



# TRUTH ON TOUGH TEXTS

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## IS BAPTISMAL REGENERATION BIBLICAL?

### ACTS 2:38 AND SELECTED TEXTS

**THEN PETER SAID UNTO THEM, REPENT, AND BE baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost.**

What does that verse, one of several we will examine, tell us about salvation? Is it dependant not only upon repentance and faith in Christ (cf. Acts 20:21; Rom. 1:17; Eph. 2:8; etc.) but also on baptism? *Baptismal regeneration* is the teaching that salvation comes by water baptism administered by the bishop and was held by many in the Early Church and still is by several denominations today. But is it biblical? To answer this, let us note two emphases: the origin of this doctrine and then the biblical teaching, including the “proof texts” that are used to teach this doctrine.

#### Baptismal Regeneration In History

The theological discipline “Historical Theology” is a critical one. “*Systematic Theology*” categorizes doctrine according to specific topics and analytically develops each topic by bringing together all the Bible says about it. In contrast, “*Biblical Theology*” is the study of doctrinal themes arranged according to biblical chronology or author with respect to the progressive revelation of Scripture. “*Historical Theology*,” however, moves beyond both of those to examine how doctrine developed after the Apostolic Age and up to the present.

Consider the doctrine of Christ, for example. Systematic Theology collects all the data on Christ and organizes it into categories such as His deity, humanity, character, work, death, resurrection, and so forth. Biblical Theology examines the doctrine of Christ through the lens of each author or how it was expressed in each era. Historical Theology, then, observes how the doctrine of Christ developed during the early centuries of the Church (such as the two natures of Christ) and also recounts deviation (such as Arianism).

Historical Theology is, therefore, crucial because it tells us what went right and wrong. There is perhaps no better illustration of where a specific doctrine went after the Apostolic Age than the doctrine of baptism, both baptism in general and baptismal regeneration in particular.

#### Baptism In History

Few subjects invoke more controversy than baptism, but

such controversy is both sad and unnecessary. “Baptize” directly transliterates *baptizō*, which literally (and *always*) means to “to dip, immerse, plunge, or place into.” The verb *baptō* originally referred to dipping clothes into dye or drawing water by placing the container into the water. Why this continues to be a debated issue puzzles (and concerns) the discerning mind. Immersion was without any doubt whatsoever the biblical mode (Matt. 3:16; Jn. 3:23; Acts 8:38). At the time of Christ, in fact, one could go all over Jerusalem and see many a *mikveh*, a ritual bath used to immerse the entire body for the purpose of ritual cleansing in Judaism. This easily explains how 3,000 people could be baptized by immersion on the Day of Pentecost. Similar baptismal founts were added to churches in coming years.

It is also extremely significant that there is again no doubt whatsoever, and non-immersionists admit, that immersion was the universal practice of the Apostolic Church, a fact John Calvin points out in his *Institutes*.<sup>1</sup> In a footnote, he even admits that deviation from immersion is seen in the *The Didache (Teaching of the Twelve)*, a 2<sup>nd</sup>-century apocryphal book. *The Didache*, in fact, is an extremely significant (although somewhat perplexing) document. Written by an unknown author (or authors), it contains teachings on church order consisting of two parts: (1) teaching about the “Two Ways” (1.1–6.2), which is instruction about the Christian life; (2) a manual of Church order and practice (6.3–16.8), which is instruction about food, baptism, fasting, prayer, the Lord’s Supper, and various offices and leadership positions.<sup>2</sup> It’s odd, however, that some historians laud this document “as a picture of life in the early church between 95 and 150.”<sup>3</sup> Yes, it might be a picture, but one that is not entirely true to Scripture. I am compelled to submit, in fact, that while there certainly are some points that *commend* it, there are others that *condemn* it.

As I have written elsewhere,<sup>4</sup> one such glaring error is that of baptism. While it starts out well—“baptize in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit”—it quickly veers from biblical revelation by adding “in running water. But if you have no running water, then baptize in some other water; and if you are not able to baptize in cold water, then do so in warm. But if you have neither, then pour water on the head three times in the name of the Father and Son and Holy Spirit (7.1–3).” Not a single word of that, of course, is in Scrip-

ture and has absolutely no authority whatsoever. Nonetheless, so-called sprinkling and pouring became accepted modes of baptism. I know my fellow believers who practice another mode will disagree, but there is simply no way to justify any other mode than immersion. With all due respect for other godly Bible teachers, this is not my *opinion*. Both by word (*baptizō*) and by biblical precedent, this is the only valid mode of baptism. (We will go deeper into baptism later.)

The famous preacher A. T. Pierson (1837–1911) provides us with a dramatic example of a man who changed his position on this issue. When Charles Spurgeon fell ill and needed a fill-in while he recovered, he amazingly asked Pierson, a Presbyterian who didn't think the mode of baptism was an important issue and thought that Christians could disagree not only on the mode but even whether it should be administered to infants or believers only. Influenced, however, by Spurgeon and others at the Metropolitan Tabernacle, but mostly by his study of the Book of Acts, he later became convinced that believers baptism was not only correct but "obedient" and was finally biblically baptized by immersion on February 1, 1896, at the age of 58, by Spurgeon's brother, Dr. James A. Spurgeon in West Croydon Chapel, London. He also rejected the practice of infant baptism. (Similarly, George Mueller changed his view; baptized as an infant and later even teaching against believer's baptism, he admitted he had never examined the Scriptures but was later immersed after doing so.) Reprehensibly, Pierson was misunderstood, severely criticized, and ultimately dropped from the rolls of the Presbytery and never again joined an ecclesiastical body.<sup>5</sup>

We should also note another shortcoming of *The Didache*; it repeats the error of others at that time of calling the Lord's Supper a "sacrifice" (14.1). This is the Greek *thusia*, which refers to the act of sacrificing or offering and appears as such in the New Testament (e.g., Heb. 9:26; 10:5, 8). But as historian George Park Fisher discerningly wrote, "The habit of looking on the sacrament as an offering is a fact of signal importance in itself and in its consequences. It is a conception foreign to the New Testament."<sup>6</sup>

Such weaknesses, and others, in fact, could very well explain that in the final analysis *The Didache* was so unimportant that it was lost in antiquity for centuries. It was not until 1873 that it was rediscovered in an ecclesiastic library in Constantinople by Bryonies Philotheus.

### Baptismal Regeneration In History

Much like other modes of baptism, the idea of the regenerating power of water baptism was an early aberration and a veering away from what Scripture says, which includes, of course, what we are told was practiced by the Church in Acts. Cyrpian (c. 200–c. 258), for example, was among the first of the Church Fathers to affirm baptismal regeneration. Likewise, Augustine (354–430) put so much stress on the sacraments that baptismal regeneration and sacramental grace (the infusing of grace by practicing the sacraments) were the inevitable conclusions.

A dramatic example of this was the "conversion" of Clovis I (466–511), the first king of the Franks (Germanic peoples) to unite all the Frankish tribes (what is now Germany, Belgium, and France) under one ruler and whose story reminds us of Constantine (see TOTT #110). While his Christian wife Clo-

tilde (a Catholic Burgundian princess who would later be venerated as a saint for this influence) urged him to convert, it was a battle in 496 that was the final push. On the verge of a total rout by the Alamanni tribe, he vowed to be baptized if his wife's God gave him the victory. After the victory, he was, indeed, "baptized," along with 3,000 of his army who followed him. As one historian clarifies, however, "The soldiers marched along side a river where priests stood with branches from trees. As the soldiers went by, the priests dipped the branches into the river and flung baptismal water on them, repeating the proper formula. As soon as the water touched the soldiers, they were supposedly made Christians."<sup>7</sup>

Was that *true* Christianity? Of course not. While the now "Christian" Franks would 200 years later figure prominently in the defeat of the Muslims at the Battle of Tours, this event simply cannot be viewed as biblical conversion. It not only underscores again the false idea of baptismal regeneration, but Clovis' life afterwards, like Constantine's, demonstrates false conversion. "The baptismal water seems to have been accompanied by no effectual inward cleansing," writes one historian. "Treachery and bloody violence marked the course of the new convert. . . . the marks of an inextinguishable infamy [are drawn] across his name."<sup>8</sup> While some historians say that Clovis and others were won to "orthodox Christianity," that is misleading since "orthodox" in this context simply means "in contrast to Arianism" (Clovis, in fact, first dabbled in Arianism). It needs to be understood that *orthodox* is not necessarily synonymous with *biblical*.

### Baptismal Regeneration In Scripture

Before addressing six texts that baptismal regeneration teachers use as "proof" (as well as address "the thief on the cross" question), it's essential to note first the foundational principle of grace alone through faith alone. Ephesians 2:8–9 could not be clearer: "For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast" (cf. Jn. 3:16, 36; Acts 2:21; Rom. 4:1–17; 10:13; 11:6; Gal. 3:8–9; etc.). That clearly declares that salvation comes not by any merit we possess or act we perform but by grace through faith. Period. *Grace plus anything is no long grace!* As noted in our last issue of TOTT on grace: "Grace is the unmerited favor of God toward man manifested primarily through the person and work of Jesus Christ, apart from any merit or works of man." Any interpretation, therefore, that contradicts that foundational principle of the Christian Faith is wrong, regardless of how one tries to interpret "proof texts." We now turn to those used not only by Catholicism but by some so-called Protestant denominations.

#### Mark 16:16

The first text used to support baptismal regeneration reads: **He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned.** But this cannot possibly teach that baptism saves because unbelievers are condemned simply for their unbelief, not for their failure to be baptized. Baptismal regeneration teachers actually commit a common logical fallacy here called "negative inference." For example, while the statement, "A dog with brown spots is an animal," is true, the negative statement, "If a dog does not have brown spots, it is not an animal" is obviously false.

Likewise, “He who believes and is baptized will be saved” is true, but the statement, “He who believes but is not baptized will not be saved” is a false assumption, yet is exactly what such teachers insist. What does this verse mean, then? It can only mean that baptism is the expected outward expression of belief. Baptism is not a *prerequisite* of salvation, rather an outward *proclamation* that the person has been saved.

### John 3:5

This so-called “proof text” declares: **Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God.** Baptismal regeneration teachers assume that this means water baptism, but several other “interpretations” have actually been offered: (1) it stands for the act of repentance that John the Baptist’s baptism signified; (2) it refers to natural birth (specifically, the fluid released when the amniotic sac breaks prior to labor); thus it means “unless one is born the first time by water and the second time by the Spirit”; (3) it means the Word of God, as in John 15:3; (4) it is a synonym for the Holy Spirit and may be translated, “by water, even the Spirit.”

Personally, I tend toward the simplicity of #2 simply because the context, verse 4, *specifically* refers to physical birth. In any case, however, this verse cannot possibly refer to baptism because Christian baptism had not yet been given or commanded when Jesus spoke these words. In short, I believe our Lord is simply saying, “Physical birth is not enough; one must be born again spiritually to enter the kingdom of heaven.” In fact, that very contrast between “flesh” and “spirit” is then made in verse 6! I would submit that any other interpretation violates the context and is looking for some deeper meaning that simply is not in the text.

### Acts 2:38

This “tough text” is considered overwhelming proof by baptismal regeneration teachers: **Then Peter said unto them, Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost.** Again, whatever this verse means, it simply cannot mean baptismal regeneration, for that is completely inconsistent with the Gospel message. So, what then does Acts 2:38 mean?

To understand *baptism* (and such a lack of understanding is why there has been so much confusion and calamity), one must first understand the principle of *identification*, for that is what baptism was *always* about. The Jews actually practiced baptism. A Gentile proselyte into Judaism had to be circumcised, offer a sacrifice, and baptize himself in the presence of rabbis. This identified the proselyte with Judaism. Likewise, the most startling way in which John the Baptist could ask people to identify themselves with his message of the Messiah was again through baptism. Christian baptism, then, is not a saving act, not a means of receiving grace, rather it is a public testimony of our identification with the death, burial, and resurrection of our Savior, for it graphically pictures those events: “Buried with him in baptism, wherein also ye are risen with him through the faith of the operation of God, who hath raised him from the dead” (Col. 2:12). Baptism is, therefore, an *outward* symbol of an *inward* reality.

Still, some insist that the wording of this verse indicates

*both* repentance *and* baptism. What is often ignored by many Bible teachers on any given text, however, is careful exegesis, and that is the case here. “For” translates the Greek preposition *eis*, which is the key to the issue. It usually means into, towards, for, to, or among. Depending upon the context (and other Scripture), it can also be rendered: in regard to, in relation to, in response to, or on account of. Matthew 12:41, for example, tells us the people of Nineveh “repented *at* [or “in response to”] the preaching of Jonah.” Likewise, the first phrase of Acts 2:25, “For David speaketh concerning [or “in regard to”] him [Christ].” Greek authority Kenneth Wuest, therefore, offers this expanded translation of our text: “. . . let each one of you be baptized upon the ground of your confession of belief . . . this baptismal testimony being in relation to the fact that your sins have been put away.”<sup>9</sup>

Another principle of interpretation that is often violated is the context. Notice the flow. Verse 39 tells us who salvation is for: “For the promise is unto you [Jews], and to your children, and to all that are afar off [Gentiles], even as many as the Lord our God shall call.” Here is the doctrinal seed of the unity of Jew and Gentile in the Body of Christ, which Paul would fully develop in Ephesians 2–3. In verse 40 then, Peter says “Save yourselves from this untoward generation,” which looks back to verses 23 and 36, which speak of the Jews crucifying Christ. Peter is saying that while the *nation* is guilty and under judgment, individual Jews can be saved if they repent. Finally, verse 41 says many Jews did, in fact, receive the message: “Then they that gladly received his word were baptized.” This clearly demonstrates again that believing came first then baptism. “Gladly received” translates *apodechomai*, a word used only by Luke (also Lk. 8:40; Acts 15:4; 18:27; 21:17; 24:3; 28:30) and indicates receiving or heartily embracing someone or something. What a wondrous picture of conversion!

If there is still doubt, it should be erased by what Peter declares a few chapters later (Acts 10). In verse 43, he tells Cornelius that “through [Jesus’] name whosoever believeth in him shall receive remission of sins” and without a word about baptism at this point. We next read that having simply *believed* Peter’s message about Christ, “the Holy Ghost fell on all them which heard the word.” It is then, only after they believed and received the Holy Spirit, that Cornelius and his household were baptized (47–48). Once again, in 13:38–39 we read, “Be it known unto you therefore, men and brethren, that through this man is preached unto you the forgiveness of sins: And by him all that believe are justified from all things, from which ye could not be justified by the law of Moses” with not a word about baptism.

### Acts 22:16

At first glance, this verse seems another strong confirmation of baptismal regeneration: **And now why tarriest thou? arise, and be baptized, and wash away thy sins, calling on the name of the Lord.** But here is another example of viewing a verse apart from the context, in this case the greater context of the Book of Acts. This is actually the second of three recountings of Paul’s conversion in Acts (9:1–30; 22:6–16; 26:9–18). When we go to the first, we read that Paul, who has been struck blind by the Lord Jesus, clearly acknowledged Jesus as “Lord” in verses 5 and 6 (cf. Rom. 10:9–10), and Ananias actually addressed him as “Brother Saul” (in the con-

text of “the Lord, even Jesus,” not as a fellow Jew) in verse 17. (It’s also clear that Jesus presented the Gospel to Paul, as Paul himself verifies in Galatians 1:11–12.) It’s also clear that Paul was filled with the Spirit before his baptism in verse 17. It was not until verse 18, however, that Paul was baptized. Coming back to chapter 22, verse 10 demonstrates that Paul had already submitted in faith to Christ as He obeyed what Jesus said. Finally, we should also observe that Paul wasn’t “sprinkled,” which could have occurred right where he sat. Rather he had to “arise” and go elsewhere for sufficient water.

### Galatians 3:27

This verse declares: **For as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ** (cf. Rom. 6:3). Of all the verses that could be used to support baptismal regeneration, this one is by far the most unlikely because the central message of Galatians is salvation by faith alone plus *nothing else* (2:16, 19; 3:10–12, 13–14, 22–24; 4:5). This, therefore, cannot possibly refer to salvation by baptism. So what does it mean? Some expositors view this as Spirit baptism, which places a believer into the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:13), but that is invisible. The completely different expression here is baptism *into Christ* and a public “putting on Christ.” **Into**, in fact, is again *eis*, which as noted earlier is the key to the issue. Again, it usually means into, towards, for, to, or among, but depending upon the context (and other Scripture), it can also be rendered: in regard to, in relation to, in response to, or on account of. Identification is again the whole issue. By baptism we are identified with Christ, “immersed” in regard, relation, and response to Him in every way.

### 1 Peter 3:21

This verse declares, **The like figure whereunto even baptism doth also now save us (not the putting away of the filth of the flesh, but the answer of a good conscience toward God,) by the resurrection of Jesus Christ.** While some insist that baptism here is water and therefore part of salvation, it can’t possibly refer to that since Peter himself repudiates such an idea with his very next statement: **not the putting away of the filth of the flesh** (body). We are reminded again that *baptizō* simply means “to immerse; place into.” Peter is simply using baptism in a figurative sense. **Figure** is *antitupon*, from which is derived the theological term “antitype.” Literally, *typos*, “type,” means “to strike with repeated strokes.” From that came the idea of an image, impression, or mark created by such repeated strokes. Figuratively, then, “a type is a model of some reality which was yet to appear, a prototype of that which was yet to be developed.”<sup>10</sup> So, an *antitype* (*anti* means against or instead of), corresponds to, resembles, or is similar to a type. Is Peter saying that just as water saved Noah it now saves us? No, he is not. He’s saying that all this is a resemblance, not that it is identical. He uses **baptism** in a figurative sense. As Noah and his companions were immersed in water, we are immersed in **the resurrection of Jesus Christ**, as Peter goes on to specify. It is *that* immersion that is our salvation, not one in water.

### What About the Thief On the Cross? (Luke 23:39-43)

I still recall the day many years ago when I was speaking to a baptismal regeneration defender and asked him, “What

about the thief on the Cross? He wasn’t baptized.” The fellow responded, “I *knew* you were going to ask that,” at which time he shook his head in dismissal of me and walked away. (How bizarre that the Roman Catholic Church even names this thief as Saint Dismas and commemorates him on March 25, based on the 4<sup>th</sup>-century apocryphal book *Gospel of Nicodemus*!)

Having to find my answer elsewhere, I began my research but found that only conjecture can be offered. One argument, for example, insists that the thief reflects a certain amount of knowledge about Jesus, so isn’t it possible that he had been exposed significantly to information about Jesus earlier in his life, had been impressed by it, and later regressed into a life of crime? That being true, isn’t it also possible that this man could have been a disciple of John the Baptist, or of the Lord himself, or of one of Christ’s disciples as they went forth teaching (Mt. 10:5ff; Lk. 10:1ff) during the preceding years? If such were the case, the man might well have already been immersed for the forgiveness of his sins on some past occasion (cf. Mk. 1:4; Jn. 4:1–2). One writer I read on this view then concluded, “I am not suggesting that this proposition can be proved. I am simply saying that no one can make the dogmatic statement: ‘The thief had never been baptized.’ That is an unknown factor. He might well have been an ‘erring child of God’ at this point.” But such words as “is it possible?,” “could have,” and “might” prove nothing. It’s hard to comprehend that someone can offer such an idea.

Another argument offered is that Jesus possessed the authority to forgive men’s sins personally and directly. He, therefore, could have made an exception about the need for baptism if He wanted to, as He also did with the paralytic in Mark 2:5. But are we actually to conclude that Jesus contradicted His own teaching on salvation, requiring baptism in most cases but not all?

Still another argument from Catholicism is that baptism was not necessary for the thief because Jesus had not yet instituted the necessity of sacramental baptism at that point but rather did so after the Resurrection. But where do we see Him do that? And what was the criteria before this event? We again are astonished at such bizarre ideas.

### Conclusion

In closing, please consider a few final thoughts. If salvation is by faith plus baptism, the inescapable conclusion is that the Savior’s work on the cross was not sufficient. “It is finished” did not mean that at all if baptism has to be added.

Should we not also consider that if baptism is essential to salvation, how could Paul have possibly been thankful that he baptized very few of the Corinthians (1 Cor. 1:14–16)? Would this not rather be something he would rejoice in doing as often as possible?

Finally, there are more than 100 New Testament passages that teach that salvation is by grace alone through faith alone with no mention whatsoever of baptism.<sup>11</sup> These simply cannot be negated by a few verses that *seem* to teach that baptism is necessary.

We, therefore, can say without the slightest shadow of a doubt that baptismal regeneration is serious false doctrine. It simply does not reflect grace. All errors about salvation, in fact, flow directly from a misunderstanding (or outright rejection) of the central biblical truth called *grace*. Tragically, how-

ever, like many other doctrines, the early emergence of baptismal regeneration in Church History created serious consequences that rippled into the future.

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**NOTES**

- <sup>1</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.15.19.
- <sup>2</sup> J. B. Lightfoot and J. R. Harmer (translators), *The Apostolic Fathers*, Second Edition (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1989), 145–46.
- <sup>3</sup> Earle Cairns, *Christianity Through the Centuries*, Third Edition (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1954, 1981, 1996), 79.
- <sup>4</sup> See the author’s soon to be published, *“In Remembrance of Me”* for details on these points.
- <sup>5</sup> Delavan Leonard Pierson (son), *Arthur T. Pierson: A Biography* (London: James Nisbet & Co., 1912; reprinted, Chambers College Press, Greeley, CO, 2013), 252–69.
- <sup>6</sup> George Park Fisher, *History of the Christian Church* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1887, 1912), 84.

- <sup>7</sup> Robert A Baker, *A Summary of Christian History*, Third Edition with John M. Landers (Nashville: B&H, 2005), 69–70.
- <sup>8</sup> Henry C. Sheldon, *History of the Christian Church* (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers), Vol. 2, 15.
- <sup>9</sup> Kenneth S. Wuest, *Wuest New Testament: An Expanded Translation* (Eerdmans, 1961).
- <sup>10</sup> Spiros Zodhiates, et. al, *The Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament* (AMG Publishers), entry #5179.
- <sup>11</sup> *Mark* 1:15; *Luke* 8:12; 7:50; 8:12; *John* 1:12; 3:14–16, 18, 36; 5:24; 6:35; 6:40, 47; 7:38; 8:24; 11:25–26; 12:46; 16:27; 20:31; *Acts* 2:21; 5:14; 10:43; 11:17,18, 21; 13:39; 13:48; 15:7-9; 16:31; 26:18; *Romans* 1:16–17; 3:22a, 25, 26, 28, 30; 4:3, 5; 4:11, 13; 5:1–2; 4:20–25; 9:30, 32, 33; 10:4; 10:6a, 9–11, 13; 14–17; 11:20; *1 Corinthians* 1:21; 15:2, 17; *2 Corinthians* 4:4; *Galatians* 2:16, 20; 3:6, 7, 8, 11, 14, 22, 24, 26; 5:5; *Ephesians* 1:13, 19; 2:8–9; *Philippians* 3:9; *Colossians* 1:4–5; *1 Thessalonians* 2:13; *2 Thessalonians* 1:10; 2:12; *1 Timothy* 1:16; 4:10; *2 Timothy* 3:15; *Hebrews* 4:2, 3a; 10:38, 39; 11:6; *James* 2:5; 2:23; *1 Peter* 1:5, 9, 18–21; 2:6; *1 John* 5:1a, 4, 5, 10, 13.

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