



This devotion is an excerpt from Bishop J.C. Ryle's work entitled, **Knots Untied**. It is the first in a series of commentary on Baptism.

THERE is perhaps no subject in Christianity about which such difference of opinion exists as the sacrament of baptism. The very name recalls to one's mind an endless list of strifes, disputes, heart-burnings, controversies, and divisions.

It is a subject, moreover, on which even eminent Christians have long been greatly divided. Praying, Bible-reading, holy men, who can agree on all other points, find themselves hopelessly divided about baptism. The fall of man has affected the understanding as well as the will. Fallen indeed must human nature be, when millions who agree about sin, and Christ, and grace, are as the poles asunder about baptism.

I propose in the following pages to offer a few remarks on this disputed subject. I am not vain enough to suppose that I can throw any light on a controversy which so many great and good men have handled in vain. But I know that every additional witness is useful in a disputed case. I wish to strengthen the hands of those I agree with, and to show them that we have no reason to be ashamed of our opinions. I wish to suggest a few things for the consideration of those I do not agree with, and to show them that the Scriptural argument in this matter is not, as some suppose, all on one side.

There are four points which I propose to examine in considering the subject:

- I. What baptism is,—its *nature*.
- II. In what manner baptism should be administered,—its *mode*.

III. Who ought to be baptized,—its *subjects*.

IV. What place baptism ought to occupy in religion,—its *true position*.

If I can supply a satisfactory answer to these four questions, I feel that I shall have contributed something to the clearing of many minds.

Let us consider first the *nature of baptism,—what is it?*

- (1) Baptism is an ordinance appointed by our Lord Jesus Christ, for the continual admission of fresh members into His visible Church. In the army every new soldier is formally added to the muster-roll of his regiment. In a school every new scholar is formally entered on the books of the school. And every Christian begins his Church-membership by being baptized.¹
- (2) Baptism is an ordinance of great simplicity. The outward part or sign is water, administered in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost, or in the name of Christ. The inward part, or thing signified, is that washing in the blood of Christ, and inward cleansing of the heart by the Holy Ghost, without which no one can be saved. The Twenty-seventh Article of the Church of England says rightly,—“Baptism is not only a sign of profession and mark of difference, whereby Christian men are discerned from others that be not christened, but it is also *a sign* of regeneration or new birth.”
- (3) Baptism is an ordinance on which we may confidently expect the highest blessings, when it is rightly used. It is unreasonable to suppose that the Lord Jesus, the Great Head of the Church, would solemnly appoint an ordinance which was to be as useless to the soul as a mere human enrolment or an act of civil registration. The sacrament we are considering is not a mere man-made appointment, but an institution appointed by the King of kings. When faith and prayer accompany baptism, and a diligent use of Scriptural means follows it, we are justified in looking for much spiritual blessing. Without faith and prayer baptism becomes a mere form.
- (4) Baptism is an ordinance which is expressly named in the New Testament about eighty times. Almost the last words of our Lord Jesus Christ were a command to baptize: “Go ye, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.” (Matt. xxviii. 19.) We find Peter saying on the day of Pentecost,—“Repent, and be baptized every one of you;”—and asking in the house of Cornelius,—“Can any man forbid water, that these should not be baptized?” (Acts ii. 38; x. 47.) We find St. Paul was not only baptized himself, but baptized disciples wherever he went. To say, as some do, in the face of these texts, that baptism is an institution of no importance, is to pour contempt on the Bible. To say, as others do, that baptism is only a thing of the heart,² and not an outward ordinance at all, is to say that which seems flatly contradictory to the Bible.
- (5) Baptism is an ordinance which, according to Scripture, a man may receive, and yet get no good from it. Can any one doubt that Judas Iscariot, Simon Magus, Ananias and Sapphira, Demas, Hymenaeus, Philetus, and Nicolas, were all baptized people? Yet what benefit did they receive from baptism? Clearly, for anything that we can see, none at all! Their hearts were “not right in the sight of God.” (Acts viii. 21.) They remained “dead in trespasses and sins,” and were “dead while they lived.” (Ephes. ii. 1; 1 Tim. v. 6.)

- (6) Baptism is an ordinance which in Apostolic times went together with the first beginnings of a man's religion. In the very day that many of the early Christians repented and believed, in that very day they were baptized. Baptism was the expression of their new-born faith, and the starting-point in their Christianity. No wonder that in such cases it was regarded as the vehicle of all spiritual blessings. The Scriptural expressions, "buried with Christ in baptism"—"putting on Christ in baptism"—"baptism doth also save us"—would be full of deep meaning to such persons. (Rom. vi. 4; Col. ii. 12; Gal. iii. 27; 1 Pet. iii. 21.) They would exactly tally with their experience. But to apply such expressions indiscriminately to the baptism of infants in our own day is, in my judgment, unreasonable and unfair. It is an application of Scripture which, I believe, was never intended.
- (7) Baptism is an ordinance which a man may never receive, and yet be a true Christian and be saved. The case of the penitent thief is sufficient to prove this. Here was a man who repented, believed, was converted, and gave evidence of true grace, if any one ever did. We read of no one else to whom such marvellous words were addressed as the famous sentence, "Today shalt thou be with Me in paradise." (Luke xxiii. 42..) And yet there is not the slightest proof that this man was ever baptized at all! Without baptism and the Lord's Supper he received the highest spiritual blessings while he lived, and was with Christ in paradise when he died! To assert, in the face of such a case, that baptism is *absolutely necessary* to salvation is something monstrous. To say that baptism is the *only* means of regeneration, and that all who die unbaptized are lost for ever, is to say that which cannot be proved by Scripture, and is revolting to common sense.

I leave this part of my subject here. I commend the seven propositions which I have laid down to the serious attention of all who wish to obtain clear views about baptism. In considering the two sacraments of the Christian religion, I hold it to be of primary importance to put away from us the vagueness and mysteriousness with which too many surround them. Above all, let us be careful that we believe neither more nor less about them than we can prove by plain texts of Scripture.

There is a baptism which is absolutely necessary to salvation, beyond all question. There is a baptism without which no one, whether old or young, has ever gone to heaven. But what baptism is this? It is not the baptism of *water*, but the inward baptism which the Holy Ghost gives to the *heart*. It is not a baptism which any man can offer, whether ordained or unordained. It is the baptism which it is the special privilege of the Lord Jesus Christ to give to all His mystical members. It is not a baptism which man's eye can see, but an invisible operation on the inward nature. "Baptism," says St. Peter, "saves us." But what baptism does he tell us he means? Not the washing of water, "not the putting away the filth of the flesh." (1 Peter iii. 21.) "By one spirit are we all baptized into one body." (1 Cor. xii. 13.) It is the peculiar prerogative of the Lord Jesus to give this inward and spiritual baptism. "He it is," said John the Baptist, "which baptizeth with the Holy Ghost." (John i. 33.)

Let us take heed that we know something of this saving baptism, the inward baptism of the Holy Ghost. Without this it signifies little what we think about the baptism of water. No man, whether High Churchman or Low Churchman, Baptist or Episcopalian, no man was ever yet saved without the baptism of the Holy Ghost. It is a weighty and true saying of the Regius Professor of Divinity at Cambridge, in the reign of Edward VI.,—"By the baptism of water we are received into the outward Church of God: by the baptism of the Spirit into the inward." (*Bucer*, on John i. 33.)