

LIVING WATERS NEWSLETTER

HARRY BOWERS, EDITOR

7844 GRIMSBY CIRCLE HARRISBURG, N.C. 28075

OCTOBER 2023

BAPTISM

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 in 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 faith, 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 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 jailor; 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, without question advocates justification on the 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 these 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.

BAPTISM: THE MOST DISPUTED DOCTRINE IN THE BIBLE. (Continued from last month).

Last month we ended with the conversion of the Gentiles. There is the record of four more conversions mentioned in Acts" Lydia and her household (16:15), the Philippian jailor (16:33), many of the Corinthians (18:8), and twelve disciples of John the Baptist (19:1-5). The first ones to hear of Christ in Europe was an Asiatic by the name of Lydia. Along with some women, who on the Sabbath day, had gathered by the riverbank for prayer. We read in verse 14: "A certain woman named Lydia, a seller of purple, of the city of Thyatira, one that worshiped God, heard us, whose heart the Lord opened to heed the things being spoken by Paul." The fact that "the Lord opened her heart" shows that it must have, up to this point been closed. The

heart of man is naturally shut against the gospel. The natural mind cannot receive the things of God, and rather recoil from it. But the Holy Spirit, directing the words of Paul, opened the heart of Lydia to hear and receive the word. Any Jewish prejudice she had, vanished as she "gave heed to the things spoken by Paul." Then we read she was baptized and her household.

Acts 16:22-33 is the story of Paul and Silas being thrown into prison and being falsely charged of proclaiming customs unlawful for the Roman officials to accept. At midnight Paul and Silas were singing hymns and praying, and suddenly the prison was shaken by a mighty earthquake and all the doors of the prison were opened. When the jailor saw what had happened, his first thought was suicide (Roman jailors were killed if prisoners escaped). Paul quickly informed him none of the prisoners had escaped and there was no need for alarm. The jailor "called for lights and trembling, fell down before Paul and Silas, and said 'Sirs, what must I do to be saved?'" (From the Roman law of death). The answer of Paul was characteristic of the apostles: "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you shall be saved, you and your house" Then we read: "And they spoke the word of the Lord to him, with all that were in his house, and took them the same hour of the night, was baptized, he and all his house immediately."

Acts 18:7, 8 is a brief account of baptism. While in Corinth, Paul "went to the house of a man Named Titus Justus, a worshiper of God, whose house was next to the synagogue. Crispus, the leader of the synagogue, believed in the Lord with all his household, and many of the Corinthians when they heard were believing and being baptized."

The last record of Baptisms is in chapter 19:1-7: "It happened while Apollos was at Corinth, Paul passed through the upper country and came to Ephesus and found some disciples. He said to them. 'Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?' And they said to him. 'No, we have not even heard whether there is a Holy Spirit.' And he said. 'Into what were you baptized?' and they said. 'Into John's baptism.' Paul said, 'John baptized with the baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in him who was coming after him, that is Jesus,' When they heard this, they were baptized into the name of the Lord Jesus. And when Paul had laid his hands upon them, the Holy Spirit came on them, and they began speaking in tongues and prophesying. There were in all about twelve men."

The Apostle Paul was within his right to question these disciples about their faith. There is a certain standard of conduct that may be expected from Christian people. There should be a marked difference in our lives and the lives of those who aren't Christians. A life of constant defeat, worry fear, and anxiety is not befitting the Christian life. There is an ironic paradox in this situation which is still with us today. We note the fact that although these men had evidently listened to the eloquent exposition of the scriptures, they were still ignorant of the life-giving and life-retaining aspect of what these scriptures taught...that of the reality of the Holy Spirit. They are spoken of as deficient in their faith. They were disciples, and all indications point to the fact they were believers, But Paul immediately recognized something missing in their life. Herein lies the danger of forms and ceremonies in religion...that they are merely forms and ceremonies and nothing more. To be baptized simply as a formality or to join in fellowship with other believers simply because it is fashionable or popular is to go no further in actual experience than these twelve disciples. As long as our lives are incomplete our religion will inevitably be a thing of struggle and toil. Full surrender brings full peace. Perhaps the question we need to ask ourselves today is the same one Paul directed toward the Ephesians. SELAH