

# Christian Baptism

The importance of Christian baptism is clear for all to see in the New Testament (Matt. 28:19; Mark 16:16; Acts 2:38, etc.). Every branch of the Christian church has agreed that baptism is a divine ordinance whose observance is part of what constitutes a church. In this the Free Presbyterian Church is at one with all the rest.

## Divided Opinion

However, historically there have been widespread differences of opinion among men equally committed to accepting the Bible as our God-given, inspired, and infallible rule of faith and practice. This is true within Protestantism. Evangelical Protestants reject the Romish notion of baptismal regeneration, but they differ among themselves as to the proper mode and subjects of baptism. Historically, the Reformed churches along with the Lutheran, Episcopal, Congregational, and Methodist churches have accepted that pouring, sprinkling, and dipping are all valid modes of baptism. They have also believed that baptism should be administered to believers and to their children because their children are included in God's covenant with His people. The proper sign and seal of the covenantal baptism, which should therefore be administered to the children of the covenant.

Over against this view, Baptists and Anabaptists have argued that baptism must follow a personal profession of faith. It cannot legitimately be administered to children who have made no such personal profession. The New Testament nowhere commands or mentions the baptism of children. The only baptism it knows is believer's baptism.

On the mode of baptism, Baptists insist that only immersion is acceptable because, they say, the verb baptizo means "to dip," and the symbolism of Romans 6 (death, burial, and resurrection) demands immersion. Interestingly, the early Anabaptists of the Reformation period baptized believers by pouring.

## Four Centuries of Controversy

It is easy to see what controversy the subject of baptism has engendered. Each point made by one side is vigorously contested by the other. After four hundred years of polemics the argument has not abated. Perhaps it will indicate the complexity of the debate to point out that one of the best presentations of the Baptist case is by an ex-Presbyterian, while one of the best apologies for paedobaptism is by a Baptist pastor who set out to write a defense of his views and was converted to a Presbyterian view of baptism in the course of his study!

## Difference Without Division

The Free Presbyterian Church recognizes that good men have differed and continue to differ on this emotive subject. Yet should God's people separate from one another over baptism? Can they not hold their view strongly while allowing conscientious brethren to hold a differing view? We believe they can and should. Thus Article 6A of our Articles of Faith states: "The Free Presbyterian Church, under Christ the Great King and Head of the Church, realizing that bitter controversy raging around the mode and proper subjects of the ordinance of Christian Baptism has divided the Body of Christ when that Body should have united in Christian love and Holy Ghost power to stem the onslaughts and hell-inspired assaults of modernism, hereby affirms that each member of the Free Presbyterian Church shall have liberty to decide for himself which course to adopt on these controverted issues, each member giving due honour in love to the views held by differing brethren, but none espousing the error of baptismal regeneration."

We do not undervalue baptism, but we do not want needless division either. We would not wish to be so exclusively Presbyterian that we could find no place for a C. H. Spurgeon just because he strongly adhered to believer's baptism. Nor would we wish to be so Baptist that we would exclude a Robert Murray McCheyne just because he strongly held to baptism for the children of believers.

In the World Council of Churches, Baptists and paedobaptists are seeking to work out an acceptable position that will do justice to all their traditions. They are doing this in a spirit of compromise on every major doctrine of the gospel. That is a betrayal. But is it not sad that Baptists and paedobaptists who agree in upholding every fundamental of the faith cannot usually find the love, the humility, or whatever it takes, to stand together in the unity of the gospel? That is the problem the Free Presbyterian Church addressed at its inception. Ever since, it has enjoyed a spirit of unity that has not been marred by the diversity of views on baptism it encompasses.