

CHRISTIAN BAPTISM



In the Gaza desert, two men sat in a chariot reading from the Scroll of Isaiah (Ac. 8:26-39). One was a Christian, and the other, an African who had embraced the Jewish faith, was returning to Africa from a pilgrimage in Jerusalem. The subject of their reading was about a certain "Servant of Yahweh" who would suffer for the sins of others. The Ethiopian asked, "Who is the prophet talking about, himself or someone else?" Philip began with that same Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus. When Philip had concluded, the Ethiopian asked, "Look, here is water! Why shouldn't I be baptized" (Ac. 8:36b)?

Why, indeed? This is the question!

The last words which Jesus spoke to his disciples after his resurrection and before he ascended into the heavens contain this commission:

"Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you" (Mt. 28: 19-20a).

As is apparent, part of the mandate to Jesus' followers was to baptize disciples. Ever since, believers have continued the practice of Christian baptism. The apostles in the early Christian churches baptized their converts (Ac. 2:41; 8:12, 36-38; 9:18; 10:48; 16:15, 33; 18:8; 19:5). The expected response of persons who had come to faith in Jesus Christ was to submit to baptism, and this pattern began with the first sermon preached by Peter after the ascension of Jesus back to the Father:

"Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ..." (Ac. 2:38a).

"Those who accepted Peter's message were baptized..." (Ac. 2:41a).

But just what does baptism mean? It obviously is a ritual, but what is its purpose? Is it a human act which attempts to induce God to do something? Is it magic? Does it symbolize something? Can one be a Christian without being baptized?

The modern person, along with the African in the Gaza desert, might well ask, "Why shouldn't I be baptized," or perhaps better, "Why should I be baptized?"

The usage of the word baptism actually begins before Christianity, and this early employment helped to shape its meaning for Christians. The verb baptize, which means to dip, was used by the Jews to describe the ceremonial pouring of water on the hands for ritual purification (cf. Lk. 11:38; Mk. 7:4). Furthermore, the act of dipping a person in water was performed for slaves who were baptized into the service of a household, or if emancipated, baptized in the name of freedom. Baptism was practiced for converts to Judaism, and for ritual purification among some Jewish sects.

Thus, when John the Baptist began baptizing people in the Jordan River, even before the appearance of Jesus, the public knew that this act signified cleansing and the adoption of a new attitude toward the future. Thus, John the Baptist baptized his converts as an outward sign of their inward change of heart (repentance) and as a sign of God's forgiveness (Mk. 1:4-5). Jesus himself was baptized by John, though as Matthew makes clear, it was not for his own sins but in order to conform to a righteous pattern (Mt. 3:13-15).

Jesus' commission to his followers to baptize disciples, then, was not an inexplicable command. Christian baptism carries with it the primary symbolic value of a change of heart and of the reception of God's

forgiveness. It is an act which points toward a new future, a demarcation between one's old life under the slavery of sin and one's new life in the freedom of Christ's forgiveness (Ac. 22:16; 1 Co. 6:11; Ep. 5:26).

This does not exhaust the meaning of Christian baptism, however. In the letters of Paul, even further content is added.

Baptism, according to Paul, also represents the death, burial and resurrection of our Lord (Ro. 6:3-5). Just as Jesus died and descended into the grave, Christians symbolically identify with his atoning death when they descend into the waters of baptism. The imagery of water closing over one's head is a particularly apt metaphor for death. Just as Jesus arose from the tomb, believers arise from the waters of baptism to live a new life. So Paul says:

"We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life" (Ro. 6:4).

Paul also writes that Christian baptism reflects one's new status as a Christian. Baptism signifies that the believer belongs to God's intimate family, where there is no longer any racial, social or gender prejudice (Ga. 3:26-28).

Finally, Christian baptism is a pledge toward God proceeding from a good conscience (1 Pe. 3:21). In other words, God calls for faith, and the believer answers with a sign of his or her faith by submitting to baptism. Baptism is thus an affirmation to God and to the Christian community that one has come to faith.

A final word should be said about the actual procedure for baptism. Christians perform this act in different ways. Some bodily immerse the candidate in water, while others pour water over the candidate's head with the person standing either in or out of the water. Still others baptize by sprinkling water on the head. Christians use differently worded formulas, the most popular being the words of Jesus in Mt. 28:19, though other formulas from the Bible are also used. Some Christians baptize infants, while others only baptize those old enough to understand the significance of baptism. Some churches rebaptize all new members, even if they have been baptized previously, while other churches accept the baptisms practiced by Christians other than themselves. In some churches, only clergymen can perform baptisms, while in others, any Christian is considered to be qualified.

These differences and the logic behind them, though not unimportant, cannot be addressed here. In any case, they often tend to obscure the real purpose of baptism, which is to point backward to the atoning death of Jesus with its gracious forgiveness and forward to the new life of Christian discipleship. Surely technicalities are not nearly so important with God as is a heart, broken and contrite (Ps. 51:16-17). At the same time, all forms of Christian baptism must find their central meaning in the death and resurrection of Jesus—in the grace of his forgiveness, the cleansing from sin which he offers, and the invitation to belong to his family.

Now, back to the original question first framed by the African in the Gaza desert: "Why shouldn't I be baptized?"

If you believe with all your heart, you should!



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