

WHAT IS BAPTISM? Right and Wrong Views Rehearsed

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“Are ye able to be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with?”—Matt. 20:22.

CHRISTIAN people in general believe in baptism, recognize it as Scripturally enjoined, and hence as being important. With many the doctrine has such force that they fear the eternal torment of those not baptized; hence in the case of the death of an infant one of the first questions is, “Was it baptized?” While this is true of all denominations, it is especially so with Lutherans and Roman Catholics, the latter going so far as to insist that if it be necessary that the child’s life shall be sacrificed at the moment of birth, a baptism must be administered in utero.

Looking back we find that in the third century immersion was universally practiced, first of adults and later on of infants. In harmony with this nearly all the ancient church ruins show remains of large baptisteries. The word baptism itself implies a complete covering with water, and it was not for some centuries that sprinkling was introduced and determined by the Roman Catholic authorities to be a proper and satisfactory form of baptism. Today, the majority of Christian people follow this custom of sprinkling, designating it baptism.

With others, we object to this usage, because the Greek word **baptizo** never signifies sprinkling, and secondly, we object that nothing in the Scriptures ever authorized the baptism of children anyway. In the Scriptures the ordinance of baptism is provided only for “believers”—“Believe in Jesus Christ and be baptized.” Realizing that children are not believers, Lutherans, Roman Catholics and Episcopalians follow the custom of having “believers” represent the children—do the believing for them. These are designated godfathers and godmothers who solemnly obligate themselves, before God and man, that the child shall be a believer, that they will see to it that the necessary instructions are given so that it can, will, must believe. Some others who follow the custom of sprinkling infants, take the matter more lightly and call it a christening, although there is a general sense of trepidation if an unchristened child die.

St. Augustine's False Teachings

Without questioning the candor of St. Augustine, we feel free to question many of his teachings, amongst others the one which led up to this matter of baptizing infants. Under the claim that everybody not a member of the Church of Christ would surely go to eternal torment, St. Augustine made proper the baptism of infants, holding that thus they were

received into the church, became subjects of Divine grace, and might be esteemed as rescued from eternal torture, the fate of all unbaptized infants according to his theology.

We pass by these changes of the Divine program during the “dark ages” with the suggestion that the few drops of water accompanying the words neither harm nor benefit the infant, and are in no sense of the word the baptism which the Scriptures enjoin. Hence from our standpoint such infants were never baptized at all. We proceed in our review of the subject to the consideration of the three different views entertained by those who practice immersion—all three of which we hold to be erroneous.

The Error of “Triune Immersionists.”

Some well-intentioned people, finding that in the past, about the third century, Triune immersion was practiced, and that it is still practiced by some, conclude that this must be the original baptism. This thought seems to them to be corroborated by our Lord’s statement, “Baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” We hold that these Christian friends are in error in that they have not gone back far enough in their search for the original mode of baptism. The Scriptures and not the theology of the third century should be our guide. Not a word in the New Testament writings suggests Triune immersion—three immersions in one—nor does our Lord’s command imply three immersions, but rather that the one immersion is done in the name of and by the authority of the Father as well as of the Son and the Holy Spirit.

The inconsistency of the general mode of procedure may readily be noted, when it is recalled that everywhere in the Scriptures, baptism is a likeness or picture of burial. Indeed Triune immersionists do especially emphasize this by baptizing face downward three times. When we ask, “Why face forward?” they answer that it is written in the Scriptures that Jesus “bowed his head” in death—that it is in imitation therefore of Jesus’ death that the immersion is performed face downward. We remind them, however, that the Apostle says we are buried in baptism, and that burials are not customary face downward, either in our time or ever; but especially we call their attention to the fact that when they baptize face forward three times it must signify not only that our Lord Jesus died but that the Father died and that the Holy Spirit died. Such a view of matters is quite sufficient to show its unreasonableness, inconsistency, inappropriateness. Surely our Lord and the Apostles never established Triune immersion; it is, therefore, one of the errors that have come down to us from the “dark ages,” and should be abandoned.

The Error of the “Disciples,” or the “Christian Denomination,” on Baptism.

We are not seeking to find fault with fellow Christians, nor to embarrass them in their errors, but on the contrary are seeking enlightenment for our own minds and theirs, for our own profit and theirs—seeking to know the truth on the subject of baptism, believing

that the truth makes free and brings a blessing which error cannot bring to us, the pure in heart.

“Disciples” claim that they have no written creed. Nevertheless their religious papers and theological works serve them as a creed, and on the subject of baptism tell us that immersion in water is the Divine formula necessary for the forgiveness of sins after faith in Christ has been exercised. We dispute this, and claim that God has attached no such important place to water baptism. Nevertheless, from the standpoint of our “Disciple” friends, this matter is a very important one and deserves a great deal of consideration. For if their theory be true, it follows that Lutherans, Romanists, Episcopalians, Presbyterians, Congregationalists, etc., etc., as well as all the heathen, are yet in their sins—hence not in fellowship nor relationship with God, but on the contrary liable for the penalty of sin upon themselves.

If, as nearly all of them believe, the penalty for sin is eternal torment, nearly all mankind all except those who have been immersed, are en-route to eternal torment. What an awful thought! One would think that a thorough conviction along this line would arouse our “Disciple” friends to an earnestness which would outdo the Salvation Army in an endeavor to have believers immersed for the remission of their sins, that thus they might be saved.

It is but fair to our “Disciple” friends that we admit that they quote certain passages of Scripture which seem to give strength and color to their views until they are rightly interpreted. For instance, they quote us the words of the Apostle, “Repent, and be baptized [**baptizo**—immersed] every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ, for the remission of your sins” (Acts 2:38); and again, “Arise, and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on the name of the Lord.” (Acts 22:16.) There are four texts of this general style upon which the “Disciple” friends rely as proofs, supports to their faith and practice on this subject. We acknowledge the texts and give them full weight, but call attention to the fact that they were addressed to Jews and not to Gentiles.

The Jews were already baptized as a nation into Moses in the sea and in the cloud. (1 Cor. 10:1, 2.) They already had a standing with God under the Law Covenant, but many of them had transgressed that Covenant—indeed the entire nation came under a special curse on account of the death of Jesus—“His blood be upon us and upon our children.” To these water baptism was held out as a symbol of their cleansing or putting away of these sins or transgressions of the Law, as indicating their return into fellowship with Moses and his Law, that thus they might be transferred with all the faithful of that nation, from Moses, the typical head to Christ, the real Head of the Lord’s faithful.

That baptism for the remission of sins was commenced by John the Baptist and his disciples, was continued by Jesus and His disciples, and was applicable to the whole

Jewish nation and to no one else. As an illustration, notice that when St. Paul visited Ephesus he found some believers who seemed to be lacking certain gifts of the Spirit at that time amongst believers. Inquiry developed the fact that they had been baptized with “John’s baptism”—the baptism of repentance and washing away of sins in water. Then the Apostle instructed them more fully, assuring them that John’s baptism was all right in its time and place, but that they should be baptized in the name of Jesus—baptized into Christ. They were baptized properly and received the Holy Spirit. (Acts 19:1-7.) Thus we see that baptism is more than a form; that its real meaning must be discerned; that a misconception of its meaning would be a hindrance to Christian development, and that John’s baptism of repentance and washing away of sins is the same that is now practiced by our “Disciple” friends under the teaching of Alexander Campbell.

“Baptists” Somewhat In Error Also.

Of all Christian denominations we believe that the Baptists most closely approximate the truth on this subject, and this is not to be wondered at, seeing that they have made a specialty of this doctrine. Nevertheless we regret to say that our Baptist friends are considerably in error also on the very doctrine they make so prominent. Without prejudice toward any Baptist brother or sister we wish to examine their views reasonably and logically and Scripturally and to trace out their difficulties, to the intent that all who love righteousness, all who love the Truth, will have the benefit thereof, and may be the better enabled to profit thereby. According to the Baptism doctrine, baptism is an immersion in water, and of it they make the door into the Church—not merely into the Baptist church, but they are particular to tell us that water immersion is the door into the Church of Christ.

A Baptist minister after having read the first volume of *Scripture Studies* called at our office and in the course of some remarks, said, “Well I am glad that you agree with us Baptists on the subject of immersion anyway.” We replied, “Partly brother,” which was the best answer we could make him. “Well,” he said, “give me your view. Wherein can we be wrong on this subject?” We replied, “Let us see first, brother, whether or not we understand Baptist doctrine as you do. Then we will point out what we think are some of its difficulties, and subsequently we will indicate what we think the Scriptures do teach. To our understanding the Baptists hold that an immersion in water is the door into the Church of Christ. Do you agree to that?” He answered, “Yes.” “If we understand Baptists, that is the reason why they exclude Christians of other denominations from the Communion table. They claim that the Lord’s supper is intended only for those who belong to the Church, and that none belong to the Church except the immersed, and hence that they are not at liberty to consider others as true Christians, members of the Church of Christ, nor to invite them to fellowship at the holy board. Are we right?” “Yes,” he replied. “Well then,” we said, “according to Baptist doctrine, Presbyterians, Methodists, Episcopalians, Lutherans, Roman Catholics and Congregationalists are not in

the Church of Christ.” He reluctantly said, “No.” “Well then,” we continued, “is it not the teaching of Baptists that the Church alone is to be saved, and that all who are not in the Church are lost—and by the word ‘lost’ do they not generally mean consigned to eternal torment? If this be so, the Baptist teaching that only the immersed are in the Church, that all others are outside and that all outside are under condemnation of eternal torment—that seems to us to be very unreasonable. We cannot believe it! We know you do not so state it, but is not that the logical conclusion and inference of your teachings?” “Well,” he replied, “what will you do with it? Our Lord says, ‘He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved, and he that believeth not shall be damned.’” We replied that his question was not a part of the original Scriptures—that all of the 16th chapter of Mark, from the 9th verse to the end is spurious, as indicated by the fact that it is not contained in the oldest Greek MSS.

We then asked, “Do you think, brother, that all the true ‘wheat’ are in the Baptist church? Have you never found people outside its communion who give evidence of having the Lord’s Spirit, the mind of Christ?” “Yes,” he thought he had seen some, who were very good Christians indeed, who had never been immersed. “Now, on the other hand, brother, have you not found in the Baptist church communion some who seem to be devoid of the Lord’s Spirit, respecting whom it is written, ‘If any man have not the spirit of Christ he is none of his’? Have you never seen any ‘tares’ in the Baptist church?” “Yes,” he answered, “I think I have found tares in the Baptist church as well as wheat outside the Baptist church.” “Then, do you not perceive that the ‘door’ to your church is somehow or other defective—when it lets in some who are not truly the Lord’s members and when it excludes some who are truly His? Surely the door of water baptism, as you have recognized it, has not been in proper working order, else there would not be such results.” He was perplexed, and urged that we explain our views of baptism.

The Scripture Teaching on Baptism

We explained to him that the baptism which the Bible sets forth, emphasizes, makes all important, is not the water baptism which our Baptist friends suggest. It is the baptism with which all the holy of every denomination have been baptized. It is a baptism which knows no denominational boundaries or limits. True it is that the Lord and the Apostles enjoined a water baptism and practiced the same, and that all believers today ought to similarly enjoin and practice a water baptism. But we hold that it must not be allowed to have the place of the real baptism, else all would be confusion on this subject, as it is today amongst Christians of all denominations. Water baptism is merely the symbol or picture—the outward evidence to others that the real baptism has already taken place in our hearts. The question then arises, what is the real baptism of which the water baptism is merely the symbol or picture?

Turning to Rom. 6:3-6 we find that the Apostle is here enjoining baptism and laying great stress upon it, and yet never refers to water baptism. So great is the stress laid upon baptism that the Apostle declares, “If we have been planted together in the likeness of His death we shall also be in the likeness of His resurrection.” In other words, the Apostle’s intimation is that if we share with Christ in His true baptism we shall also share with Him in His resurrection.

Here the entire stress is laid upon baptism—everything else is ignored; baptism is made the sole condition of our attaining to the great prize of glory, honor and immortality as members of the Body of Christ. Surely the Apostle did not mean that a water baptism would accomplish so much as this! Surely we will all agree that if we were dragged through oceans of water, or buried fathoms deep, it could by no means guarantee us a place in the First Resurrection. But the Apostle here shows a baptism which, if we participate in it, will absolutely guarantee us a share in the First Resurrection—a baptism which is, therefore, as different from water baptism as day is different from night.

A Baptism Unto Death

The Apostle here specifically tells us that “So many of us as were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death.” Here baptism is twice mentioned, but no intimation of water baptism. Baptism into Christ is not baptism into water, baptism into Christ’s death is not baptism into water. We need to be more critical in our study of the Divine Word. What is it to be baptized into Christ? We answer that it signifies, to be baptized into the Church of Christ, because the Church of Christ is figuratively spoken of as “members in particular of the Body of Christ,” of which Jesus is the Head.

All called during this Gospel Age are to seek to attain membership in the Elect Church, the Elect Body of Christ, and the Apostle here tells us that they are immersed into that Body, are baptized into that Body. This agrees well with the Baptist view, only that they would say baptism by water into this Body, whereas the Apostle Proceeds to say that we are baptized into this Body of Christ by being baptized into His death. For the time being the Apostle ignores water baptism altogether—he is explaining the true baptism and not the symbol. Let us follow his course.

What, then, is signified by this statement, “baptized into His death”? How was His death different from the death of others? The Scriptures set forth that we originally were dead in Adam, dead in trespasses and sins, and under Divine condemnation, but that we are justified, set free from that condemnation and death condition through faith in the Redeemer. It is these, justified by faith, reckoned free from Adamic death sentence, who are invited to be immersed into the death of Christ. The difference between being dead with Adam and being dead with Christ is all the difference in the world: Adam died as a sinner because he was unworthy of life; Christ died as our Redeemer, sacrificing Himself,

His life-rights, on behalf of mankind—He laid down His life, He poured out His soul unto death, a sacrifice for sins. The invitation to believers is to join with Christ in this work of self-sacrifice in the service of righteousness and truth, in the service of God and in opposition to evil.

Our Lord accomplished His death during the three and a half years from the time He was baptized by John at Jordan until He breathed His last upon the cross. During all that time he was dying—fulfilling His sacrifice. His sacrificing began at Jordan, in the sense that He there presented Himself to the Father saying in the language of the Prophet, “Lo, I come, in the volume of the book it is written of me, I delight to do Thy will, O My God, Thy law is written in My heart.” (Psa. 40:7, 8; Heb. 10:7) Our Lord made a covenant of death at that moment, which it required the succeeding three and a half years to accomplish.

Similarly we, lifted out of Adamic condemnation, were invited to present our bodies living sacrifices to God, to sacrifice with our Lord Jesus, to be baptized into His death His sacrificial death. Our consecration is like His—unto death—and that consecration is our real baptism. Hence we see that whether they are Methodists, Presbyterians, Lutherans, Baptists, Roman Catholics, Episcopalians, etc., all who are trusting in the precious blood of Christ and have made a full consecration unto death with Christ—all of these have been baptized into Christ, all such are members of His body, His church.

On the other hand, those who have not taken these steps of faith and consecration are not baptized, are not in the Church whose names are written in Heaven, are not counted by the Lord as members in particular of the Body of Christ. Here we see the clear line of distinction which the Lord draws between the true Church and the nominal church, and between the true Church and the world—it is based upon real character development. As the Lord continued to be baptized into death, so far as His will was concerned, until the end of His journey, so it is for us not merely to will to be conformed to the death of Christ but also to perform—“to lay down our lives for the brethren.”

Thus during the three and a half years of our Lord’s ministry He was dying daily, or being baptized into death all of that period. And so with us who are following in His footsteps, we are dying daily, being gradually more and more buried by baptism into His death. As His baptism was accomplished, finished at Calvary when he breathed His last, so our baptism will be accomplished, completed, finished in death when we shall breathe our last.

“I Have a Baptism to be Baptized With.”

That we are not making a new doctrine nor wresting the Scriptures from their plain statement on this subject, note our Lord’s words just before He suffered—“I have a

baptism to be baptized with, and how am I straitened [in difficulty] until it be accomplished!" (Luke 12:50) What did the Lord mean? Did He wish to be immersed again in water? Oh, no! He had no such thought—water was only the symbol, and that He had performed 3½ years before. What He meant and what he said was that, as He neared the completion of His baptism unto death, He experienced the greater difficulty and was longing for its completion, which came the very next day when on the cross He cried, "It is finished." What was finished? His baptism was finished—His baptism into death.

Another testimony along this line, corroborative of all the Apostolic teachings on this subject, is found in our Lord's words to the two disciples, James and John, who said to Him, "Lord, grant that we may sit, the one on Thy right hand and the other on Thy left hand in the Kingdom." He answered them in the words of our text, "Ye know not what ye ask. Are ye able to be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?" No one will claim that Jesus meant, "Are you able to be immersed in water?" All Bible Students know that James and John had baptized scores of Jews; not only as John's disciples, but subsequently as the disciples of Jesus, they had done much immersing. Unquestionably our Lord referred not to His water baptism, but to His baptism into death. We are to understand from the query, then, that whoever would sit with the Lord in the Throne, whoever would be of the Elect Church, must be baptized with the baptism wherewith He was baptized—a baptism into death—a full submission and consecration of every talent and power to the doing of the Divine will, even unto death. The Lord said, "Are ye able?" but unquestionably he meant, "Are you willing?" For how could the Apostles state their ability? They were willing, and that was quite sufficient—He would do the rest. And this is the picture of the symbolical immersion; the consecrated follower of the Lord having already surrendered himself to the Lord, being already reckoned dead, confesses this only by placing himself in the hands of the administrator, who, in the picture, represents the Lord, and who buries him in the water in symbol of our burial by the Lord into His death, and he raises him from the water in symbol of our resurrection by the power of the Lord from death. How beautiful the picture! How full of meaning! He that has experienced the real baptism—he that has made a full consecration of his all to the Lord and is seeking to perform his sacrifice would not hesitate for a moment to symbolize this in the manner which the Lord and the Apostles have prescribed and exemplified.

With this Scriptural view of baptism, we indeed see that only the baptized have access to the true communion table of the Lord—to the spiritual feast which the Lord spreads for those who are His and respecting whom he says He will gird Himself and come forth and serve them. (Luke 12:37.) From this standpoint we see that none of the Lord's true members are or could be excluded from a share in His baptism into death. We see also that others cannot be baptized with this baptism though they may have outward forms and ceremonies without number.