

## **SPECIAL STUDY ON BAPTISM**

Taken from Baptism: A Biblical Study  
by Jack Cottrell  
Material reprinted with permission from  
College Press Publishing Co.,  
Joplin, MO 64802

Dr. Jack Cottrell is Professor of Theology at  
Cincinnati Bible Seminary,  
Cincinnati, OH

### **ACTS 2:38-39 (I)**

Probably the clearest - and probably for that reason the most controversial - passage concerning the meaning of baptism is Acts 2:38,39, "And Peter said to them, 'Repent, and let each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you and your children, and for all who are far off, as many as the Lord our God shall call to Himself.'" This passage is important because it describes the function of Christian baptism at the point of its very inauguration on the day of Pentecost. It is part of the apostolic instruction to sinners who are asking how they might be rid of their sin and guilt. It states quite clearly that baptism is the focal point of God's promise of forgiveness and the gift of the Spirit.

### **The Messianic Outpouring of the Spirit**

On the Jewish calendar the events of Acts 2 occurred on the day of Pentecost. To the Christian community the day is significant because it was the birthday of the church. On a deeper level still, it was the formal and historical point of transition from the Old Covenant age to the New Covenant age, the actual foundation for which had already been laid in the death and resurrection of Christ.

The central event marking the inauguration of the new age was the outpouring of the Holy

Spirit. Of course the Holy Spirit was present and working among the saints of God in Old Testament times, but both the prophets and the Gospel promised a new and special presence of the spirit as part of the Messianic hope. Isaiah 44:3 says, "For I will pour out water on the thirsty land and streams on the dry ground; I will pour out My Spirit on your offspring, and My blessing on your descendants.'" Joel 2:28 says, "And it will come about after this that I will pour out my Spirit on all mankind.'" Ezekiel 36:27 puts it thus: "And I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes.'" John the Baptist promised that the Spirit would be given to believers as an indwelling presence (Luke 11:13; John 7:37-39). At His ascension He renewed this promise, as recorded in Acts 1:4-8. He told His apostles to "wait for what the Father had promised."

The activities recorded in Acts 2:1-4 are the initial fulfillment of these promises. The outward, miraculous manifestations were not the main point of Pentecost, but only the signs or evidence that the invisible, inner presence of the Spirit was now available for the first time.<sup>1</sup> The miracles - especially the speaking with "other tongues" (Acts 2:4) succeeded in their purpose of gaining the attention of the crowd and disposing them toward the message Peter was to deliver. The people asked in amazement, "What does this mean?" (Acts 2:12). Peter proceeded to explain what it meant. This is the outpouring of the Spirit promised by Joel, he said. It is one of the primary blessings of the accomplished work of Jesus the Messiah. You crucified Him, said Peter to the Jews assembled there, but God raised Him from the dead and seated Him at His own right hand. "And having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, He has poured forth this which you both see and hear" (Acts 2:33). For this Jesus whom you crucified has been exalted as your Lord and Christ (Acts 2:15-36).

The audience that heard Peter's sermon was a large group of devout Jews who worshipped God according to the Old Covenant relation. No doubt many of them had encountered Jesus and rejected Him, thinking they were defending Yahweh's honor. What they heard from Peter, as confirmed

## 2 TWENTY-SIX LESSONS ON ACTS (VOL I)

by the miraculous manifestations of the Spirit, shook them to the very foundations of their faith. Jesus, whom they had sent to His death, was their God- the exalted Messiah! From His heavenly throne, as the inaugural expression of His Lordship, He had sent forth the long awaited Holy Spirit! When this realization dawned upon them, they sensed themselves as sinners exposed to the wrath of God. “They were pierced to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, ‘Brethren, what shall we do?’ ” (Acts 2:37).

“What shall we do” about what? About the burden of their sin and guilt. What could they do to be free of this burden? Here is a primary example of the point made earlier while discussing Matthew 28, that even the most faithful Jews, when confronted with the new revelation of the Gospel of Christ, became lost sinners unless and until they accepted Jesus as their Savior and Messiah. Peter’s audience now felt this state of lostness and cried out for help. “What shall we do” to be saved?

Peter’s statement concerning baptism in Acts 2:38,39 must be understood against this background. Baptism is at the very heart of his answer to the question about what must be done to be free from sin and guilt.

### **The Gospel Offer**

Peter’s reply to the sinner’s question may be analyzed in two parts: first, the nature of the salvation offered; and second, the conditions for receiving it.

The Gospel offer made here in Acts 2:38 is a classic representation of the “double cure” referred to in the song “Rock of Ages,” viz., “Be of sin the double cure; save me from its guilt and power.” An alternative version says, “Save from wrath and make me pure.” This double cure is God’s answer to the “double trouble” sinners bring upon themselves through their sin.<sup>ii</sup>

The first and most immediately pressing problem caused by sin is *guilt*. The sinner has broken God’s law and thus has incurred its penalty.

He stands under the constant condemnation of the wrath of God. This is an objective problem, a problem of wrong relationships with God and with His law. God’s solution to man’s guilt is the death of Christ, in which He took our sin with its guilt upon Himself, paying its penalty through His own suffering. As a result God is able to offer the sinner full pardon for his sin, full remission, complete justification, complete liberation from the fear of condemnation and hell.

This is “the forgiveness of your sins” that Peter offers in Acts 2:38, and it is no doubt what his Jewish audience was inquiring about. Forgiveness itself is not a new blessing of the Messianic age, but was enjoyed by all believers in the pre-Christian era also. The newness is that now it is offered only “in the name of Jesus Christ” since His death and resurrection are the events that make it possible in the first place. In any case Peter’s offer included first of all what was most wanted and most needed by his audience.

The second part of the double trouble is not as readily perceived and understood as the first. It is the effect that sin has on the soul itself. It can be described as sinfulness, depravity, spiritual weakness, spiritual sickness, even spiritual death. The vitiating effects of sin permeate the soul just as the ravages of disease permeate the body; they make the soul weak in the face of temptation and inclined to sin more and more. In other words, sin affects not just our *relationship* to God and His law; it also affects us *personally*. Our very nature is corrupted.

The Gospel offer to sinners in the Christian era includes a divine cure for this disease of the soul. It is the new birth or regeneration, as discussed earlier in connection with John 3:3-5. As noted there, this was not made available to sinners in the Old Testament era. Though they were provided with some resources to combat the power of sin, still they were not given the gift of rebirth. This is one of the principal new blessings of the Messianic age and one of the main aspects of the Gospel offer. Thus the Jews who asked “Brethren, what shall we do?” probably were not even aware of this side of the sin problem and thus were not

asking about any solution to it. So when Peter's offer included the words, "and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit," this was an unexpected bonus! For "the gift of the Holy Spirit" is the person and presence of the Spirit Himself, who will enter the receptive sinner's heart in order to regenerate him and will remain there in order to give him strength to overcome sin day by day. The offer of the Holy Spirit *is* the offer of regeneration.

This was Peter's ultimate explanation of the tongues and other phenomena recorded in Acts 2:1-4 and about which the audience originally asked, "What does this mean?" (Acts 2:12). What this means, says Peter, is that God through Christ has now poured out the promised Spirit. And what it means for *you* is that, if you will repent and be baptized in the name of Christ for the remission of your sins, *you* will receive this very Holy Spirit as a gift. For the promised Spirit is *for you* (Acts 2:39; the word order makes the "you" emphatic).

### **The Conditions**

As is the case in Mark 16:16, the Gospel offer in Acts 2:38 is conditional. A large segment of conservative Protestantism teaches that God's gracious salvation is completely unconditional, but this view is based on a faulty view of divine sovereignty and some questionable exegesis.<sup>iii</sup> Scripture clearly connects the sinner's reception of salvation with his meeting of certain basic conditions. In Mark 16:16 faith and baptism are specified; here in Acts 2:38 repentance and baptism are specifically mentioned.

When his Jewish brethren asked "What shall we do?" Peter's first instruction was that they should *repent*. Repentance as a condition for salvation is not a controversial point, even among those who like to emphasize "faith alone." It is generally recognized that the faith which God requires for salvation cannot really exist without repentance. The latter is basically an attitude toward *sin*. It is a hatred of sin in general and especially a hatred of the sin in one's own life; it is a determination and commitment to be rid of all sin as quickly as possible. Since the holy God Himself

hates sin, one cannot truly believe in Him without sharing this hatred. Since Christ's very purpose and work was to oppose and conquer sin in all its forces and forms, and since His very blood was shed to accomplish this, one cannot truly believe in Christ without hating the sin which caused His suffering. Thus even in passages where it is not specified (as in Acts 16:31), it is understood that repentance is the Siamese twin or silent partner of faith.

In Acts 2:38 repentance is the first condition mentioned because the thing foremost in the minds of those who heard Peter's sermon was the conviction of their sin, especially their sin of rejecting Christ and causing His death. Their question specifically meant, "What shall we do *about these terrible sins*?" First, says Peter, you must have the right attitude toward them: you must repent.

The only other condition given by Peter is baptism: "Let each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins." Since Mark lists baptism as a condition for salvation, and since John gives it as a condition for entrance into the kingdom of God, we should not be surprised that it is presented here as a condition for the forgiveness of sins, as well as for receiving the gift of the Spirit.

Of course many do find it difficult to accept what Peter says about baptism and look for ways to avoid its implications. One such way is to deny that Acts 2:38 refers to *water* baptism. As one writer says, "I doubt very seriously whether Peter was referring to water baptism," because there would not have been enough water in the temple area to immerse 3,000 people (Acts 2:41) and because neither here nor anywhere else is *water* baptism specifically connected with the forgiveness of sins.<sup>iv</sup>

Such an idea is not very well thought out, however. Peter must have meant water baptism for the following reasons. First, he must have been speaking of the same baptism prescribed in the Great Commission, which had to be water baptism because it was something the apostles themselves were to administer. Second, the baptism prescribed by Peter was something the sinners themselves were

#### 4 TWENTY-SIX LESSONS ON ACTS (VOL I)

to do (“What shall we do?”); it was their decision and initiative. A purely *spiritual* baptism would be at God’s initiative. Third, Peter’s language would have immediately called to his audience’s mind the baptism of John (which was “a baptism of *repentance* for the *forgiveness of sins*,” Mark 1:4), which was known to all as water baptism. Finally it should be noted that there was ample water in the Jerusalem area (it did not have to be in the *temple* area) for immersing 3,000 people.<sup>v</sup>

Thus there is no good reason for seeing this as a reference to anything besides water baptism. It is set forth alongside repentance as a condition for receiving the blessings of salvation. This should not be surprising in view of the prominence of baptism in the Great Commission as reported by both Matthew and Mark. In fact, it would have been surprising if Peter had *not* mentioned baptism when asked “What shall we do?”

This leads to a final consideration relative to the conditions specified in Acts 2:38, namely, why is *faith* not included here, especially since the commission in Mark 16:16 includes both faith and baptism? We could not infer from both the question in Acts 2:37 and the reply in Acts 2:38 that it was not necessary to specify faith since those who heard the message and were “pierced to the heart” by it (verse 37) *already believed*. This is why they asked for further instruction on what to do. If Peter had perceived that they did not yet believe, he surely would have required this first of all.

This may be compared with the situation in Acts 16:30,31, when the Philippian jailer asked basically the same question, “What must I do to be saved?” This man, a pagan, had not as yet had the benefit of hearing a message about the true God or our Lord Jesus Christ. Thus Paul’s reply focused on the foundation requirement: “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you shall be saved.” This instruction was not meant to be comprehensive and all-inclusive; it was an opening statement immediately followed by more teaching: “And they spoke the word of the Lord to him” (Acts 16:32). Though neither repentance nor baptism is specifically mentioned, we can fairly infer that they were included in this

“word of the Lord.” This is surely the case with baptism, since the jailer was immediately baptized after hearing the teaching (Acts 16:33).

In a similar way we can consider Peter’s instruction in Acts 2:38 to have been determined by the level of response already achieved by his hearers. Since a measure of faith was already evidenced by their question, there was no need to mention it specifically.

In this connection one other point may be noted. Even though faith is not specifically mentioned here as a condition for salvation, the content of Peter’s reply was an *implicit* call for faith, and not just the faith of the Old Testament saints. It was a call for these devout Jews to rise to a new level of faith, to focus their faith upon a God who is Three as well as One. As we noted in the discussion of Matthew 28:19-20, from this time forward saving faith must include faith in Jesus as the divine Redeemer and faith in the Holy Spirit as the divine gift. A conscientious response to Peter’s instruction would have to include these elements, since he told this group to be baptized *in the name of Jesus Christ* in order to *receive the gift of the Holy Spirit*. Their Old Covenant faith was no longer adequate; whether they had been baptized with John’s baptism was now irrelevant. They are now required to accept God’s word about Jesus Christ and the Spirit as part of their acceptance of baptism itself.

In summary, then, the conditions for receiving the “double cure” according to Acts 2:38 are repentance and baptism, plus an implied faith.

## ANDANTES

---

<sup>i</sup> See Jack Cottrell, “Are Miraculous Gifts the Blessing of Pentecost?”, *Christian Standard* (May 9, 1982), 117:9-11.

<sup>ii</sup> See Jack Cottrell, *Thirteen Lessons on Grace: Being Good Enough Isn’t Good Enough* (Joplin, Mo.: College Press, 1988 reprint of 1976 edition published by Standard Publishing), chs. 5-7.

<sup>iii</sup> See Jack Cottrell, *What the Bible Says About God the Ruler* (Joplin, Mo.: College Press, 1984), chs. 5,9 and *What the Bible Says About God the Redeemer*, pp. 389-99.

<sup>iv</sup> Richard A. Seymour, *All About Repentance* (Hollywood, Fla.: Harvest House, 1974), p. 123. The last point of course is a case of begging the question.

v. Several large pools were available, such as the Pool of Siloam (just south of the temple area), which measures approximately 15 by 50 feet. A large reservoir on the southwest side of the city had a surface area of about 3 acres. See J.W. McGarvey, *Lands of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1881), pp. 189-202, for a full description of the pools of Jerusalem.

### **ACTS 2:38-39 (II)**

In chapter four above we noted that in Acts 2:38-39 Peter specifies two conditions for receiving the Gospel blessings of forgiveness and the Holy Spirit, namely, repentance and baptism. In this chapter we will explore in more detail how baptism is related to each of these blessings.

#### **Baptism and Forgiveness**

Baptism for the forgiveness of sins in the Christian age is not without antecedents in the previous era. It was foreshadowed by the Old Testament ritual purification ceremonies, also called lustrations or washings.

In the context of the Mosaic law, some acts and conditions produced a state of ritual or ceremonial uncleanness, e.g., having certain bodily discharges (Lev. 15) and touching a corpse (Num. 19:11-22). The state of uncleanness produced thereby was not moral in nature, but ritual or ceremonial. No moral fault of guilt was attached; some of the situations causing it were natural and unavoidable. The principal effect was that the person rendered unclean was considered unfit to engage in the religious services before God. To

remove such defilement, certain purification rites were prescribed, most of them involving water (e.g., Lev. 11:32; 14:8; Deut. 23:10-11).

On certain occasions and for worship leaders especially, water purification was required before one could approach God even when no specific offense was in view. See Exodus 19:10,14; 29:4; Lev. 16:4. The bronze laver used for priestly washing was particularly significant. The ministering priests were required to wash therein before serving in the tabernacle; “they shall wash with water, that they may not die” (Exod. 30:20).

In what sense did the water or the act itself have such a dramatic effect or bring about purification? The fact is that neither water nor the act of washing *caused* any change. It was a matter of divine decision and declaration. God simply declared that before the act of washing, the person was unacceptable in His sight; afterwards the person was regarded as acceptable.

If the state of uncleanness and the washing rites themselves had only a ceremonial significance, then what was the purpose of this whole system? Basically it had a symbolic or typical purpose. The whole system of *ceremonial* uncleanness and purification was an object lesson to teach about *moral* pollution and true *legal* guilt before God, and the necessity of the heart’s being cleansed from these. This is how the prophets made use of the ceremonies in their teaching. They used the ritual cleansings as analogies of the moral cleansing with which God is especially concerned. Typical teaching involving this conceptual transition from ritual to moral includes Psalm 51:2,7, “Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin.... Wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow”; Isaiah 1:16, “Wash yourselves, make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your deeds from My sight”; Jeremiah 4:14, “Wash your heart from evil, O Jerusalem, that you may be saved”; and Ezekiel 36:25, “Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols.”

The Old Testament water ceremonies, together with the prophetic imagery of divine spiritual cleansing, are the forerunners of Christian baptism. The latter unites outward washing and inner moral cleansing into a single act, viz., baptism for the forgiveness of sins. Baptism is to moral and spiritual defilement what the Old Testament washings were to ritual defilement.

John the Baptist's baptism also had a connection with forgiveness, though it is never stated in the same terms as Christian baptism. It was a baptism "for repentance" (Matt. 3:11), "a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins" (Mark 1:4; Luke 3:3). Those who were baptized confessed their sins in the process (Matt. 3:6; Mark 1:5). Thus repentance, confession of sin, and forgiveness of sin were all related to John's baptism. Whether the baptism was preached as a condition for this forgiveness or whether it was only an aid to quicken and intensify repentance is not clear.

The relation between Christian baptism and forgiveness of sins is much more specific and clear, though, especially here in Acts 2:38, where baptism is said to be "for [eis] the forgiveness of sins." The key word here is *eis*, translated in different versions in a wide variety of ways including "for," "unto," "into," "in order to," "in order to have," "so that," "with a view to," and "in relation to." The preferred terminology is a matter of considerable controversy since exegetes often try to make the word conform to a preconceived view of baptism.

Three main approaches may be identified. The first is that *eis* here retains its most common meaning of *direction or motion toward something*, which includes the concepts of *purpose* and *goal*. On this understanding the purpose or goal of baptism is to bring about forgiveness of sins. This view is consistent with the idea of baptism as a condition for salvation and for entrance into the kingdom of God. A second approach is that *eis* here means *because of*, the idea being that a person is baptized because his sins have already been forgiven. The third view is that *eis* here means the same thing as the preposition *en* (in), which does

not mean motion toward but simply *location in*. This view posits only a very general connection between baptism and forgiveness, viz., "be baptized *in relation to* forgiveness of sins." The last two views are preferred by those who reject the conditional relation between baptism and salvation.

Of these three views, the first is clearly the meaning in Acts 2:38 on both lexicographical and contextual grounds. Regarding its actual meaning, a study of the lexicons shows that the primary meaning and the overwhelmingly most common use of *eis* is "motion toward" in any one of a number of senses, the explanation of which takes two full pages in the Arndt and Gingrich lexicon. In this general category the two most common meanings are "moving from one physical place to another" (88 lines in the lexicon) and "goal or purpose" (127 lines - one full page). By contrast only five lines are devoted to the alleged causal use of *eis*. Arndt and Gingrich call this use "controversial" because there is reason to doubt that it ever has this meaning in Greek usage. M.J. Harris flatly declares that this causal sense "seems unlikely in any one of the passages sometimes adduced," including Acts 2:38. A meaning similar to that of *en* is not disputed but is still relatively infrequent. Arndt and Gingrich use only 16 lines to explain that *eis* sometimes means "with respect to" or "with reference to." Most of the cases where *eis* is used where *en* would be expected (30 of 34 lines) refer to physical location.

Of course it is understood that simply counting lines in a lexicon does not decide the meaning of a word in a particular verse. The point is to show that the primary meaning of *eis* involves motion toward or purpose, and that this is how it is used in the overwhelming majority of cases. The meaning "because of" is highly debatable simply because it has no solid basis in the Greek language as such. The meaning "with reference to" is possible but not as likely given its relatively infrequent use. Thus if *eis* has one of these last two meanings in Acts 2:38, that meaning would have to be contextually clear.

In this final analysis the meaning of *eis* in this passage will be determined by the context. The general meaning “with reference to” would be warranted only if the context itself did not suggest a more specific meaning, only if the connection between baptism and forgiveness remained vague in the context. But this is certainly not the case. We must remember that Peter’s statement is part of his answer to the Jews’ question of how to get rid of the guilt of their sins, especially their sin of crucifying Christ. They specifically asked, “What shall we do” to get rid of this guilt? Any instruction Peter gave them would have been understood by them in this light, and must be so understood by us today. When he told them to repent and be baptized “*eis* the forgiveness” of their sins, the only honest reading 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.

The fact that baptism is paralleled here with repentance confirms this meaning. Surely no one questions that Peter is telling his audience to repent for the purpose of bringing about forgiveness of sins. Even if such a connection between repentance and forgiveness were not already understood, it is perfectly unambiguous in this context. The fact that baptism is part of the same response to the same question makes its meaning just as clear and gives it the same basic meaning as repentance. In whatever way repentance is connected with forgiveness, so also is baptism. If repentance is for the purpose of bringing about forgiveness, so also is baptism.

Even if the so-called “casual” meaning of *eis* were not in doubt on lexicographical grounds, it would surely be excluded in Acts 2:38 by the context itself. “Be baptized because your sins have been forgiven” is the exact opposite of what would be expected and required in the situation. The whole point is that the Jews’ sins are *not* forgiven, and they are asking what to do to receive such forgiveness.

The bottom line is that the only meaning of *eis* that is consistent with the context of Acts 2:38 is its most common meaning of “motion toward,”

specifically the purposive meaning of “unto” or “for the purpose of.” The Greek construction is exactly the same as Jesus’ statement in Matthew 26:28, that he shed his blood “for [*eis*] forgiveness of sins,” namely, for the purpose of bringing about forgiveness. Thus we must conclude that Peter is saying in Acts 2:38 that part of what a sinner must do to bring about forgiveness of his sins is be baptized.

One other point must be made concerning the relation between baptism and forgiveness. Quite often we hear that a person is baptized “for the remission of sins that are past.” The idea that baptism brings forgiveness for every sin committed up to that point, and that a person thus remains completely forgiven until he sins again. Then he reverts to a state of lostness because of the newly committed sin, and remains in this state until some further forgiving act is performed, such as partaking of the Lord’s Supper or making specific confession of such sin (I John 1:9). Such thinking underlies the development of the Roman Catholic sacrament of penance.

Such thinking is false, however, and is based on a faulty concept not only of baptism but of forgiveness itself. The forgiveness of sins is in essence the same as justification (cf. Romans 3:28; 4:6-8). When one receives forgiveness in baptism, he becomes a justified or forgiven person. He enters the state of being justified. This is a continuing state that is maintained through continuing faith in the blood of Jesus. Through his sincere and working faith a Christian remains free from guilt and condemnation (Rom. 8:1) even if he is not free from sin itself. This is the heart of the concept of justification by faith.

This means that baptism is not for the forgiveness of past sins only, but for the forgiveness of sins, *period*. As long as one remains in the relationship to Christ begun at baptism, he is justified or forgiven as the result of what happened in his baptism. Thus all our lives we should remember our baptism, and be encouraged by that memory when we begin to feel discouraged in our

---

Christian living or to doubt the validity of our hope in Christ Jesus.

### **Baptism and the Holy Spirit**

In our study of John 3:5 we have already seen that there is a close relationship between baptism and the Holy Spirit, in that both are related to the new birth. Here in Acts 2:38 that connection is made even stronger and more specific. The gift of the Spirit Himself as an indwelling presence is promised as the result of Christian baptism: “Be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.”

The reality of the inner presence of the Spirit in our very lives and bodies is a fact taught forcefully and clearly in Scripture. See Romans 8:9-11; I Cor. 6:19; II Tim. 1:14. Acts 2:38 tells us that baptism is the point of time when the Spirit enters our lives in this way.

Though baptism is a single act involving both water and Spirit (John 3:5), this passage shows that baptism in water actually precedes or is a precondition for the Spirit’s regenerating work accomplished therein. In baptism the Holy Spirit is given; He then gives the new birth by His very presence. Thus, although they are for the most part simultaneous, technically they do not begin at the same time.

As suggested earlier in this chapter, the gift of the indwelling Spirit is the very heart of the Pentecost message and promise. Before His ascension Jesus told His apostles to wait in Jerusalem for “what the Father had promised” (Acts 1:4-5). The phenomena of Pentecost confirmed that this promise was fulfilled on that day (Acts 2:16-17,33); from that time forward the gift of the Spirit has been offered to anyone who repents and is baptized in the name of Jesus (Acts 2:38-39). Thus as unlikely as it may seem, this long-promised and long-expected gift of inestimable value is by God’s

---

design made to depend on baptism! This is indicated in Acts 5:32 also, where Peter notes that God has given the Holy Spirit “to those who obey Him” - an obvious reference to Acts 2:38. From this alone we can see what an important place God has assigned to baptism in the economy of salvation.

A problem is raised by the fact that on several occasions in the book of Acts the Holy Spirit seems to be given apart from baptism, either before it or after it. Some conclude from these events that the giving of the Spirit follows no set pattern and especially that it has no particular connection with baptism.

Twice the Holy Spirit is given *before* baptism, namely at Pentecost (Acts 2:1-4) and at the conversion of Cornelius and his household (Acts 10:44-48). It is a serious mistake, however, to see these events as typical and as representative conversion experiences. In fact, they are intended to be just the opposite. In the first place, it is not clear whether the pre-baptismal presence of the Spirit in these cases resulted in conversion (the new birth) at all, or whether it was simply a matter of equipping these particular individuals with the miraculous ability to speak in tongues.

In the second place, even if they did involve new birth, the evidential purposes of these two events required them to be unusual and unique and contrary to the normal pattern of conversion. In each case the main point was the miraculous tongues, which functioned as signs of the truth of the apostolic testimony. At Pentecost the tongues established the message that this was the beginning of the new-age outpouring of the Spirit. In Acts 10 tongues were evidence that God wanted the Gentiles to be received into His church along with Jews. Thus these events were not intended to be paradigms of conversion. They were meant to be exceptions to the rule in the sense that every miracle is an exception; this is what gives them their evidential value.

In the third place, Peter specifically indicates that the manner of the Spirit's coming at Pentecost and upon Cornelius stood apart from the normal experience. He notes that Cornelius and his household "received the Holy Spirit just as we did" (Acts 10:47; cf. 15:8), but Acts 11:15 shows that he regards the *manner* in which they received Him comparable only to the Pentecost experience itself: "And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them, just as He did upon us at the beginning." And what was the unique thing about these two occasions? These are the only two recorded cases where the Spirit was given without any human intermediary of any kind, where the Spirit *immediately* fell upon the chosen individuals. In every other case a human mediator is involved, either through baptism or the laying on of hands.

The conclusion is that Acts 2:1-4 and Acts 10:44-48 do not negate the truth of Acts 2:38 concerning the appointed connection between baptism and the Holy Spirit. They give no warrant whatsoever for expecting the Spirit to be given prior to baptism.

On the other two occasions in the book of Acts, however, the Spirit seems to be given *after* baptism, in the separate action of the laying on of an apostle's hands: see Acts 8:17-18; 19:6. The assumption that these two passages refer to the gift of the indwelling Spirit is one reason for the rise of the practice of confirmation in some church groups. But that is the question: is the giving of the Spirit in these two cases the same as that promised in Acts 2:38? It seems not to be.

What sets these two events apart from the normal conversion experience in which the indwelling Spirit is given in Christian baptism? Basically, they both appear to involve not the indwelling of the Spirit but the bestowing of *miraculous gifts* of the Spirit. At Samaria what was bestowed through the laying on of the apostles' hands was something observable and awesome (Acts 8:18); in Acts 19:6 the result is specifically given as "speaking with tongues and prophesying." Especially from the account of Philip's mission in

Samaria (Acts 8:5-18), we are justified in concluding that miraculous spiritual gifts could be bestowed only through the laying on of an apostle's hands. (This is why the Pentecost and Cornelius events were unique: even the *manner* in which the miraculous abilities were given was a miracle.) Because of the unqualified promise in Acts 2:38 (cf. Acts 5:32), we may thus conclude that both the Samaritan disciples and the Ephesian disciples received the indwelling of the Spirit when they were baptized (Acts 8:12; 19:5); subsequently they were given miraculous spiritual gifts when the apostles laid their hands on them.

Again the connection between baptism and the Holy Spirit established in Acts 2:38 remains unshaken. Events which depart from this pattern are either deliberately unique or are referring to something other than the gift of the indwelling Spirit that provides the new birth. This understanding is consistent with the testimony of other New Testament passages which tie baptism to the regenerating work of the Spirit, viz., John 3:5; Romans 6:3ff; Colossians 2:12; and Titus 3:5.

### Summary

In this chapter and the one preceding we have sought to explain the meaning of baptism as found in Peter's instruction in Acts 2:38-39. We have emphasized the significance of the historical context, namely, that this was the day when God gave the long-awaited messianic outpouring of the Holy Spirit. This was also the occasion when the Jews were confronted with their guilt of rejecting and crucifying Christ, who was confirmed as their Messiah by His resurrection and enthronement and by His participation in the sending of the Spirit. Thousands in Peter's audience came under conviction and asked what they could do to be free from the guilt of their sin.

We have seen that Peter's response included the promise of a "double-cure" from the "double trouble" of sin; forgiveness to remove their guilt, and the indwelling Holy Spirit to give them a new birth to new spiritual life. His response also included the conditions for receiving these blessings: repentance and baptism.

We have discussed in some detail the connection between baptism and forgiveness as stated here in Acts 2:38. Of special significance is the use of the Greek word *eis*, which is shown by lexical considerations and by the context to mean "unto" or "for the purpose of." Thus the very purpose of baptism is to bring about forgiveness or justification.

Finally we have discussed the connection between baptism and the Holy Spirit, emphasizing that baptism is a clear precondition for receiving the gift of the regenerating and indwelling presence of the Spirit. Passages in Acts which separate baptism from the gift of the Spirit are deliberately unique exceptions or are not talking about the saving presence of the Spirit in the first place.

## TWENTY-SIX LESSONS ON ACTS (VOL II)

### SPECIAL STUDY ON BAPTISM

Taken from Baptism: A Biblical Study  
by Jack Cottrell

Material reprinted with permission from  
College Press Publishing Co.,  
Joplin, MO 64802

Dr. Cottrell is Professor of Theology at  
Cincinnati Bible Seminary, Cincinnati, Ohio

### ACTS 22:16

Baptism is mentioned a number of times in the book of Acts after 2:38, but mostly just to record the fact that certain individuals were baptized (e.g., 8:12,38; 9:18; 10:48; 16:15,33). Only one other passage reflects significantly on the actual *meaning* of baptism, viz., Acts 22:16. Here God's servant Ananias addresses the humble Saul of Tarsus (who is about to become Paul the Apostle) with these words: "And now why do you delay? Arise and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on His name."

#### Saul the Sinner

To understand the meaning of baptism as taught in this passage, again we must study the historical context in which the statement is made. Especially we must inquire concerning Saul's spiritual state at the time Ananias addresses him. Is he already saved, or is he still an unsaved sinner? To find the answer we must study all three accounts of Saul's conversion together: Acts 9:1-19; 22:1-16; and 26:1-18.

Before his conversion experience Saul considered himself to be among the elite in believing Israel, a devout Jew who was "zealous for God" (22:3). From his perspective as a Christian, however, he realized that he had been the foremost sinner (I Tim. 1:15). He was guilty of blasphemy, persecution of Christians and of Christ Himself (26:14-15), violence, and unbelief (I Tim. 1:13).

This is another example of how even the most sincere Old Covenant faith was no longer sufficient once Christ was known.

While Saul was on his way to Damascus to persecute more Christians, the risen and living Christ appeared to him and demanded, "Saul, why are you persecuting me?" The bewildered and bedazzled Saul could only ask, "Who are you, Lord?" The reply: "I am Jesus, the one you are actually persecuting" (9:5; 22:8; 26:15). Immediately filled with a sense of his guilt and with fear, Saul could only ask, "What shall I do, Lord?" The reply: "Go into Damascus, and there someone will tell you what to do" (22:10).

Blinded by the brilliance of the risen Christ, Saul was led into Damascus; but no one came to him for three days. During this time the blind Saul prayed and fasted, waiting for someone to help him. He knew from a vision that a man named Ananias would come for this purpose (9:9-12). Ananias himself prepared by a vision, finally arrived after the three days of fasting and prayer. First he laid his hands on Saul so that the latter's sight might be miraculously restored (9:12, 17,18; 22:13). Then he announced why the Lord had confronted him to be an apostle to the Gentiles (22:14,15; see (:15,16).<sup>i</sup> Finally, Ananias told Saul what to do about his sin and guilt: "Arise, and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on His name" (22:16).

Now the crucial question is this: can we discern whether Saul is still in his sins when thus exhorted, or whether he has already been saved? To put it another way, is there any point prior to this where he might have been fully converted?

Someone might suggest that he was converted on the Damascus road at the time of his encounter with Christ. Since he calls Jesus "Lord" (22:8,10), perhaps this means that he was at that point surrendering to the Lordship of Christ. This is unlikely, however. The word itself (Greek, *kurios*) was the usual term of respectful address, on which occasions it was roughly equivalent to our word "sir". Perhaps this is all Saul meant in his first use of this term, since at this point he does not even

## TWENTY-SIX LESSONS ON ACTS (VOL II)

know who Jesus is: “Who art Thou, Lord?” (22:8). But after Jesus identifies Himself (22:8), Saul again calls Him “Lord” (22:10), perhaps in a stronger sense than before, and perhaps even indicating an attitude of submission. It is still unlikely, though, that any true conversion has taken place. Saul had not yet heard the gospel offer, nor had he been told the conditions for receiving what is offered. This is why he asks, “What shall I do, Lord?” (22:10).

The fact that Saul asked this question suggests that he was at that time in the same spiritual condition as the Jews who were convicted by Peter’s Pentecost sermon. They asked, “What shall we do?” (Acts 2:37). Saul’s question is exactly the same: “What shall I do?” But whereas they were immediately told who to receive forgiveness, Saul was not told at this point what to do about his sins. Thus we conclude that he is still in them here on the Damascus road.

But even if this is so, someone might say that Saul was surely converted during the three days when he was fasting and praying. But there is no indication that any change took place in him during this time. Conversion is usually accompanied by a deep sense of joy and relief (see Acts 8:39; 16:34), but this is not mentioned here. The fact that Saul continues to pray and fast during the whole three days shows he has not yet received that for which he is praying and fasting. He has still not had his question answered: “What shall I do?” He knows that someone named Ananias will come and tell him what to do (9:6,12), but nothing happens for three days. During this time he is still in his blindness, which is symbolic of the fact that he is still in his sins.

When Ananias first encounters Saul, what does he assume about the latter’s spiritual condition? The fact that he addresses him as “Brother Saul” (9:17; 22:13) is taken by many to be a sure indication that Ananias accepts him as a fellow Christian and thus as a saved person. It is true that Christians called each other “brother” and “brethren.” About 30 instances occur in Acts and 130 in Paul’s own writings. But this practice probably arose from the fact that the *Jews* already customarily called each other “brethren,”<sup>ii</sup> by

which they meant only “fellow Jews.” This is the sense in which Paul refers to all Jews as “my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh” (Rom. 9:3). The addressing of fellow Jews as brethren occurs quite often in the book of Acts;<sup>iii</sup> thus we need not think that anything more than this is implied by Ananias’ address of Saul as “brother.”

In fact there are two strong indications that Ananias did not view Saul as a saved Christian brother when he first encountered him. As we have seen in our study of Acts 2:38, salvation in the Messianic age includes receiving the Holy Spirit. But Ananias says that he has been sent to Saul for the very purpose of filling him with the Holy Spirit (9:17). This shows that Saul was not yet saved, and that Ananias was quite aware of it. The other element of the double cure of salvation is forgiveness of sins. Now, when Ananias tells Saul to rise up and wash away his sins (22:16), this shows that he sees Saul as still bearing the burden of guilt.

Thus there is nothing in the text or context that places Saul in the company of the saved when he first meets Ananias. He welcomes Ananias as the one whom God has sent at last to tell him what to do to be saved, and baptism is a central element in the instruction. It is related both to receiving the Spirit and to forgiveness, just as in Acts 2:38.

We can infer its relation to the Spirit in Saul’s case from Acts 9:12, 17,18. In verse 17 Ananias mentions two reasons why he was sent: that Saul might regain his sight and be filled with the Spirit. In the very next verse we are told that Saul’s sight returned (when Ananias laid his hands on him, v. 12) *and* that he was baptized. The implication is that the latter was the occasion for the giving of the Spirit, as promised in Acts 2:38.

The relation of baptism to the forgiveness of Saul’s sins is the focal point of Acts 22:16. We now turn to a more detailed study of this aspect of the verse.

### **Wash Away Your Sins**

## TWENTY-SIX LESSONS ON ACTS (VOL II)

Ananias' instruction to Saul includes two aorist participles, "rising up" and "calling upon"; and two imperatives, "be baptized" and "wash away your sins." This last item is the crucial one. What does it mean to "wash away" sins? At first the imagery might suggest to our minds the second part of the double cure, or the cleansing of our souls from the condition of sinfulness, a purifying change wrought within our very hearts. But this is not the main idea. It rather refers to the first part of the double cure, namely, the washing away of the *guilt* we have incurred because of our sins. It is equivalent to the forgiveness of sins as discussed in the study of Acts 2:38; its background is the washing or ritual cleansing ceremonies of the Old Testament. It is accomplished only by the application of the blood of Christ to our lives: "The blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from all sin" (1 John 1:7). When Ananias says, "Get your sins washed away," he is simply saying, "Get your sins forgiven."

The significant point for our purposes is the close connection between baptism and the washing away of sins. The most natural understanding is that the former is somehow the occasion or the condition of the latter. This is true for several reasons. First, this is consistent with the situation as described in the last section. Saul is under deep conviction of his sins, and has been fasting and praying for three days while awaiting instruction as to what he should do about them. Thus when Ananias tells him to "be baptized and wash away your sins," the guilt-ridden Saul would most naturally take baptism to be what he should do to wash his sins away.

Second, this view is consistent with other New Testament teaching about baptism and salvation in general and with its teaching about baptism and forgiveness in particular. It is in effect the exact equivalent of Peter's instruction in Acts 2:38. "Be baptized for the forgiveness of your sins" means the very same thing as "be baptized and wash away your sins."

Third, the very fact that Saul is instructed with an *imperative* to *wash away his sins* shows that it must be the result of baptism. As noted above,

the only true means of washing sins away is the blood of Jesus Christ. All would surely agree that only the Lord Himself can apply His blood to our souls. That is to say, the washing away of sins is an act of God and not the act of any human being. It is a spiritual act accomplished by divine power alone. It is impossible for Saul or anyone else to literally wash away his own sins. What sense does it make, then, for Saul to be told to "wash away your sins"? How could he possibly do such a thing? Here is the answer: there was *no way* that he could do this himself *unless* the washing away of sins was dependent on something he *could* do, namely submit to Christian baptism. This is the implication of the fact that "wash away" is in the imperative form.

Finally, the *number* and *order* of the imperatives show that baptism is a condition for washing away sins. If the outward act were *only* a symbolic picture of a prior inner cleansing, we would not expect him to put both in the imperative form. In such a case it would be appropriate for the "washing away" to be an aorist participle (like "rising up" and "calling upon"). Strictly speaking the action of an aorist participle *precedes* the action of the main verb. Ananias thus would have said, "Be baptized [imperative], having washed away your sins [aorist participle]." But he does not say this; he uses two imperatives instead.

But does the use of two imperatives in itself mean that baptism is a condition for washing away sins? Not necessarily. Both could be imperative, with baptism still being just a symbolic picture of the prior inner cleansing. But in this case, the imperatives would have to be reversed: "wash away your sins and be baptized." In fact, *only* if they were in this order could we say that baptism just pictures the prior cleansing. But they are not; "be baptized" - an imperative - precedes "wash away your sins" - an imperative. This order of the two imperatives, along with the other reasons cited above, requires us to conclude that baptism is a preceding condition for the washing away or forgiveness of sins.

The close connection between baptism and washing in Acts 22:16 helps us to understand the

## TWENTY-SIX LESSONS ON ACTS (VOL II)

baptismal content of other New Testament references to washing. For example, Paul says to the converted sinners at Corinth, “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” (I Cor. 6:11). All three verbs are in the aorist tense, referring to a single action in the past. The verb for “washed” is the same as that used in Acts 22:16, where the action is connected with baptism. This suggests that I Cor. 6:11 is also referring to baptism.

The two modifying phrases in this verse in Corinthians also point to baptism. “In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ” recalls Matthew 28:19; Acts 2:38; 8:16; 10:48; 19:5; and I Cor. 1:13. “In [ev] the Spirit” is the same expression as Matthew 3:11 (and parallels); Acts 1:5; and Acts 11:16. These are all baptismal references. The fact that the two phrases are used to modify all three verbs shows that the latter are all referring to a single act, namely baptism. “You were washed,” at which time “you were sanctified” and “you were justified.”

Another passage that speaks of washing is Hebrews 10:22, which says that we have had “our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.” That this speaks of baptism is clear not only from the reference to washing but also from its description as an application of water to our bodies. The statement as a whole refers to the inner and outer aspects of the “one baptism” (Eph. 4:5), namely, the cleansing of the heart from sin and the immersion of the body in water.

Two other inferences to washing that most probably are speaking of baptism are Ephesians 5:26 and Titus 3:5. These will be discussed in separate chapters.

### Calling on His Name

Ananias instructs Saul to arise and be baptized, and wash away his sins, “calling on His name.” The verb here is an aorist participle. This means that this action, while intimately connected with that of the main verb, is nevertheless meant to

precede it. Saul is thus told to “call on His name” as a preface to his baptism and the washing away of his sins.

What is the significance of this action? To understand this we must look to the origin of this expression in Joel and its use elsewhere in the New Testament, especially in Acts. The Old Testament source is Joel 2:32, “And it will come about that whoever calls on the name of the LORD will be delivered.” Since this appears in connection with Joel’s prophecy concerning the coming of the Spirit, we are not surprised that Peter quotes it in Acts 2:21, “And it shall be, that every one who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.” Paul quotes it in Romans 10:13, “Whoever will call upon the name of the Lord will be saved.” Christians are described as those who call upon His name (Acts 9:14,21; I Cor. 1:2).

Specifically, *whose* name is being called upon? In Joel it is the name of Yahweh (Jehovah), whom we know in the New Covenant revelation to include Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. In the New Testament passages the name “Lord” specifically refers to Jesus Christ. This is especially clear in Acts 9:13-17; Romans 10:9-13; and I Cor. 1:2. Thus, although no specific name is mentioned in Acts 22:16, it undoubtedly refers to calling on the name of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Now the crucial question is this: *for what purpose* or *what end* was Saul told to call upon the name of the Lord? Here again the answer is not in doubt. He must call upon the name of the Lord *for salvation*. This is Joel’s point: “Whoever calls on the name of the LORD *will be delivered*.” This is how Peter and Paul quote it: whoever calls on the name of the Lord *will be saved*. Paul equates it with the confession of the mouth that Jesus is Lord, a confession that results in salvation (Rom. 10:9,10; cf. 10:13).

Thus Ananias’ instruction does no less than confirm the unanimous Biblical testimony to the saving significance of baptism. God has promised to save us - to give us forgiveness of sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit - in Christian baptism. As a

## TWENTY-SIX LESSONS ON ACTS (VOL II)

person prepares to be baptized, he should call upon God to keep this promise; he should call upon the Lord Jesus Christ to apply His cleansing blood to his sinful heart and to send the gift of the Holy Spirit. It is a prayer of faith in the faithfulness of God.

As it applied to Saul, it meant two things. First, the fact that he was supposed to call upon the Lord's name in connection with his baptism meant that he had not yet received salvation. The whole point of his calling upon the Lord's name was *to be saved*. Thus this is one final confirmation of the conclusion already reached above, that Saul was not saved on the Damascus Road nor during his three days of fasting and prayer. He was not saved until he called upon the Lord's name in baptism. Second, this "calling upon His name" was an indication of Saul's *faith* in Jesus. We may note that there is no specific mention of faith in Ananias' instruction, but it is implied nevertheless. According to Romans 10:14, one cannot call upon Him unless he has believed in Him. Thus Saul is here being told to do what every good Jew has to do now that the Messiah has come, namely, transform his limited Old Covenant faith into the fully-rounded faith that accepts Jesus as Yahweh Himself and as the source of salvation.

### Summary

In this chapter we have explored the teaching of Acts 22:16 on the meaning of baptism. First we recounted the basic facts of Saul's encounters with Jesus and Ananias, and concluded that he was not yet saved when Ananias instructed him concerning baptism. We noted that Ananias gave him the gospel offer of the double cure: forgiveness (the "washing away" of the guilt of his sins) and the Holy Spirit.

Next, we concentrated on the relation between baptism and the washing away of sins. We concluded that the only reasonable understanding of Ananias' words is that the washing takes place in the act of baptism. This is consistent with the context and with other New Testament teaching.

Also, it is required by the fact that "wash away" is an imperative as such, and also by the number and order of the two imperatives in the verse.

Finally we saw that "calling on His name" refers to calling on the name of Jesus for His promised salvation. That this precedes baptism is shown by the participle construction and confirms the fact that baptism is for salvation. The sinner approaches baptism calling upon the Lord to save him as He has promised.

### ANDANTES

<sup>i</sup> In his brief retelling of this event to King Agrippa, Paul does not mention the role of Ananias. His summary of his commission in 26:16-18 is most likely what Jesus told him later through Ananias, rather than something spoken directly to him on the Damascus road.

<sup>ii</sup> Hans von Soden, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel, tr. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), I:145.

<sup>iii</sup> Acts 2:29,37; 3:17; 7:2,23; 13:15,26,38; 22:1,5; 23:1,5,6; 28:17,21. See also Luke 6:42 and Heb. 7:5.

## THIRTEEN LESSONS ON GALATIANS

### SPECIAL STUDY ON BAPTISM

Taken from Baptism: A Biblical Study

By Jack Cottrell

Material reprinted with permission from

College Press Publishing Co.,

Joplin, MO 64802

Dr. Cottrell is Professor of Theology at  
Cincinnati Bible Seminary, Cincinnati, Ohio

### Galatians 3:26-27

The meaning of baptism is found in Galatians 3:26-27, which reads, “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.” The key to understanding this passage is the concept of sonship as related to heirship. This is summarized in Galatians 4:7, “Therefore you are no longer a slave, but a son; and if a son, then an heir through God.”

The main point for our purposes will be this: the state of *sonship*, which qualifies us to inherit God’s blessings of salvation, is entered into in Christian baptism.<sup>i</sup>

#### I. SONS OF GOD

To understand the point of Galatians 3:26-27, we must understand the point of the whole context of Galatians 3:1-4:7. The central idea here is the significance of Abraham and our role as *sons* of Abraham. According to Paul, the gospel itself was preached to Abraham when God promised that through him “all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (3:8; Gen. 12:3). That is, through Abraham the full contents of the gospel offer would be made possible for all families and nations of the earth.

The contents of this gospel offer as specified in this passage are the same basic elements of the “double cure” mentioned in several other places and discussed in some detail in connection with Acts 2:38. The first element is forgiveness or justification. Just as Abraham was justified (counted righteous) by faith, God promised that He “would justify the Gentiles by faith” also (3:6, 8). The other element is the gift of the Holy Spirit, which was not enjoyed by Abraham himself but was a major part of the blessing that would come to others

through him. This is seen in Galatians 3:2-5 and 4:6, and especially in 3:14, where “the blessing of Abraham” is equated with “the promise of the Spirit.”

These gospel gifts are described as “the blessing of Abraham” (3:14), as “the promises . . . spoken to Abraham” (3:16), and especially as “the inheritance” which Abraham was given the privilege of leaving to his offspring or heirs (3:18).

Now, the main question that arises at this point is this: *who* are Abraham’s *heirs*? Who will inherit these gospel blessings: To put it another way, who is considered to be a *son* of Abraham?<sup>ii</sup> Sonship is the crucial idea. It is essential to have the status of a son, since in the Old Testament economy ordinarily only sons could inherit the family assets. As long as any sons were living, women and slaves did not receive an inheritance. Only if there were no sons could the daughters be heirs (Num. 27:1-11; 36:1-12), and only if there were no natural heirs at all could slaves be designated to inherit the property (Gen. 15:3). Thus to be an *heir* of Abraham, one must be a *son* of Abraham. Until we are sons, our status is no different from that of slaves (4:1-7); we have no claim to the inheritance.<sup>iii</sup>

At this stage in the argument, Paul makes the very unexpected point that Abraham has only one true son and heir, namely, Jesus Christ (3:16). He notes that the promises were given to Abraham and to his *seed*, singular. They are not given to many *seeds*, plural, but just to the one seed or offspring, which is Christ. Technically speaking He is the only seed “to whom the promise had been made” (3:19). Thus He is the only true son and heir of Abraham. The rest of us, whether Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male or female, all seem to be left out.

But here is where the gospel, the good news, gets even better. Though Christ is the only true son and heir, *anyone* who is “in Christ Jesus” (3:14) or united with Christ is counted as a part of Christ Himself and therefore as a son and therefore as an heir! This is the main point of Galatians 3:16-19. Of course, Jesus is still the only natural son; the rest of us are sons by adoption (4:5).

Since being united with Christ is our only hope of receiving the gospel blessings, our main concern should thus be *how to become one with Christ*. As we have already seen in our study of Romans 6:3-4, and as we shall see below, *baptism* marks our entry into this union.

#### II. CLOTHED WITH CHRIST

## THIRTEEN LESSONS ON GALATIANS

Before we turn to the discussion of baptism itself, we must explore the meaning of the expression “clothed with Christ” as it appears in Galatians 3:27, “For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.” The imagery itself is quite vivid. Christ is compared with a garment that we put on and begin to wear at our baptism. But what does the image represent?

This same image or figure of speech is found in other places in Scripture besides here. Its meaning varies according to the context. Sometimes it seems to be equivalent to the second part of the double cure, to the “putting on” of a new nature through regeneration and a working out of that new nature in sanctification. We put off the old sinful self (Rom. 6:6) and put on a new holy one (Eph. 4:22-24). In a sense this “new self” is none other than Christ Himself, as Paul exhorts us to “put on the Lord Jesus Christ” (Rom. 13:14). “It is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me,” says Paul of himself (Gal. 2:20). The point is that we “put on Christ” when we are living in obedience to God’s will by the power of Christ working in us and according to the example of His life.

Another possible meaning of “clothed with Christ” relates the image to the first part of the double cure, or justification. The key verse here is Isaiah 61:10, “I will rejoice greatly in the Lord, my soul will exult in my God; for He has clothed me with garments of salvation, He has wrapped me with a robe of righteousness.” In contrast to the “filthy garment” of our own futile “righteous deeds” (Isa. 64:6), God gives us the gift of His own righteousness to cover us like an all-encompassing robe. This is the “righteousness of God” which the New Testament makes central to the gospel (Rom. 1:16-17; 3:21; 10:3; II Cor. 5:21; Phil. 3:9). This “righteousness of God” is nothing less than the blood of Christ, by which He satisfied the righteous demands of God’s law by paying the penalty for our sins. Thus to be “clothed with Christ” in this sense means to be covered by His blood as if it were a “robe of righteousness” covering all our sin.

Both of these aspects of salvation are included in the total Biblical concept of “putting on Christ” or being “clothed with Christ.” It is doubtful, however, if either is specifically in view in Galatians 3:27. In view of the context, it is most likely that the main point Paul wants to get across with this image is simply *union with Christ* in and of itself. When we are clothed with Christ, we are identified with Him; we are in Him; in a sense we are a very part of Him. What is true of Christ in a sense

becomes true of us, too. The whole point of this is that because we are one with Christ, we share his sonship and heirship with regard to the blessing of Abraham. Indeed, this is the *only* way we can share in these things.

The two following verses (3:28-29) confirm this understanding. Verse 28 says that all who are clothed with Christ are “one in [*en*] Christ Jesus.” The word *in* is the Greek preposition *en*, which can also be translated “with” or “by.” In my opinion, it should be translated “with” in Galatians 3:28), so that it reads “you are all one *with* Christ Jesus.” This is the idea demanded by the context; the whole point is that we have been united with Christ, that we are one with Christ. Verse 29 affirms this union in still another way, by stating that “you *belong to* Christ.” Then follows the conclusion to which all of this has been leading. *If you belong to Christ* (are clothed with Him, are one with Him), “then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to promise” (3:29). It does not matter if you are a Gentile, or a woman, or a slave—none of whom could inherit property according to Old Testament law. If you are in Christ and one with Him, you will be *treated* like a *son* and therefore will receive the inheritance anyway. This is summed up in 4:7, “Therefore you are no longer a slave, but a son; and if a son, then an heir through God.”

### III. FAITH, BAPTISM, AND SONSHIP

Now we return to the question raised at the end of section I above. According to this passage, *how* does anyone become clothed with Christ or united with Christ, and thus share in His sonship and inheritance? The two conditions specified here are *faith* and *baptism*.

The primary requirement for sharing in the Abrahamic inheritance is faith. This is one of the main themes of the book of Galatians. Apparently the churches of Galatia were under pressure from the group known as the Judaizers to include circumcision in the list of requirements for becoming a Christian. Since circumcision was the primary symbol of the whole Mosaic law, this was equivalent to requiring obedience to law as a condition for receiving saving grace—an impossible contradiction. Throughout this third chapter especially, Paul stresses the contrast between the law-system of salvation, in which one is saved by his works, and the grace-system, in which one is saved by faith. “This is the only thing I want to find out from you,” he says to the Galatian Christians: “Did you receive the Spirit by the works of the Law, or by hearing with faith?” (3:2; see 3:5). The inheritance is not received by legal conditions (and thus by works), but by faith in God’s gracious promises (3:14, 18, 22).

## THIRTEEN LESSONS ON GALATIANS

This is the background for the crucial statement in Galatians 3:26, “For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus.” Here “sons of God” is no different from “sons of Abraham” (3:7); the inheritance is through Abraham but is ultimately from God. The important point is sonship itself, since only sons can be heirs. How do we become sons? Through *faith* in Christ Jesus.

This is highly appropriate, since Abraham’s own acceptance with God was through faith. “Even so Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness” (3:6; see Gen. 15:6). That is, through his faith he was *justified*. As “Abraham the believer” (3:9), he is a model for anyone who wants to be adopted into his family. Only when we imitate his faith can we be his sons: “Therefore, be sure that it is those who are of faith that are sons of Abraham” (3:7). Only when we imitate his faith can we be his heirs: “So then those who are of faith are blessed with Abraham, the believer” (3:9). Like Abraham, we, too, are “justified by faith” (3:24).

It is not just a question of what is *appropriate*, however, as if inclusion in Abraham’s family were merely an apt or suitable reward for someone who imitates his faith. We cannot forget Paul’s point that only *one* “seed” or son is a rightful heir to the Abrahamic promises (3:16), and that son in Christ. A faith like Abraham’s does not in and of itself bestow upon us the status of sonship, *but it does bring us into union with Christ*, and *this* is what includes us in Abraham’s family. “If you *belong to Christ*, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to promise” (3:29). We must not forget the Christological focus of our faith nor the Christological basis of the inheritance itself.

Verse 26 is very clear that faith is necessary for the status of sonship: we are “sons of God *through faith*.” But verse 27 is just as clear that *baptism* is the action that unites us with Christ, thus making our sonship possible: “for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.” The expression *baptized into Christ* is the same as that in Romans 6:3. In that discussion, the idea of “into Christ,” with the Greek preposition *eis*, refers to the event of entering into union with Christ. According to both Romans 6:3 and Galatians 3:27, the action that brings this about is baptism: we are *baptized* into Christ.

Galatians makes this connection between baptism and union with Christ even more emphatic when it says that baptism into Christ is equivalent to clothing yourselves with Christ. The concepts are almost equated. If you have done one, says Paul, then you have done the other. If you have been baptized into Christ,

then you have clothed yourselves with Christ. They are practically the same thing.

The concepts are *almost* equated, but not quite. More precisely, they are brought into such a close cause-and-effect relationship that we cannot separate them. Being clothed with Christ is the necessary result or effect of being baptized into Christ. This is the point of the sequence of the ideas in the verse.

The sequence of the concepts is worth noting for another reason. We may remember that the common Protestant understanding of baptism is that it is an act that *follows* the reception of salvation in order to symbolize the fact that one has *already* become one with Christ. But if this were true, the order of Galatians 3:27 would have to be just the opposite: “all of you who were clothed with Christ were then baptized into Christ.” But this is not what it says, because this is not the way it happens. It is the other way around, as the verse indicates.

How can we be sure this verse is speaking of *water* baptism, though? Could it be referring to Holy Spirit baptism, and not to water baptism at all? A discussion of I Corinthians 12:13 shows that this kind of distinction is not Biblically valid; there is only “one baptism” (Eph. 4:5). When the Galatians who originally received Paul’s letter read this statement about their own baptism, only one event would have entered their minds: their immersion in water for the forgiveness of sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Verse 26 speaks of *becoming sons* through faith; verse 27 speaks of *being united with Christ* through baptism. How are these concepts related? Are they the same thing, or is there just a logical (if not chronological) sequence in view? The answer is that they are not the same, but again are so closely related as cause and effect that they cannot be separated. That is, the sonship in verse 26 is the effect of the union with Christ in verse 27. Verse 26 affirms that we *are* sons of God through faith, and verse 27 explains *how* this came about. The key is the word *for* (Greek, *gar*) at the beginning of verse 27, which has the force of *because*. We are sons of God through faith, *because* we have been baptized into Christ. Union with Christ is the cause or prerequisite of sonship. And since union with Christ is entered into at baptism, then baptism also is a prerequisite of sonship.

There is a further significance of this for baptism: that which happens in baptism is the prerequisite of that which is said to happen through faith. We are sons of God through faith, but this sonship is not acquired *as soon as* we have faith. Rather, it is acquired when this faith leads us into the baptism which unites us

## THIRTEEN LESSONS ON GALATIANS

with Christ. This should serve as a caution against the common error of equating the Biblical expression “through faith” with the quite different concept “as soon as we have faith.” As an analogy, having ten dollars may be a necessary prerequisite for getting into a ball park and seeing the ball game, but this does not mean that one will see the ball game as soon as he has the ten dollars. He still has to go to the place where the ball game is being played. Likewise, having faith is a necessary prerequisite for sonship and thus heirship, but we still have to go to the place where this sonship is bestowed, which is baptism.

This does not detract at all from the significance of faith, but rather simply shows the strong bond and affinity between faith and baptism, a fact that is pointed out in a discussion of Mark 16:16.

This affinity between faith and baptism is underscored all the more by the fact that such a strong statement affirming the saving significance of baptism appears in a context where a law-system (salvation by works) is contrasted with the grace-system (salvation by faith in God’s promises). In the book of Galatians as a whole and in chapter 3 especially, Paul is attacking the idea that a sinner can be saved by works of law—especially the Law of Moses, and especially the work of circumcision.<sup>iv</sup> But in this very context where salvation by works is condemned, salvation (specifically union with Christ) by baptism is affirmed. This shows that baptism is not to be considered as a work, viz. [that is to say], as an act of obedience done simply because God as Lawgiver has commanded it. It is instead a vital part of the grace-system itself. That is, baptism is itself a work of divine grace in which the human side has the character of faith rather than works.

A final point concerning baptism is the relationship between it and circumcision. Baptism is commonly regarded as the New Testament successor to Old Testament circumcision; it is seen as having the same basic relation to the New Covenant as circumcision had to the Old Covenant. A moment’s reflection, however, on the way circumcision is treated here in Galatians as opposed to the way baptism is regarded, should dispel the notion that they are in any way equivalent. Circumcision is rejected not because it has been replaced by baptism<sup>v</sup> but because *no* mere work of human obedience can be a prerequisite for receiving grace. Circumcision is such a work and thus is excluded from the conditions for receiving grace, and is excluded in the harshest of terms. Baptism, on the other hand, is linked with faith and is spoken of quite naturally as that which brings us into saving union with Christ and thus into sonship and heirship themselves. A contrast more

pronounced than this would be difficult to imagine; the discontinuity between circumcision and baptism is thus quite complete.<sup>vi</sup>

### IV. SUMMARY

In this consideration of Galatians 3:26-27, we have discussed first of all the general context, which is dealing with the question of who may inherit the blessing of Abraham. Who are Abraham’s sons and heirs? Actually there is only one true son, Jesus Christ. But the good news is that anyone who is *in Christ* is also counted as a son and thus as an heir of the gospel promises.

We have also discussed the meaning of the term “clothed with Christ.” In some contexts, it refers to imitating Christ in holy living, namely sanctification. Another understanding is that it refers to our being covered with the blood of Christ as with a “robe of righteousness,” or justification. In Galatians 3:27, however, it seems to have the more general significance of union with Christ as such. To be clothed with Christ means to be one with Him and thus to be treated as He is treated, namely, as a son and heir.

Finally we have discussed how faith and baptism are related to sonship. They are specified here as the two basic conditions for becoming one with Christ and thus sons and heirs with Him. Baptism itself is the specific point where we become one with Christ or clothed with Him. Union with Christ logically follows baptism as its precondition—not vice versa, as many think. Likewise, becoming sons of God through faith (3:26) logically follows becoming one with Christ in baptism (3:27). That which happens *through faith* does not happen *until baptism*. Baptism is thus embraced together with faith in the grace-system, and is not a work of law like circumcision. The contrasting ways in which baptism and circumcision are treated in Galatians show that baptism cannot be the New Testament equivalent of circumcision.

## THIRTEEN LESSONS ON GALATIANS

---

<sup>i</sup> The numerous Scripture references where the book of the Bible is not named are from Galatians 3 and 4.

<sup>ii</sup> In this context there seems to be no difference between a “son of Abraham” (3:7) and a “son of God” (3:26).

<sup>iii</sup> This is the sole idea that underlies the three contrasts in the much-vexed passage, Galatians 3:28. According to Jewish law, only *free Jewish males* could inherit property. Greeks or Gentiles could not be heirs, nor could slaves or females (in most circumstances). The only thing at stake here is who can inherit the blessing of Abraham.

<sup>iv</sup> On the contrast between law and grace (and thus works and faith) in Galatians, see 2:16, 21; 3:2, 5; 5:4. On the futility of seeking salvation by law-keeping, see 3:10-13; 4:21ff. On the condemnation of circumcision as a requirement for salvation, see 2:2-5; 5:2-3, 11; 6:12-15.

<sup>v</sup> If circumcision *had* been replaced by baptism, this would have been the logical context to make that point clear. It would have been the strongest argument against the Judaizers, those who wanted to make circumcision a part of the gospel. But there is total silence in Galatians about such a connection. There *is* to such connection.

<sup>vi</sup> The relation between baptism and circumcision can be discussed further in connection with Colossians 2:12.

# STUDY OF THE GOSPEL OF JOHN

## SPECIAL STUDY ON BAPTISM

Taken from Baptism: A Biblical Study  
by Jack Cottrell  
Material reprinted with permission from College Press  
Publishing Co., Joplin, MO 64802

Dr. Jack Cottrell is Professor of Theology at Cincinnati Bible Seminary,  
Cincinnati, OH

### JOHN 3:3-5

The third New Testament passage reflecting on the meaning of baptism is John 3:3-5, which is part of Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus about the necessity of the new birth.

*Jesus answered and said unto him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God."  
Nicodemus said to Him, "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?" Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God."*

Though not everyone agrees that the word *water* in verse 5 refers to baptism, such a strong case can be made for it that this has been the predominant view throughout Christian history.

### Water and Baptism

If the water in John 3:5 does not refer to baptism, then to what *does* it refer? Two main alternatives have been suggested. First, some try to equate the water-birth of verse 5 with *physical* birth, the water itself referring to amniotic fluid. Though verse 4 does introduce the idea of physical birth into the context, the term for water is never used in this sense elsewhere in the New Testament. Verse 6 uses a different term to characterize physical birth, namely, "born of flesh". This is the common expression for ordinary physical birth when contrasted with spiritual or supernatural birth (John 1:13; Rom. 1:3; Gal. 4:23, 29). Another problem is that interpretation would have Christ saying, "Unless a person is born physically, he cannot be saved" - an awkward and puzzling affirmation to say the least.

The second main alternative is that *water* here is used figuratively as a symbol of the Holy Spirit. Such a figure may be found elsewhere in Scripture, as in Isaiah 44:3 and John 7:37-39. It is most likely also that Jesus' reference to "living water" in John 4:10-14 points to the Holy Spirit, though the latter is not specifically mentioned in the context. Thus such a usage in John 3:5 would not be conceptually alien to either the Bible as a whole or to John's gospel in particular. Counting against this view is the straightforward, prosaic nature of Jesus' statement in John 3:5, and the lack of any contextual indication of a figurative intention for the term *water*, whereas in both John 4:10-14 and John 7:37-39 he speaks of the Spirit as *living water*. Also, in these latter two passages, there is a contextual contrast between ordinary water and living water offered by Jesus. Such a contrast is absent in John 3:5. Finally, in John 3:5, the

## STUDY OF THE GOSPEL OF JOHN

expression “*born of water and the Spirit*” is so terse and tight that there is really no room for symbolic maneuvering (as there is in the poetic parallelism of Isaiah 44:3, for example). There are simply two nouns, both of which are objects of the one preposition “of” (*ek*) and are joined by the simple conjunction “and” (*kai*). Some have sought to identify water and Spirit here by translating *kai* as “even,” viz., “born of water, even the Spirit.” But the terseness of the expression plus the other considerations listed above would permit this interpretation only if there were no other reasonable and readily recognizable referent for the word *water*. But such is not the case. In both the historical and literary contexts the term *water* would immediately call to mind the common practice of baptism in water.

When Nicodemus heard Jesus’ words for the first time, he had several good reasons to apply them to baptism. We who read them today in the light of the other New Testament teaching have these and even more such reasons. First of all, the fame of the ministry of John the Baptist, highlighted by the novelty of his baptizing repentant Jews (rather than allowing them to baptize themselves, as in Essene and proselyte baptisms), cannot be overemphasized. All Israel knew that John baptized in water (see John 1:26-31). Nicodemus could not have helped but connect Jesus’ words with John’s work.

Second, Jesus’ own baptism by John, which must have been widely reported in that day and which is recorded for our reading, involved a conjunction of water baptism and the descent of the Spirit. See Matthew 3:16; Mark 1:10; Luke 3:21-22; John 1:32-33. Thus a reference to “water and Spirit” would not unnaturally cause us to think of baptism.

Third, John the Baptist’s teaching contained a strong emphasis on the distinction between water baptism and Spirit baptism. See Matthew 3:11; Luke 3:16; John 1:33. This is capsulized in Mark 1:8, “I baptized you with water; but He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.” Thus again, when “water and Spirit” are mentioned together in John 3:5, we would quite naturally think of baptism.

Fourth, another aspect of John’s teaching was the relation between his water baptism and the coming kingdom (Matt. 3:2). Thus in John 3:5, when Jesus relates water and the kingdom, it again brings baptism to mind.

The four items above would apply to anyone who knew of John the Baptist’s ministry, including Nicodemus. The fifth and last reason for understanding Jesus’ reference to water to mean baptism would apply only to those who know the teaching of the whole New Testament. I am referring to the interrelation of the concepts of baptism, birth, and resurrection. This passage refers to being “born of water.” Do any other New Testament passages specifically speak of baptism as a birth? No, but two important texts speak of it as a resurrection from spiritual death, namely, Romans 6:4,5 and Colossians 2:12. This is significant because in Scripture resurrection and birth are figuratively intertwined. Colossians 1:18 and Revelation 1:5 speak of Jesus as the “first-born from the dead” (see Romans 8:29). Acts 13:33 equates the raising up of Jesus with the day of his begetting. Thus “raised up in baptism” and “born of water” are equivalent concepts, and we are justified in taking John 3:5 as a reference to baptism.

Some who agree that this refers to baptism think that John’s baptism or even Jewish proselyte baptism must be in view, since these are the only kinds of baptism with which Nicodemus would have been familiar. We need not limit the specific reference to something in his experience, however. Jesus taught publicly about other future events and future blessings without explaining them as such. He spoke thus of his victorious resurrection: “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up” (John 2:19-22). His statement concerning the living water in John 7:37-39 referred to the Pentecostal outpouring of the Spirit. Some think His teaching about eating His flesh and drinking His blood (John 6:53ff) has to do with the Lord’s Supper. Thus Christian baptism cannot be excluded from John 3:5 simply because it had not been instituted yet. In fact, even the second part of the statement, “born of Spirit,” is itself a reference to the future Christian era, since regeneration via the indwelling Holy Spirit was a blessing offered only after Pentecost (John 7:37-39; Acts 2:38-39).

Some complain that those who are more inclined to a sacramentalist view of baptism are guilty of indiscriminately interpreting every Biblical reference to water as a reference to baptism.<sup>1</sup> In the early

## STUDY OF THE GOSPEL OF JOHN

Christian centuries such a complaint would have been justified in view of the excessively allegorical hermeneutic of the church fathers, but such is hardly the case today. Of the nearly 80 occurrences of the Greek word for water (*hudor*) in the New Testament, there are only three disputed passages where anything is at stake: John 3:5; Ephesians 5:26; and Hebrews 10:22. Of the other references, about 30 speak of ordinary water in non-baptismal situations. Eighteen other uses occur in the book of Revelation, where scenes of apocalyptic symbolism include a variety of fountains and streams. Five times John mentions “water and blood” in connection with Jesus’ ministry and death. There are 16 undisputed references to water baptism (both John’s and Christian),<sup>ii</sup> and seven undisputed figurative uses.<sup>iii</sup> In view of the fact that *water* indisputably means baptism in twenty percent of its occurrences, it is surely not unreasonable to interpret it this way in the three disputed passages if such is exegetically and theologically warranted. This is especially true in view of the fact that *water* is indisputably used in a figurative sense less than ten percent of the time, and this on only two occasions (John 4:10-15 [6 times] and John 7:38 [once]). In view of the comparative distribution of the term, there is more justification for seeing water baptism in the three disputed passages, including John 3:5, than for excluding it therefrom.

### Entering the Kingdom

This passage is without question dealing with salvation and with an essential condition thereof in the Christian age. The salvation is called “seeing (or entering) the kingdom of God”; the condition is “being born again.”

The basic meaning of the Biblical words for *kingdom* is kingship or reign or dominion; the “kingdom of God” is the reign of God. A secondary meaning is the realm over which the king reigns. A major theme of Old Testament prophecy is the coming of the kingdom. A typical statement is Daniel 2:44, “*And in the days of those kings the God of heaven will set up a kingdom which will never be destroyed.*” This was the major element in the eschatological hope of the Jews; they were “waiting for the kingdom of God” (Mark 15:43). John the Baptist’s message was so electrifying because he was declaring the imminence of this kingdom: “*Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand*” (Matt. 3:2). This was Jesus’ message, too (Matt. 4:17).

In one sense the coming of Jesus Himself *was* the coming of the kingdom, since God the King was present as Jesus Christ for the very purpose of establishing His Lordship over all of creation. The events which decisively accomplished this purpose were His death, resurrection, and ascension to glory. This was the establishment of His kingdom in the sense of His *reign*. The kingdom in the sense of the *realm* over which He reigns is made up of those who willingly acknowledge and surrender to Christ’s Lordship, viz., those who make the “good confession” that Jesus is Lord. In its identifiable concrete form the kingdom-realm is the church. The two are apparently equated in Matthew 16:18-19.

Thus from the perspective of Nicodemus, the kingdom was still a future reality; but like all good Jews he would be anxiously awaiting it and eager to enter it and be a part of it. Jesus is here telling him (and all of us) what would be necessary for entrance into the kingdom once it was established. (There is no significant difference between seeing the kingdom [verse 3] and *entering* it [verse 5].)

“Entering the kingdom” is a soteriological idea. To a Jew like Nicodemus, it would be the ultimate salvation experience. To non-Jewish people today or to anyone not steeped in the eschatological hope of the Old Testament, the expression does not immediately conjure up all the connotations of salvation; but that is its intent. To enter the kingdom is to surrender to the Lordship of Christ and thus to enter the state of grace and the realm of salvation.

### Born Again

## STUDY OF THE GOSPEL OF JOHN

Jesus' affirmation in John 3:3-5 is that being *born again* is an essential condition for entering the kingdom. In verse three He uses the word *anōthen*, which can mean either "from above" or "again". The dominant idea here seems to be the latter. At least Nicodemus seemed to have understood it this way. In his response (verse 4) he asks whether it is possible for an old man "a second time" to enter his mother's womb and be born. Though the word itself points to the idea of the rebirth, Jesus' reply (verse 5) indicates that the second birth is indeed a birth "from above" insofar as it is accomplished by the Spirit. The concept of being "born of God" is prevalent in John's writings.<sup>1v</sup> It is a supernatural act which only God, in the person of the Holy Spirit, can perform.

The concept of "born again" is identical to the concept of personal regeneration as it occurs in Titus 3:5. The Greek expressions are practically equivalent in meaning. This new birth or regeneration is the change that takes place in the sinner's inner nature during his conversion. It is one of the two main aspects of the "double cure" that God offers to the sin-sick. The first aspect is justification or forgiveness, which changes our objective relationship to God and His law by removing the guilt and penalty of our sins. This second aspect addresses the fact that sin has corrupted our hearts and souls with an inner depravity; it has infected our spirits with weakness and sickness and even spiritual death (Eph. 2:1,5). Regeneration is the point when this negative state of our souls is reversed. It is a new creation (II Cor. 5:17) when we are inwardly renewed (Titus 3:5). It is a resurrection from death to new life (Eph. 2:5,6), new life in the kingdom of God's beloved Son (Col. 1:13).

Such a momentous act as new birth or regeneration cannot be accomplished by our own efforts; it is an act of God Himself upon the soul. God's prophetic word through Ezekiel makes it very clear that He alone is the author of this work: "*Moreover, I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh*" (Ezek. 36:26). Specifically it is the work of the Holy Spirit, as the next words of Ezekiel's prophecy indicate: "*And I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes*" (Ezek. 36:27). In the words of John 3:5, we are "born of the Spirit." Paul calls it the "regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit" (Titus 3:5).

As was indicated above, this personal regeneration by the Spirit is a blessing that began on the day of Pentecost and is limited to those of the Christian era. Old Testament saints did not enjoy the reality of the indwelling Spirit and His regenerating power. Thus in John 3:3-5 the reference was totally future as far as Nicodemus was concerned. The kingdom that he longed to enter was yet to be established, and the condition for entering it was not yet available. Nor was Christian baptism, which according to these words of Jesus was to be intimately associated with being born again into the kingdom.

### **Baptism and Salvation**

Given the probability that "water" in John 3:5 refers to Christian baptism, and given the fact that "born again" and "kingdom of God" refer to salvation, we cannot avoid the conclusion that baptism is inseparable from the new birth and thus is a condition for salvation. This is in full agreement with the teaching of Mark 16:16.

The declaration in John 3:5 is unmistakably clear. Unless a person is "born of water and the Spirit", he cannot enter the kingdom, that is, he cannot be saved. This new birth that must precede entrance into the kingdom is *ex [ek] hudatos kai pneumatōs*, "from water and Spirit". The preposition *ek* basically means "from", either in the sense of separation ("away from") or source ("out of"). Only the latter fits the context here. In some sense, water and Spirit are the source of the new birth. Various shades of meaning as worded by Arndt and Gingrich include these: "the direction from which something comes," "origin," "effective cause," "the reason which is a presupposition for something," "the source from which something flows."<sup>v</sup>

## STUDY OF THE GOSPEL OF JOHN

These are very strong meanings, most of which reflect some type of cause-and-effect relationship. No one disputes such a meaning of *ek* when applied to *pneumatōs* (“of Spirit”). That the Holy Spirit is the origin or source or cause of the new birth is accepted as very natural. Thus it is quite a jolt for some to recognize that the same preposition and the same grammatical form used for “Spirit” are used also for “water”. It is a single prepositional phrase, with a single preposition which has two objects joined by the simple conjunction *kai* (“and”). Such a construction (especially the non-repetition of the preposition for the second object) brings the two objects into the closest possible relationship, marking them as two aspects of a single event. M.J. Harris makes the following comment concerning this construction and this verse:<sup>vi</sup>

*...Sometimes, therefore, the non-use of a second or third [preposition] in NT Greek may be theologically significant, indicating that the writer regarded the terms that he placed in one regimen as belonging naturally together or as a unit in concept or reality. ex hydatos kai pneumatōs (John 3:5) shows that for the writer (or speaker) “water” and “Spirit” together form a single means of that regeneration which is a prerequisite for entrance into the kingdom of God....No contrast is intended between an external element of “water” and an inward renewal achieved by the Spirit. Conceptually the two are one....*

The whole expression, says Beasley-Murray, defines the manner in which a person is “born again” (verse 3).<sup>vii</sup>

Does this mean that water and Spirit have an equal or identical causal relationship to the new birth? Few if any would be willing to go this far; metaphysical limitations simply preclude it. The only true source, cause, or origin of the new birth in any literal sense is the Holy Spirit. This is true not just because Spirit alone can impact upon spirit, but also because this birth is something that only God can accomplish. No physical act performed by a creature could do what only the Divine Spirit can do.

Nevertheless the language of John 3:5 makes the action of the Spirit *at least simultaneous* with the act of baptism. Thus the least that should be said is that baptism is the *occasion* for the new birth.<sup>viii</sup> If anyone is dissatisfied with this terminology, it should only be because it is too weak, not too strong. The language of John 3:5 actually warrants a much stronger way of speaking of the relationship between baptism and salvation.<sup>ix</sup>

This verse more than any other in Scripture shows the propriety of speaking of the *necessity* of baptism for salvation. As we saw in the discussion of Mark 16:16, however, this is only a *relative* necessity, not an absolute one. Just as the wording in Mark suggests that the only absolute necessity on man’s part is faith, so does the wording in John suggest that only the working of the Spirit is absolutely necessary to accomplish the new birth (as compared with water). This is the conclusion some draw from John 3:6,8, where “born of the Spirit” is used but not “born of water”. The action of the Spirit is the only thing absolutely indispensable for the new birth. Baptism is not inherently necessary and can be omitted where physically impossible to administer. The possibility of such an exception in prohibitive circumstances does not negate the rule laid down in John 3:5 for ordinary circumstances, however. Surely our doctrine of baptism must be based on clear statements concerning its nature and effects, and not on inferred exceptions.

### Summary

Concerning John 3:3-5 we have seen that the term *water* in verse 5 most probably is a reference to Christian baptism even though it was not instituted until later at Pentecost. We have seen also that this Pentecostal inception applies as well to the new birth and the establishment of the kingdom, which are concepts related to salvation in the Christian age. “Entering the kingdom” means receiving salvation, and “born again” is an essential condition for it. Finally we have seen that baptism itself is a (relative) necessity for salvation, since one cannot enter the kingdom without it.

# STUDY OF THE GOSPEL OF JOHN

## Andantes

- I A helpful discussion of this complaint is Donald Nash, "Water and Baptism" *Christian Standard* (April 30, 1978), 113:396-398.
- II Matt. 3:11,16; Mark 1:8,10; Luke 3:16; John 1:26, 31, 33; 3:23; Acts 1:5; 8:36,38,39; 10:47; 11:16.
- III John 4:10,11,14,15; 7:38
- IV John 1:13; I John 2:29; 3:9; 4:7; 5:1,4,18.
- V William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and other Early Christian Literature*, 4 ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1952), pp. 233-234.
- VI Murray J. Harris, "Appendix," p. 1178.
- VII Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament*, p. 228, fn. 2. This, he says, is a reason why the reference to water cannot mean physical birth.
- VIII Beasley-Murray (ibid., p. 231) agrees: "In John 3:5 it is the occasion when the Spirit gives to faith the regeneration that qualifies for the Kingdom."
- IX This is no doubt the reason why many will not admit that "water" means baptism in this verse. They have concluded on theological (rather than exegetical) grounds that baptism *cannot* have such a relationship to salvation.

### TELL EVERYONE YOU KNOW ABOUT THE FOUR-FOLD MINISTRY OF A.R.M.

Does your Chaplain know about these exciting programs provided by ARM? If you would like to see your Chaplain implement any of these programs, please provide the Chaplain with this information. Your Chaplain's office may contact A.R.M. Prison Outreach for more details.

#### Christian Greeting Cards

A.R.M. is the nation's largest supplier of Christian greeting cards to America's jails, prisons and reformatories. These commercial quality, full-color all-occasion DaySpring greeting cards are the same as those you would purchase at any Christian Book Store.

#### In-Prison Seminars

A.R.M. conducts "See Through The Scriptures" Bible seminars inside correctional facilities all across America. These seminars utilize 48 full-color overhead transparencies which take the students from Genesis through the Life of Christ in 10-12 hours.

#### The American Bible Academy

A.B.A. is "*the fastest growing Bible College behind bars*", providing beautiful bound and professionally typeset 120-page Bible Correspondence Courses to prisoners. A.B.A. also offers a spouse scholarship program which enables the legally recognized spouse of a prisoner to enroll in the same Bible course the inmate is studying at no charge.

#### The Baptistry Placement Program

A.R.M. supplies two types of baptistries for jail and prison chaplains. The Communion Table Baptistry is designed to be permanently installed in the prison chapel, whereas the Collapsible Portable Baptistry can be easily folded and transported for use in small jails or on Death Row.

**Prisoners can apply directly to A.R.M. for American Bible Academy courses. However, your Chaplain must personally order Christian greeting cards, schedule in-prison seminars, and authorize the ordering of baptistries.**

A.R.M. PRISON OUTREACH – PO BOX 1490 – JOPLIN, MO 64802  
Website: [www.arm.org](http://www.arm.org)