

# Some Answered Questions, Baptism and the Changing Law of God

'Abdu'l-Bahá

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## Baptism and the Changing Law of God

Question: Is the purification of baptism useful and necessary or is it useless and unnecessary? If the former, why was it abrogated despite its necessity? And if the latter, why did John practise it despite its being unnecessary?

Answer: The change and transformation of conditions, and the succession and revolution of ages, are among the essential requirements of the contingent world, and essential requirements cannot be separated from the reality of things. Thus it is impossible to separate heat from fire, or wetness from water, or the rays from the sun, for these are essential requirements. And since change and transformation are among the requirements of all contingent things, the commandments of God are also changed in accordance with the changing times. For example, in the days of Moses, that which was required by and consonant with the conditions prevailing at that time was the Mosaic Law. However, in the days of Christ, those conditions had so changed as to render the Mosaic Law unsuited and ill-adapted to the needs of mankind, and it was therefore abrogated. Thus Christ broke the Sabbath and forbade divorce. After Him four disciples, Peter and Paul among them, permitted the eating of such animal foods as had been forbidden in the Torah, excepting the consumption of the meat of animals that had been strangled, of sacrifices made to idols, and of blood. They also forbade fornication. Thus they maintained these four commandments. Later, Paul permitted the eating of strangled animals, of those sacrificed to idols, and of blood, but maintained the prohibition of fornication. Thus in Romans 14:14 he writes: "I know, and am persuaded by the Lord Jesus, that there is nothing unclean of itself: but to him that esteemeth any thing to be unclean, to him it is unclean." Moreover, in Titus 1:15 it is written: "Unto the pure all things are pure: but unto them that are defiled and unbelieving is nothing pure; but even their mind and conscience is defiled."



TRANSLATION

Now, this change, alteration, and abrogation was due to the fact that the age of Christ could not be compared to that of Moses. The conditions and requirements had entirely changed, and the former commandments were therefore abrogated.

The body of the world can be compared to that of a man, and the Prophets and Messengers of God to able physicians. A human being does not remain always in the same condition: Different ailments occur and each calls for a specific remedy. Thus an able physician does not treat all ailments in the same manner but varies the treatments and remedies in accordance with the requirements of these various ailments and conditions. One person may suffer severely from an ailment caused by an excess of heat: The able physician perforce administers cooling medicines. When, at another time, this person's constitution changes and the heat is supplanted by an excess of cold, the physician, of necessity, sets aside the cooling medicines and prescribes heating ones. This change and alteration is required by the condition of the patient and is an evident proof of the skill of the physician.

Consider, for example: Could the Law of the Torah be enforced in this day and age? No, by God! This would be entirely impossible, and it is for this reason that at the time of Christ the Law of the Torah was perforce abrogated by God. Consider, likewise, that in the days of John the Baptist the purification of baptism served to awaken and admonish the people and to cause them to repent of all sin and to await the advent of the Kingdom of Christ. But today in Asia, the Catholics and the Orthodox plunge infants into a mixture of water and olive oil, in such wise that some fall ill from this ordeal and tremble and struggle at the time of baptism. Elsewhere the priest sprinkles the baptismal water onto the forehead. But in neither case do these children experience any spiritual feelings. What good then can this do? Other peoples wonder and question why this infant is being plunged into the water, since it confers neither spiritual awareness nor faith nor awakening but is merely a custom that is being followed. In the time of John the Baptist, however, it was not so: John would first admonish the people, lead them to repent of sin, and exhort them to anticipate the advent of Christ. Then, whoever received the purification of baptism would repent of his sins with utmost meekness and humility, cleanse and purify his body likewise from outward defilements, and with perfect yearning await, night and day and from moment to moment, the advent of Christ and admittance into His Kingdom.

In brief, our meaning is that the change and transformation in the conditions and exigencies of the times is the cause of the abrogation of religious laws, for the time comes when those earlier commandments no longer suit the prevailing conditions. Consider how greatly the exigencies of the modern age differ from those of medieval times! Is it possible that the commandments of former centuries could be enforced in these latter times? It is clear and evident that this would be entirely impossible. Likewise, after the lapse of many centuries, that which is called for at the present time

will no longer be suited to the needs of that future age, and change and transformation will be inevitable.

In Europe the laws are continually being changed and modified. How numerous the laws that once existed in European systems and canons and that have since been annulled! These changes are due to the transformation of thoughts, customs, and conditions, and without them the well-being of the human world would be disrupted.

For example, the Torah prescribes the sentence of death for whoever breaks the Sabbath. There are indeed ten such death sentences in the Torah. Could these commandments be carried out in our time? It is evident that it would be utterly impossible. Thus they have been changed and transformed, and this change and transformation in the laws constitutes in itself a sufficient proof of the consummate wisdom of God.

This subject requires deep consideration, and the reason is clear and evident. Well is it with them that reflect!