

Baptism: Beautiful or Weird?

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2006

Ojai Valley News

Sometimes in our lives as Christians we are asked to do something that doesn't make sense to us. It is true that God's ways are not our ways and there are circumstances that stretch our ability to comprehend and we must lean not on our own understanding. One of those things that seem to be commonly misunderstood is baptism. I will be baptizing people at the beach this upcoming Sunday afternoon and I wonder how many people that see this will understand what is going on.

In the scriptures, there is the account of the infamous John the Baptist who began to preach to the people living around Jerusalem to repent and be baptized. I think many people today are confused regarding his mission and how this may affect our lives. His immediate listeners may have understood what he meant when he said repent but it seems to lose something in the translation of today. To repent means to change your ways, to turn around, to make a u-turn, to live opposite of the previous path. John didn't appreciate mere lip service and he demanded that people demonstrate that they truly meant it by living differently. He said produce fruit worthy of repentance. According to John's description, if people were willing to turn from behaviors that dishonor God's purpose for them and start living rightly they would be producing fruit. This would demonstrate that they were genuine in their heart to change and not merely looking for absolution from a religious ceremony.

There doesn't seem to be a whole lot of ceremony about what John was doing. He was out in the wilderness calling for changed lives and dunking them in the river. Although the Bible records that he was full of the Holy Spirit, he was not part of the established religious system. He was neither trained in the religious schools nor recognized as an authority in their culture. He dressed weird. He acted weird in that he ate strange food. He preached a counter message to the establishment; one of changes in the heart and lives of people rather than more attendance and participation in the mainline religion. He wasn't popular among the leaders and he saved his strongest words for those who refused to acknowledge that changes were needed. The verses record that some of the most religious of the day rejected John's message and his baptism.

Some people were very confused about who John was, what he was trying to do, and where he received his inspiration and authority. When they asked him, he told of his mission of preparing the way for Jesus. His call was to make a straight path to our hearts; this meant repentance and baptism. Baptism was the next step following repentance. My point here is to shed a bit of light on the purpose of baptism: it is meaningless without repentance.

You see Jesus preach the same message and the apostles after him. Repent and be baptized.

We don't know what goes on inside each other's hearts. The Bible says that only God knows what is inside. We don't even know the depths of our own hearts and therefore we should not judge another. As a result, when God is doing something wonderful inside of someone, many times the rest of us are oblivious. Many times we have no idea of the internal changes going on in a person's life. Here is one of the neat things about baptism.

Yes, baptism is counter culture but it tells a story. When you see someone baptized what story does it tell you? The Bible teaches of the submersion under water being symbolic of having the old ways of missing the mark and the consequences being buried in Jesus' death. This means that the penalty has already been paid for us. It is personal. The good news is that you don't stay under water. You come back out telling the story of a newness of life in Christ; all things clean and made new. I have baptized people in swimming pools, streams, the ocean, wherever there is water. I wonder what story it tells. Does it merely say that Christians do weird things or does it tell a story of God's love and intervention in a life, miraculous changes on the inside?

Dan Nelson is a frequent contributor to the Ojai Valley News and currently serves the Ojai Valley Ministerial Association and community as editor of the Religion Column. This article was published in 2006. Permission is freely granted to reprint the article in its entirety. Dan Nelson is pastor of Calvary Chapel Christian Church of the Ojai Valley.



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Sunday Worship:

9:00 & 10:30am
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Mid-Week Study:

7:00pm Thursday
Calvary Chapel Ojai Valley
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