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Baptism as Cleansing

WHAT is the symbolism of Baptism? What is signified by the use of the water? Most Baptists would reply at once by reference to Paul's teaching that immersion represents the death of the believer to sin and his rising again to a new life, and at the same time his union with Christ in appropriating the benefits of His death and resurrection (*Rom. vi. 1-11*). Probably most of our baptismal sermons are preached on that great, central and fundamental theme. But is that the complete answer? Not according to the New Testament. As we all know there are several passages where the symbolism attached to Baptism is not that of death and resurrection but that of cleansing. Am I wrong in my impression that these are avoided, or should I rather say neglected, among us? A search among literature immediately available to me confirms this opinion. For example, an examination of McGlothlin's *Baptist Confessions of Faith* has yielded small harvest. An early General Baptist Confession signed by John Smyth and others, which is practically a word for word reproduction of a Mennonite Confession, contains this clause:

"The whole dealing in the outward visible baptism of water, setteth before the eyes, witnesseth and signifieth, the Lord Jesus doth inwardly baptize the repentant, faithful man, in the laver of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Ghost, washing the soul from all pollution and sin, by the virtue and merit of His bloodshed; and by the power and working of the Holy Ghost, the true, heavenly, spiritual, living water, cleanseth the inward evil of the soul, and maketh it heavenly, spiritual and living, in true righteousness or goodness. Therefore the baptism of water leadeth us to Christ, to His holy office in glory and majesty; and admonisheth us not to hang only upon the outward, but with holy prayer to mount upward, and to beg of Christ the good thing signified" (*op. cit.*, p. 62).

But this lead is seldom followed. The Particular Baptist Confession of 1644 includes among the "things signified" by Baptism "the washing of the whole soul in the blood of Christ," with reference to *Rev. i. 5*; *vii. 14*; *Heb. x. 22* (*op. cit.*, p. 189). The Somerset Confession of 1655 (*op. cit.*, p. 208) says that Baptism "signifies and represents" among other truths, "a washing away of sins" (*Acts*

xxii. 16). More modern works are equally blank. It is indicative that in the many-volumed *Expositions* of McLaren not one sermon is included on any of these texts. I even read a manuscript not long ago by a Baptist author who deemed it his duty to deny vigorously that the idea of cleansing could be applied to Christian Baptism. On the other hand, Wheeler Robinson in *Baptist Principles* and Henry Cook in *What Baptists Stand For* (p. 140, 2nd edition) do refer to the point briefly, though perhaps as fully as the size and purpose of their books allow. One of the reasons for the general neglect may be that some of the passages raise complicated exegetical problems.

In the Bible a wealth of symbolism is attached to water. Water was very precious and meaningful to those who lived in "a dry and thirsty land" (*Psalms* lxiii. 1). The lack of it is a metaphor of spiritual need and its presence of spiritual refreshment and life. Here are some instances out of many: *Ps.* xxiii. 2; *Isaiah* xxxv. 6-7; xli. 17; xlv. 3; xlix. 10; lviii. 11; *Ezek.* xlvi. 1-12; *John* iv. 11-15; vii. 37; *Rev.* vii. 16; xxi. 6; xxii. 1-17. It is a symbol of moral cleansing in *Ezekiel* xxxvi. 25 and of professed innocence in *Matthew* xxvii. 24. There seems to be a reference to Baptism in the mysterious Johannine saying that a man must be "born of water and of the spirit" if he would enter the Kingdom of God (*John* iii. 5). If this is a true word of Jesus, Nicodemus would no doubt associate it with John's Baptism of repentance. If, as seems more likely, it is an interpretative comment of the evangelist, he is insisting that Christian Baptism as a rite does not bring the new birth of itself but must be associated with spiritual change. It is interesting to compare *Ezekiel* xxxvi. 25: "I will sprinkle clean water upon you and ye shall be clean. . . . A new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you."

Our present concern is with the New Testament passages where the reference is to the baptismal waters as an instrument or symbol of cleansing.

1. "Why tarriest thou? Arise and *be baptized and wash away thy sins*, calling on the name of the Lord," says Ananias to Brother Saul (*Acts* xxii. 16). 2. In *1 Cor.* vi. 11 there is similar use of the straightforward metaphor: "Such were some of you: but *ye are washed*, but ye are sanctified, but ye are justified, in the name of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit of our God." In "the name of the Lord" in both these passages may well be a reference to the customary baptismal formula. In neither is there any lurking ground for a belief in the efficacy of the rite in itself. Baptism is a spiritual experience linked with justification and sanctification.

3. The real complications begin with the next passage, *Ephesians* v. 25ff.: "Christ loved the church and gave himself for it; that he might sanctify and cleanse it with *the washing of water by the*

word," etc. There is, perhaps, a glance here at the bride's bath before marriage, suggested by the context, but there seems little doubt—though it has been doubted—that Paul's primary reference is to Baptism.

Scholars have engaged in much debate as to the significance of *loutron*, here translated "washing," which occurs in the New Testament only here and in *Titus* iii. 5. It seems doubtful if it can properly be rendered as bath or laver (R.V. margin) if by that is meant a vessel. It means rather the process or act of washing.

And what does "by word" or "with word" mean? For there is no article in the Greek, and that is one of the difficulties. *Rema* means a spoken word. Here it may refer to a "word" spoken by the candidate, his baptismal confession of faith, or the formula spoken by the one baptizing, or perhaps, more generally, the proclaimed message of the Gospel. *The Expositor's Greek Testament* gives the sense as, "that He might set apart and consecrate the Church by cleansing it of guilt by Baptism in accordance with the divine promise" or "on the ground of the preached word of the Gospel." By the addition of *en remati* the apostle is stressing that the rite by itself does not effect the cleansing, unless associated with the "word," in whatever sense we take it.

4. *Titus* iii. 5 is another hotly contested text. "Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy he saved us, by the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Ghost." Taken by itself the phrase "the washing of regeneration" is very difficult and has been interpreted in a sense out of harmony with the teaching of the New Testament elsewhere. But of course the phrase does not stand by itself. I read the whole passage as a clear assertion that in the process of our salvation the initiative is with God and not with us. Its reason lies not in our deserts but in the mercy of God, and Baptism is not only a human act of confession but a means of grace to the believing soul. The Baptism which in New Testament times was invariably associated with the Christian new birth is here by hendiadys made one with it, but the writer nevertheless emphasises that the regeneration is not occasioned by the rite itself but by the operation of the Holy Spirit.

A Lutheran friend of mine, of considerable eminence in his Church, once said to me that his main difficulty with the Baptist position was that we seemed to lay all the emphasis on the human side of Baptism. It was the faith of the candidate that was all important to us and we tended to forget the grace of God behind and in it all. Baptism, he urged, is a sacrament in which God too is acting in mercy and love. A sermon on this text might enable a Baptist to do justice to the truth in that protest, while positively presenting the share in Baptism of both the Holy Spirit and of the believing candidate.

5. "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.* x. 22). It seems that the sprinkling and the washing here are technical liturgical terms and that a reference is intended, after the manner of the writer, to the consecration of priests as described in *Exodus* xxix. 4-21. Transferred to New Testament terms the reference would be to the blood of Christ's new covenant (cf. *1 Peter* i. 2) and to the washing of Baptism. Christians are to be clean without and within like the priests of the old covenant. The washing of the body is symbolic of the cleaning of the inner being.

6. "The days of Noah, while the ark was a preparing, wherein few, that is, eight souls, were saved by water. The like figure whereunto even baptism doth also now save us (*not the putting away of the filth of the flesh, but the answer of a good conscience toward God*) by the resurrection of Jesus Christ" (*1 Peter* iii. 20f.). Peter is employing a rabbinical kind of typology between the waters of the Flood, on which the ark floated to safety, and the waters of Baptism, Selwyn in his commentary translates thus: "And water now saves you too who are the antitype of Noah and his company, namely, the water of baptism." But Peter guards against misunderstanding. It is not really the water which saves but the response of the soul to God who raised Christ from the dead.

"Answer," *eperotema*, usually meaning "question," is a difficult word in this connection. *Thayer-Grimm's Lexicon* suggests that it may mean "earnest seeking" and proposes to translate "Baptism now saves us not because in receiving it we have put away the filth of the flesh, but because we have earnestly sought a conscience reconciled to God." But it might be better to take the word as referring to the questions put to the candidate for Baptism, and so his confession of faith. There is some evidence in the papyri for the use of the word for the sealing of a covenant. "The (baptismal) pledge of a good conscience toward God" it might be rendered. The reality of Baptism is not the external washing but the inner cleansing, the response of the spirit to God in Christ.

It is thus at least clear that in the early Church one way of thinking about Baptism was to regard it as a ceremonial cleansing which symbolised the purification of the spirit. Three New Testament writers, possibly four if *Titus* is not Pauline, use the image. Each is careful to guard himself against misunderstanding as to the efficacy of the rite apart from the faith of the recipient, which suggests that alien Hellenistic conceptions were already beginning to infiltrate into the sacramental doctrine of the Church.