

**HINTS TO AN
INQUIRER ON THE
SUBJECT OF BAPTISM**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649602827

Hints to an Inquirer on the Subject of Baptism by Parsons Cooke & Joseph Hardy Towne

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Cover @ 2017

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AN INQUIRER

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FIRST PUBLISHED IN THE NEW ENGLAND PURITAN.

BY

PARSONS COOKE AND JOSEPH H. TOWNE.

BOSTON:

PUBLISHED BY WASHINGTON CLAPP,

AT THE OFFICE OF THE NEW ENGLAND PURITAN.

1842.

265
766

Entered, according to Act of Congress, in the year 1842,
By WASHINGTON CLAPP,
In the Clerk's Office of the District Court of Massachusetts.

860

STEREOTYPED BY
GEORGE A. CURTIS,
N. ENGLAND TYPE AND STEREOTYPE FOUNDRY, BOSTON.

741 ✓
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1842

HINTS TO AN INQUIRER.

INTRODUCTION.

Those who practise immersion assume the position, that they may lawfully debar from the Lord's table all who administer baptism in other ways. This gives the question before us an importance which otherwise would not belong to it. If the exclusive principle advocated by this body of Christians is defensible on scriptural grounds, the greater part of Christ's professed disciples are intruders at his table. But if, on the other hand, Immersers are wrong, they are guilty of exercising an usurped authority in the house of God, and of withholding the children's bread.

The honest inquirer on this subject, therefore, in settling the question, whether he shall be immersed and unite with Immersers, must, at the same time, settle the question as to close communion. He cannot join them in church fellowship, without giving his sanction to their exclusive principle. This fact he should take along with him, through the whole argument, and put every suggestion in favor of immersion to the test of the inquiry—*Is this sure and satisfactory ground on which to base close communion?*

As to the use of names, we must be excused from using the term "Baptists," for those who practise immersion. The application to them of this name, is equivalent to a concession, that we do not baptize. And there is a kind of charm attached

to the name, carrying with it an impression, injurious to the force of opposite arguments. The influence of a name on this subject, has an illustration of this kind. A Campbellite, holding forth to an uncultivated audience at the west, in favor of immersion, broke forth in the following eloquent appeal:—“Was it John the Methodist? No. Was it John the Episcopalian? No. Was it John the Presbyterian? No. *It was John the Baptist.*” And this was doubtless the end of all strife, for those who could be convinced by the sound of a name. But the sound of a name has its influence more or less with all; and it is not fit that in this respect, an advantage should be conceded to either side. For any sect to claim the exclusive use of the term Baptists, is no more equitable than that they should claim an exclusive use of the name believers; in a way to imply that no others believe in Christ but themselves. But if they choose thus to beg the question, it is not wise in us to concede it. We take the liberty, therefore, so far as we have occasion to apply a name in these remarks, to use the term Immersers instead of Baptists—a term which need not be offensive to them, as it has no invidious intent with us. We are aware that immersion, unscriptural as we conceive it to be, is associated with the purest feelings of many devout disciples of our blessed Lord; and far be it from us to trifle with such feelings. But the cause of truth requires it of all Pedobaptists, that they take special pains to break the force of a habit; and discard, entirely, the use of a term so injurious to themselves. And, furthermore, it is the duty of Immersers, themselves, to discard its exclusive use, and that for the sake of consistency. In their new translation of the Bible, they have substituted immerse, for baptize, under the idea that baptize is not a fit and proper word to express the thing, and thus have virtually expunged baptism from the Bible. And now it is passing strange, if they, who are taking measures to deprive the Christian world of the very name of baptism, should assume the monopoly of that name, and style

themselves the only Baptists. Surely, after having blotted the word from the Bible, they will not deem it fit to retain it as the name of their sect. Though the sect in its infancy, was baptized by this name, yet now, having attained to maturer knowledge, and discovered that baptize does not express the true idea, they may be expected to secure a change of name, and conform to their riper knowledge.

We wish the inquirer to mark in the outset that the nice and punctilious regard to the forms of outward rites, so much insisted upon in the Mosaic ritual, is not required of us. A divine simplicity characterizes the New Testament institutions. It is contrary to the genius of the gospel to lay great stress on outward rites. It rather invites the main solitudes upon ordering the heart and life. The kingdom of God consisteth not in meats and drinks, but in righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost. Neither circumcision availeth anything nor uncircumcision, but a new creature.

And much less does the gospel lay a stress on the mode of performing an external rite, and require the conscience to be burdened with the inquiry, whether it shall be done in this way or that. It has instituted two rites, as simple as it was possible to make them, and says nothing about a danger to be incurred, by failing to perform the simple ceremonies, precisely after a particular way.

Let the inquirer take notice, that *Immersionists assume more responsibility than we do, and have more to prove.* Their principles of close communion lay them under obligations to show to an absolute certainty, that inspiration fixes that their way, and no other way, of applying water is baptism. On the other hand, we need only show that there is no such certainty and we gain the question in dispute. For what intelligent and candid mind could ever feel justified in basing close communion upon an external ceremony of doubtful obligation? We expect, however, to show more than this. While we hold that the New Testament insists upon no particular way

of applying the water as essential, we contend that it favors sprinkling or pouring; and that of all the conceivable forms of baptism, immersion is the most unnatural and improbable, and the farthest from the true design of the rite.

CHAPTER I.

MEANING OF THE WORD BAPTIZE.

THE argument for immersion is founded upon the assumption, that the words baptism and immersion convey the same idea. But this is a gross mistake. Baptism expresses the whole idea of the rite, including the invoking of the Trinity; the receiving of the candidate's implied profession of faith, the application of the water, and the like. Immersion expresses only a fraction of this idea. The Baptizer's Letter furnishes us with an apt illustration. "If I fall from a ship's side and am thoroughly immersed—is that baptism! No. Or if men immerse me by force—is that baptism! No. Or if I am immersed with my own consent, but not in the name of the Trinity—is that baptism! No. Well, then, neither immersion, nor the use of water in any way is baptism; WHICH IS SOMETHING MORE." This is sufficient to show that baptism and immersion are not synonymous terms.

But it is said that the Greek words *bapto* and *baptizo* (both of the same origin, and so nearly identical in meaning as to allow of our speaking of them as one word) decide the controversy. We should expect confident assertions in regard to these words; for if they fail, a very material part of the Immerser's argument vanishes. Now we affirm that these words determine nothing in this controversy, unless they have a fixed and invariable meaning, *allowing water to be applied only in one way*. If, on investigation, it be found that these words so much relied on, have different senses; if in one connection they mean to plunge, and in another to wash, and in another

to tinge or color, and in another to sprinkle, the mere general command to baptize does not tell us how the water shall be used.

The question, then, before us is—have these words a fixed and invariable meaning? Even if we were to allow (as we do not) that to immerse is the *primary* signification of these terms, it would not fix us to that way of applying water. *Words very often lose their primary meaning.* Instance the English word villain, primarily a servant; the word clerk, primarily a clergyman. Examples without number might be adduced, wherein the primary meaning is wholly superseded. And then many words which retain their primary meaning have also *secondary meanings.* The English noun, general, means the whole or totality, and then secondarily, a military officer. The word meal is primarily used of the flour of corn, and then of a repast. The word dowry, primarily means a price paid for a wife; and secondarily almost the opposite, that is, a portion received with a wife; and so of many others.

Again: *when words go abroad and come into a foreign language,* they often change their meaning. Hence, if it could be shown that the Greeks used the word for immersion, and nothing else, it would not follow that the Jews, having adopted it as a foreign word, retained the same sense; nor that it bears such a meaning in the New Testament, as Greek writers give it. These suggestions are sufficient to raise at least the suspicion, that it is hazardous to rest close communion upon the assumption, that the word baptize necessarily carries the force of immersion.

The inquirer is now prepared to come nearer to the point, and see how these words are actually used. We will begin with *uninspired writers.* Callimachus and his commentators use *bapto*, to denote drawing up, &c. "To-day ye bearers of water draw up [baptize] none." Hippocrates, speaking of a certain liquid, says, "When it *drops* upon the garments they are dyed" [baptized.] Observe, the dropping of the liquid is