

IV.

THE PRESENT ASPECT OF THE BAPTISMAL
CONTROVERSY.

FIRST, let us ask : What has been the past aspect of the controversy ? We cannot understand the present except as we know the past. And yet, how difficult is it sometimes to read the past at once intelligibly and impartially. We are apt to allow the " after-thoughts of theology " too potent an influence in determining our judgment of the past. Present prejudices and opinions warp that judgment. Still, it is our duty to endeavor to clearly understand the past teachings of Christendom on the important questions now asking our candid consideration. What has been the trend of Christian thought on baptism ? What is the present status of the questions involved in its discussion ? As Baptists, of course, we begin with the New Testament. Loyalty to the Head of the Church, whose we are and whom we serve, forbids any starting point this side of Jesus and his Spirit-guided apostles. We dare not lend our ears to later voices presuming to be of higher, or even co-ordinate authority. We must sit at the feet of the Supreme Teacher and his inspired heralds in the primitive proclamation of gospel doctrine and duty.

There should be no trouble in ascertaining the New Testament teaching as to baptism. Beyond question that baptism was the immersion in water of a believer. The action, and the subject, and the design, are equally discernible. The difficulty in seeing them is not in the inspired picture, but in the prejudice-filmed eyes of men. Probably no one, reading the New Testament for the first time, and without the bias that knowledge of the controversies on this subject necessarily

engenders, would find any difficulty in reaching the truth as to any of the points involved. Especially would this be true if the New Testament were read as originally given to the world. In the apostolic teaching baptism had a grand significance. It was an expressive memorial ordinance, ever preaching to the eye. It ever spoke to men of the Christ who was buried, but risen. Paul sums up the gospel he preached to the Corinthians in these fundamental postulates: Christ died—was buried—rose again (1 Cor., xv. 1-4). Of this fundamental gospel the three great gospel institutions were memorials. The Lord's Supper, the Lord's day, the Lord's baptism—each commemorated the Christ. Each was ordained as monumental evidence to the ages to follow. Thus in baptism the believer was "baptized unto the death of Christ." That is, in baptism he expressed his trust for salvation in the death of Christ. And yet, not a dead Christ, but one who was risen (Rom. vi. 3, 4). "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." To the primitive disciples baptism was thus both a memorial and a dedicatory rite. In that solemn act of righteousness, they declared their faith in the risen Jesus and their dedication to his glorious service. The act and the significance of it both were exclusive of all subjects save those who voluntarily brought to the rite a conscious faith and a loving heart.

Scarcely had the apostles gone to heaven when error began to corrupt the beautiful simplicity of the gospel rites. The fatal tendency of the human heart is to ritual superstition—to invest sacred things with sacred efficacy. Very early Christian thought began to wander from apostolic doctrine. The ordinances of the gospel were soon regarded as "saving sacraments," and baptism was supposed to wash away sin from the soul. In the second century this error be-

came ascendant, ruling Christendom. It was but a step further to infant baptism. In the *Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia* is an elaborate discussion of this question by the distinguished Pedobaptist theologian, Dr. Geo. E. Steitz. He candidly admits that "there is no trace of infant baptism in the New Testament." "All attempts to deduce it from the words of institution [viz., Matt. xxviii. 19], or from such passages as 1 Cor. i. 16 must be given up as arbitrary. Indeed, 1 Cor. vii. 14 rules out decisively all such deductions; for, if pedobaptism were taught by Paul, he would have linked the salvation of the children with their baptism, and not with the faith of their parents" (*Encyclopedia.*, vol. 1, page 200).

If not in the New Testament, whence came it? History answers. It originated in the error that only through baptism could original sin be washed away. This is freely admitted by the eminent author of the Church of England, John Henry Blunt (*Dictionary of Doctrinal and Historical Theology*), who traces the gradual rise of the superstitious innovation out of that very early heresy. It was argued that inasmuch as infants are born in sin, they must be born of water in order to salvation. And this is yet the declared ground upon which the rite is practised, even in Protestant communions. See the form for administering baptism to infants in the Episcopal prayer-book and in the Methodist "Discipline."

In the beginning of infant baptism it was really baptism so far as the action, or "mode," was concerned. They were immersed, as they still are in the Greek Church, and most other Eastern churches. But the change of subject led subsequently to the change of the action. True it is that even before infant baptism became general, so-called "clinic baptism," or baptism of the sick, in some instances had been administered by pouring. Yet, there is no doubt, the growing prevalence of infant baptism hastened the general substitution of sprinkling for immersion. Thus the *Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia* (on baptisteries):

“ Gradually, however, as infant baptism became the rule in the church, the sacrament was administered by aspersion instead of by immersion. After the Ninth Century no more baptisteries were built. The baptismal basin was transformed into the baptismal font, and the font was removed into the church itself.”

Following the pages of ecclesiastical history downward to the present, it is comparatively easy to trace the baptismal controversy. Through all the centuries from the beginning of error we can see the varying aspects of it. The Roman Catholic Church has consistently adhered to the dogma of baptismal regeneration, in the case of both the adult and the infant. While the Protestant sects have not been as pronounced in their teaching, they have by no means been free from that error. The teaching of Augustine (who lived from A.D. 353 to A.D. 430), has been the basis of Pedobaptist doctrine, both Catholic and Protestant. According to Steitz's summary, Augustine maintained a substitutive faith of *the Church*, by which the bond of original sin is broken [in baptism], the Holy Spirit implanted in the unconscious babe, and regeneration wrought (Epistle 98). The idea of the passive receptivity of the child was Augustine's most pregnant contribution to the Church. It is not only the root of the *opus operatum* doctrine of Rome, but rules the present theory of infant baptism in the Lutheran Church. In regard to unbaptized infants, he says expressly: “ It may therefore be correctly affirmed, that such infants as quit the body without being baptized will be involved in condemnation, but of the mildest character.” John Henry Blunt declares this to be the teaching of the Church of England. John Wesley, himself a priest of that Church, said, in his “ Notes ” on Acts xxii. 16: “ Baptism is both a means and a seal of pardon.” In his sermon on the “ New Birth ” he teaches that infants are born again of the Spirit when baptized. If we take up the official symbols, or creeds, of the different Protestant churches, we shall find traces of the old leaven in each of them. Beginning with the Augsburg (Lutheran)

Confession (of A.D. 1530), and coming down through the Thirty-Nine Articles of the Church of England (A.D. 1571), and the Westminster Confession of Faith of the Presbyterians (A.D. 1647), he that runs may read the error. Take the last named as fairly representing all. In its twenty-eighth chapter it is written :

“ Baptism is a sacrament of the New Testament * * * a sign and seal of the covenant of grace. * * * By the right use of this ordinance, the grace promised is not only *offered*, but *really exhibited* and *conferred* by the Holy Ghost, to such (whether of age or infants) as that grace belongeth unto, according to the counsel of God's own will, in his appointed time.” (*Italics mine.*)

That such views of baptism are not held and urged by our Pedobaptist brethren of to-day, must be ascribed to the modifying influence of Baptist teaching. Let us cheerfully believe and admit that the reverent study of God's word has led to the comparative abandonment of views once universally prevalent among Pedobaptists. This is doubtless true, but it is also true that Baptist principles have been no small factor in forcing our friends to a more scriptural teaching on this question. They know not the debt they owe us in this matter. Nor need we be concerned as to whether they are grateful for the unconscious influence. Let us rejoice that they have gotten further away from Rome, and nearer the Scriptures, albeit, the smell of the old garments yet somewhat clings to their skirts. The world's scholarship has fully justified the Baptist teaching in this baptismal controversy. Dr. Howard Osgood, the eminent Baptist of Rochester Theological Seminary, says :

“ The authorities on philology, on the archaeology and history of Christian churches, are unanimous in asserting that the baptism of the New Testament and of the early ages of Christianity was a dipping, a submersion of the candidate in water. All philologists and lexicographers of the Greek language give ‘immersion,’ ‘submersion,’ or cognate terms, as the constant signification of the noun or verb. * * * Historians, and those who treat of the early liturgies, unite in the same testimony * * * There is not a dissenting voice in all the literature of the Christian Church for twelve hundred years.

Only in cases of great sickness was any other act allowed, and then only as a quasi-baptism. * * * The Oriental churches, Greek, Russian, Armenian, Nestorian, Coptic, and others, have always practised immersion, and allow nothing else for baptism. * * * The Western churches also preserved the baptism of the New Testament for thirteen hundred years, and then gradually introduced pouring or sprinkling. * * * Luther sought, against the tendency of the times, to restore immersion. * * * Calvin was the first to assert that immersion was of no importance: whether the person who is baptized be wholly immersed, and whether thrice or once, or whether water be only poured or sprinkled upon him, is of no importance; churches ought to be left at liberty in this respect to act according to the difference of countries. The very word *baptize*, however, signifies to immerse, and it is certain that immersion was the practice of the ancient church." (Institutes, Bk. iv, ch. 15 sect. 19)."

In this commentary, Calvin is even more emphatic as to the act of baptism. On John iii. 23, he says: "From these words we may learn that John and Christ administered baptism by the immersion of the whole body." On Acts viii. 38: "From this verse we see clearly what the rite of baptism was among the ancients; for they immersed the whole body in water."

So far as their writings show, all of the leaders of the Protestant Reformation held with Calvin as to this matter of fact. Indeed, no one had then arisen with prejudice or effrontery enough to deny it. The Roman Catholic authorities are to the same effect. Rome allowed affusion, but her scholars had no need of pleading *Scripture* sanction for it—they had the authority of the *Church*, for them the end of all controversy. Hence we find the "councils" delivering themselves. The Council of Calcuith (Chelsea in England), in A.D. 816, forbade the priests to pour water on the infants' heads, but ordered to immerse them. The Council of Nemours (A.D. 1284) limited sprinkling to cases of necessity; and Thomas Aquinas says, although it may be safer to baptize by immersion, yet sprinkling and pouring are also allowable. The Council of Ravenna (A.D. 1311) was the first to allow a choice between sprinkling and immersion. Sprink-

ling first came into common use at the end of the thirteenth century, being favored by the growing variety of adult baptism. The authority for these statements may be learned by consulting the Pedobaptist *Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia*.

The scholarship of the world at the present time utters the same voice. The exceptions are rare indeed among men of competent scholarship who say otherwise than that immersion was the apostolic practise. If it were necessary hundreds of citations could be given from Pedobaptist historians, commentators, and theologians, candidly admitting this. A few will suffice. Among modern ecclesiastical antiquarians, few stand as high as the Berlin professor, Adolf Harnack. It was he who first made accessible to European and American scholars the famous *Didache* or "Teaching of the Apostles," about which no small stir was made some years ago. In December, 1884, I wrote to this scholar, asking him to favor me with answers to several questions submitted. He promptly replied, courteously obliging me. I asked him what was the present judgment of German scholarship as to the act of baptism in the New Testament and the century following. I quote from his letter to me, under date Jan. 16, 1885 :

"1. *Baptizein* undoubtedly signifies immersion (*eintauchen*).

"2. No proof can be found that it signifies anything else in the New Testament and in the most ancient Christian literature. The suggestion regarding 'a sacred sense' is out of the question."

Professor Harnack's reference to a "sacred sense" is explained by the fact that, in my letter, I called his attention to the argument very commonly advanced in this country, that the Greek verb in the New Testament is used in a sacred sense, by which it denotes the "application of water, irrespective of mode." So important did Dr. Schaff regard Dr. Harnack's letter that he gives it in full in his edition of the *Didache*, occupying one of the large pages of that work.

Dr. Schaff has been frequently mentioned in this paper. He is probably the best known American scholar, having

been president of the American board in the late revision of the Scriptures. He is at present Professor of Church History in the Presbyterian Union Theological Seminary, in New York City. In his *Apostolic Church*, a standard work, he says:

"Immersion, and not sprinkling, was unquestionably the original, normal form. This is shown by the very meaning of the Greek words used to designate the rite," etc.

This was written in 1853, and in his latest works he expresses the same opinion. Dr. Schaff, however, thinks he can see some New Testament encouragement for infant baptism. In his encyclopedia, he labors to find apostolic authority for the right, though admitting that "Augustine, Gregory Naziansen, and Chrysostom had Christian mothers, but were not baptized till they were converted in early manhood." And this was four centuries after Christ. Evidently Christians of that day did not believe that Jesus or his apostles had commanded infant baptism.

Meyer is easily the prince among living exegetical commentators. He is a Pedobaptist affusionist in practice, yet he is compelled to say, commenting on that difficult passage, Mark vii. 4:

"*Baptizontai* is not to be understood here of the washing of hands, but of immersion (*eintauchen*), that which the word in classical and New Testament Greek always means; that is, here, according to the context, to take a bath.

Meyer is everywhere consistent with this statement. But why prolong the testimony? Two others shall close the case. One of the foremost scholars of America is Rev. L. L. Paine, D.D., who occupies the chair of ecclesiastical history in the Congregational Theological Seminary at Bangor, Maine. In August, 1875, he wrote an article for the *Christian Mirror*, of Portland. I quote:

"It may be honestly asked by some: Was immersion the primitive form of baptism; and if so, what then? As to the question of fact, the testimony is ample and decisive. No matter of church

history is clearer. The evidence is all one way, and all church historians of any repute agree in accepting it. * * * It is a point on which ancient, mediæval and modern historians alike, Catholic and Protestant, Lutheran and Calvinist, have no controversy. And the simple reason for this unanimity is that the statements of the early fathers are so clear and the light shed upon these statements from the early customs of the church is so conclusive, that no historian who cares for his reputation would dare to deny it, and no historian who is worthy of the name would wish to."

In a letter to me written March 31, 1884, Prof. Paine reiterates his emphatic testimony. In reply to some criticism upon his statement as to the unanimity of scholars concerning the primitive baptism, he says:

"There are not a few Calvinists of the present day, as for example some Congregationalists and Presbyterians who are not willing to allow that the primitive mode of baptism was immersion. My statement was concerning *historians*, not Calvinists, etc., as a whole. My present view of the historical question as to the primitive mode of baptism is unchanged. There may have been cases of pouring or sprinkling, but there is no clear record of such cases *before the third century.*" (His italics.)

In view of so decisive testimony from scholars of so world-wide reputation, it may well be asked, how can sprinkling be maintained by those they represent? This brings us to another phase of the present aspect of the controversy. Admitting that Jesus and his apostles, and the primitive Christians practised immersion, is their example of permanent authority in the matter? Let us listen to one of the lights of modern Pedobaptists—the late Dean A. P. Stanley, of the Church of England. His special department of scholarship was church history, having written several standard volumes in that line. In his latest work, *Christian Institutions*, issued in 1881, in the chapter on baptism, page 21, he says:

"We now pass to the changes in the form itself. For the first thirteen centuries the almost universal practice of baptism was that of which we read in the New Testament, and which is the very meaning of the word 'baptize'—that those who were baptized were plunged, submerged, immersed into the water. That practice is

still, as we have seen, continued in Eastern churches. In the Western Church it still lingers amongst Roman Catholics in the solitary instance of the Cathedral of Milan; amongst Protestants in the numerous sect of the Baptists. It lasted long into the Middle Ages. * * * But since the beginning of the seventeenth century, the practice [in the English Church] has become exceedingly rare. With the few exceptions just mentioned, the whole of the Western churches have now substituted for the ancient bath the ceremony of letting fall a few drops of water on the face. The reason of the change is obvious. * * * Not by any decree of Council or Parliament, but by the general sentiment of Christian liberty, this remarkable change was effected. * * * The old practice followed, no doubt, the example of the apostles and their Master. * * * But, speaking generally, the Christian civilized world has decided against it. It is a striking example of the triumph of common sense and convenience over the bondage of form and custom. * * * It is a larger change even than that which the Roman Catholic Church has made in administering the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. * * * The change from immersion to sprinkling has set aside the most of the apostolic expressions regarding baptism, and has altered the very meaning of the word."

In regard to the subjects of baptism, Stanley has much to say. I quote, page 23:

"Another change is not so complete, but is perhaps more important. In the apostolic age, and in the three centuries which followed, it is evident that, as a general rule, those who came to baptism came in full age, of their own deliberate choice. We find a few cases of the baptism of children; in the third century we find one case of the baptism of infants. Even amongst Christian households the instances of Chrysostom, Gregory Naziansen, Basil, Augustine, Ambrose, are decisive proofs that it was not only not obligatory but not usual. All of these distinguished personages had Christian parents, and yet were not baptized till they reached maturity. * * * What is the justification of the almost universal departure from the primitive usage? There may have been many reasons, some good, some bad. One, no doubt, was the superstitious feeling already mentioned which regarded baptism as a charm, indispensable to salvation, and which insisted on imparting it to every human being who could be touched with water, however unconscious."

But enough—perhaps more than enough. Stanley's flippant manner of dealing with the confessed departures from the examples of Jesus and his apostles, evokes a sigh

from the reverent heart. And yet he says the best that can be said truthfully in defence of those changes. His scholarly candor forbade his pleading Scripture authority for sprinkling, or for the infant rite. He knew the New Testament sanctioned neither, but he deliberately puts against the Word of God the authority of—"Christian liberty—common sense and convenience." Alas! that a professed minister of Christ should so presume to question and confessedly supersede the command and example of his Lord!

The question thus is narrowed down to this. Is the New Testament of final and permanent authority on the points involved in the baptismal controversy? Shall its sacred supremacy be set aside that we may follow our ideas of "common sense and convenience?" Godly Pedobaptists must meet the issue fairly. They cannot much longer satisfy their consciences with the sophistical interpretations and evasions which have done service heretofore in this controversy. The passages in the New Testament adduced in support of their practice can be shown by their own scholars to be unavailable as proof texts. Confessedly, sprinkling and infant baptism are absolutely unknown to the Word of God. They can be defended only by deliberately setting aside the authority of its precepts and examples. What shall loyal children of God do face to face with such an alternative? Can any one who loves the Master hesitate as to duty? We must obey God rather than man. His Word is supreme. Let us lovingly and loyally follow its sacred guidance.

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