

Baptism and Becoming a Christian in the New Testament

Robert H. Stein

Robert H. Stein is the Mildred Hogan Professor of New Testament Interpretation at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, a position he has held since 1997. One of evangelicalism's most respected Gospels scholars, Stein is the author of *Jesus the Messiah*, *The Method and Message of Jesus' Teachings*, *An Introduction to the Parables of Jesus*, and several other books and articles. This article was first presented at a session on Baptism for the Baptist General Conference. All biblical quotations are from the New International Version.

The purpose of this article is to investigate how baptism is related to the experience of conversion in the New Testament. As a result I shall not deal with the following important subjects: the meaning of the term "to baptize" (*baptidzein* is generally conceded to mean "to dip or immerse"); the origin of Christian baptism (it is probably not dependent upon Jewish proselyte baptism since there is no evidence of this practice before A.D. 70 and proselyte baptism was self-administered; it is unlikely that it has any direct relationship to Qumran's lustrations [1 QS 3:4-9, 6:14-23]; it is probably dependent upon the baptism of John the Baptist [Jn 3:22, 4:1-3] but the origin of John's baptism is unknown); the relationship of "laying on hands" to receiving the Spirit; etc.

In order to facilitate the discussion, I shall state a general thesis of how baptism in the New Testament is related to the experience of conversion. Although this thesis, like any thesis, cannot be "proven," I shall seek to demonstrate that it is able to explain the majority of the New Testament evidence quite well. The thesis is as follows:

In the New Testament, conversion involves five integrally related components or aspects, all of which took place at the same time, usually on the same day. These five components are repentance, faith, and confession by the individual, regeneration, or the giving of the Holy Spirit by God, and baptism by representatives of the Christian community.

It should be noted that the individual is

the "doer" of the first three components. He/she repents, believes, and confesses. In the other two components, however, the individual is the recipient and is acted upon. He/she receives or is given the Spirit by God and is baptized by the church.

I shall seek to prove this thesis in three ways. First, I shall demonstrate that the New Testament presents these five elements in various combinations as being intimately interrelated and as occurring at the same time, so that we should assume that they belong together. Second, I shall demonstrate that different components are singled out as bringing about the same result. Third, I shall present a hypothetical situation involving a first-century Christian to see if this thesis makes sense both with regard to the New Testament materials and to the experience of the earliest Christians.

New Testament Combinations of the Components

It seems clear by the varied groupings of these aspects in the New Testament that the experience of conversion was understood to involve all five components which normally occurred at the same time. As a result, when one or more of these aspects is missing from a specific passage or conversion account, we should presume that although not mentioned, they are assumed.

Faith and Baptism Associated Together

This combination occurs in several places. For instance, Galatians 3:26-27

says, "You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ." It should be noted that Paul uses "faith" and "baptism" interchangeably in this passage. The Gentile Christians are children of God by faith, a statement supported by the fact that they were baptized. This poses no problem if these two aspects of conversion occurred at the same time in the experience of the Galatian Christians, but if they were separated in time a problem immediately arises. Did the Galatians become Christians when they believed or when they were baptized? Paul envisioned no such problem arising in the thinking of the Galatians because faith and baptism generally occurred at the same time. No temporal gap was assumed between these two components of the conversion experience. The possibility that one could have faith but not be baptized was not even perceived as an option by Paul. In this passage Paul neither exalts faith at the expense of baptism nor baptism at the expense of faith. They are integrally related, and each assumes the other.

This same pairing of faith and baptism appears in Colossians 2:11-12: "In him you were also circumcised, in the putting off of the sinful nature, not with a circumcision done by the hands of men but with the circumcision done by Christ, having been buried with him in baptism and raised with him through your faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead." Once again faith and baptism are integrally related. Faith is involved in the rite of baptism, for in the experience of baptism one is raised from the water "through faith." Additional examples can be found in Acts 8:12, 16:31-33, and 18:8, as well as in Ephesians 5:26 and Acts 8:35-

36, where the washing of baptism is associated with hearing the "word."

Repentance and Baptism

Associated Together

It was a strong tenet of the Qumran community that the "baptisms" or lustrations of the community were of no value apart from repentance (1 QS 2:25ff.). Similarly, the baptism of John intimately associated these two components: "And so John came, baptizing in the desert region and preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins" (Mk 1:4, Mt 3:2-6, Lk 3:3, Ac 19:4; cf. Josephus, *Antiquities* 18.116-119). This association continued in the Christian proclamation as well (cf. Ac 2:38, 11:15-18).

Faith and Regeneration

(i.e., the Receiving of the Holy Spirit)

Associated Together

An example of this combination is found in Galatians 3:2. Seeking to demonstrate that the Galatians were justified by faith and needed no "work" of circumcision, Paul asks them, "I would like to learn just one thing from you: Did you receive the Spirit by observing the law, or by believing what you heard?" The assumed answer is that the Galatians received the Spirit, experienced regeneration or were "born again," when they believed. Since they received the Spirit, the seal of God's approval by faith, Paul demonstrates that God accepted them apart from circumcision.

In the same chapter Paul points out that by his death Christ bore the believer's curse in order that "the blessing given to Abraham might come to the Gentiles through Christ Jesus, so that by faith we might receive the promise of the Spirit." A similar association between faith and

regeneration is made in Ephesians 1:13.

Baptism and Regeneration
(i.e., the Receiving of the Spirit)
Associated Together

In Titus 3:4, after describing what the Christian was before placing his or her faith in Christ, Paul adds in verse 5 an important (and typically Pauline) “but” and states that “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 of the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior . . .” In light of the fact that the readers of Titus had all been baptized and that such a rite clearly had nuances of washing (cf. Ac 22:16, 1 Co 6:11, Eph 5:26), the expression “washing of rebirth” is best understood as referring to the readers’ experience of conversion when they were baptized and received the Holy Spirit. It is also probable that the expressions “washing of rebirth” and “renewal of the Holy Spirit” are synonymous expressions and refer to the same experience because they are both governed by the single preposition “through” (*dia*). As a result it may be better to translate these expressions as “the washing of rebirth,” i.e., the renewal of the Holy Spirit.

Additional examples of this combination include the seven passages in the New Testament which refer to the “baptism of the Spirit.” These are found in Matthew 3:11, Mark 1:8, Luke 3:16, John 1:33, Acts 1:5, 11:16, and 1 Corinthians 12:13. The context of the first six references involves an explicit comparison between the baptism of John the Baptist and that of Jesus, the Christ. John’s baptism is described as a baptism characterized by repentance. The baptism of the Christ,

however, is distinguished from that of John. What distinguishes it is not an omission of repentance, for this is part of Christian baptism as well (cf. Ac 2:38, 11:18). Rather, what separates the baptism of Jesus from that of John is that it involved the gift of the Spirit. There is no need to seek to make the term “baptism” mean two different things in these six passages. On the contrary, the water baptism of John associated with repentance is contrasted with the water baptism of the Christ associated with the coming of the Spirit. Baptism and regeneration, which involves the coming of the Spirit into the life of the believer, are intimately associated in these verses. In the experience of the earliest Christian community this association did not create any major problem because these two aspects of the conversion experience were not separated in time.

As for 1 Corinthians 12:13, there is no reason to distinguish the baptism of the Spirit referred to here from the other six references, especially since the same prepositional phrase (*en heni pneumati* [in/by the one Spirit]) is used as in the other six references (*en pneumati hagio* [in/by the Spirit]). The only difference is the use of a different adjective—“one” instead of “holy.”

Romans 6:4 can also be mentioned in this regard. Here Paul states, “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 (literally—“walk”) a new life.” Although the “Spirit” is not explicitly mentioned in this verse, baptism is associated with dying with Christ and walking in “new life.” In Romans 7:6 the expression “new way of the Spirit” is used, and these are the only two places in Paul’s writings where this term “new” or *kainotes* is used. It seems

reasonable therefore to conclude that “new life,” which is associated with baptism, and “new way of the spirit” are essentially synonymous expressions. Additional examples of the tie between baptism and regeneration can be found in Acts 9:17-18, 10:44-48, and John 3:3 and 5.

Although the New Testament indicates that there is an intimate relationship between baptism and regeneration, this does not mean that this relationship is causal in nature. At Pentecost the Spirit came upon the early church independently of baptism (Ac 2:1-4; cf. also Jn 20:19-22), which was also the case in Samaria (Ac 8:14-17). Cornelius received the Spirit before baptism. In fact, Cornelius’ baptism was dependent upon his prior experience of having received the Holy Spirit (Ac 10:44-48). Paul understood that baptism did not guarantee salvation (1 Co 10:1-5) and that the reception of the Spirit came *via* faith (Gal 3:2-5). Normally, however, baptism and regeneration were intimately associated together because they occurred together in time.

Faith and Confession Associated Together

This is seen most clearly in Romans 10:9 where Paul states, “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.” Here we find confession and faith intimately associated together. It is also important to note that recent study has pointed out that Paul is probably quoting here a confessional formula associated with baptism.

Baptism and Confession Associated Together

In Acts 22:16 Ananias tells Saul of Tarsus, “And now what are you waiting for? Get up, be baptized and wash your sins

away, calling on his name.”

Faith and Repentance Associated Together

In Mark 1:14-15 the evangelist gives an opening summary of Jesus’ message, “After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. ‘The time has come,’ he said. ‘The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!’” For Jesus (and Mark) repentance and faith were intimately connected. In Acts 20:21, Paul gives his parting words to the Ephesian elders and reminds them, “I have declared to both Jews and Greeks that they must turn to God in repentance and have faith in our Lord Jesus.”

Repentance, Baptism, and Regeneration Associated Together

In Acts 2:37-38 Luke states that after Peter’s Pentecost sermon the people were “cut to the heart” and asked Peter and the other apostles, “What shall we do?” To this Peter replied, “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.” Peter (and Luke) teach that repentance is a needed human response in the conversion experience, and they also teach that this would be followed by baptism by the Christian community and the divine response of regeneration. The latter is described here as receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Another example where these three dimensions of the conversion experience are associated together is Acts 11:1-18. Here Peter explains to the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem how he baptized a Gentile by the name of Cornelius because he received the Holy Spirit (11:15-17). Upon hearing

this the Jerusalem church concluded, “So then, God has granted Gentiles repentance unto life” (11:18). It should be noted that in 11:17 Cornelius’ experience of repentance, regeneration, and baptism is likened to Peter’s audience’s faith and regeneration experience as well as Peter’s own (“us, who believed”).

Faith, Baptism, Regeneration, and Repentance Associated Together

Acts 19 describes Paul’s encounter with certain “disciples” in the city of Ephesus. The single clearest question that he could think of asking in order to determine if these “disciples” were Christians was, “Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?” (19:2) When they responded negatively by saying that they had never even heard of the Spirit, he then asked, “Then what baptism did you receive?” (19:3) They replied that they experienced the baptism associated with John the Baptist. Paul then preached to them the Christian message (19:4b), and on hearing this they responded positively, were baptized “in the name of the Lord Jesus,” (19:5) and received the Holy Spirit (19:6). In this passage we should note that Paul (and Luke) assumed the validity of the call to repentance proclaimed by John. Paul expanded their understanding of what they had been taught by John when he explained the need for faith in Jesus and baptized them. (The fact that Paul baptized these “disciples” makes it evident that in his mind they were not Christians.) Thereupon they received the gift of the Spirit and became regenerate.

In light of the various examples given above it seems reasonable to conclude that all five of these components (repentance, faith, confession, regeneration, and baptism) were understood by the biblical

writers to be involved in the conversion experience. They are inseparable. At times one or more of them may be omitted, according to the emphasis of the writer, but even if a component is not mentioned it is nevertheless implied and assumed.

This can be seen in Acts 2:38. When Peter responds, “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus for the forgiveness of sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit,” he does not mention the need for faith. Yet certainly it must be assumed that this was also required for conversion. To deny this would mean that Peter was saying, “To be forgiven and receive the gift of the Spirit you do not need to believe in Jesus so long as you repent and are baptized!” By any New Testament standard this is clearly absurd, for in whose name would one then be baptized? In the name of someone that one did not believe in? Similarly, in Romans 10:9 when Paul says, “. . . 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,” he is not saying that confession and faith unaccompanied by repentance, baptism, and the regenerating work of the Spirit will save. These last three, although not mentioned, are assumed!

Different Components Produce the Same Results

At various times different components of the conversion experience are described as bringing about either salvation or justification. These components are best understood as integrally related in the experience of conversion, and as being temporally related, i.e., essentially occurring at the same time.

“Salvation” and the Five Components

Salvation Comes Through Repentance

Second Peter 3:9 says, “The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.” Whereas a lack of repentance brings about “perishing,” repentance results in salvation. This is evident from 3:15 where the Lord’s patience is associated with salvation. In 2 Corinthians 7:10 Paul similarly states that “Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation” Other examples associating repentance and salvation are Luke 13:3, Acts 3:19, and 11:18.

Salvation Comes Through Faith

This can be seen in the following passages:

For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast. (Eph 2:8-9)

Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved—you and your household. (Ac 16:31)

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. (Jn 3:16-17)

Salvation Comes Through Confession

The most famous passage illustrating this is Romans 10:9, where the promise is made that a heartfelt faith associated with the confession of Jesus as Lord will result in salvation. In verse 13, Paul, quoting Joel 3:5, continues, “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.”

Salvation Comes Through Regeneration

In Titus 3:5 Paul states that God “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” Regardless of how one interprets the expression “washing of rebirth,” it is clear in this verse that salvation is associated with being “renewed” or regenerated by the Holy Spirit. One can also compare here John 3:3 and 5 where entering the “kingdom of God,” which is a synonym for the salvation or eternal life spoken of in John 3:15ff., requires being born again. (Cf. also how “eternal life” and the “kingdom of God” are synonyms in Mark 10:17 and 23.)

Salvation Comes Through Baptism

Building upon the preceding analogy, Peter states in 1 Peter 3:21, “and this water symbolizes baptism that now saves you also—not the removal of dirt from the body but the pledge of a good conscience toward God. It saves you by the resurrection of Jesus Christ” This verse, which is notoriously difficult for non-sacramentalists, appears to say that salvation comes through baptism. If those reading this passage had experienced a repentance-faith-confession-regeneration-baptism conversion and all these dimensions took place at the same time, this passage is quite understandable, and the attempted interpretations which seek to deny the normal meaning of the term “baptism” are not necessary.

It should be noted that all five components described in my thesis (repentance, faith, confession, regeneration, baptism) are mentioned in the New Testament as bringing about salvation. Rather than argue that each component is a different path to salvation and that one could

choose whichever path one liked best, it appears simpler and more reasonable to assume that all five components were present in the experience of conversion. At times the situation might call for emphasizing one component over another, but all are related and assumed.

“Justification” and the Various Components

Justification Comes Through Faith

In Romans 3:28 Paul writes, “For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from observing the law” and in 5:1 he says, “Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ . . .” Numerous additional examples can be found in Romans 1-5 and Galatians 2-5.

Justification Comes Through Baptism

After describing the behavior of the unbelieving world, Paul states in 1 Corinthians 6:11, “And that is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.” The reference in this passage to being “washed” cannot be interpreted as a metaphor having nothing to do with baptism, since the expression “in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ” is a baptismal formula (cf. Ac 10:48, 1 Co 1:13-15, etc.). We should also note that the Spirit is mentioned in regard to the washing which brings about justification. It is obvious that all sorts of difficulties arise with this verse if we temporally separate the experience of baptism from justification. However, if as our thesis maintains, baptism was associated in time with repentance-faith-confession-regeneration, there is no difficulty in seeing justification intimately associated with baptism. The past tense (aorist) of the verbs “washed,” “sanctified,”

and “justified” support the view that these all refer to the event in the past when the Corinthians repented-believed-confessed-became regenerate-were baptized.

There are other examples in which the same result is said to be brought about by baptism as well as by faith. Forgiveness is associated with baptism in Acts 2:38 and 22:16, as well as with faith in Acts 10:4, 26:18, and Romans 4:3-8. Note also that forgiveness comes through repentance in Luke 24:47. A believer’s union with Christ takes place through baptism according to Romans 6:3 and Galatians 3:27, but in Galatians 2:20 and Ephesians 3:17 that union is brought about by faith. Sonship with God is related to faith in Galatians 3:7 and 26, but with baptism in Galatians 3:27, and in Romans 8:14 sonship results from having been regenerated by the Spirit.

A First-Century Understanding of Baptism

In the mind of a first-century Christian, these five components were inextricably linked in conversion, just as they were for the New Testament writers. There was no separation or exclusion of any of the elements. Allow me to demonstrate this mindset in the following hypothetical interview with Isaac of Antioch, a first-century believer.

Monday, April 5, A.D. 49

Interviewer: “Isaac, do you remember the day when you were converted?”

Isaac: “Oh, yes, I remember clearly that Barnabas preached that I was a sinner. Yet because of Jesus Christ, if I would turn from my sin, God would forgive me. So, on August 15, A.D. 44, I *repented* of my sin and became a Christian.

Tuesday, April 6, A.D. 49

Interviewer: "Isaac, do you remember the day when you were converted?"

Isaac: "Oh, yes, I remember clearly that Barnabas preached that God had fulfilled the promises that he made to our fathers and sent his Messiah, Jesus Christ. So on August 15, A.D. 44, I *confessed* Jesus as the Messiah and Lord and became a Christian."

Wednesday, April 7, A.D. 49

Interviewer: "Isaac, do you remember the day when you were converted?"

Isaac: "Oh, yes, I remember clearly that Barnabas preached that I could not be saved by my own efforts, for all my works were as filthy rags. He said that I need to trust in the grace of God and simply believe the gospel because God had made salvation in Christ possible for me. So, on August 15, A.D. 44, I *trusted by faith* in the grace of God and became a Christian."

Thursday, April 8, A.D. 49

Interviewer: "Isaac, do you remember the day when you were converted?"

Isaac: "Oh, yes, I remember clearly that Barnabas preached that I needed to be born again and that I should not marvel I needed to be made new by the Holy Spirit. So, on August 15, A.D., 44, I was *born again* through the Spirit of God and became a Christian."

Friday, April 9, A.D. 49

Interviewer: "Isaac, do you remember the day when you were converted?"

Isaac: "Oh, yes, I remember clearly that Barnabas preached that I needed to die, be buried with Christ, and be raised in newness of life. So, on August 15, A.D. 44, I was *baptized* in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and became a Christian."

Interviewer: "Now Isaac, come on. You

have told us five different stories. Which is the true one? When were you truly converted? When and how did you really become a Christian? Was it when you repented? When you believed? When you confessed Christ? When you were born again? Or was it when you were baptized?"

How would Isaac respond to these questions? I believe that he would respond essentially as follows: "All these were involved and associated with my becoming a Christian. When Barnabas preached to me, he not only spoke of my being a sinner and needing to repent, but he also talked about my need to put my faith in Jesus Christ, confess him as Lord and Christ, be born of the Spirit, and be baptized. All these took place on August 15, A.D. 44. All five were involved in my conversion!"

Perhaps an analogy may prove useful. If I were asked when I was married, I could respond, "When I said 'I do'" or "When I put a ring on her finger and she put one on mine" or "When the pastor pronounced us 'man and wife'" or "When the witnesses and pastor signed the marriage certificate" or "When we sexually consummated our marriage." If asked as to exactly which one of these caused me to become married, I would reply, "You cannot separate them. They were all part of my becoming married. When I mentioned any one of these, I assumed the others!"

Implications for Today

Let me remind you of the thesis of this article:

In the New Testament, conversion involves five integrally related components or aspects, all of which took place at the same time, usually on the same day. These five components are repentance,

faith, and confession by the individual, regeneration, or the giving of the Holy Spirit by God, and baptism by representatives of the Christian community.

First of all, I sought to support this thesis by showing how the New Testament associates these components in various combinations and that in so doing it understands them to be part of a single package. Conversion to Christianity involved accepting and experiencing this whole package, not just elements of it. Next I sought to demonstrate this thesis by showing how different components are said to bring about the same results. Because the New Testament presents all five of these components as integrally related, it can state that any one of them results in salvation. It can say that faith, repentance, confessing Christ, being born again, or baptism results in justification. Finally, I sought by means of a hypothetical example to show how the thesis explains well the conversion experience of first-century Christians.

If the thesis given in this article is valid and explains the biblical data better than any other, there are several implications that may be relevant for the present-day. One of these involves the corporate nature of conversion in the New Testament.

Baptism and Church Membership

Earlier I alluded to the fact that in conversion three parties are involved. The human participant responds by repenting of sin, believing in the gospel, and confessing Christ as Lord. God participates in the conversion experience by bringing about the individual's rebirth, i.e., his or her regeneration through the Holy Spirit. The church participates in this experience by baptizing the individual.

The fact that the Christian community is involved in the experience of conversion guards against the privatization of the conversion experience. In baptism one is "baptized . . . into one body!" One is baptized by the church and to the church. Thus baptism is more an initiation into the believing community than an act of witness to the world. This is supported by the fact that it could be performed late at night (Ac 16:33) or when no one else was present (Ac 8:26-40).

There is an ecclesiastical dimension in the New Testament conversion experience. Thus, in the New Testament at least, the question of whether church membership requires baptism or whether baptism must involve church membership is moot. Becoming a Christian in the New Testament allowed no other possibility. One could not experience conversion apart from becoming part of the visible church community. When one became a Christian they "belong[ed] to the family of believers" (Gal 6:10). In the New Testament this means "membership" in the visible church, not just the invisible one.

Is Baptism Necessary for Salvation?

Was baptism necessary for salvation in the New Testament? Is baptism necessary for salvation today? These two questions must be answered separately. In the New Testament a person was not baptized for one of two reasons. Either they did not want to repent-believe-confess Christ and thus did not want to become a Christian or they did repent-believe-confess Christ but were physically unable to be baptized. The most famous example of the latter is the thief on the cross (Lk 23:39-43). If the Philippian jailer had died of a heart attack before reaching the waters of baptism on that eventful night, he would have been a

second example. If one has faith but no access to baptism, one has Christ! On the other hand, if one has baptism but has no faith, one has nothing (1 Co 10:1-5)!

Yet to establish an understanding of the normal conversion pattern based on extremely rare or unusual experiences is to emphasize the abnormal. In general a person could not be converted to Christianity in the New Testament apart from baptism. When individuals in the first century heard "Repent and be baptized" or "Believe in the Lord Jesus and be baptized," none of them thought, "Can I do the first but not the second?" No one came to the conversion experience with questions as to whether baptism was necessary for becoming a Christian because the apostolic preaching stated that they must be baptized. Thus the rejection of baptism was a rejection of the divine program for conversion! To reject baptism was to reject the gospel message preached by Peter, Paul, and the other apostles who spoke of the need of baptism. Divine provision was made for those who, like the thief on the cross, could not be baptized, but to refuse the community's baptism was the same as a rejection of the Christ whom the community preached. It involved a clear unwillingness to obey the gospel preached by the apostles. For the New Testament church the statement "Unless you are baptized, you cannot be saved" was simply another way of saying, "Unless you believe, you cannot be saved."

On the other hand, the situation today is different. As in the first century, God makes provisions for those who turn to him in faith but cannot be physically baptized. Thus salvation is possible for the individual locked in his Gulag cell who turns in faith to Jesus Christ. Salvation is

possible for the individual isolated in the desert or wilderness who believes in Christ, even though no individual or water is present to perform a baptism.

A significant problem arises in our day and age, however, because sincere people possess different understandings (or perhaps misunderstandings) of the New Testament teaching on baptism. For them the refusal to be baptized in response to a repentance-faith-confession-regeneration experience may stem from confusion concerning what God requires in this area. The person who was led to Christ by Paul or Peter in the first century did not have any such confusion. The apostles did not present "various views" on baptism, nor had their converts been raised in Christian traditions that had different views on this subject. To refuse baptism in the first century was to refuse consciously and willingly what God said should and needed to be done. Such rebellion was damnable. Today a person may refuse baptism out of confusion, ignorance, or uncertainty, but in the first century such confusion and ignorance did not exist. Decisions concerning baptism today are often made not on the basis of obedience or disobedience but on the basis of misinformation or confusion. Lacking the context of the apostolic preaching and teaching, one's understanding of the biblical data may be "a poor reflection as in a mirror" (1 Co 13:12). Such confusion is clearly not damnable. One is saved not by perfect knowledge but by faith! This understanding seems to lie behind the later scribal addition found in Mark 16:16 which states, "Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned."

Consequences of Separating the Five Components of Conversion

The cardinal problem with most views on baptism today is that the five components integrally associated with conversion in the New Testament are now separated in time. Roman Catholic theology, for instance, recognizes that regeneration and baptism belong together. It teaches that baptism brings about regeneration as well as the forgiveness of sins, especially of “original” sin. In so doing, however, it divorces baptism and regeneration from the human components of the conversion experience—repentance, faith, and confession. Thus it seriously deviates from the New Testament pattern.

Lutheran theology also recognizes that baptism and regeneration belong together. Like Roman Catholic theology it believes in baptismal regeneration. It also, however, recognizes that in the New Testament faith cannot be divorced from either. As a result, because of its support of infant baptism, it argues that God supernaturally gives the gift of faith (*fides infantilis*) to the infant being baptized. The Lutheran view has the problem of seeking to find exegetical justification in the New Testament for attributing saving faith to nursing infants. Even apart from this, however, it still deviates from the New Testament understanding because it divorces repentance and confession from the other components of conversion.

Reformed theology deviates even more significantly from the New Testament pattern in that it separates baptism from all the other components of conversion. Based on the doctrines of predestination and divine election, baptism is seen as a “seal” of the covenant of grace and identifies the recipients of infant baptism as members of the body of Christ. The baptism of infants

is done with the view toward and hope of future repentance-faith-confession. Infant baptism, however, cannot guarantee that repentance-faith-confession-regeneration will follow, and in the majority of instances where infants are baptized it is evident that it does not. Yet even if the practice of infant baptism could guarantee that the other components of the conversion experience would follow, and it clearly cannot, the Reformed understanding of baptism would still err in separating what in the New Testament presents as a unit.

Baptist theology also deviates from the New Testament pattern. Although repentance, faith, confession, and regeneration are associated with baptism, baptism is separated in time from these four components. Thus baptism is an act which witnesses to a prior experience of repentance, faith, confession, and regeneration. As a result such passages as Romans 6:4, 1 Peter 3:21, Titus 3:5, John 3:3ff., and others, which associate baptism with the experience of conversion, are embarrassing to many Baptists and often receive a strained exegesis at their hands.

A Concluding Allegory

For many centuries there lived in the distant land of Allegoria the “Ringist” society. This society obtained its name because of an ancient custom which dominated its culture for many centuries. Among the “Ringists” there was an ancient law, “The Law of the Ring,” which decreed that no one could wear a ring on his or her finger unless that person was married. It also decreed that one must wear such a ring if married and that it must be placed on the left hand during the marriage rite. There were different variations of the marriage rite but every one of them involved the placing of a ring

on the left hand of the man and woman being married. This custom existed for many centuries and was so influential that becoming married was often referred to as "putting on the ring."

After a time the legality of "The Law of the Ring" was challenged, and as a result the national court of Allegoria declared this Law invalid. The wearing of a ring could no longer be limited to those who were married. Consequently there arose in the "Ringist" society an immediate economic boom among ringmakers, and soon various practices arose. A group arose who called themselves the "Pre-Ringists." They placed rings on their children at a very early age. When asked why they did so, they responded that they did so in the hope that one day their children would become married and this would encourage the child's future nuptials. There also arose a "Post-Ringists" group who did not wear rings until at least two years after marriage. They argued that a marriage should first be proven as successful and stable before they dared to wear rings and present themselves as examples of what marriage is to be like. Needless to say, they would never dream of putting a ring on the hands of their children. Of course, there were "Traditional-Ringists" who sought to maintain the old Ringist cultural practice, but this group became divided over whether the ring should be worn on the second or third finger of the left hand. One of these groups experienced an additional split centered around whether the ring could be made of material other than gold. Both of these splits further weakened the traditional viewpoint.

As time progressed the "Traditional-Ringists" died out, and there arose considerable debate between the "Pre-" and "Post-Ringists" as to which of their practices

was superior. Psychological studies were made as to the influence of ring-wearing on children. Sociological analyses were conducted as to the value of ring-wearing for children raised in the "Pre-Ringest" and "Post-Ringest" denominations.

An ancient manuscript was one day discovered stemming from the earliest "Ringest" society. This manuscript was many centuries older than any "Ringist" manuscript in existence. As scholars began to study it, they came across an expression that caused great confusion. That expression was "putting on the ring." At the present time there is animated debate among the "Pre-" and "Post-Ringists" as to what this expression means.