

Lesson 2: Samples of the People's Bible Teachings

Baptism by Gaylin Schmeling, Northwestern Publishing House (p. 53-56)

Baptism as New Birth

In baptism God promises and gives us all the salvation treasures Christ won for us on the cross. These treasures are received only through faith. As Jesus said, "Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved" (Mark 16:16). Faith is like a hand that receives all the benefits that Christ won for us and that are offered to us in baptism. Without faith, baptism would not personally benefit us, even though baptism itself is a great divine treasure. Baptism offers all the blessings of Christ's redemptive work whether or not we believe in it, but its blessings become our own only through faith.

Faith that receives the blessings of baptism is impossible for humans to attain by themselves. We were all born spiritually dead in sin (Ephesians 2:1). We came from our mothers' wombs physically alive, but we were spiritually stillborn. We were born living yet at the same time dead, dead in the sin inherited from our first parents. Concerning this total corruption of the human nature, called original sin, David says, "Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me" (Psalm 51:5). Our hearts were totally opposed to God and his will for our lives. Therefore, we could not decide to follow Jesus or believe in him. As a physically dead person cannot make decisions, so a spiritually dead person cannot make spiritual decisions. "No one can say, 'Jesus is Lord,' except by the Holy Spirit" (1 Corinthians 12:3).

According to Scripture every person is born of God who believes that Jesus is the only Savior from sin (1 John 5:1). Without this spiritual rebirth through faith, called regeneration, a person is not fit for the kingdom of heaven and upon death will enter the horrors of eternal separation from God in hell. Jesus told Nicodemus, "No one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again" (John 3:3).

Baptism works rebirth

Baptism, which requires faith, also creates faith. Baptism is regenerative, which means it gives rebirth. Paul writes, "[God] saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit" (Titus 3:5). We know this passage refers to baptism because baptism is the only washing the Lord has directed his church to use. Baptism is the washing of rebirth because through it the Holy Spirit creates faith, making us spiritually alive, and thus saves us (1 Peter 3:21). Rebirth, or regeneration, is essentially the bestowal of faith, for whoever believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God (1 John 5:1, John 1:12,13).

Paul confirms the fact that baptism is regenerative, that it works faith, when he tells the Galatians that by putting on Christ in baptism, they become God's children through faith in Christ Jesus (Galatians 3:26,27). Paul expresses this same truth, using different language, in Colossians, where he explains that in baptism God puts to death our sinful flesh, burying it with Christ, so that baptism is for us a watery grave. At the same time, we arise to new life through faith worked in baptism by the power of Christ's resurrection. "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" (Colossians 2:11,12). If we are raised with Christ through

faith in baptism, then baptism certainly creates faith and new life.

In his conversation with Nicodemus, Jesus pointed out that a person must be born again to enter the kingdom of God (John 3:3). The heart, mind, and soul must be completely transformed. Nicodemus understood Jesus' words as referring to physical birth and wondered how he could enter his mother's womb a second time and be born. Jesus answered Nicodemus' question in a simple and comprehensive way: "I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit" (John 3:5). To be born of water and the Spirit must refer to baptism. In the Greek text, *water* and *Spirit* are grammatically linked in such a way that they are to be thought of not as two separate things but as two things joined together into a unit. Only in baptism does the Scripture connect the Spirit with water; people are baptized "in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Matthew 28:19). Only baptism is spoken of as a "washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit" (Titus 3:5). The Holy Spirit comes to a person in the baptismal waters and brings about spiritual rebirth by working faith in the person's heart. Baptism is a means through which a person spiritually dead in sin can be brought to a living faith in the Savior. In the heart where faith has already been worked through the Word (Romans 10:17), baptism strengthens and confirms that faith. Baptism then not only brings all the benefits of Christ's cross to us, but at the same time it works the faith to receive those benefits.

The church has always taught that baptism works faith and new birth. This is how the early Christian teacher Justin Martyr, who died in approximately AD165, understood baptism:

We lead them to a place where there is water, and they are regenerated in the same manner in which we ourselves were regenerated. In the name of God, the Father and Lord of all, and of our Savior, Jesus Christ, and of the Holy Ghost, they then receive the washing with water. For Christ said: "Unless you be born again, you shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven."⁶

⁶ Justin Martyr, The First Apology I:61, The Fathers of the Church, Vol. 6 (New York: Christian Heritage, Inc., 1948), p. 99.