

Enjoined to Unity

John 3:25-36; 1st Corinthians 1:14-25



New Testament Baptism was more than celebrating conversion. It was more than looking back on what God had done in saving an individual. Baptism was the very rite of conversion. Through baptism, one expressed the desire to begin a new life under the demands of the gospel of Jesus Christ. It was the starting point of new life in Christ. Baptism signaled a new beginning, a fresh start, a birth into a new spiritual reality. Through baptism, one proclaimed faith and a lease on new life in Christ Jesus.

There was more to baptism than salvation. Baptism was also a means of identification with a larger community. Through baptism one also expressed participation in the larger body of faith. This was the issue behind the discussion of John the Baptist's disciples. They were concerned with the value of Jesus' baptism, as well as the fact that people were flocking to Jesus, while John's following was no longer gaining. In the passage we read, we find John's words graceful and humble, as he contrasts his role and Jesus' greater importance.

Years ago, there was a book that could be found in many Southern Baptist churches throughout the nation. It was a little book called *The Trail of Blood*. Its claims were that John the Baptist was the founder of the Baptist church, and that the authentic church received its identity and true baptism through being baptized by those in direct line of succession from John the Baptist. This Landmark theology laid out the claim that only those baptized by the line of John the Baptist were the real church. Others were unfit for God's kingdom and were not the real church at all.

We might think that such a theology is dead, but this theology is the source of recent discussion at the International Mission Board. One of two new policies approved by IMB trustees is Landmarkist. It defines that the only people qualified to serve as missionaries are those who were baptized in a Southern Baptist Church. No other baptism is sufficient, for the concern is the qualification of the administrator of baptism, rather than its true significance and role as one's profession of faith in Christ Jesus.

We might quickly dismiss the Landmarkist concepts of the spiritual lineage of the administrator of baptism. History shows that the details of *The Trail of Blood* are groundless, and there is little to no connection between various groups pointed to in the book. More troubling, however, is the desire to narrow parameters of determining who is acceptable, with an eye toward excluding people from being full members of the body of Christ. This is a live issue in our convention agencies and trustee boards. We have seen the same issue operating within our own association. It is this attitude of "I cannot cooperate with those who disagree with me."

This was the issue at play among the Baptist's disciples. Some discussion had arisen over proper baptism or means of purification. We do not know exactly what the discussion was, but it seems to have been over differences in John's and Jesus' administration of this rite of repentance for forgiveness. They were concerned about whether one was unacceptable or of lesser worth than the other. The disciples did not seem ready to accept Jesus' baptism, for it was not the one they knew. They were uncomfortable with what we would today call "alien immersion"—being baptized outside of their own circle of faith.

John's words seem unexpected. "I must decrease, he must increase." John had to remind them that baptism was not about the administrator and his worth. Baptism was about the individual's coming before God to begin a new life. John had no problem with Jesus' administration of baptism, for he was not concerned with his own status or standing before God. He was merely one of God's many servants. His greater concern was that people establish a commitment to new life before God.

As Paul mentions baptism to the Corinthian church, it seems that some of the same issues are at play in Corinth, as well. There were factions among the believers as to which leader or group they followed. As important as baptism was—the means and rite of conversion—Paul was grateful that the conversion of folks in Corinth had not depended upon him. He did not want his name dragged into senseless discussions of following the right human authority. Rather, he wanted them to focus their energies on what baptism really signified.

Baptism was conversion from an old way of life to a new. Baptism was conversion from worldly means of living to the spiritual or heavenly. Paul speaks of the unity of the body of Christ. This was a central aspect of the gospel in all his preaching. No one of us is worthy. There is no one of us that lives a life worthy of full imitation. We are not the examples of love, morality, or truth. There is no name under heaven by which we are to be saved, other than that of Jesus Christ. Following personalities or the theological positions of fallible humans is to fall short of the gospel. Paul wanted no part in such a fray. He reminded the Corinthian believers that factious division over human wisdom was folly.

We tend to look at Paul's words as a critique of worldly wisdom outside the church. His critique of worldly wisdom has to do with its application within the church, however. These divisions that had crept up within the Corinthian church was the issue that he addressed. He did not concern himself with the philosophies of Plato and Aristotle. His concern was the personality cultus among those who called themselves believers in Christ Jesus.

Theirs was not an attitude or spirit of love. Theirs was a spirit of exclusion. Like the disciples of John, they were overlooking the beauty of people turning to God's grace and forgiveness. Rather than focusing on matters of God's redemptive work, they were concerned about getting others to agree with them and follow along with their party agenda.

Paul did not mince his words on the issue. He did not overlook the rising factions, pretending that the issues would disappear if they were ignored. Rather, he faced them head-on, calling for unity in spite of these differences. He called them to a higher plane of cooperation and living. He called them away from the surface issues of baptism to its spiritual essence. He reminded them that their baptism meant belonging to one another. He enjoined them to unity.

We celebrate baptism today. This baptism, however, is meaningless apart from being an expression of conversion and participation in the full body of Christ. Hannah has stated in baptism her desire to be part of the body of Christ. She was not simply accepting salvation for herself, but she was joining this family of faith. She was joining the larger body of Christ Jesus, as well.

John's disciples had difficulty looking beyond their own issues of position and status. Believers in Corinth had difficulty setting aside their own petty issues. Our convention agencies are embroiled in the same struggle. Will we set aside this spirit of division to join ourselves to unity in the cause of Christ?

—*Christopher B. Harbin*