

## **'THE BAPTISM OF JOHN' AND THE FIERY BELIEVER APOLLOS -- by Dr. F.N. Lee**

[Excerpt from Rev. Prof. Dr. F.N. Lee's M.Div. thesis *Baptism Does Not Cleanse!* (pp. 43-47)]

### **The baptism of John and the fiery believer Apollos**

Not just Paul<sup>258</sup> but also Apollos<sup>259</sup> soon became an important leader in the Corinthian Church. Earlier, Apollos the eloquent Alexandrian<sup>260</sup> had listened to Aquila and Priscilla privately explaining the way of God to him more perfectly<sup>261</sup> -- while he was in Ephesus.

Still earlier, before arriving there, Apollos was already "mighty in the Scriptures."<sup>262</sup> For even previously, he "had been catechized in the way of the Lord"; was "fervent in the Spirit"; and clearly understood and acknowledged or "knew the baptism of John."<sup>263</sup>

All of this evidences that Apollos already had an adequate faith in Christ. He was thus a Christian -- even before receiving 'Johannine' baptism, and long before his arrival in Ephesus.<sup>264</sup>

[Even the Christian disciple Barnabas was never actually called a 'Christian' -- until he arrived in Antioch. Only there were the disciples first **called** 'Christians.' Yet surely, even before then, both Barnabas and all the other followers of Jesus (and many baptizees) really were Christians!]<sup>265</sup>

On Apollos, Calvin here comments:<sup>266</sup> "He understood the teaching of the Gospel.... He knew that a Redeemer has been presented to the world.... He had been instructed properly and sincerely about the grace of reconciliation." For he knew about the baptism of John!

Explains Calvin: "John was, so to speak, an intermediary between Christ and the prophets.... He went before, lighting the way for Christ, and gave a wonderful explanation of His power. His [John's] disciples are justifiably said to have had knowledge of Christ."

Thus, Andrew and others who had been baptized by John previously and who had then followed Jesus -- were never ever (re)baptized. Neither by Christ Himself, nor by His apostles.<sup>267</sup>

Dr. Calvin continues<sup>268</sup> concerning Apollos: "The statement that 'he knew the baptism of John' deserves attention. For from this we gather what the true use of the sacraments is, *viz.* to initiate us into some particular kind of doctrine -- or to establish the faith which we once embraced....

"What is this baptism of John? Luke gathers up the whole of his ministry in this word. Not only because doctrine is bound to baptism. But also because it [doctrine] is its [baptism's] foundation and head -- without which it would be an empty and dead ceremony....

"Apollos is given the further commendation that he was inflamed with a holy zeal for teaching.... That man, who was not yet...completely instructed in the Gospel, preached Christ.... Luke attributes his fervour to the Spirit.... Apollos was urged on by...the Holy Spirit" -- long before he first met Aquila and Priscilla.

## **The unitarians in Ephesus were regenerated before their Christian baptism by Paul**

The Alexandrian Hebrew Christian Apollos had long been mighty in the Scriptures, fervent in the Spirit, and knowledgeable about the baptism of John -- even before he arrived in Ephesus. The indications are that he had already been baptized before reaching Ephesus, but that it was there that he learned the way of God more perfectly. For only thereafter are we told he showed the Jews from the Scriptures that Jesus was the Christ.

Some take this as an indication that his own full conversion to Jesus Christ personally, was only post-baptismal. In that case, the Romish thesis that he was converted by baptism -- and the Lutheran thesis that he was converted during baptism -- is thereby rendered more doubtful yet.

After Apollos had departed from Ephesus for Corinth, some unitarians arrived in Ephesus who had never even heard as to whether there is a Holy Spirit. Surprisingly, they later told Paul they had previously been baptized "into John's baptism."

The Romish Church and others wrongly take this "John's baptism" to mean the baptism which had been administered by John the baptizer himself. They also wrongly claim that the latter Johannine baptism was not Christian baptism, and that all those baptized with Johannine baptism still needed Christic baptism.

If these claim were correct, they would establish quite clearly that nobody was regenerated **during** the administration of Johannine baptism. The claims would then also imply the unlikelihood of anyone being regenerated during the somewhat similar Christic baptism (even if a different rite). Yet in point of fact, Johannine baptism is essentially the same as Christic baptism. Consequently, nobody was regenerated -- during either Johannine nor Christic baptism.

## **The unitarians in Ephesus were not regenerated by "John's baptism"**

Now when Paul later returned to Ephesus, he found those unitarians there -- with their claim to have received "John's baptism." It is obvious that these men -- ignorant of the Holy Spirit, and hence also of the Christ alias the One anointed by that Spirit -- had been altogether uninfluenced by the Scripture-quoting and Spirit-filled Christian preaching of the instructed Apollos. Indeed, those non-trinitarians only seem to have arrived in Ephesus -- after the trinitarian Apollos departed thence, for Corinth.<sup>269</sup>

It had been some twenty-five years since the death of that great trinitarian, John the Baptizer. The non-trinitarians in Ephesus claimed to Paul that they had been initiated "into John's baptism." Yet they were apparently quite ignorant even about the very existence of the Holy Spirit (and perhaps even of the Lord Jesus Himself)!

That seemed very surprising. For John the Baptizer himself, while baptizing people with water, had always pointed his baptizees (and prospective baptizees) away from himself -- and toward

the coming Messiah (Jesus Christ). John had always told them how that Spirit-anointed One would soon Himself baptize them -- not (once or again) with water, but indeed with His Holy Spirit.<sup>270</sup>

The unitarians in Ephesus, however, not even alleged they had received their 'baptism' by or from John himself. They only claimed -- and that claim itself is suspect! -- to have been initiated "into John's baptism."<sup>271</sup> Indeed, they frankly admitted to Paul they had 'never even heard whether there **is** "a holy spirit"' (*sic*)!<sup>272</sup>

Clearly, this Spirit-less "John's baptism" these unitarians alleged to Paul they had received -- even if it had indeed been administered to them -- had not been administered by John himself. For John had been a Spirit-filled person (even from his mother's womb). Indeed, also after growing up, John still testified about the Holy Spirit during his Spirit-filled preaching -- and also while baptizing! Hence, this 'Spirit-less' rite referred to in Acts 19:3b, was not Johannine! Indeed, it had started to be administered probably only after John's own death.

For it seems that certain unitarians had then started initiating people "into John's baptism." By this, they probably meant they were initiating 'in the name of John' or perhaps even 'into the name of John' -- neither of which John himself would ever have done! Very clearly, this 'Spirit-less' rite was certainly not the Christian baptism John himself had administered -- to those who thereafter soon became the disciples of Jesus Himself (without then ever being 'rebaptized' by Jesus or by anyone else).

Yet this 'Spirit-less' water-rite which the unitarians in Ephesus claimed to have received before they met Paul -- the rite they called "John's baptism" -- had clearly not regenerated them! For, even long thereafter, they had 'never even heard whether there **is** "a holy spirit"' (*sic*)!

However, John himself had spoken quite clearly about the Holy Spirit -- both before and while baptizing. Indeed, before administering that water-rite, he had urged his candidates to repent (or to turn to God) and to believe in the coming Christ. Consequently, the baptisms administered by John did not themselves regenerate.

Even more interesting. Although the unitarians at Ephesus indeed claimed to have been baptized "into John's baptism," they never claimed that the Holy Spirit had regenerated them through that water-rite. To the contrary. They readily admitted they had never even heard 'whether there is a holy spirit.' So they were then admitting that, in spite of their allegedly having received "John's baptism," they had still not yet been regenerated.

### **Paul explained baptism to the unregenerate unitarians**

Paul now explained,<sup>273</sup> to those ignorant unitarians at Ephesus, the nature of the true Christian baptism which John himself had indeed administered. According to Luke in the book of Acts, "then Paul said: 'John truly baptized with the baptism of repentance, while saying to the people that they should believe in Him Who would come after him' : *i.e.*, in Christ Jesus" the Spirit-anointed One.

"When they heard [and heeded] this, they were baptized into the Name of the Lord Jesus." This could mean Paul was here simply saying that John himself<sup>274</sup> had indeed baptized people into the Name of the then-coming Messiah -- that is, the One Whom Paul here identifies as the Lord Jesus. Or it could mean Paul himself now baptized the unitarians at Ephesus -- into the Name of the Lord Jesus. Either way, there is no re-baptism at Acts 19:5. For that verse says "they were baptized" -- not: 'they were re-baptized.'

The fact is, 'Johannine baptism' is Christian baptism! Thus, specifically on this passage, nearly all Calvinist scholars. Thus Calvin, Beza, the 1637 *Dordt Dutch Bible*, Wolleb(ius), Lightfoot, Cocceius, Marckius, De Moor, J.H. Heidegger, J.H. van der Palm, H. Heppe, Gravemeijer, and A. Kuyper Sr.<sup>274</sup> *etc.*

The text could mean that Paul was here informing the unitarians at Ephesus about what John himself<sup>275</sup> had really taught. This would then show that those who had heeded John's preaching -- John's preaching that they should believe in Jesus -- were there and then baptized by John into the Name of the Lord Jesus. In that case, after explaining this to the confused men in Ephesus, all that Paul then further did -- after they heeded him -- was 'waterlessly' to lay his hands upon those ex-heretics.

Alternatively, the above words -- "when they heeded this, they were baptized into the Name of the Lord Jesus" -- may instead be referring to what those ex-unitarians in Ephesus next did in relation to Paul. This would mean that Paul himself then proceeded to give those ex-unitarians *inter alia* their first-ever triune water-baptism.

Perhaps Paul did not then give water-baptism to those men; on the other hand, it seems perhaps more likely that he did.<sup>275</sup> Either way, however, the entire passage Acts 19:1-5 cannot properly be taken to mean that the trinitarian Paul re-baptized those ex-unitarians after they had heeded his teaching. If Paul then indeed baptized them with water, that would have been the first and the only Christian baptism those previously ignorant unitarians ever received!

For Paul explained to the unitarians at Ephesus that "**John truly baptized** with the baptism of repentance/" John did this, said Paul, "while saying to the people that they should believe in Him Who would come after him -- that is, in Christ Jesus."

Whichever way the passage is taken, it cannot rightly be taken to imply baptismal regeneration. Indeed, at whatever point in time that never-repeated water-baptism took place or was to take place in respect of the approximately twelve men mentioned in Acts 19:1-7 -- it was not the same time at which their Christian faith commenced!

For any Christian water-baptism ever received by those ex-unitarians, would only have occurred after they had been regenerated by grace and through faith -- and apparently as a result of Paul's preaching the Gospel to them. Previously, it seems they had never truly been baptized by anyone. If they then ever received Christian baptism at all -- which indeed seems very likely -- that could have occurred only after they heeded and obeyed the Gospel then preached to them by Paul.

That would then have been the first and the only Christian baptism those previously ignorant ex-unitarians had ever received. More importantly, they had already been regenerated -- before they would then have received that baptism. Indeed, they were regenerated apparently while hearing the Gospel preached to them by Paul. Acts 19:4. They were therefore not regenerated by the Christian baptism itself, which would only be administrable to them at a somewhat different moment. Acts 19:5.

### **Calvin's explanation of the baptismal passage Acts 19:1-6**

The men concerned were about twelve in number.<sup>276</sup> In commenting,<sup>277</sup> Calvin here denies that these confused men had been influenced by Apollos. "It is not likely that so few 'disciples' were left at Ephesus by Apollos.... They would have been instructed more correctly by him -- seeing that he himself had learnt the way of the Lord precisely.... I do not doubt that the [Ephesian] 'brethren' whom Luke mentioned previously [Acts 18:27]...were different from these particular men" in Acts 19:1f.

Paul said: "John indeed baptized with the baptism of **repentance!**"<sup>278</sup> Here Calvin comments<sup>279</sup> "that the baptism of John was a sign of repentance.... Today, there is no difference between it and our own baptism.... It [baptism by John] was a token and pledge of the same adoption and the same newness of life which we receive in our baptism today. Therefore we do not read that Christ baptized afresh those who came over to Him from John!

"In addition, Christ received baptism in His own flesh -- so that He might associate Himself with us by that visible symbol. But if that fictitious difference [between baptism by John and our own baptism today] be admitted -- there will vanish and be lost to us this unique favour: that we have a common baptism with the Son of God." And He, the sinless One, was certainly not regenerated thereby!

Calvin continues: "It [baptism by John] is the same baptism" as Christian baptism. "But now, the question is asked whether it was right to repeat it.... Fanatical men of our day, relying on this evidence [*cf.* Acts 19:3-5], have tried to introduce Anabaptism.... I deny that the baptism of water was repeated!"

### ENDNOTES

259) Acts 18:24,27f.

260) Acts 18:24a *Apolloos...Alexandreus too; genei aneer logios.*

261) Acts 18:26b (*akribesteron autoo; exethento teen hodon tou Theou*).

262) Acts 18:24b (*dunatos oon en tais graphais*).

263) Acts 18:25a (*houtos een katecheemenos teen hodon tou Kuriou*); v. 25b (*zeoon too; Pneumati*); v. 25c (*epistamenos...to baptisma Iooannou*).

264) Acts 18:24-28.      265) Acts 11:26 *cf.* Mt. 16:18 & 18:17.

266) *Comm.* on Acts 18:25.      267) Jh. 1:31-42f & 3:22-30f & 4:1-2.

268) *Comm.* on Acts 18:25.      269) Acts 18:24 - 19:3.

270) Mt. 3:3-11f & Jh. 1:25f *cf.* Isa. 11:1-10f & 61:1f and perhaps also Acts 19:4-6.

271) Acts 19:3 (*eis to Iooannou baptisma*).

272) Acts 19:2b (*oud' ei Pneuma Hagion estin eekousamen*).

273) Acts 19:4 (*Eipen de Paulos Iooannees men ebaptisen baptisma metanoias too; laoo; legoon eis Ton Erchomenon met' auton hina pisteusoosin, tout' estin Ton Christon Ieesoun*. It is the *Textus Receptus* which here has *men*. See nn. 274 & 275 below. Note that *Christon* is omitted in P<sup>38</sup>, Aleph, A,B,E 614 *pc* lat, 13,25,40, Vulg., Boh., Syr. H., Aethr<sup>o</sup>; so Tisch., W.H., RV, Weiss, Wundt & Blass. D has *eis Christon*. The reading *eis ton Ieesoun Christon* is found in : Sah., Gig. & Pesch. Other readings have: *Christon Ieesoun*.

274) Thus: Calvin, Beza, Calixtus, Lightfoot, Budde, Rambach, and others. See at nn. 275f. Acts 19:5 (*akousantes de ebaptistheesan eis to Onoma tou Kuriou Ieesou*). Here, *akousantes* is the aorist participle of the Greek verb for *hear* or *hear-ken* [*akouein*]. This, like the word for *hear-ken* in the Germanic languages, *cf.* the German *hорchen* [hearken] and its cognate *gehорchen* [obey], usually means not merely to *listen* but to *hear well* and hence also to *heed*. See too n. 273 above.

275) Gravemeijer (*Reformed Doctrine of Faith*, Wiarda, Sneek, 1888, III:175) argues that the verses Acts 19:4-6 do not at all teach that the heretics were then baptized by Paul with water.

Argues Gravemeijer: Paul there merely *told* those men at Ephesus that after *John himself had urged the people to believe* in Jesus the Christ-ed One alias the *Spirit-anointed Messiah*, those who then heard or obeyed John's urgings were soon baptized (*by John himself*!) in the Name of the One Who was then coming after him, that is *the Lord Jesus*. After Paul had finished telling the men this at Ephesus, claims Gravemeijer, Paul simply laid his hands 'waterlessly' on them *etc.*

Gravemeijer grounds this view on the fact that the "foundational text" (namely the *Textus Receptus*!) has *men...de* in Acts 19:4-5. Thus the various editions of the *Textus Receptus*. Compare those of Stephens (1550), of Bloomfield (1843), and of Knowling even in the 1908 *Expositor's Greek Testament* (where however the *men* is noted as omitted in AlephABD, Vulg., Sah., Arm., Tisch., W.H., RV, Weiss & Wendt).

Gravemeijer thus reads Acts 19:4-6 as follows: "Then Paul said, 'John truly (*men*) baptized with the baptism of repentance, saying to the people that they should believe in Him Who would come after him,' that is, in Christ Jesus. When (*de*) they [John's people] heard [or heeded], they were baptized [by John and in Palestine] into the Name [or *unto the authority*] of the Lord Jesus. Then, when Paul had laid his hands on them [the ex-unitarians in Ephesus], the Holy Spirit came upon them" *etc.* For the whole statement of Acts 19:4-5 in the Greek *Textus Receptus*, see at nn. 273-74 above.

These verses are thus to be taken together as stating what Paul *said* in corrective response to the heretics' statement anent "the baptism of John" at the end of Acts 19:3. Only after recording this *statement* of Paul to the heretics about what John had *really* taught, does Luke go on to mention what Paul the Apostle *next did to them* (in Acts 19:6). The heretics apparently repented under Paul's preaching. Yet further, Paul then applied no water whatsoever to those ex-heretics, but simply laid his hands on them.

If Gravemeijer is right in this, Calvin too would be right in suggesting that Paul did not at all apply water to those heretics. Consequently, there is no possibility of them having been rebaptized (with water) by Paul! See too at n. 283 below.

Against Gravemeijer's hypothesis, observe that the plural form *ebaptistheesan* here in Acts 19:5b, as well as the

plural form *akousantes* in 19:5a at n. 274 above, both seem to refer to *Paul's* plural listeners. Compare their corresponding plurals (*tinas matheetas* and *autous* and *hoi...eekousamen* and *ebaptistheete* and *hoi...eipan*) in the immediately preceding Acts 19:1-3, and their corresponding plurals (*autois* and *autous* and *elaloun* and *epropheeteuon*) and *eesan* and *hoi pantes andres hoosei doodeka* in the immediately succeeding Acts 19:6-7.

To us, it seems to be of some significance that in Acts 19:4a, Paul refers in the singular (*too; laooi*) to the people that *John himself* had addressed. This in turn strengthens Kuypers's thesis (which we endorse) against Gravemeijer's. See n. 284 below. On the other hand, even Acts 19:4b goes on to use the plural *pisteusoosin* (apparently still in respect even of the singular *too; laooi* in 19:4a). This, together with the *men...de* factor discussed above, lends some credence to Gravemeijer's hypothesis.

276) Acts 19:1-7. 277) *Comm.* on Acts 19:2.

278) Acts 19:4a *cf.* 18:25 & 19:1-3. 279) *Comm.* on Acts 19:4-5.