

The Spiritual Meaning and Value of Baptism

BY

E. Y. MULLINS, D. D., LL. D.



Price Ten Cents



Baptist World Publishing Co., Inc.
Louisville, Ky.

1111 .
1111 .

THE SPIRITUAL MEANING AND VALUE OF BAPTISM.

By E. Y. Mullins, D.D. LL.D.

(Sermon preached before the Immanuel Baptist church, Nashville, Tenn., May, 1914.)

Text: "Or are ye ignorant that all we who were baptized into Christ were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him through baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we also might walk in newness of life" (Rom. 6:3, 4).

I wish to unfold the thought of the spiritual meaning and value of baptism. In order to do so, it is necessary that we glance at the New Testament teaching on the relation of a sign to the thing signified. We might at the outset become confused and mystified if we failed to do this. If we should put the sign in the place of what is signified; or put what is signified in place of the sign; or if we should fail to grasp clearly how the sign represents what is signified, it would be very easy to go astray.

Hence my sermon might be described as an effort to show the spiritual meaning and value

178078
265.1 **Restricted Area**
M 9175

of a sign or symbol. Baptism is a sign or symbol of spiritual truths and realities.

The word symbol is made up of two other words, one of which means "together" and the other to "put" or "place". Hence the primary meaning of symbol is the placing together of two things, or the use of one thing as a sign of another. There are, for example, symbols used by astronomers. The symbol which represents the sun is a circle with a dot in the center. The symbol of the planet Venus is a smaller circle with a cross hanging from its lower edge. Sometimes a sign is used to indicate a quality. A lion is the symbol of courage. An olive branch is the symbol of peace. Sometimes on ancient Greek coins a figure was stamped as a symbol of authority—a lyre or wine cup or ivy wreath. Here the symbol set forth the authority of the magistrate under whom the coin was issued.

Now, in Christianity there are two ceremonies or symbols, which correspond to the meaning I have given. Baptism is one of these. It is a ceremony which is put with spiritual truths and facts, by divine authority, for certain ends. What are those spiritual truths and realities? I can only refer briefly to them. Baptism is a sign of remission or forgiveness. As immersion, it symbolizes complete remission and forgiveness. It is also a symbol of the washing of regeneration, and as immersion it is a symbol of complete washing, a radical inward and not a superficial out-

ward cleansing. It is a symbol of submission and consecration, and as immersion it is a symbol of complete dedication to the authority and service of Christ. It is a symbol of death, burial and resurrection, and as immersion it expresses death, burial and resurrection in a dramatic and symbolic form. Thus it symbolizes our union with Christ in his death, burial and resurrection. Thus it is a symbol of our own inward spiritual death, burial and resurrection, and at the same time it prefigures our own bodily resurrection.

There is no longer any serious difference among representative scholars of the world, of all denominations, that baptism as taught and practiced in the New Testament was the immersion of the believer in water, in obedience to the authority of Christ. Prof. Sanday, of Oxford, a member of the Church of England, gives the following as the meaning of the passage I have given as my text:

“Baptism has a double function. (1) It brings the Christian into personal contact with Christ, so close that it may be fitly described as union with him. (2) It expresses symbolically a series of acts corresponding to the redeeming acts of Christ: Immersion, which symbolizes death; submersion, which symbolizes burial (the ratification of death); emergence, which symbolizes resurrection.

“All these the Christian has to undergo in a moral and spiritual sense, and by means of his union with Christ. As Christ by his death

on the cross ceased from all contact with sin, so the Christian united with Christ in his baptism has done once for all with sin, and lives henceforth a reformed life dedicated to God." (Commentary on Romans, page 153.)

This is in harmony with the New Testament teaching everywhere. Immersion and death are "put together" in this symbol. Submersion and burial are also put together, as are emergence and resurrection. If, then, these things are joined together by the authority of Christ, who shall assert an authority above his to justify us in putting asunder what he has joined together?

Now, in order that we may preserve the spiritual meaning and value of baptism, we must fulfill all the following conditions:

1. First of all, we must keep the ordinance in its proper place as a symbol. It is strange how difficult this has been in Christian history. Men have erred constantly in one of three directions: (1) They have said: "It is a mere symbol; it amounts to little or nothing." Then they have proceeded to change its form to suit their own comfort or convenience; or else they have abolished it altogether, as the Unitarians and Quakers have done. Or (2) Men have erred in another direction by identifying the sign with the thing signified. Jesus said, as to the bread and wine, "This is my blood", "this is my body", and the Roman Catholic Church has insisted on taking the words literally. Someone has said that the terrible

dogma of transubstantiation, with all its magical power in the hands of a priesthood, with all its debasing influence upon New Testament Christianity, arose out of man's failure to understand a figure of speech, a metaphor, so that Christ's words, which are easily understood by an intelligent child, were perverted into words of revolutionary import. To appreciate a symbol one must have imagination and faith. Children have no trouble in understanding symbols. I once heard of a man who objected to the poetic lines: "Sermons in stones, books in running brooks, God in everything", because it was a perversion of the facts. The poet should have said rather, "Sermons in books, stones in running brooks, God in everything". There are literalists who object to the teaching of the little stanza to baby:

"Where did you come from, baby dear?
Out of the everywhere into the here.
Where did you get your eyes so blue?
Out of the sky as I came through.
Where did you get your pearly ear?
God spoke, and it came out to hear.
Where did you get that little tear?
I found it waiting when I got here."

Now a man without imagination or insight might object that every statement in these lines is false. You might argue with such a man a week, and you could not convince him.

He lacks the insight and imagination necessary to understand figurative language. So also you could never impart spiritual insight to a literalist who insisted that Christ meant his real body and blood when he said, "This is my body", "this is my blood".

(3) A third way in which baptism as a symbol is perverted from its true use is to convert it into a saving ordinance. Ceremonies in religion are like ladders. You can climb up on them if you keep them in their place. You can climb down on them if you misuse them for wrong ends. Baptism is an act of duty. It is a sign of life within. It is the answer of a good conscience; not the regenerating power that makes a good conscience.

Hence, I repeat, if we are to preserve the spiritual meaning and value of baptism, we must keep it in its place as a symbol.

2. I remark secondly that in order to preserve its spiritual meaning and value we must maintain its relation to the truths and facts symbolized in and by it. We must never forget the value of the outward as a means of helping men to understand the inward. The idea of God never became tangible and workable and real to men generally until God became visible and audible and tangible in Jesus himself. Until Christ came, men failed to grasp the idea of God clearly. Since he came all false ideas are corrected in and through him.

For example, when the Indian or other philosophy says God is an impersonal principle, and man is to be reabsorbed at death or snuffed out like a candle, Christ comes and says God is a person and our personality will remain forever. When Mohammedanism perverts the idea of God and makes him mere power, Christ comes and shows that God is love. When science exaggerates heredity and sin, and asserts that man is under the operation of natural law, Christ corrects it by showing that where heredity and sin abounded grace did abound more exceedingly. God became visible and outward in Christ.

Now, in a corresponding manner, the central spiritual truths and facts of Christianity became visible in the ordinances. Christ planned it so. If you look at the great group of inner vital truths of Christianity, and then look at the meaning of the two ordinances of Christianity, you will at once see that it is like looking at two circles of exactly the same diameter. You can place one upon the other, and not only their centers will coincide, but their circumferences will also coincide.

Note then the two parallel lines in Christianity—the inward and real and the outward and symbolic. There are two kinds of cleansing—inward cleansing by the Spirit of God and outward cleansing in symbol through water baptism. There are two kinds of entrance into the Kingdom—the inner and spiritual, when the soul yields to Christ, and the

outward and symbolic in baptism. There are two kinds of remission of sins, two kinds of death, two kinds of burial, two kinds of resurrection—the inward and vital and the outward dramatic and symbolic. There is no conflict or confusion, nothing to lead anyone astray in this. It is like all other inward things with a corresponding outward expression. There is no conflict or confusion between the invisible thought and the visible deed; none between the inaudible thought and the audible word; none between the unheard melodies in the heart and the heard music on the organ or other instrument. There is no conflict between the beautiful sunset I see and the inward image of it I carry in my memory. There is no conflict between that marvelous and matchless experience I had one night, in Major Penn's meeting when Christ drew near and spoke to me and entered the open door of my heart and shed his radiance through my soul, and when I gave myself to him as a penitent sinner and died to him and rose in new life to him and dedicated myself to him forever—I say there is no conflict between that inward drama of my soul and that other drama a week later when on a clear November afternoon my father led me into the baptismal waters and I re-enacted outwardly all that inward transaction. There was no conflict between the song my soul sang that night of my conversion and the other song my lips sang the day of my baptism:

“How happy are they who their Savior obey,
And whose treasure is laid up above.”

Now, I think I have made clear what I mean. Christ intended that our Christianity should have the inward reality and the outward expression in the ordinances: Two kinds of remission, two kinds of cleansing, two kinds of death, burial and resurrection—the inward, vital and real, and the outward, dramatic and symbolic. If we seek to know and do the will of Christ, we will maintain both the outward and the inward.

3. Again, if we would preserve the spiritual meaning and value of baptism we must conserve the relation of the form of the symbol to its meaning. It is perfectly clear that if a certain meaning is bound up with a certain form, if the form is chosen in order to express a certain meaning, the moment you change the form you change the meaning. A symbol has no value in itself. Its value is in its fitness to a certain meaning. Its use and value ceases when it no longer expresses the necessary meaning. The American flag has red, white and blue in the color scheme. It has thirteen stripes and as many stars as there are states, on blue ground. Its value as a national symbol is the retention of these elements. Suppose we should change the color scheme to red, white and black, or increase the number of stars and put a single star on the blue ground, would that be an American flag? Surely not.

When a marriage takes place, sometimes a gold ring is used. The groom puts it on the hand of the bride as a part of the ceremony. It is a symbolic marriage which is parallel with the legally authorized ceremony. The gold, we will say, represents the quality of love, and its circular form represents the endless duration of marriage. Now, if you use a straight bar of gold instead of a ring, or if you use an iron instead of a gold ring, it is evident that the symbolic aspect of the marriage is in part destroyed. Now suppose this symbolic form of the ceremony, this use of the gold ring, instead of being voluntary, were required by law in order to make the ceremony legal. Surely everyone would seek to observe the law. Any change from a gold ring to a gold bar or iron ring would destroy the symbolism and violate the law. I remind you that baptism is not optional with us. It is commanded by Christ. To refuse to submit to it violates his command; and since the meaning of it is wrapped up with the form we cannot change the form without changing the meaning. Sprinkling no more makes real baptism than one star on a blue ground with thirteen stripes makes a flag which we would recognize as "Old Glory".

4. Finally, we must preserve the relation of baptism to the corporate life of believers in the church if we would maintain its true use and value. Baptism admits to church membership. It is not an isolated individual act mere-

ly, with no relation to church membership. In Ephesians 4:3-6, Paul gives the true basis of Christian union. It is a seven-fold union: "Give diligence to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace: one body [the church], and one Spirit [God's Holy Spirit], even as ye were called in one hope of your calling [the Christian calling], one Lord [Jesus Christ], one faith [faith in Christ], one baptism [the immersion of the believer in water], one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all." Here, then, is the glorious outline of Christian unity by the matchless hand of the master builder, Paul. We shall realize it when his ideal becomes the practical working ideal of Christendom. When the members of the one body, animated by the one Spirit, shall bow to the authority of the one Lord; when other lords shall give place to him; when the lord of self-will, and the lord of convenience, and the lord of inclination, and the lord of pride in the heart, and the lord of half-heartedness shall give place to the Lord of life and glory, then the ideal of unity will come to pass, and unto the angels and principalities and powers in the heavenly places shall be made known through the church the manifold wisdom of God.

5. If we would preserve the spiritual meaning and value of baptism, we must maintain its true relation to the subject who obeys in the act. For the person baptized baptism is a

means of expressing his relation to Jesus Christ. No one will appreciate baptism who overlooks this fact. For the normal believer, the person who follows the natural instincts of his heart when he becomes a follower of Christ, obedience in baptism is far more than the mechanical observance of a mere religious form. Feeling and sentiment, loyalty and love abound in the act. Suppose you hold in your hand a picture of a woman's face, an imaginary face, conceived in the mind and transferred to the canvas of some artist. If it were a beautiful face, artistically painted, you might care for it because of its artistic value. Otherwise, it would not interest you at all. But suppose, instead of being an imaginary face, it was the face of a real woman. Suppose further that real woman was your mother, and still further that your mother was dead and this was the only picture of her you possessed; and now suppose in her last moments, her dying statement, she had given you the picture and told you to preserve it and remember her by means of it. Do you not see how your whole soul would go out in affection toward that picture? It would be to you an expression of one of the deepest and sweetest of personal human relations. Your treatment of the picture would be your expression of your feeling toward your mother. Even so, to the loyal and loving disciple of Jesus, baptism is full of sweet, personal meaning. Let me try to put into words the real feelings of the nor-

mal disciple, who is truly loyal to Jesus, as he is baptized. This is what he says in his heart:

“Let me follow the example of my Master in this act. He went all the way to Jordan to be baptized by John, and he said, ‘Thus it becometh us to fulfill all righteousness’, and surely if it became him it becomes me. Let me obey the command of my Master, for he gave this command in his last words to the disciples. Let me obey just as his words require me to obey. Let the quality of my obedience not be lowered by compromises of any kind. Let no one presume to obey for me when I am a helpless, unconscious babe. Vicarious obedience here is not real obedience. Let my obedience be not something which men call the ‘spirit of obedience’ while the fact of obedience is wanting. Let me not follow my comfort or convenience, or the advice of human advisers, and obey partially when I can obey fully. Let me have the joy of full obedience. Let me die in symbol as Christ died actually. Let me be buried in the watery tomb as he was buried in the grave. Let me rise again from that symbolic grave as he rose from the tomb in the garden. Let me walk in newness of life as he walked in resurrection power.”

It is thus that the disciple thinks and feels and speaks. It is thus that he enters into mystic fellowship with his Savior. It is thus that he catches the spirit of the great passage of Paul in the sixth chapter of Romans. Bap-

tism is baptism into Christ. It is symbolic union with Christ. As the hand is a member of the body, so now the believer is a member of Christ. The ordinance does not unite him to Christ, but it symbolizes the union. He desires now to live the life the ordinance symbolizes. He now says, "The love of Christ constraineth me", meaning, by the love of Christ, not his love for Christ simply, nor Christ's love for him simply, but meaning rather the great eternal principle of love which ruled in Christ and is now ruling in him, as the life of the head rules in the members. Again he says with Paul: "I count all things to be loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus, my Lord, if by any means I may attain unto the resurrection of the dead." Paul did not doubt that he would be raised from the dead, but he was anxious that his life and character be worthy of the resurrection glory. The bride may not doubt the marriage just ahead before the multitude of spectators, but her hand trembles as she arranges her hair, lest she be not worthy of the great occasion. Men and women and children obey Christ in baptism because they are swayed by the eternal motive. They are transformed by the vision of the risen and glorified Savior, and the very act expresses meaning and the deepest feeling of their hearts.