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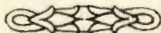
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“What’s the Use of Baptism?”



By JOHN CLIFFORD, M.A., LL.B., D.D.

IS there any use at all in Believers' Baptism to-day?
“Allowing,” says one, “that the Early Christians did immerse the disciples of Jesus in water in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, still, what’s the good of teaching and practising a rite like that now?”

“I am a Christian and have been for years. I rejoice in my discipleship to the Lord Jesus; identify myself with Christian movements; and undertake Christian responsibilities. I have the ‘substance’ of the spiritual life; what good could I get from the pursuit of the ‘shadow’? I enjoy the ‘inward grace’; what accession to that grace would accrue to me from the ‘outward sign’?”

“I do not deny that some good may attend the sprinkling of infants. Parents are taught their religious duties, and urged to train their children with a direct and avowed regard to their possession and culture of the spiritual life. But for grown people, spiritual men and women, to insist on the duty of being immersed in water, and exult in it as a privilege, this puzzles and bewilders me. I can’t see any good in it, either for the person baptised, or any one else. **What is the use of it?**”

Now, first of all, such a question, fair as it seems, has this glaring fault, that it confounds the **authority** of a law with a **perception of the use of keeping** that law, and makes the mistake of exalting a **seen utility** into the supreme standard of moral action. A thief may not perceive the use of the laws against pocket-picking and burglary; but does the judge, therefore, excuse him? Do you never tell the truth till you see what you will gain by it? Has right no claim of its own; and are not its claims often in the teeth of present and seen advantage? The question, "What's the use of baptism?" wherever urged as the **final** and all-determining inquiry, is a grave mistake.

Our Master said, "Ye are My friends if ye do **whatever** I command you"—**whatever**—without restriction, and whether you see its **uses** or not. True men do not measure their obedience to a chosen leader on the principle of profit and loss; but are eager to do **whatever** he wishes, and ready to go beyond, rather than fall short of, compliance with his will. If my King says to me, "Believe and be baptised," and does not revoke His command, nor give me **express** exemption from its claims, my duty is instant and cheerful obedience, come what may.

Again, to urge this question as final is as absurd as it is ignoble. The cannibal does not discourse on the uses of English civilisation; the totally deaf do not proclaim the pleasures of harmonious music! We must eat to know the uses of food. Lord Bacon has taught us, it is in obedience to law we learn its full import, and gain its advantage. David sang, "In the **keeping** of Thy commandments there is great reward"; and David's Lord says, "He that followeth Me shall not walk in darkness,

but shall have the light of life." To desire to see the uses of baptism without attending to it, is like wanting health without exercise, knowledge without labour, and heaven without the faith which works by love. The question gets its answer as soon as the Lord is lovingly and joyously obeyed. The uses of baptism are found in being baptised.

Then those "uses" may be reported, in the same way as we answer the question, What is the use of a telegraph wire; of preaching; or of the ordinance of the Lord's Supper? We cite the witness of Experience; a witness most Christians accept as to the uses of the Lord's Supper; and ought not to refuse as to the advantages of the parallel rite.

The Lord's Supper aids faith in, and intensifies love to the Lord Jesus; brightens hope in His present work and in its final issues; develops the fellowship of saints by securing a distinct recognition of the oneness of believers; and as it has aided, in measureless degrees, in the abolition of slavery, so it is still the foe of all caste and cliquism in the life of the Church of the Redeemer. The experience of the Church of this day, by thousands of witnesses, proclaims these to be the real fruits of the observance of the loving request of the Saviour, "Do this in remembrance of Me."

Is there a similar witness concerning the uses of baptism? What is the verdict of Experience? Let us see.

1. Miss Smiley, for years a notable minister of the Society of Friends, had accepted and taught its denial of baptism. But the study of the New Testament convinced her of the duty of being baptised, and after a most painful struggle she left her first and most cherished religious home, and put on Christ by Baptism. She was a mature

Christian, a reflective and cultured Christian in vital union with Christ Jesus and with His Church, thoroughly identified with the cause of righteousness and goodness; and if any one could be expected to find "no good" from baptism she might. But she says: "Meantime I am having great comfort in thus yielding myself. I cannot tell you how the significance of the act grows upon me and reacts upon my spiritual life. If I am deprived at this period of regarding it as an initial act, I can the more view it as the completion of my consecration. I have felt as though I were busied in gathering up the last remains of the old Adam—all of my will and my life that may have hitherto escaped, and bringing them now to a final burial. And how very surely in the same grave must I lay down all reputation, and much that has hitherto gone to make up life. May every error and cramping prejudice go down also, to rise up no more! On the other hand, I have an ever-joyful feeling of looking forward to that day as a bridal morn, when I shall openly give myself away to Jesus, to be His altogether. And though I have loved Him so long, and so truly, yet now there seems some new feeling of tenderness, and more perfect union and entire dependence. It has all come upon me as a sweet surprise; for, while ready to keep His commandments, I thought the long delay would render the act unnecessary, and not to be accompanied with any corresponding spiritual experience."

This witness could be multiplied a thousandfold; and with undivided and convincing force they declare that one signal "use" of baptism to the believer in Christ is that it **develops and perfects the spirit of consecration to the Lord Jesus Christ**; and coming as it usually does, and always

ought, at the commencement of the spiritual life, it floods the soul with hallowed feeling, and becomes the occasion of a real and abiding addition of spiritual power.

2. Sir Donald Macleod, Lieutenant-Governor of the Punjaub, writes: "It is as strange as it is true that baptism bears a more decided feature with the world by far, than even the Lord's Supper"; and adds that "he was convinced it was his duty to follow Christ in this ordinance." He was warned of the consequences; the loss of friends and of position, and told to think of the opposition he would incur, and he answered, "I have thought of all this, and must, at the risk of all consequences, regard Christ rather than man"; and so he was baptised in obedience to the inspiration of this conviction.

Dan Taylor, a great chief amongst the Baptists, must have had an energetic sense of duty to constrain him to start on a journey of a hundred and twenty miles in the depth of winter in search of somebody to baptise him. It is a common testimony, that attendance upon this ordinance nourishes and quickens a sense of responsibility to the Lord Jesus for the effect of the outward life upon the world. I have heard it said again and again by those who have publicly avowed their discipleship to Christ in this impressive act, what carefulness, what zeal, what devotion to purity the deed has wrought in them; how much more anxious they have been to walk circumspectly with unfaltering foot and unstained robe along the way of life. The soldier has been put upon his honour, and made to feel that the fair fame of his Leader was in his keeping. His conscience has been reinforced and his will has received large accessions of aid by this manifestation of himself as Christ's

"man," His sworn servant and soldier. Our doctrine of baptism has been the precious amber in which the spirit of fidelity to conscience has been preserved. It has rendered inestimable service to the cause of progress, righteousness, and liberty, by **nourishing and strengthening "intrinsic conviction,"** which is "the mainstay of human advancement," **securing the supremacy of conscience over interest.** That unquestionable "use" of baptism deserves, if anything does, a perpetual life.

3. When Jesus was baptised the heavens were opened; the Holy Ghost descended upon Him, and a voice from heaven said, "Thou art My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased." Christ sees into His work. Light comes to Him in the way of obedience. The treasures of the Divine Wisdom are opened to Him; a Divine Inspiration fills and sways Him; and the joy-giving consciousness of His Sonship is quickened and strengthened. Christ's baptism is one of the highest peaks of His earthly blessedness.

The Eunuch of Ethiopia, having been baptised, goes on his way **rejoicing.** He is a gladder and a stronger man for his ready, instant, and cheerful acquiescence in the will of Christ. The jailer of Philippi, having been baptised, **rejoiced,** believing in God with all his house. The blessed experiences of the day of baptism form an ever-recurring theme of reflection and stimulus to the pilgrims of God. The brightness of that hour has stretched as a beam of light over the whole life of the true and steadfast, and has allured not a few wanderers back again to the Father's heart and home. In baptism thousands have with joy drawn fresher and fuller draughts from the waters of salvation. So long as men

are baptised into Christ, so long will they find it an occasion of flooding their souls with **Christ's Joy**.

4. "As often as ye eat this bread and drink this cup, ye do show forth or declare the Lord's death, till He come ;" and as often as ye immerse a believing man in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, ye declare the efficiency of the Lord's death and resurrection. Buried with Christ in baptism, we preach in the language of symbol that Christ died for our sins and rose again for our justification; and affirm that in the case of a man like ourselves, that sacrifice has become conscious salvation, that resurrection newness of life. Baptisms have, as every Baptist pastor of large experience can testify, an **evangelising** "use." They preach the Gospel, and the preaching is attended with the demonstration of the Spirit and mighty power.

5. Courage is contagious. The faithful Abdiel does not stand alone—his fidelity stimulates his peers to a similar heroism. "I, too, will be a vallant soldier of Christ," says one, who sees a comrade enter the lists, fight bravely, and conquer in the name of the heavenly Captain. "Example strikes all human hearts," puts fortitude into the feeble, daring into the timid, and courage into the coward. No one who fairly estimates the temptations to faithlessness and fear in a Christian life will despise the **courage-giving** "use" of believers' baptism.

6. Lastly, departure from the Baptist teaching has been followed by a surrender of the purely spiritual character of Christ's Church. Ritualism and Priestism are at one extreme, personal discipleship to Christ expressed in baptism is at the other. Let the priest have the

smallest grain of power in regenerating a babe by baptism, and you have the germ out of which a Papacy may be developed. The baptism of believers, be they children, men, or women, is a protest against baptismal regeneration, a means of proclaiming the spirituality of Christ's Church, and of effectually battling with the errors of priesthood. To save us from Romanism we must have a true and Scriptural doctrine of Baptism.

What's the use of Baptism? It develops and perfects the spirit of consecration to Christ. It nourishes a healthy conscience, and makes its action supreme. It opens a new fountain of joy and blessedness. It illustratively preaches the efficacy of Christ's work. It stimulates to courage. It maintains the purity of the faith.

But these "uses" depend upon what the user himself is, rather than upon the particular act he performs. The benefit is not in the water, much or little; nor in the act of the administrator; but in the spiritual and inward act of the soul of the baptised person as he freely consents to Christ's authority, and subjects himself to His wish and sway. The use of the Lord's Supper is not in the wine drunk or the bread eaten, but in the faith and love and hope of the participant. As a microscope is to a botanist, and a telescope to an astronomer, so is baptism to a believer in Christ; and when there is no use for the first and second, there will be none for the third.

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