

Baptism and Dedication

People coming to the Free Methodist Church from other Christian traditions are often surprised to find that babies can be dedicated or baptized. Most church families in Christendom have chosen only one of these. Why does the Free Methodist Church make provision for people to do either?

To clarify this matter we will ask, first, about the origins of baptism. Then we will ask what it means. This is done in the awareness that people in Christian circles range from seeing baptism somewhat "magical" to seeing it as "merely symbolic." Free Methodists believe that the truth lies between these extremes.

What are the Origins of Baptism?

Baptism, and religious rites involving the use of water, have been around a good deal longer than the Christian Church. At least three practices involving water were in use among groups who had contact with the early church.

1. The Old Testament law contained regulations requiring washings. It would probably be wise not to call them "ceremonial," because that word implies a distinction the Jews could not make. External religious actions were seen as having spiritual implications for the whole person. Jesus, Paul, and the writers of Scripture were not rationalistic 20th century North Americans who find it easy to separate external actions from internal personal implications. Various kinds of "uncleanness" were to be cleansed by washings with water.
2. One group among the Jews performed a rite in which participants daily went down into a pool of water to experience cleansing and commit themselves to goodness, truth, and righteousness. This community withdrew from normal Jewish life in the second century before Christ and set up a separatist commune at Qumran near the Dead Sea. The famous Dead Sea Scrolls discovered in the desert of that region tell us these practices.
3. Furthermore, at the time of Jesus, a practice was taking shape for the initiation of Gentiles into the Jewish community of faith. Gentiles, were, of course, seen as "unclean," and so, a ceremony of purification and initiation, not unlike baptism as we know it, became a part of their "conversion" to Judaism. In Judaism, then, baptism became the sign of that change in which an "outsider" became a member of the family of faith. It was the mark of entry.

What about the New Testament itself? The Gospels tell us that before the ministry of Jesus, a man named John was in the desert preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. In fact, the fourth Gospel tell us that some of Jesus' disciples were initially disciples of this John the baptizer. The religious authorities were outraged by John's baptism. They saw baptism as something for the unclean, "something for 'outsiders', who need to get 'in'." By calling Jews to be baptized, John was asking those who required outsiders to be baptized to consider themselves as outsiders in need of God's forgiving grace. The Jewish leaders were scandalized because John was asking them to engage in a practice that implied that they too needed cleansing and forgiveness!

But John insisted that his baptism was only a preparatory rite. The water baptism he administered was only preparing people for the decisive ministry of the One who was yet to come. The Messiah would baptize with the Holy Spirit.

On the day of Pentecost He did. And from that day to this, the message for everyone who hears the Word of Christ's death for sins is as Peter preached in Acts 2:38: "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit." In the era of the church, the characteristic baptism which Jesus does is in the Holy Spirit, the visible expression of which is baptism with water.

What does Baptism Mean?

Given the fact that there were a number of kinds of baptism in the world of the early church (see Hebrews 6:2), we need to ask, "What specific meanings does Christian baptism have?"

1 Christian baptism has always been a visible way of identifying with the Christian community, of saying that a person now takes his or her official stand with the fellowship of believers. This was a very strong note in the Jewish baptism of non-Jews.

Baptism does not seem scandalous to most of us. For many it is an acceptable social convention, the proper thing to do. But not so for those who came to Christ in the New Testament era, and for many today, especially in other cultures.

Baptism means abandoning all your former first allegiances. It often meant becoming an outcast in your own family and among your friends. You could attend Christian gatherings and still not abandon all your former allegiances. You would still not be regarded for certain as a Christian. But once you submitted to baptism, you were burning all your bridges behind you. You irrevocably identified yourself with that strange little band of people who followed and worshipped as alive from the dead a man who had been executed as a criminal, a man named Jesus. You might toy with the Christian way up until baptism, but in that culture (and in some places today), you were "taking the plunge" when you submitted to baptism. Baptism means forsaking all and identifying with Jesus Christ and His body, the church.

2 Baptism is an enactment of death and new life. This is the distinctive contribution of Paul to our understanding. In his writings he repeatedly connects baptism with a person's participation in the death and resurrection of Christ. In Romans chapter 6, he is concerned to articulate the inner change (with outer consequences) that has taken place in those who have become Christians. Paul alludes to what he knows his readers believe about baptism. He reminds them that when they came to faith in Christ they became personal participants in his death to sin, and in his resurrection to new life. That is, when they came to Christ in faith (which in the earliest church was accompanied by baptism), the death of Christ became theirs, too, as did his resurrection. No longer were these events limited to Jesus and to the early 30's A.D., but they became real and effective in the lives of those who trusted him. In a way we can only hint at, believers have been joined to Christ and become a part of him. Paul's oft-used phrase "in Christ" refers to this. In the earliest days of the church, baptism was closely associated with this dying and rising with Christ through which a person came to be "in Christ."

3 Finally, the true baptism, the effective baptism that washes away sin and imparts new life, is not what is done in water (whatever the mode). What the church does in those instances is the outward expression of that inward baptism in which the Holy Spirit washes away the sins of those who trust Christ, and renews them from the inside out. There is only one Christian baptism

(Ephesians 4:5), but it has an outward side (water baptism) and an inward (baptism by the Spirit into Christ).

Many Christians use the term "Spirit baptism" to refer to subsequent experiences of the Spirit in the Christian life. However, that is not our focus here. We are using the words in the basic sense of what the Holy Spirit does when we all become Christians. I Corinthians 12:13 says, "For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body - whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free - and we were all given the one Spirit to drink."

So how did we get more than one view?

The foregoing helps us realize that there are many dimensions to baptism (just as there are many dimensions to coming to Christ). Like the other sacrament (the Lord's Supper), baptism defies total grasp by mere humans, especially fallen ones. However, let us attempt to outline what seems to have happened.

In the earliest days of the church, the good news about new life in Jesus was first preached principally to adults who made public confession, by means of the act of baptism, that they had joined themselves to Jesus in repentance and trust and had died to sin and risen to newness of life along with him. From these early precedents the church has continued to baptize adult converts. But what then becomes of the children of believers?

Two streams of interpretation have emerged over twenty centuries, both of which find some support in the New Testament texts. Though sharp battles have been fought between proponents of the two traditions, the Free Methodist position is that they are intrinsically complementary. Each needs the other for theological completeness.

The tradition practicing infant baptism has pointed to the priority of grace over faith. That is to say, this tradition stresses God's initiative in our coming to Christ. It also affirms that the little children of Christian parents have a right to "belong" in the community of faith.

The tradition espousing believers' baptism in which adults are baptized and infants are "blessed" or "dedicated" has placed emphasis on the importance of the believer's response to God's grace.

Both of these aspects of the drama of salvation need to be held together in tension if we are to have a full-orbed doctrine of coming to Christ. The tradition of baptizing only those who consciously repent and trust in Christ emphasizes free, adult decision. It stresses personal response to Christ, which presupposes volition, intelligence and accountability. The infant baptism tradition, on the other hand, stresses God's initiative prior to our human response, pointing out that God is at work in our lives (especially the lives of children with Christian parents) long before we personally respond. It also stresses the "corporate" (more than individual) dimension of life among God's people.

Acts 16:15 indicates that when Lydia opened her heart in response to Paul's message, "she and the members of her household were baptized." Paul wrote in I Corinthians 1:16, "I also baptized the household of Stephanus." Other similar statements exist. One could reasonably argue that children were likely a part of those households.

Many factors will determine which side of these debates one perceives as holding greater truth. What seems less deniable is that baptism has some relation (though not complete) to the rite of circumcision, an initiatory rite of entry into membership in the Jewish faith. Circumcision was

performed on infants. Thus it is often said that as Jews enter the old covenant community through circumcision, Christians enter the community of the new covenant through baptism.

But one cannot press the analogy between circumcision and baptism too far. There are major differences between the two. Circumcision is for males only. But it is clear in the New Testament that Christians joyfully baptized men and women from the very first (Acts 16:15). In addition, the covenant entered into through circumcision involved certain elements of national and racial identity that are not factors in the new community.

The church needs to avoid both extremes. The one extreme (which sees a baptism only as something we do as a testimony to our faith) ignores the work of God in bringing a person to faith in Jesus. The other extreme (in which baptism is sometimes regarded as almost "magical") ignores human will, personal repentance and trust. God's initiative (grace) and personal human response (faith) have to be held in tension. Thus Free Methodists use both rites, trying to paint the whole picture. When they baptize babies, pastors should make sure that their prayers include clear requests that God will bring the children to a personal faith that "owns" what the parents are promising at a time when the children (who "belong" from day one) cannot act for themselves. And when they dedicate children, pastors should make sure that their prayers include clear gratitude to God for the fact that he is already at work in the life of that child, who already "belongs" in the Christian community.

Here's what must be stressed: whether at the time of baptism (in the adult baptism tradition) or at the time of confirmation when the vows made earlier by the parents are personally "owned" (in the infant baptism tradition), it is faith in Jesus (dependent trust, not mere cognitive affirmation) that is crucial. Paul goes so far as to say that without faith and obedience, the old rite of circumcision has no value (Romans 2:25). The same is true of baptism. With either rite, clear evangelistic follow-through is crucial.

So what do Free Methodists do?

We provide a service of either baptism or dedication. In both, we emphasize the grace of God and the necessity of faith. When Christian parents - as a matter of conscience - have a preference for one service or the other, our pastors honour that request. By teaching and follow-up, we emphasize that neither practice has saving virtue and that both are appropriate only for parents who themselves are living the life of faith.

Conclusion

The Free Methodist Church's roots are clearly in the infant baptism tradition. However, over the years, as the church has incorporated people whose consciences have been shaped by both traditions, it has granted parents the right to choose which service they prefer. The Free Methodist Church attempts to embrace both dimensions of Christian truth.

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