

# STUDY ON BAPTISM

## Reflections on This & That

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### 1 Peter 3.21 once more

A couple of readers complained that my remarks on 1 Peter 3:21 shed more shadow than light. Could I summarize? I'm good at making simple things complex so the complaint is legitimate no doubt.

Peter obviously believes that baptism is part of the saving process in which God brings people to himself in Jesus Christ. Because that's true, he says "baptism saves you."

Peter says that baptism saves people "by the resurrection of Jesus Christ." Saving power and virtue lie only in the once dead and now living and glorified Jesus Christ. It's him and that power that baptism links believers to.

Peter says baptism saves (there's no denying that) but it doesn't save in the way some might think. It doesn't save by taking away "the filth of the flesh." What did he mean by that? That's where my smoke was especially dense, apparently.

The physical descendants of Abraham through Jacob were the elect of God.

They were Abraham's heirs "after the flesh" (see 1 Corinthians 10:18, KJV and other versions, Romans 9:1-5 and elsewhere).

They consistently polluted themselves and violated the covenant.

God brought that covenant to an end and re-defined "the elect," bringing judgment and an end to a fleshly standing before God.

John came baptizing, aiming to bring Israel after the flesh back to God on terms of the existing Mosaic covenant. (See Malachi chapter 4.)

That's not how baptism in the name of Jesus Christ functions in faith. Those who were baptized in the name of Jesus Christ were baptized into someone who was the end of "the flesh" (see Romans 6 and early 7). NT baptism didn't cleanse "the flesh" and make it acceptable as flesh. It proclaimed the end of it because Christ was put to death in the flesh and resurrected in Spirit. So NT baptism was nothing like John's baptism (hence Paul re-baptized Ephesians in Acts 19).

"The flesh" and "the Spirit" are two ways of relating to God. Israel's profound need wasn't met by cleansing the flesh in some baptism that kept the Old Covenant structure alive. As in the "baptism" of Noah, God ended "all flesh" so in NT baptism, which proclaims God's work in Jesus Christ, God brought an end to "the flesh".

Peter is writing to Jews and reminding them that their life with God didn't rest in their being born after the flesh. They were not baptized to purge them as a fleshly nation of their apostasies. They were born again by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead (1 Peter 1:3).

That's the best I can do. It might be no improvement.

## Baptism and Grace

I've made the point on a number of occasions that in the NT people were called to be baptized to take on them the name of Jesus and so be saved. That being the case that's what we should be teaching and practicing. A reader wonders if Ephesians 2:8-9 doesn't exclude baptism since baptism is a "work" and we aren't saved by works.

Ephesians 2:8-9 was written by a man that the risen Christ had just confronted. That same man, now a penitent believer, was told to be baptized and have his sins washed away (yes!—Acts 22:16). That's the man who wrote Ephesians 2:8-9 so how could Ephesians 2:8-9 exclude baptism on the grounds that it is some "work" that undermined grace? That makes no sense.

Ephesians 2:8-9 was written by the man that started the Ephesians church (Acts 19:1-5). He met Ephesians believers, learned that they knew nothing of the Holy Spirit that was given by the exalted Messiah and his question is: "What were you baptized unto?" Because their understanding of the gospel was profoundly lacking he **re-baptized** these people. That's the man who later wrote Ephesians 2:8-9 to that very church. And would he write something that excludes baptism because it undermines grace? That makes no sense.

Not only was he baptized to have his sins washed away, he re-baptized people to bring them into Jesus Christ.

Believer baptism is the confession of trust in and commitment to Jesus Christ that in the NT brought a person into living and saving union with Jesus Christ. It is a believer's declaration that Jesus Christ died, was raised again and has been glorified. It isn't optional! It comes straight from God.

**Some of us bend over backwards to avoid it.  
Why don't we simply bend before God and obey it?**

## Baptism and Union with Christ

1. The first piece in this brief look at baptism said that baptism bears a powerful witness to the central truths of the Christian faith—the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and because this is true, it's very hard to understand why professing Christians would dismiss baptism as of little importance or as something we can take or leave. The second piece said that, whatever modern believers did, the New Testament treats baptism as a matter of great importance. It does this by the space it devotes to the subject and by linking it with the fundamentals of the Christian faith. The second piece also showed that the New Testament consistently links baptism with faith and never speaks of it apart from faith. It does this by repeatedly linking the words themselves and (as Beasley-Murray reminds us) by telling us that what is offered to faith is given in baptism. This third piece will take a closer look at the way baptism is linked to foundational truths of the Christian faith.

## **BAPTISM AND UNION WITH JESUS CHRIST**

2. The apostolic preaching and teaching offered to its hearers all the blessings of God. But those blessings were offered in Jesus Christ. Those who gladly received this message were anxious to enter into union with the Christ. This they did by faith, said Paul in Galatians 3:26-27 when they were baptized into Christ. “You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have been clothed with Christ.” The text speaks of faith, baptism, entrance into and clothing with Christ.

3. Romans 6:3-7 tells the same truth from another angle. (See the comments later for the Roman context.) These people had been “baptized into Christ” (6:3). This union with Christ is focused in their union with his death (“baptized into his death”—6:4). And they were baptized into his death “in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead...we too may live a new life” (6:4). Their union with Christ meant union with his death and resurrection but how does this text say they experienced that union? It says they were baptized into Christ. They were baptized into his death. They were baptized into *his* death that they might share *his* resurrection. To allow the text to speak its own message we need to allow the words to mean what they obviously mean. Union with Christ is offered to faith in baptism.

4. Colossians 2:11-13 speaks of a ‘circumcision’ which takes place “in Christ”. If false teachers were saying they had to be circumcised in their flesh (see Colossians 2:16-17), Paul is making it clear that “in Christ” they have already been “circumcised” with the circumcision that really matters. Not the one where physical flesh is cut away but one in which the “body of sin” is cut away. This forgiveness and newness is found “in Christ” (three times in verses 9-11). And how and when is that new life found in Christ? This is what the text tells us: “Having been buried with him in baptism and raised with him through your faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead.” (2:12) Like the Galatians and Roman disciples, the union of the Colossians with Christ involved their union with his death and resurrection in baptism by faith. In baptism—buried with him. In baptism—raised with him. And what led them to be buried with him that they might be raised with him? It was their faith in God who raised Jesus Christ (2:12). The Colossians experienced unity with Christ “in baptism by faith”.

## **BAPTISM AND FORGIVENESS**

5. There is only one who saves—God through Jesus Christ. There is no saving power in any human response (whether that is faith, baptism or honorable deeds). The apostles knew this! The Christ knew this! So when we read of faith, repentance or baptism linked with forgiveness or salvation we know there is nothing “meritorious” in them. There is no “legal heresy” taught by the Scriptures (“so much salvation for so much goodness”) but there is no conflict between salvation by pure grace and saying “yes” to that gift on God’s terms. Time and time again the NT explicitly links baptism with forgiveness. (If we find it linked with “union with Christ” we know it must be linked to forgiveness since if we reject union with him we suffer complete loss.)

6. People who wanted to have their sins forgiven were told “repent and be baptized...in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven” (Acts 2:37-39). They didn’t debate it, they gladly obeyed what they were told (2:41). When the persecutor Saul (Paul, the apostle) wanted to have his sins washed away in Christ, he was told: “And now what are you waiting for? Get up, be baptized and wash away your sins calling on his name” (Acts 22:16). He didn’t argue either, he just got up and was baptized (Acts 9:18). And we need to remember that this is the apostle who laid such a stress on salvation by pure grace as a free gift (Ephesians 2:6,8-9). Later, he re-baptized about twelve men because their first baptism was invalid (Acts 19:1-5).

The Ephesian church to which Paul wrote so plainly about salvation by grace apart from “works” began with men who were baptized a second time by an apostle who had been baptized to have his sins washed away by the gracious Lord Jesus Christ. To deny that the New Testament links the wholly gracious forgiveness of sins with the ordinance of baptism is to deny what the New Testament expressly says again and again.

### **BAPTISM AND RECONCILIATION IN CHRIST**

7. Christ came to heal; to bring peace and harmony between God and people and between people and people. We who believed and were baptized were brought into one Body with all that that means. We’ve made its history ours, its friends and enemies ours, its Lord ours. And we’ve come from all nations and every social level. Galatians 3:26-28 sees Jews and Greeks, slaves and free, women and men all baptized by faith into union with Jesus Christ who came to destroy all elitism without killing the joys of our various cultures. *Baptism is an act of judgment, done in the name of the Prince of Peace, against all that divides!*

8. The chaotic city of Ephesus (Acts 19:13-41) saw a little church begin when some humble and brave believers said “yes” to the “one faith” about the “one Lord” and were baptized with ‘one baptism’ into “one Body” guided to “one hope” by “one Spirit” under “one God and Father” (see Ephesians 4:3-5 and Acts 19:1-5). That church learned of the reconciling power of Jesus Christ which brought Jews and Gentiles together as one through and in his body (Ephesians 2:11-22).

9. Baptism, with faith in Christ as its motivating principle, is a confession and a commitment which all humans are privileged to make— “Whatever our backgrounds or condition, we need and trust ourselves to the One who died and rose again to save us.” It brings people of all nations together under God who was in Christ reconciling the world unto himself (Matthew 28:19; 2 Corinthians 5:19).

### **BAPTISM: A CALL TO A CHRISTIAN LIFESTYLE**

10. Critics of Paul's gospel were saying, “If God gets more glory by forgiving more sin we ought to sin more and get him more glory” (Rom 5:20-6:1). In dealing with that heresy Paul reminds them of what baptism means. He said Christians can’t possibly live in sin because they had been:

- + Baptized into Christ (6:3) who came to destroy sin and deliver them from it;
- + Baptized into his death (6:3) which was a death aimed at destroying sin and severing Christ's connection with it;
- + Buried with Christ through baptism into death so that like Christ they would live a new life (6:4 with 6:5-8,10,11,14);

### **Baptism won't go away.**

Baptism declares the faith of the one submitting to it. It tells the meaning and nature of that person’s faith. It means they not only understand certain truths about Christ but that they’re making a personal commitment to **him** and to the truths about him. In the NT these people that came to be baptized understood they had not been Christ’s and now they were giving themselves to Christ in a trusting and penitent faith. They didn’t know all there was to know about this Christ but they were saying that whatever it was that they needed, under and

before God, that this Christ was the one in and through whom they would get it. They didn't know in specific all that they would be called to give to God but they knew that whatever was to be given was to be given in and through him. While they didn't know in all specifics how their lives were to be lived out, they knew that they were giving themselves to Jesus Christ as their Lord and Saviour and that their lives were to be lived out in light of that.

But their baptism was more than a personal commitment to Christ in a personal confession because what they were confessing was objective reality and truth. Their faith commitment wasn't simply what they *believed* was true, *it was a proclamation of what was indeed true whether they believed it or not*. Had they never committed to Christ it would still have been true that he had lived, died and rose again to immortal glory and Lordship. Baptism doesn't belong to an individual and the individual does not give baptism its rich and complex meaning. **The individual commits to what baptism already means independent of any individual.**

**Baptism means what God, in and as Christ by the Spirit, has determined it to mean.** It means Christ's life and death and resurrection to immortality and Lordship and it means that the person of faith enters into union with all that Jesus Christ is and stands for and purposes.

It means that the elect of God have passed from the realm of the "old man" (Adam—as a fit representative of the human race that has followed in his steps and come under the holy and righteous judgment of God—Romans 6:3-10). They have come into the realm of the "new man" (the last Adam, the second man—1 Corinthians 15:45,47). It means they have moved from the old creation that is seen through the eyes of a sinful humanity and into a new creation (as seen through the eyes of Jesus Christ—2 Corinthians 5:17, Ephesians 2:10). It means they have passed from death and judgment to life and forgiveness in Jesus Christ whose death and resurrection they embrace by faith (Romans 6:3-10).

Baptism means that everything that fragments and promotes division among people (racism, sexism, nationalism, elitism in any form) is contrary to the unifying and redeeming work of God in Christ in reconciling the world to himself (Galatians 3:26-28, Colossians 1:20).

It doesn't matter that people are ignorant of these things and so much more. The response to such ignorance is not to refuse to teach these truths. That only furthers the ignorance. It doesn't matter that they are ignorant of these things—if they're true they should be taught and people should be nurtured in them. While leaning on the NT itself, it isn't for nothing that believing people down the centuries have continued to hold baptism (along with the Supper and the proclamation of the Word) as vitally important and the invariable response to the gospel.

There are those who for one reason or another now speak dismissively of the ordinance of baptism. This state of affairs has developed step by step. Some of them grew weary of hearing baptism talked about as if it were the Saviour himself, and rightly protested. They rightly began to stress truths that were being neglected but before long they were receiving with full approval even people who **resolutely refuse** to honor God in the ordinance he ordained.

Then the "mode" of baptism became unimportant (why would **how** you do a thing matter if the thing itself is of little consequence?) and now they approve a "baptism" that takes place in the absence of faith. For a while they continued to say baptism is important but it's hard to persuade people that you believe something is important when you show in general speech and practice that it's unimportant.

And what may be even more disturbing, in trying to make baptism **less** important they are now approving of a "baptism" (infant) where the simple application of water in the absence of personal faith does what the NT says can only happen in the presence of faith. They must now construct a whole new theology about an infant's baptism, which is the application of

water in the absence of personal faith. Some now accept that baptism in the place of a faith-baptism and believe it has a retrospective effect. They don't want to jettison baptism altogether (how could that sincerely be possible in light of the NT?) so they're willing to regard the sprinkling of infants as acceptable obedience. *Baptismal regeneration is coming home*. This makes more of baptism than the Scriptures do and introduces something foreign to the NT scriptures.

It's vital and perfectly appropriate to let God have the final word about *everything* but it is never right or safe to allow anyone—however popular—or anything—however pervasive—to move us from faithful allegiance to the whole counsel of God. Bigger congregations, friendlier relations, a better reputation and (an uneasy) "unity"—some things are bought at too great a price.

## **Baptism: Bonfires and Passovers**

1. The power of public ordinances is hard to exaggerate and it's only when we're not thinking or not thinking clearly that we dismiss them. All over Northern Ireland on the 11th and 12th of July bonfires burn, flags fly, people dance, curbs are painted, streamers flutter and tens of thousands march to selected locations to listen to passionate speakers defend the union between Northern Ireland and Great Britain. These celebrations keep alive the memory of two major battles (Boyne and Aughrim) which shaped the future of Northern Ireland. For those to whom the union is a passionate concern, the bonfires, marches and speeches are vitally important. They remind them who they are, what dangers they were rescued from and what their responsibilities are to those who will come after them. Others might despise the flag-waving and bonfires but no one who cherishes the union dismisses these public traditions.

2. The greatest secular holiday of the United States is 'Independence Day' (July 4th) when people get involved in fireworks displays, picnics, speeches, and all the trappings of a public festival. Foreigners might sniff at all this but no patriotic American ridicules these public acts which commemorate the birth of the new Republican nation.

3. Yom Kippur and Passover, two of the main public observances of the Jewish people, remind them who they are and what is required of them. By these and other ordinances and festivals their history is retold and their identity is preserved and their purposes are focused. It wouldn't enter the head of a pious Jew to dismiss these rites and ordinances. To despise them would be to despise the truths and the God they proclaim. To forget them would be to forget one's roots, heritage and identity. That's not hard to understand. What is hard to understand is the way many who profess allegiance to Jesus Christ can dismiss baptism (or Holy Communion) as of little consequence. In doing this, they not only set aside the strong witness of the New Testament and the early Church, they belittle a powerful voice for Christ. (More about this shortly.)

4. This belittling of baptism is a modern thing. It isn't viewed this way in the New Testament. (The famous British scholar, F.F. Bruce, reminded us that the New Testament book of Acts knows nothing of unbaptized Christians.) You only have to read the book of Acts to see the importance placed on it by the apostles and the early Church. Nor should we think that it lost its important place as soon as the apostles died. It did not. Believers in every age down the centuries acknowledged it to be what the New Testament teaching and practice claimed it to be. This is common knowledge among those who have read 'Church History' literature. All the illustrious people in church history, whatever their differences in details, insisted that this ordinance was from the Sovereign Lord and must be treated as such. We might pass by the witness of the Church down the centuries and rest only on New Testament writings but the single voice of interpreters down the years adds assurance that we're hearing the NT correctly.

## **THE POWER & PURPOSE OF ORDINANCES**

5. Like every other public ordinance or festival, baptism proclaims the power of something or someone else. When ancient Jews put blood on their doorposts, they did so because of some prior truth or reality. (See Exodus 12 for yourself.) The act made sense because of the word they received from God. The bonfires in Northern Ireland make sense because of the victories of Aughrim and Boyne and the public celebrations in America on July 4th take their meaning and strength from the way democracy and full citizenship are received by the Americans.

6. This is true even at a personal level. A pair of baby shoes, an old photograph, a well-worn toy or a train ticket-any of these can keep alive and vibrant, memories which strengthen, cheer or inspire. Flora McDonald and her mother were buried in two sheets which were used only once before becoming their shrouds. 'Bonnie Prince Charlie' escaping from his enemies had spent the night in their home. When he left the two women reverently folded the sheets on his bed and put them aside for the day of their burial. 'Outsiders' would see only a worn out doll, a grubby train-ticket or a perfectly ordinary pair of bed-sheets. But to those who were in the know, these were 'sacraments'.

7. Baptism as an ordinance came from the Lord and those who trusted him and received him as Lord saw baptism as others couldn't. Those who wished to give their allegiance to him were baptized. Those who rejected him rejected baptism in his name. Those who saw baptism as something important and to be obeyed saw it that way because they saw something in him that filled the ordinance with deep significance and sacredness. They had no praise or reverence for baptism in and of itself because they never thought of baptism in and of itself. They thought of it in relation to him.

8. It would be a terrible mistake to isolate the ordinances and ceremonies from their origins. That would be contrary to what God wants. In Exodus 12:26, for example, we read: "And when your children ask you, "What does this ceremony mean?" then tell them..." The ordinances were not ordained so that Israel would have something to do-they told things about God, about his character and his rescuing Israel from slavery. It was part of Israel's failure that sometimes the rites were observed when their true significance had been forgotten and allegiance to one God (Yahweh) had vanished.

9. But they were meant to teach Israel of their roots; to remind them that they had not delivered themselves; to drum into their minds who had delivered them from what and to instruct them so they could live an ordered life under Yahweh. The rites and festivals, the ceremonies and sacrifices were not lifeless, joyless observances which 'had to be done because God commands them'. They were precious links with the past; they were national reminders of their continuing dignity and destiny. The Israelites felt honored to be allowed to observe them and God, their God, was at the centre of all their humble submission

## **BAPTISM AS A WITNESS TO JESUS CHRIST**

10. You can't baptize a believer without proclaiming the grace of God which was shown in the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ (see 1 Corinthians 15:1-3).

11. In the centuries following the apostles, Christians occasionally built their baptisteries with eight sides. The number eight was well established as the number which spoke of 'a new beginning' or 'resurrection'. These early believers wanted to stress the 'resurrection' aspect of baptism as well as the death and burial aspects (see all three aspects in Romans 6:3-7). And the custom to have those being baptized enter the baptistery at one end and come out another and

then to be robed in a white garment became common. Again, the death and resurrection aspects of baptism are prominent. In these ways the central events concerning the central figure of the Christian faith were heralded as part of the Christian faith each time a person was baptized.

12. From the very beginning, Christians have claimed that there is no other person but Jesus by whom people can be saved ([Acts 4:12](#)). That was what the Church witnessed to the world. They did it by their lives, by engaging in Holy Communion and in their teaching and proclamation. But they did it by the ordinance of baptism as well. Anyone who was baptized and anyone who witnessed it would hear the name of Jesus Christ associated with this person becoming a Christian.

13. You only need to read [Acts 2:38](#); [8:12](#); [19:5](#); [22:16](#) and elsewhere to see how 'the name of Jesus Christ' is proclaimed at baptism. The 'name' of a person in Scripture stands for the person as it very often does with us.

14. Just before he returned to heaven, the resurrected Lord said this to his followers: "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 will be with you always, to the very end of the age." ([Matthew 28:18-20](#)).

15. Baptism is here aligned with the whole Godhead into whom believers are to be baptized. The Son not only commands that this be done by his authority, his name is rooted firmly in that awesome company. The ordinance bears witness to the exalted person and nature of him whom we know as Jesus of Nazareth.

16. This command is universal in scope. (It is for "all nations".) It is timeless in duration. (He would be with them to do it "always, to the very end of the age.") It is the desire and will of Christ himself. ("All authority...has been given to me. Therefore go...") It should be enough that he has commanded it. It should be enough that he desires it. Both are true! Baptism cannot be administered without the Lordship of Jesus Christ being proclaimed. Since he desires it and has commanded it, we ought to gladly and humbly fulfill it.

## **Baptism: Ignorance and Ignorance**

### **Must I have all the answers?**

One of my weaknesses in earlier years as a Christian and as a student of scripture was that I felt I had to have all the answers to all the dilemmas. Take the case of those who truly have never heard the gospel of Christ but who live exemplary lives and walk well in the best light they have. What about them? I'm not interested at this point in developing my view on that question (that'll keep for another time if it suits God) but it does generate serious and complex questions. What am I to say about them? That's a good question and needs addressed but there's a more pressing question I think: what is that to me since I have heard? The ignorance of those people makes not an ounce of difference to my case because I have heard the voice of God in the gospel of Christ and the ignorance of some lovely Christ-believers about baptism is nothing to me for I have heard the voice of God in scripture.

### **There is ignorance that is culpable.**

All ignorance is not the same ignorance. Not only are there differing degrees of ignorance there are differing kinds of ignorance. If the head of a nation or a corporation were to order her subordinates to do something they all know is dishonorable we would judge her dishonorable. And if she claimed she knew nothing about the deed because, in fact, she had given her subordinates express instructions to tell her nothing about it being carried out we would still think her dishonorable. In truth, in such a case we would judge her behavior more

dishonorable because she was sly in her dishonor. If she was brought in front of a tribunal it might be the case that she is telling the truth when she says she has no knowledge of a specific act or transaction within the overall enterprise. We would judge that ignorance culpable. She is in the dark because she wanted and even ordered the darkness and we would hold her responsible for her ignorance. The above is relatively simple and uncontroversial. Other questions would be generated by the situation I've imagined but we'd have no trouble in finding the claim of "ignorance" to be inexcusable.

**There is ignorance that is not culpable.**

Then there is ignorance that is the sheer lack of knowledge. A mother feeds her child poisoned food that she bought in her usual shop and is inconsolable when the doctors can do nothing and the child dies. An appropriate person tells a man with critically important documents that they are to be delivered to a certain place at a certain time. It turns out to be the wrong place and the wrong time and an important business contract is lost. Rather than feel ill toward this mother or this messenger we feel sadness because their ignorance was not the result of negligence or carelessness. In fact, in these cases they both trusted appropriate people. They did not know the truth and they did not know that they did not know the truth. If these illustrations don't suit you it won't be difficult for you to set up your own true-to-life cases.

**There is ignorance that makes us scratch our head.**

In between these two extremes there is ignorance that we have qualms about. There's a wife that has some reason to think her husband's business dealings are crooked but she doesn't want to know any more in case she discovers her uneasiness is well grounded. There's the case where a man is conned by shrewd talkers into investing his money and losing every penny. When he tells his story we are filled with sympathy but then someone points out that he was driven by greed to the point where he ignored the obvious risks and we now wonder. Then there's the man who needs immediate First Aid and dies because the people around him are ignorant as to how to help. These people could have at some point taken the many free courses on First Aid that they knew were offered but for one reason or another they just didn't want to. Someone slays himself and his friend laments, "It's all so obvious now. I just didn't recognize the signals he was sending out." Instead of gluing himself to the television and re-runs he could have read up on counseling skills. But where would this all end? Must we become walking encyclopedias in every area? Surely not, but is there the other extreme, where because we are lazy and self-serving we spurn easily available knowledge that would enable us to help those in need? Again, if these illustrations don't make my point you make it for me by setting up situations that are true to life.

**If an angel came.**

Truth remains true even if I am ignorant of it. Truth remains true even if for some good reason I am not held responsible for my ignorance of it. The food was poisoned even though the mother was completely ignorant of it. The signal light was faulty though there was no way for the train-driver to know it.

Even if a truth-telling angel came from God to say that under certain circumstances God would tolerate ignorance about the gospel or about the virgin birth or bodily resurrection or atoning death of Christ, how would that alter the gospel? Not an ounce!

And what would we who have been privileged to know the truth on these matters be required to believe? And to preach? And to live out? In our anxiety to allow for the ignorance of some people we're saying silly things. Instead of doing that let God handle the ignorance question! It's not for us to settle all the arguments. Our business is to thank God for truth revealed and live it out in life and proclamation to all we come into contact with.

And listen, the cure for their ignorance (or ours) is not a gutless silence, or any other kind of silence!

### **Ignorance and God's mercy.**

There's a Jew in Alexandria, in Egypt, who has loved the Lord with a trusting heart from his childhood. He's a humble and kind man whose service to God fills him with joy but in the past five years he has been severely disabled due to an accident. He doesn't get to Jerusalem now and he misses it terribly; but he loves the Lord and he is saved by faith. There's nothing at all controversial about any of that.

In Jerusalem it's around 9 a.m. on Pentecost morning and while our Alexandrian believer sits prayerful and thinking, hundreds of miles away Peter is proclaiming the truth about Jesus Christ to over three thousand Jews. Peter is now saying, "Therefore, let all the house of Israel know with assurance that God has made this same Jesus, the one you crucified, both Lord and Christ" (Acts 2:36) and our North African Jew is blissfully ignorant. A multitude of his fellow-Jews, convicted of sin cry out, "Men and brethren what shall we do?" and Peter tells them to repent and be baptized in the name of that Jesus for the remission of their sins. And more than three thousand men and women eagerly do it. Our Jew in Alexandria is oblivious to it all and is quietly praising the name of the God of his fathers. What is his state before God now?

A little before nine, Jerusalem time, he was right with God. What happened to his relationship with God when Peter proclaimed the forgiveness of sins and the reception of the Holy Spirit through repentance and baptism in the name of the now glorified Christ? It's 10 a.m. and is he now lost? Peter preached the gospel and a saved man automatically became lost? Whatever we say we believe, for fear of opening doors that should be kept closed, we know in our bones that our friend can't be doomed. It's true he hasn't yet trusted in Christ and so been baptized and taken on the name of Jesus Christ. But his ignorance isn't chosen and his heart has embraced and loved the truth he knows of God and he is a saved man. (And although he isn't aware of it he is saved by the grace Yahweh has extended to him in Jesus Christ.)

Now, looked what has happened here. I sketched an imaginary situation and immediately questions are generated because the situation is complex. But what difference does it make to the people in Jerusalem under Peter's preaching? What difference does the disabled Alexandrian's ignorance make to the Jerusalem multitude? No one in the three thousand plus (Acts 2:41) jumped up and asked, "So what does this mean for my sick parents who couldn't make it here today to hear this?" It's only modern people that raise such questions. Peter must have known there were absent God-loving Jews but what had that to do with his Spirit-inspired message?

To claim that genuinely ignorant and godly people are exempt from having to believe or be baptized into Christ because they don't know they're called to and therefore can't—that's one thing. To shape our message so as to keep them ignorant or to shape our message to excuse those who know but won't humbly submit to God in the matter is something else. Those people that reject God's call are in trouble and those who help them to continue their refusal are in trouble as well (compare Matthew 5:19 and Luke 7:29-30).

It doesn't matter how popular or eloquent the preacher or how thriving the church that does it, don't permit anyone to keep you from submitting your heart and mind to Christ in this matter. Think noble things of God because he will work out the whole matter of "what if?" You know you can trust him to do that, don't you? Well, commit yourself in trust to him and if you haven't already done so, have yourself baptized into the Blessed Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ as he and his apostolic servants have called us to do.

## **Baptism: No trivial issue.**

Tell someone you believe baptism is a part of God's saving process and you're accused of believing in self-salvation. We hear words like Pelagianism and the heresy of salvation by good works. Tell someone you believe it is merely symbolic and a witness to a salvation already gained before and without baptism and you're likely to be told that you don't love God, aren't interested in obeying him and that you're undoubtedly hell bound.

There are those who despite knowing it is called for in the New Testament have no opinion on baptism at all, which I suppose is really an opinion on baptism. They see it as an ordinance without significance; well, except for those who care to invest it with significance. They don't practice it nor do they care that they don't practice it so when they hear robust dialogue about it they wonder what all the fuss is about.

Those who see it as part of the whole conversion experience press it hard on people and marshal texts to prove that it is part of the saving process. Those who think it's an "outward sign" of an already experienced "inward grace" of salvation argue just as fervently to prove their case and deny the other. If both sides in the disagreement are sensitive they tend to avoid talking about it for fear of distressing someone. It's like talking about crazy Uncle Charlie in the presence of highbrow strangers.

And again, those who think the whole thing is a waste of good time and energy piously get on with "the real heart of Christianity" and wonder why the debates go on and on. (I can't help remembering that one momentous night when the world was hungry and just as lost as now the Savior took twelve men aside in an upper room and engaged in a "church ordinance". Only a silly person thinks baptism (or Holy Communion) is a trivial issue. They didn't learn this silliness from the New Testament.)

What strikes me with real force is that none of the above happens in the New Testament. First of all, you simply can't read the New Testament and think baptism is a trivial issue. I won't stop to cite texts because that would be to kill a corpse. Whatever else we get from the New Testament record, no one sighs and says, "Oh dear, more talk about church ordinances when the world is starving and lost. What a pity we have to descend to the trivial issues." Those whose reading of the New Testament shows them that baptism is a very significant matter shouldn't pretend it is otherwise neither should we intentionally give others the impression that we think it is unimportant or trivial.

Then there's this. No one in the New Testament ever tries to prove anything about baptism, they simply call for it and those who are called obey it. Did thousands want to be right with God in Christ? They were told to repent and be baptized for forgiveness and the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:37-38). Were Christians with a Jewish background confused about their responsibility to the torah? They were reminded of their baptism into Christ (Romans 6:3-7 and Galatians 3:26-27). Was a penitent persecutor waiting to be told what to do to have his sins washed away and enter a living adventure as an apostle? He was told to wait no longer but get himself baptized to wash away his sins, calling on the Lord's name (Acts 22:16). Neither Peter nor Ananias nor Paul was attempting to prove anything about baptism and the people who obeyed didn't ask, "Do I have to be baptized?" All this debating business is a modern thing that developed out of Catholic--Protestant and then inter-Protestant controversy. It isn't New Testament! And all this reluctance to bring it up in case it offends someone isn't New Testament because in there everyone just blurts it out.

Those who say the debate arose out of Pauline teaching about grace as opposed to "works righteousness" seem to forget that the apostle who opposed some form of works righteousness was himself baptized to have his sins washed away as he took the name of Christ on him. They seem to forget also that he wrote his most compelling words about grace to "the

Ephesians” even though he founded the Ephesians church by baptizing some believers a second time. (I recognize their problem was a problem about basic gospel truth and not merely their baptism. But he did immerse them a second time once he had taught them essential truth and he baptized them “into” the name of Christ--see Acts 19:1-7.)

## **Baptism: The company it keeps.**

1. It's too easy to dismiss baptism as something unimportant or optional-- something you can take or leave. We hear that kind of talk and see that practice in some modern churches and from modern believers. But they didn't learn this from reading the New Testament scriptures.

### ***THE FREQUENT MENTION OF THE SUBJECT IN THE NEW TESTAMENT***

2. Just see for yourself how often the word and the subject is raised in the NT and you may be astonished rather than surprised. Setting aside texts which deal with baptism in the Holy Spirit or with Jewish washings the word occurs about 90 times. It's used a number of times to stand for Christ's redemptive sufferings (Luke 12:50 is an example of this: “I have a baptism to be baptized with” the Master will say.) Most of the occurrences relate to baptism as practiced by John the Baptist. Thirty one of them relate to “Christian baptism”. There are numerous other texts where the subject is raised without the word being mentioned (see John 3:5 and Titus 3:5 as two examples of this).

### ***SUBJECTS TO WHICH IT IS LINKED IN THE NT***

3. But the frequency with which the word occurs is less important than the company it keeps. We need to note what the New Testament writers and speakers link it with.

- \* Forgiveness of sins: Acts 2:38
- \* Washing away of sins: Acts 22:16
- \* Salvation: Mark 16:16; Mark 16:16; 1 Peter 3:21
- \* Entering Christ: Galatians 3:27; Romans 6:3
- \* Being born again: John 3:3-5
- \* Being clothed with Christ: Galatians 3:27
- \* Union with Christ's death: Romans 6:3
- \* Sharing his resurrection: Romans 4-5
- \* Receiving the Holy Spirit: Acts 2:38-39
- \* Entering Christ's Body: 1 Corinthians 12:13
- \* An appeal for (or a pledge to keep) a good conscience before God: 1 Peter 3:21
- \* Entering into the security of the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit:  
Matthew 28:19

4. We'll say something more about a number of these texts but this much must surely be clear: since baptism is linked with these foundational blessings and truths, it cannot be unimportant and we won't lightly dismiss it. (No matter what “we've always believed,” in our better moments we want the Scriptures to shape our understanding.)

### ***BAPTISM AND FAITH IN THE NT***

5. Central in our response to God is faith (trust). Since we can't depend on our own goodness we must depend on his. It's that confession of need, that sense of utter dependence

on God that is at the heart of faith. And faith is the heart of our response to God's gracious work in Jesus Christ. The Bible teaches that trusting submission has always been the right response of sinners to God.

6. When Israel marched around Jericho because God said so, faith wasn't absent, it was present-marching ([Hebrews 11:30](#) ). When Noah built his ark as God had commanded, it was built by faith ([Hebrews 11:7](#) ). When Abraham left his home in Ur and later in Haran the Bible says that was faith wandering ([Hebrews 11:8-9](#) ). Modern people might distinguish between faith itself and faith in action, Bible writers wouldn't. In [Genesis 15](#) Abraham simply believes God's promise and is 'justified by faith'. In [Genesis 22](#) he offers his son and is 'justified by faith'. Both Paul and James quote the same scripture ([Genesis 15:6](#) ) about two distinct events (see [Romans 4:3](#) and [James 2:21-23](#)). True faith and the 'obedience of faith' are not separable. The word 'faith' like the word 'love' includes the appropriate response called for. It cannot and should not be confined to an internal attitude.

7. Acceptable baptism is always linked to faith in the NT writings. (The rise and history of 'infant baptism' is an interesting and challenging subject but you can't find it in the New Testament writings.) Those who did not trust would not be baptized (see [Luke 7:29-30](#) with [Matthew 3:7-8](#); [21:25](#)). We are told repeatedly that those who believed were baptized; see [Acts 8:12](#) , [38-41](#); [16:14-15](#) and [30-33](#); [18:8](#) as examples. Not only were these believers baptized, they were eager and joyful when they did so. See [Acts 2:38-41](#); [8:8-12](#); [8:34-39](#); and [16:33-34](#).

8. This strong link between faith and baptism in the Christian faith makes perfect sense since baptism proclaims the central events of the Christian faith: the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ (see piece 1). It is the truth about God's gracious work in Christ that convicts us of our own helplessness and compels us to trust in God. Faith's confession is made visible in baptism; faith's content is shown in baptism. While baptism is a distinct act the New Testament doesn't treat it apart from faith. When believers are baptized they are trusting God (see this especially clearly in [Colossians 2:12](#) ). Baptism points away from the person being baptized to the one who died and rose to save the world-Jesus Christ. The very act of baptism is a confession of trust in someone other than ourselves. It doesn't point to us—it points to him! It denies self-trust and proclaims trust in the God who raised Christ from the dead. To separate baptism from trusting submission is to violate its character and the New Testament teaching.

9. Look at this from another angle. In the New Testament writings, the blessings that are offered to faith are offered in baptism. Paul insists that union with Christ is by grace through faith apart from human merit. But what is offered to faith is received in baptism for he says in [Galatians 3:26-27](#): "You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have been clothed with Christ." In being baptized into Christ these people became sons of God "through faith," says the text.

10. Paul insists that receiving the Spirit is by faith ([Galatians 3:2,14](#) ). No one merits this precious gift; there is no 'work' we can do that puts God in our debt so that he must give the Spirit to us as a seal, an anointing and a guarantee (see [2 Cor 1:22](#); [Galatians 4:6](#) ). But what God promises to faith is received in baptism ([Acts 2:38-39](#); [Gal 3:26-27](#) with [4:6](#) ). See [Acts 5:32](#); [Titus 3:5](#) and compare [Acts 19:1-7](#) with [Ephesians 1:13-14](#).

11. Every New Testament writer insists that salvation is by faith apart from human merit. We hear that from Peter ([Acts 15:10-11](#)) and we read it throughout Paul's writings ([Ephesians 2:6-8](#) and [Romans 11:6](#) are especially clear). So it's clear that our goodness or our good works have no saving power but listen to what [1 Peter 3:21](#): "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."

12. Peter preached salvation by pure grace and insisted that salvation by our own goodness was a yoke none of us could bear (compare [Acts 15:10-11](#) ). Just the same, here he tells us at least three things:

1. *What baptism does.*
2. *What baptism is and is not.*
3. *How baptism saves us.*

13. Peter simply says 'baptism saves you'. He will just as bluntly say 'faith saves you'. Salvation is given to faith in baptism as a free gift of God. There is no conflict between Christ's place as the only Saviour and our humbly submitting to him on his terms. Trusting sinners don't instruct the Lord or tell him what he can or cannot say, they joyfully and humbly submit to him ([Acts 2:37-41](#) ). *They will bring their creed into line with his Word when that Word is understood. His Word will shape their creed, not the reverse.*

14. Baptism, according to Peter, is not a Jewish rite of purification of the body; it is not a removal of some physical defilement. No, baptism saves us as an 'appeal' for or a 'pledge' of a good conscience. It isn't clear how the Greek word *eperotema* should be translated. If 'pledge' as many scholars think, baptism is a formal pledge to keep a good conscience before God. If 'appeal' as other scholars insist, baptism is an appeal to God for a good conscience. Baptism, says Peter, saves you—not as a physical or national purification but as an appeal for a good conscience before God. (See [Hebrews 9:13-14](#).)

15. And where lies its saving power? Not in baptism or the faith which acts in baptism but in the redemptive deeds of God in Christ. "Through the resurrection of Jesus Christ," says Peter. Because faith-baptism links us with the resurrection of Jesus Christ it is said to save us. Being baptized "into his death" and being "united with him in his resurrection" ([Romans 6:3-5](#) ) is how salvation comes to us in baptism (see [Colossians 2:11-12](#) ).

16. The blessings which come from union with God in Christ are offered to faith in baptism. It is in baptism that faith expresses its helpless trust in God. Baptism is faith's confession of the Messiah who died and rose to save us because we couldn't save ourselves. It is in baptism our trusting hearts appeal to God for a good conscience. It is neither right nor wise to deny to God's ordinance of baptism the place his grace and wisdom have given it. Separating baptism from faith or dismissing it as optional—that we don't learn from God's Word.

## **Baptism: Water that divides.**

Not too long ago an author wrote a book on baptism called *The Water that Divides*. The title is appropriate given today's religious climate with some people talking as if it were the most important thing in the Bible and others who think it should be carried out but if it isn't there's no great loss. Some dismiss it altogether as not worthy of discussion. Some insist that baptism is part of God's bringing the sinner into saving union with Christ (I am one of those who believe that) and others that it's an ordinance you attend to after you have entered Christ but if you don't attend to it there's no great loss. In light of the New Testament and 2,000 years of church history this is an astonishing stance for believers in the Christ to take.

Some think because salvation is altogether by God's generous grace (and it certainly is!) that baptism can safely be ignored. They don't get this from the New Testament, which strenuously and tirelessly proclaims that salvation is altogether of the gracious God and still calls all nations to be baptized into the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit ([Matthew 29:19](#) and see [Acts 2:38](#), [19:5](#) and [22:16](#)).

Some think because salvation is entirely by grace that baptism can't be part of the coming to Christ to be saved. But the New Testament insists that salvation is entirely by God's grace and it still says to people who want to be saved, "Be baptized!" for the forgiveness or

washing away of sins and it still insists that baptism initiates the trusting and penitent sinner into the Christ (Romans 6:3 and Galatians 3:27).

There is no need to and it is profoundly false to make baptism all-important (only God is all-important) but the New Testament offers no such dilemma. Baptism's importance is no more and no less than the New Testament shows it to be. Anxious to prove their point some people talk of nothing else but baptism and that's tragic. The New Testament talks about it easily and often but it doesn't make it the be-all or end-all of proclamation or even the sinner's response. It doesn't apologize for calling people to submit to it who want to belong to Christ but then it didn't need to. Those who wanted to find peace with Christ asked what to do, they were told and they did it and everyone rejoiced in the saving grace of a generous and forgiving Lord.

Part of the reason there is no heavy argumentation on baptism in the New Testament is because nobody ever dreamed of arguing about it. If people didn't argue about it today we could talk about it and call for it as part of the coming to Christ as easily and naturally as they did in the New Testament. I confess it irks me more than a little to hear baptism stressed to the point almost of tedium. But it annoys me a bit also to hear people dismiss God's command and wonder why others talk about it so much. If there was more humble submission to an explicit command of God that the New Testament relates to forgiveness, salvation and union with Christ maybe we'd hear less going on and on about baptism.

It should make us ponder our belief and practice when a gentleman understandably feels the need to write a book on baptism called *The Water that Divides* when in point of fact Paul saw it in a precisely opposite way. He saw it as water that unites. In Galatians 3:26-27 he assures the Galatians that they were all children of God by faith because (for, the Greek *gar*) when they were baptized they entered by faith into Christ and clothed themselves with Christ so that there was no longer anything to divide them. The distinctions that were used to keep them apart, sexism, racism, elitism had all been neutralized in Christ Jesus.

So, in Paul's teaching, and he knew more about grace and God's generosity than anyone before or since, baptism didn't divide, it protested everything that did divide us one from another. The man or woman, girl or boy that by faith is baptized into the reconciling Christ defies all those social and ethical differences that work to keep us apart. We can imagine what it felt like to Paul when he personally on one of those perhaps rare occasions baptized someone into Christ. Looking at it with his eyes, God at that moment, via Paul and the person now coming to Christ, was once more denouncing all that keeps humans apart from him and from one another. When he baptized someone into Christ Paul was tearing down partitions and rehearsing the truth that in Christ walls stronger than granite were destroyed.

He could have said that without mentioning baptism (he said it in other places without mentioning baptism) but the fact is that he mentioned baptism here! The Bible and life teaches us that our life with God is inlaid with many rites and actions that we don't fully understand. And there's something fearfully high-handed about puny little preachers whose life is a vapor and whose learning is fragmentary at best urging people to pay little or no attention to God's word on this matter. I'd urge anyone who wants to give their life to Christ or anyone who has loved the Christ always but hasn't yet been baptized as the New Testament lays it out to prayerfully reflect on the scriptures about this matter of baptism and act accordingly.

I'm acquainted with a godly man that has loved the Lord for many years. He has not submitted to a believer's baptism and in fact has said he doesn't need to. Speaking of that fine man a writer said, "Can you imagine anyone saying he needed to be baptized?" The writer's response was that this lovely man didn't need to do it. I think this is a silly thing to say and I think it is high-handed, especially in light of Matthew 5:19, because Matthew 28:19 gives no one the right to refuse.

I'm acquainted with a godly, prayerful and God-centered man in the New Testament who received God's personal word of approval. God sent him a preacher who would inform him how he could come to God in and through Jesus Christ. The preacher began to speak and God interrupted the proceedings by sending the Holy Spirit on the man and his whole family. If there was ever a man who didn't need to be baptized there we have him. But that's not how Peter saw it. He commanded Cornelius to be baptized in the name of the Christ and he insisted that it was Cornelius' privilege as well as due response. The whole story's in Acts 10 and into 11.

How dare we say to God-loving and Christ-believing people that they don't need to be baptized in his name? Who do we think we are? God?

## **Christ's Baptism and ours.**

In the NT, when people were called to be baptized into the name of Christ it was to have their sins forgiven (Acts 2:37-38 and 22:16). But there was much more to it than that. Peter's central affirmation in Acts 2:38 is not that baptism brings remission of sins but that baptism is "in the name of" Jesus Christ. A faith-baptism in the NT is a confession of and identification with Jesus Christ and all he means and stands for. They wanted forgiveness—as a nation and as individuals they had foundationally sinned against God and wanted it made right. How are they to make it right (2:37)?

[It's silly at this point to say that they asked the wrong question—"What must we do?" Peter wasn't offended by the question and those of us that verge on having a seizure every time we get a whiff of what we think is "legalism" are simply off base. See Acts 2:40-41.]

How are they to make things right with God? They must accept Jesus Christ as the one God marks him out to be (2:22-33). And how was this to be done? In trusting repentance they were to be baptized in his name, that is, acknowledging him as God's, Lord and Messiah (2:36).

But while this is true it isn't enough. Clear teaching on baptism in the NT (setting aside some texts that may be mused over as indecisive) is a conscious and trusting response by repentant people to identify themselves with Jesus Christ and what that name means.

I mean more than that baptism *does* identify them with Jesus Christ; I'm saying that in clear NT teaching people who came to be baptized *meant to* and *were called to* identify themselves with Jesus Christ. As in the case of Israel with the baptism of John the Baptist so it is with all who are called together from the nations of the world by God through the gospel concerning Jesus Christ. Baptism for Israel was a turning to God, a conscious acceptance of God's judgement on the nation and a turning to him. So it is with all who are called into the body of Christ by the gospel—it is more than a gift they are being offered (and it mostly certainly is sheer gift), it is a call to responsive commitment. Baptism is not a simple request for forgiveness—it is a commitment to God's agenda in Christ *and* his method of gaining his purposes in Christ. Baptism is a God-induced and free response from the sinner by which he commits himself to God and all God's purposes in and for the world.

And certainly while Jesus Christ is uniquely God's Son and was the sinless one by holy righteousness, he was called by God to commit himself to God's creative and redemptive enterprise by being baptized by John. Though sinless and in no need of personal repentance, Jesus justified God's judgment on a nation that needed to repent—a nation of which Christ was a part—by joining them in a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins.

In being baptized Jesus not only accepted the Father's assessment of Israel's state, he not only identified himself with his sinful family, he also saw that identification as having its place in God's redeeming action and so he insisted on fulfilling all righteousness.

For the best reasons John might have wanted to debate the matter of Christ needing to be baptized but Jesus saw it as a matter of humble and holy obedience and not something to be

debated. For the best reasons John would have turned Jesus from baptism (Matthew 3:13-15) but the sinless One saw it as the will of his Holy Father.

[And in the face of plain and consistent NT teaching why would we turn sinful ones away from baptism?]

What if Jesus had *refused* to be baptized? Would he even have debated it within himself?

I wonder who first asked the question, "Yes, but do I **have** to be baptized?"

## **MUST I be baptized?**

Numerous people ask me if they must be baptized to be united with Jesus Christ and his death and resurrection.

I wonder who was the first to ask that? I read of a man in the NT (Acts 8:36) that wanted to know, "Why can't I be baptized?" It wasn't, "Do I have to be baptized?" His whole hearing of the gospel was unlike so many moderns in this respect. The moderns want to know if they must be baptized and he wanted to know what would keep him from it. [Maybe it has something to do with what they are being told and the way in which they're being told.]

I read of an astonished apostle asking, concerning a Gentile household (Acts 10:47-48), "In light of what God has just done here, what's to keep these people from being baptized?" Some might have wanted to keep it from them—Peter among them, up to that point—but now the apostle insists it's their right (as well as obligation). All over the place today I read and hear of people that want to debate the matter rather than obey. All over the place I hear people teaching that people don't need to be baptized or that we shouldn't say they need to be baptized. What am I missing? In the NT God's credentialed ministers and apostles are arguing for the right of non-Christians to be baptized and today we have people who not only won't practice the ordinance, they insist that others don't need to submit to it.

### **Why would they do that?**

But why should people be baptized when they have loved and believed Jesus Christ for years? Perhaps—and maybe this should be sufficient—because the Lord would have it so! When God sent his Holy Spirit on the open-hearted Cornelius you don't hear him debating whether he needed to be baptized into the name of Jesus Christ. You don't hear the crushed and penitent Saul arguing with Ananias when he was told to arise and be baptized and wash away his sins calling on the name of the Lord (Acts 22:16). None of this, "What? Do you know who you're speaking to? I have seen the risen Lord and have been called to apostleship." None of that! Like everyone else in the NT, he rose and humbly obeyed.

No one today understands salvation by grace more clearly than Paul did. And no one today knows the profound witnessing power of baptism as Paul did. In three gospel saturated books (Romans, Galatians and Ephesians) he links baptism with union with Christ, sonship and life in Christ (see Romans 6:3-8, Galatians 3:26-27 and Acts 19:1-5 with Ephesians 2:8).

In Galatians 3:26-28 a faith-filled baptism is not only the door to sonship by faith and clothing with Christ, it is a protest against all that divides humans! And In Matthew 28:19 it links Jesus Christ with his "colleagues" in the Godhead, bearing witness to his nature and person. In Romans 6:3-8 it is a foe of sin and wickedness and a witness to the nature of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

And some dare to make it optional!

## **Preparing a child for baptism**

With evangelicals there's quite a bit of discussion about when children are ready to give themselves to Jesus Christ. Setting aside discussion about infant baptism and covenant

inclusion what we have are questions like: "Is my child old enough?" "Does my child know enough?" "Is my child mature enough?" "Does my child 'know' what he/she is doing?" These are all sensible questions and matter a great deal to people who are convinced that there is no **covenant** relationship with Jesus Christ unless there is a personal commitment of faith by the believer. Being one of those, and since I take the view that infant baptism hasn't a shred of support from scripture, the questions above *do* make sense.

But though they make sense and though they do indeed matter I don't think there can be a generalized and satisfying answer to the questions.

Children are all different! Some mature more quickly than others, some mature in some ways more quickly than others and at the same time more slowly in other ways. Their environments differ; their emotional make-up and their critical experiences differ from each other. Their church environment and parents differ and sometimes the parents aren't able to assess their children's life-experience.

It makes no sense—and everyone knows it—to say, "My child gave her life to Jesus Christ when she was thirteen therefore all thirteen-year olds are capable." There are too many variables in each life for us to be able to offer blanket advice.

I'm certain we can more easily identify extreme positions than we can offer advice about children we know nothing about. Let me be silly just to make my point. He who says a three-year old child is capable of a faith commitment to Jesus Christ and he who says that no child younger than eighteen has the capacity to render a faith-commitment to Jesus will have no credibility with us. It isn't the extremes we have difficulty with.

While I presently judge we can do nothing to determine with *precision* when this child or that is ready to give him/herself to Jesus in faith, we can certainly do something about taking seriously a child's growing sense that she/he is being called by the gospel to make a faith-commitment to God. It simply won't do for parents to dismiss a child's expression that he/she wants to belong to Jesus in a faith relationship.

It may well be that when my child comes saying, "I want to become a Christian" that she is responding merely to some *want* to do what a friend of hers did—so as not to be left out of anything, don't you know.

Hearing someone say something that frightens her might result in this emotional surge. (Her parents are Christ's and she has heard something that suggests to her that if she isn't a Christian she will never see her parents again—no wonder she wants to become a Christian.) List your own illustrations of what I'm getting at.

But there are times when we're uncertain about motivation even though in our wise love for the child we think she is not yet "able" to say *yes* to Jesus in trust with the full consent of her heart to enter a covenant relationship and commitment.

Let's say, for discussion's sake, that she's twelve or thirteen. She's an ordinary little girl; enjoys life, plays children's games, watches children's television programs and sometimes pouts like a little girl when she's crossed. It would be easy for adults to note all that and conclude that she isn't "adult enough" to give a heart's consent and surrender to the Lord (especially if she still sleeps with a doll in bed beside her).

But it's just as easy to watch adults playing their childish games and draw a similar conclusion. See the programs they watch, note the games they play and how they pout and sulk if they're beaten or crossed in their desires by a spouse or a boss. [I'm certain that adults can be wisely catechized—depending on circumstances.]

That we wrestle with such questions is a good thing for it shows we're interested in something vitally important and that we won't breezily dismiss them with barely a thought. Once we come to think that this child's conscience is awakening, that she is coming alive to the

message of the gospel and Jesus' call on her we will not (certainly *should* not!) airily put her off *even if* we remain uncertain.

We mustn't give her the impression that her feelings and thoughts are not to be taken seriously but we're not to give her the impression that she is an adult. However we work with the matter it can only help her if she knows we're anxious to give her a hearing and to help her, while we live up to our own responsibility toward her as our child.

To put her off making a public commitment to Jesus and so to become a part of his Body with a few sentences while we're watching television or heading for work or whatever, should be avoided under *all* circumstances but *especially* if she is repeatedly raising the issue.

If the boy or the girl is persistent and anxious (that will be determined by those who are in the position to know) *even if* (in our scenario) the parents are still in doubt, it might be best to set the wheels in motion for the child's surrender to the Lord. Once all who love the child and are in the position to know best [at least better than anyone else] if the time is right for him/her to enter a **covenant** relationship with the Lord Jesus the following suggestions might be useful.

What I have to say from this point on is not meant as some "this is how it should be done" program but some suggestions as to *the direction* I think we should go if we're to act wisely and well.

I think the child should be told how wonderful it is that they are going to become Christ's covenant child because he has loved them all his/her life.

I think he/she should be told that what she/he is going to do is a solemn and joyous commitment and that he/she must prepare for it.

I think the church leaders should be consulted and asked for input on what can be done to make this momentous event memorable and substantial.

I think a period of time (maybe four to six months, for perhaps thirty minutes a session) should be set aside to bring the lovely matter to a conclusion. The length of time would be secondary but not at all dismissed as not mattering

I think a room in the meeting-house (or a home other than his/her own) should be committed to which the child travels "to prepare" herself/himself to meet the Lord.

I think the parents and select people should be there to make the child aware that his/her purpose is being taken with the joyful seriousness it deserves.

I think a curriculum should be devised for the occasion that includes foundational truths about God, his purpose, the gospel and the Body of Christ into which she/he is to be brought and received by the Lord.

I think it should be announced to the assembly in the presence of the child what the child is doing in preparation to give his/her life to the Lord, and the assembly should be asked to pray for and encourage this person during this entire period and at this special time.

I think when all this heart preparation is done and the time has come to immerse this child into a faith-union and covenant relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ that it should be done in the presence of the entire assembly.

I think that his/her first engagement in holy communion at the Lord's Supper should be underscored perhaps by having them come to the front to be served first.

Other things, not little things, could be done to emphasize "the moment". The room at the appointed time could have his/her name put on it and the time appointed. The night before the day of baptism could be made a special evening in the home, some people appointed for the purpose could gather for sustained prayer and others could be appointed to call him/her and commend them to God and the furtherance of his will in them.

The object of it all is to focus the mind of the child **and** the minds of the parents **and** the assembly on what is happening. My own view is that the "salvation" and "conversion" of

children in this situation is taken far too lightly, off-handed almost, and where that occurs it's tragic.

**[I feel strongly that in addition to the above, churches should teach young children, using a catechism format, and that they should be *led* to understand that they are expected to become fellow-servants of the Lord Jesus in congregations of God's people.]** I recognize how offensive that would be to some who would speak of "brain-washing". In a society such as ours I'd judge that ludicrous. [I think congregations would do well to have such a procedure for young people who purpose to marry.]

There is more than one benefit to such a period of preparation (however it is structured). Once completed we will know that *this* child wasn't simply expressing a momentary and passing emotional desire. We will know that *this* child's coming to Christ in a covenant commitment mattered not only to the child. When *this* boy or girl is buried into *Christ's* death and rises again in *Christ's* resurrection everyone will have had the opportunity to hear again cries around the cross, the rumbling of a great grave stone and the good news, "He is not here. He is risen just as he said."

## Why faith and not baptism?

A reader acknowledges that in the NT the baptism of a trusting penitent sinner is a part of the conversion experience and is connected to the forgiveness of sins. But he also notices that the NT says we are justified "by faith" and never says that we are "justified" by confession or repentance or baptism or other faith-filled obedience. He asked for comment on that.

I need to make clear at the outset that justification, salvation, reconciliation, forgiveness, eternal life, sanctification, and the like, are all intimately related concepts and they all come to focus in Jesus Christ. But—and this is an important but—to reduce the meanings of these words to the point that they are all "saying the same thing" would be tragic as well as misleading. It just isn't true that "saved" is the same as "justified" even if the two terms relate to the same person. Vincent Taylor is right when he insists that we mustn't devalue our verbal currency. The glory and richness of the gospel is obscured when we say of such words, "they all mean the same thing." They do not. When Paul says we are "justified by faith" (Romans 5:1) he is not saying we are "saved by faith" even though the one involves the other. Each of these big words has its own contribution to make in describing the glorious relationship we have with God in Jesus Christ.

It's true the NT never says we are "justified by confession or repentance or baptism." But the NT does say that we are saved by baptism through the resurrection of Jesus Christ (1 Peter 3:21). And the NT does say that confession by the mouth is unto salvation (Romans 10:10). And the NT does say that repentance is unto life (Acts 11:18). And the NT does say that repentance and baptism are unto the forgiveness of sins (Acts 2:38). And the NT does say that baptism is into Jesus Christ and into his death (Romans 6:3-7). And the NT does say that obedience is unto righteousness/justification (Romans 6:16). And so forth.

Yes, but it never says that we are justified by confession or repentance or baptism, and this is the point the reader makes! This is true and the reader wonders why that is.

There must be numerous reasons for that. One of them must surely be that "baptism" is an ordinance from God that has no meaning apart from faith. If it is not the expression of the faith of the one baptized, whatever else it is, it is not the baptism spoken of in the NT. It follows from this that faith is the more embracing and the more fundamental reality. To isolate NT baptism from faith is to destroy it. As a faith-filled act baptism has profound truths to tell but, again, if it doesn't express the underlying notitia (taking note of the message when heard), assensus (genuine agreement to the truth of the message) and fiducia (the trusting

commitment of the heart and will to the One we've heard of) all of which is NT faith--if baptism doesn't express that it is nothing! By its very nature, faith must be the inner reception of the gospel message. Consequently it's a larger and richer human response than baptism. And since it expresses itself in baptism it is prior to baptism. Baptism doesn't give meaning to a person's faith; it expresses it! Baptism doesn't give meaning to a person's faith; faith gives meaning to baptism.

You can see this illustrated in Galatians 3:26-27. In 3:26 Paul insists that the Galatians are sons of God "through faith" in Christ Jesus and goes on to say (using an explanatory *gar*—for or because) "all of you who were united with Christ in baptism have been clothed with Christ." He's explaining that they became children of God not by commitment to the Jewish Torah because it wasn't into Judaism or into the Jewish community they had been baptized; it was Christ they were baptized into and it was Christ with whom they were clothed. They hadn't come into a particular ethnic or cultural or social society by faith; no, they entered Christ in whom all that divides and segregates humans is done away with.

But perhaps more to the point they didn't enter Christ and they were not clothed with Christ by committing to Judaism, with its ethnic exclusivity. No, they entered Jesus Christ by faith, which in Galatians is made to stand over against Judaism and the Sinaitic covenant.

Let me repeat, baptism isn't big enough to carry the load that Paul wanted carried. Nevertheless, Israelites were "baptized unto Moses" (1 Corinthians 10:2) as the Corinthians had been baptized into Christ (compare Acts 18:8). Baptism in those cases stands for the faith which baptism expresses. And Paul feels free to ask some believers "to what therefore were you baptized?" (Acts 19:3; the NIV is not at all helpful here.) He asks nothing of their faith (in the wording, I mean) because when they tell him what they were baptized unto he would know about their faith (that is, what they had learned and committed to). So baptism is, very occasionally, a stand-in for faith. But by the very nature of things, and in light of what Paul and others are contending with, baptism isn't a big enough word.

So that, I think, is one reason, why we don't find baptism spoken of in the way we find faith spoken of.

But there's something more important and more to the point. Justification "by faith" is shorthand for saying "justification by faith in Jesus Christ." The NT doesn't teach justification by faith—it teaches justification by faith in Jesus Christ.

We mustn't take the "personal" out of saving commitment to Christ. Others cannot believe for me, that is, in my stead. If I am to enjoy life in Jesus Christ in response to my hearing the gospel, I must commit to Jesus Christ. [I hate having to say that; it should not need to be said but...]

Nor must we take the "trust" element out of biblical faith. With the Lutheran and generally Reformed stress on salvation by grace as opposed to self-salvation by moral attainment that needs to be said also. There is no self-salvation! There never was! Nor can there ever be! If we have a Pelagian hair in our head we should pluck it out and burn it! If we have a Pelagian thought that lives in our heart we should hunt it down as though it were a dangerous and rabid animal, and kill it, without mercy or remorse! [This presumes that Pelagius was all Augustine and Jerome said he was and that is becoming increasingly doubtful.]

Nevertheless, we should not take the truth-content out of biblical faith. "Faith in Jesus Christ" is not simply the description of what goes on inside a person. It is not only how a person reacts within to the gospel message, it is not simply a heartfelt attitude we have toward Jesus Christ—it must contain the essentials of the gospel message if it is to be saving faith. NT faith involves the hearing and assent to the truth about Jesus Christ as well as our trusting commitment to him. Implicit trust in Joseph Smith or Mohammed as prophets may be as real as

a Christian's implicit trust in Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour; but the truth-content is altogether different.

When Paul says we are "justified by faith" he is saying we are "justified by faith in Jesus Christ." He is making truth claims. Other proposals were being made and Paul was rejecting them and affirming the truth of the gospel. He wasn't talking (merely) about the psychological change in a person's heart or the attitude they had toward Jesus Christ. In, Romans and Galatians, for example, people were proclaiming justification by subscribing to the Jewish Torah. This narrowed the privilege of life in Jesus Christ to Jews and those who would commit to living as Jews under the Torah (be sure to see Galatians 2:14-16). That understanding undermined the gospel which was open for all, independent of adherence to the Jewish Torah (compare Romans 3:21,26).

In those places Paul isn't isolating "faith" from obedience to Jesus Christ (see Romans 6:8 and Romans 2:6-16)—that's a 16<sup>th</sup> century move. He's insisting that faith (that is, faith in Jesus Christ) is a whole new arrangement, a whole new revelation of God's unfolding scheme of redemption, a whole new way of believing. The elect of God were re-defined in Jesus Christ. Formerly election meant you had to be Abraham's physical descendant through Jacob with the covenant at Sinai and all that went with that (compare Acts 15:1-2). It was flesh and Torah. Paul taught that he no longer knew Christ after the flesh (see 2 Corinthians 5:16-17). A new era had arrived—the era of faith (in Jesus Christ).

Before faith came, he says, we were under the law (Torah)—Galatians 3:23-25. He wasn't saying, "Before Jesus Christ you were justified by moral attainment (if you could manage it—which you couldn't) but now you are justified by trusting in Jesus rather than trusting in yourself." God never required anyone at anytime to earn life by moral achievement! That's a myth. Life with God was always a gift from God and faith in God was always essential to life. In Galatians Paul was opposing the "gospel" (see 1:6-9) of an exclusively Jewish Saviour. He had a specific agenda and in place of a gospel that was only for Jews and therefore was inextricably connected with submission to the Torah—he offered the gospel of life, salvation, justification by faith in Jesus Christ.

So when Paul says we're justified or saved by faith he isn't talking about "faith" as something distinct from heartfelt submission to Jesus Christ (expressed in repentance or confession or baptism or faith-filled obedience). To abstract faith in that way, in my view, misses the point entirely. What's in Paul's mind isn't faith versus faith-filled obedience. It's faith versus flesh & Torah

Faith (in Jesus Christ) embraces the content of a person's convictions as well as the total personal response to it.