

## The Sacraments, Deification, and The Beatific Vision

Do we understand Christian baptism? I suspect only partly. How about the Lord's Supper. I believe that there's more to that too than we suppose. Let's discuss these two church ordinances, as well as two other topics not normally included in evangelical pulpit ministry, Deification, and what expositors call The Beatific Vision. We need to discuss these topics because they powerfully teach us that we're involved in something big, very big, that God is doing. And, realizing that, we have a powerful motive to be transformed into something radically different and more wonderful than anything our unsaved neighbors could ever imagine.

**I. Baptism.** OK, water. Yes it cleanses. But more important is, water is deadly. Water is dangerous. We are terrestrial creatures. If in water, we die. So water represents death. It also, in Scripture, represents evil, chaos, violence, tumult, restlessness, and death —and God's judgment on it. On Day 3 of creation, God caused dry land to emerge from the waters. If He hadn't done that, there'd have been no life on earth; but with the dry land coming up out of the seas came abundant vegetation and then the animals, birds and humanity. God used a globally devastating Flood to judge wickedness on earth, although surviving the watery judgment was righteous Noah and his family. God used a watery judgment to wipe out wicked Pharaoh and his army, although His own people, the Israelites, emerged from that sea safely. The prophet Jonah rebelled against God and in judgment was cast into the water to die. But he repented, and so he emerged from the sea into a new life. That episode prophetically anticipated the Nation of Israel being thrown into "the sea," that is, into exile among the turbulent, restless, wicked Gentile nations. But in the future, that nation will return with new life to their land. The Exile is a judgment; it's a figure of death, and Israel's future return to the Land is a figure of resurrection. At the very end of the Bible, after all the horrible judgments and Satan and all evil is disposed of, in the new heavens and earth, there will be no sea.

So now baptism: Going down into the water is death. It is God's judgment upon a life of sin. And coming up out of the water is life. It's new life, resurrection life. Eternal life. This symbolic act reprises what Jesus accomplished for us, taking our sins upon Himself, dying as a judgment upon sin, going into the grave, and then emerging alive in a new, eternal, resurrected body. So by submitting to baptism we identify with Jesus; baptism represents our union with Him (and all the blessings that accrue because of that union). Baptism means we participate in the great theme of all Scripture: Sin is judged, and that judgment is death; but by grace and because of Jesus, the promised creation blessing of life can be experienced. Coming up from the water represents more than new life; it is identifying with Jesus and His work, committing to Him and to the Father and the Spirit, who make that new life a reality.

**II. The Lord's Table.** Do we really understand what we commonly call "communion" or the Lord's Supper? It's not a Passover seder. Yes, it occurred at the time of Passover when a seder was in view, but that doesn't make it a seder. It was His last meal with His disciples, and it was a special meal because He turned it into a covenant meal. What's that? In biblical times, a covenant established a relationship between two parties, usually asymmetrical parties in a hierarchy. It was a unique relationship involving mutual responsibilities (especially commitments) and privileges, as well as promises that depended on faithfulness for fulfillment. Marriage was exactly such a covenant relationship, as were suzerainty treaties. In these relationships, one party was like a father and the other like a son, or one like a husband and the other a wife. A covenant brought people together into a relationship that previously didn't exist, a relationship closer even than that between kin. And these covenant relationships were established, not by a document, or by a ceremony, but by eating a meal together. The principle was, we only eat meals with family; so to eat a meal together established a family type relationship. Covenants were thus in the domain of family. It also often was a meal that (in some way) involved sacrifice. What occurred in Genesis 15 established a covenant. So did Exodus 19-24. So, that last Supper was just such a covenant meal; it was like a marriage meal, one creating a family arrangement. Jesus was taking those twelve into intimate, loving personal relationship with Himself. He converted what may have been expected to be a seder into something more profound, a covenant meal with its attendant responsibilities, privileges. Commitments, and promises. (The betrayal of Judas in the context of this meal thus is more heinous than can be imagined.)

So when we in the Church partake of the Lord's Supper we're involving ourselves in this unique relationship with Jesus. We're symbolically identifying with those Twelve in the presence of the Lord, eating a meal together with Him, enjoying Him, being blessed by Him. We're committing ourselves to Him in loving personal relationship, as a bride does to her husband at a wedding. The other believers with us are siblings. We're enacting a ritual that's proleptic of the future marriage supper of the Lamb. Our Lord's Supper thus is a memorial of the past atoning sacrifice of Christ and yet is future-oriented, i.e., to His Return, in the same way that the Jews' Passover seder is a ritual that reprised the historic Exodus and looks forward to a future, greater exodus, i.e., from exile. We're *in Christ*, in a unique relationship, identified

with and united to the One who is the necessary sacrifice and Promissor who makes possible the future new covenant with Israel.

**III. Deification.** If my readers suppose that Christianity is all about having our sins forgiven and the assurance of being in heaven when we die, that's not adequate. However popular that notion may be, it's pathetically superficial. We need to go deeper to grasp all that Christianity is. Even this effort I'm making here may not be fully realistic, but we need to make the attempt. Sadly, the doctrine of deification is ignored in the Western church. It is not what Mormons believe, and it's not that we actually become infinite, omnipotent beings worthy of worship. Rather, it's the process by which God gives us who are in Christ a new life, a life that is God's. This isn't abstract theology, nor is it a fictive doctrine (like justification), nor is it something that only occurs in the heavenly future; it's the present reality of being "born again," or of being regenerated. When Christ ascended, He sent the Holy Spirit to indwell His believers. The gift of the Spirit brings to us, to our inner-most being, God's own life. We are actually joined, spirit-to-Spirit, to the exalted, eternal God! To be in union with Christ is to participate in Christ and be conformed to Christ. Our lives in the here-and-now are to be shaped by this reality. Yes, in the future, when we are glorified, this process will be consummated. But it's also for now; we're here to express God's life in this, our present existence. We don't merely imitate God, we actually "become the righteousness of God" (2 Corinthians 5:21). We possess and express God's very nature.

Deification is a process. It's progressive. It doesn't occur instantaneously, nor does it occur automatically. Nor is it an option for those who desire it. It's what Christianity *is*! God uses transformation by the Word to do this. Our minds undergo a process of transformation; a change occurs as we saturate our minds with the Word and the Spirit acts on our spirit. We take every thought captive to the obedience of Christ. Our affections change too as we seek to magnify Christ in all that we do. As we obey Christ's words, our will changes too. Deification affects our entire person, so our character undergoes change and we express Christ's lovely Person.

God was incarnated so that fallen humans can be redeemed, regenerated and progressively incorporated into the Triune God. Union with Christ is union with God. We become partakers of the divine nature. This was the original creational intent, that humans manifest God Himself on earth. We were made physical beings to interact with the material world AND with the capacity to interact with the transcendent spiritual world (if regenerated). And Revelation, that is, Scripture, was given to us to make this transformation possible. It fulfills God's creational purpose.

Modern Christianity is intellectualized. We pretend that it's having biblical (and some theological) information in our minds. No. It's a communion of our spirit with God through use of the Word (by reflecting deeply and praying over the text). It's Christ living again in modern times in the persons of His people. It's being in fellowship with the Triune God and enjoying His peace and love, both now and forever.

**IV. The Beatific Vision.** Expositors of different traditions define this in a number of ways. I'll say that it's knowing, seeing, loving, delighting in and being with God. See Psalm 27:4. The Beatific Vision is how the Bible ends, but we are invited through the Gospel to partake of it now, proleptically. It's the goal of creation, of redemption, of all God's great cosmic purposes. It's the blessedness of enjoying and being with God. (The capacity for blessing can be expanded as we mature in our faith, eschewing sin and worldliness and pride and smugness, so that very great blessing can be realized.) The Beatific Vision was surely anticipated at creation, because God made us to be His "image," which I submit means we're as a son to God; humans were made to be in relationship to God as a loving, obedient son is to his father.

Understanding the Beatific Vision profoundly affects our daily life. It impacts our prayers, our corporate worship, our mission, sanctification, suffering and fellowship with others. It's because of our union with Christ that we can experience it. The great call of the Gospel is to experience God, in the here-and-now as well as in a future existence. If we suppose that we're free to live as we please just so we trust Christ for forgiveness of sins – we've missed it! God has called us to Himself. It's what life is for. We encounter God where He's revealed Himself, in His Word. And in prayer.

God is invisible, yet He is the greatest reality in all existence. And He's invited us to fellowship, to communion with Himself. He doesn't need us; He doesn't need *anything*. But in transcendent love, He gives of Himself, overwhelmingly generously, to creatures who not only are unworthy but who deserve judgment. The blessing on offer is the peace, love and joy of the Triune God; it's knowing and enjoying the infinite Being we call God, seeing and delighting in His glory. Our great longing in life should be to experience God. In this era, we do that through the Son, the exalted Christ Jesus. Pursuing anything else in life is worthless. Waste. Foolishness. May we all be filled with restlessness until we realize that only by loving God, by desiring Him more than anything else, can we be satisfied with life and pleasing to God.