

An Historical Perspective on Baptism

Jack Cottrell's material — edited and organized by

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The citations included in this material demonstrate the fact that the universal understanding of the purpose of baptism for the first fifteen centuries of Christianity was that it is directly related to salvation — that baptism is for the forgiveness of sins. The idea that baptism is not connected to salvation is, in fact, a relatively recent teaching.

While you should not agree with all the applications of baptism espoused by these writers (e.g., infant baptism), the point still remains that until the fifteenth century, the consistent teaching among all was that baptism is, as the Bible plainly states, for the remission of sins and, therefore, essential for salvation. This is evidenced by this sampling taken from a book edited by David Fletcher entitled, Baptism and the Remission of Sins (College Press, Joplin, MO, pp. 28-34, 1990). The author of the chapter, Dr. Jack Cottrell, summarizes the material thusly:

“I have called the view described in this chapter the ‘Biblical consensus.’ It is the view that baptism is principally the time when God Himself is working to bestow upon the penitent, believing sinner the benefits of the redeeming work of Christ. This is the New Testament’s own doctrine of baptism, and it was recognized as such by fifteen centuries of Biblical scholarship. If this view sounds strange to the majority of modern Protestants, it is because the Biblical consensus has been replaced in most Protestant groups with an interpretation of baptism which originated in the sixteenth century in the mind of Huldreich Zwingli. It is known as the Reformed view of baptism, and it differs from the Biblical consensus in several crucial respects.” (p. 35)

Of significance is Zwingli’s own acknowledgement that his position that baptism and salvation are not connected is a departure from all teachers before him. “All the doctors have been in error from the time of the apostles,” he stated. It is a bold assertion that everyone else has been wrong for fifteen centuries!

We offer these quotes from the earliest followers of Jesus not to mount up numbers of adherents to a particular teaching, because truth is never determined by the number of people who believe something. For example, everyone used to believe that the Earth is flat! Our purpose, on the contrary, is to demonstrate that the teaching that baptism is connected in the closest way with salvation is neither new nor a perversion of the historical view. In fact, it is the teaching of the Bible that was recognized universally until the sixteenth century, when one man declared that everyone before him was wrong.

The Early Church

Justin Martyr (A.D. 110-165)

After fasting and prayer, new converts “are brought by us where there is water, and are regenerated. . . . For . . . they then receive the washing with water.” Citing John 3:5, he continues: “We have learned from the apostles this reason” for baptism, i.e., “in order that we . . . may obtain in the water the remission of sins.”

Tertullian (A.D. 145-220)

“Happy is our sacrament of water, in that, by washing away the sins of our early blindness, we are set free and admitted into eternal life.” He goes on to say that the baptismal waters wash away death and give life. “The act of baptism . . . is carnal, in that we are plunged in water, but the effect is spiritual, in that we are freed from sins.”

Cyril of Jerusalem (c. A.D. 315-

386)

“When going down . . . into the water, think not of the bare element, but look for salvation by the power of the Holy Ghost.” To candidates for baptism, he said, “Great is the Baptism that lies before you: a ransom to captives; a remission of offences; a death of sin; a new-birth of the soul; a garment of light; a holy indissoluble seal; a chariot to heaven; the delight of Paradise; a welcome into the kingdom; the gift of adoption! . . .”

Gregory of Nyssa (A.D. 334-394)

“Despise not . . . the Divine laver, nor think lightly of it, as a common thing, on account of the use of water. For the power that operates is mighty, and wonderful are the things that are wrought thereby.” He explains what is included in these “wonderful things” as “remission of what is to be accounted for, release from bondage, close relation to God, free boldness of speech, and in place of servile subjection equality with the angels. For these things, and all that follow from them, the grace of Baptism secures and conveys to us. . . . Baptism, then, is a purification from sins, a remission of trespasses, a cause of renovation and regeneration.”

The Catholic Church

Augustine (A.D. 354-430)

Baptism is “the sacrament of redemption.” It “brings salvation.” We are “saved by baptism”; “the salvation of man is effected in baptism.” We are “joined to Christ by baptism”; a person “is baptized for the express purpose of being with Christ.”

He attributes this great work to the power of God in baptism. As the human agent baptizes with water, Christ Himself is at the same time baptizing “by a hidden grace, by a hidden power in the Holy Spirit,” and “by the invisible

working of His majesty. For in that we say, He Himself baptizes, we do not mean, He Himself holds and dips in the water the bodies of the believers; but He Himself invisibly cleanses, and that He does to the whole Church without exception.” With reference to John 3:5, he says that the new birth is by water in its outward form, but “by the Spirit who bestows the benefit of grace in its inward power, canceling the bond of guilt, and restoring natural goodness.”

He refers to the “apostolic tradition, by which the Churches of Christ maintain it to be an inherent principle, that without baptism . . . it is impossible for any man to attain to salvation and everlasting life.”

Thomas Aquinas (c. A.D. 1225-1274)

Reputed as the foremost theologian of Catholicism, Aquinas’ *Summa Theologica* contains his unequivocal view that baptism is necessary for salvation:

“. . . Men are bound to that without which they cannot obtain salvation. Now it is manifest that no one can obtain salvation but through Christ. . . . But for this end is baptism conferred on a man, that being regenerated thereby, he may be incorporated in Christ. . . . Consequently it is manifest that all are bound to be baptized: and that without Baptism there is no salvation for men.”

“The grace of the Holy Ghost and the fullness of virtues are given in Baptism.”

“By Baptism a man is incorporated in the Passion and death of Christ. . . . Hence it is clear that the Passion of Christ is communicated to every baptized person, so that he is healed just as if he himself had suffered and died.”

“Baptism opens the gates of the heavenly kingdom to the

baptized in so far as it incorporates them in the Passion of Christ, by applying its power to man.”

Martin Luther

The view of the meaning of baptism by this champion of the teaching that we are justified by faith is consistent with that of the New Testament, the early church fathers, and the Catholic scholars before him.

Asked what gifts or benefits baptism bestows, he replied, “It effects forgiveness of sins. . . . As we have once obtained forgiveness of sins in Baptism, so forgiveness remains day by day as long as we live. . . . Through Baptism [the sinner] is bathed in the blood of Christ and is cleansed from sins.”

“Holy Baptism has been purchased for us by the same blood which Christ shed for us and with which He paid for our sin. This blood, with its merit and power, He has deposited in Baptism so that men attain it there. For the person who is receiving Baptism in faith is in effect actually being visibly washed with the blood of Christ and cleansed from sins.”

“It is one thing to forgive sins, and another thing to put them away or drive them out. . . . But both the forgiveness and the driving out of sins are the work of baptism.” The “new birth . . . is wrought in Baptism.”

“What Baptism promises and brings” is “victory over death and the devil, forgiveness of sin, God’s grace, the entire Christ, and the Holy Spirit with his gifts. In short, the blessings of Baptism are so boundless that if timid nature considers them, it may well doubt whether they could all be true.” It is a “flood of grace.”

It is not the water that produces these effects.” There is no magical power in the water nor in the act itself; the only power at work is God’s word of promise

(e.g., Mark 16:16), and even this power is dormant unless and until it is activated by faith. Thus the two elements that produce the effects of baptism are these: “The Word of God connected with the water, and our faith which relies on the Word of God connected with the water.”

Criticized for espousing salvation by works, Luther replied, “It is true that our works are of no use for salvation. Baptism, however, is not our work but God’s. . . . Although it is performed by men’s hands, it is nevertheless truly God’s own act,” as if the Lord Himself were thrusting us under the water with His own hands. “Hence we ought to receive baptism at human hands just as if Christ himself, indeed, God himself were baptizing us with his own hands. For it is not man’s baptism, but Christ’s and God’s baptism, which we receive at the hand of a man.”

“Through baptism man is saved,” Luther said. God “saves us by baptism.” “To put it most simply, the power, effect, benefit, fruit, and purpose of Baptism is to save.” Baptism is God’s work, and “God’s works . . . Are salutary and necessary for salvation.” One is baptized so that he “may receive in the water the promised salvation.

Conclusion

It is abundantly clear that the first followers of Jesus — up through fifteen centuries! — understood the teaching of the Bible to be that baptism into Christ is essential for salvation. Yet this teaching has been supplanted by a popular doctrine that denies this truth. It has become so popular, in fact, that most people think the historical and Biblical teaching is false. Let us uphold Bible teaching and adhere to it to the exclusion of human and ecclesiastical dogma.

The introductory section and conclusion were written by Gene McCoy.