

BAPTISM -- THE DOOR TO THE KINGDOM

Evan A. Fry, Radio Minister
 Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ
 of Latter Day Saints
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SCRIPTURE READING: John 3:1-5

There was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews; the same came to Jesus by night, and said unto him, Rabbi, we know that thou art a teacher come from God; for no man can do these miracles that thou doest, except God be with him. Jesus answered and said unto him, Verily, Verily I say unto thee, Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God. Nicodemus saith unto him, How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter the second time into his mother's womb, and be born? Jesus answered, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the Kingdom of God.

"Go ye therefore and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost."

About no other ordinance or doctrine of the Christian Church is there so much disagreement, so much argument, or so much scoffing indifference, as there is about the ordinance of baptism. Not long ago, for example, I read a witheringly scornful article from the pen of an army chaplain, directed towards a brother-chaplain who had preached a sermon on baptism by immersion to the boys about to move up to the front line trenches. His attitude was that there are much more vital and important things than baptism to be talked about when men are facing death.

Perhaps so. But all Christians are agreed on one thing -- that man is powerless to save himself, and that salvation is to be had only in and through the atonement of Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior. Man cannot save himself. He is helpless -- completely dependent on Christ for his salvation. Therefore, he is in no position to dictate the terms on which he will be saved. Christ -- the only person who can save him -- dictates the terms. To try to change them to suit the individual fancy -- or simply to ignore them scornfully and still expect a full salvation -- is rebellion. It is an expression of the very attitude which sinful man must repent of and discard, if he expects the atonement of Christ to be effective for him. Perhaps you will think I am wrong, but one of the things I should want to be very sure of if I were going into battle with the possibility of not coming back alive, would be that I had complied fully, freely, and humbly with every requirement which Jesus laid down for the salvation of my immortal soul. I should not want to be classed with those aloof and rebellious Pharisees of old, who scoffed at the publicans who were baptized of John, and refused to repent or receive baptism themselves. Luke 7:29, 30 describes them thus: "And all the people who heard him, and the publicans, justified God, being baptized with the baptism of John. But the Pharisees and lawyers rejected the counsel of God against themselves, not being baptized of him."

Where shall we go to find what we must do to be saved? Again Christian people are agreed that the scriptures speak with authority to instruct us in the ways and methods of salvation. What do the scriptures say about baptism, if we go to them open mindedly, and not trying to prove that we are right in our rebellion? Let us see what Jesus says, and "hear him."

First, it is very clear that Jesus taught us the principle of baptism by his own example. The third chapter of Matthew tells how Jesus came from Galilee unto

John, to be baptized of him; how John at first demurred, recognizing his inferiority to the Christ; and how Jesus answered: "Suffer it to be so now: for thus it becometh us to fulfill all righteousness." Jesus, though he partook of the nature of Deity, partook also of the nature of man; and as a man he submitted to the ordinance prescribed for all men who seek remission and forgiveness of their sins, and entrance to God's kingdom. He gave us his example to follow.

Second, Jesus himself practiced baptism. The Bible contains an out-and-out discrepancy on this point. John 3:22 reads: "After these things came Jesus and his disciples into the land of Judaea; and there he tarried with them, and baptized." Note that language carefully; Jesus and his disciples came; he tarried, and he (Jesus) baptized. Verse 26 of the same chapter contains the words of certain Pharisees who came to John and said, "Rabbi, he that was with thee beyond Jordan, to whom thou barest witness (and obviously it was Jesus to whom John bore witness) behold, the same baptizeth, and all men come to him." In other words, the Pharisees reported to John that Jesus was baptizing, trying by this report to arouse John's jealousy. But John refused to be aroused, reminding them that he himself had said that one greater than he should come.

Now let us look at the fourth chapter of John, which opens with these words: "When therefore the Lord knew how the Pharisees had heard that Jesus made and baptized more disciples than John, (Though Jesus himself baptized not, but his disciples,)" etc. These two verses contradict each other and the two verses we have already mentioned from the preceding chapter. Jesus came, and tarried, and baptized. The Pharisees heard that Jesus made and baptized more disciples than John, but Jesus didn't baptize any. What kind of nonsense is that? If we simply leave out the comma (which has been supplied by modern translators, and not by the original author) the verse reads: "Jesus himself baptized not but his disciples." In the light of three verses which state plainly that Jesus himself did baptize, this could mean only one thing; that Jesus baptized not any but those who were his disciples. Of course he would not baptize those who did not believe on him. He baptized his disciples.

Baptism, though it may be performed by those who hold the priesthood of Melchisidec, which Jesus held, is primarily a function of the Aaronic priesthood which John held. That is why Paul says in a parallel passage in 1 Corinthians 1:17, "For Christ sent me not to baptize, but to preach the gospel." His primary assignment was to preach, but he did baptize, for in preceding verses he names the household of Stephanas, and also Crispus and Gaius as having received baptism as his hands. Jesus largely left the administering of ordinances to those he had chosen to assist him in his ministry, but on occasion he himself, like Paul, did baptize.

Jesus himself taught baptism. He said to Nicodemus, "Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God." (John 3:5) I know of no way that a man can be "born of water" unless he comes forth completely and bodily from the water; and the only way he can come out from the water is first to go completely into it. This is baptism by immersion. Except a man be born of water, he cannot enter the kingdom.

Jesus commanded the apostles to teach and practice baptism. Matthew 28:19 records his language: "Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world."

In obedience to Jesus' command, the early apostles and other disciples taught and practiced baptism. On the day of Pentecost, Peter preached to the people of Jerusalem and commanded them, "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost." (Acts 2:38) The tenth chapter of Acts tells the story of the conversion of Cornelius and his kinsmen and friends -- the first Gentiles to be admitted to the New Testament church. And the closing verse of the chapter

tells of Peter's command to them: "And he commanded them to be baptized in the name of the Lord." Acts 16:15 tells of the baptism of Lydia and her household; and verses 33 records the baptism of the Philippian jailer by Paul and Silas. Acts 19:4 tells of Paul baptizing certain converts who had been baptized previously by one without authority. The words of Ananias to Paul after his conversion were: "And now why tarriest thou? Arise, and be baptized, and wash away thy sins, calling on the name of the Lord." (Acts 22:16) Acts 9:18 records that Paul obeyed this command, and arose, and was baptized. Yes, the early church taught and practiced baptism as the initiatory rite which gave entrance to the church and the kingdom.

What is baptism? First, it is an act of physical obedience to a spiritual law -- an outward sign of an inward grace. By water we keep the commandment, that we might be justified by the Spirit. Second, it is the making of a covenant, in which the one receiving baptism takes upon him the name of Christ, repents of his sins, and promises to serve and obey Christ faithfully and diligently until the end. Baptism is enlistment and commitment; it signalizes and gives public notice of a change of allegiance. Those who drift along without any such definite act of commitment are apt to be hazy and careless and indifferent about their allegiance to God and Christ. Baptism is a definite act of commitment; it distinguishes those who are definitely enlisted in Christ's church and kingdom from those who are outside looking in. It separates the believers from the "make-believers". It is a necessary delineation of what is and what is not the church, of who are and who are not followers of Christ.

Baptism is a symbol. Men are so constituted that they need to use symbols to visualize and make concrete the intangible ideas and feelings and emotions which need expression in some tangible and visible form. The lover brings a bouquet of flowers to the lady of his choice, to express the love which he finds difficulty in putting into words. The wedding ring is a symbol of marriage; the flag is a symbol of our country; the cross is a symbol of our salvation; the scepter is a symbol of the king's power; the crown is a symbol of his royalty; the robes of a supreme court justice are a symbol of his dignity; the scale or balance is a symbol of justice. Baptism is such a symbol. It is an initiatory rite. It dramatizes and exemplifies the death of the old man, his burial, and his resurrection and new birth. It dramatizes and exemplifies the cleansing of the whole man -- not just a part of him -- and the remission of his sins. It symbolizes his obedience and humility, as he surrenders himself into the hands of Christ's minister.

We believe that baptism by immersion is necessary to carry out the symbolism which is expressed in Romans 6:4, where Paul says: "Therefore we are buried with him by baptism into death, that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life." It is indicated by Jesus' statement that we must be born of water and of the Spirit, or we cannot enter the kingdom of God. Baptism by immersion is indicated in the statement that John baptized where there was "much water." Obviously a small amount of water in a bottle or jug would have been sufficient to sprinkly or pour on a considerable number of people. Baptism by immersion is indicated by the fact that Jesus "came up out of the water," according to Matthew 3:16; also by the fact that Philip and the Eunuch "went down both into the water" and after the baptism "came up out of the water," according to Acts 8:38,39.

The translators who put the Bible into English have wisely not tried to translate the Greek word BAPTIZO, because there is no one English word which can convey all of its exact and implied meaning. BAPTIZO is the intensive form of the Greek verb BAPTO, and means to plunge vigorously beneath the water, to dip, to drench, to immerse. Robinson's "History of Baptism," a book published in 1790, makes the interesting assertion that BAPTIZE is a dyer's word, meaning to plunge or dip beneath the water for the purpose of coloring or dying. That is, baptism imparts a moral or spiritual hue or color, by which the followers of Jesus can

be recognized. In early Latin writings, John the Baptist is sometimes called "John the Tincter", or one who dipped the people in water to tint them -- change their moral and spiritual color.

Baptism is for those who are mature enough to repent of past sins and make a choice and a covenant to serve God in the future. Baptism when rightly administered by one having authority, and received in humility and sincerity, brings forgiveness of sins, and prepares the one receiving it for the gift of the Holy Ghost. Peter said to the people of Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost, "Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost."

Baptism is an initiatory rite of beautiful symbolism. It was instituted and commanded by Jesus as the door, or means of entrance to his church and kingdom. Jesus has laid down the terms of salvation. God does not force any man to accept them; we all have our agency. We may accept Christ's terms and his methods of salvation, or we may reject them and arrange terms to suit ourselves. But remember, since we cannot save ourselves, we must depend upon Jesus to save us; and if he is our Savior, he is the one who has the right to dictate the terms. He has said that we must be born of water and of the Spirit; he has set us the example. Let us follow him.