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Baptism for the Forgiveness of Sins
Parts 1 and 2
By H. Wayne House

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Part One

Synopses Part One
Baptism has divided Christians since the Reformation. Probably the most important question regarding baptism is the reason for which one is baptized. Some churches believe baptism is necessary for salvation, while others believe it is only a sign of the inward work of grace that God does in the heart.

Moreover, even the groups who hold to baptism as a sacrament do not teach that baptism conveys grace in the same way. Whereas Roman Catholicism holds that baptism may operate apart from a baptized person’s faith, most other Christians who view it as a sacrament affirm the necessity of faith and believe God works in baptism to create faith, or at least in conjunction with faith, to bring forgiveness of sins.

Among those who consider it an outward sign of God’s inward work in the believer, the Reformed Churches believe God uses baptism to nourish the spiritual life of the baptized. Anabaptists, on the other hand, believe it is an ordinance form the Lord to be obeyed an act of discipleship.

The subject of baptism is one of the most debated and divisive issues within Christendom.1 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,2 although the reason, manner, and baptismal formula differ widely among Christian and professing Christian churches.3

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.4

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.⁵

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).⁶ 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). Ludwig Ott explains the meaning for 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.”⁸ One should not understand from this RCC teaching that the faith of the adult person is excluded in the act of baptism, only that it is not “an efficient cause of grace.”⁹ Thus, the sacrament of baptism can save a person (as in the case of an infant) apart from faith.¹⁰

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….“¹¹ 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.¹² The latter relates to the desire of a person to be baptized who is somehow hindered in being baptized.¹³ 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.¹⁴

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.¹⁵

Eastern Orthodox. Similar to the RCC, the Eastern Orthodox churches (EO)¹⁶ (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.”¹⁷ 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.¹⁸ For adults, however, there must be awareness and repentance of sins.¹⁹

When one is immersed²⁰ 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.”²¹

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.²² The Anglican 39 Articles indicates that baptism is not only assign 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.23

Lutheran. For Lutherans, baptism is a sacrament that conveys forgiveness of sins and gives eternal salvation to those who believe.24 The reasoning, however, differs from that of the RCC and EO. Each certainly believes the Holy Spirit works through the act of baptism (not the water 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.25

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?”26

Consequently, even though the Spirit uses baptism to convey forgiveness, the water apart from the Word is no different than bath water.27 It is required that the work be God’s work, but faith is necessary to receive God’s work, which is necessary for salvation.28 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.”29

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.”30 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.31

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).32

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.33

The Reformed thinkers also saw baptism as an initiation into the community of 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._34

**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 mode: “Following the Lord in baptism.”35

Anabaptists favored the term _ordination_ over sacrament. They believed _sacrament_ carries some kind of magical understanding, while _ordination_ (from _ordain_) suggests the rite is ordained by Jesus and therefore participation expresses obedience to the Lord.36

**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.37 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 cause us to re-examine our preconceptions about baptism and to realize that it is not so different from faith after all.”38 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.”39

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._40
**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.’”41 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.”42

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)43

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

* 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.45

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

* 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).47

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)48

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

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).”50 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
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).”

**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 many 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 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 expression of the reception of the grace of God. The New Testament does not speak in terms of 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.

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.
Part Two

Synopsis of Parts One & Two
In Part One we looked at the redemptive significance that baptism holds in different branches of Christianity. We discovered that a large percentage of Christian churches believe baptism brings remission of sins. They differ, however, on the importance of faith in the act of baptism. Roman Catholics allow for baptism to forgive apart from faith. Eastern Orthodoxy sees baptism as efficacious when the baptized sinner is repentant, as does the Anglican/Episcopal church. Likewise, Lutherans believe baptism brings forgiveness, but only in conjunction with the Word proclaimed and believed by the baptized, since baptism is God’s act through human instrumentality. The Reformed churches do not accept baptism as efficacious for salvation but do believe the ordinance is a sign of forgiveness and a participation in the covenant of grace. Anabaptists differ from most in that they view the act of baptism as being only an act of obedience and a requirement of discipleship. Two heterodox groups — the International Church of Christ and the United Pentecostal — consider baptism as a necessary act for one to receive forgiveness of sins.

Christians with a sacramental view of baptism need to be cautious lest they develop a doctrine that views baptism as a human work added to faith or in place of faith. On the other hand, some who see baptism as having no relationship to forgiveness may have become nonchalant regarding the New Testament’s important emphasis on baptism.

In Part Two we discover that since the early years of the church, many Christians have understood certain passages in the New Testament as teaching that baptism brings the forgiveness of sins. Our analysis of these texts, however, reveals something quite different from a purely sacramental perspective of this important Christian practice. The passages teach that baptism is an obligatory Christian rite that publicly professes the inward faith of the baptized. Through this ordinance, the believer associates with Christ and the Christian community, a necessary requirement for being a Christian. Alternative practices that some Christians have offered cannot replace baptism.

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. 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 “believe” 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. 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.”

**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:

2. Synonym for the Holy Spirit (born of water, even the Spirit).
3. The Word of God.
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. 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. 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. 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.”

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. 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:

- “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 \textit{eis} should be translated “because of” rather than “for the purpose of.” J. R. Mantey argued that \textit{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 \textit{eis} was not true in Acts 2:38.\textsuperscript{11}

Premier Greek grammarian A. T. Robertson also argued that \textit{eis} in 2:38 should be understood as “because of,” similar to its reasonable usage in Matthew 12:41: “They repented because of \textit{eis} the preaching of Jonah.”\textsuperscript{12} Kenneth Wuest contended the same, but mentioned a comment by Josephus that “John baptized people only after they had repented (\textit{Antiquities of the Jews}, book 18, chapter 5, section 2).”\textsuperscript{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.”\textsuperscript{14}

Yet, this suggestion for \textit{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).\textsuperscript{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 \textit{eis} is subordinate to “repent” alone and not to “be baptized.”\textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{17} The text would read literally, “\textit{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.\textsuperscript{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 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 \textit{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).\textsuperscript{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 imperative verb and its modifying participle. A more literal translation is, “After you arise be baptized 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.

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 36:25–27. 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 oppositional 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 flash, 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 even. 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). 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 affirmed willingness to share in the known experience of baptized persons, who were commonly treated with suspicion and hostility.

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.” 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.”

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.” David Hill expresses the sense of the Greek word ἐπιτρέπειν 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.” 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. 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.” Moreover, baptism in Judaism was of secondary importance, while in Christian baptism the emphasis is on the redemptive work of the Messiah and how the convert relates to Him. 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.

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 century 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.
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.

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. 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.

H. Wayne House is Distinguished Professor of Biblical Studies and Apologetics at Faith Seminary, Tacoma, Washington. He is also Professor of Theology and Culture (Trinity Graduate School) and Professor of
Notes (Part One)


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.


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 us 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.


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.


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
21 Dmitri, 26.
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.
33 Ibid., 246–47.
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.
39 Ibid., 25.
40 Ibid., 27.
42 Ibid.
44 Ibid., 26.
46 Ibid.
47 Ibid., 25.
49 Ibid., 8.
51 Ibid., 173.
Notes (Part Two)

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.
5  Millard Erickson, Christian Theology (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985), 1098.
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.)
8  The Greek word another 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 may be translated “wind” or “spirit.”
10  Ibid.
11  Wallace, 369 70.
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.
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.


Hill, 184 85, quoted in Averbeck, 299.

Kenneth S. Wuest, First Peter (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1942), 108 9, quoted in Averbeck, 299.

Averbeck, 299.

Bo Reicke, The Epistles of James, Peter, and John (Garden City, NJ: Doubleday, 1964), 106, quoted from Averbeck, 300.

David Hill, 188 89, quoted in Averbeck, 300.


Averbeck, 281.


Ibid., 144.

Ibid., 145.

See Averbeck, 275.

Boyd, 136.

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.)