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In Over Our Heads

An analysis of the critical issues concerning the meaning and purpose of scriptural baptism of believers.

By Charles J. Conniry, Jr.

Two ministers—one Presbyterian, the other Baptist—were discussing baptism. After arguing the merits of baptism by immersion, the Baptist minister awaited his colleague’s reply. The Presbyterian asked if the Baptist would consider a person duly immersed if he were baptized up to his chin.

“Of course not,” the Baptist replied.

“What if he were baptized up to his nose?” said the Presbyterian.

“No,” the Baptist answered.

“What if you dipped him up to his eyebrows?”

“You don’t understand,” said the Baptist. “He must be immersed completely in water—until his head is covered!”

“That’s what I’ve been saying all along,” said the Presbyterian; “it’s only the little bit of water on the top of the head that counts!”

Ironically, a practice so basic to Christianity as baptism has become a point of contention among believers. Virtually every aspect of this ordinance has been controversial: the timing (infant or believers baptism?), the mode (effusion or immersion?), the meaning (sacrament or symbol?).

Among fellowships that practice believers baptism by immersion there is the question of its relationship to salvation. Is baptism symbolic, or does it have a profound connection with a person’s salvation?

For me, this question was the crux of an agonizing dilemma in which relationships and nearly ten years of ministry were at stake. What is the connection between baptism and salvation? Why are we baptized?

Confession

In New Testament times, confession and baptism occurred together. In Acts 2:38 the confessional formula, calling upon the name of Jesus Christ, identifies confession as the vivifying element of one’s baptismal response (cf. 22:16). The confession with the mouth that Jesus is Lord, as seen in Romans 10:9, is believed to have been the primitive baptismal confession. The formula in Acts 8:37, “I believe Jesus Christ to be the Son of God,” was likely employed by the early church in baptismal ceremonies.

Although the earliest manuscript to contain this reading dates from the sixth century, Irenaeus shows the tradition of the Ethiopian’s confession to have been current as early as the latter part of the second century. Also, the hapax legomenon of 1 Peter 3:21 pledge or prayer implies an oracular declaration occasioned by baptism. For early Christians baptism served as an occasion (or locus) of confession.

The result of this juxtaposition of baptism and confession was twofold: baptism was typically administered in conjunction with one’s initial receiving of Christ (cf. Acts 16:15, 33); and baptism was associated with the occasion of salvation—hence the confusion (then and now) as to whether the act is saving. We must distinguish between the event of salvation and its (perceived) locus. Confession, not its locus (baptism), is efficacious (cf. Rom. 10:9-10).

Commitment

At the heart of our confession is a commitment to faithfulness; and at the heart of this commitment is repentance (a change of mind which anticipates and facilitates a change of life). With a view toward the New Covenant and its baptism, John the Baptist administered a “baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.” (The efficacy of baptism is derived from the repentance it expresses; repentance, like confession, is efficacious in its own right [cf. Acts 3:19].)

John’s baptism and Christian baptism are on common ground (cf. Col. 2:11-12 where the putting off of the sinful nature finds its prospectus in baptism, or Acts 2:38 in which repentance and baptism constitute a determinative response).

Accordingly, Romans 6 presents baptism as the touchstone of one’s repentance and commitment (especially verses 1-6, in which baptism marks the death of the old nature). The chapter explicates the ethical implications of baptism in light of living under grace.

In baptism, one’s well-intentioned commitment to a Christ-centered life is betokened. Perhaps this is why early Christians called baptism a
sacramentum, analogous to the military oath taken by Roman soldiers in pledge of devotion and obedience to the commanding officer.

The idea of baptism as a sacramentum is most approximated in 1 Peter 3:21, where baptism as an occasion of confession and as an expression of commitment converge. Although the oracular declaration can be understood in the sense of a prayer (in which case it would be translated “appeal”), more evidence commends the view that it served as a pledge. Hence, the confession occasioned in baptism is an affirmation of faith in the risen Christ as Savior and a pledge of fidelity to Him as Lord.

Covenant
That baptism is an affirmation of faith and pledge of fidelity suggests another facet: its role as the outward sign of the New Covenant. What makes it a definitive sign is that it substantiates confession of faith and fidelity.

As a covenant sign, baptism approximates its Old Covenant counterpart, circumcision. The two signs correspond to the covenants that they represent. The Old Covenant was predicated upon one’s lineage (inclination of proselytes being accessional) and had a patriarchal orientation. Thus the circumcision of males, administered (typically) in infancy, served its role preeminentely.

The New Covenant is predicated upon personal faith (cf. Jer. 31:31-35) and has an egalitarian orientation (Gal. 3:28). Thus the immersion of all who believe, administered upon evidence of credible faith, suits the New Covenant.

Beyond their function as covenant signs, no further correlation between baptism and circumcision is to be adduced. Baptism does not replace circumcision as God’s “new” covenant sign. Rather, it displaces circumcision, as the New Covenant displaces the Old (Heb. 8:6-13). Although a seeming correspondence between circumcision and baptism may be observed in Colossians 2:11-12, more likely the circumcision of Christ is the putting off of the sinful nature (i.e., walking by the Spirit and not the flesh) one actualizes in Him (a covenantal term).

Baptism is not the “circumcision of Christ,” but the outward evidence (definitive sign) that one is a partaker of the covenant in which this “circumcision” is experienced.

The role of baptism as a covenant sign is evident in Galatians 3. This text makes connection between the New Covenant and the Abrahamic covenant of promise—that in Christ’s seed all the nations would be blessed. The Old Covenant, of which circumcision was the sign (Gal. 5), was God’s interim pedagogical instrument to lead us to Christ (3:24).

Since the promise is fulfilled in Christ, the need for a pedagogue (including its sign) no longer exists (3:25).

Those who belong to Christ are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to promise (3:29). Inclusion in this covenant is open to all on the basis of faith, regardless of race, socio-economic status or gender (3:26, 28): “For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ” (3:27). The “all of you” in verse 27 parallels the “all” in verse 26. What is achieved internally through faith (v. 26) is evidenced externally through baptism as one clothes oneself (outwardly) with Christ (v. 27).

As an occasion of confession, baptism instantiates a (saving) profession of faith in the risen Savior. As an expression of commitment, baptism betokens dedication to Christ. As a definitive sign of the covenant, baptism confirms our identity as partakers of the new in Christ.

Why are we baptized? The answer is best expressed in another question: How could we not be baptized?