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STUDIES IN BAPTISM

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No. 26: The Hermeneutics of Baptism

"And that from childhood you have known the sacred writings which are able to give you the wisdom that leads to salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness" (2 Tim. 3:15-16).

Some years ago I knew a man who edited a semi-reformed newspaper. I'll call him Balthasar. Balthasar was a Calvinistic Baptist. He knew that I was a Presbyterian, and liked to talk about certain aspects of theology where we agreed. Through our conversations I noticed that he was becoming more and more interested in the covenant. Balthasar's theological pilgrimage into covenant theology started with the Law. He read the Puritans and quickly noticed their zeal for holiness grew out of a commitment to Old Testament Law (moral and political, not ceremonial). Balthasar was somewhat conservative in his political views, and this enabled him to take a hard line on capital punishment.

Then, one day, it seemed he suddenly changed his direction, left his study of the Law of God and the covenant, and headed into radical Anabaptism. Balthasar had been reading an antinomian Baptist who was splitting the Calvinistic Baptists at that time, and felt that Anabaptism was more consistent with his belief. I was rather perplexed. Not too long after Balthasar's change, a friend told me what happened.

In his opinion, Balthasar had realized where the study of the covenant was taking him. Balthasar was becoming committed to a basic principle of hermeneutics—namely, we do what God tells us to do until He says stop doing it—which was leading him into infant baptism. My friend said Balthasar was certain that the New Testament did not teach infant baptism. Yet, if he accepted the hermeneutical principles of his Presbyterian friends, he was bound to have to give up believer's baptism.

I remember that this situation made an impression on me. I had seen others of my Baptist friends do similarly (in an earlier essay I talked about some of these people), but Balthasar was so close. None of the others had come so close, and turned back. But this was not what impressed me. I had confirmation that *one's view of the sacraments affects his general system of hermeneutics and vice versa.*

Hermeneutics is the study of methods of interpretation, and, generally speaking, one interprets the Bible according to his view of the sacraments. A Roman Catholic usually adopts an understanding of Scripture according to his doctrine of substance (See essay No. 23 of this series for explanation of the Roman Catholic doctrine of substance), and a Baptist tends to follow a hermeneutic which is consistent with his believer's baptism doctrine.

Having said the sacraments affect one's interpretation of

Scripture, this is not to say that it does not go the other direction. The Protestant Reformers altered their view of Scripture, and a different understanding of the sacraments resulted. Whether one begins with the sacraments or with Scripture, he will find a direct interplay between the two. In this essay we want to develop the relationship between hermeneutics and the sacraments. To do this, we must talk about hermeneutics in general. But our goal is not to become so technical that we shift emphasis. This is an essay designed to point out the sacramental theology implicit within hermeneutics, and the hermeneutics implicit within the sacraments.

Humanistic Canons of Persuasion

Whether we realize it or not, we often require the Bible to conform to our standard of reason, or rationality. This standard is called a *canon of persuasion*. It may be as simple as requiring the Bible explicitly to say something so that we must have chapter and verse before we will consider a matter Scriptural. Or, the canon may be as sophisticated as Aristotle's laws of logic so that a matter is not Biblical unless it is logical. In either case, however, these canons are guidelines *outside* the Bible which we make the Bible conform to before we believe a certain doctrine is correct.

I call these *humanistic* canons because they exist in the mind of man apart from Scripture. The Bible itself does not develop them, and here is where the problem I am concerned with begins. If we bring canons of persuasion and humanistic hermeneutics to the Bible, what we believe about the content and doctrine of Scripture will tend to be consistent with our original standards of interpretation. If this seems backwards, that's because the canons of persuasion approach begins with man instead of God. This is a humanistic method of interpretation which, I believe, issues into a humanistic view of the sacraments.

Instead, man should start with God's Word and allow God's language to structure his mind. Of course, no man comes to the Bible with a blank mind. His mind must be restructured by constantly being confronted by God's mind. The restructuring of the mind of man begins at baptism. Baptism thrusts him into a new interpretive framework, and from this we can begin to appreciate the effect baptism has on one's interpretation of Scripture. Restructuring does not begin in the theoretical, but in the visual as well as the verbal proclamation of the Word of God.

To think that one understands the Bible apart from this baptismal context is naive. Baptism (and Communion) is (are) the visual presentation(s) of the Gospel. The event of baptism—mode, meaning, recipient(s)—is quite impressive on our minds. This explains why these issues stand or fall together. One who understood this was Karl Barth, the early 20th century European Reformed theologian. He innovated a system of hermeneutics and the sacraments that revolutionized Reformational thought. Importantly, his system was

compatible with many of the presuppositions of American Fundamentalism. Thus, we will use his system to probe the interplay between **hermeneutics** and baptism.

New Testamentalism

As evangelical protestants, we are most familiar with this approach to baptism and **hermeneutics**. It is the belief that the New Testament takes *priority* in the interpretation of Scripture. Canonicity of the Old Testament is not denied, but the practical effect is there. I recently spoke to a doctoral student at the leading Dispensationalist graduate school. He was somewhat shocked when I asked him how **theo-psychologists**¹ and Barthians would differ from his approach to the Old Testament. I do not think he had ever considered the point.

To clarify, I said, "Let's assume that you're a Dispensationalist pastor asked to preach through the Book of Deuteronomy. How would you apply it to your congregation?" He said, "I personally would tell them this ethic applies in the Millennium, but (he conceded) some of my associates would want to psychologize the text." I pursued him with the question, "why would your associates tend to do that?" He really did not know.

I explained to him the dynamics of the situation. If you are a Dispensational or Baptist² pastor, daring to preach through the Old Testament, you are faced with a real dilemma. Your theology dictates that the Old Testament has no direct relevance to the New Testament Christian. Yet, something inside of you says your series on the Book of Deuteronomy is not going to be very effective if you have to tell the congregation every week, "Here's an interesting law, but it doesn't apply." So, what does our pastor do?

If he wants to apply the text, he will have to do one or all of the following. He will have to typologize, that is, everything becomes a type (picture) of something to come in the New Testament. Read the early Dispensationalists, and you will see that this was almost the exclusive approach. The problem: this system works for some parts of the Old Testament, but it will not work with the *laws* of the Old Testament. Typologizing conveniently removes the practical relevancy of the most relevant part of the Old Testament.

Two, if the pastor does not want to typologize, he can psychologize the text. Reminds me of a series, by a pastor of this persuasion, called, "The Emotional Hang-ups of Moses." This pastor took pop psychology and foisted it on the Bible text to make it relevant.

Three, if these seem unsatisfactory there is one last option. The pastor can spiritualize the text. If that word sounds nebulous, that is because this approach basically says the Word of God is not the Word of God until it takes meaning in your life. What the original authors intended to say is not important. What the text means to you, whatever that may be, is all that matters.

Keep in mind that the pastor is hypothetical, but the doctoral student to whom I was describing the problem was real. His response was just as real when I pointed out to him that the first two approaches to the Old Testament text are not much different from the third. And the third was the approach of Barthianism and neo-orthodoxy. The New Testamentalism of Dispensationalism, therefore, can easily end up running into the neo-orthodoxy of Barthianism on the question, "how do we apply the Old Testament to the New Testament Christian?"

All of this results from placing a priority on the New Testament to the exclusion of historical, ethical, and sacramen-

tal relevance of the Old Testament. This opens the relationship of **hermeneutics** and the sacraments. New Testamentalism elevates the New Testament virtually to another category of canonical Scripture which might be called "super Scripture." The relevance of the rest of Scripture is minimized and, practically speaking, almost falls from the canon. But the theological effects of New Testamentalism "on the doctrines of inspiration, creation, and the sacraments have been far reaching, as we shall see in the following.

New Testamentalism and Barthianism

First, New Testamentalism and Barthianism. There is a vital connection between the former and the latter. Once Barth was asked if he believed in creation. He assured the questioner that he did indeed. The interrogator pressed another question. This time he asked Barth when he thought the creation occurred. Barth immediately responded that the creation took place in A.D. 33. Seems rather strange, but Barth knew precisely what he was saying and the implications of his statement.

As Van Tit, the greatest critic of Barth, properly analyzed, Barth put redemption *before* creation. This theological twist meant that the Word became the Word when it came to man (the Incarnation), or was experienced by man. This meant that prior to the incarnation there was no historical Word from God. The written Word was not authoritative until it became flesh and blood. Barth extended this concept to modern man by saying *experience* made the Bible authoritative, and this made the question of inerrancy irrelevant — historically and personally. Thus, for the Western Church, Barth rang the death bell on the doctrine of the inspiration and inerrancy of Scripture.

Barth also knew the 'significance of his hermeneutic — redemption before creation, New Testament before Old Testament — for the sacrament of baptism. Although Barth came from a reformed, covenantal background, he was extremely critical of infant baptism — to the point of writing a very influential work on the subject. Why was Barth so antagonistic to infant baptism?

By placing redemption prior to creation, the New Testament became the foundation of the Old Testament. Without the Old Testament as a backdrop to the New, it was natural for Barth to do away with any concept of historical and generational continuity. This destroyed the concept of covenant. In the Old Testament, God saved by family units. Without the Old Testament backdrop, however, Barth could read some type of hyper-individualism into the text of the New Testament. No longer did God deal with the *covenantal unit*; the movement of the Bible was from the corporate to individual. The place of infants in the covenant disappeared through a doctrine of radical dynamism — inverting conversion experience over the covenant — which was no different from that espoused by the original Anabaptists.

The early Anabaptists had applied the same kind of inversion to Scripture. The original Anabaptists, claiming mystical conversions, began to question whether the New Testament commanded infant baptism. Concluding that the New Testament never mentioned the subject, second baptism was received.

Notice that implicit in this approach is the subjugation of the Bible to *canons of persuasion*. The early Anabaptists, whether self-conscious of their approach or not, required the Bible to conform to their presuppositions. How so?

First, they began with the New Testament and *assumed* that totally new sacraments and ethics were given. But if they had assumed continuity their emphases on discontinuity would have been balanced. Although God gave new sacraments, they were not totally unique. He still used sacraments of food and boundary which, even though possessing unique New Covenant features, were not completely dissimilar from the sacraments of food and boundary in the Old Testament.

1. This term represents a movement which wants to "psychologize" the Bible. More will be said about this later.

2. Baptist **theology**, even though some Baptist ministers talk about Covenant theology, has essentially the same approach to the Old Testament. It may not draw the same **eschatological** conclusions, but the same radical discontinuity of the Dispensationalist between the Old and New Testaments still exists.

Second, they were quick to assume that the household baptisms of the New Testament did not include infants. If they had begun with the Old Testament and operated from the presupposition that God had always saved by households, their biases would have evaporated. Only presuppositional bias would have led them to this conclusion. But they would probably counter by saying that the baptism of infants is not *specifically* mentioned.

Third, this begs the question. The New Testament does specifically mention infant baptism via household baptisms. But Baptists want to see the very words, “infants are to be baptized.” Their request sounds so spiritual to some, but who are we to demand that God must say something just the way we expect before complying? When He establishes a concept for thirty-nine books of the Bible—placement of the newborn child into the covenant—God expects us to know what to do with our children. As a matter of fact, we observe the same New Testament silence about participation in the other sacrament, but I am not referring to infants.

The New Testament nowhere says that women can take communion. Here is an important point. Regarding the food-sacrament of Scripture we find only general designation of who can take the sacrament. God expects us to reason from the food-sacrament of the Old Testament which clearly admitted the whole family to the table of the peace offering and the table of passover. Anabaptist theology tacitly extends the mind set of the food-sacrament of the Old Testament to the women of the New Testament. And to my knowledge, no Anabaptists denied the Lord’s Supper to their wives on the same basis they refused the first sacrament to their children. Why the inconsistency? I am not sure I can answer that question to anyone’s satisfaction, but I am confident in saying that external canons of persuasion kept them from seeing the inconsistency.

If we begin with the Bible, we must let all of the Word of God speak to man. What right do we have to determine how God must express Himself before we obey? All of God’s Word is commandment. Regardless of the hermeneutical problems we think this creates for us, we must begin here. Besides, as one old minister once said, “if you think there is a contradiction in the Bible, just keep reading. The problem will work itself out.” Taken in its continuity, the Bible does not contradict itself. Whatever is perceived to be internally conflicting is only perception not reality.

Barth, however, sought to resolve all of the apparent conflicts of Revelation with his infamous system. By making the New Testament normative, the Old Testament became practically irrelevant. Certainly those original Anabaptists and many of their successors were better than this delinquent theology. But the practical bottom line was a primacy of the New Testament doctrine which wrecked the Christian Faith’s doctrines of Scripture and ethics. The fact is that four-fifths of the Bible is in the Old Testament. It seems clear that if the New Covenant were a new, New Covenant and not just a New-Old-Covenant, then God would have needed to reveal much more in Scripture. The doing away of the Old Testament, as the Baptist hermeneutic dictates, creates insufferable ethical issues. For starters, what does one do about sins such as bestiality and the laws of consanguinity?³

The relationship between the doctrine of Scripture and ethics was driven home to me early in my Seminary career. I was taking an introductory course to the Old Testament. The professor, probably the most brilliant ever to have graduated from and taught at this seminary, was completing a series of lectures which defended the integrity of the text. He was attempting to argue internally from the Bible to establish that every jot and title were inspired.

3. It should be kept in mind that strictly speaking, incest was the problem at Corinth (1 Cor. 5). The violation of the Old Testament laws of consanguinity is not referred to.

The passage he chose to make his point was Matthew 5:17ff. which reads, “Do not think that I came to abolish the law or the prophets; I did not come to abolish, but to fulfill. For truly I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or stroke shall pass away from the Law, until all is accomplished.” After reading the passage, there was a pause. Then he said, “this passage actually proves something else which causes Dispensationalists some difficulty.”⁴ But that subject is not within the scope of this course. At the moment, we only want to note that every jot and title of Scripture are inspired.”

What did he mean? I did not see the significance of what he was saying until two years later. First of all, to be consistent, the Baptist/Dispensational hermeneutic, New Testament before Old, actually does away with more than the Old Testament. Much of the relevancy of the New Testament disappears with the Old. The Gospels come before the Cross and close of the Old Testament, so they are not relevant. The Book of Acts is considered transitional unless the miraculous gifts are considered normative, and most Baptists and Dispensationalists do not want this, so the Book of Acts is out. The Book of Revelation concerns the future. Finally, some of the Epistles were written to the Jews, and this leaves us with only a few of the Epistles, Pauline, Pastoral, and Johannine, being truly normative for gentile Christians.

Second, This brings us back to the discussion of Barth. In the early 1960s, Cornelius Van Til was asked to come and lecture on Barthianism at one of the leading Dispensational seminaries. The seminary was having a very difficult time combating the teachings of Barth. Consequently, many of the students were running head long into neo-orthodoxy. Why should this fundamentalist seminary be forced to call a covenant theologian in to crush a heresy which attacks the integrity of Scripture—the very thing this fundamentalist seminary was created for? The answer is fairly simple, and it is found in my professors comments. One cannot use a passage which establishes the continuity of Old Testament Law to prove the plenary inspiration of Scripture without simultaneously arguing the former. In other words, throw out the Law of the Old Testament and the inspiration of the Old and/or New Testaments will not stand.

Another way of looking at this point comes forward in an objection I raised to one of my professors. If one appeals to the Words of Jesus to create a hermeneutic, and these words are not normative for a Church age Christian, how do we maintain a doctrine of inerrancy? Evidently, many other Dispensationalists have found that question difficult to answer, judging by the number of them who have fled into the neo-orthodoxy of Barth. It is the very point we have been attempting to make. Barth inverted the Old and New Testaments, and began creation at Redemption. Using the Anabaptists’ presupposition of New Testamentalism, he put New Testament before Old Testament in priority.

Thus, we have analyzed New Testamentalism by seeing its relationship to Barthianism, and by pointing out the dangers of giving priority to the New Testament. This ploy seems so harmless. We simply ask, as the Anabaptists initially did, “where does the New Testament teach this or that?” And most often the “this or that” primarily have to do with the sacrament. But the result is that the integrity of the canon of Scripture is swept away, ethical ruptures emerge, the Bible is divided around two people’s of God, and the covenant of baptism is inverted. A basic canon of persuasion extraneous to the Scripture turns a sacramental issue into the nightmare hermeneutic of Barth.

New Testamentalism and Evolutionary Imagery Second, inverting the Testaments of Scripture leads to

4. This professor has since become a covenant theologian. It was a great loss to the seminary I am referring to.

an even more basic problem concerning creation. If one places priority on the New Testament, how does he argue with integrity for Biblical creation? After all, his hermeneutical concerns have removed, as ethically normative, the very Old Testament which teaches the creation account. Again we hasten to note that most fundamentalists who have a Baptist hermeneutic and sacrament believe in creation. But Barth and the neo-orthodox would criticize them for being inconsistent on this point. For, Barth used the same primacy of the New Testament to argue for a chaos to creation view of history. Let us return to the conversation where Barth said creation happened at the Incarnation.

When Barth put creation on top of redemption, he created a paradigm that accommodated evolutionary presuppositions. The Church had been waiting for this for one hundred years. The mind of Western man was convinced of evolution, but the Church had not come up with a system which was logically consistent with Darwinism. What was it about Barth's system that resolved the tension? And how was it evolutionary to make creation run on the model of redemption?

Redemption is a death-to-life concept. By interpreting creation as death-to-life, matter becomes preexistent; chaos is necessary to life; original creation is not created good; primitive (chaotic) is pure; and life originates in the chaotic. All of these points feed the basic revolutionary theology of the 20th century, and all need to be addressed. But only the last development of Barth's death-to-life view of creation —life originates in the chaotic— touches on our concerns in this essay.

Evolution believes that life comes from chaos. Specifically, chaos is the sea. Evolutionists speak of one-ceiled life spontaneously erupting in time, and evolving into lower life forms, all, in the sea. Thus, the pre-eminent symbol for the origin of life and chaos is the sea. And among the religions of the world this symbol usually appears somewhere.

Christianity, however, is unique. Man, strictly speaking, did not come from the sea, nor did he evolve from a lower life-form from the sea. Although land rises out of the water (Gen. 1), man was made out of dust. After the fall of man, dust as well as the sea become definite images of death. Those being covered over by the sea are considered under the judgment of God. Here is where we come to the sacrament of baptism.

The notion that the proper mode of baptism is immersion reflects pagan evolutionary influence on Christianity. Here is why. Immersion shows man going back into and then out of the sea. This conveys the idea of man having to make some sort of descent before he can be raised—a descent into the sea of chaos.

But this is not true. First, descent was not necessary to creation. Man was originally good. Second, although man descended and fell in sin, he did not have the capacity to redeem. Christ was the only one who could descend into judgment, and come back alive. Here is the greatest fallacy of immersion. This symbol implies that man can recapitulate Christ's death. But he cannot. Man cannot messianically participate. To do so would make man into God. Rather, the Church has always accepted Pauline theology which says salvation is judicial and declarative. Man's personal involvement is therefore forensic.

Third, immersion imagery distorts the nature of water death. Water is a symbol of judgment and not just death. The pagan mind does not necessarily view death as judgment, and that is why the heathen warrior is not afraid of dying. Death is judgment in the Bible, and water judgment is always pictured as a downpour of water. The two great water judgments picture this. At the flood, rain from above was the primary source of judgment, and at the parting of the Red Sea, waters came down on top of the Egyptians. In each case, it was water from above that killed, and thus, the judgment of God. The created world (sea) was not the source of life, but rather, was used to bring judgment from the One who was the true Creator.

Immersion breaks down all of this imagery and conveys a back-to-the-sea-of-chaos idea. The Bible teaches that baptism is to be applied by pouring or sprinkling to show judgment. But it is not a judgment unto death. Rather, it is a judgment unto life.

Immersion borrows from pagan imagery. The historic Church has rejected this method except where dominated by Greek-pagan ideas. For the last century, it has been popular among Barthians and liberals to advocate immersion as the

proper, even Biblical mode. Many Baptists have naively accepted their scholarship without understanding why Barth and others would so readily accept immersion. We have attempted to explain the faulty hermeneutical and theological methods and presuppositions which have led to this.

To summarize: Barth put redemption before creation, the New Testament before the Old Testament. This complete inversion effected the doctrines of inspiration, ethics, and baptism. We have called this faulty hermeneutic *New Testamentalism*, and attempted to show the relationship of Barth's and the Anabaptists' New Testamentalism. Thus, hermeneutics and the sacraments effect each other in supporting and causal fashion.

One supporting illustration of how faulty hermeneutics and sacraments effect one another is found in almost any standard Baptist work on the mode of baptism. Baptist writers and preachers are notorious for going to non-canonical uses of the Greek word for "baptize" to try to establish that the word is used to mean immerse. As we said at the beginning of this essay, one should not come to the Bible with *canons of persuasion*. The Bible is below no other book, and is its own interpreter. In the case of mode, it is not surprising to find that the pagan mode of baptism is immersion. We saw this above. But the Bible must show this mode from its own internal use of the term. Careful study shows another mode which will be considered at another point.

For now, we are talking about the hermeneutics of baptism. Up to this point we have been critical. If our study stopped here, we shall have only succeeded in tearing down the most popular approach to hermeneutics and the sacraments among liberals and fundamentalists. Let us, therefore, turn our attention in a more positive direction.

Trinitarian Hermeneutics

The basic theme in the essays of this series on baptism has been that one's view of baptism should be consistent with the doctrine of the Trinity. The Trinity has a covenantal structure which is one and many. This same oneness and manyness appears in the correct view of hermeneutics. This is not something which is external to the Bible; rather, we see this Trinitarian view of Scripture in the verses at the beginning of this essay.

Paul says, "All Scripture is inspired." The word "Scripture" is singular. Yet, in the previous verse Paul stated that Timothy had known the "sacred writings," plural. Here we have the Bible speaking about itself. Scripture is both one and many, singular and plural. We should not be astonished. God is three and one. Neither is more basic. But how is this a guide to hermeneutics?

Since Scripture is one and three, it has continuity and discontinuity. When one comes to any text of Scripture, he should therefore look for basic contextual similarity and dissimilarity. That is, the pericope—verse, paragraph, chapter, or book—will have certain things in common with the rest of the Bible. It will also have its own unique contribution to the canon of Scripture.

Thus, the proper way to understand the Bible is to use all of the canon of Scripture (all sixty six books) to do two things. One, see how this passage fits in with the whole of the Bible. Two, determine its special message.

Roman Catholic scholars tend to find too much continuity in the text. Baptist theologians invest Scripture with too much discontinuity. Rome emphasizes the corporateness of Scripture. Nominalists note the personalness, particularity, of the New Testament.

Many times over, we have shown these same views of the sacraments. Romanists err on the side of the one, and nominalists err on the side of the many. Romanists think the oneness of God is more fundamental than His manyness. This comes out in their view of sacraments and hermeneutics. Baptists, although not as self conscious as Catholic theologians, manifest too much concentration on the manyness. Their view of the sacraments also bears this out. Perhaps we can now better comprehend the relationship between hermeneutics and the sacraments. To err in one is to err in the other.

(Note: This is the last in the series on baptism. All of these essays represent part of a book on the subject which is presently being written. Hopefully, publication will take place in early 1985. Write Geneva Divinity School for back issues and additional information.)