

Straight Bible Talk

Manchester Church of Christ, Share Christ's Love and Share His Message

Baptism and Communion

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Hundreds of different churches doing baptisms and communion in a variety of ways and for different reasons leave one wondering how all of this could come out of one book, the Bible. The simple answer is that all of this does not come from the Bible, but rather from the traditions and cultures of a variety of sources.

There are three kinds of tradition in religion. There are the traditions that have been handed down to us through the apostles whom Jesus chose. There are the traditions that replace those with different traditions from a later time. And there are the traditions that have to do with things that are not included in the apostolic traditions.

In the last category there are things such as the language in which the church worships. The Bible says nothing about what language we ought to use in worship. The only thing that might concern us here is Paul's comment, "There are, perhaps, a great many kinds of languages in the world, and no kind is without meaning. If then I do not know the meaning of the language, I will be to the one who speaks a barbarian (foreigner), and the one who speaks will be a barbarian to me." His advice then is that we ought to speak in a language that the church understands.

Concerning the second category of traditions we have an example from Jesus. In both Mark 7 and Matthew 15, the matter of Jesus' apostles' failure to wash their hands before eating bread is brought up by the Pharisees and scribes. In response, Jesus points out how they had set aside the law of God in order to keep a tradition respecting care for their elderly parents. While Jesus' disciples had broken the "tradition of the elders," the scribes and Pharisees and broken the tradition handed down from God through Moses.

To break with the tradition of the "elders" was permissible for Jesus, but to break with the tradition that had come from God was a quite different matter. Generally, we would distin-

guish between the two by referring to the tradition that comes from God as law. The traditions that have been passed down from preceding generations are simply "customs." What we read in the Bible is the way God wants things done. What we find in the handbooks, rules and customs of churches are the traditions of men, often used to set aside God's Word in favor of human traditions, or customs.

Consider, for example, the matter of how a person is baptized. There are churches that completely immerse the person, one time. There are others that do it three times. There are churches that pour water on the person's head. And there are others that simply put a little water, a drop or so, on the person's forehead. Sometimes the water is accompanied with oil or salt.

Looking at the manner in which it is done, in immersion, the person is put in the water. In the other cases, the water is put on the person. One involves an action on the person, the others involve an action performed on the water. The same verb cannot be understood to include both. Either the person is acted upon or the water is acted upon. Both cannot be derived from the same word in the Bible.

It is clear, in the Bible, that the person is baptized in the water, the water is not baptized on the person. For example, "In those days Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan." Jesus was put in the water, the water was not put on Jesus.

Twice, in his letters, Paul refers to baptism as a burial. In burial, the person is placed in a tomb. The tomb is not placed on the person. A burial furnishes a fitting illustration for baptism when one understands the meaning of the act as immersion.

As Paul describes the matter in his letter to the Romans, there is first of all a "death" to sin. The person acknowledges their wrongs in the sight of God and determines that those wrongs will no longer be a part of their life. They

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"Therefore having overlooked the times of ignorance, God is now declaring to men that all people everywhere should repent, because He has fixed a day in which He will judge the world in righteousness through a Man whom He has appointed, having furnished proof to all men by raising Him from the dead."

Acts 17:31

All scripture quotations are from the New American Standard Bible unless

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separate from sin. They "die" to sin. This is followed by a burial in baptism. And that burial is followed in turn by a "resurrection" to a new life. At this point, the person has "re-enacted" the gospel, the death, burial and resurrection of Christ. There is a death to sin, a burial in baptism and a resurrection to walk in newness of life. In the Bible, people are described as going down into the water and coming up out of the water. That is the tradition that comes from God. Sprinkling and pouring water on a person for "baptism" are traditions that come from the "elders," not from God.

Another difference in baptism arises from the question about whom we should baptize. Should we baptize adults or should young children and babies be baptized as well?

When God sent John the Baptist on his mission to prepare people for the coming of Jesus, He gave John a simple message, "Repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." Repentance was required before baptism. And his baptism was for the forgiveness of sins.

When Peter preached to the Jews on the day the church began he responded to their question, "What shall we do?" with an emphatic, "Repent and be baptized." Again, repentance was required for baptism.

When did that change? It changed when people decided that they ought to be baptizing babies. Obviously, babies cannot repent since they do not even know what sin is. The requirement was waived and

presto! we have babies baptized for "original sin." The tradition of the "elders" has triumphed over God's Word.

We have not even gotten to the part about baptizing babies being found nowhere in the Bible. There is no command to baptize those who do not believe and repent, there is no example of such being done and there is no word about what we do to make them "real" members of the church later.

Traditions had to be invented to cover the "confirmation" of their baptism. Another rite was added by the tradition of the "elders." The confusion is evident as some churches consider baptized babies as members before confirmation and some do not so consider them until after they are confirmed.

We come now to the purpose of baptism. There are many who contend that baptism is necessary in order to be forgiven and there are others who are equally adamant that baptism has nothing to do with forgiveness. What a mess. Surely the Bible cannot be responsible for both! One or the other has to be wrong. One has to be a tradition of the apostles and the other a tradition of the "elders."

Peter says plainly that baptism is "for the forgiveness of your sins (not the sins of Adam, but **your** sins). But someone is heard to complain that the translation is wrong. "For" does not mean "for," but rather means "because of." The problem is that the word "for"

in this passage is never translated "because of." (Never is a pretty strong word and I have not checked every English translation, but "never" includes some 10 or so different ones.) Besides, the Greek word that appears in the passage is a preposition that looks forward, not backward. It is also the same preposition that Jesus used when he said that his blood was "for" the forgiveness of sins.

But someone objects, "We know that baptism cannot be for the forgiveness of sins because we know that baptism is a work and we know that works do not save.

It is amazing how people can call themselves students of the Bible and then claim to "know" what the Bible does not reveal. For example, where does the Bible say that baptism is a "work." In Hebrews, the writer tells us that we need to repent of "dead works." Is baptism something for which we ought to repent?? (John's baptism was from God.)

And then there is that "nasty" little passage in James. "You see that a man is justified by works and not by faith alone." What kind of works did James have in mind? The context would indicate that he speaks of works that God has commanded. Perhaps this will help us understand the verse in Hebrews, "He became to all those who obey Him the source of eternal salvation."

Obey Him, how? By believing what God has done, repenting and being baptized! (To be continued.)