

Already Well Pleased

Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

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Baptism just might be one of the most debated topics in all of Christianity.

Aspersions or immersion? That's the ten dollar way of saying: sprinkled or dunked.

Infant baptism or believer's baptism?

And if believer's baptism, how young is *too* young? Twelve years of age? Eight years of age? Six? Five? Four?? Much lower than that and we'd have to ask if it really is any different than infant baptism.

Should baptism be officiated by only ordained clergy? Or do we actually believe in the priesthood of every believer?

Does the act of being baptized cleanse us of sin? Or is it a symbol of what God has already accomplished?

Does the water need to be holy water? Or will Colorado Springs Utilities tap water do?

You see what I mean? We Christians *kinda like* to argue about baptism, which is ok, I guess — until we start using it to determine who is a "real" Christian and who is not.

When I was still in seminary, I spent a year serving as a young adult ministry intern for a large church. The church was predominantly made up of "blue blooded" Baptists — most of them born and raised in that congregation. But in recent years they'd witnessed an influx of folks who had migrated over from other faith traditions — Roman Catholics, Presbyterians, Methodists, even a couple of Episcopalians.

That influx of other denominations led to a debate within the congregation about baptism and membership. Could a confessing Christian who happened to be baptized by some other mode than immersion be welcomed into membership or not? Should they let others into the membership of the church if they had been sprinkled as an infant or should they require that such folk be re-baptized and properly dunked?

It was clear that the traditionalists among that body could not see how anyone could rightfully belong to the Baptist church if they hadn't been "properly" baptized. "The next thing you know," they argued, "we'll be praying the rosary and handling snakes. Where does it stop? We're Baptists! We're not Catholics or Pentecostals."

For weeks, there was grumbling and murmuring in hallways, whispers when no one thought anyone else was listening. The people of the church were divided. Who could be in and who could not?

After several months (that seemed longer), the leadership was still at a stalemate. So they proposed a compromise. The proposed compromise was ratified in a congregational vote, and this was the compromise: prospective members would not be required to be re-baptized by immersion in order to become a member of the church, BUT if you desired or felt called to serve in certain offices of the church, such as the office of deacon, you would be required to submit to re-baptism by immersion.

In other words, you could become a member without being re-baptized, but you could not be a spiritual leader in the church if you had not been “properly” immersed. So, without even realizing it, what that church had done was create a two-tiered membership: a first-tier membership that granted you all the rights and privileges of membership, including all leadership positions; and second-tier membership that let you vote at business meetings, but not let you serve in positions of leadership.

And the sole determining factor was not based on the quality of their faith or the depth of their discipleship or the strength of their commitment to Christ, but solely how much water was used at their baptism.

Paul would be turning over in his grave. He believed that baptism did not erect, but tore down the walls of partition that separate us. What was it that Kris read for us just a few minutes ago?

“As many of us as have been baptized into Christ have clothed ourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female, [and if he were writing it today, he would add: there is no longer Baptist or Presbyterian or Catholic or Methodist]; for all of us are one in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3:27-28).

Who cares how much water is used? Aren't we all trying to follow the way of Jesus?

But if we Christians are prone to debate baptism, well, we come by it honest. One of the burning topics of the early church revolved around the baptism of Jesus. Namely, why was he baptized?

Even the most skeptical New Testament scholars, the ones who question the historicity of almost everything, agree on this story. The baptism of Jesus happened as certain as any event in the gospels. They come to this conclusion not only because three of the gospels tell some version of it and the fourth alludes to it, but because the early church would not have told the story of Jesus' baptism if they did not have to.

That's because Jesus' baptism is difficult to explain... and, frankly, a little embarrassing. Why would Jesus, the Son of God, submit to a baptism of repentance? If baptism is for the forgiveness of sins and Jesus is sinless, then what does Jesus' baptism mean?

As the gospel of Matthew tells it, John the Baptist was uneasy about and hesitated to baptize Jesus: “I need to be baptized by you,” he said, “and do you come to me?” (Matt.

3:14). Mark hurries past the baptism in just three verses. And Luke makes as little of the event as possible, casually mentioning that Jesus was baptized — you know — while everyone else was doing it, too: “When all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized...” (Luke 3:21).

The way Luke tells it, it sounds like Jesus was just another in a long line of people waiting to be baptized by John. John is down in the muddy waters of the Jordan. The choir stands on the bank singing, “As I went down to the river to pray.” And John brings one out of the water, shouts to the line, “Next!”, and puts that one under. “Next!” and puts that one under. “Next!” And on down the line.

But the problem remains: this line is filled with people waiting to be baptized for *the repentance of sins*. They were broken, sinful people coming to get their slate cleaned so they could start over. They were in line seeking God’s forgiveness. So why was Jesus in line? Did he need to be forgiven? Was he a broken sinner?

The church struggled with why Jesus would submit to John’s baptism? Why would he number himself among sinners?

But something happened in this story that helps us understand the meaning of baptism for Jesus — and for you and me.

What happened was “*the heavens opened*” and down came two things: “the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove” and “a voice came from heaven” (Lk. 3:21-22). A dove representing the power of the Holy Spirit and the voice of God telling us what Jesus’ baptism was all about.

You’ve probably heard this story somewhere else. It’s about a young boy, the son of a Baptist preacher. During worship one day, he watched for the first time as his dad baptized someone by immersion. So he decided he was going to try it at home with, of all things, their pet cats.

He got the kitten in and out of the water ok. The mama cat was a bit more challenging, but he eventually got her up and into the water and back out — washed of her sins, saved by grace. But that tom cat wanted nothing to do with the water.

He picked that cat up and it would scratch and claw and hiss and bite. It got away. He chased it down, picked it up, started to put it in the water again, and that cat turned around and scratched him on the face. The boy dropped the cat, took some water and threw it at the cat, and said, “Well, if you want to be a Methodist, fine!”

We get caught up on how someone ought to be baptized. We get caught up on method — aspersion or immersion? sprinkling or dunking? — as if the amount of water makes any difference at all. Baptism isn’t about how much water we use. It’s about what happens *after*.

After Jesus is baptized the *heavens are opened* – the veil between heaven and earth is pulled back – and the Holy Spirit descends and voice from God rains down over him like a blessing: “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well-pleased” (Lk. 3:22).

The voice is from heaven. The Spirit descended from heaven. The movement at Jesus’ baptism was from heaven to us, not from us to heaven. It’s about God moving from heaven to earth. It’s about God moving *to us*.

After he was baptized, “heaven was opened” (Lk. 3:21). It’s reminiscent of when Jesus died. Luke tells us that just before he breathed his last, “the curtain of the temple was torn in two” (Lk. 23:45).

For generations, Christians have held together in one hand the rending of the heavens at Jesus’ baptism and rending of the temple veil at his death. What God did at the start of Jesus’ ministry, God does again at its conclusion. The message was simple: Jesus’ baptism was now complete, and with it there was no more need for buffers between us and God. Now, we have direct access to God – no veils between us and God, no more buffers. That is how generations of Christians have interpreted these two events.

But is that what they are really about? About how we now have access to God?

Brian Blount tells this story:

“I had a colleague, Don Jewell, who taught New Testament with me at Princeton Seminary. He told me how he once taught the story of the rending of the temple veil to a group of teenagers and he told them exactly what [we’ve all heard]. He told them that the tearing of the temple curtain meant that we now had access to God.

As he was going on, feeling good about what he was teaching these young folk, a young man raised his hand and said, “I have something.”

Don nodded and said, ‘Yes?’ And the teenager looked at him and said, ‘I think you have it wrong.’

Now, imagine that – a young teenager who gets his Bible study in Sunday School one day a week telling a man who holds a Ph.D. in biblical studies, a man who has studied the Bible everyday of his professional life – in Greek and Hebrew, no less – that he has it wrong and that he, the teenager, has it right.

Well, Don listened for what the young man had to say, and the young man said, ‘Well, I don’t think it means that now we have access to God. I think it means that now, all of a sudden, God has access *to us*’

Don says that he’s never read that passage the same way again” (“Baptism of the Lord: Year B,” asermonforeverysunday.org, January 11, 2015).

The point of the story isn't about how we now have a doorway to God, but about how God will tear through the very fabric of heaven to get access *to us*.

And what we finally understand at the rending of the veil is what we were supposed to get way back at Jesus' baptism. "Heaven was opened." The Holy Spirit came from heaven *to us*. The voice came from heaven *to us*.

The gospel has never been about us being able to get to God, but about how God will do whatever it takes to get to us.

And then it makes sense, doesn't it, why Jesus would choose to be found in that crowd of sinners; why he would choose to be one more in that line of broken sinners waiting to be baptized? Where else would he be if he came to give a face to the God who would tear a hole in heaven if it meant getting to you?

And what God held true for Jesus at his baptism, God holds true for each one of us: "You are God's child, God's Beloved; with you God is well pleased."

Craig Barnes tells this story:

"When I was seminary student, I took a class from Bruce Metzger on the book of Revelation. [As an aside and in case you didn't know, Bruce Metzger was one of the primary translators for the New Testament in both the Revised Standard and the New Revised Standard Versions of the Bible. He's something of a legend among us, New Testament Greek types.] One day while he was lecturing on the ultimate victory of Jesus Christ, he looked up from his notes and said to a class full of future pastors, 'I hope that when you leave here and become pastors, you will get on your knees every morning and thank God that you are not necessary.'

I remember this aside better than anything else Metzger taught us. It really stuck in my craw. For the first five years of my pastoral ministry, I maintained an argument in my mind with his counsel: *Surely we're all necessary. The harvest is plentiful, and the laborers are few.*

When I returned to seminary for an alumni reunion, I found my old professor walking across the quad. I asked him if he remembered making that statement about thanking God we're not necessary. I was hoping he would maybe take it back. But he smiled and said, 'Oh yes, you are not necessary.' Then he gave me the second sentence I wished he had added five years earlier: 'You're too important to be necessary; you are *cherished* by God.'

On those Sundays, when you get tired of listening to me drone on and on, and you look past me and you see that baptistry window and you have the memory of your own baptism...

When you witness someone else's baptism...

When you look at a lake, a river, a glass of water and your mind wanders back to your baptism...

I hope you will remember that you are not necessary. You're far too important for that; you are cherished.

"You are my child," says God. "My son, my daughter, my Beloved; with you I am already well pleased."

Amen.