

BAPTISM AS IDENTIFICATION WITH CHRIST

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Seeing baptism as identification with Christ provides a framework for working through several abnormal situations that arise and helps make sense even of normal situations that may be overlooked in the theory and practice of the ordinance.

Addressing first the normal situation, we observe clear cases of baptism that do not move lost people into a saved condition: righteous Jews called to John's baptism for remission of sins, saved disciples of John called to Christian baptism, and the baptism of Jesus himself by John. Such examples show that Christian—and even Johannine—baptism has a bigger frame of reference than salvation from lostness.

These examples help us understand baptizing young persons raised in Christian homes. The children may never have seen themselves as anything but Christians and may have shown a devotion to Christ that is more than exemplary for someone his age. We do not have to wait till they are obviously lost before we baptize them into Christ for remission of sins. What if we become lost and then do not get them baptized in time? There is no clear way of knowing how God regards them at any particular point in their life. The point is that they identify themselves with Christ in a mature way—totally, exclusively, and permanently.

Seeing baptism as identification with Christ means that we do not have to adopt an understanding of the ordinance that requires people to be lost before they obey. We can deal sensitively and realistically with non-standard situations that have been thrown into contemporary ministry by the mispractices of the church historically. In particular, we do not have to tell (or imply to) paedobaptists that they are lost in their coming to baptism. In good conscience they can act on their adjusted understanding without implying that they are now lost, that friends and family and previous God-fearing ministers were likewise unsaved, that their own previous Christian experience was a delusion. When we create such doubts, we set them up for future uncertainty about the reality of their future Christian experience. From a practical standpoint, we may also create the adverse effect in that they may decide not to be baptized lest in so doing they violate their own conscience before God. They end up in a catch 22: they cannot obey without disobeying; they cannot obey without lying about what they think of their earlier experience and yet they now believe that baptism is immersion and a personal act of identification with Christ.

Simply put, the idea is that we call people to personal commitment to Christ. Baptism is a commanded formal expression of that identification. On the basis of that identity, God gives whatever benefits were previously not possessed in his eyes. He may have regarded as sons those

who were obedient to a previous stage of progressive revelation, those who have not yet reached an age of full accountability, those who had been mistaught or untaught on baptism matters, and yea even those who had only general revelation and conscience as previous guides.

To those who were previously lost, identification with Christ—and hence the formal act of that identification—would bring forgiveness of sins, the gift of the Spirit, and membership in the body of believers. To those whose sins were forgiven (disciples of John), it would bring the Spirit and membership in the body, and so forth. We do not have to make judgment in practice or even in theory about the previous possession of any of those graces when we call people to Christ.

This approach applies progressive revelation—a relativity factor—to all categories of people and circumstances. As patriarchs were held responsible for what they had available but not for Mosaic legislation, and as Israelites were held responsible for Mosaic revelation but not for New Testament revelation, as children are held responsible for what they can understand but not for adult matters, so also the as-yet unevangelized—may we say—are responsible for what they have available to them in nature, experience, culture, and conscience.

That same progression-relativity principle applies not only throughout the dispensations of time and across the boundaries of cultural circumstance, but also over the stages of each person's development.

We may say in closing that this approach may relate to other matters in the New Testament: (1) the coming of the Spirit on the household of Cornelius a short time before their baptism that identified them with Christ; and (2) Ananias' addressing the great persecutor of Christians as "*Brother Saul*." This expression could be a term of affection or based on his being a fellow Jew. But by the time Ananias says it, Paul was a repentant believer in Christ as the Messiah; he had seen Christ and had been praying and fasting for three days. In attitude he was no longer against Christ, and in that sense was for him. (3) It could relate to the apostles' receiving the Spirit on Pentecost aside from being baptized.