Christian Baptism in the First Century A.D.

John the Baptist did not explain baptism. Jesus did not explain baptism. The gospel writers did not explain baptism. Yet, the Jews at the time of Jesus clearly understood something about baptism, but what?

All four gospel writers tell about John the Baptist preparing the way for the Messiah through his preaching. (That was a fulfillment of a prophecy from Isaiah.) Those who were baptized by John became his disciples. So, baptism was the beginning point of one’s discipleship.

Some scholars think that John’s baptism developed from the purification washings in the Law of Moses. However, John received his instruction from God (John 1:31-33). Yet, there is parallel to the Jewish washings for purification: John was “preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins” (Mark 1:4). So, baptism also had a connection to purification.

Putting these things together, it appears that the Jews at the time of Jesus already associated baptism with purification and discipleship. For that reason we do not read explanations for baptism. Nor do we read of objections to baptism. In other words, those who wanted to be disciples of John did not argue about baptism or refuse to be baptized. Baptism was naturally understood to be associated with discipleship and purification.

Just before the resurrected Jesus ascended to heaven, He sent his apostles out with instructions to “make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.” There was no further explanation of baptism by Jesus, and the apostles did not question Him or protest baptism.

On the Day of Pentecost when Peter preached the first gospel sermon and instructed believers to “repent and be baptized for forgiveness of sins” there was no further explanation; no questions; no arguments.

It is not until we begin reading the letters to the early church that we find additional information regarding the meaning and relevance of the baptism that Jesus had instructed, i.e. Christian baptism. Paul presented a detailed explanation of baptism in Romans 6. One might wonder if he was clearing up some confusion, or simply explaining things more clearly to those without a Jewish background. Whatever the case, it is illuminating and applicable to all Christians.

So, what is the point?

When you read the New Testament you are sure to see that baptism was taught and instructed by Jesus and His apostles. Yet, you never read about people questioning baptism.

The questions and arguments about baptism appeared in church history after the first century, after the apostles’ writings. New innovations came after the New Testament writings; such as infant baptism; pouring and sprinkling instead of immersion; and specific rules on who, how and when baptism could be performed.

All of this leads me to a simple question: “Why can’t we return to the simple instruction of Jesus and the Apostles?”

Folks today might not understand the meaning and relevance of Christian baptism. Yet, the instruction of Jesus, the example of the apostles, and the teaching of the New Testament writers provide clarity. In addition, there is overwhelming testimony for the importance of baptism in the many examples of baptism in the Book of Acts. Baptism was the beginning of true discipleship and purification and it still is.

Let’s get back to the Bible.

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