

The Meaning of Baptism
Robert C. Shannon
adapted by Scott L. Saltsman

"Then Peter said unto them, 'Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost'...and with many other words did he testify and exhort saying, 'Save yourselves from this untoward generation'" (Acts 2:38,40).

Through the years a continual war has been waged over the meaning of baptism. As a result of that war scores of divergent views have been expressed, yet all those views fall roughly into three categories.

The Magical View

The first of these may properly be called the "Magical View." It is the view held by all who practice infant baptism. This is the position that in baptism God does something for the individual, even though that individual does not consciously participate at all. In infant baptism the child is not involved mentally nor volitionally of his own will. His only involvement is that he is physically present.

Is it not a strange doctrine that can divorce the spiritual from the mental and the volitional? Would anyone accept an adult for baptism who was without faith, without understanding, and who was brought against his own will? Would not everyone demand the consent of conscience of an adult who came for baptism? What virtue, what character, what worship, or what devotion is that in which the mind does not participate and which the will does not dictate? Could such honestly be called virtue, character, devotion or worship?

The term "baptismal regeneration" has sometimes been applied to all who teach baptism-for-the-remission-of-sins. The term is properly applied only to those who teach that baptism apart from faith, apart from repentance, apart from knowledge, understanding, or consent, brings remission of sins. Such a position is truly "baptismal regeneration" and deserves the designation "Magical View." Those who believe in regeneration by grace through faith, repentance and baptism, cannot properly be said to hold to the doctrine of "baptismal regeneration."

The "Magical View" of baptism is incongruous, not only from a logical point of view, but also from the point of view of scripture. Nowhere are parents commanded to baptize their infant children. Indeed, in every case of conversion recorded in the New Testament, faith came *before* baptism. This was true in the case of the audience at Pentecost, when the pricking of their hearts prompted them to cry, "Men and brethren, what shall we do?" (Acts 2:37). It was true in the case of Simon who "believed also" (Acts 8:13). It was true of the eunuch who said "I believe" (Acts 8:37,38). It was true of Saul, who cried, "Lord, what wilt thou have me to do?" (Acts 9:6). It was true of Cornelius, of Lydia, and of the jailer. Faith preceded baptism in every conversion reported in the New Testament. Why? Because the apostolic preachers were laboring under a commission in which Jesus said, "Go ye into all the world and preach the gospel to every

creature. He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved. He that believeth not shall be damned" (Mark 16:15,16). It was a commission that instructed them to make disciples of all nations by baptizing them and teaching them (Matthew. 28:19,20). They did, in fact, teach every convert prior to his baptism. Peter "preached Christ" in Samaria and on the Gaza highway (Acts 8:5, 35), and Peter "opened his mouth" in the household of Cornelius. Saul was taught both by Christ himself on the Damascus road and by Ananias. Lydia "attended unto the things which were spoken of Paul" Acts 16:14). To the jailer Paul and Silas "spake the word of the Lord" (Acts 16:32).

Not one line of Holy Scripture records the baptism of a person who was not first taught, and who did not respond to that teaching by faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Now all this vast array of Biblical documentation is sometimes brushed aside by saying, "But the church of the New Testament was a missionary church. One would expect to see baptism follow teaching and faith in a missionary situation. That does not mean that a believer's baptism should be the practice in a Christian environment where infants are born to Christian parents and reared in a Christian home."

This objection is honestly and sincerely offered, and we must deal with it. At the very outset, one could make a very good case for the proposition that the church will always be a missionary church until Satan no longer is the "prince of this world."

While the New Testament is indeed the record of only the very early life of the church, still one must remember that Christianity was at least seventy years old before the last line of the New Testament was composed. Surely during seventy years a great many Christians became parents. If these infants were to be made subjects of baptism would there not be some allusion to it in scripture? Had it been God's intent to have babies baptized would the New Testament be wholly silent on the subject? Where else shall we look for guidance to learn the will of God?

There are those who believe they have found an allusion to infant baptism in the household baptisms. There are five of these in the New Testament, yet there is no mention of the baptism of infants, In Acts 16 it is said that Lydia was baptized "and her household." As J. W. McGarvey points out, in order to find infant baptism here one must first assume that Lydia was married. The Bible says this nowhere. Her household could have been made up of servants, nieces, nephews, or cousins. Assuming, though, that Lydia was married, one must next assume that she had children. The Bible does not say that she did. One must further assume that being married and having children, they were here with her in Philippi and not back home in Thyatira (Acts 16:14). Finally one must assume that if she was married, did have children, and that were with her at Philippi, that at least one of them was too young to believe. There is little proof here for infant baptism. In the other four cases we can be certain that there were no infants in the household. In Acts 10 it is said of the centurion Cornelius that he "feared God with all his house." In the story of the jailer it is said that he rejoiced, "believing in God with all his house." In these cases it is obvious that whoever was included in Cornelius' household was old enough to fear God, and whoever may have been a part of the jailer's family was at least old enough to believe. In the first chapter of 1 Corinthians Paul says he baptized the household of Stephanas, a

man about whom we know little. While nothing more is said in that chapter, in the last chapter of the same epistle Paul mentions the family of Stephanas again and notes that they "have addicted themselves to the ministry of the saints." Thus they were old enough to perform some service that could be called a ministry. In Acts 18:8 it is said specifically that Crispus "believed on the Lord with all his house." We know little of the persons included in these households and they cannot logically be pointed out as examples of infant baptism.

If there is, then, not one sentence of command or example in all Scripture, why is the practice of infant baptism so widespread? To find the answer we must step back into the past and consider the doctrine of original sin. This doctrine held that one was born a sinner, and since baptism is clearly taught in Scripture as being "for the remission of sins," then babies were baptized. It was firmly believed that unbaptized babies were lost. This position has now been forsaken by many, and greatly watered down by churches which continue to hold to it...but the practice resulting from it lives on. So in churches all across the land infants are forced to submit to a ceremony dubbed baptism; a ceremony which is intended to perform some mysterious, miraculous, magical transformation upon the infant soul! In this respect it may be compared to the Daytona Beach buggy whip ordinance which is still on the books, although no one has seen a buggy on Daytona Beach's streets in years! In 1964, the United Kingdom set to work to revise its code of laws, which still contained ordinances relating to governing the colonies in the New World! Thus do all man-made laws, civil and religious, go out of date with passing years, but the word of the Lord abides forever!"

The Meaningless View

Many thoughtful persons were repelled by the "Magical View" of baptism. They saw that one's view of God, man and the human soul must be greatly altered in order to fit the doctrine of infant baptism. Rebelling against such notions, they took the view that baptism is meaningless. It is, they said, "only a command," and thus to many it became an empty ritual. Such phraseology as "only a command" is, on the face of it, highly questionable. Can one use "only" in connection with any Divine command? Are we not soberly charged with obedience to every command? If baptism is simply the meeting of a Divine requirement, the obeying of a Divine order, would not that alone lift baptism out of the ordinary? Christianity has no place for empty rituals. The world has seen enough of them. Christ did not walk forty miles to submit to an empty ritual. The Philippian jailer did not risk his life to observe an empty ritual. Paul did not take up precious pages in Romans, Corinthians, Galatians and Ephesians to discuss an empty ritual. Meaningless? Why, baptism is no more meaningless than a wedding ceremony is meaningless! It is, perhaps in this analogy that we can best understand the meaning of baptism. If I sit in the congregation and view a couple as they move toward the front of the auditorium, and then again as they come arm in arm back down the aisle, I can tell myself that nothing has really happened here. Physically the bride and groom are unchanged. Their appearance suggests no transformation, but something has happened here and everything is changed. Before God, before man, and before the law these two are not the same as before. Indeed, they will never be the same again. Their name is changed. The ownership of their property, and its disposition in case of death is changed. Only death or involved legal proceedings can undo what was done here, and that only partially. Should they be parted even then they will never again be "single" before the law.

What changed them so radically and irrevocably? It was a ceremony! It was not their faith in one another, though that was an important prerequisite to the ceremony. It was not their love for one another, though that was an important prerequisite to the ceremony also. While both their faith and their love changed them in many ways, it was the ceremony that made them husband and wife. Faith and love prepared them for that ceremony and altered their attitudes, but it was the ceremony that altered their status.

Now the groom may have said to his bride before that ceremony, "I feel as if I am married to you already." That does not change the fact that before the ceremony he was not married to her in the eyes of God or man. A man may say, "I felt like a Christian before I was baptized." That is well and good, and not an improper way to feel, but that does not mean that he was a Christian before he was baptized! Ceremonies are terribly important, and one should never say of marriage or baptism, "It is only a ceremony."

Those who take the "Meaningless View" of baptism must consider soberly Galatians 3:27, "For as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ." They must pause reflectively before Acts 22:16, "And now why tarriest thou, arise and be baptized and wash away thy sins, calling on the name of the Lord." They must consider earnestly Acts 2:38, "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit."

Considerable controversy has raged about this latter verse. The battle centers on the preposition "for" and its Greek counterpart "*eis*." Some have undertaken to prove that *eis* may mean "upon the basis of" or "because of" instead of "for." This would fit with their doctrine that one is baptized because his sins have already been remitted. Such an argument proves embarrassing, however, when it is pointed out that Acts 2:38 contains a dual command, "repent and be baptized." Whatever *eis* means with regard to baptism it likewise means with regard to repentance. If one is baptized because of remission, then one likewise repents because his sins are forgiven. Are those who offer this explanation ready to say that one need not repent before his sins are forgiven? Quite the contrary. These are the voices that have long argued for the primary importance of repentance, even declaring that it comes before faith in the process of conversion! The argument about *eis* proves too much, if it proves anything at all. Repentance and baptism stand together in this passage. A fair exegesis must show that either both are "because of" or both are "for" the remission of sins.

The Biblical View

We have spent a lot of time saying what baptism is not, and it may seem that the negative is out of all proportion; but when one has clearly established what baptism is not, he has gone a long way toward saying what baptism is, for the truth about baptism lies in between these two extremes. It is neither magical nor meaningless. The Biblical view is that baptism is for the remission of sins, but not without preaching, faith and repentance (Acts 2:38). The Biblical view is that baptism sees sins washed away, but not without its predecessors: teaching, faith and repentance (Acts 16:22). The Biblical view is that baptism causes rejoicing, but only when it is predicated upon preaching, faith and repentance. When these have gone before, then baptism

becomes a ceremony filled with meaning and fraught with purpose.

Sit with me in the Federal Courthouse at Greenville, Tennessee. Study the faces of the two score men and women, gathered on the front row. Listen to their heavily accented voices. Hear the oath they take. Except for the tears in their eyes they look just as they did when we came in, but not one of them is the same. When they walked into that courtroom not one of them could cast a ballot in any polling place in America. Now they can exercise that franchise and cast a vote as potent as my own. When they walked into that courtroom not one of them could be elected to even the most insignificant office in the land, but now they can serve in any office save that of President of the United States. When they walked into that courtroom they were required to report their address to the government each year, but now all restrictions are lifted. Now they can be conscripted into the Army; now they can petition Congress, now they can appeal to the courts for redress. They entered aliens; they left, citizens. What produced so marked a change in so short a time? It was a ceremony!

In like manner, the ceremony of baptism places man in a new legal relationship before God. Like those aliens, he has been taught. Like those aliens, he has already moved out of the old world. Like those aliens, he resides in a new land. As they foreswore allegiance to "prince, power and potentate," so he has foresworn allegiance to Satan and self, and like them, he is a citizen of a new country.

"For they that say such things declare plainly that they seek a country. and truly, if they had been mindful of that country from whence they came out, they might have had opportunity to have returned but now they desire a better country, that is, an heavenly; wherefore God is not ashamed to be called their God: for he hath prepared them for a city."

"Now therefore ye are no more strangers and foreigners but fellow-citizens with the saints and of the household of God."

"For our citizenship is in heaven, from whence also we look for the Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ."