



What God Does through Christ at Baptism

by Dale Mannon

Growing up in a rural community, one of my fond memories from childhood is swimming and playing in the river. As a preacher's kid, it was a very natural thing to reenact with church friends the baptisms that we saw. With all the formality and dignity that we could discern (and that we as playful youths could muster) we would say all the words we heard and immerse one another just like we saw it done. But it meant nothing, because we were play-acting. We were simply going through the motions without a welcoming or an openness of heart to the Savior. It was play.

So when we talk about baptism, it is important to understand that it is not so much about what being immersed in water does, but what God does through Christ at baptism. Baptism is not simply a nice dip in the pool. It is much, much more.

The Bible presents several significant changes that God accomplishes when one surrenders himself in baptism. **First, one becomes identified with Christ.** As Paul addressed the preacher-following and subsequent disunity within the Corinthian

church (1 Corinthians 1), he reminded them that they were not baptized into the name of Peter, Paul, or Apollos, but that they were baptized into Christ (1 Corinthians 1:13).

In countering the Jewish legalism in the Galatian church, Paul wrote that through baptism they had been clothed with Christ (Galatians 3:26,27). It was no longer the filthiness of sin or even the rags of human righteousness that God would see, it was the righteousness of Christ with which the newborn Christian was clothed. God uses baptism as the distinctive point at which one goes from being without Christ to being within Him, from being an outsider to an insider.

Second, it is at baptism that God adds one to the saved, the church. In Acts 2:41,47, Luke records that the Lord added those who were being saved to those who were already saved. Further, Paul asserts that it is by the Spirit that we are baptized into the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:13). Baptism is a spiritual event where God, through His Spirit, adds one to the saved.

Third, one receives forgiveness at baptism.

When recounting his conversion experience as recorded by Luke in Acts 22, Paul refers to his conversation with Ananias (the man divinely instructed to teach Paul). Notice in verse 16 that Ananias did not tell Paul, “Arise, and be baptized because your sins are already forgiven.” He instructed Paul, “Arise, and be baptized and wash away your sins, calling on the name of the Lord.” At Pentecost (Acts 2) after 40 days of public hush and private faith building, the Holy Spirit came in power. With the Spirit-inspired ability to speak in the language of every nationality represented, the apostles communicated the saving message of Christ. Upon hearing the message, many of the people wanted to know what they needed to do in response (Acts 2:36). Did Peter say, “Repent and be baptized but your question implies faith so you are already forgiven?” No, Peter told them to “Repent and be baptized for the forgiveness of sins” (Acts 2:38).

It is the cleansing of sins that makes relationship with God possible. God will not abide sin. God even turned His back on Jesus at the cross as Christ became sin for us (2 Corinthians 5:21). With the cleansing available through Jesus’ blood, we can now approach the throne of God boldly (Hebrews 4:16). God pours that saving blood on us at baptism.

Fourth, baptism marks the change in one’s status from lost to saved, a sinner separated from God to a saint who is joined to the Father. In the giving of the Great Commission, Jesus instructed his disciples to go and teach; those who believed and were baptized would be saved. To those who did not believe, baptism would be irrelevant; it would simply be play (Mark 16:15,16). There are six times in the New Testament where salvation or its equivalent (i.e., forgiveness of sins, saved) and baptism are mentioned

together: Mark 1:4; Luke 3:3; Mark 16:16; Acts 2:38; Acts 22:16; 1 Peter 3:21. In each and every instance, salvation or cleansing occurs as one receives Christ at baptism.

Finally, baptism marks the typical point at which the Holy Spirit moves in and takes up residence in the new disciple (Acts 2:38; 1 Corinthians 6:19). The Christian has a divine presence within to guide, convict, comfort, and transform. In a very unique event, the Holy Spirit’s presence was obviously evident in the conversion of Cornelius and his household before baptism (Acts 10). Because Cornelius was a God-fearing, God-honoring man, Peter was sent to instruct Cornelius about Jesus. However, Cornelius was a Gentile. The idea of a Gentile having access to the kingdom of God was offensive to most Jews, including Peter. For this reason, God sent Peter three visions concerning “cleanness” and “uncleanness” in order for Peter to later understand God’s plan in reaching out to Gentiles. The appearance of the Holy Spirit was affirmation to Peter of Gentile acceptability. Following these extraordinary events, Peter preached to Cornelius and his household and they were baptized into Christ. This unprecedented event should not be misinterpreted to diminish the significance of baptism.

Someone might object to the importance of baptism based on the acceptance by Jesus of the thief on the cross in what would appear to be a last minute embrace of Christ (Matthew 26). This however was not the first time Jesus simply forgave sins (see Matthew 9; Luke 5,7). Jesus could do that. As God-in-the flesh, he could show mercy to whomever he willed to show mercy (Romans 9:15). Exceptions are just that, however – exceptions – and we praise God for them. We will forever celebrate the graciousness of God whenever and however it may be displayed. We are not examining what God

can do or even ultimately in His mercy will do, but what Scripture presents as the way things typically occur. In Scripture baptism is always connected with forgiveness of sins and acceptance into Christ. Through baptism, God brings one from death to life, and from condemnation to forgiveness.

For baptism to have its intended significance, some important heart work must be done. In Matthew 7:21-23, Jesus said, “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. Many will say to me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?’ Then I will tell them plainly, ‘I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!’” Salvation comes not simply by asking Christ to be Lord, but through obedience. Biblical, saving faith is trust plus obedience.

Referring again to Cornelius (Acts 10), we see a man who was good by any human standard. The problem, as developed by Paul in Romans 3, is that when we compare humans to humans, it is not too difficult to look good. You can always find someone whose life and conduct are more deplorable than your own. Our question, however, is how many people are righteous in themselves even with good deeds and a devout lifestyle? Paul’s answer? None, no not one (Romans 3:10,23). Being less wicked does not make one righteous. Being good is not good enough. We still need Christ.

Even in our best of efforts, it is not being like Christ that saves us; it is being in Christ that saves us. The treasurer from Ethiopia was a searcher who wanted to know God, but his godly fruit did not connect Him with Christ, that is why Philip was sent to teach him. So how does one get into Christ?

Jesus said that we must believe that he is who he claimed to be, the Son of God, or we will die in our sins (John 8:24). In becoming Christians we are not embracing a system of religion but the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. We must believe that He is Immanuel, “God with us” (Matthew 1).

To truly embrace Him, we must acknowledge the emptiness of our own path, and turn to follow His path for us. This is called repentance (Acts 2:38; Luke 13:3,5). It is not simply being sorry for sin, it is a change of heart and conform to the image of Jesus. Baptism doesn’t change life; repentance and work of the Holy Spirit lead to change. Baptism is the point of decision where one decides to be separate from the world (1 Peter 2:11,12). Hence, this is a decision exclusively for adult believers.

There is a great grace awaiting. There is a gift being offered that we don’t deserve, and that we can’t earn. Only God determines what is the appropriate response to grace. Do we come to God on His terms or our terms? Just as the gift comes on God’s terms, so does the acceptance of His gift. Come accept His gift by believing that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, turning your life toward the Word and will of God, and being clothed in Christ through baptism. We look forward to welcoming you!