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THE MORAL SIGNIFICANCE OF BAPTISM.

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Baptists are not in any sense sacramentarians. I suppose that this is generally understood. An intelligent Baptist, if he ever permits himself to speak of "the sacrament of baptism," does so thoughtlessly. In the Baptist estimate of the value of the ordinance we deny its efficacy as a means for the transmission of grace; on the other hand, we insist on its utility simply as a beautiful and expressive symbol of certain basal facts in the redemptive mission of the Lord Jesus Christ, together with certain correlated and dependent ideas. We affirm that the sole value of the rite consists in this. Usually, however, we limit its significance to its symbolism of the historic facts of the Lord's death and resurrection, whereas we need (as it seems to me) to emphasize also its significance as expressive of the truths which are correlated with those facts. While we are accustomed, it is true, to speak of the burial and resurrection of the believer with Christ as a part of the symbolism of his baptism, the emphasis is not, I take it, placed here—that is, on what I may call its subjective import, but on the other, viz: its historic meaning. The conception of this part of its symbolic message is seriously impaired, if not wholly bereft of real influence, in the average mind, by the explanation that the believer's burial and resurrection with Christ are "by faith." For this phrase "by faith" is apt to make the whole idea mystical; and to say that a thing is "mystical" is, as a rule, to say that it is enveloped in mist—in other words, its practical value and its moral value are destroyed. As charity covers a multitude of sins, so this word "mystical" frequently covers up a lot of theological vacuities.

The purpose of the present essay is to bring into prominence this part of the baptismal symbolism. Baptism expresses in a beautiful and unmistakable way the great historic facts on which the entire fabric of Christianity rests, viz: the death and resurrection of Christ, but along with these it also

expresses the two great primal facts of all Christian experience, viz: the death and resurrection in Christ of the individual believer. It is not only the Lord Jesus Christ who in baptism is "evidently (i. e., visibly) set forth, crucified among you;" the candidate is also proclaimed as one crucified and risen. And this not as a fiction but as a fact. This initial rite of the New Testament churches both proclaims those historic truths without which there can be no Christianity, and also those moral facts in the believer's personal experience without which there is no true distinctively Christian life. To this—the symbolism of these two essential facts in all genuine Christian experience—it is herein desired to call attention.

II. The Conception Stated.

It is usually understood—at least so I suppose—that the death and resurrection of the believer with Christ as expressed in his baptism mean nothing more than that in his act of faith he has accepted the death of Christ as having been suffered in his behalf and stead; that in it all demands of law upon him as a sinner have been fully met, so that he is now legally free; and that upon this ground he is entitled to cherish the hope of enjoying more or less fully the new resurrection-life and power of Christ. Stated more baldly, resurrection with Christ to newness of life signifies in the baptismal symbolism the candidate's recognition of his duty to live henceforward a good life, and constitutes his pledge—the baptismal "vow"—to live it. But this good life means simply a moral life with the addendum naturally of church membership and church attendance, and the renunciation of certain things in the way of "worldly pleasures." At any rate we all know that it does not ordinarily signify much more than this. The baptized may be perfectly honest in this profession of his desire, but he does not know that anything beyond this is involved in that new life which is pledged in his baptism. As he understands it, this is the full content of the confession he makes in his submission to the rite in so far as it relates to himself.

But my contention is that this falls far below the Scripture

conception, and is indeed not the Scripture conception at all. The Scripture conception is—we shall refer to its language presently—that the baptized believer is as one actually dead—or rather he stands in the position of one who has actually died and then has subsequently come back to life again as one raised from the dead, in order that he may thenceforward live in the world, as long as it may please God to continue him here, not as men ordinarily live to pursue in it their various secular ambitions, but as one might be supposed to live in it who, after a number of years spent in heaven, should be commissioned by God to return to the world on some special errand. The death and resurrection symbolized in baptism are not metaphorical or potential; they are not presented in the ceremony as that which the believer is to strive to realize subsequently, if he can, and therefore lie wholly in his future experiences; rather they are presented in it as something experienced already—as something which already is, as already accomplished facts, as present realities of his life. In the immersion in the pool when the flood of water hid him from view, when his eyes were closed and his breathing temporarily suspended, he was for the moment actually shut out from the world and from life; he was to all intents and purposes as one dead, and whether he ever emerged again to take his place in the world as a living man depended upon the administrator of the baptism. In the act of immersion the life was apparently extinct, and it would have become actually so except for the emergence, when the candidate re-entered the world as one just raised from the dead, in order that he might henceforth walk in “newness of life”—a life not unto sin, nor yet devoted to the gratification of selfish and secular ambitions, but “unto God.” With him therefore both death and resurrection have become past experiences; he has already passed through the grave; he has become and henceforth he is a “new creature in Christ Jesus.” He has as wholly broken from his past life as the man has who shall be carried today to the cemetery and laid in the grave; the life that he now lives is the life of a resurrected man put back into the world for a few years on a special mission.

Baptism is thus the symbol of the actual death and resurrection of Christ, and at the same time the symbol of the (as it were) actual death and resurrection of the believer. That is to say: his relation to the world, on the one hand, as expressed in his baptism, is the relation of one dead; and on the other hand, his relation to Christ is the relation of one now risen from the dead.

II. The Scripture Teaching.

For this high import of baptism, and for its specially moral significance as the symbolic presentation of the primal facts of all true Christian experience, we are limited to the Pauline Epistles. The symbolism of baptism does not appear to the careful student of the New Testament to have been always the same. The Johannic baptisms were, as Paul indicates in Acts 19:4, prophetic of the Messiah "which should come after him"—i. e. after John himself had closed his ministry as the Forerunner; while those administered by Peter within the sphere of the Judaic evangelism seem to have looked backward to the Messiah as having now come, but whom the nation had rejected and crucified, and who was therefore to come again, and into whose name as many as now repented and believed on Him were baptized with a baptism significant of their entrance into a moral condition indicated by the words "the remission of sins." The baptisms of the Forerunner more remotely, and those of Peter more immediately, were both anticipatory therefore of the baptism of the Holy Ghost. The phrase "the remission of sins," however explained, carries the moral import of both of them. In fact, there is in the records no suggestion that the Johannic baptisms were ever regarded as invalid or unsatisfactory within the sphere of the Judaic ministry. The baptism which the Twelve had received was the baptism of John, and there is no intimation that they were ever rebaptized. Neither is there any intimation that other disciples of Christ who had, like the apostles, previously been the disciples of John and had received his baptism, were rebaptized upon their admission into the church with a bap-

tism distinctively Christian. The only rebaptisms of which we have any account at all are those of the twelve men at Ephesus. But these took place within the sphere of the Gentile ministry of Paul and at his demand. He himself explained that there was a doctrinal significance in these Johannic baptisms which to him in his sphere of work, and in relation to the gospel which he preached, was not acceptable. It is Paul, and not Peter, who stands before us in the history as rejecting the baptism of John "for the remission of sins."

Accordingly the narrative in the Acts prepares us to find baptism in the Epistles of Paul carrying an entirely new meaning. It is, moreover, a far deeper meaning. It is neither "into" nor "for" the remission of sins; it is "into Christ." And this is explained in Rom. 6:16 as a baptism "into His death," and hence into all that that death signifies and involves, so far as regards the consecration of the life unto God. (Col. 2:12.) The peculiar appropriateness of the rite as an immersion becomes immediately evident. It is a burial. In another passage (Gal. 3:27) it is presented in a specially Pauline significance as a baptism into a new relationship with humanity through relationship with Christ, who, though a Jew by race, was in fellowship with all men as the Son of Man, and as the Saviour of the world. All who believe in Him and share His life become, without respect to race or social conditions, equally the children of God and are introduced as such into a universal fellowship. There is now no longer either Jew or Greek, bond or free, male or female, because all have become one in Christ Jesus. Baptism therefore "into Christ," which the Apostle Paul says is a "putting on" of Christ, is at the same time, as a baptism "into His death," a baptism into that new relationship of all men with Christ and with each other such as results from His death, thereby constituting a new humanity and a new brotherhood in the abolition of all social and race distinctions.

According to this the real baptism is not the immersion in water, but the immersion into the death of Christ, of whom the immersion in water is nothing more than the beautifully

appropriate symbol, but a symbol only; and according to this also the emergence from the water is the symbol of a resurrection into a new relationship with humanity such as one might be supposed to sustain who should come back from heaven to earth on some special mission or service of the Saviour—a relationship which would be entirely free from any of those prejudices which are too common among ordinary men, and which would recognize the universal kinship of men in Him, even as Christ himself does who died for all, and to whom the white man and the black, the Chinaman and the American, are alike in their common brotherhood of spiritual destitution and need of salvation.

The various statements of the Apostle Paul which justify this conception of baptism are themselves illuminated by it. He frequently speaks of death as a past experience. In Rom. 6, with baptism and crucifixion for his illustrations, he teaches that the believer can not sin—not "ought not" to sin, but "can not" sin—because his present moral position is that of one who has already died, and as such is freed from sin's power. (See verse 7.) It is with him as it is with Christ: "Death hath no more dominion over him." He has already passed through the experience of death, and his present life is a new life—a life unto God. In 2 Cor. 5:14, 15 the love of Christ is given as the constraining power and distinguishing characteristic of this new life; and the Apostle's reason for thus giving it is that "if Christ died for all, then all died," and the purpose of the death of Christ is said to be that "they which live should not henceforth live unto themselves, but unto Him which died for them and rose again." In Gal. 2:20—a striking passage—we have the thought of a transferred life, and then of a transferred personality as a result or consequence of being "dead to the law and alive unto God" spoken of in the verse preceding. Says the Apostle: "I am crucified with Christ, nevertheless I live (this is the transference of life); yet not I, but Christ liveth in me, and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith (as a vitalizing bond of connection between us) of the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me"

(this is the transferred personality). And how vivid and bold the statement in verse 14 of the last chapter of this same epistle: "But God forbid that I should glory save in the cross of the Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world is crucified unto me and I unto the world."

If it be said that these expressions are merely rhetorical or metaphorical, I reply that Paul was too seriously in earnest to play the mere rhetorician, and that when he indulged in metaphor it was only that he might the more clearly set forth the great truth he had in mind. Death unto sin and crucifixion to the world, the crucifixion of the flesh and the self-life, with the resultant life unto God, were with him actual facts of experience which alone accounted for the nature, and for the moral power, of the Christian life. And we surely have no right in our own teaching to break the force of these statements by round-about explanations which really explain them away, nor are we at liberty to slur them over. The Christian is thought of as a dead man come back to life, and then as one whose present life has its source in the resurrection-life of Christ, which is the guarantee of both its perpetuity and power. "For ye have died," he says to the Colossians, "and your (present) life is (a life) hid with Christ in God." (Col. 3:3.) On this fact he can safely base the exhortation of the fifth verse: "Put to death therefore your members which are upon the earth." (The rendering of the Common Version, "mortify your members," is probably due to Romanistic influences.)

If these Scripture passages are—as before said—illuminated by the conception which they justify, they also throw light back on the statement of Jesus to Martha when she met Him in the street of Bethany on the occasion of her brother's death. He said to her: "He that believeth in Me, though he were dead, yet shall he live; and whoso liveth and believeth in Me, shall never die." The first part of this sentence is in the singular number and is a specific promise of the restoration of Lazarus to life from the tomb; the second part is in the plural number and is a promise of deathlessness (or of the victory

over death) to every believer. It is a promise to all, and a promise for all time. What the Saviour may have meant by it, and how it can be true in view of the fact that believer and unbeliever alike do die—as we say, are questions continually being asked. And they will continue to be asked until we change entirely our present point of view. It may be conceit in me to assume to answer them, and yet I think I can see one way in which the promise may be understood. The bitterness and terror of death consist in the forced sundering of all our earthly ties, the parting from those we love, the being snatched away from the eager pursuit of our favorite ambitions, the forced interruption of all our plans. To a large majority of professing Christians this bitterness of death still remains. And yet faith in Christ, which is the unreserved surrender of one's self to Him, involves of course the surrender likewise of all these things to Him. The most sacred loves of earth, as those of the family circle, are subordinated to the love of Christ—and are then ennobled by it. Business is done in the Christian spirit, and for Christ, in the interest of His Kingdom's extension in the world, and not for self and the accumulation of gain. Influential station among our fellow-men is desired, and when obtained is used, for the promotion of those causes which Christ has at heart and for which He unreservedly gave Himself. In a word, if we have faith in Christ in any such sense as makes us really His and identifies us with Him, then we have become crucified to the world and are now holding all things—even those which are most sacred and precious—wholly subject to His will. We value them for His sake, not for our own sake, nor for themselves. That separation which death ordinarily makes has been already made, so far as we are concerned, by our surrender to Christ. If we have already parted from the world and its attractions, then there is no further parting to be dreaded. If with reference to all earthly things, except as we use them or enjoy them for Christ's sake, we have already become as those who have died, then truly death has no farther power over us or terror for us. He who in his surrender to Christ has already died, shall never, as Christ said to Martha, die again.

The two phases of this experience—the surrender to Christ and the practical living for Christ, the death and burial with Christ and the subsequent resurrection to that life in Christ which is “unto God”—are definitely expressed in the baptismal symbolism, and are so important a part of its moral significance that they should never be overlooked.

Baptism is not a pledge or a “vow” to live so and so; it is the expression of a fact—a confession that the being dead to the world and alive unto God is already our moral status.

III The Practical Value of This Conception.

1. It makes clear the distinction between moral living and Christian living. This distinction is not so clear in many minds as is desirable, although with the prevailing ideas it is hard to see how it can be made clearer. Christian living is moral living—and something more. Of course, we all know and readily admit that morality does not save us—that not Pharisaism but Faith is the divine requirement; at the same time, what is the fruit of faith in the present life other than morality? A Baptist minister was accustomed to say to me that the sole purpose of faith in Christ was the production of upright, pure, and simple living, and that to be sweet-tempered, loving and amiable, honest and true, was the one result aimed at. But is it so? Is this all? One thing is certain, viz: that the profession of faith in Christ and the reception into the church of one who has already been living in the world worthily, and been amiable in his family and social relationships, usually make no appreciable difference in his conduct beyond the mere matter of church attendance. He remains, perhaps, just as anxious as ever to acquire wealth and, as he acquires it, to spend it in ostentatious display. So long, however, as he gets it honestly, and is sufficiently liberal to escape the charge of stinginess, his Christian character and standing are unchallenged. But according to the doctrine of Paul, if I have correctly apprehended it, something more than upright living will distinguish the Christian believer. It is expected that he will become a positive moral force in the world, laboring in

all ways that he finds open to him to promote the interests of Christ's Kingdom. His business and his money getting and his social avocations are to this end. He may have various avocations, but he has only one vocation. Morality is living conformably to the moral law, but the law of the Christian life is Christ. Christian discipleship is evidenced in the conduct by the subordination of everything one has and is to the purpose of Jesus Christ to establish the Kingdom of Heaven in a sinful world. It makes every Christian a missionary and engages him actively in a religious propaganda.

2. Furthermore, it defines the nature of the sin, or the sins, of which Christians are commonly guilty. From the point of view of his duty these are rather sins of omission than of commission. We do not expect, and as churches we would not tolerate, flagrant violations of the moral law on the part of any one professing to be a follower of Christ, but it is woeful how far most of us fall short of fulfilling the divine requirement and the divine expectation in the Christian life. On the other hand, and from the point of view now of the Christian's own personal well-being, sin is moral suicide. It proves itself to be such whether the sin be a wilful transgression or a neglect of duty. By sinning one does in respect of his spiritual life somewhat as I should do in respect of my physical life by taking poison. Sin in the Christian is something more than the violation of perceptive morality; it is the transgression of the law of his own life as a new creature in Christ.

3. The conception herein presented is essential, as it seems to me, to the salvation of the churches and, through them, of society from the dangers which threaten them. The fact of the believer's actual death and resurrection in Christ must be realized afresh in the consciousness of the Church. It alone accounts for the marvellous career of the Apostle Paul, and alone explains the wonderful successes of the churches of the first century. They were indeed "not of the world." Can we truthfully say as much? The Christian faith and life which they exhibited were accompanied by an enthusiasm that braved dangers, made sacrifices, and endured martyrdoms. And

while they thus sacrificed and endured, they possessed an exuberance of joy which made their faith a contagion. Is something such as this not what we need today against the errors of Romanism, the negations of Unbelief, the menace of Anarchy, the paralysis of Indifferentism? We shall not be helped by the multiplication of new organizations. For our salvation is not in them. Yet we are living in what might be called not inappropriately "The Age of New Organizations." The real need is more life from Christ, absorption into Christ, personal identification with Christ. The Church must be rescued from its worship of the idols of Secularism. It must feel once more the charm of the spiritual ideals to which the New Testament points it. I do not deny but most gladly admit the splendid achievements of our National Christianity in church extension, missionary enterprise, educational endowment, etc., but this must not deceive us as to the other fact that when we come to look more closely into the conditions existent in the local churches we find but a minority of the membership possessed of anything like spiritual activity. It becomes apparent that the aggregate results of church work on mission fields and in other spheres of endeavor, though magnificent, are obtained by the effort of these minorities and not by the church membership as a whole. It is not the four or five million Baptists in this country, for example, who are doing our denominational work, but the comparative few who in the various churches constitute their working force. The large majority instead of being baptized into Christ, into Christ's death, and into an entirely new relationship with humanity, are immersed in secularism and are really living for self.

The times demand another presentation of the essential nature of the Christian life, and there is no better text therefore than is found in our own baptismal rite.