

The Commitment of Baptism

Before there was Eval Kneival, there were tightrope or high wire walkers who astounded onlookers by balancing themselves and walking across a rope or cable stretched high in the air between two posts. The story is told (whether true or not I do not know) of a man who stretched his wire somewhere across Niagara Falls and proposed to stroll across it. He challenged the crowd that had gathered with several questions. First he asked, "Do you want to see me make this death defying walk across the falls?" The crowd responded with applause and a definite "yes!" Then the man asked, "Do you believe I can make this walk across the falls?" Again the crowd cheered and egged him on. Next he asked, "Do you believe I can make this walk with a chair on my shoulders?" The applause grew louder and the affirmations stronger. Then the daredevil asked, "Do you believe I can make this walk with a man in the chair on my shoulders?" At this the crowd went wild with applause and was ecstatic in its affirmation. Two people risking their lives were better than one. Finally, the man asked, "May I have a volunteer to sit in that chair?" At this the crowd went silent. There were no volunteers.

We can ask the same sort of questions in regard to Christian discipleship. We can ask, "Would you like to see God come to earth in the form of a man to save the world from sin and

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death?" Most everyone would have no trouble buying into that. "Yeah God: Come and save the world; we need some saving!" We can ask, "Do you believe God did exactly that in the person of His Son Jesus Christ?" All who claim to be Christians and even some who don't, will answer, "yes; that was a nice thing God did." We can ask, "Do you believe Jesus died for your sins and rose from death to give eternal life to all who believe in Him?" And, everyone who knows John 3:16 by heart will say, "yes we believe."

But then we will ask another question: "Do you believe in Him and in His power and in His love for you so much, that you will give up your right to live your life as you please and give yourself over to the Lord to do everything He asks you to do and to do nothing that He forbids? Will you move over and allow Him to occupy the driver's seat in your life? Will you live for Him and die for Him at His command?" It is this sort of question that separates the serious followers of Jesus from those who are not. It is this sort of question that determines those who will stay with Jesus and those who will fade away and walk with Him no longer when the going gets tough.

Now why am I talking like this today? I'm talking like this today for two reasons. First of all, I believe, as John the Baptist preached in Matthew 3:12, that God's "winnowing fork is in his

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hand," and that He is about "to clear his threshing floor, gathering his wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire." The winnowing fork was used to separate the wheat from the chaff, the seed from the hulls, and John told the people that came to him to be baptized that God was about to do this with His people. Events were coming into their world and a person was coming into their world that would test the hearts of people, and those who truly loved God would be separated from those who did not. Then John gave the people a chance to choose their destiny. He called upon the people to turn away from their sins and be baptized as a sign that they would live and die according to the word of the Lord.

The events that we see happening in our world today are winnowing fork events. Thomas Paine said in his day, "These are the events that try men's souls." I wonder what Thomas Paine would say of our events today. 9-11-2001, wars in the Middle East, Genocide and the Aids epidemic in Africa, Hurricanes Katrina and Ike, last week's plunge on Wall Street, the continuing decline of Judeo-Christian morality in America, and the implosion of leadership in Washington: surely our souls are being tried and our faith is being winnowed.

Maybe we are being winnowed for the return of the Lord. Or maybe we are just watching the change of empires on the world stage: America is on the decline, and if she continues her downward spiral, we will soon be surpassed by and subjected to China or to other nations that are on the rise. If this is the case, we will certainly need a firm commitment to Christ in order to survive.

The second reason I am talking like this today is that I want those being baptized to know what their plunge into the baptismal waters represents. Mark 8:35 says, "For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it." I've been looking for loopholes in this passage that would give me a way out; I've been looking for them for years, but there are no loopholes. The word that shuts the door on all of these is the word "WHOEVER:" Whoever tries to run his own life will lose it; only those who surrender their lives to live and die for the Lord will find salvation.

Years ago the Carpenters sang the words, "Love is surrender to His will." That phrase is profound in it's simplicity: Whoever loves God will offer his or her life to God to do as He says; and, whoever claims to love God and will not do as He says is a phony.

Baptism is, first of all, a celebration Jesus' absolute obedience and allegiance to God His Father. Philippians 2:7-9 say as translated in the New Century Version of the Bible: "But he gave up his place with God and made himself nothing. He was born as a man and became like a servant. And when he was living as a man, he humbled himself and was fully obedient to God, even when that caused his death—death on a cross. So God raised him to the highest place. God made his name greater than every other name." Jesus obeyed God by suffering and dying on the cross for our sins. He was buried and rose to life again on the third day. Baptism illustrates and mimics what Jesus did for us. The believer is buried under the water, representing Jesus' death and burial. Then she is brought up out of the water to remember and to proclaim Jesus' victory over sin and death.

But beyond that, baptism is a way for the believer to say, "I am going to follow Jesus all the way. I declare that everything in my life that was outside of Christ and against His will and contrary to His Spirit, is now dead. I will not live according to the pressures of an ungodly culture nor submit to my internal passions any longer." I say with Paul in Philippians 1:21, "for me to live is Christ and to die is gain." "In all of my life and regardless of the cost, I proclaim that Jesus Christ is my Lord. I am dead and buried with Him today in baptism and I am resurrected with Him today to live a new life.

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Matthew 3:1-17

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