

THE SYMBOLISM OF BAPTISM (Part Two) **“The Testimony of Baptism”**

INTRODUCTION:

In the previous message, we gave a detailed survey of the use of symbolism as a means in which the invisible Creator has used to communicate with His visible creature man. We saw that God’s use of symbols began before man’s fall in the garden and continued throughout the scriptures. We saw that it encompassed four realms:

First, in nature itself or what we call natural revelation.

Second, in special revelation as found in the Old Testament scriptures. Third, in special revelation as found in the New Testament scriptures. Fourth, in Jesus Christ Himself, as the God-man in *“the image of the invisible God.”* (Colossians 2:15).

We defined a symbol as something that points to a deeper reality, but is not the reality itself. In Luke 13:32 Jesus spoke of Herod in this manner. *“Go, tell that fox.”* Jesus made use of symbolism. He did not mean that Herod was a “real” fox, but that he had the cunningness or slyness of a fox. Based upon this understanding, some believe that baptism is a symbol of a deeper reality, namely regeneration, while others hold that baptism is the reality itself, thus affirming “baptismal regeneration.” We will deal with these distinctions in a future message. But today, I wish to take the position that water baptism is a symbol or representation of a deeper reality, namely, the regeneration, or renewing of a sinful person into Christ and His righteousness.

I. THE NEW CONVERT TO CHRIST

The Bible describes Christian conversion as a miraculous thing. It is such a personal, radical change that it cannot be described as something less than a “new birth,” a “second creation,” and a “resurrection from the dead.” When a human being is made conscious of such a change in his own experience, he now wishes to make a public confession of his faith. God also desires this to take place. Since God has made such a wide use of symbolism in various manners, we could only naturally expect that He would provide a special, visible symbol to enable the new convert to publically express his newfound faith in Christ as his Lord and Savior.

Let us now suppose that someone is standing before us as a candidate for membership in the church body. He has passed through the Spirit’s work in regeneration, and now wishes to make a public confession of his faith. What will that confession consist of? What are the leading truths or elements connected with this miraculous event of regeneration that he wishes to

express or describe? From time to time in the discourse before us, I will be asking you questions which I want you to answer in your minds.

1. The first truth involves a *confession of sinfulness*.

There are two figures or types under which the Bible primarily sets forth its conception of sin.

a. The first is that of *death*. The death of a human body is a most painful thing. It repulses our senses as we view its unnatural disfigurement, its insensibility to sight, sound, touch, expressions of love, its utter helplessness, its corruption and decay. It was said of Lazarus after he had been dead four days that *“by this time he stinketh.”* This is how the Bible portrays a sinner. He is *“dead in trespasses and sins”* (Ephesians 2:1); *“the soul that sinneth, it shall die”* (Ezekiel 18:4); *“The wages of sin is death”* (Romans 6:23). Sin and death are wedded together in scripture. Such a sinner is entombed in sin. How then shall our candidate symbolize to us his or her confession that they had been spiritually dead?

b. The other figure used by scripture to describe sin is that of *uncleanness*. Sin is viewed as a state of impurity, pollution, defilement, and filthiness. This was stressed in the Mosaic rituals guarding against all manner of ceremonial defilement. In particular, all dead bodies and those diseases which might be described as a living death such as leprosy, were marked out as unclean. These were regarded as special types of the filth of sin. The leper was required to cry out, “unclean, unclean” when anyone approached. So contaminating was sin viewed to be, that whatever came in the slightest contact with a dead body, was defiled and needed to undergo the ritual of cleansing, whether it was a person, animal, garment or piece of furniture.

Under the new covenant, sin is set forth as an inward defilement, or filthiness of soul. In Matthew 15:17-20, Jesus said, *“Do you not yet understand that whatever enters the mouth goes into the stomach and is eliminated? But those things which proceed out of the mouth come from the heart, and they defile a man. For out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies. These are the things which defile a man, but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile a man.”* The state or condition of sin is not only that of death, but of uncleanness as well. Impurity of soul is a fundamental truth contained in the gospel scheme. So what symbol shall the new convert select to confess his state of spiritual death and uncleanness? If you are that convert, and you have invented some symbol to represent your spiritual death, what would you choose to describe your total spiritual defilement?

2. The second great truth which this new convert would wish to express in his public confession of faith is his ***“entrance into a new way of living.”***

a. There are many figures which the Bible uses to set forth its conception of the new state in which the regenerated sinner has entered. The most frequent is that of the term ***“life.”*** As death is the representative type of sin, so life is the representative type of righteousness. ***“He who hears My word and believes in Him who sent Me has everlasting life, and shall not come into judgment, but has passed from death into life.”*** (John 5:24). ***“For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.”*** (Romans 6:23). ***“For to be carnally minded is death, but to be spiritually minded is life and peace.”*** (Romans 8:6).

The newborn convert believes he has entered into this life. He has passed from death unto life. Once dead in sin, he has been raised unto God. Conversion is a resurrection. In confessing his faith, how then should he symbolize his resurrection? If he has selected some symbol to describe his spiritual death, what symbol should he select to describe his spiritual resurrection?

b. There is a second figure which this resurrection unto a new way of living is pictured. It is a resurrection into a life of ***righteousness or purity***. In his unregenerate state, he had not merely been dead, but also defiled, so now, in his regenerate state, he has not only been quickened or made alive, but also cleansed. ***“If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”*** (I John 1:9). The new convert has passed under the quickening power of the gospel and is undergoing its purifying process which shall continue on until he shall be presented spotless before Christ in glory. If a public confession of faith involves his expressing his sense of total defilement, it is equally important that he express his desire for a total purification and his belief in that possibility. How then shall he express this desire? The first way is to symbolize his death to sin. The second is to symbolize his resurrection to life. The third is to symbolize his total defilement. The fourth is to symbolize his desire for total purification from sin. What symbol or symbols should he then select?

3. The third great truth which this new convert to Jesus would naturally wish to express is the ***source and power by which he has been made alive and cleansed***. This, of course, cannot be by any act or choice of his own. Death cannot resuscitate itself, and uncleanness cannot cleanse itself anymore than the leopard can change its spots. In Jeremiah 13:23 God asks, ***“Can the Ethiopian change his skin or the leopard its spots? Then may you also do good***

who are accustomed to do evil.” If the energy or power does not reside in the sinner, then where does it reside? By what energy source is the sinner who is dead in sin and stained in filth, made alive and cleansed?

a. Every true Christian understands that the death of the Son of God on the cross is the source of His peoples’ life. Jesus said, *“I am the living bread which came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever; and the bread that I shall give is my flesh, which I shall give for the life of the world.”* (John 6:51). *“Who Himself bore our sins in His own body on the tree, that we, having died to sins, might live for righteousness - by whose stripes you were healed.”* (I Peter 2:24). *“Having now been justified by His blood, we shall be saved from wrath through Him. For if when we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life.”* (Romans 5:9,10). Thus the source of the believer’s life is traced to Christ’s death.

b. This life of Christ is imparted to the dead sinner by the power of the Holy Spirit, so that a believer is joined to Christ in a vital, living, organic union, wherein he or she becomes an actual *participant* in the life, death, burial, and resurrection of Christ. Christ’s people are one in and with Him. He is the Vine: they are the branches (John 15:5). He is the Head: they are His body (Ephesians 5:23). He is the Bridegroom: they (the church) are His bride (Revelation 21:9). He is the second Adam: they are His spiritual offspring (Romans 5:14-19; I Corinthians 15:22; Hebrews 2:10-13).

This is the profound meaning of that distinguishing formula found throughout the Epistles which declares the believer to be “in Christ.” To be in Christ involves the doctrine that the believer has actually fulfilled the law of God in the person of Christ and His obedience. The law said, *“The soul that sinneth shall die.”* (Ezekiel 18:4). The believer has sinned and yet he shall live. In so doing, not one jot or tittle of God’s law has failed or been left unfulfilled. In virtue of his being in Christ, the believer died when Christ died. His sin was punished and the law vindicated. And so in Christ, the believer fulfilled all righteousness.

The scriptures declare such in these terms. Paul states in II Corinthians 5:14, *“We judge thus: that if One died for all, then all died.”* The believer is said to have been *“crucified with Christ,”* (Galatians 2:20), and to have been *“buried with Christ.”* (Colossians 2:12). So by being in Christ, the believer is empowered to live a resurrected life of obedience and purity unto God. Paul describes this power as being *“the love of God has been poured out (shed) in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who was given to us.”* (Romans 5:5). As the believer grows in the understanding of God’s love for him, he in turn is overwhelmed and constrained by

gratitude to live for God.

Perhaps an illustration can be given to help us better understand the nature of an organic or vital union with Christ. After all, how can one die with Christ when he was not even alive at the time of His death? This requires that we understand the meaning of the term “organic.” Organic “pertains to living parts of an organ as they are connected to the whole body.” The human body has many living organs which make up the body as an entire organism. Lets now illustrate the doctrine of organic union with Christ.

Let us suppose that a certain forest contained two special trees. I am a limb on one of the trees which is about 200 years old, but I am only 20 years old. One day a man appears with a chain saw and after examining my tree, he places a sign at the base of the tree which reads, “Marked Out For Destruction.” I inquire as to why the tree of which I am a member and related to is about to be cut down. I am informed that something happened many years ago in the history of that tree which led to a harmful effect on the forest as a whole. I begin to object and say that it is not fair that I should suffer for something the tree did, but I, as a new limb, did not so do. The man with the saw proceeded to explain that since I was a living member of the tree, I inherited the nature of the tree with all of its history. The tree was not only defiled and poisonous, but as a limb, I was “in the tree” and organically connected to its life.

The man with the saw moved to another part of the forest and started to mark out another tree, only to find the words, “George loves Martha” carved into the trunk. George Washington had left his mark on the tree. The man put up a sign reading, “Preserved For The Life of Future Generations.” Then to my amazement, the man came over and cut me off from my tree by birth and grafted me into the tree which had its life preserved. Immediately I began to sense the life of the new tree flowing into me. I not only began to take on the features of the new tree, but I learned that I would inherit the history of the tree’s life before I was actually formed as a new limb. I now possessed the nature and destiny of the new tree. I was then informed that the tree was the “Tree of Life” and would exist forever. I have passed from death unto life.

The first tree represents what it means to be “in Adam” with death and destruction marked out for its destiny. The second tree represents what it means to be in Christ, the second Adam, who is marked out to be the tree of life with an eternal destiny of life, joy, and peace in the new paradise which God has prepared for those sinful limbs who have been cut off and grafted “into Christ.” This is what it means to be “in Christ.”

What then shall be the symbol or symbols of the source and power through which our new convert has been resuscitated from death, and cleansed from sin? What would you choose to symbolize this? Thus far, the new convert has needed symbols to symbolize his spiritual death; secondly, his spiritual resurrection; thirdly, his total defilement; fourthly, his total cleansing; fifthly, the source and power by which he has been resuscitated and cleansed.

4. The fourth great truth which the newborn convert would want to confess is the *resurrection of Jesus Christ from the grave.*

It is a sad and grievous thing to see the Son of Man lying cold and silent in His grave. But He must not only die, He must be buried in a tomb as proof that the powers of sin and hell had conquered their victim. For three days and nights, the sting of death and the victory of the grave are permitted to display their powers over God's creature man. Shall death and the grave prove to be a conqueror of God's redeemer and prove Him to be someone less than He claimed to be? If Christ does not rise, then His decaying corpse will demonstrate that He was not who He claimed to be, but instead was either an enthusiastic lunatic or a lying arrogant impostor. If Christ does not rise, then all that He said was false - all that He had done and endured was in vain - all that His people had hoped for was now hopeless. If Christ does not rise, the one thing which could have given the atonement its worth, as an accomplished fact, would be lacking, and on the stone which sealed Joseph's tomb might be inscribed "No mercy here! No satisfied law! No regenerating grace! No Savior! No heaven! Paul's words in I Corinthians 15:14-18 summarize the matter. ***"If Christ is not risen, then our preaching is empty and your faith is also empty. . . . If Christ is not risen, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins. Then those who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished."*** But Christ is risen and the scene changes.

Low in the grave He lay, Jesus my Savior!
Waiting the coming day, Jesus my Lord!
Vainly they watch His bed, Jesus my Savior!
Vainly they seal the dead, Jesus my Lord!
Up from the grave He arose,
With a mighty triumph over His foes;
He arose a Victor from the dark domain.
And lives forever with His saints to reign,
He arose, He arose! Hallelujah! Christ arose!

The atonement has been accepted by the Father and the fountain has been opened for grace to flow to pardon and cleanse the worst of sinners. Just as the scriptures represent the believer as having participated in Christ's death, so it represents him as having participated in

Christ's resurrection. It asserts that believers are risen, not only like Christ, but also with Him. They are said to be not only heirs of God, but ***“joint heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with Him, that we may also be glorified together.”*** (Romans 8:17). ***“For if we be dead with Him, we shall also live with Him . . . and reign with Him”*** (II Timothy 2:11, 12). ***“God, who is rich in mercy, for the great love wherewith He loved us, even when we were dead in sins, hath quickened us together with Christ, . . . and hath raised us up together, and made us to sit together in heavenly places in Christ Jesus.”*** (Ephesians 2:4-6). In virtue of the believer's organic union with Christ, Christ's death has become the believer's death, and Christ's resurrection his resurrection.

In order to symbolize Christ's resurrection, it is essential that His burial also be symbolized. Some symbol must exist to portray His grave or tomb. What symbol would that be if you were that new convert? What would you select?

I have now given you four basic elements found in making a public confession of faith. I have asked you to pretend you are the new convert who is desiring to give your confession or testimony as to how you became a Christian. I have also asked you to select a symbol which would act as a shadow to represent these basic elements of the gospel. Here is the task I have set before you:

- (1) The first problem is to symbolize your own spiritual death.
- (2) The second is to symbolize your own spiritual resurrection.
- (3) The third is to symbolize your own total defilement or uncleanness.
- (4) The fourth is to symbolize your own total cleansing or purification.
- (5) The fifth is to symbolize Christ's atoning death by which you have been made alive and cleansed.
- (6) The sixth is to symbolize the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.

I have given you a huge task in that you must come up with six distinct symbols to represent these gospel truth. These elements comprise the basic ingredients laid out in the Gospel as expressed by Paul in I Corinthians 15:1-4 where he states, ***“I declare unto you the gospel, which I preached to you, which also you received and in which you stand, by which also you are saved, if you hold fast that word which I preached to you unless you believed in vain. For I delivered to you first of all that which I also received: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He arose again the third day according to the Scriptures.”*** The death, burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ is the Gospel which saves! It is the reality and power. We now need some way of expressing this in symbolic

form to represent this reality.

Now I am going to increase your task from a huge one to a colossal one. I want you to express in one single emblem or symbol, all of these truths!

I will now relieve you of your impossible task. The New Testament scriptures give us the one and only symbol which can do this. Would you symbolize your death in sin and your resurrection unto holiness of life? ***“Then do you not know that as many of us as were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death? Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life. For if we have been united together in the likeness of His death, certainly we also shall be in the likeness of His resurrection.”*** (Romans 6:4). The burial by baptism can only be displayed by a believer being immersed in a watery grave!

Would you desire to symbolize your complete defilement and your desire for complete cleansing? Then Acts 22:16 says, ***“And now why are you waiting? Arise and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on the name of the Lord.”*** Again, the word baptize means to immerse or dip and plunge under. Only the burial of the complete body in water can symbolize the complete cleansing.

Would you symbolize your belief in a buried and risen Savior, and your participation in His death and resurrection? Then Colossians 2:12 exhorts you to be ***“buried with Him in baptism, in which you also were raised with Him through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead.”*** Again, only the descending of the believer into a liquid tomb and emerging out of it can show forth the whole body of Christ being buried and raised out of death’s tomb.

Oh, what a glorious symbol of the Christian Gospel! If you are a convert to the Christian faith, you may tell me with words of your sinfulness and your hope in Christ for salvation. You may display your tears for your past life and your resolve for your future life. You may tell me of all that Jesus has done for you, and all that you intend to do for Him. But when I see you silently, saying not a word, descending into the waters of baptism, I read a more eloquent story told in a language which all peoples of the earth can understand; a language which does not change with the passing of time; a language which no pulpit orator can rival; I am humbled to see that God has done it again. Another lost sheep has been brought into the fold by the Shepherd of the flock. Not that anything in the ordinance imparts regeneration of life, for

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baptism is a symbol, not a power or reality. It is a shadow, not a substance.

Truly no one but an infinite God in wisdom could have devised a ritual so simple and yet so dense with meaning and glory! To Him be all honor and glory and praise forever! Amen.