

The Charismatic Gifts and Baptism

ULTIMATE AND PENULTIMATE

“Pen-” in “peninsula” means “almost.” A peninsula is “almost” an island. Similarly, what is ultimate is last, and what is penultimate is “almost” last, or second-last. These days some people have been disparaging baptism as only a step on the way, which is followed by experiences that are more important. Already in the third century, the decision was made at Rome that converts to the Catholic Church from schism or heresy should not be baptised again. It was enough that the hand of the bishop should be laid on them. A wrong understanding of Acts 8 lay behind this development. We do not object to the Roman church’s rejection of “re-baptism.” However, we see in that already the beginning of a false theological development that came to regard confirmation as conferring something in addition to baptism. Because a laying on of the hand after baptism was reserved to the bishop at Rome, it came to be regarded as more important. However, is baptism ultimate? Can it really be said that what comes at the beginning of Christians’ lives is ultimate?

The last several centuries have seen developments of this notion of something important that is subsequent to baptism. European Pietism talked about renewal of life as something that overshadowed baptism, which they tended to downplay. John Wesley wrote about a second experience after baptism. Holiness bodies have said that Christians can progress on to perfection, to a stage where they cease to sin. Many Charismatics and Pentecostals have identified a second, post-baptismal experience in speaking in tongues. However, it has to be maintained that baptism does not have to be supplemented in any way. What believers look forward to after baptism is the return of Christ (1 Cor 1:7-8).

We should consider that the important, ultimate, renewal comes in baptism. There God acts in grace to justify and save. Titus 3:5 refers to this as an act of God in the past. There He acted through the washing in which He gave us new birth and in which the Holy Spirit renewed us. Renewal cannot be understood here to refer to the sanctified life or a closer walk with God. They are penultimate. They are not reasons for salvation. Paul expressly adds there, “Not because of the righteous things that we have done.”

Most of the Scriptural passages that express the ultimate effects of baptism have verbs in the divine-passive and event-nouns that can be translated in equivalent English by verbs with “God” as the implied subject. In some baptismal passages there is a double effect, both negative (cleansing or removing) and positive (justifying, compare 1 Cor 6:11). In baptism God brought us across the waters into safety (1 Cor 10:1-2; 1 Pt 3:19-21). God saved us from the punishment coming upon the wicked (Ac 2:40 (compare the reference to baptism in verse 42)). In baptism God brought us into His rule as King (Joh 3:5; Col 1:13). This implies that by it God delivered us from the devil (compare Ac 26: 18). Deliverance from the devil was a dominant feature of the pre-baptismal ceremonies in the church of the first centuries.

In baptism, God bestowed faith. In Colossians 2: 12 there is a clause, “by which (namely, by baptism) also you were raised with (Him) through the faith that God works.” It is also clear from Gl 3 :26-27 that the Christians in Galatian were all children of God through faith because they had been baptised. In Ac 11: 17 Peter implies that he and the rest of Jesus’ disciples had also been baptised on the day of Pentecost. The phrase there “when we came to faith” is baptismal. They had received John’s baptism and had been disciples of Jesus for some three years. Nevertheless, Peter traced their faith in the risen Christ back to Christian baptism. “When you became believers” in Acts 19:2-3 is a similar reference to baptism. However, there is need for an important caution. Where people fall away from faith, the ultimate for them will be God’s condemnation.

“Regeneration” or “re-birth” is a parallel concept to “renewal.” In the context of John 3:5 the parallels of “again” (literally “from above”) are “from God” and “of water and the Holy Spirit” There is one re-birth, which comes in a double way. In Joh 3:5 there is also one re-birth, not two. In Tt 3:5 baptism is described as a “bath of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit.”

Baptism begins the new creation (Rm 6:4; Gl 6:15; 2 Cor 5:17). A person who is converted is renewed (Eph 4:24). What was old in Adam is done over again in Christ, the second Adam. The image of God, in which man was created at the beginning, will ultimately be completely restored. All Christians together are one new man (Eph 2:15). In broader terms, the New Testament is the time of the newness of the Spirit, in contrast to the old letter (Rm 7:6). We look forward to the New Jerusalem, the new heavens and earth, and the new song. That renewal is ultimate.

In baptism God adopted us as His children (Gl 3:26-27). The language of re-birth in Titus 3:5 and John goes a step further than adoption because “being born of God” means that believers are God’s genuine sons (Joh 1:13).

In baptism the Spirit incorporated us into the body of Christ (1 Cpr 12:13). In Colossians 2: 11 Paul describes baptism (the new) figuratively, in terms of circumcision (the old). In baptism God gave us forgiveness of sins (Ac 2:38; 22:16), not just forgiveness for the sins up to that point, as many people in the early church mistakenly thought. God declared us sinners “not guilty” (1 Cor 6:11) and in that washing He has also made us holy in the wider sense. In baptism God has clothed us with Christ as a garment (Gl 3 :27). These blessings are ultimate because they lead to the life to come.

^ Much current teaching about what is called “Spirit-baptism” as a subsequent experience is wrong. People often speak disparagingly about what they call “water-baptism.” That is what the German Christians at the Reformation called “Schwärmerei”, or spiritual “enthusiasm.” They forget that when the Scriptures distinguish being baptised with water from being baptised with the Spirit they mean the baptism of John the Baptist, which was a preparatory baptism of repentance. People often claim that their so-called “Spirit baptism” is evidenced by speaking in tongues. On the contrary, the Scriptures teach that God gives the Spirit in Christian baptism. “Baptise”, except in some figurative expressions, regularly involves the use of water. Charismatic gifts are not ultimate, and they are not a means of renewal. For ultimate renewal, we look to the work of the Holy Spirit through the Gospel and in baptism. The benefits of baptism, re-birth by water and Spirit, are ultimate. What is more, the Spirit, who is given in baptism, is the guarantee, the down payment of our inheritance. Even preaching in Christ’s name, doing mighty miracles, and driving out demons are not ultimate if finally the Lord says, “I do not know you!” (Mt 7:21-23).

Renewal ought to follow in the lives of the baptised. The admonition is “You are renewed. Therefore be what you are!” or “Live a new life, because in baptism God has given you new life with the risen Christ!” Baptism gives the power and the motive for this penultimate renewal. Because we have been baptised into Christ’s death and burial to the power of sin, we struggle not to continue to sin, and because we have been baptised into Christ’s resurrection, we began to walk in a new life (Rm 6:1-4). Baptism is the motive and the power for setting hearts and minds on the ultimate things that are in heaven, where Christ is (Col 3:1-2). In his transition in Romans 12, to the sanctified life of the person who is justified through faith, Paul speaks about being continuously changed by the renewal of our minds (Rm 12,2). This renewal is ongoing. God is constantly renewing the new man in His own image. The old man used to be continually destroyed by its deceitful desires. Christians have put on the new man, and their hearts and minds must repeatedly be made new. Because Christians have died to the power of the law and so been made free from it, they no longer serve in the old way of a written law, but in the new Spirit (Rm 7:6) This renewal is important response, but it is penultimate. The final result of Christ’s saving work lies in the life to come, and we should not focus on our sanctified lives as if they contributed in any way to what He has done for us.