A BIBLICAL UNDERSTANDING

by Chuck Gianotti

Why Baptism?
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In all things, may the Lord be glorified. We pray His message of grace would resound loudly.

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

WHY BAPTISM?
A Biblical Understanding

Introduction

For the person who comes to faith in Christ Jesus, there is nothing more beautiful than the first step of obedience in baptism. Universally, Christians have practiced this ritual since the beginning of the gospel proclamation. Baptism is a simple public testimony of a changed life and an identification with Christ, the central focus of Biblical faith. This booklet is written to present what the scripture teaches on this great subject and to clarify some of the more common misconceptions and distortions about it.

Let me first share my personal experience in regards to baptism and then go on to look at what the Bible says about the subject. My parents dutifully had me baptized as an infant as part of their religious observance—though no faith of my own played a role in that event. However, as an adult I came to a personal, saving faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, confessing my sinfulness and trusting His death as a substitution for my sin. And I believed that God was fully satisfied with that sacrifice of Jesus on the cross for all my sin—past, present and future. I did not have a need of salvation because I had sinned. On the contrary, sin was an innate heart issue. What I mean is that sinning did not make me a sinner—I was by nature a "sinner," therefore the sinful actions of my life were symptomatic of a deeper issue. To use scriptural terms, I was spiritually dead (see Ephesians 2:1). I came to realize my need for a Savior (God) to graciously rescue me, a poor, destitute sinner. And He did, when I received the gift of life. I accepted Christ's death on the cross in place of the death that I deserved (John 3:16, Romans 6:23, Galatians 1:4).

Now, this was not just something unique to me or needed by just those who like me committed certain sins. The scripture says, "*All have sinned and come short of the glory of God*" (Romans 3:23 emphasis mine). In fact, the Bible says, quoting the prophet Isaiah:

> *There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands, no one who seeks God. All have turned away, they have together become worthless.* Romans 3:10-12a[1]

[1] Bible references are from the New International Version unless otherwise stated.

If this is true of Isaiah (who wrote this originally) and Paul (who is here quoting it), it most certainly pertains to all of us.

Now the consequences of this are clear: *For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life through Christ Jesus* (Romans 6:23). We (you and I) deserve death because of our sinfulness. However, salvation has been offered to us as a gift. A gift cannot be worked for, paid for, or in any other way earned. To do so would be to reject the gift as a gift, and make it something that was owed. The only requirement to becoming children of God is to "receive" the gift of Jesus Christ, which is eternal life. That is why the Apostle John wrote,

A gift cannot be worked for, paid for, or in any other way earned.

> "*Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God—children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God*." John 1:12, 13

I do believe the scripture teaches that baptism is important to the Christian life, but I do not think the scripture teaches that it is "essential" to becoming a Christian and being saved from a lost eternity. To make a mistake in understanding this has serious ramifications for life and eternity!

THE MANDATE FOR CHRISTIAN WATER BAPTISM

We'll first look at a broad overview of Christian water baptism and come back to the subject again later. The primary mandate for water baptism of Christians is found in Matthew 28:18-20:

> *Then Jesus came to them and said, "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."*

The goal of Jesus' command here is clearly to "make disciples." This involves two things: 1) baptism in the threefold name (singular) of God—the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and 2) teaching these baptized ones to obey the teachings of Jesus. The whole command is book-ended with Jesus' absolute and complete authority over all creation and His assured and permanent presence with His followers.

We conclude that being a disciple of Jesus means coming under obedience to Him with the promise of His presence in our lives.

The Importance of Water Baptism

The practice of water baptism has much support scripture. We can summarize as follows:

1) It was commanded by our Lord Jesus Christ (Matthew 28:18-20).

2) It was practiced by the early church (Acts 2:41).

3) It was taught by the Apostles (Romans 6:3-5).

What Water Baptism Means

First, baptism involves obedience, for our Lord clearly taught that His followers should be baptized (Matthew 28:18-20). Second, baptism involves identification with Christ, for a Christian is baptized "into the name of Jesus Christ" (Acts 10:48). Finally, baptism involves a public, outward witness, in that it demonstrates in a dramatic way that a person really is a Christian.

As with all drama, baptism is a portrayal of a reality—in this case that reality is the person's death to the old life and being raised to new life. Romans 6:3-5 speaks of spiritual baptism, the reality of dying with Christ to the old nature, and being raised again with Christ to the new nature.

> *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. If we have been united with him like this in his death, we will certainly also be united with him in his resurrection.* Romans 6:3-5

Clearly, these things don't happen at water baptism, so we must refer to the time when a person is "*baptized into Christ Jesus*"—that is placed into Christ, namely, Spirit baptism. However, the imagery of water baptism does permeate the passage, thus creating a close identification of spirit baptism with water baptism. The idea follows that water baptism is the dramatic playing out of the spiritual reality of being identified with Christ in His death and resurrection. Going down into the water symbolizes our death and burial with Christ. Coming out of the water symbolizes our resurrection and new life in Christ. The reality of these things takes place at the moment when a person trusts Christ as Savior and is born again.

Coming out of the water symbolizes our resurrection and new life in Christ.

The Order of Baptism

In scripture, water baptism always followed upon the faith of the person being baptized:

> *Those who accepted his message were baptized…* Acts 2:41a

> *As they traveled along the road, they came to some water and the eunuch said, "Look, here is water. Why shouldn't I be baptized? Philip said, "If you believe with all your heart, you may." The eunuch answered, "I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God." And he gave orders to stop the chariot. Then both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water and Philip baptized him.* Acts 8:36-38

Baptism as an Identification with the Triune God

In addition to the identification with Jesus Christ, baptism is an identification with the triune God. Though the word "trinity" does not occur in scripture, the concept of three persons in one Godhead does occur in scripture. In fact, according to the verse, baptism is into "one" name, yet three persons are referred to equally by this one "name", rendering the three (Father, Son and Holy Spirit) as having equal status. Such ascribing of an equal status in any regard would be considered blasphemous, unless the three were actually equal. How can Jesus, then, speak of God and any one else in such a manner that would equate them on any level, unless that other person was someone fully equal with God, and in fact, God Himself?

> *Before me no god was formed, nor will there be one after me. I, even I, am the LORD, and apart from me there is no savior."* Isaiah 43:10b, 11

LORD in small caps is the translators' way of indicating that the underlying word is the Divine Name, often rendered either *Yahweh or Jehovah* (see Exodus 3:14, 15 where God declares what His unique personal Name is). Isaiah records:

> *This is what the LORD says–Israel's King and Redeemer, the LORD Almighty: I am the first and I am the last; apart from me there is no God. Who then is like me? Let him proclaim it…"*
> Isaiah 44:6, 7b

> *I am the LORD, and there is no other; apart from me there is no God.*
> Isaiah 45:5a

> *To whom will you compare me or count me equal? To whom will you liken me that we may be compared?* Isaiah 46:5

Clearly God (Yahweh), who is the creator of the universe, presents Himself as unique and without equal. There is only one God. However, Je-

sus in the New Testament uniquely claims divinity on the *same level* with the God of the Old Testament:

> *Jesus said to them, 'My Father is always at his work to this very day, and I too, am working.' For this reason the Jews tried all the harder to kill him; not only was he breaking the Sabbath, but he was even calling God his own Father, making himself equal with God*. John 5:17, 18 – (the inspired commentary of John clarifies that Jesus was making Himself equal to God.)

This follows from what John affirmed at the very beginning:

> *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God….The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us*. John 1:1, 14a

Clearly, in the case of Jesus, He was *with* God and He *was* God.[2]

What is distinctive about Christian baptism is that it is an identification with the triune God, "*in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit*." Eventually, in the early church, water baptism was performed, more concisely, "in the name of Jesus" (see for example, Acts 10:48, 19:5). This was probably because the issue of Jesus' deity was not as much a concern at later times as it was among Jewish people in the area of Jerusalem. Ultimately, baptism is an identification with Jesus, who is God.

Baptism by Immersion

The word "baptism" is a transliteration of the Greek word "*baptizo*" in which means "to dip, immerse."[3] The example of scripture supports this idea of immersion: "… *Then both Philip and the eunuch went <u>down into</u> the water and Philip baptized him. When they came <u>up out of</u> the water …*" (Acts 8:39, 40a emphasis mine).

Water Baptism Doesn't Make a Person a Christian

[2] The same can be said of the Holy Spirit, but sustaining this assertion from scripture is beyond the scope of this paper.

[3] Bauer, Arndt and Gingrich, <u>A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature</u>. (University of Chicago Press: Chicago), 1958. s. v. βαπτιζω, p. 131.

Baptism is essential to *discipleship*, but it is *not* essential to salvation. The passage does not deal with the "essential nature" of what it means to have one's sins forgiven and to have eternal life. In fact, the forgiveness of sins is not even mentioned.

Baptism is essential to discipleship, but it is *not* essential to salvation.

Consider an analogy with a wedding ring, which identifies to the world that I am married. However, putting on a wedding ring does not make me married. It *symbolizes* that I have vowed to be faithfully married to my wife until death "do us part." Conversely, one can be married without putting on a wedding ring. The ring is, none-the-less, important in declaring my love for my wife and I do wear it. If I don't wear it, one might rightly inquire why I would not want to publicly declare my commitment and love in this symbolic way—but that has no bearing on whether I am truly married or not. While the ring is important as a symbol, we don't equate it with the actual marriage commitment itself.

In the same way, one must be careful to not equate the symbol of our salvation with "being forgiven" or "having eternal life." To confuse these ideas is a serious mistake. We will look at this further below.

Before we can go further on this question of whether baptism is required for salvation and the forgiveness of sins, we need to distinguish between Christian water baptism and the other baptisms mentioned in scripture. Along the way, we will look at how requiring baptism as essential for salvation is incompatible with 1) a correcting understanding of the various baptism passages and 2) the atonement and the great truths of justification, grace and redemption.

BAPTISMS IN THE BIBLE

Baptism by John the Baptist

John's message was clear. He was "*... a voice of one calling in the desert, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him'* " (Matthew 3:3). Christ had not yet come, and of course, had not yet died on the cross. John's baptism was one of repentance and preparation for the coming of Christ. He did not baptize "*… in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit*" or "*… in the name of Jesus Christ.*" And he clearly taught that his baptism was completely different and inferior to the baptism Jesus would bring, which was the baptism with the Holy Spirit and fire.

John's baptism had the function of demonstrating a person's repentant heart, which would prepare him or her for the coming Messiah Jesus: *I baptize you with water for repentance. But after me will come one who is more powerful than I …* (Matthew 3:11a). Implied here is the indispensable need for repentance.

Now, baptism was, in all reality, symbolic for John required of the hypocritical leaders to show proof of their repentance:

> *But, when he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming to where he was baptizing, he said to them: "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Produce fruit in keeping with repentance…"* Matthew 3:7, 8

The inspired writer carries this thought forward:

> *And so John came, baptizing in the desert region and preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness [or remission] of sins*. Mark 1:4 (see also Luke 3:3)

Now, since only God can forgive sins, there are some important facts left out of this brief statement by the gospel writer (in that the verse doesn't specifically say that it is God who does the forgiving). Some assert superficially that this verse means baptism causes the forgiveness of sins or that baptism is essential to the forgiveness of sins. There are significant difficulties with this view. John's statement to the religious leaders (see above) indicates that baptism doesn't bring the forgiveness. What was required was a changed life (what a "changed life" means will be seen below). Also, the verse can be interpreted to mean that it is repentance that brings forgiveness of sins.

John's baptism did not cause, result in, or prove the forgiveness of sin.

Also, in the view that this baptism brings forgiveness of sins, presumably, this baptism only deals with past sins. Why would John's baptism only apply to past sins? Does one need to be baptized continually for new sins? If one responds that baptism results in forgiveness for the "sin principle" or the "sin nature," then baptism would be the only thing needed, and Christ's death on the cross would then be superfluous.

The word translated "for" is the Greek word "*eis*" which can have a variety of meanings. This is true of all prepositions in any language, thus making them very difficult to translate. Depending on the context it can mean "into, to, in, at, on, upon, by, near, among, against, concerning, as." It can also denote purpose, result, direction toward.[4] A very natural understanding of the verse would be that when a person was baptized with John's baptism, he was putting himself in a position of being ready for forgiveness of sin, which would later be fully made possible through Christ's atoning death on the cross.

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[4] Bauer, Arndt and Gingrich, A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature. (University of Chicago Press: Chicago), 1958. s. v. εισ, p. 228.

So we conclude that John's baptism did not cause, result in, or prove the forgiveness of sin. It was a symbolic act, which prepared people for the coming of the Christ, the Messiah. Nowhere does the scripture indicate that John's baptism brought forgiveness of sin. Simply it was to indicate a repentant heart. And this repentant heart is what puts a person in a position to receive forgiveness.

In the gospel of Luke, John makes it clear about the preparatory activities required. In addition to his baptism, it involved sharing, not extorting and not falsely accusing anyone (Luke 3:10-14). Clearly, these were evidences of repentant hearts. Would we say that being guilty of one of these things would prevent one from being saved? Hardly! For which of us can say we are completely clean. James 2:10 says, "*For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it*."

So, if baptism is required for a person to be saved, then these other requirements of John would be essential—and in fact, keeping the whole law would be required. But, in this case, no one could be saved, because every one of us breaks the law. And, according to James, even the smallest infraction (whether extortion, not being baptized, or telling a white lie), disqualifies a person. The Apostle Paul asserted:

> *All who rely on observing the law are under a curse, for it is written: "Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the Book of the Law*." Galatians 3:10

He goes on to say, "*Clearly no one is justified before God by the law, because, "The righteous will live by faith.*" (Galatians 3:11). But, I am getting ahead of myself—more on this later. John, in trying to deter Jesus, said, "*I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?*" (Matthew 3:14). John's desire to be baptized indicates his submission before Christ as the "greater than me" individual he spoke of. There is no record that he was, in fact, baptized, but the point is moot. If he was, it would be a sign that he did not hold himself above the rest of the people who needed to repent and prepare for Christ's ministry.

Baptism of Jesus

What about the baptism of Jesus?

> *Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to be baptized by John. But John tried to deter him … Jesus replied, "Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness."* Matthew 3:13, 14a, 15

If John's baptism was to bring about or effect the forgiveness of the individual being baptized, then why would Jesus need to be baptized. He had no need for repentance for Himself, for He did not sin. In speaking of Jesus, the writer of Hebrews says:

For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet was without sin. Hebrews 4:15

Paul echoes this: *God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.* (2 Corinthians 5:21). The Apostles Peter and John both agree with this assessment (see 1 Peter 2:22, 24, 1 John 3:5), and they lived with Him for over three years!

> "If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us." 1John 1:8

Even Jesus asserted: "*Can any of you prove me guilty of sin?*" (John 8:46a). Christ was the only one for whom this is true. For everyone else, John tells us: "*If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.*" (1 John 1:8). The wisdom of Proverbs affirms this with the rhetorical question: "*Who can say, "I have kept my heart pure; I am clean and without sin"?*" (Proverbs 20:9)

Just to make sure the point is clear, we are not talking about occasional sin that a person may commit and then repent of. Jeremiah, the godly prophet of the Old Testament put it starkly: "*The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?*" (Jeremiah 17:9). Isaiah, another godly prophet of the Old Testament, agrees, and clearly included himself when he uses the word "us": "*All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags.*" (Isaiah 64:6a). The best anyone can do comes far short of what is required. While *we* all desperately need forgiveness for sin, Jesus does not.

Yet, Jesus was in fact baptized—what do we make of that? Note that even John protested at the thought, or at least the order of things. Let's let Jesus speak for Himself. His baptism was not "preparatory" as it was with the people, for He was the Christ for whom people were preparing. He says nothing about forgiveness of sins. Rather, this action on His part was "… *to fulfill all righteousness*." What does this mean? Since He never sinned, it doesn't mean baptism will bring a righteousness that comes from forgiveness. Christ was righteous in His own right and did not need to become righteous: *For Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God* (1 Peter 3:18a). John refers to "… *Jesus Christ, the Righteous One* …" (1 John 2:1). So, the baptism doesn't make Jesus righteous. Rather, in everything, Jesus was proved to be righteous—His life, from His baptism by John through His death on the Cross demonstrated that He fulfilled perfectly the requirements of the law, and was obedient to His Father:

And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross! Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. Philippians 2:8-11

Jesus was the fulfillment of the law, and His actions proved He kept the law perfectly. He came in human flesh, under the law: *But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under law …* (Galatians 4:4)

Further, while He did not need forgiveness of sins, Jesus' baptism was a way of identifying with the people who lived under the law. John's baptism was now a requirement[5]. In being baptized, Jesus initiated His righteous ministry of living under the law and becoming the atonement for His people by being the substitute on the cross for their redemption from and forgiveness of sin.

Of interesting note is that there is no record of Jesus ever baptizing anyone, a rather noteworthy omission if baptism were essential to salvation.

Baptism with Fire

John the Baptist predicted:

He [i.e. Jesus] will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor, gathering his wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire. Matthew 3:11b, 12

The word "fire" occurs 67 times in the New Testament, most of the time in reference to God's judgment, as is clear in this passage. The writer of Hebrews tells us that "*God is a consuming fire*" (12:29). The epitome of God's judgment is hell:

In a similar way, Sodom and Gomorrah and the surrounding towns gave themselves up to sexual immorality and perversion. They serve as an example of those who suffer the punishment of eternal fire. Jude 1:7

The eternal destiny of the one who rejects the gracious gift of life is clearly laid out in the final book of inspired scripture: "*If anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire*" (Revelation 20:15).

Baptism with fire means to be placed into or under the fiery outpouring of God's terrible judgment. The baptism of fire, being mentioned in the same breath as baptism of the Holy Spirit (in Matthew 3:11) presents an

[5] That baptism was a requirement depends upon the fact that John the Baptist was a prophet of God and had commanded the people to be baptized.

urgency at the beginning of the gospel story, the seriousness of getting the message right. The stakes are high.[6]

Baptism with the Holy Spirit

The baptism of Holy Spirit has been subject to much debate in the last 100 years or so. What does the scripture say about this? Clearly, John the Baptist predicted that "*[Jesus] will baptize you with the Holy Spirit* (Matthew 3:11). The analogy with water baptism implies that the Holy Spirit is the "medium" for spirit baptism, in the same way that "water" is the medium for water baptism. So John is saying that just as he (John) baptizes "with" water, Jesus will baptize "with" the Holy Spirit. But, what exactly does this mean?

> "[Jesus] will baptize you with the Holy Spirit" Matthew 3:11

Jesus provides us His own interpretation of this when He gives His final instructions to the disciples prior to ascending back to His Father in heaven:

> *Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.* Acts 1:4a, 5

He is referring to the Pentecost experience when the Holy Spirit was to come down upon the early believers in the upper room as they awaited Jesus' promise (Acts 2). Peter echoed this interpretation of what baptism of the Spirit was when he convinced the other Apostles that the conversion of the Gentile centurion, Cornelius, was certified by God by the coming of the Holy Spirit onto the new believers:

> *As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit came on them as he had come on us at the beginning. Then I remembered what the Lord has said: "John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit."* Acts 11:15, 16

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[6] Some today would deny that hell involves eternal torment, that it is unimaginable that God would create some men and then consign them to such an unspeakable fate. Instead, modern views range from minimizing such a destiny, whether fashioning an alternate (such as Purgatory) or denying the eternal state of the unbeliever (called "annihilationism"). But, such views, modern though they be, minimize the nature and extent of the depravity of a created being who rejects his Creator. Thus Jesus (God in the flesh) chose the harshest words to convey in the strongest possible terms the consequences of rejecting the truth of God (which was made evident in many ways). The Lord chose extreme terms to describe the extreme nature of God's wrath. Praise God, no one need to experience that, "*for the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life though Jesus Christ*." (Romans 6:23) and "*for God gave his only begotten son so that who ever believes in him will not perish, but have everlasting life*." (John 3:16)

This experience of receiving the Holy Spirit occurred as well with the Samaritans in Acts 8:17. In fact, the Apostle Paul speaks of Spirit baptism as having taken place for all genuine Christians:

> *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

> *And if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Christ*. Romans 8:9b

In Acts 1:8, Jesus said two things about this experience: 1) "*You will receive power"* (Greek: *dunamis*), and 2) "*you will be my witnesses*." The ability to live for and effectively witness for Christ are bound up in receiving the Holy Spirit. In other words, a spiritual change takes place and a person is energized with God the Holy Spirit when he or she becomes a believer.

Baptism of Infants?

There is no Biblical record of baptism of infants. Some interpreters attempt to prove otherwise from the following passage:

> *He [i.e. the Philippian jailer] then brought them out and asked, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" They replied, "Believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved—you and your household." Then they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all the others in his house. At that hour of the night the jailer took them and washed their wounds; then immediately he and all his family were baptized … he was filled with joy because he had come to believe in God—he and his whole family.* Acts 16:30-34

Yes, the whole household was baptized, which some imply could have included infants. But, notice that "he and his whole family" came to "believe in God." Those who were baptized were old enough to have the capacity to believe—which infants do not have.

Some have likened New Testament baptism to Old Testament circumcision, a kind of "requisite" for entering a new covenant with God. But I do not believe this is taught in scripture. Circumcision represented the law and was an "initiatory" rite that brought people into the covenant relationship with God. Circumcision was required. In New Testament times, there is indeed a new covenant, but we make an enormous mistake to liken this covenant to the old covenant. It is completely different not only in its substance, but also in its symbols.

First, let's look at how Paul addressed those who wanted to hold on to and teach that circumcision was necessary for salvation in addition to belief in Christ—such people came under the Apostle's most severe denunciation

and condemnation. To him, it was a *perversion* of the concept of justification by grace:

> *I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you by the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—which is really no gospel at all. Evidently some people are throwing you into confusion and are trying to pervert the gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned! As we have already said, so now I say again: If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let him be eternally condemned!"* Galatians 1:6-9

He repeats himself for emphasis, so no one will miss his point! Twice he says concerning the one who changes the gospel, "*let him be eternally condemned*"—even if that person is himself, that is if Paul changes his message from what he first preached! Later in the book, he makes it clear that he is talking about circumcision and keeping the law:

> *Mark my words! I, Paul, tell you that if you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no value to you at all. Again I declare to every man who lets himself be circumcised that he is obligated to obey the whole law. You who are trying to be justified by law have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from grace*. Galatians 5:2-4

What some have done today is substitute a new law, a sort of "Christian law," in place of the old law. And baptism, as a sign of the new law, has been substituted for circumcision as a sign of the old law. But, the principle, by any other name, still remains:

> *All who rely on observing the law are under a curse, for it is written: "Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the Book of the law." Clearly, no one is justified before God by the law, because, "The righteous will live by faith." The law is not based on faith; on the contrary, "The man who does these things will live by them." Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: "Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree."* Galatians 3:10-13

To treat baptism as an initiatory rite that is required and which can be applied to infants (or to the dead) is tantamount to simply changing the symbols and the names of things that pertain to living by the law, but still maintaining the principle of "law," the very thing Paul rails against in his letter to the Galatians. Paul asserts most emphatically that this is a perversion of the true Gospel.

We conclude that the New Testament does not teach infant baptism.

Baptism for the Dead?

What about baptism for the dead, a sort of "proxy" baptism? This is a major (or at least one of the more well known) distinctive of the Mormon Church. Their zeal and concern for the souls that have died is commendable, however, this zeal is misdirected on two counts.

The opportunity for salvation is available only during this life.

The writer of Hebrews makes a stark comment: *"… man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment"* (Hebrews 9:27). Jesus tells a story in Luke 16:19-31 of the rich man and Lazarus, both of whom died, one going to heaven ("*Abraham's side*") and one going to hell (a place of conscious torment). The point of the story is that upon death, the consequences are permanent, and fixed—the decision to trust God must be made in this life.

Although I do not accept it as authoritative, the Book of Mormon itself does *not* allow for salvation of the dead either:

> Alma 34:31 *Yea, I would that ye would come forth and harden not your hearts any longer; for behold, now is the time and the day of your salvation; and therefore, if ye will repent and harden not your hearts, immediately shall the great plan of redemption be brought about unto you.*
>
> *32 For behold, this life is the time for men to prepare to meet God; yea, behold the day of this life is the day for men to perform their labors.*
>
> *33 And now, as I said unto you before, as ye have had so many witnesses, therefore, I beseech of you that ye do not procrastinate the day of your repentance until the end; for after this day of life, which is given us to prepare for eternity, behold, if we do not improve our time while in this life, then cometh the night of darkness wherein there can be no labor performed.*
>
> *34 Ye cannot say, when ye are brought to that awful crisis, that I will repent, that I will return to my God. Nay, ye cannot say this; for that same spirit which doth possess your bodies at the time that ye go out of this life, that same spirit will have power to possess your body in that eternal world.*
>
> *35 For behold, if ye have procrastinated the day of your repentance even until death, behold, ye have become subjected to the spirit of the devil, and he doth seal you his; therefore, the Spirit of the Lord hath withdrawn from you, and hath no place in you, and the devil hath all power over you; and this is the final state of the wicked.*[7]

Some have asserted that salvation of the dead is what Peter had in mind when he wrote:

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[7] See also Alma 42:4,13,28; Helaman 13:38 (Book of Mormon).

He [i.e. Christ] 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.
1 Peter 3:18b-20a

First of all, the order of the events listed here makes it clear that Christ did not preach to the spirits between His death and resurrection ("made alive in the spirit"). This rules out the old creedal view that Christ "descended into hell and on the 3rd day was raised again from dead."[8] Even if one were to use this view to support a second chance for those who died in ignorance, in no way can it be said of those who died in Noah's day that they died in ignorance. God's Spirit had contended with them (Genesis 6:3), yet their sin was continually great:

The LORD saw how great man's wickedness on the earth had become and that every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time. The LORD d was grieved that he had made man on the earth, and his heart was filled with pain. Genesis 6:5, 6

God held them responsible for the flood. Even the Pearl of Great Price 8:19-24 (book of Moses) agrees with this assessment.

If any of those who perished in the flood were ignorant, they were willingly ignorant (see 2 Peter 3:5). This idea is supported by the fact that Noah was a "*preacher of righteousness*" (2 Peter 2:5) and by the length of time Noah took to build the ark. There was ample time to both hear and heed the huge warning of the flood to come.

According to our passage, what Christ did was "preach" (Greek: "*kerusso*" – proclaim, announce) rather than "evangelize" ("*euangelizomai*" – the usual term for "preaching the gospel/good news"). In Peter's writing, the Lord did not go to present the good news and give a second chance to the dead, but to make a proclamation. The best way to understand this is that as Noah was preaching the message, it was Christ, who is the Word of God (John 1:1) and whose testimony is "*the spirit of prophecy*" (Revelation 19:10) who was speaking through him.[9]

The Lord did not present the good news or give a second chance to the dead.

[8] Ephesians 4:9 says, "*What does 'he ascended' mean except that he also descended to the lower, earthly regions*" But, rather than referring to hell or even the Roman Catholic idea of "purgatory", the most natural interpretation is that the Apostle Paul is contrasting the "high" (verse 8) aspect of heaven versus the lower aspects of the earth.

[9] Another viewpoint, though less well supported, is that Christ, after He was raised from the dead, proclaimed to the spirit world the victory of His death on the cross.

Peter in another place says:

> *For this is the reason the gospel was preached even to those who are now dead, so that they might be judged according to men in regard to the body, but live according to God in regard to the spirit*. 1 Peter 4:6

The gospel (i.e. good news) was preached to people who are now passed away. But, the message to them is not being preached *now*, but "*was preached.*" In other words, the truth of God was made clear to people in the past, just as is today. For God will "*judge the living and the dead*" (1 Peter 4:5). Those in the past do not escape the judgment with a claim of ignorance.

The scripture does not teach baptism for the dead.

The lone passage that purports to teach baptism for the dead is the following:

> *Now if there is no resurrection, what will those do who are baptized for the dead? If the dead are not raised at all, why are people baptized for them?* 1 Corinthians 15:29

We contend that a "proxy" baptism is not being taught here, as the Mormon church asserts. First of all, if it did, this verse would stand alone and in unique contrast to the rest of scripture. To base a major belief on an obscure reference like this would be unwise hermeneutics (method of interpretation).

Some interpreters have suggested this could refer to the idea that in baptism we reckon ourselves to have died with Christ. But, that does not fit very well in the context.

Other interpreters have suggested this could be simply a reference to a practice the Corinthians had, which did not necessarily enjoy Apostolic support. If these interpreters are correct, Paul may have used this to further his chastising of the Corinthians for carnal living (as he does throughout the book). The Corinthians were off track in many areas, quite "carnal" as opposed to "spiritual." This letter of Paul's is the most "corrective" of all his letters. So, he uses this erroneous practice to show an inconsistency in their practices and beliefs. "How," as the argument would go, "if you Corinthians practice baptism for the dead, can you not believe in the resurrection from the dead?" In other words, what's the point in your baptizing for the dead (as you erroneously do), if you in fact don't believe the dead will rise again?

Paul at other times quotes from secular, non-Biblical sources to make his point without necessarily agreeing with those sources (see Titus 1:12). In Acts 17:22, Paul tells the Athenian philosophers that he recognizes that "you are very religious" (17:23) and that he "*… even found an altar with this inscription: to an unknown god*." Does this mean Paul approved of their religion? Not at all. He was merely using that as a launching ground for his

teaching: "*Now what you worship as something unknown I am going to proclaim to you*."

So also, in 1 Corinthians 15:29, Paul may be doing just the same thing, using something from the audience's practice to provide a spring board for his teaching. In this view, he is not affirming or teaching baptism for the dead, but simply using the Corinthian's belief in this practice, erroneous though it may be. This interpretation has much to commend itself.

Another possible interpretation would be that Paul is alluding to the fact that there were many Christians dying for their faith as martyrs. But, instead of the Christian "movement" dying out through persecution, there were new believers coming to faith continuously. As they obeyed the Lord in baptism, they began to fill in the ranks of those who had died. In this sense, baptism for the dead would mean new believers were being baptized and becoming disciples in place of those who died.

We conclude that the notion that a living person can be baptized on behalf of a deceased person is not sustainable on Biblical grounds.

IS BAPTISM NECESSARY FOR FORGIVENESS?

Now, let's look more closely at the subject of whether baptism is required for forgiveness of sins, and therefore whether it is required for salvation.

First of all, scripture teaches clearly that the only requirement for salvation is faith, which involves receiving the gift of God by grace:

> *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

This rules out anything that originates from us ("*not from yourselves*") or that we can work for and earn ("*not by works*"). Salvation cannot be anything which we can take credit for ("*so that no one can boast*"). It is a gift—free. All a person needs to do is receive it in faith.

There many things that issue from a genuine faith, such as a changed life and good works, but these do not cause salvation. Rather they are the result of salvation.

There are some verses that give the impression that baptism is needed for salvation, but a closer look shows that such interpretations are imported *into* the Biblical text rather than read naturally *from* the Biblical text. We have already seen above that many verses about baptism refer to John's baptism of repentance and preparation, which do not apply to those who have come after Christ's death and resurrection. John's baptism was not the "Christian baptism" that is incumbent upon Christians. We will now take a closer look at the other verses used to require baptism for forgiveness.

Verses that *Seem* to Require Baptism for Forgiveness

Mark 16:15, 16

He [i.e. Jesus] said to them, "Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation. Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned."

Baptism is linked here with belief and there is a result: salvation. But, notice that it is only the lack of belief that results in condemnation. Nowhere in any of the New Testament is there clear teaching that a person who is *not* baptized will be condemned or not saved. That would seem odd if baptism were required for salvation. We conclude that the "essential" event that leads to salvation is faith. Baptism is not required to ward off condemnation.

Why then does Jesus include baptism here? For the same reason John the Baptist includes a change of life to go along with his baptism. He wants tangible proof!

However, one must be careful not to confuse evidence with causality. The cause of salvation is faith, the evidence is baptism. Jesus was very down to earth in His teaching. What good is a salvation that passes for reality but lacks substance. James echoes this: "*Faith without works is dead*" (James 2:26b). Another way to put this is that a faith that does not work, is not faith at all. But, "works" are not the thing that saves a person. Rather, "works" are that which give evidence of the reality of a person's faith.

> The cause of salvation is faith, the evidence is baptism.

Luke 7:30

But, the Pharisees and experts in the law rejected God's purpose for themselves, because they had not been baptized by John.

The refusal of these religious leaders to be baptized with John's baptism was symptomatic, for it demonstrated a hardened heart, a rejection of God's purpose for them.

Acts 2:37-39, 41

When the people heard this [i.e. Peter's Pentecost message], they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, "Brothers, what shall we do?" Peter replied, "Repent and be baptized everyone of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call. Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day."

Note that it was only the Jews who were told to be baptized for the forgiveness of sins. Those who had cried out "*Let his blood be on us and on our children*" (Matthew 27:25) were now required to publicly disassociate themselves with those who continued to reject Christ. The way they would do this was by publicly identifying themselves with Christ, the one they previously had rejected. But, this is not the same as saying baptism is required for salvation.

Another view of this passage sees the preposition "for" as being the operative term. To require baptism for forgiveness of sin means you would have to interpret the passage to say this: be baptized "in order to bring about the forgiveness of sin." Prepositions are very difficult parts of language to translate because they have a wide field of meaning, which doesn't always translate precisely into another language. As noted previously, the Greek word "*eis*" can mean, depending on the context: "into, to; in, at, on, upon, by, near, among, against, concerning, as." The passage could be translated then, "be baptized upon or concerning the forgiveness of sins." This would support the idea that baptism symbolizes the reality that comes from faith. See Matthew 12:41 where "*eis*" is used in this same sense, "*they repented at* (Greek: *eis*) *the preaching of Jonah*." Here the idea of purpose cannot be the right interpretation: they did not repent for the purpose of getting Jonah to preach! They repented "because" of Jonah's preaching.

In English, this variation can be seen in the word "for," as well. For example, the poster that says "Wanted For Murder" does not mean someone is looking for a person for the purpose of committing a murder, but is looking for a person who has already committed murder. In other words, "wanted for murder" means "wanted because of murder." In the same way, "baptism for the forgiveness of sins" means "baptism because of the forgiveness of sins." And that is exactly what baptism signifies. It is an outward expression of what has already taken place in a person's life.

John 3: 3-8

In the gospel of John, Jesus makes what seems to be a straight forward statement, but which is subject to differing interpretations:

> *Jesus declared, "I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again "How can a man be born when he is old?" Nicodemus asked. "Surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb to be born!" Jesus answered, I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. You should not be surprised at my saying, 'You must be born again.' The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.*" John 3:3-8

Doesn't this passage say that a person must be baptized ("born of water") to be saved? A closer look will show this to be a forced interpretation of the passage.

The main thrust is "*you must be born again.*" Now, the implication is that a first birth is not enough, but a subsequent birth is required. This contrast is carried into the following phrase: "*unless he is born of water and the Spirit*." The natural understanding here is that "*born of water*" is the first birth or natural birth (which Nicodemus was thinking about), and "*born of the Spirit*" is the second birth, or spiritual birth. Obviously, one cannot be born *again* unless one is born the first time. This redundancy in expression is meant to strike a contrast to Nicodemus who had just replied, "*Surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb to be born!*" Jesus wanted to make it clear that He was talking about another kind of birth other than natural birth, but it was an experience that is as pivotal as natural birth. In fact, it is absolutely essential that a person be spiritually born again!

Notice, in this context, spiritual birth is not a repeated act any more than the natural birth is a repeated act. Jesus is speaking of a defining event which He later connects to faith alone, and not to baptism.

> *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. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son.* John 3:16-18

In this same chapter where Jesus says, "*you must be born of water and of the Spirit,*" He clarifies what is essential for eternal life and, by contrast, what is essential for condemnation. He says nothing about baptism here. To gain eternal life, the only thing that is required is faith. To "gain" condemnation, lack of faith is sufficient. If baptism were required for salvation, this passage would be guilty of a glaring omission. When Jesus is speaking so plainly, why would He not plainly have included baptism here? The answer seems obvious: Jesus did not include baptism, because it was not required. Faith is the operative word. This is affirmed again at the end of the chapter:

> *Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on him.* John 3:36

Interestingly, the Apostle John earlier contrasted natural birth and spiritual birth:

It is absolutely essential that a person be spiritually born again!

A person must not only be physically born, but also must be spiritually born.

Yet, to all who receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become the children of God—children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God. John 1:12, 13

Again, all that is required is faith, not "faith plus baptism." To force the interpretation that "*born of water*" in John 3 means baptism, would go against the natural dichotomy presented all along in John. In other words, Jesus is saying that a person must not only be physically born, but also must be born spiritually.

There is no reasonable basis for interpreting John chapter 3 to mean that baptism is required for eternal life. And there are no compelling reasons from any other scripture that would over ride this interpretation.

Acts 22:10, 13-16

"What shall I do, Lord?" I asked. "Get up," the Lord said, "and go into Damascus. There you will be told all that you have been assigned to do." … [Ananias] said, "Brother Saul, receive your sight! And at that very moment I was able to see him." Then he said: "The God of our fathers has chosen you to know his will and to see the Righteous One and to hear words from his mouth. You will be his witness to all men of what you have seen and heard. And now what are you waiting for? Get up, be baptized and wash your sins away, calling on his name."

Some say this means baptism is a "washing away of sin," and therefore required for salvation. But a closer look will show this is not the case. First, notice that prior to his baptism, Paul had already been given his sight back, had already seen the risen Christ, and had already been commissioned to be an official witness of the risen Lord Jesus Christ. This would seem a strange juxtaposition of events if baptism was a pre-requisite to salvation. Baptism was after the fact!

The grammatical construction of the sentence is important. While the New International Version gives the impression that forgiveness follows baptism, other major translations put a comma after baptism (see the RSV, KVJ, NASB, for example). This reflects the underlying Greek sentence structure. There are two participles, the first translated "arise" which more accurately should be translated "arising", and the second "calling." The first is linked with "be baptized", the second linked with "washing away your sins." What Paul is recounting is that Ananias is saying to him: "Arising, be baptized. Calling upon His name, have your sins washed off." This fits better with the Greek sense.

1 Peter 3:20b, 21

In it [i.e. Noah's ark] 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…"

First of all, we notice that the "salvation" of Noah and his family (eight people in total), was "through" water, not "by water." Water was not the savior of the people, but it was the judgment upon the people who rejected God. God saved the eight *through* the waters. The ark, in this divine analogy, was the "savior," and corresponds later in the passage to the "resurrection of Jesus." Therefore, the ark symbolizes Christ's resurrection. "The water was not the means of salvation, for all who were in the water drowned. The ark was the place of refuge. The ark went through the water of judgment; it took the full brunt of the storm."[10]

However, Peter does go on to say that "*this water symbolizes baptism that now saved you also…*" It might seem easy to see this as water baptism because of the mention of water in the days of Noah. But, if that were the case, then salvation would be by baptism alone—no faith is mentioned here—which would seem strange. However, there are so many other scriptures that link salvation to faith alone (i.e. John 3:16) that it would be very strained to set aside the abundance of clear passages in favor of a single debatable passage here.

Whatever the baptism is here, Peter is not talking about an outward, physical event, for he goes on: "*not the removal of dirt from the body*." There is no reason to think that Peter was trying to prevent his readers from thinking he was referring to simply "taking a bath." Rather, he is making it clear that he is talking about an inward event, "*… the pledge of a good conscience toward God*." This fits better with Spirit baptism, whereby a person is baptized with the Spirit into the body of Christ and given eternal life. This is effected (or energized) "*by the resurrection of Jesus Christ*."

So according to Peter, how is a person saved? He is saved by the answer of a good conscience, which is faith in Christ (whose resurrection proved Him to be the Son of God – Romans 1:4). This process is symbolized by the eight who were saved in Noah's day, by the ark, through the waters.

If one wants to see water baptism as the imagery behind this, the water one goes into when being baptized represents death and burial, which is the judgment of God against sinners—"*The wages of sin is death…*" (Romans 6:23). Emerging from the water, represents Christ's resurrection and that we are raised with Him to newness of life, through faith.

So far, we have seen that the verses some claim to teach baptism as required for salvation and forgiveness of sins, do not support that viewpoint.

The Holy Spirit and Water Baptism

[10] William MacDonald, *Believer's Bible Commentary*, (Wichita: A&O Press, 1989), p. 1088.

There are numerous occasions where the Holy Spirit came upon people *before* they were baptized, demonstrating that baptism was not essential to receiving the Holy Spirit. For example:

> *While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message. The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles. For they heard them speaking in tongues and praising God. Then Peter said, "Can anyone keep these people from being baptized with water? They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have." So he ordered that they be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they asked Peter to stay with them for a few days.* Acts 10:44-48.

Clearly, baptism was not required for the pouring out of the Holy Spirit. The people here received the Spirit prior to being baptized—and the Apostle Paul later makes clear the reception of the Spirit is tantamount to belonging to Christ and having life (Romans 8:9-11).

Salvation is by Faith Alone

Additionally, many passages overwhelmingly speak of faith alone being required for salvation. For example:

> *I tell you the truth, he who believes has everlasting life.* John 6:47
>
> *Believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved.* Acts 16:31
>
> *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.* Romans 10:9
>
> *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

These are all major junctures in the Biblical proclamation of salvation. If baptism were required, this would constitute a major omission, as well as a hopeless confusion of the truth. There is an enormous burden of proof to "explain away" this great oversight if baptism were required. But, in fact, baptism is not included because it is not necessary for salvation.

An Example from Scripture

On of the most telling stories in scripture concerns the repentant thief on the cross:

> *Then he [i.e. the thief on the cross next to Jesus] said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." Jesus answered him, "I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise."* Luke 23:42, 43.

Note, first, that the thief was not baptized.[11] Second, his salvation into "paradise" would take place "today." There was no "after death baptism" to occur that must precede the thief's being with Jesus in paradise. It would be forced to say that during that short time span (less that 24 hours) between the time of the thief's death and his entrance into "paradise" that someone was "baptized for the dead" for the thief. Clearly, the only thing required for this man was faith in the crucified Christ. And what a faith that was! The thief was looking at a Man who was beaten to a pulp and hung on an executioner's cross! It is a simple conclusion to say that there was nothing in the appearance of Jesus at that juncture that would warrant anyone embracing Him as a savior. The prophet Isaiah predicted this:

> *He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and familiar with suffering. Like one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not.*
> Isaiah 53:2b, 3

The faith expressed by the thief was profoundly spiritual, and came despite what he saw outwardly. He saw what Isaiah went on to predict:

> *But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed.* Isaiah 53:5

How is Baptism Important Then?

Baptism is important, but not for gaining eternal life. Consider the Apostle Paul's attitude toward baptism:

> *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 house 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 1:14-17

Paul was thankful he baptized only a few, a strange cause for thankfulness if baptism has saving merit. In fact, in this passage, he specifically excluded baptism as an essential in his gospel message!

If baptism is not essential for salvation, in what way then is it important? It is important as a first step of obedience to Christ *after* one has been saved. A Christian has been saved for a purpose, but he must be saved *first* before he can strive correctly for that purpose.

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[11] Presumably, the thief was not baptized before his moment of faith. Christian baptism in the scripture was always preceded by personal faith by the person being baptized.

What then is that purpose for which a person is saved? Paul makes this clear right after he spells out the uniqueness of grace and faith in bringing about salvation:

> *For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do*. Ephesians 2:10

Good works are why we were created—however, good works do not save us. People are sinners because we have failed to meet up to God's standards, we have not done the good works He has required of us. No amount of good works (like baptism or keeping the law) will get us saved. We are hopelessly deficient. Therefore, a change needs to take place, a change we cannot make ourselves, but that which only God can make in us. This change is called the new birth, being born again by the Spirit. By faith a person looks to Christ, the only one who can save, the one who said on the cross, "*It is finished*." God invites a person to repent and receive Christ as a substitute for himself. When a person does that, God saves him:

Good works are why we were created—however, good works do not save us.

The believer has died with Christ and has been raised with Christ into newness of life.

> *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. As the Scripture says, "Anyone who trust in him will never be put to shame."… "for, Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved."* Romans 10:9-11, 13

Paul outlines the tremendous transformation that takes place:

> *Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come*. 2 Corinthians 5:17

The saved believer has been made new. Now he is on track to get on with the purpose for which God has created him—to produce good works, that is, to live for God by following the ways of Jesus. The difference now is that he has the *ability* and *right* reasons for doing those good works.

You see, many people think that by doing good works, they will attain eternal life. Ironically, this is a very self-centered motive. There is simply no way around this, despite all their efforts and protestations to the contrary.

On the other hand, those who have been saved and know their forgiveness is secure have a completely different motive for doing good works.

They do it out of thankfulness, out of a full relationship with their Maker. There is a genuine motive to do good works, because their reborn nature clearly sees that as the right thing to do. This motivation is not self-centered, rather it is God-centered. They also have the ability to please God, for they has become a new creation in Christ. And thus they glorify God.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Baptism is important and is beautiful. Every Christian should take seriously this first command in following the Lord Jesus Christ. Water baptism is simply an outward, dramatic symbol, a public witness to the reality of God's grace toward us. It is a physical demonstration of what has happened when a person is spiritually placed into Christ for salvation (baptism with the Spirit). The believer has died with Christ and has been raised with Christ into newness of life. All this takes place when the person has placed his or her faith and trust in Jesus Christ, His death, and resurrection. In being baptized, the believer makes a strong statement of identification with his or her Lord.

However, baptism is not essential to becoming saved or gaining eternal life. One cannot rely on grace *and* rely on human effort for salvation. The two are not on the same level. Grace, by definition, is free[12], something unearned, not something for which we can in any way gain credit (Ephesians 2:8-9). Grace is not something added on to our works. This is true even though our works, including baptism, may represent our best and most sincere efforts to take us the rest of the way to God.

On what authority do I claim these things to be true? Jesus Himself is the final authority:

> *There is a judge for the one who rejects me and does not accept my words; that very word which I spoke will condemn him at the last day*. John 12:48

In the end, no denomination or sect will judge you or me. Not our parents, spouse or church leaders. Rather, Jesus Christ Himself will be our judge. Each of us will have to stand before our Creator and answer for how we respond to the question: Are you born again? Jesus said this must be true of a person in order for him or her to enter the kingdom of heaven! I pray that you will be able to say by faith, "I am born again and have eternal life through faith in the finished work of Jesus Christ who died on the cross for my sin."

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[12] Bauer, Arndt and Gingrich, A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature. (University of Chicago Press: Chicago), 1958. s. v. χαρισ, p. 877.