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B A P T I S M

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by  
D. B. KNOX

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When Peter preached the first sermon on the day of Pentecost the crowds were convicted as they listened. They were pricked to the heart as Peter urged them "Save yourselves"; and they asked "What shall we do?" Peter replied, "Repent and be baptised in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins and you will receive God's Holy Spirit which He has promised" (Acts 2:38). We may contrast this reply with what Paul told the Philippian jailor when he asked the same question "What must I do to be saved?" Paul replied "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved and your household" (Acts 16:31). To the same question, Peter answered "Repent and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins"; and Paul "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved". Plainly the two replies mean the same thing because they bring about the same effect, and were both spoken by apostles to those enquiring about salvation. Later, writing to the Romans, Paul said "Whoever calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved". So here we have three statements all bringing about the same result, salvation. Plainly, they are three ways of saying the same thing, to be baptised in the name of Jesus, to put your faith in Him as Lord and to pray to Him. And we know from the whole of the New Testament that if we ask God for forgiveness, recognising Christ as Lord, we will receive that

forgiveness and the gift of the Holy Spirit. Thus putting these three statements together, we see that baptism in the name of Jesus which Peter urged as the means of forgiveness is the same as putting our faith in Christ as Lord, which was what St Paul told the Philippian jailor he should do, and baptism and the exercise of faith are equivalent to calling upon the name of the Lord, because God grants us forgiveness when we pray for it through faith in Christ.

Not long after Peter's sermon Paul was himself converted on the Road to Damascus. It was then that Paul first acknowledged Jesus as Lord. Later, while he was praying at Damascus, Ananias brought him a message about the worldwide missionary work that Jesus had for him. At the end of his message Ananias said "And why are you waiting? Get up and be baptised and wash away your sins, calling upon the name of the Lord Jesus". From one point of view Paul had already been converted, had already acknowledged Jesus as Lord, had already begun the life of obedience, had already, that is, had his sins forgiven and had already been received into sonship with God. Yet it was to this converted man that Ananias said "Get up and be baptised and wash away your sins, calling on the name of Jesus". To call on Christ's name is the way by which we are to be saved. "Whoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved"; so we see that Ananias is

urging Paul to call on Christ's name in a definite and decisive way at the beginning of His Christian life. He should be baptized in order that his sins might be washed away as he calls upon the name of Jesus.

The idea of washing in connection with the forgiveness of sins goes back into the Old Testament. The psalmist prays "Wash me thoroughly from my sins". A related idea is that of cleansing. Sin is thought to be a stain, something that needs to be cleansed, so washing in water was a natural action to express our desire for cleansing and also at the same time to express God's promise to cleanse us, to forgive us our sins when we ask for it in Jesus' name. And so Ananias told Paul: "Be baptised and wash away your sins": wash your body in Christ's name and wash your sins away at the same time. Of course, it is only God who washes away our sins, and He does so in response to our prayer, so that it was natural for Ananias to associate baptism with the prayer for forgiveness, for baptism is a calling upon the name of the Lord Jesus. It is an acted prayer. It depicts by its outward washing what we are praying for, the inward washing of God. And it not only depicts our prayer but it also depicts God's promised action to wash away our sins in response to faith in Christ. So the washing of baptism is a double sided picture, it expresses our sense of the need of being washed, as in the verse from the Old Testament

"Wash me thoroughly from my sins", and it also depicts God's promise that He will wash away our sins. We may be confident that our sins are washed away by God when we ask for this. As Ananias told Paul, "Be baptised and wash away your sins, calling upon the name of the Lord". Or as St Peter told his hearers "Be baptised in the name of the Lord Jesus for the forgiveness of your sins". Baptism then is prayer externally expressed, and it has the same effect that all prayer has when it is directed in fact towards the promises of God; that is, it most certainly brings to pass what is prayed for in faith, when God has promised to give this in response to faithful prayer. That is why Peter can write in his first letter "Baptism saves us" for it is faith in Christ as Lord which saves us. Baptism is an act of faith, it is a prayer for forgiveness. Baptism without faith is as empty and ineffective as prayer without faith. Two current notions about baptism may be mentioned. Sometimes it is said to be a seal of God's covenant, that is, of His promised relationship to us. However the New Testament knows nothing of this. In the Old Testament, circumcision was the seal of God's covenant, for the Old Testament dealt in outward signs. In the New Testament these outward signs have been fulfilled by the inward reality, and it would be a mistake to think of Old Testament signs merely as replaced by other outward signs. So in the New Testament baptism is not the seal of the new covenant, rather the

seal of the new covenant is the presence of the Holy Spirit. God gives His Spirit to all who come into relationship to Him through forgiveness and adoption, so that the presence of the Holy Spirit in our heart, which we experience and which other people can see by the changed character of our life, is the true seal of the new covenant. In the Old Testament circumcision signified the changed heart; in the New Testament this is fulfilled in the new life of the Spirit. Outward signs have passed away; now that we experience the inward reality, of which the outward was the sign.

Another current notion about baptism is that it is a confession of faith in Christ such as in the phrase "confessing Christ in baptism". This is not a New Testament phrase and the notion confessing Christ in baptism is unknown to the New Testament. Baptism is not directed towards other people but towards God. As Peter says in his first letter, it is the asking God for a good conscience, that is it is the asking for forgiveness. It is a prayer, an acted prayer, a concrete prayer one may say. Prayer is a personal thing between ourselves and God. Baptism, being essentially prayer, has all the problems that are associated with talking about prayer. For example, Jesus says "Ask and you shall receive". Yet we all know that although this is stated so categorically and is so profoundly true, it is not true if applied unthinkingly. It does not

mean that any prayer we choose to offer will be answered for we must ask in faith and according to the will of God. In the same way the New Testament speaks directly and categorically about baptism. Peter says "baptism saves" and Ananias tells Paul to wash away his sins by being baptised. But just as prayer without faith is ineffectual, so baptism without faith in Christ is vain. But yet this does not stop the New Testament saying about prayer "Ask and you shall receive" nor does it prevent it from saying "baptism saves". Just as we have learned not to foolishly apply these statements about prayer to everything we call a prayer, so we must remember to do the same about baptism. And just as we do not reject these direct and strong statements about prayer because they have unspoken conditions, so we ought not to reject plain statements about baptism saving and regenerating us, just because there are also unspoken conditions about faith and perseverance.

Lastly, who ought to be baptised? The answer to this is that whoever needs prayer for the washing away of sins is a suitable subject for baptism. For baptism is just that; and for whom ever it is right that prayer should be offered for the forgiveness of sins in the assurance that God will hear that prayer, for that person it is appropriate that baptism should be administered, to express this prayer, and moreover it is just as appropriate that thanksgiving should follow in faith

that the prayer which baptism epitomises has been heard by our faithful God.

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A NOTE ON A BASIC ENGLISH REFORMATION  
DOCUMENT ABOUT BAPTISM ... THE BAPTISMAL  
SERVICE IN THE CHURCH OF ENGLAND  
PRAYER BOOK

A perusal of the Church of England services for baptism makes it clear that baptism is understood as an aspect of prayer for forgiveness. The exhortation calls upon the congregation to pray that God will grant to this child that which by nature he cannot have, and the prayer which follows is that God will wash him and sanctify him with the Holy Ghost that he may come to everlasting life. And the next prayer is that he may receive remission of his sins.

After the reading of Scripture another prayer follows that the child may receive the Holy Ghost and be born again and further prayers are offered to the same effect before the act of baptism is administered. Thus the Church of England baptismal service is based on the concept that baptism is an expression of faith in God's promises of forgiveness, i.e. it is a prayer for the fulfilment of these promises and if they are true and sure then the magnificent declaration of faith "Seeing now this child is regenerate ... let us give thanks unto

Almighty God for these benefits" follows most properly.

The service is based on the concepts (1) that a new born baby needs God's forgiveness and regeneration of the Spirit; (2) that it is God's will to grant these things in response to faithful and persevering prayer; (3) that baptism is in essence prayer. By baptising their children parents imply that their home is God-centred, in which Jesus is Lord and that they themselves are obediently seeking first the kingdom of God and not material things and will persevere in prayer and teaching their children, bringing them up in the fear and nurture of the Lord. In these circumstances baptism at the beginning of the child's life is an appropriate, explicit act of faith in the faithful God, and thanksgiving must follow. The eye of faith sees and exults in the promised benefits already given. "Seeing now that this child is regenerate ... let us give thanks." To stop short of this thanksgiving is to truncate the action at the very point of its true apex, and would falsify the expression of that faith in the promise "Believe... and your household shall be saved" which baptism objectifies.

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