

Is Infant Baptism Biblical?

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The central teaching of the Bible is that God wants to reclaim his relationship with us through Jesus Christ (John 3: 16 & Romans 3:24–26). Jesus Christ came into the world to be sacrificed as a sin offering so that our sins could be forgiven. And now God will give eternal life to those who place their trust in him (John 3:16–18; Ephesians 2:8,9).

This is what it means when the Bible says that we are saved “by grace through faith” (Ephesians 2: 8-9). Grace is a “free gift,” the unearned eternal blessings of God. The fact that Christ died does not save people in and of itself but it provides the ground upon which God, in full harmony with His holiness, is free to save those who have sinned against him. This free gift received by *faith*.

For 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. (Ephesians 2:8,9)

Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God. (Romans 5: 1,2)

By faith, we rely upon Jesus Christ to save us.

In this article we are going to examine the Biblical teaching on how to respond in faith to God's gracious provision. We want to address a very important question: “what is the Biblical method by which we express faith in Jesus Christ as a personal commitment?” The answer to this question is found in Acts 2 and it will serve as an introduction to the three-part presentation that will follow.

In Acts 2 the Christian faith was explained publicly for the first time following the resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ. The apostle Peter spoke to thousands of Israelites who were gathered in Jerusalem for the feast of Pentecost. He told them that Jesus Christ was the promised Messiah and he explained to them how they had cooperated with the Romans to put God's Messiah to death, but that God had raised him from the dead. Peter told them that God had worked all of this out for his purposes – that Jesus Christ was now exalted to the right hand of God in heaven and that he had poured out the promised Holy Spirit. Peter went on to tell the people how to respond.

Therefore, let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ.

When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, “Brothers, what shall we do?”

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. The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off — for all whom the Lord our God will call.”

With many other words he warned them; and he pleaded with them, “Save yourselves from this corrupt generation.” Those who accepted the message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day. (Acts 2:36 - 41).

We can learn several important facts from this account.

First, the people were to turn from sinful living (repent) and be baptized in water to express their faith in Jesus Christ ("in the name of Jesus Christ"). If they did this, Peter promised that their sins would be forgiven and they would receive the Holy Spirit (2: 38).

Second, this response was given as a pattern for all people -- of all time. The promise of forgiveness of sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit was for those who heard Peter's appeal that day, for their children, and for those far off (in time, background, and proximity). In short, the promise is open to any person willing to turn from his or her sins and place their faith in Jesus Christ (2: 39).

Third, those who responded did so immediately. Three thousand people were baptized and (together with the apostles) they became the first Christians (2:40-41). As we will see, this became a general pattern followed throughout the New Testament.

There is some confusion about making the commitment to trust and follow Christ in this way, so we will embark on a three part exposition of what the Bible teaches. Our approach will be to focus on what the Bible says, we will not base our view on church tradition or history. We might come to different conclusions if we do not rely on the Bible alone, but we are committed to the faith of the Bible, and we hold it as the final authority on this matter.

We will consider, in order, the purpose of baptism, if infants can be baptized, and the proper method of baptism. By the end, we should have a clear picture of the holistic response which God has graciously given to us in the Bible.

1. The purpose of Biblical baptism is to express faith in Christ and receive the forgiveness of sins.

Water baptism was the God-given vehicle or method by which people appealed to Christ as savior. This understanding gives proper place to faith as the essential human response, while recognizing baptism as integral to expressing faith in a holistic way.

It is helpful to carefully review the following passages:

Acts 2:37-38 -- When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, "Brothers, what shall we do?" 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

Acts 22:14-16 -- "Then he said: 'The God of our fathers has chosen you to know his will and to see the Righteous One and to hear words from his mouth. . . . And now what are you waiting for? Get up, be baptized and wash your sins away, calling on his name.

1 Pet 3:20-22 -- God waited patiently in the days of Noah while the ark was being built. In it only a few people, eight in all, were saved through water, 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, who has gone into heaven and is at God's right hand-- with angels, authorities and powers in submission to him.

Gal 3:26-29 -- 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. There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

As mentioned above, in Acts 2:37-38 Peter told the people to be baptized "in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins."ⁱ The phrase, "in the name of Jesus Christ," in this passage is a commitment of trust in Jesus Christ "for the forgiveness of sins."ⁱⁱ

We see a similar emphasis in Acts 22:16. When Ananias finished telling Paul about Jesus and God's special mission for him, Paul was told to respond by arising and being baptized to "wash away his sins." His baptism was the prescribed way for him to call upon Jesus' name for forgiveness. 1 Peter 3: 21 teaches that baptism was the pledge or appeal to God for a clean conscience and Galatians 3:26-27 explicitly states that baptism was a formal commitment to clothe oneself with Christ. These passages show that in the Bible baptism was the God-given method to express one's commitment to trust and follow Jesus Christ.

Water baptism emphasized Jesus Christ's saving power and was done "in Jesus' name," as a way of "calling on the Lord" or as "the pledge of a good conscience to God" based on "the resurrection of Jesus."ⁱⁱⁱ This is why baptism brought the "forgiveness of sin" and the "gift of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2:38). This is also why baptism could "wash your sins away" (Acts 22:16) and "he who believes and is baptized will be saved" (Mark 16: 16). In baptism one was spiritually "raised with Christ" through faith in the power of God (Colossians 2:12).

A close look at 1 Peter 3:21 brings clarity to this point. Peter was encouraging Christians to be faithful to God, even though they were few in number. He reminded them of Noah, for he too was one of only a few who followed God. Peter said Noah was saved through the waters of the great flood. The water through which Noah was saved served as a foreshadow of Christian baptism. In the first century it separated the few who were saved from the many who were unsaved.

Baptism 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* who has gone into heaven and is at God's right hand — with angels, authorities and powers in submission to him. (1 Peter 3:21,22)

This passage shows that the real meaning of baptism is found not in the act itself, but in the appeal to the resurrection and power of Jesus Christ. Baptism, Peter says, points to the risen Lord who has angels, authorities and powers in submission to him. The water of baptism, or the act of baptism, had no merit in itself; it was simply the God-ordained method of appealing to the saving work of Jesus Christ for salvation.

It is important to clarify this point, because without it some have wrongly concluded that the saving merit of baptism is found in the act itself. God provides salvation through Jesus Christ, and baptism has its meaning *but* only as an appeal to what God freely provides through him. Galatians 3:26-27 smoothly relates the two: " 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." Baptism, not as a work, but as the mode of appealing to Jesus is the Biblical path. Baptism is the form, but personal faith in Jesus is the substance that give meaning to it.

2. Biblical baptism expresses a personal decision and is not for infants.

There are many different ideas about when one is ready for baptism. Some think that infants can be baptized and others do not. If we follow the Bible, there are two positive facts that will guide us to the right viewpoint (believers baptism) and a cluster of negative facts that will keep us away from infant baptism.

First, a person had to believe in Jesus to be baptized in the Bible. Jesus himself said, *whoever believes and is baptized shall be saved* (Mark 16:16). The apostle Peter described baptism as the point at which a person was saved because at that time he or she *pledged a good conscience to God* (1 Peter 3:21; Acts 22:16). The apostle said that we are saved by faith, because everyone who has expressed his or her faith in Christ through baptism, has been clothed with Christ (Galatians 3:26-28). Paul also says that we are “raised up with Christ in baptism,” *through our faith in God* (Colossians 2:12). In this way, the Bible indicates that baptism was only for those who had made the decision to believe in Christ.

Second, for baptism to be Biblical, it must express repentance. On the day of Pentecost Peter told at least three thousand people that they were to “repent and be baptized” (Acts 2:38). If we carefully read this passage, we will see that the promise of the gift of the Holy Spirit and the forgiveness of sins was for those who could both repent and be baptized. To be baptized we must admit that our ways have been sinful and that we have broken both God’s laws and God’s heart. Paul describes baptism as the point at which we pledged ourselves to die with Christ (to sin) and be raised to a new life (Romans 6:1-6). Paul’s over-riding point in the whole chapter is that we have committed ourselves to a pattern of dying with Christ and living a new life through our baptism (Romans 7:17). This is not a commitment that an infant can make.

These first two facts are important, because in the Old Testament infants were automatically added to the covenant community of Israel when their parents had them circumcised. But the Christianity (according to the New Testament) is different in this regard: it is only for those who make the personal decision to trust and follow Jesus Christ. The difference is that Christianity is not something you are born into, like an ethnic or national religion. Yes, it is wise for Christian parents to dedicate their children to God, pray for them, and raise them as followers of Christ. But the essence being a Christian is that a person enters into a saving relationship with God *only by his or her personal faith* (Ephesians 2:8-9).^{iv} Notice how the apostle Paul contrasted the two systems:

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. When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your sinful nature, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins. (Colossians 2:11-13)

Paul pointed out that baptism was like circumcision, in that through it people were brought into covenant relationship with God. But unlike circumcision, the one being baptized *expressed faith* “in the power of God.” Baptism is an expression and a commitment of personal faith. Biblical baptism was not something that parents could do for their children.

Thirdly, there is a cluster of five truths that will redirect us away from infant baptism.

- i. There are *no passages of scripture* which *clearly teach* infant baptism in the New Testament.

ii. There are *no clear examples* in the New Testament of infant baptism – all the clear and unambiguous examples are of believers being baptized. “Households” that were baptized in the Bible (Acts 11:14) included one’s “relatives and close friends” (Acts 10:24-27), infant baptism must be read into the text (it is not “there” by itself).

iii. The *correlation with circumcision in the New Testament is not infant baptism*, but the indwelling Holy Spirit (Romans 2:29), given when a person believes in Christ (Ephesians 1:13-14).

iv. *Believer’s baptism (those who personally believe are baptized) is the only practice of the church immediately after the Bible was written.* The first clear instance of infant baptism comes over one hundred years after scripture was complete (Tertullian in 207 A.D., see below) and even then, infant baptism did not become a common practice until hundreds of years after the Bible was written.^v It wasn’t until the time of Augustine in the early 400’s that infant baptism became a common practice.

v. *Everybody agrees that believer’s baptism is Biblical.* But those who practice infant baptism follow something which must be read into the New Testament. In the process, something that is (at best) “an inference” becomes “a substitute” and “replacement” for what the Bible clearly teaches.

In sum, if we are seeking to be Biblical, these three facts will guide us. First, only those who personally believe can be baptized. Second, personal repentance from sin, coupled with the commitment to live for Christ must be a driving factor in baptism. And third, there is no clear support in the Bible or in the earliest level of church history to support infant baptism.

3. Biblical baptism is immersion, not pouring or sprinkling.

There are different ideas about the proper form or mode of baptism. Some think that sprinkling is authorized, while others believe that baptism is only by pouring or immersion. Again, if we pay close attention to the Bible, there are four facts that show that only immersion is authorized by the New Testament.

First, the only Greek word used in the New Testament for baptism is *Baptizein (Baptizo)* and it means “to dip, plunge, or to immerse.”^{vi} If God had wanted us to follow a different method of baptism then he would have used other words. If he had meant to say “pour” he could have used *Ekcheo*, which means, “to pour out.” If he wanted to say “sprinkle” he would have used *Rantizo*, which means, “to sprinkle.”

Immersion is the Biblical method of baptism, because without exception, the word for immersion (*Baptizein*) is the word that is used when discussing this act.^{vii} Stated differently, if we follow the New Testament, we can know that when it speaks of baptism it means immersion, because that is what the word for baptism meant in Greek and that is the word used.^{viii}

Second, even without knowing that the word for baptism in the original Greek was *Baptizien*, one can still determine the Biblical method of baptism by the description of baptism that is presented in the New Testament. One of the clearest examples of this is found in the sixth chapter of the book of Romans. The apostle Paul wanted to remind the early Christians of the need for holy living. In order to remind them of God’s grace and their original commitment to follow Christ, Paul recalled for them the time when they were baptized. He described baptism as a *drama* which pictured three distinct acts. The first act was a death. When a person went into

the water they pledged to identify themselves with Christ's death (vs. 3). The second act was a burial. By burial in water a person re-enacted the burial of Christ (vs. 4). The third act was a resurrection. In coming out of the water, a person was raised to live a new kind of life (vs. 4,5). Whenever a person was baptized there was a re-enactment of the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus. No other action communicates this rich Biblical principle except immersion.

Or don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? 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 a new life. If we have been united with him like this in his death, we will certainly also be united with him in his resurrection. (Romans 6:3-5)

Baptism, as re-enactment of the death, burial, and then raising of Christ, must have been immersion. The same point is made in Colossians 2:12. The Biblical theology of baptism is closely tied with the method of baptism. Only immersion symbolizes burial and resurrection. And only immersion is the pattern maker for the rest of our lives -- we are constantly dying to self and raising Christ up (Romans 6:17).^{ix}

Some traditions try to evade this point by claiming that this passage refers to "Spirit Baptism," *not water baptism*. But this will not stand up to close investigation.

The Bible says that there is one baptism – with two parts, water and Spirit (Ephesians 4:5; John 3:3-5). It is not just water baptism being discussed and it is not just Spirit baptism. Critical scholars generally agree that water baptism and spirit baptism normally occurred at the same time *in the Bible* (John 3:3-5; Acts 2:38; 1 Corinthians 6:11; Titus 3:3-6). Here the two are both in mind, but the re-enactment of Christ's death, burial, and resurrection through water is primarily (see the context below).

In the Bible, unless the context demands it, water baptism is normally the primary point under discussion. This is because various passages clearly command that we submit to water baptism (Matthew 28:19-20; Acts 2:38, etc.) and it is mentioned much more often than Spirit baptism. The highly respected British scholar John Stott states the following in *Regard to Romans 6*:

But it is safe to say that whenever the terms 'baptism' and 'being baptized' occur, without mention of the element in which baptism takes place, the reference is to water baptism. Whenever water baptism is not meant, however, the alternative baptismal *element is mentioned; for instance, 'with the Spirit.'*

See this quote in *John Stott, Romans: God's Good News For The World* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1995), p. 173. This is why the vast majority of modern and ancient scholars have seen this passage as a primary reference to water baptism: See James Dunn, *Baptism in the Holy Spirit* (Philadelphia, Penn.: Westminster Press, 1970) and Gerald Bray, *Romans in the Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1998).

The context of Romans 6 strongly argues for water baptism because it was primarily in water baptism (in the Bible) that one pledged himself or herself to put off sin and live for Christ. The *context is primarily the commitment these Christians made to God by their baptism*, not what the Spirit of God did (Spirit baptism is what God does, water baptism is what we do). If we hold to the ancient belief in one baptism with two parts (but emphasizing the water here) all difficulties fade away. Also, if you read the chapter in the context, the Roman Christians "obeyed a form of teaching" (6:17): if it is water baptism, we can see what "form" they obeyed; if it is Spirit baptism that is primarily in view, what did they obey?

Third, only immersion fits the circumstantial evidence of how baptism was performed in the Bible. First, when a person wanted to be baptized in the New Testament, they went *to the*

water. The Bible never recorded that water was brought to the person seeking baptism. People went to where there was an abundant supply of water (“much water”; see John 3:23 & Acts 8:36). This would be necessary only if baptism was an immersion in water. Second, the Bible teaches that when people arrived at a place where there was water, they went down into it. The Scriptures indicate that the person being baptized and the person doing the baptism both went down into the water (Acts 8:36; Matthew 3:5,6). Third, after baptism, both the person being baptized and the person performing the baptism came up out of the water (Mark 1:10; Acts 8:39). For both people to go down into the water, and for that to be followed by both people coming out of the water, it only makes sense that baptism was immersion. All of this would have been needless effort if sprinkling or pouring were utilized.

Fourth, it is a historical fact that pouring and sprinkling, as forms of baptism, were introduced after the Bible was written and were not commonly utilized until hundreds of years later. The first instance of pouring is found in the *Didache*, written about 30-50 years after the last book of the New Testament (Revelation in A.D. 95). Pouring is mentioned as a third and last method to utilize for baptism (after immersion in flowing water and immersion in still water, which are the “best ways”). But this book is not considered scripture by any group (in our day) and pouring was never widely adopted, even in the period after the *Didache* was written. Widespread acceptance of something less than immersion begins in the fifth century, but did not become normative until hundreds of years after that. It is significant to note that the Nicene creed of A.D. 386 reveals the faith of the early church, when it refers to “one baptism for the remission of sins,” utilizing the word for immersion in the original text.

In sum, there are four points which clearly show that mode of Biblical baptism was immersion. First, the word for baptism used in the Bible means immersion. Second, theologically, full immersion in water is a concrete expression of what is involved when a person becomes a Christian: only in this way can we physically re-enact the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus. And only immersion symbolizes that which also lies at the heart of the entire Christian life — the constant dying to self and rising with Christ. Third, only immersion fits the circumstantial evidence of how baptism was practiced in the Bible. And fourth, pouring and sprinkling were historically introduced after the Bible was written. Those who hold that pouring and sprinkling are proper forms of baptism are basing it on human tradition and church history, not the Bible.

Conclusion

In our day, many infants are baptized and many people practice forms of baptism other than immersion. This is almost always done in clear conscience by people who believe that these practices are supported by the Bible. But these practices are based upon church tradition and history, not the Bible. Our intent is not to question the sincerity of such people or to put them down or to say that they are not Christians. Most have done the best that they can, with what they have known. But we want to follow the Bible alone on these matters and we encourage others to join us in this quest.

It is also a fact that in our day many confess their faith in Christ and turn from their sins without even hearing about baptism. The sinner’s prayer and asking Jesus into one’s heart get at the heart or core element of the response to God’s grace found in confession – which is personal faith (Romans 10:9-10). We believe God can work in such situations, because personal faith is the key and it can exist both before baptism and apart from baptism. To be clear – people are saved by faith, and God can give his indwelling Spirit apart from Biblical baptism,^x as many in our

day testify (Acts 15: 7-9; Ephesians 1:13-14; Romans 8:16). By these elements we can know that we are saved.

But if we are seeking to be fully Biblical, we will want baptism, as it is described in the Bible, to be an important part of the commitment to turn from sinful living and place faith in Christ. According to the Bible, a full response includes immediate baptism. This is why, in the Bible, when people decided to become Christians, they were baptized without delay after hearing about salvation, even in a big crowd (Acts 2:38-42), or even while traveling along the road (Acts 8: 36-40), or even in the middle of the night (Acts 16:31-33). As a wedding ceremony makes the commitment in marriage concrete, so water baptism concretely solidifies the commitment to trust in Christ. This Biblical pattern and practice needs to be restored to its rightful place in our day – by all of us.

ⁱSome dispute the English rendition of this passage, arguing that the preposition *eis* (“for the”) somehow means that people are baptized “because of the” forgiveness of sins (making baptism simply a symbol of salvation previously received). Technically and linguistically this is not correct. The English translations have it right – see Jack Cottrell, *Baptism: A Biblical Study* (Joplin, Missouri: College Press, 1989), p. 55-61. For the syntactical and grammatical background see Carroll D. Osburn, “The Third Person Imperative in Acts 2: 38,” *Restoration Quarterly* (1983): 81-84.

ⁱⁱI. Howard Marshall, *The Acts of the Apostles*, in *The Tyndale New Testament Commentaries* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: InterVarsity Press, 1980), p.81.

ⁱⁱⁱFor more technical work on this approach see H. Bietenhard, “Prepositions with *baptizo*,” in *The International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, edited by Colin Brown (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing Company, 1975), 3: 1207 - 1211; Lars Hartman, “Into the Name of Jesus,” *New Testament Studies* 20 (1973): 432 - 440; and Lars Hartman, “Baptism ' Into the Name of Jesus' and Early Christianity,” *Studia Theologica* 28 (1974): 21 - 48.

^{iv}A child’s inherent standing before God (Matthew 19:13-15) and the sanctifying influence of the parent’s faith (1 Corinthians 7:14) influence children until they reach the necessary level of spiritual development where they can make the personal decision to turn away from sin (even as a future life path) to faith in Christ. Even Roman Catholics now believe that children can be saved apart from infant baptism.

^vThe explicit initiation of infant baptism dates to the latter part of the second century (one hundred years after the Bible was written). We know that the church father Tertullian opposed it on the grounds that it would be safer and more profitable to wait until faith was formed in the believing adult. Infant baptism did not become an established practice until the fourth century. See F. LaGard Smith, *Baptism: The Believer’s Wedding Ceremony* (Cincinnati, Ohio: Standard Publishing, 1989), p. 115-116. See also Larry Stalley, *Baptism In The Early Post-Apostolic Church* (M. A. R. Guided Research, Harding University Graduate School, 1980); Jack P. Lewis, “Baptismal Practices of the Second and Third Century Church,” *Restoration Quarterly* Vol. 26 (1983): 1-17; and Everett Ferguson, *The Early Christians Speak* (Abilene, Texas: ACU Press, reprint 1994).

Attempts to find infant baptism within the description of households coming to faith typically minimizes the fact that “households” in the ancient world typically included relatives, in-laws, and slaves. A careful examination of the conversions in Acts 10 demonstrates this truth.

^{vi}For more information see Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*. 2nd. ed., revised by William Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich (Chicago:

University of Chicago Press, 1979). Also, consult the comprehensive study of Thomas Conant, *The Meaning and Use of Baptizein* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Kregel Publications, 1977).

^{vii}In Leviticus 14:15, in the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Old Testament) each of these words is used to indicate the three distinct actions that they describe: pouring, sprinkling and dipping.

^{viii} See F. LaGard Smith, *Baptism: The Believer's Wedding Ceremony* (Cincinnati, Ohio: Standard Publishing, 1989), p 96. See also Larry Stalley, *Baptism In The Early Post-Apostolic Church* (M. A. R. Guided Research, Harding University Graduate School, 1980); Jack P. Lewis, Baptismal Practices of the Second and Third Century Church, *Restoration Quarterly* Vol. 26 (1983): 1-17; and Everett Ferguson, *The Early Christians Speak* (Abilene, Texas: ACU Press, reprint 1994).

^x *It is important to realize that God's saving power is not limited to proper baptism.* Instead of asking people to respond to Jesus' finished work on the cross by expressing faith and repentance in baptism, many Bible believing churches encourage people to receive Jesus as Lord and Savior through saying a prayer. In this prayer people invite Jesus to come into their hearts. In their understanding this prayer is the full Biblical method by which one is made a Christian. This specific method of becoming a Christian is a recent practice, not commonly followed until recent times (starting in the early 1800's). It is now standard teaching among most Bible believing Protestants (Evangelicals). It has been made very prominent since Campus Crusade's Bill Bright popularized the Four Spiritual Laws in the middle of the twentieth century.

There is much to commend in this approach. Too often traditional churches miss the Biblical emphasis on a personal relationship with God through trusting Jesus in our hearts. We do not hear enough of the central Biblical teaching that we are saved by grace through personal faith. One can easily be drawn into accepting the sinner's prayer or simply asking Jesus into one's heart as being the full Biblical way to become a Christian. After all, we know there is one scripture which points to something similar to this. Romans 10:10 says: "For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved." Such a confession is a good thing, in and of itself, even if it is done apart from baptism, as the Bible teaches.

But is it best to stop there? Is the sinner's prayer the full Biblical response? For my part, I am glad to know that personal faith is the central issue and that God looks at the heart. However, there are no examples of anything like the sinner's prayer in all the conversions recorded in the book of Acts. The whole New Testament (including Acts) repeatedly teaches us that baptism is the full mode or method of expressing personal faith in Jesus Christ to become a Christian. This is the position which is more fully Biblical.

But for me it is another thing to say "a follower of Christ cannot be saved unless he or she has been properly baptized." To hold such a view, one must discount central elements of Biblical teaching and the work of God's Spirit:

- 1). One must reject faith as the central and essential human response to God's Grace (John 3:16; Rom. 3:25; Rom. 10:9-10; Eph. 2:8-9). Although important, we believe that baptism is not on the same level, it is a secondary matter of God-given methodology for the purpose of expressing this faith. The Bible repeatedly teaches that salvation is by *grace through faith*.
- 2). One must minimize the Biblical teaching that God looks at the heart to see what is most fundamental and essential in our motivations as we respond to his Grace (1 Samuel 16: 8; Acts 15:7-8). We believe God weighs the motives of the heart and central intentions as being more important than external religious ordinances, although both are important (Matt. 23:23; Mark 2: 23-28; etc.,).
- 3). One must discount the Biblical teaching on the nature and work of the indwelling Holy Spirit of God. One must advocate that countless millions of devoted, but un-immersed followers of Christ throughout history have been deceived in their belief that the Spirit of God has in-dwelt and sealed them as his own. One must also hold that the majority of Christ's followers in the

present have also been deceived about the Spirit's work in their lives and about their relationship with God through Him. It would mean the majority of Christ's followers at present and in history are lost. This horrifying view not only denies God's promises, but it calls into question God's goodness and providence.

4). One must put undue emphasis and weight on the act of baptism. This would cause people to rely upon their baptism, something which they have done, as opposed to a complete reliance on Christ's blood.

God ordained forms, methods, and rituals are important, but as even the Old Testament makes clear, God's gifts and acceptance of human faith is not strictly bound to proper modes. The substance of personal faith is far more important than the fullness of a proper external form given as the means to express this faith. We want to carefully practice what God has instituted about baptism, but the ultimate evidence or sign that God has made someone a Christian is the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. Biblical teaching and experience indicate that God's saving power is not limited to proper baptism (Ephesians 1: 13-14; Romans 8:9). Thus, there are three essential Biblical qualities we should look for in assessing who are saved followers of Christ:

- 1) genuine repentant faith in Jesus Christ and focus upon him as the basis of one's salvation;
- 2) the indwelling Spirit's work, including the subjective testimony of God's Spirit within affirming that one is a child of God; and, most importantly,
- 3) the emerging objective fruit of the Holy Spirit transforming one's life into the likeness of Christ.

Such people have been saved and should be recognized as Christians by all followers of Christ, even when they have not experienced a Biblical baptism.

Rejection of baptism as the method of becoming a Christian came about as a reaction to the baptismal regeneration stance of the Roman Catholic church and the *ex opere operato* view that was held and ratified by the Council of Trent in 1547. For a historical survey, see Donald Bridge and David Phipers, *The Water That Divides: The Baptism Debate* (Leicester, England: InterVarsity Press, 1977). The view that I advocate in this book is not that view. For an interesting consideration of these matters, see Geoffrey W. Bromily, "Baptismal Regeneration," *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1979) I 428, 429.