

WHY BE baptized?

BY TIM KELLEY



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Preface

Every writer I know has someone in mind as he writes. Let me tell you who that someone is for me. I imagine a relatively young college student (I've known many) who deeply believes that Jesus is God's Son and that He came to save us. That is, she believes that our moral failures—our sins—have separated us from God and God acted to bring us back into relationship with Himself by sending His Son to be one of us and give Himself as a sacrifice in our place. That's what Christians call the Gospel or the Good News.

It's good news indeed, but not too good to be true. She is convinced it is good because it is true and wants to become a child of God. She's asking, "How do I become a Christian—a follower of Jesus?" She's asked that question to several Christians and Christian organizations and is now confused by the different answers she's getting. She's read enough of the Bible to come across baptism but isn't sure whether she needs to be baptized. Some of those she talked to tell her that baptism is the necessary and final step she must take to become a Christian while others are telling her that it is absolutely unnecessary.

Now, you don't have to be just like this young woman to read this. In fact, even if you're very different from her, I hope that you'll keep reading. Even if you're already a Christian but are not clear about the place of baptism or want to be able to share the Bible's message about baptism, I hope you keep reading. It's obvious that sincere Christians disagree with each other over baptism and I don't want to just add to the noise and the unfortunate rancor over baptism with my opinions or my church's position. What I do want to do is simply look at the Scriptures, for they are the only source that can answer this question.¹

¹ With but one exception, all citations of Scripture are from the New International Version. That one exception is taken from the Today's New International Version and is noted by the abbreviation "TNIV."

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SAVED BY GRACE

Let's start with the fundamental question: How are we saved? The answer to that question is very clear, for Paul tells us quite plainly in Ephesians 2:8-9. From first to last, salvation is a gift from God and it is accepted by faith and no good work on our part can add to the finished work of Jesus. That means that there is no act, no accomplishment, and no good deed that allows me to say, in any way, that I have earned salvation. On this point, all Christians should agree. The question that confronts us is not whether we are saved by our own good works. On that, the answer must be a resounding "no!" Rather, the question is, "How does faith accept the grace of God?"

For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast. Ephesians 2:8-9

Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. Romans 5:1-2

IS BAPTISM GRACE OR WORKS?

Many see baptism as the kind of good work I just described and because of that conclude that it can have nothing to do with receiving God's grace. These honest Christians certainly believe that good works are important and such good works are exactly what those who have already received the gift of salvation eagerly do. Since the New Testament often calls for baptism, they believe that Christians should be baptized in obedience to God's Word. Let me expand the meaning of that last sentence. It is argued that people become Christians quite apart from baptism. That is, only Christians, who are already saved, are then baptized in obedience to God's command. But this begs the question, "Why?" Two

answers are given. First, one is baptized just because God tells us to do so. The second is that baptism is an outward expression of what earlier happened when we accepted, by faith alone, the grace of salvation.

Yet, do these answers start with a view of baptism that is the view of the Bible? I don't think so, and because of that they distort the Biblical teaching about baptism. Very few say that we do nothing at all to be saved. If my imagined reader says that she believes that Jesus is God's Son and she wants Him to be her Savior, and then asks what she should do, few would say, "nothing at all." Instead, many would tell her that she needs to invite Jesus into her heart. How? She is usually told that she needs to confess her faith and pray. The "sinner's prayer" is typically given as the model.² At this point I must ask, "Why would you call baptism a human work but not call inviting Jesus into your heart a human work?" One person answers her question by telling her that she needs to be baptized into Christ and another person answers that she needs to pray a certain prayer. Why one is considered a work and the other is not is not at all clear. Praying and inviting Jesus into our lives are certainly good things to do and there are examples of seekers (such as Cornelius) praying and we have the beautiful words of Jesus in *Revelation 3:20*, "*Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me.*"³ Yet, when we look at passages that describe becoming a Christian, we find neither the words "invite Jesus into your heart" nor the "sinner's prayer." On the other hand, there are many New Testament references to being baptized and most of them are in connection with becoming a disciple of Jesus. As we look at some of those references, we will ask whether or not baptism is a work.

WHAT DOES BAPTISM MEAN?

Before we look at those texts, however, it will be helpful to say something about the word "baptism." The verb "baptize" and the noun "baptism" are really Greek words that were simply made English words rather than translated (we call that transliteration). The verb in Greek is *baptizō* and means to dip, immerse, submerge, overwhelm, or plunge. The noun is *baptismos* and means an immersion or submersion.⁴ The whole discussion of baptism would have been made much

² There are many versions of this prayer. Essentially, it is a prayer where the person confesses that she or he is a sinner and asks Jesus to enter the prayer's life as Savior and Lord.

³ We don't know the content of Cornelius' prayers and the words of Jesus in Revelation 3:20 were addressed specifically to a church, not seekers.

⁴ You can find more about the word "baptize" in a good concordance, such as *Strong's Concordance*, or better, although harder to read unless you know some Greek, a good lexicon such as *The Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* by Bauer, Arndt, Gingrich, and Danker. Although you can find "baptize" in an English dictionary, it will only tell you what the word means in its common usage today but not what it meant when the New Testament was being written, and that's what really matters.

easier had the translators of the earliest English Bibles just translated the words but by that time the church was “baptizing” by sprinkling water on people and so they just brought the Greek word over to English and, unfortunately, obscured its real meaning.

WHERE’S THIS GOING?

Well, the short answer is that it’s going to the Bible. Every church has its traditions about baptism but I hope you agree with me that traditions must be measured by something more than, “That’s how we’ve always done it!” I also hope that you agree with me that the New Testament of our Bible is not just “How the earliest Christians did it,” but more importantly “What God’s will is for us.” In the case of baptism, the New Testament not only tells us how it is to be done but why it is to be done.

Of course, none of us, including me, can be completely objective as we look at the Bible. We bring our own points of view and biases (we all have them) to the Bible and read it in light of those preconceptions. Admitting that up front is important but it shouldn’t be overstressed. Complete objectivity may not be possible but reasonable objectivity is. If we didn’t believe that we could never communicate at all. So I invite you to consider these important passages with me in the expectation we can see what they mean, not just what we would like them to mean. What we will see in the following paragraphs, as we look at these scriptures, is first what the Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John) say about Baptism. There we will see that Jesus commands His disciples to make disciples by baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Then we will turn to the Book of Acts, where baptisms are frequently recorded and we will see that people who became followers of Jesus were baptized. Luke (the author of Acts) couples baptism with repentance, the forgiveness of sins, and the gift of the Holy Spirit. Finally, we will look at the letters of Paul. These letters are particularly important because, more than any other inspired writer, it is Paul who affirms that our salvation is by grace and received by faith. He also says more about baptism than any other New Testament writer. We will see that Paul describes baptism as being joined to the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus. We will also see that baptism is never considered a human work but always a

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response of faith to God's gracious work. So please read on and let the Scriptures speak for themselves.

WHAT ABOUT JESUS' BAPTISM?

The first texts about baptism in the Gospels are not about our being baptized in the name of Jesus but about the work of John the Baptist. Certainly the Gospels all think it was important that Jesus was baptized by John but what does that mean for us? Jesus was and is utterly unique. John's baptism was for repentance and Jesus was the one person who didn't need to repent. When Jesus came to John, John recognized this and protested:

"I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" Jesus replied, "Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness." Then John consented.

Matthew 3:14-15

Two points that relate to our important question can be made. First, it is here that Jesus is anointed and His ministry begins. Jesus was determined to fulfill the will of God and His baptism by the prophet was fulfilling that "righteousness." So, whatever else this may say to us, it tells that Jesus was baptized in obedience to God's will. That is certainly a model for us! Second, and this is a very important grammatical point, the verb "baptize" is here and always (when it refers to the one being baptized) in the passive voice. That means that when Jesus was baptized it was something done to Him, not something He did. That means that being baptized is not a work done by the one baptized. Baptism is submitting to the will and work of God.

BORN AGAIN

The second text is Jesus' dialogue with Nicodemus in John 3. This is a hotly debated text and a thorough discussion here is impossible but we can say some things that directly address our question. Jesus tells Nicodemus:

"...No one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit."

John 3:5

Some of those who insist that this has nothing to do with baptism argue that "born of water" refers to natural birth (the water is the amniotic fluid) and

“born of the Spirit” refers to the new birth that comes when you invite Jesus into your heart. There are many problems with this interpretation of Jesus’ words but foremost is that it contrasts “born of water” with “born of the Spirit.” However, Jesus does not contrast them, He connects them. Jesus does not say “beyond being naturally born you must be spiritually born.” Instead, he tells Nicodemus (who has obviously already been naturally born!) that he needs a new birth and that new birth is a birth of water and the Spirit. Is that the water of baptism and the coming of the Holy Spirit? At least, for now, hold open that possibility as we see other passages that clearly, by name, speak of baptism. Before we leave this passage, it is important to notice that it is right after Jesus’ conversation with Nicodemus that we have, perhaps, the best loved verse in the New Testament:

“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.”

John 3:16

Being “born again” (John 3:3) cannot be separated from “believes in him” (John 3:16). Being “born of water and the Spirit” (John 3:5) is what happens when one “believes in” God’s one and only Son. If this “new birth” is, in fact, a reference to baptism, then baptism is not an addition to believing in God’s Son, but it is included in believing.⁵

BUT WHAT ABOUT THE THIEF ON THE CROSS?

The third text is not about baptism at all but always seems to come up in this discussion. It is the story of the penitent thief who was crucified with Jesus and pleads:

“Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.”

Luke 23:42

It is Jesus’ answer:

“I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise.”

Luke 23:43

that brings this into our discussion. “See,” it is argued, “This man was saved and was never baptized!” I don’t wish to be dismissive, but I must point out that no one today—no one—is in that position. Unlike anyone who came to faith *after*

⁵ For a further discussion of this text see the appendix.

the atoning death of Jesus, this man appeals to Jesus in the very moment of Jesus' sacrifice. That moment can never be repeated. Jesus uniquely had authority to forgive sins during His time on earth (Mark 2:10) and He exercises that authority here. The thief's experience is simply not relevant to anyone *today* asking if he or she needs to be baptized! If, by His grace, God saves those who have never been baptized into Christ, then God be praised. But our question is "What should *we* do?" The example of the thief on the cross simply can't answer that question.

BAPTISM AND "THE GREAT COMMISSION"

The fourth, and a really important text in the Gospels for baptism, is the great commission.⁶ This text is found at the climactic end of Matthew:

"All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."

Matthew 28:18-20

It is unmistakable here that "making disciples" is inseparable from "baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." Disciples are those who are baptized and then taught to obey the commands of Jesus. Notice that those who are making disciples baptize and that is something they do. But those who are made disciples are done so by being baptized and that is something done to them. How can we make something so central to Jesus' final command to His disciples, optional for us? We can't remove "baptism" from the words of Jesus without denying what Jesus commands His followers to do, "To the very end of the age."

⁶ Because *Mark 16:16* is not in many of the ancient manuscripts and included only as a footnote in many modern translations, I am not including it here. Even though it may be an insertion by a later scribe, the idea that "*He who believes and is baptized will be saved*" is certainly consistent with the rest of the New Testament.

Baptism in the Book of Acts

LOOKING AT THE PASSAGES

The texts in Acts that speak of baptism are so numerous that I can't discuss all of them without making this far too long. So to begin, I am just listing these passages and asking you to read them in their larger context. As you read these passages ask yourself what all of these people did as they became disciples of Jesus. Also, notice the connection between baptism and believing, baptism and repentance, baptism and the forgiveness of sins, and baptism and receiving the Holy Spirit. So please, close this book now and read these Scriptures and then come back to this book as we talk about three of these passages.

Acts 2:37-41 — The church begins with the baptism of 3,000 (see below)

Acts 8:12-13 — The conversion and baptism of Samaritans (For a further discussion, see the Appendix)

Acts 8:36-38 — The conversion and baptism of the Ethiopian eunuch-treasurer

Acts 9:17-19 — The conversion and baptism of Saul of Tarsus (Apostle Paul)

Acts 10:44-48 — The conversion and baptism of the household of Cornelius

Acts 16:14-15 — The conversion and baptism of Lydia in Philippi

Acts 16:29-34 — The conversion and baptism of the Philippian jailor

Acts 18:7-9 — The conversion and baptism of many in Corinth

Acts 19:1-7 — The baptism of the 12 disciples (For a further discussion, see the Appendix)

Acts 22:12-16 — Paul's retelling of the story of his conversion and baptism (see below)

Welcome back. Time after time, those who accepted the message of Jesus were baptized. If you, like those described in the passages you have read from the book of Acts, believe in Jesus, shouldn't you do what all of them did? Now, let's briefly consider three of these Scriptures.

WHAT SHALL WE DO?

The first is Peter's response to our very question of what we need to do to be saved. Acts 2 tells us about the first Christian sermon. The Apostle Peter confronts his listeners with the fact that Jesus, who was crucified with the approval of many who were there, was raised from the dead and was the Lord and their Messiah. They believed Peter and cried out, "*Brothers, what shall we do?*" (Acts 2:37). Now, obviously, the answer Peter gave is "spot on" our question. Here's his answer: "*Peter replied, 'Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.'*" (Acts 2:38). Here, baptism is not described as a mere outward expression of an already experienced salvation. Instead, baptism is for the very purpose of forgiveness of sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit comes to those who receive baptism.

I could say much more about this text because it is so important, but let me just make two more points. Peter tells them to repent and be baptized. Repentance and baptism are linked and so what is said of repentance needs to also be said of baptism. Few would ever say that repentance was disconnected from salvation. Why then would one say that about baptism? Few would say that repentance was a "good work" and so not part of salvation. Why, then, make that claim about being baptized? Again, "be baptized" is passive. It is something done "to you" not something done "by you." Our role is to submit to baptism. "Repent," on the other hand is active—it is something we must do. Yet, none who repent can ever say that they earned their salvation by repenting. Salvation is sheer grace. Neither does Peter imply that those baptized could claim they earned their salvation by being baptized. Both are necessary but neither is "works salvation."

The second point is to note how baptism is tied to the gift of the Holy Spirit. It is to those who are baptized in the name of Jesus that the gift of the Spirit comes. Just as in John 3, water and the Spirit are connected.

CAN ANYONE KEEP THESE PEOPLE FROM BEING BAPTIZED WITH WATER?

Another text that needs some comment tells us about the baptism of Cornelius and his household. Some say that because the Holy Spirit came on all who heard Peter's message *before* they were baptized, and only the saved have the Holy Spirit, baptism is not part of salvation. First, we need to see just how unique this family was. They were Gentiles, and while that means little today, it meant a great deal then. Their acceptance into the people of God was a big deal

and as Peter's own reluctance to even preach to them tells us, Jewish Christians needed dramatic proof that Gentiles were acceptable to God. They also needed proof that Jewish disciples of Jesus could even be with and especially eat with Gentiles. That proof came when the Holy Spirit came on the household of Cornelius in the very same way the Spirit fell on the apostles on the day of Pentecost (Acts 11:15). By any standard, this moment is exceptional and we should not turn exceptions into general principles. Second, it may not be safe to assume that the Spirit of God only comes on those who are already saved. Read the Old Testament story of King Saul in 1 Samuel 10-11 and 16. There you see the Spirit of God coming on Saul and empowering him to prophecy. But King Saul is hardly a model of faith. Ultimately, and sadly, the Spirit of God departed from this Israelite King. The important point here is that the Spirit comes for God's own purposes, and not to follow any pattern we have devised. In the case of the household of Cornelius, that purpose was to make it clear that God accepted this Gentile family. What follows is critical. Peter immediately said, "Can anyone keep these people from being baptized with water?" (Acts 10:47) If the point was that baptism wasn't necessary, Peter missed the point altogether! Instead, the Spirit's coming was God's way of telling Peter, Gentiles too can be saved. Peter got the message and had them receive baptism.

WASH YOUR SINS AWAY

The third text is Paul's description of his own conversion. The story in Acts 22 follows very closely the first telling of this story in Acts 9. What is important for us is what Ananias said to Saul (Saul was Paul's Jewish name): *"And now what are you waiting for? Get up, be baptized, and wash your sins away, calling on his name."* (Acts 22:16). Just as Peter did in Acts 2:38, Ananias connected baptism in the name of Jesus with forgiveness of sin. This is the plain and straightforward meaning of the text and I want to urge you to be skeptical of any explanations that deny the plain meaning of such texts.

Baptism in Paul's Letters

BAPTIZED INTO THE DEATH OF CHRIST

The first text we come to is Romans 6 and it may be the most important text in the New Testament that discusses baptism. I urge you to read the entire chapter but here are the first four verses:

What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? By no means! We died to sin; how can we live in it any longer? Or don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.

Romans 6:3–4

The first thing I need to say is that Paul's main subject here is not baptism. Instead Paul wants to correct a misunderstanding that people might have when they hear that salvation is by the free gift of God's grace. Paul had just said, "*But where sin increased, grace increased all the more...*" (*Romans 5:20*) Now he needed to answer a terribly false conclusion that said, "Well, if the more we sin the more grace there will be, then we can just keep on sinning and God will just keep on forgiving." Paul's answer is "Absolutely No!"

It is in the discussion of the Christian's freedom from the power of sin that Paul speaks of what happened when his readers were baptized. First, he assumes that they were all baptized. He does not say, "Some of you were and some of you weren't baptized." It is rather, "All of us who have been baptized." That this includes all Christians is made clear by how Paul describes baptism. He does not say "baptized into the church" or "baptized as a witness to our salvation." Instead he says, "Baptized into Christ Jesus..." That's really important! For Paul, Christians are those who are "in Christ." How did that happen? They were baptized into Christ.

Baptism, though, is never thought of as some magical initiation. There's no power in the water! It's not the water—it's the cross that saves. Baptism joins us

to the death of Christ Jesus. There's the power! We are saved only by the atoning death of Jesus. God joins us to that death when we are baptized. This joining is so powerful that, in baptism, we share Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection. That is, when we are baptized, we die with Christ, are buried with Christ, and are raised with Christ. Through the death, burial, and resurrection of His Son Jesus, God brings us into a new life that is no longer under the control of sin. That happens, Paul says, when we submit to baptism.

WE ARE ALL CHILDREN OF GOD

The next Scripture we will examine is Galatians 3:26-29. Galatians is Paul's fiery and passionate defense of the gospel of grace. Those who tried to impose the Jewish rite of circumcision on Gentile believers as a necessary condition to their salvation were bringing, in Paul's words, "...a *different gospel*—which is really no gospel at all." (*Galatians 1:6-7*) Interestingly, that's a charge many of those who deny any connection between baptism and salvation bring against those who affirm such a connection. Given that, the following text is extremely important to our question.

You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise.

Galatians 3:26-29

In a world divided by race, social status, and gender, Paul affirms that all who are in Christ Jesus (Paul's favorite way of describing being a Christian) are all children of God. We are all in one family, not because of our blood but because of the blood of Jesus. How Paul says this is crucial! We are all God's children through faith. It is not faith plus some accomplishment. He does not add anything to faith. But he does describe what that faith is! We are "all sons of God through faith, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ."

Therefore, baptism is not something we do which is beyond faith—it is faith. Again, as in Romans 6, we are not baptized into any particular church, we are baptized into Christ. We are placed "in Christ" through faith when we are baptized. That's the plain meaning of the text. Baptism is not like circumcision, which is based upon the covenant God made with Israel and only applies to

males. Requiring circumcision was to make a requirement beyond faith and that denied the very nature of the gospel. But baptism is faith, not something beyond faith.

In baptism, we are all clothed with Christ. The context tells us what that means. Christ is God's Son. When we are baptized, we "put on Christ" and in Christ we are all God's sons. Even though we might be Gentiles, slaves, or women, we are all "sons" and heirs.⁷ The inheritance that came to the descendants of Abraham comes now to all of us as well, but even more, the inheritance that comes to the one and only Son of God (Jesus) comes to us for we are adopted as God's children (See Romans 8:15-17). That happens when we receive baptism through faith and "belong to Christ." Notice all these terms: "*in Christ... into Christ... put on Christ... in Christ... belong to Christ.*" All of those describe what it means to be a Christian and this happens "*through faith, for all of you who were baptized into Christ...*"

HOW DO WE RECEIVE CHRIST?

Another crucial text is Colossians 2:6-3:11. We cannot thoroughly discuss this lengthy text here but you can certainly read it all. We will especially focus on this section of the passage:

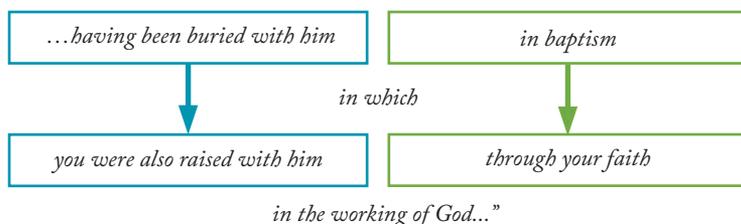
For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form, and in Christ you have been brought to fullness. He is the head over every power and authority. In him you were also circumcised with a circumcision not performed by human hands. Your sinful nature was put off when you were circumcised by Christ, having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through your faith in the working of God, who raised him from the dead.

Colossians 2:9-12 TNIV

Paul's main point is given in *Colossians 2:6*, "*So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live in him...*" In *2:9-12*, Paul expands on how they "*received Christ*" and what happened when they did so. Again, circumcision is part of the discussion and again baptism into Christ is contrasted to circumcision. Paul does this in an odd way by saying that our baptism was a kind of circumci-

⁷ Some translations change "sons" to "children" to make clear that males and females are equally welcome into God's family. Of course that's true and is Paul's point here. However, in Paul's world, only sons were considered heirs. The point is that women, Gentiles, and slaves also fully become heirs (sons) to the promises of God by being "in Christ," God's Son.

sion but not at all like Jewish circumcision. Unlike the circumcision that only removes a male's foreskin, baptism is the removal of our sinful nature (literally our whole flesh). As with Romans 6, Paul describes baptism as being buried and raised with Christ. Two other points must be made here. The first is that just as God's fullness is in Christ, those who receive baptism are given "fullness" (a completely abundant life, filled with Holy Spirit). This fullness is sheer grace and Paul connects that fullness with baptism. The second point is that Paul makes very clear what we have already seen—that is, baptism is faith not works. Since "being buried" and "being raised" are things that happen to us, there is no credit on our part for this. Also, being buried and raised are two aspects of the same experience: "*buried with him in baptism...raised with him through your faith.*" Look at how the sentence is put together:



Here, "buried with him" corresponds to "raised with him" and "in baptism" corresponds to "through your faith." This makes it clear that baptism is not a work beyond faith, but is faith. Oh yes, there is a great work being done in this removal of our sinful nature but look at who's doing the work—God is! With the same power that raised Jesus, we are transformed when we receive baptism by faith.

WAIT A MINUTE! WHAT ABOUT THESE PASSAGES?

Now I need to turn to two texts that are used to deny that baptism has any connection with salvation. The first is in *Romans 10:9-10*, "...If you confess with your mouth, Jesus is Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved." Here, the lack of the mention of baptism is seen as evidence that baptism has no place in salvation. Arguments from silence are notoriously perilous. Let me now make three points:

1. It's not likely that Paul would change his mind between Romans 6 and Romans 10! Paul clearly connects baptism with salvation in Romans 6.

2. We can find texts that speak of what a person must do to be saved that say nothing about confession either. One such text is Acts 16:30-31. In this text Paul and Silas answered the question of the Philippian jailor, "*What must I do to be saved?*" (Acts 16:30) by saying, "*Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved—you and your household.*" (Acts 16:31) Are we to conclude because there was no mention of confession that confessing that Jesus is Lord has nothing to do with salvation? Of course not! That fundamental Christian confession is assumed. By the way, their answer in Acts 16:31 didn't include baptism either but read on—the jailor and his household were immediately baptized! "*...For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body—whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink.*" (1 Corinthians 12:13)

3. The confession of faith that Jesus is Lord, not baptism, is Paul's emphasis in Romans 10 because that is what unbelieving Jews, who heard the proclaimed message, refused to do and believing Gentiles were doing. Paul doesn't mention baptism here, not because it wasn't important but because that wasn't Paul's point in this text.

1 Corinthians 1:13-17 is another text that is used to disassociate baptism from salvation:

I am thankful that I did not baptize any of you except Crispus and Gaius, so no one can say that you were baptized into my name. (Yes, I also baptized the household of Stephanas; beyond that, I don't remember if I baptized anyone else.) For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel—not with words of human wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power.

1 Corinthians 1:13-17

Here, it is argued that if baptism was connected to salvation, Paul would never say this. This argument simply and completely misses Paul's point! Even though Paul didn't personally baptize many of the Corinthians, they were all baptized (see 1 Corinthians 12:13). Paul is glad that he didn't physically immerse them in water, not because baptism isn't important but because the one who does the baptizing isn't important. Please read the whole argument. Paul didn't want personal followers—he wanted them to understand that Christ, not Paul, was crucified for them and that they were baptized into Christ, not Paul (1 Corinthe-

ans 1:12). He wanted them to know that the power of salvation was not in our wisdom but in the cross—in Jesus’ death and that’s what they were baptized into.

ONE LORD, ONE FAITH, ONE BAPTISM

Not every time that the words “baptize” or “baptism” are used in the New Testament, does it refer to immersion in water in the name of Jesus. For example, when James and John wanted to be on the right and left hands of Jesus in the Kingdom of God, Jesus asked them, “*Can you drink the cup I drink or be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with?*” (*Mark 10:38*) In context, Jesus is using the word baptism metaphorically to refer to His overwhelming trial.

Another place where “baptize” does not mean immersion in water is found in the words of John the Baptist as he forecast the coming of the Messiah, “*I baptize you with water for repentance. But after me will come one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not fit to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire*” (*Matthew 3:11-12, Luke 3:16, and Mark 1:8*). The context, especially in Matthew and Luke, strongly suggests that this is a reference to the cleansing judgment of God that will come with the Messiah and reflects Malachi 3:1-4 and 4:1.

This text has been used to support the idea that there are two baptisms; one with water and another in the Spirit. “Holy Spirit baptism,” as it is often called, has been described as a second act of grace. I can’t fully discuss the work and gifts of the Holy Spirit here but I can simply say that in the New Testament, as we have already seen, one receives the gift of the Holy Spirit in association with Christian baptism.

This leads us to Paul’s great affirmation in Ephesians 4:4-6.

There is one body and one Spirit just as you were called to one hope when you were called- one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.

Ephesians 4:4-6

This wonderful list of “ones” is structured around the Spirit, the Lord, and God the Father. One body and one hope are associated with the Spirit and at the end, God the Father stands alone. In the middle of this list is the Lord and associated with Him are faith and baptism. How appropriate! One faith and one baptism are in the Lord, Jesus, the Son.

The entire weight of the New Testament confirms that this one baptism is the baptism by faith and in water that unites us with Christ in His death, burial,

and resurrection. It is here that the gift of the Spirit comes. There is no second baptism, but there is “one Lord, one faith, and one baptism.”

Here, then, are seven great realities. Three of them are the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. The other four are all indispensable. We cannot do without the body (church), hope, faith or baptism.

YOU WERE WASHED

I want to mention two texts that don't use the word “baptize” but are generally thought to speak of baptism. Both of these emphasize the cleansing that takes place when one comes to Christ.

The first is *1 Corinthians 6:11*. After giving a list of those Paul calls “wicked,” who will not inherit the Kingdom of God, Paul reminds the Corinthians that many of them used to be among those wicked, but were so no longer. He says, “*And that is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.*” If this is a reference to baptism, as I believe it to be, it speaks of three important things happening as one comes to Christ in faith by submitting to baptism “in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.”

1. We are washed (cleansed from sin)
2. We are sanctified (set apart and made saints),
3. We are justified (made just before God).

This is not to say that baptism does these things. As the beloved hymn asks and answers, “*What can wash away my sins? Nothing but the blood of Jesus.*” There is no magic in the water. What it does say is what we have already seen in passages that unquestionably do speak of baptism—in baptism we die, are buried, and are raised with Christ and it is Christ who saves us. In Titus 3:4-7, we again have the language of washing and here, as in John 3 it is coupled with the idea of rebirth. Here's the passage:

But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life.

Titus 3:4-7

The same, sometimes bitter, argument goes on here that goes on about John 3. But please understand; the argument is not that there is power in baptism but rather that salvation, which is by the grace of God alone, is received by a faith that submits to baptism. As we have seen, Christians (all of them as far as we can see from the evidence of the New Testament) were baptized in water. How would they have understood a text that reminded them that they were washed?

WHAT DOES IT ALL MEAN?

There are many other passages in Paul's letters that relate to baptism and not all of them use the word "baptize," but hopefully these will be enough to make Paul's message clear. *Baptism is the reception of God's grace. It is faith, not works. In baptism we are joined to Christ's death, burial and resurrection, and that is what saves us.*

DRAWING A CONCLUSION AND MAKING A DECISION

This discussion has required a great deal of thoughtful consideration but most important questions do. Sincere Christians strongly disagree with one another about the place of baptism. I do not question the sincerity of those who will strongly disagree with the conclusions I have drawn from these Scriptures but I am convinced that much of the disagreement will disappear if we see baptism in its Biblical place. We are saved by God's grace and not by our good works—period. If baptism was portrayed as a good work in the New Testament, I too would insist that it is something done (as are all Christian good works) by those already saved by grace. But I believe the witness of the New Testament is overwhelming in insisting that being baptized (that is, submitting to baptism) is not a human work at all. Now, it certainly is a work but it's God's work. What is it on our side? It is simply how we say "yes" to the grace of God. Should you be baptized? Jesus commissioned us to make disciples by baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. In Acts we read that the answer to the question, "*what should we do?*" was to "*repent and be baptized for the forgiveness of [our] sins and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.*" (Acts 2:38) Throughout Acts, being baptized was consistently what happened to those who came to Jesus. In the letters of the Apostles, we

We are saved by God's grace and not by our good works—period.

see that in baptism we are joined to the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus. Let me ask the question a different way. Why would you accept the Gospel and refuse to be baptized?

WHAT ABOUT MY PARENTS AND GRANDPARENTS?

Maybe you're resisting being baptized because you feel that you would be unfaithful to your family or church tradition if you were baptized into Christ. I understand that this can be really hard, but in the end we are called to be faithful to God, even above our family. We are called to do what we know is right. God will be a fair and loving Judge of us all, including all who have followed their best understanding of His Word. I urge you to allow God's grace to complete your journey of faith by dying with Christ, being buried with Christ, and being raised with Christ in baptism.

Then again, maybe you're resisting being baptized now because your parents had you baptized when you were a baby. The subject of infant baptism can be quite an involved question and some very long books have been written just on this question alone. I can't do that here, but please consider the following:

- While it is possible to speculate that infants were part of the households that we find being baptized in the book of Acts, we are never told so. We are only told about 27 people who heard the message, responded to it, and were then baptized.
- Baptism is not like circumcision. Male babies were circumcised but salvation is open to all who choose to receive baptism—male and female.
- The consistent message of the New Testament is that baptism is the personal response of “faith in the working of God” (Colossians 2:12).

Of course parents have their babies baptized out of love and a deep desire that their children receive the salvation of the Lord. But in the end, God asks each of us to choose. You need to make your own choice. Choosing to receive baptism now is not to repudiate the faith of your parents! You should certainly always be grateful for the love they showed in having you baptized. Rather, being baptized now completes the faith journey they started you on when they had you baptized as a baby. An innocent baby does not need his or her sins “washed away” but if you are old enough to read this, you do. You do because all of us “*have sinned and fall short of the glory of God*” (Romans 3:23).

IT'S ALL AMAZING GRACE

Where will your salvation rest if you are baptized? It will certainly not be in baptism. Rather it will rest on a cross where Jesus died. By being baptized, God will join you to that cross. Thank you for taking the time to seriously consider this very important question and may God bless you as you make your decision.

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Appendix: Going Deeper

1. MORE ON “BORN OF THE WATER AND THE SPIRIT” (JOHN 3:1-7)

Could Nicodemus have understood that being born of the water and the Spirit was a reference to Christian baptism when there was no Christian baptism yet? After all, the Day of Pentecost was some time off. That’s an obvious and excellent question. To begin an answer, notice that whatever Jesus meant by being born of the water and the Spirit, Nicodemus didn’t understand it (John 3:9-10). Also, virtually everyone sees this new birth as possible only after the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus. It is far more likely that Nicodemus would have seen some connection to baptism than he would have to inviting Jesus (who stood before him at the moment) into his heart. Baptism, in some form, would not have been far-fetched for Nicodemus since ritual cleansings were a prominent feature in Jewish religious life and John the Baptist’s ministry was well known.

What Nicodemus may have understood is really an impossible question to answer, regardless of your view of “the new birth.” We don’t know, nor can we know, what Nicodemus understood or didn’t understand at that moment. One of the features of John’s Gospel is that Jesus says something that is either not understood or misunderstood at the moment but later recalled and understood. One example of this is found right before this text. After cleansing the Temple, Jesus said, “*Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days*” (John 2:19). No one at the moment understood Jesus’ words but, “*After he was raised from the dead, his disciples recalled what he had said. Then they believed the Scripture and the words that Jesus had spoken*” (John 2:22 [also John 12:16 and John 14:26]). That may be the case here. Jesus’ words were an enigma to Nicodemus at the time but later he recalled them and was, indeed, born again.

A more helpful question for me is what the readers of John’s Gospel might reasonably understand. Regardless of what Nicodemus, at the moment, did or didn’t understand, is there any reason for the reader of this narrative to connect the new birth to baptism. Here, the answer is closer at hand. In *John 1:33*, John the Baptist, seeing Jesus, tells his disciples, “*I would not have known him, except that the one who sent me to baptize with water told me, ‘The man on whom you see the Spirit come down and remain is he who will baptize with the Holy Spirit.’*” Connecting baptism into Jesus with being born of the water and the Spirit is hardly a leap.

2. MORE ON THE HOLY SPIRIT AND BAPTISM IN ACTS

In discussing the baptism of Cornelius and his household I said, “*The important point here is that the Spirit comes for God’s own purposes, and not to follow any pattern we have devised.*” I believe that really is important and want to make that same point with two other difficult texts in Acts.

Baptism and the Spirit’s coming to the Samaritans (Acts 8:1-25): This passage really goes hand-in-hand with the story of Cornelius. Just as the Gospel coming to Gentiles was a big deal, so it was also a big deal for it to go to the Samaritans. Their racial and doctrinal differences from the Jews, coupled with many generations of animosity made the acceptance of the Samaritans difficult for the earliest Jewish Christians. But Jesus told His disciples that they would be His, “*witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth*” (Acts 1:8). The story Luke tells in the Book of Acts makes it clear that, as in the case of Cornelius, sometimes the church needed *extra* convincing.

God will accept people of all races and nationalities as members of His people in Christ.

In the case of the Samaritans it was not the coming of the Holy Spirit before they were baptized but the absence of the Holy Spirit after they were baptized. That absence required the apostles’ presence. Peter and John came and laid their hands upon those newly baptized Samaritans, “*because the Holy Spirit had not yet come upon any of them; they had simply been baptized into the name of the Lord Jesus*” (Acts 8:16).

There are a lot of really thorny questions here that we cannot easily answer. Yet, we don’t have to have answers for all of those questions to see the important point for our question. As the Spirit’s coming on Cornelius’ house was unusual, so His actions here are unusual. These two events are exceptions to make it clear that God will accept people of all races and nationalities as members of His people in Christ.

Those were unique moments that happened only once. The situation for us is different. We don’t look to the exception but to the rule. The rule (common experience) is expressed by Peter at Pentecost, “*Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:38).*”

Baptism of the “Disciples” in Acts 19:1-7: This text also is puzzling. In Ephesus, Paul encounters twelve people Luke calls “disciples.” Now, the term “disciple” is almost always used in Acts to describe followers of Jesus but here are a dozen

“disciples” that not only had not received the Holy Spirit but didn’t even know that there was a Holy Spirit.

Of course, it would be nice to know how that was possible and what their ties to Apollos (Acts 18:24-28) may have been. For our purposes the following may be all we need to know: When Paul discovered that they had never even heard that there was a Holy Spirit, he asked, “*Then what baptism did you receive?*” (Acts 19:3) Why does Paul immediately ask about their baptism? Apparently, Paul knew that had they been baptized into the name of Jesus, they would have received the gift of the Holy Spirit.

3. “BAPTISM NOW SAVES YOU” 1 PETER 3:18-22

This is really an important text about baptism, but it is also one of the most difficult passages in all of the New Testament to understand. Because of that, I decided to talk about it in an appendix.

For Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God. He was put to death in the body but made alive by the Spirit, through whom also he went and preached to the spirits in prison who disobeyed long ago when God waited patiently in the days of Noah while the ark was being built. In it only a few people, eight in all, were saved through water, and this water symbolizes baptism that now saves you also—not the removal of dirt from the body but the pledge of a good conscience toward God. It saves you by the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who has gone into heaven and is at God’s right hand—with angels, authorities and powers in submission to him.

1 Peter 3:18-22

What is important for us is what is said about baptism in 3:21, “... *This water symbolizes baptism that now saves you...*” The argument seems to be that as eight people were saved through the water because they were in the ark, the water of baptism has a role in our salvation. In the days of Noah, the flood water was both the judgment of God upon sin and, ironically, the means of the salvation of Noah’s family. The water of baptism has the same role. It is a judgment upon sin and the pathway to salvation. But Peter is quick to rid his readers of any notion that baptism is just an external, magical, ritual. It is not an external washing but instead it is a commitment to God. It certainly doesn’t save us as an independent act—“*It saves you by the resurrection of Jesus Christ.*”

The Scripture begins with the good news that, “Christ died for sins, once for all,” and closes by affirming the resurrection and ascension of Jesus. In the midst of that grand story of Christ is the statement about baptism. Baptism joins us to that story. Just as we have seen in Paul’s letters, Peter connects baptism with the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus. This is very much like the wonderful praise at the beginning of this letter:

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead...

1 Peter 1:3

Peter celebrates our hope through the resurrection of Jesus in the opening of his letter. In 1 Peter 3:21-22 he returns to that theme and tells us that we are connected to the resurrection in baptism and share in that living hope.

About the Author

I'm one of those Baby Boomers who started out on Howdy Doody and graduated from college with Dustin Hoffman's "The Graduate." For me, however, far more important than any movie, television show, Elvis or even the Beatles, was the nurture I received in a Christian home and in a loving church. As a young teenager, I decided to give my life to serving the Lord in ministry and never seriously looked back on that decision. I attended what was then Pepperdine College and graduated in 1969. In 1970, I met Roxanne Cowan and in 1972 we married—and I am a very blessed man!



When I was 11 months old, I contracted polio and have since lived with its paralyzing effects. I do most of my work today from a wheelchair and preach from one that stands up (way cool!). Polio is what I had and what I deal with, but it's not who I am! Who I am is a servant of Jesus Christ, who is being transformed into the image of my Lord.

Roxanne and I have been blessed with four children, three of whom are married and have given us three beautiful grandsons, a very beautiful granddaughter, and yet another grandchild on the way.

