

WHAT THE VERY EXISTENCE OF BAPTISM SHOWS

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The very fact that baptism exists shows that salvation is not by works of law, works in a legal sense, works in a legal context, acts that have some legal value. Furthermore, the very existence of baptism shows that salvation is not by human effort relative even to an interpersonal standard of behavior, which, as in law, is also a perfection standard. To make this claim convincing, we must show that baptism is not primarily for bringing about entrance into the institutional church or for communicating to other people that we have decided to follow Jesus. For present purposes, that point is sufficiently shown by the biblical expression “baptism into Christ,” not “baptism into the church” or some wording that indicates testimony to other people.

However important it is that people begin to change their ways from what does not meet divine expectancy, the New Testament proclamation is not that people begin to act differently. This “conversion” motif is one George MacDonald emphasizes and one very much needed in the context of the totally passive salvation proclaimed in the Scottish hyper-Calvinism of his day. But the apostolic proclamation was that people turn to God properly understood as personal rather than material, and so forth (Acts 17:22-29). It was a matter of turning to God (Acts 15:19, *e.g.*).

Baptism must be interpersonal in meaning since it is not for church membership or legally causal for any result (and certainly not somehow part of a metaphysical or nature process). The interpersonal category is the only basic category left. Christianity's central call is more than a call to a devout and holy life. It is more a call to fellowship with the true God, whose real nature revealed in, and by, the person of Jesus Christ calls for that devout and holy life.

Baptism is an act of identification with Christ as a way of identifying with God “the Father,” who appointed Christ as the object of identification. He is so because he is the only manifest extension of the Father. Christ and the Father are at one in that they stand together on the other side of the personal relationship with us, and we are called on to identify with that other side of the relationship—as happens in any reconciliation process.

Baptism is (1) an act of communication by which people say something; it is a performative act. It is (2) an act of commitment first to the God (through Christ) as a person to the exclusion of all parallel alternatives, and expresses a sense of identity with God. In this case it becomes a commitment to (3) God's/Christ's lordship since this is not a relationship between equals. Only then is baptism a commitment to (4) the Lord's values, purposes, and consequent behavior. Lastly, it is a commitment to (5) the extent of obedience that Christ exemplified.

We are not called on simply to change. We are called into fellowship with God. Fellowship with him through reconciliation is the bigger issue, the more basic, more ultimate, more central, more important issue; the first consideration—or whatever figure we choose for the main consideration between people and God. Other matters like morality, worship, fellowship, ministry, evangelism, wisdom, and doctrinal

understanding of many sorts take their place as needed and possible logically after this initial matter.

The fact that baptism even exists, then, shows that there is something more in Christian concern beyond other necessary matters like behavioral change. There is something more than the other things we see Christianity address. That bigger something is fellowship with God through Jesus Christ. That is what baptism expresses.