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Baptism: Symbol of New Life - Part 1

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It was a cold Saturday, January 5, 1527, in Zurich, Switzerland. A large crowd is assembled at the Limmat River where a bound man is being led down to the shore from Wellenberg Prison. When he arrives at the bank he speaks and praises God. The man's name is Felix Manz. At 3 PM, while still bound, he is put in a boat and cast overboard into the rushing waters of the river. He is heard to say, "Into Thy hands, O lord, I commend my spirit."

What was Manz's crime? According to the court's transcript, "He confessed to having said that he wanted to gather those who wanted to accept Christ and follow Him, and unite himself with them through baptism."

Today we take baptism for granted. We think it a right for Christians to be baptized however they wish. But, actually, it cost the lives of courageous men and women to open the door to the free practice of this simple biblical ordinance.

But what exactly does the word "baptize" mean? The English word is a transliteration of the Greek term *baptizo* which is defined several ways: (1) to dip repeatedly, to immerse, to submerge; (2) to cleanse by dipping or submerging, to wash, to make clean with water, to wash oneself, bathe; and (3) to overwhelm.

The late New Testament scholar James Montgomery Boice once wrote, "The clearest example of *baptizo* is a text from the Greek poet and physician Nicander, in 200 B.C. His recipe for making pickles is helpful because it uses both

words. Nicander says that in order to make a pickle, the vegetable should first be "dipped" (*bapto*) into boiling water and then "baptized" (*baptizo*) in the vinegar solution. Both verbs concern the immersing of vegetables in a solution. But the first is temporary. The second, the act of baptizing the vegetable, produces a permanent change."

We might rightly ask, why did the translators of the English Bible not translate the word *baptizo* directly to "immerse" or "dip" instead of transliterating it as "baptism?" That is a good question. Let's just say that baptism became the accepted term long before the Bible was translated into English, and if the early English Bibles had not used it they would have caused major turmoil in the established churches in the middle ages (as did Felix Manz and his brethren in Switzerland who took it literally).

In any case, baptism is a symbol of a believer's identification with the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and is a permanent symbol of new life. In a previous article we addressed the question of whether or not baptism is necessary for salvation, so we will not cover that issue again here (Read it at: <http://www.marketfaith.org/2017/07/is-baptism-necessary-for-salvation/>). Suffice to say, baptism is not a necessity for salvation. Salvation is entirely by grace through faith in Jesus Christ alone (Eph. 2:8,9). Nonetheless, it is an important act of obedience and discipleship for a believer. Every Christian should be baptized in accord with the example and command of Jesus (Matt. 3:13-17; 28:19; Mark 1:9-11; Luke 3:21-22). Numerous other Scriptures also direct believers to follow Him in this rite (Rom. 6:4; 1 Cor. 12:13; Gal. 3:27; Eph. 4:5; Col. 2:12).

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In this two part series, we will identify four key elements of what baptism symbolizes. In part one, we will discuss the first two, and in the second installment the other two elements.

First of All, Baptism Symbolizes Our Cleansing from Sin to Serve God in a Holy Priesthood.

19 Therefore, brethren, since we have confidence to enter the holy place by the blood of Jesus, 20 by a new and living way which He inaugurated for us through the veil, that is, His flesh, 21 and since we have a great priest over the house of God, 22 let us draw near with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. (Hebrews 10:19-22)

In Hebrews 10:19-22, the writer says that Christians have confidence to enter the "Holy Place." He is using the image of the Holy Place in the temple where only the High Priest was allowed to enter to make sacrifice for sin. But he says we can enter "by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way which He inaugurated for us through the veil, that is, His flesh." Why? Because "we have a great priest (Christ) over the house of God." Thus we are "having our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water." Baptism symbolizes that washing.

9 But you are A CHOSEN RACE, A royal PRIESTHOOD, A HOLY NATION, A PEOPLE FOR God's OWN POSSESSION, so that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light; 10 for you once were NOT A PEOPLE, but now you are THE PEOPLE OF GOD; you had NOT RECEIVED MERCY, but now you have RECEIVED MERCY. (1 Peter 2:9-10)

As a result, 1 Peter 2:9 indicates that we are now part of a new royal priesthood. "But you are A CHOSEN RACE, A royal PRIESTHOOD."

That fulfills a promise of God:

"Now then, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be My own possession among all the peoples, for all the earth is Mine; 6 and you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation." (Exodus 19:5,6)

This was foreshadowed by Moses and Aaron. "Then Moses had Aaron and his sons come near and washed them with water" (Leviticus 8:6). They were priests, and only they could enter the Holy of Holies in the Tabernacle (and later the Temple). Their washing was a symbol of their cleansing of sin. So as Moses had Aaron and his sons washed with water to be priests of God, so are we in baptism to be a royal priesthood in Christ.

So baptism today symbolizes washing away of sin. Therefore we can go into the presence of God in heaven. It is, of course, only on the basis of our faith in the death and resurrection of Jesus that are sins are washed away. It is nothing of our own merit. On that basis we are now a "Royal Priesthood." This what we call the Priesthood of all believers. (Saying that was another reason Felix Manz got into such trouble.)

Second, Baptism Symbolizes Our Acceptability to God.

26 But an angel of the Lord spoke to Philip, saying, "Get ready and go south to the road that descends from Jerusalem to Gaza." (This is a desert road.) 27 So he got ready and went; and there was an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, who was in charge of all her treasure; and he had come to Jerusalem to worship, 28 and he was returning and sitting in his chariot, and was reading Isaiah the prophet. 29 Then the Spirit said to

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Philip, "Go up and join this chariot." 30 Philip ran up and heard him reading Isaiah the prophet, and said, "Do you understand what you are reading?" 31 And he said, "Well, how could I, unless someone guides me?" And he invited Philip to come up and sit with him. 32 Now the passage of Scripture which he was reading was this: "HE WAS LED LIKE A SHEEP TO SLAUGHTER; AND LIKE A LAMB THAT IS SILENT BEFORE ITS SHEARER, SO HE DOES NOT OPEN HIS MOUTH. 33 IN HUMILIATION HIS JUSTICE WAS TAKEN AWAY; WHO WILL DESCRIBE HIS GENERATION? FOR HIS LIFE IS TAKEN AWAY FROM THE EARTH." 34 The eunuch answered Philip and said, "Please tell me, of whom does the prophet say this? Of himself, or of someone else?" 35 Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning from this Scripture he preached Jesus to him. 36 As they went along the road they came to some water; and the eunuch said, "Look! Water! What prevents me from being baptized?" 38 And he ordered that the chariot stop; and they both went down into the water, Philip as well as the eunuch, and he baptized him. 39 When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away; and the eunuch no longer saw him, but went on his way rejoicing. 40 But Philip found himself at Azotus, and as he passed through he kept preaching the gospel to all the cities, until he came to Caesarea. (Acts 8:26-40)

In the eighth chapter of the book of Acts, Luke tells the story of how the evangelist Philip, who was actually one of the men originally chosen by the apostles in Jerusalem to serve tables (Acts 6:1-7), was walking on the desert road to Gaza. While he was walking a royal official from Ethiopia, the treasurer of the queen herself, came by in his chariot with

his entourage. The man, who happened to be a eunuch, which was not uncommon for men in service to queens in ancient times, apparently was a non-Jewish believer in the God of the Hebrews (a Gentile "God-fearer"). He had been to Jerusalem to worship, which was difficult for him since he would not have been allowed near the temple for two reasons. One was that he was a Gentile and they had limited access. In most cases, he could have gone through a formal conversion to Judaism if he so wished. However, since he also had a physical defect (he was a eunuch) he was ritually unclean and unqualified even to convert.

Nonetheless, the man was unfazed and had gone to worship the God he believed in and loved with his heart. Now he was heading home. As he was riding along he was reading aloud a scroll of the prophet Isaiah. Perhaps he had obtained it while he was in Jerusalem. Philip noticed it as he walked alongside, so he asked the man if he understood what he was reading. The man admitted he was confused and needed someone to interpret it for him. So Philip boldly jumped in the chariot and explained that the passage, from Isaiah 53:7 and 8, was a prophecy about the Messiah Jesus. Philip then told him the full gospel message. At some point as they traveled along, the man received Jesus as his Lord and Savior.

Consequently, the man wanted to be baptized and asked Philip if he would do the act right there in a lake or pond, or in the sea by the road: and they both went down into the water, Philip as well as the eunuch, and he baptized him.

This account has important implications. It demonstrates that even though the man was a Gentile, and that he had physical imperfections

that the Old Testament said disqualified him from worshipping in the Hebrew manner, Philip had no hesitancy in baptizing him as a believer in Christ.

The point is, God accepts people as they are, warts and all. They are welcome to Him no matter where they come from or what their physical state. Baptism says to the world: we are acceptable to God and are cleansed of all sin through Christ. We are a part of God's family. Baptism is the symbol of that cleansing and our acceptability to God.

In the next installment we will examine two other key elements about how baptism symbolizes our identification with Christ.

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