

## THOUGHTS ON BAPTISM

### Is Baptism Essential For Salvation?

Baptism is a vital topic. In the view of many Bible students, baptism is an essential part of our salvation. But many denominational doctrines are opposed to this, claiming that baptism is, at best, merely "an outward sign of an inward grace." In this view it is an outward testimony to the world that one has previously accepted Christ and has been saved before baptism. And there are some denominations that have done away with baptism altogether, evidently considering it of no value, such as the Salvation Army and the Christian Science Church.

Why is this such an important topic? If Christ has taught us through his revealed Word that baptism is essential to salvation, then one cannot hope to enter heaven without it. Thus one can see why this is so important. Let us consider what the Scriptures have to say on the matter. We will not go to human opinions, church creeds or Biblical commentaries, but only to the Word of God.

"Now there was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews; this man came to Him by night, and said to Him, "Rabbi, we know that You have come from God as a teacher; for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him." Jesus answered and said to 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". (John 3:1-5)

In this passage, Christ has plainly stated that one cannot enter into the kingdom of God without this new birth of "water" and "the Spirit." Since we are focusing on what the water is, we will leave consideration of the meaning of "the Spirit" for another time. There are basically three views as to what the water is:

- (1) that it is the water in the mother's womb at the time of birth;
- (2) that it refers to the Word (the Bible), and
- (3) that it is baptism.

As to referring to the water in a natural birth, we must observe that a man (an adult) must be born again of both "water" and "the Spirit." Thus the context does not agree that this is the water associated with natural birth. With respect to the second view, that water refers to the Bible, there is strong evidence that being born again of "the Spirit" has reference to the Holy Spirit's influence upon our new birth through the revealed Word (I Peter 1:22-23, etc.). So if "water" means "Word," then Christ is saying that we must be born again of word and word. And that wouldn't make much sense. Furthermore, if the Lord had meant to say "Word," why did he say "water?" The only conclusion that fits the context is that this water is baptism. To further support this, we refer to Romans 6:3-5, where baptism is clearly depicted as a birth to a new life.

"Or do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus have been baptized into His death? Therefore we have been buried with Him through baptism into death, in order that as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have be-

come united with Him in the likeness of His death, certainly we shall be also in the likeness of His resurrection."

Do you see that we are "raised from the dead" in baptism that we might "walk in newness of life?" That fits exactly the idea expressed in John 3 in Christ's conversation with Nicodemus-- "new birth" equals "new life."

Next we turn to Mark 16:16, as Christ is giving his final word to the disciples before he leaves to return to heaven. "He who has believed and has been baptized shall be saved; but he who has disbelieved shall be condemned." How could it be said in a plainer way? Consider an illustration. "He who has bought a ticket and boarded the train shall reach his destination; but he who has not bought a ticket shall be stuck at home." Was it necessary for the man to have bought the ticket in order to reach his destination? Obviously. Would we also have to say, "He who has not bought a ticket and not boarded the train shall be stuck at home?" We can easily see that "not boarded the train" would be unnecessary, since he would not board the train without the ticket. Now, what do we understand Christ to have said? Could it be read, "He who has believed and has not been baptized shall be saved?" Can we take such liberty with the words of our Lord? Consider something that Luke said concerning the Pharisees:

"But the Pharisees and the lawyers rejected God's purpose for themselves, not having been baptized by John" (Luke 7:30).

Now, if these religious leaders "rejected God's purpose" when they refused to be baptized by John the Baptist, then what is our situation if we "reject God's purpose" in refusing to honor the necessity of the command of Christ?

In looking at the book of Acts, we see thousands and thousands of people being baptized. This began at the beginning of the preaching of the gospel--the day of Pentecost. As Peter and the other apostles convinced their audience that the man whom they had crucified was indeed the Son of God, many hearers were convicted of sin, and asked what they might do to remove their guilt. Notice the narrative in Acts 2:36-38:

"Therefore let all the house of Israel know for certain that God has made Him both Lord and Christ-- this Jesus whom you crucified." Now when they heard this, they were pierced to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, "Brethren, what shall we do?" 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 you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit."

The result of this is seen in v. 41:

"So then, those who had received his word were baptized; and there were added that day about three thousand souls."

Note that those who "received his word" were baptized. Is it safe to assume that those who were not baptized did not "receive his word?" We observe that that very day some 3,000 were baptized. That is contrary to denominational practices today that may make one wait weeks, months, or even years before they are allowed to be baptized, or which would eliminate baptism altogether.

Some try to get around the force of Acts 2:38 by claiming that Peter was teaching that the real meaning is "Repent, and let each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ BECAUSE OF the forgiveness of your sins." In the English language, "for" can have different meanings. "I went shopping for a new coat," means "in order to obtain" a new coat. But "I went to jail for bank robbery," means that I went to jail because of a crime I committed. So, what does Acts 2:38 mean? There are three things to consider.

- (1) Can we find a similar passage where the meaning is without question;
- (2) does the original Greek of the New Testament give us any help;
- (3) does the context of v. 38 gives us any clues?

As to a similar passage, note Matthew 26:27, 28, where Christ is instituting the Lord's Supper:

"And when He had taken a cup and given thanks, He gave it to them, saying,  
"Drink from it, all of you; for this is My blood of the covenant, which is poured  
out for many for forgiveness of sins."

(1) The point to be made here is that we have the same wording in both passages. In Acts it says baptism is "for forgiveness of sins," while in Matthew it says that Christ's blood was poured out "for forgiveness of sins." Do we believe that Christ shed his blood because sins had already been forgiven? Obviously not! Therefore it does not seem likely that baptism was commanded because sins have already been forgiven.

(2) In the original Greek, the words are identical in both passages. Furthermore, the Greek word "eis," which is translated "for," may also be translated "in order to" or "unto," and carries the idea of "with a view towards." It is never translated "because of."

(3) In the verses's context, note that Peter commanded two things: "Repent, and let each of you be baptized..." There is a little word that connects the two commands-"and." The rules of grammar tell us that "and" is "a coordinate conjunction connecting words, phrases or clauses of equal rank." Thus repent and be baptized are equally important in the verse, and both would be qualified by the same modifiers. Now, if "be baptized" is to be done because sins were already forgiven, then the command to "repent" would also be because sins had already been forgiven. That conclusion is ludicrous. How can the word "for" have two different meanings in the same verse? Nowhere in the Scriptures are we taught that sins are forgiven before we even repent. Thus the quibbles made against the clear meaning of Acts 2:38 do not hold up in the light of investigation.

We should also note Mark 1:4: "John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins." We have the same phrase in both Greek and English as in Acts 2:38 and Matthew 26:28. Now, was John preaching the "baptism of repentance" BECAUSE their sins had ALREADY been forgiven? The language clearly forbids such a conclusion. How could he be telling them to repent because their sins had already been forgiven? No one would foolishly claim that to be the case. It is clearly understood that the people must repent in order to receive forgiveness. The same case must be made for baptism.

In Acts 8, we have the story of an Ethiopian government official who was taught the Word of God by Philip the evangelist. Philip was teaching this man as they rode in the eunuch's chariot.

"And Philip opened his mouth, and beginning from this Scripture he preached Jesus to him. And as they went along the road they came to some water; and the

eunuch said, 'Look! Water! What prevents me from being baptized?' And Philip said, 'If you believe with all your heart, you may.' And he answered and said, 'I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.' And he ordered the chariot to stop; and they both went down into the water, Philip as well as the eunuch; and he baptized him. And when they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away; and the eunuch saw him no more, but went on his way rejoicing" (Acts 8:35-39).

There are at least three points to make from this narrative.

(1) Philip "preached Jesus," which then led to the question about baptism. Obviously, "preaching Jesus" includes preaching baptism, or else the eunuch would not have known to ask about it.

(2) It was water that was the element in which the baptism took place. Some try to argue that the baptism commanded in the Great Commission is Holy Spirit baptism, or baptism in fire, or maybe even something else, but this passage, coupled with Acts 10:47, John 3:3-5; Acts 22:16; I Peter 3:20-21, etc., shows that water is the element under consideration.

(3) Again we note that baptism was an immersion in water. It would be somewhat foolish to go "down into the water" just to pour or sprinkle some water on the head.

Turning to Acts 22:16, we find the apostle Paul retelling the story of his conversion. The Lord encountered Saul (as he was then known) in a blinding light on the Damascus road. When Paul was convinced that Jesus was the Son of God, he was told to go into the city to a certain place where he would receive instructions. In time Ananias came to him with the word of the Lord:

"And now why do you delay? Arise, and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on His name."

When did the "washing away of sins" take place, before, or after, the baptism? Note that Paul had believed three days before, yet was still in his sins when Ananias came to him. And no, the Bible does not teach that the water of baptism literally takes away sin as it takes away dirt. But God teaches that he takes away our sins when we conform to his will at the point of baptism.

Perhaps an Old Testament story may serve to illustrate the part water has to play in our salvation. In II Kings 5, an army captain came to the prophet Elisha to be healed of his leprosy. He was told to go wash in the Jordan River seven times, and his health would be restored. At first he was furious at such a dumb instruction, but at the urging of a servant, he repented and went to the river. When he came up the seventh time, his skin was like that of a little child. Now, what cleansed him? It was not the water, but God, who bestowed his grace and mercy upon Naaman. But would he have been cleansed if he had not obeyed by going into the river? Similarly, the water of baptism does not cleanse us from sin. God does that through his grace and mercy. But God has connected water and cleansing from sin in the same way that he connected water with cleansing from leprosy. The truth is that our salvation is a combination of grace and an obedient faith.

Turning next to the letter to the church at Rome, we consider a passage to which we have already made reference, Romans 6:3-5:

"Or do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus have been baptized into His death? Therefore we have been buried with Him through

baptism into death, in order that as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have become united with Him in the likeness of His death, certainly we shall be also in the likeness of His resurrection."

There are two significant matters to consider here.

(1) Baptism is a burial in water, not a sprinkling of water. Although the "mode" of baptism is not the subject of this treatise, we note that the Bible itself claims that baptism is a "burial," and that it depicts the death, burial and resurrection of Christ. It is a fact that the definition of the Greek word "baptizo" literally means "to dip, plunge, submerge." And Bible students and commentators from all religious viewpoints agree that immersion in water was the practice of the early church.

(2) Note also that one is baptized into Christ. If one is saved before baptism, then one is saved before one is in Christ. But that is impossible, for salvation is found only in Christ, in a spiritual relationship with him.

"Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ" (Ephesians. 1:3).

Can we find any passage teaching that one can be saved apart from Christ? There is no such passage. Therefore, with confidence we can say that one cannot be saved without being baptized into Christ in the manner that the Scriptures teach--by immersion, a burial in water.

In writing to the church at Corinth, Paul dealt with some serious problems. The first thing he tackled was the division that was evident, as some were more concerned about following men than simply following Christ.

"Now I exhort you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all agree, and there be no divisions among you, but you be made complete in the same mind and in the same judgment. For I have been informed concerning you, my brethren, by Chloe's people, that there are quarrels among you. Now I mean this, that each one of you is saying, "I am of Paul," and "I of Apollos," and "I of Cephas," and "I of Christ." Has Christ been divided? Paul was not crucified for you, was he? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?" (I Cor. 1:10-13).

As Paul was chiding them, he reminded them of two significant things, namely

- (1) that Paul had not been crucified for them, and
- (2) that they had not been baptized in the name of, or by the authority of, Paul.

What lessons can we draw from this? Among other things, we can note that if one could rightly claim to be "of Christ," there were two things necessary:

- (1) Christ had to have been crucified for them, and
- (2) they had to have been baptized by the authority of Christ.

Therefore, if one has not been baptized according to the teaching of Christ, he cannot in truth belong to Christ--cannot be "of Christ."

As we continue our search through the Holy Scriptures to find teaching about baptism, we come across Galatians 3:26, 27:

"For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ."

People become "sons of God" through "the faith," i.e., the system or body of faith that God gave (the word "the" is in the original Greek). The location of our sonship is "in Christ Jesus," which is obvious, for salvation is in Christ. But when does this sonship occur? When do we become "clothed with Christ?" It is at the point of baptism! If someone disputes this, they can argue with the inspired apostle Paul. That's what he said about it, under direction of the Holy Spirit. And also note that the expression, "baptized into Christ" is the same that was used in Romans 6:3-5.

There is an interesting passage in Colossians that gives a perspective on baptism that differs from what many denominations say about baptism. Many claim that baptism is a work, and since we are not saved by works, therefore baptism has nothing to do with our salvation. But note the wording in Col. 2:12:

"...having been buried with Him in baptism, in which you were also raised up with Him through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead."

There are two points to consider here:

- (1) We again note that baptism is called a burial, not a sprinkling, and
- (2) baptism is called a "working of God," rather than a working of man.

Baptism has to do with our "faith in the working of God," who raised us up with Christ in the act of baptism. Question: Can one be saved without this "working of God?" Note also that Christ called faith itself a "work" that is approved of God (John 6:29). If it is true that we are saved without any kind of work or obedience, then we are saved without faith. Who can believe that? You see, faith or believing is something that man does, in considering the evidence and drawing a conclusion.

Titus 3:4-7 has some interesting points to consider.

"But when the kindness of God our Savior and His love for mankind appeared, He saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit, whom He poured out upon us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, that being justified by His grace we might be made heirs according to the hope of eternal life."

Please consider what is affirmed in this passage.

- (1) We are not saved by works of human merit, "but"
- (2) we are saved "by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit. Therefore
- (3) the "washing of regeneration" is not a work of human merit.
- (4) Being saved "through the washing of regeneration" is equated with "being justified by His grace." What is the "washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit?" Do you see a parallel with the statement of Christ in John 3:3-5, where Nicodemus was told to be "born again of

water and the Spirit?"

"washing of regeneration"    "renewing by the Holy Spirit" (Titus 3:5)  
"born again of water"        "and the Spirit" (John 3:5)

Also note in the passage in Titus that the "washing of regeneration" stands in contrast to the "deeds...done in righteousness" or the works of human merit. So the Bible itself denies that baptism is a work that we do in order to earn salvation, in spite of what some men would claim.

A clear passage dealing with baptism is I Peter 3:20, 21, as Peter writes about the preaching that was done to the people in Noah's day

"who once were disobedient, when the patience of God kept waiting in the days of Noah, during the construction of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were brought safely through the water. And corresponding to that, baptism now saves you--not the removal of dirt from the flesh, but an appeal to God for a good conscience--through the resurrection of Jesus Christ."

Now, many "preachers" say that "baptism does not save us," but the Word of God clearly states, "baptism now saves you." Which are we to believe--God's Word, or the word of men? Peter is making the point that Noah's salvation by water is a figure of our salvation by water. As Noah was separated from the destruction that was in the world as the water floated the ark, so we are separated from the destruction of sin by the water of baptism. And note, as has been shown before, that it is "not the removal of dirt from the flesh" to which the passage refers, but rather it is "an appeal to God for a good conscience." My appeal to God is after baptism, not before. In a sense God says, "If you do this, I will take away your sins." I then comply with God's will, and then I appeal to God as I present myself as one who has obeyed his will. Is that difficult to understand? According to this passage, does baptism save us, or not save us?

Lest we leave the reader with the impression that baptism alone saves (as some denominations teach), let us consider a fuller view of God's plan of salvation for us.

### **God's Plan of Salvation**

Perhaps there is no more important subject than how we are saved. The Philippian jailer asked Paul and Silas, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" (Acts 16:30) There is general agreement on some points. We certainly agree on the part the grace of God plays in our salvation, "for the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all men" (Titus 2:11). Some would stop there, claiming that we are saved by grace alone, but the Scripture goes further, "instructing us to deny ungodliness and worldly desires and to live sensibly, righteously and godly in this present world" (v. 12). Quite simply, there are "instructions" that God has given us, even as they were given to the jailer at Philippi. If it were not so, then all would be saved, since God's grace has "appeared to all men." But we know that not all will be saved. Yes, salvation is a gift, the free gift of God, but a gift must be received as well as given. More than once has a gift been offered, but not accepted.

(a) Faith is a fundamental ingredient in our being restored to God. John 3:16 is probably one of the most well-known verses in the Bible:

"For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes on Him should not perish, but have eternal life."

(See also Heb. 11:6, etc). But are we saved by "faith only?" The denominations of men teach this.

"Wherefore, that we are justified by faith only, is a most whole- some doctrine and very full of comfort" (METHODIST DISCIPLINE and Episcopal BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER).

Similar statements are made in Baptist and Presbyterian doctrinal statements. In fact, nearly every Protestant denomination has a similar statement in its creed book. I had a conversation with a young Baptist preacher one time, and I asked if he believed in salvation by "faith only." He replied in the affirmative. I then asked him to read James 2:24:

"You see that a man is justified by works, and not by faith alone."

He didn't know what to say except, "That's not the kind of God I serve," and closed his Bible (as he closed his mind). He then admitted that he had never read James, and did not know that verse was in the Bible, but that made no difference. The whole point of James 2 is that we are saved by an obedient faith, not just an intellectual faith. Many Scriptures bear this out, such as Heb. 11:30:

"By faith the walls of Jericho fell down, after they had been encircled for seven days."

When did the walls fall? It was after their faith moved them to obey. Was God's grace present? Assuredly so, for God had told Israel, "See, I have given Jericho into your hand" (Joshua 6:2). They did not fight for the city, and thus did not earn it, but it was given to them by the grace of God. But suppose they had said, "We have faith that God will give us the city, so we will sit and wait for the walls to fall flat." Would they have been surprised when the walls didn't go "boom?"

If "faith only" saves, then we have a problem with certain of the Jewish rulers:

"Nevertheless many even of the rulers believed in Him, but because of the Pharisees they were not confessing Him, lest they should be put out of the synagogue" (John 12:42).

Were they saved? Not if they refused to confess Christ. Furthermore, James, in rebuking the idea of faith without obedience chided his readers with this statement:

"You believe that God is one. You do well; the demons also believe, and shudder" (James 2:19).

Dear reader, the doctrine of "faith only" is simply not founded upon the Word of God.

(b) Repentance is quite necessary. Christ gave the call to repentance when he told the people that "unless you repent, you will all likewise perish" (Luke 13:3). Repentance is a change in heart and life, as we turn from serving Satan and sin to serving God and righteousness. Many profess to believe in Christ, but do not bring about change in their lives.

(c) Christ teaches us that we should not be ashamed of him, but that we should confess him before others, and he will then confess us before his Father (Matt. 10:32).

(d) So far, there is pretty general agreement on the terms mentioned for salvation. But when it comes to baptism there is great controversy. The Bible is very clear on this matter, as we have

seen, but for some reason denominational doctrines take opposite views. Please carefully consider again some of the verses we have cited:

**Mark 16:16:** "He who has believed and has been baptized shall be saved; but he who has disbelieved shall be condemned."

**John 3:3-5:** "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 can not 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."

**Acts 2:38:** "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 you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.'"

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

**Gal. 3:27:** "For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ."

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

Other Scriptures could be cited, but these illustrate the point very well. In Mark, Jesus coupled baptism with faith before salvation:

Belief + Baptism = Salvation.

Most denominational doctrines turn this around, and make it

Belief = Salvation + Baptism.

In view of this, why is it that so many preachers and denominations stumble at the plain teaching of the Bible on the subject of baptism? Is it because of Satan's influence--that great deceiver? The apostle Paul wrote of those who appear to be teachers of truth, but in truth "such men are false apostles, deceitful workers, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ. And no wonder, for even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. Therefore it is not surprising if his servants also disguise themselves as servants of righteousness; whose end shall be according to their deeds" (II Corinthians 11:13-15). I am not saying that all such men are deliberate and knowing in their teaching of error (though some are), but they themselves may be deceived. But the results are the same--they teach error, and their worship is in vain. Christ rebuked the religious leaders of his day for teaching things that were not a part of God's revelation:

"But in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the precepts of men" (Matt. 15:9).

With respect to the statement in I Peter 3:21, there is a most interesting quote from J. W. Willmarth in the Baptist Quarterly of July, 1877. Mr. Willmarth wrote a tract those long years ago entitled "Baptism and Remission." This courageous man went completely against the Baptist position on baptism, by clearly stating what the Bible teaches. In discussing the passage mentioned, he said:

In this remarkable passage it is positively asserted that, in some sense, baptism saves us; and in that same sense it must, of course, be related to the Remission of our sins. Certainly, it would seem that baptism must be very important, intimately connected with Remission and Salvation. How can an unprejudiced mind survey this testimony and then relegate Baptism to the realm of Mere Emblem, Symbol and Profession? However they are to be explained, the facts from the record are these. Our Lord before his departure commanded that those who would be his disciples should be baptized; and united Baptism with Faith in the promise of Salvation. The apostles and their co-laborers directed inquirers to repent, believe and be immersed in order to Remission. Baptism is often alluded to in the Epistles in harmony with this view of it, and also as related to other important things in Christian life and hope.

### **What about the Thief on the Cross?**

Some want to be saved like the thief on the cross, who died with Christ. When he asked Christ to remember him, Christ promised "today you shall be with Me in Paradise" (Luke 23:43). "There," they say, "the thief wasn't baptized, and he was saved." Abraham wasn't baptized, either, nor were Moses and Elijah. Why? There was no such command. The command for baptism was given after the death and resurrection of Christ, as we see in Mark 16:16. The thief couldn't have obeyed the command of Christ, even if he had wanted to, for the command had not been given. The thief had been dead and buried for many days. Furthermore, we note that the will, covenant or testament of a man does not come into force until there has been death. This is a point of law that the Bible also recognizes.

"For where a covenant is, there must of necessity be the death of the one who made it. For a covenant is valid only when men are dead, for it is never in force while the one who made it lives" (Hebrews 9:16-17).

When did Christ make the promise to the thief? Before he died. When did Christ's "last will and testament" come into effect? After he died. And there is another point to consider. If we can be saved like the thief, then we don't have to believe in the resurrection of Christ. Romans 10:9 reads that if you "believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you shall be saved." Did the thief believe this? Obviously not, for Christ had not even died, thus certainly had not been raised from the dead. Remember the old adage, "That which proves too much, proves nothing."

### **Baptism an Outward Sign?**

Then some counter with the statement that "Baptism is only an outward sign of an inward grace." I cannot count the number of times I have heard that. The statement is made to negate the importance of baptism. For the sake of argument, I will concede that baptism is "an outward sign." Does that make it any less vital? Consider circumcision of the male child in Israel. Circumcision was the "sign" of the covenant God had with Israel. Could one be a true Israelite without the "sign?" Just read the passage in the Old Testament that told how they were to circumcise even the foreigners if they wanted to be a part of Israel.

"And you shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskin; and it shall be the sign of the covenant between Me and you. And every male among you who is eight days old shall be circumcised throughout your generations, a servant who is born in the house or who is bought with money from any foreigner, who is not of

your descendants. A servant who is born in your house or who is bought with your money shall surely be circumcised; thus shall My covenant be in your flesh for an everlasting covenant. But an uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin, that person shall be cut off from his people; he has broken My covenant" (Gen. 17:11-14).

Note that circumcision was a "sign." Obviously it was an outward sign. And note also that one who did not have the sign was to be "cut off from his people."

Another such example is when God sent the plague of death upon the firstborn in Egypt. What did God tell the Jews to do if they were to escape this? They were to take the blood of a lamb and sprinkle it on the doorpost of the house.

"And the blood shall be a sign for you on the houses where you live; and when I see the blood I will pass over you, and no plague will befall you to destroy you when I strike the land of Egypt" (Exodus 12:13).

Questions: Could one be an Israelite without the "sign" of circumcision? Could one be spared from the plague without the "sign" of blood? Can one be saved without the "sign" of baptism? The Word of God speaks plainly!

### **Wasn't Paul sent not to baptize?**

The argument is made by some that Paul's statement in I Corinthians 1 shows that baptism is not important.

"I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius, that no man should say you were baptized in my name. Now I did baptize also the household of Stephanas; beyond that, I do not know whether I baptized any other. For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel, not in cleverness of speech, that the cross of Christ should not be made void" (14-17).

There are two or three points to consider.

(1) Paul was rebuking the Corinthian Christians because of a party spirit that had arisen. We might say they had "preacheritis." In view of this, Paul was glad that he had not acted in such a way to generate such feelings. Thus he was thankful he had baptized only a few of them, lest a large number would think they were to be esteemed above others, since the apostle had baptized them.

(2) If Paul was literally not sent to baptize, then he did wrong by baptizing the household of Stephanas.

(3) The truth is, the expression "not...but" is a way of emphasizing one matter over another, but it does not negate what is prefaced with the "not." As an example of this, consider John 6:27: "Do not work for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to eternal life." Now, is this forbidding working for the food that sustains the body, or saying it is not important? Obviously not. In fact, Christ taught his disciples to pray to the Father, asking for daily bread (Matt. 6:11). Paul is saying that the emphasis is to be on preaching the gospel. When people receive the gospel, baptism will follow, as we have seen in thousands of cases in the book of Acts. If the emphasis

were on baptism, then we could go out and compel people to be baptized, or we could go and baptize babies even against their will, as some denominations do. But such would not be scriptural baptism. Genuine baptism is based on the faith of the one baptized, as is seen over and over again in such verses as Mark 16:16:

"He who has believed and has been baptized shall be saved; but he who has disbelieved shall be condemned."

It makes one wonder why people will take one verse that they may not understand clearly, and try to make it contradict many others verses that are clear and easy to understand. Would such be like the Pharisees who thought that John's preaching on baptism was not important, and "rejected God's purpose for themselves, not having been baptized by John" (Luke 7:30)? Or perhaps the problem is as Paul described those who are deceived and perish "because they did not receive the love of the truth so as to be saved" (II Thessalonians 2:10).

### **Isn't Sincerity Enough?**

You say you are religious? You go to church? You believe? Is that all it takes? Please consider the words of Christ:

"Not everyone who says to Me, Lord, Lord, will enter the kingdom of heaven; but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven. Many will say to Me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?' And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you. Depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness.'" (Matt. 7:21-23).

What does it mean to practice "lawlessness?" It means practicing something for which there is no law, no authority. Do you see the supreme importance of "whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus..." (Col. 3:16)? If you remember, Cain was religious. He offered sacrifices, but God refused to accept them. The reason his sacrifices were rejected? Because they were not by faith (Heb. 11:4). Abel's offerings were by faith, and faith comes by hearing God's word (Rom. 10:17). So we must conclude that God will only accept worship and service that is according to his Word. What seems good to us may not seem good to God. What pleases us may not please God. (Isa. 55:8-9) The apostle Paul asks why his Colossian readers are submitting to the decrees of men "in accordance with the commandments and teachings of men? These are matters which have, to be sure, the appearance of wisdom in self-made religion and self-abasement and severe treatment of the body, but are of no value against fleshly indulgence" (Col. 2:20-23). Notice the reference to "self-made religion." Too often people want to worship God according to what pleases them, rather than according to what pleases God. People have told me, "I wouldn't go to a church that didn't have..."--whatever it was that "turned them on." It didn't matter whether God wanted it or not; they wanted it.

As to sincerity, consider the case of the apostle Paul. Before he became a Christian, he sincerely served God. On one occasion, as Paul was defending himself in court, he said he had lived his "life with a perfectly good conscience before God up to this day" (Acts 23:1). Obviously Paul was sincere, but in his sincerity, he blasphemed God, put Christians in jail, and participated in the death of Stephen. Later, as he stood before King Agrippa, he went over some of these things, and confessed that although he was most sincere he was also most mistaken:

"So then, I thought to myself that I had to do many things hostile to the name of Jesus of Nazareth" (Acts 26:9).

Do you see the point? Paul was sincere, but he was mistaken. His sincerity did not make him right with God. He had to change. Consider this: a person may be sincerely mistaken, but once truth is presented to such a person, one of two things will happen--either the person will cease to be mistaken, or the person will cease to be honest. Sincerely worshipping God in error will do no more good than taking cyanide while mistakenly thinking it is aspirin. The cyanide may get rid of the headache, but death is a pretty drastic "cure." My friend, in order to be pleasing to God, one must be sincerely right. Sincerely wrong is not acceptable. God has warned us that "There is a way which seems right to a man, but its end is the way of death" (Prov. 14:12).

We certainly understand this principle in other matters. In taking medicine, we want to be right. Would you be willing to take a prescription that you knew was in error, just because it tasted good? Or, if you were taking a prescription, and someone was able to show you from research data that the prescription was potentially fatal, would you continue to take it just because you had confidence in your doctor, or just because your parents may have taken it? I don't think so. Would sincerity on your part overcome the negative results of bad medicine? Obviously not. A person who takes poison, while mistaking it for good, will still die. It has happened! Now, if we show such concern for our physical life, should we not show the same concern about our eternal life? Do not think that merely being sincere will ensure your entrance into heaven.

## **Conclusion**

There is no more important matter to consider than our eternal salvation. It has been my purpose in this writing to present what God's Word teaches about a subject concerning which there is much false teaching. Consider the fact that the *Standard Manual for Baptist Churches* states that "Baptism is not essential to salvation" (Hiscox, p. 20), and the Jehovah's Witnesses' book, *The Truth that leads to Eternal Life*, states that baptism "is not a washing away of one's sins, because cleansing from sin comes only through faith in Jesus Christ" (p. 183). These are but two examples of dozens that could be presented that contradict the Bible's teaching on the purpose of baptism. And many denominational creed books, such as the *Methodist Discipline*, the *Presbyterian Westminster Confession of Faith*, the *Catholic Catechism*, and other such books teach that baptism can be administered by pouring or sprinkling water. Then we have other denominations, such as the Salvation Army and Christian Science, which eliminate baptism altogether.

Can you afford to base your hope of eternal life on the teachings of denominational doctrines? Can you afford to be a part of a church that does not teach the truth about salvation? Dear reader, eternal condemnation is not worth the risk. Do not allow the doctrines of men to cause you to be lost.

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