

Baptism: Doxology and (Aquatic) Theology

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Abstract: Mark Dever calls baptism “the discarded jewel of Christian churches today.” Indeed, recent worship discourse is consumed by debates about musical style while undervaluing the ordinances. This article argues that recovering baptism as an act of corporate worship requires returning to the confessional, biblical, and theological resources that Baptist churches already possess. Reading the four descriptions of baptism in *The Baptist Faith and Message 2000* (obedience, symbol, testimony, and prerequisite) as a coherent theological framework, the article develops a rich account of baptism that neither collapses into sacramentalism nor reduces to mere subjective expression. Drawing on the biblical theology of water, the article argues that baptism involves a rich symbolic vocabulary, and that this vocabulary enables congregations to “see the Bible” in corporate worship. By recovering baptism, evangelical churches gain both a more faithful practice and a surprising resource for addressing the varied goals of worship renewal.

Key Words: baptism, Baptist Faith and Message, Baptists, ordinances, public worship, sacraments, symbolism in the Bible, typology, water

Baptism is the discarded jewel of Christian churches today—even of Baptist churches. Confusion, ignorance, prejudice, and a misplaced and distorting cultural conservatism all beset most churches today in their practice of baptism.

~Pastor Mark Dever¹

Chicago’s South Side is the home of the Field Museum. There, in the Grainger Hall of Gems, are literally hundreds of different jewels on display: a 37-carat tanzanite necklace, a 97.45-carat ruby topaz gem, and a 3,400-year-old Egyptian garnet necklace. The museum displays some jewels as uncut stones and mounts others in unforgettable necklaces and rings. In a literal Hall of Gems, how can a visitor take it all in? When treasure follows treasure, how is it possible not to overlook something of

great value?

A Christian worship service, like the Grainger Hall of Gems, is filled with treasures old and new. Christians value the prayers, songs, Scripture readings, the Lord’s Supper, and (of course!) the sermon as priceless elements of a worship service. But few Christians understand *baptism* as an act of worship. Why has baptism become a “discarded jewel” in worship discussions? Among all the treasures on display, why is it so easy to miss the value of baptism?

Consider two reasons. First, regular Sunday morning services rarely practice baptism.² This might be because of the scarcity of conversions, or perhaps because some baptisms are performed at camps or other para-church events. A second reason Christians do not understand baptism as an act of worship might be because the most widely read books about worship rarely address the practice or meaning of baptism.³ Perhaps these authors are trying to sensitively address differing evangelical traditions who observe a variety of baptismal practices.⁴ More likely, the divisive nature of musical styles has dominated the worship discourse to the neglect of other discussions.

This article seeks to recover this jewel by arguing that baptism is an

² Aaron Earls, “Baptisms rebound, but negative trend continues in Southern Baptist churches,” *Lifeway Newsroom*, January 23, 2024, <https://news.lifeway.com/2024/01/23/baptisms-rebound-but-negative-trend-continues-in-southern-baptist-churches/>. “More than 2 in 5 (43%) Southern Baptist churches reporting in the ACP [Annual Church Profile] had no baptisms in 2022. Close to a third (34%) baptized one to five people, while 9% saw six to nine baptisms. Around 1 in 8 (13%) reported at least 10 baptisms, including 5% who saw 20 or more baptized at their church.”

³ Many well-regarded evangelical books about worship, the key texts in the field, do not address baptism, including Bob Kauflin, *Worship Matters: Leading Others to Encounter the Greatness of God* (Crossway, 2008); Keith Getty and Kristyn Getty, *Sing! How Worship Transforms Your Life* (B&H Publishing, 2017); Mike Cosper, *Rhythms of Grace: How the Church’s Worship Tells the Story of the Gospel* (Crossway, 2013); and Matt Boswell, ed., *Doxology and Theology: How the Gospel Forms the Worship Leader* (B&H, 2013).

⁴ Here, I’m thinking of the theological differences between paed- and credo-baptism, covenant promise vs. declaration of faith, and the like. See, for example, the tensions discussed in James M. Hamilton Jr., “Baptism and Church Membership: Sometimes Obedience Results in Painful Separations,” *The Gospel Coalition*, March 4, 2012, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/baptism-and-church-membership/>.

¹ Mark Dever, “Baptism in the Context of the Local Church,” in *Believer’s Baptism: Sign of the New Covenant in Christ*, ed. Thomas R. Schreiner and Shawn D. Wright (B&H Academic, 2006), 329.

indispensable element of Christian worship, helping believers “see the Bible” on Sunday mornings with its meaningful and beautiful practice.⁵

One resource for obtaining greater clarity on the place of baptism in Christian worship is *The Baptist Faith and Message 2000* (BF&M 2000).⁶ This confessional document presents baptism with four descriptions, and each is significant for an understanding of baptism as worship. As Article VII states,

Christian baptism is the immersion of a believer in water in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. It is [1] an act of obedience [2] symbolizing the believer’s faith in a crucified, buried, and risen Saviour, the believer’s death to sin, the burial of the old life, and the resurrection to walk in newness of life in Christ Jesus. It is [3] a testimony to his faith in the final resurrection of the dead. Being a church ordinance, it is [4] prerequisite to the privileges of church membership and to the Lord’s Supper.⁷

⁵ The verbiage of “see the Bible” draws from the insights of J. Ligon Duncan III, “Foundations for Biblically Directed Worship,” in *Give Praise to God: A Vision for Reforming Worship: Celebrating the Legacy of James Montgomery Boice*, ed. Philip Graham Ryken, Derek W. H. Thomas, and J. Ligon Duncan III (P&R, 2003), 65.

⁶ Discerning readers may rightfully question my choice of BF&M 2000 as the document by which to illuminate the dimensions of baptism. I believe that BF&M 2000 faithfully synthesizes the testimony of Scripture and I happily write and teach “in accordance with and not contrary to all that is contained therein.” I invite others to investigate their own confessional documents for further discussion of these points.

For broader historical surveys of the practice of baptism, see Bryan D. Spinks, *Early and Medieval Rituals and Theologies of Baptism: From the New Testament to the Council of Trent*, Liturgy, Worship, and Society (Ashgate, 2006); and *Reformation and Modern Rituals and Theologies of Baptism: From Luther to Contemporary Practices* (Ashgate, 2006); Paul F. Bradshaw, “Christian Initiation: A Study in Diversity,” in *The Search for the Origins of Christian Worship: Sources and Methods for the Study of Early Liturgy* (Oxford University Press, 1992), 161–84; and the magisterial Everett Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church: History, Theology, and Liturgy in the First Five Centuries* (Eerdmans, 2009).

⁷ Southern Baptist Convention, *The Baptist Faith & Message: A Statement Adopted by the Southern Baptist Convention June 14, 2000* (LifeWay Christian Resources, 2000), Section VII. <https://bfm.sbc.net/bfm2000/#vii>. Numbering added and British spelling of “Saviour” retained. For interactions with BF&M 2000, see Douglas K. Blount and Joseph D. Wooddell, eds., *The Baptist Faith and Message 2000: Critical Issues in America’s Largest Protestant Denomination* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2007); Rob Phillips, *Understanding the Baptist Faith and Message: A Simple Study for Southern Baptists* (High Street Press, 2022); and Daniel Scheiderer, *Still Confessing: An Exposition of the Baptist Faith and Message 2000* (Founders, 2020).

Using those four descriptions, this essay argues that baptism is a glorious act of public worship.⁸ Because baptism is obedience and testimony, it must be enacted by a believer. Because baptism is symbol and prerequisite, it must be commissioned by God and performed by a church. A robust practice of baptism will be a surprising fulfillment of the goals of the various worship tribes, but more importantly, will be a profound source of edification for local churches.

Baptism as an Act of Obedience

When Baptists call baptism an “ordinance,” they draw attention to the fact that baptism is an act of obedience. As such, baptism (like all human obedience) is the conscious activity of an individual.⁹

Sacramental thinkers who view baptism as an arena of divine work may flinch at this formulation. They might be concerned it degrades baptism into a mere subjective expression of faith. They may object that the Baptist requirement of conscious, personal faith elevates an individual’s experience over God’s promise.¹⁰ But of course, Baptists disagree. The sacramental criticism diminishes the aspect of obedience. The Baptist position is that the ordinance of baptism is not merely an aquatic communication of cognitive realities, nor a watery reminder of important biblical

⁸ The discussion of baptism usually consists of an adjudication between credobaptism and pedobaptism. See the exemplary interactions in Bruce A. Ware, Sinclair B. Ferguson, and Anthony N. S. Lane, *Baptism: Three Views*, ed. David F. Wright (IVP Academic, 2009) and the insights in Stephen J. Wellum, “Baptism and the Relationship between the Covenants,” in *Believer’s Baptism: Sign of the New Covenant in Christ*, ed. Thomas R. Schreiner and Shawn D. Wright (B&H Academic, 2006), 97–162. Rather than rehashing that debate, this essay assumes the credobaptist position and spends its energy commending baptism to be robustly practiced in local church worship services as an act of worship.

⁹ Examples of non-human obedience include wind, seas, and mulberry trees (cf. Luke 8:25 and 17:6).

¹⁰ If the baptism is grounded in the believer’s awareness instead of God’s activity, critics claim that credobaptism would have Pelagian overtones. Committed pedobaptist and capacious biblical theologian Peter J. Leithart writes, “The Bible never portrays baptism as a picture of some more important event that happens without baptism. What baptism pictures happens—at baptism. Baptism works” (*Baptism: A Guide to Life from Death* [Lexham, 2021], 4, emphasis original).

truths.¹¹ The Lord Jesus Christ commands baptism. He commands believers to baptize (Matt 28:19–20), and he commands individual Christians to be baptized (Acts 2:38). Thus, baptism is something a church does and something an individual does as an act of obedience to the Lord Jesus.¹² As such, obedience is a powerful act of worship, dramatizing the matchless value of the Savior and his authority (as Lord) over both this individual being baptized and over his church.

The Benefits of Obedience

How can submerging someone in physical water spiritually benefit the person? Does the benefit exist internally in the mind of the baptized person? Or does the benefit come externally, from the action of submersion, or even the baptismal water?

To modern and post-modern people, these two options—internal volition or external causation—seem to be the only forms of influence.¹³ First, “internal volition” names the idea that what a person does ought to spring from within, uninhibited and uncoerced, and is tied up with notions of freedom and self-determination.¹⁴ Second, “causative power” la-

¹¹ Peter J. Leithart writes, “As we establish loving and trusting relations with our infants through symbols, so God speaks to infants and establishes a relation with them through the ‘visible word’ of baptism. Thus, the question ‘Should we baptize babies?’ is of a piece with the question ‘Should we talk to babies?’ Paedobaptism is neither more nor less odd and miraculous than talking to a newborn. In fact, that is just what paedobaptism is: God speaking in water to a newborn child” (“Do Baptists Talk to Their Babies?,” *Theopolis*, September 27, 1996, <https://theopolisinstitute.com/do-baptists-talk-to-their-babies/>. <https://www.biblicalhorizons.com/rite-reasons/no-47-do-baptists-talk-to-their-babies/>. Originally published at *Rite Reasons Newsletter*, no. 47: “Do Baptists Talk to their Babies?”).

¹² Attentive readers might note the introduction of a new concept: the act of baptism as an act of a particular local church. Defense and discussion of this assertion follows in this article, but see also Bobby Jamieson, *Understanding Baptism*, Church Basics (B&H, 2016), 5–15.

¹³ Much of this section is based on the logic of my paper, “How Do Baptism and the Lord’s Supper . . . Work?” (paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society, San Diego, CA, November 21, 2024).

¹⁴ Modern thinkers prize activities that spring from the internal desires of the individual. See Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Harvard University Press); and Jerome B. Schneewind, *The Invention of Autonomy:*

bels external forces which act upon an individual regardless of that individual’s agency or awareness, effecting outcomes upon them.¹⁵

We can map these two options onto our discussion of baptism. First, Baptists worry that sacramentalists treat the benefits of baptism and the Lord’s Supper as external causation.¹⁶ These elements act upon the person irrespective of their participation or their understanding, like a child’s vitamins. Whether or not a child understands the laws of nutrition or the purpose of vitamins, parents feed their child vitamins because, “It’s good for you.”

But if Baptists might worry about distributing vitamins, then sacramentalists might worry that credobaptists are passing out placebos. A placebo has no active ingredients, contributing neither nutritional nor medicinal support for the body. The only benefit a placebo provides is a

A History of Modern Moral Philosophy (Cambridge University Press, 1997). This prizing of individual autonomy worked its way into the popular imagination through the humanistic psychology of Carl Rogers (1902–1987) in the 1950s and 60s that emphasized self-actualization and the importance of developing according to a person’s internal nature rather than external pressures (e.g., Rogers’s best-seller, *On Becoming a Person: A Therapist’s View of Psychotherapy* [Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1961]).

¹⁵ Here, one might think of Charles Darwin’s struggle for survival, Karl Marx’s view on class struggle, or Friedrich Nietzsche’s philosophy and cultural criticism. Postmodern thinkers identify coercive power as a central force (perhaps *the* shaping force) shaping human existence, from Michel Foucault’s analysis of disciplinary institutions (*Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan [Vintage, 1977]) and literary critic Edward Said’s examination of imperial domination (*Orientalism* [Pantheon, 1978]; and *Culture and Imperialism* [Vintage, 1993]) to Karl Marx’s theory of class struggle (*The Communist Manifesto* [Communist League, 1848]), and Friedrich Nietzsche’s concept of “the will to power” (*On the Genealogy of Morality*, trans. Maudemarie Clark and Alan J. Swensen [Hackett, 1998]).

¹⁶ In the arena of external causation, consider the sacramental terminology of *ex opere operato* (Latin for, “by the work worked”) which refers to the belief that the sacraments confer grace themselves, rather than through the minister or by the recipient. This method is distinguished from *ex opere operantis* (“in virtue of the agent”), which was the opposing position during the Donatist controversy. *Ex opere operato* means that the elements are neither signs of previously given grace, nor are they stimulants of the faith of the recipient, but they externally confer grace themselves. See John Hardon’s *Modern Catholic Dictionary* (2000). <https://www.catholicculture.org/culture/library/dictionary/index.cfm?id=33474>. Thomas Aquinas said it best: *sacramenta efficiunt quod figurant* (“the Sacraments effect what they represent”) (*Summa contra Gentiles* [Of God and His Creatures], ch. 78, <https://ccel.org/ccel/aquinas/gentiles/gentiles.vii.lvii.html>). To be fair, Thomas wrote this about the sacrament of marriage.

soothing emotional and psychological trick for the mind. No doctor would give a placebo to an infant, but a doctor might give a placebo to provide an anxious person some psychological relief from subjective symptoms. Is this what Baptists think is happening in baptism and the Lord's Supper?

By recognizing the commanded nature of baptism, believers can understand how baptism creates a third option that avoids these two extremes. God's grace arrives externally, sent to us in the person and work of Christ, and it elicits our own internal participation in faith and obedience. Thus, the benefits of baptism are neither the result of external causation nor internal volition.

Obedience is theologically understood when placed within grace rather than in place of grace (Gal 5:6; Jas 2:14–17, 26). Baptism is a believer's act of obedience, an ordinance, in response to the grace they have received, not a baptized person's initiative to earn or receive grace. When baptism's first quality of being an ordinance is combined with its second quality of being a sign of grace from God, the obedience of baptism can be understood as participation in God's activity, an enacted response to God's grace rather than a personal achievement of moral merit.

Baptism as a Divinely Commissioned Symbol

When Baptists insist that baptism is a symbol, they are not deemphasizing or reducing the reality of the activity.¹⁷ Indeed, for Baptists a symbol is not a reductionist alternative to an efficacious sacramental reality. Baptism instead is a divinely commissioned enactment, making visible and celebrating what God has done, while proclaiming what God is going to do.¹⁸

Prophetic Pageants and Gospels of Gesture

Throughout the Old Testament, God commissioned dramatic performances designed to make his message visible and compelling. His goal was to change the observers' perception of their context, their beliefs, and their actions. These sign-acts span the entire prophetic tradition, from the

¹⁷ See the quirky but welcomed contribution from James W. McClendon Jr., "Baptism as a Performative Sign," *Theology Today* 23.3 (October 1966): 403–16.

¹⁸ See D. C. Schindler's helpful contrast of the categories of symbolical ("brought together") and diabolical ("divided apart") (*Freedom from Reality: The Diabolical Character of Modern Liberty*, Catholic Ideas for a Secular World [University of Notre Dame Press, 2017], esp. 151–71, "Symbolical Order and Diabolical Subversion"). The irony of Schindler's ecclesial affiliation (and the series title of his monograph) is not lost on this Baptist.

early monarchy through the postexilic period, with remarkable creativity in their symbolic vocabulary.¹⁹ The prophets performed sign-acts involving clothing, objects, relationships, and personal deprivation.²⁰ Ahijah tore his garment into twelve pieces to visualize the kingdom's division (1 Kgs 11:29–39).²¹ Elisha directed Joash to shoot arrows and strike the ground, symbolizing with a simple gesture a prophetic declaration about military victories (2 Kgs 13:14–19).²² Isaiah walked naked and barefoot for three years to prefigure Egyptian captivity (Isa 20:1–6).²³ Jeremiah buried a linen waistband to represent Judah's ruined pride (Jer 13:1–11), smashed a potter's flask to demonstrate Jerusalem's irreversible destruction (19:1–13), and wore a yoke to symbolize submission to Babylon (27:2).²⁴ He also hid large stones at Pharaoh's palace to symbolize Nebuchadnezzar's conquest of Egypt (Jer 43:8–13), and Seraiah tied a stone to

¹⁹ "Sign-acts are best interpreted as dramatic performances designed to visualize a message and in the process to enhance its persuasive force so that the observers' perceptions of a given situation might be changed and their beliefs and behavior modified" (Daniel I. Block, *The Book of Ezekiel, Chapters 1–24*, NICOT [Eerdmans, 1997], 166).

²⁰ This list is based on Kelvin G. Friebel, "Sign Acts," in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Prophets*, ed. Mark J. Boda and J. Gordon McConville (InterVarsity Press, 2012), 707–13. For a fuller consideration of the topic see Friebel's, *Jeremiah's and Ezekiel's Sign-Acts: Rhetorical Nonverbal Communication*, JSOTSup Series 283 (Sheffield Academic Press, 1999). See in particular the discussion (and rejection) of the "inherent efficaciousness" of the signs (pp. 41–48).

²¹ See Paul R. House, *1, 2 Kings*, NAC 8 (B&H, 1995), 171–73. Leithart notes that the Hebrew term translated "garment" or "mantle" contains the same consonants as the name "Solomon." Thus, the cloak of Ahijah prefigures the divided nature of the kingdom and the divided nature of Solomon's heart (Peter J. Leithart, *1 and 2 Kings*, Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible [Brazos, 2006], 84).

²² See House, *1, 2 Kings*, 308 and Leithart, *1 and 2 Kings*, 233.

²³ See John N. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah, Chapters 1–39*, NICOT (Eerdmans, 1986), 381–86. "The symbolic action here is the only one reported of Isaiah, but such activity was fairly frequent with Jeremiah and Ezekiel. Like the parables of Jesus, these actions were capable of being misconstrued by hardened hearts, but they certainly could not be overlooked" (p. 384).

²⁴ See John Goldingay, *Jeremiah*, NICOT (Eerdmans, 2021), 346–50 (shorts), 443–51 (pottery), and 568–80 (yoke).

a scroll and threw it into the Euphrates to symbolize the sinking of Babylon (51:59–64).²⁵ Zechariah crafted crowns from silver and gold to symbolize the coming royal priest (Zech 6:9–15).²⁶ Each of these acts involved different elements, actions, and material symbols.

These divine sign-acts are often commissioned with the formula “The word of the LORD came to me,” or “The LORD said to me.” The prophets performed startling actions that often seemed foolish, costly, or painful, yet each action was commissioned by God with divine authority, and as such made visible and celebrated what God has done while prophesying what God was going to do.²⁷

Baptism as a Biblical Symbol

Having considered biblical symbolism more broadly, we turn now to the aquatic nature of baptism to make three connections: life and blessing, chaos and judgment, and borders.²⁸ First, consider how biblical authors

²⁵ See Goldingay, *Jeremiah*, 802–5 (stones) and 952–56 (sinking scroll). In addition to these dramatic punctiliar events, God commanded some prophets to include ongoing dramatic gestures through their personal lives. By forbidding Jeremiah to marry, attend funerals, or join feasts, God made the prophet a walking symbol of coming devastation (Jer 16:1–9). He commanded Hosea to marry an adulterous woman and name his children Jezreel, No Mercy, and Not My People, creating a family drama that symbolized Israel’s broken covenant relationship (Hos 1:2–9). Later, Hosea bought back his wayward wife and isolated her, symbolizing Israel’s future period without king or sacrifice before the restoration (3:1–5). Jeremiah’s purchase of land during Jerusalem’s siege was a sign-act that revealed God’s intention to restore the land (Jer 32:1–44).

²⁶ See Thomas Edward McComiskey, “Zephaniah,” in *The Minor Prophets: An Exegetical and Expository Commentary*, ed. Thomas Edward McComiskey, 3 vols. (Baker Academic, 1998), 3:1111–22. “It is more likely that the prophet’s symbolic act expresses a hope that extends beyond the moment to a figure who more closely fits the symbol” (p. 1114).

²⁷ False prophets occasionally mimicked these dramatic gestures without divine commission. Zedekiah crafted iron horns and promised King Ahab victory over Aram, but God later revealed through Micaiah that a lying spirit had inspired Zedekiah’s performance (1 Kgs 22:11). Hananiah broke Jeremiah’s wooden yoke and prophesied Babylon’s quick defeat, but God responded by replacing the wooden yoke with iron and pronouncing judgment on Hananiah (Jer 28). These counterfeit sign-acts did not have God’s authorization, and they gave observers false confidence.

²⁸ Some of the following sections were inspired by Alistair Roberts, “The Mode of Baptism,” YouTube, *Theopolis Institute*, June 13, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PiMQOLcwseA>. I first drew these thoughts together in my newsletter articles, <https://matthewwesterholm.substack.com/p/baptism>.

often associate water with God’s blessing. God’s goodness (pictured by water) is shared generally with the whole earth (Ps 65:9–10, “You visit the earth and water it”). This goodness is shared especially with those in difficult circumstances (Ps 105:41, “He opened the rock and water gushed out,” describing Exod 17). God provides for both good and evil people (Matt 5:44–45), but his life-giving presence is particularly enjoyed by his followers (Ps 1:3, “like a tree firmly planted by streams of water”; 36:8; 46:4–5; cf. Ezek 47). Likewise, consider how the water in the temple served the priests (Exod 30:18–20; 1 Kgs 7) and the people (2 Chron 4:6), and how rivers of water flow from God’s temples to bless the earth (Gen 2:10–14; Ps 46:4; Ezek 47:12; John 4:14; 7:38; Rev 22:1–2).²⁹ God’s presence, symbolized by rivers and waves, is also forfeit by disobedience (Isa 48:18). In the eschaton, God’s people will finally enjoy his full presence and blessing, as pictured by a river (Rev 22:1–2). In all these examples the aquatic communicates blessing.

Second, Scripture also assigns to water a dual symbolic identity as an agent of chaos and judgment, and even death. The psalmist describes chaotic circumstances using water metaphors of floods and drowning (Ps 69:1–2, 14–15). The NT describes many journeys on chaotic and dangerous seas. From the storms on the sea of Galilee (John 6:16–21; Mark 6:46–52) to Paul’s treacherous shipwrecks (Acts 27:39–44; 2 Cor 11:25–27), the sea is portrayed as a place of terror and a destiny for the dead (cf. Rev 20:13). The OT and NT also use sea imagery to describe a chaotic person (Reuben in Gen 49:4 and the Jas 1:6 description of the doubting person “like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind”). Jesus names the roaring sea and waves as a cause of distress during the end-times (Luke 21:25–26). In the book of Revelation, Satan attacks God’s people with a river and flood (12:15), while the Beast who opposes God rises from the sea (13:1).³⁰ The Bible compares God’s judgment and wrath to breakers and waterfalls that go over a person (Ps 42:7) and waves that overwhelm (Ps 88:7; e.g., Gen 6:11–8:22; cf. Jonah 2:3). God uses the sea to overwhelm individuals and nations (Ps 78:53; Isa 8:7). In the OT and NT, water is often a place of judgement (e.g., the legion of demons

²⁹ See G. K. Beale, *The Temple and the Church’s Mission: A Biblical Theology of the Dwelling Place of God*, NSBT 17 (InterVarsity Press, 2004), esp. 54, 72–77, 196–98, and 341–43.

³⁰ See G. K. Beale, *Revelation*, NIGTC (Eerdmans, 1999), 671–75, 682–85. For Beale’s discussion of metaphorical floods representing armies, divine judgment, and persecution, see esp. 672–73.

driving pigs into the sea in Mark 5:13; cf. Luke 17:1–2).³¹ In these examples, aquatic imagery symbolizes judgment.

Third, water marks biblical boundaries as early as the second day of creation. God divides the waters above from the waters below in Gen 1:6–7, and waters then create divisions in Gen 2:10–14, where four rivers from Eden divide the earth.³² These river partitions shape the scope of God’s covenant with Abraham (Gen 15:18–21), define the reign of a good king (Ps 72:8, “May he have dominion from sea to sea, and from the River to the ends of the earth!”), and mark the border of the Lord’s harvesting work (Isa 27:12). Similarly in the New Testament, water boundaries mark important territories and realms for Jesus and his disciples (Matt 8:26–28, 34).³³

Because water often marks important boundaries in the ancient world, many biblical stories involve people crossing boundary waters.³⁴ For example, the story of Abraham describes a water crossing from idolatry to true worship as God “took your father Abraham from beyond the River and led him through all the land of Canaan” (Josh 24:2–3, 14). Jacob likewise crosses the Jabbok to portray his transformation from a deceiver to his new identity (“Israel”) as one who wrestles with God (Gen 32:22). Crossing the Red Sea marks Israel’s crossing from slavery to freedom (Exod 14:21–31). The story of Joshua includes a water crossing through the boundary of the Jordan River from the wilderness to the promised land (Josh 3:14–17). The same Jordan River that Israel crossed with Joshua would serve as an important location to symbolize ministry transitions. It served as the setting when Moses passed his ministry to Joshua’s leadership. Similarly, when Elijah passed his ministry to Elisha’s leadership, it involved two crossings of the Jordan (2 Kgs 2:6–14). And once again, the Jordan serves as the setting where John the Baptist passed his ministry to the leadership of the Lord Jesus (Matt 3:13–17).³⁵

In the gospel narratives, the imagery of the OT becomes compounded

³¹ Of course, *waterlessness* is also a metaphor for God’s judgement. Zechariah 9:11, “As for you also, because of the blood of my covenant with you, I will set your prisoners free from the waterless pit.”

³² For an expansive understanding of this, see James B. Jordan, *Through New Eyes: Developing a Biblical View of the World* (Wolgemuth & Hyatt, 1988), 148–59.

³³ Note the location and water language found in the sequence in Matt 8:26–28, 34, “leave their region”; 9:1, “his own city.”

³⁴ “When you read the story of scripture,” Alistair Roberts notes, “one thing that you never really encounter are bridges, strangely enough” (“The Mode of Baptism”). Roberts’s generative insights instigated much of this section.

³⁵ An expansive interpretation of these connections is found in Leithart, *1 and 2 Kings*, 171–72.

at the baptism of Jesus. When Jesus submitted himself to baptism, like Jacob/Israel his identity was revealed (Matt 3:16–17) and like Joshua/Elisha, his ministry was launched.³⁶ Evocatively, Christ described the horrors of his passion as a baptism (Luke 12:50; cf. Mark 10:38). And so, Christian baptism is filled with rich biblical symbolism, connecting biblical realities of life and blessing, judgment and death, and border crossings into a single glorious symbol. Baptism pictures a Christian’s cleansing from the impurity of sin (1 Pet 3:21) and the union that believers have with each other and with Christ (1 Cor 12:23; Eph 4:4–6:1). Baptism invokes God’s dual-sided imagery of chaos and creation, symbolizing passing through the tribulations of this world and the judgment of God to receive the life-giving Spirit (Rom 8:2). Baptism reenacts several OT stories of water crossing.³⁷ This is echoed in Paul’s words in Col 1:13, “He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son.” That is, this water ordeal marks our spiritual-spatial transition from one boundary marker to another. Thus, when believers are baptized, they are making visible the reality that they are crossing from idolatry to true worship (Abraham), from deception to wrestling with God (Jacob), from slavery to freedom (Moses), and from the wilderness to the promised land (Joshua). Their identity as sons of God is revealed and they are launched into a life of ministry.

By symbolizing and enacting these spiritual realities, baptism celebrates the work of God. Baptism celebrates God’s finished work of redemption (Christ’s crucifixion, burial, and resurrection), and it celebrates God’s current work in regeneration (believer’s death to sin, burial of the old life, and . . . newness of life). Perhaps detailing these connections bolsters the Baptist claim that symbolism is not a reduction or minimizing of God’s divine activity. Indeed, the celebration of God’s finished and ongoing work is the very purpose of the Christian worship gathering. Perhaps now we can recognize more clearly how baptism is a means for God’s people to *see* the Bible.

Baptism as a Testimony

Sacramental thinkers accuse Baptists of overemphasizing individual

³⁶ For a robust discussion of Christ’s baptism, see Brandon D. Crowe, *The Last Adam: A Theology of the Obedient Life of Jesus in the Gospels* (Baker Academic, 2017), esp. 68–81. Crowe’s discussion of Christ’s passion as a baptism is found on 100–101. A connection between the two is found on 187–188 and 205–206.

³⁷ See above for Abraham, Jacob, Moses, and Joshua stories of crossing and their meanings.

awareness, decision, and expression as the decisive criterion of baptism.³⁸ But by defining baptism as a testimony, BF&M 2000 ensures that baptism glorifies the work of God, proclaims the gospel of God, and edifies the people of God.³⁹ Because it is a testimony, baptism cannot be a private, subjective affair. Instead, it is a public proclamation and a profound act of corporate worship.

Glorification, Edification, and Evangelism

First, because baptism is a testimony, it *glorifies the work of God*. By framing baptism as a testimony, God is the subject (and hero) of the story being told and enacted. Done well, the story of conversion does not highlight a personal decision or commitment, but instead serves as a testimony of God's decisive action to save sinners. Baptism is more than the linguistic or verbal testimony of the baptized. Indeed, the entire ceremony bears testimony to the work of God. It is an acting out and personalizing of Christ's death, burial, and resurrection.⁴⁰ And the baptismal formula names the Triune God as the proper subject of the drama: "I baptize you in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit."⁴¹ God truly is the active

³⁸ For sacramental critiques of Baptist overemphasis on individual awareness, decision, and expression in baptism, see (baptism as individualistic) Casey Ross, "Why I Am Not a Baptist," *Catholic World Report*, July 28, 2020, <https://www.catholicworldreport.com/2020/07/28/why-i-am-not-a-baptist/>; (baptism as choice) United Methodist Church, "By Water and the Spirit: A United Methodist Understanding of Baptism," <https://www.umc.org/en/content/by-water-and-the-spirit-a-united-methodist-understanding-of-baptism>; and (baptism as expressive public profession) Alexander Wilgus, "The Baptist Sacrament," *The North American Anglican*, March 27, 2024, <https://northamanglican.com/the-baptist-sacrament/>.

³⁹ See the excellent chapter from Dever, "Baptism in the Context of the Local Church," 329–52.

⁴⁰ Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans*, 2nd ed., BECNT (Baker, 2018), 305–28. "We died with Christ in baptism in that we were united with him in his once-for-all death. Because we are incorporated into Christ, his death becomes ours. At baptism (i.e., conversion) the death of Christ becomes ours because we share the benefits of his death by virtue of our incorporation into him" (p. 312).

⁴¹ R. T. France notes the stunning trinitarian formula that "more formally correspond[s] to later patristic formulations than might be expected within the NT period, let alone in the words of Jesus himself." He notes, "If Jesus had put the matter as explicitly as this, it is surprising that it took his followers so long to catch up with his formation. There is, however, no evidence that this is not an original part of the gospel of Matthew" (*The Gospel of Matthew*, NICNT [Eerdmans, 2007], 1117). France's insights notwithstanding, please note that the explicit nature of Christ's words have too seldom predicted his disciples' capacity to understand and obey.

agent of the story. Relatedly, baptismal testimony emphasizes the finished work of Christ. The candidates bear witness to what Christ has done rather than what the candidate aspires to do. The baptismal immersion depicts Christ's completed work (*τετέλεσται*), accomplished before the believer descends into the water.⁴²

Second, because baptism is a testimony, it *edifies the people of God*. The act of testimony cannot be performed by an individual without a community of witnesses. Baptism edifies God's people when a congregation actively participates as faith-filled witnesses whom the candidate addresses.⁴³ The believers in a church do not simply see someone get wet; they see the gospel reenacted in a powerful and evocative way.⁴⁴ As such, they remember their own baptism and they rejoice to see the ongoing saving work of God among them. Mark Dever writes,

Such times of celebrating baptism become highlights in a congregation's life, so that common memories are treasured. Tales of a quiet and consistent, or a dramatic and monumental, change in an individual excite interest and encourage faith. The children of the church are instructed, the young believers encouraged, the old believers provided evidence that God is calling to himself those who will continue on after them.⁴⁵

As a testimony in corporate worship, the entire church is actively involved in the baptism of each believer. This communal and ecclesiastical context for the testimony of baptism also creates accountability. Because the candidate has publicly pledged their allegiance to Christ before the church, he or she invites the church's encouragement and reminder of these commitments.⁴⁶ A baptism creates an obligation beyond the moment. The baptismal candidate welcomes the church to share in the burden of correction and celebration. Similarly, the church accepts responsibility to encourage and correct the believer, cheering them on and caring about the outcome of their faith.

⁴² See the discussion in Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 2nd ed. NICNT (Eerdmans, 2018), 384–415. See also David G. Peterson, *Engaging with God: A Biblical Theology of Worship* (InterVarsity Press, 1992), 173.

⁴³ David G. Peterson, writes, "In practice, public baptism can be a means of encouraging and edifying the church" (*Encountering God Together: Biblical Patterns for Ministry and Worship* [P&R Publishing, 2014], 160).

⁴⁴ Peterson comments, "Baptism takes its significance from the preaching of the gospel and is essentially an occasion for confessing it and embracing its promises" (*Encountering God Together*, 152).

⁴⁵ Dever, "Baptism in the Context of the Local Church," 339.

⁴⁶ See Peterson on "Maintaining the hope we profess" (*Engaging with God*, 252–53).

Third, because baptism is a testimony, it *proclaims the gospel of God to unbelievers*.⁴⁷ As a candidate is baptized, the reasons why someone would be baptized are explained. Perhaps the administering pastor explains the baptism, perhaps the person getting baptized explains their rationale, but in either case the essentials of the gospel ought to be explicitly stated for all to hear and dramatically performed for all to see. Christ died for sins, was buried in the tomb, conquered death, and rose from the dead.⁴⁸ A baptismal service often is an occasion for an evangelistic opportunity. Any unbelievers who see a baptism can hear the testimony of the gospel and see a transformed life that authenticates the message. Candidates might invite any of their family or friends to attend the ceremony. People who might be hesitant to attend a church service might happily support their friend's "faith journey," but because baptism is a Christian testimony, a personal milestone becomes a public gospel presentation.

Attesting to the Resurrection

In baptism, the testimony looks both into the past and into the future. It depicts Christ's past resurrection and points to the believer's future resurrection. The Baptist Faith and Message 2000 says that baptism "testifies to his faith in the final resurrection of the dead." It thus testifies to belief in God's future bodily raising of all believers upon the return of Christ. This resurrection testimony glorifies God by declaring his victory over death and by magnifying his power to finish what he has started.⁴⁹ Baptism's resurrection testimony edifies God's people, sustaining hope

⁴⁷ For a recitation of this truth from a more sacramental perspective, see Robert E. Webber, "Liturgical Evangelism," *Covenant Quarterly* 64.1 (2006): 144–53.

⁴⁸ Peterson notes, "There is a new kind of service to God made possible through the preaching of the gospel. This is so because Jesus' death provides the ultimate sacrifice of atonement, fulfilling and replacing the Old Testament sacrificial system. Evangelism can be viewed as the task of challenging people to yield themselves to God, calling upon them to respond in grateful obedience to all his mercies in Christ" (*Engaging with God*, 187). This challenge to respond in yielded obedience to the mercies of Christ is well pictured by baptism.

⁴⁹ In a discussion of Rom 12, Peterson highlights how the resurrection informs worship as living sacrifices: "As those who have been brought from death to life by means of Jesus' death and resurrection (cf. Rom. 6:4–11), we belong to God as a 'living sacrifice' (*thysian zōsan*, cf. 6:12–14). As those called to be saints (cf. 1:7, *kletois hagiois*), we are to live out that consecrated relationship in terms of practical holiness (*hagian*, 12:1) and so prove to be acceptable or pleasing to God (*euarestonto theo*).... We are sanctified or consecrated to God because Jesus Christ died and rose for us, and because the Spirit enables us to believe the gospel and yield ourselves to God (cf. 1 Cor. 1:30; 2 Thes. 2:13; 1 Pet. 1:2)" (*Engaging with God*, 177).

through suffering and loss because every baptism declares that death has no final claim. Present suffering will yield to future glory.⁵⁰ Baptism's resurrection testimony proclaims God's gospel to unbelievers by confronting them with the ultimate realities of death, judgment, and eternity. Unbelievers watching a baptism see Christians stake their lives on resurrection, and this declaration calls for a response from both believers and unbelievers. By describing a baptism as a testimony, Baptists clarify what baptism accomplishes without making baptism salvific. As a testimony, baptism preserves the objectivity of God's work (God deserves all the glory) and the necessity of public confession (his people must speak of what he has done).

Relatedly, testimony serves as a fitting conclusion to the Great Commission's fulfillment. Jesus commanded Christians to make disciples, baptize them, and teach them.⁵¹ Because baptism is a testimony, it serves as a fitting bridge between conversion and ongoing discipleship. New believers may not be fluent in theological nuance, but through the waters of baptism they can speak of what God has done for them.

Baptism as Prerequisite

The NT describes a clear sequence: people hear the gospel, believe, receive baptism, then join the fellowship of believers (the Pentecostal believers in Acts 2:41–42; the Samaritans in Acts 8:12; the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8:35–38; Saul in Acts 9:17–19; Cornelius in Acts 10:44–48; Lydia in Acts 16:14–15; the jailer in Acts 16:30–34; Crispus in Acts 18:8; cf. Rom 6:3–4; Gal 3:26–28). The NT church connected conversion with

⁵⁰ My church (Sojourn East) meets in a converted gymnasium, and so our baptismal is a portable single-person-sized, aluminum trough that we place at the front of our church and fill with water. After some Sunday morning baptisms, a recently widowed father of two small children spoke to an elder. The widower remarked that the shape, size, and placement of our church baptismal had reminded him of the casket (!) that held his deceased wife during her funeral service at the church that year. He commented that the baptisms that morning had reminded him that he would see his wife again at the resurrection.

⁵¹ For a careful discussion of the relationship between making disciples, teaching, and baptizing, see D. A. Carson, "Matthew," in *Matthew–Mark*, EBC 9, red. ed., ed. Tremper Longman III and David E. Garland (Zondervan, 2010), 667–69.

baptism and church membership, forming a continuous action of initiation and discipleship.⁵² From their earliest formulations, Baptist confessions have consistently taught that baptism precedes participation in the Lord's Supper.⁵³

Prerequisite for Church Membership

When churches rightfully insist that baptism serve as a prerequisite to church membership, they clarify the relationship between the visible and invisible church. Baptists recognize twin truths: first, only the Lord knows who truly belongs to him (2 Tim 2:19; cf. Num 16:5); and, second, Baptists recognize the need that local churches have in identifying their members through viable professions of faith. Baptism is the commanded sign that distinguishes members from uncommitted spectators. Anyone who attends the church may join in the congregational singing and hear the preached Word of God, but only baptized believers may join the church as a member, serve the church as an officer, and receive the Lord's Supper. Biblical congregationalism requires a regenerate church membership, where every member has a credible profession of faith. Baptist churches need clear boundaries for membership because congregations vote on budgets, pastoral calls, church discipline, and even doctrinal affairs. Meaningful congregationalism requires clear and objective criteria for who can vote on such issues. Baptism provides a public and objective act that establishes church membership rights and responsibilities.

This prerequisite allows the church to guard its purity. By controlling the front door (baptism) and by exercising discipleship (membership), the church can practice church discipline as outlined in Matthew 18. An unbaptized person has never submitted to church authority, and the church

⁵² See Nate Akin, "Why Baptism Must Precede Membership and the Table," *Church Matters: A Journal for Pastors* 6 (June 2025) <https://www.9marks.org/article/why-baptism-must-precede-membership-and-the-table>.

⁵³ "One finds the majority of [Baptist confessions] place a particular restriction on persons eligible to participate in the Lord's Supper, specifically a restriction that relates to the issue of believer's baptism" (Jason Sampler, "Southern Baptists and Restricting the Lord's Supper: A Brief Examination and Modest Proposal," *The Journal for Baptist Theology and Ministry* 6.1 [Spring, 2009]: 60). Typical is the 1757: "Declaration of the Faith and Practice of the Church of Christ, in Carter-Lane, Southwark, under the Pastoral Care of Dr. John Gill, Read and assented to, at the Admission of Members" (Article 11); John Smyth's *Short Confession* (1610) (Article 31); the *First London Confession* (1644, and explicitly stated in a 1646 addition); the *New Hampshire Confession* (1833), Article 14. See the summary of J. L. Reynolds, "Church Polity or the Kingdom of Christ (1849)," in *Polity: Biblical Arguments on How to Conduct Church Life*, ed. Mark Dever (Center for Church Reform, 2001), 391.

therefore has no basis for removing him from a fellowship that he never entered. Thus, if a church allowed unbaptized people into membership, they would confuse a watching world about who is a believer and who is merely a cultural Christian. Baptism clarifies the church's witness as a community of committed disciples. Each church exercises its unique authority when it examines candidates for baptism, administers that baptism, and grants or withholds the privileges of membership. And that includes participation in the Lord's Supper.

Prerequisite for the Lord's Supper

Requiring baptism for participation in the Lord's Supper can be uncomfortable. Evangelicals who have benefited from parachurch ministries and broad gospel-centered coalitions might grow uncomfortable when local churches make a strong distinction between the invisible and visible church. But a local church nevertheless abdicates its responsibility when it relies merely upon individuals to self-identify as Christians to participate in the life of the church.⁵⁴ New Testament believers are recognized by the church (Matt 16:19; 18:18), rather than self-declared, and so any church neglecting to discern genuine faith ceases to guard the purity of its witness (1 Cor 5:12–13).

By requiring baptism before receiving the Lord's Supper, churches follow the biblical sequence as outlined above of conversion, communion, and discipleship. While a person is not saved by their baptism, someone who refuses to be baptized demonstrates either a misunderstanding of Christ's command or an unwillingness to obey.⁵⁵ Either of these situations should give a local church great pause before admitting a person to the Lord's Supper.

The practice of closed (or close) communion protects the Table and ensures that participants understand what is and is not happening in the ordinances.⁵⁶ This sequence protects both ordinances, as removing the prerequisite cheapens both baptism and communion. The prerequisite

⁵⁴ See Russell D. Moore, "Table Manners," *Touchstone: A Journal of Mere Christianity* 24.5 (September 1, 2011): 16–18.

⁵⁵ Individual churches are well within their rights to fence the table regarding so-called "infant baptism" in their own way. This article commends the logical consistency and discipling advantages of requiring credobaptism to participate in the Lord's Supper at a local Baptist church.

⁵⁶ Closed communion restricts participation in the Lord's Supper to the members in good standing of the particular local church. For a discussion of the various points of view with advocacy for close communion, see Dallas Wayne Vandiver, "An Argument for Close Communion in Baptist Life" (PhD diss., The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2020), esp. 297–334.

preserves the distinct meaning of each ordinance by properly relating them to each other. How? The one-time immersion of baptism symbolizes a Christian's new birth while the regular meal of Lord's Supper symbolizes a Christian's ongoing dependence upon Christ. Thus, insisting on baptism as a prerequisite announces that what a corpse needs is not a meal, but a resurrection. Baptists reject both the doctrine of baptismal regeneration and the concept of cheap grace. Salvation produces obedience, and so requiring baptism (the act of obedience) addresses this tension. The person who refuses Christ's command to be baptized may indeed not possess saving faith.

Conclusion: Commending Baptism as Worship

Baptism is more than a watery rehearsal of God's past grace; each baptism is an example of God's ongoing grace to his church. Baptism truly is an act of worship. Having undergone this survey of the nature and function of baptism, consider how a robust and active practice of baptism helps to address many of the concerns and desires that the various worship tribes advocate for.

Perhaps your church's context is among the theologically light versions of Christianity. People may engage their faith lightly and show little interest in a commitment to the Lord Jesus Christ, and you have become convinced that your church would benefit from greater commitment to the Savior and his cause. You may, then, desire your community to have a greater understanding of biblical theology. Perhaps you would like to ensure your worship services are theologically robust, especially as it pertains to soteriology.

Theologically starved churches should practice baptism. As this essay demonstrates, baptism is a liturgical practice that communicates a robust theology for the Christian and for the church. Simply including baptism in worship bolsters the theological content of any given gathering. Furthermore, the waters of baptism represent an incredible opportunity for Christian obedience and wholistic commitment. A robust and engaged practice of baptism in your worship service is just what you need.

Perhaps your church context is among artistically minded, aesthetically sophisticated young urban professionals. Through your general survey of culture and your personal conversations with people in your context, you have become convinced that the believers in your church and the unbelievers in your community would benefit from more artistic expression. You may, then, live in a community with a robust theatre and drama community and you feel that dramatic presentations of the gospel would resonate with your people.

Artistically minded churches should practice baptism. The waters of

baptism represent an incredible and ancient symbolic representation of the finished work of Christ. A robust and engaged practice of baptism in your worship service is just what you need.

Perhaps your church context is among more disenchanting, skeptical, and anti-authoritarian people. Your sense is that your church would benefit from less lecturing and you desire the voice of the average church member to carry more weight. You may, then, like to highlight the voices of women and the marginalized in your church.

Participatory oriented churches should practice baptism. If your church is like mine, females will constitute about half of the people who will be baptized. And in even the most complementarian church context, genuine believers are eager to hear women speak of the grace of God in their lives from the baptismal waters. The waters of baptism represent an incomparable opportunity for members of the church to edify each other by testifying to the work of God. A robust and engaged practice of baptism in your worship service is just what you need.

And perhaps you are convinced of the value and beauty of baptism, and you wish there were more people in your church coming to genuine faith in Christ and entering the waters of baptism as an act of obedience, a symbol of spiritual realities, a testimony of God's grace, and as a prerequisite to participating in the full life of your church. I join that wish. Every time we offer baptism, may the Lord open the eyes of our hearts to see all of the polished facets that are in this glorious act. Indeed, may the Lord help us to recover this discarded jewel and truly to "see the Bible." And may the Lord of the harvest send us, his workers, into his fields to make his cause known, to baptize his disciples, and to make his praise glorious.