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The gift of baptism

By Elise L. Moore

Growing up in an area where religion wasn't discussed much in school, I was unprepared for the theological conversations I encountered when I went to college. Religion was a major topic of conversation at mealtime and during other informal gatherings. My attempts to explain concepts from my own denomination, Christian Science, were often met with blank stares. I found that I was using religious terms in a slightly different manner, and that I spoke words that other people were unaccustomed to hearing in a theological context.

Each Christian denomination and world religion seems to have its own vocabulary and special connotations related to religious terms. Part of the process of understanding others is learning something about these different language systems. Otherwise, we're listening or speaking through our own religious filter and not really communicating with each other.

My first roommate in college was a junior—who had accepted Jesus as her personal saviour. She and I spent hours sharing our religious beliefs. And she became quite adept at helping others understand what I was trying to say in theological conversations. She would translate words that I used into terms that were more familiar to our friends. It was a valuable lesson for me in communication. I realized how important it was to my fellow Christians that I be able to answer questions in ways that were meaningful to them.

Perhaps this is the message Peter had in mind when he said, "Be ready always to give an answer to every man that asketh you a reason of the hope that is in you with meekness and fear." ¹ To me, this has come to mean, *Be prepared to answer questions of faith, using words that the listener will comprehend.*

One theological topic that seemed difficult for my friends to understand when I tried to explain my views was baptism. Devoted Christians often feel that to be truly baptized, the believer must be literally submerged in

water or sprinkled with it, and by an official of a specific church. Otherwise, he or she has not truly been saved, and is destined for eternal damnation instead of heaven. I was trying to explain to my friends that, as a Christian Scientist, I practiced baptism without the water ceremony. *Science and Health*, the textbook of Christian Science, which includes a chapter entitled "Atonement and Eucharist," discusses baptism as a precious and sacred sacrament. Its author notes that Jesus didn't baptize with water, and proposes why: "He knew that men can be baptized, partake of the Eucharist, support the clergy, observe the Sabbath, make long prayers, and yet be sensual and sinful." ²

Yet my friends expected a simple "yes" from fellow Christians to the questions "Have you been baptized?" and "Have you been saved?" I wanted to share some of the richness and the deep spiritual significance of baptism as I perceived it in its more metaphorical context. But any hesitation or qualification on *my* part was interpreted as a "no." I realized that to avoid such communication meltdowns, I needed to study more deeply the meaning and practice of baptism in the Bible.

Baptism is first mentioned in the book of Matthew. Jesus' cousin, John, knew that his mission was to prepare people's thought to accept the Christ. He told the people to repent, which meant to change their minds, because the kingdom of heaven was "at hand." ³ Those who accepted John's message came to be baptized in the Jordan river, confessing their sins. The act of baptism publicly signified a change of heart. Since water was almost universally accepted as a symbol of purification, the act of being submerged, even in murky water, represented the desire to wash away old motives and mistakes. The ritual represented their repentance and, hopefully, reformation of character.

John was so successful in transforming people's thoughts and lives that he was known as John the Baptist

There are actually two Greek words used in the Bible for *baptize*. The first, *bapto*, means "to dip or immerse," while *baptize* signifies "submerge." Instead of introducing a shallow discussion on the proper method of baptizing, these terms help draw a distinction between a momentary fervor and a permanent transformation of thought and character. The distinction is described in a Bible study magazine this way: "The clearest example that shows the meaning of *baptizo* is a text from the Greek poet and physician

Nicander, who lived about 200 B.C. It is a recipe for making pickles and is helpful because it uses both words [translated *baptism* in the New Testament] . Nicander says that in order to make a pickle, the vegetable should first be 'dipped' (*bapto*) into boiling water and then 'baptized' (*baptizo*) in the vinegar solution. Both verbs concern the immersing of vegetables in a solution. But the first is temporary. The second, the act of baptizing the vegetable, produces a permanent change. When used in the New Testament, this word more often refers to our union and identification with Christ than to our water baptism. For example, Mark 16:16. 'He that believes and is baptized shall be saved.' Christ is saying that mere intellectual assent is not enough. There must be a union with him, a real change, like the vegetable to the pickle!" ⁴

So it isn't the ritual use of water—the sprinkling or submerging—that is important. It's the rejection of worldly ways and a willingness to follow Christ. To have a true union with Christ, more than repentance and right desire is required. A deeper sense of purification must reach the recesses of human thought and action until one's whole life is brought into conformity with Christ.

John talked about this second stage of baptism when he told the multitudes, "I indeed baptize you with water unto repentance: but he that cometh after me is mightier than I, whose shoes I am not worthy to bear: he shall baptize you with the Holy Ghost, and with fire." ⁵ Of course, John was referring to the imminent ministry of Jesus.

What is the baptism of the Holy Ghost? The term *Holy Ghost* literally translates as "Holy Spirit" from the Greek, and indicates an influx of spiritual sense and spiritual understanding. Jesus received the Holy Spirit at his baptism by John. As the Scripture says, "And Jesus, when he was baptized, went up straightway out of the water: and, lo, the heavens were opened unto him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove, and lighting upon him." ⁶ This baptism of Jesus didn't so much represent repentance—after all, Jesus was sinless and had nothing of which to repent—as a continuing spiritual connection with the divine. This was the baptism that Jesus brought to his disciples. They were baptized in the Holy Ghost on the Day of Pentecost, ten days after Jesus' ascension.⁷ There was no ritual involved, only prayer. But everyone knew when the disciples had received the Holy Spirit, because their lives were radically changed. The apostles glimpsed something of the divine. They discovered a new depth of

spirituality, and realized that the baptism of Jesus Christ was the total spiritualization of thought and life, which resulted in eternal life. The baptism of the Holy Ghost is symbolized by fire. This fire is symbolic rather than literal. Instead of consuming physical objects the fire of spiritual understanding burns up whatever is fearful, apathetic, willful, or vain. Just as fire melts gold so that impurities are removed, so the baptism of the Holy Ghost permeates every aspect of our lives, purging what is ungodlike. This baptism continues until the fire has nothing left to consume. When all selfishness, immorality, dishonesty, ignorance, disease, hate, and so on are eradicated by spiritual inspiration and understanding, baptism will be complete.

The baptism of John, which is the baptism of repentance symbolized by water, and the baptism of Jesus, which is the baptism of the Holy Ghost, symbolized by fire, are central to the sacrament of baptism. Mary Baker Eddy refers to degrees of baptism in her article "Pond and Purpose." Her description of the first stage of repentance begins, "The baptism of repentance is indeed a stricken state of human consciousness, wherein mortals gain severe views of themselves; a state of mind which rends the veil that hides mental deformity." She then continues with the second stage: "The baptism of the Holy Ghost is the spirit of Truth cleansing from all sin; giving mortals new motives, new purposes, new affections, all pointing upward. . . .By purifying human thought, this state of mind permeates with increased harmony all the minutiae of human affairs." She then concludes with the final degree of baptism in which all sin and sickness has been purged. "The baptism of Spirit, or final immersion of human consciousness in the infinite ocean of Love, is the last scene in corporeal sense. This omnipotent act drops the curtain on material man and mortality. After this, man's identity or consciousness reflects only Spirit, good." ⁸

This kind of baptism isn't bestowed by a church or by a member of the clergy. It is the gift of God through grace. This is the baptism of repentance, spiritualization of thought, and final unity with Christ, which Christian Scientists celebrate.

When I was in college, I hesitated to answer friends who asked if I'd been baptized, because they were referring to a ceremony in which I hadn't participated. Today, when someone asks if I've been baptized, I fervently answer "yes." I certainly do recognize Jesus as the Christ, the Son of the

living God, and I have committed to living—to the best of my present ability—in conformity with Christ. If my friends ask about baptism in the Christian Science church, my reply is that we certainly do practice baptism, but without the use of water. Occasionally, someone has asked me, "How do you know you're baptized if you haven't been through the ritual?" My reply is that our lives prove the sincerity of our commitment and transformation. And we can all be blessed by this incomparable gift of God.

1 Pet. 3:15.

2 *Science and Health*, p. 20.

3 See Matt. 3:2.

4 James Montgomery Boice, from Thayer's electronic lexicon in PC Study Bible. May 1989.

5 Matt. 3:1 I.

6 Matt. 3:16.

7 See Acts 1:3 and Acts 2. Jesus ascended 40 days after his resurrection. Pentecost is celebrated 50 days after the Passover.

8 *Miscellaneous Writings*, pp. 203:19-22; 204:12; 205:13.