

APPENDIX II

THE BAPTISMAL CONTEXT OF *LOUTRON* IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

THE word *loutron*, rendered 'washing' in the AV, occurs on only two occasions in the New Testament, at Ephesians 5.26, and Titus 3.5. As E. K. Simpson has rightly pointed out the translation 'washing' or 'water for washing' conveys the correct sense of the word,¹ a sense, moreover, which is well attested in the classical writers. To translate the word as 'laver' cannot be substantiated, since throughout the LXX *laver* was translated by *loutēr*. From this some have denied that there is any reference to baptism in either of the two verses where *loutron* occurs in the New Testament, and it is said that they must be considered as references to a spiritual washing, which Ephesians 5.26 demonstrates as taking place through the word of God (in this sense as equivalent to Scripture). On the other hand, nowhere in the New Testament is the word of God considered as a washing agent. In this respect the allusion at John 15.3 clearly bears no relation to the word of God in the sense of Scripture, nor does John 17.17. At times John 3.5 has been used to back this interpretation, but here, not only is there no mention of the word of God, but the basic reference, we believe, is to baptism, either the baptism of John as seems most likely, or less probably, proselyte baptism, as symbolising the repentance which is a prerequisite of the activity of the Spirit of God.

Taking firstly Ephesians 5.26 we note that the phrase *tō(i) loutrō(i) tou hudatos en rhēmati* conveys a slightly different sense to that usually given in the English versions, for the definite articles associated with both 'washing' and 'water' would seem to place a special emphasis upon them, singling them out, as it

were, for especial note, whereas there is no article with the difficult word *rhēma*, leaving it essentially indefinite. With regard to *rhēma* it is well to note that the essential meaning is that of the spoken word, a 'saying', and on the few occasions on which the word is used by Paul it nearly always seems to refer to the proclamation of the apostolic Gospel, that technically called the *kerygma*. This is seen clearly at Romans 10.8, 17, and elsewhere, and it is clear that the word in these contexts does not indicate the word of God in the sense of Scripture, for which, indeed, *rhēma* would hardly be appropriate. This would also seem to be the meaning at Ephesians 6.17, where the 'sword of the Spirit' is the 'utterance of God', that proclamation by which the Holy Spirit brings defeat to the enemy by bringing deliverance to those held captive in the thralldom of sin and death. In our present context however the use of the word remains somewhat indefinite, it simply refers to something which is spoken, and taken thus there seem to be no valid grounds for denying a reference to a baptismal formula. In view of this, Simpson's remark that 'Chrysostom's identification of the term with the baptismal formula savours of the sacerdotalism of his age'² seems to us to be a little unjust. Perhaps more in keeping with Pauline usage would be to see in the word a reference to the word of faith, the confession of the mouth (Rom. 10.8-10), for which baptism would provide the supreme opportunity.

Furthermore, it is important to note the use in this verse of the aorist participles — 'sanctify' (*hagiasē(i)*) — 'cleansed' (*katharisas*) — which indicate definite and distinctive events, just as Christ gave Himself for the Church in a single act of giving (again the aorist, *paredōken*) so the sanctifying and cleansing of the Church itself is a single and definite event. The use of the aorist makes it clear that the 'washing', the 'bath', is one which occurred once and required no repetition, and such would certainly apply to baptism, which, as we have pointed out in the body of the present study, is the unrepeatable sign of a spiritual cleansing. Indeed, we suggest, it would have taken little imagination for the original readers to have inserted the word 'baptismal' before 'water' in this verse.

Turning now to Titus 3.5 we should note the close similarity

between the phraseology used here by Paul and that of the Jewish *tebilah*, observing also the similarity in thought at John 3.5; 1 Corinthians 6.11, as well as the verse in Ephesians we have been considering. Once again we must note the use of the aorist tenses; at Titus 3.5, 'saved' (*esōsen*), at 1 Corinthians 6.11, 'washed' (*apelousasthe*); which speak of a completed act requiring no repetition. Furthermore, we should observe the close relationship between the activity of the Holy Spirit on the one hand, and the water or the cleansing and washing on the other. The outward application of water symbolises the inner cleansing which effects regeneration,³ which is resultant upon the renewing power of the Holy Spirit, and thus Paul can be commanded, 'Get yourself baptised and your sins washed away' (Acts 22.16). Here, at Titus 3.5, the 'renewing of the Holy Spirit' 'specifies the resultant renovation accompanying the regeneration',⁴ and thus we see that the deliverance of God 'is made ours through the outward seal of baptism; in vital experience it comes through the inner quickening of the Spirit'.⁵ The close association of baptism with the work of the Holy Spirit has already been considered, and once again we believe they are brought together in close proximity in this verse.

In view of the foregoing discussion there would seem to be no real reason for denying a baptismal context to the word *loutron* in either of the two instances in which it occurs. It is our conviction that the 'washing' of Ephesians 5.26 and Titus 3.5 is the washing of baptism, not as an act which is efficacious in itself, but as the seal of a justifying faith. The use of the aorist tenses in the associated verbs make it clear that in neither case is a continual cleansing in view, but rather a single act of cleansing or washing from which the Christian emerges sanctified, fit to be presented to his Lord; such is the sacrament of baptism.

NOTES

1. E. K. Simpson, *The Pastoral Epistles*, (1954) pp. 114ff.
2. E. K. Simpson, Commentary on Ephesians in *NLC*, (1957) p. 131n.
3. Regeneration (*palingenesia*) signifies 'new birth' in the classics (cf. Plutarch, *Phil.* 2.998C), but usually in the sense of the Stoic philosophers as relating to the periodic restitution of the material world. Here it is a personal restitution which is in view by which a man is restored to his correct relationship to God.
4. D. Guthrie, *The Pastoral Epistles* in *TNTC*, (1957) p. 205.
5. A. M. Stibbs, Titus in *The New Bible Commentary*, (1953) p. 1082.