

Is Baptism a Symbol?

by Dave Miller, Ph.D.

The design of water baptism in the New Testament is unquestionably to allow for the sinner's sins to be removed by the blood of Jesus. This purpose is variously described as "to be saved" (Mark 16:16), "for the remission of sins" (Acts 2:38), to "put on Christ" (Galatians 3:27), to "enter the kingdom of God" (John 3:5), to "wash away your sins" (Acts 22:16), to place one "into one body" (1 Corinthians 12:13) and "into Christ" (Romans 6:3). These are parallel expressions that pinpoint the same design.

In an effort to avoid the clear import of such verses, some theologians have concocted the notion that water baptism is a **post**-salvation action that **follows** the forgiveness of sins. Christendom, almost in its entirety, insists that remission of sin is imparted to the sinner at the very moment the sinner "believes" (i.e., accepts Jesus as personal Savior). This reception of Christ is an internal, mostly intellectual/mental decision in which the individual makes a genuine commitment to receive Jesus as Lord.

In his book *How To Be Born Again*, Billy Graham articulated the viewpoint espoused by the bulk of Christendom: "All you have to do to be born again is to repent of your sins and believe in the Lord Jesus as your personal Lord and Savior" (1977, p. 156). He stated further: "Faith is trust, an act of commitment, in which I open the door of my heart to Him" (p. 160); "It means a single, individual relinquishment of mind and heart toward the one person, Jesus Christ" (p. 161); "Conversion occurs when we repent and place our faith in Christ" (p. 162). Near the close of his book, Graham summarized the prevailing view of when forgiveness occurs:

Make it happen **now**. ...If you are willing to repent for your sins and to receive Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior, you can do it now. At this moment you can either bow your head or get on your knees and say this little prayer which I have used with thousands of persons on every continent: O God, I acknowledge that I have sinned against You. I am sorry for my sins. I am willing to turn from my sins. I openly receive and acknowledge Jesus Christ as my Savior. I confess Him as Lord. From this moment on I want to live for Him and serve Him. In Jesus' name. Amen. ...If you are willing to make this decision and have received Jesus Christ as your own Lord and Savior, then you have become a child of God in whom Jesus Christ dwells. ...You are born again (pp. 168-169, emp. in orig.).

Mr. Graham leaves no doubt as to his view of when forgiveness of sins occurs, and that it occurs before and without water baptism.

Another popular Christian writer, Max Lucado, expressed the same viewpoint in his book, *He Did This Just for You*:

Would you let him save you? This is the most important decision you will ever make. Why don't you give your heart to him right now? **Admit** your need. **Agree** with his work. **Accept** his gift. Go to God in prayer and tell him, *I am a sinner in need of grace. I believe that Jesus died for me on the cross. I accept your offer of salvation.* It's a simple prayer with eternal results (2000, p. 50, italics and emp. in orig.).

Lucado then followed this statement with a "response page" that provided the reader with the opportunity to make the decision that he (Lucado) had just advocated. The page, titled "Your Response," includes the statement, "I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of the Living God. I want him to be the Lord of my life," and is followed by two blank lines, one for the reader to sign his or her name, and the other to record the date (p. 51).

These two widely recognized figures are sufficient to establish the point: most within Christendom believe that salvation occurs **prior** to water baptism. The Protestant world has insisted that water baptism is a secondary and subsequent action to salvation. But if this is the case, what then is the purpose of baptism? Various religionists have maintained that it serves as "an outward sign of an inward grace." That is, since a person already has received the saving grace of God by which sins have been cleansed, baptism serves the purpose of providing an **outward** demonstration or public declaration that the person has already been saved. The claim is that baptism is a **symbol**—a visible expression of the forgiveness already received at the point of faith.

Perhaps the reader would be shocked to find that the Bible nowhere articulates this unbiblical—albeit provocative—concept. It is the figment of someone's vivid imagination that has been taken up and repeated so often that it "sounds biblical," even when it is not. When Ananias prodded Paul to "arise and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on the name of the Lord" (Acts 22:16), he said nothing about an alleged **symbolic** (versus actual) cleansing or **post**-forgiveness washing. He uttered not one word that would lead the unbiased reader to even remotely conclude that Paul's sins were washed away **before** he was baptized in water.

The grammar that the Holy Spirit selected by which to express Himself is very often a key to allowing the Bible to interpret itself. In Acts 22:16, the grammar militates against the denominational interpretation that so often is placed on Paul's baptism. The Holy Spirit utilized two participles and two verbs in verse 16 that clarify His intended meaning:

anastas is an aorist **active** participle: "having arisen" or "rising"

baptisai is an aorist **middle** imperative verb: "get yourself baptized"

apolousai is also an aorist **middle** imperative verb: "get your sins washed away"

epikalesamenos is an aorist **middle** participle: "you will have been calling"

An adverbial participle is a participle that is used as an adverb to modify the verb. "Calling" is an adverbial participle of manner. It shows the **manner** in which the main verbs are accomplished. The verbs ("baptized" and "wash away sins")—joined by the coordinate conjunction "and" (*kai*)—are "causative middles" (Robertson, 1934, p. 808) in the aorist tense, and so relate to the aorist middle of the participle that follows ("calling"). Hence, a literal translation would be: "Having arisen, get yourself baptized and get your sins washed away, and you will have been calling on the name of the Lord." In other words, Ananias was telling Paul that the way to accomplish "calling on the Lord" was to be baptized and have his sins washed away.

But doesn't the Bible teach that baptism is, in fact, a **symbol**? Doesn't baptism have "symbolic" significance? Yes, the Bible assigns symbolic significance to baptism in regard to at least three distinct features.

ROMANS 6:3-18

In a context dealing with the power of the Gospel to counteract sin (5:20), Paul addressed the potential misconception that some may form in thinking that the continued indulgence in sin might be justified in order to allow grace to flourish (6:1). When the Romans became Christians, they died to sin (vs. 2). Thus, they should no more have continued a sinful lifestyle, than a physically deceased person could continue living physically. In arguing his point, Paul informed the Romans that water baptism symbolizes the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus. He used the term "likeness" (and later "form") to pinpoint this symbolism:

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, knowing this, that our old man was crucified with Him, that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves of sin. For he who has died has been freed from sin (Romans 6:3-8).

When the believing, penitent non-Christian allows him or herself to be lowered into the watery grave of baptism, a parallel to Christ's redemptive work is taking place. Baptism is into Christ's **death** because that is where He shed His blood on our behalf. The atoning activity of Christ was achieved in His death, burial, and resurrection. Consequently, the alien sinner taps into that redemptive power in the act of water immersion. The "newness of life" **follows**—not precedes—baptism (vs. 6). The "old man of sin," the "body of sin," is eliminated in the waters of baptism. Being immersed in water— "buried in baptism" (vs. 4)—is equivalent to "you obeyed from the heart that form of doctrine to which you were delivered" (vs. 17). Only **then**, i.e., in the act of emulating Jesus' atonement in the waters of baptism, is one "set free from sin" (vs. 18). To summarize, notice that seven significant achievements occur at the point of water immersion: (1) baptized into Christ; (2) baptized into Christ's death; (3) newness of life; (4) united in His death; (5) old man/body of sin crucified/done away; (6) no longer slaves of sin; and (7) freed from sin.

COLOSSIANS 2:11-13

A second depiction of baptism as a symbol is seen in Paul's identification of a link between baptism and the Old Testament practice of circumcision. God introduced the rite of circumcision into His covenant relationship with Abraham (Genesis 17:10ff.). This surgical procedure was strictly a **physical** feature of the Abrahamic covenant sustained by God with the **physical** descendants of Abraham, i.e., the Israelites. In this sense, it did not pertain ultimately to one's **spiritual** standing with God (1 Corinthians 7:19). In contrasting and comparing Christianity with various unacceptable religions and philosophies, Paul used the physical rite of Jewish circumcision as a parallel to water baptism:

In Him you were also circumcised with the circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the sins of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, buried with Him in baptism, in which you also were raised with Him through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead. And you, being dead

in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He has made alive together with Him, having forgiven you all trespasses (Colossians 2:11-14).

One must be very careful to allow the text to express itself with regard to the intended symbolism, refraining from drawing unintended points of comparison. The point that Paul was making is the idea that as skin was cut off in the act of circumcision, so sins are cut off at baptism—**skin vs. sin!**

Paul underscored this meaning by alluding to the fact that baptism in water involves a burial followed by a resurrection—being “raised” (vs. 12). Twelve verses later, he again referred to this rising from the waters of baptism: “If then you were **raised** with Christ...” (3:1, emp. added). The conclusion is unmistakable: being buried/lowered into the waters of baptism, and then being raised from those waters, is the point at which sin is removed from the sinner—in the same way that flesh was removed from the body in the act of circumcision. In fact, Paul presented precisely the same case to the Colossians that he presented to the Romans. Note carefully the points of comparison in the following chart:

Romans 6	Colossians 2&3
(6:2) “we died”	(3:3) “you died”
(6:8) “we died with Christ”	(2:20) “you died with Christ”
(6:4) “buried with Him/baptism”	(2:12) “buried with Him/baptism”
(6:4) “Christ raised from dead”	(2:12) “raised Him from dead”
(6:4) “Walk in newness of life”	(3:5) “put to death your members”
(6:2) “live any longer in it”	(3:7) “when you lived in them”
(6:4) “Walk in newness of life”	(3:1) “Seek things above”

Both passages teach that people are dead in sin and lost until they access the benefits of the death of Christ by being buried in water baptism. At that point, a person becomes dead to sin in the mind of God. Coming up out of the waters of baptism is a type of resurrection that signals a change in the way that person now lives life.

1 PETER 3:20-22

Peter added a third instance of baptism’s symbolic value.

For Christ also suffered once for sins, the just for the unjust, that He might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive by the Spirit, by whom also He went and preached to the spirits in prison, who formerly were disobedient, when once the Divine longsuffering waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was being prepared, in which a few, that is, eight souls, were saved through water. There is also an antitype which now saves us—baptism (not the removal of the filth of the flesh, but the answer of a good conscience toward God), through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, angels and authorities and powers having been made subject to Him (1 Peter 3:18-22).

Peter made a powerful point of comparison. The antediluvian people had the opportunity to hear God’s will for their lives. Noah preached to them (2 Peter 2:5), perhaps for over a century (Genesis 6:3). But the day came when God brought the Flood waters upon the Earth, drowning the entire human population with the exception of only eight individuals. Peter noted that those eight people were “saved by (i.e., *dia*—**through**) water,” i.e., through the medium of water. In other words, God used water as the dividing line between the lost and the saved. The water was the medium that separated the eight members of Noah’s family from the rest of humanity. He then compared those Flood waters with the water of baptism. The water of baptism is the dividing line that God has designated to distinguish between the lost person and the saved person.

But does that mean that H₂O is the cleansing agent? Of course not. Such a conclusion would contradict other clear biblical testimony. Salvation is dependent upon and accomplished by means of the atoning work of Jesus Christ on the cross: His death, burial, and resurrection (1 Corinthians 15:1-4). Likewise, immersion must be preceded by faith, repentance, and confession of the deity of Christ. But Peter included this very point in his discussion. When one removes the parenthetical material from the verse, the interplay between baptism and Christ’s redemptive activity is clearly seen: “There is also an antitype which now saves us—baptism—through the resurrection of Jesus Christ.” “Resurrection” is the figure of speech known as synecdoche in which the part is put in place of the whole. “Resurrection” includes the entire atoning event of Jesus—death, burial, and resurrection. Hence, Peter attributed one’s salvation to Christ’s work on the cross—but the application of this salvific achievement to the sinner occurs **at the point of baptism.**

CONCLUSION

The Bible is its own best interpreter. It teaches that baptism is, indeed, a symbol. **But what does baptism symbolize?** It symbolizes: (1) Christ’s death, burial, and resurrection; (2) the act of “cutting off” in circumcision; and (3) the waters of the Flood. How could anyone get out of this that **baptism symbolizes past forgiveness** that

was achieved **prior** to being immersed? The honest exegete is forced to conclude that the Bible nowhere expounds such a notion. The symbolism associated with water baptism further verifies the essentiality of immersion as a mandatory prerequisite to forgiveness. We dare not go beyond what is written (1 Corinthians 4:6), since it is by Jesus' words that we will be judged (John 12:48).

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