

“Why Are We Baptized?”

I know! I know! You are fed up with discussions of baptism! However, before I leave this earthly scene, I feel compelled to speak to my brothers and sisters in the Churches of Christ one more time on this subject – well, maybe several times more!

By one of our contentions regarding baptism, we have done ourselves, our religious neighbors, and God a disservice. We have demanded that a person’s baptism is invalid if he is not baptized purposely for the remission of sins. That has allowed us to reject and condemn millions of disciples who did not fully understand the meaning and purpose of baptism when they submitted to the will of Christ in submitting to baptism.

Our inconsistency has been clear. We have to admit that none of us understood all the meaning and purposes of baptism at the time of our conversion, but we base the validity of our immersion on only one of the purposes. We have felt free to discount ignorance of all purposes except “for the remission of sins.” Brothers and sisters, that ain’t smart! That creates a law that God did not make.

At the conclusion of a class of us really old-heads, the teacher asked, “Why are we baptized?” The answer was so obvious that no one spoke up for a time. Then someone stated the expected answer, “For the remission of sins,” and heads nodded affirmatively. I wanted to yell out, “Wrong answer!” but the class was over, and I am sure I could never have changed the view that had been drilled into the class for as long as they could remember. But I haven’t given up on you!

Now, while you are thinking up all those “holy cusswords” to apply to me, let me explain what I mean. Let us review some of the many purposes of baptism and determine which must be understood correctly before the immersion.

Why are we baptized? There is ONE real reason. **IT IS THE WILL OF CHRIST!** After declaring his authority to the eleven, he charged them to go make disciples of all nations, baptizing them (Matt. 28:16-20). There are other things accomplished in baptism that are mentioned years later to those who had already been immersed. There is no indication, however, that any candidate was indoctrinated in all the designs of baptism before immersion. If a person submitted to the will of Christ in being immersed, God took care of the results even though the person did not know all that was involved.

The creed confessed was “I believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God.” The creed was not “I believe that baptism is for the remission of sins.” Salvation was based on faith in Christ rather than on understanding all doctrines correctly, else who could be saved? All promises and their fulfillment relating to baptism must be listed as sub-heads to obedience to the will of Christ. We shall list and number some of the subheads.

1. The eleven were to be “*baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.*” Thus believers were to be brought into subjection to and relationship with the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Did you fully understand that?
2. Many years after Pentecost, Peter told how eight persons were saved in the ark through water, and “*Baptism, which corresponds to this, now saves you, not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a clear conscience*” (1 Pet. 3:20-21). If one rejects the will of Christ that he be baptized, he cannot rest with clear conscience. So this is another purpose accomplished in submitting to baptism.
3. On Pentecost, Peter scared the daylights out of many of those who had called for the crucifixion of Jesus seven weeks earlier. Their consciences were so shocked that they cried out, not so much asking for information, but crying out in desperation, despair, and hopelessness indicating, “*Brothers, we are doomed! What can we do?*” They had rejected and caused the death of the Son of God. Now they were called upon to submit to his will in baptism for the remitting of those sins. What a happy relief that was for three thousand of them! Yes, that is one of the promises offered to those who renounce their sins and are baptized. No, they were not immersed because they were saved and their consciences were clear. (OK, for you uninitiated, read the context of Acts 2:38.)
4. In rejecting Jesus they had rejected God. So on Pentecost God was preparing their hearts so he could dwell in them. The heart had to be cleansed from sin before this could happen. So, applying the atonement of Jesus to cleanse their hearts, God could dwell in them as his people. God’s entry into their hearts in Spirit was a part of the promise to those who would be baptized. Three thousand accepted those promises readily. But just how thoroughly did they all understand those promises? And how much did you know about all the implications?

Notice: The promises were not parts of the commands. They obeyed the commands. One does not obey promises. You cannot obey “*for the remission of sins and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.*” How can we make one of the promises into a command which we seek to bind on all? If others obey the commands but do not attempt to obey the promises, is their obedience less acceptable than yours when you mistakenly thought you were obeying promises?

5. Evidently every obedient believer did not understand all of this even 25 years later! Paul saw fit to explain a further purpose of immersion. It symbolically involves the sinner in the process of atonement that brings life. “*Do you not know,*” he asks, “*that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life*” (Rom. 6:3-4). He is saying that, when Jesus died, was laid in the tomb, and then was given life again, you died with him, were buried there with him, and were raised to life with him symbolically in the ritual of baptism!

WOW! They had been missing that purpose and meaning for a whole generation! Did Paul conclude by saying, “Sorry, but your baptism is invalid because you did not understand these things”? I think not! Are you beginning to develop an appetite for a serving of humble pie, maybe with a dash of Tabasco, for your rejection of others because they did not understand all the purposes of baptism?

6. Along with the purpose of baptism being to relate us symbolically with the death, burial, and raising of Jesus also is its purpose of accomplishing a new birth symbolically. Nicodemus had come to Jesus with hopes of advantage because of his Jewish birth, but Jesus, informing him that he would need to be born anew, stated, “*Unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God*” (John 3:5 and context). It was not time for Jesus to announce baptism as a requirement, so Jesus expressed it in the figure of a birth of water and the Spirit. Much later, Paul explained to Galatian disciples, “*For in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ*” (Gal. 3:26-27). Paul also describes it as “*the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit*” (Col. 3:5 and context). If persons do not understand this fully while submitting to immersion, is their baptism invalid?

7. We must notice in the passage above that a purpose to be accomplished in baptism is to “put on Christ.” This is a depiction of divesting one’s old life and nature symbolically in baptism. A person discards his old ragged and soiled clothing to be re clothed in the robe of righteousness of Christ which he imputes to us. Thus baptism becomes a sort of figurative dressing room of change.

8. The Holy Spirit directed and implemented the bringing all of the forgiven ones into the same body (which is the church. Eph. 5:22) through baptism. Paul explained, “*For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body – Jews or Greeks, slaves or free – and all were made to drink of one Spirit*” (1 Cor. 12:12-13). The Spirit neither saved, converted, nor immersed persons individually but directed and implemented it all. Then God testified by manifestations of his Spirit to the acceptance of those immersed, including those on Pentecost, the Samaritans, the Ethiopian treasurer, the Gentiles of Cornelius’ household, the Roman jailor, and the rebaptized converts of Apollos at Ephesus. They were all baptized into the same body as the Spirit directed and affirmed.

Did all those converts understand all the purposes of baptism as they were being immersed? If so, why did Paul need to explain the various purposes in his writings many years later? Only those in Ephesus who knew only the baptism of John were brought into question. Their baptism was invalid for it had not been taught or confirmed by the Spirit. They thought to follow John’s teaching instead of obeying the will of Christ.

Even these eight purposes fulfilled by baptism that I have listed may not include them all. Did you have them all in mind when you were immersed? Or were you not trying to do the will of Christ to the best of your understanding? You trusted God to accept you and

to fulfill his promises connected with baptism. How, then, can you sit in the place of God to declare the baptism of another invalid when he was trying to do the will of Christ to the best of his understanding even as you were?

“Welcome one another, therefore, as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God” (Rom. 15:7). We should have a glorious welcoming party for the millions we have been rejecting! This is hard for us of our heritage. We have been taught to reject all who differ from us instead of accepting them on the same ground of our being accepted.

If you liked the Tabasco in this, wait for next week for some jalapeno! {:-) . Then I will hope to convince you that you cannot baptize anyone for the remission of sins! Horrors!

For more on this subject, read Carl Ketcherside’s great article, “More About Baptism,” in *Mission Messenger*, Vol. 35, No. 6. It is available at my web site www.freedomring.org by clicking on Links to Other Sites, and then Unity In Diversity. []

(Cecil Hook: November 2004)

Talkin’ Texas: The name “Texas” derives from the Hasini Indian word “tejas” which means “friends.” It is not a Mexican term for “Texas.”