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Our Baptist Witness: Baptism in Practice

AFTER fifty-nine years in the Baptist ministry, the larger part of which has been spent in South Africa, I look back on the past and ask myself how far the Baptist witness has been maintained effectively among us and in Britain also. Do we not need to confess that the baptistry is too little in use and baptism is often regarded in the light of an irksome act of obedience? Rather it should be a joyous spiritual fellowship with those who, following in the steps of the Master, look prayerfully for an infilling by the Holy Ghost. The rite takes on too much an appearance of legal fulfilment rather than of spiritual uplift because our thoughts are centred so much on the form. Yet the really big and fundamental distinction between our church and others is not in the mode of observance but in the persons baptized. We hold most strongly to the baptism of believers only but our name misrepresents us by suggesting that the rite is the big thing rather than the new life which fits us for it.

I have never been able to get away from the conviction that we hold the truth of Scripture in connection with the ordinance of Baptism, both as to the principle of believers' baptism, and the practice of baptism by immersion as being the ancient and original mode. This has made it impossible for me to compromise my Baptist principles by joining any paedobaptist communion. I believe in church union as far as it may go without sacrifice of principle, but no farther. Our Baptist principles go beyond the rite itself into all Christian life. "Without faith it is impossible to please God." May we not say that no service is acceptable to God in any form whatever, except such as is rendered by a believing and obedient heart? If this principle is the fundamental one, that because of our faith in Jesus Christ as our Saviour we are His disciples and followers, then it is desirable that we should be clear about it.

We have to face the fact that with a very large part of Christendom, sprinkling or pouring is a sacred act and is regarded as real baptism. If Baptists required baptism by whatever mode conscience

desired, as long as it was an act of personal faith in Christ, would not people who fight shy of immersion be more willing to make the baptismal confession? All three modes have historic sanction. Could our Lord's attitude to footwashing (rather than Peter's) point to a principle with regard to the form of baptism? We should feel that union with the church was marked by a baptism even if we felt glad to have attested our own faith in a completer way. This would be more scriptural than the practice of admitting to membership on a mere verbal statement and the neglecting of baptism altogether.

With regard to immersion, are we fully justified in tying up the principle to this one mode even granting all our claims as to the meaning of the word and the symbolism of the act? Is no consideration to be given to the habits of the west as compared with the east, nor the twentieth century with the first? We cannot but be conscious that baptism as we have often carried it out is repugnant to the feeling of many. Now our habits are very different from those of ancient times. I cannot imagine that our Lord ever meant the ordinance to be carried out in such a way as to cause a blush. I know it is often said that this is a trial endured for Christ's sake, and where that is so, it will not be without its reward, in stronger character perhaps. But does our Lord desire that this act of obedience should encounter such an obstacle. For a very real obstacle it is to many. Without disloyalty to our Lord could we not accept believers' baptism by some other mode although still holding to immersion where possible? One has to remember that we acquiesce in the alteration of the Lord's Supper from being part of a meal shared with fellow disciples into a token morsel of bread and a sip of wine. It has reduced it to a symbol. But who shall say that we do not partake of the spiritual food by communion with "Christ Himself"?

I feel that I could with a good conscience baptise by some other mode if the believing candidate sincerely desired it with a good conscience, and especially so in the case of sickness. Communion is taken to the sick, why not baptism too? Have we the right to withhold it on the ground of rigid adherence to a form? I believe that this would make for Christian unity in no small degree if we could be known to stand for the great evangelical principle of faith as the basis of all Christian experience, while leaving the actual method of expressing that faith in baptism to the conscience of the individual.

If, however, we are not all prepared to go as far as this and feel that we must adhere and require all others to adhere to our Lord's method, let us see whether it can be carried out with less to offend tender susceptibilities. In the first place it was the custom of the early church to baptise the sexes separately at different times in

different places. Women were attended by women, in some cases with the priest outside the door reciting the responses to the candidates. Many very large baptisteries were built in big cities and in some of these edifices separate pools were provided for women. The pools were big enough for immersion, one being capable of holding twelve people at a time.

There were many baptisteries built with fonts large enough for the candidate to kneel and to be up to his neck in water. His head was then bowed forwards. In the rivers it was customary for the candidate to stand immersed up to his neck and then for his head to be pressed under. Some interesting baptisteries have been recently excavated in Leptis Magna and the neighbourhood on the Tripolitan coast. They are all built of cruciform shape with steps down from the four points of the cross to the pool in the centre about three feet across and three feet deep. A chaplain sent me photographs. He says: "It is clear that the candidate had either to kneel or stoop for immersion while the person administering stood on the steps and probably just placed his hand on the candidate's head." According to Cotes (*Archaeology of Baptism*), "The primitive mode appears to have been this. Administrator and candidate both standing in the water, the former placed his right hand on the head of the candidate and pronouncing the baptismal words, gently bowed him forward till he was completely immersed in the water." The evidence of ancient frescoes and illustrations in MSS strongly supports the forward mode of baptism (immersion) and nothing further needs to be said.

How is it that the backward mode has become prevalent? When the baptism of believers was resuscitated in Reformation times the custom of the baptism of infants had become widely prevalent. The natural way to baptize an infant is to hold him face up and I suggest that it was by the adoption of this mode for believers that the present custom arose. This was strongly reinforced by Paul's argument based on baptism as burial. Burial was not, however, the original and fundamental significance of the ordinance but cleansing. Moreover, various positions of the body are used for burial, e.g., sitting up or bowed, as with native tribes of Africa. The adoption of the forward mode is not, as some imagine, an unauthorized deviation from the original way, but a return to it, which would be of great advantage in general practice. I can most earnestly commend it as reverent and dignified. On the other hand the backward mode is felt to be unseemly especially with females and often creates nervousness in the candidate.

Let us in closing revert to the consideration of the principle. Baptism ought to be the public witness to salvation by grace through faith, and an open vow of allegiance to the Saviour. The spiritual significance is all important, linked as it is historically with

the gift of the Holy Spirit, which is the distinguishing endowment of God's people. "He giveth the Holy Spirit to them that ask Him," and, "If any man have not the Spirit of Christ he is none of His." We all believe this! If, however, the fact of the baptism of *believers* were the most dominant and most publicised characteristic of our observance, while the particular *mode* in which it was practised, however important, were left to the individual conscience, I feel that our main testimony to the world would be better understood and more widely accepted by other Christians. I am not arguing for a lessening of faithfulness by any measure of indifference to the Divine will. I am sure that everyone convinced of the duty of being immersed as our Lord was, should follow in His steps. But an outward compliance, apart from sincere faith and loving obedience, is of little value.

If we required for fellowship a baptism by some mode, not necessarily immersion, as an expression of faith, our denominational witness would be all the stronger as to the spiritual life in Christ. It would not be possible to carry all our people with us easily in accepting an optional clause but I really believe it would be for the strengthening of our witness to the faith and would be very gladly welcomed by many. It would place the emphasis where it ought to be placed, and would enable our churches to be stricter in their adherence to the great principle which distinguishes them. We should then be able to make more of baptism as the occasion of a great spiritual experience, in which we gloried, and which was more glorifying to our Lord.

Shall we continue to insist on rigid uniformity in the mode, while granting to paedobaptists (without the baptism of faith) the full membership of our churches? This way lie two dangers. First there is that of belittling the importance of the rite by its total neglect. Secondly there is the danger of refraining from a free and joyous proclamation of baptism as a great strengthener and enricher of the spiritual life of the members. On the other hand by adhering to the great principle that only believers can effectually witness for the Lord the emphasis comes on the vital element of our witness, while permitting variety in the manner of giving that witness. The great thing is to get the ordinance always observed as an act of confession of Christ as Lord.

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