



BAPTISM

As I begin to write this article the familiar saying, "*Preaching to the converted!*" comes to mind, because I suspect that when I say that this month's subject is '*Baptism*', many readers, especially the older ones, will feel that all the questions that could possibly arise on this subject, were settled a long time ago, and this may well be true.

But I suggest that, unless we constantly reiterate and re-emphasize what the Scriptures teach on Baptism and other important New Testament subjects, we are in danger of losing sight of those truths which were forcefully and clearly proclaimed by the preachers and teachers who first issued the call for the restoration of the New Testament Church.

I sometimes feel that the line which once separated churches of Christ from the denominational world is growing fainter, as we see both congregations and the men who serve them, like the ancient people of God, desiring to become '*like the nations*' round about them. There was a time when the criticism levelled against us was that, in our preaching of the Gospel, we '*made too much of baptism*'. Today I suspect that the pendulum may have swung to the other extreme, with the result that much of the preaching we hear differs very little from what may be heard in denominational services.

It is for this reason that I am happy to deal with several questions about baptism, which I received recently.

The Fundamental Question.

Some of these questions come from a congregation, which is currently being visited by several people who have expressed an interest in being accepted into fellowship.

The basis of their request is that, although they have been associating with a religious body that does not believe that baptism is necessary to salvation, they, personally, believe that they have been '*scripturally baptized*'; that is, baptized for the forgiveness of sins. In fact, all of the questions that I have received really revolve around and centre in one question of paramount importance. "*What constitutes a true and valid baptism?*"

Well, let me first set out my stall! Many years ago I was taught that true baptism is the baptism; -

1. **of the proper subject;** namely, one who declares his faith in Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God.
2. **for the proper purpose;** that is, for the forgiveness of sins and addition to the One Body, the Body of Christ, the Church with all that this involves.
3. **and, in the proper manner;** by immersion in water, to represent death to past life, burial and resurrection with Christ to new life.

Since those distant days I have neither heard nor read anything that would cause me to doubt the soundness of this teaching.

Of course, I realize that the three-point definition of scriptural baptism I have just outlined is unlikely to have been heard in services of the denomination(s) with which the aforementioned enquirers have been associated. But we must never rule out the possibility of sincere religious people arriving at the truth as the result of their own independent study of the Word of God, regardless of what they have been taught by their denominational leaders.

If, when these people were immersed in water, they believed that they were confessing Jesus as Lord and Christ, and were obeying His explicit command to be baptized in order to be saved, I would maintain that theirs was a valid baptism.

Not all 'baptism' is 'true baptism'!

Certainly, there are times when we may unhesitatingly affirm that the ceremony which certain religious bodies call 'baptism' is *not* true baptism. For example, when the *subject* is a helpless baby on whose head, water is *poured or sprinkled*, this cannot be regarded as the baptism of the New Testament Church.

And even if the candidate is an individual old enough to *have a personal faith*, if, when he is *immersed in water*, he believes that baptism is merely '*an act of obedience, subsequent to salvation*', because he has already been '*saved by faith alone*', this, also, is not the baptism practised by the early Christians.

Important Points.

There are several facts, which, I suggest, should always be borne in mind.

1. *The validity of a baptism does not depend on the faith of the one baptising, but on the faith of the one being baptized.* By this I mean that it does not matter what the 'baptiser' believes or teaches about baptism. What he believes is quite irrelevant, because salvation is a matter of *personal faith and personal obedience to Christ*.
2. *A scriptural baptism does not need to be performed by an official 'baptiser'.*

We know that there are religious bodies in which only specially appointed officials are authorized to perform certain ceremonies. Usually, these 'ordained persons' are regarded as 'priests' or 'clergy', and the view of the churches in which they function is that if an 'unauthorized person' performs such ceremonies - (including what they call 'baptism') - the act is invalid.

But there is no scripture, which attributes *special authority* to the one who does the baptizing, no matter what authority is claimed for him. In principle, *anyone* might 'officiate' at a baptism, because, as I have already stated, its validity depends on the personal faith of the candidate. This also means - to put this bluntly - that, in order to be a true baptism, it is not essential that a 'church of Christ preacher' or, 'one of ours' should perform it! Look again at the three points mentioned earlier. The baptiser is not even mentioned. He is merely an expedient; only necessary for the occasion.

3. *Nor does the validity of a baptism depend on the recital of a correct form of words.* It might be reasonably argued that we have turned baptism in to a ceremony more formal than it was in New Testament times. For instance, it is customary for the one who assists the candidate for baptism to say something like: - "Upon the confession of your faith in the Lord Jesus... I now baptize you into the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, for the remission of your sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit".

I say, 'something like this', because the form of words varies from congregation to congregation. Sometimes it may begin: - "*Upon the confession of your faith in the Lord Jesus and upon His authority...*" Or, "*Having confessed your faith in the presence of these witnesses...*"

I think we are all aware that there are also other variations, but it seems to be the generally held view that some sort of formula is essential. But here are a few points about which we might profitably consider.

- i) Is it *really necessary* to use this - or any other - form of words?
- ii) Would a baptism *be invalid* if, after the candidate confessed his faith in the Lord Jesus, he was immersed without the baptiser saying anything at all?
- iii) Does the validity of a baptism depend on *the recitation of the correct formula*?
- iv) If a baptismal formula is essential, *why do we not all use the same one?* And where is *the scripture* that tells us what the formula must be?

"Into" and "In"

When, in the Great Commission (Matt. 28: 18-20), the Lord commanded the baptism of believers, His words, "baptizing them into the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit", were not meant to constitute a ritualistic formula which must precede baptism. They are words that explain what happens when one is baptized. Notice, that Jesus commanded baptism 'into', - not 'in' - the Name. The Greek preposition 'eis' is a preposition of movement, indicating a change of position. The words recorded by Matthew constitute the Lord's assurance that, when we are baptized, we enter into a new relationship with the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. The words declare the consequence of our baptism.

Similarly, when Peter on the Day of Pentecost uttered the familiar words in Acts 2; 38: "*Repent and be baptized, in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ*", this was not intended to constitute a baptismal formula. The preposition 'en' is static, and, used in this verse; it is a declaration of the fact that baptism is performed 'in' the name of the Lord Jesus; 'on' His authority. The words reveal *the authority* that lies behind baptism.

Let me put it this way. Scriptural baptism is performed on the authority of the Lord Jesus Christ, and brings the obedient believer into a relationship with the entire Godhead - Father, Son and Holy Spirit. If the candidate confesses his faith in the Lord Jesus and understands that baptism is essential to his salvation, his baptism becomes *for the remission of sins and for the free gift (Gr.'dorea) of the Holy Spirit'* even if the baptiser does not expressly state this.

When I obeyed the Gospel, as a boy of 14, there were, at that time, some facts about baptism that were very clear to me. There were truths that I clearly understood. But I have no hesitation in admitting that the significance of my baptism became much clearer and more precious to me as the years passed by, as I came to understand the depth of its meaning and learned to appreciate the spiritual riches that it brought. The one who baptized me did not attempt to list the many consequences that follow baptism. Nor could he have done so anyway! I do not believe that the person has yet been born who, coming to baptism, fully comprehends the significance and the depth of meaning of this apparently simple ordinance that the Lord Himself has made so essential to salvation.

Conclusion: Handling a delicate situation.

But - back to the case of the enquirers mentioned earlier! I recall an occasion when a lady, a member of a certain denomination, began to attend the Gospel service of the church in Corby. After a while she expressed a desire to be received into fellowship. She thought that she had been scripturally baptized, because the church of which she had been a member also practices the immersion of believers.

It was gently pointed out to her that *that* particular religious body teaches that one is saved 'by faith alone', and claims that baptism is merely 'an optional extra'. Therefore, there was a real likelihood that it was only after she had heard Gospel sermons explaining the baptism of the New Testament and had come to understand the truth, that she had convinced herself that this is what she also had received. If this were to be the case, she should consider the possibility that she had not really been scripturally baptized.

We explained to her that we were not in a position to judge in her case, since only God and she knew the facts. If she was fully convinced that she had been scripturally baptized, we must be prepared to accept her baptism. But if, on the other hand, she felt there was any doubt in her mind, she should consider being scripturally baptized. The decision was her own.

We also pointed out that we were not suggesting 're-baptism', because there is no such ceremony. Where salvation is involved, one is either scripturally baptized, or one is not baptized at all. In this lady's case, I am happy to say, after giving the matter careful thought she concluded that she had not really submitted to true, scriptural baptism, and requested to be baptized.

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