

CHAPTER 10

NEW BELIEVERS, BAPTISM, AND THE CROSS

BAPTISM AS A TOTAL COMMITMENT TO THE PARADIGM OF THE CROSS

While reading recently about the baptism of a new believer in Nepal, I was challenged to think about the absolute necessity of all believers to be totally committed to the paradigm of the Cross—even new converts.

During visits in 2002 and 2003 to Pinecrest Bible Training Center (near Utica, NY), I made friends with a student from Nepal, named Bhim Gurung. Now back home, Bhim has appreciated my emails on the Cross and has urged me to come and teach this series there. As I was reading through a detailed account of Pastor Jay Hearn's visit to Nepal, I found these very challenging comments about the commitment of a new believer called Bimol:

Bhim had spent time with Bimol instructing him concerning baptism. Then Bimol had written out his desire for baptism, as most Nepali Christians do, giving the papers to the pastor for safe keeping. In the past, many pastors and Christian workers have gone to jail because the family members of new converts have stated that their son or daughter was forced into baptism. Therefore this is a common practice in many churches.

These letters inevitably state four points. The first point is: I have given my heart to the Lord Jesus Christ and am desirous to be baptized in water of my own free will. The second point, I have not been promised wealth or financial gain if I become a Christian and go through water baptism. Third point is: if any thing should happen to me in the future and the authorities come and arrest me, I will gladly go to prison because of my love for Jesus. Then lastly, if the authorities tell me that I am to be shot in front of a firing squad, I will not renounce the Lord Jesus but will remain true to him. These were very emotional thoughts and comments for me as a westerner listening to this new young believer state his faith in our Lord.¹

Also in this article, Jay Hearn gives an account of the rejection that Bhim was willing to suffer because of His commitment to Christ:

He [Bhim] had gone to Nagaland (a province in northeastern in India) and there given his heart to the Lord; however, upon his return to his parents' home in Gorkha, the village had rejected him and demanded he leave seeing that he had "changed his religion." So under the burden of being cast out, he came to Kathmandu and lived and began a small church here, even before entering Bible school. This church had become the larger Baptist church where had I spoken in the week previous.²

If indeed I am able to accept Bhim's invitation to visit Nepal, I am certain that I could learn much from him and other believers there about living out the paradigm of the Cross—perhaps more than I can teach them. I believe that the challenge of persecution in Nepal brings into focus the need of a commitment to the Cross and also makes believers there open to further applications of this paradigm. It would be a wonderful privilege for the Lord to use me there to encourage them in their persecution and challenge them to continue searching out aspects of being conformed to Christ's death.

In Chapter 3, I inserted part of the article: "Death and Christian Discipleship" by Dennis Conner³ I feel it is appropriate to include here the whole article:

In his well-known book *The Cost of Discipleship*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote, "When Christ calls a man, He bids Him come and die." With that, the German theologian, preacher

¹Jay Hearn, "Mission Nepal – Update" highlanderglory@excite.com.

²Jay Hearn, "Mission Nepal – Update".

³<http://www.yadkinvillechurchofchrist.org/articles2.html>.

and martyr (he was executed by the Nazis in 1945) has succinctly and profoundly identified the very heart and core of what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ. The Master Himself put it this way, “If anyone desires to come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow me,” (Luke 9:23). Immediately prior to this pronouncement, Jesus had told the disciples, “The Son of Man must suffer many things and be killed, and be raised the third day,” (v. 21). For Jesus, death would be a divine necessity. That necessity also extends to the disciples of Jesus. The cross, as Jesus spoke of it in this text, was not a reference to burdens in life (“Well, that’s just my cross to bear”). Rather, the cross was an instrument of death. People were killed on crosses. Jesus was saying, “Just as I must die, so must you.”

Yet, despite the clear (but not so simple) teaching of Christ regarding this necessity for authentic Christian experience, there is little of death in contemporary teaching and preaching. The result, as I heard Humphrey Foutz correctly observe many years ago, is that “we bury too many people alive.” That is, we baptize too many people whose repentance was devoid of death. Consequently, there is little change in hearts and lives. Carnality remains a problem. We may be nicer people, but we are not being transformed into the likeness of Christ.

Perhaps one of the reasons for this state of affairs is the sheer unpleasantness of the subject. Death, we think, is not the stuff that joy is made of. Let us focus on life! Jesus did say, after all, “I have come that they may have life, and that they may have it more abundantly,” (John 10:10). The abundant life is what we want to hear about; that’s a message the church can sell to our contemporary society. But death?

What we often forget is that in Scripture the proper order of things is that before there can be life, there must first be death. Jesus had to die before He could be resurrected. For the would be disciple, that is the meaning of repentance and baptism. We have to die before we can be resurrected (Romans 6:4-5). In truth, however, baptism is only the beginning of our dying and living. Jesus spoke of a daily dying.

What kind of death, though, is this? Only the most painful kind of death. It is death to our own ambitions and ego. It is death to pride and sin. It is death to our lusts and carnal longings. It is death to our flesh; indeed, it is the gradual death of our flesh by the power of the Holy Spirit. It is death to ourselves. And each time every day that we die well, we experience the resurrection life.

Paul wrote that the driving desire of his life was “to know Him and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death, if, by any means, I may attain to the resurrection from the dead,” (Philippians 3:10). Paul’s ultimate goal was to experience the final glorification of resurrection to eternal life. Before that could happen, however, it would be necessary to be conformed in the present to the death of Christ. A cross for the Savior, a cross for the disciple. Death precedes life.

Much of our preaching and teaching today tends to focus on externals; in fact, faithfulness is often measured by how well we observe external forms and organization. This is by no means to denigrate the value of outward forms in the expression of our faith. It is to say that there needs to be more attention given to the heart and core issues of discipleship. We often speak of “fundamentals of the faith.” What can be more fundamental than death? The ultimate soundness is that of a life truly crucified with Christ—a life devoted, whatever the cost, to the pursuit of becoming like Jesus and sharing in His experience. Even the experience of death.

To what extent are we all truly Jesus’ disciples? Do we daily “take up your cross” by committing ourselves every day to live out the Cross as a paradigm more fully in every aspect of our lives and trusting in Jesus to live His life through us? Let us keep our eyes on Jesus and, as we daily worship Him and adore His nature, follow Him all the way to the Cross!