

# LIVING WATERS NEWSLETTER

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## THE SPIRITUAL SIGNIFANCE OF BAPTISM

Editor's note: This article is a Radio sermon we preached in 1961.

There is probably no subject in the entire range of Christian teaching on which the New Testament speaks more definitely and clearly than on Christian Baptism, and yet almost every conceivable view has been held regarding it, from that which attaches to baptism a magical saving power, to that which rejects it altogether as worthless. In our day it seems to be the opinion of many that baptism is, in itself, no more than going into the water dry and coming out wet. It is common for some to speak of baptism as a "mere outward act." Such a misplacing of baptism is responsible for much disregard in which it is held. Robbed of its scriptural beauty and purpose it loses its hold upon the human heart and clings to Christianity as a useless appendage and held there only by force of Divine authority; tolerated for Christ's sake rather than welcomed as an answer to a deep spiritual yearning. Baptism is more than a human aspect. It is an act of spiritual interflow, a rushing together two personalities. The penitent believer is "baptized into Christ," and Christ, in his spirit, comes into the soul, and bestows the assurance of sonship and remission. A togetherness is reached more intimate than that of any human relation, "he in us and we in him."

If baptism is a mere formality, why retain it at all in a spiritual religion like Christianity? The force of this question has some denominations holding to the ordinance with a very feeble grasp. To regard baptism as a mere outward act and then place it in a useless position is to put it on trial for its life. This is killing it and withholding it from burial. But the scriptures declare baptism is not a mere outward act, a mere washing of the body or the cleansing of the flesh (I Pt. 3:21) but a spiritual act. It is a self-giving and a Christ-taking. No one can be "baptized into Christ" without both seeking to enter and being admitted into Christ. Being "in Christ" is a special relation and can as little be accomplished by one party alone as can marriage. The phrase "baptized into Christ" (Rom. 6:3; Gal. 3:27) shows that baptism was regarded by the inspired Apostles as an act of divine acceptance by Christ. If anyone doubts this, let him try to divine the meaning of being "in Christ" so as to exclude acceptance on the part of Christ, and he will discover the moral impossibility involved. "Baptized into Christ" is the most comprehensive expression in the New Testament regarding baptism. It embraces on the physical side, a burial and resurrection (Rom. 6:4, 5) and a washing and cleansing of guilt (Titus 3:5) on the divine side. In its spiritual aspect there is an admission and an entering into Christ. Entering into Christ is the human part and admission into Christ is the divine part (John 17:21).

One of the divine characteristics of Christianity is those found in its stumbling-blocks. Christ became a stumbling-block by what he taught, by what he did, and most of all by that he demanded of men. On one occasion he commanded a rich young ruler to "go and sell all you have, and give to the poor, and come follow me" (Luke 18:18-23). This command struck the ruler like a thunder bolt. Amazed, confounded, dumb, he stumbled and went away resting in the assurance that he was keeping the commandments,

but Christ's demand revealed, not God enthroned in his heart, but mammon. The most fundamental of the commands he was continually breaking. He was not loving God with all his "heart, all his soul and all his might, and his neighbor as himself" (Deut. 6:5, Luke 10:27). He was hoarding his wealth and neglecting the poverty right around him. The stumbling-block Christ placed in the path of the rich ruler was a revelation to him. This stumbling-block was a test act to determine the true condition of his heart. A stumbling-block is a demonstration. It forces the soul to self-revelation...baptism is a stumbling-block. It is a divine revelation of the individual soul. The New Testament reveals the truth from Heaven, baptism reveals the heart. The New Testament reveals human ignorance, baptism reveals human blindness. Baptism is a searchlight but more than a revelation of one's heart. It is a winnowing fan, separating the chaff from the wheat. It is God's way of turning back the unspiritual seeking entrance into the Kingdom. It is God's wall built to keep out those who are not repentant, and by this service it becomes a protection of the spirituality of the church. Take it away, and the world and the church flow together and the church would be lost in the sea of unredeemed humanity. He who strikes baptism deal a blow at the spirituality of the church. Let anyone recognizing the truth of the scriptures, who hears "no" in his heart to baptism take heed. It is a revelation of the awful moment and is as certain as though spoken by a voice from heaven. It means the heart is not right.

Baptism is failing to accomplish fully its high and holy ends because it is belittled and minimized by the churches. The great motive for cheapening baptism must be found in that as it stands in the scriptures, it is displeasing to many. Baptism has had a stormy history and is still bending under a shower of adverse criticism. To many, this may seem sufficient proof that there is something wrong about it, but they forget that it is of the very nature a stumbling-block that it should be "spoken against" and that this is one of the highest marks of its excellency and efficiency. Men never like that which causes them to stumble. But the disastrous thing about it the churches have largely joined in this adverse criticism, to the belittling and cheapening of baptism. When a man of the world thinks he is all right without Christ finds in his heart a "no" to baptism, if the churches join with him and say it is "a mere outward act," a mere physical affair having no important relation to his conversion and that it is of no importance, that it has nothing to do with salvation, it is for him utterly ruined as a test act. The man takes no alarm at his dislike for it and that it is not his heart that is wrong after all, but baptism. In doing this the churches have put out the searchlight that the gospel was carrying into the man's heart. Woe to them who turn out the lights in this dark world. Let such people beware lest they be found fighting against God. What would the New Testament be worth, should the churches decry it, belittle it, to discredit before the world as they have baptism? It is high time they stop cheapening baptism. Honor it as command of God, use it aright. It is designed to keep out the half-hearted. It is of vast importance to Christianity to keep out the ease loving. Baptism is not to be convenient. Christ's cross was not convenient, and our cross-bearing should not be. The science of

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biology teaches that ease-taking on the part of any creature results in degeneration. Ease seeking in Christianity is nothing less than spiritual death, and all such tendencies should be resisted. Baptism, as a stumbling-block should be built so high and strong as to repeal all the unspiritual and ease loving...every other being but the humble, penitent, fleeing with a broken heart into the arms of the Redeemer. The early church was filled with heroic people whose faith shook the world. Their faith accomplished such great results because it was not weak but strong. When they came to God's command that men be immersed, they obeyed without hesitation. For example: every conversion in the book of Acts mentions baptism, but all do not mention faith or repentance. Note each conversion recorded: Acts 2:38: The Jews on the day of Pentecost; Acts 8:12: The Samaritans; Acts 8:37-38, the Ethiopian eunuch; Acts 9:18, 22:16: Saul of Tarsus (the Apostle Paul); Acts 10:47,48: Cornelius and his household; Acts 16:15: Lydia and her household; Acts 16:33: The Philippian jailer; Acts 18:8: Many of the Corinthians; Acts 19:1-5: Twelve disciples of John the Baptist. Will this generation's faith meet this challenge and prove the measure of its faith?

Christianity is without question advocates justification on the ground or basis of faith. Ephesians 2:8,9: "For by grace have you been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves, it is a gift of God, not of works, lest any man should boast." Romans 1:17 states the theme of the book of Romans, indeed, the theme of Christianity... "the righteous shall live by faith" or as the Swedish Theologian, Anders Nygren translated it "the righteous by faith shall live." In establishing this teaching Paul states in Romans 3:28: "We reckon therefore, that a man is justified by faith apart from the works of the law." Romans 9:30-32 states: "The Gentiles, who followed not after righteousness, attained to righteousness, even the righteousness, which is of faith, but Israel, following after a law of righteousness, did not arrive at the law, wherefore? Because they sought it not by faith, but as it were by works." Also, definitely to our point is Galatians 2:16: "Yet knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law, but through faith in Christ, and not by the works of the law, because by the works of the law shall no flesh be justified," and Galatians 3:24: "so that the law is become our schoolmaster to bring us to Christ, that we might be justified by faith."

The tenor of the above scriptures is that a man does not achieve his own salvation. It is a gift of God, conditioned, to be sure, but grounded upon his faith, and not upon the earning power of his own meritorious work or his own achievements. Our salvation is grounded upon the merit of Christ, upon his achievement, upon what he did for us and not upon the principle of works which we do ourselves. James, however, brings the following scriptures to our attention: "Faith without works is dead, being alone. You see that a man is justified by works and not by faith alone. For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so also faith without works is dead (James 2:17, 24, 26).

Because the majority of people are so prone to think of baptism as a work of human merit, they have fought it with all the power they have. They cannot see that baptism is simply an expression of faith or what the Apostle Paul calls "the obedience of faith" (Rom. 16:26), and not contrary to it, and not the kind of works which he condemns. Faith includes obedience just as it includes trust, reliance, love, and gratitude. Baptism is faith expressed or obedience of faith just as James points out without it faith is dead, being alone.

A growing trend today in the medical world is toward alternative medicine. This is either in the place of or adding to the accepted medical practices. The basic idea is that of natural healing. Health food stores are prospering, and drug counters are filled with natural herbs and remedies for anything that ails you. This is not to pass judgment upon this practice. We simply want to use it as an illustration of a greater problem facing physical health, that of spiritual health. And though we do not pass judgment upon alternative medicine we certainly judge alternative Christianity by its fruit.

Alternative Christianity is a trend toward either taking away, replacing or adding to the revealed Scriptural teaching and practice. The basic idea is more natural (soulish) than spiritual. So-called Christian bookstores are prospering and are filled with rows upon rows of books espousing this new trend. Televangelists, religious writers, and seminars as well as local churches and preachers continually lay before the public the virtues of alternative Christianity. Just as alternative medicine is not only new (having been practiced for ages by people before modern technology came on the scene, using roots, herbs and natural remedies found available to them) even so, alternative Christianity is not new (having come on the scene as early as the Apostolic era and has flourished throughout the history of the church coming to fruition in our modern day of new age thinking). It was known by the Apostle Paul when he diagnosed it at Galatia when false teachers came in to poison the new converts of Christ. The Judaizers poisoned the gospel of its power and simplicity by adding circumcision and law keeping as a means of salvation (Gal. 1:3-11). When Paul faced the sin of false teaching in Galatia, he was not dealing with something comparable to Buddhism, Hinduism, or Islam, but an in-house close counterfeit of the real thing, which he calls a "different gospel." False teaching and false teachers are a major subject dealt with both in the Old Testament and New Testament Scriptures, but totally ignored by the modern church. Examples are found in Matthew 7:15-23; Acts 20:28-30; II Cor. 11:12-15; II Tim. 4:3, 4; II Pet. 2:1ff; Jude I; Ezekiel 13:1-6; and a host of other passages found in the prophets. In the book of Revelation one of the beasts is identified as a False Prophet.

It was early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century that German rationalism was introduced into denominational seminaries that trickled down into the churches by preachers embracing the teaching of their professors who had rejected anything in Scripture that could not be explained on a rational basis. The authority of the Scriptures and anything in Scripture that could not be explained scientifically or psychologically was blatantly rejected. This kind of thinking flooded churches and became an alternative Christianity known as "modernism."

In opposition to modernism the pendulum swung to the other extreme in what was known as the Fundamentalist movement resulting in exclusive denominationalism. As a result, alternative Christianity has been seen in Calvinism, dispensational theology, legalism and divisions which has characterized the religious world for the past 100 years. It was in the context of this religious atmosphere that kooky religious idiocy has flourished. The world has had enough reason to reject, resist and ridicule the church when you consider some of the sensational shenanigans of some religious groups and listen to the shallow mediocre preaching from many pulpits.