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BAPTISM

The Heaven-Drawn Picture

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*“Go ye therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them into the name of the Father,
and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit”—Matthew 28:19*

“Repent, and be baptized every one of you!”

—Acts 2:38

AGAIN and again we find in the New Testament this inseparable link between conversion and baptism. In character, the two are poles apart. Conversion is spiritual, whereas baptism is merely physical. Conversion is a new birth imparted from above; while baptism is administered by the hand of a man. Conversion through faith in the blood is a powerful, soul-renewing work. Baptism is an outward picture only, devoid of soul-saving efficacy. Conversion saves the soul; baptism cannot save anyone.

Nevertheless, in the New Testament, true repentance and conversion are inseparable from baptism. Conversion is the real thing—baptism is a picture of it. But in the plan and purpose of Christ, wherever there is conversion, the picture must accompany it.

Verse 22 of Hebrews 10 is just another example of this. Access to God by the blood of Christ is spoken of. Baptism just cannot be omitted from the passage. And if Christ the Lord joins baptism with conversion, in His Word, we must not pass over this subject lightly. Let us then look more closely at the subject of New Testament Baptism.

We begin with the Great Commission of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. In these words, the Head of the Church gave His binding commission for all time to His blood-bought people. “Go ye therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in [into] the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit” (Mat 28:19).

We often hear it said that there are two kinds of doctrine; essential and non-essential. (Sometimes these “categories” are called primary and secondary doctrine). What is meant is this: that certain beliefs are essential for a man to be saved. Other doctrines, though very valuable, are not essential for a man to be saved. An example is the way in which Christ shall come again. Some believe that there will be a millennium. Others say there will be no millennium—Christ will just come and usher in the eternal, heavenly kingdom. Whichever a man believes, it will not stop him being converted. So this is “non-essential” to conversion.

Now baptism is not essential to salvation. Many a man is truly born again, but very muddled and wrong in his attitude to baptism. So we agree that, in a sense, baptism is also a non-essential or secondary matter.

Some have therefore concluded that in the interests of evangelical unity we should stop emphasizing baptism. In many churches this is done, and it is a matter of relative indifference whether a believer is baptized or not. There is one vital point which is overlooked by our friends who regard baptism as unimportant. While it is true that it is not essential to conversion, it happens to be commanded by the Lord Jesus Christ. One could re-word a commonly expressed sentiment thus: “We should not make an issue over baptism, as it is not a doctrine essential to salvation, even though we are expressly commanded to give it a paramount place by our Lord Himself.” Does anyone wish to say that? Of course not.

Baptism is non-essential to salvation, but nevertheless it is something designed and commanded by the Head of the Church, and placed on the same footing (for obedience) as Gospel preaching! It is commanded in the same Great Commission.

Like the Lord's Supper, baptism was designed and commanded to be of considerable benefit to the church and to individual believers. And like the Lord's Supper, the evidence is that in New Testament days every single true believer obeyed the Lord's command. One may go so far as to say that all New Testament churches were "closed membership" churches. That is, all those in fellowship were baptized believers.

We would point to Acts 2:38, where Peter cries, "Repent, and be baptized every one of you." Or 1 Corinthians 12:13, "For by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body." In the Greek, this is not put in the present tense. It reads, "We were all baptized into one body." Says Calvin (in agreement with most commentators), "Paul of course is speaking about the baptism of believers...teaching that part of the meaning of baptism is to bring us into the body of Christ. However, lest anyone might think that the outward symbol itself has power to achieve this, Paul says that it is the Holy Spirit's work."

Paul is able to assume that all believers in fellowship at Corinth had been admitted by baptism. Similarly he is able to assume that the Colossians were all baptized when he speaks in such general terms saying, "Buried with him in baptism, wherein also ye are risen with him through the faith of the operation of God..." (Col 2:12).

As we read the book of Acts, we see the repeated picture of people who are born again and baptized as an inevitable consequence.

The question is—why? What was the significance of this baptism. Why was it binding? Why was it so important if it had no spiritual contribution to make towards conversion? The answer is that Christ, in His wisdom, designed this ordinance to help and safeguard churches in a number of ways. If it is neglected or misinterpreted, we may be sure that certain hindrances will arise in the work of a church.

It must be emphasized that if any church strays from the Word of God and evangelical belief, baptism becomes empty of meaning. A dead Baptist church is no better than a dead Presbyterian church. But speaking of live churches, we believe that this ordinance will greatly help the church which faithfully administers it. If this were not so, why ever would Christ have commanded it? We shall understand its great value as we see what baptism portrays.

Picture of Obedience

Firstly, it is a picture of obedience. The call of the Lord goes out: "Repent...and be baptized." In the secrecy of his heart, the sinner repents before God. He has, by grace, obeyed the call. In addition he obeys the further command, "be baptized." While repentance was an inward, deeply personal response to God, baptism is an outward demonstration of obedience. So baptism shows, to the church and to the outsider, someone who is responding in obedience to the call and demands of Christ. It was so even for the Lord Jesus Christ. In living a life of perfect obedience, the sinless Savior passed through the waters of baptism, saying, "Thus it becometh us to fulfill all righteousness." Baptism is an outward picture and demonstration of obedience.

Picture of Forgiveness

Secondly, it is a picture of forgiveness. It is always linked with repentance. A baptism speaks to the believer and to the outsider, proclaiming that the washing away of sin is the only way of salvation. It conveys a picture of true conversion, not of a man or woman fondly imagining that he can please God and as a result enjoy some special religious status. Says baptism: this person has fallen before God acknowledging his need for total pardon. He has realized there is no good in him and no hope for him. He has asked for the washing away of all his sin.

Now what kind of a picture is the method of baptism by which water is sprinkled upon a person? Is that a picture of total cleansing? or does it suggest rather that only a partial cleansing is needed? Is the candidate good and worthy in the main, but in need of just a measure of forgiveness? Is a little wash sufficient for God?

If I am in need of complete forgiveness ("Nothing in my hand I bring"), then I want my baptism to be a fitting illustration. I will be "buried" in baptism. Baptism itself cannot cleanse away a single sin (except the sin of disobedience). But it is a picture of the forgiveness we have experienced, which the Lord has commanded us to show forth.

Picture of New Life

The third great truth illustrated by baptism is the supernatural change of conversion: the new citizenship, the new life, the new creation. It is a real tragedy that baptism is often shorn of so much meaning and reduced to a picture of "washing" only. It is a demonstration of obedience also. More: it is a "heaven-drawn picture" of the dramatic transformation which we call conversion. Let us examine two Scripture passages which make this so plain.

"Know ye not, that so many of us as were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we are buried with him by baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father,

even so we also should walk in newness of life... Now if we be dead with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with him...—Romans 6:3-9.

“Buried with him in baptism, wherein also ye are risen with him through the faith of the operation of God...”—Colossians 2:12.

Both these passages of Scripture point out that baptism was for those believers a very clear picture of their spiritual experience. “Look back at your baptism,” says the Apostle. “When you were baptized, you were testifying and demonstrating what God had done for you.”

Their baptism was a picture of their death to this world. It was also a picture of new birth, new life, a new heart, a new start—with Christ. It was a picture of their citizenship having passed from the kingdom of darkness to the Kingdom of God’s dear Son.

Could there be a more expressive outward sign of such an inward spiritual change? The believer goes down under the water, and rises to illustrate that old things are dead and past—all has become new. He praises God; the people of God rejoice; and the outsider is moved to a better understanding of true conversion.

This most important element of baptism is freely acknowledged even by leading commentators who do not subscribe to believer’s baptism. Calvin declares, “This identification with Christ’s death is the focal point of baptism. It is not a washing only, but also the putting to death of the old man...Baptism means that we die to ourselves and become new creatures.” How does sprinkling signify or illustrate burial and resurrection? Again, the only adequate and meaningful mode of baptism is that of immersion.

Identification with Christ

The fourth important picture presented by baptism is that of identification with Christ and His people. Let us look again at the words of our Savior.

“Then cometh Jesus from Galilee to Jordan unto John to be baptized of him. But John forbad him, saying, I have need to be baptized of thee, and comest thou to me? And Jesus answering said unto him, Suffer it to be so now: for thus it becometh us to fulfill all righteousness”—Matthew 3:13-15.

The Lord Jesus Christ had no sin and needed no baptism of repentance. What, then, was the purpose of His baptism? His words tell us that it was essential for Him to fulfill all that was required of Him. Hebrews 2:17 holds the key: “Wherefore in all things it behoved him to be made like unto his brethren, that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God, to make reconciliation for the sins of the people.”

It was essential for Christ to be baptized in order for the following:

- a) To have lived a perfect life, having been obedient to God’s every requirement, so that on Calvary He would be the Lamb without spot or blemish.
- b) To identify Himself with His redeemed people as their leader, the captain of their salvation, their “elder brother”—the “firstborn among many brethren” (Rom 8:29).
- c) To have carried out Himself everything He commands of His people.

Can any born-again believer hold back from baptism, when the Lamb of God led the way? Baptism is a picture of identification with Christ. Because He went through the water, we go through the water. In baptism, we say to Him, to the church, and to the outsider, “I will follow my Savior. I want to tread the pathway of Him who loved me and gave Himself for me.”

*Oh, let me see Thy footmarks,
And in them plant mine own.*

We consciously follow the Lamb. We pledge ourselves to Him. And as we do this we also identify ourselves with God’s people who have taken the same pathway—“For by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body” (1Co 12:13).

So the complete picture presented by baptism is:

- a) OBEDIENCE – “as many as the Lord our God shall call” (Act 2:39).
- b) FORGIVENESS – the washing away of the whole body of sin.
- c) CONVERSION – the radical, supernatural change as we die to the old life and become raised up to newness of life.
- d) IDENTIFICATION – with the Captain of our Salvation and all His people.

Who does this picture help? Firstly, it helps the individual believer. It helps him to crystallize his own testimony and express it. It impresses his experience of salvation upon his mind in such a way that his gratitude rises and assurance is strengthened. He realizes that what has been an inward, unseen transaction between himself and the Lord must now be expressed and lived out before the eyes of the world. He pledges himself to follow the Lamb and to be always identified with Him.

Secondly, baptism helps the church. Just as the Lord’s Supper keeps Calvary before us, baptism keeps conversion before us. Without baptism, we may tend to blur the sharp line between saved and unsaved. People enter the church Sunday by Sunday and hear the Gospel preached. We see their earnest faces and evident concern. Time passes, and we grow used to

them, and they grow used to us. Still they remain “seekers.” We hope and pray that a work of grace is going on in their hearts.

But when they are confronted by the testimony of others passing through the waters of baptism—others who have obeyed the call, found cleansing, experienced the new birth, and identified themselves with their Lord—the essentials of conversion are seen in evidence. There must be a response to the Word, a genuine repentance, for nothing short of the new birth is genuine Christianity. There go others who have proved the Gospel to be true.

Baptism holds conversion before the church and before the seeker as a regular demonstration of God’s grace. Baptism places a bar on the fellowship of the church. Beyond it, the seeker cannot go, not until he has become a “finder.” It is a great sifter (rightly used) and proclaims that a man can and must be sure he is saved before he can truly call himself a Christian.

There are churches and congregations where the believers are in no way distinguished from the unbelievers. Baptism tells us that the church is not just a membership role or a company of people who merely assent to Christian teaching. Baptism is the open testimony commanded by Christ Himself, picturing supernatural conversion to God.

Infant Baptism

The Bible only commands adult “believers baptism!” Why are we not prepared to read infants into this as some do? What is baptism a picture of? Obedience; Pardon; New life; Personal identification with Christ. What is infant baptism a picture of? Does it illustrate the child’s obedience to the call of Christ? Does it illustrate the repentance and forgiveness of the child? Does it illustrate that the child has renounced the world and has undergone the new birth unto God? Does it illustrate that the child is personally identified with Christ? Of course not.

What does baptism mean to the mind of the child? What does it illustrate to the parent? Does it mean that the infant is born again?

Infant baptism does not illustrate any of the things which the New Testament says baptism is meant to illustrate. Where is the obedience of the infant? Where is the new birth of the infant? At best, infant baptism can only be a picture of what the parents hope may one day happen to their child. Our Great Commission, however puts conversion and baptism in this definite order. We are to “make disciples” and, having been made disciples, we then baptize them. Baptism is, under the clear terms of The Great Commission, a symbol from those who have become disciples—*not* for those who may become disciples.

The argument that infant baptism is the covenant counterpart of circumcision is very easily demonstrated to be erroneous from the Word of God. Though there are very many differing expressions of the idea (all of them cumbersome and contradictory), they all run into insurmountable difficulties. It is not the purpose of this study to include treatment of this subject matter, but we would refer readers concerned about infant baptism to refer to a fine treatment, *Baptism Not For Infants*, a highly readable paperback by T.E. Watson, in which the contradictions and problems are derived “out of the very mouths” of the chief exponents of Infant Baptism. A first-class chapter on Baptism is to be found in *Farewell to Anglicanism* by H.M. Carson and is also highly recommended.¹

Those evangelical writers who advocate the baptism of infants are always strikingly sparse in their use of Scripture in advancing their views. When the Word of God is used it is evident that these friends are in serious difficulties. Acts 2:39, for example, is repeatedly used as an authority for infant baptism: “For the promise is to you, and to your children.” We must limit our treatment of this view of baptism to an explanation of this one text.

A preliminary reading of the passage, Acts 2:38-41, will show very clearly that “the promise” is not the promise of baptism, but the promise of the Holy Spirit.

“Then Peter said unto them, Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost. For the promise is unto you, and to your children, and to all that are afar off, even as many as the Lord our God shall call. And with many other words did he testify and exhort, saying, Save yourselves from this untoward generation. Then they that gladly received his word were baptized: and the same day there were added unto them about three thousand souls.”

The promise is that the supernatural experience of conversion, and all the subsequent blessing by the Spirit which true believers enjoy, will come to certain people.

Who are these people? First of all a statement is made to the effect that they will be people of every nation and generation. That is the sense of “YOU, and YOUR CHILDREN, and to ALL who are AFAR OFF.” “Children” is meant here to mean subsequent generations, *not* your personal children.

What distinguishes these people of every nation and generation? What causes them to receive conversion’s blessings? They are those who “the Lord our God shall call.”

In other words, those who repent, are baptized, and receive the promise of the Spirit are those who have been “called.” How is this the command to baptize infants? Have the babes heard God’s call? Have they repented?

¹ Both titles are published in the UK by Walter Publishing. A thorough USA title is *The Baptism of Disciples Alone*, by Dr. Fred Malone, published by Founders Press, PO Box 150931, Cape Coral, FL 33915, www.founders.org. Not available from Chapel Library.

If ever a Scripture condemned infant baptism, this is surely that Scripture. Verse 41 clearly says, “Then they that gladly received the word were baptized.” Baptism followed the experience of God’s call and the conscious act of repentance. The Biblical order is faithfully declared in these verses as (1) “Repent” and (2) “be baptized” (v.38).

If we must wrench out of context the words, “For the promise is to you and your children,” and if we must interpret them as a license to abandon the order and meaning of baptism, what shall we do with the rest of that sentence, “for the promise is to...all who are afar off.” Do the advocates of infant baptism wish to do the same with these words—and make them an authority for the indiscriminate baptism of anyone who happens to live along way off?

Of course not. The Scripture must never be used in such a fickle way. Baptism is a precious picture destroyed altogether as soon as it is taken out of the context of repentance and faith. Only the baptism of conscious believers gives the “picture” of baptism any expression.

Immersion

Finally, is it necessary to insist on immersion? Does the quantity of water really matter? Indeed it does. Are we to say, “Baptism is important but the picture it yields is of no importance.” If the mode is not immersion, the picture is radically changed. It would be no use instructing an artist to paint a landscape with just a few drops of paint. It is not just a difference of opinion regarding an amount of water! It is a difference over whether a person should be wholly immersed in water or merely sprinkled with a little water. That is an enormous difference of symbolic picture language.

What would non-baptist friends say if someone suggested that a wheat/wine emulsion capsule could be used in place of bread and wine at the Lord’s Table? Would it merely be a question of quantity in the symbols? No, it would seriously interfere with the Lord’s intended picture language. So it is with baptism.

We could discuss at length the New Testament teaching for immersion (Romans 6:4 and so on).² We could discuss the meaning of the Greek verb “to dip” which our word “baptize” comes from. But the picture language of baptism itself should bring all argument and gainsaying to end. The New Testament teaches very plainly what baptism is a picture of. And there is only one form of baptism which draws that picture. Discard immersion—the picture has gone!

Let us never forget that baptism was commanded for all His people by Christ. He does not suggest we are baptized as believers. Neither does He advise or recommend it. The Lord who bled for us looks upon us with that kindness and love which is beyond all telling—and commands it. Will you be baptized because He tells you to do so? Will you be baptized for the sake of His church and His testimony? Will you be loyal to the ordinances which Christ in His wisdom has given for the blessing and benefit of His people?



² Some commentators reject the teaching that Romans 6:4 reflects the method of baptism. For example, Murray says, “The assumption of so many commentators, non-baptist as well as baptist, to the effect that the apostle has in view the mode of immersion as vividly portraying our burial with Christ...is without warrant.” On the contrary, it has every warrant. Like the Lord’s Supper, baptism is a symbol or picture. We have every warrant to say that Christ designed baptism to be a good picture of what it stands for. Professor Murray’s idea of baptism bears not the slightest resemblance to death and resurrection. It is like some modern art. If it was not explained that a few drops of water signified Christian conversion, no one would ever guess.

Small wonder that many who themselves “sprinkle” or “pour” in baptism, are nevertheless ready to agree that Paul immersed—e.g. the Anglican preacher Dr. Handley Moule said, “It seems to us clear that baptism was at first, theoretically, an entire immersion...” The writers of the Book of Common Prayer agreed, for while they advocated infant baptism, they prescribed immersion as the method to be used.