

Faith & Works

Misconceptions Regarding Baptism

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Physical vs. Spiritual Dichotomy — Dualism

One of the concepts of Greek mysticism that invaded Christianity, and continues to grip Christian thinking to some extent today, is the idea of a sharp dichotomy between the "spiritual" and the "physical." "Spirit" is seen as good, and "matter" is seen as inherently corrupt. This concept is typically called "dualism" in philosophical terminology. It was originally foreign to Judaism and early Christianity, but made inroads into both. In particular, it led to the various Gnostic pseudo-Christian cults that appeared in the second century. It is also a key reason why the modern Baptist view of baptism was developed by the Swiss Reformer, Zwingli, in opposition to all the Christian writers from the Apostles until the early 16th century.

In the New Testament, the term "spiritual" is frequently used as a synonym for the things of God. The terms "carnal" and "flesh" refer to the things of fallen man. Whether "spiritual" or "carnal" things are immaterial or material is not the issue. "Spiritual" things could be either material or immaterial. Consider the following example:

1 Cor 15:42-47

42 So also is the resurrection of the dead. *The body is sown **in corruption**, it is raised **in incorruption**.*

43 It is sown **in dishonor**, it is raised **in glory**. It is sown **in weakness**, it is raised **in power**.

44 It is sown **a natural body**, it is raised **a spiritual body**. There is **a natural body**, and there is **a spiritual body**.

45 And so it is written, "The first man Adam became a living being." The last Adam became a life-giving spirit.

46 However, **the spiritual** is not first, but **the natural**, and afterward **the spiritual**.

47 **The first man was of the earth, made of dust; the second Man is the Lord from heaven.**

As is apparent from Paul's reference to the resurrected material body as "spiritual," this term does not imply something immaterial. We see, therefore, that "spiritual" does not necessarily mean non material or abstract. The "spiritual Man" was Jesus Himself. And our "spiritual body" is not an abstract or immaterial thing, but this resurrected flesh renewed by the Spirit of God through resurrection.

Similarly, the terms "carnal" and "flesh" do not merely mean "physical." These terms simply mean the things of fallen man apart from the regenerating of the Spirit of God. When Paul listed the "fruit of the Spirit" in Galatians 6, he also listed the "works of the flesh" in the same passage. Some of the "works of the flesh" are abstract and immaterial. For example, some of the works of the flesh Paul listed are "idolatry, hatred, wrath, heresies, envyings." None of these are physical or material. Yet they are "works of the flesh" according to Paul. The bottom line here is that "spiritual" and "carnal" are not necessarily clearly distinguished by tangible vs. intangible, or material vs. immaterial.

From the time of the Apostles until the Reformation "baptism" was considered by all orthodox Christians to be the point when the new birth (regeneration) occurs. There was never any perceived conflict between the physical act of baptism and the "not of works" passages in Pauline theology, something frequently argued by modern Baptists.

The first to propose such an alleged conflict between baptism and "works" within Christianity was the Swiss Reformer, Huldrych Zwingli. His hyper-Calvinistic view of the sovereignty of God was partly the reason Zwingli invented the modern (Baptist) view, that baptism is merely an outward identification with Christ and a physical sign of a prior conversion. Zwingli strongly opposed the idea man has any part whatsoever in his salvation. Man was not capable of any response to the Gospel. Everything was of God. Hence, any physical act of response to the Gospel could not in any sense determine his salvation. That ruled out baptism. Calvinists took this to such an extreme, that even non-tangible acts of the person, such as believing or repenting, were considered "works." This led to the false assumption that God does everything related to salvation, including causing the person to believe and repent, thus man is entirely passive. Yet, having such an extreme view of God's sovereignty cannot alone explain Zwingli's new innovation regarding baptism, as Prof. Mark Moore, of Ozark Christian College, explains.

"All this raises an interesting question. Zwingli was not the first theologian to have a strong view of the sovereignty of God. Augustine and Luther are two others that come immediately to mind, both of whom touched Zwingli deeply. Yet neither of these, nor any other theologian for that matter, sensed a tension like Zwingli between sovereignty and sacraments. Thus, one concludes that there was something else in Zwingli's equation other than his view of God.

"That something else is his incipient philosophic dualism. Simply put, Zwingli believed that the flesh was evil, the spirit was good, and 'ne'er the twain shall meet.' He was not a complete dualist in the Manichaeian sense. Nevertheless, based on passages such as John 6:3 and Galatians 5:17, he saw a yawning chasm between the spirit and the flesh. 'As

*long as we are in the flesh, we are never without sin. For the flesh and the spirit are contrary the one to the other, so that we do not do the things which in the spirit we would do. . . . All who are in the flesh are sinful.' This is because the flesh is always evil. As he says, 'The flesh is mire; hence whatever comes from man is stained.'"*¹

The same premise on which Gnosticism is based became the presupposition of this new view of baptism.

Not of Works

Paul taught that initial salvation is "not of works." Does this concept eliminate any and all physical activity from connection with salvation? No. The supposition that Paul's "not of works" comments rule out all physical responses to the Gospel are not based on Scripture, but on the dualistic thinking of Greek philosophy that still colors Christian thinking to some extent. Paul contrasted "works of righteousness," which he explicitly excluded from salvation, with other physical acts which he stated plainly are connected to our salvation. Therefore, there are clearly physical acts that do not fall into the category of "works" as Scripture defines them. Notice in the following passage Paul distinguished between baptism and "works." Baptism is not a "work," but is seen in contrast to "works" in the following passage. "Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy He saved us, through the washing of regeneration [literally, "the bath of second birth"] and renewing of the Holy Spirit, whom He poured out on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Savior," (Titus 3:5-6 NKJ). The bath of second birth is baptism. It is contrasted with "works of righteousness." The former is explicitly included in salvation, the latter is explicitly excluded. Yet, both are physical acts. Another physical act was also included in initial salvation by Paul. "That if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes unto righteousness, and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation." (Rom. 10:9-10 NKJ). If, "not of works" means the exclusion of all physical action, then Paul has contradicted himself in both of these passages.

Conclusion:

Baptism is not a "work" in the sense that Paul used the term when excluding "works" from salvation. Baptism is therefore not to be excluded from connection with initial salvation based on the "not of works" passages of Scripture. Paul explicitly included baptism in our salvation process, and excluded "works of righteousness" in the very same verse (Titus 3:5).

¹ Moore, Mark. Zwingli on Baptism: His Incipient Philosophical Dualism as the Genesis of Faith Only