

## **BAPTISM - A COMMAND AND A GIFT**

### **Introduction**

For the early Christians, baptism was the conscious and blessed beginning of the Christian life, a new birth, and a re-birth in the image of Christ, accomplished by bathing in water, while a few words were uttered. With the simplicity of a divine act, "the washing of water with the word" (Ephesians 5:26) brought about something incredibly magnificent, the life of eternity (cf. Tertullian *Concerning Baptism*, 1-2). For the Christian of today, baptism is still the entrance to all the sacraments, the gate to Christian life, and, hence, to the eternal life which is its ultimate consequence.

Baptism blots out original sin and all personal sins, makes the Christian a sharer in the divine nature through grace, gives the adoption of sons and daughters, and entitles him or her to the reception of the other sacraments and to the active sharing in the priestly adoration of the Church.

### **Words Of The Lord**

How the apostolic preaching interpreted "washing of water with the word of life" is plain to see in the New Testament. It is intimately bound up with the command of the risen Christ: "Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you" (Matthew 28:19f).

These words certainly record the will of the glorified Christ to institute the sacrament of baptism, though the Trinitarian formula may be an echo of apostolic practice. The inner meaning of baptism is intimated by the mysterious images our Lord uses in his conversation with Nicodemus (John 3:1-10). These, of course, are fully intelligible only to one who has experienced Christian baptism. At any rate, the reception of baptism is regarded from the beginning as the foundation of all discipleship and Christian life (Acts 2:37-41). After the descent of the holy Spirit at the first Pentecost, the apostles looked upon baptism as a rite already hallowed by tradition and administered it as such.

### **Earlier Analogies**

Attempts to show that baptism was borrowed from the religions of the Greek world have been fruitless, but the practice is certainly foreshadowed in the Old Testament.

The Old Testament frequently mentions practices analogous to baptism (which took the form of washings: among other texts, see Exodus 40:12; Leviticus 8:6; 13:6; 14:4-9; 16:4, 24; Ezekiel 36:25). In the time of Christ, such "baptisms" or washings, were much in use (Mark 7:2-4). Jewish sects like the Essenes made much of them (Josephus, *Jewish War*, 2, 117-161, and they were a special feature of Qumran (1 QS, 6, 16f; 3, 4-9).

It is easier to understand the "baptism of John" against this background, though he contributed important new features: as an emissary of God, he baptized *others* to call them to repentance in preparation for the nobler baptism to come. Jesus' disciples baptized during his lifetime in an obviously similar manner (John 4:1-3).

## **Apostolic Practice**

After the glorification of the Lord, the apostles administered the traditional rite in a new way and with a new importance: they now baptized in the name of Jesus, that is, in accordance with the gospel in the name of Jesus, assigning people to him, invoking his name over the candidate. Finally (a further development), they baptized in the name of the Father, Son, and holy Spirit, (the continuity of usage emerges in Acts 18:25 & 26 and 19:2-6, where the transition to the new form is indicated).

The washing with water and the word is the climax of a whole process: penance and faith are perfected in baptism. With this procedure, because it intimately unites one with Christ, come salvation, the remission of sins, and the gifts of the holy Spirit. Christ is the *light* that shines in baptism; he is the *life* that it bestows, the *truth* that the baptized person confess and to which he or she pledges his or her loyalty, the *source* from which flow the rivers of living water, the *water* and the *blood* from the open wound in his side. They wash away all the guilt of a person's sins.

## **Deeper Insights**

These relatively sparse data from the synoptic gospels, from Acts, and not least from the fourth gospel -- when full justice is done to the intentions underlying its composition -- are admirably expounded in other books of the New Testament, especially in St. Paul, 1 John, and 1 Peter. These books work out a theology of the washing of water with the word as a unique personal and sacramental act that confers "being-in-Christ", which is the sum of Christian existence. "You were buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the working of God, who raised him from the dead" (Colossians 2:12).

Fruitful controversy in recent years has again brought these results to the foreground. Passing over minor obscurities and differences of interpretation, this article is concerned simply with what was arrived at in common as part of the faith. The essential thing, then, is that by baptism, when we were dead through our trespasses and sins, God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us, made us alive together with Christ, raised us up with him, and made us sit with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus (Ephesians 2:1, 4-6).

For all its noble simplicity, the rite of initiation through the washing of water with the word -- so that we may gain salvation by the forgiveness of sins and the gift of the holy Spirit -- conveys several truths. First of all, baptism is the culmination of a person's personal encounter with God in Christ, of his or her personal response to the appeal of God's word. "So, those who received his word were baptized" (Acts 2:41), and responded to the good news Jesus brings; "Yes, I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God" (Acts 8:37, the Western reading).

Baptism bodies forth the faith that is the fundamental way of our living in Christ; without faith, it would be a lifeless outward show. But it is more than a "symbolic" expression of active faith; the washing by water in the word is real access to Christ and his redemption.

It is "being baptized into his death". It is dying with him and rising with him, truly sharing his sufferings so that, becoming like him in his death, we may attain the resurrection from the dead (see Philippians 3:10f.).

Another important aspect of baptism is that of purification. Washing of water with the word cleanses the Church (Ephesians 5:26); as this pure water sprinkles the body, it cleanses our hearts from an evil conscience (see Hebrews 10:22). Sharing in Christ's death and being purified in the sacred waters that flow forth from him brings about fellowship with the living Christ, a new life. One is a new creation, born again, enjoying even now a share in his resurrection that will be perfected in the future when the Lord returns.

All this is reality, but the Christian's faith must grasp and affirm its fullness in advance, ponder the consequences, and accept them in the serious constancy of a truly Christian life. "So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus" (Romans 6:11).

Baptism, then, must produce the whole breadth and depth of a life rooted and grounded in Christ (Ephesians 3:16-19). In Romans 6:12-14, the apostle forcefully points out the practical ethical consequences of baptism. What is demanded of those who are baptized is nothing less than a thoroughgoing conversion. Baptism has given them a completely new being, and they must shape their lives accordingly.

The early Church took this passage from the "indicative" to the "imperative" in baptism very seriously: "it is impossible to restore again to repentance those who have once been enlightened (in baptism), who have tasted the heavenly gift, have become partakers of the holy Spirit, and have tasted the goodness of the Word of God and the powers of the age to come, if they then commit apostasy" (Hebrews 6:4-6). These verses show what weight was then attached to the obligations imposed by baptism.

### **Controversy On Baptism By Heretics**

Practical necessities drew attention to the truth that baptism cannot be repeated. Controversy arose about baptism conferred by schismatics and especially heretics. Donatism, a schism rather than a heresy, raised the question whether the validity of the sacraments, as distinct from their effectiveness, depended on the worthiness of the minister or recipient. St. Augustine gives the classic statement of the objectivity of the sacraments: "in the matter of baptism, we must consider not who he is that gives it but what it is that he gives; not who he is that receives but what it is that he receives" (*Concerning Baptism*, iv. 16).

This principle underlies the theology of baptism that St. Augustine worked out against the heretics of his own time. Augustine reaffirms that, since Christ, the author and possessor of baptism, is its real minister, the sacrament is valid even when administered by a heretic. The heretic, too, confers the Church's baptism, the baptism of Christ, "which is always holy of its own nature and, therefore, does not belong to those who separate themselves but to that communion from which they separate" (*Concerning Baptism* I, 12, 19).

Later, he laid even more stress on the objective nature of the sacrament. Unless a person is in sacramental communication with Christ's redemptive act (fundamentally through baptism, and then through the Eucharist), "he cannot reach the kingdom of God nor gain salvation and eternal life." On the other hand, Augustine never ceased to inveigh against a mechanical conception of the sacraments. Without faith, there can be no sacrament at all. Every sacrament embodies a personal act of faith, at least on the part of the Church. It is a sacrament of this faith, a holy sign of belief in Christ and his salvation. Furthermore, though valid of itself, without love it remains barren.

Eventually, this Roman view prevailed. By defending a primacy of the official and sacramental element, independent of the personal holiness of the minister, even if he belongs to a body that is not the true Church, Rome vindicated the primacy of God's power, which is decisively exercised in baptism regardless of human limitations. However, its fruitfulness depends on the dispositions of the recipient, his or her faith and love. Such considerations finally brought it home to Christians that baptism, conferred in the proper form, in the power of Christ who is its real minister, is and remains valid because of the sustaining faith that gives access to Christ. Here are the foundations for the later doctrine that baptism imprints an indelible character on the soul. Once baptized, a Christian can never again be a non-Christian in character, though he or she may act otherwise through apostasy. This is what the writer of Hebrews was referring to.

It is, therefore, not correct, as some Fundamentalists and Evangelicals teach, to say that water baptism doesn't "do anything" itself, that it is simply one's public profession of the decision to follow Christ in obedience, although this is critical, as we have seen. Baptism is that sacred action of Christ himself whereby his redemption, his death, and his resurrection are given to us here and now, a gift, if you will, initiating us into Christian life by a concrete, tangible, symbolic confession of the faith so that we may be made conformable to the crucified and risen Lord.

What once happened to Christ now happens to us in baptism so that we may be reborn to a new life. The holy Spirit, sent by the risen Lord who sits at the right hand of the Father, fills and consecrates the water so that this sensible element may wash us immaculate and clothe us in splendor. The Fathers, from Tertullian on, call this "washing of water with the word" a *sacramentum* or *mysterium*, a term they also use for other sacred acts. By the 3rd. or 4th. century at the latest, the word had permanently acquired this technical sense. Baptism is a sacrament, an initiation that involves swearing fidelity in the service of Christ (like the oath of allegiance, the sacramentum of the Roman soldier). But, since *sacramentum* also took on the fuller force of *mysterium*, it was a sacred act that communicated symbolically what it represented and molded the believer to its likeness. As image of the death and resurrection of Christ, the mystery made the believer participate in the Passover of Christ from death to life.

Parallel to this very Pauline theology of baptism into the death of Christ, another conception looms even larger -- the impregnation of the baptismal water with the sanctifying power of Christ's spirit. Baptism produces its wonderful effects by the might of the crucified and risen Lord. He fills the water with the power of his holy Spirit, and

fructifies it so that it may beget his new life in the Church. Thus, the writer exclaims, "baptism now saves you -- not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a clear conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God" (1 Peter 4:21 & 22a).

## **Infant Baptism**

The baptism of adults is presupposed throughout the New Testament and the early Christian period. As yet, we find no references to the baptism of infants and young children. But, this is no proof that the practice was unknown. The parallel between baptism and circumcision, as a rite of initiation and entrance into the community of God's chosen people, would not have been lost on the Apostles and early Christians who came out of a Jewish background. In any case, infant baptism developed naturally out of entirely different circumstances in which Christianity found itself. It was thought fitting to receive children into the fellowship of Christ and the Church, but no special rite of infant baptism was ever devised.

In the early days, the baptism of children was something almost "incidental", a sort of appendage to the baptism of adults, which was always the main concern. Child baptism, however, became the normal practice from about the 4th. or 5th. century onward. Basically, nothing changed so that, even today, through the intermediary of their godparents, infants are treated at their baptism as if they were adults: they renounce Satan, confess the faith, and state that they wish to be baptized.

To pretend that the infant is a responsible partner is forcing matters. Our keener sense of authenticity demands that the child be treated as such, regarded as a "partner" only within his or her limitations. We must state what really happens: here is a human being on whom God is pleased to bestow salvation in Christ through the intermediary of the Church, his Body, giving the Church, the parents, and the sponsors the duty of bringing him or her to the point where he or she can freely affirm the saving grace he or she has been vouchsafed, and from that point preserve it for himself or herself.

Infant baptism, thus, exists in its own right and has its own claims to our appreciation. The problems it raises have much exercised Protestant theologians. But, the fact that all churches, including the Reformed, accept infant baptism in practice shows that they take a realistic view of baptism and see it as something objective. It is precisely Protestant exegetes, Church historians, and experts in comparative religion who now acknowledge the realism of the ancient Christian sacramental idea. They often emphasize "that St. Paul ascribes a 'real mystical action' to baptism that makes of the sinner a person freed from sin, who is bound in a mysterious way with the death and resurrection of Christ" (Neunheuser, following M.-J. Lagrange). Thus, theologians must now stress the following points:

1. The event of baptism is a sacred mystery; it is a sacrament that communicates grace, but it is no less a highly personal act on the part of the adult convert. As a mystery, baptism is an act of initiation -- an introduction to truly Christian life --whereby the redemptive death of Christ that happened but once in history is made present in the shape

of a visible rite. The person baptized can die with and like Christ and rise again with him to the new life that is being-in-Christ-Jesus, in the hope of one day attaining the full glory of the resurrection.

2. If we consider the outward sign as an ablution, then baptism is seen to be the cleansing of sinful man in the precious blood of the Lamb of God, by the water that flowed from the open side of the Crucified. The baptismal water is the instrument Christ uses to bring about this redemptive purification: filled with the power of the holy Spirit, on the invocation of God's name, it purges of all sin and awakens one to the new life of those "born again of water and the holy Spirit" (John 3:5).

The door to the kingdom of God is opened in baptism. As fellowship with Christ in his crucifixion, death, and risen life, or as instrument in the hands of the Redeemer to cleanse and give grace and life, baptism remains a sovereign act of God's omnipotence, applying Christ's redemption to the sinner out of mercy and preceding love, without any merit on our part, and demanding from that point on a life of obedience to God.

3. Nothing at all in this sacramental action savors of magic. Magic, indeed, is fatal to all true religion. If the action that proceeds from faith and is achieved in baptism is unfailingly efficacious, that is simply evidence of the power of God, who of his own free grace has willed this way of salvation appropriate to the basic event which is the incarnation of the Word, appropriate as well, therefore, to the double structure of man. Baptism proclaims the utter sufficiency of the redemption that Christ wrought once and for all in history and that takes effect now in the sacrament.

### **The Obligations Of Baptism**

Baptism imposes obligations in keeping with the spiritual nature of human beings. It gives the child all it can bear: to be a child of God, freed from the burden of original sin, of the wrath of God. But, by this very fact, the child has a duty, when he or she reaches the estate of a responsible person, of freely confessing the reality of his or her baptism by faith and love and shaping his or her life accordingly, in the hope of preserving that grace until its consummation in eternity. Otherwise, baptism would fail to achieve its real and ultimate effect.

But baptism addresses the adult convert directly. Unless he or she approaches the sacrament in the dispositions that become a responsible person, yields the assent of his or her faith, resolutely turns his or her back on sin, and freely commits himself or herself to Christ crucified and risen, the baptism remains barren, even though correctly administered and even though it truly gives the convert that first contact with Christ that marks him or her forever as Christ's possession so that, whatever his or her present deficiencies, he or she can at any time turn repentant to the Lord and giver of true life.

Baptism is living fellowship with Christ, the inauguration of that New Testament life that is inward, spontaneous obedience to God in the power of Christ's holy Spirit, the mature freedom of the sons and daughters of God. As the primal sacrament, then, baptism is, in a special sense, both the sacrament of faith in Christ and the embodiment of that faith.

That is why, should circumstances make baptism impossible, faith alone can impart fellowship with Christ and redemption through what is called baptism of desire. One who truly believes in the Lord is prepared to do his bidding without reserve and, therefore, wishes, so far as possible, to receive baptism. He or she is not saved without the desire (at least implicit) of baptism; at once justified in this way, he or she must still receive the sacrament, for it incorporates him or her into the Church's visible communion, thus entitling him or her to take part in all its sacramental and liturgical life in Christ.

--Burkhard Neunheuser, edited by Patrick J. Hession