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B A P T I S M

by
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THE PROTESTANT FAITH

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Last Sunday I had the pleasure of baptising my youngest daughter. The Service of Baptism is always a happy occasion because it celebrates the graciousness of God. God's graciousness is perhaps the most wonderful aspect of His character. You may remember that in the Book of Judges God gave His name as Wonderful, and it is certainly true that His sovereignty by which He upholds and controls every movement throughout the universe and every detail of our own lives so that even the hairs of our head are all numbered, fills us with wonder passing well beyond our powers of imagination. And God's holiness is wonderful, His complete separation from all that is unworthy or sinful, and His exalted divinity, so that He is altogether different from all that is created. In Isaiah's vision the seraphim continually cry "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty". God's sovereignty and holiness are wonderful, but His grac-

iousness and love seems more wonderful still, in that He loves us though we are sinners and neglectful of Him and rebellious against His will. He has brought us into a relationship with Himself, the closest and most intimate relationship possible, through His taking our nature in Christ in order that we all might be the sons of God and have fellowship with Him through His Spirit, a relationship which nothing will ever break through-out eternity. It is certainly wonderfully gracious.

The Service of Baptism focusses our attention on this relationship which God calls us into. It is a relationship brought about through the forgiveness of our sins, and so it is based on the death and resurrection of our Saviour, which we commemorate at Easter time.

Baptism is a sign, or symbol, that is, a picture, an acted picture expressing and strengthening our faith in

God; and like prayer which is another form of faith, it brings the blessings which we ask for. It is in fact an acted prayer.

In the Old Testament water stands for cleansing. Thus the prophet Ezekiel in chapter 36 speaking in God's name says "I will sprinkle clean water upon you and you shall be clean. From all your filthiness and from all your idols will I cleanse you. A new heart also will I give you and a new spirit will I put within you and I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh and I will give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you and cause you to walk in my statutes". Here water represents inward cleansing, and it is closely associated with the giving of God's Spirit. "I will put my Spirit within you". Jesus took up this imagery of Ezekiel of water and the Holy Spirit (representing the cleansing and renewing of the heart) when he told Nicodemus

in John 3 "Unless a man is born of water and the Spirit he cannot enter into the kingdom of heaven. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit".

In the next chapter Jesus again compares water with the new spiritual principle which He imparts. He told the Samaritan woman in John 4:14 "Whosoever drinketh of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst but the water that I shall give him shall become in him a well of water springing up to eternal life", and three chapters later, using the same picture language of water to represent the renewing power of the Holy Spirit Jesus said "If any man thirst let him come unto me and drink. He that believes on me as the Scripture hath said out of his heart shall flow rivers of living water. This spake He of the Spirit which they that believed on Him were to receive". So the water of baptism is a picture

of the cleansing and renewing power of Christ. Just as water washes the body so faith in Christ's death brings the washing away of our sins, and just as water revives the earth and brings life, so God's presence in our hearts, His Holy Spirit, brings us (by a new birth as it were) into the new, eternal life which is fellowship with God.

So baptism with water is a picture of God's promises of forgiveness and renewal, and it is also an acted prayer, insofar as the coming to baptism is an acknowledgement of our need and desire of cleansing and of the new life which God gives, and an acknowledgement that God promises to grant these things in answer to believing prayer. As St. Peter reminds us in I Peter 3:21 baptism does not consist in the outward washing of the body but in the asking God for a cleansed conscience. God most certainly grants this petition to those who ask, and so baptism is a very happy

occasion, centred round God's graciousness in bringing us into a new and eternal relationship with Himself, through faith, a relationship which nothing can break, because God is almighty. Certainly death cannot interrupt it but only advance it, for God is able to make everything, even death, serve His purposes of blessing.

Baptism is an action given to us to focus our attention and faith on the graciousness of God and our fellowship with Him through forgiveness. There is a danger in isolating the action from what it symbolises and so of focussing our attention and faith on the rite of baptism itself rather than on the promises and graciousness of God of which it is a sign or picture. If we do this, the service instead of strengthening personal fellowship with God depersonalises religion. Baptism is then thought to be a sacred action which brings some blessing through itself. It is seen most clearly in Roman

Catholic teaching in two ways, firstly in making baptism absolutely necessary for fellowship with God and secondly in making the effects of baptism independent of the recipient's faith. In making the rite of baptism in itself necessary for salvation, baptism instead of reflecting and expressing our relationship with God becomes an externalized method of obtaining that relationship, and the relationship itself becomes depersonalized, and no longer fellowship with God. But fellowship with God is not established by outward actions but by the personal response of faith, and communion of God's Spirit with our spirits through His Word.

Ludwig Ott, in his manual "Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma" page 356 summarizes the Roman Catholic doctrine "Baptism by water is... necessary for all men without exception for salvation" and he adds that this is de fide, that is to say, an essential feature of Roman Catholic faith.

However, as you know, the Second Vatican Council has said that even the heathen who know nothing of Christ, let alone of baptism may be saved. The contradiction between the two statements is got round by saying that a person can receive baptism by desire without actually undergoing it, and during the last 100 years, (since the time of Pope Pius IX) this concept has been extended to what is called implicit desire, so that the person concerned may be quite unaware of having any desire for baptism or indeed of knowing anything about it, nevertheless he is said to have received the baptism by implicit desire all unbeknown to himself or to anyone else.

This method of theologising seems a very circuitous way of maintaining the absolute necessity of baptism which has come to be part of the Roman Catholic tradition. It is much more straightforward and truer to Scripture to say that the one thing necessary

for salvation is a true response to God's graciousness, that is to say, faith. Normally this response is expressed and symbolized in baptism, but it is the response of faith that counts. In this way our relationship to God remains on the personal level and is not depersonalised into an outward action.

A further depersonalizing of relationship with God results from Roman Catholic doctrine that the benefit of baptism is ex opere operato, that is that baptism confers blessing by the valid completion of the action itself. Salvation is made to depend on the correct performance of outward actions, so that if these are omitted in any essential detail the soul is left in hell; this is taught for example with regard to unbaptised infants. This doctrine of the ex opere operato effect of baptism depersonalizes our fellowship with God by concentrating attention, not on our response to God's graciousness, but on

the correct manipulation of water. Salvation is depersonalized into a mere passport to Heaven, instead of being eternal life, or knowing God and being known by Him, which neither death nor anything can interrupt.

A Service of Baptism is a reminder to those present of their obligations, for we can never presume on God's graciousness as though it did not matter whether or not we discharge our duties. God's blessing is not a mechanical automatic thing, for though His mercy is sure and certain it is never impersonal or automatic, and we are responsible for our reaction to it. For example a parent knows when he prays for his child that it is no good just saying one prayer giving no more thought to it than that as though that momentary prayer guaranteed the child's eternal relationship with God. God has promised to bless our children whom He has given us, and the Scripture describes

them as holy from their birth, (I Cor.7), that is they are in a special status with God, because of their parents' faith. But if that status is to be transmuted, as the child's personality develops, into a living personal fellowship, the parents must act responsibly and do their duty, not only by praying daily for their children but by instructing them in the Christian faith and not merely handing over this instruction to others who may be and often are inefficient. If parents are to expect God's spiritual blessing on their children they must pray for them throughout their life; they must teach them daily; and they must fashion their own lives and home to reflect Christian values. This is the responsible behaviour which God expects of Christian parents if we are to expect God's blessings to be granted which we pray for. In other words, we must act responsibly in the situation we are in. All of us who pray through baptism for forgiveness and

fellowship with Christ must fashion our lives according to God's will, and acknowledge Him in our thoughts and actions, making time for prayer and for common Christian worship and fellowship. For if we do not make time for these things we certainly cannot be said to acknowledge Him.

Baptism then is a reminder of our relationship and of our responsibilities. At the end we all must give an account of our lives. Accountability is a notion which is not sufficiently prominent in Christian thought or in our community nowadays. There is a lot of behaviour tolerated at present which would be modified if we were more vividly aware of our accountability for our actions and for the way we live. Our neglect of this does not of course affect its certainty. St. Peter reminded those who are living a godless sensual life that they shall have to give an account to Him that is ready to judge the quick and the

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