



## Be Baptized

*Luke 3:15–17, 21–22*

*When all the people were being baptized, Jesus was baptized too.*

*And as he was praying, heaven was opened  
and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form like a dove.*

*And a voice came from heaven:*

*“You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.”*

*January 10, 2016*

## Thought for the Week

*Over every mountain there is a path, although it may not be seen from the valley.  
Theodore Roethke*

**Note about the author of this Thought for the Week** - This week's 'thought' comes from professor David F. Wells. He is a gracious person, a prolific writer, a rigorous researcher, and profound thinker committed to pursuing truth. His book, containing this excerpt, is entitled: "**God in the Whirlwind.**" In it he points out some of the cultural trends that have affected Western thought and society and also influenced the modern-day Church. I know it's a bit lengthy, but please don't let that deter you! I believe you will find it well-worth your time in reading it -- whether you agree with all of what he says or not.

"Many therapists are now finding that although young people grew up in good homes, had all they wanted, went on to college, and (perhaps) entered the workplace, they are nevertheless baffled by the emptiness they feel. Their self-esteem is high but their self is empty. They grew up being told they could be anything they wanted to be, but they do not know what they want to be. They are more connected to more people through the Internet, and yet they have never felt lonelier. They want to be accepted, and yet they often feel alienated. Never have we had so much; never have we had so little. That is our paradox...

On the one hand, the experience of abundance, of seemingly unlimited options, of opportunity, of ever-rising levels of affluence, almost inevitably produces an attitude of entitlement. Each successive generation, until recently, has assumed it will do better than the previous generation... It is not difficult to see how this sense of entitlement naturally carries over into our attitude toward God and his dealings with us. It is what leads us to think of him as a cheerleader who only wants our success. He is a booster, an inspiring coach, a source of endless prosperity for us...

Purveyors of the health-and-wealth "gospel" that is being exported from the West to the underdeveloped parts of the world seem quite

oblivious to the fact that their take of Christian faith is rooted in this kind of experience. Had they not enjoyed Western medical expertise and Western affluence, it is rather doubtful that they would have thought that Christianity is all about being healthy and wealthy. At least in the church's long, winding journey through history, we have never heard anything exactly like this before...

And while it's the case that we moderns have had this experience of plenty, it's also the case -- and this is the other side of the paradox -- that our experience of plenty is accompanied by the experience of emptiness and loss. We carry within us many deficits -- a sense of life's harshness, frustrations at work, bruised and broken relationships, shattered families, inability to sustain enduring friendships, lack of a sense of belonging in this world. Teens are committing suicide at the highest rate ever, in 2012 in America, 53% of all children were born out of wedlock). No wonder we have a sense that this world is vacant and hostile.

So we look to God for some internal balm, some relief from these wounds. We become inclined to think of God as our Therapist. It is comfort, healing, and inspiration that we want most deeply. That is what we seek from him. That, too, is what we want most from our church experience. We want it to be comforting, uplifting, inspiring, and easy on the mind. We do not want Sunday to be another workday, another burden, something that requires effort and concentration. We already have enough burdens and struggles, enough things to concentrate on in our workweek. On the weekend, we want relief.

It is not difficult to see, then, how this two-sided experience, this paradox, has shaped our understanding of God... It is the end product of at least two closely related mega-changes that have been underway in our culture since at least the 1960's.

FIRST, in our minds we have exited the older moral world in which God was transcendent and holy, and we have entered a new psychological world in which he is only inherent and only loving. This is the framework in which we now understand everything.

SECOND, we are now thinking of ourselves in terms, not of human nature, but of the self. And the self is simply an internal core of intuitions. It is the place where our own unique biography, gender, ethnicity, and life-experience all come together in a single center of self-consciousness. And every self is unique, because no one has exactly the same set of personal factors.

It is no surprise that we are now inclined to see life, to understand what is true, to think of right and wrong, in uniquely individual ways. We each have our own perspective on life and it's meaning, and each perspective is as valid as any other. And none of it is framed by absolute moral norms. This is where the overwhelming majority of Americans live... And out of this has come what Philip Rieff has called "psychological man." This is the person who is stripped of all reference points outside of him or herself. There is no moral world, no ultimate rights and wrongs, and no one to whom he or she is accountable. This person's own interior reality is all that counts, and it is untouched by any obligation to community, or understanding from the past, or even by the intrusions of God from the outside. The basis on which lives are being built is that there is nothing outside the self on which they can be built. And this self wants only to be pleased. It sees no reason to be saved. This is therapeutic deism, where morals are self-focused and self-generated.

In the aftermath of the 1960's, the words that came into vogue to describe all this were individualism, narcissism, and the "Me" generation... In time the new therapeutic preoccupations of this Me generation would, of course, seep into the church -- although in less glaring and more sanitized versions... The institutional aspect of the Christian faith, the church, came to be viewed with skepticism. Credence was given instead to what is internal. Not to church doctrine, which others had formulated. Not to church authority. Indeed, not to any external authority at all. Rather, it is in private intuitions that God is found...

Here were the seeds that by the end of the 1990's had produced throughout the West millions of people who were spiritual but not religious. In both America and Europe, around 80 percent said they were spiritual, but were decidedly hostile to all religions. They were opposed to doctrines they were expected to believe, rules they had to follow, and churches they were expected to attend.

The impulses that began in the 1960's had by the 90's become dominant... Those that followed the Boomers -- the Gen Xers and then the Millennials -- had exactly the same habits. Across the board given our self-preoccupation and our total self-focus, there is a retreat from what is important to the community to what is important only to the individual, , from others to ourselves...

There come those times in a nation's life, when its people rise up against the founding principles of their own nation. This is one of those times in America. It is far more dangerous than any terrorist attack. It is, in fact, "a free people's suicide," as Guinness put it in the title of his book.

Why? Because what holds the republic together has never been simply the Constitution and our laws. The law is an exceedingly blunt instrument when it comes to controlling human behavior. There are many things that are unethical that are not illegal. Most lying, for example, is not illegal but it is always unethical. Our criminal and civil laws can control only so much of our behavior. It is virtue that does the rest. And that is precisely what is being eroded in this self-oriented, self-consumed culture.

Here is the acid that is eating away at the nation's foundations, degrading objective values, uprooting older customs, and leaving people with no clear sense of purpose and, indeed, no purpose at all other than their own self-interest. Under the postmodern sun, everyone has a right to their own version of reality. When this comes about, any culture loses its ability to renew its own life."

## Stewardship Thought

*"John answered them all, 'I baptize you with water; but he who is mightier than I is coming... he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit...'"*

*(Luke 3:16)*

Most Christians know that *"Jesus' immersion in the water is a sign for all human beings of the need to die to themselves to do God's will."*

In other words, as baptized Christians there is only one gift that we need to give to Jesus – the gift of ourselves.

Once we surrender ourselves to God, we will know in our hearts what God calls us to do.