

The Act, Subjects, and Design of Baptism

An Address delivered by
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Though there are divisions among believers, it is pleasing to think that there is agreement on many fundamental matters. We believe in the same God, the same Savior, and the same Holy Spirit, and we all acknowledge the Bible as the standard of appeal in religion. These are great matters, and it is pleasing to know that, with few exceptions, we are agreed upon them. Still, there are subjects upon which we are not agreed, and I have resolved to devote the time at my disposal this evening to one of these subjects.

We are often blamed for saying too much about Baptism. It is seldom I give an address on that subject, but I wish to do so tonight. Baptism may be looked at from three standpoints. First, "What does baptism mean?" When Christ commanded His disciples to go and baptize, He commanded an action of some kind. What was that action? In the second place we may enquire, "Who should be baptized?" and, lastly, "What is baptism for?" - that is, is it for any particular purpose? or what place does it fill in the Christian economy? When you know what baptism means, whom it is for, and what it is for, you may be said to understand that subject.

What does Baptism mean?

What then, is baptism? When Christ said, baptize, what did He intend to be done? To all of you standing around me who are not Greek scholars the word baptize has no meaning. When the word is used, there may rise up before some of your minds a minister, a parent, an infant, and water being sprinkled on the face of the infant; but it is not the meaning of the word that calls up that picture to the mind, it is the circumstances under which you have been brought up. If you belong to a Baptist family, when the word baptize is used it may call to your mind two persons, and the one immersing the other in water, but unless you are a Greek scholar it is not the meaning of the word that calls the immersion to your mind, but the circumstances under which you have been trained. It is a Greek word, and therefore conveys no idea to an

English scholar. The New Testament was written in Greek. Those who translated the New Testament for us did not translate that word. They only slightly changed its form, and passed on the Greek word to us. Why did our translators do this? Why did they not tell us in English what the Savior wishes us to do? If baptize means sprinkle, why did they not say so? If it means pour, why did they not tell us? If it means dip, they should have said so. Why did they pass on a command of Christ in Greek, that working men were intended to obey?

Our translators had some reason for not translating that word. They either could not translate it, or would not translate it. No thoughtful person will believe that Jesus gave a command in language that cannot be understood. That would be a disgrace to any public teacher. There is only the other thing for it then, and that is, they could translate it, but would not. The fact is the word means to immerse, but does not mean to sprinkle or pour, and the churches the translators belonged to had taken to sprinkling or pouring before our translation was made. They dare not translate baptize by sprinkle or pour, and to translate it by immerse and then continue to sprinkle would have been rather awkward. Their best way out of the fix, therefore, was to pass on the Greek word to us, and not translate it at all. This they did, and hence you have a Greek word looking you in the face where you should have had an English one.

When I say that this word means to immerse, I say what scholars will not contradict. All your ministers and doctors and most of your schoolmasters know that this is true, and will not venture to contradict it. A Greek dictionary is a proper place to go for the meaning of a Greek word. Let any of you go to your minister and ask him to take down his Greek dictionary, and read to you there from the meaning of the word baptizo. Do not ask him what he thinks, ask him what the Greek lexicon says, and you will find that dip or immerse, or some such word, is given as its first meaning, and that sprinkling is not given as a meaning at all. When you immerse, you do what the word means; when you sprinkle, you do what it does not mean.

One of our brethren in America was arranging for a debate with an Episcopal Methodist. Our brother said: "I immerse, and I say that immersion is baptism. If you will deny that, you can have a debate about my practice." The Methodist said: "I will not deny that immersion is baptism." "Very well," said our brother, "you sprinkle and

call that baptism: you can then affirm that sprinkling is baptism and I will deny it, and we can have a debate about your practice; but, remember, there is no dispute about my practice. I am right, no matter how the debate goes."

My friends, that is how the case stands. Immersion is right beyond question; all the question is on the other side. Let me give a few samples from the stock of evidence that might be led in favor of immersion. I know of no Greek dictionary that does not say that baptizo means to immerse. Take one example. In Liddell and Scott, under baptizo we get to dip under, to dip repeatedly, to bathe. That is a sample of what your ministers are taught at college. But the use of a word by good writers in a language is a higher appeal than dictionaries. The word was in common use in the Greek language in Christ's day. How was it used?

I will make only two quotations, though many might be given. We will take them from Josephus, as his works are within reach of many of you. Jewish Antiquities, Bk. XV., ch. 3: 3, describing the murder of the boy Aristobulus, who was drowned by his companions in a swimming bath: "Continually pressing down and immersing [baptizing] him while swimming, they did not desist till they had entirely suffocated him." Can there be any doubt as to what baptism means here? Did they sprinkle the boy till they drowned him? Take another occurrence of the word from Josephus' Life of himself, 3: "For our vessel having been submerged [baptized] in the midst of the Adriatic, being about six hundred in number, we swam through the whole night." I have fishermen all around me. What has happened to your boat when you have had to take to swimming? Can there be any doubt as to what baptize means here?

If any man will give quotations from the Greek language where baptize as certainly means sprinkle as it means immersion in these cases, I will say no more against sprinkling, but I do not believe that anything of the kind can be given.

Notwithstanding the fact that baptize is not translated, the circumstances in which it occurs in the New Testament prove that it means to immerse. We must content ourselves with a few examples, as our time is limited. In the first chapter of Mark, verses 9-10, we have an account of the baptism of Jesus by John: "And it came to pass in those

days that Jesus came from Nazareth to Galilee, and was baptized of John in Jordan. And straightway coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens opened, and the Spirit like a dove descending upon Him." In the 9th verse we are informed that Jesus was baptized in the Jordan. In the margin of the Revised Version, it says, Greek, into: that is, Jesus was baptized into the Jordan. Now he could not be sprinkled into the Jordan, nor poured into the Jordan, but he could be immersed into the Jordan; nothing but immersion will make sense here.

Turn now to Acts 8: 36-39: "And as they went on their way, they came to a certain water; and the eunuch said, See, here is water, what doth hinder me to be baptized? 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. And he commanded the chariot to stand still, and they went down both into the water, both Philip and the eunuch, and he baptized him. And when they were come up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord caught away Philip, that the eunuch saw him no more: and he went on his way rejoicing."

Here you have Philip and the eunuch coming to the water, going down into the water, when there, the eunuch is baptized, then they both come up out of the water. Now if the eunuch was immersed, there was a reason for their being in the water; but if he was sprinkled, there was no reason for them being there. No man is stupid enough to take another man into the water for the purpose of pouring a little of it on his head; or sprinkling a few drops on his face. And we dare not attribute such stupidity to the men concerned in this case. Carson has said that "the idiot who followed the Armagh coach to Dublin to see if the big wheels would overtake the little ones, had an errand, but the person who goes into a water to be sprinkled is worse than an idiot, for he goes there without an errand." There is not an occurrence in the New Testament where the sense of the passage demands the idea of sprinkling, as these passages demand the idea of immersion.

Time will not permit more than another quotation. Romans 6: 4: "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." Here you have a literal description of immersion: "buried and raised again." When you read that passage the idea of immersion presents itself to the mind. If any man thinks he can make out a clear case for sprinkling, I am willing to

give him a public opportunity of trying to do so. We are sometimes asked if the quantity of water will make any difference. No, it will not, but whether you obey or disobey the Lord Jesus Christ may make a difference. If Christ commanded sprinkling, immersion is not sprinkling, but another action altogether, and if Christ commanded immersion, sprinkling is not immersion, but quite a different action, and, therefore, no obedience to the command of the Lord. It is the Lord's place to command, it is ours to obey, and we dare not tamper or trifle with His commandments. We stand where we do because we are certain of its truth, and simply dare not stand on the other side, for we are sure it will not stand the test.

Who should be Baptized?

Let us now turn to the question: "Who should be baptized?" This is a plain English question, and, therefore, more easily settled by anyone who will consult the Scriptures, and is disposed to abide by what they teach. In Mark 16: 15-16, we have an account of the institution of Christian baptism: "And he said unto them: Go ye into all the world and preach the Gospel to every creature: He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned." We have here the baptizing placed after the believing, though men have reversed that order. If we turn to the Acts of the Apostles, we will see how the Apostles carried out this commission. As they were guided by the Holy Spirit they would not be mistaken. In Acts 2: 41, we have the first account of Christian baptism being administered, and we are there informed that it was they who gladly received the word who were baptized. This is in keeping with Mark 16:, first believe and then be baptized.

Turn now to Acts 8:, where we have an account of Philip preaching at Samaria. It is stated in verse 12, as a result of his preaching that "When they believed Philip preaching the things concerning the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women." Here again you have the same order of things: preach, believe, and be baptized. Men and women are mentioned, but not a word is said about infants, though this would have been a likely place to find them if there had been any. Households without infants are easy to get, but a city without infants is another matter. Take just one other case. In Acts 18: 8, we are informed that many of the Corinthians,

hearing, believed, and were baptized." Thus we might go on, but enough has been given to put it beyond all doubt that believers are scriptural subjects of baptism. That believers are scriptural subjects of baptism is not doubted, and dare not be denied. We thank no man for admitting it; he dare not do anything else. Now most of you who are hearing me have been reading the Bible nearly all your days, but you never read of the baptism of an infant there, for there is no such thing in it. We practice what we can prove, and you practice what you cannot prove, and yet we are called narrow-minded, and ignorant by those who profess to be guided by the Bible in this matter, but are not. It is a strange state of affairs, but true all the same.

So far, I have said nothing that might not have been said by a Baptist, or by some sections of those known as Brethren.

What is Baptism for?

But in looking at the third question, "What is baptism for?" we must shake hands and part company with the Baptists, and fall more into line with some of the more popular bodies. In looking at this aspect of the subject, we ask your particular attention, for though we as a body speak plainly on this subject, we are constantly misrepresented by those from whom you would expect better things. For example, it is no rare thing to hear preachers say that we put the water where the blood should be. There ought to come a time when we should not be asked to call this a mistake. I think we have corrected it about often enough to call it a lie now. We ought to be allowed to call a spade a spade sometime, surely.

Let me give a sample of what I complain of. A preacher had stated publicly that we put water instead of blood. I was informed of it. Some time after, he and some of his religious friends were passing my door. I stepped out and asked them to stop. I told him what I had heard. He said, "I know you do not believe that, but some of the members of your church do." "Well," I said, "if you will give me the name of one man that so believes, I pledge myself before these witnesses that I will either have him expelled or leave myself." He could not give the name of one such man, of course, for the good reason that there was no such man. I then said to him, "I will treat this as a mistake, though I hardly think I should, but if I get you at like work again, remember I will not then call

it a mistake." This is only a sample of what is done by men who profess to be born again.

We say that the baptism of a penitent believer is for the remission of sins, but in doing so we do not put water instead of blood; we place no merit in the water; we place the merit in the death of Christ for us, as other people do, but instead of saying that man has only to believe, as some people do, we say that the Scriptures teach that he has also to repent and be baptized; we attach no more merit to baptism than other people do to faith. The Baptists say that you are saved when you believe, and you have to be baptized as a Christian duty, but the Scriptures do not say so. Look at Mark 16: 16: "He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved, but he that believeth not shall be damned." To suit our Baptist friends this would have read, "Preach the gospel to every creature, and 'he that believes and is saved ought to get baptized.'" But it does not so read, and it is as daring to alter the arrangement of a passage as to deny it altogether. Salvation comes behind baptism in that passage, not before it. God can forgive as He pleases, and here it has pleased him to say, "Believe, and be baptized, and be saved."

The Baptists have no consistent place for baptism. They say that their motive in being baptized is to obey Christ. It is true that baptism is obedience to Christ, and this is a high and scriptural motive, but that is true of every command of His in general, and, therefore, means nothing in particular. In Breaking Bread we obey the Lord, but that does not hinder it from being for the purpose of remembering Him till He comes again. So, baptism is obedience, but that does not hinder it from being a condition of pardon. The Baptists say you are saved the moment you believe, yet in a great many of their churches they refuse to have fellowship with believers who are unbaptized. They say that these people are saved and fit for heaven but not fit for their fellowship. We make baptism a condition of fellowship, because the Scriptures have made it a condition of pardon. Our conditions of fellowship and our conditions of pardon are the same, which is both scriptural and consistent.

In placing baptism at the door of the church as we do, and not inside it as the Baptists do, I have said we part company with the Baptists and fall into line with the popular bodies; yet these same bodies blame us sometimes for making too much of baptism. Many of you teach your children the Shorter Catechism. What does it say? In answer to the

question, "What is baptism?" it says: "Baptism is a sacrament, wherein the washing with water, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, doth signify and seal our engrafting into Christ, and partaking of the benefits of the covenant of grace, and our engagement to be the Lord's." Fancy all that said about an infant, and then blame us for making too much of water. We only baptize after faith in Christ, and after repentance, and, therefore, after you would say the person is saved, but you say all this about an infant where there is no faith, and where the water alone is in view. It is really too bad. How can you talk about baptism signifying and sealing an infant's engrafting into Christ, partaking of the benefits of the new covenant, and engagement to be the Lord's, and then talk about anybody making too much of baptism. Especially how can you blame those who do not baptize till after faith and repentance for making too much of it?

Take the Episcopal Catechism now. When a young person is brought before the bishop to be confirmed, he or she is thus questioned:

Question: "What is your name?"

Answer: "N. or M."

Question: "Who gave you this name?"

Answer: "My godfathers and godmothers in my baptism, wherein I was made a member of Christ, the child of God and an inheritor of the Kingdom of Heaven."

That says as much about water baptism to an infant as we say about the Gospel of Christ and all its requirements. If we put too much on baptism, what do the people do who believe this? They say as much about water alone as we say about the whole plan of salvation.

We have looked at the Commission by Mark, let us now look at an instance in which this Commission was applied, "Then Peter said unto them, Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost." (Acts 2:38). Peter had been preaching Christ; the people became anxious and asked what they must do, and here you have the answer. The people already believed, or they would not have been anxious. In addition to faith they are commanded to repent and be baptized upon the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins. Here we have baptism connected with remission of sins in a fashion that cannot be got over - not the baptism of an infant, of course, but of

penitent believers. Peter was filled with the Holy Spirit at this time, and spake as the Spirit gave him utterance, and the other apostles were present, and they also were filled with the Holy Spirit. This answer to anxious enquirers then must be right, and yet you seldom hear it given.

I venture to say that we are the only people in Peterhead who give the same answer to anxious souls as the apostles gave. Let me illustrate what I mean. One of our brethren in America was in public debate with a D.D. During the debate our brother said that the Doctor dare not, as he valued his position, or even his membership in the church he was connected with, give the same answers to anxious souls as the apostles did. The Doctor asked if his opponent was impeaching his veracity. Our brother said he was stating a fact that should be made to ring in the ears of the people, and he would now put it to the proof. Turning to the Doctor, he asked, "If you had anxious souls before you, pricked to the heart by the truth, and crying out what must they do, dare you, as Peter did on Pentecost, tell them to repent and be baptized upon the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and they would receive the gift of the Holy Ghost? Or, if you had an anxious penitent before you such as Saul was when Ananias came to him, dare you, as Ananias did, tell him to arise and be baptized and wash away his sins, calling upon the name of the Lord?" Our brother paused and waited for an answer; but the Doctor answered not one word. I give this incident to illustrate what I mean. It is the same in Peterhead today; the answers given by the apostles and early preachers dare not be given by those who profess to be guided by the apostles.

Let us now look at a passage already alluded to, the last we will have time to deal with, though much more might be given. Acts 22: 16: "And now, why tarriest thou? Arise and be baptized and wash away thy sins, calling on the name of the Lord." Many tell us that Saul was converted on his way to Damascus. If they look more closely they will find that though Saul believed in Christ, and was changed in heart and purpose toward Him, he was not for the next three days a bit like the man who knew the peace of sins forgiven. If his sins were forgiven on the way to Damascus, why had he, three days after that, to arise and be baptized and wash away his sins, calling on the name of the Lord? If baptism has nothing to do with forgiveness, this passage is worse than nonsense. Please notice that we draw a distinction between forgiveness and that change of mind, heart and purpose toward God that is brought about by the Gospel of Christ and our belief therein. Change of heart

takes place here, forgiveness takes place in heaven. The two things are quite distinct.

The Scriptures teach that baptism has a connection with forgiveness, but they do not teach that it has anything to do with the sinner's change of heart towards God, without which baptism is a meaningless action. That the passage under consideration shows a connection between baptism and forgiveness is proved by the fact that those who deny such connection never quote it to the anxious, as Ananias did to Saul.

I have already given one incident that helps to bring out this fact; I will give another. Some years ago I called at the house of a religious people. The husband chanced to be from home. In conversation, the wife told me that I made too much of baptism. I said that, as far as I knew, I only made what the Scriptures made of it. I then quoted Acts 2: 38: "Then Peter said unto them, Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost," and then said, "Now, would you quote that passage to any conceivable person under any conceivable circumstance?" She said, "No, thank goodness, I know better than that." I then quoted the passage under consideration, and said, "Would you use these words that Ananias used to Saul to any person? Would you tell any conceivable person under any conceivable circumstance to arise and be baptized and wash away his sins?" She again thanked goodness that she knew better. I said it was a terrible thing for her to profess to be a believer in Christ, and at the same time say she knew better than God's Word. I called at this house again and the husband went at me for finding fault with his wife because she would not believe in a water salvation. I said I did nothing of the kind, but I had found fault with his wife for saying that she knew better than the Word of God.

This does not only show that we think that baptism in these passages has a connection with pardon, but it shows that those who oppose us think the same thing, or they would quote them under the same circumstances as the first preachers did; but they do not. Not only do they refuse to quote these passages themselves, but they find fault with us who do. How men dare to do this and at the same time believe that the Bible is God's Word, and that it will judge them in the last day, is more than I know. It seems passing strange that we should be held as

unsound in the faith for keeping close to the Book that all profess to honor.

You must not think that I was brought up in connection with the body I am now preaching for, and, therefore, had early prejudices in its favor. Nothing of the kind. I did not know that there was such a people until I was a married man. The first meeting I attended in connection with them I had conversation with one of the elders after the meeting. He questioned my claim to a scriptural knowledge of pardon. I said to him, "Do you think I do not love the Lord Jesus Christ as sincerely as you do?" He said, "I do not doubt that, young man." I then asked, "Do you think I am not as willing to follow Him as you are?" He said, "I do not doubt that either." "Then what do you mean?" I asked. He then asked, "Are you married?" "Yes." "Did you love your wife as well immediately before the marriage ceremony as you did immediately afterwards?" "Yes." "Did the marriage ceremony change your heart at all?" "No." "Did it change your state?" "Yes, it put me out of a single state into a married state." "And might not God have an ordinance that had to do with changing your state while it had nothing to do with changing your heart?" "Well," I said, "It is possible, but what about the fact?" "Here is the fact, young man," he said, and then quoted Mark 16: 16: "He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved, but he that believeth not shall be damned." "Now salvation is a state, young man. Where does it come in that passage? After baptism or before it?"

I would have given a good deal to have got over that passage and others that the old man brought up to me, but I saw no honest road through. I had gone four miles to that meeting. The old man went a mile towards home with me. In parting he laid his hand on my shoulder and said: "Now, if we are right, come and help us, and if we are wrong, in pity come back again and let us know where." That is over thirty-four years ago. I had been converted in popular fashion over two years before that. I could not find where the old man was wrong, so I went back to help him, and have continued to do so ever since. I have seen the position presented in this discourse attacked from many a standpoint in that time and today I have the feeling of a man whose feet are upon the eternal rock of God's Word that cannot be shaken. I stand where I do because I dare not stand anywhere else. We earnestly commend to your attention the truths we have presented. We have spoken as unto wise men, and we ask you to judge what we have said. It will soon make no difference

whether the crowd be with us or against us; but whether God be with us or against us may make an eternal difference.

THE END