

A Necessary Baptism?

Matthew 3:13-17

I have always been a Baptist, so I admit I have a particular fascination with being baptized. As the son of an American Baptist pastor, the grandson of a fire-and-brimstone, pulpit-pounding Free-Will Baptist preacher, the idea of being baptized, of marking one's spiritual life by the waters through which I was immersed, was front and center to my sense of spirituality. It probably was the reason I learned to swim at an early age, in case something went wrong with the procedure when it was my time to go under.

Much like swimming lessons, I recognized from early on that I couldn't go into the deep end of the pool for this religious ritual until I was old enough understand what I was getting myself into. No angelic water-wings were there to save me. True to the spirit and intent of Baptist heritage and polity, I needed to be properly trained, spiritually prepared, and perfectly capable of making my own choice to take the plunge for Jesus. Unlike my schoolyard friends, most of whom were baptized as infants in virtually every other Protestant and Catholic church in town, I had a choice in the matter, so they told me. But unlike my sixth-grade Sunday School classmates, I was the preacher's kid, so I had less choice in the matter than I thought.

It didn't really matter. For me, baptism was a rite of passage—something I had witnessed my two older brothers experiencing once they reached the proper age of twelve. For me, it was like a graduation ritual from Sunday School, which was rewarded with the opportunity to take communion and the right to become a member of the church—something forbidden to the unbaptized or unconfirmed.

So much like my Jewish friends going through their Bar Mitzvahs, or my Christian friends receiving their First Communions, being baptized for me was like crossing the threshold into adolescence. You moved from Junior Church to adult church, which meant having to stay in the pew through the entire service, including the endlessly boring sermon!

The preparation for baptism, of course, was standard mainline Baptist education. You had to memorize certain Bible passages, read a denominational manual on discipleship and church membership, and take account of sins for which you were asking Jesus to forgive you. In that way, I could positively affirm my need for Christ as my Savior and nod my head obediently before being dunked below the surface of the baptismal waters.

As I remember it now, when it came my time to be baptized, halfway through the ceremony of a dozen girls and boys, my father stopped and said a few extra words of how proud he was that his son would choose to be baptized and follow him in the faith. In that sentimental moment, I looked up at him with my cherubic smile, as if he were God calling me his beloved son, before he baptized me in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. And though no heavens opened above me, my friends and I went back to the changing room giggling over how funny each of looked when we came up out of the water drenched to the bone in our prissy little robes!

However, we had done it! We were now fully-anointed, fully-immersed teenagers, ready for BYF (Baptist Youth Fellowship)! All we had to do is wait for the next proof of our evolving manhood, i.e., getting our driver's license!

You might think that to a Baptist boy, his baptism would have been more spiritually significant than a mere threshold to cross into the realm of adolescence. At this point in my life, I wish it had been, since my teens years failed to provide the evidence of what my parents hoped would be faithful obedience to Jesus. For them, they prayed I would be as pure and devout as a choir boy since, as a P.K., I had a public example to set. But frankly, none of that spiritual stuff mattered to me for what would be a few more years down the road. I was more geared to my life in public school than making a public statement about my religious life. Yet, as it always does, experience and a few dumb mistakes have a way of sobering up a young person to what a mature and meaningful spiritual commitment might and should be.

It's interesting to me that as much as Baptists, historically, have fashioned a heritage of creating a church of "true believers," who earnestly and faithfully strive to be righteous disciples of Christ, in practice we are similar to those of other denominational traditions where baptism is more a rite of inclusion into the church community than being an expression of personal spiritual commitment. That's not entirely true, of course, and one's baptism may eventually become meaningful at a later time, as it did for me. But for many, baptism is a ritual, a ceremony, a rite of passage from one stage of life onto another—a goal to reach in one's childhood religious education, rather than reflecting the beginning of a spiritually focused and dedicated journey with Christ. When you blend people of varying backgrounds into a congregation, the historic wars of past centuries over whose baptism is divinely recognized and authoritative quiet

down, or become entirely irrelevant. Baptism is no longer the tie that binds our communion. In fact, for churches like ours, it's possible to go through an entire lifetime as an active participant in a Christian community and not be baptized, as an infant, child, or adult. Baptism has become more of an option, a personal choice, rather than a religious requirement or expectation; in many cases, it no longer is the universal mark of declaring oneself a Christian.

At our annual meeting in a couple of weeks, one of the questions to be raised in the discussion of our proposed by-laws is: is baptism necessary in order to be a member of this church? For old-line Baptists, this wouldn't be a debatable point. Even for many of us here, we might assume it's implied in our concept of membership: how can you be a member of a *Baptist* church if you haven't been baptized?

However, the truth is the concept of baptism has changed over the generations. Is baptism necessary in order to be a part of a church—especially, a spiritual community that is as diverse as we are in its religious sensibilities and backgrounds? Why do we debate this? Because it's the other side of this question that becomes troubling: do we *exclude* people from membership if they are not baptized? Almost to a person, I believe we'd say, of course not! But then, what is the purpose of baptism, particularly in a Baptist church, if it is not a defining characteristic of our identity as a gathered community? What does it then mean, and what does it become for us if it's no longer necessary in expressing our Christian commitment?

I won't presume to make a definitive case one way or the other this morning. But I do think it's valuable for us to consider the source

of our belief in the first place, i.e., the baptism of Jesus, which is our lectionary text for today. At first glance, on religious grounds alone, one might think that Jesus, of anyone, would receive a waiver on this aquatic obligation! Throughout history, the notion of Jesus needing to be baptized hasn't settled well with Christians all the way back to the Gospel writers themselves. How could the Son of God be in need of a baptism of repentance? How could the "Savior" be in need of salvation? Who would possess the spiritual authority to baptize him?

As you notice, this dilemma played into how the writer of Matthew handled Jesus' request to be baptized. John the Baptist reacts:

"I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" But Jesus answered him, "Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness." Then [John] consented.

Still, we're left to wrestle with the question, why did Jesus feel the need to be baptized? Why should it matter to him?

There are many plausible explanations. You start with the recognition that it occurred prior to the launching of his own ministry, so Jesus may have been moved and inspired by John's proclamation. Baptism was John's prophetic *modus operandi* in calling the people of Israel to begin anew, particularly with repentance for their complicity and collusion with the imperial powers and political values of Rome—for the people of Israel to return to their God and to their own Torah-based commitments to justice and righteousness for all people within their world. Baptism was the initial response to a life that now would be socially, politically, and morally changed.

Second, religiously speaking, baptism was the common rite of passage used by Gentile converts to Judaism, where the “defiled” became “clean” by refuting their lives of the past in order to embrace and submit to the traditions and values and spirit within Judaism. For John to use this with his fellow Jews, indicated that they were to be, in effect, like Gentiles, out of favor with their God and having to “convert” to their own faith as an act of reform and renewal. Third, baptism was like a “mikvah”—a Jewish ceremonial washing, preparing oneself for worship, physically and spiritually, in order to encounter the holy God.

But in hindsight, there may have been a larger reason. Finding redemption through water was an ancient symbol for Israel in breaking with the past and beginning a new future (e.g., the Great Flood with Noah, the Red Sea with Moses, crossing the Jordan River with Joshua, the tale of Jonah, etc.). Going through the waters was an archetypal affirmation of God’s deliverance from oppression and death and the entrance into a new and faithful God-led life.

Jesus’ insistence on being baptized may have been relevant on all these counts. Jesus entered the Jordan to affirm God’s power to deliver. He went through the waters because he was born among people who needed to repent from their corruption and collusion and he would lead them to throw off the shackles of domination and oppression. He was immersed as a sign of renewal to the faith of his ancestors in calling forth the spirit of the living God, not just rigidly abiding to the laws of Torah. He rose up out of the river ritually cleansed and prepared for the coming reign of God, which he would proclaim throughout his ministry.

For Jesus, baptism was a *necessary act* to conform the meaning of his life and ministry to Israel's story of deliverance and to John's call for national repentance. To dismiss its significance or avoid baptism altogether would have separated him from Israel's ancient narrative and drained his spiritual mission of its power and purpose to transform their reality into the right way of living! The coming of the Spirit upon him confirmed God's power, authority, blessing, and intent to do the work of redemption through him and his followers. Jesus' baptism, in effect, was representative of every person's commitment to the moral and spiritual values of God's reign.

However, what occurred from early on in the church and throughout the centuries is that baptism became less about transforming the world and more about being personally redeemed for eternal life—it became more about piety instead of prophetic proclamation—more akin to self-preservation than sacrificing oneself in service to others to redeem humanity. In many Christian traditions, it has taken on a superstitious significance to the point of saying baptism itself has salvific value. Parents shudder at the thought of their child going through life unbaptized (i.e., baptism being a form of eternal life insurance!), and deathbed baptisms are not uncommon in many religious traditions. Even some in the early church mistakenly believed baptism was so necessary to eternal salvation that they carried out a practice of baptizing the dead by proxy (I Cor. 15:29).

As you can see, baptism as a Christian practice came to mean something remarkably different than Jesus' notion of it. For Jesus, baptism wouldn't about been about life after death; instead, it was a

pledge for what one would do in this life! Baptism wasn't oriented toward eternal salvation; it was a public claim one would make to join those who would align their lives with the values and interests of God on earth. It wouldn't have been premised on Jesus magically taking away the sins of the world, as much as it was inspired by the spirit of Jesus to stop committing, individually and collectively, the terrible sins of the world!

When you view it this way, can you imagine how history might have unfolded if all who were baptized in Jesus' name throughout the ages actually modeled the same spirit, intent, and values as Jesus? What would be the conditions of our world and of humanity now had every Christian risen from the waters, not reciting some catechetical set of religious beliefs, but instead dedicated to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with their God? Perhaps, we would have experienced precisely what Jesus was proclaiming in his ministry: the coming of God's reign to earth!

All of this pertains to our basic question: is baptism necessary? When viewed in this light, if baptism is done for the sake of self-preservation through death, the answer is No. It's not a superstitious shibboleth that magically guarantees anything. If baptism is a criterion for determining who is welcome to participate or join in the life of this particular church, that's up to us. If we consider it necessary for people to be baptized, that's our choice. If not, that too, is our decision.

However, if baptism is viewed as a public declaration that a person has made a commitment to renounce the hedonistic, arrogant, belligerent, punitive, war-mongering nature of uncontrolled human

behavior and self-serving values in order to follow Jesus' way of embracing the life-giving, selfless, just, merciful, generous, compassionate, and inclusive nature of God's beloved community, then it is a powerful and profound expression of spiritual transformation and renewal toward that which is god-like in this life—a sign of God's redemptive claim upon us all!

For a follower of Jesus, that is a necessary choice to make and, if it is genuine, meaningful, and enduring, it's a courageous and beautiful sign of hope and mercy to behold.

The Rev. Dr. Paul C. Hayes
Noank Baptist Church, Noank CT
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