

Psalm 19:14 Let the words of my mouth, and the meditation of my heart, be acceptable in thy sight, O LORD, my strength, and my redeemer.

1 Timothy 1:2 ...Grace, mercy, and peace, from God our Father and Jesus Christ our Lord.

“Purity for Unity with God”

Leviticus Chapter 12

Introduction: Irrepressibly Religious

Human beings are irrepressibly religious. I say “irrepressibly” because governments have tried to repress religion. The Soviet Union tried to pressure its citizens into being atheists. Castro’s Cuba tried the same thing until recent years. The communist government of China is still trying to stamp out religious groups that do not register with the state.

But no matter how hard the state pressures people to give up religion, the state always loses. After the fall of communism in the Soviet Union, people surged into the Russian Orthodox Church to learn what had been prohibited. The strongest Christian groups on earth today might be the underground churches of China. The more the communists try to crack down on them, the more they grow.

Tertullian, a second century Christian, is credited with the saying, “The blood of martyrs waters the seeds of faith.” The more the Roman government persecuted Christians, the more the church grew.

My point is this: human beings are religious whether we want to be or not. We are built with a desire to be united with God.

Purity for Unity

We want to be with God but before we can meet him, we know we must be purified from sin. Other religions may not talk about sin but they always have something equivalent to sin. Buddhists try to get rid of desire. Hindus try to get rid of bad karma.

The ultimate goal of religion is to make yourself pure so that you can be united with God. All people and all major religions have the idea that God is pure and that we need to be pure to be near him.

All major religions have ways to purify oneself. Today, I will focus on the more external, physical aspects of purity. Sometimes this is called ceremonial purity or ritual purity because it is required to participate in certain ceremonies or rituals.

The Circumcision of Jesus

In our Old Testament lesson, we read some of the purity laws that God commanded people to follow as a preparation for Christ. One of these laws is that a boy is to be circumcised eight days after he is born. Joseph and Mary followed these laws. So Jesus would have been circumcised on the eighth day. He would have been circumcised in a house under normal circumstances. The custom of having a child circumcised at a synagogue had not developed yet (even though artists usually paint this scene as though it happened in the Temple).

If you were here for our New Year's Eve service, you may remember me saying that New Year's Day is the day we celebrate the circumcision of Jesus. This is because it comes eight days after Christmas.

The Purification of Mary

Mary was subject to the Law of Moses too so she would have waited at least 33 days before ascending the Temple Mount in Jerusalem. We don't really know how much time elapsed between when Jesus was circumcised and when Mary went to the temple.

Before Mary could go into the temple, she would have probably undergone a ceremonial washing called in Hebrew a *Mikvah*.

Mikvah is very similar to a baptism, in fact, baptism developed from it. Orthodox Jews today follow a number of rules for a *Mikvah*. They must use rain water, river water, lake water or some kind of water that was not piped in or carried in. The person is immersed in the water like the Baptists do. Often there are separate facilities for men and women. When an adult converts to Judaism, he or she must undergo a *Mikvah* just like Christians undergo baptism.

We can all understand the idea that “cleanliness is next to Godliness.” What may be more puzzling today is why menstruation and other emissions of bodily fluids cause one to be considered ceremonially unclean. One idea common among rabbis is that these fluids have the potential produce human life. When they are emitted, there is a loss of *potential* life. This is not a loss of human life (like in abortion) but a loss of a *potential* human life. This still doesn’t explain why childbirth would make a woman unclean but it gives you a general idea of Jewish thought on this subject.

Getting back to Mary, she would have waited 33 days to become ceremonially clean. Then she would have had to offer sacrifices at the Temple. We assume that because she and Joseph were poor that they would have offered two doves or pigeons. Finally, she would have been considered ceremonially clean.

Baptismal Purity

In the New Testament, we are not burdened down with all these laws concerning ceremonial purity but we do begin our lives as Christians with baptism. We are washed with Christ’s righteousness and all our sins are removed. Because this washing comes from Christ himself, we only need it once.

Occasionally I am asked, “Shouldn’t we immerse people in a pool like the Baptists do?” This is one of those questions where I need more information before I answer. If the person is doubting whether sprinkling

is enough, I need to emphasize that Scripture doesn't give us any command about how baptism is to be done except that we use the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit and that we use water. The Greek word baptidzo just means to wash with water. It doesn't clarify how that washing is to be done. So a baptism by sprinkling is just as valid as one done by immersion.

On the other hand, there are some good reasons to do baptism by immersion. Most of the church Fathers that speak on this subject prefer immersion. Cyril of Jerusalem, Augustine, and Thomas Aquinas favor immersion when possible.

Luther on Baptism

Here's another Christian you may have heard of: Martin Luther. What does he say? Let me quote him:

"On this account (as a symbol of death and resurrection), I could wish that such as are to be baptized should be completely immersed into the water, according to the meaning of the word, and to the significance of the ordinance, not because I think it necessary, but because it would be beautiful to have a full and perfect sign of so perfect a thing; as also, without doubt, it was instituted by Christ." (*Luther's Works*, 1551 edition, Vol. 2, p.76)

"If you consider what baptism signifies, you will see that the same thing [immersion] is required. For this signifies, that the old man, and our sinful nature, which consists of flesh and blood, is all submerged by divine grace, as we shall more fully show. The mode of baptizing ought, therefore, to correspond to the signification of baptism, so as to set forth a sure and full sign of it." (*De Sacram. Bapt.* Quoted by Conant, *The Meaning & Use of Baptizein*)

I don't want anyone running to the nearest Baptist church to get re-baptized but immersion is better than sprinkling when possible. Sprinkling gained popularity in Northern Europe in a time before modern heating. Because it was so cold for much of the year, the baby could die if he were dunked in freezing water. Nowadays with heated water (and heated buildings), we should go back to baptism by immersion.

Conclusion

When we study the Old Testament purity laws, we see what a heavy burden the law can be. It was a heavy burden for those who tried to follow it and they had to face the fact that they constantly failed to fulfill it.

Other religions have equal strenuous laws concerning purity. People chase after these laws hoping to grow closer to God but they never grow closer to him.

But only Christians have both the law and the gospel. The law condemns but the gospel sets us free. As St. Paul put it:

Romans 8:1 Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, 2 because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death. 3 For what the law was powerless to do in that it was weakened by the sinful nature, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful man to be a sin offering...

Jesus is the fulfillment of the law. We are made pure and brought into a right relationship through him, not by our ability to fulfill the law. All we can do is say, "Thank you."

*May that peace which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.
Amen.*