



Conducted by
Alf Marsden

“It is said that the baptismal water may be poured if there is not enough water for immersion. Furthermore, it is argued that the three thousand converts on the day of Pentecost could not have been immersed because there would not have been enough water in Jerusalem. Would you please comment?”

In order to get the background to this question I think I had better quote the substance of the letter I received: “In a book, ‘This is the Faith’ by Francis J. Ripley (priest of the Catholic Missionary Society), I read the following: ‘The Didache or the Teaching of the Twelve Apostles, a document which dates from the first century, clearly says that the baptismal water may be poured when there is not enough water for immersion.’ So it is certain that throughout the history of the Church, baptism by pouring has been recognised as valid . . . Another paragraph reads ‘As St. Thomas implies, it is most improbable that the three thousand converts baptised by St. Peter on the first Pentecost were immersed; if only because there would not be enough water in Jerusalem at that time. Nor is it likely that the Gentiles baptised in the home of Cornelius, or the gaoler in prison at Philippi were plunged in the water for the purpose.’ I would be grateful to hear any comments you have on the above paragraphs.”

In order to answer this question I think we shall need to look initially at the Apostles; a group of people called the Apostolic Fathers; and the origin of the Didache.

Apostle in the New Testament

The word APOSTOLOS literally means ‘one sent forth.’ It is used of the Lord Himself. In Hebrews we read, “Wherefore, holy brethren, partakers of the heavenly calling, consider the Apostle and High Priest of our profession, Christ Jesus” (Heb. 3:1). You will no doubt recall that in the Lord’s prayer as recorded by John, Jesus said, “And this is life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent” (John 17:3). Jesus was sent by God. He is our great Apostle and High Priest.

The word also refers to the twelve chosen by the Lord for special training, and if we read Luke 6:13-16 we find the chosen ones named. Further on in Luke’s gospel we read of the twelve being sent by the Lord to preach the kingdom of God, and to heal the sick (Luke 9:2). Later on in verse 10 of the same chapter we read, “And the apostles, when they were returned, told him all that they had done.” So the twelve disciples chosen by the Lord became the Twelve Apostles and the requirements to belong to that select number were set out by Peter before Matthias was chosen to replace the defective Judas Iscariot.

Paul himself, although he had seen the Lord (see 1 Cor. 9:1), could not be numbered with the original Twelve because he had not been with Jesus all the time of His earthly ministry. Paul was commissioned directly, by the Lord Himself, to carry the Gospel to the Gentiles.

The word has a wider reference. If we read the first letter of Paul to Corinth we find there Paul admitting to more than the Twelve. When he chronicles the appearances of the risen Lord in 1 Cor. 15 he says in verse 5, 'and that he was seen of Cephas, then of the twelve'. Later in verse 7, 'After that, he was seen of James; then of all the apostles'.

In Romans 16:7 we read of Andronicus and Junias who, as Paul says, 'are of note among the apostles'. In Acts chapter 14 we read of Paul and Barnabas both going into the synagogue at Iconium, and in verse 4 the scripture says, 'But the multitude of the city was divided: and part held with the Jews, and part with the apostles'. So if Paul and Barnabas went in together, and they are referred to as apostles, then obviously Barnabas was an apostle.

That there were false apostles who posed as the apostles of Christ, cannot be doubted. In 2 Cor. 11:12, 13 we read, "But what I do, that I will do, that I may cut off occasion from them which desire occasion; that wherein they glory, they may be found even as we. For such are false apostles, deceitful workers, transforming themselves into the apostles of Christ".

I have gone to some lengths in this section so that the reader may understand that when he reads about apostles he is not necessarily reading about the original Twelve. I consider this to be extremely important, because those who were styled apostles in the postapostolic era said things which are not necessarily in accordance with the truths as first preached to the Jews and Gentiles by the original apostles who were commissioned by the Lord.

Apostolic Fathers and the Didache.

The Apostolic Fathers was a term used to denote a group of Greek Christian writers. They would be, according to history, of the second or third generation after the original apostles. They were no doubt responsible for recording the progress of the early Church, and of trying to elicit the Canon of Scriptures which could be the one weapon against deviation. The predominantly Greek-speaking church based on Alexandria was now being challenged by Carthage and Rome as to what should be included in the Canon. Rome claimed the martyrdom of Peter and Paul in the city, and so began the cult of the martyr-Apostles with the consequent apostolic succession and authority.

To understand the separate theological outlooks that developed in these great cities is a major study which cannot be gone into here, but undoubtedly the Church was being confronted with new situations and tests, and it seems quite evident to me that the writers who championed the cause of each tradition would produce conflicting ideas in trying to achieve uniformity for their own particular traditions.

The Didache, or Teaching of the Apostles, was probably composed towards the end of the second century, and was first published in 1883. It is said *not* to be a product of the Apostolic Fathers, and includes letters by such people as Clement of Rome, Ignatius of Antioch, Polycarp of Smyrna, and others. It is part of a Greek treatise called the Apostolic Constitution which purports to record the injunctions given by the Apostles of Christ through the medium of Clement of Rome. The Didache is based on the seventh book of this Constitution and purports to set out comprehensive rules for Christian life. Scholars claim that the Didache reflects the liturgy and order of a church possibly in Egypt, but more probably in Syria. It is a rather enigmatic document probably composed by wandering prophets, the bonafides of whom are rather uncertain. It has a rather enigmatic description of baptism and the eucharist, being at variance with more original documents and certainly with the Bible as we now have it. It is said to have dropped out of use except in isolated Egyptian communities.

The main point to remember is that the Didache, as seen by most scholars, is not an original document containing the Teachings of the Twelve Apostles, and that its teaching would seem not to be in line with what we can learn from our New Testament today. I suppose it is a natural thing for any of us to seek out documentary evidence which seems to support our own particular tradition and order. I do not say that the writer of the book mentioned by the questioner has set out to do that, but it is still a natural tendency for anyone.

The Apostolic Teaching

The message of the Apostles concerning baptism is both positive and unequivocal. In his letter to Rome Paul stated, "But God be thanked, that ye were the servants of sin, but ye have obeyed from the heart that form of doctrine which was delivered you. Being then made free from sin, ye became the servants of righteousness" (Rom. 6:17). Evidently, there were Christians in Rome who has obeyed the 'form' of the teaching; what they had obeyed, of course, was the gospel, and the form of the gospel message was in the form of the expiatory sacrifice of Christ; death, burial, and resurrection. Well might Paul say in the same letter, "Know ye not, that so many of us as were baptised into Jesus Christ, were baptised into his death. Therefore, we are buried with him by baptism into death; that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life. 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). Paul would obviously include himself in the subject 'we' because he had undergone the same experience (see Acts 22:16). The teaching is emphasised by Paul in his letter to the Colossians, "Buried with him in baptism, wherein also ye are risen with him through the faith of the operation of God, who hath raised him from the dead" (Col. 2:12). In baptism there is a burial and a resurrection; this is the 'form' of the teaching which believers were obedient to.

I think the apostolic teaching makes it quite clear that in the early days of the Church there were no 'modes' of baptism, as many people say today. The argument is settled scripturally by Paul in his letter to the church at Ephesus, "One Lord, one faith, one baptism" (Eph. 4:5). The 'one baptism' is immersion in water, and puts the believer into Christ. In the apostolic teaching there were no modes of sprinkling and pouring; these were introduced at a later date, when the Church went through periods of departure and apostasy after the perfection of the apostolic era. If the Great Commission is still in force today (Matt. 28:19) which it undoubtedly is, then immersion in water is still in force today. Jesus commanded the apostoles to teach and baptise (immerse) men; he teaches and commands us to do the same today.

As for there not being enough water in Jerusalem to immerse the three thousand, then this seems to me to be a ludicrous argument. Concerning the gospel preached by Peter on the Day of Pentecost, Acts 2 simply states that three thousand were immersed *on the same day*. As the gospel was preached in Jerusalem on that day, the assumption is that the three thousand were actually immersed in the environs of the city where the gospel was preached, but Acts 2 is silent as to the precise location where the immersions took place. The really important point so far as I am concerned is that the Holy Spirit says that *three thousand people were immersed on that day*. There the matter should rest. But doesn't it seem strange to you that Philip could find enough water *in the desert* to immerse the eunuch, and yet people argue that there might not have been enough water in the vicinity of Jerusalem to immerse the believers there? Why are some people not content with the simplicity of the Word.

I think we must understand that the Church has passed from the perfection of the apostolic era, through departure and apostasy, then reformation and restoration. Many unhelpful things occurred in the periods of departure and apostasy which have left their mark in the present day, but it is up to all Christians to engage themselves in the active restoration of the ancient order; only then, when we have returned to the pristine purity of the apostolic era, will the world see the splendour of that Church for which the Lord agonised at Calvary.