

REBAPTISM

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The wise policy is to let candidates make their own decision about rebaptism; after all, baptism is their obedience to God, not ours. Nevertheless, people usually take their cue from those they have come to trust on religious matters. For these reasons we will not always be able to leave the issue in the hands of candidates.

The predominate opinion has been that rebaptism is not necessary even for those who understood their previous baptism as a testimony to other believers or as the way of entering the visible body of Christ on earth. That opinion seems wise for reasons like the following.

(1) Even the “baptistic” view understands that baptism has to do with Jesus Christ—and with everything that naturally relates to him. Baptism has to do with Christ rather than Buddha, Mohammed, Reverend Moon, Moses, John the Baptist, *etc.* It is a Christian act, not a Jewish, Hindu, or Satanic one. People understand that baptism relates to Christ and that in some fashion he relates to all benefits that come to us who are in him.

(2) Baptism is God’s act rather than ours. Its meaning is not determined by the candidate or the administrator, but by the commander. We take it, then, that when we do what God tells us as a condition for his fulfilling his promise, God gives us the benefits he promised regardless of how exactly we saw the connection between our obedience and the benefit. The act is not the cause of salvation; God is the cause. The important thing is that we obey him. A candidate knows what Christian salvation entails. Our view differs from some people’s view as to where it is in the series of human responses that God begins to count a person as his child—at the time of the change of heart or at the time of baptism.

In a way, reconciliation between persons does not have a terribly specific time when it occurs. In fact, the reason for a formal rite like baptism is to focalize into a point what is actually a process. So to speak, a rite of passage exists for psychological purposes—to help us see ourselves in a new state, that is in this case, in a new association with God. Baptism is for our benefit rather than for accomplishing the result; God gives the result. Baptism is not part of a legal transaction because reconciliation is not a legal process for it to be part of; consequently, baptism does not accomplish the result nor does it have the kind of time-when that putting an insurance policy into effect does.

Salvation is reconciliation, an overcoming of estrangement between persons—God and people. Since reconciliation is an interpersonal process, it is accomplished by interpersonal means; so we must understand it in that sense, an act that one person does toward another. Formal acts can exist in a legal processes as well; but since reconciling persons is not a legal process, baptism does not have legal characteristics. That fact impacts how we handle the rebaptism issue. Rather than being rebaptized, we can re-understand what our previous baptism meant. Re-interpreting it can be an alternative to rebaptizing them.

Finally, (3) it is not wise to connect baptism specifically with the forgiveness of sins. Its design is broader than that one issue even though forgiveness is a prominent issue that is basic to the gift of the Spirit and membership in the body. Baptism identifies us with Jesus Christ (see related essays) rather than with any one specific benefit that comes from that identity. As an act of identification with him, baptism involves commitment to the values, purposes, and lordship of Christ as much as reception of forgiveness, the gift of the Spirit, and church membership. We see

baptism as pertaining to up-front identification with Christ rather than with some subsequent specific whether that specific is church membership or forgiveness of sins. We are baptized into Christ.

We also should not connect baptism directly with the forgiveness of sins--or with any other benefit, for that matter. Between baptism and the benefits stands both (a) identity with Christ and (b) God's choice to forgive, *etc.* Considering baptism as having a direct connection with any of these benefits leaves Christ out of the picture and changes the obedience into a legal work rather than an interpersonal act of trust in another.