

BAPTISM



ESSENTIAL
TO
SALVATION

Baptism

THE IMPORTANCE Of baptism is put beyond all doubt by some words spoken by the Lord Jesus Christ to his disciples shortly before he ascended into heaven. He said, 'Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature. He that believeth and is *baptised* shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned' (Mark 16. 15, 16).

It may be thought that this fact is generally accepted by professing Christians. When we examine the teaching of the Bible, however, we find that it differs fundamentally, in almost every respect, from both the teaching and the practice of the established Church. It is therefore the purpose of this booklet to examine the teaching of the Bible as to what baptism is, how it should be administered, what it means, and what it achieves.

WHAT IS BAPTISM?

Baptism has nothing to do with 'Christening'. The word baptism, as used in the New Testament, is the Greek word 'baptizo', which means 'to dip' or 'to plunge'. It is a word which was used particularly in the dyeing trade, and described the process of immersing a piece of cloth or a garment in the dye. It thus implied a complete covering by the liquid dye, resulting in a change of colour in the object being 'baptised'.

An examination of the passages where baptism is recorded in the New Testament will show that such a complete immersion was the practice in every case. For example, when a certain Ethiopian was baptised by Philip, we read that 'they *went down* both into the water,

both Philip and the eunuch; and he baptised him. And when they were *come up out of the water*', etc (Acts 8. 38, 39). Again, concerning the work of John the Baptist, we are told that he baptised 'in Aenon near to Salim, because there was much water there' (John 3. 23). These two instances clearly imply bodily immersion: sprinkling or pouring are inconsistent with 'going down into the water' and 'coming up out of the water', and with the need for 'much water'. The importance of the form baptism should take will become apparent when we come to consider its meaning.

TO WHOM BAPTISM MAY BE ADMINISTERED

In the Catholic Church, the Church of England, and some other denominations, it is the established practice to baptise or 'christen' children a few weeks after birth. This practice is endorsed by the Articles of Religion of the Book of Common Prayer, used by the Church of England, No. 27 of which reads: 'the baptism of young children is in any wise to be retained by the church, as most agreeable with the institution of Christ'.

But is such a practice 'agreeable with the institution of Christ'? In the passage already quoted (Mark 16. 15, 16) Jesus declared, 'He that *believeth* and is baptised shall be saved', and it will be found that in every case of baptism recorded in the New Testament it followed a preaching of the gospel, and a belief of the things taught. The instance of Philip and the Ethiopian is a clear case in point. It is recorded that after Philip had preached to him Jesus, they came to a certain water, and the eunuch said, 'See, here is water; what doth hinder me to be baptised? And Philip said, *If thou believest* with all thine heart, thou mayest. And he answered and said, I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God' (Acts 8. 35-37). It will be seen that there was first a preaching of the gospel by Philip, to which the man responded by expressing a desire to be baptised; but baptism was only administered after an express confession of a belief in the things which Philip had taught.

A similar instance is to be found earlier in the same chapter, which records the work of Philip at Samaria. In v. 12 we read, '*when they believed* Philip preaching the things concerning the kingdom of God, and

the name of Jesus Christ, *they were baptised*, both men and women'. Later, when Paul and Silas were miraculously delivered from prison at Philippi, the jailor, perceiving the hand of God at work, asked them, 'Sirs, what must I do to be saved?' The record continues, 'And they said, *Believe* on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved, and thy house. And they spake unto him the word of the Lord, and to all that were in his house. And he took them the same hour of the night, and washed their stripes; and was baptised, he and all his, straight-way' (Acts 16. 30-33).

In each of these cases it will be seen that baptism was administered in response to a desire which had been aroused by a belief of the gospel preached by the apostles. From this it follows that the baptism of infants is not 'agreeable with the institution of Christ' on two counts:

- (1) It is not preceded by an intelligent understanding and belief of the gospel;
- (2) It is not carried out by total immersion in water.

HOW DID 'INFANT SPRINKLING' ORIGINATE?

The practice of baptising young infants finds no countenance at all in the Bible, nor does the practice of sprinkling or pouring water over the forehead. As has been shown, such practices conflict with the clear teaching of the Bible concerning the nature and meaning of baptism.

How, then, did these practices originate? A study of ecclesiastical history shows that they were the consequence of the introduction of false teaching on other fundamental matters. During the third century A.D. the teaching current among pagan philosophers that man possesses an immortal soul found lodgment within the Christian church. Such teaching made it necessary to find homes for the souls at death, and it began to be taught that the righteous went to heaven and the wicked to hell-doctrines which, again, are not to be found in the Bible. From this it came to be argued that if a child died before reaching an age of responsibility, it would automatically be consigned to hell unless it had been baptised into the church. In fact, in the year A.D. 253 a council

was held in Africa attended by 66 bishops, at which this question was considered; and it was then agreed that baptism should be performed within the second or third day after birth as, if the child died but two or three days old, its soul would be lost. About the same time the dogma was proclaimed that `those whose weak state of health did not permit them to be washed in water, were yet sufficiently baptised by being sprinkled'.

The rite of infant sprinkling, like so many current Church practices, was actually derived from paganism. In Roman times a newly born girl on the eighth day after birth, and a boy on the ninth, underwent a ceremony of purification with so-called `holy water' in order to protect them against 5

sorcery. In `*Manual of Roman Antiquities*' (Ramsay and Lanciane) it is recorded:

`Boys on the ninth, and girls on the eighth day after birth underwent a religious purification termed "lustratio", and on this day the former received their "Proenomen" (or forename)'.

We can see from this how it became the practice for `Christening' to be the occasion on which the first name, or `Christian' name, was given.

It was not until the fifth century A.D. that infant baptism became fully established as the general practice of the Christian Church, and even then total immersion of such infants was common. In England before the Reformation it was the ordinary practice to immerse infants, and the fonts in churches were made large enough for this to be done. But from the time of Elizabeth I the Church of England adopted what had become the custom of many Western Churches and, instead of immersing the babe, either poured water upon its head or sprinkled a few drops of water on its face. The baptism of infants is usually defended by those who practise it on two grounds. Firstly, it is argued that Jesus taught the salvation of young children when he said, `Suffer little children, and forbid them not, to come unto me: for *of such is the kingdom of heaven*' (Matt. 19. 14). It is evident, however, that Jesus is referring to the *disposition* required of those who will enter his kingdom, for in the previous chapter he says, `Verily I say unto you, Except ye be con-

verted, and *become* as little children, ye shall not enter the kingdom of heaven' (Matt. 18. 3). Secondly, it is claimed that baptism corresponds to circumcision under the Law of Moses, which was performed on infants eight days old, and that the parallel between baptism and circumcision is advanced by the apostle Paul in his Epistle to the Colossians. What Paul wrote was this:

Ye are complete in him (Christ) . . . In whom also ye are circumcised with the circumcision made without hands, in putting off the body of the sins of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ: 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. 10-12).

The point the apostle is making is that baptism is the counter-part of circumcision inasmuch as it requires a 'cutting off of the flesh' (mortification of the body of sin); but he also makes it clear that an essential element of baptism is faith in the efficacy of Christ's redemptive work, which cannot be so in the case of an eight-day-old infant.

THE MEANING OF BAPTISM

The importance of the form of baptism only becomes fully apparent when its meaning is understood. It is generally regarded in Christendom as a rite by which a person becomes a member of the Church: as the prayer book expresses it, 'they that receive baptism rightly are grafted into the church'. This is, however, a most superficial view of the matter.

In the early chapters of the Acts of the Apostles, we find the record of how the apostles carried out the command of Jesus given before his ascension to heaven. Chapter 2 tells how that, only a few days later, on the day of Pentecost, Peter preached to the Jews and proselytes gathered from all parts of the Roman Empire into Jerusalem. As a result of his words the consciences of the people were pricked, and they asked, 'Men and brethren, what shall we do?' Peter's reply is instructive:

`Repent, and be baptised everyone of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins. Then they that gladly received his word were baptised' (Acts 2._38, 41).

Baptism, then, was for *the remission of sins*. How this is so is explained by the Apostle Paul in his letter to the Romans. He writes, `Know ye not, that so many of us as were baptised into Jesus Christ were baptised *into his death?*' (Rom. 6. 3) Now Jesus died in order that sin might be destroyed. Although a member of the human race, he lived a sinless life and yet submitted to death upon the cross. He thus condemned sin in his own body, and brought within the reach of man a hope of resurrection from the dead, and inheritance of immortality. But the sacrificial work of Christ did not bring life and immortality to *all* mankind. In order to benefit from his work, it is necessary to become related to him in the way that God has ordained. This way is by baptism; as the apostle continues:

`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. Now if we be dead with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with him'
(Rom. 6. 4, 5, 8).

Baptism, then, is a symbolic burial. It is an act by which the believer associates himself with Christ's sacrificial work. Just as Christ went down into the grave and rose again therefrom, to become a regenerated being, so the believer is buried in the water, and rises therefrom to a new sort of life. Baptism is thus an expression of the faith of the believer in the efficacy of Christ's sacrificial work and of his desire to associate himself with what Christ came to do.

It is this symbolic meaning of baptism which emphasises the importance of total immersion. The sprinkling of a few drops of water is no more baptism than the sprinkling of a few grains of earth would be burial, and makes nonsense of the statement of the apostle, `we are *buried* with him by baptism into death'.

A SYMBOLIC WASHING

Baptism has a secondary symbolic meaning which is, in fact, very closely associated with the first.

In Paul's account of his conversion, recorded in Acts ch. 22, he says that he was told 'And now why tarriest thou? arise, and be baptised, and *wash away thy sins*, calling on the name of the Lord' (Acts 22. 16). Baptism is thus referred to as a 'washing away of sins', and this figure is used a number of times in the apostolic letters. In the epistle to the Hebrews it is written,

'Let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience, and our bodies *washed with pure water*' (Heb. 10. 22).

This washing away of sins is, of course, very closely associated with Christ's work upon the cross, for it is by his death that it has become possible for sins to be forgiven. He is described as 'Him that loved us, and *washed us from our sins in his own blood*' (Rev. 1. 5).

WHAT DOES BAPTISM ACHIEVE?

The apostle Paul writes to the Galatians, 'For as many of you as have been baptised into Christ have put on Christ. . . And if ye be Christ's, then are ye Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise' (Gal. 3. 27, 29).

Baptism, then, is the means by which one 'puts on' Christ. In other words, it is the means by which one identifies oneself with the work of Christ upon the cross, and becomes related to God's promises. It must be accompanied by repentance, that is, a change of heart and mind, and a determination to live a new sort of life. As the apostle Paul puts it, 'Our old man is crucified with him, that the body of sin might be destroyed, that henceforth we should not serve sin' (Rom. 6. 6). And so at baptism our former sins are washed away, and we commence a new life dedicated to God. Instead of being servants of sin, leading a life

which will inevitably end in an eternal grave, we become servants of Christ, and related to eternal life; as the apostle again writes, 'Now being made free from sin, and become servants to God, ye have your fruit unto holiness, and the end everlasting life. For the wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord' (Rom. 6. 22, 23).

BAPTISM ESSENTIAL TO SALVATION

From the foregoing it will be seen that baptism is absolutely essential for salvation. If 'as many as have been baptised into Christ have put on Christ' it follows that as many as have not been baptised have not put on Christ, and are not, therefore, 'heirs according to the promise'. The position of such is specifically described by the apostle Paul in the following words:

'At that time ye were without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope, and without God in the world'.

But, he continues, 'Now in Christ Jesus ye who sometimes were far off are made nigh by the blood of Christ' (Eph. 2. 12, 13).

The case of Cornelius provides an illustration of how such a change takes place. Cornelius was a centurion in the Roman army. He was a Gentile, and thus was literally an 'alien from the commonwealth of Israel, and a stranger from the covenants of promise'. At the same time he was an outstandingly devout man, described as 'one that feared God with all his house, which gave much alms to the people, and prayed to God alway'; (Acts 10. 2) he thus fulfilled all the requirements of 'a good Christian', as that phrase is commonly understood. And yet all his piety and good works were not sufficient to bring him salvation. He was told by God to send for Peter, who would tell him 'what he ought to do' (Acts 10. 6). What *did* Peter tell him to do? First, he preached to him the things concerning the Lord Jesus Christ, and what was accomplished by his death and resurrection; and having done that, he then 'commanded them to be baptised in the name of the Lord' (Acts 10.

48). In this way he 'put on Christ', and became an heir of the promises of God to Israel.

The necessity for baptism is put beyond all doubt by the words of Jesus himself to Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews; he said, 'Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he *cannot* enter into the kingdom of God' (John 3. 5).

It is sometimes argued that the incident of the thief on the cross shows that there may be cases where baptism can be dispensed with. But what are the facts? In response to the thief's dying request, 'Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom', Jesus gave him the assurance that he would be with him in paradise. It is suggested that this was, as it were, a 'death-bed repentance' which provided no opportunity for baptism, and yet Jesus promised him salvation.

But the truth is that we do not know that this man had not been baptised. It is declared that during Christ's ministry 'the common people heard him gladly'. The thief may well have been one of those who had listened to Christ's preaching, for he knew about the future mission of Christ to return to establish his kingdom. Moreover, he must have been a man of quite remarkable faith, for at a time when Jesus was dying-when the hopes of his followers seemed dashed-when even his closest disciples had forsaken him and fled-he expressed his belief in the fact that Jesus would 'come in his kingdom'. It is not at all unreasonable to suppose that such a man would have been among those who were baptised by the disciples during Jesus' ministry. Even if this were not the case the prerogative of Jesus to accept the thief upon his confession cannot be questioned, and in no way nullifies the Lord's express command concerning baptism.

‘THUS IT BECOMETH US TO FULFIL ALL RIGHTEOUSNESS’

When Jesus went to John to be baptised by him, John protested, saying, ‘I have need to be baptised of thee, and comest thou to me?’ To this Jesus replied, ‘Suffer it to be so now: for thus it becometh us to fulfil all righteousness’ (Matt. 3. 13-15).

Thus Jesus set the example for his disciples to follow. Baptism is an act which calls, above all, for a humble and submissive attitude to God and his requirements; and it is for this reason that many cavil at this ordinance. Pride and stubbornness have no place in man's relationship with God, as Naaman the Syrian was made to learn (see II Kings 5). He was a man suffering from the loathsome disease of leprosy, but was told by the prophet Elisha, ‘Go and wash in Jordan seven times, and thou shalt be clean’. Such a command was too simple and too humbling for a great man like Naaman. He was angry because the prophet did not make a great show and heal him at once. But his servants could see the folly of his attitude, and they reasoned with him, saying, ‘If the prophet had bid thee do some great thing, wouldest thou not have done it? how much rather than, when he saith to thee, Wash, and be clean?’ It was a question of obedience, of humility, of subjecting human pride to the will of God; and when Naaman did as he was told, he was instantly cured. So it is with the command to be baptised. God does not ask of us some great thing; but He does require those who would come to Him to do so in humility, with a willingness to submit to what He has laid down. Baptism is the means ordained by God whereby we can put on the sin-covering Name of Christ; it is the ark of refuge by which we can be saved from the consequences of sin; as the apostle Peter wrote:

‘Christ hath once suffered for sins, the just for the unjust, that he might bring us to God. . . The longsuffering of God waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was a preparing, wherein few, that is, eight souls were saved by water. The like figure whereunto *baptism doth also now save us . . .* by the resurrection of Jesus Christ’ (I Pet. 3. 18-21).

The consequence of thus rendering obedience to God's command, and continuing thereafter in well-doing, will be that the believer will be rewarded with immortality when Jesus Christ returns to the earth. He will then experience that `baptism of the Spirit' of which Christ spoke to Nicodemus: `Except a man be born of water *and of the Spirit*, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God' (John 3. 5). This change of nature is described by the apostle Paul in these words:

`This corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality. So when this corruption shall have put on incorruption, and this mortal shall have put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written, Death is swallowed up in victory' (I Cor. 15. 53, 54).

It is a prospect which called forth from the apostle an exclamation which must surely be echoed by all who have learned of the way of salvation God has provided:

`Thanks be to God, which giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ' (I Cor. 15. 57).

NOTES