

Making a Splash E1050109
Acts 10:34-43 and Matthew 3:13-17
Elon Community Church, 9 January, 2005

Today, we celebrate the baptism of Jesus Christ as we hear the account Matthew's gospel. Some of us remember our baptisms and others of us do not. I happen to fall into the second category. There are different kinds of baptism. Some of us were baptized soon after birth because our parents' churches practiced infant baptism. We had no choice in the matter! Others of us remember our baptism because we were in a church that practiced "Believers' baptism." There, the choice of baptism is left up to individual.

The tradition of my nurturing church, the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), and of Baptist churches is believer's baptism by immersion. It is a beautiful experience with wonderful imagery. The ecumenical movement along with the partnership between the United Church of Christ and the Disciples of Christ cause us to look deeply at the sacrament of baptism. We must know what we individually believe and why we do what we do.

There are two important questions to ask. One, in today's secular world, is baptism necessary for entrance into the church? Two, is baptism necessary for salvation?

In today's scripture from Matthew, Jesus, the son of God and cousin of John, came to be baptized by John in river Jordan. Why? John did not want to do it. What sins had Jesus committed that he needed to be cleansed of? One answer is that it was a means to prove to Jesus and the world that Jesus was God's servant, fulfilling Isaiah's prophecy in 42:1:

"Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations."

After his baptism, Jesus saw the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove descend upon him, and he heard a voice saying, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

While modern believers might argue about believer's baptism vs. infant baptism, that was not an issue in the New Testament. There was instead, a distinction between the baptism of John, which was a baptism of repentance, and the baptism of Jesus, which was that of cross and resurrection. Interestingly, we have no record of Jesus' baptizing anyone with water.

The second distinction of baptisms in the New Testament is that between the baptism of water and the baptism of Holy Spirit. The baptism of repentance and of water is what makes believer's baptism so beautiful. It represents cleansing, washing in water, death, burial, and resurrection into new life in Christ.

But what is this other baptism— this baptism of the Holy Spirit? Something more is at work here than simply confession of faith, repentance, and cleansing. Those who have been raised in the tradition of believer's baptism by immersion need to take closer look at infant baptism. There is the issue of unmerited grace. What is grace?

God loves us unconditionally. We do not deserve that love. God loves us so much, God gave us Jesus Christ for salvation— to draw us into the sunlight of God's love. Now this is a real Christmas gift! We had no voice in God's decision. God did not send Jesus because we asked for him. We had no say in Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection. It was a free gift for us. So, in infant baptism, where a child has no choice, is perfect sign or symbol of God's grace. We have no choice and no voice. God loves us. God does not ask us if we want God to love us. We can accept or reject that gift.

In receiving that gift, we do with it as we please. We can do with Jesus as we please.

A number of years ago, a young man came into my office once saying, "I didn't find what I

was looking for in a church. You didn't tell me how I can know for sure I am saved." He had not heard me say that we are all saved. Jesus has already died for us, been resurrected, and given us value. There is nothing for us to do but accept that fact— accept that gift!

The Holy Spirit is another matter. We, the church, baptize with water, but we pray that the Holy Spirit accompanies that baptism. We can say that we have been baptized and that we are a member of a church, but the Holy Spirit is that which infuses our life of faith and infuses our corporate life with God's power, grace, and love. Baptism is passive; the Holy Spirit is active.

Baptism by water represents the entrance into the fellowship of support and care of the church, but in terms of our salvation, is baptism of any importance? All of creation has received Jesus' gift of death and resurrection. God's gift has been given, but we have the choice of accepting the gift. We can not earn Jesus. We will never deserve Jesus, but we can accept Jesus into our lives. Jesus is salvation, not baptism and not our works.

Infant baptism is neither right nor wrong. It is a wonderful expression of God's un-asked-for grace. Believer's baptism is neither right nor wrong. It is a wonderful expression of our choice in accepting God's grace.

Baptism by water is a wonderful expression of being cleansed of sin through death, burial, and resurrection in Christ. Baptism by the Holy Spirit is the power that God wills to place within us to serve and glorify God.