



## DOES BAPTISM SAVE US?



Where would anyone get the notion that water possessed the power to wash away sins? Then again, how would ink on paper be the living and active Word of God? Baptism is a rite mentioned many times in Scripture, but what is its purpose and what does it do? Who should receive baptism? How should baptism be administered? There are many questions that arise when we start thinking about this topic.

As Christians we know that to answer these questions we ought to appeal to the Scriptures as our final authority. It may be helpful to consult the practices of the Church down through history, but as helpful as this may be in finding answers, the Word of God is our final court of appeal.

Teaching Elder Tim Gallant provides this outline:

### **1. Baptism is not in competition with either faith or the Holy Spirit.**

- i. Justification occurs through the instrumentality of faith alone.
- ii. Baptism is not an instrument from man toward God, but of God toward man.
- iii. The efficacy of baptism does not inhere within itself. That efficacy is found rather in the Word of Christ's promise and in the power of the Holy Spirit.

### **2. Through baptism, we are united to Christ.**

- i. The Church is the body of Christ, "the fullness of Him who fills all in all" (Eph 1.22-23). Thus all of the riches of Christ are laid up in the Church.
- ii. Baptism is the instrument through which we are admitted into the Church (Acts 2.41, 47). Thus in baptism, the baptized one is clothed with Christ Himself (Gal 3.26-29).
- iii. Thus there is an objective, covenantal possession of Christ and all His benefits granted to all who receive baptism. The baptized person is a branch in the vine of Christ (Jn 15.1-17).
- iv. The transition of baptism is underscored in the words of the Great Commission itself (and thus clearly refers to water baptism): disciples are baptized into [Greek: eis] the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit (Mt 28.19), and thus now sustain a relationship of fellowship with the Triune God.

### **3. Baptismal union is not itself a guarantee of ultimate benefit.**

- i. We must distinguish carefully between being given Christ and all His benefits (which is entailed with membership in the Church), and receiving those benefits through genuine, persevering faith. A person may be given a gift, so

that it is really his, but never make use of that gift, or use it only temporarily and then reject it.

- ii. The Church is the congregation of Christ, yet her membership includes hypocrites (as Simon Magus, Acts 8.9-25) and persons having only temporary faith (Gal 5.4, 7).
- iii. The possession of Christ and all His benefits is turned to cursing for hypocrites and apostates (Heb 6.6). The power of baptism is not thus made null and void; to the contrary, it is precisely because of its power and blessing that covenant members are subject to special judgment, since they tempt God and provoke Him to jealousy (1 Cor 10.1-22). Even as unqualified men who transgressed the temple boundaries died for their error, so too covenant breakers and hypocrites who approach the throne under the new covenant will be judged severely for their sacrilege against the name, blessings, and covenant of God.

#### **4. The blessings of baptism are promised to believers' children.**

- i. Jesus identified believers' children as paradigms of the kingdom, when He said it was of such as these (Mt 19.13-14), and that adults must be converted and become like them in order to inherit the kingdom (Mt 18.3).
- ii. Therefore, covenant infants are believers, and should be nurtured and trained as God's children and disciples. Since the kingdom is of such as these, we deny that we ought to treat the infant children of believers as unbelievers, nor yet as a third category below that of believer. If of such is the kingdom, there is no greater believer than a covenant infant.
- iii. Thus, through baptism God places His seal of authentication of what He has promised to believers' children, that He receives them as full members of the kingdom of Christ.
- iv. This promise is not merely a deferred one (announcing what God will or may do at some point in the future), but refers to what God really and truly gives to covenant infants now, including remission of sins and participation in the Holy Spirit. If "of such is the kingdom of heaven" (Mt 19.13-14), and if the kingdom of heaven is "righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit" (Rom 14.17), it follows that the promised Holy Spirit is given to them, along with remission of sins, as Peter also declares in Acts 2.38-39.

#### **5. Baptism is a God-given means through which believers derive assurance.**

- i. Baptism is a key rite through which God declares to us the promise of the gospel in Christ.
- ii. In baptism, God really gives what He promises, in uniting us to Christ.
- iii. Therefore, we look to our baptisms for assurance, not instead of looking to Christ, but rather the opposite, as a God-ordained way of looking to Christ. Hence Paul assured the Gentiles that they were full members of the covenant

and recipients of its blessings, by reminding them of their baptism into Christ (Gal 3.26-29).

iv. Thus baptism carries a force that extends throughout life, as a means whereby God binds us to Himself as His possession.

#### **6. Baptism is a charge to live a holy life in Christ.**

i. In baptism, we are united to Christ in His death and resurrection (Rom 6.3-4).

ii. This death and resurrection contains and implies a death to sin and resurrection to a new and righteous life (Rom 6.-7).

iii. Therefore, baptism is a personal charge and committal to denying sin its reign in our bodies, and presenting ourselves to God for holy living (Rom 6.12-14).

Theologian Mark Horne writes:

#### **Can Baptism Do Anything?**

Lots of conservative Protestants want to answer “no” to this question.

The problem with this position is that conservative Protestants are bound to believe what the Bible teaches. And the Bible says inconvenient things, like “baptism now saves you” (1 Peter 3.21), or “all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3.27, 28), or “by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free” (1 Corinthians 12.13), or “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” (Romans 6.3, 4), or “in Christ you were also circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, in the removal of the body of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ; having been buried with Him in baptism, in which you were also raised up with Him through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead” (Colossians 3.11, 12).

Many people have decided that since they know the Bible could not possibly be saying such things about baptism, the baptism being referred to must be a dry “spiritual” baptism, not water baptism. But again there are some inconvenient statements in the Bible. For example, in the book of Acts in the first sermon of the Church, Peter gives this altar call: “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 2.38). Here, there is no question that normal water baptism is intended, because the text goes on to record that three thousand were baptized that day in response to

Peter's words. Yet Peter's statements about baptism are quite similar to those in the New Testament Epistles quoted above. On what basis do we claim that the Epistles must not be speaking of water baptism?

We can be sure, of course, that baptism does not absolutely guarantee that a person will inherit glory and escape condemnation at the resurrection. The Apostle Paul says amazing things about baptism in chapter 12 of his first letter to the Corinthians, but he warns them earlier that baptism does not mean they will escape the wrath of Jesus if they worship other gods (1 Corinthians 10.1-12). Likewise, Acts tells us of a man named Simeon who was baptized but then manifested an unbelieving heart (Acts 8.9-24). Likewise, when the Apostle Peter writes, "baptism now saves you" he compares baptism to the Noah and his family brought to safety through the flood on the Ark. Yet Ham apostatized and rebelled as both Peter and his readers must have known.

### *So what are we to think of baptism?*

If we try to solve this puzzle without considering anything besides the ritual itself, I don't think a solution is available. However, what if we consider the fact that Jesus established a new society, His Church? The Church is "the household of God" (1 Timothy 3.15; 1 Peter 4.17). She is the Bride of Christ (Ephesians 5.32) and the mother of all believers (Galatians 4.26). She is a corporate priesthood and royal dynasty (1 Peter 2.5, 9; Revelation 1.6). The Church has been given Jesus Christ (Ephesians 1.22, 23) with all his benefits and gifts of the Spirit (1 Cor 12.4ff). Here we have an angle that allows baptism to be something incredibly important and yet avoids superstition. Baptism is how one enters the Church. If the Church is the family of God (1 Timothy 3.15; 1 Peter 4.17) and the mother of all believers (Galatians 4.26), and if baptism is how one is admitted into the Church (1 Corinthians 12.13), then naturally, baptism would be the normal way one is adopted into God's family as one of his children (Galatians 3.26, 27).

While members of the Church are promised forgiveness, the Spirit, and many other benefits, the Bible does not say that all members of the Church will take advantage of these great things. Sadly, some do not persevere in what they have been given. One is justified by faith, after all—a persevering faith (Hebrews 10.35-39). But the fact that baptism and membership among God's people does not guarantee one will inherit eternal life, does not mean that we should disregard it as of no significance.

The point here is that it is easier to trust Christ to save us and bring us to the resurrection in glory if one is confident that one has been entrusted to Christ. The Church is Jesus' special trust and we receive in baptism God's promise that we belong to him and he to us. We must respond to this in faith by following Christ all our days. No one should presume on his baptism as a "free pass" into heaven, but neither should anyone despise his baptism in unbelief.