

The Origin of Baptism

H. Lee Mason

Strange sounds are being heard among the brethren. These are not new sounds, for they were heard many years ago when our movement was young and growing. But they are indeed “strange sounds” for a people who used to be called “a people of the Book.” It is the sound of brethren discussing the importance, or should we say the non-importance, of baptism.

John Greenlee wrote an excellent article in the February 1, 1976, issue of the *CHRISTIAN STANDARD* in which he pointed out the possibility of a split developing again in the body of Christ. He asserted that part of the epicenter of the danger involves “the doctrine and practice of Christian baptism.” Though once we debated the denominations concerning these issues, we find that many have switched allegiance and now carry the banner of the Baptists. And many of these “banner carriers” occupy the “chief seats” among us. It is time for some more Aquilas and Priscillas to take some of the brethren aside and explain “the way of God more accurately.”

But while this is happening, there is yet another “fault line” that should be examined lest the quake come and we find that many houses have been built upon it. This “fault line”, too, concerns baptism. Though it may at first seem to be minor, it ultimately involves the authority of the Word of God and its trustworthiness.

James DeForest Murch, in his history of the Restoration Movement, gives the following:

“The process of destroying faith in the authenticity and credibility of the Scriptures involved all sorts of speculation...legends and sayings from Essene, Mithraic, and other sources are adduced to prove that there was nothing unique about the religion set forth in the Gospel”¹

Today liberal scholarship is again at work trying to cut away at the origins of Christianity. Baptism is at the heart of the matter, as some are saying that baptism was simply adopted by John and Jesus from Jewish proselyte baptism, the Essenes, or Greek mystery cults. This is apparently being taught today in some of our “loyal” Bible Colleges.

An examination of any of these “possible sources” comes up empty and futile. Many religions of the past have held to some form of cleansing,² but this should not be confused with baptism. The Dead Sea Scrolls have produced evidence that the Essenes were required to bathe daily. Any attempt to liken the daily bath to Biblical baptism becomes ridiculous. People who want to begin the practice of baptism with the Jews and proselyte-baptism indeed have trouble. There is no concrete evidence which shows this was a practice until the last part of the first century A.D. In fact, Josephus gives the account of the conversion of Izates, King of Adiabene, to the Jewish faith in much detail and yet does not mention one word about proselyte baptism.³ Other Jewish works from around the time of the New Testament writers also give accounts of Jewish conversions, but no mention is made of proselyte baptism.

¹ Murch, James DeForest, *CHRISTIANS ONLY*, Standard Publishing, Cinti., Ohio, 1962, page 224.

² Numbers 19.

³ *ANTIQUITIES OF THE JEWS*, XX. 2, 4.

Although we lack extra-Biblical literature to tell us of the origin of baptism, we do have a Biblical source. On the Great Day of Questions in the last week of Jesus' life before His crucifixion and resurrection, He was asked a question of the chief priests and elders as to His authority. Matthew gives this account in 21:23-27:

“And when He had come into the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to Him as He was teaching, and said ‘By what authority are You doing these things, and who gave You this authority?’

But Jesus answered and said to them, ‘I will ask you one thing, too, which if you tell Me, I will also tell you by what authority I do these things.

“The baptism of John was from what source, from heaven or from men?” And they began reasoning among themselves saying, “If we say, ‘From heaven’, He will say to us ‘Then why did you not believe him?’

“But if we say ‘From men’, we fear the multitude; for they all hold John to be a prophet.”

And they answered Jesus and said, “We do not know.” He also said to them, “Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things” (NASV).

Jesus gives a very clear answer as to the source of His authority. His source is in the same source that gave baptism to John. Notice that the leaders' first response to Jesus was, “If we say ‘From heaven,’” They knew where John had received baptism. There was no doubt in their minds. Matthew 3 tells us that many of the Sadducees and Pharisees were coming to John to be baptized. If baptism had been a common practice among the Jews, then why would they go to John? These Jewish leaders were afraid to give the correct answer lest Jesus ask them why they had not accepted John. And they dared not give a wrong answer by saying that John had received it from men, because they knew that the people around them knew the truth. These men were afraid to lie. Upon the answer to the question which Jesus put forth to those Jewish leaders He hung His authority.

That the Jews did practice a proselyte baptism is true towards the close of the first century A.D. But in the face of the evidence, is it not more likely that the Jews adopted the practice from Christianity? Many people in the first century thought that Christianity was just a sect of Judaism. Is it not possible that to strengthen this idea, the Jews might “steal” a Christian practice? Apollos was travelling around the world preaching and practicing a wrong type of baptism. How many other Jews were doing the same thing? It is hard to tell how far Apollos alone might have spread baptism into just the Jewish community.

If it were possible to find a non-divine source for baptism, then I suppose there would be some who would say that it can be changed, altered or ignored. But the source for baptism is the Divine. We cannot change it, alter it, or ignore it. We must proclaim and practice it in the same way that the Son of God decreed it.

Brethren, it is time again that we get back to THE BOOK. There may be many scholars, but there is only one Scholar. He is still the Wisdom of God. Baptism is as divine as God the Father who originated it, the Son of God who commissioned it, and the Holy Spirit who blesses it. “Let God be found true, though every man be found a liar” (Romans 3:4)