

Captive's Corner



"Bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ"

2 Corinthians 10:5

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The Meaning of Baptism

Here is a summary of what I see the meaning of baptism to be: First of all, baptism is an act of obedience to our Lord. This becomes clear if you study Matthew 28:18-20 with Acts 10:47-48. Baptism is also an act of identification with Christ in His death - Romans 6:1-6. This is a very graphic picture. Since we have been crucified with Christ, the logical next step is a funeral or burial! Baptism is further an act of renunciation of our old habits. I believe this is the key point of Acts 22:16 where Paul is told to arise and be baptized and wash away his sins, calling on the Name of the Lord. We

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Christians know that we are cleansed of our sins by the blood of Christ. Yet, in baptism we symbolically put our past way of life and sin behind us. Finally, baptism is the answer of a good conscience toward God. You must read this statement in 1Peter 3:21 in the context of 1Peter 3:13-4:6. If you do, you will clearly see that the problem involves being ill-treated for doing right. Here, it is in suffering for righteousness that we need to be saved. So baptism is the answer of a good conscience toward God Who has raised our Lord Jesus Christ from the

dead after He, too, had suffered for doing right. Our baptism is an affirmation that we have died to the world and now live to God and according to the will of God. Thus, we accept the suffering that flows from following our Lord in this world with a good conscience that lives in the presence of our resurrected Lord Jesus Christ. To Him all authority is now given and to Him all must someday give an accounting. Our baptism, as a corresponding type to the water in Noah's day, now saves us because it *pictures* the place of refuge for us against persecutions from the world. By faith we look as Noah did beyond this perishing world to the new world to come. Jesus Christ is our ark, our place of refuge - Hebrews 11:7. We are safe in Him. We are at peace before Him. Our future is bound up in Him. Therefore, we need not fear the attacks of the world because we are safe in Christ on the other side of death! Faith is the key. A person can be baptized and not know the reality of the new life. A person who has the new life will be baptized as an expression of their death and burial in Christ. Water baptism is to be a visible expression of an invisible reality. The life which each of us now have in the living Christ is a life that not even Satan or any of his sons on earth can touch - 1John 5:18-20; Romans 8:31-37.

As you can see from the above meaning of baptism from Scripture, nowhere is water baptism spoken of as the condition of life. Rather, a person is baptized because he has been given life by God. Please

read through the book of Acts noting this fact. You will see that people are baptized *after* they believe on Christ and, thus, receive new life. You can see from the meaning of baptism in Scripture that it has no meaning for the one who has not believed on Christ. Several students have asked if they should get baptized now that they have put their faith in Christ, even though they were baptized as an infant or at some other age before they put their faith in Christ. The answer is 'yes' and you can clearly see why by the Scriptural meaning of baptism. We are not put in union with Christ (into His death and burial) until we believe on Christ. Therefore, there is no reason to express this death and burial in baptism until it has occurred (at the point of faith in Christ). In John 3:1-21 many people read into the word "water" the ordinance of baptism. But if you read that passage carefully, you will clearly see that John 3:5 is explained by our Lord in the very context in which it was spoken. Nicodemus had already shown the error of listening to the Lord's words and interpreting them from a natural, earthly viewpoint - John 3:3-4. The birth from above is a spiritual birth made possible by the Spirit of God - John 3:7-8. He continues to tell Nicodemus that as a teacher of Israel he should already know these things! Ezekiel had plainly stated the importance of being cleansed and renewed by the Holy Spirit through the Word of God - Ezekiel 36:24-32. In the Old Testament, baptisms (washings) were a large part of their rituals. But God's New Covenant

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(Testament) was to be the real thing! Jesus never once mentions baptism in John 3. He is speaking of a birth from above, not an act of obedience from beneath. Yet, what Jesus taught was for the earth, even though what He taught was brought to earth from heaven. Jesus explains how the new birth takes place by comparing His coming death at Calvary with the brass serpent on the pole in the wilderness. Compare John 3:14-16 with Numbers 21:4-9. All depends upon faith. If a man comes to the light he will be saved (Jesus is the

Light - John 1:1-14; 8:12). Man without life can do nothing for God (not even be baptized). You will notice that baptism or being baptized is never mentioned in the book of 1John, yet that book was written to those who believe in the Lord Jesus in order that they might know that they have eternal life - 1John 5:13. It seems strange to me that if baptism were so essential to salvation, that it would not even be mentioned in such a letter. Further, as we study carefully through the New Testament epistles, we see that God uses His Word and His Spirit to impart new life. See 1Corinthians 4:15, 2Corinthians 4:3-7,

1Thessalonians 2:13, James 1:18, and 1Peter 1:23. Compare also Psalm 119:50. In addition, Ephesians 5:26 equates the washing of water to God's Word. Look also at John 8:31-32 with Romans 8:1-4 and Romans 15:13. You will notice that in all of these cases God's truth is central to the freedom God offers. To me, the logical conclusion from these passages is that Christ was speaking of His Word when He mentioned "water" in John 3:5. In addition, there seems to be a difference in the Bible between "water" and "living water," i.e., the Word and the Spirit.

As for baptism in Acts 2:38-47, only those who had received the Word were baptized. Why? because the message was being preached within the Christ rejecting world of Judaism. They were enemies of Christ. But, now having a change of mind toward Him (repentance) and believing on Him (faith) they are saved and, thus, are told to identify themselves with Him (water baptism). Christ was their enemy, but now He is their Lord and Savior. So naturally they are to take sides with Him now. To make visible one's faith meant the loss of place and

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privilege within the community that controlled all the economy and social/religious order of the day. Yet, those who believed gladly took their place with Christ (which, of course, was an evidence of their changed lives!). Further, those who followed Christ did what was right before God. Even though they were to suffer for it in this life, their obedience to Christ was evidence that their conscience was good, as their hope was firmly in the life to come. Surely they, too, would suffer as their Master

and Example also suffered. But it was high time to do the will of God since in times past they did the will of the flesh to no eternal profit. Thus, in the midst of unjust suffering, to renounce this life in view of the life to come as evidenced by one's baptism is the answer of a good conscience toward God.

Mark 16:16 is used by some to teach that water baptism is necessary for salvation. However, if this verse is viewed in its context and in light of the whole of what God is saying to us in His Word, it is crystal clear that water baptism is not necessary for salvation. In verse 15 of Mark 16 the disciples were commanded to preach the gospel to the whole creation. Verse 16 says there would be two results to the preaching of the gospel. Some would believe, be baptized, and be saved; some would not believe and be condemned. In addition to what has already been said above on this subject, I would add the following to make it absolutely clear that Mark 16:16 does not, nor does any other verse of Scripture,

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make water baptism necessary for salvation: The thief on the cross was not baptized. Yet, he was assured of being in Paradise with Christ (Luke 23:43). Notice also that John 3:5 was spoken by Jesus prior to Luke 23:43, and Mark 16:16 was spoken by Jesus after His resurrection (just days after He assured the thief of eternal life). God cannot lie - Hebrew 6:18. Therefore, Mark 16:16 and John 3:5 must be consistent with Luke 23:43. This proof alone is enough. Jesus could not have meant that water

baptism was necessary for salvation since he told the thief on the cross that today he would be with Him in paradise (after He spoke John 3:5 and before He spoke Mark 16:16). The thief had believed on Jesus, and Jesus' response was, "Today you will be with me in paradise." That was good news to the thief and is to us still today. When we hear the good news of the Savior, we can believe on Him and be saved - Acts 16:31; Ephesians 1:13; Romans 10:14-17. Further proof from Scripture that water baptism is not necessary for salvation is that the Gentiles in

Caesarea were baptized after they were saved (Acts 10:44-48). Also, Jesus Himself did not baptize - John 4:1, 2. This is a strange omission if baptism were necessary for salvation. Paul even thanked God that he had baptized very few of the Corinthians (1Corinthians 1:14-16) - an impossible thanksgiving if baptism were essential for salvation. Baptism as seen above is connected with death and burial in the New Testament, not with spiritual birth, which adds to the proof that water baptism is not necessary for salvation. What then does verse 16 of Mark 16 mean?

Compare John 3:14-16 with Numbers 21:4-9. All depends upon faith. If man comes to the light he will be saved (Jesus is the Light). Man without life can do nothing for God (not even be baptized) - John 1:1-14; 8:12.

We believe it mentions baptism as the expected outward expression of faith in Christ. Baptism is not a condition of salvation but an outward proclamation that the person has been saved as mentioned already above. Again, as you read through the book of Acts, notice that water baptism follows after people hear the good news, believe, and, thus, are saved. Notice also as you read through the New Testament that it never entertains the idea of true believers who do not get baptized. Rather, in the several accounts of baptism in Acts baptism seems to be the first act of a Spirit-filled believer. In addition, since baptism is an outward/public expression of our new life in Christ and renunciation of our old life in Satan's domain, it is interesting to suggest that it is meant more for the public notice of the

angelic principalities and powers than for man's notice. Notice in the conversion accounts in Acts that new believers do not wait to get baptized so that all their family and friends can be there. For example, read Acts 8:26-40 in light of 1Peter 1:12, Ephesians 3:10, and 1Corinthians 4:9. You can look at the examples in Acts along with these other Scriptures and decide for yourself.

Some confusion exists in the church today regarding the difference between the ordinance of baptism I have just summarized (which men administer) and the baptism which the Holy Spirit administers. The Spirit's baptism places the believer into union with Christ where all the blessings of God are found. It is in union with Christ that we partake of or share in His resurrection life. This is eternal life, which is our new life from above. Christ is our life - Ephesians 1:3-14; 2:5; Colossians 1:13; 3:1-4; Titus 3:5. The Spirit's baptism also places the believer into the body of Christ, where this true life from above is shared by all members of His body - 1Corinthians 12:12-14. The moment a person repents and puts his faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit administers this baptism and begins to dwell within the believer to make the Lord's salvation real in his life. The Spirit's baptism enables the believer to serve God with His divine power. Further, the Spirit's baptism could not occur until Christ was glorified - John 7:37-39. Only then could God's Spirit put believers in Him in union with one another and join them to their Head in Heaven, Jesus Christ. Only then could His chosen ones go into all the world and preach the finished work of God's Son on the cross for salvation. Jesus Christ had to die, rise from the dead, and be glorified to the Father's right hand before His people could act on earth as His body and proclaim Him throughout the world - Acts 1:8.

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