

AMERICAN BAPTIST
HISTORICAL SOCIETY
The Practical Uses of Christian Baptism.

A

CIRCULAR LETTER,

FROM THE

MINISTERS and MESSENGERS of the SEVERAL

Baptist Churches

OF THE

NORTHAMPTONSHIRE ASSOCIATION,

ASSEMBLED

At NORTHAMPTON, June 15, 16, 1802,

TO THE CHURCHES IN THEIR CONNEXION.

COMPOSED BY ANDREW FULLER, D. D.

OF KETTERING.

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OF THE

NORTHAMPTONSHIRE ASSOCIATION,

Assembled at Northampton, June 15, 16, 1802 ;

To the several Churches they represent, or from which they have
received Letters.

*Grace be to you and peace from God our Father, and from
Jesus Christ our Lord !*

BELOVED BRETHREN,

UNDER divine protection we held our annual meeting, at the time and place appointed, and hope we enjoyed communion with God, and with his faints. From the contents of your Letters it appears that there has been no great increase in the churches this year, in regard of numbers ; but we are happy to find that in other respects there is cause for thankfulness. Excepting two or three of the churches, which are in a low afflicted state, the rest of them are dwelling in peace, and walking in the fear of the Lord ; and one* of them, which had been dissolved, is now revived, and admitted again to fellowship with us.

In connexion with our last General Letter, and agreeably to the appointment made at the yearly meeting, we now address you, dear brethren, on a subject,

* The Church at *Burton upon Trent.*

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not only of general interest, but which more immediately relates to that solemn profession which you have made of Christianity, THE PRACTICAL USES OF THE ORDINANCE OF BAPTISM.

That Christian baptism is properly administered only by immersion, and to those who make a credible profession of faith in Christ, it is no part of our present design to prove. Addressing ourselves to *you*, we shall take each of these particulars for granted. The sole object to which we now request your attention, is, The *influence* of this ordinance, (where it produces its proper effects) in promoting piety in individuals, and purity in the church.

There is no part of true religion that is merely speculative ; the whole is designed and adapted to sanctify the soul. We may presume, therefore, that if baptism be an ordinance of God, and of perpetual obligation in the church, it is of importance to Christian practice.

But it is not on presumptive evidence that we wish to rest the improvement of this institution, any more than the institution itself ; neither shall we go about to connect with it acknowledged duties by imaginary alliances ; but shall confine ourselves to those uses of the ordinance which are actually made, or suggested, in the New Testament. We could address many things to Parents, and things of importance too, on bringing up their children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord ; we could also urge it upon the children of believers, that they are cast upon the Lord from their earliest infancy ; but as we find nothing of this kind in the scriptures *connected with baptism*, however important these things would be in their place, they would be altogether irrelevant while treating on this ordinance.

Baptism is a divine institution, pertaining to the kingdom of the Messiah, or the gospel dispensation. John received it “ from heaven,” and administered it to the Jews, who, on his proclaiming that “ the kingdom of heaven was at hand,” confessed their sins. Jesus gave sanction to it by his example ; and after his resurrection, when all power in heaven and earth was commit-

ted to him, confirmed, and extended it to believers of all nations. Whatever circumstantial differences there might be, therefore, between the baptism of John and that of Christ, they were substantially the same. There were things in former ages which bore a *resemblance* to it ; as the salvation of Noah and his family in the ark, the passage of the Israelites through the sea, divers washings or bathings prescribed by the Mosaic ritual, &c. ; but the thing itself existed not, till it was revealed to the immediate forerunner of Christ.

The principal design of it appears to be, *A solemn and practical profession of the Christian religion.* Such was the baptism of John, who “ said unto the people, that they should believe on him who should come after him ; that is, on Christ Jesus.” And such was that in times of the apostles. Paul, addressing himself to the churches in Gallatia, who, after having professed to believe in Christ, cleaved to the Mosaic law as a medium of justification, thus speaks : “ The law was our schoolmaster to bring us to Christ, that we might be justified by faith ; but after that faith is come, we are no longer under a schoolmaster. For ye are all the children of God by faith in Christ Jesus. *For as many of you as have been baptized into Christ, have put on Christ.*” The allusion is to the putting on of apparel ; as when one that enters into the service of a prince, puts on his distinguishing attire ; and the design of the sacred writer is to remind those of them who had before professed the Jewish religion, that by a solemn act of their own, they had, as it were, put off Moses, and put on Christ. There is a putting on of Christ which is internal, and consists in relinquishing the former lusts, and being of the mind of Christ ;* but that which is referred to appears to, be an open *profession* of his name, to the renouncing of every thing that stood in competition with him. It was, therefore, true of “ as many as had been baptized,” whether they abode in the truth or not. And even their being “ the children of God by faith in Christ Jesus,” seems to

* Rom. xiii. 14.

express what they were in profession, rather than what they were in fact. They had, by their baptism, disowned all dependence on the privileges of birth, and the adoption which pertained to them as the children of Abraham; declared their acquiescence in that power, or privilege, to become the sons of God, which the gospel imparts to them that believe. The mention of this was perfectly in point, as it greatly heightened the evil of their defection. The amount is, *That as many as were baptized in the primitive ages, were voluntary agents, and submitted to this ordinance, for the purpose of making a solemn and practical profession of the Christian faith.* It was their oath of allegiance to the King of Zion; that by which they avowed the Lord to be their God. Hence a rejection of it involved "a rejection of the counsel of God."* The sin of the pharisees and lawyers consisted not in their refusing to submit to baptism *as unbelievers*; but in not embracing the Messiah, and so putting on the badge of his profession. Their rejection of the sign was justly construed as a rejection of the thing signified; as when a rebel refuses to take the oath of allegiance, it is construed as a refusal of submission and subjection to his rightful prince.

Such, brethren, is the profession we have made. We have not only declared in words, our repentance towards God, and faith towards our Lord Jesus Christ; but have said the same things by our baptism. We have solemnly surrendered ourselves up to Christ, taking him to be our prophet, priest, and king; engaging to receive his doctrine, to rely on his atonement, and to obey his laws. The vows of God are upon us. We have even sworn to keep his righteous judgments; and without violating the oath of God, cannot go back. If it be a sin not to confess the Lord Jesus, through fear or shame, it is a still greater sin, after we have confessed him, to turn from the holy commandment.

The religion of Jesus consists partly of *truths* to be believed, and partly of *precepts* to be obeyed; and the ordinance of baptism furnishes motives for a faithful adherence to both.

* Luke vii. 30.

We have been baptized "in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit;" and have thus practically avowed our belief in them. It was at Jordan that the Father bore witness to his well beloved Son, and that the Holy Spirit descended upon him; hither, therefore, in the early ages, men were directed to repair, that they might learn the doctrine of the Trinity. If we relinquish this doctrine, we virtually relinquish our baptism. Of this there need not be a more convincing proof than the inclination which has been discovered by those who have renounced the doctrine, to disuse the form of baptizing in the name of the sacred Three.

We have also professed, by our baptism, to embrace that great salvation which is accomplished by the united influence of the sacred Three. We have in effect declared our acquiescence in the freeness of the Father's grace, in the all-sufficient atonement of the Son, and in the sanctifying influence of the Holy Spirit; for these are the principal things by which, in the New Testament account of the economy of grace, each is distinguished. Nor can we renounce them, without virtually renouncing our baptism.

The immersion of the body in *water*, which is a purifying element, contains a profession of our faith in Christ, through the shedding of whose blood we are cleansed from all sin. Hence, baptism in the name of Christ is said to be "for the remission of sins."* Not that there is any such virtue in the element, whatever be the quantity; nor in the ceremony, though of divine appointment; but it contains a *sign* of the way in which we must be saved. Sin is washed away in baptism in the same sense as Christ's flesh is eaten, and his blood drank, in the Lord's supper; the sign when rightly used, leads to the thing signified. Remission of sins is ascribed, by Peter, not properly to baptism; but to the *name* in which the parties were to be baptized. Thus, also, Saul was directed to "*wash away his sins, calling on the name of the Lord.*" Nearly akin to

* Acts ii. 38. xxii. 16.

this is the idea conveyed to us in the first epistle of Peter : “ The long-suffering of God waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was preparing, wherein few, that is, eight souls were *saved by water*. The like figure whereunto baptism doth *now save us*, (not the putting away of the filth of the flesh, but the answer of a good conscience towards God) by the resurrection of Jesus Christ.”* The salvation of Noah and his family by the ark was *a figure* of our salvation by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The ark for a time was surrounded, as it were, with waters from above, and from beneath ; but it survived its trial, and those who were in it were at length brought safe to land. Christ also for a time sustained the deluge of wrath due to our sins ; but survived the trial, rising triumphantly from the dead, and thereby saved us from everlasting death. Of this great transaction, baptism is *a like figure*. It is another sign of the same thing. The resemblance of baptism by immersion, to the death and resurrection of Christ, and the suitableness of one to signify our faith in the other, are manifest. It is thus that baptism doth *now save us* ; not as putting away the filth of the flesh ; (for all the virtue contained in the ordinance itself is “ the answer of a good conscience toward God,”) but as affording a sign of our salvation by the victorious resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ.

And as we are taught by our baptism to adhere to the doctrine of God our Saviour, so we are furnished with motives to adorn it by a *holy conversation*. Thus it is introduced in the epistles to the Romans and Colossians as a sign of our being *dead*, and buried, to the principles and pursuits of the present world ; and by faith in Christ, *raised* as into a new world.† The *death* of Christ is emphatically mentioned as that into which we are baptized—“ Know ye not, that so many of us as were baptized into Jesus Christ, were baptized into his *death* ? Therefore we are buried with him by baptism *into death* ; that like as Christ died, and was

* 1 Pet. iii. 20, 21. † Rom. vi. 3—12. Col. ii. 12.

raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life." Christ's dying for sin afforded a most powerful motive for our dying to it; and the immersion of the body in baptism, being "in the likeness" of the former, furnishes an additional motive to the latter.

The leading idea suggested by a death and burial seems to be that of *separation from the world*. There is no greater line of separation than that which is drawn between the dead and the living. The dead know not any thing; and have no portion in all that is done under the sun. Such is the line which is drawn by the faith of the operation of God, between the world renewed and the world depraved; of which baptism is the appointed sign. If, after this, we are found among evil doers, we may well be considered and shunned as a kind of apparitions, which have no proper concerns in the affairs of mortals.

The apostle applied this reasoning against a conformity to abrogated ceremonies. "If ye be dead with Christ from the rudiments of the world, why, as though living in the world, are ye subject to ordinances?"* The same reasoning is applicable to other things. If we be dead with Christ, why, as though living, are we subject to the lusts of the flesh, the lust of the eye, and the pride of life, which are of the world? Why are any of us conformed to this world; and not rather transformed by the renewing of our minds? If we be dead, and our life be hid with Christ in God; why are not our affections set on things above, and not on things on the earth? We cannot but express our concern, that persons professing godliness should be carried away by the course of this world, as many are; meanly imitating the ungodly, whose conduct they ought rather to reprove. Such imitation, so far as it operates, contains a virtual renunciation of our baptism. The ideas of baptism and a separation from the world, whether connected by us or not, are strongly associated in the minds of men in general. After this, we cannot unite

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with them in evil, without drawing upon ourselves their most pointed censures. They may labour to seduce us for the sake of comforting themselves ; and while accomplishing their purpose may suppress their private thoughts of us, and even compliment us for our liberality ; but if we comply, their pretended esteem will be turned into reproach. Nor ought we to consider this as an evil ; but rather as a mercy. God hath hereby set a hedge about us, which tends more than a little to preserve us from temptation. If any think otherwise, and feel uneasy that they cannot act like other men, without drawing upon themselves the censures of mankind, it is a dark sign that their hearts are not right in the sight of God.

Nor is this ordinance adapted merely to separate between believers and unbelievers *individually* considered ; its design is also to draw a line of distinction between *the kingdom of Christ, and the kingdom of Satan*. Whatever may be said of baptism as it is now generally understood and practised, and of the personal religion of those who practise it, it was *originally* appointed to be the boundary of visible christianity. This is a principle, which, if properly acted upon, would go far to prevent the confounding of the church and the world ; and which, consequently, tends more than any thing of the kind to counteract ecclesiastical degeneracy and corruption. Had the christian church in all ages admitted none to baptism, from whomsoever descended, but those who professed to repent and believe the gospel, it is scarcely conceivable that any others would have been admitted to the Lord's supper ; and if so, a stream of corruption, which has actually deluged it with antichristianism, would have been diverted at the spring-head. The church might indeed have been corrupted from other causes, but these would have been merely *accidental*. Hypocrites and formalists might have imposed themselves upon it, as they did in some degree in the apostolic age ; but they would have been intruders. Whatever of this kind might have existed, believers could not have been *constitutionally* yoked together with unbelievers. The carnal descend-

ants of godly people could not have claimed a place in Christ's visible kingdom. The church could not have become national, embracing as its children all who are born in a christianized country, without any profession of personal religion. Princes and nobles, if worthy, would have been received into its communion as brethren ; but not as rulers or patrons ; and if unworthy, refused ; even though an exposure to persecution had been the consequence. But if persons be admitted to baptism without any profession of personal religion, or upon the profession of others on their behalf, their admission to the Lord's supper will in most cases follow as a matter of course. Indeed it *ought* to follow ; for though amongst evangelical dissenters these things are separated, yet from the beginning it was not so. Neither scripture nor the practice of the ancient churches afford a single example of a baptized person, unless his conduct was grossly immoral, being ineligible to communion ; and if all who are now baptized, be admitted to the supper, the line of separation will be broken ; the church will be no longer " a garden enclosed ;" but an open wilderness, where every beast of prey can range at pleasure. Thus, indeed, it was foretold it should be. The writer of the Apocalypse, describing the corruptions which should prevail in the *visible church* during the twelve hundred and sixty years reign of anti-christ, represents it under the form of the *outer court* of the temple being *left out* of the measurement as profane, and *given to the Gentiles to be trodden under foot*, in like manner as the holy place and holy city had been trodden down by the heathen, in the time of Antiochus.

As the principle of believers' baptism, properly acted upon, would prevent the admission of all unconverted characters, except hypocrites and self-deceivers, so it would have its influence in repelling *them*. The habits of some hypocritical characters, it is true, would render it an easy thing to overleap this boundary ; but it is equally true, that, to others it would be an effectual bar. There are not a few in the religious world who would like well to be members of a christian church, especially

where the pastor is a man of respectability, provided they could be admitted without drawing upon themselves the laugh of the irreligious. There is reason to believe that many persons of genteel connexions, who wish to be thought religious, and whose consciences approve of believers' baptism, are withheld by this kind of shame from offering themselves to our churches. An ordinance which thus operates, possesses a mark of its pertaining to that kingdom which is "not of this world," and into which it is "hard for a rich man to enter."

As the leading idea suggested by a death and burial is that of *separation* from the world, so the principal thing denoted by a resurrection is an entrance into a *new* state of being. Such is that "newness of life," of which the immersion of the body from the waters of baptism is a sign, and to which it furnishes an important motive. The religion of Jesus does not consist in mere negatives. It is not enough that we be dead to the world; we must be alive to God. With real christians, old things are passed away, and all things are become new. Unless our baptism, therefore, be merely a sign, or an unmeaning ceremony, our hopes, fears, sorrows, joys, companions, principles and pursuits are opposite to those of this world. Even a partial return to it is inconsistent with our baptismal vows. If those who profess to be dead to the world cannot walk in the course of it, without being considered and shunned as a kind of apparitions; those who are alive from the dead cannot return, without resembling a living character who should take up his abode in a sepulchre.

A few general reflections will conclude this epistle.

The baptism of a number of serious christians is an interesting and impressive spectacle. Often on such solemn occasions, have we witnessed the falling tear; not only from the parties baptized, and others immediately connected with them, but from indifferent spectators. We could appeal to the consciences of many serious christians, whether they did not receive their first convictions of the reality of religion at such opportunities? We could appeal to all of you, who have been in the habit of attending the administration of this ordinance, wheth-

er it has not frequently furnished you with the most solemn and tender reflections? Has not the sight of a number of young christians, offering themselves willingly to the Lord, touched the secret springs of holy sensibility? Yes, you have been reminded by it of your own solemn engagements, and led to inquire in what manner they have been fulfilled. You have remembered the days of your espousals, when you first went after your saviour, as in the wilderness, and have been sweetly impelled to renew the solemn surrender. Nor have your reflections been confined to yourselves; you have considered these new accessions to the church of God as supplying the place of others that were taken away, and as fulfilling the promise, "Instead of thy fathers, shall be thy children." When a number of dear friends and useful characters, have, one after another, been removed by death, you have been ready to ask, Who shall fill up their place; and by whom shall Jacob arise? But when others of promising gifts and graces have come forward, and yielded up themselves to the Lord in baptism, they have seemed in a manner to be "baptized for the dead." Thus, when the ranks of an army in a besieged city are thinned by repeated engagements, and the hearts of survivors are ready to faint, a reinforcement arrives; a body of new companions throw themselves in to its relief, and inspire them with new vigour.

Further: If the foregoing remarks be just, the *importance* of believers' baptism must appear in a very different light, from that in which some have represented it. If the ordinary acknowledgments of many who live in the neglect of this ordinance, and disapprove of the zeal of others who submit to it, may be considered as expressive of their principles, their conduct is not owing to a solid conviction, arising from impartial inquiry accompanied with prayer, that it is unscriptural, or that they have already been baptized according to the institution of Christ; but to a notion that it is of *little or no account*. If it be of little or no account to bind ourselves to the Lord, *in the way of his own prescribing*; to confess his

name before men ; to avow our being dead to the world, and alive to him ; to preserve the church from being constitutionally corrupted, and yoked together with unbelievers ; to obey his commandments, who saith, “ Repent and be baptized *every one of you* ;” and to follow his example, who yielded obedience to this institute, saying, “ Thus it *becometh us* to fulfil all righteousness ;” then may this excuse be admitted. But if these things be important, then is believers’ baptism important ; and all attempts to depreciate it are offensive in the sight of Him, who is the Lord and Lawgiver in Zion.

Finally, brethren, it becomes us to beware lest that which is good in itself should, through the corruption of our nature, become an occasion of evil. There is perhaps no temptation more common among religious people, than to think too highly of themselves on account of their advantages. Where such a spirit is cherished, baptism may become an idol, and the table of the Lord itself a snare. It is more than possible that some may so value themselves on account of their baptism, as to make it a substitute for a life of holiness and universal righteousness. It appears that some amongst the Corinthians approached too near, at least, to this spirit. They had been baptized—they had eaten and drank at the table of the Lord—yet they trifled with idolatry, and worldly lusts. “ I would not that ye should be ignorant (saith Paul) how that all our fathers were under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, and were all baptized unto Moses in the cloud and in the sea ; and did all eat the same spiritual meat, and did all drink the same spiritual drink ; for they drank of that spiritual rock which followed them, and that rock was Christ. But with many of them God was not well pleased ; for they were overthrown in the wilderness. These things were our examples. Wherefore let him that thinketh he standeth, take heed lest he fall !”*. As if he had said, ‘ are you members of a community which hath the promised presence of Christ ? Our fathers also were *under the cloud*. Hath God interposed in your favour ?

* 1 Cor. x.

They *passed through the sea*, as on dry land. Have you been baptized? So were they. They *descended* in a body into the sea; were *buried* as it were, by the cloud above them, and the waters on each hand of them; and afterwards *ascended* on the other side. Have you been admitted to the holy supper? They also ate of that food, and drank of that stream, the spiritual intent of which was much the same. Yet all this afforded them no security, when they provoked the divine jealousy. Notwithstanding these privileges, they fell, and were destroyed of the destroyer. These things are recorded for *our admonition.* Of what account then will our baptism be to us, if, instead of being dead to the world and alive to God, we be the reverse? Will baptism save us? No, it will bear witness against us!

And though we may not fall into so fatal an error, as to substitute baptism in the place of holiness, righteousness, and godliness; yet if we cherish a fond conceit of ourselves, magnifying our advantages, to the neglect of a spirit of humble watchfulness; our baptism, instead of aiding us, will become a snare. We do not always act up to our advantages. It is very possible that christians, who are behind us in this particular, may, notwithstanding, be before us in their general character. It were vain and foolish to imagine, that our possessing the truth in one instance, will secure us from error in every other; or that our fulfilling this command of Christ, however important, will ensure a course of universal obedience.

Let us never forget, that however adapted this or that ordinance, form, or mode of church government, may be to promote our spiritual interests, yet if we rest in the means, they will deceive us; or rather, we shall deceive ourselves. It is the presence of Christ only that can keep us alive, either as individuals, or as churches. While, therefore, we recommend the means which he hath prescribed, we devoutly add, with the apostle, "The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit, be with you all!"—*Amen.*