

Worship Patterns Differences in the Old and New Testaments

If our Lord instructed his apostles to baptize in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and that is not the same as baptizing people saying “in Jesus’ name,” why is there so much diversity in terms of how people are baptized in the New Testament?

The reason for this lies in the significant ceremonial differences between the Old and the New Testaments. Things simply are not as spelled out in the New as they are in the Old.

Under the Law, everything that is to be done in worship is given in the most minute detail, and no variation was tolerated. Blood was to be sprinkled seven times, not six or eight, on the lid of the Ark of the Covenant on the Day of Atonement. The first time it must be blood from a bull, then blood from a goat. Even the kind of underwear that is to be worn in worship is explicitly commanded (Leviticus 16:4). The whole structure of Tabernacle, and later Temple worship is to impress people with the enormous barrier between them and God.

When the Lord Jesus died on the cross, the veil of the Temple was torn from top to bottom, thereby removing the barrier between sinful humanity and a holy God. (Matthew 27:51; Hebrews 6:19, 20) The ancient and fearful rites, which if performed incorrectly brought death (Leviticus 10:1 ff.; 2 Samuel 6:6 ff.), now pass into a new form, one marked by life and freedom. So it is, when we come to descriptions of New Testament worship, we find the covenant community experiencing freedom and spontaneity under the leadership of the Holy Spirit within the structure of biblical revelation. The Bible gives the structure and is normative, but the details are not so delineated. Very different from the Old Testament’s rigid structure of worship is the picture one gets about New Testament worship from reading passages such as Acts 20:7 ff. or 1 Corinthians 14:26 ff. This is why the Regulative Principle of Worship works out very differently in the two Testaments.

In the Holy Spirit guided evolution of doctrinal emphases, the prophets stress the importance of the heart, not external ceremonies: “rend your heart and not your garments.” (Joel 2:12) That emphasis is given full voice in the preaching of the Lord Jesus: “an hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for such people the Father seeks to be His worshipers.” (John 4:23) It is echoed by his apostles: “we are the true circumcision, who worship in the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh.” (Philippians 3:3)

This emphasis on the heart and freedom within biblical structure can be seen with regard to such things as the words that are used with the sealing ceremonies of the New Testament. For example, as we lift the cup, should we say, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood,” as Paul and Luke have it (1 Corinthians 11:25; Luke 22:20)? Or, should we follow Matthew and Mark and say, “This cup is my blood of the new covenant” (Matthew 26:28; Mark 14:24)? If we get the formulae wrong, will we turn the bread into mouse flesh or the wine into urine? Such ridiculous thoughts are more fitting for Medieval folk, rather than for serious students of the New Testament

message.

It is for that reason when we come to the descriptions of New Testament baptism we do not find a clear and uniform picture of how it was done. Sometimes it is by pouring and sometimes by immersion. (Acts 1:5; 2:33; Romans 6:3-5) Sometimes it is in the name of Christ, other times in Christ Jesus, or the Lord Jesus. (Acts 2:38; 8:16; Romans 6:3; Galatians 3:27) And, of course, we have our Lord's command in Matthew 28:19 to baptize people in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

The important thing always is God's act, not man's. It is what God does in baptism, not my superstitious conformity to a religious group's view of ceremonial purity. It isn't how I am baptized but *that* I am baptized that is important. And always it is a matter of the intention of the heart.