

Grace and Paul's Conversion, No. 4

Purpose of Baptism

What we are setting forth is not *baptismal regeneration*, the receiving of life through a *sacramental* ritual whose powers cleanse the soul. Such a sacramental concept was invented to be performed upon the infant supposedly born in sin. Baptism is a responsive part of faith by which grace is accessed (Rom. 5:1f).

In baptism we symbolically die with Jesus, are buried with him in his tomb, and are raised to new life in him. Paul included his own conversion experience in expressing this: “*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, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, **we too** might walk in newness of life*” (Rom. 6:3f).

Paul again includes himself in the consideration that “...*he saved us, not because of **deeds done by us in righteousness**, but in virtue of his own mercy, by the **washing of regeneration and renewal in the Holy Spirit**, which he poured out upon us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that we might be **justified by his grace** and become heirs in hope of eternal life*” (Titus 3:5f; compare Heb. 10:22; 1 Cor. 6:11). He speaks again of symbolic cleansing by washing, “*Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might **sanctify her**, having **cleansed her by the washing of water with the word**, etc.*” (Eph. 5:25f).

Paul's statements above relate well with the words of Jesus to Nicodemus, “*Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is **born anew**, he cannot see the kingdom of God.*” “*Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is **born of water and the Spirit**, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.*” (John 3:3, 5).

From these passages we see that the **word**, **water**, and **Spirit** are involved in the **new birth**. Jesus told the disciples, “*It is the **spirit** that gives life, the flesh is of no avail; the **words** that I have spoken to you are **spirit and life***” (John 6:63). Peter adds illumination with, “*You have been **born anew**, not of perishable **seed** but of imperishable, through the living and abiding **word of God**” ... “*That **word** is the good news which was preached to you.*” (1 Peter 1:23, 25).*

Since inspired writers use natural birth as a type of the spiritual birth, let us look at the analogy. Life does not begin in the delivery room though it is ineffective without it. Our physical life comes from God through Adam and Eve and succeeding generations. Each individual new life begins with conception, an insemination (seeding). A developing period must be followed by a delivery, without which previous developments are in vain. The birth did not give the life but finalized it in a different relationship.

In similar manner the Spirit gives life through the word believed (seeding, insemination) which develops into active faith. Thus faith leads one to be baptized in finalizing the birth process. It

is then that sins are remitted and the gift of the Holy Spirit is received. A new life is recognized and a new relationship is established.

Preach Jesus' Words

It is with more dismay than joy that I compose this long essay being sent in segments. After sixty years as a teacher of the word, I almost feel apologetic for still writing on such an elementary subject as baptism. Am I just singing the "Elijah blues"? Is everyone in the platoon out of step but me? It is my deep conviction that a truly fresh restudy should be made of this vital subject free from defenses of traditional, sectarian, or popular concepts. Perhaps the greatest good the Stone-Campbell Movement contributed to the American religious scene was its reevaluation of the conversion process, yet some of its fresh concepts became distorted and sectarian within the movement.

I find it inconceivable that present-day evangelists, in advising sinners as to how to accept the pardon Jesus has to offer to every creature, actually refuse to use the words of Jesus or Peter who proclaimed, "*He who believes and is baptized will be saved,*" and "*Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of your sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.*" The fact that evangelists prefer to substitute "just believe," "accept Jesus in your heart" (whatever that means), "just pray the sinner's prayer," and other such terms for the very words of Jesus' Great Commission should be shocking to every believer.

My conscience would never allow me to give assurance to a sinner that his freedom from sin is to be enjoyed without baptism. Baptism still remains as a commanded prerequisite to the remission of sins. It was always a matter of urgency in the narratives in Acts. After the finalizing of the new relationship in Christ by baptism, Saul took food and was refreshed, the Philippian jailer and his family rejoiced, and the Ethiopian treasurer went on his way rejoicing.

Are there exceptions? Does God save any unbaptized persons today? God's prerogatives are his own. If he chooses to save a non-believer or an unbaptized person, that is his prerogative. However, I am not authorized to encourage anyone to depend upon his possible exceptions instead of his instructions. Yes, Jesus forgave the thief on the cross, but he died before Jesus commanded baptism. His case was not an exception to the terms of the Great Commission for it had not been announced.

Let me review one more time. God acted directly on Saul and spoke to him on the road to Damascus. Jesus appeared to him and conversed with him. Saul called upon Jesus inquiring what he should do. Ananias was instructed to go to him and tell him what he must do. Saul fasted and prayed for three days and nights in deep contrition. Ananias laid his hands on him giving him miraculous sight and filling him with the Holy Spirit. All of this was by divine guidance, and yet Saul's sins were not yet remitted! **By the direction of the Holy Spirit, Ananias told him to get up and be baptized to wash away his sins.** Paul confirmed these things much later in his career (Acts 22 and 26). Long after the happenings also, Paul wrote his messages that **the basis of salvation was by grace through faith rather than by our works and that we are justified by faith.** His conversion experience illustrates how he was saved by

grace through faith. How, then, could I possibly advise a sinner that baptism is not a prerequisite for the remission of sins?

Having written all the above, now let me state that I cannot bind my conscience on you but I earnestly desire to bind Scriptural teaching and precedent on you. I claim no infallibility. I am not your judge. I respect you according to the depth of your convictions. If you declare that you are a child of God, my only alternative or desire is to accept you as a brother or sister in Christ. I am saying, however, that a critical examination of our birth certificates is in order.

More to follow. []

(Cecil Hook; January 2007)