

Introduction

But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.

John 1:12-13

“Born of God.” This phrase brings to mind wonderful things: cleansing, forgiveness, renewal, hope, acceptance, fellowship, love, and salvation itself. This is intentional, since God knows that your soul truly hungers for all of these things.

We have all been born of humankind, and most of us have become disappointed and disillusioned with this birth. It is not just what we have been born *into* that has caused this, but also what we ourselves have done to our own innocence. The world is filled with sin and all the consequences *of* sin, but our own “world”—the sphere of our individual lives—has also been corrupted with *our* sin. Being “born of God” provides the redemption that we have been seeking. Our new birth in God through Christ gives us more than just absolution from our sins; it also makes it possible for us to have communion with God Himself.

But *how* is a person “born of God” (or, “born again”)? And *when* does this happen? The concept of one’s spiritual rebirth, as well as the occasion of that rebirth, is straightforward and uncomplicated: you die to your old life, and you are born into a new life with God. If you are not born *of* God, then you cannot be identified *with* God. If you do not “die” to your old life, you certainly cannot walk in newness of life with Christ. Simply put, being born of God is the process by which you are made a Christian. Likewise, if you are not born of God, then you have not yet become a Christian.

The method of becoming a child of God is extremely important to Him; therefore it must also be extremely important to you. But because it *is* so important to Him, you can be sure that His revealed instruction on the matter is very clear and not left to subjective opinions, including

yours or mine. A subject so crucial to our salvation cannot possibly be ambiguous or open to various interpretations—all of which are equally valid. It is impossible for us to teach divergent and contradictory methods of being born of God and yet somehow we all end up “in Christ” and as legitimate children of God.

So then, where are you personally in all of this? Have *you* been born of God—and if so, *how* and *when* did this happen? My purpose for asking is not to question your sincerity, for I already assume you are sincere. But no one is saved or justified by God based upon sincerity alone. God has provided the plan for *how* and *when* to be born of Him; your responsibility, as well as mine, is to conform to this plan to the very best of our ability. What we will cover from here forward may or may not support what *you* did, but it will provide biblical information on what a person *must* do in order to be born of God.

The proposition of this book is that **the New Testament teaches that we cannot be born of God—that is, we cannot become Christians—apart from being baptized *into* Christ.** Baptism marks the occasion of one’s conversion to Christ; it symbolizes the death and new birth of the soul that comes to God. Baptism is not a mere ceremonial rite performed *after* one’s conversion to Christ; it is a critical necessity *of* that conversion. There is not a single example of anyone in the New Testament becoming or being recognized as a Christian prior to his baptism, the event of his spiritual rebirth. We have no other instruction; we read of no other method; we are not obligated to obey any command other than what is given in Scripture.

Yet, despite all that the New Testament has to say on this—which is more than many people realize—baptism remains at the center of religious controversy. In fact, it is not an exaggeration to say that water baptism is perhaps one of the most misunderstood, misrepresented, and divisive subjects in the religious world today. Strong disagreement over

how to *become* a Christian creates a fundamental division among believers. This division prevents us from going forward with any other religious dialogue: if we cannot agree on how to *be* born of God, then we cannot talk about disagreements *among* those who are born of Him. Instead, we are divided over whether everyone who *claims* to be born of God really *is* born of Him.

The controversy over baptism largely centers around three major topics: the *role* of baptism in conversion; whether or not baptism is *essential* to salvation; and then *who* can be baptized. The controversy itself is one of the major rifts between denominations and non-denominational groups, as well as between denominations themselves. Every self-proclaimed Christian religion seems to have its own version of teaching on baptism. Hardly any of these religions are passive on the subject: either you accept its view on baptism, or you cannot be a part of that religion. In some cases, water baptism is a prerequisite for membership in a congregation *apart from* its connection to one's "born again" experience.

Adding to the controversy over baptism is the fact that not everyone is on the same page as to what the word actually means. In the Bible, "baptism" is a word transliterated (rather than translated) from the original Greek text in which the New Testament was written. The word that the New Testament writers used, by inspiration of the Holy Spirit, is the exact same word which we have adopted into our English language today. This means that whatever it meant to those who wrote it is *precisely* what it must mean to us who (allegedly) practice it. There can be no translating a word that does not need translating; there is no need to interpret a word whose meaning is self-evident. While other words' meanings can change over time, transliterated

words—like baptism, apostle, deacon, etc.—remain the same because we are literally using the language from which they came.¹

In the original (*Koine*) Greek of the New Testament, “baptism” always meant the same thing: immersion in (something); a whelming (of water, trials, etc.); to make fully wet; specifically, immersion in water as a religious rite as commanded by Christ and His apostles.² Baptism *never* meant pouring or sprinkling; none of the examples of baptism in the New Testament support such interpretations.³ Allegedly, pouring of water was introduced centuries after the church began in order to accommodate those on their deathbeds who wanted to be baptized but were too sick or frail to do so.⁴ Sprinkling of water likely was adopted from the ancient practice of sprinkling blood as a means of consecration (as in Exodus 24:8, Hebrews 9:19-22). We will assume that these methods came about with the best of intentions, but having the best of intentions is not interchangeable with *obedience to the command*. Uzzah had the best of intentions when he put out his hand to steady the ark of the covenant during its transport to Jerusalem, yet God struck him dead for irreverence (1 Samuel 6:3-8). Naaman also had the best of intentions when he expected Elisha to perform some great ceremony in order to heal his leprosy, yet he never would have been cleansed until he did what the prophet told him to do—

¹ If you were to look up “baptism” in a modern English dictionary, for example, you would find a variety of interpretations for this, including sprinkling, pouring, and figurative meanings. This is because such dictionaries define the word in its *contemporary* usage, and not what it meant and how it was used in the context of the New Testament. Thus, I have had people “prove” that baptism was *not* limited to immersion because Webster’s Dictionary told them so. This is neither an intelligent nor sincere approach to Bible study, yet there are many who put more faith in a modern dictionary than they do the actual Word of God.

² *Thayer’s Greek Definitions* [Strong’s #G908].

³ For example, one author—a Reformed minister—says: “The mode of baptism in Reformed theology is largely a matter of indifference,” since the emphasis is on the act itself, not how it is carried out (Richard L. Pratt, Jr., “Baptism as a Sacrament of the Covenant,” *Understanding Four View on Baptism*, ed. John H. Armstrong [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007], 66). Yet, the “act” is not even accomplished if it is not performed rightly. If one is not immersed in water, then he has not been baptized *differently* than someone else; instead, he has not been baptized at all.

⁴ Novatian (ca. AD 251) received “emergency baptism” by having water poured upon him while he laid upon his sickbed, believing that he would not survive immersion in water. Such a mode was later referred to as “clinical baptism.” Novation recovered, however, and was appointed as a priest, yet many doubted the authenticity of his baptism (Castelein, 140).

namely, dip himself seven times in the Jordan River (2 Kings 5:1-14). And Apollos had the best of intentions in preaching the message of John the Baptist, yet when he was confronted with the gospel of Christ he began to preach Jesus instead (Acts 18:24-28). Obedience to God's commands has always been more important than one's feelings or intentions.

Likewise, there are many people today who—with the best of intentions—believe that they are being born of God and thus saved through a means that God never revealed, the apostles never taught, and the early church never practiced. These people may support the practice of baptism itself, but they believe it is something to be taken care of *after* one's conversion, not an essential part *of* conversion. This reduces baptism to a mere ceremonial act rather than a necessary requirement of those who wish to be born of God.

It is true that baptism is rich with symbolism; it is *not* true that, because it *is* symbolic, it is therefore optional, expendable, or something other than an act of obedience to God. Baptism emulates Christ's death, burial, and resurrection; but He actually died, whereas the believer's death is symbolic; He actually rose from His actual death, whereas the believer is raised in a spiritual context; and so on. Nonetheless, if Christ (through His Word) commands a person who believes in Him to be baptized, then baptism is something *required* of that person and cannot be reduced to anything less than this. Commandments only need to be obeyed, not questioned or interpreted.

The act of baptism is not, however, a mere act of commandment-keeping. It is an illustration of spiritual resurrection, spiritual redemption, and the hope for a future with God. Baptism is nearly always mentioned (from Acts 2 onward) in direct connection with forgiveness, union with Christ, identity with Christ, membership in Christ's spiritual church, cleansing of the human conscience (from the guilt of sin), and calling upon the name of God for salvation. Every

time a Christian partakes of communion (the Lord’s Supper) he is reminded of the day of his conversion when *his* sins were forgiven because of Christ’s atoning death on the cross. In having *died* with Christ, the believer now *lives* with Him; in having died to sin, the believer now lives to God. The great transaction of when he became a “new creature” (cf. 2 Corinthians 5:17) was not merely something he felt in his heart, but was a real and historical event. Having died *with* Christ in baptism, the believer can now know that he will receive eternal life according to God’s promises (cf. 1 John 5:13).

There are not a variety of “faiths” or gospels taught in the New Testament, but only one. Likewise, there is only “one baptism” (Ephesians 4:5) that is required of you, not several, and not one *of* several. We cannot all claim “One gospel!” but have different (and contradictory) practices *of* that gospel. Likewise, we cannot all claim “One baptism!” but have different (and contradictory) practices of or beliefs about baptism. One author writes, “If a church’s *practice* is different from the practice of the church in the New Testament, it is likely that its *doctrine* is also different from first-century Christianity.”⁵ He means this in an ideal sense, as when the early Christians actually *did* what they were *instructed*. But the point still remains: variant practices will not legitimately arise from a singular instruction.

Believers are not divided on *every* biblical subject, however.⁶ On several significant points, most of those who call themselves Christians are in agreement. We know that we have sinned against God; we also know that God has provided in His Son the remedy for the self-inflicted sabotage of our spiritual well-being. We know that we need Christ’s redemption, and

⁵ F. LaGard Smith, 90; emphases are his.

⁶ I am using “believer” here—and will do so through the rest of this study—with reference to a person who believes in God and is willing to act upon that belief in obedience, whether before he becomes a Christian or afterward. Others use “believer” to refer exclusively to one who has already become a Christian, and whose baptism (a “believer’s baptism”) is merely, as they say, “an outward sign of an inward grace.” In other words, such people maintain that it is only *Christians* who are baptized, rather than being baptized to *become* a Christian.

that our redemption is ultimately secured through His blood offering on the cross. In other words, we know that we need to be saved, and that this salvation is not predicated upon what we do for God, but what God does for us. We all trust in the grace of God, and we all believe that, having trusted in that grace, we will be with the Lord in the hereafter.

It is at this point that we begin to diverge in our beliefs, and baptism is a key part *of* that divergence. On one hand, most will be willing to admit the *significance* of baptism. One denominational author, for example sums this up well: “We can agree that baptism is commanded by our Lord Jesus Christ...and thus should never be treated as trivial. Put simply, baptism is important, and this is why we must be serious about it: baptism is bound up with Christ and his gospel, and this connection makes it important for all who wish to be faithful to Jesus.”⁷ Yet, while most people understand baptism itself to be “important,” many of these believe nonetheless that the necessity, timing, and method *of* baptism are not important or are deemed altogether expendable.

Some believe that, since God’s grace is what saves us, therefore we need to do *nothing* in order to save ourselves. Others believe that God’s grace leads us to having faith in Him, rather than the obedience of our faith being that which initiates the salvation of our souls. Thus, baptism is not designed to call upon the name of the Lord, but is something done after one has already been “saved.” Others believe that they were saved when they called upon Jesus for salvation, but that this calling did not involve any “works” on their part. And there are many who simply listen to the words of their pastors and clergymen rather than reading the New Testament themselves.

Part of the problem, then, is that not everyone is coming to the table empty-handed, so to speak. Instead, many strive to defend their predetermined traditional practice or persuasion of

⁷ John H. Armstrong, *Understanding Four Views on Baptism*, 163.

belief. The Baptist, for example, seeks to defend the Baptist position concerning baptism. He cites Scripture, he argues passionately, he believes sincerely, but when all is said and done he comes to the table as a *Baptist*, and not as an objective student of God's Word. The Catholic defends infant baptism because he is a Catholic, not because of what is written in the New Testament (because there is *nothing* written of this in the New Testament). The Mormon defends his "baptism for the dead" (cf. 1 Corinthians 15:29) because that has become a doctrinal practice of Mormonism. The Presbyterian begins his approach as a Calvinist, and thus is already convinced of the Doctrine of Predestination before he ever dives into the doctrine of baptism.

Someone will argue, of course, that I am coming to the table with my *own* religious baggage and bias. In the sense that I am human, I cannot help but do this. But must we defend baptism (or any other subject of the gospel of Christ) in the context of a certain religious affiliation, or is it possible to understand baptism as God *revealed* it to us in His Word? It is my firm belief that baptism *can* and *must* be understood objectively, not in the existing framework of one's personal beliefs or denominational system.⁸ Otherwise, the very definition of "Christian"—and thus, being "born of God"—is reduced to each person's opinion of what this means and how it is achieved. We can call this religion if we want to, but it is not the Christianity that Paul and others preached in the beginning. We cannot claim to be keepers of the New Testament pattern and ignore or violate the pattern all at once.

The teaching on baptism in the New Testament does not tell Christians what to do after they have *become* Christians. Rather, it tells those who are *not* Christians how to *become* Christians. Later, it expounds upon this subject in order for those who *are* Christians to better

⁸ The New Testament will never lead a person to become a Baptist, Catholic, Mormon, Presbyterian, or Calvinist. It will lead him to become a Christian—nothing more, but nothing less, either. Long before these denominations ever existed, people were becoming *Christians* according to the pattern revealed by Christ through His apostles. This observation is *not* intended to evaluate every person who is involved in a denominational system; however, it remains true—and no one can deny it—that no denominational system is found in the New Testament.

understand their fellowship with Christ *in light of* their baptism. This better knowledge is then expected to be taught by believers to those who have yet to believe, or those who desire to act upon their belief in obedience to God. The entire gospel message was written *not* to make a person a denominationalist, non-denominationalist, or (as is increasingly popular) “undenominationalist.”⁹ It was written so that we can put our faith—and thus, our souls—in the hands of God’s Son for the purpose of “eternal life” (cf. John 20:31).

My own “position,” if it can be called a position at all, is simply this: God’s Word trumps all man-made or denominational teachings, regardless of what they are, who came up with them, how long they have been around, or how earnestly they are maintained. If God requires believers to be baptized in order to become Christians, then this must be the clear and inescapable conclusion of His revealed Word, this is what must be taught by all those who represent Him, and this will be what I defend. (The same must be true if God does *not* require believers to be baptized.) Upon examination of the evidence, I am confident that the honest and sincere person will come to a clearer understanding of God’s teaching on salvation—and the role of baptism in that salvation. If one truly wishes to be born of God, then he or she will discover how this is to be done by following the apostolic pattern of the New Testament.

What you believe about God and your relationship with Him must be based upon His revealed truth if indeed you wish to be “approved” by Him (cf. 2 Timothy 2:15). A belief system that is based on anything else will lead to spiritual ruin. Thus, whatever you presently believe—regardless if you are presently in agreement with me or not—I respectfully challenge you to examine the biblical evidence for yourself and see how your own beliefs compare to what God

⁹ “The Bible never made a sect or a sectarian; it takes something in addition to the Bible to do it, hence in order to have Christian union we must lay down opinions and speculations, and get together on the truth and follow the Apostolic plan, and as it will produce nothing but Christians, the future Church is bound to be Christian only” (Ashley S. Johnson, L.L.D., “Debate with a Baptist,” *Johnson’s Speeches* [Knoxville: Ogden Bros. & Co., 1895], 162).

actually teaches. If you are truly a believer, then you will choose to comply with whatever God has said. Jesus Himself said, “If you love Me, you will keep My commandments” (John 14:15). This is as true with commandments concerning baptism as it is for anything else for which He has instructed us.

Part One: What the Scriptures Actually Teach on Baptism

Admission into Christ's Church

See how great a love the Father has bestowed on us, that we would be called children of God; and such we are. For this reason the world does not know us, because it did not know Him.

1 John 3:1

Before talking about being “born of God,” one must understand the reason why we *need* to be born of God. A person who does not believe that he is lost certainly will not be interested in being saved. Likewise, one who believes that his present situation—being born of *man*—will sufficiently prepare him for the afterlife will not be interested in being born of *God*. If one does not sufficiently understand his problem, then he will not see the need for a solution. We are not covering this information because you are necessarily unaware of this information, but simply so that we can build a common foundation in order to move onto other things.

The apostle Paul wrote, “And you were dead in your trespasses and sins, in which you formerly walked according to the course of this world...” (Ephesians 2:1-2). By “dead,” Paul means separated from God’s fellowship, not completely incapacitated.¹⁰ Nowhere in the New Testament does it say that the sinner (one who is “dead”) is completely unable to *hear, believe, and respond to* the gospel of Christ. Quite the opposite: Paul preached *in order that* people would hear, believe, and call upon the Lord for salvation (see Acts 26:16-18, Ephesians 4:17-20, Colossians 1:5-7, et al). The one who has sinned against God is thus separated from His fellowship; he becomes a “sinner.” The end result of this separation, if the breach is never reconciled, will be that person’s spiritual ruin—his “death” in the final and permanent sense.¹¹ Left to ourselves, we are unable to rectify this situation: we lack power, authority, the means or

¹⁰ Calvinists will contend otherwise. They claim that the unregenerate soul is *completely unable* to do anything for itself, including making the decision to have faith or be saved; thus, God must make him “alive” *before* he has faith and before he decides to become a Christian. Please see a biblical response to this in the chapter on “Calvinism.”

¹¹ The New Testament refers to this as a “perishing” of the soul (John 3:16, 1 Corinthians 1:18, 2 Corinthians 4:3, et al), or the “second death” (Revelation 2:11, 21:8). In other words, one can be “dead” to God in this life, but there is still hope for him to be “made alive”; but once he dies in the condition of his separation from God, he will be separated from Him permanently and irretrievably.

remedy, and personal access to the spiritual realm. A corrupted soul simply cannot escape its own corrupted state of being, since that soul is limited and trapped by its own circumstances.

Christ *can* restore our fellowship with God, however, since He has not succumbed to our own affliction (sin) *and* He wields the life-giving power and authority of God Himself. The process by which He brings a person out of his state of spiritual “death” to God is called regeneration [lit., the process of being made alive again]. Thus, in the conversion *from* his sinful state and *into* fellowship with God, this person is forgiven of his sins, sanctified by God’s Spirit, and presented before God as “holy and blameless and beyond reproach”—all because of the worthy death and life-giving blood of Jesus Christ (cf. Colossians 1:21-22). The result of this great transaction is that he has become a *Christian*, whereas before he was simply a sinner. The gospel message is preached for this very objective (see 1 Timothy 1:15-16).

Just because Christ is the *Source* of regeneration does not mean, however, that nothing is required of the one who wishes to be “made alive” to God. Peter declared, “It shall be that everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved” (Acts 2:21). One who is separated from God can indeed call upon Him for salvation—in fact, he cannot be saved unless or until he does so. Christ is the One who brings him back to life—and thus restores his fellowship with God—and makes him one of His own. Christ never does this against one’s own will, or without one’s full knowledge and consent. There is nothing in Scripture that even hints that Christ regenerates those who do not themselves *choose* to be regenerated.

The sanctuary of regenerated souls is the spiritual body of believers known to us in Scripture as Christ’s church (Colossians 1:18). Those who are born of God are made members of this church by Christ Himself, since He is its head and presides over it with full authority. In other words, those who are born of God are never rogue Christians who “go at it alone” in

whatever manner they deem appropriate (or convenient), but are subject to the One who has made them a part of His church. Just as a Christian wife is to subject herself to her husband—regardless of how disparaged this idea is to many people today—so the church is subject to Christ (Ephesians 5:23-24). If the church is to do this as a corporate body, it is necessary that every member of Christ’s church also do this on an individual basis. We should understand, too, that Christ’s spiritual church is not comprised of congregations, but of individual human souls. It is impossible that it be comprised of various denominations, since there cannot be divisions within the indivisible body of Christ (1 Corinthians 1:10-13).

Admittance into God’s fellowship—which is equivalent to one’s salvation—is not decided by one’s subjective determination. God has not put something as critical as the salvation of one’s soul into the hands of mere men, church synods, or denominational officials. Religious *sincerity* cannot be confused with conformity to God’s *doctrine*, since sincerity can never be a replacement for obedience. If you wish to be born of God, then you must abide by the terms and conditions that God the Father has laid down for this. No one can come to the Father except through Christ (John 14:6), and no one can be “in Christ” who does not become a Christian.

What Being “In Christ” Means (and Does Not Mean)¹²

To appreciate what has just been said, we should pull back and look at the big picture. God’s love is unconditional: He loves all people no matter what. This does not mean He is happy with every person’s decision concerning Him, or that He will automatically save all people. It means that He continues to act in our best interest regardless of what we do or fail to do. God shows kindness to all people—even those who remain in a condemned state of being (Matthew 5:44-45). But in showing such undeserved kindness, He expects more than the sinner’s mere acknowledgement of His existence. Instead, He rightly expects a genuine change

¹² This section has been adapted from *Fundamentals of Faith* (Part Two, Lesson Six) by Chad Sychtysz (2011).

of heart toward Him that is proved by obedience. “Or do you think lightly of the riches of His kindness and tolerance and patience,” the apostle Paul wrote, “not knowing that the kindness of God leads you to repentance?” (Romans 2:4).

Our obedience to God must not be looked upon as some noteworthy effort on our part, or some great favor that we do for Him. Regardless of how much our obedience costs us—in time, effort, and the loss of what must be given up in order to provide it—it is exactly what we should have been doing all along. This is not meant to diminish the difficulty of discipleship; it is meant only to keep things in perspective. “So...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’” (Luke 17:10). Even if we could live with perfect obedience, we would still fail to do more than what God has always required of us in the first place.

And yet the fact remains: none of us has lived with perfect obedience, “for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23). Since “all have sinned and fallen,” it is necessary to have our innocence restored if we wish to stand justified before God. Christ is the One who makes this justification possible. Sinful people cannot provide the necessary *effort* or *payment* required to overcome the damage caused by even a single human sin. Having broken a single law of God, we become guilty of transgressing the *entirety* of God’s law (James 2:10). Christ becomes to the believer everything that the believer has failed to be to God. As Paul said, “By His doing you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification, and redemption” (1 Corinthians 1:30). A person cannot obtain these things on his own, but “in Christ Jesus” they are given to him by God. The one who is not “in Christ,” however, stands outside of God’s fellowship. Being “in Christ” is not to be confused with:

- Being a good, moral person (and assuming that this status is sufficient). Just because a person thinks he is saved does not make him saved, any more than one thinking he is an astronaut makes him one.
- Feeling saved. Salvation is an objective reality; it is not a subjective feeling or emotion. Christ did not die on the cross so that people could “feel” forgiveness or redemption. He died to actually forgive and redeem human souls.
- Claiming to be a Christian (without having complied with the terms and conditions of becoming a Christian). No one is saved because of what he calls himself. He is saved only because of what he does for God (in faith) and what God does for him (by grace).
- Going to church. This is often reduced to: “Sitting through a church service in a church building.” Some people place a great deal of reverence on church buildings and religious liturgy, but no one has ever been saved by sitting in a building or participating in a church service. Salvation is a deeply personal experience, not an institutional one, and certainly not an environmental one.
- Church membership. Just because a person is a member of a given congregation does not make him “saved.” Furthermore, Christ does not recognize every congregation that invokes His name in what it does. Those churches that stray from the New Testament pattern are told to repent (cf. Revelation 2 – 3), not remain as they are. No one (or no group) needs to repent unless he is in sin. Thus, straying from the pattern is a sinful action, not an acceptable or harmless one.

Being “in Christ” means being saved: a state of fellowship with God through the redemptive work of His Son. Often, people associate their relationship to God with their personal beliefs or the religious designation they have selected (according to their preferences). Thus, someone will

say, “I am a Methodist” or “I am a Catholic”; or, one will say, “I go to this church” or “I go to that church”; or, one might say, “I believe in this religion” or “I believe in that religion.” Yet no one is saved because of their affiliation with a particular denomination, congregation, or religion. No one is saved because he adopts a particular name or joins himself to a particular movement. One is saved only when he (or she) comes to God through Christ according to the terms and conditions of His covenant—the gospel of Christ.

The gospel’s terms and conditions are the same for every person in every place at any time. The Holy Spirit has revealed what God requires of every person, regardless of human opinions or beliefs to the contrary. Therefore, you will be saved in the same manner as those who were saved in the first century, as recorded in Acts. In coming to God for His salvation, we are all in the same condition: we all have the same problem; we all need the same Savior; we all must obey the same gospel; and we all are born of God and thus made to be “in Christ” that obedience. No one “in Christ” is superior to anyone else who is “in Christ”; in the Lord’s church, there is no clergy-laity system; “For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:26). Being a “son of God”—regardless of your physical gender—means that you can look forward to an inheritance from God in Christ.

Things that Complicate the Situation

While the situation explained above is really quite clear and straightforward, it is complicated by at least three things: human emotions, ignorance, and doctrines of men. We will begin by looking examining how human emotions interfere with what God has asked us to do. This is especially true in the case of one particular *part* of the born-again experience: water baptism. When it comes to one’s belief in God, faith, repentance, or love for the Lord, few people will take issue. When it comes to the necessity of baptism, however, many people in the

religious world balk and begin reasoning in a different way than they did with these other things. Instead of using logic and reason, they often switch to another form of thinking—an emotional or subjective one.

Objective reasoning examines relevant evidence, applies sound reasoning, and comes to a natural and (often) inescapable conclusion. Subjective reasoning is always dependent upon how the conclusion (or outcome) will affect the person doing the reasoning. The objective person will allow the argument to go where it must go, and accepts whatever conclusion it draws. The subjective person first asks, “How will this affect me?” or “What outcome do I *want* to have (for myself, someone I care about, or my belief system)?” His argument does not always follow the facts, but often gets derailed along the way because he already disagrees with any undesirable outcome. He may be oblivious to this; he may think, in his mind, that he makes perfect sense; he may be blinded to his error in reasoning. Or worse: he knows that he does *not* make sense, but is so averse to an undesirable outcome that he will accept whatever logical compromises or contradictions are necessary to avoid it.

For example, if a person reads, “Repent and return, so that your sins may be wiped away” (Acts 3:19), he will likely have no problem with this. He will likely reason, “Obviously, repentance is a necessary prerequisite for forgiveness; this makes sense. Besides, whatever God said, I must obey it in order to receive the salvation that He offers.” Here is a person who is thinking intelligently and logically. He is using the reasoning ability that God imparted to him when He made him “in His image.” He is using discernment—the ability to judge things according to a fixed and transcendent authority or standard—and thus realizes the true nature of his situation. He stands in condemnation before God, and yet God offers him an opportunity to have that situation reconciled through the blood of Christ. Access to His blood requires

obedience to His gospel. He knows intuitively that his repentance is a work of human effort, but it is required of God all the same. He places his trust in God to do what He alone can do, but he also realizes that he has a responsibility to fulfill as well. Thus, he willfully repents of his sins in response to the command.

Yet, when he reads, “Repent, and each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins” (Acts 2:38), he (like many people) bristles at the idea of baptism. He reasons, “I can accept [performing the work of] repentance, but I do not believe I have to be baptized. That cannot be necessary for me to be ‘born again.’ Being dunked in water simply cannot be a part of a spiritual re-birth. Therefore, I will not do it. God knows my heart that I am sincere in what I *will* do.” Now this person is no longer using the same process as before. Given these two passages that tell him what is necessary to be forgiven *by* God—and thus, is required in order to be born *of* God—he chooses one and rejects (part of) the other. He has no problem with one admission requirement but will not agree to the other. He objectively accepted the conclusion of the first passage but subjectively refuses the conclusion of the other. He arbitrarily honors one commandment of God, yet he trivializes a second commandment—as if to say, “This is expendable” or “That is beneath me” or some other personal objection.

What happened? He was doing so well at first, while he was thinking objectively. Yet, something compelled him—something *personal* and *emotional*—to shift to an entirely different form of reasoning. In other words, he allowed something else to get in the way of seeing the simplicity and purity of the gospel (cf. 2 Corinthians 4:3-4, 11:3). This emotional interference could be (and often is) one or more of the following:

- He wishes to defend a particular *religion* rather than submitting himself to the revealed commandments of God. When these two things are in agreement, he is in agreement;

where there is a jarring contradiction, however, his heart lies with the religion he seeks to defend rather than a genuine desire to uphold whatever God has instructed. The Holy Spirit never speaks out of both sides of His mouth, but people can—and, when it comes to religion, many do.

- He wishes to retain his chosen identity rather than be affiliated with people that he does not agree with, has had a bad experience with, or simply dislikes. This is related to the point just discussed. For example, someone in a denominational religion may reject the necessity of baptism *not* for lack of biblical evidence, but because he does not want to lose his identity with those with whom he is comfortable (i.e., his church friends). Or, he does not want to identify with those of whom he does not have a high opinion (i.e., adherents of a belief system different than his own). Thus, he foregoes obeying the commandment of God *not* because it is unclear to him, but because of personal reasons. This reasoning is emotional or subjective, not logical and objective. Carried to its full extent, it is also spiritually disastrous.
- He believes that numbers are on his side, and is unwilling to challenge the (seeming) popular majority. This is the “A million [insert preferred religionists] can’t be wrong” argument. This is not a logical or objective conclusion, but a purely subjective one. Ironically, those who use this argument are often oblivious to the fact that it only works when *they* use it. For instance, suppose I am a Baptist, and I say, “A million Baptists can’t be wrong.” Yet, my own religion will not allow for (say) a billion *Muslims* to be saved. What I am actually saying is, “But a billion *other* people *can* be wrong—and I believe they are!” This is not logic; it is an emotional—and desperate—appeal to an illegitimate authority. Millions or billions of people cannot determine what is necessary

to redeem the human soul; only God can do this. By appealing to any quantity of people to justify one's position, a person automatically rejects whatever God says to the contrary. God has never operated by a majority rule, popular vote, or politically-correct system.

- He does not want to offend—or condemn—his friends or family members who refuse to be baptized. This is often communicated in the following way: “If I am baptized for the forgiveness of my sins, then I will condemn my [insert spouse, favorite relative, best friend, admired mentor, or all of the above], and I cannot do that. I believe him [or her] to be good person, and who am I to condemn him?” This perspective misrepresents the situation entirely. Salvation is not about who we do or do not offend; it is about enjoying fellowship with God in this life and in the life to come. Basing one’s spiritual welfare on someone else’s beliefs (or hurt feelings) is not a logical decision but a purely subjective one. If you think about it, this kind of reasoning will prevent a person not only from baptism, but also repentance or anything else God requires of believers. Given this logic, no one will be saved unless *everyone* is saved all at once, since in any other case *someone*’s friend or relative will be offended. Yet, if a person chooses to obey God, he is not *willfully* offending or condemning anyone. He is simply doing what all people ought to be doing in response to their Creator.

These examples are common, yet they remain indefensible. Refusing to be baptized—or any other clear and explicit command that God has given to us—cannot be justified by such responses. This does not stop people from trying, however. In the end, people are going to do what they want. Nonetheless, God has only one method of salvation, and He does not change it to accommodate anyone’s emotional position.

A second reason why people resist baptism is simply out of ignorance of what the Scriptures actually teach on the subject. In the following chapters, we will examine a number of passages that both directly and indirectly provide instruction and explanation concerning this action. Just because the information is available, however, does not mean that everyone who claims to be a Christian—or who has refused to become one—has read any or all of it. Even though we live in a so-called Information Age, the truth is that people seem to be less *accurately* informed about the most important things in life than ever. Many people have a great deal of knowledge about their computer programs, digital cameras, iPhones, and video games, but these things add nothing to their spiritual well-being. Instead of discovering what God have revealed in His Word, many people will simply Google their religious questions and read what someone else *says* about His Word. This is not only intellectually lazy; it is a contributing factor to the moral decay of our society.

People are not being taught to think for themselves. In fact, people are not being taught to think at all—this is why we have the Internet, calculators, smart phones, GPS navigation, and all sorts of technological gadgetry. “Studying the Bible” is a foreign concept for many people who identify themselves with one (allegedly) Christian religion or another. In order to “[understand] what the will of the Lord is” (Ephesians 5:17), we must read and meditate upon what He has said. In fact, Paul told the Ephesians that “when you read [his inspired writings] you can understand my insight into the mystery of Christ, which in other generations was not made known to the sons of men, as it has now been revealed to His holy apostles and prophets in the Spirit...” (3:4-5, bracketed words are mine). In other words, we can “read and understand” what God wants us to *know* and *do* in order to have fellowship with Him (cf. 2 Corinthians 1:13). We have more privilege and access to the Word than at any time in human history. Given this,

we should be the most spiritually-enlightened people in all of human history. Sadly, this is not the case.

When many people read John 3:16, for example—“For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life”—they tend to oversimplify that statement. They interpret this to mean, “If I just believe in God, then I will have eternal life.” It is the word “just” that complicates things in this case. If there was nothing else to do and nothing else required of us, then to “just believe” would be acceptable and accurate. Yet “believe” in the context of the New Testament always necessarily implies “obey” (see John 3:36). Furthermore, to “believe in Him [God’s Son]” provides the object of one’s belief. Jesus did not say, “Whoever believes that the Son *loves* him,” but (in essence), “Whoever *obeys* the Son and thus does whatever He commands.” This is supported also in John 14:15, where Jesus said, “If you love Me, you will keep My commandments.” No one can truly love Jesus who will not obey Him, and if one will not obey Him, then he certainly does not believe in Him.

The point here is this: we cannot take pieces and snippets of Scripture and turn those fragments into an entire belief system. No one gains an accurate knowledge of God by reading a few select verses while refusing to examine others. When it comes to baptism, no one can read one verse on baptism and then claim to have an accurate understanding of what it is or what it does for a person. Likewise, no one can read one (or even several) verses that *omit* baptism and then claim, “See? Baptism isn’t here—therefore it is not necessary at all.” You cannot discover any of God’s doctrines by pointing out what is *not* in a given passage. This is an extremely popular method, and even a number of well-respected evangelicals promote it. Yet, it remains illogical and unconvincing and only serves to distract people from the gospel truth. If we were to

use that logic elsewhere, we would render faith, repentance, grace, and forgiveness itself completely unnecessary since these things are not mentioned in every passage concerning salvation (such as in John 3:16 itself). Such arguments, if we dare to call them arguments at all, do not manifest an honest or diligent study of God's Word, but instead call attention to that person's *lack* of honesty and/or study. (We will revisit this situation when dealing with specific passages later in this book.)

Ignorance can never be offered as an excuse when in fact we are expected to know better *and* have all the information we need at our fingertips. Even in ancient Israel, God did not excuse the ignorance of His people when they should have known better (see Leviticus 5:14-19). "My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge," God told Israel when that people became steeped in idolatry. "Because you have rejected knowledge, I also will reject you from being My priest. Since you have forgotten the law of your God, I also will forget your children" (Hosea 4:6). God has said a great deal about baptism in His Word—again, far more than most people realize—and we have no good reason to be ignorant of His instruction. This is especially true if baptism is directly involved in one's becoming a Christian in the first place.

A third reason why many people reject baptism (but cling to far less important doctrines) is because of the teachings of men. This is directly related to what was just said concerning ignorance: in not knowing what *God* has said in His Word, many will embrace instead what *men* think they know about God's Word. Not all of this latter knowledge is inaccurate, either; some of my own studies have been greatly enriched through the wisdom and perspectives of biblical scholars and commentators. Yet, listening to such men *instead* of God's Word or *at the expense* of it is a serious error indeed. When Jesus said, "Beware of men" (Matthew 10:17), He was not only talking about those people outside of our church buildings, He was talking about men in

general—including those who claim to teach and preach in His name. Any man who cannot authenticate what he teaches with an intelligent appeal to Scripture in its proper context is a man that you must avoid. Your soul is far too precious to be swayed by another man’s “take” on what you should or should not do.

In my own 30+ years of experience as a Christian, virtually every person that I have talked to who rejected the necessity of baptism did *not* do so through an appeal to Scripture. In nearly every case, such people did so because someone *told* them what to believe, what to say, and what to do. These people chose to listen to men instead of God; they chose to take someone else’s word for what God said rather than read it themselves. Whether or not they did so intentionally (or lazily) is irrelevant. What happened is that they put man-made teachings over and above God’s own—and this continues to happen over and over at an alarmingly increasing rate.

Think about what the apostle Paul said: “For I would have you know, brethren, that the gospel which was preached by me is not according to man. For I neither received it from man, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ” (Galatians 1:11-12). If Paul’s gospel teaches you how to be saved, and this gospel necessarily involves baptism, then you cannot be saved unless you obey that gospel and submit to this command. If some pastor or evangelist today says otherwise, you must choose between listening to *him* or listening to Paul’s inspired teaching, since you cannot do both. If you listen to, say, a minister *rather* than Paul, then you are putting your faith in a man and not God.

Not everyone who says “Lord, Lord” actually teaches what the Lord has said to do (cf. Luke 6:46). Simply put, not everyone who *says* he is a Christian actually *is* one. Not everyone who *thinks* he is born of God actually *is*. Whoever attempts to be born of God—and thus,

become a Christian—through some means that contradicts the revealed Word *of* God cannot possibly be approved *by* God. If we could be saved by man-made teaching, then we would not need the gospel of Christ. If faith in men (or preachers, man-made churches, or religions) could duplicate or replace one’s faith in God, then the Holy Spirit was confused when He revealed to Paul that there is only *one* faith (Ephesians 4:5). This one faith is the belief system that God defined; it is the only one that He recognizes. According to God, there are not many faiths that are all equally-acceptable to Him, but only one. If anyone teaches otherwise, he implies that God is a liar and brings upon himself an awful curse (Galatians 1:8).

Calling upon the name of the Lord for salvation requires absolute honesty with oneself *and* God. This level of honesty is often uncomfortable and may even be painful, but it is critical. Each of us has to ask himself (or herself), “Whom am I trying to please—God, other people, or merely myself?” In John 12:42-43, the apostle John tells of certain Pharisees who actually believed that Jesus was their Messiah, but they would not follow Him “for they loved the approval of men rather than the approval of God.” Your salvation is far too important to leave to someone else’s approval. If you believe that you *should* be baptized in obedience to God’s Word, then you admit that baptism is necessary *for* your salvation. If some friend, relative, colleague, mentor, pastor, or spiritual guru opposes your decision, then you must choose between that person and God. “For am I now seeking the favor of men, or of God? Or am I striving to please men? If I were still trying to please men, I would not be a bond-servant of Christ” (Galatians 1:10)—because it is impossible to do both.

Summary Thoughts

Jesus declared, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me” (John 14:6). This “way” is the path of righteousness that leads to life with God

(Matthew 7:13-14). Being “born of God” (cf. John 1:12-13) is the means by which we are put upon that path. God’s truth provides the correct information and legitimate authority to explain what being born of God means and how we can become born-again believers. At the same time, this “way” is not one of many ways that a person can find salvation. Jesus’ declaration (in John 14:6) is an exclusive, binding, and non-negotiable statement. It allows for zero exceptions; it provides for zero alternatives; it cannot be amended or modified in any way. Correspondingly, there are not many ways to be born of God, but only one. Whatever God says is required for this born-again process excludes all other methods or directions.

Our present study focuses on baptism, but baptism is merely a part of the process of being born again. It is not the whole of it, and certainly is not a replacement for it. Baptism *is* a necessary part of one’s spiritual regeneration, but is limited to what the believer does to demonstrate his faith in God; it cannot possibly replace what God does for the believer. On the other hand, baptism is not something separate from the conversion process, but is in fact a critical part of it. We are expected to have a balanced understanding on this subject without going to one extreme or the other.

The terms and conditions for admission into Christ’s church are laid down by Christ, not you, and certainly not me. If Christ says, “He who believes and has been baptized shall be saved” (Mark 16:16), then this makes both belief *and* baptism equally necessary for admittance into His church. If Peter says, “Repent, and each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins” (Acts 2:38), then this makes both repentance *and* baptism equally necessary for admittance into His church. If Paul says, “For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ” (Galatians 3:27), then this makes baptism into Christ *and* being clothed with Christ equally essential for fellowship with God. We

are not allowed to pick and choose which commandments are agreeable to us or not, since every commandment of God will be agreeable to a genuine believer. If you *are* such a believer, this will be made evident through your actions, not merely by your words.

You Must Be Born Again

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His great mercy has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead...

1 Peter 1:3

In the early part of His ministry, a Jewish teacher named Nicodemus confronted Jesus privately in order to ask Him some questions. This man came to see Jesus by night, likely because his fellow Pharisees did not approve of Him. Nicodemus began his discussion with the Lord by acknowledging God's approval of Him through the miracles that He performed. "Rabbi"—a significant address, given that Jesus had not been schooled in the rigorous rabbinic training of His day—"we know that You have come from God as a teacher; for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him" (John 3:2). God's approval of Jesus was clearly obvious to the sincere observer through the signs that He performed.

While Nicodemus initiated the discussion, Jesus immediately gave it a certain direction. "Truly, truly, I say to you," He said, "unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God" (John 3:3). "Unless" here means "without exception" or "it cannot be otherwise." Jesus linked being *born again* and *the kingdom of God* with an unbreakable or unchangeable condition: it must be *this way* and no other. If a person desires to "see" (or, become a participant in) the kingdom of God, he *must* be "born again."

God's Kingdom

To appreciate the full impact of what Jesus just said, we must understand the two major phrases that He used. First, we must understand what "kingdom of God" means in the context that He used it. In order for there to *be* a kingdom of God, at least four things are required:

- There must be a *kingdom* over which to rule. This domain or realm must be specific and identifiable. No one can rule over an abstract concept or an idea or the figment of their own imagination.
- There must be a *king* who rules over this domain. Someone must be in charge; someone must have the authority *to* rule, or else there cannot be a kingdom. Ultimately, this requires the sovereign authority of a ruler who answers to no one higher than himself.
- This specific kingdom must be *of God*.¹³ It is not “of man,” since man does not have the power to create or rule over any kingdom more powerful than human ability can control. Since this kingdom is “of God,” this necessarily implies that it is spiritual in nature—it is not of this world, not bound by this world, and cannot be destroyed by anything in this world. This is exactly what Jesus later confirmed (John 18:36-37).
- This kingdom must have a *purpose*, since nothing that God does is without purpose. There is a *reason* why God has established a kingdom; there is also a reason why Jesus *revealed* this kingdom to us in the way that He did. He did not merely say, “There is a kingdom of God, and you should know this.” Rather, He said (in essence), “It is imperative that you enter into the kingdom of God—and I will tell you how to do this.” The reason for this imperative is twofold: first, God wants to be our God and He wants believers (kingdom citizens) to be His people¹⁴; second, we cannot receive salvation through any other means other than by full citizenship in God’s kingdom.

¹³ The word (*ouranos*) translated “of heaven” can equally be translated “of God,” since whatever is “of heaven” is necessarily “of God.” Matthew’s Gospel emphasizes that the kingdom is “of heaven” (32 times); Luke’s Gospel focuses instead on the fact that it is “of God” (31 times); both emphases are correct (*Thayer’s Greek-English Lexicon* [electronic edition], © 2005 WORDsearch Corporation).

¹⁴ “I will be their God and they [i.e., those who live by faith in Me] will be My people” is a major theme of the entire Bible. I highly recommend my book, *The Gospel of Forgiveness*, in which I expound upon this thought considerably in chapter 13, “Fellowship and Forgiveness” (Summitville, IN: Spiritbuilding Publishing, 2011); go to www.booksbychad.com.

Many Christians erroneously interchange “kingdom of God” with Christ’s church, as though the two terms mean the same thing. It is true that these terms are necessarily related: if one is in Christ’s church, then he *must* be in God’s kingdom (i.e., as a citizen of it). Yet, the interchangeableness of “kingdom” and “church” is not supported by the New Testament, except in the most general sense (as in Colossians 1:13). Jesus never went about telling Jews to enter into His church; but He had much to say about entering into the “kingdom of God.” The message to Nicodemus was this: the physical kingdom of Israel—the failed and fractured kingdom that the Israelites corrupted through their rebellion and idolatry—would be replaced by a spiritual kingdom that would transcend earthly corruption and false worship. The church would be the sanctuary of those who believed in this kingdom and worshiped Christ as its King. But before the church could be built (or established), the kingdom had to be put into the charge of the Redeemer who would make this church’s existence possible.

The “kingdom of God” has always existed (Psalm 24:7-10); Jehovah has always been the “King of glory.” We cannot assume that Jesus’ preaching of the coming kingdom meant that it was something that had never been. Instead, He spoke of a new *phase* or *revelation* of the already-existing and eternal kingdom. Concurrent with the preaching of the kingdom of God was the preaching of Israel’s Messiah—the Redeemer of Jewish prophecy that would come to restore the glory of Israel *and* bring salvation to the ends of the earth (Isaiah 42:1-7, 49:5-6). The kingdom that Jesus preached was very *Jewish* in nature, since it was a direct response to (or fulfillment of) these prophecies given to that people. The kingdom of God that Jesus preached was inseparable from His identity as the Jews’ Messiah. Thus, Jesus’ proclamation of the kingdom inescapably meant “Your Messiah is about to rule, as prophesied in the Scriptures” (see Luke 24:44-48).

The kingdom of God was not exclusively for Jews, however. Paul spoke often about universal salvation “in Christ”—salvation irrespective of nationality or ethnicity. Furthermore, Jesus’ appointment as King over His Father’s entire kingdom extended far beyond His rule over those who are saved. The church is never described as having a king; and the kingdom is never described in the New Testament as having a head, husband, or shepherd. Christ’s rule extended over all of Creation—there is nothing exempted from His kingship but the Father Himself (1 Corinthians 15:27-28). Jesus Himself said (after His resurrection), “All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth” (Matthew 28:19). This authority is not limited to the church, but is all-inclusive (Colossians 1:15-18). Thus, Christ has all authority over His church; but He also has all authority over anything and everything that has been created—specifically, anything that is not God. However, not all of Creation has (yet) submitted to Christ or acknowledged His kingship. In due time, this will happen (1 Corinthians 15:25-26, Philippians 2:9-11).

Christ’s Church

The church, on the other hand, is a specific and special sanctuary in the midst of all Creation. The church is the spiritual refuge for those who have willingly submitted themselves to the King’s authority *and* have accepted responsibility as citizens of His kingdom. To be transferred (or translated) out of the domain of Satan and into the kingdom of God’s Son means to change allegiance from one lord to the other (as described in Colossians 1:13-14; see Acts 26:15-18). Regardless, every entity will eventually answer to Christ the King, since even Satan’s kingdom is subject to His authority. Yet, the one whose allegiance is thus transferred enters into a favorable relationship with the King, and enjoys all the protections, privileges, and blessings of that relationship.

We can illustrate this in a visual manner: imagine an earthly kingdom with the king's castle in the middle of it. The only access to the castle is through a moat—in other words, through water—and anyone who comes into the castle must do so through the water. Every person in the kingdom is invited to live in the castle, and those who accept this invitation are regarded as the king's "sons"—in other words, as *family*. However, only a small percentage of people accept this offer and leave their own homes and possessions behind. Those who remain outside the castle are merely servants; they remain under the king's rule, but they do not respect his authority. Those within the castle receive protection, privileges, and blessings that the people outside the castle will never receive. These people are free from the burdens that those outside the castle must endure (John 8:35-36).

So it is for all those who become members of Christ's spiritual church.¹⁵ We have been called by God through His gospel message to live in fellowship with Him in the sanctuary of believers (Christ's church), which dwells in the center of God's kingdom. We leave everything else behind in order to enter through the water into fellowship with Him. We are made sons of God because of our acceptance of the terms and conditions of this entrance (Galatians 3:26-27, 4:4-7). We enjoy privileged access to the Father as a result of our new and transcendent relationship with His Son. When the church enters into glory in the hereafter, all those who have remained faithful to the King will participate in that grand entrance. Those who refused to enter into this sanctuary will be separated from God forever.

The church is something the believer becomes a part of now; his place in the kingdom of God is something he is guaranteed (based upon the continuance of his faith) but refers to

¹⁵ We must distinguish between "Christ's church" or "the church" and *your* church or *my* church. We are not talking about individual congregations here, but the universal body of believers, both living and dead, who have been saved through the blood of Christ. This church is not comprised of congregations, and certainly is not divided into various denominations, but only the blood-washed souls of those who lived by faith while here on earth. Thus, "the church" does not refer to any *group* of churches, however named or associated, but only to Christ's spiritual church.

something in the future. If you look up all the passages in Acts and the New Testament epistles, you will see that the kingdom is nearly always spoken of as something to be inherited: it is described in a future sense, not a present one. The church is something a person immediately becomes a part of upon his obedience to the terms and conditions of Christ's gospel. The kingdom, however, is something the believer inherits—permanently and irrevocably—once that obedience has run its full course and he and all other believers are ushered into glory. We do not inherit the church, because the church is Christ Himself—His body (Ephesians 1:22-23). However, those who are in His church and who remain faithful until death (cf. Revelation 2:10) are made heirs of His kingdom. As heirs of the kingdom of God, we will share in the glory and rule that He exercises over all that has been created.

Thus, the kingdom of God in its ultimate or universal sense refers to Christ's rule over all that has been created. The church, on the other hand, did not exist until Christ built it (cf. Matthew 16:18), and He could not build it until His authority as King over God's kingdom was established. The reference to Christ sitting down at the right hand of God (Matthew 26:64, Acts 2:33, Romans 8:34, Hebrews 1:3, et al) concerns His having received "all authority" from His Father to rule over His [the Father's] kingdom. The *purpose* for this reign is to serve as the Redeemer for those who come to Him for salvation. Christ did not have the authority to redeem a single soul until He had been given "all authority" to do so. To pronounce a sinful human soul as innocent and therefore under "no condemnation" (Romans 8:1) requires divine authority. Yet, He could not receive that authority until He had proven Himself worthy *of* it by His flawless obedience and His perfect blood sacrifice.

The New Birth

We can now return to Jesus' discussion with Nicodemus, since we now have a much better understanding of what Jesus meant when He talked about entering into the kingdom of God. Nicodemus, as a Jew to whom the promise of God's kingdom was given, anticipated his own entrance into this new state of being. What Nicodemus did *not* understand was the manner in which one entered into this kingdom: he must be "born again." It is essential that we discover what Jesus meant by this. Nicodemus asked incredulously, "How can a man be born when he is old? He cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born, can he?" (John 3:4). Nicodemus was not being disrespectful, nor was he so dense (as some have accused him) by assuming that re-entering and then being re-born from one's mothers' womb was what Jesus really meant. Instead, he was merely stating the human impossibility of the instruction—in essence, "If what you say is true, then I have no hope."¹⁶ R. C. H. Lenski says on this verse, "This Rabbi from Galilee calmly tells him that he is not yet in the kingdom! ...[And] unless he attains this mysterious new birth, even he shall not 'see' it."¹⁷ Yet, there is hope, and the kingdom is attainable, as we shall see.

Being "born again" certainly does parallel a natural birthing process. But paralleling a process and exactly duplicating it are two different things. Being "born again" necessarily requires that a person *sever himself completely* from that to which he was first born, so that he can be born *again* to something entirely new. Thus, in order to be born *again*, one must first *die*. We cannot maintain two separate, concurrent lives; we must have only one life, and this one life must have only one allegiance to one King who leads us in one direction. Thus, we must die to the first life in order to enter into the second. This is spiritual language, not literal, but just because it is spiritual does not mean it is any less real or necessary. Those who are *not* "born

¹⁶ See Merrill C. Tenney's *John: The Gospel of Belief* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1948), 86-87.

¹⁷ R. C. H. Lenski, *Commentary on the New Testament: John*" (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishing, 1998), 235.

again” cannot enter into the kingdom of God, which means they will lose all hope of life *with* God in the hereafter. There is nothing imaginary or harmless about this latter state of being.

Our first birth was by physical parents into a physical world. Having been born into this world, we immediately became a part of it in a physical way. Even so, we were born as innocent creatures, not sinful ones.¹⁸ Once we sinned against God, however, we corrupted our fellowship with Him and chose instead to have fellowship with the ungodly world. Originally, we identified with the world in a merely physical or biological sense; as sinners, however, we came to identify with the world in a spiritual sense as well. It is this *identification* or *allegiance* that must be put to death in order for us to enter into the kingdom of God. This carnal, satanic, and defiant attitude is completely incompatible with the heavenly, godly, and holy nature of God’s kingdom. In sinning against God, we enter into the domain of darkness which is controlled by “the prince of the power of the air...the spirit that is now working in the sons of disobedience” (Ephesians 2:2).

You and I cannot change the fact of our physical birth. We cannot change our parents, physical family, race, ethnicity, skin color, gender, or biological traits. We can, however, change the allegiance of our soul from one master to another. This is what Jesus talked about elsewhere. In Matthew 16:25, for example, He said, “For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it; but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it.” Loosely translated, this means, “Whoever wants to retain his old identity with world will lose everything in hereafter; but whoever wants to live with God in hereafter must be born of God in the here-and-now.” The one who wishes to “save his life” is the one who refuses to die—and Jesus is not talking about a physical death (because

¹⁸ Calvinism, which underlies much of modern evangelical Christian religion, teaches that we are born sinful creatures, and thus are helpless to do anything about this until God saves us by His own decision. There is nowhere in Scripture that teaches this, and Jesus’ words to Nicodemus flatly contradicts it. We will discuss Calvinism and the Doctrine of Original Sin in later chapters in this book.

everyone dies, regardless of his moral condition) but the death of one's spiritual allegiance to this world. But the one who "loses His life for My sake" is the one who is willing to *die* to this world in order to *live* for Christ. He is, indeed, re-born into a new life.

Once a person is born again, he is given a new identity. Paul said, "Therefore if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come" (2 Corinthians 5:17). "In Christ" does not mean "a member of a Christian church" or "standing in the midst of a church building." "In Christ" means, in essence, *being in fellowship with God through one's allegiance to Christ*, the One to whom God the Father has given all authority over His kingdom. Jesus Himself said, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me" (John 14:6). He could as well have said, "No one will have fellowship with My Father whose heart (or, allegiance) still belongs to this world." Anyone who is a friend of the world is an enemy of God (Romans 8:7-8, James 4:4); if a person is not willing to die *to* the world, then he cannot become a friend of God.

So then, we understand much more now what Jesus said to Nicodemus. Only one crucial question remains, and that is: *how* is one born again in the manner in which He spoke?

Water and the Spirit

After Nicodemus expressed (what he thought was) the utter impossibility of being born again into the kingdom of God, Jesus gave him new hope. The born-again process is not impossible, but it *does* require divine intervention. In other words, a person cannot be born of God without God Himself doing for that person what he is incapable of doing for himself. At the same time, God does not do *everything*, but requires that the one who seeks His salvation participate in his own born-again experience.

“Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit he cannot enter into the kingdom of God” (John 3:5). The “unless” here means exactly what it meant in verse 3: it cannot be any other way; there are no exceptions to this. “Born of water” means that *actual water* is involved in one’s spiritual re-birth; it cannot be any other way. This is not “spiritual” water, and there is no reason to believe that this is metaphorical “water.” There is no other meaning of this phrase in the context of New Testament teaching other than immersion in literal water (as in Jesus’ own baptism), which is exactly what “baptism” means. In baptism, one is submerged in water—plunged, in essence, to his death—and buried beneath it. He rises from this watery grave in order to walk in “newness of life” (Romans 6:4). Just as a human child is born of the “water” of his mother’s womb, so the child of God is born of water; just as a human child did not have any independent identity until he was physically born, so the child of God had no identity with God (since he became a sinner) until he was born *again*.

It is not surprising to see baptism as an integral part of nearly every conversion account in the Book of Acts. Those accounts in which it is not mentioned, it is necessarily implied: no one becomes a Christian in any other manner that does not involve water baptism. When Peter said, “Repent, and each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins” (Acts 2:38), three thousand Jews responded by being baptized in water. If they wanted to be forgiven by God, then they needed to be baptized into Christ. In other words, those who heard the gospel preached understood what being “born of water” meant. What first seemed remarkable to Nicodemus was finally understood in the clearest of terms. They did not interpret this to be “an outward sign of an inward grace”—a popular teaching today. They did not even *receive* saving grace until they obeyed that which they were told to do. Their baptism was not a

sign of what *already* happened, but of what was *in the process* of happening. It demonstrated their change of allegiance from the domain of Satan to the kingdom of God (cf. Acts 26:18).

“Born of water” is *not* something God does for the believer; it is something the believer does for God—i.e., in obedience to God. I have never seen God miraculously plunge a person underwater—especially without that person’s consent!—but I have seen many people be baptized voluntarily in response to the Word of God. No one can be born again unless he meets this condition: he must be born of water. And if *any* action is required of the believer in order to receive salvation from God, then his salvation is *conditional* and not unconditional. God is not baptized for the believer; rather, the believer—if he wishes to remain a “believer”—must be baptized for God. (By “believer” here, we do not mean yet a “Christian.” There is no record in Scripture of *any* Christian being baptized in water. Baptism is not something Christians do to prove that they are believers; rather, it is what believers do in order to become Christians.)

While being born of water is absolutely necessary for the believer to enter into the kingdom of God, it is not the only thing necessary. There is at least one other requirement: he must be “born of...the Spirit.”¹⁹ (The text will not allow this born again process to merely a spiritual one, with a lower-case “spirit.” Jesus clearly and necessarily means “the Spirit of God” here, and this is supported by the rest of New Testament teaching on the subject of one’s conversion to Christ.) It is grammatically and theologically impossible to separate the importance of being “born of water” here from being “born of the Spirit”: one is as necessary as the other. The two actions either stand or fall together; no person can claim that either one is

¹⁹ The “water” here cannot refer to the baptism of John. That baptism had nothing to do with entrance into the kingdom, but was merely to acknowledge a *Jews’* repentance and recommitment to God’s covenant with Israel. In fact, those who were baptized according to John were later baptized into Christ (Acts 19:1-5). The baptism of which Jesus speaks in this passage (John 3:5) is directly linked to the ministerial work of the Holy Spirit, which refers to the church age. The Spirit had not yet been “given” (John 7:37-39); until Christ’s church was established and then immersed in the Spirit, no one could enter into the kingdom of God in the manner in which Jesus described to Nicodemus.

sufficient to meet the requirements. And if a person does not meet both requirements, then he *cannot* be a citizen of the kingdom of God. In other words, he remains under Christ's authority and will ultimately answer to Him (2 Corinthians 5:10), but he does not live in fellowship with Him since he has not yet died to his allegiance to his old life.

Just as God does not do what is required of the believer, so the believer cannot do that which is performed only by God. The believer has his own responsibility in his conversion, and God has His; neither party can assume that of the other. Being born "of the Spirit" is God's response to one who calls upon His name for salvation. This "calling" is not something separate from baptism, but baptism itself is the *means* by which it is accomplished (Acts 22:16).

As necessary and instrumental as the Holy Spirit is in one's conversion, He works in seamless conjunction with Christ, not independent of Him. The Spirit of God does not atone for anyone's sins; that responsibility belongs to Christ. But the Spirit is directly involved in sanctifying the believer's soul and transforming him from a sinner into a saint. The Spirit also testifies with the believer's spirit that the things that he [the believer] has done in obedience to God are correct and sincere (Romans 8:16-17). It is the Spirit, after all, who has revealed to us the Word of God; it is by His authority that we have received the instruction to be "born of water and the Spirit." Not surprisingly, all those who are baptized into Christ have done so according to the Spirit of God—by His authority and under His direction. Thus, "For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free, and we were all made to drink of one Spirit" (1 Corinthians 12:13). While many (Calvinist) commentators have made considerable effort to interpret Paul's words as referring to a "spiritual" baptism (or, the baptism of the Spirit), this is unsupported by either this text or the rest of the New Testament. "By one Spirit" means that *one* Spirit has determined the means by which we come into the *one*

body of Christ (His church), which is what Paul specifically addresses in that passage. To “drink” of the Spirit is to internalize (spiritually) the living water of which Jesus spoke, which is the Spirit Himself (John 7:37-39). It means, then, to have the Spirit indwell the faithful Christian (Romans 8:9).

Born Again to a Living Hope

Peter brings together both ideas in the same way that Jesus did, but from an after-the-fact perspective. “Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, to those...who are chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, by the sanctifying work of the Spirit, to obey Jesus Christ and be sprinkled with His blood: May grace and peace be yours in the fullest measure. Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His great mercy has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead...” (1 Peter 1:1-3). “Those who are chosen” refers to those who are members of the body of Christ: Christ’s *church* has been predestined for glory, and thus all those who are *in* Christ are among the “chosen” because of their inclusion in His church. It is true that God calls us by His gospel (2 Thessalonians 2:13-14); it is not true that everyone who is called responds to that invitation (“Many are called, but few are chosen”—Matthew 22:14). Those who do respond in obedience are added to His church (cf. Acts 2:47); those who do not respond remain in a state of condemnation.

Notice that “obeying” Christ and “sprinkled with His blood” are dependent upon being “born again to a living hope.” We cannot separate what Jesus said about being born again from what Peter says in Jesus’ words to Nicodemus. In other words, Peter alludes directly to what Jesus said about being reborn as a child of God without restating the procedure. However, he describes more than what Jesus said, especially with regard to the results and benefits of this

conversion. Once again, God did not miraculously plunge these believers underwater, but they carried out this command of their own volition. But if they had not submitted to this command, then they could not be born again. At the same time, no one could have been born again until (and if not for) the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Summary Thoughts

Our study is intended to provide a better understanding of baptism—what it is, why it is done, and why it is necessary. However, the believer’s objective is not merely to be baptized, but to be *born again*.²⁰ Baptism is a means to an end; it is not the “end” in itself. Baptism is an act *of* faith; it is never a replacement *for* faith. God has chosen baptism as the method by which we undergo this spiritual process. Being born *again* necessarily implies being born of *God* rather than being born of one’s biological parents. This is exactly what John talks about in his gospel: “But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God” (John 1:12-13). No one can become a child of God who is not born of Him; yet, no one can be born of God who is not born *again* through the means that Jesus described to Nicodemus.

Being born of God encompasses far more than one’s initial conversion. The believer must be converted in order to become a Christian. After this, however, he continues to undergo a perpetual cycle of conversion and transformation. Conversion indicates a different direction; transformation indicates a radical change in one’s heart. Conversion takes us down a path that

²⁰ “Born again Christian” is a redundant phrase, and indicates an ignorance of what being “born again” really means. No one can become a Christian who is not “born again”—there is no other *kind* of Christian. Likewise, no one can be “born again” *without* becoming a Christian. In our age of denominationalism, it seems that even when it comes to the term “Christian,” people are conditioned to identifying various *kinds* of Christians, as though this were possible. Yet, if one follows the New Testament, he will be led to be a Christian in the truest sense of the word: a Christ-follower. The only Christian that Christ recognizes is the person that conforms to the gospel *of* Christ.

we had not taken before, or from which we had once strayed (as in Matthew 18:1-3); transformation is what we become as we travel down that path. Conversion involves our response to God's commands; transformation is God's work upon the human heart. Yet, God will not transform the one who is not converted, or who resists the very process *of* conversion.

"Born of God" takes in this entire picture: once we become children of God, we increasingly conform to His will and nature. In effect, we become more and more like our Father (Ephesians 5:1). God calls us with His gospel, and we must respond appropriately to this call. God tells us our part in the conversion process, and we must fulfill that part exactly as He said. God reveals to us the path that leads to life, and we must be willing to walk that path and trust that He will take care of us along the way (Matthew 7:13-14, Galatians 5:16-17).²¹

Our objective must be to allow the New Testament to speak clearly and naturally. We can allow other people to help us understand *what* the gospel teaches—this book is an example of this—but we cannot *change* that teaching or teach what is not there. The Holy Spirit did not reveal His Word to us so that we might re-package it to accommodate a pre-existing teaching (whether ours or someone else's). Jesus' words to Nicodemus are clear and irrefutable: if a person is not born of water *and* born of the Spirit, he is not yet a citizen of God's kingdom, which is to say that he is not yet a Christian.

Certainly much more will be said on this entire subject as we continue. For now, it is sufficient to make the point that **born of God = born again = born of water and the Spirit = Christian.** As we have said, baptism in water is *our part* of our conversion; it does not address the entirety of what happens to our soul *in* conversion. At the same time, if our part is *required* in this process, then the process remains incomplete without it. If it meant nothing else or did

²¹ "Baptism is an overt, public act that expresses inward decision and intent; since it is performed in the open [i.e., before witnesses—MY WORDS], and not in secret, it becomes by its nature a confession of faith and allegiance embraced" (Beasley-Murray, 101).

nothing else, baptism would still be necessary if indeed God commanded us to perform it. Thus, we are not saved *only* because we are baptized, but we are not saved *without* it, either.

Instruction and Implementation

All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you...
Matthew 28:18-20

According to the apostle Peter, no one could be “born again” except for the resurrection of Christ (1 Peter 1:2-3). Likewise, no one could be born of the Spirit until the Spirit Himself entered into His ministerial work within Jesus’ church (John 7:37-39). Jesus’ words to Nicodemus (in John 3:1-5), then, anticipated what would be required of believers rather than what was immediately applicable. No one can be born of God until God had finished the necessary work of redemption that made this rebirth possible. This is why many Jews were baptized by John’s baptism of repentance (cf. Luke 3:3), but neither Jew nor Gentile was baptized into Christ until after His resurrection from the dead and His ascension to the right hand of God (Acts 2:33).

Not surprisingly, just prior to that time in which men and women would be admitted into His church, Jesus laid down the procedure once again. “All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth,” He told His apostles after His resurrection. “Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you...” (Matthew 28:18-20).²² Jesus told Nicodemus that the believer must be “born of water and the Spirit”; now he tells the apostles that the process of making disciples necessarily includes baptizing them in the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Spirit. We can safely conclude that if one is not baptized for

²² “In terms of the Great Commission in Matthew 28:19-20, baptism is something taught *before* conversion with a view to *becoming* a disciple, while ‘teaching them to observe all that I commanded you’ follows conversion and deals with the details of the Christian life” (Jack Cottrell, *Baptism: A Biblical Study* [Joplin, MO: College Press Publishing Co., 1989], 16; emphases are his).

this purpose, then he is not a disciple of Christ. And if one is not a disciple of Christ, then it is because that person has not yet recognized Christ's authority, since he has not yet been obedient to that authority.

The Process of Becoming Christ's Disciple

Jesus' instruction to His apostles was clear and inescapable. One cannot be made a Christian apart from the teaching of "the message of truth" (Ephesians 1:13-14). Baptism never precedes the hearing of the gospel, but is an inescapable result of that hearing. This demands personal responsibility from the one being taught: whatever he does in response to the gospel message—whether he obeys it or not—is his own conscious decision.

Throughout His preaching, Jesus repeatedly underscored the need for personal responsibility in the case of each person's relationship with God (Matthew 5:20, 7:21-23, and Luke 9:62, for example). Jesus spoke to Jews in order to prepare them for what was to come; we should not think, therefore, that when that time *did* come, He removed all responsibility from the believer and made God entirely responsible for each person's salvation. As we have noted previously, salvation is comprised of two components: the believer's part and God's part. These "parts" are not equal in scope or power, since man's work of faith is hardly comparable to God's work of grace, but both parts are *necessary* in order to achieve the objective of salvation.²³

The point is: Jesus required baptism as a required part of becoming a disciple. If baptism meant nothing more than immersion in water, then this is still *required* as a demonstration of obedience to what He commanded. James Coffman writes, "If nothing else appeared in all the Bible relative to the ordinance of baptism, Christ's mention of it in this circumstance would have

²³ Peter, for example, talks about the Christian faith, once proven through having overcome various trials, contributes directly and necessarily to one's salvation: "...obtaining as the outcome of your faith the salvation of your souls" (1 Peter 1:6-9). If this is true *after* conversion, there is no reason to believe it is not true *upon* one's conversion—and no passage in the New Testament teaches otherwise.

been more than sufficient to bind it upon all men for all time to come.”²⁴ If someone wishes to call upon the Lord for salvation but has not been baptized, then he has yet to comply with this simple and straightforward command. If a person says, in essence, “But I was saved by asking Jesus into my heart—and then later I was baptized,” he manifests not only an ignorance of what Jesus commanded, but he has imagined into Scripture a procedure of which neither Jesus nor His apostles ever spoke. We are not suggesting that that person did not have good intentions, but we have already established that no one is saved based upon good intentions apart from obedience to God’s commands. The fact remains that this person has not yet obeyed what Jesus commissioned His apostles—and all believers thereafter—to do.

We honor the authority of Christ only when we obey what He says to do. We cannot honor Him by refusing (or neglecting) His instructions. Jesus Himself once asked those following Him, “Why do you call Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ and do not do what I say?” (Luke 6:46). If we truly confess Him to be *our* Lord, then we must comply with whatever instructions He has given to us. Furthermore, this baptism is “in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit,” which means that the entire Godhead is behind it. **In fact, baptism is the only act we have been commanded to perform in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.** One’s baptism invokes the Godhead itself to witness, respond, and participate in the conversion of the one who comes to Christ.²⁵ Curiously, some commentators argue that this “triune formula” (in Matthew 28:19) was not used until a later time in church history, and therefore we should not have expected to see it in Matthew’s text. Nonetheless, it conspicuously *is* in the text, even against the expectations of these men. (And it appears that the only ones who seem to have a problem with this are those who have already rejected the necessity of baptism.) Until someone

²⁴ James B. Coffman, *Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (Austin, TX: Firm Foundation, 1968), 524.

²⁵ Adapted from Cogdill, 56.

has actual proof that these words are indeed fictitious, we must take Matthew's word over those of his critics.²⁶

In commenting on Matthew 28:19, William Hendriksen wrote, "Baptism, therefore, is very important. The one who submits to it, if sincere, is proclaiming that he has broken with the world and has been brought into union with the Triune God, to whom he intends to devote his life."²⁷ It is interesting that Hendriksen uses the words "very important" instead of "required" or "necessary." Likely, his Calvinistic beliefs prevented him from committing to such inescapable language. Regardless, baptism *is* "very important"—and yet it is also *essential* to salvation, inasmuch as one cannot become a disciple of the Lord apart from it. How can one demonstrate his break with the world *and* his union with God without it? How can one "devote his life" to God without obeying what He (in His Son) said to do? This is not to criticize what Hendriksen said, since it is accurate; it is to underscore its inescapable implications.

Jesus' instructions are also repeated in Mark 16:15-16, but with slightly different emphasis: "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation. He who has believed and has been baptized shall be saved; but he who has disbelieved shall be condemned." One would think that this passage, too, would be as clear as crystal in its meaning and instruction. Yet, critics—especially those who have already rejected the necessity of baptism in salvation—have been quick to say that this passage in Mark (from 16:9-20) is not found in all of the extant manuscripts of the New Testament, and therefore is questionable.²⁸

²⁶ For what it is worth, Beasley-Murray writes: "...The authenticity of the Commission to baptize, far from being discredited by examination of the evidence, is reasonably well-supported by it" (88).

²⁷ William Hendriksen, *New Testament Commentary: Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1973), 1001.

²⁸ We see a similar situation in John 7:53 – 8:11, where the story of the adulterous woman apparently is not in some of the oldest and best extant manuscripts. Yet, this does not stop many preachers from teaching it, since it does not have any controversial material in it. In fact, this story is far more questionable than the section in Mark 16, yet has gained far more acceptance. Once again, such contradictory approaches indicate not a scholarly evaluation of the text, but often a deep-seated prejudice against what the text teaches—in this case, the necessity of baptism.

While the fact of its omission in some manuscripts must be conceded, whatever is recorded in this passage does not disagree with anything we find elsewhere in the New Testament. This is especially true with regard to the direct link between baptism and salvation: if one truly believes, he will be baptized into Christ's spiritual church; if he does not believe, then neither will he be baptized.²⁹ If he is baptized in obedience to Christ's gospel—and remains faithful to that confession of faith (see Colossians 1:23)—then he will be saved. Refusal to be baptized is tantamount to refusing to obey the gospel, no matter how sincere a person claims to be otherwise. This does not mean that baptism is the only act of faith to be considered in one's conversion, but that it is a *required* one. If there are other requirements—and we know that there are—then these will be stated elsewhere with equally-binding authority.

On the Day of Pentecost

Given their instructions, it is no surprise that the apostles told others to do exactly what they themselves were commanded by Jesus. In Acts 2, we read of Peter's speech to the Jews, their response to Peter, and then Peter's response to them. This is excellent information, since we have the actual implementation of Jesus' instructions to His apostles being transmitted to those who seek reconciliation with God. Notice first what Peter does not say:

- “Just ask Jesus into your heart to be your personal Savior.”
- “Just say this ‘sinner’s prayer,’ and then Jesus will be your Savior.”
- “Accept Jesus and be saved—and *after* this, you should be baptized to let everyone know of the salvation that you have already received.”

²⁹ Some argue that, because Jesus did not mention “and is not baptized” in the latter clause of passage, therefore baptism is not necessary for salvation. How does that work, exactly? Why would an unbeliever *want* to be baptized as a demonstration of a belief that he clearly does not have—and for a salvation that he has clearly rejected? That person is condemned not merely because he did not get baptized, but because he failed to believe in the first place. If Mark’s account dealt with a less controversial subject, likely no one would resist it; but because baptism is such a point of contention, many allow their personal bias to influence how they choose to read this passage.

- “You need to repent in order to be forgiven—this is essential!—but baptism is *not* essential.”
- “You do not have to do *anything*: because you are completely dead to God and unable to make any decision concerning your salvation, there is nothing you *can* do to be saved. If you are one of God’s elect, you will be saved no matter what; but if you are not, then you will be lost no matter what. Absolutely *no work at all* on your part can contribute to your salvation.”

All of these are basic restatements of what denominational teachers have been claiming is the gospel truth about salvation. Yet, none of these come close to what Peter actually said. When it comes to the salvation of your eternal soul, should you trust the words of a denominational preacher, or should you put your faith in the inspired words of an apostle whom Christ Himself commissioned to tell you exactly what to do?

Upon Peter having indicted them for the crucifixion of their own Messiah, the Jews said to him and the rest of the apostles, “Brethren, what shall we do?” (Acts 2:37). They knew they stood condemned before God; how could they now escape that condemnation—was there any recourse? “Peter said to them, ‘Repent, and each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit’” (Acts 2:38). “Repent” is plural: it is something that is expected of all those who call upon the Lord (cf. 2:21). “Each of you be baptized” is singular: it is something that each person is expected to do in conjunction with this repentance.³⁰ Instead of diminishing baptism in order to emphasize

³⁰ Adapted from Gareth L. Reese, *New Testament History: A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Acts* (Joplin, MO: College Press, 1976), 74-77. This brings up an important and often overlooked point. John the Baptist’s baptism was all about repentance (Luke 3:3): the *purpose* for that baptism was to demonstrate the *sincerity* of one’s repentance. In fact, when certain Pharisees and Sadducees came to be baptized by him, he refused to do so because of their impenitence (Matthew 3:5-8). While the baptism that Peter required of the Jews in Acts 2:38 was for a different purpose than John’s (and achieved different results), this much is the same: repentance and baptism go hand-in-hand.

repentance (which is often the case among those who oppose the necessity of baptism), the order is quite the opposite: repentance is a general command, but baptism is a very direct and personal one. Regardless, repentance and baptism are *both* required in order to receive forgiveness *and* the “gift of the Holy Spirit.”³¹ If nothing else was known about how a person is to seek God’s forgiveness, we know this much: he *must* repent of his sins and he *must* be baptized.

Many who believe that “faith only” is required for salvation argue against the necessity of baptism in this passage. Their argument rests almost entirely upon the word “for” (*eis* in the Greek) in the phrase “for the forgiveness of sins.”³² This word, so it is argued, *can* mean “because of”—in other words, a person is baptized *because of* his forgiveness of sins. In fact, one Baptist author has written an entire book to defend this very point. His thesis: since *eis* can have other uses than “for (the purpose of),” therefore Acts 2:38 must be altogether rejected as having anything to do with the necessity of baptism.³³ Yet, of the 1,773 uses of *eis* in the New Testament, *none* of the Bible translators of any reputable translation have rendered this word

³¹ For a detailed exposition on “the gift of the Holy Spirit,” I recommend my book, *The Holy Spirit of God: A Biblical Perspective* (Summitville, IN: Spiritbuilding Publishing, 2010); go to www.booksbychad.com.

³² This is notably argued by A. T. Robertson: “My view is decidedly against the idea that Peter, Paul, or any one in the New Testament taught baptism as essential to the remission of sins or the means of securing such remission. So I understand Peter to be urging baptism on each of them who had already turned (repented)...on the basis of the forgiveness of sins which they had already received” (*Word Pictures*, vol. 3 [Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1930], 36). In rebuttal to Robertson’s imaginative rendition, see (for example) Gareth L. Reese, *New Testament History: A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Acts* (Joplin, MO: College Press, 1976), 74-77. Reese argues that Robertson’s interpretation of Acts 2:38 is inconsistent with how any other passage would have been grammatically interpreted if not for a specifically-desired outcome.

³³ Bob L. Ross, *Acts 2:38 and Baptismal Remission* (Pasadena, TX: Pilgrim Publications, 1976). Ross denies any grammatical link between “repentance” and “baptism” in this verse. Repentance is the “moral, spiritual act,” whereas baptism is “the ceremonial, figurative act” (45-49). But no one disputes this. Ross paints those who believe that baptism is necessary as holding to the doctrine of “baptismal regeneration,” which misrepresents the situation entirely. He assumes that, to advocate baptism as being essential, one must automatically reduce the emphasis of Christ’s blood—another misunderstanding or misrepresentation (40-41). “The obvious teaching of the Scripture is that faith is alive and active before baptism, and that baptism is just one of its fruits—one of the many acts of obedience that results from a loving trust in the Lord Jesus Christ as Savior” (59). Ross actually admits that baptism is an *act of obedience*; it necessarily follows that if one refuses baptism, then he is disobedient—and that is not faith. No one is disputing whether or not *every aspect* of faith can exist before baptism; yet, a person who comes to God *in* faith for the purpose of salvation must comply with His commandments, including the command to be baptized. To assume that a person is saved *before* this renders such commandments as being useless or expendable.

“because of.”³⁴ More importantly, Peter simply could *not* have said “be baptized because your sins are already forgiven” because Jesus made baptism necessary for being born again, and no one’s sins can be forgiven until he has died to the world and begun life anew with God.

Repentance is also necessary for this, but is insufficient *by itself* to comply with the instructions given by the Lord and His apostles. The conditions to forgiveness are clearly and unequivocally stated: repentance and baptism. These two conditions cannot be grammatically or theologically separated; they stand or fall together. “Forgiveness of sins” in the gospel’s vernacular is a phrase equivalent to “salvation.” No one who is saved can be unforgiven by God; anyone who is forgiven by God is also saved by Him (Ephesians 1:7). “The only honest reading [of Acts 2:38] is that baptism is for the *purpose* or *goal* of receiving forgiveness. This meaning is not just warranted but is actually demanded by the context.”³⁵

Remarkably, many denominational teachers’ responses to Acts 2:38 (and other conversion accounts in Acts) are convoluted and often desperate attempts to avoid the *necessity* of baptism in conversion. For example, one noted evangelical minister says this (on Acts 2:38): “[Baptism] is an important step of obedience for all believers, and should closely follow conversion. In fact, in the early church it was inseparable from salvation, so that Paul referred to salvation as being related to ‘one Lord, one faith, one baptism.’”³⁶ By “believers,” he means “Christians,” but this premise is impossible to defend. The idea or example of an unbaptized Christian is completely foreign to the New Testament.³⁷ Nonetheless, he cannot avoid the inescapable: baptism is *inseparably* linked to salvation. Yet, this man later says that the idea

³⁴ The word “for” in Matthew 26:38, for example—“this is My blood of the covenant, which is poured out many for the forgiveness of sins”—is the exact same usage and grammatical construction as the “for” in Acts 2:38 (Johnson, 127).

³⁵ Cottrell, 59; emphases are his.

³⁶ John MacArthur, *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary: Acts 1-12* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1996), 268.

³⁷ Adapted from F. F. Bruce, *The Book of Acts* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1954), 77.

that baptism is required for salvation is a “false doctrine.”³⁸ This begs the question: how can one teach that baptism is “important,” necessary for “obedience,” and inseparably linked to salvation, yet at the same time teach that it is a “false doctrine” to require it? Such self-refuting doublespeak will be avoided when we approach the subject objectively instead of trying to defend a predetermined religious position.

The Record in Acts

Jesus provided the instruction, and the apostles implemented that instruction in all of their preaching of His gospel. All those who choose to obey the gospel are immediately baptized as a demonstration *of* that obedience. Baptism is not something that Christians do; it is what those who call upon the name of the Lord do in *becoming* Christians. The citations speak for themselves:

- Acts 2:37-41, three thousand people responded to Peter’s command to repent and be baptized; as a result, they received forgiveness of sins and were added to the Lord’s church (2:47).
- Acts 8:12-13, Philip preached the gospel of Christ to the Samaritans (8:4-5), and many believed *and* were baptized.
- Acts 8:26-39, Philip “preached Jesus” to the Ethiopian; as a result of hearing this good news, this man desired to be baptized. (How could he have learned about baptism, unless this is an integral part of “preaching Jesus”?)
- Acts 9:11-19, the conversion of Saul (Paul) included baptism. Conspicuously, repentance is nowhere mentioned in this account, but no one denies that this requirement is necessarily implied (and so forth in the following cases).
- Acts 10:44-48, the conversion of Cornelius (and others) included baptism.

³⁸ MacArthur, *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary: Acts 13 – 28*, 268.

- Acts 16:14-15, the conversion of Lydia (and others) included baptism.
- Acts 16:33, the conversion of the Philippian jailed included baptism.
- Acts 18:8, Crispus and many other Corinthians “were believing and being baptized.”
- Acts 19:1-5, Paul baptized into *Christ* twelve men who had only been baptized according to *John’s* baptism.

What we see is a consistent agreement between the instruction and its implementation. Those of the “faith only” persuasion have argued that baptism is not mentioned in *every* instance of conversion, and therefore it is not necessary, but only “important.” (Please note that these same people remain unconvinced even when baptism *is* specifically mentioned.) We could well apply their logic to other steps of conversion that everyone *does* agree on:

- Believing is commanded (Acts 16:31), but is not mentioned in every case of conversion.
Therefore it must not be necessary for salvation (?).
- Repentance is commanded, but is not mentioned in every case of conversion. Therefore it also must not be necessary for salvation (?).
- Faith is not mentioned in *most* of the cases of conversion. Therefore faith must not be necessary for salvation (?).
- Sincerity is necessarily implied in one’s conversion, yet it is not mentioned in *any* of the conversion accounts of Acts. Therefore, sincerity is not necessary for salvation (?).

As you can see, the argument only (allegedly) works when it is directed at baptism. Otherwise, it undermines the theology of the one who uses the argument. Once again, baptism is being singled out as the one thing that is *not* required for salvation, even though it is mentioned more often in conversions in Acts than any other obvious requirements. This biased approach to Scripture is necessary, however, in order to support a predetermined agenda.

The Sum of God's Word

This much is clear: in no *one* passage of Scripture are *all* the necessary requirements for salvation given. We cannot point to any *single* passage and say that this is *all* that needs to be done. None of us is allowed to cite only our favorite passages to the neglect of those that add to them or interpret them differently. When Jesus said that we must be born of water and the Spirit, He did not mean that belief and repentance are expendable or unnecessary. And when Peter commanded that we repent and be baptized in order to be forgiven by God, he did not imply that faith and sincerity are expendable or unnecessary in this process. This is a common-sense and systematic approach to biblical interpretation.

Sadly, when it comes to avoiding baptism, people choose to violate this very simple principle. In a classic example, many Bible teachers cite Romans 10:9-10 as “proof” that baptism is unnecessary for salvation simply because it is not mentioned there. That passage reads: “...If you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved; for with the heart a person believes, resulting in righteousness, and with the mouth he confesses, resulting in salvation.” In camping on this passage, “faith only” proponents hope to exclude or minimize to insignificance all other aspects of obtaining salvation. They assume, too, that Paul meant to give a comprehensive instruction *on* salvation that contradicts what Jesus commanded and Peter implemented—and what Paul himself did in his own obedience to God (Acts 22:16).

If we keep his words in context, nothing that Paul said (in Romans 10:9-10) contradicts what Jesus or Peter taught. Jesus requires that men believe in Him and confess Him in order to be saved (John 3:16, Matthew 10:32). Those who do *not* believe or will *not* confess will face the wrath of God (John 3:36, Matthew 10:33). But Paul’s point in Romans 10:9-10 specifically

focuses on a particular *aspect* or *dimension* of one's belief and confession. In the full context of that passage (10:1-13), Paul contrasts the Jews' dependence upon their own works of law for salvation rather than putting their full confidence in Christ (10:2-4). Moses taught that perfect righteousness can only be achieved through perfect law-keeping (10:5, cf. Leviticus 18:5). Once a person breaks a law of God, however, he is no longer a law-keeper but a law-breaker, and is guilty of the entire law (James 2:10-11). Thus, Paul says that one's righteousness must be obtained through something (Someone) outside of himself.

"The righteousness based on faith" (10:6) does *not* mean that human works or human efforts are unnecessary. (If it did, then we would not need a gospel to tell us how to live *by* faith, which always requires *doing* things—but we will save this for a later discussion.) What it *does* mean is that the source of one's righteousness must be in Christ rather than in one's personal effort. As Paul said elsewhere, "By His doing you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification, and redemption, so that, just as it is written, 'Let him who boasts, boast in the Lord'" (1 Corinthians 1:30-31). So then, Christ is the One who does for us everything that we cannot do for ourselves with regard to our salvation. This is the essential definition of "grace" as used in the New Testament context of salvation.³⁹

But if we need Christ in order for us to be made righteous, how will we access Him? We did not ascend into heaven to bring Him down to us; we did not descend into the earth to bring Him up from His grave. Paul says: our access to Christ and His righteousness is through *faith*, not through human effort. Faith in Christ is predicated upon knowledge; otherwise it is "blind faith," which accomplishes nothing. "'The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart'—that is, the word of faith which we are preaching" (10:8). This "word of faith" is the gospel of

³⁹ For a detailed study on the subject of divine grace, I recommend my book, *The Gospel of Grace* (Louisville, KY: Religious Supply Center, 2008); go to www.booksbychad.com.

Christ (see 10:17). So then, when one hears the gospel of Christ and (as a result of this knowledge) puts his faith in Christ to save him rather than in himself, he is declared righteous by God. This does not negate works of human faith (including baptism), but puts them in their proper context and gives them their appropriate meaning.

This leads us to the verses in question (10:9-10). “Confess” and “believe” are popularly regarded in the most general sense, as in, “I confess His name!” or “I believe in Jesus!” Yet, Paul indicates a specific *aspect* of belief and a specific *fact* being confessed. The context is very clear on this. “If you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord” means “I confess that Jesus is *from God*, and therefore I submit to His authority, which is far above my own.” “If you believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead” means “I believe in Jesus’ resurrection, and therefore I appeal to His supreme power rather than depend upon my own.” One is saved when he puts his full confidence in Christ’s *authority* and His *power*—this is Paul’s point in this passage. His point is *not* to limit all the terms and conditions required for entering into a covenant relationship with God. Rather, His point is to contrast one’s trust in himself (which will fail him) versus his trust in Christ (who will not disappoint him—10:11).

To use this passage as a comprehensive explanation of *all* that is required for salvation not only defies common sense, but it is an entirely incorrect method of biblical interpretation. In other words, it is illogical as well as unbiblical. If *only* “believing” and “confessing” are required for salvation, then this would nullify the need for repentance, for example. Someone might argue, “But repentance is necessarily implied!” Yes, because repentance is mentioned *elsewhere* in direct connection with one’s salvation. But so is baptism—and far more often than repentance—so why not apply the same reasoning? “Because *baptism* is a work, and no one is saved by works!” will be the anticipated reply. Yet, repentance is also a work: Christ does not

repent *for you*, but expects you to do this *for Him*. Likewise, believing and confessing are both works: Christ does not believe for you or confess for you—these are actions (works!) that He expects *you* to do as part of *your* salvation. Without believing or confessing (in the context in which Paul defined these in Romans 10:9-10), a person cannot be saved. Thus, while he is not saved merely *because* he believed or confessed, he is not saved *without* these actions, either.

This soundly defeats the entire “no human works are necessary in our salvation” theory.

Summary Thoughts

In the broadest of terms, virtually all those who call themselves Christians are in agreement: the source of our salvation is Christ, not our own effort. Where the path diverges is in the understanding (or placement) of our personal effort in the matter of our own salvation. Paul teaches that our works of faith do have a place and are necessary; “faith only” proponents *want* to say that our works of faith are not necessary because everything depends upon God—but they do not and cannot really practice this. Think about what we have covered so far:

- Jesus said that, in order to enter the kingdom of God, you must be born of water and the Spirit. One part is your responsibility; the other part is God’s responsibility. Which one is more necessary than the other? They are both absolutely necessary, since without one *or* the other, you cannot enter the kingdom of God. (Just because both are necessary does *not* mean that they are both equal in power; it only means that they are both required to accomplish the given objective.)
- Jesus said that, in order to become a disciple of His, you must be taught His Word *and* be baptized in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Jesus is not baptized for you; His responsibility is to provide you with necessary teaching *and* regenerate your soul

upon your obedience to Him. Your responsibility is to respond obediently to the teaching, which necessarily includes (but is not limited to) baptism.

- Peter said that, in order to receive God's forgiveness of your sins, you must repent *and* be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ.⁴⁰ If you do not repent *and/or* are not baptized in His name, you will not receive God's forgiveness. Christ is not repenting or being baptized for you; these are things that *you* must do for *your* salvation. This does not make your salvation entirely dependent upon your human effort, since it is Christ who has the power of salvation. However, it does mean that your salvation is impossible *without* your human effort.
- Paul said that you must confess that Jesus came down from heaven—He is God, and has divine authority—*and* you must believe that He rose from the dead—He has divine power, even over death itself. If you *personally* do not perform these acts of faith, then you really do not *have* faith, since “faith” without such confession or belief is no faith at all. Yet, these actions are not done for you, but *you* are expected to do them. If you do not, then you are not saved. Thus, your salvation is conditioned upon your obedience.

This teaching is not only biblical, but it is clear and inescapable. It also transcends any need to remain in step with one church's teaching over another's. You may have questions about salvation that have not yet been covered (or that cannot be answered by mere men), but that does not mean you do not have enough information to know what to do. The Book of Acts is filled with accounts of believers who became Christians based upon far less information than you have

⁴⁰ Being baptized in the name of Jesus Christ is not different than being baptized in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. In either case, one appeals to God's authority. Whoever appeals to Christ's authority also must necessarily appeal to the Father's authority and the Spirit's authority. These three Personages of God maintain their separate identities and responsibilities, but they are completely united in mind, purpose, and love. “In the name of” literally refers to a transferring of money or property into the account bearing the name of its owner. Thus, baptism is performed as a legal transfer of one's allegiance into the account (so to speak) of the One who now owns him (as in 1 Corinthians 6:19-20) (Cottrell, 17; Beasley-Murray, 90-91). One who claims to “belong” to God without this legal transfer—a transaction authorized by God Himself—illegitimately assumes a status that has no reason to exist.

covered in the book you are reading right now, but it was sufficient information and they all responded the same way. Not one of them sat back and let God do all the work, claiming a “faith only” belief. Not one of them claimed to be “saved” by simply accepting Jesus into their heart as their personal Savior. Not one merely offered a “sinner’s prayer,” or was baptized in order to become a member of some particular congregation. The correct instruction always led to the correct implementation, when accompanied by faithful obedience. As it was with those early Christians, so it is with us: the instruction of the New Testament always leads to a clear and singular conclusion, not several contradictory ones—and certainly not a conclusion that is not even defined *by* that instruction.

Let’s summarize even further. In the few passages we have examined so far, it is clear that your salvation is the result of:

- Being born again by water *and* the Spirit of God.
- Hearing the Word of Christ *and* acting upon it obediently, *at least* through baptism, in order to become a disciple of Christ.
- Repenting *and* being baptized into Christ for forgiveness of your sins.
- Confessing that Jesus has divine authority to pronounce your innocence.
- Believing that Jesus has divine power to rescue you from your spiritual ruin.

Notice (again) that no single passage provides everything that is needed to be done with regard to salvation. We must put them all together; “The sum of Your word is truth” (Psalm 119:160). While it is true that “whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life” (John 3:16), this is a most general prescription, not a specific one. Similarly, the entire Law of Moses was summed up in, “You shall love God with all your heart, soul, and might, and you shall love your

neighbor as yourself" (cf. Matthew 22:37-40), but it took Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy for God to expound upon all the particulars of those two commandments.

Again, our purpose here is not to promote baptism as being greater than any other work of faith. Rather, we are discovering—through an honest and objective investigation of Scripture—that baptism is a *required* act of faith. We have much more to say in defense of this, and yet the conclusion will remain the same because the Scriptures are consistent in what they teach.

Washing Away Your Sins

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, who is at the right hand of God....

1 Peter 3:21-22

Water is one of the most diverse and amazing substances on earth. The earth is covered with about 70% water, and your body is comprised of about the same percentage of water. All life on earth is dependent upon water. “In the beginning,” the world was literally engulfed in water. God separated the waters of the earth so as to allow dry land to appear (Genesis 1:1-10). Thus, “by the word of God the heavens existed long ago and the earth was formed out of water and by water” (2 Peter 3:5). Just as a child emerges from the watery womb of its mother, the earth once emerged from the watery womb of God’s initial creation. Both situations define a birth experience.

Water figured prominently in the cleansing rituals of the Law of Moses. The bronze laver of the tabernacle was placed between the bronze altar and the entrance to the holy tent so that the priests could wash their hands and feet before entering into the tabernacle or ministering to the altar (Exodus 30:18-21). Ordination of the high priest, however, required a washing of one’s entire body with water before putting on his priestly garments and being anointed with holy oil (Leviticus 8:6). In a very real sense, the washing of water served as a point of separation between his two lives: the one that belonged to himself before he was ordained as a priest, and the one that belonged to God.⁴¹

⁴¹ Full bathing was also required of the high priest on the Day of Atonement, both before he offered the sin offering for himself and the sin offering for the nation (Leviticus 16:4, 24). This also serves as a point of separation: each Day of Atonement marked not only the end of one year (of the *religious* calendar), but also the beginning of a new year. The old year’s sins were atoned through the sprinkled blood upon the mercy seat; the new year thus began free of sin. This was the case for the nation of Israel as well as the high priest himself.

Likewise, water was part of the ritual cleansing of a man who once had leprosy—a generic term for any infectious or corruptive skin disease—but then became healed. On behalf of this man, two “clean” birds were offered in his ritual purification. The priest killed one bird in “living” or running water; the other was dipped in water and blood and then set free (Leviticus 14:4-7). After this, the man himself was completely shaved, his clothes washed, and his entire body bathed in water. This bathing in water served as a historical point of his re-introduction into the Israelite community from which he had previously been alienated due to his leprosy. In other words, this procedure served to *separate* the man’s disease-ridden life from the new life that he enjoyed thereafter. After this ritual was completed—a seven-day process altogether—he was, in effect, a new man, and we could say that he indeed walked in newness of life.

Likewise, water was an integral part of the cleansing of an Israelite who had been contaminated with coming into contact with a dead human body. This cleansing process is often called the red heifer ordinance, since it required the sacrifice of a flawless red heifer (Numbers 19). The heifer was to be slain and burned entirely upon the bronze altar, and its ashes put in a “clean place.” Whenever an Israelite was contaminated by any contact with a corpse, he could be ritually cleansed through a mixture of these ashes and water. In such a case, this “water for impurity” was sprinkled upon the one being cleansed, while the one who sprinkled him with this water was required to bathe himself in water for his own ritual purity. Similarly, any Israelite who was contaminated with human blood (menstruation), a seminal discharge (Leviticus 15), eating an animal that died naturally (17:15), or touching an unclean animal (22:5-6) had to be ceremonially cleansed through bathing in water. In each case, the water not only served as a cleansing agent, but the washing event itself served as a point of separation between being *unfit* to serve God and being *fit* or *prepared* to serve Him.

We should not think of “ritual” or “ceremonial” actions as being any less important than, say, the Ten Commandments themselves. While these prescriptions were ritualistic, they were still *required* by Law, and one’s failure to abide by them made him a law-breaker and not a law-keeper.⁴² Thus, the observance of ritual laws and “signs” of God’s covenant with Israel were just as important as any of the moral laws that Israel was required to obey.

The Water of Cleansing

Through His perfect life and His uncorrupted blood offering, Jesus Christ fulfilled the entire Law of Moses.⁴³ In having fulfilled “the Law,” He also fulfilled all the types, figures, and shadows of the Law—including all of its ritual feasts, cleansings, and holy days (Colossians 2:16-17). In fact, the entire Law itself was only “a shadow of the good things to come and not the very form of things” (Hebrews 10:1), and thus could not fulfill what was *ultimately* required for cleansing any man of his corruption. Water cannot cleanse a man’s conscience any more than animal blood can cleanse a man’s soul (9:13-14, 10:4).⁴⁴ However, water continues (in the *new* covenant) to serve as a symbol of purification and (as illustrated in the case of Christ’s own baptism) a separation from one life to another.

A person loses his innocence before God when he acquires carnal knowledge through his conscious and deliberate sin against God’s holy nature. Like Adam and Eve’s consumption of the forbidden fruit, so every person thereafter has given away his innocence for a taste of the world. In so doing, that person becomes corrupted *by* the world; in essence, he becomes a man

⁴² Beasley-Murray notes that the Old Testament cleansings *ended* with washing in water, but (he claims that) the matter of cleansing occurred *before* this (28-29). In the end, this distinction does not matter. First, this is not an apples-to-apples comparison between those cleansings and baptism, but simply a foreshadow of what was to come. Second, refusal to wash (in either case) is a violation of the command, and renders any previous compliance with the command null and void.

⁴³ The only blood we need now is the blood of Christ; His blood offering was given “once for all” and does not need to be repeated or supplemented with any other blood offering (10:10-18).

⁴⁴ Hebrews 9:13 makes a direct allusion to the red heifer ordinance that we have just discussed, and the writer shows that Christ’s blood accomplishes what that (red heifer) sacrifice could never do.

of the world (as opposed to being merely born *into* the world). In this spiritual identification with the world, he relinquishes the purity and fellowship that he once enjoyed with his Creator. The corruption of his soul (through his act of disobedience) is likened to—but far more serious than—the ceremonial uncleanness explained in the Law of Moses. Ritual uncleanness under the Law was not considered *sin*, but did render the Israelite unfit for participating in further service to God. The only way that his uncleanness became *sinful* was if he failed to address it through ritual purification. One who is an alien sinner, however, is “dead” to God (Ephesians 2:1). He is not merely in need of healing, but needs to be brought back to life—i.e., he needs to be reconciled with God.

What the two scenarios have in common, however, is the need for *water* in the remedial process. We have already examined the use of water in the purification rites of those Israelites who became “unclean.” They remained unclean until (or unless) they underwent the water-cleansing procedure dictated by the Law. But one who has become a sinner is also “unclean”—not just in a symbolic manner, but in a real and perilous one. His uncleanness will lead to the ruin of his soul, until (or unless) he addresses that uncleanness in the water-cleansing procedure dictated by the gospel of Christ.

Before we go any further, we must make it clear that there are no healing or reconciliatory properties in the *water itself* in either case. Baptism is a necessary part of the cleansing of one’s soul, but it is not a magical experience. (The centuries-old use of “sacrament” to define the rite of baptism does imply the mysterious work of God, and some have taken this to mean virtually the *magical* work of God.) Water itself does not provide any physical or spiritual healing effects; baptism itself cannot regenerate the soul. The water of baptism is not “holy water” filled with special or magical qualities. Baptism does not serve as a kind of amulet

designed to protect the believer against all harm. Baptism is not an act of exorcism of demonic forces that have entered into one's heart. Such are some of the myths and superstitions of those who import pagan religion, supernaturalism, and subtle forms of sorcery into the gospel of Christ. Those who believe that the work of baptism *itself* is also the work of salvation give baptism a power that none of the inspired New Testament writers will support.

Water Is Necessary in Conversion

Water "cleanses," but only in that it is involved at all, not because it is removing actual filth from the person who is washed in it (1 Peter 3:21). In other words, the water did not make the Israelite "clean" because of any magical or healing properties of the water itself; he was made "clean" because in faith he *obeyed the commandment of God* regarding his purification. Likewise, the believer is not *literally* cleansed of his sins by water, because water cannot cleanse sins. Only the blood of Christ is able to take away the sins of the world (John 1:29, Ephesians 1:7). But *access* to the blood is through obedience, and the *medium* that God has chosen to express this obedience is at least (but not limited to) immersion in water. Thus, the believer is made "clean," so to speak, when in faith he *obeys the commandment of God*. And God's command is that he be baptized in the name of Christ for the forgiveness of his sins (Acts 2:38).

Thus, water is used as a cleansing agent, but only in a spiritual or symbolic manner. But as we said earlier, just because something is ritual or symbolic does not mean it is optional, or that one can forego it without sinning against God. If God *commands* the symbol, then it is a *violation* of the commandment not to perform or participate in it. The sabbath, for example, was a "sign" of the covenant between God and Israel, yet Israel was charged with sin when they failed to observe properly that "sign" (Ezekiel 20:12, 16). Likewise, baptism is a symbol of one's cleansing of his sins—in essence, his uncleanness—but it is not offered as a suggestion or

an option, but a command: “Go therefore...baptizing them...” (Matthew 28:19); “And he [Peter] ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ” (Acts 10:48). It is impossible to seek God’s favor—and especially His forgiveness—while simultaneously resisting the very thing He says is required to *obtain* that favor or forgiveness.

So then, with the purification rites of the Law of Moses in mind, we will consider several passages in which this water-cleansing concept is incorporated into the gospel of Christ. (These are not presented in the order that they appear in the New Testament.)

□ “Now why do you delay? Get up and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on His name” (Acts 22:16). These are the words spoken to Saul after Jesus blinded him on the road to Damascus. While some clever (but unconvincing) interpretations have been given to this passage in order to avoid associating water baptism with either “washing away sins” or “calling” on the name of the Lord, the passage is actually quite simple and straightforward. It teaches thus:

- Saul (a.k.a. Paul) was himself instructed to be baptized. He did not consider it unnecessary, as some have assumed, but willingly submitted to it as a matter of obedience to Christ’s gospel. “Be baptized” was not something that Saul did after the fact of his conversion, but it was a necessary *part* of it. If Saul had not been baptized, he would not have become a Christian, much less an apostle.
- Baptism is not only a demonstration of one’s *obedience* but is also necessary for his *forgiveness*. The “washing away” is figurative language, since only the blood of Christ can truly remove sins; yet it is appropriate because the sinner-turned-believer must undergo a ritual cleansing process that symbolizes what Christ is doing for his soul. There is no way—grammatically, logically, or biblically—to

escape this conclusion in this passage. Furthermore, this instruction exactly matches what Peter told the Jews on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:38).

- Baptism is required in order to “call upon His [i.e., the Lord’s] name.” This expression means to petition God’s help for that which is beyond the scope of human ability.⁴⁵ To call upon God’s name means to put complete trust in His ability to save, but it also necessarily demands obedience to whatever God says to do with *regard* to that salvation. Peter quoted the prophet Joel on the day of Pentecost: “And it shall be that everyone who calls on the name of the LORD will be saved” (Acts 2:21). At the end of the sermon, Peter told them *how* to call upon that name: “Repent, and let each of you be baptized...for the forgiveness of your sins.” God called them through His gospel message (2:39); three thousand people called upon God with their obedience to His instruction by being baptized (2:41). Saul’s experience was no different than theirs: both the instruction and the response were the same.
- If one is not baptized, yet thinks that he is obeying God by (say) “Accepting Jesus into his heart,” this is not what Saul was instructed, nor is this what he did. Christ told Ananias what to tell Saul, and Saul would have been *disobedient* to the command if he had not consented to it. Likewise, if Saul had not been baptized, then his sins could not have been “washed away”—i.e., they could not have been forgiven. And if Saul had never been baptized, he could not have called upon the name of the Lord for salvation, since this is the means the *Holy Spirit* has chosen by which people do this. All said, Saul could not have become a Christian unless

⁴⁵ Baptism is itself a kind of prayer in which the believer beseeches the Lord. The believer not only confesses the name of Christ in his appeal, but also invokes His name for salvation (Beasley-Murray, 101).

or until he complied with these instructions. Yet, the instructions given to Saul were no different than those given to anyone else seeking God's salvation.

- In Ephesians 5:24-26, Paul taught that the church—the bride of Christ—is subject to Christ, and that Christ has sanctified His church, “having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word.” The direct connection between water and sanctification should seize our attention. The church *as a single entity* is not washed with water; it has been immersed in a different sense—in the Holy Spirit. Yet, each soul that is added *to* Christ’s church is added through the same process: he (or she) is “washed” with water for all the reasons stated above in Saul’s conversion. This washing is symbolic in nature, but this fact does not render it optional or expendable. If the church—which is comprised only of individual souls that have obeyed the gospel of Christ—can only be sanctified through water, then without water it remains unsanctified and thus unfit to serve as Christ’s bride.
 - “With the word” has led some to assume that “washing” here is merely a figure of speech and not an actual rite to be performed. This view also assumes that “the word” is what cleanses us, and is often based upon Jesus’ words to His disciples: “You are already clean because of the word which I have spoken to you” (John 15:3). But the context of that passage is far different than that of Paul’s words in Ephesians. In John 15, Christ’s disciples had not yet been given the command to go and make disciples through baptism. Also, that context has to do with their preparedness for bearing fruit in their ministry to Him; it is not addressing the means of becoming part of His church or entering into the kingdom of God. The two scenarios use common words, but are not interchangeable.

- “With the word” refers instead to *the source of authority*, just as “by one Spirit” does in 1 Corinthians 12:13. In other words, the “washing”—and thus sanctifying—of Christ’s church is in full compliance with the Holy Spirit-revealed Word of God which has instructed this method in the first place. The church is not “washed” according to tradition, man-made doctrines, or any such thing; it is “washed” because Christ required this for His most special bride. Only in this way could He present His bride to His Father as “holy and blameless.” (See Colossians 1:22, where Paul uses the same language but with reference to individual believers rather than the entire church.)
- Once again, we see that each believer—and, consequently, the entire church—comes to Christ *through the water*. It is through the symbolic rite of being “washed” or cleansed with water that one identifies *with* Christ. Just as water was used to prepare the Levitical priests for service, allowed for the newness of life of a man healed of his leprosy, and provided ritual cleansing for all those who had become “unclean,” so water continues to serve as an agent of *spiritual* cleansing for those who call upon God’s name for salvation.⁴⁶
- “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...” (1 Peter 3:21). Peter defines the “that” to which baptism corresponds in the previous verse: Noah and his family “were brought safely through the water” in the ark. Interestingly, the ark itself prefigures Christ’s own church as a refuge or sanctuary

⁴⁶ “What is the ‘washing of water’? There can be little question that it refers to baptism. The Greek word for ‘washing’ is *loutron*, which can mean ‘washing’ or ‘bath.’ It is used for baptism in Titus 3:5. It is a noun form of the verb *louo*, which is used in other places for baptism. The idea that it is used here figuratively for some spiritual bath is precluded by the reference to water; it is the ‘washing *of water*.’ The only ‘washing of water’ in Christian experience is baptism” (Cottrell, 121).

specifically prepared by God for the purpose of saving lives. Noah built the ark, whereas Christ built His church; yet both were built according to God's divine plan and authority. Water serves as a means of separation between those *outside* the ark (who were destroyed by water) and those *within* the ark (who were saved through the water). Likewise, in the gospel plan, water separates a person's identification from *those who will be destroyed* to *those who will be saved*. No one comes into Christ's church except through the water, just as Noah could not be saved except that God brought him safely through the water. If Noah had disobeyed God's commands to build the ark and then seek refuge in it, you can be certain that he also would have been destroyed by water instead of saved through it.⁴⁷ Likewise, if a person today refuses to obey God's command to seek refuge in Christ's church, he will be destroyed rather than saved.

- “Corresponding to that” means “in like figure” or “in a parallel thought.” The two situations—Noah’s and ours—are not exactly alike or interchangeable, but they share important similarities. Noah’s life was spared “through the water,” but nothing is said of his soul. Yet, Peter draws upon that figure to speak of our soul’s salvation, not that of our physical lives. The one is an analogy of the other, not a point-for-point comparison.
- “Baptism now saves you” is impossible to interpret in any way less or different than the context in which Peter uses it. Peter is talking about *the salvation of your soul*—and he links baptism directly to this salvation. As real and necessary as

⁴⁷ In commenting on 1 Peter 3:21, Bob Ross—a Baptist who vehemently rejects the necessity of baptism in salvation—says this: “Those in the ark left behind the old world to live in the new; so also the believer, having risen from the waters of baptism, now goes forth to walk in newness of life” (*Acts 2:38 and Baptismal Remission*, 65). If he really believes this, then he must also believe that *no one* can experience “newness of life” *until* he has risen from the waters of his baptism. He cannot refuse the command, yet embrace a new life with God anyway—this does not make sense, and violates the message of the gospel.

Christ's own resurrection from the dead is for your salvation, so is your resurrection (so to speak) from the watery burial of baptism. If Christ was not raised from the dead, baptism is rendered pointless and “you are still in your sins” (cf. 1 Corinthians 15:17).⁴⁸ But as it is, Christ *has* been raised, and you must be raised *with* Him in the likeness of His own death, burial, and resurrection. We understand that the *act* of baptism itself is not the power that saves us; rather, it is God’s power that saves (Romans 1:16). But this power is only given to those who believe and obey Him. We are saved *by* God’s grace, but we are not saved *apart from* human faith (Ephesians 2:8); “faith without works is dead” (James 2:26).

- “Not the removal of dirt from the flesh, but an appeal to God for a good conscience”—this explains exactly what Peter means. Baptism *is* a washing, but not for the body; it is instrumental in the cleansing of the soul. Sin and rebellion corrupt the human conscience: we know that we have sinned, and we know that we stand condemned when we did this. Through our obedience to God’s commands—specifically in this case, the command to be baptized—we call upon His name and receive the cleansing of our conscience. The blood of Christ is the *actual* healing agent of our conscience (Hebrews 9:13-14), but that is what God “applies” to us.
- Since “baptism now saves you,” then one’s *refusal* to be baptized cannot possibly save that person. Similarly, one’s claim to be “saved” *prior* to being baptized also does not work, since it contradicts the very clear and inescapable teaching of the

⁴⁸ “Baptism is only saving if there is an appeal to God for a good conscience through the resurrection of Jesus Christ. In other words, baptism saves only because it is anchored to the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ” (Thomas R. Schreiner, “Baptism in the Epistles: An Initiation Rite for Believers,” *Believer’s Baptism*, ed. Thomas R. Schreiner and Shawn D. Wright [Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishing Group, 2006], 70).

Word of God. Once again, it is not baptism alone that brings about salvation, for we know that this only addresses one aspect of what is required—yet it *is required* nonetheless. Furthermore, a person cannot stand before God with a clear (or cleansed) conscience if he has willfully refused to do what God has asked in order to have his conscience cleared.

□ “...Let us draw near with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water” (Hebrews 10:22). One should read the entire passage (10:1-22) to get the full impact of what the writer is presenting. Our focus, however, is the method by which we can “enter the holy place by the blood of Jesus” (10:19). This is not something we can do—not for ourselves or for anyone else. We are unable to enter into the very throne room of God and present ourselves literally before Him—which is what the writer describes—but Jesus did this for us (see 9:11-12). We cannot “draw near” to God apart from the divine work and intercession of His Son. But *because* of His intercession (and our “sincere heart”), we ought to have “full assurance of faith” that this is being done for us.

- Yet, there is something that both parties—the one wishing to “draw near” and God Himself—must do. God’s work is to sprinkle clean the conscience of the one who calls upon His name for salvation. This “sprinkling” is an allusion to what Moses did upon outlining God’s covenant with Israel at Mount Sinai (Exodus 24:1-8). After the elders of Israel agreed to the terms and conditions of this covenant (“All the words which the LORD has spoken we will do!”), Moses took the blood from the offerings made at that time and sprinkled half of it on the altar upon which those offerings were made. The other half he sprinkled upon the

people themselves and said, “Behold the blood of the covenant, which the LORD has made with you in accordance with all these words.” Thus, the sprinkling of blood upon the *heart* of one who comes to God refers to that person’s induction into God’s fellowship through *covenant* (see Hebrews 9:15-22). Just as Moses spelled out the terms and conditions of the first covenant at Sinai, so Christ and His apostles have spelled out these for the “new covenant” of the gospel.

- One cannot enter into covenant with God without obeying the terms and conditions of that covenant. He also cannot enter into covenant with God unless (or until) the blood of the covenant *sacrifice* has been applied to that person’s soul. But there is at least one other specific condition that must be met: the one wishing to draw near to God in covenant must have his body “washed with pure water.” This is a ritual cleansing, not a literal one. In other words, Peter has already explained (in 1 Peter 3:21) that this is not for the cleansing of the body, but the cleansing of one’s conscience. No one can enter into covenant with God with a *guilty* conscience; this is something that must be cleansed at the time that the covenant is made.
- In baptism, the believer’s former allegiance to the world is severed, since he has died to this. Just as Israel was no longer a slave nation to Egypt once they entered into covenant with God, so the believer is no longer a slave to sin once he is sprinkled with the blood of Christ. (We will expound upon these points in an upcoming chapter.) As we cited earlier, “to obey Jesus Christ and be sprinkled with His blood” is the method by which we enter into God’s covenant of salvation (1 Peter 1:2). We cannot merely focus upon what *Jesus* does, however: “to

obey” necessarily indicates that our salvation is conditional. It is not something that just happens to us; it is something that we actively seek. Our obedience demonstrates sincerity and confidence in God’s ability to save us. One who is not yet been “washed” has not yet fulfilled *his* part in the covenant-making process. This means that he does not yet *have* a covenant relationship with God.

□ “But when the kindness of God our Savior and His love for mankind appeared, He saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit, whom He poured out upon us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior...” (Titus 3:4-6).

- This passage so closely parallels Ephesians 2:8-9 that we can easily use the one to interpret the other. In both passages, the emphasis is placed upon the Godhead—God the Father, God the Son, and God the Spirit—as the source of all salvation. Yet, neither passage excludes human effort; they simply show that effort to be incomparable to divine effort. In other words, Paul is not saying in either case that *nothing* is required of the believer, but that what God provides *to* the believer is far greater than what the believer can ever provide to God or himself. Both passages teach that we are saved by grace through faith—that is, divine grace that is *in response to* human faith (Hebrews 10:38).
- Those who are decidedly against the necessity of baptism put the two phrases—“washing of regeneration” and “renewing by the Holy Spirit”—together as though one interchangeable thought. In other words, they want the Holy Spirit to be directly responsible for *both* the “washing” and “renewing.” This puts *all* the work of salvation upon God, and *none* of it upon the person needing it. But this

does not work, grammatically, biblically, or theologically. We are saved “by grace...through faith” (Ephesians 2:8); in a parallel thought, we are renewed by the Holy Spirit but not apart from the “washing of regeneration.” The only reference that “washing” has with regard to salvation in the New Testament is *baptism in water*. Those who claim that this is “Holy Spirit baptism” must first read that conclusion into the text, because it is not natural to the context; secondly, they must explain exactly what they *mean* by this. It is convenient to defer to a “spiritual baptism” to avoid a literal one; it is quite another thing to have this answer actually make sense. It is true that the Spirit is “poured out upon us” (Titus 3:6), but only as a *result* of the “washing” and “renewing,” not as a *definition* of those actions.⁴⁹

- There is no disagreement between what Jesus said in John 3:5 and what Paul wrote in Titus 3:5:

$$\begin{array}{ccc} \text{Born of water} & \longleftrightarrow & \text{washing of regeneration} \\ [\text{Born of}] \text{ the Spirit} & \longleftrightarrow & \text{renewing of the Holy Spirit} \end{array}$$

One is an act of human faith; the other is an act of divine power; yet *both* are necessary in order for the objective—being *born of God*—to be met. Or, we could view it as an equation in which both parts are required:

$$\text{Born of water} + [\text{born of}] \text{ the Spirit} = \text{entrance into the kingdom}$$

$$\text{Washing of regeneration} + \text{renewing of the Holy Spirit} = \text{salvation}$$

⁴⁹ See Acts 2:17-21, 2:33. Just as Christ’s blood was “poured out for many [His church—MY WORDS]” for the purpose of atonement (Mark 14:24), so the Holy Spirit was “poured out” upon Christ’s church for the purpose of sanctification and consecration for service to God. This “pouring out” was initially manifested in the form of visible miracles, so as to prove that it [the pouring out] actually was accomplished (Hebrews 2:3-4); thereafter, it is manifested in every genuine Christian in the form of a transformed life and the “fruit of the Spirit” (Romans 5:5, Galatians 5:22-23).

No one would deny that entrance into the kingdom of God is something different than the salvation of the human soul. Thus, two things equal to the same thing are also equal to each other: becoming a citizen of the kingdom of God is equal to becoming a Christian.

□ “Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? … Such were some of you; but you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God” (1 Corinthians 6:9, 11).

- In what case is “washed” used in the New Testament in the context of salvation?

It consistently refers to that person’s *water baptism* into Christ—not for a physical cleansing, but as an appeal to God for a “good conscience” (cf. 1 Peter 3:21).

- We might ask rhetorically: which of these actions—“washed,” “sanctified,” or “justified”—is expendable or unnecessary? There are *all* necessary. This does not mean that they are all equal in power or scope, but that is not what “necessary” implies. A man’s contribution to the conception, gestation, and birth of a child is minimal in comparison to a woman’s, but *both parties are absolutely necessary* in order for a child to be born. Likewise, what the believer does to prove that he *is* a believer in God is infinitesimally small in comparison to the incomprehensible work of God’s saving grace, yet *both parts are absolutely necessary* in order for one to be born of Him.

Once again, we see water used as the means by which a person comes to God for salvation—thus, in one’s conversion to Christ. It is through the water that the believer calls upon the name of God, identifies with Christ’s church (His bride), is actually saved, has his conscience cleansed, demonstrates his faith in God’s power, and enters into a covenant of salvation with God.

Removing water baptism from the conversion process fails to carry out the process altogether. Relegating baptism to an after-the-fact demonstration of faith undermines the very purpose *for* baptism in the first place. Baptism is not only a part of the conversion process; it is a necessary and significant one. “*Every single Bible passage* that says anything at all about the meaning of baptism represents it in some way as the time when God bestows His saving grace upon the sinner.”⁵⁰

Summary Thoughts

God has chosen water to symbolize one’s ritual cleansing of his uncleanness so that he can enter into fellowship with Him. While other requirements also exist to obtain this fellowship (under the Law of Moses as well as the gospel of Christ), this one element is critical. Under the Law of Moses, if an Israelite was “unclean,” then he could not be made “clean” apart from a ritual cleansing with water. Under the gospel of Christ, one who has an unclean conscience cannot have this cleansed apart from a ritual cleansing with water (i.e., baptism).

Water does not take the place of blood—and that was never the point—but God does not ask for us to provide blood, either. He has provided the only blood necessary for the cleansing of our heart and conscience: the blood of His Son, which is the blood of God’s covenant with us (Matthew 26:27-28). He only asks that we be obedient to the terms and conditions of this covenant. If God had asked us to be immersed in tomato juice or buttermilk in order to access this blood, hopefully we would comply. How much easier and more practical it is that He has asked us only to be immersed in water! Yet, even with the simplicity of this command, many people still offer all kinds of resistance against it.

The six passages that we have examined above not only teach but also demand that the believer *do something* in order to obtain his own salvation. This does not and cannot mean that

⁵⁰ Cottrell, 146; emphasis is his.

what he does *by itself* obtains salvation, for this is impossible. The sin-corrupted human soul cannot be redeemed by works of the sinner himself: sin never makes one holy, but holiness is itself corrupted by sin.⁵¹ What it *does* mean, however, is that no one is saved against his own will, apart from his own faith, and without his own expressed obedience *of* that faith. In comparison to what He does for us, God has not asked much in return, yet what He *does* ask is essential to our covenant relationship with Him.

⁵¹ For an actual example of this point, see Haggai 2:10-14. When something that is holy comes into contact with that which is unholy (or unclean), the holy thing becomes unclean; it does not make the unclean thing holy. The reason why Jesus can “touch” our sinful souls and make *us* holy, however, is because He has offered the necessary sacrifice to *remove* our corruption, rather than Himself becoming corrupted by our own sin.

Separation and Identification

*For 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.*
Galatians 3:26-27

You are likely familiar with the account of Israel's exodus from Egypt (Exodus 13 – 14).

After the tenth plague—the death of all the first-born males in Egypt—the Israelites left that nation and headed toward the land of Canaan. They were led by God's presence in a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. Shortly after they left, however, Pharaoh had a change of heart and decided to go and retrieve his nation of slave laborers, and thus he pursued them with his army. This put Israel in the middle of two formidable obstacles: the impassable Red Sea on one side and the entire Egyptian army and its chariots on the other.

What God did for Israel at that point has become one of the most memorable events in all of human history. First, He put the pillar of cloud between Israel and Egypt, and at night this pillar provided light for Israel, but darkness for the Egyptians. Then, He parted the Red Sea for the Israelites to cross it throughout the night, and they walked between two literal walls of water to the other side.⁵² Finally, He allowed Pharaoh's army to pursue Israel through the parted sea, but then closed the water upon those men and drowned them.⁵³

The apostle Paul draws upon this very event: “For I do not want you to be unaware, brethren, that our fathers were all under the cloud and all passed through the sea; and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea” (1 Corinthians 10:1-2). “The cloud” refers to

⁵² The Red Sea was divided in half; perpendicular to this division, God created another division between Israel and Pharaoh's army. The resulting “shape” of the two lines of division is that of a cross. Similarly, it is the cross of Christ that divides us from the world as we come through the water. It is not necessary to push such ideas too far—sometimes we “see” in Scripture what we want to see, not necessarily what God wanted us to see—but in this particular case, the implications are striking.

⁵³ As with the case of the Flood, water can serve as an agent of *salvation* or *destruction*, depending upon the moral condition of those involved. This is the point that Peter makes: the world was made through water, then destroyed by water (2 Peter 3:5-6); those in the ark were brought safely through water, whereas those outside of the ark were destroyed by water (1 Peter 3:20).

the cloudy/fiery pillar that accompanied Israel during their entire sojourn in the wilderness, from the time they left Egypt to the time they crossed the Jordan River into the Promised Land (Exodus 40:36-38). Israel was “baptized” into the cloud in that they were surrounded or whelmed by God’s presence. Likewise, Israel was “baptized” in the sea when they walked between the two walls of water—in essence, when they passed literally *through* the sea. Through these two experiences—which really was *one* experience with two different elements—all of Israel was “baptized into Moses.”

This is important, not just because the word “baptized” is used, but because of what was accomplished as a *result* of this baptism. The Red Sea represented a type of *death* to what Israel used to be: no longer would they be a mass of slaves to Egypt; after passing through the sea, they were in essence “born again” as a new nation with an exclusive identity and (in time) a land of their own. Similarly, they would no longer serve Pharaoh, but would become a nation that served God alone and no one else. As God told them at Mount Sinai, “Now then, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be My own possession among all the peoples, for all the earth is Mine; and you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Exodus 19:5-6).

In a very real sense, the water itself provided the specific point of reference for this great transition: the Israel that entered *into* the sea was not the same nation that came *out* of the sea. The situation had irreversibly and forever changed.⁵⁴ Before its “baptism,” Israel identified with four hundred years of life (and slavery) in Egypt, not really knowing who Jehovah was. After its “baptism,” Israel identified exclusively with Jehovah and His servant Moses. “Baptized into Moses” indicates Israel’s recognition of Moses as God’s prophet and lawgiver. In fact, no

⁵⁴ It is for this reason that God warned Israel repeatedly not to put any future trust in Egypt or its horses and chariots (Deuteronomy 17:16, et al). For Israel to look *back* upon what they had left behind would be like a Christian who returns to the world after having died to it and confessed his allegiance to Christ.

greater authority among men would be over Israel until the time when God raised up a prophet like Moses but superior to him in every respect (Deuteronomy 18:15-19). This, of course, is a direct prophecy of Christ Himself (Acts 3:22-25).

A New Life in Christ

One theme keeps repeating itself throughout Scripture: the Holy Spirit's use of water as a means of *separation* as well as *identification*. We can draw upon Jesus' own baptism to make the point, even though His baptism was not for the same purpose as ours. Jesus' baptism was not for purification, since He had no sins of which to be purified. However, in submitting to baptism, Jesus identified with those who were indeed baptized by John as a sign of their genuine repentance (Luke 3:3). His baptism also served as the defining event between His life on earth prior to His messianic ministry and the ministry itself. In this way, baptism permanently separated the two parts of His life. Indeed, the apostles themselves recognized that His earthly ministry began with His baptism by John and ended with His resurrection from the dead (Acts 1:21-22). Thus, Jesus' baptism was necessary "to fulfill all righteousness" (Matthew 3:15)—in other words, to participate rightly or properly in the plan that God had put in place from the beginning.

Similarly, water serves to separate the believer's former allegiance to the world and his new allegiance to Christ. This separation is necessary in order for the believer to make a new identification—one that is no longer with the sinful world, but now is with God Himself. Just as Jesus was baptized "to fulfill all righteousness," so the believer is baptized for this same reason—because it is the right and proper thing to do.

This separation and identification is exactly that to which Paul refers in Galatians 3:26-27: "For 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.” Notice how Paul links *faith* with *baptism*, since baptism is an act *of* faith, and not something independent of it.⁵⁵ Just as Israel was baptized into Moses in the presence of God *and* “through the sea,” so the believer is baptized into Christ in the presence of God’s Holy Spirit *and* in water. Just as Israel died to its former life and identification with Egypt, so the believer “dies” (*in* baptism, and not prior to it) to his former life and his identification with the godless world. After Israel passed through the sea, that nation belonged to God and heeded the words of His servant, Moses; after the believer is baptized, he belongs to God and heeds the words of His Son, Jesus Christ (see Hebrews 3:1-6).

Upon passing through the water, so to speak, we are no longer merely biological children of our parents. Far more importantly than this, “now we are children of God” (cf. 1 John 3:1-2). Being “sons of God” indicates not only a change in allegiance from the world to Christ, but also our qualification as heirs of the kingdom of God (Galatians 4:4-7, Ephesians 1:13-14, Colossians 1:12, et al). “Through faith” means that we acted *in* faith, just as Noah, Abraham, Moses, and all the other men and women of old who “by faith” did something to *demonstrate* their faith (cf. Hebrews 11). One who claims to have faith but does nothing has only an idea in his head, but there is no substance to it. The believer cannot just “accept Jesus into his heart” to separate himself from the world and identify with Christ; he must be *baptized* in order to do this. This is what “for all of you who were baptized” means. It also means that those who are *not* baptized for this very purpose do not exercise faith, but something else.

⁵⁵ Remarkably, noted Baptist professor G. R. Beasley-Murray says this: “But if faith is to be taken seriously, so is baptism. In this passage [Galatians 3:26-27] the exegetes [commentators] frequently either exalt baptism at the expense of faith or faith at the expense of baptism” (151, bracketed words are mine). Later, he says: “...In the New Testament faith and baptism are viewed as inseparable whenever the subject of Christian initiation is made discussion, so that if one is referred to, the other is presupposed, even if not mentioned. ...It is undoubtedly true that in the New Testament it is everywhere assumed that faith proceeds to baptism and the baptism is for faith” (272-273). Then later, “Baptism does not *create* faith, but faith necessarily leads one to baptism” (274).

“For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.” To be “naked” or “unclothed” in Scripture usually means to be vulnerable, unprepared, and ashamed (as in 2 Corinthians 5:4). To be improperly clothed is no better, since a person is still unfit for service to God (as in Zechariah 3:1-7). To be properly clothed, however, means to be fit, prepared, and ready to serve. In Jesus’ parable of the wedding feast, for example, the man who was cast into outer darkness was clothed, but not with the garments that the king had provided him [implied] (Matthew 22:11-14). It is extremely important to God that we be properly “clothed” or prepared for our presentation before Him. Christ can present us before the Father only if we have been cleansed of our sins, our conscience has been cleared, and we are properly attired (so to speak) for that occasion.

To be “clothed” with Christ also means to be identified with Him. Anyone who wears the king’s clothes represents the king *and* is obviously in his favor (as in Esther 6:6-11). In being clothed with Christ, however, we are not merely putting on something that belongs to Him, or to which He has given us, but we are putting on Christ Himself. As Paul said, “It is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me” (Galatians 2:20). In coming into Christ, we retain all of our faculties and decision-making control, but we voluntarily subject ourselves to His authority. In having submitted to the King, we become citizens of the kingdom of God. In dying to our allegiance to the world, we are born again to God. In coming *out* of the world, we are brought *into* Christ’s church.

Those who regard baptism as an after-the-fact demonstration of faith fail to understand the necessary implication of Paul’s words in Galatians 3:27. If *through* baptism we are “clothed” with Christ, then it stands to reason that *without* baptism we remain unclothed of Him—which is another way of saying that we have no identity with Him at all. If left in that condition, we will

be like the man at the wedding feast who wanted to share in the celebration, but refused to do what was required on *his* part in this.⁵⁶ Indeed, we ought to be preparing for the greatest wedding feast of all time: the eternal union of Christ and His bride (the church) (Revelation 19:7-9). If the apostle Paul says that baptism is *necessary* to prepare for that celebration, then you can be certain that those who refuse to be baptized will not share in it.

In being clothed with Christ, we must first remove all the clothes that belonged to the world (or someone else). We lose our own identity in order to take on His; we abandon all other allegiances in order to submit to His authority. Having separated ourselves from the world, we can now be fit and prepared to serve Him in His kingdom. But it is *water* that provides the point of reference for that separation. Just as Israel came through the water in order to prepare for their entrance into the Promised Land, so the believer today must come through the water in order to prepare for his entrance into the heavenly kingdom.

A Necessary Point of Reference

We cited *part* of Paul's statement in Galatians 2:20 earlier, but here is the full verse: "I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself up for me." The natural question would be, "*When* was Paul 'crucified with Christ'—that is, *when* did he die with the Lord?" Was it when Paul asked Jesus into his heart to be his personal Savior? No, because no one in the New Testament was saved in that way or instructed to be saved in that way. Was it during some spiritual experience that to which Paul was oblivious and

⁵⁶ In the parable (Matthew 22:1-14), the king *provided* wedding clothes for his guests, but he did not literally put these on them, since this was the guests' responsibility. Likewise, God *provides* the opportunity to be clothed with Christ, but He does not force anyone to put Him on. God *provides* the "new self" (Ephesians 4:23-24, Colossians 3:10), but He does not put it on us. God *provides* the "full armor of God," but each believer is responsible to put on that "armor" himself. In other words, there is consistency in method: God provides, but we must obey and follow through with our commitment. We do not provide what is required for salvation by ourselves, but God does not obey instead of us, either. This is true in the conversion process as much as it is in the Christian life thereafter.

that was imposed upon him? No, because no one in the New Testament was saved in *that* way, either. One thing is clear: we must *die* with the Lord in order to be *united* with Him. “For if we died with Him, we will also live with Him” (2 Timothy 2:11)—which means that if we have not *yet* died with Him, then we cannot possibly be living with Him as one of His disciples.

The visible, historical, and event-oriented point of reference for Paul’s “death” was not a born-again epiphany in his heart. Rather, it was a born-again experience in *water*, which exactly conforms to everything we have examined so far. It is the water of one’s baptism into Christ that separates his former life and his new life in Christ. This is also exactly what Paul says.

Carefully read the following passage (Romans 6:3-11), focusing on the connection between *baptism* and “newness of life,” “united with Him,” and “alive to God”:

Or do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus have been baptized into His death? Therefore we have been buried with Him through baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have become united with Him in the likeness of His death, certainly we shall also be in the likeness of His resurrection, knowing this, that our old self was crucified with Him, in order that our body of sin might be done away with, so that we would no longer be slaves to sin; for he who has died is freed from sin. Now if we have died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with Him, knowing that Christ, having been raised from the dead, is never to die again; death no longer is master over Him. For the death that He died, He died to sin once for all; but the life that He lives, He lives to God. Even so consider yourselves to be dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus.

Paul directly and unmistakably links one's baptism in water—the act of being *buried* in a type of watery grave—with his *new life* with God. This is not an optional ceremony after the fact; this is not merely “an outward sign of an inward grace.” Quite the contrary, this is the *point in time* and *the point in one's life* when he is separated from his old allegiance to sin and his new allegiance to Christ. If this event has not happened, then neither has this change of allegiance been made. If this *death* has not happened, then he remains alive to the world but dead to God (cf. Ephesians 2:1). The one who has come through the water can forever point back to that experience and say, “*That* is when I gave my life to God—when I *died* in the water and was *raised* to newness of life.”

The death, burial, and resurrection experience of the believer is *symbolic* in nature, to be sure. When God provides a symbol that must be *obeyed* in order to conform to His instruction, then however symbolic that action is, it is still required and not optional, expendable, or to be delayed until a more convenient time. In going through the motions of one's own death, the *action* is symbolic, but the *death* that he goes through is real and effective. In being buried in the water, the believer's heart dies to his former allegiance to the world, his conscience is cleansed through the sprinkling of Christ's blood, and his soul is sanctified by the Holy Spirit. (We do not bury what is alive, but what is indeed dead; likewise, what is resurrected is no longer dead, but has been made alive again.) Even though these actions are carried out in the spiritual realm, they are real and are necessary for one's salvation.

Once again, we cannot interchange what *God* does and what the *believer* is expected to do (in order to remain a believer). If one hears the gospel of Christ and learns that he must be baptized to be born of God, then he must do whatever it takes on *his* part to cooperate with this. In the passage just cited, Paul makes it clear that baptism is what the believer does to separate

himself from the world and identify with Christ; this is not something God does *for* him. “For if we have become united with Him [Christ] in the likeness of His death” (6:5) indicates a conditional situation: If we have done this, then we enjoy the results—we “walk in newness of life.” But if we have not done this, then we cannot claim to walk in “newness of life,” since we have not yet died to the old life. Being united with Christ involves dying with Him, just as Paul said in Galatians 2:20 and 2 Timothy 2:11 (cited above). We *unite* with Him by going through the same process that the Lord did. He did this *literally*—that is, He *physically* died, was buried, and was raised from His grave—whereas we do this *symbolically*. Nonetheless, this is not something you can do in your head or in your heart; it must be carried out *in the water* of your baptism.

Dying to Bear Fruit for God

While a person remains a sinner, he cannot rely upon his own merit for salvation, since God’s law condemns him as a law-*breaker* rather than a law-*keeper*. (The presence of *sin* necessarily demands the presence of *law*, since “where there is no law, there also is no violation”—Romans 4:15.) The *intent* of the law will not be satisfied with anything except the law-breaker’s execution. In the case of one’s conversion, however, the one who “dies” to law does not literally die, but he does undergo a *type* of death. It is Christ who has literally died *for* us, on our behalf, as though carrying out the due penalty of the law in Himself: His execution satisfies the laws demand of us. Through His death, we are freed, and “there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Romans 8:1). Thus, while Christ’s literal death was carried out on the cross, the believer’s representative “death” is carried out in the watery grave of his own baptism.

Paul explains this further in Romans 7:1-6. He begins with an analogy (7:1-3): a wife is legally bound to her husband as long as he lives; if he dies, she is released from that commitment. Their covenant-binding relationship—which is the foundation of their marriage—is ended upon *his* death to that covenant. She is not the one who died in this case, but he did; regardless, there is no such thing as a one-person marriage, since it cannot function without both a man *and* a woman.

This is not a perfect analogy to the “death” one undergoes in baptism, but it does illustrate this critical point: death ends one’s allegiance to any covenant to which he was once bound. “Therefore, my brethren, you also were made to die to the law through the body of Christ, so that you might be joined to another, to Him who was raised from the dead, in order that we might bear fruit for God” (Romans 7:4). It is not (the) law that dies, but the one who is condemned by it; likewise, it is not sin that dies, but the one who is being mastered by it. It is the *person* who “dies” to law and sin, not law and sin that dies to that person. “For one who has died has been set free from sin” (Romans 6:7)—this does not mean he is free from ever *sinning* again, but that sin is no longer to be his master (see 6:16-19).

The occasion of this person’s “death” is his baptism. Remember what Paul said in Romans 6:4: “We were buried therefore with Him by baptism into death....” Remember, too, that no one can be “born again” who does not die first, since one cannot serve his old life of sin *and* his new life with God at the same time. He cannot walk in “newness of life” unless (or until) the old “body of sin” is put to death. Christ literally died on the cross; we symbolically “die” in immersion in water. Christ was literally resurrected from His tomb; we symbolically are raised from our watery tomb. The believer’s “death” is *through* the body of Christ, which is to say that His death fulfills what our “death” only symbolizes. Once we have died *to* law and *with*

Christ, then we can be “joined to another”—that is, we can be joined to the resurrected Christ who lives forever. (The implication of this union is twofold: we are “raised” to live “in Christ” in this life, but also look forward to being raised from our literal grave in the future resurrection just as He was raised from His grave—see 1 Thessalonians 4:13-17.)

A person who remains alive to sin but dead to God cannot bear “fruit” for God. This does not mean that he is incapable of doing anything morally good, since even wicked people can perform good deeds when they want to. When Paul (or other New Testament writers) talks about “bearing fruit for God,” he refers to performing deeds consistent with one’s life in Christ *and* deeds that contribute to that person’s own salvation (Ephesians 5:9, Philippians 1:11, Colossians 1:9-12, Revelation 14:13, et al). Prior to his conversion, the sinner has no life with Christ, and he has no salvation; no matter what “fruit” he performs, he is still “dead” to God. Thus, he is only able to perform “dead works” (Hebrews 9:14) and “fruit for death” (Romans 7:4).

Having died to law and been raised to “newness of life” with God, everything changes. Now he is able to “bear fruit for God”—not because he is a morally superior person, but because he is now being led by the Holy Spirit and is able to produce Spirit-filled works (Galatians 5:22-23). He also has *recourse* for his sins: instead of simply remaining in condemnation for those sins that he commits, he can appeal to God for forgiveness through Jesus Christ, his Advocate (1 John 2:1-2). After this symbolic death-burial-resurrection process, he also: is made a member of Christ’s spiritual body (His church); is blessed with every spiritual blessing (Ephesians 1:3); looks forward to his eternal inheritance in the kingdom; etc. In other words, many good and positive things are provided for him *after* he becomes a Christian, which is *after* he “dies” to the world and begins life anew with God. Jack Cottrell says of this: “The specific point [of our

union with Christ] is that our relationship with Christ is so close that all the power and life that spring from His redeeming work belong to us and flow into our lives.”⁵⁷

Summary Thoughts

In this chapter, we have highlighted the need for *separation* and *identification* with regard to one’s salvation. Unless (or until) a person is separated from the world, he cannot identify with God as His “son.” Likewise, no one can claim identification with God who has not separated himself from the world. God has chosen *water* to be the agent of separation: in the case of Israel’s passing through the Red Sea, Jesus’ baptism, and the believer’s baptism into Christ, water separated the two lives (so to speak) of those involved, and allowed for a new life to take the place of the old life. We are made “sons of God through faith” (Galatians 3:26), but this faith must *at least* be demonstrated in baptism if we are to be clothed with Christ (3:27).

Paul’s discourse in Romans 6:3-11 powerfully and irrefutably explains the need—not just the symbolism of, but the *need*—for baptism. Paul further underscores this need in Romans 7:1-6, where he explains that when we die *to* law, we are freed from the condemnation of law. This makes that death not just important but also essential to one’s salvation. Since that death is symbolized in one’s baptism into Christ, this makes *baptism* not only important but also essential as well.

⁵⁷ Cottrell, 81; bracketed words are mine.

The Sign of the Covenant

...And in Him you were also circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, in the removal of the body of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ; having been buried with Him in baptism, in which you were also raised up with Him through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead.

Colossians 2:11-12

Throughout the Old Testament, God used *signs* to remind people of a covenant relationship that had been established. The rainbow, for example, was (and continues to be) a sign of God's covenant with the world that He would never again flood the earth with water (Genesis 9:12-13). The sabbath was a sign given exclusively to Israel for this same purpose: "I gave them My sabbaths to be a sign between Me and them, that they might know that I am the LORD who sanctifies them" (Ezekiel 20:12).

Such signs refer to a completed action in history ("This is what God did") as well as anticipate an *ultimate* completion in a spiritual context ("This is what God will do"). The rainbow, for example, looks back upon God's promise not to destroy the world with water again, yet it also anticipates a future life with a God who Himself cannot be destroyed (Ezekiel 1:28, Revelation 4:3). Likewise, the sabbath looks back upon the seventh day of Creation, but it also anticipates a future "rest" for those who are in Christ (Hebrews 4:9).

Signs are not equal to the thing that they represent, since they find their completion in something outside of themselves. The rainbow is not the actual covenant that God made with the world but a sign *of* it. The sabbath is not the actual rest that God enjoyed when His work of creation was completed but a sign *of* that work.⁵⁸ Nonetheless, signs are extremely important, and—if God so commands—are required to be observed. In the case of the rainbow, God provided a sign that only needed to be visually seen; nothing else was required in response. In

⁵⁸ According to Deuteronomy 5:15, the sabbath also served as a sign of God's deliverance of His people from Egypt. But once again, the sabbath was not the same as the deliverance itself, but only a sign of it.

the case of the sabbath, however, Israel was commanded to “keep” that sign in a ritual observance that directly affected their lives. The sign was directly tied to the covenant: in order to *honor* the covenant, the Israelites had to honor its *sign*. Failure to honor the sign was tantamount to a failure to honor the covenant—a failure which is always expressed, in some form or another, as idolatry.⁵⁹

The Importance of Covenant

Our common use of *covenant* refers to a mutual agreement between two or more parties in which *each party* has certain responsibilities and obligations to the other(s). While some covenants can indeed be informal and even unspoken (such as friendships), formal or binding covenants are verbalized, written out, and/or legally notarized (such as marriages or business arrangements). The covenant has stipulations both for entering into it as well as maintaining it once it has been established. It offers a reward for compliance (in the form of benefits or compensation), as well as consequences for failing to comply.

It is the covenant agreement that makes relationships both functional and durable. Marriage, for example, is a type of solemn covenant between a man and a woman; their wedding rings serve as signs of that marriage covenant. It is the covenant that allows them to function as husband and wife, and to provide a relationship of trust, commitment, fidelity, and sexual fulfillment. Without this covenant, they are just two people living together in an unholy union (cf. 1 Corinthians 6:16). Whatever benefits they enjoy from that union are temporary and artificial, since the union itself is not approved by God. In a wedding, “two individuals enter as

⁵⁹ On this point, see Ezekiel 20:16. Idolatry is the sin of *misplaced worship*, as in whenever someone turns away from his covenant with God to give honor to some other god or interest. Closely linked to idolatry is adultery, which is a corruption (sexual or otherwise) of a sacred covenant between two parties. Succumbing to greed and covetousness is idolatry (Ephesians 5:5, Colossians 3:5); yet implied in that idolatry is a violation of covenant through the introduction of someone or something into the sacred covenantal union that had no business being there, which is the essential definition of adultery (Jeremiah 3:6-9, Matthew 5:27-28, and James 4:4).

single people and emerge as a married couple. A wedding is not just symbolic of an already existing union but itself creates a new form of union. The same is true of baptism.”⁶⁰

Whenever God provides a *covenant*, it is in some way related to human sin. The rainbow, as a visible sign of God’s covenant with the earth, is directly related to the great wickedness of mankind that required the Flood in the first place. The sabbath was given to Israel as a reprieve for the great curse that God had placed upon the world as a result of Adam and Eve’s sin (Genesis 3:17-19). Even the marriage covenant has been provided in order to *avoid* sexual immorality between a man and a woman (1 Corinthians 7:1-3).

It is through a *covenant* relationship that God provides mercy and grace for the human condition. The only way that God can have a relationship with us after we have sinned against Him is through covenant: law-*keeping* will not justify us, since it is through law-*breaking* that we became sinners. God cannot enter into a holy union with law-breakers, but He *can* enter into a holy union with those who seek His forgiveness through some means *outside* of law itself. Since law cannot justify the one who has sinned against it, another method of justification must be used. This other method—a covenant agreement for salvation—has terms and conditions which both parties must uphold. Through this covenant, the sinner finds his justification in the blood of Christ rather than in his law-keeping. (This is what Paul means when he says that we are “justified by faith apart from works of the law”—Romans 3:23-28.)

There are some who teach that we are all born into a covenant relationship with God, and that the fact of our very existence makes us covenant-bound people. But this is not true and does not make sense. We are all born under the *law* of God, and we are expected to keep that law—and law and covenant are not the same things. Adam and Eve were not given a *covenant* to

⁶⁰ Anthony N. S. Lane, “Dual-Practice Baptism Response,” *Baptism: Three Views*, ed. David F. Wright (Downer’s Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009), 65.

observe when they were first put into the Garden of Eden, but a *law* to keep. Once they broke that law, a covenant was necessary in order for them to continue in a relationship with God. Likewise, a child is not born into a covenant relationship with God, but is expected to keep His law upon reaching an age of accountability to Him. At some point, however, he will break that law and will no longer be a *law-keeper* but a *law-breaker*.⁶¹ One who is not guilty of any wrongdoing does not need mercy and grace; he is justified on the basis of his own innocence. A sinner, however, stands condemned by God and can only be justified thereafter through mercy and grace. Such gifts—mercy, grace, forgiveness, fellowship, etc.—are not found *outside* of a covenant relationship with God, but only *within* it. The sinner who remains outside of God’s covenant of salvation is “dead” to Him (Ephesians 2:1); only the one who is within that covenant *and* remains faithful to it will be saved by Him.

Our relationship with God is not established upon or maintained by our feelings, emotions, church attendance, or personal stipulations. It is based upon *God’s* terms of *His* covenant, since He alone has what we need, and we are not in a position to negotiate or offer a counter-proposal. These terms are what we call “the gospel of Christ”; obedience to the gospel is equal to entering into a covenant with God through Christ. God invites each person to enter into a covenant agreement with Him when he “calls” him with His gospel (2 Thessalonians 2:13-14). God does not “call” those who are completely unable to respond, but calls those who most certainly *can* respond, and in whose best interest it is *to* respond. A sinner can either accept God’s covenant of salvation or reject it altogether. There is no third alternative.

⁶¹ It does not matter *which* law or *how many* laws this person breaks. “For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles in one point, he has become guilty of all. For He who said, ‘Do not commit adultery,’ also said, ‘Do not commit murder.’ Now if you do not commit adultery, but do commit murder, you have become a transgressor of the law” (James 2:10-11). Once a person has stumbled, he cannot “stand” before God any longer on his own merit, but must be justified through another means—one that God alone can provide.

It is only *by* God's covenant that we can come into contact with the blood of Christ, which is the atonement for our sin. Every life-giving covenant that God makes with men requires *blood* in order for the covenant itself to be made alive. Christ's blood is what gives life to God's covenant of salvation (Matthew 26:27-28, Hebrews 9:15ff). If Christ's body had not been a perfect specimen for sacrifice, His blood would have been corrupted and could not have given life to our covenant with God. If His blood had not been shed for the very purpose *of* this covenant, we could not have all the life-giving provisions that the covenant provides; "without shedding of blood there is no forgiveness" (Hebrews 9:22). Remember that a covenant is given because of sin, and blood is the atoning agent for those who sin who are in that covenant. Christ's blood will not be applied to any soul that refuses to enter into a life-giving covenant with the Father. Thus, it is the body and blood of Christ that makes our covenant with God both *possible* and then *functional*.

This is why Christians are to honor this sacrifice in the observance of the Lord's Supper, which is a sign of our covenant *with* God *through* Christ.⁶² Without a proper observance of this sign, we show contempt for what it represents. And, as we observed earlier, the sign of the Lord's Supper looks back to what God *did* for us (i.e., Christ's sacrificial death) as well as anticipates a future event that fulfills the sign in every way (i.e., Christ's return) (1 Corinthians 11:23-27, Hebrews 9:28).

The Sign of Circumcision

The above explanation serves only to explain the importance of our covenant with God *and* its signs. Despite all that we have said, we have still only scratched the surface of the

⁶² We should stress here that the *covenant itself* belongs to the Father, not to Christ. If one becomes a Christian, it is because he accepts the terms of *God's* covenant, which makes provisions for his sinful condition *and* his inability to save himself. Christ provides the *blood* required for covenant; the Holy Spirit provides the *sanctification* required for covenant; but the covenant itself is made with the *Father*.

discussion; yet, we have laid the groundwork for the subject at hand—the link between a sign of the first covenant (with Abraham) and the “better” covenant (through Christ).

In Genesis 12:1-3, God made a covenant with Abraham by which ultimately all the families of the earth would be blessed. God also promised him that he would be the father of many descendants, and would inherit the land of Canaan as his own possession. “Then he believed in the LORD; and He reckoned it to him as righteousness” (15:6). God made this covenant real to Abraham when He passed between the sacrificial animals (15:7-21).

In Genesis 17, God commanded Abraham—and any male in his household—to be circumcised. This act provided a sign of God’s covenant with him. “And you shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskin, and it shall be the sign of the covenant between Me and you” (17:11). This circumcision was *not* the covenant itself, but a sign of it. Abraham’s willingness to accept this sign indicated his faith in God’s covenant with him. If he had refused to accept the sign, then this would have shown his unbelief in or contempt for God’s covenant. In fact, God put a curse on any man of Abraham’s household that *did* refuse the sign, since this was a rejection of the covenant itself: “An uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin, that person shall be cut off from his people; he has broken My covenant” (17:14).⁶³ These people were not *born* into the covenant, but were made participants in it *when* they were circumcised. Likewise, all future males born into Abraham’s household were to be circumcised on the eighth day of their lives (17:12). Even then, the covenant was made with Abraham’s entire family, and ultimately with the nation (of Israel) that descended from that

⁶³ This “sign of the covenant” obviously extended beyond Abraham himself. Later, this sign was given to the entire nation of Israel—descendants of Abraham through Isaac and Jacob—and not to any other nation. In the 400 years between Abraham’s day and Israel’s exodus from Egypt, it appears that the sign had been neglected because the covenant itself had been virtually forgotten. When God commissioned Moses to deliver His people from Egypt, Moses responded that the Hebrews will not know who Jehovah is (Exodus 3:13). Before the Israelites could participate in the Passover, they had to be circumcised in order to identify with God’s promise with Abraham (Exodus 12:48). Before the new generation of Israel entered into the land of Canaan, every male had to be circumcised (Joshua 5:1-8), since possession of that land was a key stipulation of God’s promise to Abraham.

family. It came to be understood as a national sign (carried only by the males of that nation) and not merely an individual one. Circumcision identified a man as belonging to a covenant-bound people, and this made him a recipient of all the blessings and privileges of that covenant.⁶⁴

Of course, circumcision *by itself* meant nothing. Likewise, a non-Israelite who was not *physically* circumcised but was circumcised in his heart, so to speak, could also walk in fellowship with God *if* he lived by faith in Him (Habakkuk 2:4, Romans 1:17). A faithful heart is what God wanted even from Israel, just as Moses told them: “So circumcise your heart, and stiffen your neck no longer” (Deuteronomy 10:16; see also 30:6 and Jeremiah 4:4). Paul later argued that an Israelite’s physical circumcision was rendered useless if he did not keep God’s Law: “For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh” (see Romans 2:25-29). In other words, circumcision was never meant to be a replacement for one’s faithfulness to God, but instead an emblem *of* it. Some Jewish Christians (as well as Jewish opponents to Christianity) tried to have Gentile converts circumcised, but only so that they [Jews] could boast in having a form of dominance over those men (Galatians 6:12-13).

The emphasis, then, was not limited to the sign itself, as the Jews mistakenly believed, but what the sign represented: faith in God’s ability to perform, even against all hope of human effort (as what Abraham manifested—Romans 4:18). This did not make circumcision optional for the Israelite, however, since he was *commanded* to receive it (Leviticus 12:3). The “circumcision” of the Gentile [non-Jewish] believer of the pre-gospel era was manifested in the disposition of his heart, but the Israelite had to be circumcised in his flesh *as well as* in his heart. (“In the flesh” is what physically identified him with the nation of Israel; “in the heart” is what

⁶⁴ Obviously, the responsibility and accountability of his citizenship did not begin when the male was eight days old. It was not until the child became of age—in essence, a son of the commandment (or *bar mitzvah*)—that he was obligated to the Law and its requirements. And it was not until he was 20 years of age that he could be counted as a male (or, man of war) for that nation (cf. Numbers 1:2ff). In other words, the sign was rich with symbolism, but did not serve to qualify a male to represent Israel in every respect until he became an adult.

identified him with God.) The Israelite could never say, “I know that I am not circumcised in the flesh, but God knows my heart—and what is in my *heart* is more important than any physical act.” This kind of reasoning was impossible since indeed God *commanded* the physical act to be accomplished in order for that Israelite to have a covenant relationship with Him. No one can have a right heart with God who deliberately refuses to obey His command—whatever the command may be. And no one can enter into a covenant relationship with God who refuses the sign of that covenant—again, whatever that sign may be.

As important as the sign of physical circumcision was, it was still limited to the nation of Israel (and proselytes to the Law of Moses). Also, it could only be given to men, since it was through the males that land inheritance was perpetuated. This did not mean that women were exempted from the *covenant*, but that only the men were allowed to receive the *sign* of the covenant since they served as legal representatives and property-holders of the nation itself. Once God’s covenant with Israel was fulfilled in Christ, it would be necessary that believers be given a new sign—one that is better than physical circumcision, and one that can be given to all believers regardless of nationality or gender.

The New (or True) Circumcision

No one today can be bound to Israel’s covenant with God, since that relationship—as well as the law that defined it—has been fulfilled in Christ. The change of covenant requires a change of law also.⁶⁵ Likewise, the priesthood has changed (Hebrews 7:12); the temple has changed (Ephesians 2:19-21); and the signs, types, and ritual observances have changed

⁶⁵ By “law,” we must understand this to be a change of a *body* of laws, but not necessarily a change of every *single* law, either. Moral laws—those laws which directly reflect that nature of God Himself (e.g., “You shall not murder”—are constants in *every* covenant that God makes with men. It is not as though these moral laws “carry over” from an older covenant, but that they are a mainstay of the new covenant for the same reason they were a mainstay of the old. Ritual and ceremonial laws, as well as laws of specific responsibilities under the new covenant (e.g., “Do this [memorial] in remembrance of Me”), will change from covenant to covenant.

(Colossians 2:16-17). In having fulfilled these things, Christ has also *become* that which He has fulfilled: He is our Sabbath, He is our Passover, He is our Jubilee, etc. He is also our circumcision: in Him, the old body of sin is cut away, and in Him we have newness of life. No longer is this a physical act performed on the physical body by the physical hands of men. This is now a spiritual action performed upon the human heart—an act that Christ alone can perform. No longer is this limited to Israel, or to males, but is available to every person who comes to Him in faith seeking salvation, regardless of nationality or gender.

Just because this is a spiritual act, however, does not mean that it has no physical point of reference. In other words, there is a time and event in one's life *when* this spiritual circumcision actually takes place. Paul spelled this out for us in Colossians 2:11-13:

In Him you were also circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, in the removal of the body of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ; having been buried with Him in baptism, in which you were also raised up with Him through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead. When you were dead in your transgressions and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He made you alive together with Him, having forgiven us all our transgressions...

In this passage, Paul links together everything that we discussed in the previous chapters *and* adds a new element to the picture: “a circumcision made without hands.” This involves the death of the old body of sin in order for a new creature to be born of God—thus, a born-again experience. This occurs at the time of one’s baptism in water for the purpose of calling on the name of the Lord for salvation. In baptism, the sinner is lowered into his death (the watery grave

of his baptism), and then is raised to newness of life.⁶⁶ When he dies *with* Christ and then is “made alive together with Him,” he is forgiven of his sins.

[[chart: cmp. Rom 6:3-7, Col 2:11-13]]

The spiritual circumcision that Christ performs alludes to the physical circumcision of Israel, but then supersedes it in every way. Physical circumcision served as a sign of the covenant between God and Abraham, which was also incorporated into His covenant with Israel (since they were recipients of the *physical* inheritance of Abraham—namely, the Promised Land). Spiritual circumcision is not of the flesh, yet it is necessary for one’s induction into the new covenant with God through Christ.

Baptism is the visible *sign* of that which was done in the spiritual realm. Baptism in water symbolizes the *time* (the “when”) that corresponds to the *reality* (the “what”) of that action. Calvinists describe baptism as “an outward sign of an inward grace”—but they claim that baptism is done *after the fact* of this spiritual circumcision, rather than simultaneous *with* it. The outward/inward concept is biblically accurate, but their application of its timing is not. Baptism symbolizes outwardly what Christ does inwardly as an act of divine grace, yet *both actions* are done at the same time, as though a singular event. One is not “saved” first, and then baptized; rather, baptism marks the *event* of his salvation. He cannot choose to observe the outward sign

⁶⁶ Some scholars believe that we (American Christians) are “westernizing” the burial process, since we are accustomed to a body being buried *underground*, whereas in many cultures this was not the case. Personally, I am willing to concede the point, since it is an irrelevant one. “Burial” does not necessarily mean “six feet under,” as is common to the Western mind, but simply *separated from the realm of the living*. This is Jesus’ meaning when He refers to His own burial (John 12:24) and is Paul’s meaning when he refers to that burial (1 Corinthians 15:3-4). Thus, whether one is buried in the ground, in a mausoleum, in a tomb, or in any other appropriate manner, it is understood that he is *dead* and thus disconnected from those who are *alive*. In the case of baptism, however, it is impossible to achieve a burial without lowering someone into the water, regardless of any Western-burial implications.

of God's covenant at his convenience (or not at all), but then is inducted into the covenant through a "circumcision made without hands" anyway. Rather, he is inducted into the covenant *when* he submits to the outward, visible, and necessary *sign* of that covenant: his baptism. Again, spiritual circumcision is the "what" that happens; baptism is the "when" that this circumcision happens.⁶⁷

This is *not* to say that "baptism replaces circumcision," for this confuses what Christ does with what the believer does. "Paul does not establish a connection between physical circumcision and baptism, but *spiritual circumcision and baptism.*"⁶⁸ Christ's "removal" of the "body of the flesh" is not accomplished by immersion in water; likewise, immersion in water means nothing without one's spiritual circumcision by Christ. Nonetheless, the two actions—what Christ does for the believer *and* what the believer does for Christ—are performed at the same time. Thus, the one being baptized believes that Christ is doing for him what he could not do for himself: salvation is by His grace, but through the believer's obedient faith. The outward or visible *sign* of the believer's obedience is his baptism.

The covenant that God makes with Christians is different than the one He made with Israel. The law is different; the priesthood is different; and the signs and forms are different. Jesus did not just "replace" God's covenant with Israel with God's covenant with Christians; He *fulfilled* the one in order to *establish* the other. Likewise, He did not just replace laws meant for Israel with laws meant for Christians; He *fulfilled* their Law in order to *establish* a new law (or, code of conduct) for us. So it is with the priesthood, and so it is with the signs and forms of the two covenants: He fulfilled the first in order to establish the second.

⁶⁷ "More than one exegete [commentator—MY WORD] has pointed out that the most likely point of contact between circumcision as a rite and baptism is their joint character of being rites of initiation; circumcision was the mode of (male) entry into the Israel of the old covenant, baptism the mode of entry into the Israel of the new covenant" (Beasley-Murray, 160).

⁶⁸ Schreiner, "Baptism in the Epistles," 78; emphases are his.

Those who claim that “baptism replaces circumcision” overlook this most important distinction. This leads to all sorts of errors that are based upon a false premise—i.e., the premise that water baptism is exactly like physical circumcision in every respect. One of these errors is the idea that infant children may be baptized because of their parents’ covenantal relationship with God (since Hebrew boys were circumcised because of their Israelite parents’ relationship with God). In fact, virtually the entire argument for infant baptism rests upon this one grand assumption. We *can* say that baptism for the believer who comes to Christ *serves as a visible sign* of his identity with Christ just as literal circumcision served to identify Israel as God’s people, but this compares similar objectives, not interchangeable actions. No (male) person can presently enter into a covenant with God by being physically circumcised; likewise, no person who is circumcised by Christ needs to be physically altered for any reason in connection with his salvation. The two things have related ideas, to be sure, but they each belong to entirely separate covenants.⁶⁹

“Having been buried with Him [Christ] in baptism,” Christ performs upon the human heart the radical surgery, so to speak, that is required in order to save our souls. Without this act, we remain uncircumcised and still dead in our sins; our allegiance is still with the world, since we have not yet died *to* the world and *with* Christ. Baptism is not passively connected with this change of allegiance, but is inseparably united with it. If we are not buried with Him in baptism, we fail to comply with *our* part of this great transaction. Thus, we resist altogether the born-again process defined for us in the terms and conditions of our entrance into God’s covenant of salvation (i.e., the gospel of Christ). We cannot be become born *of* God if we will not submit to

⁶⁹ “The parallel, then, between circumcision and baptism in the new covenant is not between physical circumcision and infant baptism; rather, the parallel is between spiritual circumcision of the heart and baptism which signifies regeneration, faith, and union with Christ” (Bruce A. Ware, “Believer’s Baptism View,” *Baptism: Three Views*, ed. David F. Wright [Downer’s Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009], 46).

His will, and one who is *not* born of God *cannot* be a Christian. Only those who are of the “true circumcision”—that which *Christ* has performed, not man—have citizenship in heaven (compare Philippians 3:2-3 and 3:20-21).

Summary Thoughts

Baptism is a physical symbol or sign of what happens in the spiritual context. Nonetheless, if it is necessarily required for one’s conversion to God, then it is not an optional symbol or an expendable sign of that invisible action. Just as God told Abraham that any man of his household who refused to be circumcised must be “cut off” from that household, so any person today who *thinks* he is of the household of God but refuses do what the covenant requires of him has no place in the family of God. “Unless one is born of water and the Spirit” (John 3:5) means that it cannot be any other way. It also means that we cannot teach any other instruction and still be true to the gospel of Christ.

Israel could not refuse to “remember the sabbath” without being disobedient to the covenant to which the sabbath belonged. Similarly, by refusing to be baptized in water, one also refuses to comply with the covenant to which this baptism belongs. One who says, for example, “I have entered into a covenant of salvation with God, but I just haven’t been baptized yet,” does not yet understand that the two things—the covenant itself and the visible expressions *of* covenant—either exist together or not at all. It is correct to say, “I entered into a covenant of salvation with God *when* I was baptized.” Only when a person is obedient *to* the covenant can he enter into it. Yet, that person is also bound to act in obedience to the terms and conditions of that covenant from his baptism forward.

Just as the Israelite could not ignore his physical circumcision, so the Christian’s sign of his covenant with God is to remain ever before him. Every day he should remember the day of

his new birth by the love for Christ that is in his heart. He ought to constantly remember that he does not belong to himself, but now is the possession of the One who gave him newness of life. Then, on the first day of every week, he renews his covenant with God through another sign, the Lord's Supper. Indeed, the memorial for Christ's death for the believer ought to bring to mind the believer's "death" (in baptism) for Christ. These are not two unrelated signs, but are inseparably connected. One is personal, the other is communal; both are required.

Will people still resist these clear and unmistakable instructions? Of course. We will discuss this in the second half of this book. Even so, it is far more important to focus on what the Holy Spirit has revealed rather than trying to defend or refute a private interpretation of any biblical subject. God has no tolerance for those who customize His gospel; instead, He seeks "true worshipers" who will worship Him "in spirit and truth" (John 4:23-24). It is only this *kind* of person who is able to call upon the name of the Lord for salvation.

The One Baptism

*There is one body and one Spirit, just as also you were called in one hope of your calling;
one Lord, one faith, one baptism,
one God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all.*
Ephesians 4:4-6

When talking about the subject of baptism, not everyone is immediately on the same page. For one thing, “baptism” is used in more than one context in the New Testament. John the Baptist conducted baptisms other than what the apostles later performed. John also referred to a baptism of the Holy Spirit and a separate baptism of “fire” or judgment (Matthew 3:11). Jesus spoke of His suffering on the cross as a kind of “baptism” (Mark 10:38, Luke 12:50). Then, of course, there is the baptism that is directly associated with one’s conversion to Christ, which has been the focus of this particular study.

Additionally, there are varieties of baptism that have arisen from denominational doctrines. For example, someone might say, “Your church has its baptism, but we in our church have ours.” Such usage indicates a liturgical or ritual baptism that has nothing to do with salvation. At least one denomination that I know of uses baptism as a requirement for membership in its churches, and not for anything else. That is “a” baptism, to be sure, but it does not accomplish what is described in Galatians 3:26-27. The baptism Paul speaks of is “through faith”; this other one is for congregational membership. Another denomination practices a literal baptism for the dead—a doctrine predicated entirely upon an assumed interpretation of 1 Corinthians 15:29. A number of groups baptize infants and/or young children, but this actually accomplishes nothing *for* the child himself. As we have consistently seen in our study, baptism follows faith, and faith is predicated upon New Testament doctrine. Thus, the baptism of children does not make those children Christians, but serves some lesser purpose.

In Ephesians 4:1-6, Paul provided seven doctrinal statements that believers must maintain in order to preserve the unity of the Spirit. Not surprisingly, baptism is included in these requirements. But not just any baptism will do; instead, there is only “one baptism” that the Holy Spirit recognizes as being authentic. Whatever *this* baptism is, it must be as important to the believer as are the body of Christ, the Spirit of God, one’s calling to the faith, etc. The question is: to *what* baptism does he refer? Directly connected to *that* question is this one: what are the right *reasons* for which a person must be baptized?

The Unity of the Spirit

The “one baptism” must be that which God requires, especially since He is the possessor of the salvation sought *through* baptism. This immediately removes from consideration any baptism that comes solely from man-made religion and denominational teaching. No doctrine that has originated from men, however religious or spiritual it appears to be, can be imposed upon all of humanity for the purpose of salvation. Paul’s stress on the seven things mentioned (in Ephesians 4:4-6) is to underscore the *unity* of the Spirit’s teachings as well as the *authority* of those teachings. “One body, one Spirit, one calling, etc.” are unified teachings that are given from heaven for *all* men to believe and obey. They comprise the doctrine of Christ, upon which one’s faith in Christ is predicated. No man or group of men has the authority to add to, subtract from, or amend such teachings. Simply put, we cannot re-define God’s terms and conditions for salvation, and then teach these changes as though they are acceptable to Him.

The “one baptism” must also be that which would be an established and consistent part of gospel teaching. Paul did not have to explain this baptism to the Ephesians because they knew exactly what he was talking about: they had all participated in it themselves. The “message of truth, the gospel of your salvation” (Ephesians 1:13-14) had to include this baptism, just as the

gospel always does. In another example, when Philip “preached Jesus” to the Ethiopian traveler in Acts 8:26-39, the man clearly understood that he needed to be baptized in water in *response* to that teaching, since baptism was itself a *part* of that teaching. Today, if we “preach Jesus” accurately, it will lead to this same conclusion.

The “one baptism” is directly related to one’s salvation in Christ. Paul’s words (in Ephesians 4:1-6) define the basis by which the Ephesian Christians were called into fellowship with God. In essence, Paul says, “Remember the *foundational teachings* by which you were called into Christ, which came to you by the authority of the Holy Spirit of God, and *preserve* these in your own teachings to others.” Thus, one is saved upon his having been admitted into the “one body”—not one congregation or denomination, but Christ’s spiritual body of believers (Colossians 1:18)—and no other. He is saved by the authority of “one Spirit”—the Spirit of God who has provided, authenticated, and testified to that person’s obedience to the gospel terms and conditions (Romans 8:16, 1 Corinthians 12:12-13). The believer has been called by “one calling”—that which came from God, through the message of His gospel (2 Thessalonians 2:13-14). There is “one Lord”—the Lord Jesus Christ—to whom he must give his allegiance, for he cannot be saved by any other lord or authority. He must adhere to “one faith”—not his personal faith, but “the faith” that is specifically defined by the gospel. This is the only faith that God recognizes as being legitimate, and that is common to the salvation of every Christian (Jude 3). Likewise, he must believe in and practice only “one baptism”—that which admits him into Christ’s body, in which he receives the forgiveness of sins (Ephesians 1:7, Colossians 1:13-14). Finally, he must believe that there is “one God and Father” over all of Creation who is the Giver of life and salvation.

What the “One Baptism” Cannot Be

The “one baptism” cannot be that which John the Baptist conducted during his ministry. That baptism was specifically intended for Israelites who had strayed from their *already-existing* covenantal commitment to God, not an entrance into a *new* covenant. John’s mission was to restore the hearts of the Jews in preparation for their coming Messiah: “It is he [John] who will go as a forerunner before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers back to the children, and the disobedient to the attitude of the righteous, so as to make ready a people prepared for the Lord” (Luke 1:17). Thus, his baptism was to symbolize one’s genuine repentance in order that God could forgive him under the terms and conditions of the *old covenant* (Luke 3:3-6).

John was not a Christian; he was a faithful Jew who served as God’s prophet. John’s baptism never made people Christians; those who were baptized by him remained what they were—Jews under the old covenant. It is true that Jesus’ disciples also baptized for the same reason as John (John 4:1-2), but the results were the same. John’s baptism served an important purpose, but it was not performed for the purpose of salvation in Christ under the new covenant. In fact, those who were baptized according to John were later—after the church had been established and not before—commanded to be baptized into Christ (Acts 2:37-38, 19:1-5).

Some have argued that the “one baptism” is that of the Holy Spirit—often referred to as “Holy Spirit baptism.” Any link between the Holy Spirit and *His* baptism is rare in the New Testament, and is always in a very specific context. John the Baptist promised the Jews that Jesus would come and baptize them in this manner: “I baptized you with water; but He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit” (Mark 1:8). Jesus reminded His apostles of this just prior to His ascension: “Gathering them together, He commanded them not to leave Jerusalem, but to

wait for what the Father had promised, ‘Which,’ He said, ‘you heard of from Me; for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now’” (Acts 1:4-5). The *manifestation* of this baptism was through the miracles, signs, and wonders performed by those who received power to do so (Hebrews 2:3-4). The *purpose* for this baptism was to confirm the presence and activity of the Holy Spirit in Christ’s church—a presence not limited to those early converts, but all Christians. In a very real sense, the entire spiritual body of Christ was *immersed* in the Holy Spirit—the Jews first (Acts 2) and then the Gentiles (in Acts 10). In this way, both groups were brought together by one Spirit and made into “one new man” which has its access to the Father *through* the Spirit (Ephesians 2:13-18). Even so, it is necessary to distinguish between the authoritative *power* given exclusively to the apostles as Christ’s spokesmen (Acts 1:7-8) and the *general manifestation* of the Spirit which was given only to those upon whom the apostles’ laid their hands (Acts 8:14-17). Sadly, a great deal of confusion concerning the Spirit and His gifts today exists because of a failure to keep what we read in the New Testament in its proper biblical and historical context.⁷⁰

The visible *manifestation* of baptism with the Spirit was not something done repeatedly, or for each new member.⁷¹ Only two times in Acts did the Holy Spirit *on His own initiative* manifest His approval to each group—first Jews, then Gentiles (Acts 2, 10). This action was accompanied each time with miracles specific to those two events. This was not a baptism that could be performed by men, but was only performed by God Himself. It was not a baptism *required* by men in obedience to any gospel command, because there is no command to *be* baptized in this way. (Do not confuse *receiving the power to perform miracles* by the Spirit [as

⁷⁰ For a much more detailed explanation of this, I recommend my book, *The Holy Spirit of God: A Biblical Perspective* (Summitville, IN: Spiritbuilding Publishing, 2010); go to www.booksbychad.com.

⁷¹ It is more accurate to say “baptism *with* the Spirit” (rather than “Holy Spirit baptism”) since this corresponds to the actual language of the biblical text, *and* because this baptism is something the Father does *with* His Spirit upon Christ having taken His rightful place at His right hand (Acts 2:33-34).

in Acts 8:14-17] with *baptism with* the Spirit [Acts 1:4-5], for these are two completely different contexts. Christ's entire church has been immersed in the Holy Spirit, but not every believer has been given the ability to perform miracles.) The baptism with the Spirit never intended for any individual believer.

In contrast, the “one baptism” (in Ephesians 4:5) does *not* refer to what has been done for the entire church, but what each *person* is required to believe and obey in order to become a Christian. It is illogical for God to demand something of one who calls upon Him for salvation that He alone can perform. Furthermore, one who insists that the “one baptism” *is* “Holy Spirit baptism” must explain why every believer who heard the gospel message preached (in Acts and otherwise) was baptized in *water* in response to it. We have already examined in detail the pattern by which men and women became Christians in Acts, and it was not through a “Holy Spirit baptism.”

The “one baptism” cannot be a “baptism for the dead.” As mentioned above, at least one denomination teaches that a living person can be baptized *on behalf of* a dead person. Thus, a person who died as an unbeliever can allegedly be saved anyway by the living person’s baptism. Yet, such a practice is completely foreign to the gospel. There is no teaching or example in the New Testament of anyone being baptized on behalf of someone else. Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 15:29, “Otherwise, what will those do who are baptized for the dead? If the dead are not raised at all, why then are they baptized for them?” But this is spoken in the midst of a discourse on the resurrection, which establishes the proper *context* for what he said. Paul refers to those who are being baptized in anticipation of being raised from the dead—i.e., their actual bodily resurrection—just as those who died in faith before them hoped to be raised (cf. Philippians 3:10-11, 1 Thessalonians 4:13-17). It is a rhetorical point, not a new doctrine; it is

meant to emphasize the reality of resurrection, not create an entirely new practice for the church. This is evident in the fact that nowhere in the New Testament is anyone actually baptized “for” or on behalf of a dead person. Baptism is a personal act of faith; it cannot be done for *you* anymore than you can have faith for someone *else*.

What the “One Baptism” Must Be

Given its direct connection with salvation in Christ, the “one baptism” can only have one meaning: immersion in water for the distinct purpose of becoming a Christian. “One” indicates its unique usage and special importance. It does not speak to the time, place, ethnicity, or gender of the person being baptized; rather, it speaks to the propriety—the rightness and properness—of the thing being done. To designate something as the “one” thing puts it above all others that may appear to be similar in nature. This is true for each of the “one” things that Paul mentions in Ephesians 4:4-6:

- There are many “bodies” of men, but only “one body” into which the saved are added (Ephesians 1:22-23).
- There are many “spirits” in the world, but only “one Spirit” who has revealed the Father’s will concerning salvation (1 John 4:1-3).
- There are many “callings” to which men will give attention, but there is only “one calling” by which God invites men into fellowship with Him (1 Corinthians 1:9).
- There are many “lords” in the world, but only “one Lord” (Jesus Christ) to whom men are to give allegiance for the purpose of salvation (Acts 4:12).
- There are many “faiths” in the world, but only “one faith” that defines God’s expectations for those who wish to be saved by Him (Romans 1:17).

- There are many “baptisms” that are performed for various reasons, but there is only “one baptism” which the Spirit commands of those who wish to be born of God.
- There are many “gods” in the world, but only one God who holds the power of life and salvation (1 Corinthians 8:5-6).

In other words, there is a consistency between what Paul said in Ephesians 4:5 and what is taught elsewhere in the New Testament *and* practiced among those who call upon the name of the Lord for salvation. Two or more baptisms would create a division among those who are called by God—a division not only of doctrine, but also of method. Furthermore, if there is only “one baptism,” then this forbids creating a “new” or “alternate” baptism method (such as sprinkling or pouring rather than immersing) for special circumstances. Christ has established the terms for admission into His church, and no one has the authority to alter or amend those terms.

The Right Reason

Water baptism is the “one baptism” that Christ requires for admission into His church. But even with this understanding, people may be baptized for reasons other than what would be appropriate for those seeking salvation in Christ. Just because the method is correct does not mean that the intention is automatically correct. For example, some of the Pharisees and Sadducees came to John the Baptist to be baptized by him, but he would not permit this. Their attitude was entirely inappropriate; they were seeking baptism for the wrong reason. John’s baptism was meant to accompany one’s genuine repentance, but these men refused to repent (Matthew 3:5-9). For them, baptism was for a different purpose than what God intended it to be. The outward response was correct; the inward response was lacking altogether.

So it is today with respect to one’s baptism as a response to apostolic teaching. A person may pursue the right instruction with the wrong heart, just as men might preach the right gospel

with the wrong intentions (cf. Philippians 1:15-17). For example, a person may want to be baptized only because:

- **He feels guilty for his sins.** It is true that baptism is the visible process which symbolizes one's sins being "washed away" (Acts 22:16). However, it is not true that baptism is to be reduced to a mere salve for one's guilty conscience and nothing more. When people feel overwhelmed with guilt, they often do whatever it takes to make the guilt go away—but not necessarily what needs to be done out of *love for the Lord*. For such people, God is merely a Divine Warden who hands out instructions; He is not a God to be loved, but only an Authority to be obeyed. To "believe in the Lord" means more than just finding relief from personal guilt; it means to surrender one's heart to Him as is expected of all those who desire to "come after" Christ (cf. Matthew 16:24).
- **He is afraid of God's punishment for his sins.** This certainly is *part* of the reason for seeking salvation in God—after all, we want to be "saved" from *something very bad*. Yet, baptism cannot be *only* for escaping punishment; there must be something more than this involved. Nearly every mention of "the wrath of God" in the New Testament is countered with a reference to God's love for man and man's reciprocating love for God. In other words, God *will* destroy those who are disobedient, but He will also destroy those who fail to love Him, regardless of their technical obedience to specific commands. God's wrath should motivate us to move away from our present situation; God's love should motivate us to obey and draw near to Him.
- **He feels pressure from peers, family members, or parents who have already been baptized.** In this case, "baptism" is intended to be equivalent to salvation, but it is instead a mere desire to conform to other people's will rather than God's. Someone may

be baptized simply to escape other people's constant hounding ("When are you going to be baptized?" or "Why haven't you been baptized yet?"), which translates to, "What is your *problem*? There must be something wrong with you." People may mean well, but this does not always lead to appropriate encouragement. Or, the person being baptized may not be hounded at all, but is simply overcome with the guilt of non-conformity (as he sees it). One is active pressure from others ("You must do this!"); the other is passive pressure from within ("I can't let these people down"). In either case, his baptism is not necessarily out of love for God or obedience to His Word, but an avoidance of shame or further harassment from others.

- **He is "of age."** This refers (often) to a young person who has "grown up in the church"—a phrase that is entirely misleading—and is expected to be baptized when he reaches a certain age. That teenager's parents are usually the one's pushing for their son or daughter's baptism, but it may be that other members of the church can be just as vocal, insistent, or outright intimidating. Usually, the fear is that if a teenager is not baptized, he stands in jeopardy of losing his soul. If he *is* of age—that is, if he is capable of making an adult decision to serve the Lord for the rest of his life—then this jeopardy may be very real. However, being baptized just because he feels pressured by family or church members does not change status before God: he may believe in Him in a general sense, but he is not yet the *kind* of believer that He seeks (John 4:23-24). Thus, his baptism will be one of formality or conformity, not an expression of faith in God and His love. Instead, he needs to be baptized because of his own faith in God's ability to save him, not because everyone else thinks it is a good idea. Being "of age" can never be a replacement for one's genuine faith in the Lord.

- **He wants to get everyone off of his back.** This is essentially a restatement of several of the above scenarios, but cuts to the chase. Those who are being unduly pressured to conform will either leave altogether or will bow to that pressure and do whatever it takes to alleviate it. This is hardly the kind of heart that Christ wants. In this particular case, however, serving Christ is not even this person's objective.
- **He wants some form of attention or financial assistance.** I have had this happen on a number of occasions. A person "comes forward" during the invitation, offers a tearful plea for prayers, and requests to be baptized. Yet, he is hardly dried off from his immersion before asking for "benevolence" for rent, to pay his electric bill, or other mundane concerns. Whether or not he receives this money, it is extremely unlikely that we ever see him again—he is already on his way to find another bunch of patsies like ourselves. We will withhold comment on what we think of someone using God's church for that person's own con games. We can say, however, that one's baptism under those circumstances is entirely useless.

Frauds and scammers aside, it is safe to say that no one has a perfect understanding of baptism when he *is* baptized. Yet, if there are right reasons to be baptized, there must be wrong reasons as well. Hopefully the comments above have adequately defined some of these wrong reasons. Now we want to focus on the *right* reasons for the "one baptism" that God seeks of believers. This list is short and simple, since one's conversion to God is itself not meant to be a complex matter. The right reason(s) for a person to be baptized is because:

- He wants to obey God, and God has *commanded* that he be baptized as a necessary demonstration of this obedience.

- He wants to become a disciple of Christ—a Christian—and Christ’s own instruction requires that he (for his part) be baptized in order to accomplish this.
- He wants to be “in Christ”—that is, in Christ’s spiritual church—and baptism is the act that indicates his new membership in the body of Christ.
- He wants to be “born of God,” and his part in this process is his own baptism.
- He wants his sins to be forgiven (“washed away”), and baptism is the necessary means by which this is done.
- He wants to be saved, and baptism is an established doctrine for and an essential part of the salvation process. “In reality, all reasons given in the New Testament for the design of baptism boil down to the **same point**: baptism is the dividing line between being lost and being saved. If the recipient of baptism does not **understand** that, he has not been baptized in a manner that pleases God.”⁷²

These are logical and biblical reasons which have all been supported and expounded upon in previous chapters. Each reason given supports and is supported by every other reason; none of them stand alone, and none are in contradiction to the others. For *at least* these reasons, then, a person should choose to be baptized. A person does not have to take a special class, endure a three-month probation period, learn a catechism, seek the approval of a church board, or go through any formal counseling. He simply has to understand the seriousness of his decision to follow Christ, and the means by which this commitment is historically and publicly declared.

While the baptism candidate’s knowledge will certainly be limited (for now), he is not acting blindly or out of ignorance. He knows enough in order to make an intelligent and sincere decision to obey the Lord, and he does so. This is likely the situation with many of the cases of conversion in Acts—and millions of other situations since then. Our present study is a deep

⁷² Dave Miller, *Piloting the Strait* (Pulaski, TN: Sain Publications, 1996), 292;emphases are his.

investigation into the subject of baptism, but not every person has this opportunity when the Word of God convicts his heart and compels him to act. What he really needs is sincerity, humility, love for God, a desire to obey Him no matter what, and an understanding of his decision to become a Christian.

Summary Thoughts

The “one baptism” is not something that any of us can define apart from or in contradiction to Scripture. Whatever *we* determine is the “one baptism” must be what God has *already* determined in His Word. This conclusion cannot be something so difficult or mysterious, either, that only someone with a seminary degree can figure it out. The New Testament was not written for seminary students or clerics; it was written so that every person could “read and understand” its message and respond rightly to it.

Just because God recognizes only *one* baptism does not mean that others do not exist. Instead, it means that regardless of their existence, participating in them does not change a person’s spiritual status with God. Submitting to a baptism that He does not require may make a person *feel* clean, righteous, pious, or saved, but this does not mean that he has *become* any of these. God is the One who imparts salvation, and thus He is the One who determines the conditions—as well as who is sincere in meeting those conditions—for salvation. If a person will not submit to the “one baptism” that God requires, then he is not acting in obedience but is seeking something else.

What God seeks above all is a heart that yearns to worship Him “in spirit and truth” (cf. John 4:23-24).⁷³ He longs for each of us to set aside our pride, personal agendas, emotional baggage, adherence to man-made religion—even our primary devotion to those whom we love—

⁷³ For a detailed study on fellowship with and worship of God, I recommend my book, *Seeking the Sacred* (Summitville, IN: Spiritbuilding Publishing, 2009); go to www.booksbychad.com.

and serve Him above all else. This is an attitude that must be present in our heart when we come to Him, but admittedly it takes a lifetime to fully appreciate and master. Given all that we have studied so far, it is clear that the person who genuinely seeks God in open and honest faith will not hesitate to comply with the “one baptism” in order to enter into a covenant relationship with Him.