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Baptism in the Evangelical Tradition

Abstract

This paper explores the centrality of baptism in the Evangelical Tradition. The first question is whether it is appropriate to speak of tradition in the singular. Should it not be traditions given the difference in the application and mode of administering baptism? The paper argues that the accidentals of baptism are not as crucial as the agreed importance of the rite. The time of baptism and the recipients of the rite (infants, children and adults who profess faith in Christ) all point to the same reality. All agree it is the initiatory rite that introduces the person into the Christian Community.

The various Evangelical traditions all agree on the place of baptism in the life of the Christian and the function of baptism as the sign of the work of the Holy Spirit. Even pedobaptists practice confirmation of infant baptism when the faith of the baptized individual is confirmed. The role of infant dedication is briefly discussed. To be clear, we are discussing not nominal Protestant Christianity but the variety of Christianity, Evangelical Christianity, which takes seriously the gospel.

All Evangelicals agree that growth in the faith is part of the Christian life. This is true of those practicing believer's baptism as well as the traditions that have a confirmation process. The issue is continued growth in the knowledge of what it means to be redeemed by faith through the finished work of Christ.

Baptism, whenever it is administered, is not a ticket to heaven but a sign of the relationship between the individual and God through the work of Christ. It is an evangelical tenant that growth and maturity (to the extent it is possible) is the goal of every Christian. Deeper and higher in the knowledge of God is what every person should be striving for. Baptism realized might be a way of expressing this deepening of faith.

The various types and modes of baptism (infusion, sprinkling, and immersion) are discussed briefly. The validity of baptism practiced in other traditions. The idea is that valid Christian baptism, whenever administered, is sufficient to meet the demand of the NT.

Baptism is a sign of belonging to Christ. For those who practice immersion it represents being buried with Christ (submersion under the water) and being raised with Christ (coming out of the water). Often the accusation is made against those who practice believer's baptism on those who have been previous baptized as infants that they deny the efficacy of the person's original baptism. This is true for some traditions.

However, it is also the case that some who were previously baptized request baptism to signify their adult commitment to Christ. Unless one holds to a rigid doctrine that baptism can only be administered once in a person's life, why is this a problem? Even if we hold that baptism washes away a person's sin (C.f. the Emperor Constantine receiving baptism on his death bed), what is the problem of administering the rite upon request. The goal of the Christian's walk is increasing maturity and the testimony of that maturity to the world.

In conclusion baptism is something to point to as our initiatory rite. It is a sign of our obedience to the command of Christ. Especially for those practicing believers baptism, it is the outward sign of the inward change. For those practicing infant baptism it is a sign of acceptance into the covenant of faith. All agree that at whatever point one confesses Jesus as Lord, growth in the relationship with Christ (an evangelical tenet) and knowledge of God through the ministry of the Holy Spirit are marks of a mature believer.