

Spiritual Baptism

extract from Proposition XII § x

§ x. *Objection:* Fourth, they base an objection on the meaning of the word “baptize” which means to dip and wash with water; they allege that the very word means being baptized with water.

Answer: This objection is very weak. Paulus Riccius shows that baptizing with water was a rite among the Jews, even before John came; the ceremony received that name from the nature of the practice used both by the Jews and by John. Yet we find that Christ and his apostles frequently make use of these terms with a more spiritual meaning. Circumcision was only understood among the Jews to mean that of the flesh,¹ but the apostle tells us of “circumcision of the heart and spirit made without hands.”² So the word baptism was used, among the Jews, only to mean washing with water, but John, Christ, and his apostles speak of being “baptized with the Spirit and with fire”³ which they consider the specific baptism of Christ, different from the baptism with water, which was John’s (as has been shown above). Among the Jews baptism was only understood to be of water, yet among Christians it is very well understood to be of the Spirit without water, just as we see that Christ and his apostles understand things spiritually, using the terms which referred to shadows before. For example Christ, speaking of his body (though the Jews misunderstood him) said that he would “destroy this temple,” and “build it again in three days.”⁴ Many more examples could be mentioned.

¹ See Deuteronomy 30:6 and Jeremiah 4:4 where circumcision of the heart is mentioned.

² See Romans 2:29 and Colossians 2:11.

³ Matthew 3:11, Luke 3:16.

⁴ John 2:19

If we tenaciously adhered to the etymology of the word, it would work against most of our adversaries, as well as against us. The Greek βαπτίζω means *immergo*, that is to “plunge” or “immerse,” and that was the practice of water baptism among the Jews and also by John and the primitive Christians who did it. However our adversaries, for the most part, only sprinkle a little water on the forehead, which does not agree with the meaning of the word “baptism.” In the old times Christians who practiced water baptism thought this immersion or plunging so necessary that they dipped children. But it was thought that it might harm some who were physically weak, and therefore sprinkling was introduced to prevent that harm. But then it was ruled that people who were only sprinkled and not dipped should not be allowed to have any office in the Church, since they were not sufficiently baptized. So if our adversaries want to stick to the word, they must change their method of sprinkling.

Objection: Fifth, they cite (John 3:5) “Unless one is born of Water and of the Spirit, etc.” and infer the necessity of water baptism, as well as of the Spirit.

Answer: If this proved anything, it would prove that water baptism is an absolute necessity. But when the Papists insist on the necessity of water baptism based on this verse, Protestants rightly reply that “water” should not be understood here to mean outward water, but rather a mystical inward cleansing and washing. In the same way when Christ speaks of being “baptized with fire” it is not to be understood as outward material fire, but only as a figure of speech that means to purify. To purify is an effect of fire, as to wash and make clean is an effect of water. Therefore the Scripture refers to water where it cannot be understood to mean outward water,⁵ for example where we are said to be “saved by the washing of regeneration” (Titus 3:5).

⁵ Here the translation follows the Latin, which is much clearer.

Indeed in a place often cited, as Calvin observes,⁶ Peter says explicitly that “the baptism which saves is not a putting away of the filth of the flesh.”⁷ Therefore, since “water” cannot be interpreted to mean outward water, this objection does not serve to prove the necessity of water baptism. . . .

Objection: Sixth and last, they object that the baptism of water is a visible sign, or badge, to distinguish Christians from infidels, like the circumcision of the Jews.

Answer: This doesn’t say anything at all, unless it can be proved to be a necessary precept or part of the New Covenant dispensation. It is not lawful for us to impose outward ceremonies and rituals, and say they will distinguish us from infidels. Circumcision was positively commanded, and was said to be a seal of the first Covenant, but as we have already proved there is no such commandment for baptism, and there is not a word in all the New Testament calling it a badge of Christianity or seal of the New Covenant. Therefore unless they can offer some better proof, they beg the question miserably when they say that because circumcision was so, baptism is likewise so. Profession of faith in Christ and a holy life appropriate to that profession is a far better badge of Christianity than any outward washing. Baptism is not like circumcision, since that made a mark on the flesh, which baptism does not. A Christian is not known to be a Christian because he was baptized, especially when he was a child, unless he tells them he was baptized, and may not a profession of faith in Christ serve the same purpose?

Sources: Robert Barclay, *Apology for the True Christian Divinity*, Proposition XII § x (Glenside PA: Quaker Heritage Press, 2002) pp. 368-371 and Roberti Barclaii, *Teologiae*

⁶ In the fourth book of his *Institutes*, chapter 15 RB

⁷ 1 Peter 3:21

verè Christianae apologia, facsimile (Amsterdam: Jacob
Claus, 1676) pp. 283-285.