

# BAPTISM

WHAT IS IT?

*Does It Regenerate And Save?*

By R. K. Campbell  
Revised Edition • 1989

# BAPTISM: WHAT IS IT?

## *Does It Regenerate and Save?*

Every person born into the world is born with a sinful nature, and is a sinner needing salvation. This is a fundamental truth of Holy Scripture (Ps. 52:5; Rom. 5:12; Eph. 2:3), and one which many people acknowledge. Therefore, many agree that one must be born again to enter heaven, as the Lord said in John 3:3: "Unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God."

But *how* can one obtain this necessary, spiritual new birth, have his sins washed away, and be saved from judgment to come? Many theories are set forth as to how to get to heaven, and various doctrines are held by different schools of religion regarding salvation of the soul. What are we to believe? How can we know the true way of salvation among all the conflicting theories and doctrines of men?

"What does the Scripture say?" (Rom. 4:3) should be our earnest inquiry. "To the law and to the testimony," the prophet Isaiah says (ch. 8:20). "If they do not speak according to this word, it is because there is no light in them."

## **What Some Teach**

Some believe and teach that water baptism is the means of grace whereby the new birth is accomplished and eternal salvation is received.

Such would tell us, “It works forgiveness of sins, delivers from death and the devil, and gives eternal salvation to all who believe this.” Baptism, they say, is the means whereby the Holy Spirit makes all the great things, which Christ has wrought for us, our own. It is “the eternal means, connected with His Word, which offers, conveys, and seals unto men the grace which Christ has merited” (*Lutheran Catechism*). Without being baptized, they tell us, one cannot reach heaven—even an innocent infant. If one is baptized, he is regenerated, made anew, and received into communion with the Triune God, according to this teaching.

### **A Divinely Instituted Ordinance**

Baptism is a divinely instituted ordinance and one which should be submitted to by every true child of God. It is an established truth of Scripture according to Matthew 28:19, is for “**all the nations,**” and is connected with the promise of Christ to be with us “even to the end of the age” (v. 20). This we truly believe and teach. But Scripture never teaches that baptism is a saving ordinance, working eternal salvation and new birth for the soul. Let us search the Word of God to see what it says about baptism, salvation and new birth.

### **The Commission to Baptize**

In Matthew 28:19 the Lord commissions His disciples to “go therefore and make disciples of

all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you." First, they were to *disciple* all nations, then they were to *baptize* all those who became disciples.

In Mark 16:15,16 the commission is clearly connected with believing the gospel: "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature. He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned." Those who believe are to be baptized, and those who do not believe (in their hearts) will be damned, even though baptized. The last clause of the verse definitely shows that salvation depends upon *believing* and not upon *baptism*.

Paul confirms this in Galatians 3:26: "For you are all sons of God *through faith* in Christ Jesus." The next verse speaks of the *baptism* of those who are children of God. John 3:16 and Acts 13:38,39 also clearly state that *belief* in Christ alone saves for heaven.

### **Baptism in the Acts**

In the book of Acts, the commission to baptize is carried out. Peter preached on the day of Pentecost to the **Jewish** company and proselytes (new converts) the great message of the resurrection and exaltation to Lord and Christ of that same Jesus whom they had crucified. Cut to the heart, they asked, "What shall we do?" Peter

told them, “Repent, and let everyone of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit ... Then those who gladly received his word were baptized” and added to the disciples (Acts 2:37,38,41).

Here the “remission of sins” is connected with baptism, as also in Acts 22:16 relative to Paul. These are the only two Scriptures speaking of remission, or washing away of sins, by baptism. We must look at them closely and carefully.

Notice that this word is spoken only to Jews directly guilty of crucifying Jesus, and to Paul, the persecutor of Christ and His Church. Gentiles are not so directed, as may be seen in Acts 10. Those Jews needed to repent of their act of crucifying Jesus, and publicly manifest it by being baptized in the name of the One they had rejected. Thus their public sin would be publicly washed away and remitted by baptism. The same applied to Paul’s persecution of Jesus and His disciples. Here those who received Peter’s message, repented, believed in Jesus as the Christ, submitted to baptism in His name, were given the gift of the Holy Spirit, and were saved.

Remission of sins **before God** is only and ever by repentance and faith in Christ Jesus. “To Him all the prophets witness that, through His name, whoever believes in Him will receive remission of sins” (Acts 10:43; see also Acts 3:19; 5:31; 13:38,39; Eph. 1:7). Acts 2:38 and 22:16 then,

speaking of baptism for the remission of sins and for the washing away of sins, applies to the special, glaring, public sin of crucifying the Messiah and persecuting Him and His followers. It speaks of the **public remitting** and washing away of these special, great sins. They concern Jewish people and not Gentiles. Thus they harmonize with the above-mentioned Scriptures. But if made to mean remission of sins before God, they clash with Acts 10:43, as well as other Scriptures regarding the forgiveness of sins. This is impossible, for there is no disagreement or contradiction within the Holy Scriptures.

Later in Acts, Philip went down to Samaria and preached Christ to them. When they believed Philip, "both men and women were baptized" (Acts 8:12). A man named Simon also professed to believe and was baptized, but it soon became evident that his heart was not right with God. Peter told him that he was "poisoned by bitterness and bound by iniquity," and was perishing, even though he had been baptized (vv. 13, 20-23). This strongly refutes the doctrine that baptism makes one born again and fit for heaven.

The same chapter tells of an exercised soul from Ethiopia earnestly reading the prophecies of Isaiah concerning Jesus Christ and His sufferings for our sins (Isa. 53). Undoubtedly, he eagerly drank in the glad tidings Philip brought to him. Faith, which comes by hearing the Word of God, worked in his soul to the believing and

receiving of Jesus Christ. He then desired to openly express this inward faith in Christ by the outward act of baptism. Philip responded at once to his request, and both "went *down into* the water." The newly saved one was baptized and went his way rejoicing (vv. 27-39).

In Acts 10 and 16, the gospel is preached to Gentiles. They believed, received the Holy Spirit, and were baptized. "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved (Acts 16:31), was the word to the anxious jailor's inquiry, "What must I do to be saved?" There is no mention in this verse of baptism as a requirement for salvation at all. But when these souls believed in Christ, received the Holy Spirit and were saved, they publicly confessed it by being baptized unto Christ.

When Paul preached at Corinth, the order was the same: "And many of the Corinthians, **hearing, believed,** and were **baptized**" (Acts 18:8).

## Infants

*Nowhere* in the Bible is there any **definite** record of anyone but professed believers in Christ being baptized, and *never* is there a mention of infants being baptized. Some have **assumed** that infants and little children are included in the households baptized in Acts 16:15 and 33, but this is not even supported by the context of the passages. Concerning Lydia's household, they are spoken of as "brethren" (v. 40); and as to the jailor's household, the Word of

the Lord was spoken to them all, and “he rejoiced, having believed in God with all his household” (v. 34). Such things could not be said of infants or little children.

“Let the little children come to Me, and do not forbid them; for of such is the kingdom of God” (Mk. 10:14) is often quoted regarding the baptism of infants, but it has no connection with baptism. There is not a word in the whole context of the passage about baptizing them, and to bring baptism in here is to violate this Scripture, reading into it what is not there. Jesus took these little children up in His arms, put His hands on them and blessed them; but He did not baptize them.

John 4:2 distinctly says that “Jesus Himself did not baptize, but His disciples.” Therefore He did not baptize these children, nor is it written that He ever instructed others to do so. “Of such is the kingdom of God,” He said.

## **Doctrinal Meaning of Baptism**

Romans 6:3-5 gives the doctrinal meaning and purpose of baptism. The inspired apostle says that “as many as have been baptised unto Christ Jesus, have been baptised unto his death. We have been buried therefore with him by baptism unto death, in order that, even as Christ has been raised up from among (the) dead by the glory of the Father, so we also should walk in newness of life. For if we are become identified with (him) in the likeness of his death, so also



we shall be of (his) resurrection" (*J.N.D., New Trans.*).

These verses teach that baptism is a public identification with Christ and His death for us; it is a burial with Him. Going down into the water and being immersed is entering into "the **likeness** of his death." It is a figure of His death for us. The one baptized thereby owns that he, the sinner, deserves to die. He puts himself figuratively in the place of death, where Christ has gone, openly confessing his faith in Christ's death for his sins. The old sinful man is put in the place of death and the person professes to have "died with Christ" (v. 8).

The coming up out of the water figures the resurrection and profession of the one baptized, that he is a new creature in Christ Jesus and is now going to walk in newness of life—the Christian life.

Baptism does not *give* new life, but simply professes outwardly of *having* it and purposing to walk in it. First Peter 3:21 distinctly states that baptism does not put away the filth of the flesh, but is the answer of a good conscience toward God, obtained by the resurrection of Jesus Christ. That which baptism typifies, the death and resurrection of Christ, is what saves the soul; this is what Peter refers to.

## How Are We Born Again?

Regarding the subject of new birth, mentioned at the beginning of this booklet, the Lord

says in John 3:5,7: "Unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God ... You must be born again."

Some say that "born of water and the Spirit" means baptism. We are told that the water of baptism, and the Word of God which is in and with the water, is used by the Spirit of God to regenerate the person. He is then born again; this is the new birth, according to some teachers.

What does the Bible definitely declare about new birth? How can we determine what is meant by "born of water and the Spirit?" A principle laid down for us in 2 Peter 1:20 is helpful here: "No prophecy of Scripture is had from its own particular interpretation" (J.N.D., New Trans.). This means we cannot interpret a passage of the Bible apart from what is given elsewhere in Scripture on the same subject, nor can we give it our own interpretation. The Bible is its own interpreter in the power and illumination of the Holy Spirit who wrote it. One passage sheds light on another.

What then does the Word of God say elsewhere about new birth? In John 3 the Lord explains how to be born again. He speaks of believing on the Son of Man lifted up on the cross, and that "whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life" (v. 15). He says nothing about baptism.

John 1 tells us that those who receive Jesus Christ and believe on His name are sons of God; they are "born, not of blood, nor of the will of

the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God" (vv. 12,13). "Whoever believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God" (1 Jn. 5:1).

New birth, then, comes by receiving and believing on Jesus Christ the Savior. It is accomplished by God, not by man's will or doings, which certainly excludes baptism performed by man.

Paul told the Corinthians that they were begotten "through the gospel" (1 Cor. 4:15). James writes, "Of His own will He brought us forth by the word of truth" (Jas. 1:18). Peter adds to this with decisive clarity, "Having been born again, not of corruptible seed but incorruptible, through the **word of God** ... Now this is the word which by the gospel was preached to you" (1 Pet. 1:23,25).

These verses plainly teach us that the new life is communicated by the *Word of God*, the word of the gospel which is believed in the soul. The instrument and means of grace which the Spirit of God uses to produce new birth, then, is the Word of God, not water baptism.

In agreement with this, Ephesians 5:26 gives a definite example of water symbolizing the Word of God: "Washing of water **by the word.**" With the light of these various Scriptures shining on John 3:5, there can only be one interpretation of being "born of water and the Spirit." Water there typifies the Word of God, the message of the gospel of Christ, that which the Spirit of God uses to accomplish new birth in a believer.

This is Scriptural harmony: new birth, which is necessary for entrance into the kingdom of God, is produced by the Word of God, and applied to the soul in the illumination and power of the Spirit of God. If you introduce baptism, the harmony is shattered and contradictions appear.

One more Scripture must be examined, which some people use to teach regeneration by baptism. "Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy He saved us, through the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit" (Ti. 3:5). They say the washing of regeneration of the person is by the water of baptism.

But the verse teaches that it is *not* by our works or anyone else's, but by God's mercy alone that we are saved and regenerated by God's Spirit. To read water baptism into this verse is a vain and groundless imagination of man's mind, a reasoning **into** the Scriptures, instead of **out of** the Scriptures, as Paul did in Acts 17:2.

## Good Works

When a person is saved, he not only receives eternal life and forgiveness of sins; he is also indwelt by the Holy Spirit, and receives a new nature which responds to the teaching and guidance of the Spirit within.

Thus a true believer in Christ is enabled by grace to let his light so shine before men that

they may see his good works and glorify his Father in heaven (Mt. 5:16). We do not do good works *to be saved*; we do good works *because we are saved*. “For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them” (Eph. 2:10).

## Conclusion

Friend, is it not unmistakably clear from the Holy Scriptures we have considered: that water baptism does not save the soul or give new birth or divine life; that it was never given for that purpose; that it was never administered to any in Bible times except professed believers in Christ? Do you plainly understand that remission of sins and new birth are only obtained by living faith in Christ and His atonement for sin, and not by baptism at all?

Don't depend on your baptism and other religious works to qualify you for heaven. They are only a foundation of sinking sand, which the Lord warned about in Matthew 7:26,27; one that will perish in the storm of judgment—and those resting on this foundation will be lost forever. “By grace you have been saved through faith . . . not of works” (Eph. 2:8,9).

Give up your works and cast yourself upon God's grace and mercy. “Repent, and believe in the gospel” (Mk. 1:15). Then you will be born again by God's Word and Spirit, saved, regenerated, and assured of seeing the kingdom of

God; of entering in and being God's child forever. May God bless His Word to your soul.

## Addenda

The question is often raised by some who were baptized as infants by sprinkling, whether they should be re-baptized by immersion when they have been converted and saved by faith in Jesus Christ.

Water baptism is in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. This is surely more important than any wrong mode of baptism. Some respected Bible teachers advise that this initiatory rite into the kingdom of heaven, the sphere of Christian profession on earth, need not be repeated.

On the other hand, individuals may not be satisfied with their infant baptism, and desire to be immersed as believers in Christ. Their conscientious convictions should be regarded and acted upon. Doing so by personal conviction is far better than action by compulsory rule.

—*R.K. Campbell*  
Revised 1989

Scriptures from *The New King James Version*, © 1994, Thomas Nelson, Inc. By permission.

---

**Grace & Truth** • 210 Chestnut Street, Danville, IL 61832  
**or** • P.O. Box 4902, Kaduna Junction P.O., Kaduna, Nigeria  
Email: [tracts@gtpress.org](mailto:tracts@gtpress.org) / Web: [www.gtpress.org](http://www.gtpress.org)

PRINTED IN USA