

SCRIPTURAL BAPTISM

God chose, called, equipped, and commissioned John the Baptist for the important task of preparing the way for the coming of Christ. He was "sent from God ... to bear witness of the Light, that all men through him might believe" (John 1:6-7), and "to baptize" (John 1:33) penitent believers upon a profession of their faith in the coming Messiah. Of his dual ministry of preaching and baptizing Paul remarked, "John verily baptized with the baptism of repentance, saying unto the people, that they should believe on him who should come after him, that is, on Christ Jesus" (Acts 19:4).

John the Baptist received his call to preach and his commission to baptize directly from God. He was the first and only authorized administrator of baptism until Jesus Christ was baptized and had entered upon His public ministry. John's preaching in the wilderness attracted the multitudes, and without fear or favor he proclaimed the Word of God to them. Not only did he declare the truth of God with reference to sin and its consequences, but he challenged them to repent, and assured them of the forgiveness of their sins on the condition of their repentance. He not only preached repentance, but he also baptized those who gave evidence of having repented. The effectiveness of his ministry is indicated in Matthew 3:5-6: "Then went out to him Jerusalem, and all Judea, and all the region round about Jordan, And were baptized of him in Jordan, confessing their sins."

When the wilderness revival, which was being conducted by the flaming evangelist, was at its peak, Jesus of Nazareth was approximately sixty miles from the scene of the evangelistic activities. At the appointed moment Christ left the home of His childhood and early manhood in Nazareth and journeyed to the place where John the Baptist was preaching and baptizing the converts in the Jordan River.

I. Why Was Jesus Christ Baptized?

One day while John the Baptist was faithfully performing the duties of his heaven-appointed ministry of preparing the minds and hearts of the people for the coming One, the Saviour quietly and deliberately approached John the Baptist and requested baptism at his hands. Recognizing both superiority and deity in the earnest applicant, he shrank from performing the holy task of baptizing the Lord Jesus. Thoroughly aware of his unworthiness to administer baptism to Christ, he expressed his reluctance in the statement: "I have need to be baptized of thee, and comest thou to me?" (Matthew 3:14). Perhaps his objection was based in part on the fact that baptism implied repentance, or a renunciation of the former manner of life of which the one being baptized was actually ashamed. Besides, baptism implied an entrance upon an entirely new life. Of course, none of these things were applicable in the case of the Lord Jesus Christ, inasmuch as He had never sinned in thought, word, or deed. In this respect Christ stood alone, for of all others it is said truthfully, "All have sinned, and come short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23).

In response to the hesitation, reluctance, and protest of John the Baptist, Christ said: "Suffer it to be so now: for thus it becometh us to fulfil all righteousness" (Matthew 3:15). What gentle and meaningful words! His request, "Suffer it to be so now," means in this manner. "It becometh us" indicates the complete propriety of the action. Why was it fitting? Because it was His renunciation of worldly ambition, His promise to do the will of God the Father, His pledge to give His life a ransom for others, and a prophecy of His future death, burial, and resurrection. The expression, "It becometh us to fulfil all righteousness," conveys the idea that it was right and appropriate to show how all righteousness would be fulfilled, namely, by letting His baptism be a figurative portrayal of His death, burial, and resurrection. As Christ entered upon that pathway which was going to end in sacrificial death, His baptism was intended to portray how all righteousness was to be fulfilled. Righteousness was what God's law demanded, what every sinner needed, and precisely what Christ came to provide for and to impute to all who would believe on Him. Therefore, His memorable request may be expressed in the

words: "Permit it to be done now: for this is necessary in order for us to perform the totality of that which it is right to do."

As in every statement from His lips, and in every other act of His life, there was purpose, design, and wondrous significance in Christ's baptism. Christ insisted on being baptized by John the Baptist in order to show, in figure, at the beginning of His public ministry what He would do, in fact, at the close of that ministry. His baptism was the prefiguring of His death, burial, and resurrection whereby He fulfilled all righteousness.

Those who were present on that memorable occasion must have gazed in silence on that wondrous and impressive scene as the Son of God and the Saviour of men walked down into the Jordan River to be baptized by John the Baptist. As Christ sank beneath the baptismal waters He prefigured the death which He was to die on the cross at Calvary, when all the billows of God's wrath against sin would roll over Him, and as He arose from beneath the water our Lord symbolized His resurrection from the dead. In His baptism Christ pictured how He would fulfill all righteousness by dying, by being buried, and by rising from the dead.

God's Word describes the baptism of Christ in these words: "And Jesus, when he was baptized, went up straightway out of the water: and, lo, the heavens were opened unto him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove, and lighting upon him: And lo a voice from heaven, saying, This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased" (Matthew 3:16-17). Of course, it would have been impossible for Christ to have come up out of the water had He not been under it. When Christ came up out of the baptismal waters, the heavens were rent asunder, and the Holy Spirit descended upon Him in a dove-like form, symbolizing peacefulness, meekness, gentleness, tenderness, and love — those qualities which were to characterize the ministry of our Lord. Immediately thereafter Christ received the audible approval of God the Father in the following words of commendation and good cheer: "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased" (Matthew 3:17). Thus the Father bore testimony to the fact that His Son was the object of His love and the One in Whom He took great delight.

Since Christ's baptism was intended to be for all time the example and pattern of all who would believe on Him as Saviour, we should note and ever remember its most obvious characteristics.

1. Christ was baptized as God's child.

He was the Son of God before He was baptized. Of Him the Father said: "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased" (Matthew 3:17).

2. Christ was baptized by God's man.

Concerning John the Baptist, whom God had commissioned to administer baptism, and who baptized Christ, the Bible says: "There was a man sent from God, whose name was John" (John 1:6). Since John's baptism had the authority of God the Father behind it, Christ was anxious to receive it.

3. Christ was baptized in God's way.

God's Word says: "And Jesus, when he was baptized, went up straightway out of the water" (Matthew 3:16). "And straightway coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens opened, and the Spirit like a dove descending upon him" (Mark 1:10).

4. Christ was baptized for God's purpose.

"And Jesus answering said unto him, Suffer it to be so now: for thus it becometh us to fulfil all righteousness" (Matthew 3:15). His baptism symbolized His death, burial, and resurrection through which the righteousness of God was made available to men.

II. Who Should Baptize?

Baptism originated in the wisdom and authority of God. John the Baptist was divinely commissioned to baptize (John 1:33). He preached to his listeners "that they should believe on him who should come after him, that is, on Christ Jesus" (Acts 19:4). Upon the authority which he had received from God, John the Baptist immersed all of his hearers who repented of their sins, believed on the coming Messiah, and proved the genuineness of their repentance and faith by their fruits. Recognizing John the Baptist as the divinely authorized administrator of baptism, Christ traveled from Nazareth to the Jordan River and there honored the ordinance by requesting and receiving baptism at his hands.

During His earthly ministry Christ administered baptism, not in person, but through the instrumentality of His disciples. Concerning this the Bible says: "When therefore the Lord knew how the Pharisees had heard that Jesus made and baptized more disciples than John, (Though Jesus himself baptized not, but his disciples,) He left Judea, and departed again into Galilee" (John 4:1-3). Officiating as His authorized agents throughout His earthly ministry, the disciples administered baptism under His personal supervision, so their act was regarded as Christ's act.

Authority for the administration of believer's baptism is found in the words of Christ in the Great Commission: "Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world" (Matthew 28:19-20). To whom was Christ speaking in this commission? He was speaking to His disciples who were members of the church which He had established, to which He had already promised perpetuity, and to which at Pentecost "there were added about three thousand souls" (Acts 2:41). That Christ was speaking to the disciples in their organic or corporate capacity, and not as individuals, is evident from the fact that He promised them His presence until the end of the age. Of course, Christ knew that not a single individual to whom He spoke would live that long. Due to the brevity of the lives of the disciples, who composed the assembly to which He delivered the commission to make disciples, baptize them, and teach them, it was an utter impossibility for Him to be with them as individuals to the end of the age. Christ authorized His church to administer baptism. From that day until the present, New Testament churches have been the divinely appointed custodians, administrators, and preservers of the significant and meaningful ordinance of baptism, and our Lord has always held them responsible for its administration in conformity to His example and teaching. The Holy Spirit had Paul to admonish the church at Corinth to "keep the ordinances, as I delivered them to you" (I Corinthians 11:2).

Just as Christ baptized believers through His authorized agents or disciples, so a New Testament church administers baptism by its duly authorized agent, usually the pastor. Christ never authorized any individual to administer baptism to whomsoever he deemed to be qualified, but He entrusted the ordinance to His churches for their administration. For one to immerse another without the authorization of one of the Lord's churches is a presumptuous and unscriptural assumption of authority that does not belong to any man. Scriptural baptism can be administered only upon the authorization of a church which has been organized according to the pattern found in the Scriptures, and which holds steadfastly to the teachings and practices of the churches in the New Testament.

Inasmuch as there is not a single example of the acceptance of alien immersion in the Scriptures, a church which has been organized according to the New Testament pattern, and whose membership is governed by the Word of God as the only authoritative rule of faith and practice, is not willing to accept members whose baptism does not meet the requirements set forth in the New Testament. Acts 19 contains an example of the

rejection of alien immersion. At Ephesus Paul met some professing disciples who had received a baptism that did not meet the scriptural requirements. He asked these recipients of alien immersion: "Did ye receive the Holy Spirit when ye believed?" They replied: "We have not so much as heard whether there be a Holy Spirit." So, their alien immersion was rejected, and, after they were instructed properly and became true believers on Christ, they were scripturally baptized.

When any church receives a member or members with alien immersion, the membership thereby makes a public declaration that scriptural baptism is unimportant, and is unnecessary to Christian obedience. Such action brings into the membership of the church those who are either ignorant of or willfully disobedient to the teachings of the Scriptures on the subject of baptism. For example, one lady, who had been admitted to membership in a certain church by the alien immersion route, remarked: "Well, after all, you know we are all baptized into the same salvation." Thank God, those of us who are His children know that we were saved, not by baptism, but by the Lord Jesus Christ and Him alone. We rejoice greatly in the fact that, after Christ saved us, we received scriptural baptism in loving obedience to His expressed will.