

## Baptism and its meanings

Various explanations have been offered for the baptism of Christ over the years, some even including the notion that baptism is an irrelevant exercise that you may receive or not, depending on how you feel about it. Among the explanations offered we read that baptism,

- 1) Is a direct act of grace, and, when applied by a person properly qualified, gives to the soul positive goodness.
- 2) Is a direct act of grace giving only the capacity for goodness, which, if fostered, will lead to salvation.<sup>1</sup>
- 3) Is a seal of grace, thereby confirming divine blessing to the soul.<sup>2</sup>
- 4) Is only a sign of initiation into the religion of the Lord Jesus Christ.
- 5) Is a symbol or token of regeneration, to be given or received only by those who exhibit true signs of regeneration.<sup>3</sup>
- 6) Is a symbol of purification only.<sup>4</sup>

None of these explanations is found in any context of the Bible.

Modes of baptism have included immersion in water, affusion (pouring), or sprinkling.<sup>5</sup> In the New Testament baptism was by immersion.

Tertullian says, in referring to the worship of Isis and Mithra, that “In certain sacred rites of the heathen the mode of initiation is by baptism.” The term “initiation” shows that it was to the Mysteries of these divinities that he referred. This baptism was by immersion, and seems to have been a rough and formidable process, for we find that he who passed through the purifying waters, “if he survived,” was then admitted to the knowledge of the Mysteries. For undergoing these punishments the pagan priests promised the initiates “... regeneration, and the pardon of all their perjuries.”<sup>6 7</sup> Here as elsewhere, pagan rites typically had one or all of these characteristics: regeneration through the performance of the

---

<sup>1</sup> Jesus said, “...no one is good except God alone.” Mark 10:18; Luke 18:19.

<sup>2</sup> Paul wrote that the Holy Spirit seals the Christian. Eph. 4:30. This explanation might confuse baptism with circumcision.

<sup>3</sup> This test is nowhere mentioned in the New Testament.

<sup>4</sup> Peter says that baptism is not merely an outward sign of cleansing, or purification. 1 Pet. 3:21.

<sup>5</sup> Essig, Montgomery F., *The Comprehensive Analysis of the Bible*, “Baptism.”

<sup>6</sup> *Tertulian De Baptismo*, Christian Classics Ethereal Library, New Advent, Translated By Rev. S. Thelwall.

<sup>7</sup> Hislop, A., *The Two Babylons*, (Neptune: Loizeaux Brothers), 1959. p. 132.

initiate, purification through the cleansing quality of the water, or a benefit conferred by a qualified representative of the god.

There are numerous examples throughout history where people used baptism to bring new members into a religious body, or to signify the regeneration of the subject. The Jews baptized their proselytes after the new convert had received circumcision. The Hindus of India practice a kind of baptism today. The Brahmins make it their distinguishing boast that they are "twice born" men, and that, as such, they are sure of eternal happiness. In ancient Babylon, baptism conferred a new birth.<sup>8</sup>

Religious groups frequently offer more than one explanation for the meaning of their baptism. But what was the meaning of "baptism" to the early Christians? Was it the baptismal regeneration<sup>9</sup> as practiced by the pagans? Or, if not, then what was the meaning, or meanings, attached by the Apostles to the baptism of Christ?

## Making Disciples.

Matthew 28:18 And Jesus came up and spoke to them, saying, "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. 19 "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, 20 teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age."<sup>10</sup> i

Jesus, in the Great Commission of Matthew Chapter 28, tells how the Apostles were to "make disciples." He said, "Go...and make disciples...baptizing them...and teaching them..."<sup>11</sup> The Apostles had **two things to do to make disciples**. Doing the second, "teaching," beyond the rudimentary principles makes little sense if one avoids doing the first, "baptizing." The reason this is true is explained by the Lord's use of the phrase, "...unto the name."

"Unto the name" was a phrase used by the Biblical Hellenistic world as a legal and commercial formula. The idea involved is the transfer of ownership to an account. The expression also carries the idea of dedication. Through baptism *unto the name of someone* the one who is baptized becomes the possession of, and comes under the protection of, the one whose name he bears; he is under the

---

<sup>8</sup> Encyclopaedia Britannica, macro. Vol. 12, (Chicago: Benton), 1974. *Mystery Religions*.

<sup>9</sup> The theological doctrine that regeneration is effected in and through baptism.

<sup>10</sup> *New American Standard Bible : 1995 Update*. LaHabra, CA : The Lockman Foundation, 1995, S. Mt 28:18

<sup>11</sup> For clarity I have omitted the prepositional phrases.

control of the effective power of the **name** and the One who bears the name; i.e., he is dedicated to them.<sup>12 13 14</sup>

For example, there is a fragment of pottery that has survived from Thebes of the Second Century on which is inscribed an order to an official of a state granary to transfer wheat to another person's account. It reads:

Crispus to Na...?... Transfer *to the name* of Vestidia Secunda, represented by Pollia Maria the younger, the two and a half and a third and a twenty-fourth artabae of wheat...

Crispus of Thebes had sold some wheat to Vestidia Secunda and the voucher carried the typical formula of a transfer of ownership: “transfer to the name.” This is identical to the New Testament phrase, “in the name” or “unto the name.”

In the New Testament the Apostles were told to,

Matthew 28:19 "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit."<sup>15</sup>

In writing about the Great Commission Matthew used the same Greek formula. The phrase “... baptizing them in the name of ...” means by baptism to bind them to recognize and publicly acknowledge the dignity and authority of the Godhead. In this case the penitent believer is to be baptized in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit—that is, unto the name of the Godhead.<sup>16</sup> Baptism thus publicly acknowledges the authority and command of the Godhead and places them under the authority of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Therefore, when a new convert was baptized unto the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, he was—as it were—transferred from the previous ownership (i.e., the dominion of Satan, or another discipleship, etc.) unto the new ownership of the Godhead.<sup>17</sup>

This principle explains why, in the account of Acts 19, the followers of John the Baptist were required to receive the baptism of Christ. They had received

---

<sup>12</sup> Bauer, Walter, Gingrich, F. Wilbur, and Danker, Frederick W., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press) 1979. (εἰς (τὸ) ὄνομα τινος.)

<sup>13</sup> Thayer, Joseph Henry, D.D., *Greek English Lexicon of the New Testament*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House) 1962. (ὄνομα)

<sup>14</sup> Deissmann, Adolf, *Light from the Ancient East*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House) 1978. p. 121.

<sup>15</sup> Emphasis mine, author.

<sup>16</sup> “in the name of Christ” is equivalent.

<sup>17</sup> [Note: The “name” is the authority or religion. See comment by Cornelius Tacitus in his *Annals*, “...Christus, the founder of the name...”]

John's baptism; therefore, they were disciples of John. As servants of John these men had not received the Holy Spirit, but as disciples of Christ they would.

Also, a reading in 1 Corinthians becomes clearer,

1 Corinthians 1:13 Has Christ been divided? Paul was not crucified for you, was he? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul? 14 I thank God that I baptized none of you, except Crispus and Gaius, that no man should say you were baptized in my name.

Paul was not repudiating the doctrine of baptism; rather, he was stating that only a baptism unto the discipleship of Christ was proper. Otherwise, they were improperly dedicated to Apollos, Cephas or Paul. Paul was not making disciples for himself, but for Christ. If he had baptized in his name, they would have been his disciples.

Peter's words to the Jews in Acts chapter 2 are in accordance with the command of the Lord in Matthew. There is no distinction in the effect of the original language between the Lord's "*in the name of the Father, Son and the Holy Spirit,*" and Peter's "*...in the name of Jesus Christ.*"<sup>18</sup> The implication is that they would receive the baptism of Christ, or else, they would not be his disciples.

Peter's remark that they were baptized into Christ "...for the remission of sins" tells of a benefit to be conferred upon them as disciples of Christ. That benefit is simply not available anywhere else, or under any other discipleship.

## **The New Birth.**

John says in his gospel that Nicodemus came to Christ by night and spoke with Him. The discussion turned to the kingdom of God. Jesus told Nicodemus,

John 3:3 ... "Truly, truly I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God."

Nicodemus, a prominent Jew of the 1<sup>st</sup> Century, was also a ranking Pharisee. He had a seat on the Great Sanhedrin. He had a thorough knowledge of the Law of Moses and the traditions of the Jews. He would have been familiar with the Jewish laws concerning the making of proselytes.<sup>19</sup> Nicodemus knew that there were two broad categories of proselytes: the Proselyte of the Gate, and the Proselyte of Righteousness.<sup>20</sup> Requirements placed on the candidates were as follows:

---

<sup>18</sup> Robertson, A.T., *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, Vol. III Acts of the Apostles. (Nashville: Broadman Press), 1930.

<sup>19</sup> Jeremias, Joachim, *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus*, (Philadelphia, Fortress Press), 1985. p. 320.

<sup>20</sup> *Enhanced Strong's Lexicon*, (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc.) 1995.

### **The Proselyte of the Gate:**

- were those who fear God.<sup>21</sup>
- only professed their faith in the God of Israel.
- only bound themselves to the seven Noachic commandments.
- did not receive circumcision.
- did not receive baptism.

### **Proselyte of Righteousness:**

- became “children of the covenant.”
- perfect Israelites in every respect regarding duties, privileges, except they could not serve on The Sanhedrin.
- were required to receive circumcision.
- were required to receive baptism.
- made sacrifice (heifer, or pair of turtle doves).

Edersheim says concerning the baptism of the Proselytes of Righteousness,

“...the person to be baptized, having cut his hair and nails, undressed completely, made fresh profession of his faith before the ‘fathers of the baptism,’ and was then immersed completely, so that every part of the body was touched by the water.”

“The **change of condition** was regarded as complete. The waters of baptism were to him in very truth, though in a far different from the Christian sense, the ‘bath of regeneration.’ As he stepped out of these waters he was considered ‘born anew’ in the language of the Rabbis, as if he were ‘a little child just born,’ as a ‘child of one day.’”

“He was to regard himself as a new man in reference to his past. Country, home, habits, friends and relations were all changed. The past, with all that had belonged to it, was past, and he was a new man, the old, with all its defilements, was buried in the waters of baptism.”<sup>22</sup>

In other words, the proselyte was born again, but this time as a citizen of Israel. Nicodemus knew what this meant, and he caught the words of Jesus, but could not accept what the Lord said. His answer shows that he was confused. Why should a man be born again who was already born of the seed of Abraham as Nicodemus was, a man who was a practitioner of the Law, and a member of the Great Sanhedrin? To be born again made sense to him only in reference to

---

<sup>21</sup> Acts 13:16, 26, 43 (religious); 50 (devout).

<sup>22</sup> Edersheim, Alfred, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co.) 1987. Appendix XII.

proselytes. He was already a citizen of the nation of Israel. He expected the blessing of God to come to him because of the birth he already had. But Jesus said,

John 3:5 ... “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the spirit he cannot enter into the kingdom of God.”

Entrance into the kingdom of God requires rebirth. Even the sons of Abraham are not qualified to enter on basis of their fleshly birth. They, too, must become “proselytes” (as it were) of the kingdom of God. To *see* the kingdom of God one must be born again. To *enter* the kingdom of God one must be born of the **water and the spirit**.

The word translated, “again,” is the Greek word, *anōthen*. The word had a dual meaning: “again, and “from above.” Elsewhere in his gospel, John uses the word with the meaning of “from above.” The new birth may be understood in a dual sense also. The new birth is twofold: it is **outward** by the baptism of Christ, and **inward** by the renewal that comes from above through the Holy Spirit.<sup>23 24</sup>

## Participation in the Death of Christ.

Paul said that for a married woman to be released from the “law of her husband” the husband must die. (I Cor. 7:39) The principle cited is that death separates one thing from another. In this case, a woman from her husband. She cannot lawfully remarry until he dies; otherwise, she is guilty of adultery. In a similar way, birth as an Israelite bound one to the Law of Moses. Israelites could not change that relationship. Only death could free them from the Law. Whereas the Law of Moses, or sin, had claim on a man—and under the requirements of law that man must die to escape the claim—there would seem to be no recourse except his own death in order to escape. But the painful truth is that his death leaves him in a state worse than his previous servitude. How then can he escape? Or, in the words of Paul,

Romans 7:24 “...who will set me free from the body of this death?”

God’s answer was as profound as it was unexpected—Jesus Christ. The death of Christ upon the cross was special in the sense that it was substitutionary. His death substitutes for the death of the sinner. The penitent believer dies with Christ in a vicarious sense. The penalty for his sin is paid in Christ, and that is exactly where his baptism into Christ puts him. The Jew is made to die to the Law “...through the body of Christ.” He is therefore released from the Law—in Christ.<sup>25</sup>

---

<sup>23</sup> *An Intermediate Greek English Lexicon*, ἄνωθεν.

<sup>24</sup> *Greek English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains*, ἄνωθεν.

<sup>25</sup> Romans 6:3-11; 7:1-6.

Christ lived under the Law of Moses as an Israelite, a descendant of David after the flesh, and clearly obligated to all the provisions of the code. When Christ died He was freed from His obligation to the Law just as any other Israelite would be freed by death. But in a special sense, Christ has become the representative Israelite.

This means that Christ's life and death are viewed by God as a substitute for the elect. And God does this because of Christ's role as The Lamb. In other words, His death may be substituted for someone else's—yours in fact—if you are a Jew and must die in order to escape your obligation to the Law of Moses, or, if you are a Gentile and must die in order to escape the consequences of sin.

The (substitutionary) death of Christ may be claimed by faith—a minor concession on the part of someone who may need to be freed. But the Apostle Paul went further and said:

Romans 6:3 Or do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus have been baptized into His death?

and again:

Romans 6:4 ...we have been buried with Him through baptism into death...

Participation in the death of Christ is participation in God's sentence of death as it was carried out in the Lamb. All those who are "...in Christ," or baptized into Him, have this spiritual nearness. They die with Him.

Moreover, participation in the death of Christ is the choice of His suffering as a way of life; it is the "*Via Dolorosa*" (the Way of Suffering) God has ordained as the way of life in this world. God prescribes this way of suffering in opposition to the way of pleasure that the world advocates. A believer's baptism is the introductory act that leads to a life of humble submission to suffering—the way of Christ.

## **An Appeal To God For A Good Conscience.**

The baptism of Christ also stands between the life in servitude to sin and the new, regenerated life in Christ. Paul said,

Romans 6:4 ... we have been buried with Him through baptism into death, in order that as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life.

Romans 6:8 ... if we have died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with Him.

The life that we have in Him is the life that God recognizes and approves. Before receiving that life, we were dead in sin, just as the people of the antediluvian world. But God, in Christ, has caused us to be “born again to a living hope through the resurrection.”<sup>26</sup> There is no condemnation for us in Christ. Therefore, in Him, our conscience is clear and clean. As Peter said:

1 Peter 3:21 And corresponding to that, baptism now saves you—not the removal of dirt from the flesh, but an appeal to God for a good conscience—through the resurrection of Jesus Christ...

In this passage Peter says that the baptism of Christ corresponds to the way the Genesis Flood saved Noah and his family. Before the Flood, Noah lived in a world given over to sin and violence, a world that men had corrupted to the point that God decided to destroy it. Only Noah, his wife and three sons with their wives were transported by the waters of the Flood into a new world of righteousness, a world cleansed of its corruption. The baptism of Christ stands between the world of sin in the flesh and the world of righteousness in the Son. As Peter says, corresponding to the way the Flood transported Noah to safety, so does baptism save the believer by uniting him with Christ in His death to sin, and in His resurrected life in the spirit.<sup>27</sup>

Therefore, the baptism of Christ is an outward washing of the body that is not merely a washing of purification as the Jews practiced, but is a request for forgiveness.<sup>28</sup> It is not the performance of the candidate for baptism that purifies him but the blood of Christ, through faith. Nor do the waters of baptism have special properties that cause them to cleanse from sin. The cleansing from sin is through faith in Christ to those who are his disciples.

Paul said that Ananias told him,

Acts 22:16 ‘And now why do you delay? Arise, and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on His name.’

**Linguistic authorities** say that “be baptized” means literally “cause yourself to be baptized,” or “suffer someone to baptize you.”<sup>29</sup> “Wash away your sins” states the purpose of the baptism.<sup>30 31</sup> This signifies that baptism is for the

---

<sup>26</sup> 1 Peter 1:3.

<sup>27</sup> 1 Peter 3:18.

<sup>28</sup> Kittel, Gerhard, and Friedrich, Gerhard, Editors, *The Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, Abridged in One Volume*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company) 1985.

<sup>29</sup> βάπτισαι - verb, first aorist, middle voice: (not passive as in Acts 2:38) “cause yourself to be baptized, or “suffer someone to baptize you.”

<sup>30</sup> ἀπόλουσαι - “get washed off” as in I Cor. 6:11 [“washed, sanctified, justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ”].

<sup>31</sup> The New Bible Commentary says the verbs in this passage are in the Greek middle voice and might be rendered: “Get yourself baptized and get your



remission of sins or the cleansing of sin. Paul's sins were not forgiven when he saw and heard the Lord on the way to Damascus. As Paul's body was to be washed in the act of baptism, so his sins were to be forgiven. "Calling on his name" means invoking the name of Christ in so doing. Here baptism is clearly set forth as one of the conditions of the remission of sins, and not merely as a symbol of what had already been done. And "getting oneself properly baptized" involves "calling on the name" of the one who has the power to forgive sins—Jesus Christ.

Examples of the use of His name in this sense are in Acts chapter 10, and I John chapter 2,

Acts 10:43 "Of Him all the prophets bear witness that through His name everyone who believes in Him receives forgiveness of sins."

1 John 2:12 I am writing to you, little children, because your sins are forgiven you for His name's sake.

The admonition Ananias gave Paul is in the same form as Peter's statement in his first letter. An appeal is an earnest request. When one "calls upon the name of the Lord" it is an earnest appeal for forgiveness based upon the authority of the name. Baptism (the washing away of sins) and the appeal to God (the calling on His name) are inseparably connected.

## **Baptism—to Receive It is to Add to Our Fulfillment of the Righteous Commands of God.**

Matthew says in his gospel,

Matthew 3:13 Then Jesus \*arrived from Galilee at the Jordan *coming* to John, to be baptized by him. 14 But John tried to prevent Him, saying, "I have need to be baptized by You, and do You come to me?" 15 But Jesus answering said to him, "Permit *it* at this time; for in this way it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness." Then he permitted Him.<sup>32</sup>

It is easy for us to see how Jesus could have avoided this lowly act of bathing. John expected Him to avoid it. Yet, He didn't. Why? Because, He said, "...it is fitting to...fulfill all righteousness." And what does it mean to: "...fulfill all righteousness."? Simply put, the Lord considered John's call to a baptism of repentance as part of the righteous commands of God.

---

sins washed away." "Calling on His name..." here means "invoking His name" by confessing it in baptism.

<sup>32</sup> Matthew 3:13-15.

Even though Jesus had no need of repentance either from sin or dead works, nevertheless, He found it necessary to receive the baptism of John because as a Jew He was under the same call as his brethren. That call came from John, but it originated with the Father; therefore, Jesus shows by His example that no call that comes from God ought to be ignored.

Remember also that the baptism of Christ superseded the baptism of John—even though the baptism of John came from God. A higher and loftier purpose in the baptism of Jesus replaces the purpose of John's baptism. If Jesus would not refuse the baptism of John, how could we refuse the baptism of Jesus?

### **Postscript: a word about works of merit.**

The New Testament clearly teaches that salvation is by grace through faith, and not by works.<sup>33</sup> What this means is that the grace of God is not legalism; that is, the grace of God is not conferred because of the performance of the individual Christian. The grace of God comes to man through the performance of Christ.<sup>34</sup>

Often, a person who insists that the commands of God ought to be obeyed is called a legalist. But the person who thinks that he must obey God's commands, or live according to law, is not necessarily a legalist. A legalist is a person who thinks that if he keeps the law, that God will accept him on basis of his good behavior; i.e., his performance. But there is a difference between obeying a law because the law is from God, and **depending upon one's observance** of law in order to be saved. A person does not do a good deed so that God will recognize him, ignore his moral failures, and save him. A person does a good deed because it is the behavior that is **expected** of him.

Luke wrote the following, which Jesus said to His disciples,

Luke 17:10 ...you too, when you do all the things which are commanded you, say, "We are unworthy slaves; we have done only that which we ought to have done."

In short, there are no meritorious works—works that will atone for sin. To do everything commanded by God does not gain anything extra; we do not work to gain special merit. Doing good always is what God expects.

The baptism of Christ is one of the "ought to's". It is a command of God.<sup>35</sup>

If you have not thus far received the baptism of Christ, this writer urges you to do so.

---

<sup>1</sup> Scripture quotations are from the New American Standard Bible, (Cleveland: The World Publishing Company), 1963.

---

<sup>33</sup> Ephesians 2:8, 9.

<sup>34</sup> Romans 4:22-25; Hebrews 10:5-10.

<sup>35</sup> Mark 16:15, 16.