CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Baptism: The Baby Christian's First Step

To the beginning evangelist, it may seem that no activity could require more prayer and faith than that of witnessing to the lost. But a Christian who has known the joy of seeing a person profess faith in Christ knows that his work is only beginning. The "follow-up" of new converts, as the process of nurture and discipleship has come to be called, is a vital part of any evangelistic ministry. Most popular books on evangelism offer a chapter on the subject somewhere around this point of the book. I would like to deal with the responsibilities of the soul-winner from a slightly different angle, by addressing the responsibilities of the new believer.

Should you have the privilege of leading a person to faith in Christ, it is important that you stress to him that the Holy Spirit's immediate goal for his life is a highly visible public confession of Christ before his family, among his friends, on the job and in the church of God. Think back to our earlier discussion of the Holy Spirit's ministry in the world. His design is to exalt Christ as God's triumphant Son. He has been sent into the world to reveal to men that what appeared to be the scandal of a crucified Jewish criminal is actually the redemptive sacrifice of the Author and Sustainer of the universe. And, as we have also seen earlier, every Christian has a part in declaring this truth.

Leon Morris summarizes the Spirit's work as a commissioning by the Father to vindicate the Son by acting as a friendly prosecuting attorney. In his commentary on John 16:8, he notes:

> *"We have seen that the word translated 'comforter' is a word with legal implications. Normally it denotes a person whose activities are in favor of the defendant. Here, however, the meaning is that the Spirit will act as prosecutor and bring about the world's conviction."*[1]

Seen in the additional light of Acts 2, we can say that this work of the Spirit consists in His presenting the case of the gospel message in the private courtroom of the soul, accusing, softening and turning it to Christ. When the sinner is brought to see the truth of the gospel, he is moved by the Spirit to know, trust and confess Christ as his only hope. His subsequent public confession by testimony and baptism vindicates the cross by the demonstration of its power in his life. It has led him to renounce the world and take on the name of Jesus in this holy ordinance.

Thus in baptism the Spirit's primary goal for the Christian has been realized. It is not that He has no other goals for the new child of God, but He wants this public vindication of Christ's victory to be kept in the forefront. And such an emphasis on baptism and the public confession it involves greatly strengthens an evangelistic ministry. It challenges the unsaved hearer to take neither the love nor the judgment of God lightly, and forces him to deal decisively with his indifference to Christ and/or his fear of ostracism if he becomes a Christian.

The value of an emphasis on early baptism was vividly demonstrated to me in the case of John, a middle-aged husband and father who knew the gospel but never seemed to act upon it. His son suffered a serious eye injury, which provided me an occasion to demonstrate love and concern, and also the chance to talk to John about Christ when his heart was a little softer.

"John, are you familiar with the second commandment?" asked a friend of mine as the three of us sat together during one visit. A strange look came across John's face. "That's really something—your talking about that commandment. Hardly a day goes by without my thinking about it. I don't want my son and his son to be repeating my sins."

John had the sense of the commandment correctly in its focus on God's jealousy for His own worship and its warning that those who trespass here will see their sins visited on their descendants for three or four generations. We explained that the blood of Christ could not only cancel the guilt of his sin, but also break its hold on his life so that it would not be handed on to his son by way of condemnation.

Using Romans 10:10, I reminded John that he knew the content of the gospel already, but it had never done anything for him. "Isn't the problem that the 'Christ' you know is not a living Lord? Your 'Christ' seems to have died for sins, but He never rose again to the center of power. There is no power in the blood of Christ unless Jesus lives to present the merits of that blood to the Father as the reason for our forgiveness."

John read the passage carefully. "That must be it. I just never took Jesus seriously as the living Lord." Shortly afterwards, he surrendered his life to Christ. In the process, he asked, "You don't expect me to come over to the church and give one of those testimonies, do you?"

I laughed and said, "Yes, and not only that, but Christ expects you to invite your friends and relatives and be baptized at the same time! Christ doesn't want any big speeches. You simply need to share what Jesus' blood now means to you and that Jesus is now your Lord!"

John's baptism soon followed and was very instructive to me in the way it delivered the man from some of his key weaknesses. Perhaps most important, it caused him to face Christ publicly and affirm Him as living Lord. It forced him to leave behind his intellectual indifference and allowed him to establish his new identity as a Christian before those who knew him. There really is no easy way for John to turn back to his old life now, and, by all evidences, he is grateful for the opportunity to be publicly aligned and sealed in Christ.

As it did in John's life, this emphasis on baptism goes a long way to solve many of the problems of follow-up. First, it establishes a more biblical perspective for the soul-winner who worries that the perseverance of the new convert rests on his more mature shoulders. Certainly we are responsible to nurture new believers in the Word of God, but it is a great mistake to center our faith on our part in the undertaking and not on the power of the Holy Spirit. He is the One who separates the new believer from the world and brings him into fellowship with the body of Christ. Too many Christian leaders have been temporarily (some, permanently) sidelined from the ministry by their anxiety over the struggles and falls of those who profess Christ. We need rather to trust the new believer to the lordship of Christ, as it is displayed in the sovereign might of the Spirit, and as a consequence of his testimony, welcome him as a confessing member of the local church. If he begins to backslide, he should be disciplined for purposes of renewal just like any other member.

Secondly, the prospect of an imminent public baptism has a wonderful way of weeding out spurious responses to the gospel. In many communities in America, some knowledge of the gospel is part of the culture, and sinners vaguely sense that they ought to have some kind of "religious experience" to be a complete person. "Decisions" for Christ sometimes spring out of this impulse and not from the conviction of the Spirit. But a decision is far more likely to result in a lifetime commitment when it is expected that the new convert will tell his co-workers and friends about his baptism and invite them to see it take place.

Third, a speedy baptism will help the new Christian to see from the outset that his salvation is not his own work, but part of the ongoing ministry of the Spirit. It puts his eyes not on himself or on the one who led him to Christ, but on the Lord whose Spirit moved him to separate from the world and to take Christ's name upon him. With this foundation, I find that the new convert is much more interested in learning to pray. And that is because his baptism has given him something definite to pray about! Take John, for example, whose story was recounted earlier. He works in an auto repair shop. He resolved to tell each of his co-workers and his boss, who is Jewish, about his baptism and what Christ has done for him. Now he knows he needs help! It was not hard at all to get him to see the place of intercessory prayer in his life. In fact, I was not at all surprised that, within a month, John and his wife started a Wednesday night prayer meeting in their home!

It follows from what has already been said that, fourthly, witness by baptism defines from the outset the new believer as a witness. As a church member he is not a passive observer of a liturgical drama, but he is living for Jesus Christ in the church and the world. For him, witnessing is not a "super-natural" extra but an activity tied up with the whole new life and being of the child of God. His instruction for baptism should teach him that he is now indwelt by the Holy Spirit through faith (Gal. 3, 4) and that this Holy Spirit of witness can be relied upon completely to enable him to share Christ with the lost (Luke 24:48-49; Acts 1:8). Given this basis for confidence and the immediate opportunity to see friends or relatives at his public confession, he is very likely to remain an excited, witnessing Christian.

Fifth, baptism is a summons to forsake sin and the world. It faces the new believer with the need to rely on Christ immediately to begin cleaning up his life. Suppose, for instance, that the new Christian is filled with zeal and yet still displays deep-seated arrogance and a hot temper. This must change, and the preparation for baptism is a good time to get started. I believe that many sins can be uprooted quickly from the new believer's life if they are faced during the early period of "glow" which comes when he sees his sins covered by the blood of Christ.

Furthermore, baptism is a summons not only to separate from the world of sin, but to be ready to suffer its attacks. For a youth from an inner city gang, this can mean his life. William Krispin, an urban home missionary in Philadelphia, says, "In many places in the inner city, baptism is a life and death issue for the teenager. It means that you are separating from a whole way of life for the sake of Christ, and you are putting your life on the line with the gang." For the suburbanite, the conflict with the world takes a different form, but it can be vicious in spite of the greater sophistication. Persecution may follow baptism in the form of an abruptly ended friendship, a sneer, a wave of cruel gossip, or a direct verbal attack. Nevertheless, its coming reminds the believer that our baptism sacramentally portrays and seals our union with Christ, and in that union there must be an identification with His suffering. Christ's atoning sufferings were completed at Calvary, but our identification with Him includes our suffering at the hands of the world (Matt. 20:22-23; John 12:20-26; Phil. 1:27-30; Col. 1:24). We must teach believers new and old that suffering is our lot from unbelievers. We leaders have not taught our people that their baptism includes this summons, and as a result our people are easily intimidated in witness. They are silenced by the fear of human opinion.

Sixth, an emphasis on prompt baptism of new Christians can influence the life of even the most staid congregation. Older Christians can be stirred to life by the embarrassing freshness and boldness of the new convert. They are challenged to confess their sin of silence and to share the Word with new power. Those who are unconverted are also confronted with the work of God. Some will be led to conversion, increasing the power of the church's testimony. Others may slip out of the fellowship, frightened by the nearness of the living God. Others may persecute anyone closely tied to this new ministry of the Spirit, rightly seeing it as threat to their carnal security, their right to live a life undisturbed by the Word and Spirit.

For church leaders, this visible work of God causes the church service to take on a new relevance and vitality. Of all present, they are most directly confronted with the work of God in the regeneration of new believers. Often they are convicted of their responsibility for the metronomic worship style which has lulled their congregations to sleep. Simple testimonies by new Christians go a long way toward breaking leaders out of the iron grip of routine and formalism that so readily take over in their lives.

Having said all this, I am sensitive to the objection that, in our Presbyterian and Reformed tradition, adult baptism has only been permitted following a lengthy period of doctrinal instruction. I grant that the tradition is a strong one, but we need to ask what the Scriptures say on these matters.

The Great Commission states: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them into the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you" (Matt. 28:19-20a, RSV). Note the order stated in the passage: baptism comes first, followed by the fulness of teaching. It is not that teaching is omitted before baptism, but that, prior to baptism, it focuses on salvation and public confession of Christ. The rest is to come afterwards.

The book of Acts powerfully confirms this interpretation of the Great Commission. I would commend to the Christian leader the study of the following passages on baptism in the book of Acts: 2:37-42; 8:12-13, 26-40; 10:44-48; 16:14-15, 31-34; 22:6-16. What exists in all of them is a pattern of speedy, if not immediate, baptism upon conversion.

It might be objected that this emphasis on baptism and public witness could lead to a "rebaptizing" of persons who have already been baptized as infants. In reply I would affirm my conviction that baptism is an ordinance of Christ which is not to be repeated. Therefore I want no part in "rebaptizing" those who have been truly baptized. But is "baptism" in a sacramentarian setting a baptism in the biblical sense of that term? In answering that question, we must study the conception of baptism maintained in the particular denomination which administered the "sacrament." If it turns out that the intention is substantially different from that found in Scripture, then you have reason to question the validity of the "baptism." What it comes down to is that the teaching of baptismal regeneration is seriously in conflict with Scripture. Therefore a session might properly conclude that an "infant baptism" carried out with such an unbiblical intention is no baptism at all, and proceed to the application of this ordinance to the new Christian.

To summarize, baptism is a covenantal sign of the visible passage by which the new Christian enters fully into his new life. His public confession unites him in fellowship with his brethren. He comes to see his place in God's kingdom as part of the people of God, whose common purpose is to witness to the world with praises to the God who called him out of darkness into His marvelous light (I Pet. 2:9). The more this sign and the accompanying confession are given prominence in worship, the greater will be the blessing upon our corporate life and witness.

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1. Morris, *Gospel According To John*, p. 697.