

Do Baptism and the Lord's Supper Have Any Place in the Present Dispensation of the Grace of God?

~Other Speakers G-L: Harry Ironside:

IT is most distressing to one who has revelled in the grace of God for years, but has recognized on the other hand that grace produces loving obedience in the heart of the believer, to read the puerile and childish diatribes of the ultra-dispensationalists, as they inveigh against the Christian ordinances as though observance of these in some way contravened the liberty of Grace. Insisting that Paul had a new ministry revealed to him after Acts 28, and that this ministry is given only in the so-called prison epistles, they make a great deal of the fact that in these epistles we do not have any distinct instruction as to the baptizing of believers, or the observance of the Lord's Supper.

We have already seen, I trust clearly, that Paul himself disavows any new revelation having been given him after his imprisonment, but insists that the mystery was that very message which he had already made known to all nations for the obedience of faith. It was but part of that whole counsel of God which he had declared to the Ephesians long before his arrest. These brethren, by a process of sophistical reasoning, try to prove that baptism belonged only to an earlier dispensation and was in some sense meritorious, as though it had in itself saving virtue, but that since the dispensation of grace has been fully revealed, there is no place for baptism, because of changed conditions for salvation. To state this argument is but to expose its fallacy.

Let one point be absolutely clear: No one was ever saved in any dispensation on any other ground than the finished work of Christ. In all the ages before the cross, God justified men by faith; in all the years since, men have been justified in exactly the same way. Adam believed God and was clothed with coats of skin, a picture of one becoming the righteousness of God in Christ. Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him for righteousness. Nevertheless, afterwards he was circumcised; but that circumcision, the apostle tells us, was simply a seal of the righteousness he had by faith. And throughout all the Old Testament dispensation, however legalistic Jews may have observed the ordinance of circumcision and thought of it as having in itself some saving virtue, it still remained in God's sight, as in the beginning, only a seal, where there was genuine faith, of that righteousness which He imputed. The difficulty with many who reason as these Bullingerites do, is that they cannot seem to understand the difference between the loving loyal obedience of a devoted heart, and a legal obedience which is offered to God as though it were in itself meritorious. No one was ever saved through the sacrifices offered under law, for it is not possible that the blood of bulls and of goats should take away sin. Nevertheless, wherever there was real faith in Israel, the sacrifices were offered because of the instruction given in the Word of God, and in these sacrifices the work of Christ was pictured continually.

When John the Baptist came in the way of righteousness, he called on men to confess their sinfulness and their just desert of death by baptism, and so we read that the publicans and sinners "justified God, being baptized with the baptism of John." There was no merit in the baptism. It was the divinely appointed way of acknowledging their sinfulness and need of a Saviour. Therefore it is called a baptism "unto repentance for the remission of sins." They were like men in debt, giving their notes to the divine creditor. A note does not pay a debt but it is an acknowledgment of indebtedness. Christ's baptism was simply His endorsement of all of these notes. When He said to John, who would have hindered Him from being baptized, "Suffer it to be so now, for thus it becometh us to fulfil all righteousness," it was as though He said, "In this way I pledge Myself to meet every righteous demand of the throne of God on behalf of these confessed sinners." And this is surely what He had in mind when, three years later, He exclaimed, "I have a baptism to be baptized with; and how am I straitened till it be accomplished!" (Luke 12: 50). On the cross He met the claims of righteousness and thus fulfilled the meaning of His baptism.

Christian baptism has its beginning in resurrection. It was the risen Christ about to be glorified who commissioned His apostles to go out, not simply to Jews, observe, nor yet to proclaim a second offer of the kingdom, as some say, but to carry the Gospel to men of all nations, baptizing those who professed to believe, in (or, unto) the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. This we see them literally doing throughout the early days of the Church, as recorded in the Book of Acts. Wherever the Gospel is preached, baptism is linked with it, not as part of the Gospel, for Paul distinctly says, "Christ sent me not to baptize, but to preach the Gospel," but as an outward expression of faith in the Gospel. It is evident in the Book of Acts that there is a somewhat different presentation of this, according as to whether the message is addressed to Jews in outward covenant relation with God or to Gentiles who are strangers to the covenants of promise. Paul calls these two aspects of the one Gospel, the Gospel of the circumcision and the Gospel of the uncircumcision. The Jew being already a member of a nation which, up to the cross, had been recognized as in covenant relationship with God, was called upon to be baptized to save himself from that untoward generation. That is, to step out, as it were, from the nation, no longer claiming national privilege, nor yet being exposed to national judgment. With the Gentile, it was otherwise. He was simply called upon to believe the Gospel, and believing it,

to confess his faith in baptism. And this abides to the end of the age as our Lord Himself clearly declared in the closing verses of Matthew 28. There has never been any change in the order.

It has been said that the baptism of the Holy Spirit superseded water baptism, but Scripture teaches the very contrary. Cornelius and his household were baptized with the Holy Spirit when they believed the Word spoken by Peter. But the apostle, turning to his Jewish brethren, immediately asks: "Who can forbid water that these should not be baptized which have received the Holy Ghost as well as we?" And they were at once baptized by authority of the Lord Jesus, which is what the expression "in the name of" involves. This was not a meritorious act. It was a blessed and precious privilege granted to this Gentile household upon the evidence of their faith in Christ.

It has been objected that the apostle Paul himself makes light of baptism and was really glad that he had not baptized many at Corinth. It is surely a most shifty kind of exegesis that would lead any one to make such a statement. In the record in Acts, where we read of Paul's ministry in Corinth, we are told that many of the Corinthians hearing, believed and were baptized. Paul did not himself do the baptizing, save in a few instances, but he certainly saw that it was done, and the Holy Spirit evidently quotes the record with approval. Why then did Paul thank God in First Corinthians 1, that he had baptized so few? The answer is perfectly plain. Because the Corinthians were making much of human leaders and he saw the tendency to glory in man. He knew that if there were many there who had been baptized by him, they would be likely, under the prevailing conditions, to pride themselves upon the fact that he, the apostle to the Gentiles, had been the one who baptized them. But far from making light of baptism, when he chides them for their sectarian spirit, he shows them that the only name worthy of exaltation is the name of the One by whose authority they had been baptized.

As to the various disputed scriptures in Romans 6: 3, 4; Colossians 2: 12; Ephesians 4: 5; and Galatians 3: 27, where baptism is mentioned without any definite indication as to whether it is water or Spirit, one thing at least is perfectly clear. Water baptism is necessarily implied, because Spirit baptism is but a figurative expression, and water baptism was the act upon which the figure was based. This comes out in the first mention of Spirit baptism. "I indeed," says John, "baptize you with water" (this then was the actual literal baptism), "but He shall baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire." It is not literal baptism in the Holy Spirit. It is not literal fire, but figurative. If this be but kept in mind, there would be no confusion. Baptism in water pictures both burial and resurrection. On this Paul bases his instruction in Romans 6 and Colossians 2:12. Thus water baptism marks people out as belonging to Christ by profession, and therefore is the basic thought in Galatians 3: 27, even though it is by the Spirit's baptism that people are actually united to Christ.

There has been much disputation regarding the passage in Ephesians 4, but without laying special stress on the importance of water baptism, it is very evident that the passage would have no meaning if water baptism, as well as that of the Spirit, were not in view. Let me try to make this plain. In the opening verses, the apostle calls upon the Ephesian believers, and of course all Christians, to walk worthy of the vocation wherewith they have been called, and he lays stress on the importance of endeavoring to keep the Spirit's unity in the bond of peace. Then he explains this unity as being sevenfold. In verse 4 he emphasizes three special things, one Body, one Spirit, and one hope. Now there can be no question that the Spirit is brought in here as forming the Body, and the Spirit forms the Body by what is called elsewhere the baptism of the Spirit. Then in verse 5 we have another trio, one Lord, one faith, one baptism. Here it seems to me clearly enough we have, not a duplication of what we have already had in verse 4, but something that is more outward. One Lord in whom we believe; one faith that we confess; and one baptism by which we express our allegiance to that Lord and that faith. In verse 6 we have God Himself as the Father of all, the Founder of this blessed unity.

Now without going into any disputation as to whether the term "one baptism," is to be confined to the baptism of the Spirit, or the baptism of water, it is certainly evident that it at least implies water. No man confesses his faith in Christ by the baptism of the Holy Spirit alone, for millions have been baptized by the Holy Spirit, and yet the world knows nothing of it. On the other hand, of course, many have faith in Christ who have never been baptized in water, but that does not alter the fact that, according to the Lord's own instructions, water baptism should follow confession of Christ. The Lord has never rescinded this order, and for men to attempt to do so is but to substitute human authority for divine.

The statement has been made that inasmuch as all carnal ordinances were abolished in the cross, this includes baptism and the Lord's Supper. However, to merely state this is to refute it, inasmuch as Christian baptism was not given until just before the Lord's ascension, and the Lord's Supper was given from heaven to the apostle Paul by special revelation, long after Christ's ascension (1 Cor. 11: 23, 24). To read into such a passage as Hebrews 6: 1, 2 any reference to Christian baptism, is ignorance so colossal that it does not even deserve an answer. The apostle there is definitely referring to Judaism in contrast with Christianity. The "doctrine of

baptisms" is the teaching of washings under law.

To the lover of the Lord Jesus Christ there can be nothing legal about baptism. It is simply the glad expression of a grateful heart recognizing its identity with Christ in death, burial, and resurrection. Many of us look back to the moment when we were thus baptized as one of the most precious experiences we have ever known.

All ultra-dispensationalists do not reject the Lord's Supper, but those who are rigidly tied up to the prison epistles and have practically no other Bible, set this blessed ordinance aside in the same curt way that they dismiss water baptism. We are told that in a spiritual dispensation there is no place for outward observances. And yet, singularly enough, these brethren meet together for worship and prayer, and that very frequently upon the first day of the week, though they are almost a unit in denying that this is the Lord's Day. They insist, though the Holy Ghost has Himself changed the term; that the Lord's Day is identical with the Day of the Lord; and so the observance of the first day of the week is with them simply gross legality. Think of parting with all the holy privileges of the Lord's Day on the plea that it is a mark of higher spirituality to make this a common day like any other. I know that some quote as authority for this, Paul's words in Romans 14: 5: "One man esteemeth one day above another: another esteemeth every day alike. Let every man be fully persuaded in his own mind." But an examination of the entire passage in which this verse is found, will make it clear that the apostle is here referring to Jewish distinctions between clean and unclean meats, and holy and common days, and he would have Gentile believers respect even the legal feeling of their Jewish brethren in these matters. The enlightened Christian of course in a very real sense esteems every day alike, that is, every day is devoted to the glory of God, but this does not mean that he fails to differentiate between days on which he participates in the ordinary activities of the world, and the first day of the week, which is largely set aside for spiritual exercises. We have known men to glory in their liberty, as they called it, who could take part in Christian service on Lord's Day morning and spend the afternoon golfing, or in some other more worldly way, and this on pretence of a higher spirituality than that of those who are supposed to be legal, because they use the hours of the entire day either for their own spiritual upbuilding or for the blessing of others.

It is strange that many, who insist that there are no ordinances or commandments connected with the dispensation of pure grace, should take up collections in their services and urge people to give as unto the Lord to support their ministry. logically, they should tell people that giving is legal and belongs to the old dispensation, but has no place in the present age, when we simply receive but give nothing in return! The passage already referred to in 1 Corinthians 11 makes it clear that though the apostle Paul did not receive his instruction concerning the observance of the Lord's Supper from the twelve, it was given to him by special revelation from heaven, thus indicating what an important place it has in this age. Surely one is guilty of gross perversion of Scripture who dares to teach that since Paul's imprisonment, the Lord's Supper should no longer be observed, when the Holy Ghost has said, "As often as ye eat this bread and drink this cup, ye do show the Lord's death till He come."

The most sacred hours that many of us have ever known have been those spent with fellow-believers seated at the table of the Lord, recognizing in the broken bread and poured-out wine, the memorials of our Saviour's death, and thus in a new way entering into and appropriating the reality of which the symbols speak. We may be thought legal, because we refuse to surrender such precious privileges at the behest of some of our self-styled expositors of pure grace, but we remember "that the grace of God salvation bringing for all men, hath appeared, teaching us that denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously and godly in this present world, looking for that blessed hope and the appearing of the glory of our great God and Saviour Jesus Christ," and until He come, by His grace, to remember Him in the way of His own appointment.