

Water and Fire; Acts 8:14-17

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Introduction

Jesus was baptized, and he commanded his followers to baptize, and in the New Testament the Holy Spirit became present at these baptisms in powerful ways. Yet no two baptism stories are alike. As a result, there is wide range of belief and practice about baptism.

- Some believe that water baptism is the means of initiation into the local congregation, and they will be baptized as many times as they join churches. Others believe that the local congregation stands for the whole Church, and baptism is a one-time event.
- Some believe water baptism is a one-time event, but only IF it happened at the right time. Others believe baptism is a one-time event, but only IF it was received in the only true denomination, meaning, whatever denomination lays such a claim exclusively on themselves.
- Some believe that there is no salvation without water baptism. Others reject water baptism as a human ritual, and all that matters is life in the Spirit.

In the Evangelical Covenant we teach that water baptism is commanded by Jesus as the initiation into God's set-apart community of grace. We also teach that we must consciously depend on the Holy Spirit. Our desire at Elgin Covenant is for spirit-filled mission to our community and our world, to bring a gospel that has power to awaken repentance and save souls.

Let us pray: Lord God, we need your help to discern your will and to do it. Therefore send your Spirit upon us in this time of reflection on your Word, in Jesus' Name, amen.

1. Baptized into Repentance

We begin with Jesus, who was baptized by John into repentance for the forgiveness of

sins. This baptism expresses faith that salvation is coming in Christ and his Kingdom. Jesus Christ, by being baptized, identifies himself with this hope, and validates it.

In verses 2 through 14 John taught that to be baptized into repentance means beginning a life of generosity and justice. Those with much are to share with those who have a lack –that is generosity. We collect benevolence offerings on the second Sunday of each month, we sponsor World Vision children with our collection box next to the water fountain, and we do many other such things. John also teaches that those who have power are to do justice; to restore what they have extorted and not abuse their power. John’s point is that those who are looking for the Lord and his Christ to redeem the world, to make right what has been wrong, need to repent of their wrongs and start reflecting the priorities of Christ in their lives.

One issue is whether the baptism that John brought remains in force. In one way it does not, and in another way it does. In Acts 19 the Apostle Paul found a community of disciples in Ephesus, who had received John’s baptism but had not heard about the name of Jesus Christ or the Holy Spirit. So Paul has them re-baptized into the name of Jesus Christ. Their faith in the saving God of Israel had been incomplete because they did not know who Jesus Christ was or what he had done.

The True Church must discern when a baptism is insufficient. Some groups call themselves Churches and their members Christians, because they teach parts of the Bible and use terms like salvation, Jesus and Israel. Yet these groups deny that the Christ of God came in the flesh; they deny that Jesus Christ is fully God and fully human, the Divine Word made flesh, the only Son of the Father from everlasting to everlasting; these are not true churches, and their baptisms cannot be recognized as valid.

2. Baptised into the Church

The baptism of repentance that John taught is valid as it is included with baptism in the name of Jesus Christ. In Acts 2, as the Spirit was poured out on Pentecost, those who heard Peter preaching in their own languages, were told, “Repent and be baptized, everyone one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins.” He uses John’s language with the addition that in the name of Jesus Christ all that John had hoped has been achieved.

Our baptism into the name of Jesus Christ is our initiation into the Church, into those who bear the name of Christ upon ourselves; that is, we are called Christians. As such, baptism is a one-time event. If you have been baptized in another denomination of the Church, whether as an infant or as a conscious believer, so long as that Church teaches and performs its baptism in the belief that Jesus Christ is God, then in the Evangelical Covenant we honor that baptism. We honor infant baptisms and believer baptisms and we perform both according to each family’s conviction.

The ethics taught by John in the baptism of repentance remain in force with the baptism into Jesus’ name; how can we bear the name of Jesus unless we exhibit these facets of his character – generosity and justice? (Or we can say mercy and righteousness, or love and holiness.) The sad truth is that for too long too many who have been called Christians have shown the world nothing of generosity or justice, and shown instead violence, worldliness and abuse. Some who love the Lord and live out generosity and justice, are embarrassed to be called Christians. They prefer “follower of Jesus.” The disconnect about the name “Christian,” is that people have called themselves Christian on the basis of water, but the ritual has not been attended by that which truly saves the soul, which truly invites the sinner into the life of God for the renewing of the mind so that we can live by God’s priorities, and that is, repentance. It is

water, it is Jesus Christ who saves. We must repent, believe, and call on him to live in our hearts as Lord of our lives.

We are baptized into his name, and it is time to reclaim his name, to call ourselves Christians, according to our faith that when we repent the Spirit he places within is the very character of Christ. We ought to be embarrassed by the Church's legacy of corruption, bigotry, war, violence, and abuse, but let us also lift up the Church's redemptive legacy of leadership, sacrifice and martyrdom in such causes as Abolition, Civil Rights, the elevation of women, advocacy for children, access to medical and education – in short, for human dignity: not only in America but around the world, not only a hundred fifty years ago but today. You will not know these stories unless you read magazines like *Christianity Today*, *Covenant Companion* and *Voice of the Martyrs*. People are dying, right now, targeted by hate-filled extremists because of the name they bear. Do not reject the name Christian for yourself. Let those who hear you call yourself a Christian see what that means to you.

3. Baptised into Mission

The New Testament also teaches that there is an experience of the Holy Spirit that is vital to the Church's life and power for witness in the world. John prophesied that Jesus would baptize with the Spirit and with fire, that is, with power. Some call this experience a Spirit baptism. Some call it being filled by the Spirit, or being anointed. The Holy Spirit came on Jesus after he was baptized, while he was praying, anointing him with power for his public ministry – to preach, to heal, to calm storms, to raise the dead. The Holy Spirit came on the apostles as they were praying, anointing them to share the gospel of the resurrection of Jesus Christ publicly with power, and three thousand hearers were baptized with water into the name of Jesus Christ.

In the story we read in Acts 8, Philipp was a spirit-filled evangelist, sharing the gospel in the power of God. As a result many Samaritans believed and were baptized into the name of Jesus Christ. These Samaritans were now saved. When Peter and John went to them, they prayed that the Samaritans would receive the Spirit, and laid their hands on them, and the Samaritans came to be filled with the Spirit. The text in Acts 8 is silent as to why Peter and John prayed for the Samaritans to receive the Spirit, but when we set the story in the context of all of Acts, Peter and John want to see the Samaritan believers become full partners in the Church's mission, not only receiving salvation, but receiving the power to carry the gospel to others.

This is amazing, because for centuries the faith of the Samaritans was seen as second-rate by adherents to the Judaism of Jerusalem's temple; there was hostility between the two faiths which even led to violence. Baptism into the name of Jesus Christ reconciled those former divisions and created a new community of Christ-followers from among Hebrew Jews like Peter and John, Greek Speaking Jews like Philipp, and Samaritans. A short while later Peter saw the Holy Spirit fall on a Roman Centurion. Gentiles were entering the mission of the Church too, and not just safe, likable Gentiles, but those in the evil empire keeping Israel under its heel.

The unity between the Jewish Christians Peter, John and Philipp, and the Samaritan Christians, was established in the repentant faith they all shared in Jesus Christ. The apostles did NOT come to the Samaritans and say, "We have good news. Theological errors don't matter anymore, we can all think and do whatever we want." No. Philipp was anointed to share God's Word, and by their repentance the Samaritans became Christians and entered into the family of God. That is the lesson and good news of this text.

Being baptized by the Spirit, therefore, means more than having the power to do the acts of generosity and justice, to give our alms to local benevolence and World Vision. Generosity

and Justice are the outcomes of the Spirit of Christ imparted to us when we repent and ask Jesus Christ into our hearts, and he bears fruits in us of love, joy, peace, patience, and kindness.

When Christians are baptized by the Holy Spirit we are given the power to become ambassadors of reconciliation, to reach out even to our enemies and share with them peace with God, calling them into repentance and the life of God, and preparing them for their own anointing as full partners in the mission of the Church.

Think about a person, or a group of people, or a kind of people, that you struggle to love. Before Peter and John had Jesus living within them, they hated Samaritans. Then Jesus through his Spirit lived within them, working on them for the fruits of generosity, justice, and love; and then the Holy Spirit anointed them, and they burned with a desire not only to see Samaritans be saved, but to become full partners in the mission of the Church. If this reconciliation was possible between ethnic Jews and ethnic Samaritans, it is possible for you and the people you struggle to love: This is the power of God. If this is the power you want to see flourishing in your life and in the church, seek it. Pray and ask God to prepare your heart for the baptism that anoints your gospel, that gives you the desire and imagination to reconcile the people you find hard to love, that takes this church to the next level of mission to the lost.

Conclusion

The water of baptism bears a witness to the cleansing, renewing, saving grace of God. Jesus Christ has commanded water baptism as a public act of initiation into the church. But it is not the act of baptism that saves, for it is not the water that saves; if it were, the water would be magical. It is Jesus Christ who saves; it is his Spirit living in our hearts that bears witness to our repentance and bears the fruit of it for our salvation and the redemption of the world.

In the repentant life, the Holy Spirit ignites power within you and the Church for mission. Some traditions call this a spirit baptism. Others call it anointing, or filling. Sometimes this Spirit Baptism follows closely on a person's baptism in Jesus's Name, sometimes, as in the case of the Samaritans, the Holy Spirit comes later. At all times the Church as the community of Christ must discern the Spirit's anointing and follow in it, into mission, in redemption, into renewal, into revival.

Our congregation is marking 125 years of ministry in 2015. In all our celebrations of what Jesus Christ has done in the past, let us be focused on inviting him to do more in the future, to fill us, who have been baptized into his name, so that we can touch our world with the power that is the love of God in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.