

Reflections on “Baptism Now Saves Us” in 1 Peter 3:21

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My remembrance of Dr. Bill Arp: Dr. William (Bill) Arp was one of my closest friends at Baptist Bible Seminary where I taught for 22 years. I remember when I interviewed for the theology position in the spring of 1994, the first home where I had a meal was Bill’s. I learned immediately of his love for family, and his home became a place of peaceful repose whenever I had the occasion. Bill’s teaching specialty was Greek and New Testament. He was considered our “go-to guy” for many of the epistles. There was clarity as he used discourse analysis to highlight serious observation of the text for his students as he followed grammatical-historical interpretation. The last eight years of my time at the seminary, I served as Dean and had the opportunity to call upon Bill to help out in various academic capacities in addition to his teaching of students. Bill was known for his love for working through difficult passages in the Bible. In light of this, I asked him from time to time to lead the faculty in a discussion of selected New Testament “problem” verses. On one occasion I asked him to lead the faculty through a discussion of the knotty problems in 1 Peter 3:18-22. We never finished our discussion – we ended up mired in the discussion of the spirits in prison! But Bill’s leadership on the issues at hand was always helpful. I have chosen in this article to explore briefly one phrase in 1 Peter 3:21 -- “baptism now saves us.” By this discussion I hope to honor my good friend.

While the gospel mentioned in 1 Peter 3:18 is itself controversial, there are several other details in verses 18-21 that have made the interpretation of these verses among the most difficult in the New Testament.² First,

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in verse 18 the text says that Jesus was “made alive in the spirit.” Is this referring to the agency of the Holy Spirit, or is it a reference to Jesus’ being made alive in his human spirit. A more thorny issue is the identification of the “spirits now in prison” (v. 19) to whom Jesus went to make proclamation. What is the content of his proclamation? Is it the gospel or is it a statement of victory? Where is the location of the prison? Is it Hades or some other place? When did this take place? Between the time of his death and resurrection, after his resurrection, or some other time? Moreover, what is the connection between the spirits’ disobedience and the time of Noah (v. 20)? Significantly, one has to decide if these spirits are human or angelic. So few verses and so much exhausting study!

It is in this context that Peter draws a somewhat complex comparison between the eight souls on Noah’s ark being delivered through the waters of the flood and the relationship of believers being delivered in a way that somehow involves water baptism during the Christian era. I’ve chosen five views but many more could be given. Complicating matters is the fact that some of the views are not mutually exclusive. This is not an attempt to present a detailed exegetical presentation of the passage. The intent is to summarize and briefly assess some of the main views of the phrase “baptize now saves us.”

View # 1: Baptismal Regeneration and Initial Justification

One view common throughout the history of the church is that Peter’s statement that baptism saves is a rather straightforward assertion that baptism brings regeneration and initial justification. This is the Roman Catholic position. The Vatican online catechism states: “Holy Baptism is the basis of the whole Christian life, the gateway to life in the Spirit (vitae

² Thomas R. Schreiner, “Baptism in the Epistles: An Initiation Rite for Believers,” in *Believer’s Baptism: Sign of the New Covenant in Christ*, ed. Thomas R. Schreiner and Shawn D. Wright (Nashville: B & H Publishing Group, 2006), 69.

spiritualis ianua), and the door which gives access to the other sacraments. Through Baptism we are freed from sin and reborn as sons of God; we become members of Christ, are incorporated into the Church and made sharers in her mission: ‘Baptism is the sacrament of regeneration through water in the word.’”³ The statement could not be clearer. The Spirit comes into the believer’s life through water baptism. Rebirth or regeneration as well as remission of sins comes through the act of water baptism.

Water baptism also brings initial justification according to Roman Catholic teaching. In one statement in the Vatican catechism, justification is said to come by faith and baptism.⁴ The Catholic tradition further teaches that justification is an ongoing process to which baptism is just the door by which one enters: “Scripture reveals that it is precisely through this justification and salvation the new Christian experiences in baptism that he enters into a process of justification and salvation requiring his free cooperation with God’s grace.”⁵ Furthermore, “there are many biblical texts revealing both justification and salvation to have a future and contingent sense as well as these we have mentioned that show a past sense.”⁶ In 1547, the Council of Trent (as part of the Counter-Reformation) rejected the Reformers’ view of justification by faith alone. In the place of this doctrine was asserted that baptism brings initial justification followed by an ongoing increase of justification through obedient sanctification.⁷

³ “Catechism of the Catholic Church,” *The Holy See*; 1213, accessed June 3, 2018, http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/___P3G.HTM.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 1987.

⁵ Tim Staples, “Justification: Process or One-Time Deal?” *Catholic Answers*, September 19, 2014, accessed June 6, 2018, <https://www.catholic.com/magazine/online-edition/justification-process-or-one-time-deal>.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Council of Trent, Sixth Session: Decree on Justification, Chapter 10. For a more detailed discussion, see Mike Stallard, “Roman Catholicism and the New Perspective on Paul,” *Journal of Ministry and Theology* 14 (Fall 2010): 5-24.

Such views as baptismal regeneration and initial justification based upon water baptism are not the only explanations and not even the best elucidations of verses like 1 Peter 3:21 as the discussion below will show. The belief that Peter's statement "baptism now saves you" is a straightforward assertion of such notions is simplistic. The language of typology or symbolism based upon the use of ἀντίτυπον cannot be ignored or so easily dismissed in the verse. What seems to be taking place in such interpretations is that a few words taken out of context are used to express truths that are coming into the passage from a specific theological system. There is no reason to interpret Peter here to contradict Paul's wonderfully clear assertions that a man is justified by faith alone and quite apart from water baptism (e.g., Rom 4:1-5; 1 Cor 1:17; 15:1-4). Consequently, that aspect of salvation-justification as a forensic matter, cannot be in view in Peter's declaration that baptism now saves.

View # 2: Baptism as the Instrumental Agency of Salvation

Another view is that Peter's words "baptism now saves" point to the fact that the experience of water baptism functions as the instrumental agency of salvation. Usually, this is voiced so that baptism is not the efficient cause of salvation.⁸ In this way, the teaching of baptismal regeneration appears, at least on the surface, to be avoided. This distinction between the instrumental and efficient cause of salvation has long been discussed and advocated within the Stone-Campbell Restoration Movement. It has also been voiced in Roman Catholic presentations where the sacrament of baptism constitutes one instrumental means by which the participant dips into the merits

⁸ A. B. Caneday, "Baptism in the Stone-Campbell Restoration Movement" in *Believer's Baptism: Sign of the New Covenant in Christ*, ed. Thomas R. Schreiner and Shawn D. Wright (Nashville: B & H Publishing Group, 2006), 315.

of Christ (the presumed efficient means).⁹ Such a view sees baptism, faith, confession, and witnessing (among other things) as “means that operate in various ways congruent with the rational and moral nature of salvation.”¹⁰

Interestingly, even though some interpreters attempt to divorce the view of baptism as instrumental agency from baptismal regeneration, others appear to conflate the two positions as part of the whole. When a Baptist reviews such teaching, he usually sees confusion in the presentation. For example, in some Lutheran overviews of the issue, water baptism is labeled in terms of baptismal regeneration. Water baptism “gives salvation ... new life in Christ.”¹¹ Yet, the same author declares: “Baptism saves. It does not do so as mere water or as the cause of salvation, which lies in Christ’s incarnation, death, and resurrection. Baptism saves as one form of the *instrument* God has used from the creation of the universe on, namely, his Word” (italics added).¹² Here the commentator separates water baptism from the efficient cause of salvation and includes the word of God in the operation of grace at the moment of the baptismal act. The Baptist Nettles responds to the overall view (including the infant baptism inherent in the Lutheran understanding): “Such language has the enchantment of intriguing theological speculation, but compared to the biblical material it amounts to no more than an assertion. Passages that deal with divine sovereignty in salvation tie the intended salvation to the word, read or heard, and purposely embraced.”¹³ In other words, the instrument of salvation is always faith exercised upon the hearing of the word

⁹ John Hardon, *The Catholic Catechism* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1975), 176.

¹⁰ Thomas J. Nettles, “Baptist View: Baptism as a Symbol of Christ’s Saving Work” in *Understanding Four Views on Baptism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2007), 36-37. Nettles does not hold the view stated here but explains it succinctly.

¹¹ Roger Kolb, “Lutheran View: God’s Baptismal Act as Regenerative” in *Understanding Four Views on Baptism*, 91.

¹² *Ibid.*, 109.

¹³ Thomas J. Nettles, “A Baptist Response” in *Understanding Four Views on Baptism*, 111.

of God proclaimed. A presentation of baptismal agency appears to conflict at some level with *sola fide*.

One criticism of the conclusion that *sola fide* is in jeopardy if we accept an instrumental view of baptism is that the pendulum swings too far the other way: “Out of zeal to enforce Christian baptism, some have mistakenly exalted repentance and baptism to the place of effectual cause. This error of ‘baptismal regeneration,’ vesting baptism with effectual cleansing power, invariably diminishes grace. Yet others, excessively fervent to preserve *sola fide*, have committed the opposed error of ‘creedal (or popularly ‘decisional’) regeneration,’ assigning to faith the effectual saving power that belongs only to God’s grace.”¹⁴ Although such advice must be considered, there is still the problem that there is always the temptation of baptismal regeneration lurking in the background when one holds to instrumental agency for the ordinance. Furthermore, the Bible makes it clear that faith has a special relationship as *the channel* by which the salvation of God’s grace is applied to the sinner’s life. The Apostle Paul without ambiguity affirms that faith is the instrumental cause of salvation for good reason: “Therefore, it [justification] is of faith that it might be according to grace” (Rom 4:16). Moreover, in Romans 11:6 grace is divorced entirely from good works. In other words, God has chosen the channel of faith (the simple trusting of what God has done) and not good deeds or actions that men do, so that salvation is totally by grace. In this way, salvation is wholly of the Lord. Participating in water baptism is never treated in this way in Scripture. Rather it is an action or deed that a believer exercises that memorializes what God has done but does not channel God’s saving grace in any fashion.

Yet there are other evangelicals who voice the instrumental view of baptism without invoking anything near the doctrine of baptismal regeneration. For example, Buswell uses the language of instrumental cause: “When one does something for something else, the first item is not necessarily the cause of the

¹⁴ Caneday, “Baptism in the Stone-Campbell Restoration Movement,” 312.

second.”¹⁵ Thus, baptism is not the “efficient cause of the remission of sins.”¹⁶ Presumably, water baptism could be the instrumental cause in the way that Buswell states the case. Another example is found in Caneday who states, concerning 1 Peter 3:21, that “in this one verse Peter speaks of both the instrumental and efficient causes of salvation.”¹⁷ Sometimes, this particular approach is stated when the interpreter also holds the fifth view below thereby showing that the views are not always mutually exclusive but sometimes constitute emphases within the commentaries.

View # 3: Baptism as Salvation from a Bad Conscience

Under this heading, two interpretive and related aspects are brought together. When the text states, “baptism now saves you,” a parenthetical explanation gives both a negative and a positive affirmation. On the negative side, baptism is not “the removal of dirt from the body.” One can debate here whether this is an image of literal cleansing of the body or moral cleansing in light of the fact that *σάρξ* is the Greek word translated either *body* or *flesh* in the various translations. The use of this word at times in Pauline thought to refer to a person’s propensity to sin sharpens the question. If moral cleansing is in view, which is likely, then the idea that baptism produces either justification, regeneration, or remission of sins cannot be maintained at all from this passage. If the literal cleansing of the physical body is meant to be excluded from baptism, then the positive side of the given explanation becomes more important.¹⁸ The text says that baptism is the

¹⁵ J. Oliver Buswell, *A Systematic Theology of the Christian Religion* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1962), 238. Buswell discusses both 1 Peter 3:21 and Acts 2:38 together in this regard. This statement is given in his discussion specifically about Acts 2:38 but applies to our discussion here due to his coupling of the two passages.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Caneday, “Baptism in the Stone-Campbell Restoration Movement,” 315.

¹⁸ Schreiner is probably correct to argue that it is hard to rule out the moral aspect since “It would be strange indeed if baptism did not represent

“pledge of a good conscience toward God.” Such wording leads some interpreters to conclude that baptism “does not save from sin, but from a bad conscience.”¹⁹ What gives the believer a good conscience is that baptism “is the symbol of what has already occurred in the heart and life of one who has trusted Christ as Savior.”²⁰ Presumably, the true believer can have a clear conscience since he now stands in an acceptable relationship to God through Jesus.

View # 4: Baptism as Physical Deliverance from Corrective Chastening

Bauder presents a specific way of looking at baptism as a pledge of a good conscience. He comments,

Since baptism is commanded by Jesus Christ as part of the Great Commission, refusing baptism would constitute a gross contradiction for any professing believer. To refuse baptism would be a clear step of disobedience at the very beginning of the Christian life. It would consequently open a believer to the kinds of chastening that accompany severe disobedience (Heb. 12:5-8; 1 Cor. 11:29-32). By being baptized in accordance with Christ’s command, the believer commences the Christian life with a step of obedience which, if maintained, will avoid the chastening that comes from waywardness.²¹

In light of this truth, baptism according to 1 Peter 3:21 gives “physical deliverance from corrective chastening.”²² According to this view, when the verse states, “baptism now saves you,” it

cleansing from moral impurity” (Thomas R. Schreiner, *1, 2 Peter, Jude*, NAC, gen. ed., E. Ray Clendenen [Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2003], 195).

¹⁹ Roger M. Raymer, “1 Peter” in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary* ed. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), 2:852.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Kevin Bauder, *Baptist Distinctives and New Testament Church Order* (Schaumburg, IL: Regular Baptist Press, 2012), 236-37.

²² Ibid., 237.

is not talking about spiritual regeneration or baptism giving forgiveness of sins.

This interpretation has much in its favor. The entire text makes sense step by step. Particularly, there is a more appropriate one to one correspondence between the water of Noah’s flood in verse 20 as physical deliverance from God’s judging hand and water baptism in verse 21 leading to a similar physical deliverance from God’s judging chastisement upon believers.²³ However, there are some issues to be resolved under this scheme. First, while in both Noah’s time and the present time, believers are the ones delivered, there is no consistency in the analogy for those who are judged. In Genesis 6-8, unbelievers are judged severely by the deluge. In this view, Peter is speaking of Christian believers being judged if they fail to be baptized. This may not be what Peter had in mind. Second, there is some tension with baptism as the first step for a believer and not an ongoing practice. At the point of conversion, a believer can avoid chastisement, but only for a time. The rest of his life must also live up to correct standards to avoid chastisement from the Lord. Most Christian believers struggle with later life decisions more than they struggle with water baptism. While not wanting to denigrate the significance of the first act of obedience for every true believer, it is not clear that Peter was trying to communicate the view expressed here. Finally, the statement “baptism now saves you” is followed by the parenthetical statement about a clear conscience but concludes with “through the resurrection of Jesus Christ.” While the death and resurrection is, as Bauder says, the “ground of all blessing” for Christians,²⁴ one wonders if the gospel context is pushing more in the direction of baptism symbolizing something in relation to eternal life. This is especially true in light of the eternal salvation implied at the beginning of the passage in 3:18-19.

In spite of such questions, this view should be carefully considered. Too many times terms like *water* are automatically assumed to refer to baptism, and words like *saved* are

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

wrongfully thought to always reference deliverance for eternal life. Interpretation should be open to local context before theology from elsewhere creeps in.

View # 5: The Sign of Baptism is a Picture of God's Saving Grace

In the history of the church, there has been a long and vigorous discussion of the difference between the sign and the actions signified by the sign. By sign is meant ceremony, ordinance, or sacrament, depending upon the tradition involved. Pertinent to the discussion here, baptism is the sign and what is signified is salvation. In one Catholic description, the relationship between the two comes the closest together: "It might be asked whether the sacrament is symbol or a reality. ... It is both. To begin with, it is a sign. ... The sacraments are signs which indicate symbolically Jesus' presence.... But that is not all. What they indicate, they also give. They actually accomplish what they signify."²⁵ One can see the conclusion of baptismal regeneration in these words.

On the other hand, in baptistic and many other evangelical presentations of the sign of baptism and the salvation it signifies, there is a wedge dividing the two. Baptism is a picture of salvation. It does not accomplish salvation. It points to salvation. Thus, it is a sign that saves only metaphorically or symbolically. This is the meaning of Peter. In the verse, salvation is accomplished by means of the resurrection of Christ. Assumed here is the death of Christ so that the entire gospel is in view in light of 1 Peter 3:18 where the paragraph begins with the death and resurrection of Christ.²⁶

The support of several evangelical writers can be marshaled in favor of the view that baptism as the sign pictures the reality.

²⁵ *A New Catechism: Catholic Faith for Adults* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1970), 255.

²⁶ Schreiner, *1, 2 Peter, Jude*, 196-97. See also, G. R. Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1962), 261-62.

Only a handful of samples will be cited here.²⁷ Caneday summarizes, “Peter puts the *figure*, baptism (understood as cleansing) in the place of *the thing figured*, the ‘good conscience’ that makes a pledge unto God. That is to say, Peter employs the figure for the thing figured when he says, ‘baptism now saves you.’”²⁸ Lewis and Demarest give the general thought this way: “The picture of the flood waters bringing deliverance to Noah’s family (1 Peter 3:19-21) reminded Peter of the spiritual deliverance wrought by Christ’s death (cf. v. 18) and symbolized by Christian baptism. Peter made clear, however, that the efficacy of baptism resides not in the washing of water but in the individual’s faith in the resurrected Christ (v. 21).”²⁹ Grudem comments, “We could paraphrase Peter’s statement by saying, ‘Baptism now saves you’—not the *outward* physical ceremony of baptism but the *inward* spiritual reality which baptism represents.”³⁰ Schreiner highlights the significance of the moment of baptism in this regard when he declares, “Believers at baptism ask God—on the basis of the death and resurrection of Christ—to cleanse their consciences and forgive their sins.”³¹ In all of these cases, baptismal regeneration is rejected. Baptism never saves as the efficacious means of bringing new life, forgiveness of sins, justification, and other blessings of God at conversion. Baptism is the sign or symbol that points toward or pictures the reality of salvation through faith in the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus

²⁷ The view of Lewis Sperry Chafer is worth noting but outside the categories of this article. Chafer appears to take the baptism of 1 Peter 3:21 as Spirit baptism and not water or ritual baptism. See Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology* (Dallas: Dallas Seminary Press, 1948), 6:150. Although he is correct to understand that the interpreter should not rush to assume that the word *baptism* always refers to water baptism, it is not at all clear that Peter has Spirit baptism in mind on this occasion.

²⁸ Caneday, “Baptism in the Stone-Campbell Restoration Movement,” 315.

²⁹ Bruce A. Demarest and Gordon R. Lewis, *Integrated Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 3:272-73.

³⁰ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 974.

³¹ Schreiner, *1, 2 Peter, Jude*, 196-97.

Christ. This view seems to fit the context of the difficult passage of 1 Peter 3:18-21 better than the other views. It also assists in harmonizing the NT teaching concerning the relationships of baptism, faith, and salvation. In the end, *sola fide* is preserved in a reasonable and biblical way.

Conclusion

This brief study was not intended to be an exhaustive exegetical work of 1 Peter 3:21 and its context. Hopefully, enough has been said to pique interest for further study and to outline some major views that exist on the meaning of “baptism now saves us.” It was found that some of the views overlap. They are not always mutually exclusive. This might be expected in such a difficult passage that has many interpretive tentacles.

Perhaps one of the obstacles that modern evangelical interpreters face in understanding such passages is that today’s modern church culture differs sometimes drastically from NT times. In the Apostolic Age, water baptism was *the profession of faith*. There was not a tremendous time gap between the exercise of faith in Christ as Savior and participation in ritual baptism. Today, there are sometimes classes that churches make new believers attend before they are baptized. Doctrinal abuses in the past (namely, baptismal regeneration, among others) have perhaps intensified the problem. Schreiner eloquently describes the dilemma:

For some believers today the connection of baptism to conversion seems odd, for they associate conversion with belief, making a profession of faith, or even going forward at an evangelistic event. Baptism is separated from conversion because many were baptized long before or after their conversion. But in the NT era it was unheard of to separate baptism from faith in Christ for such a long period. Baptism occurred either immediately after or very soon after people believed. The short interval between faith and baptism is evident from numerous examples in the book of Acts (Acts 2:41; 8:12-13; 8:38; 9:18; 10:48; 16:15, 33; 18:8; 19:5). It follows, then, that when Paul connects death to sin with baptism,

death to sin takes place at conversion, for baptism as an initiatory event occurs at the threshold of one’s new life. Paul appeals to baptism because it dramatically represents the washing away of one’s sins and the new life to which believers are called.³²

I believe my good friend, Bill Arp, in whose memory this article is written, would agree with Schreiner’s summary of the problem. Perhaps it is noteworthy to remind ourselves that Peter said that some of Paul’s scriptural writings were hard to understand (2 Pet 3:16). The challenge is that apparently, some of Peter’s writings are not so easy to understand either. I am sure my friend Bill relished the challenge as he opened his Greek New Testament with a smile.

³² Schreiner, “Baptism in the Epistles,” 92-93.