

Philadelphia Letter.

ALLAN D. PHILPOTT.

The following letter will explain itself:—

REV. A. B. PHILPOTT—*Dear Sir and Bro.*,—I gladly avail myself of your courteous offer to obtain for me some information as to what the Disciples understand to be the nature of the relation between baptism and the forgiveness of sins. It often happens that the same form of words cover very different views. My questions are therefore shaped to elicit with precision, if that is possible with so difficult a theme, the real distinction between the views held among you and the Baptists.

1. Is "baptism for the remission of sins" understood to imply that baptism actually contributes toward securing remission, or is in any degree a condition of remission? Or, on the contrary,

2. Is Elder Isaac Errett's statement in the American Supplement to the Encyclopedia Britannica, viz.: "To the believing penitent they regard baptism as conveying the divine assurance of the forgiveness of sins"; is this statement all which the Disciples believe concerning the relation of baptism to forgiveness?

Forgiveness and assurance of forgiveness are plainly two things, one the act of God, the other a feeling of man. Would some Disciples hold that baptism is merely a way of conveying assurance that one has been forgiven?

3. If any hold that baptism does anything toward securing forgiveness, is in any degree a condition of being forgiven, how is baptism fitted for that service? Or do they take the Word of God for it, without any attempt at explanation?

(a) Because baptism sets forth in a vivid way the fact of the atoning work of Christ? And if this is the proper account, does baptism convey assurance otherwise than as a text which expresses the same facts might do the same office? Or is it

(b) Because the divine appointment of baptism to the office of conveying assurance of forgiveness has attached a mysterious efficacy to the ordinance? In other words, is a sacramentalist notion held?

(c) Or is it because baptism is an act of submission and obedience so definite and complete that it amounts to an outward and formal acceptance of Jesus as Lord, that it may serve to convey assurance?

On this supposition, the assurance of forgiveness, as many Baptists have learned by experience, is deepened with strictest moral fitness when disobedience is abandoned. And forgiveness ought not to be looked for so long as disobedience is the habit of the soul. But this view excludes all mystic value in baptism. It does not contemplate its efficacy as due merely to the divine appointment, but the divine appointment as due to the fitness of baptism, to serve as an act of final and open submission.

I would not be surprised to learn that the points above raised have not been so generally considered as to secure general agreement about them among the Disciples. As to some of them, the same state of facts exists among Baptists, while as to others of them the Baptist answer would be prompt, and hardly the same as that which, as I suppose, the Disciples would give. But I wish to escape from the region of supposition, and hence await with deep interest the answers which you may be able to furnish. I do not wish either to magnify or to minimize differences, but only to ascertain

certain the facts. You may be assured that no improper or unfriendly use will be made of the information you can supply. If, in addition to the written answers you seek for me, you can refer me to some of the more important among recent printed statements, or statements which serve acceptably at the present time to the great body of Disciples, this will be an additional service of no small value. I would like to have those statements accessible to our students. Yours very truly,

E. H. JOHNSON.

Crozer Theological Seminary, June 26, 1890.

The symposium which is submitted below will be found to fully cover these questions. I may, with propriety perhaps, add a few words without any pretence at an elaborate answer. These questions have a decided theological drift. They are framed by a man who holds an important chair in Crozer Theological Seminary, a leading Baptist institution. They come from a good motive and are exhaustive and searching. But the leaders among the Disciples have not been, nor have they aspired to be, theologians. They have in fact looked somewhat askance at theology in the current use of that term. They try, however, to understand and teach the Word of God. Whatever is expressly laid down therein, or clearly implied, for our observance and instruction, is held to be essential. The New Testament does not explain *how* baptism "contributes toward securing remission of sins." The philosophy of it is nowhere set forth. It is very natural that we should try to form some theory about it. And there are many hints and suggestions in the Word of God that throw a partial light upon it. The following papers will show an entire agreement as to the design of baptism—that it is *in order* to the remission of sins. The explanation of why this is so, or exactly in what sense it is true, is to some extent a matter of inference. And even upon this point there will be found to exist a tolerable harmony. But after all, this phase of the question is relegated to the domain of private opinion. It must not be thought strange, then, if leading men show some differences in their treatment of it.

1. There is most certainly a uniformity of view among us on Dr. Johnson's first question, namely, "That baptism contributes toward securing remission, and is a condition of remission." We hold that no other view of this ordinance can possibly be harmonized with the utterances of the divine Word upon the subject. And with this view we do not believe any passage of the New Testament to be in conflict. Baptism holds a prominent place in the account of New Testament conversions. It is embraced with singular emphasis in the great commission. That it is a command enjoined by the head of the church upon all penitent believers is as clear as anything can be. If the language in Acts ii. 38 does not place baptism in the same category as faith and repentance, as a condition of remission, then the passage has no direct meaning at all. Peter was surely not using language on this important occasion to conceal his ideas. Repentance and baptism here stand or fall together as prerequisites of pardon. Equally so the faith implied in the question which the three thousand asked. We would not hold, of course, that baptism has the same relation to Christian character and a redeemed life in an absolute sense as faith and repentance. Baptism is an ordinance pure and simple, and has only a relative value. Faith and re-

pentance are spiritual states and possess an independent and absolute importance. Baptism is important because Christ has enjoined it—it has no importance in any other relation to the Christian life than that in which He has placed it.

2. As to the doctor's second question, there is an implication that might lead some into error. It reads as though Bro. Errett was in disagreement with his brethren. Any one familiar with his writings would have no reason whatever to suppose such to be the case. It would have been well, perhaps, if he had been a little more elaborate in his article in the Encyclopedia Britannica upon the point. The language is unusual among us in the treatment of the subject. That "baptism conveys the divine assurance of the forgiveness of sins" is certainly not out of harmony with the idea that it is also a condition of forgiveness. The same may be said of faith and repentance. As pardon is conditioned upon these, they may be, to the one conscious of their possession, an assurance of forgiveness, since God has promised forgiveness upon their exercise. In this way also baptism is an assurance, because forgiveness in the New Testament is, in some sense, made contingent upon it. The Gospel points out to the sinner how he may come back to God through the atoning merits of Christ's death. These conditions all enable him to appropriate the mercy of God in the forgiveness of his sins, and thus may be said to bring also assurance of forgiveness. They do so simply because we believe that God will do what He has promised when we do what He has required. I do not believe that Bro. Errett used this phraseology in any other sense.

3. As to the third question, it may be doubted whether our literature will afford any clear and exhaustive answer upon which all would agree. We say simply that baptism does something towards securing remission because Christ commanded it, made it a condition of entrance into His Church, and when we submit to it we are conscious of having obeyed Christ. There are many things suggested by this ordinance which we commonly point out, as for instance:—

(a) It beautifully symbolizes a death to sin and a resurrection again to a new life.

(b) It points to the death, burial and resurrection of Christ by which our salvation from sin was made possible.

(c) It symbolizes the washing away of sin.

(d) It is the open and public way in which we signify that our relations to the world are broken off, and that we henceforth desire to walk with Christ.

(e) It is a part of the new birth. "Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit," etc. Whatever may finally be decided upon as the true exegesis of this passage, we have always held that the word "water" here had reference to baptism. If so, it places the matter in a very clear and unmistakable light. We do not offer these things in explanation of the question *how* baptism goes toward securing remission. It is not revealed how it does so. We find it in the Word of God, and insist upon it simply because we find it there. We do not make it identical with regeneration as is often alleged. It is simply the consummating act by which we become members of the body of Christ, which is the Church.

Under (3) the doctor has suggested three ways in which the efficacy of baptism may be explained. I am not myself exactly clear as to the meaning of some things he has here set down.

The first question (a) would, perhaps, be accepted by some and rejected by others. The second (b) would be utterly rejected. The one under (c) would be accepted, with some reservation as to the use of the words "mystic value" of baptism. We see a fitness in baptism as an "act of obedience, definite and complete," yet we insist upon it not for that, but because it is a command; but we would not consider that equivalent to attaching a mystic value of baptism. But enough. I gladly give way to others who can speak more authoritatively upon this subject.

DEAR BRO. PHILPOTT,—In compliance with your request, I submit the following as my answer to Prof. Johnson's questions:—

1. I understand that baptism is a condition of the remission of sins; and that it "actually contributes toward securing remission" by being one of the conditions on which this blessing is granted.

2. The statement quoted from Isaac Errett does not convey "all which the Disciples believe concerning the relation of baptism to forgiveness"; neither was it intended by him to convey all that he himself believed, as I learn from his other writings. Baptism conveys the divine assurance of forgiveness of sins, simply and only because, when the penitent believer is baptized, he has the assurance of God's promise that his sins are forgiven.

3. We do not pretend so say, or to know, "how baptism is fitted for that service." If Christ had appointed any other act in the place of baptism, it would have served to us the same purpose.

I do not accept any of the views suggested under (a), (b), (c). While baptism (a) does symbolize the burial and the resurrection of Jesus, it does not, so far as I can see, "set forth the atoning work of Christ." We heartily repudiate the idea (b) that any "mysterious efficacy" is attached to the ordinance, or that it has the sacramental virtue ascribed to it by Romanists. The "outward and formal acceptance of Jesus as Lord" (c) takes place in the public oral confession of Christ and not in baptism. Baptism is that particular "act of submission and obedience" in which God for Christ's sake forgives the sins of the penitent believer.

I do not see that I can make my meaning clearer by adding other words.

Fraternally yours,

J. W. MCGARVEY.

Lexington, Ky., July 14, 1890.

I do not use the words, "Baptism is for the remission of sins," first, because they are not found in the New Testament, and, second, because they are liable to convey a false idea.

The expression would be understood by many to set forth the idea of "baptismal regeneration"—a thought not found in the Word of God.

The nearest approach to "Baptism is for the remission of sins" in the sacred writings is Acts ii. 38, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, for the remission of sins."

This language from the New Testament teaches that repentance and baptism for remission. But even this is a partial presentation of the doctrine of the passage, because in the statement here made there is an important omission. Simon Peter commanded convicted men to "repent and be baptized, in the name of Jesus Christ, for the remission of sins." The full and accurate propositional statement, as contained in Acts ii. 38, therefore, would be that repentance and baptism in the name of Jesus Christ are for the remission of sins.

It is clear from this and other lan-

guage in the New Testament, that baptism is in some manner connected with pardon. The ordinance seems, moreover, to be connected with forgiveness as a condition precedent.

This does not mean that there is such a connection between baptism and remission that every person who is not baptized is necessarily lost. This would be the case if baptism were *per se* a condition of salvation.

Baptism, preceded by an evangelical repentance and faith, is a condition of the remission secured for every man by our Lord's voluntary death on the cross. Baptism, to such a person as is here described, is a positive point to which an intelligible and tangible assurance of personal acceptance is received. Baptism is an open and formal proclamation, or confession, of faith in the Son of God and of surrender to Him. It may not be certainly known why God through Christ has made this appointment; but that He has established this order is evident.

There is also an apparent appropriateness in placing baptism where, in the New Testament teaching, it is located.

The gospel finds man in a state of rebellion. He is engaged in fighting against God. The most High demands an unconditional surrender. This was, and is, the demand which God makes of all men through Jesus Christ our Lord. The Gospel of the Son of God is a proclamation of emancipation from sin and deliverance from condemnation on the sole condition that really, truly, and in fact each person, having reached the years of accountability, does for himself recognize that all authority in heaven and on earth belongs to Jesus of Nazareth. To practically recognize this fact is to unconditionally surrender to Him who is King of kings, Lord of lords.

At the moment of this surrender, which is an experience of the intellect, the affections and the will, an affair within and not without the rebel; at this instant the act of pardon takes place in the mind of Him who alone can forgive sins. But of this gracious decree the penitent must remain, certainly to some extent, ignorant, since he knows not the true state of his intellect, his affections, his will. "Tis a point I long to know," must be the expression until some indubitable, some divinely appointed test is applied. The man of thought, anxious as to his standing in the presence of the Omniscient Judge, is supposed to soliloquize: "Do I think right about God as He reveals Himself in the person of Jesus of Nazareth? Do I love Him as I ought to love Him? Do I feel right toward Him? Do I really submit to Him? Am I in fact obedient within to Him who claims to possess all authority? Do I in very deed recognize His right to rule in, to reign over me? If I am in this state of mind and heart, God will, without doubt, deal graciously with me; but am I in this condition?"

At this juncture, baptism is presented as the divinely ordained test. Obedience to the command, "Be baptized," tests as nothing else does, as nothing else can, the utter and absolute surrender of the soul to the Lord Jesus.

Why should the penitent believer be baptized? Simply and only because the Son of God requires it. There is so far as I know, no mystical, no mysterious, no magical, efficacy in baptism. Nor is it a mere rite. The very genius of Christianity forbids mere rites; hence also the fetish idea of baptismal regeneration.

"Baptism for remission of sins," if the expression is permissible, is justification by faith. In baptism faith is at