

Are Christians All Wet? A Critical Analysis of the Purpose of Christian Baptism

Philip M. Jackson and Steve Parker

With a foreword by F. F. Bruce

Revised edition, 2022

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Dedication

This volume is dedicated to Dr. and Mrs. David Dummer, missionaries in Peru, for their unselfish help in the life of one of the authors.

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Foreword

John the Baptist announced that, whereas he baptized in water, the one whose way he was preparing would baptize in the Holy Spirit. It might have been expected, then, that when Jesus completed his ministry on earth and commissioned his disciples to proclaim the good news in his name, baptism in water would have been displaced among them by the new baptism with the Spirit. In fact, this is not what happened: they did experience the new baptism with the Spirit, but continued to administer water-baptism. The church for the most part has received this practice as something ordained by the Lord to be carried out in obedience to him so long as it remains on earth.

In this connection questions were raised which are debated to this day. What is the relation of baptism in water to baptism with the Spirit? Who are to be baptized, and when, and how? And what is the significance of water-baptism?

It is to this last question that the authors of this book address themselves. More particularly: in what sense, if in any, is baptism “necessary for salvation”? The great merit of their work is its exegetical basis. The relevant biblical texts are examined one by one, with due regard to grammar and context, and all of them together are found to point to one conclusion. For this reason it gives me pleasure to commend this study to other Bible students. I hope that it will be widely read and considered by those who are prepared to search the scriptures for themselves, “to see whether these things are so.”

F. F. Bruce
Emeritus Professor
University of Manchester
1986

Preface to the revised edition

When this book was first written, we made just a few photocopies to distribute among friends. In order to ensure its long-term preservation in the digital age, we are now posting the same basic text, with some relatively minor modifications. A few typos have been corrected, and the format adjusted. In terms of content, it is virtually the same as the original version. However, we have clarified the wording at several points in order to avoid potential confusion.

If we were to write up this study for the first time, we would organize it much differently now. Nevertheless, we have not modified any of our main beliefs or conclusions about this topic in the intervening years. Therefore, we present it here as it was originally penned, for the most part. We are grateful to Devin Schlote for helping us scan and format the original version of the text.

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May 2022

Acknowledgements

We would like to acknowledge, with deep and sincere appreciation, the invaluable help which Dr. F. F. Bruce has lent us at several points during the research and writing of this book.

Introduction

As the title of this book suggests, our primary objective in this endeavor is to examine the very important Biblical doctrine of water baptism. This study is the result of long hours of examining the various issues raised by different sectors of the Christian world. It has become our conviction that the majority of Bible-believing Christians today are ill-aware of the exegetical problems raised by several verses dealing with water baptism. Time and again we have felt urged by the Holy Spirit to make others aware of the importance which the Bible places on water baptism, an importance which we believe has been overlooked in most evangelical circles. Thus one of the objectives which we pray will be accomplished by this study is to set forth the scriptural emphasis on the purpose and immediacy of Christian baptism.

At the same time, our studies have also made us aware of the following fact: There are many Christians who believe that water baptism is absolutely essential for salvation, i.e., a person becomes a child of God at the point of baptism and not before. We feel this is carrying the doctrine to an extreme which contradicts the harmony of scripture. While many evangelicals brush this aside as an elementary doctrine easily refuted by the contention that we are saved by grace and not by works (which is true: Eph. 2.8-9), experience has shown us that it is not such a simple matter. While it is true that the preponderance of Scripture affirms that man is saved through simply trusting in the savior's finished work, there are several verses in which baptism is brought into such a close connection with salvation that it seems to throw a wrench into the whole scheme. Those Christians who do believe that baptism is an essential part of salvation can present very strong evidence in support of their contention. In fact, the authors of this book have come to the conclusion that the belief that baptism is necessary for salvation is perhaps the most difficult theological issue with which the Church is confronted today. Therefore another very important goal of this book will be to examine the arguments used by those who believe in the necessity of baptism for salvation and show why we believe this cannot be true. We hope that by doing this we may help other Christians who are struggling with this issue, as we ourselves have struggled for some time.

The format we will follow is this: After presenting each verse which we are going to discuss, we will give an analysis, where appropriate, of some of the more difficult grammatical structures involved. We feel it is very important to understand a verse grammatically before one attempts to interpret it theologically. Much confusion has unfortunately arisen because some interpreters, in their enthusiasm to argue for a certain exegesis, have rushed into a theological understanding of a verse and thus hindered a correct analysis of its syntactic structure. As we proceed in the discussion of each passage, we will present in a dialogue format some of the arguments used to assert that baptism is necessary for salvation. After each argument we will give the reasons why we do not accept it as being valid.

At the same time, we hope to avoid a practice which has caused us great frustration in the past. Namely, many teachers, commentaries, theology books, etc. which discuss water baptism do such a good job of explaining what certain passages do not say that they never get around to explaining what they do say. On one occasion one of the authors witnessed a study in which the teacher explained that this verse does not teach such and such about baptism, and this other verse does not mean such and such. When it was finished, he asked the teacher "Where is a verse which does show us the significance of water baptism?" and the only passage which the teacher could offer was Matt. 28.19-20! We would hope that the Bible, our great manual of instruction, has more to say to us about this important rite than that. Thus as we respond to each argument

intended to prove the necessity of baptism and show why we reject that point of view, we will at the same time expound our own understanding of the passage and explain what it does mean.

Many Christian readers might question the sensibility of investing precious time and resources in carrying out theological discussions such as this one when there are countless millions who have never heard the sweet name of Jesus. We sympathize with this objection in many respects and are anxious to leave the study of baptism and move on to other endeavors. However, keep in mind that the purpose of water baptism is an issue related to salvation and hence a very important one. If some groups are correct in asserting that baptism is valid only if a person comes with the intention that his baptism be the culminating and necessary moment of his salvation, then millions of professing Christians such as ourselves, who claim to be saved through simple faith in Jesus Christ, will die in our sins and spend eternity in Hell. This is no minor issue at all!

Finally, there is another vigorously-contested aspect of baptism which, although important, is beyond the scope of this investigation: the question of mode. That is, is immersion the only valid means of administering the rite, or are sprinkling and pouring also acceptable? We feel it is not within our purpose or ability to add any new pages to the many already written concerning this issue. Suffice it to say that, based on the meaning of the word *baptism* and the symbolism which the Scriptures assign it, we feel that immersion is the means by which God would have every man and woman baptized. Apart from this statement of our presuppositions, we do not wish to enter any further into this controversy and thus we will proceed now to the much more important question of the significance of water baptism in the life of a believer.

PART I

Chapter 1

The Nature of the Problem

Water baptism is a very important topic for Christians to consider. It is mentioned over 100 times in the New Testament, and it was specifically mentioned as part of the Great Commission which the Church is to carry out (Mark 16.15-16; Matt. 28.19-20). In addition, it is placed in the same category as faith and repentance as one of the foundational doctrines of Christianity (Heb. 6.1-2). The Bible admonishes us in many places to be diligent students of the Scriptures. Part of our call as Christians is to study this important theological ritual so that we might understand it and practice it correctly. The first time that a person unfamiliar with the Bible picks it up and starts studying the passages discussing the significance of water baptism, he might notice that as far as the writers of the Scriptures were concerned, baptism was very intimately associated with the conversion process. In fact, he may even come to the conclusion that water baptism is a requirement for someone to be saved. Consider these verses:

Mark 16.16: “Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned.” Doesn’t this statement make baptism a condition for being saved?

Acts 2.38: “Peter 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.’” Are we really to be baptized for the forgiveness of our sins?

Acts 22.16: “And now what are you waiting for? Get up, be baptized and wash your sins away, calling on his name.” Was Saul of Tarsus (Paul) actually supposed to wash away his sins by being baptized?

Rom. 6.3-4: “Or don’t you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.” Is it true that in baptism we literally die to our sins and rise up to new life with Christ?

I Pet. 3.21: “And this water symbolizes baptism that now saves you also—not the removal of dirt from the body but the pledge of a good conscience toward God. It saves you by the resurrection of Jesus Christ.” Does water baptism in fact save us? If so, in what way?

It is easy to see how these questions would naturally come to the mind of a serious student of the Scriptures. It is also easy to see why some people conclude from these verses that baptism is absolutely necessary for salvation. We are no exception to the norm; we are open-minded, serious Bible students and these questions have come to our minds on many occasions.

At the same time, as one digs deeper into the spiritual truths contained in God’s Word, one also discovers numerous passages which on the surface teach that all one needs to do in order to be saved is to believe in Jesus Christ. These two doctrines are obviously contradictory, so either one or the other, or both, must be false. We firmly believe that the Bible is in complete harmony with itself. Therefore, as we began to study these issues we realized that somehow there must be a way to understand all of these verses as being in harmony with each other and with everything else that the Bible has to say. Which position is correct? Is it true that water baptism is an absolute requirement for salvation? Or is it true that man can be saved by faith alone, without any other condition? If baptism is not necessary for salvation, what exactly is its significance and purpose? Is it simply a symbolic experience which we should undergo at some point in our lives? Or is there a deeper meaning to baptism, a significance somewhere between these two extremes?

These were the questions which motivated us to see what the Bible has to say about this very important topic. These are also the same questions which are motivating us today to write this book and share our findings with others. Briefly stated, the overall question we want to consider is this: What does the Bible teach the significance of water baptism should be in the life of a Christian? This is the nature of the problem to which we now turn our attention.

Chapter 2

Mark 16.16

“He said to them, ‘Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation. Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned’” (Mark 16.15-16, NIV).

When certain Christians are attempting to prove that water baptism is absolutely necessary for salvation, this is often the first passage in the Bible they will turn to. Typically, their argument at this point will sound somewhat like this:

Argument: Here Jesus makes baptism a requirement for salvation. Baptism and belief are equally necessary parts of obeying the gospel. In the clause *whoever believes and is baptized will be saved*, belief and baptism are grammatically coordinate and both of them are antecedents of the main verb *will be saved*.

In order to respond to this argument, we first need to lay the groundwork for our approach to Biblical interpretation. There are certain facts which must be considered about the context of this verse before one can understand Jesus’ words as his disciples must have understood them. In order to do so, it is necessary to introduce our readers to some crucial concepts and terms which form the framework of our theology. In addition, it is necessary to go back a few pages in the history recorded in the Bible in order to grasp all of the relevant presuppositions which must be brought to bear on this verse. We beg the reader’s understanding as we leave this verse for the moment in order to deal with it more appropriately in a later chapter.

Chapter 3

Interlude: Mark 1.4

“John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins” (Mark 1.4, NASB).

Although this verse does not normally enter into the discussion of whether or not baptism is necessary for salvation, it is a very important one to study in order to understand what the Bible says about water baptism. We believe that this verse is the key to unlocking many other passages referring to water baptism, and a correct understanding of it now will help resolve many difficulties later on. Notice that this passage refers to the ministry of John the Baptist. The baptism which he administered was different in some respects from the baptism which Christ himself initiated following his resurrection. This latter ordinance, which is still in effect today, is sometimes referred to as Christian baptism to distinguish it from John’s baptism. Although the two baptisms do share many characteristics in common, they are different in at least three crucial respects:

(1) The proclamation of John’s baptism was limited to the nation of Israel whereas Christian baptism is universal in its scope. Paul reported that John’s message of repentance was proclaimed “to all the people of Israel” (Acts 13.24), yet the Gospel accounts do not indicate any general attempt to include the surrounding Gentile nations in this call to baptism. Of course individual Gentiles who were converted to Judaism during the time of Christ’s ministry undoubtedly continued to receive baptism just as proselytes had done in Old Testament times, but the uniqueness of John’s baptism was that it was directed specifically towards the Jews themselves. Christian baptism, on the other hand, was from its inception universal in nature (Matt. 28.19-20; Mark 16.15-16; Acts 10.42-48).

(2) John’s baptism did not explicitly call to mind the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Since the disciples’ minds had not yet been opened to realize all that the Scriptures prophesied about the Messiah (Luke 24.44-48), this aspect of baptism did not become meaningful for them until after Christ’s atonement. Jesus did hint at the significance of dying which would be associated with baptism (Mark 10.38-39; Luke 12.50), but the fuller understanding of death to sin and new life with Christ was not understood as a characteristic of baptism until after the resurrection (Rom. 6.3-5; Col. 2.11-13).

(3) The full significance of the baptism in the Holy Spirit had not yet been accomplished in the days of John the Baptist. He himself made mention, immediately after commanding the people to be baptized, of another man coming after him who would baptize them with the Holy Spirit (Mark 1.8). Elsewhere Christ speaks of the future coming of the Spirit in a way in which He had not yet been experienced (John 7.38-39; 14.16-17; 16.7, 13-15; Acts 1.5-8). It is true that for the Jews of those days there was already an awareness of the working of God’s Spirit (e.g. John 3.5-8; cf. Ezek. 36.25-27), but the close connection that baptism had with conversion was apparently not yet understood as a fruit of the Spirit’s operation. In the post-resurrection writings, however, and especially in the book of Acts, both the Holy Spirit and water baptism are naturally mentioned together because they are so intimately associated within the framework of salvation (Acts 2.38; 9.17-18; 10.47; 19.1-5; 1 Cor. 6.11; Tit. 3.5). Thus Christian baptism involves an acknowledgement of the present ministry of the Spirit of God in fulfillment of what John’s baptism could only look forward to.

With this as a background from which to understand John's baptism, we will now proceed to an analysis of Mark 1.4. As we mentioned in the introduction to this book, we feel it is absolutely essential to carry out a grammatical analysis of a given sentence before attempting to understand it theologically. Throughout this discussion the most important question we want to ask ourselves is: What is the relationship in this verse between baptism, repentance, and the forgiveness of sins? In order to answer this question satisfactorily, we need to focus in specific on two grammatical structures: the Greek preposition which is translated here as *for*, and the construction *baptism of repentance*.

Before we do so, let us say by way of preparation that in our approach to interpreting the Bible, we give ultimate consideration not so much to what a verse says but to what it means. That is, our exegetical approach is built upon the discipline of semantics, the study of meaning. We must begin, of course, with considering what a particular sentence says. But that is by no means the end of our study. Our ultimate objective is to use this information as only one of the necessary steps we must go through in order to understand what a verse means.

In the next few pages we will introduce the reader to some key terms and concepts which form the foundation of a semantic approach to Biblical interpretation. Some of the discussion will get a little complicated and deep, so we want to advise the reader of this in advance. We would suggest that the reader initially go through this section somewhat briefly with the goal of getting an overall idea of the main points and concepts. Later, if he is interested in pursuing this study in more depth, he might return to this chapter and re-read it for more detail and understanding.

Let us now introduce several important concepts relating to translation theory, especially as it applies to translating the Bible. In translation we are dealing with written language. Language in this sense can be thought of as a form-meaning composite. In other words, language involves some type of tangible material (the form) used in a regular way understood by the speaker or writer and his audience to convey a desired meaning. In written language this physical material or form is the letters which, when put together, make up words and sentences. These letters and words are used in a fixed way to stand for certain things and concepts so that they communicate a meaning. When a writer wishes to convey a certain message, he must encode his thoughts into this written grid so that others can understand them. The reader, on his part, must decode this grid so that he can abstract from the written form the meaning intended by the writer. Thus language in its simplest form involves an initiator (the speaker or writer), a receptor (the listener or reader), and a mutually understandable medium through which meaning can be conveyed from one to the other. The whole purpose of the written form, then, is to help us as readers to get at the meaning conveyed by the author.

A problem arises when a writer wishes to communicate something to a reader who does not use the same linguistic forms (language) that he does. While the shape of some or all of their letters may be the same, they do not necessarily stand for the same sounds. In addition to this the linguistic rules by which they form these letters into words and sentences are not the same. In this case we say that the writer and his audience speak different languages, and communication between them is therefore impossible. If communication between them is to take place at all, another person must help them by taking the form used by the writer and transforming it into the form used by the reader. This process is what is called translation.

Of course one of the goals of translation is accuracy. In other words, the translator seeks to change the writer's form into the reader's form in such a way that both convey the same meaning. In order to do this effectively, he must be familiar with the way in which forms are

naturally used in each language, especially when the rules which govern how these forms are used are different. Before the translator can attempt to convey a message in the language used by the readers (the target or receptor language), he must first determine what the meaning is which has been encoded in the writer's language (the source language).

It is at this point that semantics becomes useful. Semantics is the study and determination of meaning. It helps us to decode the source language text (e.g., the Greek New Testament) so as to understand the message intended by the original authors. In this sense, then, semantics is closely related to exegesis. Exegesis deals with interpreting, i.e. abstracting the meaning from, a certain passage of Scripture. This is the first step in the process of translation.

As we mentioned earlier, one of the key issues in a grammatical analysis of Mark 1.4 is the preposition *for*. This word connects the construction *baptism of repentance* with the phrase *the forgiveness sins*. Thus it is important to understand its meaning. The Greek word from which this preposition is translated is *eis*. It is difficult to sum up all that this word means in just one English word, but perhaps the closest literal translation/equivalent would be *into*. There are many different shades of meaning, however, which *eis* can convey, as indicated by translations such as *for, in, to, on, toward, at*, etc. which are common in English versions of the New Testament. Now to understand *eis* here as meaning literally 'into,' in the sense of physical movement, would not fit the context because the end result or object of the preposition in this case is *forgiveness*. That is, the word *eis* in its most literal form conveys the meaning 'into' in the sense that a person walks into a room. Such a meaning cannot be possible here because *eis* is connecting two phrases: *baptism of repentance* and *the forgiveness of sins*. It will help us at this stage to point out that semantically, prepositions stand for a relationship between two objects or ideas. In this case the relationship is between *baptism of repentance* and *forgiveness*. The most likely meaning of *eis* in this verse is that it is indicating purpose or result. The majority of Greek scholars and Biblical commentators agree with this interpretation. So we could express this part of the passage by saying that those who heard John the Baptist preaching were to respond to his message so that their sins would be forgiven.

The next question which arises is, what is the meaning of the phrase *baptism of repentance*, and how is it related to the purpose clause *for the forgiveness of sins*? Let us deal with the first part of this question first. The expression *baptism of repentance* is an example of a very common grammatical structure in the Greek New Testament known as the genitive construction. This structure consists of two adjacent nouns, the second of which is marked by a particular suffix to show that it is in the genitive case. The genitive case is what would normally correspond in English to a possessive relationship: *John's book* or *the book of John*. However, the genitive construction is used in such a variety of ways in the New Testament that the semantic relationship which exists between its two parts often has very little to do with possession. In *baptism of repentance*, for example, no one would conceivably understand that *repentance* possesses or owns *baptism*. In cases such as this, the grammatical configuration is simply a very common literary device which by itself tells us very little about the meaning behind it. In order to get at the meaning of any particular genitive construction, one has to keep in mind at least three things: the overall context in which the structure appears, the normal meaning of the individual nouns which make up the construction, and the implied and probable relationship which the two nouns have to each other.

Let us illustrate these points with several examples of the genitive construction in order to show the many possible semantic uses that it has (Beekman and Callow 1974:253-65):

reference	example	semantic type	suggested meaning
1 Pet. 5.4	a crown of glory	attribute	a glorious crown
Acts 9.36	full of good works	degree	(she) did very many good works
Mark 15.47	Mary of Joses	kinship	Mary, Joses' <i>mother</i>
Gal. 5.24	they of Christ	role	they, Christ's <i>disciples</i>
Matt. 2.1	Bethlehem of Judea	location	Bethlehem <i>which is in Judea</i>
Luke 24.49	the city of Jerusalem	identification	the city <i>which is called Jerusalem</i>
Matt. 8.28	the country of the Gadarenes	identification-location	the country <i>where the Gadarenes lived</i>
Rev. 14.14	a crown of gold	substance or material	a crown <i>which consisted of gold</i>
Matt. 10.42	a cup of cold water	contents	a cup <i>which contains cold water</i>
Mark 1.1	the gospel of Jesus Christ	reference	the gospel <i>which is about Jesus Christ</i>
Luke 13.11	a spirit of infirmity	agent	a spirit who <i>causes (people) to be sick</i>
Acts 2.42	the breaking of bread	experiencer	(they) broke bread
Rom. 3.22	faith of Jesus Christ	regard	(all who) believe in or trust Jesus Christ
II Thess. 2.10	the love of the truth	content	(they) love <i>that which is true</i>
Matt. 2.1	in the days of Herod the king	time	when Herod the king <i>was ruling</i>
Jude 15	the deeds of ungodliness (of them)	manner	they <i>had acted in an ungodly manner</i>
Luke 13.1	the sacrifices of them	goal	the sacrifices which they <i>were offering (to God)</i>
Matt. 15.26	the bread of the children	recipient	the bread which <i>is to be given to the children</i>
James 1.25	a hearer of forgetfulness	sequence	(he) hears <i>and then (he) forgets</i>
Rom. 4.11	a sign of circumcision	generic-specific	he was marked, <i>that is he was circumcised</i>
Jude 9	a judgement of reviling	circumstance	(he) judged (him) <i>and at the same time (he) reviled (him)</i>

From the above examples the reader should note two important facts concerning the genitive construction. First of all, even though it is grammatically composed of two adjacent nouns, semantically either or both of these nouns may stand for an event or action. Secondly, and in addition to this, the genitive as a whole may communicate or imply yet another semantic event. Take for example the genitive listed above from Luke 13.11. In the King James Version this verse reads: "And, behold, there was a woman which had a *spirit of infirmity* eighteen years, and was bowed together, and could in no wise lift up herself." In this case the word *infirmity* is an abstract noun since what it refers to semantically is an event, not an actual thing or object. *Infirmity* here could be understood as meaning 'to be sick.' In addition to this, the genitive of *infirmity* implies a relationship between *spirit* and the action *to be sick*. This relationship has

been termed “agent” since the spirit in this case is the one who caused the sickness. All of this, when taken together, gives us an idea of what the genitive *spirit of infirmity* actually means. Notice how this passage has been translated in the New American Standard Bible: “And behold, there was a woman who for eighteen years had had a sickness caused by a spirit...”

From these examples we hope to have conveyed to the reader the fact that the genitive construction, insofar as its grammatical form is concerned, is quite ambiguous. In other words, it is a fixed grammatical structure with many different potential meanings. Here is an example from English to show another type of structure which is semantically ambiguous: *Flying planes can be dangerous*. In this case the one form *flying planes* has two possible meanings: ‘Planes which are flying (can be dangerous)’ and ‘(It can be dangerous) for someone to fly a plane.’ A good example of an ambiguous expression in the Bible is the genitive *the love of God*. This one form can mean *God loves you/us*, in cases such as Rom. 5.5; and it can also mean *you/we love God*, as in I John 2.5. In each case the immediate context and overall theme of the writer can help us deduce the most likely interpretation of such expressions.

Given this discussion as a background to understanding the genitive construction, let us now apply such an analysis to the expression *baptism of repentance* in Mark 1.4. First of all we need to observe that the two words *baptism* and *repentance* are grammatically, i.e., in their formal characteristics, nouns. However, *baptism* and *repentance* do not bring to mind actual physical objects or things; rather they refer semantically to concepts which we would envision as events or actions. That is, *(someone) baptizes (someone else)* and *(someone) repents*. If there were an exact one-to-one correspondence between semantic concept and grammatical form, an object or thing would be expressed grammatically by a noun, and an event or action (such as *baptism* and *repentance*) by a verb. That is, we would say *ball, dog, apple* and *to swim, to drive, to believe* but not *a swim, a drive, belief*, etc. When there is a mismatch between semantic concept and lexical form, as occurs with the words *baptism* and *repentance*, then we say that these words are *skewed*. In other words, skewing refers to a situation in which a word’s grammatical form does not correspond to its most simple semantic class. This does not imply that such words are incorrect or uninspired. As a matter of fact, skewing is a very common device in language because it allows us to say more concisely and eloquently what would otherwise be a long, monotonous expression. The problem that skewing presents for translators is that it often results in ambiguity. In order to resolve ambiguity we frequently go through a process known as *unskewing*. Basically what this involves is a matching up of semantic concept with grammatical form. For example, any words which express or imply an event are restated in a verbal form. Thus the words *baptism* and *repentance*, which are grammatically skewed, would be restated as *to be baptized* and *to repent*, respectively. This does not mean that we would necessarily translate such words this way. Rather, unskewing is simply a semantic tool which helps us see more clearly the meaning behind a given statement. Once we have unskewed the words *baptism* and *repentance*, we note that they refer to events and that therefore they involve a subject or actor, at least implicitly. We could supply these subjects based on the context of Mark 1.4 by saying that John the Baptist preached (to the people/Jews) that *(they) should repent* and that *(they) should be baptized*. (Notice here also that we have taken an initial step in expressing the relationship between *baptism* and *repentance*. Since repentance is a logical and theological prerequisite for baptism, it should come first when the two verbs are placed in a coordinate relationship.) As a result of making explicit the actors in *(they) should repent* and *(they) should be baptized*, we have two chunks of meaning, each one involving a subject and a verb. These units of meaning are referred to as *propositions*. So by unskewing the events *baptism* and

repentance and understanding the subject implied for each one, we have begun a step known as *propositionalization*. In order to complete the propositionalization of the genitive *baptism of repentance*, we now need to express in an explicit way the relationship which exists between the two propositions (*they*) *should repent* and (*they*) *should be baptized*.

As we mentioned above, an obvious aspect of John's message as recorded in Mark 1.4 is that he proclaimed a baptism *characterized by* repentance. This is perhaps the simplest way of understanding this particular genitive: it is a baptism *having to do with* repentance. Accordingly, an initial propositionalization of John's message would be *repent and be baptized*, without saying anything else about the relationship between the two events. However, such an understanding is still a very superficial one, and it fails to do justice to all that John's baptism must have implied for those Jews who heard him preach. Specifically, we still must ask ourselves, in what way was John's baptism characterized by repentance?

We would like to suggest that the genitive *baptism of repentance*, in addition to being placed in a semantic class which might be termed "descriptive or characteristic genitives," should also be understood in a deeper way. We would place it in a category known as "result-reason," along with certain other genitives which appear in Rom. 1.5, I Thess. 1.3, and I Pet. 5.14. In these verses we have the genitives *the work of faith*, *the labor of love*, *the perseverance of hope*, and *a kiss of love*. It has been suggested for these four examples that the first noun in each case expresses an action which resulted because of the reason expressed by the second noun. In other words, one could propositionalize these genitives as follows (Beekman and Callow 1974:264):

Rom. 1.5	the obedience of faith	(they) obey <i>because</i> (they) believe (in God/Christ)
I Thess. 1.3	the work of faith	(you) work <i>because</i> (you) believe (in God/Christ)
	the labor of love	(you) labor <i>because</i> (you) love (God/Christ)
	the perseverance of hope	(you) persevere <i>because</i> (you) hope (for glory)
I Pet. 5.14	a kiss of love	(you) kiss each other <i>because</i> (you) love each other

Notice that in these five genitives, all ten nouns refer semantically to events and are thus skewed, just as in Mark 1.4. We would therefore place *baptism of repentance* in this same group, with the following understanding:

Mark 1.4	a baptism of repentance	(they) should be baptized <i>because</i> (they) had repented
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While this propositionalization gets much closer to what we feel is the intended meaning, one could arrive at still another slightly deeper understanding. We feel that it is necessary to bring out this third shade of implied meaning in order to get an accurate picture of all that the writer intended to convey by the expression *baptism of repentance*. We would suggest that in addition to being understood as expressing characterization and result-reason, this particular genitive could also be placed in a category which might be called "expression-motivation." The genitives listed above from Rom. 1.5, I Thess. 1.3, and I Pet. 5.14 would also fit in this class. Basically they involve the same type of relationship as result-reason, with the further implication that the first noun in each case represents a means of expressing or showing the action which motivated it, shown by the second noun. In other words, given a genitive such as *a kiss of love*, the implied meaning is (*you*) *kiss each other because* (*you*) *love each other*. In addition to this, however, it would also be correct to understand this expression as meaning (*you*) *kiss each other*

to show/demonstrate that (you) love each other. Similarly, John's message in Mark 1.4 could be taken as *(they) should be baptized to show demonstrate that (they) had repented.* This propositionalization brings out what is perhaps the deepest meaning of the expression *baptism of repentance.* We feel it is necessary to use this particular relationship, in addition to the two already suggested, in order to fully understand all that is implied about John's baptism in Mark 1.4. To summarize our analysis of the genitive construction, then, we could say that the meaning behind *baptism of repentance* is that it was a baptism characterized by, resulting from, and designed to express or show the repentance which John the Baptist demanded of his hearers.

At this point it would be helpful to illustrate and validate our analysis by listing various translations of Mark 1.4 which bring out the implied meaning of the genitive construction *baptism of repentance:*

“And so it was that John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness proclaiming a baptism *in token of repentance,* for the forgiveness of sins” (New English Bible).

“For John came and began to baptise men in the desert, proclaiming baptism *as the mark of a complete change of heart and of the forgiveness of sins*” (Phillip's Modern English).

“This messenger was John the Baptist. He lived in the wilderness and taught that all should be baptized *as a public announcement of their decision to turn their backs on sin,* so that God could forgive them” (Living Bible).

In addition to these English language translations, there are translations into other languages which also render the genitive *baptism of repentance* in a way which we feel correctly expresses the relationship between these two actions in an explicit manner. In this case the verse which has been translated is Acts 19.4. The versions given below are back translations, or literal renderings in English, of how this passage was translated into several languages of Mexico and Guatemala under the direction of the Wycliffe Bible Translators (Waterhouse 1966:66):

(Cf. NASB): “And Paul said: ‘*John baptized with the baptism of repentance,* telling the people to believe in Him who was coming after him, that is, in Jesus.’”

“John baptized people *to show that they had repented of their sins.*”

“When John baptized the people *he considered it as a sign that the people had looked away from the evil road (=repented).*”

“John baptized people *so that it would be demonstrated that they had changed their thoughts.*”

Paraphrase or Translation?

In the above translations, which render the expression *baptism of repentance* in a non-literal way, one can observe how in many cases the two skewed nouns *baptism* and *repentance* have been reworded as verbs. This is because in many languages, especially those outside the Indo-European family, concepts which are semantically events must be rendered grammatically as verbs, i.e., they cannot be skewed. In addition, the genitive construction itself has been unskewed and its implied relationship expressed in an explicit form. There are a large percentage of languages in the world in which constructions such as the genitive do not exist. In these cases, complex syntactic structures must simply be unskewed and their propositions rendered in a

highly transparent way. At this point one might ask, if this is so, then can these works really be considered translations? Aren't they actually paraphrases and thus somewhat unreliable?

In response to this well-meaning concern we would offer the following explanation: Technically speaking, a *paraphrase* is an alternate (synonymous) statement of a given meaning in a different way within a specific language. In English, for example, these sentences are essentially paraphrases of each other: *John hit the ball; The ball was hit by John; A male person named John made aggressive contact with the spherical play item.* Paraphrase in this sense is the opposite of ambiguity. Ambiguity involves one form with many potential meanings; paraphrase involves many forms with one meaning. A translation is a transference of meaning from one language to another. Thus it would be more correct to say that all English versions of the Bible, whether the King James or the Living Bible, are translations from the Greek. At the same time they are all paraphrases of each other since they contain essentially the same message, in different forms, in the same language. Therefore, it is technically incorrect to refer to a translation as a paraphrase. We are aware of the popular use of the term *paraphrase*, nevertheless, especially as it appears in conjunction with The Living Bible. This, unfortunately, is a usage which has developed negative connotations due to the popular notions of what constitutes a good translation.

The essential difference between more literal translations, such as the King James Version, the Revised Standard Version, the New American Standard Bible, etc. and translations such as the Living Bible and Phillip's Modern English is not that the latter are paraphrases or add meaning to the original text. All translations, no matter how literal, add words not present in the Greek and change word order when necessary. The important consideration in determining whether a translation is faithful to the original is not whether it changes the words (form) but whether it changes the meaning. A large part of the total meaning of the original text is left implicit in the more literal translations. The emphasis in translations such as The Living Bible is to make explicit as much of the meaning as possible by rendering it in an overt and idiomatic way. Hence translations of this type are known as *idiomatic* or *dynamic equivalence* translations. Of course an obvious argument against idiomatic translations is that when a translator decides what was implied in the original text, he is likely to be biased by his own theological presuppositions. Unfortunately this is true, but with ever-improving exegetical procedures and tools, we can be assured that the essential meaning of God's Word will always be preserved intact. The above discussion is not intended as an argument in favor of idiomatic translations as opposed to literal ones. The usefulness of any given translation will depend in large measure on the type of audience to which it is directed. In the English-speaking world, we have long theological traditions based on some of the more literal translations and thus idiomatic versions have not been well received in certain sectors of Christendom.

Now it would be profitable to return to our discussion of Mark 1.4 to conclude with some summarizing remarks. One of the key questions which still needs to be directly considered is: What exactly is the relationship between baptism, repentance, and forgiveness in this verse? There are some who might assert that the genitive *baptism of repentance* is an inseparable unit and thus must stand or fall as a whole insofar as its connection with forgiveness is concerned. We trust that the previous comments have shown that such a view cannot be maintained linguistically. Given the implied relationship between baptism and repentance as denoted by the genitive construction, it is entirely possible that John had in mind repentance alone as the only necessary condition for forgiveness.

Consider, for example, Hebrews 9.20: “[Moses] said, ‘This is *the blood the covenant*, which God has commanded you to keep.’”¹ Here we have a genitive construction, *blood of the covenant*, and a following clause which is connected with it by the relative pronoun *which*. To what does *which* refer? To *blood*, to *covenant*, or to the entire construction *blood of the covenant*? In this case *which* can only refer to *covenant* and not to any other part of the genitive construction. The point is that even though genitive constructions form an inseparable grammatical unit, they can and must be separated semantically in order to determine the relationship of their individual parts with the surrounding context.

Those who believe that baptism is necessary for salvation often try to equate Mark 1.4 with a certain usage of the genitive construction in Matt. 26.28: “This is my *blood of the covenant*, which is (poured out for many) for the forgiveness of sins.” Here we have a genitive construction, *blood of the covenant*, semantically connected to the phrase *for the forgiveness of sins*. Those who appeal to this verse claim that the relationship between *blood of the covenant* and *forgiveness of sins* is similar to the associated meaning between *baptism of repentance* and *forgiveness of sins* in Mark 1.4. However, if we look at the semantic structure of Matt. 26.28, we can readily see that it is very different from that of Mark 1.4 in several important aspects.

First of all, in the genitive construction *blood of the covenant*, the nouns *blood* and *covenant* stand for objects and things, not actions. That is, *blood* and *covenant* are not skewed words. Recall, however, that the nouns *baptism* and *repentance* are skewed since semantically they refer to actions, not things. Thus right from the beginning we can observe that the two genitive constructions *blood of the covenant* and of *baptism of repentance* are very different in their grammatical-semantic make-up. The first is skewed only in one sense (the word *of* stands for an implicit event such as *blood (which seals) the covenant*), whereas *baptism of repentance* is skewed in three ways: *baptism* is skewed, *repentance* is skewed, and the relationship between the two is skewed. The genitive *baptism of repentance*, therefore, is much more similar to the other result-reason genitives, as we discussed earlier, than it is to the genitive *blood of the covenant*. Thus it should not surprise us that its relationship to the expression *forgiveness of sins* is also very different from that found in Matt. 26.28.

This brings us to the second major point of dissimilarity between Mark 1.4 and Matt. 26.28. In the latter, we can ask ourselves, how is the genitive *blood of the covenant* related semantically to the rest of the verse, beginning with *which*? In other words, what is the antecedent of *which*—*blood* alone, or *covenant* alone, or *blood of the covenant* together? Even a superficial study of the verse should tell us that *which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins* refers to *blood* alone, not to *covenant*. In other words, in this example only one of the two nouns (the first one) is connected semantically with the remainder of the verse. This poses a grave problem for those who jump from Mark 1.4 to Matt. 26.28.

If those people who appeal to Matt. 26.28 were consistent with the semantic structure of that verse, they would be implying that in Mark 1.4, only part of the genitive construction (the

¹Technically there are crucial differences between a covenant and a testament, and this distinction has important theological implications. For example, a testament (or will) is initiated by death, whereas a covenant does not always entail death. The word *diathēkēs* in Hebrews 9.20 appears consistently throughout the Bible for the concept which many English versions render *covenant*, while other versions translate this same Greek word as *testament*. Although we use the term *covenant* in this chapter, we affirm that it involves death and therefore more strongly implies a testament.

noun *baptism*) is semantically connected to the phrase *for the forgiveness of sins*. In other words, since *covenant* in Matt 26.28 is not semantically connected to the following phrase beginning with *which*, then by the same logic *repentance* in Mark 1.4 has no semantic connection with *for the forgiveness of sins*! The conclusion which this type of analysis would force upon the understanding of Mark 1.4 is that *forgiveness of sins* is semantically dependent only on *baptism*, to the exclusion of *repentance*! Such a conclusion, of course, is theologically unsound since repentance can be shown from other passages to be a requirement for salvation.

In conclusion, we trust that the reader has seen the very important semantic differences between Mark 1.4 and Matt. 26.28. The genitive constructions in the two verses are *a priori* of a different semantic nature, and hence their semantic connections with the remainder of the respective verses are also markedly different.

With respect to the forgiveness of sins in Mark 1.4, baptism is related to the entire process only to the extent that it results from and serves to confirm genuine repentance. This is not in any way meant to demean the emphasis that John placed on baptism. As a matter of fact, while baptism may not be in focus with respect to the forgiveness of sins, it is indeed very much in focus as the object of John's preaching. That is, placing *baptism* first in the genitive construction immediately after the verb *preaching* shows us that in Mark's eyes, the main thrust of John's message was a call for the Jews of his days to receive baptism. While repentance was the key which unlocked the door of God's grace, it is every bit as true that John's baptism was designed by God to be the culminating seal of a life-changing process which might be viewed as truly beginning at the point of one's submission to this beautiful rite (cf. Matt. 3.5-6; Luke 7.29-30).

As we mentioned at the beginning of our analysis of Mark 1.4, this particular verse does not normally enter into a discussion of whether baptism in our days is necessary for salvation. Among those who hold that baptism is a necessity today, many would agree with us that John's baptism was not a condition for salvation for those who lived during Christ's ministry on earth. There are some, however, who would contend that John's baptism, like Christian baptism, was a necessary prerequisite for one to enter God's kingdom. To these dear friends we urge a reconsideration of their beliefs in light of the preceding comments on Mark 1.4. In addition, we would direct the reader to take into account several instances during the time that John's baptism was in force in which persons were saved without any mention of baptism (Luke 7.36-50; 17.11-19; 23.39-43). In each case the context indicates that baptism was highly unlikely, if not impossible, to have taken place concurrent with each person's forgiveness. The only condition which Jesus made note of was an inward state of one's heart: faith. With these thoughts in mind let us now turn our attention to another difficult verse.

Chapter 4

John 3.5

“Jesus answered, ‘Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God’” (John 3.5, NASB).

The primary difficulty and point of controversy in Jesus’ statement here is: What does *born of water* refer to? This is an important question since the context of this entire passage is a sermon on the necessity of being born again. The exegetical problems raised by Jesus’ reference to water have divided commentators into three or four main schools of interpretation. While we are certainly not qualified to settle the issue in an authoritative way, we can nevertheless point out certain factors which have led us to our particular conviction. It is not our purpose to argue exhaustively for or against the different understandings of Jesus’ saying. Rather, we will briefly comment on a couple of them and focus our attention more specifically on the obvious implications that this verse has with respect to the baptism controversy.

Some interpret *born of water* as referring to each person’s physical (first) birth. The main evidence which is offered in support of this interpretation is that Jesus’ entire conversation with Nicodemus is a contrast between the fleshly nature of man and the new, regenerate nature given to us by the Spirit. This interpretation is a relatively new one in the history of Christian theology. It has gained some popularity in the United States but has not been generally espoused by European theologians. The difficulty which we see with this interpretation is that it is perhaps the remotest thing that would have come to Nicodemus’ mind when he heard the words of Jesus. It would require an understanding of Jesus’ statement as a tautology, or saying the same thing in two different ways. In other words, if *born of water* refers to our physical birth, then Jesus would be saying that in order to enter the kingdom of God, one must be born by being born and then by being born again. The fact that all men have already been born once is so obvious that it would have been pointless for Jesus to say it. Rather, the context of the discourse as a whole leads us to believe that both *water* and *the Spirit* are elements associated with the second birth.

If this is so, then what does the water stand for? Several commentators are of the opinion that *water* here is used in a metaphorical sense to refer simply to the inward, spiritual cleansing which accompanies conversion. This line of reasoning sees the new birth as a fulfillment of God’s promise to the Jews in Ezekiel 36.24-27. There are variations of this theme which interpret *water* as an emblem of the Spirit himself (cf. John 7.37-39; Titus 3.5) or as a symbol of the word of God (Eph. 5.26; I Pet. 1.23). All of these ideas have certain merit, we agree. However, keeping in mind who it was that Jesus was speaking with, it seems improbable that he would have expected his words to be understood primarily in this figurative sense.

Nicodemus, a Pharisee and ruler of the Jews (v. 1), undoubtedly was aware of the baptism which John the Baptist had been proclaiming to the nation of Israel. For the Pharisees, submission to John’s rite indicated a recognition on their part of their inherent sinfulness and need for forgiveness (Mark 1.4). As such, it marked a break from their traditional reliance on their ancestry and the Law as their basis for righteousness. John’s baptism was a declaration that all men needed an inward, spiritual experience if they were to be considered heirs of the Kingdom (Luke 7.29-30). Thus it would be natural for Jesus to emphasize this point when talking with a Pharisee about the new birth.

There are numerous Biblical scholars who concur with us on this point. Among the sources which interpret *born of water* as a reference to baptism are Arndt and Gingrich, Barnes, the *New Bible Commentary*, A. T. Robertson, and the *Wycliffe Bible Commentary*. As a matter of fact, in one particular study that was done, a compiler listed the interpretations espoused by twenty-five major commentaries, including those mentioned above. Of these, only one saw *born of water* as a reference to physical birth. Two of the twenty-five interpreted it as symbolic of the Spirit. The remaining twenty-two (88%) stated that water was to be understood as baptism.²

Whatever the true meaning of Jesus' words was intended to be, let us assume for the moment that *born of water* is a reference to baptism. At this point a very obvious argument arises.

Argument: When Jesus said, "Unless one is born of water and the Spirit....," he was making baptism a necessary condition for salvation.

In response to this we would emphasize a correct understanding of the historical context in which this conversation took place. Jesus was speaking before his death and resurrection, during the ministry of John the Baptist. Thus it would be anachronistic to insist that this verse is speaking primarily of Christian baptism. The important fact to keep in mind in understanding Jesus' words here is the significance that John's baptism of repentance had for the Jews of his days. As was pointed out in the discussion of Mark 1.4, baptism was viewed as the seal or expression of true repentance. Thus *born of water*, if understood as baptism, stands not just for the physical action of immersion but for all that the rite expresses about the heart attitude of its recipient.

Jesus' use of *water* to stand for baptism is an example of a very common semantic device in scriptural language. Known as a *metonymy*, it involves the use of an actual physical object or action to refer to something with which it is associated. Blood, for example, is often used as a metonymy in the New Testament to refer not just to the actual liquid which flowed through Jesus' veins but to His death on the cross. When blood is used in this sense we could illustrate its figurative meaning as *blood (=death)*. (The symbol = here does not mean that blood is the same thing as death. Rather, it is simply a semantic device which means that blood by implication stands for or is associated with death.) There is another well-known, and more complicated, metonymy which relates to the analysis of John 3.5. It occurs in the Gospel accounts of Jesus' agony in the garden when he prayed "If it be possible, take this cup from me." Here *cup* is used as a reference to death. In the culture of the time, execution or murder by poisoning would be associated with drinking from a cup. So *cup* in this context stands for the poison contained in the cup, which in turn stands for the death caused by drinking the poison. This constitutes a double metonymy, which could be illustrated as follows: *cup (=poison (=death))*.

In a similar way, *born of water* in John 3.5 is a double metonymy standing not just for baptism but for the repentance demonstrated thereby. It would naturally be understood in that way by a Jew such as Nicodemus. In other words, *water (=baptism (=repentance))*.

²The sources which were consulted were the following: Arndt and Gingrich 1957; Barnes 1868; Barrett 1955; Bernard 1928; Brown 1966; Bullinger 1898; Dods 1902; Guthrie 1970; Harrison 1962; Hendriksen 1959; Hobbs 1968; Hoskyns 1940; Hunter 1965; Lenski 1942; Macleod 1953; Meyer 1891; Morris 1971; Plummer 1896; Robertson 1932; Sanders and Mastin 1968; Schnackenburg 1968; Tasker 1960; Tenney 1948; Vincent 1889; and Westcott 1881.

Those who would still press this verse as teaching the necessity of baptism for salvation would be wise to take into account several salvation experiences in the Gospel of Luke: the sinful woman (7.36-50); the ten lepers (17.11-19); Zaccheus the tax collector (19.1-9); and the thief on the cross (23.39-43). All of these people were saved during the time of Christ's earthly ministry and after he had the conversation with Nicodemus recorded in John 3. In each case one would have to stretch the limits of credibility and common sense to assume that the person whose sins were forgiven had been baptized. The responsibility of man in appropriating the new birth cannot be fit into a baptismal tank but rather must be understood as encompassing the essentials of true Christian religion: a penitent and believing heart.

Furthermore, during this point in Jesus' ministry, the phrase *kingdom of God* did not refer to the location of our eternal destination after death. John 3.5 does not say, "...he cannot enter into the kingdom of *Heaven*." Rather, Jesus emphasized that "the kingdom of God is within you" (Luke 17.21). To take part in this abstract realm we must first "see" the kingdom of God (John 3.3). This entails understanding it. Then we enter it by repenting of our sins — a step of faith which culminates in baptism as an expression of new life. As Paul emphasizes in Romans 14.17, "the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking" (visible, physical activities), but rather "righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit" (inward character traits). Being baptized in water is thus essential to being filled with the Holy Spirit (Romans 15.13), not to being saved *per se*. Much of the confusion about these points might be eliminated if baptism were consistently administered right after conversion, as the Bible commands (see Chapter 19).

One final word remains to be said about Jesus' statement in John 3.5. Many of those who believe that baptism is essential to the new birth argue that since the Spirit is mentioned in this verse, the baptism spoken of must be the future Christian baptism associated with the indwelling Holy Spirit. It is true, as was pointed out previously, that the personal working of the Holy Spirit had not yet reached its culmination during the ministry of John the Baptist. This does not mean, however, that the Holy Spirit was prevented from operating in the regeneration and subsequent ministry of individual believers. On several occasions Jesus taught his disciples that the kingdom of God was already coming upon them and that the Holy Spirit would henceforth be given in ever greater measure (cf. Luke 1.15; 2.25; 4.1; 11.13; John 6.63). Thus the new birth mentioned by Jesus to Nicodemus, which has been endowed with its fullest power in the Church age, was offered and commanded even then to the Jews living during John's ministry. Just as it could not be construed as implying for them the necessity of baptism for salvation, neither can it for us today.

Chapter 5

Mark 16.16 Revisited

“He said to them, ‘Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation. Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned’” (Mark 16.15-16, NIV).

Having discussed the main presuppositions which form the basis for our approach to Biblical interpretation, and having studied the significance of John’s baptism of repentance, it would now be appropriate to return to this verse. We introduced it in an earlier chapter, but we had to take a short detour in order to return to it in the right frame of mind.

Recall that the typical argument which is often raised in connection with this verse is as follows:

Argument: In this account of the Great Commission Jesus makes baptism equally necessary as belief in God’s plan of salvation. Belief and baptism are grammatically coordinate and both are antecedents of the main verb *will be saved*.

The thrust of this argument is that *baptism* is an antecedent of the verb *saved* and that therefore the grammatical structure of the verse settles the issue. Right away let us say that as far as the syntax of the sentence is concerned, such an analysis is correct. That is, it is indeed true that from a syntactic point of view, *whoever believes* and *(whoever) is baptized* are grammatically coordinate and both together serve as the subject of the main verb *will be saved*. However, one’s understanding of a passage should never be limited to simply the grammatical arrangement of its different components. It is true, of course, that proper exegesis must begin with a grammatical analysis of the passage in question, but it cannot end there. One’s theological interpretation of Scripture must not contradict established grammatical facts, but one must always be careful to consider all the relevant semantic features of a text before ending the discussion. In other words, we begin to understand a particular statement by looking at the grammatical relationships which exist between its various parts (the form), but this should be only the first step in ultimately arriving at the semantic relationships which those forms express (the meaning). For example, all of the following must also be taken into account in interpreting the Bible: figures of speech, idiomatic expressions, cultural connotations, implied information, the perlocutionary and illocutionary functions of the speaker, skewing, etc.

In the case of Mark 16.16, the key semantic component which a syntactic analysis by itself fails to bring out is the connotationally-implied relationship between belief and baptism. That is, one must keep in mind who was speaking here as well as the historical context in which this statement occurred. Jesus, a Jew, was giving a commission to his disciples, who were also Jews. The timing is just a few days after his crucifixion and resurrection. For the previous three years John’s baptism of repentance had been proclaimed throughout the Jewish nation. This was the first recorded mention (along with Matthew 28.19-20) of Christian baptism. Thus when these eleven disciples heard the word *baptism*, immediately they would understand its relationship to belief in Christ—it was an expression and seal of genuine repentance. As part of the Great Commission it was to be administered to those who would come to trust in the risen savior. The only new characteristics of this baptism were its identification with a Messiah who was now

totally revealed and the universality of its scope. Comparing Mark 16.16 with Mark 1.4, note that in both cases we have the same author, Mark (also a Jew), writing to the same audience about the same Jewish concept, baptism. It would be immediately apparent to any early reader of this book how baptism related to the proclamation of the gospel and why it was therefore included in this account of the Church's mission.

In case some readers still wish to emphasize the grammatical structure of Mark 16.16, let us illustrate why this cannot be the final word as far as exegesis is concerned. In I John 4.7-8 the apostle writes, "Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love." In these verses love is grammatically associated with knowing God in much the same way that baptism is related to salvation grammatically in Mark 16.16. Here, on the surface at least, one might conclude that loving other people is a condition for salvation since "whoever does not love does not know God." In order to arrive at the true meaning of this passage, however, one must go beyond the syntactic level alone. He must also take into account the overall theme and purpose of I John, how *love* is used throughout the book, and the implied relationship between love and knowing God.

In a similar way, Matthew 10.22 contains another statement about salvation which cannot be fully comprehended just by looking at the surface structure. Here Jesus is quoted as saying, "All men will hate you because of me, but *he who stands firm to the end will be saved.*" Compare this with Mark 16.16a: "*Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved.*" In both cases there appears the main verb *will be saved* introduced by a grammatical subject beginning with *he who* or *whoever*. If one were to understand Matthew 10.22 strictly in terms of its grammatical composition, one would have to conclude that a person is not saved until he has stood firm to the end.

Loving other people and standing firm to the end are characteristic responses of a person who has faith in Jesus Christ, just as baptism is. Yet it is the faith, and not the demonstrations of faith, which saves us. This is clear from numerous passages of Scripture (I John 5.11-13; John 5.24; John 3.16-18; John 3.36; John 6.40; John 6.47; John 11.25-26; Acts 10.43; Acts 16.31; Rom. 4.16; Rom. 5.1; Rom. 10.4; and Gal. 3.7-9, to name but a few). The reader should note especially that many of these verses contain the expression "whoever believes." These verses make no distinction at all between those who believe and have been baptized, and those who believe and have not been baptized. Therefore, verses such as Mark 16.16 should be interpreted in light of this very clear Biblical teaching about the preeminence of faith.

Those who believe that Mark 16.16 teaches the necessity of baptism for salvation are basing their conclusion solely on the syntactic relationship of its various parts. This line of theology necessarily asserts that a person who has repented of his sins and believed in Jesus Christ is not yet saved; he still needs to be baptized. If these people were consistent in their exegetical principles they would also have to conclude, based on I John 4.7-8, that a baptized penitent believer is not saved until he loves other people. Furthermore, they would have to say that a baptized penitent believer who loves other people is not saved until he stands firm to the end (Matt. 10.22). This shows the problems which result when one confuses works done in faith with faith itself.

On the Use of Analogies

When discussing Mark 16.16 with persons who believe that baptism is necessary for salvation, it is common for them to use an over-simplified analogy to attempt to prove their point. “It’s as simple as one plus one equals two,” they might say. Another one which is heard frequently is “He who eats his food and digests it will live; he who does not eat his food will die.” “See,” they will tell you, “these analogies show that baptism is just as necessary as belief is.” This line of reasoning suffers from a fatal logical flaw: an analogy is only as accurate as the presuppositions of the person who uses it. In other words, the truthfulness of an analogy rests on the truthfulness of the propositions which lie behind it. In order for the analogy to be valid, the presuppositions it expresses need to have already been proven true. But if they had already been proven correct, then there would have been no need to resort to an analogy. This is why analogies are of little use as a logical reasoning device. They cannot prove the argument which they are designed to express. Their primary usefulness is in illustrating or teaching about a point that has already been demonstrated.

In all fairness to an accurate understanding of Mark 16.16, we must admit that both sides are guilty in this respect. We have heard several analogies of this verse used by persons who believe that it does not make baptism necessary for salvation, and many of these analogies are just as over-simplified. The following one is typical: “He who gets on the bus and sits down will get to Chicago; he who does not get on the bus will not get to Chicago.” All of these contrived examples do follow the structure of Mark 16.16 from a grammatical point of view. However, for every analogy which someone has thought up illustrating a certain meaning, any clever person could think up another one which has the same grammatical structure and which illustrates their particular understanding. Therefore, in evaluating the truthfulness of any given analogy, one must take into account not only the syntactic but also the semantic relationships expressed by its various parts.

For example, let us examine the first analogy given above. Those who would like to show that Mark 16.16 makes baptism necessary for salvation have suggested that we understand it as being similar to $1 + 1 = 2$. In other words, they would say, $1 + 1$ is to 2 just as belief plus baptism is to salvation. But let’s not stop there. There is an additional relationship implied by such an analogy. Not only does $1 + 1 = 2$, but also $1 = 1$, as any first-grader knows. Therefore those who use this analogy are implying not only that belief plus baptism is necessary for salvation, but also that belief is exactly the same thing as baptism. This formulation entirely misrepresents one of the most important concepts of the passage—the relationship between belief and baptism. Therefore the analogy collapses under the weight of its own false presuppositions.

Much the same could be said for most of the other analogies which are offered for this verse. In almost every case they tend to give the impression that salvation can be reduced to a two or three step computerized formula. It is true of course that there are certain absolutes which God has established in order for us to relate to him. However, the personality of man requires such individual attention that it seems contrary to the experiences of Scripture to attempt to enclose the Holy Spirit within a theological box. One must understand baptism not just as a grammatical component in a certain syntactic arrangement but above all as an outward manifestation of an inward working of God in an individual’s soul. Only then will one comprehend how it relates to salvation and why it was included in the Great Commission.

Having said this, it would only be fair for us to expound our own understanding of Mark 16.16. As we mentioned in the introduction to this work, it is frustrating when someone rejects

the interpretations of a verse given by other commentators and yet never says himself what the passage does mean. We have referred several times to the relationship between belief and baptism, and how this should affect one's interpretation of the verse. We feel we can express this in a vivid way through the use of an analogy of our own. We are somewhat hesitant to do so for fear that our purpose be misunderstood. As was stated above, no analogy can prove that a certain interpretation is correct. This we readily admit. The analogy we wish to share is not designed to validate our position but rather to illustrate and draw certain applications from the position we have already established. The appropriateness of our analogy stands or falls not on its own merits but on the presuppositions which it expresses.

Our particular analogy of this verse is based on an actual analogy from God's Word in which the Church is likened to a bride and Christ is the groom or husband (Eph. 5.22-33, etc.) Just as in a wedding the bride is joined to the groom for life and is committed to serving him, so we as members of the Church are in a spiritual sense married to Christ Jesus and committed to serving him. And just as in a wedding a ring is given as a token of the participants' love for and commitment to one another, so in the spiritual dimension Christ has given us baptism as the means to express our new life in him. In baptism we are proclaiming that we are leaving behind the old world and entering into a union with Christ, who promises to care for us and guide us unto death. Thus when Jesus says, "Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved," we would liken this to saying, "Whoever accepts his vows and puts on his ring will be married." Whenever we witness a marriage ceremony in real life, we understand that the exchange of rings is only a token and pledge of one's commitment to his or her spouse; no one would insist that the rings are what actually join the couple together. The validity of the marriage lies in the fact that God has already ordained it as such in Heaven; man and woman on their part acknowledge and accept such a responsibility when they say their vows. This then serves as a basis for the exchange of rings.

All analogies, if pressed to their logical conclusion, eventually break down, and this one is no exception. However, there are certain natural inferences to be drawn from our illustration which we would urge the reader to consider. It is true that putting on a ring is not what makes a person married, yet at the same time it is just as true that a wedding without the exchange of rings would seem empty and incomplete. In other words, the best time for someone to be baptized is right when they are getting married to Jesus Christ! In many evangelical churches today baptism is often delayed on the pretext that the newly-born Christian does not yet understand the full significance of Christian life. Why not wait, it is argued, until he understands more fully what it means to die and rise with Christ, and then baptize him? In our opinion this is like saying, why not wait until after the honeymoon to exchange rings? After all, what bride and groom fully comprehend all that lies before them when they stand together at the altar? Why not rather seal the pact once and for all and then get on with the honeymoon, fully assured of having left behind the single life? And why not inaugurate our salvation with the beautiful symbol of immersion and then get on with our union with Christ, fully convinced that we left behind our former existence once and for all when we arose from the waters of baptism?

Chapter 6

Acts 2.38

“And Peter said to them, ‘Repent, and let each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit’” (Acts 2.38, NASB).

This is a very important verse in the study of Christian theology since it comes at the end of Peter’s discourse to the Jews on the day of Pentecost. It is one of the most frequent passages discussed when considering the purpose of baptism since Peter includes a command for baptism as part of his invitation. It is of especial significance since this was the first recorded proclamation of the gospel after Christ’s resurrection and since the promised Holy Spirit is about to be received by the first converts of the Church Age. Before looking at this verse from a theological point of view, it is necessary to discuss some very important grammatical issues related to its interpretation.

The first point, and a very controversial one, has to do with the meaning of the preposition *for* in the clause *for the forgiveness of your sins*. In Greek this preposition is the word *eis*, the same one we looked at when discussing Mark 1.4. Recall that the word literally means *into*. In our analysis of *John’s baptism of repentance for (eis) the forgiveness of sins*, we argued that *eis* in this context indicates purpose or result. That is, John’s hearers were to respond *so that* their sins would be forgiven. Furthermore, it was pointed out that such forgiveness was connected most directly with repentance and only in an associative sense with baptism. Given the similarity of context and the equivalence of Greek words at this point, our conviction is that *eis* must be interpreted in the same way in Acts 2.38. In other words, we feel that *for (eis) the forgiveness of your sins* here should be understood as indicating purpose or result. There would be no reason to even discuss this at all if it were not for a different opinion espoused by certain commentaries and Greek scholars.

There have been several interpreters, most notably A. T. Robertson (1930:35-36), who have argued that *eis* in Acts 2.38 should be understood as indicating grounds or reason. In other words, they would assign it a meaning roughly equivalent to *because of*. Their basis for this interpretation lies in the contextual use of *eis* in two other passages in the New Testament. In Matthew 12.41, Jesus states that “The men of Nineveh will stand up at the judgement with this generation and condemn it; for they repented at (*eis*) the preaching of Jonah...” Here, it is argued, *eis* cannot indicate purpose since it is associated with *the preaching of Jonah*. To take it in that sense the passage would have to mean the men of Nineveh repented *so that Jonah would preach*, which is illogical. Rather, they conclude, *eis* here must mean that the Ninevites repented *because of Jonah’s preaching*. However, as another author has pointed out, there is nothing wrong with understanding *eis* in its normal sense in this passage since the Greek word for *preaching* is not a verb but a noun. That is, the nominal form here would refer not so much to the action of preaching but to the message that was preached. In other words, the men of Nineveh repented in order to accept or respond to the message which Jonah preached (Mott 1965). Most translations render this passage in a way similar to that given above from the New American Standard Bible: “...they repented at the preaching of Jonah...” Such a translation is a more neutral approach somewhere between the two interpretations given above. Whatever the case may be, it would

seem to be stretching things quite a bit to say that the only or best understanding of *eis* in Matthew 12.41 is that it means *because of*.

Another passage frequently mentioned to show that *eis* may have a retrospective meaning is Matthew 10.41. Here Jesus says that “He who receives a prophet in (*eis*) the name of a prophet shall receive a prophet’s reward; and he who receives a righteous man in (*eis*) the name of a righteous man shall receive a righteous man’s reward.” In this case it is true that there are some valid translations which render the phrases *in the name of a prophet* and *in the name of a righteous man* in the sense of grounds or reason. The New International Version, for example, says “Anyone who receives a prophet because he is a prophet will receive a prophet’s reward, and anyone who receives a righteous man because he is a righteous man will receive a righteous man’s reward.” Before jumping to any conclusions, however, we would point out that in this context it is not *eis* which has a retrospective meaning; it is rather the entire clause in which it appears. That is, the phrase *in the name of a prophet* as a whole shows the reason for anyone to receive a prophet. The preposition *eis* still retains its basic meaning of *in* or *into* (the name of). Compare this phrase with its use in the Great Commission in which we are commanded to baptize converts “*in (eis) the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit*” (Matt. 28:19). Thus we have to conclude that the passages commonly referred to in order to show that *eis* may have a retrospective meaning are not at all conclusive. In each case it is still possible to understand *eis* in its normal sense.

But just for the sake of argument, suppose that someone could prove that in a certain passage *eis* of necessity meant *because of*? In such a case one would be forced to that conclusion only because the immediate context made it absolutely impossible for *eis* to be indicating aim or purpose. Even if such an example could be found (and we know of none), would that be so significant that it would give interpreters the liberty to understand *eis* in whatever way they wanted in cases where the normal meaning was possible? On the contrary, given the overwhelming preponderance of instances in which *eis* means *into* or *for*, shouldn’t we naturally be inclined to take it in such a way when it makes sense to do so in the immediate context?

Such is precisely the conclusion we have been led to with respect to Acts 2.38. The evidence is so overwhelmingly in favor of interpreting *eis* as indicating purpose that we have come to respectfully reject the position of A. T. Robertson *et. al.* Let us now present the reasons for our conclusion so that the reader may judge their validity for himself.

1. The normal meaning of the word *eis*. What we have been establishing in the preceding paragraphs is that the basic sense of *eis* is *into, to, for, etc.*, and that there is no conclusive example in New Testament usage in which it ever deviates from this meaning. Arndt and Gingrich (1957:228), two of the most well-known and respected lexicographers of New Testament Greek, give the following description of *eis*: “...to denote purpose *in order to, to... eis aphasin hamartion* for forgiveness of sins, so that sins might be forgiven Mt. 26:28; cf. Mark 1.4; Lk. 3:3; Ac. 2:38.” Thayer’s lexicon, another standard work, says the following (1889:183): “*Eis*, a Prep. governing the Accusative, and denoting entrance into, or direction and limit: *into, to, towards, for...*” In his exhaustive concordance, Strong (1890) does not even give *because of* as a possible meaning of *eis*. As a matter of fact, this particular preposition appears in the Greek New Testament 1773 times, and in not one instance is the word in and of itself ever translated into English as *because of*.

The following quote by a Baptist scholar should suffice to echo our sentiments:

“It is feared that if we give to ‘eis’ its natural and obvious meaning [in Acts 2.38], undue importance will be ascribed to Baptism, the Atonement will be undervalued, and the work of the Holy Spirit disparaged. Especially is it asserted that here is the vital issue between Baptists and Campbellites. We are gravely told that if we render *eis* in Acts ii. 38 *in order to*, we give up the battle, and must forth with become Campbellites; whereas if we translate it *on account of*, or *in token of*, it will yet be possible for us to remain Baptists.

Such methods of interpretation are unworthy of Christian scholars. It is our business, simply and honestly, to ascertain the exact meaning of the inspired originals, as the sacred penmen intended to convey it to the mind of the reader. Away with the question, ‘What *ought* Peter to have said in the interest of orthodoxy?’ The real question is, ‘What *did* Peter say, and what did he *mean*, when he spoke on the day of Pentecost, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit?’

.... The natural and obvious interpretation cannot give undue importance to Baptism, for Baptism is here united with Repentance and Faith.

.... When the Campbellites translate *in order to* in Acts ii. 38, they translate correctly. Is a translation false because Campbellites endorses it?” (Willmarth 1877:304-5).

2. The grammatical connection between *eis* and repentance. In Acts 2.38 Peter commands his listeners to “Repent and be baptized ... for (*eis*) the forgiveness of your sins.” The two commands *repent* and *be baptized* are coordinated grammatically by the conjunction *kai* (‘and’). Therefore they stand together in a syntactic sense as the main clause to which the dependent clause *for the forgiveness of sins* is connected. Whatever one claims is the connection between baptism and forgiveness in a grammatical sense, he must also accept as the connection between repentance and forgiveness in a grammatical sense. That is, if one understands Peter as saying *be baptized because of the forgiveness of your sins*, he must also understand him as saying *repent and be baptized (do both of these) because of the forgiveness of your sins*. Obviously it would make no sense for Peter to command someone to repent because their sins had been forgiven. Rather the gospel message was clearly a command to repent in order to receive forgiveness, and it would be natural to include baptism in such a command as the outward and visible sign of one’s willingness to repent. Thus the most obvious understanding of Peter’s message would be *Repent ... so that your sins will be forgiven*; such a relationship necessarily establishes the same relationship between baptism and forgiveness in a grammatical sense. We the authors do not base such conclusions on our own knowledge of the Greek language, inasmuch as it is frightfully small. Rather we appeal solely to those recognized scholars whose job it is to explain how the New Testament is to be read.

For example, in his *Commentary on the Book of Acts*, F. F. Bruce (1973:77) states that “It would, of course, be a mistake to link the words ‘unto the remission of your sins’ with the command ‘be baptized’ to the exclusion of the prior command ‘Repent ye.’” Elsewhere he writes “Grammatically, the two imperatives ‘Repent’ and ‘be baptized’ in Acts 2.38 are coordinate the one with the other, and the following phrase ‘unto remission of sins’ is equally related to both—I should say to both together rather than to each separately” (F. F. Bruce, personal correspondence, 1984).

Similarly, the nineteenth century Baptist scholar Horatio B. Hackett (1852:53) comments on Acts 2.38, “*In order to the forgiveness of sins* we connect naturally with both the preceding

verbs. This clause states the motive or object which should induce them to repent and be baptized. It enforces the entire exhortation, not one part of it to the exclusion of the other.”

Likewise, the *Translator's Handbook on the Acts of the Apostles*, published by the United Bible Societies, comments on this verse: “*So that your sins will be forgiven* (literally ‘into a forgiveness of your sins’) in the Greek may express either purpose or result; but the large majority of translators understand it as indicating purpose. The phrase modifies both main verbs: *turn away from your sins* and *be baptized*” (Newman and Nida 1972:60).

3. Other passages in which the phrase “for the forgiveness of sins” appears. We have already mentioned Mark 1.4 as a verse in which the expression *for (eis) the forgiveness of sins* is used. It was noted in that case that since forgiveness was connected primarily with repentance, it would be most natural to understand *eis* as introducing the purpose of John’s baptism of repentance. There are two other New Testament passages in which the words *for the forgiveness of sins* are used. (In all of these instances the Greek words are the same.) In Matthew 26.28, at the Last Supper with his disciples, Jesus speaks of the cup as representing his blood which is “poured out for many for (*eis*) the forgiveness of sins.” Obviously the sense here is that Christ’s blood was shed *for the purpose that* or *in order that* our sins would be forgiven.

In a similar way, Christ speaks after his resurrection of the message which his followers were to deliver. In Luke 24.47 he commands that “repentance for (*eis*) forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all the nations...” Here it is repentance alone, with no mention of baptism, which was to be proclaimed so that men’s sins would be forgiven. Repentance is never demanded of someone whose sins have already been forgiven.

As the unbiased reader examines these New Testament uses of the clause “for the forgiveness of sins,” we feel he will be led to see that it invariably means ‘so that (one’s) sins will be forgiven’.

4. The overall context of this verse within Peter’s discourse. Note that what prompted Peter’s exhortation in Acts 2.38 was a question raised by his listeners in the preceding verse. At the end of Peter’s message on the day of Pentecost, those Jews who heard him preach were convicted of their sin and asked, “What shall we do?” (v. 37). Obviously they were so convinced by Peter’s message that they were now ready to repent and believe the good news. When they asked, “What shall we do?,” there was an implied purpose which would be understood as the completion of their question. What they were actually meaning was “What shall we do *in order to respond?*” or “What shall we do *in order accept this Christ?*” or “What shall we do *in order to be saved?*” Peter naturally picked up on their understood meaning and explained what they should do. Since their query contained an implied purpose clause, it would be very appropriate for Peter to respond with a purpose clause to tell them what they needed to do. It would make little sense, once the Jews had asked what they needed to do in order to be saved, for Peter to tell them to be baptized because their sins had been forgiven. Thus to take *eis* in Acts 2.38 in any other way than as indicating purpose clashes with the overall context in which the verse occurs.

5. The logical order between baptism, forgiveness, and the reception of the Holy Spirit. After Peter urged his listeners to repent and be baptized, he promised them that in so doing they would receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. This was the culmination of the promise of Christ to bestow his Spirit on those who were to become children of God (cf. Rom. 8.9, 15-16; Gal. 4.6). The promise of the Holy Spirit comes after Peter’s command to “repent and be baptized ... for the forgiveness of sins.” This would make sense in that the common process of conversion in the early Church was to repent, believe, confess Christ, and be baptized all at once. Thus baptism was the seal of the convert’s experience and was normally understood as the point at which his

sins were forgiven and he too became a partaker of the Holy Spirit. To take *eis* here as indicating grounds or reason for baptism does damage to the relationship between conversion and the reception of the Spirit. If one holds to this view, then the process must be understood as 1. Repent. 2. Be baptized because your sins are forgiven. 3. Receive the Holy Spirit. The problem with this ordering is that the Bible clearly teaches that one receives the Holy Spirit when he truly repents, since that is when his sins are forgiven. However, the view that baptism here is on the grounds of repentance separates forgiveness from the reception of the Holy Spirit. It implies that even though one sincerely repents and is forgiven before he is baptized, he does not yet receive the Holy Spirit until after he is baptized. We would rather understand this passage as teaching that baptism was the culminating point at which these Jews demonstrated their heartfelt sorrow and confession of sin, thereby receiving God's pardon and his Spirit as sign of their sonship.

Observe how the following translations render this verse, bringing out the relationship between forgiveness of sins and the reception of the Holy Spirit:

“And Peter replied, ‘Each one of you must turn from sin, return to God, and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; *then* you also shall receive this gift, the Holy Spirit’” (The Living Bible).

“Peter told them, ‘You must repent and every one of you must be baptised in the name of Jesus Christ, *so that* you may have your sins forgiven *and* receive the gift of the Holy Spirit’” (Phillips Modern English).

6. Various translations of Acts 2.38. The final evidence to which we appeal as a basis for insisting that *eis* must indicate purpose are several standard and well-accepted renderings of this passage in many different languages. The following can be taken as typical:

“Peter replied, ‘Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ *so that* your sins may be forgiven. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit’” (New International Version).

“Peter said to them, ‘Turn away from your sins, each one of you, and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ, *so that* your sins will be forgiven; and you will receive God's gift, the Holy Spirit’” (Today's English Version).

“And Peter said unto them, Repent ye, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ unto the remission of your sins; and ye shall receive the gift at the Holy Spirit” (American Standard Version).

“Peter said to them, ‘You must repent—and, as an expression of it, let everyone of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ—that you may have your sins forgiven; and then you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit’” (Charles B. Williams).

“Da ye penaunce, and eache of you be baptized ... *in to* the remissioun of youre synnes” (Wycliffe's version of 1308).

“Repent ye, and let be baptized each of you on the name of Jesus Christ (*with a view*) to forgiveness of the sins of you, and ye will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (Marshall's interlinear Greek text).

The following are literal back translations into English of the clause *for the forgiveness of your sins*. They show how this verse was rendered in various indigenous languages of Mexico and Guatemala. These translations were done under the auspices of the Wycliffe Bible Translators (Waterhouse 1966:11).

“...*so that* will be given to be destroyed your sin.”

“...*so that* God will forgive your sins.”

“...*so that* your evil actions be blotted out.”

“...*then* your sins be cleansed.”

“...*thus* God will wipe out your sins.”

We are not aware of a single translation in any language of the world in which the clause “for the forgiveness of your sins” is rendered as “because of” or “upon the forgiveness of your sins.”

Grammar or Theology First?

After exploring such translations and commentaries on the syntactic structure of Acts 2.38, we have come to the conclusion that those who argue that *eis* can mean *because of* are not doing justice to the grammatical rules of the Greek language. We understand, of course, their reasons for doing so. To interpret “*eis* the forgiveness of sins” as a purpose clause creates some rather thorny theological problems. However, to escape such a dilemma by asserting that *eis* can be interpreted as grounds or reason is to allow one’s theology to override and contradict well-established ground rules for dealing with the Greek language. In keeping with the convictions which form a basis for this book, we would much rather take the Greek in the most obvious and natural way possible, even if doing so leaves us with a more difficult exegetical task, than bring to the passage a set of theological presuppositions which forces us to interpret the grammar in a way which neither Peter nor his listeners would have imagined.

Let us conclude this portion of our analysis with some comments by Stanley D. Toussaint, Chairman of the Department of Bible Exposition of Dallas Theological Seminary. He states that “Any exegesis must of necessity be grammatical. This means the normal grammatical usage is to be preferred. Many attempt to escape the problem of Acts 2.38 by saying this is an untypical use of *eis*...” [That is, that it means *on the basis of*.] “This type of exegesis is not grammatical inasmuch as it takes a remotely possible meaning as first choice. It is far better to take the normal meaning and see if good sense can be made of it” (Toussaint 1966:5).

Having given our reasons for interpreting *eis* in this context as “so that” or “in order that,” we now wish to briefly mention another grammatical characteristic of this verse. While this point is less controversial and less important than the question of *eis*, it is still significant for it can help us gain an insight into the theological relationships involved in Peter’s command.

Luke, the author of Acts, records Peter’s statement in verse 38 as “Repent (ye)...” In Greek this imperative verb is second person and plural number in form. It refers to the entire group of Jewish listeners collectively or as a whole. The coordinate command is “and let each one of you be baptized.” This imperative in the Greek is in the form of a third person singular verb, not second person plural as is “Repent.” The command to be baptized has been shifted into a different person and number as an emphatic device to focus on each individual as a separate entity. While repentance is something which had often been commanded of the Jewish nation as a whole, baptism never was. Beginning with the public preaching of John the Baptist, baptism was demanded of individual Jewish believers as a sign that they specifically had turned from their sins. Thus it was natural for Peter to tell his audience “Repent ye” (2nd person plural) but “be baptized every one of you” (3rd person singular) to emphasize that a few individual believers could not be baptized for the sake of the whole group. Each one would have to be baptized for himself to show that he too was joining in a widespread movement of repentance.

This is not to say that the change of person and number in Peter's two commands is an unusual or highly complex use of Greek. We readily admit that this type of shift is a very natural and unambiguous way of linking two coordinate verbs insofar as the syntax is concerned. However, while this particular type of emphasis may not be all that significant from a grammatical point of view, it can be very important from a semantic viewpoint since it hints at a key theological principle—the relationship between repentance and baptism. Repentance and baptism are indeed commands, as Peter has indicated. However, each involves a different kind of action—repentance is inward and initial; baptism is external, expressive of and subsequent to repentance—and one must always keep this in mind when weighing their significance.

Having looked at a couple of important grammatical structures which appear in Acts 2.38, we now turn to the theological issues which this verse raises.

Argument: In Peter's command "Repent, and let each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins," he makes baptism a condition for salvation. The two verbs "repent" and "be baptized" are grammatically coordinate and both are connected to the purpose clause "for the forgiveness of your sins." Baptism is as necessary for salvation as repentance is.

This type of argument is very similar to the one which is made with respect to Mark 16.16, and our response will likewise be similar. Such arguments, it was noted, are limited strictly to the grammatical structure of the passage in question. They fail to recognize the very crucial semantic relationships which exist between the various parts. In the first place, while it is true that repentance and baptism are grammatically coordinate in Acts 2.38, they are not coordinate in an exactly identical way. As we have just pointed out, the change in person and number focuses on a different kind of action which baptism entails. In order to see this verse through the eyes of Peter, one must keep in mind the historical setting of this particular scene.

Peter's sermon here on the day of Pentecost marks the first recorded time that the gospel was publicly proclaimed after Christ's death and resurrection. This day marked the beginning of a new age for the followers of Jesus. They had just passed through a preparatory stage of three years during which John's preaching to the Jews led many of them to repent and be baptized in order to express their readiness to follow the Messiah who was about to be revealed. Those who listened to Peter's message at Pentecost had heard of John's baptism and had seen what Jesus had done, yet they refused to believe. Now after being presented with the apostle's convincing evidence of Christ's resurrection and Messiahship, these Jews were moved by the Holy Spirit and ready to follow this Christ whom they had crucified. What Peter told them in verse 38 was basically "Now that you see who Jesus really is, you need to do what you refused to do when He was here on earth—repent and be baptized as we other Jewish believers have done." At the very mention of baptism, the first time any unbelievers had heard this concept proclaimed after the crucifixion, these Jews would have immediately associated it with all they had heard about baptism during the previous three years. They knew that for a Jew living in those days, baptism was to be understood as an emblem performed by a penitent believer in order to demonstrate the reality of his faith. The only new characteristics of baptism which Peter brings out here is that it is to be done "in the name of Jesus Christ," and that it is associated with the reception of the Holy Spirit. Before, John administered baptism as an expression of one's faith in a Messiah yet to be named. Now that Jesus had been revealed as the Son of God, it was proper to receive baptism in identification with him specifically. We would say then that those who appeal strictly

to the grammatical arrangement of Acts 2.38 as evidence that baptism is necessary for salvation have not gone deep enough into Peter's thoughts. His command here is to a particular type of people at a particular historical moment, and it involves particular Jewish rite with particular implications about its significance. It is true that we are to apply this teaching to our lives today in obedience to God's word, but in order to correctly obey a command of Scripture we need to first realize how that command was understood by those to whom it was originally addressed. Baptism does indeed need to be administered to all those who would embrace Jesus' teachings, but only as it truly relates to repentance within the entire process of one's conversion.

A couple of interpretive translations of Acts 2.38 should serve to illustrate our particular understanding of this verse. We commend them for expressing in an overt way the important relationship between repentance and baptism which was understood as implied information by Peter and his listeners:

"You must repent—and, as an expression of it, let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ—that you may have your sins forgiven; and then you will receive the gift of Holy Spirit" (Charles B. Williams 1937:261).

"Repent (and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ) for the remission of sins" (Stanley D. Toussaint 1966:5).

Argument: If Peter had said "Repent, and let each of you believe in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins," no one would deny that belief was a necessary condition for salvation. Baptism stands in the same place in Peter's actual message, thereby making baptism a condition for salvation.

In the first place, Peter did not say "Repent and believe..." so the argument given above is a strictly hypothetical one and is not likely to get us very far in an understanding of what the Bible actually does say. Furthermore, such an argument is pointless since all it really does is reflect one person's point of view about how the passage should be understood. Now if Peter had in fact said "Repent, and let each of you believe in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins," we would indeed agree that both repentance and belief were necessary for salvation. However, this bears no weight at all in a discussion of baptism because belief and baptism are two very different actions. Belief, like repentance, is an internal action which comes before baptism. What is more, the relationship between repentance and belief is very different from the relationship between repentance and baptism. Therefore it follows logically that the relationship between belief and salvation will also be different from the relationship between baptism and salvation.

The basic tenet of the argument stated above is this: Given a certain grammatical structure, any elements which substituted into a given slot will necessarily have the same function and relationship with respect to the other parts of the sentence as the original one did. This is tantamount to saying that if $x + y = z$, one can substitute any variable he wishes for x , for y , and for z and they will always add up correctly. This of course is not true. One must always keep in mind the individual meanings of the various parts of a sentence as well as their semantic association with one another. The salvation of a human soul is much too complex psychologically and experientially to attempt to reduce it to an impersonalized mathematical equation.

Argument: Peter's command to these Jews to repent and be baptized is similar to the account of Naaman the leper in II Kings 5.1-14. Here Naaman is told by Elisha the prophet, "Go, wash yourself seven times in the Jordan, and your flesh will be restored and you will be cleansed." What was Naaman told he needed to do in order to be cleansed? Go and wash (or dip) in the Jordan. What if he didn't wash in the Jordan—would he have been cleansed? No, because he was told to do two things: go and wash. Notice that he wasn't cleansed until he actually obeyed everything he was told to do. In the same way, the Jews on the day of Pentecost were told by Peter, "Repent and be baptized. . .for the forgiveness of your sins." Until they obeyed both commands they could not be forgiven.

Those who believe that water baptism is necessary for salvation often advance the above argument in support of their conclusion. This is a clever tactic since the cleansing of Naaman does indeed illustrate their thinking about how baptism relates to our salvation in Acts 2.38. In response to this argument we would make the following points.

1. It is true that God did not cleanse Naaman until he obeyed and washed in the Jordan seven times. However, this does not mean that God could not have cleansed him before he washed in the river. Since God knows the heart of man, he knew exactly when Naaman's attitude changed. God had the power, if he had wanted to, to cleanse Naaman of his leprosy while he was on the way to the river and before he washed himself. In this case he did not do so, but that does not mean that such an example is necessarily binding on us.

2. Naaman's healing was very different from the spiritual cleansing which we as Christians receive today. Naaman was living under the Law; we are no longer under the Law. In those days the emphasis in God's dealing with man was on obedience to a series of rituals designed to produce ceremonial, physical purity. Today in the age of grace God has emphasized the attitude of one's heart, and not so much his outward actions, as indicating an inward, spiritual purity. Naaman's cleansing was a physical one; the cleansing we receive in our conversion to Christ today is an emotional and spiritual one. Those who teach that baptism is a necessary condition for salvation do not normally believe that there is any mystical power associated with the water itself. We are not cleansed by the water of baptism, they would say, but by the blood of Christ which is applied to our inner man when we submit to baptism. Many evangelicals who have not studied this particular doctrine in depth have a mistaken notion that those who believe that baptism is a condition for salvation attach some special power to the water itself. This, unfortunately, is a misunderstanding of their position. However, in all fairness to those who have acquired this misunderstanding, is there any wonder that they have that idea when debaters appeal to the case of Naaman to illustrate their position on Acts 2.38? In other words, when a particular person believes that baptism is a part of our spiritual cleansing today and many people think he teaches water regeneration, can he really put all the blame on the other party when he himself draws analogies for his position from the physical cleansing of a leper in Old Testament times?

3. Finally, we would point out that there is a much nicer illustration of Christian conversion than that of Naaman the soldier. In Luke 17.11-19 is recorded an account of how Jesus healed ten lepers of their physical disease. When these ten men saw Jesus, Luke tells us, they cried out, "Jesus, Master, have pity on us!" (v. 13) Obviously they had seen or heard of Jesus' miraculous powers and upon beholding him in person, thought that he might heal them. Jesus, hearing their request, told them, "Go and show yourselves to the priests." Undoubtedly

this would have brought to their minds the Old Testament provision for cleansing a leper, given in Leviticus 14. This portion of the Law stated that “These are the regulations for the diseased person at the time of his ceremonial cleansing, when he is brought to the priest... The person to be cleansed must wash his clothes, shave off all his hair and bathe with water; then he will be ceremonially clean” (Lev. 14.2, 8). According to the regulations for cleansing which God had prescribed for Israel in Leviticus, a leper was to be brought before the priest. After examining his disease, the priest was to make an appropriate sacrifice and then sprinkle some of the blood on the leprous person. Afterwards the leper was to take a ceremonial bath and then he would be pronounced clean.

When Jesus told these leprous men to “Go and show yourselves to the priests,” they and everyone who heard this command would immediately recall the Levitical code for ceremonial cleansing. Observe that Jesus’ command consisted of two imperatives: 1. Go, and 2. Show yourselves to the priests. Not only that, but it was also inferred that when the lepers got there, they could expect to be instructed by the priests to undergo the necessary purifications, including a ceremonial bath. According to the logic advanced by those who believe that Acts 2.38 makes baptism necessary for salvation, these lepers would not be healed until they had obeyed everything which Jesus commanded them. Just as Naaman needed to go and wash in order to be cleansed, and if he went but did not wash he would still be in his infirmity, so these lepers could not expect God’s favor until they completed both parts of Jesus’ prescribed formula for them.

As we continue reading the story, however, we find that the lepers headed for the temple and as they were still on their way, they were cleansed (v. 14). They were healed of their leprosy as soon as they began to obey, but before they completely obeyed Jesus’ command. One of the ten, who happened to be a Samaritan, immediately returned to Jesus to thank him and give glory to God. Jesus’ final comment to him was that “your faith has made you well” (v. 19). This leper was healed by God because of his faith, and yet he had not even obeyed Christ’s entire command! He went, but he did not show himself to the priests! He was on his way, having faith in God’s power to heal him, and before he got to the priests and bathed his body God saw his heart was right and healed him.

When we read Peter’s command in Acts 2.38 to “repent and be baptized for the forgiveness of sins,” we should remember that this Jesus in whose name we are baptized is the same one who told ten lepers to “Go and show yourselves to the priests,” and then healed them as they were yet on the way. We are not implying by this comparison that the case of the lepers is meant to be a universal example for everyone today. What we would suggest is that insofar as it related to spiritual cleansing in the age of grace, the account of Jesus’ healing of the lepers is much closer to the deeper meaning of Acts 2.38 than is the story of Naaman. The cleansing of Naaman’s leprosy took place at a time when God required different expectations of man and in which the Son of Man, our advocate, had not yet come. When Jesus heard the lepers’ cry for pity, the Kingdom of God had already dawned and the One who became flesh was already instructing his creatures about the need above all else for man’s inward being, his heart, to be sprinkled clean and acceptable in God’s sight. May God help us to comprehend and apply the teachings of his Word in heart, in spirit, as well as in action.

Chapter 7

Acts 22.16

“And now why do you delay? Arise, and be baptized and wash away your sins, calling on His name” (Acts 22.16, NASB).

The context of this passage is an account of the conversion of Saul of Tarsus. Paul, speaking to his fellow Jews in Jerusalem, is retracing the steps which led up to his conversion and call to ministry. As part of his testimony he shares about seeing Jesus on the road to Damascus, being led into Damascus, and being visited by Ananias. Ananias, having been instructed by God to approach Saul, comes to him and commands him to “arise, and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on His (Jesus’) name.” This verse brings together in the same context the concepts of baptism and washing away of sins. It is therefore often mentioned, among other verses, to show that baptism is necessary for the remission of sins. The basic argument runs like this:

Argument: It was when Saul received water baptism that his sins were washed away (forgiven) and he called on the name of the Lord for salvation.

Before we respond directly to this contention, we need to point out a very important grammatical factor which relates to the interpretation of this verse. The verbs “be baptized” and “wash away your sins” are coordinate imperatives and show two things which Saul was exhorted to do. The expression “calling on His name,” however, is a different type of grammatical structure in the Greek. The word for “calling” is a participle, meaning that it is not to be taken as an additional action to be done after the main verbs “be baptized” and “wash away your sins.” As a participle, it functions in an adverbial sense to modify or further explain the main verb or verbs. It would be entirely possible to render this clause as “*by* calling on His name.” Such an understanding assumes that this particular participle is being used in an instrumental sense, i.e., “calling on His name” explains what Saul is to be doing as he submits to baptism and how he is to wash away his sins.

Furthermore, the participle *calling* in this instance is in a particular temporal aspect known as *aorist*. The aorist tense in Greek indicates that the action in question takes place once and for all at a specific moment, i.e., it is not a continuous or repetitive action. One thing which is very important about aorist participles in the Greek language is that by themselves they do not indicate when exactly the action is considered to take place. They can refer to a present, simultaneous event or to one which took place entirely in the past. As a matter of fact, aorist participles as a general rule tend to refer more often to a past action than they do to a present one. The immediate context is often the only clue for determining how any given participle is to be understood.

What this means from an exegetical point of view is that it is entirely possible, given the rules of Greek grammar, to understand “calling on His name” in Acts 22.16 as an action which wholly precedes the other verbs “be baptized” and “wash away your sins.” “Calling on His name” in this context could refer to something Saul was to do immediately before being baptized. It could also refer to an action Saul had performed prior to Ananias’ coming to him, for

example, when he called Jesus “Lord” three days earlier on the road to Damascus. In this case one could express that meaning with a translation such as *having called on His name*.

That these interpretations are grammatically possible, and even probable, is borne out by Newman and Nida in their handbook on Acts (1972:425): “The participle *by calling on his name* is an aorist participle and must be taken as action prior to the main verb or verbs with which it is connected.” In addition, F. F. Bruce, another New Testament critic, writes that “the participle means literally ‘having called upon (his name)’ and could refer to any antecedent time, going right back to the Damascus road” (personal correspondence, 1984).

Argument: If the aorist participle in this verse does indeed represent a past action, why is it never translated that way?

Our response to this question is simply that most versions of the Bible in English tend towards a more literal translation of Greek words and phrases which are semantically ambiguous. In other words, the more literal English translations often retain ambiguities from the Greek so as not to appear prejudiced towards one interpretation over another one. Dr. John Callow, a translation consultant with the Wycliffe Bible Translators, makes the following comment: “However, if you glance at various translations into English, you will find that they generally translate this participle with ‘calling’. This isn’t necessarily too significant, as English translations are loath to move away from one word equivalences, and anything other than a present participle would require several words” (John Callow, personal correspondence, 1985).

To summarize, the facts we have wanted to establish about the grammatical structure of Acts 22.16 are the following: The Greek word for “calling” is in the aorist tense and thus refers to an action which chronologically precedes that of the verbs “be baptized” and “wash away your sins.” What is more, the word “calling” is a participle which describes and defines the circumstances surrounding the other events mentioned in this verse. Ananias did not tell Paul “by being baptized wash away your sins” or “wash away your sins being baptized.” Rather, his statement includes two separate and distinct commands—“be baptized” and “wash away your sins”—as well as an adverbial clause, “calling on His name.”

Keeping these facts in mind, let us now present two different views about how this verse is to be interpreted. It should be noted that among evangelical scholars there is some disagreement concerning when exactly Saul was saved. The issues involved are somewhat complex and the authors of this study are hesitant to settle on one or the other view as a dogmatic statement of fact. What we will do is simply present the two basic alternatives and allow the reader to evaluate their credibility for himself.

The first interpretation, which a majority of sources tend to agree with, is that Saul entered into a saved relationship with God when he met Jesus Christ on the road to Damascus. There are three main accounts of Saul’s conversion, given in Acts 9.1-30; 21:37 to 22.21; and 26.1-23. The major evidence which tends to support the “road to Damascus” view is as follows.

The most obvious moment in Saul’s life which marked a complete change in his attitude toward Christ was when Jesus appeared to him on the road. This change of heart is demonstrated by his willingness to obey what Jesus had told him to do. In Acts 22 Paul recounts that when he saw the light and heard a voice saying to him, “Saul! Saul! Why do you persecute me?,” he immediately asked who it was. When the voice replied, “I am Jesus of Nazareth,” Saul must have then realized that this Jesus Christ, whom the disciples had been proclaiming was the Son of God, had indeed risen from the grave as the omnipotent, eternal God of Israel. His immediate

response was simply “What shall I do, Lord?” (vv. 7-10). At that moment Saul had completely surrendered his will to God and was willing to do whatever Jesus commanded him.

Later, in Paul’s first epistle to the Corinthians, he writes that “No one can say, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ except by the Holy Spirit” (1 Cor. 12.3). Paul himself, who realized what it meant to say, “Jesus is Lord,” after discovering who it was that had appeared to him, responded by calling Jesus “Lord” (Acts 22.10). Now it is true that simply calling Jesus “Lord” does not necessarily indicate that one is saved (cf. Matt. 7.21-23). What matters is not one’s intellectual acknowledgement of this fact but rather one’s heartfelt commitment to such a truth. And in the case of Saul of Tarsus, do not his subsequent actions indicate that when he called Jesus “Lord” on the road to Damascus, he was indeed expressing a sincere conviction that even from that very moment Jesus Christ was Lord of his life? The narratives in Acts and elsewhere tend to substantiate this observation.

Another factor which also might be considered as evidence that Paul was saved on the road to Damascus is that when Ananias came to him three days later, he immediately called Paul “brother” (Acts 9.17; 22.13). The use of this word in and of itself is inconclusive since the Greek word for *brother* may simply indicate physical kinship without any reference to a spiritual bond (cf. Acts 22.1). However, what is significant about it in the context of Saul’s conversion are the circumstances surrounding its use. Luke, the author of the Acts, was an able historian. He may have been a Gentile, and was writing a narrative account of the happenings in the early church to Theophilus, who was possibly also a Gentile (cf. Acts 1.1; Luke 1.1-4). Since the Acts of the Apostles was a narrative work hand-written by Luke, he tended to record only the essential details in many instances in order to keep his accounts from being cluttered up with too many insignificant facts. In other words, everything which Luke recorded in this historical book was included for a specific purpose. As a historian, he had to assume an editorial role, as it were, and select very carefully just which details to share with his readers. The very fact that Luke reported Ananias to have said “*Brother* Saul” indicates that in Luke’s eyes, the use of the word “brother” in this context is significant. For the Christians in the early church who read this account, Ananias’ manner of addressing Saul would likely have been understood as an affirmation of their oneness in the faith (John Werner, personal correspondence, 1984).

A final point which might be made in affirming that Saul was actually saved on the road to Damascus is that in subsequent experiences in which he is recounting his call as an apostle, he seems to date his conversion from that point. In his testimony before King Agrippa in Acts 26, Paul relates that when Jesus appeared to him on the road, he told him that “I have appeared to you to appoint you as a servant and as a witness of what you have seen of me and what I will show you” (v. 16).

Elsewhere, in discussing the importance of Christ’s resurrection as part of the gospel he had received, Paul writes that Jesus “appeared to James, then to all the apostles, and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born” (1 Cor. 15.7-8). Since Paul himself considered that he was “born” as an apostle, having seen the risen Christ on the road to Damascus, can one really believe that he was still in his sins at that time? On the contrary, does not the fact that Jesus appeared to Saul to call him as his servant and witness indicate that from that moment, God considered him to be one of his children?

The arguments mentioned above deserve strong consideration and we will let them speak for themselves. Assuming that Paul was indeed saved on the road to Damascus, how would the proponents of this view explain the meaning of Acts 22.16? If Paul’s sins were already forgiven, why did Ananias tell him to “arise, be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on His name”?

In the first place, they would point out, remember that the Greek participle “calling” actually refers to an action which precedes the verbs “be baptized” and “wash away your sins.” It is possible to take this action as having been fulfilled on the road to Damascus three days earlier. Secondly, the imperative “wash away your sins” is used here in a figurative sense. No one’s sins are literally washed away, either in baptism or by any other means. It is possible, then, to interpret “wash away your sins” as being a symbolic way for baptism to portray the inward cleansing we receive at the moment of salvation. A rendering of Acts 22.16 which illustrates the above position would be something like this: “And now why do you delay? Arise, and be baptized, and wash away your sins (in a figurative sense), (since) you have (already) called upon His name.”

An alternative view of this verse, and one which is also possible from a grammatical standpoint, is that Saul was not saved until Ananias came to him in Damascus, three days after Saul’s encounter with Christ. The proponents of this interpretation would respond to the previous one by claiming that although Saul had an intellectual understanding of who Jesus was, it was not until his meeting with Ananias that he willfully trusted in the Savior and called on his name for salvation. With respect to the change of heart which Saul demonstrated on the road to Damascus, this is readily admitted. However, advocates of this second view would point out that such a change could have been solely on an intellectual level and did not actually indicate that Saul had surrendered his heart to God. Notice, for example, that Saul’s question to Jesus “What shall I do, Lord?” in Acts 22.10 is similar to the response of the Jews who heard Peter’s sermon on the day of Pentecost. In Acts 2.37 their question “Brothers, what shall we do?” indicates a certain change of heart, but they were not yet saved. Peter’s reply in v. 38 (“Repent and be baptized...for the forgiveness of your sins”) shows that they had not yet truly repented, even though in their minds they had come to accept the truthfulness of Christ’s sovereignty.

Secondly, although Saul did indeed refer to Christ as “Lord” on the road to Damascus (Acts 22.10), this does not necessarily imply an acknowledgement of Christ’s deity. The Greek word which is translated here as “Lord” was also used as a customary title of respect for any gentleman (similar to our use of “Sir”). For examples of this usage, see Matt. 21.29-30, John 5.7, John 12.21, John 20.15, and Acts 16.30. It would have been very natural, once Saul had been overpowered by such a being, for him to refer to Jesus as “Lord” without meaning that he was considering him to be part of the Godhead. Furthermore, as was pointed out previously, referring to Christ as “Lord” does not always ensure that one is saved. There are those who on the last day will appeal “Lord, Lord,...” yet Christ will reply that he never knew them (Matt. 7.21-23).

Another point which is often made to support the view that Saul was saved on the road to Damascus is that Ananias called him “brother” immediately upon seeing him. While the word by itself does not necessarily involve a spiritual relationship, it was argued that the circumstances surrounding its use would lead one to understand it in that sense. However, it is also important to keep in mind the fact that Ananias and Saul were brothers in the Jewish faith, and Ananias may have referred to Saul as such in order to reassure him of his friendly intentions. This would be very similar to Paul’s use of the word “brother” at a later stage of his ministry. In Acts 21 Paul is reported to have been at the center of a riot involving the Jews in Jerusalem. Desiring to relate to them as fellow Jews, he motioned for them to be silent and addressed them as “brothers and fathers” (Acts 22.1). He then proceeded to tell them about his conversion experience, including how Ananias came to him and called him “Brother Saul.” In this instance one would suppose that the Jews to whom this story was told would interpret Ananias’ use of the word “brother” as

referring to nothing more than a Jewish bond of brotherhood. Thus the word “brother” by itself does not necessarily mean that the one being referred to is a Christian.

A final argument which is often advanced to prove that Saul was saved before Ananias came to him is that Paul himself dated his call as an apostle from the moment Christ appeared to him on the road (Acts 26.16; I Cor. 15.8). If Saul was made an apostle at that time, it was pointed out, it would be natural to conclude that he was also in a saved relationship with God from that moment. The response to this would be that under normal circumstances this would be a valid conclusion, but Paul was called as an apostle in a very unique way. He acknowledged this when he described himself as being “abnormally born” (I Cor. 15.8), meaning that he was different in certain respects from the other apostles. Notice that in a sense Judas was considered to be an apostle just like the other eleven (Matt. 10.1-4; Mark 3.13-19; Luke 6.12-16, 9.1-2), although his actions indicated that he may never have had a true relationship with Jesus Christ. In a similar way, Saul’s call as an apostle on the road to Damascus may be understood as simply a fulfillment of one of the requirements for such an office, without necessarily entailing a salvation experience at that point.

Another bit of evidence which we would like to bring out in this discussion is the fact that Saul remained in a blinded state until Ananias came to him. Recall that when Jesus appeared to him on the road, Saul fell to the ground at the flashing of the light. When he got up, he opened his eyes but was unable to see, so his companions had to lead him into Damascus. There Saul remained in prayer and fasting for three days, unable to see anything. When Ananias finally came to him, he told Saul that Christ had sent him “so that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit.” At that point, the Bible tells us, “something like scales fell from Saul’s eyes, and he could see again. He got up and was baptized” (Acts 9.17-18). What is interesting about this sequence of events is that even though Saul had seen Jesus on the road, he remained in darkness until Ananias came to him. In several Scripture passages the concept of becoming a Christian is analogized in terms of passing from darkness to the light, from being blind to being able to see. This does not prove that Saul’s physical blindness for three days necessarily indicated an unsaved spiritual condition, but it is a factor which might at least be taken into account.

Those who believe that Saul was not saved until Ananias came to him in Damascus would argue that such a conclusion is the most natural and obvious understanding of Ananias’ words in Acts 22.16. All of the points brought up to show that Saul was saved on the road, they would contend, can be shown to be inconclusive. At the same time, the context of Ananias’ conversation with Saul would indicate that Saul’s sins were not yet forgiven, for Ananias commanded him to “arise, be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on His name” (Acts 22.16). Notice that when God first appeared to Ananias in a vision and told him to go to Saul, Ananias hesitated and pointed out all that Saul had done to persecute the Church. He then complained that Saul had come to Damascus “with authority from the chief priests to arrest all who call on your name” (Acts 9.14). What is interesting in this conversation is the expression that Ananias used to refer to Christians—those who “call on your name.” Later, when he came to Saul, he instructed him to wash away his sins, calling on God’s name (Acts 22.16). From Ananias’ perspective, at least, it would seem that he considered Saul’s baptism to be very closely related to his becoming a member of the Lord’s church, the body made up of “all those who call on God’s name.”

A final point which might be made in support of the view that Saul was not saved until his encounter with Ananias is that almost every translation of Acts 22.16 which has been

consulted renders the participle *calling on (His name)* as simultaneous with the command for Saul to be baptized and wash away his sins. In other words, nearly every published translation of this verse seems to go against the interpretation that “calling on His name” was an action that Saul had previously accomplished on the road to Damascus. Recall that the aorist participle for *calling* means literally *having called*, and that such a construction admits of the possibility that this was something Saul had already done before Ananias came to him. While it would be grammatically possible to render this participle in such a way, there are no translations which do so. The immediate context would seem to indicate that it should be associated more directly with a current, simultaneous action. In this case the most natural way to interpret *calling on His name* is that in Ananias’ eyes, it was to be done immediately prior to and as a prerequisite for Saul’s baptism. In other words, one might reword Ananias’ command to Saul in the following way in order to specify the actual and logical sequential ordering which was implied: “And now what are you waiting for? Get up and call on His name so that you can be baptized and have your sins washed away,” or, “Get up and call on His name as you are being baptized and so that your sins will be washed away.” As F. F. Bruce explains, if the aorist participle *calling* is indeed signifying real past action, “no difficulty is raised: it will then refer to the convert’s invoking the Lord’s name by way of confession (possibly in response to a question asked by the baptizer) before receiving baptism” (personal correspondence, 1987).

This latter interpretation of Acts 22.16 assumes that baptism was associated very intimately with Saul’s conversion experience. Several New Testament scholars have suggested that in Saul’s case, his very act of baptism constituted as it were a prayer to God for a good conscience (cf. I Pet. 3.21). This view would tie in closely with the interpretation of Acts 22.16 which was just given. It must always be borne in mind, however, that the most significant feature of this verse, both from a grammatical and a theological perspective, is the participial clause *calling on His name*. One must admit that Saul initially called on the Lord on the road to Damascus, and that that action marked a very important changing point in his life. One must also admit that given the context of Acts 22.16, Saul again called on the Lord’s name when he was baptized, and that without such a step his salvation experience would not really have been considered complete. At the same time, it is overridingly important not to attach to Saul’s baptism more than what was intended. Ananias did not tell him “by being baptized wash away your sins.” He did tell him to be baptized and wash away his sins, but he also explained that such actions were to be accomplished by calling on God’s name for salvation. It is only by interpreting this verse in this way that one can allow the Bible to be at harmony with itself, for it promises us that everyone who “calls on the name of the Lord” will be saved (Rom. 10.13; Acts 2.21, 9.14).

As we bring together all of the aforementioned thoughts concerning Saul’s conversion, we are struck by the conclusion that his experiences, among all those accounted for us in God’s word, are perhaps the best evidence that salvation is rightly to be considered a process. The Holy Spirit seems to meet each individual at the point of his or her particular spiritual need, powerfully yet individually coaxing them towards that culminating moment when saving faith becomes actualized. For Saul of Tarsus, as indeed it should be for all those who call on God’s name, that moment of proving was when he was commanded to be baptized. In order to truly follow God’s teachings, we as individuals in his Church need to become more aware of our obligation to be someone’s Ananias. But in doing so let us take pains that the significance of baptism not be misrepresented. In the case of Acts 22.16, this will be accomplished if we keep in mind that Paul, a Jew, was commanded to be baptized by Ananias, another Jew, and that in the

context of chapters twenty-one and twenty-two, Paul is describing this event to a group comprised entirely of his Jewish “brothers and fathers.” As a Jew speaking to Jews, Paul shared with them the common understanding of how baptism related to repentance, belief, and a godly confession within the framework of religious conversion. This is the thread of redemption which helps us tie together in mutual interpretation all of the New Testament teachings concerning water baptism.

Chapter 8

Romans 6.3-4

“Or don’t you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the father, we too may live a new life” (Rom. 6.3-4, NIV).

In dealing with this passage we are confronted for the first time with an issue that has not been raised so far in our study: Is the baptism referred to here a physical baptism with water or is it a non-physical, spiritual baptism only? In other words, is Paul talking in this case about water baptism, or is he referring to the so-called “baptism of the Holy Spirit”? It is unfortunate that such a question needs to be asked, but since disagreements over this issue abound in the literature dealing with baptism, we need to consider it. If it is true that the baptism spoken of in Romans 6 is strictly a spiritual one, then the passage is not really relevant to our study of water baptism and we can disregard it.

This is precisely the solution which many commentators have espoused. Upon being confronted with these verses, they argue that since the baptism spoken of in this context is so intimately connected with spiritual regeneration, it cannot be referring to physical baptism; it must therefore be spiritual baptism. While this type of reasoning would make it much easier for us to interpret these particular verses, we do not accept it for the following reasons.

In the first place, it is dangerous to approach Scripture with an *a priori* viewpoint that prevents one from considering various interpretations. That is, when one concludes beforehand that anytime baptism is spoken of in the context of salvation, it cannot be water baptism, one is allowing his theology to establish what the Bible must mean, rather than vice-versa. We should approach exegesis with an open mind and consider all the passages relevant to a certain topic before concluding what the Bible teaches about that issue. To do otherwise can lead to all sorts of disharmonious and excessive theologies. For example, the authors have read discussions of baptism by commentators who were so troubled by Mark 16.16 and Acts 2.38 that they argued that in both cases it was spiritual baptism, not water baptism, that was being discussed! We feel that such preconceived conclusions are not fitting for honest, truth-seeking students of God’s Word. We would much rather allow the most obvious and natural understanding of a passage to be the one that influences our thinking, than to take an easier way out in order to avoid difficulties. In summary, we feel compelled to admit that the baptism spoken of in Romans 6 is water baptism, in spite of how problematical this position might prove to be, because such is the conclusion to which we are led by a consistent and normal application of the principles of Biblical hermeneutics.

One of the standard principles used in exegeting a particular text is the following one: All other things being equal, a literal interpretation of a given passage should be considered before a figurative interpretation of the same passage. In other words, the burden of proof must be carried by the person who chooses to interpret a passage in a non-literal way. Someone else has aptly named this premise “the golden rule of interpretation,” and it can be stated as follows: “When the plain sense of Scripture makes common sense, seek no other sense; therefore, take every word at its primary, ordinary, usual, literal meaning unless the facts of the immediate context, studied in

the light of related passages and axiomatic and fundamental truths, indicate clearly otherwise” (Cooper 1970:50).

In the case of Romans 6.3-4, the reference to baptism should be understood in its literal sense unless proven otherwise. The primary, literal sense of the concepts *baptism* and *baptize* is the physical action of baptizing in or with water. To understand baptism as referring to a spiritual, non-physical event constitutes a metaphorical (figurative) usage of the term. While metaphors and other figurative devices are very common in Biblical literature, we should be cautious in assuming that the author is employing a figurative meaning when an equally plausible, non-figurative meaning of the same term also fits the context. When two different understandings of a certain concept—one literal and one figurative—are both very common in Biblical writings, a good rule of thumb to use in deciding which one is being employed in a given passage is the following: If a literal understanding of the concept is allowed by the context, assume it to be the writer’s meaning. Interpret the concept in a figurative way only when the context forces you to do so.

In the case of Romans 6, there is nothing in this context which would force us to the conclusion that spiritual baptism was in Paul’s mind. When figurative or spiritual baptism is being discussed, the most obvious clue that we have to lead us to this conclusion is that the Spirit himself is mentioned in the same context as baptism. As we compile all the New Testament passages in which this is the case, we can make the following observations: There are two main contexts when the Holy Spirit and baptism are mentioned together. The first is when the baptism in the Holy Spirit is being contrasted with John’s baptism of repentance (cf. Matt. 3.11; Mark 1.8; Luke 3.16; John 1.33; Acts 1.5, 11.16, 19.1-3, etc.). The second is in I Corinthians 12.13 in which the immediate as well as the larger context of several chapters indicates that the emphasis is on the Holy Spirit. In these two usages of the concept of baptism we may legitimately conclude that it is spiritual baptism which is in focus since the Holy Spirit is mentioned in the same context. Such is not the case with Romans 6.3-4. In these two verses there is no mention of the Spirit, so our initial assumption should be that Paul is not discussing spiritual baptism.

At the same time, a careful reader will note that in the verses just mentioned, every time that spiritual baptism is referred to, the concept of baptism is always expressed by means of a verb: *baptize*, *baptized*. This may be nothing but a coincidence, but it is interesting to observe that whenever the Spirit appears in conjunction with baptism, this event is always expressed in an unskewed way, perhaps to emphasize the fact that the Spirit is the explicit agent or instrument of the action of baptizing. Whenever there is an explicit reference to the Spirit in the same context as baptism, this concept is never expressed as a noun: *baptism*. In Romans 6.3-4, the action of baptism is expressed in a verbal form in two instances (“*baptized* into Christ Jesus” and “*baptized* into his death”), but it is also expressed once by means of a noun (“buried with him through *baptism*”). This is never the case in any of the passages in which spiritual baptism is undisputedly in focus. We would have to conclude that from a linguistic point of view, it would be unnatural to assume that Paul is referring to spiritual baptism in Romans 6, since in this case he uses a noun form of the word. Furthermore, as we have pointed out above, since there is no explicit reference to the Holy Spirit in this passage, the weight of evidence suggests that baptism in this case should not be understood in a figurative sense. To do so one would have to override the contextual clues that would otherwise lead us to interpret this passage in a way which would harmonize with the pattern of Biblical reference to baptism discovered thus far.

Finally, an additional argument in support of the view that the baptism referred to in Romans 6 is a physical baptism with water is the fact that Paul speaks of it symbolically as a

burial. Being immersed underneath water is a beautiful portrayal of leaving behind one's former life in order to be resurrected with Christ Jesus. Referring to the physical action of immersion as a burial would seem very natural and appropriate for the original readers of Paul's words. If the baptism in this context is only a spiritual one, it becomes much harder to grasp Paul's metaphorical intent in speaking of it as a burial. It is more likely that when Paul refers to our being buried with Christ, he is envisioning that moment when believers are plunged beneath the watery surface of the baptismal pool and enter into the death of Christ. For the first-century Christians this was so automatic upon conversion that there would be little doubt in their minds as to what Paul was referring.

In summary, we reject the notion that the baptism discussed in Romans 6 is strictly a spiritual, figurative experience. It is much more natural and straightforward to accept it as an actual, physical event. Our justification in making this claim lies in the application of obvious and well-established principles of Biblical exegesis. We do not rule out a given possibility just because it makes the passage more difficult to explain. We would assert that since water baptism is the primary, non-figurative sense of this concept, we should accept it as such because it makes sense in this context. To claim that spiritual baptism is Paul's emphasis here, one has to pass over the more natural literal understanding of the term and assume a metaphorical usage, without any contextual evidence that such is the case. In addition, the reference to this baptism as a burial immediately conjures up the picture of an actual immersion, whereas it is difficult to see any figurative connection between spiritual baptism and being buried with Christ.

Having established our thoughts on this point, we will now focus our attention on the issues which more directly relate to the theme of this book. Assuming that *baptism* in Romans 6.3-4 is in fact water baptism, what does this passage tell us about the significance of this rite? Specifically, how would we respond to the following claim by those who believe that baptism is necessary for salvation?

Argument: It is in baptism, and not before, that we get into Jesus Christ. Apart from Christ, there is no salvation. In order to be saved, one needs to be in Christ, and the Bible states that the means by which we get into Christ is by being "baptized into him." Only when one arises from the waters of baptism is he a new spiritual creation in Christ.

The crux of the above argument, and its fallacy as well, is the claim that being "baptized into Christ Jesus" means that we literally get into Christ, i.e., we literally become members of His body, by means of baptism. If this contention were true, then we would indeed concur that baptism is essential to salvation. However, we feel that the above argument reflects an overly superficial and erroneous understanding of the expression "baptized into Christ." In the Greek the word translated as *into* is *eis*, the same preposition we have already discussed in some detail. Since the literal meaning of *eis* is 'into,' its primary sense would therefore involve the movement of a certain object from one point to another point in physical space. Recall, however, that *eis* is used in clauses such as "for the forgiveness of sins" to indicate aim or purpose. In those contexts (cf. Acts 2.38) *eis* cannot mean 'into' in the sense of physically moving into a new location since "forgiveness of sins" is not an actual spatial point. Likewise, in the expressions "baptized into (*eis*) Christ" and "baptized into (*eis*) his death," *eis* does not literally mean 'into' in the sense of physical space, since Christ and death are not actual physical locations. The only thing which we

are literally baptized into during baptism is the water! We must therefore look for a deeper meaning in Paul's words here.

This meaning can be ascertained by looking at another passage in which the expression "baptized into" is used in a similar way. In I Corinthians 10.1-2 we read "For I do not want you to be ignorant of the fact, brothers, that our forefathers were all under the cloud and that they all passed through the sea. They were all baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea." In this context Paul is drawing an analogy from the Israelites' passage through the waters of the Red Sea, which he establishes as an Old Testament type or foreshadowing of baptism. In the case of the exodus from Egypt, the Israelites' leader was Moses; as Christians today our spiritual leader is Christ. They were "baptized into Moses"; we are "baptized into Christ." We have the same author in both passages (Paul); he uses the same grammatical construction in each case; and the two contexts are analogous from a theological point of view. It would therefore be quite appropriate to take the insights which can be gleaned from the expression "baptized into Moses" and apply them to Romans 6 to help us understand the expression "baptized into Christ."

It should be immediately apparent that the expression "baptized into Moses" cannot be understood in a literal, superficial way, just as "baptized into Christ" cannot. The Israelites did not literally get into Moses or become part of his body by dint of their having passed through the waters with him. Rather, Paul's intent is obviously that the passage through the Red Sea—their baptism—established Moses as the recognized leader of the Jewish believers. They were "baptized into" him in the sense that they were "baptized" in identification with him; they were "baptized" with him in recognition and acceptance of him as their spiritual leader.

A couple of non-literal translations of I Corinthians 10.2 bear this out well:

"In the cloud and in the sea they were all baptized as followers of Moses" (Today's English Version).

"And so they all received baptism into the fellowship of Moses in cloud and sea" (New English Bible).

"This might be called their 'baptism'—baptized both in sea and cloud!—as followers of Moses—their commitment to him as their leader" (The Living Bible).

In the same way, we would assert that the expressions "baptized into Christ" and "baptized into his death" in Romans 6.3 can best be understood as involving an implied relationship of identification with respect to the goal of baptism: We are baptized in identification with Christ, acknowledging him as our spiritual leader; we are baptized in identification with his death, acknowledging his death as our own.

One other verse should serve to show the appropriateness of understanding "baptized into" in a non-literal way. In Matthew 28.19-20 are recorded Christ's famous words known as the Great Commission. In verse nineteen he instructs his followers to "go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." In this verse the word translated as *in* is the same Greek word *eis* which appears in Romans 6.3-4 and I Corinthians 10.2. In the Greek the command is for us to literally baptize converts "*into* the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." It would be futile to attempt to understand this word *into* in a literal way in this context. There is no way anyone can get *into* another person's name. Rather, we are baptized in identification with the name of the Godhead; we are baptized with respect to God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit, acknowledging their lordship and sovereignty in our lives. This is not to imply that it is an improper use of the Greek language to employ the preposition *eis* in this context. On the contrary, it is a very common and natural way to show with what or whom someone is being

identified by means of baptism. We are “baptized into Christ” and “baptized into his death” in the sense that we are baptized with respect to Christ and his death, acknowledging his lordship and sovereignty in our lives. By being baptized we express our faith in Christ and in the power which his death has to free us from our sinful past and give us a new spiritual existence.

The preceding paragraphs have shown that the expression “baptized into Christ” is best understood, both logically and contextually, in a non-literal way. This was established from similar uses of the expression in other passages, most notably I Corinthians 10.2. On one occasion when this line of reasoning was presented to a person who believes that baptism is necessary for salvation, he rejected it with a counter-argument of his own. We would like to share this with the readers that they might judge whether or not it is valid. The argument was roughly as follows:

Argument: Even if the expression “baptized into Moses” in I Corinthians 10.2 means that the Israelites were baptized into his leadership, this would still demonstrate that their baptism established a relationship between them. That is, since the Israelites were baptized into Moses’ leadership in passing through the Red Sea, such a step was necessary for them to be followers of Moses. The same is true of Romans 6.3-4. We need to be “baptized into Christ” in order to be his followers, and until we are baptized, he is not our spiritual leader.

In response to this argument we would simply point out the following facts: Those Israelites who were true God-fearing believers were already followers of Moses the moment they set out from Egypt, and even before then. Moses had been their established leader from the beginning of their opposition to Pharaoh’s rule. Those who obeyed his God-given instructions to prepare for the exodus were already embracing him as their leader. In going forth from Egypt they were already being directed by him, so that their passage through the parted waters in no wise established Moses as their leader. It did not produce a new relationship between Moses and the Jewish people but rather was the seal of an already existing relationship. The Israelites’ “baptism” confirmed, acknowledged, and outwardly expressed a relationship which they had previously enjoyed. In their “baptism” the saving element was not a physical contact with water but a spiritual commitment to Moses. On that day the ones who were immersed were destroyed. Those who were saved passed through safely without getting wet at all. This Old Testament example very beautifully illustrates for us the dual nature of Christian baptism. That which is the saving essence of baptism today is not that in baptism we are putting to death our former lives by burying them under water, but rather that in our spiritual man (which is untouched by anything physical) we pass through safely because of the follower-leader relationship which such an action proclaims to our souls.

We feel that with these comments we have sufficiently responded to the arguments springing from a literal interpretation of the construction “baptized into Christ.” Nevertheless, we have been challenged with respect to a related issue and we would like to respond briefly to that point as well. A common claim among those who believe that baptism is necessary for salvation is that we get into Christ at the point of baptism and not before. There is not a verse in the Bible, we are told, which teaches that we believe into Christ, i.e., that we get into Christ by faith. If it is true that we are saved at the point of faith, why does the Bible never say that we “believe into Christ”? The following quotation is quite typical of such a position:

Argument: “Are you not persuading men that they are saved before they actually are saved if you tell (them) that they ‘believe into Christ,’ since there is not a verse in the Bible which teaches this?” (“An Open Letter to Billy Graham” 1980:i).

In response to this challenge we regret that the persons who hold such viewpoints have limited their study at this point just to the English versions of the New Testament. It is true that there is no English translation to our knowledge which contains the words “believe into Christ.” However, when we go to the Greek we find quite a different story. In John 3.16, for example, the Greek literally says, “For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes into (*eis*) him should not perish but have eternal life.” That’s right, the Greek contains this same preposition *into* (*eis*) which we have seen before, even though most English versions translate this expression as “believe in him.” Thus the Bible does indeed support the notion that we believe “into” Christ.

Nor is the above verse an isolated example of such a construction. The Greek also contains the word *into* in the following verses: “Whoever puts his faith in (*eis*) the Son has eternal life...” (John 3.36); “For my Father’s will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in (*eis*) him shall have eternal life...” (John 6.40); “Jesus said to her, ‘I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in (*eis*) me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in (*eis*) me will never die...’” (John 11.25-26); “All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believe in (*eis*) him receives forgiveness of sins through his name” (Acts 10:43); “Know that a man is not justified by observing the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ. So we, too, have put our faith in (*eis*) Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Christ...” (Galatians 2.16).

It should be evident that those who hold to a literal interpretation of “baptized into Christ” have quite a dilemma at this point. Since faith or belief is a necessary prerequisite for baptism and since the Bible teaches that we literally “believe into Christ,” one would have to conclude that we are saved, i.e., in Christ, at the point of faith, even before baptism. Such is the logical conclusion which one would have to draw if one consistently applied the exegetical principles used by those who say that Romans 6.3-4 makes baptism a necessary condition for salvation. On the other hand, if one were to claim that the Greek expression “believe into Christ” is not to be understood in a literal manner, one should also give up the position that “baptized into Christ” is to be taken literally. We trust that those who believe water baptism is necessary for salvation will see the exegetical problems which result from their interpretation of Romans 6.3-4.

In conclusion, we would like to wrap up this chapter by noting that in the passage under consideration, it is Christ’s death to sin, not ours, which is set forth as being efficacious for our regeneration. “Or don’t you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?” In being baptized we acknowledge that Jesus died the death that was due to us, and that any effort accomplished on our part in addition to this is as filthy rags in comparison (Isaiah 64.6). Do we really sing “There’s room at the cross for you”? How can that be when the Prince of glory is hanging there? Which of us would dare hang there at his side? There’s room at the cross for only one person, and Jesus is the only one worthy to hang there. To attempt to crucify one of our foul carcasses would do nothing but pollute the land (Deuteronomy 21.22-23). Rather, in baptism we take part in his death and burial, so that we may walk in the power of his resurrection from the dead.

The point of view which says that in baptism we die to sin and are buried anew along with Jesus himself, entails in essence a never-ending reenactment of Christ's atonement. Such a position is tantamount, in our estimation, to baptismal transubstantiation: Christ himself in all of his suffering is present in and under the elements. We prefer to view baptism as the acknowledgement of a once-and-for-ever accomplishment on our behalf, just as in communion the elements bring to mind the enduring power released through a momentaneous breaking of Christ's body. In partaking of the Lord's Supper true believers acknowledge that their hope for salvation must be placed totally in the One who died, rather than in the commemoration of the event, and so it should be also with respect to water baptism.

Chapter 9

I Corinthians 12.13

“For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body—whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink” (I Cor. 12.13, NIV).

Although this passage does not normally enter into the discussion of whether or not water baptism is necessary for salvation, it does arise from time to time and thus we would like to examine it briefly. Among those who believe that a person must be baptized in order to be saved, the typical line of reasoning concerning this passage goes as follows:

Argument: In this verse Paul states that all believers entered into the body (of Christ) by baptism. Only those who are members of Christ’s body—his Church—are saved. Therefore, since baptism puts us into the one body, it is necessary for salvation.

Our response to such an argument is simply that the context of this verse indicates that Paul is referring to spiritual baptism, not water baptism. Recall from the discussion of Romans 6.3-4 that we pointed out two types of passages in which the baptism spoken of could be considered a non-literal, spiritual one. This verse is one of those cases. Our justification for coming to this conclusion lies in the fact that the Spirit himself is explicitly mentioned in association with this baptism: “For we were all baptized *by one Spirit*...and we were all given the one Spirit to drink.” Paul here speaks of our “drinking of the Spirit,” a metaphorical device which establishes that he is employing a figurative sense of the concept “baptism,” not a literal one.

Furthermore, the particular Greek construction employed in this verse to show the relationship between baptism and the Spirit demonstrates that water baptism is not what is in Paul’s mind. In the phrase “baptized by one Spirit,” the Greek word translated as *by* in most versions is the preposition *en*. (In some translations it is expressed in this context as *in*.) The primary relationship which Paul is establishing between baptism and the Spirit in this passage is that the Spirit is either the agent or the medium of our baptism. In other words, he is either the one who baptizes us (“baptized by one Spirit”), or else he is the medium in which we are baptized (“baptized in one Spirit”). Both of these interpretations seem to be possible translations of the Greek, and the majority of commentators would agree that these are the two most probable interpretations of Paul’s words.

Whichever is the most exact meaning of the Greek expression, one thing is certain: In either case this verse is not speaking of water baptism. In a literal baptism with water, the agent (the person who performs the action) is a human being; in I Corinthians 12.13 the agent of baptism is the Spirit himself, not a human agent. In literal baptism, the medium in which we are baptized is water; in this case we are baptized in the Spirit and thus Paul can say that we “drink of Him”—we are drowned and immersed in the Spirit and thus filled with him.

As a final point in support of our position we would ask the reader to observe that the larger context of the verse under consideration also indicates that the spiritual aspect of baptism is what is in focus. In Paul’s first letter to the Corinthian church, he deals with several major issues at some length. In chapters twelve through fourteen the overall theme is the correct use of

spiritual gifts and some basic doctrines about life in the Spirit. Notice that Paul introduces this major division by the words “Now about spiritual gifts...” (I Cor. 12.1) and then his predominant theme for the next three chapters is the Spirit. He signals a switch of theme again at the beginning of chapter fifteen: “Now, brothers, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you...” (I Cor. 15.1). Thus verse thirteen of chapter twelve appears in the section whose overall theme is the Holy Spirit.

In summary, we have stated previously that all other things being equal, a reference to baptism should be understood literally unless the context indicates otherwise. In the case of I Corinthians 12.13, the context does indicate otherwise. Not only is the overall theme of this chapter the life in the Spirit; the Spirit himself is also mentioned explicitly two times in verse thirteen. Thus while the burden of proof is on the person or persons who choose to interpret a given use of *baptism* in a figurative way, we are quite confident that in this case the proof for our position has not been found lacking.

Chapter 10

Galatians 3.27

“You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ” (Gal. 3.26-27, NIV).

Once again we are faced with a verse in which the question of literal vs. figurative baptism is a hotly-debated issue. In the book of Acts, it is much more evident whether the writer is discussing water baptism or spiritual baptism, for the context of the events being narrated usually makes it clear what actions are involved. In the epistles, however, Paul (and other writers as well) assumes that most of his implied thoughts will be taken for granted by the reader. Therefore, he often slips in a parenthetical comment without worrying too much about whether his words might have several possible interpretations. Such is the case here with respect to the baptism mentioned in verse 27: Is Paul referring to water baptism or to spiritual baptism? In cases such as this one, this question must be answered before continuing the discussion any further, else whatever more is said will be quite futile in the event that the two parties do not agree about the nature of what is being discussed.

As we have stated before insofar as exegesis is concerned, we will continue to proclaim here: if the plain, literal sense of an ambivalent expression fits the context, then accept it as the author’s intention rather than looking for a less obvious figurative meaning. We believe that Paul is speaking about water baptism in this passage, for there is no compelling evidence to warrant the conclusion that spiritual baptism is in his mind. In addition to this basic application of an elementary exegetical principle, we would like to point out also that two leading Bible critics make comments about this verse that point to the same conclusion.

A. T. Robertson, one of the most renowned Baptist scholars America has produced, makes an interesting observation about Galatians 3.27 in his *Word Pictures in the Greek New Testament*. In reference to the expression “put on Christ” or “clothed (yourselves) with Christ,” he notes that this particular Greek expression was used in the secular world to describe the action taken by a military recruit who was “putting on” his new uniform for the first time (Robertson 1931:298). The parallel in Christian baptism is obvious and profound: In baptism we demonstrate that from this point forward our occupation will be a soldier in the army of Jesus Christ. When we “put on Christ” in baptism, the association with his name shows which unit we are fighting for. Since this expression in the Greek culture refers to an actual physical action of putting on clothes, it would be natural to assume that the closest parallel would be to a literal action of baptism, physically evident to any observers, rather than to an unseen spiritual event.

Furthermore, F. F. Bruce, the well-known English scholar, points out also that the Greek words translated as “put on Christ” or “clothed with Christ” may have reference to another physical action related to the baptismal process. In his book *The Epistle to the Galatians*, he comments that the use of this expression in the context of baptism conjures up the idea of a convert’s disrobing himself and putting on other clothing more appropriate for being immersed in water (Bruce 1982:186-87). This is not to imply that there is any mystical or supernatural power associated with one’s baptismal clothing or the water itself. Rather, what Bruce is getting at, we surmise, is that Paul is reminding his readers of the new spiritual identity they accepted when they submitted to the physical rite of baptism.

The point of referring to Robertson and Bruce in this connection is simply to draw attention to the fact that being “clothed with Christ” in baptism implies that an actual physical action had taken place. Whether Paul had in the back of his mind a military picture as Robertson suggests, or whether he was envisioning the more immediate circumstances surrounding baptism, the conclusion is the same in the following respect: The Greek expression employed in this passage would more readily fit the context if we assume that a physical baptism with water is being referred to. Adding to this the fact that the Spirit is nowhere mentioned in this passage, we may say rather confidently that those who claim this is a spiritual type of baptism have all the burden of proof on their shoulders. What evidence at all do they have that this is spiritual baptism? The fact that verse 26 places this baptism in a context of salvation is irrelevant at this stage; we must first ask ourselves “What kind of baptism is meant here?” before we can consider “What does this passage teach about such a baptism?” It would be dangerous to begin drawing up a theology about a certain topic before one has even demonstrated that such a topic is being discussed.

Having stated our convictions about the nature of the baptism referred to in Galatians 3.27, we can now focus our attention on the question “What does this passage teach about water baptism?” First we will present the typical arguments used by those who believe that baptism is necessary for salvation, and then we will respond. One of the most common arguments which is voiced concerning this verse is the following:

Argument: As Paul states here, we get “into Christ” by means of baptism. Furthermore, it is in baptism, and not before, that we are “clothed with Christ” or “put on Christ” in the sense that we appropriate his very righteousness. Those who have not been clothed with Christ’s righteous nature by being baptized into him are not saved.

There are in effect two main parts of this argument, so let us look at each one separately. The first argument being presented here is that we literally get into Christ by means of baptism. This is the same type of reasoning which was presented in the chapter on Romans 6.3-4, and we believe that it was dealt with sufficiently at that point. To review briefly, recall that the expression “baptized into” someone or something means baptized in identification with that person or thing, baptized in response to the authority or leadership of a person or a name, baptized as a means of acknowledging fellowship with that person. That the expression “baptized into” cannot be understood literally was established by I Cor. 10.2 which says that the Israelites were “baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea.” Likewise, Rom. 6.3 states that Christians are baptized into Christ’s death, and in the Great Commission Jesus commands us to baptize converts in (into) the name of the Father, etc. Thus baptism does not literally put anyone into Christ, so we can dismiss the first part of the argument presented above.

The second point to which we need to respond is the claim that we literally put on Christ’s righteous nature by means of baptism. Our response to this claim is similar in the sense that we do not think Paul’s words are meant to be taken so literally in this context. As we mentioned previously, A. T. Robertson has pointed out that the Greek expression used in this verse was equated in the military world with the uniform put on by a newly recruited soldier. Whether or not a man wears a uniform is not what makes him a soldier. The clothing he is issued identifies which army he is fighting for, but the bottom line is that he had already been signed up as a soldier before he was issued any military gear. It is in this sense that we argue Paul describes

baptism as “putting on Christ”: not that we are literally clothed with Christ, any more than putting on a uniform makes a person a soldier. Rather, baptism identifies us as followers of Christ and thus we will henceforth be equipped with the tools we will need to carry out his orders.

Secondly, the fact that “clothed with Christ” is being used in a figurative sense here is also established by other passages in which the same Greek words are employed with that meaning. For example, in Romans 13.14 Paul exhorts his readers to “clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desire of your sinful nature.” In the Greek here the verb “clothe” or “put on” has the same root as that used in Galatians 3.27. What is important in this passage in Romans is that Paul is writing to people who are already Christians, people who have already been clothed with the righteous nature of Jesus Christ. If baptism is the means by which we literally “put on Christ,” then these believers in Rome had better start looking for some water!

Obviously, Paul is not commanding them to be baptized again, but rather to rekindle the previous desires they had when they began to fight for righteousness’ sake. How were they to do this? It had to be by means of an inward response in faith, just as they had responded when they received baptism in identification with Christ. What is crucial to understand here is that baptism is not inseparable from the notion of “putting on Christ.” We can, and should, “put on Christ” initially at the point of baptism, but as Paul indicates in his letter to the Romans, baptism is not indispensable for such an action to take place. It is the attitude of one’s heart, and not the outward sign, which allows one to be “clothed with Christ.” If being clothed with Christ is tantamount to appropriating his righteous nature, then Paul is implying that his readers in Rome had lost their salvation, for he urges them to be clothed with Christ again.

There are other passages in which Paul uses this same type of analogy to make his point: “You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to *put on* (same Greek word) the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness” (Ephesians 4.22-24); “Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. *Put on* (here it is again) the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the devil’s schemes” (Eph. 6.10-11); “Therefore, as God’s chosen people, holy and dearly loved, *clothe yourselves* (Paul likes this word, doesn’t he?) with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience” (Colossians 3.12). Surely the reader can see that in these contexts the notion of “putting on” is used in a metaphorical sense to refer to an attitude of one’s heart, and not to a literal action affecting one’s position before God. Thus any argument based on a literal interpretation of the expression “clothed with Christ” in Galatians 3.27 does not do justice to the normal tendencies of Paul’s literary style.

There is still a further argument which is usually made in connection with this passage, and it is perhaps more worthy of consideration. Those who believe that water baptism is necessary for salvation often propose the following line of reasoning:

Argument: The word *for* which introduces verse 27 connects it to verse 26 and shows the reason why we are sons of God through faith; we are saved by faith because we have been baptized. It is true that we are saved by faith, but not by faith alone; these two verses prove that faith saves us only when it leads us to obey the command to be baptized. Baptism is the necessary embodiment of faith

because as Paul says, “You are all sons of God through faith *for* all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.”

In fairness to those who hold this position, we must confess that such an argument has some merit and should not be brushed aside lightly. We agree wholeheartedly with the view stated above insofar as the syntax (grammar) of the passage is concerned. That is, it is indeed true that verses 26 and 27 are connected in the Greek by a conjunction which indicates the reason or grounds of the first verse. However, if we look at just the grammar alone, we often miss out on the most important clues to the overall meaning of a given passage. We have shown this in earlier chapters when we pointed out that in passages such as Mark 16.16 and Acts 2.38 perhaps the most important factor to be considered is the implied semantic relationship which exists between the various propositions of an utterance. This must also be taken into account in analyzing Galatians 3.27, especially in light of all that we have learned about how Paul is using the idea of baptism in this context.

Recall that for anyone who was familiar with the ministry of John the Baptist, baptism signified an expression of one’s repentance and faith in the Messiah. Since no human being can actually see another person’s repentance or faith, the only indication one has that someone’s faith is genuine are the visible actions which that person performs. Baptism is the outward action *par excellence* by which we validate and testify concerning our saving faith. In Scriptural language it is quite common to mention a visible symbol when one is actually referring at a deeper level to things or actions which are automatically associated with such a symbol. This is basically what we mean by a metonymy, as discussed in the chapter concerning John 3.5.

In the case of Galatians 3.27, as occurs in many other similar passages, the concept of *baptism* refers not just to a physical action of being immersed in water but to an entire succession of actions which are intimately connected with this rite. Baptism in the New Testament always implies faith, repentance, and verbal confession of Jesus Christ, and thus can be used to refer to any of them as well as to the entire process as a collective whole. Baptism means baptism as well as all these things associated with it. This is another common Biblical device known as a *synecdoche*. A synecdoche, like a metonymy, involves an associative relationship between an object or action and something else logically connected with it. Unlike a metonymy, however, which can imply different types of semantic associations, a synecdoche is very specific in that it always involves a part-whole relationship. When a synecdoche is employed, one part of a complex action, usually the part most evident to our perceptual senses, is used to refer to the entire process. This is what F. F. Bruce (personal correspondence, 1984) is getting at when he writes that “in New Testament usage what is strictly true of the reality symbolized may be said of the symbol.” In other words, what is brought about in an absolute sense by faith alone—our becoming sons of God—can be ascribed to baptism in a context discussing both actions, since baptism is the expected and visible manifestation of faith.

Perhaps at this point it would be helpful to recall an analogy we used in an earlier chapter to show the relationship between baptism and faith. In discussing Mark 16.16 we introduced the illustration of a wedding ring to show the intimate connection between two actions. When a bride and groom stand at the altar professing their love for each other, they normally exchange rings to demonstrate and seal their life-long commitment. The ceremony is not really complete without the outward symbol, so that from a practical point of view it is virtually impossible to separate the vow made from the symbol used to represent the vow. After the fact one can mention just the ring and actually be implying all that took place when that ring was put on. From a divine

perspective, however, the two parts of the action are indeed distinct since it is only the commitment, and not the symbol, which binds the two people together.

This is why Paul can refer so naturally to baptism as an embodiment of true faith as well as a symbol of all that faith accomplishes. When he says that “you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ,” we understand him to be saying, in terms of our analogy, “you are all sons of God, joined to his son Jesus Christ by accepting him and committing yourselves to him, for all of you who received baptism in identification with him have put on a Christian wedding ring.”

This is not meant in any way to deemphasize the importance of being baptized. On the contrary, while our illustration sets forth the relationship between baptism and faith which we believe to be consistent with the whole of Scripture, it also stresses the importance of being baptized immediately. To separate baptism from saving faith is to destroy the beauty and symbolism of the rite; it is, as well, to make faith empty and unresponsive as long as it hesitates to obey. Just as a marriage ceremony would seem unfinished without the exchanging of rings, so the conversion of an alien soul to God is devoid of excitement without the symbolic rebirth in water. Christians who want to grow in their faith in Christ before being baptized are like honeymooners who have yet to put on their rings. And they are also like soldiers going through basic training while still wearing their civilian clothing! Does it not make more sense, once we have enlisted in the army of Jesus Christ, to receive our new uniforms at once and identify ourselves with our new commander-in-chief, even though we may yet have much to learn about the tactics of spiritual battle? After all, which of us has really ever finished our instruction process? Are we not all continually preparing ourselves for tougher and tougher battles? To the fight, soldiers of God! Onward we march, upward to Zion, clothed in the righteousness of Christ alone, leaving behind once and for all our former lives in a watery grave, looking unto Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith. Soldiers of Christ, arise!

Chapter 11

Colossians 2.11-12

“In him you were also circumcised, in the putting off of the sinful nature, not with a circumcision done by the hands of men but with the circumcision done by Christ, having been buried with him in baptism and raised with him through your faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead” (Col. 2.11-12, NIV).

Before we consider what this passage teaches about the purpose of baptism, we must once again take up the issue of which kind of baptism is being discussed. Many sincere Christians believe the baptism spoken of in this context is spiritual baptism only. With all due respect, we feel that those who hold to this view probably have come to such a conclusion not because the context of these verses warrants it, but primarily because their belief about the nature of water baptism is at odds with what this passage states. The same could be said as well for Romans 6.3-4 and Galatians 3.27, as we have already mentioned.

In harmony with our previously stated methodology for interpreting passages such as this one, we have come to the conclusion that *baptism* in verse twelve is simply and literally water baptism. Our reasons for this conviction are fourfold, as will be explained in the following paragraphs.

In the first place, there is nothing in the context surrounding *baptism* in these verses to indicate that it is anything but literal baptism. There is no mention at all of the Spirit, so one should not be too quick to assert that Paul is using a figurative sense of the word here. All other things being equal, since the literal and most obvious meaning of baptism is allowed by the context, we should accept this as the author’s intent until the alternative is shown to be true. It makes no difference whether such a position makes our exegetical task more difficult. We should allow the Bible to influence what we understand about baptism rather than vice-versa.

Secondly, a literal understanding of water baptism is suggested for this passage by the fact that in the context it is described as a burial. This can most readily be explained if we assume that Paul is envisioning an actual immersion in water, as was discussed previously in connection with Romans 6.3-4. Those who spiritualize baptism in this context do so at the expense of losing a clear and obvious pictorial image of being buried with Christ, as the physical rite so beautifully illustrates.

Thirdly, the interpretation of baptism as a physical action in these verses is the one most in harmony with the analogy that Paul is using when he refers to circumcision. In this passage he compares and contrasts the Jewish rite of circumcision with the Christian rite of baptism. It would be fallacious, of course, to equate the two events in every single respect, but whatever else they have in common, we can say at least that the following analogy is one of the major points of emphasis: Jewish circumcision was a physical rite which represented a spiritual truth, just as water baptism is today. This parallel holds true only if we assume that Paul is speaking of water baptism in this case. If we wish to spiritualize baptism in this context, it becomes much more difficult to explain the connection with physical circumcision that Paul is driving at.

Lastly, we would like to note a very important theological observation concerning Paul’s writings. In the Pauline epistles, there are three main passages in which the apostle discusses the significance of baptism: Rom. 6.3-4, Gal. 3.27, and here in Col. 2.12. These passages tend to be grouped together in the sense that a certain writer will classify all three of them as referring to

water baptism, or else he will classify all three references as spiritual baptism. These three passages are the only ones in all of Paul's writings in which he discusses the significance of baptism. All of his other references to the rite are superficial and parenthetical in nature. What is interesting is the following fact: If these three passages (Rom. 6.3-4, Gal. 3.27, and Col. 2.12) are understood as referring to spiritual baptism, then we are left with the curious observation that the great Apostle Paul had nothing whatsoever to share with us about the significance of water baptism. In other words, if the concept of baptism is spiritualized in these three cases, then we must abandon any hope of learning anything of importance about water baptism from Paul. Could any student of theology conceive of such a gap in Paul's doctrinal writings? Baptism is part of the Great Commission, and it is mentioned over one hundred times in the New Testament. Is it really conceivable that the master of theology himself would totally overlook this important concept in his thirteen recorded books? Unfortunately, that is what we must conclude if we spiritualize baptism in the three passages in which Paul discusses its significance. This is another reason why we believe Paul is discussing water baptism in Col. 2.12. It is simply too important a topic for him to leave out of his theological discussions.

In conclusion, in this the last passage of a series in which the nature of baptism is a disputed issue, there is nothing to warrant the conclusion that Paul has in mind a spiritual kind of baptism. On the contrary, all the clues we have in the immediate context indicate that water baptism is what is being discussed. Since the plain, literal sense of baptism fits well in this passage, it would be exegetically incorrect to look for a metaphorical interpretation of this concept here.

Having given the Biblical basis for our understanding of what *baptism* means in Colossians 2.12, let us now consider the argument used by those who claim this passage teaches that water baptism is necessary for salvation. The following statement is representative of such a view:

Argument: In verse twelve Paul states very clearly that it is in baptism that we are raised up in new life with Christ. Baptism is the embodiment of our faith in Christ's resurrection and thus until we obey this step we are not saved.

Our response to this argument is basically that we can agree with such a belief with the limitation that we can accept baptism as being the time and place of salvation, but not the means. We hesitate somewhat in making such a statement for fear that we be misunderstood. We affirm without the slightest doubt that man's part in appropriating salvation is faith and faith alone; yet at the same time a living, saving faith will inevitably be led to express itself initially in some overt way. This moment of crisis, as it were, must fall within the constraints of our physical world and thus needs occur at a specific time and in a specific place. The time and place at which saving faith should be initially actualized has been clearly set forth in the word of God as being the moment of baptism.

The recipients of Paul's letters would have been in no danger of misunderstanding this point. For them, baptism was so automatic and immediate as a means of indicating one's response to the proclamation of the gospel that Paul's words in this context would cause no consternation. At the point of faith a convert in New Testament times was always led to realize that as he came up out of the waters of baptism (emerged), he would be considered a new creature in Christ, i.e., "raised with him through faith" in the words of the apostle. Quite aptly

someone has described baptism and faith as being “the outside and the inside of the same thing” (Denney 1903:185), symbolizing burial (immersion) and resurrection (rising up).

We realize that these words may bring cries of protest in many evangelical circles because of the overriding emphasis on faith in the conversion process. We too have had our doubts about the veracity of the concepts we are now propounding. However we have been drawn to our present position only after much consideration and primordially because no other view in our experience has been able to satisfy the longing we have to understand Colossians 2.12 correctly, i.e., Biblically, in context, and as it must have been understood by its original audience. We challenge any evangelical believers who separate faith and baptism, insofar as timing is concerned, to reconcile their position with the plain language of this passage of Scripture. Let us formulate this challenge in terms of an open question to our readers: Assuming that (1) The Bible is our ultimate and only source for doctrine, practice, and beliefs as Christians and (2) We agree that the *means* of salvation on our part is faith alone, without baptism; Where is there any basis in Scripture for separating saving faith from water baptism *insofar as time and place is concerned*? Stated in slightly different terms, where in Scripture does it support the notion that water baptism should be administered to a new Christian at any point other than at the moment of conversion?

Now in order not to appear too heretical to the average Christian, let us clarify these rather strong convictions with a few concluding remarks. At the same time, these final comments can serve as a further response to those who would make baptism, in addition to faith, a means of appropriating salvation. Of primary importance in the understanding of Colossians 2.12 is the realization that it is Christ’s resurrection, and not our own, which is emphasized: “buried with him in baptism and raised with him through your faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead.” The writer makes it clear that we are raised with him not through baptism but through faith; not trusting in our obedience but in his.

The saving essence of the moment of baptism is not that we are obeying the right command but that we are putting our faith in the right person. Saving faith must be such that it is not directed towards an act, nor towards a series of doctrines, but towards a living, all-powerful being. We are never taught in the Bible that the object of our belief should be a pool of water or our own obedience but rather the Lord Jesus Christ himself.

The first few lines of a well-known hymn are very appropriate as a conclusion in that they summarize quite well what we have been trying to express:

My faith has found a resting place,
Not in device nor creed;
I trust the Everliving One,
His wounds for me shall plead.

I need no other argument,
I need no other plea;
It is enough that Jesus died,
And that He died for me. (Hewitt 1891)

Chapter 12

I Peter 3.21

“Who once were disobedient, when the patience of God kept waiting in the days of Noah, during the construction of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were brought safely through the water. And corresponding to that, baptism now saves you—not the removal of dirt from the flesh, but an appeal to God for a good conscience—through the resurrection of Jesus Christ” (I Peter 3.20-21, NASB).

This passage is the last of the major ones which are often referred to by those who are attempting to prove that baptism is necessary for salvation. Before we look at the theological issues raised by these verses, it is necessary to consider two minor, although significant, grammatical points. In verse twenty, Peter makes reference to the fantastic deliverance of Noah and his family from the flood. In verse twenty-one, he makes a comment about baptism. These two parallel thoughts are connected by the phrase “and corresponding to that” in the translation quoted above. This wording is unfortunately a little bit vague and ambiguous in that it does not make clear what the antecedent of “that” is. Some Christians who believe that baptism is not necessary for salvation take advantage of this ambiguity in English versions to avoid the full force of Peter’s words. Specifically, it has been claimed that the antecedent of “corresponding to *that*” is not the word “water” but the entire concept of Noah’s deliverance in verse twenty. This makes it possible for such people to conclude that “baptism” in verse twenty-one is not water baptism at all but some figurative, spiritual type of baptism! Sadly, one of the authors of this book has heard such an interpretation on two different occasions by evangelical ministers with degrees in theology.

Unfortunately for those who hold such a viewpoint, a study of the Greek wording of these clauses shows that they cannot be right. In the Greek there is a very interesting word which might be translated literally as *antitype*. This word expresses a comparison between an Old Testament shadow or type, and its counterpart or fulfillment in the New Testament. In the New American Standard translation as quoted above, this connecting word has been translated as “corresponding to.” So far so good. However, in the Greek as used by Peter in these verses, this concept of antitype connects two words in the original—the word *water* in verse twenty and the word *baptism* in verse twenty-one. The vast majority of Greek scholars would affirm this point. To disassociate baptism in verse twenty-one from the notion of water is to do a grave injustice to the grammatical construction of this passage in the Greek. Several of the more idiomatic translations bear this out by showing very clearly the connection between water and baptism:

“In it only a few people, eight in all, were saved through water, and this water symbolizes baptism that now saves you also...” (NIV).

“...the ark, in which eventually only eight souls were saved from the water. That water was a kind of prophetic parable of the water of baptism which now saves you” (Phillips Modern English).

“And in the ark a few persons, eight in all, were brought to safety through the water. This water prefigured the water of baptism through which you are now brought to safety” (New English Bible).

Before we even consider the significance of what these verses teach about baptism, we need to agree that because of the grammatical details of this passage, it is undeniably water baptism which is being discussed.

Secondly, before going any farther we also need to clarify another common misunderstanding of Peter's words. The way the Greek reads is "saved through water, and this water symbolizes baptism that now saves you also" as the NIV translates it. That is, there are two separate and distinct ideas here (from a grammatical point of view). The first is "water corresponds to or symbolizes baptism." The second is "baptism now saves you." If we were to represent these major semantic propositions in a linear fashion, we could illustrate them as *water - corresponds to or symbolizes - baptism* and *baptism - saves - you*. Some people, when they read this passage, interpret it as though the order of elements were like this: *water - (is) - baptism* and *baptism - corresponds to or symbolizes - sav(ing) - you*. In other words, they rearrange what Peter is saying in order to make it sound like the correspondence or antitype is not between water and baptism but between baptism and salvation. This is unfortunately a misrepresentation of how the passage is set up grammatically. It is true that baptism does symbolize certain aspects of salvation, as other passages indicate, but that is not what these specific verses are saying. In the literal, grammatical sense, verse twenty-one states simply that "baptism (now) saves you," not "baptism symbolizes saving you."

We have not yet said one thing about the theological implications of Peter's words because our initial focus should be on what the Bible says, not on what the Bible means. As we have attempted to do throughout this book, we want to approach Scripture by first seeking to understand a passage grammatically before we attempt to understand it semantically. This may make our exegetical task more difficult, but that is beside the point. Our purpose should not be to make our theological task necessarily an easy one, but at least it should be based on sound grammatical principles.

Now then let us turn to the theological issues raised concerning what these verses mean.

Argument: In verse twenty-one Peter states very simply that "baptism (now) saves you." This should end any discussion about whether or not baptism is necessary for salvation. The Old Testament parallel in verse twenty is obvious: The water separated Noah and his family from the sinful elements of the world; baptism today saves us by separating us from the sinful nature we have inherited from the world.

In order to respond to this argument, it would be helpful to split it into two logical parts and respond to each one separately. First we will consider the Old Testament type of baptism as brought out in verse twenty. Then we need to examine the statement "baptism now saves you" in verse twenty-one.

In considering the deliverance of Noah and his family from the flood, it is interesting to note that Peter uses the same Greek root meaning "save" in verse twenty as he does in verse twenty-one. In verse twenty he writes, concerning the eight people, that they were "*brought safely* through the water." This could just as well be translated "*saved* through the water," for the Greek root is the same one translated in verse twenty-one as "baptism now *saves* you." On the other hand, another way of looking at this parallel is to say in verse twenty-one "baptism now brings you safely through." We are not implying that this is necessarily the best way to translate these verses, but at least it is grammatically possible, as the translators of the New English Bible

demonstrate: "...and in the ark a few persons, eight in all, were brought to safety through the water. This water prefigured the water of baptism through which you are now brought to safety."

Secondly, it is important to note that in the case of Noah's family, their connection with the flood is that they were saved *through* the water. There is some disagreement among Bible commentators about what kind of relationship this preposition indicates. Some feel it should be understood as instrumental, i.e., those in the ark were saved "by (means of) water." We feel this is definitely not the best interpretation, and the majority of commentaries agree with us. Noah and his family were not saved by the water but by the ark; they were not saved by the water but in spite of it. If the floodwaters themselves were a means of salvation, then everyone living at that time would have been delivered, not destroyed!

Rather, we think that it is best to interpret this preposition as simply indicating a locational relationship. That is, those in the ark were saved in the midst of water, in the medium of water, in the location of water, or simply "through (the) water." This is how this phrase is translated in the New English Bible, the Revised Standard Version, the New American Standard Bible, and the New International Version.

Above all, the most important thing to keep in mind when considering verse twenty is: In what way was Noah's family "saved" during the flood? Their salvation was primarily a physical deliverance, not a spiritual one. It is true that this very important event undoubtedly had significant repercussions in Noah's spiritual condition, but it could not be said to constitute his initial spiritual salvation. Those persons who claim that baptism is necessary for salvation would have to conclude that Noah was in an unsaved spiritual condition prior to the flood, if they were consistent with their exegetical principles. Why? Because the verb used to express that Noah was "saved" in verse twenty is the same one used in verse twenty-one when it states that baptism "saves" us. In fact, there are certain persons who do indeed claim, because of this parallel, that Noah was an unsaved man before the flood. Such is the extreme to which this type of theology can lead.

The reason these persons come to such a conclusion is primarily because they put so much emphasis on obedience. They do not deny the necessity of faith, of course, but they claim that true saving faith does not exist apart from certain acts of obedience. In the case of Noah, he was commanded by God to build an ark for his family and then get into it. Only once he had done that, it is claimed, was his faith active and genuine, and therefore Peter could say that Noah was "saved" at the time of the flood.

In response to this, let us look at three scriptures which show that such a conclusion is not valid. In the first place, in Hebrews 11.7 it states that "By faith Noah, when warned about things not yet seen, in holy fear built an ark to save his family." The writer of Hebrews says that Noah was exercising faith when he constructed the ark. The emphasis in Hebrews 11 is on the type of living faith by which we can see that men and women in Old Testament times did indeed know and serve God. The point is that Noah had a living, saving faith from the very moment he began to build the ark, months before the flood came. Furthermore, there is evidence that he was in a saved relationship with God even before God told him to build the ark. In Genesis 6.9 it says, "This is the account of Noah. Noah was a righteous man, blameless among the people of his time, and he walked with God." The context of this verse indicates that this was before God spoke to Noah concerning the ark and the flood. Furthermore, in Gen. 7.1 it says: "The Lord then said to Noah, 'Go into the ark, you and your whole family, because I have found you righteous in this generation.'" The conclusion is obvious: Noah knew God, by faith, even before he began to build the ark, and certainly before he actually got into the ark. He was not saved from his sins by

building the ark or by passing through the flood; he was saved long before then. The very reason God allowed Noah to be delivered through the flood was that he “was a righteous man” who “walked with God.” Noah was not saved because he passed through the flood; rather he was allowed to pass through the flood because he was already a saved man.

These observations have been made in order to demonstrate that the salvation Noah and his family experienced during the flood was not salvation in the spiritual sense, i.e., it was not salvation from their sins. It was simply a physical salvation, a separation from the pollution and corruption of the ungodly men living in the world at that time.

Furthermore, it is important to consider how Noah’s physical salvation from the flood was brought about. There are several profound theological insights which can be gleaned from this study and applied to an understanding of water baptism. As we pointed out previously, the water was not the means or instrument of Noah’s deliverance; it was simply a medium in which or through which his salvation took place. The crucial instrument which effected his salvation was the ark. Contrary to the argument used by those who claim that baptism is necessary for salvation, the water was not what separated Noah and his family from the evil world in which they lived. The thing that made all the difference was the ark. If it were not for the ark, the floodwaters would have destroyed the righteous people along with the unrighteous ones. Noah and his family did not even come in contact with the water, for they were in the ark. In the case of the flood, the ones who were immersed were lost and the ones who were saved got sprinkled and poured on!

The key in Noah’s salvation, then, was that he had gotten into the ark. We feel this is a very beautiful symbol of how we as Christians are saved by being in Christ. In the account of the flood in Genesis 7.17-19 it describes Noah’s experience as follows: “For forty days the flood kept coming on the earth, and as the waters increased they lifted the ark high above the earth. The waters rose and increased greatly on the earth, and the ark floated on the surface of the water. They rose greatly on the earth, and all the high mountains under the entire heavens were covered.”

Noah’s deliverance typifies very dramatically the spiritual resurrection which Christians today can experience. Our ark is Jesus Christ; in him, by virtue of his resurrection, we are lifted high above this earth, saved from God’s wrath poured upon mankind. And by having a renewed mind set on Heaven, to where he has ascended, we can see all the high mountains of this life covered up beneath us. Notice how Peter draws this connection by concluding his thoughts on baptism with a reference to the resurrection: “Who once were disobedient, when the patience of God kept waiting in the days of Noah, during the construction of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were brought safely through the water. And corresponding to that, baptism now saves you—not the removal of dirt from the flesh, but an appeal to God for a good conscience—through the resurrection of Jesus Christ.”

Do you remember the story of Peter walking on the water? He stayed on top as long as his focus was on the power Jesus possessed. As soon as he focused on his human limitations, he began to sink. The miracle of baptism is that we too, with our eyes on Jesus, can be held up above the limitations of our human nature and experience God’s supernatural power carrying us through the water.

In the story of the great flood, there is a very crucial significance which can be associated with the sequence in which the events occurred. After the ark was prepared, God commanded Noah to lead his family as well as the various animals into the ark. Once they were all inside, just before the rain started to come down, the door to the ark was shut. Who shut it? God did, as it

states in Genesis 7.16: “The animals going in were male and female of every living thing, as God had commanded Noah. Then the Lord shut him in.” God saw to it that Noah and the other passengers were safely in the ark and then he sealed the door good and tight before a drop of rain fell from the sky. Noah’s part in his own deliverance was complete once he got into the ark. After that, everything else was up to God. Once Noah’s family got on board and God shut them in, they were separated from the world. Even if not a drop of rain had come down, their responsibility would have been finished and they would have been just as safe and sound in the ark as if they had passed through the flood.

One of the most important points then which the passage in I Peter makes about baptism is the following: The saving essence of baptism is not that we are getting into the water but that we are getting into the ark (Jesus Christ). The water is nothing but the medium through which those in the ark are lifted out of the world and into a new life.

Before we conclude this discussion of the parallel between Noah’s deliverance and Christian baptism, let us consider very briefly a minor argument which has been made at this point. On one occasion, a minister who believed that baptism was necessary for salvation made the following argument:

Argument: It is improper to press the parallel between Noah’s salvation and Christian baptism to the point of saying that in Noah’s days, those who came into contact with the water were destroyed while those who were saved were not touched by the water. If we pressed the analogy that far, we would have to say that in today’s age those who are immersed in the water (baptized) are lost while those who are never baptized are saved.

If we think about the above argument in terms of our previous discussion, we can say that we agree with it wholeheartedly. You see, the problem with this argument is that it fails to recognize the dual nature of water baptism. Baptism affects two different parts of us, but in different ways. There is a part of a person which is wholly internal—the soul—and which can never come into contact with any physical object. The waters of baptism do not touch our soul, but the fact that we are getting aboard the Ark does cleanse our soul of the stain of sin. On the other hand, there is a part of us which does come into contact with the water—our flesh or human nature—and this aspect of our being is indeed put to death, just as the corrupted elements of Noah’s world were destroyed in the flood. So we would say that yes indeed that which is immersed in the water—our flesh—is lost, destroyed, put to death, while that part of us which will live forever—our soul—never comes in contact with the water, although it does come in contact with Jesus’ blood. In this sense, then, we could affirm that the part of us which is saved is never really baptized, even though we drown our bodies in the water.

Now then let us turn our attention more directly to the challenge presented by verse twenty-one. Recall that Peter’s words “baptism now saves us” are fairly straightforward from a grammatical point of view and thus give rise to the obvious argument that this verse teaches the necessity of baptism for salvation.

As a response, our goal in the next few pages will be to demonstrate that although the clause “baptism now saves us” is clear from a syntactic (grammatical) point of view, it is not nearly so simple from a semantic point of view, i.e., concerning the deeper levels of meaning behind it.

We feel the context of this clause—which includes the preceding verse as well as the explanatory information included in verse twenty-one—justifies us in concluding that the statement “baptism now saves us” is semantically complex and should be understood as an example of a figure of speech known as a synecdoche.

We introduced the concept of synecdoche in discussing Galatians 3.27 and now we would like to go into it in a little more detail. A *synecdoche* (pronounced “sin-*eck*-duh-key”) is a semantic device which involves an associative part-whole or whole-part relationship. In other words, when a synecdoche occurs, a writer is using one part of a complex whole to actually stand for the whole object or event. The opposite type of relationship, which is also termed a synecdoche, occurs when an entire object or event is expressly stated although the writer actually wants to focus on one specific part of that whole. Let us give some examples of this type of device used in the Bible.

One very common synecdoche which occurs in the Bible is when an author refers to “the Jews.” At a superficial, grammatical level, “the Jews” refers to a certain ethnic-religious group of people. If we were to understand “the Jews” in an exact, literal sense, we would have to conclude that the writer was referring to every single Jew alive at the moment of speaking. This, of course, was rarely the writer’s intention. Rather, when he referred to “the Jews,” in most cases he actually meant a certain type or class or subgroup of Jews. When the generic term “the Jews” (a whole) is used in this way to refer to a subset of the Jews (a part), we would say that semantically the author or speaker has employed a figurative whole-part association, or synecdoche.

For example, in John 5.16 it states “So, because Jesus was doing these things on the Sabbath, *the Jews* persecuted him.” Here when John says that “the Jews” persecuted Jesus, what exactly does he mean? Obviously this cannot mean that every single Jew alive at that time persecuted him, for there were many Jews who had believed in Jesus and were following him. Therefore, we could conclude that from a semantic (meaning) point of view, what John really means is “the unbelieving Jews.” That is, to illustrate this linguistically, we could say that “the Jews” (=the unbelieving Jews), where the sign = is interpreted as “represents or means by implication.” Furthermore, John is still not referring to the entire group of unbelieving Jews, for not every single one of them was necessarily persecuting Jesus. Rather, when he says, “the Jews,” what he really means is “some of the Jews,” specifically some of the unbelieving Jews. To be even more precise, we could infer that the subgroup of unbelieving Jews which John is referring to consists of certain ones who were in some way recognized as representatives or leaders of these unbelieving Jews, e.g., perhaps some of the priests or rabbis. If we were to illustrate the deepest meaning of this one particular example, we would say that in this case “the Jews” (=certain leaders or representatives of some of the unbelieving Jews). Thus the simple words “the Jews” in this context have a very non-literal meaning. “The Jews” is a term denoting an entirety or whole, yet its true significance is that it refers by association to a specific, limited part of that whole. Therefore, we say that it constitutes a synecdoche.

Similarly, in Matthew 16.1 we read that “the Pharisees and Sadducees came to Jesus and tested him by asking him to show them a sign from heaven.” Here again, given the context we understand the narrator to be implying that a select group of the Pharisees and Sadducees, probably their leaders or spokesmen, came to Jesus to test him. This is the same type of semantic device we have just discussed concerning “the Jews.” In this case “the Pharisees and Sadducees” means a certain group of Pharisees and Sadducees, so again we have a whole-part synecdoche (the whole stands for a part of that whole).

Let us consider also, for the sake of illustration, the opposite type of synecdoche. The apostle Peter, in describing the attitude Christ had while suffering, writes that ““He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth”” (I Pet. 2.22; he is quoting Isaiah’s description of the Messiah). What does the word “mouth” mean in this context? It says that “no deceit was found in his mouth.” Are Peter and Isaiah implying that someone actually looked inside of Jesus’ speaking apparatus to see if there was any deceit there? Obviously not. Rather, the word “mouth,” referring to part of Jesus’ physical body, actually stands for the whole of it. In other words, Jesus’ mouth is associated with him to such an extent that it can be used by itself to refer to him. Peter and Isaiah could just have easily written “...and no deceit was found in *him*.” In this case “mouth” was chosen evidently because it is the part of the body normally associated with speaking, by which we can tell when someone is being deceitful. The point is that in this case “mouth” means not only the mouth but the whole body of which that mouth is a part. A part of an object is standing for the entire object, so we say that this is a part-whole synecdoche.

Now then, let us utilize this explanation of synecdoches to analyze a passage which can help us in understanding I Peter 3.21. In John 4.1 we find the following statement: “The Pharisees heard that Jesus was gaining and baptizing more disciples than John.” Focusing on the clause “Jesus was gaining and baptizing more disciples than John,” we observe that there is only one subject (“Jesus”) but two verbs (“gaining”) and (“baptizing”). Obviously “Jesus” is the implied subject of the second verb, such that we could restate this as “Jesus was gaining and (Jesus was) baptizing more disciples than John.” According to this verse, Jesus baptized more disciples than John did. This is what the Bible literally says, insofar as the actual grammatical words that are used, but is this a true statement? Is it true that Jesus (the actual person Jesus) baptized more disciples than John did? Evidently not, for the following verse says, “although in fact it was not Jesus who baptized, but his disciples.” Oh ho! So Jesus did not really baptize anyone. How then can the author in the previous verse say that “Jesus was gaining and (Jesus was) baptizing more disciples than John was”? Isn’t he contradicting himself? No, for then the Bible would contain an error. Rather, John is utilizing here another instance of a very common type of figurative device, very similar to a synecdoche.

When John says in verse one that “(Jesus was) baptizing more disciples than John (was),” what this actually means is “(Jesus’ disciples were) baptizing more disciples than John (was).” We know that this is the real meaning since the following verse explains it for us. In this case the literal word “Jesus,” which is grammatically implied by the context, actually stands for or means “Jesus’ disciples.” “Jesus” in this context is used in place of something intimately associated with him—his disciples. Since he was such a prominent figure, it was very natural for John to make this kind of association. In this case, the relationship between Jesus and his disciples does not involve a part-whole or whole-part association, so it is not a synecdoche. Rather, it involves simply a logical semantic relationship and therefore it constitutes what is known as a metonymy. We discussed this type of figure of speech earlier in the chapter dealing with John 3.5. In the case of John 4.1, we could illustrate the semantic relationship involved in this way: “The Pharisees heard that Jesus was gaining and (Jesus(=his disciples) was/were) baptizing more disciples than John.”

The point of this discussion is to help the reader realize this very important exegetical fact: The literal, grammatical construction of a clause alone does not always determine its meaning. In John 4.1, the literal words state that *x* does *y*, but as we dig deeper we find that *x* does not do *y*, but rather *z* does *y*, where *z* is not equivalent to *x* but only associated with *x*. The true meaning of a verse of Scripture can only be determined once we have considered the

relevant contextual semantic factors, and having done so we may find that the deeper meaning of a passage is quite different from what it appears to be on the surface.

Now then let us return to I Peter 3.21 and illustrate what we have just said. This verse does indeed contain the words “baptism now saves you,” but it does not stop there. Peter immediately follows this clause with a note of explanation to clarify what he does and does not mean: “And corresponding to that, baptism now saves you—not the removal of dirt from the flesh, but an appeal to God for a good conscience—through the resurrection of Jesus Christ.” In this particular translation, Peter’s explanatory comments have been set off by hyphens to indicate that they are a sort of parenthetical or clarifying statement. Many translations do this in one way or another—by using hyphens, parentheses, or making these clauses into a separate sentence. Likewise, in John 4.1-2, the second verse functions in a similar way to clarify the first one. Accordingly, most translations indicate this by setting off verse two with a hyphen or parentheses. In the case of John 4.1-2, the writer states “(Jesus) baptized more disciples than John,” then he immediately clarifies this with a parenthetical statement which tells us that in fact Jesus himself did not baptize other people. In the case of I Peter 3.21, the apostle states that “baptism now saves you,” then he immediately clarifies this with a parenthetical statement which tells us that there is a deeper meaning than just the literal words themselves.

What exactly is the function of the explanatory clauses in I Peter 3.21? This is the question we now need to consider. Peter writes that “baptism now saves you—not the removal of dirt from the flesh, but an appeal to God for a good conscience...” He clarifies for us that the focus in baptism is not on the washing away of dirt from our bodies, i.e., the most important part of baptism has nothing to do with the physical action of being immersed in water. Recall the Old Testament parallel in which Noah and his family were brought safely through the flood in the ark. The water never touched them; it was being in the ark that separated them from the filth of the physical world.

Secondly, Peter states that what we do need to consider about baptism is that it involves “an appeal to God for a good conscience.” The Greek word for *appeal* can also be translated as “answer, promise, pledge,” etc. The key is that all of these terms describe the state of a person’s heart, not his physical actions. Furthermore, it is grammatically possible to understand the phrase “an appeal to God for a good conscience” as indicating that the good conscience comes before the point of reference, i.e., before baptism: “the promise made to God from a good conscience” (Today’s English Version); “the appeal made to God by a good conscience” (New English Bible). As A. H. Strong points out in his *Systematic Theology*, the Greek term translated as *appeal, answer, pledge*, etc., may have reference to the verbal question and answer period in which the person about to be baptized affirms his faith in Christ and his desire (pledge, promise, vow) to follow him from that point forward (Strong 1907:821). The answer or appeal for a good conscience which saves us is that verbal acknowledgement of Christ which immediately precedes and finds its expression in our immersion in water.

The conclusion at which we are driving is that the concept of *baptism* entails much more than a physical act of being immersed in water. Since baptism in New Testament terms was so intimately connected with one’s conversion experience, any reference to *baptism* would bring to the mind of the original readers the faith, repentance, and confession of Christ which took place simultaneously with that event. The word *baptism* in this context is a complex whole which refers to a series of individual parts which comprise it—repentance, faith, confession, and finally the actual immersion in water. What Peter makes clear, however, is that the physical part of this entire process is not the part which saves us; the saving essence of baptism is the faith in Christ’s

resurrection which is associated with the immersion and demonstrated by means of our testimony—the interrogation of our faith, which leads up to the baptism itself.

We would say, then, that the statement “baptism now saves you” in the first part of I Pet. 3.21 constitutes a synecdoche. The grammatical term *baptism*, standing for the entirety of a complex event, is used to refer semantically to one specific part of that whole—faith—which is intimately associated with it. We would classify this as a whole-part synecdoche. John 4.1 states that “Jesus baptized other people,” yet Jesus himself was not the one who actually did the baptizing. In a similar way we understand Peter to be saying “baptism now saves you”—yet not the actual immersion itself but the faith which is associated with it.

In discussing this verse with those who believe that baptism is necessary for salvation, we have found that one of their favorite techniques in arguing is to ask the question “What does Peter here say that baptism does?” The obvious answer is that baptism saves us. However, as we have just pointed out, such a line of reasoning takes a small part of this verse out of its whole context and thus entirely misses the point Peter is trying to make. The relevant question which must be asked concerning I Peter 3.21 is not “What does baptism do?” but rather “Which part of baptism saves us?” To this question we would respond “the answer or pledge of a good conscience,” proceeding from one’s heart and secured by faith. This is the interpretation we have found to be most consistent with all that the Bible teaches concerning salvation.

This is what we understand F. F. Bruce (personal correspondence, 1984) to mean when he writes that “in New Testament usage what is strictly true of the reality symbolized may be said of the symbol. Water applied to the body does not strictly cleanse the soul from sin, but it symbolizes that cleansing and thus can be said (symbolically) to effect it,” as we mentioned in our discussion of Galatians 3.27. (Actually these comments were made with respect to the expression “Arise and be baptized and wash away your sins” in Acts 22.16, but they are just as appropriate here.)

Similarly, A. H. Strong writes that “regeneration, the inward change, and baptism, the outward sign of that change, were regarded as only different sides or aspects of the same fact, and either side or aspect might therefore be described in terms derived from the other” (Strong 1907:821). Elsewhere, “‘in Scripture language, a single part of a complex action, and even that part of it which is most obvious to the senses, is often mentioned for the whole of it, and thus, in this case, the whole of the solemn transaction is designated by the external symbol.’ In other words, the entire change, internal and external, spiritual and ritual, is referred to in language belonging strictly only to the outward aspect of it. So the other ordinance [the Lord’s Supper] is referred to by simply naming the visible ‘breaking of bread,’ and the whole transaction of the ordination of ministers is termed the ‘imposition of hands’ (cf. Acts 2.42; 1 Tim. 4.14)” (Strong 1907:946).

As we have pointed out, A. H. Strong mentions that the Greek word translated as “appeal” or “pledge” may be related to the verbal interrogation of a convert concerning his faith immediately preceding baptism. The translations which render this word as “answer” may actually indicate more than an internal “answer” or peace in one’s conscience; they may in fact reflect an actual verbal response given by the convert to a question such as “Do you believe with all your heart that Jesus Christ is the Son of God?” This is the same type of interchange which took place between Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8.36-38). Philip’s question and the eunuch’s response show the part of the process which both of them understood to be the saving element—faith or belief in Jesus Christ. The idea of baptism is brought up in I Peter 3.21 since Peter had just drawn an analogy based on the flood of Noah’s days, and since the water of

baptism is a fulfillment of that antitype. Furthermore, within the entire conversion process, the actual immersion in water is the part which is the most sensorial, i.e., it is the part which is most easily seen, felt, experienced, etc. (Perhaps that is why God has given it to us.) Hence it is the part to which someone who has experienced it can most easily relate.

This focus on the confessional part of baptism is hinted at in certain other passages in which a casual reading might not bear it out. For example, in Romans 10.9-10 Paul states: “That if you confess with your mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved.” Later he writes “For ‘everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved’” (Rom 10.13).

Several commentators presume, and we agree with them, that when Paul mentions “confessing with your mouth” and “calling on the name of the Lord” in this passage, he is alluding to the confession of faith accompanying the moment of baptism. This is the same confession demanded by Philip and given by the eunuch in Acts 8, and it is the same “answer (or pledge or response) of a good conscience” described in I Peter 3.21.

Furthermore, we feel that this same type of confession can be tied in with Ananias’ command to Paul in Acts 22.16: “And now what are you waiting for? Get up, be baptized and wash your sins away, *calling on his name.*” As we discussed in an earlier chapter, Paul was to wash away his sins by calling on Christ’s name, i.e., by verbally confessing his faith in him. This is why it would be so meaningful for Paul to write later to the Christians at Rome: “For ‘everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.’” This confession in Paul’s case was intimately associated with the experience of baptism, and we have no reason to doubt that there was any less of a connection for his readers at Rome. Nor should there be any less of a connection for us today, especially if we consider passages such as Romans 10.9-10 and 13 in light of the experience of the eunuch in Acts 8.36-38, the experience of Saul in Acts 22.16, and the explanation of baptism given by Peter in I Peter 3.21. We find all of these ideas and admonitions perfectly in harmony the one with the other, and with the rest of the Bible as well.

We would be amiss if we did not conclude this discussion of I Peter 3.21 with some comment on the role of baptism itself in this entire process. As we have mentioned earlier, it is frustrating when commentators explain what a passage does not teach but then never explain what it does say. In the case of I Peter 3.21, our approach has been to argue that the expression “baptism now saves you” constitutes a synecdoche with an emphasis on faith. But what then does this passage tell us about the actual act of baptism, the immersion in water? Too many people leave this question unanswered and by doing so they miss out on one of the most beautiful parallels in all the Bible.

Let us recall the Old Testament flood account which Peter mentions in verse twenty. We observed earlier that it was not the water but the ark which truly brought about Noah’s deliverance. We concluded that the physical aspect of water baptism—the immersion in water—is not the part which is absolutely essential in our salvation today. However, the water did play a very important role in that it was needed in order to lift those in the ark out of the world and carry them on to their new life. It is true that Noah and his family were safe and sound once they got inside the ark, but without the water they would not have gotten anywhere! This is what we understand Peter to be saying for us today. Sure, it is possible to become a Christian—get on board the ark, Jesus Christ—without being baptized, but until you pass through the water you’ll be stuck on the ground still trying to reach the new life God has designed for you to live! You need to call down that divine flood to help lift you out of your earthly existence and be carried on

to that new resurrected life, leaving behind once and for all the worldly elements which are still pursuing you. If you have accepted Jesus Christ, you are safe and secure in him. But if you have not yet been baptized, the sinful elements of this world—all the corrupted tendencies of your former life—are pounding on the doors of the ark trying to get to you. You need to have them buried in the flood; put them to death for good; drown them in the water as it propels you onward in your great adventure of deliverance. You cannot truly appreciate what the ark was designed to do until it carries you through the water!

In reflecting on thoughts such as these, we can see that there is a very important dual nature ascribed to water baptism. Baptism was evidently designed by a sovereign God to be the moment in space and time, although not the means, of our deliverance. Insofar as our eternal, spiritual salvation is concerned, the water is an important setting but not the instrument per se. However, there is still a physical part of our salvation—the deliverance we can experience even in this physical world—and many people unfortunately miss out on the important role water baptism plays in effecting this. The sinful people in the world during Noah’s days were still alive once Noah got on board the ark with his family, even after the rain started to come down. They may have been sprinkled and poured on for quite a while, but until they were actually immersed in the water and destroyed they were still able to torment the righteous people aboard the ark.

This same dual nature of baptism was also alluded to in our discussion of I Corinthians 10.2. There it says that all the Israelites were “baptized into Moses” in passing through the Red Sea. In one sense, their salvation was effected long before then, because Moses had led them out of their former slavery in Egypt. Here it is Egypt which represents the slavery of our sinful life, parallel to the unrighteous world in which Noah lived. But just as was the case with Noah, the Israelites were still not totally delivered in a physical sense until they passed through the sea. The water was not necessary for them personally—it never touched them—but it was necessary to put to death their former captors who were still trying to pursue them. Again the dual nature of baptism is portrayed in an Old Testament antitype, and we miss so much of its significance if we finish our study after considering only the spiritual aspect of salvation. There is also a physical part to our salvation, and it is in this respect that many people have overlooked the important role of water baptism, thereby missing out on many of its blessings as well.

Chapter 13

Titus 3.5

“He saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit” (Tit. 3.5, NIV).

This is the last passage we will consider that is sometimes used to argue that water baptism is necessary for salvation. Because the word “baptism” does not actually appear in this verse, the argument is a little bit more indirect, but it nevertheless does come up at times. Although this is not one of the major verses upon which different theologies of baptism have been based, it is nevertheless an interesting and important one and therefore we will discuss it here briefly.

Let us say by way of introduction that the exegetical difficulties which this verse poses are quite complex. In addition to the metaphorical usage “washing of rebirth,” this verse also contains two back-to-back genitive constructions (“washing of rebirth” and “renewal by (of) the Holy Spirit”) which give rise to a very complicated grammatical structure. For this reason it is grammatically and semantically possible to understand these clauses in a variety of ways, and it is therefore not surprising that different interpretations of this passage abound in the commentaries.

This being the case, we do not expect to add any new insights to the study of this verse, especially since our command of the Greek language is so limited. Rather we will simply summarize the different interpretations which have already been offered and present them to the reader for his appraisal of their validity. Because of the difficulty of interpreting this verse, our own comments will be expounded with more hesitation than has been employed before. Whereas in previous chapters we have felt quite confident at times in presenting our own views very strongly, we feel it is prudent with respect to this verse not to appear so dogmatic. There are a number of different interpretations which are worthy of consideration, and we feel less inclined to take quite so strong a stance insofar as our own opinion is concerned.

Let us now consider the main exegetical issues related to the interpretation of Titus 3.5.

As we focus on the second part of this verse, we find this statement: “He (God) saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit.” The different interpretations offered for this sentence all seem to revolve around two main questions: First, what does the expression “washing of rebirth” refer to? Secondly, how are the two propositions “washing of rebirth” and “renewal by the Holy Spirit” related to each other and to the main clause “he saved us”?

The first question which naturally arises from a superficial reading of Titus 3.5 is: what does the expression “washing of rebirth” mean? Specifically, does it refer to water baptism or simply to a non-physical spiritual type of cleansing? Naturally, there is some disagreement about this question, but it would probably be a surprise to many people to know that a large majority of evangelical writers believe that “washing” in this context refers to water baptism. For example, in one study carried out, it was noted that out of fifteen major exegetical sources which stated an opinion on this matter, twelve believed “washing” referred to baptism. These twelve sources include Arndt and Gingrich, Barnes, John Calvin, F. F. Bruce, *The Interpreter’s Bible*, and *The*

New Bible Commentary. Only three commentaries expressed the opinion that “washing of rebirth” was strictly a spiritual experience.³

Among those sources which believe that “washing” here is an allusion to water baptism, various reasons are given for coming to such a conclusion. A representative summary of points to consider would include the following: (1) the expression “washing” is used in Acts 22.16 where baptism is clearly in focus, as well as in Hebrews 10.22 (“having our bodies washed with pure water”) where baptism could be the implied reference, looking forward to a future state of perfection; (2) the word used for “rebirth” means *regeneration* or *spiritual resurrection*, and Romans 6.4 and Colossians 2.12 ascribe this event to the moment of baptism; (3) likewise, in John 3.5 Jesus speaks of being born again, in which context this new birth is intimately associated with water. As we have already stated, the water in John 3.5 is in our opinion none other than the water of baptism (Mott n.d.).

Nevertheless, there are other commentators (although they seem to be in the minority) who believe that the emphasis on baptism should be minimized and that rather the work of the Holy Spirit is what is in focus. They would point out, for example, that the Holy Spirit is explicitly mentioned in this verse and is ascribed a causative or agent role (“He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit”). Furthermore, the following verse shows that the emphasis in verse five is on the Holy Spirit (Fee 1984). In addition, in the passage in John 3 where the new birth is being described, there is a distinct focus on the work of the Holy Spirit. In other words, those who hold to this interpretation are saying in effect that “washing of rebirth” is intimately associated with the Holy Spirit and therefore if it is a reference to baptism at all, it should be understood as the baptism in the Holy Spirit, not water baptism.

In our opinion this is a valid interpretation because of the explicit reference to the Holy Spirit in this verse. However, although this fact makes it justifiable to interpret “washing” as a spiritual experience only, it does not necessarily make it the best or exclusive interpretation. Just because baptism and the Holy Spirit are mentioned together in the same context does not force one to conclude that the two are necessarily being connected in the mind of the writer. It is definitely a theologically sound conclusion, but it is not of necessity the most exact one.

In our own estimation we prefer the interpretation which assumes that “washing of rebirth” refers to water baptism. We feel that this is an obvious inference which Paul’s readers must have understood. At the same time, we do not want to discount the role of the Holy Spirit in this verse because of the obvious connection he has with the entire operation. As we stated at the beginning of this chapter, we are less dogmatic in our views on this verse than we are on other verses. Perhaps in this case one of the reasons for such an exegetical dilemma is because we, like others, have assumed that literal baptism vs. spiritual baptism entails an either/or question. Why can’t it be both/and? After all, since water baptism is so intimately associated with conversion, rebirth, and the reception of the Holy Spirit in other passages, would it be that much out of place for Paul to refer to all of these experiences in one breath here?

The second major question which needs to be considered involves a larger and more complicated part of the verse. In the second part of Titus 3.5 we find three distinct propositions: “he saved us,” “the washing of rebirth,” and “the renewal of or by the Holy Spirit.” In order to truly understand this passage we need to analyze exactly how these three propositions are related

³The sources which were consulted were the following: Alford 1856; Arndt and Gingrich 1957; Barnes 1861; Barrett 1963; Calvin 1948; Gealy 1955; Hendriksen 1965; Huther 1885; Kelly 1963; Lenski 1937; Nicholson 1965; Phillips 1958; Scott 1936; Stibbs 1970; and Taylor 1962.

“the washing of rebirth and renewal, effected by the Holy Spirit,” or else they are seen as a generic-specific restatement: “the washing of rebirth, that is, the renewal by the Holy Spirit.”

(3) A final possibility is that “rebirth” and “renewal” both modify “washing,” as is the case with the previous interpretation, but that the emphasis in the whole sentence is on the Holy Spirit. In this case “washing” is understood in a metaphorical sense to refer to the work of the Spirit, not primarily to water baptism, if even at all. This interpretation also builds on the second grammatical possibility, in which the only object of “through” is the word “washing,” with everything else dependent on it. This position is illustrated quite well by the translation of this verse which appears in the Good News Bible (Today’s English Version): “...he saved us through the washing by which the Holy Spirit gives us new birth and new life” (Fee 1984).

Having presented these three principal schools of thought regarding Titus 3.5, we leave it to the reader to consider them thoughtfully and judge which one, in his opinion, seems best. In our thinking, as we have said, we tend toward the position that “washing” refers to water baptism. Furthermore, we feel that “rebirth” and “renewal” probably are synonymous expressions for what the Spirit accomplishes in us at that time.

If this is so, then does not this verse make immersion in water an indispensable condition for salvation? If baptism is the moment at which spiritual cleansing and rebirth take place, how can anyone be saved separate from it? These are the obvious questions which arise from our understanding of this verse, and which naturally lead us into the following argument:

Argument: When Paul wrote that God “saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit,” he was making water baptism part of the plan of salvation. One of the means by which God accomplishes rebirth or regeneration in us is baptism. It is at that point and not before that the Holy Spirit cleanses us and indwells us.

This is a strong argument in that it is well supported by the passage, as we have seen. Our response is that if this verse is indeed referring to water baptism, it is another example of a synecdoche in which an entire process—conversion—is expressed by means of only one of its constituent parts—baptism. Our understanding of this passage would be parallel to that of I Peter 3.21, which we have just discussed. Regarding the phrase “baptism now saves you” in that verse, it was argued that the saving essence of baptism lies not in the physical action of immersion in water but rather in the heartfelt actions of faith and repentance which baptism outwardly expresses. Our understanding of Titus 3.5 is identical. In New Testament times converts were commanded to be baptized so immediately that immersion was in a sense part of their salvation process, although not, we would add, the part which actually saved them. We would also liken this passage to Acts 22.16 in which Saul was exhorted by Ananias to “be baptized and wash away [his] sins, calling on [Jesus’] name.” There the imagery of washing suggests that baptism fits into the salvation process in a metaphorical way, much as it does in Titus 3.5. Above all, the important part in Saul’s conversion was his calling on the Lord in faith, and no less can be presumed for Titus 3.5 either. Finally, one must not forget the special significance attached to the Holy Spirit in this passage. For the sake of argument, we have granted the assumption that “washing” refers to water baptism. It may be that Paul had in mind strictly a spiritual type of washing here, but even if he was implying a reference to literal baptism, he clarified his statement very explicitly by mentioning the causative role of the Holy Spirit within the entire

process. He is the one who regenerates us and renews us, and “not because of righteous things we had done.”

PART II

In the previous section, we discussed several passages teaching certain truths about the significance of water baptism. These are the passages most often referred to as evidence that baptism is necessary for salvation. In each case we argued that such a conclusion was not the best interpretation. Then we offered our own insights concerning what the passage does teach about baptism.

In this next section we would like to look at three narrative passages describing someone's Christian conversion. These accounts are very important because in each case it can be shown that the individuals were saved either prior to their baptism or at the very least, without any reference to baptism as the means of their salvation. Consequently, they present strong Scriptural evidence in support of the view that water baptism is not an absolute condition for salvation.

Chapter 14

The Household of Cornelius

The first part of this book was dedicated to analyzing various arguments often advanced in order to prove that water baptism is necessary for salvation. In almost every passage considered, baptism is brought into such an intimate relationship with conversion that our task was very difficult. As we stated in the introduction to this book, we feel that the doctrine of water baptism is one of the most difficult theological issues which one can study. Specifically, to deny that baptism is a necessary condition for salvation is not a conclusion which can be entered into lightly. Indeed, as Jesus himself said, “He who believes and is baptized will be saved” (Mark 16.16); and further, “Unless a man is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God” (John 3.5). On the day of Pentecost Peter proclaimed to his audience, “Repent and be baptized ... for the forgiveness of sins” (Acts 2.38), and Saul was exhorted by Ananias: “Get up, be baptized, and wash your sins away, calling on His name” (Acts 22.16). In the Epistles we find statements such as “We were buried with him in baptism” (Romans 6.4) and “baptism now saves you” (I Peter 3.21). We would have to admit that if we took these passages in a literal, grammatical sense, we could no longer with a clear conscience affirm our present position. In a similar vein, if these passages were the only ones in the Bible which had anything at all to say about salvation, the conclusion that baptism was necessary for salvation would be inescapable. Why then do we not hold to that position? Why do we not believe that the very act of baptism itself is for the forgiveness of sins? Why do we not conclude that baptism itself is what washes away our sins? Why do we not teach that baptism itself saves anyone? Why not, indeed?

The basic reason why we cannot agree with such a position is this: The Bible has much more to say about salvation than just what is mentioned in these passages. Specifically, the great majority of verses which speak of the conditions for salvation attribute it to faith alone. We have already hinted at this by pointing out in almost every passage discussed so far the primordial importance of faith. Furthermore, there are several passages which indicate very clearly that no works on our part are to be connected with salvation. In a future chapter we shall discuss more in detail this very crucial relationship between faith, works, and salvation. Finally, there are several narrative accounts in which we can see very clearly that certain persons were saved either before baptism or without being baptized at all. If we assume that the Bible must be interpreted in such a way that it is always in harmony with itself (and this we affirm without reservation), then these accounts indicate that baptism cannot be a condition for salvation.

Basically, then, our line of reasoning can be summarized as follows: The Bible does not contradict itself. All passages which discuss a certain theme, in this case salvation, must be considered collectively and brought to bear when interpreting any one verse discussing that theme. The Bible indicates that salvation is appropriated on our part by faith and not by works. In several instances persons in New Testament times were saved at the point of faith, before or without baptism. Therefore, baptism is not a condition for salvation, and consequently, in the passages discussing baptism this must be a guiding force in seeking the correct interpretation. When baptism is mentioned in the same context as salvation, we should consider the deeper theological meaning of the passage rather than stopping after analyzing just the grammatical construction of the verse(s). In every case, as we have seen, the deeper semantic sense of the passage confirms our conclusion that the emphasis in conversion is on the inner state of one’s heart—faith—rather than on the outward expressions of that faith.

Where then are the accounts of persons who were saved prior to baptism? This is one of the pillars in our theological position. Since God does not change in his moral character or nature (Mal. 3.6; Heb. 13.8), and since he “does not show favoritism” (Rom. 2.11), we can assume that he will not require different conditions for salvation for one person than he does for another. He could, of course, if he wanted to, but he has outlined very specifically for us the plan of salvation which is in effect for all of mankind, along with the commission to deliver this message to all peoples and nations. Of course the outworking of salvation will be different in each individual once he enters into this relationship with God, but the basic requirements for salvation remain the same for everyone, else the Great Commission is a tremendous folly. Now if we can demonstrate that several persons responded positively to this plan of salvation, and did so before being baptized, then the position which affirms that baptism is a condition for being saved cannot possibly be in harmony with what God has revealed to us in his Word.

Let us consider first of all the case of Cornelius, a devout Gentile, along with the members of his family. In Acts 10.43-48 we find the following account:

“All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.’

While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message. The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles. For they heard them speaking in tongues and praising God.

Then Peter said, ‘Can anyone keep these people from being baptized with water? They have received the Holy Spirit, just as we have.’ So he ordered that they be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they asked Peter to stay with them for a few days.”
(NIV)

The setting of this passage, the reader will note, is in the house of Cornelius. He was a “devout and God-fearing” man (Acts 10.2) who nevertheless had never been exposed to the Christian message after Christ’s resurrection. God knew of his prayers and the sincerity of his devotion and thus he sent Peter to announce the Good News for the first time to a specifically Gentile audience. Peter was led to Cornelius’ house and began to share with him and his family about God’s love and forgiveness accomplished in Jesus Christ. Miraculously the Holy Spirit came upon the Gentiles. As a result, they began to praise God and speak in tongues. Peter then had them baptized and reported to the other Jewish believers what had happened.

In the case of Cornelius, a whole can of theological worms could be opened if we were to get sidetracked into issues other than water baptism. We are speaking of course about the miraculous way in which the Holy Spirit came upon him and his family members, and the chronological sequence in which the different events took place. For example, was Cornelius already saved before Peter came to his house, since he was a “devout and God-fearing” man? If so, why had he not yet received the Holy Spirit? What is the significance here of their “speaking in tongues,” and to what does this action refer? These are hotly-contested issues among different Christian groups, and we have no desire to enter into that particular controversy. They are indeed important questions, and we could take several additional pages to discuss them, but that would be going beyond the purposes of this book. Our topic has been the significance of water baptism, not the baptism in the Holy Spirit, and so for the sake of relevance to our overall theme we

would prefer to skip over the other theological issues presented by this passage, interesting though they may be.

Basically, in the remaining paragraphs of this chapter we want to focus specifically on the significance and timing of water baptism within Cornelius' experience. We think the sequence of events in this case is very important since it establishes clearly that the members of Cornelius' household were saved before they were baptized. Consider first of all verse 44: "While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message." Peter had begun to preach a message beginning in verse 34 of chapter ten. The quote lasts until verse 43, and according to verse 44, the Holy Spirit "came on" the Gentile audience at some point during Peter's message. Verses 45 and 46 tell us a little bit more about this activity of the Holy Spirit: "The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles. For they heard them speaking in tongues and praising God." At some point during Peter's sermon, the members of Cornelius' household opened their hearts to the message and believed in the true God of the Jews. God responded by pouring out upon them the Holy Spirit. Now how did Peter and the other Jews know that these Gentiles had received the Holy Spirit? After all, the Holy Spirit cannot be seen. They knew it because they observed the Gentiles speaking in tongues. In this case such action was evidence for the Jewish Christians that the Gentiles had also received the Holy Spirit. Then Peter spoke up and recognized this fact out loud, verbalizing perhaps what was in the mind of the other Jews as well: "Can anyone keep these people from being baptized with water? They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have" (verse 47).

The narrative is remarkably clear in stating that Cornelius and the other Gentiles received the Holy Spirit before they were baptized. This is extremely significant because it demonstrates that they were already saved when Peter commanded them to be baptized. This can be shown by examining other passages which explain the role of the Holy Spirit in conversion. In Romans 8.9, for example, Paul writes that "you, however, are controlled not by the sinful nature but by the Spirit, if the Spirit of God lives in you. And if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Christ." The first truth we should recognize is that, in the New Testament age, if the Holy Spirit does not live in someone, that person does not belong to Christ, i.e., he is not a child of God. The corollary to this statement should be obvious, and it is indeed borne out by various Scriptures: If a person has received the Holy Spirit, that person *is* a child of God.

Consider, for example, Romans 8.15-16. Here we find a further statement by Paul on the role of the Holy Spirit: "For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit who makes you sons. And by him we cry, 'Abba, Father.' The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children." Those who have received the Holy Spirit are God's children.

Compare this with a very similar statement in Galatians 4.6: "Because you are sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out 'Abba, Father.'" The reason God gives his Spirit to someone is because he can see by that person's heart that he is one of his children. The reception of the Holy Spirit is God's recognition that a person is being born into His family. The presence of the Holy Spirit within an individual is a confirmation of spiritual rebirth.

There is also a deeper significance which the reception of the Holy Spirit implies, and this is explained for us by a couple of verses in Paul's letter to the Ephesians. In verses thirteen and fourteen of chapter one he writes "And you also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation. Having believed, you were marked in him with a

seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession—to the praise of his glory.” Later, in chapter four and verse 30, he writes “And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed until the day of redemption.” From these verses we can glean another important lesson about one of the roles of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit serves as a seal or pledge that that person is a member of God's family and will one day receive his eternal inheritance. The Holy Spirit acts as a deposit or down-payment of all that God intends to give to his children at a later date. Both of these passages teach that when a person receives the Holy Spirit, he is sealed until the day of redemption.

In unmistakably clear language the Apostle Paul tells us that a person who has received the Holy Spirit is a child of God and can therefore call him “Abba” or Dad. The Holy Spirit is God's mark of ownership upon a person. A person who has received the Holy Spirit is sealed in Christ, just as Noah and his family were sealed into the ark by God. This seal or pledge assures that person of being included in God's family and guarantees an inheritance in heaven on the day of final deliverance.

The important question which needs to be asked is: When did this happen to Cornelius and his household? When did they receive God's Spirit of adoption which made them sons? When did they receive the mark, seal, pledge, deposit of God's ownership upon them? Was it after they were baptized, or before?

As the passage itself indicates for us, this crucial event took place before they were baptized. While Peter was delivering his message, the Holy Spirit was poured out upon them, and they began to speak in tongues. Peter then exclaimed ““Can anyone keep these people from being baptized with water? They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have”” (verse 47). Clearly Cornelius and the other Gentiles who put their trust in Jesus Christ while listening to Peter's words were sons of God before they were baptized. Since they were sons of God, their sins were forgiven; they had been born again; they were saved.

This passage is quite damaging to those who hold the position that a person is not saved until he is baptized. In order to be consistent with their theological stance, they have to deny that Cornelius and his household members were saved prior to their baptism and therefore they have devised arguments to attempt to prove this. In this section of the book, the role of the arguments will be reversed. Previously we have presented arguments affirming the necessity of water baptism for salvation, and then we explained why we reject them. Now the arguments will be presented from the perspective of denying our position. In other words, after presenting evidence demonstrating that persons were saved prior to baptism, we will then share some of the more common arguments presented against our position.

In the case of Cornelius and his household, the typical argument presented by those who believe they were not saved until they were baptized goes like this:

Argument: The narrative account in Acts 10 is not in chronological order; it is just a brief summary of some of the events which happened. Specifically, when it says in verse 44 that the Holy Spirit came on all who were listening, it does not specify at what point during Peter's speech this actually happened. All it says is that it occurred “while Peter was still speaking these words.” In chapter eleven of Acts the true sequential order is given for in verse four it says that “Peter began and explained everything to them precisely as it had happened” or “in order.” In his summary account in chapter eleven he indicates the actual moment during his

speech at which Cornelius and the others received the Holy Spirit: “As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit came on them as he had come on us at the beginning” (verse fifteen). The time at which the Gentiles received the Holy Spirit was right at the very beginning of Peter’s message, which corresponds to verse 34 of chapter ten and not to verse 43.

This is important since in Acts 11.13-14 Peter recounts how the angel had told Cornelius: “Send to Joppa for Simon who is called Peter. He will bring you a message through which you and all your household will be saved.” Since Cornelius and those in his house needed to hear Peter’s words in order to be saved, and since the Holy Spirit came on them right at the beginning of Peter’s message, they could not yet have been saved at that point. It was not until Peter had actually delivered his sermon, ending in verse 43 of chapter 10, that they had the opportunity to hear his words and be saved. When the Holy Spirit came on them at the beginning of Peter’s address they were not saved and in fact they were not even believers yet, since there was not yet any message for them to believe. In this case the reception of the Holy Spirit does not indicate that these individuals were saved, since they had not yet had a chance to hear and believe the gospel.

Therefore the passages quoted from Romans and Ephesians about the Holy Spirit do not apply to these persons. In his epistles Paul is writing to believers, and in the narrative in Acts 10 the Holy Spirit was received by unbelievers. The message from Peter by which Cornelius and his family would be saved culminates in Acts 10.47-48 in which he orders them to be baptized. The fact that he commanded this action shows that water baptism was absolutely essential for their salvation.

The narrative account of Cornelius’ conversion is so forceful and clear that those who proclaim the necessity of baptism for salvation have been driven to extremes such as those expressed in these arguments. Their strategy for avoiding the obvious impact of these verses lies in attempting to superimpose a forced and artificial sequence on the order of events. We hope that the average reader will see how far-fetched this line of reasoning is.

In response to the argument presented above we would simply point out that there is nothing at all to prevent the straightforward conclusion that both accounts—the one in chapter ten as well as the one in chapter eleven—are narrated in true sequential order. In other words, we feel it is definitely not a commonsense view to insist that the reception of the Holy Spirit took place at the very beginning of Peter’s speech, in Acts 10.34. In Luke’s account in chapter ten, he quotes Peter up to verse 43 and then states that “While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message.” The most simple and obvious conclusion is that the reception of the Holy Spirit by the Gentiles took place either simultaneous with or immediately following Peter’s sentence in verse 43: “All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.” This was an ideal climax to Peter’s sermonette, and it would be very logical that the Gentiles would open up their hearts and believe the message at this point.

With respect to Peter’s account that the Holy Spirit came on the Gentiles “as I began to speak” (Acts 11.15), we would point out that this expression in no way must of necessity be taken in a literal sense. For example, Bruce (1954:233) points out that the particular Greek construction employed in this case “is not to be pressed,” i.e., it need not be taken in the sense of

absolute beginning. It would be quite plausible and natural, given the context, to translate Peter's words as "I had just begun to speak when..." (cf. the New English Bible and the Living Bible). He was evidently prepared to go on preaching more but was interrupted when the Gentiles began praising God and speaking in tongues. From his perspective the few sentences he managed to get in before this happened amounted to just a small percentage of a longer message that he might have delivered, so it would be quite natural for him to summarize this later by saying "as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit came on them..."

This explanation also fits the overall context much more naturally than does the "out-of-sequence" view suggested by the other camp. If the Holy Spirit actually came on Cornelius and his family at the very beginning of Peter's speech, this would mean that Peter went right on preaching the equivalent of ten whole verses at the same time that his audience was speaking in tongues and praising God out loud! This action on the part of the Gentiles was so astounding to the Jewish believers that they were "astonished." Any preacher in his right mind in such a situation would surely stop speaking and praise God along with the others. If all this happened literally when Peter just began to speak, the ensuing pandemonium would have prevented him from going on for ten whole verses, as the text indicates he did. Peter, being an Apostle of Jesus Christ and well-informed of sound doctrine, would have realized that if he kept preaching while the Gentiles were speaking in tongues, somebody would have been out of order! (cf. I Cor. 14.26-33). It makes much more sense to assume that the order of events as described in chapter ten is just as literal and sequential as is Peter's summary of the whole situation in chapter eleven. When Luke writes that the Holy Spirit came on the Gentile audience "while Peter was still speaking these words," (Acts 10.44) we understand "these words" to be referring to the immediately preceding sentence as quoted in verse 43.

There is also another piece of evidence which makes it clear that Cornelius and his family received the Holy Spirit at the end of the quoted part of Peter's message, not at the beginning. The fact that Peter immediately commanded them to be baptized indicates that he knew they were already believers at that moment, for faith and repentance are clearly prerequisites for baptism (Mark 16.16; Acts 2.38; Acts 8.12; Acts 8.37). Peter clearly understood this and therefore he would not have stated so strongly that the Gentiles were ready to be baptized unless he knew they had already believed the good news about Jesus Christ. Now how, we would ask, did Peter know that these people already had faith? Obviously he knew it because their speaking in tongues and praising God was an outward demonstration of the fact. Apart from this indication, Peter had no way to know that Cornelius' family members had come to believe his message, and he would have therefore not commanded that they be baptized right away.

But if we take the position that the descent of the Holy Spirit occurred right when Peter began to speak, then there would have not yet been any message for the Gentile audience to believe in. In this case, even their speaking in tongues and praises to God would not have indicated that they were believers in the Christian sense, for they would not yet have had an opportunity to hear the message through which they would be saved (Acts 11.14). If this is true, then Peter could not have known that they were believers and his command that they be baptized would have been premature. His comment on the situation was not "These Gentiles may now be baptized if they believe in Jesus Christ," but rather "Can anyone keep these people from being baptized with water?," with the strong implication by means of the rhetorical question that those people had already given ample evidence of the fact that they believed in the gospel.

The conclusion that Cornelius and the members of his household were in fact believers when the Holy Spirit came upon them is also demonstrated by other accounts of this same

incident. In Acts 11, as we have seen, Peter recounted this experience to the other Jewish believers in Jerusalem to justify his actions in entering a Gentile household. His description of the climactic moments is as follows: ““As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit came on them as he had come on us at the beginning... So if God gave them the same gift as he gave us, who believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I to think that I could oppose God!”” (verses 15 and 17). When the Jewish believers in Jerusalem heard this explanation, reports Luke, they “had no further objections and praised God, saying ‘So then, God has even granted the Gentiles repentance unto life’” (verse 18).

Peter’s description of the reception of the Holy Spirit by the Gentiles is compared with the reception of the Holy Spirit by the 120 believers on the day of Pentecost. In this comparison, however, Peter specifically notes that those who received the Holy Spirit at his initial outpouring were qualified to do so because they “believed in the Lord Jesus Christ” (v. 17). There would have been no reason for Peter to add this qualifying remark unless he meant it to be an indication to the Jews in Jerusalem that the Gentiles in Caesarea were also believers in Christ when they received the gift of the Holy Spirit. Furthermore, the response of the other Jews shows that they understood this to be Peter’s interpretation of the happenings because their comment was “God has even granted the Gentiles repentance unto life” (Acts 11.18). Now how did the Jews listening to Peter’s story know that the Gentiles had repented? Peter never mentioned specifically that they repented, believed, or were baptized. The only indication that he gave of the fact that the Gentiles had responded in any way was that they had received the Holy Spirit. The other Jews listening to this immediately and naturally understood the implication of Peter’s narration since they commented that the Gentiles had already repented when they received the Holy Spirit.

But if we assume for the sake of argument that the Gentiles received the Holy Spirit right at the beginning of Peter’s message, then once again there is no evidence that they ever repented. If the Holy Spirit came upon them before Peter even spoke a word, then there would not yet have been any message indicating how or why they needed to repent. In that case the Jewish believers in Jerusalem could not have surmised later that the Gentiles had repented, for the only thing Peter told them about the outcome was that they had received the Holy Spirit.

Here again a fuller account of the first conversion of Gentiles after Pentecost bears out the fact that they were indeed believers and had repented at the point that the Holy Spirit came upon them. No other explanation makes sense in light of the response of the other Jews upon hearing this remarkable story.

Let us consider just one other account of Cornelius’ experience which shows even more clearly that our position is correct. In Acts 15 are recorded some of the proceedings of a council of Christian leaders which took place in Jerusalem. Responding to a disagreement between Jewish and Gentile Christians, the leaders in the early church came together to discuss the matter of Gentile converts. At a certain point Peter addressed them and once again recounted the conversion experience of the members of Cornelius’ household: “Brothers, you know that some time ago God made a choice among you that the Gentiles might hear from my lips the message of the gospel and believe. God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us. He made no distinction between us and them, for he purified their hearts by faith” (Acts 15.7-9).

In this account of Cornelius’ conversion, told from a slightly different perspective, Peter makes it remarkably clear that the order of events is as we have been arguing: First he spoke the gospel message; then the Gentiles heard it and believed; and finally God, who saw by their hearts that they truly believed, responded by giving them the Holy Spirit. This gift of the Holy Spirit

indicated that the Gentiles too were sons of God, for they had been purified by their faith in the gospel. Compare this passage with Galatians 4.6, quoted earlier, which states that “Because you are sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, ‘Abba, Father.’”

The outpouring of the Holy Spirit on Cornelius and his family, manifested outwardly by their speaking in tongues and praising God, showed that God in his omniscience could see something which was hidden to man: the fact that they had a pure heart because they had just put their faith in Jesus Christ. Notice also that in Ephesians 1.13 Paul makes it unmistakably clear that no one can receive the Holy Spirit unless he or she is a believer: “And you also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation. Having believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit.”

Once again the harmony of the Scriptures helps us confirm the correct interpretation of a disputed series of verses by shedding light from one passage to another. The claim that the Gentiles received the Holy Spirit before they even heard Peter’s message and therefore before they could believe in it, is utterly falsified by Peter’s later account of the same incident as recorded in Acts 15.

In summary, our response to the arguments presented earlier has been to show that it is quite artificial to claim that the Gentiles in Acts 10 received the Holy Spirit right at the beginning of Peter’s speech. Every indication from the Scriptures and from common sense points to the conclusion that the sequence of events took place exactly as described in that chapter. The entire weight of the argument of those who believe that baptism is necessary for salvation hinges around a literalistic interpretation of Peter’s words “as I began to speak” in Acts 11.15. The claim that the Holy Spirit descended on Cornelius and the others present before Peter could speak a word is plainly contradicted by Acts 10.44 which states that this event took place “while Peter was still speaking.” This shows that Peter had already begun his message when the Gentiles believed it and became sons of God. Even if we stretched our sensibility to the limit and said that Peter managed to get in only one sentence before the Gentiles were baptized in the Holy Spirit, that first sentence would have been enough of the gospel message for them to be true believers, for it states “I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism, but accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right” (Acts 10.34-35).

In addition, the reader should note that in the argument typically presented by those who claim that the members of Cornelius’ household were not saved until they were baptized, the role of the Holy Spirit is usually not mentioned at all. As we have pointed out, several passages in Romans, Ephesians, and Galatians explain very clearly what happens when a person receives the Holy Spirit. The only response which the other side normally makes to this is to deny that these other passages of Scripture apply in the case of Acts 10. In other words, they simply claim that Cornelius’ conversion was an exceptional one and that therefore we cannot interpret it in light of other verses which are directed towards “normal” Christians!

Obviously, this is not the best way to go about establishing a Biblical understanding of a certain topic. Rather, in determining the meaning of a certain passage, we should bring to bear all the verses in the Bible which discuss that topic and allow them to shed light for us. This should be especially true when, as is the case here, we are dealing with a narrative section such as in the book of Acts. Many of the accounts given here are abbreviated to the barest of detail, and therefore in interpreting them we should always consider what other passages say on the same subject, especially when these other passages come from teaching and doctrinal books such as the Pauline epistles.

Before we can leave the account of Cornelius and his family we need to consider one more argument often advanced by those who deny that these people were saved prior to being baptized. In order to respond to the very strong statements made in Acts 10 about the operation of the Holy Spirit, the following argument is often presented:

Argument: The Gentiles did not actually receive the Holy Spirit himself in the sense that he dwelled within them; what they received was nothing more than the miraculous ability to speak in tongues. When it says in Acts 10.45, for example, that “the gift of the Holy Spirit” had been poured out on them, what this is referring to is the gift of tongues which they then utilized. In this context “the gift of the Holy Spirit” means one of the gifts he can give people, namely, the gift of tongues; it does not mean the Holy Spirit himself.

This is shown further in the account of Balaam and his ass in Numbers 22.21-35. In verse 28, it is recorded that God miraculously “opened the donkey’s mouth,” and she spoke to Balaam. This is another example of the Holy Spirit’s miraculous empowerment to speak in tongues. The donkey spoke in a special language, yet no one would say that the donkey had received the Holy Spirit or that she was saved.

Basically what this argument amounts to is another forced attempt on the part of certain people to come up with some way to explain how someone can receive the Holy Spirit and still be unsaved. If what Luke wanted to convey to us was that what the Gentiles received was no more than the ability to speak in tongues, he would have described it as “*a* gift of the Holy Spirit” rather than “*the* gift of the Holy Spirit.” The gift of tongues is only one among many spiritual gifts, and it is by no means of such priority that it would be termed “*the* gift of the Holy Spirit.” Rather, “the gift of the Holy Spirit” refers to the Holy Spirit himself in all of his totality. This is made clear by another use of the same expression by the same author, Luke, in another verse in the same book. In Acts 2.38, a verse we have already studied in some detail, Peter promises his audience that they too can receive “the gift of the Holy Spirit.” There the same words are used in the Greek as are used in Acts 10.45 to describe “the gift of the Holy Spirit” which the Gentiles received. When Peter promised his audience in Acts 2 that they would receive “the gift of the Holy Spirit,” what he had in mind was obviously the Holy Spirit himself, the indwelling Spirit of adoption as sons of God, and not simply a certain spiritual gift such as tongues. We can conclude that this was exactly the same experience Luke is describing for us in Acts 10. Not only does the Greek expression for the Holy Spirit bear this out, but also the surrounding context makes it patently clear, as we have seen.

Furthermore, when Peter commanded that the Gentiles be baptized (v. 47), he gave as his reason the fact that they had received the Holy Spirit. Here again the Greek construction is identical to that employed in another passage, in this case Romans 8.15. There Paul writes that we did not receive a spirit of fear but we “received the Spirit” who makes us sons of God. In the case of Romans 8 Paul clearly has in mind the reception of the Spirit in person, not just one of the spiritual gifts. The fact that Peter uses these same words to describe the experience of the Gentiles in Acts 10 is evidence that the same concept is being discussed in both cases. If we would simply follow the established rule of allowing the Bible to explain itself, the harmony of all these passages referring to the Holy Spirit would end any discussion about his role in the conversion of Cornelius and the others present in his household.

In response to the reference about Balaam's ass, we trust that the reader can see the ridiculousness of trying to compare a donkey with a human being insofar as the Holy Spirit is concerned. A human being is inherently different from a donkey in the spiritual plane, and those who claim that she "spoke in tongues," in the sense of a spiritual gift, are grasping at straws in order to avoid the impact of Cornelius' reception of the Holy Spirit.

In the model argument presented above, the main thrust was to assert that the Holy Spirit, even in the sense of one of the gifts of the Spirit, could be operating in a person who was still unsaved. With love and concern for those who hold to that position, we would warn with all seriousness that such a belief is dangerously close to blasphemy. Jesus warned the Pharisees that they should be careful not to attribute to Satan what was actually the work of the Holy Spirit. In the same vein, we would warn all men concerned for their own spiritual condition that to claim that the Holy Spirit is operating in someone who is unsaved, still in his sins, and hence a child of the devil is treading upon very risky ground. Obviously, we are in no position to pass judgement on an issue of such eternal significance; only God can do that. However, we do have clear Scriptural teaching which asserts that the presence of the Holy Spirit in a person indicates that he is saved, and to deny this in any way is a very dangerous doctrine indeed.

Finally, we would like to conclude this chapter with a few comments on a specific verse from Peter's message to the household of Cornelius. We feel this verse is very important since it is the climax of Peter's message and contains a very clear statement of God's plan of salvation. It indicates plainly that what is required on man's part to appropriate salvation is simply faith, without external works such as baptism. In Acts 10.43 Peter culminates his short message with a summary statement of the main point he wanted the Gentiles to grasp: "All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name."

No statement of the gospel message could be more simple and clear. Yet because of a theological position which chooses not to accept this verse at face value, there are those who would argue that not "everyone who believes in him" will be saved, unless we understand "everyone who believes" to mean "everyone who believes plus receives baptism." But is this the intent of Peter's message? Did he really mean for us to read into his words more than he actually said?

We think not, for if we approach this passage through the eyes of Peter's actual audience, it is clear that such a thought would not have crossed their minds. Let us do that for a brief moment. Let us temporarily lay aside the theological disputes about such matters as when the Gentiles actually received the Holy Spirit, etc. If we can do that and look strictly at verse 43 on its own merits, we will get an idea of the impact it must have had on those to whom it was directed. It is certainly worth our while to do this, for the verse makes a statement about the conditions for salvation. Therefore, regardless of whatever else the surrounding verses tell us, verse 43 is a very important one and we should allow it to penetrate our minds.

Once again, the verse states "All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name." Our friends who believe that no one can be saved without water baptism would tell us that because of other passages in which baptism is linked to salvation, we must understand baptism to be an implied condition in Peter's statement, along with belief. But if we put ourselves in the place of Cornelius and the other members of his household, we will realize that this cannot be so. Recall the setting of this story: Cornelius was a devout and God-fearing man. He was somewhat familiar with the ministry of John the Baptist and Jesus (Acts 10.37-38), but apparently he had not heard anything about Jesus since the crucifixion. One day an angel appeared to him and said that by Peter's mouth he would

hear more fully about God's appointed way of salvation. Peter arrived and delivered the short message quoted in Acts 10:34-43. Remember that this was all Cornelius heard about salvation after Christ's death and resurrection. Now put yourself in his place. You have just heard Peter's sermon, ending in verse 43 with the statement that "all the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name." If you were Cornelius, what would you think you now needed to do in order to be saved? Believe in Christ and go jump in a pool of water? Obviously not. Many spiritual works, such as being baptized and identifying with Christ in other ways, would be produced in your life if you had genuine faith, but there is no way you would think of adding baptism to Peter's words as a condition for salvation any more than you would add joining the local church.

So if we look at this passage through the eyes of those living at the time, we can see that they would have naturally understood Peter's words in a plain and literal sense. Furthermore, there is one other little factor which should dispel any doubt about the matter. Peter specified in verse 43 that the salvation he was proclaiming was a salvation about which "all the prophets testify." Think for a moment about this: Who are these prophets Peter is referring to? They cannot be the apostles themselves or any of the prophets in the New Testament sense, since the New Testament had not yet been written. The only Scriptures and prophets with which Cornelius was familiar were those of the Old Testament. Peter in verse 43 is declaring that we can be saved by believing in Christ, just as the prophets of the Old Testament proclaimed. There are several passages in the Old Testament which bear out this truth, i.e., that salvation is on the basis of faith in Jesus Christ, the Messiah. But where are there any of these prophets who, in proclaiming that "everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins," actually said "everyone who believes in him and is baptized received forgiveness of sins?" After all, if the faith which saves us means faith plus baptism, and if "all the prophets" testify about this salvation, we would expect many allusions in the Old Testament to this doctrine. But there is not a single passage in the Hebrew Scriptures which teaches this. There is not a single verse in which one of these prophets referred to being saved by believing in the Messiah and by being baptized. Such a thought would never have crossed the minds of any of the original recipients of the Old Testament writings, nor did such a thought suggest itself to Cornelius and the others present with him. There is no way that they would have read baptism into Peter's words. They would have simply understood them just as they were pronounced: "All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name." Hallelujah! Amen.

Chapter 15

The Ethiopian Eunuch

The account of the conversion of the Ethiopian eunuch recorded in Acts 8.26-40 makes for another fascinating and controversial study. We would like to analyze it briefly since its main points can help us increase our understanding of the topic of water baptism. Specifically, one of the principal reasons it is crucial to our overall theme is because we believe there is evidence to conclude that the eunuch was saved before he was baptized. This is the second of three major narrative passages in the Bible which we feel demonstrates that a certain person or persons was saved either before or without receiving water baptism. Thus we appeal to it as proof that baptism is not absolutely necessary for salvation.

By way of introduction, the principal sequence of events in the conversion of the eunuch can be summarized as follows: Philip, a dynamic evangelist in the early church, had come to Samaria to proclaim the good news about Jesus Christ. While he was there, an angel of the Lord instructed him to head out towards a certain spot in the desert. As he was doing so, he came across a chariot in which he found a eunuch from Ethiopia. The eunuch had been reading a certain passage of Scripture. Led by the Holy Spirit, Philip approached the eunuch and shared with him about Jesus Christ. Right after this, the eunuch spotted some water and requested to be baptized. Philip replied that he could do so if the eunuch first professed that he believed the gospel concerning Christ. The eunuch responded that he did believe in Jesus, whereupon Philip baptized him.

The important point which interests us about this particular story is the fact that the eunuch gave a specific profession of faith in Christ before he was baptized. Philip wanted him to indicate that he sincerely believed the message of salvation and the eunuch responded by confessing that "Jesus Christ is the Son of God." In the book of I John we are given many specific guidelines by which we can determine the validity of different spirits and doctrines. In chapter 2.15 it says, "This is how you can recognize the Spirit of God: Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God." This is exactly what the eunuch confessed, so we can be sure that at that point he was being led by the Holy Spirit in his beliefs. Furthermore, in I John 4.15 we read that "if anyone acknowledges that Jesus is the Son of God, God lives in him and he in God." The eunuch did make this acknowledgement, and he did so before he was baptized. According to John the Apostle, God was living in the eunuch at that moment, just as the eunuch was living in God. If God, in the person of the Holy Spirit, is dwelling in a person, that person is a child of God. We conclude that the eunuch was saved before he received baptism. If that is so, then baptism could not have been a condition for his becoming a child of God. Rather, the basis of his salvation, just as is the basis for ours, is faith in Jesus Christ.

Incidentally, the confession of faith given by the eunuch immediately before he was baptized is in our opinion likely to be the type of confession referred to by Paul in Romans 10.9-10. The reader will recall that we touched on this briefly in the chapter devoted to I Peter 3.20-21. In Romans Paul writes "That if you confess with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved." Since verbal confession of Christ was normally made at the point of baptism, the original readers of Paul's letters would have probably made this association upon reading verses nine and ten of

Romans chapter ten. Most of their conversion experiences must have undoubtedly been very similar to that of the eunuch insofar as the immediacy of faith, confession and baptism is concerned. The point Paul is making in Romans 10 is that with our hearts we believe and this results in justification, i.e., a righteous standing before God. In the case of the Ethiopian eunuch, the narrative makes it very clear that this took place prior to his being baptized.

We should note at this point, since others might bring this up as well, that verse 37 of Acts 8 does not appear in all of the manuscript copies of the New Testament and therefore some people question its authenticity. We acknowledge that this is a controversial issue, but we feel that in the long run it does not matter either way in the formulation of our baptismal theology. Even if the verse is not valid, the message it conveys can certainly be substantiated by other scriptures. There is no truth or doctrine revealed in this verse which is contrary to what the rest of the Bible contains. All of its ideas and concepts can be found elsewhere. For example, there are several other accounts in the book of Acts which indicate clearly that belief was always considered to be a prerequisite for baptism. This being so, the verses quoted from I John certainly can be applied to many of these other conversion stories in the book of Acts, and by logical extension to the case of the eunuch, even if someone does want to question the validity of Acts 8.37.

In response to these observations we have made concerning the salvation of the Ethiopian eunuch, those who believe that baptism is necessary for salvation counter with arguments of their own. They obviously will argue that the eunuch was not saved until he was baptized. One of their typical lines of reasoning in coming to this conclusion is the following:

Argument: The passages in I John which speak of acknowledging Jesus Christ cannot be applied to the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8. The verses in I John are directed to a different audience, namely, to those who are already Christians. The eunuch was in a different situation than were the readers of John's epistle. The verses in I John are not referring to the initial confession of Jesus Christ such as accompanies the experience of baptism.

Our reply to this argument is to reiterate that all of the passages in the Bible which discuss a certain topic are relevant and must be taken into account when formulating a doctrine. Else how would we explain Paul's statement that "all Scripture is God-breathed (inspired by God) and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness" (II Tim. 3.16)? Our friends who hold to the other position would say that all Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, except that I John 2.15 and 4.15 are not useful when it comes to the Ethiopian eunuch, and Romans, Ephesians and Galatians are not useful for teaching about Cornelius, etc. As we stated previously, the best way to understand the Bible is to allow one verse to shed light on another one. This is especially true when we are dealing with the book of Acts. The narrative accounts given here are for the most part summaries of the most important details of certain historical events in the early church. They are of course true and correct as far as they go, but it would be wise to interpret their details on the basis of more in-depth doctrinal and explanatory passages such as those found in the epistles.

Those who teach that baptism is necessary for salvation show that they implicitly agree with this approach to Biblical interpretation by freely referring to other verses on baptism when they are making a point in the book of Acts. They would argue, for example, that Cornelius and the other Gentiles in Acts 10 needed to be baptized in order to be saved since in Acts 2.38 Peter

connected repentance and baptism with the forgiveness of sins, and since Romans 6.3-4 describes baptism as a death and burial with Christ, and since I Peter 3.21 states that baptism saves us, etc. They insist that these other verses must apply to Cornelius, even though he was not present to hear Peter's words in Acts 2 and even though Romans and I Peter had not even been written yet. And we agree with them: all passages of Scripture must be brought to bear on one another. Stated in other terms, the whole of the Bible must be used to understand any one part of that whole.

But this is exactly the point we have been making with respect to I John. Here we find a doctrinal discussion of the significance of confessing Jesus Christ, and in Acts 8 we find a narrative in which a person did precisely that. Therefore we use I John to help us understand Acts 8. After all, the other camp insists that we must keep in mind Romans 6.3-4 and I Peter 3.21 when looking at Acts 10, so why should we not also consider I John when looking at Acts 8? Either we use the whole of Scripture to interpret one portion of Scripture, or else Paul's words in II Timothy 3.16 have fallen on deaf ears.

Returning to the statement in I John 4.15 that "if anyone acknowledges that Jesus is the Son of God, God lives in him and he in God," we would ask the question "What does the word 'anyone' mean here?" Either it means precisely that, or else it does not. Of course, when John writes that "if anyone acknowledges....," we assume by commonly-accepted principles of pragmatics that he means anyone who sincerely acknowledges that Jesus is the Son of God. In the case of the eunuch, the context indicates very clearly that he was indeed sincere when he confessed his faith in Jesus Christ. If he was not, he sure pulled a fast one on poor Philip. According to I John anyone who (sincerely) acknowledges that Jesus is the Son of God is saved. The eunuch acknowledged this to Philip, and he did so before he was baptized. We conclude that he was saved at that very moment, before Philip baptized him.

But, our friends would object, I John is written for people who are already Christians. And that is exactly the point we are making. Only a Christian can make the kind of profession which is spoken of in I John 4.15, and the eunuch did so before he was baptized. Those who believe that baptism is necessary for salvation would argue that we cannot use that type of reasoning. According to them, I John applies only to those who are Christians. Thus I John 4.15 cannot be used to prove that the eunuch was already saved. When you ask them "Why not?," they will reply "Because the confession the eunuch gave before he was baptized is not the same kind of confession spoken of in I John." When you ask them further "Why not?," they will reply "Because the confessions spoken of in I John are referring to those given by people who are already saved." Somebody is arguing in circles!

There is one further argument often made by those who believe that baptism is necessary for salvation. They focus on the very immediate reaction of the eunuch in requesting baptism as evidence that it was part of his salvation. Their argument typically runs like this:

Argument: Verse 35 (of Acts 8) states that Philip preached to the eunuch "the good news about Jesus." Immediately after this the eunuch saw some water and wanted to be baptized. Where did he get the idea that he should be baptized? Obviously Philip had been explaining to him about baptism as the means of accepting Christ. But the previous verse states that Philip was telling him the good news or gospel. Baptism is therefore part of the gospel. Preaching the good news about Jesus involves proclaiming baptism as our response required to accept the gospel.

In response to this we would say that we can agree with this argument up to a certain point. Undoubtedly part of the discussion between Philip and the eunuch involved an explanation of the significance of water baptism. We feel this is the most logical way to account for the eunuch's response. However, to conclude that therefore baptism is part of the plan of salvation is a *non sequitur*. The text does indeed state that Philip talked with the eunuch about the good news, but it does not say that that is the only thing they talked about. Since baptism is so intimately associated with conversion, it would be quite natural to bring it up when talking with someone who is obviously interested in becoming a Christian. But this does not mean that baptism is necessarily an essential element of the gospel. We would be comfortable saying that in a sense baptism is part of our salvation as long as we clarify this by adding that it is not the part which actually saves us. The means God has established by which we respond to the gospel and appropriate his redemption is faith and faith alone. Nevertheless, as humans it behooves us to have a way in which we can initially put this faith into practical action, and the means God has established for us to do so is by receiving water baptism. The account of the Ethiopian eunuch makes this point very clearly and strongly.

In closing, let us make a few remarks about what this passage should indicate to us concerning the prerequisites for baptism. Those who believe that baptism is absolutely essential for salvation correctly teach that faith or belief must precede baptism. With this we heartily concur. However, most of these people also specify that our faith must be of a certain type in order for it to be saving faith. They would say that since the Bible teaches that baptism is a condition for salvation, one must be in agreement with (believe) this doctrine or else baptism has no effect. In other words, they claim that even if a person believes in Jesus Christ and is baptized, that person is not saved unless he or she also believes that baptism was a necessary part of their salvation. According to this position, the faith which must exist in order for a person to be saved consists not just of faith or belief in the person of Jesus Christ, but also faith or belief in the fact that water baptism is an essential step in the process of salvation.

If that is true, then Philip baptized his convert prematurely. The eunuch never gave any indication that he believed baptism was necessary for him to be saved. When he requested baptism, Philip told him the one condition he would have to fulfill: "If you believe with all your heart, you may." (Acts 8.37) Now what was it exactly that he had to believe? Both he and Philip understood what kind of faith was implied, for he responded, "I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God." The only thing he was required to believe in was the lordship of Jesus Christ. If one of our friends who claims that baptism is necessary for salvation had been the evangelist in this case, he might not have consented to baptize the eunuch, since the eunuch did not indicate any particular belief about water baptism. In the scriptural account, however, there was only one thing which in Philip's eyes could hinder someone from being baptized: faith in Jesus Christ and in him alone. Originally we had titled this book *What prevents me from being baptized?* in order to highlight the importance of this issue. What indeed does one need to do in order to be baptized? Believe in Jesus Christ alone? Or believe in Jesus Christ as well as believe in a doctrine about baptism? The eunuch has indicated for us which is the correct response.

At the same time, there are also sincere Christians who would have imposed other restrictions—in a different sense—on the eunuch before he could have been baptized. Among evangelical Christians of various churches and denominations there are many people who go to an opposite extreme on this issue. In many cases someone who desires to be baptized is told he must go through a period of instruction or training first, or else he needs to wait until a public ceremony can be arranged, or else he needs to join a church, or else he has to be baptized by "a

qualified individual.” If these “prerequisites” had been in force at the time, they would have spelled the end of the eunuch’s conversion, for he did not fulfill a single one of them. We feel we need to point out, with all love for those who practice these doctrines, and with a firm desire to see God’s precepts proclaimed, that to our knowledge not a single one of them can be supported from Scripture.

Many churches have their converts go through a baptismal class or some such instruction before they will baptize them. This notion would have been totally foreign to the Christians living in the first century. The eunuch was evidently not very aware of all that had recently happened concerning Jesus’ life and death, and yet Philip did not have him wait “until he understood the Christian experience better.” He baptized him on the spot.

Many evangelicals proclaim that baptism must be a public ceremony, an identification with a specific church. What verse in the Bible can be offered to support this notion? With what church did the eunuch publicly identify when he was baptized out in the middle of nowhere? Who were all the witnesses when Paul was baptized by Ananias? To what church did Paul take the Philippian jailer and his family in the middle of the night in order to baptize them publicly in Acts 16? No, baptism is first and foremost an experience for the person receiving it, and the presence or absence of other people is incidental.

Lastly, many churches will only recognize a baptism if it is performed by someone they deem “a qualified individual,” usually implying by this an ordained minister. We have studied the doctrine of water baptism in some depth for a number of years and have yet to find a single verse in the Bible that would validate such a claim. Philip was not an apostle but simply a follower of Jesus who happened to have a gift for evangelism. He obviously had no qualms about baptizing his convert. Paul was baptized by Ananias, about whom all we know is that he was a “disciple.” Even the Apostle Paul himself did not baptize most of his own converts, but allowed others to do so (I Cor. 1.14-16). If any ordinary, Spirit-led follower of Jesus Christ can perform the most important interpersonal role possible in this world, that of leading another person to a relationship with Almighty God, why should we have any hesitations about their performing a less important task such as baptizing that new-born soul? If we insist that the leadership role of a pastor or minister is such that only he should baptize someone, why do we not also insist that only he should lead souls to Christ? After all, is not the latter function of inestimably greater eternal significance? Again we would reiterate that baptism is ultimately an experience for the one receiving it. Those who attach so much significance to the issue of who can do the baptizing are in danger of misunderstanding John 1.12-13: “But as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his name: Which were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God.”

Once again we would like to ask the question posed by the Ethiopian eunuch: “What prevents me from being baptized?” What indeed? Did his lack of experience in the practice of Christianity prevent him? Did the lack of church membership or an audience prevent him? Did the lack of an ordained minister prevent him? No, we can see that there was only one thing which stood between this willing soul and the waters of baptism: personal faith in Jesus Christ, the Son of God. Those who believe that baptism is necessary for salvation would have added an additional constraint which did not seem to concern Philip. On the other hand, many evangelicals would go to the other extreme and add a different set of constraints—ecclesiastical constraints, if you will. It is our desire and prayer that those who hold to these theological positions, for which we find no scriptural support, would be challenged by this book to reconsider their practices.

Chapter 16

The Thief on the Cross

In the Gospel of Luke we find one of the accounts of the two thieves who were crucified along with Jesus. This story is very interesting and important in our study of water baptism, for here we have the case of a person who was saved without any mention of baptism. Furthermore, the circumstances indicate that it would have been virtually impossible for the thief to have been baptized given the conditions in which the story is set. Thus we should study this account in more detail to see what it might teach us about the role of water baptism within God's plan of salvation.

The passage which concerns us is found in Luke 23.32-43. Here we read that two common criminals were crucified at the same time as Jesus. At a certain point one of them, according to the Gospel account, apparently underwent a change of heart (repentance) and began to recognize the truth about who Jesus really was. Then he called out to Jesus, "Lord, remember me when you come into your kingdom" (Luke 23.42). To this Jesus replied, "I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise" (v. 43). This statement is crucial since Jesus was giving this repentant thief an assurance that on that very day, after he died, he would be with him in paradise. By this we know that the thief was a saved man. However, the context clearly indicates that there was no indication on Jesus' part that the thief was expected to be baptized in order for this promise to him to be fulfilled. We conclude from this story that under the guidance of Jesus Christ himself, a person was declared to be saved without having been baptized.

As far as we are concerned, the main point of the story is as simple and straightforward as that. However, as we shall now see, other people do not take it in quite the same way. Specifically, there is a very interesting and unique controversy revolving around the order of certain events and their historical significance. Because this ties in with our study of water baptism, we will discuss it here.

Whenever we make the point that the thief was saved without being baptized, one of the most frequent objections we hear from those who believe baptism is absolutely necessary is the following:

Argument: At the moment in which this story took place, men were still under the Old Testament. Hence they were to obey the Law, and from it receive God's directives for their lives. Baptism was not yet a necessary condition for salvation. Baptism became necessary once the New Testament went into effect. This did not happen until Jesus died (cf. Matt. 26.28). The gospel as we know it today did not go into effect until that time. Part of the gospel includes the message about Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection (I Cor. 15.1-4). Since baptism is the means by which we share in this through faith (Rom. 6.3-4; Col. 2.12), the full significance of baptism would not have been relevant until after Jesus died. The gospel, which includes water baptism, did not go into effect until after Jesus died. When the thief was converted, he was still living under the Law and the Old Testament, and was not responsible to the gospel. Therefore it was not necessary for him to be baptized in order to be saved.

In response to this let us say right from the very start that we agree entirely with the doctrine that the New Testament was consummated by Jesus' death. This is important, so let us establish it from a few Scriptures. In Luke 22.20 (cf. also Matt. 26.28) Jesus, at the Last Supper, took the cup of wine which represented his blood and declared, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you." The Old Testament, which was in effect until that time, had been established by God in his promises to Abraham establishing the nation of Israel. Many of these promises were about to be fulfilled in Jesus' substitutionary death, and the New Testament would be established. In Hebrews we read, "For this reason Christ is the mediator of a new covenant...now that he has died as a ransom to set them free from the sins committed under the first covenant. In the case of a will, it is necessary to prove the death of the one who made it, because a will is in force only when somebody has died; it never takes effect while the one who made it is living" (9.15-17).

By the word of Scripture we can see that God understood Christ's death to be the means by which the New Testament (his will or death wish) would be put into effect upon the death of the testator (Jesus Christ). This is extremely important for the following reason: Jesus died before the thief did! This can be established by the Gospel according to John. In chapter 19.31-33 we read, "Now it was the day of preparation, and the next day was to be a special Sabbath. Because the Jews did not want the bodies left on the crosses during the Sabbath, they asked Pilate to have the legs broken and the bodies taken down. The soldiers therefore came and broke the legs of the first man who had been crucified with Jesus, and then those of the other. But when they came to Jesus and found that he was already dead, they did not break his legs." Crucifixion as a means of execution often led to slow, prolonged deaths in which the victim gradually lost strength for several hours or even days. In order to hasten this process, the executioners would often break the legs of the victim in order to bring about his death more quickly. This is what the soldiers did in the case of the two thieves crucified with Jesus. Evidently, they must have still been alive at that point. However, as they approached Jesus they saw that he was already dead and thus there was no need to break his legs. The thief lived and died as a saved man after Jesus' death (i.e., under the New Testament) without ever receiving Christian baptism!

This is a strong argument against the notion that Christian baptism is necessary for salvation under the New Testament. Those who do hold to this position often respond, "But the thief was saved under the Old Testament, before baptism became a requirement for salvation." The dilemma these people run into is that they also believe a person can lose his or her salvation. Among those who believe that water baptism is necessary for salvation, it also seems to be the case that they invariably believe a child of God can lose his salvation, i.e., fall from his position of grace. One of the ways in which someone could lose his salvation, they believe, is by persistently disobeying God's commandments, especially the major ones relating to salvation. This is why they teach that if someone professes faith in Jesus Christ, yet refuses to be baptized, that person is not saved.

In the case of the thief on the cross, it is true that he was originally saved under the Old Testament, but he also lived under the New Testament, after Jesus died. If baptism in water is indeed a requirement under the New Testament, then the thief would have needed to submit to this or else lose his salvation. It makes absolutely no difference whether or not it was practical for the thief to be baptized: a requirement is a requirement, and God "does not show favoritism" (Rom 2.11). The fact that the thief did indeed die as a saved man (according to Jesus' promise) without receiving Christian baptism shows that baptism cannot be a requirement for salvation in the New Testament. Those who believe that baptism is necessary for salvation create a dilemma

for themselves in that two of their own theological positions are mutually contradictory. When this was pointed out to one of these persons by the authors of this book, the other person insinuated that perhaps someone baptized the thief after they took him down off of the cross! Such are the extremes to which this theological position can lead.

We should add a parenthetical thought at this point to clarify something which might be going through the reader's mind. We have not stated whether or not we agree with the doctrine that a person can lose his salvation. Our beliefs on this matter are totally irrelevant to the discussion we have just presented. The point is that such a doctrine is held by those who believe that baptism is necessary for salvation, and in the case of the thief on the cross, this leads to a logical contradiction. It does not matter whether or not we believe that a person can lose his salvation, since in any case we do not believe baptism is a requirement for salvation in the New Testament. These doctrines create a problem for their theological position, not for ours.

A second response we would like to make to the argument cited above concerns the notion of when the gospel was first proclaimed. Recall that part of their basic argument goes like this: the message of the gospel involves the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ (I Cor. 15.1-4). The gospel therefore was not proclaimed until after this took place. Those who lived before Christ's crucifixion, such as the thief, were not under the gospel but under the Law.

Our conviction is that those who believe this are simply mistaken, and we will give several Scripture references which prove them wrong. The Bible teaches very clearly that the gospel was proclaimed as being in effect before Christ's death. Specifically, we will show that during the time that John's baptism of repentance was in effect, the gospel was even then being preached. In Luke 16.16, for example, Jesus states "The Law and the Prophets were proclaimed until John. Since that time, the good news of the kingdom of God is being preached, and everyone is forcing his way into it." Here *good news* is simply a synonym for *gospel*. Many persons who believe that baptism is necessary for salvation declare that during Jesus' pre-crucifixion ministry, people were not under the gospel but under the Law. Jesus Christ declared that they were not under the Law but under the gospel. Someone may object that the word *gospel* is not actually present in this verse in the Greek manuscripts. However, there is ample reason to understand it as being present in the meaning of Jesus' words. What he literally said is that the kingdom of God was being preached, and common sense tells us that in order to proclaim God's kingdom there must be a message associated with that kingdom. This message is what we call the gospel or good news. Almost every translation of this verse in English includes the expression "gospel" or "good news" as the implied object of what was being preached at that time.

Even if we were to disregard Luke 16.16 because the Greek version does not actually contain the word *gospel*, there are several other verses in which this word is present in the Greek. Each one of these proves that the gospel was indeed being proclaimed before Jesus' death. For example, in Mark 1.15 Jesus is reported to have preached throughout Galilee, "The time has come... The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!" At another point during his ministry, Jesus commissioned the twelve apostles, who then "set out and went from village to village, preaching the gospel and healing people everywhere" (Luke 9.6). Furthermore, in Jesus' discourse about the end times in Matthew 24, he prophesied that "this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come" (24.14). By Jesus' own words we see that the gospel which is even today being proclaimed to the uttermost parts of the world, is the same one which was foreshadowed at the time that he spoke those words, before his crucifixion. The thief on the cross was saved under the

gospel during the Old Testament, and he continued being saved under the gospel during the New Testament!

Consider another passage as well. In John 3.5 Jesus proclaimed to Nicodemus, “I tell you the truth, unless a man is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.” As we discussed in an earlier chapter, the image of water here most likely refers to baptism, and therefore this verse is often mentioned as evidence that baptism is necessary for salvation. However, given the time in which Jesus spoke these words (during the ministry of John the Baptist), any reference to baptism would be understood as a focus on the repentance which baptism demonstrates. The curious thing is that many people who believe that baptism is necessary for salvation will cite John 3.5 as proof, and then they will turn right around and tell you that the gospel was not preached until after Jesus’ death! They cannot very well hold onto both of these propositions at the same time. If Jesus’ words in John 3.5 make baptism a requirement for salvation, then the gospel was certainly being proclaimed before the crucifixion, and the thief on the cross was responsible to obey it. The fact that the thief did not need to be baptized shows that John 3.5 does not make baptism a condition for going to heaven. Furthermore, all of these observations demonstrate that the gospel, which was proclaimed before the New Testament went into effect, does not include water baptism as part of its basic message.

But what about the contention that part of the gospel message includes Jesus’ death, burial, and resurrection, as I Cor. 15.1-4 indicates? If this is so, then how could the gospel have been proclaimed before these events actually took place? Our reply is that the circumstances surrounding Christ’s suffering were details that would have to be filled in when the appropriate time came, but the essential facts had been revealed long before then. For instance, these same verses in I Corinthians give us an indication of this fact: “For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures.” (15.3-4). The fact that Jesus would serve as the atonement on our behalf was proclaimed in the Old Testament scriptures, especially in Isaiah and the Psalms, even if it was in a shadowy way. Many of the specific details would not become evident until after the fact, but nevertheless the point remains that the good news was previewed even throughout the days of the Old Testament believers.

From the very beginning of man’s practice of sin on this earth, God has revealed to us his plan of salvation. As early as in the Garden of Eden he gave to Adam and Eve the promise of one who would crush Satan (Gen. 3.15). Abraham likewise received many promises from God which were directly related to the coming Messiah. In Galatians, Paul comments on this: “Scripture foresaw that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, and announced the gospel in advance to Abraham: ‘All nations will be blessed through you.’” (Gal. 3.8). Not only was the good news preached during the ministry of John the Baptist, but, as we have seen, it was proclaimed even before then to Adam and Eve, to Abraham, and to all of the great men of faith of the Old Testament. This is the message which is being carried all over the world today, and which will be preached “in the whole world as a testimony to all nations” until the end of this age (Matt 24.14). As John’s description of heaven foretells: “Then I saw another angel flying in midair, and he had the eternal gospel to proclaim to those who live on the earth—to every nation, tribe, language and people” (Rev. 14.6). What unites all of these senses of *gospel*, regardless of their historical context, is that God saves those who believe in Him, apart from human works.

In Paul’s comment in Galatians on the gospel that was proclaimed to Abraham (3.8), we read how the Scriptures announced that “God would justify the Gentiles by faith.” This is the good news which saved the thief on the cross. Realizing who Jesus was, he repented of his sins

and trusted him alone to save him: “Lord, remember me when you come into your kingdom” (Luke 23.42). Jesus then promised him that a place was reserved for him in paradise. There is not even a hint here of any need to be baptized. The manner by which men were declared righteous in the Old Testament is similar to how we can be justified today: by believing in (trusting) God alone to save us from our sins. This is truly an eternal message.

There is one difference, however, between the thief and us in the way we should express our faith in Jesus Christ at the moment of our conversion. In the case of the thief on the cross, it was very appropriate for him to literally call out to Jesus and ask to be saved. This was, in effect, a prayer to God that he might be forgiven and born again. In this instance, though, Jesus was physically present with him. Today, even though Jesus is present among us through the Holy Spirit, he himself is not physically present as he was at that time. It is our conviction that God, understanding the hesitations of our human nature, has provided a means by which we, too, may experience something which physically, tangibly, allows us to “see” Jesus: in receiving baptism we can experientially participate in the crucifixion with Christ which the thief on the cross was allowed to witness in person. Baptism is our means of saying, by faith, “Lord Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” This is why we contend that, when someone today wishes to put their trust in Christ to save them, saying a prayer is not the best method for expressing this. There should be something more tangible, something which more vividly portrays the gospel to us, and God has designed water baptism to do just that. As the reader studies through the conversion accounts in the book of Acts, perhaps he will notice something very peculiar: After Jesus left this earth and ascended into Heaven, nobody ever expressed their desire to be saved by simply repeating a “sinner’s prayer.” In every case which is recorded for us, the means by which a repenting soul expressed his or her initial saving faith was by being immersed in identification with Jesus Christ. Perhaps we would do well to follow this pattern more closely in our own evangelistic practices.

Let us conclude this portion of our discussion with a few remarks by way of summary. When certain persons who believe that baptism is necessary for salvation attempt to explain away the account of the thief on the cross, they usually do so by asserting that the gospel was not proclaimed until after Christ’s death and resurrection. We have shown from various Scriptures that this notion is incorrect. Their basic fallacy lies in confusing the Old Testament with the Law and equating the New Testament with the gospel. It is true that during the ministry of John the Baptist, people were still under the Old Testament, but that does not mean that they were still under the Law. The Law and the Old Testament may have been in effect simultaneously for many years, but they are not the same thing. God’s testament with Abraham was established long before the Law was instituted—430 years before then, in fact—and it continued in effect even after the Law was no longer needed. One of the purposes of the Law was to lead men to an awareness of their need for Christ, and once Jesus showed up on the scene the Law was superfluous (see Galatians 3.16-25).

Until Jesus actually died, the Old Testament was still in effect, even if the Law was not. However, just because people were not yet under the new testament, this does not mean that the gospel was not yet being proclaimed. This is where our friends get confused. The preaching of the gospel did not have to wait until the inauguration of the New Testament; rather it preceded it and prepared men for it so that when the New Testament was finally instituted, it was a culmination of three years of ministry by Jesus, John the Baptist, and their disciples. Their mission was to prepare the way in advance so that God’s children would be ready to enter into the new age of the Church.

Before we finish this chapter, we should devote a few paragraphs to discussing a different argument which is sometimes suggested as an explanation for the exceptional case of the thief on the cross. Among those who teach that baptism is a condition for salvation, there are many who would agree with our previous statements concerning the gospel. They acknowledge that the gospel was preached before the crucifixion and that the thief was subject to it. How then do they explain the fact that no mention at all was made of his need to be baptized? The following argument is often presented as an explanation:

Argument: The account of the thief in Luke 23 is not a record of his conversion but rather of a rededication of his life to God after falling away. This is shown by his request “Lord, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” Obviously, he must have heard the gospel about Jesus at some point before their crucifixion, or else he would not have known who Jesus was or what his mission had been. The fact that he knew about Jesus’ coming kingdom shows that he had been exposed to the gospel previously. At that earlier point he could have responded and been baptized. Subsequently he must have rejected the faith and fallen back into sin. At the late hour of his crucifixion, an awareness of eternity ahead could have been the impetus for him to rededicate his life to God in this way.

Our response is simply that such an argument hinges around too many hypothetical suppositions. It could be true, of course, but it would involve an awful lot of *ifs*. Only a very biased reader of Luke’s gospel would imagine upon reading this account that it involves a rededication instead of a conversion. Everything which the thief needed to know in order to make a profession of faith in Jesus, he could have learned in a few hours or days immediately before his execution, probably while he was still in jail. The entire city was in an uproar during Jesus’ last week on earth, and no one in Jerusalem would have been ignorant of the claims and accusations made about him. Our explanation is the simpler one in that it does not need to assume all sorts of hypothetical circumstances about the thief’s background.

But just for the sake of our discussion, let us grant for a moment that their argument may be right. That may account for the thief on the cross, but there are many other instances, especially in Luke’s gospel, of persons who were saved without any indication that they were baptized. For example, in Luke 7:36-50 is recorded the story of a sinful woman who, with a sorrowful heart, anointed and kissed Jesus’ feet. Because of this demonstration of her attitude, Jesus said to her “Your sins are forgiven... Your faith has saved you; go in peace” (verses 48 and 50). Jesus stated that she was saved by her faith, and the setting of the story indicates that the reader would have to stretch his imagination quite a bit to assert that the woman was baptized during the sequence of events described by Luke.

Later in the same Gospel, ten lepers approached Jesus wanting to be healed. As they were on their way to the priest at Jesus’ command, all of them were cleansed. One of them came back to thank Jesus. When Jesus observed his attitude, He commented “Rise and go; your faith has made you well” (literally, “your faith has saved you”) (Luke 17:11-19). Normally the ritual that was observed with lepers was that they were presented to the priest who then offered the appropriate sacrifices. Then they were to undergo a ceremonial washing—a sort of baptism—and they would be pronounced clean (Leviticus 14). In the case of the Samaritan leper, he never made it to the priest. On the way, he was healed, or saved by faith, as Jesus put it. There is not the slightest hint that he was baptized during this process.

Finally, let us mention the case of Zaccheus, the tax collector. Upon seeing Jesus he climbed a tree to get a better view. When Jesus spotted him, he ordered him to come down. In the ensuing conversation Zaccheus gave a sincere indication that he was willing to turn his life around and stop sinning. Jesus then commented "Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham." (Luke 19.1-9). What was it on Zaccheus' part that saved him? Had he somehow managed to go jump in a nearby fountain once he got down from the tree? No, what saved him was the faith which Jesus knew was in his heart. Jesus knew it because it was demonstrated in Zaccheus' attitude toward sin.

In each of these accounts an initial, unprejudiced reading would give the obvious impression that these people had for the first time committed their lives to Jesus Christ. At no point is baptism ever mentioned, and in each case the circumstances indicate that it is highly unlikely that it took place concurrently with each person's conversion. The only element on their part which Jesus mentioned that had any connection whatsoever with their salvation was faith. These accounts are so clear and straightforward that they should end any discussion about the necessity for baptism.

Nevertheless, those who are on the other side of this issue would still argue that somehow these persons had managed to be baptized. Either the person had been previously converted and baptized, and then had fallen away, or else in between the lines of the story we are to assume that they were baptized before Jesus declared them to be saved. After all, our friends would argue, it never says that these persons were not baptized. No, but neither does it say that they were not playing the French horn. It takes about as much imagination to believe the one supposition as it does the other. Those who claim that baptism is indispensable for salvation would say that these are all exceptional conversions and that we have to assume that each one followed the prescribed norms set up as "standard," i.e., with baptism included. The trouble is, when we search the Gospels for instances such as these in which baptism is indeed specifically mentioned as being part of an individual's conversion, we are hard-pressed to find many examples. It is cause for wonder when the number of exceptions to a certain "norm" exceeds the number of cases which demonstrate it. A theology with so many exceptions is in our opinion a little bit too exceptional to be true.

PART III

Chapter 17

On Faith and Works

At a very basic, although perhaps oversimplified level, the issue of whether or not water baptism is necessary for salvation can be reduced to a more general disagreement with respect to the following controversy: According to the Bible, is a man saved by faith alone or by faith plus certain works? This is an issue which has confronted the Christian church from the very early days, in which some of the Jewish believers insisted that Gentile converts still needed to be circumcised. The evangelical position has stood firm time after time in its conviction that faith alone, without the addition of works, is what God considers in claiming someone as his child.

This belief was one of the key tenets of the great reformation movement started by Luther: “the righteous shall live by faith” (Rom 1.17) was his battle cry in the midst of the sacramental burdens of the Roman Catholic Church. Throughout the centuries, movements have arisen challenging the “justification by faith” position in various ways, so that many of the arguments tossed back and forth in this book have been considered by the Church down through the years. “There is nothing new under the sun” might be an appropriate condensation of this chapter, for the belief that baptism is necessary for salvation is just one of the many manifestations of an ancient doctrine which says that faith alone is not enough; man must do something in addition to simply believing in Jesus Christ before he can be saved.

Our belief that salvation is not to be connected with any works on man’s part stems from two major doctrines, mutually supporting, which are set forth clearly in the Bible. In the first place, many passages specifically state that our works are of no value whatsoever when it comes to our being justified in God’s eyes. Secondly, and as a corollary to the first proposition, is the doctrine that we are saved by faith alone, so long as that faith has as its object the person of Jesus Christ and his works accomplished on our behalf. Let us consider initially the first of these two doctrines.

The fact that man cannot be saved by any works or good deeds he does is established by a number of Scripture passages. For example, in Ephesians 2.8-9 Paul writes, “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast.” In Romans he echoes this same theme: “And if by grace, then it is no longer by works; if it were, grace would no longer be grace” (11.6). And earlier in Romans he devotes the entire fourth chapter to show that Abraham was not considered righteous by anything he did but rather on the basis of his faith in God.

The reason why we can never hope to be saved by our own works is because just one sin defiles us in God’s sight. He is totally holy and pure, and by his own design only creatures who are equally pure will be allowed into his eternal presence. Because we have inherited a sinful nature, we do not live holy lives but rather willfully sin hundreds of times. If just one sin makes us unacceptable in God’s sight, imagine how we must seem to him after we have committed hundreds and thousands of sins. Because of this Isaiah the prophet declared, “All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags; we all shrivel up like a leaf, and like the wind our sins sweep us away” (Is. 64.6). James was expressing this same idea when he wrote “For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it” (James 2.10).

If this is true, then no works on our part, including baptism, can improve our standing before God. Those who teach that baptism is necessary for salvation have to find some other way

of explaining these verses so that baptism can be included in the plan of salvation. Their typical argument at this point in the discussion runs like this:

Argument: When these passages say that we are not saved by works, they are referring to the works of the Law. It is true that those works cannot save us, but there are other works, such as baptism, which God requires us to obey if we wish to be saved.

Our response is that there is no indication in these passages that the author had in mind a distinction between the works of the Law and other kinds of works. To limit these works to a certain subclass such as the works of the law is to impose an artificial semantic restriction on the authors' meaning without any justification from the context. The plain and most general meaning of a certain word should always be understood as the author's intent until proven otherwise. The kind of evidence which would demonstrate that "works" was being limited to a narrow class would be, for example, a discussion of the Law in the overall context surrounding the verse being considered. Only in James 2.10 is this the case. However, even in James the point of the author is not to distinguish between the works of the law and other types of works. Rather, the very fact that James mentions this in the New Testament shows that as far as he was concerned, a work is a work is a work. If the authors of the New Testament had meant that no works of the law could save us, they would have been wasting their time in even mentioning this, for the law had long since ceased being in force. Rather, their point in mentioning works is that no works at all can save us. The works of the law are just one example of this false belief which needed to be repudiated. Why would God have inspired Paul to devote such a large portion of his letters trying to convince the Jews that the works of the law could not save them, if he wanted him in the next breath to assert that other kinds of works were necessary?

We can see this even more clearly if we consider the context of one of the passages we have cited. In Romans chapter 4 Paul devotes many verses to developing the theme that Abraham was not saved by circumcision nor by any other kind of work. Those who believe that baptism is necessary for salvation would respond that Paul's emphasis here is on the works of the law. However, if we consider the historical setting of Abraham's life, we can see that this cannot be the case. Abraham lived more than four hundred years before the Law was given through Moses (Gal. 3.16-17). When Paul speaks of Abraham's works, therefore, one cannot assume that he is making a point about the works of the law. In denying that Abraham's circumcision had any connection whatsoever with his justification before God, Paul was proclaiming that no ritualistic observance, whether connected with the law or not, had any power at all to save anybody.

This is important since it illustrates a very profound and significant theological premise: in true Biblical religion, a spiritual principle that is true today was true in the past and will be true in the future. The validity of this premise rests on the immutability of God's nature. Since God never changes, spiritual truths arising from the nature of his personality can never change. This is not to say that the practical application of these truths will always be the same. At certain points in history God has given men different guidelines for how they should worship Him (e.g., the Law), but the basic spiritual principles governing how men can know God and be saved have always been the same. Abraham was saved by faith, apart from works, before the Law was given; men and women were saved by faith, apart from works, under the Law; and we can be

saved the same way today—by faith, apart from works—now that the Law is no longer in effect. What is true has always been true.

In summary, a person in the Old Testament was saved by grace through faith in the blood atonement of animals, on a temporary basis. In the New Testament, persons are saved by grace through faith in the blood atonement of Christ, on a permanent basis. Either way, blood had to be shed in order for someone to receive remission of sins (Heb. 9.22). The interchange between faith and the shedding of blood is a transactional function which produces the result of forgiveness. For believers in both Old Testament times and New Testament times, our salvation was completed, and our sins literally taken away, when our Lord went into the Holy of Holies as our Great High Priest. For those living after the crucifixion of Christ, his blood takes away sins in a way that the blood of animals could not (Heb. 10.4). Consequently, in order to be redeemed in the New Testament, all that anyone needs to do is simply believe in the shed blood of Jesus (Eph. 1:7).

The second major Biblical doctrine which has led us to the conclusion that no works on man's part can add to his salvation is the fact that we are saved by faith alone—a faith that is directed towards what Jesus Christ has already accomplished for us. There are scores and scores of verses which teach this truth: e.g., John 3.16-18; John 3.36; John 5.24; John 6.40; John 6.47; John 11.25-26; Acts 10.43; Acts 16.31; Rom. 4.16; Rom. 5.1; Rom. 10.4; Rom. 10.9; Rom. 10.13; Gal. 3.7-9; I John 5.1; I John 5.11-13, to name but a few. Nearly every one of these passages promises that “he who believes” or “everyone who believes” will be saved.

Those who teach that baptism is necessary for salvation would heartily accept these verses as being true. However, in order to harmonize them with their other theological doctrines, they redefine and qualify what is meant by faith, rather than accepting the literal meaning of the verses at face value. Their typical argumentation sounds somewhat like this:

Argument: It is true, as these verses state, that man is saved by faith. However, nowhere does the Bible teach that we are saved by faith alone. Repentance is also a condition for salvation, as many verses indicate. Repentance is not the same thing as faith; therefore, there are at least two things that someone must do in order to be saved. All that the above verses tell us is that faith is a condition for salvation. In order to get the total picture, we have to consider all the verses in the Bible which tell us what we need to do in order to be saved. The only place in the Bible where the words “faith only” appear is in James 2.24 which says, “You see that a person is justified by what he does and not by faith alone.”

We cannot stop just after reading the verses which state that “whoever believes will be saved.” This cannot be a complete doctrine since repentance must also be added to belief. Repentance comes after belief, as can be seen in Acts 2.37-38. After Peter preached his sermon on the day of Pentecost, the Jews who were listening were convicted and asked, “What shall we do?” (v. 37). Obviously, they had believed Peter's message or else they would not have responded in this way. They were believers, yet they were still not saved. Peter's response indicated what they still needed to do: “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven” (v. 38). Repentance comes after belief and is also a condition for salvation. Therefore, a person is not saved at the point of faith alone.

In a similar way, baptism is also a condition for salvation. Many scriptures bear this out. Baptism, as well as repentance, must be present in addition to faith in order for someone to be saved. When the Scripture says, “he who believes” or “everyone who believes,” by implication it means he who believes, repents, and is baptized.

This argument contains a number of different points. In order to deal adequately with each one, it would be helpful to consider them individually.

Let us start with the claim that repentance comes after belief. First of all, there is a detail associated with this position which a casual discussion might not reveal. Among those who teach that baptism is necessary for salvation, it is often the case that they make a distinction between belief and faith. They understand belief as simply an intellectual acceptance that a certain idea is true, whereas they would define faith as an active, obedient response to a person or doctrine. When they consider statements such as “whoever believes in Jesus has eternal life,” they understand this in the sense of mental assent only. That is why they feel other things need to be added to it. Whenever this understanding is left implicit in a discussion, they assume that we mean the same thing when we talk about *belief*. However, in our eyes, belief in the Biblical sense involves much more than a mere intellectual acceptance of some truth. For us it implies a heartfelt trust in God as a person, a willful commitment of one’s life to Him. We therefore consider *belief* and *faith* to be synonymous terms when used in this type of context. It was important to make this clarification before going on, so that we may now use the terms *belief* and *faith* interchangeably in the ensuing discussion.

Concerning repentance, we do agree that this is a condition for salvation, as many scriptures make clear (for example, Luke 13.3; Luke 24.47; etc.). By *repentance* we mean a turning around of one’s life; a change of heart (with respect to sin) that leads to a change in behavior. If it is true, as the above argument claims, that repentance comes after belief, then our friends have a point in saying that salvation cannot occur at the point of faith alone. Our response is that in separating repentance from faith, one has imposed a forced sequential order on two logically inseparable ideas. It is our contention that repentance and faith are so intertwined in the process of conversion that it is pointless to try to separate them.

As far as the passage in Acts 2.37-38 is concerned, we would point out that the Jews who asked the question “What shall we do?” may have believed Peter’s message in the sense that they intellectually agreed with it, but that does not mean that they were necessarily believers in a Christian sense. They were under conviction, yes; they were enquirers at that point, yes; but there is no indication that they had already trusted in Christ on a personal basis.

We repeat, it is empirically impossible for humans to attempt to separate two internal actions of the will—repentance and faith—when only God can see the attitude of one’s heart. As we study the Scriptures to discover the relationship between repentance and faith, we find that if anything at all is revealed about their sequential order, it is that repentance comes before belief/faith, and not vice-versa. The best way to see this relationship is to look for all the passages in which repentance and faith are mentioned together in the same context. To our knowledge, there are four such verses in the Bible: Mark 1.15; Acts 20.21; Hebrews 6.1; and Matthew 21.32. The first three of these verses show the order in a grammatically simple and straightforward way: “‘The time has come,’ [Jesus] said. ‘The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!’” (Mark 1.15); “I [Paul] have declared to both Jews and Greeks that they must turn to God in repentance and have faith in our Lord Jesus” (Acts 20.21); “Therefore

let us leave the elementary teachings about Christ and go onto maturity, not laying again the foundation of repentance from acts that lead to death, and of faith in God” (Heb. 6.1). As the reader can see, in every case in the Bible in which repentance and faith are brought together in a grammatically coordinate relationship, repentance always precedes faith, and not vice-versa.

Furthermore, there is one more passage which mentions these two concepts in the same context, and it is vitally important since it shows very explicitly what the relationship between repentance and faith must be. In Matthew 21.32, in a parable directed towards the Jewish leaders, Jesus makes the following statement: “For John came to you to show you the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes did. And even after you saw this, you did not repent and believe him.” What is crucial about this verse is that in the Greek, the two verbs *repent* and *believe* are not grammatically coordinated by the conjunction *and*. Rather, they are arranged in a certain type of structure which is known as the genitive of purpose or result. What this means is that the second verb, *believe*, constitutes the purpose or result of the first action, *repent*. A more literal translation of this relationship would be “you did not repent in order to believe him” (cf. the King James Version and the Living Bible). This shows very clearly what the relationship between these two actions is. If there is any sequential order at all which should be assigned to them, it is that repentance precedes and is a prerequisite for belief/faith.

This conclusion is further substantiated by a verse in the Gospel of John. In chapter 16.8-9, Jesus infers that it is a sin not to believe in him. Logically, nobody can believe in Jesus unless they have first repented of their sin of unbelief. Again this leads us to see that it is impossible for belief to come before repentance. Repentance is a prerequisite for belief and thus the two actions cannot be separated from one another in time.

By these comments we do not mean to imply that we should go to the other extreme and attempt to order repentance before faith/belief. Our whole point is that it is invalid, both scripturally and logically, to attempt to force a chronological sequence on the relationship between these two concepts. Repentance and faith form an inseparable unit when it comes to Christian conversion. It is true that they are not precisely the same thing; but neither are they two entirely distinct actions. Rather, they are two different aspects of a single life-changing decision. Repentance is the negative side of faith. In repentance we turn away from sin. At the same time, we need to redirect our lives in the opposite direction. Faith is the positive side of this process. In faith we turn towards God. Faith and repentance are two inseparable parts of a single action of the will. As such, it is pointless to attempt to separate them or impose a chronological sequence upon them.

For these reasons, we find nothing at all contradictory in asserting that man is saved by faith alone, even though repentance is part of the process as well. In the several passages which teach that “whoever believes will be saved,” it is obvious that a simultaneous reference to repentance is implied, since repentance is the counterpart of faith. However, to claim that baptism is also implied is adding something to the meaning of Scripture. Repentance does not come after faith, but baptism certainly does. Faith implies that repentance has also taken place; it does not necessarily imply that baptism is also included. Faith and repentance constitute a type of action which is totally different from baptism. Faith and repentance are inward; baptism is outward. Faith and repentance themselves cannot be seen; baptism can be seen. Faith and repentance are actions involving the spiritual side of man; baptism is performed by the physical part of man. Faith and repentance can exist solely between an individual and God; baptism

requires the involvement of another human being. Faith and repentance produce baptism; baptism is a result and expression of saving faith and repentance.

To conclude this section of our discussion, let us examine a few verses which exemplify the preponderant Biblical emphasis on justification by faith alone. In Romans 1.17, the foundational verse of Luther's theology, the apostle Paul writes "For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: 'The righteous will live by faith.'" (NIV). The Good News Bible translates this verse, "For the gospel reveals how God puts men right with himself: it is through faith, from beginning to end. As the scripture says, 'He who is put right with God through faith shall live.'" Notice that as a basis for this doctrine, Paul quotes the Old Testament prophet Habakkuk. One must be cautious not to add to this message more than what was implied by the original writer. If someone wants to persuade us that for Paul, justification by faith means justification by faith and baptism, they must first demonstrate that Habakkuk also had baptism in mind when he penned his famous words.

The statement which Paul cites in Romans 1.17 is from Habakkuk 2:4b, which says in Hebrew, "The righteous will live by his faith," implying *his [own] faith*. Under inspiration, Paul leaves out the pronoun *his*. Although salvation in the Old Testament was "dependent" upon the coming Messiah, believers then did not yet know this person as the Lord Jesus Christ. They were putting their faith in Jehovah God (not in the son of God), and that is what saved them at the time. Blood was applied through the work of the priests in offering sacrifices; otherwise, Jews could not have gone to Abraham's bosom. It is in this sense that each person was saved by *his* own faith, even though their redemption would not be completed until the Messiah actually came. In that context they did not necessarily comprehend all of this, since revelation progresses incrementally throughout the scriptures. Nevertheless, what is crucial for us now is that the faith which Old Testament believers possessed, and which justified them before God, had nothing at all to do with baptism.

Similarly, in Acts 10 Peter proclaimed to the household of Cornelius: "All the prophets testify about [Jesus] that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name" (v. 43). The type of belief which saved Peter's audience is the same type that the prophets of the Old Testament spoke of to their audiences. Nowhere in the Old Testament is there any indication that this was understood as implying faith plus baptism.

Finally, in Galatians 3 Paul shares a profound insight about Abraham, the great man of faith. In verses 7-9 he writes, "Therefore, be sure that it is those who are of faith that are sons of Abraham. And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, 'All the nations shall be blessed in you.' So then those who are of faith are blessed with Abraham, the believer" (NASB). Abraham was a believer in the God of the Bible, as a foretype of Christians today.

In summary, the nature of the controversy over the issue of justification by faith boils down to this: In the Bible, there are many, many verses which, if taken at face value, teach that we can be saved simply by believing in Jesus Christ. There are also a few verses which, if looked at only from a grammatical perspective, seem to indicate that baptism is also a condition for salvation. Assuming that the Bible does not contradict itself, it follows that both propositions cannot be true at the same time. In order to understand the Bible in such a way that it is in harmony with itself, there are two alternatives. First, we can acknowledge that man is indeed saved by faith alone. In this case, we must interpret the few verses in which baptism is associated with salvation in a less than literal way, i.e., we must look for a deeper semantic meaning of

these verses revolving around the relationship between faith and baptism. The second alternative is that we can decide that baptism is indeed necessary for salvation. In this case, we take a handful of verses discussing baptism at face value and allow them to determine how we interpret the scores and scores of verses which seem to teach justification by faith only.

For us, it is clear which alternative is preferable. Our approach allows us to accept the literal meaning of the Bible in the greater number of cases. In every instance in which baptism is mentioned in the same context as salvation, we are justified in seeking a deeper meaning for the verse since either repentance or faith is always present as well. If baptism were equally as indispensable a part of the plan of salvation as are faith and repentance, then we would expect to find many verses in which baptism by itself stood for all three elements in a context relating to salvation. This is never the case. Invariably, whenever baptism is mentioned there is also a simultaneous reference to either faith or repentance. On the other hand, faith is mentioned by itself scores of times, and repentance is mentioned by itself several times, in connection with salvation. We conclude from this that faith/repentance or repentance/faith is the only absolute condition for man to be saved, and that baptism, although ideally administered at the moment of conversion, is not unconditionally necessary.

There is one final argument which we must consider before we can dispense with this issue of faith vs. works. Recall that in the previous argument a reference was made to the second chapter of James. Since this is connected with another argument that is often made, we shall consider both of them now.

Argument: To claim that man is not saved by any works at all on our part is wrong because faith itself is a work. In John 6.29 Jesus says, "The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent." This shows that there are in fact works which God considers necessary for salvation. Faith is only one of them. As James says, "You see that a person is justified by what he does and not by faith alone" (James 2.24).

Our response is that insofar as faith is a "work," it is a work far different and vastly more important in God's eyes than any other kind of work. It would help to consider the context of the verse in John 6. Here Jesus is talking with a crowd of Jews about spiritual food. In verse 27 he admonishes them not to work for food that spoils but rather for eternal food. Clearly the usage of *work* and *food* in this context constitutes a metaphor standing for spiritual fruit and rewards. The crowd then asks Him, "What must we do to do the works God requires?" (v. 28). Obviously they are assuming that there must be several things they must do in order to inherit eternal life. Jesus' answer is simply, "The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent" (v. 29). Notice that Jesus purposely switched from a plural to a singular form. By doing this he was indicating to the Jews that they had missed the main point of all of his teachings. They were concentrating on works; God wanted them simply to believe. Therefore to use this verse as evidence that faith is one among several works we must do in order to be saved is not justified by the context. On the contrary, the main point of the story contradicts any such notion! (The John Ankerberg Show 1982).

Similarly, a correct understanding of James chapter two in context will show that the apostle is not establishing a doctrine of salvation by works. In verses twenty through twenty-four he writes, "You foolish man, do you want evidence that faith without deeds is useless (or dead)? Was not our ancestor Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son

Isaac on the altar? You see that his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did. And the scripture was fulfilled that says, ‘Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness,’ and he was called God’s friend. You see that a person is justified by what he does and not by faith alone.”

The epistle of James is a plea for Christians to put their faith into action. It is an exhortation to sanctification, not to justification. His theme is that if we claim to have been justified because of our faith, our works had better be showing it.

This is also the point of his reference to Abraham, in which context verse twenty-four is set. He is not saying that Abraham’s initial justification was brought about by works, but rather that his works testified to or made complete his faith. This can be demonstrated by considering the chronology of certain events in Abraham’s life. The incident James is referring to here is when Abraham obeyed God and offered up his son Isaac. If James meant for us to understand that this work was actually part of Abraham’s salvation, then we would have to conclude that Abraham was not saved until this test of obedience was successfully passed. But that is wrong, as can be seen by looking at Romans. In Romans 4.9-11, Paul writes, “We have been saying that Abraham’s faith was credited to him as righteousness. Under what circumstances was it credited? Was it after he was circumcised, or before? It was not after, but before! And he received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised.” If Abraham was justified by faith even before he was circumcised, then he was certainly already saved before he offered up his son Isaac, several years later. Our conclusion is that James 2.24 makes sense only when it is considered in light of the overall theme of the epistle. When we do this, we can see that the entire Bible remains totally in harmony with the doctrine of faith alone, apart from works.

We should point out here that once someone permits the addition of anything at all to faith as being necessary for salvation, there is really no limit as to where one might stop. For example, in I John 4.7-8 we read, “Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love.” If we took these verses at face value, we would have to conclude that loving other people is a condition for salvation. Furthermore, in Matthew 10.22 Jesus states, “All men will hate you because of me, but he who stands firm to the end will be saved.” In a literal, grammatical sense, this sentence makes standing firm to the end a condition for being saved. If that is true, then we must live every moment in constant fear and dread lest we die right after we make a minor slip up but before we can repent of it. Once someone allows any action on man’s part, other than faith, to enter into the salvation process, then we can no longer have any assurance about our standing before God. If human performance, no matter how slight, is a basis for justification, then Jesus’ sinless life and substitutionary atonement were nothing but examples of how we should live, and their saving merits become superfluous.

When discussing salvation with someone who believes that baptism is part of the requirements, it is interesting to pin them down on what they believe concerning those people who lived under the Old Testament Law. If you succeed in getting into this issue deep enough, you will usually discover that these persons believe that the basis for salvation in Old Testament times was obedience to the Law! It seems they have totally missed the point of James 2.10: “For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it.”

This illustrates what in our opinion is the basic fallacy of the faith plus works philosophy: It draws too fine a line between faith and obedience. It is true that faith produces obedience: true saving faith will always be accompanied by good works which validate that faith. But in the

ultimate analysis, one has to recognize that faith and obedience are not the same thing and that they play very different roles in the salvation of one's soul.

The faith which we are proclaiming as being efficacious for salvation is distinguished from their faith not so much in its quantity or quality as in its object: We believe that when the Bible speaks of justification by faith it is referring to a faith which has as its goal the very person of Jesus Christ himself. Their faith is directed not only towards the person but also towards a series of doctrines which they claim is part of the gospel. Our assurance of salvation rests totally on what Jesus has done for us; theirs rests on Jesus as well as on the fact that they themselves have obeyed certain of his commandments. For us, it is sufficient to sing,

My faith has found a resting place,
Not in device nor creed;
I trust the Everliving One,
His wounds for me shall plead.

I need no other argument,
I need no other plea;
It is enough that Jesus died,
And that He died for me. (Hewitt 1891)

PART IV

Chapter 18

Summary of the Reasons Why We Do Not Believe Baptism Is Necessary for Salvation

In this chapter our aim is to enumerate and briefly summarize the reasons why we reject the position which claims that water baptism is a condition for salvation. Most of these reasons have already been discussed in some way or another in previous chapters. There are a few others which have been hinted at but not explicitly developed. Finally, there are one or two which we mention now for the very first time.

1. The clear Scriptural emphasis on faith alone, excluding works, as being the requirement for man to appropriate salvation. There are a tremendous number of verses which promise eternal life to “him who believes” or “everyone who believes.” No distinction at all is made in these verses between he who believes and is baptized, and he who believes and has not been baptized. Furthermore, there are several passages which specifically state that no works on man’s part are considered to be necessary for salvation.

2. The relationship between faith/repentance and baptism. The Christian religion above all others emphasizes that it is what is in a man’s heart that counts more than anything he does. Faith and repentance are internal actions. Their sincerity can be seen only by God. Baptism is a result of faith and repentance; it is an outward expression of them which can be witnessed by other men. The apostle Paul took great pains in his doctrinal letters to distinguish between works done in faith and faith itself.

3. Faith and/or repentance are frequently mentioned by themselves in a context relating to salvation; baptism never is. There are many passages in which faith is mentioned as the only condition for salvation; there are several in which repentance is mentioned alone. If baptism were equally as necessary for salvation as are faith and repentance, we would expect to find many similar verses in which baptism was mentioned by itself in connection with salvation. This is especially true since of the three, baptism is the one which is most perceptually tangible and would therefore be the natural choice to stand for all three. However, this never occurs. In every instance in which baptism is related in some way to salvation, there is always a simultaneous reference to faith, repentance, confession of Christ, or the activity of the Holy Spirit.

4. Instances of persons who were saved during the ministry of John the Baptist without any mention whatsoever of baptism. This list would include the prostitute who anointed Jesus’ feet, the Samaritan leper, Zaccheus the tax collector, and most notably, the thief on the cross. These persons were just as much exposed to the gospel of Jesus Christ as you and I are today, yet in every case their conversion occurred in circumstances which would almost entirely disallow the possibility that they had been baptized.

5. Instances of persons who were saved during the post-resurrection age before they were baptized. Among those we have discussed are the household of Cornelius and the Ethiopian eunuch. Those in Cornelius’ family all received the gift of the Holy Spirit while listening to Peter’s message. It was only after this happened that Peter commanded them to be baptized. The Ethiopian eunuch made a sincere confession of faith in Jesus Christ before being baptized. According to I John, God abided in him from that very moment. If these people were already born again Christians before they were baptized, then baptism could not have been one of the requirements they needed to fulfill in order to be saved.

6. The unchanging nature of the plan of salvation throughout history. In order to claim that baptism is a condition for salvation today, one has to admit that at some point during human

history God has changed the plan of salvation. The unity and harmony of the whole Bible argue against this. One of the principal messages which Jesus and the other New Testament evangelists had so much trouble getting across to the Jews was that the gospel they were proclaiming was exactly what the Old Testament prophets had been saying all along. Jesus came not to do away with the law and the prophets but to fulfill them (Matt. 5.17-18). God's moral and spiritual nature never changes, and He "does not show favoritism" (Rom 2.11). If this is true, then it would be inconsistent for him to establish different requirements for salvation for certain generations of people that he had not established for others.

7. The imagery of baptism pre-figured as Old Testament types. These would include the passing of the Israelites through the Red Sea during the exodus from Egypt (I Cor 10.2); the salvation of Noah and his family in the ark (I Pet. 3.20-21); and the Jewish rite of circumcision (Col. 2.11-12). In each of these Old Testament symbols the physical elements did not actually effect salvation but rather accompanied it as a seal and culmination of God's redemptive powers. In the case of the Red Sea and the flood, the waters of destruction never even touched the ones who were brought through safely. In the case of circumcision, Paul showed from the example of Abraham that saving faith had already been demonstrated on his part before God commanded him to perform the actual ceremony. We misinterpret these valuable lessons from history if we insist that the water of baptism today is in any way a part of what actually saves us.

8. In Scripture passages describing the significance of baptism, it is always Christ's death to sin, not ours, which is emphasized. In baptism we are not baptized into our own death but into his (Rom. 6.3-4). In baptism we are not raised up into our own resurrection but into Christ's (Col. 2.12). Baptism as an expression of faith does not save us through our own efforts but through the resurrection of Jesus Christ (I Pet. 3.21). The reality which water baptism was designed to express for us is that God saw us dying to our sins and rising to new life with Jesus when he underwent these experiences on our behalf.

9. The infinite sacrifice Christ performed in dying for our sake on the cross makes anything at all we could do meaningless in comparison. If our sins were so horrible in God's sight that it was impossible for us to save ourselves, and if his love for us was so great that in order to make our redemption possible he himself came down from Heaven to die an excruciating death, what point would there be in adding to all of this a measly little act of obedience by mortal men? If the ransom price has already been set at the very life of God himself, what more could we hope to add to this? Jesus cried out for all of us to hear, "It is finished! (The debt is paid in full.)" All we have to do is accept this infinite gift. Hallelujah!

10. The theological similarities between baptism and communion. Communion (the Lord's Supper) has no saving power; it is simply a remembrance of the power of Jesus' death to continually sustain our spiritual walks. Communion and baptism are the two ordinances Christ has given to the Church to symbolize and recall the truths of the gospel. Baptism proclaims the power of Christ's atonement to regenerate us and give us new life; communion proclaims its power to sustain us once this new spiritual life has been initiated. Both are acts of obedience; both require faith. In order to be consistent one should either recognize that both of these sacraments are necessary for salvation or that neither of them is. Certain creeds have chosen the first alternative; we feel the second one is correct. But to make a distinction in the soteriological effectiveness of baptism vis-à-vis communion is to fail to recognize that these two signs were instituted by Christ with a similar function in mind.

11. If baptism is necessary for salvation, then an individual alone by himself with God cannot get saved. Baptism assumes the participation of another human being, whereas the very

essence of salvation involves an immortal soul bared and alone before God. Salvation involves a relationship between an individual person and God; it would seem illogical if this relationship had to be complicated by the presence of another human being. This is not to say that baptism cannot coincide with the moment of salvation. Rather, we are simply saying that it would seem out of line with the nature of redemption to add a requirement which an individual by himself could not fulfill.

PART V

Chapter 19

Baptismal Conversion: Towards a Theology of Christian Baptism

Introduction

At the beginning of this book we stated that we had two main purposes in undertaking a work of this type. First, we wanted to deal with the arguments of those who believe that baptism is necessary for salvation, and show why we reject them. Secondly, we wanted to explain what we believe the Bible does teach about the significance of water baptism—its purpose and role in the life of a Christian, and how it relates to salvation. The majority of our time thus far has been spent in carrying out our first objective. We have presented in a systematic way the verses and arguments which often arise in a discussion about the necessity of baptism, and we have responded to each one according to the convictions we have come to hold. When the situation was appropriate, we have also interspersed the discussions with some insights we have gained regarding the purpose of baptism, hinting at the ideas we would now like to develop straightforwardly and in more depth.

As we have indicated in several places, one of the frustrations we have often encountered in seeking to understand water baptism is that many teachers, textbooks, and other sources spend virtually all of their efforts trying to show what the Bible does not say about the subject. Very few ever seem to get around to telling us what the Bible does teach about its purpose. Many times, after studying a certain treatment of the subject, we find that our Bibles are filled with holes and gaps where there used to be verses discussing water baptism. One after another the major passages are explained away, discarded, or in some way avoided until we are left with precious few positive statements anywhere which can tell us something of importance. We have taken pains to avoid this approach. In discussing every passage we have carefully explained not only what it does not mean but also what it does mean.

The second major purpose of our book, then, has been to develop an all-encompassing, scriptural theology of water baptism, keeping in mind at all times that each passage must serve in some way in building the total picture. Thus far we have scattered such comments throughout the various chapters. Now in this final chapter we would like to conclude our study by bringing all of these ideas together at the same time in order to give coherence to our thoughts in a comprehensive way.

Issues We Have Purposely Avoided

As we stated in the introduction to this book, there are a couple of controversies related to the study of water baptism which we have not discussed. We feel that to give them adequate attention we would have had to go beyond the scope of this study. These issues include the question of how baptism should be administered—by sprinkling, pouring, or immersion; and the question of whether or not newborn babies should be baptized.

In avoiding these issues we do not mean to imply in any way that they are not important. On the contrary, these are matters which have also led us into many hours of research and study. It is just that in order to give these questions the attention they deserve, we would have had to expand our book considerably and this we have chosen not to do. It was felt that in order to concentrate our efforts on tackling the job well, we should limit our study to one major issue, the

most important one relating to water baptism—its significance and purpose in the redemptive plans of God.

Perhaps at this point we can allow ourselves just a short digression in order to make a few summary comments about these other two issues. Regarding the mode of baptism, suffice it to say that we are immersionists: we believe that the only mode of baptism supported by the Scriptures is total immersion. Briefly, our reasons for coming to this conclusion are as follows:

1. The meaning of the Greek word for *baptize*. This is almost universally acknowledged to be ‘dip’ or ‘immerse.’ This was also the understanding of Luther and Calvin.

2. The symbolism ascribed to baptism in the Bible. In every case in which baptism is described in metaphorical terms, the image can only be justified if we assume that baptism was understood to mean immersion. Burial with Christ is a central theme of the baptismal passages, and immersion illustrates this beautifully. In no verse discussing water baptism is the ordinance ever assigned a symbolism which would correspond to sprinkling or pouring.

3. The Old Testament types of baptism. In the passing of the Israelite exodus through the Red Sea, only total immersion would have sufficed to destroy the Egyptian army pursuing them. In the destruction of the world at the time of the flood, God’s purposes would not have been met if the unrighteous nations had simply been sprinkled or poured upon. This might have put them under a little bit of conviction, but none of them actually died until they were drowned beneath the waters.

For these reasons we feel that only immersion satisfies the commandment that God has given us in his Word to make disciples of all nations by baptizing them and teaching them to obey everything Jesus has taught us.

Regarding the issue of infant baptism, it should be clear from the comments we have made about the significance of the event that it would be totally inappropriate to baptize babies. In order for the scriptural objectives of baptism to be fulfilled, the person undergoing the experience must consciously and rationally understand the meaning of Christ’s atonement on his behalf. We would have no hesitations about baptizing a child so long as that child is old enough to comprehend the gospel and personally accept Jesus Christ. Someone who is old enough to believe in God is old enough to be baptized!

Those who believe in infant baptism normally give as evidence for their position two primary arguments. In the first place, they emphasize the covenantal relationship of God with his people. This results from an approach to theology in which the church today is viewed as the spiritual heir of the promises and covenants which God made with the nation of Israel. With respect to baptism, this rite is seen as the counterpart of the Jewish practice of circumcision, and thus it is administered to infants born into the believing community. The second major argument which is often made in support of infant baptism is that babies, too, can have faith in the sense that they rely on God for their survival, much in the same way that they trust in their parents and respond to their love in tangible, although non-linguistic, ways.

Briefly, our reasons for rejecting infant baptism are as follows:

1. Nowhere in the New Testament is there any specific example of the baptism of an infant. Most paedobaptists will admit this.

2. The type of faith described in the Bible as being a prerequisite for baptism can always be seen in context to involve a conscious, active understanding of the essential truths of the gospel. Whoever can receive baptism can also receive the Lord’s Supper. If paedobaptists consistently applied their theological principles and carried them to their logical conclusion, they should give the communion elements to babies as well.

3. Infant baptism as a religious practice is dangerous in that it gives a false sense of security to all persons involved. Consider the millions and millions of baptized heathens in the Western world who are doing great damage to the name of Christianity. This should dispel any notion that infant baptism makes any difference in the life of one who has no faith. He who has baptism yet has not faith has nothing; he who has faith yet has not the sacrament has Christ (Wotherspoon 1928:120; Beasley-Murray 1962:304).

In summary, we hold to the doctrine which is known as believer's baptism. We believe that baptism should be administered only to those persons who can verbally demonstrate their acceptance of the truths of Christ's work.

Summary of the Major Passages Dealing with Water Baptism

In this section we would like to briefly review the main points we have made with respect to each of the major verses we have considered so far.

–Mark 1.4: “John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.” The genitive construction *baptism of repentance* implies that the relationship between the two events is of crucial importance. Forgiveness is predicated upon repentance, and baptism is associated with this entire process as the result of, token of, expression of inward repentance.

–John 3.5: “Jesus answered, ‘Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God.’” Being *born of water* is most likely a reference to baptism. However, Jesus spoke these words to a Pharisee during the ministry of John the Baptist, so baptism would be understood as an indication that even the Jews needed to repent of their sins before they could accept their Messiah.

–Mark 16.16: “Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned.” The decisive factor in either case is faith, not baptism. The crucial relationship between belief and baptism must be understood, even if it is not stated explicitly. The inclusion of baptism in this context shows that it is far from being a casual commandment which we should obey when it is convenient. Saving faith and baptism should occur simultaneously, not separated by days or weeks.

–Acts 2.38: “And Peter said to them, ‘Repent, and let each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.’” The preposition *for (eis)* denotes aim or purpose, not grounds or reason. The two imperative verbs *repent* and *be baptized* are grammatically coordinate and serve as a whole, not individually, as the antecedent of the clause *for the forgiveness of your sins*. However, the switch from second person plural (*repent*) to third person singular (*let each one of you be baptized*) is a signal that repentance and baptism involve two different types of action. The Jewish audience listening to Peter's sermon would naturally remember John the Baptist's emphasis on baptism as an outward expression and confirmation of one's willingness to repent. Again, the immediacy of baptism is emphasized.

–Acts 22.16: “And now why do you delay? Arise, and be baptized and wash away your sins, calling on His name.” Here the instrumental clause (*by calling on His name*) indicates the means by which Paul was to wash away his sins. Baptism was very closely related to these actions, but it was not the means of effecting them. This verse supports the notion that for the first-century Christians, baptism could be viewed as a prayer to God asking for his forgiveness (cf. I Pet. 3.21). The Greek word for *calling* is an aorist participle which means that

chronologically speaking, its point of reference could be any previous point, including the moment of Saul's encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus.

–Romans 6.3-4: “Or don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.” Being *baptized into* someone or something means being baptized in identification with or as followers of that person or thing (cf. I Cor. 10.2; Matt 28.19). The death to sin which baptism emphasizes is not our own but that of Christ himself. Nevertheless, this passage makes clear that in Paul's eyes the moment at which we are spiritually reborn by virtue of participating in Christ's death and resurrection through faith should coincide with the moment of baptism.

–I Cor. 12.13: “For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body—whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink.” The baptism spoken of here, which is indeed necessary for salvation, is the baptism in, with, or by the Holy Spirit. This interpretation is justified by the context since the whole chapter as well as this particular verse is a treatise on the Holy Spirit.

–Gal. 3.27: “For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.” Baptism is the identification with Christ par excellence of Christian experience. Being *clothed with Christ* is a common Pauline metaphor referring to the utilization of the spiritual armament which Christ provides for us as his soldiers. This verse is syntactically linked to the previous one, indicating that the experience which should accompany the moment of our becoming sons of God through faith is baptism.

–Col. 2.11-12: “In him you were also circumcised, in the putting off of the sinful nature, not with a circumcision done by the hands of men but with the circumcision done by Christ, having been buried with him in baptism and raised with him through your faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead.” That which raises us up with Christ is not baptism but rather our faith in the fact that God raised Christ from the dead. The reality of our spiritual resurrection took place not at the moment of our conversion but rather 2000 years ago when God considered us to be dying and rising with Christ. Nevertheless, within the chronological confines of our human existence there must be a specific moment at which we begin to realize these wonderful truths. When that happens, the immediate reception of water baptism makes them all the more vivid and meaningful.

–I Peter 3.20-21: “Who once were disobedient, when the patience of God kept waiting in the days of Noah, during the construction of the ark, in which a few, that is eight persons, were brought safely through the water. And corresponding to that, baptism now saves you—not the removal of dirt from the flesh, but an appeal to God for a good conscience—through the resurrection of Jesus Christ.” The comments about baptism in verse twenty-one must not be separated from its Old Testament counterpart discussed in verse twenty. Noah and his family were not saved by the water but in spite of it. They were saved by getting aboard the ark, a type or symbol of the Lord Jesus Christ. Similarly, the saving essence of baptism lies not in the physical actions associated with it but rather in the condition of one's spiritual life which is revealed by the verbal testimony accompanying the actual immersion. It is a common literary device in Biblical writings to express the totality of a complex event solely in terms of one of its component parts.

–Titus 3.5: “He saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit.” Although the

washing of rebirth is most likely a reference to water baptism, there is also an emphasis in this verse on the role of the Holy Spirit as the agent of regeneration. The connection between “he saved us” and “through the washing of rebirth” can be explained as another example of the principle of synecdoche, as we discussed in connection with I Pet. 3.21. That which is true of a spiritual reality is said to be true of a symbol representing that reality.

–Acts 10.34-48: The conversion of Cornelius and his household in Caesarea. These God-fearing Gentiles opened their hearts to Peter’s message and believed in God while Peter was still speaking. God responded to their faith by cleansing their hearts of sin and giving them the gift of the Holy Spirit (cf. Acts 15.7-11). The Holy Spirit is God’s mark of ownership on his children (Rom. 8 15-16; Gal. 4.6; Eph. 1.13-14). Peter then commanded these newly-born Christians to be baptized.

–Acts 8.26-40: The conversion of the Ethiopian eunuch traveling through the desert. Led by the Holy Spirit, Philip the evangelist approached the eunuch and proclaimed to him the gospel of Jesus Christ. The eunuch desired to be baptized, but first Philip demanded from him some evidence of his faith in Christ. The eunuch acknowledged that Jesus was the Son of God. According to I John, if someone acknowledges this truth, God dwells within that person, and he dwells in God.

–Luke 23.32-43: The thief on the cross alongside of Jesus. Having repented of his sins and confessing to Jesus his desire to be saved, the thief was promised that that very day he would go to live in paradise. This interchange took place during a period in which the gospel was being preached. Then Jesus died and the new testament was inaugurated. The thief lived and died under the new testament without ever receiving Christian baptism. There are several other accounts of conversions in the Gospel of Luke which give no indication at all that the person or persons being saved had ever been baptized or were required to before their sins would be forgiven.

As we put all of these verses together and consider prayerfully what they are saying to us, we are led to the conclusion that a correct Biblical theology of water baptism must take into account two very important truths: First, water baptism as an act of obedience is not a condition for one’s sins to be forgiven. Faith alone, which baptism naturally expresses, is the means God has ordained by which we can appropriate the saving power of Christ’s work. Secondly, even though salvation is through faith “from beginning to end,” there is nothing at all illogical in God’s designing a model for conversion in which water baptism accompanies this initial saving faith not as an instrument or a means but rather as a time and place for this faith to be exteriorized. This second point emphasizes a spiritual truth which we believe the majority of evangelical Christians have overlooked. Consequently, one of the motivations for this book has been to point out this weakness in many theologies of baptism and at the same time to develop an approach of our own which does correctly recognize the dual nature of this issue.

Brief Overview of the Traditional Theologies of Water Baptism

Before we present our own theology in more detail, we would like to set the stage for it by briefly examining the major approaches which have been traditionally taken in various denominations and movements. Each approach will be discussed with respect to how closely it approximates what we believe to be the Biblically correct position. We will start with the approach which we feel reflects the most serious errors and misunderstandings, and then present various other doctrines which move closer and closer towards our own position.

We admit at the outset that the presentation of these theologies reflects our own understanding of what we believe each one is saying. In no way do we claim that these summaries would necessarily be endorsed as an accurate statement of that particular church's or denomination's position. Furthermore, for the sake of brevity we have chosen to discuss only those theologies which differ from one another in significant ways. Minor variations of each one will be ignored and a "standard," eclectic summary will be presented.

1. The Roman Catholic position

According to this viewpoint, baptism is one of several sacraments which automatically bestow God's grace whenever it is administered in the proper way. Therefore, its application to infants is encouraged and even prescribed. Baptism, because of its very power as instituted by Jesus Christ, *ex opere operatio* regenerates the person who receives it, results in the forgiveness of any sins committed up to that point, and makes that person a member of the community of believers or universal Church. Therefore no faith is necessarily required on the part of the baptized; faith exists in the members of the believing community and through this faith the sacrament is authenticated. It makes no difference whether the sacrament is performed by sprinkling, pouring, or immersion. The Roman Catholic Church is the largest and most well-known proponent of this doctrine, which is often referred to as "baptismal regeneration." This position is essentially, with minor differences, the same as that held by most Lutherans and Episcopalians (Anglicans) also.

Of all the approaches to baptism which have won a numerous group of followers, this is the one which we believe is farthest from the Biblical truth. It reduces the symbol to a rite fraught with magical and superstitious connotations and depersonalizes the individual human-to-God relationship which is so central to Jesus' teachings. It errs in that it transfers the efficacy of baptism from individual faith to the sacrament itself. At the same time, it fails to recognize that Christianity as proclaimed by Christ and his followers always involved a conscious, rational decision on the part of the convert to willfully repent of his or her sins and with an aware understanding put one's trust in the person of Jesus Christ.

2. The "Church of Christ" position

This position, exemplified most typically by the so called "Church of Christ" movement, is numerically not all that large in many locations, yet its adherents are normally the ones who most tenaciously defend the belief that water baptism is absolutely necessary for salvation. According to this viewpoint, baptism is to be received only by believers, i.e., it repudiates the notion of baptizing babies. Baptism as a physical action is not what saves someone; rather, baptism as an act of obedience, along with repentance, faith, and verbal confession of Christ, is one of the conditions for salvation laid down in God's Word. Many of the proponents of this position claim that in order to be saved, one must not only believe in Jesus Christ and be baptized, but also have the right purpose in mind in being baptized, namely, one must believe that baptism is part of the salvation process. They would therefore deny or seriously question the salvation of anyone who does not hold to these principles, be they baptized or not. Baptism is to be performed by immersion only; any rite administered by sprinkling or pouring is not considered to be a valid baptism. In certain theological works of a general nature, this approach

is also sometimes classified as “baptismal regeneration,” although in the strict sense this terminology should be reserved for the Roman Catholic position alone.

Besides the “Church of Christ” group of churches, other sects which sometimes hold to this viewpoint are some of the more extreme pentecostal movements, which in this case would associate water baptism with the reception of the Holy Spirit and the ability to speak in tongues, and some of the so-called Christian churches (non Disciples of Christ).

We heartily agree with the proponents of this position in their emphasis on believer’s baptism as opposed to infant baptism. In that respect they are in line with the Biblical doctrine that personal faith should precede baptism. Likewise, their recognition of immersion as the scriptural mode of baptism is highly commendable. On the other hand, their insistence that baptism is absolutely necessary for salvation reflects a break-down in the separation between faith and works which Jesus so pointedly emphasized. In their desire to restore the scriptural doctrine that baptism should occur simultaneously with saving faith, they have gone to the other extreme and carried their dogmatism to a dangerous and unbiblical point. When so much emphasis is given to the preaching of baptism, as these persons have done, then the centrality of Jesus Christ in the gospel message is in jeopardy of being missed.

3. The “reformed” position

This viewpoint is typical of many of the churches and denominations arising from movements started by some of the great reformers such as John Calvin. In our present times it would be exemplified most notably by such groups as the Presbyterian Church, the Christian Reformed Church, and many of the Methodist churches, as well as various splinter movements associated with these denominations.

This position states basically that baptism is a sign and seal of God’s covenant relationship with his chosen people, much as circumcision was for the Jews in the Old Testament. Consequently, baptism has no saving power and should not be considered a requirement for salvation. At the same time, due to baptism’s role as a symbol of the community of believers in the New Testament, it is appropriate to administer it to children born into families of the Church. As with all those who practice infant (paedo) baptism, the proponents of this theology acknowledge sprinkling and pouring as valid modes of performing the ritual.

With this position we are getting somewhat closer to the Biblical teaching concerning the significance of baptism. We applaud those who adhere to this approach for their recognition that baptism is simply a sign or seal of God’s blessing and therefore not absolutely necessary for salvation. On the other hand, we cannot commend the practice of baptizing those who are not old enough to give a personal indication of their faith in Jesus Christ. The scriptural support for such a doctrine is totally lacking. Given the two principal errors we have considered thus far, that of baptizing infants and that of making baptism a requirement for salvation, the latter is definitely much more serious in that it is related to the doctrine of salvation.

4. The “baptist” position

We will now present the position which is held by perhaps more evangelicals than any other approach. This is the last major theology of baptism which has a widespread following, and of the four it is the one with which we could feel most comfortable. We have named this the *baptist* position, implying by the use of the lower case *b* that it is not held exclusively by Baptist

churches. Many other evangelical churches and denominations espouse this doctrine or something very similar to it. Among the more well known of these groups would be included the Brethren churches, the Evangelical Free churches, various Pentecostal and “charismatic” churches, the Christian and Missionary Alliance churches, Bible churches, and many other groups holding a similar view on water baptism. The many Baptist churches are the ones which are most often associated with this position.

According to this viewpoint, baptism is to be administered to believers only, never to infants. Baptism is a symbol of spiritual regeneration and a public identification with the gospel of Jesus Christ. Baptism is one of the first steps of faith a new believer is expected to obey, but it is not a requirement for salvation. In some cases baptism is viewed as the final requirement for membership in a particular church or denomination. Often, the person desiring to be baptized has to go through some type of instructional or training period. This period can vary greatly, from just a few days following conversion all the way up to a year in some churches. Usually immersion is considered to be the correct way of baptizing, but because of the large diversity of backgrounds among those who hold to this position, there are some who would also admit sprinkling or pouring.

This position is about as close to the Biblical pattern as we have found among all of the mainstream theologies. We recommend it for its rejection of infant baptism and especially for its acknowledgement that baptism is not a condition for salvation. At the same time, there are a few minor issues which this approach often raises, and which leave us somewhat uncomfortable. One of the tenets of the “baptist” position is that baptism is a public identification with a particular group of believers as well as a symbol of the spiritual regeneration previously experienced in a Christian’s life. The emphasis on baptism as a public event, although well-meaning, is not entirely scriptural. Ideally, it is a good thing to confess Christ before other men, but that did not stop the jailer in Acts 16 from being baptized in the middle of the night; it did not stop the Ethiopian eunuch from being baptized out in the desert; and it did not stop Paul from being baptized in the house of Ananias.

In addition, those who hold to this position have yet to indicate one verse of Scripture supporting the notion that baptism was designed to be a symbol of a *previous* experience in the life of a Christian. Every verse we have examined which indicates anything at all about the timing of baptism points towards the conclusion that as far as the writers of the Bible were concerned, it was expected to be received as an integral part of one’s conversion experience. The requirement in many churches that a “candidate” for baptism must first sit through a baptismal class or some similar type of study destroys any hope that his or her baptism will be performed in a totally scriptural way!

This in our opinion is the main weakness of the “baptist” position: it is normally implemented in such a way that the immediacy of baptism is overlooked. Were it not for this, we could agree with this theology almost without reservation. As it stands, it suffers this one shortcoming in comparison with the “Church of Christ” position. Although the latter insists incorrectly that baptism should be considered a necessary part of the salvation process, it does correctly recognize that baptism should be part of the conversion process. This insight is one that many evangelicals have missed in formulating their theology of baptism, and we hope and pray that this book might serve in some way to challenge these brothers in Christ to return to their Bibles for more study.

Perhaps a brief summary of the historical development of baptismal theology will help us to see why the current situation exists as it does. At the time of the Reformation, baptismal

regeneration as practiced by the established Roman Catholic Church was the norm everywhere. Should a newly-born infant die before coming of age, its destiny in the next world would depend on whether or not it had received this all-important introductory rite into the Church. Once in the Church, a person was assured that the indulgences, masses, and penances of the faithful could serve on his behalf in the event that he ended up in purgatory. Thus any baptized Catholic would surely make it to Heaven sooner or later. In the midst of these sacramental burdens and excesses, the great cry of justification by faith rang out from the lips of Martin Luther, John Wycliffe, and others. Eventually the reformers won a devout following, and in order not to fall back into the same errors as their forefathers, they placed a tremendous emphasis on the idea of adult conversion, a new birth that was necessary to truly lay hold of Christ by faith.

Out of these seeds sprung a series of movements whose supporters came to be known as the “anabaptists” or rebaptizers. They acquired this name because of their practice of baptizing adults who had experienced this new birth through faith. Due no doubt to the relative newness of their ideas at that time, the anabaptists, or simply baptists, as they were later called, were very cautious in making sure that one of their converts was truly regenerated and fully understood the significance of his actions before they baptized him. This has been an obvious influence in many present-day “baptist” type churches which demand clear evidence of new life and spiritual fruit as a prerequisite for baptism.

In the 1800’s, another movement arose in America under the direction of Alexander Campbell and others. Campbell’s followers, who came to be known as the Disciples of Christ, insisted that they were restoring Biblical truths which had also been lost during the Dark Ages of the Church. Not only did they hold to the notion of believer’s baptism, but they also insisted that water baptism was more than just a symbol of a previous regeneration. For them, baptism was the indispensable culminating moment of the conversion process and hence was absolutely necessary for salvation.

As we see it, this was a well-meaning doctrine but one which in the circumstances was pushed to an extreme as an over-reaction to the baptistic position. The baptists correctly realized that salvation was all by faith, with or without the sacraments. However, in emphasizing this they separated baptism from its Biblical role in the conversion process. Campbell and his followers on their part were right in insisting that baptism should once again be made an integral part of conversion, but in doing so they assigned it a significance which the Scriptures never intended it to have. In this way there was formed a movement from which the current Church of Christ position has evolved.

We feel that if one could combine the positive truths of each of these two positions, which were formulated during a turbulent, combative period of history, the result would be a theology of baptism which would avoid the unscriptural extremes of both. As we have stated previously, the truly Biblical theology towards which we are striving must account for two very important doctrinal facts which appear superficially to be paradoxical yet which the Scriptures nevertheless maintain, namely, that regeneration is accomplished by faith alone, but that baptism was designed to be administered at the same time that this is occurring. This profound, inseparable duality suggested by the salvation accounts of the New Testament has led us to develop a theology of water baptism which we have named *baptismal conversion*.

Baptismal Conversion

Baptismal conversion is an approach to the theology of water baptism which is predicated upon two very clear Biblical teachings: (1) The means God has established for man to appropriate salvation is faith in Jesus Christ, and nothing else; (2) Baptism was designed by God in such a way that its purpose is maximally appreciated when a Christian experiences it at the very moment of his or her conversion. One might compare baptism in this approach to the function of the “sinner’s prayer” or an altar call in many evangelical circles. At the point that someone is on the verge of committing his or her life to Jesus Christ, it is appropriate to request of them an outward action of some kind by which they can exteriorize their faith and help them realize what it is that they are doing. In many evangelical churches this is accomplished by having convicted listeners raise their hands, stand up, or come forward before the church. Then they are normally led through a short prayer asking Jesus to forgive their sins and make them a new creature. As effective as this approach may be from a psychological point of view, it is not the scriptural way of culminating a conversion. The Biblical position is that God has already provided a means by which we can take a part in helping a repenting sinner to be introduced to his savior through faith, and this means is water baptism.

There are a number of premises and corollaries which arise from the practical application of baptismal conversion to actual human experience. These can be summarized as follows:

1. A person who has sincerely trusted in Jesus Christ to save him from his sins is a born-again child of God, regardless of whether or not he has been baptized.

2. The ideal and most scriptural time for a new Christian to be baptized is at the very moment of his conversion.

3. If someone receives baptism at some point subsequent to his conversion, much of the beautiful symbolism and significance of the rite is lost, but it is valid, nonetheless.

4. Baptism consists of three primary parts, each of which contributes in a unique way to the importance of the event. First, there is the verbal confession of Jesus Christ which should immediately precede the actual immersion. It can be accomplished quite effectively even while the convert is standing or sitting up in the water. This confession or testimony helps the convert realize that he now possesses saving faith. It also serves as a safeguard later on to prevent him from thinking that the actual immersion is what saved him. Secondly, there is the identification with the essential truths of the gospel which baptism symbolizes and helps the convert to realize. The symbolism of being buried and raised (resurrected) with Christ helps the person being baptized understand that that is what happened to him when Jesus died in his stead on the cross. Thirdly, there is the actual physical experience of immersion into the water, and emerging out of it again. There is something innately ingrained in the human species which makes us feel cleansed and renewed after being overwhelmed by water. God has given us this unique experience in order to help drive home to our senses the fact that we have just experienced a life-changing passage from an old way of life to a new one.

5. Consequently, the ultimate effectiveness of baptism is gained by no other mode than total immersion. Baptism by immersion was a first-century method of audio-visual Christian education! (New American Standard Soul Winner’s New Testament 1971:394)

6. The practice of having a penitent sinner exteriorize his initial saving faith by means of a prayer or an altar call should be replaced or at the very least supplemented by water baptism.

7. The responsibility for seeing that a new Christian realize the blessing he will receive by being baptized at once lies not with the convert himself but with any Christian or Christians who were influential in his conversion.

8. In order for baptismal conversion to be effectively implemented, we must recognize that there is no scriptural prohibition against any follower of Jesus Christ to baptize another person. If a minister is present when someone is converted, by all means he should perform or oversee the baptism. However, many times this is not the case, and then the evangelist or other disciple who was used to present the gospel needs to feel the peace and liberty to baptize the convert at once.

Some of the scriptural reasons which have led us to formulate the doctrine of baptismal conversion can be summarized as follows:

1. In every major passage in the Bible in which water baptism is discussed, its significance is described in terms which unmistakably reflect a context of conversion.

2. There is not a single case in all the Bible in which a born-again Christian requested water baptism after his conversion. In every example the convert was commanded to be baptized by the person who was the spiritual leader at the moment. In the apparently exceptional case of the Ethiopian eunuch, notice two things: First, even though he requested to be baptized, it was only because Philip had just been explaining to him about how he could accept Jesus Christ as his savior. Secondly, the eunuch was not necessarily saved at the moment he requested to be baptized, for Philip immediately demanded from him some evidence of the sincerity of his faith.

3. In the examples we have in the Book of Acts and elsewhere describing actual baptisms, the indication is that the evangelist or spiritual leader in a conversion situation always took upon himself the responsibility for seeing that the convert understood his need to be baptized. It was never left for the convert to discover this fact for himself at some later time.

4. There is not a conclusive case in the whole Bible of any baptism which was separated from conversion by more than a few minutes. In several instances the evangelist went to a great inconvenience with respect to the time of day or the physical limitations in order to permit his convert(s) to be baptized on the spot.

The most notable case is when the Philippian jailer was awakened in the middle of the night by an earthquake and then converted by Paul and Silas. Paul and Silas had been severely beaten and they were probably dirty, tired, bloody, and hungry, yet even then they did not delay the baptism until the next Sunday or even the next morning. They saw to it that the jailer and his family were baptized "immediately ... at that hour of the night" (Acts 16.33).

Why was it so urgent that they be baptized at once? It had nothing to do with the fact that Paul and Silas as Jews would be familiar with the custom of having Gentile proselytes baptized. When a male Gentile converted to Judaism in Old Testament times, he was first circumcised and then two or three days later, after he was healed, he would be baptized. There is no precedent in Jewish religion or history for baptizing a convert immediately. Where did Paul and Silas get the notion that their converts should be baptized so quickly? We believe it was part of the doctrinal instruction which Jesus has given to his Church to proclaim and practice (Mark 16.15-16).

5. In every conversion account recorded in the book of Acts, the only element which is invariably mentioned is baptism. Faith, repentance, verbal confession of Christ, and speaking in tongues are also mentioned in connection with many of the conversions. By implication faith and repentance undoubtedly accompanied each conversion, and confession of Christ probably did so, but the only element which is specifically mentioned as being present in every conversion is water baptism.

6. The symbols and typologies which are ascribed to baptism in the Bible stress its immediacy and urgency. In I Cor. 10.2 Paul relates baptism to the passing of Israel through the Red Sea. The Jewish nation was already saved once they began their exodus from Egypt, but until they passed through the waters safely the Egyptians were still coming after them! Their spiritual salvation was assured, but God still wanted them to observe the miracle of their physical deliverance. Many Christians find that, until they are baptized, they feel as though they are still being chased by Egyptians. In I Pet. 3.21 the apostle likens baptism to the deliverance of Noah and his family during the flood. Noah was not saved by the water but rather by getting into the ark. At the same time, it is just as important to realize that the corrupted elements of the world did not die until they were drowned in the flood. Noah was safe and sound inside of the ark, but until the water came he could not get anywhere! A Christian who has not been baptized is like a person in a boat sitting on dry land about to embark on a wonderful journey but never able to get started.

In Rom. 6.3-4 and Col. 2.12 Paul likens baptism to a burial. It only makes sense to bury someone once they have died. Jesus was taken down off the cross right away because the Jews did not want his corpse to desecrate the land (see Deut. 21.23). It was only after he was buried that he could be resurrected from the tomb. In the same way, a Christian who has not been baptized has left his carcass hanging on the cross with Jesus. He may have died to his sins, but he could be responsible for polluting the land until he buries that body in the watery tomb and arises to new life with Jesus.

In Gal. 3.27 baptism is described as “putting on Christ.” This was a common expression referring to taking up one’s spiritual weaponry. In the military world, a new inductee is issued his military clothing before he starts basic training. This is so that everyone can identify him as a soldier. A person who becomes a Christian without being baptized is like a recruit who starts training while still wearing his civilian clothes. He seems out of place, and it is difficult to tell which army he is fighting for.

As we have suggested previously in several different chapters, in Western culture there is a very common event which serves as a very striking and appropriate analogy for the doctrine of baptismal conversion. We are referring of course to a wedding ceremony and the exchanging of rings by the bride and groom. Our theological position can be compared to this ceremony in the following ways:

1. In a wedding, the groom takes the bride to be his wife and promises to love and protect her as long as they both shall live. When a person becomes a Christian, he or she is made a part of the Body of Christ, his bride. Jesus enters into a covenant relationship with us in which we are promised his love, protection, and guidance in sickness and in health, whether rich or poor, for the remainder of our lives.

2. In a wedding ceremony, it is customary for the bride and groom to put on a matching pair of rings. These rings seal their vows and serve as a token or pledge to them and also to the whole world that they are committing their lives to each other. Notice also that a ring totally encircles the finger it is worn on. This symbolizes the completeness of the wearer’s break with his past status and the life-long nature of his commitment. With respect to Christian conversion, God has given us water baptism as a seal and token of our commitment to Jesus Christ. Our immersion symbolizes the identical bond that Jesus Christ experienced in the sense that we become one with him in his crucifixion, burial, and resurrection (Rom. 6.3-4). Any witnesses who are present at a baptism can consider that they are observing a marriage taking place. The person who has been baptized has acknowledged before other men the seriousness of the vow he

has just taken. Just as a ring totally encircles the wearer's flesh, so water baptism by immersion totally surrounds the Bride of Christ, symbolizing the totality of our break with the past and the eternal duration of our commitment to God.

3. At a wedding it is customary for the bride and groom to receive presents from well-wishers. At conversion we receive the gift of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2.38). The Holy Spirit and his ministry gifts are the Christian wedding present we receive from our new Father.

4. Putting on a ring is not what makes a person a husband or wife. The thing which truly unites the couple is their mutual commitment to each other. When God sees this in their hearts, he sanctifies and blesses their bond. Receiving water baptism is not what makes a person a Christian. That which truly effects our marriage to Jesus is our commitment to him. When God sees that genuine trust and faith in Christ are present in a person's heart, he sanctifies and blesses that relationship, regardless of the presence or absence of external elements.

5. If for some reason a bride and groom do not put on a ring, they can still be married, nonetheless. However, the ceremony would seem in some way to be incomplete or lacking in its impact. The ideal time for putting on the ring is during the marriage ceremony itself. In the same way, a person can become a Christian without being baptized on the spot. However, the experience never really reaches its climactic fulfillment until the moment of baptism. For this reason, the ideal time to be baptized is at the very moment of one's conversion.

6. After a wedding, the bride and groom enjoy a honeymoon in which they culminate the marriage act and begin to learn about living with each other on an intimate, day-by-day basis. But it is not appropriate to do this until after the wedding ceremony is completed. After becoming a Christian, many people experience an incredible contentment and happiness in their newly-established relationship with Jesus Christ. They begin to learn what it is like to live with Him intimately on a day-by-day basis. However, the full peace and fulfillment which this offers can be experienced only after the convert has made a complete break with his past and culminated his new experience by being baptized. A Christian who walks away from his conversion without being baptized and then attempts to live a spiritual life is like a bride and groom who go on their honeymoon without having first put on their rings! They need to complete the ceremony and assure themselves that they have totally abandoned the single life before the contentment of married life can be appreciated.

One might argue at this point that when someone becomes a Christian, he does not yet realize all that he is getting into. Why not wait until he understands more fully what the resurrected life is all about? Then he can appreciate his baptism all the more. Our response is that this is like saying, why not delay putting on your rings until after the honeymoon is over? Then when you do so you will understand what married life is like and the exchanging of rings will be all the more meaningful. Unfortunately, this is precisely the problem with so many marriages today. People go through with the ceremony without really committing themselves unreservedly to the other person. They get into the real thing and find out what it is like, and many of them give up. How important it is that the wedding ceremony be a final, culminating seal of the newlyweds' commitment so that their bond will be indissoluble! After all, how many couples standing at the altar fully comprehend all that lies before them? They are taking a step of faith—trusting in the other person and trusting that God, who has led them together, will sustain them “in better and in worse.” If Christians were to delay being baptized until they understood more fully what it means to die and rise with Christ, then each of us should be baptized again right now, and again next month or year, and once more a year later, etc.

Unfortunately, many Christians never make it that far because their spiritual lives are aborted shortly after the honeymoon with Christ is over. All the problems we are experiencing in our culture with marriages and other interpersonal relationships seem to carry over into our practice of Christianity as well. People enter into a relationship with Jesus Christ and then when the going gets tough they give up. Some of these “spiritual divorces” could be prevented, we feel, by a correct application of the teachings of baptismal conversion. Potential converts should be instructed with all the seriousness of pre-marital counseling so that they count the cost of being a true disciple of Jesus Christ before making that commitment. Then when they are ready to do so they will appreciate the full significance of water baptism and allow it to be the seal and climax of their marriage to Jesus Christ. Stated in other words, we believe that the solution lies not in delaying baptism but in delaying conversion. Conversions should no more be rushed into than a marriage should be. Every potential follower of Jesus Christ needs to go through some type of engagement period until he is good and ready to say, “I do.” Then in the culminating moment baptism can be the means by which he confesses to Jesus “with this ring I thee wed.”

7. It is judicious in every wedding to have a minister or some other officiating person directing the events so that everything follows the prescribed guidelines. He should assist the bride and groom in their solemn commitment by pronouncing them man and wife at the proper time. He is also responsible for ensuring that the rings be exchanged at the right moment and in the correct way. At a conversion, it is advantageous to have a follower of Jesus Christ present in order to see that things run smoothly and as they should. This believer-priest, among other things, should give assurance to the convert that he or she has truly entered into a relationship with Jesus Christ. In addition, the spiritual leader should assume the responsibility for seeing that the convert be baptized at the right moment and in the correct way.

The position of baptismal conversion urges the recognition that a spiritual marriage with Jesus Christ is a covenant relationship entered into by two mature persons capable of understanding the implications of their decision. It also recognizes that the exchanging of rings does not produce the marriage but simply seals it and confirms it. Finally, it emphasizes that the rings be put on during the actual wedding ceremony, and not later, in order to finalize the bond at that point and propel the bride and groom into their new lives with power, finality, and assurance of their new status.

Some Common Objections to the Doctrine of Baptismal Conversion

In the several years that we have spent studying the doctrine of water baptism and formulating the ideas we are presenting here, we have had many opportunities to share some of these thoughts with Christian ministers, teachers, and friends. They have been very helpful in pointing out things we needed to consider and have often raised objections to one or more of our tenets. Some of these objections were well-founded and have been assimilated into our theology. Others we have chosen not to accept, and we would like to present several of them now so the reader can see how we would respond.

1. You’re making too much fuss about a minor matter. Baptism is sort of on the level of foot washing: it is a Jewish custom set up mainly for the culture of those days.

Response: Consider two facts: (1) Baptism is mentioned in the New Testament more than 100 times. Foot washing is mentioned only once. Baptism is often presented in terms of a

commandment. Foot washing is mentioned in John's Gospel only as an example which Jesus set for us to follow. (2) Baptism was specifically included two times by Jesus as part of the Great Commission (Matt. 28.19-20; Mark 16.15-16). Baptism is considered, along with faith and repentance, as one of the foundational doctrines of Christian theology (Heb. 6.1-2). Something which is given that much attention in the Bible is certainly in a different class than foot washing.

2. Your idea is impractical; it would be too hard to implement.

Response: With all due respect for those who have said this, we feel it is shameful for a Christian to make such a statement. Since when were followers of Jesus Christ supposed to base their theological practices on practicality? How practical is it to "go into all the world and preach the gospel to every living creature"? How practical was it for Jesus and many of his followers to be martyred for the sake of righteousness? The relevant question for a Christian in considering a certain doctrine is not, is it practical?, but is it scriptural? If it is indeed scriptural, then the issue of practicality is totally beside the point. Our objective is to do what Jesus has commanded us in his Word to do, not to sit around and wonder whether or not it will be easy. The reader should notice that this objection does not really deal with the issue of whether or not our position is Biblical; it avoids it entirely. As a matter of fact, its silence on the matter is an implicit agreement that our theology is scriptural; otherwise, a better objection would have been raised. We are not bothered at all by the issue of whether or not baptismal conversion is practical, so long as we are convinced that it is the Biblically correct position. The minute someone shows us scriptural facts which refute our doctrine, we will change it. Until that happens, doubts about its practicality will be considered to be a dodge.

Now then, for the sake of frankness, we will admit that yes this practice may be a little hard to implement at times. However, "where there's a will there's a way," as the saying goes. Those who truly want to follow Biblical teachings will find a way to do so. For example, one thing we can do is insist that every Christian church have a baptistry or some such fixture which can be made available at a moment's notice. We can also use swimming pools, lakes, etc. One of the authors of this book was immersed in a bathtub. When saints of God fervently seek to do his will, he will provide the means.

3. It would be impossible to implement since only church leaders should perform baptisms, and they are not present at every conversion.

Response: Where does it say in the Bible that only certain types of Christians can baptize someone? We have yet to find a single verse which supports this notion. The Ethiopian eunuch was baptized by Philip, whose only designation was that he was an evangelist. The Apostle Paul was baptized by Ananias, "a certain disciple" (Acts 9.10). Even Paul himself did not personally baptize most of his converts (I Cor. 1.13-17).

On the day of Pentecost, 3000 Jews repented and were baptized (Acts 2.41). Suppose we assume for the sake of argument that only the twelve apostles were considered eligible to baptize converts. If that is true then each one would have had to baptize 250 people. That averages out to twenty-five people baptized every hour (roughly one every two minutes) for each apostle for ten hours straight without stopping! Given these circumstances, it is only natural to assume that the apostles received the help of the other believers present with them in the upper room. This group consisted of simple, ordinary followers of Jesus Christ, including many women. If we do not

prohibit ordinary lay Christians from introducing an eternal human soul to the creator of this universe, the most awesome spiritual experience one could accomplish, why do we hesitate when it comes to letting them baptize another person?

In many Christian textbooks written about systematic theology the topic of water baptism normally falls under the section titled “ecclesiology” (the study of the function of the church). This is an unfortunate practice since it misrepresents the true domain of baptism within Christian experience. Perhaps it would be more appropriate to treat baptism under the section called “soteriology” (the study of the process of salvation) since baptism is so intimately connected with conversion.

4. It could not be implemented with children of believing age since they would not understand the significance of baptism.

Response: Children have an incredible ability to sort through complex issues and reduce them to the bare essentials they need in order to understand them. If a child of six or seven, or even less, years of age can grasp something as intellectually profound as the gospel, why do we expect any less of them when it comes to something much more tangible and concrete such as water baptism? While he was on earth, Jesus often pointed to the faith of little children as an example for adults to follow. Anyone who is old enough to trust in Jesus Christ is old enough to be baptized.

5. The reason baptism was so immediate in New Testament times is that it was part of the Jewish culture. Everyone back then understood its significance, so it could be administered right away.

Response: Baptism was indeed part of Jewish culture, but the immediacy with which it was commanded in the New Testament was not. In the Old Testament times, when a Gentile proselyte (convert) became a Jew, he underwent a ceremonial cleansing in which he immersed himself in water several times while rabbis quoted portions of the Hebrew Scriptures. However, this normally did not take place until the wounds of circumcision had healed, several days after the rite was performed. In the eyes of the Jews, he was considered to be one of them as soon as he was circumcised, even though his baptismal cleansing was an essential climax to the process.

When John the Baptist arrived on the scene, however, baptism appears to have taken on an urgency which it did not have previously among the Jews (Mark 1.4). This urgent call to be baptized was carried over into the Book of Acts after Jesus’ ascension. For example, 3000 converts were baptized on the very day of Pentecost. Peter observed that the Gentiles in Cornelius’ house had received the Holy Spirit and immediately commanded them to be baptized. Paul and Silas were instrumental in the conversion of the Philippian jailer in the middle of the night and immediately baptized him and his family. If anybody had a reason to say, “Come back next Sunday and we’ll baptize you,” it was Paul and Silas. The Ethiopian eunuch was baptized out in the middle of the desert without so much as a crowd of witnesses or a “baptismal class.” Notice when it was that the Holy Spirit considered Philip’s work to be done and zapped him away: not just after he had preached the gospel but after he had baptized his convert as well.

The Jews who performed these baptisms sensed an urgency and immediacy which cannot be brushed aside as simply part of their culture. They commanded Jews as well as Gentiles to be baptized at the very moment of their conversion without any historical precedent for doing so. Where did they get this notion that baptism should be received so quickly by a new believer in

Jesus Christ? We would suggest that it was simply because God had communicated to them that such was his design for the purpose of water baptism. If that was true for them, had we not best learn a lesson and follow their example?

6. In our Western culture today, people do not understand the real significance of water baptism. Because of so many different baptismal theologies, the Biblical rite has been abused and perverted until it is no longer recognizable. If we were to baptize converts immediately, there is the danger that they would believe that baptism, rather than their faith, is what saved them.

Response: If baptism is so misunderstood in our culture, could not a large part of the reason be that those who know its true significance have remained silent for too long? What better way could there be of helping people understand a Biblical truth than to proclaim it loudly and clearly? Certainly there is the danger that people will misunderstand our position, but correct instruction both before and after baptism will help to prevent this from happening.

It is interesting to see how Western culture has deeply pervaded our approach to Christianity. In most other civilizations, there is always some type of public ceremony which establishes an individual's status within the society. Puberty rites are typically the moment at which a boy or a girl is considered to become an adult. In America today, one of our greatest social problems hinges around the concept of self-identity: Who am I and where do I fit into this culture? Distinctions between males and females are blurred by dress and behavior. What is equally as tragic is that for us there is no social sign by which we can determine when a boy becomes a man, and when a girl becomes a woman. This has influenced Westernized Christianity to the point that many people do not know when they really got saved, and hence they sometimes doubt if they even did. In the typical evangelical approach, there is no established social event which marks the beginning of a new spiritual life. This is exactly what God designed baptism for: baptism is supposed to serve as an indelible reminder to a Christian and to others that he has passed from an old life to a new one. Biblical baptism is the introductory rite into the Christian community.

This function of baptism is distorted when we delay it for the sake of giving the convert prolonged instruction and training or allowing him to experience more of the Christian life first. The sequence of events which is normally practiced today is first, convert someone, then teach him, then baptize him. The Biblical order is prescribed in the Great Commission: "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you" (Matt. 28.19-20). Jesus our Lord said to baptize them first and then teach them everything else afterwards. No one can truly be a disciple of Jesus Christ unless he or she has been baptized.

When someone goes through a "baptismal class" or some similar type of study before they are baptized, the result is that many times they are presented before the congregation as a "candidate" for baptism, as though they were being elected to some political office. What Christian on the day of Pentecost in Acts 2 would have thought of the 3000 Jewish converts as "candidates" for baptism? With that type of thinking we might as well describe a convicted sinner as a "candidate" for being a Christian. Let us not fail to preach the whole counsel of God's Word simply because some listeners may not understand it all. That should be the Holy Spirit's concern, not ours. Let us seek to practice true Biblical doctrines and we will undoubtedly receive God's blessings in our work.

7. In keeping with the practices of the post-apostolic age, it is prudent to delay baptism so that new converts can receive instruction about the Christian life. Early Christian documents attest that baptism was delayed, so why should we not continue that tradition?

Response: Early Christian documents and church traditions may be enlightening when it comes to studying Christian history, but they are not binding on us. In the first place, sources such as the Didache do mention a delay in baptism for the purpose of instruction, but they do not state how long of a delay is recommended. Was it five minutes, five days, or five months? How can such a vague writing stand up against the authoritative and explicit Word of God? And when we find early Christian writings at odds with one another, how do we know which one to follow?

Secondly, once we start allowing the writings of the Church fathers and early traditions and rituals to influence our practices today, where do we stop? Is not the Bible our all-sufficient guide and manual? If the Bible answers these questions for us, why do we need to look anywhere else? Once we admit a delay in baptism, why do we not also permit the baptism of babies? And if we are going to follow Church traditions and rituals, why do we not allow for rosaries, transubstantiation, the papacy, purgatory, etc.? Where do we draw the line?

Those who prefer to let Christian writings and traditions shape their theology are free to do so; we, on the other hand, will stick with the Bible. For us it is all-sufficient and authoritative, and that to us is the bottom line. We will leave church history for the historians and for those who wish to follow it rather than the Bible.

8. Baptismal conversion is not appropriate for the pioneer mission fields where isolated, uncivilized people have never even heard of Jesus Christ, much less water baptism.

Response: As with little children, we believe that anyone who can grasp the essential elements of the gospel enough to be saved, can also understand the significance of water baptism. Obviously it may be a little harder to explain initially to a group of people with absolutely no Christian heritage, but if we can communicate to them profound spiritual concepts such as substitutionary crucifixion and resurrection, then a physical symbol of all this should not be too difficult to describe. As a matter of fact, in most “uncivilized” cultures the existence of a concrete sign such as baptism would seem much more natural than the absence of any sign at all. Virtually all of these groups practice some type of “rite of passage” when an important social change occurs in a person’s life. In Christian conversions baptism would fulfill this function quite naturally and appropriately.

We believe that God in his infinite wisdom and foreknowledge has prepared these “uncontacted” groups for the gospel by designing into their cultures signs and symbols which foreshadow their Christian message. When the gospel actually arrives to these people, these cultural practices can serve as “redemptive analogies” by which profound spiritual truths of the Bible can be related to everyday concepts in their lives (Richardson 1974, 1981). An example of this is the symbolism of the wedding ceremony and exchange of rings in our culture. Many of the parables Jesus told also illustrate the notion of redemptive analogies. With the writer of Ecclesiastes we would say “I have seen the burden God has laid on men. He has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the hearts of men; yet they cannot fathom what God has done from beginning to end” (Eccl. 3.10-11). It would interest us to explore the different rites of passage practiced in various cultures in order to study how they might be drawn upon to explain the concept of water baptism. But that is a topic for some other work.

Conclusion

Dear reader, are *you* all wet? What is preventing *you* from being baptized? If you have not yet experienced this blessed ritual of the Christian life, why are you putting it off? You need no more instruction or training. The only prerequisite you need to fulfill is that you can say with a sincere heart "I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God." Be like the Ethiopian eunuch in his desire to live out the gospel. Climb aboard the ark with Noah and his family, and be lifted out of your world into a new life. Join the Israelites in passing untouched through the Red Sea, and leave your former masters drowned in the water. Come down off the cross and be buried in the tomb with Jesus Christ, and then experience what it is like to rise up with him. Clothe yourself with Christ so the whole world will know that you are fighting on his side. Nothing is preventing you but your own desire. Do it now! May God bless everyone who reads these words.

If you have a specific question about water baptism and would like our help, please feel free to contact us. We would also enjoy hearing from anyone who has experienced a special blessing through obeying the scriptural command to be water baptized.

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