

What John's Baptism Reveals About Denominational Baptisms

By Patrick Swayne

It is increasingly common to find Christians whose belief regarding baptism amounts to believing in work-based salvation. Among those who approach baptism this way are those who believe that any baptism – as long as it is done in obedience to God – is enough to allow one to be added by the Lord to the church, the body of the saved. Some even hold that those who are baptized with denominational understandings of Christianity can be accepted into fellowship by God's people without being retaught and baptized again. Though they may not realize it, these people have divorced faith – not subjective belief but the objective accepting of the revealed words of God (Romans 10:17) – from baptism.

The Bible does not support the idea of baptism as a work to earn salvation. In fact, while the Bible says that belief is a work (John 6:28-29), it denies that baptism is a work at all. Paul called baptism “the washing of regeneration,” and denied that it was a work “of righteousness which we have done” (Titus 3:5). Baptism is a physical action – “our bodies [are] washed with pure water” (Hebrews 10:22) – but as a response to God, it loses all its power without faith. It must be the “answer of a good conscience” (1 Peter 3:21), and only results in a new spiritual life “through faith in the working of God” (Colossians 2:12).

I believe that God anticipated the errors into which mankind would depart and preempted them in the pages of the New Testament. It is possibly for this reason that we have a fair bit of teaching in the New Testament regarding the baptism of John. Most people know that John the Baptizer prepared the way for the coming of Jesus by encouraging repentance and baptism. What some don't realize is that Scripture reveals 1) the motivation that drove people to be baptized by John and 2) an instance where John's baptism came into direct conflict with the baptism of taught by Christians.

Mark reveals this often overlooked detail regarding John's baptism: “John came baptizing in the wilderness and preaching a baptism of repentance **for the remission of sins**” (Mark 1:4; cf. Luke 3:3). Students of the New Testament should immediately see the connection between the reason for John's baptism and the reason that Christians are baptized – “**for the remission of sins**” (Acts 2:38). Those baptized by John and those baptized on the day of Pentecost were motivated by **the same thing** – a desire to obey God and to be released from their sins.

When we turn to the book of Acts, we find an instance where a group of disciples who were baptized according to John's teaching but who had no knowledge of Jesus and His church were discovered by Paul. Paul learned that these individuals were baptized “into John's baptism” (Acts 19:3) after they showed no knowledge of the existence of the Holy Spirit. He then taught them about Jesus Christ, and the Bible says, “When they heard this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus” (Acts 19:5). These “disciples” (v. 1) as Luke describes

them had already been baptized 1) in obedience to God (John's baptism was necessary "to fulfill all righteousness" according to Jesus – Matthew 3:15) and 2) for the remission of sins, but they were baptized again because of their incomplete understanding.

When people are baptized into denominational Christian religions, they typically have been taught something about God, just like those who obeyed John's baptism. They also often are being baptized as an act of obedience to God, just like those who obeyed John's baptism. Some denominational Christians will even say that they were baptized for the remission of sins (though they often contradict this stated purpose by saying they were saved by a prayer or an experience before baptism), just like those who obeyed John's baptism. However, if their understanding of Christ and His teaching is not correct, their baptism is no more valid than the disciples Paul met in Ephesus.

New Testament baptism is comprised of three essential elements – method (immersion in water), motivation (in obedience to God, for the remission of sins), and understanding (a genuine understanding and acceptance of Christ's authority – in the name of the Lord Jesus). The disciples of John fell short in terms of their understanding, and so do those who are taught denominational understandings of the Christian faith. Without a right understanding, there cannot be a proper faith, and, as was stated above, baptism has no power without faith.

Christ will ultimately be the judge of the living and the dead (Acts 10:42; 2 Timothy 4:1; 1 Peter 4:5), and, as judge, Christ decides who will be added to the body of the saved, the church (Acts 2:47). However, on this side of eternity, we should respond to those baptized into denominational faiths the same way that Paul responded to the disciples he met in Ephesus – not by accepting them into fellowship, but by teaching them and encouraging them to be baptized into the authority of Jesus based on an understanding that comes from the word of God only, not a creed, catechism, or statement of faith.