

Armagh Baptist Church – Sunday 5th July 2009

“What is the Truth about Baptism?”

John ch.3:16-36

Introduction

Last Sunday night we looked at the first part of John ch.3. That’s the most familiar part of this great chapter. Tonight I want us to look on down John ch.3, because so often we stop at v.16 – that verse which is the favourite verse of many –

‘For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son...’

But if we do, we never see what comes after it.

Or sometimes we stop at v.21 after that passage that says that...

‘Men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil.’

Tonight I want us to take a look at the remainder of John ch.3 – esp from vs.16-36.

But first of all let me tidy up a few small details from last week.

Someone asked me during the week about vs.5-7:

*‘I tell you the truth, no-one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is **born of water and the Spirit**. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. You should not be surprised at my saying, ‘You must be born again.’*

I didn’t really deal with that bit last Sunday night, so let me try to answer it now:

1. What does it mean to be born of water and the Spirit? (vs.5-7)

Does that mean, as some people think, that water baptism is essential for salvation?

Some people, and some churches, actually teach that!

But I think I have pointed out to you before that the thief on the cross never had the chance to be baptized, and yet as he hung there on the cross, Jesus was able to say to him, *‘Today you will be with me in Paradise!’* – So from that, we can conclude that baptism of any kind – whether administered to you as a child, or even as a believer by immersion, is not essential for salvation. But believers’ baptism is essential as a mark of obedience to your Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ.

So if to be *‘born of water’* (v.5) does not refer to baptism, what can it mean then?

Well, some people think it refers to our physical birth as a baby – how we come into the world in the first place. We come out of the water within our mother’s womb. The mother’s ‘waters break’ when she gives birth to a child. Those who think like this, see a link with the next verse – *‘that which is **born of the flesh** is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.’* (v.6). In other words they say that to be *born of water* is the same as being *born of the flesh* – so they say it’s physical birth that is meant here.

But since absolutely everyone is born of the flesh, or has to experience physical birth in order to come into this world, why would the Holy Spirit feel it necessary to add this phrase here in v.5, if that is all it meant?

A third explanation is that **'water'** here refers to cleansing from sin. It doesn't have any connection to the waters of baptism at all, nor any connection to physical birth at all, but it's simply a way of talking about the need for each one of us to be purified, to be cleansed from our sin, as well as being born again of the Holy Spirit of God at the moment of our conversion. There are a number of Scriptures that bear out such an understanding. First of all an important passage from the Old Testament, as so much of John's Gospel refers back to the Old Testament, especially the Book of Ezekiel...

Ezekiel 36:24-29a – *'For I will take you out of the nations; I will gather you from all the countries and bring you back into your own land. I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws. You will live in the land I gave your forefathers; you will be my people, and I will be your God. I will save you from all your uncleanness.'*

Then two passages from the New Testament:

Ephesians 5:26 – *'Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless.'*

Titus 3:5 – *'He saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Saviour.'*

So taking these references together, it seems to me that being *'born of water and the Spirit'* in John 3:5 is in fact one and the same thing. It is talking about how God cleanses us from our sin and all uncleanness when we trust in Jesus as our Saviour, and how he puts His Holy Spirit into our hearts from that moment onwards to enable us to live lives that are clean and pure – lives that glorify Him, that are totally different from the lives that we lived before. That's why we *must* be born again, born from above, born of God's Spirit – because there is nothing else that can give us that **deep clean** which each one of us needs in our lives to make us acceptable in God's sight.

It's not a matter of cleaning up the outside of our bodies, or the outside of our lives – what everybody else sees – it's a matter of having our hearts cleansed from sin – the bit that only God can really see! We all need a change on the inside, which will then have an effect on the outside, if we really have been born again.

Before we move on to look at the remainder of this chapter, I want you to notice that there are three 'Musts' in this chapter:

(3:7) – ***'You MUST be born again!'*** – that's what is necessary for the **Sinner**.

(3:14) – ***'The Son of Man MUST be lifted up!'*** – that's what was necessary for us to have a **Saviour**. Jesus had to die on the cross for our sins, otherwise we could never be saved.

(3:30) – ***'He MUST become greater; I MUST become less.'*** – that's what is necessary for the **Servant**. In this case it was John the Baptist who was speaking. He wasn't out to draw attention to himself, or to invite people to trust in him, or to follow him as his disciple. No, he was out to point people away from himself to Jesus. And that should be the task of every preacher of the Gospel, of every Christian minister. We're not in this business to make a name for ourselves, we are in it to make much of Jesus' name – to point people to Him, because only in Christ can anyone find salvation. But with each of these '*musts*' – these imperatives, in John's Gospel we are reminded that it is absolutely necessary, absolutely imperative, that each one of us gets saved, that each one of us experiences the new birth – and is born again. Are you?

2. The need to believe in God's only Son to have eternal life. (v.16-21)

If we want to be born again, to know this cleansing from our sins, and the change that the Holy Spirit can make in our lives, then John spells it out to us, what we need to do, in vs.16-21.

We need to believe, we need to trust, in the Son that God has sent from heaven, the One who was lifted up onto that cross to die for each one of us.

As we saw last week in v.16, if we do, we will not perish eternally in Hell, but we will have eternal life, which starts right now, the moment we believe.

If we do, we will be saved (v.17).

But if we don't, John leaves us in no doubt – If we don't believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, then we stand condemned already – precisely because we have not believed, we have not put our trust, in the name of God's one and only Son (v.18).

But if we do believe, if we do put our trust in Jesus, then we are under no condemnation (v.18a). See also Romans 8:1. It couldn't be clearer. It's black & white.

So what is the problem then? Why do so many refuse to believe and be saved?

Well John tells us in vs.19-21: The problem is that many love their sin and darkness too much to leave it behind and come to faith in Christ, and a whole new way of life.

Which one are you? A believer; or an unbeliever? One who loves darkness because your deeds are evil, or one who isn't afraid to come into the light, because you know

that whatever you have done in the past, that you're now ashamed of, that God has forgiven and cleansed you from it. He no longer holds it against you. You are no longer under God's condemnation for your sin. Why not step out of the dark tonight?

3. So what is the Truth about Baptism then? (v.22-30)

(i) Jesus was baptizing in the Judean countryside (v.22) As we come into the final section of this chapter we find that the theme of **baptism** is running through this part, even if we don't believe that water in v.5 had anything to do with it! Here in v.22 we are told that Jesus was baptizing in the Judean countryside.

One of the last things I did as pastor of Cavan Baptist Church was to baptize a number of Nigerians, who had come to live in the Cavan area. Two of them were teenagers – Francis and Ruth Adediran. As I was preparing them for their baptism, I said to them, that if we were back in their home country of Nigeria, it would be great to be able to go out to a river or a lake and baptize them there. But here in this cold country of ours they'd be more likely to get their death of cold, and so would I.

That is the only reason why we baptize in a baptismal tank in a church building. It would be a far greater witness to do it outside these walls, because that's what baptism is supposed to be – a witness to the watching world! Not just something for other believers to watch inside a building. So here in v.22 we find that Jesus was baptizing out in the Judean countryside, not in a religious building at all. But then as we read on into v.23, we discover that...

(ii) John the Baptist was also baptizing at a place called Aenon, near Salim.

The Apostle John tells us the reason why he chose to baptize there (v.23):

***'Because there was plenty of water there,
and people were constantly coming to be baptized.'***

It was because there was **plenty of water** there. Now this was out in a semi-desert area, but John still was able to find a particular place where there was plenty of water. It requires plenty of water to baptize people – not just a few drops. Only then can you see the picture of a believer going down into the water, dying to their old way of life. Then while they're under the water that symbolizes the fact that their past is buried, and as they come up out of the water it symbolizes the fact that they rise to walk in a whole new way of life.

That same picture of baptism also symbolizes the fact that they are trusting in the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus as their only grounds for salvation.

It's **his** death and resurrection that saves us, not **our** baptism. I don't think sprinkling portrays that picture at all. That's why we baptize believers by immersion in plenty of water. But then in v.25 an argument about baptism develops. That's nothing new!

(iii) Baptism is not a ceremonial washing or sacramental ritual. (v.25-26)

That was the point that some of John the Baptist's followers and a certain Jew were arguing over. The Jews often did this. In the time between the Old & New Testaments baptismal pools became quite common around Jerusalem. For example the pool of Bethesda, or the pool of Siloam – many of these pools would have been used for a kind of Jewish baptism. They had become very concerned about how they could wash themselves on the outside in order to be ceremonially clean and fit for worship.

But they had missed the point. Baptism has got nothing to do with that. No amount of water can wash away our sins – a few drops on an infant's head, or even a whole tank full of water can't do it! A whole ocean of water could never cleanse us from our sins!

We used to teach the children a chorus:

*'What can wash away my sin? Nothing but the blood of Jesus.
What can make me whole again? Nothing but the blood of Jesus.
O precious is the flow that makes me white as snow.
No other fount I know – nothing but the blood of Jesus.'*

And that's true – the Bible says in 1 John 1:7-9 *'The blood of Jesus Christ, God's Son, cleanses us from all sin.'* I hope you're not trusting in your baptism, or in anything else to cleanse you from your sins and make you right with God, except the blood of the Lord Jesus Christ that was shed for you on that cross. As someone has said,

(iv) 'Baptism can make you wetter, but no better.'

Baptism cannot save you – but Jesus can! And that was John's message (vs.26-36). He pointed them, not to *his baptism* as the answer for their sin problem, **but to Jesus**. He pointed men, women, boys and girls to Jesus for salvation, not to himself (v.30).

That is my job here in Armagh too. It is not to draw attention to myself, or even to the Baptist Church – but to point men and women, boys and girls, to Jesus for salvation.

I want to do that again tonight. If you want to be saved, if you know you need to be born again, then look to Jesus, believe in Jesus, put your trust in Jesus, I can do no more for you. Did you know that when a priest is giving someone the last rites, those are the very words that he says, ***'I can do no more for you, put your trust in Jesus.'***

Sadly at that point it is often too late, so I'm telling you now! I can do no more for you, nobody can. So why not tonight, put your trust in Jesus and be saved tonight? But notice the warning in v.36. You're either one or the other! Condemned, or Not! Don't reject Jesus any longer, believe in him tonight – Be saved, and not condemned!

Don't make the mistake that many people make of trusting in your particular church's ceremony, or ritual or baptism, whatever form that might take.

Instead put your faith in the simple truth, that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, died on a cross for your sins, and having dealt with your sins once and for all, he rose again.

And today he lives to be the Saviour of anyone who will put their faith and trust in Him as Saviour and Lord of their lives.

Stop trusting in who baptized you, or what church you were baptized in, or what kind of baptism you received (whether sprinkling or immersion). If you want to be saved, have eternal life, be born again, then you must accept the One who God has sent to be the Saviour of the World – because He can be your Saviour too! Trust Him tonight.

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