

Rebaptism For “The Right Purpose”

Why introduce this over-worked subject again? It is because we in the Church of Christ have let it block the path to unity. Our rejection of others because they were not baptized purposely “for the remission of sins” separates us from the greater portion of believers. In this, we have become rejecting judges denying the very validity of the discipleship of others.

We in the Church of Christ probably have discussed baptism more than any other group because we have considered it of more importance than most other Christian groups. It seems that by now we should have laid the subject to rest. I think I have dealt with the subject sufficiently for my readers in general in my books. However, now being on the Web with new readers who are not familiar with the views I have expressed, I hope this essay may offer some helpful clarification.

In proclaiming Jesus’ promise that “he who believes and is baptized will be saved,” we have also used the emphatic statement of Peter on Pentecost, “Repent, and be baptized every of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins” (Mk. 16:16; Acts 2:38). Although most all Christian groups practice baptism as an act of obedience to Christ, they generally teach that believing is the only necessary action of obedience in order to receive forgiveness. So they think they are saved before obedience in baptism. Since those persons are not baptized purposely “for the forgiveness of your sins,” many of my people contend that those persons should be rebaptized specifically for that purpose.

By denying the validity of the baptism of such persons, many in the Church of Christ actually deny that such persons are saved, and they offer them no fellowship or admission into their congregations. So this goes beyond friendly discussion about accepting disciples and is made the basis of rejection. Rebaptism becomes a dividing issue.

Let me clarify this point in the beginning. Allowing God to be God who may make gracious exceptions as he may choose, I am convinced that ordinarily baptism is an essential action on the part of the sinner in accepting the grace of God bestowed in Christ. The contention of this essay is that one is not required to understand each and every purpose or result of baptism in order for God to fulfill those purposes and effects.

Is “for the remission of your sins” a part of the command or a part of the promise? If it is a part of the command, then one is required to understand that purpose and to be immersed specifically for that purpose. If it is a part of the promise, then it is fulfilled by God to the one obeying his command to be immersed whether that person understands fully or not.

If, in order for baptism to be valid, one must understand its purpose, let us look at the stated purposes. In Peter’s declaration on Pentecost, he first called for convicting faith. Then he called for them to repent and be baptized in order for their sins to be forgiven. Can anyone deny that both faith and repentance, in addition to immersion, are necessary for the remission of sins? Faith, repentance, and baptism are (1) for the forgiveness of sins and (2) to receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. Shortly after Pentecost, Peter delivered a similar discourse at Solomon’s Porch. Even though baptism is not mentioned specifically, he called for faith and, “Repent therefore, and turn again, (3) that your sins may be blotted out, (4) that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord, and (5) that he may send the Christ appointed for you, Jesus, whom heaven must receive until the time for establishing all that God spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets from of old” (Acts 3:11-22. Numbering added). If a candidate for baptism must understand these five stated purposes and have them in mind for his baptism to be valid, woe is me! I am a goner, a dead duck! I did not fully comprehend them all at that time and I still do not 62 years later! What about you? Were you baptized purposely in order to receive the gift of the Holy Spirit? Why make an issue of one promise and not the other? In the one account of rebaptism in the Scriptures, converts of Apollos were asked by Paul, “Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?” We are not told of any inquiry into the understood purpose of their prior baptisms (Acts 19:1-9).

Commands are to be obeyed, but how do you obey a promise? When Jesus announced, “He who believes and is baptized shall be saved,” he set forth two things that a person can do and the result that God will accomplish. The promised result was not a part of the command. It cannot be obeyed. Neither were any of the five promises enumerated above parts of the command. These are not things a person can do. In Matthew’s account of the Great Commission, no mention is made of the purpose or promise connected with baptism (Matt. 28:18-20), yet we can be confident that God saved those who were obedient.

Judean disciples in the Jerusalem church were convinced that circumcision, in addition to obedience in baptism, was necessary to be saved, yet no question is raised about the validity of their baptisms (Acts 15).

Other purposes were fulfilled through baptism in response to faith and repentance also. I shall continue the numbering begun above. We are baptized (6) into Christ (Gal. 3:27; Rom. 6:3-4). By our baptism we are brought (7) into the one body, (8) the church (1 Cor. 12:13; Col. 1:18). It is through this obedience that we are (9) born again, (10) become a child of God, and (11) enter the kingdom of God (John 3:3-5; Gal. 3:26-27). There we find (12) newness of life (Rom. 6:3-4) and (13) are circumcised with the circumcision of Christ (Col. 2:11-14).

These are things that God through his Spirit accomplished in and for us when we obeyed him in baptism, whether we understood it or not. If one must have had those purposes in mind prior to baptism, then few of us could have confidence that God's promises were fulfilled in us. Most of us would need rebaptism! Isn't it amazing how we become hung up on one point!

There is no Biblical record that all the purposes listed above were explained to a person before baptism. The last eight of them were explained to disciples after their baptisms to assure them of what God had accomplished in and for them when he saved them.

Perhaps it will put things in better perspective to look again at the records of conversions in *Acts*. On Pentecost Peter was addressing the very people who had called out for the crucifixion of Jesus. His discourse was designed to turn them from rejecters to believers in Jesus as the Christ. His powerful presentation of Christ caused them to recognize the horrible thing they had done so that they felt doomed. They called out in despair asking rhetorically what they could do when they thought their case was hopeless. They were probably surprised and greatly relieved when Peter told them simply to repent and be baptized in order to receive forgiveness and the gift of the Holy Spirit.

In Samaria (Acts 8), to these people who had been rejected by the Jews but were eager to serve God, the need for repentance and forgiveness was not mentioned, but great numbers of them were baptized eagerly in acceptance of Christ. A similar pattern is seen as the righteous Ethiopian gladly expressed his acceptance of, and allegiance to, Jesus as his Savior. They were not escaping impending doom due to heinous sins so much as aligning themselves with the one who would save them.

Saul's circumstance was similar to that of the Jews on Pentecost. Being convicted by an appearance of the Lord on the road to Damascus of fighting against God by his frenzied persecution of disciples, Saul cried out, "What shall I do, Lord?" Later, this man who had been fasting and praying in contrition for three days and nights was told to be baptized to wash away his sins (Acts 9, 22). Forgiveness was the burning issue with him.

Cornelius was a devout, God-fearing Gentile (Acts 10). After God convinced the Jews that he was receiving Gentiles by the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on Cornelius and his household, Peter commanded them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. No

mention is made of “for the remission of sins,” for that was not the emphatic issue with them so much as their being initiated into life in Christ. In his Great Commission, Jesus had authorized baptism in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. When they baptized in the name of Christ, they were baptizing as Jesus had authorized. It was a matter of obedience to Christ.

In no case was a discourse on baptism delivered to those who were to be immersed. No evidence points to an explanation of all the designs of baptism, nor of reimmersion of the penitents after they learned all the designs. They simply obeyed the expressed will of God -- like we should do, whether we understand all its purposes or not.

Many in our congregations think of baptism as a sacrament, a ritual or ceremony through which grace is conferred to the soul. They think it changes the soul from death to life, affecting a new birth in us. They believe in baptismal regeneration – that in baptism divine action transforms and regenerates the soul in a new birth process.

Baptism symbolizes, finalizes, and confirms the change that the convert has undergone rather than accomplishing the change. The conversion process is similar to the process of physical birth. There is an insemination, a conception, a period of gestation, and a parturition or birth. The birth finalizes what has been taking place in the womb rather than being the cause of the life developing process. The parturition is necessary, but it is not the cause of life. Life is not conferred, infused, or poured into the fetus at birth, yet the life-giving process is incomplete without it.

In similar manner, a sinner hears the gospel, develops faith, decides to submit his life to God in Christ, begins a process of reformation, and is baptized. Although baptism is necessary in this procedure, it is not the cause of life. Baptism confirms what has already been developing in the person. The regeneration is a process finalized by baptism instead of being produced by it.

Now, must a person who held a sacramental view of baptism be rebaptized when he learns of his misunderstanding? Such a person has obeyed what was commanded. He was not commanded to understand all the purposes and implications. If God does not demand such an understanding, why should we? And again, who could ever qualify for baptism, for it is likely that none of us has understood all. He stands on unholy ground who rejects others who do not have his particular understanding.

The respected pioneers of our Movement did not demand rebaptism of those who had been immersed in other groups. It was later in the nineteenth century that an issue began to be made of it. David Lipscomb, the influential editor of the *Gospel Advocate*, opposed such rebaptism. In 1884, Austin McGary and Elijah Hansborough started the *Firm Foundation* especially to promote the rebaptism issue. That publication became very effective, but now I am confident that both the issue and the journal are waning.

“By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place which he was to receive as an inheritance; and he went out, not knowing where he was to go” (Heb. 11:8). If he had waited until he saw everything clearly, he would not have left. How can we demand that others see all clearly before they begin obedience to the simplest of commands?

[For a thorough study of this subject, read RE-BAPTISM, Jimmy Allen, Howard Publishing Co., 3117 N 7th, West Monroe, LA 71291.]