

TWO BASIC POINTS ABOUT BAPTISM

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Two points should be highlighted in presentations about baptism. First, baptism should not be too closely identified with outer response. That lends itself to distinguishing inner and outer, identifying faith with inner and baptism with outer, and then affirming that it is the inner dimension that justifies rather than the outer expressive act as well, thus trying to avoid baptism as a work and bringing it into conformity with the Pauline formula “salvation by faith” vs. works. But “faith” in Romans/Galatians does not mean inner action; that is the usage in James. Paul means action in the context of personal relationship (faith) vs. action in the context of legal process (works). We do well to unite inner and outer response in salvation and to consider baptism itself as comprised of both dimensions inseparably. That unity of aspects applies to all acts of obedience.

Second, baptism should not be identified too closely with forgiveness of sins. We do better to understand baptism as a personal act of identification with (God by identification with) Christ (who is one with God). This puts it up front at the level of the whole rather than with a significant subsequent part—forgiveness of sins, which then leads to the gift of the Spirit and church membership. Baptism can then rightly be considered a part of the salvation process by being a part of God's only condition for salvation—identity with Christ; and it can have that value without having any partial or indirect causal connection with any consequence of being “in Christ.” We are baptized “into Christ” to indicate formally our willingness to identify with him and commit to him; and on the basis of that identity God forgives, *etc.* Were there no forgiveness even involved, baptism would still state that identification (cp. Jesus' baptism, the baptism of saved Jews, the Christian baptism of John's previous disciples, and the “baptism” to Moses, Paul's fear of Corinthians being baptized into Paul). Baptism would express a sense of oneness with Christ, personal commitment to him, to his values, to his purposes, to his lordship, to the degree he himself exemplified obedience to God the Father. That is a much richer meaning for the ordinance. On the basis of our acting (vs. active) subjective identity with Christ (not a particular, formal act of identification itself) God alone acts objectively to forgive, *etc.* Salvation by faith vs. works is meant in an interpersonal vs. legal sense. Actions, whether inner or outer, done in the context of relationship can have no other than a conditional (vs. causal) value; so the only acts that have anything to do with results are the acts the other person freely promised before we acted.

Both of these points appeal to holistic thought. The whole person comes into the picture, not just the inner or outer aspect. The whole of life comes into the picture, not just sins or reconciliation or church membership or other subsequent divine blessings. Consequently, salvation as a whole and baptism as a particular fit with one prime characteristic of interpersonalism, that is, holism.