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BAPTISM AND LAYING ON OF HANDS

Essentially, baptism is an ordinance through which a person makes his covenant with God and thus becomes a member of Christ's Church. Socially, it is a positive action by which man recognizes his need for allying himself with God. Paul said, "Therefore, we are buried with him by baptism into death, that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life" (Romans 6:4). Baptism becomes more than a covenant which a person makes by his own power, for herein is the power of God.

Our baptism in water is symbolic of the burial of Christ; and in this we are buried with Him into death that will permit a new life to emerge. Likewise, as Christ was raised by the glory of God, so also by that power can we be raised to this newness of life. Paul says it this way, "Buried with him in baptism, wherein also ye are risen with him through the faith of the operation of God, who hath raised him from the dead" (Colossians 2:12).

Jesus told Nicodemus, "Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God Except a man be born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God" (John 3:3-5). The reference to baptism as rebirth is significant. It also points to this "new life" idea. As we examine what takes place as a result of birth, we can see this plainly. Prior to birth, the unborn individual is completely limited. By the nature of his existence, he is dependent and will ever remain so until he is born. He is limited also by darkness which blinds his vision. He is likewise limited as to the possibilities of growth physically and otherwise. Birth removes these limitations. Darkness is removed, and he can see. Physically he is now free to grow. His intellect now becomes useful. Through birth he enters a new life with possibilities he could not have realized if he had remained unborn. So it is with baptism.

WHY BAPTISM?

The fact that it is a command of Christ gives reason for baptism. We have noted His command for rebirth, saying that without it man could neither see nor enter the Kingdom. In what is considered His last great commission, He said, "Go ye, therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son; and of the Holy Ghost" (Matthew 28:18).

Baptism is also for remission of sins. John proclaimed the "baptism of repentance for the remission of sins" (Mark 1:3). In answer to the question of those who had crucified Christ, Peter said, "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins" (Acts 2:38). Ananias said to Paul, "Arise, and be baptized, and wash away thy sins" (Acts 22:16).

As Jesus came to John and asked for baptism, John hesitated. He could probably see no reason for Christ, the Son of God, to be baptized. Nevertheless, Jesus said, "Suffer me to be baptized of thee, for thus it becometh us to fulfill all righteousness" (Matthew 3:43). On another occasion the Master said, "He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved" (Mark 16:15).

WHO SHALL BE BAPTIZED?

Repentance is a requirement for those who would be baptized (D&C 17:20). John the Baptist rebuked the Pharisees and Sadducees, "Repent, therefore, and bring forth fruits meet for repentance" (Matthew 3:35). Who shall be baptized? Those who repent, believe, and gladly receive the teachings of Jesus.

From the earliest days of the Church established by Jesus, the mode of baptism was immersion. It is obvious that Jesus was thus baptized, for when He was baptized, He "went up straightway out of the water" (Matthew 3:45).

Certainly the symbolic significance of baptism cannot be portrayed in any other way. Paul called it "buried with him in baptism" (Colossians 2:12). Only total immersion can fulfill this. We also find

that John was baptizing at Aenon specifically because there was “much water” there (John 3:24). Likewise, when Philip baptized the eunuch, “both Philip and the eunuch” went down into the water (Acts 8:38). There is no evidence that baptism was ever performed in any other way in the Church under the personal direction of Christ or the apostles.

BAPTISM OF LITTLE CHILDREN?

Since we affirm that baptism involves a sacred covenant, we believe that it is neither required nor does it have any value to those who have not reached the age of moral responsibility—an age of understanding where they can believe with all their heart. The fact that Jesus blessed little children rather than baptized them is significant. Mormon specifically denies the need of baptizing little children, saying that they are alive in Christ (Moroni 8:25). Modern-day revelation tells us that when a child is eight years old, he has become accountable. It places the responsibility upon the parents to teach the child so that at this age he will have sufficient understanding to believe with all his heart and to intelligently covenant with God (see D&C 68:4a-b).

AUTHORITY TO BAPTIZE

One cannot become a citizen of any earthly kingdom unless he has met the requirements for citizenship. Also, even though he may have met these requirements, citizenship can be administered only by one having specific authority to do so. In like manner, we positively affirm that no one can become a citizen of the Kingdom of God without meeting the requirements; and he can be inducted into the Kingdom only by one who has been given specific authority of God for this purpose. Baptism from other sources is invalid regardless of the sincerity of the participants.

Paul said, “For as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ” (Galatians 3:27). Through baptism man affirms his appreciation of Christ and all that He has done and does for us. It is truly a privilege to join with Christ through baptism, accepting from Him the power to become the sons of God, to work with Him in building up the Kingdom of God and establishing His righteousness, and to share with Him as “joint heirs” of God (Romans 8:16-17).

LAYING ON OF HANDS

The principle of laying on of hands is significant because in each case the needy individual approaches God seeking a gift or blessing. In that seeking, he recognizes the authorized ministers of God as those standing in the stead of Christ. Together the minister and seeker approach God. The use of the hands in the act of giving gifts is common; and we find that it is so with the ordinances. The gift of God comes to the seeker through the laying on of hands by God’s servants (see Acts 8:14-17, 19:6; 2 Timothy 1:6). While neither a man nor his hands bestow the gift, it is through or by the laying on of the hands that God bestows the gift.

CHRIST AND THE APOSTLES

Jesus taught His doctrine not only by precept but by example. This is equally true with the principle of laying on of hands as it is with the others. When little children were brought to Him, He “took them up in His arms, and put His hands upon them, and blessed them” (Mark 10:14). He might have simply said a prayer in their behalf, but this was more than that. The fact that He blessed them indicates that He bestowed a blessing upon them.

Laying on of hands for healing the sick was common with Jesus and His disciples. Mark records, “Jesus said, . . . A prophet is not without honor, save in his own country, and among his own kin, and in his own house. And he could do no mighty work there, save that he laid his hands upon a few sick folk and they were healed” (Mark 6:6-7).

Luke tells us, “Now, when the sun was setting, all they who had any sick, with divers diseases, brought them unto him; and he laid his hands on every one of them and healed them” (Luke 4:40). Concerning Paul, it is noted, “And it came to pass that the father of Publius lay sick of a fever and of a bloody flux, to whom Paul entered in, and prayed, and laid his hands on him, and healed him” (Acts 28:8). James admonishes the sick to call for the elders to anoint them with oil, that by the prayer of faith, healing could come (see James 5:14-15).

Ordination of men to ministerial (priesthood) authority by the laying on of hands was recognized early in religious history. This was commanded in the case of Aaron (see Exodus 40:12-13) and Joshua (see Numbers 27:18-23). In the Church following the resurrection of Jesus, we find record of this, too. The seven men who were chosen to look after the temporal things were thus ordained (see Acts 6:6), as were Barnabas and Paul (see Acts 13:3).

In the Book of Mormon record we also find this to be true: "Alma . . . ordained priests and elders, by laying on his hands according to the order of God" (Alma 4:1). In latter-day revelation this procedure is prescribed: "Every elder, priest, teacher, or deacon is to be ordained according to the gifts and callings of God unto him; and he is to be ordained by the power of the Holy Ghost which is in the one who ordains him" (D&C 17:12).

When men were baptized of water, the gift of the Holy Ghost was bestowed upon them through the laying on of hands. Two examples of this are found in those baptized in Samaria (see Acts 8:14-17) and with disciples in Ephesus baptized by Paul (see Acts 19:6). Paul writes of "the gift of God which is in thee by the putting on of my hands" (2 Timothy 1:6).

Moroni records, "The words of Christ which he spake unto his disciples, the twelve whom he had chosen, as he laid his hands upon them: And he called them by name, saying, Ye shall call on the Father in my name in mighty prayer; and after ye have done this, ye shall have power that on him whom ye shall lay your hands, ye shall give the Holy Ghost; and in my name shall ye give it, for thus do mine apostles" (Moroni 2:1-2). We find a similar command in latter-day revelation: Elders are "to confirm the church by the laying on of the hands and the giving of the Holy Ghost" (DC 17:8e; also see D&C 34:2c, 49:2g-h). The laying on of hands is certainly one of the principles of the doctrine of Christ. Through it God bestows rich blessings upon man.

Questions for Discussion

1. Give a definition of the word "baptism."
2. Give three reasons why the Scriptures say a man must repent and be baptized.
3. Why are baptism and the laying on of hands called the "sacramental principles"?
4. Why are both of the two baptisms necessary? What is the meaning of each?
5. Why is authority of priesthood necessary in the rite of baptism? Upon what do we base the authority of our Church?
6. Where do we find the precedent of the mode in which we baptize? Why is this the only mode accepted by the Church?