

Symbolism vs. Substance

Candlelight vigils do not, in and of themselves, create or preserve civil liberties. Wearing a lapel pin or displaying a colorful ribbon does not cure cancer, effect world peace, or eliminate the threat or use of illegal drugs. These are all symbols. There is nothing wrong with symbols. But symbols cannot effect a remedy. They may motivate people to take substantive measures. But symbols, by their very nature, are not substantive.

It is disturbing, therefore, when baptism is regarded and presented as a mere symbol, as though nothing of real substance is connected with it. This is the way baptism is presented by many – that it follows salvation as a work of obedience to show outwardly what previously occurred inwardly. People who “invite Jesus into their heart” (non-Biblical language) are told they should be baptized. But why? To obey the Lord’s command. Baptism is relegated, thereby, to the category of obedience to a command. Unfortunately, many who present baptism using Biblical language (that it is “for the remission of sins”) likewise classify it as a law. Neither correctly represents Biblical teaching.

The Bible nowhere indicates that baptism validates, verifies, or otherwise signifies salvation that has already occurred. The popular explanation that baptism is an outward sign of an inward work of grace is of human, not divine origin. The Bible does not present baptism as a mere sign or symbol of salvation that precedes it. To the contrary, baptism and salvation are presented as concurrent events. It is represented as the point at which God’s grace gifts are bestowed upon the penitent sinner. Baptism is the grace place.

Peter clearly states that baptism saves (1 Peter 3:21), an unambiguous assertion that baptism is substantive and not purely symbolic. We recognize that Peter employs the word that is variously translated “figure,” “symbol,” or “likeness.” It is the word “antitype,” which supports our thesis that it enjoys great substance. We are to see a connection between two items or events. In this case, Peter says there is something about the flood in Noah’s day that corresponds to baptism. That which connects the two is salvation by means of water. God spared Noah’s family by means of the water that destroyed those who did not believe Noah’s preaching. In baptism, God again uses water as the means by which sinners are saved from eternal destruction. That God uses water in this way is consistent throughout history. He saved the Israelites from the Egyptians by the water of the Red Sea (see 1 Corinthians 10:2). It was through water that the Israelites entered the Promised Land. The water of the flood brought Noah and his family from the old world to the new world. In a parallel way baptism brings people from their old life in sin to their new life in Christ.

Some activities really have no connection with the cause to which they draw attention. Walking around a track for hours to raise awareness and funds with regard to the abuse of women and children, however noble and worthwhile, has no connection to the cause, either symbolically or in reality. Baptism, on the other hand, not only portrays and proclaims the gospel message that Jesus died, was buried, and arose to everlasting life, but is the occasion of our death to sin and resurrection to eternal life (Romans 6:1-11). Hardly a mere symbol, it is the point at which God does His work (Colossians 2:11, 12) of regenerating (Titus 3:5), washing (Acts 22:16), forgiving (Acts 2:38), justifying (Romans 3:24-26), and saving (Mark 16:16; 1 Peter 3:21) sinners.

Contrary to a prevalent position that baptism merely symbolizes salvation already received, the Bible presents baptism as the reality itself – the substantive fact that baptism is where God does His gracious work of saving those displaying faith in the blood of His Son (Romans 3:25). It is this faith that leads the sinner to the waters of baptism, where the blood of Jesus covers and blots out all sin. Now that is substantive!