

In today's evangelical church, water baptism is often regarded as a rather insignificant matter, at least in the process of salvation. However, baptism carried the utmost significance to the early Christians. They associated three very important matters with water baptism:

1. **Remission of sins.** They believed that water baptism canceled all past sins. For example, Justin Martyr wrote, "There is no other way [to obtain God's promises] than this – to become acquainted with Christ, to be washed in the fountain spoken of by Isaiah for the remission of sins, and for the remainder, to live sinless lives."

They based their views on baptism and remission of sins on the following Bible passages, among others:

- *"And now why are you waiting? Arise and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on the name of the Lord" (Acts 22:16).*
- *"Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy He saved us, through the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit" (Titus 3:5).*
- *"There is also an antitype which now saves us, namely baptism (not the removal of the filth of the flesh, but the answer of a good conscience toward God)" (1st Peter 3:21).*
- *"Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2:38).*

Since this washing was completely independent of any merit on the baptized person's part, baptism was frequently referred to as "grace". I was surprised to find that the early Christians used the term "grace" to refer to a specific act such as baptism.

2. **The New Birth.** Based on Jesus' words to Nicodemus, the early Christians also believed water baptism was the channel through which a person was born again. Irenaeus mentioned this in a discussion about baptism, "As we are lepers in sin, we are made clean from our old transgressions by means of the sacred water and the invocation of the Lord. We are thus spiritually regenerated as newborn infants, even as the Lord has declared: *'Except a man be born again through water and the Spirit, he shall not enter into*

the kingdom of heaven" [John 3:5].

3. **Spiritual Illumination.** The early Christians believed that the newly-baptized person, after receiving the Holy Spirit, had a clearer vision of spiritual matters, receiving illumination as a child of God and a citizen of His kingdom.

Clement of Alexandria discussed all three of these spiritual events associated with baptism: "This work is variously called grace, and illumination, and perfection, and washing. Washing, by which we cleanse away our sins. Grace, by which the penalties of our sins are canceled. And illumination, by which that holy light of salvation is beheld, that is, by which we see God clearly."

In a letter to a young Christian friend, Cyprian explained his own baptism in a similar fashion, "Considering my character at the time, I used to regard it as a difficult matter that a man should be able to be born again.... Or that a man who had been revived to new life in the bath of saving water could be able to put off what he had formerly been – that he could be changed in heart and soul, while retaining his physical body.... I used to indulge my sins as if they were actually a part of me, inherent in me. But later, by the help of the water of new birth, the stain of former years was washed away, and a light from above – serene and pure was infused into my reconciled heart. Then through the Spirit breathed from heaven, a second birth restored me to a new man."

BAPTISM WAS NOT AN EMPTY RITUAL

In short, baptism in early Christianity was the supernatural rite of initiation by which a new believer passed from being the old man of the flesh to being a newly reborn man of the spirit. However, please don't think their practice was some empty ritual. The early Christians didn't separate baptism from faith and repentance. Baptism wasn't some magical ritual that could regenerate a person if it wasn't accompanied by faith and repentance. They specifically taught that God was under no necessity to grant forgiveness of sins simply because a person went through the motions of baptism. A faithless person was not reborn through water baptism.

***"WHAT MUST I DO
TO BE SAVED?"***

ACTS 16:30

LEARN THE GOSPEL

John 6:45; Romans 10:17

BELIEVE IN CHRIST

Hebrews 11:6; John 3:16

CONFESS CHRIST

Matthew 10:32-33; Romans 10:9-10

REPENT OF SIN

Acts 3:19; 17:30

BE BAPTIZED INTO CHRIST

Mark 16:16; Romans 6:3-6

REMAIN STEADFAST

1st Corinthians 15:58; Revelation 2:10

***"THE ASSEMBLING OF
OURSELVES TOGETHER"***

HEBREWS 10:24-25

SUNDAY

Worship @ 10:00 a.m.

Studies @ 11:45 a.m.

WEDNESDAY

Studies & Worship @ 7:00 p.m.

THURSDAY

Men's & Ladies' Studies @ 6:20 p.m.

75 Sherrod Boulevard
Belén, New Mexico

**Seekers Welcome.
Members Expected.**

***"IF A MAN IS OVERTAKEN IN
ANY TRESPASS...
RESTORE SUCH A ONE"***

GALATIANS 6:1

CONFESS TRESPASSES

James 5:16; 1st John 1:9

REPENT OF SIN

Acts 8:22

PRAY FOR FORGIVENESS

Acts 8:22

REMAIN STEADFAST

1st Corinthians 15:58; Revelation 2:10

***"A WORD FITLY SPOKEN IS
LIKE APPLES OF GOLD IN
SETTINGS OF SILVER"***

PROVERBS 25:11

"The Bible is very easy to understand. But we Christians are a bunch of scheming swindlers. We pretend to be unable to understand it because we know very well that the minute we understand, we are obliged to act accordingly."

– Søren Kierkegaard

"WHOLE COUNSEL"

ACTS 20:27

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WHAT BAPTISM MEANT TO EARLY CHRISTIANS

David W. Bercot

I still remember the first time I read Jesus' words to Nicodemus: *"Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God"* (John 3:5). I was a young boy at the time, and I was reading that verse in a small Bible study group. The teacher asked the question, "What does it mean to be born of water?" I thought for a moment and quickly raised my hand. "Jesus must have been referring to water baptism", I blurted out, feeling proud of myself for having figured this out. However, to my chagrin, the teacher explained that this was a common misconception and that being born of water was not water baptism.

Through the years, I was able to correct others who mistakenly thought that this passage refers to water baptism. I felt very knowledgeable to be able to explain the "correct" view. So it took the wind out of my sails when I discovered that the early Christians **universally** understood Jesus' words to refer to water baptism.

And once again, it was the Gnostics who taught differently than the church – saying that humans can't be reborn or regenerated through water baptism. Irenaeus wrote about them: "This class of men have been instigated by Satan to a denial of that baptism which is regeneration to God."

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