



Jonesboro Heights Baptist Church
Sanford, North Carolina

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Signs of Discipleship
Acts 2: 37-42

Signs—we see them everywhere. You can't go up and down the streets or highways without seeing *signs*.

Some of them are road or street signs. They *give us information* we need to know to drive safely or to get where we're going.

Some of them are signs that *advertise* certain businesses or services or even churches. Even lawyers, doctors, hospitals, and funeral homes use billboards or other signs to market themselves these days!

Some of the signs we see *identify* something—a place or a group or an organization or a school or a church, tying what it identifies to a particular location.

Signs are an important part of life. If they're well-done and well-placed, they're extremely helpful. If not, they can make things even more difficult.

I remember a time years ago when Jo Ann and I had gone to Washington, DC on vacation. On the way back through Virginia, we went by Mount Vernon, the home of George and Martha Washington. After enjoying the visit there, we started making our way back home. Somehow I got confused about where I should turn. It was, of course, a long time before the days of GPS systems, and the more I tried to follow the road signs, the more confused I got. You see, there weren't a lot of them, and the ones that were there must have been designed for the locals rather than folks passing through. At the intersections, the signs were set at a different angle than I was accustomed to in our native North Carolina—they were turned where you could read the names of both roads. The only problem was that if you weren't familiar with the placement of the signs, you couldn't tell which road was which! I don't know how long we kept driving before we finally made it back to I-95!

Signs need to be clear and well-placed.

Two signs

Our Lord Jesus Christ has graciously given us two signs that show us in a dramatic way what it means to be the company of Jesus' disciples, the body of Christ, the people of God. They are both clear and well-placed.

We've already witnessed one of these signs this morning with the baptism of Dakota Johnson. We'll share in the other one in just a few minutes as we partake of Holy Communion.

Baptism and communion. As Baptists, we have traditionally, at least in North America, called these two rites *ordinances*. Christians in most other traditions, Protestant, Catholic, and Orthodox alike, and even our British Baptist brothers and sisters, usually call them *sacraments*,

though each group may imply a very different understanding of these rites by that same term. I like to call them *signs—signs of discipleship*.

Like other signs that tell us about something—a business, a product, or what’s up ahead—these signs point beyond themselves to greater realities than water and bread and wine. They point to our Lord Jesus Christ and what he has done for us, and to what it means for us to follow him together as our Lord. They show us a powerful picture of the very essence of what it means to be his disciples—one at the beginning of our journey with Jesus, the other one all along the way.

The text we read a moment ago is about what happened on that first Pentecost after Jesus’ crucifixion and resurrection and in the weeks and months that followed. After the Spirit was poured out on the church and Peter preached a powerful gospel message, about 3,000 people trusted Christ and became his followers. Luke says that those who believed Peter’s message and repented were baptized and continually shared in the fellowship, including the Lord’s Supper.

Here baptism and communion are set alongside each other—one as a once-for-all act marking the beginning of the believer’s journey and the fact that one now belongs to Christ, the other a continually repeated act in remembrance of Christ and in celebration of the church’s fellowship in him.

Think about it with me for a few minutes: *baptism and communion are signs of the faith and fellowship of Jesus’ disciples*.

Baptism: the sign of faith

Baptism is the sign of faith.

As Peter preached, those who welcomed his message repented and put their faith in Jesus Christ. Then they were baptized, immersed in water to show that they were following Jesus.

But why? If baptism is a sign, what does it *signify*?

Well, baptism paints a picture of several realities that are taking place as a person begins his or her journey of following Jesus.

First, it’s *an indication of our repentance and faith*, or as Peter put it in 1 Peter 3:21, “an appeal to God for a good conscience” (NASB).¹ It’s the public display that we recognize that we are sinners before God, that we have turned from our sin to God, that we have put our trust in Christ, and that he has washed our sins away through the blood of his sacrifice on the cross.

Now the waters of baptism don’t literally wash our sins away. If they did, then I guess we’d need to do like the Randy Travis song² says the preacher urged at the river baptism of the formerly wicked Eddie Lee Vaughn:

Pray for the fish;
They won't know what's coming
When the sin starts rolling off the likes of him.
Lord be with 'em, they ain't done nothin'
Please won't you leave them
just a little bit 'a room to swim
Pray for the fish . . .

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are from the *New International Version*.

² Randy Travis, “Pray for the Fish.” <http://www.cowboylyrics.com/lyrics/travis-randy/pray-for-the-fish-2099.html>.

No, it's not a literal washing, but it is a sign of the spiritual washing that we've experienced in Christ.

Baptism is also a sign of our *identification with Christ*. Through baptism we identify with him in his own death, burial, and resurrection. We declare our faith in him and our intention to follow him. Just as he told his disciples that he was going to be rejected, killed, and raised on the third day, and that whoever would come after him had to take up his or her own cross and follow him, we declare in the waters of baptism that we have taken up *our* cross, and that we have become his disciples. We declare that we belong to him, that he is our *Lord*!

But that's not all. Baptism is also a sign of *how we have died to our old way of life so that we are now a new person in Christ*. As Paul put it in Romans 6:4, "we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life" (NRSV). Whether it's the image of spiritual resurrection or spiritual regeneration (being born again or born from above), it's the expression of the reality that once we become followers of Christ, we're not who we used to be! And baptism portrays that reality beautifully!

But there's even more. Being lowered in to the waters of baptism also signifies *how the Holy Spirit has incorporated us into the body of Christ*. As followers of Jesus, we are "in Christ," as Paul so often put it in his letters. We belong to the body of Christ. We have been made a part of his church in a mystical, organic way. It's something we can't explain; but it's a reality we have to live!

You see, baptism is sort of like a wedding ring. Wearing a wedding ring tells everyone that sees it that you have made a lifelong commitment to another person as your wife or husband. It tells them that you entered into a new relationship with that person when you pledged your love and faithfulness for as long as you live, that this is the person to whom you have been joined for life in a one-flesh relationship. The wedding ring is the mark of being married.

In a similar way, baptism is the placing of Christ's mark on us. It says to everyone who ever knows that we have been baptized that we have committed our life to Christ, pledging to follow him faithfully forever as a part of his people. It says that we have trusted in what Christ has done to save us from our sins, and that we belong to him. It marks the beginning of our Christian journey, and it tells others that we are disciples of the Lord Jesus.

Communion: the sign of fellowship

Now if baptism is like the wedding ring, Holy Communion is like the wedding anniversary.

Every year, most married couples stop to mark the anniversary of their wedding in some way. Hopefully on that day they not only celebrate the years God has given them together, but they reflect on the vows they made to each other when they were married, and look forward to the coming years together.

And so it is with communion. It's a time of remembrance, celebration, and commitment.

Luke says in our text that those who had been baptized "devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer" (2:42). When Luke says "fellowship" here, he means our participation in Christ, what we all share and hold in common in him. When he says "the breaking of bread," he's talking about a lot more than a covered-dish fellowship meal—though that was a very important and deep act of fellowship both then and still is now. He's talking about the Lord's Supper, Holy *Communion*!

So what's the significance of communion?

First, it's *a remembrance* of our Lord Jesus Christ and how he gave himself for us on the cross. We remember his sinless life and his perfect sacrifice, his body given for us and his blood poured out for us. We remember his love for us and his willingness to give his life so that we might have life.

Communion is also *a celebration*.

It's a celebration of our fellowship, our communion with Christ—the fact that we are in him and he is in us. It's the celebration that we are a part of the body of Christ. As we partake of the Lord's Supper, we experience communion with our fellow believers as we share the signs of his body and blood, and we remember that we are all sinners saved through his sacrifice!

It's also a celebration of Christ's resurrection, because he is at the Table with us. He is the host, and only a living Lord can do that. We can commune with him at his Table because he has risen and is alive forevermore! And because he is alive, we celebrate our anticipation of his coming!

And communion is *a commitment*. Because Jesus gave himself for us, we give ourselves to and for him. Because he took up his cross, we take up ours. Because he poured out his life for us, we pour ours out to him. Because he is committed to his Father and his Father's will, we commit ourselves to him as we partake of the bread and cup as the tokens of his sacrifice. In our eating and drinking we're saying, "I cast my lot with Jesus, to keep following him, to live as he lived, to become as he is, to do what he does.

If a picture is, as they say, worth a thousand words, then we're hearing a lot today. Baptism and communion *signify* the faith and fellowship of Jesus' disciples.

Christ's mark on us. Christ's communion with us. *Signs of discipleship*.

Are *you* his disciple? Are you *really* following him?

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