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## Baptism - Receiving the Word Gladly

Sermon preached by Mr J W Walder at Galeed Chapel Brighton on 27th February 2002  
on the occasion of the baptism of Mr P Topping

“Then they that gladly received his word were baptized.” Acts 2:41

The matter that we are about this evening is one of the ordinances of God’s house, and a most solemn matter, for much of God’s glory is involved in it. May he give to us that grace and that enabling to attend to it in his holy fear, and to his glory.

The first thing I will attempt to notice is what authority we have for baptism. We cannot expect God’s blessing unless we have his authority for that which we attend to. But, if we find we have good ground and good reason to believe that this is according to his will, then we have ground to expect that he will grant his approval and blessing.

Well, the greatest possible example that we can have to consider and to follow is that of Christ himself, for he came to John to be baptized, and when John questioned the matter, he said: “Suffer it to be so now: for thus it becometh us to fulfil all righteousness.” (Matthew 3:15) He did not say for ‘me’ to fulfil, but ‘us.’ So we have God’s blessed warrant and Christ’s own example to follow in this matter. Spiritually considered if we have union to him, we therefore have an interest in his death and resurrection shown forth by baptism, and thus we may rightly follow him.

Secondly, the manifested and divine approval of God the Father and God the Holy Ghost. God the Father said upon the baptism of his Son in our nature: “this is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased.” (Matthew 3:17) We have then the approval of God the Father. The Holy Spirit descended upon him like a dove, so also we have the divine approval of the Holy Ghost. (Matthew 3:16) This is our warrant, God’s order and God’s approval.

We have following this the express and most clear commandment of the Lord Jesus Christ himself: “If ye love me, keep my commandments.” (John 14:15) “If ye love—love me” now that is the important point; that is the qualifying feature in the following of Christ in his ordinances: “If ye love me.” “And he that loveth me shall be loved of my Father, and I will love him and manifest myself to him.” (John 14:21) So we have the express commandment of Christ, addressed to all those believers who have been quickened by his Spirit and have divine life. There is also his commandment to his apostles: “Go ye therefore and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.” (Matthew 28:19) They had a command to do it.

We have also the good and God-approved example of all those who have gone before us, for this solemn ordinance has been practiced from Christ’s day down to this by those who seek to serve him according to his own revealed will.

So we have indeed grounds to believe that this is according to the will of God and we may, therefore, seek and expect his blessing and approval upon it and upon us in attending to it. May this be our happy lot on such an occasion as this, and may it be used to cause some exercise in those hearts already exercised regarding God’s will concerning them.

Now I have spoken briefly of the authority we have regarding baptism and the solemnity of it.

This is an ordinance rightly termed believer’s baptism and I will try and look at that more clearly in a moment. Now what of the right characters? This is of vital importance. Who is it that may walk in this ordinance rightly, and to the honour and glory of God? Well, we are shown plainly in the words of our text who they are: ‘They that gladly received his word were baptized.’ Who are these people then? Are they stony ground hearers? The good seed fell upon them, but it was upon stony ground. There was not much earth. They received the word gladly and it sprang up quickly, but when it was tried, and trouble and difficulty came, they were offended and fell away because there was no depth of earth. Well, that is not the character in our text. The character here is a good ground hearer.

Now, there is no receiving of the word gladly unless our hearts are prepared to receive it, like those good ground hearers who bear fruit, some thirty, some sixty, and some a hundredfold. We read in a verse previous to our text that these people who heard the preaching of the sufferings of our Lord Jesus Christ on sinner's account, his crucifixion, his death, his burial and his resurrection, that they were pricked in their hearts and said to the apostles, "Men and brethren, what shall we do?" (Acts 2:37)

Now these are the right characters, those whose hearts are prepared to receive the gospel and are convicted and convinced of their need of Christ. The darts of conviction are stuck fast in their consciences. They are wounded in their hearts and brought to feel a sense of their wretchedness and sinnership. Such hearts are being prepared. My friends, they are sinners who feel themselves to be so, and who stand in need of a Saviour. The heart must be prepared to receive the good seed and to receive it with gladness. So the first thing is to be pricked in our hearts, like those who have the blood-dipped dart fixed in their consciences, so that their consciences are sorely grieved under a sense of the depth of their sin and the great weight of their guilt before God. They are brought before the almighty God lost, ruined, wretched, undone and helpless, wholly condemned and cursed sinners. This is the ground being prepared, made good ground. Otherwise there will be no fruit: we shall be nothing better than the way-side hearers, but the good ground hearers are those in our text who have received the word gladly.

Well, the parable of the sower shows us there are four kinds of hearers of the word. They who receive the word gladly in the right sense of it are the good ground hearers. Without preparation, without this conviction, without some measure of a sense of our wretched, ruined, guilty condition, we shall be like the way-side hearers or the stony ground hearers or the thorny ground hearers. You see, all these hearers sat under and listened to the same gospel. It was not a different one, they all heard the same words, the same doctrine, and they all heard Christ preached. But there was only one kind of hearer into which the good seed fell and brought forth fruit. The rest were unaffected. None were prepared in any measure to receive salvation but the good ground hearer. Like the stony ground hearer, the good seed fell upon it. It was God's Word, God's gospel, the good seed, but their hearts were like stone. The sun shone upon it, it never melted it; the rain fell upon it, but it did not soften it. Like all men by nature, nothing can soften but God's grace; nothing can have any effect but the Word of God being applied by the power of the Holy Ghost. Well, may God be merciful to us each, and may we be among the good ground hearers and be favoured and blessed with this right, vital, needful qualification for baptism. Such who have been baptized, and those who we hope may yet be constrained to follow the Lord in his ordinances, have this qualification: "Then they that gladly received his word were baptized"—and only they.

Let me attempt, as I may be enabled, to enlarge upon the receiving of the word gladly. First, of course, there is the incarnate Word, Christ Jesus, for,

*The written and the incarnate Word  
In all things are the same.*

(Gadsby's 878)

Now, my friends, have you received Jesus Christ gladly into your heart? We read of some who were of his own family, brothers and sisters (considered so as far as men were concerned) yet they believed not in him. "But as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God." (John 1:12) That is, he gave the right or privilege so to do. Now, what is the name and person of Christ to us? Is the preaching of the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ wonderful news? Does it fit and suit our case? Do we see in this glorious person a merciful, wonderful, glorious, blessed and lovely Saviour? Do we, in our feelings, most gladly receive the Lord Jesus Christ as the incarnate Word? Do we know the intense longing and desire and waiting and pleading and asking that he would come, even to us personally, that he would visit our souls with his salvation, with his lovingkindness? You know, my friends, there are only two things really, there is nothing half-way between, there is no neutral ground here. We either reject or we receive Christ: it is one or the other. Either our hearts are still in that wretched state they are in through the Adam fall, and we are saying, 'We will not have this man to reign over us, we want nothing of his ways,' or else we are saying, 'Come, Lord Jesus, when wilt thou come unto me, when wilt thou visit my soul with thy salvation?' Are we loving him in the want of him and desiring him intensely in the deep persuasion that no other can do helpless sinners good, desiring him on account of that blessed and precious fact that

he is the sinner's Friend? Longing for him and having love toward him is receiving him. I find there is nothing between that, either rejecting him or longing for him, one or the other; we stand on one side or the other. A great mercy, a wonderful mercy, if there is room for Christ in our hearts, as he has made that room himself!

*Ye lambs of Christ's fold, ye weaklings in faith,  
Who long to lay hold on life by his death;  
Who fain would believe him, and in your best room  
Would gladly receive him, but fear to presume.*

(Gadsby's 804)

Then there is hearing the Word gladly in the preaching of the Lord Jesus Christ as the Saviour of sinners. There are several things to notice. I will try and bring before you as many things as I can regarding the proclamation of that best news that has ever fallen upon the ear of man, the blessed good news of a free gospel and salvation by grace received gladly. If we have found a response in our poor hearts to, and have gladly heard such comfortable, encouraging, heart-warming, enlivening news as the gospel, maybe there is hope even for us.

That blessed gospel proclaims salvation upon the terms and conditions suitable to us, such lost sinners and at such a cost as we can afford; being bankrupt the Gospel proclaims free grace, absolutely free super-abounding grace. So can we remember, some of us, the first service that we ever enjoyed when the Word came to us in all its suitability and sweetness? When a precious gospel was preached to us and received into our hearts gladly as showing a door of hope, a way whereby even we might find favour in the eyes of God, and "if free grace, why not for me?" This producing in our heart an earnest plea, and a confidence that that salvation that is set forth by the precious gospel might be for us; and that not only the Word, but the substance that is set forth by the Word, might be received into our hearts in all its saving power and sweetness.

A further point—has the wonderful proclamation of God's covenant mercy been revealed to us and we have received it gladly? What sweeter theme, what more blessed salvation, what more wonderful characteristic of Jehovah, of the God of Israel, than this, his great name, the Lord, the Lord God gracious and merciful, forgiving iniquity, transgression, and sin! O, is there not a peculiarly sweet sound in that one great word *mercy*? For this mercy is for those who are miserable, very miserable and wretched on account of the fact that they are feeling their guilt and hell-deserving condition. Mercy is free, sovereign, super-abounding, never ceasing, never ending. God's mercy, that mercy in which he has declared he delights, O the wonder of it! God delights with all the delight of God to show mercy to poor, guilty sinners. O, he says in substance, I am pleased to do this, I am happy to do this, I delight to do this, to show mercy and to manifest the nature, the degree, extent and effect of that mercy.

Now, my friends, have we received the Word gladly and has it found a place in our hearts? Have we embraced it, laid hold of it, loved it and blessed God for it? Are we thankful, very thankful that he has shown mercy to a poor miserable sinner and turned his sighing into gladness, his mourning into praise, his tears and sorrow into joy? A most wonderful exchange: "Beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning, the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness." (Isaiah 61:3) Blessed exchange! O blessed word, what a wonderful word! It is part of the glorious gospel, part of that which is to be found in Christ, incarnate.

Then there is the proclamation of justification. This is a wonderful subject, a very deep doctrine, and very wonderful and great, becoming God, in a way that is to the glory of Jehovah as well as to the justification of a poor sinner. I remember the first time in my life when I rejoiced at the persuasion that pardon was obtainable, that there was a possibility that I could be pardoned—not that I had been pardoned or had received the blessing, although I longed for it. I could see it was possible, and possible in a way which is to God's honour and glory and for the good of a poor sinner, through the Lord Jesus Christ, who undertook to perfect and complete his finished work for poor sinners like you and me. O, this justification! God is just, he is holy, and I would not wish him to be any other or any less just than he is. O no! I do not want a salvation upon any other ground. It must be just and right. God is just, and may we tremble before him as being so whilst we are in this world, as we may behold somewhat of his glory, majesty, and holiness. He is just, and the justifier of the ungodly. O what a word that is, the ungodly! We

trust we want this blessing knowing we are ungodly, unjust and unrighteous when tried. How is it that this God, who is so great and so holy and just, can justify a poor sinner? How can he take away his guilt and condemnation and curse and sin and bring pardon into his heart and conscience with power and make him feel that wonderful declaration, "Who shall lay anything to the charge of God's elect? It is God that justifieth. Who is he that condemneth? It is Christ that died, yea rather, that is risen again, who is even at the right hand of God, who also maketh intercession for us" "There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus, who walk not after the flesh but after the Spirit." (Romans 8:33-34, and v. 1)

Has that been received gladly? The blessed and wonderful proclamation of the gospel is justification for the guilty, the justly condemned, those whom the law has arrested, accused and condemned—that such may be set free! How so? Because the Lord Jesus Christ has borne the punishment that they deserve. He, that wonderful, blessed and glorious substitute for poor sinners stood in their place, bore all that they deserved and satisfied absolutely the law and the justice of God. You see the blessedness of it. On account of the glorious work of Christ, God would be unjust if he did not justify those for whom Christ died. Justice is now on the sinner's side. Is this good news, received gladly? It causes a most blessed, sweet hope and expectation in our poor hearts that the Lord will be gracious to us in this and bring that sentence that is from above, even from Jehovah himself, down into our poor hearts and assure us he has justified us freely through Christ Jesus. To whom is he pleased to grant this wonderful blessing? It is to criminals, guilty criminals, who are brought to acknowledge and confess their sin.

Now another point. There is the proclamation of imputed righteousness. There is no man righteous, no not one who is born into this world the sons and daughters of Adam. They are sinners throughout, utterly so. How then is man to be righteous before God? To whom is it said, "Thine expectation shall not be cut off." (Proverbs 23:18) Who is this righteous person? That one to whom God is pleased freely to impute the obedience of Christ. He took our nature, came and stood in our place, was made under the law, so that the law had every right to demand of Christ, as our representative, full and complete obedience. He rendered this obedience, honoured the law, satisfied it, and brought in an everlasting righteousness which he had no need of for himself. He has a righteousness which is essential to his Godhead, and a righteousness essential to him as the God-man Mediator in all his glorious offices, which righteousness cannot be communicated to another; but he has another righteousness to give to his people. He has two coats and he will give one to those who have none. O what a glorious doctrine! But, my friends, most needful and most precious is to have the wonderful experience of feeling that one is as righteous as Christ in his imputed righteousness. Has this ever shone with sweetness and glory in the eyes of our faith and been received by us with gladness? Have we wondered at it and admired it, been overwhelmed by a sight of that glorious robe, the wedding garment? What good news this is and it is! This robe is put on ungodly wretches. We read of it in Ezekiel 16, and very precious and sweet words they are: "And thy renown went forth among the heathen for thy beauty: for it was perfect through my comeliness, which I put upon thee." (v. 14) You know that relates to that babe that was cast out into the open field, abandoned, not wanted, just thrown out and left to die in its own blood. Well, the Lord came by and it was a time of love. He washed thee and swaddled thee and clothed thee, and thou wast perfect in the comeliness he put upon thee. My friends, when we come before God, as we shall all do one day, we must have a righteousness better than our own to stand before him, one that must be absolutely perfect to be accepted of God. We can only appear in Christ our righteousness. May we have cause to rejoice in it and with the church: "In the Lord have I righteousness and strength!" (Isaiah 45:24)

Now another point is that wonderful news that there is forgiveness with God that he may be feared; that he multiplieth pardons; that pardon is promised to a penitent soul. A very good, wonderful, blessed doctrine! But whoever longed after or sought this pardon who did not know his guilt? That must be felt first, according to God's sovereign will and purpose, and to that depth and degree that he will have it to be known and experienced by such a person to whom he has purposes of love and mercy. We shall come under the influence of the Holy Spirit to convict of sin, and that not once only but throughout our experience. There will be an ever deepening degree and measure of a sense and realisation of how great and enormous that is, the exceeding sinfulness of sin, the unspeakable offensiveness of it, the guilt which

is attached to every sinful thought, motive, desire and deed, every lust of the flesh and the affections and lusts of the old man with his deeds. This will be solemnly known and felt.

*Ye broken hearts all, who cry out, 'Unclean,'  
And taste of the gall of in-dwelling sin;  
Lamenting it truly, and loathing it too,  
And seeking help duly, as sinners must do.*

(Gadsby's 687)

O, it will cause you to put both hands up, to hang down your head with shame and guilt, and cry out before God, "Unclean, unclean." The leper all the day of his separation should cover his upper lip and cry out, "Unclean, unclean." (Leviticus 13:45) Now this guilt, felt in a guilty conscience, is the good ground, prepared ground to receive the good seed and to receive the Word gladly. Then there is beauty, attraction, sweetness in that one word, pardon. God's pardon! That pardon which is in perfect harmony with his holiness and justice! This may be oft repeated, needs to be oft repeated, and it is for backsliding, and turned aside, fallen sinners who have brought a fresh sense of guilt upon their consciences. These will feel their need afresh and then they will again receive the Word gladly.

My friends, we cannot have pardon without having peace, and certainly and absolutely we can never know peace without pardon. We know what it is to be far off from God, with enmity between us and that great God, and between God and us. All thus taught need consolation, they need pardon, they need peace. Peace with God! They see and feel their need of it on account of that dreadful and solemn feeling of being an object of God's wrath. They long and they plead and they pray that God would bring the consolation of reconciliation into their hearts, that they may know and feel for themselves the glorious truth of Christ's atonement. Reconciliation and peace! It is a wonderful place to be in, it is a wonderful blessing to feel and know that there is just nothing between our poor souls and our God but love and blood and peace. Who can value it sufficiently? It is an earnest, a foretaste, a sweet and precious earnest of that which is to come. They that gladly received the Word were baptized. They gladly received this precious gospel that proclaims peace and goodwill toward men through the blessed Lord and Saviour the Lord Jesus Christ.

Another point in their receiving of the Word gladly is to have hearts prepared already by the work of the Holy Spirit upon them so that there is a most relative suitability between their souls and the Word spoken and between their state and case and a precious Christ. There is a relative suitability in these poor souls who are convinced that without holiness they shall not see God. The words of Scripture plainly set that before us, "Without holiness no man shall see the Lord." (Hebrews 12:14) Are we holy? Just the opposite! We are unholy in every part and particle of our being. We are altogether wrong in everything, all the time. There is not a grain, not a speck, not an atom of holiness in us. We are altogether ungodly and unholy by nature, a fallen son or daughter of Adam. Well, how are we going to appear before God in a state like this? Can we expect that God will receive us? This is such a vital, vital matter! Without holiness we shall never see him with joy! We shall see him indeed in his anger, but not with joy. Then how are we going to be holy? The hymn writer puts it simply—

*That we're unholy needs no proof;  
We sorely feel the fall;  
But Christ has holiness enough  
To sanctify us all.*

(Gadsby's 181)

Yes he has, and may that word be proclaimed and gladly received, that Christ has holiness enough.

Well, there is also the receiving of the Word gladly. Gladly receiving the good, wonderful news that it is possible that such a one as I should be made in Christ's holiness as holy as the Holy One. Perfect! The hymn writer speaks of that perfection of his people:

*Perfect holiness of spirit,  
Saints above, full of love,  
With the Lamb inherit.*

(Gadsby's 484)

They are holy with this imparted holiness of Christ, a holy principle, a holy nature, that holiness which is imparted out of his rich fullness.

Then that causes my mind to go on to one more thing: without holiness there is no happiness. There cannot be. Sin and sorrow are inseparable. No man has yet been able, and no man will ever be able to separate those two things, sin and sorrow, and if grace prevents not it will be eternal misery. But holiness and happiness go hand in hand together, they are one, and until we are perfectly holy we shall never be perfectly happy. Well, this happiness, intense happiness, what good news! O, with what gladness these people receive it! "Happiness, thou lovely name, where?"—well, where is it to be found? Who can promise it, let alone give it?

*Object of my first desire,  
Jesus, crucified for me;  
All to happiness aspire,  
Only to be found in thee.*

*Source and giver of repose,  
Singly from thy smile it flows;—  
Happiness complete is thine,  
Mine it is, if thou art mine.*

(Gadsby's 988)

O, this happiness! Christ is the happiness of his people. O what blessed good news! This is received gladly. This blessed Jesus, and all that he is, is received so gladly into the hearts of poor sinners whose hearts have been prepared to receive him and it, and they do receive it, and that with more gladness than they can tell.

What fullness there is in Christ! Who can speak of him sufficiently? For in him there is everything that a sinner can need. The abundance there is of life and health and strength, rest and joy and consolation, and every other rich and wonderful blessing of the covenant of God's grace! All in Christ are communicable blessings, communicable grace. O, he is the incarnate Word, and the written and the incarnate Word in all points are the same. The gospel proclaims pardon for the guilty, happiness for the sinner that is miserable, liberty to captives, deliverance for the oppressed, justification for the ungodly, strength for the helpless, peace for those who have been at enmity to God and every rich blessing.

Well then, I have spoken a little of the ordinance, the warrant we have for it and the authority, and I have tried just a little to show who the person is that is a right candidate to be baptized. "Then they that gladly received his word were baptized."

The Lord add his blessing.

Amen.