

The Importance of Water Baptism



October 1, 1990

Faith Pulpit

Faith Baptist Theological Seminary

Ankeny, Iowa

October 1990

The Importance of Water Baptism

Myron J. Houghton, Ph.D., Th.D.

The importance of water baptism has been understood in different ways throughout church history. Some groups have taught that water baptism is the means by which God forgives sins. Others have said that water baptism is a sign and a seal of being in a covenant relationship with God. Obviously this view is much more vague than the first one and allows for differences of interpretation. Yet a third view argues that since water baptism is only a symbol of what God has already done and since water baptism has caused great division within Christendom, either water baptism should not be performed at all or it should be made optional for church membership. Historically, Baptists have rejected all of these views. On the one hand, Baptists deny that water baptism brings forgiveness of sins or places one into a covenant relationship with God. On the other hand, Baptists believe that water baptism is commanded by God and therefore, is a requirement for church membership. In this short study, we will be looking at 1 Peter 3:21, trying to determine what this verse is saying, hoping that it will help us understand the importance of water baptism.

Someone may ask, "Why use 1 Peter 3:21? After all, this section of 1 Peter has many words and ideas that are difficult to understand." My answer is to agree with the questioner, but to say also that in this passage Peter is attempting to show us the importance of water baptism. Notice that Peter tells us that "baptism doth also now save us"; Peter goes on to explain that this "saving" is "not the putting away of the filth of the flesh, but the answer of a good conscience toward God." While these words can be understood in different ways, no one can doubt that in

them Peter is trying to explain the significance and therefore the importance of water baptism. It is true that a few commentators, rejecting the idea that water baptism saves, have used their theology to determine that therefore Peter must be referring to Spirit baptism. Later in this article I hope to show that Peter really speaks about water baptism. At this point, however, we ought to be able to agree that one's theology must not determine the meaning of Scripture; otherwise, our doctrinal beliefs rather than God's Word itself become the authority. Scripture itself must be allowed to tell us what it means. So, as far as our method is concerned, we must allow the passage itself, and the setting or context surrounding it, to tell us the correct meaning.

With this in mind, let us turn our attention to the verse itself. It says, "The like figure whereunto even baptism doth also now save us (not the putting away of the filth of the flesh, but the answer of a good conscience toward God) by the resurrection of Jesus Christ." In the remainder of this article, we will try to understand the meaning of this verse by asking three questions:

- (1) What is this "baptism"?,
- (2) In what way does baptism "save" us?, and
- (3) How is Jesus Christ's resurrection related to baptism?

What is this "baptism?"

The Bible teaches that when we trust Christ as Savior, we are "baptized" or placed by the Holy Spirit into the Church which is Christ's Body (Eph. 1:22-23; 1 Cor. 12:13). At the same time we are placed "in the Spirit" which is another way of saying that God's Holy Spirit indwells us (Rom. 8:9). In summary, then, Spirit baptism relates a believer to the Church which is Christ's Body and to the Spirit Himself. However, the "baptism" of 1 Peter 3:21 does not seem to do this. Instead, the baptism discussed in 1 Peter 3:21 is a "like figure" or a copy which corresponds to Noah and his family being brought safely through the water (which is described in verse 20). In other words, "like figure" links the "baptism" of 1 Peter 3:21 with "eight souls were saved by water" in 1 Peter 3:20. When one thinks about Noah and his family being brought safely through the water and then relates these thoughts to the word "baptism", what comes to mind is not the baptizing work of God's Spirit, but rather a person being dipped in water and being brought safely out of the water.

Furthermore, the "baptism" of 1 Peter 3:21 is "the answer of a good conscience toward God." This requires baptism to be voluntary. Spirit baptism is not voluntary, but occurs immediately upon conversion. It is water baptism, the baptism of a willing believer, which is voluntary. It is this baptism that is the answer of a good conscience toward God.

In what way does baptism "save" us?

Those of us who reject the idea that water baptism brings the forgiveness of sins, tend to think of 1 Peter 3:21 as a problem passage, one that does not offer any positive teaching about water baptism, but one which must be "explained" because of its use by those who believe in baptismal regeneration. Nevertheless, Peter is quite clear concerning the meaning of "baptism doth also now save us." Note with me the following three facts:

- (1) "also" in "baptism doth also now save us" connects this sentence to "eight souls were saved by water" in the preceding verse. The word translated "like figure" does the same thing. The "eight souls" in 1 Peter 3:20 are Noah and his family. The word translated "saved" in verse 20 is the same as the word "saves" in verse 21 except that in verse 20 "saved" has a prefix meaning "through." In fact the word "through" occurs a second time.

Peter wants us to realize that Noah and his family were not saved BY MEANS of water, but they were brought safely THROUGH water. Water was not a means of deliverance; it was the means of death, as the people who were Noah's neighbors discovered! An examination of Genesis 6 & 7 tells us the same thing. Now, IN WHAT SENSE WERE NOAH AND HIS FAMILY "SAVED"? The water of the flood was a judgment from God which brought a premature physical death. It is from this premature physical death that they were saved. The Bible tells us that when believers are disobedient, God chastens them—even to the point of a premature physical death (see 1 Cor. 11:30–32). Obedience to God "saves" (to deliver) the believer from divine chastening. It is in this sense that "baptism doth also now save us." If the reader feels this is not the correct understanding of these words, let him consider the remaining two facts:

(2) in verse 21, Peter clearly tells us what he does NOT mean by "baptism doth also now save us." He says, "NOT the putting away of the filth of the flesh." Notice that Peter does not use the word for "body"; instead he says, "flesh." This is important because some have understood Peter to mean, "not the removal of dirt from the body" but no one either today or in Peter's day argues that the only value of water baptism is that of a good bath! Rather, Peter is telling us that water baptism does not remove our sins, precisely because now, as then, there are those who would make water baptism, rather than the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the object of their trust for salvation.

(3) Peter carefully explains the importance of water baptism when he describes it as "the answer of a good conscience toward God." In joyful obedience to God, one who already enjoys forgiveness of sins is baptized as an answer or pledge of a good conscience toward God.

How is Christ's resurrection related to water baptism?

Peter has already told us in this epistle that Jesus Christ's sacrificial death and resurrection for us bring forgiveness and new life to us when we put our trust in God (1 Peter 1:3, 20,21). Water baptism is related to Christ's resurrection in two ways:

(1) the idea that obedience to God (by being baptized, for example) delivers or saves a believer from the chastening hand of God, which ultimately would lead to a premature physical death, depends on the distinction between the way God deals with believers and with unbelievers. And that distinction depends on Christ's death and resurrection.

(2) We saw that water baptism is the "like figure" of eight persons being brought safely through water. This is life (Noah and his family's physical life) coming out of the midst of death. Christ's resurrection also speaks of life coming out of death. As such, water baptism is a picture of our Lord's death and resurrection. It is His resurrection which invests water baptism with meaning.

To conclude: The baptism of a believer in water does not bring forgiveness of sins, but this does not mean that it is unimportant. As a command of God, disobedience (refusal to be baptized) would bring divine chastening. Obedience saves us from this chastening. Prefigured by Noah's family being brought safely through the water, the believer's baptism pictures the once-for-all death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.