

Water Baptism as a Symbol?

This is the view adopted by many Baptists.¹ While they reject the second approach – sacramentalism² – they say that in Romans 6:3-4 Paul was speaking of water baptism as a representation of conversion.

Of the three possibilities, this has the least merit. The apostle was *not* speaking of a representation. There's not the slightest suggestion of it in the text. The apostle was stating a fact, a reality. He was speaking of the substance, not the shadow or sign. Paul does not here call baptism *a picture of* or *a symbol of* union with Christ, or say that it *represents* that union. He says that baptism *unites* to Christ. He states it categorically: baptism unites to Christ and brings all the benefits of Christ's redemption to the one baptised.

The context is all-important. It determines the meaning. I am referring to the apostle's lead-up to Romans 6. His argument in the previous chapters – in itself – rules out the possibility of his speaking of water baptism as a representation.

Consider the immediate context of Romans 6:3-4

The notion that Romans 6 is to do with baptism as a symbol fails to come to grips with the dynamic of Paul's argument. It is incredible to think that the apostle, having, in Romans 5, set out the spiritual *reality* of the headship of Christ, would take his teaching further by talking about a *symbol* of it. Believers are in Christ (Rom. 5:12-21); they are in him by baptism – they died, were buried, rose, ascended and were seated in glory (Eph. 1:3; 2:6) with and in him (Rom. 6:3-4). Throughout this section of Romans (Rom. 3:21 – 8:39), Paul is speaking of something which was determined in eternity in God's decree, was accomplished in time with Christ in

¹ I include all those who baptise only believers, not only those who are known as 'Baptists'.

² Sacramentalists believe that grace is conveyed (or made effective) by an outward act. In terms of baptism, they believe that when water is applied to someone, something spiritual and inward happens to that person: he receives grace, is regenerated, or whatever.

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his death, resurrection and ascension, is made actual in the believer's experience when he comes to faith and repentance, and will be fully realised in the last day when Christ returns.³ Paul is not talking about a symbol. A symbol (in Romans 6) – after talking about the reality (Romans 5)? The suggestion, in light of the context, is incredible. The reality of the believer's experience is a cardinal point in the apostle's argument.

Indeed, it is stronger than that. As we have seen, Paul wrote Romans 6 because of an objection made to his teaching in Romans 3, 4 and 5. He opened Romans 6 in this way: 'What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase?' 'By no means!' he thundered. 'We died to sin; how can we live in it any longer? Or don't you know that all of us who were baptised into Christ Jesus were baptised into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life. If we have been united with him like this in his death, we will certainly also be united with him in his resurrection' (Rom. 6:1-5). And so on. Now... if we are to believe that the baptism in Romans 6 is water baptism as a symbol or representation of the spiritual reality, we have to believe that Paul defended and enforced his argument concerning the believer's union with Christ by reference to... to what? To a symbol! Really? The notion is risible. To try to defend such majestic doctrine by a symbol is not to defend it, but to degrade it. And as such it is too much to swallow.

Douglas J.Moo set out the representational theme with unimpeachable clarity: 'It is clear that Paul... refers to water baptism... Baptism... functions as shorthand for the conversion experience as a whole'.⁴ In other words, according to Moo, Paul is supposed to have said something like:

Don't you know that all of us who were *regenerated, convicted, brought to repentance and faith and thus* into Christ Jesus, *and were afterwards water-baptised as a symbol of it*, were *regenerated,*

³ See my *Eternal Justification: Gospel Preaching to Sinners Marred by Hyper-Calvinism*.

⁴ Douglas J.Moo: *The Epistle to the Romans*, William B.Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, 1996, p355.

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convicted, brought to repentance and faith into his death, having been afterwards water-baptised as a symbol of it? We were therefore buried with him through *regeneration, conviction, repentance and faith* into death, *having afterwards being water-baptised as a symbol of it*, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.

This introduction – this insertion, intrusion – of the notion of a symbol, a rite, into the flow of Paul’s discourse at this point simply fails to match the context.

Moreover, in light of what he said in Romans 4, Paul could not possibly speak, in Romans 6, of a rite or ceremony. To do so, makes the rite, the symbol, if not the climax, then at least the hinge, of the apostle’s argument, whereas Paul was clearly making union with Christ that climax or hinge. For him to *rise* to a symbol would be ridiculous!

Let me explore this a little. In Romans 4, Paul shows that Abraham was justified before he underwent circumcision, and four centuries before the giving of the law. This can only mean – as Paul made clear – that neither circumcision or the law can make any contribution to the sinner coming to faith and hence to justification. Not only that. Under no circumstances should anyone try to insert any rite or ceremony into this vital step. We may broaden the point: under no circumstances should anyone try to insert any rite or any ceremony whatsoever into the bringing of a sinner out of Adam into Christ, neither should he make any suggestion which might be construed as giving credence to such a notion. Talking about water baptism, even as a symbol, runs that serious risk. It should not be done. Listen to Paul, speaking of justification by faith:

Is this blessedness only for the circumcised, or also for the uncircumcised? We have been saying that Abraham's faith was credited to him as righteousness. Under what circumstances was it credited? Was it after he was circumcised, or before? It was not after, but before! And he received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised.⁵

⁵ For the seal, see my *Infant* pp137-154. Abraham is the only man ever to be circumcised as a seal. Baptism is not a seal. Certainly, infant baptism is not!

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So then, he is the father of all who believe but have not been circumcised, in order that righteousness might be credited to them. And he is also the father of the circumcised who not only are circumcised but who also walk in the footsteps of the faith that our father Abraham had before he was circumcised. It was not through law that Abraham and his offspring received the promise that he would be heir of the world, but through the righteousness that comes by faith. For if those who live by law are heirs, faith has no value and the promise is worthless, because law brings wrath. And where there is no law there is no transgression. Therefore, the promise comes by faith, so that it may be by grace and may be guaranteed to all Abraham's offspring – not only to those who are of the law but also to those who are of the faith of Abraham. He is the father of us all (Rom. 4:9-16).

Consequently, if the baptism in Romans 6 is water baptism as a symbol, then we have to believe that Paul, writing so strongly against circumcision or the law preceding Abraham's justification (in chapter 4), then proceeds to speak of the union of a believer with Christ in the new covenant in terms of the symbolism of the ceremony of water baptism. Incredible! Even to introduce the note of a symbol, even with Moo's qualifications, diminishes the apostle's argument to such an extent that it beggars belief.

In short, the representational scheme is out of the question – almost an irrelevance in the context – adding nothing to the apostle's argument, only weakening one of the most majestic of all the apostle's statements on conversion, and, furthermore, exposing his readers to think of the fatal and erroneous doctrine of baptismal regeneration, regeneration by water baptism. What a toxic combination!

And this leads me on to the next suggestion; namely, that Paul, in Romans 6:3-4, was speaking of baptismal regeneration, regeneration by the administration of water.⁶

⁶ Sacramental baptism inevitably leads to sacerdotalism – the notion that a priest has the power to administer water and so regenerate. And this inevitably leads to the idea of baptising babies at the earliest possible moment. See my *Infant* p238.