

“You Can Be a Christian, but You Can’t Get Baptized”



The objection was not uncommon. I recently received an email from an American college professor requesting advice for a Thai student of his who had recently become a Christian. The student’s Buddhist mother back in Thailand was greatly upset about her son’s decision. But she would be okay with his new faith under one condition. He didn’t get baptized.

The first time I ever heard this objection to baptism, it seemed a bit odd. Why would a Thai Buddhist, who is largely unfamiliar with the Christian faith, object to baptism in particular? Why would they single out baptism as the one thing that “my son” or “my daughter” can not do? Why does not church attendance, Bible study or prayer solicit the same fierce opposition?

Because of the great importance of ceremony in Thailand culture. A pastor from Isaan (Northeast Thailand) explains:

“You need to understand this part of Isaan culture. Ceremony is the traditional way in our culture to officially mark a new beginning. If there is no ceremony then there has been no new beginning. If we do a ceremony, then it means we have now received or started something new. These ceremonies address our cultural need to show that something has begun. They come from our cultural background and address the deep need we have as Isaan people to show “beginning”¹

Though this pastor is speaking of Isaan in particular, his observations hold true for the rest of Thailand as well. To the chagrin of many missionaries, a significant number of Thai Christians mark the beginning of their Christian life from their date of baptism. For the missionaries, this way of dating their conversion raises fears that this believer is trusting in the act of baptism for their salvation instead of grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. For the missionary, it is a question of faith vs. works. For the Thai believer, however, I suspect that in many cases this way of dating their conversion doesn’t reflect a works mentality, but the Thai importance of ceremony for marking a new beginning.

What implications does the Thai significance of ceremony as a new beginning have for baptism in Thailand?

¹ Paul H. De Neui, *Voices from Asia: Communicating Contextualization Through Story*. Pasadena, CA: Fuller Theological Seminary, unpublished, 2001, p.21.

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1. More Weight Should be Put on Baptism than “Decisions for Christ”

Following the pattern of Western churches, it is not uncommon for many Thai churches to place a big emphasis on getting people to pray to receive Christ. Because Westerners, particularly Americans, have a fear of lifeless forms and dead ceremonies, a bigger emphasis has been put on individual decisions which take place within the person, rather than external ceremonies related to that decision. It is the internal, not the external which matters. Private decisions, sometimes announced through saying the sinner’s prayer and sometimes not, are given much greater importance than ceremonies. In Thailand, however, saying the sinner’s prayer doesn’t necessarily signify a break with anything. It is not a decision which garners opposition from the surrounding culture, and can be easily incorporated into a folk Buddhist worldview. But baptism, the Christian rite of initiation into the Christian community, signifies a new beginning and a break with the past. Christians know it. Buddhists know it. A personal decision to ask Jesus to help you is easy. But baptism actually means a change and it is a much better (though not foolproof) indicator of true saving faith than any other Christian activity.

2. Urging Baptism Will Help Discern True Faith

Since the ceremony of baptism represents a clear break from the past in Thai society, a new convert’s hesitancy to get baptized *may* indicate that there is not yet true saving faith in that person. It would seem that baptism is many times not encouraged in churches out of a fear that unconverted people will agree to be baptized, thus producing nominalism. That is certainly a danger. But given the public significance of the baptism ceremony in Thai society, might not encouraging baptism actually have the opposite effect? If a new convert doesn’t want to get baptized when specifically asked, that could be a helpful indicator to church leaders that there may still be some conflicting allegiances in their heart and/or family conflicts regarding their new faith. An active avoidance of baptism should be a sign that some further pastoral attention is needed.

3. Baptism Should Not Be Delayed

While many churches are eager to have people pray “the prayer”, they are less eager to get people baptized quickly. Some churches “save up” all their baptisms for a once-a-year special event, such as Easter or a trip to the seaside. Some Western churches don’t encourage baptism directly, but wait for new converts to request it. But what does the Scripture say? In Matthew 28:18-20, Jesus says that the first step in making disciples is to baptize them. If church leaders, therefore, are not actively urging new converts to be baptized, they are neglecting the first part of Jesus’ commandment to make disciples of all nations.

Some may point out that we don’t want to be too quick to baptize, lest the conversion is not genuine. I agree. An adult convert needs to give evidence of a credible profession of faith and show some evidence of a changed life. That’s not to mean that they need to have their whole life together but that they are turning away from sin and turning towards God in a tangible way.

The deciding factor in whether someone should get baptized is whether God wants that person to get baptized. When the Apostle Peter witnessed the Holy Spirit being poured out on Cornelius

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and family, he said, “Can anyone withhold water for baptizing these people, who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?” (Acts 10:47). Similarly, if there is a discernible change in someone’s life, indicating that God has given them new life, we too should ask, “Can anyone withhold water for baptizing these people?” The decision to baptize should be based not on a decision that an individual person has made but upon the decision of God. If God has decided to make a new beginning in the life of a person, the Christian ceremony that marks a new beginning should not be put off. This is especially true in a culture that attaches such importance to ceremony.

4. The Corporate Dimension of Baptism Should be Emphasized

Many Western churches strongly emphasize that baptism is a personal, individual decision. Often times, the corporate aspect of baptism is totally neglected. However, we don’t just get baptized “in general” as way of showing our decision to follow Jesus as an individual. We are baptized into something. That something is the church. Baptism is a sacrament of incorporation. It signifies that we are now part of the body of Christ. Those whom Christ has marked out for baptism are those whom he wants to be part of his visible body on this earth, namely the church. Since ceremony in Thai society is often seen as a new beginning, baptism should be emphasized as a new beginning of not only an individual’s new life in Christ, but as their new beginning as part of the body of Christ. If the new Christian is making a break with their past of sin and idolatry, then they are going to need brothers and sisters in Christ who can help them find their new life in Christ. As we walk together in community, we learn from one another what it means to live as a Christian.

Conclusion

For far too long, Christianity exported from the West has been focused upon individual decisions and personal experience. But the body of Christ is a corporate whole, not a collection of scattered parts. The decision to baptize is God’s decision to include someone in the body of Christ, and to neglect the leading of the Holy Spirit in baptizing people is a disservice to Christ and His church. Though the Western church has, in many cases, downplayed its significance, baptism is meaningful and should be administered promptly to those whom God has decided to include in the church. And in a sacramental society such as Thailand, it is all the more important that we not miss out on the significance of marking out a new beginning in Christ in a way that is both Thai and Christian: the ceremony of baptism.