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BAPTISM.

By D. B. Knox

The Protestant Faith

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Baptism goes back to John the Baptist. He preached that the Christ - the Messiah - was soon to come, and urged people to make themselves ready by turning back to God. "Repent, for God's kingdom is imminent" was his message. For those who repented there would be forgiveness when the Messiah came. A large number of people responded to his preaching and he baptised them as a sign of their repentance. It was a sign that they were cleansing themselves from their sinful ways, turning their back on their old life and turning to God to serve Him and wait for His kingdom. Repentance means changing your mind, about your attitude to life and how you behave, and this is what they were doing in response to John's message, and their being baptised was a sign of it. The sign of baptism was based on the Old Testament; for example, Isaiah's words "wash you, make you clean, put away the evil of your doings.....cease to do evil, learn to do well....." (Is. 1:16). Isaiah called out the people to repent and, speaking metaphorically, called them to wash and make themselves clean, and so when John called people to repentance, he used the metaphorical sign of washing through which his hearers could express their response. Thus baptism expresses a death to sin, the turning away from sin; and this is how it was used in early christian preaching. Thus, Peter, in the first christian sermon told those who responded to his message that they should repent and be baptised (Acts 2:38); and Ananias told Paul at his conversion that he should be baptised (or perhaps baptise himself - the Greek can mean either) and wash away his sins; that is, he should express his determination to cleanse himself from his old way of life of opposing Christ by undergoing the sign of baptism; "wash you, make you clean,.... cease to do evil, learn to do well," as Isaiah put it.

St. Paul described baptism as a sign of death to sin (Rom.6:2-6). The reality of which it is a sign is that we were crucified with Christ when Christ was crucified. The sign of this reality is the baptism we underwent. The consequence of this reality is that we should regard ourselves as dead to sin (Rom.6:11). Sin in our life belongs to the past and we should not feel free to continue a sinful life (Rom.6:1).

In the Old Covenant, circumcision was the sign of God's covenant and this involved putting off the old sinful life. This sign was fulfilled when we were united to Christ in His death. This is what St. Paul calls the "circumcision" of Christ (Col.2:11). The cross was also Christ's "baptism", to which he referred when he said he had a baptism with which he must be baptised (Lk. 12:50). So when Christians are baptised it is a sign that they identify themselves with Christ's death and turn their back on their old sinful life, and it is a pledge that they intend to lead a new life (Rom.6:4)

It must always be remembered that repentance is closely linked with faith. We repent because we believe the message. We undergo the sign because we have come to believe that Jesus is Lord. That is, we are baptised into the name of the Lord Jesus Christ.

When John the baptist preached his baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, the promised forgiveness was still in the future - the Kingdom had not yet come, the Christ had not yet been disclosed. But when Peter preached, things were different. Jesus was Messiah, the Christ, and had been raised from death, having conquered sin, and was now exalted in His kingdom. Peter's hearers were

invited to repent and be baptised into the name of Jesus; and Peter promised that they too would receive the Holy Spirit, which was the sign of their forgiveness; (for to all whom God forgives and adopts as His children, he give the Spirit of His Son. The Spirit teaches us to pray to God as our Father. The Spirit's presence is the proof that we are our Father's sons and brothers of our Saviour).

Not every reference to "baptism" in the New Testament refers to baptism in water, the sign of repentance from sin. Sometimes it is a reference not to the sign, but the reality. Thus Jesus used the word more than once to mean His death (Mk. 10:38; Lk. 12:50), for on the cross He died to sin (Rom. 6:10). This is probably what the word means in Col. 2:12, for in this passage St. Paul is speaking of the Christian having done with the old way of life. He uses the terminology of the Old Testament concepts of circumcision and uncircumcision, where circumcision was a sign of renovation of life (cf. the phrase "circumcise your heart"). In the death of Christ the Christian was "circumcised" in that "he put off the body of the flesh in the circumcision of Christ", that is, in the death of Christ, with whom he was crucified. St. Paul goes on "having been buried with Him in His baptism (i.e., his death) in Whom you were also raised in union with Him...." (This is the better translation, as the New Testament never says we are raised in baptism. 'His' before baptism is a translation of the Greek definite article.) Baptism is a sign of repentance, death and burial. Thus in Gal. 3:27 St. Paul wrote "as many of you as were baptised into Christ put on Christ". He is arguing that the old way of life can no longer be lived by the Christian. In 1 Cor. 6:11 again he refers to the fact that Christians had left a sinful way of life. He wrote "Such were

some of you (drunkards, etc.) but washed yourselves'. (The Greek ought to be translated thus Cf. Isaiah 1:16)There may be reference to water baptism as the sign, but it is more likely to be a direct reference to reality of repentance, couched in Old Testament metaphor. (This is clearer in the Greek, which has washed from i.e. from an immoral life.) The same is probably true of Titus 3:5, "according to his mercy he saved us, through the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit". It is often thought that there is a reference to water baptism here. This is possible but not probable, for once again, the reference is more likely to be directly to the reality, that is, to the cleansed life, which the Holy Spirit brings about in furtherance of God's mercy.

John 3:5 "except a man be born of water and the Spirit he cannot enter into the kingdom of God" has been traditionally interpreted of baptism. Again, this is a possibility, but it is not likely exegetically. Either (1) The reference to water may be as a symbol of the Spirit, for this was Old Testament imagery, so that to be born of water and the Spirit is a double way of saying 'Born of the Spirit', i.e. "Spiritual water", and this is supported by the fact that in verse 8, the reference is simply to being born of the Spirit; or (2) The reference to water may be a reference to natural birth, in contrast to spiritual birth, for these two births are contrasted in the following verse (verse 6). or (3) Water may stand for the old order of Judaism (cf. the six water pots and John's baptism). Thus the old order is not enough, a man must also be born of the new if he is to see the kingdom of heaven. In 1Cor. 12:13 baptised in the Spirit is not a reference to water baptism but to the gift of the Spirit which comes with conversion and is equivalent to drinking of the

Spirit in the same verse.

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). Thus, to the same question, Peter answered: "Repent and be baptised in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins"; and Paul answered "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved". Plainly the two replies mean the same thing because they both 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 repent and be baptised in the name of Jesus; to put your faith in Him as Lord; and to pray to Him as Lord (i.e. as God). 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 repentance and 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 both baptism and the exercise of faith are equivalent to calling upon the name of

the Lord, because God grants us forgiveness when we turn to Him and 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, and already repented and 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 baptised in order to express his change of way of life, as he symbolically washes away the past, as he calls upon the name of Jesus as his new Lord.

The idea of washing is connected in the Old Testament, not only with repentance "wash you, make you clean" (Is.1:16) but also with God's forgiveness of sins. 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. 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 in his message to Paul, to associate baptism, with prayer to Christ for salvation. For baptism which is a sign of repentance goes very closely with faith which is a prayer for forgiveness, a calling upon the name of the Lord Jesus. So, baptism becomes part of an acted prayer. It depicts by its outward washing what we are praying for, the renewal of our life and the inward washing of God. And it not only depicts our prayer but it may also be seen to depict God's promised action to wash away our sins in response to faith in Christ, for in truth it is God who gives repentance to the change of heart and the change of life that follows.

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 may be also seen as a picture of God's promise that He will wash away our sins. We may be confident that our sins are washed away by God when we in repentance and faith 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, "Repent and be baptised in the name of the Lord Jesus for the forgiveness of your sins and you will receive the Holy Spirit". (The Spirit is the seal that the sins have been washed away by God).

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 repentance towards God and faith in Christ as Lord which saves us. In the same way as we might say "Repentance saves". 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 a relationship with God, which called for 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 of confessing Christ in baptism is unknown to the New Testament.

The New Testament religion does not ask us to confess Christ by ritualistic action, but in our daily life and words.

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 act of repentance that asks for forgiveness, like the repentance of the Prodigal Son. 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 (or by baptising himself.) 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 apply foolishly 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 cleansing us from sin, just because there are also unspoken conditions about faith and perseverance.

The obligation on a Christian to be baptised rests on Mat. 28:19, 20. interpreted as referring to

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water baptism. The validity of this reference has been questioned but it is not a question here entered into. It is plain that water baptism derived as it was from Judaism was practised among Christians in New Testament times (as also, for example, was fasting), so that it is sufficient here to consider who are suitable subjects for baptism if the rite is to be administered as closely as possible to New Testament custom. The answer to this is that whoever needs prayer for the washing away of sins is a suitable subject for baptism. For baptism in the New Testament is just that; and for whomever 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 baptism, in faith that the prayer which baptism epitomises has been heard by our faithful God. Thus baptism belongs to the beginning of the Christian life. It is for those who need to be forgiven; for those not yet been forgiven, as it were, but are turning to God putting off the old, in order that they might henceforth live the new life.

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 a new nature through the regeneration of the Spirit; (2) that it is God who gives these things and that it is His will to grant them 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 in 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 you and your
household shall be saved", which baptism object-
ifies.

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