

## A Concise Refutation of Baptismal Regeneration

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We read in Romans 4:10-12, righteousness was credited to Abraham by faith, *before the ordinance of circumcision and the Mosaic law, and he received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had while uncircumcised*, so that he might be the father of all who believe *without being circumcised*. So Abraham was regenerated and saved before circumcision and therefore the father of all who believe whether physically circumcised or not. David, under the Mosaic Law, speaks of the blessing on the man to whom God credits righteousness apart from works, saying, *“Blessed are those whose lawless deeds have been forgiven, and whose sins have been covered. Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord will not take into account.”* This is a quote from Psalm 32:1-2. So then, those under the law were likewise justified by faith. They were to be physically circumcised but that in itself did not save them or regenerate their hearts. Only those circumcised in heart were truly regenerated; the remnant, the true Israel of God. Paul says in Romans 2:28, 29, *“For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh [even though it was to be done outwardly in the flesh]. But he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that which is of the heart, by the Spirit.”* So then, Abraham was converted, regenerated, forgiven and had righteousness reckoned to him by faith, circumcised in the heart, apart from physical circumcision, baptism, or any other statute, or ordinance. This places all the emphasis on salvation by God alone through faith. Faith in what He does on our behalf and not by anything we do on His behalf, protecting us from any misconceptions about the extent to which we participate in our own regeneration.

Under the Old Covenant, all those born physically in national Israel were to be circumcised as a sign and seal of their entrance into the covenant with God. Under the new covenant *all* who enter are born of the spirit and are therefore circumcised by the Spirit; in the heart rather than in the flesh. Baptism, therefore, signifies the spiritual “circumcision” of those born of the Spirit. We have new ordinances under the new covenant, the Lord's supper and baptism, but the means of regeneration and justification remain constant throughout Scripture. Justification has always been, and remains to be, by faith and not of works (Eph. 2:9, Rom. 4:2) and faith has always been, and remains to be, justified by works and not mere profession (James 2:24, 1 Jn. 2:3). Jonathan Edwards writes,

The change effected in *regeneration, repentance, and conversion*, is signified by *baptism....*and so is *circumcision of the heart* signified by the same thing. None will deny, that it was this internal circumcision, which of old was signified by external circumcision; nor will any deny, now under the New Testament, that inward and spiritual baptism, or the cleansing of the heart, is signified by external washing or baptism. But spiritual circumcision and spiritual baptism are the same thing; both being *putting off the body of the sins of the flesh*; as is very plain by Col 2:11-13.<sup>1</sup>

Baptism is an outward expression and testimony before God and man that we have, by faith, become partakers of His divine promises. Believing that if we have died with Him we shall also live with Him (Rom. 6:8). It is a representation of the spiritual reality that the old man has been crucified and a new man resurrected, expressing externally the dedication of our hearts to putting off the former conduct of the old man, or old self, and *putting on the new self, which in the likeness of God has been created in righteousness and holiness of the truth* (Eph. 4:24), no longer living for ourselves but for Him who died for us and rose again (2 Cor. 5:15). In other words, it is an external representation of God's work in the new birth and not part of the process in which it takes place. Therefore the inward reality of the new creation is not conditioned on the outward representation, but rather the inward reality is expressed externally in loving obedience to God. So then, baptism, like any of the ceremonial washings and ordinances throughout Scripture, are intended by God as visible, external exhibitions and types of invisible spiritual realities; the spiritual essence already established by God in a heart of faith.

Jesus says in Matthew 23:25-27,

“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and of the dish, but inside they are full of robbery and self-indulgence. You blind Pharisee, *first clean the inside of the cup and of the dish, so that the outside of it may become clean also.*”

Christ states that any outward cleansing, without first being cleansed inwardly, is to no avail. We must repent and seek the mercies of God that we might be washed inwardly, receiving a new heart and a new spirit, through the regenerating power of the Spirit. “*Cast away from you all your transgressions which you have committed and make yourselves a*

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<sup>1</sup> *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, Volume 1; Hendrickson Publishers (November 1, 1993) p. 213

*new heart and a new spirit!*” (Ezek. 18:31). This can only be accomplished by God Himself as stated in Ezekiel 36:25–27,

“Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols. Moreover, I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. *I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will be careful to observe My ordinances.*”

And in Deut. 30:6,

“Moreover *the LORD your God will circumcise your heart* and the heart of your descendants, to love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, so *that you may live.*”

God says of the one who repents and turns to Him in faith,

“*I will sprinkle clean water on you;*”

“*I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols;*”

“*I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you;*”

“*I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh;*”

“*I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes*”

“*I will circumcise your heart and the heart of your descendants, to love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul that you may live.*”

These promises are fulfilled, not by any outward action on our part, but by the actions of God Himself, through the instrument of faith; by His Spirit and not by obedience to any external ordinances, statutes, or commandments. Even as physical circumcision, performed by human hands, did not regenerate, but was an outward sign, baptism does not regenerate and is an outward sign and seal of the work of the Spirit in our salvation. He says, *I will put My Spirit within you...and you will be careful to observe My ordinances.* In other words, our obedience to any of God's ordinances, statutes, and commandments is a product of the effectual work of the Spirit in us (Phil. 2:13, 1 Jn 3:9). We obey His ordinances, including baptism, because we are regenerated, not to be regenerated; as a result of having a new heart, not that we might receive a new heart. Paul says in Romans 8: 8, 9, “*those who are in the flesh cannot please God. However, you [who are regenerate] are not in the flesh but*

*in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you.*” The unregenerate walk according to the flesh and until they are born of the Spirit they cannot please God. Our obedience in baptism is spiritually pleasing to God and therefore only those already indwelt with the Spirit will be baptized. “...*the natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; nor can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned* (1 Cor. 2:14). Again, we must be born of the Spirit before we can discern or receive spiritual things.

There is no doubt that New Testament baptism is closely related to regeneration and our salvation, but to say that baptism is the *cause* of regeneration and salvation is to put the cart before the horse. God, “*saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness*” (Titus 3:5). When Jesus was baptized by John He says, “*Permit it at this time; for in this way it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness.*” So then, baptism is a deed which we do in righteousness. Paul continues in Titus saying, “*by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit, whom He poured out upon us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior.*” This is in harmony with, ***I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols. Moreover, I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you... I will put My Spirit within you,*** etc. Jeremiah 4:14 says, *Wash your heart from evil...That you may be saved.* This inward cleansing, is the washing and renewing by the Holy Spirit in regeneration. Paul is telling his readers that the change from our former manner of life characterized by sinful behavior, v. 3, 4, is *not on the basis of deeds which we have done*, partaking in external ceremonies, etc., but entirely on the basis of what God has done to us and in us by His Spirit. In other words, through the Spirit we “*clean the inside of the cup and of the dish, so that the outside of it may become clean also*” He then says “*whom He poured out upon us.*” In other words, through our faith in Christ, we are cleansed from our sins, our hearts washed and renewed, receiving a new spirit that we might walk in newness of life, delivering us from our former manner of life and the bondage of sin, the Holy Spirit poured out on us, indwelling and gifting us for service. Water baptism is a picture or representation of this work but a picture is not the thing itself. When we value a photograph of our family it is because of that which it represents and not the value of the photograph itself. Likewise, we value baptism because of the reality of that which it represents. Similarly, circumcision of the flesh or partaking of the Lord's supper are outward observances which are representations of much deeper spiritual realities. The NLT interprets Titus 3:5 as, *He washed away our sins, giving us a new birth and new life through the Holy Spirit;* Meaning it is God's work from beginning to end. This is typified in baptism but the type is not the substance. This same phraseology of the Holy Spirit being

*poured out* is used in Acts 10:44-48 speaking of the Gentiles receiving the Holy Spirit prior to water baptism, and in Acts 11:17 Peter refers to it as being *baptized with the holy spirit*:

While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit fell upon all those who were listening to the message. All the circumcised believers who came with Peter were amazed, *because the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out* on the Gentiles also. For *they were hearing them speaking with tongues and exalting God*. Then Peter answered, “*Surely no one can refuse the water for these to be baptized who have received the Holy Spirit just as we did, can he?*” And he ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ.

Here, it is said that the Holy Spirit had been *poured out* on the Gentiles and they were speaking with tongues and exalting God, receiving the Holy Spirit just as Peter and the other Jews had *before they were baptized with water*. Surely it would be difficult to make the case that they received the Spirit prior to being regenerated. Peter then says the following in Acts 11:17 as he reiterates that experience,

And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as He did upon us at the beginning. And I remembered the word of the Lord, how He used to say, 'John baptized with water, *but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit*.' Therefore if God gave to them the same gift as He gave to us also *after believing in the Lord Jesus Christ*, who was I that I could stand in God's way?"

So again, Peter is saying they were *baptized with the holy spirit* when they *believed in the Lord Jesus Christ*, prior to their being baptized with water. Although Peter in other passages expresses these in differing sequences, these passages show, nonetheless, that water baptism itself cannot be the means of regeneration without contradicting what Peter says here.

In Acts 8:34, when Philip preached the gospel to the eunuch he said,

“Look! Water! What prevents me from being baptized?” And Philip said, “*If you believe with all your heart, you may.*” And he answered and said, “*I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.*” And he ordered the chariot to stop; and they both went down into the water.”

The eunuch was saved in that he *believed with all his heart* that Jesus Christ was the Son of God before he went down into the water. *“If you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved; for with the heart a person believes, resulting in righteousness, and with the mouth he confesses, resulting in salvation”* (Rom. 10:9). In other words, if the eunuch would have fallen out of the chariot, broke his neck and died, it would be difficult to conceive that God would condemn him because he never made it to the water even though it was his heart's desire to do so. That would be similar to the predicament of the thief on the cross, who had no access to water, yet he was regenerated nonetheless. His words demonstrated repentance, faith, and a transformed heart which is the work of the Spirit in regeneration. If the believing thief was, as some have argued, baptized and regenerated at sometime in his life prior to being on the cross, he would have been a believer and surely he would not have been referred to as a *thief* or a *robber* by the inspired writers but rather as a disciple or brother. In Matthew's account it is said that, *“Even the robbers [plural] who were crucified with Him reviled Him”* which would further indicate that the conversion of the penitent thief took place shortly thereafter. The account of the thief on the cross emphasizes the fact that we become new creatures in Christ apart from any outward deeds, ceremonies, or works performed by us. *“Where then is boasting? It is excluded. By what kind of law? Of works? No, but by a law of faith”* (Rom. 3:27). The only difference between the two thieves was that the one had faith in the Son of God and the other did not. The one was born of the Spirit the other was not. *“The wind blows where it wishes and you hear the sound of it, but do not know where it comes from and where it is going; so is everyone who is born of the Spirit”*(Jn. 3:8). If the regenerated thief would have had his life spared, he would have, no doubt, been baptized immediately thereafter and lived out his life in faithful service to His Lord.

We find throughout Scripture, as with the Pharisees, that the outward form without the inward spiritual essence is a ruinous error. The emphasis in Scripture is first and foremost on what *we are* prior to what *we do*. Scripture constantly warns against the error of the reverse. Whenever it is tried the results are nothing more than a reluctant righteousness that is as *filthy rags* (Isa. 64:6) as opposed to one who has been transformed by the power of God in regeneration who then *rejoices in doing righteousness* (Isa. 64:5). Therefore, Paul makes such statements as, *“For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything, but faith working through love”* (Gal. 5:6). The majority of the circumcised in the Old Testament were never regenerated even as many today are baptized and never regenerated. *“Circumcision is nothing, and uncircumcision is nothing, but what matters is the keeping of the commandments of God”*(1 Cor. 7:19). Circumcision was

indeed a commandment of God but the outward act by man in isolation from the inward act by God, which it represents, is nothing; it is of no use. Only the circumcised in heart, which was represented by circumcision of the flesh in the Old Testament, will characteristically keep the commandments of God. Likewise, only those who have died and risen with Christ spiritually (born again of the Spirit), represented by water baptism, will characteristically keep the commandments of God. In other words, the Spirit's work in regeneration effectually changes the root, the heart of a "bad tree," and is thereby renewed and converted into a "good tree" that inevitably bears good fruit. Water baptism is a fruit not a root. It is not the cause of regeneration but the fruit of regeneration.

Are there passages that equate baptism with salvation? Certainly, it says in 1 Peter 3:21 that "*baptism now saves you.*" However, for every 1 Pet. 3:21 there are multiple passages that have no mention of baptism at all in regards to our salvation (Rom. 10:13, etc) and, as shown previously, other passages clearly say that water baptism followed the reception of the Holy Spirit. Peter says, in v. 20 that, "*eight souls were saved through water.*" Are we to say then that they were regenerated by water? No, the water saved Noah and his family as a result of their prior faith in God and therefore built and entered the Ark and were "*brought safely through the water.*" In baptism, when we are submerged in the water, we identify with those, who because of sin, perished in the flood waters, with the acknowledgment that apart from Christ's death in our place we would perish as well. However, when we rise from the water we identify with those in the Ark which is a type of the resurrected Christ in whom we find life and safety; a lifeboat from the wrath of God that is poured out on the sons of disobedience. In other words, Noah being rescued *through the water* points to being rescued from death *through the resurrection of Jesus Christ*, as stated in v. 21, not to the baptism which exemplifies it. We are not regenerated by baptism any more than Noah was regenerated by boarding the Ark. Noah would have had eternal life had he died before entering the Ark, for "*Noah found favor in the eyes of the Lord...Noah was a righteous man, blameless in his time; Noah walked with God.*" So then, a professing Christian thinking in his heart "I am already saved and therefore have no need to be baptized" would be as irrational as Noah thinking in his heart, "I am already saved and therefore I have no need to enter the Ark." But rather, Noah obeyed God because of his faith even as we obey God in baptism, because of our faith. Wuest's "Word Studies from the Greek New Testament" commenting on 1 Pet. 3:21 writes,

Water baptism is clearly in the apostle's mind, not the baptism by the Holy Spirit, for he speaks of the waters of the flood as saving the inmates of the ark, and in this verse, of baptism saving believers. But he says that it saves them only as a counterpart. That is, water baptism is the counterpart of the reality, salvation. It can only save as a counterpart, not actually. The Old Testament sacrifices were counterparts of the reality, the Lord Jesus. They did not actually save the believer,

only in type. It is not argued here that these sacrifices are analogous to Christian water baptism. The author is merely using them as an illustration of the use of the word “counterpart.” So water baptism only saves the believer in type. The Old Testament Jew was saved before he brought the offering. That offering was only his outward testimony that he was placing faith in the Lamb of God of whom these sacrifices were a type....Water baptism is the outward testimony of the believer's inward faith. The person is saved the moment he places his faith in the Lord Jesus. Water baptism is the visible testimony to his faith and the salvation he was given in answer to that faith. Peter is careful to inform his readers that he is not teaching baptismal regeneration, namely, that a person who submits to baptism is thereby regenerated, for he says, “not the putting away of the filth of the flesh.” Baptism, Peter explains, does not wash away the filth of the flesh, either in a literal sense as a bath for the body, nor in a metaphorical sense as a cleansing for the soul. No ceremonies really affect the conscience. But he defines what he means by salvation, in the words “the answer of a good conscience toward God,” and he explains how this is accomplished, namely, “by the resurrection of Jesus Christ,” in that the believing sinner is identified with Him in that resurrection.<sup>2</sup>

When the publican beat on his chest and cried out “*Lord be merciful to me a sinner*” Christ said he went home justified. However, it was not the outward expression of words that was justifying but rather the work of the Spirit in his heart which expressed itself in words. When Jesus says in Matthew 12:37, “*For by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned,*” are we to conclude that we are justified by words rather than by faith? No, Christ is speaking of the condition of the heart, “*For the mouth speaks out of that which fills the heart*”(Matt. 12:34). The heart filled with the Spirit, speaks forth good things and is evidence of regeneration and therefore justification. So, even as good words are the fruit of a good tree, v. 33; outward expressions of the renewed heart, so baptism is an outward expression of the renewed heart. In this sense, even as faith is justified by good words, it is also justified by baptism and good works. We do not speak good things to be justified, however, if we do not speak good things we demonstrate an uncircumcised heart and therefore, according to Christ, we are condemned. Likewise, we are not justified by being baptized but if, having the opportunity to do so, we refuse to do so, we demonstrate an uncircumcised heart, and are therefore condemned (1 Jn. 2:3-5). The only sense in which Scripture stipulates that we are saved by baptism would be in the same

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<sup>2</sup> *Word Studies from the Greek New Testament*, Kenneth S. Wuest, 1 Pet. 3:21; Eerdmans Publishing Company; 2nd edition (June 1, 1980)



sense in which James stipulates that we are justified by works and not by faith alone (James 2:24). That is to say, regeneration generates obedience, but, obedience does not generate regeneration. Likewise, we are not saved by keeping God's commandments (Eph. 2:8, 9) but we are not saved if we do not keep God's commandments (1 Jn. 2:3-5). So then, regeneration, not baptism or any other work, is the horse which must be placed before the cart of good works including baptism.

When we put undue emphasis on the external we are in danger of falling into the error of the Jews in insisting that, "*Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved*" (Acts 15:1), even though Abraham, whom they claimed as their father, was saved without being circumcised. Likewise, when we say, "Unless you are baptized you cannot be saved" we discount the fact that our father Abraham (Rom. 4:10, 11) was saved without being physically baptized. This does not mean that these God ordained observances have no role to play in our covenantal relationship with God but only that neither are efficacious in our regeneration or salvation. Knowing this guards against any danger of being deceived into thinking that mere outward expression is effectual in itself. A misunderstanding of Romans 10:13 is a perfect example of this principle. "*Whoever will call on the name of the Lord will be saved.*" This has resulted in the notion that if we repeat the "sinner's prayer" we will be saved, which has resulted in the Church being inundated with "goats." "*These people draw near to Me with their mouth, And honor Me with their lips, **But their heart is far from Me.***" (Matt. 15:8). That does not diminish the significance of calling on the name of the Lord but only that the mere outward expression does not save. Likewise, when Peter says, "*baptism now saves you,*" if not read in light of all of Scripture, it can result in the error of thinking that the mere submersion in the water of baptism saves us which is no more true than that a repetitious prayer saves us. John Owen writes,

God hath instituted his holy sacraments, and hath put this virtue into them, that they should represent and exhibit unto the faith of believers the grace which he intends and designs by them. But men have not been contented herewith; and therefore they will put more into them than God hath furnished them withal. They will have them to contain the grace in them which they exhibit in the way of a promise, and to communicate it unto all sorts of persons that are partakers of them. Thus, some would have baptism to be regeneration itself, and that there is no other evangelical regeneration but that alone, with the profession which is made thereon. Every one who is baptized is thereby regenerated. The sign and figure of grace, they would have to be the grace itself. Nothing can be invented more pernicious

unto the souls of men; for all sorts of persons may be brought to a ruinous security about their spiritual condition by it, and diverted from endeavors after that real internal work, in the change of their hearts and natures, without which none shall see God. This is to put that into it which God never placed there. (*Works of John Owen: Epistle to the Hebrews*)<sup>3</sup>

We find as well that baptism is not regenerative in our experience. It is difficult to deny that many have been truly saved and have experienced a radically changed life yet, because of an insufficient understanding of baptism, have waited a length of time before being baptized. In other words, when they *believed with all their heart* there was a radical change, which would indicate regeneration, but no further change when they were eventually baptized. Furthermore, many have been baptized and yet have never been regenerated anymore than many thousands who repeat the “sinners prayer.” Therefore, taking Scripture as a whole, not to mention the experience of many, baptism is a consequence of regeneration rather than regeneration being a consequence of baptism.

The fact that baptism has no regenerative power in and of itself, in its outward form, does not diminish the proper significance, power, and importance of baptism. The true believer rejoices in the partaking of it as it is the sign and seal of all the grace, promise, power and glory of being united with Christ in his life, death, and resurrection. It is his initiation ceremony of being adopted into the family of God as one of His dear spiritually born children. A sign of the spiritual reality of being seated with Christ at the right hand of the Father, access to the Holy of Holies, and the privilege of coming into the very presence of God. It represents all that he has inherited through his faith in Christ. It is a precious God-ordained ordinance to the regenerate child of God, and if properly understood, his natural response will be, Look! Water! What prevents me from being baptized? However, to the unregenerate it is nothing more than a powerless, lifeless and meaningless ritual.

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<sup>3</sup> The Works of John Owen: An Exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews, Nabu Press (December 7, 2013)