

In our first section established that we are set in the basic relation to Christ as the Church. All this depended on how God had, before the creation of the world, seen us in His eternal Son. This Son having come to us in history as the Christ of Israel, is the person God appointed for us, through Whom, and in Whom God has worked our salvation.

In our second section we considered what it means to live in relation to a head. How were we to understand how this shaped our corporate attitudes and approach to the Lord.

In our third section we saw that He is building us as his people, called out from the world. We also see that, in the light of the Ascension of our Lord, we are drawn into his present rule and that there is a relationship with earth and heaven, based upon the fact that our Head has gone into the heavens and has made provision for another One -like Himself - the Holy Spirit, to come and make His home with us. So, as a corporate body of the Head we understand that our binding and loosing can have a commensurate reciprocal answer in heaven.

1- The vicarious Life of Jesus

We have seen from our studies of John Campbell, that the vicarious life of Jesus - a life lived in our humanity for our sakes and on our behalf - has caused us to focus our attention on the Incarnation and the obedience of Christ as he lived out the flesh. We have come to see that sanctified this flesh of ours and it was in this flesh that He offered Himself to the Father as a sacrificial offering, all of this on our behalf.

Indeed, while we were considering the atoning death of Christ, we were forced back to the incarnation as the real place of mystery, and the basic ground of all that the death of Christ meant as the culmination of that life which He lived for our sakes.

It is to this incarnational base, expressed in the Lord's life that we look back to understand the Gospel sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper. They have to do with the whole historical Jesus Christ from his birth to his resurrection and ascension. It is here that their content, reality and power are based. Also, it is not simply a matter of considering the saving act of God upon us which He did in Christ, but it also requires us to look at the act of God fulfilled in the humanity of Christ. For the saving act of God is identical with Jesus Christ.

So the primary mystery [sacramentum] is Jesus Christ himself. If we want to know what they mean to God and to us, we are driven back to the incarnate reality of the Son of God. Because he has incorporated himself into our humanity. He has assimilated the people of God into Himself as his own Body.

2 - The mystery of Christ and His Church

Previous to this we have looked at the analagous picture of marriage as an expression, worked out in the lives of men and women who marry, to be an expression of the mystery between Christ and the Church. It is a mystery declared by their common life together, their ways of relating to one another, and the matter of spousal love to be evidenced only within a common life and welfare together.

The sacraments also have to be understood as a common life - κοινωνία - or participation, in the mystery of Christ and his Church within the communion of the Holy Spirit.

3 - Baptism not simply a ritual or a human response.

To interpret the meaning of baptism we have to look at the whole saving work of God in Christ Jesus. For it is only as we go there we find the objective grounds for the content, reality and power of baptism.

This means that we do not look at baptism simply as an event in itself. We do not look at it simply as a ritual act, which has its meaning simply in its performance. Nor do we, in the same way, simply regard it as an act that is done simply as a matter of human response; we are not looking to the attitude of the baptised and his obedience of faith - its ground, meaning and content do not lie there.

Baptism has its focus beyond these two matters of ritual or response. Its focus is directed to the one saving act of God which was embodied in Jesus. Focussing here means that when the Church baptises

in his name, it is actually Christ himself who is at work, pouring out his Spirit upon us and drawing us within the power of his vicarious life, death and resurrection. Baptism is powerful and operative in that Jesus Christ is risen and alive.

4- Looking past the ritual to the grounds of the act

That people were actually baptised was important, but the early Church's interest did not lie in the ritual act of baptism; and its lack of interest is seen in that it gave us no record of a rite of baptism. What was indispensable to baptism however, was the act that stood behind it and which now impinges on us through our baptism.

This is consistent with our understanding that a sacrament is a sign it is not the thing, the reality, which is signified. This means that we must look at the sign as a pointer; we must move our gaze from it to focus on the realities which it points to. The sign points to something which is not itself.

In that sense, the name baptisma, [not baptismos], points not to the ritual but to the objective reality that stands behind the ritual. It is the reality that is found in Jesus Christ himself. [kerygma has the same issue, it points not to the act of preaching, but to what is preached - the objective content, which is Jesus Christ himself].

For both baptisma and kerygma their primary reference is the to the mystery of the kingdom, the mystery of Christ, God manifest in the flesh. Their secondary reference is to the activity of the Church in preaching and baptising.

So, primarily, baptisma refers not simply to the baptising of someone in the name of Christ, but to the baptism with which Jesus Christ himself was baptised for our sakes; this is where the reality lies. And this baptism Christ worked out right through his whole life from his birth to his resurrection. It is the one baptism which he continues to apply by his Spirit to us in our baptism into Him. In this way, for our baptism, He is both its material content and its active agent.

It comes to this, baptism is both an act of Christ and the act of the Church in His name. But it is understood finally not in the terms of what the Church does but what God in Christ has done, does do and will do for us in the Spirit.

5 - John's Baptism is our 1st point of reference

It is the preparatory baptism of John, initiation by water into the messianic age and community that gave to the Christian church the ritual act. But Christian baptism is not 'baptism into John'. Rather, what our baptism means begins with a transformation of John's baptism. It finds its meaning in what happened to Jesus.

For Jesus, his submission to John's baptism in the Jordan found its meaning fulfilled throughout the whole course of his vicarious obedience. In the Jordan waters he stood with sinners and then went on to do the implications of that for the whole of his life, his death and his resurrection. Its issue was his whole life's commission.

John brought together the preaching of the Kingdom with an act of baptism leading to repentance for the remission of sins. He was sent to baptise in water in the light of the coming One, the Christ who, when he came, would baptise in Holy Spirit and fire. In this way he would fulfil the messianic promise of the last days when God would cleanse his people by judgment, pour out his Spirit and inaugurate a new age. This account of John's work is found in the Gospels and interpreted in the light of the whole life of the Christ bringing about its fulfilment.

In being baptised by John, Jesus humbled himself to identify with sinners. He did this in obedience to his Father's will to make many 'righteous'. It was then that the Father opened the heavens, declared his pleasure with his beloved Son and what followed was the public descent of the Spirit upon him. The early Church understood this not to be the time when He was adopted as Son, but that it pointed back to his birth by the Spirit, to be the Saviour of the world, and also forward to his death on a cross when he was to fulfil the whole work of atoning redemption.

6 - Jesus' death is our 2nd point of reference

Certainly Jesus linked his baptism in the Jordan with his death. And then, in his teaching and interpreted his whole life as the Son of man who came to serve and give his life a ransom for many. In the last Supper he went on to inaugurate the new covenant in his blood for the remission of sins. In this way, his baptism and his cup both spoke of the sacrificial life and death into which he was consecrated in the Jordan river.

Both his baptism in the Jordan were matters that issued from the Father. For in the case of John, he heard his cousins' voice but really his Father's word through this prophet; in the case of his death, He understood the cup was from the Father.

7 - Pentecost: our 3rd point of reference - Jesus baptising in the Spirit & fire

The early Church also made much of the coming of the Spirit upon Jesus at his baptism. It was an anointing to be King of the messianic kingdom and endowed him with authority. It pointed through his suffering to his exaltation. In his exaltation he opens the kingdom of heaven to all believers baptised in his Name. He also pours out on them the fullness of his Spirit. This action was the promised baptism in the Spirit which was inherently anticipated by John concerning the baptism that Jesus would bring [Acts 2.1-13].

8 - The commission to make disciples of the nations. Matthew 28.16-20

In the exercise of this power/authority that Jesus commissioned his apostles, telling them to make disciples of all the nations. They were to do this by baptising and teaching them all that Jesus had commanded them. This was what they were to do; when they did it the empowering and reality of that 'being made a disciple of Jesus' was received from Jesus by the Spirit - it was based upon what Jesus did in respect of his vicarious life, death and resurrection.

9 - Baptism in water and Spirit - one common baptism. 1 John 5.6-8

It is upon this basis that we understand the baptism in the Name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. It drives us back to Jesus own baptism in the Jordan and then takes us forward to Pentecost which is the baptism of the Church in Spirit. What happened to Jesus Christ in all that he underwent by incarnation, was baptised in the Jordan in receiving a baptism for sinners, and then went on and endured for our sakes, formed the content of both baptisms; so making them essentially one baptism common to Christ and his Church.

10 - Baptism is union with Christ: Romans 6.3-7; 1 Peter 3.18-4.1

Baptism means that we become one with Him, sharing in his righteousness, and that we are sanctified in Him as members of the messianic people of God, compacted into one Body in Christ. So there is one baptism, and one Body through the one Spirit. Christ and his Church participate in the one baptism in different ways - Christ actively and vicariously as Redeemer, the Church passively and receptively as the redeemed Community.

11 - Each individual who is baptised may find:

1. It is their initiation into and the sharing in the one vicarious baptism of Christ
2. Through his birth they have a new birth and are made members of the new humanity
3. Through his obedient life and death as the incarnate Son their sins are forgiven and they are clothed with new righteousness.
4. Through his resurrection and triumph over the powers of darkness they are freed from the dominion of evil.
5. Through his ascension to the Father the Kingdom of heaven is opened for them, and they wait for his coming again to fulfil in them the new creation
6. Through sharing in his Spirit they are made members of his Body, and are admitted into

the communion of the Holy Trinity.

Baptism sets forth not what we do nor primarily what the church does to us, but what God has already done for us in Christ, and through his Spirit continues to do in and to us.

Our baptism is not ritual washing baptisimos, it is a baptisma. It is not a separate or a new baptism but a participation in the one all-inclusive baptism in common with Christ and his Church. It was worked out vicariously through Christ alone but into which he has assimilated the Church through the baptism in the one Spirit, and which he applies to each of us through the same Spirit. It is baptism in the Name of the triune God.

Some Linguistic Matters

(a) the words, "baptein", "baptizein", "louesthai" in OT/NT.

When we come to think about baptism we need to be very clear as to the words which are used in the Old and the New Testaments and their respective differences. In the NT, the use of the verb "baptein" does not change from the way the LXX - the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible - translates it continually.

However, the word "baptizein" undergoes a change in its usage once we are looking at the NT. Consistent with its usage in the LXX, it is used metaphorically (for eg. by Christ of his sufferings (Mark 10.36,39, Lk.12.50) and of ceremonial purification (Luke 11.38). However, inconsistent with its usage in the LXX it is used for the initiatory rite, where a washing for religious purposes is the central idea in view. It is this usage which brings us close to the technical sense of 'baptizing' as we understand it. It is worthy of note that, in this usage, the word "louesthai" - washing - is never used. It is clear, from Luke 11.38 that, of itself, the word "baptizein" does not carry the meaning there of immersion.

(b) The prepositions used with "baptizein" in the NT.

When the verb is followed by a preposition, it can sometimes refer to:

(i) the element into which the immersion takes place e.g. Mark 1.9 in ("eis") the Jordan Mark 1.9) or in which the immersion takes place (in ("en") the Jordan, Mark 1.5, in water Matt.3.11, John 1.26)

(ii) the purpose, or end in view of the immersion. (Matt.3.11, unto repentance, Acts 2.38 unto remission of sins ("eis" in both cases)

In the case of "eis" we also have a large number of renderings in the English translations. Of this same Greek word we have: "into" (Romans 6.39, "unto" Matt.3.11 "for" (Acts 2.38) and "in" (Matt.28.19). This should not surprise us for prepositions are much used little words, and the context in which they are set is often decisive for the way they are translated. However, the basic idea, which is what we want, of the preposition "eis" is 'with a view to'.

(c) The verb "baptizein", when used of the person to be baptised, is always in the passive.

The significance of this grammatical point is very important. It means that the divine side of baptism is primary - what matters is what God is doing to us, not what we think we are doing when we undergo baptism. The meaning of baptism as we shall see, is to be found in the NT as stating what it is that God is doing.

(d) the difference in usage of "baptisma" and "baptisimos"

Here we see that the former is used of John's baptism and of Christian baptism, the latter word is used of the Jewish ceremonial washings (Mark 7.4, Luke 9.38 39, Heb.9.10). Such texts as Romans 6.4, Ephesians 4.5, and 1 Peter 3.21 indicate that "baptisma" was reserved for Christian baptism. (Although there is the variant reading of Col.1.12).

In the LXX - the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible - the word "baptein" is used frequently in the sense of "dip" (Ex 12.22, Lev.4.6,17,9.9,14.6 etc.) The intensive "baptizein" occurs three times, twice literally to refer to bathing (Namaan 2 Kings 5.14, and Judith 2 Kings 12.7) and once metaphorically (Isaiah 21.4).

The usual word for ceremonial washing is "louesthai", the middle voice being used for the person who does the washing does it for himself, in his own interests. (Lev.14.8,9,15.5-10,13.16-22, 16.4 etc.) The active is used of Moses washing Aaron and his sons (Ex. 29.4,10.12, Lev.8.6) and of God washing Jerusalem (Ezekiel 16.49).

But "baptizein" is not used in the LXX of any initiatory rite. And the two cognate nouns "baptisimos" and "baptisma" are not found in the LXX; probably due to the fact, certainly in the case of baptisma, that the Christian church coined the word to express what they wanted to indicate.