

RE-BAPTISM

The desire to be baptised for a second time can happen, when people meet Jesus as Lord and Saviour for the first time, or in a fresh way. They recognise that they were baptised as young people or babies. Often it occurred under the name of “Christening”. People interpret this as something different to baptism, but it is not.

More importantly they want their baptism to be an event in which they can participate, rather than something of which they have no recollection. They want to make the responses and the decisions themselves, rather than leave it to the parents and godparents who may or, may not, be good practising Christians.

Often people are not conscious of this desire until another person questions the reality and effectiveness of that earlier baptism. It then becomes a question mark, at the best, and a burden, at the worst. Seemingly, being baptised again as a believer and by full immersion is the only way that the person can resolve the matter.

This desire is perfectly understandable but it does raise some difficult questions. In particular it asks, “From the point of view of God, what happens in a baptism?”, “Does he get involved?” or “Is baptism a purely subjective matter?”

WHAT IS BAPTISM?

John, known as the Baptist, baptised. Luke 3:16 (NRSV) “I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; ... He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.” The Bible usually calls John’s baptism a baptism of repentance (e.g. Luke 3:3).

After the coming of the Holy Spirit, enquirers asked of Peter and the others “What should we do?” He replied: (Acts 2:38 NRSV) “Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.”

In the New Testament mention is made of three baptisms. There is John’s baptism in the water of repentance. There is baptism in water, in the name of Jesus. There is baptism with Holy Spirit. The baptism of John was a temporary expedient, which was quickly replaced by baptism in the name of Jesus or of the Holy Trinity (see Acts 19:1-6, Matthew 28:19). baptism in water, in the name of the Trinity became the norm.

Baptism is a rich idea. It includes a washing away of sin, a death to self and a rising again in Christ (Romans 6:4-6). As well, a covenant relationship in Christ is entered into, together with His Body, the Church. Baptism is the sign of a change of status, of position and so of relationship, with our God.

Is it an empty sign with no dynamic content, simply a gesture, or is it a sign of God acting? This is the fundamental question.

AN INITIATING GOD

Our God takes initiatives. Creation, and the acts of salvation through Moses and in Jesus, are the big examples. He takes initiatives usually before people are fully able to understand the implications. Just read about Abraham, and Noah, Samson and Gideon, Saul and David, for a start.

God is not dependent upon our response nor our cooperation for him to act. That thought is far too presumptuous. Of course it helps, he is seeking it and

he is wanting it. Nevertheless, he can and does act without us.

The question, for us is whether God acts in baptism, or is he dependent upon our response and participation first? If baptism is simply our response to a call that God has made upon our lives, then our answer must be different from the point of view that God initiates something in a person’s life at the point of baptism.

To the person who seeks to be re-baptised it is this question that must be asked. Did God start something in your baptism, at whatever age, and in whatever circumstances? If he did, then there is no need to be re-baptised, simply affirm your response to that initiative.

If that answer does not help the person then they are seeing baptism as a personal response without acknowledging God’s initiative. In these sort of circumstances it may help to allow such a person to reaffirm the baptismal promises with full immersion but without an actual baptism. This allows the person to make a commitment, to be symbolically washed, and so make a reaffirmation of the baptism event, for the person’s own sake.

The problem with doing a second baptism is that it is asking our God, “Where were you in the first one?”

THE EARLY CHURCH

In the New Testament “whole households” were baptised (Acts 11:14; 16:15; 16:33; 1 Cor. 1:16). Yes, we can deny that children were involved. Though we cannot argue from silence, it is hard to believe that, on all these occasions no children were there. If children were present then they were baptised within the context of believing parents and families.

Likewise the question of baptism taking place after death (1 Cor. 15:29ff) would show that the early church was already considering unforeseen questions concerning baptism, here that of post-baptismal sin. A reading of the early church fathers shows that infant baptism soon became very common.

CONCLUSION

Many, on both sides of the debate, are prepared to state categorically what the Bible says. The arguments pour out on both sides, and many volumes have been written.

The practice of Infant Baptism has been abused. This demands that the Church be always vigilant regarding policy, teaching and discipline on the question of baptism. Parents and godparents need to be fully aware of the contents of the promises that they are asked to make. Nevertheless it is God's command that we baptise. He is the one who, in His love for His children, would want to touch, heal, and set free.

Most sincere Christians have many starts within the journey with Jesus. Most starts, if not all, come from a nudge of the Holy Spirit. May all our "new" starts be done with renewal and reaffirmation of our baptismal promises, so that we glorify and magnify our God for what He has done in our lives.

Further Reading:

Michael Green: "Baptism - Its, Practice and Power".

The "Grove" Booklets on Ministry and Worship - #20; #24.

NOTE

The material in this pamphlet may raise other questions which you might like to discuss with your church leadership.

**Published by the National Executive of
Anglican Renewal Ministries Australia.**

July 1995

Copies of this pamphlet, and pamphlets on other topics, can be obtained from:

ARMA (Vic), PO Box 1134, Glen Waverley, Vic, 3150

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