

BAPTISM INTO CHRIST

By Paul Penno Jr.

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A letter to a thoughtful who was baptized: “Dear Kristen: When your Mom shed some tears of joy at your baptism, I did too. When you made the choice on your own to follow Jesus, you did the right thing. I made that choice also when I was very young, and I am still glad today. And although I am weak and faulty in many ways, I think I can safely say that I have never gone back on that choice. And the Savior has never forgotten to hang on to me.

When we sing that song, “O Jesus, I Have Promised To Serve Thee to the End,” I sing it, “O Jesus, I have *chosen* to serve Thee to the end.” When we promise something to God, we often forget and break our promise and then we think, “I guess I’m no good; I’m not cut out to go to heaven. There’s no hope for me.” But God doesn’t ask us to promise Him. He never has asked His people to do that. He asks us to believe His promises to us, and to *chosen* to follow Him.

I don’t have to beg the Lord to be good to Kristen, or ask Him not to forget her! And I don’t have to beg Him not to forget to let the sun rise tomorrow morning. Wouldn’t it be silly for us to spend all night in a prayer meeting fasting and begging the Lord, “Please, God! Don’t forget to let the sun rise tomorrow!” He’s going to do that anyway!

And so, He’s going to be faithful to you, and remember you every day of your life. And He will always remind you to remember Him. He has

promised to hold you by the hand (Isa. 41:10, 13). But I *do* pray that God will teach me how to help Kristen, how to encourage her. And please remember that even if we all in the local church, in our weakness, may forget and not know how to help you, Jesus is more real than all of us put together. Now you are ready to make the choice to believe Him every day of your life. If we choose to believe His Good News promises, Jesus says it becomes “easy” to bear His yoke, for we are always joined with Him (Mt. 11:28-30).”

Should fear be the motivation in leading someone (a child, for example) to be baptized? Whether the right answer is yes or no, let’s not forget what Jesus said about letting the little children come to Him and don’t hinder them, don’t get in their way, don’t stop them (Mt. 19:14). Even if a youth demonstrates a lack of mature sanctification, let’s think of those arms of Jesus opened wide to welcome him. And if we have mistakenly “hindered” one, let Jesus give us the gift of repentance.

And let’s express on Jesus behalf a glad welcome into the kingdom of God and trust Him to “receive” them. Let the youth snuggle into His arms. When He warned us not to “hinder” them, He knew that as sincere parents or teachers we could be inclined to misunderstand His drawing of the children and sincerely but inadvertently “hinder” them.

The story of one famous baptism inspires us. The Ethiopian eunuch riding in his chariot “down from Jerusalem unto Gaza” was reading the Bible while jolting along. What had caught his attention was Isaiah 53, about the “Suffering Servant,” wondering

what the heart-arresting story meant. “Then the Spirit of the Lord said unto Philip, Go near, and join thyself to this chariot.” Philip’s response is inspiring: “And Philip ran thither to him.” Oh that the Lord may give us grace to be so instantly responsive! (See Acts 8:26-38).

He began his soul-winning ministry by asking a question, usually a good way to break any ice: “Understandest thou what thou readest?” The man needed a human being to illuminate his reading of the text! “How can I except some man should guide me?” Thank the Lord, he welcomed Philip who eventually told him that “if thou believest with all thine heart, thou mayest” be baptized.

What is required for baptism? That “believing with all the heart.” What it means to “believe” is therefore important. In the Ethiopian’s case, it was a heart appreciation of Isaiah 53. Excellent! A verse-by-verse reading of that chapter with a voice subdued by humility, letting the Spirit melt the heart. Let the children come to Jesus.

Have you ever thought how precious to a teenager is the Bible truth of the New Covenant? In accepting baptism, he begins to realize that he is a child of Abraham—provided of course that he has been correctly instructed about the New Covenant promises God made to “our father Abraham.”

Teenagers generally are the most worried segment of humanity. They are just becoming aware that life stretches out before them; what to do, what to be, perplexes them. They often agonize about which way to go. It’s impossible to overestimate the encouragement that a conscious

awareness of God’s New Covenant promises can give to them. First, of course, the youth must clearly see himself as the “heir” to all the promises God has made to Abraham and his “seed” (Gen. 12:2, 3; Rom. 4:13-16). Which are:

(1) “I will make you a great nation.” In other words: I will make you to be a very important person. (Says the teen, “Wow!”)

(2) “I will bless you,” which means, I will make you to be a happy person all your life. (Girls, if you’re thinking of marriage, grab that one, and hold on to it. Keep yourself until you know for sure that God, not selfish desire, has led you. Believing the New Covenant will save you from untold agony.)

(3) “And make your name great.” In other words, you will not merely *be* somebody great but you’ll always be *known* as such (in the way you really want to be).

(4) “And you shall *be* a blessing.” Every healthy teen wants to become someone useful to society; not to live only for self. Here’s the Good News about it; believe it and you’ve got purpose from now on.

(5) “I will bless those who bless you.” You’ll be surrounded by people who love and trust you, and they will realize that their happiness is bound up with yours.

(6) “I will curse him who curses you.” The New Covenant-educated teen will fear no enemies. (That’s a direct parallel to Psalm 23, “You prepare a [banquet] table before me in the presence of my enemies.”) You walk through life as a prince or princess, head held high (and yet always gifted with

appropriate common-sense humility; Harvard, Yale, Stanford, Oxford, Cambridge, can never give you that sense of poise).

(7) “In you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.” Not that you will be as famous as Abraham, “the father of the faithful,” but when you come to the end of life you will know that wherever your steps have taken you, you have left behind a trail of happiness for people you’ve touched. In other words, “your cup runs over.”

Warning: the Old Covenant can do none of this for you.

How can we “save” our children and youth “from this perverse generation” (Acts 2:40)? The floodgates of moral filth have been opened; evil cascades upon them. One Bible chapter suggests two apparently opposite remedies: “Knowing . . . the terror [KJV] of the Lord, we persuade men” (2 Cor. 5:10, 11). The idea seems to be—more fire-and-brimstone preaching/teaching. Does it work? Well, it seems to get them into the baptismal pool, but does “sanctified terrorism” hold these children and youth when temptation “shall come in like a flood” (Isa. 28:19)? They face terrific peer pressure plus the drives of their own sensual nature; will Jonathan Edwards’ preaching hold them when the dams burst?

The same chapter plugs an alternative motivation: “The love [*agape*] of Christ constraineth us . . .” or motivates us, this to total consecration to the One who died for us and rose again (vss. 14, 15). In fact, Paul devotes much more time to developing this motivation than to his brief mention of “terror” (KJV).

He goes so far as to present a Savior who “was made to be sin for us,” in other words, who was forced to be immersed in all the moral filth of the entire human race, who suffered the most awful peer pressure and had to resist the most powerful inner urges as He “resisted unto blood, striving against sin”—all “without sin” (see vss. 16-6:1; Heb. 4:15; 12:4). Read it: it’s all “grace much more abounding.” Don’t despise it!

When we read that it’s “the terror of the Lord [that] persuades” us, do we correctly see what Paul said? The word translated “terror” in the KJV is *phobos* in the Greek; it’s not a New Testament word for raw, mind-numbing, Holocaust terror.

The honest truth is that God does not want to terrorize children and youth. He is too wise; He knows that terror cauterizes, hardens hearts. That word means a mingled awe and reverence that solemnizes the heart of a child and youth. A wise author once said, “Share with your children the secret of the cross.” Will it work? Nothing else will!

When we talk about “child evangelism,” what do we mean? Merely persuading children to profess to be Christians? Nominal church members? Go through the rite of baptism? Have their names on a record book? The temptations to life-hypocrisy today are enormous.

Jesus was a child of twelve when He witnessed His first Passover. Like all children, He wondered what the killing of the Passover lamb meant. No one could help Him, not even His mother. But His sinless mind was gradually able to grasp the truth—the blood of billions of Passover lambs could not

wash away even one human sin. He sensed the meaning of Psalm 40:6-8, “Lo, I come . . . to do Thy will, O God.” Someone holy, undefiled, must give Himself to be “the Lamb of God.”

Through His young human soul there surged a great desire: “O Father, let Me be the world’s ‘Passover Lamb’!” From that moment, the divine/human Messiah in His childhood grew to be absorbed “in [His] Father’s business” (Luke 2:49). John the Baptist caught Christ’s total consecration at the age of thirty when he cried out, “Behold the Lamb of God!” (John 1:29).

The age of twelve is still very significant. The Holy Spirit today is often forced to by-pass older people because they quickly become full of themselves and stay that way; children are sensitive to the call of heaven to give themselves to the One who gave Himself for them—if only someone can be humble enough to step aside and let Christ be revealed to them.

Shortly before Jesus met the woman at the well at Sychar (John 4), John the Baptist had baptized Him. But that meant a prerequisite of repentance, for the only people that John could baptize were those who had repented. But Jesus never had sinned! Then how could He let Himself be baptized? To be baptized without repenting would be hypocrisy, for John’s mission was only “the baptism of repentance” (Acts 19:4). John knew this. That’s why He refused Him the rite.

But here’s the wonder: the sinless Son of God lets Himself be lowered into the water the same as any common sinner, making a public confession of

repentance. (It’s childish to think the reason was He merely wanted to show us the physical method—John could do that; or make a “bank deposit” of “merit” to be transferred to some disadvantaged people like the thief on the cross).

Jesus actually did experience repentance. He had to, or John could not have baptized Him; but it was not for His own sins, but for ours. Therefore it had to be a shared (corporate) repentance. Totally sinless, He was “made to be sin for us who knew no sin” (2 Cor. 5:21). He identified with the human race so closely that He felt that our sins were His own. Don’t you want understanding and compassion? Sure. So Jesus learned how to feel that burden for others, including the five-times loser at the well.

Some people say that if you’ve never gone bungee-jumping you’ve missed real fun. Or if you’ve never been to Disney Land, you’re deprived. But let me ask a sobering question: Have you ever experienced repentance before God? If your answer is No, then you truly have missed out on something that is wonderful, refreshing, and encouraging! Repentance is not breast-beating, wearing hair-shirts, self-flagellation, paying penance, doing Rosaries, going on painful pilgrimages, or giving heavy donations to the church. It’s deeper than all that.

The Bible talks about it over 100 times. Far from being a sad experience, it’s joyous, like the gateway to heaven, like being healed after sickness, like recovering from a painful accident, or like coming out of prison after long incarceration. It’s getting

back on the right road after you've lost your way in a distressing detour.

The very first sermon Jesus preached after His baptism in the River Jordan was a call, "The kingdom of God is at hand: repent, and believe the gospel" (Mark 1:15). Thus the first sin we need to repent of is not believing the gospel. Repenting only of outward acts of sin is like papering over a widening crack in the wall—it's superficial. The sin that underlies all sins is what the Bible calls the sin of unbelief. In that first sermon, Jesus calls upon us to get at the root of our problem, discover the reason why we've lost the main road. The outward acts of sin, the addictions, the bad habits that drag us down, all are fruit borne by unbelief that lies deep in our hearts.

But God is so kind to us that He will convict us of that sin and will give us the precious gift of repentance. It's a step towards eternal life, but we can't self-start ourselves. We are all born with a dead battery and need jumper-cables from Jesus. The apostle Peter pleaded with those who had crucified Jesus, You "slew [Him] and hanged [Him] on a tree, Him hath God exalted . . . to be a . . . a Saviour, to give repentance to Israel, and forgiveness of sins" (Acts 5:30, 31). Don't refuse the "gift"! Seeing at last how *we* had a part in crucifying Him is precious truth that is a shaft of clear bright sunshine pouring into one's dark jail cell, yes, light from Heaven.

The earth must someday soon be lightened with the glory of "the third angel's message in verity," when a multitude of all nations and tongues will join

Him in winning every one in the world who is willing to believe the gospel.

Rather than a few celebrities doing it on screen or through electronics, that fourth angel's ministry must be performed "largely" by humble people working on a personal heart-to-heart level. Their "training"? Seldom that of "literary institutions," but knowing Good News better than we have thought it is.

What does it mean to be "in Christ"? Says Paul: "We judge thus: that if One died for all, then all died" (2 Cor. 5:14). Were we "in Christ" when He died on the cross? Does that mean we go 50/50 with Him in saving ourselves? Paul adds, "I am crucified with Christ" (Gal. 2:20), "buried with Him through baptism into death" (Rom. 6:4), "united together in the likeness of His death," "crucified with Him," "died with Christ," so that we are "alive to God in Christ Jesus" (vss. 5-11).

The "together" idea seems clear. As humans we are all "in Adam," that is, when he sinned in Eden "we" sinned so that "in Adam all die" (1 Cor. 15:22). But likewise, "even so, in Christ shall all be made alive." There has to be a legal framework of the gospel—Christ our "second Adam."

But here's another statement that many overlook. Right next to the "crucified with Christ" statement Paul reminds the Galatians: "Before [your] eyes Jesus Christ hath been set forth, crucified among you" (3:1). We "behold" Him so vividly that we identify with Him. A bond is established, we are "united" with Him. We empathize with Him; we realize that it is we who deserve to be crucified. "In

Him” we kneel in Gethsemane with Him, intimately together. We are not like careless children who have no solemn appreciation of what it cost Him to save us.

When a child suffers agony, does not a parent suffer too? A parent enters into his child, as it were, feels with him, “identifies.” Christ on His cross dies our second death; what the word “faith” means is that we identify with Him, as though we are inside His own soul. We “reckon” ourselves “dead” with Him, says Paul (Rom. 6:11).

It is clear in Ephesians 1: “in Him we have redemption through His blood,” not a heartless exchange as when we sign an insurance policy, but a heartfelt identity as a Bride forever identifies with her Bridegroom (Rev. 19:7, 8). Christ’s command to “abide in Me” expresses that closeness of intimacy. But please note: all of this is by faith alone, not an iota of merit attached thereto. Our identity with Him is totally heart-appreciation, not 1/99, in no way self-salvation even .0000000001 percent.

Now comes a message by a lay preacher in Sacramento, a local elder in a church, who finds in Scripture the idea that God has written in His Book of Life, the name of every human being. The fact that one has the gift of life is evidence, he says, that his/her name is written there. There is a hymn we used to sing long ago, “Is my name written there, On the page white and fair? In the Book of Thy kingdom, Is my name written there?” The lay preacher says, according to how he understands the Good News of the Bible, the answer is Yes. The entering of your name was accomplished when the

Son of God died for you “from the foundation of the world” (Rev. 13:8): “For God sent not His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved”; “I came not to judge the world, but to save the world”; “God our Saviour will have all men to be saved, and to come unto the knowledge of the truth”; He “is the Saviour of all men, specially of those that believe” (Jn. 3:1, 17; 12:48; 1 Tim. 2:4; 4:10).

When Paul says that by the sacrifice of Christ, God “hath made us accepted in the Beloved” (Eph. 1:6) the Father accepted His Son’s sacrifice, and He also accepted the human race “in Him.” When at Christ’s baptism, the Father declared “This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased” (Mt. 3:17), He also embraced the entire human race “in Him.”

The lay preacher is declaring that God looks upon every human being as a sheep which is lost, not as a wolf to be destroyed as soon as possible. He sees God drawing a circle to take in every sinner, not to keep him out. Nothing but our own perversity of will can exclude us.

So, is this lay preacher teaching a wild heresy that everybody is going to be dragged into Heaven whether or no, even against his/her will? By no means! Some people (far too many!) actually want their name erased from that Book of Life, and their names *will be erased*, because in giving Himself for us Jesus gave us back the power of choice that Satan had wrested from us. You can live forever in God’s kingdom of *agape* if you choose (and praise Him for it!); or you can perish forever with Satan, if you choose (and curse God with him). Jesus says

quite plainly that the person who refuses to overcome will have his/her name “blotted out of the Book of Life,” very Bad News indeed.

But there is Good News: “He that overcometh, the same shall be clothed in white raiment; and I will not blot his name out of the book of life, but I will confess his name before My Father, and before His angels” (Rev. 2:5).

Don’t let money, fame, pleasure, anything, rob you of that delicious moment of joy!

Dr. Sang Lee tells how in his medical training in Korea years ago their clinic had a woman patient who was deeply depressed because her mother-in-law had thrown her out of the house and her husband had deserted her because she bore 3 girls and no boy. She wouldn’t eat, smile, didn’t want to live. All medications had failed.

Then Dr Lee’s instructor gave her electric shock treatment, and she snapped out of it, wanted to play ping-pong, was hungry. They marveled at this wonder. But in a few days she lapsed back into depression and soon died. This was before Dr. Lee became a Christian. Now he realizes that what the woman needed was for her husband to call her on the phone, tell her he loved her dearly, wanted her back, etc. The “medicine” she needed was love. Scientific experiments show that even baby animals sicken and die if deprived of the mother’s licking.

Okay, but I have a question: what will happen if the depressed patient doesn’t have anybody to love him/her? For us to tell the patient, “Don’t worry, God loves you, but sorry, I’m too busy,” doesn’t seem to help very much. And even if the doctor or nurse or

even a friend does take time to minister love to the patient, there are so many people in need of love that effective ministry seems impossible. How can the patient get the love needed?

Does God see and care? Yes; but what can He do? If He speaks in thunder tones from heaven as He did at Christ’s baptism, “This is My beloved son/daughter in whom I am well pleased,” that would surely help; but even Christ Himself was terribly tempted to doubt the Voice in just a few days as He entered the wilderness of temptation. “If Thou be the Son of God . . .” was the doubt that assailed Him (He never gave in, but our patient probably would give in).

God cannot speak in an audible Voice to every human being; the inexorable law of the universe requires that we believe on the testimony of the Word of God, the Bible. But in order for this depressed lady to have understood the personal love of God for her, she would have needed a far clearer understanding of “the truth of the gospel” than is usually proclaimed (Gal. 2:5, 14). That eventual unfolding of the gospel will be the “light” that “will lighten the earth” as Revelation 18:1-4 says will come. Could anything be more important than searching for that “truth of the gospel”? God has “commanded” us to tell it. But we must learn it first.