

The Baptists and the New Testament.*

WE who are Baptists claim that the New Testament is the authoritative word to which we appeal for the basis and sanction of our conception of the nature of the Christian Church, and the mode and subjects of baptism.

"Confessions of Faith" were once rather popular among us, though they were objected to by some during the eighteenth century, and during the last century were said by many to be unnecessary.

Joshua Thomas (of Leominster) maintained that a "Confession of Faith" was needed to set forth our interpretation of the truths contained in the New Testament, and to make it clear whether we were Unitarians or Trinitarians, Calvinists or Arminians, believers in baptism by immersion on the ground of faith, or otherwise. In consequence of the various declarations made by religious bodies who professed to found their belief and practice on the New Testament the Baptists also had need of their "Confession of Faith." Some liberal-minded Baptists, however, argued against this view, and the Rev. J. Jones (Mathetes) and others maintained later that there was no need whatever of a Confession. If the Confession contained more than the New Testament it would contain too much. If it contained less it would be too little. If it only contained the same it would be superfluous. It may be, however, that Confessions are of value as expressions from time to time of the doctrine of a denomination and the interpretation of the New Testament accepted by it at that period. The evil was that Confessions were made mill-stones and not milestones. It would appear that the members of the Baptist denomination in general (like those of other denominations) needed the guidance of greater minds, and that the individual church from the days of Paul downward was not always able to deal with its problems of life and thought without direction from outside. That accounts for the rise of Associations and Councils, and that is perhaps the reason for their continuance among Baptists. Notwithstanding all this, the

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New Testament was the touchstone of the Baptists for their doctrines, and it is to the word and to the testimony that they loved to appeal for authority for their faith and order when formulating a Confession, and sometimes in opposing it after forming it. They believed that all the books of the New Testament were of equal value and inspiration, though some of them noted that Paul at times spoke his own mind, declaring *his belief* that he had the mind of Christ. Yet in spite of their loyalty to the letter of the New Testament they, in common with the great body of the Church, put away several customs once regarded as important; such as frequent or weekly communion, the love feast, the holy kiss, and the washing of the disciples' feet; although the practice of the Early Church lay behind all these and they believed a definite word of the Lord to be behind the custom of washing the feet. It is difficult to know how they surmounted words like those of John xiii. 14, "If I then, your Lord and Master, have washed your feet, ye also ought to wash one another's feet, for I have given you an example that ye should do as I have done to you." Here is a command as positive as any, and it is not strange that J. R. Jones, of Ramoth, and Christmas Evans for a time, were entangled on facing it and hearkened unto Archibald McLean. The Baptists in Wales were divided also more than once in regard to the "laying on of hands," and though the custom has been retained in some of the older churches until to-day, not only at the setting apart of officers, but at the admission of members, the body of the denomination have learnt to regard it as one of the things that passed away with the apostolic age, holding that the gift of the Spirit is no longer conferred on any one by empty hands.

After all, it is not easy to understand how a denomination which laid such stress on the authority of Christ and the New Testament could allow so many of the practices of the Early Church to become of no account in its sight, and follow the Catholic or Roman Church in its rejection of some of them. It may be that some Baptist not too strictly scriptural will rise at some future time, and in his desire for union enquire "If it is the Church of Rome which put an end to some of these practices, what have we to say against her altering the practice of administering baptism by immersion of both sexes, and especially in cold countries like Siberia, Greenland and North Canada?"

Here is a matter that requires our consideration. However, the Baptists have clung to the two ordinances which they adjudged permanent institutions in the New Testament and of greater importance than the rites mentioned; they believed that the washing of feet and the holy kiss, for instance, were incidental and pertained to Eastern countries; and that it was the Spirit of

Truth and not the whim of any church that turned them aside. They believed the time for observing Communion was a matter of church order and convenience, and that the laying on of hands might be regarded as a Jewish custom which could be observed or rejected without breaking the concord. They held that the heart of Christianity was in the two ordinances, and that they could not cease to be faithful to the ritualism they were accused of embracing; the ritualism which is essential to their interpretation of the religion of the New Testament. By now it is acknowledged by many without our ranks that we have much to say for our standpoint, and some have ventured the prophecy that the final conflict for the purity of the faith will lie between the Roman Catholics and the Baptists.

The controversies as to the meaning of *bapto* and *baptizo* have ceased, and hardly any of the commentators or lexicographers now doubt that believers' immersion was the practice of the Early Church. It is true that some have referred to the "Teaching of the Apostles" (a church directory probably pertaining to the first half of the second century) and the section in chapter 7, which speaks of pouring water on the baptized. We may as well give the quotation in full: "Thus shall ye baptise. Having first recited all these things (concerning 'the two Ways') baptise in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, in living (running) water. But if thou hast not living water then baptise in other water, and if thou art not able in cold, then in warm. But if thou hast neither, then pour water on the head thrice in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." Kirsopp Lake has argued (in Hastings' *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*) that in face of such words we cannot be positive as to the mode practised by the Early Church, but all that can be safely based on this is that the pouring over the whole body was as near an approach to the primitive mode as was possible under certain circumstances, and that the pouring was also some kind of portrayal of the baptism or out-pouring of the Holy Spirit. And no argument for vicarious baptism as having Paul's authority behind it can be based on the reference to "baptism for the dead" in 1 Cor. xv. 29. Undoubtedly Tertullian was correct in saying that it refers to the act of living persons accepting baptism for the dead, and we find sacrificing for the dead in 2 Mac. (xii. 42, 43) and in Plato's *Republic* (ii. 364). But Paul's reference to a custom that was introduced probably from the Mystery Religions is no proof that he approved of it, any more than his statement that "they that be drunken are drunken in the night" proves that he commends drunkenness as Tertullian points out. It may be said without any hesitation that the custom

of the apostolic age was altogether in favour of baptism by immersion on profession of faith. Baptism was regarded, especially in the Gentile lands where the Mystery Religions suggested the analogy, as a symbol of a dying to an old life with Christ and the rising with Him to a new life. And there is little sign that any were baptised without personal faith even when mention is made of the baptism of families. All this is admitted by commentators and historians generally to-day, but another argument has been started and that, I believe, strikes rather directly at the root of our reliance as Baptists on the New Testament. Apart from the fact that we are sometimes spoken of as ritualists too enslaved to the letter, and a body of people that continue to practise a rite of Jewish origin, it is argued that our continued practice of immersion is founded on the tradition of the Early Church and Paul, rather than on a command of Christ in the Gospels. We are told that the great Commission found in the present conclusion of Mark's Gospel (Mark xvi. 16) and in Matt. xxviii. 19, did not come from the Lord Jesus. It is argued that if we are to believe the Book of Acts, the primitive Church baptised in the name of Jesus and not in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and that the controversy concerning the admission of the Gentiles could not have arisen if there already existed a command of Christ to preach the gospel to the whole world. It is true some have argued that the form of the Commission as given by Eusebius agrees with the custom in Acts, and suggested that the change from the name of Jesus to that of the Trinity was made in a later age; but the difficulty already mentioned is not thus overcome, viz., that Jesus after His resurrection had given a command to make disciples of all nations, and that the Church in Judea refused to conform to that positive command until Paul had his way in spite of them.

It may be claimed that the conclusion of Matthew's Gospel is in accord with the Spirit of Christ, but it is difficult to continue to believe that the great Commission is a word spoken by Him to His disciples after His resurrection from the grave and before His ascension. Besides, it is asserted to-day that Jesus Himself laid no stress on water-baptism during His ministry, and that it is doubtful whether all the disciples were baptised, not to speak of others who followed Him.

It is argued that even the baptism of Jesus Himself was more of a difficulty than anything else in the period when the Gospels were written. Why did He come to John and submit to a baptism of repentance? that was the difficulty. That, it is said, is the reason for amplifying Mark's simple record in Matthew's Gospel. These are the words of Mark, "And it came to pass in those days that Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee

and was baptised of John in Jordan and straightway coming up out of the water He saw the heavens opened, etc." But in Matthew we have a protest on the part of John in the words, "But John forbade Him saying I have need to be baptised of Thee and comest Thou to me?" Then we have the reply of Jesus, "Suffer it to be so now for thus it becometh us to fulfil all righteousness," and after this, "Then he suffered Him"; intimating that there was no need of baptism for remission of sins on the part of the Sinless One. It is observed, though, that no comment that lays such clear emphasis on the moral perfection of Jesus is found in the "Gospel according to the Hebrews" as quoted by Cyprian (*de Rebapt.* xvii) and Jerome (*contra Pelag.*, iii. 2). It is stated in an incomplete section of this Gospel that Jesus went not down with His father and mother unto John, but that He went later. And these are the important words, "But He said unto them, what sin have I done that I should go and be baptised by him? unless perhaps this thing itself which I have said is ignorance in Me." Though this Gospel comes from Ebionite circles—circles that denied the deity of Jesus—yet the quotation from it and the apologia in Matthew show that Christ's submission to a baptism of repentance was the occasion of much controversy during the first century and the beginning of the second.

At present some have another way of explaining the obedience of Jesus to John's baptism. According to the Gospels they say John's baptism is but a witness to another and better baptism, and the obedience of Jesus to John's baptism was only something necessary to His consecration to His public work. That is the meaning of "fulfilling all righteousness"; not a confession of sin or of repentance. Even in Mark's Gospel we have John witnessing, "I indeed have baptised you with water, but He shall baptise you with the Holy Ghost." And in Matthew's Gospel we have a clearer declaration, "I indeed baptise you with water unto repentance, but He that cometh after me is mightier than I, whose shoes I am not worthy to bear, He shall baptise you with the Holy Ghost and with fire." John, in his Gospel, goes further and deletes the baptism of Jesus by the Baptist altogether. Let verses 26-34 of John i. be read to see how skilfully the witness of the other evangelists to the coming of the Greater One is used, and how he avoids stating that Jesus was baptised of John. Note verse 33, "And I knew Him not, but He that sent me to baptise with water the same said unto me, Upon whom thou shalt see the spirit descending and remaining on Him the same is He which baptiseth with the Holy Ghost." But not a word of the baptism of Jesus. In view of this it is argued that the baptism of the Spirit is

the Christian baptism and the baptism of the canonical gospels. The early Quakers argued much to the same effect with the Baptists during the seventeenth century. They referred with a large measure of contempt to "Water-baptism," and contended that the baptism of the Spirit is the "one baptism" mentioned in the Epistle to the Ephesians. And it must be admitted that the Quakers persuaded many Baptists to follow them by the strength of their argument.

At present the Quakers and others maintain that this is the standpoint of the "spiritual Gospel," the Gospel of John. Attention is called to the statement in John iv. 1, that Jesus baptised, and then to the correction that follows, "Though Jesus Himself baptised not but His disciples," iv. 2. And it is maintained there is no other reference to baptism in the four Gospels, excepting the words of the Commission, unless a reference to it can be read into John xiii. 10. "He that is washed needeth not save to wash his feet" and if "of water" is retained in John iii. 5. There are Greek texts without the words "of water," and Kirsopp Lake argues for their omission as later Church additions. He remarks that the form of the words given by Justin Martyr (*Apol.* i. 61) is, "For Christ said, Except ye be born again, ye cannot enter into the kingdom of God."

Yet Odeberg argued strongly, quoting from Jewish and Gnostic writings, that "water" here meant "heavenly seed," or outflow from above or from God, and that the meaning of "born of water and of the Spirit" is "born from above." And W. F. Howard refers to the similarity between this and 1 John iii. 9, "Whosoever is born of God doth not commit sin for his seed remaineth in him and he cannot sin because he is born of God."

Later Quakers also plead that the two ordinances are only assigned a spiritual meaning in the Gospel of John. They maintain there is no command to continue the communion in the Synoptic Gospels nor any mention of its institution in the Gospel of John. The new commandment there is to love and serve one another. "This Lord's Supper," says Dr. Rufus Jones (*Studies in Mystical Religion*, p. 18), "calls for no visible elements, no consecrated priest. It calls only for a human heart conscious of its needs and ready to eat the Bread of God, on the one momentous condition of willing and loving what Christ wills and loves." The water of baptism and bread of the communion mean little in themselves. "We are dealing," he says, "with a process by which the believer takes into himself the Divine Life, and by an inward change makes it his own so that he has actually 'God abiding in him.' It is claimed that the author of the fourth Gospel was an early Quaker, a man who had outgrown the Jewish ordinances and ceremonies of the Early Church and

rested on their spiritual significance alone. There is no baptism but that of the Spirit, and it is not sacramentarianism that is found in John vi., but a protest against a pagan communion and a declaration in favour of a spiritual participation of the Lord Jesus, "It is the Spirit that quickeneth; the flesh profiteth nothing" (vi. 63).

This new exposition is a challenge to our standpoint as Baptists and our interpretation of the ordinances. What have we to say against it? I shall at present only outline a reply. Our argument is that the Early Church did not begin to baptise at Pentecost without having a reason or command for doing so. Jesus gave an important place to the mission of John the Baptist, otherwise, what is the meaning of his question, "the baptism of John was it from heaven or of man? Answer Me" (Mark xi. 30), and the conversation which follows. And however much Christian baptism was indebted to Judaism, or to the mystery religions, Paul saw a moral and spiritual significance in the rite and made baptism a visible medium by which those who obeyed should exhibit their new relationship to Christ and their new life in Him. It was not an empty ceremony but a visible and most effective symbol to show forth a change of condition and life. And it is doubtful whether the majority of seekers of Christ can afford to be without some definite and memorable sign such as baptism at the commencement of their religious career. A minister of another denomination testified that Baptists had a great advantage over Paedo-baptists because believers' baptism was a personal act, a public act of consecration on joining the Church.

Dean Inge says (*Contentio Veritatis*, 295, 296), after enquiring whether we should do away as far as possible with the visible and mechanical, "These questions have been answered in the affirmative by the Quakers who are perhaps for that reason the most consistent representatives of one type of contemplative mysticism. They agree with the Ebionites of the first century who taught that the Lord declared 'I am come to abolish sacrifices.' This is a type which has appeared several times in the history of Christianity. Some of the pantheistic mystics of the Middle Ages tried to dispense with sacraments . . . and their systems were short-lived. The historian must admit that non-sacramental Christianity has never been popular or successful. To many this will seem a sufficient refutation of it as a practical form of religion. If Christianity was intended to be an universal religion it must not dispense with rites which to many express the very ideas of religious worship. Why should we consider that a spiritual act is coarsened and spoilt by being translated into symbolic action? We have not (unless we are Quietists) the

same feeling about *language* which is also a symbolic or rather a conventional representation of ideas. It is no vulgarisation of the mysteries of grace to associate them with such trivial actions as washing and eating. A spiritual act is one which brings us into communion with God, not one that transports us out of correspondence with the things of time and space. Indeed, in most cases, the spiritual act is richer and more complete when it finds expression in some external symbolic action."

Lacking the outward signs, the Quakers have hitherto failed to appeal to any large body of people in any nation; and whatever might have been the attitude of the author (or last editor) of the Gospel of John toward the two ordinances there remain in the Gospel itself and in the first Epistle of John expressions which show that water-baptism had an abiding place in the Church. The words "of water and of the Spirit," whatever may be said, are found in all the major MSS., and in *Aleph* and some early translations they are found in John iii. 8 also. It was too late even for an evangelist to abolish baptism from the Church at the end of the first century or the beginning of the second. It would appear also that the symbolic meaning of the water and the blood from the side of Jesus (John xix. 34) is that the two ordinances have their essential meaning in His person. To the same effect are the words, "This is He that came by water and blood even Jesus Christ," (1 John v. 6). Though the Son of God came not by water alone it was not meant to signify that the water-baptism was not as real as His baptism of blood. The words of John iv. 2, do not necessarily mean that baptism was more to the mind of His disciples than to that of their Master. They may, as Bernard says, be but a correction of the saying of the Pharisees in iv. 1. They may also only mean that the Lord entrusted the administration of baptism to His ministers. There came a time when the task was entrusted by an apostle to others, Acts ii. 38, xi. 48, cf. 1 Cor. i. 17. The great Saviour submitted to the baptism of John so that He might consecrate Himself to His public ministry, and in devoting Himself to the chief purpose of His coming the same symbol of perfect consecration fills His mind.

He had another baptism to be baptised with and how was He straitened until it was accomplished. And He asked the Sons of Zebedee, "Are ye able to drink of the cup that I shall drink of, and be baptised with the baptism that I am baptised with?"

In view of all these things it is difficult to believe that the one baptism was unimportant in His sight any more than the other.

We must leave the matter here with the suggestion that the final contest will lie between the interpretation of the Quakers

and that of the Baptists when all Protestants come truly to desire the union of the denominations. So we ought to be more convinced as to the strength of our position than we are now.

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ROGER SAWREY, commandant at Ayr in 1659, had bought Broughton Tower, on the Furness boundary of Lancashire and Cumberland. When there was danger of a rebellion in 1664, Sir Roger Bradshaigh of Wigan, a deputy-lieutenant, called out the trainbands. He ordered George Fell, junior, of Swarthmore Hall, to send one armed man, and also to take care that Sawrey did no harm. Fell's excuse was published in 1912; it implies that Sawrey was too far away for him to act. There is no evidence that he was intending to rise. The fear of a rising led, however, to the temporary Conventicle Act, forbidding all worship except at parish churches and their chapels.

LAURENCE CLAXTON, 1615-1667, was Baptist 1644, Seeker 1646, Ranter 1650, Muggletonian 1658. In 1660 he published his recantation, *The Lost Sheep Found*. No copy was collected by Thomason, but one has just been bought for the Friends' Library.

THE PARTICULAR BAPTIST FUND in February 1789 gave to Robert Hyde of Cloughfold in Lancashire the following books, which he joyfully catalogued in a note to John Stutterd of Colne, who would probably see what he might ask for. Mosheim's *Ecclesiastical History*, in six volumes. Prideaux's *Connection of the Old and New Testaments*, in four volumes. Jennings' *Jewish Antiquities*, in two volumes, 1766. Watts's *Logick*. Watts on the *Mind*. Evan's *Sermons*, in two volumes, Samuel Stennett on the *Parable of the Sower*. Shaw's *Immanuel*, or a discovery of true religion. Mason's *Student and Pastor*; Mason's *Self-Knowledge* (John Mason, M.A., Dorking). Latimer's *Sermons*.