

Baptism Before the Epistles and Theologians

Your comments on my article last month, FR 109, *“The Gospel Plus What?”*, were mostly favorable. This will be a sort of trailer to that essay. This will be considered because so many questions continue to be raised and so many different concepts are expressed about baptism. We will try to see baptism through the eyes of those baptized before any epistles were written and before theologians formulated their systems. It may be that we unconsciously try to fit baptism within the template of Augustine, Luther, Calvin, or other learned (or not so learned) theologians who came along centuries after Pentecost.

Devout Jews from Judea and many surrounding nations were gathered in Jerusalem for the Pentecost holiday (Acts 2). Many of them had called out for Jesus’ crucifixion seven weeks before. The visible and audible outpouring of the Holy Spirit got their attention and drew a crowd. Then the gospel message preached by Peter and the apostles produced faith. By it they were convicted of their sin of rejection of Christ. That brought such fear of doom that they cried out rhetorically, *“Brothers, what shall we do?”*

The realization of their guilt brought fear and hopelessness. The message of the gospel was truly Good News for their sins could be remitted, being no longer held against them. Without giving any doctrinal discourse to make sure his inquirers understood everything about baptism, the atonement, and the Holy Spirit, Peter said to those believers, *“Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.”*

You know what? -- they took that at face value! No questioning or wrangling. They were not graduates of prestigious seminaries who tried to fit Peter’s words into some system of theology. They heard their answer in the Gospel, the Good News, being heralded that very morning. It was the gospel plus what? Plus all the explanations a later generation would read from Paul, Peter, and James? Plus the theories of their favorite theologian centuries later? Three thousand submitted to baptism that day without waiting to hear a seminar on baptism. It was plain enough for them.

The account of the conversion of the treasurer of Ethiopia continues to thrill us (Acts 8:26-40). In one presentation by Philip as they rode along, “he told him the good news of Jesus.” In that gospel message, Philip had told him about baptism, for “as they went along the road they came to some water, and the eunuch said, ‘*See, here is water! What is to prevent my being baptized?’*” Without argumentation, further explanation, or waiting, the man submitted to baptism and immediately resumed his journey rejoicing.

God got the attention of Saul, the persecutor, on the road to Damascus. Saul learned that he had been persecuting his savior. This conviction brought such trauma the he fasted and prayed for three days while still in his sins. God sent Ananias to him who, after explaining the purpose of his visit, told him, *“And now why do you wait? Rise and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on his name.”* (Acts 9, 22, 26). Paul was an

educated theologian of the Law of Moses, but he took the instruction at face value and complied without debating the necessity of baptism or if water could wash away sins. His extreme concern was to be free of his sins rather than to understand a system of theology.

We next look at a man's response to the gospel who was evidently a pagan. He was the jailer at Philippi who was charged with keeping Paul and Silas imprisoned. About midnight, the Lord got his attention by means of an earthquake that loosed his prisoners. He would have to pay with his life for letting prisoners escape. Sensing the part that Paul and Silas played in this, he cried out in desperation, "*Men, what must I do to be saved?*" Their quick reply was, "*Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household.*" To bring about faith, "*They spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all that were in his house. And he took them the same hour of the night, and washed their wounds, and he was baptized at once, with all his family ... and he rejoiced with all his household that he had believed in God*" (Acts 16:16-34). Do you think this pagan convert understood all the implications about baptism that were later mentioned in the epistles and debated by theologians centuries later? He simply submitted to it as a part of the answer to his burning question. It was an expression of his belief in God that brought immediate happiness.

There was an urgency about baptism in these cases we have reviewed. They did not hesitate after being told what to do because their immediate concern was forgiveness. Their freedom from guilt was promised only after their obedience as an expression of faith. Their faith was completed - made perfect by their actions of obedience (James 2:22). Were they all too simplistic in submitting to baptism thinking it would affect their spiritual condition? Are we wiser and more sophisticated than they were? Why must we complicate that which is portrayed in Acts so simply?

I suppose all persons say that a person must do something to accept the grace of God through faith. It is common to hear preachers encourage sinners to accept Christ in their hearts and to pray the sinners prayer. That calls for action. However, there is no Scriptural precedent for that sort of instruction.

Are we to disregard explanations about baptism written later by Paul and Peter? Surely, not. They enrich our understanding and give us more confidence, that is, if they are interpreted in light of what was illustrated in these examples of conversion in Acts. The information in the epistles was written to persons who had already been baptized, not to cast doubt on what they did, but to add richer meaning to it.

Much later, Paul explained to Roman disciples (Rom. 6:3-4) that they had been baptized into Christ. Until baptized they had been out of Christ. Symbolically, those disciples had been crucified with Christ (v.5f). They had been dead in sin but were buried (figuratively) with Christ in his tomb and had been raised with him into newness of life. This newness of life, new birth, and becoming sons of God related to baptism (Gal. 3:26f). Paul stated that they were all baptized into one body which is the church (1 Cor. 12:13; Eph. 4:4; Col.1:18). There could be but one body-church because there was only

one baptism by which they were initiated into it (Eph. 4:1-4). Whereas a Jew was initiated into Israel by physical birth and the visible mark of circumcision, so disciples were circumcised with a circumcision not made with hands in their burial with Christ in baptism and being raised with him, which was evidence of initiation into spiritual life (Col. 2:9-14). There is more but this is sufficient.

Paul surely remembered what he had written about justification by faith as he wrote these things about baptism, and/or he remembered what he had written about baptism when he wrote about justification by faith. He saw no conflict; neither will we when we understand what Paul wrote.

Who can say that the first converts mentioned above understood all these things before their baptism? Why, then, would such an understanding be a prerequisite for persons today? These points made by Paul would add to their understanding, yet lack of understanding did not invalidate their conversions.

Paul's explanations complemented the simplistic concepts the first converts might have had but they in no way contradict or confuse the matter. In spite of all that, the systems of theology developed by theologians and churches confuse baptism as to design, purpose, action, and importance. We must resist the temptation to line up texts and arguments on one side of the subject to defeat the texts and arguments of the opposing side, like two armies seeking to annihilate each other. Biblical teachings do not defeat or counteract other Biblical teachings! Rather than battling texts against texts, we must sit at the peace table and find the harmony between what we have interpreted as opposing or counteracting texts.

Hebrew disciples were exhorted to "*leave the elementary doctrines of Christ and go on to maturity*" (Heb. 6:1). I almost feel apologetic in continuing to write upon this elementary subject, yet I feel constrained to do so because of questions that continue to come from sincere people and because of the many confusing teachings I hear and read from religious teachers. Too many begin with a system of theology in which they have been nurtured and then try to make baptism conform to it instead of taking it at face value as the earliest converts did.

(Cecil Hook; March 2002) []