

Baptizing “For the Remission of Sins”

In witnessing many baptisms I have observed that most of the men doing the baptizing use some ritualistic words that include “I baptize you for the remission of your sins.” I do not attempt to baptize persons for the remission of their sins. Do you? “Emphatically, yes,” you say? Where do you find instructions for doing that? Neither Jesus nor his apostles taught you or anybody else to do it!

As though I have not read, heard, and repeated Acts 2:38 about 13 million times (some margin for error) in my 83 years, you probably want to tell me that Peter commanded convicted, believing sinners, “Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission / forgiveness of your sins.” (Peter even added, “and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit,” which we usually omit.) See, it still says “for the remission of sins” right there in black and white.

Will you look with me to see what Peter did not say? He did not say, “Repent, and let one of us baptize you for the forgiveness / remission of your sins.” The apostles did not claim power or authority to baptize sinners for the remission of sins. “Picky, picky,” you say? This is not just a matter of semantics. There is an important difference. The purpose of the action must be in the mind of the one being baptized rather than in the one doing the baptizing.

If you can baptize persons for the remission of sins, we might work out a fantastic deal. We could send you to most any Third World country and offer the natives \$5.00 each to allow you to baptize them. We could visualize an unending line of people waiting for you to baptize them. What a harvest of souls!

You are repulsed by that suggestion because you know that you cannot baptize a person for remission of sins. You can only cooperate with those who wish to have the purpose of baptism fulfilled through their accepting action. Knowing this, why do you continue to tell people that you are baptizing them for the remission of their sins in the ritual?

This all reflects back to the sacramental concept of rituals performed by an “authorized” person through which the one baptized receives grace. It was conceived in the early centuries. The infant was thought to be born with guilt of the sin of Adam; so a priest performed a ritual called baptism for the remission of the infant’s sin. It was accomplished without the knowledge, consent, or belief of the one supposedly receiving the remission of the inherited sin. The ritual was performed based upon the proxy knowledge,

consent, and belief of the parent or sponsor. The consent of the baptized infant was confirmed after the fact when it reached the age of understanding. The concept was also extended to believing, consenting adults who were to receive forgiveness through a cleric authorized to perform the sacramental ritual.

Since you have no such power, is it appropriate for you to indicate that you are exercising such capability in your baptismal ceremony?

Generally, our people have judged and rejected the baptism of those coming from other denominations even though the individuals claimed that they were baptized for the remission of sins. We argued that they were not baptized for the forgiveness of sins because the preacher who baptized them did not believe that baptism was for the remission of sins. Whose belief determines the validity of baptism -- that of the immerser or of the one immersed? If it depends upon the one who performs the ritual, we are all in jeopardy, for the person who immersed us just might have been misinformed or hypocritical.

Perhaps you agree that what I am stating is technically correct but that it is good to include "for the remission of sins" in the ceremony as a teaching benefit for those present. But how can you justify teaching something which is not true?

Others may contend that the purpose should be stated in the ritual so the one being baptized will always remember the purpose for his or her baptism. Remember whose purpose? The candidate should be taught to be baptized for the forgiveness of sins beforehand as a motive for being immersed. Because of the tension and distraction of the moment, I doubt that many persons could tell you later what the preacher said in the ceremony. For that reason, as we approached the ceremony, I usually calmly reminded the candidate of their purpose.

For most of my career, I used some simple wording as, "Upon the confession of your faith in Jesus Christ as the Son of God, and in obedience to his command, I baptize you into the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen." That's what Jesus told his apostles to do (Matt. 28:19).

In the last congregation in which I served, however, an elder took me to task for not including "for the remission of sins." I explained to him the points I have made in this essay. He was not convinced. He insisted that I follow his concept. What could I do?

After that, I still did not say, “I baptize you -- for the remission of sins.” I changed the focus from “I” to “you,” like “You are now being baptized --- in order that you may be forgiven your sins and receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.” Or, “You are now being baptized as an expression of your belief in Jesus and his promise to forgive your sins and give you the gift of the Holy Spirit.” Yet such a ceremonial statement hardly replaces the need for the previous teaching and understanding of the one being baptized.

Here is another matter for consideration by you who believe in “the law of silence,” that is, that when a thing is specified, all things not specified are excluded. According to that rule, when you specify “for the remission of sins,” you exclude all other purposes, even the reception of the gift of the Holy Spirit. But that is another lesson. Maybe later.

Sometimes we can be so “right” that we are wrong! Technical points can be emphasized so as to distort the truth. If, however, we must have a correct understanding of everything about baptism in order for it to be valid, there is little hope for any of us. Even so, that gives no license for us to continue to teach and practice what we know is incorrect. Spiritual growth and maturity are enhanced by more accurate understanding.

(Cecil Hook, December 2001) []