

Baptism

When I was in Afghanistan way back when I learned to be careful when sharing my faith as a Christian, it could have cost me my life. To convert from Islam was to become outcast both from family and from society. The mark of conversion, as far as Afghans were concern, was baptism.

Baptism is what defines our identity as Christians in terms of culture and society. A sacrament for some, an ordinance for others, in truth a mystery (Romans 6:1-11), baptism is at the core of Christian faith. It also has become a litmus test concerning varying distinctives of theology and practice. Do we sprinkle, do we immerse? Do we baptize once and only once or is there more? When I pastored in Texas I became aware that one particular denomination required baptism with church membership. That meant if one had been baptized in another church and decided to move their membership they had to be re-baptized.

And what happens when baptism goes outside the baptismal tank and people experience what is referred to as being baptized in the Holy Spirit even to the evidence of speaking in unknown languages? For some groups even to mention this is to face being ostracized.

For me it's not the form or even the function of baptism that is important but its very essence. What is the essence of baptism and why is it important not only to our identity as Christians but to our ability to manifest God's Kingdom on earth as it is in heaven? The following are select passages of Scripture that give us an idea of what baptism consists:

"John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins." (Mark 1:1-4; Matthew 3:1-3)

Baptism of Jesus: *"Jesus answering said to John, 'Permit [my baptism] at this time; for in this way it is fitting for us [Father, Son, Holy Spirit] to fulfill all righteousness'."* (Matthew 3:15; Mark 1:9-11; Luke 3: 21-22)

"Jesus answered and said... 'Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God...unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God'." (John 3:3, 5)

Baptism from Jesus: *"As for me [John the Baptist] I baptize you with water for repentance, but He [Jesus] who is coming after me is mightier than I...He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire."* (Matthew 3:11)

"For John [the Baptist] baptized with water, but you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit." (Acts 1:5; 11:16)

"Therefore we have been buried with Him [Jesus] into death, in order that as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have become united with Him in the likeness of His death, certainly we shall also be in the likeness of His resurrection." (Romans 6:4-5)

I have chosen to address the issue of baptism because I was approached by a mother inquiring about when the next baptism class was going to be so her son could be part of it. My response was that because of our small numbers rather than a class I wanted to "tutor" (mentor) anyone interested in being baptized one-on-one and go from there. But there was more involved in my response than low numbers. First, I am aware that for many classes (catechism) about baptism and the concluding baptism on Easter Sunday constitutes more of a rite of passage than it does baptism as ordinance or sacrament. Second, for some baptism is synonymous to salvation even to the fact they keep the "tank" full of water so that if one confesses Jesus as Lord they immerse him/her the same service to prevent loss of salvation due to any unforeseen accident. Third, for some baptism instruction, immersion and church membership are the trifecta of their faith which does not include being "born-again" or baptism as empowerment for ministry giving credence to nominalism at the expense of true Christian faith and practice.

I was baptized in water on Easter Sunday 1955 and it was a very important day in my life. But I also confessed Jesus as Lord and Savior 18 years later giving my life in service to Him and was re-baptized subsequently thereafter. I could go further in sharing experiences of a personal nature but the point is made. Baptism is complex and we need to follow what God has not only given through the Bible but in conjunction with His Holy Spirit. And, it doesn't hurt to get the advice and counsel of those mature in the faith as we enter into the baptism God intends for us.

If any are interested in studying this topic more or are interested in giving their lives to Jesus Christ leading to being baptized, please contact me at the church and let's talk.

Pastor Bud