

Sam Storms  
Bridgeway Church  
June 28, 2015

## **The Battle over Baptism (2)** **Acts 2:36-41**

Everyone is quick to acknowledge the importance of the Great Commission (Matt. 28:19) and the responsibility to “baptize” disciples in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. But it is unsettling to discover that perhaps no command of Jesus has been the cause of so much controversy and division in the Church.

Baptism is, sadly, a divisive issue. Debates rage over its mode (sprinkling or immersion), its meaning, and especially its recipients (paedo-baptism vs. credo-baptism). But the relationship of baptism to regeneration or the new birth, as well as to the forgiveness of sins, is especially troublesome. In this message I want to examine three passages (Acts 2:38, John 3:5, and 1 Peter 3:21) that are often at the center of this debate.

### *Acts 2:38*

“Let all the house of Israel therefore know for certain that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified.” Now when they heard this they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, “Brothers, what shall we do?” And Peter said to them, “Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself.” And with many other words he bore witness and continued to exhort them, saying, “Save yourselves from this crooked generation.” So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls (Acts 2:36-41).

When the Apostle Peter, in response to his sermon, was asked on the Day of Pentecost, “What must we do?”, he replied: “Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 2:38). This passage, together with John 3:5 and 1 Peter 3:21, are typically the three most often cited as evidence that in order for a person to receive new life and the forgiveness of sins they must be baptized in water. What are we to make of this claim?

To be baptized in Christ's name is to be baptized by his authority, as if Christ were himself performing the rite. It also signifies the intention of the believer to be committed to and identified with Jesus. There is also a sense in which it is an indication of new ownership: the believer is transferred from the world and self to the Savior. It is, in effect, the Christian's pledge of spiritual allegiance. But is Peter also saying that water baptism is necessary for the forgiveness of sins? As you can well imagine, there have been several different answers to this question.

Some respond with a simple Yes! They argue that water baptism is in fact necessary for salvation and the forgiveness of sins. If true, this would appear to undermine any notion of salvation by faith alone through grace alone (*sola fide, sola gratia*).

Others point out that the preposition translated “for” in v. 38 (Greek, *eis*) can also be translated “because of” (it may be used this way in Matthew 3:11; cf. also Mt. 10:41; 12:41). Thus the idea would be that a person should be baptized not in order to be saved and forgiven of sins but *because* they are *already* saved and forgiven. Although this is grammatically legitimate, it would be rare and unlikely.

A few argue that these people in Acts 2 were already saved. The “forgiveness” they seek is not for salvation but for restoration of fellowship with God that had been broken by their sin of crucifying the Messiah.

The view that is most consistent with what we read elsewhere in the New Testament is that ***Acts 2:38 says nothing about the relationship between baptism and forgiveness but everything about the relationship between repentance and baptism.*** Let's look at four lines of evidence.

**First**, after making every effort to understand a biblical verse on its own terms, all such verses must be read and interpreted in the light of every other verse in the Bible. Every biblical text is perfectly harmonious with the message of the Bible as a whole. So if one verse or even two appear to conflict with the clear and consistent testimony of the rest of Scripture, we need to pause and consider the very real possibility that we are incorrectly interpreting that one or those two texts. In other words, the clear meaning of all Scripture must be allowed to shed its light on those passages that are somewhat obscured in darkness or difficulty.

In the case of Acts 2:38, if we discover that our interpretation of it is in conflict with what is clearly and consistently taught elsewhere in the Bible, the likelihood is that we have misunderstood it and need to examine it more closely yet again. Which brings me to my second point.

**Second**, the Gospel of John is explicitly an evangelistic book (cf. John 20:30-31). Yet there is not one word in it concerning Christian baptism (not even John 3:5; see below). If one studies merely through the sixth chapter of John it is clear that faith or belief is stated to be the means or condition through which we are saved (see John 1:7,12; 3:16,18,36; 5:24; 6:40,47; needless to say, there are countless other texts in John that affirm this same truth). Together with the rest of the NT, **there are almost 150 passages that speak of faith and/or repentance as the sole condition for justification and forgiveness of sins**. If water baptism were absolutely essential for salvation, how do we explain its omission in these numerous texts?

**Third**, in 1 Corinthians 1:17a Paul actually contrasts water baptism with the gospel: "For Christ did not send me to baptize but to preach the gospel." If water baptism were essential to the gospel, and thus essential to salvation, Paul could hardly have said this. Baptism is not the gospel. Faith in the blood of the cross of Christ is (1 Cor. 1:18).

**Fourth**, two things are important to note in the book of Acts itself. In the early church, **baptism in water was the normal, routine, and typically immediate response to faith**. In fact, sometimes it appears that faith has its climactic expression in baptism. It is the occasion on which the sinner calls upon the Lord and commits himself/herself to the Lord (see especially Acts 2:41; 8:12-13, 36-38; 9:17-18; 10:44-48; 16:14-15, 30-33; 18:8).

If you had asked a person in the early church, "When did you become a Christian?" they likely would have answered by saying: "Well, I was baptized on March 3<sup>rd</sup> last year." Thus the idea of an unbaptized Christian is simply not entertained in the NT. **If you are a believer and have not been baptized, you are saved but you are also in sin!** Furthermore, nowhere in Acts (or anywhere in the NT) is baptism set forth as the sole prerequisite or condition for forgiveness and justification. But frequently faith/repentance is (see Luke 24:47; Acts 2:21; 3:19; 4:4; 5:31; 9:42; 10:43-48 [cf. 15:8-9]; 11:21; 13:38-39; 14:1; 16:31; 17:12,30,34).

What does this evidence from Acts tell us? We see that forgiveness and justification are God's gift to those who believe. We are justified by faith alone! Also the normal, routine, virtually unspoken expectation was that everyone who believed would be baptized. Why? Because water baptism is the outward expression of an inward faith. **Baptism symbolizes what faith secures**. Faith without baptism was like joy without a smile. Baptism articulates in a visible form the invisible reality and results of faith. Baptism publicly proclaims everything that faith privately achieves.

**Forgiveness is promised to whoever is baptized, not because baptism secures forgiveness, but because baptism signifies faith/repentance**. Thus Peter includes baptism in Acts 2:38 not because baptism is related to forgiveness but because baptism is related to repentance. Baptism is critically important not to forgiveness but to faith and repentance.

#### *John 3:5*

Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again.' The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit" (John 3:5-8).

In John 3:5, Jesus said to Nicodemus, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.” For many, this is an unequivocal declaration that apart from water baptism there is no salvation. My task will be to examine this statement to determine what Jesus meant and what it tells us about the experience of saving grace.

It’s important to note that whereas Jesus refers to being “born of water and the Spirit” in v. 5, in vv. 6 and 8 he mentions only the Spirit. The reference to “water” is dropped. I believe the reason for this is that “Spirit” is fundamental and “water”, whatever it means, must be subsumed under or defined as an elemental part of the operative work of the Spirit in regeneration. Had our Lord regarded “water” as an independent agency in regeneration and important in itself (i.e., as distinct from the agency of the Spirit), he surely would have mentioned it again and given it more prominence. Instead, he describes the birth “from above” as effected or caused by the Spirit alone and wholly outside the sphere of the “flesh” (v. 6).

Another thing to note is that the “begetting” or regeneration or new birth of which Jesus speaks is unitary, that is to say, there are not two births experienced, each with its respective agency, one by water and another by the Spirit, but one birth “by water and Spirit” in which the Spirit is the dominant factor. The text does not say “born of water and of Spirit” but “born of water and Spirit.” One preposition (*ek*, translated “of”) governs both nouns. It is a single “water and Spirit” birth. Hence “water” is to be understood as coordinate with the “Spirit” rather than independent of or contrasted with it.

Verses 6-8 tell us a great deal about how regeneration or the new birth occurs. In v. 6 Jesus indicates there are two kinds of birth. If you are born of the flesh you are flesh. If you are born of the Spirit you are spirit. Another way of saying the same thing is that human nature (“flesh”) only produces human nature. ***If you want a spiritual effect you must have a spiritual cause.*** The point is that when it comes to regeneration, human nature is wholly impotent and hopelessly sterile. You can’t get a spiritual or saving effect from a physical (i.e., human) cause.

We can now turn our attention to the several interpretations of “water” to see which, if any, best accounts for the evidence just noted. I will only mention the more prominent interpretations.

#### *Water as Baptism*

There are several interpretations that insist baptism in some form or other is in view in this passage. Needless to say, some insist that “water” here in John 3 refers to Christian baptism. This view takes one of three forms: a) baptismal regeneration *ex opere operato* (lit., by the working of the thing worked), that is to say, the water of baptism is the indispensable and always effectual means by which regeneration is accomplished (this is the view of Roman Catholicism); b) a mediating view which says that the Spirit alone regenerates, but only in and through the waters of baptism as the divinely ordained occasion on which or the God-appointed means by which the Spirit works; and c) water baptism is the outward sign and confirmation of an inward regeneration produced by the Spirit.

There are several things to say in response to the idea that water baptism is in view. First, the NT nowhere indicates that regeneration and water baptism are inseparable. The point of v. 8, once again, is that the Spirit operates as freely and sovereignly as the blowing of the wind, a highly inappropriate analogy if regeneration is inextricably tied to water baptism.

Second, if “water” refers to baptism, either as the indispensable means of regeneration or the occasion on which the Spirit operates, why is it omitted in vv. 6-8?

Third, it would be *anachronistic* to see Christian baptism here, for it had as yet not been instituted. Would Jesus have rebuked Nicodemus for being ignorant (John 3:9) of an ordinance about which nothing had yet been said?

Fourth, if Jesus were speaking of the necessity of Christian baptism for salvation, it is odd that he never incorporated it into his proclamation of the good news, and even more strange that he himself never performed the ritual (cf. John 4:2). If baptism were indispensable for salvation, our Lord would have set the example by administering it (cf. also 1 Cor. 1:10-17).

Fifth, and finally, the new birth is something impossible for human beings to produce. Being born again is something that we cannot engineer or contrive or achieve. It is wholly produced and caused by the Spirit. And it happens mysteriously and unpredictably. ***The regeneration of the human heart by the Spirit cannot be pinned down to a precise time or a precise mode. It is simply not possible to reconcile the freedom and sovereignty of the Spirit's work with the idea that the Spirit is given through the water of Christian baptism.***

#### *Water as Word*

According to this somewhat popular interpretation, “water” is taken as symbolic of the Word of God (cf. Eph. 5:26; James 1:18; 1 Pt. 1:23-25). This view would fit well with the rest of Scripture on the nature and means of regeneration, but it does not answer well to the context and argument of John 3. Why did not our Lord simply say “of Word and Spirit”, as is the case in other texts where regeneration is in view? Also, if the Word is in view, an instrumentality surely different from that of the Spirit, why is it dropped from the narrative in vv. 6-8? And finally, our Lord rebukes Nicodemus for being ignorant of such truth, truth apparently quite conspicuous in the OT (see 3:9). But although the Word is associated with quickening in the OT (Psalm 119:50), it is not associated with “water”.

#### *Water as Holy Spirit*

Support for this next view is found in John 4:7-15 and 7:37-39 where “water” is undoubtedly a metaphor for the Holy Spirit. The translation would then be: “of water, *that is*, the Spirit.” The connective “and” (*kai*) would be taken as either exegetical or appositional, preferably the latter. In other words, the symbol is immediately followed by the thing symbolized, an excellent explanation as to why the word “water” is dropped from discussion in vv. 6-8. If “water” = the Holy Spirit, there would be no need to mention it but once.

But if “water” simply means the Spirit, why did Jesus mention it at all? It would appear to be a tautology, yielding a needless repetition. The point is this: unless “water” symbolizes something other than the Spirit or some specific work of the Spirit in the regenerative experience, there is no convincing explanation as to why this word “water” was ever uttered in the first place. For what does it possibly add to the narrative that is not already supplied by the word “Spirit”? Consequently, some have said that “water” is more than a mere synonym for the Holy Spirit. They argue that it refers symbolically to the life-giving operation of the Spirit (as is the case in 4:7-15 and 7:37-39). This is entirely possible, but not the best solution.

#### *Water as a Symbol of Spiritual Cleansing or Purification from Sin*

We now come to the view that I find most convincing. According to this interpretation, when Nicodemus heard the word “water” he would immediately have thought of the religious significance of water in the OT (more properly, he *should* have thought of it; his failure to do so evoked Jesus’ rebuke). The religious use or rather the religiously symbolic meaning of water in the OT pointed in one direction: ***purification***. What Nicodemus ought to have thought of first was ***the indispensable necessity of purification for entrance into the kingdom of God.***

That “water” in the OT often signified washing and purifying from the pollution of sin is evident from the numerous texts:

“Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin!” (Ps. 51:2).

“On that day there shall be a fountain opened for the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem, to cleanse them from sin and uncleanness” (Zech. 13:1).

See also Isaiah 1:16; Jeremiah 33:8; Exodus 30:20-21; 40:12; Leviticus 14:8-9; 15:5-27; 2 Kings 5:10. Born “of water” would therefore mean to Nicodemus that ***entrance into the kingdom of God could only be through spiritual purification from the pollution and defilement of sin*** (an idea, I might add, no doubt repugnant to many among the Pharisees of his day).

Of all the OT texts dealing with this subject, ***Ezekiel 36:25-26*** is surely the most fundamental. In fact, it may well be that this passage should be regarded as the Old Testament parallel of John 3:5. Here is the text from Ezekiel:

“I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh” (Ezek. 36:25-26).

The two elements of John 3:5 (“born of *water* and *Spirit*”) thus correspond to the two elements of the OT counterpart. Water in both texts speaks of purification. Spirit in both texts speaks of renovation or renewal. These are not to be separated, however, but are to be taken as correlative aspects of the one experience of regeneration: *it is a cleansing from sin and an impartation of spiritual life.*

*1 Peter 3:18-22*

For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit, in which he went and proclaimed to the spirits in prison, because they formerly did not obey, when God's patience waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was being prepared, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were brought safely through water. Baptism, which corresponds to this, now saves you, not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers having been subjected to him (1 Peter 3:18-22).

What does Peter mean in v. 21 when he says that “baptism, which corresponds to this, now saves you”? What is “this”? To what does it refer? Clearly he has in mind the experience of Noah and the flood and the deliverance of eight people: Noah and his family (v. 20).

Peter evidently sees in Noah's experience and that of the other seven people with him a **pattern** or **type** or **prefiguring** or **foreshadowing** of the experience of Christians in his day (and today as well):

- The fewness of the people (8) / the minority to whom Peter was writing
- Noah and his family persecuted and slandered / Peter's audience persecuted and slandered
- God set apart Noah and his family in the ark / God set apart the Christians of the first century and today through baptism.

There are some denominations and other church groups that love this passage because they think it endorses the idea that you must be baptized to be forgiven of your sins. But Peter obviously knows that some might take his words to suggest that the waters of baptism are essential for salvation, so no sooner has he declared that “baptism . . . now saves you” than he qualifies his language. It's as if he says:

“Wait. Don't jump to any unwarranted conclusions. Let me explain what I **don't** mean and what I **do** mean. I **do not** mean that water baptism has any saving power apart from faith in Jesus Christ. **The physical action of baptism** in which water removes or cleanses dirt from the body **has no saving power**. There is no intrinsic saving virtue in water baptism. There is no mechanical relationship between being immersed in the water and having your sins forgiven. The physical dimension of baptism is good for washing your body but not your soul! Neither the water nor the ritual itself has any redemptive results.”

I don't know how Peter could have been any clearer: Baptism as an outward physical ritual of itself accomplishes nothing with respect to eternal life.

The only sense in which baptism saves, says Peter, is *insofar as* it provides the occasion for “an appeal to God for a good conscience.” In other words, when you get baptized you appeal to God or you ask God, on the basis of the death and resurrection of Christ, to cleanse your conscience and forgive your sins. Baptism is the occasion on which the believer calls out to God for spiritual purification. It is the call of faith, not the water, that results in salvation.

Some prefer the translation, “a pledge to God *from* a good conscience.” In this case, it is in baptism that the believer responds to the question: “Do you trust Christ for salvation and pledge yourself to follow him and submit to his Lordship?” The response, “Yes,” is the “pledge” or promise of the believer, in response to which God saves.

Therefore, baptism saves, says Peter, only in the sense that it is the outward expression of the inward commitment to God; it is the external display of an internal repentance; it is the physical symbol of a spiritual reality.

It is not the water itself or its cleansing effect on the body that saves. Peter is unmistakably clear about that. Baptism saves only insofar as it is the public expression of commitment and repentance on the part of the believing soul. Baptism is the vehicle or the instrument of your appeal to God, or of your pledge to God.

We see something similar to this in Romans 10:13. There Paul says, "For everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." This is not a denial that "faith" alone saves. Rather it is a description of what faith does: faith calls upon God. That is precisely what Peter says a person does in the waters of baptism: he/she "calls" upon God in faith or, to use Peter's words, he/she makes "an appeal to God for a good conscience."

But what is the point of bringing up the subject of baptism in this context? Peter's audience was suffering greatly at the hands of their enemies. This entire letter is a call for them to persevere, an encouragement to them not to quit or abandon their faith. Peter's point here is two-fold.

First, he wants to reassure them that their unbelieving enemies who persecute and slander them and especially the demonic forces that stand behind those enemies cannot win. Don't ever think such evil spiritual forces are outside or beyond the sovereign control of Christ. He has triumphed over them through his death and resurrection and his ascension to the right hand of the Father in heaven (see Col. 2:14-15).

Second, Peter also encourages them to persevere by reminding them of what their baptism means. By being baptized they are set apart and publicly marked as God's elect people. When Noah and his family constructed the ark they were ridiculed and mocked. Peter is telling these believers in the first century and us today that no matter how badly we may be treated, our baptism, insofar as it reflects our faith in Christ, identifies us as those who belong to God. It is the symbol of our union with Christ and our victory, through him, over all our enemies. It is a reminder of the victory which is ours because we are in Christ who is victor over all.

### *Conclusion*

People often ask, "Is baptism *necessary*? *Must* I be baptized?" The answer is in one sense **No**, but in another sense **Yes**.

If you are asking me, "Is baptism necessary for *salvation*?" the answer is No. You are justified by faith alone. You are fully and finally forgiven of your sins when you repent and embrace the sacrifice of Christ on the cross and trust what he accomplished there as your only hope for eternal life.

If you are asking, "Is baptism necessary for *sanctification*?" the answer is Yes. The NT commands that all believers be baptized. Not to do so is disobedience, and to disobey an explicit command is to fall short of that progressive conformity to the image of Christ that we call sanctification.

So, "must" you be baptized? If you want to be saved, No. If you want to be obedient, Yes.