

A History of the Baptists

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CHAPTER IX THE REFORMERS BEAR WITNESS TO THE BAPTISTS

THERE was a constant conflict between the Reformers and the Baptists on the proper subjects of baptism. At first the Reformers were disposed to take the Baptist side of the controversy and to deny the necessity of infant baptism. "The strength of the Baptist reasoning in regard to infant baptism," says Planck, the great German Protestant historian, referring to Melancthon, "made a strong impression on his convictions." Planck continues: "The Elector, wishing to quell the controversy, dissuaded the Wittenberg theologians from discussing the subject of infant baptism, saying he could not see what benefit could arise from it, as it was not of much importance, and the rejection of it would create great excitement, since it had been so long hallowed in the Church by the influence of Augustine, its defender. Melancthon agreed with the Elector. Whether it were right in him to be so quickly convinced, we leave it for theology to determine" (Planck, *Geschichte der Entstehung, der Veranderungen und der Bildung unseres protestantisehen Lehrbegriffs*. Leipsic, 1781-1800. 6 vols). When the Reformers for State and political reasons finally retained infant baptism, between them and the Baptists there was a constant controversy. On the form of baptism, however, by dipping, there was but slight conflict between the parties, since the Baptists and the Reformers held practically the same views. even when the Reformers practiced, or permitted, pouring or sprinkling, they generally affirmed that the primitive rite was by dipping.

De Hoop Sheffer relates that in Germany "until 1400, there was no other method (of baptism) than immersion." The displacement of immersion after that date was not rapid. Dipping as the form of baptism, at the time of the Reformation, still existed in many parts of Germany "In the North and East of Germany," says Van Slee, "even as in England and the Northern kingdoms immersion still existed up to the breaking in of the Reformation period of the sixteenth century" (Van Slee, *De Rijnsburger Collegianten*, 376. Harlem, 1895). Dipping for baptism, in Germany, was practiced as late as 1560. The Archbishop of Metz, in 1549, called a provincial council, which published decrees that were not only applicable to that province, but also to Treves and Cologne. The Synod made no provision for sprinkling, it required the priest "to dip the child three times in water" (Sleiden, *The General History of the Reformation*, XXI. 481).

In 1551, at Wittenberg, the Saxon Confession of Faith was adopted by the superintendents, pastors and professors, that it might be presented to the Council of Trent. The Confession was published by Melancthon, and contained the following reference to baptism:

Baptism is an entire action: to-wit, a dipping (*mersio*) and a pronouncing of these words, I testify by this immersion (*mersione*) that thou art washed from sin, etc.

In Pomerania, one of the Northern provinces of Prussia, the form of baptism in 1560 was immersion. They were required to baptize by the ritual of Luther, which was by immersion, and the following is added:

While it is possible, we would much rather they be baptized naked, whether it be in Winter or Summer time. But where it is not, they can be baptized in their clothes. Still no one should take offense, for we baptize not the clothing, but the person. Not alone in the head, but the whole body as the ordinance of Christ and the words in baptism convey (Acta et Statuta Synodica Ecclesiarum Pomeranie Dormni, 1560).

The Roman Catholic custom of the period is mentioned by the celebrated Jacopo Sadeleto, who was Secretary to Leo X., and was afterwards made a cardinal by Paul III. Writing in the year 1536, he says:

Our trine immersion in water at baptism, and our trine emersion, denote that we are buried with Christ in the faith of the true trinity, and that we rise again with Christ in the same belief (Sadoleto, Pauli Epist. ad Romanos commentar. cap. VI. 8).

It is observed that in the North and East of Germany the form of baptism as practiced by the Baptists was not especially a matter of note. This was because that in the North and East of Germany immersion was the common practice and so the dippings of the Baptists did not seem an unusual thing. But in the South of Germany at Strassburg and Augsburg the practice of dipping was especially made a record of as peculiar to the Baptists, because there affusion was the common practice of the people. The Baptists stood out in this particular as acting contrary to the customs of the people. Had the Baptists of North and East Germany practiced sprinkling it would have been a matter of peculiar remark. That this was not done is a powerful intimation that the Baptists of those sections practiced dipping.

Martin Luther did not differ substantially from the view expressed by the Roman Catholic Church on the form of baptism. The act of baptism was not

an item of controversy at that time, for the Reformers either preferred immersion, as Luther, or held the act to be a matter of indifference, as Calvin. Luther at first followed the practice of his own country and insisted on immersion. It is not altogether impossible that Luther learned the practice of dipping from the Baptists of Bohemia, for in the early days of the Reformation he leaned heavily on the old evangelicals (Enders, Luthers Briefwechsel. II. 345, Nr. 280).

Roman Catholics claimed that the Baptists received their views of baptism from Luther. This was the charge of John Eck, the old opponent of Luther (Eckius, Enchiridion Locitivni Communion, 226. Anverpiae, 1539). This charge greatly exasperated Luther. Robinson says:

Luther bore the Zwinglian dogmatizing, but he could not brook a further Retormation in the hands of the dippers. What rendered the great man's conduct more surprising is that he had himself, seven years before, taught the doctrine of dipping. . . . The Catholics tax Luther as being the father of the German dippers, some of the first expressly declare, they received their first ideas from him, and the fact seems undeniable, but the article of Reforming without him he could not bear. This is the crime objected against them, as it had been against Carlstadt. This exasperated him to the last degree, and he became their enemy, and notwithstanding all that he had said in favor of dipping, persecuted them under the title of re-dippers, re-baptizers, Anabaptists. It is not an improbable conjecture that Luther at first conformed to his own principles and dipped infants (Robinson, Ecclesiastical Researches, 542, 543).

It is doubtless true that Luther began by dipping infants. That he taught immersion there can be no doubt. In his celebrated sermon on Baptism, date 1518, he says:

First baptism is called in Greek *baptismos*, in Latin *mersionio*, that is, when we dip anything wholly in water, that it is completely covered over. And although in many provinces it is no longer the custom (in other provinces it was the custom) to thrust the children into the font and to dip them; but they only pour water with the hands out of the font; nevertheless, it should be thus, and would be right, that after speaking aloud the word (baptize) the child or any one who is to be baptized, be completely sank down into the water, and dipt again and drawn out, for without doubt in the German tongue the word (taufe) comes from the word tief (deep), that a man sinks deep into the water, what he

dips. That also the signification of baptism demands, for it signifies that the old man and sinful birth from the flesh and blood shall be completely drowned through the grace of God. Therefore, a man should sufficiently perform the signification and a right perfect sign. The sign rests, in this, that a man plunge a person in water in the name of the Father, etc., but does not leave him therein but lifts him out again; therefore it is called being lifted out of the font or depths. And so must all of both of these things be the sign; the dipping and the lifting out. Thirdly, the signification is a saving death of the sins and of the resurrection of the grace of God. The baptism is a bath of the new birth. Also a drowning of the sins in the baptism (Opera Lutheri, I. 319. Folio edition).

In the judgment of Luther, in the year 1518, in Germany, *taufen* meant to dip. He is altogether a capable witness on this point. It is a significant fact that when the Ritual of Luther (Schaff, History of the Christian Church, VI. 578, 607, 608), in 1528, prescribed immersion there was no controversy on baptism between him and the Baptists.

There is an account of how Luther caused dipping to be restored in Hamburg. John Bugenhagen found that only sprinkling was performed, and he reported the case to Luther. There was some confusion on the subject. Bugenhagen, A. D. 1552, says:

At length they did agree among themselves, that the judgment of Luther, and of the divines at Wittenberg, should be demanded upon this point: which being done, Luther did write back to Hamburg that sprinkling was an abuse, which they ought to remove. Thus was plunging restored at Hamburg (Grosby, The History of English Baptists, I. xxii. London, 138).

Luther affirmed that the Baptists were in the practice of dipping. In a familiar letter written to his wife he says:

Dear Kate—We arrived here, at Halle, about 8 o'clock, but have not ventured to go to Eisleben, for we have been stopped by a great Anabaptist (I mean a flood) which has covered the road here, and has not threatened us with mere "sprinkling," but with "immersion," against our will, however. You may comfort yourself by being assured that we are not drinking water, but have plenty of good beer and Rhenish wine, with which we cheer ourselves in spite of the overflowing river. Halle, January 25, 1546.

No other construction, save that the Baptists were in the practice of dipping can be applied to this language of Luther.

We now turn to the testimony of Huldreich Zwingli, the Swiss Reformer. As early as June 15, 1523, he wrote to his friend, Wittenbach, that the bread and wine in the Eucharist are what the water is in baptism. "It would be in vain," he added, "for us to plunge a man a thousand times in water, if he does not believe" (D' Aubigne', History of the Reformation, III. 298).

Zwingli published, at this date, a book which is most suggestive of the practice of the Baptists, and without point if they did not practice dipping. The book is *Elenchus contra Catbaptistas*, A Refutation of the Tricks of the Catabaptists or Drowners. Why should they be called "drowners" if they did not immerse? The title of such a book would be inappropriate to persons in the practice of sprinkling. The word "Catabaptist" essentially means a submersion, and not one who merely despises baptism. The idea of despising baptism is not inherent in the word, but only an implication from their rejection of infant baptism, or any part of the meaning of Catabaptist, for the word does not mean anything different from Submersion. Other words may be used in connection with it to indicate that the Baptists despised infant baptism, but the idea is not contained in the word Catabaptist, but in words which explain such hatred. Catabaptist is a Greek word which means one who submerges. The lexicons and the Greek language are all in accord with this use.

Hence Ottius, under the year 1532, relates:

Our churches are infested throughout the country by the Catabaptists whom it is not possible at this time to reproach with evil. We have tried by the Scripture to persuade them but with their convictions this is not possible. Silence was then placed upon them, the neglecting of which, it is deserving that the authorities should return to their pertinacities that they shall be immersed a second time and returning, be submerged from within deeply (Ottius, *Annales anabaptistica*, 55).

The Baptists preferred the name Catabaptists to that of Anabaptists. Indeed, they always repudiated the word Anabaptist, since they did not consider that they practiced anabaptism. They simply baptized; never attempted to rebaptize. They did think they practiced catabaptism, namey, immersion. They never would have admitted the name as applicable to them if it meant despisers of baptism. They practiced baptism; they rejected infant baptism. "They naturally disowned," says Gieseler, the able historian, "the name Anabaptist, as they declared infant baptism invalid and called themselves

Catabaptists" (Gieseler, *A Compendium of Ecclesiastical History*, V. 255, 256).

The use of the word Catabaptist among Baptists may be found in Fusslin (III. 229); and as late as the time of Schyn, A. D. 1729, the name Catabaptist, even among the Mennonites, meant immersion. There had been before the days of Schyn changes among the Mennonites, and in his time many of them practiced affusion, yet the word Catabaptist still meant immersion. Schyn rejected the word Baptist as not appropriate to his people. "Yet some think," he continues, "that the name Catabaptist is more suitable; but because this word is of ambiguous meaning, and is used by adversaries in a bad sense, and more properly means immerse, and that rite is not in common use among Mennonites, nor is it esteemed necessary among all Mennonites, hence also the name does not suit all Mennonites" (Schyn, *Historiae Mennonitarum Plenior Deductio*, 35).

Zwingli made many references to the immersions of the Catabaptists. A few instances are here cited. He says: "Since, therefore, you see that Catabaptism which you hope as from a fountain to derive all your counsel is proved by no Scripture," etc. Once more he says of his Baptist opponent: "What then if upon you, you raging wild ass (for I could not call him a man whom I think was baptized among the shades of the Phlegethon)," etc. This was one of the rivers of hell. He further says of his opponent: "Yet, as I have said, since the man now doubtless burns among the shades as much as he froze here through his Catabaptist washings, I have concluded to omit his name." He further tells of a whole family of Baptists who had been immersed and then made shipwreck of themselves.

Desiderius Erasmus was the most brilliant representative of the humanistic culture of the sixteenth century. Writing out of England, in 1532, he says: "We dip children all over in water, in a stone font" (Erasmus, *Coloquia Familiaria*). His influence was very great upon the educated ministers among the Baptists of the lower Rhenish provinces, such as John Campanus, and others (Rembert, *Die Wiedertaufer im Herzogtum Julich*), and the Baptists often spoke of him as the ornament of the German nation (Beck, *Die Geschichte Bucher der Wiedertaufer*, 12 note). We certainly know that John Campanus was in the practice of dipping.

Philip Melanchthon, the co-laborer with Luther, says:

The immersion in water is a seal, the servant he who plunges signifies a work of God, moreover, the sinking down in that manner is a token of the divine will, with the form spoken, to baptize in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit; as the

apostles use to baptize in Acts, in the name of Christ. In which words the signification is plain. Behold, to what end we should plunge, that so ye may receive, and also to be made certain of favor toward thee in the divine testimony. . . A seal is made in baptism, for from this custom he may know that he is passing from death unto life. It is also the sinking down of the old Adam in death, and the coming forth of the new. This is why Paul calls it the bath of regeneration. This signification is easily perceived from the type (Melanchthon, "Communes rerum theologiarum, Part, De Baptismo A. D. 1521).

William Farel, the Geneva Reformer and the friend of Calvin, wrote in 1528 in the defense of the Baptists. He had already written, September 7, 1527, a letter in appreciation of the position of the Baptists on the subject of baptism. He now compares their baptism by dipping to that of Christ. He says:

It is not understood by many what it is to give one's name to Christ to walk and preserve in the newness of life by the infusion of the Spirit with whom Christ dips his own, who, in His mind and by His grace wish to be dipped in water (*intingi aqua*) in the presence of the Christian congregation, that they may publicly protest that they believe in their hearts, that they may be dearer to the brethren and closer bound to Christ by his solemn profession, which is only rightly dispensed as that great John, and the greatest of all, Christ, commanded (Herminjard, Correspondance des Reformateurs dans les pays de Ia langue francaise, II. 48).

There is an instance of dipping on record from Henry Slachtcheaf. He wrote to Martin Bucer as follows:

And this I desire to admonish thee, brother, no longer to impart baptism to infants. I see this by the Lord who has shown to me clearly by the Spirit, and not on that account to dare to dip our children in water. Hence it is cursed with the mother, it is cast out from place to place, etc. Hence my friend, I beseech you, do not oppose the truth. Vehemently and wickedly have the things of our Gospel suffered with many most of all about these two ordinances, the Supper and the baptism, but with the Lutherans very badly. With the Anabaptists that I know thus far baptism is

observed literally (Cornelius, Die Geschichtquellen d. Bisthums Munster, I. 228, 229).

Thus was immersion the literal practice of the Baptists. Slachtchaef baptized a child by dipping upon a profession of faith. Cornelius says of him:

He preached in Hueckehoven in the house of Godert Reinharts, and he dipped it in a bucket of water (*er es eimer wasser taucht*) (Ibid, 228).

The vessel (*eimer*) was doubtless a tub used to hoist water out of the well. Whatever the vessel was the child was dipt into it. The ceremony was performed by a man who had written Bucer against infant baptism and stated that baptism was by dipping. This same vessel is elsewhere mentioned in the practice of dipping among the Baptists.

There are two examples in the writings of John Calvin which go to show that the Baptists were in the practice of dipping. Calvin came in direct contact with the Baptists and well knew their opinions, for he married the widow of a Baptist preacher. In the first example, he defines, in a well-known passage the meaning of the word. He says:

The word signifies to immerse, and it is certain that the rite of immersion was observed in the ancient church (Calvin, Institutes, Bk. IV. C. 15).

Immediately following this statement he makes a reply to a Baptist who urged that Acts 19:3-5 taught rebaptism. Calvin says to the Baptist:

That if ignorance vitiated the former baptism, so that another baptism is made to correct it; they were the first of all to be baptized by the apostles, who in all the three years after their baptism scarcely tasted a small particle of the measure of the sincere doctrine. Even now among us, where would there be sufficient rivers for a repetition of the dipping of so many, who in ignorance of the compassion of the Lord, are daily corrected among us (Ibid, c. 15. Sec. 18).

Calvin thus speaking of his own times declares that if the opinions of the Baptists prevailed the rivers would not suffice suffice for their dippings.

The second instance where Calvin refers to the dipping practiced by the Baptists is as follows:

Truly so much ignorance deservedly requires another baptism, if for ignorance they should be rebaptized again. But what pertains to us it would be necessary always to have a lake or a river at our back, if so often as the Lord purge any error, we should be completely renewed from baptism (Calvin, *Opuscula. Contra Anabaptists*, II. 28. Geneva, 1547).

Calvin was here discussing the relation of baptism to Acts 19:3-5 as expounded by the Baptists. He declared the *Baptist needed a river or lake to carry out their idea of dipping*.

Diodati, the Geneva reformer and scholar, expressed himself, A. D. 1558, clearly on the subject of dipping. In speaking of the baptism of John, Math. 3:6, he says: "Plunged in the water for a sacred sign and seal of the expiation and remission of sins" (Diodati, *Pious and Learned Annotations Upon the Holy Bible*. London, 1648).

When once the position of Luther and the other Reformers is understood, it is not surprising that the form of baptism was not a subject of discussion between the Reformers and the Baptist. The testimony of the Reformers is clear and distinct that the Baptists were in the practice of dipping.