

“RELIGION: EXPERIMENTAL OR EXPERIENTIAL”

**A SERMON BASED ON THE ACTS OF THE
APOSTLES (ACTS 19:1-7) AND PRESENTED
FOR ORLEAN UMC ON JANUARY 10, 2021----
(BAPTISM OF THE LORD SUNDAY)**

**ONE OF THE CONTROVERSIAL ISSUES IN MANY
CHURCHES TODAY IS THE ISSUE OF REBAPTISM.**

**REBAPTISM SIMPLY MEANS BEING BAPTIZED
AGAIN..... SOME PASTORS SIMPLY REFUSE TO
BAPTIZE A PERSON A SECOND TIME, AND
OTHERS REQUIRE IT QUITE OFTEN.....**

**IN THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH ---- WE
BELIEVE THAT BAPTISM IS ABOUT GOD’S
ACTION....NOT OUR ACTION....BAPTISM IS AN
INSTRUMENT OF GOD’S INITIATING LOVE AND
GOD DOES NOT TAKE THAT AWAY-----EVER!**

**PERHAPS YOU HAVE KNOWN A FEW PEOPLE
WHO HAVE BEEN BAPTIZED SEVERAL TIMES –
OR AT LEAST MORE THAN ONCE.....**

**SOMETIMES THIS BECOMES AN EMOTIONAL
ISSUE AS SOME INSIST ON BEING REBAPTIZED
BECAUSE THEY STILL DON'T FEEL THEY HAVE
THEIR CONVERSION EXPERIENCE JUST RIGHT.**

**SOMETIMES IT IS A THEOLOGICAL PROBLEM
THINKING THAT BAPTISM IS THE ONLY WAY TO
RECEIVE FORGIVENESS OF SINS..... SOMETIMES
IT IS JUST A TOURISM ATTRACTION AS WHEN
PEOPLE ARE REBAPTIZED WHEN VISITING THE
JORDAN RIVER IN ISRAEL.**

TODAY'S TEXT IS THE ONLY OCCASION THAT I KNOW OF IN THE BIBLE WHERE PEOPLE WERE BAPTIZED AGAIN OR REBAPTIZED..... FOR ME, THIS IS A VERY INSTRUCTIVE PASSAGE AND HELPS TO SHAPE MY UNDERSTANDING OF BOTH THE FAITH AND THE MEANING OF BAPTISM.

THE TEXT BEGINS BY RELATING A FOOTNOTE ABOUT PAUL'S TRAVELS..... APOLLOS, THE GREAT ORATOR AND RISING STAR IN THE CHRISTIAN MINISTRY, STAYED IN CORINTH, WHILE PAUL MADE HIS WAY THROUGH THE INTERIOR REGIONS TO ARRIVE AT THE GREAT CITY OF EPHEBUS.

I SUSPECT THAT PAUL WAS A BIT SURPRISED TO FIND PEOPLE IN EPHESUS WHO WERE ALREADY DISCIPLES OF JESUS. THIS BIT OF INFORMATION REVEALS SOME IMPORTANT FACTS ABOUT THE EARLY EXPANSION OF THE MESSAGE ABOUT JESUS – THERE WERE OBVIOUSLY MORE MISSIONARIES THAN JUST PAUL’S ENTOURAGE. IT ONLY MAKES SENSE THAT MANY EARLY BELIEVERS IN JESUS WOULD SPREAD THE NEWS ABOUT HIM AS THEY TRAVELED ABOUT THE ROMAN EMPIRE. AND WE HAVE THE STRONG IMPRESSION HERE, THAT THESE PARTICULAR WITNESSES HAD ALSO BEEN FOLLOWERS OF JOHN THE BAPTIST.

SOMETIMES WE MAKE THE MISTAKE OF THINKING THAT JOHN THE BAPTIST QUIT HIS MINISTRY AFTER BAPTIZING JESUS, BUT THE BIBLE MAKES IT CLEAR THAT HE CONTINUED TO PREACH AND HAVE DISCIPLES, MUCH LIKE JESUS DID..... SOME OF THE DISCIPLES OF JOHN HAD APPARENTLY MADE THEIR WAY TO EPHESUS..... THERE THEY PREACHED A GOSPEL WHICH WAS A MIXTURE OF THE GOOD NEWS ABOUT JESUS AND THE BAPTISM PRACTICED BY JOHN THE BAPTIST.

VERSE TWO TELLS US THAT THERE WAS A TEST OF FAITH THAT PAUL ADMINISTERED. I FIND IT VERY INTERESTING TO NOTE THE TEST THAT PAUL ADMINISTERED TO SEE IF ONE'S BAPTISM WAS VALID. AND IT IS AS INTERESTING TO ME WHAT HE DID NOT ASK AS WHAT HE DID. LET'S LOOK AT SOME OF THE THINGS PAUL DID NOT ASK.

FIRST OF ALL, THE TEST WAS NOT DOCTRINAL IN NATURE. HE DID NOT ASK IF THEY BELIEVED IN THE VIRGIN BIRTH OF JESUS. HE DID NOT ASK IF THEY BELIEVED JESUS WAS GOD BECOME FLESH.

**HE DID NOT ASK IF THEY BELIEVED IN THE
RESURRECTION, PREDESTINATION, ETERNAL
SECURITY OR THE INSPIRATION OF THE BIBLE. IT
SEEMS THAT PAUL DOES NOT MEASURE THESE
FOLLOWERS BY DOCTRINE AT ALL.**

**SECOND, PAUL DID NOT ASK IF THEY WERE
BAPTIZED INTO THE RIGHT CHURCH. MANY
DENOMINATIONS CONSIDER BAPTISM IN ANY
OTHER DENOMINATION AS INVALID.**

**WHEN A PERSON COMES TO JOIN THAT
CHURCH, THEY WILL BE REQUIRED TO BE
REBAPTIZED IN THAT CHURCH TO MAKE SURE IT
WAS DONE CORRECTLY. NOT SO---BY THE WAY -
--- IN THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH.....**

**QUITE OFTEN IN THIS PRACTICE, THERE IS THE
UNDERLYING ASSUMPTION, THOUGH SELDOM
SPECIFICALLY EXPRESSED, THAT THE
COMPETING CHURCHES ARE NOT REAL
CHURCHES.....**

THEIR THINKING GOES THIS WAY: IF OUR CHURCH IS THE ONLY CORRECT ONE, AND WE HAVE ALL OUR DOCTRINES AND BELIEFS EXACTLY RIGHT, THEN BY DEFINITION, OTHER CHURCHES ARE INCORRECT AND WRONG..... IN FACT, THOSE CHURCHES ARE NOTHING MORE THAN SOCIAL CLUBS WITH INCORRECT DOCTRINE. THEREFORE, BAPTISM IN THOSE INCORRECT CHURCHES WAS NOT A REAL BAPTISM..... OURS IS THE ONLY TRUE CHURCH, AND BAPTISM IN OUR CHURCH IS THE ONLY REAL BAPTISM.

**FORTUNATELY --- AT LEAST IN MY VIEW ---PAUL
SEEMS TO HAVE NO SUCH CONCEPT. NEITHER
DOCTRINE, DENOMINATION NOR CHURCH HAS
ANYTHING TO DO WITH CORRECT BAPTISM FOR
PAUL.**

**THIRD, HE DID NOT ASK ABOUT THE AUTHORITY
OF THE ONE WHO PERFORMED THE BAPTISM.....
IN MANY CHURCHES THERE IS A STRONG
EMPHASIS ON THE MINISTER HAVING THE RIGHT
CREDENTIALS..... IN SOME, THERE IS THE
REQUIREMENT OF ORDINATION.**

**ONLY THOSE WHO HAVE BEEN PROPERLY
CREDENTIALLED BY THE DENOMINATION ARE
ALLOWED TO PERFORM THE ORDINANCE OF
BAPTISM.**

**FOURTH, PAUL DID NOT MENTION THE
AUTHORITY OF THE PASTOR BY LINE OF
SUCCESSION..... IN SOME CHURCHES,
FORTUNATELY NOT OURS ----THERE IS A
REQUIREMENT THAT THE MINISTER SERVE IN A
DIRECT LINE OF AUTHORITY PASSED FROM
MINISTER TO MINISTER THROUGH THE
CENTURIES.**

**OUR CATHOLIC FRIENDS WERE THE FIRST TO
CLAIM THIS DIRECT LINE OF AUTHORITY
PRESERVED FROM POPE TO POPE DOWN
THROUGH THE AGES IN A DIRECT LINE FROM
SIMON PETER.**

**SOME CREATIVE BAPTISTS RESPONDED BY
PUTTING FORTH A CLAIM THAT THEIR DIRECT
LINE OF AUTHORITY DESCENDED FROM JOHN
THE BAPTIST WHO PRECEDED PETER, AND
THEREFORE THE BAPTIST CHURCH WAS
SUPERIOR TO THE CATHOLIC CHURCH.....**

**THE THINKING HERE WAS THAT IF THE
CATHOLICS CAN CLAIM THEY ARE THE TRUE
CHURCH BECAUSE OF A DIRECT LINE TO PETER,
THEN THE BAPTISTS CAN CLAIM THAT THEY ARE
THE TRUE CHURCH BECAUSE OF AN EVEN
EARLIER HISTORICAL LINEAGE..... BUT ONCE
AGAIN ---- AND AGAIN FOR THE BETTER GOOD ---
--PAUL HAS NONE OF THAT.**

**WHEN ONE JOINS THE CHURCH ONE DOES NOT
JOIN THE PASTOR OR THE LEADERS OF THE
CHURCH ---- WE ARE NOT SUPPOSED TO
WORSHIP THE PASTOR OR THE LEADERS....**

**WE HAVE JOINED OURSELVES TO CHRIST AND
RECEIVED THE HOLY SPIRIT....WE WORSHIP
CHRIST.....NOT THE PASTOR!!**

**FIFTH, PAUL DID NOT ASK ABOUT THE MODE OF
BAPTISM. HISTORY HAS SEEN TERRIBLE
BATTLES REGARDING BAPTISM BY IMMERSION
VERSES BAPTISM BY SPRINKLING..... THIS
BATTLE STILL RAGES TODAY IN SOME CIRCLES.
THOSE WHO BELIEVE IN SPRINKLING OFTEN
ARGUE THAT THE AMOUNT OF WATER DOES NOT
DETERMINE THE VALIDITY OF THE BAPTISM.
BAPTISM IS MADE EFFECTUAL BY THE WORK OF
GOD, NOT BY THE AMOUNT OF WATER.**

THOSE WHO PREFER IMMERSION ARGUE FOR THE IMPORTANCE OF THE IMAGE OF BURIAL AND RESURRECTION..... IN BAPTISM WE ARE BURIED TO AN OLD WAY OF LIFE AND RAISED TO WALK WITH GOD IN OUR HEARTS.

AND SOME PEOPLE IMMERSE BY DIFFERENT MODES. THERE ARE THOSE WHO BAPTIZE THREE TIMES BY PLUNGING THE SUBJECT BENEATH THE WATER ONCE IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER, ONCE IN THE NAME OF THE SON, AND ONCE IN THE NAME OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. OTHERS OF US IMMERSE A PERSON ONE TIME IN THE NAME OF ALL THREE.

**PAUL DOESN'T SEEM TO CARE IF THEY WERE
IMMERSED, SPRINKLED OR DUNKED ONE TIME
OR THREE TIMES.**

***SO WHAT IS THE TEST THAT PAUL GIVES? HE
ASKS THEM ABOUT THEIR EXPERIENCE, "DID
YOU RECEIVE THE HOLY SPIRIT WHEN YOU
BECAME BELIEVERS?" ISN'T THAT AN
INTERESTING QUESTION?***

**THERE IS THE ASSUMPTION FROM PAUL THAT
THE PERSON BEING BAPTIZED SHOULD KNOW
THAT THE HOLY SPIRIT HAS COME ON THEM.**

**ONCE AGAIN THERE ARE MANY
INTERPRETATIONS OF THIS TEST.**

**OUR PENTECOSTAL FRIENDS SOMETIMES INSIST
THAT A PERSON HAVE A SEPARATE BAPTISM. IT
IS ALSO A REBAPTISM OF SORTS, BUT IT IS THE
“BAPTISM OF THE HOLY SPIRIT.” BY THAT
PHRASE, THEY MEAN THAT SOME TIME AFTER A
PERSON’S PHYSICAL BAPTISM, THEY WILL
NORMALLY HAVE AN EXPERIENCE WITH THE
HOLY SPIRIT WHICH ALWAYS LEADS TO
SPEAKING IN TONGUES. WHEN THEY BURST
FORTH INTO TONGUES, THEY ARE CONSIDERED
TO HAVE BEEN BAPTIZED IN THE HOLY SPIRIT.**

BUT IN OUR TEXT, THERE IS THE ASSUMPTION OF PAUL THAT BELIEVERS SHOULD RECEIVE THE HOLY SPIRIT “WHEN THEY BECAME BELIEVERS.” THIS VERSE INDICATES THAT PAUL EXPECTED A PERSON TO KNOW THEY HAD THE HOLY SPIRIT UPON THEIR CONVERSION TO CHRIST.

MY OWN INTERPRETATION OF THIS EXPRESSION BY PAUL IS THAT THE PERSON SHOULD HAVE AN EXPERIENCE OF GOD BEFORE OR DURING THE TIME THEY ARE BAPTIZED.

SOME OLD BOOKS FROM THEOLOGIANS OF THE 18TH CENTURY TALK ABOUT “EXPERIMENTAL RELIGION.” -----IT SEEMS THAT THOSE WRITERS MEANT BY “EXPERIMENTAL” WHAT WE TODAY MEAN BY THE WORD “EXPERIENTIAL.”

ACCORDING TO MIRIAM-WEBSTER ONLINE, THE WORD “EXPERIENTIAL” MEANS “RELATING TO EXPERIENCE, DERIVED FROM EXPERIENCE OR PROVIDING EXPERIENCE.” BUT THE WORD “EXPERIMENTAL” MEANS “RELATING TO OR BASED ON EXPERIENCE OR EXPERIMENT.”

AND MY ONLY ASSOCIATION WITH THIS WORD
TIES WITH THE SECOND MEANING WHICH IS
ASSOCIATED WITH EXPERIMENT, WHICH MEANS
TO ME SOMETHING THAT IS STILL BEING
TESTED.

TO SAY THAT I HAVE AN EXPERIMENTAL
RELIGION MEANS THAT I AM JUST CONDUCTING
A FEW TESTS OR EXPERIMENTS TO SEE IF I
BELIEVE THIS..... BUT TO SAY THAT I HAVE AN
EXPERIENTIAL RELIGION MEANS THAT I AM
ABSOLUTELY CONVINCED OF MY FAITH
BECAUSE OF MY EXPERIENCE WITH GOD.

IT SEEMS TO ME THAT PAUL IS ARGUING FOR AN EXPERIENTIAL RELIGION. “DID YOU EXPERIENCE THE HOLY SPIRIT WHEN YOU BECAME BELIEVERS?”

I BELIEVE YOU CAN BE BAPTIZED BY THE VERY BEST OF MODES (WHATEVER ONE MAY DETERMINE THAT TO BE) AND ONE CAN BE BAPTIZED BY A MINISTER WITH THE MOST IMPECCABLE OF CREDENTIALS AND AUTHORITY, AND IT STILL MEAN NOTHING.

**IN THE SAME WAY, I BELIEVE YOU CAN TAKE THE
ELEMENTS OF THE LORD'S SUPPER AND, IF YOU
EXPERIENCE NOTHING, IT IS JUST THE
INGESTING OF A CRACKER AND JUICE. BUT IF
YOUR HEART IS RIGHT, THEN THOSE SIMPLE
ELEMENTS ARE TRANSFORMED INTO
COMMUNION WITH THE DIVINE.**

**IF WE DO NOT EXPERIENCE GOD, THEN OUR
BAPTISM WAS JUST A DUNKING IN WATER. AND
ON THE OTHER HAND, OUR EXPERIENCE CAN
MAKE OUR BAPTISM VALID NO MATTER THE
MODE OR THE MINISTER.**

**WHETHER WE ARE SPRINKLED OR IMMERSED,
DUNKED ONE TIME OR THREE TIMES AND NO
MATTER WHO THE MINISTER WAS, OUR
EXPERIENCE WITH GOD IS WHAT COUNTS.**

**HAVE YOU ALWAYS BEEN A BELIEVER????
NEVER ANY QUESTIONS OR DOUBTS OR
MOMENTS WHERE YOUR FAITH HAS BEEN
CHALLENGED..... OR PERHAPS YOU HAVE HAD A
CONVERSION EXPERIENCE OF ONE KIND OR
ANOTHER -----WHAT IF YOU CANNOT REMEMBER
THE NAME OF THE MINISTER WHO WAS
PREACHING OR TEACHING OR OFFICIATING OR**

**TALKING OR LEADING A REVIVAL SERVICE OR A
WORSHIP SERVICE WHEN YOU DECIDED TO
ACCEPT CHRIST..... WHAT IF HE OR SHE TURNED
OUT TO BE A CHARLATAN? WHAT IF HE OR SHE
WASN'T REALLY ORDAINED OR LICENSED OR IN
ANY WAY CREDENTIALLED? WHAT IF HE OR SHE
WAS WRONG IN SOME OF THEIR THEOLOGY?
WHAT IF.....WHAT IF....WHAT IF.....**

**WAS MY ----OR YOUR ----CONVERSION STILL
VALID?**

**OF COURSE, IT WAS! IT WAS VALID BECAUSE OF
WHAT HAPPENED IN OUR HEART AND HAD
NOTHING TO DO WITH THE MINISTER ----
WHOEVER HE OR SHE MIGHT HAVE BEEN.....**

**AND THE SAME IS TRUE WITH BAPTISM. FOR
EXAMPLE ----- AS ONE WHO EXPERIENCED
INFANT BAPTISM ---- I CANNOT REMEMBER THE
NAME OF THE PASTOR WHO BAPTIZED ME..... IN
FACT I PROBABLY NEVER KNEW THAT PERSON'S
NAME..... I SUPPOSE I COULD LOOK BACK IN THE
HISTORY OF THAT CHURCH --- GO BACK SOME
SEVENTY TWO YEARS ----AND FIGURE IT OUT,**

**BUT AT THIS MOMENT I DON'T KNOW.....AND
FRANKLY IT SIMPLY IS NOT IMPORTANT..... DOES
THAT BRING MY BAPTISM INTO QUESTION? NOT
IN THE LEAST. I DON'T CARE WHO THE MINISTER
WAS..... IT MAY EVEN BE A GOOD THING THAT I
DO NOT KNOW OR REMEMBER, BECAUSE THE
ONLY THING THAT MATTERS IS THAT GOD WAS
THERE, AND I WAS THERE.**

**WHEN PEOPLE COME TO JOIN THIS CHURCH AND
HAVE BEEN BAPTIZED ELSEWHERE WE BELIEVE
THAT THIS IS TOTALLY SUFFICIENT**

WE DO NOT REQUIRE REBAPTISM..... WE HAVE THE AUDACITY TO BELIEVE THAT OTHER CHURCHES ARE REAL CHURCHES, THAT BAPTISM IN THOSE CHURCHES IS A REAL BAPTISM, AND WE DON'T WANT THEIR BAPTISM TO BE A BARRIER TO BECOMING A PART OF THIS FELLOWSHIP OF FAITH.....

IN OUR TEXT, PAUL GOES ON TO ASK THESE DISCIPLES IN EPHESUS, "INTO WHAT THEN WERE YOU BAPTIZED?" AND THEY REPLY, "INTO JOHN'S BAPTISM."

PAUL EXPLAINS TO THEM, “JOHN INDEED BAPTIZED WITH THE BAPTISM OF REPENTANCE, SAYING TO THE PEOPLE THAT THEY SHOULD BELIEVE IN THE ONE WHO WOULD COME AFTER HIM, THAT IS, IN JESUS.” AND THEY WERE BAPTIZED IN THE NAME OF THE LORD JESUS. VERSE SIX THEN EXPLAINS, “WHEN PAUL HAD LAID HIS HANDS ON THEM, THE HOLY SPIRIT CAME ON THEM, AND THEY SPOKE WITH OTHER LANGUAGES AND PROPHESED....”

**THE SPEAKING IN TONGUES AND PROPHECY
ARE THE EVIDENCE THAT SOMETHING HAD
HAPPENED TO THESE NEW
BELIEVERS.....CERTAINLY THIS DOES NOT
MEAN THAT EVERY CHRISTIAN MUST SPEAK IN
TONGUES AND PROPHECY IN ORDER TO PROVE
THEY ARE A CHRISTIAN..... IT SIMPLY MEANS
THAT THEY HAD AN EXPERIENCE THAT
RESULTED IN A CHANGE IN THEIR BEHAVIOR.
AND THAT IS THE ESSENCE OF CONVERSION – A
CHANGE, A TRANSFORMATION.**

RELIGION CAN BE EXPERIMENTAL OR
EXPERIENTIAL..... I HOPE THAT IT IS NOT
MERELY AN EXPERIMENT FOR YOU, BUT THAT IT
IS SOMETHING THAT IS EXPERIENTIAL, AND
THEREFORE, SOMETHING THAT CAN NEVER BE
TAKEN AWAY FROM YOU.

PRAISE GOD AND MAY IT BE SO FOR YOU AND
FOR ME.....AMEN.....