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**A BETTER SINNER'S PRAYER**

Baptism as Calling on the Name of the Lord to Be Saved

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## INTRODUCTION

When were you saved? Usually, when this question is asked, the term “saved” means “became a Christian.” So, when did you become a Christian? Many would simply say that it was when they believed the gospel and put their faith in Jesus. Others might tell the story of how they cried out to God in desperation, asking him to forgive their sins and give them new life. Some of us cannot remember a time when we first believed, and so we try to think back to some particular moment in time when we started to take our faith seriously. The point is that most Christians would accept that there was a time when we called on the name of the Lord to be saved. We prayed the so-called “sinner’s prayer”—whether kneeling at our bedside, weeping in our car, or after raising our hand and coming down the aisle—and it is often these conversion experiences that are deemed the decisive moment of saving faith, the occasion when we were born again.

What is commendable about such answers is the recognition that the good news of Jesus does demand a response of faith. Salvation is a gift that we do not deserve and cannot earn, yet it is a gift from God we can and must receive (Eph. 2:8-9). However, there is one answer to this question that is conspicuously absent. It is a response not given in many Protestant churches today despite the fact that it is the premiere response of repentance and faith found throughout the New Testament. That missing answer is *baptism*. For a variety of reasons, baptism has been divorced from the biblical concept of conversion. In some traditions, it has become a rite that serves as a channel of God’s grace apart from saving faith; God has graciously promised to work in the waters and therefore the faith of the recipient becomes virtually irrelevant. In the majority of Protestant traditions, baptism has largely been severed from the moment of saving faith, coming either before one’s conversion (as in churches that practice the covenant baptism of infants) or after it (as in churches that practice the baptism of believers only). To state it plainly,

there are those who hold that we are either saved by baptism apart from faith, or that we are saved by faith apart from baptism. Either the grace of God or the response of the sinner is emphasized at the expense of the other. And for the majority of evangelicals, it is often the personal decision or the inward response that matters most. It is the sinner's prayer, not baptism, where "faith comes to focus . . . and God is asked to provide the benefits of salvation."<sup>1</sup>

But the witness of the New Testament is that baptism is neither a mechanical process nor a mere symbol. It is not just about what God has promised to do, nor is it solely about what we must do (or have already done). Rather, baptism is included in the complex of conversion as a vital part in the process of how someone actually becomes a Christian. Every sinner must accept the truth of the gospel, turn from sin and self to God as he has been revealed in Christ, confess Jesus as the risen Lord, and receive his grace to be saved.<sup>2</sup> We must be born again to enter the kingdom of God (John 3:3). And I would argue that this is precisely what baptism is all about. This is what God does in baptism by grace through faith. The prayer for salvation "inheres in the event of baptism."<sup>3</sup> It is a better sinner's prayer.

### Thesis

This paper will seek to demonstrate that the New Testament presents baptism as an act of faith in the promises of God whereby the penitent sinner calls upon the name of the risen Lord Jesus to be saved.<sup>4</sup> It is a dimension of the divine-human encounter of conversion that gathers up

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<sup>1</sup> Stanley K. Fowler, *More Than a Symbol: The British Baptist Recovery of Baptismal Sacramentalism*, Studies in Baptist History and Thought, Vol. 2 (Eugene, OR; Wipf and Stock, 2006), 202.

<sup>2</sup> George R. Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament* (Milton Keynes, UK: Paternoster, 1962), 268.

<sup>3</sup> Fowler, *More Than a Symbol*, 202.

<sup>4</sup> This paper essentially argues for the view of baptism presented in George R. Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament* (Milton Keynes, UK: Paternoster, 1962); Anthony R. Cross, *Recovering the Evangelical Sacrament: Baptisma Semper Reformandum* (Eugene, OR; Pickwick Publications, 2013); Everett Ferguson, *The Church of Christ: A Biblical Ecclesiology for Today* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1996), 179-203; and Stanley K. Fowler, *More Than a Symbol: The British Baptist Recovery of Baptismal Sacramentalism*, Studies in Baptist History and Thought, Vol. 2 (Eugene, OR; Wipf and Stock, 2006).

the other elements in a profound and demonstrative way. From the human perspective, it is the dramatic expression of our repentance and faith in Christ. But from the divine perspective, it is the supreme occasion of our union with Christ and welcome into his church. Better than a private prayer or a raised hand, baptism is the divinely appointed meeting place for the grace of the Savior and the faith of the sinner, where all of the blessings of salvation are found.

Many evangelicals balk at the idea of baptism functioning in this way, insisting that our justification is by faith alone. Yet we know that saving faith is inherent in the commands to repent (Acts 3:19), call on the name of the Lord (Acts 22:16), confess Christ (Rom. 10:9-10), and obey the gospel (Rom. 10:16). We have no problem telling the sinner to do these things in order to be saved. We understand that turning to God, kissing the Son (Ps. 2:12), and asking for his forgiveness are not “works of the law” that merit our justification. These responses are simply *how* one believes the promises of God and appropriates his gracious offer of salvation. The same is true of baptism. Stanley Fowler explains that “‘faith alone’ for Paul means faith as opposed to meritorious works, not faith as opposed to baptism.”<sup>5</sup> While Paul frequently draws a contrast between faith and works, he never does so with baptism, since it is “the normal, though not invariable (and certainly not absolutely necessary), vehicle by which faith in Christ comes to tangible expression and God meets the penitent sinner in grace”; it is “no more an extra ‘condition’ for salvation than is the prayer for salvation” we ask of converts.<sup>6</sup> What I am suggesting is that we should likewise have no trouble speaking of baptism like this. We should be able to insist on the ordinance in the same way that we insist on these other responses to the gospel. As an act of saving faith, the Christ-ordained means of calling on his name, it is how one comes to receive God’s gifts of grace.

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<sup>5</sup> Fowler, *More Than a Symbol*, 205.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

A study of the New Testament will reveal that all the blessings of salvation are associated with both faith and baptism.<sup>7</sup> In his comprehensive survey of Christian literature across the first five centuries, Everett Ferguson notes that the early church is “virtually unanimous in ascribing a saving significance to baptism.”<sup>8</sup> They had no problem speaking highly of baptism because they heard the New Testament authors speaking in this way. Peter Leithart asserts that “the Bible speaks of baptism as an effective rite,” noting the following:

Baptism brands us with the Triune name (Matt 28:18-20); washes sin (Acts 2:38a); confers the Spirit (Acts 2:39b); grafts us into Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection (Rom 6:1-14); justifies (Rom 6:7); sanctifies (1 Cor 6:11); joins us with the Spirit-filled body (1 Cor 12:12-13); clothes us with Christ (Gal 3:27-29); regenerates (Titus 3:5); and saves (1 Pet 3:21). By baptism, we are anointed as priests and kings and join the Pentecostal company of prophets (Acts 2:15-21, 37-42). Baptized into one name, we become members of one another (1 Cor 1:10-18; Eph 4:4-6). The Bible never portrays baptism as a picture of some more important event that happens without baptism. What baptism pictures happens—at baptism. Baptism *works*.<sup>9</sup>

The reason baptism works, I would add, is because it is a divine-human encounter, the meeting place of God’s grace and the sinner’s faith. As it will hopefully be shown, the New Testament writers “think of baptism in terms of grace and faith—always grace, always faith.”<sup>10</sup> Therefore my intention is to briefly survey texts on baptism in order to highlight the vital connection with faith and clarify my thesis that it is a calling on the name of the Lord to be saved.

## Clarifications

Some important clarifications need to be made up front. First, my purpose is quite obviously not to try and say all that can be said, or answer all that can be questioned, about

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<sup>7</sup> Cross, *Recovering the Evangelical Sacrament*, 76, Kindle edition: “God’s gift to faith and baptism is one, namely, salvation in Christ.”

<sup>8</sup> Everett Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church: History, Theology, and Liturgy in the First Five Centuries* (Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2009), 854.

<sup>9</sup> Peter J. Leithart, *Baptism: A Guide from Life to Death*, Christian Essentials (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2021), 3-4 (emphasis original).

<sup>10</sup> Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament*, 278.

baptism.<sup>11</sup> With all my emphasis on the sinner's response to the gospel, it must not be overlooked that baptism is also the church's responsibility to carry out in obedience to Christ's command. In other words, baptism is not only something we must do, but also something *done to us*—and not just by the powerful working of God but by the authorized, key-wielding citizens of the kingdom of heaven. However, the focus here will be on retrieving a more biblical understanding of baptism as the God-given means for a penitent sinner to call on the name of the Lord, be united with Christ, and welcomed into the new covenant community.

Second, my purpose is not to enter the waters of the debate between paedobaptism and credobaptism. Addressing the relationship between the old and new covenants, and crucial questions of continuity and discontinuity, is beyond the scope of this paper. That being said, the following observations are relevant to that conversation (in particular as it concerns the connection of the gift of the Holy Spirit with baptism), and how one responds to the evidence marshalled below will certainly impact one's position. But the goal of this paper is to provide a better definition of baptism, gain a more robust understanding of conversion, and recover "the baptismal imagination of earlier generations."<sup>12</sup>

Finally, my purpose is also not to address all the intricacies of the *ordo salutis* (order of salvation), and the tensions raised there between God's sovereignty and man's responsibility. While affirming the truth that God alone is ultimately responsible for the new birth, when one looks at the way baptism is described in the New Testament, the overwhelming impression is that baptism is not something done *after* someone becomes a Christian, but something done *to become* a Christian. Bobby Jamieson articulates this well:

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<sup>11</sup> For example, I do not intend to discuss whether "sacramental" language is good or helpful. Although it should be noted that just because baptism, as the physical and outward response to the gospel, is the most visible element in the complex of conversion, that does not mean that it is any less important than the other more "spiritual" elements.

<sup>12</sup> Leithart, *Baptism*, 2

As a matter of systematic-theological description, it is appropriate to identify regeneration as a discrete moment which should precede baptism. When we zoom all the way in like this, we can speak of “becoming a Christian” before being baptized. Yet for all these necessary refinements *we need to make sure we can still speak like the Bible speaks*. And the New Testament tends to keep the lens pulled back. As a result, it can look at the process of conversion as a unified whole, baptism included. . . . In order to align our vocabulary with the New Testament, we shouldn’t think of becoming a Christian as merely an invisible, private transaction that is attested after the fact by the visible act of baptism. Instead, becoming a Christian in a comprehensive, biblical sense involves the public act of baptism.<sup>13</sup>

We can indeed affirm that the Spirit’s work of regeneration and illumination occurs before baptism; we would never have come to the waters if the eyes of our heart had not been opened to see the beauty of Jesus in the first place (e.g., John 10:26). But, as we will see, the Bible also seems to describe the Spirit’s work of regenerating and baptizing a person into the body of Christ along with the act of water baptism. Summarizing the evidence, Ferguson writes: “The Spirit through the word of God leads one to conversion, works in baptism in imparting the new life, and is received as an indwelling gift.”<sup>14</sup> We must not be too preoccupied with the precise timing of the elements of conversion (see John 3:8). The ingredients for a cake may be added to the mixing bowl in a slightly different order, but they all need to go in. We must not make too much or too little of baptism; we should make as much of it as the Bible makes of it.

## BAPTISM IN THE GOSPELS

Surprisingly, all four Gospel accounts begin with the ministry of John, the son of Zechariah, before the ministry of Jesus. “The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God” (Mark 1:1) is with Yahweh’s messenger coming to prepare the way for Yahweh’s messiah. Given the words of the prophets, one might have anticipated such a forerunner proclaiming that

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<sup>13</sup> Bobby Jamieson, *Going Public: Why Baptism Is Required for Church Membership* (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2015), 40–41 (emphasis added).

<sup>14</sup> Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church*, 165.

the kingdom of heaven was at hand.<sup>15</sup> But what is unexpected is the nature of his ministry: “John appeared, baptizing in the wilderness and proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins” (Mark 1:4). Of all the ways God could have chosen for his people to repent and receive his forgiveness, he sent John to baptize with water (John 1:6, 33). The goal, of course, “was not simply to get people baptised, but to call together the repentant and restored people of God for the imminent eschatological crisis.”<sup>16</sup> The God of Israel was calling Israel to return to him, flee from the wrath to come, await his messiah, and *do so in baptism*. To reject the baptism of John was to reject the very “purpose of God” (Luke 7:30). And while John’s baptism is distinct from Christian baptism in several ways, the two are nevertheless related in that it is essentially an act of obedient faith in the promises of God in order to obtain his salvation.

### **Baptism and Repentance**

*“John appeared, baptizing in the wilderness and proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.”*

Mark 1:4; Luke 3:2-3

Like the prophets before him, who called Israel to return to the Lord, the hallmark of John’s baptism was “repentance.” This is a word that essentially means conversion, the turning away from sin to begin a new relationship with God.<sup>17</sup> In his preaching, he gave the command for his hearers to repent (Matt. 3:2), and this response was to be expressed in water baptism that they might receive the forgiveness of their sins (Mark 1:4). Yet we also read that he came

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<sup>15</sup> Peter J. Leithart, *The Priesthood of the Plebs: A Theology of Baptism* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2003), 1.

<sup>16</sup> R. T. France, *The Gospel of Mark: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Carlisle: W.B. Eerdmans; Paternoster Press, 2002), 65.

<sup>17</sup> Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament*, 34: “It is now generally agreed that *μετάνοια* and *μετανοεῖν* in the New Testament can be rightly represented only by terms that connote *turning* or *conversion*. This ‘conversion’ does not primarily refer to a moral change from evil to righteous conduct but to a change in a man’s relationship to God. The baptism to which John called the Jewish people was therefore a ‘baptism of conversion’; it marked the individual’s turning from sin to God that he might henceforth live in obedience to Him” (emphasis original).

baptizing with water “for repentance” (Matt. 3:11) that they might be converted.<sup>18</sup> What is important to notice here is the undeniable relationship between baptism, repentance/conversion, and forgiveness. John did not call for a baptism without repentance, nor a repentance without baptism. Indeed, “the act of immersion is empty and purposeless unless it is received with repentance.”<sup>19</sup> It was a baptism *of repentance* for a divine pardon. It was done “as a plea for eschatological salvation,” seeking forgiveness in order to fleeing the coming wrath associated with the coming kingdom of God (Luke 3:7-10).<sup>20</sup> In other words, to come to the Jordan river and receive this baptism was a response of faith to the word of God as delivered by his prophet.

Beasley-Murray observes that John’s command to “repent” in Matthew 3:2 clearly indicates the human aspect of conversion, the need for sinners to return to God and receive his salvation. Yet his mention of baptism “for repentance” in Matthew 3:11 seems to indicate the divine activity of conversion, the work of God in the life of the one who comes to him *for* conversion in order to be saved. He writes: “In so far as baptism *issues in* conversion it presumes the activity of God, who therein accepts the baptized man turning to Him and makes of the act the pledge of his forgiveness and seal of the baptized into the Kingdom.”<sup>21</sup> This will be a recurring theme in our survey of the various New Testament texts on baptism. It is a divine-human encounter where the grace of God meets the faith of the sinner for salvation.

### **Baptism and Jesus**

*“He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.”*

Matthew 3:11

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<sup>18</sup> In both Mark 1:4 and Matt. 3:11, the preposition εἰς is behind the English word “for.”

<sup>19</sup> A. B. Caneday, “Baptism in the Stone-Campbell Restoration Movement,” *Believer’s Baptism: Sign of the New Covenant in Christ*, NAC Studies in Bible & Theology, Thomas R. Schreiner and Shawn D. Wright, eds. (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2006), 306–307.

<sup>20</sup> Fowler, *More Than a Symbol*, 157

<sup>21</sup> Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament*, 35 (emphasis original).

Not only do all four Gospels describe John's God-given baptismal ministry, but they also include his words about the greater one coming after him who would baptize his people with the Holy Spirit (Mark 1:8, Luke 3:16; John 1:33).<sup>22</sup> This is then followed by an account of the baptism of Jesus, who came to John in the Jordan as the representative of his people, in order "that he might be revealed to Israel" (John 1:31). Thus, it was at his baptism that Jesus was revealed as Israel's messiah, God's anointed king. And as he came up out of the water, the Spirit descended and remained upon him. This is significant, not only because Jesus in that moment was revealed by the Father to be his Son and equipped by the Spirit for his ministry, but because in his baptism he became "the 'Bearer' of the Spirit, that He might baptize in Spirit and fire."<sup>23</sup>

Some have taken John's words to indicate a contrast between his baptism "with water" and the messiah's baptism "with the Holy Spirit" (Mark 1:8). The idea is that while John's baptism in water was physical and outward, Jesus's baptism of the Spirit would be spiritual and inward. It is true that John contrasts these two baptisms, but the contrast is *not* between the physical and the spiritual. The difference is that John's baptism did not come with the promise of the Holy Spirit (John 7:39). Robert Stein notes this is an instance of "step parallelism in which the second baptism is an advancement on and fulfillment of the first"; Christian baptism "is not only a baptism of repentance with water, but a baptism of repentance with water and the Holy Spirit as well."<sup>24</sup> Similarly, Fowler points out that "although Christ's baptizing in the Holy Spirit is contrasted to John's baptism, it is never contrasted to Christian baptism. In fact, both Acts 2:38 and Acts 19:1-6 seem to assume that the norm is that Christ would baptize in the Spirit in

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<sup>22</sup> Matthew and Luke both include "and fire," most likely a reference to the refining fire of the Lord described in Malachi 3:1-4. There, Yahweh's way is prepared by his messenger, and "the Lord whom you seek" comes to purify a priestly people that they may offer offerings in righteousness to Yahweh that are pleasing to him.

<sup>23</sup> Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament*, 61.

<sup>24</sup> Robert H. Stein, "Baptism in Luke-Acts," *Believer's Baptism: Sign of the New Covenant in Christ*, NAC Studies in Bible & Theology, Thomas R. Schreiner and Shawn D. Wright, eds. (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2006), 35-36.

connection with baptism in water.”<sup>25</sup> We will return to this connection between the baptism of the Spirit and Christian baptism in later sections. For now, it is sufficient to point out that while the baptism of John did not include the gift of the Spirit, it was this baptism to which Jesus himself submitted and which he would later invest with power for the sake of his kingdom.<sup>26</sup>

“...the Pharisees had heard that Jesus was making and baptizing more disciples than John (although Jesus himself did not baptize, but only his disciples).”

John 4:1-2

In John 3:22-23, we learn that Jesus, who also preached repentance just like John (Matt. 4:17; Mark 1:14), had taken up his baptismal ministry as well. Not only did Jesus receive John’s baptism alongside the people whom he had come to save, he further endorsed it by authorizing his own disciples to do the same. Thus Jesus accorded great significance to the baptism of John, affirming himself that it was only by this baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins “that one could be truly counted among the people of God.”<sup>27</sup> It should be no surprise, then, that the risen Lord Jesus will later commission his disciples to baptize disciples into his kingdom—not only as a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, but as a baptism into his own name.

It is this context, and the clear endorsement of John’s baptism by Jesus at this point in redemptive history, that perhaps provides a better way of understanding his words to Nicodemus in John 3:5 about the new birth: “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.” Most commentators rightly recognize the Old Testament background behind this mention of water and spirit, drawn from passages such as Isaiah 44:2-3 and Ezekiel 36:24-28.<sup>28</sup> It is also clear that Jesus is not directly referring to the

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<sup>25</sup> Fowler, *More Than a Symbol*, 172.

<sup>26</sup> Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament*, 44.

<sup>27</sup> France, *The Gospel of Mark*, 66.

<sup>28</sup> For example, see D. A. Carson, *The Gospel according to John*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Leicester, England; Grand Rapids, MI: Inter-Varsity Press; W.B. Eerdmans, 1991), 194–195; Colin G. Kruse, *John:*

ordinance of Christian baptism here, though it would have been quite natural for the early church to hear these words and make the connection (as they would the Lord's Supper from texts such as John 6:53-56). Ferguson observes that "John 3:5 became the most cited baptismal text in the second century and continued to be important afterward."<sup>29</sup> However, when one considers the repeated mentions of water baptism in the surrounding context (John 1:24-34, 3:22-23, 4:1-2); that Pharisees like Nicodemus certainly knew of the baptismal ministry of John, yet "rejected the purpose of God for themselves, not having been baptized by him" (Luke 7:30); and the way in which Jesus himself endorsed John's baptism at that time (see also Matt. 21:23-27; Mark 11:27–33; Luke 20:1–8); a reference to baptismal water here is very likely.<sup>30</sup> It should not be hard to imagine that Jesus would have "laid on a Pharisee the necessity of submitting to baptism in the light of the imminence of redemption and sending of the Spirit. . . . If Nicodemus would be born anew, he must be baptized on repentance and faith in the word of the Kingdom preached by its herald, John the Baptist, and its representative, the Son of Man."<sup>31</sup> This is not to say that water and the Spirit have the same function, since the emphasis in John 3:3-8 is on that which is born of the Spirit.<sup>32</sup> But it does suggest a connection between baptism and receiving Jesus (John 1:12).

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*An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 4, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 108–109. These authors take the phrase as a conceptual unity, an example of hendiadys.

<sup>29</sup> Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church*, 143.

<sup>30</sup> "The need for cleansing and expectation of the renewal of the Spirit, accordingly, was in the air in the period of Jesus and the early Church. The Evangelist's setting of the dialogue with Nicodemus alongside a second section concerned with the relation of John's baptism to that promoted by Jesus (vv 25–30) indicates how he wished the first to be understood: Pharisees like Nicodemus should not stand aloof from the call to repentance for the kingdom of God issued by John the Baptist and by Jesus, for *all* stand in need of God's forgiveness and the recreating work of the Holy Spirit, which is as imminent as the kingdom itself. In Nicodemus's situation these gifts are separated, but it is a division determined by the tension within the ministry of Jesus of the 'now and not yet,' . . . and by the fact that the sending of the Spirit awaits the 'lifting up' of the Son of Man (7:39). In the time of the Church the gifts are conjoined, since the Lord by his death and resurrection has achieved a once-for-all cleansing and sent the Spirit of the kingdom: he who is baptized in faith in the Son of Man, exalted by his cross to heaven, becomes a new creation by the Spirit, 'sees' the kingdom, and in Christ has life eternal (vv 14–15)." George R. Beasley-Murray, *John*, vol. 36, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1999), 49.

<sup>31</sup> Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament*, 229–230.

<sup>32</sup> Fowler, *More Than a Symbol*, 163.

It bears repeating that at this point in the story of Israel, Yahweh was calling his people to return to him, to flee from the wrath to come, to anticipate the arrival of his messiah, and to *do so in baptism*. Jesus himself picked up John's baptism of repentance as he announced the nearness of the kingdom. This was how God had chosen to "give knowledge of salvation to his people in the forgiveness of their sins" (Luke 1:77). This was how the true Israel of God was to be made ready for the Day of the Lord. And it was John's baptism, with its expectation of the one to come who would baptize with the Holy Spirit, that served as the antecedent to Christian baptism.

### **Baptism and the Kingdom**

*"Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit."*

Matthew 28:19

After his resurrection from the dead, Jesus commissioned his church to make disciples of all nations. This was authorization to welcome all who responded in faith to his gospel into the church, for he had given the keys of the kingdom of heaven to his disciples for this purpose (see Matt. 16:13-19; 18:15-20). The way they were to carry this out, in part, was through baptism.<sup>33</sup> As Nolland comments, "No doubt we are to understand that the confession of sins . . . and the ritual washing, *marking in a concrete manner God's reception of the act of repentance made by the penitent*, which had characterised John's baptism are also to be marks of this new Christian baptism. But Christian baptism involves more."<sup>34</sup> From now on, baptism would be in the name of

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<sup>33</sup> In Luke, Jesus tells the eleven that "repentance for [εἰς] the forgiveness of sins" must now "be proclaimed in his name to all nations" (Luke 24:47). In Matthew, the task is to baptize repentant sinners in/into "the name." In Acts, Peter proclaims the gospel of Jesus and the proper response: "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for [εἰς] the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2:38).

<sup>34</sup> John Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Carlisle: W.B. Eerdmans; Paternoster Press, 2005), 1267–1268 (emphasis added).

the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, bringing the repentant sinner into a relationship of belonging to the triune God.<sup>35</sup>

By his authority, Jesus had taken John's baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins and filled it with new and eschatological significance. Baptism would now be a participation in his death and resurrection, an entrance into his blood-bought and Spirit-filled church, and an immersion into the name of the triune God. It would serve as the effective sign of their initiation into the new covenant community, the renewed Israel reconstituted in Christ, as well as their "pledged submission to his lordship."<sup>36</sup> As we will see below, the ordinance of baptism would become the occasion for calling upon the name of the risen Lord Jesus to be saved, to receive the forgiveness of sins and the gift of the promised Holy Spirit.

## BAPTISM IN ACTS

It must be said at the outset that the situation in the book of Acts is, in one sense, very exceptional. It was the overlap of the old and new ages, the time between the birth of the church and the destruction of the temple, when the Apostles were present and the gospel was going to the nations in extraordinary ways. In another sense, though primarily descriptive rather than prescriptive, the book of Acts is instructive for the new covenant reality in which we find ourselves today. For our purposes, we will focus on the response demanded by the gospel of the risen Lord Jesus. The events in Acts make it clear that baptism was understood as an essential part of conversion.<sup>37</sup> It was both the dramatic expression of repentance and faith in the promises of God, as well as the supreme occasion of salvation and initiation into the church. In other

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<sup>35</sup> Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament*, 91.

<sup>36</sup> D. A. Carson, "Matthew," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Matthew, Mark, Luke*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelien, vol. 8 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1984), 597.

<sup>37</sup> Cross, *Recovering the Evangelical Sacrament*, 58, Kindle edition.

words, we find that baptism was considered to be the divinely appointed meeting place for the grace of the Savior and the faith of the sinner.

A brief survey of the various conversions in the book of Acts will reveal a number of differences in the pattern of events that occur. In particular, the response of baptism and the reception of the Spirit do not always take place in the same order or with the same results. This is due to the unusual situations that came about during this unique time in the history of the church, as Samaritans and other Gentiles were being added to the restored people of God in Christ. What is crucial to notice is that the elements themselves (whether mentioned directly or implied) are always the same. Repentance, faith, baptism, and the Spirit go together because, as Jamieson notes, they “are all components of the same unified conversion event.”<sup>38</sup> To understand the normative relationship between these components, we should look not so much to the diverse narrative accounts but to “statements declaring what is expected to occur,” such as Acts 2:38.<sup>39</sup>

### **Baptism and Conversion**

*“Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself.”*

Acts 2:38-39

Peter had just proclaimed to the Jews gathered in Jerusalem that God’s promised king, David’s greater Son, had been enthroned and his promised Spirit had been poured out. Those who heard this were cut to the heart and asked: “Brothers, what shall we do?” (Acts 2:37).<sup>40</sup> That

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<sup>38</sup> Jamieson, *Going Public*, 48.

<sup>39</sup> Fowler, *More Than a Symbol*, 160.

<sup>40</sup> There are a number of verbal and conceptual parallels between Luke 3 and Acts 2: both John and Peter proclaim good news (Luke 3:4-6, 18; Acts 2:14-36) and a baptism of repentance for forgiveness (Luke 3:3; Acts 2:38); their hearers ask, “What shall we do?” (Luke 3:10, 12, 14; Acts 2:37); they mention the promise of the Holy Spirit (Luke 3:16; Acts 2:38-39) and “exhort” the people with “many other” words (Luke 3:18; Acts 2:40). This suggests that just as John’s baptism was given for conversion in the purpose of God (Luke 7:30), so is Christian baptism today.

their concern was about what they must do *to be saved* is made evident by Peter's response in verse 38, which recalls what he previously said in verse 21. There, he quoted the prophet Joel: "And it shall come to pass that everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord shall be saved" (Joel 2:32). Because the day of salvation had dawned with the resurrection and exaltation of Jesus, Peter rephrases Joel's words in light of this good news. The response, "everyone who calls upon," is now clarified as everyone who *repents* and is *baptized*. The name, "of the Lord," is now understood specifically as *the name of Jesus Christ*. And the result, "shall be saved," is now explained as *the forgiveness of sins* and *receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit*.<sup>41</sup> It is in this way that Christian baptism is an act of faith in the promises of God whereby the penitent sinner calls upon the name of the risen Lord Jesus to be saved.

As in the preaching of John, repentance and baptism are joined together. Baptism is simply not baptism without repentance. It demands repentance, and this implies faith, since repentance is not just a turn from sin and self but a turn towards God and all that he is for us in Christ. Because "repentance and faith are the two sides of the same coin," baptism is thus rightly understood as an "expression of faith."<sup>42</sup> Peter then states that the purpose of responding to the gospel in such a way is the blessing of forgiveness and the Holy Spirit.<sup>43</sup> Even if one tries to maneuver around the fact that the baptism of repentance is *for* divine pardon (as John also proclaimed), the promise that follows is even more unavoidable: "... and you *will* receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2:38). These twin blessings are the result of being united with Christ both in his death and resurrection, a reality which Paul says occurs through baptism (Rom. 6:4).

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<sup>41</sup> Conrad Gempf, "Acts," in *New Bible Commentary: 21st Century Edition*, ed. D. A. Carson et al., 4th ed. (Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1994), 1072.

<sup>42</sup> I. Howard Marshall, *Acts: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 5, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1980), 86.

<sup>43</sup> Stein, "Baptism in Luke-Acts," 49, notes: "Although some have sought to interpret the expression '*for [eis] the forgiveness of your sins*' as 'in the hope of forgiveness' or 'because of your forgiveness,' it is best to interpret the expression as indicating the purpose of repentance-baptism."

But, again, when baptism is rightly understood as an act of faith, it should not be hard to accept it as the moment when the vilest offender, who truly believes, from Jesus a pardon receives. To clarify: “The power of forgiveness is not in the water or in the act. The power is in God and the blood of Christ; it is received because one calls on the name of the Lord, and it is received in baptism. The act is an appropriate expression for what God does.”<sup>44</sup> And neither should it surprise us that the gift of the Spirit is associated with baptism in the name of the risen Lord Jesus, since it was he who had received the Spirit from his Father for this very purpose: “For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself” (2:39).<sup>45</sup> Those who come to Jesus in baptism will receive the living water of his Spirit to drink (see Isa. 55:1; John 7:37-39; 1 Cor 12:13; Rev. 22:17).

None of this is to suggest that the penitent’s faith or the Spirit’s work are restricted to the moment of baptism. Saving faith is present before baptism (bringing us to the waters), in baptism (calling on the name of the Lord), and after baptism (working through love). The Spirit also works before, in, and after conversion, which is why Beasley-Murray warns: “We must beware of exaggerating distinctions in the various stages of what the New Testament writers probably saw as a unitary process.”<sup>46</sup> Caneday likewise views conversion in this way when he writes:

Against the trend of conceiving of conversion in terms of elements abstracted from one another in these post-Augustinian times, without theological embarrassment the apostles preached, as expressed in Acts 2:38, that baptism and repentance are indivisible elements of conversion to Christ. Baptism is an indispensable aspect of conversion along with at least four other elements: repentance, faith, confession, and regeneration.<sup>47</sup>

Yet while the different elements in the complex of conversion should not be isolated from each other, there is a sense in which baptism “is the gathering, visible, effective sign around which the

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<sup>44</sup> Ferguson, *The Church of Christ*, 183–184.

<sup>45</sup> Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament*, 104.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 96–97.

<sup>47</sup> Caneday, “Baptism in the Stone-Campbell Restoration Movement,” 313–314.

others can be grouped.”<sup>48</sup> This is why, in Acts 2:41, we read that “those who received his word were baptized” and added to the number of the church, when Luke could just have easily said that three thousand souls believed the gospel and were saved that day. For him, to come to the waters of baptism in repentance and faith *was* to come to Jesus to receive his salvation by grace, be welcomed into his church, and become a Christian. Michael Green says it well: “There is the human side, repentance and faith. There is the churchly side, baptism into the visible family of Christian people. And there is the divine side, forgiveness of sins and reception of the Holy Spirit. All three belong together. All three are necessary parts of Christian initiation.”<sup>49</sup>

### **Baptism and Faith**

*“And now why do you wait? Rise and be baptized and wash away your sins, calling on his name.”*

Acts 22:16

Paul’s account of his conversion before the crowd in Jerusalem further elaborates upon the words spoken to him by Ananias. In Luke’s narrative, Paul is told that Jesus had sent Ananias to lay hands on him so that he might regain his sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit (Acts 9:17). In Paul’s retelling, after he had received his sight (22:13), we learn that Ananias exhorted him to “rise and be baptized and wash away your sins, calling on his name” (22:16). The implication is that his baptism was the occasion when he was filled with the Spirit. But it is not the case that baptism would automatically convey this gift or effect the forgiveness of sins. For Paul to have his sins washed away, he would need to call upon the name of the risen Lord Jesus, the only “name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved” (4:12). He would

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<sup>48</sup> Lars Hartman in Jamieson, *Going Public*, 41.

<sup>49</sup> Michael Green, *Baptism: Its Purpose, Practice and Power* (Milton Keynes, UK: Paternoster, 1987), 8.

need to repent, humbly admit his need for cleansing, and put his confidence in God's gracious provision of forgiveness by invoking the name of Jesus.<sup>50</sup> He was to do all of this in baptism.<sup>51</sup>

In the narratives of Acts, despite the unusual circumstances of this unique time in redemptive history, baptism is consistently regarded as "the occasion and means of receiving the blessings conferred by the Lord of the Kingdom."<sup>52</sup> It is how penitent sinners, in response to the gospel, confess with their mouths that Jesus is Lord, believe in their hearts that God raised him from the dead, and are saved. For whether Jew or Gentile, "the same Lord is Lord of all, bestowing his riches on all who call on him. For 'everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved'" (Rom. 10:9-13). Baptism, as a dimension of the divine-human encounter of conversion, is where the forgiveness and the Spirit of God meet the repentance and the faith of man.<sup>53</sup> To be sure, salvation from beginning to end is entirely the gift of God (Eph. 2:8-10), and the faith that receives is incomparable to the grace that gives, but a response is still necessary.<sup>54</sup>

To insist upon another moment of salvation is to replace the ordinance of baptism with some other occasion or means of calling on the name of the Lord. If not baptism, it will be a prayer prayed, a feeling felt, or a decision for Christ made. None of this is to say that such prayers and decisions of faith are wrong or inappropriate. It is not that "God is gracious to sinners *only* in baptism, but rather that one may *expect* him to be gracious in baptism."<sup>55</sup> Baptism

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<sup>50</sup> Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Acts*, Expanded Digital Edition, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), 906.

<sup>51</sup> Martin M. Culy and Mikeal C. Parsons, *Acts: A Handbook on the Greek Text*, Baylor Handbook on the Greek New Testament (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2003), 429, note: "The whole process of baptism, washing of sins, and calling on the Lord's name is portrayed as a single complex event."<sup>51</sup>

<sup>52</sup> Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament*, 102.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 272: "From the human side baptism is a confession of that faith in Jesus as Lord, a joyful committal of self to Him unto the sharing of his death and resurrection, and an appropriation by faith of the boundless grace the Lord has brought through his redemption. In baptism the Gospel proclamation and the hearing of faith become united in one indissoluble act, at one and the same time an act of grace and faith, an act of God and man."

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 269.

<sup>55</sup> Fowler, *More Than a Symbol*, 234 (emphasis added).

is the better way God has provided for us to pray the sinner’s prayer, call upon his name, enter his kingdom, and be saved.

## BAPTISM IN THE EPISTLES

As we briefly survey the rest of the New Testament texts on baptism, it is crucial to keep in mind all that we have been observing. For example, while Paul never even mentions John the Baptizer or his ministry in any of his letters, there are remarkable similarities between their ministries.<sup>56</sup> This therefore would impact how one interprets references to baptism in Paul. If the ritual washing of baptism was proclaimed by John, endorsed and then transformed by Jesus, practiced by the Apostles, and received by the Jew-Gentile church as the “the God-ordained mode of faith’s appropriation of the gospel and of God’s appropriation of the believer,”<sup>57</sup> then it would be wrong for us to assume that Paul’s appreciation of baptism was any different.<sup>58</sup>

It must also be kept in mind that the New Testament authors do not provide an extended exposition of baptism as they do other gospel doctrines. It is never the focus of their argument for, as Castelein notes, “Scriptures do not argue for the penitent believer’s baptism but *from* such a baptism since it was taken for granted that all believers started their life in Christ in baptism.”<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> See Michaels, J. Ramsey, “Paul and John the Baptist: An Odd Couple?” *Tyndale Bulletin* 42, no. 2 (November 1, 1991), 245–60, <https://doi.org/10.53751/001c.30517> (accessed January 22, 2026). He notes the indebtedness of Paul to John evident in Acts 20:21 (“testifying both to Jews and to Greeks of repentance toward God and of faith in our Lord Jesus Christ”) and 26:20 (“that they should repent and turn to God, performing deeds in keeping with their repentance”). “The picture that emerges from these texts is of a Christian missionary who saw himself doing for Jew and Gentile alike what John the Baptist had done for the Jews: i.e., calling them to repent and believe in Jesus. . . . Faith and repentance are inseparable for Paul in the Book of Acts, and because they are, Paul sees his own ministry as a kind of extension of John’s, beyond the Judean desert to the entire Mediterranean world.” (252-53).

<sup>57</sup> Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament*, 180.

<sup>58</sup> Regarding Paul’s remark in 1 Corinthians 1:17, that Christ did not send him to baptize but to preach the gospel, his point is not the unimportance of baptism. He is emphasizing the priority of gospel proclamation in his ministry and his dismay over the Corinthian church’s partisanship. To paraphrase: “Having heard your report, I thank God I only baptized a handful of those among you, otherwise more might be tempted to say that you had been baptized into *my* name. God forbid! I was not sent to you to make you *my* disciples, but to make you disciples of Christ!”

<sup>59</sup> John D. Castelein, “Christian Churches/Churches of Christ View: Believers’ Baptism as the Biblical Occasion of Salvation,” in *Understanding Four Views on Baptism*, ed. John H. Armstrong and Paul E. Engle, Zondervan Counterpoints Collection (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2007), 134 (emphasis original).

The way the New Testament authors naturally speak of baptism in the context of faith and union with Christ suggests that the readers would have readily understood the saving significance of the ordinance. Again, our aim should be to make as much of baptism as Scripture does.

Finally, there is some dispute as to whether references to baptism in the epistles primarily refer to the visible act of immersion in water or to the invisible reality of baptism of the Spirit.<sup>60</sup> Although these baptisms may be distinguished, they should not be so easily or readily separated. In fact, as we have seen, the trajectory of the New Testament leads one to expect that the baptism of the Spirit anticipated by John is fulfilled in Christian baptism. Schreiner points out that “both Spirit baptism and water baptism were part and parcel of the complex of saving events that took place at conversion,” and that “those who see a reference only to Spirit baptism and exclude water baptism put asunder what God meant to be joined together.”<sup>61</sup> Cross likewise adds: “While there is undoubtedly a metaphorical use of baptism in the New Testament there nevertheless has to be an underlying reality which makes the metaphor appropriate. That this reality is both real and an experience, and one that is associated with baptism, is made clear by Paul.”<sup>62</sup>

### **Baptism and Union with Christ**

*“Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ*

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<sup>60</sup> Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church*, 148: “Although the verb ‘baptize’ can have a metaphorical use, the context usually gives a clear indication of this. Without such an indication, the ordinary use of the word at the time in Jewish and Christian circles for the religious immersion of a person in water should be assumed.” See also Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1996), 359; Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans*, ed. Robert W. Yarbrough and Joshua W. Jipp, Second Edition, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic: A Division of Baker Publishing Group, 2018), 309.

<sup>61</sup> Thomas R. Schreiner, “Baptism in the Epistles: An Initiation Rite for Believers,” *Believer’s Baptism: Sign of the New Covenant in Christ*, NAC Studies in Bible & Theology, Thomas R. Schreiner and Shawn D. Wright, eds. (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2006), 75.

<sup>62</sup> Cross, *Recovering the Evangelical Sacrament*, 154, Kindle edition.

*was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.”*  
Romans 6:3-4

Here Paul reminds the church that they should not “continue in sin that grace may abound” because they have “died to sin,” both its penalty and power (Rom. 6:1-2). He follows this statement with the truth that those who have died to sin are those who have died with Christ in baptism. Specifically, we were buried with Christ “by/through [διὰ] baptism” into his death to sin (6:4, 10). It would appear that for Paul, “baptism serves as the instrument by which we are united with Christ in his death, burial, and resurrection.”<sup>63</sup> It is the means or the occasion of our union with Christ and his redemptive work.<sup>64</sup> By being baptized *into Christ Jesus* (6:3), we are thus consider ourselves “dead to sin and alive to God *in Christ Jesus*” (6:11).<sup>65</sup>

Some see this as directly opposed to the doctrine of justification by faith, which Paul has just advocated in the preceding chapters. But as was noted above, baptism is never presented as a work of the law in contrast to saving faith by which we merit right standing with God. Rather, justification by faith and baptism are the inside and the outside of the same reality.<sup>66</sup> This can be seen in Romans 6 itself, where Paul continues to elaborate upon the fact of the believer’s justification by faith. He declares that “one who has died” with Christ—through union with him

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<sup>63</sup> Stephen J. Wellum, “Baptism and the Relationship Between the Covenants,” *Believer’s Baptism: Sign of the New Covenant in Christ*, NAC Studies in Bible & Theology, Thomas R. Schreiner and Shawn D. Wright, eds. (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2006), 151. So also Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 361-366.

<sup>64</sup> Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament*, 130: “[It] is not that the believer in his baptism is laid in his own grave, but that through that action he is set alongside Christ Jesus in *His*; in baptism he is reckoned as occupying that grave as he was not before, just as an effective relationship with the Lord on the cross is assumed which did not exist before. Further, the very real connection between baptism and the believer’s relationship to the redemptive acts of Christ is seen in the consistent use of the aorist tenses throughout the passage.”

<sup>65</sup> Calvin also highlights the believer’s participation in Christ’s death in baptism: “*Through* baptism Christ makes us sharers in his death, that we may be engrafted in it. And, just as the twig draws substance and nourishment from the root to which it is grafted, so *those who receive baptism with right faith* truly feel the effective working of Christ’s death in the mortification of their flesh, together with the working of his resurrection in the vivification of the Spirit.” John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, vol. 1 & 2, The Library of Christian Classics (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 1307 (emphasis added).

<sup>66</sup> Green, *Baptism*, 30.

in his death by baptism—has been “set free [justified] from sin” (6:6-7). Indeed, even the structure of Romans itself supports this understanding of baptism, as Cross observes:

This baptism is never without faith – faith confessed in baptism and baptism as a confession of faith (cf. Gal. 3.25–26; Col. 2.11–12). That this is so is confirmed by the structure of Romans, where Paul develops his doctrine of justification by faith (Rom. 1–5) before unselfconsciously addressing baptism in chapter 6. This is no change of subject. . . . A single reality is here being looked at from two different angles as is reflected in the combination of faith and confession of Christ in baptism in Romans 10.9–10.10.<sup>67</sup>

When baptism is understood as the means or occasion of calling on the name of the Lord to be saved (as in Rom. 10:13), such baptismal language poses no contradiction.

Another way to explain references to baptism like this by New Testament authors is that it is an instance of synecdoche, “a figure of speech in which a part stands for the whole or vice versa.”<sup>68</sup> The event of water baptism is often used as a synecdoche for the whole experience of conversion.<sup>69</sup> For many evangelicals, conversion usually only refers to a specific moment when a person was born again and “saved.” However, Schreiner is closer to the mark when he writes that “for Paul the events of baptism, faith, reception of the Spirit, repentance, and confession of Christ are one complex, and all occur at conversion.”<sup>70</sup> This helps to explain why one more of these components may be missing from a particular biblical text, why they may be described in a different order, or why only one may be mentioned.<sup>71</sup> Caneday concludes: “The expressions in Rom 6:3–4 invite Christians who view conversion and baptism as separate to acknowledge that Paul regarded them as inseparable though distinguishable as sign and thing signified.”<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Cross, *Recovering the Evangelical Sacrament*, 41, Kindle edition.

<sup>68</sup> Jamieson, *Going Public*, 42.

<sup>69</sup> See Cross, *Recovering the Evangelical Sacrament*, 88-99; Jamieson, *Going Public*, 41-44; Stein, “Baptism in Luke-Acts,” 51-52. While not using this specific term, Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 366, essentially describes synecdoche when he writes: “In vv. 3–4, then, we can assume that baptism stands for the whole conversion-initiation experience, presupposing faith and the gift of the Spirit.”

<sup>70</sup> Schreiner, *Romans*, 312.

<sup>71</sup> Cross, *Recovering the Evangelical Sacrament*, 96, Kindle edition.

<sup>72</sup> Caneday, “Baptism in the Stone-Campbell Restoration Movement,” 322–323.

*“For in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ.”*

Galatians 3:26-27

If the relationship between baptism and faith was implicit in Romans 6, here it is made explicit. In verse 26, whether one takes the phrase “in Christ Jesus” to refer to the concept of union with Christ (e.g., ESV, NIV) or to the object of faith (e.g., NASB, KJV), the necessity of faith is clearly being stressed. But this truth is then grounded in verse 27, where Paul stresses that it was our *baptism* into Christ where we came to “put on Christ” and be identified with him.<sup>73</sup> It is all those baptized into Christ who now belong to Christ, and those who belong to Christ are Abraham’s offspring and heirs according to promise (Gal. 3:28-29), having received “adoption as sons” (4:5) and “the promised Spirit through *faith*” (3:14; 4:6-7). Instead of separating faith and baptism, associating union with Christ with one aspect of conversion or another, we should keep them together. Ferguson explains: “Paul binds faith and baptism together as two aspects of entering into Christ. One now belongs to Christ on the basis of faith in him by being baptized into him. If a distinction is to be made between the relation of faith and baptism to the blessings described, one might say that baptism is the time at which and faith is the reason why.”<sup>74</sup>

This agrees with what we have observed so far about baptism in the Gospels and in Acts, since here in Galatians the blessings of forgiveness of sins (1:4; 3:13) and the promised Holy Spirit (3:14) are once more associated with faith *and* baptism. Similarly, Beasley-Murray stresses here that “if faith is to be taken seriously, so is baptism,” which is “the baptism of faith and grace, so that in it faith receives what grace gives. Above all grace gives Christ, for Christ is the fullness of grace; faith therefore receives Christ in baptism.”<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> As in Romans, notice how naturally Paul mentions baptism in 3:27 after his insistence on faith in 2:15-3:26.

<sup>74</sup> Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church*, 147.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 151.

*“In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead.”*

Colossians 2:11-12

As in Romans 6, Paul is once more addressing the believer’s union with Christ in his death, burial, and resurrection. Though there are several exegetical challenges in these verses, the emphasis is clearly on Christ’s redemptive acts and our participation in those acts by being “in him” (2:11). We receive the true circumcision, the spiritual circumcision of the heart, when we come to be united with Christ in his death to sin, because it was there on the cross that his body of flesh was cut away (see 1:22).<sup>76</sup> Yet this union is precisely what Christian baptism is all about. Paul explains in verse 12 that our baptism is “the means by which or at least occasion in which this powerful spiritual conjunction (‘buried with him’) takes place.”<sup>77</sup> Not only were we buried with Christ in baptism, but it is there that we were also raised with Christ through [διά] *faith* in the God who gives life to the dead. This is because baptism itself “is a confession of faith in the resurrection of Jesus by God. It is done in faith in the activity of God, who raised him from the dead.”<sup>78</sup> Paul then restates the truth of verses 11-12 in the following verses, where he proclaims to the Colossians that they have come to belong to the new covenant people of God in Christ: “And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses” (2:13).

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<sup>76</sup> “Christ’s body was stripped off in his death, He was buried, He was raised; in Him the Colossian Christians stripped off their body of flesh, were buried with Him in baptism and were raised with Him therein.” *Ibid.*, 152-153. See also James D. G. Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Carlisle: William B. Eerdmans Publishing; Paternoster Press, 1996), 153–162; David W. Pao, *Colossians and Philemon*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), 163–168.

<sup>77</sup> Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 159.

<sup>78</sup> Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church*, 160.

Much could be said about the relationship between the initiation rites of old covenant circumcision and new covenant baptism, but the vital relationship between baptism into union with Christ and faith in the God of resurrection must not be ignored.<sup>79</sup> It is remarkable that the divine actions of heart circumcision, resurrection life, and forgiveness are described as occurring in, happening through, or resulting from *baptism*. Yet this should not be surprising when one remembers that Christian baptism is always faith-baptism. As an act of saving faith, the Christ-ordained means of calling on his name, it is how one comes to receive God's saving grace.

### **Baptism and the Spirit**

*“For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit.”*

1 Corinthians 12:13

This passage has drawn considerable debate as to whether Paul's primary reference is to the event of water or Spirit baptism. However, as we have observed, such a strict dichotomy is unhelpful and quite unnecessary, especially considering the fact that there is only “one baptism” (Eph. 4:5). Anthony Cross has demonstrated that a rather convincing case can be made for taking Paul's mention of baptism in this text as referring both to water and Spirit baptism, for they are two sides of the same coin, emphasizing both the human and divine aspects of conversion.<sup>80</sup> Remember, the expectation was that Jesus would baptize with the Holy Spirit, and Peter declared that all who repent and are baptized in the name of Jesus would receive the gift of his Spirit. Schreiner seems to agree when he writes: “Baptism in water and the Spirit is the signature event for Christians, marking them out as members of the people of God.”<sup>81</sup> These two events can be

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<sup>79</sup> Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament*, 156, comments: “So important a function is ascribed to faith here, it is difficult to see how the experience described can be held to be present without the exercise of faith on the part of the baptized.”

<sup>80</sup> See Cross, *Recovering the Evangelical Sacrament*, 146-170, Kindle edition.

<sup>81</sup> Schreiner, “Baptism in the Epistles,” 72.

held together if it is kept in mind that baptism is *how* the believer comes to Jesus to receive him (John 1:12), how the thirsty receive the water of life that he freely offers (Rev. 22:17), and how we all are “made to drink of one Spirit” (1 Cor. 12:13). Baptism is “a place where God’s promise of the Spirit is fulfilled in the believer because baptism is an expression of their faith in Christ.”<sup>82</sup>

A comparison of this text with Galatians 3 is instructive. There, Paul speaks of our baptism “into Christ” as the occasion where we “put on Christ” and came to be “in Christ.” Here, Paul speaks of our baptism “in/by one Spirit” into the “one body” of Christ. Yet it is important to notice that both passages are immediately followed by a similar description of the unity of the church—as the body of Christ and the fellowship of the Spirit—where there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free. Thus, it is likely that both passages are referring to the same reality, even though 1 Corinthians 12 emphasizes the baptism of Spirit. Christian baptism is the immersion in water of a penitent sinner into union with Christ, yet such a union is not possible apart from the Holy Spirit, for “anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him” (Rom. 8:9). It is only by the Spirit that one comes to have fellowship with the Father and the Son, and so baptism into Christ is also properly described as a baptism in/by the Spirit.<sup>83</sup>

### **Baptism and Salvation**

*“Baptism, which corresponds to this, now saves you, not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ.”*

1 Peter 3:21

This is a premier example of a verse that has been used either to make too much of baptism or too little. Some Christians insist on the saving power of baptism here to the point that they seem to disregard the way Peter immediately qualifies his words. Others are embarrassed by

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<sup>82</sup> Cross, *Recovering the Evangelical Sacrament*, 159, Kindle edition.

<sup>83</sup> Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament*, 169–170.

his claim, going to great lengths to over-qualify and essentially explain away what Peter is plainly saying. In view of our study, it should be abundantly clear how the Apostle who preached a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins on Pentecost (Acts 2:38) is able to make such a profound statement. Having just described the deliverance of Noah's family through the waters of the flood, Peter explains that this event prefigured Christian baptism. Just as Noah was saved through the judgment of the flood, those baptized into union with Christ are saved through the flood of God's wrath that fell on him.<sup>84</sup> But it is neither the ritual in and of itself that saves, nor the water used in baptism that saves; "it is *baptism in the sense to be defined in the next clause that saves* and that answers to the salvation of Noah."<sup>85</sup> Specifically, "baptism is only saving if there is an appeal to God for a good conscience through the resurrection of Jesus Christ."<sup>86</sup>

There is ambiguity in the way some of these terms are translated and interpreted. The word "appeal" can also be taken to mean "pledge," and this appeal/pledge can either be *from* a good conscience or *for* a good conscience. Whatever one decides on these issues, it still does not change the fact that the basis of this appeal/pledge is the resurrection of Jesus Christ,<sup>87</sup> and that "the subjective appropriation of God's grace is in view."<sup>88</sup> Fowler likewise observes:

In any case, the attitude toward God which comes to expression in baptism is the fundamental concern and the basic instrumental cause of salvation from the human side. Nevertheless, it is assumed that this attitude comes to expression *in baptism*, and thus baptism is instrumental in the application of salvation to the individual.<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> In Mark 10:38 and Luke 12:50, Jesus speaks about his death on the cross as a baptism, because suffering and judgment are often described in Scripture as an overwhelming flood (e.g., Pss. 18:16; 42:7; 69:1–2; Isa 43:2).

<sup>85</sup> Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament*, 260 (emphasis original).

<sup>86</sup> Schreiner, "Baptism in the Epistles," 70.

<sup>87</sup> Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church*, 193, notes: "The phrase 'through the resurrection of Jesus Christ' connects the passage on baptism with a word that became important in later baptismal theology, 'to be begotten again' (ἀναγεννάω—appearing in the New Testament only in 1 Pet. 1:3 and 23). 'God ... begat us again [gave us a new birth] to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ' (1:3). Both the new begetting or new birth and the salvation in baptism are effected, according to Peter, by the resurrection of Jesus from the dead."

<sup>88</sup> Schreiner, "Baptism in the Epistles," 70.

<sup>89</sup> Fowler, *More Than a Symbol*, 164 (emphasis original).

In this way, baptism is again being presented as a dramatic expression of our faith in the risen Lord Jesus. From the human perspective, it is the means by which one responds to and receives God's gracious offer of salvation. Yet from the divine perspective, it is "the supreme occasion when God, through the Mediator Christ, deals with a man who comes to Him through Christ on the basis of his redemptive acts. It is a meeting of God and man in the Christ of the cross and resurrection."<sup>90</sup> God brought salvation through judgment by raising Jesus from the dead, and those who pass through the waters in faith are raised with him to stand on new creation ground.

### **Baptism and Washing**

*"And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God."*

1 Corinthians 6:11

In this final group of passages, the act of baptism is not explicitly mentioned but is likely implied by a reference to "washing." Attempts are often made to take such language as simply metaphorical, symbolic of the spiritual cleansing effected by the blood of Christ. This is usually an overreaction to "sacramental" interpretations that emphasize the cleansing power of the baptismal waters themselves (baptism as a mechanical process or magical ritual), or an unwillingness to associate the physical act of immersion with the spiritual reality of conversion (baptism as a mere symbol). However, as we have seen, when baptism is understood as a better sinner's prayer, these texts provide further evidence that those who are "washed" are those who are baptized in faith in order to receive the benefits of God's grace in Christ.

Just as Ananias told Paul to "be baptized and *wash away* your sins, calling on his name" (Acts 22:16), so here in 1 Corinthians 6:11 Paul reminds the church they had been *washed*. This

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<sup>90</sup> Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament*, 262.

fact alone suggests that baptismal cleansing is in view.<sup>91</sup> Their washing is then connected with sanctification and justification, and therefore entrance into the kingdom of God (6:9-10). In baptism by faith, we are calling on the Lord to be cleansed from sin, consecrated to God, and justified in Christ. In baptism, the once unrighteous are welcomed by the church into the covenant community as fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel (Eph. 3:6). This is what our God promises to do by his Spirit for all who come to him through faith in his Son. Leithart suggests that here “it seems best to understand the three verbs not as different moments in the process of salvation but as dimensions of a single event of washing in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ.”<sup>92</sup> Ferguson reaches a similar conclusion: “Unlike the later theological distinction between sanctification and justification, here being made holy and being declared just are united with the purifying water. The three verbs belong together and are not to be separated from baptism.”<sup>93</sup> This relationship between the baptismal washing (as a response to the gospel) and the consecration of the believer is also probably in view in Ephesians 5:26, where Christ gives himself up for his bride “that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word.”<sup>94</sup>

*“Let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.”*

Hebrews 10:22

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<sup>91</sup> Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament*, 163, gives four further lines of evidence in addition to this coincidence of language: (1) the aorist tense of all three verbs “points to an occasion when the washing, sanctification and justification took place”; (2) “in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ” reflects the baptismal formula; (3) the connection of washing with “the Spirit of our God” recalls the link between baptism and the Spirit observed in Acts; (4) other baptismal sayings in Paul “testify to the same momentous transition to the new existence that is expressed in different language in 1 Cor. 6:11.”

<sup>92</sup> Leithart, *The Priesthood of the Plebs*, 109.

<sup>93</sup> Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church*, 150.

<sup>94</sup> “The baptism that sanctifies and cleanses is that in which the Word is heard, confessed and submitted to by the baptized.” Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament*, 204.

Because of the self-offering of Jesus, our great high priest, who made the way for us into the presence of God by his blood and through his flesh (Heb. 10:19-21), the author of Hebrews exhorts his brothers to draw near with confidence. He employs language from Ezekiel 36 to describe the benefits of the new covenant enjoyed by those who draw near to God through Jesus: their hearts have been “sprinkled clean.” He also alludes to the priestly ordination rites and cleanliness laws of the Old Testament by adding how their bodies have been “washed with pure water.” This description of true and total cleansing, made possible by Christ, is why they are fit to enter the holy places in full assurance of faith. But the additional reference here to an outward washing seems to suggest that their baptism in water is in view. More than just a figurative washing, David Peterson argues that “the heart-body parallelism in this verse . . . represents Christian conversion/initiation in terms of its inward and outward aspects: inner spiritual renewal and outward washing with water (cf. Acts 2:38–39; 22:16).”<sup>95</sup> The idea, once more, is not that mere water effects the cleansing needed to draw near to God; rather, “the meeting place of the sanctifying power of Christ’s death and the individual is the baptism wherein the believer turns to God in faith for cleansing through Christ.”<sup>96</sup>

This passage brings another aspect of baptism into focus: it fulfills the priestly ordination rite of the old covenant.<sup>97</sup> Aaron and his sons were to be washed with water (Ex. 29:4; Lev. 8:6) and sprinkled with blood (Ex. 29:20-21; Lev. 8:30), as well as dressed for service and anointed with oil (Ex. 29:5-9; Lev. 8:7-13). The result of this ritual was ordination to the priesthood. Likewise, in baptism believers are washed with water, sprinkled with blood (Heb. 12:24),

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<sup>95</sup> David G. Peterson, *Hebrews: An Introduction and Commentary*, ed. Eckhard J. Schnabel, vol. 15, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (London; Downers Grove, IL: IVP; IVP Academic, 2020), 242.

<sup>96</sup> Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament*, 250.

<sup>97</sup> See Peter J. Leithart, *The Priesthood of the Plebs: A Theology of Baptism* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2003).

dressed for service (Gal. 3:27), and anointed by the Spirit (2 Cor. 1:21-22) so that we may now draw near to God as priests. Baptism does not merely picture this ordination; it *is* the believer's ordination service. "Since the church is the royal priesthood (1 Pet. 2:9–10; Rev. 1:6; 5:10; 20:6) and since through baptism the Spirit incorporates members into that community (1 Cor. 12:12–13), it follows that baptism inducts into Christian priesthood."<sup>98</sup> This washing, as an act of faith in the promises of God, is fitting for conveying the salvific and priestly realities of the gospel.

*"He saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior."*

Titus 3:5-6

As with the other "washing" texts, not all are persuaded that Paul's reference here is to baptism, but "again it seems most natural that believers would associate washing with their baptismal experience."<sup>99</sup> That this is the washing of baptism is reinforced by the association with God's saving action, his merciful forgiveness of sins (see Titus 3:3), the gift of the Spirit "poured out" on his church through Christ (3:6), and even justification by grace (3:7). It should also be observed that the emphasis is clearly on the work of the triune God: He saves us, he justifies us, he makes us "heirs according to the hope of eternal life" (3:7). God is always the principal actor! The washing itself is to be understood as being received *for* "the regeneration and renewal that the Spirit effects" (similar to the emphasis on the Spirit found in John 3:3-8).<sup>100</sup> This is not a work done by us in righteousness; this is how "those who have believed in God" (Titus 3:8) call upon the name of the Lord to be saved. Once again, Beasley-Murray's comments are insightful: "The total effect of vv. 5–6 is to represent baptism as the counterpart in the individual's

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<sup>98</sup> Ibid., 93.

<sup>99</sup> Schreiner, "Baptism in the Epistles," 85.

<sup>100</sup> Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament*, 278–279.

experience of the sending of the Spirit at Pentecost. Baptism is the occasion when the Spirit works creatively in the believer, as He made out of the community of the disciples the Body of Christ and will produce at the end a new creation for the everlasting Kingdom.”<sup>101</sup>

Many hesitate to associate regeneration or the new birth with baptism, insisting that regeneration must precede faith. In one sense, this is certainly correct. As was previously pointed out, when one zooms in on the complex of conversion, “it is appropriate to identify regeneration as a discrete moment which should precede baptism.”<sup>102</sup> But there is another sense in which we should not be afraid to speak as Scripture speaks. The various texts we have surveyed on baptism indicate that the New Testament authors prefer to keep the lens pulled back and thus view conversion as a unified whole, regeneration included.<sup>103</sup> In this way, all the blessings of salvation are associated with baptism by faith. We can recognize that the Spirit is at work before, in, and after conversion, while also maintaining that baptism is a dimension of the divine-human encounter of conversion that gathers up the other elements in a profound and demonstrative way.

## CONCLUSION

That baptism is a calling on the name of the Lord to be saved, “a means of prayer for acceptance with God and for full salvation from God,” is an aspect of the ordinance that has gone much overlooked since the early days of the church.<sup>104</sup> Yet this is how it is consistently portrayed across the pages of the New Testament. The rite of baptism is presented as an act of faith in the promises of God. It is the response demanded by the gospel, the place appointed for the penitent sinner to come to Christ and receive his grace. The biblical evidence suggests that “entrance into

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<sup>101</sup> Ibid., 211.

<sup>102</sup> Jamieson, *Going Public*, 40–41.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

<sup>104</sup> Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament*, 102.

the life of the kingdom of God includes repentance, faith and baptism from the human side, and forgiveness of sins and the gift of the Spirit from the divine side, and that baptism is the normal point at which the action of each side is focused.”<sup>105</sup> In other words, it is a better sinner’s prayer.

It is astonishing to consider that Scripture associates precisely the same gifts of grace with both faith and baptism.<sup>106</sup> As it has been shown, this includes not only forgiveness (Acts 10:43; 22:16) and the Holy Spirit (Gal. 3:2; 1 Cor. 12:13) but also justification (Rom. 3:28; 1 Cor. 6:11), union with Christ (Eph. 3:17; Rom. 6:3-4), sonship (John 1:12; Gal. 3:26-27), church membership (Acts 5:14; 2:41), the life of the age to come (John 3:16; Titus 3:5), and even salvation itself (Eph. 2:8; 1 Pet. 3:21). All of these gifts “are ours in and through baptism, precisely because *it is* faith-baptism, but *only* when it is faith-baptism.”<sup>107</sup> However, as Beasley-Murray rightly reminds us: “Faith has no merit to claim such gifts and baptism has no power to produce them; all is of God, who brings man to faith and to baptism, and in his sovereignty has been pleased so to order his giving. . . . Our duty is to make sure that we neither deny the reality of man’s part in faith and baptism nor underestimate the wonder of grace in both.”<sup>108</sup>

Returning to our original question, I would suggest that baptism is an appropriate answer to give for the moment when a person was saved. “Believers can and should point to their baptism as the moment in which the Spirit claimed them in full and in which they claimed Christ in full.”<sup>109</sup> Although perhaps the question itself is a bit misleading, since becoming a Christian is something of a process, involving “a number of components that are intimately interrelated and

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<sup>105</sup> Fowler, *More Than a Symbol*, 221. “This concept of faith, baptism and grace implies that baptism is the normal venue for the introduction of the individual into the sphere of redemption, although this is neither invariably nor automatically true” (210).

<sup>106</sup> Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament*, 272–273.

<sup>107</sup> Cross, *Recovering the Evangelical Sacrament*, 80, Kindle edition (emphasis added).

<sup>108</sup> Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament*, 273–274.

<sup>109</sup> Brandon C. Jones, *Waters of Promise: Finding Meaning in Believer Baptism* (Eugene, Oregon: Pickwick Publications, 2012).

belong together.”<sup>110</sup> At the same time, we should have no problem responding with our baptism, for not only is it a vital part in the complex of conversion, it is also the most suitable element for marking the occasion of our turn to God in Christ and acceptance by him. It is dramatically memorable and publicly observable; it is a fitting representation of the whole saving event.

Marriage provides a helpful analogy. Some say that baptism is like a wedding ring, a mere symbol of the vows made before God. But baptism is more like a wedding *ceremony*. There, the couple pledges their commitment to one another before God and a congregation of witnesses. The minister officially pronounces the couple as husband and wife, who then share a kiss indicative of the consummation to follow. The marriage license is finally signed and submitted. All of these elements are involved in and constitute a marriage. Yet, in another sense, it is actually *God* who is ultimately responsible for joining the two together as one flesh (Matt. 19:6). So, to answer the question, “When were you united to your spouse?” you would rightly reply, “The day when I was married.” Likewise, to answer the question, “When were you united to Christ and his church?” you would rightly reply, “The day when I was baptized.”

### **Implications**

There are a few implications that follow from these observations. First, the inseparable relationship between faith and baptism challenges proponents of covenant theology who insist on the baptism of infants. This is not to suggest that the human response of faith is the most important or essential component of baptism, or that all of the arguments for the inclusion of believers’ children into the church at birth are unconvincing. And it must certainly be recognized

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<sup>110</sup> Robert H. Stein, “Baptism in Luke-Acts,” 57. Quoting Cross, he adds: “One does not become a Christian in Acts at the minute of faith, or the instant of repentance, or the time of confession, or the moment of baptism, or the point in time when God gave his Spirit. These were not separated in time as in the present day but occurred together, that is, on the same day, and thus ‘the need to pinpoint exactly when conversion took place and also to identify the normative sequence for the constituent elements of conversion-initiation are obviated.’”<sup>110</sup>

that baptism is not only something we do but something done to us, both by God (who raises the dead) and his church (that wields the keys). Still, the way baptism is presented across the entire New Testament reveals that faith is nevertheless essential to what baptism *is*. Emphasizing the role of God and the church in baptism should not displace the role of the baptized; the priority of grace does not diminish the necessity of faith. The covenant baptism of infants may very well be a good and necessary consequence deduced from Scripture, but baptism as an act of faith, a calling on the name of the Lord for salvation, is a truth expressly set down in Scripture.

Second, the saving significance accorded to baptism challenges those who insist that baptism is merely a sign, an act of obedience consequent to conversion.<sup>111</sup> The exegesis of baptismal texts by Baptist authors often appears to be influenced more so by an aversion to paedobaptism or baptismal regeneration than by the words of the biblical authors. They are quick to assert what baptism is *not* and all that it does *not* do, while the New Testament regularly affirms the exact opposite (e.g., 1 Pet. 3:21)! Similarly, Michael Haykin remarks that “the Baptist tradition has been focused more on the proper subjects and correct mode of baptism than its meaning.”<sup>112</sup> The result, broadly speaking, is a deficient baptismal theology. To be worthy of the name, credobaptists should strive to recover a better, fuller, and richer definition of baptism, along with a more robust understanding of conversion.<sup>113</sup> This does not mean adopting specific

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<sup>111</sup> “What is really important, we often hear in baptist churches, is what happens in the heart, in the conversion experience as it is transacted between God and the soul. Baptism is ‘just’ a symbol—like a wedding ring, nice but dispensable, a mere external ceremony. So what is usually left as the compulsion for baptism among baptists? Obedience. Why do it? Because Jesus did it and the NT commands it. So baptism, instead of being a cataclysmic gateway from death to life, becomes merely the first of many acts of discipleship. The sense of drama is gone, the sense of baptism having some real contact with salvation is gone, and baptism has been reduced to an act of sheer obedience. The real drama is elsewhere, in the private enclave of the heart.” Jonathan H. Rainbow, “‘Confessor Baptism’: The Baptismal Doctrine of the Early Anabaptists,” *Believer’s Baptism: Sign of the New Covenant in Christ*, NAC Studies in Bible & Theology, Thomas R. Schreiner and Shawn D. Wright, eds. (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2006), 205.

<sup>112</sup> Michael A. G. Haykin, *Amidst Us Our Belovèd Stands: Recovering Sacrament in the Baptist Tradition* (Bellingham, WA; Lexham Press, 2022), 13.

<sup>113</sup> “Baptism is the committing of oneself to Christ in faith. Baptism is the response of repentance. Baptism is the prayer for baptism in the Holy Spirit. I am not baptised in the hope (by others) that I might subsequently be

labels or using loaded terms such as “sacramentalism” or “baptismal regeneration;” it simply means that we should seek to make as much of baptism as the Bible makes of it.

Third, the close connection in time between a sinner’s conversion to Christ and their baptism into his body, evidenced in the immediate baptisms found in Acts, challenges both paedobaptists and credobaptists alike in our practice of church membership. It is imperative that we use the keys of the kingdom well, guarding the borders of the kingdom and doing our best to ensure that we are baptizing credible professors (Matt. 16:13-19; 18:15-20). There are good reasons for why the church came to introduce a period of instruction for new converts before their baptism and admission to the Lord’s Table. However, we must also take care that we do not lose the significance of baptism as the God-ordained response of faith to the gospel. It should not be treated as some kind of “reward” for those who have jumped through enough theological hoops, or held out as a distant privilege for those who have produced enough spiritual fruit, for baptism is *how* a penitent sinner comes to God in Christ to receive his grace, enter his kingdom, and be raised to walk in newness of life. The time between baptism and the other elements of conversion may vary, but “baptism should be regarded as the ultimate and unreserved ratification of the individual’s turning to God and of God’s gracious turning to the individual.”<sup>114</sup>

### **Applications**

To begin to address some of these issues, we would do well to follow the pattern of the New Testament and regularly include baptism in the preaching of the gospel as the right and necessary response to God’s salvation in Christ. We must not reduce the Christian faith “to mere

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converted. I am not baptised in order to demonstrate to others that I have been converted (whether in the near or distant past). I am baptised as the means of that conversion. This is the sinner’s prayer. This is the promise of the Spirit. This is the washing of new birth (Titus 3.5).” John E. Colwell in Cross, *Recovering the Evangelical Sacrament*, 13, Kindle edition.

<sup>114</sup> Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament*, 394.

believism, a form of Evangelical gnosticism in which spirit and matter are artificially separated,” where the most real and genuine response of faith occurs privately within one’s heart.<sup>115</sup> The gospel demands a response for Christ from the heart and the body (Acts 2:37-38). We should call our hearers to not only repent and believe but also to be baptized into the name of Jesus Christ, for it is in baptism that Jesus reclaims our entire life in the body for himself. Such an outward, public, and physical expression should not be treated as an optional extra. Yes, the thief on the cross entered Paradise without being baptized, for “faith and baptism do not enjoy the same logical status of necessity.”<sup>116</sup> As H. J. Wotherspoon has beautifully articulated it: “*He who has faith, but cannot obtain a sacrament, has Christ: he who has a sacrament but has not faith has nothing.*”<sup>117</sup> But that does not change the fact that the thief on the cross would have likely been among the first to get in the water if he had been able to hear Peter’s sermon on Pentecost!

We would also do well, in our teaching on baptism, to keep it tied together with both conversion and church membership. This is because baptism is “the divinely ordained normative confirming sign and seal of initiation into God’s new covenant and his covenant community, without which the normative process of Christian initiation is incomplete.”<sup>118</sup> We should speak of baptism as our transfer from the kingdom of darkness to the kingdom of the beloved Son, as our burial with Christ and resurrection by his Spirit, as our ordination into the royal priesthood. We should behold baptism as the emergence of a new creation in the midst of the old, as a proof of Christ’s continued victory over sin and death, and as a glimpse of the bodily resurrection yet to come. Baptism is the rite of initiation into the church precisely because this is what baptism is and what it does. Peterson writes: “In practice, baptism may be separated in time from the

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<sup>115</sup> Cross, *Recovering the Evangelical Sacrament*, 104-105, Kindle edition.

<sup>116</sup> Wellum, “Baptism and the Relationship Between the Covenants,” 152.

<sup>117</sup> Quoted in Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament*, 304 (emphasis original).

<sup>118</sup> Jones, *Waters of Promise*, 142.

moment of conversion, but it provides a ‘focus and occasion for the divine-human encounter,’ serving as ‘a metaphor for the divine initiative in the encounter.’”<sup>119</sup> This also means that when we experience times of suffering and trial, and our faith wavers, we can look to our baptism. We can remember the good confession we made the day when we emerged from the waters united to Christ. We can look to our baptism because it tells us who we are—better yet, *whose* we are.

Finally, let us not be guilty of despising baptism. As Naaman’s servant once remarked: “It is a great word the prophet has spoken to you; will you not do it? Has he actually said to you, ‘Wash, and be clean?’” (5:13). Since baptism is how our God intends for us to call on the name of his Son to be saved, to be cleansed of our sin and enter his kingdom like little children, then why devalue it? Since baptism is the place where God has promised to meet the sinner who has turned to him in obedient faith, the place where we can expect him to be gracious to us, then why insist on another? Why replace baptism with sinner’s prayers, raised hands, altar calls, and decision cards? Instead, we should aim to restore baptism to its rightful, biblical place as a baptism of conversion, “the act of faith of a believer as they respond to the grace of God who draws near in Christ by his Spirit.”<sup>120</sup> In the words of Beasley-Murray once more: “It behoves us accordingly to make much of baptism. It is given as the trysting place of the sinner with his Saviour; he who has met Him there will not despise it. But in the last resort it is only a *place*: the Lord Himself is its glory, as He is its grace. Let the glory then be given to whom it belongs!”<sup>121</sup>

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<sup>119</sup> David G. Peterson, *Romans*, Evangelical Biblical Theology Commentary (Bellingham, WA; Lexham Press, 2020), 263.

<sup>120</sup> Cross, *Recovering the Evangelical Sacrament*, 343, Kindle edition.

<sup>121</sup> Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament*, 305 (emphasis original).

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