

SOME THOUGHTS ON BAPTISM

By Ashby L. Camp

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I. Introduction

A. Salvation is a *gift* offered by a gracious God to a justly condemned mankind (Rom. 3:23-24, 5:15-17, 6:23; Eph. 2:8; Heb. 6:4; 1 Pet. 3:7; Rev. 22:17). There is no work we can perform to earn our innocence before God (Rom. 4:1-8, 9:30-32, 11:6; Eph. 2:8-9; 2 Tim. 1:9; Tit. 3:5). That does not mean, however, that all people will be saved. On the contrary, relatively few will be saved (Mat. 7:13-14; Lk. 13:22-27) because relatively few will accept the gift of salvation on God's terms. We now are looking at the conditions set forth in Scripture for receiving salvation. I'm going to spend a disproportionate time on baptism because that is a matter over which there is considerable disagreement in the religious world.

B. Salvation is offered to people through the message of God's saving work in Christ. That message, the "gospel," is the means through which God calls one to salvation (2 Thess. 2:14) and exercises his saving power (Acts 11:14; Rom. 1:16; 1 Cor. 15:2; Eph. 3:6; 2 Tim. 1:10). It is the seed through which lost humanity receives the new birth (Lk. 8:11-15; Jas. 1:18; 1 Pet. 1:23-25). For that reason, the gospel is called the words of this Life (Acts 5:20), the word of salvation (Acts 13:26), the word of reconciliation (2 Cor. 5:19), the gospel of salvation (Eph. 1:13), and the gospel of peace (Eph. 6:15).

C. God wants all people to be saved (Ezek. 33:11; Mat. 11:28; Jn. 3:16-17, 5:23; Acts 17:30-31; 1 Tim. 2:4; 2 Pet. 3:9; 1 Jn. 2:2), and to that end Jesus commanded the church to make disciples of all nations (Mat. 28:19), to preach in his name to all nations (Lk. 24:47), and to be his witnesses to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8). God chooses, however, to leave mankind free to accept or reject his gracious appeal (Mat. 23:37; Mk. 3:5; Lk. 13:34; Jn. 3:36, 5:40-44; Acts 4:11, 7:51, 13:46; Rom. 2:4-5; 1 Pet. 2:4).

D. The N.T. identifies four conditions for receiving the gift of salvation that is offered in the gospel: belief/faith, repentance, confession, and baptism. All four are bound together and form a total response, one that is internal and external, private and public, personal and corporate.

1. All are agreed that belief/faith is of fundamental importance in receiving salvation, for without faith it is impossible to please God (Heb. 11:6). It is by faith that we are justified (Rom. 3:22, 28, 5:1, 10:4; Gal. 2:16, 3:24), by faith that we are sanctified (Acts 26:18), by faith that we are born of God (Jn. 1:12-13; Gal. 3:26; 1 Jn. 5:1), through faith that we receive the Spirit (Gal. 3:14; Eph. 1:13), through faith that we inherit the promises (Heb. 6:12), through faith that we are saved (1 Cor. 1:21; Eph. 2:8; 2 Tim. 3:15), and through faith that we have eternal life (Jn. 3:16, 5:24, 6:40, 11:26, 20:31; 1 Tim. 1:16).

a. In one sense, belief/faith is believing intellectually that the gospel message is true, but faith that consists only of mental assent is insufficient for salvation (Jas. 2:14-26).¹ Saving faith is the "yes" of the total person. It includes believing the facts about God's work in Christ, but it also includes a surrender to those facts, a decision to live in accordance with them. Anything less is mere lip service (e.g., Lk. 6:46).

b. So faith in this fuller sense, saving faith, involves a commitment of the will, a turning from a life of rebellion or indifference to a life of submission to Jesus Christ (Mat. 10:37-39; Lk. 9:23-26, 14:25-33). In other words, it involves an actualization of trust. The Bible calls this turning "repentance"² and makes clear that there is no salvation without it (Lk. 5:32, 13:3, 15:10, 24:45-47; Acts 2:37-39, 3:19, 5:31, 17:30, 20:21, 26:19-20; Rom. 2:4-5; Heb. 6:1; Jas. 2:14-26; 2 Pet. 3:9).

2. The Bible likewise makes clear that salvation is not received until this saving faith (penitent belief) is expressed in confession and baptism, which are two aspects of one event. I discuss a bit later the relationship of baptism and forgiveness; here I just want to show the link between confession and baptism.

a. That confession is part of baptism is indicated in Peter's call in Acts 2:38 to be baptized "in the name of Jesus Christ." As Craig Keener states in *The IVP Background Bible Commentary New Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 329:

"In the name of Jesus Christ" distinguishes this sort of baptism, requiring faith in Christ, from other ancient baptisms; this phrase simply means that the person being baptized confesses Christ. (. . . it does not denote a formula said over the person being baptized, but rather indicates the confession of faith of the person receiving baptism; see 2:21 [with 2:38-41] and 22:16).

b. G. R. Beasley-Murray writes in the *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 61: "It is universally acknowledged that 'Jesus is Lord' is the primitive confession of faith in Christ that was made at baptism." It is this baptismal confession to which Paul links salvation in Rom. 10:9, 13. (That doesn't mean a person must use those exact words; it means he or she must confess that truth.)

¹ Having called his readers to good works, James defends that call against a circulating false doctrine that works are irrelevant or insignificant for those in Christ. This false doctrine may well have originated in a misunderstanding of Paul's doctrine of justification by faith (e.g., Rom. 3:28; Gal. 2:15-16, 21). There are clear hints of this tendency to misunderstand Paul in Rom. 3:8, 6:1, and Gal. 5:13. James's point is that, since saving faith involves surrender and thus inevitably results in works, a point with which Paul would have agreed, faith without works cannot save because it is not a saving faith. Though one's works do not save, their absence testifies to the absence of saving faith.

² In *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 713, Wayne Grudem defines repentance as "a heartfelt sorrow for sin, a renouncing of it, and a sincere commitment to forsake it and walk in obedience to Christ."

c. Confession as part of baptism fits with the reference to Timothy having made the "good confession" in association with his calling to eternal life (1 Tim. 6:12 with Mat. 27:11 and parallels). As Donald Guthrie observes in *The Pastoral Epistles*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 127: "The *good confession* is taken by most commentators to refer to Timothy's baptism, . . ." William Mounce writes in *Pastoral Epistles*, Word Biblical Commentary (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2000), 356:

The verse shows that the call to eternal life occurred at the same time as Timothy's confession. A commission/ordination can hardly be termed a call to eternal life, but the conversion/baptism experience is precisely that: God's call on Timothy's life and Timothy's accompanying confession at his baptism. This is the decisive argument.

d. Likewise, Eph. 5:26 ("through the washing in water with a word") is most likely a reference to the confession of the baptized person. See, e.g., F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians to Philemon and to the Ephesians*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 388; G. R. Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962), 101, 361.

e. Though Acts 8:37 probably is not part of the original text, it provides early corroboration of the practice of baptismal confession.

II. The Mode and Subjects of Baptism

A. Christian baptism is an *immersion* in water to which a *penitent believer* submits because of his faith in Jesus Christ as he is revealed in the gospel.

1. The Greek word translated (or, more accurately, transliterated) "to baptize" literally means "to immerse," that is, to put completely under the water.

a. Kittel's *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), a standard reference work, states (1:530): "*Bapto*, 'to dip in or under' (transitive): [supporting references omitted]. The intensive [form] *Baptizo* occurs in the sense of 'to immerse' (transitive) from the time of Hippocrates, in Plato and especially in later writers."

b. The standard *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000) by Bauer, Danker, Arndt, and Gingrich states (p. 164) : "In Greek literature generally to put or go under water in a variety of senses, also figurative, e.g., 'soak' . . ."

c. The *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975) defines *baptizo* (1:144) as "dip, immerse, submerge, baptize." The author, Beasley-Murray, points out that *baptizo* is the word used in the LXX for Naaman's sevenfold dipping or immersion in the Jordan River in 2 Ki. 5:14. He states

(p. 144), "Despite assertions to the contrary, it seems that *baptizo*, both in Jewish and Christian contexts, normally meant 'immerse', and that even when it became a technical term for baptism, the thought of immersion remains."

2. Several lines of evidence substantiate that immersion, rather than sprinkling or pouring, is the mode of baptism in the N.T.

a. Acts 8:36-39 makes clear that Philip and the eunuch went *down into the water* and then came *up out of the water* (see also, Mat. 3:16; Mk. 1:5, 10). As Wayne Grudem remarks in *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 968: "Apparently neither of them thought that sprinkling or pouring a handful of water from the container of drinking water that would have been carried in the chariot was enough to constitute baptism."

b. Jn. 3:23 points out that John was baptizing at Aenon near Salim "*because there was much water there.*" It is hard to make sense of this comment if baptism could be administered by sprinkling or pouring.

c. Paul says that in baptism we are both *buried* with Christ and *raised* with him (Rom. 6:3-4; Col. 2:12). The old man that is under judgment goes down into the watery grave, and the new man that is justified rises from it. This imagery is difficult to apply to anything other than immersion.

d. The post-apostolic church universally practiced baptism by immersion. The only exceptions expressed in early church history were where there was not adequate water for immersion (*Didache* 7) or where the person was so ill that it was dangerous to take him to a place for immersion (Cyprian, *Epistle* 69 [75].12). As Everett Ferguson remarks in *The Church of Christ: A Biblical Ecclesiology for Today* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 202-203, "Both circumstances were considered exceptional, and it was a long time before something other than immersion became common (and that only in the western branch of the church)." See also, Everett Ferguson, *Early Christians Speak*, rev. ed. (Abilene, TX: ACU Press, 1987), 33-54.

3. As Everett Ferguson states in *The Church of Christ*, 201 (emphasis supplied): "The baptism commanded by Jesus in the making of disciples is an immersion in water. The topic formerly was warmly debated, but *in these days there is general scholarly agreement.*"

B. The subjects of baptism are penitent believers. Since baptism is an expression of saving faith, it cannot be administered scripturally to infants. They do not possess such faith and are not in need of saving.

1. Thus, Ferguson writes in *The Church of Christ*, 195-196:

The theology of baptism presented in the New Testament would seem to rule out infant baptism, in spite of its long history in Catholic and

Protestant churches. Against the practice are the following facts: (1) There is no mention of the baptism of infants in the New Testament. (2) Every account of baptism in the New Testament shows it to be a response by believers (cf. Acts 18:8 as representative). (3) The evidence of church history places the beginning of infant baptism at the end of the second century.

2. Two other experts in early church history, Hendrick Stander and Johannes Louw (who is the editor of a Greek lexicon), both of whom belong to churches that baptize infants, reached the following conclusion in their book *Baptism in the Early Church* (Leeds, England: Reformation Today Trust, 2004), 184:

The patristic literature of the first four centuries clearly shows how infant baptism developed. . . . [D]uring the fourth century infant baptism became more and more accepted and though believer's baptism of people of responsible age still continued in many areas, the development of the church (after church and State became reconciled) into a more unified body, controlled by the see of Rome, provided a theological base for infant baptism to be accepted. While the third century voiced objections against what appears to have been a growth in the number of infants being baptized, the fourth century seems to have accepted these baptisms along with adult baptism which was still performed on a regular scale. It may, however, be said that since the fourth century infant baptism began to develop into a generally accepted custom.

3. As James Renihan writes in the foreword to Stander and Louw's book:

[This book] demonstrates that believer's baptism did not simply disappear after the apostolic era, but continued to be the accepted position for centuries. Infant baptism became part of ecclesiastical practice gradually, apart from apostolic injunction. For this reason, it must be called into question, and rejected as a suitable practice for Christian churches.

III. Baptism and Forgiveness

A. Baptism is the moment at which the penitent believer appropriates by faith the benefits of Christ's atoning death. That is when one receives by faith the gift of salvation and all the blessings associated with it. In other words, salvation is by grace, through faith, in baptism. I want to spend some time explaining the biblical basis for that assertion.

B. Before his ascension to heaven, Jesus charged his disciples in Mat. 28:19-20 to go and make disciples by means of baptizing and teaching. They were commanded to administer the rite of baptism as part of a person's becoming a disciple, and we see them doing that throughout the N.T. The baptism they were to administer was a baptism "into" the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. As pointed out by Murray J. Harris in "Appendix: Propositions and Theology in the Greek New Testament," *The New*

International Dictionary of New Testament Theology (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978), 3:1209, this most likely means that "the person being baptized passes into the possession of the Triune God." In other words, it is the moment of a "spiritual transaction."

C. So it's not surprising to see in the N.T. that a penitent believer's sins are not forgiven until he or she is baptized.

1. Acts 2:36-40 is quite clear. Peter told those who were convicted of their sin ("cut to the heart") that to be forgiven they needed to repent and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ (note especially vv. 38 and 40). He then declared that this promise was programmatic; it was for all people for all time.

a. As C. K. Barrett notes in *Acts*, International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994), 1:154: "[To repent] is usually connected with sin, and means sorrow for and turning from a life, or an act, of disobedience, but it includes also the positive aspect of a turn to God . . . Both these aspects are involved in baptism, which is described as being for, that is, as issuing in, forgiveness, but also as being [in the name of Jesus Christ]." Regarding Acts 22:16 (see following), he writes (2:1043), "[Wash away] accompanies [baptize], reinforcing the interpretation of the middle voice given above and also giving an interpretation of baptism: it is for the washing away, that is, the forgiveness of sins. This is explicit at 2:38; cf. Bultmann (*Theologie* 139). The thought is persistent through the NT; cf. also Barnabas 11.11."

b. Jaroslav Pelikan writes in *Acts*, Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2005), 239:

In Peter's formula at Pentecost, the prepositional phrase in English, "for the forgiveness of your sins," renders the prepositional phrase in Greek, εἰς ἄφεσιν τῶν ἁμαρτιῶν ὑμῶν, the preposition εἰς being used here as a "marker of goals" or "to denote purpose." To the recurring objection of those who reject the orthodox doctrine of sacramental grace that works *ex opere operato* and who insist that the sacraments do not convey forgiveness of sins but only announce it – which does seem reminiscent of the objection of the scribes and Pharisees, as reported by Saint Luke, "Who can forgive sins but God only?" (Luke 5:21) – the tenor of the preposition εἰς here would appear to be that the God who alone can forgive sins had, in sovereign freedom, chosen to attach that forgiveness to the means of grace, and specifically to baptism, in a connection described by the Epistle to Titus: "He saved us, not because of deeds done by us in righteousness, but in virtue of his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal in the Holy Spirit" (Titus 3:5).

2. Consider the case of Paul's conversion reported in Acts 9:1-19, 22:2-16, and 26:12-18.

a. An extremely bright light from heaven surrounded Paul, and in response, he fell to the ground. A voice said to him in Aramaic, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads." Paul asked the one speaking who he was, and he was told, "I am Jesus of Nazareth whom you are persecuting." Paul then asked what he should do, and Jesus told him to go into Damascus where he would be told all that he must do.

b. Having been blinded by the light, Paul was led by the hand into Damascus and there spent three days fasting and praying to God. God gave him a vision that Ananias would come to him, and when Ananias arrived, he told Paul that God had chosen him to be a witness to the world for Jesus Christ.

c. At that point, Paul was without question a penitent believer. He knew the truth about Christ, and he was ready to be a witness for him to the world. But despite his penitent faith, Acts 22:16 makes it clear that his sins were not yet forgiven. In other words, he was not yet saved. Ananias said to him, "And now what are you waiting for? Get up, be baptized, and wash your sins away, calling on his name."

3. Paul writes in Eph. 5:25-26: "Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, cleansing her by the washing in water with a word, . . ."

a. As acknowledged by N.T. scholar Markus Barth in *Ephesians 4-6*, The Anchor Bible (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1974), 692: "Practically all interpreters in the East and West, in ancient, medieval, Reformation and modern times, agree in explaining [Eph.] 5:26 as a reference to baptism."

(1) For example, Andrew Lincoln states in *Ephesians*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas, TX: Word Books, 1990), 375:

[S]anctification is explained [in Eph. 5:26] as a cleansing that takes place through washing with water. . . . The definite article (lit. "the washing in water") may well indicate a specific event, and the readers are scarcely likely to have taken this as anything other than a reference to their experience of baptism. In 1 Cor. 6:11 washing and sanctifying occur together as metaphors of salvation, with an allusion to baptism highly probable. But here, the explicit mention of water suggests not simply an extended metaphor for salvation . . . but a direct reference to water baptism (cf. also Acts 22:16; Heb. 10:22), not to baptism by the Spirit.

(2) See also, F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians to Philemon and to the Ephesians*, 388-389; A. Skevington Wood, "Ephesians" in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978), 11:77; PHEME PERKINS, *Ephesians*, Abingdon New Testament Commentaries (Nashville: Abingdon, 1997), 134; Ernest Best, *Ephesians*, International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T&T Clark 1998), 542-543.

b. As noted above, the phrase "with a word" in Eph. 5:26 probably refers to the confession made by the baptized person that Jesus is Lord. It possibly refers to the proclamation by the one baptizing that the person was being baptized into the name of Jesus.

4. In Tit. 3:5 Paul says that God saved us "through a washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit." In light of Paul's own experience of baptism, where Ananias told him to "wash away his sins" (Acts 22:16); in light of the fact the only other occurrence in the N.T. of this word "washing" (*loutron*) is Eph. 5:26, where the baptismal reference is clear; in light of what is said elsewhere in the N.T. about baptism; and in accordance with the majority of commentators, Paul is saying that God in his mercy saved us at the time of our baptism, where we were reborn and renewed by the Holy Spirit.

a. As Baptist scholar G. R. Beasley-Murray summarizes the point of Tit. 3:5-6 in *Baptism in the New Testament*, 211: "Baptism is the occasion when the Spirit works creatively in the believer, . . ."

b. Other modern commentators recognizing a reference to baptism here include J. N. D. Kelly, *The Pastoral Epistles: Timothy I & II, and Titus*, Harper's New Testament Commentaries (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1960), 251-252; Martin Dibelius and Hans Conzelmann, *The Pastoral Epistles*, Hermeneia (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1972), 148; Jerome D. Quinn, *The Letter to Titus*, The Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 1990), 217; John Stott, *Guard the Truth: The Message of 1 Timothy and Titus* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 204.

5. In Rom. 10:9-10 and 13 Paul links salvation to the confession that "Jesus is Lord." Beasley-Murray declares in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, 61: "It is universally acknowledged that 'Jesus is Lord' is the primitive confession of faith in Christ that was made at baptism." As I explained, confession and baptism are two aspects of one event, an event that Paul in Romans 10 connects expressly to salvation.

6. Heb. 10:22 states (NASU): "[L]et us draw near with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled [clean] from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water."

a. As Paul Ellingworth observes in *The Epistle to the Hebrews: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 523: "Almost all commentators . . . see here a reference to baptism." For example, William Lane states in *Hebrews 9-13*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas, TX: Word Books, 1990), 287:

The reference in v. 22b is almost certainly to Christian baptism, which replaces all previous cleansing rites. Christian baptism belongs to the new covenant because it is accompanied by the reality it symbolizes. Both clauses of v. 22b provide complementary interpretations of the event of

baptism. The washing of the body with water and the purging of the heart are complementary aspects of Christian conversion.

b. James D. G. Dunn observes in *Baptism in the Holy Spirit* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1970), 213-214:

The close complementary nature of the two cleansings (of heart and body) [referred to in Heb. 10:22] remind us that we cannot separate Christian baptism from conversion. It is related to the cleansing of the heart as the body is related to the heart. It is the outward embodiment of the spiritual transformation which is taking place inside a man. It would simply not occur to the writer, or to early Christians generally, that the two could be separate. The popular idea that conversion precedes baptism, and that baptism is a confession of a commitment made some time previously is not to be found in the N.T. Baptism is the act of faith, part of the total cleansing which enables the convert to draw near and to enter the Holy of Holies by the way opened up for him by Jesus.

c. See also, Harold Attridge, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, Hermeneia (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1989), 289 (the writer "is no doubt alluding . . . to baptism where the effects of Christ's death and exaltation were regularly understood to be appropriated by believers"); Victor Pfitzner, *Hebrews*, Abingdon New Testament Commentaries (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997), 144 ("The language of cultic washing almost certainly refers to Christian baptism [cf. Titus 3:5]"); F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 250-251 ("the present reality which he has in mind is surely Christian baptism"); James Thompson, *The Letter to the Hebrews*, Living Word Commentary (Austin, TX: Sweet, 1971), 138 ("The reference is undoubtedly to the readers' experience of Christian baptism"); Leon Morris, "Hebrews" in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), 12:104 ("The washing of the body with pure water is surely a reference to baptism"); Donald A. Hagner, *Hebrews*, New International Biblical Commentary (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1990), 165 ("Bodies washed with pure water refers . . . almost certainly to Christian baptism"); David A. deSilva, *Perseverance in Gratitude: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on the Epistle "to the Hebrews"* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 340 ("The addressees, then, are reminded of their identity as those who have been cleansed by baptism and the blood of Jesus from every external and internal defilement that bars safe access to God").

D. Sins are not forgiven until baptism because God has established baptism as the culminating expression of one's faith, as the moment at which one is brought by faith into union with the atoning work of his Son. Thus, Paul says in Rom. 6:3-4 that our baptism into Christ was a baptism into his death. He says in Gal. 3:26-27 that our baptism into Christ was a clothing of ourselves with Christ. He says in Col. 2:11-12 that through our being buried in baptism we experienced a *spiritual circumcision*, a putting off of the body of the

flesh.³ The old man, the condemned sinner, died with Christ in baptism, and the new man, redeemed and free from condemnation, was raised with Christ in baptism through faith in the power of God.

E. Since baptism, rather than the "sinner's prayer," is the form in which faith is to be expressed for one to "get into" Christ, it is not surprising that Jesus and Peter state expressly that baptism is a part of receiving salvation.

1. Jesus told Nicodemus in Jn. 3:5 that unless a man is born of water and Spirit he cannot enter the kingdom of God. And then, in the very next scene (Jn. 3:22 – 4:2), we are told that Jesus (through his disciples) was baptizing people.

a. D. Moody Smith, Jr., who's been called the dean of Johannine studies in America, states in *John*, Abingdon New Testament Commentaries (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999), 95: "Birth by water is almost certainly a reference to Christian baptism, which would be accompanied by the Spirit."

b. Barnabas Lindars states in *The Gospel of John*, The New Century Bible Commentary, paper ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), 152:

To be born of (lit. from) water and the Spirit can only mean 'as a result of', as in 1:13. The spatial idea has fallen into the background. It refers to an act, and that act can only be water-baptism and the giving of the Spirit which that conveys. It is not absolutely necessary to assume John is referring to the Christian sacrament of baptism when he uses the phrase. . . . But the impression that Christian baptism is meant is hard to resist.

c. J. Ramsey Michaels states in *John*, New International Biblical Commentary (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1989), 56-57:

It is more likely that born of water and the Spirit is a metaphor for baptism in water and in the Holy Spirit. . . . Jesus is telling Nicodemus that he cannot enter the kingdom of God unless he takes the step of initiation into the new community of faith forming itself around Jesus. He must leave the group he is in and join the new group by being baptized in water and the Holy Spirit.

d. At the time of this conversation, the gift of the Spirit was separated from the expression of faith in Christ made at baptism in that the sending of the Spirit was not until Jesus' crucifixion (Jn. 7:39), but the two still are linked in divine purpose. Though reception of the Spirit was in some sense still future for those baptized at that time because of their faith in Christ, in another sense they participated in the gift as a present reality. In other words, the same kind of "now and not yet" tension that characterizes the Lord's kingdom proclamation characterizes his statement to Nicodemus.

³ So attempts to dismiss or diminish the significance of baptism by analogizing it to physical circumcision are misguided.

e. Some commentators I respect reject the notion that the essential birth from above, which Jesus describes as a birth "of water and Spirit," has anything to do with Christian baptism. They do so because they are convinced that a reference to Christian baptism would have been incomprehensible to Nicodemus. But given that the Messiah was expected by Pharisees (Nicodemus's sect) to come baptizing in water (Jn. 1:24-25), given that Jesus (through his disciples) was baptizing in water, and given the Old Testament's connection between water and the transforming activity of the Spirit (e.g., Ezek. 36:25-27), I think the objection is overrated.

2. In Mk. 16:16 Jesus told the disciples that whoever believes AND is baptized will be saved. Though this verse is textually suspect, meaning that it may not have been part of the original Gospel of Mark, it still reveals a very early understanding of Jesus' teaching about the need for baptism.

3. Peter wrote in 1 Pet. 3:21 that the water of Noah's flood "is a prefigure of baptism that now saves you."

a. I. Howard Marshall, who's been called the dean of evangelical New Testament scholars, states in *1 Peter*, IVP New Testament Commentary Series (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1991), 130-131:

The interpretation of this verse has been plagued by Protestant fear of finding in it a basis for the doctrine of "baptismal regeneration." This view ties the experience of receiving the Spirit and being regenerated to the moment of baptism with water and sees this experience as taking place regardless of the repentance and faith of the person baptized. . . .

There is no justification for this view in Scripture. What Peter is talking about is the occasion when a person comes to water-baptism seeking salvation through faith in Jesus Christ. "Baptism saves you" is simply a shorthand way of saying, "God saves you in and through the act of baptism, which is the outward expression of the twin facts that he regenerates you by his Spirit on the basis of the atonement wrought by Christ and that you come committing yourself in faith and repentance to Christ as your Savior."

b. Likewise, John H. Elliott states in *1 Peter*, The Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 675-676:

The association between baptism and resurrection, like the earlier link between baptismal rebirth and resurrection (1:30), reflects traditional Christian teaching, according to which undergoing baptism was the ritual means for identifying personally with the crucified and resurrected Christ (Rom. 6:4-5, 8-11; Col. 2:12; cf. 1 Cor. 15:20-28, 29-34). This association between baptism and Christ's resurrection makes it clear that it is the resurrection of Jesus Christ that gives baptism its saving efficacy and makes human rebirth possible. Baptism is thus the *instrument* rather than the agent

of salvation, for it is ultimately God who raises Jesus Christ from the dead (1:21; 2:4d) and through his resurrection (1:3) confers new life and living hope on those who bear Christ's name (2:5a, 24; 4:6c), as consistently attested throughout the NT.

Baptism "saves" by bringing believers into contact with the saving power of God manifested in the resurrection of Jesus Christ and unifying believers with the resurrected Christ (Rom. 6:3-5, 8-11; Col. 2:12-14).

c. See also, J. Ramsey Michaels, *1 Peter*, Word Biblical Commentary (Waco, TX: Word, 1988), 213-218, 221-222; Peter H. Davids, *The First Epistle of Peter*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 143-145; Leonhard Goppelt, *A Commentary on 1 Peter* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 265-271; Paul J. Achtemeier, *1 Peter*, Hermeneia (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1996), 266-272; Thomas R. Schreiner, *1, 2 Peter, Jude*, New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2003), 193-197.

F. Objections to linking baptism to salvation

1. The primary objection to linking baptism to salvation is that doing so contradicts the truth that salvation is by grace through faith, not by works (Eph. 2:8-9). But that objection is groundless.

a. In Lk. 18:35-43 a blind beggar received his sight after persistently crying out for Jesus to have mercy on him, and yet Jesus told him (v.42) "your *faith* has healed you." The fact the blind man did "the work" of calling out for the blessing did not nullify the truth that it was received by grace through faith.

b. The same point is evident in Mk. 5:25-34 involving the woman healed of bleeding. Her bleeding was not cured until she in faith reached out and touched Jesus' garment, and yet Jesus told her (v.34) "your *faith* has healed you." The fact she was not healed until her faith was expressed in "the work" of touching the Lord did not alter the fact that the healing was received by faith.

c. Likewise, the walls of Jericho fell only after the Israelites marched around them for seven days, but the writer of Hebrews says that they fell "*by faith*" (Heb. 11:30). The Israelites expressed their trust in the Lord's promise, and he provided the blessing. That is what happens in baptism.

2. Some claim that to link baptism to salvation is to attribute the washing of our sin to the water of baptism rather than the blood of Christ, but that is a misunderstanding. Baptism simply is the God-ordained way of calling out for the blessing, the prescribed means of appealing to God for mercy, for the application of Christ's blood. As Peter makes clear in 1 Pet. 3:21, the power of baptism to save is drawn not from the water but from the resurrection of Christ, an event to which one is connected through submitting to baptism. Baptism is an appeal or a pledge to God.

3. Others object to linking baptism with salvation by pointing to those passages that mention only belief/faith as necessary for salvation. But those passages must be read in theological context and cannot be pitted against the host of Scriptures that link salvation to repentance, confession, and baptism. Peter mentions only baptism in 1 Pet. 3:21 and Paul mentions only repentance in Acts 26:19-20, yet everyone understands that those statements were predicated on an assumption of faith. In the same way, those who mention only faith as necessary for salvation assumed baptism as the culminating expression of that faith (e.g., Acts 2:40-41, 8:34-39, 16:29-33). That was general knowledge in the first-century church, so it did not need to be repeated every time faith was mentioned.

4. Some object to baptism's role in salvation by pointing out that the thief ("rebel" or "insurrectionist" probably is more accurate) on the cross was forgiven without baptism (Lk. 23:39-43). That is true, but Jesus acknowledged in person the acceptability of the thief's public confession of faith. There is no reason to believe that Jesus intended that to be a generally acceptable form of confession. On the contrary, the salvation plan that Christ entrusted to the church calls for faith to be publicly expressed in baptism. As Peter said in Acts 2:39, "This promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off – for all whom the Lord our God will call" (NIV). This is for all people for all time. The question is not whether God is able to save apart from baptism – certainly he is – but whether he has chosen to do so.

5. Still others object to baptism's role in salvation by pointing out that those in Cornelius's house to whom Peter preached the gospel received the Spirit (which indicates they were saved)⁴ prior to being baptized (Acts 10). That is true, but the unique circumstances of that case make it inapplicable to subsequent situations. In Acts 10, Peter had, for the first time, taken the gospel to Gentiles. By giving the gift of the Spirit to the Gentiles who accepted Peter's message, God made it clear to the Jewish Christians that even Gentiles who believed could not be refused baptism (note Peter's question in v. 47, "Can anyone keep these people from being baptized with water?"). The normal connection of salvation and baptism was altered to overcome the deep prejudice the Jews had against the Gentiles. Once that point was made, Gentile conversions followed the normal pattern.

G. One way of checking the understanding of baptism I've just sketched is by post-apostolic Christian history. If my understanding is correct, one would expect some confirmation from the testimony of the early church. Scripture remains the authority, but history can aid in its interpretation.

1. On the issue of baptism and conversion, the witnesses from the early church are unanimous and unambiguous. I'll quote just one source, but I could provide similar comments from the Epistle of Barnabas, Justin Martyr, Theophilus of Antioch, Hermas, Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Novatian, and Cyprian. See Ferguson, *Early Christians Speak*, 33-36 and David W. Bercot, ed., *A Dictionary of Early Christian Beliefs* (Peabody, MA: Henrickson Publishers, 1998), 50-56.

⁴ Some deny that receipt of the Spirit in this instance is indicative of salvation, but I am persuaded that it is.

2. Tertullian, a Christian writer and teacher, wrote the earliest known treatise on baptism around A.D. 210. In this quote, he is responding to an attack on the importance of baptism.

The subject of this treatise is the mystery of that water by which the sins of our original blindness are washed away and we are set free for eternal life. It will serve a useful purpose in building up not only those who are at present under instruction, but also those whose faith is similarly vulnerable through inexperience because they have been content to believe without examining the reasons for the traditions they have received. In point of fact a viper from the Cainite heresy [note: a form of gnosticism] who recently spent some time here succeeded in carrying off a fair number with her poisonous teaching – and one of its primary features was an assault on baptism. That was natural enough, since vipers and asps and even basilisks generally frequent arid and waterless places. But we are little fishes, called after our great fish Jesus Christ. We are born in water and can only survive by staying in water. So this monstrosity of a woman, who had no right to teach even if it had been sound doctrine, knew very well how to kill little fishes – by taking them out of water.⁵

3. Everett Ferguson, who served as editor of the *Encyclopedia of Early Christianity*, reaches the following conclusion regarding the early church's view of baptism *Early Christians Speak*, 38:

The unanimity and vigor of the early second-century statements about baptism are presumptive of a direct relationship between baptism and forgiveness of sins from the early days of the church. The consistency with which second-century authors make the statements which they do would have been impossible if this had not been the common Christian understanding earlier. It is inconceivable that the whole Christian world reversed its understanding of the meaning of its central rite of conversion within fifty years of the lifetime of the apostles.

H. The impression sometimes is given that only members of churches of Christ (and the conservative Christian Church) believe baptism is linked to salvation, but that is false.

1. As recognized by Beasley-Murray in *Baptism in the New Testament*, 298 (emphasis supplied): "That the rite of baptism is represented in the New Testament as necessary for salvation is believed by *many exegetes*." That's part of the reason I've been quoting various scholars. In terms of mainstream denominations, Catholics, Orthodox churches, Lutherans, and some Anglicans and Episcopalians agree that baptism is the moment at which God's saving grace is imparted.

⁵ Maurice Wiles and Mark Santer, eds., *Documents in Early Christian Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 173-174.

2. In fact, the connection between baptism and salvation was accepted doctrine for 1500 years of church history. The view that baptism is unrelated to salvation goes back only to Huldreich Zwingli (1484-1531). It arose as an overreaction to the Roman Catholic error of baptismal regeneration. See, Cottrell, "The Biblical Consensus," 17-38 and Jack W. Cottrell, "Baptism According to the Reformed Tradition," in *Baptism and the Remission of Sins*, ed. David Fletcher (Joplin, MO: College Press, 1990), 39-81.

3. Martin Luther, the great Reformation leader, never considered baptism optional for salvation. He wrote, "It is solemnly and strictly commanded that we must be baptized or we shall not be saved." No one believed more strongly than did Luther in "faith only," but he rightly understood that the requirement of baptism was not inconsistent with salvation by faith. In response to his critics who argued that his view of baptism was a kind of works-salvation, Luther said, "Yes, it is true that our works are of no use for salvation. Baptism, however, is not our work but God's." See, Jack W. Cottrell, "The Biblical Consensus: Historical Backgrounds to Reformed Theology" in *Baptism and the Remission of Sins*, ed. David Fletcher (Joplin, MO: College Press, 1990), 31-34 and Kenneth R. Craycraft, "Sign and Word: Martin Luther's Theology of Sacraments," *Restoration Quarterly* 32 (no. 3, 1990), 143-164.

4. John Calvin also rejected Zwingli's view. As John Mark Hicks states in "Stone-Campbell Sacramental Theology" in *Restoration Quarterly* 50 (No. 1, 2008), 43-44:

Both Luther and Calvin opposed the innovations of Zwingli. As the Augsburg Confession (1530) affirms, baptism is no mere "profession among men," but it is a sign and testimony of the will of God toward us so that faith "believes the promises that are set forth and offered" (article 13) and "baptism is necessary for salvation" (article 9). Calvin rejected any notion that the sacraments "merely feed our eyes with bare show." Instead, God "effectually performs what he figures" (*Institutes* 4.15.14) in that the sign conveys "the substance and reality, inasmuch as God works by external means" (*Institutes* 4.15.1). The sacraments are not "empty signs." Rather, "the reality and efficacy at the same time" are "conjoined with them."

5. Other Reformed confessions acknowledging that baptism is not merely symbolic but is the normal channel for imparting God's saving grace include the Belgic Confession of 1561, the Confession of Faith of the English Congregation at Geneva (1556), the Second Helvetic Confession of 1566, and even the Westminster Confession of Faith of 1647. David F. Wright, *What has Infant Baptism done to Baptism?* (Waynesboro, GA: Paternoster Press, 2005), 97-99.

6. The anti-sacramental view of Zwingli, which many wrongly assume represents the historic understanding of conversion, grew in prominence in conjunction with later revivalism. Hicks writes in "Stone-Campbell Sacramental Theology" (p. 44):

Early English Baptist theology tended to follow Calvin, while Continental Anabaptist theology tended to follow Zwingli. Eighteenth- and

nineteenth-century revivalism watered down British sacramentalism except among the Scottish Baptists. American Baptists, influenced by the Great Awakenings and revivalistic conversion measures, rejected any kind of baptismal efficacy. Baptism was reduced to a mere human testimony.

7. Frederick Dale Bruner opined in *A Theology of the Holy Spirit* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), 264 (see n. 52) that the view most widely represented in New Testament scholarship is that baptism is "the *place* where God identifies the believer with Christ and his work, and this not merely symbolically but really."

8. To choose one example, Alan Richardson, late professor of Christian Theology at the University of Nottingham, wrote in *An Introduction to the Theology of the New Testament* (New York: Harper & Row, 1958), 348-349:

In the Church of the NT, faith and baptism belong together, like soul and body in biblical thought: the one cannot exist without the other. To regard sincere faith as adequate to salvation apart from baptismal incorporation into Christ's body is sheer "Christian Science" by the standards of NT theology; by ignoring the reality of the body it makes salvation a subjective affair, a disembodied soul-salvation of individuals who have "enjoyed" a certain "experience." The profession of faith without the bodily action of submission in baptism is not the obedience of the whole man; a mental act which has no outward embodiment is a mere phantom of the full-blooded, full-bodied wholeness of biblical thinking. Believing while dispensing with the act of obedience, with the act of baptism, is a kind of docetism, and is thus not belief in the NT sense at all. The action – or, rather, the passion – of being baptized, is itself part of the act of believing, since to believe means to obey. So often we hear it said that the thing which matters is the inward attitude of mind and heart and will, and that outward conformity to a "mere" ceremony is formalism, externalism, or institutionalism. Thus, baptism ceases to be a necessity and becomes an optional extra for those who like pretty-pretty ceremonies; and those who insist on baptism are accused of exalting the letter above the spirit. Such reasoning develops from the post-Renaissance breaking up of the biblical unity of body and soul, of faith and obedience, of inner truth and outward expression. It is not surprising that it did not emerge in Christian thought until after the Reformation; . . .

. . . Baptism, with its accompanying repentance and faith, was the divinely appointed way by which the individual entered into the sphere of the Messianic forgiveness of sins . . . and the outpouring of the Spirit; there was no other way of entering upon the life of the Age to Come.

9. A good recent example is David F. Wright, Emeritus Professor of Patristic and Reformed Christianity at the University of Edinburgh. He writes in *What has Infant Baptism done to Baptism?* (Waynesboro, GA: Paternoster Press, 2005), 88-91:

It is an instructive exercise simply to tabulate all of [the New Testament's] varied references to and statements about baptism, and then to ask yourself whether this is an ordinance or sacrament which is merely symbolic rather than truly effective as a means by which Christ or the Holy Spirit works our blessing. Let me take you fairly quickly through many of these texts, conscious though I am that several of them could each justify an exegetical essay on its own.

* * * [comments on various texts omitted]

I have cut many an exegetical corner but I am not assuming the mantle of a biblical commentator. My concern has been simply to convey a sense of the markedly direct terms in which the New Testament documents attribute the multifaceted reception of God's salvation to the instrumentality of baptism. This is what I mean by the strongly realist presentation of baptism in the New Testament. There is not a single text which *prima facie* ascribes to baptism only a symbolical or representational or signficatory function.

I. Those who recognize that baptism is part of God's revealed way for accepting salvation need not insist that no unbaptized person can be saved.

1. When a father tells his children that only those who eat all their dinner will be allowed to watch an upcoming television program, he does not necessarily mean there can be no exceptions to that requirement. If one child becomes ill and unable to eat, it would not contradict the father's pronouncement if he let that child watch the show, because his statement was not intended to encompass such an extraordinary situation.

2. Scripture clearly teaches that salvation is received when faith is expressed in baptism, but that revelation may not encompass one who, for example, comes to faith while stranded in Antarctica, having never before heard the gospel, and then dies while searching for a way to be baptized (plug in your favorite hypothetical). It certainly seems possible that such a bizarre circumstance was outside the contemplation of the N.T. writers.

3. F. D. Srygley, writing in the *Gospel Advocate* over a century ago, expressed his concern over treading in ignorance on the sovereignty of God:

As I understand the N.T., the "pious unimmersed" ought to be immersed. And in case they are not immersed, I know of no promise in the N.T. that they will be saved. But, as to whether God will make allowance for honest mistakes, and save those who think they are obeying him when in reality they are doing something he has not commanded in lieu of what he

has commanded, is a question for God to settle, and I decline to take any part of it.⁶

4. It is one thing to accept the possibility of baptismal grace being conferred without baptism; it is another thing to urge the church to view it as typical and to receive the unimmersed into its fellowship.

⁶ F. D. Srygley, "From the Papers," *Gospel Advocate* 32 (March 26, 1890), 193.