

Baptism Sunday
August 16, 2026

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Maybe the most famous Christian convert outside of the Bible is a man named Augustine, who came to Christ around the year 400. He told the story of his conversion in a wonderful book called *The Confessions*.

Legend has it that when Augustine returned to his hometown in North Africa after years of being away from home in Italy, during which he became a follower of Christ, he came into the town square and looked around. Then a woman ran up to him, someone with whom he had been immorally involved. She said, "Augustine, Augustine, it is I!"

And he looked at her with great gentleness and smiled and said, "Yes, but it is not longer I."

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Today the focus of our service is on the radical difference that Jesus makes in a life.

Appropriately, this morning everything is going to be different from a normal Sunday, and here's why. Because today it is our joy to celebrate the baptism of *nine* Christian believers!

As far as I know, this is a first for Covenant, to have so many believer baptisms in one morning. And I love it! I love what God is doing in our midst, drawing people to himself. And I love how God is using the witness of this church, and of the families in this church, as we seek to live a life of love together.

This is such a source of joy to us that we decided to build the whole service around the baptisms. So here's how the service will unfold. I'll be preaching first, then we'll get a chance to hear the testimonies of those who will be (were) baptized in the other service, and then we'll celebrate four (five) baptisms during this service. Then we'll respond with closing music and our offering.

Before we go on, just a thought about the feel of the service today. Baptism is an incredible sacred moment, and it is filled with a sort of holy gravity, but it is also an incredibly joyful one. Jesus tells us in Luke 15.10 that when people give their lives to him in faith, "there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels."

I think it is appropriate that we would echo here on earth that joy in heaven. I hope we will approach this as a joyful family celebration, complete with whooping and cheering when

those are being baptized stand up in the baptism pool after they've been baptized and prayed for.

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It's been a while since we've gone over what baptism is all about, and we might be a bit rusty in our understand, especially because we come from so many different denominational backgrounds.

So I want to take some time as we begin to remind us what the Scriptures teach about baptism.

The Christian church refers to baptism as a *sacrament*. A sacrament is a remembering ritual that Jesus commands of his followers.

There are two sacraments that the whole Christian church – Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant – recognizes: baptism and communion.

We are baptized once, as a mark of the presence of Christian faith.

And we celebrate communion regularly, as believers, as a way of remembering what God did through his son on the cross to make our relationship with God possible.

Both sacraments, baptism and communion, are rituals that use physical things – water, wine, bread – to serve as symbols of deeper spiritual realities.

The objects are just objects. This is just a trough full of tap water. There is nothing magic about it. Being washed in the water doesn't accomplish anything. It is an external symbol of something internal that has already happened.

Both Christian sacraments are a reshaping by Jesus of a remembering ritual that the Jewish people practiced.

In communion, Jesus adapted the Passover meal to tell the story of his own sacrificial death and how he gave up his life to rescue us.

And in baptism, Jesus adapted a familiar ritual washing ceremony that was used at the Jewish synagogue.

Every time Jewish believers gathered for service, they stepped into a *mikvah*, which was a small ceremonial pool of water outside the synagogue. Stepping into it and back out of it represented a prayer for God to wash and make clean the head (our thoughts), the heart (our desires), and the hands and feet (our actions).

You may remember that John the Baptist (if we were translating it today we would say John the Baptizer) called the Jewish community to what he called (in Mark 1.4) a "baptism of repentance," inviting them to turn away from practices that dishonored God and turn toward choices that pleased him. That was nothing more than a special sort of mikveh.

Jesus picks up on this familiar ritual and adapts it, giving it a much wider and deeper meaning.

You may know that *repentance* means turning around and going the other direction. But when Jesus uses baptism as a symbol of repentance, unlike John, he doesn't just mean turning around from a bad *choice* and starting from that point on to make a better one.

He uses the baptism of repentance to refer to a *whole life* that is turned around and sent in a different direction. Baptism is a sign of a life turned around by Jesus.

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Okay, that may raise a question for some of you. If baptism represents a life that is turned around and goes a different direction with Jesus now at the center, then why do some churches like Covenant baptize infants?

A newborn child can't make a decision to follow Jesus. They don't have saving faith. So are we saying that baptism makes children right with God? That somehow it turns them around and sends them in a new direction spiritually?

No, not at all.

The reason some churches practice baptism of infants is because we have recorded for us in the New Testament, in the Book of Acts – which is the history of the first thirty years of the early church – examples of both the baptism of believers, such as the Ethiopian who comes to faith in Acts 8, and the baptism of the *children* of believers, such as the family of the jailer from Philippi who gives his life to Jesus in Acts 16.

Here's how the early church came to understand that seeming contradiction.

Just as they recognized the parallel between the Passover meal of the Old Testament and the Lord's Supper for New Testament believers, because Jesus spelled it out during the last supper, they also saw the connection that Paul made in Colossians 2 between the Old Testament practice of circumcision, when a child was born into a family of Jewish faith, and the New Testament practice of baptism when a child was born into a Christian family of faith.

What they recognized was that in the Bible in both of its testaments there is revealed a pattern of expectation related to how people will come to faith.

When you come to Jesus from outside the Christian faith, from a non-Christian family, you come to faith through the witness of Christians around you, and then you are baptized as a believer.

But If you grow up in a family of faith, the biblical expectation and hope is that you will come to faith through the witness of your immediate family and your church family, as their faith becomes your own.

So when a child born into a believing family is baptized as a newborn, it's on the basis of their *parent's* faith, in the hope of their faith becoming the faith of the child when they come of age. And, in fact, it is clear from the evidence that the early church regularly practiced the baptism of newborn children of Christian believers.

Baptizing a newborn child doesn't mean that child has saving faith. Giving our lives to Jesus by faith, not baptism, is what makes us right with God. The baptism of a newborn is a baptism of hope, reflecting the faith of the parents and their hope that this child will one day follow them in giving his or her life over to Jesus as King.

One other thing that's important to say before we go on. The Evangelical Presbyterian Church, the denomination of which we are a part, believes that *how* we do baptism is not a faith essential. That's because there is no place where all of this is spelled out definitively in the New Testament.

Here at Covenant, as you know, we don't insist on this all being done in a certain way. As a church in the Reformed tradition we affirm infant baptism. But because our church family comes from so many different traditions, we celebrate both baptism and dedication of infants as faithful practices.

The important thing, whether through dedication or baptism, is that believing parents offer their children to the Lord and commit themselves to raising those children in their Christian faith.

I hope that has done more to clarify things for you than confuse them.

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So let me come back now to what the New Testament teaches about the practice of believer baptism.

There are two passages of Scripture in the New Testament that unpack the significance of baptism.

The first one is found in I Peter 3, which says baptism is an image of a person being washed and made clean. Just as water washes mud from our hands, baptism is a picture of how Jesus forgives us, washing the stain of guilt and shame from our hearts when we put our faith in him.

I Peter 3.21-22

This water symbolizes baptism that now saves you—not the removal of dirt from the body but the pledge of a clear conscience toward God. It saves you by the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who has gone into heaven and is at God’s right hand—with angels, authorities and powers in submission to him.

The second passage, one that talks about another significance of baptism, is found in Romans 6. In addition to the waters of baptism being a picture of being washed clean, this passage says baptism offers an image of a person dying to who they were previously, like a person drowning in a pool, and then coming back to life as a new person, just as we die to a previous way of life and are made new when we become followers of Jesus.

Romans 6.3-5

Have you forgotten that when we were joined with Christ Jesus in baptism, we joined him in his death? For we died and were buried with Christ by baptism. And just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glorious power of the Father, now we also may live new lives. Since we have been united with him in his death, we will also be raised to life as he was.

Let me zero in on this second baptismal image of faith as a dying and rising to new life. That imagery takes us straight back to one of the most probing things Jesus ever said.

Matthew 16.25

Whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it.

Obviously when he speaks of us losing our lives Jesus isn't talking about physical dying. He is talking about abandoning a way of life that is *centered on us*, and embracing a way of life that is all about him.

Going from a life in which I matter most, my life is about me, things go the way I want them to go, and I get to call the shots, to a life in which He matters most, my life is about him, things go the way he wants them to go, and he gets to call the shots.

That is the repentance, the turning around and going the other way, that he calls us to. Not just turning from a specific sin or two, but from a life that is lived for us, lived for our sake and on our terms, and turning to a life of his making that is lived for him.

Whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it.

As the rest of the New Testament unpacks this idea, it's clear that these stirring and haunting words of Jesus imply two things.

They imply, first, for the follower of Jesus, that when we give our allegiance to Jesus there will be a decisive break with the past. That is the biblical norm.

Something ends, and something else begins in its place – an end and a beginning as stark as the end and beginning of life.

And that thing that begins is not of our doing. It is not something we muster up or make happen. It is something of Jesus's doing, something that the Spirit brings to life in us and gives to us as gift.

Paul writes about that in Galatians 2.

Galatians 2.20

I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself up for me.

I'm sure most of you have heard this quip.



I understand it originally came from a Leslie Chow movie in response to someone complaining about having a bad day. It's a way of putting a small thing made into a big thing

into a bit of perspective. No, is the implied answer. You didn't die, so don't make such a big deal over it.

Let me pluck that phrase out of that context and carry it over into the conversation we're having now.

When we claim to be followers of Jesus, the New Testament asks us this question:

Yes, but did you die? And the right answer, when you become a Jesus follower, is yes. I did die! Something came to an end, and something began, when I gave my life to Jesus. My old life ended, and God brought me to life by his Spirit as a new person, a person whose life is centered on him and his kingdom purposes.

So this image of dying and rising anticipates a decisive end to an old way and a decisive start of something new. A death and a new life.

And second, these words of Jesus imply that, for the follower of Jesus, there will be a radical *discontinuity* between the old and the new, a markedly different before and after. We're not recognizable as the old person we once were. We don't just pick up where we left off when we come back to life, having added a new belief or two. Our life takes on a completely different shape.

On Friday I was talking with Lily Hyde about her coming to Christ and the beautiful new life she has been enjoying, when I looked over and saw a stunning Luna Moth perched on the screen on my window.

I haven't seen a Luna moth in twenty years. If you've never seen one, they are huge, luminous, lime green moths with a five inch wing span and a long curving tail at the end of each wing.

Yes! Exactly! I thought. No wonder the church has moths and butterflies as metaphors for new life in Christ. What a gorgeous, glorious, no-longer-a-caterpillar transformation! Not just the one I saw on my window, but the one I was hearing about on the phone.

Paul elaborates on this second implication when he writes in II Corinthians 5:

II Corinthians 5.15

Christ died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again.

When we are baptized, that's the truth that we declare. Jesus has changed my life. Before Christ, my life centered on me. Then I surrendered my life to him in faith, I gave him my allegiance, and the center of my life shifted. Now my life centers on him. And as a result, it

is so much more beautiful and meaningful that any small life of my own making turned in upon myself could ever be.

There's one other significance to the act of baptism that I want to mention. While it is not spelled out anywhere in the New Testament, it is implied in every single baptism that takes place in the New Testament, when men and women step forward, out in the open, right in the midst of a crowd, and present themselves for baptism. And that is that baptism is a way of declaring *publicly, openly*, our allegiance to Jesus as King.

When we get baptized, we are saying to our church family, and to the rest of the world: Do you want to know what my life is all about? Do you want to know the thing that matters to me more than anything else? It's my allegiance to Jesus, my King. He is the one who explains my life and why I live it the way I do. And I want all the world to know.

In England, whenever the King is in residence at one of the palaces scattered across the country, they raise a flag called the Royal Standard.

The British Royal Standard



Whenever that flag is flying, it is a public declaration that the King is in residence.

That's what baptism communicates. It is a banner over our lives that says, "The King lives and rules here,"

John Berryman wrote a poem about the Christian life that ends with this line. It's a great way to sum up the public declaration we make when we are baptized as believers.

Under new management, Your Majesty: Yours.

When we are baptized, that's the public confession we are making: Jesus, I want all the world to know that I am yours.

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This week I was so blessed to meet with all but one of the men and women and young people who are presenting themselves for baptism today, and to hear their stories. It was so moving and meaningful.

As we spoke, so many of these biblical themes that we've just talked about came through: a brand new beginning; immersing myself in God; dying to an old, small and unsatisfying way of life; no longer being at the center; putting Jesus first; publicly declaring that Jesus is our King.

We want you to share in that joy, and to give you a chance to hear how God has been at work in each of these nine lives. So let's hear first the faith stories of those who will be/were baptized during the other service, and then we'll hear the rest of the stories as part of the baptisms as they take place.

James, Emma, Rikki, Lily, Joel, come and share with us your faith stories.
Audrey, Logan, Alex, Elise, you may still be a bit soggy. Come and share with us your faith stories.

Sharing

God is so good and so loving in his pursuit of us, desiring to fold us into his loving arms and fill our lives with his presence and purposes. Let's respond with worship.