

Part III: Baptism: Drama, Grace and Inaugural Spirituality

Peter's Baptismal Ethics

A. Introduction

1. In mid-20th Century some scholars argued that the letter of 1 Peter was based on a sermon preached at a baptismal service or was structured around a baptismal catechism. This position is not held by many today, but the contents of 1 Peter certainly reflect many baptismal themes:

- a. birth imagery
 - b. emphasis upon imitating Jesus
 - c. strong ethical focus
 - d. significant reflection on the meaning of suffering
2. Explicit definition of Christian baptism in 1 Peter 3:21

B. 1 Peter 3:21 – Context

1. Christians have no need to fear Satan (3:12-14)
2. Jesus experienced suffering and death, but was raised from the dead (3:17-18)
3. All “angels, authorities and powers are under his [Jesus’] authority” (3:22)
4. Just as God preserved Noah through the flood, so God preserves believers even through “fiery trials” (4:12)

C. 1 Peter 3:21 – Baptism as a sign or pledge of commitment to God

1. Several key questions in this passage
2. What is the meaning of the phrase *συνειδήσεως ἀγαθῆς ἐπερώτημα εἰς θεόν* – “pledge? of a good conscience towards God”?
 - a. only occurrence of *ἐπερώτημα* in the NT
 - b. in papyri contemporary with NT it signifies a “stipulation often of a contractual nature, pledge.”
 - c. the corresponding verb means to request or make a plea, but in the NT it never means to pray. It signifies to make an inquiry, ask a question.
 - d. so this does not signify a prayer made to God for a good conscience. Rather it means that the person in his or her baptism is pledging to God something that arises from a good conscience or awareness (subjective genitive) or something that the person will do as a result of the pledge, i.e. maintain a good awareness towards God (objective genitive) and thus behave in a holy manner.
 - e. probably the objective genitive fits most adequately with the parallel to Noah, who kept his commitment to God, built the ark and was preserved.

D. 1 Peter 3:21 – Salvation based upon the resurrection of Jesus, not our Baptism

1. According to Peter baptism is not merely a purificatory ritual, i.e. “the washing of the flesh’s filth.”
2. Baptism “saves” because it reflects the person’s faith commitment in “the resurrection of Jesus Messiah.”
3. This salvation is secure because Jesus Messiah is now at the “right hand of God”, the place of ultimate authority (3:22).

E. 1 Peter 3:21 – The moral dimension of Baptism

1. Through baptism the person gives God first place.
2. Consider 2:11-12 and its expression of the reality of the spiritual and moral struggle the believer engages.
3. Baptism marks this point of transition, as God locates the believer in his family.

F. Summary – Peter’s Baptismal Theology

1. Baptism indicates a person's involvement in the resurrection of Jesus.
2. He contrasts baptism with Jewish purificatory rituals.
3. Baptism serves notice that the believer has entered into a new family, a new culture, with new behaviour and ethical struggles.
4. Evil is real and baptism marks a person's placement under God's might hand.
5. Baptism signals hope in God's preservation when judgment comes.
6. Baptism expresses the believer's commitment to God of faith and loyal obedience.
7. Just as God "saved" Noah through the waters of the flood, but this was dependent upon his prior obedience to God's commands, so too baptism is the water that "saves" a believer in this limited sense (i.e. demonstrates God's provision for salvation), but depends upon a prior commitment in faith to Jesus Christ.

G. Using Peter's Baptismal Theology for Spiritual Guidance

1. The nature of discipleship:
 - a. transition into God's family – new status as “chosen, resident alien;”
 - b. believers live under God's protection, but still struggle with evil;
 - c. believers can access God's power displayed in Jesus' resurrection;
 - d. a personal pledge to God to live loyally and obediently.
2. Coping with the reality of evil.
3. The shape of pastoral ministry.