

One Baptism

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In American evangelicalism with our robust ecumenical spirit in spreading the good news, we are still among the most divided parts of the body of Christ. How ironic it is that for all the lip service of rallying around the cross of Christ for the sake of missions, ecclesiastically we still treat each other as foreigners. This is most visible in our abuse of the historic practice of Christian baptism. Baptism, which was intended to be a sign of Christian identity and unity in the family, is in fact our great symbol of schism. One of the most divisive evangelical practices is "rebaptism."

Rebaptism in essence declares that the person who was either baptized as an infant or baptized in another communion did not receive "true Christian baptism." The logical implication, although seldom stated, is that the church body which performed the previous baptism is "not Christian." It appears to me that evangelicals have got to come to grips with the sectarian nature of this practice. One of the few ways we can publicly acknowledge our oneness in Christ is to recognize the validity of one another's baptism if performed with water in the name of the Trinity.

The careless treatment of baptism by evangelicals was brought home to me a few years ago when inquiring about the church background of my seminary students. One of the students announced to the class that he had been baptized four times which got a number of laughs; the professor didn't think it was funny at all but a sad commentary on the state of evangelicalism in America. There is a glaring inconsistency between our verbal interdenominational embrace of each other as Christian brothers and sisters and our elitist practice of baptism. It should not shock us that some non-believers, think the terms Methodist, Baptist and Roman Catholic refer to three different religions.

Rethinking Rebaptism

This "every man for himself" attitude toward baptism is in sharp contrast with the new vision of Christian unity emerging in certain corners of the worldwide Church. On a recent trip to the Czech Republic, a Pentecostal minister informed me that one of his church members had transferred membership to the Roman Catholic Church in his community and the priest had requested a certificate of baptism. The Pentecostal pastor was delighted at this demonstration of Christian solidarity in his country. It is difficult to imagine two more disparate parts of the body of Christ than a Catholic and a Pentecostal. If they can humbly honor one another, why can't evangelicals who should have much more in common?

Some pastors have stopped the practice of rebaptism out of respect for other Christian communions while still holding their personal views on believer's baptism. One pastor told me that he apologizes to new members for having to rebaptize them before they can join his church. One prominent evangelical church recently began to rethink this issue because the inconsistency of rebaptism with the catholicity of the church is a logical conclusion the pastor could ignore no longer.

Pastors and churches struggle with the intense individualism of our culture and the continual clamoring for meaningful experiences. The desire to be both pastorally sensitive and theologically consistent is a genuine tension for many. Persons baptized as infants may request rebaptism because it was not a “meaningful experience” for them the first time. Or persons traveling in Israel may insist on being baptized again in the Jordan River. For church leaders it may be the path of least resistance to go ahead and baptize a second time thinking no harm is done. In these and similar instances there is little theological reflection on the implications of such a decision. Is baptism merely a personal faith experience that individuals may repeat at will or is it symbol of Christian identity properly administered only once?

The New Testament Witness

There is no mention of Christian rebaptism in the New Testament nor is there any principle anywhere in Scripture which points to rebaptism. The only exception one might consider is Acts 19 but the context indicates that John’s disciples were unfamiliar with the Holy Spirit and had therefore not received Trinitarian baptism previously. This was not rebaptism because the earlier baptism was not authentic Christian baptism.

If rebaptism was to be sanctioned in the New Testament Church, a prime opportunity to make this clear was afforded in the account of Simon Magus in Acts 8. Simon believed and was baptized, yet, his conversion had not been genuine. Peter does not tell him to be rebaptized but to “repent.” Simon’s faith apparently was not “saving faith,” but he is not directed to be baptized again with water. The implication of this account in Acts is that water baptism administered in the name of the Lord, even without genuine faith being exercised by the recipient, is still true baptism and is not to be repeated. Paul exhorts Simon to true faith and repentance so that the full benefit of his baptism is realized but baptism is not repeated.

The New Testament emphasizes that there is “one baptism” among Christians. Our unity together in the fellowship of the Triune God is symbolized and sealed unto us through baptism in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Paul states, “There is one body and one Spirit, just as also you were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, *one baptism*, one God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all.” (Eph.4:4-6) The reality of that oneness in the Spirit is made visible in the one-time sign of water baptism.

Protestant Baptism

Martin Luther and John Calvin, pillars of the Protestant movement, were both opposed to the rebaptism of Roman Catholics based upon the teaching of the New Testament and the uniform practice of the early church. The Reformers never envisioned rebaptism as having any part in the Protestant movement. Building upon the foundation of the 16th C. Reformation, the English Puritans attempted to craft confessional statements on baptism that reflected biblical teaching. The 1647 Westminster Confession of Faith states: “The sacrament of baptism should be administered only once to a person.”

American Protestants have struggled with the issue of rebaptism. Presbyterians, for example, at their annual meeting in 1845, declared that Roman Catholic baptism was not Christian baptism, therefore, inferring that rebaptism would be in order. Professor Charles Hodge of Princeton

Seminary countered that this action was “in opposition to all previous practice and to the principles of every other protestant church.” Hodge acknowledged the errors of Catholicism but he also observed, “there is not a Church on earth which teaches the doctrine of the Trinity more accurately, thoroughly, or minutely, according to the orthodoxy of the Reformed and Lutheran churches, than the church of Rome...they teach the doctrine of the atonement far more fully and accurately than multitudes of professedly orthodox Protestants.” The Catholic Church is “a part of the visible church on earth” and rebaptism is out of order. (See Charles Hodge, “Review of the General Assembly,” *Biblical Repertory and Princeton Review*, 1845) Hodge’s basic argument was the insoluble connection between baptism and belief – if Catholics are Christian then one cannot pronounce their baptism illegitimate through rebaptism.

Rebaptism first emerged as a Reformation issue during the ministry of Ulrich Zwingli in Zurich, Switzerland. It was just as wrong-headed for the Zurich City Council in 1525 to mandate the baptism of all children as it was for dissenters, who rejected infant baptism, to run off on their own and rebaptize one another. Both groups were in effect treating each other as “heretics” and showing no respect for honest differences of conscience in interpreting the Bible. Why must we attempt to bind one another’s conscience on this matter by asserting that only “our view” is the legitimate Christian perspective?

Testimony of the Early Church

It is precisely at this point that reflection on early Christian practice is helpful. There have been gallons of ink spilt on interpreting baptismal practice in the early church and there is no need to rehearse the well-known data. There is a fact scholars can agree on - there were periods in the ancient church when both believer’s baptism and infant baptism were practiced simultaneously. Some delayed baptism until adulthood and other Christians had their children baptized. A number of the Fathers such as John Chrysostom and St. Augustine, were raised by Christian mothers who chose to delay baptism until their sons professed faith as adults. One should also note that Chrysostom and Augustine, who both became bishops, were advocates of infant baptism. The interesting fact is that this diversity of practice did not appear to be a problem in the minds of the Church Fathers.

While there was allowed diversity of baptismal practice, there was broad consensus on the issue of rebaptism. Early sources indicate that there is to be only one baptism among Christians. The 4th C. *Apostolic Constitutions* stated, “Be you likewise contented with *one baptism* alone,...For as there is one God, one Christ, and one Comforter, and one death of the Lord in the body, so let that baptism which is unto Him be but one.” (See *Apostolic Constitutions*, 6.15). The Nicene Creed likewise affirms belief in “*one baptism* for the remission of sins” and by this time (4th C.) both believer’s baptism and infant baptism were common.

The bishops at Nicaea, in addition to producing their famous Trinitarian creed, also had to address a number of pastoral problems; one concern was the readmission of schismatics and heretics to the Church. A group known as Paulianists, followers of Paul of Samosata, had been guilty of the Adoptionist heresy which denied the deity of Christ. Since they had denied essential Christian teaching, rebaptism would be necessary according to the Nicene bishops. Two schismatic groups, Novationists and Donatists, held orthodox Trinitarian views but had separated themselves over matters related to the pre-Constantine persecutions. Since no

Trinitarian or Christological question was at stake, the bishops declared that no rebaptism was required. Basic Christian orthodoxy was the determining factor in whether rebaptism was necessary.

St. Augustine (4th/5th C.) spent much of his ministry in North Africa preoccupied with schismatic Donatists. The Donatists had separated from the Catholic Church and demarked that split by rebaptizing their adherents, declaring themselves alone to be the “true church.” The practice of rebaptism was a breaking of the bonds of unity among African Christians. Augustine, tirelessly worked for the reunification of the North African church, pleading with the Donatists to rejoin the one church of God. That reunion did take place eventually and the Donatists were received back into the church.

Baptism and the Unity of the Church

The New Testament emphasizes that there is “one baptism” among Christians. To rebaptize one previously having received Christian baptism in an orthodox church (i.e., Trinitarian baptism with water) is a denial of the unity of the church. Rebaptism in this instance undermines the catholicity (universality) of Christian identity. Rebaptism has historically been sectarian unless required due to heretical teaching associated with a previous baptism.

The “holy catholic church” down through the centuries has included those who practice both infant baptism and believer’s baptism. The position of believer’s baptism is honorable; many in the past have paid dearly for acting according to conscience and this is praiseworthy. There is no suggestion here that anyone should abandon his or her convictions and understanding of the Scriptures. Infant baptism is likewise due respect as an ancient practice of the Church. Must these two positions be mutually exclusive? The early church reminds us that there is room for both practices in the family of faith. Why cannot one be true to traditional credobaptist convictions and also honor the baptismal practice of other Christians? And why can’t paedobaptists allow parents freedom to make choices according to their convictions informed by Scripture? Is there not some middle ground between this on-going trench warfare among evangelicals over baptism? Certainly, this can’t be God-honoring for us to publicly treat each other as outsiders by refusing to recognize one another’s baptism.

Evangelicals rebaptize Mormons because they are not Trinitarian, that is, their baptismal practice is not Christian. But, why rebaptize someone previously baptized in another Christian communion? Should we treat a fellow Christian church the same way we treat a heretical cult? Rather than try to reinvent baptismal practice, evangelicals should follow Scripture and listen to the wisdom of the saints in ages past. Luther and Calvin remind us that Protestants ought not rebaptize one another nor rebaptize Roman Catholics who choose to join a Protestant congregation.

Are evangelicals just a collection of marginally-Christian sects or are we members of the “one, holy, catholic and apostolic church” as the Nicene Creed declares? Yes, we have a fundamental unity in Christian faith but that faith demands a visible expression in the world. One of the chief ways we demonstrate our visible oneness before a watching world is by our common Christian identity through one baptism in the name of Father, Son and Holy Spirit.