



STATEMENT DB040

## Bringing Baptism Into Biblical Balance

Charles Haddon Spurgeon, often referred to as the Prince of Preachers, said that up until the time he was baptized, he was afraid to confess Christ. Thereafter, he lost all fear of man and never again hesitated to boldly profess his faith. He likened his baptism to “crossing the Rubicon or burning the boats. No retreat was possible after that, nor have I ever wanted to go back to the world from which I then came out.”<sup>1</sup>

Spurgeon’s words underscore the critical importance of baptism. Christians may forever debate whether one should be *dunked*, *dipped*, or *drycleaned*. However, one thing is indisputable: baptism symbolizes our entrance into a community of believers who are one in Christ. It is a sign and seal that our old Life has been buried and we have been raised to newness of life through His resurrection power.

While the mode of baptism is not essential to *salvation*, the mandate of baptism is essential to *obedience*. Because it is extremely important, every Christian should understand and know what the Bible says about baptism. I have developed the acronym *B-A-P-T-I-S-M* to help you remember and relate to key issues surrounding this significant sacrament or ordinance.

### B – BACKGROUND

The background of baptism can be traced to Old Testament times. As far back as the first book of the Bible eight people were saved from the great flood of God’s judgment. Peter pointed out that the water of the flood “symbolizes baptism that now saves you” (1 Pet. 3:21).<sup>2</sup> Old Testament prophets such as Isaiah, Ezekiel, and David likewise used water as an external symbol for internal cleansing (Isa. 1:16; Ezek. 36:25ff; Ps. 51:2).

John the Baptist was the final prophet of the Old Covenant. As John baptized Jesus in the Jordan, he was ushering in the messianic fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy. Behind the *symbol* of baptism is the *substance* of baptism, which is the blood of Jesus Christ removing our sinfulness. As water cleanses the outer man from soil and sweat, so the blood of Jesus Christ cleanses the inner man from the stain of sin.

### A – ACTS 2:38

The most critical mistake one can make with regard to baptism is to believe that it is necessary for salvation. Several aberrant or cultic movements, such as the International Churches of Christ (Boston movement), teach that belief is not sufficient for salvation – baptism is also required. In concert with other cultic groups, they distort passages such as Acts 2:38 to defend this deadly doctrine.

Acts 2:38 climaxes Peter’s powerful proclamation of the gospel on the day of Pentecost. Those impacted by his message cried out, “What shall we do?” Peter replied, “*Repent and be baptized*, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.”

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Groups that believe baptism is necessary for salvation mistakenly regard Peter's words, "*Repent and be baptized*" as evidence that belief plus baptism results in salvation. Scripture, however, does not support this view.

First, the Book of Acts itself demonstrates that baptism is the *sign* of conversion, not the *means* of conversion. Acts 10:47, for example, describes believers who were indwelt by the Holy Spirit (and therefore saved — see Rom. 8:9) prior to being baptized.

Furthermore, the Bible as a whole clearly *communicates* that we are saved by faith and not by works (Eph. 2:8-9). As Paul pointed out in Romans, our righteous standing before God is "by faith from first to last" (Rom. 1:17). When the jailer asked the apostle Paul, "What must I do to be saved?" Paul responded, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved" (Acts 16:30-31).

Although baptism is not the means by which we are saved, it is the means by which we are set apart. By baptism, we testify that we are no longer our own — we have been bought by Christ's blood and have been brought into the community of faith. This is the significance of Peter's command in Acts 2:38. He was not telling them that they could not be saved *without* baptism. He was telling them that their genuine repentance, which by the grace of God accompanies salvation, would be evidenced by their baptism.

## **P — PRESCRIPTION**

Not only do groups like the Boston Church of Christ movement mistakenly make baptism a necessary means of salvation, but they also prescribe a particular pattern for the baptism rite itself. In their case one must be baptized as a disciple (fully conscious of what that means) by the "true church" in order to be saved. (Even those who were previously elders in other Churches of Christ are told they must be rebaptized in the Boston movement in order to be saved.)

The United Pentecostal movement is another group that teaches that unless you are baptized using the correct formula, which they prescribe, you are not truly saved. In their case the magic formula is "in the name of Jesus." In their theology, those who are baptized in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are not truly born again.<sup>3</sup>

In sharp distinction Scripture does not point people to a prescription or to a magic mantra, but rather to the very person of Jesus Christ. To baptize converts "in the name" of Christ or "in the name" of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is to baptize them into the authority of God. When Peter urged those who believed the gospel to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ (Acts 2:38), he was not prescribing faith in a formula, but rather faith in the authority vested in the name of Jesus Christ.

Similarly, when a police officer commands someone to "stop in the name of the law," the power is not in the phrase, but in the authority it signifies. An Old Testament example is when David's servants gave Nabal a message "in David's name" (1 Sam. 25:9). They were not trusting in this phrase for protection, but rather in the power of the person it represented.

When a physician provides someone who is sick with a prescription, their trust is not in the paper on which it is penned, but rather in the person who issued it. So it is with baptism. The power is not in a prescribed formula, but in the heavenly physician.

## **T — THIEF**

The thief on the cross provides perhaps the most potent proof that we are saved by faith or belief and not by baptism (or any other work). When this thief placed his faith in Christ on the cross, Jesus said to him, "*today you will be with me*

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*in paradise*" (Luke 23:43). In his case there was neither the necessity nor the opportunity for baptism.<sup>4</sup> Baptism would have symbolized his entrance into a community of believers on earth. The cleansing power of Christ's blood to which baptism points, however, was sufficient to assure him of his entrance into a community of believers in eternity.

The Book of Titus provides additional compelling evidence against baptism being a condition for salvation. Paul made it clear that "rebirth and renewal" are not the result of "righteous things we had done," but rather "because of his mercy" (Titus 3:5). The "washing of rebirth" is *not* literal water baptism, but the cleansing of the Holy Spirit that "washes" away our sins by the blood of Jesus Christ (1 Pet. 1:18-19; 1 John 1:7; Rev. 1:5).

Christ's words in Mark 16:16 clearly indicate that belief, not baptism, is the condition for salvation.<sup>5</sup> Here Christ said, "Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned." It is clear from the first part of His statement that baptism should follow belief. It is equally clear from the second part, however, that belief alone, not baptism, is required for salvation. Christ did not say, "Whoever believes *and is not baptized will be condemned.*" Rather Christ makes nonbelief (with or without baptism) the only condition for condemnation.

## I – INFANT BAPTISM

As we have seen, those who teach that baptism is necessary for salvation undermine an essential doctrine of the historic Christian faith. The same cannot be said regarding those who baptize babies as well as adult-convert believers. Here we would do well to remember the maxim: "In essentials unity, in nonessentials liberty, and in all things charity." While we may debate this issue vigorously, we must never divide over it. Many, including the Roman Catholics, members of many Reformed churches, Lutherans, Anglicans, Episcopalians, and Eastern Orthodox believers, baptize infants as well as adult converts.

My father, who is a pastor in the Christian Reformed Church, baptizes babies. I, on the other hand, believe baptism should be reserved for those who are old enough to have a biblical understanding of salvation, a conscious commitment to Christ, and a knowledge of the significance of baptism. Neither one of us, however, doubts the other's salvation. As Bruce Milne puts it, "God has signally blessed and honored the ministry of his servants on both sides of this divide, whether paedobaptists [those who believe in infant baptism] like Luther and Wesley, or Baptists like Spurgeon and Billy Graham. One need but recall the mutual esteem between the Anglican John Newton and the Baptist William Carey to recognize the needlessness of bitter division over this issue."<sup>6</sup>

Having said this, I would be remiss if I did not point out how deeply divided biblical scholars are on this issue of baptism. Spurgeon said, "As long as you give baptism to an unregenerated child, people will imagine that it must do the child good. They will ask, 'If it does not do the child any good, why is it baptized?' The statement that it puts children into the covenant, or renders them members of the visible church, is only a veiled form of the fundamental error of Baptismal Regeneration."<sup>7</sup>

Reformed theologian R. C. Sproul, on the other hand, argues that those who dispute the validity of infant baptism make [the new covenant less inclusive than the old covenant] with respect to children, despite the absence of any biblical prohibition against infant baptism.<sup>8</sup> Sproul is correct in contending that there is no biblical prohibition against infant baptism. He and others equate the New Covenant's baptism with the Old Covenant's circumcision. However, there is no clear and compelling teaching or example supporting infant baptism either. On the contrary, where the Bible does speak clearly concerning baptism it emphasizes the faith of those who are baptized.<sup>9</sup>

## S – SIGNIFICANCE

Not only are the subjects of baptism (babies or believers) debated, but the significance of baptism is debated as well. Doctrinal divergence runs the gamut from Quakers, who do not believe in physically baptizing followers, to Catholics, who believe in baptismal regeneration.

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Among those who hold to baptismal regeneration, there is a variety of opinion. The Church of Christ holds that believers must be baptized to be saved; the Roman Catholic Church holds that baptism confers the grace of justification,<sup>10</sup> thus dealing with the problem of original sin; and Lutherans hold that the sacrament of baptism involves a nonverbal communication of the gospel, which newborn babies can choose to accept or reject.

Reformed churches (Presbyterian Church in America and the Christian Reformed Church) hold to baptism as a sign of God's election and calling. As Israel was separated unto God through circumcision, so children of the covenant are separated unto God through baptism. Those who mature to an age of reason ratify their baptism through a public profession of faith.

Many contemporary evangelical churches, including Baptists, Pentecostals, and Calvary Chapels, opt for a symbolic rather than sacramental<sup>11</sup> view of baptism. In their view being submerged in baptism is symbolic of dying to our old lives and being buried. Emerging up out of the waters of baptism is symbolic of being raised with Christ to newness of life (Rom. 6:4-6).

While evangelicals debate secondary concepts surrounding baptism, there are essential teachings regarding baptism that must never be compromised. First, baptism is not necessary for salvation, but it is necessary to obey the command of Christ (Matt. 28:19-20). Furthermore, while baptism does not save us, it does publicly set us apart as those who are part of the community of faith (Rom. 6:5). Finally, a key passage concerning the significance of baptism is found in Romans 6:4-6. Here Paul pointed out that we are buried with Christ "through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life." Thus baptism represents our saving union with Christ in His death, burial, and resurrection.

## **M – MODES OF BAPTISM**

The mode of baptism is often as hotly contested as the meaning of baptism. In the early Christian church submersion or immersion was the primary mode. If water was scarce, pouring or splashing was permitted. In the early Middle Ages, however, sprinkling became the prevalent mode for baptism.<sup>12</sup>

Those who believe that we should be baptized by sprinkling rather than submersion maintain that baptism in Scripture is often portrayed as a cleansing or washing, and therefore does not require submersion. They point to passages such as Ezekiel 36:25<sup>13</sup> in the Old Testament and Hebrews 10:22<sup>14</sup> in the New Testament.

Those who believe we must be submerged rather than sprinkled or splashed point to the fact that the Greek word for "to baptize" (*baptizein*) in classical usage means "to immerse."<sup>15</sup> They also appeal to passages such as Romans 6:4-6 and Colossians 2:12 "to express the symbolism of the Sacrament."<sup>16</sup> Being submerged represents being buried with Christ and coming up out of the water indicates being resurrected as a new creation in Christ.

## **A FINAL WORD**

As believers we must never take baptism for granted. It is not only a responsibility, but also an incredible privilege. As Jesus' public ministry did not begin until after His baptism, so baptism is a necessary threshold that each of us must cross into a life of fruitful service unto God.

— *Hank Hanegraaff*

<sup>1</sup>Charles H. Spurgeon, *Spurgeon at His Best*, comp. Tom Carter (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1988), 20.

<sup>2</sup>In verse 21 Peter makes it clear that the water used in baptism does not provide the means of our salvation. Rather, God's grace through faith in Jesus Christ alone saves us. Thus it is important to emphasize that "saved through" does

not mean “saved by means of,” just as Noah and his household were not saved *by* the water of the flood but were preserved *in the midst of* that water.<sup>3</sup> It is instructive to note that the doctrine of baptism in the name of Jesus only was the principle factor that led to the heresy that Jesus is not only the Son but the Father and the Holy Spirit as well. For them, “Jesus Only” is God.

<sup>4</sup>Those who believe in baptismal regeneration frequently argue that the thief on the cross was still under the Old Covenant and therefore did not need to be baptized. If this were the case, Christ’s words in John 5:24. “Whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me *has* eternal life” would have been irrelevant prior to his death and resurrection as well. The promise that God will save those who place their trust in Christ is a universal principle. Thus if a believer shares the gospel with an unbeliever while both of them are dying in the desert, the unbeliever will be born again despite the absence of water.

<sup>5</sup>While two of the oldest and most reliable manuscripts (Codex Vaticanus and Codex Sinaiticus) do not contain Mark 16:16, the substance of this passage is sustained throughout Scripture (Acts 16:31, John 3:16, John 5:24, etc.).

<sup>6</sup>Bruce Milne, *Know the Truth* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1982), 235.

<sup>7</sup>*Spurgeon at His Best*, 21.

<sup>8</sup>R. C. Sproul, *Essential Truths of the Christian Faith* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale, 1992), 228.

<sup>9</sup>The account in Acts 16 of Lydia’s household (v. 15) and the household of the Philippian jailer (v. 31) being baptized does not necessarily imply that they had infants who were baptized.

<sup>10</sup>Ludwig Ott, *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma* (Rockford, IL: TAN Books and Publishers, 1974), 354.

<sup>11</sup>Sacrament is the English equivalent of the Latin, which was taken from the Greek word for “mystery.” As defined by Augustine, a sacrament is a visible and outward act in which God works invisibly and supernaturally.

<sup>12</sup>See Carl F. H. Henry, ed., *Basic Christian Doctrines* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1962), 257. The *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, edited by Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1984), says. “It is conceded that immersion was the primary mode in the early church, but it is pointed out that other modes were permitted” (118).

<sup>13</sup>“I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols” (Ezek. 36:25).

<sup>14</sup>“Let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance or faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water” (Heb, 10:22).

<sup>15</sup>Elwell, 118.

<sup>16</sup>*Ibid.*