A WASHING OF REGENERATION?

Catechism Two, Lesson 18

Reading: 1 Peter 3:18–22; Mark 16:15–20.

1. Does Baptism “Save” Us?

As we have already mentioned, the term “salvation” is a comprehensive one. It describes the entire package of reconciliation between man and God, the whole process from justification to glorification. The Greek word, you recall, included restoration of the whole person and every form of deliverance from sin and its effects. In the past few lessons, we have gone into detail regarding water baptism as a deliverance or cutting off of the power of original sin, the “old man.” This circumcision is an essential part of salvation, but it is by no means the whole package. All through the New Testament we find that initiation into Christ required four basic experiences with the risen Christ: repentance from dead works, faith toward God, water baptism, and receiving the Baptism in the Holy Spirit. These are all closely related. Together they form a basis for the ongoing process of salvation in each believer.

A. Water baptism results in a good, clean conscience toward God.

Our identification with Christ through the obedience of faith in water baptism allows us to be released both from the continued source of sin and from constant condemnation. We know we have buried it to walk in newness of life in Christ. We know we have come in through the door, into Christ our ark of safety.

The like figure whereunto even baptism doth also now save us (not the putting away of the filth of the flesh, but the answer of a good conscience toward God,) by the resurrection of Jesus Christ (1 Pet. 3:21).

B. Faith for salvation always expresses itself in commitment through obedience.

It is never enough merely to say that we believe; we must act upon that faith. The gospel is not only to be believed but obeyed. It is, remember, the offer of a new kingdom. We enter this kingdom by submitting to the King Himself; by doing what He requires us to do. One of the requirements Jesus stipulated was baptism.

In flaming fire taking vengeance on them that know not God, and that obey not the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ (2 Thess. 1:8).

He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned (Mark 16:16).

2. Do We Believe In “Baptismal Regeneration”?

No. We do not believe that water baptism itself is the cause of grace or of salvation. God Himself is the initiating source of all salvation. He has made this available through the life, death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is through repentance, faith, and water baptism that we are placed in Christ and made actual partakers of His life.

A. Through baptism we identify with the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ.

Much confusion about how baptism relates to spiritual change is the result of failing to understand that God is not in time. God is eternally present. When we identify with Him now, we receive the benefits of the salvation worked out in history on Calvary. By obedient faith, we are made partakers of His death, burial, and resurrection. Water baptism is the point of time in our history where we make contact with the completed work of Christ accomplished 2,000 years ago.

We then, as workers together with him, beseech you also that ye receive not the grace of God in vain. (For he saith, I have heard thee in a time accepted, and in the day of salvation have I succoured thee: behold, now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation.) (2 Cor. 6:1, 2).

For as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ (Gal. 3:27).

B. Baptism is of no profit if we are not prepared by repentance and faith.

As soon as the Church fathers forgot the clear relationship between repentance and faith to baptism, they began to think of baptism in magical terms. They thought that the water itself could make a Christian out of people. For this reason, many unscriptural ideas were introduced, such as infant baptism and an overemphasis on the seriousness of sin after baptism. Baptism cannot be lifted out of the salvation package either to be made the whole thing or to be eliminated as many modern leaders do. Baptism works hand in hand with repentance and faith on the one hand, and leads to the Baptism in the Holy Spirit on the other hand. The teaching of God’s Word usually produces the repentance and faith needed to participate in baptism meaningfully.

And with many other words did he [Peter] testify and exhort, saying, Save yourselves from this untoward generation. Then they that gladly received his word were baptized: and the same day there were added unto them about three thousand souls (Acts 2:40, 41).

3. What Does The Bible Mean By “The Washing Of Regeneration”?

Many arguments have arisen over the meaning of this term, found in Titus 3:5. Some insist that it specifically refers to the work of water baptism in bringing about a spiritual new birth. Others react to the opposite extreme and insist that the water is only the outward symbol and testimony of the inner work performed by the Holy Spirit in cleansing the inner man through faith. Both sides of the question have real contributions to make, but both suffer from overemphasis. We can best understand this Scripture in light of the total doctrine of salvation, in which both the Word and water baptism play essential roles.

A. Salvation is something God does for us, not something we can do ourselves.

If baptism itself were the whole cause of salvation, we could save ourselves or force others to be saved by plunging them into water. The context of this passage brings out the contrast between God’s grace

and our own efforts. Paul is stressing the necessity of the operation of the Holy Spirit to produce any spiritual life within us.

But after that the kindness and love of God our Saviour toward man appeared, not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy he saved us, by the washing of regeneration, and renewing of the Holy Ghost; which he shed on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Saviour; that being justified by his grace, we should be made heirs according to the hope of eternal life (Tit. 3:4–7).

B. Inner washing requires the working of the Word within us.

We only hear and receive a word from God by faith, but that faith is then expressed in obedience to the word. Any experience with God works this same way: the Holy Spirit applies the word of truth to us here and now, creating faith in us to relate us to the benefits which are already available in Christ. Water baptism is no exception to this.

… Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it; that he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word, that he might present it to himself a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish (Eph. 5:25–27).

It is clear from the context here that more than water baptism is included. There is a continual inner changing and cleansing which happens as we submit to God’s Word. Water baptism is one instance of receiving such inner cleansing. Through obedience, we make it possible for God to come to us inside where we need Him.

C. The New Testament contains no symbols or types, only fulfillments.

The Old Testament has often been called God’s picture story book. Many things required of God’s people under the Old Covenant prepared the way for better things to come. These obediences served a two-fold purpose: to enable Israel to find God’s mercy under arrangements God made prior to the coming of Christ, and to portray the fulness of reality which would be found only in Jesus Christ. Now that the substance has come, we no longer see shadows or types. All New Covenant obediences are in themselves points of contact with the living God. Symbols have been done away.

(See Hebrews, chapters 8 and 10).

4. What Is Necessary To Effect Regeneration Or The New Birth?

Regeneration and the new birth are the same thing. Either term refers to the spiritual change within believers which transfers them from death and sin into Christ and the sharing of His eternal life. The Greek word for regeneration is palingenesia (pah-lin-ge-ne-see-ah). It is a combination of two words meaning “again” and “birth.” This particular word only occurs twice in the New Testament, but equivalent words and phrases are used throughout Scripture to speak of the spiritual and inner work done in the believer to make him a real part of Jesus Christ. When we study this work of regeneration as a whole in the Bible, we find several agents:

A. The living Word of God.

Being born again, not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible, by the word of God, which liveth and abideth forever (1 Pet. 1:23).

B. Water baptism.

… Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.… Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God (John 3:3, 5).

C. The Holy Spirit imparting new life.

For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus hath made me free from the law of sin and death (Rom. 8:2).

D. Knowledge of God in Christ.

And this is life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom thou hast sent (John 17:3).

E. Total renewing of the person.

And be renewed in the spirit of your mind; and that ye put on the new man, which after God is created in righteousness and true holiness (Eph. 4:23, 24).

F. Becoming a partaker of Christ’s divine nature.

Whereby are given unto us exceeding great and precious promises: that by these ye might be partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world through lust (2 Pet. 1:4).

The reason we have seen so much confusion about the new birth is because of a common misuse of Bible language. Regeneration and justification are two different things. Justification is God’s legal declaration of our right standing; regeneration is God’s work within us to make us truly righteous and spiritual. Both are essential to salvation.

5. How Does Water Baptism Differ From Other Washings Known In Bible Days?

Water baptism is a foundational experience in which God performs an operation upon our hearts. It is not something external. Water is only a means for our obedience. The Lord Himself meets us when we obey in faith expecting to have His work of circumcising the heart and burying the old nature. All other washings in Scripture were only external. They had nothing to do with inner change. Many have come to view baptism as an external symbol because they equate it with these earlier washings.

A. Jewish ablutions (washings) were self-administered; baptism requires someone to minister to us in the authority of His Name.

Under Old Covenant Law, four Levitical ablutions were required:

(1) Washing of the hands (Lev. 15:11).

(2) Washing of the hands and feet (Exod. 30:18, 19).

(3) Bathing of the whole body (Num. 19:8; Lev. 22:4–6).

(4) Sprinkling with the water of separation (Num. 19:19).

None of these washings made the person clean on the inside. They merely attested to ceremonial cleanness and readmission to the camp. The real cleansing had already occurred, for example, the leprosy had been healed.

B. Proselyte baptism was an immersion of one’s self after instruction to declare death to the old life and entrance into a new life as a Jew.

In addition to circumcision of the flesh and presenting an offering, the male who converted to Judaism was required to immerse himself. He stood in water up to his neck while the law was read. Then he ducked himself as a symbolic cleansing from Gentile uncleanness. Women only experienced the ablution and presented the offering.

C. The Essene community practiced many ceremonial washings.

The Essenes were very strict and separatist in their religion. Their emphasis was upon moral and religious purity. They were always requiring washings and immersions in water as part of this moral cleansing. These are the people who preserved the Dead Sea Scrolls for us. Their “baptisms” were known before John the Baptist came preaching his baptism of repentance.

Home Study: Lesson 18

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1. How is water baptism related to salvation?

2. What is “baptismal regeneration” and why is it not Scriptural?

3. Who washes us on the inside?

4. What was the two-fold purpose for types in the Old Testament?

a.

b.

5. What agents does God use to bring about our regeneration?

a.

b.

c.

d.

e.