

Baptism: Its Importance

Before I look at the arguments put forward by infant baptisers in support of their practice, I want to stress the importance of baptism itself. Reader, I urge you not to dismiss this subject as of little or no consequence. Do not wave it aside as trivial. Jesus described his baptism as ‘fitting... to fulfil all righteousness’ (Matt. 3:15). He said it was seemly, fitting, to carry out all God’s commands and ordinances. How then can baptism be regarded as a matter indifferent or optional, as some (including evangelicals; especially, of all people, Baptists!) think it is? Christ’s words show the importance of the issue. I am not interested in a sterile, hair-splitting quarrel over nothing, striving ‘about words to no profit’ (2 Tim. 2:14).¹

Some might dismiss my book as written by one with a very low view of baptism – the inevitable consequence, they might add, of my denial of sacramentalism. Well, let me briefly spell out what I think about baptism. Baptism is a standing command – an ordinance – there is nothing optional about it – an ordinance of Christ, an obligation which he has laid upon all his people throughout this age.² It is one of

¹ ‘Early Christianity... knew nothing of an unbaptised believer’ (Wright: *What...?* p36). ‘I defy anyone to conduct the basic scrutiny of the baptismal references in the New Testament... and emerge with the conclusion that baptism was a second-order issue in the apostolic churches... It would be a severe affront to the New Testament teaching to reckon baptism itself as anything less than fundamental to the church of Jesus Christ’ (Wright: ‘Christian’ p166). My position precisely.

Since I disagree with much that the Baptist sacramentalist George Beasley-Murray has written on the subject, I am glad to be able to quote him on the question of baptism as an ordinance: ‘We should observe that the authority of... baptism is of the weightiest order. It rests on the command of the risen Lord after his achieving redemption and receiving authority over the entire cosmos [Matt. 28:18-20]; it is integrated with the commission to preach the good news to the world, and it is enforced by his own example at the beginning of his messianic ministry. Such a charge is too imperious to be ignored or modified. It behoves us to adhere to it and conform to it as God gives grace’ (Beasley-Murray: *Baptism in the New Testament* p92).

² Although, according to Mark 16:16, there is nothing saving in baptism, Christ commanded it for believers as the outward testimony of an inward

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two such ordinances; baptism is experienced but once – upon profession of faith³ – whereas the Lord’s supper is to be regularly repeated throughout the believer’s life; while baptism is an individual experience, the supper is a corporate act of the local church, and serves to nourish its unity. Both are symbolic acts. But while the grace represented in the symbols is not conveyed by these symbols,⁴ nor in

experience. Combining this with Rom. 10:9-10, where we are taught that an outward confession is essential, as Spurgeon said: ‘The promise of salvation is not made to a faith which is never avowed’. And: ‘God requires [baptism in water], and though men are saved without any [water] baptism... [and] though [water] baptism is not saving, yet, if men would be saved, they must not be disobedient’ (Spurgeon: *Early* p147; Grass and Randall p59).

³ Sacramentalism skews – to put it mildly – the biblical order. The infant baptiser, Oscar Cullmann, argued for baptism before faith. ‘But how’, asked Fowler, ‘does all this correlate with the New Testament passages which call for faith prior to baptism?’ Quite. Fowler summarised Cullman’s black-is-white argument thus: ‘What is demanded by baptism is *subsequent* faith’ (Fowler p212, emphasis his). How wrong can you be? As Beasley-Murray said: ‘Faith is needful *before* baptism... Baptism is administered to converts. This is commonly recognised now [in 1962. Beasley-Murray cited Roman Catholics, Lutherans, Anglicans, Reformed, Congregationalists, Methodists], though not by all. Cremer has many successors. His statement: “Faith must be the *effect* [emphasis original] of our baptism, if the latter has effected anything at all”, is manifestly constructed on the basis of infant baptism as the norm of baptismal practice... [and] is anachronistic in the consideration of New Testament teaching’ (Beasley-Murray: *Baptism in the New Testament* p274, emphasis his; see also *Baptism Today and Tomorrow* pp38-41). Beasley-Murray was not quite right. This distortion – the utter turning up-side-down of the New Testament – is not only because of infant baptism. He himself pointed out Cremer’s reference to baptism *effecting* something. This is the core of the problem. If it is granted that baptism is a sacrament – that is, it *effects* something, it *produces* something – all sorts of distortions of Scripture follow. Naturally, if baptism effects or produces something, that ‘something’ must follow baptism. So, if baptism produces faith, baptism must precede faith. But baptism does not produce anything! Sacramentalism is the root of the trouble, as I keep saying, and shall keep saying.

⁴ Contrary to Richard Sibbes: ‘The sacraments are mysteries, because in the one, under bread and wine, there is conveyed to us the benefits of Christ’s body broken and his blood shed’ (Sibbes: *Fountain* p462). Certainly not. *Salvation* is not *conveyed* to us by the Lord’s supper! And I disagree with Calvin: ‘I do not... deny that the grace of Christ is applied to us in the sacraments’ (Calvin: *Commentaries* Vol.20 Part 2 p239). I do. Take the

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the observance, this does not mean they are pointless. In the physical symbols, the believer sees – represented before his eyes – the spiritual realities of his redemption in Christ, and so finds spiritual instruction, edification and encouragement.⁵ There is, furthermore, a massive benefit to be gained by sheer obedience to Christ – ‘Whatever he says to you, do it’ (John 2:5) – even if this should mean being plunged in water! The ordinances also serve as a kind of physical preaching of the gospel to any unconverted who might observe them.⁶ Baptism serves another purpose also – a very important purpose, at that. It leads the believer into local church membership,⁷ including the Lord’s supper.⁸

supper. Christ is *represented*, not *presented*. ‘This is my body which is given (broken) *for* you; do this in *remembrance* of me’ (Luke 22:19; 1 Cor. 11:24-25). It is **not**: ‘This is my body which is given (broken) *to* you; do this to *receive* me’. In saying this, I repeat the above – immense blessing comes by obedience to Christ. But this is a far cry from sacramentalism.

⁵ I agree with the Reformed infant-baptiser, Richard L.Pratt, although I would have strengthened his statement: ‘The visible rite of baptism is added to the preaching of the word in order to confirm what is preached and what we experience through the inward work of the Holy Spirit in connection with preaching’ (John H.Armstrong p62). Quite! No nonsense about conveying grace – it confirms, demonstrates what *has already been experienced*. This is undoubtedly the New Testament position. If it had remained the practice in the churches, my book would never have been written. More important, infant baptism would have never been thought of! See below for my comments on the passages which sacramentalists claim to teach sacramentalism.

⁶ But I do not place the ordinances above preaching; nor even equal to it. At least some, if not many, infant baptisers do, as I will show. Furthermore, I think the word should be preached at the ordinances.

⁷ For Spurgeon on this, see Spurgeon: *Early* pp125,145-152; Grass and Randall pp60-62. Acts 8:38 could be cited against me; similarly, Acts 9:18. But not every detail in Acts (or the Gospels) should be taken as normative for church practice – the letters are designed for that purpose. Acts records a transition period, a time of explosive spiritual power when extraordinary things were happening – some unique in the history of the church. And I mean unique, never (whatever some may claim) to be repeated. Just as hard cases make bad law, so to use extraordinary – unique – events as normative for the church today, is far from sensible. Consider, for instance, the immediacy of New Testament baptism. If I may speak personally, while I acknowledge that excessive delay of baptism is the mistaken norm in some circles, as one who has had the responsibility for baptising, I have felt the need in our culture, blighted by centuries of Christendom (see below), for more caution than

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Whether or not all this is dismissed as a low view of baptism, it is (although I have not stopped to set out the biblical arguments)⁹ – as I see it – the biblical position.¹⁰

seems warranted by the practice in Acts – which practice was carried out under very different social and religious conditions to our own. Compare the rapid funeral arrangements in Acts 5:1-11 with ours today. I will return to this point about the extraordinary.

To get back to the two texts in question: As for Acts 8:38, it is hard to see what Philip could have done with an individual convert who was travelling back to North Africa where there was no other believer – let alone a church. If similar circumstances should occur today, no doubt a like-baptism would take place. But we are talking about the other 99.9999% of cases. Let us not legislate for such an isolated instance. As for Acts 9:18, note how, upon baptism, Paul immediately joined the disciples at Damascus, and started preaching there (Acts 9:19-20). As for the connection between baptism and church life as found in the Gospels and Acts, Matt. 28:18-20 is unassailable for the former, and Acts 2:41-42 for the latter. See Fuller: *Essays* p857.

Of course, it is easy to caricature, poke fun at, and dismiss, Baptists for their efforts at regulating church membership and introducing members (Ella pp7-23 and *passim*) – and there is a good deal of serious criticism that needs to be made and acted upon – but what about infant-baptiser churches and their methods and results? I shall have more to say on this, in addition to what I have already said in my *Battle*; which see.

⁸ See end note on p23 for excursus: ‘Strict communion’.

⁹ I emphasise the ‘biblical’. If I *was* writing about believer’s baptism, I would not depend on history. It would be no part of my case to try to establish an unbroken line of believer’s baptism from the apostles to the Anabaptists. I know there is little documentary evidence to support it. But there may be reasons. Leaving to one side – for the moment – the time of the very early Fathers, it is to acknowledge the obvious to say that for at least 1400 years after the apostles, the *biblical* ordinance was carried out only by the minority. Furthermore, it was the practice of a desperately persecuted minority. ‘Heretics’ on the run – and worse – can hardly be criticised for not retiring to the study (which they did not possess) to set out their case in writing, especially in those days without easy writing-facilities, PCs, CD ROMs, memory sticks, printers (indeed, a printing-press!), internet, e-mails, mobile phones and all the rest. To cap it all, can it really be thought that Rome – who tried to destroy the ‘heretics’ – would have preserved their writings? In saying all this, however, I am not conceding that there was no witness to believer’s baptism in those days. But my case would not depend on it.

¹⁰ I am not setting out what I see as the biblical – the Baptist – position. My purpose in this book is confessedly negative, exposing the errors and dangers,

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And baptism goes far deeper than baptism; the truth is, it goes to the very heart of church life.¹¹ The nature of the church, who its

as I see them, of infant baptism – to act as a siren (in the opposite sense to Greek mythology!), warning the unwary of treacherous reefs ahead. In this regard, I make no apology for being strident – mariners kept from foundering on the rocks don't often complain of the clanging bell which disturbed their sleep. As to that, while some want only a positive approach, the Bible shows us how necessary – and God-honouring – a negative course can be. Lloyd-Jones: 'It is the business of a Christian teacher, as I understand it from the New Testament itself, not only to give a positive exposition but also to oppose wrong teaching. The New Testament itself does that, but this approach is not popular today. People say: "Don't be negative, give us the positive truth; don't be controversial". But if error is being taught it must be corrected. Paul does this constantly. He exposes the false, warns against it, urges Christians to avoid it; at the same time he gives the positive truth. So we must of necessity do the same. What we believe is of vital importance, because it is going to affect our whole life and conduct' (Lloyd-Jones: *Sons* pp92-93). And eternity. As I have explained, I aim to speak the truth, albeit trenchantly, in love. If I needlessly offend, I sincerely apologise, and ask those who disagree with my tone, to be kind enough to remember why I have written. *It is the care of souls which moves me*. I dread to have to confess with W.E.Gladstone (in a pamphlet published late in life): 'It has been my misfortune all my life, not to see a question of principle until it is at the door – and then sometimes it is too late!' (A.N.Wilson p474). I quote this with regard both to myself *and those who read what I write*. The same goes for this further piece from Winstanley's address to Cromwell in 1651: 'I must speak plain to you', he said, 'lest my spirit tells me another day: "If you had spoken plain, things might have been amended"' (Hill: *Defeat* p19). I have wrestled over 2 Tim. 2:23-26. But I do not think I have engaged in 'foolish and ignorant disputes'; nor have I set out to 'generate strife'; and I hope I have not been guilty of what Paul meant by 'contention' or 'striving'. John Gill's comments are apt: 'Such an one ought not to strive about words *to no profit*, about *mere* words, and in a litigious, quarrelsome manner, and *for mastery and not truth*; though he may, and ought to strive for the faith of the gospel; and this is praiseworthy in him' (Gill Vol.6 p636, emphasis mine). Calvin, too, I have found helpful, especially when he, even in his comments on the verse, was prepared to call the views of those he opposed, 'silly trifles' (Calvin: *Commentaries* Vol.21 Part 3 p233) – not forgetting, also, his diatribes against the Anabaptists and others. I hope my attitude bears at least some semblance to 2 Cor. 2:3-4. Jude 3 springs to mind, also.

¹¹ H.M.Carson, when writing about how he came to question his involvement in infant baptism: 'Significantly the question was bubbling in my mind at the

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members are, how they become members and what is expected of them – that is what lies at the heart of this subject. The infant-baptiser B.B. Warfield put it this way: ‘According as is our doctrine of the church, so will be our doctrine of the subjects of baptism. If we believe... that only those already united to Christ have right within his house and to its privileges... If we are to demand anything like demonstrative evidence of actual participation in Christ before we baptise, no infant, who by reason of years is incapable of affording signs of his union with Christ, can be thought a proper subject of the sacrament’. As just noted, Warfield believed in infant baptism, and therefore he did not demand the evidence he referred to. But even so his statement illustrates the point I am making – baptism and the doctrine of the church are inseparably linked. What we believe about baptism, and what we do about it, will be governed by – and will influence – what we believe concerning the church, because ‘as is our doctrine of the church, so will be our doctrine of the subjects of baptism’.¹² I agree with Warfield. Robert L. Dabney made the same point when he said that the doctrine of baptism and the Lord’s supper ‘is closely dependent on that of the church; and is treated by many authorities, as strictly consequent thereon’.¹³

Let me illustrate what I am trying to say by an example totally unconnected with baptism. Think about the atonement, especially the extent of the atonement. For whom did Christ die? The question of the extent of the atonement is not a barren discussion about mere numbers – the very nature of redemption itself is at stake. Did Christ accomplish a certain redemption for all the sinners for whom he shed his blood? Or did he die for some sinners who will never be saved? In

very time as I was facing the fundamental problem of the doctrine of the church. It was the biblical doctrine of the church, as I understood it, that ultimately forced me out of the Church of England. I was now beginning to discover that the two issues were not separate... The biblical doctrine of the church as [at the very least] a company of believers drawn from the world was, in fact, one of the factors leading me towards the acceptance of the baptism of believers as being the only true baptism – just as the Anglican view of the national and comprehensive Church was more consistent with the practice of infant baptism’ (Carson: *Farewell* pp64-65).

¹² Warfield p389.

¹³ Dabney p726. Note the link Dabney properly made between baptism, the supper and the church.

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other words, it is not merely the number of the sinners for whom Christ died, but what did he actually accomplish by his death?¹⁴

Similarly, in this book I do not consider baptism only. As I said, the issue goes far deeper; the very nature of the church depends on it; and it has no small effect on salvation itself. Indeed, salvation can be jeopardised by a wrong view of baptism. In short, eternity is at stake. *That* is how important it is.¹⁵

And that leads us to another neglected aspect of the subject – one which strikes me personally as I write about it. As to the place of baptism in addressing sinners, I feel the force of C.H.Spurgeon’s comments on Ananias’ command to Saul: ‘Arise, and be baptised, and wash away your sins’:

The tendency with many good evangelists is to say nothing upon that point. The main thing is to get this man to be a believer in the Lord Jesus Christ, but to say: ‘Arise, and be baptised’, is not that far less important? Brethren, we have nothing to do with altering Christ’s message, but are bound to deliver it as a whole, without addition or diminution. The tendency everywhere is to say: ‘Baptism should not be mentioned; it is sectarian’. Who said so? If our Lord commanded it, who dares call it sectarian? We are not commanded to preach a part of the gospel, but the whole gospel; and this Ananias did. Is it not written: ‘He that believes and is baptised shall be saved’? Why omit one clause? I question whether God’s blessing has not been withheld from some teachers and preachers because they have failed to repeat their message in its entirety. A brother will write to me next week and say: ‘I am sorry that I cannot circulate your sermon, because you allude to baptism’. My dear brother, if you cannot circulate the sermon, I must be content without your kind help; but I cannot amend the Lord’s word to please the best man upon the earth. What prominence is given to baptism here [in Acts 22:16]! We should greatly err if we believed in baptismal regeneration, or even in the efficacy of washing in water for the removal of sin; but, on the other hand, we are not to place in the background an ordinance which, by the language of Scripture, is placed in the forefront. Ananias said to Paul: ‘Arise and be baptised, and wash away your sins’. And this tallies with that other text: ‘He that believes and is baptised shall be saved’. In both of these passages,

¹⁴ See my *Particular*.

¹⁵ For this reason, I do not think I am ‘obsessed with disputes and arguments over words, from which come envy, strife, reviling, evil suspicions, useless wranglings’ (1 Tim. 6:4-5). If any reader thinks concern for the eternal welfare of souls is described by such words, he and I part company.

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the Lord puts a special honour upon baptism, and it would be ill for us to neglect that which he so evidently esteems. Do not make any mistake, and imagine that immersion in water can wash away sin; but do remember that if the Lord puts this outward profession side by side with the washing away of sins, it is not a trifling matter. Remember that other text: 'With the heart man believes unto righteousness, and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation'. Faith must be followed by obedience, or it cannot be sincere; do, then, what Jesus bids you. That is not, however, my point. I want to urge upon you that you should always speak the Lord's word faithfully, and be true to that which the Lord reveals to you, even to the jots and tittles. In these days there is much talk about 'undenominationalism', and in that talk there is much to be admired; but the danger is lest [that?] we should on all hands begin to pare away a little from the word of God for the sake of an imaginary unity. The suggestion is that one is to give up this, and another to give up that; but I say to you – give up nothing which your Lord commands.¹⁶

Quite!

I leave it there. Whether or not I have succeeded in allaying the fears of any who think I have a low view of baptism, I cannot say. But this is what I think about the ordinance.

Now for a look at infant baptism. But, before getting into the heart of the matter, some cautionary remarks are necessary. They will form the next chapter.

¹⁶ Spurgeon: *Metropolitan* Vol.31 pp250-251.