

BAPTISM AND THE TIMING OF SALVATION

by

Michael Kennedy

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This paper is a response to a booklet written by Ron Edson entitled Repentant Faith and Baptism. This booklet can be viewed or downloaded from the following web site:

<http://www.geocities.com/sotsip/index.html>.

For many years Ron Edson believed that Salvation came to the individual believer at the point of baptism. Edson held this view as late as February 23, 1997, when he preached a sermon entitled "Baptism Now Saves Us." Edson said,

God sent His Son to die on the cross and shed His blood to forgive us of our sins. And the teaching here is very clear that it is at baptism that we make that appeal to God, "I want a clear conscience" and He responds, as Acts 2:38 says, with the forgiveness, the wiping away, the washing away of our sins.¹

However, because of his recent studies, Edson now believes that salvation comes at the point of faith and repentance. Edson now teaches that baptism is a work of obedience that every Christian should do after he has already been saved. Edson's booklet is a defense of his new view concerning the timing of salvation. Edson writes, "One of the many issues that divide us is the timing of salvation, i.e., do we receive God's gift of forgiveness at the time of our commitment of repentant faith in Jesus or not until that commitment is followed up by baptism?"² It is very important to notice that Edson recognizes the *timing*

¹ Ron Edson, "Baptism Now Saves Us," (Vancouver, WA. Minnehaha Church of Christ, 2/23/97), audiocassette.

² Ron Edson, Repentant Faith and Baptism (<http://www.geocities.com/sotsip/index.html>, 2002), 2.

of salvation as the main controversy his booklet is attempting to address. However, throughout his booklet, Edson fails to recognize the difference between the *timing* of salvation and the *means* of salvation.

The Importance of Proper Hermeneutics

Edson believes that the Bible student who wants to learn about the timing of salvation should first consult the Gospel of John, Romans 1-4 and 10, and 1 John. He holds these texts as normative on the subject of conversion.

The Gospel of John, Romans 1-4 and 10, and I John are all significant texts that teach that a person is saved when he comes to the point of repentant faith in Jesus Christ. Since each of these texts is written for the purpose of explaining how to have eternal life; how to be saved; and/or how to be justified, they must receive primary consideration in the study of the subject of how to become a Christian. This is the approach that has been used in this booklet. I urge you to carefully study these passages and the first eight chapters of this booklet before plunging into this chapter and the chapters to follow. If you have done this study with an open heart and are convinced I am in error, I ask you to contact me and explain my error to me.³

It is necessary to have a starting point in any inductive investigation. In this case, a study of what the Bible says about the timing of salvation is no different. And some texts will carry greater weight because of the purpose for which they were written. However, it is inappropriate to form conclusions until all the data has been examined. Edson gives conclusions

about the timing of salvation based only upon his interpretation of his "primary" passages. He also seems to imply that the reader will not be able to accurately interpret all the New Testament passages about baptism until he first accepts the previously stated conclusions.

However, many of the New Testament passages about baptism provide crucial information about the timing of salvation. If a person really wanted to know what the Bible says about the timing of salvation in the process of becoming a Christian, what better place is there to begin than at the beginning of Christianity? The beginning of Christianity is recorded in the second chapter of Acts. There, the first Christian sermon was preached and the first invitation was given. Throughout the book of Acts, the Bible student finds examples of conversions. Many times these conversion accounts record instructions given to people who were asking what they must do in order to be saved.

Many of the New Testament Epistles discuss the purpose of baptism and how it relates to salvation. Even though the purpose of those passages may not be to convert unbelieving readers, the information given about baptism and salvation is still true.

When commenting on Colossians 2:11-12, Edson writes,

Development of the purpose of baptism was not Paul's aim in this passage. While this in no way means that information about baptism in this passage should be

³ Edson, 28.

ignored, it certainly means that our interpretations of it concerning the role of baptism or how to become a Christian should be subservient to teachings in passages that are expressly dealing with the subject of justification, salvation, and eternal life. This is the same as the main point of chapter 3.

Secondly, if we keep in mind that the purpose of baptism is to serve as an authentication of our repentant faith through which Christ saves us, the passage aligns perfectly with all other Scripture.⁴

Here he urges the reader to accept his view of baptism before he attempts to explain a key passage about baptism and the timing of salvation. The Bible student must gather and examine all of the biblical data before he comes to any conclusions about baptism or the timing of salvation.

There is another hermeneutical problem with Edson's starting point. Edson makes an assumption about the purpose of the Gospel of John, Romans 1-4 and 10 and 1 John that is based on incomplete data. His implied conclusion is that the timing of salvation was the purpose (or at least closely related to the purpose) for which these texts were written. By making this assumption, Edson is neglecting the hermeneutical Law of Frame of Reference. The Law of Frame of Reference refers to the necessity of asking questions about the context of any given passage before determining its meaning or purpose.

This is sometimes called the Law of Opposition (Negation) and might well be denoted as the Law of Context. It has to do with the frame of reference of a speaker or writer so that his statements are given the

⁴ Edson, 44.

proper construction within the boundary of his meaning.⁵

The Gospel of John, Romans and 1 John were all written to Christian communities who were already saved. John and Paul were writing to specific Christian communities with specific problems. The early Church never had disputes about the timing of salvation. However, there were many other doctrinal disputes in the early Church. Some of these disputes centered around heresies that were attacking the faith of Christians and actually causing some Christians to lose their faith in Christ. If a Bible student is trying to determine the purpose for which an author wrote a book or a passage he needs to consider what that author was writing in opposition to.

The Gospel of John

Edson believes that the Gospel of John was written to serve as an evangelistic tract with the sole purpose of converting people to Christianity. He then concludes that faith is the time of salvation since faith is the only prerequisite mentioned in John 20:31 for receiving eternal life.

According to these verses he wrote "that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name." In other words, he wrote it as a gospel tract to lead people to Jesus and enable them to have life, to be saved.⁶

⁵ Grayson Harter Ensign, You Can Understand the Bible: A Study of the Science of Interpretation (Joplin: College Press, 1978), 92.

⁶ Edson, 6.

Edson fails to consider the necessary ongoing nature of faith in the life of every Christian. In order to "have life" a Christian must maintain his belief that "Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God." Edson is assuming that John 20:31 is telling the reader (a potential convert) how to receive eternal life. However, this verse does not necessarily tell the reader how or when to receive eternal life. The statement in this verse says nothing about the timing of belief or salvation. It is written in such a way that it could very well be referring to Christians who are being deceived by false doctrines about the identity of Jesus. Edson dismisses this possibility.

Others say that John was written to Christians to counteract the attack against faith in Christ coming from Gnosticism and so should only be used to deal with remaining a Christian, not to determine how to become a Christian. Regardless of to whom it was written and the situation that prompted its writing it is still true that John 20:31 says "these have been written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name." If you want to know God's will about receiving eternal life, the Gospel of John will tell you.⁷

However, it is improper hermeneutics to just ignore the situation of the Church at that time and the intended audience to which the Gospel was written and just assume from John 20:31 that this book was an evangelistic tract used to teach people how to become Christians. There is nothing in this verse that

⁷ Edson, 6.

tells the reader how or when to "receive" eternal life. The condition for *having* life is simply belief in two facts about Jesus. First, Jesus is the Christ. Second, Jesus is the Son of God. If Edson is right about the purpose of this Gospel, then shouldn't the unbelieving reader simply read John 20:31 and decide to believe those two facts and instantly receive salvation at that very moment? There is nothing in this verse to indicate that John was talking about the point in time when a person first believes those two facts. This verse can be read as an exhortation for Christians to continue to believe these two facts about Jesus regardless of what others were teaching about Him. This interpretation is far more reasonable given the historical and cultural situation and the way the Gospel of John was used by the early Church.

Altogether like others, he relates for the sake of strengthening the faith of the Church, first in the Messiahship, then in the divinity of Jesus . . . We maintain the truth, with certain limits, of the polemic aim attributed to our Gospel by several Fathers, and by a considerable number of modern scholars. The first epistle of John incontrovertibly proves that the author of our Gospel lived in a region in which many false doctrines had already arisen in the bosom of the Church.⁸

After appealing to several salvation passages in the Gospel of John, Edson concludes that the main message of the book is that people receive salvation when they believe. "To summarize,

the main message of John is that all believers receive the gift of salvation when they believe."⁹ However, none of the passages quoted by Edson identify "when" a person is saved.

The First Epistle of John

Edson makes a similar assumption about the first epistle of John. He believes that John wrote this letter to give Christians assurance of salvation and therefore the Bible student should be able to examine this letter and discover everything that is necessary for salvation as well as the precise timing of salvation.

There are some who object that the reason I John does not include baptism as a requirement to be met before salvation is received or assured is because it was written to Christians who already understood the requirement to be baptized and indeed had been baptized. Based upon this line of reasoning it is concluded that one cannot go to I John to learn how to become a Christian. This sounds good on the surface but when carried to its logical end it becomes ridiculous. It would also be true that John would not have written about the need for faith because the recipients of this letter, as disciples of Jesus, understood that faith was a requirement and indeed had met that requirement. And of course, they could not have become Christians without hearing about and following through with repentance so John would not have written about that quality either. Come to think of it, you can say the same about confession and loving your brothers in Christ. It sounds like, according to this line of reasoning, that John might as well have not written at all. Too bad he didn't know that; he could have saved himself a lot of effort.¹⁰

⁸ Fredric Louis Godet, Commentary on John's Gospel (Grand Rapids: Kregal Publications, 1978), 212-213.

⁹ Edson, 21.

¹⁰ Edson, 26

Edson fails to recognize the difference between actions that must take place at a single point in time and actions that are, by their very nature, continuous. Belief, repentance, confession, loving God and loving others are all linear actions that must continue throughout the Christian's life. Baptism is a point in time that only takes place once in a Christian's life. A study of the Apostle John and the people he was ministering to in last part of the first century would give Edson a more accurate picture of John's purpose in writing this letter. The false doctrines that John was arguing against were having a negative effect on the beliefs and behaviors of the Christians. These false doctrines did not attack the meaning of baptism or the timing of salvation. John was addressing a pre-Gnostic heresy dealing with dualism and the nature of Christ.

The purpose and themes are probably the most important of the four areas as an aid to interpretation. We should not study any passage without a basic knowledge of the problems and situation addressed in the book and the themes with which the writer addressed those problems. Without realizing that John was fighting an incipient Gnosticism in his first epistle, one could easily misread the polemical tone of 1:8-10.¹¹

The Book of Romans

Edson also makes false assumptions about the purpose Paul had for writing the book of Romans. Edson writes, "The main

¹¹ Grant R. Osborne, The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1991), 20-21.

theme of Romans 4 is that we are reckoned as righteous when we believe, as was Abraham."¹²

Notice that Edson specifically writes, "*when we believe*" not "*because we believe,*" indicating that he believes the purpose of Romans 4 is about the *timing* of salvation rather than the *means* of salvation. When the Bible student examines the main controversies in the early Church he will see that the *timing* of salvation was never held in question. However, Paul was constantly arguing with the Judaizers about the *means* of salvation. All of the Christians believed that a person was saved when they were baptized into Christ but some of the Jewish Christians were teaching that the means of salvation was by circumcision and obedience to the Law of Moses. Many Jewish Christians did not believe that Gentiles could become Christians unless they also became Jews. This was a big part of the controversy in Acts 15. Because this was a common misunderstanding in the early Church, many of Paul's epistles, including Romans, emphasize grace through faith in Christ as the means of salvation as opposed to works of law as a means of salvation. It is important to notice that Paul did not write about this issue because the timing of salvation was in question. Paul wrote about this issue because the means of salvation was in question.

¹² Edson, 15.

The Difference Between The Time and The Means

Edson claims that the Gospel of John, Romans 1-4 and 10 and the first epistle of John stand in stark contrast to the verses that are used to teach that baptism is the point in time when a person is saved. "These scriptures stand in stark contrast to those used to defend the position that one is not saved until he is baptized."¹³ However, the New Testament does teach that salvation comes at the point of Christian baptism and the entire New Testament is in perfect harmony with itself concerning the issue of salvation. The problem occurs only when the Bible student makes no distinction between the *means* of salvation and the *time* of salvation. Throughout his booklet, Edson is constantly appealing to passages that focus on the means of salvation and he is assuming that they are teaching the timing of salvation.

Romans 4

Edson writes, "Again, Romans 4:1-5 and 23-25 teaches that Abraham was reckoned as righteous when he believed God's promise without performing any work or obedience of any kind and that we are justified in the same manner."¹⁴ Edson specifically writes "when he believed" not "because he believed." This passage was written to emphasize grace through faith as the means of

¹³ Edson, 8.

¹⁴ Edson, 14.

salvation as opposed to what the Judaizers were teaching as a means of salvation. Abraham had faith in God's promises and that was the means of his justification. The point of this passage is to show *how* Christians are justified not *when* they are justified. Christians are justified in the same "manner" as Abraham but not in the same *timing* as Abraham. This passage says absolutely nothing about the timing of salvation for the Christian.

Many scholars, those who follow Huldreich Zwingli and his teachings of Covenant Theology, insist that Romans 4:10-11 indicates that the time of salvation is prior to the time of Christian baptism. Edson does not mention these verses, however, since they do refer to the timing of Abraham's justification they should be taken into consideration. Romans 4:10 includes the present participle "οντι" which the New American Standard translates "while he was." This is a temporal participle.

The participle itself, just like the subjunctive, optative, imperative, and infinitive, is timeless. Its time is relative to that of the main verb. Generally speaking, however, the present participle will be translated by using "while" or "as," the aorist participle by "when," "since," or "after."

πως ουν ελογισθη; εν περιτομη οντι η εν ακροβυστια; (Rom. 4:10)
How therefore was it reckoned? *While he was* in the state of being circumcised or a state of not being circumcised?¹⁵

¹⁵ James A. Brooks and Carlton L. Winbery, Syntax of New Testament Greek (Lanham: University Press of America, 1979), 146.

The Bible student should notice three things about this passage. First, the participle is present not aorist. If Paul wanted to contrast the point in time when Abraham was justified to the point in time when Abraham was circumcised he would have used an aorist participle. Paul's point was to show that Abraham's justification came prior to the continuous state of being in circumcision. He used this argument to show that being a Jew was not a prerequisite for justification by faith.

Second, the first question Paul asks in verse 10, "How then was it reckoned?" shows that he is talking about the means of justification not the timing of justification. If Paul wanted to talk about the timing of justification he would have asked, "When then was it reckoned?" The only reason Paul mentions the timing of Abraham's justification is to show that being a Jew or being circumcised is not a prerequisite to justification by faith. This was in opposition to what the Judaizers taught.

Third, Paul makes no connection between physical circumcision and Christian baptism. Many scholars in Reformed Theology insist that this passage supports the idea that Christian baptism has the same purpose as physical circumcision of the Old Testament. This doctrine has absolutely no Scriptural support.

It has neither a sound exegetical basis nor a solid theological rationale. It is an inference drawn from a faulty concept of covenant unity, which itself was

created by Huldreich Zwingli in 1525 in the midst of his controversy with the Anabaptists regarding infant baptism. The bottom line is that Romans 4:11 has nothing whatsoever to say about the meaning of Christian baptism.¹⁶

Romans 10

Edson also confuses the timing of salvation with the means of salvation when he attempts to explain Romans 10.

Those who believe that a person is not saved until he is baptized will often point out that these verses do not literally mean that salvation comes at the point of faith because they include confession as an additional step to be taken before one is saved. Therefore, they reason, baptism cannot be ruled out as a prerequisite for salvation either. Adding additional steps to faith, such as confession or baptism, to be accomplished to receive eternal life contradicts the main theme of the passage, i.e., that Paul's desire for the salvation of Israel thus far had been thwarted because they didn't realize they couldn't establish their own righteousness, that the righteousness of God is attained by everyone who believes.¹⁷

Again, the Bible student should recognize the Law of Frame of Reference. Edson is correct when writes that this passage was based upon Paul's desire for the Jews to be saved. However, if that is true, why would Paul focus on the timing of salvation rather than the means of salvation? What was the real stumbling block for many of the Jews in Paul's day? Why did many Jews reject Christianity? Were the Jews opposed to baptism? No, both the Bible and extra-biblical literature record the fact that

¹⁶ Jack Cottrell, The College Press NIV Commentary: Romans Volume 1 (Joplin: College Press, 1996), 292.

¹⁷ Edson, 18.

many Jews practiced baptism in the first century. Were the Jews opposed to repentance? No, the Jews of the first century were constantly quoting the Old Testament exhortations to repent. The reason the Jews rejected Christianity was because they were opposed to the very things Paul mentioned in Romans 10:9. The majority of the Jews rejected Christianity because they could not accept the fact that Jesus is Lord and that God raised Him from the dead. The precise nature of the faith Paul describes in this passage should indicate that he is addressing a specific stumbling block in the Jewish mind rather than providing a comprehensive list of the requirements for salvation.

We cannot assume that any one NT passage includes the entire list of conditions for salvation - not even this one. In fact, this verse contains something that shows us that it was not intended to include all the conditions necessary for salvation, namely the limited nature of the content of the faith specified here. Paul says if you believe "that God raised him from the dead," you will be saved. But virtually all Christians agree that the content of faith must include more than this; it must especially include "faith in his blood" (3:25). Thus the abbreviated content of the faith described here shows this verse is not intended to be a comprehensive, exclusive list of conditions.¹⁸

Edson ignores this and assumes, from this passage, that being justified *by* faith means being justified at the *time* of faith.

Such simultaneity, however, is not inherent in the preposition "by" in the phrase "justified by faith,"

¹⁸ Jack Cottrell, The College Press NIV Commentary: Romans Volume 2 (Joplin: College Press, 1998), 180.

and this verse is evidence of it. The fact that another separate act besides faith (i.e., confession) is also a condition for receiving salvation shows that one does not receive it as soon as the faith is present. This same logic also shows that justification by faith does not exclude from the salvation package the act of baptism, which in other texts is shown to be the precise *time* when the salvation is received (e.g., Col 2:12, "in baptism").¹⁹

Edson tries to get around this by saying that the natural result of saving faith is a desire to call out to God. He implies that faith and confession are so closely related that they must take place at the same time.

Faith is the atmosphere of confession. This conclusion is also supported by Romans 10:13, "Whoever will call upon the name of the Lord will be saved." Is calling upon the name of the Lord to be viewed as yet another step that must be taken to attain salvation? Of course not! Can you imagine anyone becoming a Christian without calling out to God? Again, it is preposterous! Saving faith moves one to cry out to God through Jesus Christ, our only means of salvation.²⁰

Nevertheless, believing and confessing are two different things that do not happen simultaneously. If Edson is truly concerned about the *timing* of salvation, he cannot say this passage supports the theory that salvation comes *as soon as* a person believes. In fact, this passage may be teaching that the occasion of Christian baptism is the point in time when a person receives salvation.

¹⁹ Cottrell, 182.

²⁰ Edson, 18.

One thing about this verse suggests that baptism may not have been absent from Paul's thinking after all, even though it is not specifically mentioned. That is the fact that the verbs "confess" and "believe" are aorist tense, which suggests that Paul had in mind a specific past act that was associated with the sinner's initial and decisive confession of faith. In early Christian practice, this act was baptism. Bruce says, "If we are to think of one outstanding occasion for such a confession to be made, we should more probably think of that first confession - 'the answer of a good conscience' (I Pet. Iii.21) - made in Christian baptism" (205).²¹

Beasley-Murray comes to the same conclusion about this passage. Notice the clear distinction he makes between the *time* of salvation and the *means* of salvation when he writes,

In the baptismal passage of Rom. 10:10 it is said:
For with the heart faith is exercised for
righteousness (εις δικαιοσυνην),

And with the mouth confession is made for
salvation (εις σωτηριαν).

Here it is evident that faith is directed to the Lord for the purpose or with the result of receiving righteousness, and confession is made in order to receive, or with the effect of receiving, salvation: the point of time of the bestowal of the gift is not mentioned, but it is not needful to do so; faith turning to the Lord receives the grace sought, just as confession made in baptism receives the salvation of God.²²

Faith is listed as the means of salvation and confession at the time of baptism is listed as the time of salvation. Paul does not mention baptism as the time of salvation because he was not trying to establish the time of salvation.

²¹ Cottrell, 180.

²² G.R. Beasley-Murray, Baptism in the New Testament (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1962), 103.

Acts 22:16

In Acts 22:16 Saul is the subject of four actions. All four of these actions are in the aorist tense indicating a specific point in time. "Arise" is an aorist participle. "Be baptized" and "wash" are both aorist verbs in the imperative mood. And "calling" is an aorist participle. Edson rejects the idea that this verse shows Christian baptism to be the *time* of salvation. Instead, he believes that this verse indicates that calling on the name of the Lord is the *means* of washing away sins.

What did Ananias say? He gave two commands; "be baptized" and "wash away your sins" followed by one explanatory phrase, "calling on His name." Does he say that since both baptism and washing commonly involve water that they are the same? No, he does not. Is it possible that Ananias meant that the washing was done by or during baptism? Most assuredly that is a possibility when only this text is considered. Another reasonable option is that calling on the name of the Lord is the means of washing away sins. This is consistent with Acts 2:21 and Romans 10:13 both of which promise that "everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord shall be saved."²³

Edson believes that "calling on the name of the Lord" is the *means* of washing away sins but he refuses to add "calling on the name of the Lord" to his list of requirements for salvation. Edson believes salvation comes at the point of faith and repentance and that faith and repentance are the only requirements for salvation. If that is true then he should not say that calling on the name of the Lord is the *means* of washing

away sins. And if salvation comes at the point in time when a person believes and repents why did Ananias command Saul to be baptized and wash away his sins without saying anything about faith or repentance? Is it likely that Saul would just automatically know that the command to wash away his sins was really a command to believe and repent and it had nothing to do with the command to be baptized?

In addition to the fact that both "be baptized" and "wash" are aorist imperatives, the order of these two commands indicate that baptism is a prerequisite to the forgiveness of sins.

But does the use of two imperatives in itself mean that baptism is a condition for the washing away of sins? Not necessarily. Both could be imperative, with baptism still being just a symbolic picture of the prior inner cleansing. But in this case, the imperatives would have to be reversed: "wash away your sins and be baptized." In fact, *only* if they were in this order could we say that baptism just pictures the prior cleansing.²⁴

Edson objects to the argument based upon the word order in this verse.

The baptism accompanies the repentant faith that cries out to (calls on) the name of the Lord for relief from the guilt of sin. The only meaningful objection to this interpretation is that baptism is listed before both "wash away your sins" and "calling upon the name of the Lord." This is supposed to prove that baptism comes before forgiveness. My main question would be; "are those who use this argument willing to stick with it consistently?" For instance, Romans 10:9 says "if you confess with your mouth Jesus

²³ Edson, 37.

²⁴ Jack Cottrell, Baptism: A Biblical Study (Joplin: College Press, 1989), 73.

as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you shall be saved." With the above rule of interpretation we would have to conclude that confession must precede belief. Do you believe this is getting silly? If you do, you get the point.²⁵

There are two major problems with Edson's argument. First, Edson is comparing apples and oranges when he suggests that these two passages have similar grammatical constructions. Romans 10:9 is a conditional clause with the conjunction εαν. The two conditions listed are aorist, subjunctive verbs (ομολογησης and πιστευσης) and the promised effect is a future indicative verb (σωθηση). Acts 22:16 is not a conditional clause. It is a command in the imperative mood and both verbs and both participles are in the aorist tense.

Second, Edson misunderstands the common objection based on the sequence of commands in Acts 22:16. The objection is based on a cause and effect sequence. Salvation or "wash away your sins" is the effect or the end result. The things necessary for salvation must take place before that end result. In Romans 10:9-10 both "believe" and "confess" are conditions that are listed before the end result of "salvation." In Acts 22:16 "wash away your sins" is equivalent to "salvation" in Romans 10:10. It is the effect or the end result. Saul is told to do two things before the end result will take place: he must "arise" and he

²⁵ Edson, 38.

must "be baptized." "Arise" and "be baptized" both come before "wash away your sins." This passage clearly teaches that Christian baptism is the *time* when a person's sins are washed away.

Colossians 2:11-13

Probably more than any other passage, Colossians 2:11-13 identifies Christian baptism as the point in *time* when a person is saved. Verse 11 indicates that it is at a specific point in time that Christ changes a person's heart by a spiritual circumcision made without hands. Verse 12 identifies that specific time as being "in baptism." Verse 12 also identifies baptism as the point in time when a person is buried with Christ and raised up with Christ. Verse 12 calls baptism "the working of God" indicating that God is doing His redemptive work when a person is being baptized. Verse 13 identifies this event as the time when transgressions are forgiven.

When Colossians 2:12 says this takes place "in baptism," it is affirming what the whole New Testament assumes and teaches, namely, that baptism is an act of salvation. It does not say this happens "before baptism" or "after baptism," but specifically and clearly *in baptism*. This shows that we must at least say that baptism is the time or occasion during which God bestows salvation upon the sinner.²⁶

However, since Edson confuses the *time* of salvation with the *means* of salvation he rejects the obvious meaning of this

²⁶ Cottrell, 129.

passage. He writes, "Verse 11 says our circumcision is one made without hands by Christ. This of course demands that we are speaking of Christ's redemptive work in and for us, not of baptism that is done by men's hands."²⁷ The *means* by which a person experiences this inner change is certainly the redemptive work of Christ. However, the *time* when this takes place is at baptism when a person receives the gift of the Holy Spirit for regeneration and sanctification. Edson identifies the change described in this passage as taking place when a person exercises faith and repentance. However, it is important to recognize that repentance and regeneration are two different things. Repentance is a change that a person makes in his own life. Regeneration is a change that only God can make in a person. The change described in this passage is clearly the work of God. Edson continues,

Regardless of one's view of the purpose of baptism, the middle phrase of verse 12 ("in which you were also raised up with Him") must be interpreted figuratively. Just as one is not literally buried with Christ, so one does not literally come up out of the waters of baptism with Christ. (If "raised up with Him" means a person is with Christ as a new Christian, then "buried with Him" would also have to mean he is with Christ as a Christian. This runs counter to the view that a person doesn't become a Christian until he has been buried in the waters of baptism. If the "with Him" phrases indicate any thing concerning when a person is saved, they would tend to support the view that a person is saved when he has repentant faith.) In either case, "raised up with

²⁷ Edson, 44.

Him" is figurative of starting to live a repentant, Christ-like life. It is obvious that this new life starts when one makes a decision of repentant faith.²⁸

The "with Him" in this passage is not the phrase that indicates the timing of the event. The phrase, "with Him" indicates the identification or connection that takes place between the convert and Christ "in baptism." Baptism is a picture of the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. "In baptism" the convert identifies with each of these aspects of the gospel. Paul specifically states that this burial takes place "in baptism." He does not say "in faith and repentance." Then Paul specifically states that "in which" (in baptism) the convert is raised up with Christ. He does not say that "in faith and repentance" he is raised up with Christ. This text identifies beyond dispute that baptism is the point in time when a person receives forgiveness and spiritual regeneration. It is obvious that this new life starts "in baptism."

Edson makes another mistake that is closely related to the issue of time and means. On several occasions Edson overlooks the difference between linear action and punctiliar action. A person is saved by faith. But faith is continuous throughout a Christian's life as is repentance. A person is saved at a specific point in time, "in baptism." Baptism is a point in time. It only happens once and then its over. Edson believes

²⁸ Edson, 45.

that baptism is a testimony of repentance as if repentance only happens once and baptism proves that it happened. He quotes Galatians 3:27 and connects it to Romans 13:14 to support this view.

We have already noted that the purpose of baptism is to denote or testify of repentance. In Romans 13:14 Paul said "put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh in regard to its lusts." The Greek word for "put on" is the same one as for "clothed" in Galatians 3:27. Romans 13:14 could very well be translated "clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ." What did Paul mean in Romans 13:14? His use of the phrase "make no provision for the flesh" indicates he was speaking of repentance. In verse 12 he said "lay aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light" and in verse 13 he said "let us behave properly as in the day, not in carousing and drunkenness, not in sexual promiscuity and sensuality, not in strife and jealousy." He then continued by saying "but put on (clothe yourselves with) the Lord Jesus Christ." There can be no doubt that in Romans 13:14 clothing with Christ is repentance. Although this doesn't prove that "clothed yourself with Christ" in Galatians 3:27 means "repentance" it at least shows that this is a very reasonable and scriptural interpretation.²⁹

However, the context of Romans 13 clearly indicates that Paul is talking about the repentance that takes place throughout the Christian's life. Galatians 3:27 mentions the starting point (baptism) when each Christian first puts on Christ.

One begins the process of "putting on Christ" at baptism (Gal 3:27), but the process is only completed upon Christ's return. And here the "putting on" of Christ is synonymous with the final conformity to his image or form. The processes begin at baptism when the believers not only die with Christ and believe that

²⁹ Edson, 41.

they will also live with him (Rom 6:8), but they also from that moment participate in the power of life manifested in his resurrection.³⁰

Baptism is the point in time when a person is saved. Repentance is a decision that continues to take place in the Christian's life as he grows in sanctification. An ongoing attitude of repentance is necessary in order to maintain faith.

The Difference Between Faith and Repentance

Edson wants to use the passages that only mention faith as a requirement for salvation to prove that baptism is not a requirement for salvation. But he does not want to drop repentance from his list of requirements so he is forced to merge faith and repentance into one idea.

Edson is not the first person to struggle with the harmonization of the passages that promise salvation by faith with the passages that emphasize a need for repentance. Currently, there is an Evangelical debate going on over this very subject. Some scholars, like Zane Hodges, teach that faith is the only requirement for salvation. Others, like John MacArthur, teach that faith must be accompanied by sincere repentance. Millard Erickson makes some interesting observations about the hermeneutical methods used to solve this problem.

The difficulty appears to stem in part from the fact that the Bible gives different formulas for

³⁰ Norman R. Petersen, "Pauline Baptism and Secondary Burial," Harvard Theological Review 79:1-3 (1986): 221.

conversion, different responses to the query, "What must I do to be saved?" Some passages, emphasized by Hodges, specify that faith is necessary for salvation, but make no mention of repentance. Other passages specify repentance, but make no mention of faith. The question is, How are we to interpret and integrate these passages, which ultimately is systematic theology's task? There are various possibilities:

a. We might regard one of the two sets of passages as primary from a hermeneutical standpoint and interpret the other set in that light. This appears to be the technique which Hodges has followed, elevating the passages where faith is mentioned to a position of normativeness.

b. We might conclude that there are multiple (or at least dual) ways of salvation. One may be saved by faith or by repentance. The method varies with the individual, so that some need to believe and others to repent. Whatever a given individual lacks is what he or she must exercise.

c. We might conclude that both faith and repentance are necessary to salvation. In those biblical passages where only one is mentioned explicitly, the other is implicit. Repentance and faith would then be complementary aspects of a whole conversion.³¹

Edson uses the method described in point "a" to exclude baptism from the plan of salvation but he refuses to use that same method to exclude repentance from the plan of salvation. In fact Edson uses a unique method that neither Erickson nor any other Bible scholar has used to include repentance in the plan of salvation. He redefines both repentance and faith to mean the exact same thing. When he writes about Romans 1-4 he claims that the Abraham was justified at the point of "repentant faith."

³¹ Millard Erickson, The Evangelical Mind and Heart: Perspectives on Theological and Practical Issues (Grand Rapids, Baker Book House, 1993), 120.

Abraham believed God's promise and his belief was reckoned to him as righteousness. Had Abraham been obedient? Was he obedient in the future? Definitely! The type of faith referred to is a repentant faith. This has been the main subject of the previous chapters of Romans. But the stated point of Romans 4:1-3 is that he was justified (reckoned as righteous) at the point of faith, not after the completion of some work or obedience.³²

Edson claims that Abraham was justified by both faith and repentance. He combines these two distinct responses into one single event that takes place at a specific point in Abraham's life. However faith and repentance are two different things with different definitions. Faith is a decision people make about God. Repentance is a decision people make about sin. Hebrews 11:1 defines faith as "the assurance of *things* hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." Hebrews 11:6 mentions the object of the faith that is pleasing to God. "And without faith it is impossible to please *Him*, for he who comes to God must believe that He is and *that* He is a rewarder of those who seek Him." A further examination of the definitions offered by major lexicons and dictionaries will confirm the fact that faith and repentance are two different things that rarely take place at the exact same time.

The Greek word for faith is πιστις (PISTIS). W.E. Vine gives the following definition. "Pistis (πιστις, 4102), primarily, 'firm persuasion,' a conviction based on hearing (akin to peitho, 'to

³² Edson, 10.

persuade'), is used in the NT always of 'faith in God or Christ, or things spiritual.'" ³³

Joseph Henry Thayer writes,

1. conviction of the truth of anything, belief, . . . in the N.T. of conviction or belief respecting man's relationship to God and divine things, generally with the included idea of trust and holy fervor born of faith and conjoined with it . . . a. when it relates to God, πιστις is the conviction that God exists and is the creator and ruler of all things, the provider and bestower of eternal salvation through Christ . . . b. in reference to Christ, it denotes a strong and welcome conviction or belief that Jesus is the Messiah, through whom we obtain eternal salvation in the kingdom of God. ³⁴

Walter Bauer identifies the faith of Abraham in Romans 4 as faith in God without mentioning the repentance of sins as a necessary part of faith. "πιστις can also be characterized as faith in God by the context, without the addition of specific words; so in connection with OT personalities: Abraham Romans 4:5, 9, 11-13, 16, 19f." ³⁵

None of these definitions include repentance as a necessary part of faith. The object of saving faith is always God and His promises. The object of repentance is always sin. Edson even gives a definition of πιστις in an attempt to prove that baptism cannot be included as a part of faith.

³³ W.E. Vine, Vine's Expository Dictionary of Biblical Words (New York: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1985), 222.

³⁴ Joseph Henry Thayer, A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament (Wheaton: Evangel Publishing Company, 1974), 512-513.

It doesn't take a very thorough research of the Greek word *pistis*, which has been translated into English as "faith" or "belief," to conclude that faith means faith-not faith plus baptism. This is especially obvious in Romans 4:2-5 where insertion of "baptism" with faith lowers Bible hermeneutics to all-time new depths. While a main point of verses 2-4 is that Abraham didn't **earn** his justification, verse 5 becomes contradictory to that example and to itself with the insertion of "baptized." Such a step makes it read "to the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly *and is baptized*, his faith *and baptism* is reckoned as righteousness."³⁶

Of course the same argument could be made for excluding the command to repent from the concept of faith in Romans 4. However, Edson does not play the same word games with "repent" that he does with "baptized" because that would "lower Bible hermeneutics to all-time new depths."

The Greek word for repent is *μετανοεω* (METANOEO). Bauer points out that the emphasis of *μετανοεω* is on the negative. "Since in *μετανοεω* the negative impulse of turning away is dominant, it is also used with *απο τινος*: repent and turn away from something."³⁷ Vine writes,

1. *metanoeo* (*μετανοεω*, 3340), lit., "to perceive afterwards" (*meta*, "after," implying "change," *noeo*, "to perceive"; *nous*, "the mind, the seat of moral reflection"), in contrast to *pranoeo*, "to perceive beforehand," hence signifies "to change one's mind or purpose," always, in the NT, involving a change for

³⁵ Walter Bauer et al., A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 660.

³⁶ Edson, 15.

³⁷ Bauer, 512.

the better, an amendment, and always, except in Luke 17:3, 4, of "repentance" of sin.³⁸

Vine does not suggest what he thinks the object of repentance is in Luke 17:3-4, nor does he explain why the object of repentance in that passage cannot be sin. Concerning the noun he writes,

Metanoia (μετάνοια, 3341), "afterthought, change of mind, repentance," corresponds in meaning to A, No. 1, and is used of "repentance" from sin or evil, except in Heb. 12:17, where the word repentance seems to mean, not simply a change of Isaac's mind, but such a change as would reverse the effects of his own previous state of mind.³⁹

Thayer defines the verb μετάνοεο as,

A change of mind: as it appears in one who repents of a purpose he has formed or of something he has done . . . the change of mind of those who have begun to abhor their errors and misdeeds, and have determined to enter upon a better course of life, so that it embraces both a recognition of sin and sorrow for it and hearty amendment, the token and effects of which are good deeds.⁴⁰

None of the lexicons ever combine faith and repentance as the same thing. And there is absolutely no evidence to suggest that these two things must take place at the same moment in a person's mind. Usually a person has faith in God before he decides to repent of sins. However, sometimes people repent of sins before they put they faith in Christ. Cornelius displayed actions of repentance long before he put his faith in Christ. A

³⁸ Vine, 525.

³⁹ Vine, 525.

careful study of the life of Abraham shows that he displayed actions of repentance in Genesis 12:4 long before the statement of faith in Genesis 15:6 (which Edson points to as the time of Abraham's justification).

Edson redefines the word repentance and even applies it to Jesus at His baptism.

All this confusion goes away when we recognize that repentance is a decision to do the Father's will. Jesus made that decision of obedience (Hebrews 5:8, though not talking about this event, would support the conclusion that Jesus decided to be obedient.) and his baptism fulfilled all righteousness by testifying or authenticating that decision or repentance. For those who are offended at the thought of Jesus repenting because repentance means a decision to turn around or away from evil, just remember that for children who grow up loving Jesus and wanting to obey him their repentance is not one of turning but one of deciding to continue to try to do what is right.⁴¹

Edson seems to say that Jesus repented or made a decision to follow the Father and that was equivalent to putting faith in God. But how does Jesus use the word "repentance"? In Luke 15:7 Jesus said, "I tell you that in the same way, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance." If a righteous person "needs no repentance," it is inappropriate to suggest that Jesus repented and His baptism was to authenticate His repentance.

⁴⁰ Thayer, 405-406.

⁴¹ Edson, 32.

The Difference Between Faith and Works

One of the biggest misunderstandings about Christian baptism is based on the assumption that baptism is a "work" in the context of Paul's discussion of "faith" and "works" in Romans 3-4, Galatians 3 and Ephesians 2:8-9. Since Paul teaches that people are saved by grace through faith and not by works, and since baptism is an act of obedience and therefore a work, then it stands to reason that baptism cannot be the time or the means of salvation. This argument is dependant upon the assumption that the time of salvation is the same as the means of salvation. But this argument is also based on the assumption that baptism falls into the "work" category in those passages rather than the "faith" category.

Edson believes that there is no valid reason to exclude baptism from the works class. "Since circumcision, like baptism, is also passive but is still considered a work, there is no valid reason to exclude baptism from the works class."⁴² Edson is correct when he states that appealing to the passive nature of baptism is not a valid reason to exclude baptism from the works class. However, just because one suggested reason is not valid that does not mean that there is "no" valid reason to exclude baptism from the works class.

⁴² Edson, 12.

The key to understanding the relationship between Christian baptism and Paul's discussion of faith and works is found in the contextual meaning of faith and works. In the context of these passages Paul uses the words "faith" and "works" in opposition. However, the basic lexical definitions of these two words are not opposites. And there are places in the New Testament where these two terms are used in harmony rather than in opposition. John 6:28-29 says, "Therefore they said to Him, 'What shall we do, so that we may work the works of God?' Jesus answered and said to them, 'This is the work of God, that you believe in Him whom He has sent.'" The Bible student must discover the contextual meaning of these words by examining the frame of reference in these passages.

Edson tries to come up with a definition for "works" that will include baptism but exclude faith and repentance. However, his definition comes far short of accomplishing this goal. Edson's definition for "works" is simply "obedience."

When one faces instructions or commands from God, he is facing law. Acts 10:48 certainly places baptism in the law or obedience category with Peter's words "and he ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ." In chapter 10 we will see that the Lord's instruction that baptism is to be done in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit certainly makes it a matter of obedience.⁴³

⁴³ Edson, 13.

When Edson discusses Matthew 28:19-20 he indicates that it is a command given in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. The implication is that it must be a work. He writes, "The necessary implication of the above paragraph is that baptism is to be done in the authority of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This places baptism solidly in the 'obedience' category as also mentioned in chapters 4 and 9."⁴⁴

Edson makes similar comments in his exposition of the third chapter of Galatians.

Verse 11: "Now that **no one is justified by** the ("the" is not in the original) **Law** before God is evident; for, '**the righteous man shall live by faith.**'" Again, unless one takes the position that baptism is not obedience and therefore not a part of law, this verse might as well say "no one is justified by baptism."⁴⁵

However, even Edson cannot remain consistent in his application of his definition for "works of law." Many times the New Testament records the command "believe" in the imperative mood (Acts 16:31). This is a command that must be obeyed. And this places faith "solidly in the obedience category." Edson recognizes this when he quotes Acts 6:7.

Acts 6:7 informs us that "the word of God kept on spreading; and the number of the disciples continued to increase greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were becoming obedient to the faith." That last phrase is certainly indicative of repentant faith.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Edson, 35.

⁴⁵ Edson, 41.

⁴⁶ Edson, 53,

Edson also admits that faith is an act of obedience when he writes, "God does not withhold the gift of salvation until some *other* obedience such as baptism is accomplished; it is the immediate result of repentant faith." However, faith is just as much an act of obedience as baptism.

If baptism is a work, so is faith. In fact, the word work is never used in connection with baptism, but it is used pointedly in reference to faith. Remember what the crowd from Capernaum asked Jesus? "What must we do to do the works God requires?" Jesus answered, "the work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent" (John 6:28, 29).⁴⁷

Remember, that Edson also wants to include repentance as a part of "faith" rather than "works." The New Testament gives the command to repent in the imperative mood no less than ten times. When that is compared to the two times in the New Testament that the imperative command to "be baptized" is given, it seems obvious that repentance is just as much, if not more, a matter of "obedience" as baptism. When Paul talks about works of law in opposition to faith he must be talking about something other than just "obedience."

When the Bible student takes into consideration the Law of Frame of Reference he will see that Paul was arguing against a specific heresy in the early Church taught by the Judaizers. These Judaizers were teaching a way of salvation that was not

⁴⁷ F. LaGard Smith, Baptism: The Believer's Wedding Ceremony (Nashville: Gospel Advocate Publishers, 1993), 65.

dependent upon the grace of God through faith in Christ. Paul presents two ways of obtaining salvation: the way of grace through faith and the way of law through works.

Theoretically, these are both legitimate ways of salvation (Rom. 10:5). The way of salvation by law through works is to live by God's law perfectly from the cradle to the grave. In this context works of law represents how people as God's creation respond to the laws of the Creator. These are all the laws the Creator gave His creation to *live* by. These laws are laws concerning morality and worship. Jesus summed up these laws in the commands: "love God" and "love your neighbor." However, the way of salvation by law through works is not practical or possible because "all have sinned." And Paul shows that it only takes one sin to disqualify a person from this way of salvation.

The good news is that Jesus provides another way of salvation by grace through faith in Him. When God gives sinners instructions or commands concerning how to be forgiven, redeemed, and saved. These are not works of morality or worship. These are not commands that the Creator originally wanted His creatures to live by. These are commands about how to have sins forgiven. Cottrell gives a clear explanation of this in his commentary on the book of Romans.

Thus "works of law" cannot be broadened to include "anything a person does" besides faith. We cannot posit two categories of human acts, where faith

alone is one category, with everything else constituting a second category called "works of law." Sinners are instructed, yea, *required* to do other things that cannot be labeled "works of law," because they are not responses to the law given by God as Creator to man as creature. The most obvious example of this is repentance, and an equally clear example is baptism. Both repentance and baptism are the sinner's response to God as the Redeemer. They are neither "works" nor "works of law," any more than saving faith is.

This does not mean that we are justified *by* repentance and baptism, in the way that we are justified *by* faith. As discussed above, faith alone is the sole *means* by which justification is received. It does mean, though, that "faith" in 3:28 (as in 3:27) is an abbreviated way of referring to the grace system as a whole, and that repentance and baptism are legitimately understood within the grace system as conditions for receiving justification that are fully compatible with faith. They are not "works of law" any more than faith is.⁴⁸

When Paul uses "faith" and "works" in opposition to each other these words are abbreviations for two opposing systems of salvation. The "works" system depends on the law, morality and justice. The "faith" system depends on grace and the forgiveness of sins. When the Bible student examines everything the Bible says about baptism it becomes very clear that baptism has nothing to do with morality or justice but it is closely connected to grace and the forgiveness of sins. Baptism belongs in the "faith" system of salvation not the "works" system of salvation.

⁴⁸ Jack Cottrell, The College Press NIV Commentary: Romans Volume 1 (Joplin: College Press, 1996), 270-271.

It is important to remember that there is a difference between the "necessity of means" and the "necessity of precept." Just because sinners cannot be saved by obeying the laws of the Creator that does not mean that they no longer have an obligation to obey the laws the Creator. There are many laws of morality in the New Testament that God expects Christians to live by. Obedience to these laws is not a means of forgiveness or salvation. But obedience to these laws is necessary simply because they are the precepts of the Creator.

Matthew 28:19-20 indicates that baptism is not just a command that must be obeyed because of the "necessity of precept." The great commission indicates that baptism is unlike any other command that Christians are taught to obey.

The way the commission is worded suggests that baptism has a unique importance in the process of disciple-making. We can agree that the term "all things" (Greek, *panta*) does refer to the good works or acts of obedience belonging to the Christian life; in other words it refers to the whole scope of sanctification that follows conversion. But the term is comprehensive ("all things"), and baptism is not included in it. The clear implication is that baptism is not meant to be placed in the category of Christian good works.⁴⁹

The Great Commission indicates that baptism belongs in the category of "necessity of means" rather than "necessity of precept."

⁴⁹ Jack Cottrell, Baptism: A Biblical Study (Joplin: College Press, 1989), 12.

Colossians 2:11-13 also indicates that baptism is not a good deed that the convert performs. This passage calls baptism the "working of God."

"Faith in the working of God" also means that in baptism we must believe in what God in His word promises to do for us at the very moment of baptism itself. The work of baptism is truly God's work. In it He has promised to forgive our sins (Acts 2:38; 22:16) and give us the gift of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:38-39). In it He has promised to put our old sinful nature to death, to remove it in a kind of spiritual circumcision - a circumcision performed by Christ Himself (Col. 2:11). In it He has promised to raise us up from the dead, to make us alive again, to give us new life (Col. 2:12).⁵⁰

It is inappropriate to teach a new believer to be baptized simply because it is a good deed that God has commanded him to obey. Jimmy Allen takes a dangerous step toward a works oriented salvation when he writes,

It is my belief that the New Testament teaches when a penitent believer in the crucified and risen Savior is immersed in water to fulfill righteousness or obey God, the Lord forgives his past or alien sins (although he may not know that sins are remitted or that the Holy Spirit is given at the time). If the thesis is correct, the key word is obedience.⁵¹

This is the kind of teaching that gets people like Ron Edson to think that baptism is a work of man rather than a work of God. This is ego-centric rather than Theo-centric. It puts the emphasis on what the person does rather than on what God does. This kind of teaching would leave the implication that the

⁵⁰ Cottrell, 134.

new believer was saved by his own good deeds. However, in God's plan of salvation the key word is not "obedience" the key word is "faith," faith in what God has promised to do in baptism. If the new believer is taught to believe in the good deeds that God has promised to do in his baptism, then he will know that he was saved by grace through faith at baptism and not by his own works.

The Biblical Consensus of All Christendom

Edson writes,

For those who believe that baptism precedes salvation there is a strong tendency to conclude that it is better to be safe than sorry. The logic here is that if one believes, practices, and teaches that baptism must be done before salvation is received, the "safe" course is being followed. If it would turn out that one is saved at the point of faith, he would still be saved after baptism; but if baptism were necessary, some might end up eternally lost because they had not taken the required step. Therefore, to be on the safe side everyone should believe, practice, and teach that baptism must be done before salvation is received.

Please note that Scripture is very plain in teaching and all genuine believers agree that our faith must be one that produces obedience. But this "better safe than sorry" approach is clearly not valid in light of Scripture's teaching against division. Not only did Jesus pray for our unity in John 17, but also division is sternly rebuked in Romans 16:17, I Corinthians 1:10, and Galatians 5:20.⁵²

Edson assumes that the one who takes the "better safe than sorry" stance is the one who is causing division. He is wise to

⁵¹ Jimmy Allen, Re-Baptism: What One Must Know To Be Born Again (West Monroe: Howard Publishing, 1991), 39.

⁵² Edson, 2.

discourage readers from basing their doctrines on the subjective perspective of what is safe or unsafe. However, it is also inappropriate to accept or reject biblical doctrines because of their potential for division. Christian leaders must accept and teach biblical doctrines simply because they are taught by God's word regardless of the division that might take place.

It is ironic that Edson would make such a strong appeal to unity in the defense of his position. He knows from experience that his new view about baptism and the timing of salvation does not produce unity. When Edson's views were introduced to a congregation that had always been unified on baptism and the timing of salvation, it did not produce unity. It did not preserve unity. It did not prevent division. In fact this new view about baptism and the timing of salvation caused a severe division in the congregation. Anytime a Christian leader teaches the view that salvation precedes baptism to a group of Christians who believe that salvation takes place at the time of baptism he is creating a high risk for division.

But perhaps Edson is referring to the divisions that already exist in Christendom as a whole. Perhaps Edson is referring to those first Restoration preachers who left the Presbyterian and Baptist denominations and started preaching about the necessity of baptism. Or perhaps Edson is referring to the small "minority" of Restoration churches that have failed to

reach out in a spirit of unity to the vast "majority" of churches that do not teach the necessity of baptism. But is the view that salvation precedes baptism really the majority view in all Christendom? And is the view that baptism is the time of salvation really a split away from the original teaching of the Church?

The three oldest and the three largest denominations in the world all teach that baptism is necessary and that it is the time of salvation. These churches may not be in agreement about the mode of baptism or the subjects of baptism but they have always taught the same thing about the meaning of baptism as it relates to the timing of salvation. The Roman Catholic Church has over 633 million members worldwide, and 57 million in the United States.⁵³ There are several Orthodox denominations worldwide all of which believe and teach that baptism is the time of salvation. In the United States there are 3.5 million Eastern Orthodox members⁵⁴, 2.5 million Greek Orthodox members⁵⁵, and over a million Russian Orthodox members.⁵⁶ In addition to these Orthodox members there many more in other Orthodox churches and there are several million more members worldwide. There are 9 million Lutherans in the United States and several

⁵³ Johnny Pressley, TTH 611 Theology of American Denominations Course Outline, 2000 Cincinnati Bible Seminary, Cincinnati, OH. 38.

⁵⁴ Frank S. Mead, Handbook of Denominations in the United States (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 227.

⁵⁵ Mead, 231.

million more worldwide who believe that baptism is the time of salvation.⁵⁷ Of course sound doctrine is not determined by a majority vote and those who cause division are not always in the minority. However, it is a common misconception that the Restoration Movement is all alone in its view of baptism and it must, therefore, be the cause of the division. Such is not the case.

Jack Cottrell has shown from a study of Church history that the biblical consensus from the time of the Apostles all the way up to 1525 has been that baptism is the time of salvation.

We are referring here only to the meaning and purpose of baptism, since the issues of its mode and subjects had been compromised long before the Reformation. With regard to meaning and purpose of baptism, since the issues of its mode and subjects had been compromised long before the Reformation. With regard to meaning, however, there existed a remarkably consistent agreement within Christendom for fifteen hundred years, up to and including Martin Luther himself. This agreement consisted in two main points: (1) baptism is a work of God, i.e., the main action in baptism is something being done by God and not by man; and (2) the divine work accomplished during baptism is the initial bestowal of saving grace upon the waiting sinner, i.e., it is the point of transition from wrath to grace for the individual.⁵⁸

There are absolutely no writings among the early Church fathers that challenge the teaching that baptism is the time of salvation. Barnabas was a Christian leader who wrote some time

⁵⁶ Mead, 235.

⁵⁷ Pressley, 73.

⁵⁸ David W. Fletcher, ed. Baptism and the Remission of Sins: An Historical Perspective (Joplin: College Press, 1990), 18.

between AD 70 and AD 130. He believed and taught that baptism was the point in time when sins were washed away.

Blessed are they who, placing their trust in the cross, have gone down into the water. . . . We indeed descend into the water full of sins and defilement. However, we come up, bearing fruit in our heart, having the fear [of God] and the trust in Jesus in our spirit.⁵⁹

Justin Martyr was a Christian leader who wrote in AD 160. He taught that baptism was the spiritual circumcision.

We who have approached God through Him have received, not carnal, but spiritual circumcision, which Enoch and those like him observed. And we have received it through baptism by God's mercy, since we were sinners. And all men alike may obtain it.⁶⁰

Irenaeus was a Christian leader who wrote in AD 180. He believed and taught that baptism was the time of regeneration and forgiveness.

When we come to refute them [the Gnostics], we will show in its proper place that this class of men have been instigated by Satan to a denial of that baptism which is regeneration to God. Thus, they have renounced the whole faith. . . . For the baptism instituted by the visible Jesus was for the remission of sins.⁶¹

David Bercot lists over 80 quotes from the early Church fathers about the meaning of baptism all of them are in perfect

⁵⁹ David W. Bercot, ed. A Dictionary of Early Christian Beliefs: A Reference Guide to More Than 700 Topics Discussed by the Early Church Fathers (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1998), 51.

⁶⁰ Bercot, 51.

⁶¹ Bercot, 51.

harmony with the biblical teaching that baptism is the time of salvation.⁶²

At the time of the split between the Eastern and Western Church both groups held strongly to the view that baptism was the time of salvation.

At issue was how to deal with Christians who had received baptism in a heretical or schismatic community, and now wanted to be received into the fellowship of the Catholic Church. Above all Cyprian of Carthage spoke out against the validity of heretical baptism. He argued that there is only one true church, only one Spirit and one baptism (Ep. 71,1; 74,4); and there is no salvation outside the church (Ep. 73,21). . . . Augustine's dispute with the Donatists became crucial for the whole further development of the West, and even the Reformers of the 16th century. For him, validity of baptism outside the Catholic church was based on the fact that the real bestower of baptism is Jesus Christ himself (De bapt. IV,12,18; In Joh. VI,7; Ep. 93,47).⁶³

Martin Luther firmly believed and taught throughout his entire life that baptism was necessary for salvation and that it was the point in time when a person was saved. Many Restoration preachers have defended baptism by unfairly and ignorantly attacking Martin Luther. One Restoration preacher writes,

We are indeed justified by faith (Romans 1:16, 17; Romans 5:1, 2). Paul's great doctrine is central to the New Testament doctrine of salvation. The distortion is produced by Martin Luther's elaboration of the idea into justification by faith alone.⁶⁴

⁶² Bercot, 51-56.

⁶³ Walter Kasper, "Ecclesiological and Ecumenical Implications of Baptism," The Ecumenical Review 52, no. 4 (Oct. 2000): 530-531.

⁶⁴ Joe Carson Smith, "The New Testament Process of Salvation," The Restoration Herald, Vol. LXXX, no. 6 (June 2001): 5.

This is unfortunate. If more Restoration preachers would study church history they would discover that Martin Luther was one of the greatest defenders of the necessity of baptism. Luther believed that baptism was for salvation. When he wrote about baptism in *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church* he clearly stated that salvation comes at the time of baptism.

Now, the first thing to be considered about baptism is the divine promise, which says: "He who believes and is baptized will be saved" [Mark 16:16]. This promise must be set far above all the glitter of works, vows, religious orders, and whatever else man has introduced, for on it all our salvation depends. But we must consider it as to exercise our faith in it, and have no doubt whatever that, once we have been baptized, we are saved.⁶⁵

The first one to introduce the heresy that baptism is not the time of salvation was a man named Huldreich Zwingli. Zwingli even recognized that he was the first to teach this doctrine.

Zwingli began his theological career exactly where Luther and other Reformers did - as a true son of the Roman Catholic Church. As such he first believed that the water of baptism washes away sins, including the inherited sin present in infants. However, by 1523 he had repudiated this understanding of baptism. Although he acknowledged that all teachers before him had held to this view, he rejected it. "In this matter of baptism," he said, "all the doctors have been in error from the time of the apostles."⁶⁶

If Edson is going point a fingers at those guilty of causing division over the issue of baptism and the timing of

⁶⁵ Martin Luther, *Three Treatises*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1970), 180.

⁶⁶ Fletcher, 40.

salvation he needs to point to Zwingli and all those who follow his heresy.

What Is At Stake?

What is at stake? Why make such a big deal about baptism and the timing of salvation? When Ron Edson told the elders of the Minnehaha Church of Christ about his new view of baptism they asked him to reconsider his views or resign as preacher of the church. Many people scoffed at the elders' decision. "How could they ask Ron to resign because of such a silly little disagreement?" What is at stake?

The Unity of the Church

If the leadership of a church is divided it is just a matter of time until the church itself will be divided. A leadership cannot be divided on crucial issues such as those dealing with salvation. All the teachers in a congregation must be teaching the same thing about salvation. 1 Corinthians 1:10 says, "Now I exhort you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all agree and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be made complete in the same mind and in the same judgment."

An Accurate Understanding of the Bible

James 3:1 says, "Let not many of you become teachers, my brethren, knowing that as such we will incur a stricter judgment." 2 Timothy 2:15 says, "Be diligent to present yourself

approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, accurately handling the word of truth." It is important that the teachers in a congregation not only teach the same thing but also teach the right thing. God has a higher standard for teachers of the Bible than He does for students of the Bible.

When Restoration preachers teach about baptism they often put a far greater emphasis on the mode of baptism than the meaning of baptism. Both are taught in Scripture and both are important. However, the Bible has a lot more to say about the meaning of baptism than about the mode of baptism. Far too many preachers are glossing over the meaning of baptism as if it was not important.

The Salvation of the Lost

Ultimately the greatest thing at stake when leaders disagree about matters of salvation is the salvation of the lost. Even if it is just a disagreement about the timing of salvation it may still have an eternal impact on someone's soul.

When someone is taught that their baptism was just their own good work and it testified to their repentance and they believe it to the point where they reject the idea that God was doing anything in their baptism then that is exactly what their baptism was. It was simply their own good work and God did not grant them salvation through their own good work.

When Christians teach people about baptism they should emphasize the fact that it is a work of God. They should urge the new converts to appeal to God and believe in the blessings God promises to give them in baptism. 1 Peter 3:21 says that baptism is "an appeal to God for a good conscience."

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