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I

The Import of Baptism

The ordinance of baptism with which we are concerned is the ordinance that was instituted by our Lord himself on the eve of his ascension when he gave to his disciples the commission, "Go ye therefore and disciple all the nations, baptising them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you" (Matt. 28:19, 20). Other baptismal rites had preceded this commission. There was the baptism of John the Baptist. But John's baptism is not to be identified with the ordinance instituted by Christ on the eve of his ascension.¹ The character of John's baptism was analogous to

¹ Cf. *contra* John Calvin: *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, IV, xv, 7 and 18; IV, xvi, 27; John Gill: *A Complete Body of Doctrinal and Practical Divinity* (London, 1796), Vol. III, pp. 290 f. Calvin maintains that the baptism of John and that dispensed by the apostles during the ministry of our Lord on earth was the same as that enjoined by our Lord in the great commission. He argues that the baptism of Matthew 28:19, 20 was not the original institution of baptism. His interpretation of Acts 19:1-6 in *Inst.* IV, xv, 18 does not appear to be a tenable one. The element of truth in Calvin's contention for the identity of all three baptisms is sufficiently guarded by the interpretation which the present writer presents above. Cf. Edward Williams: *Antipaedobaptism Examined, Works* (London, 1862), Vol. II, pp. 67 ff.; N. B. Stonehouse: "The Gift of the Holy Spirit" in *The Westminster Theological Journal*, November, 1950 (Vol. XIII, No. 1), p. 13, n. 12. Dr. Stonehouse takes the position that "specifically Christian baptism began only with the establishment of the Christian church following the exaltation of Christ". He also thinks, however, that "the baptism by the disciples of Jesus mentioned in John 4:1 ff. may best be understood as a continuation of John's baptism". Although the question as to whether the baptism by Jesus' disciples aligns itself more closely with John's baptism rather than with Christian baptism is not of great importance, I am disposed to think that the baptism by Jesus' disciples points more in the direction of the significance of Christian baptism than does the baptism of John. The reason for this judgment is given in the next paragraph.

the character of his ministry. John prepared the way of the Lord and his ministry was preparatory, transitional, and introductive. So was his baptism. We may no more identify the baptism of John with the ordinance instituted by Christ than we may identify the ministry and mission of John with the ministry and mission of Christ. Hence we cannot derive from the nature of John's baptism the precise import of the ordinance of Christian baptism.

There was also the baptism that accompanied the ministry of Jesus prior to his death and resurrection (John 3:22, 26; 4:1, 2). These are the only references to this baptismal rite, which was actually performed not by Jesus himself but by his disciples (John 4:2). What its significance was it is difficult to say. We should be justified in inferring that it stood in a closer relationship to the ordinance instituted just before the ascension than did the baptism of John. It apparently indicated rather markedly the acceptance of Jesus as the Messiah and, in that sense, the discipleship of Jesus rather than that of John, a discipleship which John himself recognised as the only proper result of his own ministry and a discipleship urgently enjoined by John when he said, "He that hath the bride is the bridegroom: but the friend of the bridegroom, which standeth and heareth him, rejoiceth greatly because of the bridegroom's voice: this my joy therefore is fulfilled. He must increase, but I must decrease" (John 3:29, 30). Yet we do not have warrant by which to identify this baptism during Jesus' earthly ministry with the ordinance of Matthew 28:19, 20. The latter is baptism in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. We have no warrant to suppose that the earlier rite took this form. It is quite reasonable to believe that there was a very close relation between these two rites both in the mind of Jesus himself and in the recognition of the disciples. Indeed, so close may have been the relation that baptism in the name of the triune God was the necessary development of the earlier rite. But we are compelled to recognise the distinctiveness of the rite enunciated and embodied in the great commission. It is from the terms of this institution and from subsequent references in the New Testament that we are to derive the precise import of this ordinance.

We are liable to be misled by the nature of the ordinance, as one of washing with water, into thinking that the basic import is that of purification. However important that element is and even though it is included in the import of baptism, it does not appear to be the most central or basic element. We must take our point of departure from the very formula which Jesus used in the institution, "baptising them into the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit" (Matt. 28:19). It is this notion of "baptising into" that must be appreciated and analysed. This formula appears in other connections, as, for example, "baptised into Moses" (I Cor. 10:2) and "baptised into the name of Paul" (I Cor. 1:13). It is apparent that it expresses a relationship to the person into whom or into whose name persons may have been baptised. It is this fact of relationship that is basic. Hence we have to ask the question: what kind of relationship?

It is here that some of the most relevant references in the New Testament afford us light and direction. Such passages as Romans 6:3-6; I Corinthians 12:13; Galatians 3:27,28; Colossians 2:11, 12 plainly indicate that union with Christ is the governing idea. Baptism signifies union with Christ in his death, burial, and resurrection. It is because believers are united to Christ in the efficacy of his death, in the power of his resurrection, and in the fellowship of his grace that they are one body. They are united to Christ and therefore to one another. Of this union baptism is the sign and seal. The relationship which baptism signifies is therefore that of union, and union with Christ is its basic and central import.¹

¹ The Westminster Confession of Faith and the Catechisms reflect a fine insight in this regard; cf. Confession of Faith, Chapter XXVIII, Section I; Larger Catechism, Question 165; Shorter Catechism, Question 94. The Shorter Catechism says with its characteristic brevity and clarity, "Baptism is a sacrament, wherein the washing with water, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, doth signify and seal our ingrafting into Christ, and partaking of the benefits of the covenant of grace, and our engagement to be the Lord's". Calvin in his excellent discussion in *Inst.* IV, xv and xvi does not place this aspect of the import of baptism in the forefront but rather the purgation of sin in the blood of Christ and the mortification of the flesh in regeneration; cf. *Inst.* IV, xvi, 2. Yet this element is by no means absent. He lists it as the third advantage which our faith receives from baptism; cf. *Inst.* IV, xv, 1-6.

Pierre Ch. Marcel, most recently, in his able treatment of the subject of

it is difficult, if not impossible, to escape the conclusion that this washing with water involved in baptism represents that indispensable purification which is presupposed in union with Christ and without which no one can enter into the kingdom of God. There is also the consideration that baptism is the circumcision of the New Testament (Col. 2:11, 12). Circumcision, without doubt, symbolised purification from defilement. We should infer that baptism does also.

In reference to the other respect in which purification applies to the import of baptism there need be no question: it represents purification from the guilt of sin. Earlier it was maintained that the baptism of John and Christian baptism must not be identified. It does not follow that there is no similarity in respect of import. Both rites involved washing with water and we must therefore discover some element that will apply to both. John's baptism did have reference to the forgiveness of sins (Matt. 3:6; Mark 1:4; Luke 3:3). We should expect that such a reference could not be excluded from the import of Christian baptism. Such an expectation is confirmed by express intimation in other passages; Christian baptism stands in a similar relation to the remission of sins (Acts 2:38; 22:16; I Pet. 3:21). We may therefore conclude that baptism represents the remission of sin or, in other words, purification from the guilt of sin by the sprinkling of the blood of Christ.

We may say then that baptism signifies union with Christ in the virtue of his death and the power of his resurrection, purification from the defilement of sin by the renewing grace of the Holy Spirit, and purification from the guilt of sin by the sprinkling of the blood of Christ. The emphasis must be placed, however, upon union with Christ. It is this that is central, and it is this notion that appears more explicitly and pervasively than any other. Hence our view of baptism must be governed by this concept. Anything less than that kind of union expressed in the formula of institution will provide too restricted a conception and will distort our view of what is exhibited and sealed by this ordinance.

II

The Mode of Baptism

Baptism signifies and seals union with Christ and cleansing from the pollution and guilt of sin. The central import is that of union with Christ, ingrafting into him, and partaking of the benefits of the covenant of grace. In reference to the mode of baptism the question is whether a particular method of applying water or of relating the person to water is of the essence of the symbolism.¹ The Baptist contention is that the mode is of the essence of the symbolism and that, since to baptise means to immerse, baptism is not properly administered by any other mode. The Baptist argument rests mainly upon two contentions: (1) that βαπτίζω means to immerse² and (2) that passages like Romans 6:3-6 and Colossians 2:11, 12 plainly imply that the death and resurrection of Christ provide us with the pattern for immersion in, and emergence from, the water.³

We may now proceed to examine these two arguments.

¹ Cf. James Bannerman: *The Church of Christ* (Edinburgh, 1868), Vol. II, p. 123.

² Cf. Alexander Carson: *Baptism in its Modes and Subjects* (Philadelphia, 1845), p. 19; A. H. Strong: *Systematic Theology* (Philadelphia, 1909), Vol. III, p. 993. Carson says, "BAPTO has two meanings: baptizo in the whole history of the Greek language has but one. It not only signifies to dip or immerse, but it never has any other meaning." Strong says, "This is immersion, and immersion only". Cf. also John Gill: *op. cit.*, pp. 307 ff.; Abraham Booth: *Paedobaptism Examined* (London, 1829), Vol. I, pp. 40-131.

³ Cf. Alexander Carson: *op. cit.*, pp. 142 ff.; A. H. Strong: *op. cit.*, pp. 940 ff.; John Gill: *op. cit.*, p. 310; Abraham Booth: *op. cit.*, pp. 162 ff. For a statement and criticism of the Baptist position cf. Robert Wilson: *Infant Baptism a Scriptural Service, and Dipping Unnecessary to its Right Administration* (London, 1848), pp. 286 ff.

A. *The Meaning of βαπτίζω*

The Old Testament. In the Septuagint⁶ βαπτίζω occurs very infrequently (II Kings 5:14; Isa. 21:4). In Isaiah 21:4 it is used in a figurative sense to translate the Hebrew word בעה which means to terrify, startle, or fall upon. It would appear that nothing very determinative regarding the precise import of βαπτίζω can be derived from this instance. In II Kings 5:14 the reference is to Naaman's baptising of himself seven times in Jordan, and βαπτίζω translates the Hebrew word טבל. It is the word βάπτω which occurs most frequently in the Septuagint, occurring some seventeen times. In most of these instances it translates the Hebrew word טבל just as βαπτίζω does in II Kings 5:14. טבל means to dip or be moist with. In Leviticus 11:32 βάπτω translates the Hebrew word בוא and no doubt refers to immersion — the articles concerned are put into water. In Psalm 68:23(24) βάπτω translates the Hebrew word יחך which means to smite through. But the Greek seems to convey a different idea, one akin to that of the Hebrew word טבל.

There need be no question then that טבל means to dip and so also does βάπτω which is the Greek rendering. Furthermore, that βάπτω may also sometimes refer to immersion there need be no question. This appears in Leviticus 11:32. The question is whether טבל and βάπτω necessarily refer to immersion and that they therefore mean to immerse. It can readily be shown that טבל and βάπτω do not mean immersion. That is to say, the dipping denoted by טבל and

⁶ In the discussion which follows account is taken simply of instances appearing in the canonical books of the Old Testament. Furthermore, it is not deemed necessary to enter into a detailed discussion of each instance of βάπτω and βαπτίζω. The purpose of our discussion is simply to show that βάπτω in the usage of the LXX does not mean immersion and that it cannot be shown that βαπτίζω means immersion. It is not forgotten, of course, that as able an immersionist as Alexander Carson allows that βάπτω does not always mean to dip but that it also has a secondary and derived meaning, namely, to dye (*cf. op. cit.*, pp. 18 ff.). Other immersionists, however, do not concede as much as Carson. In any case it is well to review the Old Testament usage in reference to βάπτω. This provides a necessary and suitable introduction to the New Testament usage in reference to βαπτίζω and its cognates. For discussion of Isaiah 21:4 *cf.* Robert Wilson: *op. cit.*, pp. 178 f., 267 ff.

βάπτω is not always to be equated with immersion. This fact that dipping is not equivalent to immersion needs to be stressed at the outset. Far too often in anti-baptist discussions this fact is overlooked and a good deal of unnecessary argumentation arises from the oversight.

In Leviticus 14:6, 51 we have the ritual prescribed for the cleansing of a leper and of a house in which the plague of leprosy appeared. The priest was to take the cedar wood and the scarlet and the hyssop and the living bird and dip them in the blood of the bird that was slain. It is obvious that a living bird cannot be immersed in the blood of another bird. It may be dipped in such blood but such dipping could not be immersion. Here is a case where *βάπτω* is used to denote an action that cannot be construed as immersion. And so *βάπτω* does not *mean* immersion. It can refer to an action performed by immersion but it can also refer to an action that does not involve immersion at all. Hence there is no reason arising from the meaning of the word *βάπτω* why in any instance of its occurrence it should refer to immersion. When it does refer to immersion our knowledge that this is the case is not derived from the word *βάπτω* but from other considerations.

It is also worthy of note that in these two instances the live bird was to be baptised *into the blood* (*εἰς τὸ αἷμα*) of the slain bird. Hence even "baptism into" (*βάπτω εἰς*) does not mean to immerse, and the preposition "into" does not add any force to the argument that *βάπτω* means to immerse.⁶⁴

⁶⁴ An objection to the validity of the argument drawn from Leviticus 14:6, 51 could be urged on the basis of the consideration that the blood of the bird that was slain flowed into the living water in the earthenware vessel and that it was not simply in the blood of the slain bird that the living bird, the cedar wood, the scarlet, and the hyssop were dipped but in the mixture of water and blood in the earthenware vessel. This is the view of able commentators such as Keil and Delitzsch, S. H. Kellogg, J. P. Lange and others. If this view of the ritual could be proven, the position taken above would have to be modified. For it might be maintained that, in such a case, there could be enough fluid for immersion of the four items specified. There are, however, two things to be said in reference to this objection. (1) Even on the supposition that it was in a mixture of blood and water that the items were dipped, it is not apparent that there would have been enough fluid for purposes of immersion.