

What Does God Want? (3)

By Bob Young

Relationships restored, redemption, reconciliation
Response, repentance, re-creation, renewal

What does God want? What is the message the church is called to share? I am thinking about ministry, I am thinking about mission work. I am thinking about local evangelism, worldwide evangelism. I seek more complete, clearer understanding. I wish to focus and sharpen the message the church shares with the world.

How do we effectively communicate the message of God for the world? How do we help others know God and the salvation he provides through Jesus Christ?

In two previous studies, I suggested that God desires that we human beings **recognize him** and **respect him**. To those truths we must add that God also desires that we **respond to him**, but the response he desires has a larger purpose: the restoration of relationships, the renewal of that which was lost in Eden. In sending Jesus, God is working toward the re-creation of humanity. **Restored relationships** require **redemption** and **reconciliation**. Romans 3 speaks of justification, redemption, and propitiation as the work of God in Jesus. Ephesians 2 describes the **restoration of broken relationships**--both vertical (between human beings and God) and horizontal (between human beings). Our response must involve **repentance**, allowing God to complete the process of **re-creation, renewal, and rebirth**, remaking us once again in his image.

By now we have seen that the response he desires from us is multi-faceted. Knowledge, respect, responsive hearts seeking relationship restored. Churches disagree and divide, churches are distinguished, by how they define the responses God desires.

God's ultimate goals are that we become like him and that we fulfill his purpose for making us in his image. Whatever words we may use to describe the response, the response falls short if it does not lead us to imitate him and become like him (a common New Testament theme), and to follow him (in discipleship). Interestingly, our imitation of Jesus begins even before we imitate him in our daily lives. Our imitation of Jesus begins as we reflect his death, burial, and resurrection (the gospel summarized, 1 Corinthians 15:1-4) in our own baptism, signifying our own death and resurrection. Our baptismal response confirms God's promise that imitation is possible, not only by becoming like Jesus in his death, but also in his resurrection (Rom. 6:3-6). Our baptism is not an imitation of his baptism, but rather is an imitation of his death and resurrection. Baptism is not merely a symbol of a commitment to be an imitator – baptism as the response and pledge of a good conscience that initiates our imitation.

My purpose in this lesson is not to study what the New Testament says about baptism, but the truths revealed in our texts show the importance of baptism. New life is not possible without the death of the old person. Some teach that new life begins before the old person dies, before the resurrection to newness of life. Some teach that new life begins before baptism, which leads to the self-contradictory idea that baptism is the death and burial of a newly alive person rather than of a spiritually dead person ready to be resurrected. This brief survey suggests that the illustrations and examples Paul uses should be studied carefully to understand the relationship between baptism and the resurrected, saved persons that we become in Christ.

Moving on.... The response God desires must not be limited to baptism! **Christianity cannot be defined exclusively by whether one has imitated Christ in baptism. Nor can one's response be limited to weekly worship, or any other simply formula that would distinguish Christians from non-Christians.** The biblical description is "disciple"—used much more often in the New Testament than "Christian." Discipleship is the most common word in the New Testament to describe the imitation God desires. "Whoever will not take up his cross and follow cannot be my disciple." This view of discipleship demands daily response. (Taking another brief

detour – I wonder if we would do well to use disciple to describe responsive faithful Christ-followers, while limiting our use of church member, Christian, and other less common biblical descriptions.)

God's desire that we respond to him, that we imitate him and become like him -- this desire God honors by committing himself to participate with us. (Remember God with us, in us, for us, beside us, before us.) Our commitment to be responsive disciples brings also the gift and presence of the Holy Spirit within us, confirming truth, empowers our continuing response, guaranteeing God's promises.