

BAPTISM : ITS MODE. (5)

Epistles and Revelation

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Introduction

When we turn to the Epistles of the New Testament we find more or less extended treatments of such subjects as Assurance; Church Officers; the Gospel; Immorality; Israel; Judgment; Justification; the Law; Legalism; Marriage and Divorce; Resurrection; the Second Coming; Sectarianism; Sin; Spiritual Gifts; the State; Things Indifferent etc. Even the subject of Widows occupies 14 verses of I Timothy - some 12% of the Epistle.

In contrast the words: βαπτίζω, βαπτισμα, βαπτισμος, ¹ occur only 19 times in the Epistles: three times in Romans; ten in I Corinthians; once each in Galatians, Ephesians, Colossians, and I Peter and twice in Hebrews. Βαπτω occurs once in Revelation. We look in vain for any extended treatment of the subject - the references being mainly incidental to the actual discussions.

Now compare this with virtually any Confession of Faith. It would be almost unthinkable that the matter is not discussed - often at length. One has seen Introductory leaflets put out by Baptist churches in which, in order to explain their name, substantial space is devoted to stating that only adults are Baptized on profession of faith and that Baptism is by immersion ! Now all this is quite foreign to the New Testament. Even in the Pastoral Epistles, where surely we might have expected it, there is only an incidental reference in Titus 3 : 5.

We have already remarked that the matter simply does not occupy the place in the New Testament that it does in our discussions - and it might well be felt that this extended series of articles already transgresses that balance were it not that a defence of the Biblical and Reformed position is forced on us by those who so pertinaciously urge what we are convinced is an un-biblical one.

With these considerations in mind, let us examine what we may deduce from the

¹ For the benefit of those readers who are not conversant with New Testament Greek, we give below the rough English equivalent pronunciations of these three greek words, and of the fourth that follows in the same paragraph. They are, in order of appearance :

βαπτίζω - pronounce it BAP - TID - ZOW. Verb, means "I baptize".

βαπτισμα - pronounce it BAP - TIZ - MA Noun, means "baptism".

βαπτισμος - pronounce it BAP - TIZ - MOS Noun, means "washing"

βαπτω - pronounce it BAP - TOW. Verb, means "I dip", or "dye".

texts themselves.

Romans 6 : 3 , 4.

It is perhaps understandable that those who already hold the immersionist position will read into these verses a confirmation of it; and then cite them, as they regularly do, as proof texts for immersion. And certainly when we find a non-Baptist scholar of the stature of Bishop Lightfoot citing verse 4 as an 'image of baptism' we should pause. However not too long - for if we have followed out the logic of the position so far we hold no such pre-suppositions. Let us then take a longer look at the passage. The following points should be born in mind.

1. The Apostle is not here dealing with Baptism as such - but with the Antinomian objection which invariably arises whenever the doctrine of Justification by Faith alone is properly expounded.

2. It would be rather odd that we need to base an argument for a particular mode on an incidental reference when dealing with another subject altogether. For the essential refutation of the Antinomian position is, that we are united with Christ.

3. It is this union of the believer with Christ that is the essential point that Paul is concerned to convey - not only Baptized and Buried but also Crucified and Planted (See the following verses 5 and 6)- the latter two having no reference to water baptism. The word translated 'planted' in the AV and 'united' in the RV has the idea of grafted - a very intimate union. A full exposition of the passage would extend well beyond the confines of an article - and the interested reader is referred to the appropriate commentaries.²

There is, however, one purely practical consideration which should be born in mind - and it is this. We are simply being misled by our experience of burials in seeing a connection between that and the immersionists practice. For our Lord's burial was not a going down into a dug grave. Rather it was an 'entombment'. Once this is grasped all apparent force in the passage simply disappears.

I Cor. 1 : 13 - 17.

This passage, though it contains six of our twenty texts adds nothing to our understanding of the mode of Baptism.

I Cor. 10 : 2

Speaking of the Israelites coming out of Egypt Paul writes : "*were all baptized unto Moses in the cloud and in the sea...*" This passage has evoked some rather odd exegesis. Gill, in defence of his belief that Baptism always means immersion visualises the Israelites passing through the Red Sea, with the water standing on

² John Murray and D. Martyn Lloyd Jones will both be found helpful. I found the latter quite convincing in seeing the references to Baptism pointing to I Cor. 12 : 13. - though I doubt if his distinction between 'with the Spirit' and 'by the Spirit' is valid.

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either side and the cloud overhead as a picture of immersion. Others have wondered whether Psalm 68 : 9 - "*Thou, O God, didst send a plentiful rain...*" referring to the wilderness might not apply - presumably baptism by sprinkling ! But the truth surely is that just as Rom. 6 applies to our union with Christ, so all the text is telling us is that these are united with Moses - they are Moses men. Incidentally, the whole multitude was baptized : men, women, and **children**.³

I Cor. 12 : 13.

This text refers to the Baptism of the Holy Spirit - the reality which is symbolized by water baptism. We have already noted that we are not immersed in Him but that He is spoken of as poured out on us.

I Cor. 15 : 29.

If I understood what these two references meant it might add something to our understanding of the **Meaning** and possibly the **Subjects** of baptism. It adds nothing to our understanding of the mode.

Gal. 3 : 27.

This text probably refers to what we have called **real** Baptism, not water Baptism. In other words, to the Baptism with the Holy Spirit to which reference has just been made. It adds nothing to our understanding of the mode.

Eph. 4 : 5.

This occurs in a passage devoted to the subject and importance of Christian Unity. We are reminded that there is : "*one Lord, one faith, one baptism.*" Yet it is notorious that baptism is a divisive issue ! It would seem therefore that it must point to 'real' baptism - and not to any particular mode associated with the ritual.

Col. 2 : 11, 12.

Verse 12 parallels Rom. 6 : 4. However the previous verse introduces an additional item of information for it tells us that : "*In Him also ye are circumcised...*" Now clearly physical circumcision is not meant; indeed the passage goes on to add "*with the circumcision made without hands...*" This would confirm the opinion previously expressed that what is in view is our union with Christ,

³ There is a superb comment on this verse given by one Neil Macmichael, one of the "Relief" Synod theologians in Scotland in the 19th Cent. Dr. John McLeod in "**Scottish Theology**" noted it on pages 253 - 254, and it runs thus : "(Macmichael) was applying what the Apostle says of the fathers who were all baptized unto Moses in the cloud and in the sea, and he said : ' 1. The Israelites were baptized, both adults and infants; for the Apostle declares it. 2. They were not immersed, a fact which Moses and other inspired writers testify. 3. The Egyptians who pursued them were immersed. 4. The Israelites had baptism without immersion, and the Egyptians immersion without baptism. 5. The baptism of the Israelites was their salvation, and the immersion of the Egyptians drowning'. !! Ed.

effected by the Holy Spirit - not water baptism at all. This then is an additional reason for rejecting any adventitious connection with immersion.

Hebrews 6 : 2; 9 : 10.

The first passage speaks of : *"the doctrine of baptisms..."* and the second of *"diverse washings..."* In the Greek the word is : βαπτισμος , *Baptismos*. The only other occurrences are at Mark 7 : 4; and 8., passages which speak of the *"washing of cups, pots..."* etc. and which we have already considered. These references all seem to point back to the Old Testament modes of symbolic purging of sin - and the attentive reader will have noted how cleansing is made by various sprinklings and washings: Lev. 14 : 6, 7; Num. 8 : 7 ; 19 : 11 - 13. cf. Ps. 51 : 7; Ezk. 36 : 25 - 27. That this is what is in mind seems to be confirmed by the examples given in Heb. 9 : 13, 19, 21 : *"sprinkling the unclean", "and sprinkled both the book and all the people", "moreover he sprinkled with blood..."* .

Now a distinction can just about be drawn between these two almost synonymous Greek words (βαπτισμα , βαπτισμος); the one referring to Christian baptism, the other to Old Testament purifications but the obvious implication is that both were carried out by sprinkling or washing.

I Peter 3 : 21.

This probably refers to Holy Spirit baptism - not water baptism.

Revelation 19 : 13.

The Greek word is : βαπτω. It occurs also in Luke 16 : 24 and John 13 : 26. and is translated 'dip' in all three places. Here finally we seem to have an example of 'immersion' ! But when we look up the cross reference in Isaiah 63 : 3, 4 from which the image was drawn we read : *"Their blood shall be sprinkled upon My garments, and I will stain all my raiment."* What John saw in his vision is Christ's garments sprinkled by the blood of His enemies - and the word he used to describe this : βαπτω is the root word from which we have the four others and whose meaning we have been trying to ascertain.

Discussion.

I. I have looked at every text in the New Testament which uses the word baptism in one of its five greek forms. Most of these have been discussed but the 14 references to βαπτιστης (Pronounce it BAP - TIS - TACE , it means 'a baptiser') i.e., John the Baptist are generally incidental and mainly omitted.

Now if we take paper and draw on it three columns and label the first: **Immersion Certain**, the second: **Immersion Possible or Probable** and the third: **Immersion Impossible or Improbable** we may, apart from those references which are Figurative, assign every text. Not a single one goes into the first

column - **Immersion Certain !** In the second may go the references to Our Lord's Baptism; the Ethiopian Eunuch and Rev. 19 : 13 - the garment dipped in blood. Virtually all the other references where an assignment can be made will be found in the column - **Immersion Impossible or Improbable.**

I believe these results speak for themselves and I would encourage anyone bothered by this matter to repeat the exercise for themselves.

To speak plainly, had Scripture wished us to know that immersion and only immersion constituted Christian Baptism, why in no single case is immersion certain and why in so many cases does a plain reading lead to the probable conclusion that immersion was not involved ?

II. Why then the widespread and unthinking adoption of Baptist views in Evangelical Churches ? Well probably 'unthinking' actually sums it up ! A Greek dictionary is consulted and gives the meaning 'dip' or 'submerge'; a quick glance at the New Testament suggests both John's Baptisms and that by Philip of the Ethiopian Eunuch was immersion, and a misunderstanding of Romans 6 completes the delusion.

Now our experience tells us that the earth is flat; that the sun rises in the east and goes round the earth to the west; and that if you burn things they decrease in weight. But the facts do not bear us out - and we have to learn that in fact the earth is basically a ball and the apparent motion of the sun is caused by the earth's rotation. Only the coming of accurate balances served to explode the phlogiston theory. There is absolutely nothing wrong with framing an hypothesis as to a situation provided it is then checked and if necessary revised in the light of all the facts. The Baptist hypothesis rests on arguing from the particular to the general - a logical fallacy - and not checking out every aspect. For if it can be shown that in a single case Baptism does not mean immersion then the whole argument crumbles.

In fact we have shown above there is not a single certain case of immersion in the New Testament, and that the probability in case after case is that Baptism was administered by sprinkling or pouring. Let our Baptist brethren go through the whole New Testament and show that every instance recorded was or probably was immersion; and if this cannot be done - and of course we are convinced that it cannot, we invite them to abandon their schismatical divisions and return to the Reformed Faith.

III. But there are additional points which confirm our position and which need to be set out. There is in fact a threefold aspect to Baptism. First, lying behind the matter are all the purifications of the Old Testament, which of course pointed forward to the taking away of sins by our Lord Jesus Christ. We find reference to these in the New Testament in the baptizing of pots and vessels etc. in Mark 7; in our Lord's failure to wash or baptize Himself in Luke 11; in dispute between John's disciples and Jews '*about purification*', and finally in the references to Baptisms in Hebrews. Now all these baptisms or purifications were clearly carried out

by pouring, sprinkling, or washing.

Second, as we have seen, the strong probability is that most of the Baptisms of the New Testament were carried out by pouring or sprinkling; and as we have shown there is nothing in the terms to imply that immersion was ever practiced.

Third, these water baptisms pointed forward to, or signified **real** Baptism; the ingrafting of us into the body of Christ by regeneration - the Baptism of the Holy Spirit. And how is that represented to us? Here are a selection of phrases: "...and it sat upon each of them." (Acts 2 : 3); "For as yet He was fallen upon none of them:" (Acts 8 : 16); "...the Holy Ghost fell on all them which heard the word." (Acts 10 : 44); "...the Holy Ghost fell on them, as on us at the beginning" (Acts 11 : 15); "...the Holy Ghost came upon them;" (Acts 19 : 6). The point surely which is being emphasised in each case is that 'real' baptism is pictured not as an immersion in the Holy Spirit, but that He falls on us from above - as in baptism by sprinkling or pouring.

Now each of these three separate items is congruous with the others. The washings and sprinklings of the Old order point forward to the pourings or sprinklings of the New in Baptism and finally to the great Reality of the falling of the Holy Spirit on believers. And we are reminded in Scripture that a three-fold cord is not easily broken. Substitute immersion in the second and the whole imagery falls apart.

IV. We have earlier remarked that the practical requirements of immersion pose many questions - not least medical ones. At least one minister has remarked on being ill for days after baptizing by immersion a large number of persons, and C. H. Spurgeon in his later years delegated the operation as his lack of health would not allow him to perform it. How odd to have a ministerial ordinance which the minister cannot perform.

One has heard of one Anglican missionary in Africa who insisted on baptizing converts by immersion and who contracted bilharzia as a result so that his missionary career was terminated - and indeed his life imperilled.⁴ In other cases people have nearly been drowned when baptisms have been performed in the sea.⁵

⁴ This Anglican missionary was the Rev. Canon M.H.Garner, M.A., a devout man indeed. He served in Uganda with the Africa Inland Mission. Convinced, at that time, that "immersionism" was the correct mode of baptism, he baptized his African converts in the rivers. Unbeknown to him at that time was the fact that river waters in Africa tend to carry the microscopic worm organism which produces the disease we call 'bilharzia', otherwise known as 'schistosomiasis'. Infection takes place through simple contact with the water, the micro-organism penetrating the skin undetected, entering the blood stream, and breeding therein, producing a long-term debilitating and terminal disease. Modern antibiotics, I understand, can arrest its progress, but prior to their availability, to practice immersionism in African rivers was to run a high risk of contracting a terminal illness. These details concerning Canon Garner can be found in: *The Churchman's Magazine*, for May/June 1983, this being the magazine of the Protestant Truth Society, London. *Ed.*

⁵ In fact, an *Associated Press* report in the London 'Times', Sat. Aug. 22nd 1992 p.9 reported that a pastor and two members of his congregation were **actually drowned** while undertaking baptism by immersion in the River Vaal south of Johannesburg, South Africa. *Ed.*

More might be said - but we forbear.

V. This consideration rather naturally leads on to our final one. The worship of the Old Testament with its types and shadows and sacrifices must have been extremely laborious. But our Lord tells the Samaritan woman that : "*...the hour cometh, and now is, when the true worshippers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth : for the Father seeketh such to worship Him.*" (John 4 ; 23). In the Acts and the Epistles we can identify the elements of that worship. It was performed "*with reverence and godly fear*" (Heb. 12 : 28) on the Lord's day and consisted of:

1. Reading the Scriptures.
2. Praise - in the singing of the Psalms.
3. Prayer.
4. Preaching the Word.
5. Benediction.

To these were added the two sacraments:

6. Baptism.
7. The Lord's Supper.

Now this extremely simple New Testament worship required no Temple, not even a Synagogue. Rather regularly the Scripture speaks of 'a church in a house'. Even two or three gathered together in the name of our Lord were promised God's presence. The Head of the household or an Elder to minister, a supply of the Scriptures, some water, a little bread and wine and all was provided for. Meeting Houses could come later - and would obviously be convenient where large numbers were involved. But there are now, in areas of persecution, and doubtless may be in the future, particularly where no Reformed worship is available, great advantages in such simplicity.

But on the Baptist premise all this is distorted ! Much water is needed, some large container - and as all who have experienced it know, no small performance. How absurd ! Does this sound like the simplicity of New Testament worship - or some Pharisaic distortion which has crept in later like some incubus to distort the primitive and Biblical mode ?

Conclusion

We rest our case - believing it to be unassailable. If the Lord will we will endeavour to consider the Subjects of Baptism in one or two concluding articles.

In this sense, as it (βαπτίζω) expresseth baptism, it denotes "**to wash**" only, and not "to dip" at all : for so it is expounded, Titus.iii.5; Eph. v.26; Heb. x. 22; 1 Pet. iii.21. And it signifies that communication of the Spirit which is expressed by "pouring out" and "sprinkling", Ezek. xxxvi.25, and expresseth our being washed in the blood of Christ, Titus ii.14; Heb.ix. 14, 19, 23. *John Owen : Works Vol.16 p. 266.*