

BAPTISM : IN THE EPISTLES OF PAUL

PAUL'S epistles are written to Christians – to those who had been baptised “into Jesus Christ”. Yet Paul never treats baptism as something which has no longer any meaning, or as something which Christians can ignore in their “going on to perfection”. Paul rather recalls to Christians the event of their baptism as an inspiration to continue faithful so that they may attain and realise their heavenly calling.

Romans 6 : 1-11

For this purpose he demonstrates what baptism into Christ has accomplished in the lives of Christians, and what it has made them. No finer passage on this subject can be referred to than what Paul writes to the Christians in Rome (Rom. 6:1-11). Very often, and rightly, we use verses 3 and 4 of this passage to show that baptism is *immersion*, – burial in water, and *emergence* – coming up out of water – rising again. But to read on to verse 11 we find it means far more than the outward act. In verses 1 and 2 Paul says, “What shall we say, then? Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who *died to sin* live any longer in it?” (Italics ours). That Paul's readers *died to sin* was shown by their baptism, as he goes on to say: “Do you not know that all of us who were baptised into Christ Jesus were baptised into his death?” (Baptism was our dying to sin). Our immersion was not a *mode of baptism* (there is no such thing) but a burial of one who is dead.(to sin). “We were buried, therefore with him by baptism *into death*, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life” (vs 3-4).

In verse 5 Paul sets out the glories of baptism: “For if in baptism we have been united with him *in a death like his*, we shall certainly be united with him *in a resurrection like his*.” The uniting with Christ is *past*: it took place in our baptism – a specific event in time: “we *have been* united.” The resurrection is future: “We *shall be* ... in a resurrection like his.” Notice that “like his” – a resurrection like Christ's. Not only a spiritual resurrection “to walk in newness of life”, but as real a resurrection as Christ's was – “like his”. “Because I live” said Jesus to His apostles “you shall live also.” Thus baptism is an assurance, a guarantee, that those who remain faithful to Christ Jesus shall share in His final victory and resurrection over sin, death, the grave and the devil.

Baptism and The Gospel

We have said “to those who remain faithful”. Baptism is a death, burial and resurrection which begins the “newness of life”. the sharing in. fellowship with.

Christ's own death, burial and resurrection. These very things constitute the gospel: in 1 Cor. 15:1-4 Paul writes: "Now I remind you, brethren, in what terms I first preached the gospel..." Omitting verse 2 and going on to verse 3 Paul tells us what the gospel is: "the gospel... that Christ died for our sins... that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day..." Thus the gospel is the facts of the death, burial and resurrection of Christ — the very same things portrayed in baptism. These three great events are similarly proclaimed in the Lord's supper, the breaking of bread. Of both baptism and the breaking of bread Paul says "I received from the Lord what I delivered to you" (1 Cor. 15:3; 11:23).

Now back to Rom. 6. Verse 5 begins with the word "For" — a conjunction linking up with what Paul has already said in the previous four verses. If what Paul has written there is true, all that he goes on to say in verses 5 to 11 is equally true. We must not "continue in sin" because we have been baptised into Christ. As His death, burial and resurrection were events which make men and women "new creations in Christ Jesus", so in baptism *our* death to sin, burial of the body which is dead to sin, and re-rising of that old body as a "new man" are life-changing events in the Christian's history. Christ's death, burial and resurrection usher in the glories that are tasted in this life and are yet to be experienced. So the Christian's baptism is the entrance to his new life and the fulness, in time and eternity, of his salvation.

The mighty blessings that follow baptism are mentioned in verses 6 to 10: our old self was crucified, as Christ was, that we might be no longer enslaved to sin; we are freed from sin; if we have died with Christ we shall also live with him; as with Christ, so we shall never die again — death shall not have dominion over us any more than over Him; like Him, we (in baptism) have died once for all; as He, so we now live to God.

This is not wishful thinking, nor "pie in the sky by -and-by". It is not self-delusion nor an attempt to cheer us up when so much around us seems against us. It is not to assure us that all will come right in the end. It is plain solid fact. It is evident, seen and heard and handled, as John stresses in the 1st chapter of his 1st Epistle. It can be reckoned upon; it is a foundation to build upon; it can be taken as tested and proven. And that is exactly what Paul tells us to do in verse 11. There he states the practical outcome of his preceding teaching and premisses. In the King James version we are told, "Likewise *reckon* ye also yourselves to be dead indeed to sin but alive unto God through Jesus Christ our Lord." In the RSV we have, "So you also must *consider* yourselves dead indeed to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus." This is, in my view, one of the passages of scripture which the KJV renders better than other translations. "Reckon" is much stronger, more definite than "consider". It means that we are not simply to *contemplate*, to *think upon* the truths Paul has set out concerning baptism and what follows; but to make those truths the groundwork of our lives, to *act* upon them. We are not to *hope* that these things are so, but to *know* that they are, by the word, the authority of God Himself. These things *are* so, and Paul is saying to Christians, in effect, "BE WHAT YOU ARE"

The authority for baptism

We see, then, that baptism, far from being unnecessary or a matter of indifference or of one's personal choice, is in the New Testament vitally connected with some of the most glorious truths and mighty events in the Bible. One final event will drive home this lesson.

In one of the appearances that Jesus made to His apostles after His resurrection He gave them what we term the "Great Commission" — "Go... make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you" (Matt. 28:19-20). There is the authority to preach the gospel and to baptise, the authority of Christ Himself. But by omitting verse 18 preceding, we overlook much of this authority.

There Jesus says, "*All authority* in heaven and on earth *has been* given to me; Go *therefore...*" (*Italics mine*). There Christ, who has all authority, tells His followers that, *therefore* (because He has all authority) they are to preach and baptise and teach. In other words, Christ is making the most stupendous claim ever uttered by man; yet in the same breath, so to speak, He commands His messengers to preach, baptise and teach. Dare anyone else have placed baptism in such a setting? If so, he would be guilty of utter blasphemy. Christ Himself placed baptism there. How then can too prominent and important a place be given to this sublime doctrine?

In this short series of articles on Baptism we have tried to put out of mind our own views and opinions on the subject, and to present what we believe is the clear teaching of scripture. We are aware of the possibility of this or any other subject's becoming an obsession and given a position out of all proportion to its importance. Rather than our over-stressing baptism in its many facets we believe that we have not yet brought out its full meaning and implications as set out in the New Testament. We have striven not to present "Church of Christ doctrine" but simply the teaching of the word of God.

Indeed, the writings of many great Bible scholars and expositors who do not practise immersion can be quoted as being quite as strong and firm as what we have written. David King wrote a booklet — *Baptism, Pouring, Sprinkling — the Question Settled* — in which he quoted numerous non-immersionist Bible scholars to prove what baptism is and what takes place in baptism.

But we must content ourselves with a quotation which we have twice previously published in the *Scripture Standard*. (August and December 1959):

There is the witness, too, of some of the finest Bible scholars who do not themselves practise immersion. Such men have written about baptism, what it is and what it does, in words as firm and strong as any we use. Hear this, for example, from Bishop Anders Nygren of the Lutheran Church, in his *Commentary on Romans*:

"It is immediately evident that in these words (Rom. 6:3-4) Paul makes reference to the external form of the rite of baptism. When he who is baptised is immersed in the water, the act signifies burial 'with Christ'; and when he again comes up out of the water, that signifies resurrection 'with Christ'. But it would be an utter misinterpretation if, for that reason, one were to characterise Paul's view of baptism as 'symbolical', in the sense in which that word is generally used. For, according to Paul, in baptism we have to do with realities, not merely with symbolical representations. That which baptism symbolises also actually happens, and precisely through baptism."