

## The Answer of a Good Conscience Toward God

Rheems Mennonite Church

I would like you to turn with me now to 1 Peter 3 for a message. I would like to use the parenthesis of verse 21 as a text for the sermon this evening. The context here is regarding the work of Christ. It begins verse 18 (the immediate context) and goes to verse 22.

*“For Christ also hath once suffered for sins, the just for the unjust, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh, but quickened by the Spirit: (19) By which also he went and preached unto the spirits in prison; (20) Which sometime were disobedient, when once the longsuffering of God waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was a preparing, wherein few, that is, eight souls were saved by water. (21) The like figure whereunto even baptism doth also now save us (not the putting away of the filth of the flesh, but the answer of a good conscience toward God,) by the resurrection of Jesus Christ: (22) Who is gone into heaven, and is on the right hand of God; angels and authorities and powers being made subject unto him.”*

I would like to go back to verse 21 again and read this and omit the parenthesis. *“The like figure whereunto even baptism doth also now save us . . . by the resurrection of Jesus Christ: (22) Who is gone into heaven.”* That is a running thought. And in the parenthesis he makes an explanation and gives us, helps us in our understanding of the meaning and implications of water baptism.

Now, the death and resurrection of Christ is a pattern of what takes place in our salvation experience and is typified by baptism. In becoming a Christian we need to go through a death experience — death to the flesh — death to ourselves — and out of that we rise to new life in Jesus Christ. It is a pattern of our Christian life.

Now, the question is here, that is sometimes raised here in these verses, in verse 20, How is Noah and the flood connected to it? And I would just like to note that it is actually the same idea. He says Noah and his family were saved by water. The last phrase of verse 20 is that they were saved by water. It was a water of death and life. It was a water of death to the world and life to Noah and his family. It was a water of destruction that prepared the way for something new. And that is the way it works in spiritual experience in the Christian life. There must first of all be a death to ourselves so that there could be a new work of God take place in our experience. And we will notice that as we go along.

The new life of God within us is by the Holy Spirit. And the pouring out of the Holy Spirit is symbolized by water. It symbolizes the washing away of the old and the impartation of the new.

Now, a key word in this parenthesis I would like to lift out is the word “answer.” *“(Not the putting away of the filth of the flesh, but the answer of a good conscience toward God).”* In the German the word that is given there instead of answer the word that is given there is instead of answer the word *Bund* is given which means “covenant.” That is an interesting and I think it is involved in that. Actually, the Greek [Strong’s # 1906] idea would be the word witness or answer.

Answer is consistent with what the original meaning is here. But it is an answer, it is a covenant, a declaration, a public declaration of covenant. It is a “witness.” In Spanish the word [*aspiración* or *demanda*] “testimony” is used there. It is a testimony of a good conscience toward God, or the covenant of a good conscience toward God, or the witness of a good conscience toward God. All of that is contained in the thought there — “the answer of a good conscience toward God.”

I would like to look, this evening, at: *How is it the answer of a good conscience?*

And what we can learn about baptism from this passage.

1] *Baptism is symbolic.*

This is the first thought I would like to give in connection with what we can learn about baptism from this passage is that it is symbolic.

Baptism is not the physical washing, he is saying here in this parenthesis — “not the putting away of the

filth of the flesh.” Water is involved. And we often think of, in connection with water, of washing. But he is saying is it not the physical washing away of dirt, of water, of filth. Neither is baptism, rather it is symbolic. That is my point here.

Now, neither is it the process by which the flesh or the old nature is dealt with and taken away. It is symbolic. There are those that teach that wrongly. That when you are baptized why that wipes away the flesh. That wipes away the old nature. That takes care of the old man. That is not true. It is symbolic. It is a rite, an ordinance. And in the instruction classes that the applicants have gone through we have one of the definitions for ordinance there and as many of you know “It is an outward ceremony which is symbolized with symbolic meanings — spiritual symbolic meaning.” And so it is symbolic. That is the point. It is a rite, an external rite that helps to drive home to us the reality of what has occurred in the life of one baptized.

Now, all the ordinances are actually that. They are symbolic of something that is already present, that is already there. Sometimes the thought is given that we wait too long to baptize. We ought to baptize right away. And sometimes that comes because they feel that there is some impartation of some grace or, like a sacrament. Those that believe in sacraments say that the performing of it gives some spiritual benefit or has some spiritual merit. Well, we believe that it is symbolic. It is a religious rite. It is an ordinance, but it symbolizes something that has already occurred. And that is, that at conversion it is when the Holy Ghost came upon them.

In the book of Acts they baptized when that evidence of the Holy Spirit’s presence was there. And so, the pouring out of the water of baptism is symbolic of that fact.

## 2] *Baptism is symbolic of experiencing life out of death.*

(Now, that is the thought that I gave in the opening where in connection with Noah and with the death and resurrection of Christ). And that is where the experience of Christ’s work applies. Verse 18, speaking of Christ he says He was, “put to death in the flesh, but quickened by the Spirit.” Same thought is in verse 21 where we say, “The like figure whereunto even baptism doth also now save us . . . by the resurrection of Jesus Christ. . .” from the dead.

Now, out of that experience, we could go to Christ’s experience. Out of Christ’s work for us comes new life for us, the possibility of new life for us, spiritual life, better life. But the putting to death of our flesh opens the way for spiritual life. It does not, it is not merely denying the flesh. But denying the flesh is part of repentance and of sorrows for sin that opens the way for the outpouring of the Holy Spirit into our lives. We reject the flesh. We deal with the flesh and open the way for spiritual life.

And that is a principle. It is a principle that underlies all of God’s judgments, God’s judgments in the world where God deals with sin for the purpose of opening of the way for the new, for a new world order, for the presence of righteousness. God judges us for the purpose of bringing us to holiness and bringing us to purity and maturity. That is what God does. He deals in judgment in the interest of bringing life.

That is illustrated and gone over a number of times in 2 Corinthians 4:10–12 where he says, he speaks there about the “Always bearing about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus, that the life also of Jesus might be made manifest in our body. (11) For we which live are always delivered unto death for Jesus’ sake, that the life also of Jesus might be made manifest in our mortal flesh. (12) So then death worketh in us, but life in you.” And it is the same principle. There is death so that there can be life.

He illustrates that also in 1 Corinthians 15 in connection with the resurrection, where he speaks about it using the illustration of a seed. He said, there is a seed that is planted and there is, that seed dies so that a new plant can come forth from that. The principle of death resulting in life.

And that is exactly what happens in the new birth experience. Baptism is symbolic of washing as in the Old Testament purifying and cleansing, and the impartation of new life in one act. In other words baptism by the outpouring of water is not only connected to the Old Testament sprinklings of purification but also to the impartation of new life by the Holy Spirit. That is what baptism symbolizes, the dying of the old and the impartation of new life. And that new life comes in and indwells us by the work of the Holy Spirit as He comes into our hearts, as He takes control of us. Then there is evidence of that as how new life comes and then we reflect the presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives by what we do and how we live and how we talk in every area of life.

The principle of death to bring life is woven into the natural world as well as every aspect of the spiritual world. In giving up we receive. Over and over again those paradoxes are so much a part. "He that humbly himself shall be exalted" (Luke 14:11; 18:14). It is giving up to receive. It is the dying to live. It is that principle. And it is illustrated in Noah and the ark as well as in the death and resurrection of Christ. And is again part of what is symbolized in water baptism. It symbolizes the new life that has come out of death and the purification that comes as a result of that.

3] *Now, baptism also symbolizes surrender to the Lordship of Jesus Christ.*

The Scriptures say here that it is "the answer of a good conscience toward God" (1 Peter 3:21). It symbolizes the surrender to the Lordship of Christ and is a public declaration of that. It is "the answer of a good conscience toward God."

How do we live in good conscience? The apostle Paul gave that testimony at one point. He said, "I have lived in all good conscience" (Acts 23:1) even though there were times when he acknowledged that he had failed. He said that his desire was to be always in a relationship with God that was right. And he lived in good conscience toward God. And I think that living in a good conscience toward God means that we have a spirit of surrender that becomes evident in every part of life. Where if we would not have the work of the Holy Spirit in our hearts there might be a response, a carnal response, a response of the flesh. But the surrender to the Lordship of Jesus Christ has an impact on how we respond in every other situation of life. We are surrendered to Him. He is Lord in our Lives. So, it symbolizes that. It is "the answer of a good conscience toward God."

4] *Baptism also symbolizes an acceptance into the body of Christ the Church.*

Again, we believe that a person after he becomes a Christian is in a saved relationship with God. But the rite of baptism is the entrance rite into the Church and has been, that is what it is, it is clear from the Scriptures. It says that in Acts 2 and in Acts 5 when those that were added to the Church after they were baptized and the Scripture says they were "added" (Acts 2:41, 47; Acts 5:14) to the Church. It was the entrance rite into the Church. And it symbolizes acceptance into the body of Christ.

In Matthew 3 people came to be baptized of John the Baptist. And what were they baptized to? What was being reflected? Well, it showed their acceptance of him as a prophet of God. And in accepting him as a prophet of God they were coming under the authority of God. In the same way that we allow a man, representing the Church, to baptize us is to accept the brotherhood as an authority in one's life. So, baptism is voluntary coming under the authority of the brotherhood. And it is coming. That was very much a part of the understanding of the Anabaptists as they became a part, a baptized member of the Church, that they showed that they accepted the church that they were becoming a part of as an authority in their lives.

That concept is very foreign to most churches today. Just very recently in a local paper in our area there was a feature on churches in the community who had what they called contemporary worship services. It was interesting. I read part of it because I knew of and was acquainted with most of the churches and knew some people that went to some of them. But almost every one of the people they talked to emphasized that at their church it does not matter how you dress. And tone went so far as to say that probably Jesus would not even be allowed in many church services of the formal churches because He would not be dressed right to come to church. And it talked about some of the more far out ways that people dress to come to church and again emphasizing that it does not matter.

Running through that whole thing was this idea that the church has absolutely no authority over any area, any aspect of the lives of people. You come just as you are and that is the way you want to and you will be accepted no matter what you say and who you are and how you act and how you look and on and on and on. Well, that is not a church. That is not the New Testament Church at all.

There were entrance requirements that needed to be met and there was an authority that was there, an authority that we accept because it helps us in a similar way that the submissive child in a home that accepts the authority of parents comes under that authority, the person that comes under that authority finds help to go right and to be right and to act right, to learn to know how to deal with one's self. That authority becomes a help to help in development and maturity. Parents are commissioned with the responsibility to

bring their children “up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord” (Ephesians 6:4) with discipline and training. There is an authority there that is designed for the good of the children. That is the point. And the authority is and should be exercised for that purpose. That is exactly how it is to be in the Church of Jesus Christ. The authority is to be exercised for the welfare and the good of the people that are a part of it. Baptism is symbolic of accepting that authority.

There are other Scriptures like the Scripture in 1 Corinthians 10:2 where he speaks about they “were all baptized unto Moses in the cloud and in the sea.” And the children of Israel crossed the Red Sea on dry ground and it rained on them as they went through, obviously. That is what it says they, “were all baptized . . . in the cloud and in the sea.” They walked through the sea rained on by the clouds in a symbolic baptism of coming under the authority of Moses. They were baptized unto Moses. When they came out of Egypt and crossed that Red Sea they were declaring by that they were willing to come under the authority of a man that God put here over us in authority that was divinely instituted.

5] *Baptism is also a symbol of commitment for the future.*

And that thought is in the idea of covenant. I mentioned that the German word *Bund* means covenant. I asked a German man this question. His native language was German. I asked him what the word *Bund* means. And he thought a little and he said “Well, I guess the nearest thing in English would probably be covenant.” He said you go, it is the agreement, it is a commitment. When you sign something that two people are agreeing to you enter into a *Bund* — a covenant. And he said so it is symbolic of commitment for the future.

One of the questions that are, that will be asked this evening of the applicants for baptism is whether they are willing to make a commitment of faithfulness for the future. And that is part of baptismal vows. We are going to forsake sin and the world. We are going to be faithful. We make no provision for going back. It is a commitment to future faithfulness. And one that we do not take lightly.

6] *Baptism is also a public identity with the people of God.*

And that comes from the idea of the Spanish word “testimony.” It is an open declaration of my spiritual standing. It is a testimony. We are going to be asking [the applicants] to give a verbal testimony this evening. But the act of baptism is the most powerful testimony he will be giving this evening. By submitting himself to water baptism he is giving, making an open declaration of his identity, his spiritual standing, the fact that he has received the Holy Ghost and believes with all his heart.

Remember the Ethiopian eunuch. He was there and he said, “See, here is water; what doth hinder me to be baptized? (Acts 8:37) And Philip said, If thou believest with all thine heart, thou mayest” (Acts 8:36-37). And we believe that believing with all one’s heart means that there is an unmixed intention and desire to faithfulness. We are intending to move on and be faithful from here. It does not work to try to live a successful Christian life, successful in terms of a victorious Christian life if we have not burned the bridges and did like Jesus said, not look back. He said, “No man, having put his hand to the plough, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God” (Luke 9:62).

Lot’s wife was not sure whether she wanted to go to Zoar or stay in Sodom. Part of her was still in Sodom. And the kind of commitment for us to be victorious in the Christian life means that we need to not look back. My commitment is ahead. And when we start looking back we are going to be torn between conflicting desires and after a bit we will go where we are looking because that is what Jesus was saying. It needs to be a firm commitment and I am going to continue on and I am going to be faithful. There are times when things from the past come back to in a sense haunt us. Those memories from the past are used by the enemy as he brings them up to try and bring condemnation to us and things where we have failed in the past or maybe things that were part of our old life that the devil would like to remind us of. But when those things come we need to be steadfast in looking ahead. I am going to be faithful. I am not going to be dwelling on those things. I am not going to let those things get a grip on me. I am not going to let my mind wander and stay there and go in its circles. But I am going to move on with God. And that is what it means when He says, “whoso putteth his hand to the plough.” I should say (I want to put it in the positive) “and does not look back, is fit for the kingdom of heaven.” It is a continuing on, a public testimony, a public identity that that is what I am intending to do. I am not going to go back.

Sometimes people have asked, and this has happened several times in my short time since I have been a bishop, where individuals came to the end of instruction and were not sure about giving their commitment to the church, and they asked whether they could be baptized but not become a part of the Church. And that very thing is totally against, it undermines the whole idea of baptism or what it symbolizes and means. Because when we are ready to be baptized we are saying, and we are openly declaring that I am ready to surrender and go the whole way with the Lord and give myself to the people of God.

And the answer is a resounding “No.” We do not baptize people with a halfway commitment. We only baptize those that are ready to commit themselves to faithfulness and to open themselves to become a part of a brotherhood of believers and accept their input into our lives. And I am glad for that clarity and as a part of our spiritual heritage and a part of the church life that we appreciate and accept. And may God help us to continue that and to maintain that.

Again, this evening, all the possibilities that are contained in what baptism is were made possible by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. I would like to conclude with that thought. I mentioned in the opening that baptism also now does save us “baptism doth also now save us . . . by the resurrection of Jesus Christ: Who is gone into heaven, and is on the right hand of God; angels and authorities and powers being made subject unto him” (1 Peter 3:21, 22).

It is the resurrection that gives us God’s stamp of approval on the work of Jesus in dying for our sins. And it is based on His work for us. And it is also the resurrection that makes it possible to not only be delivered from the sins of the past but to live in victory in the present. And He is in heaven interceding [see Romans 8:34]. He is there for us. He is there giving us the grace and the courage to live the resurrection life, His resurrection power. So, the resurrection, the death and resurrection of Jesus is also tied in to our faithfulness, being faithful in the Christian life. And may we appreciate that and may the Lord bless us as we continue in that.

One of the clearer Scriptures on baptism is Matthew 28:18–20. We are given specific instruction from the word on baptism and how to baptize.

The Great Commission. “And Jesus came and spake unto them, saying, All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth. (19) Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: (20) Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world. Amen.”

It is very clear that part of the teaching is to baptize.

I would like to call your attention again to the fact that the brethren in their work in India and the Hindus who surround their work, they view it and they do not mind how much a person goes to church with the Mennonites. They do not mind how much or how many Bible studies they go to. They do not even mind if they try to teach people from the Bible. But in their minds they cross a line when they submit to water baptism. And when they are baptized they consider that to be an identification with another system, and it is! It is.

Why do they have that attitude?

Well, I think it is because it is one of the reasons why there is baptism.

It is why it was instituted.

It is to draw a line of commitment that is necessary for the ongoing work of the Church and for faithfulness.