

“A Serpentine Appendix”

Mark 16:9-20 ¹

We’ve now been making our way through the Gospel of Mark for two and a half years, and we’re getting close to the end. Mark’s Passion narratives will be the focus of our study during Holy Week, and there will be two or three other messages from Mark outside Holy Week; but we’ve nearly completed our journey. Today’s text comes from the concluding verses of Mark . . . well, just because.

A little later in the year, we’ll begin another extended series of sermons that will take us through the Bible from Genesis to Revelation. I’m planning to preach through the Bible with one or two sermons from each book, and that, too, will take a long time. For today, though, please open your Bible to the very end of Mark.

Our Scripture this morning is one of the most mysterious texts in the New Testament. Your Bible probably has a line or some other marker after Mark 16:8, accompanied by a statement something like “The best and earliest manuscripts conclude with 16:8.” Our text this morning comes after that line and that statement.

While the earliest and most reliable manuscripts of Mark end with 16:8, we do have manuscripts that end in several other ways:

1. The “standard ending” concludes with 16:8.
2. Some manuscripts end with what is known as “the shorter ending” of Mark. You may have this as a footnote in your Bible. The shorter ending goes like this:

And all that had been commanded to them they quickly reported to those around Peter. After these things, Jesus himself sent out through them from east to west, the holy and imperishable proclamation of eternal salvation. Amen.

Can you sense how awkward that is? This shorter ending sometimes appears in the manuscripts after v. 8 with nothing after it. Sometimes it appears after v. 8, with verses 9-20 following; and sometimes it appears after v. 20. The shorter ending has no compelling claim to authenticity, so it seldom appears outside a footnote.

3. A great many manuscripts include the longer ending of verses 9-20 without the shorter ending at all.
4. A few manuscripts include several sentences between verses 14-15 that scholars regard as definitely not from Mark. These sentences are not usually included in English Bibles, even in a footnote.²

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on January 13, 2019. Parallel and related passages will be noted in other footnotes.

Sources for this sermon include: Barclay, William, “The Gospel of Mark,” *The Daily Study Bible* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1954); Culpeper, Alan, “Mark,” *The Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2007); Garland, David E. “Mark,” *The NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996); Lane, William, “The Gospel According to Mark,” *The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974); Turlington, Henry, “Mark,” *The Broadman Bible Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman, 1969); Wessell, Walter, “Mark,” *The Expositor's Bible Commentary, Volume 8: Matthew, Mark, Luke*. Digital Version; Williamson, Lamar, Jr., “Mark,” *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Preaching and Teaching*, digital version.

² A few early manuscripts add: *And they excused themselves, saying, “This age of lawlessness and unbelief is under Satan, who does not permit God’s truth and power to conquer the evil [unclean] spirits. Therefore, reveal your justice now.” This is what they said to Christ. And Christ replied to them,*

After considering all the options, only two appear seriously viable: that the Gospel of Mark ends at 16:8, or that it ends at 16:20, with the “shorter ending” not included at all. While the “longer ending” is not in the earliest and best manuscripts, it is old. This longer ending is present in the great majority of the manuscripts we have, and it was already beginning to be circulated among the churches by the middle of the second century.

The reason these various endings have been appended to Mark’s Gospel is fairly obvious. If the Gospel ends with 16:8, then it ends with fear and silence. There is no joyful reunion with a resurrected Savior. There is no commission to spread the Good News. Stopping with 16:8 is an unhappy and unworthy way to end such a Grand Story as has been told up to that point.

At the same time, there are good reasons for thinking that Mark did not write verses 9-20. There are marked differences in style, grammar, and vocabulary that make it difficult to believe that the same author who composed the rest of Mark wrote these verses at the end.

As just one example, Mary Magdalene, who has already been mentioned three times in the body of the Gospel,³ is introduced in 16:9 as though she is unknown to the reader. Verse 9 also mentions that Jesus had “driven seven demons” out of Mary, which the body of the gospel had not reported.

The bizarre promise of immunity from snakes and poisonous drinks that appears in this longer ending is completely out of character with Jesus as He has been revealed in the Gospel of Mark, in the other Gospels, and in the New Testament as a whole. Jesus never exempted Himself or His followers from the natural laws that govern this life, nor did He ever suggest that such exemptions would be given to future believers.

Such miracles have actually taken place, but very rarely. There is no corroborating promise anywhere else that such immunity has been promised to us.

It’s also noteworthy that the longer ending doesn’t resolve the tensions set up in verses 1-8. Jesus doesn’t appear to Peter, and Peter isn’t reinstated after his denials. The angels promised that the disciples would see Jesus in Galilee, but those encounters don’t get recorded in this longer ending.

The longer ending does, however, bring the disciples back into the story. It does record Jesus’ commission to take the Good News to all nations. And it does connect all this with the ongoing history of the Church. All this suggests that the longer ending might have been a very appropriate call to faith and to mission for the second-century Church, and that’s where it probably originated.

Even so, the question remains whether Mark intended to end his Gospel with 16:8. Maybe he really did intend for the shock value we experience to be his conclusion. How *could* anyone who had seen the empty tomb and heard the angel’s words keep such news to themselves? Perhaps such an ending would encourage Mark’s readers to do otherwise.

But if that had been Mark’s intention, surely someone would have known this. Why did the early church feel such a strong need to tidy things up with the various endings that have come down to us? It just doesn’t seem right for a document that is all about Good News to end with fear and silence.

“The period of years of Satan’s power has been fulfilled, but other dreadful things will happen soon. And I was handed over to death for those who have sinned, so that they may return to the truth and sin no more, and so they may inherit the spiritual, incorruptible, and righteous glory in heaven.”

³ Mark 15:40, 47, 16:1.

Consequently, most scholars have concluded that Mark was either unable to finish the Gospel or that the last page was lost, and lost pretty soon after it was written. Maybe “the dog *did* eat Mark’s homework.” In that case, the endings that have come down to us represent attempts to supply what was so obviously lacking.

Absent some stupendous archaeological discovery, we’ll probably never know the answer to these musings. But we do need to look briefly at what verses 9-20 tell us, and to that we now turn. Verses 9-20 can be divided into four thematic units that have parallels in other Gospels and in the rest of the New Testament.

Unit 1: Jesus appears to Mary Magdalene (vv. 9-11)

Unit 2: Jesus appears on the Emmaus Road (vv. 12-13)

Unit 3: Jesus appears in the Upper Room (vv. 14-16)

Unit 4: Jesus Ascends and the Church Expands (vv. 17-20)

Let’s look at each for just a moment.

Unit 1: Jesus appears to Mary Magdalene (vv. 9-11)

⁹ *When Jesus rose early on the first day of the week, he appeared first to Mary Magdalene, out of whom he had driven seven demons.* ¹⁰ *She went and told those who had been with him and who were mourning and weeping.* ¹¹ *When they heard that Jesus was alive and that she had seen him, they did not believe it.*

Although, as we’ve noted, the information about the “seven demons” is unique to Mark’s appendix, the general thrust of this account appears in each of the other Gospels,⁴ so this is essentially consistent with other texts.

Unit 2: Jesus appears on the Emmaus Road (vv. 12-13)

¹² *Afterward Jesus appeared in a different form to two of them while they were walking in the country.* ¹³ *These returned and reported it to the rest; but they did not believe them either.*

This brief mention of Jesus’ appearance on the road to Emmaus is recorded much more expansively in Luke 24:13-35, and the accounts are generally in agreement; but the note about the two men not being believed is unique to this appendix. One commentator wondered whether the Apostles were told of the Resurrection by others before they themselves saw the risen Christ so that they would know how it was going to feel for those to whom they themselves would tell the Good News to have to believe based on the testimony of others.

Unit 3: Jesus appears in the Upper Room (vv. 14-16)

¹⁴ *Later Jesus appeared to the Eleven as they were eating; he rebuked them for their lack of faith and their stubborn refusal to believe those who had seen him after he had risen.*

¹⁵ *He said to them, “Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation.*

¹⁶ *Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned.*

Jesus appeared to His disciples many times during the forty days between His Resurrection and His Ascension, and most of those appearances weren’t recorded in any of the Gospels. While the rebuke recorded here doesn’t appear in parallel accounts of Jesus’

⁴ Matthew 28:1-10; Luke 24:1-11; John 20:11-18

resurrection appearances, we do know that Jesus had reproached the Twelve for their lack of faith in the past (Mark 4:40, 9:19).⁵

This longer ending of Mark includes a shorter version of Jesus' Great Commission and a confusing statement about baptism. There isn't time here to unwind that confusion, but I will attach other sermons with the online version of this one that will attempt such unwinding.⁶

Whereas Jesus had previously given His disciples authority over spirits and had shared with them His power to heal, this longer ending expands such authority to all who follow Jesus, as did in fact take place at Pentecost.⁷ But this longer ending adds two "superpowers" that do not appear elsewhere and are almost certainly spurious. These two superpowers have to do with snakes and with poison.

Unit 4: Jesus Ascends and the Church Expands (vv. 17-20)

17 And these signs will accompany those who believe: In my name they will drive out demons; they will speak in new tongues; 18 they will pick up snakes with their hands; and when they drink deadly poison, it will not hurt them at all; they will place their hands on sick people, and they will get well. *19 After the Lord Jesus had spoken to them, he was taken up into heaven and he sat at the right hand of God. 20 Then the disciples went out and preached everywhere, and the Lord worked with them and confirmed his word by the signs that accompanied it.*

Jesus talked about "trampling on" snakes in Luke 10:19, but that appears to be metaphorical. Jesus never talked about picking snakes up or of surviving poison, whether from snakes or otherwise. Paul did survive a snakebite in Acts 28:3-6, but there is no general biblical promise about such survival or about drinking poison without harm.

Taken literally, these statements about snakes and poison sometimes lead to suffering and death, and they frequently bring disrepute upon the Gospel. Taking these words *literally* is not a good idea, but if we take them *seriously*, we can affirm with whoever wrote them that those who give themselves to following Jesus with whole-hearted obedience will find their faith confirmed in powerful and tangible ways.

The last paragraph of the longer ending gives a brief statement about Jesus' Ascension,⁸ and it affirms that, in the mystery of the Trinity, Jesus is, even now, at this moment, seated at the right hand of the Father.⁹ And this last paragraph ends with a one-sentence summary of the book of Acts as a whole, leaving the impression that it was written after this missionary project had been underway for some time.

The real wonder in this longer ending—as indeed, in the Gospels themselves—is that our Lord entrusts the Good News to followers who are so slow to understand, so self-centered, so fractious and afraid. Jesus did not—and does not—wait for them, or for us to "get our own house in order" before we are sent into the world to "tell the Good News." **It was then, and it continues to be today, that it is in our efforts to follow and to obey Jesus that our faith takes root and begins to grow.**

⁵ The appendix uses words for this failure of faith that are not used in other places: *apistia* and *sklerokardia*.

⁶ Matthew 28:16-20; see the attached sermons, [Water] *Baptism: Putting on the Armor of Light; and Baptized!* [Holy Spirit]

⁷ See also John 3:18, 36; Acts 1:3, 2:4, 38, 8:7, 9:17, 10:46-47, 16:18, 31, 33, 19:6, 28:8.

⁸ Reported more fully in Acts 1:2-11; see also Luke 24:50-53.

⁹ Psalm 110:1; Romans 8:34; Colossians 3:1; Hebrews 1:3

The added endings of Mark testify to the Church's insistence that the Good News does not, *cannot* end with fear and silence. Apart from a stunning manuscript discovery, we will never be sure how Mark concluded his Gospel. But the message of the book as a whole is plain enough:

Jesus of Nazareth was the eternal God in human flesh. After He had taught, preached, and healed with great power, He **died** for our sins, just as the Scriptures said. He was **buried**, and he was **raised** from the dead on the third day, just as the Scriptures said. He was **seen** by Peter and then by the Twelve. After that, he was seen by more than 500 of his followers at one time (1 Corinthians 15:3-7).

That is to say, *God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself, no longer counting people's sins against them. And he gave us this wonderful message of reconciliation* (2 Corinthians 5:19).

My friends, those of us who have been born again through faith in Jesus testify that He is not only *alive*, but that He is *here, now*. And Albert Schweitzer was right when he said of Jesus that:

He comes to us as One unknown, as of old by the lake-side He came to those who knew Him not. He speaks to us the same word: "Follow me!" and He sets us to the tasks which He has to fulfill for our time. He commands. And to those who obey Him, whether they be wise or simple, He reveals Himself in the toils, the conflicts, the sufferings through which we shall pass in His fellowship, and as we follow Him, we learn in our own experience Who He is.⁷⁵

⁷⁵Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus: A Critical Study of its Progress from Reimarus to Wrede*, 3rd. ed., trans. W. Montgomery (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1954), p. 401. I've edited Schweitzer's statement as he might have written it today.

“Baptism: Putting on the Armor of Light”

Acts 8:26-39; Romans 13:11-14 ¹

This afternoon, as we celebrate the baptisms of ____, ____, ____, and ____, I thought it might be good for us to think together once again about how we Baptists understand baptism. Although baptism is not the most important Christian doctrine, it is easily the foremost Christian ceremony, and with the exception of the Quakers and the Salvation Army, all Christian denominations baptize.

Indeed, it’s obviously from this issue that we Baptists take our name. We come from the line of the “Anabaptists,” which means “to baptize again,” and the title refers to our commitment to believer’s baptism as distinct from infant baptism. Some of our forebears literally gave their lives for this distinction.

We sometimes say that “we believe what the Bible says about baptism” . . . but what *does* it say? And why do Christians—and especially Baptists—put the emphasis on baptism that we do?

Well, for starters, Jesus Himself was baptized (Matthew 3:13-17). He told His disciples to baptize (John 4:2), and He told us to baptize (Matthew 28:19); so the authority for baptizing is very strong, resting on the command of the Risen Lord, integrated with His commission to preach the Good News to all the world, and enforced by His own example at the beginning of His public ministry.

So what did Jesus mean for us to do when He told us to “baptize”? As is the case with all words, this word—βαπτίζω (“baptidzo”)—has a meaning. For 400 years on either side of the New Testament, the word “baptize” had a definite, consistent, and universally-understood meaning that applied in all fields, not just to religious affairs. This meaning was basically “to submerge” or “to immerse,” and βαπτίζω was actually the word used to describe the sinking of a ship.

There was no question in those days about sprinkling or pouring. Greek has words for these actions, but those words are never used in the Bible to refer to baptism. Indeed, scholars of nearly all Christian groups agree that what the New Testament practices and teaches is **believer’s baptism by immersion**.

As we consider what the Bible says about baptism, the book of Acts is our primary source for what the early Church did, while the writings of Paul are our primary sources for how the early Church understood what it did. In the book of Acts, repentance, faith, baptism, and the receiving of the Holy Spirit are always found in close relation to one another. While each situation was different, and there is some variation in the order of things, the New Testament knows of no other baptism but that of a believer—a person who has placed his or her faith in Jesus of Nazareth, crucified, buried, risen, reigning, and coming again to claim His own.²

Believer’s baptism is an act that draws its meaning from the person of Jesus and from the relationship that a believer establishes with Jesus through repentance and faith. Though propositional Truth is certainly involved in New Testament faith—that is, we affirm that certain statements are, in fact, True—New Testament faith is not simply agreement that certain propositions are true. New Testament faith has to do with the establishment of a deep relationship with, of love for and obedience to the Risen Christ as Lord of all of life.

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship of Columbia, Maryland on December 6, 2015.

² Further, when the New Testament is taken as a whole, it’s clear that receiving the Holy Spirit—also called “the baptism of the Holy Spirit”—is a distinct act of God’s grace at the time of conversion, whether separate in time from water baptism or not.

The act of being baptized is a public proclamation that our sins have been covered by the Blood of **God the Son**, that by this means we have entered into a New Covenant with **God the Father**, and that this Covenant has been sealed by the arrival of the indwelling presence of **God the Spirit** in our lives. Baptism by immersion is a theological symbol of our *participation* in the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus and of our *rebirth* into a New Life in Him.

Baptism is also a public identification with and a public commitment to all other persons who acknowledge Jesus as the Son of God—those persons across the ages, past, present, and future, who constitute the spiritual, invisible Church, the Bride of Christ. And baptism has always marked the boundary between who is and who is not a member of the visible Church, the Body of Christ in the world today.

Such identification with the visible Church has, from the very beginning and even to this present moment, often meant certain persecution and an increasingly likely death. In the early church, those who were about to receive baptism often spent the preceding night in a vigil of fasting and prayer, knowing that great suffering lay ahead.

All of this is to say that **believer's baptism is a symbol of a rebirth that cuts life in two**. Unbelievers and believers of other faiths alike understand very clearly that the baptism of a follower of Jesus is the sign of a commitment that changes life completely. Before conversion, Paul wrote, we "*lived in this world without God and without hope. But now [we] belong to Christ Jesus. Though [we] once were far away from God, now [we] have been brought near to him because of the blood of Christ*" (Ephesians 2:12-13, NLT).

It is because of this symbolism that candidates for baptism are frequently dressed in white robes as ____, ____, ____, and ____ were today. There are several levels of symbolism in such dress. First of all, the robes represent grave clothes, even as the process of immersion in water symbolizes death and burial. Baptism is a public statement that, as Paul put it, "*I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me*" (Galatians 2:20).

Second, the white robes represent "putting on" or "clothing ourselves with the righteousness of Christ," as Paul put it in Romans: "*The night is nearly over; the day is almost here. So let us put aside the deeds of darkness and **put on the armor of light**. Let us behave decently, as in the daytime, not in carousing and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and debauchery, not in dissension and jealousy. Rather, **clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ**, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the flesh* (Romans 13:11-14).

Finally, the white robes represent the white garments promised by the Risen Christ to the righteous in the life to come: "*The one who is victorious will . . . be dressed in white. I will never blot out the name of that person from the book of life, but will acknowledge that name before my Father and his angels*" (Revelation 3:5).

In the beginning, believer's baptism by immersion was universal in the Church. Everyone was a first-generation believer, so infant baptism wasn't an issue at all. Occasionally, though, the situation arose that a dying person sought baptism and was baptized by pouring for reasons of health and safety. Such baptism was considered valid, but it was also considered highly irregular, and if these persons recovered from their illnesses, their irregular baptism prevented them from serving as elders in the church.³

³ As centuries passed and new structures developed, such irregular baptism also prevented its recipients from entering "holy orders."

This occasional death-bed pouring led to confusion about both the purpose of and the mode for baptism. Some persons began to believe that baptism was necessary for salvation,⁴ and as increasing numbers of Christians became confused in this way, moving away from a commitment to believer's baptism and moving toward the idea of what's called "baptismal regeneration," they understandably began to be concerned about their children. It's hardly a coincidence that infant baptism began to be practiced in the third century, soon after the idea of baptismal regeneration began to gain headway.

Now if babies and the sick need to be baptized, with immersion being dangerous in these situations, then someone has to decide which of the various modes of baptism—immersion, sprinkling, or pouring—is authorized in a given instance. Church leaders and officials began to assume this duty, and little by little the Church became the sole custodian of baptism as a "saving sacrament." Things had now moved a long way from the instructions of Jesus, and considerable confusion now surrounded both the purpose of and the procedure for the baptism Jesus commanded.

It's significant that the oldest rituals for infant baptism actually require the administrator to ask the child if it repents, believes in Christ, and renounces the ways of the world, with the sponsor or parent answering for the child. The presence of such an exchange, however artificial, demonstrates that the early church *required faith before baptism*. Much later, the great reformers, Luther, Calvin, and Zwingli, permitted infant baptism only because otherwise they would have excommunicated the whole church (!) . . . but they had real problems explaining why they kept it.

Taken together, the inevitable result of all this has been that the distinction between the Church and the world has become more and more fuzzy and indistinct over time. Through infant baptism, people were admitted to the Church without being born again. These persons had not experienced God's redemption. They did not have a new heart and mind. They did not have the presence of the indwelling Holy Spirit. And they did not understand that **membership in a church is not the same thing as being born again**.

As Baptists understand it, the New Testament teaches that *personal* repentance for *personal* sin followed by *personal* faith in the Lord Jesus Christ must precede baptism in every instance. The issue here has nothing to do with infants or adults. The issue is not a question of age in any sense, but of intelligent, freely-chosen faith, unprompted by adults who confuse baptism with salvation. For Baptists, the central issue in baptism is not infant baptism vs. adult baptism. **The central issue is FAITH baptism vs. NON-FAITH baptism.**

Confusing the issue even more, some Christian groups baptize infants but do not hold that this saves them, requiring later instruction and confirmation to complete this work. Such baptism is apparently done to secure the effect it has on the parents, but more often than not such baptism generates a false sense of security that leads to less religious instruction in the home, not to more. Baptists are much more comfortable with a process of infant or child *dedication* in which the parents are the participants, not the child, maintaining a clear distinction between such dedication by parents and the later development of repentance and faith in the child's own heart.

Having said all this, I suggest to you that there are three crucial alternatives with respect to baptism:

⁴ This conclusion was based on selective reading of Scripture (e.g., Acts 2:38) rather than on thorough-going study and interpretation of the entire New Testament.

1. Either baptism is for those who can understand and believe the Gospel for themselves, or else it isn't, and infants and other unbelievers are valid subjects for baptism.
2. Either salvation is by faith alone, and doesn't depend on baptism at all, or else salvation depends in some way on baptism and is incomplete without it.
3. Either baptism finds its significance in the mind and heart of the one receiving it, or else it takes its meaning from the understanding and qualifications of the *administrator*, and what the *recipient* believes and understands is irrelevant.⁵

With respect to the third alternative, if the sufficiency of our baptism depended on the faithful character of the administrator more than on our own personal faith in Jesus, as it does in some faith groups, we'd need to keep that person under surveillance as long as he or she lived in order to be sure that we ourselves ended life with a "baptism that worked." You and I can be very glad that the validity of our baptism depends, not on the administrator, but on the faith of the baptized and on the faithful mercies of God!

Even so, we Baptists sometimes find ourselves contending inadvertently for the qualifications of the administrator when we insist on "rebaptizing" persons who come to us from other Christian denominations, and who have already been baptized as believers. The question then is whether we're contending for "Baptist Baptism" or for *biblical* baptism.⁶

Much of life hangs on being able to ask the right questions, and as I understand the matter, the right question here is never one of "**rebaptism**," but is rather a question about the nature of biblical baptism. Baptists generally understand New Testament baptism to have three components:

1. The candidate is baptized by immersion, preserving the New Testament practice as well as the visual and physical symbolism of the act.
2. The candidate is so baptized after her or his personal, intelligent, and uncoerced confession of faith in Christ, and not before.
3. The candidate understands that baptism has no saving effect—we are saved by grace alone (Ephesians 2:8-9)—and baptism is therefore a symbol, an act of obedience, not a sacrament, or an act of salvation.

If these three requirements have been met, no matter when or where or by whom, then a person has experienced New Testament baptism, and that baptism should be accepted as such.

There is one more thing that needs to be clearly stated here: our Christian faith does not rise or fall on the question of baptism by immersion. **Our Christian faith is anchored, not in water, but in the saving blood of Jesus**, and while we Baptists may keep closer company with those who share our understanding of baptism, any persons who lift up the Name of Jesus, our crucified and risen Savior, the Lord of the Universe and our soon-coming King— *any such persons*—are our brothers and sisters in Christ, and we gladly make common cause with them for the Kingdom of God. Happily, our membership documents here at CBF reflect these truths.

⁵ We might also add a fourth alternative: "Either the New Testament teaches baptism by immersion, preserving the symbolism of death, burial, and resurrection, or else it doesn't, and any amount of water, applied in any fashion, will get the job done." At the same time, the first identifiable "Baptist" congregation that practiced believer's baptism was an English congregation in Amsterdam led by John Smyth. Smyth baptized himself by pouring in 1609, and then similarly baptized the other confessing Christians in the group. It was not until 1641 that a recovery of baptism by immersion took place.

⁶ This practice took its rise from J.R. Graves and the "Landmark Controversy" that began in 1854.

In that ecumenical spirit, when we conclude this service in a little while, I will invite you to join me in reading *The Apostles' Creed*. One of the very earliest Christian confessions of faith, *The Apostles' Creed* is still in weekly use in many Christian congregations around the world, and as we read it together, we will join our hearts with brothers and sisters around the world who are members of The Body of Christ across the ages, the Church Universal (here, "catholic" means "universal").

The Apostles' Creed

I believe in God, the Father almighty, Maker of heaven and earth.

I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried; he descended to the dead. On the third day he rose again; he ascended into heaven, where he sits at the right hand of the Father, and he will come to judge the living and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting.

Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria.



“Baptized!”

Matthew 3:13-17; Acts 2:36-41 ¹

¹³ Then Jesus went from Galilee to the Jordan River to be baptized by John. ¹⁴ But John tried to talk him out of it. “I am the one who needs to be baptized by you,” he said, “so why are you coming to me?”

¹⁵ But Jesus said, “It should be done, for we must carry out all that God requires.” So John agreed to baptize him.

¹⁶ After his baptism, as Jesus came up out of the water, the heavens were opened and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and settling on him. ¹⁷ And a voice from heaven said, “This is my dearly loved Son, who brings me great joy” (Matthew 3:13-17).

Now fast forward some three years as Peter shouts to the crowds at the Festival of Pentecost, ³⁶ “So let everyone in Israel know for certain that God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, to be both Lord and Messiah!”

³⁷ Peter’s words pierced their hearts, and they said to him and to the other apostles, “Brothers, what should we do?”

³⁸ Peter replied, “Each of you must repent of your sins, turn to God, and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ to show that you have received forgiveness for your sins. Then you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.” ³⁹ This promise is to you, and to your children, and even to the Gentiles—all who have been called by the Lord our God.” ⁴⁰ Then Peter continued preaching for a long time, strongly urging all his listeners, “Save yourselves from this crooked generation!”

⁴¹ Those who believed what Peter said were baptized and added to the church that day—about 3,000 in all (Acts 2:36-41).

These two scenes form the “bookends” of Jesus’ earthly ministry. In the first scene, God the Father speaks out of heaven at Jesus’ baptism and the God the Spirit descends in the form of a dove to rest on the shoulder of God the Son. This event, recorded in each of the four Gospels, is the source of our mental image of the Holy Spirit taking the form of a dove (Matthew 3:16; Mark 1:10; Luke 3:22; John 1:32), and I believe that this is also the first place in the Bible where all three Persons of the Trinity appear together in the text.

The second scene took place fifty days after Jesus’ resurrection, at the Jewish Festival of Pentecost. The Bible tells us that *during the forty days after his crucifixion, [Jesus] appeared to the apostles from time to time and proved to them in many ways that he was actually alive. On these occasions he talked to them about the Kingdom of God.*

In one of these meetings as he was eating a meal with them, he told them, “Do not leave Jerusalem until the Father sends you what he promised. Remember, I have told you about this before. John baptized with water, but in just a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit” (Acts 1:3-5; notice the Trinity once more).

So it was that *on the day of Pentecost, seven weeks after Jesus’ resurrection, the believers were meeting together in one place. Suddenly, there was a sound from heaven like the roaring of a mighty windstorm in the skies above them, and it filled the house where they were meeting. Then, what looked like flames or tongues of fire appeared and settled on each of them. And everyone present was filled with the Holy Spirit and began speaking in other languages, as the Holy Spirit gave them this ability.*

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the First Baptist Church of Bristol, Virginia on Pentecost Sunday, 2009 (May 31).

Godly Jews from many nations were living in Jerusalem at that time. When they heard this sound, they came running to see what it was all about, and they were bewildered to hear their own languages being spoken by the believers (Acts 2:1-6). This second scene, the second “bookend,” records the conclusion of the sermon Peter preached that morning, and how the crowd responded to it.

As we’ve noted, this is Pentecost Sunday, and we could go in many directions with these texts, but this morning I want to focus on three areas of confusion that have grown out of the Pentecost experience: (1) “the baptism of the Holy Spirit”; (2) the spiritual gift of “speaking in tongues”; and finally (3), “being filled with the Spirit.” We’ll not be able to treat any of these exhaustively, but perhaps we can gain a little more understanding for the journey.

The key issue in seeking such understanding is to use a bifocal approach as we examine each text. On the one hand, we’ll do our best to understand what the particular passage seems to mean in its specific context, and on the other, we’ll enlarge that context to include the New Testament as a whole. It’s especially important to discern whether a particular text is congruent with the primary teachings of the New Testament or whether it represents some sort of exception, and if so, of what sort.

The matter of “**the baptism of the Holy Spirit**” is a prime example of the need for such discernment. Peter’s statement in Acts 2:38, for example, could be understood to mean that water baptism is prerequisite to receiving “the gift of the Holy Spirit”: *“Each of you must repent of your sins, turn to God, and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ to show that you have received forgiveness for your sins. Then you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.”*

Another passage that has led to persistent misunderstanding is found in Acts 8:14-17: ¹⁴ *When the apostles in Jerusalem heard that the people of Samaria had accepted God’s message, they sent Peter and John there.* ¹⁵ *As soon as they arrived, they prayed for these new believers to receive the Holy Spirit.* ¹⁶ *The Holy Spirit had not yet come upon any of them, for they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus.* ¹⁷ *Then Peter and John laid their hands upon these believers, and they received the Holy Spirit.*

If we look at these two passages alone, apart from an examination of the whole New Testament, we might conclude that water baptism is a necessary prerequisite to the baptism of the Holy Spirit, that the “laying on” of apostolic hands is necessary to receive the Holy Spirit, and therefore, that “*confessing with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believing in your heart that God raised him from the dead*” is insufficient in itself to receive God’s gift of the Spirit’s presence in our lives (Romans 10:9). Do you begin to sense the problems here? Fortunately, clarity is not terribly difficult to discover. These are both “exceptions that prove the rule.”

With respect to water baptism and “Spirit baptism,” the overall witness of the New Testament is clearly that those who “*confess with their mouths that Jesus is Lord and believe in their hearts that God raised him from the dead*” receive the Gift or the Baptism of the Holy Spirit in that same moment, whether water baptism is present or not. As Paul put it:

- “*And when you believed in Christ, he identified you as his own by giving you the Holy Spirit, whom he promised long ago*” (Ephesians 1:13).
- “*Those who do not have the Spirit of Christ living in them are not Christians at all*” (Romans 8:9).

With respect to the “laying on of hands,” there’s no suggestion anywhere else that the laying on of apostolic hands was necessary before converts received the Spirit. For example, nothing is said about this being done to the Pentecostal believers in Acts 2, to the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8, to the household of Cornelius in Acts 10, or to the Philippian jailer’s household in Acts 16.

The situation with Cornelius is especially helpful. Cornelius was a Roman army officer who “*was a devout man and who feared the God of Israel*” (Acts 10:22). He was a Gentile, a non-Jew, and this put him outside the boundary in which the Apostles intended to preach the Gospel. In order to breach this boundary, God sent visions both to Cornelius and to Peter, and this resulted in Peter’s being reluctantly willing to visit Cornelius in Caesarea and to tell him the Good News about Jesus.

The Bible says that *even as Peter was saying these things, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who had heard the message. The Jewish believers who came with Peter were amazed that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out on the Gentiles, too. And there could be no doubt about it, for they heard them speaking in tongues and praising God.*

Then Peter asked, “Can anyone object to their being baptized, now that they have received the Holy Spirit just as we did?” So he gave orders for them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ (Acts 10:44-47).

These three “exception incidents” in Jerusalem, Samaria, and Caesarea each had a specific purpose as God began to help the Apostles and the other disciples understand what Jesus meant when He told them to “*tell people about me everywhere—in Jerusalem, throughout Judea, in Samaria, and to the ends of the earth*” (Acts 1:8).

Those first believers were just as human as we are, and they had a hard time with the idea that God was really serious about creating a Kingdom of “*every tribe, language, people, and nation*” (Revelation 5:9). As we, too, admit in our more honest moments, they really wanted God to limit the Kingdom to people of their own sort.

The three exceptions in Jerusalem, Samaria, and Caesarea were divinely designed to emphasize the fact that God really was serious about the fact that in Christ “*there is no longer Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male or female*” (Galatians 3:28), and that “*Anyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved*” (Romans 10:13).

The matter of water baptism in these passages is also the source of a great deal of confusion, and I’ll have to deal with that on another day. Perhaps this morning it’s sufficient to note that while water baptism preceded the gift of the Spirit in Jerusalem and in Samaria, such baptism followed the gift of the Spirit in Caesarea. Water baptism was neither the issue nor the point in these accounts.

The thrust of these three exceptions is to demonstrate beyond any possible doubt that God’s salvation applies first to the Jews, then to the hated half-blood Samaritans, and finally even to the despised Gentiles, such as we are. In recognition of their exceptional nature, these three experiences are often referred to as “the *Jewish* Pentecost,” “the *Samaritan* Pentecost,” and “the *Gentile* Pentecost.”

What, then, shall we make of the popular teaching these days that multitudes of Christians have never received the “Baptism of the Holy Spirit,” and that all such “unblessed” believers should seek this gift until they experience it? The first thing to note is that such teaching does not come from the New Testament. This error comes from the mistaken attempt to equate the *baptism* of the Spirit with the *spiritual gift* of “speaking in tongues,” or “unknown languages” (1 Corinthians 12:27-31).

There are at least two types of “**speaking in tongues**” in the New Testament. We see the first of these in the Jewish Pentecost, where the Apostles and other disciples were empowered to speak in known languages that they themselves had never learned so that the international Jews who had come to observe the Passover might hear the Gospel in their own languages. The second is found in the Gentile Pentecost, where “speaking in tongues” seems to refer to ecstatic speech that is not a known human language. The International Mission Board refers to such ecstatic speech as “private prayer language,” and such speech is what people usually mean when they refer to “speaking in tongues.”

While such ecstatic speech remains to this day as one of the thirty or so spiritual gifts named in the New Testament, we do well to note that ecstatic speech was the source of a great deal of confusion and conflict in the early church (and remains so today), and that what we call “the love chapter” of 1 Corinthians was written specifically about such conflict (1 Corinthians 12-14). It’s also important to note that neither of these kinds of speech is reported at the Samaritan Pentecost, which shows that neither should be considered normative or required.

To summarize all this, when taken as a whole, the New Testament teaches that the “baptism of the Spirit” is an event simultaneous with faith in Christ, that is never repeated, and that need not be sought as some “second blessing.” Further, the New Testament gives no instruction about being *baptized* with the Spirit, since that baptism takes place once for all at initial faith. We are baptized with or receive the gift of the Holy Spirit at the moment of our first faith in Jesus, becoming full citizens of God’s Kingdom with “all the rights and privileges appertaining thereunto.” This baptism is a once-for-all experience, giving us access to all the glories of God’s inbreaking Kingdom.

But the New Testament does instruct believers to **be filled with the Spirit**, which is a different matter entirely (Ephesians 5:18). Being filled with the Spirit has to do with placing our lives at the Spirit’s disposal and under the Spirit’s control. Such filling is a moment-by-moment experience, repeated, renewed, and deepened throughout every moment of our lives, because the Spirit’s control of our lives is no more automatic because we’ve been born again than salvation is automatic because we’ve been born physically. God’s Spirit controls or “fills” our lives by invitation only, and this filling has to do not with salvation, but with power.

When Paul wrote, “*Don’t be drunk with wine, because that will ruin your life. Instead, let the Holy Spirit fill and control you*” (Ephesians 5:18), his point was that the person who is filled with the Spirit will be controlled by the Spirit even as some persons are filled with and controlled by the desire for alcohol or other drugs. And the context of this verse makes it clear that Paul regarded this filling as an experience needed by every Christian, not some esoteric matter for the spiritually elite. Being filled with and controlled by God’s Spirit is absolutely essential for a normal Christian life. Anything less is *sub-normal*.²

Let me conclude by suggesting five steps toward such filling:

1. We acknowledge that we need God’s Spirit to fill and to control our lives, and we ask God to do this.
2. We abdicate all control of our lives, asking God to lead and guide us through Scripture, spiritual promptings, circumstance, and fellow believers.
3. We abandon any sin that we consciously tolerate in our lives, asking God to reveal any sin of which we’re not aware (Psalm 139:23-24).
4. We appropriate God’s powerful promises and life principles, found throughout the Bible.
5. We abide in Christ all the days of our lives, bearing eternal fruit through the Spirit’s work in us (John 14-15).

² See Watchman Nee, *The Normal Christian Life* (Bombay, India: Gospel Literature Service, 1957).

And if we continue to do these things, Paul told us that our roots will go down deep into the soil of God's marvelous love. We will have the power to understand how wide, how long, how high and how deep His love really is. We will experience the love of Christ, though we will never fully understand it, and we will be filled with the fullness of life and power that comes from God (Ephesians 3:17-19).

“Now glory be to God! By his mighty power at work within us, he is able to accomplish infinitely more than we would ever dare to ask or hope. May he be given glory in the church and in Christ Jesus forever and ever through endless ages. Amen” (Ephesians 3:20-21).