

## *The Baptism in Romans 6:3-4*

Romans 6:3-4 speaks of baptism, of a baptism which accomplishes much. As I have shown, this cannot be water baptism as a symbol or representation of the believer's spiritual experience. While water baptism is a symbol of that experience, in Romans 6 Paul is not talking about a symbol. Neither is he talking about water baptism as a sacrament. The New Testament does not warrant the notion of a sacrament, and there isn't a drop of water in Romans 6. In short, the baptism of Romans 6:3-4 is spiritual baptism. That is all it can be.

By way of providing further support for this, let me return to that broader point I made earlier; namely, that we must not let any comparison between the Hebrews' exodus and the gospel experience of redemption blur, in the slightest, the contrast between the two covenants; in particular, over this matter of baptism. Many, however, do confuse the old and new covenants at this point, with disastrous consequences.<sup>1</sup>

The old covenant dealt in physical and external matters: in the exodus, under the old covenant, the Hebrews sheltered under physical blood on a physical lintel, they physically ate the lamb, they physically crossed the sea, they came to the physical mount Sinai, they were given an external law written on stone tablets, they entered a physical land, and so on.

The new covenant, in contrast (2 Cor. 3:7-11; Heb. 12:18-24, for instance), is a spiritual, internal covenant. While Christ died physically, and shed his blood physically, even so, we appropriate Christ and all his benefits by faith, we come spiritually to Mount Zion, Christ's law is written upon our hearts by the Spirit, we enter by faith into spiritual rest in Christ, and so on. Thus, while the exodus (that is, the physical) does, to a certain extent, illustrate the gospel experience of redemption (that is, the spiritual), the two must not be collated or confused. Alas, the distinction in the covenants, the distinction between the physical and the spiritual, is not always maintained.

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<sup>1</sup> See my *Infant*.

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The Jews got it wrong. In response to Christ, they made the crass mistake (or was it deliberate?) of conflating the physical and the spiritual over a parallel issue:

Jesus declared: 'I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never go hungry, and he who believes in me will never be thirsty. But as I told you, you have seen me and still you do not believe... My Father's will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day'. At this the Jews began to grumble about him because he said: 'I am the bread that came down from heaven'... [Jesus said:] 'I tell you the truth, he who believes has everlasting life. I am the bread of life. Your forefathers ate the manna in the desert, yet they died. But here is the bread that comes down from heaven, which a man may eat and not die. I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live for ever. This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world'. Then the Jews began to argue sharply among themselves: 'How can this man give us his flesh to eat?' Jesus said to them: 'I tell you the truth, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day. For my flesh is real food and my blood is real drink. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me, and I in him. Just as the living Father sent me and I live because of the Father, so the one who feeds on me will live because of me. This is the bread that came down from heaven. Your forefathers ate manna and died, but he who feeds on this bread will live for ever' (John 6:35-58).

The physical/spiritual principle, which was in play here, could not be clearer. And it applies to the exodus/redemption parallel. At the very least, this makes it extremely likely that the Hebrews' water 'baptism' with Moses in the sea (1 Cor. 10:2) is replaced by spiritual baptism in the individual's experience of redemption (Rom. 3:3-4).

I go further: it makes it certain. Let me quote the apostle's words to the Corinthians in full: 'They were all baptised into Moses in the cloud and in the sea' (1 Cor. 10:2). In other words, the Israelites were joined to Moses in the cloud and the sea, the cloud and the water. Believers are united to Christ (Rom. 6:3-4) in the spiritual equivalent of the cloud and the water. The question is: Is it fair, it is right, to 'spiritualise' the cloud, and leave the 'water' unchanged as water? Even in the exodus, the important factor was

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not the physical but the spiritual. As the apostle goes on to say: ‘They all ate the same *spiritual* food and drank the same *spiritual* drink; for they drank from the *spiritual* rock that accompanied them, and that rock was Christ’ (1 Cor. 10:3-4). The reality, the equivalent in the new covenant of the manna, the water from the rock, and the water of the sea, is spiritual throughout. Hence, the baptism in Romans 6:3-4 is not water baptism, but spiritual.

And if this is not convincing enough, consider John the Baptist’s testimony:

I baptise you with water for repentance. But after me will come one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not fit to carry. He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor, gathering his wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire (Matt. 3:11-12).

I draw attention to these words: ‘He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and with fire’.

What am I saying? The cloud, the water, the fire are either physical or spiritual. I defy anybody to maintain the physical when speaking of fire. The same goes, therefore for the water. We are talking about spiritual baptism – not water baptism.

And as such there’s no quibble about it, no qualification: all the elect, at God’s decreed time, are baptised into Christ by the Spirit, all of them are regenerated, all of them are brought to faith, and all of them are thus converted; all of them – without exception.

And this is true for all the following Pauline passages:

All of us who were baptised into Christ Jesus were baptised into his death. We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life (Rom. 6:3-4).

We were all baptised by one Spirit into one body – whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free – and we were all given the one Spirit to drink (1 Cor. 12:13).

You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptised into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ (Gal. 3:26-27).

In him you were also circumcised, in the putting off of the flesh, not with a circumcision done by the hands of men but with the circumcision done by Christ, having been buried with him in baptism

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and raised with him through your faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead. When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made you alive with Christ (Col. 2:1-13).<sup>2</sup>

All this can only be said of spiritual baptism. Water has nothing to do with it.

Thus, while the idea that the baptism of Romans 6 is symbolic constitutes a diversion from the glory of the passage, the sacramental idea ruins it – and those who adopt it. Spiritual baptism, regeneration, is the great need for us all.

As Jesus said:

I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again... I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit.<sup>3</sup> Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. You should not be surprised at my saying: 'You must be born again'. The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit (John 3:3-8).

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<sup>2</sup> Peter said the same in 1 Pet. 3:18-22.

<sup>3</sup> The 'water' in John 3:3-8 has no more to do with literal water (hence, baptism) than the 'fire' of Matt. 3:11-12 has to do with literal roasting (see my *Baptist* pp189-195).