

J N DARBY ON BAPTISM

J N Darby Letter No. 431 – Why I could not be a Baptist – Believers' Baptism – Infant Baptism – Household Baptism – The House and the Assembly

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The following letter written in French by John Nelson Darby, outlines his position on baptism – particularly believers' baptism as practiced by the Baptists and other Evangelical Christians. I translated it as part of an earlier task as assisting a brother who desired to have some 475 letters of JND translated into English. However, I feel that due to the large amount of confusion that exists as to this important subject it is as well to publish my translation (slightly edited) here.

My French is far from perfect, and whilst this translation has been revised by another,

Pourquoi je ne Pourrais être Baptiste. – Baptême des Croyants – Baptême des Enfants – Baptême des Familles – la Maison et l'Assemblée.

Montpelier, 1851

To Mr L.F.

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The State of the Church

In the state of confusion in which the Church finds itself, if its existence is even remembered, it is very natural that in such a matter one acts according ones individual conviction. But when it is a question of the destruction of the unity of the Church, it is a more serious question. The Baptists are a sect, and enough to say, in my opinion I would not be part of it. If a brother believes he should be baptised, I would never seek to dissuade him, even though he had already been baptised and I believe him mistaken in the way he sees it. However, if he believes that it is according to the Word, he would be well, I think, to have it done. That does not break the unity of the body.

The Baptists quote, "Thus it becometh us to fulfil all righteousness."

Having said that, I will give you a few general principles on this subject. I am not convinced at all by the rationale of the Baptists. I find in their reasoning, without their suspecting it, inversion of the basic principles of Christianity, and a complete ignorance of what Christian baptism is. They speak of the baptism of John, and that the Lord says "thus it becometh us to fulfil all righteousness." Matt 3:15. Think about it. Does the Christian achieve righteousness in fulfilling ordinances? Is that a Christian principle, or is it an perversion of Christianity? Moreover the baptism of John means absolutely nothing for Christians; it was a baptism just for the Jews, a baptism, which assumed the entrance, through repentance into the privileges of the kingdom, and did not assume the death and resurrection of Christ, rather exactly the opposite. The baptism of John was not done in His name, nor in keeping with the truths announced in the gospel. Consequently those who had the baptism of John had to be baptised again later in the name of the Lord, as if they had never had received any baptism beforehand. (Acts 19:4-5). I am then urged to be baptised in obedience to an ordinance in order to fulfill righteousness (principle which inverts the fundamentals of Christianity), and a baptism which excludes the death and resurrection of Christ (only true sense of Christian baptism). This baptism however belongs historically to a system which predated Christianity which one both

Jews and heathens received. The death and resurrection of Christ formed the basis of a new creation, to which the baptism of John did not have any bearing. When I hear similar arguments, I am the more convinced that those who use them (though they are very sincere) do not understand the first elements of the subject they are dealing with, and unwillingly and unknowingly invert the foundation of Christian truth.

But there are further points which make me reject the Baptist system. That is, that I deny their principle of obedience to an ordinance and in particular to the ordinance (they say) of baptism. Baptism is a granted privilege, and the act is that of the person who baptises, not of the person baptised. I say that the thought of obedience to baptism is not in the Word, or that there is a commandment addressed to men, it is that to be baptised

Baptism as a Privilege

Firstly, I say that the idea of obedience to an ordinance does not belong to the Christian system. I recognize that Christ established baptism and the supper, but obedience to ordinances was destroyed, in principle, at the cross. (Col 2:14 Eph 2:15). When it is a matter of the supper "This do in remembrance of me." (Luke 22:19), it is a directive as to the purpose of the symbol. Every time that we eat of it, we should do it with this purpose. This is not a commandment to do it, but a directive to make one intelligent in doing it.

For baptism in particular, the commandment is to go and baptise, that is to say that the act was the act of the apostles in receiving the gentiles into the Church. And this is so true that the apostles could not be baptised, but they did baptise those who received their teaching.

Through examining the cases presented, I find that the baptism is considered to be a privilege granted to somebody whom one admits in the house of God, and is never an act of obedience nor of testimony. The apostle says "Can any one forbid water that these should not be baptised, who have received the Holy Spirit as we also did?" (Acts 10:47). "What hinders my being baptised", says the eunuch (Acts 8:36) Evidently in this case it was not a matter of obedience, but an accorded privilege, an admission into the privileges that others enjoyed. I would remark in passing, although an adult, heathen or Jew, must believe to be baptised, the words "If thou believest with all thine heart, thou mayest." Acts 8:37KJV as foreign to the Word by everybody who are concerned with the authenticity of texts. The apostles received the order from the Lord to baptise.

I would add that the Baptists' idea that baptism is a symbol of what we are is also contrary to the Word because it says "buried with him in baptism, in which ye have been also raised (Col 2:12). That is then not based on the assumption that we are already dead and raised. On the contrary, in figure, we die and are raised in baptism itself, that is to say that we were not that beforehand. That is the sign of the thing through which we enter, not the sign of our state to ourselves.

I totally reject the whole Baptist system, because I have received teaching from the Word of God. I am fully convinced that it is entirely false. There is an order to baptise given to the apostles, but baptism is not the subject of a particular commandment to the one who is baptised. The difference is from beginning to end in the character of the act. If I give to my business agent an order to remit a hundred francs to such and such a person, he is obligated to obey me. If I give a letter of title to somebody, the obedience the recipient is totally a different matter.

Baptism is the Reception of a Person into the Christian Assembly down here in this World

However to reject what is false is not the only thing one has to do. It is a matter of knowing the truth in order to be able to glorify God; but the question has become much simpler. Baptism is the reception of a person into the midst of the Christian Assembly down here in this world. I do not

believe that one who reads the New Testament freely could deny that. Who then must be received into this assembly, baptism being recognized to be the means of receiving them (for I agree with the Baptists on this point)? I accept that in regard to the persons baptised, heathen or Jewish, in a word as to any who have not received baptism (as also for a Quaker or the child of a Baptist), those who believe ought to be baptised, because one can only receive an adult (who can act of his own accord) on his won responsibility. It is all simple so long as one does not try to push the tide back, with the big stick in his hand as Charlemagne harassed the Saxons.

But the remaining question is this – Should children of believing parents be received into the Assembly?

I should say a word as to the Assembly itself, because what has given rise to a lot of difficulties is the ignorance of what the assembly of God is on earth. I say ‘the Assembly’ not assemblies. Those baptised become, by baptism members of the Christian Assembly on earth, not of an assembly. However this assembly is the house of God where the Holy Spirit dwells. The world is the desert where Satan dwells. The Assembly is “a habitation of God in the Spirit” Eph 2:22). In this Assembly one is admitted by baptism, and it is true that it is the habitation of the Spirit for Hebrews 6 supposes that one can be partakers of the Holy Spirit without having been converted. In this case the one having the Spirit thus, was not really part of the body of Christ, but he possessed the Spirit, in the sense of a gift, being in the house where the Spirit lived and acted. So Ananias and Sapphira lied to the Holy Spirit. In this case, it was in the Spirit’s presence, not the gift, but for the point we are concerned about it is the same. However it is a matter of knowing if the children of Christians can be received into this house, or are they to be left in the world where Satan reigns. It is not a matter of commandment. I deny any commandment for any ordinance, baptism in particular. There isn’t one for an adult. It is a matter of knowing God’s will is in regard to this privilege. However it is clear to me that according to the Word, children should be received. It is fully evident that there would have to have been a change in God’s system of things in order not to receive them – a change which moreover has never been announced. However, here are a few passages which makes me see in a positive way the thoughts of God in regard to this. Before citing them I pose a recognized principle, because I believe it scriptural, that baptism is the Lord’s desired way to be received outwardly into the assembly of God, and its meaning is the death and resurrection of Christ. But here, in passing, I must also again remark that the views of many on this point are decidedly unscriptural. They assume that the ordinances, baptism in particular, are the sign of the state where somebody finds themselves and participates. However this idea is opposed to the testimony of the Word. The baptised person participates in an act of ordinance which is no sign at all that he participated beforehand. Thus, baptism is not a sign that a man participates in the death and resurrection of Christ. Baptism is (in figure), the participation in these things by the act itself. The testimony of Col 2:12 is positive in this regard: ”buried with him in baptism, in which ye have been also raised with him”. That is an act that the participation has taken place; it is not a sign of the participation that precedes it. It is the same in regard to the Supper. One eats (in figure) the body that was broken (1 Cor 11:24 KJV & Martin/Osterheld, not JND or JND-French and the blood that was shed. It is not a figure that one has done it already. The same principle is found in Rom 6:4. Other passages confirm the same.

Baptism and Little Children

Having made this principle clear, and having shown that the Baptist principle is not well founded, that the Word contradicts their idea that baptism is the sign that one is already dead and risen again, whereas the Word teaches that we figuratively die there and are raised. Having, as I say, brought all this into the light, I come to the passages which authorize me to believe that children of Christians are objects of this favour, baptism being the means of their being able to enjoy it.

Matthew 18 is a striking passage, showing how God considers the children. The Lord takes a little child (v2), not a converted person (He even distinguishes in v6 the difference between a believing child and others) and declares that one must become such, and that their angels continually see the face of their Father who is in the heavens (v10), that is to say that they are the objects of His special favour. But the testimony is something much more exact than that. They are lost; Christ has come, He says (v11) “to save that which was lost.” “For it is not the will of your Father who is in the heavens that one of these little ones should perish.” (v14). In receiving a little child in His name, I receive Christ, and I recognize that, even being children, this little being is lost; but that it is the object of the Father’s love which I know, and whom there is not other means of salvation, even for a child, than the death and resurrection of Christ. So I introduce it into the house by this means. The testimony is therefore very clear, we are born children of wrath.

I have already shown that baptism is not a witness rendered to the state of the individual, but the admission that the individual is a testimony to the value of the work of Christ. The Baptist will now say to me, I know “But you admit a little heathen child” The Word tells me totally the opposite. It says that if one of the parents is a Christian, the children are holy. However they are not holy by nature, it is a relative holiness, that is to say as a right of entry into the house. That is the sense of this word in the Bible. They are not soiled or profane. A Jew who married a woman from the nations was profaned, and their children profaned, and the woman was to be sent back with them. But in Christianity it is a system of grace, and the woman, instead of making her husband profane, is sanctified and the children are holy. And this is the proper force and the evident bearing of the passage, because it concerned the question of whether a believer should divorce his unbelieving wife. Thus the children, being holy, have the right to enter into the house and it is a real advantage that they enjoy.

To speak of legitimate children is nonsense, because only modern laws have made a distinction in such a case.

One may perhaps ask me, why then do we not give the supper to children? I answer: Because the light of the word prevents me. The supper, considered from this point of view, is a figure of the unity of the body. We are all one body, and so we all participate of the one loaf. For in the power of one Spirit we have all been baptised into one body, (1 Cor 12:13), that is to say that one must be baptised of the Holy Spirit to take the supper.

“Children, obey your parents” could not be said to children who were not inside. One does not address such precepts to heathens. I see then that Christ, who received the child, wants us to receive such in His name, and by doing that we receive Him, Himself. Notice that in Matt 18 the Lord applies the parable of the lost sheep to the little children (or to the letter it was to a little child who was there). I repudiate entirely any dedication to God apart from baptism. Not only is this Baptist practice a human innovation, but (without wishing it I admit), it pretends to be able to present the children to God without the death and resurrection of Christ. If one could present them to God by the death and resurrection of Christ they are then subjects of baptism. To do otherwise is to deny Christianity: not to devote them is impossible for a Christian. In my opinion, the Baptist deprives his child of the protection of the house of God and of the care of the Spirit and leaves it in the world where Satan reigns, instead of (though it is fortunately inconsistent) to bringing it up in the discipline of the Lord...

Summary

Finally I deny entirely that there is a commandment to be baptised, as a matter of obedience. I say that the principle is false and that baptism is always presented in totally the opposite way from that

which is the basis of the Baptist system. Reception into the church, the enjoyment of privilege of being brought into the house where the Spirit is, by citing the baptism of John, is to be ignorant of the first principles of Christianity and of the nature itself of Christian baptism. Baptism as the Word considers it, is a reception by the church, according to the favour of God, because they are holy. It is the opposite of the profanity of a Jew who had married a foreigner. In the case of a Christian the children are holy, whereas in the case of the Jew they are profane. I repeat this because I am seeking to use this word not to weaken the scriptural proof, whilst it only makes the truth and the bearing of these passages of scripture clearer.

Here is an outline of what, I am perfectly convinced, is the true idea according to the Word. This Word allows absolutely nothing of the Baptist system. Nevertheless if somebody, individually thinks that he has not been baptised, I do not blame him if he gets baptised. Rather, I respect his conscience like the conscience of one who believes he should only eat herbs. But if one makes a sect out of this lack of light, then I condemn it totally. However it is obvious that the Baptist position is one of pure ignorance, It is truly impossible that a man can speak of fulfilling righteousness, in being baptised according to the example of Jesus with John the Baptist, if he has the least light of the ways of God in Christ. He may be sincere but his ignorance as to the truth of the gospel is very great...

NOTES BY EDITOR

Baptism does not mean becoming coming part of the assembly

Infant baptism is not authorised in Scripture. A child would not understand it.

JND was baptised ,that is to say christened, and felt that one baptism was all that was necessary

His comment that Baptists were a sect is unfortunate.