

FR 163

More About Baptism

W. Carl Ketcherside

{Editor's Note: This is an excerpt, without introduction or conclusion, taken from a much longer discourse in which the gifted Carl Ketcherside (1908-1989) answered questions about baptism. The knowledge and wisdom expressed in this selection from his MISSION MESSENGER may create in you a desire to read more of his thoughts. At the end of this piece, I will direct you to a rich source of his much-needed teaching on this subject. -Cecil Hook)

Last month I dealt at length with questions related to baptism and answered a goodly number of queries which I encounter in almost every place where I go in these days to spread the gospel of peace on earth to men of good-will. I did not get through with those questions and in this issue we will resume where we left off. It is almost imperative that you read what was written in the paper last month in order to get a proper clue to the reasoning which will be employed in the copy you now hold in your hand.

Again, it must be made clear that I do not gauge my love for others upon their agreement with me. I want you to sincerely study the revealed word for yourself and to formulate your own convictions. I shall love you if you cannot concur with what I write. I intend to be accountable only to God for what I believe and I allow all of my readers to occupy that same ground. I shall be dealing with some pretty "sticky" questions among the believers who generally read this paper and I want you to be free from any pressure.

BAPTIST BAPTISM

1. Would you receive a man into your fellowship on his "Baptist baptism"?

In the first place, I think it should be clearly understood that the fellowship with God and Christ is not something we can extend or withdraw, but something in which we share through divine grace. It is a state or condition into which we are called (1 Corinthians 1:9). I am in the fellowship with every person on this earth who is in Christ Jesus and in whom the Spirit dwells.

The fellowship is the fellowship of the Spirit, and there is only one Spirit. All in whom he abides are in the fellowship. So it would not affect one's standing with God whether I accept him or not, but it might affect my standing if I reject one whom God accepts. However, I presume you really mean to ask if I would receive into the congregation of saints with which I am associated, and recognize as a brother in the Lord, one who had been immersed under the influence and teaching of members of the Baptist Church.

This may be rather plain, but I would be as much inclined to receive one on the basis of "Baptist baptism" as I would "Church of Christ baptism" or any other exclusivistic partisan baptism. I am not interested in either one. When baptism is made a sectarian rite it is prostituted from its original and divine purpose, and made to serve a selfish end for which it was not ordained.

It would be rather incongruous for a group to seek to get control of the universal birth process and copyright it, and insist that those who entered the world through the ministrations of one who was not an authorized obstetrician was not a child and should not be accepted as a member of the human race or family. I doubt there is such a thing as "Baptist baptism." One is either baptized or he is not, and whether it is a Baptist who immerses him has little significance. The validity of baptism depends upon the heart of the believer and not upon the theological slant of the administrator.

I must confess that I have never met a person who confessed that he was immersed with "Baptist baptism." I suspect this is a term originated by enemies of the Baptist position, and applied by them to people who would disavow it. Having had some little experience with folk who credit views to me which I do not espouse I am a little reluctant to put words in the mouths of others or to state their views in language which they would not personally indulge.

We are not called upon to receive anyone as a Baptist, Methodist, or Presbyterian, but we are called upon to receive all who are Christians. If a Christian has previously been identified with some religious party and expresses a desire to be just a Christian and a Christian only, we are not obligated to receive him as a partisan, but as a Christian. His obedience to the good news made him a Christian, and he does not have to cancel that obedience and go through the process again to become a Christian.

I recall the remarks of E. G. Sewell, an editor of Gospel Advocate, in association with David Lipscomb. "I have been preaching for sixty-two years, and have never had any one to come forward to unite with the church of Christ that said he had been baptized into the Baptist Church.. .But I have found a number of people that said that when they were baptized they did it in submission to the will of God, and they were encouraged to take their stand at once among those who are simply Christians and to live the Christian life as the word of God directs. So I am in no dilemma in regard to the questions you ask. But those that require all those that have been baptized to do God's will to be baptized again, 'having it in view that baptism is for the remission of sins,' are the ones that are in the ditch, there being no authority in the word of God for any such procedure."

BECAUSE OF REMISSION

2. But is not remission of sins the design of baptism, and if so, can one be saved who is baptized because he believes his sins have been remitted?

I trust that you will bear with me if I seem to speak at length in answer to your question. I know of nothing else so fraught with the possibility of subtle error as this question. I do

not impeach your integrity or impugn your motives for I used to ask the same question in the same way and for the same purpose. I asked it with the sincerity and the same eagerness to be right that you manifest. I am convinced, though, that there was a motivation behind it which is not right or scriptural.

First of all, forgiveness of sins is not man's design for baptism but God's design for those who are baptized. Forgiveness of sins is a judicial act. It is an executive act of pardon. It takes place in heaven in the mind of God. It is not something to be secured by purchase or barter. One does not obtain it by trading off or swapping any act or deed. It is not, therefore, the exclusive design of baptism and may not be the most important motivation.

Secondly, there are at least nine "designs" for baptism set forth in the new covenant scriptures and the selection of one of these as the specific or superlative design which must be understood and recognized to establish the validity of obedience, to the exclusion or ignoring of the others, does not speak well for those who profess to revere all that the Spirit has spoken.

The primary design or motivation for baptism is the desire to unquestioningly "conform in this way with all that God requires" (Matthew 3:15). It is unthinkable that Jesus would be immersed in water purely for a secondary or inferior purpose, and this is the reason he gave when insisting that John immerse him in the waters of the Jordan.

The highest form of obedience of authority does not question or enquire what reward will be received for obedience, or what favor will be granted. It is prompted by reverence and respect for the will of the one whose requirements are met. It is not obedience to receive something but to honor the requirements of the one obeyed. It is upon that basis that our Lord set the example for us. Small wonder that, at the time, a voice from heaven declared, "This is my Son, my beloved, on whom my favor rests."

I am inclined to agree with David Lipscomb in his expressed view that few, if any, who have been immersed have obeyed this divine requirement because their sins have been forgiven. There is not a sufficient motivation about such an idea to prompt anyone to be baptized. No logical or rational explanation can be given for such a procedure. Here is the statement by Lipscomb:

"I do not think any one was ever baptized because his sins were remitted. They may have believed their sins were remitted before they were baptized, but the remission of sins was not the moving cause. There is nothing in remission of sins as a motive to prompt one to be baptized. They may have thought, inasmuch as God had forgiven their sins, they ought to obey his command to be baptized; but in that case the desire to obey God is the moving cause. When a man is baptized to obey God, he is led by a proper motive; and I believe when he does this to obey him, God will forgive his sins, whether he knows the act in which God forgives or not. Man cannot be led by a holier or more acceptable motive

than the desire to obey God and so 'fulfill all righteousness.' It is a dangerous thing to require more than God requires."

Men may be told that they were justified and forgiven upon the basis of personal faith and at the very moment of trustful surrender. They may accept it as factual and rely upon it, but there is nothing in this to motivate them to be immersed. Intellectually and philosophically, those who are immersed, believing their sins have been forgiven, are led to obedience for another reason. When sifted down it will generally be found that their desire is to obey God, to do his will, or to follow the example of Jesus.

They may be mistaken about the time when the forgiveness of God was accorded and when the pardon was decreed. They may be the victims of theological error in that respect, but such a mistake will not cancel God's gracious promise. It is not conditioned upon being correct about every theological point at the time of obedience. I do not serve the kind of God who bestows his love only upon those who have an intellectual key honed down until it fits every slot in the keyhole of mental correctness. This would deny grace, which, I suspect, is the real problem of all too many of us.

I no longer have a zoo concept with one cage labeled Baptists, another Methodists, and another Presbyterians, and I no longer separate God's precious word into the proper "chow-mix" to fling through the bars to each species. All of these names are as human as the cages. God regards no one as a Baptist, a Mennonite, or a Congregationalist. He regards every person on this universe as one for whom his Son died. So I receive men as individuals without reference to their sectarian categories. I accept what truth any man possesses as truth, and I seek, upon that foundation, to build more truth. It is pretty difficult to sectarianize everybody else on earth without ending up with your own sect of left-overs. When you get all of the other species in their respective cages, you may end up as "the great uncaged species," and may be the most dangerous of the lot!

When a man from the Baptist tradition tells me he was immersed to obey God or follow his will I do not catechize him about how many wrong ideas he had at the time. I have immersed some people in my time who had some pretty scrambled notions but who sincerely sought to obey the Father in humble submission. I did not try to straighten out all of their hang-ups before I assisted them in their obedience to my Lord.

It will help you to remember that "unto the remission of sins" is not a part of the command Peter gave to conscience-stricken enquirers on the day of Pentecost. When they cried aloud asking what to do they were told to do two things, "Reform your lives and be immersed in the name of Jesus Christ." "For the remission of sins" does not express what we do for God but what he does for us. This is just as true of the Holy Spirit which is bestowed as a gift.

When any person reforms his conduct and is immersed upon the basis that he believes in Jesus Christ, he has done all that is required to receive the forgiveness of his sins. He may be incorrect in his information as to when God accords amnesty or bestows pardon,

but this no more invalidates the promise than a mistake as to when the bank credits your interest wipes out your deposit.

[This was copied from MISSION MESSENGER, Volume 35, Number 6. For further study of the subject, you should also read the previous issue, No. 5. To access this rich source of material, you may go to my web site <www.freedomstr.org>, click on NEWSLETTERS AND ARTICLES, choose Mission Messenger, and then click on to the Volume and Number. Several years ago, I made Vol. 35, No. 6 into a 14-page booklet and I have several copies left which I offer for \$2.00 each postpaid. This may be of special interest to you who do not have internet access.]

(Cecil Hook; March 2003) []