

We must consider how our words will be heard

Building Bridges Instead of Barriers

By Greg Nettle

Fifteen years ago, at every baptism I performed, I would recite the words, “I now baptize you in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—for the forgiveness of sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit” (a very biblical statement; see Acts 2:38). Today when I baptize someone I simply state, “I now baptize you in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit” (also a very biblical statement; see Matthew 28:19). Why the subtle shift? Because the second statement tends to build bridges while the former tends to build barriers.

Stating that I was receiving forgiveness of sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit when I was baptized at age 11 was certainly appropriate. I sensed God’s tug on my heart, walked down the aisle at the invitation, publicly stated my confession of faith in Jesus Christ, was whisked away to the “baptism changing room,” and immersed before the worship service ended.

However, for the 50-year-old man who has been a committed follower of Christ for the past 35 years and has only recently come to an understanding of his need for immersion, the words from the book of Acts sound like an indictment of his entire walk with Christ. Should the 50-year-old man be baptized? Absolutely. But one statement forces him to grudgingly discount 35 years of following Jesus as his Savior and Lord, while the

other statement allows him to joyfully admit that he now more fully understands Scripture. One is a bridge, the other a barrier.

The People We Reach

In the area where our church ministers, we have a large population of Roman Catholics. Many of



them are not active in their faith. The way we teach baptism can be one of the largest barriers erected for these “unchurched Catholics” to become part of our church family.

All who become members of our church first attend our “Welcome to RiverTree” seminar. At virtually every seminar someone with a Roman Catholic background will ask, “I was baptized as a baby; is it necessary for me to be baptized again?” And I can respond in one of two ways. To build a barrier I can state that they really never were baptized—that what hap-

pened to them as an infant was virtually meaningless, and that their “infant baptism” was a mistake as a result of one of several wrong teachings in the Catholic Church. An insurmountable barrier will have been erected.

Or, I can explain that their parents must have cared deeply about them to go through the sacrament of having them baptized as an infant. They should be thankful that they had parents who cared. Their baptism as an adult will be a natural response to a fuller understanding of what the Bible teaches. A bridge has been built. One response brings an end to the conversation while the other allows the dialogue to continue.

Invariably, someone will ask, “Do you believe baptism is essential for salvation?” The dialogue goes something like this. . . .

“I believe that all Christians need to be baptized.”

“So baptism is what saves you?”

“No, you are saved by the grace of God through faith in Jesus Christ.”

“So you don’t believe that a person has to be baptized to be saved?”

“I believe that when a person places her faith in Jesus Christ, accepting Him as her Savior and Lord, her biblical expression of that faith should be baptism.”

“Oh, OK.”

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Now, I could have responded by saying that yes, I believe baptism is essential for salvation. But, once again, a barrier would have been built. All the questioner would have heard was that I believe the water is what saves people. By choosing not to use the word “essential,” a bridge is built that allows us to continue our faith discussion. Our ultimate goal is to lead this person to obey Jesus further, not only in the area of baptism but in every area of discipleship.

The Approach I Take

I know that I may be accused of erring on the side of pragmatism. However, I consider the approach to baptism that I now take to be a strategic decision in the spirit of Paul’s approach to matters that in his day built

barriers rather than bridges (1 Corinthians 9:19-23). The truth is that I would rather be bridging people to Jesus and baptizing them in His name than arguing over points of doctrine that may divide us, or even worse, keep them from the Savior.

I believe that our responsibilities as followers of Christ should focus on building bridges to Christ rather than stressing what may become barriers to Him.

At RiverTree Christian Church, every new convert to Christianity is immersed. And, to be a member at RiverTree, a person must have been immersed as a result of a personal decision he or she made at an appropriate age. In other words, I do not take baptism lightly.

However, I do agree with the words of Barton W. Stone: “Let us acknowledge all to be our brethren who believe in the Lord Jesus, and humbly and honestly obey Him as far as they know His will and their duty.” I believe that our responsibilities as followers of Christ should focus on building bridges to Christ rather than stressing what might become barriers to Him. I find the ancient example of Priscilla and Aquila, “to explain the way of God more accurately” (Acts 18:26), to be one that enables me both to remain faithful to the biblical practice of water baptism and to build bridges and not barriers to the Savior.

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