

THE EARLY CHURCH BAPTISM

Baptism is a subject that is treated with many varying degrees of importance in the church today. Some even think baptism is optional since salvation is obtained entirely from the blood of calvary. This of course is a faulty concept as we can show from many different scriptures. For example, Israel was saved by the blood from death of the first born while in Egypt. At the Red Sea they were saved from Egypt and the Pharaoh who wanted to take them back into bondage and slavery. 1CO 10:1 For I do not want you to be unaware, brethren, that our fathers were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea; [2] and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea; [3] and all ate the same spiritual food; [4] and all drank the same spiritual drink, for they were drinking from a spiritual rock which followed them; and the rock was Christ. [5] Nevertheless, with most of them God was not well-pleased; for they were laid low in the wilderness. [6] Now these things happened as examples for us, that we should not crave evil things, as they also craved. [7] And do not be idolaters, as some of them were; as it is written, "THE PEOPLE SAT DOWN TO EAT AND DRINK, AND STOOD UP TO PLAY." [8] Nor let us act immorally, as some of them did, and twenty-three thousand fell in one day. [9] Nor let us try the Lord, as some of them did, and were destroyed by the serpents. [10] Nor grumble, as some of them did, and were destroyed by the destroyer. **[11] Now these things happened to them as an example, and they were written for our instruction, upon whom the ends of the ages have come.** (That is us)

Pharaoh's army was drowned in the Red Sea. Their bondage to Egypt was brought to a final conclusion at the Red Sea. They were saved by the waters of baptism. They were saved from hunger and death by the manna. They were saved from death by thirst by the water out of the rock. They were saved from the armies of Amalek by prayer and warfare. ETC.

The early church had no such optional concept of baptism. Baptism was never an option or treated as some extra experience that you could participate in if you wanted . Baptism was expected, it was commanded, and it was required of every candidate who was to be accepted into Christian fellowship. No believer was invited to partake of the Lord's table who was not properly baptized.

The early church understood that the Christian experience was activated and sealed by participation in Christ's death, burial and resurrection. Not just by death alone. Not just by blood alone. Not just by burial.

Some of their baptism practices may seem rather ritualistic by us who have tried to cast off as much ritual as possible. However the act of baptism should be judged by the results they obtained compared to the results we obtain.

Since the early church candidates faced almost certain persecution or death, their entire salvation experience had to produce something real, with power. Their experience must produce a personal power beyond anything we don't know anything about.

Therefore rather than be critical of their method we should learn from their example. I would certainly like to see baptism restored to that same power. Of course all power comes from God and not from some particular action. Still our earthly actions are what activates our faith to participate in spiritual experiences. Faith requires some action and is not simply static believing.

For example, we can't just say "I will participate in baptism by faith without getting wet." The experience that baptism is designed to produce must accompany the action of being baptized. The "act" by faith should produce the "experience". One without the other is nothing.

Therefore whatever action is necessary to activate the faith to receive the real experience should be acceptable to any born-again candidate. Within reasonable bounds, of course. We may reject the action that activates faith simply because we label it as ritualistic.

We should be able to accept whatever form baptism took in the early church if their baptism produced the power to be martyrs. If our baptism is less than we expected we should inquire why it didn't produce the scriptural evidence. We must learn to discern the true from the false, the superficial from the profound. We can all learn from others, in whatever age. There is a corporate knowledge as well as corporate experience. The individualism of our culture may lead us to shallow understanding, if we only accept what we ourselves have discovered.

While baptism is a past experience for most of us, it should have a present reality in our daily experience. This is where the real power lies. Not just in a once for all time event but in what baptism does and is in daily life, personally. Then whatever provides for the daily experience of baptism is what is essential and acceptable within the once for all time event.

,

Therefore let us look at a typical baptism as described by some early church fathers.

After a candidate understands the nature of Christ's sacrifice and the provision for his reconciliation to God through Jesus Christ, he is brought to the waters of baptism. There he strips off his normal clothes. (What he is baptized in is not clear) Since their Sundays were not a holiday,

(Saturday was the Sabbath), they had their meetings early on Sunday morning. About 4:00 or 5:00 AM while it was still dark. The candidate then faced west toward the darkness. He then confesses Jesus Christ as Lord and then denounces Satan and any hold he may have had on the candidate.

He is then handed a burning candle and turning to the waters he plunges the candle into the water. This signifies the end of all illumination of the past from whatever source, and the conclusion of that old life.

Then demonic powers are bound and cast out to set the candidate free from all evil oppression. **This part of baptism was called "denunciation".**

Now the candidate is ready for the next part which was called " THE DROWNING". In some writings there is reference to Behemoth and Leviathan. Some think it referred to Jesus' decent into the grave to defeat and break Satan's power of death. One writes about the drowning of demons in the waters of baptism.

The candidate is then submerged in the waters and is raised up out again. Then he breathes out over the waters. This refers back to the record of creation but here it obviously refers to the new creation and Christ rising in resurrection life. As God breathed into the old Adam and gave him life so now the candidate breaths out and in again. This indicates the breath of new life, which is eternal life.

After this they put on another garment or robe. This was referred to as the baptismal robe and indicated they were now clothed with Christ and therefore “IN CHRIST.” That he is raised up to the glory of God.

Following this they anointed the person with oil. Justin Martyr, who lived in the second century, says, “As we come up from the washing we are anointed with the blessed unction.” Some called this the sealing of the Holy Spirit. This obviously refers to what we would call “ The Baptism of the Holy Spirit”. Some call it the “ Water Bath Of The Spirit.” (Immersion of the Spirit).

The candidate is handed a burning candle and the ministers say “ Having become worthy of the Holy Gift, and having received the illumination, you are now called “**CHRISTIAN**”. The candle is a symbol of Christ’s resurrection light NOW THE CANDIDATE IS TO BE RECEIVED INTO CHRISTIAN FELLOWSHIP BY PARTICIPATING IN HIS FIRST HOLY EUCHARIST. What we call the Lord’s Table. Following the Lord’s Table he was received in the fellowship by the holy kiss.

The process involved (1) The confession, (2) Renunciation, (3) Immersion,(drowning) (4) Clothing, (5) Anointing, (6) Illumination, (7) Union (fellowship)

Whether this process is valid for us today is something we could pray about. In any case we can learn something from what they did. Looking from the viewpoint of the tabernacle it doesn’t seem too strange. It appears to help the candidate understand what he was doing and to truly expect his life to be radically changed.

We could at least ask ourselves if we are satisfied with the results of our current method.