

The Purpose of Water Baptism

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“As many as are persuaded and believe that what we teach and say is true, and undertake to be able to live accordingly, are instructed to pray and to entreat God with fasting, for the remission of their sins that are past, we praying and fasting with them. Then they are brought by us where there is water, and are regenerated in the same manner in which we were ourselves regenerated. For, in the name of God, the Father and Lord of the universe, and of our Savior Jesus Christ, and of the Holy Spirit, they then receive the washing with water. For Christ also said, ‘Except ye be born again, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven.’ Now, that it is impossible for those who have once been born to enter into their mothers’ wombs, is manifest to all. And how those who have sinned and repent shall escape their sins, is declared by Esaias the prophet, as I wrote above; he thus speaks:

‘Wash you, make you clean; put away the evil of your doings from your souls; learn to do well; judge the fatherless, and plead for the widow: and come and let us reason together, saith the Lord. And though your sins be as scarlet, I will make them white like wool; and though they be as crimson, I will make them white as snow. But if ye refuse and rebel, the sword shall devour you: for the mouth of the Lord hath spoken it.’¹

“And for this [rite] we have learned from the apostles this reason. Since at our birth we were born without our own knowledge or choice, by our parents coming together, and were brought up in bad habits and wicked training; in order that we may not remain the children of necessity and of ignorance, but may become the children of choice and knowledge, and may obtain in the water the remission of sins formerly committed, there is pronounced over him who chooses to be born again, and has repented of his sins, the name of God the Father and Lord of the universe; ... And in the name of Jesus Christ, who was crucified under Pontius Pilate, and in the name of the Holy Ghost, who through the prophets foretold all things about Jesus, he who is illuminated is washed.”²

The above quotation comes from Justin Martyr, one of the earliest Christian writers after the Apostles. This document was written within just a few decades after John’s death. It was intended to explain the universal practices of all the Christian churches to the pagan Romans. Justin’s statement illustrates how the earliest Christians understood

¹ Isaiah 1:16-20

² Justin Martyr, First Apology, Ch. LXI

the Apostles' teaching on this subject, and how they interpreted certain passages of Scripture. It is evident in the first paragraph that they interpreted John 3:3-5 as referring to water baptism: *"Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God. ... Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God."* Being *"born of water and the Spirit"* was seen as the single act of baptism, in which both water and God's Spirit were the instruments of baptism. It is also evident that the early Christians saw water baptism in the prophecy of Isaiah which referred to the remission of sins. Finally, it is quite clear that they placed *"regeneration"* at the point of water baptism.

While it is true that baptism eventually became a sacrament, a kind of almost magical rite in Roman Catholicism with redemptive qualities being given to the water itself, that was certainly not the case in second century Christianity. As Justin indicated, the regeneration of the Spirit takes place in the water, not by the water.

From the earliest times until the Protestant Reformation, baptism was always considered the point in time in which regeneration takes place. This was true of all Christian sects. Only during the Reformation was water baptism separated from regeneration and the remission of sins as a reaction against Rome's sacramental view of baptism. In modern Evangelicalism derived from Reformed theology, baptism has been assigned a role it never had before, that of being a public testimony of a prior regeneration.

Baptism has become a very emotional and controversial issue in western Christianity. Yet, it is one of the clearest teachings in God's Word. Yet, because of the emotional and theological baggage associated with it, the only way someone can come to the truth on this critical subject is to set aside his presuppositions, his concerns about peer pressure, and his emotional reservations, and take a fresh look at the subject from a clean slate. Just as with any pursuit of truth in God's Word, we must take revelation progressively, from the first use of baptism, and build line upon line, precept upon precept, interpreting each passage in both its literary and historical context. This requires that we always interpret a passage based on prior revelation.

John's Baptism

The first baptisms recorded in the New Testament were performed by John the Baptist, preparing the way for the Messiah. Moses had predicted the coming of the New Lawgiver.³ John's baptism prepared the Jewish people to receive *"that Prophet"* whom Moses foretold, pointing out that Jesus was *"the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the*

³ Deut. 18:15-19 & Acts 3:22-23

world.”⁴ John’s preaching also indicated that the people must believe on Jesus as the Messiah.⁵ And Jesus preached the same message as John – the Gospel of the Kingdom.

John the Baptist	Jesus
<i>“In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea, and saying, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!’”⁶</i>	<i>“From that time Jesus began to preach and to say, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand’.”⁷</i>

This “Gospel of the Kingdom,” preached by both John and Jesus, was also the Gospel preached by the disciples when Jesus sent them out to the cities of Israel with the first commission.⁸ It was the same Gospel proclaimed to the Gentiles in the Great Commission.⁹ So, the baptism associated with this “Gospel of the Kingdom” ought not be considered two distinct baptisms. John’s baptism is Christian baptism.

John baptized a huge number of believers. *“Then Jerusalem, all Judea, and all the region around the Jordan went out to him and were baptized by him in the Jordan, confessing their sins.”*¹⁰ Yet, Jesus baptized even more people than John! *“After these things Jesus and His disciples came into the land of Judea, and there He remained with them and baptized.”*¹¹ *“Therefore, when the Lord knew that the Pharisees had heard that Jesus made and baptized more disciples than John (though Jesus Himself did not baptize, but His disciples)...”*¹² Christians like to quote John 3:16, but many don’t know that only a few verses later we find Jesus’ baptizing multitudes of people who believed the message both He and John were preaching, all prior to His crucifixion. It is important to note that Jesus always baptized by proxy. The parenthetical statement above shows that the disciples’ baptizing people was considered to be Jesus Himself baptizing them. The text first says that Jesus made and baptized more disciples than John, and then explains that the actual baptisms were done by proxy – through the disciples.

We can conclude that all the baptisms Jesus’ disciples performed were identical in meaning with those John performed. And the message, “the Gospel of the Kingdom,” was the same.

⁴ John 1:29,36

⁵ John 1:15, 27, 30, Acts 19:4

⁶ Matt 3:1-2

⁷ Matt. 4:17

⁸ Luke 10:9-11

⁹ Matt. 24:14

¹⁰ Matt 3:5-6

¹¹ John 3:22

¹² John 4:1-2

The requirement for being baptized by either John or Jesus was a willingness to repent. The word “repent” means a change of thinking and course. The Greek word literally means to “rethink.” It is to change one’s mind and thus set out in a new direction. Public baptism was the means of changing one’s course, an act of obedience, faith, and lifelong commitment. Baptism was the point where the change of course occurred. And, it was the means of procuring remission from past sin, both its guilt and power. *“John came baptizing in the wilderness and preaching a baptism of repentance for (eis – “unto”) the remission of sins.”*¹³ The result of baptism was the *remission* of sins. The Greek word for “remission” means *to set free*. It is the same word used twice by Jesus reading Isaiah in the synagogue; *“The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me, because He has anointed Me to preach the gospel to the poor; he has sent Me to heal the brokenhearted, to proclaim **liberty** to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set at **liberty** those who are oppressed’.*¹⁴ Essentially, baptism was the event where the sinner was set free from sin. (The “Year of Jubilee” in Lev. 25 uses the same Greek word in the LXX.)

Jesus’ own Baptism & the Promised “Baptism in the Holy Spirit”

John began to preach and baptize months before Jesus. Just before Jesus Himself began to preach and baptize, John made a prediction about Jesus and baptism. *“I indeed baptized you with water, but He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.’ It came to pass in those days that Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee, and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And immediately, coming up from the water, He saw the heavens parting and the Spirit descending upon Him like a dove. Then a voice came from heaven, ‘You are My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.’”*¹⁵

John’s baptism was in water resulting in the remission of sins. But, he indicated that Jesus would baptize in the Holy Spirit in the future. That this did not occur immediately is clear from other passages which indicate the giving of the Spirit was delayed until after the resurrection of Jesus,¹⁶ and was still future immediately after Jesus’ crucifixion.¹⁷ Yet, shortly after John identified Jesus as *“the Lamb of God,”* and prophesied of the future baptism in the Holy Spirit, Jesus came to John to be baptized.

Immediately after coming up from the water, the Holy Spirit descended on Jesus in a visible form. This was a sign to the crowds that Jesus was the one whom John prophesied would baptize in the Holy Spirit.¹⁸ Yet, it was more than this. Why did Jesus

¹³ Mark 1:4

¹⁴ Luke 4:18

¹⁵ Mark 1:8-11

¹⁶ John 7:39

¹⁷ Acts 1:4-5

¹⁸ John 1:32-34

Himself even need to be baptized? He did not need the “remission of sins.” The baptism of Jesus, with the immediate descent of the Spirit, was the clear demonstration of what water baptism would soon become – not only the point at which one receives the remission of sins, but also the Holy Spirit would descend upon every repentant believer being baptized in water! From the beginning, water baptism was an outward act of repentance, faith, and obedience, and resulted in the remission of sins. It was the point at which one secured his place in the coming Kingdom of God. But, something else that was invisible (the baptism in the Holy Spirit) was illustrated by the visible form of the dove’s descent upon Jesus for all to see. This sign was meant to forever link the promised invisible “baptism in the Spirit” with visible water baptism. It pointed to the time John prophesied about, when those being baptized in water for the remission of sins would also immediately receive the invisible baptism in the Spirit. This is obvious from a comparison between baptism before and after the crucifixion of Christ.

Before Crucifixion: *“And he went into all the region around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins.”*¹⁹

After Crucifixion: *“Then Peter said to them, “Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; **and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.**”*²⁰

The audience remained the same — Jews. The only differences were that water baptism was to be performed *“in the name of Jesus Christ”* (by His authority) and the Spirit was promised for all those who repented and were baptized.

This point is demonstrated clearly by Paul's encounter with certain Jewish “disciples” in Acts 19. His first question to them was, *“Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?”* When they said that they were not aware of the Holy Spirit, Paul immediately suspected their baptism. *“Into what then were you baptized?”* To which they replied, *“Into John’s baptism.”* It is not that they were ignorant of the existence of the Spirit. That would be impossible for any Jew familiar with the first chapter of the Torah, not to mention John's own preaching about the one coming after him, who would baptize them in the Holy Spirit. Rather, they were not aware of what occurred at Pentecost, of the Spirit's coming again to Israel in fulfillment of the promises in several Old Testament prophecies.²¹ The most likely reason they were ignorant of the Spirit's coming upon the 120 in the upper room, and the subsequent filling of the 3000 Jews

¹⁹ Luke 3:3

²⁰ Acts 2:38

²¹ cf. Ezek. 36:25-27, Ezek. 37:14, Ezek. 39:29, Joel. 2:28-29

who repented and were baptized on Pentecost, was because they did not live in Israel and were not present in Jerusalem on the Day of Pentecost. They had apparently been baptized by John prior to his identifying Jesus as the one coming after Him who would *“baptize you in the Holy Spirit.”* Paul then rebaptized them in the name of Jesus Christ, and they received the Spirit immediately.

The Necessity of Baptism in the Spirit

While both Jesus and John were preaching repentance to Israel, and baptizing many converts *“for the remission of sins,”* one curious Pharisee made a private appointment with Jesus to discuss these things. Nicodemus seems to have been a rather wise and upright leader among the majority of corrupt men of the Sanhedrin. His appointment with Jesus was recorded in John 3. *“This man came to Jesus by night and said to Him, ‘Rabbi, we know that You are a teacher come from God; for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him.’ Jesus answered and said to him, ‘Most assuredly, I say to 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? Can he enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born?’ Jesus answered, ‘Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not marvel that I said to you, ‘You must be born again.’ The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear the sound of it, but cannot tell where it comes from and where it goes. So is everyone who is born of the Spirit’.”*²²

The concept accepted by nearly all Jews of the time was that their descent from Abraham made them automatic recipients of all the promises. Here, Jesus burst that bubble for Nicodemus. Jesus informed him that a “new birth” was necessary if he expected to secure his inheritance in the promised coming Kingdom. His natural birth of the seed of Abraham was not sufficient. Jesus told Nicodemus plainly that *“unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.”* This second birth Jesus spoke about meant starting over a completely new life. It implied forsaking the old, with all its accomplishments and status. After Nicodemus expressed understandable confusion, Jesus restated His point: *“Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.”*

Some have supposed that Jesus meant physical birth when He spoke of being “born of water.” However, there is nothing in Scripture or Jewish tradition to suggest that “born of water” refers to physical birth. Even Alfred Edersheim, the Jewish Christian scholar, equates “born of water” here to baptism.²³ But, more importantly, to say that one must

²² John 3:2-8

²³ Edersheim, Alfred, The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah, pp. 269-270

be born physically in order to inherit the Kingdom is a redundant statement. No one exists who has not been born physically, except the angels! To include physical birth as a prerequisite for partaking of Christ's Kingdom makes no sense!

The Greek grammar casts serious doubt on that interpretation also. In the clause, "γεννηθη ἐξ ὕδατος καὶ πνεύματος" ("born of water and spirit"), both nouns in the prepositional phrase are connected by "and" to a single verb. Thus the kind of action described by the verb must be the same for both objects. It cannot be physical birth regarding "water" and spiritual birth regarding "spirit." The single verb has one meaning only. The verb is also in the subjunctive mood, which indicates *possibility* but not *certainty*. It essentially says, "if a man might be born..." It is hard to imagine Jesus' referring to someone's physical birth with uncertainty, because everyone who exists was born. His language implies that some people who already exist had not been "born of water." Therefore, "born of water" cannot refer to physical birth.

The statement in verse 5, "unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God," is juxtaposed with the statement in verse 3, "unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God." It is apparent, then, that being "born of water and Spirit" is equivalent to being "born again." It is not equivalent to physical birth plus spiritual birth.

Everyone who expects an inheritance in the Kingdom must have a second birth consisting of being "born of water and Spirit." The preposition here is "ἐκ," meaning emerging from something. Combined with the concept of "birth" it is apparent that baptism is in part a rebirth. Being immersed in the water we die to sin and leave behind the old life. Coming up out of the water we are *born again*. Likewise, Jesus immerses us in the Spirit, and we come forth from this experience with a changed heart, a "new creature." The "second birth" is accomplished through both "water" and "Spirit." Hence, Jesus told Nicodemus that one must be born anew with "water and Spirit" in order to inherit the Kingdom.

For those who doubt that being *born again of water and Spirit* is what Jesus meant, consider Paul's words to Titus. "Not from works of righteousness that we have done, but according to His mercy He saved us, **by means of the bath of second-birth and renovation of the Holy Spirit**; whom He poured out on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Savior, that having been justified by His grace we should become heirs according to the hope of eternal life."²⁴ What could "the bath of second-birth" mean (in addition to the "renovation of the Holy Spirit"), if not water baptism? This passage clearly links the water of John 3:5 with

²⁴ Titus 3:5-7 Literal Translation

the second birth of verse 3. It is through 2 things, the “*bath of second-birth*” and the “*renovation of the Holy Spirit,*” that we are saved according to His mercy. These two things are contrasted with “*works of righteousness that we have done,*” and are the prerequisite to our becoming “*heirs according to the hope of eternal life*” (the inheritance contained in the Gospel of the Kingdom). Baptism cannot be considered one of the “*works of righteousness*” which Paul elsewhere disqualifies from salvation because it is here contrasted with such “*works.*” Baptism is not a “*work,*” according to Paul, it is obedience to the Gospel.

The Great Commission

The Great Commission is recorded in three of the Gospels.

Matthew – “*And Jesus came and spoke to them, saying, ‘All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.’ Amen.*”²⁵

Matthew’s account includes baptism of Gentiles as a necessary requirement of making them “*disciples.*” One cannot be a “*disciple*” then without being both baptized and taught. Since Matthew’s account does not mention getting people “*saved*” in its terminology, it must be assumed that either Jesus did not think it important for people to be “*saved*” before they follow Jesus, or else salvation is assumed in the term “*make disciples.*” Some might suggest that the language permits that people be “*saved*” and “*baptized*” in order to be a “*disciple,*” but that being “*saved*” does not necessarily require one to be a “*disciple*” of Jesus. In other words, not all “*saved*” people are disciples. The problem is, the only “*goal*” of the Great Commission according to Matthew is to make “*disciples.*” The New Testament knows nothing of people who are *saved* but not *disciples* of Jesus. But, what does Mark say?

Mark – “*And He said to them, ‘Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature. He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned.’*”²⁶

According to Mark, Jesus made baptism and faith requirements for salvation in His command to the Apostles. The objection is usually raised that the second sentence, “*he who does not believe will be condemned,*” excludes baptism and therefore indicates that

²⁵ Matt. 28:18-20

²⁶ Mark. 16:15-16

baptism is not necessary. It is merely gratuitous in the first statement. But, how does one explain Jesus' including baptism as the requirements for salvation? If it was not a part of the Gospel He commanded them to preach to "every creature," why was it included as a requirements for salvation? It is far easier to explain why baptism would not be mentioned in the second (negative) statement (which states what condemns) than to explain why baptism would be included in the first (positive) statement (which states what saves). Jesus did not include baptism in the negative statement because it was unthinkable that anyone would be baptized if they did not believe the Gospel. Baptism was the tangible way for people hearing the Gospel to respond to it in faith and obedience. It was the means to "obey the Gospel." Christian baptism automatically brought on the disdain of the religious leaders, and frequently persecution. Those who believed the Apostles' preaching and responded to the call to be baptized would be saved. Those who did not believe the message certainly would not believe that getting dunked in water would do anything for them either! Jesus thoroughly covered both possible responses to the Gospel with His statements. Baptism served as joining with Christ through public confession. As Jesus said, "Therefore whoever confesses Me before men, him I will also confess before My Father who is in heaven. But whoever denies Me before men, him I will also deny before My Father who is in heaven." (Matt 10:32-33).

There are powerful grammatical reasons that prove baptism a necessary part of obeying the Gospel in this verse. First, the clause translated "He who believes and is baptized" is a construction that conforms to Granville Sharp's first rule.

"When the copulative kai [and] connects two nouns of the same case, [viz. nouns (either substantive or adjective, or participles) of personal description respecting office, dignity, affinity, or connection, and attributes, properties, or qualities, good or ill,] if the article ho, or any of its cases, precedes the first of the said nouns or participles, and is not repeated before the second noun or participle, the latter always relates to the same person that is expressed or described by the first noun or participle: i.e. it denotes farther description of the first-named person."²⁷

The clause in question is: "ο πιστευσας και βαπτισθεις" (lit. "the believed-one and baptized-one"). The Greek words rendered "believed-one" and "baptized-one" are both aorist participles in the nominative case (subject of the verb). They are being used as substantives (like nouns). The fact that the definite article "ο" precedes the first participle (believed-one) but not the second participle (baptized-one) means that both participles are describing the same person. Essentially, the subject of the sentence is "the believed/baptized-one" **as a single person**. It is to this person that salvation is

²⁷ <http://www.pfrs.org/sharp.html>

promised. A person who believes but is not baptized is not addressed at all in this passage. The only promise of salvation in the Great Commission is given to “the believed/baptized-one.” To claim that this passage promises salvation to someone who has only believed but not been baptized is completely wrong. There is only one kind of individual named, someone who has both believed and been baptized.

Also, notice that “*shall be saved*” (σωθησεται) is a future indicative verb. The description of the subject as “the believed/baptized-one” demands that his believing and having been baptized are current characteristics of the person named. Yet, “shall be saved” is future tense. Thus, being “saved” is promised to the person who is characterized as having believed and having been baptized. Salvation comes in response to a person believing and being baptized. This necessarily means that baptism is BEFORE salvation, not after it. The text does not indicate, “*The believed/saved-one shall be baptized,*” as most Baptists and other Evangelicals teach. Rather, it is “*The believed/baptized-one shall be saved.*” This passages promises salvation only to a person who has both believed and been baptized. Baptism is not superfluous; it is essential to the criteria Jesus laid out in the Great Commission.

We should ponder what Jesus meant by “believe.” What exactly should people believe? The obvious answer is, “the Gospel.” But, what exactly constitutes the whole Gospel Jesus commanded to be preached to every creature? He did not define what the “Gospel” was here. He only told them to go preach it. This necessarily assumes that they were already familiar with the content of the message. They already knew what the “Gospel” was, because they had been preaching and baptizing already since the days of John the Baptist. Did it include His statement to Nicodemus, that one must be “*born of water and Spirit*” to inherit the Kingdom? Did it include the “*baptism of repentance unto the remission of sins*” which both John and Jesus had been proclaiming? Most evangelicals would deny both. Why then did Peter, preaching the very first sermon in obedience to this very command, reply to those who asked what to do to be saved, “*Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ unto the remission of your sins, and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit?*”²⁸ On what basis can we excise Peter’s command from the Gospel, and truncate the plain Gospel presented on the very first day that the Apostles began to obey the Great Commission under the power of the Holy Spirit?

Up to this point, both John the Baptist and Jesus’ disciples had baptized many “*unto the remission of sins.*” No doubt, this was practiced when Jesus sent them out the first time

²⁸ Acts 2:38

to preach to the cities of Israel.²⁹ Why, when expanding the commission to include the Gentiles, should the disciples think that suddenly baptism was no longer “for the remission of sins,” particularly in light of Jesus’ statement, “He who believes and is baptized will be saved?” But, let’s see what Luke had to say.

Luke – “Then He said to them, ‘These are the words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things must be fulfilled which were written in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms concerning Me.’ And He opened their understanding, that they might comprehend the Scriptures. Then He said to them, ‘Thus it is written, and thus it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead the third day, and that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in His name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. And you are witnesses of these things. Behold, I send the Promise of My Father upon you; but tarry in the city of Jerusalem until you are endued with power from on high.’”³⁰

After personally baptizing by proxy for Jesus hundreds of people “for the remission of sins,” what would the disciples make of the statement that “repentance and remission of sins should be preached in His name to all nations?” Remember, the “Gospel of the Kingdom” that was preached by both Jesus and John involved “the baptism of repentance for the remission of sins.”³¹ Exactly how does that differ from the “repentance and remission of sins” Jesus now commanded them to preach to the rest of the nations? On this Resurrection Sunday, Jesus explained the reason He had to die, giving the disciples more complete knowledge of the Gospel. But, He did not revoke the previous Gospel and issue them a new one.

For proof that our understanding of the Great Commission is correct, we need only turn to the launching of the Great Commission.

Peter Obeys the Great Commission

On the day of Pentecost, Peter preached a powerful sermon to a large crowd of Jews gathered for the Jewish Feast. He powerfully proved from the Old Testament Scriptures that Jesus, the one they had “by wicked hands crucified,” was the promised Christ. They were “cut to the heart” by Peter’s sermon, and cried out, “Men and brethren, what should we do?” Their question betrays a desperate plea for God’s mercy, that they might be relieved from the guilt and penalty of this mother of all sins. Peter’s reply was in perfect harmony with all three accounts of the Great Commission. “Then Peter said to them,

²⁹ Matthew 10

³⁰ Luke 24:44-49

³¹ Mark 1:4

*'Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is to you and to your children, and to all who are afar off, as many as the Lord our God will call'.*³²

There have been various attempts to get around this passage by Evangelicals. The most common is to claim that the preposition “εις” (translated “for”) can refer back to something already accomplished in the past. That is, they would be baptized referring to their former “remission of sins.” The problem is, the preposition “for” (εις) connects both repentance and baptism with the result — the “remission of sins.” Therefore, either BOTH lead to the “remission of sins” or else both refer to a former “remission of sins.” If it is the former, then they were forgiven before they repented! If it is the later, then their sins were remitted only when they repented and were baptized. Also, keep in mind that the former preaching was “the baptism of repentance for the remission of sins.”³³ Repentance and baptism cannot be separated in such a statement. The only logical and consistent conclusion is that repentance and baptism resulted in the remission of sins.

The preposition “εις” implies progress to a point reached. The implied progress is always forward, never backward. When used with action verbs (like “repent” and “be baptized”), its inherent meaning of progress to a point is always retained. Therefore, “repent” and “be baptized” εις the “remission of your sins,” indicates that both repentance and baptism result in “the remission of your sins.” Any other interpretation is simply not supported by the biblical usage of this preposition. For those still not convinced that Peter preached baptism as the means of obtaining salvation, consider the following passage from the First Epistle of Peter.

1 Pet 3:18-21

18 For Christ also suffered once for sins, the just for the unjust, that He might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive by the Spirit,

19 by whom also He went and preached to the spirits in prison,

20 who formerly were disobedient, when once the Divine longsuffering waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was being prepared, in which a few, that is, eight souls, were saved through water.

21 There is also an antitype which now saves us — baptism (not the removal of the filth of the flesh, but the answer of a good conscience toward God), through the resurrection of Jesus Christ,

³² Acts 2:38-39

³³ Luke 3:3

This passage is seldom understood, but is rich in meaning. In verse 18, Peter explains that our salvation was purchased by Christ, being *“put to death in the flesh but made alive by the Spirit.”* This is also the symbolism of baptism according to Paul in Rom. 6, which we will cover later. Peter then indicates that Jesus, by the Spirit, went and preached to those *“in prison”* from the days before the flood. He then makes an interesting statement, indicating that the eight people saved in the ark were *“saved through water.”* The preposition translated *“through”* is the Greek word *“διὰ.”* It means *“by means of,”* and is usually translated *“by”* or *“through.”* The idea in this clause is that the water is what saved Noah and his family. The same water that brought destruction to the wicked is what lifted the ark to safety. Peter then stated that the reality of that symbol for us is *“baptism,”* which also saves us.

This verse explains the heart of the one submitting to baptism. The reason we submit to baptism is not to clean the dirt from our bodies. It is *“an appeal to God for a good conscience”* (NASB). The Greek word translated *“appeal”* according to Thayer’s Greek Lexicon means: *“1) an inquiry, a question, 2) a demand, 3) earnestly seeking, a craving, an intense desire.”* That is why we enter the water of baptism. It is not to testify to a conscience already purified. The act of baptism itself is *an appeal to God for a clean conscience,* through the *“remission of sins.”* Translations that have *“answer”* or *“pledge”* are simply wrong. That is not the meaning of the Greek word. Below is our literal translation of this verse from the Greek.

In the flood, “... eight souls were saved by means of water. This [water] also, (the reality of this illustration – baptism), now saves you. It is not the removal of the dirt from the body, but imploring God for a good conscience through the resurrection of Jesus Christ.”

This perfectly describes why 3000 Jews, who *“by wicked hands”* crucified Jesus, lined up to be baptized! What is abundantly clear from the context is that these Jews who asked Peter, *“what shall we do,”* already *“believed”* the Gospel Peter preached. They believed that Jesus, whom they had crucified *“by wicked hands”* was indeed the Christ, that He had risen from the dead and ascended into heaven, as Peter preached. Otherwise they would not have cried out, *“men and brethren, what shall we do?”* Their plea to Peter and the other Apostles was answered by Peter. *“Repent and be baptized ... unto the remission of your sins.”* As each of the 3,000 Jews entered the water, they were *“imploring God for a good conscience”* through the resurrection of Jesus Christ which Peter had just preached to them.³⁴ Their sins were not yet forgiven even though they had already believed. They

³⁴ cf. Acts 2:23-36

still needed to “*Repent and be baptized ... unto the remission of your sins*” after they believed the Gospel Peter preached.

Baptism According to Paul

Dispensationalists who appeal to Paul and his “Gospel” as the basis of their faith will get no help from him on the baptism issue. Paul’s teaching is perfectly consistent with what we see with the Gospels and Peter. We should begin with Paul’s own account of his conversion and baptism. It is common knowledge that Jesus met Paul on the road to Damascus. No doubt, Paul “believed” at that point. Luke records Paul’s receiving his sight and baptism by Ananias in Acts 9. Paul also told the story himself in Acts 22. Here are both accounts.

Acts 9:17-18

17 And Ananias went his way and entered the house; and laying his hands on him he said, “Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you came, has sent me that you may receive your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.”

18 Immediately there fell from his eyes something like scales, and he received his sight at once; and he arose and was baptized.

The purpose for Ananias’ visit in verse 17 was for Paul to *receive his sight*, and to be *filled with the Spirit*. **The result** of Ananias’ visit in verse 18 was that Paul *received his sight* and was *baptized*. Now, let’s look at Paul’s own account.

Acts 22:12-16

12 “Then one, Ananias, a devout man according to the law, having a good testimony with all the Jews who dwelt there,

13 “came to me; and he stood and said to me, ‘Brother Saul, receive your sight.’ And at that same hour I looked up at him.

14 “Then he said, ‘The God of our fathers has chosen you that you should know His will, and see the Just One, and hear the voice of His mouth.

15 ‘For you will be His witness to all men of what you have seen and heard.

16 ‘And now why are you waiting? Arise and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on the name of the Lord.’

There is no mention here of receiving the Holy Spirit. Yet, there is no question that Paul was *baptized for the remission of sins*. Remember, this is Paul’s own testimony. He got up and was baptized on the word of Ananias, who told him to be baptized in order to wash away his sins.

We can infer from the sequence of events the following things:

1. Paul already believed.
2. He had not yet received the Holy Spirit when Ananias arrived.
3. His sins were not yet “washed away” when Ananias arrived.
4. When Ananias left, Paul had been baptized in water and the Holy Spirit, and his sins were “washed away.”

The natural inference is that Paul received the Holy Spirit and remission of sins when baptized by Ananias.

Romans 6

The most important passage in Paul’s Epistles regarding baptism is Romans 6. We offer our verse by verse commentary using the NKJV translation. We do not recommend the KJV in this chapter, because it incorrectly translates several aorist indicative verbs as present indicatives.

1 What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound?

2 Certainly not! How shall we who died to sin live any longer in it?

The previous chapter ended with this point: the law was given to show the exceeding sinfulness of man. And where sin abounded, God’s grace abounded more. In essence, the law indirectly shows the magnitude of God’s grace by showing the magnitude of man’s sin that God is willing to forgive. Paul anticipates the question that arises naturally from this concept: “*Should we continue in sin so that grace can abound even more?*” The answer is an emphatic, no! The reason is that they have “died to sin” (aorist tense).

3 Or do you not know that as many of us as were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death?

This verse answers the how and when of verse 2. Paul reminds them how and when they “died to sin.” It was at their baptism. He also explains what baptism is, a partaking of Christ’s death. The preposition “εἰς” (unto or into) is used twice. They were baptized into Christ, being baptized into His death.

4 Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life.

Here the concept of burial is introduced. Not only were they united with Him in His death, but also in burial. The implication is that the old sinful nature has died in the act

of baptism and should remain buried, since they now walk as resurrected men. The preposition “through” (Gr. “διὰ”) indicates the means by which something is accomplished. That is, their baptism was the means by which they were buried with Christ into His death. It is more than an act of symbolism pointing back to something already accomplished. Paul equated the act of baptism with union with Christ and His atoning death. Baptism, therefore, is not symbolic of a past union with Christ, but is the outward act representing what is actually occurring that moment – the uniting of the believer with Christ and His atonement.

5 For if we have been united together in the likeness of His death, certainly we also shall be in the likeness of His resurrection,

This is a conditional statement. The outcome (apodosis), that the Roman believers will be raised from the dead in glorified bodies in the likeness of His resurrection, is dependent on the condition (protasis), that they had all been united together in the likeness of His death (baptism). The condition directly implies that baptism is necessary for their future hope of resurrection. In effect, Paul was making their all having been united together in Christ’s death, through baptism, the condition and assurance of their collective resurrection (at the second coming).

6 knowing this, that our old man was crucified with Him, that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves of sin.

7 For he who has died has been freed from sin.

Paul here explains what actually occurs at baptism. The ritual of baptism carries this purpose: that the “body of sin” might be killed, that is it dies and is buried in the water, never to rise again. “Body” is a metaphor (as also the “old man”), referring to the old sinful nature which was their former master. The old nature dies in baptism, so that they no longer are its slaves as they come up out of the water. This corresponds perfectly with the concept of “remission of sins” attached to baptism in Acts 2:38. The word “remission” means “release,” being set at liberty. That is, being freed from sin’s prison, being loosed from the power and hold of sin. Paul seems to have exactly the same concept here.

8 Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with Him,

As in verse 5, we have another conditional statement here. There is no question in this context that “died with Christ” is what occurred at baptism, based on vs. 3-4. Paul says that “we believe” those who were baptized will live with Him. As in Mark 16:16, those

with the seal of baptism are promised salvation. No such promise, in either passage, is implied for those who have not sealed their faith and repentance through baptism.

1 Corinthians 6

1 Cor. 6:9-11

9 Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived. Neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor homosexuals, nor sodomites,

10 nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners will inherit the kingdom of God.

11 And such were some of you. But you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit of our God.

In verse 11, three things are listed together in contrast to the Corinthians' former condition. First, all three verbs (washed, sanctified, and justified) are *aorist indicatives*. This means that the action occurred at a past *event*. "Sanctified" and "justified" are both in the *passive voice*, indicating the Corinthians were passive in their "sanctification" and "justification." Someone else (God) carried out the action of the verb, and they received the action. But, "washed" is in the *middle voice*, indicating that the Corinthians participated in both the doing and receiving of the action — being "washed." We could paraphrase this as follows: "*You washed yourselves, you were sanctified, you were justified.*"

The only possible explanation for their active participation in the washing (but not sanctification and justification) is that "washed" refers to their baptism — something one willingly does and yet also receives. If it referred to some kind of spiritual washing performed by the Spirit (cleansing from sin, etc.) it would be in the passive voice as well. The Corinthians could not wash themselves of sin.

Also, notice how that "washed" as well as "sanctified" and "justified" relate to the last clause: "*in the name of the Lord Jesus and in the Spirit of our God.*" "Washed" (baptism) is "*in the name of the Lord Jesus,*" and "sanctified" and "justified" are "*in the Spirit of our God.*" This is water and Spirit baptism occurring simultaneously! "Washed" is the outward part, in which the believer actively participates, and "justification" and "sanctification" are the inward works that accompany it in which the person is entirely passive. All this is done *in the name of Jesus Christ and in the Holy Spirit*, just as in Acts 2:38. Yet, baptism with justification and sanctification are held in contrast to their former state, and are together seen as the remedy for their former condition — being fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, homosexuals, sodomites, thieves, covetous, drunkards, revilers, or extortioners.

Galatians 3

Gal 3:26-29

26 For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus.

27 For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ.

28 There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

29 And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise.

Paul used the same terminology as Romans 6 — being “baptized into Christ.” Verse 27 states that those who were “baptized into Christ” have “put on Christ.” The verb “put on” means “to clothe.” Being clothed with Christ is dependent on being “baptized into Christ.” Therefore, this verse alone indicates that baptism results in two things: being “in Christ” and being “clothed with Christ.” Is there another way to get “in Christ?” The Scripture does not indicate such.

Ephesians 5

Eph. 5:25-27(Literal Translation)

*“25 Husbands, love your wives, just like Christ also loved the Church and gave Himself up for her, 26 that He might set her apart, cleansing [her] by **the bath of water in the proclamation**, 27 so that He may present her to Himself a glorious Church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that she may be holy and flawless.”*

While this passage is primarily about husbands loving their wives, it uses Christ and the Church as its model. There is a clear reference here to the Jewish custom of the ceremonial bath taken by the bride-to-be upon accepting the proposal of her future husband. The bath represented her putting away her past, and complete devotion to her future husband for the duration of the betrothal period. Paul draws a parallel to this custom, saying that Christ has cleansed the Church through the “bath of water.” The Greek word we have translated “the proclamation” is “*ρηεμα*,” which always refers to something spoken, such as a saying, a declaration, a profession, or a proclamation. It never refers to the written Word of Scripture. It probably refers to either the confession of faith at baptism (cf. 1 Tim. 6:12), or to the baptism contained in the Gospel message preached. Christ has set apart His Church for Himself through this “bath of water.” Notice that here as well as 1 Cor. 6, baptism is tied to “sanctification,” or setting the believer apart from the world for Christ Himself.

Colossians 2

Col 2:11-13

11 In Him you were also circumcised with the circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the sins of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ,

12 buried with Him in baptism, in which you also were raised with Him through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead.

13 And you, being dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He has made alive together with Him, having forgiven you all trespasses,

The “circumcision of Christ,” also “the circumcision made without hands,” is the removal of “the body of the sins of the flesh.” The verb “removal” means to undress and lay aside. This is the opposite of Galatians 3:27, “putting on” Christ. This “circumcision” made without hands is the “circumcision of the heart.”³⁵ It is a procedure performed by the Holy Spirit. Paul tells us when this occurs in the next verse, “buried with Him in baptism.” This is exactly the same phrase Paul used in Rom. 6:4. The idea there is being united with Christ in His death and burial by means of water baptism. The putting off of the “body of sins” is the death of the old man in baptism, leaving him in the grave, and coming up clothed with Christ. Through baptism “He has made [you] alive together with Him, having forgiven you all trespasses.” This is the “new birth.”

Hebrews 10

Heb 10:19-23

19 Therefore, brethren, having boldness to enter the Holiest by the blood of Jesus,

20 by a new and living way which He consecrated for us, through the veil, that is, His flesh,

21 and having a High Priest over the house of God,

22 let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.

23 Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful.

The “boldness” (v. 19) with which we can approach a Holy God comes from the “full assurance of faith” (v. 22). That assurance stems from our hearts “having been sprinkled” (a metaphor referring to the Old Testament practice of sprinkling vessels with blood as a purification rite) and our physical bodies having been baptized with “pure water.” How can this outward “washing” provide assurance of salvation unless it was connected

³⁵ Rom. 2:28-29

with salvation? The two things here that provide assurance are the same as being “*born of water and Spirit*” in John 3. Our hearts are purified by the application of Christ's blood by means of being baptized in the Spirit, and our flesh bodies are symbolically purified by means of baptism in water. These two things provide the assurance necessary for us to approach the Holy of Holies with boldness. Likewise, Paul instructs us to persevere in “*our confession of our hope*.” This is most likely a reference to that public confession and statement of our faith made at baptism.³⁶ Hebrews repeatedly warns us to persevere in our “*hope*” and “*profession*.”³⁷

Conclusion

Baptism is the tangible mechanism for responding to the Gospel in order to become a disciple of Jesus Christ. The requirements for baptism are: an understanding of the Gospel, belief of the Gospel, the willingness to forever forsake the old life, a willingness to commit one’s life to Christ and remain a pure virgin for Christ until the consummation of the wedding at His coming, a heart that earnestly pleads for God to clear one’s conscience of the guilt of sin, and a public confession of faith in Christ.

The benefits of baptism are: the death of the old nature, the setting free from the guilt and bondage of sin, the application of the atonement of Christ, becoming a “*new creation*,” putting on Christ's righteousness by imputation, the gift of the Holy Spirit, and adoption into the family of God which is the guarantee of the resurrection and inheritance in Christ’s coming Kingdom.

Basing one’s assurance of salvation on some extra-biblical act, such as a “*sinner’s prayer*” or a feeling, is risky business when God’s Word on this subject is so clear.

³⁶ cf. 1 Tim. 6:12 & Rom. 10:9-10

³⁷ Heb. 3:1,6, Heb. 4:14, Heb. 6:11,18-19