

Born of Water

lessons pro and con
on the necessity of baptism

by Jay Guin

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PROLOGUE

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 Titus 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 (divorce and remarriage, creationism, among many others). Obviously, under this thinking, it would be the rarest of cases for a non-Church

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of Christ member to make it to heaven, and 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, that is, the gospel of Jesus.

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 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 (lately 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* (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 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>. A Sinai fragment dated about 100 A.D. is to the same effect. <http://www.churchhistory.net/documents/baptism2.html>. However, when immersion was

[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 this respect. 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, 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) unbaptized?

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 huge difference between permitting pouring where an immersion is impossible and permitting pouring at any time.

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

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 this 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 symbol—

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!¹

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, his sole authority being a quotation

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.

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from J. W. McGarvey.³ I urgently express my greatest respect for all these men and their work—generally. But it just hurts me more than I can express that by their not articulating a better scriptural argument for their position the Churches of Christ are now more deeply divided than ever.

And 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 gospel as well as he understands it. And increasingly, I find the same notion becoming commonplace among many of our ministers, especially the younger ones, such as our youth and campus ministers. 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—relying on quotations from Restoration Movement leaders, or unproven assertions that baptism is just a symbol, or characterizing our traditional position as “water regeneration” or “sacramentalism.” Emotional appeals to the spirituality of many who are not properly baptized are frequently urged, and the emotional side 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: we have to ask, are there persuasive arguments?

But here's the rub. 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 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

³ “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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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 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. The gospel is the good news about Jesus—not baptism. “Faith” is faith in Jesus, not 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, which is all about Jesus.

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 lost 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 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.

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

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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 (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 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,

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.

⁷ I lay out the arguments for these statements in greater detail in *The Holy Spirit and Revolutionary Grace* (Nashville: Power Source Productions, 1994).

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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 baptism.

(Matt. 28:19) 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) 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) ‘And now what are you waiting for? Get up, be baptized and wash your sins away, calling on his name.’

(Rom. 6:3-4) 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.

(1 Cor. 12:13) 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. 3:26) 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) 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.

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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(Titus 3:4-7) 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 quite 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.

(1 Cor. 12:3) 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) "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) 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?

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.

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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 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) 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.

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. Thus, 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) 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) “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) **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 will in fact be saved. How can we reconcile our position with these verses?

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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?
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 "faith only" 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? Was it insulting?

CHAPTER 2 WHO IS GOING TO HEAVEN?

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

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

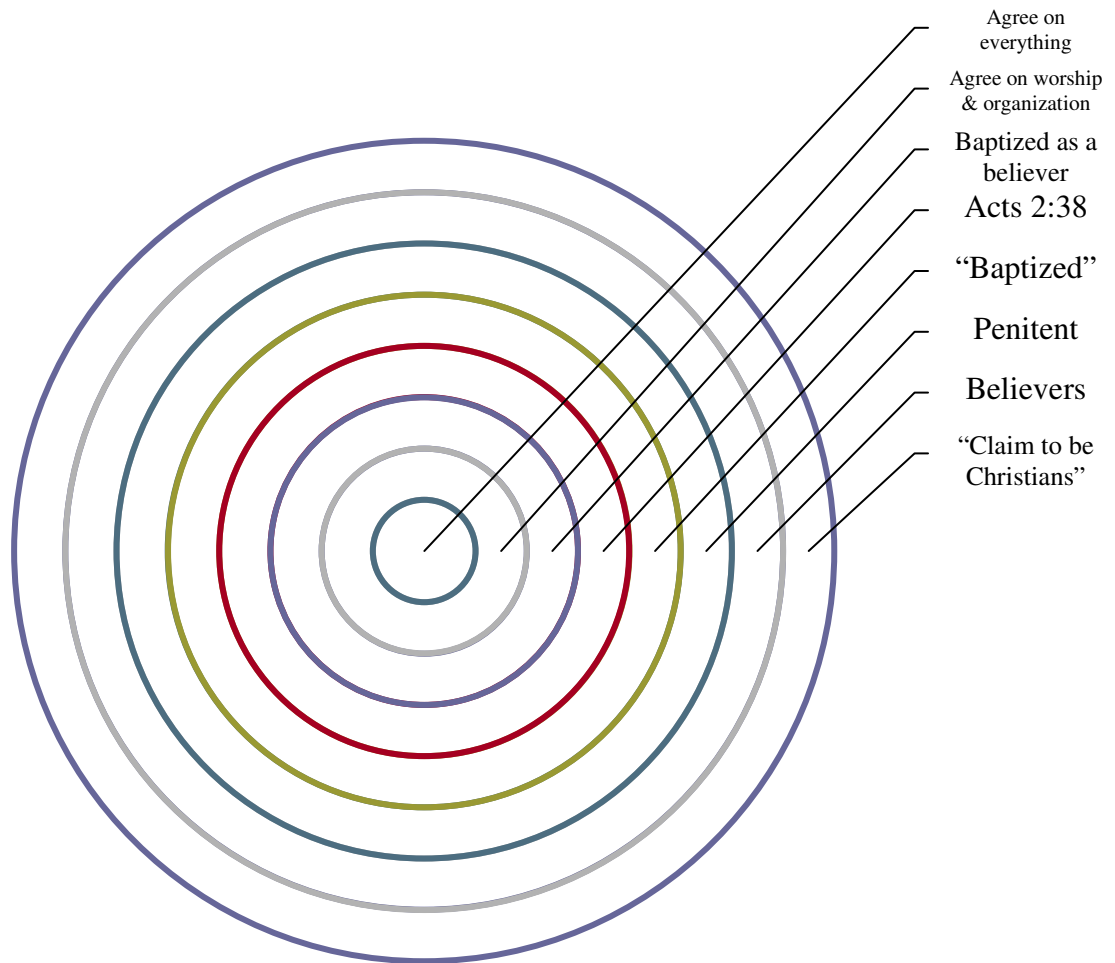
Perhaps even more important is the fact that we can't be unified as the body of Christ if we don't even know who is in the body of Christ. Jesus prayed, just before his arrest—

(John 17:20-23) “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 going to heaven. **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. 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 sin.

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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 water baptism remains the nearly universal practice of all 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 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.

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

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 believers were either Catholic or Orthodox until the Reformation.

¹¹ 16th Century theologian and an important leader of the Protestant Reformation. He founded the Reformed Church 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.

¹² “Genevan Confession” (1536). Calvin derived the idea from Ulrich (or Huldreich) Zwingli. See Jack Cottrell, *Baptism, A Biblical Study* (Joplin, MO: College Press Publishing Co., 1989), 166.

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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, perhaps due to fear of being seen as intolerant of the views of other believers. Indeed, the spirit of the late 20th Century is that intolerance is the greatest of all secular sins—and this secular spirit has crept into a great many churches. The notion that salvation comes before and separate from baptism is only 500 years old and has only very recently gained acceptance outside Calvinist circles.

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 Armenian (anti-Calvinist) view that salvation is received voluntarily.

Early in the 20th Century, the *Gospel Advocate* periodical 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 that only those who 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. (Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* II.xxii.4). However, infant baptism was controversial until

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.

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becoming the general practice in the 5th Century.¹⁵ 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.¹⁶

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 Episcopalians. The Methodist Church began as an offshoot of the Episcopalians (that is, the Church of England), and so also continues the practice.

The denominations that never enjoyed status as an “established” church generally only baptize those old enough to be believers. The practice of baptizing only adults 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 official 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 Christ), the Mormons,¹⁷ 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 Episcopalian 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, which is 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.

¹⁵ Everett Ferguson, *Early Christians Speak* (Ft. Worth: Sweet Publishing Group, 1971), 62-64.

¹⁶ Frank Viola, *Pagan Christianity* (Gainesville, FL: Present Testimony Ministry, 2002), 236.

¹⁷ 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.

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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 was 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.¹⁸

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.¹⁹ 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.

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 published demonstrating the salvation of those in the Churches of Christ and 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.²⁰ The circle shrank to include only those who had correct teaching on nearly every point.

¹⁸ For example, numerous articles reprinted in David Lipscomb & E. G. Sewell, *Questions and Answers* (Nashville: McQuiddy Publ. Co., 1921).

¹⁹ 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.

²⁰ 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.,

[continued on following page]

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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.²¹

and

God will not do for man what man can do. God performed only that which man could not do. The commands of grace are obeyed by faith. Works perfect faith, otherwise it is dead.²²

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,

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

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.

²¹ H. A. (Buster) Dobbs, “Does Grace Guarantee Final Salvation?” *The Firm Foundation* <http://www.bible-infonet.org/ff/editorials/grace/111_09_02.htm> (September 1996).

²² Goebel Music, *Behold the Pattern* (Colleyville, TX: Goebel Music Publications, 1991), 508.

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the smiles of heaven. But when I became acquainted with my duty, I submitted to it.²³

It has also been famously reported that Stone—

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.” “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.”²⁴

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. . . .²⁵

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.²⁶

In his Lunenburg letter correspondence, Campbell famously wrote²⁷—

²³ *Christian Messenger*, Vol. 12 (1841), 38, quoted in Leroy Garrett, *The Stone-Campbell Movement* (Joplin, MO: College Press Publishing Co., 1994), 84.

²⁴ 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>.

²⁵ “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.

²⁶ “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.

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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.

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 Pedobaptist²⁸ more intelligent in the Christian Scriptures, more spiritually-minded and more devoted to the Lord than a Baptist,²⁹ 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 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**

²⁷ 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>>.

²⁸ Someone who practices the baptism of infants.

²⁹ Someone who only baptizes believers.

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not consist in being exact in a few items, but in general devotion to the whole truth as far as known.³⁰ ...

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.

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 should encourage or even countenance sin. No one denies the necessity of faith. Of course, there are a few professors who get quoted in the popular press teaching all sorts of things, but the denominations are in fact united on these teachings.

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?

³⁰ Unless otherwise indicated, **boldface** in a quotation is added by the author, while *italics* are in the original.

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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.

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 Armenianism, 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 presuppositions.

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 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 of the inconvenience of dealing with the genuine believer, who is genuinely penitent, but who honestly, in good faith, fails to be scripturally baptized.

But reality is quite different. 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 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 persuasive arguments *persuade*! Maybe we just haven’t done that good of a job of being persuasive. Maybe the fault is ours!

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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 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.

However, 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 sometimes truth is found in between the extremes.

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.

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Afterwards, two members who noticed this event ask to meet with the elders. The elders invite them to their next meeting, unaware that 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 sort of thing 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 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

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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 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.

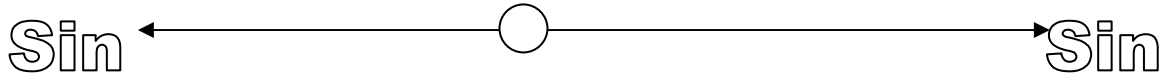
The oldest eldest who'd been listening intently with his eyes closed, spoke up. "Gentlemen. I thank you so much for caring enough about God's word and about our members—men and women, girls and boys—to come speak with us. I think you are both sincere and both make well-intended points. You are good-hearted 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-give 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 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—couldn't lead to something clearly sinful. And as our 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 is true. It's one those human flaws that plague us all.

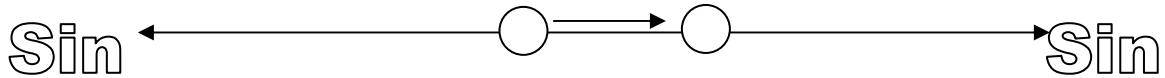
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Perhaps a chart will help make the point.

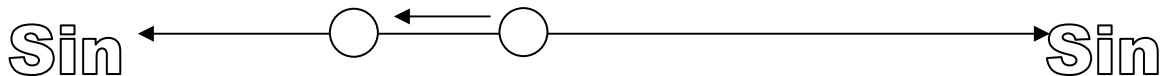


The line represents all the possible outcomes of a decision. The arrow tips are the sinful extremes. Of course, there are usually, maybe always, sinful extremes in both directions. The circle is where a congregation presently is on the issue. This congregation is just a hair left of center.

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

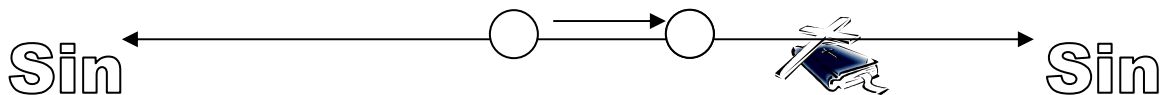


If the church moves a bit to the right, it's moving toward the extreme right.



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 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

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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.

On the other hand, if someone intentionally adopts a change for wicked motives, then the change is wrong. Such a person may well be guilty of compromise with Satan. And such a change may well lead to ever-greater sin. We are not at all suggesting that no change can lead to sin or that no wrongful compromise ever occurs. Rather, the point is that it takes much more to prove someone wrong than to point out that the change he or she proposes is in the direction of some wrongful extreme. And far too often, we’ve accepted such arguments as convincing. They are not.

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?
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

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:

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) “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 his second letter to the Corinthians, we see just how profound his experience was—

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(2 Cor. 12:2-4) 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 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.

Baptism as a burial with Christ

Paul declares in Rom. 6—

(Rom. 6:3-4) 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**.

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.

The meaning of *eis*

The preposition that often follows “baptize” in the Greek is *eis* (pronounced “ice”), meaning most literally and naturally, into.¹ 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?

¹ “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.” 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). Of course, “immerse” implies motion.

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Water regeneration

Many who reject the necessity of baptism refer to those who insist on baptism—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.

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 Lawson²—

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

² “Occasional Salvation: Baptism as a When, Not a What in Salvation,” *The Christian Standard* (July 30, 1995), 628-629.

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baptized. My difference with my religious neighbors is over the occasion or event at 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. 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.

Discussion questions—

1. How does Saul's conversion demonstrate the necessity of baptism?
2. 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?
3. If we are baptized "into" Christ, then where are we before baptism? How can water have the power to put someone into Christ? What does it mean to be "in" Christ?
4. Does it matter who performs the baptism?
5. Does it matter what denomination the person who does the baptizing is a member of?
6. 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?
7. 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?
8. 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 two most controversial passages touching the subject.

1 Peter 3:18-22

A critical passage is 1 Peter 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 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 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.

Any doubt should be made clear from the contrast Peter is drawing. In verse 21, the word translated “symbolizes” in the New International Version or “figure” in the King James Version is literally “antitype.” Baptism, Peter writes, is the antitype of the

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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 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*.³

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.

We have to consider John 3:1-8—

Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a member of the Jewish ruling council. He came to Jesus at night and said, “Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him.”

³ Beasley-Murray, 262.

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In reply Jesus declared, “I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again.”

“How can a man be born when he is old?” Nicodemus asked. “Surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother’s womb to be born!”

Jesus answered, “**I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit.** Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. You should not be surprised at my saying, ‘You must be born again.’ The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.”

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.

While many, including myself, have argued that “born of water” refers to physical birth, the stronger case is that it refers to water baptism. 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. And in English, we often refer to the “waters of birth” or to a mother’s “waters” being broken. However, I’ve been persuaded by more careful study that “born of water” refers to baptism, for the following reasons:

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

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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.*

“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.*⁴

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 Titus 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.*⁵

The Church Fathers are unanimous in interpreting John 3:5 as a reference to water baptism, as well⁶—

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 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

⁴ 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/

⁵ Quoted by Basil Overton, “How Are We Born of the Water and the Spirit?” <http://www.gospelgazette.com/gazette/2001/mar/page17.htm>.

⁶ *Catholic Answers*, http://www.catholic.com/ANSWERS/tracts/_bornagn.htm.

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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]).

“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

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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]).

“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.” 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 1:12-13.⁷ In both cases, “of” is the same preposition, ‘*ek*.

⁷ Paraphrased in the NIV as “born of human descent.” The KJV has “born ... of blood.” It is literally “of bloods.”

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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.⁸

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’.⁹

Another interpretation sometimes offered is that “water” refers to the Spirit, referring to Isa. 44:3 and John 7:37. However, John 7:37 uses “living water” to refer to the Spirit. Isa. 44:3 might use “water” to refer to the Spirit but could equally well be interpreted to refer to blessings in general.

Ultimately, this interpretation fails because Jesus surely intended to be understood by Nicodemus. Nicodemus was likely familiar with the baptism of John, but was not likely to have understood “water” as meaning the Holy Spirit—it was hardly a conventional metaphor at the time. Anyway, why would Jesus refer to be being born of “Spirit and Spirit”?

In conclusion, the baptism interpretation has the stronger weight. Many commentators from a great many denominations agree. The Greek supports this view. And there is simply no evidence that a First Century Jew might have understood “water” as a reference to physical birth.

Does this mean that those believers who have been wrongly baptized—as infants or by sprinkling—are lost? After all, Jesus plainly says that one cannot be saved “unless” he is baptized of the water and the Spirit?

The question must now be re-defined—if a devout, penitent believer believes himself to have been baptized, will God accept that baptism even though the baptism is either not by immersion or before the believer came to believe? Is it enough that the believer thinks he has fulfilled the command to be baptized?

⁸ 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.’” D. A. Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies* (Boston: Baker Book House, Inc., 1996), 41.

⁹ Beasley-Murray, 230.

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Colossians 2:11-14

Perhaps the argument most commonly used by those disputing the necessity of baptism is based on Col. 2:11-14:

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. When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your sinful nature, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, having canceled the written code, with its regulations, that was against us and that stood opposed to us; he took it away, nailing it to the cross.

In this passage, 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.

It's not surprising that some Jews who were converted to Christianity in the First Century assumed that circumcision would remain a part of the new covenant. But Paul disputed this in the strongest of terms:

(Gal. 5:1-6) It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery. Mark my words! I, Paul, tell you that if you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no value to you at all. Again I declare to every man who lets himself be circumcised that he is obligated to obey the whole law. You who are trying to be justified by law have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from grace. But by faith we eagerly await through the Spirit the righteousness for which we hope. For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love.

Thus, Paul declares that salvation cannot be by works but must be by faith, and that adding any work to the gospel nullifies the gospel. Therefore, while being circumcised is certainly no sin, insisting on circumcision as a condition to salvation—adding it to the gospel—alienates one from Christ.

Now, the question comes, while no one disputes the importance of baptism, if baptism is analogous to circumcision, wouldn't it also be wrong to insist that salvation comes only to the baptized—just as wrong as insisting that salvation comes only to the circumcised? After all, “The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love.”

This conclusion appears to be further supported by Paul's argument in Romans—

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(Rom. 2:25-29) Circumcision has value if you observe the law, but if you break the law, you have become as though you had not been circumcised. If those who are not circumcised keep the law's requirements, will they not be regarded as though they were circumcised? The one who is not circumcised physically and yet obeys the law will condemn you who, even though you have the written code and circumcision, are a lawbreaker. A man is not a Jew if he is only one outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical. No, a man is a Jew if he is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code. Such a man's praise is not from men, but from God.

Paul's argument that circumcision of the flesh is useless without circumcision of the heart is based on the Law of Moses itself—

(Deut. 30:6,8) The LORD your God will circumcise your hearts and the hearts of your descendants, so that you may love him with all your heart and with all your soul, and live. ... You will again obey the LORD and follow all his commands I am giving you today.

Thus, Paul argues, God judges the heart, not the flesh, and therefore circumcision cannot be a condition to salvation.

Max Lucado states the argument very well—

Yet, rather than see circumcision as a sign of submission, the Jews had come to see it as a sign of superiority. With time they began to trust the symbol more than the Father. ...

Later Paul asks, "Did God accept Abraham before or after he was circumcised?" (Rom. 4:10). Important question. If God only accepted Abraham after the circumcision, then Abraham was accepted according to his merit and not according to his faith.

What is Paul's answer? Abraham was accepted "before his circumcision" (v. 10). Abraham was accepted by God in Genesis 15 and circumcised in Genesis 17. Fourteen years separate the two events!

If Abraham was already accepted by God, then why was he circumcised? Paul answers the question in the next verse: "Abraham was circumcised to show that he was right with God through faith before he was circumcised." (v. 11).¹⁰

¹⁰ NIV: "And he received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised."

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Paul's point is crucial: Circumcision was symbolic. Its purpose was to show what God had already done. ...

[A symbol] alone doesn't transform me, empower me, or enable me.

Neither does your heritage, even if you're a descendant of John Wesley.

Neither does your communion service, even if you double up on the wafers.

Neither does your baptism, even if you got dunked in the Jordan River.

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 believe that God will save his children based upon a symbol?
...

[W]hat kind of God would look at the sincere seeker and say, "You dedicated your life to loving me and loving my children. You surrendered your heart and confessed your sins. I want to save you so badly. I'm so sorry, your church took communion one time a month too many. Because of a technicality, you are forever lost in hell"?

Hogwash. Our God is abundant in love and steadfast in mercy. He saves, not because we trust in a symbol, but because we trust in a Savior.

And I think we must all agree that baptism is a symbol. But that is not really the question. The question is whether baptism is *only* a symbol. Indeed, the key issue is whether we receive the Holy Spirit at baptism or whether we can receive the Spirit by other means.

Recall Deuteronomy 30:6: "The LORD your God will circumcise your hearts" I cannot circumcise my heart. Only God can. Or as Paul writes in Rom. 2:29: "No, a man is a Jew if he is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code."

Thus, to contend that baptism is a mere symbol, I must contend that I can receive the Spirit by some other means—because the reality the symbol symbolizes is the state of my heart, and only the Spirit can produce in me a heart that God approves (see also Heb. 8:10).

Now, with this background in mind, let's take a fresh look at Paul's comparison of baptism to circumcision in Colossians. The first point has to be that Paul's comparison is just that—an analogy. Paul did not say that baptism is like circumcision in all respects,

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only that there is a comparison that is instructive. No analogy is valid beyond the point being made.

What is the point that Paul was making? Plainly, that we Christians don't need to be circumcised because God has saved us through our baptism. Our baptism eliminates any need for further initiation into Christ and thus eliminates the need for circumcision.

It clear that Paul wrote Colossians to refute false teaching in that church that was a blend of Judaism and Greek philosophy. One of the errors was insistence on circumcision as a condition to salvation. Likely, the false teachers taught that being in Christ through baptism was not enough.¹¹ Paul thus pointed out that circumcision is not needed because baptism suffices. We are buried and resurrected with Christ in our baptism and so have no need of circumcision.

Now, nothing could be further from Paul's thinking in Colossians than the suggestion that baptism, like circumcision, is just a symbol and thus not really necessary. In fact, Paul could not have been plainer in tying our salvation to our baptism. His very point is that we know we don't need circumcision because of the sufficiency of our baptism! Paul could have just as easily argued that faith is enough, and therefore circumcision is not needed, as he did argue in Galatians 5—but the argument he made to the Colossians is that *baptism* is enough.

And so, we see a huge difference between Christian baptism and circumcision. Both symbolize entry into a covenant with God. But baptism brings with it more than a symbol—it brings the Spirit.

(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.”

(1 Cor. 12:13) 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.

(Titus 3:4-7) 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.

¹¹ Herbert M. Carson, *The Epistles of Paul to the Colossians and Philemon, The Tyndale New Testament Commentaries* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1978), 16.

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The New Testament makes it clear that all the saved and only the saved have the Spirit. And the Bible teaches that the Spirit is received at baptism. And the Bible teaches that salvation occurs at the point of baptism. The unity of thought is manifest.

And yet, for all this, Lucado's point must still be dealt with. After all, the Bible also teaches that the Spirit is received at the point of faith. For example, Gal. 3:2 teaches, "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?" And that salvation comes to all who have faith. The unity of thought is again obvious.

This leaves Lucado's question ringing in our ears: Will God say, "Because of a technicality, you are forever lost in hell"? Is wrongly believing oneself properly baptized enough to nullify genuine faith? Or will God keep his promises to save all who have faith?

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, does the author persuade you that "water" refers to the waters of baptism rather than the waters of physical birth? Might it be otherwise?
4. What role does the Spirit play in baptism? Why must it be baptism of water *and* Spirit?
5. If Jesus' teaching to Nicodemus means that baptism is essential, why does John 3:16, 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.
7. In what ways is baptism like circumcision?
8. In what ways is baptism not like circumcision?
9. Why do you think circumcision was the chosen symbol in the Law of Moses?
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? PART I

The following essays all argue that baptism by immersion while a believer is *not* essential. In Part IV, we'll try to reach some conclusions after we work through these arguments.

Unpersuasive arguments

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

Others have argued that baptism can't be essential or else baptism would be a form of works salvation. But baptism is not a work. Works are those things done that have intrinsic merit toward salvation. In other words, if a person could do works perfectly, he'd not need Jesus and wouldn't need grace. In fact, if a person could do works perfectly, he'd not need baptism and he wouldn't need forgiveness. A work, therefore, is righteous living, living morally, doing good works, living the life Jesus would have us lead.

Baptism, on the other hand, is purely passive. We accept and receive baptism. We don't do baptism. In fact, the word is always passive (in English and in the Greek) when applied to the convert. The convert hears, believes, repents, and confesses (active) and is baptized (passive). Once a convert demonstrates faith and penitence he receives God's grace in baptism. It is by no means a work.

Moreover, Paul, who teaches vigorously against works salvation, plainly associates baptism with salvation—over and over—including in Galatians (3:27), the same book in which he condemns those who insist on works salvation.

Now, this is an extraordinarily important point, because many in the Churches of Christ have gotten confused by this argument. When Baptists have argued against the necessity of the baptism saying an essential baptism would lead to salvation by works, we've disputed them by arguing the Bible teaches salvation by works—and in so doing have contradicted a great deal of the New Testament.

(Eph. 2:8-10) 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

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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.

A full explanation of the doctrine of works and faith is outside the scope of this book, but we must not pervert our theology to defend baptism. Baptism is never presented in scripture as a work and it's entirely consistent to teach against a works-based salvation while insisting on baptism. Indeed, Martin Luther did exactly that—and no one has ever been more adamant in insisting on a faith-only salvation—

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. ...

For to be baptized in the name of God is to be baptized not by men, but by God Himself. Therefore although it is performed by human hands, it is nevertheless truly God's own work. From this fact every one may himself readily infer that it is a far higher work than any work performed by a man or a saint. For what work greater than the work of God can we do? ...

Thus you see plainly that there 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.¹

The question re-defined

And so, we've not really quite answered the question yet. If the question is phrased, "Must a penitent believer be baptized to be saved?" then John 3:5-8 indicates that baptism is indeed essential. But the question should really be asked: "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.

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—

¹ Martin Luther, *The Large Catechism* (1530), translated by F. Bente and W. H. T. Dau, *Triglot Concordia: The Symbolical Books of the Ev. Lutheran Church* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1921) 565-773.

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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 definition quoted above.

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

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 really 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

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).

⁵ Matthew George Easton, *Easton Illustrated Bible Dictionary* (3rd ed., Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1897), <http://bible.crosswalk.com/Dictionaries/EastonBibleDictionary/>.

⁶ Of course, numerous 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), and W. E. Vine, *An Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words* (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1940).

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Pharisees were scholars who should have known better. On the other hand, 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.

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.

The "outside the covenant" argument

Recall that we've always taught that Bible history should be divided between the Patriarchal, the Mosaic, and the Christian dispensations, each dispensation having a distinctive covenant with God, that being a distinctive means of salvation.⁷ In each dispensation, God has had a covenant under which sin was forgiven. And in each dispensation God has forgiven sin and has accepted people outside the terms of the stated covenant—even when the terms of the covenant were stated in terms that indicated that the terms of the covenant were mandatory.

The Patriarchal dispensation

In the Patriarchal 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).

And yet, at the same time 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 Patriarchal Dispensation. Melchizedek did not receive the promises made to the Jews. And yet he was a priest of God. He was accepted outside the covenant then in effect.

⁷ References to dispensations have been correctly criticized at times to the extent that we have ignored the substantial commonality between the Patriarchal, Mosaic, and Christian dispensations.

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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 says that 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).

And yet 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—quite outside the Mosaic covenant. David wrote in response to God’s forgiveness—

(Psa. 51:16-17) 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.

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.

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.

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

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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).

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) 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 Christ.

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) 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.

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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) [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.

"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

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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.⁸

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

CHAPTER 7
DOES GOD MAKE EXCEPTIONS? PART II

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, but also 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.

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 must lead to the conclusion that the apostles received the Holy Spirit at Pentecost and yet they weren't baptized other than by the Spirit.

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 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

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message” and clearly cannot be the apostles themselves. And those who were baptized were “added to their number”—plainly indicating that the apostles 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 they all 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.

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 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 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 despite a faulty baptism, we should nonetheless urge them to be properly baptized, just as Cornelius was.

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

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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 baptism 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.

It seems most likely that these 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.

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 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.

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

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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.

And so, where does this leave us? Ironically, Acts has been preached repeatedly in the Churches of Christ as teaching the necessity of water baptism of believers. And yet Acts is the very book that demonstrates the possibility of exceptions to the usual practice of the Spirit (and hence salvation) being received at the moment of water 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, frequently granting forgiveness to those with penitent faith outside the specific terms of his covenant.

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 descendents. And even Jesus died. “The last enemy to be destroyed is death” (1 Cor. 15:26).

And yet at 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.

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!”

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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) “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—

(Job 40:2,8) “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.

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

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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.

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) “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.

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) 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.

Discussion questions—

1. 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?
2. In Paul’s terminology, is baptism a work we do or a gift we receive?
3. Is it possible to have a genuine faith and to be genuinely penitent and yet fail to be properly baptized in all good faith?
4. 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”?

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5. If you have a study Bible, check the notes on baptism. What do your Bible's notes say constitutes a good baptism?
6. 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?
7. 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?
8. 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?
9. Were the apostles baptized? If so, when? By whom? If so, why doesn't the Bible record it?
10. Why doesn't Luke tell us whether Apollos was re-baptized when he reports that the Ephesians were?
11. Do you agree with the author that receipt of the Holy Spirit receives greater emphasis in the scriptures than baptism?
12. Do you agree that God has sometimes saved people during New Testament times without baptism?
13. 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?
14. 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?
15. 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?
16. What might cause someone to celebrate the damnation of others?

CHAPTER 8 THE NATURE OF GOD'S HEART

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 his 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.

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) 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

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

Gispen, following earlier Jewish commentators, believes the ban was provoked by Nadab and Abihu’s drunkenness, which had led them into such error.⁹

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

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.

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.

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 men 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) 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 gracious to

⁹ G. J. Wenham, *The Book of Leviticus, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1979).

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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.¹⁰

Certainly, our God is not to be trifled with. But remember that this is the same God who forgave the uncleanness of the Northern Kingdom worshippers at Hezekiah’s request. This is the same God who judges the heart—and so we understand that God—who knows our hearts perfectly—judged the hearts of Nadab and Abihu as unworthy of their very important office.

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) 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 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.

Uzzah, however, is a case where the man punished appears to have had a good heart. 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

¹⁰ Thanks to Al Maxey for bringing this argument to my attention.

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

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 anyway he saw fit. Nothing in scripture indicates that Uzzah was damned for his innocent mistake. 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

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wished in both cases to bring to the attention of his people the importance of getting these things right.

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.

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,¹¹ 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:

(Prov. 21:2-3) 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) "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,

¹¹ For example, Lev. 16, dealing with Day of Atonement, and Lev. 4 and 5, dealing with sacrifices for unintentional sins.

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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.

(Amos 5:21-24) “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!”

(Micah 6:6-8) 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) 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!

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

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were 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 can 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 ultimately 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) 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) 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) "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. 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—

(James 2:17-19) 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

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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) 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?

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“Christ did not send me to baptize”

How do we deal with the fact that Paul wrote—

(1 Cor. 1:17) 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.¹² 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. Somehow, in our zeal to preach the doctrine of baptism, we’ve sometimes lost our priorities.

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.

¹² Count from *QuickVerse*TM software.

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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.

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) "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?

Other verses use "baptize" as a metaphor.

(Mark 10:36-40) "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

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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 water baptism:

(Acts 10:47) "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 belie 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.¹³

"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."¹⁴

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.

The example of Jesus' healing

A very familiar story is told in Matthew:

(Matt. 9:1-8) 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."

¹³ *Epistle of Barnabas* 11:11, circa 133 A.D., quoted by Everett Ferguson, *Early Christians Speak* (Ft. Worth: Sweet Publishing Group, 1971) (hereafter, "Ferguson"), 33.

¹⁴ *Hermas, The Shepherd*, Mandate IV:iii.1, circa 136 A.D., quoted by Ferguson, 33.

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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) In him and through faith in him we may approach God with freedom and confidence.

(Heb 4:16) 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!

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, but we simply hear what we are to believe, and that we are to confess, but we need only confess what we are to believe. 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! 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 to his son from demon possession “if you can do anything.”

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(Mark 9:23-24) “‘If you can?’” said Jesus. “Everything is possible for him who believes.”

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)?

The believer’s wedding ceremony?

It has often been argued that baptism is analogous to a wedding.¹⁵ 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.

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.

¹⁵ 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 original.

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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 took¹⁶ Rebekah, and she became his wife; and he loved her: and Isaac was comforted after his mother's death.

The marriage of Jacob and Leah was similarly accomplished:

(Gen. 29:21-23) 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

¹⁶ The NIV translates "took" as "married," but the word certainly doesn't refer to having a wedding.

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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 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 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 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

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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 man or woman 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.

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 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 notice 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 Patriarchal, Mosaic, and Christian dispensations, we see God making repeated exceptions from the stated pattern of how

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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 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.

John 4:2-3 makes it clear that those without faith in Jesus are lost. This certainly seems to deny salvation to Jews and Moslems, 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 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 “faith only” verses were written and when the “faith plus baptism” verses were 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 “born of water and the Spirit” (John 2:5) will be saved. Which is the weightier doctrine? Which is closer to the heart of God?

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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6. The far, far greater emphasis that scriptures give faith over water 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 water 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) “If you can?” said Jesus. “**Everything** is possible for him who **believes.**”

(John 1:12-13) 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) 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) “**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) “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.”

(John 6:29) Jesus answered, “The work of God is this: to **believe** in the one he has sent.”

(John 6:35) 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) “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) “I tell you the truth, **he who believes** has everlasting life.”

(John 7:38-39) “**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.

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(John 11:25-26) 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) “I have come into the world as a light, so that **no one who believes** in me should stay in darkness.”

(John 20:31) 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) “All the prophets testify about him that **everyone who believes** in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.”

(Acts 13:38-39) “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) They replied, “**Believe** in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved—you and your household.”

(Rom. 1:16-17) 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) 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) 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) 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**.

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(Rom. 5:1-2) 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) Christ is the end of the law so that there may be righteousness for **everyone who believes**.

(Rom. 10:9-13) 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 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) 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) “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) 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) 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) 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) 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) 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

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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 Thess. 2:13) 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) 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) 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) 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) 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) **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) 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) 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 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 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.

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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). 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 that 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?

9. Our God keeps his promises (Num. 23:19; Jos. 23:14; 2 Cor. 1:20; Titus 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. 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.

10. 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) "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."

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 another 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—even more so than other forms of obedience. As Beasley-Murray writes—

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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

So suppose that this person declines baptism, do we treat him as a member of the congregation? I think not. In theological terms, therefore, I suppose I'm against "open membership." This is because we are dealing with an exception to a rule here—not a rule. If we aren't careful, we'll quickly allow the exception to swallow the rule and we'll stop bothering to baptize our converts. It's an easy path from believing that God will overlook the failure of a penitent believer to be properly baptized in good faith to believing that baptism is just unnecessary. We can't allow that to happen. Indeed, we are commanded not to allow that to happen.

Now I don't want to be understood as agreeing with many who teach that baptism is a condition to church membership but not to salvation. Baptism is indeed the occasion of our salvation.

This brings me to a pet peeve. The new fashion is to speak of the "churched" and "unchurched" rather than the "saved" and the "lost." Evidently, the assumption is that all who have a Christian church home should be presumed saved and thus not someone to be evangelized. But quite obviously, this is not always the case—even if we were to completely ignore the doctrine of baptism.

Take, for example, the millions who are nominally Catholic, Orthodox, or Lutheran but who've never been to church since confirmation. In many countries, being a church member is little different from being a citizen. People are just born Catholic and are never really converted. Of course, this isn't always the case, but some countries have church attendance rates of less than 3% while having membership rates of nearly 100%. These "churched" people need a Savior!

On the other hand, I can fully appreciate the feelings of those who take offense at Church of Christ members going around seeking to "convert" people who've already been saved. We can do better, I'm sure.

It would be great if we could present the gospel as Paul did to the Ephesians: "Have you received the Holy Spirit?" This would, after all, moot all the other issues. But there aren't many people who could intelligently answer that question (and it would treat

² G. R. Beasley-Murray, 92.

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as lost many within the Churches of Christ who have received the Holy Spirit but refuse to admit it). And so, how do we distinguish those whom we ought to convert from those who are already on the path to heaven?

It's just not enough to ask, "Have you been baptized?" or even "Have you been baptized by immersion on a confession of your faith for the forgiveness of sins?" Not that these are bad questions—it's just that they aren't the sorts of questions that speak to the heart. And it's really more important that we learn about the heart of a potential convert than his or her baptism—isn't it? I mean, what are faith and repentance if not issues of the heart? And how else would we rescue those who've been baptized without a true commitment?

I've heard some ask potential converts whether they've made a commitment to Jesus. This question speaks both to faith and to repentance and so seems a good place to start, to me.

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.

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 believer's prayer, and are therefore baptized after salvation. We are supposed to be baptized *into* salvation.

However, 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 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.

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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 and 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.

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.

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.

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**PART V
HARD QUESTIONS**

**CHAPTER 10
SOME 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, "faith only" and "faith plus baptism." Isn't it possible that the "faith only" 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 "faith only" 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 "faith only" 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 oversimplification 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"?

Q. But Paul wasn't saved—didn't have his sins washed away—until he was baptized, and he plainly had faith long before then.

A. This question misses my entire point. I'm not teaching, as many do, that we are necessarily saved when we believe. Rather, I'm teaching that the gospel plan and what is supposed to be normal is that we are saved when we're baptized. But I'm also teaching that someone who has genuine faith and penitence but who fails to be

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properly baptized out of an honest mistake will nonetheless be saved. Thus, Paul is a classic example of the plan as God intends it. Cornelius is an example that proves that God is not limited to the normal and intended plan. God can, does, and will make exceptions. “This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to *all* who believe” (Rom. 3:22).

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) 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.”¹ I guess my point is

¹ *Essays. First Series. Self-Reliance* (1841).

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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.

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

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we seek to make the boundaries clear, we constantly run into new issues that require further explanation and clarification—not to mention 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 language. 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) The spiritual man makes judgments about all things, but he himself is not subject to any man’s judgment

(Rom. 12:2) 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: when the believer first believes and repents.

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

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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) No, we speak of God's secret wisdom, a wisdom that has been hidden and that God destined for our glory before time began.

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?

CHAPTER 11 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.

Only God is the judge. But as Paul did in Ephesus, we must inquire of those we encounter whether they truly are Christians. And even if someone we encounter is saved, that person may well be in serious spiritual danger. Being saved is not the

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same as staying saved. For example, someone who has left the fellowship and support of fellow Christians is in spiritual trouble, even if properly baptized.

Jesus left the 99 sheep to rescue one. The one he went to rescue was already one of his sheep but was in great danger nonetheless. We need to vigorously seek not only the lost, but also the straying 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 faith may not be real. 1 John 4:2-3 teaches, 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. The Mormons, for example, teach the same doctrine of baptism that the Churches of Christ do, but they also are arguably polytheistic. Of course, not all Mormons have been taught or even believe the polytheistic elements of the religion. Many other denominations have sufficiently unorthodox teachings that it's fair to question their salvation.

But 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, it's clear that 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.

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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 cover 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 earlier said that 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.

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- 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. If another Church of Christ in town chooses to practice open membership, that is, to not insist on baptizing the already saved, it's their call and I wouldn't for a minute question their salvation. They may even be right in so doing. 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.

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 just published:

[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

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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 cause of Christ, such as baptism of believers by immersion for forgiveness of sins and weekly observance of the Lord's Supper.²

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 may have an attraction

² Jeff W. Childers, Douglas A. Foster & Jack R. Reese, *The CRUX of the Matter, Crisis, Tradition, and the Future of the Churches of Christ* (Abilene, TX: ACU Press, 2001).

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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.³

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 Post-modern 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.

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

³ Undated letter quoted by Dale Jenkins, *Music Issues: Praise Teams, Choirs, etc.* (March 30, 2001), http://www.grannywhitechurch.com/pub/misc_archive/Music-Dale%20Jenkins.doc.

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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 remotely tempted to leave my Church of Christ home church.

However, I must admit to being somewhat spoiled, having a congregation blessed with an excellent eldership and a talented, dedicated membership. It is a great joy to be a part of this congregation. But I know that not everyone is so lucky.

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.

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?

CHAPTER 12
IS THE CHURCH OF CHRIST A DENOMINATION?

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:*⁴

1. A large group of religious congregations united under a common faith and name and organized under a single administrative and legal hierarchy.

*Webster’s Revised Unabridged Dictionary:*⁵

3. A class, or society of individuals, called by the same name; a sect; as, a denomination of Christians.

*WordNet 1.6:*⁶

1. a group of religious congregations having its own organization and a distinctive faith.

The *Encarta Dictionary: English (North America)*⁷ 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

⁴ (4th Ed., Boston, Mass.: Houghton Mifflin Co., 2000).

⁵ (Plainfield, NJ: MICRA, Inc., 1998).

⁶ (Princeton University, 1997).

⁷ www.encyclopedia.com (2005).

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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—

May a person who **is** a Christian, but in a denomination, **remain** there and be saved?⁸

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.”⁹

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.¹⁰ 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 in 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?

⁸ (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.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 29.

¹⁰ 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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- 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) 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 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

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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) 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.”

Discussion questions—

1. How do the people you know, outside the Churches of Christ, use “denomination” in everyday speech?
2. How does the Church of Christ use the term?
3. Is the Church of Christ a denomination?
4. Should we be at the forefront of unity efforts?
5. How might we encourage greater unity without boasting?

CHAPTER 13 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

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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.

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

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expectation that the Holy Spirit's actual indwelling would not be received, and yet each of these believers did receive it.¹¹ Their baptism was valid 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) 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) And so John came, baptizing in the desert region and preaching a **baptism** of repentance **for** the forgiveness of sins.

(Luke 3:3) He went into all the country around the Jordan, preaching a **baptism** of repentance **for** the forgiveness of sins.

(Acts 8:16b) [T]hey had simply been **baptized into** the name of the Lord Jesus.

(Acts 10:48) 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) On hearing this, they were **baptized into** the name of the Lord Jesus.

(Rom. 6:3-4) 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.

(1 Cor. 1:13-15) 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

¹¹ 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.

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you except Crispus and Gaius, so no one can say that you were **baptized into** my name.

(1 Cor. 10:2) They were all **baptized into** Moses in the cloud and in the sea.

(1 Cor. 12:13) 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) [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) 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.¹²

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

¹² See footnote 1 on page 31.

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would make perfect sense. Now try to substitute “for” or “in order to”¹³ 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.¹⁴

(Matt. 28:19) 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) [T]hey had simply been **baptized for** the name of the Lord Jesus.

(Acts 10:48) 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.

(Acts 19:5) On hearing this, they were **baptized for** the name of the Lord Jesus.

(Rom. 6:3-4) 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) 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) They were all **baptized for** Moses in the cloud and in the sea.

(1 Cor. 12:13) 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) [F]or all of you who were **baptized for** Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.

¹³ 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.

¹⁴ 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.

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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 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

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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:

(Matt. 3:13-17) 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 fulfill**¹⁵ **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

¹⁵ *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).

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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.
- 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.¹⁶

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..

¹⁶ 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.

BORN OF WATER

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.¹⁷

¹⁷ 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).

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