

BIBLICAL INSIGHTS #44: A REVIEW OF AN ARTICLE ON BAPTISM

By John Temples

A while back, I was asked to comment on an article (author unknown) that was sent to one of our members. The article dealt with 1 Peter 3:21, and the author took the position that baptism is not necessary for salvation, in spite of what Peter said. Here is the full text of the article along with my comments. The article text is printed in italics, my comments in bold text.

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ARTICLE: Question: Does 1 Peter 3:21 teach that baptism is necessary for salvation? Answer: As with any single verse or passage, we discern what it teaches by first filtering it through what we know the Bible teaches on the subject at hand.

MY COMMENTS: Correct! The writer is saying that in order to correctly interpret an isolated verse or passage, we need to take into account every other passage that deals with the same subject. We heartily agree. Unfortunately, in the next two sentences the writer lets us know that in regard to this issue (baptism), he is not going to do what he just said ought to be done.

ARTICLE: In the case of baptism and salvation, the Bible is clear that salvation is by grace through faith in Jesus Christ, not by works of any kind, including baptism ([Ephesians 2:8-9](#)).

MY COMMENTS: Right off the bat, he locks in on one verse dealing with salvation and draws the conclusion that the verse contains the whole plan of salvation. Very few Bible doctrines are completely stated in one verse. Are there no other passages dealing with salvation? Of course there are, and he began by saying we ought to

consider all of them; but he's not going to. And by the way, baptism is not even mentioned in Ephesians 2:8-9.

ARTICLE: So, any interpretation which comes to the conclusion that baptism, or any other act, is necessary for salvation, is a faulty interpretation.

MY COMMENTS: Wow! Case closed! The point at issue is, does 1 Peter 3:21 teach that baptism is necessary for salvation? He says that if any passage seems to teach that, then our interpretation of that passage is faulty. He's starting from a place where his conclusion is already assumed to be true (or false, in his case). This is a logical fallacy called "begging the question" or "assuming the thing to be proved." It's exactly the same situation as a debate between a creationist and an evolutionist. The evolutionist says, "The evidence is clear that life evolved; therefore, any evidence that seems to point to a supernatural creation is faulty and I will not consider it."

ARTICLE: Those who believe that baptism is required for salvation are quick to use [1 Peter 3:21](#) as a "proof text," because it states "baptism now saves you." Was Peter really saying that the act of being baptized is what saves us?

MY COMMENTS: Sure sounds like it.

ARTICLE: If he were, he would be contradicting many other passages of Scripture that clearly show people being saved (as evidenced by their receiving the Holy Spirit) prior to being baptized or without being baptized at all.

MY COMMENTS: "Many" passages? And people being saved without being baptized at all? I would like to see that list. The Lord did pronounce some people's sins forgiven during His ministry, but I challenge anyone to show an example of a person being saved prior

to baptism, or without baptism, after Pentecost, when the gospel went into effect.

ARTICLE: good example of someone who was saved before being baptized is Cornelius and his household in [Acts 10](#). We know that they were saved before being baptized because they had received the Holy Spirit, which is the evidence of salvation ([Romans 8:9](#); [Ephesians 1:13](#); [1 John 3:24](#)). The evidence of their salvation was the reason Peter allowed them to be baptized.

MY COMMENTS: The author is confusing the miraculous coming of the Holy Spirit upon Cornelius and his household with the coming of the Holy Spirit into the life of a Christian after baptism. The Spirit's coming in Cornelius's case was not for his salvation, but rather for the purpose of authentication—proving to Peter and the Jews present that Gentiles would be accepted by God into the church. The result of the Spirit's coming upon them was that “they spoke with tongues and magnified God” (Acts 10:46). This is not the usual and customary result when a person is saved, showing that this was a unique case. In fact, Peter had to go all the way back to Pentecost to find a similar situation (Acts 11:15-17).

ARTICLE: Countless passages of Scripture clearly teach that salvation comes when one believes in the gospel, at which time he or she is sealed “in Christ with the Holy Spirit of promise” ([Ephesians 1:13](#)).

MY COMMENTS: Again, he is begging the question, assuming the point he is supposed to prove, which is “baptism is not necessary for salvation.” Yes, many passages teach the necessity of faith/belief for salvation. Other passages say repentance is also necessary (Luke 13:3). Still others say confession comes before salvation (Acts 8:36-37, Romans 10:9-10). And 1 Peter 3:21 adds baptism to the mix. You have to consider all the passages together to arrive at the whole truth on what brings salvation. It takes all: faith, repentance, confession, and yes, baptism.

ARTICLE: Thankfully, though, we don't have to guess at what Peter means in this verse because he clarifies that for us with the phrase "not the removal of dirt from the flesh, but an appeal to God for a good conscience." While Peter is connecting baptism with salvation, it is not the act of being baptized that he is referring to (not the removal of dirt from the flesh).

MY COMMENTS: Notice that the writer concedes that "Peter is connecting baptism with salvation." However, the writer has already decided that any Bible statement that "seems" to connect baptism with salvation is being incorrectly interpreted. So, Peter's apparent poor choice of words must be corrected! The writer then says "...it is not the act of being baptized that he is referring to...." Yes, it is. What else could it be? The writer then correctly states that the purpose of baptism is not a merely ritualistic cleansing of the body, but is an appeal to God for a good conscience. We agree on that.

ARTICLE: Being immersed in water does nothing but wash away dirt.

MY COMMENTS: That would have been news to Jesus—He said baptism was necessary "to fulfill all righteousness" (Matthew 3:15). Paul certainly did not feel that way either. He said in Romans 6:3-5, "Or do you not know that as many of us as were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death? Therefore we were buried with him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life. For if we have been united together in the likeness of His death, certainly we also shall be in the likeness of His resurrection." This passage shows the true significance of baptism: it is a re-enactment, a likeness, of the burial and resurrection of Christ. Having died to sin by faith and repentance, we go through a likeness of His burial (going down into the water) and a likeness of His resurrection (coming up out of the water). I think it does a little more than "wash away dirt."

ARTICLE: What Peter is referring to is what baptism represents, which is what saves us (an appeal to God for a good conscience through the resurrection of Jesus Christ). In other words, Peter is simply connecting baptism with belief. It is not the getting-wet part that saves but is the “appeal to God for a clean conscience” which is signified by baptism, that saves us.

MY COMMENTS: It is sad to read such demeaning comments as “Being immersed in water does nothing but wash away dirt” and “It is not the getting-wet part that saves” in regard to a rite that the Lord Himself submitted to and commanded. To be clear, I can agree with the writer’s last sentence: “It is not the getting-wet part that saves but is the ‘appeal to God for a clean conscience’ which is signified by baptism, that saves us.” No, “getting wet” by itself does not save; but doing what the Lord said do by being baptized sure does!

ARTICLE: The appeal to God always comes first. First belief and repentance, then we are baptized to publicly identify ourselves with Christ.

MY COMMENTS: We agree that faith and repentance must precede baptism. Funny, but I don’t find any Bible passage that says the purpose of baptism is “to publicly identify ourselves with Christ.” We more likely “identify ourselves with Christ” when we confess Him publicly before our baptism. I DO find passages that state the purposes of baptism are: “to be saved” (Mark 16:16), “to receive remission of sins” (Acts 2:38), “to wash away sins” (Acts 22:16), to “get into Christ” (Galatians 3:27), and “baptism now saves us” (1 Peter 3:21) (There’s that pesky statement of Peter again—I don’t know why he said that. I know he knew better!)

ARTICLE: An excellent explanation of this passage is given by Dr. Kenneth Wuest, author of Word Studies in the Greek New Testament. “Water baptism is clearly in the apostle’s mind, not the baptism by the Holy Spirit, for he speaks of the waters of the flood as saving the inmates of the ark,

and in this verse, of baptism saving believers. But he says that it saves them only as a counterpart. That is, water baptism is the counterpart of the reality, salvation. It can only save as a counterpart, not actually. The Old Testament sacrifices were counterparts of the reality, the Lord Jesus. They did not actually save the believer, only in type. It is not argued here that these sacrifices are analogous to Christian water baptism. The author is merely using them as an illustration of the use of the word 'counterpart.'

MY COMMENTS: I'm having a bit of trouble understanding Dr. Wuest's use of the word "counterpart." The definition of "counterpart" is "a person or thing holding a position or performing a function that corresponds to that of another person or thing in another place." ("The American ambassador had talks with his French counterpart.") Some synonyms of "counterpart" are equivalent, opposite number, peer, equal, parallel, complement, match, twin, mate, fellow, brother, sister, analog. Is Dr. Wuest saying baptism is the equal, the peer, the analog of salvation? I doubt it. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that baptism is the physical act that, following faith, repentance, and confession, procures for us the spiritual reality—salvation.

ARTICLE: So water baptism only saves the believer in type.

MY COMMENTS: Too bad Peter did not make that clear.

ARTICLE: The Old Testament Jew was saved before he brought the offering. That offering was only his outward testimony that he was placing faith in the Lamb of God of whom these sacrifices were a type....Water baptism is the outward testimony of the believer's inward faith.

MY COMMENTS: I think the writer is giving the Old Testament Jews too much credit. They knew nothing of Christ, the "Lamb of God" who was to come; they were simply doing what the Mosaic Law told them to do to avert God's wrath. And "the Old Testament Jew was saved before he brought the offering"?—Really? I guess the Hebrew writer

was mistaken when he said “...it is not possible that the blood of bulls and goats could take away sins” (Hebrews 10:4).

ARTICLE: The person is saved the moment he places his faith in the Lord Jesus. Water baptism is the visible testimony to his faith and the salvation he was given in answer to that faith.

MY COMMENTS: More blatant begging the question—assuming as truth the thing to be proved.

ARTICLE: Peter is careful to inform his readers that he is not teaching baptismal regeneration, namely, that a person who submits to baptism is thereby regenerated, for he says, “not the putting away of the filth of the flesh.”

MY COMMENTS: We can agree with the writer here. “Baptismal regeneration” is the idea that just the mere physical act of baptism saves. Baptism must be preceded by faith, repentance, and confession, and followed by a faithful life of service to Christ and the church.

ARTICLE: Baptism, Peter explains, does not wash away the filth of the flesh, either in a literal sense as a bath for the body, nor in a metaphorical sense as a cleansing for the soul.

MY COMMENTS: In regard to the latter part of this statement, then I guess Ananias misspoke, and Paul misunderstood, when Ananias told him to “arise and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on the name of the Lord” (Acts 22:16).

ARTICLE: No ceremonies really affect the conscience. But he defines what he means by salvation, in the words “the answer of a good conscience toward God,” and he explains how this is accomplished, namely, “by the resurrection of Jesus Christ,” in that the believing sinner is identified with Him in that resurrection.

MY COMMENTS: If “no ceremony really affects the conscience,” why did Peter say baptism is “the answer [appeal, inquiry for] a good conscience before God? And exactly at what point in the salvation process is the sinner identified with Christ’s resurrection? It is when he comes up out of the water of baptism. Read Romans 6:3-5 again: “Or do you not know that as many of us as were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death? Therefore we were buried with him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life. For if we have been united together in the likeness of His death, certainly we also shall be in the likeness of His resurrection.”

ARTICLE: Part of the confusion on this passage comes from the fact that in many ways the purpose of baptism as a public declaration of one’s faith in Christ and identification with Him has been replaced by “making a decision for Christ” or “praying a sinner’s prayer.” Baptism has been relegated to something that is done later. Yet to Peter or any of the first-century Christians, the idea that a person would confess Christ as his Savior and not be baptized as soon as possible would have been unheard of.

MY COMMENTS: The author is certainly correct here. But why would baptism have been so urgent to get done? Could it be because until one was baptized, his sins were still unforgiven (Acts 22:16)?

ARTICLE: Therefore, it is not surprising that Peter would see baptism as almost synonymous with salvation. Yet Peter makes it clear in this verse that it is not the ritual itself that saves, but the fact that we are united with Christ in His resurrection through faith, “the pledge of a good conscience toward God through the resurrection of Jesus Christ” ([1 Peter 3:21](#)). Therefore, the baptism that Peter says saves us is the one that is preceded by faith in the propitiatory sacrifice of Christ that justifies the unrighteous sinner ([Romans 3:25-26](#); [4:5](#)).

MY COMMENTS: Correct! The writer finally admits that there is a baptism that saves us—the one that is preceded by faith in Christ. He actually does a pretty good job here of paraphrasing Mark 16:16—“He who believes and is baptized shall be saved.”

ARTICLE: Baptism is the outward sign of what God has done “by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit” (Titus 3:5).

MY COMMENTS: Am I seeing two “washings” here? Does the writer mean that the “washing of regeneration” and baptism are two different things? I’ve been “washed” (cleansed of sin), so I must be “washed” (immersed in water) as a sign of it? The “washing of regeneration” is generally taken by Bible scholars to mean the act of baptism (the “washing” that regenerates us, makes us new creatures). Adam Clarke, a Methodist scholar, saw it that way—he said in his commentary on Titus 3:5, “By the washing of regeneration--Undoubtedly the apostle here means baptism.”

(End of article and comments)

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SOME QUESTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION:

1. Which did Jesus say: “He who believes is saved, and can then be baptized,” or “He who believes and is baptized will be saved”? (Mark 16:16) Do we wash our clothes because they are already clean, or because they are dirty?
2. We know that faith must precede baptism (Mark 16:16). We also know that repentance must precede baptism (Luke 13:3, Acts 2:38). We know that confession must precede baptism (Acts 8:36-37, Romans 10:9-10). Is there any passage that specifically states that salvation precedes baptism?

3. Why was Paul told to “be baptized and wash away his sins” (Acts 22:16) if his sins were washed away as soon as he believed in Christ (which he did three days prior)?
4. Did the Ethiopian eunuch rejoice over his salvation before or after his baptism? (Acts 8:38-39)

--John Temples