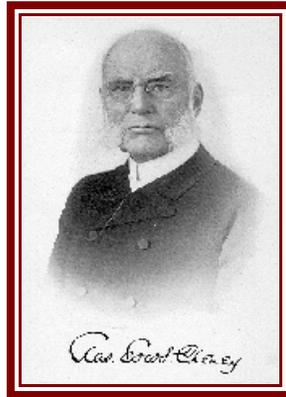


Baptism and the Bible

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BAPTISM AND THE BIBLE

Christianity deals with the greatest problems which ever set human thought to work. That all thinking disciples should follow the same paths of reasoning, or arrive at precisely the same conclusions, was never promised by the Master. All attempts to force the followers of Jesus into one and the same intellectual perception of doctrinal truth, have uniformly resulted in a deadening superstition on the one hand, or a reaction into blank unbelief upon the other.

The history of European Christianity for many centuries was the record of an outward and organic unity. But it was that produced by a crushing force. Few are they among believers in this country who find in these dark ages the highest type and best example of what the Church of Christ should be. There are certain great facts and principles, embodied in evangelical creeds and confessions, which belong to the whole body of Christ. They are the common heritage of that true Church which our communion service calls "the blessed company of all faithful people." But while the human mind is constituted as it is, men will differ as to the best and most effective ways in which the common truth can be defended and preserved.

The Reformed Episcopalian claims no monopoly of the whole truth of God, but he does recognize his responsibility as the representative of certain principles, to neglect which would impair the foundations of the entire building. In deepest loyalty to the gospel and the King, he claims the right to acquaint himself with, and to make known to others, the methods by which he would aid in upholding the stately structure of universal Christianity.

Where shall be our starting point? Biography begins at the cradle. History has its threshold where man appears first on the earth. So membership of a visible church has its initial point in the solemn rite which Christ ordained as the entrance upon His earthly kingdom.

I THE POSITION ASSIGNED TO BAPTISM IN THE WORD OF GOD

The Reformed Episcopalian rejects any essential doctrine which does not find its basic and ultimate authority in the Bible. In this respect, he treats religious principles precisely as the patriotic American deals with the principles of politics. In all that concerns my rights and duties as a citizen of the Republic, I have a profound veneration for the views and interpretations of the Constitution which appear in the utterances of Washington, Jefferson and Adams. The words of such men are entitled to due respect. But they can never place any great constitutional question beyond the pale of controversy. The ultimate appeal must be to the Constitution itself. In like manner every Reformed Episcopal clergyman is required by his ordination vow to teach nothing as essential to salvation, except that which is taught in Holy Scripture, or may be clearly proved by it.

Even in regard to matters of smaller moment, the Reformed Episcopalian desires to know whether God's written Word has borne its testimony. No careful student of the Scriptures will come to the conclusion that baptism is a subject of trifling importance.

There are no fewer than seventy-six passages in the New Testament which deal with this question. God has not thrust it into a corner. It is impossible to read the Bible and ignore the allusions to baptism.

But the importance of the rite is not to be gauged merely by the frequency with which it is mentioned. There is a far more weighty evidence. The Lord Jesus Christ Himself insisted upon being baptized. He had no sins to be washed away. Surely, He needed not to have the element of water applied to His blessed person as symbol of such spiritual cleansing. Yet such importance did He attach to this symbolic use of water, as a teacher of man's sinfulness, and need for inward cleansing, that He compelled John the Baptist to baptize Him (Matt. 3:13-15).

Isaiah had foretold seven hundred years before, that Christ should be "numbered among the transgressors." Sinless Himself, He yet was baptized, that in all respects He might be identified with sinners.

His ministry is marked by the baptism of those who became His followers. Though He "baptized not" with His own hands, His disciples administered that rite to more converts than even John had baptized at the waters of the Jordan (John 4:1, 2).

Go one step further. The last words of a father to his children do not deal with trifles. Yet the latest words which Jesus spoke to those whom He sent forth to bear His banner to the ends of the earth, imposed on them a command to baptize all who through their preaching of the gospel should believe on Him (Matt. 28:19).

The Reformed Episcopalian plants his feet firmly upon the Scriptures when he proclaims the momentous nature of the sacrament of baptism. For, as he pushes on his study of the New Testament, he meets the fact that the command of the Master was carried out by His apostles. It would be difficult to recall in the pages of the Book of Acts, a solitary record of conversion whether it be that of Saul of Tarsus, of the three thousand Jews on the Day of Pentecost, of the jailer at Philippi, or of Lydia, the purple-seller of Thyatira, in which the yielding of the heart to Christ is not followed by the confession of the mouth in baptism. The Reformed Episcopalian does not say with the Roman Church that there is no possibility of salvation without this symbolic cleansing. He has no proof that the penitent thief had ever been baptized. Nor can he limit God's mercy where a repentant and believing soul may be placed in circumstances which make the act of baptism impossible. He does hold with unwavering firmness to the simple fact, that the Bible clearly declares it the duty of every believer to confess his faith by a baptism with water in the name of the Holy Trinity. Such a fact lifts the baptismal washing out of the realm of that which is merely an optional ceremony. It makes it obligatory on every soul who trusts in Jesus and would do His will.

I. THE QUANTITY OF WATER USED IN SYMBOLIZING THE SPIRIT'S POWER TO PURIFY IS NOT A MATTER OF CONCERN

The Reformed Episcopalian is willing to yield regard to brethren who refuse to admit to the table of the Lord those Christians who have not been baptized by immersion, but it is a deep conviction of Scripture truth which leads him to protest against what seems to him such unbrotherly exclusion. For it is the Bible which makes baptism with water a symbol of the soul's spiritual cleansing through the work of the Holy Spirit. It is the Bible which teaches that the other sacrament is a symbol of the soul's feeding by faith on a crucified Saviour.

The Reformed Episcopalian cannot help asking why the quantity of bread and wine should not be prescribed in the Lord's Supper, if the quantity of water must be prescribed in baptism. If a morsel of bread and a taste of wine, which in themselves satisfy neither bodily hunger,

or bodily thirst, are yet sufficient to symbolize how Jesus satisfies the soul, why should not as much water as the hollow of the hand will hold, be sufficient of that cleansing element to symbolize how Jesus by His Spirit purifies the heart?

The limits of this article forbid an extended argument. Let it suffice to say that the Greek verb *baptizo*, from which we get our word "baptize," has never been proved to mean the total immersion of the body in water. Both Plutarch and Xenophon among the classic Greek authors use it with reference to the sprinkling which a gardener bestows upon his plants. Is there any evidence that when this word, far older than the New Testament, came to be enlisted in the service of the Gospel writers, its former classic meaning was altogether changed? On the contrary, there is not one passage where we are compelled to believe that it meant a complete submersion.

Luke tells us that the Pharisee who had invited our Lord to dinner was shocked because Jesus "had not first washed" (in the Greek) "baptized himself," (Luke 11:37, 38) . Can we believe that the host expected every guest to totally submerge himself as a preparation for the feast?

John the Baptist predicted that Jesus should "baptize you with the Holy Ghost, and with fire" (Matt. 3:11) . The fulfillment came upon the Day of Pentecost. But how? The author of the Book of Acts replies, "There appeared unto them cloven tongues like as of fire, and it sat upon each of them" (Acts 2:3) . They certainly were not immersed in fire. Again, when Peter preached to Cornelius and his household, "the Holy Ghost," we are told, "*fell on* all them which heard the word" (Acts 10:44) . They were immersed in the Holy Spirit. Yet when Peter comes to describe the scene to the disciples at Jerusalem, he describes it as a baptism. "Then remembered I the word of the Lord, how that he said, John indeed baptized with water; but ye shall be baptized with the Holy Ghost" (Acts 11:16).

But the passage most frequently urged as settling the whole question, is in Paul's Epistle to the Romans. It reads, "Know ye not, that so many of us as were baptized into Jesus Christ 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" (Romans 6:3-6).

Those who claim that there is no baptism except in immersion declare that the figurative expression, "buried with Him," must be literally carried out by the entire burial of the baptized person in water. It seems incredible that this purely figurative language should be thus pressed to literal and minute conclusions by excellent and learned men. For in the very same passage, Paul also asserts that we are "*planted* together in the likeness of his death." Why should we not carry into literal details this figure also? Or, when the Apostle adds, "Knowing this, that our old man is *crucified* with him," why not with equal reason press the figure to mean a literal stretching of the Christian on a cross?

It would be an easy task to prove that the monuments of the primitive Church, the pictorial inscriptions of the early Christians on the walls of the catacombs, as well as the recorded history of ancient Christianity, show that baptism was performed either by immersion, by sprinkling, or by a combination of both. But the Reformed Episcopalian rests his persuasion upon the written Word of God. From that he knows no appeal.

III. BAPTISM IS THE SEAL SET TO THE MOST IMPORTANT TRANSACTION WHICH CAN TAKE PLACE BETWEEN A HUMAN SOUL AND ITS MAKER AND REDEEMER

Baptism attests the *covenant* entered into between the sinner and his Saviour in the hour that, penitent and believing, the soul receives Christ as its only atoning sacrifice.

Jesus invites "Come unto me." The soul responds by a trustful and loving surrender, but the surrender is not completed in all its fulness until the seal of baptism has been set to the solemn yet joyful transaction. The Reformed Episcopalian can not forget that Christ never invited adults alone. He did not merely ask men and women to "come." He said, "Suffer the little children to come unto me" (Mark 10:14). His invitation and command was -that parents who believed on Him should dedicate their offspring by a complete surrender, even as themselves. Surely, He meant that the infant, equally with the parent, should receive the seal of such surrender. His reason for requiring the children to be brought to Him makes the case still stronger. "For," He says, "*of such is the kingdom of God:*" He declares as plainly as words can speak, that the children of believing parents are members of His kingdom and Church. We have His word for it. Can anything be more unscriptural than to refuse to the very class of souls whom Jesus has thus painted out as members of His kingdom, the seal by which that membership was witnessed?

Moreover, as we follow the Lord to the close of His earthly career, we hear Him giving His special commission to the pardoned and restored Apostle Peter. He lays it upon the conscience of His penitent disciple that he is to "feed" His "sheep." But, as if it were even more a duty, He *first* says, "Feed my lambs" (John 21:15-17) . Then the lambs belong to Christ, equally with the sheep. They are also in His flock and in His fold. Would the Good Shepherd put His mark, His seal, upon the sheep, and not upon the lambs?

Nor can the Reformed Episcopalian forget that when the Apostles went forth in Pentecostal power and wisdom, they baptized whole families. Lydia of Thyatira was baptized "*and her household,*" an expression which is the exact equivalent of our word "family" (Acts 16:15) . Not only did Paul and Silas baptize the Philippian jailer, but "*all his*" (Acts 16:33) . Paul, in writing to the Corinthian church, does not take the trouble to say whether or not he baptized Stephanas, the head of a household; but does place on record that he baptized *his family* (I Cor. 1:16) . According to the Old Testament God commanded the Jews to circumcise all male infants as a sign and seal of his covenant with Abraham and his descendants. Incredible, indeed, does it seem that if the Jewish custom of receiving the little ones formally into the Church by a distinct and appointed ceremony was departed from by the early Christians, no command to that effect was given, and no controversy sprang up about so inexplicable an omission. Baptism is the New Testament counterpart to the Old Testament rite of circumcision and thus is similarly administered to infants. To the Reformed Episcopalian, the subject is intensely practical. All history attests that in the early Church, believing parents realized a responsibility for their children's gospel training, which is sadly lacking among members of the Church today. The primitive Christian realized that in solemn dedication, his child had been given to Christ. It was the parents duty and privilege so to surround the child from his very cradle with the atmosphere of Christian truth, and prayer, and daily instruction, that the child should grow up into a sense of his own responsibility for the fulfillment of parental promises. The strength of early Christianity lay in this family religion,

ever stimulated and sustained by the consciousness in both parents and children, that alike they had been dedicated to the Lord.

Those early disciples did not leave their offspring first to hear the elements of the gospel from the lips of a Sunday school teacher, nor did they believe that their little ones must grow up in the darkness of alienation from God, till some revival should let in a sudden flash of spiritual light.

IV. FIDELITY TO THE BIBLE COMPELS PROTEST AGAINST THE THEORY THAT THE NEW BIRTH IS INSEPARABLY TIED TO BAPTISM

In 1873 some of us turned away from the Protestant Episcopal Church. The world has a right to ask what drove us out from our mother Church. One of the causes which forced that separation concerns baptism. The prayer book of the Protestant Episcopal Church required its ministers to declare immediately upon the baptism of an infant or adult that the baptized person was then and there born again of the Spirit of God. An infant is brought to the baptismal font, "a child of wrath" (see the Church Catechism). The water of baptism is put upon his brow, and then for the first time, the minister lifts up his voice to God in this thanksgiving, "*We thank Thee that it hath pleased Thee to regenerate this child (this Thy servant) with Thy Holy Spirit.*"

To every evangelical Christian, the new birth is that "creative act of the Holy Ghost, whereby he imparts to the soul a new spiritual life." Yet the prayer book of the Protestant Episcopal Church tied this work of the omnipotent God, wonderful as the original creation of man, to a ceremony performed by a sinful creature. Experience showed that very often none of the fruits of the Spirit were brought forth by those who had been baptized. The Bible testified that Simon Magus, baptized by apostolic hands, was yet "in the gall of bitterness, and in the bond of iniquity" (Acts 8:23) . Appeal was made to high church leaders for Scripture proof that the new birth was inseparably tied to baptism with water. They pointed to Christ's language to Nicodemus, "Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God" (John 3:5) . Christ clearly taught that His disciples must be baptized both with water and the Holy Spirit, but there is not one word in Jesus' solemn utterances to the Jewish rabbi which said, "Baptism with water insures the baptism of the Spirit." I may say to the newly-landed immigrant, "except you be .naturalized, and filled with the spirit of your adopted country, you cannot be an American." But I dare not say, "Take the step of legal naturalization and the spirit of patriotism will of necessity come with it."

High church leaders then pointed to Paul's words to Titus, "According to his mercy he saved us, by *the washing of regeneration*, and renewing of the Holy Ghost" (Titus 3:5) .

To assume that "the washing of regeneration" was baptismal washing was simply to beg the question at issue. Not only so; but we perceived that Paul brought out this "washing of regeneration" as something specially in *contrast* to the "works of righteousness which we have done." By these works he asserted we were *not* saved. But in the case of the vast majority of the Christians in the days of Paul and Titus baptism was the deliberate act of an adult, voluntarily done as a work of righteousness. It, therefore, could not be the "washing of regeneration" referred to by the apostles.

Still, again, they stated that Peter declares, "Baptism doth also now save us" (I Peter 3:21) . But we could not fail to read the rest of the verse, "not the putting away of the filth of the

flesh, but the answer of a goad conscience toward God."

Evangelical ministers in the Protestant Episcopal Church, then and now, found themselves pushed into this fearful position. They found no evidence in the Scriptures that regeneration was uniformly wrought by the act of baptism. God's Spirit was free (John 3:8). He might regenerate the soul in the hour of the baptismal rite, or before, or afterwards. Yet, every such minister must give up the use of the baptismal service, or else in solemn words of thanksgiving to God, publicly declare that which he did not believe to be God's truth

Do not imagine that such a dilemma faced the low churchmen of the English and American Episcopal Church for the first time when the controversy arose which resulted in the Reformed Episcopal Church. Evangelical ministers and laymen had groaned under the bondage of the baptismal service from the days of the Reformation. They perceived the awful chasm which yawned between the plain teachings of the gospel, and the words which the prayer book put into the mouth of the officiating minister. They saw that, under the literal teaching of the baptismal service, the souls of sinners were imperiled. Believing themselves to be regenerated by God's Holy Spirit in the act of baptism, and thus saved by the baptismal washing, men came to trust their entire hope for eternity to an outward and mechanical ceremony.

They saw, too, that a Romish superstition pervaded the minds of the humble and unlettered members of the Church, leading them to believe that the unbaptized infant must certainly perish. They heard it said from high church pulpits that in baptism we have "a new principle put into us, and sanctification and purity unspotted are attributed to the Church of Christ as the effect of the washing of water." They heard it asserted, that "baptism is the new birth." And when, with the Bible in their hands, they refuted such false doctrine, their own people pointed them to the baptismal service and asked, "Do you not, every time you baptize with water, pray God to `sanctify this water to the mystical washing away of sin'? Do you not, when the application of water has been r lade, turn to the people, and say, `Seeing now, dearly beloved, that this child (this person) is regenerate, let us give thanks'? Do you not then before the Searcher of hearts say, `We thank Thee that it hath pleased Thee to regenerate this child (this person) with Thy Holy Spirit'?"

Do you ask how such low churchmen-honest, conscientious and God-fearing, managed to stay in the old Church and repeat on every baptismal occasion a statement which they believed to be inconsistent with the Word of God? I can best answer that question from my own experience. I satisfied my conscience, through many years of ministry in the Protestant Episcopal Church, by trying to explain away the language of the service. Two or three widely different theories have been put forth by low church theologians, either one of which, it was believed, would bridge over the abyss between die prayer book and the Bible. One of these was that the service spoke of a sort of *ecclesiastical* regeneration, a new birth into the visible church, rather than into the spiritual life.

Another explanation was that the service taught what was called, "the judgment of charity:" In other words, it charitably took for granted that the baptized infant or adult *would* repent and believe, and God *would* give His spiritual new birth to that soul. It told the minister to imagine himself for the moment far down the future, supposing repentance and faith to have been exercised, and regeneration therefore to have been imparted. On such an hypothesis he could speak of what might be as though it were accomplished, and so declare



to God his thankfulness for it. That good and great men in the evangelical party could satisfy their consciences with so artificial and unnatural an explanation, only showed how hard pressed low churchmen were to find some method to fill up the gulf between the Bible and the baptismal service.

There came a day when conscience told me that I was juggling with plain words, to torture from them that which they did not mean. The service did not speak of the future, but of *what had just now been accomplished* by the application of water. "We thank Thee that it *hath* pleased Thee to regenerate this person."

In agony of soul, I turned to the other explanation. Did not the baptismal service mean that a new birth was wrought by baptism only in the sense of introducing the baptized person into the new world of Church privileges? Was it not a sacramental and ecclesiastical, instead of spiritual regeneration, of which the prayer book spoke?

But the language of the service refused this rationalization. It met me with the plain words, "that it hath pleased Thee to regenerate with *Thy Holy Spirit*." Surely that meant not ecclesiastical, but *spiritual* regeneration.

I had reached the point where I must choose, in God's sight, between the Protestant Episcopal baptismal service and the Bible. You know the result. But God had been working upon other minds and consciences as He had upon my own.

The Reformed Episcopal Church has a baptismal service which echoes the teaching of the Word of God. It struck out the assertion which made baptism with water the unfailing channel of regeneration. It made its message, reiterated every time the sacrament is performed, a clear enunciation of the truth that baptism is a *sign and seal* of spiritual regeneration, but not that regeneration itself. Here is a Church which is true to the Word of God upon a question which meets us at the very threshold of the visible kingdom of God.