Why All the Controversy over Baptism (Part 2)

There has developed a mildly negative view toward baptism among some. You can hear it in the way some folks talk about baptism: *'submitting' to Christian baptism*, or *'allowing' oneself to be baptized*. A hesitant mindset is foreign to the believers of first century Christianity.

Do you remember the man from Ethiopia who was reading from the book of Isaiah as he traveled home from a visit to Jerusalem (Acts 8)? He was an outsider to the Jewish religion according to the Law of Moses because he was a eunuch. He could therefore only participate from a distance. Yet, he was a devout man desiring fellowship with God.

When Philip was sent to him to teach him the gospel, he began teaching him about Jesus based on the reading from Isaiah. Then, with eagerness the man asked, "What prevents me from being baptized?" (v. 36) The outsider from Ethiopia recognized that he was not excluded from discipleship to Jesus. He was baptized and then "went on his way rejoicing." (v. 39)

Perhaps this is more of an extreme case of excitement. Yet, none of the examples of baptism in the New Testament even hint that there was any kind of controversy regarding baptism.

So, what has happened???

After the first century religious and historical writings reveal a number of diversions from the simple teachings of Jesus and the New Testament writers.

A religious writing called the Didache (probably written early in the 2nd century) gives specific instructions (restrictions) regarding baptism.[1]

- Baptize in living (running) water;
- If not living water, other water is ok;
- If not cold, then warm.

- If insufficient water for baptism, then pour[2] water on the head three times; in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.
- Before the baptism, both the baptizer and the believer to be baptized must fast.

Whether a person agrees or disagrees with the value of these innovations, they simply are not found in scripture, but developed at a later time, originating with man, not God.

Similar innovations are described in the writings of a 2nd/3rd century Christian writer known as Hippolytus. The baptismal candidate was to undergo three years of instruction and finally, if found worthy of 'receiving' baptism, was baptized only after three days of preparation.[3]

Though some have argued that infant baptism is consistent with the biblical text, examples are lacking. In fact, the best evidence is that the practice emerged near the end of the second century. Even then it was not widespread but found primarily in North Africa.[4]

It is clear that new ideas began to emerge in the second and third centuries and after; ideas that originated with man, not God. When these idea were taught as truth, confusion and controversy were sure to result. Yet, Jesus said...

"If you continue in My word, then you are truly disciples of Mine." —John 3:31

The simple way to avoid confusion is to return to the teachings of the New Testament.

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[1]Ferguson, Everett. "Baptism in the Early Church." Eerdmans, 2009, p. 202.
[2]Pour—a distinctly different Greek term than the Greek term for 'baptize.' (Ferguson, 202)
[3]Ferguson, 329.
[4]Ferguson, 336.