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Baptism: From Heaven or From Men?

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Baptism is from heaven, not from men. Following the Resurrection of our Lord Jesus, He instructed His disciples to make disciples of all nations (Matthew 28:19). In this command, Jesus instructed His disciples to do two things: (1) “baptizing them in [into] the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (28:19) and (2) “teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you” (28:20). The Gospel of Mark also records the Great Commission this way: “Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation. Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned” (Mark 16:15-16). Baptism is associated with belief. We should never divorce baptism and faith in Jesus as the Savior of the world. Baptism is the one sign that testifies to our acceptance of Jesus as God’s Way of salvation.

It is not uncommon for many Christians to speak of baptism as a non-essential in the life of the believer. Whatever view we have of baptism in relationship to salvation, we cannot, and must not, negate baptism as a command of God. Baptism plays a very important role in the Gospel of Matthew. In fact, Matthew begins the ministry of John the Baptist with water baptism (3:1-12). Immediately following John’s call for repentance and baptism, Matthew records the baptism of Jesus. We are fortunate that Matthew records this event. We should listen and pay attention to Matthew’s description of Jesus’ baptism:

Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to be baptized by John. ¹⁴ But John tried to deter him, saying, “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?” ¹⁵ Jesus replied, “Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness.” Then John consented. ¹⁶ **As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water.** At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. ¹⁷ And a voice from heaven said, “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.” (Matthew 3:13-17)

Matthew not only begins his Gospel with the baptism of John, but he also concludes his book with Jesus’ command to His disciples to baptize. Since Matthew begins and ends his book with baptism, then, it must have played a very important part in the ministry of John and of

Jesus. Biblical baptism is not an option, or preference, with the teachings of the New Testament writings. Once more, we are indebted to Matthew for his account of the Great Commission:

Then the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go. ¹⁷When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. ¹⁸Then Jesus came to them and said, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹Therefore **go and make disciples** of all nations, **baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,** ²⁰and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.” (28:16-20)

Can we accept or reject Christian baptism at will? Is water baptism essential for salvation? Is water baptism from heaven or from men? How do we respond to these questions? If it is from heaven, can we refuse baptism and still be saved? Is rejection of water baptism a rejection of God’s counsel? Is baptism a sign of God’s grace? These are questions that I encourage each reader to reflect upon in his or her decision to follow Christ. During the last week of Jesus’ earthly ministry, He questioned the chief priest and the elders of the people about John’s baptism. Matthew records the following conversation between Jesus and the religious leaders:

Jesus entered the temple courts, and, while he was teaching, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him. “By what authority are you doing these things?” they asked. “And who gave you this authority?” ²⁴Jesus replied, “I will also ask you one question. If you answer me, I will tell you by what authority I am doing these things. ²⁵**John’s baptism—where did it come from?** Was it from heaven, or from men?” They discussed it among themselves and said, “If we say, ‘From heaven,’ he will ask, ‘Then why didn’t you believe him?’” (Matthew 21:23-25)

It is obvious that John’s water baptism came from heaven, not from men. For one to cast-off baptism—God’s heavenly design for the believer—is to discard the counsel of God. Luke, in his Gospel account, captures a conversation of Jesus to a crowd in which Jesus addresses the rejection of John’s baptism by the Pharisees and teachers of the Law. As we read Luke’s account of this interaction with the crowd, we should weigh carefully Jesus’ comments about baptism. I entreat every reader to keep his or her ears open to the negative response by the religious leaders concerning John’s baptism. Luke writes about this as follows:

I tell you, among those born of women there is no one greater than John; yet the one who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he. ²⁹(All the people, even the tax collectors, when they heard Jesus’ words, acknowledged that God’s way was right, because they had been baptized by John. ³⁰But the Pharisees and experts in the law **rejected God’s purpose** for themselves, because **they had not been baptized by John.**) [Luke 7:28-30]

When the Pharisees and the experts in the Law rejected baptism, they rejected God’s purpose for themselves. When we renounce Christian baptism, we, too, are declining to consider God’s purpose for ourselves. We might also ask the question: Is Christ’s baptism from heaven or from men? If it is from heaven, and it is, then, why not acknowledge that God’s way

is right and be baptized? If the religious leaders rejected God's purpose for themselves, do we not also reject God's purpose for ourselves by not being baptized?

In the Great Commission, as cited above, Jesus commanded His disciple to baptize believers **into** the name of the trinity (Matthew 28:18-20). Just a perusal, or read-through, of the books of the New Testament reveals the role that baptism plays in the conversion of thousands in their response to Jesus as Lord. Luke, in the Book of Acts, narrates a significant number of baptisms in the early phases of the Christian church. Were the baptizers acting on the command of Jesus? Could baptism be rejected or accepted just on the whims of the people? Is baptism simply a subjective action on the part of the respondent or is it an objective command of our Lord Jesus? We need to confront the question of baptism with a question, was baptism from heaven or from men? How do we react to this question? What is our answer? Some citations from the Book of Acts should shed additional light on the attitude of the first-century church as to the importance of this Christian institution.

THE DAY OF PENTECOST

On the Day of Pentecost, Luke informs us that Peter replied to the penitent, “**Repent and be baptized**, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 2:38). Luke further states: “Those who accepted his message **were baptized**, and **about three thousand** were added to their number that day” (2:41). Did Peter tell them to do what Jesus commanded in the Great Commission? On that day, Peter “warned them” and he “pleaded with them” to save themselves “from this corrupt generation” (2:40). Did any respond? Yes! As stated above, “**Those who accepted his message were baptized.**” Do we want to save ourselves? Then, why not do what they did? They gladly accepted the message of salvation by grace through faith in Jesus and were baptized the same day (2:41). They were not baptized three months later. It is not uncommon for churches to put off baptism for weeks after an individual takes action to accept Jesus as Lord. Is baptism no longer valid in God's scheme of redemption?

THE PEOPLE OF SAMARIA

Luke also records the preaching of Philip in Samaria and the reaction of the people: “**But when they believed** Philip as he preached the good news of the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they **were baptized**, both men and women” (8:12). Why do we suppose they were baptized? Do we suspect that Philip understood the Great Commission? Was he acquainted with the events that transpired on the Day of Pentecost? Luke mentions one of the Samaritans by name—Simon (8:13). In fact, he says, “Simon himself believed and was baptized. And he followed Philip everywhere, astonished by the great signs and miracles he saw” (8:13). **It is significant that baptism is never pushed over into the corner. Is baptism a command of God? Did Jesus command baptism in the Great Commission? Why do many church leaders today down-play baptism?**

THE ETHIOPIAN EUNUCH

In Acts 8:26-39, Luke records the conversion of the Ethiopian eunuch with Philip the evangelist. After Philip shared with him the Good News of Jesus as God's way of salvation, the **eunuch requested baptism** (8:36). How did the eunuch know about baptism? Did Philip tell him about water baptism during the course of his conversation about Jesus being the One that Isaiah wrote about in the eighth century (Isaiah 53)? Why did he want to be baptized immediately? Was water baptism essential for his obedience? Did his baptism signify that he had accepted the message of salvation by faith in the finished work of Christ? Was the eunuch baptized? What does the record say? Listen to the following remarks by Philip and the eunuch:

As they traveled along the road, they **came to some water** and the eunuch said, "Look, here is water. **Why shouldn't I be baptized?**"^c ³⁸And he gave orders to stop the chariot. Then both Philip and the eunuch **went down into the water** and **Philip baptized him**.³⁹ When **they came up out of the water**, the Spirit of the Lord suddenly took Philip away, and the eunuch did not see him again, but went on his way rejoicing. (Acts 8:37-39)

SAUL OF TARSUS

One of the most notorious persecutors of the Christian church was Saul of Tarsus (Acts 9). Paul was on his way to Damascus to persecute Christians when he had an encounter with the Lord Jesus. Following this meeting, he continued his journey to Damascus as a believer in the One he persecuted. Since he suffered blindness, he was led into Damascus. Following his three-day blindness (9:9), God sends Ananias (9:10) to restore Paul's sight and to allow Paul to be filled with the Holy Spirit (9:17). This account of Paul's conversion is a summarized version. In this brief account, we are told that Paul was baptized without delay. Why? Did Ananias tell him about the Lord's command in the Great Commission? How did Paul know about the importance of baptism? Did he wait a few months to be baptized? No! Immediately following the restoration of his eyesight, Luke says that "He got up and **was baptized**" (9:19). Again, why did Ananias tell him to be baptized? Was it because the Lord had commanded him to be baptized? **If he had refused baptism, would he have rejected the counsel of God? Have you yourself rejected the counsel of God by not being baptized as a believer?**

CORNELIUS THE CENTURION

Luke also records another case of conversion that involved the command of baptism—Cornelius the centurion (Acts 10). After the appearance of an angel in a vision, Cornelius was instructed to send for Simon Peter (10:5). When Cornelius sends for Peter, Peter responds to the call and leaves the next day for Caesarea (10:22). Upon Peter's arrival, he begins to speak to them about God's Good News of salvation by faith in Jesus. Peter's sermon on this occasion is

^c Some late manuscripts *baptized?* Philip said, "If you believe with all your heart, you may." The eunuch answered, "I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God."

quite revealing concerning what will put one in a right relationship with God. We need to incline our ears as we listen to this marvelous speech:

Then Peter began to speak: “I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism ³⁵ but accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right. ³⁶ You know the message God sent to the people of Israel, telling the good news of peace through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all. ³⁷ **You know what has happened throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John preached**—³⁸ how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power, and how he went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil, because God was with him. ³⁹ We are witnesses of everything he did in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They killed him by hanging him on a tree, ⁴⁰ but God raised him from the dead on the third day and caused him to be seen. ⁴¹ He was not seen by all the people, but by witnesses whom God had already chosen—by us who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. ⁴² He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one whom God appointed as judge of the living and the dead. ⁴³ All the prophets testify about him that **everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.**” (10:34-43)

Peter associates “forgiveness of sins” with belief in Jesus (10:43). **Did this forgiveness negate the necessity of water baptism?** No! Did God pour out His Holy Spirit upon unsaved individuals? Did this deluge of the Holy Spirit do away with the command of Jesus concerning baptism? No! During Peter’s speaking, Luke says, “While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message” (10:44). Then, Luke records the astonishment of those who had accompanied Peter to the house of Cornelius: “The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles. For they heard them speaking in tongues and praising God” (10:45-46).

Did they receive “forgiveness of sins” when they believed on the name of the Lord? Did they receive the “Holy Spirit” before baptism or after? Were they the children of “Hell” when the Holy Spirit was poured out upon them? Did God pour out His Spirit upon children of the Devil? Again, we need to ask the following probing question, did this phenomenon exempt them from Christian baptism commanded by our Lord? The answer is an emphatic “no”! Listen once more to the words of Luke: “Then Peter said, ‘Can anyone keep these people from **being baptized with water**? They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have.’ So he ordered that they **be baptized** in the name of Jesus Christ” (10:47-48). Is this not what our Lord told them to do in the Great Commission? Is baptism essential to the life of the believer? Can we reject Christian baptism and please God?

LYDIA’S CONVERSION IN PHILIPPI

Again, Luke narrates another conversion, which acceptance of Christ also involved baptism as taught in the Great Commission. Luke, in his narration of Paul’s second missionary journey, tells about the conversion of Lydia and her household (16:11-15). Upon their (Paul, Silas, Luke, and his companions) arrival in Philippi, a Roman colony (16:12), they inquired about worshipers of the one true God. In their investigation, they discovered that a group of

women were outside “the city gate to the river” (16:13). Luke writes down the following events ensuing Paul’s preaching Jesus:

On the Sabbath we went outside the city gate to the river, where we expected to find a place of prayer. We sat down and began to speak to the women who had gathered there. ¹⁴ One of those listening was a woman named Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth from the city of Thyatira, who was a worshiper of God. The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul’s message. ¹⁵ **When she and the members of her household were baptized,** she invited us to her home. “If you consider me a believer in the Lord,” she said, “come and stay at my house.” And she persuaded us. (16:13-15)

After she listened to the message about Jesus, she accepted this message of Christ and responded by being baptized as well as members of her household.¹ How did she know about baptism if Paul had not shared what the Lord commanded in the Great Commission?

CONVERSION OF THE PHILIPPIAN JAILER

Once when Paul and his companions “were going to the place of prayer” (Acts 16:16), they were met by a “slave girl who had a spirit” (16:16). As a result of the slave girl following them for several days, Luke says that Paul “became so troubled that he turned around and said to the spirit, ‘In the name of Jesus Christ I command you to come out of her!’ At that moment the spirit left her” (16:18). As a result of this exorcism, the owners of the slave girl seized Paul and Silas and “dragged them into the marketplace to face the authorities” (16:19). This resulted in their imprisonment and the stripping of their clothes, and a beating (16:22-23). Following this imprisonment, an angel of God interfered with a “violent earthquake” (16:26) that shook the very foundations of the prison (16:26). This earthquake resulted in the opening of the prison doors and the loosening of the chains that bound the prisoners (vv.26-27). These conditions wreaked havoc in the mind and heart of the jailor who was responsible for their incarceration. Escape for the prisoners meant death for the guard. As Luke writes about this catastrophic event, we stand in amazement at the results of this mighty miracle. Listen to Luke as he narrates the following details:

The jailer woke up, and when he saw the prison doors open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself because he thought the prisoners had escaped. ²⁸ But Paul shouted, “Don’t harm yourself! We are all here!” ²⁹ The jailer called for lights, rushed in and fell trembling before Paul and Silas. ³⁰ He then brought them out and asked, “**Sirs, what must I do to be saved?**” ³¹ They replied, “**Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved**—you and your household.” ³² Then they spoke the **word of the Lord** to him and to all the others in his house. ³³ **At that hour of the night the jailer took them and washed their wounds; then immediately he and all his family were baptized.** ³⁴ The jailer brought them into his house and set a meal before them; he was filled with joy because he had come to believe in God—he and his whole family. (16:27-34)

¹For a detailed study of the “message of Christ,” see Dallas Burdette, “Preaching in the Early Church,” in *From Legalism to Freedom: A Spiritual Narrative of Liberation* (Longwood, FL: Xulon, 2008), 344-382

They preached the message of grace to him and his entire household. How soon before they were baptized? Was it two weeks later? Was it a month later? Did they wait until several responded to the Good News of God before baptism? If baptism is so unimportant, as advocated by many Christians today, then, why were they baptized “immediately” in the same “hour of the night”? Does this sound ridiculous? Why the same hour of the night? Does this baptism remind us of the command of Jesus in Matthew 28:18-20?

BAPTISMS IN CORINTH

Following their release from prison, Paul and Silas traveled to Thessalonica, 128 miles SW of Philippi, (Acts 17:1-9), then, to Berea, 41 miles SW of Thessalonica, (vv.10-15), next, to Athens, 200 SE of Berea, (17:16-33), and, finally, Paul arrives in Corinth, 40 miles W of Athens, (18:1). During Paul’s stay in Corinth, Luke writes, “Every Sabbath he reasoned in the synagogue, trying to persuade Jews and Greeks” (18:4). As a result of his proclaiming the Good News of God’s kingdom, Paul **baptized Crispus and many of the Corinthians**: “Crispus, the synagogue ruler, and his entire household believed in the Lord; and many of the Corinthians who heard him believed and were baptized” (18:8).

APOLLOS’ AND JOHN’S BAPTISM

Apollos was a learned man and a man “with a thorough knowledge of the Scriptures” (Acts 18:24). Even though, in the words of Luke, “He had been instructed in the way of the Lord, and he spoke with great fervor and taught about Jesus accurately, though he knew only the baptism of John” (18:25), he still did not understand the baptism of the Great Commission—into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. As a result of this lack of proper understanding of Christian baptism, Priscilla and Aquila invited Apollos “to their home and explained to him the way of God more adequately” (18:26). This episode of Priscilla and Aquila is given as an introduction leading up to Paul’s engagement with certain individuals who had not been baptized in the name of Jesus—“about twelve men in all” (19:7).

There were believers in Ephesians who knew only of the baptism of John the Baptist (19:1-7). Since they **had not been baptized** “into the name of the Lord Jesus” (19:5), they were baptized again: “Paul said, ‘John’s baptism was a baptism of repentance.’ He told the people ‘to believe in the one coming after him, that is, in Jesus.’” On hearing this explanation, they were baptized **into** the name of the Lord Jesus (19:4-5). Once more, if baptism is nonessential, then, why were they baptized again? Is it because of the command of Jesus in Matthew 28:18-20?—“baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (28:19).²

²For a detailed study of rebaptism (Chapter 4), see “Rebaptism in the Stone/Campbell Movement,” in Dallas Burdette, *From Legalism to Freedom*, 196-235. Presently (2-4-2021), I am adding this study to my essays on baptism: see freedominchrist.net.

CONCLUSION

Just a casual reading of the conversions in the New Testament reveals that those who accepted Christ through repentance submitted to water baptism. Water baptism is something performed by one individual upon another individual who has accepted Jesus and repented of his or her sins. **If water baptism is from heaven and not from men and women, how can we reject Christian baptism and expect to inherit eternal life.** If we get rid of Christian baptism, we throw out God's counsel. Why were individuals commanded to be baptized? Did this command stem from the command of Jesus to His disciples? Have we accepted the baptism commanded in the Great Commission? Chapter 2 of this study on baptism sets forth the concept that in baptism, God, in His mercy and grace, allows us to share in the Death, the Burial, and the Resurrection of His Son Jesus. Baptism is a constant reminder of God's grace and love for the world. Water baptism is from God, not from men and women. We are not at liberty to reject God's counsel without impunity. **Where did John receive his authority to baptize with water?** John, one of the Twelve, recorded the testimony of John the Baptist about water baptism:

Then John gave this testimony: "I saw the Spirit come down from heaven as a dove and remain on him. ³³ And I myself did not know him, but the one **who sent me to baptize with water told me,** 'The man on whom you see the Spirit come down and remain is the one who will baptize with the Holy Spirit.'³⁴ I have seen and I testify that this is God's Chosen One."