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The Doctrine of Baptisms

Baptism could well be one of the most widely practiced and universally misunderstood ceremonies connected with Christian religion. Many churches urge their adherents to sprinkle infants with holy water as soon after birth as possible, believing that should they die without this rite being performed these innocent children would surely not be saved. Other millions of Christians believe that in the simple act of being immersed in water they are “born again,” and at that moment become saved regardless of all else.

There is a mountain in the United States containing subterranean vaults in which are stored billions of names and genealogies of people, both living and dead. Those involved in this enormous project are primarily interested in the possible future salvation of those they consider as having died in a lost state, but who can be saved, even many centuries later, through a living descendant being baptized for them.

These are but samples of the confusion which surrounds the teaching of baptism. It was Jesus who established baptism as principal doctrine. He demonstrated when and how it is properly performed, and his apostles in their

writing clearly defined its meaning. The following pages bypass all church tradition on the subject and look in depth at what the Scriptures really say.

In listing some of the basic principles of the truth, Apostle Paul includes “the doctrine of baptisms.” (Heb. 6:2) Doctrine simply means teaching, and since the word “baptisms” is used in this expression in the plural, Paul is apparently reminding us that in the teachings of the truth 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 actually to us there is but “one baptism.”—Eph. 4:5

The Bible identifies certain symbolic baptisms. We have the baptism of John for the repentance of sin. There is a death baptism and the baptism of the Holy Spirit. And the Bible speaks of being baptized into Jesus Christ, and also of being baptized for the dead.

Basically, the Greek words translated “baptize” and “baptism” mean to “overwhelm” or submerge. This would indicate that the sprinkling or pouring of water on the head is in no sense of the word the true water baptism referred to in the Scriptures, for the individual is not thus submerged or covered by water.

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 that "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 Mt. Sinai, were professedly in covenant relationship with God.

However, there were many individuals in Israel who at heart 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 sin against the Law Covenant brought them back into God's favor and friendship. To encourage the people thus to repent was the object of John's ministry.

We are not to understand that repentance and remission of sin were accomplished by water immersion. This 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 seems well illustrated by Jesus' parable of the two Israelites who "went up into 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, “I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other: for everyone that exalteth himself shall be abased; and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted.” (vs. 14) A true spirit of repentance and humility resulted in his reconciliation to friendship with God under the terms of the Law Covenant. It was this that prepared Israelites for water immersion by John.

John’s ministry was designed to prepare the Jewish people to receive Jesus. Those who followed on to accept the Messiah and devoted their lives to being his disciples eventually came under the merit of his blood and thus received justification to life. But, under the Law arrangements, 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 was this opportunity of returning to God through repentance that John offered to the Israelites.

JESUS REQUESTS IMMERSION

John the Baptist had been conducting his ministry for about six months when Jesus went to him and asked to be immersed. (Matt. 3:13-15) 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 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 did not explain the situation to John. He simply said, "Suffer it to be so now: for thus it becometh us to fulfil all righteousness." John then yielded to Jesus' request and immersed him, apparently realizing that the Master must have had some valid reason for taking this step of water baptism.

Jesus did not explain to John, nor to anyone else later, just why he desired to be baptized in water. His only 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 types; as for example the sacrifice of the Passover lamb, and later the offering of the bullock on Israel's typical Day of Atonement. Related to these was the point mentioned by Paul in Hebrews 3:1,2. Here the whole house of Israel under Moses is compared to another house over which Christ is the Head.

The nation of Israel 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. They knew that upon leaving Egypt they would encounter dangers and difficulties.

Soon after they left Egypt the Israelites were faced with a real test of their devotion to God and to his servant, Moses. This was at the Red Sea. The Egyptian army had pursued and overtaken them. The Red Sea was in front of them. Through Moses, the Lord instructed them to go forward. A failure to obey meant death at the hands of the Egyptians. To obey 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 TYPICAL BAPTISMS

Commenting on the typical 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, of course, 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. But the water about and above them in the heavy mist served well to illustrate this surrender to Moses.

Since the Apostle Paul thus refers to this typical immersion in water, certainly Jesus

knew about it and of its significance. We think it reasonable to conclude that Jesus saw it was his guide to fulfill all righteousness. The whole typical house of servants was thus immersed at the same time. But with the anti-typical house of sons it is different: these are dealt with individually, Jesus, the Head, being the first.

The Apostle Peter refers to another symbolic baptism found in 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 family, or house, was involved—Noah, his wife, and 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 surrender. The Lord had given instructions concerning the building of the ark. If they trusted in Noah 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 their head, Noah. Since Peter applied the experience of Noah and his family in this manner, it seems that Jesus also could see in it a guide in the way of righteousness, and this therefore could be another reason he asked John to baptize him.

BAPTISM OF THE SPIRIT

When Jesus was immersed by John, the Holy Spirit came upon him and he was filled by it. (Luke 3:21,22; 4:1) This constituted for Jesus what is later referred to in connection with his disciples as the baptism of the Spirit. (Acts. 1:5) Jesus yielded himself fully to do the Heavenly Father's will, and through the Holy Spirit of truth the divine will was revealed to him. We are informed that the heavens were opened to him.—Matt. 3:16

Jesus offered himself in full consecration to do his Father's will. He buried his own will into the will of his Father. Then God immersed him, as it were, filling him with his Holy Spirit of truth. The descent of the dove upon Jesus was merely the outward manifestation of the Holy Spirit's baptism.

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 a baptism to be baptized with; and how am I straitened till it be accomplished!" (Luke 12:50) The Greek word here translated "straitened" means to "compress" or "arrest." In Luke 8:45 it is translated "throng" but here the *Revised Version* renders it "press" and *Rotherham* uses the expression "hemming in."

The modern arrangement of these words would be, "How I am pressed" or "hemmed in" until my baptism is accomplished! Jesus' baptism, or immersion by the Holy Spirit, held him captive to the will of his Heavenly Father, and

would continue to do so until he finished his course in death.

WITH HIM

John the Baptist said that Jesus would baptize with the Holy Spirit. (Matt. 3:11) Shortly before Pentecost Jesus told his disciples that in a few days they would receive the baptism of the Holy Spirit. (Acts 1:5) Cornelius and his household were said to be baptized by the Holy Spirit. (Acts 11:16,17) Later, the Apostle Paul wrote that we are all baptized by one spirit into the body of Christ.—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 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 be. However, every true follower of the Master has come under the captivating 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 is every one of his consecrated followers in proportion to their ability to be emptied of self that God's Spirit might take control.

The privilege of sharing in Jesus' baptism was indicated by him in a conversation with James and John. They said to him, "Master, we would that thou shouldest do for us whatsoever we shall desire." Jesus replied, "What would ye that I should do for you?" Then they requested, "Grant unto us that we may sit, one on thy right hand, and the other on thy left hand, in thy glory."—Mark 10:35-37

Jesus' reply to this request 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 10:38,39

Jesus is 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 death baptism with him.

INTO DEATH

The sacrificial death aspect of baptism is brought to our attention by the Apostle Paul in Romans 6:3-5. "Know ye not," Paul writes, "that so many of us as were (margin, are) baptized into Jesus Christ were (are) baptized into his

death? Therefore we are buried with him by baptism into death. ... For if we have been planted together in the likeness of his death, we shall be also in the likeness of his resurrection."

Our baptism as followers of the Master is, as Paul indicated, "into Jesus Christ" even as the baptism of the typical house of servants was into Moses. Our wills are buried into God's will, as his will is expressed through Christ. This burial means that we accept the headship of Jesus, and the spirit of our consecration is to be obedient to the dictates of our Head.

Thus we become captives to 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 himself even unto death. The Holy Spirit leads all those who are surrendered to the will of God in the same direction as it did Jesus.

There is only one Holy Spirit. It is, in this context, the Holy Spirit of truth. All who are accepted by the Father come under its influence because they are all members of the same body. There is 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 nations. These were to be inducted into this house because of individual surrender

to the will of God and willingness to accept the headship of Jesus over their lives.

Jesus, our Head, recognized that it was the will of God to symbolize his dedication to the Father by water immersion. If we had 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.

True, 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 present themselves to him to do his will. 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

This readiness to recognize the propriety and importance of water baptism might well be one of the early indications of the genuineness of one's consecration to the Lord. True, it is only a symbol, but what a meaningful symbol! 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 his being raised up 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 added that this was a “like figure whereunto even baptism doth also now save us.” (I Pet. 3:21) Peter makes a further observation concerning the baptism which saves us. He explains that it 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.”

The answer of a good conscience toward God is the dedication of ourselves to do his will. When we come to understand something of the great love God has expressed toward us through Jesus Christ, if our conscience is tender and pure, the only answer we can give is to say, “Here Lord, take my little all, and take me. Reveal to me thy will from day to day, and give me strength to do it.” This is consecration. This is the burial of our will, the denial of self, the acceptance of the headship of Christ. This is our part in true baptism.

Since 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. But 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, he 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.”—Matt. 16:21-25; 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 even unto death, the baptism of death. For those, then, whose conscience has answered to 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. True baptism is a great deal more than 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. But when we make a full consecration, we should remember that it calls for all that we have and are; for from thenceforth everything belongs to the Lord, and we are following Jesus 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 the Gospel, for otherwise there might be a question as to how we should lay down our lives in sacrifice. But now we know. The Gospel represents Jesus. It reveals his will and the Father’s will. The divine will is that this Gospel shall be ministered to others,

to all the world as we have and can make opportunities. This is the great commission that is given to us by God through his Holy Spirit. 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, honor and immortality will be ours in the resurrection.—Rom. 2:7

FOR THE DEAD

The baptism of the true disciples of Christ is unto death, and it is “for the dead.” Paul mentions this aspect of baptism in I Corinthians 15. He sets forth the hope of the resurrection of the dead, and assures us that in the kingdom death will be destroyed, and 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?”—I Cor. 15:29

Here Paul explains that if there is to be no resurrection of the dead, then those who have been baptized for the dead have served in vain. What does he mean? The proper answer is suggested by Paul in his letter to the brethren at Galatia. We quote: “As many of you as have been baptized into Christ (by that “one Spirit”) have put on Christ. ... And if ye be Christ’s, then are ye Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise.”—Gal. 3:27,29

The key here is Paul’s use of the expression “Abraham’s seed.” 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 dead or dying. Jesus, and those baptized into him, are the faith seed of Abraham, being prepared by God to bless the dead world of mankind.

The only way the dead can be blessed is by their being raised from the dead. But, 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 those who have died, by raising them from the dead and helping them to qualify for life eternal.

This emphasizes that there is a real and glorious divine purpose in connection with Christian baptism. That purpose is that those who participate in it shall be the future blessers of the world of mankind. And it is more than living a moral life and attending religious meetings when it is reasonably convenient. It is a death baptism. Paul said, "I die daily." Are we who are being baptized into Christ dying 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

■

Preview of the Kingdom

Close your eyes for a moment to the scenes of misery and woe, degradation and sorrow that yet prevail on account of sin, and picture before your mental vision the glory of the perfect earth. Not a stain of sin mars the harmony and peace of a perfect society: not a bitter thought, not an unkind look or word; love, welling up from every heart, meets a kindred response in every other heart, and benevolence marks every act. There sickness shall be no more; not an ache nor a pain, nor any evidence of decay—not even the fear of such things. Think of all the pictures of comparative health and beauty of human form and feature that you have ever seen, and know that perfect humanity will be of still surpassing loveliness. The inward purity and mental and moral perfection will stamp and glorify every radiant countenance. Such will earth's society be; and weeping bereaved ones will have their tears all wiped away, when thus they realize the resurrection work complete. ■

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