



TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Sermon Notes

Is *That* What We're Saying? Answering Some Questions About Baptism

David Anguish

Introduction

1. Jack Cottrell keeps our focus on the biggest issue in determining what the Bible teaches about baptism or any other subject:

The main problem underlying the modern confusion on baptism thus is not paucity of Biblical material, but rather an *a priori* commitment to certain theological presuppositions. . . .

With full awareness of the difficulties involved, our goal in this study is to examine the main New Testament passages on the meaning of baptism as if we were hearing or seeing them for the first time. How would the original hearers of certain key statements have understood them? . . . For one who reads the New Testament today, what is the natural, face-value meaning of the passages on baptism? How would he understand the baptismal references if he had no prior knowledge of or commitment to any particular theological viewpoint, e.g., Reformed, Catholic, Lutheran or "Campbellite"? (Jack Cottrell, *Baptism: A Biblical Study*, 7-8).

2. Realizing this ideal is a real challenge, one we must take seriously by asking what presuppositions we bring to Bible study. The importance of the subject of baptism makes the challenge more difficult.
 - a. Nearly *every* group considers baptism important, but all do not understand it the same.
 - b. Because of the importance attached to it, baptism can quickly become controversial, making it even more difficult to be clear or fairly heard.
3. Two things are incumbent upon us.
 - a. First, as Jesus and the apostles did, we must be willing to explain why we believe as we do, not just repeatedly assert our belief (Matthew 21:23-27; Acts 22:1; Philippians 1:7, 16; 1 Peter 3:15).
 - b. Second, we must seek to be clear about what we believe, a goal that includes the willingness to respond to misunderstandings that might exist about what we have taught.

Body

I. Two Common Questions.

- A. "Are you not ignoring Bible passages that teach belief is the means of salvation?"
 1. I've never heard anyone among us say this, but I understand why some have gotten this impression.

2. In response, I will stress that my interest is aligning my belief and teaching with Jesus' will which cannot be clearer: we are saved by faith (cf. Romans 1:17; 5:1; etc.).
 - a) Some confusion stems from the fact that the New Testament speaks of the connection between faith/believing and salvation in two different ways.
 - (1) The act of believing is an act of faith (cf. Acts 16:31; John 8:24; etc.).
 - (2) Faith is used in the broader sense of submitting to God's word as we accept salvation (1 John 5:1-4; 2 Corinthians 5:7; Ephesians 2:8-9; James 2:14-26).
 - b) The issue, then, is in what sense we mean, "saved by faith/belief."
3. We can explore this more by considering the gospel of John, often used as a source for replying to an emphasis on baptism as necessary for salvation.
 - a) John is emphatic that belief in Jesus is necessary for salvation (John 3:16; 8:24).
 - b) In light of his purpose statement (20:30-31) that he was trying to convince people to believe (or to reinforce their belief), we would expect more emphasis on belief.
 - c) Before using John to say "belief only," we should ask whether repentance and conversion are necessary (Acts 3:19)? John says nothing explicitly about either.
 - d) John stresses the point at issue (belief) for his purpose and is not exhaustive.
- B. "Are you not saying that baptism is the most important step for salvation?"
 1. Again, I don't know of anyone who has said this, but I see why some ask.
 2. By way of response:
 - a) We tend to stress points of dispute more than points of general agreement.
 - b) Without belief, repentance, and faithfulness, baptism just gets a person wet.
 - c) While we should not stress baptism more than God's word does, neither should we stress it less (cf. Matthew 16:19).

II. Baptism as God's Work: Responding to the "Works Salvation" Charge.

- A. The question in two forms.
 1. "You're making baptism a work. Do you not believe in grace?"
 2. "You're teaching baptismal regeneration."
- B. Baptismal regeneration defined and explained.
 1. James Orr defined "baptismal regeneration" as "the idea that baptism is the instrumental cause of regeneration, and that the grace of regeneration is effectually conveyed through the administration of that rite wherever duly performed."¹
 2. In practice, many who have leveled this charge state the point far more strongly.
 - a) A. T. Robertson, for example, called it a "perversion of the symbolism of baptism" and denied that baptism is in any sense "necessary for salvation" or "the means by which spiritual change is wrought."²
 - b) C. H. Spurgeon saw it as the view that any become "members of Christ, children of God, and inheritors of the kingdom of heaven when they were baptized."³

¹ James Orr, "Baptismal Regeneration," *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia (ISBE)* I: 397. His definition is the introductory part of a longer article in which representatives of the Anglican and Lutheran Churches explain their positions on baptism. Both are groups Orr said believe baptismal regeneration. Both believe it in part because of their convictions about the sin of infants.

² A. T. Robertson, "Baptism," *ISBE* I: 387.

³ C. H. Spurgeon, "Baptismal Regeneration," A Sermon Delivered on Sunday Morning, June 5, 1864 at the Metropolitan Tabernacle, Newington (England), www.spurgeon.org/sermons/0573, accessed 11 August 2009.

3. Examined more closely, however, the matter is more complex.
 - a) Robertson shows his concern when he writes: "If baptism is necessary to salvation or the means of regeneration, then the sick, the dying, infants, must be baptized, or at any rate something must be done for them if the real baptism (immersion) cannot be performed because of extreme illness or want of water" (*ISBE*, 387).
 - b) Spurgeon, arguing against the practice (and the Book of Common Prayer) of the Church of England, was also concerned with infant baptism, and especially with the "mechanical" idea that one's baptism as an infant made him a Christian without any regard for how he lived later in his life.
 - (1) He was especially distressed at the idea that someone who was clearly not living in harmony with God's will (morally or religiously) could be the subject of a funeral service that pronounced "'sure and certain hope of the resurrection to eternal life.'"
 - (2) He was equally distressed at the problem this created for trying to see people converted, noting the typical response of a person living in sin who would respond to pleas to repent by declaring that he was "a member of Christ, a child of God, and an inheritor of the kingdom of heaven" by virtue of his baptism as an infant.
4. Two things need to be said in response.
 - a) Spurgeon and Robertson are correct in noting the lack of biblical support for infant baptism and the idea that baptism guarantees eternal salvation apart from belief, repentance, and holy living (a sacramental view of baptism).
 - b) Given their predisposition to see baptismal regeneration in this way, we can understand how they might hear us saying that we believe in "water salvation."⁴
- C. The answer to this confusion is to be found in a correct understanding of how baptism is instrumental in the salvation process.
 1. Titus 3:4-7 shows the answer.
 - a) The subject is the work of "God our Savior" (v 4) to "save us" (v 5).
 - b) A contrast is presented between being saved by "works done by us in righteousness" (not possible) and being saved "according to his mercy" (v 5).
 - c) The text could not be more clear about what saves: verse 7 uses a participle (aorist) to declare that we are among the "having been justified ones" (literally rendered) "by that grace" (τῇ ἐκείνου χάριτι, *tēi ekeinou chariti*) (see v 6) with the result that "we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life" (v 7).
 - d) Verse 5 shows the means God used—through (διὰ, *dia*):
 - (1) "Washing of regeneration" (λουτροῦ παλιγγενεσίας, *loutrou paliggenesias*); the latter word literally means "to become or be born again."
 - (2) "Renewal of the Holy Spirit" (ἀνακαινώσεως πνεύματος ἁγίου, *anakainōseōs pneumatōs hagiou*); the word "renewal" means "to renew or make new" in the sense of being better than that which is old.
 2. Three things stand out in Titus 3.
 - a) It is clear that in no sense can we say that the power for our salvation is found in baptism or in anything other than the work of God through Jesus by means of the Holy Spirit; this is the very definition of salvation by grace.

⁴ In fairness, I acknowledge that I have heard some statements from some in our fellowship that would lend support to this impression.

- b) As we have seen in texts like Romans 6:3-4 and Galatians 3:26-27, the *timing* God has chosen for the transition from the old life to the new, from being outside of Christ to being in union with him, and from not being saved to being saved includes baptism.
- c) That means that baptism is not a human work, but God's work, the way he chose to move us (and show we are moving) from being lost to being saved.⁵

Conclusion

1. As part of his response to some in our fellowship who would relax the emphasis on baptism in search of a more inclusive fellowship, LaGard Smith observed:

When one *starts* with Scripture and *stays* with Scripture, the texts pertaining to Christian birth are clear and unequivocal: baptism is an essential prerequisite to forgiveness, salvation and kingdom fellowship. At that point Christian unity finds its natural boundary around all those who have been immersed in faith into the family of God.

By contrast, when one goes about it backwards—starting, instead, with subjective feelings about where the boundaries of Christian unity ought to be—the inevitable result is an end run around the many texts that speak so clearly about how we can come into a saved, forgiven relationship with God (F. LaGard Smith, *Who Is My Brother? Facing A Crisis of Identity and Fellowship*, 41-42).

2. Smith says essentially what Cottrell said in the quotation in our introduction: baptism is essential for having the assurance—and being able to point to the moment when we received it—that we have entered into the body of the saved.
 1. We have that assurance because God in his word says we have it.
 2. We do not have it because we have in any sense done a work of righteousness in being baptized, but because we have passively submitted to God's way for entering into his covenant community.
3. If you cannot point to that kind of biblical baptism and therefore do not have that assurance, we can help you have it today.

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www.davidanguish.com

⁵ For elaboration of this point, see Cottrell, 137-143. Especially noteworthy is this observation: "It is tragic that much of Protestantism has allowed itself to be seduced into thinking and speaking of baptism as almost solely something that man himself does. The following are typical ways of referring to baptism today, not just as descriptions but as expressing its very meaning and essence: in baptism one makes a response, makes a commitment, expresses his faith, testifies to his faith, announces his faith, confirms his salvation, demonstrates his discipleship, or pledges to live the Christian life. What do these actions have in common? For one thing, they are all *human* actions, things *we* do. More significantly, *the Bible never once speaks of baptism in such terms*. Why not? Because in the Bible baptism is thought of not as something we are doing but as something *God* is doing. It is indeed 'the working of God' (Col. 2:12)" (Cottrell, 140-141).