

CELEBRATING PARTNERSHIPS

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Celebrating Partnerships

Jim Denison is a pastor in Texas, but when he was in college, he served as a summer missionary in East Malaysia. He attended a small church while he was there, and he tells an incredible story from that time. At one of the church's worship services, a teenage girl came forward to announce her decision to follow Christ and be baptized.

During the service, Denison noticed some worn-out luggage leaning against the wall of the church building. He asked the pastor about it. The local pastor pointed to the girl who had just been baptized and told Denison, "Her father said that if she was baptized as a Christian she could never go home again. So she brought her luggage."¹

Many people in our society today view baptism as an old, archaic initiation ritual. Some today view it as sort of superstitious action; that getting baptized is something to check off the list of things that "covers the bases" in case God is real and I want to get to heaven someday.

But in true, Christ-following, Biblical churches, baptism has been an action that tells the world that from now on, I am going to spend the rest of my life following Christ, that there is no turning back; that my old life is gone and from now on I will be known as a Christian; I will find my entire identity in Christ. From now on I am in a...

1. Partnership with *Christ*

From the very beginning of the church, baptism meant that a person was now "all-in" with Christ. This is why we don't baptize people more than once; if a person made that decision once, they need not make it again. To baptize someone twice is to cheapen the incredible commitment that baptism is. That's why the Bible says,

"All of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ." (Galatians 3:27, ceb)

To be clothed with Christ means that we put on the life of Christ. I committed to memory something that Dr. Porter said at our Faith Promise banquet last Sunday: "The call to take up our cross and die to ourselves is not a call to a *changed* life. It's a call to an *exchanged* life – our life for Christ's in us."

To be baptized means to be buried with Christ, then to be raised to life in Christ. That's why the Apostle Paul wrote:

¹ Raymond McHenry, *Stories for the Soul* (Hendrickson, 2001), p. 48

“Or have you forgotten that when we were joined with Christ Jesus in baptism, we joined him in his death?” (Romans 6:3, nlt)

So to be baptized in Christ does not mean we enter into a 50-50 partnership with him. It means that we give up all of ourselves to him.

- It is a – ***Diminishing* Partnership.**

That means that we live more and more for Christ and less and less for ourselves. John the Baptist said:

“He must become greater and greater, and I must become less and less.”
(John 3:30, nlt)

What we’ve seen today is not only these people entering into a partnership with Christ, we’ve also seen people entering into a...

2. Partnership in the *Church*

The Bible says in Ephesians 2:19:

“Now you are no longer strangers to God and foreigners to heaven, but you are *members* of God’s very own family, citizens of God’s country, and you belong in God’s household with every other Christian.” (Ephesians 2:19, tlb)

When a person becomes a Christian, it is understood and expected that by baptism, the person becomes a member of the Universal Church, which includes every believer in Jesus that has ever lived since the very beginning until the end of time, all around the globe. But you can’t live the Christian life without living out your faith with other believers *in a local church*. Let me read that passage again:

“Now you are no longer strangers to God and foreigners to heaven, but you are *members* of God’s very own family, citizens of God’s country, and you belong in God’s household with every other Christian.” (Ephesians 2:19, tlb)

So God expects you to be a member; you belong as a part of a household – a family. In Romans the Bible says:

“For just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others.” (Romans 12:4-5, niv)

Each member belongs to all the others. I tell our membership class, “If you don’t want to belong to everyone else, don’t join our church, because that is what it means to be a member. It is a commitment to other people.”

- This is what is – ***Declared* in Baptism.**

For some denominations, baptism and membership in the church are the same thing; when you get baptized, you are joining the church. There's a good reason for that, even though we disagree with that thinking. They do that because Baptism is about joining the Universal Church. You are baptized into faith in Christ and you are automatically a member of the Universal Church (capital "C"). But the problem is that you don't belong to a local church until you make a commitment to an actual group of believers.

- So you declare your partnership in the church at baptism, but then it is - ***Demonstrated* in Membership.**

This is where you live out your faith with each other, working together, helping each other grow in the faith. There are fifty-eight times in the Bible that it uses the phrase "one another." It says, "love one another," "Care for one another," "Pray for one another," "Greet one another," "Encourage one another," "Counsel one another," "Share with one another," "Help one another," and on and on. That means that we are *not* obeying the Bible if we are not in a committed partnership to a local church. So while we declare in baptism that we are a part of the Universal Church (capital "C"), we demonstrate it by membership in a local church (little "c").

And then together, we are in a...

3. Partnership in the *Kingdom*

We are partners together, working to advance the Kingdom of God through the Good News of Jesus Christ. We work together to show and to share the Good News of God's Love in Christ, so that others will be introduced to Jesus through us.

The Bible uses terms like "co-workers," "co-laborers," and "partners." But it is a different understanding that what we usually think of; we usually think it just means two people working together, or three, or four, or a hundred people working together. But that's human addition - 1 person + 1 person = 2 people working together.

But the Bible word for "co-worker," "co-laborer," and "partner," in the Greek language, is one word: "synergos" - it's where we get our word "synergy" from. Synergy means two people working together, whose combined effort is greater than the sum of their parts. In the Bible, partners in the church means 1+1=3, or 4, or 5, because God is involved!

Let me describe it this way: have you ever been to a "Tractor Pull"? This is when they cover the floor of an arena with dirt and guys in souped-up tractors compete to see who can pull the heaviest loads. That's nothing new because long before the internal combustion engine, farmers were competing with animals to see which one was strongest. They still have competitions in which workhorses compete. The beautiful Clydesdales breed has always been one of the strongest horses. Long before the Budweiser wagon, Clydesdales were pulling heavy loads. In these

competitions, competitors made an interesting discovery. A single horse could pull a heavy load, but when yoked with another horse, together, they could pull more than the sum of the amount that each horse could pull alone.

For instance, let's say a single Clydesdale can pull a sled holding two tons of weight. And another Clydesdale can pull three tons. You would think that when yoked together, the most they could pull would be five tons. But in reality when these two horses are yoked together, they can actually pull seven tons! You may think that's not possible, but this phenomenon has been proven many times. It's called *synergy*. Two pulling together can accomplish more than the sum of the two parts.

Now apply that principle to the yoke of Christ. You can try bearing the heavy load yourself, but Jesus invites you to join with others in Him. Think about how much strength He has! He's the strong One and we are the weaker partners. Remember that first song you learned as a child? "Jesus loves me, this I know; for the Bible tells me so; little ones to Him belong, they (we) are weak but He is strong!"

God calls and commands us to work together for his Kingdom. God doesn't *need* us to accomplish his purposes, but he invites us to. He chooses to limit himself to our involvement. He wants us to work together with him for the sake of bringing his Kingdom to earth, as it is in heaven. Jesus taught us to pray, "Your Kingdom come, Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven..." right? And then he intends to answer that prayer through the Holy Spirit in us, through us. He wants to see more and more people, here with us, being united with Christ in baptism and with the church in membership.

Pray