

Study # 4

Cruciformity and Baptism

In the New Testament, baptism was instituted to be a graphic picture of the meaning of cruciformity and a public declaration of a believer's commitment to a cruciform life. Immersion into water showed that the old life was reckoned as dead and buried in the water; rising out of the water declared that a new life had begun, a new life of following Christ completely, even if suffering and death were the consequences. Being baptized into Christ meant reckoning one's self dead to all that was less than or detracted from one's new life and "being united in his resurrection" meant a victorious life of power to live out the paradigm of the Cross.

Or don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.

If we have been united with him like this in his death, we will certainly also be united with him in his resurrection. For we know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin— (Rom. 6:3-6)

Persecution at the time of the early church made public baptism a crucial event for a new believer; his declaration of commitment to be a disciple of Jesus might cost him his life, his livelihood, or at least rejection from family and friends. In this confession of faith at his baptism, the believer was demonstrating cruciformity in being ready to suffer or die for Christ and that he understood that such a commitment to cruciformity was a foundational aspect of being a disciple of Christ.

In some countries today, baptism has the same significance as it did in the first century. The following is an account of baptism of a new convert in Nepal:

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.¹

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a modern martyr, has this to say about baptism in his book,

The Cost of Discipleship:

[T]here 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

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

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.²

It is obvious that such a cruciform life was not intended for only the apostles, nor for a select few “saints” thereafter; baptism was to be the beginning commitment to a life of cruciformity for all disciples then and now:

Therefore go and **make disciples** of all nations, **baptizing them** in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the end of the age. (Matt. 28:19-20)

Finally, it is clear from Scripture and must be emphasized, that **cruciformity defines our new life; being united with Christ in His resurrection means that we have power to live out the paradigm of the Cross and have ability to rise above evrything that is not cruciform.**

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²Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, as quoted by Dennis Conner in: “Death and Christian Discipleship”, www.yadkinvillechurchofchrist.org/articles2.html.