

July 24th, 2022

1 Corinthians 12:12-26 “One With the People of God”

In the early summer of 1983 at a church camp 50 miles outside of Big Timber, Montana, I made a decision to follow Jesus. A year and a half later, I was baptized on November 18, 1984, during a Sunday evening worship service at the Christian Missionary Alliance Church in Veneta, Oregon. That evening, my youth leader, Greg Johnson, baptized me in a baptismal tank that was considerably chillier than the one we have here in Chico. Over the years, people have asked me, “Why didn’t you get baptized at camp when you decided to follow Jesus?” For one thing, it was against Clydehurst Christian Ranch’s policy to baptize campers. The rationale is that it’s easy for youth to get caught up in the “mountaintop moment” when they decide to follow Jesus. Maybe they came forward to confess their faith because their friends did, or maybe they just wanted to please their youth leaders. You never want to create a situation where campers say, “I shouldn’t have done that ... I felt pressured ... I wasn’t ready.” Later when I became a part of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), I discovered that this was standard policy for our church camps too. Parents get upset when their kids come home and say, “Hey, I got baptized at camp!” It’s not that parents don’t want their kids to be baptized, it’s that they want to talk to their kids about their decision and perhaps bring their pastor into the conversation too so that they can arrange to have a baptismal service where friends and family can share in the experience. Me? I had a lot of things I had to work through before I finally made the decision to be baptized, but I never regretted it. I waited because I wanted to make sure I was doing it for the right reasons.

Now, please remember that I did not grow up in a household that went to church. I made the decision to follow Jesus on my own. I didn’t *inherit* my faith, I *confessed* my faith which, as I eventually found out, was an important principle in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). I tried out a lot of churches before I settled into the Disciples. I loved that we

celebrate science and reason and that questions are welcomed. I especially liked the way we articulate the sacrament of baptism which is where we are this week in our study on the Disciples Affirmation of Faith.

Through baptism into Christ
we enter into newness of life
and are made one with the whole people of God.

That's powerful! What this says to me is that baptism is the point of entry into a new life in Christ. And baptism isn't just "all about me." On one hand it *is* about me because I'm the one who made the decision to be baptized. Nobody baptized me as a baby without my consent. I chose the time and place. On the other hand, it's *not* all about me because in the big picture it's how I become one with all of God's people. For a kid who had very little experience with church, this was a revelation. This isn't just any old rite of passage, it is a sacred moment where one becomes part of something much bigger than just the people who are there in the water.

Even though I tried to avoid it and run, I eventually answered a call to ministry and found myself pastoring a church. I know that sounds like I woke up one morning and there I was standing behind a pulpit saying, "How did I get here?" I promise I'll tell you how I became a pastor in the next couple of weeks. Anyway, here I was, attending seminary in Upper East Tennessee and serving a church in southwest Virginia confident that I had such a clear understanding of our church's belief about baptism. That clarity and confidence came to a crashing halt one Sunday. Josh, one of our church's youth, came forward during worship service and confessed that Jesus is the Christ the Son of the Living God and wanted to be baptized. Hallelujah! Way to go Josh. I had all sorts of flashbacks to when I was his age and made my decision to follow Jesus. I was excited. After church, we had a brief meeting with his parents and grandparents and we all decided that we'd baptize him the following Sunday during morning worship. Josh was happy. His parents

were happy. His grandparents were happy. And I was thinking, “This is so great! I’m digging this pastor-thing.” Here’s a trade secret that pastors don’t often share with people: Any time a pastor says, “Wow! I’m digging this pastor thing!” it is often followed by a “Oh really, now ... let’s put that to the test” moment.

The day Josh came forward to be baptized was also the day I learned about old school Stone-Campbellite water regenerationists. A woman who, *might* have been alive when Alexander Campbell died in 1892 approached me and asked why we didn’t fill up the baptismal immediately after church to baptize Josh on the spot. I said, “I suppose his family wanted some time to invite anyone from out of town who wants to see him get baptized.” She said, “But what if he dies between now and next Sunday?” Now, for a brief moment I thought she was joking, but thank God I had a wise old clergy mentor who taught me early on that most church folks who have been on this earth for close to a century rarely joke about matters concerning the church. So the good thing is that I managed not to laugh at her question. I did (maybe a little patronizingly) say, “Well that would be very sad if Josh died this week.” She said, “Indeed it would! It would be terrible to see that poor boy’s soul condemned to hell because you all wanted to wait so long.” I said, “Whoa ... wait, why would Josh go to hell? I mean, he just made a decision to follow Jesus.” She said, “But it says that you must repent and be baptized in order to be saved.” Even though I had four-plus years of college and two years of seminary under my belt I was still quite ignorant about church-culture, church-lore and church-people in general. What I learned was that when some church people say, “it says,” that means, “I’m pretty sure the Bible says this because my preacher pounded it into my head since childhood.” Also, in some circles, whenever the term “saved” is used, you are expected to auto-fill the words “from hell” after “saved” even if the context of the scripture has no reference to an afterlife. Go ahead and look it up ... don’t take my word for it, look up how many times the word “saved” refers to an afterlife. The closest we get is Acts 16:31 and Romans 10:9-10 and even then, I’m not even remotely convinced that the word “saved”

means receiving forgiveness from sins for the purpose of escaping eternal punishment! But believe me, there are people who have been conditioned to add “from hell” to the word “saved” whenever it comes up in scripture.

The takeaway from this whole experience? Some people believe that baptism has very little to do with demonstrating your commitment to the new life we receive when we decide to follow Jesus. That’s secondary. For them, baptism is literally fire insurance. It is your virtual signature on the policy that will save you (from hell). Oh sure, you may publicly confess that you want to follow Jesus, but if you aren’t baptized, well ... tough luck for you. “Yeah, but what if a tree falls on a person three seconds after they came forward to confess their faith in Jesus?” Sadly, for some, the answer to that question is, “Well that’s too bad because if God makes an exception for that person, then God would have to start making exceptions in other cases which amounts to moral relativism which God is incapable of participating in because God is perfect and without sin and is therefore bound by God’s own rules.” And if you think that sounds like, “God renders God’s self incapable of showing mercy and compassion” then welcome to the club because that’s exactly what it is. I don’t make this stuff up! By the way, Josh survived those seven days between his confession of faith and the time he was baptized. His grandpa Bud played guitar and sang hymns about baptism at the service. It was beautiful.

Some of you may be thinking, “So wait a minute, I thought this series you’re preaching was supposed to be sort of an advertisement for how cool it is to be part of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). Didn’t you say that this woman who thought Josh would go to hell for not being baptized was part of the Stone-Campbell movement? Yes I did. And I called her an “old school Stone-Campbellite water regenerationist.” Remember a few weeks ago I said that we Disciples believe that periodic self-critique and self-reflection is a good thing. Yes, it is true that in the early years of our movement, both Barton Stone and the Campbells latched on to the idea that believer’s baptism by immersion in

water is a more biblically accurate understanding of baptism than traditions that baptized infants. I agree with this. Even the word “baptismo” in the original language of the New Testament literally means “to immerse.” And since we are all about confessing rather than just believing, it makes sense that since babies are incapable of making a confession of faith that we would practice “believer’s baptism.” The problem is that people, religious people especially, just cannot let go of the idea that if they think they’re doing something right, then all of a sudden everyone else is doing it wrong, and thus jeopardizing their salvation (from hell)

Alexander Campbell saw that this was becoming a problem and started throwing out little hints in his magazine *The Millennial Harbinger*, that the *form* of one’s baptism isn’t as important as the *intent*. How do you think that went over with the people who aligned themselves with our movement *because* they thought we were right and everyone else was wrong? Not so well. In the same way that some people today say that Billy Graham and Rush Limbaugh started getting all soft and squishy near the end of their days, people back in the late 1800s were saying that Campbell was losing his mind and that he started making grave compromises that would lead to the destruction of our great restoration movement. The truth of the matter is that Campbell was reminding people that even though we were trying to restore the faith and practice of the New Testament Church, we were also a unity movement, and we were losing sight of that by dismissing other churches as “apostate” and thus “unsaved.”

Finally, someone from Lunenburg, Virginia wrote a letter to Campbell’s magazine and asked him point blank, “Are you saying there are true Christians in other sects that don’t practice believer’s baptism by immersion?” Campbell said, “Yup. That is what I’m saying.” Nine years after Campbell’s death, the movement had it’s first split. On one side were the hard-core restorationists who to this day believe sincerely that they are the only ones who are truly “saved” (from hell). On the other side are the ones who value Christian unity and recognize that

even though different churches have different ways of expressing their faith, so long as they confess Jesus, they are brothers and sisters in the larger body of Christ. Paul articulated this in the scripture Jerry read earlier. But every now and then, you run into an old-school Stone-Campbell water regenerationist in our midst. And that's okay. We love them too.

We in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) still practice baptism by immersion for those who are able to confess their faith in Christ. Over the years, though, we have been challenged to consider how we receive folks who have been baptized in other traditions. Because our church has a covenant structure and each congregation is free to set its own policies and practices, we don't have an official "denominational policy" about receiving people who have not been baptized by immersion into fellowship. I will say, however, that most Disciples congregations today make it clear to Christians who come from other traditions that the most important thing is not the form of baptism, but one's ability to claim baptism as their own. So for example, someone who comes from a Lutheran tradition who wants to be a member of a Disciples congregation may say, "Well, I was baptized as an infant. Can I still be a member?" We will typically reply, "Do you claim that baptism as your own?" In my experience, most people will say, "I guess it really wasn't 'my own'" and will choose to be baptized by immersion. But every now and then, someone will say, "In my tradition, we lay claim to our baptism after catechism as teenagers when we receive first communion." Not all, but most Disciples congregations today, including ours, will say, "Then if that's the baptism you claim, we welcome you with open arms." Again, we are a movement continually learning to live into our call to be one with the whole people of God. We want to make sure that the table Christ has set before us is as big as Christ built it. And remember, Jesus was the son of a carpenter, so we believe it's a BIG table. More about that in two weeks.