

BAPTISM

TRUTH OR TRADITION

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Baptism: Truth or Tradition

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F O R E W O R D

Baptism: Truth or Tradition—the name chosen for this booklet reminds us that we must place our trust in the truth of the Scriptures, not in the traditions of men. While this is true for any area of our spiritual lives, it is especially true of baptism. So much misunderstanding has surrounded this practice—to the point that even wars have been fought over it!

Scripture must be our authority. It does no good to say, “But that is the way we have always done it!” If we have no biblical basis for the traditions we hold, perhaps these traditions warrant closer examination. And if they are found to be in error, they must be discarded.

Are you willing to hold your traditions in the light of the Scriptures, even if it means laying them aside if they are wrong? The cost may seem great, but if you understand the value of the truth you will gain, you will see that it is actually a very small price to pay.

C H A P T E R O N E

The Truth About Baptism

One of the areas that causes the greatest confusion when we talk about the matter of salvation is the subject of baptism. It causes much conflict among very sincere and earnest religious people of different convictions and beliefs. Baptism is practiced by a variety of groups, but with a variety of emphases as well. For example, there are some who teach you must be baptized to be saved. This is seen clearly in those groups which believe you must baptize infants if they are to be cleansed and forgiven before God. They equate baptism with salvation.

There are others who teach that baptism is a necessary part of salvation. It is one of several things you must do if you are going to be cleansed and forgiven by God. Then there are those who teach that baptism is important, but not necessary for salvation. They teach that salvation comes only by faith in Jesus Christ, and that baptism is simply a matter of obedience of one who has become a child of God. It is interesting that all those holding to these positions claim the Bible supports their beliefs. Obviously, they cannot all be correct or the Bible would be teaching contradictory positions.

Our Primary Authority

The Bible must be our authority. It is only as we come to the Word of God that we can find truth on the matter of salvation and a personal relationship with God. As we consider a subject like bap-

tism, it is very important for us to submit ourselves to the Scriptures. Yes, we all have our own personal convictions and beliefs. Different churches teach different things, but none of that really matters. What really matters is what God has said about the subject. We must come to the Word of God with a mind set on determining what God has said and a willingness to submit ourselves to it.

Warning Against Misplaced Authority

There is always a danger in coming to the Word of God with preconceived ideas and convictions in an attempt to support those convictions out of Scripture. In Matthew 15:3, Jesus gives a warning that is fitting for us to heed as we come to this kind of area. The subject is not baptism, but the warning is applicable to us. “And he answered and said to them, ‘And why do you yourselves transgress the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition?’ ” Here, Jesus is addressing very religious people—the Scribes and Pharisees. They were the experts in religious beliefs and practices among the Jews, and yet these very earnest and diligent religious leaders were guilty of violating the Word of God because of the traditions they had developed.

Note here that these were people who claimed to support and teach the Scriptures, but Christ said because the traditions they had developed were contrary to the Scriptures, they were in rebellion against the Word of God: “And thus you invalidated the word of God for the sake of your tradition” (Matt. 15:6). This is the danger. When we have certain convictions or beliefs that are not true to the Word of God, but choose to hold to those convictions, to that extent we are guilty of nullifying the Word of God.

Submission to Biblical Authority

To the Pharisees, Jesus said, “You hypocrites, rightly did Isaiah prophesy of you, saying, ‘This people honors Me with their lips, but their heart is far away from Me. But in vain do they worship Me, teaching as doctrines the precepts of men’ ” (Matt. 15:7-9). The seriousness of the issue forces us to be very careful to come to the Word of God with the desire to know what God has said and taught and to obey it. If that is not the way we approach the Scriptures, then Jesus says we are hypocrites, professing with our lips something

that we deny with our hearts. But God looks at our hearts to see if we are sincere before Him.

Origins and Types of Baptism

Exploring the Origins

Before we look into what the Scriptures say about baptism, perhaps it would be helpful to study something of the background of baptism apart from Scripture. As the New Testament opens, baptism is already being practiced and everyone seems to recognize and understand its significance. There were no questions like, "What is baptism? Why would you be putting people in water?" They recognized it for what it was. Yet when the Old Testament closed four hundred years earlier, there was no baptism going on. Somewhere between the time the Old Testament closed and the New Testament opened, the practice of baptism was started and became a recognized and understood religious activity.

Jewish Proselytes. Two areas will help us better understand the possible origins of baptism. The first is Jewish proselyte baptism. In the first century, a Gentile convert to Judaism was required to undergo circumcision, to undergo a ritual bath or cleansing called baptism, and to offer a sacrifice. The ritual bath or baptism symbolized the cleansing from his defilement as a Gentile and his identification with the nation Israel. It is not known how early this practice developed. The information we have comes from the last half of the first century, but the indications seem to be that the practice goes further back and was being practiced even before the time of Christ. This helps us understand why the Jews had no questions about what baptism signified as John practiced it among the Jews. They had adopted the practice themselves to identify converts who had become true adherents to Judaism.

Mystery Religions. Baptism was also practiced in another religious area: the mystery religions. The mystery religions were actually a variety of religions, dominant over a period of about a thousand years, from the time of Alexander the Great to several centuries after Christ. Through all this time the mystery religions pervaded the Greek and Roman world.

The mystery religions were a mixture of Greek and Roman ideas, strongly influenced by Oriental thought. The Greek religious

system had, in effect, gone bankrupt. It started out strong, but its problem was in tending to emphasize the bright, sunny side of life—it made no provision for death or life after death. It made no provision for the dark side of life as we might call it. The Greeks soon came to realize that a religion that did nothing but speak about people who were in the bloom of health and about places where everything was going well was not worth much because it did not match reality. With the collapse of the Greek gods, the Oriental influence entered, and with it the developing of the system called mystery religions.

The reason we are interested in the mystery religions is because one of the requirements for an initiate entering a mystery religion was for the individual to be baptized. This symbolized a cleansing, as in Jewish proselyte baptism, and it also identified the person with that particular religious group. So with baptism already being practiced in the mystery religions, it would be common enough for the people to recognize its meaning.

It seems two things were present among both the Jewish proselyte baptism and the mystery religion baptism—they both symbolized that a cleansing or purification had taken place, and they were both a means of identification. They identified a person with a particular religious group or sect. In New Testament times baptism was probably a recognized practice, well understood by people because of its use among various religions.

Exploring the Types

In the New Testament Scriptures, baptism is a prominent subject. You should do a thorough study of baptism for yourself. If you were to take a concordance, you would find the word *baptism* appears 120 times in the New Testament. A good starting point is to make a list of all 120 references, then to read each one to see what it is talking about. There are at least five different kinds of baptism mentioned in the New Testament. As you categorize them yourself, you may come up with a more varied list, but here are five basic kinds as an example for you.

With Water. Three of these kinds of baptism are mentioned by John the Baptist in Matthew 3:11: “As for me, I baptize you in water for repentance, but He who is coming after me is mightier than I,

and I am not fit to remove His sandals; he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.” Note the first baptism here: “I baptize you with water.” This is the type we usually think of when we hear the word *baptism*. We think of people being put in water or sprinkled with water. We will be studying this kind of baptism in some detail.

With the Holy Spirit. Note the end of Matthew 3:11. John says when the Messiah comes, “He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.” So the second kind of baptism is Holy Spirit baptism. In our study of baptism in the New Testament, we must continually decide, “Is this passage referring to water baptism or to Holy Spirit baptism?” There are at least eleven references to Holy Spirit baptism in the New Testament. In our study of Holy Spirit baptism, we will examine these.

With Fire. The third kind of baptism mentioned at the end of Matthew 3:11 is baptism with fire. “He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.” The passage goes on to talk about judgment in Matthew 3:12, so the baptism of fire may be a reference to the judgment that the Messiah will bring. But the main point to note is that three different kinds of baptism are mentioned here.

With Suffering. Mark 10:38,39 speaks of a baptism of suffering: “Jesus said to them, ‘You do not know what you are asking for. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or to be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?’ And they said to Him, ‘We are able.’ And Jesus said to them, ‘The cup that I drink you shall drink; and you shall be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized.’ ” He was not talking about water baptism here. That had already taken place. He was talking about something else—probably suffering. He was talking about something different from the water baptism He had already experienced. The baptism He spoke of here had yet to take place.

Figurative Baptism. Finally, there exists evidence for another type of baptism. First Corinthians 10:2 speaks of Israel’s being baptized into Moses, perhaps referring to a figurative type of baptism. We will study some of the problem passages later.

The point to be noticed here is that simply because a passage contains the word *baptism* does not mean it is referring to Christian water baptism. There are different types of baptism, as we have seen so far in our study. When we come to a passage, we first have to

determine the type of baptism it is talking about. Is it water baptism? or perhaps Spirit baptism? maybe another type entirely? Even if we conclude that the passage does refer to water baptism, we need to recognize that there are different types of water baptism, also.

Water Baptism: Some Distinctions

Keeping all these types of baptism straight may sound rather complicated. But we must be careful to use words properly and in their proper settings to understand their meaning. As you will see, there is a key idea or element associated with the word *baptism* each time it is used, even among different types of baptism.

Baptism of John

There are at least three different kinds of water baptism mentioned in the New Testament. First, there is the baptism of John. “Now in those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the wilderness of Judea, saying, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.’ . . . And they were being baptized by him in the Jordan River, as they confessed their sins” (Matt. 3:1,2,6). This is the distinct baptism of John the Baptizer.

Baptism of Christ

Next, there is the baptism of Jesus Christ. “And after being baptized, Jesus went up immediately from the water” (Matt. 3:16). It is true that Jesus was baptized by John the Baptist in water, but as we will see later, the baptism of Jesus is different from the normal baptism that John practiced.

Christian Baptism

Finally, there is Christian baptism, the type we normally think of. In Acts 19, Paul discovered some disciples of John the Baptist who were still adhering to his message, long after he had been executed (see Acts 19:1-6). In Acts 19:3-5, Paul asked them, “ ‘Into what then were you baptized?’ And they said, ‘Into John’s baptism.’ And Paul said, ‘John baptized with the baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in Him who was coming after him, that is, in Jesus.’ And when they heard this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus.” Note what happened here. Even though these disciples

had been baptized with John's baptism, they are baptized again in the name of Jesus. Obviously, since they were rebaptized, there is a difference or a distinction between the baptism of John and Christian baptism.

Some would also add a fourth type of water baptism: Jewish baptism. Hebrews 6:2 contains a reference to *washings*, referring to various Jewish practices. The Greek word, however, is *baptisms*, so it is possible that there are actually four types of water baptism found in the New Testament.

Again, we need to recognize that there are various kinds of baptism. With each passage we come across as we are studying this subject, we must ask ourselves, What kind of baptism is it referring to? If we determine that it is speaking about water baptism, we have to ask ourselves, What kind of water baptism? Only when we have answered these questions will the pieces fit together in an understandable way.

The Baptism of John—Its Purpose

Let's examine more closely two types of water baptism, specifically, John's baptism and the baptism of Jesus Christ. Earlier we saw that there was a distinction made between the baptism of John and the baptism of Jesus. This distinction will help explain the true significance of water baptism.

The baptism of John played such an important part in his ministry that it became part of his title; today he is known as John the Baptist. Three basic facts about the ministry of John will help us understand what its purpose was. First, John's baptism was inseparably related to the coming of the Messiah and the Messianic Kingdom. "As it is written in Isaiah the prophet, 'Behold, I send My messenger before Your face, who will prepare Your way; the voice of one crying in the wilderness, "Make ready the way of the Lord, make His paths straight" ' " (Mark 1:2). Mark quotes from Isaiah, with an introduction from Malachi 3, and tells us that John is the messenger who goes before to make ready the way of the Lord. The ministry of John is to prepare the nation Israel for the coming of the Messiah. "And all the country of Judea was going out to him" (Mark 1:5).

The second fact about John's baptism is that it did not, in and of itself, provide cleansing from sin. Mark 1:4 calls it a baptism of

repentance for the forgiveness of sins. But the baptism itself did not provide the forgiveness. This is explained more clearly in Matthew 3.

In Matthew 3:6 we find many from Jerusalem and the surrounding areas were coming out into the wilderness to the Jordan to be baptized by John. “But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, ‘You brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Therefore bring forth fruit in keeping with repentance’ ” (vv. 7,8). John said the Pharisees and Sadducees were not fit to be baptized! Consider this: If baptism indeed brought salvation and forgiveness, then what these people really needed was to come to John to be baptized. But when they came, John rebuked them. He told them that what they really needed was repentance and the changed life that repentance brings. Only then could they receive baptism.

There is also the example of the Ephesian disciples mentioned in Acts 19, which we studied earlier. If John’s baptism brought cleansing and forgiveness of sins, they would not have needed to be rebaptized. They would have been cleansed and forgiven by the baptism with John. So John’s baptism is associated with repentance, but not with salvation.

Thirdly, John’s baptism is superseded by Christian baptism. Acts 19 clearly demonstrates this. The disciples of John were rebaptized with what we would call Christian baptism. It is clear that John’s baptism is different from Christian baptism.

The Role of Repentance

There are three things involved in John’s baptism that help us understand its purpose. First, there was repentance. John’s baptism indicated that a person had repented; he had changed his mind about his sin and his relationship with God. He was submitting himself to God and His Word for cleansing and forgiveness in preparation for the coming Messiah. But it was a repentance that had to be demonstrated with a changed life, “Bring forth fruit in keeping with repentance” (Matt. 3:8). So baptism was a testimony to repentance, a way of publicly saying, “I have changed my mind about my sinful condition. I am casting myself on the mercy of God and His salvation to prepare me for the coming Messiah.” This point will always hold true—baptism will be an indication of a repentance that has already

occurred, and repentance is what always brings salvation.

In Luke 24:45 we see again that repentance is the issue. “Then He opened their minds to understand the Scriptures, and He said to them, ‘Thus it is written, the Christ should suffer and rise again from the dead the third day; *and that repentance for forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in His name to all the nations*’ ” (emphasis mine). It is repentance, the changing of one’s mind, that brings salvation. Baptism simply testifies to that fact.

In Acts 3:19 Peter preaches, “Repent therefore and return, that your sins may be wiped away.” The wiping away of sins is connected to repentance. The same is true in Acts 5:31: “He is the one whom God exalted to His right hand as a Prince and a Savior, to grant repentance to Israel, and forgiveness of sins.” Throughout the Book of Acts, repentance is always the issue that determines forgiveness. It is that change of mind that results in believing in God and His salvation. For John, the testimony of that repentance was baptism.

The Role of Cleansing

The second thing to understand about John’s baptism is that it seemed to symbolize cleansing. It was a picture of the cleansing from sin that a person received when he believed in Jesus Christ. We see something of this symbolic cleansing in the Old Testament. In Leviticus 14:8,9 we find the example of a person cleansed from leprosy being washed in water, symbolizing the cleansing he had experienced. In Ezekiel 36:25,26 God promised water for cleansing the nation Israel. Those who were coming to John to be baptized recognized it as symbolizing that they had been cleansed from their sin through repentance and faith in God.

The Role of Identification

The third focus in John’s baptism was identification. Those who were baptized by John were being identified with him and his message concerning a coming Messiah and a coming Kingdom. This is a crucial idea in baptism—identification. Do you remember the disciples of John asked, “ ‘Into what then were you baptized?’ And they said, ‘Into John’s baptism’ ” (Acts 19:3). They were saying through John’s baptism that they were identified with him and his

message, as opposed to the message and baptism of Christ. Paul recognized this and clarified it. He then explained what John's message was and asked them if that is what they identified with. So the baptism of John identified those who were preparing for the coming of the Messiah.

The Baptism of Christ—Its Uniqueness

The baptism of John prepared the nation for the coming Messiah. But what about the baptism of Jesus? What was its purpose? One of the most often-used statements about a person being baptized is, "You are following Christ in baptism." But can we really *follow* Christ in baptism? As we study the baptism of Christ, we will see that His baptism was a special event—unique and unrepeatable.

Matthew 3 records the baptism of Jesus. As we saw earlier, John's baptism signified cleansing from sin, repentance and identification. But Jesus had no sin to repent of or be cleansed from, so obviously His baptism was going to be different from the normal baptism that John carried out. The only alternative left is identification. The significance of Christ's baptism was that it identified with John and his message.

Christ's Early Identification

We can review Jesus' identification with Israel through the few windows we are given into His early life. When He was eight days old, He was circumcised in fulfillment of the requirements of the Old Testament Law (see Luke 2). Next, when He was forty days old, He was presented to the Lord in the temple and redeemed there with the proper sacrifice. When God slew the firstborn of Egypt, He spared the firstborn of the Israelites, and He commanded them to either redeem their firstborn with a sacrifice or slay them (see Ex. 13:13). When Jesus was twelve years old, we find Him in the temple at Passover debating with the scholars, possibly entering the responsibilities of an adult male.

Christ's Identification in Baptism

The pattern we see here is one of Jesus identifying Himself in significant ways with the nation Israel, and His baptism by John follows this practice. The fact that He is about thirty years of age at

the time of His baptism is significant because the Old Testament tells us that a male could not begin to carry out his priestly functions until he was thirty years of age. Because Jesus is the Prophet, Priest and King of the nation, it would be fitting for Him to begin His ministry at thirty years of age.

In Matthew 3:14, as Jesus comes to John to be baptized, note John's response: "But John tried to prevent Him, saying, 'I have need to be baptized by You, and do you come to me?'" John realized his need to be identified with Christ, his need to be cleansed by Christ. Jesus' response is important: "But Jesus answering said to him, 'Permit it at this time; for in this way it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness'" (Matt. 3:15). Jesus recognized that it was right and proper. In fact, it was obligatory for a believer in Israel to be baptized by John. The true believers in the nation Israel were going out to be baptized by John, indicating that they were trusting God and anticipating the coming Messiah to bring in the Kingdom. And now, following His previous pattern of identifying with the nation in important ways, Jesus is baptized by John. In doing so, He identifies Himself with the message of John—"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matt. 3:2). He identified Himself with the believing remnant in Israel who were prepared for the coming Kingdom.

The concept of identification is key here. Jesus is not indicating repentance or cleansing by being baptized, but He is identifying with John the Baptist and the message he is proclaiming. In the area of identification, Christ's baptism is like John's baptism.

The Inauguration of the Messiah

But there is another dimension to the baptism of Christ that is totally unique to Him. It not only identified Him with believing Israel, but it was also His inauguration into His messianic office. Understanding this answers a lot of interesting questions. For example, did Jesus really make clay birds when He was a little boy, then touch them and have them fly away? The answer of Scripture is "No," because Jesus did not begin to function as Messiah until He was thirty years of age at His baptism by John. Before that time He never offered the Kingdom to Israel. He did not travel about preaching repentance. John 2 tells us that the first miracle Jesus performed was turning water into wine at Cana of Galilee after His baptism by John.

Jesus' baptism by John marks the beginning, or the inauguration, of the public ministry of Christ.

Note several key things that happened during Jesus' baptism. First, the Spirit came upon Him like a dove. "And after being baptized, Jesus went up immediately from the water; and behold, the heavens were opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending as a dove, and coming upon Him" (Matt. 3:16). The Spirit could have come upon Jesus without any visible representation, of course, but John would not have seen it. In another passage we see that John had been told by God that the One upon whom he saw the Spirit of God coming would be the Messiah, so the visible representation was very important for him (see John 1:33). The descending of the Spirit is a fulfillment of Isaiah 42:1: "Behold, My Servant, whom I uphold; My chosen one in whom My soul delights. I have put My Spirit upon Him; He will bring forth justice to the nations."

It is significant that a dove is used to picture the coming of the Spirit because the dove is the bird of sacrifice. It is a reminder here that even as the Spirit comes upon Jesus, anointing Him for His messianic ministry, it will involve the sacrifice of Himself to pay the penalty for sin.

Also in Matthew 3:17, along with the descending of the Spirit, a voice came out of the heavens saying, "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well-pleased." This statement is a combination of two messianic passages—Psalm 2:7 and Isaiah 42:1. It amounts to a coronation formula: God announces from heaven that Jesus is His beloved Son, hence, the Messiah; then Jesus begins His messianic ministry, offering the Kingdom to Israel.

At the beginning of His public ministry, Jesus quoted Isaiah 61 at a public reading of Scripture: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me, because He anointed Me to preach the gospel to the poor. He has sent Me to proclaim release to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind, to set free those who are downtrodden, to proclaim the favorable year of the Lord.' And He closed the book, and gave it back to the attendant, and sat down; and the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed upon Him. And He began to say to them, 'Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing' " (Luke 4:18-21).

After His baptism He had clearly embarked upon His messianic ministry. The Spirit of the Lord had come upon Him, and the

voice from heaven had confirmed Him. He had begun to offer the Kingdom to Israel.

Baptism's Role Today

The baptism of Jesus was unique and different from the baptism of John as normally practiced. It was also different from normal Christian baptism. When a believer is baptized today, he is not being identified with the message and ministry of John the Baptist, nor is he being inaugurated into a messianic office. This is why it is not theologically correct to say, "We are baptized because Jesus was baptized." If that were the only reason for baptism, there would be no such thing today. We should not be baptized simply because Christ was baptized, any more than we should be crucified because Christ was crucified. It was a unique part of His messianic ministry.

But baptism did play a key part in what God was doing up to that point in His people's lives, both in the ministry of John and in the ministry of His own Son. And even today, baptism continues to occupy a significant place to those who become believers in Jesus Christ, related as it is in a special way to the ministry of the Holy Spirit.

C H A P T E R T W O

The Truth About Holy Spirit Baptism

Jesus spent much time in the last days of His life telling His disciples about the coming of the Holy Spirit. “And I will ask the Father, and He will give you another Helper (another Comforter, another One like Me) that He may be with you forever; that is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it does not behold Him or know Him, but you know Him because He abides with you, and will be in you” (John 14:16,17). But what exactly is the ministry of the Holy Spirit? How is His ministry made manifest in this day and age?

The New Ministry of the Spirit

The Holy Spirit has always been at work in the world. For example, we know that John the Baptist was filled with the Holy Spirit from his mother’s womb (see Luke 1:15). The Spirit came upon numerous Old Testament figures like David and the great prophets. When we talk about the Holy Spirit coming upon the disciples, as in John 14, we must realize that He is assuming a unique and special ministry, different from that which He had performed in the past. Jesus speaks of this new ministry of the Holy Spirit in John 14:17: “He abides with you, and will be in you.” As we study the ministry and manifestations of the Holy Spirit, His indwelling of believers will remain central to our understanding of His work.

In our previous study of baptism, we saw that the way in which the Spirit enters our lives is by Holy Spirit baptism. John the Baptist prophesied in Matthew 3:11 concerning this: “As for me, I baptize you with water for repentance, but He who is coming after me is mightier than I, and I am not fit to remove His sandals; He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.” John himself did not baptize with the Holy Spirit, but he did predict that it would take place.

Acts 1 records Jesus’ words to His disciples concerning the baptism of the Holy Spirit: “And gathering them together, He commanded them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait for what the Father had promised, ‘Which,’ He said, ‘you heard of from me; for John baptized with water, but you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now’ ” (vv.4,5). Jesus had spent three years in ministry on the earth. He had died and was raised from the dead, but there still had been no baptism by the Holy Spirit. Even His own inner circle of disciples had not experienced it, but He told them that it would happen “not many days from now.”

Since they obviously had not received the Holy Spirit in Acts 1, which records Jesus’ words immediately preceding His ascension to the Father, what then is John 20:21,22 speaking of? “ ‘Peace be with you; as the Father has sent Me, I also send you.’ And when He had said this, He breathed on them, and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit.’ ” In Acts, Jesus told the disciples they had not yet received the Spirit, but in John 20, before the incident in Acts, he told them to receive the Holy Spirit.

Most likely, Jesus is making a prophetic reference in John 20:22. He is telling the disciples what will happen to them in the near future. This idea is supported by John 16:7, “But I tell you the truth, it is to your advantage that I go away; for if I do not go away, the Helper shall not come to you; but if I go, I will send Him to you.” The coming of the Holy Spirit in His new and unique ministry was contingent upon the departure of Christ. Christ had not yet ascended in John 20, so He could not have meant for the disciples to receive the Spirit immediately as He breathed upon them. Jesus was speaking of the time when He would ascend to the Father and send the Holy Spirit.

The Occurrences of Spirit Baptism

So when did this event finally occur? Acts 11 records the account of Peter after he had preached the Gospel to the house of Cornelius (see Acts 10). Essentially, Peter was being rebuked for preaching to the Gentiles, something the believing Jews at Jerusalem disagreed with. Peter related what had happened with Cornelius, “And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them, *just as He did upon us at the beginning*” (Acts 11:15, emphasis mine). This refers to the Jews in Acts 2—when the Holy Spirit came upon them and they began to speak with tongues. Peter said the same thing had happened to the Gentile Cornelius and his household.

Peter continues, “And I remembered the word of the Lord, how He used to say, ‘John baptized with water, but you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit.’ If God therefore gave to them the same gift as He gave to us also after believing in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could stand in God’s way?” (Acts 11:16,17). Peter said the Gentiles also experienced the fulfillment of Jesus’ promise, “You shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit,” the same promise that was fulfilled in the Jewish disciples in Acts 2. There the Holy Spirit came upon *them*, and they began to speak with other tongues. Peter said the experience recorded in Acts 2 was the baptism of the Holy Spirit for the Jews. Acts 10 records the baptism of the Spirit among the Gentiles.

The Significance of Spirit Baptism

What is significant about the baptism of the Holy Spirit? First, it makes us members of the Body of Christ: “For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free, and we were all made to drink of one Spirit” (1 Cor. 12:13). It is amazing to think that there are writers who believe this passage is talking about water baptism, although it clearly says, “by one Spirit we were baptized.” They must be wearing blinders! The passage obviously refers to Spirit baptism, the baptism that has placed us into the Body of Christ.

Unification

This passage in 1 Corinthians emphasizes the unity of the Body of Christ amidst its diversity. In 1 Corinthians 12:12 Paul talks about

the body having many parts, while still remaining a single body. Because we have been placed into the spiritual Body of Christ by the Holy Spirit, we have become members of His Body. This is the baptism of the Holy Spirit. It makes us part of the Body of Christ, part of the Church over which Jesus Christ is the head. Under His leadership we have unity and oneness amidst diversity.

Identification

Another item of significance about the baptism of the Holy Spirit is that it identifies us with Christ in His death, burial and resurrection. “Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus have been baptized into His death?” (Rom. 6:3). Is this speaking of water baptism or Spirit baptism? You will recall that in 1 Corinthians 12:13 we were baptized *by one Spirit* into the body of Christ. So when we read in Romans 6 that we have been baptized into Christ Jesus, we should understand that it is a baptism of the Spirit, not of water.

Romans 6 continues, “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, knowing this, that our old self was crucified with Him” (vv. 4-6).

Paul is telling us that we have been identified with Christ by the Spirit of God. Remember that one of the key ideas in baptism is identification. In Romans 6 we see that we have been identified with Him; we have been united with Him. Paul is saying that when a person believes in Jesus Christ, he is identified with Christ by the Spirit of God, and that God views him as having died, having been crucified with Christ. He views him as having been buried with Christ when Christ was buried and raised up to newness along with Christ in His resurrection. This is how God can justly declare us forgiven. Romans 6:23 states, “The wages of sin is death,” and everyone who comes to Christ dies. When does this happen? When a person places his faith in Christ. At that moment the Spirit identifies the new believer with Christ, and the payment for sin by Christ is credited to him.

Spirit baptism is a key function of the Spirit. The spiritual identification that He brings about provides our forgiveness. That is why we can be a part of the Body of Christ. Two functions occur simultaneously: The moment a person places his faith in Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit identifies him with Christ in His death, burial and resurrection. At that time the Spirit also places that person within the Body of Christ. From that time on, the Holy Spirit indwells the believer, and the believer dwells in Him.

Another passage dealing with these two functions is Colossians 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." Again, we must ask ourselves, what type of baptism is mentioned here? The context of the passage gives us the answer. Colossians 2:11 reads, "And in Him you were also circumcised with a circumcision made without hands." Obviously, this passage refers to a spiritual reality. We know that circumcision is a physical act, but the circumcision Paul speaks of is made without hands. It is a spiritual circumcision. So when verse 12 continues speaking of baptism, it is a spiritual baptism as well. It parallels Romans 6 in content, examining the idea of our being placed in Christ and identified with Him by the Spirit of God. Part of the confusion on the relationship of baptism to salvation is a failure to understand the context of the passages we are talking about. These passages refer to Spirit baptism which is essential to salvation.

Essential for Salvation

In 1 Corinthians 12:13 Paul says, "By one Spirit we were all baptized into one body." Note that this Spirit baptism is something that had already happened among the Corinthians. But in 1 Corinthians 3:1, Paul calls the Corinthians babies, fleshly Christians. From this we see that the baptism of the Holy Spirit is not something that happens later to a believer that elevates him to a new plane of Christian life. If it were, how could the Corinthians still be fleshly? The baptism of the Spirit introduces people to the Christian life. It is what makes people Christians.

"By one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free, and we were all made to drink of one Spirit" (1 Cor. 12:13). Not only are we baptized with the Holy Spirit, but we also drink, or partake, of the Spirit. The sig-

nificance of this is found in Romans 8:9: “But if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Him.” It is that simple. If you do not partake of the Spirit of God, you cannot belong to Him. This is a universal truth for all believers.

In light of the Scriptures, we can conclude that a person is baptized with the Holy Spirit the moment he recognizes and believes that he is a sinner for whom Jesus Christ died. The Spirit of God identifies him with Christ in His death, burial and resurrection and makes him a part of the Body of Christ. This is the baptism of the Holy Spirit.

The baptism of the Holy Spirit occurs once in a person’s life—at the moment of salvation. It can be compared to physical birth. We have many interesting, exciting and unique experiences as human beings, but one that is never repeated is birth. It happens once and it is done. It is the same with Holy Spirit baptism. We are born into God’s family and it is done. The penalty for sin does not have to be paid twice. Hebrews 10 addresses the fact that Christ has died once for all. So when we believe in Him, we are forgiven once for all.

The Evidence of Spirit Baptism

What is the evidence of the baptism of the Holy Spirit? Those who teach that the baptism of the Holy Spirit follows salvation as a distinct and separate work often teach that the ministry of the Spirit is accompanied by speaking in tongues. How does this issue of tongues fit in with the baptism of the Holy Spirit?

Many earnest Christians are giving their lives to preaching to other believers that they must be baptized with the Spirit and obtain the gift of speaking in tongues. But is it necessary to speak in tongues to prove you have been baptized with the Spirit? Even if the gift of tongues occurs at salvation, is it the evidence that proves you have been saved and baptized by the Holy Spirit? Three passages in Acts will help clarify this matter.

Baptism of the Jews

The first is Acts 2. What really happened on the Day of Pentecost? “And when the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly there came from heaven a noise like a violent, rushing wind, and it filled the whole house where

they were sitting. And there appeared to them tongues as of fire distributing themselves, and they rested on each one of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit was giving them utterance” (Acts 2:1–4).

On the Day of Pentecost a mighty wind filled the room, and fiery tongues appeared above the heads of the disciples. These were evidently unrepeated experiences, so not everything that happened the first time the baptism of the Spirit occurred is happening today. Therefore, those who use Hebrews 13:8, “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, and today, yes and forever,” to imply that everything must be repeatable are not being consistent. You can turn your television on and see people speak in tongues, but you probably will not see fiery tongues above their heads. You will not see the papers blowing off their stands as the mighty wind rushes through. So it cannot be said that everything is being repeated as it happened in Acts 2.

As far as we can tell, rushing winds and fiery tongues are experiences never repeated after Acts 2, but the speaking of tongues is the focal point here. The word *tongues*, used in Acts 2:4 is the Greek word *glossa*. We carry it over into English as glossalalia—a combination of two words, *glossa*, meaning tongue, and *laleo*, which means to speak. In Acts 2, the disciples began to speak with tongues. But what is speaking with a tongue? The word is used either of the physical tongue in your mouth or of the sound that the tongue makes. It is often used of the language that is spoken with the tongue.

Acts 2:6 continues: “And when this sound occurred, the multitude came together, and were bewildered, because they were each one hearing them speak in his own language.” The word translated “language” is the Greek word *dialektos*, which corresponds to the English word “dialect.” It is used again in Acts 2:8, “And how is it that we each hear them in our own language to which we were born?” *Dialektos* always means a language or a native language. In Acts 1:19 it is used to distinguish between two names, *Hakeldama* and “Field of Blood,” with *Hakeldama* identified as the name given by the people in their own language (*dialektos*).

Since this is the meaning of the word in Acts 1, it follows that it would be used in the same way in Acts 2. So the people who were hearing the disciples speak in tongues were actually hearing them

speaking a language. There are those who claim that the gift mentioned in Acts 2 was a gift of hearing that enabled the people to hear the disciples speaking in their particular languages. But to do that, one would have to reverse the meaning of the passages with the Spirit pouring Himself out on the unbelievers instead of on the disciples. Those who support this are not being faithful to what Scripture is saying.

This is what happened in Acts 2: After the Spirit came upon the disciples, they began speaking in all the different languages of those who were present in Jerusalem. This was true even though those languages were not native to them and had not been learned by them. This is the gift of tongues.

Baptism of the Gentiles

Acts 10:46 records a second account of the gift of tongues, this time at the house of Cornelius: “For they (Jewish believers) were hearing them speaking with tongues and exalting God.” Were they speaking in earthly languages here? In Acts 11:15 Peter says the same thing happened to the Gentiles that had happened to the Jews in Acts 2. Do you think if Cornelius had simply begun babbling away, the Jews would have accepted it as corresponding to their own experience? No! Especially in light of the fact that babbling tongues were present in the pagan religions of the day. It had to be the same phenomenon that the Jews experienced in order to convince those skeptics that salvation had indeed been extended to the Gentiles.

Baptism of John’s Disciples

The third reference to speaking in tongues associated with the baptism of the Holy Spirit is found in Acts 19:6 where Paul had just seen the conversion of the disciples of John the Baptist: “And when Paul had laid his hands upon them, the Holy Spirit came on them, and they began speaking with tongues and prophesying.” It must have been the same phenomenon as in Acts 2 and 10. To say that it had ceased by this time to be a language presents a problem of inconsistency. That would be an arbitrary change, an especially glaring one, in light of the fact that *glossa* is used many times outside the context of gifts to refer to languages (see Rev. 5:9). Under the baptism of the Spirit in Acts 2, the Jews spoke in other earthly languages.

In Acts 10 the Gentiles spoke in other earthly languages. In order to say that by Acts 19 the gift was no longer an earthly language would require strong support.

There are teachers who claim that the tongues mentioned in 1 Corinthians had ceased to be earthly languages. “To another the effecting of miracles, and to another prophecy, and to another the distinguishing of spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, and to another the interpretation of tongues” (1 Cor. 12:10). The word in question here is “kinds.” It is translated from the Greek word *genos*, which means nationality, race, kindred or people. In effect, Paul is saying that there are different nationalities of tongues, languages that are characteristic of different peoples. Some have taken this word to mean something quite different, but its consistent use in Scripture is to refer to nationalities. First Corinthians 12 is in agreement with the other passages in Acts. They all support the fact that the gift of tongues was the supernatural ability to communicate in a language that had never been learned by the speaker.

The Testimony of Tongues

How do we answer the argument, “The gift of tongues always accompanies the baptism of the Holy Spirit?” After all, we have just seen that in every instance recorded in Acts, the baptism of the Holy Spirit was indeed accompanied by tongues. Many groups claim that the only valid evidence of the baptism of the Holy Spirit is the gift of tongues.

When approaching this argument, ask if we are speaking about biblical tongues. As we have seen, the gift of tongues was the ability to speak in an earthly language that you had never been taught. There are many cults and pagan religions around the world that use babbling speech as part of their worship systems. Just because some people may put together syllables and sounds and call it language does not mean it is the biblical phenomenon. There are people, even among those who are a part of the tongues movement, who have taken tape recorders into tongues meetings all over the world. These tapes have been analyzed by linguists, and they have not been able to determine that there is any language involved with the practice. It has been determined that the sounds usually come from the types of sounds that are native to the speakers’ original language. And

remember, according to our study of the Scriptures on this matter, if it is not an earthly language, it is not the biblical phenomenon.

Their Value in the Past

“But,” you may ask, “why would that phenomenon have occurred in Acts and not occur today?” There are several reasons. First, it clearly demonstrated that God had poured out His Spirit as He had promised. This was a period of transition. Christ had promised to send the Holy Spirit. John the Baptist had prophesied that it would happen. So without some form of visible evidence, how were the disciples to know when the baptism had taken place? The Spirit of God cannot be seen or touched, so unless He did something to manifest His presence on those occasions, no one would have known the baptism of the Spirit had begun. In Acts, each time a major group is brought into the Body of Christ through the baptism of the Spirit, it is given visible evidence. It happened to the Jews in Acts 2, and perhaps to the Samaritans in Acts 8. Tongues are not mentioned there, but evidently there was some visible evidence of their identification with Christ. In Acts 10 it appeared among the Gentiles. It was especially necessary that there be a visible, undeniable confirmation that Gentiles were saved just like Jews, so they received the gift of tongues. And in Acts 19 it was the disciples of John the Baptist who received the gift. How could they be sure that the Messiah had come and that they should believe in Jesus of Nazareth? The visible confirmation was given to them as well.

So on specific occasions the Spirit substantiated the fact that all these different groups were being brought together into one body. This avoided the creation of a Jewish church, a Samaritan church, a Gentile church and a John-the-Baptist church. They were all united into one body. It is also important to note that the baptism of the Spirit did not occur until an apostle was present. The Church was united under the authority of apostolic leadership. This was crucial, because it gave unity to the Body of Christ from the beginning.

Their Value Today

These supernatural evidences were necessary when the Scriptures were not yet complete. Hebrews 2:4 says that supernatural signs accompanied those who received the Word of God and who

were communicating it to the rest of the Church. These were the apostles. This conforms to what Paul says in 2 Corinthians 12:12, "The signs of a true apostle were performed among you with all perseverance, by signs and wonders and miracles." The evidence of a true apostle was the miraculous. We do not have apostles today, in spite of what people say, because according to 1 Corinthians 9, an apostle had to have personally seen Jesus Christ after His resurrection from the dead. Therefore, if apostles are gone, we can assume the evidences of Apostleship are gone as well.

The New Testament also indicates that not everyone who was baptized with the Spirit spoke in tongues. "For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body" (1 Cor. 12:13). Paul did not say the problem with the Corinthians was they needed the baptism of the Holy Spirit. He said that they had all been baptized with the Spirit, but they did not all speak with tongues. Consider 1 Corinthians 12:29,30. In this passage Paul mentions that God has appointed the different members in the Body and has placed each one as He wishes. These are the gifts. He mentions some of the gifts, then asks, "All are not apostles, are they? All are not prophets, are they? . . . All do not speak with tongues, do they?" The way these questions are phrased implies a negative answer. All do not speak in tongues, do they? No. But all the Corinthians had been baptized with the Holy Spirit according to 1 Corinthians 12:13, yet in verse 30 he says not all speak in tongues. So even among the Corinthians the baptism of the Holy Spirit was not necessarily evidenced with tongues.

The people who experienced the gift of tongues were involved in a transitional period. The same type of thing happens today when we pass a new law or institute a new practice. Everyone entering the program after a certain time is under the new law, but those who had been previously involved with the old law go through a transitional period. The disciples were believers in Jesus Christ, saved men, before there was a baptism of the Holy Spirit. They ministered and served Jesus Christ during His earthly ministry but were not baptized with the Holy Spirit until Acts 2. There had to be a change for them. But after this period of transition, all who believed in Jesus Christ received the baptism of the Holy Spirit at the time of their salvation. That is why we do not find anywhere in the Scriptures a command to be baptized with the Holy Spirit. You would not know

this by watching some preachers today who are constantly exhorting people to “get the second blessing.” The New Testament never commands us to be baptized with the Holy Spirit because the command to believe in Jesus Christ takes care of it. We are commanded to be constantly filled with the Spirit, being under His control, but that is different from the baptism of the Spirit.

In summary, the baptism of the Holy Spirit is the ministry that places a person into the Body of Christ. It is the ministry of the Spirit that identifies an individual with Jesus Christ in His death, burial and resurrection. Baptism of the Holy Spirit first occurred in Acts 2 when the Church began. The baptism of the Holy Spirit was accompanied by the supernatural ability to speak in earthly languages foreign to the speaker as the Gospel spread to new groups, Jews, Samaritans and Gentiles. That is the pattern in the Book of Acts. The baptism of the Holy Spirit was not always accompanied by tongues, even in the New Testament; the Corinthians were evidence of this. The baptism of the Holy Spirit depends solely on a person’s faith in Jesus Christ. It is necessary for salvation, but the only way you can have it is by recognizing that Christ died for you and placing your faith in Him. In that instant of time, that work of the Spirit will occur.

The baptism of the Spirit is what is called a non-experiential work. This does not mean that you cannot experience it, but it is not something you necessarily feel or observe. It is something God does for you with His Spirit in identifying you with Jesus Christ so He can declare you forgiven and cleansed and part of His own family.

The Testimony of Changed Character

What is the evidence of the baptism of the Holy Spirit? It is not speaking in tongues. It is a transformed life. That is the point of Romans 6. If you have died with Christ and have been buried with Christ, you have been raised with Christ to newness of life. “Even so consider yourselves to be dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus” (Rom. 6:11). A life lived in conformity to the character of God is the evidence that you have been baptized with the Holy Spirit, because that is the evidence that you have been the recipient of God’s grace.

C H A P T E R T H R E E

The Truth About Christian Water Baptism

So far in our study of the subject of baptism, we have seen several significant factors. We have studied the differences between John's baptism and Christ's baptism. John baptized in water for repentance in view of the coming Messiah and the coming Kingdom. Jesus Christ was baptized in water by John, but for a unique and special purpose as He began His messianic ministry and identified Himself with the believers in Israel. We have also studied Holy Spirit baptism. We noted that this ministry of the Holy Spirit identifies a person with Christ in His death, burial and resurrection the moment he believes.

The next area to be studied is one that divides much of Christendom—Christian water baptism. This issue raises much debate and discussion. The debate is certainly not new; it dates back to the early periods of church history—over such matters as the importance of baptism, its significance and the modes that should be practiced.

But who is our supreme authority? Remember, the real issue is not what a particular church believes or practices. We must determine what God has said about the matter, because He is the supreme authority. What does the Word say about baptism in connection with being a Christian? Instead of interpreting Scripture in light of traditional dogma, we must study the Scriptures and adjust and

submit ourselves to what they say regarding baptism.

We will be studying three aspects of Christian baptism: its importance, its significance, and finally, the mode to be practiced. Of the three, the latter is probably the least important. The Scriptures do teach specifically about the mode of baptism, but it is not equal in importance to the first two areas.

The Importance of Water Baptism

Matthew 28:18–20, often called the Great Commission, records Christ’s instructions to His disciples shortly before His ascension to the Father. “And Jesus came up and spoke to them, saying, ‘All authority has been given to me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.’ ” This passage contains a single command: make disciples. Three words make up this command: going, baptizing and teaching. The way in which disciples are made is through the preaching of the Gospel. A person becomes a disciple by believing the truth concerning Jesus Christ, so *disciple* is a synonym for *believer* or *Christian*. When Matthew 28 says “making disciples,” it is actually saying “make Christians.”

These verses tell us that wherever we are or wherever we go we are to be making believers. Wherever God has placed us, or will place us, we are to be spreading the Good News of the Gospel so that men and women can believe and become disciples. It is characteristic of a disciple to then be baptized and taught, but it is not part of his becoming a Christian.

Public Identification

In Matthew 28 Christ addresses baptism: “Baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit” (v.19). Again, the key idea in baptism is identification. A name represents all a person is and stands for, so to be “baptized in the name of” a person or group means to be identified with that person or group. In Christian baptism it involves identifying yourself with the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

The method the disciples used to carry out this command is

unfolded in the Book of Acts. As we shall see, baptism involves a public identification, an open declaration by a person who has decided to follow Christ. The thought of an unbaptized believer is foreign to the New Testament. It was expected and demanded that if a person had indeed believed in Christ, his faith would be made evident through public baptism. Conversely, without water baptism it would be questionable whether the person had really understood and believed in Jesus Christ. As we study Acts, this pattern will be seen over and over again—those who believe will be baptized.

In Acts 2:14–36 Peter explains in some depth the Gospel, the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. He points to the Old Testament to testify to the fact that it was God’s plan that His Son die on a cross to pay the penalty for sin and then be raised from the dead. As Peter preaches, the Spirit of God takes this truth and drives it home to the heart of those listening.

Acts 2:37 continues, “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?’ ” They understood that they were guilty of crucifying the Lord of Glory, the Messiah of Israel, although it was part of His perfect plan. They then turned to Peter for help. His answer to them was, “Repent, and be baptized” (Acts 2:38). Those who received the words of Peter were baptized. In the future we will study some of the difficult passages that seem to imply that baptism is necessary for salvation, but it is important now to understand the order that Peter stresses—repent, change your mind about Christ and your sin, believe in Him and then be baptized. It was assumed here that if you had believed in Christ and your repentance was genuine, you would testify to it in water baptism.

Acts 8 records the experience of Philip as he preached the Gospel in Samaria. “But when they believed Philip preaching the good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were being baptized, men and women alike. And even Simon himself believed; and after being baptized, he continued on with Philip” (vv.12,13). Those who heard the Gospel as Philip preached it were baptized. The order is clear. The Gospel was presented, people believed and were baptized. There was a close association between becoming a believer and being baptized. In fact, it was an immediate identification.

Immediate Identification

As we continue through Acts, it is important to note that it was the common practice to baptize converts as soon as they professed faith in Christ. There is value in this scriptural pattern. Jesus said that when we make disciples we are to baptize them. Christianity today allows for a lapse that tends to spread into years. We lose something when that happens, because in our examples in Acts, baptism immediately made public a person's commitment to Christ. There was no room for secret disciples. No hemming and hawing for weeks saying, "How am I going to tell my family that I have believed in Christ?" The secret was already out! There was nothing to do but go home and say, "I have trusted Christ and have been publicly identified with Him in baptism." This brought an immediate break with family and friends and former religious activities. Right at the beginning, it helped clarify the issue, which is healthy and helpful for the growth and development of a new Christian.

Example of the Ethiopian Eunuch. In Acts 8 we find Philip preaching to the Ethiopian eunuch. The eunuch is reading Isaiah 53 concerning the suffering and death of the Son of God, the Messiah of Israel. "And the Spirit said to Philip, 'Go up and join this chariot.' And when Philip had run up, he heard him [the eunuch] reading Isaiah the prophet, and said, 'Do you understand what you are reading?' And he said, 'Well, how could I, unless someone guides me?' And he invited Philip to come up and sit with him. . . . 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?'" (Acts 8:29–36).

Philip explained the significance of Isaiah 53 to the eunuch, and proved to him from the Scriptures that Jesus was the Christ. Later as they approached some water, the eunuch immediately thought of identifying himself with Christ. Acts 8:38 records the actual baptism.

In most Bibles, Acts 8:37 will be noted in some way to identify it as a later addition. It is not found in manuscripts dated earlier than the sixth century. We can however, trace to the second century the content of the conversation of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch, so the concept of this part of the conversation is early, even though

the manuscript evidence is late. It seems this verse was added to help clarify the issue that if you believed with your heart you could be baptized, but it was probably not part of the original text of Acts.

The point to note is that immediately after he heard the Gospel and made a positive response of faith, the eunuch was baptized. This was helpful to him. He was returning to Ethiopia as a high official in the court of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians. Some may ask, "What good would this do back in Ethiopia? He was baptized by Philip and then Philip left; how is that a public testimony?"

As a high public official of the queen, the eunuch would not be traveling alone. He would have an entourage accompanying him. In front of them all he had identified himself as a follower of Jesus Christ. Upon returning to Ethiopia his testimony would be out. The servants and those accompanying him would have witnessed the fact that he was publicly baptized as a follower of Jesus Christ. From the beginning his testimony would be known.

Example of Paul. In Acts 9 we have the example of the Apostle Paul and his conversion on the Damascus road. After smiting Paul with blindness and sending him on to Damascus, God sent Ananias the prophet to minister to him. Ananias laid his hands on Paul and said, " 'Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on the road by which you were coming, has sent me so that you may regain your sight, and be filled with the Holy Spirit.' And immediately there fell from his eyes something like scales, and he regained his sight, and he arose and was baptized" (Acts 9:17,18). As Paul regained his physical sight he was also given spiritual sight—new life. The point is that he was immediately baptized. There was no hesitation, no passing of time. Can you imagine the impact as the word spread among the Jews that Saul, the persecutor of the Christians, had been baptized as a follower of Jesus Christ? But it was out in the open, right at the beginning.

Example of Cornelius. Consider another example in Acts 10. Peter had preached the Gospel to the house of Cornelius. As they believed the message, the Holy Spirit fell upon them. Then Peter said, " 'Surely no one can refuse the water for these to be baptized who have received the Holy Spirit just as we did, can he?' And he *ordered* them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ" (vv. 47,48, emphasis added). The reason they could be baptized was because

they had received the Holy Spirit. Salvation had already occurred. Since they had received the Spirit, Peter ordered them to be baptized. It followed immediately upon their profession of faith in Jesus Christ.

Other Examples. At the risk of belaboring the point, turn to Acts 16, the story of the Philippian jailer. The jailer asked Paul and Silas, “ ‘Sirs, what must I do to be saved?’ And they said, ‘Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you shall be saved, you and your household.’ And they spoke the word of the Lord to him together with all who were in his house. And he took them that very hour of the night and washed their wounds, and *immediately* he was baptized, he and all his household” (vv. 30–33, emphasis added). The end of verse 34 tells us the jailer believed in God with his whole household. He was immediately baptized because he believed the message concerning Christ.

Acts 18:8 reads, “And Crispus, the leader of the synagogue, believed in the Lord with all his household, and many of the Corinthians when they heard were believing and being baptized.” Those who heard the message and believed it were immediately baptized.

A final example is found in Acts 19, with the disciples of John the Baptist: “And when they heard this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus” (Acts 19:5).

The pattern is consistent. The disciples were given their instructions in Matthew 28. As they obeyed those instructions, they preached the Gospel wherever they went. People believed the Gospel and were saved, and they were immediately baptized. This pattern is set down by Scripture, and it is a pattern we should follow today. There is great value in believers being baptized as soon as they trust Christ. If someone believes in Jesus Christ this week, he should be baptized this week. It is good not only for the sake of public testimony but for the individual as well, in the open stand he is driven to take.

Breaking With the Past

Perhaps you are thinking, “But my family just won’t understand!” That is part of the purpose of baptism. Do you think these first-century Jewish families understood it? It created a break. “But,”

you say, “wouldn’t it be better if we didn’t have that break? Can’t we just work it in gradually?” Whenever we come up with “Plan B” to God’s “Plan A,” we are in trouble. It may seem logical to do it that way, with subtlety, but Christ said we are to be publicly identified as His followers through baptism. In Acts we find that this was done immediately. God’s plan is best. For one thing, it takes pressure off the new believer. From the beginning his conversion is out in the open. There is no need to worry about “how to break the ice.” The ice has already been broken.

The Significance of Water Baptism

Baptism is important because Christ commanded it. But what is its significance? We can look at it negatively and positively. First, what it is not. Baptism is not necessary for salvation. In a future study we will examine the specific verses that seem to connect baptism to salvation. But as we shall see, Scripture makes it clear that baptism cannot be necessary for salvation.

Not Necessary for Salvation

In 1 Corinthians 1 Paul spoke to the Corinthians about the divisions that existed at Corinth: “I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius, that no man should say you were baptized in my name” (1 Cor. 1:14,15). Paul was concerned lest his prominence and impact in ministry cause people he baptized to think they were identifying themselves with him. He understood that the purpose of Christian baptism was to identify a person with Jesus Christ, not with an earthly, physical leader. Paul continues, “Now I did baptize also the household of Stephanas; beyond that, I do not know whether I baptized any other” (1 Cor. 1:16). Paul did not keep track of who he had baptized. Primarily, he preached the Gospel and those who were with him carried on the baptizing.

Paul’s Attitude. With that as background explanation, note 1 Corinthians 1:17: “For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the Gospel.” This statement is important because it makes a distinction between the Gospel and baptism. Baptism is not a part of the Gospel. The Gospel as Paul unfolds it in detail in 1 Corinthians 15 is that Christ died for our sins, He was buried, He rose from the dead and was seen by witnesses. Paul maintained that if a person

believed this, he was saved. Communicating this message was what his ministry centered on. He did not involve himself extensively in baptism because it was not part of the Gospel.

This does not mean that baptism is not important. It means that it is not necessary for salvation. There are many things commanded and required of believers in the Scriptures that are not part of salvation. But as soon as we recognize this, we are tempted to say, "Well, it doesn't really matter whether I do these things or not." With respect to salvation, no, it does not matter. But as far as being obedient and submissive to the Lord Jesus Christ, yes, it matters a great deal.

Salvation Through Faith. Acts 11 also makes it clear that baptism is not necessary for salvation, nor is it a part of our salvation. In this passage Peter recounts to the Jews at Jerusalem the salvation of the household of Cornelius in Acts 10. " 'If God therefore gave to them the same gift [the Holy Spirit] as He gave to us also after believing in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could stand in God's way?' And when they heard this, they quieted down, and glorified God, saying, 'Well then, God has granted to the Gentiles also the repentance that leads to life' " (Acts 11:17,18).

The gift of the Holy Spirit was given to the Gentiles after they believed. The Jews recognized that this meant the Gentiles could be saved through repentance, a change of mind that results in faith in Christ. It had nothing to do with their being baptized.

Another passage to consider is Acts 15. At the council of Jerusalem, Peter recounted the salvation of the Gentiles recorded in Acts 10. It is hard for us to grasp how important it was for the Jews to recognize that Gentiles were saved in the same manner as they were. Peter said to them: "And God, who knows the heart, bore witness to them, giving them the Holy Spirit, just as He also did to us" (v.8). This referred to the household of Cornelius. Peter could not see their faith, but God could. God saw that the Gentiles had believed, and at that moment he gave them the Holy Spirit. This manifestation of the Holy Spirit testified to the Jews that the Gentiles could be saved. "And He made no distinction between us and them [Jews and Gentiles], cleansing their hearts by *faith*. . . But we believe that we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, in the same way as they also are" (v.9,11, emphasis added). You see, salvation is not a result

of baptism, but it is by grace through faith. God's grace has provided our redemption through faith in the finished work of Jesus Christ. Baptism is not even mentioned here, because it is not a part of salvation.

Answering Tough Questions. One passage, if properly grasped, can resolve any issue that might be questioned as necessary for salvation. For example, do you have to be a church member to be saved? Do you have to observe the sacraments to be saved? Any of these questions can be answered by viewing them in light of Romans 3 and 4.

“For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from works of the Law. Or is God the God of Jews only? Is He not the God of Gentiles also? Yes, of Gentiles also” (Rom. 3:28,29). The issue here is whether there are different paths of salvation for Jews and Gentiles. Paul argues that since there is but one God for both the Jews and Gentiles, there can be only one way to Him. The God of the Jews is also the God of the Gentiles, “since indeed God who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through faith is one” (v.30). The main thought is that God is One. Since there is but one God, Jews and Gentiles must be justified in the same way, by faith. There can only be one way of salvation. To believe that Jews are saved in a different way than Gentiles would require two gods—one who saves the Gentiles one way and one who saves the Jews in another. But if there is one thing we are agreed upon, it is the fact that there is but one God. And since there is one God, there can be only one way of salvation.

What are the implications of this concept in our day? There are people who think, “Well, there are different religions, different beliefs, and we are all going to heaven in our own way.” But that is not true unless there are many gods. If there is only one God, there is only one way of salvation. “But if that is the case,” they say, “how can we know the way to be saved by this one God?” It is very simple. All we have to do is find one clear example of how an individual was saved by God in the past. Then we will know how this God will save anyone He ever saves. Romans 4 becomes this illustration.

“What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh, has found? For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about; but not before God. For what does

the Scripture say? 'And Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness' " (Rom. 4:1-3). Genesis 15:6 contains the quote used here. This means that Abraham was saved, because God declared him righteous.

Here Paul is attacking the Judaizers. These were Jews who believed in Christ, but also believed that people had to be circumcised before they could be saved. Being Jews, the Judaizers were descendants of Abraham. But was Abraham circumcised? "Is this blessing then upon the circumcised, or upon the uncircumcised also? For we say, 'Faith was reckoned to Abraham as righteousness' " (Rom. 4:9). When God declared Abraham righteous in Genesis 15:6, had Abraham been circumcised? If you were a Jew and were reading this you would know right away. No, Abraham was not circumcised until Genesis 17. So Paul continues, "How then was it reckoned? While he was circumcised, or uncircumcised? Not while circumcised, but while uncircumcised; and he received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had while uncircumcised" (Romans 4:10, 11).

Consider the flow of the argument. In Genesis 15, God declared Abraham righteous. Then in Genesis 17, some twenty years later, Abraham was circumcised. Was circumcision necessary for Abraham to be declared righteous before God? The answer must be no. The Judaizers were wrong. The one true God had declared Abraham righteous by faith apart from circumcision. And because there is only one God, He must save everyone in the same way.

Many other questions can be answered using this argument. For example, is church attendance necessary for salvation? Well, what church did Abraham belong to? He could not have belonged to any church, because the Church did not even begin until Acts 2, two thousand years after Abraham died! If circumcision was not a part of his salvation, and it followed only twenty years later, could church membership be a part of it following two thousand years later? In light of this, anyone who says, "You must believe in Christ and be a member of this church to be saved," must believe in two gods, one who saves people by faith, and one who saves people by church membership.

But consider now the issue at hand. Is baptism necessary for salvation? Well, when was Abraham baptized? As far as we know,

Abraham was never baptized. God saved Abraham by faith without his ever having been baptized. Can baptism be necessary for salvation? No, because there is only one God and He saves everyone He ever will save in the same way—by faith.

You can ask yourself any question here. Are the sacraments, holy communion or confession, for example, necessary for salvation? Are any outside acts necessary for salvation? No. God said in Genesis 15:6 that faith alone accomplishes salvation.

Paul concludes in Romans 5:1: “Therefore having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom also we have obtained our introduction by faith into this grace in which we stand.” It is not only Abraham who has been justified by faith, but the entire Church has been justified in that way as well. In fact, Paul teaches in Galatians 1 that anyone who preaches that you must believe in Christ and be circumcised to be saved has corrupted the Gospel and is under the curse of God. This is a very serious issue, adding requirements to salvation. We may think, “Well, at least the Judaizers believed in Christ.” But Paul tells us that anyone who teaches that you must believe in Christ plus something else to be saved is under the curse of God. They are destined to hell.

This principle applies to baptism as well. Those who say you must believe in Christ and be baptized to be saved are under the curse of God. They are on their way to hell. They are not preaching the Gospel, although their preaching may include bits and pieces of it. In Galatians Paul calls it a corrupted gospel, of a totally different kind than the one he preached. He preached salvation by faith in Christ alone.

Identification with Christ

If baptism is not necessary for salvation, what is its purpose? So far we have been looking at the negative aspect of baptism, what it is not. On the positive side, it is a public identification with Jesus Christ. It is based upon the baptism of the Holy Spirit that occurs at the moment of salvation. In our previous study of Holy Spirit baptism, we studied Romans 6 where Paul unfolds the details of this ministry of the Spirit. Holy Spirit baptism is that ministry of the Spirit that identifies a person *spiritually* with Christ in His death,

burial and resurrection, the moment a person believes. This is why 2 Corinthians 5:17 tells us: “Therefore if any man is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come.” We have died and have been given new life, but it was a spiritual transaction. It can occur as a person is sitting in a group of people. When he believes and recognizes that Christ died for him personally, the baptism of the Spirit takes place and he is instantly transformed into a new creature, identified spiritually with Christ. But no one around him can see it happen. God can see a change of heart, but no one else can.

So the next logical step is water baptism, a public identification with Christ, testifying to the world that a spiritual transaction has taken place. It is not necessary for salvation, but it is very important in accomplishing God’s purposes in a believer’s life.

“Well,” you may think, “there are many other ways of being identified with Christ. I could write a speech and testify to my salvation that way. It doesn’t have to be done by baptism.” It is true that there are many other good ways of testifying to your new faith. However, Jesus said we are to make disciples and baptize them. “But aren’t those other ways just as good?” you ask. They may be good ideas, but who is the Lord of the Church? Jesus Christ is the Lord of the Church, and He said we are to be baptized. That is His way and His plan. This does not mean that you cannot stand up and give a verbal testimony or print one and hand it out. But until you do what He commanded, that is, be identified with Him in public water baptism, you are being disobedient. It is that simple.

The Mode of Water Baptism

We have seen so far that the importance of baptism stems from the fact that Christ commanded it. Baptism is significant because it is God’s way of having us identified before the world as followers of Jesus Christ. But what about the mode of baptism? The mode is important, but it is not the most important thing. People sometimes get mired down in discussions about the proper mode of baptism. The Bible gives a clear indication of what mode of baptism to use, and it is as important for us to be biblical in this area as in any other.

The Meaning of “Baptism”

The mode of baptism the Bible points to is immersion. Consider the word *baptize*. You may be aware that the word *baptize* and *baptism* are not English words but Greek words. For example, the Greek word for *baptize* is *baptizo*. Instead of being translated into English, this word was transliterated. In transliteration, each letter of a foreign word is given its English equivalent. So *baptizo* becomes *baptize*, and *baptizma* becomes *baptism*. When the Bible was translated into English, instead of actually translating the word *baptism*, it was simply transliterated. There was a reason for this. Several centuries ago when the Bible was first translated into English in Great Britain, the Anglican church in Britain was committed to sprinkling as the mode of baptism to be practiced. The translators of the Bible could have gotten themselves into a great deal of trouble if they had translated this Greek word. Why? Because the word translates “to dip, plunge or immerse.” It is used in secular Greek of dyeing a garment, immersing it so that it is thoroughly covered. It is also used to describe a boat that has sunk beneath the water. The meaning of the word is clear, but the translators did not wish to come into conflict with the beliefs of the Church of England, so they decided not to translate it, but transliterated it instead.

What would Matthew 28 look like if the word *baptize* were translated? “Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, [immersing] them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you” (vv.19,20). There are other Greek words for sprinkling and pouring. The reason the word *immerse* was used here was not for lack of a better term. It was used purposely to convey a specific meaning.

The Picture of Baptism

Besides the specific meaning of the word, a second reason the Scriptures indicate that immersion is the biblical mode of baptism is the picture it portrays. In our study of Holy Spirit baptism, we saw that at the moment of salvation, we are identified with Christ in His death, burial and resurrection. In water baptism we declare to the world that we are identified with Christ. Romans 6 teaches since we have been raised with Christ to newness of life, that new life should be seen in everything we do and say. Baptism by immersion best

symbolizes this identification that has taken place. It is a declaration to the world, “I am a new creature in Christ. You may have known the old me, but now I am changed and you should see this change in the way I live.”

Perhaps this is why some people are intimidated by baptism. They would like to believe in Christ, but they are not ready to make a major change in the way they live. Baptism is a declaration to the world that a person has identified himself with Christ and has become a new creature. This declaration is most clearly seen in the mode of baptism that pictures death, burial and resurrection—baptism by immersion.

The oldest baptism manual that mentions mode dates between 100 and 150 A.D. In this manual it is assumed that immersion will be practiced, although it does allow for pouring if not enough water is available, or if infirmity is a problem. But when the manual mentions pouring, it uses a completely different word than the word for immersion, so it was recognized even then that there was a difference between the two modes of baptism.

Summary of New Testament Teaching

To summarize, what does the New Testament teach about Christian water baptism? First, that it was commanded by Christ and practiced by the early church in the Book of Acts. Christ said that His followers were to be characterized as those who had been baptized in identification with Him.

Second, it follows faith in Christ, and it should be practiced as soon after that faith is placed in Christ as possible. We have tended to reverse the order Christ gave in Matthew 28 to make disciples, baptize them and teach them. We make disciples and say, “Now we are going to teach them, then after they have been taught awhile, we will baptize them.” This is not the order Christ gave, nor the one that was actually followed in Acts.

Third, it is not necessary for salvation, nor is it a part of salvation. Besides the examples we have already looked at concerning this, we could have considered the thief on the cross who died without being baptized (see Luke 23:39–43). The argument of Romans 3 and 4, that one God would have to save everyone the same way, would apply to the thief. God saved the thief on the cross the same

way He saved Abraham—by faith in the revelation God provided.

Fourth, baptism publicly identifies a person as a follower of Jesus Christ. The New Testament indicates that the method should be immersion.

The fifth and last point is that baptism pictures our identification with Christ and the new life we have in Him. This kind of pressure is healthy. When a person believes in Christ and is publicly identified with Him in baptism, the eyes of not only believers, but also of the world should turn on that person to see how a person who is a new creature in Christ should live. They should see differences in the way he relates to his family, in the way he treats people, in the things he talks about, in the commitments he makes and in the things that are important to him and in the things that consume his time.

We are quite privileged, when you think about it. The true and living God is willing to call us to Himself as His sons. We are privileged to belong to the Lord of glory, and He wants us to be publicly identified with Him. You would think He would be the one who would want to keep it a secret! But no, God wants us to let everyone know, right at the beginning, that we belong to Him. People should be breaking down the doors to get in! He is not ashamed of us; how can we be ashamed of Him?

This should be something we share with people when we share the Gospel. Yes, there is the risk that people could be confused, perhaps believing that baptism is necessary for salvation. This was a problem in the New Testament as well. Simon the Sorcerer was baptized in Acts 8, but afterwards Peter said to him, “For I see that you are in the gall of bitterness and in the bondage of iniquity” (Acts 8:23). It seems that Simon did not really believe. That will happen, but it does not change what God has said.

We need to be clear in our understanding of the Gospel—the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ. But we also need to be clear in our understanding of the importance of baptism. Throughout the Book of Acts the example is the same: once a person has believed in Christ, it should become public knowledge immediately, in the manner in which God said it should be done. It is a privilege and an honor to be identified with Him before all the world through water baptism.

C H A P T E R F O U R

The Truth About Tradition

As we approach the study of baptism's problem passages, the most important thing to keep in mind is that Scripture is clear on the subject of salvation. Salvation is by faith in the revelation God has given of Himself. That revelation is now centered in the death and resurrection of His Son. We are saved by believing that God's Son died on a cross and was raised from the dead.

This matter is so important that in Galatians 1 Paul said if you think you must believe in Christ *plus* something else in order to be saved, you are under a curse. You are not saved. This "something else" could be circumcision or baptism, for example. It is not true to say you believe Christ died for you, and if you believe in Him plus be baptized, then you will be saved. The Judaizers said, "If you believe in Christ and are circumcised you will be saved." Of them, Paul said that if even an angel from heaven taught such a thing, he would come under the curse of God. It is important we understand that salvation is by faith in Christ alone.

Is Baptism Necessary for Salvation?

With this background explanation, we can now examine several passages in the New Testament which, if taken by themselves, would seem to indicate that baptism is necessary for salvation. The problem many people get into when they study problem passages is that they *begin* with them, instead of looking first at how the subject is dealt with generally in the Word of God. Since we have al-

ready studied the subject of baptism in some detail, we can now approach the problem passages with greater understanding. Is there a contradiction in the Word of God concerning baptism's role in salvation? Or can these passages be understood in a way that is in harmony with the rest of Scripture?

Believed and Baptized for Salvation

The first passage to be considered is Mark 16:9–20. There is a question concerning the validity of this section of Mark; that is, was this passage part of Mark's Gospel as he wrote it? It does not appear in the oldest manuscripts, which makes many believe it was added at a later time. We will not deal with this particular question, mainly because there is nothing in this section that conflicts with other teachings of the New Testament. It is simply a question to think about as we approach this passage.

Our concern is Mark 16:15,16: "And He said to them, 'Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation. He who has believed and has been baptized shall be saved; but he who has disbelieved shall be condemned.' "

Certainly this seems to indicate that you must do two things to be saved—you must believe and you must be baptized. That would definitely be a problem—if it were true. But in our previous studies we have seen that if there is only one God—and there is—then there can only be one way of salvation (see Romans 3 and 4). Since Abraham was saved by faith alone, then that is the way of salvation for everyone. Before Abraham was ever circumcised, God declared him righteous in Genesis 15:6, therefore, circumcision cannot be necessary for salvation. And as far as we know, Abraham was never baptized, so baptism cannot be necessary for salvation either.

What does this passage mean, then? The last part of verse 16 gives us a hint: "He who has disbelieved [not believed] shall be condemned." The real issue dealt with here is faith. Those who do not believe will be condemned. Those who do believe and are baptized will be saved. This point is consistent with what we have seen in our previous study. Those who truly believe in Christ will be baptized as a public identification with Him, as a public testimony of their faith. It would raise serious questions about the validity of a person's faith if he refused to be baptized. Baptism is required and

demanded of a believer, not for salvation, but out of obedience to Christ. Imagine this conversation:

“Do you truly recognize that you are a sinner?”

“Yes.”

“Do you recognize that Jesus the Son of God died to pay the penalty for your sin?”

“Yes.”

“Will you believe in Him?”

“Yes.”

“Now you must be identified with Him in baptism.”

“No, I do not want to be identified with Him!”

Would this not raise a question about the sincerity of this person’s confession of faith? If he truly understood the issues and truly believed, the Scriptures assume that he would then be baptized, as Mark 16 assumes. Scripture is not concerned with keeping a person’s conversion a secret. It is not concerned with keeping harmony in the family, if you will. Scripture is concerned with public identification and the public break that comes with baptism. Those who believe will be saved and will testify to it in water baptism. Those who do not believe are lost. That is the point of Mark 16, and it fits with the rest of the Scriptures we have studied together.

Born of Water and the Spirit

Another problem passage to consider is John 3. This is one of the more common passages used to support the doctrine of baptism for salvation, probably because it is such a familiar chapter. But to read John 3 and to see water baptism there is to completely ignore what the passage is all about. The problem arises among those who, every time they see the words “water” or “wash,” assume the passage is talking about water baptism. But this is not the case. The word *baptism* is not even used in this section of John. And the context indicates that it would be totally foreign to what Jesus is talking about.

John 3:3 records the words Jesus spoke to a man named Nicodemus. Nicodemus was a ruler of the Jews, a Pharisee, and in verse 10 we are told he was the teacher of Israel. Evidently he was a

very prominent man. Nicodemus came to Jesus to talk to Him about His claim to be the Messiah, and about His coming kingdom. Jesus said to him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God." Jesus was not being cryptic. He wanted Nicodemus to know that the Messiah and His coming Kingdom could not be seen without a second birth, a birth from above. The word translated "born again" could mean either born a second time, or born from above.

Nicodemus' reaction to this statement was one of confusion: "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?" (John 3:4). In verse 5 Jesus said, and note the parallel here: "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God." In verse 10 Jesus then rebuked Nicodemus for not understanding what He was talking about. How could He do this? If Jesus had been talking about Christian water baptism, how could He have expected Nicodemus to know? Christian water baptism had not even begun yet! As the teacher of Israel, Nicodemus was an authority on the Old Testament Scriptures, but as far as we can tell, baptism never occurred in Old Testament times. And yet, Jesus rebuked Nicodemus, saying: "Are you the teacher of Israel, and do not understand these things?" (John 3:10).

Nicodemus was confused over the issue of being "born again." Jesus explained that it was not another physical birth, but it was one of water and the Spirit. As some people hear this, they immediately think, "Aha, water! This must be talking about water baptism!" But Jesus took a symbol used for the Holy Spirit in both the Old and New Testament, and used this symbol to clarify things for Nicodemus. The Greek conjunction *kai*, translated "and" here, is the same Greek word used for "even." So John 3:5 could be translated: "Unless one is born of water, even the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God." So the word "water" symbolizes the Holy Spirit. This is supported by the fact that throughout the rest of the discussion, water is never mentioned again. The whole discussion revolves around the ministry of the Spirit of God, the symbols of which Nicodemus would have been expected to understand. Why should he have understood the symbols? Because the Old Testament says that to be a part of the kingdom of God, you must have a new life given you by the Spirit of God, and it uses water as a pic-

ture of the Holy Spirit.

Isaiah 44, as one example, uses water as a symbol of the Holy Spirit. This chapter speaks of the blessings that will come to the nation Israel in the days of the Messiah. "I will pour out water on the thirsty land and streams on the dry ground; I will pour out My Spirit on your offspring, and My blessing on your descendants" (v.3). Hebrew poetry is made up of synonymous parallelisms. Our poetry is made up of rhymes. Synonymous parallelisms say the same thing in different ways. So in Isaiah 44:3, the water is a picture or metaphor for the Holy Spirit. This should have presented no problem for Nicodemus. He should have understood it right away. When Jesus said, "Be born of water, even the Spirit," Nicodemus should have understood that the water pictured the Holy Spirit. After all, did not the Old Testament promise new birth through the Spirit?

Consider the Book of Ezekiel. "I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols. Moreover, I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put My Spirit within you" (Ezek. 36:25-27). God promises to cleanse Israel with water, but the real agent is the Holy Spirit. He will give them a new heart. There will be a new birth. In effect, God says He will change them on the inside in preparation for His coming kingdom. The same idea is found in Ezekiel 37:14 concerning the resurrection and restoration of the nation Israel: "And I will put My Spirit within you, and you will come to life."

Nicodemus was the authority on the Old Testament; he was the teacher of Israel. So when Jesus told him that he had to be born again by the Spirit of God to get into the kingdom of God, there was really no excuse for his lack of understanding. These Old Testament verses that Nicodemus should have known refer exactly to what Jesus was talking about. Water is used as a metaphor for the Spirit a number of times in the Old Testament in the context of being poured out upon the nation. Nicodemus should have known that Christ was referring to the Spirit.

There should be no misunderstanding on our part in interpreting John 3 either, because Jesus Himself tells us in the same book that water pictures the Holy Spirit. "If any man is thirsty, let him

come to Me and drink. He who believes in Me, as the Scripture said, 'From his innermost being shall flow rivers of living water.' But this He spoke of the *Spirit*, whom those who believed in Him were to receive" (John 7:37–39, emphasis mine). If we would just allow the Gospel of John to be our interpreter, we would see that water is used to symbolize the Holy Spirit. To come to John 3 and say that the water referred to is baptism is to do violence to the Scriptures.

We must understand Scripture in its context. For example, we often use the word "water." But we are not talking about baptism every time we use the word! It is the same way with the Scriptures; we have to allow for the context. The context of John indicates that the water Jesus referred to in John 3 is the Holy Spirit. So the point of John 3 is that we are to be born of water, which is the Holy Spirit.

Repent and Be Baptized

Another passage that has confused people on the role of baptism is Acts 2:38. Peter has been preaching on the Day of Pentecost and has presented the Gospel, that the Old Testament prophesied the death of the Messiah and His subsequent resurrection. He concludes in verse 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.' "

Here it sounds like Peter said we must repent *and* be baptized for the forgiveness of sins. But as we shall see, the issue is the same as in Mark 16. The Jews were commanded to be baptized as a testimony of their belief in Jesus Christ. The dividing line was marked off right at the beginning—no secret disciples were allowed. This baptism was clearly not for salvation, however, because several times throughout the Book of Acts, Peter preached the message of salvation without even mentioning baptism.

For example, in Acts 3:19 Peter preached to the crowd that had gathered after the healing of the lame man: "Repent therefore and return, that your sins may be wiped away." He did not say anything about baptism. He told the people to repent, change their minds about their sin and Jesus Christ, believe in Him and then their sins would be wiped away; but he did not say anything about baptism.

Later, in Acts 5:31 after telling the Jewish Council that they had hung the Messiah on a cross, he said: "He is the one whom God

exalted to His right hand as a Prince and a Savior, to grant repentance to Israel, and forgiveness of sins.” Again the forgiveness of sins was presented in the context of repentance. We have seen this already in our study of water baptism; the theme of repentance for forgiveness of sins runs throughout the Book of Acts. Of course, this repentance was expected to be publicly declared through water baptism. This is what Peter was requiring in Acts 2. In fact, he told the Jews if they would repent and be baptized, they would receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

In Acts 10 we find Peter preaching to the Gentiles at the house of Cornelius. In verse 43 he says, “Of Him [Christ] all the prophets bear witness that through His name everyone who believes in Him has received forgiveness of sins.” After the Gentiles believed and the Holy Spirit was poured out on them, Peter continued, “Surely no one can refuse the water for these to be baptized who have received the Holy Spirit just as we did, can he?” (v.47).

Is the issue clear now? In Acts 2 Peter said the people needed to repent and be baptized, then they would receive the Holy Spirit. In Acts 10 he said they could be baptized in water because they had already received the Spirit. The common ingredient in both instances was repentance. So it is repentance that brings forgiveness and the Holy Spirit. The water baptism that should follow is a testimony to that. Otherwise, Peter would be saying that salvation is found in two ways: by repentance and water baptism in Acts 2 and by repentance and faith in Acts 10. Water baptism is not the crucial issue as far as a person’s salvation is concerned, but it is very important as far as his testimony is concerned. In Acts 2:38 Peter is calling on the Jews to believe in Christ for forgiveness of sin and to testify to that belief through water baptism.

Be Baptized and Wash Away Sins

Paul’s account of his conversion in Acts 22 has caused some people to conclude that water baptism provides salvation. In this passage Paul shared with the Jews how God had saved him, so they would have an understanding of what had happened to him and why his life was changed. In verse 16 Paul was told, “And now why do you delay? Arise, and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on His name.”

This passage seems to say that you can wash away your sins by being baptized. But we know that would be in conflict with the rest of Scripture. Actually, the thrust of the passage is that we are to arise and be baptized, having washed away our sins *by calling on the name of the Lord*. Our sins are washed away by calling on the name of the Lord, not by being baptized. We know this is true because the Book of Acts tells us.

Consider Acts 2. When Peter preached on the Day of Pentecost, he quoted extensively from the Old Testament prophet, Joel. “And it shall be, that everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved” (v.21). Joel said that salvation comes by calling on the name of the Lord. And what did Paul say in Acts 22? He said that he was saved by calling on the name of the Lord. As a result he was baptized as a public testimony and a public identification.

Some people believe that Paul was already saved before he was baptized, using Acts 22:10 as evidence. This records his confrontation with Christ after Paul was struck down. When Christ revealed His identity Paul said, “What shall I do, Lord?” Here Paul appeared to be submitting himself to Christ, and some say this was the point of his conversion. This may be so, but it seems that Acts 22:16 fits with the general flow of Scripture. Our sins are washed away by calling on the name of the Lord, and one who has done that should arise and be baptized.

Water baptism was especially important in Paul’s case. Can you imagine the rumors that would have been circulating throughout Israel? To hear that Paul, the persecutor of the Church, had believed in Christ would have been almost unthinkable. Many people would not have believed it. But to hear that Paul had believed in Jesus Christ and been baptized as a follower of Christ would have been a shattering testimony that could not have been denied.

Washing of Regeneration

The next problem passage is Titus 3:5. This is very similar to John 3:5, which we have already studied. The word *baptism* is not even used. “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 justi-

fied by His grace we might be made heirs according to the hope of eternal life” (Titus 3:5–7).

It is interesting that this would be considered a problem passage when the word baptism is not even used. There are those who think, “Ah, there is that word, “washing;” it must be talking about baptism!” These same people have probably told their children to “go, get washed,” and they certainly did not mean for them to be baptized! Why then, when they come to the Word of God and see “water” or “washing,” do they assume it is talking about water baptism? One can read the entire Old Testament and find that it talks about water many times, but never once does it refer to baptism. So it follows that the word “water” as used in the New Testament does not automatically refer to baptism.

The word “washing” simply explains what is in view in this passage. The “washing of regeneration” is the washing brought about by being regenerated. To be regenerated is to be reborn, to have new birth. Paul is telling us that we are washed, we are cleansed by the new birth, and we are made new by the Holy Spirit. He then proceeds to talk about the ministry of the Holy Spirit.

The passage means that through the ministry of the Holy Spirit, we are born again and made new in Christ. “Therefore if any man is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come” (2 Cor. 5:17). Romans 6 developed this in detail. The Spirit of God identifies us with Christ in His death, burial and resurrection. Our old self dies and we are cleansed, forgiven and made new. That is what Paul is talking about in Titus 3:5 also. We are washed and made clean when we are reborn. It is a ministry of the Spirit of God using the Word of God. Peter confirms this in his first epistle, saying, “You have been born again . . . through the living and abiding word of God” (1 Pet. 1:23). So the Spirit of God using the Word of God brings about the rebirth of an individual. The only way to find baptism in this passage is by bringing some preconceived doctrine to it, seeing the word “wash,” and then concluding that the Scriptures support your own doctrine. You cannot come to that conclusion by studying the passage. We are clearly told what the “washing” is here—it is the regeneration of the Spirit. It is not a “washing” by water at all.

Baptism Now Saves You

First Peter 3 is perhaps the most difficult passage to explain, simply because of the way it is structured textually. What it says is clear, but it can be confusing as you read it. Peter is drawing a parallel between the salvation of Noah and his family through the flood and baptism. Verse 20 reads, “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.” “Safely through the water” translates literally, “saved by water.” A little of the parallel is lost in the New American Standard version, but the idea is correct. They were actually saved through the water, not by it. “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” (1 Pet. 3:21). The word “corresponding” is the Greek word for *antitype* which means figure. This verse is saying that baptism saves us like the water saved Noah.

You may be thinking, “But I didn’t think Noah was saved by the water. I thought he was saved by being in the ark!” And he was, that is obvious. But in a sense, Noah was saved by the water in that it cut him off from the realm of the unbelievers. The water separated him from the unbelievers who faced the judgment of God. So in that sense he was saved by the water.

Corresponding with that, the figure of baptism now saves us. Peter qualifies baptism here so that no one can misunderstand what he is saying. “Not the removal of dirt from the flesh, but an appeal to God for a good conscience—through the resurrection of Jesus Christ” (1 Pet. 3:21). Baptism has nothing to do with a physical cleansing; it is not the physical water that is important. It is the inner person, the good conscience and response in faith to the resurrection of Christ that is important. How does that relate to baptism? When you have truly believed in Christ, you have been cleansed and forgiven. As you are identified with Him in water baptism, it becomes a public declaration and a *separation from the realm of the unbeliever*, just as it was for Noah.

To this day, baptism is still a dividing point. Many people have been believers for months or years, but have not been baptized for fear of causing turmoil in their families. But according to this pas-

sage, that is what baptism is intended to be. Think of the Jews of New Testament times. When they were baptized they were disowned by their parents—even written off as dead. It brought a break, and yet it was still commanded.

When considering this passage, we must remember that it was written by the same Peter we saw preaching in Acts 2. He is clear on the issue of salvation, but he is drawing a parallel here. He calls baptism a figure or type, not the reality, picturing our salvation by the water that separated Noah from the realm of the unbeliever. This is why baptism should take place early, at the time of conversion. It is good to have that break established at the beginning so our new stand is clear to the world.

Can You Be Baptized for the Dead?

One other passage concerning baptism that causes some confusion is 1 Corinthians 15:29: “Otherwise, what will those do who are baptized for the dead? If the dead are not raised at all, why then are they baptized for them?” This verse is most often used by cults who have come to teach that you can be baptized in the place of a person who has died to accomplish their salvation. This interpretation is so contrary to everything else the Word of God says that it should be obvious to anyone who is exposed to it.

Some groups have taken this passage to mean that you can go back to your ancestral list and be baptized in place of loved ones or ancestors who died without being baptized and thus bring about their salvation. But as we have already seen in Romans 3 and 4, salvation is never accomplished by baptism. So if a living person cannot be saved by being baptized, surely a dead person cannot be saved that way! If this were the only verse we had ever received from God, then perhaps the groups that teach this doctrine might have a case. But this is only one of thousands of verses, so we must interpret it in light of them all.

What can this passage mean? Very simply, it means that as some believers were dying, others were trusting Christ and being baptized, thus filling the dead believers’ places in ministry upon the earth. Paul questions the purpose of all of this if there is no resurrection of the dead. That is the context of the passage. What good is it to go on with the process of preaching the Gospel, seeing people

saved and baptized, then dying and having other people take your place, unless there is a resurrection from the dead? If there is no resurrection, this is all futile. This explains the passage in its context, and it fits with the rest of Scripture.

Are there any verses that present us with *real* problems? Only when those few verses are taken out of the Scriptures as if they are the only revelation we have from God on the issues of salvation and baptism. But we have revelation from God that runs from Genesis to Revelation, so we must put these problem verses in their proper context. We must look at the broad setting of what God has said about baptism and then move into the verses that are less clear. When we use the rest of Scripture to help us, we find that we really do not have a conflict at all.

Infant Baptism: What Does It Accomplish?

Another area that needs to be addressed is infant baptism. Depending on your background, you may have wrestled with this yourself. As far as Scripture is concerned, it is really a non-issue. Scripture simply does not speak to the issue of infant baptism. This in itself should tell us something. The Word of God is the unfolding of God's plan of redemption to bring glory to Himself. For it to have failed to speak about something which is supposedly necessary to bring salvation to multiplied millions of infants is more than an oversight. So the fact that God never addresses infant baptism is significant in itself.

We already know that baptism is not a part of salvation. We have resolved that through our study of Romans 3 and 4. If there is only one God and only one way of salvation—that being faith in the revelation God has given—then you cannot say that infants are saved differently. According to what Paul has said, two paths of salvation would require two gods, a god who saves adults by faith, and a god who saves infants by baptism.

Origins of the Practice

Most of those who hold to the doctrine of infant baptism come from a theological background of amillennialism. Amillennialism teaches that there will be no earthly millennium. The only kingdom that will ever exist is in the hearts of people. They believe that the

people of God in the Old Testament and the New are synonymous—that Israel is the Church and the Church is Israel. From this they draw that infants should be baptized, because for the Israelites to be a part of the covenant of God they had to be circumcised.

It all seems to have a certain logic to it. But it is all a figment of someone's imagination. It is true that infants had to be circumcised in the Old Testament. All Jewish males were circumcised on the eighth day—but that did not have anything to do with saving them. Romans 4 makes that clear. Circumcision was a physical sign of their identity as part of the chosen nation, which, for obvious reasons, actually indicated the faith of their parents.

Distinction Between Circumcision and Baptism

God made it very clear that all males were to be circumcised on the eighth day. There was no question about it. But on what day should infants be baptized? God never addresses that. Should we just assume then that baptism has replaced circumcision? If you believe that kind of theology, you should still be practicing circumcision, because Scripture never says that God replaced circumcision with baptism. If you believe in the “one people of God” theory that the Church and Israel are the same, then you had better be circumcising male infants on the eighth day because that is what God said His people should do to be part of the covenant nation Israel. Do not try to mix baptism with circumcision because God never did. Out of this faulty theology comes many problems which we will not resolve because the theology itself is not biblical. The Church and Israel are not the same; they are distinct.

Scriptural “Proofs”

Nevertheless, there are some passages that are often pointed to as supporting the doctrine of infant baptism. It is hard to believe, but the following passages are actually used by prominent amillennial writers, the names of whom you would surely recognize, as a basis for their doctrine of infant baptism. They have simply taken baptism passages that use the words “household” or “family,” assumed that this included infants, and then used these verses to support infant baptism.

The Family of Cornelius. For example, Acts 10 is often used in

this context. “And on the following day he [Peter] entered Caesarea. Now Cornelius was waiting for them, and had called together his relatives and close friends” (v.24). If we were to follow the example of the writers mentioned earlier, we would assume that Cornelius’ “relatives and close friends” included some infants. But as you continue on in this passage to verse 47, it says that the only ones who were going to be baptized were those who had already received the Holy Spirit and were speaking in tongues. Now that really would have been a miracle! Even the infants spoke in tongues!

To come to such a conclusion is simply reading too much into the passage. The fact that Cornelius gathered all his relatives and friends together does not mean that there were young babies or infants involved. In fact, the indication is otherwise. When this incident is recounted to the Jews in Jerusalem in Acts 11:16–18, the focus is on the *repentance* of those involved. The end of verse 18 says, “God has granted to the Gentiles also the repentance that leads to life.” So it seems clear that in Acts 10 with the family of Cornelius, only the adults, those who believed and repented at the message of Peter, received the Holy Spirit and were baptized. To read babies into it goes far beyond anything you can find in Acts 10.

Lydia’s Household. Another passage is Acts 16:14,15: “And a certain woman named Lydia, from the city of Thyatira, a seller of purple fabrics, a worshiper of God, was listening; and the Lord opened her heart to respond to the things spoken by Paul. And when she and her household had been baptized, she urged us, saying, ‘If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come into my house and stay.’ And she prevailed upon us.”

There is that word again—“household.” Can we assume that Lydia had babies in her household? No, we cannot, because we do not even know if Lydia was married! Her household could have been her servants and those who worked with her. After all, she was a merchant woman from another city. To assume she had young babies with her is a groping assumption. If baptism were necessary for the salvation of an infant, you would expect God would be clearer than this, would He not?

The Philippian Jailer’s Household. Later in Acts 16:31–34 we find another commonly used passage that supposedly supports the baptizing of infants, this one concerning the household of the

Philippian jailer. “And they [Paul and Silas] said, ‘Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you shall be saved, you and your household.’ And they spoke the word of the Lord to him together with all who were in his house. And he took them that very hour of the night and washed their wounds, and immediately he was baptized, he and all his household” (Acts 16:31–33).

First, this passage does not promise “blanket” salvation for the entire household. It promises that the jailer may be saved, along with his household, if they would believe also. In other words, salvation was not limited to the jailer only. And second, there were no babies baptized at the Philippian jailer’s house. How can we know that? By reading verse 34: “And he brought them into his house and set food before them, and rejoiced greatly, having believed in God with his whole household.” The household that was baptized were those who had believed. That implies each member had enough years and maturity to understand the Gospel message and respond to it.

There are many families whose entire household could be baptized, without including any infants. To read these things into these passages is quite a mistake. The Scripture records historical events that have occurred, and there is no indication that the baptism of infants ever took place. There is no instruction anywhere in the Word of God that we are to baptize infants. So why should we want to do it?

The Household of Stephanas. One final passage concerning this subject is 1 Corinthians 1:16: “Now I did baptize also the household of Stephanas.” Were there babies involved in this passage? Definitely not. How do we know? Because 1 Corinthians 16:15 says, “You know the household of Stephanas, that they were the first fruits of Achaia, and that they have devoted themselves for ministry to the saints.” Does this passage imply there were three-month-old babies devoting themselves to serving the saints? Of course not, that is ridiculous! We understand that the household of Stephanas consisted of adults, because adults are the ones who are able to give of themselves. Infants do not minister. But here the household of Stephanas gave themselves to the ministry of the saints. It was the same household that was baptized in 1 Corinthians 1, so we can assume that there were no babies there.

Infant Salvation: Is it Possible?

The whole idea of baptizing babies is found nowhere in Scripture. In fact, if you could be saved as a baby by being baptized, then you have a real theological problem: the existence of two gods, instead of just one. But what about the salvation of infants? What does happen to infants who die before they can understand the Gospel and believe?

Not Addressed in Scripture

This requires some application. Scripture does not directly address the salvation of infants. Scripture is concerned in its entirety with the salvation of those who have the ability to understand the Gospel message and respond to it. This is consistently true for both the Old and New Testament. The issue of a baby or a mentally disabled person who never develops the ability to understand the Gospel is not considered in Scripture.

Personal Opinion

What follows will be an opinion, a bit of conjecture in light of Scripture. The general flow of Scripture seems to indicate that infants are saved. This is really taking two steps out into the air, and if you do not wish to accept it, that is fine. Up to this point, all the arguments presented have been scriptural, so you do not have a choice on them. But this is personal opinion, based on the overall attitude of Scripture toward children and infants.

David and His Infant Son. The Scriptures give us several allusions to the salvation of infants. One that is often used, but is probably not really applicable, is 2 Samuel 12:23. After David's first baby by Bathsheba died, David said, "I shall go to him, but he will not return to me." Some take this to mean that since David was a great saint, after death he would go to be with the Lord, and there he would see his little one. This may be so, but he was most likely saying that the baby would not come back to life, but he would join it in death. This verse is not the strongest proof to use.

Jesus' Attitude. A stronger proof is the fact that every time Christ referred to children in the Gospels, He used them as positive examples. He could have taken a little child, sat him on His knee and said, "Here is an example of a dirty, rotten little sinner," and He

would have been right. Everyone is born with a sin nature, totally depraved from the inside out. But Jesus never did that. Any time He used children as examples, it was always in a positive way: “Become like children,” “Have faith like a child,” and so on (see Matt. 18:1–6). It certainly is not conclusive proof, but it is positive.

Judgment Based on Works

The strongest proof of the salvation of infants, what there is of it, is that all of the judgments of Scripture are based on works. This does not refer to salvation. We are saved by the grace of God through faith in Jesus Christ. But all the judgments of Scripture are based on works. This is true of the Great White Throne Judgment in Revelation 20, which forever settles the destiny of the wicked in hell. They are judged on the basis of their works recorded in the book of deeds. This implies that people are judged because they are responsible for their actions, and for the decisions and choices they have made. This would seem to rule out infants from the judgment seat, since we recognize that a two-week-old baby is not in a position to make decisions for which we would hold it accountable. There is no indication in Scripture that God would hold it accountable either.

Salvation Always By Faith. On the other hand, salvation is always a matter of responding to God’s revelation. This involves the ability to understand and respond to what God has revealed. It requires a certain maturity. No one believes a two-week-old baby has the ability to understand the facts of the Gospel or their own personal sinfulness and the need to trust in the grace of God for salvation. And yet salvation is always found in that framework in the Scriptures. This would seem to rule out infants from the realm of salvation that the Word of God talks about.

Are Infants Condemned for Original Sin? We know that infants are born sinners. David said, “In sin my mother conceived me” (Ps. 51:5). He was not referring to sin involved in conception, but the sin nature we inherited from Adam, our forefather. If an infant goes to hell, never having had a chance to sin himself, he must be sent there based on the sin of his parents. But that cannot be, because the Bible promises that no one will be condemned for the sin of his parents! (see Ezek. 18:20).

This is encouraging, because it seems to indicate that babies

will not be sent to hell for original sin; that is, the sin connected to parents all the way back to Adam, our ultimate forefather. But why are they not sent to hell for original sin? Does God just choose to overlook this sin when it comes to infants?

Penalty Paid. Perhaps a possible explanation is that the death of Jesus Christ as the Second Adam took care of the issue of original sin. It did not do away with it; but it dealt with the penalty for any original sin. When the first Adam sinned, he brought sin and condemnation to the whole human race. When Jesus Christ, the Last Adam, died on the cross, the penalty for original sin was taken care of. We still have sin natures as part of our character, but the Scriptures never speak of anyone being sent to hell because of original sin. We go to hell because *we* sin. That is why we say all the judgments are based on works. In light of Romans 5, the death of Christ as the Second Adam resolved the issue of any penalty that would be associated with the sin I inherited from my parents. But we soon begin to manifest our sin natures by our own choices, and for that we will be held accountable and be destined to hell unless we believe in Jesus Christ.

Your Accountability

One thing is true, however, infants cannot read books! This means that anyone who might be reading this is in a position of accountability before God. You have the ability to understand God's revelation. You are a sinner. Jesus Christ died on a cross to pay the penalty for that sin, and He was raised from the dead. Have you recognized that? Have you repented, changed your mind about Christ and your sin, and believed in Him alone for salvation? All eternity hinges on that issue. If you have not, you must. And if you do believe in Him, you should publicly declare that fact by being identified with Him in water baptism.

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