Reaping the Harvest

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Baptism is a highlight in the life of God's church.

"When the grain is ripe, at once he puts in the sickle, because the harvest has come."—Mark 4:29.*

It was a balmy November Sabbath in Korea. A little mountain lake was basking in the afternoon sunlight. Trees scattered about the bank displayed a gorgeous array of greens, yellows, browns, and reds. They shone brilliantly against the deep-blue sky.

A gentle whispering of the wind created a perfect atmosphere for hundreds of believers gathered together to witness 100 new converts making a covenant with their Lord in baptism at the conclusion of an evangelistic series.

Many years ago on a chilly Sabbath in the Netherlands, four individuals, including the writer, were baptized in an indoor swimming pool surrounded with advertising billboards. About 40
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friends and church members gathered around the edges of the pool. A small choir provided the music. It was a modest affair, yet the testimony of the Holy Spirit was felt just as powerfully then as at the large baptism in Korea.

On each occasion, God’s Spirit demonstrated the power of the blood of the crucified and resurrected Saviour, making each event thrilling and memorable.

Reaping Through Baptism

The reaping of the harvest through baptism is a highlight in the life of God’s church. When the new Christian confirms his spiritual marriage to the Lord in baptism, we witness the outcome of a long, painstaking process wherein humans, as coworkers with God, have unselfishly worked to gain the victory over the devil. At the moment of reaping, we rejoice, exclaiming, “It was worth all the effort!”

How blessed we are to live when we can participate in proclaiming the last message of mercy to those we love, and to others who have no one who cares enough to tell them of Jesus. Never have the opportunities for winning persons to Christ been so favorable.

God is pouring out His Spirit in many parts of the world. Baptisms are increasing as we observe a phenomenal increase of new members, making the Adventist church one of the fastest-growing churches in the world. We can truly exclaim, “Praise the Lord for His abundant mercies!”

From time to time, however, we are rudely awakened out of our euphoria when we read reports of increased apostasies among our new babes in Christ, sometimes reaching 40 or 50 percent. Why would anyone want to leave? What went wrong? Can we do anything about it? Is the preparation insufficient?

In His love God has given counsel on how individuals can be prepared for this momentous pinnacle of baptism. Let’s consider His people’s true mission.

As a Building Site

The New Testament views God’s church as a building, a temple. Its foundation comprises the work of the prophets and apostles, while Jesus Christ, the Rock of Ages, makes up the chief cornerstone. God’s people are in the business of building on this foundation. Each member of His church becomes a stone in this grown temple. (See Eph. 2:20-22.)

The stones of God’s temple are unique and precious. They are “living stones” (1 Peter 2:5). Not only do they make up part of the temple but they are also instrumental in bringing in new stones to complete this magnificent temple. The new stones are the new converts cut out of the quarry of a rebellious world.

The construction of the temple is not a haphazard work. To ensure its success God has laid down the building code. Any departure from His counsels will inevitably result in disappointment.

The Master Builder urges: “Be careful how you build and what materials you use. Sooner or later the quality of your work will be revealed. It is paramount to bring to the temple materials that will stand the test of fire—the trials, temptations, conflicts, tribulations, and discouragements—brought about by the enemy of souls.”

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tian who faithfully presents the word of life, leading men and women into the way of holiness and peace, is bringing to the foundation material that will endure, and in the kingdom of God he will be honored as a wise builder” (The Acts of the Apostles, p. 598).

Our text for today enlightens us in evaluating whether or not our building materials are in harmony with God's building standards. Using yet another metaphor, the illustration of the harvest, Jesus points out when the material, the grain, has reached its desired quality.

Crucial Question

Here the crucial question is “When is the grain ready for the harvest?” The biblical answer is simple: “When the grain is ripe.” Then follows our obvious query, “How do we know when it is ripe, or how can we evaluate its ripeness?” The Lord gives the criteria for assessing the quality of the building material, the ripeness of the harvest, the readiness of new converts for baptism.

The gospel shows that the grain ripens under the combined effects of hearing the Word, accepting it, and bearing fruit (Mark 4:20). These three experiences, the criteria of maturity, should be present before a baptism takes place. Often one is exposed to the Word and even accepts it. But without the bearing of fruit, we would be unwise to begin reaping, because the harvest is not ripe. The heart needs to be involved. “When the truth is received as truth by the heart, it has passed through the conscience, and has captivated the soul with its pure principles. It is placed in the heart by the Holy Spirit, who reveals its beauty to the mind, that its transforming power may be seen in the character” (Evangelism, p. 291).

Thus failure to properly prepare persons for baptism has been a source of weakness and apostasy in the church.

Sacred Ordinance

Readiness for baptism is better realized when we understand the meaning of this sacred ordinance. It means the baptismal candidate experiences the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ by crucifying the old life. His sins are completely washed away (Acts 22:16), and he begins a totally new life (Rom. 6:3-6). Baptism is a public declaration that one has forsaken the service of Satan and has become a member of the royal family, a child of the heavenly King.

In view of the sacredness of this ordinance, “the test of discipleship” should be carefully applied to the candidates to determine “whether those who profess to be converted are simply taking the name Seventh-day Adventists, or whether they are taking their stand on the Lord's side to come out from the world and be separate and touch not the unclean thing [2 Cor. 6:17]” (Testimonies to Ministers, p. 128). On the other hand, great care should be taken not to judge the motives for baptism. In His commission, Christ stressed the need of teaching others “to observe all that I have commanded you” (Matt. 28:20). We are called to give careful instruction in “the saving truths of the gospel” (Testimonies, vol. 6, p. 11), which are brought out in the three angels’ messages of Revelation 14.

The faithful proclamation of the three angels’ messages produces a quality harvest characterized as “those who keep the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus” (Rev. 14:12). These are not only ready for baptism but prepared to meet their Lord when He returns. The ultimate fulfillment of our text on the reaping of the harvest will take place at the Second Advent. In that awesome day Christ Himself will take the sickle and reap the harvest of the earth (Rev. 14:14-16). Then He will lead His followers into His glorious kingdom.

I would invite each reader to accept Christ’s loving invitation to become His coworkers in reaching the unsaved. What a privileged mission to which we are called! To prepare a people to stand in the day of judgment and Christ’s return!

Consider the extravagant expenditure of love Jesus laid out in coming to us. See Him dying on the cross in great pain, in our place to pay the penalty for our sins so that we may enjoy the gift of eternal life today and forever.

Can we resist such love? Right now, would you like to accept this great gift by redesigning your life fully to Him, and committing yourself as God’s coworker to the joyful mission of finishing His work?

Questions for Discussion

1. Why is a baptism one of the church’s most joyful occasions?
2. What should be done to prepare people for baptism?
3. How can we know when people are ready for baptism?
4. Describe the significance of baptism.
5. For which harvest should we prepare candidates?

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