

Christian Baptism

Benjamin B. Warfield (1851-1921)

NO rite or ceremony enters into the essence of Christianity. There were some in Paul's day who thought that the blessings of salvation could be enjoyed only by those who performed certain ritual acts. But Paul defended with the utmost vigor the gospel of salvation by faith alone. He made it perfectly clear that he meant to exclude not merely moral but also religious acts. He took Abraham for his example. Abraham, he said, was justified by faith, by faith apart from all works all works of the moral law, of course, but also all works of religious ceremonial. God, of set purpose, gave Abraham the rite of circumcision not before but after his justification, for the precise purpose of making it plain that justification is by faith alone and is not secured or conditioned by the performance of any rite. Here is Paul's argument in one of its briefest expressions, Rom. iv. 9-12: "For we say, To Abraham his faith was reckoned for righteousness. How then was it reckoned? when he was in circumcision, or in uncircumcision? Not in circumcision, but in uncircumcision: and he received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had while he was in uncircumcision: that he might be the father of all them that believe, though they be in uncircumcision, that righteousness might be reckoned unto them; and the father of circumcision to them who not only are of the circumcision, but who also walk in the steps of that faith of our father Abraham which he had in uncircumcision." According to this all those that believe are Abraham's seed and heirs according to the promise given to him, whether they are circumcised or not. But not all those who are circumcised are his children and heirs, but only those among them that believe. In other words, it is not circumcision but faith which counts. For, as Paul wrote elsewhere, Gal. iii. 7, 9, with crisp exclusiveness, "they that are of faith, the same are sons of Abraham," and are blessed with him.

From the fact that no rite or ceremony enters into the essence of Christianity, however, it does not follow that all rites and ceremonies may be safely neglected by the Christian, if not positively despised. Paul who set circumcision summarily aside as in no sense a condition or procuring cause of salvation, did not treat it as of no value. In the wider sweep of this same argument he found occasion to ask the question, "What is the profit of circumcision?" Rom. iii. 1. The answer was "Much every way." Precisely what the nature of this great and varied profit was Paul did not here state. But this is sufficiently intimated in the passage already considered. According to this passage circumcision had no function whatever in the procuring or reception of salvation, whether as a means of securing it, or as a condition of its gift, or as a channel of its bestowment. It did not precede salvation as, in one way or another, obtaining it or facilitating its reception; it followed upon it, as

presupposing its existence already. Its actual function is declared in the two words, "sign" and "seal": "And he received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had while he was in uncircumcision." While yet uncircumcised, Abraham believed. Through this faith he received a righteousness bestowed on him by the God who "justifieth the ungodly." God in his grace gave him circumcision as a sign and a seal of this righteousness. The value of circumcision consisted therefore just in this: that it marked Abraham out, by a visible sign, as one who had received this righteousness from God and was henceforth to be the Lord's, and it sealed that righteousness to him under a covenant promise.

Baptism is the form that the circumcision which God gave Abraham in the old covenant takes in the new. The apostle therefore called it "the circumcision of Christ," Col. ii. 11, the circumcision, that is, which we have received in this new dispensation in which Christ is now Lord and Master. In the passage from the old covenant to the new the form of the rite was changed, not its substance. It remains a "sign" which God has given his people, marking them out as his, and a "seal" binding them indissolubly to him and pledging them his unbroken favor. Baptism, as circumcision, is a gift of God to his people, not of his people to God. Abraham did not bring circumcision to God; he "received" it from God. God gave it to him as a "sign" and a "seal," not to others but to himself. It is inadequate, therefore, to speak of baptism as "the badge of a Christian man's profession." By receiving it, we do make claim to be members of Christ, and our reception of it does mark us out to the observation of our fellowmen as his followers. But this is only an incidental effect. The witness of baptism is not to others but to ourselves; and it is not by us but by God that the witness is borne. We have believed in the Lord Jesus Christ and God gives us this sign as a perpetual witness that this faith is acceptable to him, and as a seal, an abiding pledge, that he will always treat it as such. He who has been baptized bears in himself God's testimony and engagement to his salvation.

It is thus that Paul could write of God's people being buried and raised again with Christ in baptism. Col. ii. 12; Rom. vi. 4. This does not mean that they acquire an interest in Christ by subjecting themselves to baptism. It means that by receiving baptism they indicate that they are in Christ, participants in the benefits of his death and resurrection; and that these benefits are now sealed to them under the sanction of a covenant promise. We are now like documents to which the seals have been attached. We may think that a signet ring with the name of the Lord upon it has been impressed upon us to authenticate us as his forever. What has happened to us is that we are called by the "honorable name" (James ii. 7). The meaning of that is that we have been marked as the peculiar possession of our Lord, over whom he claims ownership, and to the protection and guidance of whom he pledges himself.

There is nothing in the whole history of the people of God which they value more highly, on which they more deeply felicitate themselves, on which they more securely depend, than that they are called by the name of the Lord. It was to this fact that they appealed when in their affliction they turned to the Hope of Israel, the Savior thereof in time of trouble: "Thou, o Jehovah, art in the midst of us, and we are called by thy name: leave us not" (Jer. xiv. 9). It was in this that their jubilation reached its height: "I am called by thy name, o Jehovah, God of hosts" (Jer. xv. 16). When our Lord commanded his disciples to baptize those whom in their world-wide mission they should draw to Christ "into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit," precisely what he bade them do was to call them by the name of the Triune God, that they might be marked out as his and sealed to him as an eternal possession.

Naturally, therefore, this sign and seal belongs only to those who are the Lord's. Or, to put it rather in the positive form. this sign and seal belongs to all those who are the Lord's. There are no distinctions of race or station, sex or age; there is but one prerequisite -- that we are the Lord's. What it means is just this and nothing else: that we are the Lord's. What it pledges is just this and nothing else: that the Lord will keep us as his own. We need not raise the question, then, whether infants are to be baptized. Of course they are, if infants, too, may be the Lord's. Naturally, as with adults, it is only the infants who are the Lord's who are to be baptized; but equally naturally as with adults, all infants that are the Lord's are to be baptized. Being the Lord's they have a right to the sign that they are the Lord's and to the pledge of the Lord's holy keeping. Circumcision, which held the place in the old covenant that baptism holds in the new, was to be given to all infants born within the covenant. Baptism must follow the same rule. This and this only can determine its conference: Is the recipient a child of the covenant, with a right therefore to the sign and seal of the covenant? We cannot withhold the sign and seal of the covenant from those who are of the covenant.

The baptism of infants, no doubt, presupposes that salvation is altogether of the Lord. No infant can be the Lord's unless it is the Lord who makes him such. If salvation waits on anything we can do, no infant can be saved; for there is nothing that an infant can do. In that case no infant can have a right to the sign and seal of salvation. But infants in this do not differ in any way from adults; of all alike it is true that it is only "of God" that they are in Christ Jesus. The purpose of Paul in arguing out the doctrine of signs and seals, was to show once for all from the typical case of Abraham that salvation is always a pure gratuity from God, and signs and seals do not precede it as its procuring cause or condition, but follow it as God's witness to its existence and promise to sustain it. Every time we baptize an infant we bear witness that salvation is from God, that we cannot do any good thing to secure it, that we receive it from his hands as a sheer gift of his grace, and that we all enter

the Kingdom of heaven therefore as little children, who do not do, but are done for.

Surely it is only a curious question how exactly baptism is to be administered. Our concern is in its significance, not in the mode of its performance. The New Testament leaves us in no doubt as to its meaning. But we may search the New Testament in vain if we are seeking minute instructions how we are to perform it. It is, no doubt, not merely a sign and a seal, but also a symbol, and the symbolism it embodies cannot be a matter of indifference to us. It is a washing of the body with water to symbolize the absolute cleansing of the soul in the blood of Jesus Christ. We must not lose this symbolism. But it does not follow that in order to preserve it we must enact a complete bath in the manner in which we administer the rite. Complete cleansing may be symbolized by the washing of the feet only, John xiii. 10, or of the hands only, Mark vii. 2. It was God himself who declared, "I will sprinkle clean water upon you and ye shall be clean" (Ezek. xxxvi. 25). It is not the amount of water which we employ but the purpose for which we employ it that is of moment. In Jesus Christ we are washed clean of all our sins. He has given us a sign that our sins are washed away and a pledge that we shall be clean in him. Any application of water which will symbolize this cleansing will serve as such a sign and seal.

It is important that we should not narrow the symbolism of baptism. Baptism does not symbolize any section or part of salvation, but the whole of salvation. Baptism and the Lord's Supper, for instance, do not divide the field between them, each symbolizing one element in the broad process of salvation or one exercise in the complex enjoyment of salvation. They are two ways of symbolizing salvation as a whole. Salvation is cleansing, salvation is ransoming. Baptism represents it from the one point of view, the Lord's Supper from the other. Whichever sign and seal we are thinking of, it marks us out as sharers in all the benefits of Christ's redemption and pledges them to us. Baptism therefore symbolizes not merely the cleansing of our sins but our consequent walk in new obedience. This, let us never forget, is not only symbolized for us but sealed to us, for baptism is given to us by God as an engagement on his part to bring us safely through to the end. In receiving it, we receive upon our persons the seal of his covenant promise.

It is not only our duty, then, but our high privilege, to receive baptism. We not only obey God's command in receiving it, but lay hold of his covenant promise. Having his mark upon us, and resting upon his pledge, we may go forward in joy and sure expectation of his gracious keeping in this life and his acceptance of us into his glory hereafter. Under this encouragement we are daily and hourly and momentarily to work out the salvation thus sealed to us, in the blessed knowledge that it is God who, in fulfilment of his pledge, is working in us both the willing and the doing. Thus we shall, as our fathers expressed it, "improve our baptism." We improve it "by serious and thankful consideration of the nature of it, and of the ends for which Christ instituted it, the privileges and benefits conferred and sealed thereby, and our solemn vow made therein: by being humbled for our sinful defilement, our falling short of, and walking contrary to, the grace of baptism and our engagements; by growing up to assurance of pardon of sin, and of all other blessings sealed to us in

that sacrament; by drawing strength from the death and resurrection of Christ, into whom we are baptized, for the mortifying of sin, and quickening of grace; and by endeavoring to live by faith, to have our conversation in holiness and righteousness, as those that have therein given up their names to Christ, and to walk in brotherly love, as being baptized by the same Spirit into one body." Surely, he who does these things shall never stumble, but shall be fully girded for entrance into that eternal Kingdom for which we are marked and sealed in our baptism.

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