

Born of Water

lessons pro and con
on the necessity of baptism

by Jay Guin

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OUTLINE

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PREFACE TO THE APRIL 2016 EDITION

I wrote the earliest version of this book in 2002. The version that I posted at <http://OneInJesus.info> was dated 2005, two years before I began the blog.

Beginning in early 2007, I began daily blogging on scriptural questions with a focus on the Churches of Christ. This led to some 157 posts on baptisms, most around 1,500 words each. That's a *lot* of writing about baptism.

More importantly, the baptism posts brought about thousands of comments from readers, which pushed me deeper into the scriptures. The readers disagreed or refused to be convinced until I answered all the hard questions. And they asked some really hard questions.

Every couple of years, I'd wade into the baptismal fray yet again to see how well my revised views might stand up to the critiques of that year's readership.

As a result, my views have changed. My ultimate conclusions regarding baptism are largely unchanged, but I've discarded some arguments that didn't stand up well to scrutiny, and I've added several new arguments. The discussion is deeper, more theological, more deeply rooted in the over-arching narrative of scripture. Better.

But not perfect. I'm sure the readers will help me find more of my mistakes and push me delve more even more deeply into the scriptures and the mind of God.

I'm looking forward to it.

Also, I've added several lengthy footnotes to respond to questions that came up in my discussions with readers regarding baptism, even though the question is not directly on point. There's just no convenient stopping point, and a disagreement in some seemingly unrelated area has a tendency to bleed over into our baptismal theology. And so, since I so much enjoy writing theology, I've indulged in the occasional excursus. You may skip them if you wish.

A FEW NOTES ON QUOTED MATERIALS

The original version of this book used the NIV. I now use the ESV for these sorts of studies, as it's closer to the Greek in most of Paul's epistles and more widely accepted within the more conservative Churches of Christ.

Emphasis in quoted material is shown by **boldface** and is mine, unless otherwise noted. *Italics* are in the original unless otherwise noted.

Throughout this book, Greek characters in the original text will be transliterated into English without any notation.

“OT” and “NT” refer to the Old Testament and New Testament. “ESV,” “NIV,” and “KJV” refer to the English Standard Version, New International Version, and King James Version of the Bible respectively. “NET” refers to the online NET Bible translation found at <https://bible.org/netbible/>. The website and various other electronic editions provide very extensive, scholarly translator notes. Highly recommended – and free.

Bible book names will normally be abbreviated using the first three letters of the book name. Books with three- or four-letter names aren't abbreviated.

The traditional citation format is sadly antiquated. My citation format is “whatever is easiest.” If my research software gives the publisher and headquarters, fine. If not, I can't imagine that the readers care to know the publisher's headquarters city. They're going to order off Amazon or the publisher's website, or check the book out of a library. They're not going to mail in an order.

INTRODUCTION

PROLOGUE TO 2005 EDITION

The essence of good writing is knowing what you intend to say before you start. And so, I apologize in advance. You see, I wrote this series of essays on baptism without knowing where I'd end up, all in an effort to decide for myself what I should believe on this critical issue. The conflicting views and intense emotions associated with baptism had become increasingly a problem for me. I didn't quite know what my own view was, and the students in my Sunday School class kept asking for instruction in this area. Clearly, they were wrestling with the same issue.

The materials I could find were of little use. There are lots of great books and articles urging the necessity of water immersion of believers for salvation. But there is very little material arguing the contrary position – even though many within the Churches of Christ are being persuaded that we should no longer deny the salvation of those improperly baptized.

It bothered me greatly that this dispute had arisen. It bothered me even more that the issue had not received truly in-depth study in the literature. If those who argued for accepting the salvation of the unbaptized were right, they certainly hadn't stated their case well enough to persuade those of us with an analytic bent. I'm the sort of person who can't be persuaded without understanding the whole argument – step by step. I have to think through it in detail. I have to wrestle with all the arguments, all the scriptures. It's just the way God made me.

And so I began looking for arguments for both sides of the case. I asked myself, if I were arguing for this or that side, what would be the best arguments I could muster? And if I were on the other side, how would I attack that argument?

There came a point where I felt compelled to draw up an outline of the arguments. Each point in the outline eventually became an essay. Finally, I wrote a conclusion. And then I re-wrote it. Several times. And so I wrote most of these essays long before I knew where I was heading with all this. Frankly, I was more than a little surprised at where I wound up.

INTRODUCTION

“So, has your son decided where he’s going to college, yet?” a friend of mine asked.

“Harding. In Searcy, Arkansas,” I replied.

“Harding, huh? I’ve heard of that school. It’s a Church of Christ school, isn’t it?”

“Yes. It’s a small, liberal arts ...”

“You must be in the Church of Christ,” he interrupted. “That reminds me of a joke!” Since there’s only one Church of Christ joke, I already knew what he’d say, but I politely allowed him to tell his joke. Anything else would have been too defensive and would have only made the point of the story seem all the more true. He continued, “You see, this guy died and went to heaven. He met Saint Peter at the gate, and Peter showed him around.

“They walked over to an area and saw a cocktail party going on. Peter said, ‘This is where we keep the Episcopalians. And over here is where we keep the Pentecostals.’ Peter pointed to a group speaking in some strange language with some angels. The guy asked Peter, ‘Are they really speaking in the tongues of angels?’ Peter just laughed and said, ‘No, but the angels pretend to understand them. It keeps the Pentecostals happy – and that’s what’s heaven is all about!’

“Now,’ Peter said, ‘be very, very quiet. That’s the Church of Christ area – don’t let them hear you – they think that they’re the only ones here! And we do want to keep them happy!’”

He told it better than most, and so I laughed.

Now, the point of the joke is not as obvious as you might think. Not only does it poke fun at us for thinking we’re the only ones going to heaven, it also pokes fun at us for thinking that we’d enjoy heaven less if someone else happened to be there.

Why is it that we in the Churches of Christ have the reputation of thinking that no one else is going to heaven? There are essentially two reasons, I think. First, a minority of us believe that a church must have the correct position on all key doctrines for its members to be saved. These key doctrines are typically listed as the “marks of the church” and typically include the name of the church, the five acts of worship (singing, praying, preaching, giving, taking the Lord’s Supper), and church organization (plurality of elders conforming to the standards in Tit 1 and 1 Timothy 3 and a plurality of deacons conforming to the standards in 1 Timothy 3). Some would add any number of controversial doctrines to the list

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(divorce and remarriage, creationism, among many others). Obviously, under this thinking, it would be the rarest of cases for a non-Church of Christ member to make it to heaven, and even many within the Churches of Christ wouldn't make it.

Of course, there's a huge difference between being wrong and being damned. We don't have to be right about every possible scriptural question to be saved – just hear, believe, repent, confess, and be baptized.

The second reason is that we have taught for close to two centuries that salvation requires a proper baptism, and so those who aren't baptized or – what we usually mean – who are improperly baptized are lost. And, of course, most believers are not baptized as we believe the Bible requires.

While not originally a part of its plea, very early in its history the Restoration Movement,¹ under the influence of Walter Scott and Alexander Campbell, adopted a distinctive position on Christian baptism, being that –

- a. Baptism is for the forgiveness of sins (Acts 2:38),
- b. Baptism is for people old enough to be believers (Gal 3:26-27), and
- c. Baptism is by immersion, not sprinkling or pouring. Based on Greek word studies and history, this is beyond dispute the meaning of the Greek word translated “baptize” and is agreed to by nearly all historians.²

¹ The author is a lifelong member of the Churches of Christ, and this book is written primarily for the benefit of other members of the Churches of Christ, with their background, views, and history in mind. The Churches of Christ are a product of the 19th Century Restoration Movement (often called the Stone-Campbell Movement) led by Barton W. Stone, Thomas and Alexander Campbell, and Walter Scott. Over the years, the movement has devolved into three major groups, the non-instrumental Churches of Christ, the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) denomination, and the independent Christian Churches and Churches of Christ. The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) is a formally organized, institutional denomination. The other two groups primarily differ in their acceptance of instruments in the formal worship assembly. The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) does not insist on baptism as a condition of membership, while the other Restoration churches almost universally do.

² See, for example, Everett Ferguson, *Early Christians Speak, vol. 1* (Ft. Worth: Sweet Publishing Group, 1971), especially chapters III through V.

However, honesty requires that we admit that at least some within the early church accepted pouring when immersion was not practical. For example, the uninspired *Didache* 7:1-3, written about 76 A.D., says,

But concerning baptism, thus shall ye baptize. Having first recited all these things, baptize in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit in

[continued on following page]

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Thus, the Restoration Movement separated from the old-line European denominations (Catholic, Anglican, Reformed, Lutheran, Presbyterian) and Methodists in rejecting infant baptism. And the Movement also differed from the modern view of many Baptists that Christians are to be baptized after they've already been saved by accepting Jesus into their hearts. Of course, some Baptists adopt essentially the same view as the Churches of Christ, and some denominations that baptize infants immerse adult converts for the forgiveness of sins.

So while the Restoration Movement churches are in the minority in their baptismal views, they are not unique in any of their views. Indeed, the notion that baptism is for the forgiveness of sins is the majority view, while the practice of immersion of believers has substantial support among the Baptists and many independent churches. Baptism of adults by immersion is becoming increasingly common among Catholics, for example.³ Many other denominations have begun encouraging baptism by immersion, although not insisting on it. Baptists, the Assemblies of God, Seventh Day Adventists, Mormons, the Church of God,

living [running] water. But if thou hast not living water, then baptize in other water; and if thou art not able in cold, then in warm. But if thou hast neither, then pour water on the head thrice in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

<http://www.churchhistory.net/documents/didache.html>.

However, when immersion was possible, pouring was not acceptable until the 14th Century, when the Council of Ravenna approved baptism by immersion or pouring without regard to circumstance. William Clapper, *A Short History of Immersion*, <http://charlesdailey.net/baptism.html> (undated). There is, of course, a significant difference between permitting pouring where an immersion is impossible and permitting pouring at any time.

Honesty further requires us to admit that the Greek word for "baptize" can mean "wash." For example,

(Mk. 7:3-4 ESV) 3 (For the Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they wash their hands properly, holding to the tradition of the elders, 4 and when they come from the marketplace, they do not eat unless they wash. And there are many other traditions that they observe, such as the washing [*baptismos*] of cups and pots and copper vessels and dining couches.)

Obviously, the Pharisees weren't immersing their couches.

See *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd Edition, Revised and edited by Frederick William Danker based on Walter Bauer's *Griechisch-deutsches Wörterbuch zu den Schriften des Neuen Testaments und der frühchristlichen Literatur*, 6th edition, ed. Kurt Aland and Barbara Aland, with Viktor Reichmann and on previous English editions by W.F.Arndt, F.W.Gingrich, and F.W.Danker (hereinafter, "BDAG"), "*baptizo*" 1400.

³ See Vickie Shepherd, "Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults," *e-Catholic 2000*, <http://www.ecatholic2000.com/rcia9.html> (2000).

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Jehovah's Witnesses, and others reject infant baptism and baptize believers by immersion.

The purpose of this essay is not to challenge any of these three statements. They are each easily shown to be true.⁴ Rather, the question that the Churches of Christ are – and I am – struggling with is whether a person who somehow didn't meet these three conditions but who has faith in Jesus and who has repented is lost. In other words, how should we think of the righteous believer who is (according to our view) improperly baptized?

⁴ In many respects, the definitive work on baptism is G. R. Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1962). Beasley-Murray is a Baptist who reaches identical conclusions to the traditional Church of Christ position, except that he ultimately refuses to find baptism to be essential to salvation.

PART I PRELIMINARIES

CHAPTER 1 BAPTISM IN THE CHURCHES OF CHRIST TODAY

Where to begin? I'm so torn up over the baptism controversy that I feel as though I've lost all sense of direction. I grew up in the Churches of Christ, and I've attended Churches of Christ all my life. The one thing that I've always been sure of – the one thing that defined us “Church of Christ-ers” as a people – has been our understanding of baptism.

I remember hearing countless sermons and Sunday School lessons on the necessity of baptism, and at the time, they all made perfect sense – and they still make good sense today. As I've matured in the faith, I've changed many of my views, but our doctrine of baptism has always had plenty of support in the scriptures. None of this has changed.

And yet, now our most popular writer, Max Lucado, has declared baptism to be a mere symbol¹ –

Please understand. Symbols are important. Some of them, like communion and baptism, illustrate the cross of Christ. They symbolize salvation, demonstrate salvation, even articulate salvation. But they do not impart salvation. ...

Do we honestly think that God would save his children based upon a symbol? ...

Please understand, it is not the act [of baptism] that saves us. But it is the act that symbolizes how we are saved!

And then *Wineskins* published an April 21, 1996 sermon by Mike Cope² concluding that we should not consider baptism as essential for salvation. Cope relied on quotations from Barton W. Stone and Alexander Campbell, founders of the Restoration Movement, both of whom plainly declared that baptism is not essential to salvation. More recently, Randy Harris reached a similar conclusion,

¹ Max Lucado, *In the Grip of Grace* (Dallas: Word Publishing, 1996), 50, 115.

² Mike Cope, “Christians Only – And Not the Only Christians,” *Wineskins*, vol. 3, no. 3 (April/May 1997), 6-11. <http://archives.wineskins.org/article/christians-only-not-the-only-christians-apr-may-1997/>.

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his sole authority being a quotation from J. W. McGarvey.³ I urgently express my greatest respect for all these men and their work. But it just hurts me more than I can express that the Churches of Christ are now more deeply divided than ever – in part because our more progressive leaders have not articulated a *theological* basis for their views on baptism.

While these are some of the plainer examples, it's clear that many leaders in the Churches of Christ have adopted the view that baptism, although commanded, is not essential to salvation – essentially concluding that God will excuse a believer's failure to be baptized where the believer obeyed the command as well as he understands it. And I find the same notion becoming increasingly commonplace among many of our ministers, especially the younger ones. Indeed, some no longer bother teaching the doctrine of baptism at all; some even look down just a bit on those who do.

I must admit that the thought of seeing God's grace extended far beyond the borders of the Churches of Christ is attractive – who could celebrate the damnation of millions of believers in Jesus? – but is there a solid *scriptural* argument in support of that position? The most vocal proponents of this position often rely on plainly inadequate arguments – quotations from Restoration Movement leaders, unproven assertions that baptism is just a symbol, or characterizing our traditional position as “water regeneration” or “sacramentalism.” Appeals to the evident spirituality of many who are not properly baptized are frequently urged, and the appeal of the argument is strong – but it's not strong enough. But then neither is it enough to point out the weaknesses of these arguments. Rather, we have to ask: *Are there persuasive arguments?*

As I've gotten older and become closer to mature believers among the “denominations,” that is, not within the Churches of Christ, I find it harder and harder to question the spirituality of many who've never been baptized, at least, not as we define baptism. Indeed, the prayer life and Christ-likeness of many Methodist friends of mine rival that of any Churches of Christ member I know. These are not only good people, but people who give every indication of being filled with the Spirit. And Rom 8:11 teaches that only saved persons have the Spirit.

When I was a child, growing up in a small town Church of Christ, I was instructed that the denominations were lost because they didn't obey God's

³ Quoted in “How can we have a deeper understanding of baptism and the Lord's Supper?” *Theology Matters* (Joplin, MO: College Press Publishing Co., 1998), 234. McGarvey is considered the greatest of the Restoration Movement scholars at the end of the 19th Century, and is claimed by both the instrumental and non-instrumental branches of the Restoration Movement.

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commands, were rebellious, and cared nothing for obedience. But my own experience tells me that I was deceived. While all churches, Churches of Christ included, have hypocrites who show up for services but who've never really put on Christ, none are filled entirely with the rebellious. In fact, many non-Church of Christ fellowships are filled with prayerful, non-materialistic, self-sacrificing, dedicated servants of Christ. If they err in their practices, they do so out of unintentional ignorance, not out of a rebellious, self-willed heart.

While I struggle with this paradox, I find that many of the more conservative Churches of Christ writers have declared Max Lucado and like thinkers "apostate," quite literally judging them damned for their false teachings,⁴ even though Brother Lucado and other like thinkers who are being damned by their brothers were baptized for forgiveness of sins strictly in accordance with their critics' understanding of the scriptures. Evidently, we think that to be saved, we must not only have faith in Jesus, we must have faith in baptism. But the gospel is the good news about Jesus – not baptism. New Testament faith is faith in Jesus, not faith in baptism.

We are getting dangerously close to turning baptism into an idol when we insist on believing in baptism as a condition to being saved. Indeed, when we preach "hear, believe, repent, confess, and be baptized" without even mentioning Jesus, and when we preach more on baptism than Jesus, we have badly missed the point of the gospel.

Therefore, I find myself in something of a quandary. In addition to wrestling with my own understanding of baptism, I realize that if I take a view less strict than our traditional view, I will be labeled as damned by many of my brothers and sisters. And yet, if I dare insist on believer's baptism by immersion as a condition of salvation, many of my brothers will label me a hopelessly narrow-minded legalist.

This polarization of the Churches of Christ is wrong and wicked regardless of the side that I'm on. I don't wish to be condescended to by the free-er thinkers. I don't wish to be disfellowshipped and condemned by those who take a stricter view. I just wish to be allowed to prayerfully search out the truth while remaining in full, loving fellowship with all my brothers and sisters.

With this background in mind, what position should I come to on this baptism issue? Let's start with some basics that perhaps we can all agree on.

1. Grace is extended to the saved, not the lost. Grace is available for the lost, by becoming saved. Therefore, the many passages that teach us to accept our

⁴ For example, *Seek the Old Paths* 10, no. 4 (April 1999).

fellow Christians only speak to our acceptance of those who've been saved. For example, Rom 15:7 is one of my favorite verses, and I teach from it all the time:

Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God.

This verse plainly teaches that we should accept our fellow believers on exactly the same terms on which we were accepted. "Accepted" in the Greek⁵ speaks of a single point in time, obviously the instant of our salvation. But the first "accept" is present tense, implying a continuous acceptance. Thus, Paul instructs us to continually accept others as brothers in Christ on the same terms that we were accepted by Christ when we were saved.

Well, on what terms did Christ accept me? Until I'm persuaded to the contrary, I must say that the familiar litany of "hear, believe, repent, confess, be baptized" answers the question. Thus, I must accept as brothers all who've met the plan of salvation.

This brings us to two sub-points:

a. This verse plainly prevents us from condemning those who disagree with us about the necessity of baptism, if Christ has accepted those persons. And even the most conservative members of the Churches of Christ have to admit that those who heard, believed, repented, confessed, and were baptized for the forgiveness of sins have been saved. If I've been saved just this way and then conclude that God will save believers who are unbaptized out of ignorance, I have still heard, believed, repented, confessed, and been baptized, and I'm still saved. Even if I'm wrong in my understanding of the necessity for baptism, I haven't left the faith and I'm not willfully continuing to sin (1 John 4:2-3; Heb 10:26).⁶ Being mistaken on some point of doctrine does not cost me my soul – once I've been saved.

b. This verse does not require me to accept as saved someone who has not met the conditions of salvation as I understand them. Rather, this verse demands that I accept that someone who was once saved and who continues in that which brought him salvation – faith and repentance – as still saved. If a once-saved person continues to meet the same terms of salvation that I believe allowed me to be saved, then I must admit that this person is still saved. If a correct understanding of, say, the doctrine of divorce and remarriage was not

⁵ Aorist tense, indicating punctiliar action, that is, action at a single point in time.

⁶ These two verses teach that one may lose his salvation by giving up his faith in Jesus as God's Son come in the flesh or by willfully continuing to sin – that is, repudiating faith or repentance. We'll cover the NT's teachings on falling away in more detail in a bit.

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required to accept someone as saved when he was baptized, then such a correct understanding is not required to keep that person saved.⁷

2. Whatever the answer to the baptism question is, the answer will be found in scripture. Repeated references to the writings of Campbell, Stone, and McGarvey demonstrate that a position is within the historical scope of the Restoration Movement, and perhaps protects the writer from a claim of “liberalism,”⁸ but such recountings do not prove the point.

3. On the other hand, life experiences do count for something. I will explain more later, but the Bible plainly teaches that Christians can be discerned as such by their behavior.

Having hopefully narrowed the discussion a bit, let’s review what the Bible says about Christian baptism.

(Matt 28:19 NIV) 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

(Acts 2:38 NIV) Peter replied, “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.”

(Acts 22:16 NIV) ““And now what are you waiting for? Get up, be baptized and wash your sins away, calling on his name.””

(Rom 6:3-4 NIV) Or don’t you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.

⁷ I lay out the arguments for these statements in greater detail in *The Holy Spirit and Revolutionary Grace* (Nashville: Power Source Productions, 1994). Now available as a free .pdf download at <http://oneinjesus.info/books-by-jay-guin/the-holy-spirit-and-revolutionary-grace/>.

⁸ True liberalism is the denial that Jesus of Nazareth was and is the Son of God, the Messiah, and truly resurrected in real historical space-time. True liberalism denies the inspiration of scripture as “God breathed.” However, there has arisen a tendency to brand as “liberal” those who do not bind a rule that the speaker considers binding. This is a slanderous abuse of the term. Indeed, using such language against a brother who is not actually a liberal is a lie and hence a sin.

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(1 Cor. 12:13 ESV) For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body-- Jews or Greeks, slaves or free - and all were made to drink of one Spirit.

(Gal 3:26 NIV) You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.

(Col 2:11-12 NIV) In him you were also circumcised, in the putting off of the sinful nature, not with a circumcision done by the hands of men but with the circumcision done by Christ, 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.

(Tit 3:4-7 NIV) But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life.⁹

Quite plainly, these (and other) passages associate baptism with salvation. In fact, the notion of an unbaptized saved person is foreign to the New Testament's epistles. In Rom 6, Paul declares that we were baptized "in order that" we may live a new life. Peter declared on the day of Pentecost that the lost are to "be baptized ... for the forgiveness of your sins." Peter's command is to "every one of you."

The persuasiveness of these verses cannot be denied. And yet the discussion does not end here. There are other verses that must be dealt with.

⁹ Some will note that I've skipped Mark 16:16: "Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned." As just about every translation made after the King James Version notes, this verse does not appear in the oldest manuscripts of Mark, and so it was evidently added by a scribe some time after Mark wrote it. I realize that there are those who consider this text part of the original, but we shouldn't build a theology on a text that is disputed by a majority of conservative scholars.

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(1 Cor 12:3 NIV) Therefore I tell you that no one who is speaking by the Spirit of God says, “Jesus be cursed,” and no one can say, “Jesus is Lord,” except by the Holy Spirit.

Obviously enough, Paul is not saying that the mere recitation of “Jesus is Lord” saves someone. Rather his point must be that all who’ve truly accepted Jesus as Lord are saved. Now, I would have to doubt the salvation of someone who knows that Jesus wishes him to be baptized by immersion and who refuses baptism. Taking the lordship of Jesus seriously means seeking to do his will – not rebellion. But surely we can admit that someone who has been wrongly taught about the nature of baptism could fail to be baptized as an adult by immersion and still say with “Jesus is Lord” from the depths of his heart.

Paul makes similar declarations in Galatians:

(Gal 2:15-16 NIV) “We who are Jews by birth and not ‘Gentile sinners’ know that a man is not justified by observing the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ. So we, too, have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by observing the law, because by observing the law no one will be justified.”

(Gal 3:2 NIV) I would like to learn just one thing from you: Did you receive the Spirit by observing the law, or by believing what you heard?

Paul tells us that we are “justified,” that is, saved, “by faith in Jesus Christ.” We “put our faith in Christ Jesus” so that “we may be justified by faith.”

Paul declares in Rom 8:9-11 that all who have the Spirit are saved. And Paul tells the Galatians that they received the Spirit by “believing what you heard,” that is, the gospel. Clearly, Paul separates the lost from the saved by faith in Christ Jesus. And while we in the Churches of Christ believe that God requires faith plus baptism, Paul declares that *all* who have faith are saved.

John teaches much the same thing:

(1 John 4:2-3a,15 NIV) This is how you can recognize the Spirit of God: Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, but every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God. ... If anyone acknowledges that Jesus is the Son of God, God lives in him and he in God.

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John could not say more plainly that acknowledging the incarnation of Christ (that is, faith) makes one “from God” and that failure to acknowledge Christ denies salvation. In this passage, faith in Jesus – acceptance of the gospel – separates the saved from the lost. Verse 15 couldn’t be plainer in teaching the sufficiency of faith – and there is no mention of baptism.

Many other verses declare – and declare plainly – that *all* who have faith will be saved.

(John 3:14-18 NIV) Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life. “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 5:24 NIV) “I tell you the truth, **whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned**; he has crossed over from death to life.”

(1 John 5:1 NIV) **Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God**, and everyone who loves the father loves his child as well.

We in the Churches of Christ would like to contend that *only* those who have faith *and* are properly baptized are saved, and yet these verses say plainly that *all* who have faith are saved. By our logic, only a small percentage of believers in Jesus will be saved. How can we reconcile our position with these verses?

And so we have a paradox: many Bible verses plainly require only faith for salvation, and yet other verses just as plainly require baptism plus faith.

Discussion questions –

1. The author says he was very upset when he first heard leaders in the Churches of Christ teaching that baptism is not essential for salvation. Why should that be upsetting?
2. Have you found yourself confused or unsettled by poorly defended teaching that baptism is not essential?

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3. Do you know believers outside the Churches of Christ who appear to be filled with Spirit, that is, who show forth the fruits of the Spirit and seem very spiritual?
4. Do you read books by non-Church of Christ authors? If so, does it bother you to think that you're learning from men or women who might be damned? How can a lost person produce valuable devotionals or Bible study materials?
5. Have you ever noticed that there are both "everyone with faith" and "faith plus baptism" verses? How have you reconciled the seeming contradiction?
6. Do you agree with the author that the presence of the Holy Spirit in a Christian can be discerned? Do Christians act differently from non-Christians?
7. Have you ever heard the joke the Introduction begins with? Why did the person telling it tell it? Did you find it insulting?

CHAPTER 2 WHO IS SAVED?

Perhaps the most important question facing the Churches of Christ today is simply this: Who is saved? The reasons for this are plain.

First, if we are wrong about who is saved, we may try to convert people who've already been saved. Or we may fail to convert people who are lost.

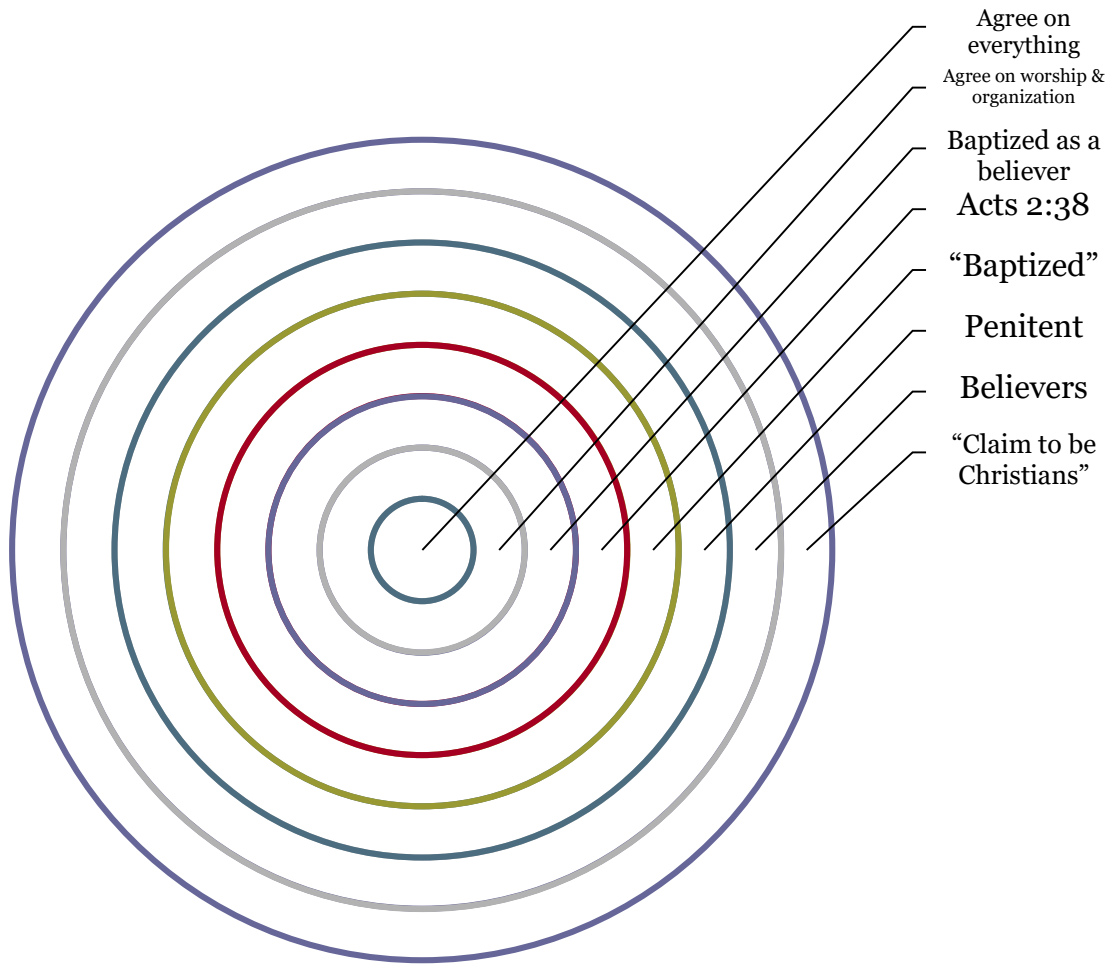
Perhaps even more important is the fact that we can't be unified as the body of Christ if we don't even know who is in the body of Christ. Jesus prayed, just before his arrest –

(John 17:20-23 NIV) “My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one: I in them and you in me. May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.”

Jesus tells us that the unity of *all* Christians is essential to the salvation of mankind. And if the Churches of Christ are wrong on the baptism issue, we've failed to be united with the vast majority of Christ's body and have greatly contributed the loss of the church's credibility in seeking and saving the lost.

In short, getting this one right is of monumental, literally eternal importance.

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Consider a series of concentric circles, each indicating a possible definition for who is saved.

The first circle would include everyone who considers himself a Christian, no matter how unreasonably.

The second circle would include all who have faith in Jesus, defining “faith” as mere intellectual acceptance – as in “even the demons believe and shudder” (Jam 2:19). They know who Jesus is, but they’ve not put their trust in him or given their loyalty to him.

Inside that, **the third circle** would be penitent believers – people who actually try to live the life Jesus calls us to. This is essentially where Southern

Baptists draw the line. There is virtually no one who teaches that faith is required to be saved and penitence is not. Some preachers overstate the faith-only nature of salvation in their sermons, but no one seriously contends for the antinomian view that grace allows Christians to continually knowingly, deliberately sin.

The fourth circle is for those who are baptized in some form or other, whether as infants or believers. This is the line drawn by most denominations. In fact, almost every denomination there is baptizes its converts. Some pour or sprinkle, but baptism with water remains the nearly universal practice of Christian denominations. The most notable exceptions are the Society of Friends (Quakers), Christian Scientists, and the Salvation Army, all of whom believe in a Spirit-baptism without water. There are very few people in the third circle who are not also in the fourth.

The fifth circle we cross is the “Acts 2:38” line, that is, whether the baptism received is intentionally for the forgiveness of sins. Until the Reformation, all baptisms were for the forgiveness of sins (that is, for salvation), as this is the doctrine of both the Catholics and the Orthodox.¹⁰

The most important group to dissent from the overwhelming consensus on the necessity of baptism is the Calvinists. Indeed, John Calvin,¹¹ while teaching and practicing baptism, did not see baptism as the moment of salvation. He couldn't and have been consistent with his other teachings.

In the view of Calvin, salvation is “unconditional” and “irresistible.” He taught that God arbitrarily elected some to be saved before the Creation and those who are elected cannot resist the saving work of God. Thus, the saved all have had salvation experiences in which God instantaneously converted the lost soul. In the absence of a saving experience, salvation cannot be had – not by prayer, not by Bible study, and not even by baptism – and certainly not by just deciding to obey God. Thus, Calvinist converts had to relate a “saving experience” to be accepted into the church and allowed baptism.

¹⁰ The Roman Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church divided in 1054 over several questions, including the authority of the bishop of Rome (the Pope) over the entire church. Essentially all European believers were either Catholic or Orthodox until the Reformation, although there were small dissident groups from time to time.

¹¹ 16th Century theologian and an important leader of the Protestant Reformation. He founded the Reformed Church, together with Ulrich Zwingli in Zurich, and, through his disciple John Knox, the Presbyterian Church. Calvinism was the dominant doctrine of English and American Protestantism for many years. The Puritans, Congregationalists, and Baptists are also heirs of John Calvin's teachings, although many Baptist denominations have now rejected most of the central elements of Calvin's distinctive salvation doctrines. However, the Southern Baptist Church continues to teach the perseverance of the saints, that is, once saved, always saved, as well as continuing to separate baptism from salvation.

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Had Calvin accepted baptism as the saving event, salvation would have been voluntary – someone may choose to be baptized or not – which was contrary to his other teachings. Thus, Calvin saw baptism as evidencing salvation already obtained.¹²

As the use of the sacraments will confer nothing more on unbelievers than if they had abstained from it, nay, is only destructive to them, so without their use believers receive the reality which is there figured. Thus the sins of Paul were washed away by baptism, though they had been previously washed away.¹³

I've observed that the Calvinist view of baptism has lately begun to spread far beyond the churches with Calvinistic heritage.

In fact, the idea that one may be saved by uttering the Sinner's Prayer – the Baptist doctrine that replaced Calvin's insistence on a saving experience – only goes back to the revival preaching of D. L. Moody in the 19th Century. It only gained popular acceptance with the preaching of Billy Graham and the publication of the *Four Spiritual Laws* by Campus Crusade for Christ in the 1950's.¹⁴ To invent the idea of the Sinner's Prayer, Moody, Graham, and Campus Crusade had to combine the Calvinist view that salvation precedes baptism with the Arminian (anti-Calvinist) view that salvation is received voluntarily.

Early in the 20th Century, the *Gospel Advocate* advocated the view that baptism of believers by immersion to obey God was sufficient, even if the convert believed that he was already saved. This view was strongly advocated by David Lipscomb, who as editor of the *Gospel Advocate* was likely the most influential member of the Churches of Christ in the late 19th and early 20th Centuries.

The Firm Foundation was founded by Austin McGary to contest this teaching, with McGary insisting that baptism was ineffective unless the convert intended to have his sins forgiven when he was baptized. This issue was hotly contested for many years. However, a change in editors eventually led the *Gospel Advocate* to adopt the same view as *The Firm Foundation*. By World War II, it had become nearly universal belief in the Churches of Christ that only those who

¹² "Genevan Confession" (1536). See Jack Cottrell, *Baptism, A Biblical Study* (Joplin, MO: College Press Publishing Co., 1989), 166.

¹³ John Calvin, "Heads of Agreement on the Lord's Supper," from *Calvin's Tracts & Letters Volume Two* (Baker Edition). <http://www.virtualchristiancenter.com/calvin/agreement.html>.

¹⁴ Frank Viola, *Pagan Christianity* (Gainesville, FL: Present Testimony Ministry, 2002), 236-237.

had been baptized as believers, by immersion, for the purpose of obtaining the forgiveness of sins should be considered a fellow Christian.

The sixth circle is the border between those who baptize only believers and those who baptize infants as well as believers. Infant baptism dates back at least to 185 A.D.¹⁵ However, infant baptism was controversial until becoming the general practice in the 5th Century.¹⁶ Indeed, as late as the 4th Century, many – including Constantine himself – refused baptism until they were on their death bed, to be certain that they had no time to fall from grace after receiving forgiveness through baptism.¹⁷

It is likely that infant baptism became the dominant view because Christianity had become the official state religion of the Roman Empire in the 4th Century after being legalized by Constantine. Only Christians could enjoy the benefits of Roman citizenship. As infants had long become citizens at birth, it would have only made sense to the Roman mind that Christianity should also be received at birth.

The denominations that began as official state religions all continue to practice infant baptism: the Catholics, Orthodox, Lutherans, Reformed, Presbyterians, and Anglicans (or Episcopalians or the Church of England). The Methodist Church began as an offshoot of the Anglicans and so also continues the practice.

The denominations that never enjoyed status as a state-established church generally only baptize those old enough to be believers. The practice of baptizing only believers was renewed by the Anabaptists (who date back at least to the Reformation and were severely persecuted by both Catholic and Protestant state churches) and spread to the Baptists, Churches of Christ, and many other denominations founded in the United States or England, where freedom of religion first allowed believers to worship without being part of the established state religion.

The denominations that baptize only believers and that baptize for forgiveness of sins include at least the Churches of Christ, the independent Christian Churches and Churches of Christ, the Christian Churches (Disciples of

¹⁵ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* II.xxii.4

¹⁶ Everett Ferguson, *Early Christians Speak*, vol. 1 (Ft. Worth: Sweet Publishing Group, 1971), 62-64.

¹⁷ Frank Viola, *Pagan Christianity* (Gainesville, FL: Present Testimony Ministry, 2002), 236.

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Christ), the Mormons,¹⁸ and many of the Assemblies of God and Churches of God. Many of the Pentecostal churches follow this practice. Of course, among those churches that practice infant baptism, the adult converts are baptized as believers for the forgiveness of sins. In fact, the Catholic and Anglican Churches are beginning to immerse their adult converts. The Orthodox have always immersed their adult converts.

The seventh circle reflects a view common within the Churches of Christ that one is only saved if he or she is a member of a congregation with a scriptural name, scriptural organization, and scriptural worship of five and no more than five acts of worship.

Under this view, a scripturally baptized penitent believer would be saved, but if such a person joined a church that engaged in false practices, the convert would be lost for his or her error until he or she repented by joining a proper congregation. This teaching contradicts the views of Stone and the Campbells but became prevalent in the decades following the Civil War. David Lipscomb, for example, taught this doctrine in the *Gospel Advocate* from the time he became editor shortly after the Civil War.¹⁹

This line of reasoning follows closely the teachings of Baptist James R. Graves in Nashville beginning in the late 1840's. Graves helped found the Landmark Movement within the Southern Baptist Church.²⁰ The Southern Baptists formally rejected their teaching around 1900 as a form of creedalism. The Landmark Baptists became a separate denomination that remains about the same size as it was 100 years ago.

It is likely that the Churches of Christ adopted the Landmark arguments to counter severe attacks against "Campbellism" launched by Graves, who published his debate against an aging Alexander Campbell under the title *Alexander Campbell and Campbellism Exposed*. Hence, when Graves attacked the Restoration churches for having the wrong pattern of worship, the Restoration churches retaliated in kind, pointing out their more scriptural name, organization, and choice of acts of worship.

¹⁸ The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints adopted their salvation theology from Sidney Rigdon, who was among the earliest Restoration Movement preachers but who left the Movement to join with the Mormons.

¹⁹ For example, numerous articles reprinted in David Lipscomb & E. G. Sewell, *Questions and Answers* (Nashville: McQuiddy Publ. Co., 1921).

²⁰ C. Leonard Allen & Richard T. Hughes, *Discovering Our Roots: The Ancestry of the Churches of Christ* (Abilene, TX: Abilene, TX: ACU Press, 1988), 69 ff.

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Soon, these characteristics came to define in their minds the borders of the Kingdom of Heaven. Thus, the 20th Century saw countless tracts and books demonstrating the salvation of those in the Churches of Christ and the damnation of the “denominations” by comparing each denomination’s date of founding, founder, choice of creed book, name, organization, pattern of worship, and pattern of salvation, with the true patterns practiced by the Church of Christ.

Inevitably, over time, the number of essential characteristics of the one true church became larger and larger. In the 20th Century, the number of cups used in the Lord’s Supper, the establishment of a Sunday School, the hiring of a located preacher, the use of the church treasury to support missionaries or orphans homes, the support of extra-congregational organizations, such as missionary and Bible societies, and many other questions came to define the borders of the Kingdom, so that those on each side of each issue declared those disagreeing as damned.²¹ The circle shrank to include only those who had correct teaching on nearly every point.

There are now many within the Churches of Christ who, quite literally, declare *any* doctrinal disagreement as damnable!

We are required to keep every specific of the law of Christ, if we receive spiritual blessings, which include forgiveness and the promise of eternal salvation. ...

The grace of God guarantees our final salvation. This, of course, does not mean grace alone, but grace accessed by faith, which includes works of obedience.²²

and

God will not do for man what man can do. God performed only that which man could not do. The commands of grace

²¹ Two of the most comprehensive defenses of this view are found at Bert Thompson, *Non-Denominational Christianity: Is Unity Possible?* (Montgomery, AL: Apologetics Press, Inc., 1984) and Thomas B. Warren, *Christians Only – and the Only Christians* (Ramer, TN: National Christian Press, Inc., 1984). Thompson, for example, draws the line at “errors which one may believe which do not directly affect his manner of life or his religious practice in an adverse way.” Examples of benign error would be “the war question, indwelling of the Holy Spirit,” and circumcision (without binding it on others). However, errors in worship practice, joining a false church, and “error on the subject of baptism or the Lord’s supper” would damn. *Ibid.* 21-22.

²² H. A. (Buster) Dobbs, “Does Grace Guarantee Final Salvation?” *The Firm Foundation*. http://www.bible-infonet.org/ff/editorials/grace/111_09_02.htm (Sept. 1996).

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are obeyed by faith. Works perfect faith, otherwise it is dead.²³

The eighth and smallest possible circle, therefore, is the circle of those who agree on every single point of doctrine.

One final historical note. It is a fact that the founders of the Restoration Movement disagreed with the consensus view of the 20th Century Churches of Christ. The founders of the Movement did not consider baptism essential to salvation, although they did agree that baptism is for forgiveness of sins.

This is precisely the position of Barton W. Stone, the earliest of the founders of the Restoration Movement, who considered Christian character as the ultimate test of salvation, in preference to baptism, because Christian character showed the presence of the Spirit more certainly than immersion.

Thus, Barton W. Stone wrote,²⁴

There are many pious Christians, who from ignorance of immersion as their duty, have neglected it, and yet are accepted of God with all their ignorance. ... For twelve years I thus lived without immersion, and believe I lived under the smiles of heaven. But when I became acquainted with my duty, I submitted to it.

It has also been famously reported that Stone²⁵ –

remembered having remarked that there were four different kinds of union. Book union was founded on a creed or confession of faith. Head union was the same as book union, except that the articles of the confession were not written in a book. Water union was founded on immersion into water. Fire union was “the unity of the spirit – a union founded on the spirit of truth.” Fire or spirit union, he argued, alone would “stand,” and no other union was “worth the name.”

²³ Goebel Music, *Behold the Pattern* (Colleyville, TX: Goebel Music Publications, 1991), 508.

²⁴ *Christian Messenger*, Vol. 12 (1841), 38, quoted in Leroy Garrett, *The Stone-Campbell Movement* (Joplin, MO: College Press Publishing Co., 1994), 84.

²⁵ D. Newell Williams, *Campbell-Stone Dialogue*, “Our Unity in Christ: From Cane Ridge to Kansas City” (August 7-8, 2001). <http://www.disciples.org/ccu/documents/dnwilliams.htm>.

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“This spirit,” he observed, was “obtained through faith, not in a human form or set of opinions, whether written or not written, but in the Lord Jesus Christ, the Savior of sinners; and by a cheerful obedience to all his known commands.” “This spirit,” he continued, “leads us to love God and his children – to love and pray for all mankind.” He stated that it was fire union “for which Jesus prayed [in John 17:20-21], and by which the world will believe that he is the Christ of God.”

Similarly, Alexander Campbell agreed that neither baptism nor a correct understanding of baptism is essential to salvation:

There is no occasion for making immersion, on a profession of faith, absolutely essential to a Christian. ... He that infers that none are Christians but the immersed, as greatly errs as he who affirms that none are alive but those of clear and full vision. ... ²⁶

But who is a Christian? I answer, Every one that believes in this heart that Jesus of Nazareth is the Messiah, the Son of God; repents of his sin, and obeys him in all things according to his measure of knowledge of his will.²⁷

In his Lunenburg letter correspondence, Campbell famously wrote²⁸ –

In reply to this conscientious sister, I observe, that if there be no Christians in the Protestant sects ... for many centuries there has been no church of Christ, no Christians in the world; and the promises concerning the everlasting kingdom of Messiah have failed, and the gates of hell have prevailed against his church! This cannot be; and therefore there are Christians among the sects.

²⁶ “Any Christians Among the Sects,” *Millennial Harbinger* (1838), 567-570, quoted in Leroy Garrett, *The Stone-Campbell Movement* (Joplin, MO: College Press Publishing Co., 1994), 384-85.

²⁷ “Review of Christians Among the Sects,” *Millennial Harbinger* (1840), 164, quoted in Leroy Garrett, *The Stone-Campbell Movement* (Joplin, MO: College Press Publishing Co., 1994), 385.

²⁸ From the so-called Lunenburg Letter correspondence. Alexander Campbell, *Millennial Harbinger* (1837). Excerpted from a series of articles published over the course of several issues. The entire correspondence may be found at <http://www.bible.acu.edu/stone-campbell/Etexts/lun16.html>.

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But who is a Christian? I answer, Every one that believes in his heart that Jesus of Nazareth is the Messiah, the son of God; repents of his sins, and obeys him in all things according to his measure of knowledge of his will. ...

But every one is wont to condemn others in that in which he is more intelligent than they; while, on the other hand, he is condemned for his Pharisaism or his immodesty and rash judgment of others, by those that excel in the things in which he is deficient. I cannot, therefore, make any one duty the standard of Christian state or character, not even immersion into the name of the father, of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, and in my heart regard all that have been sprinkled in infancy without their own knowledge and consent, as aliens from Christ and the well-grounded hope of heaven. ...

Should I find a Pedobaptist²⁹ more intelligent in the Christian Scriptures, more spiritually-minded and more devoted to the Lord than a Baptist,³⁰ or one immersed on a profession of the ancient faith, I could not hesitate a moment in giving the preference of my heart to him that loveth most. Did I act otherwise, I would be a pure sectarian, a Pharisee among Christians. Still I will be asked, How do I know that any one loves my Master but by his obedience to his commandments? I answer, In no other way. But mark, I do not substitute obedience to one commandment, for universal or even for general obedience. **And should I see a sectarian Baptist or a Pedobaptist [baptizer of infants] more spiritually-minded, more generally conformed to the requisitions of the Messiah, than one who precisely acquiesces with me in the theory or practice of immersion as I teach, doubtless the former rather than the latter, would have my cordial approbation [approval] and love as a Christian.** So I judge, and so I feel. It is the image of Christ the Christian looks for and loves; and this does not consist in being exact in a few items, but in general devotion to the whole truth as far as known. ...

²⁹ Someone who practices the baptism of infants.

³⁰ Someone who only baptizes believers.

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There are mistakes with, and without depravity. There are willful errors which all the world must condemn, and unavoidable mistakes which every one will pity.

There is no serious disagreement among the denominations as to whether faith and repentance are required to be saved. As much as some like to pretend otherwise, no one teaches that penitence is not required, and no one teaches that grace encourages or approves sin. No one denies the necessity of faith.

Thus, the question that truly divides the Churches of Christ (and many others) from the larger community of believers is the baptism question. What sort of baptism is required to be saved? What makes a baptism work? And what if someone thinks he or she is baptized but fails to be baptized as the Bible teaches? Does grace cover this mistake? Or does the unbaptized believer never even attain grace?

Discussion questions –

1. If the Sinner's Prayer has only been taught for 150 or so years, why do you suppose the teaching is so widespread?
2. Why do so many churches find Church of Christ teaching on baptism objectionable?
3. Does it concern you that many within the Churches of Christ consider all other denominations lost in their sins? Do you think this is the correct position to take?
4. Are you surprised to learn that the early leaders of the Restoration Movement didn't consider baptism essential, even though they vigorously taught and practiced baptism? Why do you think their teaching has been largely forgotten?
5. If you were to learn that most of the denominations are in fact saved, would you consider that grounds for celebration or disappointment? Why?
6. Which of the eight circles is taught as the correct circle in your home church? What are the reasons given?
7. Which do you consider to be the correct circle? Why?
8. Do you know any Baptists who believe they were baptized for the forgiveness of sins or to be saved?

CHAPTER 3 AVOIDING FALSE ARGUMENTS

Before we dig deeper, we need to dispense with some false arguments made by those on both sides of the controversy.

A. The last-verse-read argument

One Sunday morning, the local Church of Christ is studying baptism. A class member raises his hand. "Teacher, what about John 3:16? It says all who believe will be saved, and many people who aren't baptized believe, very sincerely. What does this mean?"

The teacher smiles knowingly. He's heard it before. "Turn to Acts 2:38," he says. "You see, here we're told that baptism is essential. You have to read all the verses together. We can't just pick one and ignore the other." The class is entirely satisfied that their pre-existing views have been affirmed.

Two blocks away, at the local Baptist Church, a class member raises his hand. "Teacher, what about Acts 2:38? It says you have to be baptized to have your sins forgiven, and many people who aren't baptized believe, very sincerely. What does this mean?"

The teacher smiles knowingly. He's heard it before. "Turn to John 3:16," he says. "You see, here we're told that baptism is not really essential. You have to read all the verses together. We can't just pick one and ignore the other." The class is entirely satisfied that their pre-existing views have been affirmed.

Now we need to be very, very careful here. The tendency of believers of all stripes is to argue for their position by using the "last verse read" argument. You read the inconvenient verse first, and then explain it away by reading the preferred verse second. Of course, the conclusion changes when the verses are read in a different order.

This is hardly the only doctrinal dispute where the winner is often declared based on which side's favorite verses are read last. This is why Christians still dispute over Calvinism versus Arminianism, infant baptism versus believer baptism, and on and on. And now that the "argument" has been pointed out, it is obviously a ludicrous approach to deciding truth. As hard as it is, we must actually wrestle with *all* the verses, "theirs" and "ours," and find a position that is squarely founded on all of them, not just the verses that happen to suit our preference.

B. The false-motives argument

“Teacher,” a student asks, “how can we say those in the denominations are lost? I mean, we don’t agree with everything among ourselves. How can their disagreements damn when ours do not? I mean, what about people who’ve heard, believed, repented, confessed, and been baptized for the forgiveness of their sins? Aren’t they saved even if they attend a Baptist Church?”

The teacher patiently explains, “It’s simple, really. Turn to Heb 10:26. You’ll see that those who’ve been saved lose their salvation if they willfully continue to sin. Indeed, these are some of the most fearsome verses in the Bible.”

The student looks confused. “But this passage only talks about deliberate sin. What about a Baptist who doesn’t sin on purpose, who really thinks he’s doing what’s right?”

The teacher is now a bit exasperated. “You can’t be serious! I can’t tell you how many debates there’ve been between the Lord’s church and the Baptists. Our best preachers have met the Baptists in debate year after year and carefully explained our views in great detail. You could fill a library with just the books and tracts that have been published pointing out the errors of the Baptist Church! If they cared one whit about the truth, they’d have no trouble learning it!”

We must dispense with another false argument. Too often, my brothers have argued that anyone who disagrees with them on a given point must do so out of false motives. We often refuse to concede that someone can honestly, thoughtfully, prayerfully disagree with us. This way we can avoid the inconvenience of dealing with the believer who is genuinely penitent but who honestly, in good faith, fails to be scripturally baptized.

My Methodist, Baptist, and Pentecostal friends disagree with me on some points, even though they are honestly, sincerely, thoughtfully, and prayerfully seeking to obey God’s will. None are seeking to disobey what he or she knows God says. They just see things differently.

This hardly makes them right. But let’s at least agree that virtually all such people do not baptize their babies (in the case of Methodists, for example) believing that they are condemning them to hell but perversely wishing to go their own way against God’s known will. Give them credit for believing that they are saving their babies’ souls – however strongly we may disagree with their interpretation of scripture.

The mere fact that we’ve written tracts and held debates on a subject hardly proves that every single Baptist, Methodist, or Pentecostal is familiar with those materials, much less that they’d find them persuasive. After all, truly

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persuasive arguments *persuade!* Maybe we just haven't done that good of a job of being persuasive. Maybe the fault is ours.

C. The false dichotomy

Your wife walks in the door fresh from the local dress shop. "Just look at this beautiful dress I bought!" she says. You notice that the dress is indeed very beautiful – too beautiful.

"Ahem. It looks really nice," you say, "but how much did it cost?"

With a wicked grin she says, "Just \$10,000."

After you pick your jaw up off the floor and put your eyes back in their sockets, you say, trying to suppress your anger and surprise, "That's too much. You know we can't afford that kind of money!"

She responds, "You don't want me to wear anything! Do you expect me to go around naked? Well, do you? I've worn out all my old clothes and now you won't let me buy a thing! You are such an ogre!"

Your wife has just committed the logical error known as the "false dichotomy." In other words, she's falsely assumed that the only possibilities are the two extremes: a \$10,000 dress or nakedness. Of course, there are numerous other possibilities, and she knows it, but her goal isn't to seek the truth but to win the argument. So she hopes you are fooled by her ploy. You aren't.

We make the same mistake in many of our doctrinal debates. For example, in discussing whether baptism is essential, we assume that either baptism is absolutely essential or else baptism isn't required at all. Either you're "for baptism," meaning the absolute necessity of doing it in exactly the Church of Christ way, or else "against baptism," meaning any other position, even if you insist on baptism but not every point of Church of Christ teaching.

This is a false dichotomy, that is, we've falsely assumed that there are only two choices. There are other possibilities. Baptism may be required but the rule may admit of exceptions. In fact, most rules have exceptions, but this doesn't mean there are no rules!

We often ignore the in-between positions in our debates. We accuse one side of extremism and then take an equally extreme but opposite position. Of course, some in-between positions are very wrong – but often, truth is found in between the extremes.

D. Camels noses and compromises

At a Sunday morning assembly, the elder making the closing announcements asks the members and visitors to pass in their attendance sheets. At no one's request, a seven-year old girl named Katie gets up to help pick up the sheets. She's seen her friends (all boys) do the same thing the last several weeks and just assumes that if her friends can pick up announcement sheets, so can she.

Afterwards, two members who noticed this event ask to meet with the elders. The elders invite them to their next meeting, unaware they have opposite feelings on the matter.

At the meeting, the elders tell the two members they should feel free to express their concerns. The older member, named Sam, begins.

"I can't tell you how upset I am about this. I haven't slept a wink since Sunday morning. That little Smith girl got up to pick up announcement sheets, and not a soul did anything to stop her! I mean, she walked right past two deacons and an elder, and they did nothing!"

An elder responded, "You know, of course, that this was an entirely spontaneous action by the girl. We didn't ask her to take up announcement sheets. But when she walked by me, smiling, so proud to be helping out at church, I just didn't have the heart to tell her that God wouldn't approve of her serving the congregation this way. There really wasn't time to think through all the doctrinal ramifications, but – on the spot – I couldn't think of a scripture that permits boys to do this and not girls. And, you know, I still can't. But maybe I've missed something. Is there a scriptural problem here? I mean, there may be reasons of expedience that we decide not to allow this, but before we talk about the practical implications, we really have to consider what God says."

The older member looked the elder in the eye, ready to take up the challenge. "I know that she wasn't asked to speak, or teach, or exercise authority. But I know this: this is the way these things begin. First, you let girls take a seemingly neutral role in worship. Then you give the women the right to pass communion. Pretty soon, they're preaching, and then you make them elders! It's the camel's nose under the tent! Giving women too much authority always starts with something like this! It's happened at lots of congregations!"

Another elder turns to the younger member. "Joe, you haven't said anything. Are you here to support what Sam says or do you have something else on your mind?"

"No. I'm not here to support Sam. I love and appreciate Sam. He's served the Lord very well over the years. In fact, I care so much for Sam that I'm not

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sure I'd have come if I'd known he'd be here taking the position that he has. I don't want to start an argument or divide the church. But I just see things differently.

"You see, I have three daughters. They are bright, servant-hearted, little girls, and I can't tell you how excited they were to see Katie picking up announcement sheets! And I'm scared to death that telling that sweet little Katie she can't pick up announcement sheets will just be the first step in our taking some major steps backwards regarding women. I'm so worried about this I haven't slept a wink since Sunday.

"Right now, we don't require women to wear hats in church, but we used to. Are we going back to that? And it used to be that we wouldn't let women ask questions in class. Are we going back to that? And are we going to make them wear dresses on Sunday night and Wednesday night like we used to? Are we going to start preaching sermons against women wearing pants like we used to? Are we going to ban jewelry and make up like we used to? I just can't bear the thought of telling my daughters they can't play soccer anymore because they can't wear pants even for sports – but that's what we told my grandmother! And it looks to me like we're right back there. It's the camel's nose under the tent!

"It just seems to me that we have this great opportunity to treat our girls better than we treated their mothers, and we're going to blow it, and for no good reason. In fact, I've heard of lots of churches where this sort of thing was the first step in taking the church 50 years backwards in terms of their treatment of women! I don't want to have women elders or preachers, but I just can't ask my wife and daughter to go back to the way things used to be."

The second elder smiled. "So no matter what we do, we're going to bring a host of evils down on this congregation, right? I mean, one seven-year old girl picks up a few pieces of paper and suddenly any decision we make leads to a long list of horrors, right?" The two members nodded, maybe a little sheepishly.

The oldest elder, who'd been listening intently with his eyes closed, spoke up. "Gentlemen. I thank you so much for caring enough about God's word and about our members – men and women, girls and boys – to come speak with us. I think you are both sincere and both make well-intended points. You are good-hearted men.

"But I've been an elder for an awfully long time, and I learned something a long time ago that might be of some help here: no matter what decision we make on anything, no matter what we decide, any decision we ever make – taken to extremes – will have ungodly results. But it's our God-given job to make decisions. We just need to be sure that we don't go to extremes – either extreme. And I can assure both of you that no matter which way we go, we'll not

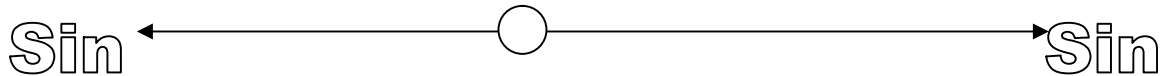
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go to either extreme. None of these terrible things you are afraid of will happen at this church so long as God gives me and my brother elders breath. We'll make a decision. I don't know what it will be because we've not talked about it yet. But we know our scriptures, and we respect our women, and neither of you needs to lose any more sleep."

It's a classic argument, you know – the camel's nose under the tent. Let the camel stick his nose under the tent skirt and pretty soon the whole camel comes in, destroying the tent and everything in it. And sometimes this is true, but not nearly as often as our editors and authors would have us think. You see, there's not a single position or decision that anyone can ever make that – taken to extremes – wouldn't lead to something clearly sinful.

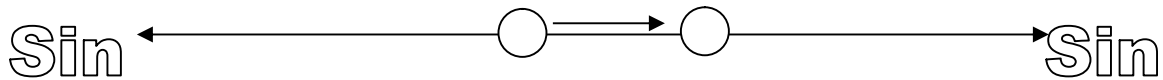
And as my story attempts to illustrate, it's remarkable how many of our brothers and sisters know of countless congregations where just this thing has happened. Of course, rarely can they give the names of those churches! But we sometimes imagine to be true what we are afraid might be true. It's one those human flaws that plague us all.

Perhaps a chart will help make the point.

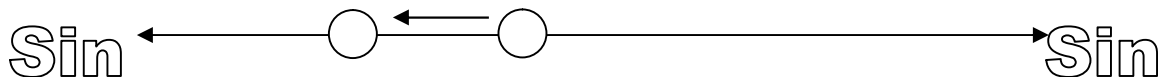


The line represents all the possible outcomes of a decision. The arrow tips are the sinful extremes. Of course, there are usually, maybe always, sinful extremes in both directions. The circle is where a congregation presently is on the issue. This congregation is just a hair left of center.

Any change in a given position moves the church closer to a sinful position:



If the church moves a bit to the right, it's moving toward the extreme right.

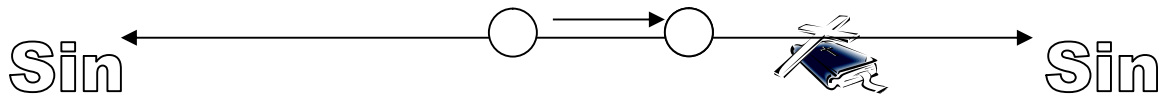


But a decision to the left, moves the church one step closer toward the extreme left. No matter which way the church changes, it moves toward a sinful extreme. And so, do we refuse to ever change? Well, only if we are never wrong, and only Jesus can make that claim!

The solution is to get away from worrying about extremes. Rather, we need to worry about truth, and we need to always move in the direction of truth, even

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though a movement toward truth will always also be a move toward a sinful extreme.



In the above example, a move to the right not only moves the church closer to the sinful extreme on the far right, it moves the church closer to scriptural truth. Even if members, editors, or others protest the move – and accurately point out how this moves the church closer to the sin on the far right – the church must make this move. In fact, it should move even further. Of course, the church should also carefully refrain from moving too far.

Now this brings us to a related fallacious argument, the “compromise argument.” Just as every move can accurately be described as moving the church closer to a sinful extreme, every move can also be categorized as compromise with a sinful extreme. Move right and you’re closer to being a Pharisee. Move left, and you’re closer to being a liberal.

Take the most recent chart above. When the elders decide to move the church to the right, those who disagree can characterize the move as a compromise between the church’s former position and the sinful too-far-right extreme. After all, the church’s new position will not only be closer to the sinful right, it will not go all the way, making it look an awful lot like compromise. Of course, this “compromise” happens to move the church closer to the truth.

Now we need to make an important distinction here. Proving that a position happens to be a move toward a sinful position does not make it wrong, does not make it a compromise, and doesn’t prove it will lead to sin. After all, *all* moves are toward a sinful extreme.

We are going to have to content ourselves with proving arguments wrong by the scriptures rather than fears of what may happen next or spurious compromise claims.

Discussion questions –

1. Have you ever heard one of these arguments used in a church class, sermon, or debate? Was it effective? Should it have been?
2. Give an example of each kind of false reasoning other than the example given by the author and then explain the mistake made.
3. What are some doctrines often defended by the last-verse-read argument?
4. What are some doctrines often defended by the false-motives argument?

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5. What are some doctrines often defended by the camel's-nose-under-the-tent argument?
6. What are some doctrines often defended by the false-compromise argument?
7. Can a doctrine can be true even though sometimes defended by a false argument?
8. Would it be wrong to use a false argument if it helps persuade someone of the truth?

PART II WHY BAPTISM IS ESSENTIAL

CHAPTER 4 CLASSIC ARGUMENTS

A. The meaning of “faith”

Before we wade off into the choppy waters of baptismal doctrine, we have to pause to define “faith.” In the Churches of Christ, a great many of our disputes would disappear if we’d take the time to carefully understand the meaning of this short word before we take a position.

In the NT, “faith” refers to faith in Jesus as Messiah and Lord, but it includes more. In the Churches of Christ, we tend to hear “faith” as referring solely to believing that Jesus is Messiah and Lord. But the use of “faith” as *solely* what someone believes is a Reformation teaching. It’s not the biblical meaning of the word.

For example, in Rom 4 and Gal 3, Paul builds his argument for salvation by faith on the fact that God credited Abraham with righteousness because of his faith. (We’ll consider these chapters in more detail in a future chapter.) We Gentiles enjoy the benefit of the same covenant God made with Abraham because the Gentiles have been grafted into Israel (Rom 11).

(Gen. 15:6 ESV) And he believed the LORD, and he counted it to him as righteousness.

Abraham’s faith was belief that God would keep his promises. His “faith” was trust in God to do what he said he would do. *Thus, a second element of saving faith is to trust God to keep his promises.*

Another meaning of “faith” in the Bible is “faithfulness.” For example, in Gal 5:22, Paul lists “faithfulness” as a fruit of the Spirit. The Greek word translated “faithfulness” there (*pistis*) is the same word usually translated “faith.”

N. T. Wright explains in *Christian Origins and the Question of God: Jesus and the Victory of God*, 263, how “repent” and “faith” were used by First Century Jews. He refers to a story told by Josephus¹ about a Jewish rebel named Jesus –

¹ Josephus is a Jew who switched loyalties during the Jewish rebellion of AD 67-70 that led to the destruction of the Temple. He worked for the Roman forces and afterwards retired on a

[continued on following page]

I was not ignorant of the plot which he had contrived against me ... ; I would, nevertheless, condone his actions if he would **show repentance and prove his loyalty** to me.

(quoted by Wright at p. 250).

The Greek used by Josephus, *metanoesein kai pistos* (repent and believe = show repentance and prove loyalty) is identical to the Greek in Mark 1:15 –

“The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; **repent and believe** in the gospel.”

Wright notes that “believe in me” is translated “be loyal to me” in most translations. “Believe in” or “to have faith in” thus can mean “be loyal to,” “be faithful to,” or even “submit to as lord.”

Wright explains,

Josephus asked Jesus the Galilean brigand leader [not Jesus of Nazareth], ‘to repent and believe in me,’ in other words, to give up his agenda and follow Josephus instead. Jesus of Nazareth, I suggest, issued more or less exactly the same summons to his contemporaries.

To “repent” in this context is not to “no longer commit that sin” but to “change loyalties.” “To have faith in” or “believe in” means “to follow” so that the many, many commands of Jesus to “follow” him in the Gospels overlaps with Paul’s instruction to have “faith” in Jesus.

In short, a third meaning of “faith” is “faithfulness” or even “to follow.” This side of “faith” is very nearly synonymous with “penitence” and “obedience.” And so there can be no faith/trust/faithfulness without obedience. Faith by definition includes a heart that obeys.

Thus, the Greek word for “faith” has three meanings, and all three are found in our confession when we are saved –

- Belief that Jesus is Lord, the Messiah, and Son of God, crucified and resurrected by God (Rom 10:9; Matt 16:16) = faith at its simplest.

pension from the Emperor. He wrote a number of books that remain vitally important sources of First Century Jewish history.

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- Trust that God's promises surrounding Jesus and those who commit themselves to him are true (Gen 15:16; Rom 4:3; Gal 3:6) = hope.
- Faithfulness to Jesus, living as co-crucified people who carry their crosses daily and serve, submit, and sacrifice as Jesus did (Gal 2:20, 5:5-6; Rom 13:23) = love.

Thus, when the scriptures say that everyone with "faith" will be saved, the promise is to those who honor their confession and who not only believe Jesus to be Messiah and Lord intellectually but submit to him as Lord and trust him to be their Savior.

But there is no requirement that Christians understand every single doctrine or that they be entirely free of sin. Therefore, a Christian may have faith and yet misunderstand how to be properly baptized. A Christian will obey the command to be baptized as he understands it, but he's not required to have perfect understanding to have faith or to be faithful.

1. Falling away

I can be faithful or obedient or penitent and yet be imperfect in so doing. If you ask me whether my four sons have been obedient children, the answer is absolutely, unquestionably "yes!" If you ask whether they've ever disobeyed, you'll get the same answer.

But their hearts are faithful. Their hearts are filled with love for their parents and their brothers (even if they don't always know it). They are obedient, although they often disobey, because obedience characterizes their lives at home, at school, etc.

Hence, when we very correctly insist that a convert must be "obedient," that is absolutely true, but it hardly means that the convert may make no mistakes — even doctrinal mistakes. You see, my obedient sons often misunderstood my instructions, and yet I never once disowned them for misunderstanding my will. I sometimes punished them for not paying attention as they should, but they remained my sons and heirs, a part of my household and family despite their occasional willful disobedience.

I'm an estate planner, and some of my clients have shared with me that they'd disowned a child. It's always a deeply sad situation involving a child who rebelled and continued to rebel despite repeated pleas to return and obey. It's rare — but it happens.

I can't imagine a theology that makes God into a father less loving than ordinary people — people who aren't even Christians.

Therefore, falling away can happen, but it requires rebellion.

(Heb 10:26-27 ESV) For if we go on sinning deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, ²⁷ but a fearful expectation of judgment, and a fury of fire that will consume the adversaries.

This passage concludes a theme that runs throughout Hebrews, warning against rebellion. The teaching isn't that we're damned every time we sin or misunderstand this or that doctrine. Rather, it requires sinning deliberately against known laws of God. "Sinning" is present tense in the Greek, implying continuous action — rather than aorist, which implies a single action.

We can also fall away if we deny faith in Jesus —

(1 John 4:2-3 ESV) By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, ³ and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you heard was coming and now is in the world already.

And we can fall away if we refuse to trust God's promises to save those with faith in Jesus —

(Gal 5:5-6 ESV) For through the Spirit, by faith, we ourselves eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness. ⁶ For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but only faith working through love.

Paul declares damned the Judaizing teachers who required circumcision in addition to faith in Jesus. Why? Because circumcision damns? No, because, as v. 6 says, it's not "faith working through love."

His logic is that only faith acting in love saves; therefore, circumcision does not. It's a failure to trust God's promises.

2. Conclusion

Thus, we fall away by leaving through the same gate by which we entered: faith. We entered in belief, trust, and faithfulness; and if we leave, we leave by surrendering any one of those three.

This is a simple, understandable, easy-to-teach approach to understanding faith and salvation and falling away — and it's what the scriptures *say*. It's

entirely consistent with the dozens of verses that promise salvation to all with faith.

Throughout this book, when I say “faith,” I always mean faith in the NT sense – including all three elements. I never use “faith” in contrast to obedience or penitence, unless referring to someone else’s position, because in the NT, except when used ironically by James, “faith” includes having an obedient or penitent heart. When I speak of a “believer,” I use the word in the NT sense of one who has faith – and therefore all believers are faithful and trust God to keep his promises.

B. Arguments in support of the necessity of baptism

Let’s review briefly the arguments that support the necessity of baptism. In addition to the verses quoted earlier, the following arguments strike me as entirely valid lines of reasoning – in fact, I concur in nearly all the arguments that we’ve historically made on this subject:

1. The conversion of Saul

Saul, a persecutor of Christians, was struck blind by a bright light on the road to Damascus. God called Saul into heaven, where he saw the risen Jesus and renamed him Paul.

(Acts 22:6-16 NIV) “About noon as I came near Damascus, suddenly a bright light from heaven flashed around me. I fell to the ground and heard a voice say to me, ‘Saul! Saul! Why do you persecute me?’

“‘Who are you, Lord?’ I asked.

“‘I am Jesus of Nazareth, whom you are persecuting,’ he replied. My companions saw the light, but they did not understand the voice of him who was speaking to me.

“‘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.’ My companions led me by the hand into Damascus, because the brilliance of the light had blinded me.

“A man named Ananias came to see me. He was a devout observer of the law and highly respected by all the Jews living

there. He stood beside me and 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.'"

As Paul further recounts his conversion in 2 Cor, we see just how profound his experience was –

(2 Cor 12:2-4 NIV) I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven. Whether it was in the body or out of the body I do not know – God knows. And I know that this man – whether in the body or apart from the body I do not know, but God knows – was caught up to paradise. He heard inexpressible things, things that man is not permitted to tell.

Now, it does strain credibility to imagine that Paul did not have faith in Jesus before he was baptized – he received the gospel directly from the resurrected Jesus himself! And yet Ananias told Paul to be baptized to wash away his sins – days later. Surely, Paul understood that his sins weren't washed away until the moment of his baptism.

What we don't know from that passage is whether Paul had submitted to Jesus as Lord (decided to be faithful or loyal to Jesus) or had decided to trust the promises of God made through Jesus prior to his baptism. It could be that the delay was to give Paul time to make the dramatic decisions regarding the rest of his life that God had called him to.

2. Baptism as a burial with Christ

Paul declares in Rom 6 –

(Rom 6:3-4 NIV) Or don't you know that all of us who were baptized into [eis] 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.

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Note first the phrase “baptized into Christ Jesus.” Clearly, this implies that we were out of Christ Jesus before being baptized into him. Just so, we did not enjoy “new life” until we were raised with Christ after being buried with him in baptism.

It is really hard to make any sense out of this passage unless we understand salvation to occur at the moment of baptism.

3. The meaning of eis

The preposition that often follows “baptize” in the Greek is *eis* (pronounced “ice”), meaning, most literally and naturally, into.

Whatever translation of *eis* may be possible in its varied relations, there is no possible translation when it relates to a real or verbal baptism, but into.²

Of course, “immerse” implies motion.

We’re baptized “into” the name of Christ (Acts 8:16; Acts 10:48; Acts 19:5; Rom 6:3; 1 Cor 1:13-15), Christ’s death (Rom 6:3-4), the body of Christ (1 Cor 12:13), and Christ (Gal 3:27) – not to mention forgiveness of sins (Acts 2:38). And how can I be baptized “into” these things unless I was out of these things before my baptism?

4. Water regeneration

Many who reject the necessity of baptism for salvation refer to those who insist on baptism for salvation – especially those within the Churches of Christ – as believing in “water regeneration” or as teaching that baptism is a sacrament – in the Catholic sense of “sacrament.”

The Catholic view of a sacrament is that a sacrament is a means by which the church, as an institution, mediates grace to a Christian. Of course, the Churches of Christ believe, like most Protestant churches, that we are a priesthood of believers and so no institution, priest, or other person stands between God and Christians.

² James W. Dale, *Christic Baptism and Patristic Baptism* (Wauconda, IL: Bolchazy-Carducci Publishers, *et al.*, 1874, reprinted 1995). Zodiates defines *eis*: “After verbs implying motion of any kind, into or to, toward.” Spiros Zodiates, *The Complete New Testament Word Study Dictionary* (Chattanooga: AMG International, Inc., 1994).

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The accusation is either that we in the Churches of Christ believe that water itself saves or that salvation is imparted by the person doing the baptizing – in either case, we are accused of teaching a doctrine of salvation by works. Neither charge is fair. The most articulate response to this argument that I’ve found is from an essay by Tom Lawson³ –

Occasional Salvation

So what’s the problem? It is, to put it simply, an occasional problem. What is the occasion, the event, the moment of time when a person is saved?

But do we need an event? A simple look around reveals that, indeed, we must have such an event. No evangelical would say, “Well, I was saved gradually between 1987 and 1994.” No, every denomination and tradition that understands Christianity in terms of conversion and justification is driven to supply an “event” or occasion. ...

So, if I may paraphrase what I assume I am being told: a person is saved BY grace, THROUGH faith, WHEN he prays (and means) the sinner’s prayer. Would I then be justified to accuse those who teach such an approach of being “verbal regenerationists”? I could point out that prayer is, in fact, a “work.” It is something people do. It requires effort (air pushing through lungs, vocal cords vibrating, mouth moving to form words, etc.). Is this then teaching a salvation by works? Are my evangelical friends guilty of forsaking the glorious gospel of grace by teaching people that they are saved when they say the sinner’s prayer? Of course not!

At least, then, it should be clear that those who understand Christian baptism as the initiating event into the covenant are not “water regenerationists.” We simply say that a person is saved BY grace, THROUGH faith, WHEN they (in genuine faith and repentance) are baptized. My difference with my religious neighbors is over the occasion or event at

³ “Occasional Salvation: Baptism as a When, Not a What in Salvation,” *The Christian Standard* (July 30, 1995), 628-629.

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which salvation occurred, not the foundational cause of salvation. ...

Lawson concludes by pointing out that baptism is very nearly a violent act. It's dark and cold under the water. The person being baptized is completely at the mercy of the baptizer. And this matters.

It matters because baptism teaches that Christianity is about trusting someone else to save you. It's about approaching death only to be rescued by someone else's hand. Baptism is not just some ancient relic of a forgotten past – it's a powerful lesson in what it means to be a Christian. And being a Christian is vastly more than just asking to be saved or to have a personal relationship with Jesus. It's about surrendering your entire life, a lesson easily missed in the Sinner's Prayer and even more easily missed by someone baptized as an infant.

5. Faith requires obedience

Perhaps the most common argument in Church of Christ literature is that faith in Jesus requires obedience, and a failure to be properly baptized is disobedience and hence damning.

But if an error in baptism damns, what about an error in worship? Well, that's damning, too. And an error in the use of the church treasury? Also damning. In fact, just about any error damns. As a result, the argument utterly destroys grace – so much so that some in the Churches of Christ speak of the “grace-unity heresy,” as though grace and unity were heretical!

Here's the problem with the logic. Faith does indeed require obedience, but “obedience” doesn't mean “perfect obedience” or “obedience according to perfect doctrine” or even “precision obedience,” as so often insisted on by the *Gospel Advocate*. Rather, “obedience” refers to having a penitent heart that wants to obey.

If you visit your friend at her home and her children are well-mannered and courteous, you might remark, “What a wonderful job you've done of raising such obedient children!” You wouldn't mean that they are perfect, only that they are generally obedient because they are trying to do right. You know they'll make mistakes but still be obedient.

Consider,

(1 John 1:9-10 ESV) If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. ¹⁰ If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.

Obviously, no one is perfect. However, my brothers often assume that we can have perfect doctrine, although we might be incapable of perfect morality. This is sheer Gnosticism – the Second Century heresy that taught a radical separation between the physical (morality) and spiritual (doctrine).

Fortunately, the scriptures are far more realistic about humanity's ability to achieve doctrinal or intellectual perfection, and grace is given for both moral and doctrinal error – so long as we still have faith in Jesus.

6. Romans 14

For example, in Rom 14, Paul wrestles with Christians in Rome who disagree over whether it's sinful to eat meat (likely referring either to the Jewish kosher laws or meats sacrificed to idols) or to honor certain days as special (likely referring to the Sabbath and Jewish festival days). The Romans who considered these commands binding thought they were disputing over a doctrinal issue. They would have argued vigorously from the scriptures the necessity of honoring the Sabbath or refusing certain foods.

In Church of Christ parlance, they would have seen these as matters of "faith." Those who considered these commands to be no longer binding would consider them matters of "opinion." That is, they would consider them mere scruples, but those who insisted on obedience saw themselves as obeying commands and those who disagreed as disobedient.

And yet Paul teaches,

(Rom. 14:1-4 ESV) As for the one who is weak in faith, welcome him, but not to quarrel over opinions [NIV: disputable matters].² One person believes he may eat anything, while the weak person eats only vegetables.³ Let not the one who eats despise the one who abstains, and let not the one who abstains pass judgment on the one who eats, for God has welcomed him.⁴ Who are you to pass judgment on the servant of another? It is before his own master that he stands or falls. And he will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make him stand.

V. 4 is key. We should not "pass judgment" on the other person, even on matters that we argue from the scriptures. Why? Because "he will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make him stand." That is, he'll be saved by grace, just as will you. Grace applies in matters of scriptural interpretation – but this assumes that we remain within the bounds of faith in Jesus. Grace comes by faith (Eph 2:8-10).

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(Rom. 14:5-6 ESV) One person esteems one day as better than another, while another esteems all days alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind. ⁶ The one who observes the day, observes it in honor of the Lord. The one who eats, eats in honor of the Lord, since he gives thanks to God, while the one who abstains, abstains in honor of the Lord and gives thanks to God.

Paul then specifically instructs that those who disagree as to whether one day might be holier than another must “be fully convinced in his own mind,” that is, don’t do something you doubt to be correct in God’s eyes.

Paul then points out that those who eat and those who don’t eat do what they do in honor of God. Those who celebrate certain days and those who refuse to do so all do what they do to honor God.

(Rom. 14:10-13 ESV) Why do you pass judgment on your brother? Or you, why do you despise your brother? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God; ¹¹ for it is written, “As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall confess to God.” ¹² So then each of us will give an account of himself to God. ¹³ Therefore let us not pass judgment on one another any longer, but rather decide never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of a brother.

Finally, Paul tells both sides to stop passing judgment on each other. He next explains that there are no unclean foods (v. 14), giving his apostolic opinion and presumably settling the argument. But he doesn’t require those who consider some foods unclean to change – only to stop passing judgment on those who disagree.

And in Romans, Paul never gives the answer as to who is right about one day being holier than another. The answer is that the two sides must stop passing judgment on the other and recognize that both sides are covered by grace, brothers and sisters in Christ, and to be welcomed and accepted as such – despite their doctrinal disagreement.

7. Faith requires repentance

A very similar argument is made in terms of repentance. Based on Acts 2:38, we teach that one must repent as a condition to salvation. Repentance requires obedience, and so a refusal to be baptized correctly shows a failure to have repented.

The argument fails for the same reason as the “faith requires obedience” argument fails.

8. Nowhere does the Bible require “faith only”

It’s true that the Bible nowhere requires “faith only.” But the Bible does often say that *everyone* with faith will be saved. For example,

(John 3:16-18 ESV) “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. ¹⁷ For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. ¹⁸ Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God.”

(We will see many, many more such verses as our study continues in the following chapters.)

Now, if only those with faith in Jesus who are baptized strictly in accordance with Church of Christ teaching are saved, then John 3:16-18 is simply not true. “Whoever believes” does not mean “whoever believes and is baptized exactly correctly.” Of course, in NT times, these were almost always the very same people. But today, it’s often the case that they are not.

The next argument is inevitably that if we can be saved with “faith only,” then we don’t have to obey – leading to antinomianism (the idea that we can sin all we want so long as we have faith). This argument fails because it misunderstands the Bible’s use of “faith.” As we just covered, the NT word for “faith” includes faithfulness, which might also be translated loyalty or even penitence.

9. Martin Luther wrongly added “alone” to “faith” in Rom 3:28

Although John Wycliffe’s 1382 English translation of the Bible is likely the first translation into the language of the people since the fall of the Roman Empire, the Catholic Church thoroughly suppressed his work, and his translation was forgotten by the time of the Reformation.

Much later, in the 16th Century, Martin Luther translated the scriptures into German, and thus lit a fire under the Protestant Reformation. Soon, William Tyndale translated the Bible into English, and although he was burned at the stake for doing so, the church authorities were unable to keep translations out of

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the hands of the people. Soon the church was publishing its own translation (one of which is now called the King James Version).

Famously, Luther translated Rom 3:28 by adding “alone” after “faith” (in German, of course) –

(Rom. 3:28 ESV) For we hold that one is justified by faith
[alone] apart from works of the law.

The argument has often been made that Luther’s translation led to centuries of doctrinal error. However, Calvin and Zwingli developed their theology from their own Bibles – the Latin Vulgate or Erasmus’s Greek text – not Luther’s German translation. Tyndale did not add “alone” to his translation, nor is it in the KJV.

The Baptist teaching that one is saved when he first comes to faith, not baptism, traces back to the Reformed Church founded by Calvin and Zwingli, not back to Luther. In fact, Luther insisted on baptism as the moment of salvation.

This is from his Large Catechism⁴ –

For it is of the greatest importance that we esteem Baptism excellent, glorious, and exalted, for which we contend and fight chiefly, because the world is now so full of sects clamoring that Baptism is an external thing, and that external things are of no benefit. But let it be ever so much an external thing, here stand God’s Word and command which institute, establish, and confirm Baptism. But what God institutes and commands cannot be a vain, but must be a most precious thing, though in appearance it were of less value than a straw. ...

Still Baptism is itself a work, and you say works are of no avail for salvation; what, then, becomes of faith? Answer: Yes, our works, indeed, avail nothing for salvation; Baptism, however, is not our work, but God’s (for, as was stated, you must put Christ-baptism far away from a bath-keeper’s baptism). God’s works, however, are saving and necessary for

⁴ Martin Luther, *Large Catechism*, “Holy Baptism” (1538), published in *Triglot Concordia: The Symbolical Books of the Evangelical Lutheran Church: German-Latin-English* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1921).

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salvation, and do not exclude, but demand, faith; for without faith they could not be apprehended. For by suffering the water to be poured upon you, you have not yet received Baptism in such a manner that it benefits you anything; but it becomes beneficial to you if you have yourself baptized with the thought that this is according to God's command and ordinance, and besides in God's name, in order that you may receive in the water the promised salvation. Now, this the fist cannot do, nor the body; but the heart must believe it.

Thus you see plainly that [baptism] is here no work done by us, but a treasure which He gives us, and which faith apprehends; just as the Lord Jesus Christ upon the cross is not a work, but a treasure comprehended in the Word, and offered to us and received by faith. Therefore they do us violence by exclaiming against us as though we preach against faith; while we alone insist upon it as being of such necessity that without it nothing can be received nor enjoyed.

It's a shame that so many in the Churches of Christ have treated Luther as the enemy of our baptismal theology. In fact, he may be the greatest defender of the necessity of baptism born since the apostolic age.

Discussion questions –

1. What are the three elements of NT "faith" according to the author?
2. Does Jesus use "faith" in this three-part sense?
3. Does James use "faith" in a different sense?
4. How should we reconcile James with Jesus' and Paul's use of "faith"?
5. If "faith" include faithfulness and trust, as well as belief, can there be such a thing as faith without obedience? Does this mean you don't have faith if you make any error at all?
6. Does Saul's conversion demonstrate the necessity of baptism? Is there another way to understand the story?
7. In what ways is baptism like a burial and resurrection? What dies? What's made alive again? Can sprinkling or pouring be like a burial and resurrection?

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8. If we are baptized “into” Christ, then where were we before baptism? How can water have the power to put someone into Christ? What does it mean to be “in” Christ?
9. Does it matter who performs the baptism?
10. Does it matter what denomination the person who does the baptizing is a member of? Does it matter what the person baptizing the convert is saved?
11. What if the person being baptized desires baptism for the right reason but the person doing the baptizing has the wrong understanding of the purpose of baptism?
12. If someone were to be saved without baptism, when would the salvation occur? Is it possible to be saved gradually? Must there be a particular moment when someone passes from being lost to being saved?
13. Read Rom 8:9-11. Does this passage mean that someone who has the Spirit is saved and someone who doesn’t have the Spirit isn’t saved? Does your answer affect your answer to question 7?

CHAPTER 5 THREE CRITICAL PASSAGES

The argument for the necessity of baptism would not be complete without consideration of the three most controversial passages touching the subject.

A. 1 Pet 3:18-22

A critical passage is 1 Pet 3:18-22 –

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

This intriguing passage is frequently relied on by both sides of this issue. Those insisting on the necessity of baptism for salvation rely on the phrase “baptism that now saves you,” pointing out that salvation occurs at the moment of baptism, and thus, without baptism, there can be no salvation.

Those who insist that baptism is not essential for salvation rely on the phrase “not the removal of dirt from the body but the pledge of good conscience toward God,” arguing that this specifically denies that the actual immersion is effective, so that it is only the commitment to God that matters. Hence, the Sinner’s Prayer is simply making the pledge that saves.

It should be obvious, of course, that we can’t just pick out those phrases that suit our presuppositions. The whole passage has to have meaning. And very plainly, what Peter is saying is that baptism saves but not by the power of the water, but rather salvation comes by the power of the resurrection of Christ. While some are offended at the notion that baptism saves, the fact is that the Bible says that baptism saves. But, of course, there is no power in the water – or even in the person administering the baptism. Rather, Jesus saves, but he saves through baptism.

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Any doubt should be made clear from the contrast Peter is drawing. In verse 21, the word translated “symbolizes” in the NIV or “figure” in the KJV is literally “antitype.” Baptism, Peter writes, is the antitype of the Flood. In the Flood, the water was hardly the means of salvation – it was the means of destruction. God was the source or power of destruction, but the means whereby God chose to destroy the world was water. Ironically, the same water that destroyed the world also saved eight people – by separating them from the rest of the world, purifying God’s creation. Thus, the water destroyed the corrupt, but by miraculous means, God used the water to rescue the faithful as the water lifted the ark above the raging waters.

Now the faithful eight were faithful before the Flood, but they were not saved from the corruption of the world until they were “saved through water” – which is comparable to baptism. Of course, it was not ultimately the water that saved the eight – it was God – without God’s miraculous care the water would have only drowned them.

Peter declares that baptism is not effective unless administered to someone who is committing himself to God by this means. Thus, baptism of an infant can’t be within this passage, as an infant can’t make a “pledge of a good conscience toward God.”

Surely we are not interpreting amiss in believing that once more we have the representation of baptism as the supreme occasion when God, through the Mediator Christ, deals with a man who comes to Him through Christ on the basis of his redemptive acts. It is a meeting of God and man in the Christ of the cross and resurrection; it is faith assenting to God’s grace and receiving that grace embodied in Christ. This is more important than Noah and the Flood and the disobedient spirits, but all together combine to magnify the greatness of the grace revealed in the suffering and exalted Lord who meets us in the Christian *baptisma*.⁵

B. John 3:1-8

Now, as we’ve seen, there are plenty of passages that teach that *if* you have faith and are baptized, *then* you are saved. None of the previously quoted “baptism” passages, however, says what happens if you have faith and are not baptized. Perhaps baptism is one but not the only path to salvation.

⁵ Beasley-Murray, 262.

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We have to consider John 3:1-8 –

(John 3:1-8 ESV) Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. ² This man came to Jesus by night and said to him, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him.”

³ Jesus answered him, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.”

⁴ Nicodemus said to him, “How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?”

⁵ Jesus answered, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. ⁶ That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. ⁷ Do not marvel that I said to you, ‘You must be born again.’ ⁸ The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.”

If “born of water” in verse 5 refers to baptism in water, Jesus has said that baptism is not only *a* path to heaven, it is *the only* path to heaven.

There are four possible meanings of “water” suggested in the commentaries:

- The waters of physical birth
- Baptism
- The Holy Spirit
- The water of conception

1. Physical birth

The argument for a reference to physical birth is that Jesus refers to being “born again” and that “flesh gives birth to flesh” in the immediate context, so that physical birth is very much a part of the discussion. Indeed, Nicodemus is moved to ask ironically whether Jesus is calling on him to return to his mother’s womb.

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And in English, we often refer to the “waters of birth” or to a mother’s “waters” being broken.

On the other hand, in chapter 1, when John wishes to refer to physical birth in 1:13, he refers to birth “of blood” (literally “from bloods”) – so why use a different metaphor here for the same idea in a similar context?

2. Baptism

There are strong arguments that baptism is in mind:

a. This is the position taken by the Christian church for centuries, by many different denominations and expositors:

Except he experience the great inward change of the Spirit, and be baptized (wherever baptism can be had) as the outward sign and means of it. – *Wesley’s Notes*.

John himself declared that his baptism was incomplete, – it was only with water. One was coming who should baptize with the Holy Ghost. That declaration of his is the key to the understanding of this verse. Baptism, complete, with water and the Spirit, is the admission into the kingdom of God. – *Alford’s Greek Testament*.

This regeneration, which our church in so many places ascribes to baptism, is more than being admitted into the church. ... This is grounded on the plain words of our Lord in John 3:5. By water, then, as a means, the water of baptism, we are regenerated or born again; whence it is called by the apostle, the washing of Regeneration. – *Doctrinal Tracts*, M. E. Church Edition of 1825.

Forasmuch as our Savior Christ saith, None can enter into the kingdom of God except he be regenerated and born anew of Water and of the Holy Ghost; I beseech you to call upon God the Father, through our Lord Jesus Christ, that of his bounteous goodness he will grant to these persons that which by nature they cannot have; that they may be baptized with Water and the Holy Ghost, and received into Christ’s Holy Church, and be made lively members of the same. – *Book of Common Prayer*, Art. Baptism.

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“John said: I baptize with water; the One coming after baptizes with Spirit; but Christ says: The baptism of both is necessary. One must be born of water and the Spirit.” - *International Revision Commentary*, edited by Dr. Schaff.⁶

It is true that the word water does often symbolize temptation in Holy Writ, especially in the Psalms. (Psalms 18:16; 69:1-3.) But here (John 3:5) it cannot be interpreted that way; for here Christ is speaking of baptism, of real and natural water such as a cow may drink, the baptism about which you hear in the sermons on this subject. Therefore, the word water does not designate affliction here; it means real, natural water, which is connected with God’s word and becomes a very spiritual bath through the Holy Spirit or through the entire Trinity. Here Christ also speaks of the Holy Spirit as present and active, in fact, the entire Holy Trinity is there. And thus the person who has been baptized is said to be born anew. In Tit 3:3 Paul terms baptism “a washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit.” In the last chapter of Mark we read that “he who believes and is baptized will be saved.” (Mark 16:16.) And in this passage Christ declares that whoever is not born anew of the water and the Holy Spirit cannot come into the kingdom of God. Therefore, God’s words dare not be tampered with. - *Martin Luther’s Sermons on the Gospel of Saint John*, Vol. 22, p. 283.⁷

The Church Fathers are unanimous in interpreting John 3:5 as a reference to baptism, as well⁸ –

As many as are persuaded and believe that what we [Christians] teach and say is true, and undertake to be able to live accordingly, and instructed to pray and to entreat God with fasting, for the remission of their sins that are past, we pray and fast with them. Then they are brought by us where

⁶ Excerpted from B. W. Johnson, *New Testament Commentary Vol. III: John* (St. Louis: Christian Board of Publication, 1886). http://www.ccel.org/j/johnson_bw/bwjntc3/htm/

⁷ Quoted by Basil Overton, “How Are We Born of the Water and the Spirit?” <http://www.gospelgazette.com/gazette/2001/mar/page17.htm>.

⁸ *Catholic Answers*, http://www.catholic.com/ANSWERS/tracts/_bornagn.htm.

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there is water and are regenerated in the same manner in which we were ourselves regenerated. For, in the name of God, the Father . . . and of our Savior Jesus Christ, and of the Holy Spirit [Matt 28:19], they then receive the washing with water. For Christ also said, "Unless you are born again, you shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven." (Justin Martyr, *First Apology* 61 [A.D. 151]).

"^And [Naaman] dipped himself . . . seven times in the Jordan' [2 Kings 5:14]. It was not for nothing that Naaman of old, when suffering from leprosy, was purified upon his being baptized, but [this served] as an indication to us. For as we are lepers in sin, we are made clean, by means of the sacred water and the invocation of the Lord, from our old transgressions, being spiritually regenerated as new-born babes, even as the Lord has declared: `Except a man be born again through water and the Spirit, he shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven.'" (Irenaeus of Lyons, Fragment 34 [A.D. 190]).

"[N]o one can attain salvation without baptism, especially in view of the declaration of the Lord, who says, `Unless a man shall be born of water, he shall not have life.'" (Tertullian, *Baptism* 12:1 [A.D. 203]).

"The Father of immortality sent the immortal Son and Word into the world, who came to man in order to wash him with water and the Spirit; and He, begetting us again to incorruption of soul and body, breathed into us the Spirit of life, and endued us with an incorruptible panoply. If, therefore, man has become immortal, he will also be God. And if he is made God by water and the Holy Spirit after the regeneration of the laver he is found to be also joint-heir with Christ after the resurrection from the dead. Wherefore I preach to this effect: Come, all ye kindreds of the nations, to the immortality of the baptism." (Hippolytus, *Discourse on the Holy Theophany* 8 [A.D. 217]).

"[When] they receive also the baptism of the Church . . . then finally can they be fully sanctified and be the sons of God . . . since it is written, `Except a man be born again of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God.'" (Cyprian of Carthage, *Letters* 71[72]:1 [A.D. 253]).

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“This then is what it means to be ‘born again of water and Spirit’: Just as our dying is effected in the water [Rom 6:3, Col 2:12-13], our living is wrought through the Spirit. In three immersions and an equal number of invocations the great mystery of baptism is completed in such a way that the type of death may be shown figuratively, and that by the handing on of divine knowledge the souls of the baptized may be illuminated. If, therefore, there is any grace in the water, it is not from the nature of water, but from the Spirit’s presence there.” (Basil the Great, *The Holy Spirit*, 15:35 [A.D. 375]).

“You have read, therefore, that the three witnesses in baptism are one: water, blood, and the Spirit (1 John 5:8): And if you withdraw any one of these, the sacrament of baptism is not valid. For what is the water without the cross of Christ? A common element with no sacramental effect. Nor on the other hand is there any mystery of regeneration without water, for ‘unless a man be born again of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.’” (Ambrose of Milan, *The Mysteries* 4:20 [A.D. 390]).

“[In] the birth by water and the Spirit, [Jesus] himself led the way in this birth, drawing down upon the water, by his own baptism, the Holy Spirit; so that in all things he became the first-born of those who are spiritually born again, and gave the name of brethren to those who partook in a birth like to his own by water and the Spirit.” (Gregory of Nyssa, *Against Eunomius* 2:8 [A.D. 382]).

“[N]o one can enter into the kingdom of Heaven except he be regenerate through water and the Spirit, and he who does not eat the flesh of the Lord and drink his blood is excluded from eternal life, and if all these things are accomplished only by means of those holy hands, I mean the hands of the priest, how will any one, without these, be able to escape the fire of hell, or to win those crowns which are reserved for the victorious? These [priests] truly are they who are entrusted with the pangs of spiritual travail and the birth which comes through baptism: by their means we put on Christ, and are buried with the Son of God, and become members of that blessed Head.” (John Chrysostom, *The Priesthood* 3:5-6 [A.D. 387]).

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“It is this one Spirit who makes it possible for an infant to be regenerated . . . when that infant is brought to baptism; and it is through this one Spirit that the infant so presented is reborn. For it is not written, ‘Unless a man be born again by the will of his parents’ or ‘by the faith of those presenting him or ministering to him,’ but, ‘Unless a man be born again of water and the Holy Spirit.’ The water, therefore, manifesting exteriorly the sacrament of grace, and the Spirit effecting interiorly the benefit of grace, both regenerate in one Christ that man who was generated in Adam.” (Augustine, *Letters* 98:2 [A.D. 412]).

b. Baptism is very much in the context. John 1:19 *ff.* discusses the baptism of John. Indeed, in 1:26, John the Baptist says “I baptize with water” and in 1:33, John says that Jesus “will baptize with the Holy Spirit.” This is, of course, parallel with “born of water and Spirit” (although John the Baptist speaks disjunctively – it’s water or it’s Spirit) whereas Jesus is speaking conjunctively (which is closer to the church’s traditional understanding but not how John the Baptist spoke) Immediately after the account of Jesus with Nicodemus, we read in 3:22 that Jesus and his disciples went to the countryside and baptized with water.

c. There is no evidence that the Jews thought of water as an element of or symbol for physical birth. Indeed, John’s earlier references to natural physical birth speak of being “born of blood.” John 1:12-13.⁹ In both cases, “of” is the same preposition, ‘*ek*. One commentator who sought evidence that the Jews used “water” to refer to physical birth came up with considerable evidence of water being a Jewish metaphor for conception, but nothing for associating water with physical birth.¹⁰

d. The Greek tends to support that only one birth is in mind –

The unity of the two elements is shown by the use of the single preposition ‘*ek*: ‘by water and Spirit’.¹¹

⁹ Paraphrased in the NIV as “born of human descent.” The KJV has “born ... of blood.”

¹⁰ Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John, The International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1971), 216-217. “In due course I turned away from the view that the water is simply the amniotic fluid that flows away during the process of birth, because I could find no ancient text that spoke of birth as ‘out of water.’” See also D. A. Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies* (Boston: Baker Book House, Inc., 1996), 41.

¹¹ Beasley-Murray, 230.

3. Holy Spirit

On the other hand, there are good arguments that the Spirit is in mind:

a. “Water” is often used in the OT to refer to the Spirit.

(Isa 44:3 ESV) For I will pour water on the thirsty land, and streams on the dry ground; I will pour my Spirit upon your offspring, and my blessing on your descendants.

(Isa 32:14-15 ESV) For the palace is forsaken, the populous city deserted; the hill and the watchtower will become dens forever, a joy of wild donkeys, a pasture of flocks; ¹⁵ until the Spirit is poured upon us from on high, and the wilderness becomes a fruitful field, and the fruitful field is deemed a forest.

(Eze 39:29 ESV) “And I will not hide my face anymore from them, when I pour out my Spirit upon the house of Israel, declares the Lord GOD.”

(Joel 2:28-29 ESV) “And it shall come to pass afterward, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions. ²⁹ Even on the male and female servants in those days I will pour out my Spirit.”

“Pour out” is clearly a water metaphor.

b. In John, the Spirit is referred to as water. In John 7:37 John is explicit –

(John 7:37-39 ESV) On the last day of the feast, the great day, Jesus stood up and cried out, “If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink. ³⁸ Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, ‘Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.’” ³⁹ Now this he said about the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were to receive, for as yet the Spirit had not been given, because Jesus was not yet glorified.

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Commentators are nearly unanimous that Jesus' references to "living water" in John 4, his conversation with the Samaritan woman, are also references to the Holy Spirit.¹²

Some object that if "water" = "Spirit," then Jesus is saying we must be born of "the Spirit and the Spirit," but the same objection could be lodged against Isa 44:3, where the prophet uses "water" as a poetic metaphor for Spirit in parallel. Perhaps Jesus is borrowing the prophets' metaphor in a similar Hebraic parallelism.

Or Jesus' phrase could be a hendiadys, a figure of speech common in *koine* Greek in which two nouns or two verbs are joined by "and" with the intention that they be read as a single noun or verb. One author gives a couple of examples¹³ –

Webster's defines this figure well: "the expression of an idea by the use of two usually independent words connected by 'and' ("nice and warm") instead of the usual combination of an independent word and its modifier ("nicely warm"). In Hendiadys the two words are the same part of speech (i.e., two nouns, two verbs, etc.), and if they are nouns, they are always in the same case. The figure Hendiadys places equal emphasis on both words conjoined by the "and," whereas if the concept was rendered literally, such as "nicely warm," the emphasis of the phrase is on the noun, not the modifier. ...

Isaiah 1:13 (NIV)

Stop bringing meaningless offerings! Your incense is detestable to me. New Moons, Sabbaths and convocations—I cannot bear your evil assemblies.

The Hendiadys in the last phrase of this verse has made it hard to translate, but the meaning is clear, and the NIV has done a superb job of bringing that meaning into English: The

¹² Guy N. Woods, in his 1989 commentary on the Gospel of John in the Gospel Advocate commentary series argues that "living water" refers to the word of God, even though John himself says "living water" refers to the Holy Spirit.

¹³ "Figures of Speech – Hendiadys (Two for One)," *Truth or Tradition?* <http://www.truthortradition.com/articles/figures-of-speech-hendiadys-two-for-one>.

last phrase is rendered more literally in the ESV: “I cannot endure iniquity and solemn assembly.” God usually desires solemn assemblies, but in this case the people were so evil that the solemn assemblies they held were corrupted and evil. The figure Hendiadys recognizes and emphasizes that the people were holding assemblies, but also emphasizes that those assemblies were wicked.

Luke 21:15 (ESV)

“for I will give you a mouth and wisdom, which none of your adversaries will be able to withstand or contradict.”

It is obvious that this verse is a figure of speech, because everyone has a mouth and therefore has no need for God to give them one. Actually, there are a couple figures of speech in this verse, and we will unpack them one at a time. “A mouth and wisdom” is the figure Hendiadys for “a wise mouth,” but the figure is better than the literal statement because saying someone has a “mouth” places emphasis on the fact that there will be much speaking. Someone may have a “wise mouth” but not say much, but someone who has a “mouth” says a lot. This is one of the instances where the literal expression “mouth and wisdom” and the figurative expression “wise mouth” are both true. God will inspire much speaking and give wisdom to the speaker as well. Perhaps, “I will give you a mouth, indeed, a wise mouth,” would be a good rendition. Also, “mouth” is not literal, but is put by the figure Metonymy for the words spoken by the mouth, so in teasing out the figures a little further, a good translation might be: “I will give you (many) words, indeed, wise words.”

Thus, “water and Spirit” could mean “the Spirit, indeed, the Spirit that is the water of prophecy.” Or it could be “water that is Spirit,” consistent with Isaiah’s use and the usage of several other OT prophets. Jesus would be using “water” to be certain Nicodemus recalled the many OT passages that speak of the Spirit as water to be poured out from heaven when the Kingdom arrives.

This interpretation nicely sets the stage for “living water” in the very next chapter, which would otherwise not be defined until three chapters later.

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c. Although Leon Morris found no evidence that “water” was used as a metaphor for birth in *koine* Greek, he found plenty of evidence that “water” is used as a metaphor for conception.

“Water” may be connected with procreation. This conception is quite foreign to us and we find it difficult at first to make sense of it. But Odeberg has gathered an impressive array of passages from rabbinic, Mandaean, and Hermetic sources to show that terms like “water,” “rain,” “dew,” and “drop” were often used of the male semen. If “water” has this meaning here, there are two possibilities. Being born “of water” may point to natural birth, which must then be followed by being born “of the Spirit,” that is spiritual regeneration. Or better, we may take “water” and “Spirit” closely together to give a meaning like “spiritual seed.” In this case being born “of water and the Spirit” will not differ greatly from being born “of the Spirit.”¹⁴

The Greek word translated “born” means “conceived” when the father is in mind,¹⁵ and the ESV translates the same word as “conceived” or the like in Mat 1:2-16 (“was the father of” or KJV: “begat”), Mat 1:20 (“is conceived”), Acts 7:8, 29, 13:33 (quoting Psa 2:7), 1 Cor 4:15, Phile 1:10, Heb 1:5 (Psa 2:7 again), 5:5 (again). 1 John 3:9 speaks of being “born again” because “God’s seed abides in him,” and so the reference is really to conception (“seed” is a metaphor for semen¹⁶).

In fact, given that Jesus was literally conceived by the Holy Spirit, and we are to be transformed into his image, it makes quite a lot of sense to speak of Christians being “conceived again” of the Spirit – like Jesus. And so this is a very likely translation of John 3:5. After all, Jesus is not likely to be thinking of God or the Spirit as the Christian’s spiritual mother. God is referred to as “Father” nearly 100 times in John’s Gospel.

The primary objection is Nicodemus’s reference to returning to his mother’s womb, but literal re-conception would also require a return to the womb. Jesus’ words are perfectly ambiguous as to whether he has birth or

¹⁴ Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament, (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1995), 191–192.

¹⁵ BDAG, *gennaō*.

¹⁶ *Sperma* can refer to literally semen, to inherited characteristics from the father, or descendants. But conception is always part of the picture. BDAG.

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conception in mind, but several factors should point us toward the meaning “conception”: Jesus’ own conception (it was more precisely a virgin conception rather than a virgin birth, right?); John’s reference to the Spirit as “God’s seed” in 1 John 3:9; the countless references to God as a Christian’s “Father”; and the many references to Jesus as “only begotten” Son, based on Psa 2:7, which speaks of conception, not birth.¹⁷ Hence, we might take “water” as an allusion to “seed”

¹⁷ Several passages that translate *gennaō* as “born” clearly intend to refer to conception. For example –

(1 Pet 1:23 ESV) since you have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God.

Again, “seed” refers to semen or the male element of conception, and so “born again” should be translated “conceived again” or “begotten again” or even “re-fathered.”

Equally plain is –

(1 John 3:9 ESV) No one born of God makes a practice of sinning, for God's seed abides in him, and he cannot keep on sinning because he has been born of God.

And there are verses that speak of God as conceiving a Christian without explicit reference to God’s seed –

(John 1:12-13 ESV) ¹² But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, ¹³ who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.

Since the reference is to a child coming into being due to the will of the Father, conception is in mind, not birth.

(1 John 2:29 ESV) If you know that he is righteous, you may be sure that everyone who practices righteousness has been born of him.

Again, the reference is to being “born” of God – our Father. Conception is the thought, not birth. This is yet another passage that associates re-conception with the Spirit (referred to as the Anointing in 1 John 2:27).

The ancients did not understand conception as the joining of egg with sperm. Rather, they thought of semen as “seed” that was “planted” in a “fertile” woman. Hence, inheritance generally passed via the sons, as only the sons could pass along the “seed” of their fathers. To be begotten of God would thus not only make one an heir of God but also take on his characteristics by inheritance. Being “born” of God would accomplish neither as no one inherited from his or her mother.

First Century and earlier Judaism had no practice of adoption. There was no Hebrew word for “adopt” until the 20th Century. Barbara T. Blank, “Jewish Adoption in America,” *My Jewish Learning*. <http://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/jewish-adoption-in-america/>

Hence, in Psa 2:7, when God declares that he has become the Father of the Messiah, he speaks in terms of having “begotten” him. The Romans practiced adoption, considering adoption to make one an entirely new person in the eyes of the law, so that even the son’s old debts would be forgiven when he was adopted. Thus, to a Hellenistic or Roman audience, Paul can use adoption as a metaphor for salvation. Among Jews, salvation is pictured as gaining a new father by being re-begotten, based on Psa 2:7 and our likeness to Jesus in his being re-begotten by the Spirit.

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or the Spirit as means of re-conceiving Christians or causing them to be newly begotten, just as Jesus was.

The hendiadys thus becomes “spiritual seed” or “spiritual semen.” I recognize that “semen” is a bit graphic for American tastes, but it’s the language we find in 1 Pet 1:23 and 1 John 3:9. Where the translators use “seed” to translate *sperma*, it’s a euphemism for God’s semen or sperm.

d. If Jesus’ point in saying that Nicodemus “must be born of the water and Spirit” was that baptism is essential for salvation, how could he (or John¹⁸) say in the same discourse,

(John 3:16-18 ESV) “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. ¹⁷ For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. ¹⁸ Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God.”

Any interpretation of John 3:5 that contradicts John 3:16-18 is surely in error.

In short, it’s not nearly as easy or as clear a question as many would argue. There are strong arguments on both sides. And if Jesus meant to say that salvation comes only by baptism, he sure found an odd context in which to say it (just before saying that everyone with faith will be saved) to an oddly chosen person (Nicodemus did not respond by asking for baptism but for a return to his mother’s womb) at an oddly chosen time (Jesus began his baptismal ministry *afterwards* (v. 22)) and in an oddly chosen location (Jesus wasn’t near the Jordan, where he would begin his baptismal ministry (v. 22)). Had Nicodemus desired baptism, he presumably would have had to follow Jesus down to Jericho along a very dangerous road, some considerable distance from Jerusalem – not because there was no water in Jerusalem but because Jesus didn’t baptize anyone until he left Jerusalem, most likely to baptize in the Jordan.¹⁹

¹⁸ Translators differ as to whether Jesus said these words or Jesus’ discourse ended earlier and these are the words of John. They are just as inspired either way, and if it’s John speaking, he’s commenting on what Jesus had just said to Nicodemus.

¹⁹ The text says Jesus was in the Judean countryside. Jerusalem sits atop Mounts Zion and Moriah. There’d be very few places suitable for baptisms between Jerusalem and the Jordan River to the east. To the north was Samaria, where Jews usually did not travel. To the south is desert.

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C. Colossians 2:11-14

Perhaps the argument most commonly used by those contending for infant baptism or those insisting on the necessity of baptism is based on Col 2:11-14:

(Col 2:11-14 ESV) In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, ¹² having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead. ¹³ And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, ¹⁴ by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross.

In this passage, many commentators believe that Paul compares Christian baptism to the Jewish practice of circumcision. Circumcision goes back to the covenant God made with Abraham (Gen 17:9-14). The requirement to be circumcised was renewed in the Law of Moses (Lev 12:3). Circumcision therefore held a very high place in Jewish thought.

Perhaps Christian baptism is properly administered to infants, just as circumcision was. Perhaps baptism is just as essential as circumcision was. Not so.

In Paul's vocabulary, "a circumcision made without hands ... by the circumcision of Christ" can only refer to the Holy Spirit. After all, we use our hands to baptize converts! Recall the similar passage,

(Rom 2:25-29 ESV) For circumcision indeed is of value if you obey the law, but if you break the law, your circumcision becomes uncircumcision. ²⁶ So, if a man who is uncircumcised keeps the precepts of the law, will not his uncircumcision be regarded as circumcision? ²⁷ Then he who is physically

Jesus might have gone to the west, to the fertile coastal plains. But the symbolism of the Jordan River would have been powerful, as this was the entry into the Promised Land. 3:26 tells of a disciple complaining to John the Baptist about Jesus' baptizing, while John was in Aenon, near the Jordan, to the north of Jerusalem. It would have been very natural for a disciple of John to travel along the Jordan and so come across Jesus on his way to see John if Jesus was baptizing in the Jordan. Moreover, the Jordan is on the way to Galilee, Jesus' next stop (4:3), as Jews normally walked around Samaria along the Jordan when traveling between Galilee and Jerusalem.

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uncircumcised but keeps the law will condemn you who have the written code and circumcision but break the law. ²⁸ For no one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly, nor is circumcision outward and physical. ²⁹ But a Jew is one inwardly, and circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter. His praise is not from man but from God.

Paul is referring to God's promise to circumcise the hearts of the Jews made in Deu 30:6, which the prophets interpreted to refer to the Holy Spirit, promised to be outpoured at the coming of the Kingdom.

(Deu 30:6 ESV) And the LORD your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring, so that you will love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live.

(Eze 36:26-27 NIV) I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. ²⁷ And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws.

The point of the reference to baptism in Col 2:12 is not that baptism is like circumcision, but that baptism is when the Spirit is received, and therefore when the heart is circumcised by the Spirit as Paul describes in Rom 2:29 and Moses prophesied in Deu 30:6. Therefore, I'd understand the passage along these lines:

(Col 2:11-14 ESV) In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands [by God through the Spirit], by putting off the body of the flesh [our unregenerated, sinful natures compared to the foreskin, which is cut off and thrown away], by the circumcision of Christ [the circumcision of our hearts by the Spirit], ¹² having been buried with him in baptism [which is when you received the Spirit and so when you received the circumcision of the heart], in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead. ¹³ And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh [before being baptized, receiving the Spirit, and having your hearts circumcised], God made alive [fulfilling the promise of Deu 30:6 "that you may live" when your hearts are circumcised] together with him [Jesus], having forgiven us all our trespasses, ¹⁴ by canceling the

record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands.
This he set aside, nailing it to the cross.

Now, understood that way, in light of Paul's understanding of the work of the Spirit to circumcise our hearts, obviously Paul is not saying that baptism replaces circumcision. After all, Paul argues in Rom 4 and Gal 3 that circumcision is not necessary for our salvation, but here the circumcision he is speaking of, results in our forgiveness. This is because Paul is referring to the receipt of the Spirit at baptism, not baptism itself.

Of course, this only changes the question. Rather than asking, "If baptism replaces circumcision, why isn't it as essential for Christians as circumcision was for Jews?" we should ask, "If the Spirit is received at baptism, and if the Spirit is God's means of circumcising our hearts and forgiving us, how can baptism be less essential than the Spirit?"

And that's an interesting question to which we'll return.

Discussion questions –

1. In 1 Pet 3:18-22, Christian baptism is compared to Noah's flood. How are they the same? How are they different?
2. If "the removal of dirt from the body" doesn't save, then what does the water have to do with it? Isn't baptism a ceremonial washing?
3. As to John 3:5, how does the necessity of being "born of water" reconcile with John 3:16-18, which state that all who believe will be saved? What about those who believe but aren't baptized? Does the author persuade you that "born of water" refers to something other than baptism? Are you certain enough to treat those baptized contrary to your understanding as damned?
4. What role does the Spirit play in baptism? Can the Spirit be received apart from baptism?
5. If Jesus' teaching to Nicodemus means that baptism is essential, why does John 3:16-18, which is part of the same discussion, mention only faith as being required? Did John make a mistake? Or are we misunderstanding one of these two passages?
6. Explain how circumcision affected one's relationship with God under the Law of Moses. Was it essential for salvation?
9. Why do you think circumcision was the chosen symbol in the Law of Moses?

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10. Why do you think baptism was the chosen symbol in the new covenant?
11. Was circumcision just a symbol or did failure to be circumcised have consequences?

PART III WHY BAPTISM IS NOT ESSENTIAL

CHAPTER 6 DOES GOD MAKE EXCEPTIONS?

The following essays all argue that baptism by immersion while a believer is *not* essential.

A. Unpersuasive arguments

There are several arguments made in the commentaries that simply aren't persuasive and so won't be discussed here at any length. For example, many argue that baptism can't be essential or else it would be a sacrament. But a sacrament, in the Catholic sense, is usually defined as a type of God's grace that is administered through the church's institutional leadership, and the Churches of Christ have never argued that only a church official may baptize.

Others argue that baptism can't be essential or else Calvinism would be in error. This is not the place to wrestle with the challenges of Reformed theology, but the reasoning is circular. Perhaps Calvinism is in error because baptism is essential. We can't *assume* our theology into existence.

B. The question re-defined

The question that should really be asked is, "Will God accept a penitent believer as baptized if the believer mistakenly considers himself baptized?" Will God damn him despite his genuine faith and righteousness? Now this is a *much* harder question.

When I speak of being baptized in error, I mean any error that might be involved in baptism without contradicting faith in Jesus. We consider the meaning of "faith" in chapter 4. Recall that I never use "faith" to refer to a belief that lacks faithfulness. *That is, in the NT vocabulary, and for purposes of this book, "faith" is not faith unless it involves a commitment to be obedient to Jesus as Lord. Therefore, I'm not speaking of baptismal errors committed in intentional rebellion against God's known will. Also, I don't ever imagine that someone might be saved without faith in Jesus.*

On the other hand, baptismal error would include the error of the Society of Friends (Quakers), the Salvation Army, and Christian Scientists who practice Holy Spirit baptism without water baptism. They consider themselves to have been scripturally "baptized" without the application of water, although many of

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their members elect to be immersed in water – which those denominations permit but do not require.

Infant baptism, baptism by pouring or sprinkling, baptism believing oneself already saved, and baptism denying that the convert will receive the personal indwelling of the Holy Spirit¹ are other more common examples of errors I have in mind – if the person baptized genuinely believes himself to be honoring God’s will regarding baptism and has a genuine faith in Jesus (which is a redundancy, but you know what I mean).

Consider the typical believer who has not been exposed to the teaching of the Churches of Christ or other immersionist groups. The believer reads the New Testament passages declaring baptism necessary and then turns to his dictionary to see what “baptism” means. He reads something like –

A religious sacrament marked by the symbolic use of water and resulting in admission of the recipient into the community of Christians.²

A Christian ceremony in which a person has water poured on their head, or are covered briefly in water, to show that they have become a member of the Christian Church.³

the application of water to a person, as a sacrament or religious ceremony, by which he is initiated into the visible church of Christ. This is performed by immersion, sprinkling, or pouring.⁴

You see, unless a Bible student goes to the considerable trouble of checking out New Testament Greek references, even a serious student will not be advised of the importance of being immersed. Nor is this a recent problem. For example, Noah Webster’s 1828 dictionary defines “baptism” exactly the same as the 1998 *Webster’s* definition quoted above.

¹ Commonly taught in the Churches of Christ, but increasingly a minority position.

² *American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* (Houghton Mifflin Co.: 4th ed. 2000).

³ *Cambridge International Dictionary of English* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

⁴ *Webster’s Revised Unabridged Dictionary* (Plainfield, NJ: MICRA, Inc., 1998).

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In fact, even Bible dictionaries can sometimes fail to give a sound definition. For example, the *Easton Bible Dictionary*⁵ says,

The mode of baptism can in no way be determined from the Greek word rendered “baptize.” Baptists say that it means ‘to dip,’ and nothing else. That is an incorrect view of the meaning of the word. It means both (1) to dip a thing into an element or liquid, and (2) to put an element or liquid over or on it. Nothing therefore as to the mode of baptism can be concluded from the mere word used.⁶

The New Bible Dictionary says,⁷

The NT evidence is not sufficiently clear to resolve the question whether paedobaptism [infant baptism] or believers’ baptism is the more appropriate expression of and response to the gospel.

Now I readily admit that the true rite of baptism is to be determined by reference to the original scriptures, as written in First Century Greek, but I have a problem imagining God damning a soul to hell because he was given a bad definition of “baptism” by a standard English or Bible dictionary. I mean, in the Gospels we often read of Jesus’ condemning the Pharisees for their false understandings of the Old Testament, but the Pharisees were scholars who should have known better. We don’t see Jesus condemning the common people for their lack of scriptural understanding so long as they approached Jesus with simple faith. Now, some might object that “ignorance of the law is no excuse,” but that maxim is a human legal principle, not a part of the Bible.⁸

⁵ Matthew George Easton, *Easton Illustrated Bible Dictionary* (3rd ed., Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1897), <http://bible.crosswalk.com/Dictionaries/EastonBibleDictionary/>. Because this dictionary is in the public domain, it’s available on several Christian research websites and in several free Bible research software products.

⁶ Of course, other Bible dictionaries support the view that baptism is of believers, by immersion. See, for example, Walter A. Elwell, *Baker’s Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology* (Boston: Baker Book House, Inc., 1996), W. E. Vine, *An Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words* (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1940); “BAPTISM, BAPTIST, BAPTIZE,” Steven D. Renn’s *Expository Dictionary of Bible Words* (2005).

⁷ “Baptism,” 121 (1996).

⁸ In fact, Paul argues in Rom 5:12-13 that we are only accountable for the commands of God that we know. Hence, the giving of the Law of Moses increased sin because it increased accountability. The same principle is implicit Rom 1-2, where Paul argues that both Jews and Gentiles are both sufficiently aware of God’s will to be accountable, and in Gen 2-3, where Adam and Eve were not charged with sin because they lacked knowledge of good and evil. The Law of

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Others might object that “baptism” of infants is no baptism at all, since infants have neither faith nor repentance. And others will object that “baptism” requires immersion, that being the meaning of the Greek word *baptisma*, and a mere pouring or sprinkling is simply not what the Bible refers to when baptism is mentioned. These points are well taken. But God is much more subtle than we sometimes realize. The following discussions show that we cannot approach this issue quite so simplistically.

C. The “faith was sufficient for Abraham and Israel” argument

For many years, Paul has been read as saying that the Jews were saved by works under the Law of Moses, but Christians are now saved by faith. And Paul certainly wrote extensively on law versus faith in Gal and Rom. But recent scholarship has concluded that we’ve badly misread the NT.

First, we’ve assumed that the dispensations – Abrahamic (or Patriarchal), Mosaic, and Christian – each repeal and replace the previous dispensation. This teaching largely comes from the study notes in the Scofield Study Bibles sold beginning in the 19th Century. In the Churches of Christ, many were converted by use of the Jule Miller filmstrips, which taught Scofield’s dispensational theory. Even those not converted using the filmstrips likely saw them in Bible class.

Scofield was, of course, correct to note the series of dispensations and that God’s relationship with his people changed in each one. But he failed to realize that the old covenants weren’t so much repealed as fulfilled and transformed by God over time. In fact, the NT is quite clear that we are saved today under the terms of God’s covenant with Abraham. This is the point of Gal 3 and Rom 4. It’s also clear that the Jews under Moses were also saved by faith due to the promises given to Abraham. Paul makes this point in Rom 4 and Eph 3, and it’s especially clear in the “rollcall of the faithful” in Heb 11, which repeatedly declares that the heroes of the OT were saved by their faith. We will cover these passages shortly.

Second, this means we misread the Gospels when we assume that Jesus is repealing the Law of Moses and legislating new laws. Rather, Jesus is often explaining how the Torah (Law of Moses) should have been understood by the Jews all along or else anticipating the fulfillment of some of these commands through the cross. But he’s not legislating.

For example, in Matthew, Jesus twice quotes Hos 6:6,

Moses follows the same principle, treating intentional sin much more severely than unintentional sin (Num 15:29-31).

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(Matt 9:13 ESV) “Go and learn what this means, ‘I desire mercy, and not sacrifice.’ For I came not to call the righteous, but sinners.”

(Matt 12:7 ESV) “And if you had known what this means, ‘I desire mercy, and not sacrifice,’ you would not have condemned the guiltless.”

Hosea predates Jesus by hundreds of years. His point is not “The rules are changing” but “You’ve misunderstood God for centuries”!

Now, if the Patriarchs were saved by faith, and Israel was saved by faith, and Christians are saved by faith – all thanks to the promises God made to Abraham – then clearly our thinking about salvation needs to center on faith.

Moreover, if we’re saved by faith because of God’s promises to Abraham, where does baptism fit in? Abraham wasn’t baptized. There was no baptism for atonement, forgiveness, or receipt of the Spirit under the Law of Moses. Did God further condition his salvation? Did he add baptism to faith? Or are we looking at things the wrong way?

We need to first go over the passages that explain how faith worked to save before Jesus, and then we’ll return to these questions.

1. Romans 4

In Rom 1 – 2, Paul demonstrates that both Jews and Gentiles need a Savior and that works cannot ever be sufficient to save. In Rom 3, Paul declares that we are saved by faith in Jesus. And then in Rom 4, he proves that faith is sufficient to save because we’re saved by the same promises that saved Abraham.

(Rom 4:1-4 ESV) What then shall we say was gained by Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh? ² For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. ³ For what does the Scripture say? “Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness.”

At first glance, we might think that Paul is using Abraham as an example or type. That is, we tend to assume that we aren’t saved exactly as Abraham was saved, but under a different dispensation that happens to have some similarities to our own. But let’s let Paul tell us what he means, rather than assuming.

First, Paul tells us that Abraham was justified by faith, not works. His faith was treated as righteousness.

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(Rom 4:4-8 ESV) Now to the one who works, his wages are not counted as a gift but as his due.⁵ And to the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness,⁶ just as David also speaks of the blessing of the one to whom God counts righteousness apart from works:⁷ “Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven, and whose sins are covered;⁸ blessed is the man against whom the Lord will not count his sin.”

Verses 5 and 6 summarize what Paul just said about Abraham and set up David’s declaration from Psa 32:1-2, speaking during the time of the Mosaic covenant. We tend to imagine that under Moses sins were forgiven periodically by sacrifices offered under the Levitical system. But in Psa 32, David celebrates living in a state of *continuous* forgiveness! How is this possible?

(Psa 32:10 ESV) Many are the sorrows of the wicked, but steadfast love surrounds the one who trusts in the LORD.

David says this blessing is for the one who “trusts” God. Remember that Abraham’s faith was trusting God’s promises.

(Rom 4:9-12 ESV) Is this blessing then only for the circumcised, or also for the uncircumcised? For we say that faith was counted to Abraham as righteousness.¹⁰ How then was it counted to him? Was it before or after he had been circumcised? It was not after, but before he was circumcised.¹¹ He received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised. The purpose was to make him the father of all who believe without being circumcised, so that righteousness would be counted to them as well,¹² and to make him the father of the circumcised who are not merely circumcised but who also walk in the footsteps of the faith that our father Abraham had before he was circumcised.

Paul explains that Abraham was saved by faith long before God asked him to be circumcised. Therefore, circumcision is not required as a condition of salvation by faith. Rather, circumcision is a “sign” and a “seal” of justification that predates his circumcision.

Abraham is therefore the father of “all who believe” (v. 11), whether or not circumcised.

(Rom 4:13-14 ESV) For the promise to Abraham and his offspring that he would be heir of the world did not come

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through the law but through the righteousness of faith. ¹⁴ For if it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void.

Paul then denies that the Torah (or Law) brought “the promise” to Abraham. Rather, salvation by faith came by the “righteousness” of faith. After all, if the Law is required for salvation, the promise to Abraham would be voided. Therefore, Paul implies, the Jews under Moses were actually saved by faith.

(Rom 4:15-17 ESV) For the law brings wrath, but where there is no law there is no transgression. ¹⁶ That is why it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his offspring – not only to the adherent of the law but also to the one who shares the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all, ¹⁷ as it is written, “I have made you the father of many nations” – in the presence of the God in whom he believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist.

The Law only brings wrath, and so “the promise” of salvation by faith comes by grace “to the one who shares the faith of Abraham,” Paul says speaking of Israel while under the Law.

In v. 17, Paul reminds us that God promised to bless “the nations” through Abraham. Therefore, the promise of salvation by faith is now given to the Gentiles as well as the Jews – with no need for circumcision.

(Rom 4:23-25 ESV) But the words “it was counted to him” were not written for his sake alone, ²⁴ but for ours also. It will be counted to us who believe in him who raised from the dead Jesus our Lord, ²⁵ who was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification.

Now, if Abraham was saved by faith, then we’re saved by faith. And if we’re saved by faith by virtue of the promises made by God to Abraham, it would only make sense that the Jews would be saved by faith under Moses as well – which Paul said earlier in the chapter. But we struggle to believe this.

In Rom 5, Paul begins to explain the reasons for the Law and the need for abounding grace. In Rom 6 – 8, Paul explains the ethical implications of salvation by faith, that is, he answers the question, “Shall we go on sinning that grace may abound?” He begins by reminding his readers of the significance of baptism for how they should live as Christians and finally culminates in chapter 8 with a discussion of the impact of the Holy Spirit on how we live.

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Notice that Paul has a very high view of baptism, but he doesn't mention baptism once in his discussion on how we're saved. He doesn't say that circumcision was essential but has now been replaced by the equally essential baptism. Rather, he says that circumcision was never essential and only mentions baptism to answer the question of how we should live now that we've been saved by faith.

2. Galatians 3

Galatians begins with a series of curses on those who teach a "different gospel." Paul then relates a series of stories about his relationship with the other apostles to make the point that the true gospel teaches salvation by faith. He wraps up chapter 2 with some of the strongest statements on the sufficiency of faith to save found in the Bible.

(Gal 3:5-8 ESV) Does he who supplies the Spirit to you and works miracles among you do so by works of the law, or by hearing with faith - ⁶ just as Abraham "believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness"? ⁷ Know then that it is those of faith who are the sons of Abraham. ⁸ And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, "In you shall all the nations be blessed."

Amazingly, Paul calls "gospel" God crediting Abraham with righteousness because of his faith. His point is that the Gentiles are saved by faith because of God's covenant with Abraham. It's the same promise, and so both are "gospel."

(Gal 3:9-12 ESV) So then, those who are of faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith. ¹⁰ For all who rely on works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, "Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law, and do them." ¹¹ Now it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law, for "The righteous shall live by faith." ¹² But the law is not of faith, rather "The one who does them shall live by them."

The Law cannot save; therefore, not only are the Gentiles saved by faith, but so were the Jews. After all, "no one is justified before God by the law." This is true not only while Paul is writing but has always been true.

(Gal 3:13-14 ESV) Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us - for it is written, "Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree" - ¹⁴ so that in Christ Jesus

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the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith.

As much as I'd love to pause here as talk about the atonement and the Spirit, for now, the point is that Jesus died so that "the blessing of Abraham" (salvation by faith) "might come to the Gentiles." The Jews did not yet have the Spirit (with rare exceptions), but they already had the promise of salvation by faith.

(Gal 3:17-18 ESV) This is what I mean: the law, which came 430 years afterward, does not annul a covenant previously ratified by God, so as to make the promise void. ¹⁸ For if the inheritance comes by the law, it no longer comes by promise; but God gave it to Abraham by a promise.

The Law did not annul the promise of salvation by faith. Therefore, the Jews are saved by faith – and so are the Gentiles. God keeps his promises, and his promises to Abraham extended to his descendants.

(Gal 3:21-26 ESV) Is the law then contrary to the promises of God? Certainly not! For if a law had been given that could give life, then righteousness would indeed be by the law. ²² But the Scripture imprisoned everything under sin, so that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe. ²³ Now before faith came, we were held captive under the law, imprisoned until the coming faith would be revealed. ²⁴ So then, the law was our guardian until Christ came, in order that we might be justified by faith. ²⁵ But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian, ²⁶ for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith.

We'll not take on the difficult question of why God gave the Law if it could not save. That's for another day. For now, the point remains that "you are all [Jews and Gentiles] sons of God, through faith." The promise given to Abraham now, through Jesus, has been extended to Gentiles.

(Gal 3:27-29 ESV) For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. ²⁸ There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. ²⁹ And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise.

Suddenly, baptism appears – without explanation – but to make the point that somehow baptism explains ("for" means here "as explained by the fact that"). It all leads to the conclusion that everyone with faith – assumed to be the same

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people who've been baptized – “are Abraham’s offspring” and therefore “heirs according promise,” that is, we inherit the promise given to Abraham – salvation by faith.

Unlike in Rom 6, Paul isn't using baptism to make a point about Christian ethics. Rather, he's telling his readers that they know they are *all* “sons of God, through faith” because their baptism assures *all* of them of this fact. The English translations tend to end v. 26 with a period, but in the original Greek, v. 27 is part of the same sentence:

(Gal 3:25-27 ESV) But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian, ²⁶ for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith[,] ²⁷ for as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ.

“For” translates the Greek *gar*. In English, verses 26 and 27 both begin with “for” (*gar*). According to Thayer's,

Moreover, not the number but the nature of the word after which [*gar*] stands is the point to be noticed ...

It's concealed in the English, but in the Greek, in both verses the *gar* follows “all.” Hence, Paul's point is that *all* are saved as shown by the baptisms of both Jews and Greeks, slaves and free, male and female. He's building a case for the universal availability of the gospel: unlike circumcision, it's not just for free male Jews.⁹ Paul is not arguing Calvinist vs. sacramental baptism theology. Rather the fact the Jews and Gentiles, slaves and free, male and female are all baptized demonstrates that all are saved by faith in Jesus.

What explains or demonstrates that we are no longer subject to the Law as guardian? The fact that we are *all* sons of God through faith. What explains or demonstrates that we are *all* sons of God through faith? That those who have been baptized are the same people who put on Christ. In other words, our baptisms demonstrate the truth of the fact that we're *all* saved by faith. Even the Jews had to be baptized to enter Jesus.

Probably Paul mentions baptism here because he is about to emphasize the oneness of those who are in Christ (v. 28, where the “all” of v. 26 recurs): the visible sign of this oneness is not faith but baptism; the oneness with Christ that is symbolized in baptism is the basis for the oneness in Christ

⁹ Non-Jewish male slaves could be circumcised and so participate in Passover (Exo 12:44). Circumcision for male Jews, however, was mandatory.

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(cf. Eph 4:5, "one Lord, one faith, one baptism"). Here, as in Rom 6, "there is an appeal in the presence of those who were in danger of forgetting spiritual facts, to the external sign which no one could forget."

Ronald Y. K. Fung, *The Epistle to the Galatians*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1988).

Baptism in the New Testament invariably implies a radical personal commitment involving a decisive no to one's former way of life and an equally emphatic yes to Jesus Christ. Historically, however, the doctrine of believers' baptism has also implied a gathered church, a community of intentional disciples marked off from the world by their commitment to Christ and to one another. Baptism is the liturgical enactment of the priesthood of all believers, not the priesthood of "the believer," a lonely, isolated seeker of truth, but rather of a band of faithful believers united in a common confession as a local, visible *congregatio sanctorum* ("gathering of saints"). Paul's discussion of baptism in Galatians comes at a critical juncture in his quest to redefine the people of God, the family of faith, the true children of Abraham. For him baptism was an outward sign not only of the personal response of faith but also of the new community that belongs to Christ by virtue of grace alone. ...

Baptism is recalled as the concrete moment in their own life in which they for their part confirmed, recognized, and accepted their investing with Christ from above, their ontic relationship to him, not only in gratitude and hope but also in readiness and vigilance.

Timothy George, *Galatians*, The New American Commentary. (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1994), 30.

That is, baptism demonstrates the unity of the Jews and Gentiles because it incorporates the convert into a united church. In fact, because baptism is

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always administered by someone else, it's an action of the church that accepts the convert's confession of faith and initiates him into the community of the saved.¹⁰

Baptism in the NT is always in the passive voice. It's not something done but a gift received.

3. Salvation of the Jews

Because Abraham was saved by faith (and not works of the law), the same is surely true of Israel. God did not repeal his promises to Abraham when the Law of Moses came into effect and then reinstate his promises to Abraham when Jesus died on the cross. The promises made to Abraham remained continuously in effect.

For example, in the Torah, God explicitly says he chose Israel to be saved because of his covenant with Abraham –

¹⁰ This is not to say that baptism fails if administered by a lost person or outside the faith community. Rather, the intended, normative (intended to be normal but not necessarily universal) case is baptism within a congregation of faith. The convert confesses Jesus as Lord (Rom 10:9), and the church accepts him into the community of the saved by baptism.

This statement should not be confused with the Southern Baptism practice of voting whether someone may join a congregation. Baptism is “into Christ” not into a local congregation. But being baptized into Christ is also being baptized into his body, the church-universal. And baptism is received, not done for oneself, and when possible, it's received from God by the hands of the church-universal.

Again, this is not the Catholic sacramental theology that the church as institution (the bishops, cardinals, pope, etc.) determines who may be saved. “The church” means the body of believers, not the institutional leadership.

In Church of Christ practice, occasionally the leadership of the local congregation will delay a requested baptism because the person requesting baptism is considered too young to fully understand the nature of the commitment that baptism involves or because the person requesting baptism doesn't have sufficient understanding to be baptized – yet.

The same thing happens when any Christian studies the Bible with a non-Christian. Often the non-Christian requests baptism before she's been taught enough about Jesus to follow him as Lord. The Christian teacher quite properly delays baptism until the student is ready.

Finally, I'm not saying that someone must be baptized during the assembly. The church-universal is the body of believers, whether or not assembled. The “community of the saved” is the body of believers associated in active fellowship, which includes but isn't limited to the assembly.

In my congregation, if someone requests baptism on a Tuesday night, they'll probably be baptized on that Tuesday night. But text messages and Facebook posts will go out inviting other Christians to be there to welcome the new brother or sister into the fellowship of believers. It's unthinkable that someone might be baptized without Christian brothers or sisters there to hug, pray, applaud, and sing in celebration of the conversion. We think it's a big deal, don't mind being spontaneous, and celebrate without reservation.

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(Lev. 26:40-42 ESV) “But if they confess their iniquity and the iniquity of their fathers in their treachery that they committed against me, and also in walking contrary to me, ⁴¹ so that I walked contrary to them and brought them into the land of their enemies – if then their uncircumcised heart is humbled and they make amends for their iniquity, ⁴² then I will remember my covenant with Jacob, and I will remember my covenant with Isaac and my covenant with Abraham, and I will remember the land.”

(Deu 9:5-6 ESV) Not because of your righteousness or the uprightness of your heart are you going in to possess their land, but because of the wickedness of these nations the LORD your God is driving them out from before you, and that he may confirm the word that the LORD swore to your fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob. ⁶ “Know, therefore, that the LORD your God is not giving you this good land to possess because of your righteousness, for you are a stubborn people.

And the OT has countless passages that speak of God’s salvation in terms of believing in God or trusting God.

(Exo 4:30-31 ESV) Aaron spoke all the words that the LORD had spoken to Moses and did the signs in the sight of the people. ³¹ And the people believed; and when they heard that the LORD had visited the people of Israel and that he had seen their affliction, they bowed their heads and worshiped.

(Psa 40:4 ESV) Blessed is the man who makes the LORD his trust, who does not turn to the proud, to those who go astray after a lie!

(Psa 84:12 ESV) O LORD of hosts, blessed is the one who trusts in you!

(Psa 125:1 ESV) Those who trust in the LORD are like Mount Zion, which cannot be moved, but abides forever.

(Psa 146:5 ESV) Blessed is he whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the LORD his God,

(Pro 16:20 ESV) Whoever gives thought to the word will discover good, and blessed is he who trusts in the LORD.

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(2 Chr 20:18-20 ESV) Then Jehoshaphat bowed his head with his face to the ground, and all Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem fell down before the LORD, worshiping the LORD. ¹⁹ And the Levites, of the Kohathites and the Korahites, stood up to praise the LORD, the God of Israel, with a very loud voice. ²⁰ And they rose early in the morning and went out into the wilderness of Tekoa. And when they went out, Jehoshaphat stood and said, “Hear me, Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem! Believe in the LORD your God, and you will be established; believe his prophets, and you will succeed.”

(Jer 17:7-8 ESV) “Blessed is the man who trusts in the LORD, whose trust is the LORD. ⁸ He is like a tree planted by water, that sends out its roots by the stream, and does not fear when heat comes, for its leaves remain green, and is not anxious in the year of drought, for it does not cease to bear fruit.”

(Jer 39:18 ESV) “For I will surely save you, and you shall not fall by the sword, but you shall have your life as a prize of war, because you have put your trust in me, declares the LORD.”

(Hab 2:4 ESV) “Behold, his soul is puffed up; it is not upright within him, but the righteous shall live by his faith.”

This is but a sampling of the many OT verses that speak of salvation for those with faith in or who trust God. After all, the faith shown by Abraham was trust that God would keep his promises. The “trust” passages speak very much to this promise.

4. Ephesians 3

The theme of the first four chapters of Ephesians is the unity of Jews and Gentiles made possible by God’s grace. Chapter 1 speaks of God’s election of Israel to be saved and God’s choice to include believing Gentiles among his elect people. Chapter 2 explains that God does this by saving us by faith, not works – allowing him to include Gentiles among the saved.

(Eph 3:1-3 ESV) For this reason I, Paul, a prisoner for Christ Jesus on behalf of you Gentiles – ² assuming that you have heard of the stewardship of God’s grace that was given to me for you [Gentiles], ³ how the mystery was made known to me by revelation, as I have written briefly.

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This is a complex sentence. We need to follow its contours closely. Paul introduces the idea of a “mystery” disclosed to him by God.

(Eph 3:4-5 ESV) When you read this, you can perceive my insight into the mystery of Christ, ⁵ which was not made known to the sons of men in other generations as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit.

This mystery is now a revelation. It was hidden in the past but is now revealed through the apostles and prophets.

(Eph 3:6 ESV) This mystery is that the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.

The mystery now revealed is that the Gentiles are “fellow heirs” (co-inheritors) of the promise that comes through Jesus by the gospel. That the Jews were to receive the gospel was no secret. The OT prophets had been very clear on this point. The newly revealed truth is the inclusion of the Gentiles among the Jews without distinction and without having to become Jews to be saved.

(Eph 2:11-16 ESV) Therefore remember that at one time you Gentiles in the flesh, called “the uncircumcision” by what is called the circumcision [the Jews], which is made in the flesh by hands – ¹² remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. ¹³ But now in Christ Jesus you [Gentiles] who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. ¹⁴ For he himself is our peace, who has made us [Jews and Gentiles] both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility ¹⁵ by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, ¹⁶ and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility.

The Jews have always had the “covenants of promise,” but the Gentiles were without hope – until Jesus changed everything. He broke down the “dividing wall of hostility” joining Jews and Gentiles into a single body.

We often miss one of Paul’s implicit but essential points. The Gentiles are saved because they’ve been added to the same body as the Jews. The Gentiles have now received the covenant promises of the Jews – and so may be saved.

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Paul speaks of Jesus as extending the promises to the Gentiles, not as establishing a new promise. Now, there is a difference – a big one – in that the faith required of the Jews has become faith in Jesus as Lord (Rom 10:9). The Jews were saved by faith – but now only by faith in God understood correctly through Jesus. Miss Jesus and you miss God.

Before Jesus, the Jews were asked to believe in a Messiah not yet revealed. After Jesus, they were asked to believe in the revealed Messiah – which became a stumbling block.

And so we have the irony that the Jews largely surrendered promises they already had by rejecting Jesus as Lord – and thereby rejecting God. And yet the promises were extended to the Gentiles, who largely accepted them.

5. Hebrews 11

The “rollcall of the faithful” in Hebrews 11 lists many heroes of the OT and declares them saved by faith – even though they lived under either the Abrahamic or Mosaic covenants – because the promises God made to Abraham never went away.

(Heb 11:13-16 ESV) These all died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth. ¹⁴ For people who speak thus make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. ¹⁵ If they had been thinking of that land from which they had gone out, they would have had opportunity to return. ¹⁶ But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared for them a city.

This chapter would make no sense at all unless (a) Israel found salvation through faith, rather than works, and (b) we Christians are saved by the same faith. Again, of course, before Jesus, the Jews believed in a Messiah promised but not yet revealed; Christians believe in the revealed Messiah.

6. Salvation of the Christians

So this brings us back to baptism. The key faith versus works passages speak of the sufficiency of faith in Jesus to save. They never say that circumcision was once essential and now baptism replaces circumcision as the essential initiatory rite. Rather, they say that faith was sufficient for Abraham and for Israel, and therefore faith is sufficient for Gentiles. Hence, there is no need for something that is other than faith, such as circumcision.

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Baptism is mentioned and accorded a vital place, but it doesn't receive nearly the same emphasis or centrality as faith. Only faith goes back to Abraham. Only faith allowed God to save Israel despite their inability to keep the Law of Moses. And only faith allows God to save Gentiles without circumcision. All of Paul's arguments are centered and focused on faith in Jesus and the receipt of the Spirit (which I've not tried to summarize here). Baptism is mentioned and never belittled. But baptism is *never* at the center of Paul's arguments.

In Romans, Paul doesn't even mention baptism in his discussion of how Christians are saved in Rom 1 - 5. It doesn't come up until Paul deals with the ethical implications of salvation by faith: "Shall we go on sinning that grace may abound?" (Rom 6:1). But it's assumed to be universal, well understood, and very closely tied to our forgiveness.

In Galatians, Paul covers nearly three chapters on our salvation and the gospel and only mentions baptism in Gal 3:27 as explaining or demonstrating the unity that we all have by faith in Jesus.

In Ephesians, Paul covers salvation by faith for three chapters, and then early in chapter 4 mentions "one baptism" as one of the seven ones that demonstrate the unity of Jews and Gentiles through Jesus.

In Hebrews, which speaks to the superiority of Jesus and Christianity to Judaism, baptism is only mentioned in passing (Heb 10:22 and possibly 6:2) –

(Heb 10:19-23 ESV) Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus,²⁰ by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh,²¹ and since we have a great priest over the house of God,²² let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and **our bodies washed with pure water.**²³ Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful.

Baptism is metaphorically compared to the washing Jews had to undergo to enter the Temple, where the Jews approached God's presence in the Holy of Holies. Our confidence is in the sacrifice of Jesus (v. 19), but baptism helps assure us that our faith allows us to draw near to God thanks to the work of Jesus.

So it's not possible that our salvation is based on baptism. Over and over, Paul points us to faith in Jesus. Baptism is not the linchpin. It's not the foundation. It's, rather, a critically important assurance of our salvation – a form of assurance that was universally practiced by the early church and administered to all converts who confessed Jesus. In fact, I believe it's even more than that. But it's not co-equal with faith in Paul's theology.

D. The “outside the covenant” argument

Now that we have a better understanding of the substantial common ground of the three dispensations, we can acknowledge that under each dispensation/covenant, salvation was marked by various rituals and practices – but salvation did not ultimately depend on anything other than faith.

1. The Fall of Man

God told Adam that if he ate from the tree of knowledge of good and evil, he would “surely die.” Once Adam and Eve had eaten, God pronounced a curse on all creation in Genesis 3. The final curse was “By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return.” (Gen 3:19). God promised death to Adam and all his descendants. And even Jesus died. “The last enemy to be destroyed is death” (1 Cor 15:26).

And yet at least two people never died. “By faith Enoch was taken from this life, so that he did not experience death” (Heb 11:5a) And Elijah ascended to heaven in a whirlwind (2 Kings 2:11). In each case, God had promised death but God was more generous than his promises. But this is not unusual for our gracious God.

2. The Abrahamic dispensation

In the Abrahamic age, God made a covenant with Abraham under which Abraham’s faith was credited to him as righteousness. God promised his favor to all Abraham’s descendants (Gen 12:1-3, 7; 13:14-17; 15:6,22).

Abraham was required to be circumcised, but as Paul argues in Rom 4 (covered earlier), this was after he was saved by faith. Circumcision was a “seal” or “symbol” of his salvation, and God insisted on it as a matter of obedience, but it was not a condition to becoming saved.

Although God had chosen to save the world through Abraham, we find Melchizedek, who was a “priest of God Most High” (Gen 14:18). After Abraham defeated four rival kings, Abraham gave a tithe of the spoils to Melchizedek. Jesus himself is compared to Melchizedek in Heb 7. Clearly, Melchizedek had been granted God’s favor outside the covenant. Why? All we know is that Melchizedek served God.

Plainly, Melchizedek was not a descendant of Abraham and was not part of the Abrahamic Dispensation. Melchizedek did not receive the promises made to the Jews. And yet he was a priest of God, and he was accepted outside the terms of the covenant then in effect.

3. The Mosaic dispensation

In the Mosaic dispensation, sins were forgiven by various sacrifices and by the ritual of the Day of Atonement (or *Yom Kippur*) (Lev 4-6, 16). Indeed, the Law of Moses could be read as saying these sacrifices are the only means of forgiveness. Lev 6:4-6 says that a sinner “must” make restitution with a 20% penalty and “must” bring a ram for sacrifice. Similar mandatory language is found throughout Lev 4-6. Or as the Hebrews writer states, “In fact, the law requires that ... without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness” (Heb 9:22).

a) The circumcision in the Promised Land

Nonetheless, the scriptures are filled with stories of God acting outside the covenant to save. For example, there is this amazing story in Joshua –

(Jos. 5:2-8 ESV) At that time the LORD said to Joshua, "Make flint knives and circumcise the sons of Israel a second time." ³ So Joshua made flint knives and circumcised the sons of Israel at Gibeath-haaraloth. ⁴ And this is the reason why Joshua circumcised them: all the males of the people who came out of Egypt, all the men of war, had died in the wilderness on the way after they had come out of Egypt. ⁵ Though all the people who came out had been circumcised, yet all the people who were born on the way in the wilderness after they had come out of Egypt had not been circumcised. ⁶ For the people of Israel walked forty years in the wilderness, until all the nation, the men of war who came out of Egypt, perished, because they did not obey the voice of the LORD; the LORD swore to them that he would not let them see the land that the LORD had sworn to their fathers to give to us, a land flowing with milk and honey. ⁷ So it was their children, whom he raised up in their place, that Joshua circumcised. For they were uncircumcised, because they had not been circumcised on the way. ⁸ When the circumcising of the whole nation was finished, they remained in their places in the camp until they were healed.

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For forty years, Israel had failed to honor the obligation to be circumcised, and yet God provided his people with food and water and led them to the Promised Land.

b) David and Bathsheba

God has never been limited to the legally specified means of forgiving sins. For example, when David committed adultery with Bathsheba and had her husband, Uriah, killed, the prophet Nathan charged David with sin, and David repented. God forgave David's sin on the spot (2 Sam. 12:13). There was no sacrifice, tabernacle ritual, or the like. David confessed sin and God forgave him – entirely outside the Mosaic covenant. In fact, according to the Law, those guilty of sinning intentionally (with a high hand) will not be forgiven but are to be cut off (Num 15:29-31).¹¹

David wrote in response to God's forgiveness –

(Psa 51:16-17 NIV) You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it; you do not take pleasure in burnt offerings. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.

c) Naaman

One of the Old Testament's most fascinating accounts is the story of Naaman. Naaman was a commander in the Syrian army. He was struck with leprosy and could find no cure. Eventually, he came to Elisha, a prophet of God, and Elisha told Naaman that he would be cured if he dipped seven times in the Jordan River.

(2 Kings 5:11-14 NIV) But Naaman went away angry and said, "I thought that he would surely come out to me and stand and call on the name of the LORD his God, wave his hand over the spot and cure me of my leprosy. Are not Abana and Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than any of the waters of Israel? Couldn't I wash in them and be cleansed?" So he turned and went off in a rage.

¹¹ Commentators disagree as to the meaning of "cut off." In some contexts, it seems to refer to execution. In others, it seems to refer to expulsion from the camp, that is, left to make it in the desert apart from God and fellow Israelites. Of course, there's not necessarily a practical difference.

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Naaman's servants went to him and said, "My father, if the prophet had told you to do some great thing, would you not have done it? How much more, then, when he tells you, 'Wash and be cleansed!'" So he went down and dipped himself in the Jordan seven times, as the man of God had told him, and his flesh was restored and became clean like that of a young boy.

This passage has often been used, by analogy, to demonstrate the importance of strict compliance with the ordinance of baptism. After all, Naaman was not cleansed until he had followed all of Elisha's instructions – only on the seventh dip was Naaman cured. Thus, we have argued (correctly, I think) that one who has received instructions on baptism should do precisely as he has been told, for the promise is given only to those who meet the terms of the promise.

But we often overlook another intriguing element of the account:

(2 Kings 5:17-19a NIV) [S]aid Naaman, "please let me, your servant, be given as much earth as a pair of mules can carry, for your servant will never again make burnt offerings and sacrifices to any other god but the LORD. But may the LORD forgive your servant for this one thing: When my master enters the temple of Rimmon to bow down and he is leaning on my arm and I bow there also – when I bow down in the temple of Rimmon, may the LORD forgive your servant for this."

"Go in peace," Elisha said.

Amazingly, Naaman (a) was not a proselyte to Judaism – nothing remotely suggests that he was, for example, circumcised, and (b) intended to continue to enter the temple of an idol and to feign worship of the idol. And yet Elisha approved Naaman's proposal.

Here's another example of worship and faith being accepted outside the covenant. Naaman came nowhere close to meeting the terms of the Law of Moses, and yet he is accepted by God's prophet.

What does Elisha in fact do? He says to Naaman, "Go in peace." "Go in peace," says the prophet of the Lord to this man torn between the ideals of his new faith and the realities of his old life. ... "Go in peace," says the prophet to the people we so quickly judge and dismiss when we make idols of our limited understandings.

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“Go in peace.” The words swirl in the air surrounding Naaman and surrounding us, telling us our God is not a tame God. We can grasp at him through our theologies of peace, hope, liberation, grace, or personal salvation through Christ. But always we know him only in part, always he rises fiercely and wildly above us just when we think we have pinned him down. He is not a butterfly to be chased and stuck to a board and admired. He is, finally, as we see in Jesus, a God of joy and love, but he is a God also whose ways remain partly mysterious and unknowable, and before whom we do well to bow with fear and trembling as he touches and moves our lives in ways our bottles of theology and doctrine are too small and fragile to contain.¹²

d) Hezekiah’s Passover

We rarely study 2 Chronicles, but 2 Chr 30 tells an important story. Hezekiah was king of the southern tribes of Israel and a reformer. He decided to restore the celebration of Passover, which had been forgotten for generations. He sent letters to the northern tribes, under a different kingship, inviting them to join in the Passover in Jerusalem.

While most from the Northern Kingdom scorned the message, a few men “humbled themselves and went to Jerusalem” (v. 11). We learn in verse 18 that those of the northern tribes “had not purified themselves, yet they ate the Passover, contrary to what was written.” By the time those in the Northern Kingdom learned of the Passover celebration, it was too late to undergo the required ritual purification from ceremonial uncleanness (Num. 9:6, for example). The Law of Moses penalizes with death entry into the Tabernacle while defiled (Lev 15:31).

Hezekiah prayed to God, “May the Lord, who is good, pardon everyone who sets his heart on seeking God – the Lord, the God of our fathers – even if he is not clean according to the rules of the sanctuary” (2 Chr 30:18-19) – and God overlooked the transgression. The Israelites then celebrated the Passover “with great rejoicing, while the Levites and priests sang to the Lord every day, accompanied by the Lord’s instruments of praise” (v. 21). And God heard their prayers (v. 27).

¹² Michael A. King, “Naaman and the Wild God of Israel,” *Spirituality Today* (Spring 1986), Vol. 38, pp. 4-8.

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In this case, even under the severity of the Law of Moses, God allowed ignorance of the Law to be an excuse – because those in ignorance were turning toward him. God accepted imperfect worship, judging the hearts rather than the “cleanness” of the worshippers. (And cleanness was achieved by a ceremonial washing, a precursor of baptism!)

We cannot lightly dismiss this lesson as limited to the Old Testament. After all, Paul refers to Jesus as our Passover lamb:

(1 Cor 5:7-8 NIV) Get rid of the old yeast that you may be a new batch without yeast – as you really are. For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed.

If the death of Christ is comparable to the sacrifice of the Passover lamb, then our baptism, which is a re-enactment of Christ’s death, burial, and resurrection, is comparable to being cleansed to celebrate the Passover. Does the God of Hezekiah still make exceptions? And if the humble Israelites could participate without the required washings in the Passover, surely we can participate without the required washing in water.

e) John the Baptist and Jesus

In the time of John the Baptist, baptism was for the forgiveness of sins. Sins were forgiven by repentance and immersion by the prophet (Mark 1:4). And nowhere is this practice found in the Law of Moses. God was again acting outside the covenant to forgive sins.

f) Jesus

While Jesus walked this earth, he freely forgave sins, based on faith – but without the baptism of John and without compliance with the sacrifices demanded by the Law of Moses. Even on the cross, Jesus forgave the sins of the thief (Luke 23:40-43), saving him based on faith. Once again, God was forgiving outside the covenant.

In each case, the forgiven person had faith and sought to live the life God would have him lead (to the extent possible under the circumstances). In none of these cases was God’s covenant-means of forgiving sins followed.

g) Summary

Before Jesus’ death on the cross and after the giving of the Law of Moses on Mt. Sinai, God governed his people by the Law, and yet he frequently made exceptions. God is bound not by his own laws. He is bound by his *promises*, which is why so emphasizes the language of promise in Gal 3, Rom 4, and Eph 3.

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The common pattern is simple. God never rejects someone who comes to him with faith (which includes repentance, by definition).

4. The Christian dispensation

Whether God makes exceptions is particularly significant when we consider the Christian dispensation, of course. It is undoubtedly true that the Epistles and the Gospels suggest that baptism is not only normative, perhaps even essential. But Acts has several examples where baptism is either not mentioned as part of the salvation of a person or where a person was clearly saved without baptism. And Luke's Gospel doesn't even once mention Christian baptism. Imagine that: A Gospel without baptism!

a) The apostles/the 120 disciples

The most obvious example is the apostles themselves. While all four of the Gospels record the baptism of Jesus, none record a baptism of the apostles. Indeed, they couldn't have been baptized into Jesus until after his death, burial, and resurrection, and yet the Gospels and Acts make no reference at all to their being baptized. A fair reading of Acts 2 leads to the conclusion that the apostles received the Holy Spirit at Pentecost and yet they weren't baptized other than by the Spirit.¹³

We know from John 3:22-26 and 4:1-2 that Jesus, through his disciples, baptized early in his ministry. It has been argued that Jesus was baptizing in his own name so that Jesus' baptisms were equivalent to Christian baptism. However, we know from Mark that Jesus concealed his nature as Son of God

¹³ It's been fairly noted that Acts 2 has to be reconciled with –

(John 20:21-23 ESV) Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you." ²² And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³ If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld."

Most commentators conclude that Jesus was speaking proleptically, that is, using a figure of speech in which Jesus speaks of something as presently true even though it will really only be true in the future, as a means of emphasizing the certainty of the event. Compare the familiar, "Introducing the next President of the United States ..." often spoken of someone who had not yet even won his party's nomination. There are several examples of prolepsis in Jesus' discourse that makes up chapters 13 -17.

It's also worthy of note that Thomas was not present and there's no record of Jesus breathing on him and promising him the Spirit. And in John 7:39, John says the Spirit wouldn't be given until Jesus was glorified, that is, after his Ascension into the glorious presence of God. And so it appears likely that Jesus was prophesying and even preparing the apostles for the Spirit, but the gift was not given until Pentecost.

during the first part of his ministry (Mark 1:43; 3:12; 5:43; 7:36; 8:30; 9:9). It seems very unlikely that Jesus would have baptized into his own name at a time, early in his ministry, when He was not yet ready to reveal his divinity.

It has been argued that the apostles were baptized at this time. And yet the Bible just doesn't say that. Given the extensive and repeated references in Acts to Paul's baptism, why wouldn't Luke (who also wrote Acts), at least, have recorded the baptisms of the other apostles – if they in fact had been baptized? Some have objected to this interpretation, arguing that the apostles were baptized with the 3,000 baptized on Pentecost, and yet Acts 2:40-42 contradicts any such interpretation:

With many other words he warned them; and he pleaded with them, "Save yourselves from this corrupt generation." **Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day.** They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.

Notice that the people baptized were "those who accepted his message." Because the apostles had already accepted the message, they could not be included among "those." This conclusion is verified by the next sentence, which declares that "they" devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching. "They" refers to "those who accepted his message" and clearly cannot be the apostles themselves. And those who were baptized were "added to their number" – plainly indicating that the apostles (and the other 120 disciples) were already saved.

It has sometimes been argued that John had baptized the apostles and that this baptism was somehow converted into Christian baptism at Pentecost, but there is simply no evidence of this in the Bible. There is evidence that *some* of the apostles were disciples of John, but this hardly proves that all 120 disciples were. And there is no evidence that John's baptism was considered effective after Pentecost – indeed, all those present at Pentecost – other than the apostles – were baptized in response to Peter's sermon. It is unlikely that none of the 3,000 had accepted John's baptism. And the Acts 19 account of Paul re-baptizing the converts who had only received John's baptism certainly seems to flatly contradict this theory.

b) Cornelius and his household

Cornelius and his household received the Spirit before baptism (Acts 10-11). Recall that Rom 8:11 teaches that everyone who possesses the Spirit is saved. And if the apostles were saved by receipt of the Holy Spirit without baptism, then we must conclude that Cornelius and his household were saved when they received the Spirit, before their baptism. Indeed, Peter declared that "the Holy Spirit came on them as he had come on us at the beginning ... So if God gave

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them the same gift as he gave us, who believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I to think that I could oppose God” (Acts 11:15-17).

It must also be noted, however, that Peter felt compelled to have Cornelius and his household baptized in water after they had already received the Spirit (Acts 10:47-48). It is far from clear why Peter felt compelled to have Cornelius and his household baptized after they received the Spirit while the apostles evidently were not baptized. At the least, this account strongly suggests that even if we conclude that there are people who are saved without a proper baptism, we should nonetheless urge them to be properly baptized, just as Cornelius was.

c) Apollos and the Ephesians

In Acts 18:24-28, we find that Apollos had faith in Jesus (he had been “instructed in the way of the Lord”) but had received only John’s baptism. Priscilla and Aquila “explained to him the way of God more adequately,” but there is no mention of re-baptism, even though the Ephesians, who had received only John’s baptism, were re-baptized in order to receive the Spirit (Acts 19:1-7). Either Apollos was never baptized into Christ or Luke felt it was unnecessary to so state.

It really is difficult to reconcile the Apollos account with the account of the Ephesians. In adjacent passages, we find one person baptized in John’s baptism not re-baptized, followed by an account of a group baptized in John’s baptism required to be re-baptized.

There have been a couple of suggestions at resolving this dilemma. One theory is that those who had been baptized in John the Baptist’s baptism before the death of Jesus were saved based on faith in Jesus afterwards, without re-baptism, but that baptism in John’s baptism after Jesus’ death was insufficient. Thus, it is suggested that the Ephesians had received the baptism of John after the death of Jesus while Apollos had had an earlier baptism.

This is a truly intriguing theory, but there is simply nothing in the Bible that says that this is true. Maybe it is, but our doctrine must be based on what the Bible says, not on guesses as to what *might* fill the silences of scripture. Nothing says when Apollos or the Ephesians were baptized in John’s baptism, and if the timing of their baptisms mattered, one would think that Luke would have mentioned the fact. And if this theory is so, why were all the converts at Pentecost baptized? Surely at least some of the 3,000 had been baptized by John.

Another theory is that Apollos was in fact re-baptized, this being implicit in his being better instructed. On the other hand, Acts contains so many baptism accounts that it surely seems odd that Luke would have skipped the re-baptism of Apollos – a very important figure in early church history – while describing in detail the baptism of the Ephesians, who aren’t even named, among so many others.

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It seems most likely that the Ephesian disciples were not believers in Jesus – at least not in Jesus of Nazareth as Son of God. Luke uses “disciples” to refer to followers of John the Baptist (Luke 5:33) as well as to Jesus’ followers. If these men were already Christians, then why did Paul baptize them? And why didn’t they already possess the Spirit? After all, as Paul declares in Gal 3:2, the Spirit is received based on faith in Jesus. It seems likely that these 12 were followers of John the Baptist, expecting the Messiah, but not knowing Jesus of Nazareth to be the Messiah prophesied by John.

Paul had to teach these men that John the Baptist “told the people to believe in the one coming after him, that is, in Jesus” (Acts 19:4). Evidently they believed John’s prophecy but were unaware that Jesus of Nazareth had come and fulfilled the prophecy. Paul did not teach them baptism; rather he taught them Jesus, and upon their acceptance of Jesus, he baptized them. On the other hand, Apollos was already a believer, and for whatever reasons, Paul seems to have felt no need to re-baptize him. The most likely explanation is that faith in Jesus was sufficient to save him and Paul saw no reason to baptize him at this stage of his Christian journey – although that is inconsistent with Peter’s treatment of Cornelius.

Luke’s failure to explain this discrepancy is easily understood in light of Luke’s (and Paul’s) much greater emphasis on the receipt of the Holy Spirit. It was evidently clear from what was reported about Apollos that he had received the Spirit, and thus inquiry into his baptism was not essential. The Ephesians, on the other hand, gave no such evidence, and so Paul asked them, not whether they’d been baptized, but whether they’d received the Spirit. Now, to a modern member of the Churches of Christ, this question is an absurdity. We would ask someone whose salvation was uncertain whether he’d been baptized. But Paul asked about the receipt of the Holy Spirit. Plainly, in Acts, and in Paul’s thinking, the ultimate hallmark of salvation is whether the Holy Spirit has been received, not whether baptism has been received. This fact is plain from Acts 2, Acts 10-11, and Acts 18-19, not to mention Rom 8.

d) The Samaritans

Indeed, in Acts 8, when Philip converted and baptized the Samaritans, a problem arose “because the Holy Spirit had not yet come upon any of them; they had simply been baptized into the name of the Lord Jesus” (Acts 8:14). Thus, water baptism was considered incomplete unless the convert had also received Spirit baptism. This is hardly surprising in light of John 3:5.

e) Conclusions

And so, where does this leave us? Ironically, Acts has been preached repeatedly in the Churches of Christ as teaching the necessity of baptism of believers. And yet Acts is the very book that demonstrates the presence of

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exceptions to the usual practice of the Spirit (and hence salvation) being received at the moment of baptism.

Is the age of exceptions over? Are these exceptions limited to apostolic times? Did God make these exceptions for a limited purpose? Or is it God's nature to make exceptions?

The bottom line is that there is only one truly general rule – “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom 3:23). We have *all* been saved solely by the willingness of God to make exceptions – regardless of the dispensation or covenant under consideration.

In each dispensation God has establish a well-defined covenant as to how he will forgive the sins of those with faith in him – and in each dispensation God has repeatedly made exceptions, always granting forgiveness to those with faith (which includes faithfulness or penitence) outside the specific terms of his covenant.

Discussion questions –

1. Imagine that you live in the late First Century. Someone gives you a copy of the Gospel of Luke, and this is the only New Testament resource you have. Can you, by reading Luke, find salvation? Does the Gospel of Luke offer enough information to its readers so that they can be saved?

You see, there's not a single reference to Christian baptism in Luke's Gospel. The baptism of John the Baptist is mentioned. But somehow Luke managed to write an entire Gospel and not once mention that you must be baptized to follow Jesus.

2. Is baptism an element of *pistis* (the Greek word for faith)? If you argue that faith implies obedience and obedience implies baptism, then what other acts of obedience are as essential as baptism? How do we decide what acts of obedience are as essential as faith in Jesus? Or is every possible act of obedience equally important?
3. What are the essential elements of a real, efficacious baptism? And by “essential” I mean God absolutely will not save you if you miss this element – regardless of your faith, your repentance, or confession. If you miss an essential element, you are without hope. Do you have to understand that you'll receive the Holy Spirit in order to actually receive the Spirit? Do you have to understand that you'll become a new creation to become a new creation? Do you have to understand that you'll become a part of a royal priesthood to become part of a royal priesthood? Do you have to understand that forgiveness will happen concurrently with your immersion for forgiveness to happen concurrently with your immersion?

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4. The author seems very concerned to defend the notion that Christians are saved by faith rather than works. Does Eph 2:8-10 support his view?
5. In Paul's terminology, is baptism a work we do or a gift we receive?
6. Is it possible to have a genuine faith and to be genuinely penitent and yet fail to be properly baptized in all good faith?
7. Do you agree with the author that someone can read his or her Bible diligently and honestly and not understand the true doctrine of baptism? Does the Bible ever explicitly define "baptism"?
8. If you have a study Bible, check the notes on baptism. What do your Bible's notes say constitutes a good baptism?
9. The author gives several examples from the Old Testament of people forgiven outside the Mosaic covenant. Does his argument make sense? Was God really being more gracious than the Law of Moses promised?
10. Would it somehow be wrong for God to forgive someone even though God also commanded that that person should receive forgiveness by other means? Does God have to follow his own rules?
11. What do the stories of Hezekiah's Passover and Naaman tell about God's personality? Is God looking to find a way to condemn us? Or looking for a way to save us?
12. Were the apostles baptized? If so, when? By whom? If so, why doesn't the Bible record it?
13. Why doesn't Luke tell us whether Apollos was re-baptized when he reports that the Ephesians were?
14. Do you agree with the author that receipt of the Holy Spirit receives greater emphasis in the scriptures than baptism?
15. Do you agree that God has sometimes saved people during New Testament times without baptism?
16. Is the age of exceptions over? Are these exceptions limited to apostolic times? Did God make these exceptions for a limited purpose? Or is it God's nature to make exceptions?
17. Would you be disappointed if believers outside the Churches of Christ went to heaven? Would it bother you if others were saved by the millions – if the Churches of Christ were in fact only a small minority among the saved?

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18. Read the Parable of the Day Laborers. What is the nature of the master whom Jesus describes? What kind of personality does he have? Why is he upset at the complaints of the workers he hired first?
19. What might cause someone to celebrate the damnation of others?

CHAPTER 7 THE NATURE OF GOD'S HEART

A. The Sovereignty of God

I recently spoke with a preacher who related this experience. He was meeting with a minister from another Church of Christ congregation who was complaining that he'd become too familiar with ministers in "the denominations." Exasperated, the preacher asked, "Would you be disappointed if, when you get to heaven, you find the Baptists there?" The other minister said without hesitation, "Absolutely, I'd be disappointed! It would mean that God had broken his promises!"

1. Job

Job teaches us that we have no business judging God, especially for his extraordinary generosity. I wish space allowed a thorough study of Job. Chapters 33-42 particularly make the point.

Beginning in chapter 33, Elihu charges Job with arrogance in being angry with God –

(Job 33:12-18, 29-30 NIV) "But I tell you, in this you are not right, for God is greater than man. Why do you complain to him that he answers none of man's words? For God does speak – now one way, now another – though man may not perceive it. In a dream, in a vision of the night, when deep sleep falls on men as they slumber in their beds, he may speak in their ears and terrify them with warnings, to turn man from wrongdoing and keep him from pride, to preserve his soul from the pit, his life from perishing by the sword." ...

"God does all these things to a man – twice, even three times – to turn back his soul from the pit, that the light of life may shine on him."

God's greatness manifests itself, not in condemnation, but in his continual efforts to rescue man from spiritual death. God is continually striving to save us, not to find a technicality by which to damn us!

Later, God himself upbraids Job for his arrogance –

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(Job 40:2,8 NIV) “Will the one who contends with the Almighty correct him? Let him who accuses God answer him!” ...

“Would you discredit my justice? Would you condemn me to justify yourself?”

These brief quotations give but a taste of the lesson taught in Job: God is so far beyond us that we have no right to question God’s justice and judgment. Nonetheless, we should also know that God is good. We may not live to see his ways come to righteous fruition, and we may be too foolish to even understand God’s purposes – but God’s purposes are always good.

2. Romans 9

Paul teaches a similar lesson in Rom 9:8-26 –

Therefore God has mercy on whom he wants to have mercy, and he hardens whom he wants to harden. One of you will say to me: “Then why does God still blame us? For who resists his will?” But who are you, O man, to talk back to God? ...

As he says in Hosea: “I will call them ‘my people’ who are not my people; and I will call her ‘my loved one’ who is not my loved one,” and, “It will happen that in the very place where it was said to them, ‘You are not my people,’ they will be called ‘sons of the living God.’”

God is sovereign. He will keep his promises, but he will also do *more* than he promises! This is his right and does not make him a liar. Rather, he makes him a loving, gracious God worthy of our worship.

3. The Parable of the Day Laborers

Jesus describes God in the Parable of the Day Laborers as a master who pays some of his servants more than they have earned while others receive only the wages they deserve. When some servants complain, God replies,

(Matt 20:15 NIV) “Don’t I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?”

When we are unhappy that God might be more generous than he has promised, we act just like the envious day laborers – and we sin in so doing. We should rather celebrate serving a gracious Lord.

4. Conclusions

God loves those whom he created. God loves the world so much that he gave up Jesus to die for our sins so that we might be saved through faith in him. How can we dare criticize God for making exceptions? Everyone of us deserves damnation. That's what sin means. And we've been saved on the thinnest of technicalities – the fact that Jesus can serve our sentence for us. Thank God for exceptions! And may he forever make exceptions generously!

(Psa 135:5-6 NIV) I know that the LORD is great, that our Lord is greater than all gods. The LORD does whatever pleases him, in the heavens and on the earth, in the seas and all their depths.

We should all be thankful that what pleases God is to do whatever is required to save people with faith, even though none of them deserve it.

B. God's condemnation based on technicalities

The story, perhaps apocryphal, is told of a baptism that took place many years ago at Freed Hardeman College (now University). A young lady was baptized, but someone noticed that the woman's right hand never actually went under the water. Some vocal young college students insisted that the baptism had to be re-done because the woman had not been completely immersed. Initially, the college refused, but the students mounted a vigorous protest, posting placards around campus citing Rom 6 – to the effect that to be partially buried is not to be buried at all. Eventually, the administration yielded and re-baptized the woman – quite thoroughly all under water, all at once.

And so, just how buried must one be to be buried? What if a hand or a foot pops out of the water so that the baptizee is never completely buried? Are her sins completely forgiven? This certainly seems to be a silly question. I mean, does anyone seriously believe that God would deny salvation to someone who genuinely tried to obey the command to be baptized but failed entirely by accident?

At this point, someone will surely bring up Nadab and Abihu, Uzzah, and Ananias and Sapphira. These three accounts have frequently been cited for the premise that God will indeed condemn based on a technicality.

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1. Nadab and Abihu

Nadab and Abihu were the sons of Aaron, Moses' brother and the first high priest under the Law of Moses. As such, they were heirs to the position of high priest and among the very first priests of the tabernacle. But they offered "strange fire" (Lev 10:1 KJV), and God struck them dead.

(Lev 10:1-11 NIV) Aaron's sons Nadab and Abihu took their censers, put fire in them and added incense; and they offered unauthorized fire before the LORD, contrary to his command. So fire came out from the presence of the LORD and consumed them, and they died before the LORD.

Moses then said to Aaron, "This is what the LORD spoke of when he said: 'Among those who approach me I will show myself holy; in the sight of all the people I will be honored.' Aaron remained silent. ..."

Then the LORD said to Aaron, "You and your sons are not to drink wine or other fermented drink whenever you go into the Tent of Meeting, or you will die. This is a lasting ordinance for the generations to come. You must distinguish between the holy and the common, between the unclean and the clean, and you must teach the Israelites all the decrees the LORD has given them through Moses."

The passage is clear that Nadab and Abihu's sin was much more than a technicality. Their failure to obey God's command as to the ceremonies of the tabernacle was "contrary to [God's] command" and dishonored God. God commanded that the sacrificial fire be lit from the altar, using fire that had been lit by the finger of God himself. Lev 16:12 requires that the fire be taken from the altar.¹⁴ This fire was initially lit by God himself in Lev 9:24 and was to be kept continuously burning. Lev 6:13. Nadab and Abihu didn't act where silence implied a prohibition. Rather, they violated God's specific instructions.

In fact, it appears very likely that they had made their mistake due to performing their rituals while drunk –

¹⁴ Gordon J. Wenham, *The Book of Leviticus*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1979), 155.

Gispen, following earlier Jewish commentators, believes the ban was provoked by Nadab and Abihu's drunkenness, which had led them into such error.¹⁵

Why else would God have threatened their successors with death if they drank alcoholic beverages when acting as priests?

Immediately, the text plunges into a warning to Aaron and his sons about the evils of intoxication while ministering in the house of God. Surely, some link is present, or vv. 8 - 11 are left dangling with no context or setting. ... No wonder, then, that older Jewish commentators thought there was a connection, and Nadab and Abihu had drunk wine to excess. In their view (and ours), this circumstance provides the occasion for the warning found here in vv. 8 - 11.¹⁶

Also aggravating their sin was the fact that, as the sons of Aaron, the first high priest, whatever pattern they set would be followed for generations.

As Paul Harvey likes to say, we also need to read the rest of the story. Later in the same chapter we read the account of Eleazar and Ithamar. These two surviving sons of Aaron were appointed to replace Nadab and Abihu. However, in vv. 16-18, Moses finds that the two men had incorrectly handled the very next ceremony! Moses was very unhappy, to say the least.

Aaron defended their mistake:

(Lev 10:19-20 NIV) Aaron replied to Moses, "Today they sacrificed their sin offering and their burnt offering before the LORD, but such things as this have happened to me. Would the LORD have been pleased if I had eaten the sin offering today?"²⁰ When Moses heard this, he was satisfied.

Aaron said that he too had made mistakes in the service. It was an accident. These things happen. And Eleazar and Ithamar were not punished.

As stated in G. J. Wenham, *The New International Commentary on the Old Testament, The Book of Leviticus*, "This suggests, perhaps, that God is more

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., "The Book of Leviticus," in *General Articles; Genesis-Leviticus* (vol. 1 of *New Interpreters Bible*, Accordance electronic ed. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 1071.

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gracious to those who make mistakes because they fear him than to those who carelessly and impudently enter his presence as Nadab and Abihu did.”

The fact that the two stories are immediately juxtaposed as they are in Leviticus 10 is intended to make a point, and the point is surely that God overlooks honest mistakes (among those in grace, of course) but does not overlook willful disobedience.¹⁷

It is noteworthy that in the OT, also, the heart attitude is more important than the mechanics of all the sacrifices (1 Sam 15:22; 2 Chronicles 30:19).¹⁸

We don't see in Lev 2 an unjust God looking for a chance to catch his children in a foot fault. Rather we see a holy God, insisting that his laws be taken seriously – seriously enough that his rituals aren't conducted while drunk – seriously enough that the priests not dishonor God by disregarding very plain instructions from God.

2. Ananias and Sapphira

Similar points can be made about Ananias and Sapphira. This couple lied to the apostles, saying they had donated all the money from a sale of their land when it was in fact only a part:

(Acts 5:1-4 NIV) Now a man named Ananias, together with his wife Sapphira, also sold a piece of property. With his wife's full knowledge he kept back part of the money for himself, but brought the rest and put it at the apostles' feet. Then Peter said, "Ananias, how is it that Satan has so filled your heart that you have lied to the Holy Spirit and have kept for yourself some of the money you received for the land? Didn't it belong to you before it was sold? And after it was sold, wasn't the money at your disposal? What made you think of doing such a thing? You have not lied to men but to God."

Nothing is plainer than the fact that God, through his apostles, was judging the hearts of this couple. This is why Luke records that the sin was

¹⁷ Thanks to Al Maxey for bringing this argument to my attention.

¹⁸ R. Laird Harris, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers*, 1990, 2, 567.

committed “with his wife’s full knowledge” and why Peter can say “Satan has so filled your heart that you have lied.” This was no honest mistake. This couple died for their intentional, knowing sin.

3. Uzzah

The Israelites had allowed the Philistines to capture the Ark of the Covenant. God compelled the Philistines to return the ark by plaguing them with boils (some translations say hemorrhoids!) The ark wound up in the house of Abinadab. King David wanted the ark brought to Jerusalem.

Now, David made a couple of mistakes here. First, the ark was supposed to be carried by priests of the tribe of Levi. Second, God had commanded that rings be built into the ark at its upper corners and poles placed through these rings – providing a very stable means of carrying the ark (Exo 25:13-15). David had the ark placed on a cart to be carried. David plainly had not bothered to inquire into God’s word as to the handling of the ark.

The oxen stumbled and threatened to spill the ark onto the ground. Uzzah reached out to touch the ark – only to steady it – and was struck dead! While 2 Samuel offers no explanation for this, other than to refer to Uzzah’s “irreverent act,” the parallel passage in 1 Chronicles provides more detail:

(1 Chr 15:1,12-15 NIV) After David had constructed buildings for himself in the City of David, he prepared a place for the ark of God and pitched a tent for it. ...

He said to them, “You are the heads of the Levitical families; you and your fellow Levites are to consecrate yourselves and bring up the ark of the LORD, the God of Israel, to the place I have prepared for it. It was because you, the Levites, did not bring it up the first time that the LORD our God broke out in anger against us. We did not inquire of him about how to do it in the prescribed way.” So the priests and Levites consecrated themselves in order to bring up the ark of the LORD, the God of Israel. And the Levites carried the ark of God with the poles on their shoulders, as Moses had commanded in accordance with the word of the LORD.

God struck Uzzah dead, not because of Uzzah’s sin, but because David and the Levites – who really should have known better – failed to inquire as to the correct procedure for moving the ark. Evidently, by the time of David much of the Law of Moses had been forgotten. The fact that the ark was kept in private houses for so long demonstrates that the tabernacle services were being ignored – many

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of the tabernacle rituals could not have been performed without the ark being present.

Moreover, Uzzah was not as innocent as we often imagine. He was the son of Abinidab and charged with the care of the ark (2 Sam 6:3). As such, he should have reviewed the rules in the Law of Moses for how to transport the ark, and he didn't.

In so far as David had decreed how the ark was to be transported, he was responsible for Uzzah's death, but some blame must have attached to Uzzah and Ahio, whose family had for years been in charge of the ark.¹⁹

Now, here is an amazing fact about God. Our God sometimes takes lives of the innocent to punish others. For example, after David's sin with Bathsheba, God took the life of their newborn son as punishment for David's sin. Who could be more innocent than a newborn child? But we can't judge God by human standards. When God takes a life, he has it within his power to place that soul in heaven. We can't do that, and so we can't take lives. But God can (for example, Rom 9), and he had the prerogative to punish David any way he saw fit. Nothing in scripture indicates that Uzzah was damned for his mistake (which was not entirely innocent). Nonetheless, I believe he was no more damned than the first son of David and Bathsheba.

In the cases of both Nadab and Abihu and of Uzzah, God was preparing his people for the initiation of a new age of worship. Nadab and Abihu were among the first priests to serve in the tabernacle. The transporting of the ark to Jerusalem was a first step toward the construction of the temple of Solomon (based on plans made by David) and the re-institution of the proper worship service there. It is hardly surprising that God wished in both cases to bring to the attention of his people the importance of getting these things right.

C. Mercy, not sacrifice.

The essence of the heart of Jesus is found, I believe, in Hosea 6:6 –

For I desire mercy, not sacrifice, and acknowledgment of God rather than burnt offerings.

¹⁹ Joyce G. Baldwin, *1 and 2 Samuel: An Introduction and Commentary* (Tyndale Old Testament Commentary 8; IVP/ Accordance electronic ed. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 222.

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This passage is so important to Jesus that Matthew twice refers to Jesus' quoting from it (Matt 9:11-13; 12:1-8).

Now what does this have to do with baptism? Everything. Because sacrifice was the Mosaic event when forgiveness of sins was granted,²⁰ just as baptism is the Christian event of forgiveness. How could God prefer mercy to sacrifice when sacrifice is the prescribed covenant-means of forgiving sins?

Hosea's declaration is hardly an isolated concept:

(Pro 21:2-3 NIV) All a man's ways seem right to him, but the LORD weighs the heart. To do what is right and just is more acceptable to the LORD than sacrifice.

(Isa 1:11-20 NIV) "The multitude of your sacrifices - what are they to me?" says the LORD. "I have more than enough of burnt offerings, of rams and the fat of fattened animals; I have no pleasure in the blood of bulls and lambs and goats. When you come to appear before me, who has asked this of you, this trampling of my courts? Stop bringing meaningless offerings! Your incense is detestable to me. New Moons, Sabbaths and convocations - I cannot bear your evil assemblies. Your New Moon festivals and your appointed feasts my soul hates. They have become a burden to me; I am weary of bearing them. When you spread out your hands in prayer, I will hide my eyes from you; even if you offer many prayers, I will not listen. Your hands are full of blood; wash and make yourselves clean. Take your evil deeds out of my sight! Stop doing wrong, learn to do right! Seek justice, encourage the oppressed. Defend the cause of the fatherless, plead the case of the widow."

"Come now, let us reason together," says the LORD. "Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool. If you are willing and obedient, you will eat the best from the land; but if you resist and rebel, you will be devoured by the sword." For the mouth of the LORD has spoken.

²⁰ For example, Lev 16, dealing with Day of Atonement, and Lev 4 and 5, dealing with sacrifices for unintentional sins.

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(Amos 5:21-24 NIV) "I hate, I despise your religious feasts; I cannot stand your assemblies. Even though you bring me burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them. Though you bring choice fellowship offerings, I will have no regard for them. Away with the noise of your songs! I will not listen to the music of your harps. But let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream!"

(Mic 6:6-8 NIV) With what shall I come before the LORD and bow down before the exalted God? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousand rivers of oil? Shall I offer my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul? He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.

In each of these passages, which in many ways foreshadow the New Covenant, God disdains sacrifice and urges justice, mercy, humility, and righteousness. And in each case, forgiveness of sins is predicated, not on God's own sacrificial system, but on whether we walk humbly with our God. Indeed, the prophets say, do so and "though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool" – and all this without regard to ritual sacrifice.

Baptism is in many ways analogous to Old Testament sacrifice. The Law of Moses makes clear, for example, that sacrifice must be offered for the forgiveness of sin. But, of course, the sacrifice itself does not forgive the sin – forgiveness was by God's grace. And yet the sacrifice was a necessary step. Sacrifice, like baptism, was the event at which God's forgiveness was received by the faithful.

And baptism compares to sacrifice because it unites us with Christ's sacrifice:

(Rom 6:3 NIV) Or don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?

Jesus, following the prophets of the Old Testament, taught that the condition of a man's heart is far more important than ritual – even a ritual commanded by God as a condition to and the very occasion of salvation!

D. Can the presence of the Spirit be discerned by observation?

Let's suppose that it were possible to discern whether an individual has the indwelling of the Spirit by observation. If that were true, then we could tell if that person is saved, since only the saved possess the Spirit and all who possess the Spirit are saved (Rom 8:9-11).

Now, it would plainly be a mistake to suppose that *all* who possess the Spirit may be discerned as such by observation. Clearly, there may be Christians who are in deep spiritual trouble, in need of repentance, who behave in a worldly manner. No one can tell from observation whether the Spirit has left such a person. But this is not the question. The question is whether there are *some* people in whom the Spirit burns so brightly that his presence can't be denied? What does the Bible say?

Certainly, it was true during the time of Acts that this was the case. Somehow, Phillip knew that the Samaritans had not yet received the Spirit even after their baptism (Acts 8:15-16). Something led Paul to conclude that the Ephesians had might have not yet received the Spirit (Acts 19:1-3). Recall that Paul asked them whether they'd received the Spirit – not whether they'd been baptized.

Here are a couple of verses to consider:

(1 Cor 12:3 NIV) Therefore I tell you that no one who is speaking by the Spirit of God says, "Jesus be cursed," and no one can say, "Jesus is Lord," except by the Holy Spirit.

(1 John 4:2-3a, 15 NIV) This is how you can recognize the Spirit of God: Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, but every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God. ... If anyone acknowledges that Jesus is the Son of God, God lives in him and he in God.

In each of these passages, the writer declares that faith in Jesus demonstrates the presence of the Spirit. Now we have to understand that merely saying the words is not enough – we understand that the speaker must *mean* the words, too.

And there are other verses that suggest that Christians may be discerned by their behavior. For example,

(John 13:34-35 NIV) "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another.

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By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.”

Therefore, the presence of a genuine faith and a Christ-like love for fellow believers indicates the presence of the Spirit.

Now, the favorite verse to rebut this argument is from James –

(Jam 2:17-19 NIV) In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead. But someone will say, “You have faith; I have deeds.” Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by what I do. You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that – and shudder.

Thus, the argument goes, the demons believe, and yet plainly they aren’t saved. Plainly, salvation requires more than faith. And I agree – depending on how one defines “faith.” The Bible treats the faith that saves and repentance as inseparable concepts. Faith is simply accepting Jesus as the Son of God, while repentance is accepting Jesus as Lord. But if you truly accept Jesus as God in the flesh, you must also accept his Lordship – he can’t be the Son of God and not be Lord. They are two sides of the same coin.

The demons are damned because they haven’t made Jesus Lord and thus don’t show their “faith” in deeds. A true Christian has not only accepted Jesus as Son of God, he’s made Jesus Lord – and therefore can show his faith by his deeds. On the other hand, the deeds are not the basis of salvation (Tit. 3:5-6) – they are the result of salvation (Eph 2:8-10). The demons don’t have faith in the same sense that Christians do. After all, we could hardly consider the demons of hell proper candidates for baptism just because they have no choice but to know who Jesus is!

Faith produces baptism (at least, this is how it’s supposed to work), which results in receipt of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:38), which results in good works. The Spirit gives spiritual gifts to all Christians “for the common good” (1 Cor 12:7). Moreover, the Spirit changes our hearts and thus our behavior –

(Gal 5:16-25 NIV) So I say, live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature. For the sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the sinful nature. They are in conflict with each other, so that you do not do what you want. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under law. ...

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

Against such things there is no law. Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires. Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit.

And so we see that the presence of the Spirit is supposed to have an ethical influence – much more than that – it's supposed to change our hearts and thus our behavior.

Now, undoubtedly, there are people who have never so much as heard of Jesus – idolaters even – who live very moral and upright lives. Mere good deeds do not prove the presence of the Spirit. But deeds done by a person of faith demonstrates a Spirit-filled heart. Isn't that what the verses plainly say?

E. The example of Jesus' healing

A very familiar story is told in Matthew:

(Matt 9:1-8 NIV) Jesus stepped into a boat, crossed over and came to his own town. Some men brought to him a paralytic, lying on a mat. When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, "Take heart, son; your sins are forgiven."

At this, some of the teachers of the law said to themselves, "This fellow is blaspheming!"

Knowing their thoughts, Jesus said, "Why do you entertain evil thoughts in your hearts? Which is easier: to say, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Get up and walk'? But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins" Then he said to the paralytic, "Get up, take your mat and go home." And the man got up and went home. When the crowd saw this, they were filled with awe; and they praised God, who had given such authority to men.

Jesus was asked to heal the paralyzed man, but he forgave him even though he *wasn't asked to do so!* The men asked for less than Jesus was willing to give, and yet Jesus gave what was needed.

This is the nature of our Savior. He does not give begrudgingly to those who approach him with faith.

(Eph 3:12 NIV) In him and through faith in him we may approach God with freedom and confidence.

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(Heb 4:16 NIV) Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.

Why do we suppose that a Baptist who asks to join the church, the body of Christ, with a saving faith and penitent heart but ignorant of the true purpose of baptism, will be denied his greatest need by a loving, gracious Savior? Why imagine that a Savior anxious to forgive will fail to do so when a faithful man or woman fails to use enough water in the baptismal ceremony? This is the same Savior who forgives the faithful who don't even ask for forgiveness!

F. Is baptism a work?

Those with a Southern Baptist or Calvinist background often argue that baptism can't be essential for salvation or else it would be a "work," and Paul is very clear that it's error – even damning error – to add a work to faith as a requirement for salvation. For example, in Gal 5, Paul writes,

(Gal 5:2-4 ESV) Look: I, Paul, say to you that if you accept circumcision, Christ will be of no advantage to you. ³ I testify again to every man who accepts circumcision that he is obligated to keep the whole law. ⁴ You are severed from Christ, you who would be justified by the law; you have fallen away from grace.

In other words, Paul argues that if you insist on any element of the law as a condition of salvation, you must apply the entirety of the law. We can't pick and choose. And, obviously enough, no one can perfectly keep the entirety of the Law of Moses, and so adding any element of the Law of Moses creates a standard that cannot be met and which therefore damns.

Notice a couple of things. First, "law" is a reference to the Law of Moses. And, obviously enough, baptism is not part of the Law of Moses.

Second, baptism is a gift received, not a work done. It's always spoken of in the passive voice in the NT. It's never pictured as something that earns salvation.

However, both these arguments ultimately fail. Let's start with the second point. Circumcision is even *more* of a gift received than a work done. Under the Law of Moses, infants are circumcised eight days after birth. Not only is it passive, the infant has no choice in the matter! And yet Paul plainly considers circumcision a "work" that leads to falling from grace.

As to the fact that baptism is not part of the Law of Moses, we need to keep reading in Gal 5 –

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(Gal 5:5-6 ESV) For through the Spirit, by faith, we ourselves eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness. ⁶ For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but only faith working through love.²¹

The reason adding works to faith damns is not that works are particularly awful. It's that they are not faith. Paul declares that only "faith working through

²¹ Some have objected to this line of reasoning on the basis that there is no "only" in the Greek. However, *alla* may be translated "only" or "but" or, as in the ESV, "but only." See, for example, Richard N. Longenecker, *Galatians* (Word Bible Commentary 41; Accordance electronic ed. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 229, translating *alla* as "only" in 5:6.

Paul has already declared that faith, through the Spirit, provides our hope of salvation (v. 5). And so it's hard to translate v. 6 without an "only" because Paul's point is that faith, expressing itself through love, is what "counts" or "avails" (KJV) in contrast to any other possibility. If something has to be added to faith for it to count, then faith doesn't avail (that is, suffice or accomplish its intended result).

Hence, many translations use "only" or "but only," including the ESV, NAB, NET, NIB, NIRV, NIV, NJB, NRS, and TNIV. The translation hardly reflects a Calvinist or Baptist bias when the Catholic New Jerusalem Bible adds the "only"!

The Louw-Nida Greek lexicon notes that *alla* is —

a marker of more emphatic contrast (as compared with *de* 89.124) – 'but, instead, on the contrary.'

Bryan Findlayson notes in the technical notes to his "Lectionary Bible Studies" that the *alla* is adversative, that is, meaning "but only," citing the highly respected *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*. <http://www.lectionarystudies.com/studyn/epiphany8cben.html>.

The combination *oute/alla* is parallel to Galatians 1:12 —

(Gal 1:12 ESV) For I did not receive it from any man, **nor** was I taught it, **but** I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ.

Paul's point in 1:12, of course, is that the gospel he received came *only* from revelation and not some blend of human and divine sources.

This meaning is clear from the context as well. Suppose Paul meant —

(Gal 5:6 ESV) For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but ... faith working through love [as well as some other unspecified things].

If that's a proper translation, how does Paul's logic flow? It doesn't. If Paul admits that justification may be found in something other than faith working through love, then circumcision might be one of the other things essential for justification. He's not made his point unless he is saying that circumcision and uncircumcision both fail to be essential for salvation because neither is faith working through love.

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love” or “faith expressing itself through love” (NIV) “counts for anything.”²² That is, only faith has the ability to accomplish what’s being discussed: justification.

The danger is not in adding works but in considering faith insufficient. In v. 4, Paul declares that our hope comes “by faith.” The problem with circumcision is not that it’s a “work” but that it’s not faith. Adding circumcision to faith as a condition of salvation makes faith insufficient – contrary to God’s covenant with Abraham and countless repeated promises over the centuries to save all with faith.

(Gal 2:16 NET) yet we know that no one is justified by the works of the law but by the faithfulness of Jesus Christ. And we have come to believe in Christ Jesus, so that we may be justified by the faithfulness of Christ and not by the works of the law, because by the works of the law no one will be justified.

(Gal 3:2 ESV) Let me ask you only this: Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law or by hearing with faith?

(Gal 3:5-9 ESV) Does he who supplies the Spirit to you and works miracles among you do so by works of the law, or by hearing with faith - ⁶ just as Abraham “believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness”? ⁷ Know then that it is those of faith who are the sons of Abraham. ⁸ And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, “In you shall all the nations be blessed.” ⁹ So then, those who are of faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith.

(Gal 3:11-14 ESV) Now it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law, for “The righteous shall live by faith.” ¹² But the law is not of faith, rather “The one who does them shall live by them.” ¹³ Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us - for it is written, “Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree” - ¹⁴ so that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith.

²² The KJV “avails” and ESV “counts for anything” translate the Greek *ischuō*, meaning “to be able to, to have the strength to, to be very capable of,” Louw-Nida.

(Gal 3:22-26 ESV) But the Scripture imprisoned everything under sin, so that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe. ²³ Now before faith came, we were held captive under the law, imprisoned until the coming faith would be revealed. ²⁴ So then, the law was our guardian until Christ came, in order that we might be justified by faith. ²⁵ But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian, ²⁶ for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith.

In chapters 2 and 3, Paul builds his case on the sufficiency of faith in Jesus to save. His point in chapter 5 is that only faith saves – and so adding anything to faith as a condition of salvation ultimately establishes a burden greater than anyone can bear – because whatever logic leads to adding the something extra will require you to pile on more and more until few people, if any, can be saved.

This is exactly the experience of the 20th Century Churches of Christ. Early on, even before the Civil War, many argued that baptism strictly in accordance with Church of Christ teaching was essential for salvation.

Soon other requirements were added. To faith in Jesus must be added not only an impeccable baptism but also *a cappella* worship, objection to missionary societies, rejection of located preachers, rejection of fund raising by any means other than a free will offering, no use of the church treasury for unauthorized purposes, no having only one elder, no having elders with only one child or a deceased child, etc., etc., etc. And the number of saved people declined with each issue of each editor-bishop's periodical.

Paul saw the danger with the eyes of prophecy. He wrote,

(Gal 5:13-15 ESV) For you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another. ¹⁴ For the whole law is fulfilled in one word: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." ¹⁵ But if you bite and devour one another, watch out that you are not consumed by one another.

When we add to faith as a requirement of salvation, we soon find ourselves biting and consuming each other. Love is the first casualty of a "gospel" that finds faith in Jesus insufficient to save.

In short, there's no error in saying that baptism is the moment when God saves in the ordinary case. I think that's exactly the case. But if we insist that those improperly baptized are damned, then haven't we treated baptism just like circumcision? How would we not be guilty of the Galatian heresy?

CHAPTER 8 ADDITIONAL ARGUMENTS

A. “Christ did not send me to baptize”

How do we deal with the fact that Paul wrote –

(1 Cor 1:17 NIV) 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.

For all the many scriptures that support the traditional position of the Churches of Christ, there is no explaining this passage in light of what we’ve traditionally taught. How can the greatest evangelist in history say – by inspiration – that Jesus did not send him to baptize? Don’t we send our missionaries out to baptize? Don’t we expect reports from them as to numbers of baptisms? Can you imagine a Church of Christ missionary saying that he wasn’t sent to baptize?

I’ve always rationalized this by saying that Paul was following Jesus’ example of doing the baptizing himself, letting his disciples perform the immersions (John 4:2). But if Jesus had his apostles baptizing in Palestine, then why would the apostle Paul not baptize in Corinth? Paul would never pretend to be Jesus! And, of course, Paul did baptize some within Corinth, just very few, while Jesus baptized none. This argument just doesn’t add up. Indeed, we read of other apostles baptizing in great numbers at Pentecost.

Plainly, Paul’s point is that baptism is secondary to faith. Indeed, Paul speaks of “faith,” “belief,” or variants, 187 times to just 16 references to “baptism,” or variants.²³ Does our literature and do our sermons reflect the same relative emphases? Why not?

Paul did not preach baptism – he preached “Christ, and him crucified” (1 Cor 2:2). Faith is thus faith in Christ, not in baptism. The gospel is the “gospel of Christ” (for example, 1 Cor 9:12), not the gospel of baptism. We are to convert to Jesus, not to baptism. In our zeal to preach the doctrine of baptism, we’ve sometimes lost our priorities.

²³ Count from *QuickVerse*™ software.

But this no more means that we should ignore baptism than that Paul did. Paul clearly saw to it that his converts were baptized. He just made sure that they were converted to a person, not a doctrine or a rite.

It's worth noting that although Paul regularly mentions baptism in his writings, it is almost always as an incidental. He uses baptism to make another point, that is, the point is *never* baptism. All his references to baptism are in support of other arguments.

It would be a mistake to trivialize baptism. Clearly, Paul saw baptism as an important part of this teaching. But it would be an even bigger mistake to imagine that baptism is co-equal with faith in Jesus in Paul's theology. Plainly, it is not. Indeed, in 1 Cor 1:16, Paul plainly contrasts the gospel with baptism. They are not the same thing.

B. But doesn't "obey the gospel" mean "be baptized"?

No, it does not. Contrary to thousands of Church of Christ sermons and invitation talks, to "obey the gospel" is to believe in Jesus – *not* to be baptized. The phrase is found three times in the Bible –

(2 The 1:5-10 ESV) This is evidence of the righteous judgment of God, that you may be considered worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you are also suffering – ⁶ since indeed God considers it just to repay with affliction those who afflict you, ⁷ and to grant relief to you who are afflicted as well as to us, when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels ⁸ in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and **on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus.** ⁹ They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might, ¹⁰ when he comes on that day to be glorified in his saints, and to be marveled at among all who have believed, because our testimony to you was believed.

Paul speaks of those who do not "obey the gospel" in v. 8. Who are these people? Well they are the people who will be "marveled at among all who have believed" because Paul's readers believed his testimony (v. 10). Plainly, Paul is referring to people who did not believe as people who did not obey the gospel.

(Rom 10:13-17 ESV) For "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." ¹⁴ How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? ¹⁵ And how are they to

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preach unless they are sent? As it is written, “How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!”¹⁶ **But they have not all obeyed the gospel. For Isaiah says, “Lord, who has believed what he has heard from us?”¹⁷ So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.**

Again, Paul speaks of those who “obeyed the gospel” (v. 16), but in the context of who has believed. Chapter 10 is all about faith in Jesus, with not a word about baptism.

(1 Pet 4:17 ESV)¹⁷ For it is time for judgment to begin at the household of God; and if it begins with us, what will be the outcome for those who do not obey the gospel of God?

In the final passage, Peter doesn’t give a clear definition, simply contrasting those who do not obey the gospel with the household of God. But how one obeys the gospel is not stated.

Therefore, to equate “obey the gospel” with baptism is sheer presumption. That is just not how that phrase is used in the NT.²⁴

²⁴ “Obey the gospel” seems to parallel Paul’s “obedience of faith,” used several times in the NT. N. T. Wright comments on Rom 1:5 –

It is possible that by this dense phrase he means, as in the NIV, “the obedience that comes from faith,” but it is much more likely that he means “the obedience which consists in faith.” “Obedience” is a more prominent theme in Romans than elsewhere in the NT (elsewhere in Paul only in 2 Cor 7:15; 10:5-6; Phlm 21). ...

Of course, the actual notion of “obedience” – doing what one is told – is itself important. Generations of theologians have worried whether this emphasis on obedience, so early in a letter supposedly about “justification by faith alone,” does not suggest the priority of good moral works rather than pure faith. Such anxiety misses the point. When Paul thinks of Jesus as Lord, he thinks of himself as a slave and of the world as being called to obedience to Jesus’ lordship. His apostolic commission is not to offer people a new religious option, but to summon them to allegiance to Jesus, which will mean abandoning other loyalties. The gospel issues a command, an imperial summons; the appropriate response is obedience.

The “obedience” Paul seeks to evoke when he announces the gospel is thus not a list of moral good works but faith. Faith, as Paul explains later (10:9), consists in confessing Jesus as Lord (thereby renouncing other lords) and in believing that God raised Jesus from the dead (thereby abandoning other worldviews in which such things did or could not happen, or not to Jesus; cf. too 4:23-25). This faith is actually the human faithfulness that answers to God’s faithfulness. As we will discover in chap. 3, that is why this “faith” is the only appropriate badge of membership within God’s true, renewed people.

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C. Don't we contact the blood of Christ at baptism?

In the Churches of Christ, it's long been taught that souls are cleansed when we contact the blood of Christ in baptism. Very typical is this from Jeffrey Asher²⁵ –

I submit that the Scriptures teach the blood of Christ is applied to sinners in baptism, and that this is what the apostle Paul had in mind in Romans 6:3 when he said we are "baptized into [Christ's] death." ...

Baptism into Christ's death enables us reach the blood of his cross (John 19:34). Baptism is God's operation of washing us in the blood of the Lamb and cleansing us of our sins (Col. 2:12,13). "[You] were buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the working of God, who raised him from the dead. And you, being dead in your sins and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He has made together with Him, having forgiven you all trespasses. . . . " How much clearer can it be? God forgives men of their sins when they obey his command for baptism.

Of course, John 19:34 says nothing about baptism. It actually says,

(John 19:34 ESV) But one of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear, and at once there came out blood and water.

And Col 2:12-13 says nothing about the blood of Jesus.

Despite the anxieties of some, therefore, that Paul is undermining his own doctrine of "justification by faith" before he has even stated it, v. 5 really does look ahead to Paul's exposition of justification, even though it places that theme in a rather different context from that which some expositors have assumed.

N.T. Wright, *"The Letter to the Romans," in The Acts of the Apostles – The First Letter to the Corinthians* (vol. 10 of New Interpreters Bible, Accordance electronic ed. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002), 420.

Notice how transparent this text becomes once we define "faith" to include faithfulness and trust. When we separate faith from faithfulness, we struggle to make sense of Paul.

²⁵ "Baptism and Jesus' Blood," *Truth Magazine*, XXXI: 15, 460-461 (August 6, 1987). <http://www.truthmagazine.com/archives/volume31/GOTO31202.html>.

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Asher's argument is that our sins are forgiven at baptism; our sins are forgiven by the blood of Jesus; therefore, we contact the blood of Jesus in baptism.

But the Bible never says this. Alexander Campbell taught the importance of purity of speech when speaking of biblical things. Why speak in terms that the Spirit never inspired?

The waters of baptism are never said to symbolize the blood of Jesus. They symbolize his death and the Spirit. They symbolize cleansing. And I believe, with Asher, that baptism is normally the moment when we're forgiven. I just think God's makes exceptions when needed to honor his many promises to save all with faith in Jesus. I don't believe in the sort of sacramentalism that requires water for salvation no matter what.

In fact, in NT thought, the waters do not carry the efficacy of forgiveness. The forgiveness comes from the receipt of the Spirit –

(Tit. 3:4-7 ESV) But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, ⁵ he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, ⁶ whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, ⁷ so that being justified by his grace we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life.

“Regeneration” in v. 5 could be translated “new birth,” “new beginning,” or even “re-begetting,” reflecting God's becoming the convert's father in parallel with Psa 2. The only other use of the underlying Greek word in the NT is –

(Matt 19:28 ESV) Jesus said to them, “Truly, I say to you, in the new world [NIV: the renewal of all things], when the Son of Man will sit on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.”

The word is borrowed from the Stoics and refers to the end of the age. It's plainly eschatological and looks ahead to the Second Coming when all things will be made new (Rev 21:5). We are not just given a fresh start, but we're given a new nature as new creations by the power of the Spirit (2 Cor 5:17). (Those who deny a personal indwelling of the Spirit deprive themselves of one of most beautiful promises in the Bible.)

The language of v. 5 is ambiguous both in the English and the Greek. Is the washing “of renewal and regeneration” so that “of the Holy Spirit” applies to both? Or is Paul saying that the washing regenerates and the Holy Spirit renews?

I doubt seriously that Paul believes that the water regenerates and the Spirit renews. Rather, the Holy Spirit is poured out like water (v. 6) to wash, regenerate, and renew us. Water does not forgive. Only God can forgive, and when we're saved (normatively at baptism), he does so through God the Spirit.

(1 Cor 6:11 ESV) And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.

(2 The 2:13 ESV) But we ought always to give thanks to God for you, brothers beloved by the Lord, because God chose you as the firstfruits to be saved, through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth.

So it's really much more about the receipt of the Spirit than the water – not that we aren't supposed to experience both. But we in the Churches of Christ tend to overlook the Spirit's role because some deny any “direct operation” of the Spirit on the Christian – and yet it's the Spirit's operation on the Christian that is often credited with our forgiveness!

And so, we've substituted the idea of contacting the blood of Jesus for the biblical concept of being washed, sanctified, justified, and saved by the Spirit – which we normally receive at baptism. We leave the Spirit out and so find ourselves treating the water as the carrier of God's forgiveness – when in fact the carrier is what the water symbolizes: the outpoured Spirit.

D. Are all references to baptism references to baptism by the Holy Spirit?

It has often been argued that the New Testament does not use “baptism” to refer to water baptism but only to baptism by the Holy Spirit. The argument relies on the numerous New Testament passages that plainly refer to non-water baptisms – such as –

(Matt 3:11-12 NIV) “I baptize you with water for repentance. But after me will come one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not fit to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. 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 quotes John the Baptist as saying that the baptism of Jesus will be with the Holy Spirit, in contrast to John's baptism, which is with water. Does this mean that Christian baptism was not with water?

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Other verses use “baptize” as a metaphor.

(Mark 10:36-40 NIV) “What do you want me to do for you?” he asked.

They replied, “Let one of us sit at your right and the other at your left in your glory.”

“You don’t know what you are asking,” Jesus said. “Can you drink the cup I drink or be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with?”

“We can,” they answered.

Jesus said to them, “You will drink the cup I drink and be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with, but to sit at my right or left is not for me to grant. These places belong to those for whom they have been prepared.”

Here, “baptism” refers to a martyr’s death, not to water immersion.

In the account of the conversion of Cornelius, Peter refers both to the apostles’ receipt of the Spirit on Pentecost and the receipt of the Spirit by Cornelius and his household as baptism of the Holy Spirit.

The argument is then made that the Greek word translated baptism is often used metaphorically to refer to something other than a dipping into water. Finally, it is pointed out that most passages that refer to baptism do not make reference to water at all, and could be just as easily interpreted as referring to baptism with the Spirit. For example, Acts 2:38 makes no express reference to water and could well have referred to the same Spirit baptism that the apostles had just received.

But there is considerable evidence to the contrary. First, let’s take the case of Cornelius. After receiving baptism with the Holy Spirit, Peter commanded baptism with water –

(Acts 10:47 NIV) “Can anyone keep these people from being baptized with water? They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have.”

Similarly, the references in the Gospels to John and Jesus (through his disciples) baptizing in the Jordan River (John 1:28) or where there was “plenty of water” (John 3:23) as well as the account of the baptism of the Ethiopian eunuch, where Phillip and the eunuch went down “into” the water (Acts 8:36-39), plainly

believe any argument that New Testament baptism didn't involve a water immersion.

Finally, the early Church Fathers plainly repudiate this notion:

We descend into the water full of sins and uncleanness, and we ascend bearing reverence in our heart and having hope in Jesus in our spirit.²⁶

"I have heard, Sir, from some teachers that there is no other repentance except that one when we descended into the water and received the forgiveness of our former sins." He said to me, "You have heard correctly, for it is so."²⁷

There is simply no way that Christian baptism in the New Testament or in the following century was Holy Spirit baptism separate from water baptism. Indeed, the account of the conversion of Cornelius makes clear that when, in an extraordinary situation, Spirit baptism was received without water baptism, Peter felt compelled to administer water baptism.

E. Why perfect baptism if not perfect faith or repentance?

We teach that to be saved, one must have faith, repent, and be baptized. We teach, of course, that one must also hear and confess, but we simply hear what we are to believe and what we are to confess. How can we accept someone for baptism – or even church membership – if he's not told us that he believes? These are therefore necessary elements but not truly distinct from faith.

But I've never heard it taught that our faith must be perfect to result in salvation. After all, Jesus himself taught that we would be able to move mountains if we have only as much faith as a mustard seed! (Matt 17:20) Jesus healed many people based on their faith even though their faith was immature and simple – sometimes just enough to ask to be healed.

A boy's father asked Jesus to heal his son from demon possession "if you can do anything."

(Mark 9:23-24 NIV) "'If you can?'" said Jesus. "Everything is possible for him who believes."

²⁶ *Epistle of Barnabas* 11:11, circa 133 A.D., quoted by Everett Ferguson, *Early Christians Speak*, vol. 1 (Ft. Worth: Sweet Publishing Group, 1971) (hereafter, "Ferguson"), 33.

²⁷ Hermas, *The Shepherd*, Mandate IV:iii.1, circa 136 A.D., quoted by Ferguson, 33.

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Immediately the boy's father exclaimed, "I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!"

Plainly, Jesus did not insist on perfect faith.

And he doesn't insist on perfect repentance. After all, if we were to repent perfectly, we'd stop sinning altogether, and no one other than Jesus has accomplished that!

It is, therefore, fair to ask: if we don't have to believe or repent perfectly, why do we insist on perfect baptism? If my faith can be weak and immature, why can't my baptism? Indeed, which of these elements is more important, more fundamental? Aren't the scriptures the story of faith? Isn't the church the "household of faith"? Didn't Paul declare Christianity to be "by faith from first to last" (Rom 1:17 NIV)?

F. The believer's wedding ceremony?

It has often been argued that baptism is analogous to a wedding.²⁸ Here's the argument in a nutshell:

While certainly the essence of a marriage is the commitment made between husband and wife, no matter how committed they are to each other, they're just not married until they participate in a wedding. They might live together, have sexual relations, bear children, and take on all the appearances of a married couple, but with no wedding, they are not married.

To extend the analogy, it is further argued that a wedding is, like a baptism, a symbol. The wedding ceremony symbolizes the joining of man and woman to become united, one flesh, as Moses wrote in Genesis 2. The ceremony symbolizes the love of the bride and the groom. And, of course, a traditional church wedding is filled with a great many more symbols.

Thus, although it is true that a wedding is a symbol, it is also the occasion at which the marriage actually occurs. It is much more than just a symbol – it actually effects a change in the relationship between the bride and groom – indeed, the relationship between the bride, the groom, and God himself.

²⁸ Most famous perhaps is F. LaGard Smith's recent book *Baptism, the Believer's Wedding Ceremony* (Nashville: Gospel Advocate Co., 1993), but the analogy is not new.

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And, as is true of baptism, it is not just the ceremony that makes the marriage. The bride and groom must come to the wedding intending to be married. With no intention to be married, the ceremony is a fraud and the marriage is not recognized. For example, many marriages have been annulled (declared to have never occurred) when the parties were too drunk to truly consent to the marriage.

Thus, just as Peter said that baptism saves, not the water but the pledge of a good conscience to God, a wedding marries – not the preacher saying the words, but the pledge of a man and woman to be husband and wife to each other. But even so, a wedding requires the words by the preacher or the judge, just as salvation requires the immersion, even though the essence of the event is the commitment being made, in faith, to God.

This is a powerful argument. It is also wrong. To see why, we need to learn something more about marriage, because the way we see marriage today is not the way the authors of the Bible saw marriage.

Today, we typically think the way a man and woman get married is by being married by a preacher or a judge. Somehow, we've taken on the idea that marriage requires the approval of the government. In fact, in my home town, preachers typically conclude the ceremony by saying something like, "By the powers vested in me by God and the State of Alabama, I now pronounce you man and wife." But, of course, although the *Code of Alabama* authorizes church officials to officiate at weddings, nowhere does the Bible do so.

Think about it. Isn't this rather a strange notion? Why should the government have to approve an otherwise extremely private arrangement? And when and how did this start? The answer may surprise you.

Nowhere in the Bible do we read about people getting governmental consent to a wedding. We don't read about preachers – or rabbis – marrying people. Adam and Eve were husband and wife and had no wedding. The next marriage we read about is Isaac and Rachel –

(Gen 24:67 KJV) And Isaac brought her into his mother Sarah's tent, and took ²⁹ Rebekah, and she became his wife; and he loved her: and Isaac was comforted after his mother's death.

²⁹ The NIV translates "took" as "married," but the word certainly doesn't refer to having a wedding.

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The marriage of Jacob and Leah was similarly accomplished:

(Gen 29:21-23 NIV) Then Jacob said to Laban, “Give me my wife. My time is completed, and I want to lie with her.” So Laban brought together all the people of the place and gave a feast. But when evening came, he took his daughter Leah and gave her to Jacob, and Jacob lay with her.

In both Old Testament and New Testament times, marriage was accomplished without government or church involvement. The details might vary based on local customs, but getting married meant simply agreeing to be married. No license. No blood tests. No preacher. And no judge.

And this didn’t change until after the time of Constantine – hundreds of years after Christ. In fact, it was well into the Middle Ages that the church (not the government) usurped the couple’s exclusive authority to make a marriage – as a sacrament. Indeed, by the time of the 16th Century Counter-Reformation, the Council of Trent declared that any marriage not made by the church (by then, the Roman Catholic Church) was void and adulterous.

As a result of the Protestant Reformation, many governments (including England’s) rejected the notion that only the church could marry a couple, and so judges were granted the power to marry couples in many lands. The United States borrowed this practice from England. But England did not limit the power to grant marriage to the church and to judges – England also allowed couples to marry purely by private agreement, as had been true going all the way back to Adam and Eve. This is known in the US and in England as a common law marriage.

In the United States, many states no longer recognize common law marriages because of the practical problems they create in proving who is married to whom. The states want a good, certain record of marriages to better enforce inheritance and divorce laws. But several states, including my home state of Alabama, still recognize common law marriages.

In such states, there is nothing immoral or illegal in marrying under the common law. All that is required is a mutual intent to be presently married which intent is objectively evidenced by the couple holding themselves out to the public as husband and wife. Period. Just like Isaac and Rachel.

Some have been confused and thought that having sexual relations alone makes a marriage, but the law (and Biblical principle) is that the marriage comes from an intent to be married, and sex is only possible evidence of the intent. Consummation is not essential to a common law marriage.

Moreover, it’s worth noting that many state statutes don’t actually give the minister or judge the power to marry. Rather, the traditional terminology is that

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the minister or judge may only “solemnize” the marriage, meaning, formally declare that the marriage has occurred!

And so, where does this leave us with respect to baptism? Well, in the ordinary course, baptism really is just like a wedding ceremony. It’s a symbol and it is much more than a symbol – it is the actual occasion where salvation occurs, just as a wedding really is the actual occasion where marriage occurs. But what happens if the husband and wife make a technical mistake? What if they forgot to buy a marriage license? What if they don’t realize that their preacher isn’t ordained in the state they are getting married in? What if they didn’t have the number of witnesses required by state law? What if they failed to sign the license and mail it to the Bureau of Vital Statistics? Are they still married? Yes! In fact, they are still married even if all they did is pledge their hearts to one another to be married and then undertook to really live as husband and wife. Legally. Morally. And in God’s eyes. They are just as married as if married by 20 preachers before 1,000 witnesses.

So what do we learn from the wedding analogy? *If* the analogy holds at all, it teaches us that baptism should be and often is both a symbol of our salvation and the very occasion of our salvation. And just as no one would prudently recommend getting married without a license, witnesses, and so on, seeking salvation outside a proper baptism is foolhardy. But if someone were to make an honest error in how to commit himself to God, the pledge of the heart to God by a faithful, penitent believer is enough.

But I’d add, if a married couple came to my congregation, married at common law, I’d ask them to be remarried with a license and the whole works – because to do otherwise would leave them open to tremendous uncertainty in many respects. It’s just good practice to do things the best way possible. I’ve seen many a miserable widow struggle to prove her common law marriage after her husband died.

This is not to be confused with the notion common in Churches of Christ that we should insist on X practice because taking the most conservative position is the safest position. In fact, the only safe position is relying on God’s grace. When we try to be safe by imposing a law that is doubtful, we become guilty of “will worship” (Col 2:23) and we risk becoming guilty of “teaching for doctrines the commandments of men” in violation of Matt 5:19. It’s just as wrong to add to God’s commands as to take away. The safe course is neither to the right nor to the left but straight on toward Jesus.

The reason I would baptize someone clearly incorrectly baptized is (a) Peter had Cornelius baptized even though he’d already receiving the Spirit, (b) many churches will not accept someone as a member without a proper baptism, and (c) most importantly, Jesus was baptized and we are to follow his example. It’s not about being safe. It’s about being like Jesus.

G. Football, Instant Replay, and Marriage³⁰

We are children of the Enlightenment — most of us — and we therefore assume without reflection that the world is explained rationally and logically — and simply enough for a reasonably bright person to understand.

This is not the Christian worldview, and the doctrine of the Trinity plainly shows it. To a First Century Jew, not everything could be understood, but that was *God's* problem. Our job is to believe, and God will explain it one day — if it suits him. And that's entirely up to God.

(Deu 29:29 NET) Secret things belong to the LORD our God, but those that are revealed belong to us and our descendants forever, so that we might obey all the words of this law.

(Job 11:7-9 ESV) “Can you find out the deep things of God? Can you find out the limit of the Almighty? ⁸ It is higher than heaven – what can you do? Deeper than Sheol – what can you know? ⁹ Its measure is longer than the earth and broader than the sea.

(Rom 11:33-34 ESV) Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! ³⁴ “For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor?”

I'm not particularly happy about this. I greatly prefer to understand. But still it's true. The Christian worldview starts with scripture, not reason. We Christians don't reject reason, but we don't consider reason the beginning of truth. God's revelation of himself is the beginning of truth. (To be carefully distinguished from my interpretation of God's revelation of himself, which can be very wrong. God always speaks truth. We don't always understand.)

I say this to say that sometimes we have to recognize that things don't have to make perfect sense. I even have some examples from everyday life.

1. A wedding example

Imagine a couple in love, engaged but not yet married. They are filled with passion for and commitment to each other. And so they decide to marry.

³⁰ I include this essay, originally posted at my blog OneInJesus.info, because several readers found it helpful – more helpful than my theological writing. College football is a wonderful thing.

They get a license, hire a church, get a preacher, invite hundreds of guests, and plan the perfect wedding and reception. The preacher announces that they are “husband and wife” and permits the man to kiss his new wife. (Why he needs the preacher’s permission will forever remain a mystery to me.)

The congregation, friends, and family celebrate the wedding. It’s Friday night — and off they go to their honeymoon in the Caribbean, filled with much-anticipated and long-delayed passion.

On Monday, the preacher files the fully signed and dated wedding certificate with the local registry — and state law says they aren’t married unless the certificate is filed. And yet the registry was closed and locked and under guard from Friday night until Monday morning.

When were they married? Was the weekend a time of fornication contrary to the plan of God for only *married* men and women? Or was it a God-fearing celebration of the love of a husband and wife as God planned from Eden?

It’s a head scratcher — and not at all unusual and rarely worried about. Why not? Because in our minds, the filing of the certificate on Monday “relates back” to Friday night. The law, church — and surely God — do not care that there was a delay. Why would anyone care in the least? In fact, no one does.

But to many of us, we worry mightily about when, during the three-day gap between coming to faith and baptism, the convert is saved — because, after all, the baptism is “necessary.”

And so is the wedding certificate necessary? I mean, you’d *better* file it. But even the State of Alabama does not imagine that the marriage was not real, legal, and effective until Monday — and no one really cares what the statute says, because the statute assumes a prompt filing but not a filing between the announcement of “husband and wife” and the kiss.

So what if the preacher carrying the certificate to the courthouse is run over by a train on the way there? What if the man and woman meet as the only two people on a desert island, which is far away from anyone and yet subject to American law under the United Nations’ charter? Can they marry contrary to law?

Did *God* consider them married on Friday or Monday? I mean, if they’d not filed the certificate at all — not ever — they’d not be married under the laws of many states (and our hypothetical desert island).

But in the eyes of the state, and surely God himself, it all relates back and happened Friday night — in anticipation of the certificate being filed. Because it was *going* to be filed. And, besides, in the law, marriage is mainly about a

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covenant relationship between a man and woman, not whether a certificate gets filed and signed — although it is in fact legally necessary in some jurisdictions.

2. A football example.

Consider the 1979 Rose Bowl. Michigan vs. Southern Cal. The game was tied late, 10 to 10. USC drove to the end zone. The quarterback handed the ball to running back Charles White, and on the 3-yard line, he fumbled. The ball was recovered by Michigan.

But the referees signaled touchdown for USC! The game ended 17-10, and Southern Cal was voted national champions — even though millions of TV viewers saw the replay and knew to a certainty that White had not scored.

Now, this is not a lesson on grace. It's lesson on time. The question isn't why or how, but *when* did White score the touchdown?

He absolutely did not cross the goal line with the ball, but the score is 17-10, USC won the game, and White received statistical credit for the yardage all the way to the end zone and for the touchdown. And so — he must have scored. But he didn't.

When did he score the touchdown? Did he score it when he crossed the goal line? Well, he didn't cross the goal line. That is, he didn't have the ball when he did. Did he score it when the referees raised their arms to signal a touchdown? Sort of. But the play had already been blown dead and the ball wasn't even in play. And yet he scored.

At the end of the play in real time, White had not scored. But when the referees raised their arms, he *had* scored. Their judgment “related back” and changed the reality of what happened in the past!

You say it wasn't real? Well, the scoreboard disagrees. So do those who voted USC nationals champions! So do the statisticians. He scored.

The future really can change the past.³¹

3. And so ...

We lawyers speak of conditions subsequent (French roots cause the adjective to follow the noun, as in “attorney general”). It means a condition to a thing that arises or not after the thing. The filing of a marriage certificate is a condition subsequent, because it’s essential to the validity of the marriage even though occurring after the marriage is valid. That is, not filing can retroactively annul the wedding.

Now the crazy thing about us Enlightenment folk is that giving a thing a name makes it seem all reasonable and rational, although it’s really just as conceptually difficult as it was before. They were married Friday night — and their physical union was perfectly moral and legal and Christian — unless they failed to file their marriage certificate afterwards, in which case they were never married (not true in all states).

When a running back carries the football across the goal line, he scores. Unless the referee doesn’t see him score (as happened when Alabama’s Joe Namath scored against Texas many long years ago but *never* to be forgotten). If the referee doesn’t see it, he doesn’t score.

In a sense, there is no score until the referee raises both arms in the air and, nowadays, the video review is completed while beer commercials play on TV. It can take three or four minutes for a score to be a score. And so sometimes the arms go up, the fans cheer and celebrate, and the score gets taken off the board.

Just so, even when the running back doesn’t score, if the referee says he scores, he scores. That is, he credits the back as having scored. It counts — no matter how many decades later Southern Cal haters (and there are many) complain about the bad call.

³¹ In my original post, I noted that the future can literally change the past in quantum physics. But I will spare the readers the lesson in quantum mechanics and the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle. If you’re familiar with such things, imagine a case of gravitational lensing where a single photon could travel around either side of a star. Such cases have been observed. The crazy thing is that the photon doesn’t “decide” which side to take until it’s been “observed” on earth, possibly years, even millions of years, later. Hence, the present changes the past — even millions of years in the past. If this sounds like total nonsense to you, don’t worry about it. Just realize that God created a world that’s amazing beyond our imaginings — and our God is not bound by time. He’s no more bound by time than by space.

And you won’t be surprised to learn that this wasn’t the part of the post that readers found helpful.

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So sometimes what really matters is not what happens but what the referee says happened. Just so, sometimes what really matters is not whether you were saved when you were baptized or when you had faith or when you prayed the Sinner's Prayer or when you were confirmed, but when God Almighty decides to consider you saved.

And notice this. The most significant element of being saved is whether you live or die eternally — which comes *later* under all theories (except for being run over by a train on the way to the baptistry). So it doesn't matter all that much unless you think God is more legalistic than lawyers and the NCAA. Think about that one for a while.

God lives outside of time. Einstein gave this a mathematical description, but Augustine beat him to the realization by over 1500 years. God made time. It's part of the Creation. Therefore, God is not bound by time — not the time we experience.

This explains God's foreknowledge and turns predestination on its head — and makes nearly all the conversations about baptism and faith and the moment of salvation pointless. We are saved when God says we're saved, and that happens in heaven — where there is no time. It doesn't happen in time.

And so I'm not sure it matters all that much. Unless, of course, we're of the view that the faith that saves is faith in Church of Christ baptismal theology. And I'm pretty sure that one's just not in the Bible.

On the other hand, Paul couldn't be more clear that the faith/works dichotomy is really important. And so we need to consider that one in the context of baptism.

PART IV CONCLUSIONS

CHAPTER 9 WRAPPING UP

I was speaking to one of my law partners about an event scheduled to take place in a local bar – we were considering how to respond to the invitation we had both received. He said, “I used to enjoy that sort of thing – back before I was saved.”

“Saved?” I said. “I thought you had grown up a Christian?”

“No, I was saved when my wife converted me. I grew up Methodist, was baptized as a baby, but I never gave my heart to Jesus until my wife converted me.”

“But you were active in the Methodist church, weren’t you?”

“Very active. I went to the youth activities. Hung around the teen center. I did all that, but it was just a place to hang out and make friends. Jesus didn’t enter my heart until after I was married.”

Now, I don’t repeat this story to condemn Methodists. Not at all. The point is that salvation is much more than going through the motions. I’ll tell another story to wrap up the point:

Many years ago when I was a teenager, two teenagers in my church went forward to be baptized. They were children of church members but had been hoodlums for years. Well, they went forward, were baptized, we sang “O Happy Day!” and they were roundly congratulated and hugged afterwards. The church secretary added them to the church roll.

The next day, some of their friends approached them. “We heard you got baptized last night. Does that mean you’re going to be good and quit cussing and all?”

“Hell, no!” they said. “That was just insurance.”

Certainly, becoming a Christian is much more than the externals.

And so, where am I? Still in perplexity of spirit, I’m afraid. Despite obsessive study, I find myself squarely caught up in a paradox – how to reconcile

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what the Bible says about baptism with what I know about the nature of God. But I think that I've come to a correct conclusion. Let's think through some key facts:

1. God is a God of exceptions – at least when it comes to insisting on the covenant-means of obtaining forgiveness. In the Abrahamic, Mosaic, and Christian dispensations, we see God making repeated exceptions from the stated pattern of how grace is to be obtained. God further evidences his willingness to make exceptions in that he has allowed some of his faithful followers to escape even the curse of death. More precisely, God is not a rulebook – he's a person, and as such, God's words cannot be understood without first understanding his personality. I mean, how many times has any of us thought, "You would not have misunderstood me if you really knew me"?

2. On the other hand, in even the most exceptional cases, God insists on faith and repentance as essential requirements for forgiveness. Melchizedek had faith. Naaman had faith. Those who celebrated Hezekiah's Passover had faith. Those baptized by John the Baptist had faith. Those forgiven by Jesus while in the flesh had faith. The thief on the cross had faith. Certainly the apostles had faith. None of those for whom God made an exception were acting in knowing rebellion.

1 John 4:2-3 makes it clear that those without faith in Jesus are lost. This certainly seems to deny salvation to Jews and Muslims, among others. There are many other verses to the same effect – pay particular attention to Paul's discourse in Rom 9-11. And recall that "faith" always includes faithfulness (or repentance) – except in the book of James where James is contending with a false doctrine of faith.¹

3. I can find no case where genuine faith and penitence were insufficient to gain God's favor. This fact seems pretty important to me.

4. If a baptism that is improperly conducted but is believed to be proper is a barrier to salvation, then for the last several hundred years, the overwhelming majority of the faithful have been lost. Indeed, C. S. Lewis, Charles Wesley, Fanny J. Crosby, and nearly all the authors of our best books and composers of our best hymns are damned in their sins! For that matter, very few, if any, were saved from the time infant baptism became generalized until the Anabaptists reinstated the baptism of believers 1,500 years later. In fact, if this is the case, the church was defeated for over a millennium!

5. Of course, the baptism verses are still in the Bible. When the "everyone with faith" verses were written and when the "faith plus baptism" verses were

¹ See the author's *The Holy Spirit and Revolutionary Grace* for a more comprehensive explanation of the close connection of faith with repentance.

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written, they created no paradox, because faith and proper, scriptural baptism nearly always went hand in hand. (The exceptions for the apostles, the Samaritans, and Cornelius and his household and the likely reasons for those exceptions have already been discussed.)

Today they don't. They should. But they don't. And today, it cannot be simultaneously true that all who believe will be saved and that only those who've been baptized will be saved. Which is the weightier doctrine? Which is closer to the heart of God?

6. The far, far greater emphasis that scriptures give faith over baptism has to be accorded its fair implication. Indeed, how could Paul declare, "For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel" (1 Cor 1:17) unless faith in the gospel is of far greater importance than baptism?

And, of course, it's not just the number of references – it's also the character of the references to faith. For example –

(Mark 9:23 NIV) "If you can't?" said Jesus. "Everything is possible for him who believes."

(John 1:12-13 NIV) 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 3:14-18 NIV) Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life. "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 3:36 NIV) "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 5:24 NIV) "I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life."

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(John 6:29 NIV) Jesus answered, "The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent."

(John 6:35 NIV) Then Jesus declared, "I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never go hungry, and he who believes in me will never be thirsty."

(John 6:40 NIV) "For my Father's will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day."

(John 6:47 NIV) "I tell you the truth, he who believes has everlasting life."

(John 7:38-39 NIV) "Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him." By this he meant the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were later to receive. Up to that time the Spirit had not been given, since Jesus had not yet been glorified.

(John 11:25-26 NIV) Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?"

(John 12:46 NIV) "I have come into the world as a light, so that no one who believes in me should stay in darkness."

(John 20:31 NIV) But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

(Acts 10:43 NIV) "All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name."

(Acts 13:38-39 NIV) "Therefore, my brothers, I want you to know that through Jesus the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you. Through him everyone who believes is justified from everything you could not be justified from by the law of Moses."

(Acts 16:31 NIV) They replied, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved - you and your household."

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(Rom 1:16-17 NIV) I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile. For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: "The righteous will live by faith."

(Rom 3:22-24 NIV) This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.

(Rom 3:25-28 NIV) God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood. He did this to demonstrate his justice, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished - he did it to demonstrate his justice at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus. Where, then, is boasting? It is excluded. On what principle? On that of observing the law? No, but on that of faith. For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from observing the law.

(Rom 4:4-5 NIV) Now when a man works, his wages are not credited to him as a gift, but as an obligation. However, to the man who does not work but trusts God who justifies the wicked, his faith is credited as righteousness.

(Rom 5:1-2 NIV) Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God.

(Rom 10:4 NIV) Christ is the end of the law so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes.

(Rom 10:9-13 NIV) That 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 trusts in him will never be put to shame." For there is no

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difference between Jew and Gentile – the same Lord is Lord of all and richly blesses all who call on him, for, “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.”

(1 Cor 1:21 NIV) For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe.

(Gal 2:15-16 NIV) “We who are Jews by birth and not ‘Gentile sinners’ know that a man is not justified by observing the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ. So we, too, have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by observing the law, because by observing the law no one will be justified.”

(Gal 3:2 NIV) I would like to learn just one thing from you: Did you receive the Spirit by observing the law, or by believing what you heard?

(Gal 3:22 NIV) But the Scripture declares that the whole world is a prisoner of sin, so that what was promised, being given through faith in Jesus Christ, might be given to those who believe.

(Gal 5:6 NIV) For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love.

(Eph 1:13-14 NIV) And you also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation. Having believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God’s possession – to the praise of his glory.

(Eph 2:8-10 NIV) 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. For we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.

(2 The 2:13 NIV) But we ought always to thank God for you, brothers loved by the Lord, because from the beginning God

chose you to be saved through the sanctifying work of the Spirit and through belief in the truth.

(1 Tim 1:16 NIV) But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his unlimited patience as an example for those who would believe on him and receive eternal life.

(Heb 10:39 NIV) But we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who believe and are saved.

(1 John 3:23-24 NIV) And this is his command: to believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and to love one another as he commanded us. Those who obey his commands live in him, and he in them. And this is how we know that he lives in us: We know it by the Spirit he gave us.

(1 John 4:2-3 NIV) This is how you can recognize the Spirit of God: Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, 3 but every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you have heard is coming and even now is already in the world.

(1 John 5:1 NIV) Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God, and everyone who loves the father loves his child as well.

(1 John 5:3-5 NIV) This is love for God: to obey his commands. And his commands are not burdensome, for everyone born of God overcomes the world. This is the victory that has overcome the world, even our faith. Who is it that overcomes the world? Only he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God.

(1 John 5:13 NIV) I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life.

Now, be careful. This is not the last-verse-read argument. Rather, we have been forced by circumstances to choose between two Biblical promises both of which were true when written. How can both be true today? How do we choose? Well, certainly not based on our presuppositions or our choice of denomination or fellowship. Rather, we still must look to the Bible for guidance and let the Bible tell us which of the two promises is more fundamental – which is closer to the

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heart of God. And nothing could be plainer to even the casual Bible student than that the central element of the gospel is faith – not baptism. Which is why Paul preached faith – not baptism.

Also, we can't help but notice the number of times that Christian faith is compared by New Testament writers to Abraham's faith (Rom 4; Gal 3; Heb 6, 11). But Abraham was saved without baptism and, as Paul points out in Rom 4, without circumcision. Just faith.

Ultimately, though, what I find persuasive is the vigor with which the New Testament writers assure us that *all* who believe will be saved. We should not be embarrassed by these verses. We shouldn't feel compelled to explain them away. They say what they say, and say so thanks to God's inspiration, which surely foresaw the problems we have to wrestle with today.

7. Of course, we are saved by faith in Jesus; we are not saved by faith in baptism. And yet, the way the 20th Century Churches of Christ taught the gospel, if the convert did not believe his baptism was for the forgiveness of sins, his faith in Jesus was completely unavailing. Hence, faith in baptism was a requisite to salvation. This is utterly contrary to countless passages that teach that the content of faith is Jesus (for example, 1 Cor 15:1-8). We don't confess baptism to be baptized, nor do we hear and believe baptism. And yet, the poor convert who was instructed regarding Jesus but not regarding baptism is considered damned! How can this be?

8. Our God keeps his promises (Num 23:19; Jos 23:14; 2 Cor 1:20; Tit 1:2; 2 Pet 3:9). In these times, we find God presented with a choice: He must either dishonor his promises that he will save *all* who have faith; or else he must create an exception from his requirement that salvation is only for those born of water and the Spirit (if that's the meaning of John 3:5, which is far from certain). Well, plainly, God is going to keep *all* his promises, and the only way he can do so is to save the penitent faithful who've been wrongly taught about baptism.

9. While God can and does make exceptions, we are not God and we have no right to make exceptions for him. Therefore, if a penitent believer who has not been properly baptized enters our influence, we are obligated to teach him God's will on the subject.

Baptism is a bigger issue than simple obedience. For example, notice Matthew's version of the Great Commission:

(Matt 28:19-20 NIV) "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."

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Notice that Jesus tells his apostles to evangelize the world, to baptize their converts, and to teach them to obey his commandments. He distinguishes baptism from obedience to commandments. Baptism is thus not *just* a law to be obeyed. *We* are commanded to baptize our converts – and that *is* a matter of obedience. Therefore, for those who wish to be a part of my congregation, I am compelled to teach baptism. As Beasley-Murray writes –

Finally we should observe that the authority of Christian Baptism is of the weightiest order. It rests on the command of the Risen Lord after his achieving redemption and receiving authority over the entire cosmos; it is integrated with the commission to preach the good news to the world, and it is enforced by his own example at the beginning of his messianic ministry. Such a charge is too imperious to be ignored or modified. It behooves us to adhere to it and conform to it as God gives grace.²

And so, to wrap up, we in the Churches of Christ are right about baptism. Scripture really does teach baptism – meaning water immersion – of penitent believers into forgiveness of sins. We should continue to preach baptism in that way. Amen.

I disagree with Max Lucado, who suggests that baptism is only a symbol. It is a symbol, of course, but it is a symbol that, in the ordinary case, is the occasion of our salvation. Our sins are very truly washed away in baptism.

I also disagree with many Baptists, in that I don't believe we are normally saved at the moment of faith, or the Sinner's Prayer, and are therefore baptized after salvation. We are supposed to be baptized *into* salvation. If the Baptists are right, then many NT passages incorrectly teach salvation theology. I don't want to claim to be smarter than the apostles. I prefer for my speech to reflect the language of the scriptures – and presently, both Baptists and Church of Christ members find themselves uncomfortable with what the Bible says about baptism. I'm good with it *all!*

I believe that when a person who has genuine faith and who genuinely repents genuinely believes that he or she has satisfied the command to be baptized, God will honor his many, many promises to save all who believe in Jesus. God keeps his promises. All of them.

Therefore, we in the Churches of Christ erred when we left the original principles of the Restoration Movement and insisted on considering the vast

² G. R. Beasley-Murray, 92.

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majority of believers from Constantine until now as lost on technicalities. This approach has greatly marginalized us, separating us from the community of most of our brothers and sisters in Christ. It has also lured us into seeking to “convert” the saved, distracting us from much more useful work among the lost.

Recently, we’ve sometimes over-reacted to this error by committing what may be an even worse mistake – considering all who are nominally Christians of one sort or another as saved. I know many people who have been baptized, by immersion or otherwise, who are almost certainly lost in their sins, having never made a commitment to Jesus. These people shouldn’t be left behind in our conversion efforts.

Now, for many of us, this leaves the line between the saved and the lost uncomfortably unclear. We can clarify the line considerably, however, by focusing on what matters most – whether someone has received the Holy Spirit and whether that person has a true faith (which necessarily includes a true commitment to repentance). Perhaps we aren’t called to judge – but when the answer is not obvious from that person’s life, I think we do need to ask: Have you made a commitment to Jesus?

I conclude with a quote from Alexander Campbell:

All the good and virtuous in all [Christian] sects belong to Jesus Christ; and if I belong to him, they are my brethren. ... Many, I hope, will stand on the right of the Judge in the great day, who cannot now walk on the same side of the street.³

Amen.

A. Summary

- The traditional teaching of the Churches of Christ is largely correct. We correctly interpret Acts 2:38 and all the other familiar baptism proof texts. Therefore, I teach baptism of believers by immersion into forgiveness of sins – just like Peter preached on Pentecost.
- However, unlike many in the Churches of Christ, I teach that grace applies to baptismal error – in theology or practice. Hence, a failure to be correctly baptized does not damn.
- In accordance with traditional Church of Christ teaching, I hold that faith in Jesus is absolutely essential to salvation. So is repentance. “Faith,” in

³ Quoted in C. Leonard Allen, *Distant Voices: Discovering a Forgotten Past for a Changing Church* (Abilene, TX: Abilene, TX: ACU Press, 1993), 60-61.

the Greek, and as typically used in the New Testament, includes not only belief that Jesus is the Messiah and Lord, but also faithfulness to Jesus as Lord and trust in Jesus to keep his promises. Therefore, we can't have "faith" without having committed to follow Jesus, including his ethical teachings.

- All with faith (as defined above) in Jesus will be saved, but that doesn't mean the moment of salvation is the moment of faith. Rather, God intends for salvation to occur at the moment of baptism, which is intended to be very shortly following faith. The New Testament is written on the assumption that baptism and faith are essentially simultaneous — and so the writers do not focus on the timing of salvation vis-à-vis baptism. Hence, some verses speak of salvation occurring at the moment of faith and others at the moment of baptism. This only becomes a contradiction in modern practice because we often separate the two, contrary to New Testament practice.

B. The Need for a Ritual

People need rituals. God doesn't so much, but people do.

1. Love

Consider a young couple. The young man embraces his girlfriend and for the first time says, "I love you." She hugs him, smiles, kisses him passionately, and the evening ends.

Later he discusses the evening with a friend over coffee. The friend says, "Wow, it's great that you have a girlfriend who is so affectionate! Can't you see in her eyes how much she loves you?"

"Yes, I know she loves me," the young man says, "but I need her to *say* that she loves me. In fact, if she won't say it, I don't think I can continue in this relationship."

Is he right to consider her reluctance to express her feelings a barrier to their relationship? Why not travel on her body language and behavior? Why are the words so important?

And, you know, the words really *are* important — not because of tradition or his inability to perceive her emotions. They are important because his girlfriend has to make a decision. She may feel love for him very much, but saying that she loves him changes their relationship and it changes her. It forces her to admit to herself that this is how she feels — and once she admits that, it changes

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her life. As soon as she admits her love, she has to make a commitment and be willing to make sacrifices.

Moreover, once he hears her words, he'll behave differently. He'll see her as a companion. No more will they just be dating. They'll be bound to one another in a way that's radically different from before. The words matter. And if she never says the words, their relationship will not progress much at all. In fact, it will end.

So when did she fall in love her boyfriend? When she first felt those feelings? When she started imagining what it would be like to be married? When she found her dreams filled with him? When she says the words?

Well, she fell in love over time. For some, it takes a few weeks. For others, it takes years. But true love is never at first sight. It always takes some time.

When did their relationship change? Well, it changed incrementally, a bit here and a bit there. They were strangers, and then two people on a date, and then they were a couple, and then they were a couple in love.

When did they become a couple in love? Well, not until they admitted it to themselves and then to each other. The words matter. The words change everything. The words change both lives forever.

But, of course, many couples say, "I love you" and don't mean it. The words only matter as between honest people. Lies happen.

And then there are some couples, not many, who fall in love, get married, have children, and grow old together never having said "I love you."

Is it essential that you tell your boyfriend that you love him if you want to one day be married? Yes. Well, almost. Relationships don't always follow the rules, but the rules are the rules for a reason. They matter.

2. Confession

It's become popular to argue that faith is a process, and it is *obviously*. But there has to be a moment when the first inklings of faith mature to saving faith. When does that happen? Well, not before I'm willing to confess my faith.

It's not that confession is a magical, sacramental thing that empowers (or forces) God to save me. Rather, it's more that faith isn't really faith until the believer is willing to confess it. If the believer won't even tell the church that he believes, it's just not enough faith to save. It's not really what the Bible calls "faith."

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(Rom 10:10 ESV) For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved.

Now, if we avoid the sacramental Plan of Salvation understanding and, instead, see confession as the moment when faith becomes real — real both to the church and the believer — Paul’s teaching makes perfect sense. Jesus teaches the same thing.

(Luk 12:8 ESV) “And I tell you, everyone who acknowledges me before men, the Son of Man also will acknowledge before the angels of God”

Words matter. A willingness to say the words, to admit to yourselves and others that you’ve made the decision to be a believer, takes faith from a possibility to a reality.

(And as I said already, the words aren’t enough. They aren’t so much sacramental as a necessary evidence of actual saving faith.)

3. *Baptism*

Why does God want believers to be baptized? Well, actions matters, just as words matter.

The requirement to be baptized forces another requirement — confession. I can have something *like* faith and keep it a secret. But when I confess my faith to others, wonderful things happen.

First, I admit my faith to myself. I make a decision: my faith matters enough that I’m willing to admit it to the church. That’s a big deal because faith too weak to be admitted is faith too weak to matter.

Second, when I admit my faith to the church, my relationship to the church changes. I go from being a visitor to family. From outside the body to inside. Of course, these things happen when I’m baptized, but *confession and baptism cannot be separated. I confess so I can be baptized. I’m baptized because I confessed.* It’s the confession that starts the process at the human level. Before then, my faith is between me and God only — and it’s not much of a faith. Not really.

Third, when I confess, the church knows to baptize me. They may botch the ceremony by teaching bad baptismal theology or by not using enough water. But the church invites me to bring my faith to fruition by taking a simple, easy action based on my confession.

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Fourth, this forces the church to decide whether to accept me for baptism. I know some find this idea horrifying, but in fact churches sometimes delay baptism for someone too young to understand or who has not yet learned enough about Jesus to understand the meaning of the ritual.

In the Churches of Christ, these decisions are usually made by the preacher, under the elders' oversight. In traditional Baptist Churches, this is done democratically. Other denominations have their own processes. Regardless of how well we like the chosen process, the fact is that baptism is only for those who understand enough to have a genuine faith — and the church is irresponsible if it baptizes people it knows do not meet this standard.

Of course, properly taught, baptism is no simple, easy action at all! Baptism is into the death of Christ and into his body and into his Kingdom. It's a pledge to live a different kind of life by different values. No, baptism should be *scary* because Christianity done right is *scary*.

Now, can you confess without being baptized? Yes, if you don't understand God's intentions regarding baptism. And it happens every day, because of some bad theology that's crept into Christianity. But it's not the design.

Can I be saved without baptism? Well, yes, if the church botches its instructions to you. God won't damn you for that any more than you'd have the right to divorce your wife because the wedding certificate was improperly signed.

4. Marriage

Imagine that two devout Christians get married, with the preacher, bridesmaids, the whole works. They later have two children. Ten years later, the husband discovers that the preacher forgot to sign the wedding certificate. A lawyer tells him that his marriage is legally invalid (wouldn't be true in Alabama, but assume it's true wherever you live). Would it be sin for the man to abandon his "wife" and children, and then go marry a pretty young thing?

Well, to a heartless legalist, the man would be leaving a relationship of fornication and entering into the holy estate of matrimony. But most people would see it as God surely would — as sin. He made a commitment and he needs to keep it. Even though the ceremony was done wrong, he's bound to his commitment.

Nor can he abandon his children because the ceremony was wrong. You see, the commitment is vastly more important than the rite.

It's not a perfect analogy, but hopefully it shows the danger of treating baptism in a legalistic fashion. (Amazing that some argue from marriage that the legalities of baptism matter more than the commitment! That's upside down.)

What really matters is the commitment made and the resulting relationship. He's confessed his love for his bride and declared his intention to be married to her. She did the same. Technically right or not, in their hearts they were married, and in God's eyes, they became bound to each other.

No, he cannot leave and marry the pretty young thing. In fact, to do so would be a grave sin.

5. The normal case

And so, yes, baptism matters. Indeed, baptism is normally, by design, the moment when faith is confessed, commitment is made, the body is joined, and the Kingdom is entered — all by the power of God, due to the faith of the convert. This is when the Spirit is received. Normally.

A defective baptism does the same thing. Obviously, botching the baptism is a serious mistake by the church, but for the convert, it works well enough. God does not damn because a Baptist minister baptizes a convert to obey an ordinance because of salvation already received — all in a Baptist baptistry in a Baptist church. The baptism takes, and the mistake is not all that serious in the grand scheme of things.

(You know, we tend to exaggerate how terrible these things are because we've been debating the topic for over a century. And debates distort the importance of the issue under consideration. My oldest son used to debate in high school. He learned that to win, he had to "prove" that his opponent's position on DDT, EPA emission standards, or whatever would inevitably result in nuclear holocaust! We in the Churches of Christ tend to debate at about that level. That's why we sometimes teach that every mistake damns. That's how people try to win debates — at a high school level.)

6. An arranged marriage

One more story. A couple is married at the age of eight days. They are from a province in India where the parents arrange and make marriages for their children.

Many years later, when the children are of age, there's a ceremony designed to confirm the marriage. According to the law, either one could refuse to confirm the marriage, but rarely does anyone do that. Rather, they remain true to their traditions and upbringing and voluntarily go through the confirmation ceremony.

The boy and girl, now 21, have never met and may well have never confessed their love for each other. But they are genuinely committed to the

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marriage. Indeed, these marriages have a better success rate than Western marriage built on romantic love and the passions of the young couple.¹

In God's eyes, is the Indian couple married? If so, when were they married — according to God? When their parents declared them married, with the parents making vows for their children? When the ceremony was held when they were babies? Or when they confirmed that decision? And does it matter all that much?

Well, what if the couple refuses to go through the confirmation ceremony? Is that a divorce in God's eyes?

Well — you know what? — I'm not sure I know the answer. But this much I know: if they confirm the marriage, they're married — even though the ceremony is contrary to the marriage practices we read about in the Bible.

7. Infant baptism

Now, I dislike infant baptism. I think it's an unhealthy practice for the body of Christ. After all, in nations where infant baptism is nearly universal, the church is extremely weak. Evidently, the church does a very poor job of making confirmation a real confirmation. It can easily become too much ritual and not enough substance.

But, of course, Churches of Christ have sometimes so focused on baptism that many of the teens who are baptized do so out of social pressure and not a real commitment to God. Yes, we can do the rite exactly right as a matter of form and theology and yet still get the heart of the rite entirely wrong. Of course, you can also do the rite wrong and get the heart wrong. And God certainly wants the rite right and the heart rite. But the heart is the thing that ultimately matters.

(1 Sam 16:7b ESV) "For the LORD sees not as man sees: man looks on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart."

¹ Not as unrealistic an example as you might imagine. Until the last century, child marriages had been practiced in India for centuries, and remain practiced today in a few places. After the government imposed a law requiring that the couple be at least 18 (bride) and 21 (groom), previously made marriages would have become illegal and so would require confirmation when the participants reach legal age. I make no claim of any expertise in Indian marriage law. I'm just saying the example is well within the realm of possibility.

8. Conclusions

I think the original design of baptism is not only God's design, but the best possible design. God's wisdom in providing for a confession followed by baptism of a believer is how churches ought to deal with conversions.

Words are necessary, but words can be cheap. Asking for an action as evidence of faith helps confirm in the heart of the convert that faith requires certain behaviors. It's not *just* words.

And baptism powerfully illustrates what God is doing. It's a death, burial, and resurrection, and it's a cleansing from sin. It's receipt of the Spirit as Living Water. The symbolism is powerful.

To a Jew, the waters of baptism would symbolize the Spirit as well a new crossing of the Red Sea.

(Isa 44:3 ESV) For I will pour water on the thirsty land, and streams on the dry ground; I will pour my Spirit upon your offspring, and my blessing on your descendants.

(1Co 10:1-4a NET) For I do not want you to be unaware, brothers and sisters, that our fathers were all under the cloud and all passed through the sea, 2and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, 3and all ate the same spiritual food, 4 and all drank the same spiritual drink.

It's a shame that these symbols have been forgotten in our teaching.

And John the Baptist would tell us that baptism symbolizes repentance — forcing an announced decision.

(Luk 3:3 NET) 3 He went into all the region around the Jordan River, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

Just as an unspoken apology is not good enough, repentance that's not announced reveals a lack of commitment. God's forgiveness announced through John required a change of heart that was real enough that the penitent person would let John immerse him.

Baptism, done right, is a powerful way to be introduced into the Kingdom. It's an act of submission. Think about it — the convert's life is in the hands of the person doing the immersion! For a moment, buried in the suffocating, cold water, the believer is truly helpless, with no way out except the embrace of the

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immerser. If ever you have to trust someone with your life, it's when you're being baptized!

And in this sense, the immerser symbolizes Jesus. When we go under the water, we submit ourselves into the hands of Christ just as we yield to the hands of the immerser. We decide to rely entirely on the hands and strength of Jesus for breath and life, just as we rely on the hands and strength of the immerser. Baptism is truly an act of faith!

(Gen 15:6 ESV) 6 And he believed the LORD, and he counted it to him as righteousness.

CHAPTER 10
BAPTISM AS A STORY THAT DEFINES US

Most Americans have a Western mindset, born of the Enlightenment and, long before that, the Greek philosophers. We think in terms of propositional truths. We're all lawyers and scientists. What is true is that which can be stated in a simple, declaratory sentence and tested by logic and experience.

The Jews of biblical times, however, had an Eastern mindset. They thought much more in terms of story and narrative. Hence, their greatest teacher famously taught using parables. He even used his own life as the largest of canvases on which to paint his lessons.

When we Westerners confront a parable of Jesus, we insist on extracting a moral or lesson or principle – ripping the lesson out of its narrative. And that's not wrong. It just limits what we can learn. Easterners, however, see the story as the moral, and so they seek to live in the story.

To a Westerner, the Lord's Supper is a remembrance – that is, a time of remembering the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus. To an Easterner, the Lord's Supper is a remembrance – that is, a time of joining the apostles at the table with Jesus, a time of becoming one with our spiritual ancestors – sitting at the table with Jesus and either betraying him, denying him, or joining him on the cross.

Johnny Cash's "Were you there when they crucified my Lord?" is a hymn that beautifully captures the idea:

Were you there when they crucified my Lord?
Oh were you there when they crucified my Lord?
(Oh, sometimes it causes me to tremble)
Tremble
Were you there when they crucified my Lord?

Were you there when they nailed Him to the cross?
Were you there when they nailed Him to the cross?
(Oh, sometimes it causes me to tremble)
Tremble
Were you there when they nailed Him to the cross?

Were you there when they laid Him in the tomb?
Were you there when they laid Him in the tomb?
(Oh, sometimes it causes me to tremble)

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Tremble

Were you there when they laid Him in the tomb?

Well, were you there when the stone was rolled away?

Were you there when the stone was rolled away?

(Oh, sometimes it causes me to tremble)

Tremble

Were you there when the stone was rolled away?

The Jews of biblical times were defined by two major stories: Abraham and the Exodus. Ask a Jew of Jesus' day who he is, and he'd say something like, "A son of Abraham." To Western ears, this sounds like genetics, but to a First Century Jew, this was a claim to a unique relationship with God defined by a covenant to credit faith in God as righteousness. The children of Abraham were God's chosen people, his elect, his bride, his cherished possession, and beneficiaries of God's promises.

Ask the same Jew whether he and his people had been defeated by the Romans, and he'd declare that God himself had freed the Jews from slavery – and they are slaves of no man.

(John 8:31-33 ESV) So Jesus said to the Jews who had believed him, "If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, ³² and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."

³³ They answered him, "We are offspring of Abraham and have never been enslaved to anyone. How is it that you say, 'You will become free'?"

Amazing! The Jews were under the brutal, totalitarian rule of an occupying army: the Romans. They'd been defeated in battle and were unwillingly paying tribute to a foreign nation that garrisoned troops throughout their country to suppress revolt. And yet they claimed to already be free because they were children of Abraham and God had freed them from Egypt 1,500 years earlier! Our stories define us.

Jesus disagreed –

(John 8:34-45 ESV) ³⁴ Jesus answered them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin. ³⁵ The slave does not remain in the house forever; the son remains forever. ³⁶ So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed. ³⁷ I know that you are offspring of Abraham; yet you seek to kill me because my word finds no place in you. ³⁸ I speak of

what I have seen with my Father, and you do what you have heard from your father.”

³⁹ They answered him, “Abraham is our father.”

Jesus said to them, “If you were Abraham's children, you would be doing the works Abraham did, ⁴⁰ but now you seek to kill me, a man who has told you the truth that I heard from God. This is not what Abraham did. ⁴¹ You are doing the works your father did.”

They said to him, “We were not born of sexual immorality. We have one Father – even God.”

⁴² Jesus said to them, “If God were your Father, you would love me, for I came from God and I am here. I came not of my own accord, but he sent me. ⁴³ Why do you not understand what I say? It is because you cannot bear to hear my word. ⁴⁴ You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks out of his own character, for he is a liar and the father of lies. ⁴⁵ But because I tell the truth, you do not believe me.”

Wow! Jesus reframes the worldview of his Jewish audience in a *radical* way. He declares their true father to be the devil – and calls them liars and murderers – because they are slaves – slaves to sin – as evidenced by their inability to see YHWH in Jesus. If they were true sons of Abraham, they'd do Abraham's works – including recognizing the voice of YHWH when they hear it. The fact that they do not recognize YHWH when he appears to them in the flesh and speaks to them demonstrates that they are not who they think they are. Not at all. Abraham believed the word of God. Jesus' audience did not.

When God invited the Gentiles into Christianity, this created a story problem. The Jews who'd accepted Jesus still thought of themselves as sons of Abraham, freed by God from Egyptian slavery – and now followers of the Messiah and Son of God: Jesus. But what would be the story of the Gentiles who entered the Kingdom? What narrative would they share with their Jewish brothers and sisters? How could they become a single people, one nation, a unified kingdom without a shared story?

And so God gave Christians – both Jews and Gentiles – a common story: baptism.

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(1 Cor 10:1-4 ESV) For I do not want you to be unaware, brothers, that our fathers were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea,² and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea,³ and all ate the same spiritual food,⁴ and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank from the spiritual Rock that followed them, and the Rock was Christ.

Paul says that baptism is for a Christian what the Exodus was for the Jews. Christians pass through the waters of baptism to escape slavery to sin just as the Jews passed through the waters of the Red Sea to escape Egyptian slavery.

Christians are sustained by God by the bread and wine of the Lord's Supper – symbolic of the body of Jesus provided by God for our sakes – just as the Jews were sustained by food and drink provided by God to sustain them in their journey through the desert.

From this shared story, Paul concludes,

(1 Cor. 12:13 ESV)¹³ For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body – Jews or Greeks, slaves or free – and all were made to drink of one Spirit.

In 1 Cor, Paul is dealing with a highly divided congregation, disputing over, among many other things, the gifts of the Holy Spirit. In chapter 11, they were divided by economic status, with the Lord's Supper and love feast² shared unequally between the rich and poor.

And so in chapter 12, Paul explains that our common story – our shared baptismal experience – proves that we are a single body. The fact that both slave and free church members were baptized means that we were *all* freed together from the slavery that matters most: slavery to sin. The fact that Jews and Gentiles were baptized together means that we must eat at a common table – the Lord's table – even if it means giving up meat sacrificed to idols (the subject of chapters 8 – 10) – so we come together as equals defined by a common story. If we don't share our food and drink, if we divide over gifts, if we treat each other rudely, we aren't just sinning, we're denying our baptisms into Jesus.

² The early church ate a common meal together, called the "love feast" or *agapē*. See, for example, Jude 12, 2 Pet 2:13, Gal 2:12, 1 Cor 5:11. It appears that the Lord's Supper was taken as a part of this common meal. Acts 2:42-46, 20:6-11, and especially 1 Cor 11:17-34.

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Paul reasons *from* baptism – a shared experience and story – to conclusions about how his readers should see themselves, not just in relationship with God but in their relationships with each other. The equality of all Christians before God and to each other is shown by our equal sharing of the baptismal experience.

We've all experienced our own Exodus, our own escape from slavery, our own defeat of the armies of the enemy, our own entry into the protection and leadership of God – through baptism. And this tells us how to live as Christians.

Just so, Paul writes,

(Gal. 3:23-29 ESV) Now before faith came, we were held captive under the law, imprisoned until the coming faith would be revealed. ²⁴ So then, the law was our guardian until Christ came, in order that we might be justified by faith. ²⁵ But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian, ²⁶ for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. ²⁷ For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. ²⁸ There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. ²⁹ And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise.

Again, we see the two great defining narratives of Judaism: sonship of Abraham and freedom from slavery. But Paul redefines these narratives in vital ways.

First, both Jews and Gentiles are Abraham's offspring – and so inherit under God's covenant promises given to Abraham – because we belong to Jesus (“are Christ's” v. 29). Even Gentile converts are sons of Abraham because a son of Abraham is someone justified by faith. And we know that, like Abraham, we're justified by faith because of our baptisms!

And there is neither slave nor free among Christians because we are all free – having been freed from sin by faith, as shown by our baptisms. There is no distinction between male and female in Christ because, unlike the male-only circumcision mark, we are marked by our baptism, received alike by male and female.

The same reframing of our stories is found in Rom 6 –

(Rom. 6:1-8 ESV) What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? ² By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it? ³ Do you not know that all of us

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who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? ⁴ We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. ⁵ For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.

⁶ We know that our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin. ⁷ For one who has died has been set free from sin. ⁸ Now if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him.

Again we see Paul using the language of the Exodus – freedom from slavery – in connection with baptism. Our baptisms demonstrate that we should live as Jesus-people, freed from sin and so enabled to live as were always meant to live.

Peter and Paul both argued their cases from Joel, who had long before promised a radically different new world, a kingdom in which the Spirit would be outpoured, in which everyone who calls on the name of the Lord would be saved.

(Joel 2:28-32a ESV) “And it shall come to pass afterward, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions. ²⁹ Even on the male and female servants in those days I will pour out my Spirit.

³⁰ “And I will show wonders in the heavens and on the earth, blood and fire and columns of smoke. ³¹ The sun shall be turned to darkness, and the moon to blood, before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes. ³² And it shall come to pass that everyone who calls on the name of the LORD shall be saved.”

Joel promised a kingdom to be marked by the outpouring of the Spirit on both male and female, slave and free, bringing in “everyone who calls on the

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name of the Lord,” not just Jews but Gentiles as well. Gal 3:28 is built on Joel 2:28-32!³

Peter uses Joel’s prophecy as the primary text for his sermon delivered on Pentecost in Acts 2, culminating in –

(Acts 2:38-39 ESV) And Peter said to them, “Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. ³⁹ For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself.”

Notice carefully. Peter quotes Joel 2:28-32a in Acts 2:17-21 as the scriptural foundation for his sermon. He says the prophecy is being fulfilled before their very eyes (v. 16). He then demonstrates from the scriptures that Jesus is not only the Messiah, but the Lord (vv. 22-26). That is, he claims that Jesus is the same “Lord” as the “LORD” on whose name we must call to be saved according to Joel 2:32a.

In Joel 2:32a, “LORD” is written in all capital letters to signify that “LORD” translates YHWH. That is, Peter is declaring that Jesus is not just the Messiah but he also YHWH – God the Son!

And then he says that to be saved, the Jews must believe in Jesus⁴ and “be baptized ... in the name of Jesus Christ,” that is, that must “call on the name of the LORD” by being baptized in the name of Jesus.

³ See Bobby Valentine’s “Galatians 3:28, Baptism and Women in the Gathering,” *Stoned-Campbell Disciple* (April 22, 2016). <http://stonedcampbelldisciple.com/2016/04/22/galatians-3-28-baptism-women-in-the-gathering/>.

⁴ The Churches of Christ, among many other denominations, traditionally have taught that “repent” in Acts 2:38 means “repent of all your sins.” But Peter’s sermon only accuses his audience of denying that Jesus is the Messiah and so crucifying him. These were, after all, pilgrims who’d traveled for even thousands of miles to celebrate Pentecost in Jerusalem. They were not immoral, wicked people. They were obedient Jews who denied Jesus as the Messiah. Hence, “repent” in context means to turn away from your former path of disbelief and to instead turn to Jesus in faith.

(Acts 2:36 ESV) ³⁶ “Let all the house of Israel therefore know for certain that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified.”

The same is true of Acts 3:14-19, where Peter commands his hearers to repent of their lack of faith.

If this is not true, then Peter did not require his converted to believe in Jesus as a prerequisite to baptism in either of his first two gospel sermons, which is unimaginable. On the other hand,

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Now, Peter offers no explanation at all for why baptism is the chosen means of calling on the name of the Lord, but it's what he preached.

Parallel to Peter's sermon in Acts 2 is the account of Paul's conversion. After Paul was struck blind on the road to Damascus, Ananias came to him and said –

(Acts 22:14-16 ESV) And he said, "'The God of our fathers appointed you to know his will, to see the Righteous One and to hear a voice from his mouth; ¹⁵ for you will be a witness for him to everyone of what you have seen and heard. ¹⁶ And now why do you wait? Rise and be baptized and wash away your sins, calling on his name.'"

"Calling on his name" is an allusion to Joel 2:32a, and is associated with baptism, as in Acts 2:38.

Shortly thereafter, Luke records –

(Acts 9:21 ESV) And all who heard him were amazed and said, "Is not this the man who made havoc in Jerusalem of those who called upon this name? And has he not come here for this purpose, to bring them bound before the chief priests?"

By this time, "those who called upon [the name of Jesus]" has become a virtual synonym for "Christian." "Called" is actually a present participle and would be better translated "those calling" or "those who call" as in the NIV and NET Bible. The reference is not back to a moment of baptism, but to a continual state of being. Christians continue to call on the name of the Lord, that is, they continue to rely on Jesus for forgiveness as LORD, that is, God the Son. Therefore, the phrase is not a reference to baptism but to continuous reliance on Jesus as Lord and Savior.

A key parallel passage is from Rom 9 –

this hardly means that we don't have to repent of our sins to be saved. After all, to have "faith" in Jesus requires that we commit to be faithful to him, as we've covered previously. In fact, to a Jew, believing Jesus to be Messiah and YHWH (LORD) certainly meant submitting to him as Lord, which is just another way of saying "repenting" – in fact, it's even more exact as the goal isn't just to give up sin but also to follow Jesus. The repentance required is both a rejection of sin and entry into God's mission by following his Son as King/Messiah/Lord. We should preach baptism on these same terms.

(Rom. 10:9-14 ESV) because, if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. ¹⁰ For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved. ¹¹ For the Scripture says, “Everyone who believes in him will not be put to shame.” ¹² For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; for the same Lord is Lord of all, bestowing his riches on all who call on him. ¹³ For “everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.” ¹⁴ How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching?

Notice that in v. 13, Paul, like Peter, relies on Joel 2:32a for the teaching that “everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.” However, although Paul is speaking of evangelistic preaching and how people are saved, he says nothing about baptism. Although baptism is our shared, unifying event and story, forgiveness comes by confessing “Jesus is Lord” and believing in the resurrection.

Compare –

(1 Cor. 1:2 ESV) To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints together with all those who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours:

Paul treats “those who ... call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ” as meaning “Christians” based on Joel 2:32a.

Joel doesn’t say that “everyone who calls on the name of the Lord through baptism will be saved.” Rather, both Peter, Luke, and Paul interpret Joel as saying “everyone who calls on the name of the Lord [Jesus] will be saved.”

As a result, although Paul, Luke, and Peter treat baptism into Jesus as *vitally* important – as defining the narrative that defines who we are as a people – salvation is promised to *all* who confess Jesus as Lord. That is, the early church taught and practiced baptism as the means by which a convert first called on the name of Jesus as Lord. And this practice defined the church’s unity and how Christians should live. It was a part of the church’s shared narrative, defining them as a distinct people.

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But the church did not consider baptism to be the unique, only means of calling on the name of the Lord. Rather, the promise of Joel 2:32a means what it says: “everyone who calls on the name of the LORD shall be saved.”

PART V
HARD QUESTIONS

CHAPTER 11
SOME QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

A. Questions & Answers

I am foremost a Sunday School teacher, and good teaching requires taking and answering questions. And so here are the hardest questions I could think of –

Q. You've suggested that we must choose between two kinds of verses, "everyone with faith" and "faith plus baptism." Isn't it possible that the "everyone with faith" verses assume baptism? Maybe "faith" includes baptism, which is, after all, an act of faith.

A. This argument is purely circular. In other words, you assume that baptism is essential with no exceptions. You conclude therefore that the "everyone with faith" verses must include baptism. You then conclude that the Bible makes baptism essential – with no exceptions – because all the faith verses include baptism as a requirement.

To accept this interpretation, we'd have to include baptism in "faith" everywhere it appears. But there are countless verses where this plainly isn't true (for example, Luke 23:42-43; John 9:35-38; John 11:27; John 16:31). We can't use one definition of "faith" in the "everyone with faith" verses and another in all the other verses.

Over and over again, the Holy Spirit inspired godly men to write that faith is enough – *all* who have faith will be saved. These verses are not an occasional over-simplification for effect. They are, indeed, the very backbone of the New Testament.

And please understand that I'm not saying that the "faith plus baptism" verses are no longer true – they remain true even today. It's just that they admit of exceptions. God's nature requires it.

Q. If you're right, then why baptize people who've already been saved through faith?

A. Because baptism is a command. And because Jesus was baptized even though he was sinless and didn't need forgiveness. How can we not encourage believers to follow the example he set – or not "to fulfill all righteousness"?

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Q. Well, if God will make an exception for baptism, why not for any other violation of his commands?

A. Exactly. He does. The term for it is “grace.” The whole point of Christianity is that mistakes are forgiven. We cannot live a perfect life. We can’t even repent perfectly. We can’t confess our sins perfectly. We never even have perfect faith. And that’s okay. God forgives our shortcomings.

Now, it is very, very important that we distinguish between grace, the forgiveness of sins, from license, the notion that we can willfully continue in sin and God will cover the sin. The Bible is very clear that intentionally continuing to sin will result in damnation.

(Heb 10:26-27 NIV) If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left, but only a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God.

It’s not just any mistake that damns us. To become lost, we must “keep on” sinning and we must keep on “deliberately.” A deliberate sin is not enough. Continuing to sin (as we all do!) is not enough. It’s only when we no longer make Jesus our Lord – when we repudiate the repentance that allowed Jesus to forgive us in the first place – that we fall away.

Now, plainly, refusing to be immersed out of a rebellious, willful heart could jeopardize one’s salvation, not that I’m anyone’s judge. But 99.99% of those who haven’t been properly baptized weren’t willfully sinning in failing to do so. They mistakenly thought that through infant baptism, or sprinkling, or whatever other improper baptism they had experienced, they had honored God’s command to be baptized.

Q. This just seems so inconsistent. I mean, either God requires baptism or he doesn’t. You really can’t have it both ways!

A. To quote Ralph Waldo Emerson, “A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds, adored by little statesmen and philosophers and divines.”⁵ I guess my point is that we sometimes insist on consistency as being logical when in fact consistency is downright foolish. In fact, as a math major and lawyer, my very nature urges me toward consistency in all manner of things, but as a parent (and as a practicing lawyer, actually), I’ve learned that consistency can be a very dangerous thing.

⁵ See the author’s *The Holy Spirit and Revolutionary Grace* for a discussion of the underlying theology.

For example, suppose I tell my middle schooler that he must finish his homework before watching any TV. Well, this would be an entirely sensible command for a parent to give – and I’ve given it often. But suppose the kid suddenly comes down with the flu and is too sick to do his homework. Or suppose it snows and school is cancelled for the next day. Or suppose that his homework is watching the TV news. Plainly, in any of those cases, I’d be inclined not to enforce my otherwise entirely sensible rule.

Now, am I inconsistent in failing to enforce my command? Of course not. I’m just a good parent. Perhaps I should have said something like, “Do your homework before you watch any TV – unless one or more of the following exceptions apply: (i) inclement weather or other ‘act of God’ that closes the school tomorrow, (ii) you become too sick to do your homework but not too sick to watch TV, or (iii) your homework requires you to watch TV (but this exception applies only to the watching of the TV show(s) that you are required to watch and none other).”

Now, in reality, lawyers do write in just this manner, but no other sane person does. And even we don’t speak to our children this way. Other than in legal documents, people just don’t give that level of detail. It is understood by people with walking-around sense that just about anything anyone says to someone else admits of various implied, common sense exceptions.

And so when we read scripture, we have to realize that (thank God!) the scriptures weren’t written by lawyers. Largely, the New Testament is made up of personal letters that reflect remarkable exactitude in their composition and yet do not attempt to state each exception imaginable. Such writing would have been unreadable – and far outside the culture of the day. Long-winded lawyers came later.

Imagine the Ten Commandments written in this style. Rather than “Thou shalt not kill,” we would have “Thou shalt not kill a human being, human life being defined as commencing at the moment of conception and continuing until brain death notwithstanding continued breathing or other organic activity, except in the case of a just war, being any war ordered by Jehovah God or in fulfillment of his righteous decrees, in which case enemy combatants may be killed – and civilians, too, but only as collateral damage, that is, if their deaths are unintentional even if inevitable, or in the case of self-defense, but only if lethal force is reasonably perceived as truly necessary to prevent death or severe bodily harm – or in some states – to protect private property, or if you’re a policeman

Of course, the command could well take 500 pages to write comprehensively. And it would be nice, I suppose, to know the exact bounds of the command. But you see, as we seek to make the boundaries clear, we constantly run into new issues that require further explanation and clarification – not to mention

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very vague, hardly useful-at-all concepts like “reasonably perceived” or who is an “enemy combatant” and who is a civilian in a civil uprising by civilians with guns, and on and on and on.

God’s commands are righteous, true, and holy – and they often admit of exceptions no matter how broadly stated. That is the nature of communicating with human language. Our language is just not that precise. And no one can ever write enough words to answer all the questions and express all the exceptions.

Fortunately, God has blessed his children not only with his word, but also with intelligence and sensitivity – and the indwelling Spirit. Indeed, God assures us that –

(1 Cor 2:15 NIV) The spiritual man makes judgments about all things, but he himself is not subject to any man’s judgment ...

(Rom 12:2 NIV) Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is – his good, pleasing and perfect will.

Without attempting to plumb the depths of these passages, the point is that the truly spiritual man will be able to make judgments that conform to God’s will. That’s a comforting thing to know.

Q. If God sometimes saves without baptism, then how does God know when to save someone?

A. This is actually a very profound question. After all, in the ordinary course, a believer is saved when he or she is baptized. This is when the believer receives the Holy Spirit and is added to the church. If no baptism occurs, then when does all this happen?

The answer is: I don’t know. It may be when the believer first believes and repents. It may be when he dies. The promise is that all with faith will be saved, not that they are necessarily presently saved. God may wait and save them as they die. Or save them when they go through confirmation. Or when their hearts become truly penitent.

We aren’t told, and therefore I don’t have the answer.

Q. If this is so, then everyone is saved before being baptized!

A. No. In the ordinary course, salvation and receipt of the Holy Spirit occurs at baptism.

Q. Then how does God know when to give his Spirit to the believer? If the believer has believed and repented and not yet been baptized, how does God know whether to give the Spirit and save the believer immediately or to wait for baptism?

A. God is not limited as man is. God sees the future perfectly. Therefore, he knows in advance who will be baptized and who will not (Acts 2:23; Rom 8:29). God doesn't have to wait for our decisions to know what decisions we will make.

This doesn't mean that we have no choice. God doesn't predict based on our predictability. Rather, God exists outside time. Indeed, time is part of the Creation and therefore God is bigger than time. God exists as much in the future as in the present. He doesn't predict the future – he sees it as though it has already happened.

(1 Cor 2:7 NIV) No, we speak of God's secret wisdom, a wisdom that has been hidden and that God destined for our glory before time began.

Q. So what if someone with faith (as defined above) dies before being baptized despite intending to be baptized? Perhaps they get hit by a train on the way to be baptized.

A. This is, of course, a familiar debating point made by Baptists against the traditional Church of Christ position, which denies salvation to those unbaptized. But I teach that all with faith will be saved and that grace will cover an insufficiency in baptism. *Obviously*, such a person will be saved. God repeatedly promises to save *all* with faith in Jesus (as defined above). Obedience is about the heart, and the fact that the believer intended to obey and was prevented by circumstances beyond his control does not change the fact that he had a penitent heart.

Q. So when was he saved? At coming to faith or at baptism? He wasn't baptized, and so he must have been saved at the moment of faith.

A. This logic only works if the moment of faith and the moment of baptism are the only possibilities. Who made up that rule? There are more than two possibilities.

My view is that God saves the believer, in this rare circumstance, when he dies – which is when it matters most. Why not? God promised to save all with faith in Jesus, and so he will – and he won't be prevented from saving him by our insistence on hammering God into the limits of the Baptist/Church of Christ debate. God is much bigger than that.

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The early church taught that an unbaptized believer could be saved by baptism in blood – martyrdom. In that case, the believer would be saved at death. They couldn't imagine God denying salvation to someone who died for Jesus before he was baptized. I can't imagine God denying salvation to someone with faith (as defined above) in Jesus when he has promised *repeatedly* to save *everyone* with faith (as defined above) in Jesus.

Q. If grace covers baptismal error, why not the complete absence of faith in Jesus?

A. One of the great errors of 20th Century Church of Christ teaching – and most Protestant teaching – was our insistence on abstracting rules from the text and leaving the narrative of scripture behind. We took “faith” and “repent” out of their context and so misunderstood them in subtle but important ways.

Read Paul, especially Romans. Chapter 1 – 5 are all about the sufficiency and *necessity* of faith to save, explained in light of the Old Testament. Plainly, Paul sees faith as non-negotiably essential. Romans 9 – 11 make this clear beyond all doubt. Paul concludes that most of his fellow Jews are damned because they lack faith in Jesus.

The book of Acts is the story of missionaries saving Jews with faith in God by teaching them to believe in Jesus as Messiah. Without Jesus, they were lost despite their faith in God and moral lifestyles.

Therefore, I reject the “available light” theory because Acts tells a different story.

Discussion questions –

1. Do the author's conclusions make sense or seem internally inconsistent to you? Is he close to the heart of God? Or self-contradictory?
2. Is it possible to write commands applicable for all time that include every possible contingency?
3. Can you think of any broadly worded commands that admit of unstated exceptions?
4. The author seems to assume that the Holy Spirit indwells each Christian in a way that affects his or her heart and mind. Do you agree or disagree?
5. Explain how 1 Cor 2:15 and Rom 12:2 apply to Christians today. If we dispute so much, how can these verses be true?

B. What about the Denominations?

A client just called me about some church concerns. He's helping his church look for a new site, as his church has outgrown its building. They've sold their building but haven't even found a site for their new building. They were considering meeting in a high school gym for two years. I offered them our church building on Sunday afternoons. It seemed the right thing to do.

However, they are Presbyterians. Conservative, Bible-thumping Presbyterians who left the United Presbyterian Church over the homosexual ordination issue. They are classic evangelicals. But they don't baptize as we do. Are they damned? If so, then perhaps we should treat them as enemies of Christ. But it just didn't seem the thing to do. I mean, a few years ago, before they had a teen program, their teens participated in our ministry!

But maybe I should just think of them as enemies of God. And if that's the case, why help them out? Why help the legions of Satan? But they sure seem to think and act like Christians. It's rather strange to run into legions of Satan who bow their knees to God.

Q. If all this is so, should we treat all those within the denominations as brothers and sisters in Christ?

A. Not all, but many. As noted earlier, many people have only a very nominal commitment to the Lord, even though their names may be on a church roll somewhere or other. Indeed, many may actively attend the services of a Christian denomination and yet have never made a commitment to Jesus. Merely joining a church – merely being baptized even – does not a Christian make.

There are any number of "Christian" churches that have become so infested with liberalism that many within the church do not acknowledge Jesus as the true Son of God come in the flesh. These people are lost. Such churches teach such a watered-down theology that lifelong members don't know enough about Jesus to believe in him or what his Lordship involves.

Judging such people is hard. Admitting that there are many saved people outside the Churches of Christ does not mean admitting that everyone else is saved or even that everyone calling himself a Christian is saved.

Of course, there are also denominations that teach heresy of such a serious nature that their salvation is in jeopardy. Most of the mistakes made by most denominations are not damnable, as they don't threaten the validity of their members' faith or repentance. But if the doctrine of God or Jesus is sufficiently distorted, then their faith may not be real. 1 John 4:2-3 teaches,

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for example, that denying that Jesus came in the flesh damns, and this only makes sense.

I've thought about trying to draw the line more clearly, but I'm not sure I know how. It's always important to realize that God saves individuals, not denominations. A believer can join a heretical group and not hold to heretical beliefs. Many denominational teachings don't make it to the grassroots level, you know.

Hence, in the vast majority of cases the circles of salvation, faith, penitence, and an acceptable baptism are all the same – or very close. And it's clear that some teaching is so unacceptable as to destroy faith. Precisely drawing those lines, if it can even be done, is for another day.

Q. But those in other denominations teach error!

A. As do many within the Churches of Christ. As already discussed, some error, such as error in not believing in the incarnation of Jesus, can cost you your soul. But how do we justify declaring that error within the Churches of Christ will be forgiven but error committed under some other label is necessarily beyond the power of God's grace to forgive?

I mean, here in the Churches of Christ we have our fair share of disagreements on all sorts of doctrines. Different preachers teach different things about the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, divorce, the age of the earth, who qualifies to be an elder or deacon, what can be bought with church funds – I could fill several pages listing such issues. If we declared as damned all who disagree with us on any issue, most congregations would have only one saved member, because even among elderships and even between spouses, there is just about always some disagreement.

I've taken many surveys of Sunday School classes, asking true-false questions on many issues that plague the Churches of Christ. In classes as large as 90 members, I've yet to have two people complete the form exactly the same way! Does that mean that only one member of that class will go to heaven? Or does grace cover doctrinal error (other than the sins of deliberately continuing to sin or lacking faith in Jesus) just as it covers moral error?

So how can we be so arrogant as to suppose that God loves us so much that he'll forgive our doctrinal mistakes but he won't forgive the mistakes of those Baptists or Methodists who are otherwise people of genuine faith and repentance?

In fact, this puts a finger on a very important failing of many of us within the Churches of Christ. We sometimes are guilty of a modern-day Gnosticism. The Gnostics were Second Century heretics who taught that salvation would

be gained through knowledge. (“Gnostic” is from the Greek *gnosis*, meaning knowledge).

We make a similar error today when we teach that while man is not morally perfectible, he is doctrinally or, that is, intellectually perfectible. We know that we need grace to cover our errors of dishonesty, lust, materialism, and lack of commitment, but we sometimes deny that we need grace to cover doctrinal error. After all, we unconsciously conclude that we are capable of having perfect doctrine and thus having a perfect pattern of worship and pattern of church organization.

But, of course, mankind is fallen, and it’s not just our bodies and our will that is fallen – it’s also our intellect. And this is more than amply evidenced by our continual inability to agree on countless questions. If we really were intellectually perfectible, you’d think that after 2,000 years of debate, we’d have agreed on almost everything. In fact, we seem to disagree over more and more things every year.

Praise God that his grace abounds and covers not only our moral failings, but also our intellectual failings! And he also covers the intellectual shortcomings of those who disagree with us – except, of course, failure to have true faith and repentance.

Q. Why baptize someone who is already saved? In suggesting that you are afraid where failure to baptize such people will lead, aren’t you guilty of the camel’s-nose-under-the-tent false argument?

Not really, but it’s a very fair question. I believe we should baptize members of denominations who come within our influence if they haven’t already been properly baptized. There are at least these reasons:

- Jesus commanded us to do so in Matt 28:19.
- Jesus was baptized, and we should follow his example. No one is more saved or right with God than Jesus was before he was baptized.
- A failure to baptize may lead to a tendency to forget to follow other commands.

But here’s the point. When I argue for baptizing those saved in the denominations without baptism, I’m not suggesting that those who disagree are damned or outside the church. I’m just giving my advice. I can certainly see the other side, as requiring baptism can be offensive to the already saved and may be interpreted by other denominations as questioning their salvation.

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The camel's nose argument is legitimate in questions of expedience but never proper in questions of doctrine. Doctrine is whatever God teaches, and where the doctrine leads is for God's wisdom, not ours. And so, when we are called to make our own judgments, we have to carefully refuse to condemn those who have a different opinion.

Q. If other denominations are saved, then why remain a member of the Churches of Christ?

A. We need to recall that repentance includes not doing something you know to be wrong just because you think God will forgive you. Grace is not license. Therefore, just because God's grace is broad enough to cover the errors of many of our brothers and sisters in other denominations, we are not thereby permitted to participate in their error. We know better.

That's not to say that the other denominations are wrong in every way that they differ from us. Far from it! Many congregations outside the Churches of Christ have much to teach us. That's why we keep buying their books! Just look in our church libraries. Even in the most conservative Churches of Christ, the libraries are filled with books written by authors from other denominations (such as nearly every Bible translation ever published!) There is a lesson for us all in that fact.

Of course, the most obvious the reason the Churches of Christ remain my home is our insistence on baptism of believers, by immersion, for the forgiveness of sins. This is, of course, the biblical doctrine, and there are advantages and blessings in this practice lost by most other denominations.

Also, as stated in a book recently published:⁶

[We] are grateful for our heritage in Churches of Christ and unabashed about our commitment to it. We believe in its best instincts. We desire to go back to the Bible. We want to do Bible things in Bible ways, to participate in an undenominational vision of the church, to be Christians only but not the only Christians. We want our children to love these churches as we have. We believe Churches of Christ have something important to say to the larger Christian world. We mourn the loss of so many of our members who turn their backs on teachings we believe are central to the

⁶ Quoted in C. Leonard Allen, *Distant Voices: Discovering a Forgotten Past for a Changing Church* (Abilene, TX: Abilene, TX: ACU Press, 1993), 60-61.

cause of Christ, such as baptism of believers by immersion for forgiveness of sins and weekly observance of the Lord's Supper.

I would add that I have a keen appreciation for *a cappella* music. I've heard what the other denominations do for music, and – right or wrong – in or out of grace – it's just not as good. We have something very special in our musical heritage, and the instrumental churches just don't have the pure joy of our congregational singing.

I've attended worship services at St. Peter's Basilica in the Vatican (the largest Catholic Church building in the world and part of the headquarters of the Catholic Church in the Vatican), St. Paul's Cathedral in London (the largest Anglican church building in the world), and Rick Warren's Saddleback Community Church outside Los Angeles, and I'd far rather spend an hour singing in any Church of Christ I've ever attended.

Tom Lawson, of the instrumentalist independent Christian Churches, has written advocating that we in the non-instrumental Churches of Christ maintain our *a cappella* tradition:

1. It tends to maintain the central players in the worship as a congregation rather than the performers up front. When the music of worship is the music of the church itself, it seems less likely that we move from worship to watching worship. The worth of a particular service is, many times, gauged by the quality of the performances. Applause is not merely tolerated, it is expected.
2. It tends to preserve times of silence within corporate worship. My church feels obligated to not allow a single moment of silence within the entire worship experience. Every moment when someone is not speaking or singing must be filled with the organ or piano. I do not need my moods programmed at every moment.
3. It tends to preserve simplicity of worship that may be increasingly attractive in our complicated age.

I am baffled why some within the Church of Christ would pick this time to move toward inclusion of the instrument in worship. Doesn't the growing attraction of everything from a cappella secular music to Gregorian chants give indication that less may be more and that simplicity and times of silence

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may have an attraction as great as the “big performance”? To my friends within the Church of Christ, I would encourage you to think long and hard before you join the rest of the evangelical world in this area that so clearly impacts the entire worship service. I find myself wishing that, at least once in a while, we’d close up the piano, turn off the organ, unplug the guitars and just see what would happen.⁷

And we have other things going for us that I wish everyone else would emulate. Congregational autonomy is one. We may take our practices a little to the extreme sometimes, but I see no good that comes from national and international power structures. Certainly, the Disciples of Christ (Christian Church) branch of the Restoration Movement has had a bad experience with its national organization. They are rapidly declining in numbers.

We are also special because we have a heritage of calling for the unity of all Christians. The New Testament is filled with calls to unity, and we have been and should return to the forefront of the unity effort.

Amazingly, we live in an age that many are calling post-denominational. Many Christians have decided that they just don’t care about whatever historical accidents created the various denominations. They just want a church home that is Bible-based, where they feel loved, and where God is served in meaningful ways. Our heritage suits the times very well.

We have a wonderful tradition of heavy reliance on the scriptures. This is nothing to be ashamed of, and people are looking for just this. And a plea for true nondenominational Christianity has never been more in tune with the mood of the times.

This age is also being called Postmodern because many in society are no longer looking for logic and analysis. They are looking for mystery and a re-connection with tradition. While our heritage of debate and conflict doesn’t suit the times at all, our heritage of seeking the Old Paths, of seeking to emulate First Century practices – especially the weekly Lord’s Supper and *a cappella* music – can be very powerful in today’s world. That is, it will be effective if done well. Rote, mechanical “celebration” of the Lord’s Supper won’t get it. Delving deeply into its mysteries with genuine awe and reverence will. Ponderous singing of bad hymns won’t get it. Truly beautiful *a cappella* singing will.

⁷ http://www.grannywhitechurch.com/pub/misc_archive/Music-Dale%20Jenkins.doc.

The beauty of all this is that we are very well positioned to be a very important influence on Christianity in the 21st Century – but not if we bicker and fight among ourselves. If we continue to behave so childishly, we will sink in oblivion, and we'll richly deserve it. But the world will be much the poorer for our demise. We have too much to offer to fritter it away on infighting.

Pray that “we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ” (Eph 4:13).

And so, while my town offers a great many fine congregations of many denominational stripes, I am not tempted to leave my Church of Christ home church.

Now, I've been a member of this congregation long enough to know that things weren't always so great. The reason the congregation is doing so well is that people who were unhappy with some aspects of it many years ago didn't leave. They stayed and ultimately influenced the congregation to become a truly excellent church. If the most talented and thoughtful members leave every congregation that is struggling with legalism or torn up over personalities, then those congregations will have no chance to right themselves.

I would never judge someone who chooses to leave a troubled, spiritually deficient congregation – there are so many factors that must weigh in such a decision – but if you have the misfortune of being in a community where the local Church of Christ is not as good a congregation as it should be, I urge you to consider staying and working to make it better.

Q. I noticed that a few times you referred to the Churches of Christ as a denomination. Why?

A. “Denomination” is a funny word in that its meaning is not entirely agreed on. The following definitions from www.dictionary.com are illustrative:

*The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language:*⁸

1. A large group of religious congregations united under a common faith and name and organized under a single administrative and legal hierarchy.

⁸ (4th Ed., Boston, Mass.: Houghton Mifflin Co., 2000).

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Webster's Revised Unabridged Dictionary:⁹

3. A class, or society of individuals, called by the same name; a sect; as, a denomination of Christians.

WordNet 1.6:¹⁰

1. a group of religious congregations having its own organization and a distinctive faith.

The *Encarta Dictionary: English (North America)*¹¹ defines “denomination” as –

religion a religious grouping within a faith, for example, a section of the Christian church that has specific beliefs and practices that differ from those of other groupings and its own system of organization

Certainly, we would object to being called a denomination under the first definition. The Churches of Christ have no single administrative or legal hierarchy. On the other hand, we certainly are a society of individuals called by the same name. We like to talk about how other names might be acceptable, but we just about all use the same name. There’s no denying it. We are without a doubt a group of religious congregations having our own organization and a distinctive faith (as the dictionary writers use “faith”). We therefore fit squarely within the last three definitions.

Therefore, we are a denomination. Moreover, we are a denomination as the word is commonly used in the ordinary speech in 21st Century America. No one outside our own fellowship would understand our objection to being called a denomination.

However, during much of the 20th Century, we in the Churches of Christ have used “denomination” in a sense foreign to conventional use, to all dictionaries, and to all other religions. For example, Bert Thompson wrote in 1984 –

⁹ (Plainfield, NJ: MICRA, Inc., 1998).

¹⁰ (Princeton University, 1997).

¹¹ www.encyclopedia.msn.com (2005).

May a person who is a Christian, but in a denomination, remain there and be saved?¹²

Plainly, Thompson means by “denomination” any fellowship of believers other than the Churches of Christ. Indeed, the entire thesis of his pamphlet is that “We still plead for people to come out of denominationalism, and into the church.”¹³

In other words, Thompson insists that “denominations” are not the church nor are they part of the church. Thus, only those in the Churches of Christ are saved, and thus “denomination” means a body of lost people.¹⁴ This conclusion, of course, flatly contradicts one of the founding principles of the Restoration Movement, that we are “Christians only, but not the only Christians.” More importantly, it also contradicts scripture.

We prove ourselves to be out of touch with the society in which we live when we use words in ways not found in scripture or standard dictionaries. How can we expect people – even our own members – to understand us? By most definitions and by common usage, we are a denomination, and so I sometimes very accurately refer to us as a denomination. And this implies no criticism. It doesn’t mean that I think we’re lost. It just means what the dictionaries say it means.

Q. So doesn't this mean that that we're just another denomination?

A. No. We don't have to be the only ones going to heaven to be special. We don't have to be right about everything to be right about some things. We don't have to be able to look down our noses at everyone else to be valuable and important.

Recall Paul’s inspired words –

(1 Cor 1:31 NIV) Therefore, as it is written: “Let him who boasts boast in the Lord.”

The last thing that Christians need is to feel superior to others. If any part of your self-esteem or ego is based on feeling superior to your religious

¹² (boldface in the original). *Non-Denominational Christianity: Is Unity Possible?* (Montgomery, AL: Apologetics Press, Inc., 1984), 13. See also Thomas B. Warren, *Christians Only – and the Only Christians* (National Christian Press, Inc., 1984), which is to similar effect.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 29.

¹⁴ This point is discussed, and the arguments of Thompson and Warren are critiqued, in considerably more detail in the author’s *The Holy Spirit and Revolutionary Grace*.

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neighbors, then you have some serious repenting to do. Indeed, the only proper Christian response to learning that God has saved more people than we once realized is celebration! If your heart doesn't leap with joy at the very thought that there are millions more saved than you once believed, get on your knees and pray for a more Christ-like heart.

Our purpose as a distinct religious heritage and fellowship is not to be the only saved believers. Indeed, the founders of the Restoration Movement began their work decades before it occurred to anyone to even question the salvation of the other Christian denominations. The Restoration Movement was not founded to save souls from denominationalism. Indeed, as noted earlier, Stone and the Campbells vigorously denied that those in the Restoration Movement were the only ones going to heaven! One of the earliest slogans of the Movement is "We are Christians only, but not the only Christians."

No, the purpose of this Movement was to seek truly nondenominational Christianity – rightly defining that term. We pervert this idea by defining "nondenominational" as free from error – arrogantly supposing that we are actually free from any doctrinal error – while continuously in serious internal disagreement over any number of doctrinal issues.

"Nondenominational" meant calling on all Christians in all denominations to recognize one another as brothers based on a common understanding of the true essentials of salvation – genuine faith and repentance – and baptism along the lines taught in this book. In the early days of the Restoration Movement, most denominations denied the salvation of those in other denominations and refused to allow anyone who did not agree with the leaders of a congregation on all major points of doctrine to be a member of that congregation. The Campbells and Stone declared this to be sin and called on their fellow Christians to recognize one another as brothers and sisters in Christ. Sadly, and *very* ironically, we've come full circle and are now often guilty of the very sins that the Restoration Movement was founded to protest!

The Restoration leaders took their plea one step further, however, and sought a common understanding of how to worship and to organize their congregations. By restoring First Century worship and church structure they felt they could establish a pattern on which all could agree, helping to realize greater unity in Christ. But never did the first generation of Restoration leaders teach that having a First Century worship service or church organization was essential to salvation. Rather, they sought common ground on which all could agree. They saw incorrect worship and incorrect congregational government as sin but not as beyond the scope of grace.

It was later generations that confused sin with damnation, who felt the need to enforce all their interpretations of scripture with the threat of hellfire. And in this respect, they were wrong.

Certainly, those who intentionally violate God's will on such subjects are abandoning the repentance that allowed them to be saved, but very few believers worship God with an organ believing themselves to be rebelling against the same God whom they are worshipping. And who authorized us to judge the hearts of these people, anyway?

I've said before that we are special because we are relevant, needed, and capable of bringing much needed change to the religious world. But we won't get there without first gaining humility – just as Jesus did:

(Phil 2:5-8 NIV) Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death – even death on a cross!

Learning humility is no fun (I say speaking from unpleasant experience), and learning that we are not the only ones that are going to heaven is bound to be a humbling experience for some. But it's an essential first step toward becoming able to persuade people of those issues wherein we are right.

The next step is to connect with the rest of the Christian community. We can speak to and associate with our denominational neighbors without condoning their errors, just as we can fellowship the members of our own congregations who disagree with us on any number of issues. If we don't connect with those with whom we disagree, they'll never hear us and never learn the truths that we know. How can we be so callous as to isolate ourselves – as though we had nothing worth sharing?

And we need to realize that merely being right on some issue or other hardly makes us persuasive. We must zealously endeavor to follow all the old paths (Jer 6:16 KJV) – not just a handful of pet issues. We must reignite the First Century passion for prayer, for personal evangelism, for generous giving to the poor, for being in touch with the Spiritual side of things, for compassion, for brotherly love, for commitment. As the saying goes, “No one cares how much you know until they know how much you care.”

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Discussion questions –

1. The author makes a case for preserving the unique features of the Churches of Christ. Are there any distinctive features of the Churches you think should be preserved?
2. How can the Churches of Christ best teach the other denominations about their special insights into Christianity?
3. Does the author's teaching on baptism justify a decision to join a congregation in another denomination? When might it? When not?
4. How do the people you know, outside the Churches of Christ, use "denomination" in everyday speech?
5. How does the Church of Christ use the term?
6. Is the Church of Christ a denomination?
7. Should we be at the forefront of unity efforts?
8. How might we encourage greater unity without boasting?

CHAPTER 12

SHOULD THE BAPTISTS BE RE-BAPTIZED?

We had a bright, self-confident student intern working for my firm one summer. Inevitably, our discussions led to religion, and he was a devout Baptist. He really knew his stuff, and he enjoyed discussing his views on religion with me.

One day, while we were disputing over whether baptism is required for salvation, a fellow employee – another Baptist – happened by. She asked what we were discussing. In response to our reply, she said, “Well, of course you have to be baptized to be saved!”

Our intern was dumbstruck. He asked how a fellow Baptist could take such a view. She replied, “That’s what I’ve always been taught and what our pastor has taught us since I was a little girl.” She assured the intern that her church was a member of the Southern Baptist Convention in good standing.

If you’ve been persuaded by the preceding chapters, then it should already be obvious that the typical penitent, believing Baptist is saved. However, as discussed earlier, I believe we should baptize even saved people who’ve not yet been baptized. Have the Baptists been baptized? Or did they just get wet?

The question arises because most Southern Baptists, although baptized by immersion as believers, are baptized *because of* their salvation rather than *in order to be* saved. By the end of the 20th Century, most Churches of Christ leaders had concluded that baptism is only effective if for the forgiveness of sins, as Acts 2:38 plainly states. However, throughout the history of the Restoration Movement, the question of whether the convert has to understand the purpose of baptism has been controversial.

A great many Baptists have taken the view that baptism is for the forgiveness of sins, in the same sense that the Churches of Christ have always understood it. In fact, this view seems to be spreading. But then, many other Baptists believe that baptism is in response to having already been saved at the moment of faith, or praying the “believer’s prayer,” and thus is not essential to salvation.

The question then boils down to those Baptists who have been immersed for some reason other than for forgiveness of sins. Does this immersion constitute New Testament baptism?

1. Biblical baptism is immersion. The Churches of Christ and Baptists agree on this point.

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2. Not just any immersion counts. Hearing, believing, confessing, repenting, and going for a swim doesn't get it. You must be immersed for a Biblical reason. The purpose behind the immersion makes the getting wet a baptism.

3. The validity of baptism does not depend on who does the baptizing. You do not have to be immersed by a member of the Churches of Christ (or even a Christian) to be saved. Imagine if this were true. Your baptism would not be effective unless the person baptizing you was saved at the moment you were baptized. But this means that a saved person must have baptized him. And so on. You would have to check out the spiritual genealogy of all baptizers to know if a baptism counted! Worse yet, all baptisms would have to be traced back to the apostles! After all, under this view only the apostles could initially have baptized anyone. Thereafter, only those baptized by an apostle could baptize. And so on. Once the chain is broken, no one could ever be saved again.

Thus, the only question is: what does the Bible say is an acceptable reason for being immersed? We will deal with this question in two phases. First, is our traditional argument valid? We have traditionally argued that the only good baptism is a baptism for the purpose of obtaining forgiveness of sins. If you believe that your sins are forgiven upon attaining faith in Jesus, before baptism, as many Baptists do, then clearly you are not being baptized to obtain forgiveness. Our disagreement with these Baptists centers on Acts 2:38:

Peter replied, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit."

The key phrase is "for the forgiveness of sins" or, in the American Standard Version, "unto the forgiveness of sins." If "for" or "unto" indicates the purpose of baptism in the mind of the believer, then this phrase would define an acceptable subjective intent. If "for" or "unto" defines the effect of baptism, that is, its result but not necessarily the believer's purpose, then this verse does not define for us what the believer must be intending, and we will need to look elsewhere for a sufficient purpose.

After all, baptism has many effects that are not always intended or expected by the believer. Thousands have been baptized within the Churches of Christ with the expectation that the Holy Spirit's actual indwelling would not be received, and yet each of these believers did receive it.¹⁵ Their baptism was valid

¹⁵ See *The Holy Spirit and Revolutionary Grace* or Harvey Floyd, *Is the HOLY SPIRIT for Me?* (Nashville: 20th Century Christian, 1981) for more detail on the doctrine of the Holy Spirit.

despite receiving something that was not only unexpected but also contrary to their understanding of baptism. They had a partially false understanding of the effect of baptism, but the baptism was nonetheless effective. If misunderstanding the effect of baptism as it relates to the Holy Spirit does not prevent the baptism from being effective, then does misunderstanding the effect of baptism as it relates to when (not whether) sins are forgiven?

Acts 2:38 can only be read as requiring that the believer have forgiveness as his purpose in being baptized if the word translated “for” or “unto” has this meaning in this context. The Bible itself answers this question. Let’s look at every other place where similar phrasing is used and see what was intended in these other verses. The phrase in Acts 2:38 in the Greek is *baptizo eis*, or “immerse” “into.” Each of the following verses contains virtually the identical form of the same phrase:

(Matt 28:19 NIV) 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 . . .

(Mark 1:4 NIV) And so John came, baptizing in the desert region and preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

(Luke 3:3 NIV) He went into all the country around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

(Acts 8:16b NIV) [T]hey had simply been baptized into the name of the Lord Jesus.

(Acts 10:48 NIV) 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 19:5 NIV) On hearing this, they were baptized into the name of the Lord Jesus.

(Rom 6:3-4 NIV) Or don’t you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.

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(1 Cor 1:13-15 NIV) Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Were you baptized into the name of Paul? 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.

(1 Cor 10:2 NIV) They were all baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea.

(1 Cor 12:13 NIV) 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.

(Gal 3:27 NIV) [F]or all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.

Notice that, by far, the most common translation of *baptizo eis* is “baptize into.” Why is this? The correct translation of the Greek preposition *eis* is seen in Acts 8:38:

(Acts 8:38 NIV) And he gave orders to stop the chariot. Then both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water and Philip baptized him.

Eis means into when it refers to immersion. Remember that “baptize” is a technical church term that we invented long after the Bible was written. When Peter or Paul said “baptize,” their listeners and readers did not hear a technical term – they heard “immerse.” That was what the term meant to Peter’s listeners on the day of Pentecost.

It is readily conceded that in other contexts *eis* can mean something subtler, such as “unto” or “for.” But when you are talking about going under water, “into” is the most obvious translation, and no other meaning can be substituted if “into” makes sense.¹⁶

Whatever translation of *eis* may be possible in its varied relations, there is no possible translation when it relates to a real or verbal baptism, but into.

¹⁶ James W. Dale, *Christic Baptism and Patristic Baptism* (Wauconda, IL: Bolchazy-Carducci Publishers, *et al.*, 1874, reprinted 1995). Zodhiates defines *eis*: “After verbs implying motion of any kind, into or to, toward.” Spiros Zodhiates, *The Complete New Testament Word Study Dictionary* (Chattanooga: AMG International, Inc., 1994).

In Matt 3:11, John the Baptist declares, “I baptize you with water for repentance.” “For” translates *eis*. Many would argue that in this context *eis* does not mean “into,” but rather something like “because of” or “on account of.” Thus, the argument goes that *eis* in Acts 2:38 means that we are to be baptized “because of” forgiveness of sins. But the meaning of *eis* in Acts 2:38 must be taken from the verses using *baptizo* and *eis* in the most similar way, being the verses cited in the main text. Moreover, it is entirely possible that Matthew meant to be understood as saying “into” here – “I baptize you with water into repentance” – meaning that, as is also true of Christian baptism, the subject of the baptism was pledging a life of penitence beginning with his baptism. Compare 1 Peter 3:21 saying that baptism is “the pledge of good conscience toward God.”

That *eis* is best translated “into” is amply demonstrated by re-reviewing the verses quoted above. In every case, “into” could have been used by the translators and the verses would make perfect sense. Now try to substitute “for” or “in order to”¹⁷ or any other phrase and see if it works. Moreover, in those verses that translate *eis* as “in,” “into” is clearly a better translation. In fact, the New International Version translators typically footnote it as an alternative translation.¹⁸

(Matt 28:19 NIV) Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them for the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,

(Acts 8:16b NIV) [T]hey had simply been baptized for the name of the Lord Jesus.

(Acts 10:48 NIV) So he ordered that they be baptized for the name of Jesus Christ. Then they asked Peter to stay with them for a few days.

¹⁷ Alexander Campbell translates *eis* as “in order to” in his translation of Acts 2:38 in his Bible translation, *The Living Oracles*, (4th ed., Bethany, VA: M’Vay & Ewing, 1834): “And Peter said to them, Reform, and be each of you immersed in the name of Jesus Christ, in order to the remission of sins, and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is to you, and to your children, and to all that are afar off; as many as the Lord our God shall call.” This translation is neither good Greek nor good English as “in order to” must be followed by a verb, “to” being the first element of an infinitive.

¹⁸ Although I have based this article largely on the NIV, which is generally very good, some of its translations are biased toward Baptist theology. These translations have varied from edition to edition. The quoted verses translating *eis* as “in” are good examples of this difficulty.

CONCLUSIONS

(Acts 19:5 NIV) On hearing this, they were baptized for the name of the Lord Jesus.

(Rom 6:3-4 NIV) Or don't you know that all of us who were baptized for Christ Jesus were baptized for his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism for 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.

(1 Cor 1:13-15 NIV) Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Were you baptized for the name of Paul? I am thankful that I did not baptize any of you except Crispus and Gaius, so no one can say that you were baptized for my name.

(1 Cor 10:2 NIV) They were all baptized for Moses in the cloud and in the sea.

(1 Cor 12:13 NIV) For we were all baptized by one Spirit for one body – whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free – and we were all given the one Spirit to drink.

(Gal 3:27 NIV) [F]or all of you who were baptized for Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.

Translating these verses as we would like to translate Acts 2:38 doesn't make sense. Clearly, we should translate Acts 2:38 to be consistent with the meaning of the same words in similar contexts in other places in the New Testament. Thus Acts 2:38 should be translated –

be baptized into the forgiveness of sins.

or better yet –

be immersed into the forgiveness of sins.

What a beautiful word-picture! Peter tells us what baptism symbolizes: being immersed, totally and fully, into forgiveness of sins. This translation makes baptism come alive as a demonstration of what God is doing for us while we are being immersed. It is also what Peter's listeners would have heard. By peeling 2,000 years of church-talk veneer from Peter's words and translating into simple English, we see exactly what he was saying, and it is powerful!

But Peter talks about the *effect* of baptism, not the *intent* of the person being baptized. If we must bind “into forgiveness” as the necessary reason for being baptized, then we must bind all similarly phrased verses. Thus, no one is

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saved unless while being baptized he intended to be immersed into *all* of the following:

- forgiveness of sins
- the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit
- the name of the Lord Jesus
- the name of Jesus Christ
- Christ Jesus
- Christ Jesus' death
- one body by one Spirit

How many of our brothers and sisters were baptized for the express purpose of entering into one body by the Spirit? I have heard many preachers baptize in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, but I have been to many baptisms where these words were not used. Were those baptisms valid?

I would note that most Church of Christ baptisms that I have witnessed have been baptisms “in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,” when they should have been “into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit”! But I’m sure the baptisms were entirely effective despite this common slip into a “Baptist” translation (in this case, a mistake by the King James Version translators).

There is no basis for saying that the language of Acts 2:38 imposes the one acceptable reason to be immersed. Certainly, we have shown that forgiveness of sins is supposed to occur at baptism. Acts 2:38 is extremely clear on this point. But it is equally clear that we receive the gift of the Holy Spirit when we are baptized. I am persuaded that those who were baptized denying that they were receiving the Holy Spirit were not only saved, but received the Spirit. Just so, those who are baptized believing that they have already received forgiveness will be saved despite their incomplete understanding.

This brings us to the second leg of the argument. If Acts 2:38 tells us an effect of baptism, but not the purpose that the believer must have while being baptized, what does? After all, we have already agreed that not just any immersion counts.

I can only find one passage that clearly speaks in terms of what the believer intends while being baptized – the baptism of Jesus:

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(Matt 3:13-17 NIV) Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to be baptized by John. But John tried to deter him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?"

Jesus replied, "Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill¹⁹ all righteousness." Then John consented.

As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and lighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased."

The baptism of Jesus is one of only three events recorded in all four Gospels (the others being the feeding of the 5,000 and the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus). It is obviously a very important event. Why? Why, indeed, when before his baptism Jesus was already sinless, God's Son, and well pleasing to God? Verse 15 gives the reason: to fulfill all righteousness. What does this mean?

I've been amazed at the number of my students who have responded to this question by saying that Jesus was fulfilling *prophecy*. He was fulfilling righteousness, not prophecy. These are two very different things. He was "filling up" that which is right; he was doing the right thing. And what makes something "right" or "righteous"? The only test of right-ness is the will of God. If Jesus was doing God's will, he was doing what was right, and therefore fulfilling righteousness. If this was not God's will, then he was not fulfilling righteousness.

Therefore, Jesus was baptized *to obey God!* Not for forgiveness of sins, not to receive the Holy Spirit, and not to become God's Son, but to obey God. But why did God want Jesus to do this?

God wanted Jesus to set an example for his followers who were to come. And clearly, Jesus' baptism is remarkably like our own. When we were baptized, these three things happened:

- The Holy Spirit descended upon us from heaven.

¹⁹ *Pleroo*, literally, to fill; metaphorically, to complete. Spiros Zodhiates defines it as "to fulfill, perform fully." Compare Acts 12:25 and Col 4:17. *The Complete Word Study Dictionary* (Chattanooga: AMG International, Inc., 1994).

- God declared us to be his beloved son (or daughter).
- God declared that he is well pleased with us.

Jesus had no need for these things, but we did. And by learning about Jesus' baptism, we graphically see what God did for us in our own baptism. Jesus is our perfect example, and he submitted humbly to an otherwise unnecessary baptism, because God willed it, to show us that we are not too good to submit and what submission means for us. If Jesus was setting an example for us to follow, then being baptized to fulfill righteousness (or the same thought, to obey God) follows his perfect example.

I cannot find a Biblical justification for declaring that those Baptists who are baptized to obey God are not scripturally baptized. Their purpose is the same purpose that Jesus had. That is pretty good authority. Therefore, there is no Biblical justification for requiring the re-baptism of the Baptists.²⁰

Do I think that we all ought to be Baptists? Certainly not. They have some errors in their doctrines and practices, but God has forgiven these and even gone so far as to bless their work. And I can think of no greater blessing to God's kingdom, *all* of God's kingdom, than for the Churches of Christ and Baptist Churches to recognize one another as brothers and sisters as well as co-workers.

Should we merge churches? Don't be ridiculous. There is only one church, and the Baptists and we are already in it. We might as well get used to it.²¹

²⁰ Alexander Campbell considered those who taught that Baptist baptism is invalid to be heretics. See Leroy Garrett, *The Stone-Campbell Movement* (revised ed., Joplin, MO: College Press Publishing Co., 1994), 262-268. While Campbell certainly disagreed with many within the Restoration Movement on any number of points, the only ones Campbell ever labeled a heretic were these, the Mormons, and those who taught the doctrine of a second chance after death.

²¹ For more detailed study of this subject, read Jimmy Allen's *Re-Baptism? What One Must Know To Be Born Again* (West Monroe, LA: Howard Publishing Co., Inc., 1991).

CHAPTER 13 SO WHAT?

So what? As a Bible class teacher, I hate it when someone asks me this. It means I didn't properly present the material. I failed to make the practical application. As they say here in West Alabama, I didn't put the hay down where the goats can get it.

So what how do these lessons on baptism matter? Well, quite a lot. Let's start with one of the founding documents of the Restoration Movement, Thomas Campbell's 1809 "Declaration and Address." He writes,

PROP. 1. That the Church of Christ upon earth is essentially, intentionally, and constitutionally one; consisting of all those in every place that profess their faith in Christ and obedience to him in all things according to the Scriptures, and that manifest the same by their tempers and conduct, and of none else; as none else can be truly and properly called Christians.

2. That although the Church of Christ upon earth must necessarily exist in particular and distinct societies, locally separate one from another, yet there ought to be no schisms, no uncharitable divisions among them. They ought to receive each other as Christ Jesus hath also received them, to the glory of God. And for this purpose they ought all to walk by the same rule, to mind and speak the same thing; and to be perfectly joined together in the same mind, and in the same judgment.

Now, there was no Church of Christ denomination in 1809. By "Church of Christ," Campbell means the church universal. And he defines the church as all who profess (or confess) faith in Christ and who obey Christ.

All agree that he should be obeyed, of course, but some may wish to argue that we disagree with the other denominations about *how* to obey Christ. Campbell has anticipated this question:

8. That as it is not necessary that persons should have a particular knowledge or distinct apprehension of all Divinely revealed truths in order to entitle them to a place in the Church; neither should they, for this purpose, be required to make a profession more extensive than their knowledge; but

that, on the contrary, their having a due measure of Scriptural self-knowledge respecting their lost and perishing condition by nature and practice, and of the way of salvation through Jesus Christ, accompanied with a profession of their faith in and obedience to him, in all things, according to his word, is all that is absolutely necessary to qualify them for admission into his Church.

9. That all that are enabled through grace to make such a profession, and to manifest the reality of it in their tempers and conduct, should consider each other as the precious saints of God, should love each other as brethren, children of the same family and Father, temples of the same Spirit, members of the same body, subjects of the same grace, objects of the same Divine love, bought with the same price, and joint-heirs of the same inheritance. Whom God hath thus joined together no man should dare to put asunder.

In Proposition 8, he makes clear that we don't have to all agree regarding "all Divinely revealed truths" so long as we agree that we are lost, that salvation is found in Jesus, and that we have faith in Jesus and commit to obey him – even though we disagree about any number of other doctrinal questions.

Campbell concludes in Proposition 9 that those who agree on these few things should "consider each other as the precious saints of God ... brethren ... members of the same body" Indeed, it would be sin for us to be separated from each other.

So the original Restoration Plea was that all who had faith in Jesus (including trust and faithfulness, as we've previously covered) be together in a common fellowship, a single church – even though we disagree about the mode of baptism, predestination, instrumental music, or countless other things.

10. That division among the Christians is a horrid evil, fraught with many evils. It is antichristian, as it destroys the visible unity of the body of Christ; as if he were divided against himself, excluding and excommunicating a part of himself. It is antisciptural, as being strictly prohibited by his sovereign authority; a direct violation of his express command. It is antinatural, as it excites Christians to contemn, to hate, and oppose one another, who are bound by the highest and most endearing obligations to love each other as brethren, even as Christ has loved them. In a word, it is productive of confusion and of every evil work.

CONCLUSIONS

Campbell speaks very strongly against division – and he does not make baptism a term of union – no more than he insists on agreement regarding apostolic succession or gifts of the Spirit. What matters is that we agree regarding Jesus – and commit to be faithful to and to trust his promises.

Now, the beauty of the baptismal theology I teach is that the Churches of Christ may and should continue to baptize their converts as they have done in the past. They do not have the least reason to adopt the Sinner’s Prayer or infant baptism. But they may nonetheless be in full, unrestricted communion with denominations that also believe in Jesus but have different baptismal theologies.

The implications are huge. First, the “church of Christ” becomes vastly larger. My brothers and sisters aren’t just the heirs of the American Restoration Movement (or Stone-Campbell Movement) who sing *a cappella*. It’s *all* with faith in Jesus. The numbers go from the millions to the billions!

That’s not to say that necessarily all members of all nominally Christian denominations are saved. There are some so liberal that they deny faith in Jesus. Some deny salvation by faith to such an extent that they are like the circumcisers in Galatia who add to the gospel and so teach a different gospel. *There are boundaries*. Claiming the name “Christian” or “church” isn’t enough. Faith requires not only belief but faithfulness and trust – but not perfect faithfulness or trust – a test none of us could meet.

And so I may just have to recognize as a brother or sister someone I cannot worship with in the same service. They may worship in a way that I cannot participate in in good conscience – or vice versa. But that doesn’t mean we can’t visit the widows and orphans together. It doesn’t mean we can’t work to further God’s mission in our home town together.

Suddenly, with baptism no longer a barrier, and with faith (properly defined) as the common bond that unites us, we not only may join together in serving God, we *must*. Unity is not just a smart strategy; it’s a command. To refuse unity with fellow Christians – even those I disagree strongly with regarding Calvinism or apostolic succession or whatever – would be to divide the church. And the scriptures say harsh things about those who divide –

(Gal. 5:18-21 ESV) But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law. ¹⁹ Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, ²⁰ idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, ²¹ envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.

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Let's see: "enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy." Sounds like church! Really. Sometimes the works of the flesh are more descriptive of how we relate to other congregations and other denominations than the fruit of the Spirit! We need to repent.

(Eph. 4:1-3 ESV) I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, ² with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, ³ eager to **maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.**

Notice that v. 3 tells us that unity is something to be maintained, not accomplished. When God saved us and we were baptized, we were *all* baptized into the same Christ, the same church, the same body, the same family. If we're not united, it's not because our ancestors and forebears messed up. It's because *we* did not maintain what was given to us at our baptisms – according to Gal 3:28 (as we've previously covered).

Ever since the Protestant Reformation, we've tried to negotiate our way to unity. Unity meetings have been like negotiations for an international trade treaty, with long-winded speeches, committees, and white papers – and little to show for the effort. This is totally the wrong approach.

Famously, Luther and Zwingli failed to unite their reformation movements because they disagreed over the presence of the body of Jesus in the communion elements.²²

Philip of Hesse wanted to unify all the leading Protestants because he believed that as a divided entity they were vulnerable to Charles V. As a unified force, they would appear to be more powerful. Philip's theory was sound but it failed to take into account one major issue – beliefs.

Luther and Zwingli had corresponded in the early years of the Reformation and they met at Marburg in October 1529. This meeting became known as the Colloquy of Marburg. If Philip wanted the meeting to be a symbol of Protestant unity he was disappointed. Both Luther and Zwingli fell out over the sacrament.

²² C. N. Trueman, "The Marburg Colloquy," *The History Learning Site*. (March 3, 2016). <http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/the-reformation/the-marburg-colloquy/>

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Luther believed that Christ was present at every celebration of the sacrament – though he was never too sure about what happened to the bread and wine in the Mass. Zwingli believed that the communion service was a commemoration of Christ’s sacrifices and that the bread and wine were purely symbolic.

Both men clashed over the phrase ‘*hoc est corpus meum*’.

Luther held the view that this meant ‘this is my body’. Whereas Zwingli believed it meant ‘this signifies my body’. Both men believed that they were right and the meeting only served to demonstrate that the Protestant world was a divided one especially over interpretation. Luther refused to shake hands with Zwingli when he departed and he made his dislike of Zwingli very public.

They agreed on literally every doctrine they discussed – except consubstantiation – a doctrine with very little practical implication. I mean, you take the Lord’s Supper the same way regardless of your view on this question. And yet the two great theologians refused to even shake hands – and risked military defeat of their religious reforms – over this single issue. In fact, Zwingli soon thereafter died in a battle that likely would have been avoided had the Swiss and German reformers agreed.

We assume, utterly without scriptural justification, that we must agree on any issue we happen to feel strongly about to be united. And yet Rom 14 teaches to the contrary. The founding principles of our Restoration Movement teach to the contrary. And now we need to live what the Bible and the Restoration leaders both teach.

Therefore, the solution to the church’s lack of unity isn’t a series of unity meetings or speeches or papers. It’s for congregation A to reach out to congregation B and invite them to meet together for communion. It’s as simple as that.

It’s not a weekly prayer breakfast of pastors. It’s the Eucharist. It’s shared bread and wine. It’s remembering the death and resurrection with people who disagree over predestination or tongues or how often to take communion. We agree that Jesus is Lord, the Messiah, the Son of God, we’ve committed to be faithful to him, and we trust him to keep his promises to us – and so we may all take communion together. It’s just a step across the street to take communion *together*.

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Not everyone there will have been baptized the way I think they should have been, but they *all* will consider themselves baptized. They've all obeyed that command as they understand it – and that's all God requires.

I mean, we act like this is the hardest, most difficult thing in the world, and I'm telling you that unity is as easy as eating a cracker and sipping a cup of Welch's grape juice or wine with someone who disagrees with you about something not nearly important as Jesus or the unity for which he prayed.

Now, we start there. Grape juice and matzos. We don't even have to take up a collection. Just remember and proclaim Jesus at a shared table. How hard would that really be?

Yes, there are narrow-minded, legalistic, hateful people who will "write you up." So? Wear it as a badge of honor.

You may have family members who treat you as a stranger – and that won't be any fun. But if I can't suffer a sneer from my great aunt to follow Jesus, I'm not much of a Christian, am I? I mean, what greater cause could there be than the unity of the Christian church? Would I die for it? Well, then, I should be willing to endure an uncomfortable Thanksgiving or two. And if my family disowns me, well, I will have gained thousands, millions, billions of brothers and sisters. Someone will take me in.

Do it two churches at a time in a shared building. Most church buildings will easily accommodate a larger crowd once a quarter or so. And then, once a year, rent a basketball arena or football stadium, and invite every Christian in town to take communion together. It'll be a lot of trouble, but God gifts many of our members with the organizational skills to pull it off.

There may be tensions over leavened vs. unleavened bread, fermented vs. unfermented fruit of the vine, who is authorized to say a blessing over the elements, who can pass the elements, whether people come forward or receive elements in their seats, and all sorts of other things. But people who love Jesus and desire his unity with the same passion he does will find a way. You'll figure something out. It can happen because God wants it to happen.

Then the pastors can meet for a weekly prayer lunch. But at this point, pastoral prayer meetings will seem so small and inadequate for a truly united church. Rather, we'll need to have leaders gather to coordinate *mission*. Literacy programs. Food programs. Job training. All the things churches do separately they'll want to do together. If I, a lifelong Church of Christ member, wish to participate in the Methodist's job interview training program as a teacher, they'll welcome me and I'll feel like I belong.

CONCLUSIONS

God's united church will be able to share talents and resources. We'll stop competing and instead celebrate every conversion, every baptism, and every church plant in our town because we're *one*. We'll stop thinking like Wal-Mart and McDonalds and instead think like family. We'll love each other. We'll eat together. We'll share ideas. We'll swap pulpits. We'll do theology together and might even persuade each other on a few points – but we'll be far more focused on bringing the gospel to the damned and healing the brokenness of our community than getting all the churches agreed on the nuances of inaugurated eschatology.

Some churches will merge. Some will close their doors so their members can join churches that are better at doing God's mission. Some will share youth ministers. I mean, leaving behind the American franchise competition model and trying God's one-family model will be *revolutionary*.

And your hometown will notice. It will change everything.

**APPENDIX
EXCERPTS FROM
THE LUNENBURG LETTER CORRESPONDENCE**

Alexander Campbell, one of the founders of the Restoration Movement and the son of Thomas Campbell, struggled for years to reconcile his view that there are “Christians among the sects” (meaning, the denominations) and his insistence on baptism of believers by immersion for remission of sins.

A woman from Lunenburg, Virginia wrote and asked for a direct response. Campbell replied²³ –

But who is a Christian? I answer, Every one that believes in his heart that Jesus of Nazareth is the Messiah, the son of God; repents of his sins, and obeys him in all things according to his measure of knowledge of his will. A perfect man in Christ, or a perfect Christian, is one thing; and “a babe in Christ,” a stripling in the faith, or an imperfect Christian, is another. The New Testament recognizes both the perfect man and the imperfect man in Christ. The former, indeed, implies the latter. Paul commands the imperfect Christians to “be perfect,” (2 Cor. iii. 11.) and says he wishes the perfection of Christians. “And this also we wish” for you saints in Corinth, “even your perfection:” and again he says, “We speak wisdom among the perfect,” (1 Cor. ii. 6.) and he commands them to be “perfect in understanding,” (1 Cor. xiv. 20.) and in many other places implies or speaks the same things. ...

Should I find a Pedobaptist [baptizer of infants] more intelligent in the Christian Scriptures, more spiritually-minded and more devoted to the Lord than a Baptist, or one immerse on a profession of the ancient faith, I could not hesitate a moment in giving the preference of my heart to him that loveth most. Did I act otherwise, I would be a pure sectarian, a Pharisee among Christians.

²³ Alexander Campbell, in reply to “Any Christians Among Protestant Parties?” *Millennial Harbinger* (July 8, 1837). Paragraphing modified to facilitate reading.
<http://www.outrageouscampbellite.com/writings/TheLunenburgLetter.html>

CONCLUSIONS

Still I will be asked, How do I know that any one loves my Master but by his obedience to his commandments? I answer, In no other way. But mark, I do not substitute obedience to one commandment, for universal or even for general obedience. And should I see a sectarian Baptist or Pedobaptist more spiritually-minded, more generally conformed to the requisitions of the Messiah, than one who precisely acquiesces with me in the theory or practice of immersion as I teach, doubtless the former rather than the latter, would have my cordial approbation and love as a Christian. So I judge, and so I feel. It is the image of Christ the Christian looks for and loves; and this does not consist in being exact in a few items, but in general devotion to the whole truth as far as known.

With me mistakes of the understanding and errors of the affections are not to be confounded. They are as distant as the poles. An angel may mistake the meaning of a commandment, but he will obey it in the sense in which he understands it. John Bunyan and John Newton were very different persons, and had very different views of baptism, and of some other things; yet they were both disposed to obey, and to the extent of their knowledge did obey the Lord in every thing.

There are mistakes with, and without depravity. There are wilful errors which all the world must condemn, and unavoidable mistakes which every one will pity. The Apostles mistook the Saviour when he said concerning John, "What if I will that John tarry till I come;" but the Jews perverted his words when they alleged that Abraham had died, in proof that he spake falsely when he said, "If a man keep my word he shall never see death."

Many a good man has been mistaken. Mistakes are to be regarded as culpable and as declarative of a corrupt heart only when they proceed from a wilful neglect of the means of knowing what is commanded. Ignorance is always a crime when it is voluntary; and innocent when it is involuntary. Now, unless I could prove that all who neglect the positive institutions of Christ and have substituted for them something else of human authority, do it knowingly, or, if not knowingly, are voluntarily ignorant of what is written, I could

not, I dare say that their mistakes are such as unchristianize all their professions. ...

There is no occasion, then, for making immersion, on a profession of faith, absolutely essential to a Christian – though it may be greatly essential to his sanctification and comfort. My right hand and my right eye are greatly essential to my usefulness and happiness, but not to my life; and as I could not be a perfect man without them, so I cannot be a perfect Christian without a right understanding and a cordial reception of immersion in its true and scriptural meaning and design. But he that thence infers that none are Christians but the immersed, as greatly errs as he who affirms that none are alive but those of clear and full vision.

In a later issue, Campbell added these thoughts to his reply:²⁴

The case is this: When I see a person who would die for Christ whose brotherly kindness, sympathy, and active benevolence know no bounds but his circumstances; whose seat in the Christian assembly is never empty; whose inward piety and devotion are attested by punctual obedience to every known duty; whose family is educated in the fear of the Lord; whose constant companion is the Bible: I say, when I see such a one ranked among the heathen men and publicans, because he never happened to inquire, but always took it for granted that he had been scripturally baptized; and that, too, by one greatly destitute for all these public and private virtues, whose chief or exclusive recommendation is that he has been immersed, and that he holds a scriptural theory of the gospel: I feel no disposition to flatter such a one; but rather to disabuse him or his error.

And while I would not lead the most excellent professor in any sect to disparage the least of all the commandments of Jesus, I would say to my immersed brother as Paul said to his Jewish brother who gloried in a system which he did not adorn: "Sir, will not his uncircumcision, or unbaptism, be

²⁴ *Ibid.* Paragraphing modified to facilitate reading.

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counted to him for baptism? and will he not condemn you, who, though having the literal and true baptism, yet dost transgress or neglect the statutes of your King?"

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