

The Reformed View of BAPTISM

(2) Its Mode

Michael Kimmitt

'In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea...Then Jerusalem, all Judea, and all the region around Jordan went out to him and were baptized by him in the Jordan confessing their sins.' Matt. lli. 1; 5,6.

Introduction

In a previous article I suggested that the Reformed - and Biblical position might be most conveniently considered in terms of: **The Meaning; The Mode and The Subjects of Baptism**. Having introduced the subject generally and dealt with the first point we now take up the controverted issue of the second.

Now it is a curious fact that the New Testament does not tell us how Baptism was administered! - after all everyone then knew by experience. But that very fact should alert us first to its relative unimportance and second to the consideration that the very fact that these matters may concern us deeply suggests that here we do not have the mind of Christ. He has set us free (Hallelujah!) - and we should be very cautious about any tendency to go back under a yoke of bondage.

After all, a rite which is to be administered to young and old; to those in health, sickness or extremis; in deserts, tropics, tundras, the arctic as well as temperate climates can hardly be tied to one only mode of administration!

Now in fact we might simply end our consideration there - and I suspect if we did so we would be close to the mind of the New Testament - were it not for the fact that not only Baptist churches but a growing number of Evangelical ones persist in asserting that only Total Immersion (dressed and usually backwards!) constitutes Baptism. To give an example, taken simply from the latest to hand:

"The administration of baptism... will be by total immersion in water. Matt 3:5,6.13,16 Jn 3:23 Acts 8:38,39 Rom 6:3,4"

Needless to say, the proof texts do not prove the point, but of

that more anon.

How then is the matter to be resolved? Clearly the answer is by reference to those same inspired scriptures, which are: *'profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work'*

Every text referring to Baptism in the New Testament has been examined and classified. This seems to point to quite clear conclusions - and I can only urge anyone bothered about this issue to pursue the same course. What follows is simply a summary.

Baptism and its cognates.

There are five words used in the New Testament and it may be helpful at this point simply to list them:

<i>Baptisma</i>	Baptism	22
<i>Baptismos</i>	Washing	4
<i>Baptistes</i>	Baptist*	14
<i>Baptizo</i>	Baptize	80
<i>Bapto</i>	Dip or Dye	3
* John the Baptist		

In the first column the Greek word has simply been transliterated; in the second is the translation and the final column gives the approximate number of uses of each word in the New Testament. It is not necessary to know Greek to be able to see that in most cases the words are simply taken over into our language. In the Providence of God the translators of the Latin version simply used the original words which have in turn been Anglicized in our versions.

The Baptisms of John

As we think about the work of John the Baptist perhaps almost unbidden an idea comes into our mind compounded from our imagination - and photographs of missionary activity of this dour figure standing in the Jordan, with perhaps a line of four or six figures in front of him waiting to be immersed. I suggest however that we need to ask ourselves two questions:

How many people did John baptize?

How long did his ministry last?

We may feel we do not know - but in fact we can at least make feasible estimates.

As we read the Gospel narratives what we find is that a great

religious revival is going on under John's ministry. Pharisees, Sadducees, Tax Collectors and Soldiers as well as the common people are all moved by the preaching - and come to be baptized. Now at the time the population of Jerusalem is estimated at between 200 000 and 250 000 people. In Agricultural societies perhaps only some 10% of the population is not engaged in husbandry - so when we read of *'Jerusalem, all Judea, and all the region round the Jordan'* we may suggest a population around 2 000 000! Allowing that the word 'all' does not mean every single person yet we may estimate the answer to our first question that around 1 000 000 people were baptized.

Now we know that John was six months older than Our Lord and from Lk iii. 23 that Jesus was about 30 when his ministry began; John then was about the same age: which was apparently the normal age for the start of a priest's ministry. After a period Christ comes to be baptized and then enters on His ministry. John's then decreases, he is imprisoned and finally executed. At the outside his work probably did not last beyond a year.

Now back to Jordan - and that line of figures. Let us suppose that instead of four or six a continual stream is presented. How long will it take to immerse each one? Perhaps a minute? After 50 minutes John wades to the bank, rests for a few and resumes his labours. After four hours he has immersed 200 - and is utterly exhausted. He resumes the next day - and after five days he has done a thousand. There are still 999 000 to go! How long does one suppose flesh and blood could sustain such an activity?

May we not at this point hear some other scriptures? *'Purge me with hyssop and I shall be clean: wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow'. 'Then will I sprinkle clean water upon you and ye shall be clean.'* What need for this ado about immersion? How appropriate that a Priest of the Levitical order should use those sprinklings and washings of Old Testament usage which all point forward to the *'taking away of the the sins of the world.'*

Mathematics is a marvellous science; the one exact science we have. We apply it to the data across two millennia - and it demonstrates incontrovertibly that whatever the gospel writers meant when they spoke of John's Baptism it cannot mean immersion. Nor is there any reason why it should. If a small piece of bread and a sip of wine may represent the Lord's Supper why may not a sprinkling of water represent our cleansing from sin in Baptism?

Objections

Although this seems quite clear it maybe that certain objections are felt to this interpretation. The writer can think of four and it may be helpful simply to consider them.

1. John is said to baptize: '*in the Jordan river*'; does this not imply immersion? Not necessarily. It could be by immersion but an old picture of baptism shows a person standing in the water and the administrator pouring water on his head from a container. This would be equally consistent with the phrase: '*in the river*'.

2. In the phrase: '*I indeed have baptized you with water, but He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit*' the Greek word *en* should be translated *in* instead of *with*. This is in fact offered as an alternative in the margin of the RV and in the text of the ASV where *with* appears in the margin. Now this is very interesting, because it comes to the heart of the discussion. What really is at issue in the argument is not the amount of water - but how it is applied. Is the water poured or sprinkled on the person - which is consistent with the translation *with* or is the person immersed in the water - which is consistent with the translation *in*?

Now Greek prepositions are tricky, even for the expert. A glance at the Englishman's Greek Concordance shows that the normal translation is *in* but *with* occurs as do *among*; *at*; *by*; *on*; *unto* etc. A good example of the use of *with* is in I Cor iv. 21. where Paul uses the phrase *en rabdo* which is translated '*with a rod*' and where *in* would be quite inappropriate. To translate then *en udati* as *with water* seems quite in keeping. The correctness of this translation is strengthened by the fact that in the parallel phrase in Luke's gospel the Greek *en* is omitted. This then requires the dative *with*. A further consideration is that the translation; '*in the Holy Spirit*' seems quite out of keeping with what actually happens. We are not immersed in Him! He is poured out on us. For these three reasons it seems appropriate to reject the translation *in* and use *with* as in our common translation.

3. But surely says someone all this is beside the point: whatever your arguments we have an actual example in the case of Our Lord. His Baptism was by immersion. Well, taken on its own, it may have been. There is nothing in the narrative to rule it out - but neither is there anything there to imply it must have been. Although Our Lord's Baptism is mentioned in all four gospels only two have a direct account. In Matthew we read: '*And Jesus, when He had been baptized, came up immediately from the water;*' and in Mark:

'coming up out of the water'. Once again we are faced with the trickiness of Greek prepositions. In Matthew the word used is *apo*. This means *from* or *away from* - not *out of* as the AV translates. In Mark the word is: *ek* which means *out of* or *from*. Putting both accounts together all we apparently are being told is that Our Lord came from the water. If he and John the Baptist had stepped into the Jordan and John had scooped up water and poured it on Our Lord's head and then they had both come away from the water all the facts in the Biblical narrative would be covered. In the light of our previous discussion immersion seems unlikely.

4. One further objection needs to be considered. Does not the fact that John baptised in Jordan - and later *'in Aenon near Salim, because there was much water there'* point to immersion as the mode? Well, no it does not! Judea was a relatively barren area compared with Galilee. Doubtless the towns and villages had adequate but limited water supplies - enough for themselves and passing travellers except in times of drought: 1 Kng. xvii; but quite inadequate for the massive number of travellers who came as a result of John's preaching. Food could be carried - but apart from the baptismal needs, water in bulk was required for travellers and animals. In fact the reference to *'much water'* in the Greek is: *udata polla* which Thayer translates as *'many springs or fountains'*. Again the derivation of the name Aenon is given by Strong as *'place of springs'*. Now it is perfectly feasible to water both man and beast in a place of springs; and to baptise a multitude by pouring or sprinkling. It would be singularly difficult to immerse even one person in those springs with which I am acquainted!

Interestingly the account in John iii. adds an additional datum of information - for we read in verse 25: *'Then there arose a dispute between some of John's disciples and the Jews about purification'*. Clearly this is linked with the references to Baptism - four in five verses. But how were Jewish purifications carried out? By 'sprinkling': Lev. xiv. 6,7; Num viii. 7 and xix. 11-13. So far then from supporting the Immersionists position a careful examination of John iii. points in precisely the opposite direction.

Conclusion.

We have examined the circumstances surrounding John's Baptizing and have ascertained that it is precisely what might have been expected from a Priest carrying out purifications under the Old Dispensation. This fits in with the very large numbers who came - and nothing in the possible objections is inconsistent with the

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that in the hundred years prior to 1171 the English had been overrun by the Normans and their confiscated lands handed over for the most part to the Norman barons; also that Henry (of Norman French extraction) ruled over territory in France considerably larger than England.

Much more could be said - of how English Christians were persecuted and burnt for their faith after Henry IV passed the Act "De heretico comburendo" in 1401, but I would remind Mr McAuley that for the last 150 years devoted Protestant missionaries have been carrying the Gospel to the Roman Catholics of Southern Ireland and I have before me the testimony of a grateful former Roman Catholic priest to the help he has received.

As you will know - after 1401 the Lollards were virtually wiped out as had been the Albigenses, and the Bohemians. William Sawtre, one time Rector of Lynn, was the first of many to be burnt by Royal command. The most prominent was Lord Cobham, Sir John Oldcastle, who was hung alive in chains and roasted, over a slow fire, to death (1418). By 1450 Lollardism had been almost completely extinguished.

I do not think any of our Irish friends were burnt alive for their faith - except perhaps when numerous Protestants were herded

into churches and burnt by Roman Catholic fanatics.'

REPLY FROM MR JON. McAULEY:

I apologise if my comments offended any of my English brethren. I did not in any way make the comments with an intention to offend English Christians, although I would be surprised if an Irish interpretation of history was accepted in England. I appreciate the fact that many other nations left their mark on the history of Ireland. I would suggest however, that English incursions had more effect on the Island's history than any other nation. I agree there may have been a number of reasons for the invasion by Henry II but I would again assert that the real reason for the invasion was the desire of Henry to extend the authority of Pope Adrian IV and to bring Ireland under English domination. I have read of and have great admiration for the Christians of the land of England who gave up their lives for the cause of Christ the King; I hope I have made no comment that suggests otherwise. These martyrs were also, I would suggest, done to death by the same Roman Catholic rulers as the martyrs in Ireland.

Finally, in response to the last few comments, I agree that it is only the "Preaching of the Gospel" that brings any real hope to any nation or people.

REFORMED VIEW OF BAPTISM *(Continued from page 17)*

interpretation that these Baptisms were carried out by pouring and/or sprinkling. Everything cries out that they could not have been carried out by immersion. God willing we will continue the consideration of what we can learn of the mode of Baptism in the rest of the New Testament in subsequent articles.