



## *The Biblical Purpose of Baptism*

We receive a great number of questions dealing with a variety of biblical issues. In this Feature article, we wish to address a reader's obviously sincere concerns with the Biblical purpose of baptism. We will state their objections, and then follow with our response.

### *Baptism Isn't Always Mentioned.*

Our truth seeker acknowledges that we have cited a number of passages which appear to connect baptism with salvation (e.g., Mt. 28:19-20; Mk. 16:16; Acts 2:38; 22:16; Rom. 6:3-4; 1 Cor. 12:13; Gal. 3:27; Eph. 5:26; Tit. 3:5; 1 Pet. 3:21). But he says:

"I'm also familiar with Ephesians 2:8, 'by grace are ye saved...', and Romans 3:22-27. Nowhere in these passages is baptism mentioned as a requisite to salvation."

(1) While it is true that the passages referenced (Eph. 2:8; Rom. 3:22-27) do not explicitly mention baptism, neither do they contain any allusion to repentance. Are we to assume that repentance is not required for redemption? Surely not.

(2) It is rarely the case that a single context will totally exhaust the biblical material on a particular theme. It is the “sum” of the truth that counts (Psa. 119:160), not an isolated text, that may focus upon a limited point of emphasis.

Acts 2:38 contends for repentance and baptism as “requisites” for “forgiveness,” with no specific mention of faith. However, by means of that interpretive rule known as “analogy of faith,” belief in the Lord must be **implied** as well.

Let’s assume that the Bible is a self-interpreting book, and what is obscure in one passage may be illuminated by another. No single statement or obscure passage of one book can be allowed to set aside a doctrine which is clearly established by many passages.

For example, the fact that God is said to be “one” (Dt. 6:4) does not negate the biblical truth so abundantly affirmed elsewhere that God, i.e., the nature of deity, is possessed by three Personalities — Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (cf. Mt. 28:19-20). A truth emphasized in one passage may be enlarged by additional information in other texts. This is a most fundamental principle of interpretation.

(3) While Ephesians 2:8 mentions salvation by grace through faith, later, in the same letter, the apostle affirms that one is “cleansed . . . by washing of water with the word” (5:26).

If one concludes that “saved” (2:8) is the equivalent of “cleansed” (5:26), it then becomes obvious that salvation by “faith” is not independent of being “washed with water,” (a phrase admitted by virtually all scholars to be a reference to baptism – Arndt, 481; Thayer, 382).

Moreover, while both grace and faith are stressed in Romans 3:22ff — as means of “redemption” — three chapters later the inspired apostle affirmed that one is buried with Christ in baptism that he might walk in “newness of life” (6:3-4).

Is “newness of life” a parallel descriptive for salvation? of course it is. Clearly, then, salvation by grace and faith is not exclusive of other conditions specified in supplementary texts relating to justification.

### ***What about Those Who Call on the Name of the Lord Shall Be Saved.***

This same truth seeker charges:

“When you cited Romans 10:12; interestingly you do not mention the very next verse, ‘whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.’”

In Acts 2, after describing a “great and notable day” that had been foretold by the prophet Joel, this declaration was made: “And it shall be, that whosoever, shall call on the name of the Lord shall be saved” (Acts 2:21).

To what does “calling” on the name of the Lord refer? Surely not merely verbalizing the expression, “Lord, lord,” for Christ plainly denounced those who do nothing more than that (cf. Mt. 7:21; Lk. 6:46). It is clear that a comparison of verse 21, with the information provided subsequently in this same chapter, demands that “call” be assigned a comprehensive sense.

Note this question: Is the “saved” of verse 21 equivalent with “remission of sins” in verse 38? Yes it is; the blessing is identical. Since there are not alternate plans of salvation for the lost sinner (cf. Jude 3), it becomes obvious that the “call” (v. 21) encompasses the “repent and be immersed” of the later passage (v. 38).

To suggest, therefore, that the term “call” somehow negates the specific commands to repent and be baptized in order to enjoy remission of sins, is a serious error.

Well, What about Zaccheus and the Thief on the Cross?

Our truth seeker continues with “Jesus announced to all gathered at Zaccheus’ house that ‘This day is salvation come’ (Lk. 19:9); no mention is made of baptism. And as Jesus hung on the cross, the thief crucified next to him recognized His power and majesty; Jesus rewarded the thief’s faith with the memorable promise, ‘Today shalt thou be with me in paradise’ (Luke 23:43). While one could, I suppose, speculate that Zaccheus and his house were somehow baptized in an unrecorded interim, there can be no doubt about what happened on the cross.”

(1) Neither Zaccheus nor the crucified thief was explicitly instructed to “repent.” Will it be argued that repentance is a matter of no consequence? One ought to reflect upon the logical extension of an argument before making it.

(2) At the time of their encounters with the Savior, neither Zaccheus nor the thief were under the commission which was inaugurated later — on the day of Pentecost. They both lived during a transition period when the law of Moses was still operative (thus providing forgiveness by means

of animal sacrifice), and yet the ministry of John the Baptizer had begun also (Lk. 16:16). It was a very unique time.

Further, John baptized “for the remission of sins” (Mk. 1:4), and vast multitudes were immersed by him (Mt. 3:5-6). It cannot be established whether or not either of these gentlemen had been exposed to John’s preaching, or whether or not they had, at some point, obeyed his message relative to baptism. They might very well have, and then, one or the other of them could have lapsed into his old ways again.

One thing we do know is this: those who heard John’s preaching, and who ignored his baptism, were rejecting the counsel of God (Lk. 7:30).

Here is an interesting question: if refusing John’s baptism was a rejection of God, what would be the case with reference to one who refuses the baptism commissioned by Him whose shoes John was unworthy to bear?

(3) During the days of His public ministry, Christ had the power to personally forgive sins, independent of the rite of baptism (cf. Mk. 2:5). When the Lord died, however, his will was subsequently expressed in the written record of the new covenant (Heb. 9:15-17). The Savior’s “will” is now mandated by means of a written code. That ratified will (cf. Mt. 26:28) requires immersion “for the forgiveness of sins” (Acts 2:38). No one has the right to argue that forgiveness may be bestowed in some other fashion.

There is not an example in the book of Acts of a “conversion” that does not either state explicitly, or at least imply, baptism in the conversion process. Even Acts 17:34, the term “believed” must embrace the rite when compared with other uses of the verb in the same document (cf. 16:34). For further study on this matter, see my commentary on the book of Acts (Jackson, 415-418).

### ***Why Was Jesus Baptized?***

“Our Savior himself was baptized; surely he didn’t do so in order to ensure salvation. Rather, His baptism is proof positive of the symbolic nature of the act, as opposed to its efficacy.”

(1) Our Savior never repented; are we to assume then that repentance is unnecessary? Again, our friend should carefully calculate the consequences of his argument before he makes it.

(2) Jesus was baptized in order to “fulfill all righteousness” (Mt. 3:15). This expression has to do with doing whatever has been appointed by God to be acknowledged and obeyed by man. Again, it is here used “in the sense of fulfilling the divine statutes.”

The point is, for whatever reason he was immersed, Christ **obeyed**. If, therefore, one is instructed to be immersed today in order to have his sins washed away (Acts 22:16), if he follows the Lord’s example, he will **obey**. Moreover, he will not attempt to argue a contrary position.

(3) If our baptism is somehow parallel to Christ’s baptism, and we are baptized in order to demonstrate “symbolically” a salvation we have received already, would that not suggest that Jesus was immersed to “demonstrate a salvation already received”? And if that logic follows, from what was Jesus saved?

Clearly, the baptism of Jesus was in a different class than ours, and his case provides no argument to invalidate baptism “for the remission of sins” today.

### ***Those Who Don’t Believe Are Condemned.***

Our truth seeker question why we frequently cite Mark 16:16, in which Jesus states that ‘he that believeth and is baptized shall be saved’ However, the second clause in that sentence, ‘but he that believeth not shall be damned’ states unequivocally that belief (faith) is the key element to salvation.”

(1) While faith may be described as “**a** key element,” in the salvation process, because it is the motive out of which additional acts of obedience arise, it is not correct to suggest that it is the **only** element in salvation.

Again we stress, such reasoning would exclude repentance. May one be saved without sorrow for sin and a corresponding reformation of life? Surely our friend will not so contend.

(2) When Christ affirmed that one who disbelieves will be condemned, it was entirely unnecessary to add further acts of rebellion in order to make the case. The unbeliever is condemned at that point. It is superfluous to extrapolate the disobedience.

Suppose we say: “He who eats and digests his food shall live, but he who eats not shall die.” Would it be sensible to say: “He who eats and digests his food shall live, but he who eats not,

and does not digest, shall die.”? Can one digest what he does not eat? Is it even necessary to discuss baptism with one who is in a state of disbelief?

(3) The plain truth of the matter is this: Jesus “unequivocally” stated that “he who believes and is baptized shall be saved.” The terms “believes” and “is baptized” are, in the Greek Testament, compound participles in the aorist tense. In Greek grammar this reflects a format which indicates an action that takes place prior to that of the leading verb, which, in this case, is “shall be saved.” This means that both actions occur before that suggested by the verb.

In other words, salvation does not occur until the believer has been baptized. This is as plain as language can be.

#### *Jesus Didn’t Baptize.*

“Finally, our truth seeker states, if baptism is essential to salvation, does it not seem odd that the scriptures specifically state that our Saviour Himself did not baptize (Jn. 4:2).”

(1) That is not exactly correct. The text actually says that “Jesus was making and baptizing more disciples than John” This clearly indicates that Jesus did not view the rite as a trivial matter, this is “rather an explanation of the manner in which Jesus baptized. . it does not reflect a minimizing of immersion.

(2) This text merely declares that Jesus did not **personally** administer the immersion. And there is a very good reason for that. There almost certainly would have been a problem in that those who were immersed directly by Christ would have tended to develop an inordinate pride and claimed some superiority over those who were baptized merely by one of the disciples.

There is absolutely nothing in this context to suggest that baptism is not essential.

#### *Disobedience Doesn’t Condemn.*

In conclusion, our truth seeker says this:

“I suggest that the believer is indeed being disobedient if/when he does not get baptized. But to suggest that not getting baptized is a sin unto damnation, as you do, is troubling doctrine, not to mention unscriptural.”

(1) Note the logic in truth seeker's conclusion. One who refuses to be baptized is **disobedient**. But refusing to submit to baptism is not a damning act. Thus, one is forced to conclude that disobedience is not a damning activity.

How very opposite to the affirmation of an inspired writer who affirmed that Christ is the author of eternal salvation to those who **obey** (Heb. 5:9). Is there a solitary line in the New Testament that promises salvation to the disobedient?

(2) We must again press this point. Those who refused John's baptism (cf. Mk. 1:4), "rejected the counsel of God" (Lk. 7:30). "Counsel" denotes "the purpose of God respecting salvation" (Thayer, 104).

May one repudiate God's saving plan, and still be saved? If such a judgment hung over those who rejected John's baptism, what of those who reject the baptism commissioned by Jesus (Mt. 28:19; Mk. 16:16)?

(3) Those who submitted to John's baptism, "justified God" (Lk. 7:29), — "declared God to be righteous, i.e., by receiving the baptism declared that it had been prescribed by God rightly."

If accepting baptism "justifies" God, would not rejecting baptism "condemn" God? Is it possible that one can so act as to "condemn" God, and yet not be held responsible for that rebellion?

We would respectfully suggest, therefore, that our truth seeker's position, namely that one may be disobedient and reject baptism, and yet still please God and receive salvation, is the dogma that is both "troubling" and "unscriptural." It is our devout hope that he will reconsider his point of view.