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A table of contents for *The Baptist Quarterly* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_bq_01.php

Baptism and the Church

BAPTIST FAITH AND PRACTICE IN A BIBLICAL AND ECUMENICAL LIGHT

As this article will have to be published in more than one instalment the reader may be glad to have a list of the section headings which help to show the total argument.

Introduction

- I. The Church according to the New Testament.
- II. Baptism and the Church according to the New Testament.
- III. Baptism and the Church in the Baptist Movement of Today.
 - (1) Is baptism regarded in the Baptist church as an incorporation into both the local church and the Universal Church, the Body of Christ?
 - (2) Denomination and Church.
 - (3) Baptism, Church and the Lord's Supper.
- IV. Baptist Faith and Ecumenicity. Three Positions.
 - (1) "No" to Infant Baptism as a Christian Baptism. Closed Communion.
 - (2) "No" to Infant Baptism. Open Communion.
 - (3) "Yes" and "No" to Infant Baptism. Ecumenical Intercommunion.

INTRODUCTION

THE topic of "Baptism and the Church" has such a range, many-sidedness and current interest that it cannot possibly be elucidated from all sides and exhaustively in the limited space available. The aim of this paper is to confront the New Testament conception of Baptism and the Church with the one within the Baptist churches of to-day. The ecumenical movement challenges the Baptists to face the problem of Baptism and the Church and think it out, and the view-points stated in this paper should be understood as a contribution to present discussion.

It is outside the compass of the task stated to try to give an answer to the multitude of questions included in such topics as "Baptism—a sacrament?" or "Baptism and Faith." A treatment of the topic of "Baptism and the Church," however, must build on a definite position taken to the problems mentioned. As an assumption of the following exposition these two thesis will be valid. (1) Baptism is a sacrament in the sense that it means an activity of God with

man. At the same time Baptism is also an expression of man's surrender to God. (2) Only that Baptism is a right Christian Baptism, which is preceded by repentance and which is received in faith in Christ. The principal thesis of this paper can be stated thus: man is incorporated by believers' baptism into the Church, and the Church is constituted by the fellowship of those believing in Christ and baptized into Christ.

Baptism, like the Church, has an inner side and an outer one. Both sides belong indissolubly together and must not be pulled asunder. The theoretical separation of them which will be made here only aims at explaining the rich and many-sided contents of Baptism and the Church. In practice they must be preached and experienced as an indissoluble unit.

I. THE CHURCH ACCORDING TO THE NEW TESTAMENT

Christ was given to the Church, "*which is his body, the fulness of him that filleth all in all*" (Eph. i. 23). Jesus said to Nicodemus, "*Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God*" (John iii. 3), and according to Peter all the prophets give witness to Christ that "*through his name whosoever believeth in him shall receive remission of sins*" (Acts x. 43). In the opening verses of the Epistle to the Ephesians Paul salutes "*the saints which are at Ephesus and the faithful in Christ Jesus*", and in the beginning of *i Corinthians* he speaks of "*them that are sanctified in Christ Jesus*," of those who are called," and of "*all that in every place call upon the name of Jesus Christ our Lord*." The distinctive mark of God's Spirit is according to 1 John 4. 2 that "*every spirit that confesseth that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh, is of God*." And Paul adds, "*For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, they are the sons of God*" (Rom. viii.14). As to God's children John gives this negative characterization, "In this the children of God are manifest, and the children of the devil: whosoever *doeth not righteousness* is not of God, neither he that *loveth not his brother*" (1 John iii.10). Finally we read in 1 Peter of those "*which in time past were not a people but are now the people of God*" (1 Peter ii.10).

In this choice of quotations a number of characteristics are given of those who belong to Christ's body, the Church: those who have been born again and have received remission of sins, the saints, the faithful, those who are sanctified, called, those who call upon Jesus Christ and confess that he has come in the flesh, those who are led by the Spirit of God and are God's children, those who do righteousness and love their brethren. These people are God's people and Christ's body filled with the fulness of God. This New Testament description can be summarized in the words of the creed *communio sanctorum*, the communion of the saints. The charac-

teristics mentioned here are all of an inner kind. They refer to man's hidden life with God and to his relationship to his neighbour. They express essential things about faith and Christian life. Without these inner religious and ethical qualities the communion of saints cannot exist. The fellowship which is without the love of God and the neighbour does not have the right to bear the Christian name. It is dead even though it is alive in name.

These inner characteristics of the Church, the body of Christ, are not, however, the only ones which the New Testament has given us as marks when we want to localize Christ's Church on earth. There are also definite *outer, objective marks*. From the last pericope of *Matthew* (ch. xxviii.16-20) three kinds of such outer marks can be derived, namely :

(1) *The Word*. "All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth. Go ye therefore and teach all nations . . . teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world." Jesus gave his disciples the task to preach the Gospel and to teach and at the same time he promised always to be present with them. And Christ is still present on earth by his Spirit and his Word both in its spoken and written form, the Bible. In the latter appear the first and foremost distinctive marks of the Christian Church : *the Word*, which is the incarnate, crucified and risen Christ, the Word as a promise and a commission, as a judgement and the power of God unto salvation, as an authority and a norm for faith and life. Where Christ's Church exists, here God's Word is proclaimed soundly and clearly, there it is received in faith and there it works as highest authority.

(2) *Baptism and the Lord's Supper*. ". . . baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost." The Lord's last commission was not only a commission to preach and teach but also to *baptize*. On Whit-Sunday when the Church in a way appeared visible to all, it was done by the proclamation of the Word, by baptism and furthermore by breaking of bread, the Lord's supper (*Acts* ii. 40-42, 46). Through the whole history of the Church water baptism in the name of Christ and (or) the triune God together with the Lord's supper have been necessary outer criteria of the presence of Christ's Church, and thus the Church detaches itself from all other forms of human and Christian communities.

(3) *The Ministry*. "Then the eleven disciples went away into Galilee, into the mountain where Jesus had appointed them. . . . And Jesus came and spake unto them saying . . ." Jesus directed his commission to *the eleven disciples*. The task of preaching and baptizing was thus given primarily to the apostles, who in their turn transmitted it to their disciples. The succession of Paul—

Timothy is here a typical example. But there existed in the primitive church a number of ministries, namely bishops, presbyters, deacons, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers. In the primitive church there was as yet no fixed doctrine and practice as to these ministers but there was a strong consciousness of the fact that some were called to special ministries in the Church. All Christians had to give a reason of the hope that was in them (1 *Peter* iii. 15) and by faith and good works spread the Gospel (1 *Peter* ii. 12 f.). All those who receive the epistles of Peter are requested to "shew forth the praises of Him (God)" (1 *Peter* ii 9). On the other hand, it is almost certain that as early as in New Testament days both instruction in a limited sense and the administration of baptism and the holy supper were regarded as the special calling of bishops and presbyters. In stating this it should also be observed that their ministries were not limited to one single man in each church. It could also be added that among the Anabaptists of the sixteenth century a distinction was made between those who were called and sent to baptize and those who did not have this task. This is not the place to detail the facts of the "general priesthood" and the "special" one in the New Testament and in later history. In this connection it is only important to state that there has existed a special ministry from the primitive church and all through church history, a ministry which has been modelled in different ways at different times and in different church traditions. The ministry in this wide sense is an outer characteristic of the Christian Church.

The primitive Church can thus be described as the community of those who believed *and* were baptized. What has been said so far gives no support at all to the frequent distinction of a "visible" church and an "invisible" one—or to put it another way of an "essential church" and a "cult church." The Church of Christ is *one*, and she is *visible*. The New Testament ideal means that the "essential church" consisting of believing and regenerated men should be identical with the "cult church," i.e. the baptized and communicating congregation. Under the influence of historical development, not least by the victory of infant baptism and the established Church over the independent Church of believers, this conception of the Church was broken to pieces and it became usual to distinguish between the "invisible" communion of saints and true believers and the "visible" institutional Church. Pietism solved the problem by separating the "ecclesiola," the small group of believers, and the *ecclesia*, the big established Church embracing all baptized inhabitants of a country. Other solutions are offered by a Lutheran people's church theology of a Swedish type, which does not even demand baptism for church-membership, much less faith, and modern high-church theology influenced by Anglicans. This theology regards the Church built on infant baptism and

apostolic succession as justified by the New Testament, and it makes baptism the foundation of church-membership. In the Methodist Church they count upon a preparatory membership built on infant baptism and a valid membership built on confession of personal faith in Christ.

The Baptists maintain that the situation in the primitive Church should be taken as a pattern also by later ages for the modelling of the Church in the world. That is the reason why it is necessary to analyse the problem of New Testament baptism in its relationship to the Church, before we turn to the Baptist churches of our age to find out how the New Testament ideal is realized in and by them. Like the Church, baptism can be regarded from two different view-points, namely the inner and the outer ones, and an analysis will show that there is an exact parallelism between the Church and baptism, when they are regarded from these two view-points.

II. BAPTISM AND THE CHURCH ACCORDING TO THE NEW TESTAMENT

Jesus said to Nicodemus, "Except a man *be born of water and of the Spirit*, he cannot enter into the Kingdom of God" (*John* iii. 5) and in his sermon on the first Whit-Sunday Peter uttered the famous words, ". . . 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* ii. 38). In *Titus* iii. 5. f. both these sides of the contents of baptism are emphasized, ". . . according to his mercy he saved us, by the washing of regeneration and the renewing of the Holy Ghost; which he shed on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Saviour." The connection between faith and baptism is stressed both in *Mark* xiv. 16. "He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved" and in *Gal.* iii 26 f. "For ye are all the children of God by faith in Christ Jesus. For as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ." The relationship of baptism and baptized man to Christ and his body, the Church, is illustrated by Paul in *1 Corinthians* and especially in the classic passage on baptism in *Romans*, "For by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body (*1 Corinthians* xii. 13), "For if we have been planted together in the likeness of his death, we shall be also planted together in the likeness of his resurrection" (*Romans* vi 5). Of the relationship of Christ and the Church and baptism it is said in *Eph.* v. 25 f., ". . . Christ loved . . . the Church and gave himself for it; That he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word."

In the New Testament passages quoted above it could at once be observed that baptism is intimately associated with regeneration, remission of sins, the acceptance and filling of the Holy Ghost, faith, sanctification and the growing together into one body in Christ.

Those before mentioned, who, according to the New Testament form the communion of saints, those who believe and are sanctified, those who are born again and led by the Spirit, etc.—can, according to the same authority, be summed up in *those who are baptized*. To be baptized in a New Testament sense is to believe, to be regenerated and filled with the Spirit and, in the deepest sense of the word, “to be planted together with” (“to be one with,” *Weymouth’s* translation) Christ in his death and resurrection. The Church is the body of Christ, and those who are baptized into Christ form one body and are thereby made members of the Church of Christ on earth, of which Christ is the head and in which those sanctified and purified by the word and the water are members. That there could not be a question of full identity between Christ and his body, the Church is evident from the wording of *Eph.* v. 23, where it is said that Christ is at the same time “the head of the Church” and “the saviour of the body.” To be baptized into the Church means thus on one side to become a member of the body of Christ and on the other side to be placed under Christ as Saviour and Lord.

Thus in the New Testament the fact that you are a member in Christ can be expressed in two different ways, namely to believe and to be baptized. (By this it has not been said, of course, that under all circumstances to believe and to be baptized should be the same thing. You can fall away from faith and yet be baptized. We shall return to this point.) The community of the believers and saints is at the same time the community of those baptized. By believers’ baptism one passes over from death to life, from the power of Satan to the Church of Christ; and by this baptism one is incorporated into the fellowship of the believers and those baptized. The New Testament does not know unbaptized believers as members of the Christian Church.

By this *the external side of baptism* has also been touched upon. Baptism has its deep, inner, religious meaning, but it has also an external sociological function to fulfil. On the day of Pentecost people were “added unto” something already existing, namely the Church, by believers’ baptism. By this word—*prosetethesan*—it is expressly stated that the Church was not created on the first day of Pentecost. As a divine thought of salvation in Christ it existed from the very beginning, and as a consequence of the fall of man, God made this saving will of his known in the old covenant through his chosen people. In the man Jesus, surrounded by his disciples, the head and lord of the Church was made manifest to the world, but the Church in its proper sense did not appear until after the resurrection on the first day of Pentecost as a consequence of the pouring out of the Spirit and Peter’s missionary sermon. “Then they that gladly received his word were baptized.” *Acts* is the story

of how one individual and one group of people after another were "added unto" the Church by baptism, and thus the Church of Christ became visible in the world. The inner religious event in baptism had at the same time an outer sociological significance: people were born again and became members of the Church of Christ on earth. Primarily they were received in the local church of Jerusalem, Ephesus, Corinth, etc., but at the same time they were incorporated into the world-wide Catholic Church. Is Christ divided? A self-evident consequence of the belief in the Church as the body of Christ is that it is one and that the local church is part of the vast visible Church of Christ on earth.

Apart from *Acts* the external, sociological function of baptism is elucidated also in *Col.* ii.11-13. There baptism is compared to circumcision, the outer sign and proof of citizenship in the elect people of the old covenant. Thus the work of baptism is to act as a "sign of nationality," which expresses citizenship in the people of the new covenant (cf. the phrase of "the people of God," 1 *Peter* ii. 10). In the same way as circumcision was meant to define a visible and obvious limit between Jews and heathens, baptism should essentially serve as a visible line of demarcation between the Church and the world. All the writers of the New Testament teach us that this line could not be drawn sharply and definitely, not even in the primitive Church. This fact is illustrated, for instance, by the fact that Paul found it necessary to give the following exhortation in 1 *Corinthian* v. 13: "Therefore put away from among yourselves that wicked person." The perfect separation of the Church and the world lies with God alone, and its definite result will not be revealed until the *parousia* and on the day of judgement. In the age between the resurrection and the return of Christ, the task of believer's baptism is to define an *approximate* limit between the Church and the world. The difficulty of defining this limit clearly, i.e. of administering the gift of baptism rightly in this world of sin and death points a twofold reminder—first to the baptizing Church: be careful of baptism, so that it is not misused and fails of its purpose—secondly, to those baptized: baptism does not give any guarantee of salvation. In this age every baptized man runs the risk of losing what he has won by faith and baptism, namely salvation. One can lose the thing, the remission on sins, though one keeps the sign, baptism. But if this should happen, baptism serves as a constant reminder of the lost thing both to baptized man himself and to the world around, so he who has gone away can be driven by baptism to return to the fellowship which he has left.

TORSTEN BERGSTEN

(translated by Nils Sundholm)

(To be continued)