

**THE
BON AIR
PULPIT**

July 9, 2000

**Scripture: Acts 2:38-41, 8:12, 10:48 and 16:33
Sermon : Commitments and Confirmations**

Take your Bible and turn to the book of Acts, Chapter 2. We are going to read selected passages of scripture this morning all having to do with the subject of baptism. I wanted to say as we get ready to read, that for a person to speak about baptism recognizes that there are so many things that will be left unsaid. When you listen to a message like this there are people who are raised in various kinds of traditions who can say, “Yes, but.” I wanted just to simply say to you that my purpose this morning is to tell what we think scripture teaches and to try and emphasize that. If there are additional issues and questions that you would like to know about, then we will take the opportunity to share with you on a personal basis.

The book of Acts is the story of the Christian church for the first thirty years. There are many different stories in it, some with large groups, some individual, different kinds of people preaching. But the interesting thing is that while the circumstances are all very different, when the sermon is over, when the teaching is over and people are asked to commit their life to Christ, there is one significant thing that all of them do. All of them are baptized. Let me call to your attention a couple of these verses. Acts 2:38. Peter replied, *“Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit”* Acts 8:12 Philip is preaching up in Samaria and *“when they believed Philip as he preached the good news of the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized both men and women.”* Acts 10:47 *“Can anyone keep these people from being baptized with water. They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have received it.”* Acts 16:31 Paul had been in prison, it is the middle of the night and an earth quake has come. Paul has been released from prison. The amazing truth is he goes home to spend the rest of the night with the jailer who has put him in prison. He begins to share with him about his faith in Christ. Verse 31 *“Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you shall be saved, you and all your household.”* Then they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all the others in the house. At that hour of the night the jailer took them and washed their wounds. Then immediately he and all his family were baptized.

Let me tell you about an emotional experience that took place in my life. It happened when I visited the city of Zurich, Switzerland. In the city of Zurich, the Limmet River flows through the center of it. On the side of the banks, there is a building that has a plaque and the plaque commemorates the grand event that happened at that spot and it was because of what happened there that I had come. The names of that plaque are Felix Monz and Conrad Grable. They were men who lived during times of tremendous

upheaval in the countries of Europe about the church. Questions were being asked about what the church taught and if it was right. I always liked to say that they asked in a different attitude than many of the questions we ask in our culture. In our culture, we often ask questions to prove that something is false so we can turn away from it. They would be asking questions to find out what was true, so they could turn to it. They began to ask questions. Had the church strayed from what the Bible taught, and one of the biggest questions they asked was the most basic of all. How does a person become a Christian? They believed that the church taught that what you do is in your faith that if you work hard enough that one day maybe you might become a Christian. As they read through the New Testament they understood that you are saved by the grace of God and that you work because you already are a Christian.

Then there was another group of people who began to ask another question. They said you know that we understand how a person becomes a Christian, there is the big question and that is this... .. Who is it that is a member of the church? Let me tell you the reason they asked the question. You have to journey with me just a moment. People in this day, as many people still believe today, that when a baby is born, he is born with a twisted moral nature. These people sincerely believe that that child, if he dies before he can give his life to Jesus Christ, he would go to live eternity with out God. These people believe that so strongly, that if a baby is born today and they are aware that that baby is getting ready to die, they will go get some water and they will baptize that baby. If you believe that, you would baptize him too. What would happen in these countries of Europe is still true in many of them today. Every child that was born, were taken down to the church and they were baptized. In fact in some countries, there were actually laws that if you did not baptize your child, you could be arrested. You would be arrested because they viewed that if you didn't baptize that child, and if he went out into eternity without God, then you were guilty of the greatest form of child abuse. What that led to was this. Everybody that was a member of the country was a member of the church. The church and the community were exactly the same. The problem was this. Multitudes of people never followed through with their baptism, never went to confirmation, never studied any more. The state may have fifty million people and fifty million belonged to the church but on Sunday morning you can't find but five million. They began to say something is wrong. The church ought to be composed of people who have given their heart and their life to Christ and we have churches that have all kinds of names on the roll, but they never even follow through with their faith.

I lived in Germany for three years. In Germany, the only way you can not become a member of the church is that your families have to confess that they are atheists. What was happening five hundred years ago, was that many people who had their names on the roll, never came to church. There were actually preachers and officials in the church who were trying to stand and lead the church that didn't even know what it meant to be a Christian. These people said there has to be something more. They went back and began to read some of the passages of scripture that I have read and what they found was this. A person came to faith in Jesus Christ as they began to understand about Him and that then they would commit their life unto Christ. As they understood, as they committed their life to Christ, they were baptized and then they would become a

member of the church. They arrived at this decision. The church ought to be composed of people who have made a voluntary decision to commit their life to Christ and they were baptized and then they are members of the church. That raised a tremendous fire storm. The tremendous fire storm was that they went down to the river, they baptized each other and people began to mock them and began to call them the ana Baptist. Ana means rebaptized or baptize again.

The town council of Zurich got together and they said, “You are a radical. You are disturbing the social order. You must desist.” Felix and Conrad said, “No, we believe that this is what the Bible teaches.” In March of 1526, the town council of Zurich said all right then, we will baptize you ourselves. They tied chunks of concrete around their neck and they threw them in the Limit River and there they drowned. The little plaque says, “AT THIS SPOT, FELIX MONZ AND CONRAD GRABLE DIED AS MARTYRS FOR THEIR FAITH..”

When you come to a Baptist Church, sometime people say Baptists get their name by how they baptize. They use lots of water. No, that is not true. There are a lot of Christians who baptize like we do. The emphasis is who you baptize. Who you baptize, our understanding of scripture is, who you baptize is those individuals who are old enough to know that they have sinned, know that they need to be forgiven, know that Christ is the Savior, and they have given their life to Him. On the profession of their faith, they are baptized and then they are part of the church. That is the reason that when you come into a Baptist Church the architecture is almost always the same. The first thing you see is the communion table. The communion table is always here at the center, at the front, because it emphasis the death of Jesus Christ for our sins. Almost in all Baptist Churches, the pulpit is behind it, it is in the center. It is not over on the side, it is usually in the center and the reason for that is because we believe in the centrality of the word of God.

When I stand to speak to you on Sunday morning, you have not come to hear what I think. You have come to hear what God says. I always laughingly say, I always struggle with that, because many times I would like to tell you what I think. If you knew how much came up that never came out, you would be grateful for what you got. Someone says when I come to your church, you preach the Bible. I say to them, “I am too dumb to do anything else, but I am too smart to do anything else either.” We believe that it should be central, you should stick to the scripture.

Behind me is the choir. Why is the choir usually behind the pastor? Because what we are symbolizing is as Baptist, while somebody like me may be called the pastor of the church or the leader of the church, this church isn't run by me. This church is run by all of us and all of us together are praising God together and all of us are in the job of leading in worship and all of us are serving together. The fourth part, usually in every Baptist Church, is the baptistery. The cross that explained we all share it together. A person gives his heart and his life to Christ and then we baptize him and then he is a member of the congregation. We understand that is the Biblical pattern. You would think that after working at this for about five hundred years, we would get it right. But we haven't. Interestingly enough, in the United States, one out of every eight people are not church members, but one out of eight people in the United States is a Baptist.

We are a very fractured group. That is the under statement of the week. We are Southern Baptist, Northern Baptist, Eastern Baptist, Western Baptist, American Baptist, National Baptist, Two Seats in the Spirit Predestination Baptist, Seventh Day Baptist, we have more Baptist than Carter has liver pills. If you want to know how diverse we are Newt Gingrich is a Baptist, Bill Clinton is a Baptist, Al Gore is a Baptist, some of your greatest artists are Baptist, and maybe even as amazing, you are one. All kinds of Baptists. All of them are different, but all of them essentially believe the same thing. That is that a person, as he is old enough, gives his heart and life to Christ and he is baptized and a member of the church. The church ought to be composed of people, who in the freedom of their own conscious, gives their life to Jesus. I would say that after five hundred years you would think we got it right, but we don't.

Let me tell you the other statistics. Out of every eight Baptists, about two and one half of them, the FBI would have trouble finding them. Even in a Baptist Church there are many people who walk down the aisle of the church and say I want to give my life to Christ, make a profession of faith, and are baptized. They walk out the back door and many times a few years later you don't see them. In the normal, what ever that is, a normal Baptist church, about two out of every ten that are baptized in one year walk away from their faith. What Baptists are beginning to realize, is that while we reach out to people and say we want you to commit your life to Christ that we have not done a good job in helping people to understand what it means to give your life to Christ. What does it mean to be a disciple, what does it mean to be a member of a church, what does it mean to surrender your heart and your life to Christ? That is the reason that today across America about one out of every ten Baptist Churches are opening the doors of the church and say come to Jesus Christ. If you want to come, we will baptize you, but we want to care for you and we want to spend time with you and we want to help you to understand what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ. Some people think that if you even say something like that you are putting up a barrier. Not so. The doors are going to be open but the church is saying, we have an obligation to you. To help you, to care for you, so you will understand. I just say to folk who have a question about it, I just say to them, if you keep doing what you have always done, you keep getting what you always got. If you can explain why in a Southern Baptist Convention that proudly says you have sixteen million members, you can't find seven million of them. We need to sit down and spend time with folk to help them to understand what does that mean to make a life changing decision to give your life to Jesus Christ. When I pastured in Memphis for twelve years, a wonderful church, a grand traditional church, but the community around it began to change. People began to walk down the aisle to give their life they didn't have the foggiest notion what we were talking about. Twenty five years ago, I pastured a church that said, when people walk down the aisle, why don't we have a class to help them to understand what it means to give your life to Christ and what it means to be a member of a congregation. Let me tell you a danger of people like me. Everybody in this room knows that I am over sixty years of age. The danger of people my age is to think that the world around them is the same world that they grew up in forty years ago. I want to tell you as an over sixty year old pastor, I can tell you the world is different out there today in the best communities as it was twenty five years ago in the city of Memphis when the

whole community changed. People come and try to make decisions for Christ and if we do not spend enough time with them to help them to understand, we sin against God and against men.

Let me tell you what it means to walk down an aisle and say I want to give my life to Christ and if you come in a Baptist Church then they are going to ask to baptize you. What does that mean? Why is that water behind me? The first thing that it symbolizes is that your life has been changed. A, while ago, when that young lady and that young boy walked out, the water was there. They were drawing a picture of a spiritual decision that has happened in their life. This is the decision. The water represents death. It represents dying. This is the way I used to be. I am dying to my old way of life, I am burying it, putting it behind me. When they came up out of the water, the picture they are drawing was now my life has changed as though I have died and somebody else has moved in.

Early Baptists, when they baptized, actually had little rules about it. They would have died, they would have kicked us out of the association if we had put water in a baptistery. They felt like you had to be baptized in a river. The reason they thought you had to be baptized in a river is that you would come in one side and you were baptized and you would go out the other side. What you were saying is that you are leaving your sin behind me and the water has symbolically washed it away. The symbolism is this. Christianity is more than accepting facts in your head, it is more than having feelings in your heart, it is having your whole life changed by Jesus Christ. When we are baptized, what we are saying is, this is what has happened to me. Some people think of baptismal water almost as the fluid that is in the womb of a mother. Just as water is there and a child is born, water is here to symbolize a new birth, a new life, a change has been done. That is what you are saying. I want to put some things behind me, I want to start a new life in Christ. The second thing it symbolizes is, it is a contrast.

You remember a man, when you open up the New Testament, was baptized and his name was John the Baptist. I always say that is not in contradiction to John the Methodist or John the Presbyterian. John the Baptist was not a Baptist contrary to what some people thought. It meant John the Baptizer. John the Baptizer said this. "I baptize you with water but one is coming after me who is mightier than I. He is going to baptize you with the Holy Spirit." When those young people were baptized in water, what it is symbolizing is that the Spirit of God has entered into their life. The Christian life is not somebody trying to live for God. The Christian life is that there is a new strength inside of you that enables you to do what God wants you to do. It is not a struggle, it is not me always working hard. It is God on the inside helping me to live as I ought to live. When we go under the water, what it is symbolizing is, in all of my life I need God to help me to live like I ought to live.

Some of you remember a little bit of your church history and remember when the Roman Emperor, Constantine, decided to become a Christian he said, "I want everybody to become a Christian." He brought all of his soldiers down to the river and he said, "We will baptize everyone of you." But they didn't want to give up all of who they are to Christ. History says they were all baptized, but they took their swords and held them out of the water.

I remember the first time I ever baptized and it was in a little pond in North Louisiana. The man was as nervous as he could be. If you saw how skinny I was when I was in college, you would have been nervous too. It is like asking a heart surgeon, "Have you ever done this before?" He asked me, "Have you ever baptized anybody before?" I said, "No, I haven't." We walked out, I baptized him and he walked back up. He turned to me and said, "Thank you." He looked down and said, "I left my watch on, I ruined my watch." I said, "Well maybe that is okay. Maybe that is symbolic. Maybe you need to baptize your watch. You need to baptize your time." Then he looked at me and he said, "I am in real trouble. I baptized my wallet too." I said, "Well, maybe that is symbolic. Maybe you need to baptize your wallet too."

When you are baptized, what you are symbolizing is, all that you are, is given to God and you are going to live in the power of the spirit. The last thing it means is us. It means a commitment of your life. If you haven't turned over recently to the book of 1 Corinthians 10, let me encourage you to do that. 1 Cor.10: 1-2. It uses the word baptism in a way we don't usually use it and if you understand that, you will understand what water baptism is. Listen to what it says. *"I do not want you to be ignorant brothers that our forefathers were all in the cloud and they all passed through the sea.* {the incident is what most of you know. The children of Israel coming out of Egypt, they were trying to get to the promise land and here is this big body of water called the Red Sea. How are they going to get across it? Moses prayed to God and said God how are we going to do that? He says you walk towards the water and I will take care of you.} Can you imagine this. Here is a Momma. She has her little precious child in her arms. She turns to her husband and says, "What are we getting ready to do?" He says, "We are marching towards the water." She picks up her little baby and she starts walking towards the water. She was saying this. "I am going to follow my husband and we are going to follow Moses and if we drown, we drown. We made the commitment, we are going to follow." Listen to the next verse. *They were all baptized into Moses.* How do you get baptized into Moses? You just simply say, "Moses, we are going to follow you. If you drown, we drown. But if we get through, we are going to celebrate on the other side." When you are baptized into Jesus, that is what you are saying. You walk to life and you say, "Dear God, I am going to live in you, I am going to stand for you and what ever happens I am going to follow you." I just say to folk, if Jesus is wrong, then I am wrong. If I go to my death bed, I am going to trust in Jesus. If it is wrong, it is wrong. My eternity is secure in Jesus Christ. If it is wrong, it is wrong. But my whole destiny, my life is baptized into Jesus. You come and say, "I want this decision in my life and I want to be baptized," what you are saying is, "I commit my life, my destiny, my eternity to Jesus Christ."