

ELABORATED IN A CONVERSATION
BETWEEN A CHRISTADELPHIAN & A BELIEVING
STRANGER DESIRING
TO BE IMMERSSED INTO THE NAME OF CHRIST

Printed in the Christadelphian (Ambassador) Magazine,

June 1868 Published as a booklet, July 1869

Prefaced by a few remarks in defence of the practice of

EXAMINING CANDIDATES FOR OBEDIENCE

NO one admitting that the validity of immersion depends upon a belief of the Gospel preached by the apostles can consistently deny the propriety and necessity of an endeavour on the part of those to whom the application for immersion may be made, to ascertain whether this pre-requisite qualification actually exists.

It is a mistake to draw a parallel between the apostolic era and our own time, as to the particular method of arriving at this knowledge. The circumstances are so totally different as to preclude a comparison.

The apostles came on the ground with a fresh, and (among those receiving it) uncontested doctrine concerning Christ. There was a direct issue between them and all who opposed them. The question was one upon which a wide and palpable difference existed, and in reference to which an individual's position could be defined in a word. The apostles proclaimed that Jesus of Nazareth was the Christ on the strength of his having risen -- of which they declared themselves the personal witnesses. The enemy contended that Jesus of Nazareth was an impostor, and that his alleged resurrection was a contrivance by which his dead body had been stolen. There was no middle ground in such a controversy.

A man was either a friend or an enemy. If he were a friend, few words were needed to define his position. The simple statement that he believed Jesus to be the Christ, the Son of God, covered all the ground occupied by the Gospel as amplified in the apostolic definition (Acts 8:12)-- "The things concerning the Kingdom of God and the Name of Jesus Christ."

The case stands very differently now, when nominal believers associate with their historical belief doctrines subversive of the scheme of truth with which the name of Christ was -- without question or the possibility of mistake -- identified in apostolic days. It ceases to be sufficient for a man to say he believes in Christ, unless he is able at the same time to define what is the truth concerning Christ.

The simple confession of belief in Christ does not bring with it the guarantee it did in apostolic times that the doctrines embodied in Christ are received. It had ceased to be sufficient so early as the close of the apostolic era, for we find John, in his old age, laying it down as a necessity to-- "Try the spirits, whether they are of God, because many false prophets are gone out into the world" (1 John 4: 1). --and insisting upon it as a duty to receive no one in fellowship who did not bring with him the truth involved in the profession of faith in Christ (2 John 10) -- a direction which had reference to those professing a nominal belief in Christ.

In our day, the necessity for acting on John's principle is imperative. The apostasy has held sway for centuries, and still reigns with undiminished power. And thru its influence there exists around us a state of society in which (while so far as words go there is universal profession of belief in Christ) there is an absolute and virulent rejection of the truth of which Christ is the centrepiece and embodiment.

We must, therefore, dispense with mere forms and phrases, and address ourselves to the work of gauging the actual relations of things. We must find out the truth of a man's profession when he claims fellowship with us and the genuineness of his faith when he asks to be immersed. And this nowadays cannot be done without crucial test; for words have become so flexible and mere phrases so current, that a form of words may be used without any conception of the idea which it originally and apostolically represented. The principal pains must, therefore, be taken to ascertain the substance of a man's belief, rather than to get him into a set form of expressing it.

But some hold that examination is altogether unscriptural, and that it is a practice savouring of priestly arrogance. Those who think so look at the matter from a wrong point of view. If the position taken up by the examining party implied the assumption that the efficacy of the candidate's immersion depended on the administration or sanction of the examiner, the objection would hold good; but this would never be the attitude of enlightened believers of the truth. They would say to anyone asking to be baptized-- "We are under the law of Christ. That law requires a man seeking baptism to be a believer of the Gospel; and it requires of US not to receive into our fellowship those who do not believe the truth, on the pain of being held responsible for their guilt.

"You ask us to baptize you. As a matter of allegiance to Christ, and defence of our own position, we must ascertain whether you believe the truth. We cannot be parties to your baptism if you do not receive the truth. We should be misleading you, and implicating ourselves."

We cannot impart validity to immersion by compliance, nor can we vitiate it by withholding countenance. But, as a matter of the commonest order and self-protection, we are bound to ascertain whether a man applying for immersion believes the truth of the Gospel or not.

Jesus associates baptism with belief (Mk. 16:16); and it is our duty to him to see that this association exists, so far as we are called upon to sanction a profession of his name. Philip is recorded to have observed this precaution in the case of the eunuch (Acts 8:37). Paul at Ephesus re-immersed 12 men, on putting their faith on a right footing (Acts 19:3-5). In ALL recorded cases of baptism, BELIEF PRECEDED IT, and it is an outrage on common sense to suppose that the parties immersing took no steps to ascertain the existence of that belief. The dictates of common sense coincide with apostolic example and scriptural induction.

Pentecost (when 3000 were baptized in one day) will be instanced by the objector as a case in which the pre-immersion examination we contend for could not have taken place. It is true there was no examination on that occasion, but it was not necessary. Examination is herein contended for as a necessity, not as a ceremony. Where special circumstances rendered it superfluous, it would not be enforced by wise men.

The special circumstances in the case of Pentecost were of this character. In the first place, the 3000 were composed of-- "JEWS, devout men out of every nation under heaven" (Acts 2:5). --who had come to Jerusalem to worship. They were men grounded in the elements of the Law and the Prophets, in a state of reverent appreciation to the extent of their understanding. They were, therefore, men in whom constitution and culture conspired to make them the ready and fruitful recipients of the good seed.

Secondly, the only question on which their minds had to be changed was the identity of the Messiah. They looked for the Messiah, and in great part believed the truth concerning the Messiah. But they did not know the Messiah had come.

They did not believe that the Nazarene, publicly executed as a criminal some weeks before their arrival in Jerusalem, was he. Hence, the point aimed at was to convince them that Jesus was the Christ (Acts 2:36). This was successfully accomplished by the visible outpouring of the Holy Spirit, combined with the testimony of the apostles. And their confession of faith was limited by the circumstances of the moment, to the admission that the man whom the nation had crucified and slain 'was' Lord and Christ'.

Thirdly, we read that Peter with 'many words' taught and exhorted them (Acts 2:40). His words were words of authority, and therefore the implicit reception of what he declared stood in the room of the examination which -- in the absence of authority -- is forced upon us in our deserted times.

These were so many circumstances which excluded the examination contended for under present conditions. They made such examination unnecessary and, indeed, highly out of place. But what was unnecessary then may be necessary now. None of the circumstances of the Pentecostal triumph attend the proclamation of the truth today. If our case had been the apostolic case, the apostolic practice would not have been the Pentecostal method. They would have advertised, and lectured, and examined. The apostles always showed a sensible regard to exigencies (Acts 6:2 -- appointment of deacons).

Good sense consists in the adaptation of means to ends. In the hands of good sense, methods are flexible. Pedantry adheres to forms and methods, to the sacrifice of the practical object involved. We cannot, in matters of pure expediency, imitate the apostles without the circumstances and gifts of the apostles.

What was the necessity then may be impracticable now, and vice versa. "All things common," for instance, was a necessity among a multitude of disciples in one city at a time of persecution; and it was practical with inspired men at the head. But now it is neither necessary nor practicable.

On the other hand, critical examination was not necessary in the days when the issues of truth were simple, and when the voice of authority was present to decide them. But now, with a change on both points, there is of necessity a change of attitude on the part of those contending for the Faith.

The answer given to the case of the Pentecostal believers applies to every case that may be cited. Philip taught the eunuch minutely (Acts 8:35), and all the eunuch had to do was to believe what was taught him, and signify his belief in an intelligible fashion, however short. 'Examination' would have been out of place. But there is no Philip now to teach with divine dogmatism, so we have to "examine".

The same with Cornelius. Peter was aware he and his friends knew the truth (Acts 10:37). All he had to do was to direct them how to do under an arrangement which -- for the first time -- admitted Gentiles to a covenant relation with God. And all Cornelius and his friends had to do was to obey the directions given. Examination would have been absurd. But there is no Peter now whose word will be taken with unquestioning faith. And so we have to examine, to see if people comprehend the written truth.

In apostolic days, there was divine authority present in every case to direct and perfect submission to authority on the part of those who were obedient. This constitutes the great difference between that time and our time. And with a difference of circumstance, there is of necessity a difference of method of procedure in the matter, but the result aimed at and secured is THE SAME: the induction of men and women into Christ by the belief and obedience of the truth.

The mode in our day found effectual for ascertaining whether an applicant for immersion is qualified by a scriptural apprehension of the things concerning the Kingdom of God and the Name of Jesus Christ is exemplified by the following -- Conversation.