

*DID JOHN PREACH BAPTISM FOR THE  
REMISSION OF SINS?*

A CRITICISM.

MRS. LEWIS'S paper with the above title in the March number of the EXPOSITOR will have been read with great interest. A very important point has been raised, the argument has been stated with great clearness, and the issue has been made to depend mainly on the grammatical construction of a familiar phrase. In this way the question has been discussed without any heat of theological controversy.

The following observations are offered in the same spirit. The phrase which comes under discussion is the familiar one, *βάπτισμα μετανοίας εἰς ἄφεσιν ἁμαρτιῶν*, and the first question is whether the qualifying expression *εἰς ἄφεσιν ἁμαρτιῶν* is to be regarded as dependent upon and qualifying *βάπτισμα* or *μετανοίας*, a third alternative that this expression is dependent on both *βάπτισμα* and *μετανοίας* being rejected by Mrs. Lewis as "a most unusual grammatical construction" (p. 225). There remains however another possible grammatical construction. It would certainly not be logically or grammatically possible to make the expression *εἰς ἄφεσιν ἁμαρτιῶν* dependent on both *βάπτισμα* and *μετανοίας* taken separately, but it is quite possible to make it dependent on *βάπτισμα μετανοίας* taken together as one phrase. And that this has been the construction put upon the words by the Christian Churches and by a consensus of theologians it is almost impossible to doubt.

A further examination of the words will confirm this view. St. John did not preach baptism absolutely, he preached baptism with a condition. He preached a baptism of repentance, *i.e.* a baptism which stood in some relation

to repentance. What that relation was we learn by the verbal expression: μετανοήσατε, καὶ βαπτισθήτω ἕκαστος ὑμῶν . . . εἰς ἄφεσιν ἁμαρτιῶν, "repent and be baptized every one of you for the remission of sins" (Acts ii. 38). In other words, the baptism of John and afterwards the baptism of Christ had for a precedent condition repentance (μετάνοια). But the baptism of John was to be followed as well as preceded by μετάνοια: ἐγὼ βαπτίζω ὑμᾶς ἐν ὕδατι εἰς μετάνοιαν (Matt. iii. 11). Μετάνοια was to be the final cause of baptism. Baptism must lead on to μετάνοια. In order to see how this could be we must consider the true meaning of μετάνοια. "Repentance" is an inadequate rendering. The preposition μετά with which the word is compounded implies change, and μετάνοια signifies the change of heart and life and *motive*, the "amendment of life" (A.V. *marg.*), which follows upon conviction of sin. Baptism marked and symbolised this change and became the starting point of the new life.

A further point remains. Why should John's baptism be thus characterized? Was there any other baptism from which it was to be distinguished? Expressions such as εἰς τὸν Μωϋσῆν ἐβαπτίσαντο (1 Cor. x. 2), and διαφόροις βαπτισμοῖς (Heb. ix. 10) certainly imply that baptism was not an unknown rite among the Jews. It is probable that proselytes were baptized; and the baptism of John does not appear to have created surprise as an innovation. If then baptism was a familiar rite, it was all the more necessary that a new teacher should clearly indicate the significance which he put upon it. This the Baptist did by the use of a qualifying word—μετανοίας. There is a remarkable passage in Josephus which further illustrates this necessity of definition. Josephus, speaking of John's baptism (*Ant.* xviii. v. 2) says: οὕτω γὰρ καὶ τὴν βάπτισιν ἀποδεκτὴν αὐτῷ φανεῖσθαι μὴ ἐπὶ τινῶν ἁμαρτιῶν παραιτήσῃ χρωμένων ἀλλ' ἐφ' ἀγνείᾳ τοῦ σώματος ἅτε δὴ καὶ τῆς ψυχῆς δικαιοσύνης

*προκεκαθαρμένης*—a passage which Whiston translates as follows: "For that the washing with water would be acceptable to Him (God) if they made use of it, not in order to the putting away of some sins but for the purification of the body; supposing still that the soul was thoroughly purified beforehand by righteousness." This passage seems to indicate an unwillingness on the part of the Pharisee Josephus to admit the need of repentance or conversion for those who came to John's baptism—a misconception which shows how necessary the addition of *μετανοίας* was in order to exhibit the true meaning and purport of the rite.

Turning now to the expression *εἰς ἄφεσιν ἁμαρτιῶν*, we are unable to agree with Mrs. Lewis's suggestion that *ἄφεσις* can bear the sense of "forsaking" in this connexion. Indeed in the instance cited from Liddell and Scott's Lexicon the rendering given to *ἀφήμι* is "to put away," *ὀργήν*, "to divorce," *γυναῖκα*. And both in the Old and New Testaments the use of *ἄφεσις* in the sense of letting go or remission is too well established to need proof.

*Εἰς ἄφεσιν ἁμαρτιῶν* then can only mean for the remission of sins, *i.e.* in order that sins may be remitted or forgiven.

The further question how this is possible is purely a theological one. But on the supposition that baptism is the outward symbol of a new and spiritual life imparted by virtue of the Incarnation of Jesus Christ, it does not involve greater difficulty than such as is necessarily present in any endeavour to realise the invisible operations of divine grace.

The new life thus begun has its counterpart in the physical life. It is true that among the baptized are found murderers and liars and criminals of the worst type; in other words, men who have weakened or lost their spiritual life; but it is equally true that among those who are

naturally born some are weak and diseased and all ultimately die. In each case the life imparted has been weakened or vitiated or destroyed. But still in each case a life was originally given.

ARTHUR CARR.