

Paul Not Sent To Baptize

“For Christ did not send me to baptize but to preach the gospel” (1 Cor. 1:17). Even as a teenager seventy years ago, I heard preachers and others quoting that portion of Paul’s writing as evidence of lack of importance he placed on baptism. Though I was but a teenager, I recognized the misuse of that passage from Paul. It is distressing now, in our age of better education and enlightenment, to still hear that passage twisted to mean what Paul did not mean.

If Paul was not sent to baptize, then he violated the will of God and failed the mission he was sent to accomplish, for he did baptize some people! In fact, it was so many he was not sure he could remember all of them. Some preachers, eager to downplay the vital place of baptism, ignore the context in which those words were written, thus violating their integrity as interpreters of God’s word.

Paul was confronting the disunity of the Corinthian disciples as they were following different leaders. He placed the names of Apollos, Cephas, Christ, and himself as though they were the guilty leaders. Then he dissociates himself from such a role: *“Or were you baptized in the name of Paul? I am thankful that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius; lest any one should say that you were baptized in my name, (I did baptize also the household of Stephanas. Beyond that, I do not know whether I baptized any one else.) For Christ did not send me to baptize but to preach the gospel.. .”* Paul did immerse a few that he could remember but, in view of their exalting partisan leaders, he was glad it was so few lest they claim him as their party leader. Reporting on Paul’s initial visit to Corinth, it is stated, *“And many of the Corinthians hearing Paul believed and were baptized”* (Acts 18:8). Evidently, attendants helped Paul in his evangelism by doing most of the actual immersing, perhaps even because of his bodily weakness.

Because the person administering the baptism was unimportant did not mean that baptism itself was unimportant. Their baptism was in response to Paul’s preaching.

Back when you were in high school English class, unless your interest was directed more toward the girls or some other distraction, you may remember studying about literary devices. One among many was the “ellipsis.” An ellipsis is the abridging or shortening of an expression by leaving out words that are understood to be in the sentence. There are numerous examples of this literary device in the Scriptures.

John exhorted, *“Little children, let us not love in word or speech but in deed and in truth”* (1 John 3:18). Was John saying that we should not tell others we love them but only demonstrate love in action? No, we all can readily detect the literary device so that we understand him to be saying, *“Little children, let us not love in word or speech (only) but (also) in deed and truth.”*

When Ananias lied before the assembly about his gift from the sale of his property, Peter shocked him, declaring, “*You have not lied to men but to God*” (Acts 5:4). How could Peter say Ananias had not lied to them when they all had just heard the man lie? In his use of ellipsis, Peter was saying, “You have not lied to men (only) but (also, or more importantly) to God.”

Jesus stated, “*I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will, but the will of him who sent me*” (John 6:27). Was Jesus saying that he was unwilling to come down from heaven? No. Supplying the omitted words of an ellipsis, we understand him to have been saying, “I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will (primarily or only) but more importantly, or also) the will of him that sent me.”

“*Do not labor for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to eternal life*” (John 6:27). Was Jesus forbidding the growing of a garden or the using of wages to buy food? Of course, not. He was minimizing the importance of physical food in comparison to spiritual food.

It is easy enough for us to agree on the meanings of these elliptical statements. So why can we not admit that Paul was saying, “Christ sent me not (only, primarily) to baptize, but (also, more importantly) to preach the gospel”?

In these elliptical statements, the negative clause is minimized and the positive clause is emphasized. Paul did recognize that preaching the gospel was more important in his mission than merely baptizing people. It was by the gospel that they were saved while obedience in baptism was only the ritual initiating them into that salvation, and Paul was not denying the essentiality of that initiation.

For more, see *Free To Change*, Ch. 8; “Literary Devices.”

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