

Shall We Surrender the Scriptural Purpose of Baptism?

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The subject of the one age-lasting baptism (Eph. 4:5; Mat. 28:19–20) has stirred discussion and controversy for centuries. Men have hotly contested various facets of the subject in countless conversations and thousands of debates. At least as early as the twelfth century men and women were brutally persecuted, even burned at the stake, because they dared oppose Roman Catholic infant “baptism.” Countless sermons have been preached and pages written on baptism marking this as a significant subject even from the days of John.

Why Controversy on Baptism?

It is ironic that there should be so much controversy over baptism when one considers the plainness and clarity of the New Testament’s teaching on it. All such controversy would end were all men as noble as the Berean Jews (Acts 17:11). Comparatively few are willing to bow in humble submission before the throne of the King of kings. Sad to say, men continue to wrest the Scriptures to their own destruction, often defining words and interpreting statements to fit their biases.

When men “gladly receive the word” they do not quibble over what inspired men teach about baptism, but immediately comply (Acts 2:41, KJV). Just as clearly, when men seek to avoid the Gospel’s straightforward teaching on this subject, they indicate their contempt for the Word. While some are sincere in their errors, many who teach heresy on baptism know exactly what they are doing.

A quarter century ago I would have had in mind only denominationalists in the foregoing descriptions. Now, however, these attitudes and actions are every bit as descriptive of some who were once among us, but who now – at least in heart and attitude – no longer are. The statements of some indicate their willingness to give up all of the New Testament ground on baptism – ground regained by great effort and at immense cost over many generations. New Testament teaching on baptism, especially on the purpose of the act, is so pivotal that to surrender it is to surrender the very heart of the Gospel – redemption through the blood of Christ. When one corrupts baptism, he emasculates God’s glorious plan of salvation. All who are concerned with pure doctrine and practice – and with primitive Christianity – will ever be concerned with what the Scriptures teach about baptism.

The Scriptures specify every particular concerning baptism, including its element (water), its action (immersion), and its authorized subjects (believers who confess their faith and repent of their sins). We must understand, comply with, and contend for each of these. The Scriptures also specify in clarion terms the purpose of New Testament baptism. The purpose of the act continues to spark much controversy. Is baptism a condition of salvation or a “sign” of salvation “after the fact”? Is forgiveness of sins granted before one is baptized or in the act of baptism? Is baptism unto or because of salvation?

The Scriptural Purpose Set Forth

Unprejudiced readers of the Bible cannot fail to see the connection Scripture makes between baptism and salvation in numerous explicit statements (e.g., Mark 16:15–16; John 3:5; Acts 2:38; 22:16; Rom. 6:3; Gal. 3:27; Tit. 3:5; 1 Pet. 3:20–21). To teach thus is not a third cousin to teaching that water washes sins away but is a “straw man” created by men desperate to deny Gospel Truth. I have never heard or met anyone of whom I am aware who so teaches. Obviously, if there were forgiving power in water, the Pre-incarnate Word could have stayed in Heaven.

The old song has it just right: “What can wash away my sin? Nothing but the blood of Jesus” (Rev. 1:5; cf. Mat. 26:28; John 1:29; Rom. 5:9; Heb. 9:22; 1 Pet. 1:19–20; et al.). Acts 22:16 does not come close to saying that water washes away sins, but it does explicitly tell us when—in what act—sins are washed away by the blood of Christ. The passage is explicit: that act is baptism. The Bible gives only one means of entering into the death of Christ (in which he shed His blood) so as to access the cleansing power of His blood: BAPTISM (Rom. 6:3). Thus, no baptism—no blood; no blood—no cleansing; and no cleansing—no Heaven. If this simple, Scriptural summary does not convince men of the necessity of baptism for one’s salvation, they cannot be convinced.

Denominational Deceivers and Fellow Travelers

At least since the sixteenth century when Martin Luther invented his “salvation by faith alone” plan, religionists have been deceiving the world about baptism’s purpose. Perhaps ninety-five percent of Protestantism, following Luther, denies the undeniable Scriptural connection between baptism and forgiveness/salvation. During one Nashville, Tennessee, crusade, Billy Graham (in a television interview) “quoted” both Mark 16:16 and Acts 2:38, as follows, respectively: “He that believeth...shall be saved”, and “Repent...for the remission of

sins.” (Most denominational preachers try merely to rationalize these unmistakably clear statements away; Graham just pompously erased them!)

It is bad enough that most denominationalists deny Truth on this point. It is worse when leftist preachers and professors still pretending to be among us demonstrate their apostasy by surrendering this Scriptural ground. Men such as Carroll D. Osburn and Max Lucado have openly declared that the Scriptural purpose of baptism is a matter of indifference to them. Several congregations and their respective preachers joined with Franklin Graham’s campaign in Lubbock in April, 2000 and several Nashville “Churches of Christ” did the same with Billy Graham in July of the same year. Every time one endorses and extends fellowship to baptism-hating denominationalists he implicitly neuters baptism’s Scriptural purpose.

Must One Understand Baptism’s Purpose?

Germane to a discussion of the purpose of baptism is the question, “Must the sinner understand that baptism is necessary for salvation?” My answer: “Must the communicant understand the purpose of the Lord’s supper for his partaking to be acceptable to God?” Paul’s answer: “For he that eateth and drinketh, eateth and drinketh judgment unto himself, if he discern not the body (1 Cor. 11:29). The same principle applies to singing and praying (1 Cor. 14:15). How can one’s “baptism” be more than a physical bath if he does not understand, or, if understanding, he denies its Scriptural purpose?

A question is, “Can one be taught incorrectly/unscripturally on baptism and somehow be correctly/Scripturally baptized?” Apparently, Paul did not believe so (Acts 19:1-5). In Ephesus he re-taught and correctly baptized about a dozen souls who had been taught and had submitted to John’s obsolete baptism. Doubtless, they had sincerely sought to please God in submitting to John’s baptism. Surely, Paul’s behavior here is instructive.

False Brethren and Fatal Compromises

Such men as Rubel Shelly, Doug Foster, and Jimmy Allen would have given their blessing to the misinformed Ephesians. These men are on record advocating that one can be taught incorrectly yet be baptized correctly. They deny that one must know baptism’s purpose for it to be efficacious. Several years ago, Shelly opined that, as long as one was baptized in order to “please God” or “obey God,” that this constituted sufficient “purpose” for the act. One should want to please God in all things, including baptism, but such is not a “purpose” of, but a motivation for, baptism. Let us not confuse motive and purpose.

Shelly has also averred that baptism is acceptable as long as it is for “a Scriptural reason.” This implies that there is more than one Scriptural purpose for the act, which the Scriptures deny. Foster (in a Wineskins article) and Allen (in an entire book advancing his view) went to great lengths a few years ago basically to argue that the action is the essential ingredient of baptism. They allege that as long as a believer is immersed, God will take care of the “purpose,” even if the candidate is ignorant of or disagrees with it. (By what reasoning is the action important if the purpose is not? I predict that they will give up the action, too. Likely, some have already done so.)

There is one – and only one – purpose of baptism. It is expressed in various ways, all of which are equivalent to each other (e.g., to be saved [Mark 16:16; 1 Pet. 3:21], to enter the kingdom/church [John 3:5; 1 Cor. 12:13], to receive remission of sins [Acts 2:38], to have sins washed away [22:16], to enter into Christ and His death [Rom. 6:3–4], to put on Christ [Gal. 3:27]). It simply cannot be that the sinner’s knowledge of baptism’s significant purpose is unnecessary!

Another Dire Consequence

Baptism is the New Testament “Red Sea” (1 Cor. 10:1–4), separating God’s people from all others. It distinguishes those who are still in their sins from those washed in His blood, those still in the world from those in His saved body of people – the church, those who have no hope from those who have the hope of Heaven.

The doctrines of these false brethren represent a crucial abandonment of fundamental Truth concerning fellowship, as well as salvation. Consistency demands their immediate embrace of millions of denominationalists as brethren, including all of the Baptists, for starters. I strongly suspect that one reason for their capitulation on baptism is to begin opening fellowship doors that will eventually lead to full amalgamation with denominationalism at large (aping their Disciples of Christ forefathers). Their types long ago lost the capacity to think of the church in any but denominational concepts.

The efficacy of the whole Christian system to save men rests on the sacrificed blood of the one perfect Lamb of God (John 1:29). How dare anyone even suggest that there might be more avenues to the cleansing blood than the one way taught in Scripture! If only the blood of Christ can take away sins (and it alone can [Heb. 9:22; Rev. 1:5]), and If God assigned baptism as the point of contact with the blood of Christ (and He did [Rom. 6:3]), then baptism is

manifestly the hinge-pin of the Lord's plan of salvation — the point at which God and man come into fellowship with each other. When one gives up the New Testament doctrine on the purpose of baptism, he makes a fatal capitulation.

[Note: I wrote this MS and it originally appeared as an “Editorial Perspective” in the September 2000 issue of *THE GOSPEL JOURNAL*, of which I was editor at the time.]

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