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Baptism



This portrait is of the Baptism of Clovis and dates from around 1500.

So far, all of these short pieces written here have been about current news items in which young and new Christians can find themselves attacked with false assumptions from others. Such pieces have described the Christian position to set the record straight.

There are a number of cases in the New Testament where disciples and followers of our Lord Jesus Christ said something that seemed culturally sensible at the time but actually made no sense at all. Jesus Christ had to put them right by telling them they were making wrong assumptions.

When we read about Bartimaeus being blind the disciples naturally ask him “who sinned?” was it Bartimaeus himself, or was it either of his parents? Jesus had to correct them and tell them it was neither. They had a wrong assumption at the outset.

For a similar example of wrong thinking, we read in Matthew’s gospel, at chapter 22, that some saducees asked Jesus this:

²⁵ Now there were seven brothers among us; the first married, and died childless, leaving the widow to his brother. ²⁶ The second did the same, so also the third, down to the seventh. ²⁷ Last of all, the woman herself died. ²⁸ In the resurrection, then, whose wife of the seven will she be? For all of them had married her.”

²⁹ Jesus answered them, “You are wrong, because you know neither the scriptures nor the power of God. ³⁰ For in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage,

Here Jesus is having to correct leaders of the Church for their false assumptions that after death everything is the same when it isn’t the same at all.

Christians today are no different. Christians today can often find themselves arguing about baptism completely unnecessarily. So it is that some can argue, quite wrongly, about Baptism, because although we are commanded to Baptise and to be baptised, there is no example in the gospels of our Lord Jesus Christ baptising anyone!

At the end of Matthew's gospels the resurrected Jesus speaks to his disciples and the instructions he gives them are called "The great commission". The great commission includes the commandment:

¹⁹ Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.

So the commandment for all of us is to: *make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.*

So Baptism is an important part of the Christian faith. The essential part is to baptise "in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit". It is not the issue of whether or not to baptise that there is any real debate. The debate is instead about how to baptise.

In John's gospel we are told that John baptises with water but Jesus baptises with the Holy Spirit and so the two baptisms are different. It is also in John's gospel that we hear about Jesus baptising people but then we are told that it wasn't Jesus, in that case, but his disciples! At John chapter 4 we read:

¹ Now when Jesus learned that the Pharisees had heard, "Jesus is making and baptizing more disciples than John"² — although it was not Jesus himself but his disciples who baptized — ³ he left Judea and started back to Galilee.

We have to understand that what is written in the gospels is all the special events. We are simply not told about the ordinary, regular events of the early Church: The point is that the first readers of the gospels would have known the ordinary, regular work of the Church, whereas it is us, 2000 years on, that does not know with certainty what was done in the early Church.

Therefore, we are not told in the gospels of the Bible any detail about how to baptise and at this point Churches all work that out *with integrity*. Therefore, as Christians, we should not criticise Churches but listen to them instead.

We know, for example that children were present and included in the baptism, but we do not know how old they were. The decision in ancient times would have been made by the head of the household rather than by individuals. It is after the reformation (circa 1600 AD) that people start to be treated more as individuals.

In St Paul's first letter to the Corinthians and he talks to them about divisions in the Church in Corinth (the divisions were not about Baptism but about leaders). St Paul writes in chapter 1:

¹⁴ I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius, ¹⁵ so that no one can say that you were baptized in my name. ¹⁶ (I did baptize also the household of Stephanas; beyond that, I do not know whether I baptized anyone else.) ¹⁷ For Christ did not send me to baptize but to proclaim the gospel, and not with eloquent wisdom, so that the cross of Christ might not be emptied of its power.

This tells us that St Paul baptised two adults, Crispus and Gaius, and the household of Stephanus. The "household" included children but please notice that it does not tell how old the children were at all.

So some Churches baptise children and ask the parents to make oaths on the children's behalf and some Churches baptise only consenting adults. What is wrong is only when we argue about it because the Bible doesn't tell us one way or another on that detail.

When the disciples baptised thousands in Jerusalem they were households, and would have included children but, once again, we are never told the age of the children, we are simply told they are households. This simply tells us that the head of the household is the one who would have decided.

In the same way there is an even stranger and irrelevant argument over full immersion or to wash the hair or head with water. Once again you can hear Jesus telling us all we are not asking the right question at all.

In the book of Acts we are told of the gaoler in Phillipi. In Acts chapter 16 we read:

²⁵ About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them. ²⁶ Suddenly there was an earthquake, so violent that the foundations of the prison were shaken; and immediately all the doors were opened and everyone's chains were unfastened. ²⁷ When the jailer woke up and saw the prison doors wide open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself, since he supposed that the prisoners had escaped. ²⁸ But Paul shouted in a loud voice, "Do not harm yourself, for we are all here." ²⁹ The jailer called for lights, and rushing in, he fell down trembling before Paul and Silas. ³⁰ Then he brought them outside and said, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" ³¹ They answered, "Believe on the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household." ³² They spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house. ³³ At the same hour of the night he took them and washed their wounds; then he and his entire family were baptized without delay.

So in verse 26 we hear that there has been an earthquake and in verse 33 we hear that St Paul baptised them all. Now, after an earthquake it is NOT credible that St Paul lowered them all down into a well of water, one by one, and baptised them by full immersion. It is credible that St Paul baptised them with water drawn from the well in a pale or bucket, the same as water drawn from the well to wash the wounds.

There are many examples of baptism in the book of Acts and in the letters of the New Testament about baptism in the form of washing, but ...Once again, in the book of Acts, we read about Philip and the Ethiopian Eunuch in chapter 8:

³⁴ The eunuch asked Philip, "About whom, may I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?" ³⁵ Then Philip began to speak, and starting with this scripture, he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus. ³⁶ As they were going along the road, they came to some water; and the eunuch said, "Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?" ³⁸ He commanded the chariot to stop, and both of them, Philip and the eunuch, went down into the water, and Philip baptized him. ³⁹ When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away; the eunuch saw him no more, and went on his way rejoicing.

Look at the words here:

....Philip and the eunuch, went down **into** the water, and Philip baptized him. When they came up **out of the water**.....

This, almost certainly, is an example of baptism by full immersion.

Immersion does give a good image of being covered completely by Christ and coming up out of the water as a new Christian, born again.

So both baptism by full immersion and baptism by washing can be found in the Bible and both can be right.

The Church of England and the Church in Wales allow, and can do, both forms of baptism.

Therefore, Christians should not spend their time criticising a Church's view of baptism but instead should listen with respect. Listening, not criticising, is the Christian response here.

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