

CIRCULAR LETTER.

TO THE CHURCHES COMPRISING THE EASTERN BAPTIST ASSOCIATION.

DEAR BRETHREN,—

We have thought it fitting to address you at the present time upon our POSITION AND DUTIES AS BAPTISTS:—a subject always reasonable, but rendered peculiarly so just now because of "the signs of the times" in which our lot is cast.

Permit us to ask, in regard to our POSITION, What is it to be a Baptist? That is, what does our denominational distinction signify?

It is descriptive of our practice. We are Baptists because we baptize. That is, we immerse. And we do so, because immersion alone is baptism. Sprinkling or pouring can be called baptism only by a perversion of terms. Thus when we immerse a candidate, we do so because we are persuaded that if he were not immersed he would not be baptized.

There is a farther reference, in our denominational distinction, to the subjects of baptism. The baptism administered by John, by the Saviour, and by his apostles, though circumstantially different from each other, yet substantially involved, in each case, a credible profession of "repentance toward God, and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ." So also among us. We do not baptize any because of what others may be, in regard to religion, but because of what they themselves profess to be. Again we baptize, not in the hope that those baptized may at some time become believers, but on account of their own trustworthy avowal, that such they already are. And lastly, we baptize, not to make men Christians, but in the charitable persuasion, that heaven itself has already made them such. Such is our baptism. Such alone in our view, is the baptism of the New Testament.

We call our churches Baptist churches, because they are composed of baptized believers. Not of baptized households, as households; but of baptized individual believers; who have been "born," as they avow, "not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of GOD." The Baptist theory of a church, we would farther remark, is necessarily at the utmost remove from that of a national church. We have not the least idea either of a national Christianity, or of a national church. We can find no such church in the New Testament, and no framework on which such a church can be constructed. Churches made up of professing households, or built upon a national model, may include many Christian elements, and be regarded, in some sense, as Christian churches; though doubtless very imperfect ones. But they clearly are not, in our view, New Testament churches; such churches being composed, according to their profession, of baptized believers, and of such alone.

Now upon the members of churches constituted in the manner indicated as above, there devolve certain DUTIES. In regard to which we would say to you, brethren,

I. Let us not be ashamed of our name.

Men choose to cast reproach upon it, and upon the rite to which it points. Yet can that be unfitting, either in man or woman, of which our great Messiah said, "Thus it becometh us to fulfil all righteousness." Can that be an unworthy rite which symbolizes the cross itself? That cross in regard to which Paul exclaims, "God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ;"—that rite to which he who suffered on the cross directly refers when he says, "I have a baptism to be baptized with; and how am I straitened till it be accomplished!"—and which he left to his church as a precious legacy when he went up on high introducing it into his commission, and saying, "He that believeth, and is baptized shall be saved."

Let it be remembered, too, that the corruption of baptism stands in early and intimate association with the great anti-Christian apostacy. The spirit of evil laid the foundation on which Rome is built; when he taught men, alas! too soon, to pervert baptism into a saving ordinance. Thus Satan himself, in his own Satanic fashion, does honour to baptism, while he exalts it into a daring rivalry with Him who has appointed it. Indeed, the false theories of baptism, which obtain around us on every hand, hinder men from attaining to correct conclusions in regard to the nature of the Gospel dispensation. A New Testament religion, and a New Testament church, as might easily be shewn, can never be rightly understood apart from the acceptance of a New Testament baptism.

What follows? That as the anti-Christian apostacy began in the grievous corruption of baptism, so that apostacy can be brought to an end only by a sound and searching baptismal reform. And farther, that as grave errors in regard to baptism continue to work wide mischief, not within Rome alone, but without it as well, so the abandonment of those errors is essential to the reform of the bodies which have been betrayed into them, and their attainment to the highest measure of spirituality and usefulness. Nay, we cannot help thinking that, as the reform of John the Baptist prepared the way for the personal advent of the Son of God, so shall baptismal reform, in these advanced ages, open the way for the introduction of the glories of the millennial period.

Wherefore, dear brethren, let us not be ashamed of our name as Baptists. It is not so great as our Christian name. Yet is it closely related to it. And while our Christian name ranks as our grand catholic distinction, which we shall bear with us to the skies, still our Baptist name, eminently subservient as it is to that greater name, may be fitly cherished; in meek regard to Him who has prescribed our baptism, and to whom we would still look up, evermore enquiring, with the humbled Saul of Tarsus, "Lord! what wilt thou have us to do?"

II. Let us seek to do honour to our name. Let us so conduct ourselves, that our Baptist name, and our brethren who bear that name, may not be ashamed of us.

Let us not, for instance, make too much of our distinguishing rite. You remember Hezekiah's *nehustan* that brazen serpent which Moses made in the wilderness, with its wonderful office and

history. You remember, too, how that brazen serpent was preserved as a precious relic. Not preserved alone, however, but worshipped as well; for unto the days of Hezekiah "the children of Israel did burn incense unto it." Wherefore the good Hezekiah, in his holy zeal against idolatry in its every form, "brake [it] in pieces, and called it *nehustan*;" that is, a piece of brass. Yes! there lurks a danger here. Men are exceeding prone to put the creature in the place of the Creator—the instrument and representative of good in the place of its great Agent. Here lies much of the poison of Rome; in its angel-worship, its saint-worship, its relic-worship, its worship of Mary, and its endless idolatry, Christian in name, but Pagan in fact. Let us beware here; and bid all others beware; especially such as ask for baptism at our hands. There was no saving power in the brazen serpent of old, any more than in the rod with which Moses wrought so great miracles. They were instrumental; they were representative; and no more. The God who directed their use by the hand of Moses, was above them, above Moses, was ALL; else they had been nothing. So there is no saving power in the water of baptism. "Remission of sins" is not there; but in "the blood of Jesus Christ," which "cleanseth us from all sin." The "renewing of the Holy Spirit" is not there; but in the influences which he "sheds on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Saviour," of which influences, again, as well as of the fountain of reconciling blood, the baptismal water is the emblem, and no more. Brethren, let us cleave to this our profession. In spite of all sophistry to the contrary, eye, and of all Scripture too, *mis-quoted and mis-applied*, to give a colour to that sophistry; lest, before we are aware, we become a sort of *plunging* Puseyites, and find ourselves in friendly alliance with Rome; and lest too we thus become the reproach of our name and of our brethren, instead of their glory.

Furthermore: in order that we may do honour to our Baptist name, let us continually remember the holiness to which, as *individuals*, our baptism binds us. In baptism we "put on Christ." Having thus assumed our uniform as the soldiers of Christ, let us be careful to act in character, and "keep ourselves unspotted from the world." Having passed avowedly from the world into the church—openly "translated," in the baptismal emblem, "into the kingdom of God's dear Son," let us walk as children of that kingdom. Dead to sin—"buried with Christ by baptism into death," like dead men let us leave the world behind us, even as Christ did when he slept in Joseph's tomb. And then, as he rose from that tomb to live and reign in glory, so let us also rise with him, to "walk" henceforth "in newness of life." Something like this men expect from us, even as ourselves have taught them. To fall short here is to dishonour our profession, and to bring reproach upon "that worthy name by which we are called." Wherefore, let us seek grace, that we may remember our vows, and meet the expectations we have excited, and bring glory, and not reproach, to our Saviour and our God.

So, too, in our associate capacity, as churches. "The visible church of Christ," as we read in the articles of the Church of England, "is a congregation of faithful," that is, of believing "men." Nothing more Scriptural than this; unless, by way of being still more definite, we were to say, a church of Christ is a company of baptized believers. The Church of England neutralizes her theory here by her infant baptism, as well as by her discipline in other respects. This theory can never be perfectly realized where infant-baptism is practised. In the constitution and government of our churches we aim avowedly to give it full effect. On the one hand, in our baptism itself we maintain a practical protest, not only against infant-baptism, but against the manifold and inevitable corruptions arising out of it. On the other, we go about to shew, not only that our ordinance is in itself pure and holy, but that it is fraught with pure and holy consequences. Here, again, is something that the world expects from us—something that we have taught the world to expect. Something, too, that our Master expects from us—for which he has made provision—that we have vowed to render him. Aye, and if we fall short here, heaven is in some sort disappointed; inasmuch that we provoke the complaints, "What could have been done to my vineyard, that I have not done in it? Wherefore, when I looked that it should bring forth grapes, brought it forth wild grapes?" Alas! for our "wild grapes!" Have we not more of them among us than there ought to be? How many of our churches are up to the true standard of New Testament discipline? Which of them is so exemplary in all things, that He "who walketh in the midst of the seven golden candlesticks" has no room to say thereof, "I have somewhat against thee?" Be it ours, brethren, to trace out our faults here, and to seek grace to confess and forsake them. So shall our churches be adorned by a New Testament holiness. Those who love holiness shall thus be attracted to our fellowship, while such as love it not will be repelled. Thus shall our Great Head be glorified; our distinguishing rite shall be commended; we shall at last live down prejudices; we shall take that only course by which, as a denomination, we can maintain our standing among men—by which alone that standing can be rightfully maintained; while, in a word, we may hope, in the strength of God, not to live only, but to prosper, to conquer, and to do exploits for heaven, and truth, and souls.

III. Let us be willing to make sacrifices for our name. We read of some who, for their Christian name, "took joyfully the spoiling of their goods." With this, and much more, have our Baptist brethren, in former days, been familiarized. And even yet, the world over, with all the boasted liberality of our age, our Baptist name exposes us to disaste, and inconveniences, to say nothing of sufferings, and that even among some whom we must needs love as brethren, and from whom better things might have been expected. Let us not, however, be too sensitive to things like these. Have we an approving conscience. Let that suffice. What matters it, who frowns, if heaven be pleased to smile? Alienation, contempt, opposition, repression never hurt the truth yet; but the contrary. The truth that can live through these must at last rise above them. The God of truth, in his own good time, will openly shew himself on the side of truth. The mist that hangs around the truth shall ere long be dissipated; and they who have stood by the truth when under a cloud shall reap their reward when that cloud is scattered, and both themselves, and the truth which they have loved at all hazards, shall "shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father."

But there is another point here, with which we are more directly concerned. "Buy the truth!" says Solomon. We must always expect God's truth to cost us something. If less than heretofore in the way of contribution, if not now, as under the law, by way of assessment, then more in the way of untaxed bounty. "Freely ye have received;"—here is the principle of Christian beneficence. "Freely give;"—here is its mode. Give "as God hath prospered" you;—here is its measure. Oh! did we but all of us proceed in harmony with these suggestions, how much more should we do for Christ than we now do! Especially if that other New Testament hint were once adopted into practice,—"*Upon the first day of the week let every one of you lay by him in store, as God hath prospered him.*" All this, however, is broad and general in its aspect. Our specific aim here is this,—that, as Baptists, we are summoned to the free, the grateful, the enlarged, the constant support of our Baptist institutions. As Christians we shall thus justify our Christianity. As Baptists, too, we shall vindicate our zeal for a New Testament Christianity; while we shew our readiness to consecrate our substance to its maintenance and propagation. Our churches, our pastors, our Sunday Schools, our missions, our COLLEGE, with all else that belong to us, will obtain a larger and less grudging consideration. We shall come to put a literal interpretation upon our Lord's great precept, "Seek ye first the kingdom of God." We shall permit Solomon to expound it for us, when he says, "Honour the Lord with thy substance, and with the first-fruits of all thine increase." We shall farm, and mine, and trade, and save even, not to build our own houses, but the Lord's. We shall be more concerned to leave our children a heritage of wisdom and piety, than of any other possessions. We shall bequeath to them God's cause as the most precious of all bequests; assured that if they find in their hearts to stand by Him, He will not find it in his heart to desert them. And while, lastly, we shall not shut up our bosoms against the claims of general beneficence, we shall feel that God's truth as identified with Baptist principles and movements—as associated, remember again, with a *New Testament Christianity*, has evermore its largest claims upon us, and apportion our benefactions accordingly. Thus shall we make those "sacrifices" for our Baptist name with which a gracious God shall be "well-pleased;" and which shall in all things return in copious blessings upon our souls. So shall we not blush for our name. Our name shall not blush for us. Next to our Christian name, and always in subordination to that, it shall become our highest praise. Nay, we shall thus hasten the time when it shall become "a praise in the earth."

This last expression may fitly introduce the one other topic to which we would here invite your attention.

IV. Let us wear our name in hope.

That name, we venture again, to insist, embodies God's truth. That truth was once universally admitted in the church of God; so that a man could not have pretended to be a Christian without having bowed to the apostolic commission, an establishment, and a perpetuity, and a character, which may not be set aside, and cannot be abrogated. There was a time, indeed, when it was all but buried in a hopeless oblivion. Yet even then, it shone, with a living light, in the pages of the New Testament. A few also, even then, as among the Waldensian witnesses, beheld that light, and obeyed it. And now many eyes turn to its lustre, and acknowledge its power. Our very opponents admit our premises, while they repudiate our conclusions. Many, moreover, who leave not their ranks, and still call themselves by their names, yet in the matter of baptism, follow not their practice. We find ourselves, also, in the midst of a period in which baptismal questions awaken a new and peculiar interest. Well may we watch the controversy thus set on foot. It may have its evils; as what controversy conducted by fallible men has not? Yet the truth will not suffer by it, and must ultimately prevail. Meanwhile, in common with our Lord, we enjoy this great advantage, that "the common people hear us gladly." Our adherents, no doubt, are found more among the humbler masses than anywhere else. We have here the significant and weighty fact, that the African mind seems to be especially receptive of Scriptural views of baptism. We say nothing about the philosophy of these facts. It is simply as facts that we here refer to them. And surely they ought to lead our minds hopefully forward. It is the ordinary career of great truths in the world,—that they first strike downward, and captivate the many, and then move upward, and triumph over the pride and prejudice of the aristocratic few. Just so it is, and so it shall be, we may well believe, in regard to our baptismal theories.

And now look, brethren, at these other facts. In the translation of the Scriptures Baptist Missionaries have long been in the van,—the great Bible translators for the world. We know how they render the holy records; and we know what to expect from the influence of the sound and faithful translations they are continually giving to the world. That is one fact which we would here have you notice. The other is, that in two important portions of the great Indian field, the Baptists have been left to work almost alone, if not entirely so. We refer here to Burmah and Orissa. They thus have glorious opportunities, which they are not leaving wholly unimproved, for planting God's whole, unmultiplied truth in these countries, and for practically illustrating the nature and value of that truth. Nor may it be doubted, that their labours will at length redound, not to the benefit of Burmah and Orissa alone, but to that of the whole Eastern world.

Nor need we stop here for want of other facts, and not less cheering ones. We might tell you of what God is doing by our Baptist brethren, and for them, all through Middle and Northern Europe. But we must not trespass upon your attention farther. You are not unacquainted with these things, nor with the progress of Baptist sentiment throughout the world. We hasten to our practical conclusion. It is simply this. Brethren, in looking forth upon the future of the body to which it is our honour to belong, yield not, we beseech you to the suggestions of despondency. Such suggestions were wholly out of place. Our light may, feebly lives, and glows, and spreads. "Therein we do rejoice; yea, and will rejoice." Not in a sectarian spirit; but for the sake of that whole round of truth—truth full-orbed—truth unshorn of its beams, which, as we conceive, we have derived from the New Testament, and in which we would that the world should participate with us. Well, the world shall not always be blind to that truth. It shall mount to the highest heavens. It shall pierce to the deepest, darkest valleys. It shall bathe the earth with its splendour, its warmth, and its gladness. It shall bring it under the sway of our gracious King, and fill it with the joys of his salvation. It shall usher in the glories of the latter day. It shall prepare the world for the second coming of the Son of God. Wherefore; beloved brethren, let us still "thank God, and take courage." Thus did Paul in his day, at the very beginning of the gospel. As for us, "we have heard with our ears, O God! the times of old." Nor is this all. "As we have heard, so have we seen in the city of the Lord of hosts, in the city of our God." Above all, and best of all, have we not experimentally found our God to be with us, while we have been enabled faithfully to adhere to the ordinances as delivered to us by his apostles? Like Paul, therefore, we also may well "thank God, and take courage," while we also accept of his animated exhortation, "Be y steadfast, unmovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord; forasmuch as ye know that your labour is not in vain in the Lord."