



Central Peninsula Church

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Acts 2:37-42

Mark Mitchell

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The Church's Symbols of Grace

SERIES: *Understanding the Church*

I know that many of you were praying for me last week as I traveled back to Boston to defend my doctoral thesis. I appreciate your prayers a great deal and I want you to know that it couldn't have gone better and I'm scheduled to graduate on May 11. Many of you ask if you should then address me as Dr. Mitchell and my standard reply is, "Absolutely, but you're not allowed to laugh when you say it!" It's hard not to laugh when we all know I'm now educated way beyond my intelligence!

One of the things I've decided to do is actually participate in my graduation ceremony. I didn't do it when I graduated from college, and I didn't do it when I graduated from seminary, but it's my last chance and this time I'm going to do it. So on May 9 my family and I will fly back east and walk through graduation. There is a lot of "pomp and circumstance" that goes into all of this. I have to purchase academic robes with the proper regalia. There is a certain formality to the ceremony with prayers and speeches by scholars who have already blazed the academic trail. And then, of course, I'll receive my diploma. They'll call my name and I'll walk up, trying not to trip over my robe or my pride. The diploma will have my full name printed on the front, it will be signed by the President, and stamped with the school's seal. It should be quite an event!

Why is that these kinds of events are important to us? It's not the robes, or the piece of paper, or the stained glass; rather it's what they symbolize. Somehow all of these things bring to the surface the deeper significance of what's been accomplished. Maybe it's because we're physical beings that we need physical reminders to fully appreciate and enter into what we're celebrating. Symbols are powerful.

Jesus understood this. He gave to the church two powerful symbols that are designed to help us remember and enter into what he accomplished on our behalf. As we continue our study on the church, I want us to take a closer look at these symbols, because without them, it's debatable whether we can even be the church.

Turn with me to Acts 2.

I. Symbols of Grace in the Early Church (Acts 2:37-42)

In the book of Acts we see the earliest and most pristine example of the church. Acts records the first 60 or so years of the church. In Acts 2 we see the promised Holy

Spirit falling on the 120 followers of Jesus left in Jerusalem after he ascended into heaven. It was a very dramatic event in that it took place right out in the open and many foreigners were there for the Jewish celebration of Pentecost. When the Holy Spirit fell these 120 believers began to speak in foreign languages, and those who watched and heard them said, "Why are these Galileans speaking praising God in our language? Are they drunk?"

Then Peter got up and said, "We're not drunk. It's only 9:00 in the morning!" (I've always found that to be a rather funny statement. What if it were 6:00 in the afternoon?). Peter went on to preach what in essence was the first sermon ever preached by a Christian. It was a sermon designed to convince unbelievers that this Jesus who had just been crucified was indeed both Lord and Savior. That sermon stretches from vv. 14-36. It ends with these piercing words: **"Therefore let all the house of Israel know for certain that God has made Him both Lord and Christ — this Jesus whom you crucified."** Notice the emphasis on the "YOU." Peter didn't pull any punches. He didn't "soft sell" the message.

In verse 37 we see the response of the crowd who had been transfixed to Peter's words: **"Now when they heard this, they were pierced to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, 'Brethren, what shall we do?'"** Rather than getting defensive ("We didn't do that!"), they were cut to the heart. They felt the pain of remorse. They were convicted. They were willing to admit they had been wrong. And out of that they wanted to know what to do. How can we make it right? How can we deal with this?

Peter again speaks up. Before I read what he said, let me ask you, how would you answer that question? Would you say, "Well, why don't you come to church with me"? Or, "I have this book I want you to read"? Or, "You need to ask Jesus into your heart"? What would you say?

"And Peter said to them, 'Repent, and let each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you and your children, and for all who are far off, as many as the Lord our God shall call to Himself.' And with many other words he solemnly testified and kept on

exhorting them, saying, 'Be saved from this perverse generation!'"

Peter tells them first what they were to do, and then he tells them what God will do. They were to repent and be baptized in the name of Jesus. To repent means to turn around and completely change your mind, in this case, about Jesus. This is tantamount to believing in Jesus as both Lord and Savior. As a matter of fact, you'll notice down in v. 44 those who did repent are called believers. Repentance and faith go together; when you turn away from sin, you turn toward God and believe in his Son. But that's not all they were to do. They were also to be baptized. Notice he says, "Let *each of you* be baptized..." Why does he say "each of you?" That's because Jews practiced baptism, but they only baptized Gentile converts. So if a non-Jew wanted to become a Jew, they would baptize him as a public symbol of their repentance; they were breaking off from their Gentile past and washing away all defilement. But Peter says you ALL have to be baptized, Jews and non-Jews, in the name of Jesus, symbolizing that it was him they were now trusting in and identifying with. We'll talk more about this in a minute, but for now I want you to see that baptism was clearly an important symbol for the early church and for all subsequent followers of Jesus.

Next, Peter tells them what God will do. God will give them two free gifts. God will forgive their sins and give them his Holy Spirit. Peter says these gifts are not just for them, but for every generation and every nation. He talks about "all whom the Lord our God shall call to himself." It appears that salvation, which Peter calls them to in v. 40, has three parts: First, God calls us to himself, as he did here through Peter's preaching. Second, we respond in repentance and faith, symbolized by baptism. Finally, God gives us these gifts of forgiveness and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. That's how salvation takes place.

The response of the crowd to Peter's instructions was nothing less than miraculous. Look at vv. 41f, "**So then, those who had received his word were baptized; and there were added that day about three thousand souls. And they were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.**"

I've often wondered where they got all the water! Three thousand! How long do you think it took to baptize them all? I love the phrase, "there were added that day about three thousand souls." Added to what? The membership roll of the First Baptist Church? They didn't even have one! He's probably talking about the body of Christ as a whole. The body of Christ multiplied 26 times, from 120 to 3,120 in

just one day. You think we had a building problem! Imagine this!

Notice Peter doesn't just describe their birth, he also describes their growth. He describes how these spiritual babies were nurtured through continual devotion to four things: First, they were devoted to learning. They fed from the hands of the apostles who taught them the Scriptures. Second, they were devoted to loving. Luke describes it as "fellowship," which means the sharing together of a common life. It involved all the "one anothers" that we see in the Bible - love one another, bear one another's burdens, confess your sins to one another, weep with one another, be hospitable to one another, etc. The last two things they were devoted to have to do with worship. They were devoted to "the breaking of bread and to prayer." In their worship, they were devoted to eating and they were devoted to praying.

Next week I will talk about what it means to be a praying church, but for now I want to focus on what it means to be an eating church. When Luke uses this term, "the breaking of bread," what is he talking about? Is he talking about potluck dinners? There are two other verses which can help us here. First, in his gospel, when Luke describes the last meal Jesus had with his disciples, he uses the same language to describe how Jesus took some bread, gave thanks, broke it, and gave it to them saying, "**This is my body, which is given for you; do this in remembrance of me**" (Lk. 22:19). Second, in Acts 20:7 Luke describes a gathering of believers in the city of Troas, which along with Paul he himself was at, "**And on the first day of the week, when we were gathered together to break bread, Paul began talking to them, intending to depart the next day, and he prolonged his message until midnight.**" I didn't have the opportunity to be here last week to hear John Brandon preach, but I hear that he took this passage to heart and many of you at least thought he would preach until midnight! But that's not what I want you to observe here. Notice Luke describes their gathering together on the first day of the week, which for Christians has always been Sunday, as specifically being a time when they "gathered together to break bread." He is not talking about any old meal, he's clearly talking about the breaking of bread as a part of worship; he's talking about what we call Communion or the Lord's Supper. This was the second powerful symbol that Jesus gave to his church.

So we see here two powerful symbols. I want to spend the rest of our time talking about these two symbols in the context of our worship and our life together as a church. One of the ironies of our faith is that these two symbols, which were at least partly designed as symbols of our unity in Christ, have in fact become the center of disagreement and the cause for fractures with the body of Christ. So let's take closer look.

II. Symbols of Grace in the Ongoing Life of the Church

A. The number of the symbols: One of the issues that has caused problems is the question of how many of these symbols are there. If you grew up in the Roman Catholic tradition, as I did, you know that they count no less than seven symbols or sacraments of the church. Besides baptism and the Communion, there is confirmation, marriage, ordination, confession and the anointing of the sick, all of which are considered sacraments. Others have added foot washing. But as important as those other things are, they shouldn't be considered on par with baptism and the Lord's Supper. Jesus uniquely gave us these two symbols because they each represent that which is absolutely central to salvation. As important as marriage is, it's not central to salvation. And Jesus never even talked about confirmation or ordination. There are two and only two divinely instituted symbols of grace - baptism and the Lord's Supper.

B. The purpose of the symbols: This leads to the question of the purpose of these symbols. Some would say that these are really much more than symbols in that they actually channel grace to a person regardless of the condition of that person's heart. So the water of baptism actually saves you. The act of communion channels grace because the bread and the wine actually become the body and blood of Christ. But the Bible never really says that. Instead, when it comes to salvation, the Bible places a lot more emphasis on our own personal faith. And our faith is always to be in Christ, not in the symbols themselves!

For instance, Peter writes in his first letter, **“And corresponding to that, baptism now saves you — not the removal of dirt from the flesh, but an appeal to God for a good conscience — through the resurrection of Jesus Christ”** (1 Pet. 3:21). Do you see his point? It's NOT the water; it's what the water represents! It's not the physical symbol that saves; it's what it points to. It's like wearing a wedding ring. A wedding ring symbolizes marriage; baptism symbolizes our salvation. Wearing a wedding ring doesn't make you married any more than baptism makes you saved. The symbol is important. If you don't wear one it usually means you're not married. But don't confuse the symbol with the reality.

I heard a story about a young couple who had their first child while the father was stationed overseas during the war. For the first two years of her life, all that little girl ever saw of her father was that photograph her mother had framed and set on the kitchen table. Her mother taught her to say “daddy” whenever she saw it. Finally, her daddy came home. Her mother couldn't wait to see the delight in her daughter's face when she finally saw her daddy. But when she saw him she cried and ran away. She wouldn't come near this stranger. Instead, she kept pointing at the picture and saying, “That's my daddy!” Her dad was

heartbroken. Then one day as she sat at the kitchen table eating breakfast, she looked long and hard at the stranger sitting with her and then long and hard at the daddy in the picture. Her eyes went back and forth between the stranger and the picture. Finally, her face lit up and she cried out, “They're both the same daddy!”

The Christ we meet by faith through these powerful symbols is the same Christ who died and rose again. But don't confuse the symbols with the reality. Let the symbols point you to the reality.

C. The symbol of baptism: Think for a minute about each of these symbols. The symbol of baptism is a symbol of new birth through faith. That's why as believers you only do it once, to symbolize your new birth; your entrance into the body of Christ; the fact that you're a new person in Christ. That's why we don't baptize infants, but rather dedicate them. Some of you were baptized as infants, as I was, and you wonder if you should be rebaptized when you have come to faith. That's a very personal decision, but my sense is that you should, because baptism was designed to be a public declaration of your new identity in Christ. There is no reality to that when you are an infant. That can be a difficult thing to do. When I was baptized in college my parents took it very personally. But it was important for me to declare my new identity.

Back in 1990, center fielder Brett Butler left the San Francisco Giants as a free agent and joined their rivals, the Los Angeles Dodgers. When Butler returned to San Francisco for the first time as a Dodger, Giant fans greeted him with a mixture of boos and cheers. But the cheers turned to boos when Butler walked up to the Dodger manager Tommy Lasorda and gave him a big hug. Here is what Butler said about that, “It turned a page in my career. I'm a Dodger now; I'm not a Giant. That just kind of solidified it. I wanted them to know, I'm a Dodger.”

You see, when we become a Christian, we need to somehow identify with Jesus in the sight of our family and friends. Our new identity needs to be solidified. That's what baptism does. It symbolizes the fact that we've died and been raised up to new life. That's why it's best if possible to be placed all the way into the water - because that best symbolizes our death. And then we come out of the water as new creatures. That's what Paul meant in Romans 6:4, **“...we have been buried with Him through baptism into death, in order that as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life.”** Those pictures we saw remind me of ancient times that when warriors were baptized before a battle they sometimes would hold their right hand high above the water so it didn't get wet. Then they could say, “This hand has never been baptized” and they could swing

their battle axes as freely as ever. It's good to remember that when we get baptized every aspect of our lives is buried with Christ.

Baptism also illustrates our forgiveness; the fact that we've been washed and cleansed. The apostle Paul had on his hands the stain of Stephen's murder. Then Christ revealed himself to Paul on the Damascus road and sent him into the care of a man named Ananais. One of the things that Ananais did was have Paul baptized. He said, "**Now why do you delay? Arise, and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on his name**" (Acts 22:16). Paul needed that powerful symbol to remind him that the stain was gone forever. He was clean. He was washed.

D. The symbol of Communion: Next there is the symbolic meal we call Communion or the Lord's Supper. Whereas Baptism was a one-time act of entry into the Christian faith, Communion is an ongoing act of growth. It's something we're to keep doing. It was instituted by Christ at the final Passover meal he ate with his disciples (Mt.26:26ff). It was probably practiced by the early church in the form of a meal or what they called a "love feast."

This reminds me of the little boy who was visiting his grandparents. They took him to church with them, which his parents didn't normally do. At church they took Communion, and after church he asked his grandparents what it was all about. His grandfather said, "That was Jesus' last supper." The little boy looked at his grandfather and said, "Boy, they didn't give him much, did they?" Well, it's not the amount that matters, it's the meaning.

Communion was designed to be a reminder of the death of Christ on our behalf. It's the Passover meal reinterpreted through the lens of what Christ did. Just like the Jews did each year, every time we take Communion we should look in four different directions. First, we should look back, and remember with thanksgiving how Christ offered his life for us to save us from bondage to sin. Jesus said, "This is my body...this is my blood...do this in remembrance of me."

Second, we should look in. We should examine ourselves. At the Passover, the head of the house would go through a little ritual the day before the feast where he would take a light in one hand and a pair of tongs in the other and search the house for any trace of leaven. Leaven was a sign of corruption and sin. That's why Paul wrote, "**Therefore whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the**

Lord in an unworthy manner, shall be guilty of the body and the blood of the Lord. But let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of the bread and drink of the cup" (1 Cor. 11:27-28). Communion should be a time of "spring cleaning" in our hearts, where we take the light and the tongs and search our hearts for any known sin.

Third, we should look around. We don't eat this meal alone; it's something we do uniquely with our brothers and sisters in Christ as a symbol of our unity. Listen to what Paul said in 1 Cor. 10:16-17, "**Is not the cup of blessing which we bless a sharing in the blood of Christ? Is not the bread which we break a sharing in the body of Christ? Since there is one bread, we who are many are one body; for we all partake of the one bread.**" This is not a time to harbor bitterness and resentment; it's a time to deal with it.

Finally, we should look forward. Paul said, "**As often as you eat the bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death UNTIL HE COMES**" (1 Cor. 11:26). These symbols remind us that the day will come when we will sit with him and eat at the marriage supper of the lamb.

So there are two powerful symbols the Lord has given us to remind us and allow us to relive our salvation - baptism and the Lord's Supper. Both are for believers only. They commemorate our salvation, they don't invoke it. Baptism is a one-time symbol of new birth; Communion is an ongoing symbol of Christ's death.

CONCLUSION

All of us rejoiced this last week as 19-year-old private first class Jessica Lynch was rescued by a helicopter-born team of Navy Seals and Army Rangers. These brave men risked their lives to find and save just one fellow soldier. Jessica was totally unable to help herself. With two broken legs, she had to be carried out of the Iraqi hospital where she was being held. As news of her rescue spread last Tuesday night, her family and friends in Palestine, Virginia were jubilant.

It reminds me of our salvation. Totally helpless, God sent his Son into enemy territory to rescue us, one at a time. And like those hometown friends in Palestine, Virginia, Jesus tells us that all the angels in heaven rejoice when one sinner repents. Jessica will never forget. We can never forget. That's why the Lord has given us these powerful symbols of his gracious salvation.

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