Paul’s Reference to Baptism in Romans 6:3-4

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The Concept of Baptism

The idea of baptism in the secular Greek comes from \( \text{baptō} \) (\( \beta\acute{\alpha}πτό \)) literally meaning “to dip, to dye.” It also means “to cause to perish (as by drowning a man or sinking ship).”\(^1\) \( \beta\acute{\alpha}πτω \) describe the ritual bath undertaken by a gentile convert to Judaism during the initial Christian era. However, this rite is undertaken only after circumcision which symbolizes the convert’s decisive turn from heathenism, and the bath simply fits the new convert to enter upon his first act of worship. It seems that the Greek writers avoided the use of \( \beta\acute{\alpha}πτιζω \) when describing this rite of purification. In the New Testament, \( \beta\acute{\alpha}πτω \) occurs only four times and only mean “dip,” while \( \beta\acute{\alpha}πτιζω \) occurs in all the Gospels as a technical term with reference to John’s baptism, and that of Christ.\(^2\) Mounce remarks: “\( \beta\acute{\alpha}πτισμα (baptisma) \)occurs only in Christian literature. In the NT it was used of the baptism by John, of Christian baptism, and figuratively of martyrdom.”\(^3\) By the time of the Romans, \( \beta\acute{\alpha}πτιζω \) seems to have become a technical expression for the rite of Christian initiation by water, and something that the Romans would understand when Paul addresses the issue (Rom. 6:3).\(^4\)

The Setting in Romans 6:1-14

After having dealt with the doctrine of justification, Paul went on to refute those who might contend that since grace abounds where sin did abound, then it is better to continue in life of sin so that grace might be given a greater chance to magnify itself. Paul points out that justification by faith does not favor a sinful course of life. The justified man is dead to sin and is now alive with the life of Christ. Paul emphatically protests that it is inconceivable that one who has been saved should continue in the former life therein. Godet remarks: “The Christian’s breaking with sin is

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\(^1\) G. R. Beasley-Murray, “Baptism” in NIDNTT, Vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Pub. Co., 1986), 144. Kenneth S. Wuest, Romans in the Greek New Testament (Grand Rapids; Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1955), 96-97. Wuest explains that the word is used in the classics of a blacksmith who dips a hot piece of iron in water, tempering it; also of Greek soldiers placing the points of their swords, and barbarians, the points of their spears in a bowl of blood.

\(^2\) Ibid, 145.


undoubtedly gradual in its realization, but absolute and conclusive in its principle."

The Various Views About Romans 6:3-4

Essentially, two views are commonly held by many people. First there is the notion of water baptism as the emphasis of Paul. The second is that baptism in this chapter refers not to the physical but spiritual baptism.

**Water Baptism.** Those who practice baptism by immersion believe that water baptism is an outward demonstration of inward reality. Immersion illustrates aptly the believer’s death, burial and resurrection with Christ. Phillips remarks: “Baptism thus compliments the Lord’s Supper. The one ordinance sets forth the believer’s death with Christ; the other sets forth Christ’s death for the believer.”

Newell holds strongly to the view that Rom. 6:3-4 refers to water baptism:

“[You who are Christ’s] died with Him. Not only so, but your baptism sets forth further that you were buried with Him: for was it not a vivid portrayal of your death and burial, when you went down into the waters which signified - not cleansing, but death? . . .we must not confuse this water-baptism of Romans Six, which stands for the identification of believers with Christ in death, burial and resurrection; with that Holy Spirit baptism of 1 Corinthians 12:13 (italics author’s)."

A.T. Robertson in setting forth the argument for baptism by immersion alluded to Rom. 6:4 as a symbol: "The submergence and emergence of immersion thus, according to Paul, symbolizes the death and burial to sin on the one hand and the resurrection to the new life in Christ on the other." Sanday and Headlam agree with Robertson in the mode of baptism but they differed in its significance because baptism performs a double function by bringing people into contact with Christ: “this act of baptism was an act of incorporation into Christ.” It also expresses a symbolism of a series of acts corresponding to the redeeming acts of Christ in His death, burial and resurrection. Both believe that baptism is sacramental in efficacy: “it is baptism which makes a man a Christian.” Lenski, a Lutheran, also views baptism in Romans 6:3-4 as sacrament. To him it does not matter if the rite is performed via immersion, sprinkling or pouring for it is the most effective spiritual means of connecting men to Christ resulting in salvation. “Baptism made this

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connection for us, this sacrament initiated us into the Christian faith and Church (John 3:5).”

Dunn cautions against such view: “There is some danger of reading the more sophisticated sacramental theology of later centuries into the language here.”

**Spirit Baptism.** Others hold the view that Paul’s reference to baptism in Romans 6:3 is a spiritual baptism. Baptism into Christ signifies union with him and participation of all the privileges which he as Christ embodies. Shedd reasoned that water baptism is not referred to because the burial spoken of in Rom. 6:4 is “not in water, but in sepulcher.” Murray argues that one should not impute unto Paul either a sacerdotal or evangelical view of the efficacy of baptism. He remarks that:

We have no more warrant to find a reference to the mode of baptism in συνεταφησέν here in vs. 4 than σωμφότοι in vs. 5, συνεσταυρωθη in vs. 6, ἐνεδύσασθε in Gal. 3:27, all of which bear no analogy to the mode of immersion.

Murray also charges those who argue for the mode of baptism guilty of arbitrarily selecting passages to support mode of immersion. Murray would concede only “when all of Paul’s expression are taken into account that we see that burial with Christ can be appealed to as providing an index to the mode of baptism no more than can crucifixion with Him” (italics mine).

He maintains that the concept of union with Christ - not the mode of baptism - is in the foreground. Wuest holds that the believer is baptized into Christ and thus into death - the separation of the believing sinner from his sinful nature, and impartation of the divine nature. This is an act of God. This separation is the result from this spiritual baptism.

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10 R.C.H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of Romans* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Pub. House, 1936), 392-393. James M. Stifler *The Epistle to the Romans: A Commentary Logical & Historical* (Chicago; Moody Press, 1960), 106. Stifler is another individual who advocate baptismal regeneration: “Baptism involved among other things oneness with Him in His death to sin. By the ordinances or in the ordinance they declared their acceptance of him as Savior and so came “into” him.”


12 W. H. Griffith Thomas, *St. Paul’s Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1956), 167. “But it is at least significant that the ideas of death, burial and resurrection in the passage are all purely spiritual and are considered quite apart from literal ordinances; so that to be consistent in our interpretation the Baptism also should be spiritual.”


In sorting through the vast information one must acknowledge that Paul’s writing in Romans 6:3-4 is not a direct emphasis on water baptism. Paul’s topic at hand is not about the proper mode of baptism but the proper conduct that should flow out of a believer’s life because of His union with Christ. To insist that those verses meant the mode of baptism is akin to teaching a right doctrine from a wrong text. One must understand that the objective behind the parallel in this passage is that of analogy not identity. 18 The proper understanding to the phrase “baptized into Christ Jesus” is to see Paul’s thoughts in his other writings which would parallel the thrust that a believer’s life must manifest the life of one who has died to sin and alive unto Jesus Christ, walking with eternity’s value in view. 19 Nonetheless, the agreement regarding baptism is that immersion is a proper and beautiful symbolic mode of believer’s baptism. Robertson writes:

Baptism, as taught in the NT, is the picture of death and burial to sin and resurrection to new life, a picture of what has already taken place in the heart, not the means by which spiritual change is wrought. It is a privilege, and duty, not a necessity. It is a picture that is lost when something else is substituted in its place. 20

However, as Gromacki reminds all:

Although water baptism by immersion best pictures the procedures of death, burial and resurrection, it is not the means to secure that form of identification with Christ. Being raised with Christ comes through the faith of the operation of God, who hath raised him from the dead. 21

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19 Col. 2:11-12; 3:12 Cor. 13:4; Eph. 4:17; Gal. 3:26-27; Rom. 6:9; 8:11; 1 Cor. 6:14.


BIBLIOGRAPHY


