



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

ARTICLE XVII, Of Baptism, (the Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion)

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, whereby, as by an instrument, they that receive Baptism rightly are grafted into the Church; the promises of the forgiveness of sin, and of our adoption to be the sons of God by the Holy Ghost, are visibly signed and sealed; Faith is confirmed, and Grace increased by virtue of prayer unto God. The Baptism of young Children is in any wise to be retained in the Church, as most agreeable with the institution of Christ.

Part III. Let us now consider, in the last place, what position baptism ought to hold in our religion.

This is a point of great importance. In matters of opinion man is ever liable to go into extremes. In nothing does this tendency appear so strongly as in the matter of religion. In no part of religion is man in so much danger of erring, either on the right hand or the left, as about the sacraments. In order to arrive at a settled judgment about baptism, we must beware both of the error of defect, and of the error of excess.

We must beware, for one thing, of *despising baptism*. This is the error of defect. Many in the present day seem to regard it with perfect indifference. They pass it by, and give it no place or position in their religion. Because, in many cases, it seems to confer no benefit, they appear to jump to the conclusion that it can confer none. They care nothing if baptism is never named in the sermon. They dislike to have it publicly administered in the congregation. In short, they seem to regard the whole subject of baptism as a

troublesome question, which they are determined to let alone. They are neither satisfied with it, nor without it.

Now, I only ask such persons to consider gravely, whether their attitude of mind is justified by Scripture. Let them remember our Lord's distinct and precise command to "baptize," when He left His disciples alone in the world. Let them remember the invariable practice of the Apostles, wherever they went preaching the Gospel. Let them mark the language used about baptism in several places in the Epistles. Now, is it likely,—is it probable,—is it agreeable to reason and common sense,—that baptism can be safely regarded as a dropped subject, and quietly laid on the shelf? Surely, I think these questions can only receive one answer.

It is simply unreasonable to suppose that the Great Head of the Church would burden His people in all ages with an empty, powerless, unprofitable institution. It is ridiculous to suppose His Apostles would speak as they do about baptism, if, in no case, and under no circumstances, could it be of any use or help to man's soul. Let these things be calmly weighed. Let us take heed, lest in fleeing from blind superstition, we are found equally blind in another way, and pour contempt on an appointment of Christ.

We must beware, for another thing, of *making an idol of baptism*. This is the error of excess. Many in the present day exalt baptism to a position which nothing in Scripture can possibly justify. If they hold infant baptism, they will tell you that the grace of the Holy Ghost invariably accompanies the administration of the ordinance,—that in every case, a seed of Divine life is implanted in the heart, to which all subsequent religious movement must be traced,—and that all baptized children are, as a matter of course, born again, and made partakers of the Holy Ghost!—If they do not hold infant baptism, they will tell you that to go down into the water with a profession of faith and repentance is the very turning-point in a man's religion,—that until we have gone down into the water we are nothing,—and that when we have gone down into the water, we have taken the first step toward heaven! It is notorious that many High Churchmen and Baptists hold these opinions, though not all. And I say that although they may not mean it, they are practically making an idol of baptism.

I ask all persons who hold these exceedingly high and lofty views of baptism, to consider seriously what warrant they have in the Bible for their opinions. To quote texts in which the greatest privileges and blessings are connected with baptism, is not enough. What we want are plain texts which show that these blessings and privileges are *always and invariably conferred*. The question to be settled is not whether a child may be born again and receive grace in baptism, but whether *all* children are born again, and receive grace when they are baptized.—The question is not whether an adult may "put on Christ" when he goes down into the water, but whether *all* do as a matter of course. Surely these things demand grave and calm consideration!—It is positively wearisome to read the sweeping and illogical assertions which are often made upon this subject. To tell us, for example, that our Lord's famous words to Nicodemus (John iii. 5), teach anything more than the *general necessity* of being "born of water and the spirit," is an insult to common sense. Whether *all* persons baptized are "born of water and the Spirit" is another question altogether, and one which the text never touches at all. To assert that it is taught in the text, is just as illogical as the common assertion of the Baptist, when he tells you that because Jesus said, "He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved,"—therefore nobody ought to be baptized until he believes!

The right position of baptism can only be decided by a careful observation of the language of Scripture about it. Let a man read the New Testament honestly and impartially for himself. Let him come to the reading of it with an unprejudiced, fair, and unbiased mind. Let him not bring with him pre-conceived ideas, and a blind reverence for the opinion of any uninspired writing, of any man, or of any set of men. Let him simply ask the question,—“What does Scripture teach about baptism, and its place in Christian theology?”—and I have little doubt as to the conclusion he will come to. He will neither trample baptism under his feet, nor exalt it over his head.

(a) He will find that baptism is frequently mentioned, and yet not so frequently as to lead us to think that it is the very first, chief, and foremost thing in Christianity. In fourteen out of twenty-one Epistles, baptism is not even named. In five out of the remaining seven, it is only mentioned once. In one of the remaining two, it is only mentioned twice. In the two pastoral Epistles to Timothy it is not mentioned at all. There is, in short, only one Epistle, viz., the first to the Corinthians, in which baptism is even named on more than two occasions. And, singularly enough, this is the very Epistle in which St. Paul says, “I thank God that I baptized none of you,”—and “Christ sent me not to baptize, but to preach the Gospel.” (1 Cor. i. 14, 17.)

(b) He will find that baptism is spoken of with deep reverence, and in close connection with the highest privileges and blessings. Baptized people are said to be “buried with Christ,”—to have “put on Christ,”—to have “risen again,”—and even (by straining a doubtful text) to have the “washing of regeneration.” But he will also find that Judas Iscariot, Ananias and Sapphira, Simon Magus, and others, were baptized, and yet gave no evidence of having been born again. He will also see that in the first Epistle of John, people “born of God” are said to have certain marks and characteristics which myriads of baptized persons never possess at any period of their lives. (1 John ii. 29; iii. 9; v. 1, 4, 18.) And not least, he will find St. Peter declaring that the baptism which saves is “not the putting away the filth of the flesh,” the mere washing of the body, but the “answer of a good conscience.” (1 Peter iii. 21.)

(c) Finally, he will discover that while baptism is frequently spoken of in the New Testament, there are other subjects which are spoken of much more frequently. Faith, hope, charity, God’s grace, Christ’s offices, the work of the Holy Ghost, redemption, justification, the nature of Christian holiness,—all these are points about which he will find far more than about baptism. Above all, he will find, if he marks the language of Scripture about the Old Testament sacrament of circumcision, that the value of God’s ordinances depends entirely on the spirit in which they are received, and the heart of the receiver. “In Jesus Christ neither circumcision availeth anything, nor uncircumcision; but faith which worketh by love,—but a new creature.” (Gal. v. 6; vi. 15.) “He is not a Jew which is one outwardly; neither is that circumcision which is out-ward in the flesh: but he is a Jew which is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the spirit, and not in the letter; whose praise is not of men, but of God.” (Rom. ii. 28, 29.)

It only remains for me now to say a few words by way of practical conclusion to the whole paper. The nature, manner, subjects, and position of baptism have been severally considered. Let me now show the reader the special lessons to which I think attention ought to be directed.

(1) For one thing, I wish to urge on all who study the much-disputed subject of baptism, the importance of aiming at *simple* views of this sacrament. The dim, hazy, swelling

words, which are often used by writers about baptism, have been fruitful sources of strange and unscriptural views of the ordinance. Poets, and hymn-composers, and Romish theologians, have flooded the world with so much high-flown and rhapsodical language on the point, that the minds of many have been thoroughly swamped and confounded. Thousands have imbibed notions about baptism from poetry, without knowing it, for which they can show no warrant in God's Word. Milton's *Paradise Lost* is the sole parent of many a current view of Satan's agency; and uninspired poetry is the sole parent of many a man's views of baptism in the present day.

Once for all, let me entreat every reader of this paper to hold no doctrine about baptism which is not plainly taught in God's Word. Let him beware of maintaining any theory, however plausible, which cannot be supported by Scripture. In religion, it matters nothing who says a thing, or how beautifully he says it. The only question we ought to ask is this,—“Is it written in the Bible? what saith the Lord?”

(2) For another thing, I wish to urge on many of my fellow Churchmen the *dangerous tendency* of extravagantly high views of the efficacy of baptism. I have no wish to conceal my meaning. I refer to those Churchmen who maintain that grace invariably accompanies baptism, and that all baptized infants are in baptism born again. I ask such persons, in all courtesy and brotherly kindness, to consider seriously the dangerous tendency of their views, and the consequences which logically result from them.

They seem to me, and to many others, to degrade a holy ordinance appointed by Christ into a mere charm, which is to act mechanically, like a medicine acting on the body, without any movement of a man's heart or soul. Surely this is dangerous!

They encourage the notion that it matters nothing in what manner of spirit people bring their children to be baptized. It signifies nothing whether they come with faith, and prayer, and solemn feelings, or whether they come careless, prayerless, godless, and ignorant as heathens! The effect, we are told, is always the same in all cases! In all cases, we are told, the infant is born again the moment it is baptized, although it has no right to baptism at all, except as the child of Christian parents. Surely this is dangerous!

They help forward the perilous and soul-ruining delusion that a man may have grace in his heart, while it cannot be seen in his life. Multitudes of our worshippers have not a spark of religious life or grace about them. And yet we are told that they must all be addressed as regenerate, or possessors of grace, because they have been baptized! Surely this is dangerous!

Now I firmly believe that hundreds of excellent Churchmen have never fully considered the points which I have just brought forward. I ask them to do so. For the honour of the Holy Ghost, for the honour of Christ's holy sacraments, I invite them to consider seriously the *tendency* of their views. Sure am I that there is only one safe ground to take up in stating the effects of baptism, and that is the old ground stated by our Lord: “Every tree is known by his own fruit.” (Luke vi. 44.) When baptism is used profanely and carelessly, we have no right to expect a blessing to follow it, any more than we expect it for a careless recipient of the Lord's Supper. When no grace can be seen in a man's life, we have no right to say that he is regenerate and received grace in baptism.

(3) For another thing, I wish to urge on all Baptists who may happen to read this paper, *the duty of moderation* in stating their views of baptism, and of those who disagree

with them. I say this with sorrow. I respect many members of the Baptist community, and I believe they are men and women whom I shall meet in heaven. But when I mark the extravagantly violent language which *some* Baptists use against infant baptism, I cannot help feeling that they may be justly requested to judge more moderately of those with whom they disagree.

Does the Baptist mean to say that his peculiar views of baptism are needful to salvation, and that nobody will be saved who holds that infants ought to be baptized? I cannot think that any intelligent Baptist in his senses would assert this. At this rate he would shut out of heaven the whole Church of England, all the Methodists, all the Presbyterians, and all the Independents! At this rate, Cranmer, Ridley, Latimer, Luther, Calvin, Knox, Baxter, Owen, Wesley, Whitfield, and Chalmers, are all lost! They all firmly maintained infant baptism, and therefore they are all in hell! I cannot believe that any Baptist would say anything so monstrous and absurd.

Does the Baptist mean to say that his peculiar views of baptism are necessary to a high degree of grace and holiness? Will he undertake to assert that Baptists have always been the most eminent Christians in the world, and are so at this day? If he does make this assertion, he may be fairly asked to give some proof of it. But he cannot do so. He may show us, no doubt, many Baptists who are excellent Christians. But he will find it hard to prove that they are one bit better than some of the Episcopalians, Presbyterians, Independents, and Methodists, who all hold that infants ought to be baptized.

Now, surely, if the peculiar opinions of the Baptists are neither necessary to salvation nor to eminent holiness, we may fairly ask Baptists to be moderate in their language about those who disagree with them. Let them, by all means, maintain their own peculiar views, if they think they have discovered a "more excellent way." Let them use their liberty and be fully persuaded in their own minds. The narrow way to heaven is wide enough for believers of every name and denomination. But for the sake of peace and charity, let me entreat Baptists to exercise moderation in their judgment of others.

(4) In the last place, I wish to urge on all Christians the immense importance of giving to each part of Christianity its *proper proportion and value*, but nothing more. Let us beware of wresting things from their right places, and putting that which is second first, and that which is first second. Let us give all due honour to baptism and the Lord's Supper, as sacraments ordained by Christ Himself. But let us never forget that, like every outward ordinance, their benefit depends entirely on the manner in which they are received. Above all, let us never forget that while a man may be baptized, like Judas, and yet never be saved, so also a man may never be baptized, like the penitent thief, and yet may be saved.—The things needful to salvation are an interest in Christ's atoning blood, and the presence of the Holy Ghost in the heart and life. He that is wrong on these two points will get no benefit from his baptism, whether he is baptized as an infant or grown up. He will find at the last day that he is wrong for evermore.