

Baptismal Instruction in the New Testament and Other Related Issues

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I. Introduction

The question of the content, extent, and timing of the instruction given to new converts to Christianity in the apostolic church is an important one. Such instruction is usually called “catechesis,” from the Greek verb *katecheo*, “to teach.” There is historical evidence to indicate that from the second to the fifth centuries catechesis in the Christian church took place before baptism and in some cases it lasted several years.[1] Once the practice of infant baptism was fully accepted in the church a shift took place and baptism preceded catechesis.[2] We also know that Jewish proselytes received instructions on the commandments and on the meaning of conversion before they experienced the cleansing water.[3]

II. Catechesis in the New Testament

In the NT there are a few passages that some have interpreted as suggesting that the sequence was baptism and then catechesis. They are occasionally employed to justify baptizing individuals who claim to have accepted Jesus as their personal Savior, but who have not had prior biblical instruction. It is those passages that we would like to look at briefly.

A. The Gospel Commission—Matt 28:19-20

Jesus commanded the disciple to “go and make disciples . . . , baptizing them . . . , and teaching them to obey everything I commanded you.” Since “teaching” is the last item in the list a number of individuals have concluded that the catechesis was given after baptism. But

the text is not as clear as some believe. The main exegetical problem has to do with the relation between the two participles—“baptizing,” “teaching”—and the main verb—“make disciples.” Is making disciples explained in terms of baptizing and then teaching (“make disciples, by baptizing and teaching them”), or should the participles be taken as having imperatival force, listing what the Lord expected from the disciples without emphasizing the specific sequence to be followed (“make disciples, baptize, and teach”)?

Based on Greek grammar the first possibility is very unlikely[4] due to the presence of the two participles instead of two finite verbs.[5] The second has the support of Greek grammar according to which it is possible “for the Greek participle to perform a function similar to that of a finite verb, especially when the finite verb would occur in the indicative or imperative mood.”[6] In this particular case the finite verb is an imperative (“make disciples”) making it possible for the participles to function as imperatives. Therefore, the participles do “not indicate that the Gentiles must be disciplined before they are baptized, or baptized before they are taught. It looks as if Matthew perceives baptism as occurring in the middle of a discipling-and-teaching process that must continue indefinitely.”[7]

Although this understanding presents the most likely meaning of the text, absolute certainty is not necessarily possible. Even if we accept the suggestion that there is an implicit sequence, the command “make disciples” would imply that some pre-baptismal instruction was given to new converts and that instruction continued after baptism.[8] In Matthew to become a disciple “means above all to follow after righteousness as articulated in the teachings of Jesus.”[9] Church members were expected to continue to grow in faith and knowledge after baptism (Heb 5:11-14). Therefore the question is not whether catechesis preceded baptism but how much instruction was given before baptism.

B. The Practice of the Apostles in Acts

In the book of Acts we find several cases where baptism was not preceded by any formal catechesis. After Peter's sermon at Pentecost three thousand were baptized "that day" (Acts 2:41). The instruction they needed was given through a sermon and "those who accepted his message were baptized." We are not told whether they received any further instruction during the day.

In Samaria, Philip "proclaimed [lit. "was proclaiming,"] the Christ" and many were baptized. The verb "proclaimed" in Greek is an imperfect suggesting that his preaching took place during a period of time. His message included the good news of the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus (8:5, 12). Obviously some instruction was given before baptism. Philip also explained the Scripture to the Ethiopian, who most probably was a Gentile who feared the Lord and participated in the Jewish system of worship.[10] The text says that Philip began his Bible study with Isa 53 and then went through the rest of the Scriptures. Touched by the Spirit the Ethiopian requested baptism and Philip baptized him (8:35). No more details are given.

Paul baptized the jailer and his household after "speaking the word of the Lord to him and to all the others in his house" (16:32-33). But notice that Paul first informed him he had to believe in the Lord Jesus, then he instructed the jailer and his family, and finally baptized him. The impression we get is that once the person understood the Christian message and made a commitment to it, baptism took place.

C. Possible Content of the Catechesis

It is very difficult to know in detail the content of the instruction given to prospective members of the church. We can get an idea of the type of instruction they received before baptism by examining the apostolic speeches in Acts. It was as a result of listening to those

sermons, which contained teachings of the church,[11] that people accepted the gospel and were baptized.[12] Among the most important topics mentioned in them we find the good news of Jesus Christ (8:35), the OT messianic prophecies were fulfilled in him (2:16; 3:18; cf. 8:32-35), he is the Son of David (2:30-31) and the Son of God (9:20); mention is made to his earthly ministry (2:22), his death and resurrection (2:23; 3:15; 4:10), his exaltation and mediation (2:33; 3:13; 4:11; 5:31), and his Lordship (2:36).

Other doctrines specifically mentioned in the speeches recorded in Acts are, repentance (2:38; 3:19), forgiveness of sin (10:43; 13:38), justification (13:39), worship of the true God (17:29), final judgment (10:42; 17:31; cf. Rom 2:16), second coming of Christ (3:20-21), general resurrection (24:15; 17:18), the kingdom of God (8:12), and the Holy Spirit (2:33, 38). This impressive list of topics indicates that instruction was given to unbelievers before they were baptized. The amount of catechesis probably depended on the background of the individual. Basic instruction was necessary because through baptism the convert entered into a new life, the life of a Christian (Rom 6:4).

D. Catechesis as an Introduction to a New Life

If baptism means the end of an old way of life and the beginning of a new one, it is simply impossible to baptize someone without explaining to him or her the practical implications of a Christian life. The call to repentance and confession before baptism implies that the individual is accepting a new way of life that is in harmony with the Christian message (Acts 2:38; 10:43). Paul makes reference to this change of life, in the context of his discussion on baptism, by contrasting the condition of the individual before and after becoming a Christian. He writes, “But thanks be to God that though you used to be slaves of sin, you wholeheartedly obeyed the form of teaching you were entrusted. You have been set free from sin and have become slaves to righteousness” (Rom 6:17-18). It was through faith in Christ expressed in the baptismal act that the individual was freed from the power of sin,

and it was also at baptism that the person made a commitment to the Christian teaching. The text presupposes that specific Christian instruction was given to the candidate for baptism.

III. Baptism, the Church, and the Spirit

According to the Scriptures to be baptized is to become part of the people of God, that is to say, to be incorporated not only into Christ (Rom 6:3-4), but also into his body, the church (1 Cor 12:12). For this reason the Bible makes no distinction between baptism into Christ and becoming a member of the church; the Lord and his church are inseparable. Through baptism we become children of God and members of a community of faith where Christ is Lord: “You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all in Christ Jesus” (Gal 3:28). The first group of believers who were baptized after listening to the sermon of Peter “were added” to the disciples of Jesus, to the church that was born that day through the outpouring of the Spirit (Acts 2:41). The NT does not support the idea that a Christian can exist as such isolated from the community of believers. That type of individualism is unknown in the Scriptures and is incompatible with the biblical understanding of the nature of the church.

The reception of the Holy Spirit by new converts was significant not only because they were empowered to live a holy Christian life, but also because this was the first gift they received from God through the intercessory ministry of Christ before the Father (Acts 2:33). In other words, it was a significant piece of evidence pointing to the fact that Jesus had been exalted to the right hand of God. He was alive before the Father!

Occasionally the individual received the Spirit through the laying on of hands (Acts 8:17; 9:17; 19:6), but there is no command from the Lord or the apostles to make this practice a permanent one in the church. In fact Jesus (Matt 3:16) and the apostles received the Spirit without the laying on of hands (Acts 2:1-4). Phillip baptized the Ethiopian but there is no

reason to conclude that he received the Spirit through the laying on of hands (8:38-39). The more common biblical view seems to be that believers received the Spirit at baptism (1 Cor 12:13; Tit 3:5). The association between the Spirit and baptism is probably based on the fact that Jesus was anointed by the Holy Spirit at his baptism.

That in some cases the laying on of hands is mentioned does not mean that it was only through this act that the Spirit was imparted to new believers. The few cases where it was performed are very peculiar and should not be used to universalize the practice.[13] In fact it took place in contexts where former disciples of John the Baptist (Acts 19:1-7), gentiles (8:12-17) or an enemy of the church (9:17-18) were joining the church. The practice served to emphasize that the apostles had been appointed as God's instruments in the church and that the reception of the Spirit was a divine gift.

IV. Conclusion

The importance and seriousness of the baptismal act requires from the individual careful consideration and a lucid understanding of what it means. Since the rite is a public confession of faith and commitment to Christ and his church, a public examination of the candidates is appropriate. Every new convert must know what does it mean to be a Seventh-day Adventist. This is not just a matter of sharing present truth with them; it is also a matter of honesty on our part. Baptism joins people to the church and call them to stand for truth, therefore the least we can do is to ascertain that they know the biblical truth we proclaim and our mission on this planet. Instruction should continue after baptism in order to deepen the understanding of the Christian message and its full impact on the daily life of the believer.

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- [1]. Everett Ferguson, "Catechesis, Catechumenate," in Everett Ferguson, ed., *Encyclopedia of Early Christianity* (New York, NY: Garland Publishing, 1999), p. 224; and Alan Kreider, "Baptism, Catechism, and the Eclipse of Jesus' Teaching in Early Christianity," *Tyndale Bulletin* 47 (1996):317-43.
- [2]. Kreider, "Baptism," pp.344-46. There is evidence of infant baptism during the mid-second century but it is after the fifth century that it became a generalized practice in the church. See, David F. Wright, "The Origin of Infant Baptism—Child Believers' Baptism?" *Scottish Journal of Theology* 40 (1987):1-23.
- [3]. Ferguson, "Catechesis," p. 223.
- [4]. There are some who argue for it ; e.g. Robert H. Mounce, *Matthew: New International Biblical Commentary* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1985), p. 268.
- [5]. D. A. Carson, "Matthew," in Frank E. Gaebelien and J. A. Douglas, eds., *Expositor's Bible Commentary*, vol. 8 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1984), p. 597, writes, "The syntax of the Greek participles for 'baptizing' and 'teaching' forbids the conclusion that baptizing and teaching are to be construed solely as the *means* of making disciples."
- [6]. Stanley E. Porter, *Idioms of the Greek NT* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1992), p. 182. See also Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 14-28: Word Biblical Commentary* (Dallas, TX: Word, 1995), p. 882.
- [7]. Douglas R. A. Hare, *Matthew: Interpretation* (Louisville, KY: John Knox, 1993), p. 334.
- [8]. W. A. Davis and Dale C. Allison, *The Gospel According to Saint Matthew* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1997), p. 686, writes, "Concerning the order of the ecclesiastical verbs in vv. 19-20, perhaps one first hears the call to discipleship (*matheteusate*) then enters the community through baptism (*baptizontes*) and finally learns instruction (*didaskontes*) with a view towards obedience (*terein*). In this case *matheteusate* ["make disciples"] could refer to pre-baptismal instruction. But it is better to regard *matheteusate* not as the first in a series but as a general imperative which is filled out (although not exhausted) by what follows: baptism and instruction in obedience belong to discipleship."
- [9]. Hagner, *Matthew 14-28*, p. 887. Francis W. Beare, *The Gospel According to Matthew* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1981), p. 545, writes, "Matthew has shown what it means to be a disciple. It means renunciation of all earthly ambition, the denial of self, the bearing of the cross, the following of Christ, the willingness to be a servant of all, the commitment to doing the will of the heavenly Father." Obviously that would require pre-baptismal instruction.
- [10]. "A recently discovered inscription from Aphrodisias lists, along with a number of Jews, fifty-four Gentiles who are called *theosebistai* or 'God-fearers' Although some scholars argue that the title *God-fearer* here means the Gentiles concerned have simply expressed their support for the Jews as fellow townspeople, it seems much more likely that term indicates that these Gentiles were linked in some formal way to the Jewish community, without being proselytes. This and other inscriptions, and some literary sources, strongly suggest that there were a number of Gentile 'God-fearers' who were formally associated with the Jewish community, were involved in at least some facets of synagogue life and kept some of the commandments without becoming proselytes who joined the community" (P. R. Trebilco, "Diaspora Judaism," in Ralph P. Martin and Peter H. Davis, eds., *Dictionary of the Later NT and Its Developments* [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1997], p. 292).
- [11]. According to Acts 5:28 and 17:19, the preaching of Paul was called a "teaching." See H. F. Weiss, "Didache instruction, teaching," in Horst Balz and Gerhard Schneider, eds., *Exegetical Dictionary of the NT*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1990), p. 320.
- [12]. On the content of the apostolic speeches in Acts see M. L. Soards, *The Speeches in Acts: Their Content, Context, and Concerns* (Louisville, KY: Westminster, 1994); F. F. Bruce,

“The Speeches of Acts—Thirty Years After,” in Robert Banks, ed., *Reconciliation and Hope* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1974), pp. 60-68; still useful is C. H. Dodd, *The Apostolic Preaching and Its Developments* (London, 1945), pp. 20-29.

[13]. Heb 6:1-2 lists a number of basic Christian teachings (e.g. repentance, faith) and among them mentions “the laying on of hands.” The phrase is commonly understood to refer to the practice of receiving the Spirit through the laying on of hands. What makes this interpretation attractive is that the previous item in the list is “instruction about baptisms.” But since “baptisms” is plural its meaning is not clear. Perhaps it is referring to teachings that had the purpose of distinguishing the nature of the Christian baptism from the baptism of Jewish proselytes or from baptismal practices at Qumran (cf. Paul Ellingworth, *Commentary on Hebrews* [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1993], p. 315). The phrase “laying on of hands” is used in the NT in different ways making it difficult to be dogmatic concerning its meaning here. It was performed during blessings (Matt 19:15), for healing (Matt 9:18; Acts 5:12), for reception of spiritual gifts (1 Tim 4:14; 2 Tim 1:6), and for appointing a person to a particular task (Acts 6:6; 13:3). It is interesting to observe that healing was not always connected to the laying on of hands, indicating that the act was not indispensable for the miracle. The same is also the case with the reception of the Spirit. In Heb 6:2 “laying on of hands” could be referring in a general sense to “the conferring of special gifts” (Donald Guthrie *The Letter to the Hebrews* [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1983], p. 139).