

**“The voice of the Lord is over the waters; the God of glory thunders; the Lord is over many waters.”
(Ps 29:3)**

✠ Lecture VI: Baptism in The Holy Gospels ✠

The Holy Bible is far from silent on the subject of baptism. Many clear and straightforward verses are spread over the whole range of the New Testament from the Holy Gospels to the Holy Epistles. In what follows we shall, by the grace of God, examine the meaning of baptism as recorded in the Holy Gospels.

**“Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you.”
(Mt 28:19-20)**

The key term in this commission is “make disciples”. “Going” is the prerequisite for making disciples, “baptizing” and “teaching” are the means of making disciples. It is very significant that baptism is distinguished from the category of “all things” that the believers must be taught to observe. This is especially important in view of the common Protestant heresy that baptism is just one of the “good works” of Christian life and that it is a mere act of obedience comparable to the many other acts of obedience that we are to perform simply because God has commanded them. If this is so, why is baptism alone singled out for specific mention, and why is it separated from “all that I have commanded you”? The way the commission is worded suggests that baptism has a unique importance in the process of disciple making. We can agree that the term “all things” does refer to the good works belonging to Christian life, but the term is comprehensive “all things” and baptism is not included in it. The clear implication is that baptism is not meant to be placed in the category of good works; it has a meaning distinct from any act of obedience expected of a Christian and an importance far beyond that of any of these acts. This unique importance of baptism is revealed by the following passage where baptism is mentioned but where it would be out of place if it were just another good work, “There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all” (**Eph 4:4-6**). This passage lists the seven fundamental bases for Christian unity. Isn’t it striking the company that baptism keeps? If baptism is relatively insignificant or even if it has equal significance with other Christian commands and duties, then of all such duties why should it be singled out and ranged here alongside items that occupy a much more lofty sphere of importance? Its companions are the three Persons of the Trinity, the Church (one body), heaven (one hope), and faith (the one body of doctrines which are believed). How can Protestants fail to see the significance of baptism being included here in some sense comparable in importance at least to faith itself? (See **Heb 6:1-2** for a similar listing). More light is shed on the nature of this uniqueness in the record of one divinely directed instance of implementing the commission; St. Philip & the eunuch (**Acts 8:26-40**). It is written that St. Philip “preached **Jesus** to him” (**v.35**). This is the one word summary of his preaching “Jesus”. The only recorded response is the eunuch’s cry “Look! Water! What prevents me from being baptized?” (**v.36**). We cannot avoid the conclusion that the evangelistic preaching of Lord Jesus Christ includes the imperative of baptism. In terms of the commission in (**Mt 28:18-19**), baptism is something taught **before** conversion with view to becoming a disciple, while “teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you” **follows** conversion and deals with the details of Christian life. The element in the text itself that confirms the unique importance of baptism is the expression “in the name” (Gr. *eis to onoma*). In the biblical world, a person’s name was not just an arbitrary means of identification but was considered to be intrinsically related to the person himself, representing his qualities, his character, and his very nature. Thus “the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit” represents the very Persons of The Holy Trinity. So the Lord Jesus Christ commissioned His apostles to baptize people into a specific relation with the Holy Trinity. The phrase “*eis to onoma*” was a technical term used in the world of Greek business and commerce. It indicates the entry of a sum of money or an item of property into the account bearing the name of its owner. (Albrecht Opeke, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*) The use of this phrase in (**Mt 28:19**) indicates that the purpose of baptism is to unite us with the

Triune God in an **ownership** relation. Thus the person being baptized passes into the possession of the Triune God. Such a relationship prepares him/her for the dwelling of the Holy Spirit after baptism (Chrismation). St. Paul said, “Or do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, **and you are not your own?** For we were **bought at a price**; therefore glorify God in your body and in your spirit, **which are God’s**” (1 Cor 6:19-20). The price that St. Paul is talking about is the redemptive death of our Lord Jesus Christ and the strong relation between baptism and the death of the Lord is revealed in (Rom 6:3-4; Col 2:11-13). Thus when we are baptized “in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit” we become God’s own special possession. No wonder baptism is singled out in the commission as having a unique importance. What we know just from this one passage (Mt 28:18-19) warrants the assessment that baptism has a **saving** significance – a conclusion that will be even more inescapable in view of the other verses to be discussed below.

“Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature. He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned.” (Mk 16:16)

It is universally accepted that faith is and has always been an essential condition for salvation (Jn 3:16,18,36). What is striking about (Mk 16:16) is that faith and baptism are linked together in this context. If anything at all were going to be put into such a relationship with faith, there are other things that might at first seem to the non-Orthodox Christian more appropriate than baptism. For example, a Protestant would not have been surprised at, “He who believes and calls on the name of the Lord will be saved” (Acts 2:21) or “He who believes and confesses Christ will be saved” (Rom 10:9-10). Actions such as praying and confessing Lord Jesus Christ would appear to have a kind of family resemblance to faith, whereas baptism seems to be a different kind of act all together. This is why it is important to note the close conjunction of faith and baptism in this commission. It should cause our brethren the Protestants to reexamine their wrong preconceptions about the role of baptism in the issue of salvation and to realize that it is not so different from that of faith after all. This is borne by other passages that bring the two together, we have commented on (Eph 4:5) above and will comment on (Gal 3:26; Col 2:12) later. The saving faith must be directed specifically toward Lord Jesus Christ and His saving work of atonement and resurrection. This is one reason why faith has a natural affinity with baptism, namely, because baptism in its very action symbolizes the death, burial, and resurrection of the Lord. Thus not only is the saving faith believing in the saving work of Lord Jesus Christ, but also it is believing what God has promised to do in baptism, namely, to apply the atoning blood of Lord Jesus to us personally and to raise us from spiritual death (Rom 6:3-4; Col 2:11-13). Therefore, we may conclude that it is most appropriate that faith and baptism be listed together as **co-conditions** for salvation. This is supported by the straightforward and unequivocal connection between baptism and salvation, “He who believes **and is baptized** will be saved”. Such a statement is consistent with the conclusion drawn from the discussion of (Mt 28:18-19) above and is also in agreement with “There is also an antitype which now saves us, namely baptism” (1 Pet 3:21). The same question arises here as with (Mt 28:18-19); if baptism does not have this special saving efficacy, why should it be mentioned here at all? Some Protestants may be reluctant to draw the obvious conclusion from this passage because the second negative part of the verse omits baptism. This omission cannot legitimately be used to negate the force of the first clause. If there is not an intimate relation between baptism and salvation, then the inclusion of baptism in the verse at all is unnecessary and even misleading. Why then the omission? Because when compared with anything else the sinner can or must do to receive salvation, faith is basic in the sense that it has a fundamental **chronological** priority. The person who does not believe will not even seek baptism in the first place. Thus there is no need to mention both faith and baptism in the negative clause. The following statement is comparable: “He who turns on his TV and tune in to channel 5 will see the program; he who refuses to turn on his TV will miss the program”. Since turning on the TV is basic to everything else, there is no need to mention the channel in the second clause.

“Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the Kingdom of God.” (Jn 3:5)

This is part of the Lord’s conversation with Nicodemus about the necessity of the new birth. Do any other New Testament passages specifically speak of baptism as a birth? No, but two important texts speak of it as a resurrection from spiritual death (**Rom 6:4-5; Col 2:12**). This is significant because resurrection and birth are figuratively intertwined in Holy Scripture:

- “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His abundant mercy has begotten us again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.” (**1 Pet 1:3**)
- **Col 1:18** and **Rev 1:5** speak of our Lord as the “first born from the dead.”

Thus “raised up in baptism” & “born of water” are equivalent concepts and we are justified in taking (**Jn 3:5**) as reference to baptism. This verse is without question dealing with salvation with an essential condition thereof in the Christian age. The condition is baptism, “being born of water and Spirit”. This is in full agreement with the teaching of **Mk 16:16** and **1 Pet 3:21**

‡ **FAQ:**

Q3: The word “water” is used figuratively as a symbol of the Holy Spirit In Jn 4:10-14 and Jn 7:37-39.

How do we know that the same word “water” in Jn 3:5 is not also a symbol of the Holy Spirit?

A3: Counting against this view is the straightforward nature of the Lord’s statement in **Jn 3:5** and the lack of any contextual indication of a figurative intention for the term. For example, here the bare and unqualified term “water” is used, whereas in both **Jn 4:10-14** and **Jn 7:37-39** the term “living water” is used. Moreover, in these latter two passages, there is contextual contrast between ordinary water and living water offered by the Lord (Holy Spirit) such contrast is absent in **Jn 3:5**. Finally, in **Jn 3:5**, the expression “born of water and the Spirit” is so tight that there is really no room for symbolic maneuvering. There are simply two nouns, both of which are objects of the one preposition “of” and are joined by the simple conjunction “and”. If the term “water meant the Spirit, there would have been no need for such repetition.

Q4: What is the efficacy of the Protestants’ baptisms?

A4: These baptisms have no saving or spiritual efficacy whatsoever. In fact, this is what the Protestants themselves believe and confess. Here is what the Baptists for example confess about their Baptism and Eucharist: “These ordinances have no saving efficacy and possess no power of themselves to impart a blessing. They are symbols of important truths and are to be observed in obedience to the command of our Lord” (J. Clyde Turner, *The Things We Believe*). To them, “being born again,” means a mental acceptance of Lord Jesus Christ as a personal savior. They believe that this mere acceptance of the Lord will grant them the second birth, justification, regeneration, and the forgiveness of sins! Thus their baptism is a mere sign or symbol, a declaration of the faith and salvation, which, according to them, they had already obtained. In other words, the saving efficacy of the Protestants’ baptisms is the same as the saving efficacy of the shower you took this morning.

* This lecture is adapted from, *Baptism A Biblical Study* by Jack Cottrell.