

LIVING WATERS NEWSLETTER

HARRY BOWERS EDITOR

7844 GRIMSBY CIRCLE, HARRISBURG, N.C. 28075

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BAPTISM: THE MOST DISPUTED WORD IN THE BIBLE

We begin this article by invalidating the two most used arguments against baptism: the thief on the cross and the unavailability of water. Jesus said to the thief, "I say unto you today, you will be with me in paradise." Many people put more confidence in the thief than they do in the 110 times baptism is mentioned in the Bible by declaring, "the thief was saved without baptism, so it is not important." During the ministry of Jesus many were saved by Jesus declaring "your sins are forgiven." These, including the thief, were saved under the Old Covenant by the spoken words of Christ. After the death and resurrection of Christ this was no longer true. We have to obey the written word. The other argument the unavailability of water: "Let's say we are on top of a mountain, or miles from water, and one is saved but dies before we can reach water for baptism." This is comparable to the Sadducee's question to Jesus concerning the seven-times married woman whose husbands die. "In the resurrection whose wife shall she be?" A very unlikely situation, but Jesus answers: "Is this not the reason you are mistaken, that you do not understand the Scriptures or the power of God?" His answer covers the question of baptism.

The remainder of this article will be an examination of the first conversions after the resurrection and ascension of Christ. It is the record of what God says we must do to be saved. The first record of conversions concerns the very people who were guilty of crucifying Jesus. Peter's sermon recorded in Acts 2:4-38 ends with these words: "Therefore, let all the house of Israel know for certain God has made him both Lord and Christ—this Jesus whom you crucified" The people respond: "when they heard this they were pierced to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the Apostles, 'Brethren, what shall we do?'" Peter did not tell them to walk up front and invite Jesus to come into their heart; neither were they told to confess their sins and start praying for forgiveness. The "Altar call" and "Sinner's prayers" are products of revival meetings of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and were unknown to any responding in the book of Acts. Nor were they directed to "find the church of your choice" for there were none to find. The inventions of the Billy Graham crusades had not yet been invented. Peter said to them, "Repent and be baptized for the remission of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" Verse 41: "So then, those who had received the word were baptized; and that day there were added about three thousand souls." Someone might object: "How could twelve men baptize three thousand people?" Nowhere does the Bible say baptism must be administered by the clergy. When one was baptized, they could baptize others. Some unbelieving commentaries insist the word "for" (*eis*) in this passage means "because of." This would say baptism is "because we have remission of sins." However the word "because" (*oti*) is never used as "for." *Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon* states: "for" then denotes an "entrance into, of entrance into a place." "For," then denotes an "entrance into forgiveness." We note also that the receiving of the gift of the Holy Spirit is connected with baptism in this passage; and will be seen throughout these records of conversions.

The second record of conversions is in the third chapter of Acts. Peter and John heal a lame man, and this draws a crowd (about five thousand men, (4:4). Verse 12: "When Peter saw this he replied to the people..." Verses 12-26 is the record of Peter's second sermon in which he stated: "Therefore repent and turn (be converted KJV) so that your sins may be blotted out and times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord; and He may send Jesus, the Christ appointed for you, whom heaven must receive until the period of restoration of all things..." "Repent." The same command given of Pentecost (2:38). Repentance is an internal change resulting, not from remorse, but from conviction of sin and godly sorrow for it. The Greek term means a change of mind. It is a change of determination and will, the resolve to turn from sin to God. "Repent and turn." The command is to do something that does not have something done for us. The act following repentance is given in Acts 2:38. Baptism is not expressly named here, but is understood of itself, seeing that thousands had been baptized, and the thought is suggested in the figurative expression in order that your sins may be blotted out, namely by baptism. This is basically the same command he gave in Acts 2:38. The "times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord..." is equivalent to "receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit." Peter enlarges a bit on this promise of God by saying: verses 20-21: "that He may send Jesus, the Christ appointed for you whom heaven must receive (by ascension to God's right hand) until the period of restoration of all things..." (Romans 8:21).

We now turn to Acts 8. None of the Apostles had left Jerusalem until Saul began "ravaging the church by persecution" (8:3). So Philip, one chosen to serve tables (6:5), "went to the city of Samaria and began proclaiming Christ to them...when they believed Philip preaching the good news about the Kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, men and women alike" (verses 5-12).

The Jews of this day had no dealings with the Samaritans. We read that Jesus "must go through Samaria." He went there because he knew he had a work to do with the Samaritans which is illustrated by the contact of Jesus with the woman at the well, recorded in John chapter four. In Philip we have an early Christian led of God to preach the gospel to those with whom the Jews would have no concourse. It is astonishing today to see how society has remolded and remade the thinking of the church to the same extent as this ancient society in the erection of barriers to the gospel of Christ. Our problem of denominationalism is not only theological, but social. Different congregations make a different appeal to people on the different rungs of the social ladder, and as a result the very people who claim to have the answer to life's problems through the gospel are alienating themselves from the very people who need to find answers. Thus we have "the rich people's church" and the "poor people's church," the "important people's church" and the church for those not quite so important, the church of the "blue bloods" and the church of those whose blood is only red. And let's not overlook the "traditional" and the "contemporary." Philip was more interested in the "need" of the people than the "breed" of the

people. He was more concerned with what God thought of the Samaritans than what the Jews thought of them. So "Philip went down to the city of Samaria and began proclaiming Christ to them" (ver. 5). What exactly did Philip preach? Verse 12: "When they believed Philip preaching the good news about *the kingdom of God* and *the name of Jesus Christ*, they were being baptized, men and women alike."

Philip could not savor this "success" in Samaria very long, for "an angel of the Lord spoke to Philip saying, 'Get up and go south to the road that descends from Jerusalem to Gaza.' So he got up and went..." (ver. 26, 27). He left the crowds in Samaria to proclaim Christ to a Eunuch of Ethiopia, who had failed to find Christ in the temple at Jerusalem but found him in the desert of Gaza. He was returning and was sitting in his chariot reading the prophet Isaiah (Isa. 53). This passage was a prophecy of the death of Christ. "The Eunuch asked Philip, 'Of whom does the prophet say this? Of himself or of someone else?' Then Philip beginning from this scripture preached Jesus to him" (34, 35). Note that both Philip and Peter on the day of Pentecost preached Jesus from the Old Testament. Imagine that! How does this compare with what is preached today? Verse 36: "As they went along the road they came to some water; and the eunuch said, 'Look! Water! What prevents me from being baptized?'" How could this man, who could not understand Isaiah 51, and knew nothing of Jesus, realize his need for baptism? Let's be honest! When Philip preached Jesus, he must have preached baptism. Verse 37: (The KJV translators must have thought Luke needed some help here, so they included this verse which is not found in early manuscripts. "And Philip said, 'if you believe with all your heart, you may.' And he answered and said 'I believe Jesus Christ is the son of God'"). "And he ordered the chariot to stop; and they both went down into the water, Philip as well as the eunuch, and he baptized him. When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away; and the eunuch no longer saw him, but he went on his way rejoicing" (vers. 38, 39).

The next record of conversion is that of Saul (later the apostle Paul), recorded in Acts 9, the original record, Acts 22, his defense before the Jews, and Acts 26 his defense before King Agrippa. The hand of Saul of Tarsus fell heavy upon the church as he was "Yet breathing threatening and slaughter against the disciples of the Lord, and he went to the High priest and asked of him letters to Damascus unto the synagogues, that if he found any of the way, whether men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem" (Acts 9:1, 2). The record states that as the foe of Christ approached the city of Damascus, a blinding dazzling light flashed out of the blue sky, and Saul and his companions fell to the earth smitten by a stroke of lightning. Then all heard a voice, but Saul alone understood what was said "Saul, Saul why persecute thou me?" The astonished persecutor replied, "who are you, Lord?" and the Lord said, "I am Jesus whom you persecute." Saul did not know he was persecuting the Christ. Jesus was, to him, an imposter, crucified, dead and buried. To him it was not a persecution of the Galilean, but ignorant fools and fanatics who said he was the Messiah and told wild tales of his coming out of the tomb and of his coming back to earth. But now he learns that it is Jesus whom he is persecuting. Christ so identifies himself with his church that he who persecutes his followers persecutes him. Saul is directed to enter the city, and it would be told him what he had to do. (Acts 9:3-9; 22:4-11; 26:11ff).

The Lord appeared to a disciple and told him to go and meet Saul. "So Ananias departed and entered the house, and after laying hands on him, said 'Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus has appeared to you on the road by which you were coming, has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.' And immediately there fell from his eyes something like scales and he regained his sight, and he got up and was baptized" (Acts 9:17, 18). "Ananias came to me and said 'Brother Saul, receive your sight!' And at that time I looked up at him, and he said, The God of our Fathers appointed you to know His will and to see the Righteous One and to hear an utterance from his mouth. Now why do you delay, Get up and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on His name" (Acts 21: 13-16).

"Who are you Lord?"..."I am Jesus whom you are persecuting." To many, Christ is only a figure in a story. A person walking around Palestine barefooted, concerned with straying sheep. To some he's only an artistic Christ who lives on canvas wearing a white robe with a halo around his head. We need to let the living Christ redeem us from the Christ of sentimental song and simpering piety. The rough carpenter's hands, pierced with wounds of brutal nails, need to call us to the hard demands of a redemptive and cross-bearing world's need of God. Christ is a victorious Lord calling us to the proclamation of a revolutionary gospel. What the church needs today is to see, as Paul did, not a historic figure, but the living Lord.

The tenth chapter of Acts tells the story of one of the great turning points in the history of the church. For the first time a Gentile is admitted into the fellowship of the kingdom. It was Peter's sermon, comparable to his sermon on Pentecost, that opened the door of faith to a Roman centurion. Acts chapter eleven tells of the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem calling Peter into account for his non-Jewish actions. However, it all ends well when "They quieted down and glorified God, saying 'Well then, God has granted to the Gentiles also repentance that leads to life'" (Acts 11:18). Here is the record: "Now there was a man at Caesarea named Cornelius, a centurion of the Italian cohort, a devout man and one who feared God and gave many alms to the Jewish people. He saw in a vision an angel of God and fixing his gaze on him he said, 'What is it, Lord?' And he said to him, 'Dispatch some men to Joppa and send for a man named Simon, who is called Peter, he is staying with a tanner named Simon whose house is by the sea.' He sent them to Joppa."

In the meantime God had appeared to Peter three times when he went on the housetop to pray and had declared to him that the Gentiles were to be received into the fellowship of the kingdom and we were to go and preach to Cornelius and his household basically the same type of sermon he had preached on the day of Pentecost as recorded in Acts two. Acts 10:44: "While Peter yet spoke these words, the Holy Spirit fell on all of them that heard the word. And they of the circumcision that believed were amazed because on the Gentiles also was poured out the gift of the Holy Spirit, for they were hearing them speaking in tongues and glorifying God. Then Peter answered, can any man forbid water that these should not be baptized, who have received the Holy Spirit as well as we?" And he commanded them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they asked him to stay on for a few days.

(Baptism: Continued next month.)