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The ‘Why?’ of Baptism
Baptized to testify to our repentance and salvation.
By Charles J. Conniry, Jr.

When I met the Lord at age 20, my heart was filled with the desire to study God’s Word. The more I got into the Bible, the more I realized the need for Christian fellowship. I associated for a short time with a local Baptist church (not BGC) but felt it was not right for me. I was beginning to fear I would never find a church home, when a friend invited me to a fellowship he had been visiting. They claimed to be “New Testament Christians.”

The subject of baptism was broached during my first visit, as a teacher questioned the validity of my immersion in the Baptist church: “Why were you baptized, Chuck?” he asked.

“I was baptized in obedience to the Great Commission,” I said.

He probed: “Yes, but why were you baptized?”

“Because I love Jesus,” I said. I sensed he wasn’t satisfied.

“When you were baptized?”

“Before I was baptized, of course!” I said.

He shook his head, “That’s what I was afraid of.” He opened the Bible and read several passages relating to baptism.

I had read Matthew 28:19-20; Mark 16:16; John 3:5; Acts 2:38; 22:16; Romans 6:1-5; Galatians 3:26-27; Colossians 2:12; Titus 3:5 and 1 Peter 3:21, but was without a satisfactory explanation for these “anomalous” passages. I had concluded that such were the “hard sayings” of the Bible whose meaning was elusive to me.

The Acceptance
I was impressed with the man’s knowledge. What he said made sense to me. I thanked him: “I appreciate my baptism all the more now that I know how important it was to my salvation.”

“The baptism you went through doesn’t count!” He went on to explain that it was not enough to go through the right act. Because I had not believed that baptism was essential to salvation before I was baptized, it was invalid. What I needed was a “scriptural baptism.” So I was baptized again that night “for the remission of sins.”

The next morning I was overwhelmed with mixed feelings. Did I believe I had been lost until the night before? Was I ready to accept that millions of believers were destined for hell because their position on baptism differed from what I now embraced? Were these feelings coming from my own heart or from the devil? How could I be sure?

My only reliable guide was the Bible. I reasoned that such passages as Acts 2:38 could not be compromised: if baptism was “for the forgiveness of sins,” then I had to accept that one could be sincere, but sincerely wrong; that one’s error regarding baptism may jeopardize one’s eternal destiny.

Without delay I was taken under wing by the associate minister. He believed I had potential to teach and preach and encouraged me to consider full-time ministry. I moved to Louisiana to obtain the training. By the time I graduated I was convinced our fellowship had the truth, and I was to set straight the rest of Christendom.

The Rationale
Proponents of this position consider the term “baptismal regeneration” a misnomer in reference to their teaching. They argue that the expression implies baptism confers grace apart from faith, ex opere operato (“from the work done”). Since they do not believe baptism is efficacious apart from faith, the term does not apply.

However, “baptismal regeneration” is the doctrine that baptism results in the regeneration of the person who is baptized. Thus, while baptismal regeneration has a wider range of application, the view here-in presented does fall into that category.

What made this brand of baptismal regeneration so compelling to me was the emphasis placed on harmonizing “salvation passages.” John 3:16, for example, makes a positive statement regarding the efficacy of belief, but says nothing about repentance. Yet from Acts 3:19 one learns that repentance is prerequisite to salvation. Moreover, while Acts 3:19 underscores the place of repentance, it says nothing of the need for confession, as does Romans 10:9-10.

None of these passages standing alone yields a comprehensive “list” of the “steps necessary for salvation.” Accordingly, if baptism is “for the forgiveness of sins” (Acts 2:38), it follows that it must be included on the list.

There is also an amalgamating of baptism and faith. Passages that emphasize saving faith are paralleled with texts highlighting obedience
(with baptism identified as an essential component of obedience). They stress that biblical faith includes active obedience. Such references as Hebrews 5:9; 1 Peter 1:22; Acts 5:32 and James 2:21-26 are cited in an effort to refute the “faith only” position.

Additionally, the associate pastor showed me how 1 Corinthians 15:1-4; 2 Thessalonians 1:6-9, and Romans 6:1-4, 16-18 are combined to prove the essentiality of baptism: the gospel is the death, burial and resurrection of Christ (1 Cor. 15:1-4). The gospel must be “obeyed” (2 Thess. 1:6-9 [they fail to account for Paul’s substantive use of the present participle]). Since one cannot literally obey the death, burial and resurrection of Christ, a form-baptism—has been provided (cf. Rom. 6:1-4, 16-18). Hence baptism is the means by which one “obeys the gospel.”

In this belief system, baptism is not a work, it is a component of saving faith. It is the definitive act by which one’s faith is actualized. In baptism one enters into a covenant relationship with Christ (Gal. 3:27; Col. 2:11-12), contacts the blood of Christ (cf. Rom. 6:3) and receives the forgiveness of sins and the indwelling gift of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:38).

The Shift

By Spring 1985 when I enrolled at Bethel West, I had abandoned the belief that only those baptized “for the forgiveness of sins” could be saved. I realized the notion that God would consign to hell sincere, obedient followers of Christ because they missed it on baptism contradicted the spirit of Scripture.

From 2 Chronicles 30:1-22 (especially 18-20) I saw that God is free to extend His mercy to whomever He wishes—even if their response to Him is fraught with error. I concluded that God requires a person to believe in Jesus, repent of his sins, and apply the Bible as he or she understands it. This approach enabled me to keep my belief that baptism was an essential part of salvation, while acknowledging God would save those who were “doctorially deficient” on the subject.

While I was at Bethel Seminary, my understanding of baptism was enhanced through the insights of the late Professor A. Berkeley Mickelsen. He had come to the West Campus in Fall 1986 to teach New Testament theology. During that time I interacted with him at length.

Of particular benefit was the emphasis he placed on the connection between baptism and confession. Dr. Mickelsen’s position was that baptism is “confession in drama.” The salvific import of baptism is to be understood in terms of its function as an act of confession. Dr. Mickelsen illuminated a facet of the subject I had not considered and has significantly contributed to my theology of baptism.

As I now see it, salvific power is associated with baptism. In the New Testament baptism is represented as the locus of confession, not the locus of salvation. This fact is attested in several passages. Most significant is Acts 2:38 in which the confessional formula, *epi to onomati Iesou Christou* (“calling upon the name of Jesus Christ”), is in juxtaposition with baptism. It is not the baptism that is *eis aphesin ton hamartion human* (“for the forgiveness of your sins”), but the confession that baptism occasions.

While baptism derives its salvific import from confession, it is efficacious regardless of its locus (cf. Acts 22:16 and Romans 10:9-10—note it is confession “with the mouth,” not the water, that leads to salvation).

The Result

The shift in my theology of baptism has brought me to leave that fellowship of “New Testament Christians.” Although some have encouraged my family and me, others have castigated me as a heretic.

I empathize with their position. They are doing what God calls all of us to do: stand by our convictions.

I am thankful that as I stood by my convictions, God led me to a place of ministry in the Baptist General Conference—a fellowship in which I feel more at home than ever.