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Baptism: *Symbol and Sacrament*

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Is water baptism merely a symbol or is baptism purely a sacrament? Is it both? Since neither word (symbol or sacrament) is employed in the New Testament writings with baptism, then these words are accommodative nomenclatures, or classifications, to express truths contained in baptism.¹ It appears that baptism is a symbol of His **Death, Burial, and Resurrection**. Yet, it also comes into view that baptism, in some sense, is more than just symbolic. We detect from the writings of the New Testament that baptism is, in a number of contexts, associated with remission of sins. In seeking to capture the various meanings associated with baptism, I have chosen two words—symbol and sacrament—in order to try to summarize a more rounded view of this command ordered by our Lord Jesus.²

The question of the importance of baptism permeates the whole of the Christian community. There is not a consensus concerning the import, or significance, of this practice within the church of the Redeemed. Numerous questions arise within certain communities of Christ as to the essentiality of this ritual. Is it necessary to salvation? **Can we dispense with baptism and still be saved? Generally, Christians interpret this command from Jesus within the framework of their own Christian experience.** Just a casual reading of books on baptism reveals the puzzlement, or disorientation, existing among equally godly men and women. Our interpretation of the significance of this ordinance depends, to a large extent, on our own frame of reference. In other words, the common tendency is to read into the various texts our own preconceived prejudices inherited from our forefathers.

I labored for seventeen years in a fellowship that did not recognize anyone as a Christian if he or she was not baptized specifically “for the remission of sins” as mentioned in Acts 2:38. “For remission of sins” became the determining factor in our acceptance of others. Yet, this was

¹In 1 Peter 3:21, the NIV’s translation uses the word symbol.

²Even though the word *sacrament* is employed in this chapter, it is not to be interpreted as a sacrament in the normal sense of the term as utilized by the Catholic Church. This chapter also refutes what is known as baptismal regeneration. This chapter seeks to bring the two earlier chapters into focus as to the significance of this often misunderstood symbol and sacrament.

not the whole story. One had to be baptized by a Church of Christ minister. This movement (one-cup and non-Sunday school fellowship) did not even accept as Christians those who belonged to the Christian Church, another movement that came out of the Stone/Campbell Movement.³ Many Christians within the various Churches of Christ still teach that one's baptism is invalid if one does not know the precise time sin is remitted. In other words, baptism must be performed with the following formula: "for the forgiveness of sins."

Many Christians labor under the impression that one is justified by baptism, not by faith in the finished work of Christ upon Calvary. With just a casual reading of the Scriptures, we see statement after statement that one is justified by faith. Yet, this does not negate the importance of baptism in the life of every believer. When we believe in Jesus as the Savior of the world, we must respond to Jesus with water baptism. Jesus, in the Great Commission, joins belief and baptism in redemption. Jesus tells His disciples to "Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation. ¹⁶ Whoever **believes and is baptized** will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned" (Matthew 28:15-16).

As we reflect upon this statement by the Lord, we must not negate water baptism from faith in Christ. **What relationship does water baptism have with faith?** Again, we must inquire about the "act" of baptism in its relationship to salvation. Does baptism, in and of itself, have magical powers to save us apart from faith? Is baptism simply "baptismal regeneration"? Is baptism to be interpreted as a work whereby we earn our own salvation? **Or, is baptism a means whereby we act in response to salvation offered through faith?** Can we dispense with water baptism? The answer is emphatically "no"! Does water baptism have any place in God's scheme of redemption? These are questions that confront Christians in the various fellowships of those who profess faith in Christ as God's Way of salvation.

This chapter seeks to have balance in presenting baptism. Since water baptism is commanded by Jesus, we cannot reject Christian baptism without rejecting God's purpose for us in our lives. **Yet, we should be careful in presenting baptism as a work whereby we earn our salvation.** Baptism is the other side of the coin, so to speak. Listen to Paul's words as he writes to Titus as he discusses the matter of justification:

But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, ⁵ he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, ⁶ whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior, ⁷ so that, **having been justified by his grace**, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life. ⁸ This is a trustworthy saying. And I want you to stress these things, so that those who have trusted in God may be careful to devote themselves to doing what is good. These things are excellent and profitable for everyone. (Titus 3:4-8)

Another statement of Paul deals with justification and works. Pay attention to Paul as he seeks to nip-in-the-bud the concept of works as a means of justification:

³For an in-depth study of rebaptism, see Dallas Burdette, "Rebaptism in the Stone/Campbell Movement," in Dallas Burdette, *From Legalism to Freedom: A Spiritual Narrative of Liberation* (Longwood, FL: Xulon, 2008), 196-235. I have also included this study as Chapter 4 in this series on water baptism for the benefit of the reader or readers.

For it is by **grace you have been saved, through faith**—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—⁹ **not by works**, so that no one can boast. ¹⁰ For we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do. (Ephesians 2:8-10)

There appears to be a tendency within some Christian communities to defame, or discredit, water baptism. In my experience, I have discovered churches that do not talk about baptism. Just a few years ago, a friend of mine went to pastor a particular congregation in Opelika, AL that did not focus upon baptism as a command of Jesus. In fact, shortly after beginning his work with this local body of believers, he discovered that none of the members had ever been baptized, which included the widow of her late husband who pastored the church. Since water baptism is commanded by the Lord, it is not a take-it-or-leave-it proposition. If baptism is ordained by the God of heaven, how can we disallow water baptism and not turn down God’s purpose for us in our lives? In baptism, we observe all the major doctrines of Christianity within the theology of baptism. What is the significance of baptism in the Christian economy? Can we reject the baptism commanded by Christ, and not, at the same time, refuse a direct command from the Lord Jesus? Luke reveals an informative statement concerning the rejection of John’s baptism by the religious leaders:

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**.³⁰ But the Pharisees and experts in the law rejected God’s purpose for themselves, because they had not been baptized by John. (Luke 7:29-30)

If we throw out Christian baptism, are we rejecting God’s counsel? Are we willing to acknowledge that Jesus’ way is right by submitting to His baptism even if we do not understand all its implications in our lives? Jesus instructed His disciples to “go and make disciples of all nations, **baptizing them** in^a (εἰς, *eis*, “into”) the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Matthew 28:19).

BAPTISM AS SYMBOL

When we confront Pauline teaching on baptism, we come face-to-face with a whole range of ideas of a most complex subject. How do we interpret the implications in baptism for the believer? Paul informs the Colossians that in Christ everyone is a “new self” (Colossians 3:10). For Paul, when one is “in Christ,” there is neither “Greek or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all” (3:11). Whatever we wish to say about water baptism, we need to bear in mind that Paul expresses the **outcome of baptism as having “put on the new self” (3:10)**. How do we become united with Christ wherein the divisions of our race are obliterated? Again, Paul writes: “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!” (2 Corinthians 5:17).

One who is justified by faith in the finished work of Christ welcomes baptism as a sign, or seal, of that which has already taken place. Yet, this justification does not take away the importance of water baptism in the life of every individual. There is some sense in which this union with Christ, according to Paul, occurs when we are “Buried with him in baptism and

^a Or *into*; see Acts 8:16; 19:5; Romans 6:3; 1 Cor. 1:13; 10:2 and Gal. 3:27.

raised with him through your faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead” (Colossians 2:12). Within the ἐκκλησία (*ekklēsia*, “congregation, assembly, church”) of God, the divisions of race are wiped out. The work of Christ’s Atonement for men and women become visible and effective. For us to be “in Christ” is to be in the fellowship of Jesus the Messiah. When we put our faith in Christ and are baptized, we, in some sense, put on Christ. Paul expresses this awesome truth this way:

You are all **sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus**,²⁷ for all of **you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ**.²⁸ There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.²⁹ If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise. (Galatians 3:26-29)

It is significant that Paul speaks of one becoming a child of God through faith, not baptism. Yet, he did not discount baptism in the scheme of God’s redemption. Paul continued his thoughts by saying that those “**who were baptized** into Christ have clothed” themselves with Christ. As believers, we believe and are baptized in obedience to the command of Christ. **Symbolism is something designed by God, not by humanity.** J. S. Whale⁴ wrote about symbols in Christianity. He writes:

We do need symbols to compass the ineffable things of our experience. Goethe went to the root of this matter when he said that the highest cannot be spoken: it can only be acted. The inadequacy of words, the impotence of definitions is notorious.⁵

“Baptism and the Lord’s Supper are means of grace,” writes Whale.⁶ He, yet again, speaks of symbols with great insight. Take note once more as he himself grapples with words to capture the place of symbols within the Christian community. He pens:

The Gospel is a Gospel of Divine Action in time. We do not choose the symbols of water, bread and wine. They are chosen for us, given to us: these rites of Baptism and Eucharist go back to Christ Himself.⁷

Both baptism and the Lord’s Supper derive their meaning from the redeeming work of Christ. As we reflect upon baptism and the Lord’s Supper, we are reminded of God’s Divine action. The action of baptism proclaims that God has done something for men and women. **Baptism is a sign that God redeems those who accept His message of grace.** When we are confronted with doubts about our salvation, we can look back and point to our faith and baptism. In one sense, we can say that baptism is the foundation of our certainty. How? Baptism symbolizes our death, our burial, and our resurrection with His Death, His Burial, and His Resurrection. Remember, Christ has redeemed us and has given us the sign of this fact in

⁴ **J. S. Whale** (d. Sept. 17, 1997 at the age of 100), distinguished theologian and congregational preacher.

⁵J. S. Whale, *Christian Doctrine* (New York: Cambridge University Press, [1941], 1966), 155. This book consists of eight lectures delivered in the University of Cambridge to undergraduates of all Faculties.

⁶Ibid., 159.

⁷Ibid., 156-15.

baptism. Baptism has no efficacy apart from faith in the Lord Jesus. **In baptism, we witness the place where the road of sin ends and a new road begins**—a life with Christ. Kevin Giles⁸ is correct when he comments on water baptism: **“the point where the response to the ‘word’ is actualized.”**⁹

NEW RACE THROUGH THE DEATH AND THE RESURRECTION OF JESUS

Jesus has become the Initiator of a new race of men and women who know the power of His redemption. For Paul the doctrine of salvation is as Christ-centered as is his doctrine of the *ekklēsia* —both come to spotlight in water baptism. In other words, baptism directs the gaze of the person being baptized on the Death, the Burial and Resurrection of Jesus for the sins of humanity. In addition to the person being baptized, the observers also reflect upon the Christ of Calvary. This act of submission, on the part of the penitent individual, lets others know that this one has accepted God’s message of grace. Paul cuts away all underbrush as he seeks to capture the very essence of Christian baptism in his Epistle to the Roman Christians:

Or don’t you know that all of us who were **baptized into Christ** Jesus were **baptized into his death**? ⁴ We were therefore **buried with him through baptism into death** in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life. ⁵ If we have been **united with him like this in his death**, we will certainly also be **united with him in his resurrection**. ⁶ For we know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be done away with,^a that we should no longer be slaves to sin— ⁷ because anyone who has died has been freed from sin. (Romans 6:3-7)

Water Baptism Ordained by Jesus

Baptism was ordained by the Lord for all disciples, just as the Christian experience of life in Christ Jesus through the Holy Spirit was/is intended for all believers. Unfortunately, many Christians do not cite Acts 2:38 in their teaching. Peter, in response to those who were convicted concerning the Christ, he said, **“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). Did they reject baptism? Listen once more to the comments of Luke as he describes the reaction of the penitents: **“Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day”** (2:41). This command concerning baptism had been given by the Lord fifty days earlier. In Jesus’ final encounter with His disciples, he commanded baptism:

⁸ **Kevin Giles**, Vicar of St. Michael’s Church in North Carlton, Australia.

⁹ Kevin Giles, *What On Earth Is the Church: An Exploration in New Testament Theology* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1995), 143.

^a Or *be rendered powerless*

Therefore **go** and **make disciples** of all nations, **baptizing them** in^a the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,²⁰ and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age. (Matthew 28:19-20)

It is not uncommon for Christians today to deny the importance of baptism as a means for the further transmission of grace, that is to say, forgiveness of sins, reception of the Holy Spirit, and induction into the body of Christ. As a result of this mindset, many believers insist on **ONLY** viewing baptism as a beautiful and expressive symbol of certain basic facts in the redemptive mission of our Lord, but, at the same time, disallows any efficacy or grace imparted to the respondent. Thus, a key term employed by many believers is simply “representation.” In other words, for many, baptism is nothing more than a picture, a witness, or a sign of the salvation established by the Lord. Yes, it is all this, but it is more. **Baptism is connected with the message of grace.** Anders Nygren’s¹⁰ comments are well worth citing:

What now has baptism to do with that message? We can answer: in baptism it is just that Gospel which encounters us, and that in concrete deed. **In baptism God deals with us personally, takes us out from the power of darkness and sets us as members in the kingdom of His Son.** Through our natural birth we belong to a race which is subjected to sin and death, and as members of that sinful humanity participate, in every aspect of our being in all of its conditions. In the same manner we, through baptism, are placed in an entirely new context. **We are members in the new humanity whose head is Christ and who in Him participate in God’s righteousness and in the life of the new aeon, the eternal life.** It is for this reason that baptism is called ‘the bath of regeneration,’ because through it we are born into this new existence which God gave us through Christ. By the natural birth we have been born to a life which, in the final analysis, bears the mark of death. Through baptism, the bath of regeneration, we have been born to life, to the life ‘in Christ.’¹¹ (Emphasis mine—bold)

As believers, we need to be concerned with truths enshrined within the sacred pages of God’s Holy Word. J. H. Oldham¹² writes one of the most insightful paragraphs that one can read concerning the sacraments (Lord’s Supper and baptism). We detect passion in his writings as he pens the following words: “To listen to the Word is to open the mind and heart to the message of the grace and truth that came by Jesus Christ. This truth enshrined in the Bible is made living and effectual by the Holy Spirit.”¹³ Again, he writes perceptive words about the church with its various activities that sets forth the reality of God’s redemption. Even though the following quote is lengthy and refers to the Thirty-Articles of the Church of England, nevertheless, his words are full of meaning and well worth reflecting upon:

^a Or *into*; see Acts 8:16; 19:5; Romans 6:3; 1 Cor. 1:13; 10:2 and Gal. 3:27.

¹⁰ **Anders Nygren** (1890-1978), Swedish, Lutheran theologian, and Professor of Systematic theology at Lund University

¹¹ Anders Nygren, *The Gospel of God*, translated by L. J. Trinterud (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, [1949], 1951), 69-70.

¹² **J. H. Oldham** (1874-1969), an ecumenical leader.

¹³ W. A. Visser’t Hooft & J. H. Oldham, *The Church and Its Function in Society* (London: George Allen and Unwin, [1937], 1938), 154-155.

Corresponding to the receptive acts by which the Church is ever constituted afresh, there are the active functions in which, through its appointed officers, the Church mediates what it has received. These are, **first**, the proclamation of the Gospel—not merely in preaching and addresses, but in acts of worship and deeds of mercy and love that declare its central message—and, **secondly**, in the administration of the sacraments, with their unfailing witness to the objectivity and reality of God’s redemption.

It is the constitutive functions of the Church that it is intended to safeguard when the Church is defined in the Thirty-nine Articles of the Church of England and in the Confessio Augustana, as the congregation of faithful men in which the pure Word of God is preached (or the Gospel is rightly taught) and the Sacraments duly administered. Without the exercise of these essential functions in which the Church renews its life, the Church would no longer be a Church in the Christian sense. **But this is not to say that the preaching of the Gospel and the Sacraments are the expression of the life of the Church.** They are the source of a new life which is meant to manifest itself in new attitudes and behaviour and to bring about transformations in the life of society. The deepest truths are often the most dangerous. **Insistence on the essential, constitutive functions may lead too easily in practice, as we have already seen, to a disastrous ecclesiasticizing of the Church, so that it becomes primarily an affair and interest of the clergy and pastors and theologians rather than a community of redeemed men and women joyfully serving God in the ordinary concerns of the common life.**¹⁴ (Emphasis mine—underlining and bold)

BAPTISM AS A SACRAMENT

Another side of the coin of the study of baptism is sacrament. Yet, this aspect of baptism may also be corrupted. It is wrong to look upon baptism as a “miracle-working rite” (Sacramentalism), that is to say, “baptismal regeneration,” that is, baptism separated from faith in Jesus. **Baptism is not a human manipulation, a secret procedure through which we may appropriate something hard to obtain.** It is not a heathen rite in which we engage in order to control the gods. No, in Christian baptism, God bestows the blessings of salvation mediated through it. **It is in response to God as Creator for His great love that we are submissive to the ordinance of baptism.** In other words, baptism should never be viewed as a “magical rite.” Baptism is not “baptismal regeneration.” **It is both symbol and sacrament.** Baptism for the believer is a two-sided happening. Emil Brunner¹⁵ explains baptism this way:

In baptism it is God, first and sovereign, who acts, who forgives sin, who cleanses man and regenerates him. But man too acts in baptism. He allows this cleansing of himself to take place, he lets himself be drawn into the death of Christ, he confesses his faith and his attachment to Christ. **Baptism is not merely a gift to man, but also an active receiving and confession on the part of man.** Indeed baptism, precisely as this free confession of man, is the stipulation for the individual’s joining the Church. Baptism is not only an act of grace, but just as much an act of confession stemming from the act of grace.¹⁶ (Emphasis mine—bold)

¹⁴Ibid., 155, 156.

¹⁵**Emil Brunner** (1889-1966), Swiss Protestant theologian and Professor of Theology in Zürich.

¹⁶Emil Brunner, *The Divine-Human Encounter*, translated by Amandus W. Loos (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1943), 178-179.

Symbolic and Sacramental Nature of Baptism

When we approach the symbolic nature of baptism and its sacramental¹⁷ nature, we have the tendency to go to extremes. For example, when the symbolic nature of baptism is stressed, the tendency is to look upon baptism as a useless addition that supplies nothing important. In other words, it is superfluous, no real value. **Though many abuse baptism as commanded by Jesus, we must never forget the symbolic element in baptism as well as the sacramental element.** In the symbolic element of baptism, we witness the Death, the Burial, and the Resurrection of Jesus our Lord. In the act of baptism, we easily grasp His Death, His Burial, and His Resurrection. As believers, we must be careful that we do not minimize. Immersion is much clearer in this symbolic act than the act of pouring or sprinkling.

In baptism, God separates us from sin and gives us a life out of sin-death (spiritual death) with a constant direction toward Himself. In baptism, we die to sin and experience new life in and through Christ. In baptism, we experience the new life. Nygren is correct when he writes: **“Baptism is the act of initiation into the Christian life.”**¹⁸ Again, Nygren’s comments on baptism unravel the mystery of baptism with its implications in the life of the believer. Listen to him as he seeks to capture the very essence of the importance of Christian baptism:

It is like when an ingrafted branch grows together with the tree. Through baptism we are ingrafted into Christ and grown together with Him. Just as our life here on earth has been put into a vast context, which in the final analysis dominates us, so it is also with the new context into which we have been set with Christ. ‘Now it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me’ (Gal. 2:20). For when we are members in Christ’s body, then that which has happened to Him who is the Head and the First-born has happened also to us. Christ’s Death is our death. Christ’s Resurrection is our resurrection.¹⁹

Günther Bornkamm²⁰ paints a graphic picture of baptism and its implications in the lives of those who have accepted the message of grace through baptism. Pay attention to Bornkamm as he writes:

Believers have the new life presented to them nowhere else than in Christ: “hid in Christ was God” (Col. 3:3). “This life does not possess experience of itself but faith” (Luther). **The baptized person is nothing but one who believes and hopes.** It is in this way that he has justification and the new life presented to him in baptism. So, too, the tension of his temporal existence is determined: “If we have died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with him” (Rom. 6:8). The event from which we originate in baptism, i.e. death (“we have died”); faith is ours in the present (“we believe”); life in the future (“we shall be with him”). In the faith that is based on what has happened and that reaches toward what is coming, death, and life are together present. Of course, faith is not itself the basis. It is to be noted that faith is hardly mentioned in connection with the baptismal texts of Rom. 6

¹⁷The word *sacrament* denotes a religious rite that is regarded as a means or a sign of grace.

¹⁸Anders Nygren, *The Gospel of God*, 70.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, 70-71.

²⁰Günther Bornkamm (1905-1990), German New Testament scholar and Professor of New Testament at the University of Heidelberg.

and Col. 2:24. The basis is rather the resurrection of Jesus Christ, in which the life of baptized persons is already a real, though hidden present (Rom. 6:9-11).²¹

BLESSINGS ASSOCIATED WITH BAPTISM

We cannot deny that the Holy Spirit associates gifts, effects, and many spiritual blessings with baptism. Perhaps, we should reflect on the following blessings related with baptism: (1) the combination of baptism and the forgiveness of sins on the Day of Pentecost [Acts 2:38]; (2) Paul's baptism connected with washing away of sins [22:16]; (3) baptism and union with Christ are combined in Galatians [Galatians 3:26-27]; (4) burial and resurrection of an individual linked with baptism [Colossians 2:12]; (5) baptism and union with Christ and release from the power and guilt of sin and the sharing in the risen life of the Redeemer drawn out in Christian baptism [Romans 6:1-11]; (6) baptism and the possession of the Holy Spirit are coupled [Acts 2:38]; and (7) baptism and the new beginning are combined by Paul [Titus 3:5]. Paul's statement to Titus 3:5 about "the washing of rebirth" deserves special attention:

But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, ⁵ he saved us, **not because of righteous things we had done**, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, ⁶ whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior, ⁷ so that, having been **justified by his grace**, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life. (Titus 3:4-7)

Salvation is characterized by the "rebirth" (new beginning) and "renewal" which the Holy Spirit effects. In other words, *water* cannot give the **new beginning** with God. It is only the Holy Spirit who can produce the new life. But, on the other hand, the context reveals that the operation of the Holy Spirit is associated with water baptism (see also John 3:5 and 1 Corinthians 12:13).

CONCLUSION

Baptism is a spiritual act. Apparently, Peter sought to correct any possible misapprehension of it in his First Epistle. Peter uses Noah's Ark and the water as an example of Christian baptism. Pay attention to his explanation:

In it only a few people, eight in all, were saved through water, ²¹ and **this water symbolizes baptism** that now saves you also—not the removal of dirt from the body but **the pledge^e of a good conscience toward God**. It saves you by the resurrection of Jesus Christ. (1 Peter 3:20b-21)

Peter would not have disagreed with Paul's statement to the Christians in Ephesus. Paul's comments do not negate what he wrote on baptism. Listen to Paul as he explains the source of salvation: "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—⁹ not by works, so that no one can boast" (Ephesians 2:8-9). In light of the

²¹Günther Bornkamm, *Early Christian Experience*, translated by Paul L. Hammer (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1969), 81.

^eOr *response*

totality of the Scriptures, we are compelled to conclude that one who understands baptism as simply “a beautiful and expressive symbol” fails to understand the whole of baptism as presented in the New Testament.

On the other hand, if we understand baptism only as a sacrament, that is to say, a magic formula for the forgiveness of sins apart from the Atonement that is also wrong. **Baptism embodies the saving acts of God “in Christ,” and it also allows the person submitting to baptism to share in the Death, the Burial, and the Resurrection of Christ.** It is through baptism that we are grafted into the “true” vine, namely, Christ. Just as Christ’s baptism initiated His Messianic work, so our baptism initiates our Christian life and kingdom work. In baptism, the Good News of God encounters us in a concrete deed. The sacramental aspect of baptism is what God does for us “in” and “through” His Son Jesus. Again, Paul’s words to the Christians at Rome drives home the actions that take place in baptism.

Don’t you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? ⁴ We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life. (Romans 6:3-4)

In order for our baptism to be valid, we must believe that Christ was raised from the dead. We must confess our faith in Jesus as Lord. After Paul wrote about baptism, he dealt with the concept of earning one’s salvation through Law keeping (10:1-4). He then set forth words to describe the very heart of justification. Let us hear Paul as he writes:

Moses describes in this way the righteousness that is by the law: “The man who does these things will live by them.”^b ⁶ But the righteousness that is by faith says: “Do not say in your heart, ‘Who will ascend into heaven?’^c” (that is, to bring Christ down) ⁷ “or ‘Who will descend into the deep?’^d” (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead). ⁸ But what does it say? “The word is near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart,”^e that is, the word of faith we are proclaiming: ⁹ That if you confess with your mouth, “**Jesus is Lord**,” and **believe in your heart** that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. ¹⁰ For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved. ¹¹ As the Scripture says, “Anyone who trusts in him will never be put to shame.”^f (10:5-11)

The words of Jesus to Nicodemus also focus upon belief in Jesus as the means of justification before God. Jesus goes right to the heart of redemption:

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son,^f that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. ¹⁷ For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. ¹⁸ **Whoever believes in him** is not condemned, but **whoever does not believe** stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God’s one and only

^b Lev. 18:5

^c Deut. 30:12

^d Deut. 30:13

^e Deut. 30:14

^f Isaiah 28:16

^f Or *his only begotten Son*

Son.^g ¹⁹ This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. ²⁰ Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that his deeds will be exposed. ²¹ But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what he has done has been done through God.”^h (John 3:16-21)

We should recall the words of Jesus, as reported by Mark, concerning the Great Commission: “Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation. ¹⁶ **Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved**, but whoever does not believe will be condemned” (Mark 16:15-16). Yes, the proclamation of the Good News of God’s Way of salvation and faith are united in a single action, namely, baptism. When we accept Jesus as the Way, we need to react in the same manner as did Cornelius and his household following Peter’s sermon about Jesus and the forgiveness of sins. Luke reports that they were baptized following the message of grace: “So he [Peter] ordered that they be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they asked Peter to stay with them for a few days” (Acts 10:48). In the first seventeen years of my ministry, I never focused upon the Sermon that Peter preached before he commanded baptism. The following is the gist of the sermon that Peter proclaimed to Cornelius and his household:

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)

When did Jesus command them to preach the Good News and to baptize? Both Matthew and Mark give details concerning the final words of Jesus to His disciples. Have you accepted Jesus as the Son of God in order to receive the forgiveness of your sins? Have you been baptized **into** the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit? If not, why not? Michael Green’s²² comments on baptism and the communion are well-worth citing:

As all the world knows, Christians have two ceremonies which are integral to their life and faith. One is baptism, the sacrament of Christian initiation. The other is the Holy Communion, the sacrament of Christian growth. Both are rooted fairly and squarely in the resurrection.²³

^g Or *God’s only begotten Son*

^h Some interpreters end the quotation after verse 15.

²² **Michael Green** (b. 1930), British theologian, Anglican priest, apologist, and author.

²³ Michael Green, *Christ is Risen!—So What?: Is it True? Does it Matter?* (Kent, England: Sovereign World, [1982], 1995), 50.