



STATEMENT DB055-1

## Baptism for the Forgiveness of Sins (Part 1)

by H. Wayne House

The subject of baptism is one of the most debated and divisive issues within Christendom.<sup>1</sup> Though other theological doctrines may receive more attention than baptism, there is no Christian ceremony that is more widely practiced. Almost every Christian group practices baptism,<sup>2</sup> although the reason, manner, and baptismal formula differ widely among Christian and professing Christian churches.<sup>3</sup>

B. F. Smith ably describes the tension within the church over the purpose and mode of baptism:

*No doctrine of the faith has been more often or more sorely wounded in the house of its friends, more universally observed and more widely misunderstood, discussed with more heat and less light, written about with more fervor and less fairness, or had the truth about it more closely sought after or more cleverly side-stepped. This warrants an earnest and sympathetic study of all the factors involved. We Christians, with all our vaunted scholarship and exegetical skill, seem unable to agree on whether this simple act is symbol or sacrament, uniform or blanket, whether it is the main gate to the church temporal or the sole entrance to life eternal.*<sup>4</sup>

Even though the matter of baptism of infants and the modes of baptism are important, the major question is the necessity of baptism. This, then, shall be the focus of this two-part article.

### Varieties of Baptismal Theology

The Christian church today is divided between Christians who believe that baptism is necessary for salvation and those who view it only as an ordinance symbolizing the inward work of salvation. To put it another way, the theological camps differ on whether God performs a divine work in baptism or whether baptism is a human response to a divine work.<sup>5</sup>

Views of Christian baptism are too diversified to set forth all of the variations. I will, therefore, depict baptism in broader strokes, examining many of the major divisions and groups within the Christian religion as well as two groups that fall short of orthodoxy.

Roman Catholicism. Baptism is a sacrament in the Roman Catholic Church (RCC).<sup>6</sup> Though others use the word *sacrament*, the RCC and Eastern Orthodox (EO) perspective is different in that they believe the sacraments are effective simply by the completion of the sacrament (known as *ex opere operato*).<sup>7</sup> Ludwig Ott explains the meaning of this view of grace: "The formula 'ex opere operato' asserts, negatively, that the sacramental grace is not conferred by reason of the subjective activity of the recipient, and positively, that the sacramental grace is caused by the validly operated sacramental sign."<sup>8</sup> One should not understand from this RCC teaching that the faith of the adult person is

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excluded in the act of baptism, only that it is not “an efficient cause of grace.”<sup>9</sup> Thus, the sacrament of baptism can save a person (as in the case of an infant) apart from faith.<sup>10</sup>

Against the teachings of the Reformation, the Council of Trent declared that “there could be no justification without Baptism or the desire for the same....”<sup>11</sup> This alternative to water baptism includes baptism by blood or of desire. The former relates to martyrdom on the part of an unbaptized person by reason of his or her confession of Christian faith or that person’s practice of Christian virtue.<sup>12</sup> The latter relates to the desire of a person to be baptized who is somehow hindered in being baptized.<sup>13</sup> RCC dogma has extended this baptism of desire since Vatican II to allow even those outside the pale of Christianity to be saved if they would have been baptized if they had known the truth.<sup>14</sup>

In RCC theology, baptism takes away all sins, original sin and all personal sins, as well as punishment for sin. Baptism also restores sanctifying grace to the soul. It does not, however, take away all the consequences of original sin such as death, suffering, ignorance, and the inclination to sin.<sup>15</sup>

Eastern Orthodox. Similar to the RCC, the Eastern Orthodox churches (EO)<sup>16</sup> (e.g., Greek Orthodox, Russian Orthodox, Rumanian, and Serbian) believe baptism causes forgiveness of sins: “Through Baptism we receive a full forgiveness of all sin, whether original or actual; we ‘put on Christ,’ becoming members of His Body the Church.”<sup>17</sup> The EO affirm that through baptism sins are washed away and the baptized share in the death and resurrection of Christ and also in His nature.<sup>18</sup> For adults, however, there must be awareness and repentance of sins.<sup>19</sup>

When one is immersed<sup>20</sup> into water, the believer “communes with God in a mystical way; thus the Church uses the word ‘Mysteries’ to designate the sacraments by which the grace humans need in life to commune with God, is given to them. The sacraments are the means by which man experiences salvation in this world as a taste of the eternal life and kingdom which is to come.”<sup>21</sup>

Anglican/Episcopalian. The Church of England (CE) and the Episcopal Church (EC) consider baptism as the time when one renounces the sources of sin (devil, world, and flesh), confesses faith, and receives forgiveness of sins, according to The Book of Common Prayer.<sup>22</sup> The Anglican 39 Articles indicates that baptism is not only a sign of profession but is also a sign of regeneration or the new birth. Baptism serves as an instrument that grafts the baptized into the church and is the means by which the promises of forgiveness of sin and adoption as sons of God by the Holy Spirit are visibly signed and sealed.<sup>23</sup>

Lutheran. For Lutherans, baptism is a sacrament that conveys forgiveness of sins and gives eternal salvation to those who believe.<sup>24</sup> The reasoning, however, differs from that of the RCC and the EO. Each certainly believes the Holy Spirit works through the act of baptism (not the water in itself) to effect salvation, but Lutherans stress the importance of the combination of the Word with the sacrament to cause this spiritual work to occur.<sup>25</sup> Lutherans, therefore, do not consider the act of baptism to be a human work of merit bringing forgiveness but a work of God, through human hands, whereby He conveys grace to the believing and repentant soul: “To be baptized in God’s name is to be baptized not by men but by God himself. Although it is performed by men’s hands, it is nevertheless truly God’s own act. From this fact everyone can easily conclude that it is of much greater value than the work of any man or saint. For what work can man do that is greater than God’s work?”<sup>26</sup>

Consequently, even though the Spirit uses baptism to convey forgiveness, the water apart from the Word is no different than bath water.<sup>27</sup> It is required that the work be God’s work, but faith is necessary to receive God’s work, which is necessary for salvation.<sup>28</sup> C. F. W. Walther clarifies this doctrine: “It is of paramount importance that I believe, that I regard, not the water in Baptism, but the promise which Christ has attached to the water. It is this promise that requires the water; for only to it has the promise been attached.”<sup>29</sup>

When one thinks of Lutheranism, one turns to the great doctrine of justification by faith alone (*sola fide*) as advocated by Martin Luther and the Lutheran church. Lutherans do not believe, then, that baptism saves in addition to faith. In

the words of Walther in his comment on Mark 16:16: "He does not say: 'He that is baptized and believeth,' but the reverse. Faith is the primary necessity; Baptism is something to which faith holds. Moreover, the Lord continues: '*But he that believeth not shall be damned.*' This shows that even if a person could not have Baptism administered to himself, he would be saved, as long as he believed."<sup>30</sup> The person's response to the act of baptism, then, is the same as the person's response to the spoken gospel. The Word of God enters the ears and baptism enters the eyes. It is, as Augustine said, "a visible word." Neither the Word nor the sacrament is a work in addition to faith but the means by which faith is created and in which the unredeemed believes unto salvation.<sup>31</sup>

Reformed Churches. The sixteenth-century Reformers who did not follow the Lutherans on the sacraments are generally the originators of Reformed Theology. Though these men used the term "sacrament" for baptism, they nonetheless perceived the meaning of baptism differently from both the RCC and the Lutheran Church. While Luther, Calvin, and Zwingli agreed on much regarding baptism while in opposition to the RCC, they also differed on important points. For example, they agreed that the forgiving grace of God imparted in the sacraments related to the guilt of sin due to Adam's fall and not the inherited sin nature. Moreover, they agreed that the sacraments are signs and seals attached to the Word, having no virtue apart from the Word. Lastly, they concurred that the sacrament did not have any fruit apart from faith in the recipient (in contrast to *ex opere operato*).<sup>32</sup>

The difference pertained to Luther's struggles with the Anabaptists, which led him to put greater emphasis on the nature of the divine institution of the sacrament than on the subjective state of the recipient. Moreover, Calvin and Zwingli both agreed that baptism was a sign and proof of faith, but they differed in emphasis. The former saw the benefit of baptism as an instrument of God to provide nourishment to the believer. The latter saw the sacrament as a memorial of profession, in which a person could look to baptism for a reminder of God's saving work apart from human effort.<sup>33</sup>

The Reformed thinkers also saw baptism as an initiation into the community of the faithful, similar to the function of circumcision in the Old Testament. James Bordwine succinctly states the Reformed view found in the *Westminster Confession of Faith*:

*Baptism is a sacrament of the New Testament, ordained by Jesus Christ, not only for the solemn admission of the party baptized into the visible Church; but also to be unto him a sign and seal of the covenant of grace, of his ingrafting into Christ, of regeneration, of remission of sins, and of his giving up unto God, through Jesus Christ, to walk in the newness of life....Although it is a great sin to contemn [sic] or neglect this ordinance, yet grace and salvation are not so inseparably annexed unto it, as that no person can be regenerated, or saved, without it: or, that all that are baptized are undoubtedly regenerated.*<sup>34</sup>

Anabaptists. The Anabaptists were a threat to Roman Catholics, Lutherans, and the Reformed alike in post-Reformation Europe. Among other doctrinal matters, they challenged infant baptism and the sacramental nature of baptism, even in the mild form found in Reformed theology. They viewed baptism as important in that it publicly identifies a new believer's spiritual transformation and publicly affirms that the believer has placed himself or herself under Jesus Christ. The baptism of Jesus is viewed as a model: "Following the Lord in baptism."<sup>35</sup>

Anabaptists favored the term *ordinance* over sacrament. They believed *sacrament* carries some kind of magical understanding, while *ordinance* (from *ordain*) suggests the rite is ordained by Jesus and therefore participation expresses obedience to the Lord.<sup>36</sup>

Churches of Christ/Christian Church. The Churches of Christ (COC) and the Christian Church (CC) have been among the most adamant in holding that baptism is necessary for the forgiveness of sins.<sup>37</sup> These two groups are composed of individual congregations that may vary on a number of issues but have historically tended to join on the importance of baptism in salvation. Unlike others discussed earlier, who view baptism as a divine work wrought through human hands, the COC and the CC have viewed baptism as a human act of obedience embracing the meaning of faith. Jack Cottrell says, "It is so important to note the close conjunction of faith and baptism....It should

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cause us to re-examine our preconceptions about baptism and to realize that it is not so different from faith after all.”<sup>38</sup> Speaking of the focus of saving faith on Christ’s death and resurrection, he adds, “Faith has a natural affinity with baptism, viz., because baptism in its very action symbolizes the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ...God’s word of promise, which we believe, is visualized in Christian baptism, so that baptism itself becomes a kind of visualization of faith.”<sup>39</sup>

The perspective of the Churches of Christ and the Christian Church has been evolving through the years with more latitude often being expressed toward the possibility of a person being saved without baptism. (This was true when I attended Abilene Christian University for a graduate degree in Greek: even though I disagreed with their position, I was accepted as a believer by the professors.) For example, Cottrell comments regarding a possible interpretation of Mark 16:16:

*A second possible explanation has been suggested, however, distinguishing between what is absolutely necessary for salvation as compared with what is only relatively necessary. The idea is that even if baptism has been appointed by God as a necessary part of the salvation process in the New Testament age, it still has only a relative necessity and can be dispensed with in extraordinary circumstances. The only absolutely and inherently necessary condition for salvation is faith; thus it alone is mentioned in the second clause. It is conceivable that one could be saved without baptism, but not without faith.*<sup>40</sup>

International Churches of Christ. The International Churches of Christ (ICC), also known as the “Boston movement” because of the central role of the Boston Church of Christ, is different from the COC and the CC, even though it originated out of the COC. Along with the United Pentecostal Church, to be discussed below, it holds to a very rigid view of the necessity of baptism for the forgiveness of sin — even more than that found in the RCC and EO. The writings of the ICC are relatively sparse. It is, therefore, difficult to present a comprehensive statement of their beliefs. Jerry Jones emphasizes this point in his study of the movement: “Throughout the Churches of Christ, there is a reluctance to commit anything doctrinal to writing. The rationale is that ‘we follow the Scripture, not the doctrine of men.’”<sup>41</sup> He recounts the story of Eugene Borland, a pastor who has had many confrontations with ICC: “As I have met with leaders in the group oftentimes they would say, ‘Well, we don’t put anything into writing because once you put it into writing then it is man’s works. Anything that has to do with man’s works, whether it’s his work or denominationalism, is false and it quickly degenerates into heresy.’”<sup>42</sup>

Nonetheless, their views on baptism may be found in their personal discipleship booklets *Making Disciples* and the *Boston Church of Christ Acts Study Series*. The comments reveal unambiguous statements affirming baptismal regeneration. Note a few of those comments by editor Randy McKean on the subject of baptism:

*Jesus shed this blood when he died. In Baptism we share by faith in the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus. Thus we contact the blood in baptism and are forgiven of our sins and SAVED. (emphasis in original)*<sup>43</sup>

*Acts 2:38 teaches that sin is forgiven at baptism — one is saved at the point sin is forgiven.*<sup>44</sup>

*Romans 6:2-4 states that baptism is an actual participation in the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ. It is not merely a sign, seal, or symbol.*<sup>45</sup>

*1 Peter 3:21 says that baptism DOES save you through the resurrection of Jesus Christ. (emphasis in original)*<sup>46</sup>

*Refuting false doctrines...“the thief on the cross was not baptized.”...Jesus had not even died yet, and baptism is participating in his death (Romans 6:2-4); also on earth, he had the power to forgive sins (Matthew 9:2-6).*<sup>47</sup>

In their guide to the Book of Acts, regarding baptism, we find the following statements:

*The blood of Jesus saves us....When we share His death by faith in baptism it is at that point in time we contact His blood and thus our sins are forgiven. (emphasis added)*<sup>48</sup>

*Colossians 2:12 teaches we are saved by FAITH in the working of God at baptism. (emphasis in original)*<sup>49</sup>

There is little question, therefore, that the ICC adheres to the view that baptism is a necessary component of salvation.

United Pentecostal Church/Oneness Churches. Similar to the baptismal regeneration emphasis of the International Churches of Christ is the United Pentecostal Church. In reality, there are several "Oneness-type" Pentecostal groups, but the UPC is by far the largest and most significant. David Bernard, possibly the best-known theologian in the UPC, speaking of the purpose of water baptism, says, "We should remember that water baptism is administered because of our past life of sin; it is for the 'remission of sins' (Acts 2:38)."<sup>50</sup> He identifies the nature of the repentant person's baptism with that of Christ's: "First, we must ask what was the purpose of Jesus' baptism. Certainly He was not baptized for remission of sin as we are, because He was sinless (I Peter 2:22). Instead, the Bible says He was baptized to fulfill all righteousness (Matthew 3:15). He is our example and He was baptized to leave us an example to follow (I Peter 2:21)."<sup>51</sup> Unlike the Lord, however, the sinner must repent, but it is insufficient apart from baptism: "Scripture portrays repentance and baptism as being inextricably bound together in the process of remitting sins (Mk 16:16; Lk 24:47; Acts 2:38)."<sup>52</sup>

### **Critiques of Baptismal Regeneration**

A. Serious Deviation from Doctrine of Grace. Often in the discussion of how baptism relates to forgiveness of sins, Christians are like ships passing in the night. We use different words but mean the same things. This is sometimes the case when discussing *sola fide* (faith alone) with those believers in a more confessional or ritual-oriented community; these people usually do not hold to the absolute necessity of baptism in affirming faith in Christ, and even when they emphasize baptism, they are speaking of it as a work of God in which a person believes.

On the other hand, there are those who hold a more rigid requirement of water baptism, such as the UPC and the ICC. As evidenced by the absolute statements given above, they hold to baptism as a work that repentant sinners must do before they will be forgiven of their sins by God. They may do this honestly through their misinterpretation of the biblical texts. Nonetheless, they reject the biblical and Reformation doctrine that a person is saved by grace through faith alone apart from any works that we may perform, and so they pervert the gospel.

B. Inconsistency Regarding the Doctrine of Grace. The Lutheran theology of baptism could cause some within that tradition to become guilty of placing undue confidence in the sacramental act to the detriment of a genuine faith in Jesus Christ unto salvation. This is not to say, however, that a person holding to the efficacy of baptism for the forgiveness of sins cannot believe in faith alone. Certainly Martin Luther, the father of the Reformation doctrine, should not be maligned in this regard. As indicated earlier, if we view baptism as the work of God, and not man's, and if a person places his or her faith in the work of God, not the water itself, for the forgiveness of sins, surely one should not declare this an addition of human merit to faith. There also must be the recognition, however, that baptism is not necessary to salvation; for God works in various ways to save people by the gospel apart from baptism.

Anabaptists are open to criticism for sometimes viewing baptism as merely a symbol of the inner work of God that can be observed or not dependent on the individual conscience of the believer. This is a gross distortion of the New Testament teaching that joins baptism with repentance and faith; they should never be separated as an expression of the reception of the grace of God. The New Testament does not speak in terms of an unbaptized Christian. To deny the outward manifestation of the inner work of the Spirit is a serious contradiction of the biblical teaching and should cause reflection on the genuineness of the faith claimed by the person who rejects or neglects water baptism.

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Reformed theology does not equate baptism with actual forgiveness, but only as a sign of the inner work of grace and an outward initiation into the community of Christ. Yet they practice infant baptism. If baptism is connected to repentance in the New Testament, then it should not be used as a public statement for children who have not repented.

In Part Two we shall seek a biblical understanding of the relationship between baptism and salvation. We shall also examine the proof texts commonly used in support of baptismal regeneration.

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1 For example, note the title of the book by Donald Bridge and David Phipers, *The Water That Divides: The Baptism Debate* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1977).

2 An exception is the Quakers. See J. Gordon Melton, ed., *The Encyclopedia of American Religions: Religious Creeds*, 1st ed. (Detroit: Gale Publishing, 1988), 476.

3 I say professing Christian because even cults such as the United Pentecostal Church practice immersion similar to many orthodox or evangelical Christian churches but believe in baptismal regeneration and deny Trinitarian baptism.

4 B. F. Smith, *Christian Baptism* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1970), ix.

5 Daniel G. Reid, et al, eds., *Dictionary of Christianity in America* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1990), 106.

6 From Latin *sacramentum*, meaning sacred or holy thing. Ludwig Ott, *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma*, ed. in English by James Canon Bastible and trans. from German by Patrick Lynch (Rockford, IL: Tan Books, 1955). The Latin is *res sacras* or *res sacra*.

7 Ott., 329: "*Sacramenta operantur ex opere operato*, that is, the Sacraments operate by the power of the completed sacramental rite." See for a comparison of religious traditions on the matter of reception of grace in salvation, H. Wayne House, *Charts of Christian Theology and Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992).

8 Ott., 330.

9 *Ibid.*, 329.

10 *Ibid.*

11 *Ibid.* "The Sacraments are the means appointed by God for the attainment of eternal salvation. Three of them...are in the ordinary way of salvation so necessary, that without their use salvation cannot be attained." (340–41.) O'Brien says, "Baptism is necessary for the salvation of all men because Christ has said, 'Unless a man be born again of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God.'" John A. O'Brien, *Understanding the Catholic Faith*, an Official Edition of the Revised Baltimore Catechism, no. 3 (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 1955), 197; Ott, 356.

12 Ott, 357.

13 *Ibid.*

14 *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (New York: Doubleday, 1995), 321, §1260.

15 O'Brien, 195.

16 The reader should distinguish between the capitalized "Orthodoxy" referring to a branch of Christendom and the lower-cased "orthodoxy," which speaks of faithfulness to the truth of Scripture.

17 Timothy Ware, *The Orthodox Church* (London: Penguin Books, 1964), 284.

18 For an understanding on the Orthodox view of confirmation in relation to baptism, see Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1976), 170.

19 Bishop Dmitri, *Orthodox Christian Teaching* (Syosset, N.Y.: Department of Religious Education, Orthodox Church in America, 1980), 28.

- 20 Ware writes, "Orthodox are greatly distressed by the fact that western Christendom, abandoning the primitive practice of Baptism by immersion, is now content merely to pour a little water over the candidate's forehead. Orthodoxy regards immersion as essential (except in emergencies), for if there is no immersion the correspondence between outward sign and inward meaning is lost, and the symbolism of the sacrament is overthrown" (284).
- 21 Dmitri, 26.
- 22 F. L. Cross and E. A. Livingston, ed., *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 2d ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974), 128. Also see *The Book of Common Prayer*, according to the use of The Episcopal Church (New York: The Church Hymnal Corporation and The Seabury Press, 1979), 302-5, 308.
- 23 Philip Schaff, ed., *The Creeds of Christendom with a History and Critical Notes*, vol. 3: *The Evangelical Protestant Creeds*, rev. David S. Schaff (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1931, reprint, 1985), 504-5.
- 24 C. F. W. Walther, *The Proper Distinction between Law and Gospel*, trans. from 1897 German ed. (St. Louis: Concordia, 1980), 354.
- 25 Bjarne W. Teigen, *I Believe, A Study of the Augsburg Confession and the Apology of the Augsburg Confession* (Mankato, MN: Bethany Lutheran College, 1980), 43.
- 26 *The Book of Concord*, trans. Theodore G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), 437.
- 27 *Ibid.*, 439.
- 28 *Ibid.*, 441.
- 29 Walther, 346.
- 30 *Ibid.*, 352.
- 31 *Ibid.*, 357. In understanding the Lutheran perspective on baptism, it is important to emphasize that Lutheran theology provides for the reception of the Holy Spirit and forgiveness from sins with or without baptism.
- 32 Louis Berkhof, *The History of Christian Doctrines* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1937), 245-46.
- 33 *Ibid.*, 246-47.
- 34 James E. Bordwine, *A Guide to the Westminster Confession of Faith and Larger Catechism* (Jefferson, MD: The Trinity Foundation, 1991), 170, 173.
- 35 Reid, 106. For a presentation of believers' baptism, see the entry, "Baptism, Believers'," by G. W. Bromiley in the *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, Walter A. Elwell, ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991), 114-16.
- 36 Reid, 106.
- 37 See the Fact Sheet on the COC, the CC, and the Disciples of Christ (DC 600) produced by the Christian Research Institute International.
- 38 Jack Cottrell, *Baptism: A Biblical Study* (Joplin, MO: College Press, 1989), 24.
- 39 *Ibid.*, 25.
- 40 *Ibid.*, 27.
- 41 Jerry Jones, *What Does the Boston Movement Teach?* vol. 1 (privately published, n.d.), 6.
- 42 *Ibid.*
- 43 Randy McKean, ed., *Making Disciples* (privately published, n.d.), 22.
- 44 *Ibid.*, 26.
- 45 *Ibid.*, 24.
- 46 *Ibid.*
- 47 *Ibid.*, 25.
- 48 *Boston Church of Christ Acts Study Series* (privately published, n.d.), 7.
- 49 *Ibid.*, 8.
- 50 David K. Bernard, *The Oneness of God, Pentecostal Theology*, vol. 1 (Hazlewood, MO: Word Aflame Press, 1983, 1997), 139.
- 51 *Ibid.*, 173.
- 52 *The P.A.S.T.O.R.S. Course: Soteriology Book, Four of Five*, 61.