

# *Against Baptismal Regeneration*

## An Exposition of John 3:5 & Titus 3:5

### **Introduction**

Does water baptism convey God's grace in salvation? Is water baptism the condition for or the consequence of receiving God's saving grace? If faith, as the Reformers argued, is the sole means of becoming born again into the family of God, what is the place of water baptism? Could individuals enter the kingdom of God apart from being baptized? More importantly, if it were the true that all who are saved are baptized, is it necessarily true that all who are baptized saved?

These questions have divided the Body of Christ for almost 20 centuries and another look at the relevant biblical passages is deserved. On one side of the issue are those who insist the Scriptures teach water baptism is requisite for salvation; others aver that faith alone is the only condition for receiving God's redeeming grace. The former see water baptism as the vehicle through which God's Spirit confers redemption; the latter see it as a depiction of what the Spirit of God has already done upon faith in Christ.

While varying views on the effects of water baptism exist, I will confine this paper to those who insist upon either: a) Water baptism alone is sufficient for entering the kingdom of God, or b) Water baptism, though necessary unto obedience, is not essential for entering God's kingdom. After briefly surveying the historical background of water baptism before New Testament times, I will demonstrate that the practice is not a "Christian" innovation. Second, in an effort to highlight how quickly disparities arose in the early Church, I will show how the Ante-Nicene Fathers viewed water baptism. Third, brief reference will be made regarding the notion of "baptism of desire" and the practice of infant baptism in the Catholic Church.

Finally, I will offer a theological exposition of two key passages (Jn. 3:5; Titus 3:5), both of which will establish that while water baptism may be in view, it was never regarded as the means or instrument by which the righteousness of Christ was imputed to the subject. Instead, I will argue that divinely enabled faith is the sole condition for receiving the gift of eternal life and that the custom of water baptism was never understood by the first century Christian Church to convey the work of God's Spirit in salvation. Rather, faith alone in Jesus was and still is the necessary and sufficient condition for redemption.

### **Cultural-Historical Background**

The cultural and religious context of the New Testament did not occur in a historical vacuum. Many antecedent beliefs and practices went into the notion of water baptism. In the first century, religious lustrations had already become a common ceremonial rite of initiation and/or purification within Judaism. What follows in this section is (1) a brief introduction to the various uses of *baptw* in the Septuagint (LXX), (2) a survey of some Mishnaic and Talmudic sources, and (3) a few parallels between the practice of baptism at Qumran with that of John the Baptist. This will serve as a starting point for an introduction to the historical basis for Christian baptism.

Of the 16 times βαπτω is used in the LXX, several mean "to dip." The priest is required to dip his finger or other materials into the blood of a sacrificed animal in a ritual cleansing (Lev. 4:6, 17; 9:9). Dipping hyssop into water or blood is also mentioned (Num. 19:18; Ex. 12:22). In addition, a moral

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purification is clearly in view from Lev. 14:19-29. On account of pride, Naaman was stricken with leprosy then told to go and dip seven times in the Jordan River for cleansing. The Qal stem of the verb “to be clean” is nowhere used in the Old Testament for physical cleanliness, hence some type of religious purity must have taken place in Naaman, and his subsequent confession demonstrates a change of heart (2 Kgs. 5:15ff).<sup>1</sup> The significance is that ritual cleansing by immersion is clearly in view in the canonical Old Testament writings (also, cf., Heb. 6:2).

Proselyte baptisms can be found in early Judaism. The Mishnah attributes the practice of baptism to Jewish proselytes dated ca. A.D. 10-80 and is associated with the schools of Shammai and Hillel.<sup>2</sup> Though there is much disagreement as to when the practice actually began,<sup>3</sup> it seems that Oepke’s comments are worth considering. He states:

It is hardly conceivable that the Jewish ritual should be adopted at a time when baptism had become an established religious practice in Christianity. After A.D. 70 at least the opposition to Christians was too sharp to allow the rise of a Christian custom among the Jews. Proselyte baptism must have preceded Christian baptism.<sup>4</sup>

If Judaism did not derive its practice of water baptism from Christianity, then Christianity may very well have procured the practice from Judaism. This may account for why so many readily accepted the baptism of John the Baptist. Though some deny that Jewish proselyte baptisms were as early as New Testament times, the practice is affirmed by many experts on Jewish literature.<sup>5</sup> Though it is difficult to date precisely when proselyte baptisms occurred – before, during, or after New Testament times – their proximity to the schools of Hillel and Shammai place them very close to the first century.

Related to John the Baptist and water baptism is the Qumran sect. In spite of the numerous speculations of John the Baptist’s supposed relationship with Qumran (if he even had one at all), a glance at the *Manual of Discipline*<sup>6</sup> indicates that the people at Qumran did administer some type of water lustration. The text of 1QS 3:4-9 demonstrates that a changed lifestyle, or repentance from sin, and obedient commitment to Torah was the necessary prerequisite before one could enter into the Qumran community. It remains possible that John adapted the Qumranian practice of daily ritual cleansing to a single, unrepeatable, and eschatological rite (cf., Mt. 3:2; 3:11, 12).

The idea that repentance ought to occur prior to water baptism is precisely what John the Baptist put forth to the Pharisees and Saducees (Mt. 3:7-9). Furthermore, the fact that a dispute arose over John’s baptism and “the matter of ceremonial washing” (Jn. 3:25) strongly suggests some degree of continuity between John’s water baptism and Jewish purification rites. Many Old Testament passages allude to a moral purification that utilizes water as the chief agent of cleansing (Is. 1:16; Jer. 4:14; Ez. 36:25; Zech. 13:1).

The significant point of difference between John’s baptism is that it was meant for Jews as well as Gentiles. No more could the children of Abraham insist that their heritage alone was sufficient for entry into the kingdom of God (Mt. 3:9). They too needed to manifest true repentance and submit to water baptism. Though the ethical element regarding repentance is present in all three types of baptism (Jewish, Qumranian, Baptist), it was John’s baptism alone that inaugurated God’s coming reign in Jesus of Nazareth.

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With Qumran's ceremonial activities, assumed to be known at least among the Pharisees and Sadducees,<sup>7</sup> and the Jewish practices of ceremonial washings and proselyte baptism, it is no doubt that some clarification was needed from John as to how his baptism was different. Despite important theological differences between the Jewish ceremonial purification rites, Qumran's administration of baptism, and John's baptism, it is historically undeniable that early Christian baptism had a number of significant influences that helped develop the notion of water baptism for the early Christian Church.

### **Ante-Nicene Testimony**

Justin Martyr (d. 165 A.D.) associated salvation with the act of baptism by declaring water baptism as "the washing that is for the remission of sins and unto regeneration."<sup>8</sup> Irenaeus (d. 200 A.D.), a disciple of Polycarp (d. ca. 156) who himself was a disciple of John the Apostle, claimed that "we are made clean by means of the sacred water and the invocation of the Lord from our old transgressions, being spiritually regenerated as new born babes."<sup>9</sup> Moreover, it is quite possible that the practice of infant baptism was an established Christian ordinance before Irenaeus' day.<sup>10</sup> Tertullian (d. 240 A.D.) and Origen (d. 254 A.D.) both attest to infant baptism in their works as well.<sup>11</sup> Tertullian saw a connection between the Exodus via the Red Sea and water baptism. He taught that "what God did once by the mystery of water to free an earthly people . . . he still does by the mystery of water when he frees a spiritual people."<sup>12</sup>

The *Didache* (ca. 120-180 A.D., probably Syrian in origin) is the earliest evidence that allows for the pouring of water in the case where there is limited water. It reads:

Now about baptism: this is how to baptize. Give public instruction on all these points, and then "baptize" in running water, "in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." If you do not have running water, baptize in some other. If you cannot in cold, then in warm. If you have neither, then pour water on the head three times "in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." Before the baptism, moreover, the one who baptizes and the one being baptized must fast, and any others who can. And you must tell the one being baptized to fast for one or two days beforehand . . .<sup>13</sup>

The *Didache* is instructive on several points. First, baptism required a lot of water, not just sprinkling. Second, the Trinity is clearly highlighted in the *ipsissima verba* of the formula. Third, though the addition of fasting is nowhere found in the New Testament, the *Didache* implicates that infant baptism is not in view due to the danger posed to infants fasting. This last point, coupled with Tertullian's opposition to infant baptism and Cyprian's (ca. 254 A.D.) insistence upon faith being present in the recipient, indicates the early Church was divided on the issue of whether infants should be baptized.<sup>14</sup>

However, the disparity of views in the Ante-Nicene Church should cause us to pause and critically reflect upon New Testament evidence. Early historical testimony should only be persuasive in so far as it corresponds to the inspired Canon. Division inevitably arises when Apostolic doctrine is embellished beyond what is originally written. Though the embellishment is meant to enhance understanding, where Scripture is clear, then further elucidation must be carefully governed by the perspicuity of relevant biblical texts.

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### **Catholic Testimony**

The Catholic Church has traditionally held that baptism is essential for salvation. The Council of Trent (1545-1563 A.D.) declared that “if anyone says that baptism is optional, that is, not necessary for salvation, let him be anathema.”<sup>15</sup> Moreover, the Councils affirmed that “even infants, who could not as yet commit any sin of themselves, are for this cause truly baptized for the remission of sins.”<sup>16</sup> Due to a commitment to Augustine’s position on *originale peccatum* (original sin), the Church insists that the safer, more practical course of action is to baptize whenever possible.<sup>17</sup>

Some elaborate theories have developed within the Catholic Church to explain the fate of unbaptized infants.<sup>18</sup> One theory suggests that since unbaptized infants are not capable of reaching heaven, the child benefits from Christ’s redemptive work by receiving a reward of “natural happiness” in Limbo, where the fullness of human nature prior to the Fall is restored. Another theory states that at the moment of death, grace is made available, cognitive and moral faculties are imparted to the infant where a choice is then made possible, either for or against heaven.

Still, another theory asserts that infants are separated from their link to Adam’s sinful nature since Christ’s death. Though Limbo is still their fate, it becomes the “baptistery of heaven.” Finally, the Catholic Church, until recently, held that whoever dies in original sin will not inherit the kingdom of heaven. This is entirely different from holding that whoever dies without baptism is excluded from heaven. For infants, God’s grace may very well take the initiative and regenerate, though no one can be certain if this is indeed the case.

More recently the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) suggests that everyone, without distinction, will be ushered into the kingdom of heaven. Those who, through no fault of their own, do not know the gospel, but who strive to do God’s will by conscience can be saved.<sup>19</sup> Even Jews and Muslims will find their place in the kingdom of heaven.<sup>20</sup> Although the Catholic Church applies the baptism of desire to adults and not infants, the “baptism of desire cleanses from original sin and remits all personal sins.”<sup>21</sup> This “baptism of desire, along with Karl Rahner’s notion of the “anonymous Christian,” gives Christianity a highly questionable breadth and scope beyond the exclusive claims of Scripture (e.g., Ex. 20:1-5; Josh. 24:14-25; Is. 40:18-20; Jer. 10:1-16; Jn. 14:6; Acts 4:12; Eph. 1:20-21; 1 Tim. 2:5).

This brings us to the New Testament where two key passages will be examined on water baptism. The exegesis that follows will demonstrate that water baptism, though important, is not essential for salvation and always occurs subsequent to faith in Christ.

### **John 3:5 and Water Baptism**

John records the well-known dialogue between Jesus and Nicodemus. Though a Pharisee steeped in Judaism, Nicodemus was perceptive enough to acknowledge God’s work through Jesus (Jn. 3:1-2). Despite the cordial titles attributed to Jesus (“Rabbi,” “teacher”), it seems that Nicodemus did not go far enough in his conclusions about who Jesus really was. Jesus’ initial response was abrupt and, no doubt, took Nicodemus by surprise (Jn. 3:3).

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Apparently Nicodemus believed that by virtue of his birthright and his special status as a Pharisee, he had already secured a position in the kingdom of heaven. But Jesus knew otherwise (cf., Jn. 2:23-25). In fact, Paul states that “a man is not a Jew if he is only one outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical. No, a man is a Jew if he is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code” (Rom. 2:28-29). Jesus insisted that without a new birth, one cannot enter the kingdom of heaven. Nicodemus knew absolutely nothing of this new birth *as it related to his Jewish heritage*, which explains his perplexed and bewildered reply (Jn. 3:4). Had Jesus been talking of a pagan Gentile being reborn into Judaism, Nicodemus would have understood well enough. But the idea of a *Jew* being reborn to enter God’s kingdom was inconceivable as Nicodemus was certain that his bloodline alone was sufficient.

Jesus’ admonition to be “born again” means simply to be reborn from above or to be birthed a second time. It is a conversion or transformation of one’s very nature; an act accomplished solely by God (Jn. 1:12-13). Nicodemus knew that repetition of a natural birth was preposterous, yet he could not think of this born-again idea any other way. Historical heritage and personal piety blinded Nicodemus’ eyes to spiritual truths. This fundamental misunderstanding shows he knew nothing of this new or second birth as it related to him. More than likely, it never occurred to him that this second birth happens in a spiritual dimension rather than a physical one. Consequently, Jesus repeats his statement in similar terms to help clarify (Jn. 3:5).

It is important to show that being “born again” and being “born of water and the Spirit” are one and the same ideas. The essential difference is simply that the latter expression “echoes OT phraseology and might have been calculated to ring a bell in Nicodemus’ mind.”<sup>22</sup> So, whatever Jesus meant by the expression “born of water and the Spirit” must also be true of the expression “born again.” The question to ask is: What is meant by the phrase γεννηθῆναι ἐξ ὕδατος καὶ (lit., “born [out] of water and”)?

One possibility is that Jesus had John’s baptism in mind. Assuming that water is a symbol of a changed disposition of the heart, the meaning would be something like, “Nicodemus should enter into all that ‘water’ symbolizes, namely repentance and the like.”<sup>23</sup> Of course, the Pharisees consistently opposed Jesus and John’s baptism (Lk. 7:30), and it is highly unlikely that Jesus would simply be reiterating what Nicodemus already may have known, especially in light of the intimate and progressive nature of the dialogue. If baptism, John’s or otherwise, were in view, then the formula is the Spirit + H<sup>2</sup>O = salvation.

However, Carson levels some serious objections to the position that John’s baptism is what Jesus intended.

The argument presupposes that John the Baptist was so influential at the time that a mere mention of water would conjure up pictures of his ministry. If so, however, the response of Nicodemus is inappropriate. If the allusion to the Baptist were clear, why should Nicodemus respond with such incredulity, ignorance and unbelief (3:4, 9-10), rather than mere distaste or hardened arrogance? Even if John’s baptism is mentioned in near contexts, the burden of these contexts is to stress the *relative unimportance* of this rite (1:23, 26; 3:23, 30). If John’s baptism lies behind ‘water’ in 3:5, would not this suggest that Jesus was making the Baptist’s rite the

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requirement for entrance into the kingdom, even though that rite was shortly to be superseded by Christian baptism? [emphasis his]<sup>24</sup>

Another interpretation would be to take the expressions γεννηθῆναι ἐξ ὕδατος καὶ πνεύματος (lit., “born [out] of water and spirit”) as two separate activities – the former being physical birth, while the latter being spiritual birth. The sense here would be that natural procreation is not enough; one must become a spiritual recreation. But, as Carson points out, there is “no ancient text that [speaks] of birth as ‘out of water’ – just as we do not speak that way today.”<sup>25</sup>

Moreover, the construction ἐξ ὕδατος καὶ πνεύματος (lit., “[out] of water and spirit”), indicating both nouns are governed by one preposition, favors the idea of only one concept. Quite possibly it is one birth of “water and Spirit.” Harris’ comments are exegetically and theologically significant.

“ἐξ ὕδατος καὶ πνεύματος” (Jn. 3:5) shows that for the writer (or speaker) “water” and “Spirit” together form a single means of that regeneration which is a prerequisite for entrance into the kingdom of God (ἄνωθεν = birth, Jn. 3:3, 7). No contrast is intended between an external element of “water” and an inward renewal achieved by the Spirit. Conceptually the two are one.<sup>26</sup>

Since neither physical birth nor John’s baptism are in view here, coupled with the idea that the expression in Jn. 3:5 is one concept, then another interpretation is more likely. Given the fact that Jesus was talking with a Pharisee, chances are Old Testament references having to do with the Spirit’s activity in cleansing and renewal would have been, and indeed should have been, recalled to mind by Nicodemus.

Ezekiel 36:25 is just such a reference (also, Is. 44:3-4; Joel 2:28). Ezekiel speaks of an eschatological cleansing and renewal by God’s Spirit that refers to the Jewish people. Though it was invoked as biblical authority for baptism of proselytes,<sup>27</sup> the context suggests a national revival of Israel. And, whatever applied to the nation of Israel necessarily applies to individuals of that nation. Therefore, it is quite possible that “born of water and Spirit” is signaling a new begetting or birth that cleanses and purifies Jewish nationals. The religious leader should have anticipated a spiritual cleansing for his nation, but, sadly he did not (compare, Jn. 3:10; Jer. 31:29ff).

More importantly, if John’s readers were primarily, though not exclusively, Jews (cf., Jn. 20:30-31 where his overarching purpose may very well be to identify Jesus as the Messiah), then this reading of the dialogue between Jesus and Nicodemus would not only have been an effective evangelistic maneuver to the Jews, but also the communication of a hope realized, viz., the fulfillment of God’s Old Testament promises anticipated in the spiritual renewal of his chosen people! This hope had never been fully understood nor realized before in Jewish history. But now, through faith in Jesus the Messiah, hope becomes reality. On the one hand, John is saying an individual’s Jewish credentials were unimportant to this spiritual renewal. Yet, on the other hand, John intimates one’s Jewish credentials significantly enhance this spiritual renewal, in that God faithfully and fully completes the promises he makes to his specially chosen people. Jesus the Messiah is both the Promise and the Promise Keeper!

While it is true that God’s kingdom is of a spiritual nature and entrance into it can only be by spiritual rebirth, water baptism is not completely removed from the encounter between Jesus and Nicodemus. In other words, it is not entirely wrong to read this text in light of Christian baptism. John

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may be employing some type of anachronism in projecting Christian baptism upon his readers. Regardless, “if baptism is associated in the readers’ minds with entrance into the Christian faith, and therefore with new birth, then they are being told in the strongest terms that it is the new birth itself that is essential, not the rite.”<sup>28</sup> Or as F. F. Bruce sates, “it is a pity when reaction against the notion of baptismal regeneration by an *opus operatum* leads to the complete overlooking of the baptismal allusion in these words of Jesus.”<sup>29</sup> Therefore, water baptism may be the objective signification of a subjective response of faith in Jesus, but is not the means of salvation.

### **Titus 3:5 and Water Baptism**

Since Jesus clearly points to the operation of the Spirit of God in salvation and purification, it is necessary that one understand Paul’s teaching to Titus as being in accord with Jesus’ teaching. However, before looking into the specifics of Titus 3:5, a survey of new Testament teaching regarding the regeneration of persons will provide a sufficient background from which to better understand what may be packed into Paul’s statement to Titus.

*Regeneration is that activity of God wherein he radically transforms the moral, mental, emotional, volitional, and relational fiber of a person through the unique work of the Holy Spirit.* As was previously demonstrated in the dialogue between Jesus and Nicodemus, this transformation is analogous to a new birth where one begins his/her spiritual life (see Jn. 3:3-7; 2 Cor. 5:17; Gal. 6:15; Jm. 1:18; 1Pt. 1:3; 1 Jn. 2:29). The new birth has its start and finish in God the Holy Spirit who alone brings it about without respect to human activity (Jn. 1:13; 3:8). Value systems are wholly renovated not just altered. Old impulses and habits are replaced with new ones (Gal. 5:19-24; Col. 2:11-12) as a spiritual death takes place of the old self or nature (Gal. 2:20), which was dominated by sinful desires and activities (Rom. 6:1-11), and is replaced with a new spiritual life that is never to be corrupted (1 Pt. 1:4).

Furthermore, regeneration is God’s gracious means of cleansing from sin whereby the Spirit of God purifies the converted person from moral corruption. Paul clearly states that regeneration is a work of God and not of humans (Rom. 4:4-5; Gal. 2:16-17; Eph. 2:4-5, 8-9). This purification or washing is actualized at the time of conversion when the Holy Spirit enters a believer’s life and is symbolized at the time of a believer’s baptism (Acts 10:47; Eph. 1:13; 1 Cor. 6:11; possibly Heb. 9:14; 10:22; 1 Pt. 3:21). Water baptism, therefore, is an expression of regeneration and was never seen as the means of it. We come to God with empty hands offering only our need (Lk. 18:13-14). Scripture affirms that any righteous activity, not enabled by God, is completely insufficient for acquiring a right standing before him (Is. 64:6; Phil. 3:8b-9).

With these biblical evidences in place, the teaching of Titus 3:5 should be clearer. It reads: “he saved us, not because of righteous things we have done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit.” According to Catholic tradition, the sacraments (viz., baptism) are effective *ex opere operato* (“from the work done”). Essentially, grace in salvation is imparted through the work of the sacrament itself. A causal connection exists between the new birth and the act of water baptism. The water is thought of in terms of the instrument or means whereby grace is conveyed. “As truly, therefore, as the spiritual rebirth of man is caused principally by the

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Holy Ghost, so it is caused instrumentally by water, and consequently, the water of Baptism exercises a casual effect on justification.”<sup>30</sup> Titus 3:5 is cited by Catholic tradition, along with Acts 2:38; 22:16; Eph. 5:26 as supporting biblical evidences.

Nevertheless, Titus 3:5 clearly states that “God” saved us. The construction of ἀλλὰ κατὰ τὸ αὐτοῦ ἔλεος (lit., “but according to his mercy”) suggests at least two things. First, the use of ἀλλὰ; rather than δὲ; is a marker for more contrast. What is so sharply contrasted is what God does versus what humans do. Second, the genitive use of the intensive pronoun αὐτοῦ, which functions in the place of the third person possessive pronoun and in the predicate position, is usually an “emphatic use of the attributive structure.”<sup>31</sup> The point is simply that Paul is seeking to bring out God’s activity in salvation, not efforts done by humans. Because of his mercy, regeneration is God’s work.

While it is true that the text reads διὰ λουτροῦ (lit., “through [or by] water”),<sup>32</sup> it has a secondary or intermediate means, rather than the primary means.<sup>32</sup> An example would be the expression διὰ τοῦ προφήτου where God, the primary agency, is the one acting through the human prophet, the secondary agency (cf., Mt. 1:22). Hence the “washing” may refer to water, but the purifying effect of the Holy Spirit’s activity in regeneration is the primary agency where persons are cleansed from sin’s defilement. Water is merely an intermediate means.

If water, however, is God’s medium of purifying the sinner, then how is it that a material substance is the cause of, or means through which, spiritual renewal comes? Where is faith? Of course, the Catholic Church may answer that faith need only be present in the parents of infants or in the Church itself. From whence comes this dogma? To which Scripture(s) can one turn to find the transferal of faith from one subject to another? It seems that water alone can no more cleanse the heart than can circumcision or any other tradition. Both Paul and Jesus are univocal on this issue (Mt. 15:1-20; Rom. 2:25-29; Gal. 5:6).

Finally, though the preposition διὰ is not repeated in the second expression ἀνακαινώσεως πνεύματος ἁγίου (lit., “renewing by the Holy Spirit”), it is most likely repeated in thought. This opens the possibility of two aspects to salvation. First, the “washing of regeneration” may be the instantaneous purification that occurs at the moment of faith when the Holy Spirit enters the believer (cf., Eph. 1:13), with baptism representing this miraculous occurrence. Second, the idea of continual restoration by the Holy Spirit as a lifelong process could be what Paul has in mind by Holy Spirit renewal (cf., Eph. 5:26, 27 where cleansing is done *until* no spot or wrinkle is left; also, 2 Cor. 3:18). The first aspect, instantaneous-Holy Spirit-wrought-purification, is the necessary requisite for the subsequent aspect, continual-Holy Spirit-wrought-renewal.<sup>33</sup> Given absolute continuity of teaching regarding salvation, it must be true that whatever Paul meant in Titus 3:5 is in accord with the rest of Scripture. Otherwise, the central doctrine of the entire Bible, viz., redemption, becomes opaque.

The logical sequence of the salvific event, normative for all believers, is: Upon belief in the gospel message, the Holy Spirit enters the human heart and transforms it into a new creation and water baptism ensues shortly thereafter (cf., Acts 10:44-48; 11:15-17; 16:14-15; 18:8). Though water baptism is included in the Great Commission and is not optional, it is far from being effectual unto salvation. Contrary to Catholic doctrine, water baptism is a manifestation of grace, not the means of receiving it.

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Apart from the operation of the Holy Spirit and faith in the gospel, there would be no salvific peace with God (Rom. 5:1-2).

Moreover, there is no explicit command in Scripture to baptize infants. If there is any parallel between circumcision and water baptism (cf., Col. 2:11-12), it is merely by way of analogy. Circumcision brought the infant into the national blessings of Israel. But those blessings did not necessarily include a redemptive relationship with Yahweh. That is accomplished by faith alone and is prior to any ceremonial rite which is symbolic of that relationship. Abraham was declared righteous by believing and *before* his circumcision (Rom. 4:9-12). In other words, the rite presupposes the relationship. Therefore, infants who have not the capacity to believe do not receive any benefit whatsoever from water baptism.

Household baptisms (Acts. 10:44; 16:15, 31-33; 18:8; 1 Cor. 1:16; 16:15) indicate that the subjects involved were old enough to “assent to the Gospel, receive the Spirit, and participate in ministry.”<sup>34</sup> Any teaching which insists infants were part of the baptized households appears to be an argument from silence. And, in the spirit of Augustine, where Scripture is silent, so must we also be. There are sufficient biblical evidences regarding the doctrine of salvation that are normative and must be practiced without fabricating our own.

### **Conclusion**

It has been argued that the idea of baptismal regeneration has no scriptural support from either John 3:5 or Titus 3:5. Despite the fact that the dogma has a long history in the Christian Church, baptismal regeneration has no biblical warrant. Rather, the preeminent role of the Holy Spirit in the salvation and purification of those who place faith in Jesus is both the necessary and sufficient means of receiving God’s grace in redemption. Despite the fact that the dogma has a long history in the Christian Church, the portrayal of spiritual cleansing and renewal is what the ceremonial rite points to in every New Testament case. Infants who are baptized, despite Roman Catholic teaching, are done so without any necessary connection to their eschatological destiny. When infant baptism is done in the name of salvation, then a plethora of deviant doctrines (of which Protestantism is not short) necessarily arise in order to substantiate the dogma that water baptism cleanses and renews.

More could be said about the issue of baptismal regeneration. An exegetically responsible and theologically faithful look at Acts 2:38; 8:13; and 1 Pt. 3:19-21 must also be taken into account. A thorough biblical understanding of the relationship Spirit baptism has to water baptism would be useful prior to arriving at one particular position over another. However, the texts dealt with here demonstrate the operation of the Holy Spirit in salvation-purification is best pictured by the symbolic act of water baptism. John tells us that one’s national or religious heritage is not sufficient for entering the kingdom of God. Paul tells us that God alone, without respect to any human effort, is the sole and sufficient Agent through whom the blessings of redemption flow. Therefore, God is the one who brings about salvation for all who have faith in his Son.

*Soli fide!*

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—ENDNOTES—

1. Richard Averbeck, "The Focus of Baptism in the New Testament," *Grace Theological Journal* 2 (1980): 272. Also, cf., G. R. Beasley-Murry, "Baptism," in *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, hereafter referred to as *NIDNTT*, ed., Colin Brown, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978), 144.
2. H. Danby, *The Mishnah* (London: Oxford University, 1933), 148, 431.
3. Cf., Alfred Eedersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, Appendix 12 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, reprint, 1980), 745-747.
4. Albrecht Oepke, βαπτω in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed., G. Kittel, trans. G. W. Bromiley, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1964), 535.
5. Cf., H. H. Rowley, "Jewish Proselyte Baptism," *Hebrew Union College Annual* 15 (1940), 313-334. Also, T F. Torrence, "Proselyte Baptism," *New Testament Studies* 1 (1954), 150-154.
6. As cited in L. F. Badia, *The Qumran Baptism and John the Baptist's Baptism* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1980), 52-53.
7. Interestingly, it is now known that one period in which the Qumran sect occupied the area near the Dead Sea was ca. 4 B.C.-68 A.D.
8. Justin Martyr, *Apology*, I.66, cited in Gordon R. Lewis and Bruce A. Demarest, *Integrated Theology*, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 74.
9. Irtenaeus, *Fragments*, 34, cited in *ibid.*.
10. T. M. Lindsay, "Baptism: The Reformed View," in the *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, ed. G. W. Bromiley, vol 1 (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1979), 421.
11. Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1986), 557.
12. Tertullian, in chapters 8, 9 of *De baptismo*, from T. M. De Ferrari, "Baptism (Theology of)," in *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, vol. 1 (Washington D.C.: The Catholic University of America, 1967), 63.
13. From *Early Christian Fathers*, ed. and trans. by Cyril C. Richardson, vol. I: The Library of Christian Classics, (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1953), 175.
14. Cf., Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church: Ante-Nicene Christianity*, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1910), 250.
15. De Ferrari, "Baptism," 63.
16. *Ibid.* Lewis and Demarest, *Integrative*, vol. 3, 75.
17. De Ferrari, "Baptism," 63.
18. *Ibid.*
19. Cf., W. M. Abbott, "Dogmatic Constitution on the Church" [*Lumen Gentium* 2.16], in *The Documents of Vatican II* (New York: Guild Press, 1966), 34.
20. Cf., "Declarations on Non-Christian Religions," in *Documents*, 663-666.
21. De Ferrari, "Baptism," 63.
22. F. F. Bruce, *The Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 84.
23. Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John* in *The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 216. On this view cf., B. F. Westcott, *The Gospel According to St. John*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, n.d.), 50.

# *Against Baptismal Regeneration*

## An Exposition of John 3:5 & Titus 3:5

24. D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 193.
25. D. A. Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), 40.
26. M. J. Harris, "Appendix: Prepositions and Theology in the Greek NT," in *NIDNTT*, vol. 3, 1178.
27. Bruce, *John*, 84.
28. Carson, *John*, 196.
29. Bruce, *John*, 85.
30. Joseph Pohle, *The Sacraments: A Dogmatic Treatise*, ed., Arthur Preuss (St. Louis: B. Herder, 1942), vol. 1, 1.
31. Stanley E. Porter, *Idioms of the Greek New Testament* (Sheffield: JSOT, 1994), 130.
32. Ibid. Cf., also Maximilian Zerwick, *Biblical Greek*, ed., Joseph Smith (Rome: Scripta Pontificii Institui Biblici, 1963), 113.
33. D. Edmond Hiebert, "Titus," in *Expositor's Bible Commentary*, vol. 11, ed., Frank E. Gaebelin (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978), 446.
34. Lewis and Demarest, *Integrative*, vol. 3, 289.

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