

*The Meaning  
of  
Baptism*

by D. W. B. Robinson

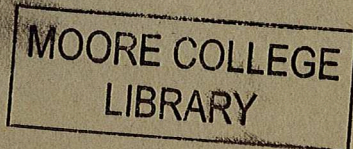


A FALCON BOOKLET

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# THE MEANING OF BAPTISM

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## CHAPTER I

## BAPTISM AT PENTECOST

**C**HRISTIAN BAPTISM goes back to the day of Pentecost. A good starting point for our study, therefore, is the reply given by Peter in Acts 2. 38 to the question of the conscience-smitten Jews, "What shall we do?" Peter answered: "Repent ye, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ unto the remission of your sins; and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost. For to you is the promise, and to your children, and to all that are afar off, even as many as the Lord our God shall call unto him."

Here at once we notice three points about baptism:

1. It was a *token* of "the promise" which God had made first to the Jews but ultimately to as many as He should call to Himself;
2. It was performed *with a view* to the benefits of the promise, namely, the forgiveness of sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit;
3. It required for its *effectiveness* repentance and faith in the name of Jesus Christ on the part of those baptized. Faith here meant confidence or trust in Jesus' work as Messiah, especially as achieved in His death and resurrection.

**God's Covenant Promise**

It is of crucial importance to a right understanding of baptism to grasp its connection with what Peter here calls "the promise." For this "promise" takes us back at once to the whole movement of God towards men which is the story of the Old Testament. This approach is summed up in the "covenant" which God made with those whom He called to be His people.

It is not too much to say that all the benefits and spiritual blessings offered by God to men are the outcome of His "covenant." The Bible gives special prominence to the covenant made with Abraham as the representative head of those who were to be "a holy people" and "a peculiar treasure" for the Lord's own possession (Genesis 17, Exodus 19. 5, 6).

As the history of the Hebrews went on, the prophets made it clear that the "promise" of the covenant was a promise of spiritual rather than material benefits, and that Abraham's "children" would be found coming from all parts of the world at the call of God (e.g. Isaiah 49). In particular, Jeremiah and Ezekiel declared God's promise of a renewed covenant whose chief characteristic would be the giving of His own Spirit in full measure (Jeremiah 31. 31ff., Ezekiel 36. 23ff.). This new covenant between God and those whom He calls to be His people was established through the death of Jesus Christ who said: "This is my blood of the covenant which is shed for many unto remission of sins" (Matthew 26. 28).

Frequently in the Old Testament God's word to His people was accompanied by some action in which they were required to participate. The action was as much God-given as the word. It was a pledge of God's covenant promise on the one hand, and of the people's acceptance of their reciprocal obligations on the other.

Thus we can see the significance of Peter's words on the day of Pentecost. He offered the benefits of the covenant to his Jewish hearers, and commanded them to be baptized. Those who submitted to baptism indicated thereby their acceptance of God's promise. The new sign-action accompanying the proclamation of the new covenant corresponds to the sign-action which accompanied the first disclosure of the covenant. When God made the covenant with Abraham and his children, He commanded them to be circumcised and said that circumcision should be "the sign of the covenant between Me and you." With the calling of men into the new covenant came the command to be baptized, thereby indicating that baptism was to be a sign of that new covenant.

If we knew nothing else whatever about baptism it would be enough for us to know that it was God's guarantee of the blessings of the covenant, or, in other words, of the promise God makes to us through the Gospel. As Article XXVII puts it, by baptism "the promises of the forgiveness of sin, and of our adoption to be the sons of God by the Holy Ghost, are visibly signed and sealed."

**Baptism before Pentecost**

On what authority did Peter issue the command to be baptized? And why was baptism selected rather than some other sign-action? The Gospels supply the answer to both questions. Not many days before Pentecost, Jesus Himself had given instructions that those who became disciples should



be baptized (Matthew 28. 19). This might have been a surprising requirement had not baptism been already familiar to the Apostles as the sign-action employed by John the Baptist and indeed by Jesus Himself in the early stages of His ministry (John 4. 1). The statement in Mark 1. 4 that "John baptized in the wilderness and preached the baptism of repentance unto remission of sins" shows that John's baptism, like that of Pentecost, was with a view to remission of sins and was made effective by repentance. But there was an even more explicit connection between the two baptisms. John's baptism is said to mark "the beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ" (Mark 1. 1-4, Acts 1. 22, and 13. 24) and it looks forward to the giving of the Holy Spirit, the central promise of the new covenant (Mark 1. 8, Acts 1. 5).

Yet, important as John's baptism was in preparing the way for, and giving meaning to, the baptism of Pentecost, baptism as a rite was not new in John's day. It was already an established practice among the Jews, for example. So we must now turn to consider the meaning of the word baptism and the practice of baptism among the Jews up to the time we meet it in the New Testament.

## CHAPTER II

### THE MEANING OF THE WORD

TWO THINGS help to determine the meaning of a word: its derivation and the context in which it is used. It is a mistake to rely on derivation alone, for words frequently change their meaning or acquire new meanings which cannot be accounted for merely by a knowledge of the root-meaning. Nevertheless, derivation is usually the first line to explore.

The word "baptize" in English means to perform a certain rite. It is a transliteration of the Greek word *baptizo* and it was taken into English to represent the performing of the same rite as is represented by *baptizo* in the Greek New Testament. This is an important observation, for it reminds us that *baptizo* in the New Testament has already acquired a technical meaning; that is, it denotes the performing of a certain rite. In the case of such "cult-words," the original meaning of the word may or may not be of help in determining how the rite was performed. This important linguistic fact is frequently overlooked. It is overlooked, for instance, by those who, with reference to the New Testament, make statements such

as "*baptizo* means to dip." The truth is that, in the New Testament, *baptizo* does not mean to dip: it means to perform the rite of baptism. We may compare the modern popular use of the word "christen." The original meaning of the word was to make Christian. But to-day the word means to perform a naming ceremony, without necessarily implying anything about the manner of performing the ceremony or its religious significance. So it is with *baptizo* in the New Testament. What *baptizo* meant originally, and whether the original meaning is of relevance in determining the connotations of the word in the New Testament, are other questions, and to them we now turn.

#### Derivation and Usage

*Baptizo* is an iterative or intensive form of another verb, *bapto*. By iterative we mean that an action is performed repeatedly; by intensive we mean that it is performed with some special force or effect. The primary word *bapto* means to dip or, in a derived sense, to dye. In the Greek translation of the Old Testament (the Septuagint), for example, *bapto* is used some sixteen times, always transitively. Usually it describes the action of taking some (small) object and dipping it in and out of some fluid. It is used, for example, of the priest dipping his finger in blood or water, and of dipping bread in vinegar. It is not used of a person either dipping himself or being dipped, although in Daniel 4. 33 it is used, in a derivative sense, of Nebuchadnezzar's body being "wet" with the dew of heaven.

This last instance is actually an intensive use of *bapto* similar to what we shall find is a common use of *baptizo*. It is worth noticing, therefore, how the intensive force of the verb can displace altogether the primary idea of dipping. The king's body was not dipped at all. The dew in point of fact descended on it. But as the context shows, the verb indicates a certain effect rather than a particular motion.

*Baptizo*, unlike *bapto*, is regularly used of persons. Presumably the word originally meant to dip repeatedly or to dip with special force or effect. But the precise action of dipping in and out again is no longer present in a great number of instances of the word known to us. Rather, as with *bapto* in Daniel 4. 33, we have the idea of someone or some object being seriously or permanently affected by water or by some metaphorical equivalent of water. The action envisaged is usually that of being overwhelmed rather than of being dipped; the person or object "baptized" is, as a rule, inert, while the



water (or equivalent) is the moving agent. Thus, *baptizo* is used of persons being "overwhelmed" by sorrow or calamity; "overcome" by wine (i.e., drunk or "soaked"); "deep" in debt (or "up to one's ears"); "overwhelmed" in an argument ("out of one's depth" or "in deep water," we might say); "heavy" with sleep. Josephus uses the word in the active voice of the great crowd of pilgrims who "flood" Jerusalem at feasts.

These are all metaphorical uses. But the idea of being overwhelmed is equally present in some of the literal uses. For instance, *baptizo* is used of men being drowned. A good example of the distinction between *bapto* and *baptizo* in their literal senses is to be had in their respective application to a ship. Euripides in the *Orestes* uses *bapto* of a ship when he means that it pitches, i.e., it dips its prow in and out of the water. But when *baptizo* is used of a ship it means that it either becomes water-logged or sinks.

In none of these instances of *baptizo* in ordinary Greek, literal or metaphorical, is the action of dipping implied at all. For to dip is to lower an object into a fluid and then withdraw it. But *baptizo* does not necessarily imply a lowering motion, nor does it imply a withdrawal from the medium concerned.

What should we expect, then, when the word is used in a technical ritual sense? It cannot be argued that the rite was called baptism because it was an act of dipping, for dipping was neither the literal nor metaphorical meaning of the word at the time. It is more likely that the rite was called baptism because it represented an experience in the spiritual or moral realm similar to what was conveyed by *baptizo* in the literal or metaphorical realm, i.e., the experience of being overwhelmed or enveloped by some power. Thus, *baptizo*, when used of a ritual act, may connote the significance of the rite, but not necessarily its mode.

### Jewish Ritual Washing

There are four occurrences of *baptizo* in the Greek Old Testament (which includes the Apocrypha):

1. Isaiah 21. 4. "Evil baptizes (i.e., overwhelms) me." This is an example of the metaphorical use we have already noticed.

2. 2 Kings 5. 14. "Then Naaman went down and baptized himself seven times in Jordan." Here we have our first occurrence of that intransitive or middle use of *baptizo* which seems to be used exclusively in a ritual connection. It is quite likely that the Jews who made this translation saw in Naaman's

ritual action a prototype of the baptism by which a Gentile became a member of the Jewish church, and used the middle voice of *baptizo* because it had that ritual flavour. Naaman may have dipped himself, but the word used does not necessarily convey this. It is true that the Hebrew word used here in the original usually means "dip" when used transitively, though not always; it sometimes means "moisten." But this is an intransitive use—the only one in the Old Testament—which, as the lexicon of Brown, Driver and Briggs points out, is parallel to the phrase "wash in" in verses 10 and 12 of the same chapter. It is not improbable that this intransitive use of *tabal*, like the middle of *baptizo*, connotes a ritual act rather than a particular motion.

3. In Judith 12. 7 we read that Judith baptized herself every night at the fountain in the Assyrian camp before prayer.

Ablutions before prayer were generally practised by the Jews, although the law enjoined the practice upon the priests only. The origin of this particular baptism is described in Exodus 30. 17-21, where it involved the washing of hands and feet only in the laver of brass.

4. In Ecclesiasticus 31. 30 (34. 25) we read: "He that baptizeth himself after touching a dead body, and toucheth it again, what profit hath he in his washing?" This is a reference to the custom enjoined in Numbers 19. In this ceremony the essential thing was the sprinkling of the "water of separation" on the unclean person (verses 13 and 20). "Whosoever toucheth the dead body of any man that is dead, and purifieth not himself, defileth the tabernacle of the Lord; and that soul shall be cut off from Israel: because the water of separation was not sprinkled upon him, he shall be unclean." Running water had to be collected in a vessel for this purpose. As part of the final purification ceremony the unclean man had also to "bathe himself in water," and some think that it is this washing which is referred to in Ecclesiasticus. This could be so, although the bathing was less important than the sprinkling; but in any case we have in Hebrews 9. 13 a reference to this same ceremony of sprinkling where it is clearly one of the "divers baptisms" mentioned three verses earlier.

### In the New Testament

When we turn to the New Testament we find that the verb *baptizo* and the related noun *baptismos* are again used of Jewish ritual washings both of objects and persons. Mark 7. 4



speaks of the *baptismoi* of cups and pots and brazen vessels (and couches, according to some manuscripts). These purifications were much elaborated by the Rabbis, but their ultimate authority goes back to Leviticus 6. 28 and 15. 12, where the procedure is described in our English versions as "rinsing." No doubt the simplest way to cleanse a small vessel was to dip it in water, but the word used is not limited to such an action. It is applied, for instance, to the washing of Ahab's chariot by the pool of Samaria in 1 Kings 22. 38, and to washing blood off a body in Ezekiel 16. 9. However, when Mark speaks of the baptism of cups, etc., he is thinking of ritual lustration rather than of the form of the rite. The same is true of the baptism of persons mentioned in the same passage. Here we are told that those who follow the "tradition of the elders," when they come in from the market place, do not eat unless they first baptize themselves. Again, in Luke 11. 38, "the Pharisees marvelled that Jesus had not first baptized before dinner." There was no command in the Old Testament about such lustrations, and the Gospels do not speak of anything more specific than washing either the hands (Mark 7. 2, 3) or the feet (Luke 7. 44) before a meal. Whether the later Rabbinical rules laid down in the Mishnah (c.200 A.D.) and subsequent tractates of the Talmud were in force in Jesus' day, we do not know. These certainly required the total immersion of a Jew after contact with Gentile neighbours. But *baptizo* itself, used in such a context as Luke 11. 38, implies nothing more than ceremonial ablution (see Moulton and Milligan's *Vocabulary of the Greek Testament* under *baptizo*). It is hardly likely that the Pharisee who invited Jesus to dinner would have expected Him to take a complete bath in his (the host's) house before dining, although he might well have expected Him to wash His hands.

In the interesting *Fragment of an Uncanonical Gospel* discovered in 1905 and dated in the second century A.D. by Grenfell and Hunt, Jesus is rebuked by a Pharisee for walking in the Temple "not having washed and your disciples not having been baptized in regard to their feet." Jesus replies, "But I and my disciples, whom you say have not been baptized, have been dipped in the waters of eternal life." Here, persons are said to be baptized when only their feet are washed. We are reminded that two of our oldest and best manuscripts read "sprinkle themselves" instead of "baptize themselves" in Mark 7. 4. This is probably not the original reading, but it may be evidence of how some early scribes thought the ceremonial ablutions were carried out.

Hebrews 9. 10 is interesting. The writer describes the ordinances of the Levitical system under three headings: "gifts and sacrifices," "meats and drinks" and "divers washings." The word translated "washings" in the last phrase is *baptismoi*. These various baptisms are set out in Leviticus and Numbers; they were performed by a variety of methods which included sprinkling, affusion and dipping (see on Ecclesiasticus 31. 30 above).

### Two Conclusions

Much of what we have said in this chapter has bearing on the question, to be considered later, of the proper mode of Christian baptism. But for now we emphasize two conclusions.

First, the word "baptize" as used in the New Testament is already a cult-word describing a ceremonial washing. It cannot therefore be taken in its literal sense, which in any case would probably be "to drown." Indeed, the use of *baptizo* does not tell us anything about the *mode* of the ritual act. On the other hand, it does imply that the significance of the rite will have to do with being overwhelmed by some force or power.

Secondly, the Jewish uses of the word show that baptism with them was connected with cleansing from defilement. It was thus always, in some sense, "unto remission of sins."

## CHAPTER III

### JOHN THE BAPTIZER

JOHN THE BAPTIST links the Old Testament and the New. His baptism, especially his baptism of Jesus Christ our Lord, may perhaps be regarded as gathering up all that was relevant from the older period, ready to be pressed into the service of the Christian church. But before explaining the meaning of Jesus' baptism, we must notice two further elements of Old Testament teaching.

Already in the Old Testament the idea of ritual purification of things and persons in water had been extended to apply to the moral and spiritual condition of men and women.

"Purge me with hyssop," cried David, "and I shall be clean; wash me and I shall be whiter than snow" (Psalm 51. 7).

Isaiah preached: "Wash you, make you clean, put away the evil of your doings from before mine eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do well" (Isaiah 1. 16).



Ezekiel gave the promise: "Then will I sprinkle clean water upon you and ye shall be clean; from all your filthiness and from all your idols will I cleanse you" (Ezekiel 36. 25).

The point about such passages is that they show all Israel to stand in need of cleansing from moral defilement. The imagery is largely that of the Levitical baptisms for ritual defilement such as was involved, for example, in touching a dead body. But the prophets point to a deeper need of cleansing. When John the Baptist came, therefore, he not only followed the prophets in calling on all Israel to confess their sins and seek cleansing from them; he supplied an actual rite of purification in water as a sign of this cleansing.

It is thought probable that even before the time of John the Baptist the Jews were familiar with a somewhat similar form of baptism for Gentile proselytes who wished to embrace the Jewish faith. But the New Testament is silent about this, and our positive evidence for its practice comes only from the second century A.D. or later. If we may assume, however, that proselyte baptism was customary in the days of John, even though that baptism was of ritual rather than moral significance, John may well have been implying that the Jews, through their sins, were no better than Gentiles, and needed, like Naaman, to be willing to submit to baptism in the Jordan if they wished to receive cleansing of their spiritual leprosy from the God of Israel.

### Death by Drowning

The other Old Testament picture which we must notice is that of being overwhelmed by the waves of calamity or evil, and of being snatched by God from the very jaws of death. These pictures are very common in the Psalms. "Let not the waterflood overwhelm me, neither let the deep swallow me up; and let not the pit shut her mouth upon me" is an example from Psalm 69. 15. A sustained and dramatic presentation of this experience is found in the book of Jonah. All God's waves and billows passed over Jonah; he went down to the bottoms of the mountains and came to "the belly of hell." But even there God preserved him, by means of the great fish, and in due time restored him to dry land. Now these experiences, especially that of Jonah, are foreshadowings of our Saviour's experience of death and being raised up from death. We have already seen how much this idea of being overwhelmed by the flood of calamity is associated with the verb *baptizo* in non-biblical Greek, and how on one occasion even in the Septuagint it is used in such a sense.

### The Baptism of Jesus by John

The link between John's baptism and that of the Christian church is the baptism of Jesus Christ Himself. This is a strangely neglected subject. Yet, coming as it does on the threshold of the Gospel, it supplies the key to the interpretation of Jesus' mission, and at the same time it supplies the kernel of meaning to Christian baptism. There are four aspects of Jesus' baptism which show this.

1. Jesus' baptism was *an act of identification*. That is, it did not represent merely Jesus' personal response to John's preaching of repentance. John recognized this, and at first was reluctant to proceed with the baptism. But by baptism Jesus identified Himself with sinners. The Voice which came from heaven, "Thou art my beloved Son, in thee I am well pleased," indicated Jesus as the Servant of Isaiah's prophecy (Isaiah 42. 1), one of whose marks was that "he was numbered with the transgressors" (Isaiah 53. 12). In His baptism we see Jesus (as Dr. James Denny puts it) "submitting to be baptized with their baptism, identifying Himself with them in their relation to God as sinners, making all their responsibilities His own. It was a great act of loving communion with our miseries." All those other baptisms were like a rope of sand apart from Jesus' baptism. All baptisms of repentance unto remission of sins were futile until they found their complement in that one baptism which "fulfilled all righteousness." As John baptized the people they became a community awaiting the Kingdom of God. But when John baptized Jesus He became the Chief Member, the Head, of that community.

2. Jesus' baptism was *a sign of His death*. Once again, this was implied by the Voice from heaven which addressed Jesus as the Suffering Servant, who "made His grave with the wicked," and who, being "numbered with the transgressors," "poured out His soul unto death." It was not by accident that, on two occasions during His ministry, Jesus spoke of Himself being baptized, on both occasions plainly referring to His coming death. In Mark 10. 38 He asked the sons of Zebedee, "Can ye be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?" (showing, incidentally, the idea of "identification" which we have just mentioned). Again, in Luke 12. 50 Jesus said, "I have a baptism to be baptized with, and how am I straitened till it be accomplished!"

This aspect reminds us of that connotation of the word *baptizo* so common in metaphorical uses, of being overwhelmed by some superior power. The ultimate overwhelming



power is death or Sheol, as the Psalms reveal. We may say that Jesus' baptism by John looked forward to His death on the cross, i.e., it was proleptic. Moreover, here lies the foundation of the truth which every Christian believer was taught; that his own baptism, whatever else it may have signified, was a baptism "into the death of Jesus Christ" (Romans 6. 3).

3. Jesus' baptism was *crowned with the descent of the Holy Spirit*. In one sense we may see this as the anointing of Jesus for His messianic function. But it is also the basis of that association of baptism with the giving of the Spirit which was set out by Peter at Pentecost and which has been held throughout the Church's history. The principal work of the Holy Spirit is, of course, to make us sons of God by regeneration, and this leads us to the final aspect of Jesus' baptism which we wish to consider.

4. Jesus' baptism was *accompanied by God's assurance of His divine Sonship*. The Voice was for Jesus Himself, not the bystanders, on this occasion. "Thou art my beloved Son." Jesus did not become the Son of God at the moment of His baptism, but He was declared to be such at that moment. We speak with reserve here, but it may well be that for Jesus Himself this experience of baptism and the Voice from heaven was a vital assurance concerning His own Person and Mission.

In a measure this is true for us all. Some people speak of "confessing Christ in baptism." But the more significant truth is that the Father confesses us as His sons in baptism. We cannot say that we become sons of God in the precise moment of baptism, for new birth by the Spirit is as unsearchable as the wind (John 3. 5-8). But the word of God accompanies the rite of baptism and assures us of "our adoption to be the sons of God by the Holy Ghost" (Article XXVII).

#### CHAPTER IV

### MY BAPTISM

THE NEW TESTAMENT has much to say about baptism which it is not possible to discuss in this booklet. But let us have no doubt about the heart of the matter. Baptism should convey to every man or woman who has received it certain indelible impressions. Here they are.

First, I have been baptized on the authority of Jesus Christ who is Lord of all things and holds all authority in heaven and on earth. He it was who, having been Himself baptized by John, and having passed through that baptism of death of which all other baptisms are a picture, commanded His disciples to "make disciples of all nations, baptizing them into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost" (Matthew 28. 19). Whatever is intended by baptism, that I have received as from Jesus Christ Himself.

Secondly, in my baptism God entered into a covenant with me. If God had never approached me with His promise to receive me as one of His sons I should have been lost and helpless. But God took the initiative and came to me. Baptism was His covenant-sign. It signified what God has done for me. It was a picture of the Gospel of God's grace, and in receiving baptism I received the Gospel. Some people speak of baptism as if it were no more than an opportunity to confess Christ before men and show obedience to one of His commands. But we should rather speak of baptism as an act of receiving God's assurance of salvation. To say "I have been baptized" is to say "God has made a covenant with me, to make me a member of Christ's body, to regenerate me by the power of His Holy Spirit, and to give me a share in the eternal inheritance of the people of God." My baptism was thus a "visible word" (as Augustine called it) which I have accepted—the sign-action of the Gospel. Where that visible word has been received in genuine faith, it is a most precious assurance of God's favour and goodness towards us. Even the unworthy receiving of baptism, in which none of its blessings are imparted, and which brings judgment on the unbelieving recipient, does not deprive the rite itself of its character as a witness to the Gospel promise.

Thirdly, my baptism taught me that all these blessings flow from the death of Christ and that I have been drawn into a most intimate spiritual union with Him. In His death, as figuratively in His baptism, Jesus Christ identified Himself with me in my relation to God as a sinner, and now He works in me (as the Catechism says) "a death unto sin and a new birth unto righteousness" which I apprehend by faith. To say "I have been baptized" is to say "I have gone down to the depths of Hades with Christ, and death has no more dominion over me."



## CHAPTER V

## WHY ARE INFANTS BAPTIZED?

THE MAJORITY of Christians hold that the infants of Christian parents ought to be baptized as soon as practicable after birth. This practice is described in Article XXVII as "most agreeable with the institution of Christ." Baptists, however, and other churches which hold what may be called "Baptist" views, are of the opinion that no person should be baptized until he is capable of exercising personal faith in Christ and until he has publicly confessed that faith. In this, Baptists believe they are following the teaching of the New Testament.

Nobody denies, of course, that there are cases recorded in the New Testament of adults who heard the Gospel, believed it, and were therefore baptized. There is no disagreement about the propriety of these persons being baptized as conscious believers. The Baptist position, therefore, concerning the baptism of infants cannot be established merely by reference to these cases. The question to be decided is, does the New Testament tell us what was done in the case of children whom converts may have had at the time of their own baptism or who may have been born to them subsequently? Unfortunately the New Testament does not tell us whether any of the converts it mentions had young children or not, nor does it tell of any children being born subsequently. But on the other hand—and this is equally important, though often overlooked—there is no case of a person being baptized as a believer whose parents we know to have been baptized some time previously. Thus the Baptist is no better off than anyone else when it comes to quoting instances from the New Testament. There is simply no direct evidence regarding the one crucial case which might decide the issue. Our opinion as to the probability or otherwise of the baptism of believers' children must rest on indirect evidence, which is partly circumstantial and partly arises from the character of baptism as a covenant sign.

**The Evidence**

Two pieces of evidence outside the New Testament may be mentioned first.

Although we have no record of the actual practice of the early church in regard to the children of Christians, the very

first time that evidence does appear—late in the second century—it reveals an established custom of baptizing the children of believers in infancy. This does not prove that the custom existed in the New Testament, but it places the onus on those who deny that it did to prove their case and to provide an alternative explanation of the origin of the custom so early in the church's history.

A second piece of evidence is from the custom of Jewish proselyte baptism. As we have mentioned, our details are not earlier than the third century A.D., but it is usually held that the practices described in the Jewish Talmud in regard to proselyte baptism had been in existence for some time.

When a Gentile wishes to embrace the Jewish faith and join the Jewish church he was circumcised and baptized. Since his children were regarded as sharing the benefits of their father's action, they too were forthwith circumcised and baptized. No adult proselyte was baptized without a confession of personal faith in the God of Israel, nor was the child of such a proselyte relieved of the necessity of making a personal confession of faith when he came to years of understanding. But the Jew saw no inconsistency in both circumcising and baptizing the children of a proselyte with their father.

**The Covenant**

There is, however, one fundamental reason why infant baptism is considered a right and necessary procedure. It is that baptism is represented in the New Testament as a divinely appointed sign or token of God's covenant with His people, and that, right throughout the Bible, a man's children are included with him in that covenant. If either of these truths is denied, there might indeed be little or no justification for baptizing infants. But if they are admitted, the case for infant baptism is irresistible.

That a man's children are included with him in God's covenant in the days of the Old Testament, does not require demonstration. Nor is there the slightest doubt that, though every Hebrew was individually accountable to God and required to put personal trust in Him, he nevertheless received the sign of the covenant when he was eight days old. Both the covenant and the sign of the covenant originated in the sovereign will of God, and in God's purpose the covenant was made with households, even though salvation was apprehended by personal faith no less in the Old Testament than the New.



When the covenant was renewed through the death of Christ, the promise was extended beyond Israel to "as many as the Lord our God shall call unto Him," and circumcision ceased to be its sign. But was no new sign given as a token of the new covenant, and were the children of those whom God should call no longer to be included in the covenant? The answer to both these questions is given as clearly as can be desired in the passage we have already taken as our text for the meaning of baptism, Peter's address at Pentecost. Here Peter summons "the whole house of Israel" to accept the blessings of the new covenant of the Spirit made available through the Gospel. He says: "Repent and *be baptized . . . for the promise* (i.e., of the covenant) *is to you and to your children. . . .*" How could Peter express more clearly, having regard to the composition of his audience and the allusions in his sermon, the fact that baptism was the sign of the new covenant and that the children of those who embraced the covenant were included within it?

Other parts of the New Testament confirm that the children of believers were "within the covenant." 1 Corinthians 7. 14, for example, asserts that the children of "holy" parents are likewise "holy." Now "holy" here does not refer to moral attainment; it is rather a term applied to those who are members of the "people of God" whose status, given by God, is one of "holiness," which means set apart by God for Himself. The term "saints" in the New Testament means the same thing. Thus the children of those who belong to the "people of God" are likewise reckoned to be members.

Again, in Ephesians 6. 1 the children of "saints" or believers, are exhorted to a certain course of action "in the Lord." Moreover, they are assured that one of God's covenant promises of the Old Testament (Exodus 20. 12) will be fulfilled to them. The fathers of these children are further reminded that their children are proper subjects for the chastening and admonition of the Lord—a privilege of the sons of God (Proverbs 3. 11, 12; Hebrews 12. 5, 6)—and Paul's instruction is based fairly and squarely on Old Testament precedents where the responsibility of parents to children springs directly from their relation in the covenant (e.g., Genesis 18. 19; Deuteronomy 4. 9, etc.).

Then there are the various occasions in the New Testament when whole households are baptized together following the conversion of the head of the home. We are told nothing of the composition of these households, so we cannot definitely assert that there were children baptized (although it would be

unusual if there were no children in any of the households mentioned). But whether young children were involved or not, the principle of these household baptisms is what matters, namely that God's covenant with a man extends to his family. This is brought out vividly in the incident of the Philippian jailer. When the jailer asked, "What must I do to be saved?" Paul replied, "Believe . . . and thou shalt be saved, *and thy house.*" Then we are told "he was baptized, *he and all his family*, immediately." Finally there is the statement, "he, having believed in God, rejoiced *with all his house.*" Every verb here is in the singular, but in every action the man takes his family with him! (Compare Noah, Genesis 6. 18 and 7. 1.)

### The Seal of Faith

Infant baptism stands or falls with the doctrine of the covenant. To deny baptism to the infants of believers is to deny a part of the terms of the covenant proposed by God. Naturally, the relation of personal faith to baptism differs in time-sequence according to whether baptism is administered to an infant or an adult. But there is no difficulty about this when we recall that the same was true in regard to circumcision. Abraham received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the faith which he had before he was circumcised. Faith came first, and the seal of faith afterwards. Yet Abraham was commanded by God to circumcise his son when he was eight days old. This must be regarded as a seal of the faith Isaac was to have *after* he was circumcised. The covenant sign stood for the same gracious promise of God in either case. The meaning of baptism, too, is the same whether administered to an adult believer or to his infant child, for the same word and promise of God is set forth in baptism whenever administered. The same faith is demanded of every person to whom that word and promise comes. But in the case of an infant, baptism awakens faith as its meaning is subsequently explained in catechism and "hearing sermons" (see the instructions to god parents at the conclusion of the baptismal service); while in the case of an adult convert "faith is confirmed" (Article XXVII) by baptism. In either case baptism brings the person baptized into the sphere of God's covenanted mercies, marks him as a member of the visible church, and places upon him the obligation "to believe in God and to serve Him."

It is not possible in this short tract to discuss at any length the question of the relation of regeneration to baptism. Readers are recommended to read *The New Creation* by Archdeacon T. C. Hammond, especially the chapter on



"Regeneration, Faith and Baptism." This may be said, however. Regeneration is the sovereign work of the Holy Spirit in the human soul. It is not given to us to detect either the beginning or the full working of this mysterious operation, though we see some of its results (John 3. 6-8). God, however, "calls us to the knowledge of His grace and faith in Him" (to use the language of the baptismal service) through His word, which includes His word as set forth in the sacrament of baptism. To receive baptism is to receive the promise of regeneration. Baptism is therefore "a sign of regeneration" (Article XXVII), not in the sense of being evidence, but in the sense of being a token or symbol of regeneration. But it is also an "effectual sign" (Article XXV) which means that God employs it as a "means whereby we receive" that which it signifies. The word of God, in sacrament as in preaching, is "alive and powerful" (Hebrews 4. 12). When an infant is baptized, prayer is made, "Give Thy Holy Spirit to this infant that *he* may be born again," and thanks are given for God's promise which "He, for His part, will most surely keep and perform." Evidence that God has heard the prayers of those who called upon Him will be seen when the child, having received the Gospel which his baptism proclaimed, is converted, i.e., when the work of the Holy Spirit in regeneration produces the fruits of repentance and faith.

### Confirmation

It may be added that, in the Church of England, the rite of confirmation, performed when a person has reached years of discretion, provides an opportunity in the presence of the congregation for a personal confession of faith which in baptism has been made through sponsors. But the benefits associated with baptism are regarded as having been already received by the confirmer. It is wrong to think, e.g., that the Holy Spirit is first given in confirmation, for baptism is the sacrament of the giving of the Spirit. The prayer that the confirmer may be strengthened with, and increase in, the Holy Spirit, has reference to the continuing work of sanctification, not to regeneration.

The presence of the bishop and the laying on of his hands with prayer are expressions of fellowship and blessing appropriate to the occasion when a person confirms his baptismal vows and is confirmed in the status, privileges and duties already conferred on him in baptism. Confirmation as we now practise it has no exact precedent in the New Testament (though laying on hands for various purposes is biblical

enough). Baptism, as a sacrament of admission into the Church of God, is quite complete without confirmation. But confirmation serves to recall to the baptized person everything implied by his baptism—the covenant and its responsibilities—and by stressing the role of personal faith impressively underlines the doctrine of justification by faith only.

## CHAPTER VI

### METHODS OF BAPTISM

THE CHURCH OF ENGLAND prescribes two methods of baptism: immersion (dipping the candidate in water) or affusion (pouring water on the candidate). Contrary to popular opinion, sprinkling is not prescribed. The Prayer Book actually restricts even affusion to cases where it is certified that the child is weak, immersion being the prescribed method "if the child may well endure it." (It is worth noting that the Prayer Book requires parents not to defer the baptism of their children longer than the first or second Sunday after their birth.) In the baptismal service for older persons "able to answer for themselves," which was added to the Prayer Book only in 1662, the rubric simply says that the priest "shall dip him in the water or pour water upon him."

We may add that pouring is not restricted by the Prayer Book to pouring on the head, nor is either dipping or pouring required to be performed more than once. There is a great need for a more careful administration of baptism. Sprinkling, or a mere moistening of the forehead, are not recognized forms of baptism either in the Church of England or in the Roman Catholic Church. The Eastern Orthodox Churches recognize only immersion.

### Early Evidence

One constantly meets with the assertion, made even by Anglican scholars, that in the early church baptism was usually or invariably by immersion. But despite the confidence with which this assertion is made it does not rest on facts. Indeed, so far as the writer knows, there is no certain reference to baptism by immersion earlier than about 200 A.D. when Tertullian speaks of the candidate being thrice immersed (*ter mergitatur*) in baptism. How is it, then, that so many speak of the primitive use of immersion with such assurance? There are two reasons for the prevalence of this opinion, in the



writer's view. One is that the word *baptizo* has been wrongly taken to imply dipping, and the other is that a wrong inference has been drawn from the use of the phrase "buried in baptism." We shall deal with these points in a moment. No doubt, of course, most of the language used concerning baptism in the writings of the first two centuries is quite consistent with immersion, and we do not deny the possibility that immersion was in fact employed in that time. But what has often been overlooked is that the language used may be applied with equal appropriateness to the method of affusion where the candidate stood in a stream or pool. It has sometimes been urged, for instance, that the phrases "to go down into the water" and "to come up out of the water" imply immersion. But obviously these expressions apply equally well to any method of baptism for which the candidate stood in the water. In Acts 8. 38, 39, where both these phrases occur, it is clear that they cannot of themselves imply immersion, unless we are to suppose that Philip was immersed as well as the eunuch, for "they went down *both* into the water"!

Probably the earliest picture we possess of a baptism is a painting in the catacomb of Callistus at Rome. The latest research regards this catacomb as belonging to the second century, although the painting may belong to the following century. In this painting the candidate is being baptized by affusion while he stands in a stream or pool. "It is remarkable," says the Dictionary of Christian Antiquities, "that in almost all the earliest representations of Baptism that have been preserved to us, this (i.e., pouring water from a vessel over the body) is the special act represented." The New Testament evidence points to this method quite as much as, if not more than, it points to immersion. We have early evidence that running water was preferred to still water for baptism. This confirms that a candidate at least stood in the water, but it does not tell us whether he was dipped in it or whether the water was scooped and poured on him.

The Didache, a Christian manual from the late first or early second century (and which therefore may even be contemporary with some of the later books of the New Testament) gives these instructions for baptism: "Concerning baptism, thus shall you baptize. Having first recited all these things, baptize in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit in running water. But if you have no living water, then baptize in other water, and if you cannot do it in cold then in warm. But if you have neither, then pour water on the head three times in the name of the Father and the Son

and the Holy Spirit." This interesting passage proves beyond doubt that where water was not available in quantity, baptism might be performed by affusion presumably from a vessel. But it is not possible to say more with certainty. Even where running water was available, or a standing pool, affusion may have been a permissible method. The scale of preferences mentioned does not necessarily have to do with the method of administering the water; the kind of water may be all that is in view, i.e., first, running water; secondly, a pool or tank; thirdly, water from a vessel.

We have already dealt with the meaning of the word *baptizo* at some length and have shown that it is inadmissible on linguistic grounds to deduce from the mere use of the word when used of a ritual act how that act was performed. The term is appropriate to any form of washing or ceremonial sprinkling. Arguments in favour of immersion as the original form of Christian baptism which are based on the meaning of the word have no substance. The word points to the meaning of the rite rather than to its mode.

### Buried in Baptism

The phrase "buried in baptism" which occurs in Romans 6. 4 and Colossians 2. 12, is the other main argument put forward in support of the view that immersion was the primitive mode of baptism. But this argument rests on a double misunderstanding.

1. The verb *thapto* does not have the same connotations as the English word "bury" by which it is translated in these passages. One of the difficulties in translating one language into another is finding exact synonyms or equivalents. With us, "bury" means to "inter," that is, to lower into the ground and cover again with earth. *Thapto* in Greek, however, does not mean this at all. It means rather "to honour with funeral rites" (to quote the ninth edition of Liddell and Scott's lexicon) irrespective of the method by which the body is disposed of. Liddell and Scott says, for example, that it is "frequently used with reference to cremation." The word connotes a public ceremony like our word "funeral" rather than any specific process which the body undergoes. Its use in the phrases we are considering tells us something of the character of the baptismal ceremony, but has no necessary bearing on the mode of baptism.

2. When Paul says "all we who were baptized into Jesus Christ were baptized into His death; *therefore* we were buried



with Christ by baptism," he is making a deduction not from the mode of baptism but from the theology of baptism. Baptism represented dying with Christ: that was agreed. Therefore, argued Paul, baptism, being a public ceremony, was a kind of funeral which proclaimed to all that the candidate had been committed to death. But—and this is why Paul introduces the idea of the funeral—the man publicly committed to death is now precluded from any return to his former life: he is bound to go on in his experience of union with Christ to resurrection and a new life. In Romans 6, Paul does not even connect rising again with baptism: baptism there is a figure of death only. In Colossians 2, both death and resurrection are represented in baptism. But of course the idea of being raised is essentially in contrast to deadness, and has no necessary reference to the motion by which the body was committed to death. In any case, our Lord was placed in the tomb by a horizontal rather than a vertical movement and His rising from the dead may well have been a similar movement.

### Symbols

In trying to envisage what mode or modes of baptism may have been employed in the New Testament, we will to some extent be guided by the figures of speech used by various writers. We have already seen three important truths associated with the rite.

*Cleansing* from sin is one. To express this, either affusion or immersion is apt. Both kinds of "bathing" were common in the Jewish world, and both have precedents in the ceremonial law. Indeed, in the light of Ezekiel's prophecy of cleansing under the new covenant (Ezekiel 36. 25), sprinkling might be considered an adequate method, although there is no evidence that this was employed in the early centuries of the church.

*The Giving of the Spirit* is a primary baptismal truth. Of this, affusion is clearly the most appropriate symbol. In the context in which Christian baptism first appears (Acts 2), the Spirit is three times spoken of as "poured out." The Spirit is again "poured out" in Acts 10, this time on the Gentiles when Peter cannot but go ahead and baptize them. There are numerous Old Testament prophecies about God pouring out His blessing, especially the supreme blessing of His Spirit. We cannot doubt, for example, that a passage like Isaiah 43. 25-44. 5 was brought into close association with the experience of baptism by the early Christians (see also Isaiah 42. 1).

*Union with Christ*, especially in His death, is expressed in a number of pictures in the New Testament, often with the baptismal experience in the context. Affusion is certainly no less appropriate to express this than immersion, and is often more appropriate. Even where the picture is of death, while immersion is an apt symbol of drowning or of being enveloped in the sea, affusion has its independent aptness as a picture of an unmoving subject being overtaken and overwhelmed by the moving agent, death. Indeed, when Jesus speaks in the Gospel (Mark 10. 39) of His own death-baptism and of our sharing it, it is more than probable that He has in mind the Old Testament picture of the wave of death which moves upon the victim. It has been suggested that affusion is envisaged in Galatians 3. 27 where baptism is described as a "putting on of Christ," the pouring from above which envelops the candidate being suggestive of the putting on of a tunic.

Dr. Handley Moule, who holds that in practice both immersion and affusion were employed from the first, suggests that the latter mode was really a modification of the former. He says: "It seems to us clear that baptism was at first, *theoretically*, an entire immersion, but that, also primevally, the theory was allowed to be modified in practice; *the pouring* of water in such cases *representing* the ideal immersion" (*The Epistle to the Romans* on Romans 6. 5). But there is no ground for supposing that affusion was only a modification of immersion. They were independent modes, each with its own background of idea and practice in the Old Testament, and each representing in its own way the meaning of baptism. Actually, both immersion and affusion have been modified in practice. The ideal immersion was in running water, and the Christian custom as well as the Jewish was that the person being immersed should be naked (The Mishnah: Mikwaoth; Cyril of Jerusalem: Catechetical Lectures II 2) so that nothing should interpose between the water and the body. Similarly, affusion has been modified from a pouring over the whole body to a pouring over the head only.

In some of the New Testament pictures of baptism it is difficult to see more than a mere contact or association with water. Those whom Paul says (in 1 Corinthians 10. 2) were "baptized in Moses" (i.e., into union with him) "in the cloud and in the sea," actually were under the cloud in the one case and passed through the sea in the other, as Paul says. They were not in physical contact with either element. In the one case it was above them, and in the other on either side of them.



If the two are taken in conjunction, there was water above and around them. But of course this is just as truly represented in affusion as in immersion. In 1 Peter 3. 21 the Flood is a symbol of baptism, even though the ark floated on the top of the waters. If the rain is included in "the water," clearly affusion is as good a parallel as immersion. But probably we should not press any of these figures.

In general, the weight of evidence supports copious affusion (with the candidate standing in stream or pool) as probably the most usual mode of baptism in the primitive church, although immersion in a baptistery seems to have become the rule by the third century. It is impossible for either mode to deny the aptness or validity of the other. Indeed the New Testament lays no command on us in the matter of the mode of administration, and we know too little about the actual practice of the early church to make exclusive claims. The fact that our earliest evidence outside the New Testament (which may be as early as some parts of the New Testament) makes mention of a refined form of affusion (pouring on the head) should make us cautious about making too much of a particular mode. The significance of baptism is what matters; the mode is of lesser importance. It is arguable that the most vividly symbolical method of baptism would be to stand in the path of an oncoming breaker, although it would pose certain practical problems for the clergyman! But however the rite is administered, so long as water flows on the baptized, it is "a sign of Regeneration or new Birth whereby, as by an instrument, they that receive Baptism rightly are grafted into the Church; the promises of forgiveness of sin, and of our adoption to be the sons of God by the Holy Ghost, are visibly signed and sealed; Faith is confirmed, and Grace increased by virtue of prayer unto God" (Article XXVII).

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