

IS BAPTISM OPTIONAL?

The question is about more than getting your hair wet in public.

by Dean Merrill

Can you get to heaven without being baptized in water? Apparently so. (The well-known example of the bad guy on the cross next to Jesus comes to mind; see Luke 23:39-43.)

But should you try it? My answer: Probably not.

Now don't instantly accuse me of being a Church of Christ hardliner or believing in baptismal regeneration. Instead, let me ask this: "What do you think the apostolic founders of the church would say?"

Funny thing—we happen to know already, don't we? Listen to these Scriptures:

Peter to the Pentecost crowd: "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins" (Acts 2:38).

Paul to the Galatians: "All of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ" (Gal. 3:27).

Peter after having his talk interrupted by an outburst of tongues: "'Surely no one can stand in the way of their being baptized with water. They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have.' So he ordered that they be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ" (Acts 10:47-48).

Paul to the Ephesians: "Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word" (Eph. 5:25-26).

Peter reflecting on the ark of Noah: "This water symbolizes baptism that now saves you also—not the removal of dirt from the body but the pledge of a clear conscience toward God" (1 Peter 3:21).

Paul to Titus: "He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life" (Titus 3:5-7).

If you start making a list of all the New Testament people whom we *know* were baptized in water, you need a full sheet of paper:

- Dozens (hundreds?) who came to hear John in the desert
- Jesus himself
- Early followers of Jesus and his disciples (see John 3:22; 4:1-2)
- The crowd on the Day of Pentecost
- The Samaritan converts (including Simon the magician)

- The Ethiopian eunuch
- Cornelius and his family
- Lydia and her family
- The Philippian jailor and his family
- The 12 disciples at Ephesus
- Many at Corinth, including Crispus, Gaius and the household of Stephanas

Do we have the right to ignore such a host of witnesses?

Standard Operating Procedure

I'm not trying to pick the scabs of past fights over how to baptize (forward? backward?), what formula to invoke, how young is too young, or what color the drying-off towels should be. I'm just puzzling over the fact that water baptism seems to be pretty much S.O.P. (standard operating procedure) in the New Testament, to the point that Peter actually *ordered* it to be done (Acts 10:48) at least once.

Ordered? Come on, Peter, let's not make anybody uncomfortable. We need to be audience-friendly, don't you understand? Folks these days don't like to be pressured. That's why we word it gently in our pulpit announcements and bulletin notices:

"Would you *like* to be baptized? If so, we have a class starting in two weeks...."

"Have you ever *thought about* possibly being baptized?"

"If you *feel led* to be baptized, the next opportunity will be ..."

"Those who are *interested* in baptism, please fill out a query card...."

The whole tone suggests a take-it-or-leave-it proposition. If you feel so inclined, fine. But if you'd rather not get your hair wet or have people see you in a drippy sweatshirt, no problem.

Why Not?

Our brothers and sisters in other parts of the world are not always so flexible. Argentine pastor Juan Carlos Ortiz, in his classic book *Disciple*, writes sarcastically about "the fifth Gospel," which he calls "the Gospel According to St. Evangelicals," in which obedience and submission are quite optional. "Someone will say [to a new convert], 'Do you know about baptism? We're going to have a baptismal service soon—it will be a nice warm spring day, and we'll heat the water, and a group is going to be baptized. Why don't you take advantage of the opportunity?'

...

"And if the person says, 'Oh, no, I really don't care to,' we say, 'Fine, of course not, you can wait until you're ready.'

"This was not the message in the primitive church. They said, 'Repent! Be baptized!' It was a command, not an option...."

“What happens is that we vaccinate people against the real gospel of the Kingdom with these little doses once in a while. Then we wonder why we preach and preach and preach and it doesn’t seem to penetrate the people” (pp. 22-23).

So how does this actually work in the real world of church life? What do you say to the reluctant person? Ortiz describes what took place in his Buenos Aires congregation:

“For a long time, I was baptizing people, but it was just a ceremony for me. It was a nice ceremony—we had photographers, we had nice robes, we had a choir singing in the back; it was quite a show.

“That was before God started to renew us. Now we understand that baptism has a meaning. It should be done right away, as soon as the person begins to live in the new Kingdom....

“In Argentina we sometimes use this baptismal formula: ‘I kill you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, and I make you born into the Kingdom of God to serve Him and to please Him.’ It’s different, but it works much better.

“Some people think that salvation is through baptism alone; others say through faith alone. But the apostles said, ‘Repent and be baptized!’ Both things. They didn’t say, ‘He who believes and is saved will, after a few months, be baptized.’ They said that baptism has a meaning in salvation.”

How Soon?

Ortiz then goes on to talk specifically about timing:

“The water, the ceremony is not much. But the ceremony is backed by what Jesus Christ did on the cross and in the tomb. And so baptism has a tremendous value. It tells the person being baptized that he is passing from death to life. That’s why it needs to happen at the moment of passing.

“This is not something I have invented. The primitive church never baptized anyone after the first day they were converted. They didn’t even wait for the evening meeting. If someone was saved in the morning, he was baptized in the morning. If he was saved in the middle of the night, as the Philippian jailor in Acts 16, he was baptized in the middle of the night.

“So in Argentina we do not assure a person of salvation until he is baptized, not for the sake of the baptism but for the sake of obedience. If a person says, ‘I believe,’ but doesn’t want to go through with baptism, we doubt his commitment to the new Kingdom. Because obedience is what salvation is all about.

“If we are not close to a river or a pool, it’s no problem—we go ahead and baptize the person in his own bathtub in his own house. We baptize the man, his wife, and his children all in the same tub, and it’s more convenient that way than in the church, since they have heat and towels and everything right there! And you can even have a cup of coffee with them afterward.

“Baptism is thus a tremendous object lesson. If we do it at the right time, people understand much better what they are doing. They are escaping from darkness and being born into the Kingdom of God” (pp. 31-32).

Cutting Corners?

Radical stuff, I know. But it’s hard to dismiss his earnest desire to follow New Testament precedent. We, in our quest for the minimum standard, our searching for how little we can inconvenience people and still get them on board, must ask whether we are shortchanging the salvation experience. We so desperately want people to accept God’s plan for their lives. Are we cutting a corner by leaving baptism to the shadows of what it means to be a disciple?

No, perhaps water baptism is not *mandatory*. When I get to heaven, I fully expect to meet the penitent thief (or terrorist, or whatever he was). But he will be there because he yielded to the Savior’s love and cried out, “Remember me when you come into your kingdom.” He was willing at last to lay down his self-destructive ways and be a follower for once in his life. That is part of what it means to come under the authority of Christ.

Here in our time, we face a big challenge in convincing self-assertive people (Christians old and new) that Somebody Else is supposed to be in the driver’s seat of their lives, not them. It is not an easy sell. Perhaps baptism is a place to start.

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