

Baptism Or Christ

by Charles Leiter

Not long ago a friend of mine became a Christian. Now, I do not say that he “made a decision” or “had an emotional experience.” No, this was a miracle! After years of wandering in spiritual darkness, caring nothing about the things of God, he was wonderfully apprehended by the risen Christ and transformed by power from on high. In the words of Paul, he became “a new creation,” “old things passed away and all things became new.” The things he once loved, he now hated; the things he once hated, he now loved. Christ and His Word became exceedingly precious to him, and he could say with the man of John 9, “One thing I know, that whereas once I was blind, now I see.” With this new love for God came a desire and power to break with sin that he had never known before.

How amazing then, in the light of all this, that my friend was later told (by one who also professed the name of Christ) that he could not possibly be a Christian! No, he was in fact “dead in sins” and still under the wrath of God! And the reason? Why, he had not yet been baptized! “According to the Bible,” he was told, “a man’s sins are not washed away unless and until he is baptized.” It matters not what evidences there are of the Holy Spirit’s indwelling presence, what signs of the life of God in the soul of man; all these are labeled false and deceptive because the new believer has not yet had his body physically dipped in water!

Now the fact that such things are being taught, even by those in professedly orthodox Christian circles, would not be so important if it were simply a matter of being a slightly different angle on Christian truth. But that is not the case. What we have here is not the true gospel viewed from a different standpoint; it is an entirely different “gospel” altogether -- a false gospel. In other words, we are dealing here, not with the difference between a red apple and a green one, but the difference between an apple and a tomato. Here there are two entirely different messages, which lead the soul to two entirely different destinations.

Salvation by Works

Why is this the case? What is it about the “baptismal forgiveness” message that puts it in a different category than the true gospel? The answer to this question is not far to seek: The Bible teaches that men are justified solely through the avenue of faith, and is thus a proclamation of “salvation by faith”; the “baptismal forgiveness” message teaches that men are justified by “faith plus obedience,” and is thus a proclamation of “salvation by works.” Now the advocates of baptismal forgiveness will immediately insist that this is not the case -- that theirs is not a message of “salvation by works,” but the Scriptures make it clear that is most certainly is the case nonetheless. We could quote literally hundreds of Bible passages to demonstrate this (e.g. Jn 3:14-18, 5:24, 6:47; Acts 16:30-31; Rom 1:16-17, 3:21-22, 5:1, 9:30-33, 10:1-13; I Cor 1:21; Gal 2:16, 3:1-14; Eph 2:8; Phil 3:8-9; I Pet 2:6-8, I Jn 5:1), but must content ourselves with quoting just one, which is illustrative of the rest -- Romans 3:28. “We maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from works of the law.” It is important to notice at the outset that justification is here taught to be by faith alone; it is specifically said to be “apart from” or “without” works. In fact, faith must be alone, or it is not “faith” in the Biblical sense of the word. The very idea of “believing on Christ” means that we trust Him as the One who has finished the “work” of salvation, so that there is nothing left for us to do. “To the one who does not work, but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is reckoned as righteousness. Just as David also speaks of the blessing upon the man to whom God reckons righteousness apart from works.” (Rom 4:5-6) Faith and works belong to two mutually

exclusive categories as far as a man's forgiveness before God is concerned. Accordingly, when the "Judaizers" at Galatia tried to teach that men are justified by "faith plus circumcision," Paul condemned them as "false brethren" (Gal 2:4), teaching a false "gospel" (Gal 1:6-9), and uttered the strongest of curses upon them (Gal 5:12, 1:8-9). To add "works" to "faith" in any measure is thus, according to the Bible, to believe in "salvation by works" and to place oneself under a curse. (See Galatians, chapters 1-6). "We maintain," therefore, "that a man is justified by faith apart from works of the law."

"Yes," says someone, "but Paul was speaking here only of the works of the Mosaic Law, not works of obedience to Christ." "It's true that we can't be justified by faith plus keeping the Law of Moses, but we can be justified by faith plus obedience to the commands of Christ." Nothing could be further from the truth! When Paul set out to contrast "salvation by faith" with "salvation by works," he was not for a moment limiting himself to the works of the Law of Moses. He often singled out the Law of Moses, true enough, because it was the particular "religious hang-up" of the people of his day. But when Paul says that justification is by faith and that "works" can have no part in it, he is speaking of all human activity or goodness whatsoever. Consider, for example, Romans 9:11. "Though the twins were not yet born, and had not done anything good or bad, in order that God's purpose according to His choice might stand, not because of works, but because of Him who calls." What does Paul mean by the term "works"? The answer is given within the verse itself. By "works" Paul means "doing anything good or bad"! Or again, consider 2 Timothy 1:9. "Who has saved us, and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works, but according to His own purpose and grace which was granted us in Christ Jesus from all eternity." Here "our works" are contrasted with "God's own purpose and grace." What are "works" then? Not the deeds of the Law of Moses only, but anything whatsoever from the realm of human activity and initiative. Even truly righteous deeds are ruled out. "He saved us, not on the basis of works which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy." (Titus 3:5) Again, verse after verse could be cited. It is obvious, then, that Paul intended his words to apply to any and all religious ceremonies or commandments that men might set forth alongside faith as a condition for justification, not just the ones that happened to be a problem in his own day.

Not "Demon Faith"

"But," someone protests, "James teaches that we are not saved by faith alone." (See James 2:14-26). And, of course, this is true. But the type of "faith" James is referring to is mere mental assent, something even the demons have. (James 2:19) James is concerned to emphasize that true saving faith is much more than just heartfelt mental assent. Because it always involves a complete renewal of the mind ("repentance") and is the result of a supernatural revelation of Christ to the heart (Mt 16:15-17, 2 Cor 4:3-6, Mt 11:25-26), saving faith inevitably leads to a life of obedience to God. When James says that Abraham was "justified by works when he offered up Isaac," he does not mean that Abraham's sins were not forgiven until this time. (Paul makes it very clear that Abraham was justified long before he was even circumcised, much less offered up Isaac! See Rom 4:9-11; Gen 15:6, 17:10, 22:1.) What is James saying then? He is simply saying that justifying faith always manifests itself through works. It is "perfected," "fulfilled," and vindicated through works. In the words of John, "The one who says, 'I have come to know Him,' and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him." (1 Jn 2:4) The true believer will desire to obey Christ's commands, including the command to be baptized. But notice here, good works are the outcome (Eph 2:10), not the cause (Eph 2:8-9), of salvation in Christ.

What is Faith?

“But even if you say that men are saved by ‘faith alone,’ still ‘believing’ itself is just another type of ‘work’ --something men do in obedience to Christ which obtains the favor of God.” Absolutely not! When God pronounces repentant sinners to be “just” in His sight, He is looking at the blood and merits of Christ, not the faith of man! The gospel is not a “new law,” a series of steps “1,2,3,” that men confidently obey in order to “get saved.” On the contrary, the very idea of “believing on Christ” involves giving up entirely on all our own “doing” and ability. Justifying faith, in its very essence, is reliance upon Another. It is the attitude of one who has given up all hope of anything virtuous he himself can ever do -- including even his own “believing,” “repenting,” or “obeying” -- and has then looked entirely and completely to Another for his salvation. Faith is self-despair directed Godward. It is the helpless soul’s gaze upon the Savior.

The Lord Jesus Christ gives a glorious illustration of this in John 3:14-15, when He explains saving faith in terms of the serpent in the wilderness. (Num 21:4-9) Just as the serpent was lifted up by Moses that men might look at it and be saved, so Jesus would be lifted up on the cross that whoever believes (i.e. “looks”) on Him might have eternal life. How were men saved in relation to the serpent? By “looking plus works”? By “looking plus baptism”? No! By “looking” alone! “When he looks ... he shall live.” (Num 21:8) Moreover, since faith is the gaze of the soul upon Christ, it is impossible to exercise Biblical faith and to look at ourselves at the same time. Those who put confidence in anything but Christ, whether it is their own supposed “faith” or tearful “repentance” or “obedient baptism,” are still trusting in their own works and will go to hell for certain.

Some Particular Examples

In light of these great general principles taught throughout the Bible concerning the way of salvation, it is amazing that anyone should misinterpret the particular passages of Scripture relating to baptism. These passages have been misinterpreted, however, and we need in the space which remains to deal briefly with some of them. The usual method of those who believe in baptismal forgiveness is to ignore the great doctrinal sections of Scripture where the way of justification is dealt with specifically and in depth (e.g. Rom 1:16-4:25; Gal 2:11-3:29) and to turn to the Book of Acts, where the history of various conversions is set forth. Because the baptism of new converts is specifically mentioned in most cases, it is not difficult to come up with an impressive list of New Testament conversions, all containing the word “baptism.” (This is precisely the same method used by those who desire to prove that “tongues” are the “one true evidence” of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit.)

But does the Book of Acts actually teach that men must be baptized in order to be saved? The answer to this question is, “No!” Consider, for example, the case of Cornelius and his friends. (Acts 10:44-48, 11:12-18, 15:7-9) While Peter was still speaking, “the Holy Spirit fell upon all those who were listening to the message.” One can imagine the folly of trying to convince these Spirit-filled believers, who were “speaking in tongues and exalting God,” that they were still dead in sins because they had not yet been baptized! The Bible leaves no room whatever for any question as to whether these people were truly saved before baptism. They had received the “gift” of the Holy Spirit “just like the Apostles.” (Acts 10:45, 47) This is interpreted by Peter to be the “same gift” that had been promised by Christ (Acts 11:15-16) and had earlier been given to the Apostles themselves “after believing in the Lord Jesus Christ.” When the disciples at Jerusalem heard about this outpouring of the Spirit, they concluded that God had “granted to the Gentiles also repentance unto life.” (Acts 11:18) And Peter, speaking of this incident later, considers the gift of the Holy Spirit to be an evidence that “God who knows the heart” was “bearing witness to them”

and “making no difference” between the Jewish Christians and them, “cleansing their hearts by faith.” (Acts 15:7-9) In fact, it was the outpouring of God’s Spirit upon Cornelius and his friends that Peter gave as the reason why they should be baptized! (Acts 10:47-48) Now, if baptism is not necessary to salvation, how can some men teach that it is?

Paul’s Conversion

But let us consider another example from the Book of Acts -- the conversion of Paul. (Acts 9, 22, 26) Those who believe in baptismal forgiveness often appeal to Acts 22:16, in an effort to prove their position (“Arise and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on His name.”), insisting that the phrase “wash away your sins,” is meant quite literally. In other words, when Ananias tells Paul to “be baptized and wash away his sins,” he is not referring to what baptism signifies and symbolizes (the internal washing away of sins by the blood of Jesus), but to what baptism actually does. Now we know this cannot possibly be the correct interpretation of this verse, because of the Scriptures we have examined. (Exactly the same thing is involved here as in the other New Testament ordinance, the “Lord’s Supper.” When Jesus says, “This is My body...,” we know from Scripture as a whole that His words cannot possibly be meant at face value, though many insist on interpreting them that way.) Nevertheless, if we look more closely at the events surrounding Paul’s contact with Ananias, we find that even this passage of Scripture points in the opposite direction of baptismal forgiveness. What happened prior to Paul’s baptism? Ananias “entered the house, and after laying his hands on him said, ‘Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus ... has sent me so that you may regain your sight, and be filled with the Holy Spirit.’” (Acts 9:17) When we consider these words concerning the purpose for Ananias laying his hands on Paul, especially in the light of such passages as Acts 8:14-19 and Acts 19:6, the evidence is very strong indeed that Paul was filled with the Holy Spirit when Ananias laid his hands on him and at the same time that he received his sight. In other words, the conversion of Paul follows the same pattern as that of Cornelius -- he was a child of God and received the fullness of God’s Spirit before he was baptized.

The Gospels

There are other books in the New Testament besides Acts, however, which give us a historical account of the conversions of individual people, and these books are the Gospels. What do we find in the Gospels concerning the necessity of baptism? Exactly the same things as in the Book of Acts! Jesus tells people their “sins are forgiven” without ever saying a word about baptism. (See, example, Luke 5:20, 7:48.) It is important to realize here that the practice of baptism had already been confirmed by Jesus Himself. (Jn 3:22, 4:1-2) (It was not invented on the day of Pentecost!) This, then, would have been the perfect opportunity for Jesus to have insisted on baptism before pronouncing forgiveness. Instead He says, “Your faith has saved you; go in peace.” (Lk 7:50)

Another example is provided in the case of the tax-gatherer, who cried out in despair, “God be merciful to me the sinner.” This man “went down to his house justified” -- without baptism. (Lk 18:13-14) One might also think of the thief on the cross, who would have been in a most wretched condition if he could not have been saved without baptism. What a consolation it is for the sick and frail (for whom baptism is often dangerous or impossible) to know that they can find pardon from the Savior the same way this thief did, simply by crying to the Lord for mercy. (Lk 23:42-43)

The Old Testament

It is not only in the Gospels and the Book of Acts, however, that people are saved by faith

alone, without baptism or other works. The way of salvation has always been the same, from the beginning of the Bible to the end. Even the people of the Old Testament were not saved by works, as some suppose, but entirely by faith. This is brought out clearly in such passages as Romans 4:1-12 and Hebrews 10:36-12:2. In Romans 4:1-12, Paul's whole purpose in bringing up the cases of Abraham and David is to prove that the way of salvation by faith which he is preaching is not some new thing, but the manner in which men have always been saved. This is true whether they lived before the Law of Moses was given (as Abraham did) or lived directly under the Law of Moses (as David did). Verses 3, 5, and 6, could hardly be clearer in their teaching as to the way of salvation during the Old Testament period.

But what about circumcision? What part did circumcision play in an Old Testament believer's justification before God? Non whatsoever! Abraham was counted righteous in God's sight through faith alone, long before he was ever circumcised. (Rom 4:9-10; Gen 15:6, 17:10) Circumcision was a sign and seal of the righteousness he already possessed while still uncircumcised. (Rom 4:11) Now just as circumcision was the covenant-sign of the Old Testament, so baptism is the covenant-sign of the New Testament. (Col 2:11-12) Is it not amazing, then, that those who lived under the Law of Moses could be justified apart from circumcision or any other work, and yet we are told by some men that those who live under the Gospel of the Kingdom must be baptized before they can be saved! It would seem that such people live in a period of less grace than the Old Testament, rather than more grace, as the Bible tells us! And isn't God the same "yesterday, today, and forever"? How, then, could something so basic and important as the way of salvation ever change? In fact, why would Paul appeal to the cases of Abraham and David at all, if not because they were saved in exactly the same way that we are?

As we have already seen, circumcision was intended by God to be a "sign" and a "seal" of the righteousness which Abraham possessed while uncircumcised. In Colossians 2:11, we are given some insight as to just what it was that circumcision symbolized. It was an external removal of physical flesh that signified the internal "circumcision of the heart" and "putting off the old man." (See also Rom 2:28-29, Acts 7:51, Jer 4:4, Dt 30:6, etc.) Now if circumcision, the covenant-sign of the Old Testament, was meant as a sign and a seal, is it not altogether reasonable to suppose that baptism, the covenant-sign of the New Testament, is also intended as a sign and a seal? And, as a matter of fact, is this not exactly what we find Paul teaching in Colossians 2? For, after explaining the symbolism involved in circumcision (v. 11), Paul immediately presents the symbolism set forth by baptism (v. 12). What is it then that baptism signifies? It signifies the burial and resurrection of the believer with Christ. The believer goes down under the water as a picture of his burial with Christ, then comes up out of the water as a picture of his resurrection with Christ. (See also Rom 6:3-4.) Again, those who would teach baptismal forgiveness insist that this is not merely the picture presented in baptism, but what baptism actually accomplishes. We trust that enough has already been said to show the wrongness of such an interpretation. Paul did not place anywhere near the importance on baptism that such people would like to think that he did. When writing to the Corinthians, he tells us that he was sent "not to baptize, but to preach the gospel." He can't even remember for sure who he did baptize! These are hardly the words of a man who looks to baptism to wash away sins!

"Problem Passages"

But what about all those passages which are used to teach baptismal forgiveness? Several of them have already been touched upon in the preceding discussion. The honest seeker will find that many of the others do not even relate to water baptism at all. For example, the word "baptism"

is often used in reference to the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, one of the distinguishing marks of the New Covenant. (Mt 3:11, Acts 1:4-5, Gal 3:2-5) Fiery trials and sufferings are also described as a “baptism.” (Lk 12:49-50, Mk 10:38-39, Mt 3:11) The word “water,” too is often used in a symbolical sense, and represents such things as the Holy Spirit, or cleansing by the Word of God. (Jn 4:14, 7:37-39, 13:5-11, 15:3, 17:17; cf. Eph 5:26) The same is true when the Bible speaks of “washing.” (Jn 13:5-11, 15:3, etc.; cf. I Cor 6:11, Tit 3:5)

Nor are passages such as Mark 16:16 difficult to understand. Baptism is mentioned here in the same breath with believing because baptism is integrally involved in what it means to become a disciple and to follow Christ. It is one of the first steps of obedience to Christ and is the initiation rite, so to speak, whereby the new believer is officially received into the company of the church. There were many in Jesus’ day who were only willing to “believe” on Him secretly, because of fear of men. (See Jn 12:42-43, Jn 2:23-25.) It was the costly and humbling act of baptism, however, that was often the acid test of whether their “faith” was true saving faith or mere “mental assent” such as James warned against. For this reason Jesus spells out one of the conditions of discipleship right while he is giving the Great Commission. “He who has believed and has been baptized shall be saved.” (Mk 16:16) But note the contrasting parallel. “He who has disbelieved shall be condemned.” Jesus does not say, “He who has not been baptized shall be condemned,” for baptism has nothing to do with the real point of what He is saying.

Another passage which fits into the same category as Mark 16:16 is Acts 2:38. “Repent and be baptized!” Peter tells those who a short time before had been mocking and persecuting the church. In other words, if they wanted to get right with God, they must not only “make a decision” or say they “believed,” but have a complete about-face in their whole way of thinking. They must come out and identify themselves officially, by baptism, with the despised group of Christ’s followers. Nothing less is involved in true saving faith. Again, then, it was because baptism was a stringent test of one’s profession of faith and the “badge” of becoming a Christian that Peter called his hearers to “repent and be baptized.” It should be noted, furthermore, that the phrase, “baptized for the forgiveness of sins,” again has to do with what baptism signifies, not what it actually does. This can be seen by a comparison of Matthew 3:11. Baptism in the name of Christ “for” the forgiveness of sins (Acts 2:38) no more means that baptism effects forgiveness than John’s baptism in water “for” repentance (Mt 3:11) caused those who were baptized to repent. They were already repentant, or they would not have come to John for baptism. John’s baptism was rather a baptism that signified repentance on the part of those baptized. Repentance was the thing that his baptism stood for and was specifically identified with. (Note: The same Greek word “eis” -- “for” -- “unto” -- appears in both of these passages.)

Overview

It may be profitable here, in summary, to point out that the whole position of baptismal forgiveness involves a mistaken concept of the nature of salvation in Christ. Salvation as set forth in the Bible is a gloriously reasonable thing. That is, it makes sense. Union with Christ takes place in the spiritual realm, through a spiritual revelation of Christ to the heart, and can be known by the spiritual graces that are evident in the life of a true believer. Those who believe in baptismal forgiveness, though, must insist that a person who has not yet been physically dipped in water is not a Christian, no matter how strong the evidences are that God has taken up residence in his life. This is an irrational, superstitious, legalistic, and sacramental view of salvation. It is irrational in that it makes no moral sense whatsoever. It is superstitious in that it causes men to believe that somehow a physical action is necessary for union with Christ, even though they can’t understand why this

should be true. It is legalistic in that it teaches men to obey a commandment in order to get peace with God. It is sacramental in that it gives a semi-magical quality to the ceremony of baptism.

Some have testified of the sense of “peace” and apparent release from the burden of sin that they have experienced as a result of being baptized. There is an excellent psychological reason for this. If distressed men are told, “Do THIS, THIS, and THIS, and you will be saved” (and they really believe what they are told), then when they do they do the things commanded, they will of course experience some sort of “release.” John Bunyan, in *Pilgrim’s Progress*, speaks of this very thing in the advice that Worldly Wiseman gives to Christian concerning how he may “be rid of his burden.” “Why, in yonder village (the village is named Morality) there dwells a gentleman whose name is Legality, a very judicious man, and a man of a very good name, that has skill to help men off with such burdens as thine are from their shoulders.” How much easier it is to follow Mr. Legality and “do something” in order to get rid of our burden, than to wait upon an invisible God to remove it for us!

A Personal Appeal

I see now, in review, that I have spoken quite plainly at times in my zeal against the false teaching of baptismal forgiveness. And so it should be. The early apostles, not to mention the Lord Jesus Himself, condemned false doctrine in a way that seems almost “unChristian” to us today, and we too are commanded to “contend earnestly” for the faith and to reprove men “severely.” (Jude 3, Tit 1:13) Our motive in this, though, must be love. It is because we love men that we cry out with all our hearts against the error that threatens to damn them. Against you, dear friend, who are caught or confused by this false teaching, I bear no resentment or contempt whatsoever. I love you and have written that you may be blessed. God forbid that this tract should be used against you by bitter opponents who want only to win an argument and care nothing about your soul.

And how is it with your soul? Is your faith in a Person or in a thing? No matter how you may say that you do not believe in “salvation by works,” do you still maintain that men must do something besides trusting Christ in order to be saved? One need not be around those who teach baptismal forgiveness for very long in order to discover that their message is not “CHRIST, CHRIST, CHRIST,” but “BAPTISM, BAPTISM, BAPTISM.” Is that your message? Or do you glory in Christ alone? Has God opened your eyes to the wonderful message of salvation by Jesus’ blood and righteousness? If so, will you now renounce your faith in your baptism for the hellish thing that it is and cast your all upon the Savior? Will you come to him just as you are, not bringing any “good works” or supposed “obedience” with you, and rely on Jesus alone as your Salvation? If you will, He will surely catch you in His all-sufficient arms and cause you to become “the righteousness of God in Him.”

“For neither is circumcision anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation.” Galatians 6:15