

29

"Baptized With Water"

- Ac 10:47

What is the purpose of baptism? John the Baptist explicitly stated the purpose of his baptism when he said, "I baptize you with water for repentance" (Mt 3:11). Did John baptize them so that they could repent or because they already had repented? Was John's baptism a means to repentance or the result of repentance? In both English and Greek, "for" (*eis*) can refer to either an objective (I left "for" home) or a cause (I cried "for" joy). In Mt 3:11, "for" denotes a cause; John's baptism came because they had already repented. It was an outward sign of an inward act. For instance, when many of the Pharisees came to be baptized, John condemned them as a "brood of vipers" because they had not yet repented (Mt 3:7-10). Thus, when Luke wrote that John was "preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins" (3:3), he meant that John's baptism was symbolic of a person's repentance in order to be forgiven. It was not a "baptism for forgiveness" but rather a baptism that expressed "repentance for forgiveness." Incidentally, "repent" is from *metanoia* and means "a change of thinking." As such, it is a close parallel to faith; one never occurs without the other. John urged men to change their thinking about sin (Mt 3:6) and to believe in the one coming after him, that is Jesus (Jn 1:6-9; Ac 19:4).

However, John's baptism was preparatory and, as such, was not a full Christian baptism. In Ac 19:1-7, Paul required those in Ephesus who had received only John's baptism to be re-baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. What then is the purpose of this Christian baptism? At the very least it serves as a sort of "rite of initiation" (*New Testament Theology*, D. Guthrie, 738) into the fellowship of those who have believed in Jesus (*New Bible Dictionary*, J.D.G. Dunn, 122). However, beyond its function as a mere rite of entry, there are certain other implications. I use the word "implications" because as R. L. Dabney observed, there is "an absence of all set explanations of its meaning in the New Testament, and at the same time, of all appearance of surprise at its novelty" (*Lectures in Systematic Theology*, 759). This, Dabney believed, is because the meaning of baptism is rooted in Old Covenant ceremonial law and symbolizes purification from sins. The OT is replete with examples of ceremonial cleansings accomplished through the use of water (Nu 19:11-21; 31:21-24). Thus, the Jews were not surprised that John the Baptist used water graphically to portray repentance and forgiveness of sins (Mk 1:4). Further, water is nature's detergent, a cleansing agent well suited to the symbolism of purification. Notice how Ananias told Paul to "be baptized and wash your sins away" (Ac 22:16), and that Peter associated baptism with forgiveness in Ac 2:38.

Perhaps the most telling purpose of water baptism is found in such passages as Mt 3:11: "I baptize (*baptizo*) you with water for repentance. But after me will come one who is more powerful than I . . . He will baptize (*baptizo*) you with the Holy Spirit." Baptism into water also symbolizes our baptism into the Holy Spirit. In Ac 1:5 Jesus told his disciples, "John baptized (*baptizo*) with water, but in a few days you will be baptized (*baptizo*) with the Holy Spirit." This promised baptism into the Spirit began on the day of Pentecost. Peter quoted Joel's prediction that Yahweh would "pour out" (*ekcheo*) His Spirit on His people and declared it fulfilled (Ac 2:17; 33). A similar declaration was made by Peter in Ac 11:15-17 when the Holy Spirit "came on" the Gentiles and he remembered what the Lord

had said in Ac 1:5. Peter then asked, "Can anyone keep those people from being baptized with water? They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have" (Ac 10:47).

Based on Romans 6, some groups have contended that baptism into water portrays our spiritual death, burial, and resurrection with Christ. Often repeated during baptism is the phrase, "buried with Him through baptism into death, we are raised to walk in newness of life." This, however, is not really an appropriate association with baptism into water. First, notice the complete absence of the word "water" in Ro 6; the baptism of Ro 6 is "into His death" and refers to our spiritual baptism (the regenerating work of the Spirit wherein we are placed into Christ), not water baptism. Second, burials in the Roman world were typically in tombs that could be repeatedly accessed, not six feet underground and covered with dirt. Water may portray a modern "liquid grave" but it is not like a first century tomb (hewn above ground out of rock and sealed with a boulder).

Thus, baptism is an act that serves as a rite of initiation (or entry) into the fellowship of believers, and it symbolizes repentance, purification from sins, and immersion into the Holy Spirit. Having observed what baptism is, it remains to examine what it is not, i.e., a means of salvation. Those who believe in baptismal regeneration teach that there is no forgiveness apart from baptism. Often quoted in support of this view are Mt 16:16; Ac 2:38; 22:16; Ro 5:1-7; Tit 3:5, and 1 Pe 3:18-21. The essential problem with this view is the failure to see that baptism (like any other act of obedience) is not a means to salvation, it is the result of salvation. It is symbolic, not saving. Admittedly one would wonder about the genuineness of someone claiming to believe in Christ yet refusing baptism. Still, the fact remains that baptism is a fruit, not the root. Interestingly, every group that believes in baptismal regeneration also holds to either a Pelagian or Armenian view of human nature and God's grace. As Dabney said, "These facts are too uniform for chance: they betray a causation" (*Lectures*, 742).

Those who teach baptismal regeneration believe that there is no forgiveness apart from water baptism. Faith in Jesus is important as well, they say, but mere faith is not enough to save; it must be accompanied by water baptism (either one without the other is useless).

The crushing bulk of scriptural evidence points to justification by faith alone as the only means of salvation. John wrote that eternal life belongs to "whoever believes" (Jn 3:16). When the Philippian jailer asked how to be saved, Luke recorded that he was told "Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved, you and your household" (Ac 16:31). The gospel is "the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes" (Ro 1:16). Paul wrote, "to the man who does not work but trusts God who justifies the wicked, his faith is credited as righteousness" (Ro 4:5-6). The letter to the Ephesian church reveals that "it is by grace you have been saved, through faith-and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God-not of works, so that no one can boast" (2:8-9).

So thoroughly is salvation from the Lord (and not as a result of anything we do) that the word "grace" is repeatedly used in Scripture to describe the means of forgiveness. From *charis*, "grace" means "undeserved kindness"; it is "the action of one who volunteers to do something to which he is not bound"; it is "favor" (BAGD, 877). Grace is the opposite of that which is deserved or earned. For instance, in Ro 4:4 Paul wrote that "when a man works, his wages are not credited to him as *charis*, but as an obligation." If we must "do" anything to qualify for God's grace, then grace is no longer grace (an undeserved favor precludes any prerequisites; cp. Ro 11:5-6). Not even faith is a prerequisite to receiving grace! Indeed, faith itself is the result of having first experienced grace. When Nicodemus asked Jesus how to be born again, Jesus said, "The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is

with everyone born of the Spirit" (Jn 3:8). In other words, we have as much control over being born of the Spirit as we do over the wind. Jesus told the Jews that "no one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him" (Jn 6:44, 65). Just prior to this Jesus had said, "all that the Father gives to me will come to me . . . and I shall lose none of all that he has given me" (vv 35-44). Concerning the unbelief of the Jewish leaders, Jesus stated, "you do not believe because you are not of my sheep" (Jn 10:26). It is not the case that they were not sheep because they did not believe; being one of the sheep was prerequisite to believing, something over which they had no control. When the apostles preached the gospel to the Gentiles at Pisidian Antioch, Luke commented that "all who were appointed to eternal life believed" (Ac 14:48). The Philippian Christians were told that it had been "granted" to them to believe (Php 1:29). As Eph 2:8 teaches, every ingredient in being saved is a gift from God, including the ingredients of grace and faith. Suffice it to echo Paul's words that "it does not, therefore, depend on man's desire or effort, but on God's mercy" (Ro 9:16).

But what of those verses that seem to teach faith plus baptism as a means of salvation? Mk 16:16 states, "whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned." The NT certainly assumes that every believer will be baptized, and this is reflected in the first half of 16:16. However, we should note that according to the second half of the verse, condemnation comes as a result of unbelief, not the lack of any ritual activity (e.g., baptism). Taken in isolation someone might possibly misunderstand 16:16 as teaching baptismal regeneration, but, when compared with the rest of Scripture, this misunderstanding evaporates. In any event, "whoever does not believe will be condemned" puts the emphasis on faith, not baptism. A train conductor might similarly state, "whoever boards this train and takes his seat will go to Chicago; whoever does not board this train will not go to Chicago." Would anyone misunderstand the conductor to be saying that if someone boarded the train but did not take his seat that somehow he would not get to Chicago? Clearly the conductor adds "take his seat" merely for the comfort of the passenger. The passenger could stand up the entire trip to Chicago if he so desired; he wouldn't be very comfortable, but he would still get to Chicago. Similarly, a Christian who never gets baptized will still reach his heavenly destination.

Some point to Jn 3:5 to justify baptismal regeneration ("I tell you the truth no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit"). The problem with this is that the word "baptism" is never mentioned in the conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus, nor is the term "water" used anywhere in Scripture as a synonym for baptism. Furthermore, the natural sense of the passage clearly parallels "water" with being born out of a mother's womb (3:4) and with "flesh" (3:6). Simply stated, Jesus told Nicodemus that in order to see the kingdom of God two births are necessary. The first is a physical, literal, "flesh" birth (which is, of course, accompanied by amniotic "water"); the second is a metaphorical, "Spirit" birth into God's family (cp. Jn 1:12-13).

Perhaps the most popular text of baptismal regenerationists is Ac 2:38, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins." The crux of Peter's intended meaning lies in the word "for." This one little preposition (*eis*) is translated forty-seven different ways in the NASB; it would be unwise to build a theology of baptismal regeneration on a single word with such a broad range of meanings! Even if one wants to maintain that *eis* here connotes a goal, it still does not follow that baptism is necessarily involved. This can be shown from a grammatical standpoint in the Greek text. The phrase "for the forgiveness of your sins" (lit., "the sins of all of you") agrees in person and number with the command to "repent" ("all of you repent"); both are second-person plural. The phrase "let each of you be baptized," on the other hand, stands alone grammatically since it is in the third person singular ("let each one"). The word order of the Greek makes little difference; it is the grammatical agreement that matters. Thus, the text should be

translated, "Repent, all of you, for the forgiveness of your sins; and let each one of you be baptized."

In Ac 22:16, Ananias told Saul, "Get up, be baptized and wash your sins away, calling on His name." Taken in isolation this too could be taken to teach baptismal regeneration. There are, however, better alternative explanations for this verse. It is fully conceivable that the text is to be translated, "be baptized, and wash away your sins by calling on his name," hence connecting "washing" with "calling" and not with "baptism" (which merely symbolizes the washing effected by calling on his name). Alternately, Ananias may simply be speaking metaphorically of that which baptism symbolizes—the washing away of sins.

Another exegetical blunder is to read water baptism into Ro 6:1-10. *Baptizo* simply means "immersion"; the element into which that occurs must be observed from context. There are several kinds of immersion in the NT, including immersion into the Holy Spirit (Jn 1:33), fire (Mt 3:11), Christ (Ga 3:27), Moses (1 Co 10:2), and, of course, water. Whereas in English the word "baptize" has exclusively religious connotations, it was not so with the Greek word *baptizo* (which evoked as much religious imagery as the words "dip" or "plunge under" would today). Thus, it is a mistake to read the word "baptize" in the Bible and always think of a religious ritual involving water. Ro 6 speaks of immersion into Christ Jesus and his death, which occurs by grace through faith (Ro 5:17). The word "water" is completely absent. The same is true of Ga 3:26-29, which refers to being "baptized into Christ" (not water). It is a spiritual baptism that places us into Christ, not a water baptism. Literally translated, Ga 3:26-27 states, "you are all sons of God through *faith* in Christ Jesus, all of you who were *immersed* into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ." Clearly, being immersed into Christ is paralleled with having faith in Christ.

Yet another example of a non-water immersion is 1 Co 12:13, "For we were all immersed by one Spirit into one body . . . and we were all given the one Spirit to drink." Here the baptizer is the Spirit and the element into which we are immersed is the body of Christ, not water. One should no more associate this baptism with water than one would associate the "drink" of 12:13 with water.

Tit 3:5b ("He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit") has been used to justify the necessity of water baptism in order to be saved. Does the word "water" appear anywhere in the chapter? Indeed, where is the word "baptism"? "Rebirth" actually does have a "washing" effect (it washes away our sins), but to read water baptism into this passage is truly to force into it something that is not there. In fact, 3:5a states, "he saved us, not because of righteous things we have done." What is water baptism but one of the "righteous things" which we might do? Verse 7 goes on to reveal clearly that we have been "justified by his grace" (not by water baptism).

But what of the seemingly irrefutable verse, "baptism now saves you" (1 Pe 3:21)? Having just written of Noah and the flood (3:20), Peter was reminded of the water of baptism and stated that it constitutes a "figure" or a "likeness." The Greek for "figure" is *antitupos* (from which we derive our word "antitype") and means "copy" or "representation" (the counterpart of reality). Originally *antitupos* connoted the exactness of correspondence between the stamp and the die (Rienecker, *Linguistic Key*, 760). Thus the baptism that Peter mentioned is purely symbolic; it is the counterpart of reality and not the reality itself (Henderson, *First Peter*, 68). As has been pointed out in this chapter, water baptism is indeed symbolic of being saved. Peter goes on to explain that what actually saves us is not "the removal of dirt from the body" (i.e., "water baptism"), but rather the answer of a good conscience toward God through the resurrection of Jesus. As a counterpart to actual salvation, water baptism "saves" the believer only in type (Wuest, *Word Studies*, Vol. 2, 108).

If water baptism really were a necessary condition to being forgiven, then baptism would have to be included as a part of the gospel message. However, regarding baptism Paul wrote, "for Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel" (1 Co 1:17). Prior to this he had written, "I am thankful that I did not baptize any of you except Crispus and Gaius" (v 14). Do these sound like statements from a man who believed in baptismal regeneration? Clearly baptism is not a part of the gospel, nor required in order to be saved.

God's people have always and only been saved by grace through faith. Abraham was justified by believing God (Ge 15:6), and this is the pattern for NT believers as well (Ro 4:9-12, see also Heb 10:4; Heb 11; Lk 7:36-50; Lk 18:13-14; Lk 23:39-43). By way of balance, it should be pointed out that any person who has experienced God's grace will respond with both faith and a desire to obey his commands. Thus, every true believer will naturally want to be baptized. One of the reformers correctly said, "we are saved by faith alone, but a faith that saves is never alone" (it is always accompanied by good works). Therefore, while baptism is unnecessary for forgiveness, a person claiming to believe, but refusing baptism, is of questionable genuineness.

The error of baptismal regeneration is that it requires man to do something (in this case, be baptized) in order to be saved. Water baptism is certainly an important result of salvation, but not a means to salvation. The theology of baptismal regeneration is the result of not truly understanding the gospel of grace. The perverted "gospel" condemned in Galatia was that of faith in Christ plus circumcision. The lesson derived from this is that a "gospel" of faith in Christ plus *anything* is really "no gospel at all" (Ga 1:7).

- S.A.

This document contains the following shortcuts:

Shortcut text	Internet address
---------------	------------------