



STATEMENT DB055-2

Baptism for the Forgiveness of Sins (Part 2): Sign, Seal, or Means of Grace?

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ANSWERING BAPTISMAL REGENERATION PROOF TEXTS

Those who believe water baptism is necessary for salvation use several New Testament passages to support that view. In this second article, I will interact with some of those biblical texts and seek to demonstrate that the texts do not support baptismal regeneration. There are many other passages besides these that could be discussed,¹ but within the constraints of a magazine article I have chosen to analyze what I consider to be the most important.

Mark 16:16

He who has believed and has been baptized shall be saved; but he who has disbelieved shall be condemned.²

The first obvious problem with using this passage is that 16:9-20 is not found in the most reliable Greek manuscript tradition.³ Consequently, it is suspect to build a doctrine on the verse. A second reason for doubting that verse 16 teaches baptism for salvation is that the passage's teaching is in a conditional form: "The one who believes and is baptized shall be saved." In the Greek there are two expressed conditions, namely "belief" and "baptism" (known as a *protasis*). There is also one statement, which indicates the result from the fulfillment of the conditions, namely, "shall be saved" (known as an *apodosis*). The two conditions do not need to bear identical relationship to the apodosis, however. One may be a cause and the other may be the evidence.⁴ This would explain the subsequent statement, "He who does not believe will be condemned."

This analysis also conforms to logical construction, as elucidated by Millard Erickson: "It is simply absence of belief, not of baptism, which is correlated with condemnation. According to the canons of inductive logic, if a phenomenon (e.g., salvation) occurs on one occasion but not on another, the one circumstance in which they differ is the cause of the phenomenon."⁵

John 3:3-5

Jesus answered and said to him, "Truly, truly, I say unto you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God" Nicodemus said to Him, "How can a man be born when he is old? He cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born, can he? Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God."

Interpretations of the phrase "born of the water and of the Spirit" abound in Christian circles, focusing primarily on what is meant by "born of the water." Following are some of the ways in which this phrase has been interpreted:

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1. Christian water baptism.
2. Synonym for the Holy Spirit (born of water, even the Spirit).
3. The Word of God.
4. Physical birth.
5. John's baptism.
6. A symbol, along with "wind," for the work of God from above.

Those who advocate baptismal regeneration favor view 1, but the passage is open to several other legitimate understandings. Views 1, 2, and 3 depend on later New Testament teaching being read back into the passage, lessening the likelihood of their correctness. Some might believe interpretation 4 is the proper one, since Nicodemus brought up the issue of physical birth (3:4), and because of Jesus' retort (3:6), but this view is not likely since this would fail to advance the argument of the passage and render Jesus' subsequent words as trivial.⁶ Position 5 has merit since it is found within the historical context of familiarity with the baptism of John and previous references to the coming spiritual baptism by the Messiah (e.g., John 1:33). In this case, Jesus would be saying the Pharisees should accept John's message of repentance and baptism to prepare for the Messiah, who would then give the Holy Spirit.

Position 6, however, may be the best choice in view of the context.⁷ Jesus tells Nicodemus that he, being a teacher of Israel, should be able to recognize the fulfillment of biblical truth (3:10). Nicodemus acknowledges Jesus as a teacher sent from God (3:2), but Jesus wanted Nicodemus to recognize Him as the Son of God (3:15-16). He adds that Nicodemus must be born from above.⁸ Nicodemus ponders an earthly birth while Christ leads him to a heavenly understanding. Jesus then contrasts the birth to which the teacher of Israel speaks to a birth that comes from God.

In order to teach this teacher, Jesus moves to imagery with which Nicodemus should have been familiar, that of water and wind (not the Spirit), elements of this earth. Though Christians have become accustomed to pairing "water and Spirit," as Zane Hodges says, "it is hardly the most natural semantic association for these two words. Rather, the association of 'water and wind' as elements in the physical world is one that is both readily and frequently made."⁹

These figures were used in the Old Testament to speak of spiritual renewal and should have been familiar to Nicodemus. The Jews were quite familiar with, and desirous for, the refreshment of the waters *from heaven* and the winds that blow *in heaven*, necessary for human life.¹⁰ The Old Testament prophets used such physical elements to speak of spiritual nourishment from above. Jesus then chides Nicodemus for his failure to comprehend His words and leads him to understand that he should embrace the Son of God as the One who came down from heaven.

In His teaching to Nicodemus, Christ picks up two renewal themes in the Old Testament: the "water" of Isaiah 44:3 and the "wind" of Ezekiel 37:9-10. Moreover, Nicodemus should have compared this imagery with the riddle given in Proverbs 30:4: "Who has ascended into heaven, or descended? Who has gathered the wind in His fists? Who has bound the waters in a garment? Who has established all the ends of the earth? What is His name, and what is His Son's name, If you know?" (NKJV). Nicodemus, being a teacher of Israel, should have known that God gives spiritual renewal (from above) and that God's Son, who was standing before him, brought this spiritual birth. For this reason Christ continued in His discourse with Nicodemus to interpret the riddle of Proverbs 30:4: "No one has ascended to heaven but He who came down from heaven, that is, the Son of Man who is in heaven. And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man [a title understood for deity in Judaism, cf. Dan. 7:13, 14; Mark 14:61-64] be lifted up, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life."

Acts 2:38-39

And Peter said to them, "Repent, and let each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you and your children, and for all who are far off, as many as the Lord our God shall call to Himself."

Acts 2:38 appears to indicate that baptism has as its purpose the forgiveness of sins. Note the various translations:

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- “so that your sins will be forgiven” (TEV).
- “so that your sins may be forgiven” (NRSV).
- “for the remission of sins” (KJV, NKJV).
- “for the forgiveness of your sins” (NAB, NASB, NJB, RSV, NIV).

These translations would seem to teach that baptism brings about forgiveness of sins.

In reality, there are several alternatives available to the translations offered above. The issue is one of Greek grammar and word meaning; namely, how the Greek words for *repentance* and *baptism* relate to the phrase “for the forgiveness of sins” and what the meaning of the preposition “for” (*eis*) is within the verse.

A view offered by several New Testament Greek grammarians is that Acts 2:38 does not teach that baptism brings forgiveness because the Greek word *eis* should be translated “because of” rather than “for the purpose of.” J. R. Mantey argued that *eis* could be used to express cause in various passages in the New Testament, among them Matthew 3:11 and Acts 2:38. Mantey believed, as do many others, that salvation by grace would be violated if a causal *eis* was not true in Acts 2:38.¹¹

Premier Greek grammarian A. T. Robertson also argued that *eis* in 2:38 should be understood as “because of,” similar to its reasonable usage in Matthew 12:41: “They repented because of [*eis*] the preaching of Jonah.”¹² Kenneth Wuest contended the same, but mentioned a comment by Josephus that “John baptized people only after they had repented (*Antiquities of the Jews*, book 18, chapter 5, section 2).¹³ Interestingly, Robertson concluded his analysis by saying that one “will decide the use here according as he believes that baptism is essential to the remission of sins or not.”¹⁴

Yet, this suggestion for *eis* to be understood as “because of” brings more problems than it solves for nonsacramentarians, since repentance then would also be “because of the forgiveness of sins,” and not only baptism. Such a measure to correct the interpretation of baptismal regeneration is unacceptable because it flies in the face of Lucan theology where repentance, rather than baptism, brings forgiveness of sins (Luke 13:3; 24:47; Acts 3:19ff; 5:28-32; 11:18; 17:30; 20:21; 26:20).¹⁵

One alternative is to repunctuate the passage to read “Repent, and let each one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ, for the remission of sins,” or “Repent for the remission of sins, and let each one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ.” If this were the correct understanding, the *eis* is subordinate to “repent” alone and not to “be baptized.”¹⁶ What favors this interpretation is that “repent” here is a second person plural verb, which would be in proper accord with “remission of your sins,” while “let each...be baptized” is a third person singular verb.¹⁷ The text would read literally, “*You* [command] repent...for the remission of *your* sins.”

A second alternative is that baptism incorporates both a spiritual reality and a physical symbol. Daniel Wallace has suggested that this may be seen in the account of the conversion of Cornelius and his family in Acts 10-11. They were not refused baptism because they had received the Spirit. In other words, since they had the internal testimony through spiritual baptism, they also should have the public testimony through water baptism.¹⁸

Repentance and faith are opposite sides of the “coin” of conversion and are the internal workings of the Holy Spirit in the heart of the person who comes to God. In this writer’s opinion, Acts 2:38 teaches that one should believe in Jesus Christ unto forgiveness of sins and seal that confession of the heart with the outward confession of baptism.

The incident at Cornelius’s house poses serious problems for baptismal regeneration. Acts 10:44 reveals that on hearing the gospel preached by Peter, the house of Cornelius received the Holy Spirit (cf. Matt. 3:11; Acts 2:39). Reception of the Spirit showed Peter that God had already worked inwardly in the house of Cornelius, demonstrating the legitimacy of baptism for these newly regenerated believers. Interestingly, the issue is *faith* and *not*

baptism when Peter recounted the event to the apostles and elders at Jerusalem; he did not even mention water baptism (Acts 11:15-18).¹⁹ This passage is in agreement with another text in Acts (16:30-31), where a Philippian jailer asks what he must do to be saved. Paul told him to believe in Christ and he would be saved. Only later (after the jailer washed Paul's and Silas's wounds) did Paul baptize him.

Acts 22:16

And now why do you delay? Arise, and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on His name.

Some have read Acts 22:16 as though it said, "Arise, and wash away your sins by being baptized and call on the name of the Lord." This English rendering of the text would lead one to think that the verse has two conjunctions (*kai* in Greek) rather than one. This is, however, quite different from the actual Greek syntax. In reality, there are two distinct ideas being stated in the verse, the text having two separate clauses, each with an imperatival verb and its modifying participle. A more literal translation is, "After you arise be baptized²⁰ and wash away your sins, calling on the name of the Lord." The calling on the name of the Lord would be a confession of Christ similar to those found in Joel 2:32, Acts 2:21, and Romans 10:13. The baptismal act would be a visual statement that one is "calling on the name of the Lord" and becoming a Christian, similar to how "altar calls" function today (see below).

Romans 6:3-4; Galatians 3:26-27; 1 Corinthians 12:13; Colossians 2:11-12

These biblical texts speak of baptism into Christ or into His body. They are often taken as teaching that baptism is a necessary component to being in Christ. They do not teach that salvation comes through baptism, but they convey an important symbolism of what happens in baptism. It is the public statement that the individual makes of identification with Jesus Christ, an outward expression of what has occurred inwardly through the operation of the Holy Spirit. For example, the reference in 1 Corinthians 12:13 speaks not only of being baptized in the Spirit but also of drinking into the Spirit. Both of these symbolically refer to the individual's participation in the life of God. When a person is baptized, he or she comes into unity with all other believers in Jesus Christ. This unity transcends social distinctions.

Titus 3:5

He saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit.

In the context of Titus 3, the "washing of regeneration" does not need to be viewed as speaking of baptism. Instead, it uses a common word for the cleansing process to express a spiritual reality. This is similar to how water is used in Ezekiel 3 6:25-27. The joining of water and the work of the Spirit found in the Ezekiel passage leads to another possibility on the construction of the phrase, "washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit." It may be understood in an appositional way with the conjunction "and" (*kai*) being translated as "even." This verse would then be translated, "washing of regeneration, even the renewing of the Holy Spirit."

1 Peter 3:19-21

...He went and made proclamation to the spirits now in prison, who once were disobedient, when the patience of God kept waiting in the days of Noah, during the construction of the ark, in which a few, that is eight persons, were brought safely through the water. And corresponding to that, baptism now saves you — not the removal of dirt from the flesh, but an appeal to God for a good conscience — through the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Some have viewed 1 Peter as a baptismal tract, lending support to a high view of baptism in the salvation event. David Hill, however, countered this perspective by simply observing that "baptism" occurs only once in the letter and virtually in a parenthetical way (3:21).²¹ In reality, Peter's letter addressed the suffering of believers (1 Pet. 1:6-7; 3:13-18; 5:10). A Christian's suffering and his or her baptism were linked because in accepting baptism, he or she

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affirmed willingness to share in the known experience of baptized persons, who were commonly treated with suspicion and hostility.²²

The wording of 3:21 may seem to support baptismal regeneration, but a careful look at the parallels by Peter, and the Greek syntax, reveals that his typological comparison points in another direction. The Greek language, unlike English, has what is known as concord, in which a modifying word will agree in gender and number with its antecedent. The first word in this verse is the neuter pronoun translated “which,” referring back to “water,” a neuter noun, not to “ark,” which is a feminine noun. Wuest translates it, “which (water) as a counterpart now saves you, (namely) baptism.”²³ Thus, the water of Noah’s day is a type of the water of baptism. Note the New Jerusalem Bible: “It is the baptism corresponding to this water which saves you now — not the washing off of physical dirt but the pledge of a good conscience given to God through the resurrection of Jesus Christ.” The ark would more accurately refer to salvation, since the ark delivered Noah and his family as it was lifted by the flood waters, but “[Peter] was centering upon the issue of water in order to use baptism as an analogy to Noah’s deliverance through the suffering and judgment of his day.”²⁴

The apostle Peter continued in this vein by stressing that baptism saves not through the removal of dirt but rather as an appeal to a good conscience before God, or, as Bo Reicke translates, “a pledge of good will to God.”²⁵ David Hill expresses the sense of the Greek word *eperoteime* as meaning “a response or assent to a covenant obligation, an agreement to maintain righteousness, through obedience, in the future. . .The characterization of baptism in 3:21 would then be as follows: not so much the abandonment of the moral failures of the pre-Christian life as a firm response to God, a commitment to maintain before the world an upright life of which one need not be ashamed.”²⁶ In other words, Peter is not teaching that baptism confers forgiveness of sins (“removal of dirt”) but rather it is the initiation of a life of obedience that demonstrates true conversion and salvation.

BIBLICAL TEACHING ON BAPTISM AND SALVATION

We have seen that the prooftexts used for baptismal regeneration do not require that interpretation. Let us now examine the meaning and importance of baptism in the New Testament, first by looking at the historical background to baptism, next by comparing the baptism of John and Jesus, and last by setting forth the meaning of baptism in the primitive church of the first century.

Background of New Testament Baptism

Scholars are unsure of the exact origin of baptism. Undeniably some form of immersion was required of proselytes to Judaism.²⁷ Moreover, some have viewed Qumran as a possible site for John the Baptist to have acquired his baptismal practice. His call to baptism included a call for religious purity and repentance as well as a concern with the eschaton (last days), not to mention his geographical proximity to Qumran. Despite the similarities, there are important differences.

In Jewish proselyte baptism the candidate dipped himself into the water, whereas in the examples of John’s baptism (and subsequently, Christian) the verb is almost invariably passive, indicating an act performed on the candidate. This may be the reason why John received the name “the baptizer.”²⁸ Moreover, baptism in Judaism was of secondary importance, while in John’s baptism the emphasis is on the redemptive work of the Messiah and how the convert relates to Him.²⁹ A second distinction is that at Qumran the washings were regularly repeated, making them unlike John’s and Christian baptism, which was received but once, though the first ceremony of purification at Qumran did admit one into the community.³⁰

There is no certainty, then, that baptism, as seen in the New Testament, came from Qumran or larger Judaism since the earliest references to proselyte baptism within Judaism belong to the latter half of the first century³¹ and are not

well-defined. It might be safer to say that Judaism and Christianity borrowed from the same source, the Levitical cleansings of the Old Testament.³²

Comparison of John's and Christian Baptism

John's baptism and Christian baptism have much in common. In fact, Jesus' baptism may be viewed as a complement and fulfillment of John the Baptist's work. John declared to the crowds that he baptized in water, but the Messiah to come would baptize the people in the Holy Spirit and in fire (Matt. 3:11), which was fulfilled in Acts 2:1-4 and Acts 10:44-48 (cf. Acts 1:5 and 11:16).

Second, John's baptism and Christian baptism are similar because they are both baptisms of repentance. John demanded that baptism be accompanied by sincere repentance, which it represented (Matt. 3:7-9). The people *were confessing* their sins *as* they were being baptized (Matt 3:6).

Last, John's baptism and Christian baptism both focus on the Messiah. John's pointed to the Messiah, who was to come, whereas Christian baptism points back to the Messiah, who did come.

The Meaning of Christian Baptism in the Primitive Church

Baptism was an integral part of the overall experience of becoming a Christian in the earliest periods of the church. It was associated with being united with Christ (Rom. 6:4-5) and putting on Christ (Gal. 3:27). Even the forgiveness of sins is connected to baptism because it serves as the external statement of that internal event. It is even likely that baptism served analogously in becoming a member of the New Covenant community as a counterpart to the Old Testament practice of circumcision (Col. 2:11-12). The term "baptism" seemed to be used as a short form for the gospel, in which faith and repentance were expected (Matt. 28:19). At the least, it was not ancillary to the gospel, but a very real part of it. There is little question that baptism was *not optional* for one who named the name of Jesus Christ, and it was virtually the first thing a Christian did after responding in faith to the gospel (Acts 2:38; 8:34-38; 10:45-48; 16:31-34).

With all its importance, however, baptism was never absolutely necessary for a person to become justified before God. The New Testament insists only on the internal work of repentance/faith (e.g. John 3:15, 36; 5:24; Acts 2:21; 10:43; 15:9), this requisite given in the New Testament at least 60 times with no mention of baptism.³³

Let us now put baptism into perspective for today's church. Baptism is a necessary initiation rite for Christians today as much as it was in the first century; the biblical text never says it will lose its importance over time. Baptism is much like circumcision, which never saved anyone in the Old Testament times; nonetheless, it was not optional for one who wanted to be a part of the covenant with Abraham and a part of the Israelite community.

Baptism is not a requirement for salvation. Rather, it is to faith what words are to ideas. One may have an idea without putting it into words, but it conveys no external reality for anyone else. One may also have faith without baptism, but this has no significance outside oneself. Sometimes an evangelical preacher may give an "altar call" for people to come to the front of the church or pulpit if they truly repent in their hearts and believe in the gospel.³⁴ This is seen as a public statement of that internal belief. This is unfortunate because in the early church the person was called to be baptized as a public statement of that faith. We have substituted the altar call (of recent origin) for Christian baptism. It was in baptism that repentance and faith in Christ were proclaimed, without which there was no divinely recognized *first Christian act*. To the early Christian there simply was no alternative to baptism and there was no such thing as an unbaptized Christian. To reject baptism was to reject Christ and initiation into His church.

NOTES

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- 1 For example, Matthew 28:19; Luke 7:30; John 19:34; Acts 8:35-38; Ephesians 4:5; Hebrews 10:22.
- 2 Bible quotations are from the New American Standard Bible except where otherwise indicated.
- 3 See the textual apparatus of *The Greek New Testament*, 2d ed., Kurt Aland, et al. (New York: United Bible Societies, 1966, 1968), 196-98.
- 4 Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 688.
- 5 Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985), 1998.
- 6 Zane Hodges rightly comments that the expression would have been comprehensible but not much to the point, and even vapid. It would be like saying that a person must be born once before he or she can be born twice. Advocates of the view fail to explain why such a trivial idea would be included. This interpretation can be described as purely verbalistic and accounts only for the occurrence of the words, not for the choice of the words nor why they are used in the setting of John 3. (Zane C. Hodges, "Problem Passages in the Gospel of John, Part 3: Water and Spirit — John 3:5," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 135 [July 1978] 212-13.)
- 7 See my discussions in Earl Radmacher, Ronald B. Allen, H. Wayne House, ed., *Nelson's New Illustrated Bible Commentary* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1999), 1319.
- 8 The Greek word *anōthen* has been translated as "again" (KJV, NKJV, NASB, NIV, TEV), "anew" (RSV Darby), and "above" (NJB, NRSV, Young's, NAB).
- 9 Hodges, 216. The Greek word *pneuma* maybe translated "wind" or "spirit."
- 10 Ibid.
- 11 Wallace, 369-70.
- 12 Archibald Thomas Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, vol. 3, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1930), 35-36.
- 13 Kenneth S. Wuest, "The Practical Use of the Greek New Testament: Prepositions and Synonyms in Greek Exposition, Part III," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 117 (July 1960): 236.
- 14 Robertson, 36.
- 15 Gregory A. Boyd observes that since the same phrase "for [eis] the forgiveness of sins" occurs in John the Baptist's and Jesus' baptism, if baptism literally forgave sins, why would John's disciples need to be rebaptized (Acts 19:4-6)? (*Oneness Pentecostals and the Trinity* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992], 137.)
- 16 Though this would be different from the word order in the Greek, the Greek language does not depend nearly so much on the order of words as does English in order to make sense.
- 17 Wallace acknowledges this option but continues that "its subtlety and awkwardness are against it." (Wallace, 370.) On the other hand, McIntyre, in his study of this construction of the New Testament believes it fits well syntactically. (Luther B. McIntyre, Jr., "Baptism and Forgiveness in Acts 2:38," *Bibliotheca Sacra* [January 1996]: 53-62.)
- 18 Wallace, 370-71.
- 19 B. J. Oropeza, "Baptism: Is It Necessary for Salvation?" (unpublished paper), 8.
- 20 The Greek is difficult to express in fluid English but could be rendered, "Rise, have yourself baptized and allow your sins to be washed away by calling on the name of the Lord." See Wallace (426) for a technical explanation.
- 21 David Hill, "On Suffering and Baptism in 1 Peter," *Novum Testamentum* 18 (1976): 181-89, quoted in Richard E. Averbeck, "The Focus of Baptism in the New Testament," *Grace Theological Journal* 2 (Fall 1981): 298.
- 22 Hill, 184-85, quoted in Averbeck, 299.
- 23 Kenneth S. Wuese, *First Peter* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1942), 108-9, quoted in Averbeck, 299.
- 24 Averbeck, 299.
- 25 Bo Reirke, *The Epistles of James, Peter, and John* (Garden City, NJ: Doubleday, 1964), 106, quoted from Averbeck, 300.
- 26 David Hill, 188-89, quoted in Averberk, 300.
- 27 Merrill C. Tenney, "Baptism and the Lord's Supper," *Basic Christian Doctrines*, ed. Carl F. H. Henry (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1962), 256.
- 28 Averbeck, 281.
- 29 G. R. Beasley-Murray, "Baptism, Wash," *New Testament Theology*, vol. I: A-F, Colin Brown, gen. ed., trans. from *Theologisches Begriffslexikon zum neuen Testament*, ed. Lothar Coenen, Erich Beyreuther, and Hans Bietenhard (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1971), 145.

30 Ibid., 144.

31 Ibid., 145.

32 See Averbeck, 275.

33 Boyd, 136.

34 B. J. Oropeza says, "Water baptism functioned much like modern evangelical Christianity's alter [sic] call. It was the visible public confession point where one proclaimed his or her faith in Jesus Christ. It identified him as a visible member of the body of Christ. This is not to say that such a person could *not* be saved prior to baptism, anymore than a person cannot come to faith prior to his alter [sic] call. It was the normative, but not absolutely necessary, outward expression of one's faith." (Oropeza, 8.)