

Grace and Paul's Conversion, No. 2

As our story has unfolded in the previous segment, Ananias was sent to Saul to instruct him as what he was to do. Concluding his instructions, Ananias urged him, “*And now why do you wait? Rise and be baptized and wash away your sins, calling on his name.*” His sins still had not been remitted!

Sins Washed Away

There is no indication that Saul hesitated, questioning whether sin is something that can be washed from the body in water. He was familiar with the rituals of cleansing required by the Law of Moses in which he was schooled. He could understand the washing of baptism to be a ceremony of purification and that God accepted such an approved expression of faith inasmuch as it was impossible for a person to remit his own transgressions. The trust was in the grace of God rather than an efficacious or sacramental ritual.

In later times as he told his own conversion story, Paul never explained that Ananias was too simplistic and misled in directing him to wash away his sins in baptism. Paul's epistles to the Romans and Galatians, written about twenty-five years after his conversion, in which he commented on baptism, justification by faith, confession, and calling on the name of the Lord were in complete harmony with the narrative of his conversion.

Saul's obedience was under the direct guidance and supervision of Jesus, the Holy Spirit, and a Spirit-directed disciple. It was in harmony with Jesus' own Great Commission to every creature and with what Jesus had told Nicodemus in veiled language about a birth of water and the Spirit. It was in harmony with the other narratives of conversions in *Acts*. It is questioned only by modern theologians!

Saul of Tarsus, thereafter known as Paul, the apostle, became the evangelist to the Gentiles who wrote various epistles. In looking back in later years, did Paul ever denounce the place of baptism in the receiving of the grace of God in Christ? He did not. Instead he emphasized it as the time of finalizing our relationship with Christ.

In discussing the covenant of Law and the covenant of grace through faith, he taught that they were no longer children under a custodian of Law, “*for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith.*” The next sentence explains how: “*For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ*” (Gal. 3:26f). Paul included himself as one being “*baptized into Christ*” (Rom. 6:3). That change of relationship is not accomplished through faith without baptism.

When we are baptized into Christ, we are baptized into the one body, which is the church / *ekklesia* / the saved (1 Cor. 12:13; Eph. 4:4; Col. 1:18). One cannot have fellowship with Christ, the source of all spiritual blessing (Eph. 1:3), without being in his spiritual body which is the church (universal congregation, assembly of the forgiven).

Since baptism is a ritualistic acceptance of the remission of sins provided in Christ's atonement (Acts 2:38; 22:16), we are forgiven / saved by the same process that creates our relationship in Christ in his saved group.

We were separated from God by our sins (Isa. 59:2). Paul says we are reconciled to God in our relationship in Christ (2 Cor. 5:18f). That reconciliation is in one body (Eph. 2:6) which is the church; hence, the reconciled are his church. The church does not save, but it is the saved, for the same procedure that saves us makes us his saved group. All these considerations identify baptism, not simply believing, as the point of change of relationship. Being thus reconciled to God, we are in fellowship with God and all others whom he has forgiven.

Paul further informs us that "*if any one is in Christ, he is a new creation*" (2 Cor. 5:17). This newness of life (new birth; John 3:3-5) is given when one symbolically dies with Christ, is buried with him, and is raised from the dead with him in baptism (Rom. 6:3-4). In this rebirth of water and the Spirit one becomes a child of God entering and submitting to the Kingdom of God (See Gal. 3:26f again).

These references from Paul which should be studied in context, of course, were written long after his conversion experience which he himself related in Acts 22 and 26. In them he explains some deeper meanings without altering his story. Do we have reason to change it?

By Grace Through Faith

About twenty-five years after his conversion he explained: "*For by grace you have been saved through faith; and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God – not because of works, lest any man should boast*" (Eph. 2:8f). By that statement was he saying that Ananias really *goofed* and misled him into thinking that he could gain salvation by works when he told him to be baptized to wash away his sins? Certainly not. Paul could know that he was formally accepting Christ's forgiveness which changed his relationship rather than his contributing anything to it. His obedience was no more meritorious than his faith. Neither faith nor baptism contributed anything to the atoning of sins but both are essential to the accepting of the atonement.

Justification is not delivered to us C.O.D.! We pay nothing for it, nor do we have anything of merit to offer. That does not mean, however, that we do not have to answer the postman's ring or walk to the mailbox. We must accept the gift or it is "returned to the sender." We may sign a receipt and use a pocket knife to open the gift. All these actions are necessary to receiving the benefit of the gift but offer nothing whatever toward payment for it. Paul did not class his actions of acceptance as works adding anything to the completed work of Christ.

All of Paul's explanations about salvation by faith must be interpreted in harmony with his own conversion. Paul taught salvation by faith – a system of faith – rather than by law with its system of works. When he wrote of saving faith, he was referring to faith in its full essence which includes response. "*For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is of any avail, but faith working through love*" (Gal. 5:6) is a succinct statement of that. Not through rituals of the Law (code) of Moses, but by grace through faith working through love. Love is Christ's **law**

/ principle of action. Without the essential element of action, faith is dead, hence, ineffective. The active response of faith is not a work in the sense that Paul says we could have reason to boast. []

(Cecil Hook)

OVER 20,000 FREE BOOKS have been distributed in Nigeria. They beg for more. I hope to have another printing done there early in 2007. Size of printing and dollar exchange rate cause the cost to vary but, so far, *Free In Christ* has never cost more than \$1.50 per copy. So, for only \$150.00 you may place about 100 books in the hands of eager readers. They are distributed without charge. No one except the printer makes any money off the books. You are invited to have a part in this much appreciated work.