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SHOULD YOU BE BAPTIZED?

Across most Christian denominations baptism is seen as the “admission ticket” to the faith.

Is it free? Or is there a price attached?

by James McBride

Baptism is one of the “rites of passage” in many religions, not least in Christianity. The rite was practiced, for example, by the Sumerians (3rd millennium BC). It was integral to those embracing Judaism. And, of course, is particularly known to the Christian world through “John the Baptizer”. Jesus, himself baptized by John, commanded his disciples “...going, therefore, disciple all nations, baptizing them...” (Matthew 28:19). And from the earliest beginnings of the Christian church the rite was enjoined on all converts to the faith. The apostle Peter on the first Christian Pentecost urged his hearers to “...repent, and be baptized” (Acts 2:38).

In Roman Catholicism baptism is one of the seven “sacraments”, and is administered almost always shortly following the birth of a child into a Catholic family. Most denominations today baptize infants. But it wasn’t always so. Peter’s hearers, for example, were mature adults.

Lesson From History

During the first couple of centuries of the Christian faith, baptism of adults was the sole practice. To become a Christian was a serious life choice. Jews who accepted Jesus as the Messiah were ostracized from the community, with loss of job, status, family ties. They were even beaten in the synagogues. Peter’s hearers that first Pentecost were entirely Jews (or proselytes) gathered from around the world in Jerusalem for the age-old festival of Pentecost. They were totally committed to the divinely revealed faith of Israel - to the observance of the weekly Sabbath and the annual holy days (see Leviticus 23) and to the precepts of the “Law of Moses”. But something was missing.

At Sinai, some fifteen hundred years before Jesus’ birth, Israel had entered into a covenant with God. They would, in return for obedience to God, be “a special treasure to Me above all people” and they would be “a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Exodus 19:1-8).

As a nation, they failed to keep their side of the covenant and lost God’s protection (but not His oversight). The separate House of Israel and the House of Judah were taken from the land of promise and exiled to Assyria and Babylon. Only the House of Judah returned, and chastened by seventy years of exile they were diligent in observing the Law. But the general ethos of the nation in the time of Jesus - as today - was one of outward observance. Just as today, there was lip service paid to “being good”. But the hearts of most people festered with self-serving which surfaced in violence, greed, oppression, tax fraud, aberrant sexual behaviour. Jesus, John - and all the apostles - challenged this.

Change of Heart

The challenge of the teaching of Jesus demanded a fundamental change of heart. Not just the outward obedience of the Ten Commandments but a new personal relationship with the Law-giver.

The guilt associated with all human sin could, in Israel, be removed through the tiresome round of divinely prescribed animal sacrifices. But these could never bring forgiveness: “For it is not possible that the blood of bulls and goats could take away sin” (Hebrews 10:4).

The awfulness of human sin demanded a greater sacrifice. But now in Jesus, the divine representative, all sin could be forgiven. He is “the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29).

God’s Grand Design

In further revealing God’s grand design for mankind, Jesus unveiled a new covenant. Now the same divine Law would no longer be written on stones but in the human heart. The power that enabled Jesus to live in perfect harmony with the heavenly Father was now - through his sinless life, death and resurrection - made available to humankind. God would dwell in us by means of His Spirit and we could

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literally become His sons and daughters, and brothers and sisters of Jesus His Son.

But it required “repentance” - a genuine sorrow for our transgression of the divine Law which results in a changed life. Repentance demands mature reflection on past and present behavior. It demands an understanding of “sin”. It demands a readiness to count the awesome cost of discipleship - to the point of martyrdom, if need be.

It required, too, the knowledge that only the sacrifice of “the Lamb of God” - Jesus of Nazareth, God’s appointed victim - was sufficient to bear away all the sin of mankind.

Baptism, then, is possible only for someone of mature mind.

A Watery Grave

In the Scriptures there is but one form of baptism. That’s by the submerging of the repentant individual in water. The apostle Paul describes it as a watery grave: “*Do you not know that as many of us as were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we are buried with him through baptism into death*” (Romans 6:1-11). And emerging from this watery grave - we would drown if we stayed under the waters! - is symbolic of our resurrection as “*a new creature in Christ*” (vv.4-5). Mere sprinkling - or hosing - fails to convey this significance!

Rising out of the water, every sin has been forgiven. We are clean! The Lamb of God, Jesus of Nazareth, has taken all the sin of each of us upon himself through his suffering and his sacrificial death on the hill of Golgotha - “the place of the skull”. His life blood, lanced by a Roman spear, poured from his lacerated body.

Until Jesus returns (unlike the sacrifice of the Passover which will be observed after he comes back), baptized Christians annually observe a memorial of his suffering and death in the Lord's Supper '*on the night he was betrayed*' (I Corinthians 11: 20-26).

Also significant in baptismal symbolism is the concept of being washed - again perfectly represented by immersion. Paul was confronted by Jesus for persecuting believers. He said: “*Arise and be baptized [Gk= immersed], and wash away your sins*” (Acts 22:16, Hebrews 10:22). The water here is symbolic of Christ’s blood shed for us: “...to him who loved us and washed us from our sins in his own

blood” (Revelation 1:5).

Your Choice

Every one of us - all mankind - has “*fallen short of the glory of God*”. His plan for each of us is that we share in His glory - a process that requires we become spiritually mature. By nature God is absolutely pure, and none of us can enter the divine Family loaded with our sin. God’s love for us has in Jesus the Messiah provided a path to forgiveness. In baptism we acknowledge our determination to change our inborn hostility to God and His law (“repentance”), emerging from the water clean in His eyes through the righteousness of Jesus.

God’s “glory” is not some ethereal pie-in-the-sky. He offers us the choice of extinction - or of living for ever in partnership with Him as joint-heirs with Jesus Christ in a real material universe in which the divine plan will develop endlessly.

The example of Jesus, himself immersed by John, and the example of the practice of the early church confirms that baptism is the prescribed path into the Body of Christ, his church. It is symbolic of our death to the '*old man*' - that nature we brought into the world with us. It is symbolic of our 'resurrection' as a new creation in Christ. It is symbolic of the washing away of our sin - our falling short of the glory of the Creator - in the shed blood of our Saviour.

If you are willing to pay the heavy price of discipleship, you must counsel about baptism. Each of us is faced with a stark choice of living for ever - or death.

God wants you to choose life!

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