

Baptism - A Confession of Faith

by

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"When they believed Philip preaching the things concerning the kingdom of God, and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women." Acts 8:12

Christian baptism is an act of worship, taking the form of a ceremonial washing, in which a believer in the Lord Jesus Christ identifies himself, by faith, with the Savior's atoning death, and consecrates himself to a lifetime of faith and obedience to the Lordship of Jesus Christ. Like the Lord's Supper, baptism is an ordinance, i.e. sacred tradition, given to the church by the Lord Jesus, both by his own example (Mt. 3:13-17) and his own explicit command (Mt. 28:19). The ordinance of baptism is a ceremony of initiation, marking the entrance into discipleship and identifying one as a fellow believer with his brothers and sisters in the local church. The ordinance of communion is a ceremony of remembrance, commemorating the Savior's crucifixion and resurrection by sharing the bread and wine with fellow believers.

At least four parallels can be made between these two ordinances that Christ gave to the church.

(1) *Both ordinances are acted sermons, proclaiming the gospel of the grace of God in Jesus Christ visibly and dramatically.* "As the preaching of the word makes the gospel audible, so the ordinances make it visible." They are, consequently, visual aids, portraying the gospel in picture form.

(2) *Both are outward expressions of an inward reality.* Peter classified baptism in the same category with Noah's ark as "figures" of the means of salvation (1 Pet. 3:20-22). Baptism is, then, a symbolic act, by which an individual expresses his conviction that God has already performed the substantial work of grace in the soul that Paul calls "the washing of regeneration" (Titus 3:5). The salvation in gospel baptism is a "now" salvation ("*. . . baptism doth also **now** save us . . .*"), that is, a present deliverance in which the believer receives a sense of pardon and peace from a guilty conscience, not the removal of "the filth of the flesh [i.e. indwelling sin]" (1 Pet. 3:21). The Lord's Supper, likewise, is figurative of the actual means of salvation. When Jesus took the elements and said "This is my body . . . this is

my blood," he meant that the bread and the wine represented, not constituted, his broken body and his shed blood. Neither baptism nor communion are themselves the means by which one is saved; rather, they point to and picture the objective work of salvation performed by Christ and applied by the Holy Spirit.

(3) *Both are signs of the believers union with Christ.* By participating in the ordinances, the believer is reminded of his personal interest in Christ's atoning work as a participant, not a spectator. The ordinances are expressions of individual assurance testifying with Paul, "I am crucified with Christ . . . who loved me and gave himself for me" (Gal. 2:20; Col. 2:12). When an individual personally and physically is immersed, he is saying, by that act, "I believe that Jesus Christ was crucified, buried, and resurrected for me; I trust only in his merit, for time and eternity." Further, when one personally and physically takes the bread and the wine into his body, he is saying, "I believe that his body was broken and his blood was shed for me; he is my only hope for heaven and my only source of strength and nourishment now."

(4) *Both ordinances are "church" ordinances, in terms of the fact that the authority to administer the ordinances has been given to the church* (Mt. 28:19). The Biblical observance of these two ceremonies, "as [the apostles] delivered them" (I Cor. 11:2), are marks by which a genuine church is identified and defined (2 Ths. 2:15).

Believer's Baptism

A convincing case can be made from the New Testament regarding the fact that immersion is the Scriptural mode or method of baptism. Philip and the Eunuch "went down both into the water . . . and he baptized him," then they came "up out of the water" (Acts 8:38-39). Certainly, complete immersion most accurately portrays Christ's death, burial, and resurrection. Even more convincing is the case that can be made for the fact that believers, as opposed to infants and unbelievers, are the only appropriate subjects for the ordinance. To the eunuch's question "What doth hinder me to be baptized?" Philip responded, "If thou believest with all thine heart, thou mayest" (Acts 8:36-37). On the day of Pentecost, it was those who "gladly received the word" that were baptized (Acts 2:41). It was after Paul and Silas spoke the word of the Lord to the Philippian jailor and his family that they were all baptized (Acts 16:32-34). To everyone who believes the gospel of Jesus Christ,

baptism is commanded (Acts 10:48), for faith without works is dead. Baptism is the act of faith, by which a believer makes a break with his past lifestyle, turns from his idols, and sets out to follow the Lord Jesus Christ for the rest of his life. It is a dramatization of repentance at a radical level, a turning point in life marked by a distinct and voluntary decision to die to self and to live completely and only for the Lord. It is the believer's testimony, first to the local fellowship, and then to the watching world, of personal faith in Christ Jesus. It is a courageous act in which one risks the embarrassment and vulnerability of scorn and ridicule as the first step of a Christian discipleship that will be marked by ongoing persecution. It is a confession that the believer is not ashamed of the gospel or embarrassed by the Savior, but willing to suffer humiliation for the One who laid down his life for him. Like the entire Christian life, this first step is inconvenient and physically unpleasant, but a true believer is willing, yea, even glad to suffer hardship for the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. Yes, baptism is for believers.

A Confession of Faith

Baptism, however, is not only a profession of the fact that one believes *in* Jesus, it is also a confession of what one believes *about* Jesus. In Acts 8:12, Luke specifically refers, not to the mere *fact* of their faith, but to the *content* of their faith, i.e. not "that" they believed but to "what" they believed: "But when they believed Philip preaching *the things concerning the kingdom of God*, and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women."

Both of the ordinances are, in fact, expressions of the content of faith. They both say something not only of the person, but also of the work of Jesus Christ. There is no New Testament precedent for separating the person from the work of Christ. Paul said "we preach Christ crucified" (1 Cor. 1:23), a Christological formula that expresses an inseparable union between the person and the work of Jesus. The argument that baptism is merely an existential experience with the person of Christ, but not a theological confession of the work of that same Christ, is an attempt to put asunder what God has joined together. That Paul understood baptism to be a confession of one's belief about the cross is clear from his argument in 1 Corinthians 15:29: "Else what shall they do who are baptized for the dead, if the dead rise not at all? Why are they then baptized for the dead?"

An idea had taken root in the church at Corinth that there would be no bodily resurrection of the dead in the last day. This particular controversy was a theological departure of no small importance. Paul saw this aberrant teaching as a threat to the essentials of the faith. He proceeds in 1 Corinthians 15, therefore, to dismantle the false teaching by a logical argument, the force of which is simply irresistible. "If there is no resurrection," he argues first, "then Christ is not raised, for Christ's resurrection guarantees ours." If you deny the resurrection of the dead, in other words, you must deny the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Secondly, he argues, if you deny the resurrection of Jesus Christ, then the entire Christian faith is meaningless and worthless. All is vain if Christ is not alive. He then proceeds to describe the vanity and futility of a Christless Christianity. Preaching is vain, he says, for we have no gospel. Your faith is vain, for Christ cannot help you if he is in the grave. Furthermore, hope and assurance of salvation is vain, for, if Christ is not raised, you are yet in your sins. Then, Paul says, "By the way, if Christ is not alive from the dead, why are you still practicing the ordinance of baptism, for baptism pictures not only death and burial, but also resurrection? Baptism is meaningless if you deny the doctrine of the resurrection."

Paul understood the theological implications of the act of baptism. The inconsistency between their practice of the ordinance of baptism and their insistence that there was no resurrection was glaring. By denying the doctrine of the resurrection, they had robbed the act of baptism of its essential meaning. Baptism is primarily, then, a confession of faith, not an existential experience.

Baptism in Christian History

Historically, every tradition, whether Baptist, Protestant, or Roman Catholic, considered the ordinances as mirrors of theology; hence, the practice of referring to one's particular tradition as a "communion," i.e., the Methodist communion, the Episcopal communion, the Presbyterian communion, etc. The tendency to classify the ordinances in "experiential" (as opposed to "theological") terms is a relatively new phenomena that gained prominence in twentieth century ecumenism through the influence of the World Council of Churches and the rapid growth of the charismatic movement.

It was this understanding of the theological, not only the experiential, nature of Christian baptism that was the motivation behind the Donatist controversy

in the early church (A.D. 200-300). Believing that baptism was first, an ordinance of the church, and secondly, a statement of faith, the Donatists refused to accept the authority of Roman Catholic baptisms. Because they required Scriptural baptism of proselytes and of converts who had received pedo-baptism, Baptists were derisively termed "Anabaptists," meaning "re-baptizers." Who were these "Anabaptists"?

In the second century, the church moved from the simplicity of a living organism to the complexity of a sacramental and authoritarian institution. A campaign known as "the Free Church movement," opposing the institutionalized church arose in which certain groups left to pursue a pure church based on the Bible. In his *History of the Christian Church*, Philip Schaff says concerning one of these groups known as the Donatists, "The Donatist controversy was a conflict between separatism and catholicism . . . between the idea of the church as an exclusive community of regenerated saints and the idea of the church as the general Christendom of state and people." The Donatists, together with the Novatians (ca. A.D. 250), Paulicans (ca. 625), Albigenses (1140), Waldenses (1180), and others who opposed the institutionalized church were branded as heretics and "Anabaptists." In the book *Rediscovering Pastoral Ministry*, James Stitzinger writes, "As a general rule, the Anabaptists rejected the idea of an invisible church, viewing the church as a voluntary association of regenerated saints. They sought to restore the idea of a primitive, New Testament church free from magisterial entanglements. This allowed the practice of church discipline, but meant that the church did not have the right to force its views on anyone or persecute those who opposed it."

Defining a 'Church'

Behind the question of the validity of someone's baptism is the question "How should we define 'the church'?" Is the church merely some vague, nebulous, mystical group that includes everyone who professes to believe in Jesus? In the New Testament, the idea of 'the church' is concrete and definite, not abstract and general. When Jesus said, "If he neglect to hear them, tell it to the church" (Mt. 18:17), he indicates that 'the church' is a local group that has definition and structure, else the command would be unintelligible.

In general terms, a true church is defined by its commitment to the gospel of Jesus Christ in all three of its functions:

- (1) The preaching of the word;
- (2) The observance of the ordinances;
- (3) The administration of discipline.

Each of these three functions converge, like the spokes of a wheel to the hub, on the same gospel. Each is an expression of that gospel. The preached word makes the gospel audible. It is the gospel verbally and rationally proclaimed. The ordinances make the gospel visible. In them, the gospel is visually displayed and illustrated. The practice of church discipline in which each is accountable to and responsible for his brother makes the gospel practical. It is the gospel practically applied and lived out. What a group believes regarding the gospel, then, determines how they preach, how they observe the ordinances, and how they live interactively with others. These three functions, furthermore, are expressions of their understanding of the gospel message.

Baptist's historical insistence on authentic Scriptural baptism, consequently, arises from these three convictions:

- (1) A conviction for 'believer's' baptism. By that phrase they mean "people who give evidence of regeneration, and who really believe in Jesus Christ by submitting to what the Scriptures have to say about both his Person and his Work."
- (2) A conviction that baptism is a confession of faith, a statement expressing not only *that* one believes in Jesus but also what one believes about Jesus Christ;
- (3) A conviction that baptism is a church ordinance, an official ceremony that the church alone has the right to administer. This initial ordinance determines communion, the perpetual ordinance.

Admittedly, there is scarcely any subject that has been more historically controversial. As in every controversy, the challenge to be people of conviction while guarding against the ugly arrogance of an exclusive, sectarian spirit demands a posture of humility before God.