.

Scriptural References: Acts 2, Romans 6

Can one be baptized and not be saved?

A faith response to Christ and his promises is both outward and inward. In other words our baptism does not mean very much if our heart is not in it. A true commitment to Christ is inward – not only a baptism of the flesh, but of the Spirit by the Spirit, a baptism of the heart.

Scriptural References: I Corinthians 12:13, Romans 2

Can one be saved and not be baptized?

We feel every believer who refuses to submit to Christ in baptism does not represent the true heart of a disciple. The natural expression of our discipleship journey should embrace God's plan to demonstrate our faith through baptism.

However, the question has been raised, what if a person dies before they have a chance to be baptized? What if they had never come to a full understanding of what baptism is, but had an honest heart before God? These questions are more difficult because scripture never deals with a post-resurrection conversion not including baptism. However, a true analysis of the God's heart shows he never turns his back on an honest seeker. There are times in scripture when he has set aside his commands when it would benefit his people.

In other words, are there examples of God making exceptions in order to benefit an honest heart? Yes. Should every believer be baptized? Again, yes.

Scriptural References: II Chronicles 30, I Samuel 2, Luke 6

What happens after baptism?

We believe salvation is demonstrated by the change in ones heart. As believers mature, God's Holy Spirit begins to make changes – a renovation of the heart. We will display more and more of the fruits of His Spirit. Evidence of our salvation is shown by a transformed life that takes seriously the way of God's Kingdom. As Paul says, “. . . *he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves.*”

Scriptural References: Galatians 5:17-25, Colossians 1:13

Conclusions:

- We believe our understanding of scripture will often be different than the understanding of other believers. We believe it is honest seekers who God is looking for. Like our Lord, we will not turn away anyone who is honestly seeking God's will in his or her life (Matthew 9,12, and 25). It is our expectation that we as a congregation will not be divisive on this issue.
- We believe we need to rethink our old tradition of insisting on doctrinal uniformity. To think we are the only ones with right answers is arrogant. Only God has all the answers. We are to be held accountable for bringing mankind to Him. In the spirit of Paul, our position would encourage: “*All of us who are mature should take such a view of things. And if on some point you think differently, that too God will make clear to you.*” (Philippians 3:15-16). We intend to support an atmosphere encouraging an ongoing growth through study and mutual sharing without indicting another's character or motives.
- We realize that change is hard and these views represent a change to some of you. However, the church at Norway Avenue will continue to be a place that baptizes believers. As we continue to wrestle with traditional doctrinal positions, we ask for your grace filled input, and your prayers as we all seek His will with an open heart.