

**IS BAPTISM NECESSARY  
FOR SALVATION?**

**A Critical Analysis**

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# INTRODUCTION

In the study of Christianity the central theme is the Person and Work of Jesus Christ. Paul understood the Gospel, the message of the saving work of Christ, to be so important that he said, "But though we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel unto you than that which we have preached unto you, let him be cursed. As we said before, so say I now again, If any man preach any other gospel unto you than that ye have received, let him be accursed" (Galatians 1:8-9).

In the face of baptismal regeneration we must consider precisely what makes a teaching "another gospel....than that which we have preached unto you." It will be my contention that the Scriptures teach clearly that baptism is not necessary for salvation. Baptismal regenerationists, on the other hand, teach that baptism is necessary for salvation. If the Scriptures deny the necessity of baptism for salvation, then its teaching is "another gospel" than that preached by Paul.

We will examine Scriptures purported to teach the necessity of baptism for salvation, and seek to understand their true meaning. We will also show that the New Testament teaches that salvation is strictly by grace through faith without baptism.

## PREFACE

There are several religious groups which teach that baptism is necessary for salvation. Among them are several "Church of Christ" groups, some branches of the "Christian Church - Disciples of Christ," and many small groups in the Christian tradition.

Such groups teach that water baptism is absolutely essential to the salvation of the soul. Many of them also teach that this baptism must be by immersion, not by pouring or sprinkling. We will not address the question of the mode of baptism, because baptism's relation to salvation is more important. The studies of the history of baptism and the usage of the word throughout Scripture and ancient Greek and Hebrew literature show that baptism could be by any of the three modes. The most careful

*Is Baptism Necessary for Salvation?*

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studies of the meaning of the word itself and its usage show that immersion is not necessarily implied in it (see, e.g., Oepke, "Bapto," in Kittel's *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, and the articles on the subject in Hastings, ed., *Dictionary of the Bible and Dictionary of Christ and the Gospels*).

It is the purpose of this booklet to analyze the doctrine that baptism is necessary for salvation (generally referred to as baptismal regeneration). We will measure the teaching against Scripture, examining New Testament texts used in support of it, and those which we believe show it to be incorrect.

It is not our purpose to question the Christian faith of members of the groups teaching the doctrine of baptismal regeneration; there may well be many sincere Christians who are confused or misled on this issue.

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And now may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you.

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# DISCUSSION OF TEXTS

## **MATTHEW 28:19-20**

*Go ye therefore, and teach all nations,  
baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son,  
and of the Holy Ghost: Teaching them to observe all things  
whatsoever I have commanded you: and lo,  
I am with you always, even unto the end of the world. Amen.*

We have here a command of Christ that we should teach (the meaning of the Greek is "make disciples") all nations, and instrumental in that teaching is the act of baptizing converts. In other words, baptism is part of making disciples. However, it does not say here that baptism is necessary for salvation. The same command also includes the clause, "teaching them to observe all things" that Christ has commanded them. If we are to assume that baptism is essential to salvation, then by consistent interpretation of the context, we should say that absolute obedience to all Christ's commands is also necessary for salvation.

But this, of course, is contrary to the teaching of Scripture. Scripture tells us that no one, even the Christian, is without sin (I John 1:7-2:2). If, then, we are to say that believers who do not obey all of Christ's commands may be saved, then we may, unless some other text teaches otherwise, say that believers who are not baptized may also be saved.

Some argue, however, that this verse proves that one gets "into Christ" by being baptized in water. In support, reference is made to a marginal reading in the Revised Version which has "into" as the translation for "in the name of..." But this certainly cannot *prove* the point: the Revised Version simply shows that this is one possible rendering of the phrase, while in fact the more accurate rendering is simply "in." This rendering is chosen by

the Authorized Version, the Phillips Modern English Translation, the New English Bible, the Jerusalem Bible, the New International Version, and the Today's English Version, all highly reputable translations. In addition, this is the primary meaning of the phrase *ets to onoma* in the Greek. A.T. Robertson, the greatest English-speaking Greek scholar of our century, makes no allowance for the possibility of translating this passage "into the name" (*Word Pictures in the New Testament*, I, 245; also his notes on Matthew 10:41, 42, 12:41; and his *Grammar*, page 593). A comparison with Matthew 10:41, 42 will show that such a translation of *ets to onoma* (in the name) would make many of its uses meaningless. This does not prove that one gets "into Christ" by being baptized in water.

Matthew 28:19-20, therefore, does not prove the necessity of baptism for salvation, or for coming "into Christ."

### MARK 16:16

*He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved;  
but he that believeth not shall be damned.*

This verse is often quoted as supporting the teaching that baptism is necessary for salvation. A more careful analysis of the verse shows that it teaches nothing of the sort.

While the first clause says that all who both believe and are baptized will be saved, it does not say that all who neither believe nor are baptized will not be saved. In other words, the clause does not exclude any group, while it does tell of a group of people who will be saved, namely, those who both believe and are baptized. But the second clause negates one group: those who do not believe will not be saved. There is no negation of the group of those who believe but are not baptized. Thus while the verse as a whole does teach that belief is essential to salvation, it does not teach that baptism is.

While this does not prove that baptism is *not* necessary for salvation, it does mean that this verse cannot be used to prove that baptism is necessary for salvation.

In addition, Mark 16:9-20 is a section which does not appear in what some regard as the best of the manuscripts of the New Testament. It appears late in manuscript evidence, and therefore is perhaps not original. These words quoted of Jesus may not be His words at all, but words added a century later than the original by a scribe who was copying a manuscript of Mark. (See the notes about this in the New International Version, the Revised Standard Version, the New English Bible, the Jerusalem Bible, and reference editions of the Authorized King James Version. See also the commentaries on the text.) Since there is serious doubt concerning the originality of Mark 16:16 it should not be used as proof of doctrine.

### LUKE 7:30

*But the Pharisees and lawyers rejected the counsel of God  
against themselves, being not baptized of him.*

This was in reference to John the Baptist's baptism, not to Christian baptism. Therefore, it cannot be used to prove the necessity of baptism for salvation. Acts 18:24-19:7 shows that John's baptism is invalid now (this pointed out by one of the "Church of Christ" writers in the pamphlet *A Pocket Bible Ready Reference for Personal Workers*, by Ernest Clevenger, Jr.; it is thus the more surprising that two other "Church of Christ" writers, Dykes and Williams, make reference to this as an argument in favor of the necessity of baptism for salvation in their booklet *Ready Answers to Religious Errors*, (2nd. ed.).

Furthermore, John the Baptist *preached* baptism. To reject his baptism, therefore, was to reject him. He was sent from God to testify of Christ (John 1:6,7), and therefore whoever rejected him rejected God. It was, then, not specifically the rejection of baptism which caused them to be against God, but the rejection of John which was entailed in the rejection of John's baptism. But I will show later that the Christian is not sent to preach baptism, for the Gospel, which he is sent to preach, does not include baptism (1 Corinthians 1:17).

Luke 7:30, therefore, does not prove the necessity of baptism for salvation.

### JOHN 3:5

*Jesus answered, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God.*

If "born of water" means water baptism, then this verse proves that it is necessary to be baptized in water to be saved. About that we can be sure. But I will give several reasons why "born of water" cannot mean "baptism in water."

First, at the time that Christ said this, Christian baptism had not yet been instituted. There was no such thing at that time as baptism "in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit." It therefore would have been impossible for Nicodemus to understand "born of water" as referring to water baptism in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Also, this must be seen in the context of verse 6: "That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit," and of verse 7: "Marvel not that I said unto thee, Ye must be born again." This shows that being "born again" (see also verse 3) is being "born of the Spirit." Being "born again" cannot be being "born of the flesh" (verse 6), so it must be being "born of the Spirit."

If this were the case, then verse 5 would contradict verse 6 if "born of water" meant water baptism, for verse 6 requires for salvation only being "born of the Spirit," while verse 5 would require being baptized in water and being born of the Spirit. But if being "born of water" does not mean water baptism, and instead means either the natural first birth, or is a figurative way of saying "born of the Spirit," then verse 5 does not contradict verse 6. Is there any reason to think that "born of water" might mean either the natural birth or be a figurative way of saying "born of the Spirit?" These two points will comprise our next two reasons for rejecting water baptism as the meaning of "born of water."

There is good reason to believe that "born of water" could mean the natural birth. The context supports this interpretation. In verse 3, Jesus has told Nicodemus that he must be "born again." In verse 4, Nicodemus responds by speaking of the natural birth, and asks if there is the possibility of repeating it. It would be perfectly natural for Jesus to respond then by

referring first to the natural birth, and then to the spiritual birth (the rebirth), in order to set Nicodemus' thinking straight.

If this is the correct interpretation, the effect would be to make the discussion run something like this: Jesus says to Nicodemus, "You must be born again to enter the kingdom of God." Nicodemus responds, saying, "But Jesus, I don't understand. How can a man go through the natural birth a second time?" Jesus answers, "But you see, a man must not only be born naturally, but spiritually as well. That means that he must be born 'of water' (the natural birth) and 'of the Spirit' (the rebirth)." Then Jesus continues with his comparison of the natural and spiritual births by saying, "You see, whatever is born of flesh, whatever is born naturally, is natural; whatever is born spiritually, whatever is born of the Spirit, is spirit. Therefore in order to enter the kingdom, which is spiritual, you must be born again. The Spirit is spiritual, going where He will, and so is everyone who is born of the Spirit." This understanding makes the whole conversation fit together.

Understanding "born of water" as water baptism, however, makes the conversation stilted and disjointed, for Jesus first speaks of being "born again," Nicodemus responds by asking if the natural birth can be repeated, Jesus tells him a man must be baptized in water and born of the Spirit, then identifies being born of the Spirit with being born again, and then repeats the reference to being born of the Spirit. In this understanding, baptism would be mentioned only once, and would not be connected with the new birth at all. It would be out of place. But the understanding which takes "born of water" to mean the natural birth makes the context smoother and more logical. Thus it is more probably correct to understand "born of water" as referring to the natural birth than as referring to baptism in water (especially remembering the first two points made above.)

Also, "born of water" could be simply a figurative way of saying "born of the Spirit." The word "water" in connection with salvation, the covenant, regeneration, rebirth, is often used in Scripture as a symbol of the Holy Spirit. Jesus Himself used water this way when he said, "He that believeth on me as the Scriptures hath said, out of his belly shall flow rivers of living waters. But this he spake of the Spirit" (John 7:37,38). With this in mind, the reader should note the following verses, and see if they make more sense understanding "water" in each case as a

symbol of the Spirit, not as the physical element: Isaiah 55:1; 12:3, 35:6; 44:3; Ezekiel 36:25; Jeremiah 2:13; Zechariah 14:8, cf. Ezekiel 47:1-5; John 4:10; Revelation 21:6; 22:17. These make more sense if we see "water" in them as symbolic of the Holy Spirit. We therefore have good precedent for understanding "water" in connection with salvation as symbolic of the Holy Spirit, and this means that it would be reasonable to do so at John 3:5 as well.

If this were the case, John 3:5 would be understood as follows: when Jesus said, "You must be born of water and of the Spirit," He used water as a figurative way of saying "born of the Spirit," and then made Himself perfectly clear by reiterating the thought in plain language. Such a form of speaking was common to the Jews and to Jesus' own teaching. It would readily be understood by Nicodemus, who as a Pharisee would be quite familiar with the Old Testament symbolic usage of "water." Water baptism, on the other hand, in the Christian formula, could not have been understood by Nicodemus, because it did not exist at the time.

The context, then, seems to favor the understanding of "born of water" as meaning the natural birth. Other symbolic use of "water" favors the understanding of the phrase to mean "born of the Spirit" said figuratively. But neither the context nor other figurative uses of "water" favors the understanding that it refers to Christian baptism.

(It might be objected that if "born of water" were figurative, the verse would have an unnecessary repetition. This objection is brought by Williams and Dykes in *Ready Answers to Religious Errors*, page 33, where they write that if "born of water" is understood as symbolic of "born of the Spirit," the verse would then read "...born of the spirit and of the Spirit," which is nonsense. But Williams and Dykes arrive at this by neglecting one of the meanings of the Greek word used there for "and" (*kat*). *Kat* not only may mean "and," but can be used as an explicative word to join something unclear to something clear. When it is used in this sense, it can be translated "namely," or "indeed." Thus the verse would read, "...born of water, namely, of the Spirit," or perhaps better yet, "born of water, that is, of the Spirit." That this usage is permissible, is seen in Joseph Thayer's *Greek-English Lexicon*, under *kat*, sec. 1.3. It therefore would not be nonsense to see "born of water" as figurative for

"born of the Spirit.")

Finally, we are told in John 1:12 that being "born of God," as opposed to being born naturally, comes simply as the result of receiving Christ, that is, believing in His name (which must not be confused with mere intellectual assent; to "believe in His name" is to trust in Him as Savior and Lord, that is, to have faith in Him.) Thus to understand "born of water" as "baptized in water" in John 3:5 would be to make that verse contradict John 1:12-13.

John 3:5 does not even refer to water baptism, or to any form of baptism. It therefore does not prove the necessity of water baptism for salvation.

#### JOHN 19:34

*But one of the soldiers with a spear pierced his side,  
and forthwith came there out blood and water.*

Quite curiously, W.C. "Bill" Johnson in *Let the Bible Speak About Baptism*, page 8, refers to this verse as proof that it is baptism which identifies us with Christ's death where He shed His blood, which saves us. But the objective reader can see no connection between this and baptism. Does Mr. Johnson think that whenever water is mentioned, it must refer to baptism? This would be ridiculous (we have seen that it does not in John 3:5).

Quite simply, this verse shows us part of the physical cause of Christ's death on the Cross. Dr. W. Stroud, *Physical Cause of the Death of Christ*, shows that the emission of water from Christ's chest cavity when He was pierced showed that the sac surrounding the heart, which contains a substance most commonly described on sight as water, burst, so that the water was mixed with the blood which flowed from his ruptured heart. (This means, significantly, that Christ died of a "broken heart.")

Not every historical narrative in the Bible has a symbolic significance. Hence it is not necessary that there be one in John 19:34.

The text itself appears as simple historical narrative, which does not bear symbolic meaning. But if symbolic meaning is sought in it, it would seem most reasonable to take "water" here

as referring to the Holy Spirit, as was noted in our discussion of John 3:5, under the fourth reason why that verse does not refer to baptism in water. Water is more frequently used symbolically in Scripture of the Spirit and therefore it would seem that this would be the most likely candidate, if we were determined to find some symbolic meaning in it. But the best interpretational procedure here is to leave it as an historical statement.

John 19:34, therefore, does not prove the necessity of water baptism for salvation.

### ACTS 2:38

*Then Peter said unto them, Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost.*

This is one of the favorite verses of those who believe baptism is necessary for salvation. They point out simply that it says that we must be "baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins," and since remission of sins is necessary for salvation, baptism is therefore necessary for salvation.

A careful study of the Greek grammar at this point shows that it is repentance, not baptism, which is "for remission of your sins."

The Greek text reads:

μετανοήσατε	καὶ	βαπτισθήτω	ἕκαστος
You (plural) repent	and	be baptized	each one
ὑμῶν	ἐπὶ	τὸ	ὀνόματι
of you	in	the	name
			of Jesus
			Christ
εἰς	ἄφεσιν	τῶν	ἁμαρτιῶν
for (the)	remission	(of the)	sins
			of you (plural).

This makes it clear that "remission of your (plural) sins" is the result of "you (plural) repenting," not of "each one (singular) being baptized." The command to repent is given in the plural number and second person; the command to be baptized is given

in the singular number and third person; the sins remitted belong to "you" in the plural number and second person. It is therefore improper to refer "remission of sins" to "baptism" as its cause, for this would mean that each one was baptized for the remission of the sins of all those present.

To take "baptism" here as causing the remission of sins would be to make the text say, "Let him be baptized for the remission of all your sins," and "Let him (another) be baptized for the remission of all your sins," and "Let him (yet another) be baptized for the remission of all your sins," and so on to each person in the group, so that each one would be baptized for the remission of the sins of all the people in this group.

But the grammar instead is quite clear. Remission is the result of repentance, not of baptism. You repent and your sins will be remitted. You all repent and the sins of all of you will be remitted.

Acts 2:38, therefore, does not teach the necessity of baptism for salvation.

### ACTS 8:35-38

*Then Phillip opened his mouth, and began at the same scripture, and preached unto him Jesus. And as they went on their way, they came unto a certain water: and the eunuch said, See, here is water; what doth hinder me to be baptized? And Phillip said, If thou believest with all thine heart, thou mayest. And he answered and said, I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God. And he commanded the chariot to stand still; and they went down both into the water, both Phillip and the eunuch; and he baptized him.*

There is nothing on the surface of this which teaches the necessity of baptism for salvation, but teachers of baptismal regeneration refer to this as a good example of the manner of salvation. The eunuch has heard the Word, he has been taught, he has repented, he has believed, and finally he is baptized to complete the process. They contend that baptism must be involved in "preaching Jesus," because otherwise the eunuch would not have known about it. If "preaching Jesus" included preaching baptism, they reason, baptism must be part of the



Gospel, and since the Gospel is the way of salvation, baptism must be necessary to salvation.

But this neglects the context. Verse 27 tells us that this eunuch had come to Jerusalem to worship. He was therefore familiar with the Jewish religion, if not actually a convert to it. If he were a convert, or if he were considering becoming one, he knew of the Jewish practice of baptizing all converts to Judaism (which had been the case for several centuries). The Jews used baptism as an initiation rite for Gentiles who were converted to Judaism (see on "baptism" in Hastings, ed., *Dictionary of the Bible*, in *Baker's Dictionary of Theology*, in Kittel's *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, and other historical studies); baptism was used as initiation in other religions also. Hence the eunuch would be familiar with this use of baptism even if Phillip never mentioned baptism.

What is more, the eunuch was reading from Isaiah, and happened at the moment when Phillip joined him to be reading Isaiah 53:7, 8. But the tense of the verb "read" in verse 28 is imperfect, meaning that he was continuing to read; that is, he had been reading before Phillip got there and was still reading when Phillip walked up to him. This makes it extremely probable that he had also just read Isaiah 52:15, which begins, "So shall he sprinkle many nations..." The eunuch, familiar with Judaism as he must have been since he had gone to Jerusalem to worship, would almost certainly have known that the Jews referred to this passage in connection with their rite of baptizing converts as initiation.

A further reason to believe that Phillip's preaching of Jesus did not include telling the eunuch of baptism is that Paul himself separates the preaching of the Gospel from baptism (1 Corinthians 1:17). If Paul left baptism out of the Gospel and Phillip had it in the Gospel, there would be a contradiction in Scripture. But the simple answer is that Phillip did not include the teaching of baptism in his preaching of Jesus.

It is perfectly allowable that Phillip could have mentioned baptism, however, without making it a part of the preaching of Christ. The passage only mentions that he preached Christ to him, but this does not mean that after preaching Christ to him, he could not also tell him about baptism, and indeed about many other things. He could, therefore, have told the eunuch about baptism without saying that baptism was actually part of the

saving Gospel.

With all of this it should be perfectly clear that Acts 8:27-39 does not prove that baptism is a part of the preaching of Christ, that is, a part of the Gospel. It certainly gives no clear indication that Phillip taught that baptism was necessary for salvation, or that the eunuch believed it was; indeed not only does it give no clear indication, it gives no indication at all.

Acts 8:35-38, therefore, does not prove the necessity of baptism for salvation.

### **ACTS 10:48**

*And he commanded them to be baptized  
in the name of the Lord...*

This text is often called upon by baptismal regenerationists to show that baptism is necessary for salvation. But certainly there is nothing inherent in it which proves this. We all agree we are commanded to be baptized, and that neglect or rejection of baptism is sin. But some hold this sin to be unforgivable, since one cannot be saved unless one is baptized. I will contend, on the other hand, that this is not the "unforgivable" sin, and that the one who commits it, while yet having faith in Christ, is forgiven of this sin and saved anyway.

First, the mere fact that we are commanded to be baptized, and that is all this verse says, cannot show that baptism is necessary for salvation. We are also commanded not to sin. Does that mean that if we sin, we cannot be saved? But this would be nonsense since in Christ we have forgiveness of our sins. Therefore it is possible to disobey commands of the Lord and yet be saved.

Now what makes this command from the Lord any different from the general command not to sin, or the commands specifically not to lie, covet, etc., so that disobedience to this command cannot be forgiven while those can? There is nothing in the text which makes that difference, and there is nothing anywhere else where baptism is spoken of that makes that difference. The command which we cannot disobey and yet be forgiven is the command to believe on the Lord Jesus Christ (Acts 16:31; Mark 16:16b, if accepted in the text; John 8:24). But the whole point of believing on the Lord Jesus Christ is that it

is obedience to this very command which brings forgiveness for disobedience to any other commands (Colossians 1:14; I John 1:7-2:2). True faith in the true Christ brings immediate justification (Romans 3:1-5, 23-28), and justification is an absolute guarantee of salvation (Romans 8:29-30).

Acts 10:48, then, does prove that we are commanded to be baptized. It does not prove, however, that baptism is necessary to salvation.

There is another reason for rejecting this as a "proof" of the necessity of baptism for salvation. Those who claim that it is such a proof must ignore or seriously misconstrue the context. Peter is speaking to Cornelius and his friends, and then he turns to the other Christians around him and says (verse 47), "Can any man forbid water, that these should not be baptized, which have received the Holy Ghost as well as we?"

Peter says that this group of people had received the Holy Spirit "as well as we." He acknowledges that these people were already saved. Just as truly as Peter and the Christians with him had received the Holy Spirit, so Cornelius and his friends had received the Holy Spirit. Having received the Holy Spirit was proof that they were already saved, as Romans 8:9-16 shows.

Those who have received the Holy Spirit are the children of God. They are "born of the Spirit." They are "born again." They are guaranteed their inheritance (Romans 8:11; II Corinthians 1:22; 5:5; Ephesians 1:14). They are, in fact, saved. Cornelius and his friends were saved before Peter commanded them to be baptized.

Acts 10:48, therefore, does not prove that baptism is necessary for salvation.

### **ACTS 22:16**

*And now why tarrest thou? arise, and be baptized,  
and wash away thy sins, calling on the name of the Lord.*

Baptismal regenerationists often refer to this as proof that baptism is necessary for "washing away sin," that is, for regeneration, for remission of sin. There are several reasons why this cannot be the case.

First a careful study of the Greek text shows that "wash away" is coordinated with "calling." That is, it is by "calling on the name of the Lord" that Paul was to "wash away" his sins, not by being baptized.

Even the English does not say, "be baptized washing away your sins," or "wash away your sins being baptized," but rather "be baptized and wash away your sins, calling on the name of the Lord." This shows that washing away the sins and being baptized were separate acts, and that the washing away of the sins was done by calling on the name of the Lord.

Second, being baptized was not a part of the Gospel which Paul preached. We know this for two reasons.

a) Paul carefully distinguishes baptizing from preaching the Gospel in I Corinthians 1. There he writes, "I thank God that I baptized none of you, but Crispus and Gaius; Lest any should say that I had baptized in my own name. And I baptized also the household of Stephanas; besides, I know not whether I baptized any other. For Christ sent me not to baptize, but to preach the gospel..." (verses 14-17a). Baptism, then, cannot be part of the Gospel. But the Gospel is the "power of God unto salvation" (Romans 1:16). The Gospel tells us what it is necessary to know in order to be saved. Paul leaves baptism out of the Gospel. Therefore Paul did not consider baptism necessary to salvation.

b) Acts 22:15 says Paul would be Christ's "witness unto all men of what thou hast seen and heard." Paul did not preach baptism (I Corinthians 1—14-17) as a part of the Gospel.

Hence we must see Acts 22:16 as telling us simply of an historical fact. Ananias told Paul he should be baptized, and Paul was baptized. But the grammar does not support the idea that his baptism was the washing away of Paul's sin: it shows instead that his calling on the name of the Lord brought forgiveness (Romans 10:9-10; Acts 16:31). Baptism was not incorporated into what Paul considered to be the Gospel. Therefore Acts 22:16 does not prove the necessity of baptism for salvation.

A.T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, Vol. III, pages 391-392, admits the *grammatical possibility* that this could be interpreted as teaching baptismal regeneration, or baptismal remission. But grammatical possibility is far from actuality. There is also the grammatical possibility, and the stronger one in fact, that washing away is accomplished by calling on the name of the Lord. The grammar alone, therefore,

cannot settle it, and discussions such as those above are necessary to clarify the matter. Robertson does write, however, "It is possible ...to take these words as teaching baptismal remission or salvation by means of baptism, but to do so in my opinion is a complete subversion of Paul's vivid and picturesque language. As in Romans 6:4-6 where baptism is the picture of death, burial and resurrection, so here baptism pictures the change that had already taken place when Paul surrendered to Jesus on the way (verse 10). Baptism here pictures the washing away of sins by the blood of Christ." Comments are in order here.

It is possible, by isolating this verse from its context and from other New Testament teaching on the subject, to take this as teaching baptismal regeneration, but again this is only one way to understand it. It has already been shown that this would not fit the context, it does not fit the most clear understanding of the grammar, and most important, it is contrary to Paul's entire teaching of what the Gospel is (I Corinthians 1:17; Galatians 1:11, 12; Acts 16:31, Romans 10:9, 10). Possibility must not be confused with either probability or actuality.

Acts 22:16 does not teach the necessity of baptism for salvation.

### **ROMANS 6:3, 4**

*Know ye not, that so many of us as were baptized into Jesus Christ were baptized into his death? Therefore we are buried with him by baptism into death; that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life.*

Some insist that this passage teaches that water baptism is the means of getting into Christ (e.g., W.C. "Bill" Johnson, *Let the Bible Speak About Baptism*, page 8). But does it really teach this? There are several reasons why it does not.

First, the Greek word here translated "into" would be translated better "in" or "unto" (A.T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, IV, pages 361, 362; see also his *Grammar*, pages 591, 593), rather than "into." Thus Robertson writes at Romans 6:3, "Better, 'were baptized unto Christ or in Christ.' The translation 'into' makes Paul say that the union with Christ

was brought to pass by means of baptism, which is not his idea, for Paul was not a sacramentarian ...Baptism is the public proclamation of one's inward spiritual relation to Christ attained before the baptism. See on Galatians 3:27 where it is like putting on an outward garment or uniform, *Into his death*...So here 'unto his death,' 'in relation to his death,' which relation Paul proceeds to explain by the symbolism of the ordinance." Therefore we see that the Greek grammar itself does not teach that the baptism here spoken of is actually the means of getting "into Christ."

Second, Paul is speaking in figures and symbols throughout the first half of this chapter. Would the proponents of baptismal regeneration take "our old man is crucified with him" in verse 6 literally, or will they recognize it as symbolic? It is symbolic, and it paints a vivid picture of dying to self and being alive to Christ. But this gives us precedent to interpret "baptism" in this passage as symbolic, too.

Another key to the fact that this passage is to be interpreted symbolically is "*reckon ye also yourselves to be dead...*" (verse 11). All along, it is this "reckoning" that is emphasized. The "also" tells us that we reckon ourselves not only dead to sin, but also reckon other things of ourselves. These are expressed in the two symbols of being baptized in Christ and being crucified with Him (verses 3, 4, 6).

Thus Paul is simply using baptism as a symbol to paint a vivid picture of what happens when one is identified with Christ; that is, when one has "put on Christ," has been "born again." Baptism gives an excellent picture of what is to become a Christian, for it pictures the burial and the resurrection. But the baptism itself is not that burial or resurrection. As Robertson puts it (on verse 4, "...a symbol is not the reality, but the picture of the reality." Baptism, therefore, symbolized identification with Christ.

Third, that baptism symbolizes identification can be shown by two studies. a) In I Corinthians 10:2, Paul writes that the Israelites "were all baptized unto Moses in the cloud and in the sea; And did all eat the same spiritual meat; And did all drink the same spiritual drink; for they drank of that spiritual Rock that followed them: and that Rock was Christ." This clearly shows that "baptism unto Moses" was a symbolic way of speaking of their identification with him: they ate the same meat, and drank the same drink; they were identified with him.

b) A careful reading of Romans 5:12-6:11 shows clearly that identification with Christ, on the one side, or with Adam, on the other, is Paul's theme. It is by our identification with Adam that death passed upon all men (5:12); it is through his offence that the many be dead (5:15); and by the judgement of him that all stand condemned (5:16); and because of his offense death reigns over all men (5:17) until they are saved (7:25, 8:1); by his offense judgement came on all (5:18); by his disobedience many were made sinners. But on the other hand, it is by our identification with Christ that we have life: Adam pre-figured Christ in this sense, that identification with him brings on us the things which apply to him, and identification with Christ brings on us the things which apply to Him (5:14). Yet the benefits of identification with Christ far outweigh the tragedies of identification with Adam (verse 15); by identification with Him God's grace, which is given to all, abounds to those who are identified with Him (verse 15); by identification with Him the gift of justification comes to us (verse 6); identification with Christ brings abundant righteousness in life (verse 17); identification with Him brings justification and righteousness unto life (verse 18); identification with Him applies His obedience to us (verse 19).

Paul uses baptism often as a symbol of identification. He does it in I Corinthians 10:2. He follows the tremendous passage on identification with Christ on the one hand and with Adam on the other with a more in-depth passage on identification with Christ, Romans 6:1-11. As Christ died for our sins, and "became sin for us," (II Corinthians 5:21), so He died to sin because He had taken on our sins (Romans 6:10). Thus when we are identified with Him, we too are "dead to sin" (verse 2); we are identified with His death (verse 3), with His burial and resurrection (verse 4), with His newness of life because of this resurrection (verses 4, 5), in His crucifixion (verse 6), in living with Him (verse 8), and in dominion over death forevermore (verse 9): "...in that he died, he died unto sin once: but in that he liveth, he liveth unto God. Likewise reckon ye also yourselves to be dead indeed unto sin, but alive unto God through Jesus Christ our Lord." (Romans 6:10, 11.)

The entire passage of Romans 5:12-6:11 is concerned with our identification first and naturally with Adam, and second and by spiritual rebirth (John 3:3-6) with Christ. It is correct, therefore, especially in the light of Paul's usage of the term in I Corin-

thians 10:2, to understand "baptism" in Romans 6 as symbolic of identification. Therefore it is not water baptism which actually puts us "into Christ" or is necessary for our salvation, but "identification with Christ:" dying with Him to sin, rising with Him to life, living with Him to dominion over death and sin.

Romans 6:3, 4, therefore, does not prove the necessity of baptism for salvation.

### **I CORINTHIANS 12:13**

*For by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body, whether we be Jews or Gentiles, whether we be bond or free; and have been all made to drink into one Spirit.*

Williams and Dykes (*Ready Answers to Religious Errors*, page 32) call on this verse as a proof that baptism is the means by which we get into the body, or Church, of Christ. There are several reasons to reject this teaching. They teach that this refers to water baptism. But there is nothing in the context to make us think this. The Bible makes reference to baptism in water (Acts 10:48), in fire (Matthew 3:11), in the Holy Spirit (Matthew 3:11; Acts 1:5), in Christ (Romans 6:3, 4). It is therefore not necessary that we understand I Corinthians 12:13 as referring to water baptism.

Certainly it is by being baptized by the Holy Spirit that we get "in the body of Christ," but there is nothing to identify this baptism by the Holy Spirit with water baptism. Indeed, the language of Paul both in this verse and elsewhere in this epistle to the Corinthians makes it highly improbable that he meant that this was baptism in water.

a) Paul goes on after saying that we are baptized by the Spirit into the body of Christ to say that we also all drink of one Spirit. If we are going to insist on a literal interpretation of "baptism" in the first half of the verse, we have a right to insist on consistency and interpret the "drinking" of the second half literally. But this would be nonsense. If we take "drinking" in the second half figuratively, we have a right to take "baptism" in the first half figuratively.

b) When considering Paul's words in I Corinthians 1:12-17

one realizes that it is highly unlikely that Paul would identify baptism by the Spirit into the body of Christ with baptism by any man: "Now this I say, that every one of you saith, I am of Paul; and I of Apollos; and I of Cephas; and I of Christ. Is Christ divided? was Paul crucified for you? or were ye baptized in the name of Paul? I thank God that I baptized none of you, but Crispus and Gaius; Lest any should say that I had baptized in mine own name. And I baptized also the household of Stephanas: besides, I know not whether I baptized any other. For Christ sent me not to baptize, but to preach the gospel: not with wisdom of words, lest the cross of Christ should be made of none effect."

Being baptized by Paul caused some Corinthians to say they were "of Paul;" being baptized by Apollos caused some to say they were "of Apollos;" or by Cephas (Peter) caused some to say they were "of Cephas;" and some retorted arrogantly, "Well, I am simply of Christ." Since this was the case with the Corinthians, it is inconceivable that in writing to them Paul would refer to baptism by the Spirit intending for them to understand it as water baptism by any man or men.

c) The context of I Corinthians 12:13 is figurative language. Even the word "body" is used figuratively to describe the unity of the believers in Christ. Verses 7-11 all speak of a spiritual, not a physical, working by the Holy Spirit. Verses 12-31 all speak figuratively of their various topics. Therefore we have good reason to believe that "baptism" in verse 13 is used figuratively of a spiritual, not physical act of the Holy Spirit.

d) We have already seen how Paul used "baptism" figuratively for "identification," and this understanding fits here and in the context of I Corinthians 1-13. Paul is dealing with the subject of division in the Corinthian Church (those other subjects, such as marriage, which enter discussion do so as they are related to the subject of unity in the Body), and 12:12-31 is the climax of that discussion. It gives the final blow to any arguments of real division in that body: no matter that there are different members, different ministries, different actions, the body is one because Christ is One, and He is the Head of the Body. The use of baptism for "identification" in the Body of Christ would be natural for Paul, and would lend great weight to his argument for the unity of the Body of Christ.

The baptism spoken of in I Corinthians 12:13 is figurative, referring to identification. It is done spiritually by the Holy Spirit,

not through any physical means, and involves regeneration, the act of making the believer a "new creature" (II Corinthians 5:17). It does not refer to water baptism.

I Corinthians 12:13, therefore, does not prove the necessity of water baptism for salvation.

### **GALATIANS 3:27**

*For as many of you as have been baptized into Christ  
have put on Christ.*

Williams and Dykes (*op. cit.*, page 32) argue that this proves the necessity of water baptism for salvation, because it is by that that one gets "into Christ" and "puts on Christ." But there are reasons why this is not the case.

a) We have already seen that Paul often used "baptism" as a symbol for identification. This usage here would fit the meaning of the text. If it is symbolic of "identification," the meaning would be as follows: "For as many of you as have been identified in Christ have put on Christ." We have good reason from Paul's other writing, as shown above, to take this figuratively, and it fits the context that way. Therefore the figurative is the most likely meaning.

b) The verb in Greek translated "put on" has the meaning of putting on a badge or uniform of service "like that of a soldier. This verb is common in the sense of putting on garments (literally and metaphorically as here). See further in Paul (Romans 13:14; Colossians 3:9f; Ephesians 4:22-24; 6:11, 14). In I Thessalonians 5:8 Paul speaks of 'putting on the breastplate of righteousness.' He does not here mean that one enters into Christ and so is saved by means of baptism after the teaching of the mystery religions, but just the opposite. We are justified by faith in Christ, not by circumcision or by baptism. But baptism was the public profession and pledge, the soldier's *sacramentum*, oath of fealty to Christ, taking one's stand with Christ, the symbolic picture of the change wrought by faith already (Romans 6:4-6)." (A.T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, IV, 298.)

In other words, even if "baptism is taken as referring to water baptism, the language which Paul uses shows it to be an outward

sign of something that has already happened inwardly. The baptizing itself then would be an entirely outward event, with no spiritual *effect*, but only a spiritual *significance*. Hebrews 9:13ff reminds us that no outward ceremony has a real effect on the heart.

c) The word "into" in the A.V. would, again by Robertson's principle quoted earlier, be better translated "in" or "unto," meaning "in reference to" Christ, thus showing that the baptism itself is not the means of getting to be "in Christ."

d) Galatia stood in the middle of an area infested with the mystery religions, and these bodies made much of outward acts. Paul was refuting the teachings of these religions, and so there is the initial probability that he did not want "baptism" in 3:27 to be taken as the literal, outward act. Baptism in water was a common initiatory rite in the mystery religions, and Paul knew that from his own travels in the area. It would be extremely unlikely that he would speak of it in the same way they did.

e) It is by the receiving of the Holy Spirit that we know we are saved. In fact, those who have received Him are saved (Romans 8:1-16). But Paul in Galatians 3:2, 3 points out specifically that it is by faith that the Galatians received the Holy Spirit. To say then that Galatians 3:27 teaches baptism as the means of regeneration would make it contradict verses 2, 3.

f) In verse 6 Paul quotes the fact that Abraham was justified when he believed God; that is, when he had faith. But Genesis 15:6 shows that this justification came before any physical act, specifically that of circumcision. Now the fact that Abraham was justified by faith without works is proof that he was saved (Romans 8:29-30; cf. Romans 3:1-5, 28). Circumcision is the Old Testament counterpart to baptism in the New Testament (see on Colossians 2:12 later). Therefore we can be saved before and even completely without being baptized in water. (The use of Abraham as an example of the manner of our justification is supported in Galatians 3:28-29, and by Paul's whole argument in Romans 3-4.)

Baptism in Galatians 3:27 does not refer to physical baptism in water, but is figurative of our identification with Christ which is achieved by faith (John 1:12-13), as was the case in I Corinthians 12:13 and Romans 6:3, 4. It cannot be used as proof that baptism is necessary for salvation. But even if it did refer to water baptism, it would not prove the necessity of baptism for

salvation, for it specifically speaks of it as an outward sign, we know that outward signs do not affect the heart's relation to God, and we know that there are those who were saved before they were baptized in water (Cornelius and his friends, Acts 10) or were circumcised (Abraham, Genesis 15).

Galatians 3:27, therefore, does not prove the necessity of water baptism for salvation.

### **EPHESIANS 4:5**

*One Lord, one faith, one baptism.*

This of course cannot be used as proof that baptism is necessary for salvation, for it simply does not address that question. But Williams and Dykes (*op. cit.*, page 31) use this verse to argue that there is only one way to baptize, that is, immersion. But there are several reasons that this cannot hold.

First, the text does not say "one form of baptism," but simply "one baptism." There is no reason why there cannot be various forms of the "one baptism," just as there are various members of the "one Body" of Christ.

Second, we have already seen in Paul's writings the figurative use of baptism. Paul's predominant use of "baptism" is figurative for identification. This meaning is more logical here, since the word appears in the context of an argument for the unity of the Body (verse 3). It is better to understand "baptism" here in Paul's common sense of identification with Christ, than to infer from it water baptism.

Ephesians 4:5 does not prove the necessity of water baptism for salvation. Neither does it prove the necessity of immersion.

### **EPHESIANS 5:25, 26**

*Husbands love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church and gave himself for it. That he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word.*

*That he might present it to himself a glorious church not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish.*

There is no mention of baptism here, but simply "washing of water by the word." It was shown in the discussion of John 3:5 that "water" does not always refer to baptism, even when it is used in the context of washing or regeneration. It more often refers to the Holy Spirit.

If this were physical baptism, then 1) this would mean that Christ physically baptizes the Church as a whole, not just individual members of it. That of course is absurd. 2) This would mean that, following Christ's example with the Church, the husband should baptize his wife in water (and somehow, he should do this by "the word!"). But this would leave no one to baptize husbands!

The text says plainly that this "washing of water" is to be done "by the word." John 8:31-32 says, "If ye continue in my word, then are ye my disciples indeed; And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free." The Word is the key to this. The "washing" is to be accomplished by leading the wife (as Christ led the Church) into the Word. Psalm 119:9 shows clearly that cleansing is accomplished by the Word of God in a person's heart: "Werewithal shall a young man cleanse his way? by taking heed thereto according to thy word." This, coupled with the fact that "water" here certainly need not refer to baptism in water, is sufficient reason to reject the idea that this verse teaches the doctrine of baptism for cleansing from sin.

The context shows that this "washing of water by the word" is an inner cleansing (verse 27), a making holy of the Church on the one hand by Christ, and the wife on the other hand by the husband. But Hebrews 9:13ff shows that outward ceremonies do not actually cleanse the heart from sin.

Ephesians 5:25-27, therefore does not prove the necessity of water baptism for salvation.

## **COLOSSIANS 2:12**

*Buried with him in baptism, wherein  
also ye are risen with him; through the faith  
of the operation of God who hath raised him from the dead.*

The previous discussions of Romans 6:3, 4; I Corinthians 12:13; Galatians 3:27 should show clearly that this does not

prove the necessity of baptism for salvation. But there is need for discussion anyway.

First, the verse is quoted out of context. The entire context runs from verse 10 through verse 17: "And ye are complete in him, which is the head of all principality and power. In whom also ye are circumcised with the circumcision made without hands, in putting off the body of the sins of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ: Buried with him in baptism, wherein also ye are risen with him through the faith of the operation of God, who hath raised him from the dead. And you, being dead in your sins and the uncircumcision of your flesh, hath he quickened together with him, having forgiven you all trespasses: Blotting out the handwriting of ordinances that was against us, which was contrary to us, and took it out of the way, nailing it to his cross; And having spoiled principalities and powers, he made a show of them openly, triumphing over them in it. Let no man therefore judge you in meat, or drink, or in respect of an holyday, or of the new moon, or of the sabbaths (corrected from "sabbath days" in A.V.): Which are a shadow of things to come; but the body is of Christ."

This context shows that baptism is presented as the New Testament counterpart of circumcision in the Old Testament. They are presented in a careful parallel to each other. The one who is "in Christ" is circumcised with a circumcision made "without hands." The parallel usage of circumcision and baptism demands that we understand the "baptism" to be made "without hands," also. Therefore this cannot be a reference to literal water baptism, but rather a use of the figure of "baptism" as a picture of dying and rising with Christ, as in Romans 6:3, 4.

Second, since baptism is shown to be the New Testament counterpart to circumcision in the Old Testament, we know that those relations of circumcision to salvation in the Old Testament apply to the relation of baptism to salvation in the New Testament. Circumcision was not necessary for salvation in the Old Testament, for Abraham was saved before he was circumcised. (Genesis 15:6.) Furthermore, Romans 2:28-29 shows clearly that it is not physical circumcision (that "made with hands") but spiritual circumcision which makes one truly a Jew, one of Abraham's children.

Since baptism is the New Testament counterpart to circumcision in the Old Testament, we may therefore understand

Romans 2:28-29 to have the same meaning in relation to baptism that it has in relation to circumcision: "For he is not a Jew, which is one outwardly; neither is that circumcision, which is outward in the flesh: But he is a Jew which is one inwardly; and the circumcision is that of the heart, in the spirit, and not in the letter; whose praise is not of men, but of God." This can be understood in relation to baptism, meaning that "baptism is not that which is outward in the flesh, but...baptism is that of the heart, in the spirit and not in the letter." This is precisely what was shown in my discussions of Romans 6:3, 4; I Corinthians 12:13; and Galatians 3:27. The use of "baptism" by Paul as a symbol for identification thus makes perfect sense, for circumcision in the Old Testament was a means of identification with the nation Israel. But whereas physical circumcision identified one with the physical, outward Church, spiritual baptism is that which identifies one with the spiritual "Body of Christ."

The use of "baptism" in Colossians 2:12 is figurative, as was the use of it by Paul in Romans 6:3, 4; I Corinthians 12:13; Galatians 3:27, etc., and refers to a spiritual baptism "made without hands," an identification with Christ in His Death, Burial, and Resurrection. It is accomplished by a direct spiritual act of the Holy Spirit, not by a physical act done by man.

Colossians 2:12, therefore, does not prove the necessity of water baptism for salvation.

### **TITUS 3:5**

*Not by works of righteousness which we have done,  
but according to his mercy he saved us,  
by the washing of regeneration  
and renewing of the Holy Ghost.*

This is sometimes referred to as proof that baptism is the means of regeneration, but it does not mention baptism, and our discussion of Hebrews 10:22 actually showed that the regeneration, the cleansing of the evil conscience, is accomplished by washing, or sprinkling in the blood of Christ. Revelation 1:5 makes it perfectly clear that the washing from sin is done in the blood of Christ, not in the waters of baptism.

Furthermore, there is good grammatical cause to believe that "washing of regeneration" means "washing which is regeneration." This is argued for by Charles Hodge (*Syst. Theol.*, III, 596), who notes that this would be the meaning if the genitive case in the Greek here is interpreted as a "genitive of apposition," identifying "washing" with "regeneration." Thus Hodge writes, "We are saved by that washing which is regeneration, namely, the renewing of the Holy Ghost."

Titus 3:5 does not actually refer to baptism in water. It refers to washing of regeneration which is done in the blood of Christ which was shed to cleanse us from sin. It cannot be used to prove that baptism in water is necessary for salvation.

Furthermore, even if baptism is not seen as a work of the law, it is a work of righteousness. It is something which we do: therefore it is a work. It is right for us to do it: therefore it is a work of righteousness. But this very verse says that it is not by any works of righteousness which we have done that we are saved. Therefore it cannot be by baptism that we are saved (the apparent contradiction between this and I Peter 3:21 will be handled below).

Titus 3:5, therefore, does not prove the necessity of baptism in water for salvation.

### **HEBREWS 10:22**

*Let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith,  
having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience,  
and our bodies washed with pure water.*

Reference to this verse as proving regeneration, or the new birth, by water baptism ignores the point of the contrasting of that sprinkling which affects the heart, removing from it an evil conscience, and that washing of the body with pure water. It is the sprinkling (with the blood of Christ: 9:14, I Peter 1:2) which touches the heart. The washing of pure water affects the body.

Paul was careful to distinguish between an outward holiness or circumcision, which was of the flesh (Romans 2:28-29) and an inward which was of the heart. The true Jew, the true child of Abraham (and therefore the true Christian) has the inward cir-



cumcision of the heart, not only the outward, and this is accomplished by the "sprinkling of the blood of Christ" (I Peter 1:2), not by a washing in water in the sacrament of baptism (I Peter 3:21).

As was previously pointed out, the writer of Hebrews shows us that no outward ceremony affects the heart (Hebrews 9:13ff). He would not, and does not contradict himself here by teaching that the washing of the body in pure water accomplishes an inward cleansing.

The sprinkling with the blood of Christ has reference to the Old Testament figure of this with the priests, who had to be sprinkled with the blood of sacrifices before ministering (Leviticus 8:22) and the sprinkling of the blood of the sacrifices upon the people (Hebrews 9:19, cf. Exodus 24:8) as symbols of that cleansing of the heart which would be effected by the blood of the Messiah (Isaiah 53), the Lamb of God (Genesis 22:8). The washing in water has reference to the washing of the priests before entering service at the altar (Leviticus 8:6). The former is inward and spiritual, "of the heart" (Romans 2:28-29), and the latter is outward and physical, "of the flesh" (Romans 2:28-29).

(For a complete discussion of the various possible interpretations of this passage, see Franz Delitzsh's *Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, Vol. II, pages 174-179. Certainly the washing of the body in pure water here refers to water baptism - only a few commentators have thought otherwise, and the evidence is against them. But that does not mean that it is the means of regeneration. It is outward, and is not the *means* of our being sprinkled with the blood of Christ.)

The washing of the body in pure water spoken of in Hebrews 10:22 does refer to water baptism, but does not present it as the means of the cleansing or purifying of the heart. The verse clearly shows that baptism is not this means: sprinkling with the blood of Christ is, and water baptism is expressly distinguished from sprinkling with the blood of Christ. Since water baptism is not the means of purifying the heart from sin, it is not the means of regeneration, and it is not necessary for salvation.

Hebrews 10:22, therefore, does not prove the necessity of water baptism for salvation.

### **I PETER 3:19-21**

*By which also he went and preached unto the spirits in*

*prison; Which sometime were disobedient, when once the longsuffering of God waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was a preparing, wherein few, that is, eight souls were saved by water. The like figure whereunto even baptism doth also now save us (not the putting away of the filth of the flesh, but the answer of a good conscience toward God,) by the resurrection of Jesus Christ.*

Besides Acts 2:38 this is the next text most strongly depended on by those in favor of the idea that baptism is necessary for salvation. The reason is obvious. This text includes the striking phrase, "baptism doth also now save us." But is this surface understanding the correct understanding? I will give several reasons why it is not.

Peter immediately gives a carefully devised explanatory phrase with the sole purpose of avoiding a misunderstanding of the words "baptism doth also now save us." In reference to baptism he writes, "not the putting away of the filth of the flesh, but the answer of a good conscience toward God." Now the physical baptism is a "putting away of the filth of the flesh" (Hebrews 10:22, washing the body in pure water). But what actually saves is "the answer of a good conscience toward God."

This shows the close connection between this verse and Hebrews 10:22. There there is another careful distinction between outward cleansing of the body in pure water, and inward cleansing of the conscience. The same distinction is made here in II Peter 3:21, and shows that it is not the outward act which saves but the inward change which is signified by the outward act. Thus Peter refers briefly to the sign of clear conscience, the submitting to baptism, as a short way of referring to the actual thing; the clear conscience. But then for clarification he explains that it is not the sign which saves, but the thing signified: the clear conscience saves, not the physical baptism.

In this context, then, "baptism" is used metaphorically to symbolize a conscience clear before God. It is not said that it is the outward, physical act of baptism which saves, but that it is the good conscience which baptism signifies which saves. This good conscience is achieved by the washing of the conscience by the blood of Christ (Hebrews 10:22; Titus 3:5; Revelation 1:5; I John 1:7), and is acquired entirely by faith (Romans 3:28; Ephesians 2:8-10) before baptism in water is practiced as a sign

of that good conscience (Romans 4:8-11, remembering that baptism is the New Testament counterpart to circumcision; Colossians 2:11-12).

It is not said in I Peter 3:21, therefore, that it is the outward, physical act of baptism which saves, but that it is the good conscience which baptism signifies which saves. This good conscience is achieved by the washing of the conscience by the blood of Christ (Hebrews 10:22; Titus 3:5; Revelation 1:5; I John 1:7), and is acquired entirely by faith (Romans 3:28, Ephesians 2:8-10) before baptism in water is practiced as a sign of that good conscience (Romans 4:8-11).

Thus we see that it is deceiving to refer simply to the phrase "baptism doth also now save us" without taking it in context with the very careful explanatory phrase which Peter uses, that is, that it is not the outward and physical act which saves, but the inward testimony of a cleansed, a good conscience before God, which saves, (Cf. I John 3:21.)

I Peter 3:21, therefore, does not prove the necessity of water baptism for salvation.

This concludes the comments on texts purported to support the doctrine that baptism in water is necessary for salvation. It has been shown that there is no text in the Scripture which proves the necessity of baptism for salvation. We should be careful not to fall prey to the old argument, "Well, no one of them proves it, but if you look at them all together, if you take them in combination, they give such strong evidence of the fact that you really can't deny it." This is the old "leaky bucket" argument. What it really says is, "Well, if one leaky bucket won't do the job, let's use ten!" But of course ten leaky buckets will carry water no further than one. If none of the texts prove the doctrine, then all of the texts do not prove the doctrine. Water baptism is not necessary for salvation.

There remain two questions to be asked. The answers to both have been touched upon in the foregoing discussions, but they have not been systematically presented. First, if baptism is not the means of our salvation, is not the means of our coming into Christ, is not the means of regeneration or new birth, is not the means of remission of sins, then just what is and why is it commanded and is it important? Second, if baptism is not necessary for salvation, how are we saved?

## The True Significance Of Baptism

Baptism is the New Testament counterpart to circumcision (Colossians 2:11-12). Circumcision is a sign and seal of the covenant relation of the Old Testament believer to God: the relation of justification, of forgiveness of sins, of regeneration, in short, salvation (Romans 4:8-12). Simple physical circumcision did not cause that relation to God (Romans 2:28-29). The one who entered that relation was commanded to be circumcised as a sign of it (Romans 4:11). (The question of circumcision of infants is not related here. See J. Barton Payne, *The Theology of the Older Testament*, pages 392ff for a discussion of that.) Not being circumcised did not prevent salvation (Romans 4:10).

Therefore baptism is a sign and seal of the covenant relation of the New Testament believer to God: the relation of justification, of forgiveness of sins, of regeneration, in short, of salvation (Romans 6:1-5; I Peter 3:21; Galatians 3:27). It signifies the identification of the believer with Christ in His Death to sin (Romans 6:10, 11), in His Burial (Romans 6:3, 4), and in His Resurrection to victorious life (Romans 6:4-5). Simple physical baptism does not cause that relation to God (Romans 2:28-29; also Simon Magus was baptized, but did not have or receive that relation - Acts 8:10-24; Romans 9:13ff, proving that an outward ceremony does not affect the relation of the heart to God); the one who is baptized but does not have faith is not by the mere baptism placed in the relation to God which we call salvation. The one who enters the relation of justification, of forgiveness of sins, of regeneration, that is, of salvation is commanded to be baptized (Acts 10:48) as a sign and seal of his relation to God (Romans 4:11; 6:3-11; Galatians 3:27). Not being baptized does not prevent salvation (Acts 10:47-48, Cornelius and friends were saved before baptism), even though it is a sin not to be baptized.

# Is Baptism Important?

Of course baptism is important! It is commanded by our Lord (Matthew 28:19) and by Peter, (Acts 2:38), and disobedience to this command is sin. This aspect is the primary aspect of its importance: if we do not get baptized, we disobey Christ, and that is sin. The second aspect of its importance is that baptism is the primary sign and seal of the covenant relation between the believer and God: it tells the world that the believer is a believer, and it tells the Church the same. Thus baptism has this twofold importance. But its third aspect of importance is more inward and personal: it is the way for the believer to most formally express his faith (other than sharing in the Lord's Supper), and this has personal as well as community benefits.

Baptism, then, is important for three reasons: it is commanded, and neglect of it is sin; it is the means of showing the world and the Church that one professes to be a believer (and indeed when it is done in truth it positively shows the person to be a believer); and it expresses faith in Christ, thus having personal and community benefits.

But regardless of this great importance of baptism, we do find that the Scriptures teach that baptism is not necessary to salvation. Like any sin except blasphemy against the Holy Spirit (which, in the long run, is a life-long rejection of Christ, and therefore a lifelong rejection of the Gospel; this topic is far aside from our present one, and cannot be discussed here), the sin of failing to be baptized is forgiven because of the shed blood of Jesus Christ applied to the believer (Colossians 1:14, I John 1:7). This is not a suggestion that Christians should not be baptized: I believe they should. But it is simply a recognition that failure to be baptized does not prevent one from being saved.

# How Then Are We Saved?

It seems almost incredible that this question need be asked, in the face of the massive Biblical testimony on the point. The

question amounts to the same thing the Philippian jailor asked: "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" And Paul and Silas give the simple answer, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved" (Acts 16:31,32).

We are saved by believing on the Lord Jesus Christ. There is nothing more we must do to gain salvation. "Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith without the deeds of the law" (Romans 3:28).

The "believing" spoken of in Scripture should not be confused with mere intellectual assent. True belief always meant trust, complete trust. As intellectual assent, belief is bogus (James 2:19). But as true belief, belief always results in the fruit of good works, though it is the faith that saves, not the works (James 2:14-26).

For further Scriptural teaching on the way of salvation, the reader is invited to study the following passages: John 3:16; Romans 1:16-17; 3:20-28; 4:1-8; 13-16, 23,25; 5:1 6:23; 8:30; Galatians 2:16,21; 3:2,3,10ff,24; Ephesians 2:8-10; Titus 3:5-7; I Peter 1:2-9.

We are saved, then, by grace through faith. We are justified by faith without the works of the law, and by God's grace those who are justified are all saved, without exception (Romans 8:30; I Peter 1:9).

"For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them." (Ephesians 2:8-10.)

# Conclusion

The conclusion of this study must be that baptismal regeneration teaches "another gospel" by adding a requirement for salvation which Scripture does not teach.

But does this mean that all members of groups teaching baptismal regeneration are "accursed" (Galatians 1:8-9)? No. Those who, though they now believe otherwise, began by believing that they were saved entirely by grace through faith remain saved (John 10:27-29; I Peter 1:4-9). They are simply in error.

But those who have always believed that baptism is necessary for salvation have missed the Gospel and are depending on their own works of righteousness to be saved, contrary to Titus 3:5. They must be prayed for and witnessed to, in the hope that they will see the foolishness of trying to be saved by the works of the law or their works of righteousness (Galatians 3:1ff; Romans 8:1-4), and then turn to Christ in full and absolute trust in Him and His grace to forgive and save them utterly.

It is my belief that most people in groups teaching baptismal regeneration originally believed that they were saved simply by grace through faith, and did not depend on themselves at all. But the others must be shown, lovingly and sensitively, the way to the true salvation through the Gospel. Those who once believed the Gospel, but who now have been led to believe otherwise, must be shown how to return to the true Gospel, as Paul showed the Galatians in chapters 2-3.

Let us give all thanks and glory to the Author and Finisher of our faith, Who will continue to keep us by the word of His power, unto salvation, the result of our faith which was given us by Him (Ephesians 2:8-10; John 6:29; I Peter 1:5,9).

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