

The Reformed View of BAPTISM

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'For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel'

Introduction

Systematic Theology is that subject which taking the information provided by Biblical, Exegetical and Historical Theology, seeks to weave it into a comprehensive whole to be applied in Practical Theology. We may liken it to a massive tree, growing out of the bedrock of Scripture. The trunk is Theology proper, what we learn about God; and then the main branches are typically Anthropology, the doctrine of Man; Soteriology, the doctrine of Salvation; Ecclesiology, the doctrine of the Church and Eschatology, the doctrine of the last things.

The branch we are currently interested in is that dealing with the Church and this splits into various sub-branches: Idea; Attributes; Government etc. The one we want is: The Means of Grace and again we find this branches into Prayer; Preaching; the Sacraments. Taking the last we find it divides into Baptism and the Lord's Supper - and we take up the former.

Now the purpose of this slightly complicated introduction is to try and instil a sense of proportion into the subject! In terms of the whole we are actually dealing with a fairly minor matter. Paul's quote, at the beginning of this article, is a sad perplexity both to Sacramentalists and all those who seem to make a Shibboleth of the subject. Indeed it is of interest to note that of the cluster of words used relating to Baptism there are only twenty references in the Epistles and Revelation; five of which occur in the I Corinthians passage from which we have already quoted and of which at least another five are not dealing with Christian Baptism at all!

In short the subject does not occupy the place in Scripture which it all too often does in our Ecclesiastical debates - one large Denomination seeing it as so important that it warrants division and the proliferation of Baptist churches. An admittedly extreme case occurred a few years ago when the then President of the Baptist Union, was on the one hand denying the fundamental doctrine of the Divinity of Christ while presumably on the other holding the position that only Immersion constitutes valid Baptism.

However it will often be found that the issue of what constitutes Baptism does expose a whole mass of related theology - and of course there are important practical issues. A young person, for instance, brought up in a Reformed church goes off to University; finds only the local evangelical Baptist Church preaches a definable gospel, but is then exposed to remarks about 'infant sprinkling' and is persuaded on some pretty tendentious exegesis to submit to re-baptism by immersion.

So, at the risk of simply falling into the same trap of exaggerating its place in theology above that it occupies in Scripture let us seek to set out the Reformed - and Biblical position. It seems to the writer that this might most conveniently be done in terms of: **The Meaning; The Mode and The Subjects of Baptism.**

THE MEANING OF BAPTISM

'Go therefore and make disciples...baptizing them' Mt.28:19.

'I indeed have baptized you with water, but He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.' Mk. 1:8.

A variety of meanings are associated with Baptism in Scripture and the Reformed Confessions. However, for our purposes I wish simply to concentrate on three.

First, and self evidently, it is associated both in Scripture and in practice with the profession of Christianity. This is asserted in the first of the texts placed above. A Christian is someone who has been Baptized in the name of the Trinity - and incidentally those who have never been baptized have no right to the name. Of course much professed Christianity has little basis or is doctrinally very questionable. Nonetheless, what divides off the Christian world from the Muslim or the Hindu is this: that the persons concerned have been baptized. I suggest too this carries the important practical point that, when we approach baptized people we do so on the basis of their profession while we seek to explain to them 'the way of God more accurately'.

When we turn to the second text we note that although there is only one Baptism, Eph. 4. yet two aspects are brought before us in John's teaching. We may perhaps call these the 'Ritual' and the 'Real'. The first refers to the actual physical activity the disciple undergoes: the ritual; the second to the reality to which the ritual points. It is important to keep both these ideas in mind as a failure to distinguish them may lead us to attribute to one aspect a scripture which is actually referring to the other.

Second therefore, Scripture associates Baptism with cleansing. Just as we put a dirty garment to the wash, so the use of water here points to a cleaning - and quite clearly the washing away of our sins. Not of course in an *ex opere operato* mode but in a recognition that this is what happens in conversion. So we find people coming to John the Baptist: *'and were baptized by him in the Jordan, confessing their sins.'* And so also we find Ananias telling Paul: *'Arise and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on the name of the Lord.'*

Third, and most importantly, Baptism points to our Union with Christ. This is the point underlying the second part of our text - that which speaks of the 'Baptism of the Holy Spirit'. This is well set forth in 1 Cor 12:13: *'For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body - whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free - and have all been made to drink into one Spirit.'*

Objections

At this point we must seek to deal with two objections. Charismatics, and Pentecostals generally, will argue that the text from John the Baptist points to a two stage process: first conversion, symbolized by water baptism and then a second and subsequent 'Baptism of the Spirit'! However it is clear that there is no support for this in the Epistles - and indeed the reverse is stated in the 1 Cor 12. passage which has just been quoted. In the case of Cornelius and his relatives and friends we see the word is preached, the Holy Spirit converts and they are then baptized with water. We have here both the external ritual and the internal reality.

A more cogent argument appear to be brought by Baptists who state, to quote Augustus Strong: 'The central truth set forth by baptism is the death and resurrection of Christ, - and our own death and resurrection as connected with that.' It is clear he is linking that with the idea that only Immersion adequately represents this.

To this it may be replied in the first place that the truth of Christ's death is surely set forth by the Lord's Supper - and in the second that His resurrection is celebrated in every Christian Church by the fact that we meet on Sunday - the day of resurrection having replaced the Saturday Sabbath.

Inevitably reference is made to Rom.6: 'buried with Him by baptism into death' but the point is that here Paul was not discussing Baptism as such. He is seeking to refute the antinomian argument against a free justification - and in order to do so he emphasizes that we are buried, raised, planted, crucified with Him. In short that we

are united to Christ. What is in view is not water baptism but that action of the Holy Spirit that has brought us into Union with our Blessed Redeemer. In a parallel passage in Col. ii. we are said to be circumcised with him. It is clear therefore that it is not the physical but the spiritual aspects which are in view. To emphasize one aspect is poor exegesis - however common.

Besides, we are easily misled by our experience of burials with the coffin lowered into the grave and the promise of resurrection; but Our Lord was laid in a tomb in a garden - presumably on a shelf. There was nothing that corresponds to the baptists 'immersion'.

Conclusion

In concluding this discussion of the Meaning of Baptism I want to call attention to the way in which the coming of the Spirit is represented in Scripture. We are baptized *'with the Holy Spirit'*. *'And there appeared to them divided tongues, as of fire, and it sat upon each of them.'* *'For as yet He had fallen upon none of them.'* *'the Holy Spirit fell on all those who heard the word'* *'the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out on the Gentiles also.'* *'And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell on them, as on us at the beginning. Then I remembered the word of the Lord, how He said, "John indeed baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit."* ' The significance of these representations will appear subsequently.

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