

The Teaching of Baptism

*“Know ye not, that
so many of us as
were baptized into
Jesus Christ were
baptized into his
death? Therefore
we are buried with
him by baptism
into death.”
—Romans 6:3,4*

BAPTISM COULD WELL BE

one of the most widely practiced, yet most generally misunderstood, subjects connected with Christian religion. Many churches urge their adherents to sprinkle infants with what is termed “holy water” as soon after birth as possible, believing that should

they die without this rite being performed, these innocent children would not be saved. Other Christians believe that in the simple act of being immersed in water they are “born again,” and from that moment their salvation is assured regardless of all else. Still another group keeps records of names and genealogies of millions of people, both living and dead. This is done in the belief that the salvation of those they consider as having died in a lost state can be secured, even many centuries later, through a living descendant’s being baptized for them.

These are but a few examples of the differences of thought which surround the teaching of baptism.

To properly understand this important teaching we must look beyond man-made traditions and examine what the Bible truly says. It was Jesus who established baptism as a principal doctrine. He demonstrated when and how it is properly performed, and his apostles, in their writings, clearly defined its meaning.

In listing some of the basic principles of truth, the Apostle Paul includes “the doctrine of baptisms.” (Heb. 6:2) Doctrine simply means teaching, and since the word “baptisms” used in this verse is in the plural, Paul is apparently reminding us that in the Scriptures we may expect to find reference to more than one baptism. In a general way, however, all these baptisms bear a certain relationship to one another, so that to us there is actually but “one baptism.” (Eph. 4:5) In the New Testament, the Greek words translated “baptize” and “baptism” mean to “make fully wet,” to “immerse, or submerge.”

JOHN’S BAPTISM

Baptism is first brought prominently to our attention in the Bible in connection with the ministry of John the Baptist. We read concerning him, “John did baptize in the wilderness, and preach the baptism of repentance for the remission of sins.” (Mark 1:4) John’s ministry was not to the world in general, but to the people of the Jewish nation, who, through the Law given at Mount Sinai, were in covenant relationship with God. However, there were many in Israel who were not living up to their privileges under the Law. Thus, they were estranged from God and from his covenant. Their repentance, and the remission of their sins against

the Law Covenant, brought them back into God's favor and friendship.

We are not to understand that their repentance and the remission of their sins were accomplished by water immersion. Baptism was merely an outward symbol which indicated that repentance and the acceptance of God's will as expressed through the Law had already taken place in the heart and life of the one immersed. There is no sin-cleansing efficacy in water, not even in the water of the river Jordan. The real objective of John's ministry was later well illustrated by Jesus' parable of two Israelites who went to the Temple to pray. One was a Pharisee, the other a publican. The Pharisee prayed, "God, I thank thee, that I am not as other men are, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this publican." The publican, on the other hand, "standing afar off, would not lift up so much as his eyes unto heaven, but smote upon his breast, saying, God be merciful to me a sinner."—Luke 18:10-13

In the parable, Jesus said of the repentant publican, "This man went down to his house justified rather than the other." (vs. 14) A true spirit of repentance and humility resulted in his justification, or reconciliation to friendship with God under the terms of the Law Covenant. It was this repentant heart condition that prompted those Israelites to seek water baptism by John.

John's ministry was designed to "prepare" the people to receive Jesus. (Luke 7:24-27) Under the Law arrangement, and until Pentecost, the publican of the parable represented those who took the necessary step of repentance to restore them to the favor of God in the manner in which it was then

available. It is this which was thus symbolized by those receiving the baptism of John. Those who went on to accept the Messiah and devote their lives to being his disciples, eventually came under the redemptive merit of his blood and received justification to life.

JESUS REQUESTS IMMERSION

John the Baptist had been conducting his ministry for about six months when Jesus came to him and asked to be baptized, or immersed, in the Jordan River. (Matt. 3:13-15) At first John refused, saying, "I have need to be baptized of thee." John knew that the one great desire of Jesus had been to do his Heavenly Father's will. He knew, too, that there was no occasion for repentance in Jesus' sinless life, so he felt that the symbol of repentance as he had been administering it was wholly inappropriate.

Jesus, however, did not explain the situation to John. He simply said, "Suffer it to be so now." John then yielded to Jesus' request and baptized him, apparently realizing that the Master must have had some valid reason for taking this step of water immersion. Jesus' only further remark was, "Thus it becometh us to fulfil all righteousness." Evidently there was something in the Old Testament Scriptures which indicated to Jesus that this was a proper and necessary thing to do.

The Old Testament contains many instructions which served as a guide for the Master in laying down his life as man's Redeemer. Some of these were in the nature of prophecies, and some were in the form of pictures and illustrations. For example, the various ceremonies and sacrifices of Israel under

the Mosaic Law served as an “example and shadow” of greater things to come with respect to God’s plan for mankind. (Heb. 8:5; 10:1) Related to this is the point mentioned by Paul in which he compares the “house” of Israel under Moses to another “house” over which Christ is the head.—Heb. 3:1-6

The Israelites came under the leadership of Moses while still in Egypt. In order to be delivered from their bondage to Pharaoh, it was necessary that they trust themselves fully to Moses’ headship over them. Soon after they left Egypt, the Israelites were faced with a true test of their devotion to God and to his servant, Moses. The Egyptian army had pursued and was about to overtake them. The Red Sea was in front of them. Through Moses, the Lord instructed them to go forward. A failure to obey would surely mean death at the hands of the Egyptians. Obedience meant the risking of life in the Red Sea. The Israelites followed the leadership of Moses into the sea, which meant that they put themselves wholly into his hands as the representative of their God.

TWO OLD TESTAMENT BAPTISMS

Commenting on the significance of this experience, Paul wrote that the Israelites “were all baptized unto Moses in the cloud and in the sea.” (I Cor. 10:1,2) This was a symbolic baptism. The real baptism, or burial of the Israelites into the headship of Moses, had previously occurred. They had committed themselves to his leadership, else they would not have been with him in the Red Sea. Yet the water on each side and in the clouds above them served well to illustrate their “baptism” into Moses.

Since the Apostle Paul refers to this Old Testament immersion in water, certainly Jesus knew about it, and of its significance. We think it reasonable to conclude that Jesus saw it as his guide to “fulfil all righteousness.” Though in one sense all the Israelites were symbolically baptized at the same time as they passed together through the Red Sea, each one still had to make his individual decision to follow Moses, their leader. With the spiritual house of Israel, baptism is likewise an individual matter, and Jesus, the Head, was the first to enter into this arrangement.

The Apostle Peter refers to another symbolic baptism from the Old Testament. He speaks of the “eight souls” which were “saved by water,” and then explains, “The like figure whereunto even baptism doth also now save us.” (I Pet. 3:20,21) Here another group of people, or house, was involved, that being Noah, his wife, his sons and their wives. Here, also, death would have come to the family had they not followed the leadership of Noah into the ark and to safety.

How could they be sure that they would be saved in the ark? This was a matter of faith, and of surrender. God had given instructions concerning the building of the ark. If they trusted in Noah, God’s servant, they would enter the ark, which they did, and were saved. The waters of the flood in which they were more or less engulfed pictured their immersion into the will of God, under the head of their family, Noah. Since Peter mentioned the lesson of this “baptism” experience of Noah and his family, it seems that Jesus also could see it as a guide in the way of righteousness. This, therefore, could be another reason he asked John to immerse him.

BAPTISM OF THE SPIRIT

At the age of thirty, Jesus offered himself in full consecration to God, burying his own will into the will of his Father. When he was baptized by John, the Holy Spirit came upon him and he was filled by it. (Luke 3:21,22) This constituted for Jesus what is later referred to in connection with his disciples as being “baptized with the Holy Spirit.” (Acts 1:5) Although John was the instrument used to literally immerse Jesus in water, it was God who baptized him, as it were, filling him with his Holy Spirit of truth. The account states that “the heavens were opened to him,” and the Spirit of God descended “like a dove.” (Matt. 3:16) The descent of a dove upon Jesus was merely the outward manifestation of the Holy Spirit’s baptism. He was then “led by the Spirit into the wilderness,” where the divine will would be fully revealed to him—the opening of heavenly truths.— Luke 4:1

Jesus recognized this, and later he referred to his real baptism as something which had not as yet been fully accomplished. He said, “I have an immersion to undergo; and how am I pressed, till it may be consummated.” (Luke 12:50, *Wilson’s Emphatic Diaglott*) This statement by Jesus is not to be thought of as a question, as might be indicated by the sequence of the words, “how am I.” The modern arrangement would be, “How I am pressed” until my baptism is completed! Jesus’ baptism, or immersion by the Holy Spirit, instilled within his being full submission to the will of his Heavenly Father, and would continue to do so until he finished his course in death.

BAPTIZED WITH HIM

John the Baptist foretold that others would also receive the baptism of the Holy Spirit, and that Jesus would be used to baptize in this way. (Matt. 3:11) Thus, we find that shortly before Pentecost Jesus told his disciples that in a few days they would receive the baptism of the Holy Spirit. Cornelius and his household, the first Gentile converts, were likewise said to be baptized by the Holy Spirit. Later, the Apostle Paul wrote that we are all baptized by one Spirit into the body of Christ.—Acts 1:5; 11:16,17; I Cor. 12:13

In connection with Jesus' baptism of the Spirit there was an outward and miraculous demonstration of the power and acceptance of God. This was true also at Pentecost, and in connection with the experience of Cornelius and his household. In this latter case it was to give assurance of the acceptance into the divine family of Gentile believers, for this represented an extension of divine grace beyond that to which the Jews were accustomed.

These outward and miraculous demonstrations were never repeated, and there is no reason to suppose that they ever will. However, every true follower of the Master has come under the undeniable and impelling influence of God's Holy Spirit. Just as Jesus was filled with the Spirit from the very beginning of his dedicated life of sacrifice, so in every one of his consecrated followers, in proportion to their ability to be emptied of self-will, God's Spirit takes control.

The privilege of sharing in Jesus' baptism was indicated by him in a conversation with James and John. They requested of him, "Grant unto us that

we may sit, one on thy right hand, and the other on thy left hand, in thy glory.” Jesus’ reply was, “Ye know not what ye ask: can ye drink of the cup that I drink of? and be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?” Upon saying that they were able, Jesus said, “Ye shall indeed drink of the cup that I drink of; and with the baptism that I am baptized withal shall ye be baptized.”—Mark 10:35-39

Jesus was not here referring to his symbolic immersion in the waters of Jordan, but to his baptism into the will of his Heavenly Father—that will which was revealed to him by the Holy Spirit. With Jesus, this baptism was continuing, and did continue, until on the cross he cried, “It is finished.” (John 19:30) To James and John he indicated that they would have the opportunity of sharing this baptism with him.

INTO DEATH

The sacrificial death aspect of baptism is brought to our attention by the Apostle Paul in the words of our opening text, where he speaks of our being “baptized into Jesus Christ” and “into his death.” Paul continues, saying, “For if we have been planted together in the likeness of his death, we shall be also in the likeness of his resurrection.” (Rom. 6:3-5) Our baptism is, as Paul indicates, “into Jesus Christ,” even as the baptism of the Israelites was into Moses. Our wills are buried into God’s will, as it is expressed through Christ. This burial means that we accept the headship of Jesus, and the spirit of our consecration is to be that of obedience to the instructions of our Head.

Thus, we become directed by the influence of the Holy Spirit in our lives—the same Spirit that led

Jesus into the wilderness, and “pressed” in upon, and urged him on to sacrifice, even unto death. The Holy Spirit leads all those who have surrendered to the will of God in the same direction as it did Jesus. All who have been accepted by the Father come under the Holy Spirit’s influence because they are all members of the same body. There is, then, only this one true baptism for the consecrated believers of the Gospel Age.

WATER BAPTISM

When Jesus presented himself to John to be baptized in water, a new house, the house of sons, began to be formed. This house of sons was to be made up of faithful individuals from among all mankind. These were to be inducted into this house based on their individual surrender to the will of God, and their desire to accept the headship of Jesus over their lives. As their Head, Jesus recognized that it was the will of God to symbolize his dedication to the Father by water immersion. If there was no other criterion to guide us, we should recognize that it is also the will of God that we follow Jesus’ example in this as in all other matters pertaining to the will of God.

Not a great deal is said in the Bible about water baptism, but enough, nevertheless, to reveal clearly that it is the will of God for all who fully dedicate themselves to him. When the Ethiopian eunuch, to whom Philip witnessed in the chariot, saw the privilege of becoming a disciple of Christ, he said, “See, here is water; what doth hinder me to be baptized?” Philip realized that there was nothing to hinder, so he baptized the eunuch.—Acts 8:36

Such readiness to recognize the propriety and importance of water baptism might well be an early indication of the genuineness of one's consecration to the Lord. Though it is only a symbol, what a meaningful symbol it is! The one being immersed is overwhelmed by the water into which he is submerged. It presses in on him from all around until he is lifted out of the water by the immerser as a picture of the prospect of his being raised in the first resurrection. Surely all who have truly surrendered themselves to do the will of God should, when the opportunity presents itself, feel like the Ethiopian, and they will not want anything to hinder them from taking this step.

SAVED BY BAPTISM

When the Apostle Peter referred to Noah and his family passing through the Flood, he said that it was symbolic of how "baptism doth also now save us." He then made a further observation, that the baptism which saves us is "not the putting away of the filth of the flesh, but the answer of a good conscience toward God, by the resurrection of Jesus Christ." (I Pet. 3:21) This "answer of a good conscience" is the dedication of ourselves to do God's will. When we come to understand something of the great love God has expressed toward us through Christ, the only answer we can give in good conscience is to say, "Here Lord, take my little all, and take my heart. Reveal to me thy will day by day, and give me strength to do it." This is the burial of our will, and the acceptance of Christ's headship. (Prov. 23:26) This is consecration, and our part in true baptism.

When Jesus took this step of full surrender and dedication to his Father, there was no turning back. He realized that the completion of his baptism meant voluntary and sacrificial death. He realized, also, that only by faithfulness even unto death could he hope to be raised from the dead by the power of his Father, to participate in the great future work of the kingdom. Knowing this, when Peter tried to dissuade him from going to Jerusalem, where Jesus knew he would be put to death, the Master said, "Whosoever will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me. For whosoever will save his life shall lose it; but whosoever shall lose his life for my sake and the gospel's, the same shall save it."—Mark 8:31-35

Thus, Jesus explained that for himself, and for all who take up their cross to follow him, salvation depends upon faithfulness unto death—the baptism of death. For those whose conscience has answered the love of God by the denial of self and the taking up of their cross to follow the Master, life itself depends upon faithfulness. Thus seen, the implications of true baptism are serious and exacting. Baptism denotes more than merely a reformation of life, or as Peter states it, a "putting away of the filth of the flesh." This is expected by the Lord as a prerequisite to the dedication of our lives to him. When we make a full consecration, however, it calls for all that we have and are. From thenceforth everything belongs to God, and we are following Jesus in his baptism into death.

Jesus said that if we lose our lives for his sake "and the gospel's," we will save them. We are glad that he included these words, for otherwise there

might be a question as to how we should lay down our lives in sacrifice. We know that the Gospel, or good news, is represented in Jesus. He has told us that this Gospel is to be ministered throughout all the world as we have and can make opportunities. (Matt. 24:14; Luke 24:46-48) If we are completely buried in the tasks implied by this commission, and remain so until we are completely consumed in this sacrifice of praise to God, then glory and honor and immortality will be ours in the resurrection.—Rom. 2:7

FOR THE DEAD

In the fifteenth chapter of I Corinthians, the Apostle Paul sets forth the hope of the resurrection and assures us that in the kingdom death will be destroyed. (vss. 12-26) He then adds, “Else, what shall they do which are baptized for the dead, if the dead rise not at all? why are they then baptized for the dead?” (vs. 29) What is meant by Paul’s statement that if there is to be no resurrection of the dead, then those who have been baptized for the dead have served in vain. The answer is suggested by Paul in another of his letters: “As many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ. ... For ye are all one in Christ Jesus. And if ye be Christ’s, then are ye Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise.”—Gal. 3:27,29

God promised Abraham that his seed would bless all families of the earth. (Gen. 12:3; 22:18) All the families of the earth concerning which this promise is made are either already dead or dying. Jesus, and those baptized into him, are the seed of Abraham, being prepared by God to bless the dead world of

mankind. The only way mankind can be blessed is by their being raised from the dead. As Paul argues, if there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has died in vain. His baptism into death was for naught, and the baptism into death of his disciples is to no purpose. Jesus died on behalf of the dead world, and the death baptism of his disciples is designed by the Heavenly Father to qualify them to be associated with Jesus in the future work of blessing mankind by raising them from the dead and helping them to attain eternal life upon the earth.

What a glorious divine purpose is thus shown in connection with Christian baptism. Those who participate in it will share in blessing the world of mankind. Surely, then, true baptism is more than living a moral life, and attending religious services when it is convenient. It is a baptism unto death. Paul said, "I die daily." (I Cor. 15:31) Do we who are being baptized into Christ die daily? Only by faithfulness in so doing will we gain that "great salvation; which at the first began to be spoken by the Lord, and was confirmed unto us by them that heard him."—Heb. 2:3 ■