

Baptise them

We now come to the entry point for the Christian life, namely baptism. Much has been written on this subject. We will not attempt to focus on church practice, but rather to raise issues to do with our theme. There are several areas connected with baptism that relate to following Jesus more closely.

We notice firstly from Matthew 28 that baptism is to be carried out in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. This suggests that the three persons of God all have their own function in baptism. Paul wrote to new Christians, "Because you are sons, God sent the Spirit of his son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out "Abba, Father." (Gal 4:6). In Romans 8:15, a similar sentence occurs, which uses the phrase, "the spirit of sonship". We can see that the various roles of God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit are all at work in baptism.

The Romans 8 passage continues, "We are God's children" (v16). It seems that baptism is best understood in connection with being born again as a child of God (John 3:3). A second birth of this kind is the work of God; baptism is a public recognition of this event. When a baby is born, I suppose it is most aware of the struggle involved in birth. But soon, it begins to grasp that it has been born into a family. In addition to needing food to grow, good relationships are vital to emotional health. In our century, we have become more aware of the importance of the weeks and months before and after a child's birth. Being born well, as it were, is not just a matter of the time of labour, but depends on the whole environment of the child and its family.

These thoughts can be applied to a person's new birth. Something so important and precious as baptism should not be trivialised. We will take four chapters to discuss its implications. In this one, we will make some general comments about baptism. In the next two we will discuss the inner requirements of repentance and faith, and in the fourth suggest some of the implications of baptism in the holy Spirit.

This final point brings us to a first important emphasis. We are used to thinking of there being one rite of baptism, as a ceremony involving water. This is thoroughly Scriptural. The Ethiopian, who in all church history may have had the most 'correct' baptism, came to faith when Philip spoke to him, and was immediately baptised in water. Afterwards, the Spirit snatched Philip away, giving us the impression that the whole job was finished (Acts 8:26-39). And Paul writes emphatically that there is one baptism, as there is one faith and one Lord (Eph 4:5). It seems clear that baptism should be a once and for all event. The word means 'washing', and we expect it to be done involving water.

However, there is another side to the New Testament's teaching. Hebrews 6:2 refers to instruction about baptisms with an s, implying more than one baptism. Also, all four gospels and the Book of Acts tell us that Jesus will baptise his followers in the Holy Spirit, an activity over and above water baptism (Matt 3:11, Mark 1:8, Luke 3:16, John 1:33). Believers are to be drenched in the Holy Spirit, as well as washed clean from sin.

Through history, the church has paid far less attention to Spirit baptism than to water baptism. Perhaps that is because it is far less easy to arrange. It is not difficult to provide water and pour it on someone, or immerse them in it, but Spirit baptism requires the initiative of Jesus.

Alternatively, people may have thought that the promise of Spirit baptism was fulfilled once and for all at Pentecost in Acts 2, and that to encourage each believer to attempt to enter into this experience afresh would therefore be a mistake.

While this teaching may seem faithful to Acts 1:5, where the Spirit baptism is recorded as coming in the next few days, Acts 2:38-39 suggests that the Pentecost experience is one that is repeatable for future generations of people that repent and are baptised (in water). And as the Book of Acts unfolds, we find several instances of believers receiving the Holy Spirit (Acts 4:31, 8:15-17, 9:17-18, 10:44 etc.).

It therefore seems more helpful to hold that believers can expect both water baptism and a filling of the Holy Spirit, or Spirit baptism.

Ideally, there should be no tension between water and Spirit baptism. The areas we address in these four chapters apply to both water and Spirit baptism. We should not divide what God evidently wants joined together, since Spirit baptism is for all, young and old, slave and free, as is water baptism (Acts 2:17-18). Still, growth and development is seldom a tidy affair which goes by the book. Sometimes, a group of disciples was discovered in the Book of Acts who had received the one and not the other. Paul would then pray for them to receive the

Holy Spirit (Acts 19:1-7). We may also notice that for the twelve, there was a time gap between their water baptism, presumably at the hands of John the Baptist, and their Spirit baptism at Pentecost. Our attitude to Spirit baptism will be, better late than never.

While Bible interpreters may not all agree with what has been said so far, we can all unite on one fundamental point, namely that baptism is a sign and seal of the new birth. Jesus told Nicodemus that he must be born again (John 3:3). We can confidently say that the outward sign of baptism is meaningless without the inner reality of new birth.

Birth is not something that the baby being born can control. The believer is not the author of his own new birth. He cannot manipulate it. However, it has been suggested that some babies are anxious to be born, while others enter this world reluctantly, and in a similar way, believers can choose to co-operate with the new birth.

It seems from experience that some people are dragged into the kingdom of God kicking and screaming, while others think it all through very carefully, and end by making a thought-out commitment. With normal birth, however babies finally arrive, it is important that they are cleaned up, well wrapped, fed and nurtured from their earliest moments.

And while the fact of the new birth may be beyond their control, as thinking people, Christians can contribute to starting out well in their new lives. Perhaps an analogy will help. The passengers on a train will all have arrived in the carriage in different ways. Some will have been in a hurry, others will have been ready in good time. Some will have had difficulty affording the fare, others hardly considered the cost. For some it is an important journey, planned well in advance; for others it feels like a routine event; for others again, it was a last minute decision. What all passengers have in common is that they each made a decision to board the train, and then acted on it.

For some the decision was well thought out. They have come with luggage, a packed lunch, and material to read during the journey. Others who only decided to travel at the last minute made no preparation. But whatever state the passengers are in, as the train pulls out of the station, the most crucial point of distinction is between those who caught the train and those who missed it.

All this may seem unhelpfully obvious, but it has its application for the Christian life. Jesus invited people to think carefully before they became involved in something they might not be able to finish. What is the point of starting to build a tower, and then running out of money half way? People will laugh (Luke 14:28-30).

Then once you are in the Christian life, however you became involved, is it not better to be thorough-going about your decision? Jesus called people to take decisive action. Generally the instruction was blunt and unmistakable - "Follow me". It was no use only making half a decision (Luke 9:57-62).

The next two chapters will give an impression of some of the ground most people need to cover if they are going to be consistent Christians. Ideally it should be thought through and dealt with at an early stage, but better late than never.

Acting on some parts of it may prove very difficult, even painful, like the trauma of birth, but it is necessary and worthwhile, and yields good results in the end. Christians need to be prepared to be decisive about their new life, and take the trouble to lay good foundations.