

# Washed

by Timothy R. Nichols

## Part 1: The Story of Baptism

New Testament authors regularly remind their readers of their baptism. In the contemporary church, baptism is something one should do, certainly, but we devote little theological attention to it, and often treat it as an afterthought, something to be done whenever it's convenient. **What would change if we began to see ourselves, and behave, as a body of baptized people?**

This essay will explore that question by digging deeply into the theology and practice of baptism. The goal is not to go through every single biblical reference, but to highlight a series of key biblical concepts that—even if we pay lipservice to them in our teaching—we do not actually apply in practice.

And as with all things biblical, we must start with the Story, and the Story begins with creation. In the beginning, the Spirit brooded over the waters. On the third day, dry land emerged out of those waters. In the Flood, God reversed the third day and de-created the world, but -- in a type of baptism attested by Peter -- saved eight people through water, and placed them as His people in a new world scoured clean.

Their descendants fell into madness and idolatry, and God once again made a people for Himself, growing them into a nation. He brought them out of Egypt into the wilderness, and the Egyptians thought they were lost...then He saved them through the Red Sea (an image of baptism later exploited by Paul). He brought the second generation through the waters of the Jordan on their way into the land.

So then John comes, calling members of God's chosen people out into the wilderness to pass through water. The image is unmistakable: John is claiming that the land has become corrupt, another Egypt if you will, and "out of Egypt" God is saving a new people for Himself.

The rulers come out, demanding to know who he thinks he is, that he has the spiritual horsepower to make such a claim. They ask him a multiple choice question: "Are you (a) the Messiah, (b) Elijah, or (c) the Prophet like Moses?" There was no option (d) in their minds, because who else would have the authority to do such a thing? To their surprise, he basically says "I'm nobody." But he says it with a quote from Isaiah that means "I'm nobody...but Yahweh Himself is coming behind me."

Jesus ratifies John's baptism by participating in it. As the prototype of the new humanity that God is taking for Himself, Jesus must be baptized — and so he goes to John, "to fulfill all

righteousness.” Jesus’ baptism means what John’s baptism meant — and then some! The Father “turns the volume up to 11” by speaking from heaven and causing the Spirit to descend on Jesus. When we follow Christ in baptism today, our baptism means what His meant: God is taking another people out of the world for Himself. Not to replace Israel (as Paul later clarifies in Rom. 9-11), but to provoke her to jealousy, so that she might return.

In baptism, we physically induct the person into the people of God. As in Jesus’ baptism, it’s less the baptized person making a declaration about God than God making a declaration about the baptized person: “This is My son/daughter.” In this way, baptism is God’s reply to a profession of faith. When I baptize someone, I stand as a member of the Body speaking on behalf of my Father, telling the person I’m baptizing (and whoever else happens to be around) that God has accepted them into His family.

And so from the very beginning, baptism has a communal element to it. Even Jesus didn’t baptize Himself. We are baptized by someone, into a Body, in the presence of the Father and under the ministry of the Spirit. We may get baptized by ones, but in baptism we are never alone.

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### **Part 2: The Hermeneutics of Defective Practice**

In every biblical example of the Church’s actual practice of baptism, it takes place immediately upon profession of faith. Not next week, or next year, or “whenever we get enough people signed up to have a baptismal service.” NOW. Right away. There is no thought given to gathering the local church for a service. There is, in fact, no such thing as a “baptismal service” in the New Testament. The person who led the new convert to Christ baptizes them on the spot.

This is very different from our contemporary practice, and that difference has an impact on the way we understand the Scriptures about baptism. For the New Testament believers, baptism was an immediate part of their conversion experience. If the Ethiopian eunuch had been run over by a chariot as he crossed the road to get baptized, he would still go to heaven, of course. The spiritual reality of the new birth took hold the moment he believed. But throughout the New Testament examples, baptism immediately follows belief. It is God’s--and the Body’s--physical, tactile statement accepting the new convert.

So consider how New Testament believers would hear Paul’s words: “Neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor homosexuals, nor sodomites, nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners will inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you, *but you were washed*, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit of our God.” (1 Cor. 6:9-11)

You were *washed*. Our minds go immediately to metaphor. Theirs would go immediately to their baptism, because *they were literally washed* immediately after they believed. Ditto for Paul’s

reference to the “washing of regeneration” in Titus and the “washing of water by the word” that Christ gives the Church in Ephesians. Baptism was the physical analog of the spiritual reality, in which the new convert is physically accepted into the Body in recognition of what God has done.

When we read those passages, we immediately want to decide whether the passage is talking about water baptism or Spirit baptism, but we impose that question because we have already removed water from the way we handle conversion. Our practice is so far removed from biblical practice that we see two baptisms where Scripture sees only one. Then we bump into Ephesians 4:5 (“one Lord, one faith, *one baptism*”) and want to know which is the *real* one, water or Spirit? If you had to pick between the two, the answer is obvious -- Spirit baptism, of course! But the question poses a false dilemma: Jesus’ baptism teaches us that baptism is a single composite event in which water and Spirit are both involved. What God has joined together, let no man separate.

Through much of Christian history, baptism was separated from conversion by a long process of catechesis, to make sure the person was a “real” convert. In contemporary FG churches, we invert the error and separate baptism from conversion lest anyone get the idea that it was the dunking, rather than God’s grace through faith alone, that brings about the new birth. But Paul was not confused on this point, nor can he be accused of confusing others -- yet he baptized the Philippian jailer and his family immediately after they believed, even though it was the middle of the night!

Let us repent and return to biblical practice. Let us not deprive new converts of something God meant for them to have, and let us not impose artificial hurdles—a new members’ class, getting three more people to sign up, getting over their fear of public speaking—between a new convert and baptism.

And especially, let us not impose the results of our disobedience on the NT text.

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### **Part 3: Raised with Christ**

Because baptism immediately followed the profession of faith in the New Testament Christians’ experience, it becomes a God-given memory hook that they could use to remind one another of who they really are.

Paul did exactly that with the Corinthian church (as we saw in the last installment). He does the same with the Roman church in chapter 6. Having walked them through our universal guilt and need for salvation, Paul explains that God justifies through faith, as He did with Abraham (who was justified before his obedient circumcision) and David (who was cleansed from his adultery and murder). Where sin abounds, Paul explains, grace abounds much more. Which immediately leads to the question: If grace always outstrips sin, then why worry about sin? Should we just keep on sinning, and get more grace?

“Of course not!” Paul says. “How shall we who died to sin live any longer in it?” This is a strange idea, this “died to sin.” Have you ever thought about that turn of phrase? What does it even mean? We took our sin to the door of the house, as it were, tossed it out on the sidewalk, said “You’re dead to me!” and slammed the door? Manifestly this is not actually the case, is it? I mean...look at us. We keep inviting it back into the house!

So what does Paul mean by it? Watch where he takes them. This “dead to sin” state is not something that they do themselves; it is something that was done to them. “Don’t you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death?” Remember, for them, baptism immediately followed belief. When he says this, their minds immediately go back to conversion: they believed in Jesus, and then they were put under the water and brought out again.

Paul cashes out that image: “We were buried with Him through baptism into death, so that -- just as Christ was raised from the dead...--we also should walk in a new life.” You went into the water and died, Paul says, so that you could be brought out into a new life, the resurrection life God gave Jesus. It’s an apt image. A member of Christ’s Body, standing in for God, puts you into the water. If they left you there, you really would die. You can’t breathe down there! And then Christ’s Body brings you out of that place of death, literally raises you into a new life.

We can’t just baptize you into Christ’s death; we baptize you into His resurrection too. The two things come as a set. And that means you may not just take your ticket to heaven and run. Your sins are dealt with, make no mistake -- we covered that back in Romans 5. Your sins won’t get you booted out of the people of God -- we covered that with the David example back in chapter 4. But God did all this for a purpose, and it’s not just so you can go to heaven when you finally die. He did it so you can *live*!

Specifically, so you can live the new life that Jesus is also living: a resurrected life devoted to God (and as we will see in chapter 8, empowered by the Spirit).

This, Paul says to the Romans, is what your baptism *means*.

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### **Part 4: Baptism As a Sign of New Covenant Priestly Ordination**

God set Israel apart from all the other peoples of the world as a priestly nation, borne out of Egypt on eagles’ wings, and brought to Himself at Sinai. As the priestly nation, it was their job to mediate Yahweh’s blessing and revelation to the world.

As God’s priestly nation, Israelites also observed a detailed series of purity regulations; their law is full of washings. A man who’s had a nocturnal emission, or a woman who’s finished her

period, would wash themselves and be unclean until evening, when the evening sacrifice would cover them and they would be restored to ceremonial cleanliness. Self-washing was quite common.

Being washed by someone else was another matter. One of the rare places it happened was in priestly ordination. As Hebrews says, there's no such thing as a self-appointed priest; the new priest has to *receive* priesthood from someone entitled to confer it on him. The new priest-to-be is brought to the door of the tabernacle, where someone else washes, anoints, and dresses him in priestly garments (see Ex. 29 for details).

When Jesus submits to John's baptism, we can already see that God is taking out a new people for Himself (as we discussed back in Part 1), and He consecrates Jesus in particular with the Spirit. Jesus' followers partake in that same Spirit, and Peter explains God's purpose for this people: "You are a chosen generation, *a royal priesthood*, a holy nation, God's own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light."

This new priestly people is not limited by ancestry; it's open to the world: "For the promise is to you, and to your children, and to those who are far off, as many as the Lord our God will call." (Peter didn't know how true those words were when he said them at Pentecost, but he found out over the next few years!)

How is this possible? It's easy to say we're priests because we are in Christ, but that doesn't quite explain it. Priests had to be Levites, sons of Aaron, but Jesus was from Judah. Jesus has no right to the priesthood under the Law. How does partaking in a son of Judah make us priests?

As Hebrews explains, there is a superior priesthood that predates and supercedes the Sinai covenant. One such priest, Melchizedek, received tithes from Abraham (Levi's great-grandfather) and in turn blessed him. Melchizedek is not a priest because of his parentage, but simply because God called him — and so is Jesus, minister of a better covenant, heir to better promises, and the initiator of a superior priesthood. He has entered the Heavenly Tabernacle as our Forerunner, and that means we come behind him, offering up the sacrifice of praise, the fruit of our lips, and also remembering to do good and to share, which are pleasing offerings to God.

When our High Priest and Forerunner went into the heavenly tabernacle with His own blood -- the sin offering to end all sin offerings -- the temple veil was torn from top to bottom. Nothing separates the Holy of Holies from the rest of the temple. Formerly only the High Priest could enter God's presence; now, where He goes, we go.

Here we have no continuing city, no fixed earthly sanctuary. Following our Forerunner, we enter into the heavenly sanctuary from wherever we happen to be. Our prayers rise like incense from

every living room and street corner, and every beggar's hand is an altar where we place offerings to God. By the power of the Spirit, as we stand on the sidewalk, we stand with angels and the saints who've gone before us in the Holy of Holies.

So in that light, consider baptism: *you don't baptize yourself*. When I baptize someone, I stand as a priest mediating God's blessing and assurance to the new convert, who is being received as a New Covenant priest after the pattern of Jesus Himself, a priest according to the order of Melchizedek. As in any priestly transaction, three people are involved: God, the priest, and the person being brought near.

In our zeal to uphold the priesthood of the believer, we evangelicals have neglected the very fundamentals of priestly ministry. We know that any Christian can draw near to God, and so we have drawn the unwarranted inference that no one needs a priest. But just as I needed someone else to baptize me, so other times I need someone else to bring me to God and minister God's grace to me. We hear one another's confessions in obedience to James 5:16; we pray for one another's healing. We forgive sins by the power of the Spirit (John 20:22-23). When we hear those confessions, they are heard in heaven; when we forgive sins, it is God's forgiveness, mediated through us; our prayers for the sinner's healing are offered in the Holy of Holies, no matter where we happen to be standing.

Having been washed by the Body and received into Christ's priesthood, we must not neglect our duties. God calls us to mediate His grace, blessing, and revelation to one another — and how much more to the world!

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#### **Part 5: Baptism Saves**

*"There is an antitype that now saves us: baptism"*

*- St. Peter*

Doesn't that just annoy you? We have our ways of explaining the text, but isn't it irksome that Peter would say something that requires so *much* explaining? How could he be so unclear? Perhaps he wasn't.

Perhaps we need to repent of stage-managing the text, and just submit to it.

Let us resolve together not to be embarrassed by this text. Let us not panic and label it an "unclear" passage (where "unclear" means "I wish it said something else.") Let us not be preoccupied with arguments about what this passage *can't possibly* say. There's a fear that if we allow this passage to speak, it will somehow give aid and comfort to baptismal regeneration or some other false doctrine, and we can't have *that!*

All those responses are unworthy of God's children. God isn't going to lead us into false doctrine; if something He says sounds weird, the problem is with *us*. He is speaking; let us *listen!* One of the best ways to listen is to experience the text as its original addresses did: read the entire letter aloud from end to end.

As I read, I notice that throughout the letter, Peter applies the sufferings of Christ to the readers' present situation. He calls them to remain faithful in trial, keeping in mind the coming glory, as Jesus did (1:11). He draws on Christ's example of patient suffering for servants (2:21). He encourages all his readers to be willing to suffer for good, as Christ did in order to bring us to God (3:18). He reframes their suffering as sharing in Christ's sufferings, and therefore cause for rejoicing (4:13). He frames his instructions to his fellow elders by reminding them of Christ's suffering, and of partaking in the coming glory (5:1).

The crucifixion and glorification of Christ aren't the only historical events Peter ties to the present moment; he also uses the Flood to map current events. In 2 Peter, he draws on the Flood to remind us that uniformitarian assumptions have a spiritual agenda: forgetting the Flood means forgetting the reality of divine judgment on the world. But when he invokes the Flood in 1 Peter, the judgment motif is in the background. The focus is on salvation.

3:18-4:6 is a single unit of thought, and it begins by springboarding off Peter's call in the previous paragraph to holy living, and his closing observation that it's better to suffer for doing good than for doing evil. Peter applies the sufferings of Christ to the situation, reminding his readers that Christ also suffered in order to bring us to God, physically dying but raised by the Spirit. Let's not get bogged down in the "spirits in prison" debate here. For our purposes, most views make the same point: that Christ proclaimed the victory of God's salvation over sin, which gives Peter occasion to bring in the Flood as a type of our present situation: in the ark eight souls were saved through perilous flood waters...which brings us to *the scandalous sentence* in 3:21.

It's a complex sentence, and we generally get so scandalized by the middle that we forget about the end. So just for today, let's focus on the end first, then come back to the middle. "There is an antitype that now saves us—baptism...***through the resurrection of Jesus Christ***, who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, angels and authorities and powers having been made subject to Him." Did you get that? Baptism saves *through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who is ascended in power*. Before we go any further, let's give that its due weight: it's not the power of magic water that works in baptism, nor the power of our commitment to Jesus, nor even the power of the Church. The resurrection of Jesus Himself is at work here.

Now let's look at the parenthetical: "There is an antitype that now saves us: baptism (not the removal of filth from the flesh, but the appeal of a good conscience unto God)." There's a temptation to stay well away from all the dangerous interpretations by just refusing to let this passage have anything to do with water. We say "It's not talking about water at all -- 'not the removal of filth from the flesh,' see?"

That won't do. We can't refuse to see water in the passage when Peter just invoked the Flood; there literally couldn't be any more water than that! Peter's point in the parenthetical is simply that the water of itself does nothing. Washing off a little dirt is not the point; the heart must be involved. This is no *ex opere operato* rite; if we baptize a pagan, we get a wet pagan. But when the person is submitting to baptism as an appeal of a good conscience toward God...well, that's another matter. What happens then?

Peter says it saves him through the resurrection of Jesus, following the pattern of Noah's day, where eight souls were saved in the Flood. (Don't look at me like that. That's what it says.)

Remember: no embarrassment, no panic. Just keep listening. Peter directed our attention to the days of Noah. Did the ark deliver them to heaven? No. What did the ark do? It delivered them from the old world that was perishing, and brought them into a new (earthly) life.

Baptism does that. When you approach the water, you are a believer, destined for heaven to be sure, but still encumbered with familial loyalties, earthly alliances and allegiances. But then a member of Christ's Body puts you into the water, and *what goes into the water dies*. When that same member of Christ's Body brings you up out of the water, all those things, good and bad, are behind you. You are *physically and visibly* united to God's people here on earth. As of that moment, *that* is your most important group membership, your most important loyalty. As Jesus Himself once put it, "These are my mother and my brothers." You are entering a new life by the power of Jesus' resurrection, with which you were united in baptism.

You enter into this new life with the Body, which is markedly different from your old one. Peter goes on to describe this new life in terms reminiscent of Romans 6. The world thinks it strange that you won't join them in their pursuits, but they will have to give account to God for what they've done. You've been delivered from all that; you no longer belong to them; you belong to God's people.

This may make more sense if we make it concrete. Let me tell you the true story of a young man I'll call Robbie. When we first met Robbie, he was pushing all his worldly goods in a shopping cart. Robbie's drug of choice was meth, and he used it often. In our ministry, Robbie got mentoring, met Jesus, was baptized, joined a small group, got (and stayed) clean, found a job, then a place to live and a vehicle. He enjoyed a normal life for several years, even coming back to our ministry to serve as a drummer in our worship band for about a year. A few months ago (owing to the coronavirus lockdown), Robbie got laid off. Unable to find another job to make rent, he lost his apartment. I last saw him a week ago; despite the fact that he's living in his car, he's still neat, well-groomed, and sober. He's driving for DoorDash and just interviewed for a good warehouse job that would put him back on his feet. I'm praying he gets it.

Most of us probably wouldn't trade our situation for Robbie's right now, but let's compare it to his former life. In the timespan I've known Robbie, what's happened to the people like him who

*weren't* saved from that life? Bill was found dead in a dumpster, Jimmie died of a drug overdose, Joe was stabbed to death. If we believe (and we do!) that sin has deadly consequences, then we also believe that your deliverance from a life of sin into a life devoted to God's will is a *real* deliverance from death.

As real as being on the ark.

We struggle with talking like that because we think that being united with the Body in this life doesn't really matter. Unfortunately, our churches are often so weak that we kind of have a point. But that just means we need to repent our way into a robust Body life as well as a robust practice of baptism. Perhaps if our Body life were not so embarrassing, we'd be less embarrassed by the way Peter talks about the real thing.

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#### **Part 6: The Firstfruits of Mere Obedience**

"All authority in heaven and earth has been given to me," Jesus said, "therefore *go and disciple the nations*, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you. See, I am with you always, even to the end of the age."

They would first receive power from the Spirit, Jesus told them, and then they would begin spreading out organically (first Jerusalem, then Judea and Samaria, then to the furthest parts of the world). The intention from the beginning was that they should go to *the nations*, to *every creature*, all the way to the ends of the earth.

And when they go, the commission is to *make disciples*. By what means do we make disciples? Jesus mentions two things: baptism and teaching. In the evangelical Protestant world, we tend to place the majority of the emphasis on teaching, so a natural starting point for change might be to reform our teaching about baptism. Instead of our current minimalist teaching on baptism for fear people will get the wrong idea, what if we spoke of baptism with the ease and confidence that the New Testament authors do? What if we touched on baptism regularly in our discussions of participating in Christ, holy living, and more (as we've been discussing in Parts 3, 4, and 5)?

Accompanying that more robust teaching, what if we begin again practicing baptism the way the New Testament teaches us to (as we discussed in Part 2)? Jesus' baptism—our prototype—unites water and Spirit in a single event; the early Christians emulated this as closely as they could. In the New Testament, immediacy was key, as we see with the Philippian jailer getting baptized in the middle of the night. They didn't wait weeks or months for the next scheduled baptism service. There was no baptism service, actually. Just an immediate baptism, by the Christian who's on hand.

So let's empower our people to go do it! We trust people to do *CPR* after a half-day of training; how much time would it really take to make them able to baptize? Give 'em the lesson so they won't drown anybody, let 'em practice on you once, and off we go!

God does not always tell us in advance what the benefits of obedience will be; we often find out when He *shows* us along the way, as we obey. If we simply do as God has shown us -- *mere obedience*, in other words -- we do far better than we know. I find that after a season of trusting obedience, I can often describe the benefits in detail, but I didn't know what was going to happen when I started.

Today, I know a little more about the benefits of accepting the biblical practice of baptism. We'll be digging into that more in Part 7, but let's start with this: evangelicals — particularly in youth work—are (in)famous for manufacturing extra-biblical rites of passage, from the time-honored “walking the aisle” to the more exotic options like throwing your stick in the bonfire, standing up and shouting “I want the cross” at a rally, or jumping off the top of a telephone pole at the ropes course for Jesus (not making any of these up). It's easy to sneer at these stunts because they're not in the Bible, but it's noteworthy how hungry we are for something like this. There's a reason why we're hungry for this: God made us hungry for it.

Baptism, elevated to its proper importance, *is* that thing we're searching for. It is the thing Paul invokes in Romans 6 to remind the Romans that they participate in Christ's new life. The New Covenant form of priestly dedication. The thing that Peter says saves his readers, because in it they were rescued from their old life. (He admits it's not automatic, and Paul likewise reminds the Corinthians that the fate of the Exodus generation can be theirs despite their baptism. Yet the apostles still speak of baptism highly and often.) People's beliefs change; their fervor for the Lord waxes and wanes, but baptism is stubbornly historical, and therefore unalterable. Whatever has changed, the fact remains: you are baptized. Elevating that fact in pastoral conversation and teaching brings real fruit.

How is that possible? How does a dunking in water that doesn't do anything of itself (as both Paul and Peter admit) manage to accomplish so much? This is the question we will examine in Part 7.

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### **Part 7: Life in the Washed Body**

“Can anyone forbid water,” Peter asks in Cornelius' house, “that these should not be baptized who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?” Why does he ask this? Peter grasps social and spiritual realities that we--individualists that we are--have overlooked.

A wealth of biblical teaching forms the backdrop to Peter's question. Literally from creation, water and Spirit go together. The Spirit broods over the waters of creation, starting the “blue thread” of baptism motifs in history that we discussed in Part 1. The New Covenant re-creation

also pairs water and Spirit: “I will sprinkle clean water on you...I will put My Spirit in you.” John the Baptist admitted his ministry of water only was incomplete, and the One coming after Him would bring the Holy Spirit. Jesus validated John’s words (as Peter mentions in Acts 11), delivered on what they promised, and exemplified this union of water and Spirit in His own baptism.

The Gentiles Peter is talking about already have the Spirit; they are lacking only the water. Peter understood at the time that baptism meant receiving the Gentiles into full fellowship; in fact, when he returned to Jerusalem, it was the fellowship that people had a problem with: “You went in to uncircumcised men and ate with them!” Nobody complained that he *preached* to the Gentiles, but how dare he *eat* with them!

Baptism has a social meaning. A member of the Body put you into the water and brought you back out again. At that moment, a member of the Body received you into the life of the Body. In baptism, you are tangibly, literally received into the Body as it presently exists here on earth. You enter into the Body’s social and spiritual life. And as Peter points out later in his epistle, that new life has spiritual consequences.

It’s a life surrounded by priests, as we discussed in Part 4. When you are struggling, confused, afraid, anyone in the (washed) Body has the authority to take you by the hand and lead you to the throne of God in the heavenly tabernacle. We can all do this for each other -- and we all need it. On the flip side, you come up out of the water with the authority and responsibility to do the same for anyone else: older, younger, male, female, rich, poor, new Christian or wise old pastor, or even pagan -- makes no difference. They all need God’s presence, and you are ordained to minister it to them.

It’s a life of discernment, in which anyone in whom the Spirit dwells -- that’s all of us -- might correctly discern God’s will, and no one is above correction or adjustment from other members of the Body (as we recently discussed in *Pandemonium, Prophecy, and Peace*). As Paul explained to the Corinthians, God might give any one of them a teaching, a psalm, a tongue, an interpretation, a word of prophecy, but that’s not an excuse to go off half-cocked: it all has to be subjected to the collective discernment of the Body.

It’s a life of communal and continual “washing of water by the Word.” The Word (mixed with faith in those who hear it) cleanses the Bride for her wedding day. This is something Christ does for the Body, but He frequently uses us as the means to do this work for one another, precisely through the collective discernment Paul urges on us: “the whole Body...causes the growth of the Body.”

That can’t happen if we’re not close to one another. Discernment functions effectively when we refuse to hide: “if we walk in the light as He is in the light, we have fellowship *with one another*.” Willingness to stand in the light and be exposed enables us to share life with each other. Not hiding -- from God or each other -- means that a *lot* of sin comes into view. How can we have

fellowship in that environment? Keep reading: "...and the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin." Jesus takes care of the sin so we can continue to live with each other. It sounds insane, impossible...until you see it in operation. Of course it's a miracle, but it's a miracle that God is pleased to do regularly. (See *Heart Physiology of Walking in the Light* for a tie-in discussion.)

This doesn't mean you have to be besties with everybody in your church. Jesus wasn't besties with everybody: He had the crowds (that He didn't trust), and then the 70 (His "street team"), and then the 12, and then the three, and then John. You can be similarly selective -- but when you're up in the middle of the night, distressed and in need of prayer, there should be people you can call on (even if they might fall asleep on you in the moment). When you call those people, you should tell them the truth, *and they should not be surprised when you do*.

It may be true that in the end, we go to heaven or hell by ones, but Noah's family came through the Flood together, Israel passed through the sea together, and if we think we'll fulfill those types in isolation, we've not absorbed the lesson very well. We grow *together*. In the present, we are saved in shared life with one another and with God Himself. That life displays the manifold wisdom of God before the world, seen and unseen, and is both the telos for which we are saved and the means by which our salvation is being accomplished. Baptism is a sign of that salvation, but like a wedding ring, it accomplishes what it signifies -- it initiates us into that community in which we find present experience of resurrection life.

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### **Part 7b: The Messy Intimacy of Resurrection Life (an Excursus)**

I ended Part 7 with the statement that baptism "initiates us into that community in which we find present experience of resurrection life." I stand by the statement; it's what the New Testament teaches. But the ugly truth is that for many, our experience with church falls well short of that.

And mostly, we're ok with it.

You show up Sunday morning, there's coffee in the lobby, there's a band, a guy does some talking, you feel a little convicted, or a little inspired, and you leave. "Present experience of resurrection life" is a lot to put on what is essentially a music-and-Bible hour.

I want to be really clear that I'm not being at all dismissive of gathered worship. Our Sunday worship is a big deal both spiritually and relationally, but that's a topic for another day. Today, I want to focus on what church life is like *outside* the gathered church service, and the first point is that there must be church life outside the Sunday service. If the only time you see other believers is for an hour or two on Sunday...no wonder you're missing out!

Our fathers and mothers in the first century church ate bread daily from house to house. Over the past 15 years or so, I have invested deeply in following their example. Make no mistake, it's

costly. Looking back over my calendar for this week alone, I can see it's cost me about 8 hours of time (outside the worship service), and the headspace to juggle that time in a productive way. It's not leisure time and coffee meetings; mostly we're getting something else done, but doing it *together*. It takes extra effort to synch up schedules, and that's the easy part. The *real* cost is being seen and known, even when I don't want to be. It's hazardous business being known. The "wounds of a friend" are still wounds, ya know?

They literally say things like "You need to check your forgiveness level" or "Just do what you said you were going to do" or "I hear you struggling with this decision, but I didn't hear where you prayed about it." And also "That was wrong. You need to ask for forgiveness." We don't back away when things get hard; when things get bad between us, we spend *more* time together. We've dealt with misunderstandings, jealousies, and sins together, and come out forgiven and stronger. Whatever's going on, we're committed to bringing the life of Jesus to bear on it *together*. We share our aspirations, fears, the contents of our freezers, childcare duties, worship, money struggles, game nights, prayers. Without telling anything that's not mine to share, I can tell you we've been through births and deaths, major illnesses, birthdays, adoptions, infertility, miscarriages, promotions, firings, all of it. With these people, I'm learning what Jesus meant when He said "These are My mother and My brothers."

You know what? It pays off handsomely. This is the baptized Body through which Christ washes me with water by the Word. Hearing a bit of generally applicable Bible on Sunday morning is good, but hearing the most applicable biblical truth served up at the exact moment when I need to obey it, with nowhere to hide, from someone who knows me, loves me, and is already asking the Spirit to work in my heart...that's something different. *That's where we face the death that lives in us, and see the resurrection that Jesus brings, moment by moment.*

Quiet as it's kept, this is the kind of community that forms the backdrop of *all* the NT letters. Ain't no cathedrals or megachurches yet; every single church in the NT is a house church. The small group—small enough to gather in a private home—is the basic unit of church life. It is to small groups that *all* the commands in the church epistles are given, and within the life of such small groups that those commands are obeyed.

So then we gather in our hundreds, in buildings you could park a jet in, and we wonder: Golly Ned, why isn't it more like what we read about in the New Testament? The problem isn't big gatherings *per se*, it's that we've allowed the big gathering to replace the basic unit of church life, which is a small group of people that share day-to-day life together. As we discussed with other aspects of baptism back in Part 2, disobedience has consequences. If we want to see the life Jesus came to give us, we need to walk in the ways He designed for us.

## ***Washed***

### **Part 8: Bearing Witness**

*“There are three that bear witness: the Spirit, the water, and the blood, and the three agree as one.” -St. John the Evangelist*

Blood has borne witness on earth from our earliest days. The innocent blood of Abel cried out from the ground. The innocent blood of the first animals slain (and every Old Covenant sacrifice thereafter) bore witness to sin’s deadly power and God’s covering mercy, but as Hebrews later explains, also demonstrated that a better solution must be found: the blood of bulls and goats could cover, but not take away, sin. This is the famous scarlet thread that runs through the Bible, culminating in Jesus.

The “blue thread” of waters of creation and (baptismal) re-creation moves through many of those same texts, as we discussed in Part 2. Sometimes it is a counterpoint, as when the life-giving waters of the Nile were replaced with blood. Sometimes it is harmony, as in the washing of the offerings that consecrate newly washed priests (see Exodus 29) or in the washing of the ascension offerings (see Leviticus 1). But these two threads are united forever in Jesus: “one of the soldiers pierced His side with a spear, and immediately blood and water came out.” “This is He who came,” John is at pains to remind us, “not only by water” as John the Baptist did, “but by water and blood.” As John himself said, “I baptize you with water, but He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.” During Jesus’ earthly ministry, His disciples also baptized with water, but on Pentecost, the Spirit and fire arrived, marking a new era in the history of God’s people.

Baptism marks the boundary between the washed Body and the “and such were some of you” world—a world that refuses to thank God, and therefore descends into self-defeating thinking and darkness of heart, falling for creature-worship and devoting itself to fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind instead of fulfilling the destiny for which humans are designed: partaking of the divine nature.

They run in a flood of wickedness, while we live out a hope that makes them wonder. They think it’s strange that we don’t join them. They ask about it. Asking doesn’t mean they’re ready to join up, though. It took Nicodemus a while to go public, and remember the earliest experience of our people: “They were all with one accord in Solomon’s Porch, yet none of the rest dared join them, but the people esteemed them highly.”

*We can’t have that effect on the world unless we follow the example Jesus and His earliest followers set for us: **public** speech and action. We need to be able to say with Peter, “These things were not done in a corner.” If everything we do is inside a church building, can we really say that?*

We’re reaching out to a world that was already awash in a sea of advertising before social media democratized it. Used to be, only restaurant advertisers took close-up pictures of their food. Now, anyone can show their supper to the world, and we all know people whose lives look enviable on Instagram, but the reality is performative and hollow.

If there's a secret here, it's to *not* do that. Forget "tweaking the messaging" and focus on doing what Jesus and the early church did: *conducting our shared life visibly*. Put the tire swing in the front yard, not the back. Make the fence waist high instead of head-high. Build a big front porch instead of a back deck—and have dinner on it regularly. Run through the neighborhood rather than on a track at the gym. Take the small group meeting to the park...or the whole church service. Live a life you can invite people into. Live it where they will bump into it. Have enough margin that you can invite them in.

Live differently, visibly. You are the salt of the earth.

In that context, baptism will regularly be public *without being a production designed for public consumption*. It's simply another part of our shared life. Yeah, it's weird—so what? From the world's point of view, we do a ton of weird things: we pray together, sing together, eat together, and whoever's walking by is welcome to join in if they care to. If you believe, then we baptize you in the nearest available water, but what's one more brick on the load at that point? It's otherworldly, but then, we are ambassadors from another world.

I've done baptisms in the Platte River with cyclists passing by on the bike paths and golfers crossing over the bridge above us and kids on the playground beside us — and baptized in the same place when it was utterly deserted. Who is around is up to God; my job is just to obey the biblical teaching. We just—try this on for size—we just do what God called us to do, *without reference to what the world thinks about it*.

Thus we become a witness. By prophetic word and testimony, we manifest the Spirit. By sacrifice and the foolishness of preaching, we manifest the blood of Jesus by which the world is saved. That day at Cornelius' house, Peter preached the blood and God sent the Spirit — what remained except to apply the water? So they did, "and the three agree as one."

We should do the same.