

Matthew 28:18-20: Baptizing Disciples

OUTLINE

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INTRODUCTION

Today we come to consider the last instructions of Christ to His church in Matthew's gospel. Jesus we know appeared to His disciples for 40 days and had several encounters with them. Matthew's gospel chooses to focus on just one after the initial resurrection appearances, Christ's final instructions in what we know as the Great Commission. Matt. 28:16-20, '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." These are very familiar words for us, and familiarity can breed contempt. We must not miss the astounding announcement of the new state of affairs that Jesus resurrection has brought about, all authority is now His. The victory over satan, sin and death is won; Christ has fulfilled the promises of a coming deliverer and has taken His authority to bring the work that He has begun to completion. The final hope of a new creation is guaranteed and now it is only a matter of time. Contrary to Jewish expectation Jesus does not immediately punish all His enemies from the face of the earth, no there is a stunning and unexpected twist as Christ sends His church out as heralds announcing that His enemies who are worthy of death can receive a full and free pardon if they will repent and believe, if they will enter the service of King Jesus and stop their fruitless rebellion. Shockingly Jesus seeks a people not only from the Jews but from all nations to become His people. This new people are not arranged in the Old Covenant way of nationality and families, no, in fulfillment of the New Covenant promises they are all to be disciples not a mixed multitude of saved and unsaved; not marked out as the people of God by a national or racial ceremony like circumcision but are baptized and demarcated from the world as the people of God. And these are not mere converts but gathered into churches where they are taught the commands of Christ. No doubt all of this would be shocking and terrifying, but Christ's victory also guarantees His perpetual presence with them until the task given to them runs its course and Jesus finally returns to judge those enemies who would not accept the offer of pardon. We should experience a great sense of Joy at this new state of affairs; wonder at the generosity of God towards His enemies; the privilege and honour of being His representatives and ambassadors; responsibility and urgency as we see what is at stake and the need for all to hear; a sense of insufficiency as we see the largeness of the task and the aggression that we will face, but also a confidence as we see He promises Himself as our portion for this task. Today we have a baptismal service, so we want to focus in on some of these words as they bear upon our understanding of baptism. There is a lot we can say, but today we have two things we want to highlight, firstly, that the baptism of the new covenant is a baptism of disciples; and secondly, that it is a baptism into the name of the Trinity.

Baptism and disciples

V19, '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.' Because Christ is risen; because He has been given the name above all names; because He is the victor over satan, sin and death and seated at God's right hand; because salvation is now available to the nations and a day of judgement has been set, the church must now set out to announce this new state of affairs, and invite sinners to join Christ's kingdom. The main verb of this verse is 'make disciples'. The aorist participle 'go' reinforces the main verb, in other words, they are to 'go' in order to 'make disciples'. The target of the verb is 'all nations.' Not just Israel but all nations. Then there are two present participles, 'baptizing' and 'teaching', this explains the how of making disciples of all nations. Each of these are further qualified as baptism is to be into the name of the Trinity; and the teaching must consist of all the commandments of Christ. And has been pointed out these actions imply the local church, for Christians do not baptize themselves but are baptized, and this is an act of initiation into a people. The first baptismal service after Pentecost saw 3000 souls added to the church in Jerusalem, Acts 2:41. And God has appointed the teaching offices of the church to impart this instruction, Eph. 4:11-16.

Today I want to highlight that baptism is a baptism of disciples, not nations, not infants, but disciples. What we need to appreciate about these words of Christ to His disciples is that He was not speaking in unintelligible terms about things that they did not understand and had never heard before. The word 'disciple' would be well understood after Jesus 3 ½ year teaching ministry with them. And the word 'baptize' would be a clearly understood practice from both the baptizing ministry of John the Baptist and the disciples themselves who had already done baptisms under Christ. Consider the word 'disciple,' what does it mean? It means what you think it means. '*a learner, disciple, pupil.*'¹ It is not a Christian word, it is a generic term for someone who learns from another. But as with many normal concepts they take on peculiar properties as they are defined by the realities of the gospel. In the gospels we see that disciple describes a wide variety of people including those who followed Christ for a while a fell away. John 6:66, 'After this many of his disciples turned back and no longer walked with him.' But Christ spoke on what a disciple must do and be, Luke 14:26-27, 'If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple. ²⁷ Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple.' 14:33, 'So therefore, any one of you who does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple.' John 8:31-32, 'So Jesus said to the Jews who had believed him, "If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, ³² and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." 13:34-35, 'A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. ³⁵ By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.' 15:8, 'By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples.' What is interesting is that as you go into the book of Acts 'the disciples' is one of the most common ways of talking about followers of Jesus and how they were identified even before they were slanderously called Christians, Acts 11:26. This notion of disciple as one who knows the truth, who obeys Christ's commandments, who opts to follow Christ

¹ Alexander Souter, [*A Pocket Lexicon to the Greek New Testament*](#) (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1917), 150.

above all others, and who gathers in a love community of other disciples to show the love of Christ underscores baptism as a baptism of believers.

Sadly there are many people who go under the banner Christian who are not disciples in this sense. People speak of Christian nations, and what they mean is that there may have once been a state church that baptized generations of babies, and there may be a history of Christian influence on the laws of the country. But one is not a disciple by birth or by association. You may have grown up in a so called Christian country; culture, and family but are you a disciple? Have you seen the truth of your sin and your need for Christ alone as your sin bearer? Have you turned your back on your life of self-rule and recognized His Lordship over your life submitting to Him? Are you willing to give your allegiance to Him first and foremost even before your closest loved ones because He is Lord and Saviour? Have you taken up that cross where you willingly embrace a life of the world hating you, a life of putting sin to death, a life of being publicly associated with Christ and His people, a life of doing His will? Are you a student, a follower and teacher of His teachings, His commandments? The word disciple carries with it the ideas of commitment, opting in, your personal choice, a life of sacrifice to follow. The Great Commission is a message calling for sinners who have lived in denial of the truth, who have been self-governing, and as a result have brought condemnation upon themselves to repent and swear their allegiance to Christ committing the rest of their lives to His service. You can't be half a disciple. That is because the truth about sin and judgement and Christ's right to rule us are not only half true nor are they insignificant, but these are truths that demand full allegiance, a full abandonment of self-rule, a full commitment to the truth and lifelong obedience to His will.

The second word to contemplate is the word 'baptism' itself. The verb baptize is an intensive form of the word baptō which literally means 'to dip.'² The disciples would have been familiar with the baptism of repentance that John the Baptist implemented as a preparation for the coming of the Messiah. This was not a baptism that took note of race because John baptized Jew and Gentile soldiers; nor was it influenced by whether someone had been circumcised at birth; it was a baptism of repentance towards sin. And this baptism has an intimate connection with Christian baptism because firstly, Jesus Himself in identification with sinners, namely us, submitted to this baptism. Secondly, the disciples of John the Baptist became the first disciples of Jesus and there is no record of their being rebaptized; thirdly, Jesus and His disciples baptized like John, alongside John, but more than John, so much so Jesus was confused for being John resurrected after his death, John 3:22-23, 'After this Jesus and his disciples went into the Judean countryside, and he remained there with them and was baptizing. ²³ John also was baptizing at Aenon near Salim, because water was plentiful there, and people were coming and being baptized.' 4:1-2, 'Now when Jesus learned that the Pharisees had heard that Jesus was making and baptizing more disciples than John ²(although Jesus himself did not baptize, but only his disciples).'

As we consider these two things, a baptism of repentance, and a baptism to make disciples the nature of the baptism becomes clearer. This was not a baptism that was used like circumcision was used in the OT to define a nation belonging to Abraham but a people separating themselves from sin in

² Kostenberger, Believer's Baptism, p18.

preparation of the Messiah; nor was it applied along family lines; it was applied to those who opted in and who were signaling their repentance and allegiance to the Messiah. We do not see one infant being baptized in the NT, no command to baptize an infant in the NT, every mention of household baptisms fits the description of believers; and the single mention of children in the context of baptism in Acts 2:38-39, 'And Peter said to them, "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. ³⁹ For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself." This verse mentions a promise, which promise? It is the promise of the Spirit being poured out upon all flesh in Joel 2:28, Acts 2:17, "And in the last days it shall be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams.' Sons and daughters prophesying hardly paints the picture of new born infants being baptized on the 8th day. Many raise the question, wouldn't it have been too radical a break to suddenly stop including infants in the covenant people of God with no explanations? The explanations have been given since the baptism of John, we become the people of the Messiah by becoming His disciples, by a baptism of repentance, not by birth. When John came to make disciples of the Messiah from the Jews he did not baptize men with their families, but those who repented and opted into being disciples. When we go out to make disciples of all nations we do not baptize a man and his infant children but only those who confess faith, repent and opt into becoming His disciples. Can a young person who is not an adult be baptized? Yes, we baptize upon a credible confession of faith.

Baptism and the Trinity

V19, '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.' Baptism has a number of associations. We are baptized into Christ; we are baptized into the Church, here we have emphasized the fact that we are baptized into the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Now we must highlight as we look at this point that this baptism is by the commandment of Christ. Christ has all authority, and He has commanded that those who seek to be His disciples, that they do this by outwardly identifying with Him by baptism. Baptism is a command, it is not an optional extra, there is no such thing as a non-baptized disciple. at least there should not be.

Secondly we are alerted to the richness of our confession in the act of Baptism. You will notice that baptism is a confession of faith in the Triune God. We see that we are baptized into the name not names, even though there are technically three names. To be a disciple of Christ is to be Trinitarian believer. We are confessing what our confession more fully states, 'In this divine and infinite Being there are three subsistences, the Father, the Word or Son, and Holy Spirit, of one substance, power, and eternity, each having the whole divine essence, yet the essence undivided.' And of course we are saying more than this though a lot of the mysteries related to the Trinity are truths we grow into rather than fully grasp all upfront. Our confession teases out more of these mysteries, 'the Father is of none, neither begotten nor proceeding; the Son is eternally begotten of the Father; the Holy Spirit proceeding from the Father and the Son; all infinite, without beginning, therefore but one God, who is not to be divided in nature and being, but distinguished by several peculiar relative properties and personal relations.'

Thirdly, in this act of confession we are also expressing our faith in the redemptive acts of all three in our salvation. We are expressing that the Father, who is the eternal Father of the Son is now our Father in Christ. That we have received the adoption of sons through faith in Him. Our baptism into His name expresses our interest in Him as our Father. But we are also baptized into the Son. He who was incarnate and became for us a prophet to reveal God and the way of salvation to us; priest who was both the offering and offerer who fully satisfies God in payment for our sins; and King who now reigns over all for the good of His church and the glory of God, who has promised to come again to judge His enemies and rule us in a New Creation. By being baptized into the name of the Son we are showing our interest in Him in all that He has done for us. But we are also baptised into the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Trinity, the one who proceeds from the Father and the Son and is given to us in order to apply all the benefits of the Saviour to us through uniting us to Him. In being baptized into His name we show that we have an interest in His work in regenerating us, sanctifying us, teaching us, empowering us, comforting us, etc. God commands baptism as a sign and pledge of all that He is for us as our God and we His people. Baptism is a word from God to us about Himself and what He will do for His own.

It has been pointed out that baptism is not only an oath sign of God's promises to us, but also an oath sign of our promises to God. Matthew Henry talks about it as an oath of abjuration, that is a big fancy word for renouncing. In being baptised we are making a promise, a commitment, an oath to renounce the world, the flesh and the devil. We lay our old lives in the grave of repentance. The old idols, the old controlling addictions, the old sin haunts, the old me who was a slave to sin and satan is dead. But not only is baptism an oath of abjuration but also an oath of allegiance. We say no to all our old sins, but we also say yes to all of Christ's commands. We take Him as Lord, as Boss, as King, and His commandments for our law, His life for our pattern, and His people as our people, His name for our name. This is why we must be taught all the commandments of Christ. He commands us to fulfil the law by loving God and neighbour; by practicing inward and outward purity and obedience; by emulating His other serving, grace driven enemy love; and by becoming a church that loves one another, builds up believers, and shines a light for His name. A church that will perpetuate the great commission by making more disciples who make more disciples who make more disciples.

There is so much more that we can say but I think we have made the point. Christ sent us out into the world to gather his new covenant people, a people who are formed by the outpouring of the Spirit, as a people from all nations. These people are not casual attachments but disciples who have repented from their sins and have been outwardly marked as God's people by their identification with God; His saving in Christ, and Christ's people in the act of believer's baptism. Today Joseph is showing that Christ is his king; he is confessing his faith; he is renouncing the world and his sin, and he is swearing his allegiance to Christ while identifying with His people.