

# Baptism – What Does the Bible Teach?

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## Introduction

In Mark 16:16 Jesus made one of the most explicit statements in the New Testament concerning baptism: “He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that disbelieveth shall be condemned.”<sup>1</sup> In spite of the plainness of His statement regarding the purpose of the act and its place in the Divine plan for man’s salvation, men still largely ignore and/or obstinately oppose Jesus’ teaching. Jesus tied the act of baptism inseparably to salvation, which makes it imperative that we understand what the Bible teaches on this subject. Any interpretation of other passages relating to baptism and salvation that contradicts the plain statement here must necessarily be an erroneous interpretation.

I suppose uninspired men have written at least hundreds of books and millions of words about baptism. Many of these things we could read with profit, but those works will not be the source of this study of the subject. Rather, this will be a study the only Book with the only words on this subject that really matter—the Bible, in which God gives us all that is important for us to know about baptism.

Before we can begin our study we must narrow the scope of it, however. The Bible refers to several baptisms, and space limitations forbid the discussion of all of them, even if they all pertained to us. These baptisms include:

1. Baptism in water that John administered (Mark 1:4–5)
2. “Baptism” in suffering (10:38)
3. Baptism in water that Jesus administered through His apostles (John 3:22; 4:1–2)
4. “Baptism” in the Holy Spirit (Mat. 3:11)
5. “Baptism” in fire (v. 11)
6. Baptism as set forth in the great commission (28:19–20; Mark 16:15–16)
7. “Baptism” of Israel when they crossed the Red Sea (1 Cor. 10:2)

While we could study all of these baptisms with profit, which of them is especially relevant to us almost twenty centuries from the time that the New Testament discusses this subject?

The baptism with which we are concerned is the one of which we read in Acts 8:36, in which the Ethiopian said to Philip the Evangelist: “Behold, here is water; what doth hinder me to be baptized?” Further, it is the baptism that Peter commanded at Caesarea when he preached to the group Cornelius had gathered: “Can any man forbid the water, that these should not be

baptized...? And he commanded them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ..." (Acts 10:47–48). Further still, it is the baptism about which that same apostle wrote in 1 Peter 3:20–21, when he referred to the eight souls in the ark in Noah's day who were saved through water, and then said, "which also after a true likeness doth now save you, even baptism, not the putting away of the filth of the flesh, but the interrogation of a good conscience toward God, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ."

In about A.D. 62 Paul wrote his letter to the Ephesians, in which he said: "[There is] one Lord, one faith, baptism." He did not mean thereby that he had never heard of the several other baptisms mentioned in the Bible. Rather, he meant by this statement that, at the time that he was writing, only one of those baptisms was in effect. He meant that all of the other baptisms had either fulfilled their function and had passed into obsolescence, or that they were yet to come. Now, what was/is that baptism? In Matthew 28:19 the Lord told the apostles:

Go ye therefore, and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit: teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I commanded you: and [note carefully the next clause] lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world.

As long as the world stands—until Jesus comes again—this baptism is to be preached and administered. For that reason this baptism is relevant to everyone in our time, even this long after Jesus spoke these words. Furthermore, if the world stands another two thousand or ten thousand years, the baptism of which Jesus spoke in this statement will be just as relevant to those people then as it was when Jesus uttered those words.

Jesus is the author of the baptism we will study in this chapter. He therefore has the exclusive right to determine (and He has determined) every facet of it, including its element, its purpose, its action, its precedents, those who are eligible for it, and every other thing pertaining to it. Moreover, the only source of that information is the New Testament. I will develop our study by asking several questions about baptism and examining the Bible's answers to them.

### **Should Everyone Be Baptized?**

To begin with, let us ask this question: "Is baptism for everyone?" or "Should everyone be baptized?" There are two correct answers to this question. Of course, we have in mind those who are accountable and responsible persons before God, thus excluding infants or those who are otherwise mentally incompetent. Should all of those who are capable of hearing, understanding, and responding to the will of God be baptized? The first correct answer is "Yes," if we have in mind God's "ideal" will. The force of the Lord's commission to the apostles is that He wills that every human being hear His Gospel of salvation and respond in obedience

(consummated by baptism) in order to be saved. So, if God “had His way,” all men would be baptized.

The second correct answer to this question is “No, baptism is not for everyone; not everyone should be baptized.” God has made us creatures of free will, and He allows us to choose to accept or reject the Gospel. Most men have rejected the Lord’s generous and loving invitation. Such people should not be baptized.

***Baptism Is Not for Those Who Do Not Believe in Christ***

For example, it would do an unbeliever—whether an infant, a mentally handicapped person, or an infidel—no good whatsoever to be “baptized,” except to bathe his body. Jesus said: “Except ye believe that I am he ye shall die in sins” (John 8:24). Thus it is clear that those who do not believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, should not be baptized.

***Baptism Is Not for Those Who Will Not Confess Christ***

Even if one believed in Christ, if he were unwilling for any reason to confess his faith in Him in the presence of others, he should not be baptized. When the Ethiopian asked Philip if he might be baptized, Philip said: “If thou believest with all thy heart, thou mayest” (Acts 8:37a, KJV). Upon his confession (v. 37b), Philip baptized him, but Philip’s words imply that he would not have done so had the man not first been willing to confess his faith. One must not only believe in his heart, but he must vocalize said faith: “...with the mouth confession is made unto salvation” (Rom. 10:10). Clearly, baptism is not for those who will not orally confess their faith in Christ as God’s Son.

***Baptism Is Not for Those Who Will Not Repent***

However, a person might believe in Christ and willingly confess that faith, but if he is unwilling to repent of his sins, then he is not yet a Scriptural candidate for baptism. *Repentance* means that one changes his mind about his sinful behavior and/or religious errors, and then changes his life to conform to that change of mind. The murderer must decide it is wrong to murder and then murder no more, and so with the thief, the drunkard, the liar, the adulterer, and the practitioners of every other thing that is contrary to the will of God. Such is the requirement of repentance. Peter told the people on Pentecost (who had tacitly confessed their faith in Christ in their agonizing question: “What shall we do?” [Acts 2:37]): “Repent ye, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ unto the remission of your sins; and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (v. 38). Repentance precedes baptism in the New Testament plan of salvation, thus one who refuses to repent should not be baptized.

### ***Baptism Is Not for Those Baptized Against Their Will***

Furthermore, baptism is not for those who do not—of their own will—decide that they must thus respond to the will of Christ. Luke records that those on Pentecost whom Peter told to repent and be baptized, then “**gladly received his word** [and] were baptized” (v. 41, KJV, emph. DM). One must submit to baptism of his own volition and in order to obey the Lord, not merely because others (e.g., parents, spouse, sweetheart, or friends) have pressured him to do so. It is certainly not wrong for kindred and others to encourage one to be baptized, nor is it wrong to rejoice when such occurs. However, such factors must not be the basic motivation of one’s baptism.

Paul reminded the Roman saints: “But thanks be to God, that, whereas ye were servants of sin, ye became **obedient from the heart** to that form of teaching whereunto ye were delivered; and being made free from sin, ye became servants of righteousness” (Rom. 6:17–18, emph. DM). That “form of teaching” they had obeyed “from the heart” involved baptism (v. 4). Their motivation was correct: they responded in sincere obedience—“from the heart”—to the command of Christ. One who does not have this motive is not ready to be baptized.

### ***Baptism Is Not for Those Who Do Not Know or Who Reject Its Purpose***

Finally, if one does not know the Scriptural purpose of baptism, or if knowing it, he denies or rejects that purpose, he should not be baptized. Until twenty or so years ago when I would make this point in a Gospel sermon I would aim it mainly at those outside the body of Christ who deny the necessity of baptism. Now, I must direct it to some within.

In 1984 Rubel Shelly wrote that he had several years earlier baptized a man who was not convinced that one “just had to be baptized” to go to Heaven.<sup>2</sup> He did so on the basis of reasoning with the man that (1) Jesus commanded it and that (2) one who wants to follow Him will obey his commands. Shelly thus argued that as long as one is baptized in order “to obey Christ,” this is all that matters. As noted above, this is indeed a correct **motive** for one’s baptism. However, I deny that this is “all that matters” pertaining to baptism. Several important ingredients to Scriptural baptism are involved besides motive, such as the action, the element, and particularly, **the purpose** of the act.

In the same article Shelly argued that *for the remission of sins* is only “a Scriptural reason [i.e., purpose, DM] rather than **the** Scriptural reason/purpose for baptism. This statement unmistakably implies that more than one Scriptural purpose for baptism exists, which I deny. Baptism has one—and only one—Scriptural purpose. The New Testament states this purpose variously, but these all equal the same purpose. Baptism is declared to be a condition of

salvation, of entering the kingdom, of obtaining remission of sins, and of other results, all of which equal the same result.

Baptism is the line that the Lord has drawn between:

1. Those who are still in darkness and those who have been translated into the kingdom of the Christ (Col. 1:13)
2. Those who are still in the world in their sins that alienate them from God and those who have had their sins forgiven and have been added to His church (Acts 2:37–47)
3. Those who are still in the guilt of their sins and those who have had their sins washed away by the blood of Christ (Acts 22:16; Rev. 1:5)
4. Those who are impenitent sinners and those who are blessed with newness of life (Rom. 6:3–4)

The New Testament mentions several other such contrasts, but they all have the same meaning; they all add up to the one purpose of baptism.

Jimmy Allen, long-time Bible professor at Harding University, wrote a book in 1991, titled *Re-baptism? What One Must Know To Be Born Again*.<sup>3</sup> The thesis of the entire book is that the baptismal candidate need not know the Scriptural purpose of baptism for his baptism to be Scriptural. He argues that, if one is baptized from a sincere desire to obey God, he need understand no more about baptism—God will take care of the purpose of the act. Not surprisingly to many of us, Rubel Shelly put his endorsement of the book on its back cover.

This is an exceedingly dangerous doctrine, fraught with glaring error. **First**, by implication, if the doctrine these men are advocating about baptism is true, then there are millions of people (e.g., all of those in the Baptist Denomination) whom we should embrace as brethren (dare we suggest that this may be at least part of the motivation for this teaching, at least by some?). Innumerable sincere folk have been immersed in water as a religious act, desiring thereby to “obey God,” totally ignorant of the Scriptural purpose of baptism. Many (if not most) of these have been taught that which directly contradicts the Bible’s plain and repeated declarations concerning this subject. Are we ready thus to open the fellowship floodgates? I am confident that the change agents want to do this very thing.

**Second**, if the **purpose** of baptism is unimportant, could one not as well argue that the  **motive** is unimportant? If not, upon what grounds? If God can take care of the purpose, why can He not take care of the motive? One might reply that the three thousand on Pentecost “gladly received” the Word, leading them to be baptized (Acts 2:41), which implies their sincere desire to obey God. I heartily concur with this deduction. However, in response I must point out that they were fully cognizant of the **purpose** of the act to which they submitted. Note:

1. They had asked if there were any remedy for the heinous crime they had committed (v. 37).
2. Peter told them that the remedy was to repent and be baptized “**unto the remission of your sins**” (v. 38, emph. DM).
3. They therefore were fully conscious of the **stated purpose of baptism**: in order to receive that which their guilty souls sought—the forgiveness of their sins.

**Third**, God has so intimately entwined the **purpose** of certain ordinances with those ordinances themselves that to omit or alter the purpose of the act is to render the act vain. The Lord’s Supper is a case in point. Suppose a Hindu should visit one of our assemblies on the Lord’s Day. He watches others eat the bread and drink the fruit of the vine and follows their example, not wanting to not “fit in,” but having no idea of the purpose of so doing. Surely all will agree that his physical participation is utterly vain. Likewise, such is the case even for a Christian who mindlessly eats the bread and drinks the cup: “For he that eateth and drinketh, eateth and drinketh judgment unto himself, if he discern not the body” (1 Cor. 11:29). The **purpose** cannot be sundered from the **act** without rendering the act meaningless. Clearly, one’s mind must be fixed on the purpose of remembering the death of our Savior as we partake (v. 27).

Baptism is just such an ordinance. When its purpose is either ignored or denied by the candidate, the act is thereby rendered vain. **One cannot be taught incorrectly on baptism and baptized Scripturally. It is just that simple.** It might help some to grasp this point if we had a case in Scripture where some people were taught incorrectly concerning baptism and baptized, and then observe an apostle’s reaction. Just such a case exists. Acts 19:1–7 tells of Paul’s return to Ephesus. The opening verses of that chapter tell us that he found there about a dozen men who had been baptized. Paul’s initial assumption was that they had been taught and baptized Scripturally. But upon some conversation with them, he learned that this was not so. Since they had no knowledge of the Holy Spirit (which they obviously would have had, had they been taught correctly concerning baptism), Paul asked them: “Into what then were ye baptized?” (v. 3). When they answered, “Into John’s baptism,” what did Paul say? Had he been like almost all denominational preachers and several among us now, he would have said: “That’s just fine. As long as you did it in order to obey God, that’s all that’s necessary.” He might have added: “You did it for ‘a’ scriptural purpose; God will take care of assigning the right purpose whether or not you understand or agree with it.”

This was hardly the apostle’s reaction. Paul immediately taught those men correctly and then baptized them Scripturally. This reaction must be ours to any similar circumstance. This occurrence demonstrates beyond the shadow of a doubt that one cannot be taught incorrectly

and baptized Scripturally. If one does not understand the Scriptural purpose of baptism, or if he knows it and denies the purpose, he is not ready to be baptized.

### **Will There Be Any in Heaven Who Were Not Baptized?**

Faithful saints who have studied with people in other religious bodies over the years have likely been asked the following question, or one similar to it: “Will there be anyone in Heaven who has not been baptized?” At times this writer has been asked this question in order to arouse emotion rather than to make a sincere attempt to arrive at the Truth. Whatever the motivation, it is a good question, however. The Bible answers it clearly, and likewise, we should not hesitate to answer it just as the Bible does.

As with the first question I posed at the beginning of this chapter, there are also two correct answers to this question. Again, I do not have in mind innocent infants who died in infancy or those who were mentally incapable of responding to the Gospel. I have in mind those who were accountable, responsible persons and who will stand before the Son of God in Judgment (2 Cor. 5:10). Will any of these be in Heaven although they were not baptized?

The first correct answer is, “Yes, there will be many unbaptized accountable persons in Heaven.” The Bible not only teaches that many will be in Heaven who were never baptized; it names many of them. For example, Jesus said: “And I say unto you, that many shall come from the east and the west, and shall sit down with Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob, in the kingdom of Heaven” (Mat. 8:11). In most of its occurrences in Matthew, *kingdom of Heaven* refers to the earthly “stage” of the Lord’s kingdom, the church (3:2; 4:17; 10:7; 16:18–19; et al.). But in a few contexts this phrase **could not** refer to the church, and Matthew 8:11 is one of them. Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were never, and will never, be in the church. Therefore, the phrase in this passage must refer to the eternal Heavenly “stage” of the kingdom—Heaven itself. None of those old patriarchs ever heard of baptism, but they will be in Heaven.

Hebrews 11 gives us a long list of heroes and heroines of faith. Starting just outside the Garden of Eden with Abel, the author names numerous Old Testament characters and some of their exploits. He finally has to say, “for the time will fail me” to tell of others. The inspired writer unmistakably placed the stamp of faithfulness upon each of these as he attached the phrase *by faith* to their respective names. Hebrews 12 begins by calling all of those listed in chapter 11 “so great a cloud of witnesses,” who are in the figurative “grandstands,” cheering us on as we run the Christian “race”. They have run their races faithfully, and the implication is clear that they are saved eternally—they will be in Heaven. However, not a one of them ever heard of baptism. Numerous other such other illustrations occur in Scripture. So, yes, there will be many people in

Heaven who were never baptized. But do not miss this point: All of those of whom the Bible speaks as being saved or in Heaven who were not baptized have this one thing in common: **They all lived before Christ died on the cross.**

The second correct answer to the question is definitively, “No, there will be none in Heaven who were not baptized,” if we have in mind those who lived since our Lord’s death. This is the answer the Bible gives repeatedly, as I will demonstrate shortly.

To thus answer, however, is almost like waving a red flag before most moderns. In a day cursed by the evil twins of Bible ignorance and hyper tolerance (for everything but the Truth!), most folk simply cannot comprehend how anyone could make such a “judgmental” statement of “exclusivism” and “intolerance.” We need to ask such reactors to reason with us. Do not those (i.e., the ones who so often judge us to be “judgmental”!) who claim that men are saved by faith alone generally draw a very exclusive line against all who do not believe in Christ? Do they not exclude all the Atheists, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, Confucianists, and all other unbelievers? Is it not judgmental to declare all of these to be damned? Do they not practice intolerance and exclusivism to bar them from Heaven? Of course, we agree with their contention that unbelievers will be lost; the Bible clearly and repeatedly says so (Mark 16:16; John 3:16; 8:24; et al.). Were belief unnecessary to be saved, the Second Person of the Godhead could have remained in Heaven. The problem with their doctrine on this subject is that they draw their line at the point of belief alone, teaching that it is all that is necessary to salvation.

We must, however, draw the line where the Lord has drawn it, realizing that where He drew it originally is where it will still be drawn—without alteration—at the Judgment. While the Bible teaches that there will be no unbelievers in Heaven, the Lord’s “line” does not stop there. The Bible just as unequivocally teaches that the believer **who is not baptized** will not be in Heaven either. We do not help our friends or loved ones if we let them believe the Bible teaches otherwise.

Let us now turn to the Scriptures in order to demonstrate the truthfulness of the foregoing assertion. In the following eight verses both baptism and salvation (or its equivalent) are tied together in the same statement in a very concise way. Without exception, every passage has the following things in common: (1) Baptism **precedes** salvation, and (2) baptism is related to salvation as **cause is to effect**. Consider them now in the order of their appearance in the New Testament text.

**Mark 16:16**

Jesus said: “He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that disbelieveth shall be condemned.” Notice the order: Believe, be baptized, and be saved. It is not believe, be saved, and then be baptized if one chooses to, or if one wishes to join a denomination. The latter is man’s version of it. Again, the Lord’s order is believe, be baptized, and be saved. But some respond: “The Lord did not say in the last clause of this verse, ‘He that disbelieveth and is not baptized shall be condemned.’” No, He did not, for such words would have been superfluous. Surely, it is evident that if one does not believe, he is certainly not going to be baptized. The Lord did not include baptism in the second clause because *he that disbelieveth* takes care of, by implication, the matter of baptism in that part of the verse.

**John 3:5**

The Lord said to Nicodemus: “Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except one be born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God.” For one to be saved he must be in the kingdom of God (1 Cor. 15:24; Col. 1:13–14; et al.). *Born of water* refers to baptism in water, as there is nothing else in all the Bible to which it can reasonably refer. Therefore, Jesus here teaches that being baptized in water is absolutely necessary to being saved.

**Acts 2:38**

To those who believed in Christ on Pentecost, Peter commanded: “Repent ye, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ unto the remission of your sins; and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.” Notice the order again: Repent, be baptized, and receive remission of sins (the equivalent of salvation).

**Acts 22:16**

Ananias told a believing, penitent Saul of Tarsus what he “must do” (9:6): “And now why tarriest thou? arise, and be baptized, and wash away thy sins, calling on his name.” If language means anything at all, and if Ananias knew what he was talking a bout, Saul’s sins were not “washed away” until he was baptized.

**Romans 6:3**

Paul asked a rhetorical question in this passage: “Or are ye ignorant that all we who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?” If one believes the Bible to be the Word of God, He understands without equivocation that salvation is to be found only in Christ and only through the merits of the blood He shed in his death. Therefore, one must gain access to that blood in order to be saved. How does one gain access to that blood and enter into Christ? Paul says that we are baptized into Him and into His death, wherein His blood was

shed. Thus access to Christ and His blood are by means of baptism. The New Testament never gives any other avenue of access for coming into Christ and into the merits of his death—besides baptism.

**Romans 6:4**

This verse is also relevant to the question before us: “We were buried therefore with him through baptism unto death: that like as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we also might walk in newness of life.” When does the newness of life begin, in which one has fellowship with God and His Son because he has been forgiven of his sins? It is after—not before—baptism; it is when we have been raised from baptism that we are able to walk in this newness of life.

**Galatians 3:27**

Paul makes a very succinct, but powerful statement here: “For as many of you as were baptized into Christ did put on Christ.” Perhaps the following illustration will help us see the force of Paul’s statement in this passage:

<b>GALATIANS 3:26</b>		
<b>COLUMN A</b>	<b>COLUMN B</b>	<b>COLUMN C</b>
<b>Desiring Salvation</b>	<b>Scripturally Baptized</b>	<b>“In Christ”</b>
John Doe		
Mary Doe	Mary Doe	Mary Doe
Jack Doe		

According to Paul’s simple statement, no name could be entered under “Column C” before it had first been entered under “Column B.” Note the passage again: “For as many of you as”—not one more or less, but the very same ones and the very same number— “were baptized into Christ did put on Christ.” He allows for no exceptions. As noted on Romans 6:3 above, salvation is **in Christ alone**, and like that passage, this one teaches that **one must be baptized** to come into Christ.

**1 Peter 3:21**

Peter states: “Which also after a true likeness doth now save you, even baptism, not the putting away of the filth of the flesh, but the interrogation of a good conscience toward God, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ.” The significant part of the passage relative to the question before is “after a true likeness [i.e., of Noah and his family’s being saved through water (v. 20)] doth now save you, even baptism.” The KJV rendering of this passage captures its essence: “The like figure whereunto even **baptism doth also now save us** (not the putting

away of the filth of the flesh, but the answer of a good conscience toward God,) by the resurrection of Jesus Christ” (emph. DM).

If were going to concoct some single-act “plan of salvation,” it would not be “saved by faith alone,” as most of the Protestant world advocates. In several cases of conversion recorded in the book of Acts, faith is not mentioned in the process of conversion. Of course, it is always implied and is always present. My “plan” would not be “salvation by confession of faith only.” As with faith, confession of faith is seldom specifically mentioned, although, again, it is always implied. My one-act plan would not be “salvation by repentance alone,” because repentance is rarely specified in the cases of conversion in the book of Acts, although it is also a necessary condition and is implied in each case. I would not tell seeking sinners to “pray the sinner’s prayer” as my one-act “plan.” Nowhere does the New Testament tell sinners to thus respond to Christ for salvation.

Perhaps the reader can by now guess what my one act “plan” would be—“salvation by baptism only.” In every case of conversion that the book of Acts describes in detail, **baptism** is **always** present, is **always** mentioned, and is **always** the consummating act. (It is strange indeed that the one act in the conversion process that is explicitly mentioned as a part of every detailed account of conversion—baptism—is the very act that is almost universally ignored and/or discarded.) I would be on much firmer ground in teaching “baptism only” than anyone ever could be for teaching faith only, confession only, repentance only, and most certainly, the “sinner’s prayer” only.

But the truth of the matter is that, while we could argue that there is more of a Scriptural basis for “baptism only” when compared to the other single-act hypotheses, “baptism only” would be just as erroneous as the others. The Lord’s plan is not a one-act plan; salvation is not by baptism only, even as it is not faith only, confession only, or repentance only. All of these are the several parts, and they make up the whole of the Lord’s conversion process whereby He delivers one from the power of darkness and translates him into the kingdom of His dear Son (Col. 1:13). When men discard baptism from the plan of salvation, they do as much violence to it as if they discarded faith (Mark 16:16). **If the Lord admits accountable souls to Heaven who have lived since He died on the cross without their being Scripturally baptized, He has lied to us in His Word. It is just that plain and simple.**

## What Action Does Baptism Require?

Does the New Testament tell us the action involved in baptism? Indeed it does. The fullest description of an actual baptism in the New Testament is in Acts 8. Philip “preached Jesus” to an Ethiopian as they rode in his chariot. Luke tells us:

And as they went on the way, they came unto a certain water; and the eunuch saith, Behold, here is water; what doth hinder me to be baptized? And Philip said, If thou believest with all thy heart, thou mayest. And he answered and said, I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God (vv. 36–37).

Then Luke describe the baptism:

And he commanded the chariot to stand still: and they both went down into the water, both Philip and the eunuch, and he baptized him. And when they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord caught away Philip; and the eunuch saw him no more, for he went on his way rejoicing (vv. 38–39).

What did Philip do to this Ethiopian when Luke wrote, “he baptized him?” Did he **pour** some water on him? Did he **sprinkle** some water on him? Let Paul answer: “**We were buried** therefore with him **through baptism** unto death: that like as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we also might walk in newness of life” (Rom. 6:4, emph. DM). Paul answers again: “Having been **buried with him in baptism**, wherein ye were also raised with him through faith in the working of God, who raised him from the dead” (Col. 2:12, emph. DM). Philip and the Ethiopian did not both go “down into the water” so that Philip might sprinkle or pour some water on the man’s head. He buried (i.e., immersed, submerged) him in the water. Unless one wants to argue that various “baptismal” actions were used in the several New Testament cases of conversion (which argument would be totally without basis), we have here the explicit (and exclusive) definition of the action of the baptism Jesus ordered in His great commission—a burial in water.

One does not have to know the first letter of the Greek alphabet to know that the Bible teaches that baptism is immersion, and is never any other action. However, it does not hurt to know that there are three separate words in the Greek language for *sprinkling*, *pouring*, and *immersion*, just as in our English language. Furthermore, the Greek word meaning immersion appears behind our English word, *baptism*, and its cognates in every case in the New Testament. Our word *baptize* is actually the Greek word *baptidzo* transliterated (i.e., spelled with English letters) into our language, which word invariably means to dip, plunge, immerse, submerge, overwhelm, and like terms. Had *baptidzo* actually been translated (instead of transliterated), it would read *immerse* in every appearance in the inspired text.

## What Is Baptism “For”?

The King James Version in Acts 2:38 reads as follows: “Then Peter said unto them, Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost.” That sounds plain enough, but those who recoil at the suggestion that baptism is necessary for salvation raise a question about the English preposition *for* in this passage. They argue that *for* is used in two different, and almost opposite, senses in our daily communication. I freely admit this to be the case, and we automatically, by context, interpret its meaning as we participate in ordinary conversation.

I may illustrate the different meanings as follows: If one goes to the supermarket **for** a loaf of bread, he goes there **in order to buy** a loaf of bread. But if one has a cousin in prison **for** theft, he is not there **in order to steal**, but **because** he was convicted of theft. In the first case, *for* is looking forward toward an end—buying a loaf of bread. In the second case, *for* is looking backward to something that has already occurred. Many thus aver relative to Acts 2:38 that Peter told the people on Pentecost to repent and be baptized **because their sins had already been remitted**. Does this assertion and interpretation deserve any credence?

I suggest four reasons why this argument is wholly without merit and therefore, why this interpretation is false. Since it deals directly with the Lord’s plan of salvation, it constitutes a deadly doctrine fraught with disastrous and eternal consequences both for those who teach it and for their followers (Mat. 15:14). It cannot be possible that Peter is here teaching that baptism **follows** rather than **precedes** remission of sins for at least the following reasons:

1. The word *repentance* is connected with *baptism* by the coordinate conjunction, *and*, making them equally and identically (grammatically speaking) related to the desired end— “remission of sins.” If **baptism succeeds** rather **precedes** remission of sins, then both reason and grammar demand the same concerning repentance. Contrariwise, if **repentance precedes** rather than **succeeds** remission of sins, then so must baptism. I have never been able to discover one case in the entire Bible in which God either promised or extended forgiveness to a sinner **before** he repented. No such case exists. Since repentance is a condition of pardon and since baptism is inseparably joined to repentance in relation to pardon, it must follow that baptism is as surely a condition of pardon as is repentance. Thus, Peter’s statement means: “Repent and be baptized for [i.e., **in order to receive**] remission of sins.”
2. If Peter is here teaching that baptism is **because** God has already granted remission of sins, he is in conflict with the consistent teaching of the remainder of the New Testament on this subject. I earlier discussed eight passages which clearly specify baptism as a condition of

salvation. The respective sources of the statements in those passages were the Lord, Paul, Ananias, and Peter, whom Luke quoted in Acts 2:38. One who insists that Peter places baptism after remission of sin in this passage implies that Peter contradicted the Lord, Paul, Ananias, and **even himself**. Only when we acknowledge the obvious import of Peter's words on Pentecost (i.e., that baptism is a condition of pardon for the alien sinner) are we able to harmonize them with the consistent teaching of the New Testament on the relationship between baptism and salvation.

3. The identical phrase Peter used on Pentecost, *for the remission of sins*, was spoken by he Lord when He instituted His supper: "And he took the cup, and gave thanks, and gave it to them, saying, Drink ye all of it; For this is my blood of the new testament, which is shed for many **for the remission of sins**" (Mat. 26:27–28), *emph. DM*). The Lord's words here will help us see exactly what Peter meant by his use of the same phrase in Acts 2:38. (I suggest that readers write *Mat. 26:27–28* in the margin of their Bibles beside Acts 2:38, and then enter *Acts 2:38* beside Mat. 26:27–28.) To begin with, I state that which should be obvious: Whatever this prepositional phrase means in one place it likewise means in the other. Therefore, if there is anything in either context that limits this phrase to one exclusive meaning, then this meaning must govern the definition of the phrase in the other.

When the Lord said that His blood was to be shed "for the remission of sins," did He mean that He would shed His blood **because** the sins of mankind had already been remitted, or **in order that** they might be remitted? Surely, to ask this question is to answer it. God's law from the beginning has required a blood sacrifice for sin (Gen. 4:4), and this immutable principle is stated as follows: "Apart from shedding of blood there is no remission" (Heb. 9:22b). While millions of barrels of animal blood were sacrificed from the time of Abel until the last sacrifice in Herod's doomed temple in A.D. 70, it was insufficient: "For it is impossible that the blood of bulls and goats should take away sins" (Heb. 10:4).

Had the sin problem been solved or solvable before Jesus shed His blood, His death would have been unnecessary. (In fact, the virgin conception and birth and the incarnation of the Eternal Word (John 1:1–2, 14) would not have been necessary.) The shedding and offering of His blood was absolutely necessary for—and resulted in—the forgiveness of sins. There cannot be the least doubt that *for remission of sins* in Matthew 26:28 means *in order to*. This is therefore precisely the meaning *for remission of sins* must—and does—have in Acts 2:38: "Repent and be baptized **in order that** your sins may be remitted" is what Peter commanded. On the other hand, if one insists that *for remission of sins* in Acts 2:38 means **because** sins

have been remitted, he must accept the same meaning of it in the words of our Lord, thereby implying that the Lord's sacrifice was unnecessary.

4. As earlier discussed in connection with the action involved in baptism, so with the meaning of the word *for* in Acts 2:38: One need not know a single letter of the Greek alphabet to know assuredly the meaning of the term. However, as before, it may be helpful here to know that the Greek word translated "for" (*eis*) indicates forward motion toward an end, rather than backward motion toward an accomplishment. The ASV correctly and helpfully uses a preposition that removes Peter's statement from the realm of controversy for the open-minded student: "And Peter said unto them, Repent ye, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ **unto the remission of your sins**; and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (emph. DM).

### **Is Baptism a Work of Human Merit?**

The Protestant churches generally have concluded and taught for centuries that, if baptism is necessary for salvation, it thereby becomes a work of man's righteousness by which he attempts to merit or earn his salvation. Their argument is as follows: (1) Man cannot be saved by his own works, (2) baptism is a work that man does, (3) therefore baptism cannot be necessary for salvation.

I readily agree that their own works of righteousness cannot save men. The Bible states few things more plainly than that no human being can live so as to earn or merit salvation: "For by grace have ye been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not of works, that no man should glory" (Eph. 2:8-9). However, it is appropriate to ask where the Bible ever assigns baptism the role of being a work of man's righteousness? It never does so, but men have assumed in this case the very thing that they must prove.

The New Testament is a wonderful book in so many ways. One way in which it impresses us again and again is that there has never been a religious error that the devil and his cohorts could ever invent, but that the New Testament has already anticipated it and answered it. In actuality, it would have to be this way if the Lord fulfilled His promise to the apostles: "Howbeit when he, the Spirit of truth, is come, he shall guide you into all the truth: for he shall not speak from himself; but what things soever he shall hear, these shall he speak: and he shall declare unto you the things that are to come" (John 16:13). Every bit of religious and moral Truth is in the documents of the inspired writers. The New Testament therefore has the answer to every error that the devil or men can concoct.

The foregoing being so, we should not be surprised that the Holy Spirit anticipated the erroneous teaching that baptism becomes a work of our merit and righteousness if it is held to be necessary to salvation. Paul wrote the following on this very subject: “Not by works done in righteousness, which we did ourselves, but according to his mercy he saved us, through the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit” (Tit. 3:5). Note first the repetition of the principle he stated in Ephesians 2:8–9—we **cannot** be saved by our own works of righteousness. Paul then stated the basis upon which we **are** saved, here ascribing it to God’s mercy, equivalent to his ascribing it to God’s grace in Ephesians 2:8. Then, in this statement to Titus (that denies man’s ability to save himself by works of righteousness and affirms that we are saved by God’s mercy), Paul added these words: “...through the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit.” This clause has understandably long been identified with being “born of water and the Spirit” (John 3:5), which Jesus said was necessary to “enter into the kingdom of God.” We believe the two clauses are generally equal in meaning. Just as *born of water* cannot reasonably be explained except as a reference to baptism in water, so with *the washing of regeneration*.

This being so, where did Paul, through the Holy Spirit, place baptism? Did he identify it as one of our own works of righteousness? Quite the contrary. He said that the “washing of regeneration” (i.e., baptism) is a part of God’s plan of mercy whereby men are saved. The passage explicitly stated, “He saved us, through the washing of regeneration.” Thus, rather than baptism’s being something men do to merit salvation, it is identified as the act in which God has bestowed His mercy upon us.

When one understands the Truth concerning baptism, salvation, and grace, he does not trust in himself when he is baptized. Paul tells us where the properly-taught sinner’s faith will be when he is baptized: “Having been buried with him in baptism, wherein ye were also raised with him **through faith in the working of God**, who raised him from the dead” (Col. 2:12, emph. DM). One’s faith is not in himself, but in God’s power, which He demonstrated in raising Jesus from the dead.

Perhaps it will be helpful to use the erroneous thesis mentioned above concerning baptism and works of righteousness, only with another word in place of *baptism*:

1. If **belief** is necessary for salvation, it thereby becomes a work of man’s righteousness by which he attempts to merit or earn his salvation (Jesus said that to believe on Him is to do “the work of God,” i.e., the work God requires on our part [John 6:29]).

2. If **repentance** is necessary for salvation, it thereby becomes a work of man's righteousness by which he attempts to merit or earn his salvation (does one not have to "do something" [i.e., "work"] in order to repent? [Mat. 3:8; Acts 26:20]).
3. If **confession** of one's faith is necessary for salvation, it thereby becomes a work of man's righteousness by which he attempts to merit or earn his salvation (does one not have to "do something" [i.e., "work"] in order to confess the Christ? [Rom. 10:10]).

To be consistent, if one is going to define baptism as a work of one's own righteousness, he must also define faith, repentance, and confession of one's faith in the same way. There is absolutely no basis for thus categorizing any of the above elements of the Lord's merciful plan to save sinful mankind. I doubt that men would ever have denied what the Scriptures so plainly teach about the role of baptism in conversion had they not first adopted the baseless, damnable doctrine of salvation by faith alone that originated with the sixteenth-century Reformers. Once having adopted this false view of salvation by faith, they then were forced either to mount an all-out campaign against the teaching of Scripture concerning baptism, or give up their false position of salvation by faith alone. Regrettably—and eternally so for multiplied millions—they chose the former.

I do not hesitate to admit that baptism is a "work," but only in the same sense that faith, repentance, and confession of one's faith are "works"—they involve the wills and the actions of human beings. They are simply actions of obedient response to the Gospel of the Son of God. However, none of these is a "work" in any sense related to meriting, earning, or achieving salvation by one's own righteousness. To thus teach concerning baptism is one of the most egregious errors and lies that Satan has ever inspired.

### **What Is the Relationship Between Baptism and the Blood of Christ?**

We have long believed that, if we could enable those in the denominations to see the relationship between baptism and the blood of Christ, they might cease their campaign against it. The accusation of believing in "water salvation" is frequently hurled at those who insist on upholding the Bible doctrine of baptism in water unto the remission of sins. This is a totally baseless and senseless "straw-man" accusation, often used in desperation by one who cannot tolerate the plainness of Bible teaching on baptism and salvation. I have never met or even heard of anyone who believed or taught that one could be cleansed from even one sin by water (which I presume is the implication of the pejorative "water salvation" charge). One would have to be mad thus to believe; such an idea is ridiculous on the very surface (unless one wants to further suggest the absurdity that we believe in "holy water" that has special powers). Christ

could have foregone His painful sojourn on Earth if water could remove even one sin; there was plenty of water available when He came, just as there is now.

At times when I have reasoned with people from Acts 22:16 they have leveled the “water salvation” charge. In this passage, Ananias, the Lord’s trusted spokesman, said to Saul of Tarsus: “And now why tarriest thou? arise, and be baptized, and wash away thy sins, calling on his name.” When we emphasize that this passage teaches that in baptism, and not before, Saul’s sins would be washed away, some reply: “See there, you just believe in ‘water salvation’; just get them in that water and it will wash their sins away.” Now if this is what Ananias taught, then that is what I would be teaching, because he taught the Truth (the Lord did not send a false teacher to Saul [9:10–12]). However, careful examination of his words shows that Ananias did not say a word about what the cleansing agent for sins is. Try as one might, he will not find it in this statement. One must look elsewhere for this information, and it is not hard to find. It is emphatically stated in Revelation 1:5, where John wrote of Christ: “Unto him that loved us, and washed us from our sins in his own blood” (KJV). A verse we earlier noticed says the same: “And without shedding of blood is no remission” (Heb. 9:22). The old song that we sing captures this Truth exactly: “What can wash away my sin? Nothing but the blood of Jesus.”

Since Acts 22:16 does not tell us what washes away our sins, what does it tell us about baptism and forgiveness? It tells us when sins are washed away—in the act of baptism. Therefore, Acts 22:16 and Revelation 1:5 combined teach us that, when one is Scripturally baptized, the blood of Christ “washes” his sins away. Romans 6:3 combines both of these elements (i.e., baptism and the blood of Christ) in one simple statement: “Or are ye ignorant that all we who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?” The apostle states that we are baptized into the death of Christ, meaning into the merits of His death, found in the cleansing blood that He shed in His death. Search as one might, he will find no means of access to the death of Christ—in which He shed His blood—apart from baptism.

These things being so, one must face the following conclusions:

1. Apart from the blood of Christ there is no forgiveness of sins.
2. Apart from baptism there is no access to His blood.
3. Therefore, apart from baptism there is no forgiveness of sins.

If this accurate depiction of the relationship between the blood of Christ and baptism does not convince those who despise baptism, I know not where else to turn to convince them.

## When Should One Be Baptized?

The Bible provides numerous examples to indicate when one should be baptized. We may generally answer that these examples uniformly testify that those who heard and believed the Gospel were urged to, wanted to be, and were baptized without delay. Consider the following:

1. On the day of Pentecost the three thousand who heard the first Gospel sermon were baptized “that same day” (Acts 2:41). We are not to suppose that they came with towels and a change of clothes to hear the apostles preach. Nor is there any indication that any of them said they must first go home and get those items when they were commanded to repent and be baptized. Being baptized was the last thing they expected to do that day, but they did not allow the inconvenience of going home dripping wet to dissuade them.
2. When Philip was preaching Jesus to the Ethiopian as they rode through the Judean countryside in a chariot, the learner spotted a body of water and asked, “what doth hinder me to be baptized?” (8:36). They did not wait until they arrived in the next town; instead they stopped the chariot and Philip baptized him immediately (vv. 38–39).
3. It was after midnight when the jailer in Philippi came trembling before Paul and Silas, asking, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?” (16:30). After the necessary teaching, Paul baptized the man and his household “the same hour of the night,” not even waiting for the dawning of the day (v. 33).
4. As noted earlier, Ananias exhorted Saul not to wait, but to arise and be baptized (22:16). The context implies that he did so.

There was no waiting a week or even a day for a special “baptismal service.” Why was there such a sense of immediacy? The answer is found in the fact that the apostles and other preachers of Truth taught without fail that, until the sinners had been baptized, the guilt of their sins, which would condemn them forever, was still upon them. Sinners thus sincerely convicted, whether in that bygone day or now, will not want to sleep or eat until they have peace with God through the blood of Christ. This is accomplished in Scriptural baptism.

### Conclusion

A fitting conclusion to this study is the emphasis on a principle in Luke’s statement in Acts 2:41: “Then they that gladly received his word were baptized: and the same day there were added unto them about three thousand souls.” We here learn that, when men gladly receive the Word, they do not quibble about the place of baptism in God’s great plan of mercy and grace. Contrariwise, when men quibble about the necessity of baptism, they thereby demonstrate that they have not yet gladly received the Word.

### Endnotes

1. All Scripture quotations are from the American Standard Version unless otherwise indicated.

2. Rubel Shelly, "What Are They Saying About Baptism?" *The Ashwood Leaves* (Nashville, TN), ed. Rubel Shelly 1 Feb. 1984: 2–3.
3. Jimmy Allen, *Re-Baptism? What One Must Know To Be Born Again* (West Monroe, LA: Howard Pub. Co., 1991).

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