

A BAPTISM MESSAGE

The Sunday after Epiphany Sunday always includes passages about baptism. Not by accident, the children's Sunday School lesson is about baptism, too. I think it is productive to periodically take a close, analytical look at the very important Christian practice of baptism, and that is what we'll do.

Dunking, pouring sprinkling.... signifying an event by getting a person wet seems like a very strange thing to do, but is it.....

Why do players dump the Gatorade on their coaches head.... or spray champagne on each other to celebrate a victory???

Water is pretty important to life,..... so maybe it does make sense to use water in a special / holy / transcendent manner???

And, we do just that...., and we call it baptism.

There are numerous interpretations / views on baptism.... from Sacrament – a part of salvation to merely a ritual.

Baptism is an identifying part of our heritage; we are Anabaptists – named because the original group baptized “again”. They rejected infant baptism, which was very radical at that time, and baptized believers “again”– initiating/ restoring the concept of believer's baptism.

Even though this radical departure from the norm helped form our initial identity, it is fascinating that our regard towards baptism is Not as rigid as others. We did not/ do not rest our theology on baptism. Baptism is simply a sign.... for us.... reflecting our theology.

Groups such as the Roman Catholics and the Baptists tend to be much more inflexible with their view of baptism.

I believe most of us know that Catholics deem baptism to be a sacrament – a mystical, powerful action involving God's grace that saves.

The Baptists have a different view, yet act nearly as authoritarian about baptism as those who believe it to be a sacrament.

Most Baptist churches absolutely insist on “believer's baptism” and that the form must be immersion – total dunking.

Many Baptist churches assert that the valid baptism must be in “Baptist” water,..... and anyone baptized elsewhere must have it done again to be accepted as a member.

The youth leaders, when I was a teen, were Mennonite, and in order to join the Baptist church, they had to be baptized, again, in Baptist water.

They were annoyed, but needed the job, so went along..... which is also reflective of our Mennonite flexibility about baptism.

By the way, I'm still very good friends with them, and they were the ones who kept bugging me to become a Mennonite.

Baptists are this way because their roots come from the Reformation movement, and the Reformers had to prove they were right; their theology arose from position / the argument to alter / correct / reform the existing church,... be it Roman Catholic, Luthern or Presbyterian.

This Need to be more correct was magnified in the 1800s... when the various denominations expanded and thus competed with each other.

Baptists sold themselves as the ones who baptized in the only correct manner, therefore they were better – the true church.

This 19th century denominational competition war was called Landmarkism. Each group had their claims to be the only correct / good Christians, in order to win converts.

Baptist even adopted the Anabaptist as family in their sales pitch.

I bet you didn't know that?

Baptist had a bizarre story, called the scarlet thread. It was about how they could trace their roots all the way back to St. Peter. Therefore, they claimed to be the one and only true church.

They asserted their heritage ran through the Anabaptists,... and included many of the monastic sects, too. Unfortunately, a few hundred years were skipped now and then,..... BUT.... the story sold well.

Baptist do baptism, and they claim to do it the right way, and that way is by immersion Only.

The candidate is dunked once backwards, totally under the water.

It's backwards because that is how a person is buried – face up.

The dunking is a burial, and the lifting out of the water is the resurrection.

I've baptized many people that way, and I dreaded baptizing big people. ... because it wasn't easy lifting them back up.

These days, each Baptist church has a baptistry – a big tank full of water... water that got really rank if it wasn't regularly changed.

Most baptistries are in the wall behind the pulpit, and the pulpit must be in the centre.... signifying the central importance of the sermon.

Some old churches, such as the one at the second church I pastored, had the baptistry located in the stage under the pulpit. The flooring would be removed for a baptism. This one I was at had a really cool canal that lead from the back, so the pastor and candidate would stroll in together, along the canal to the large dunking area at the front.

Most are elevated in the back wall,...which means there were stairs going up and then down into the water,...all out of view from the congregation, except the last couple steps going down.

This going down into the water was important, because the Bible states that Jesus came “UP” out of the water. *Baptists have to be correct!*

So, the baptistry had to be elevated for all to see, yet it had to be down from the entrance.

Do you get the picture? []

There would be dressing rooms next to the corridor leading to the up and down stairs to the baptistry. Candidates wore white robes, and so did the pastor; however, most pastors wear, under the white robe, big rubber fishing waders in order to keep their clothes dry.

My father used to brag that he could change his clothes so fast after a baptism that he would join the congregation in the final verse of the hymn that follows a baptism. I wasn't so fast.

Also, keep in mind those rubber fishing waders have suspenders and big clunky boots.

Many years ago,, at a Baptist church, ... when I was learning the ropes,..... I assisted the lead pastor during the baptisms.

I'd help the candidates down and up the steps, and the pastor, if needed.

I was out of view of everyone.

One time, the pastor baptized 5-6 people, and the last was a very large man. I could tell he was winded when he said he's closing baptismal words at the end. He then preceded up the stairs. He was out of view by the third stairs. When he reached the top, he stumbled, and started to fall backwards.

I reached for him and grabbed the stair railing for support. All I was able to grasp of him was his suspenders.

There he was dangling backwards, bouncing up and down from the elastic in the suspenders, with arms waving [] It was a very long 5-10 seconds.

All this was out of view....., but he was very close to doing a back dive into the baptistry,..... and that would be very bad form.... and his wadders would have filled with water.....soaking his suite.

I can still picture the look of terror on his face.

He didn't fall backwards. No one in that church ever heard what happened,..... and life went on.

Baptists are very fussy about doing baptisms, but every group has their radical / their anarchists.

There was once a very unique baptism at Crescent Hill Baptist Church. That church was THE one next to the seminary. It was a large,... “we do it perfectly” church where many of the professors and students attended.

The lead pastor, Steve Shoemaker, was my mentor. He was the quintessential, intellectual Baptist pastor.

However, there was something very different about this particular baptism. Deke Slayton was a prankster and an iconoclast – a dangerous blend.

I found out later, that Saturday night, Deke put a large amount of bubble bath in the baptistry water.

As Steve moved into the water and began to baptize the water started to bubble and foam, and soon the bubbles crescent the glass wall in the front of the tank.

Steve kept a stoic face and continued as if all was normal,..... but I can't say the same for the congregation.

Laughter was squealing out from the hand covered mouths of many, the rest just had wide open mouths of shock.

That Sunday, baptism was not done in the correct / perfect Baptist way.

I don't think bubbles and backward drives are the proper techniques, and I'm not sure rubber wadders are Biblical either.....

So, what is baptism? What about the proper way, and why do we do it?

Baptism is not a Christian creation.

There are references to it in the Old Testament, and baptism was common in many pagan religions, and it was fairly common in the Jewish sects preceding and including Jesus' time on earth.

Generally, baptism was a cleansing ritual – the actual and symbolic washing away of impurities. Usually, it was required before joining the group or religion... a type of initiating rite.

John the Baptist and others during his time used baptism to demonstrate the washing away of sins... to declare and act out the confession of sins.

Jesus' "baptism of repentance" by John the Baptist is very problematic.

There was no need for Jesus to have moral cleansing or to repent, so why did he have John baptize him?

There are countless explanations, all are conjecture and rationalizations.

They range from it was an act of affirmation for John, to Jesus' initiation to a new, cleaner religion to creating a all together new version for baptism. No one knows for sure,..... and that is important to remember..... and even more essential to remember was God's response.

God used the moment of baptism to condone, declare and praise Jesus.

When Jesus was baptized, the heaven tore apart, God's Spirit came down like a dove and the Voice from heaven was heard.

Baptism is special,..... yet does it really matter how it is done?

The apostle Paul tried to shift baptism away from the association to only repentance.

Paul redefined it as an action that mimics Jesus' burial, death and resurrection, and in Acts 19 (printed in the bulletin), Paul expanded the meaning further by stating that God's Spirit can be poured out at the time of baptism.

And, that surge of God's Spirit changes people. They could preach and some spoke in tongues.

Baptists are really troubled by the speaking of tongues. For the most part, Baptists try to ignore the whole topic. I guess because speaking in tongues is beyond control,.... it's messy, and Baptists like things in order.

Typically, Mennonites are not bothered by the New Testament citations about speaking in tongues. I suppose it is because most Mennonites are convinced that those said to be speaking in tongues were actually speaking low German; they just didn't know it at the time.

Baptism was important in the early church and through out all of church history. The early church had rules and litanies for baptism, yet they were flexible.

Living water was preferred, meaning in a river or lake, yet it was stated that if that wasn't possible then the next choice was cold water, but warm water was an acceptable third choice.

There are still a few "traditional" Baptist churches that insist on having cold water.... like the Early Christians used.

Boy....oh boy,..... that cold water is brutal. It is not easy to act reverent and to speak clearly when the body is numb from the waste down.

Interestingly, infant baptism was permitted by the early church, for extreme situations, such as a dying baby.

Even the modes of baptism were not a big deal – immersion, affusion or aspersion.

Immersion is total dunking like the Baptists do it, yet some groups baptize face first and some dunk 3 times ... representing the trinity.

And counter to what the Baptists declare, the Greek word for baptism does not mean immersion. It means a ceremonial rite with water.

Affusion is pouring. The Early church did this, too – for those in jail or in other limiting circumstances.

The First Anabaptists did affusion – the pouring of water method, and that is the way we do baptism, too.

Aspersion is sprinkling, and this technique evolved out of the need to baptize the sick and infirmed. Sprinkling was the third choice.

However, Cyprian in the 3rd century said sprinkling was fine. Sprinkling was not common until the 13th century.

Paul's input and all the difference methods allowed reveals a couple of things:

One,... baptism is no longer about cleansing. It's hard to bath with a few sprinkles of water.

Two: the style / the manner of doing baptism really isn't that important,... but don't tell that to the Baptist.

Nevertheless, baptism is still important.... and powerful.

And, that is part of the reason, that it evolved into infant baptism.

Thanks to the notion of “original sin”, promoted by Augustine, and a base desire for a magical salvation to erase damnation,..... baptism became a sacrament – essential for salvation / a means of salvation.

It was thought that children were born with original sin, and so baptism would wash that sin away. Fear was the prime reason that infant baptism became the norm, but there were other factors, too.

Many “heathen” people detested being forcible converted and forcible soaked with water,..... so the hyper evangelists found it easier to baptize babies in order to make them Christian.

Another aspect was Christianity was a community / cultural / ethnic way of being, and it seemed proper to bring in a baby to this community,.... at the beginning... through baptism.

Baptism comes in lots of flavours.

And, I mentioned some lighter moments with the Baptists,... to reveal that the method is not the important part.

Moreover, there is also flexibility in the interpretation of the purpose, too.

We embrace “believers baptism”; however, we get troubled when our young people don’t join our community before they hit 20.

That’s part concern for their soul and part concern for the ethnic group.

As I mentioned at the beginning, there are numerous interpretations for the purpose of baptism.

For some it is a sacrament, for others it is a ordinance..... We call it a sign.

I like that “a sign”.

A sign represents / stands for: .. A public proclamation for all to see;

it’s a signal that we embrace repentance and have committed to be a follower of Christ.

And a sign can be powerful, too.

Baptism is an amazing and powerful experience.

We do baptism because we want to. It adds value to our Christian expression. It connects us to the past and to each other, and baptism includes the senses.

Our senses help bond / tattoo our thoughts and desire to a deeper part in our brain..... to our soul.

We feel and better remember our commitment to Christ... because of baptism.

A sign is powerful because it invites a reaction / a response.

Our Baptism is a sign for others and for God.

Baptism invites God to be present.

Baptism is an invitation to God; it is our calling out: “Here I am. I am choosing to live you way. Here I am. I am your child.”

“I am yours” is the baptism message.”

Consider God's response when Jesus was baptized.
Consider the voice of God / the presence of God that is revealed in Psalm 29.
Choosing to be open to God is..... huge.

Baptism is a sign, with a wet head, for all to see, including God.
Baptism is a sacrament.... with a few drops of water
Baptism is an holy ordinance.... that soaks the whole body.

Baptism is a declaration..... that states from that point on we are God's children.

God hasn't forgotten,..... but how well are we remembering?

Baptism is a message that says, "God..... I am yours."