

After tucking in his six-year-old son Chris one night, Robert O'Brien tapped his son's chest and asked, "Do you know what you have in there?"

Chris looked puzzled and responded, "My guts?" **"No, you have a piece of God,"** his father replied. After a brief silence Chris responded, **"God is in my guts?" "No,"** said his Dad, **"we have a piece of God inside of us; it is God's gift to each of us."** Chris smiled, tapped his Dad's chest, and asked whether his Dad had a piece of God in his guts. They laughed and together they began to ask the same question about the rest of the family.

"Does Mommy have a piece of God?" "Yes," they answered, laughing. "Does Matt have a piece of God?" they asked about his older brother. "Yes."

O'Brien knew that Chris attended a day care center with a little girl named Mary who was so spoiled she made the people around her miserable. He said, **"You know, even Mary has a piece of God."** Chris looked stunned, and then he said emphatically, **"No, not Mary."** When his father insisted Chris said, **"Daddy, I have been with her more than you. She doesn't have a piece of God."** O'Brien told his son that God never missed anyone; everyone has a piece of God inside. Chris pondered this thought a while, and then said, **"Well, her piece must be all covered up with junk!"**

This is the day we celebrate the baptism of Jesus. It is also the time we celebrate our own baptism.

A pastor in Winston-Salem, N.C., was teaching a membership class and explaining how some churches baptize by immersion and others by sprinkling. **"Does anyone know how the Quakers baptize?" he asked the class. A young man responded, "Oats?"**

THANKFULLY, ALL CHRISTIANS USE 'WATER,' NOT 'OATS, BUT TODAY WE CELEBRATE WASHING AWAY ALL THE "JUNK" THAT COVERS PEOPLE-- and keeps us from being what God has created each of us to be.

Only one person who ever lived escaped being covered with this junk and that was Jesus. Still, he came to be baptized by John. The Jews already practiced baptism before John the Baptist, but their baptism had little to do with repentance and confession of sins. Among the Jews, clothing, utensils, and even articles of furniture were ceremonially cleansed. **They were, in a sense, baptized.**

Jesus' baptism occurred during the Feast of Weeks, a time when many believers from surrounding areas came to the Temple for the blessing of the "first bread made from the new harvest of spring grain." It was a perfect time for many people to witness his baptism and hear his message.

It was also a perfect time for John the Baptist to establish himself as a force to be reckoned with. After all, what self-respecting preacher does not enjoy being the center of attention? All of Jerusalem was coming out to hear him and now all these visitors. God was truly blessing his ministry. **Do you want to know what was different about John the Baptist, though more unique than even his diet or his wardrobe?** It was his humility. Or you might want to call it his integrity. Look at verse 16. John says, "I baptize you with water; but he who is mightier than I is coming, the thong of whose sandals I am unworthy to untie. . . ." In those days rabbis had disciples who performed all sorts of menial tasks for them except for the removing of their sandals. In the Middle East of John's time, sewers were unknown and the waste products of humans and animals filled the streets. It was unthinkable that anyone else would handle your sandals after a day spent walking about in such conditions. But John says that the One who is coming is so great that John is unfit to perform even this lowly task for him. (4) The people of Israel had been without an authentic prophet for hundreds of years, and some of them wanted to worship John and follow him. But he deflected all glory off himself and onto Jesus, insisting that he was unworthy even to be a forerunner to him.

John knew his place in the scheme of things. EVEN MORE IMPORTANT, HE KNEW JESUS' PLACE.

Here is the first important thing we learn in the story of Jesus' baptism: WE SEE WHO JESUS IS. This is clear in verses 21-22. The Holy Spirit descends as a dove and a voice comes from heaven, "You are my beloved Son: in You I

am well pleased." These words are similar to words found in Psalm 2:7, "He said to me, *~You are my son, today I have begotten you . . . ~*" words that God would use toward a king when he came into power. According to the Code of Hammurabi, these are also the words one would use in legally adopting a child. **This baptism by water and the Spirit marked the beginning of Jesus' ministry**, revealed his identity to those who witnessed it, and deepened the faith of many of the witnesses.

LET'S CONSIDER, FOR A MOMENT CHRIST'S IDENTITY AND WHAT IT MEANS TO US.

Ted Engstrom, in his book **THE FINE ART OF FRIENDSHIP**, tells a story which helps us grasp some of *who Jesus is and what he has done for us*.

A young husband has a crippling, terminal neurological disease. His wife is carrying a baby which this unfortunate young man may never live to see. Thus, he writes a letter to this unborn child to say something very important that is on his heart. **Listen carefully as I read these words. They are very beautiful. Remember he is writing to his unborn child:**

"Your mother is very special," he writes. "Few men know what it is like to receive appreciation for taking their wives out to dinner when it entails what it does for us. It means that she has to dress me, shave me, brush my teeth, comb my hair, wheel me out of the house and down the steps, open the garage and put me in the car, take the pedals off the chair, stand me up, sit me in the seat of the car, twist me around so that I am comfortable, fold the wheelchair, put it in the car, go around to the other side of the car, start it up, back it out, get out of the car, pull the garage door down, get back into the car, drive off to the restaurant. And then, it starts all over again. She gets out of the car, unfolds the wheelchair, opens the door, spins me around, stands me up, seats me in the wheelchair, pushes the pedals out, closes and locks the car, wheels me into the restaurant, then takes the pedals off the wheelchair so I won't be uncomfortable. We sit down to have dinner, and she feeds me throughout the entire meal. And when it's over she pays the bill, pushes the wheelchair out to the car again, and repeats the same routine. And when it's over, finished, with real warmth, she'll say, 'Honey, thank you for taking me out to dinner.' I never quite know what to answer . . . "

If you have ever been the target of unconditional love, you know that young man's predicament. If you ever get a grasp on all Christ has done in your behalf, you understand the uncertainty of this young husband with this tragic neurological disease. You simply do not know what to say. You and I are the recipients of an amazing self-giving love. The Lord of all life came into our world and gave his life on our behalf. That is who Christ is and what he has done. He is not simply a good teacher who gave many insightful lessons about life. He is the Lamb slain from the foundations of the earth. He is the Cornerstone who was rejected. He is the Lily of the Valley crushed under the heel of humanity's sins. And because he left his throne and entered our valley the valley of suffering and pain, he knows our hurt, our disappointment, our fears, our frustration.

There is an interesting story of a sixty-four-year-old mother with an interesting library.

Her bookcase was separated into (3) sections. The first rack contains books on psychology and theology. Many are thick textbooks full of mile-long words. **The second rack was stocked with medical textbooks and journals.** There seems to be a special focus on genetics and medicine on this rack. And **the third rack was full of multiple issues of HEAVY EQUIPMENT DIGEST.** Quite a contrast—YES?

A stranger visiting her home might say that she is a woman of diverse interests. Her sons, however, know that she is a devoted mother. **You see, one son is a Christian counselor**, and so this mother read all his old textbooks to learn more about his work. He is known to her by the first rack in the bookcase. **This mother also read all the medical journals on the second rack so that she could better understand the work that her second son, the Doctor.** And what about the subscriptions to HEAVY EQUIPMENT DIGEST? **Well, that represents a third son who spent years in that field.** This mother spent considerable time ACQUAINTING herself with her sons' interests, to better understand them. **It was important to her to know about Freud and DNA and Bulldozers. WHY? So, she could BETTER KNOW THE SONS SHE RAISED AND LOVED.**

How do we know God loves us? Because Christ has walked where we walk and he experienced what we experience. At Jesus' baptism, we are introduced to Jesus as the Father's Son, with whom the Father is well pleased. *Jesus was baptized to show us who he is and to show us how much God loves us.*

And that brings us to THE 2ND THING WE CAN LEARN FROM TODAY'S READING...JUST AS JESUS' BAPTISM SEALED HIS IDENTITY, OUR BAPTISM SEALS OUR IDENTITY. Because we have been baptized, we know who we are. **WE ARE CHILDREN OF GOD!!**

I love the story of Martin Luther who, on those dark and discouraging days that we all have, would say to himself over and over, "*I am Baptized. I am Baptized.*" He affirmed that whatever was happening to him in that moment, he was a child of the covenant God had made with His people. Try that on one of your bad days. You might get surprising results. **WE HAVE BEEN BAPTIZED!** Think about the implications of that statement.

Several years ago, a man and his wife were found frozen to death in their car. A blizzard had dumped tons of snow in the area, burying their vehicle. Before she died, the woman scribbled a note on a piece of paper and stuffed it in the glove compartment. **The note read: I do not want to die this way.**

Tragically, less than six feet from their icy grave was a stranded bus, whose festive passengers remained warm throughout the night.

Less than six feet away there was help and hope, but they died unaware.

I wonder how many people--good people, even Christian people struggle through life never realizing that all the help and all the hope they need is closer than the air they breathe.

We ARE CHILDREN OF GOD WHO HAVE BEEN BAPTIZED!! God loves US! God sent Christ into the world to WASH AWAYT ALL THE "JUNK" FROM OUR LIVES!!

This is OUR identity. Each of us belong to Christ. IT IS AS SIMPLE AS THAT!!

THANKS BE TO GOD—THAT CHRIST CLAIMS US!!

Amen.