

Baptism
and the
Remission of Sins

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BAPTISM

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I REJOICE in the fact that two great bodies among the followers of Christ have made common cause in their advocacy of the paramount authority of the Scriptures regarding the form, and also in their advocacy of immersion as the sole New Testament mode of baptism. Surely good and only good can come from a free and fraternal interchange of views upon points regarding which there may be only partial agreement, or regarding which there may be total disagreement. And if as a result of such conference the dove of Christian peace, fraternity, and unity shall hover a little nearer than before, it will be time and effort well spent.

The topic assigned to me is very clear, distinct, and specific. It is not what is the view commonly held, but what is the New Testament teaching—not as to the form of baptism, or the relation of baptism to the Lord's Supper, but the relation of baptism to the remission of sins and the new birth?

It need not be emphasized in this presence, but

it may not be amiss to remind ourselves at the outset that any interpretation of the New Testament teachings on this subject, which shall be trustworthy or final, must possess the following merits: (1) It must take account of all the elements of the problem. The total relevant teachings of the New Testament must be taken into account. (2) The interpretation must resort to no straining of the principles of grammar, or violent exegesis of any kind. The rack and the thumb-screw used to be applied to men to extort unwilling denials or confessions. Now they are often applied to the Scriptures. I shall hope to avoid the revival of the Inquisition even in this form in what follows. (3) The interpretation must be self-consistent throughout. All the factors of the problem must be fused into a final unity. There must be no heterogeneous elements lying about loose when the structure is completed, and (4) it goes without saying that our view must be confined to the Scriptures. We are to make no excursions for the time being into the realms of dogma, or elsewhere, but interrogate the New Testament alone.

Perhaps the best method of approaching our problem will be to go straight at it and place before our minds the significant passages of Scripture which connect baptism most closely with regeneration and the remission of sins.

The first passage we will note is in Mark 16 : 16, containing Christ's words in the commission:

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“He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that disbelieveth shall be condemned.” Here unquestionably salvation in one member of the statement is put over against faith and baptism in the other. Whether faith and baptism are conditions of salvation in the same sense of the word will have to be determined by other considerations, as we shall see a little later.

Consider next the much-discussed passage in John 3 : 5: “Except a man be born of water and the Spirit, he can not enter into the kingdom of God.” I need not remind you, of course, that many and diverse interpretations have been made of these words: That water means the natural birth which Jesus is here contrasting with the spiritual; or that by a hendiadys, water and Spirit are taken as synonymous, water simply suggesting in figure what Spirit conveys in reality; or that water here means baptism, and that baptism is a condition of entrance into the kingdom of God. For the present I will let the last meaning stand and concede that it is entirely possible that water here does signify baptism

Again, in Acts 2 : 38 we read: “And Peter said unto them, Repent ye, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ unto remission of your sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost.” It is sometimes maintained regarding this passage that the preposition *eis* means “in reference to,” and that it cannot bear the meaning “in order

to," because repentance and baptism would in that case both be in order to remission of sins, which is forbidden by other teaching of Scripture. I need not, of course, remind you that on the other hand it is maintained with equal vigor by many learned interpreters that here the preposition carries its usual simple and clear meaning "in order to," and that, therefore, baptism and repentance are both in order to remission of sins. It must be confessed that this seems to be the natural meaning of the passage, and as a provisional interpretation I will let it stand.

- Again, in Acts 22 : 16, we read in the words of Ananias to Saul: "And now why tarriest thou? Arise and be baptized, and wash away thy sins, calling on his name." Here baptism assuredly is placed in a very close relation to remission of sins. The "washing away of sins" is a form of expression necessarily connecting the second clause with the first, "arise and be baptized," and it would seem to be difficult to disconnect the two statements if we are to deal fairly with our syntax and our principles of exegesis.

Again, in Titus 3 : 5, 6, this language occurs: "He saved us through the washing of regeneration, and renewing of the Holy Ghost, which he poured out upon us richly through Jesus Christ our Saviour." This is sometimes translated "laver of regeneration," or "bath of regeneration," but in any case water is the basis of the idea, whether the lan-

guage be figurative or literal. The word *loutron* translated "washing" shows this. It is natural, therefore, to refer this expression to baptism, although there is no lack of exegetical authority for the view that the language is figurative and refers to water as a cleansing element.

A passage in Eph. 5 : 26 is of similar import. Christ loved the church and gave himself for it that he might sanctify it, "having cleansed it by the washing of water with the word," etc. Here the word translated washing, *loutron*, is the same as in the passage just referred to in Titus. Two remarks may be sufficient regarding these words. The first is that the sanctifying and cleansing spoken of are not necessarily the same, or at least the one may be the spiritual and the other the ceremonial aspect of the same thing. The second remark is that if the washing referred to is baptism, though it is not necessarily to be so taken, it is to be noted in addition that the word is referred to as the instrument of the cleansing.

We read, again, in 1 Peter 3 : 20, 21, that Christ preached to the spirits in prison when the long-suffering of God waited in the days of Noah while the ark was preparing, "wherein few, that is eight souls, were saved through water; which also after a true likeness doth now save you, even baptism, not the putting away of the filth of the flesh, but the interrogation of a good conscience toward God, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ." Most

probably the word *eperootema*, translated "interrogation," should be rendered appeal or earnest request. The passage is confessedly a difficult one. The sentence is long and involved and various figures of speech are introduced. Among the many interpretations possible the passage may mean that baptism as an antitype of the flood of waters in the time of Noah, and as the request or prayer of a good conscience, now saves through the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

The above passages constitute the New Testament group of teachings in which the relations between baptism on the one hand and regeneration and remission of sins on the other are stated in the strongest terms.

Taking these passages, then, as a basis for an induction, what conclusion can be drawn? For one thing this group may be described as a closed circle of teachings which are self-consistent and harmonious. In this closed circle of teachings we find nearly if not all the elements of salvation placed in the closest kind of connection with baptism; in some instances even a causal connection seems to be taught. In the passage in 1 Peter, baptism or water is said to save us; in Acts 2 : 38 baptism is declared to be "unto remission of sins." In Acts 22 : 16, baptism is referred to as a means of washing away sins. In Ephesians, cleansing through the washing of water is the form of statement, and in Titus it is called the bath or laver of regenera-

tion. For the sake of clearness of treatment we have presented these passages together, and now we leave them for the moment to consider another group. Meantime the final conclusion must be reserved until our interpretation is complete.

The second group of passages to which attention is called makes no reference at all to baptism.

In John 3 : 18 we read: "He that believeth on him is not judged; he that believeth not hath been judged already, because he hath not believed on the name of the only begotten Son of God." In these words faith alone is indicated as the condition of exemption from judgment. Again in Acts 3 : 19 we read: "Repent ye, therefore, and turn again, that your sins may be blotted out, that so there may come seasons of refreshing from the presence of the Lord." Here repentance alone is made the condition of the blotting out of sins. Once more, in Acts 10 : 43, faith by itself without reference to baptism is coupled with remission of sins: "To him bear all the prophets witness, that through his name every one that believeth on him shall receive remission of sins." In Rom. 3 : 21 we read: "But now apart from the law a righteousness of God hath been manifested, being witnessed by the law and the prophets; even the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ unto all them that believe." Here faith is coupled vitally with the realization of righteousness. In Rom. 1 : 16 also salvation is declared to be conditioned upon

faith: "I am not ashamed of the gospel; for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth."

In giving instructions to an inquirer, Paul, in Acts 16 : 31, says: "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved." Eternal life is offered on condition of faith, as clearly set forth in John 3 : 14, 15: "As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up; that whosoever believeth may in him have eternal life." Once more in Rom. 5 : 1 we read: "Being, therefore, justified by faith, let us have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ." There are a number of instances in the New Testament which indicate that repentance is coupled immediately with remission of sins. In Matt. 9 : 2 Jesus says to the sick of the palsy, yet unbaptized: "Son, be of good cheer, thy sins are forgiven"; and to Zacchæus, in Luke 19 : 9: "To-day is salvation come to this house." In Luke 18 : 14 Jesus declares of the publican who had offered a penitent prayer that he went down to his house justified. The dying robber heard from Christ's lips the words: "To-day shalt thou be with me in paradise (Luke 23 : 43).

We might extend this class of quotations indefinitely, but it is unnecessary. We may now repeat our process of induction employed in dealing with the first group of passages. Looking, then, at this latter collection of teachings by themselves,

what do we discover? We find that, as in the former group, practically all the great elements of salvation were connected closely with baptism, so here we find that those elements of salvation are vitally connected with faith or repentance, and no reference whatever is made to baptism. Righteousness, justification, remission of sins, eternal life, salvation, all these great aspects of the one redemption are declared to be ours upon condition of faith, or of repentance, or of both.

Glancing back, then, we discover that there are two closed circles of teachings in the New Testament, one of which associates the initial ceremony of the Christian life, baptism, and the other the initial spiritual exercise of the Christian life, faith, with the rise in the soul of all those spiritual blessings which together constitute salvation, and which may be summed up in the terms employed in our subject, regeneration and remission of sins.

The situation thus disclosed gives rise, of course, to the problem of harmonizing these two groups of passages. For I take it that all of my readers will concede that harmony in some form is possible. This problem is indeed a far-reaching and profound one, and involves the whole question of the relation of the ceremonial to the spiritual in Christianity. That there is a ceremonial principle in Christianity is clear from the numerous and important passages in which the two Christian ceremonies are placed in important relations to other

Christian elements. That there is a spiritual principle, of course, goes without saying.

In view, now, of the closed circle of ceremonial teachings, as well as a closed circle of spiritual teachings, in one of which regeneration and remission seem to be made dependent upon baptism and in the other upon faith, we may give to the emerging problem a fourfold form. (1) Do the ceremonial passages properly yield the law of interpretation according to which the other group must be understood? or (2) does the spiritual group impose that law, requiring us at any cost of mere verbal or grammatical exegesis to understand the ceremonial passages in a spiritual way; or (3) can we unite the ceremonial and the spiritual principle in salvation and hold that it is in the union of the two that the truth is found? or (4) finally, is there a comprehensive conception of salvation itself and the conditions leading to it, which enables us to harmonize the two groups of passages, observing the most faithful obedience to the principles of exegesis and preserving in their integrity both the ceremonial and the spiritual elements in Christianity? To state these four questions more concisely, does baptism secure remission of sins, or does faith secure this blessing, or do baptism and faith together do so, or is remission of sins a broader conception in the New Testament than we have been wont to hold, which relieves both exegesis and theology of all their embarrassment?

1. First, then, does baptism alone secure remission of sins and regeneration? I shall not discuss this point at length for the reason that the essential matters which relate to it will be brought forward farther on in the discussion, and for the further reason that, if I understand the views of the scholarly and representative writers among both the Disciples and Baptists, this view is entirely repudiated. Certainly it is rejected by all Baptists. I have a strong impression that sacramentalism, in the sense of an *opus operatum*, which asserts efficacy in the sheer application of the material element, is not a doctrine now held by any really representative member of either denomination. In any event, the purposes of this paper can be attained by considering the view which, if I understand it aright, is the prevalent one among Disciples, viz., that which insists upon a spiritual change prior to baptism in order to any sort of efficiency in the ordinance itself. This is not meant to ascribe to writers among Disciples the view that baptism is without any spiritual efficacy, but only the view that baptism, apart from a preceding spiritual change, is without efficacy. Baptism with them, as I understand it, has a supplemental, but no original and inherent spiritual efficacy. We pass this first question, then, for the present to consider very briefly the second, whether faith alone secures remission of sins and regeneration.

2. In reply to this question it certainly is an im-

pressive fact, whether conclusive as yet or not, that in our second group of passages there is a closed circle of teachings which clearly indicate that faith alone is a condition of remission, justification, and of eternal life. If we had no other Scripture bearing upon the subject, the whole question could be closed at this point. But inasmuch as these blessings elsewhere seem to have an equally close connection with baptism, in an extensive and important group of passages, we must await further development of the argument before announcing our conclusion.

3. We consider in the next place, then, question three: Whether or not the two principles are to be united in salvation, so that both faith and baptism are conditions of remission, the one supplementing and completing the other. There are several forms in which this view may be held. One is that regeneration is a begetting on the part of God, while baptism is the birth of the soul newly begotten in God's image. This assumes the necessity of the spiritual begetting prior to the birth through baptism, and regards baptism as the supplementary spiritual process. Another form of this general view holds that repentance precedes baptism, is necessary to its efficacy, indeed, but that in baptism God actually remits the sins of the penitent believer. A third form of the view omits all spiritual efficacy from the conception of baptism, save as a means or condition of Christian assurance. Re-

penitance and remission and regeneration have already taken place before baptism; this ordinance simply brings to the penitent and obedient disciple the assurance that God now accepts and pardons him.

As to the last of these views, it may be conceded that many penitent believers do obtain in baptism the inward peace and joy which is called assurance. It may be questioned, however, whether we have Scripture warrant for holding that the ordinance uniformly brings this assurance.

As to the first view, that we must distinguish between a prior begetting and a subsequent being born, I think it cannot be maintained from the Scriptures. The birth is by water and Spirit in the third chapter of John, not a begetting by Spirit and a birth by water, and so of the other passages bearing upon the subject. No such distinction is observed by the Scripture writers, and although John's writings uniformly employ the Greek words which denote begetting and begotten in reference to sonship or childship to God, these writings nowhere distinguish between a spiritual begetting and a baptismal birth.

The second view named, that repentance precedes baptism, while remission accompanies it, we now consider. There are serious objections to this view also. One is that if the distinction between regeneration and remission usually maintained by interpreters is correct, there is conflict of scriptural

teaching on this point. For in Titus 3 : 5 it is the washing of regeneration which baptism secures, and not that of remission. If remission again is God's act, then it is inconsistent for Ananias to say to Saul in Acts 22 : 16, "Arise and wash away thy sins." Some interpretation must be found which will harmonize these varying statements better than the view which limits immersion to the means or condition of securing remission for sins previously repented of. Another objection to this view is that it separates in time the sinner's act of repentance and God's act of remission. This is never taught in Scripture. Forgiveness is the correlative to repentance, and in the case of the healed paralytic, the justified publican, and of Zacchæus, the evidence all indicates that there was no interval of time between genuine repentance and divine remission of sins. Inasmuch, therefore, as baptism can never thus follow without some small interval of time, it can scarcely be held to be a condition of remission of sins. Then besides, remission of sins would depend upon the administration of baptism, and tend strongly to a sacerdotal conception of the ministry.

Again, if baptism is the condition of remission of sins, it is difficult to understand why it is never commanded in Scripture that we repeat it. It must be borne in mind that forgiveness is an act of God repeated at frequent intervals throughout the Christian life. The prayer for forgiveness is imbedded in the heart of the Lord's Prayer for the perpetual

use of believers. Why is the condition of remission to be observed but once if the necessity for remission so frequently arises? It is scarcely to be held that there are two principles of remission taught in the Scriptures, so that a man may actually be forgiven in two totally distinct ways at different periods of his spiritual experience.

A further objection to the view we are considering is that it leaves unexplained the large group of passages which connect remission and regeneration with faith, entirely exclusive of baptism. It is scarcely conceivable that if baptism were a necessary condition to the actual remission of sins it would ever be omitted in the statements of the conditions of salvation by the biblical writers. In other words, this principle of interpretation is not broad enough to explain adequately all the facts. The induction is not an adequate reproduction in general terms of the total significance of the phenomena.

Once again, this view unites two incompatible things in salvation—the spiritual and the physical. To hold that repentance, which is a spiritual act on man's part, finds its correlative, forgiveness, which is a spiritual act on God's part, only through the mediation of baptism, a physical act which he might be prevented from performing at all, is, it seems to me, to place incongruous things in vital relationships.

It is easy to see how perilous this principle might become. If a physical act, a religious ceremony

actually secures the unspeakable blessing of remission of sins, then it is almost inevitable that the preceding spiritual condition, repentance, will wane in importance, and men will gradually adopt a thorough-going sacramental theology at all points. So much for our third question.

We now come to the fourth and last, whether we may find a principle of interpretation broad enough to include all the Scripture teachings upon the subject in hand. I am quite well aware that as yet all difficulties are not cleared up. I announce my conclusion and then proceed to establish it. It is that in one closed circle of teachings, the ceremonial, we find a distinct ceremonial principle in Christianity; that in the other closed circle of passages we find a distinct spiritual principle in Christianity; and that there is no union or amalgamation of these two principles on the one hand, and there is no conflict between them on the other.

We must begin on common ground if we are to make progress toward unity of view. I take it that we all agree as to the Lord's Supper. When Jesus says to the disciples, "This is my body" (Luke 22 : 19), or "this is my blood" (Mark 14 : 24), we have no difficulty of interpretation. All Baptists and Disciples agree here that we have no "real presence" in the Romish or Lutheran sense. The bread and wine are symbols. They do not, when partaken of, communicate grace; they vividly portray truth to the mind, and in proportion as the

mind of the participant grasps the significance, the meaning of the symbols, is there blessing for him in observing the Lord's Supper.

My next remark is that we have in these passages relating to the Supper at least a recognition of the ceremonial principle in Christianity in the sense here maintained. We eat the body and drink the blood of Christ in the Lord's Supper, for so the Scripture asserts—but we do this *symbolically*. The exegetical difficulty which Romanists have never found it possible to overcome is the pointblank assertion of Christ that the bread and wine *are* his body and blood. I am not referring to the passage in the sixth chapter of John, which I do not think refers to the Supper, but to the words of the institution in Matthew, Mark, and Luke.

This ceremonial principle is clearly seen in reference to the Supper, and these words of Christ naturalize the principle, so to speak, in Christianity, and furnish us a clew to the interpretation of the other ceremony without doing exegetical violence at any point. Christ says pointblank, in the third chapter of John, that in order to enter into the kingdom of God a man must be born of water. This is literally true of symbolic entrance into that kingdom. Ceremonially no man ever entered into the kingdom without baptism, for baptism is the ceremonial door into it. So also in the second chapter of Acts, baptism is "in order to" ceremonial remission of sins. I employ the terms ceremonial and symbolic here

- as synonymous. There is but one way to secure actual spiritual remission of sins, and that is by means of repentance, and there is but one way to obtain ceremonial remission, and that is baptism.
- No man since the time of Christ ever received ceremonial remission otherwise. So also of entrance into the kingdom. Actual spiritual entrance is conditioned upon birth by the Spirit of God; ceremonial or symbolic entrance through the ceremonial birth. As the spiritual principle of Christianity is a closed circle, actual and spiritual justification, regeneration, and remission are all secured through repentance and faith (spiritual conditions), and through these alone; and as each is complete, needing no addition when faith is exercised; so also ceremonial remission and ceremonial justification are complete when baptism is performed.

It is clear, then, that when the birth by water and that by the Spirit are conjoined as conditions of entering the kingdom of God, the Saviour had in mind both the actual spiritual entrance and the ceremonial entrance, and where repentance and baptism are conjoined as conditions of remission, it is evident that actual spiritual and ceremonial remission are both in the mind of the writer.

Lest this be not perfectly clear, a few illustrations are given to show how in common usage the real and the symbolic may be united to express purpose or result. Take this example: The minister pronounced them husband and wife and the groom

placed a ring on the finger of the bride in order to consummate the marriage ceremony. The ring was symbolic and might have been omitted; the essential thing was the pronouncement by the minister. Or this: In order to complete the interment, dust was sprinkled on the casket, the words of the burial service were uttered, and the grave was filled. Here the sprinkling of the earth was symbolic only. Or this: The representatives of the two nations signed the papers and shook hands in order to consummate a treaty of peace. In each of these instances there was an actual, and a ceremonial performance of the same act. It is easy to distinguish the two in every instance.

Now, in Christianity the ceremonial symbolizes the spiritual and the actual. Baptism and the Supper are beautiful external figures of internal spiritual realities. The closed circle of teachings, therefore, in which we read of the "laver of regeneration," of baptism as the "earnest request of a good conscience towards God," as well as the other passages referred to, need only be interpreted in the light of the ceremonial principle we have expounded in order that all difficulties be cleared completely away. "He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved" does not mean that faith is the first step and baptism the second in the conditions of salvation, but this: He that believeth and is baptized is actually saved, his sins actually remitted without and before baptism, just as the bridal pair may be and

are actually often joined in marriage without the symbolic ring. And just as they are and can never be symbolically married without the ring or other symbol, so no man can be symbolically saved without baptism.

The above interpretation leaves all the passages of Scripture intact, recognizes the full natural force of every noun, preposition, and verb involved in the exegesis, and in particular, it is comprehensive enough to allow for apparent contradictions in that it clearly defines the ceremonial and spiritual principles of Christianity in their relations to each other.

It is impossible to see how this interpretation is to be avoided without rejecting our common view of the teachings regarding the Lord's Supper and adopting a corresponding principle there. If the spiritual and ceremonial are to be made jointly efficacious in saving in the one, so must they be in the other instance.

To sum up our view now we may say that baptism, in its relation to regeneration and remission, is not a procuring cause, nor is it a part of a whole of which the latter are the other part, nor is one a spiritual condition of which the other is spiritual fulfilment; but rather, baptism is symbolic cause of which symbolic remission and symbolic regeneration are the effects. Baptism is not the moving or original cause of salvation, nor is it a meritorious or efficient cause, and it is certainly not the final

cause. It is rather a symbolic instrumental cause, producing a symbolic effect. It is the external, invariable concomitant symbol of an internal spiritual reality which precedes.

- In the New Testament baptism was the invariable concomitant of faith and confession of Christ. It is well that two great Christian bodies insist upon this close relation of the two. The New Testament does not contemplate a divided Christendom. Entering the kingdom by faith was never dissociated from the significant ceremonial act which always attended it. It will be well if Baptists and Disciples continue their emphasis upon this close relationship, and that we will thus gradually come to see this whole subject alike, signs are not wanting. In these I greatly rejoice, and pray that our common Lord and Master may preside over the destinies of both bodies, and in his own time and way bring together again those who years ago were sundered, and make all of us increasingly fruitful with the passing years.

NOTE.—The foregoing is the address exactly as given at the Indianapolis Congress of the Disciples. It was published in many religious papers of both Baptists and the Disciples. In issuing the paper in the form of a tract for general distribution it seems fitting to add a few paragraphs, in part to clarify the preceding argument at one or two points, and in part to meet an objection which has been made.

First, I wish to repeat what is stated or implied above, that the words "ceremonial" and "symbolic" are employed as synonymous. They mean the same thing, and can be exchanged for each other in passages where they occur.

Another point. The writer would not be disposed to controvert vigorously interpretations of some of the ceremonial passages cited; for example, John 3 : 5, and others, different from those advanced. I recognize that a number of these passages are difficult, and it is possible that some of them may not refer to baptism at all. This, however, does not affect the force of the argument. The argument only requires that the unequivocal passages are to be viewed in the light of the ceremonial principle. The equivocal passages are also *susceptible* of interpretation in the same way. But if it could be shown that these latter do not contain a reference to baptism, this would in no way affect the argument.

Again, it is not claimed that the list of passages employed to illustrate the principle of interpretation is exhaustive. There are a number of scriptures falling in both circles of passages which do not appear in the paper. It is claimed, however, that no passage of Scripture is left unprovided for in the discussion. All of those omitted are easily seen to come under the operation of the principle of interpretation expounded. They were not cited in every instance from lack of time and space.

One other point: An objector has questioned the

interpretation which makes the one word remission mean spiritual and ceremonial remission at one and the same time, on the ground that the two things do not sufficiently coalesce, or that they are heterogeneous things, not to be connoted by the same word. This objection overlooks several things. One is the close association of the spiritual and the ceremonial or symbolic in the Jewish mind, and also the fact that the symbolic and actual are simply the outward and inward sides of the same thing. Both are *remission*, and it is this common basis which binds the two meanings together in one word.

The objection also forgets that such combination of meanings in a single word is quite common in Scripture. In John 5 : 21 the word for "quickeneth" or "makes alive" means both regeneration and resurrection, as the context shows. In James 2 : 24 the word "justified" means at one and the same time a status acquired on condition of faith, and a manifestation of spiritual condition through good works. We might multiply such examples indefinitely. There is no sound principle of exegesis which can be urged against the interpretation given. The sole test of its correctness, therefore, is whether or not it best explains all the passages involved.

The writer ventures, in closing, a personal word of appreciation for the practically unanimous verdict of approval accorded the paper by his Baptist brethren, and the very large measure of indorsement by brethren among the Disciples.