

A Child's Baptism

I was four years old when I was awakened to the knowledge of my need for Christ as personal Savior. There is never a day in my memory that I did not know that Christ died for my sins and that without Him one could never go to Heaven or live the more abundant life on earth. One defining moment in my childhood came when my brother walked up to Mom and asked to be saved. She opened the bedroom door and invited him in. I was observing the whole thing, so I politely followed him in and just before entering the door, Mother stopped me and said, "Johnny, you're too young!" I waited outside, knowing at even this young age, something very, very important was happening on the inside of my parent's bedroom. David came out crying and soon afterwards Dad came home. Mom said, "David, tell Daddy what happened to you today!" He, beaming, said, "I got saved." As Dad leaned over to hug his neck, I joyously responded, "I did too." Mother quickly corrected me and said, "You did not." But oh, I wanted to be saved! My parents were just trying to be cautious, because it is not unusual for one kid to follow another. They wanted me to own the decision for myself, not ride on David's conversion. God, however, was working with me, even at that young age. I knew that knowing Christ was the most important thing in life. Thankfully, at the ripe old age of six I asked my parents if I could be saved. They told me I could if I understood and really wanted to be. I understood and I wanted to be saved, so at 7930 Landsdale Street in the Washington D.C. suburbs of District Heights, Maryland, I was told once again the story of Jesus and I prayed the simple prayer of repentance and faith, accepting the finished work of Christ for the remission of my sins and acceptance into the family of God.

I suppose with all my childhood mischievousness, no one could tell exactly when I was being serious. Anyway, when my parents explained what it meant to be baptized, they paused and I distinctly remember Mom whispering to Dad, "Do you think he really means it?" Then when they turned and faced me, I thought they did not believe I was sincere, so in an attempt to give their doubting minds peace, I declined to be baptized. A sudden jar of disappointment followed my happy moment of conversion by declining this first act of obedience.

Two years later at the age of eight, I walked up to my parents and asked, "Why can't I be baptized?" They explained since I was still holding to my conversion testimony, that I should be baptized.

As we honor this Sanctity of Life Sunday, I want to illustrate the faith of a child and the importance of claiming the promise of Proverbs 22:6, "*Train up a child in the way he should go: and when he is old, he will not depart from it.*"

Dad was firm; he said if I knew I was saved and was sure of it that I would need to walk the aisle to profess my faith before the people. On a Sunday morning at the First Baptist Church of District Heights, I walked the aisle by my eight-year old self and took my father by the hand and said, "I am saved and I want to be baptized." Dad concluded the invitation and looked at me as I sat on the front row and said, "Johnny-Boy, come up here tell the people why you have come." The people had been seated and I looked eyeball-to-eyeball with people I had known all my young life. I was frozen with fear. When I opened my mouth, the tears began to come. I said, "I feel like Jesus has been knocking on my heart about this and I have asked Him to come into my heart and now I want to be baptized."

My short speech was over and Dad spoke up. I see him now in my memory with his dark suit and tie and highly polished shoes and perfectly groomed hair saying, "And what is the pleasure of the Church?" I believe it was old Brother Mountainjoy who spoke up first and said, "Pastor, I move that we accept Johnny Pope into the membership of this Church following baptism and afterwards receive him into full fellowship." The motion was seconded and the vote was unanimous. Then to add even more intensity to the moment, Dad said, "We are going to ask you to come by and give our little brother the right hand of Christian fellowship. I remember the serious faces, the smiling faces and the tears in some people's eyes. In the coming Kingdom of God upon this earth, our Lord promises, "... a little child shall lead them" (Isaiah 11:6). There is a sense in which the Kingdom of God is established in the hearts of God's people and in His Church. Kingdom life is often accentuated by the leadership of a child. In my own personal baptism, I saw God leading me to understand the importance of obeying God.

I was not following any man when I walked down that long aisle to profess my faith and request baptism. It was a lonely walk; Dad was not with me, my brother was not with me, and my friends were not with me. It stands out as an important moment, because I could sense that God was with me and I was doing this for Him and Him alone. God said, "...Hath the LORD as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of the LORD? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to hearken than the fat of rams" (I Samuel 15:22).

The Bible says, "*The like figure whereunto even baptism doth also now save us (not the putting away of the filth of the flesh, but the answer of a good conscience toward God,) by the resurrection of Jesus Christ*" (I Peter 3:21). The Word of God points out that baptism doesn't wash away our sins, it only illustrates that truth. Baptism is the answer of a good conscience toward God. You tell the world you are a Christian. You show the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus. You say with your baptism, "When Christ died, I died. When Christ rose from the dead, I rose from the dead. And now I rise to walk out of the baptistry into a new life. Romans 6:4 says it best, "*Therefore we are buried with him by baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life.*"

I truly feel sorry for the Christian denominations that baptize children without a profession of their faith, which is totally unscriptural, for the Bible teaches plainly baptism is for the believer only. When the Ethiopian requested baptism, notice the question asked, "And Philip said, *If thou believest with all thine heart, thou mayest. And he answered and said, I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God*" (Acts 8:37). Not only is it unscriptural to baptize a child without conversion, the child misses out the opportunity to see, feel and experience the act of baptism which is designed to be a benchmark for obedience to the Lord for the rest of his or her life.

As I was prepped for baptism, the days were bright and I was happy. I realized that I was obeying my Lord and I could sense His smile. Then the day came! At the end of the morning service I was ushered into a room and placed into a long white baptismal robe. Dad was already in the baptistry, also in a long white robe. As I stepped into the water, he extended his hand and placed me on a cinder block. Dad lifted his hand toward heaven and said, "My dear Brother Johnny, according to your public profession of faith and by the

authority of the First Missionary Baptist Church of District Heights, I baptize you in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.” I didn’t want to miss a thing; as Dad lowered me into the water, I watched everything! With eyes wide open, I went under and back up. I remember walking out of that water as light as a feather because I knew I had done the right thing.

Today maybe God is dealing with someone about obeying God. Perhaps in the matter of salvation, baptism or another issue. If you would, allow these little children who have obeyed the Lord to lead you to do the right thing in your life.

-Pastor Pope-