

# Jonathan Just Said "Jesus is God." What does an infant receive in Baptism?

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*He saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing (diav\outrou)-of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life.*

-- Titus 3:5-7

My son Jonathan is nearly two years old. About a year ago he began to talk, and one of his first words was "Jesus." Admittedly, that is a word he hears at the dinner table and around the house, but what makes a baby ask questions about the man with the beard in the paintings and then point to the cross on the wall? What makes him remember things about Jesus and yet forget the name of the next door neighbor? The Bible claims that infants receive a great deal at their baptism -- including faith. Is this true? If it is, why do some -- indeed, why do so many -- deny it?

To examine these questions, we will follow this basic train of thought:

- I. What do our opponents say?**
- II. What does the Bible say?**
- III. What is the difference?**
- IV. What conclusion can we draw?**

## ***I. What do our opponents say?***

Karl Barth<sup>1</sup> almost seems to have been angered by the mention of infant baptism. In the fourth volume of his *Church Dogmatics*<sup>2</sup> he attempts to explore every proof passage used for infant baptism and negate them all. For Barth,

(Baptism) is not to be understood as a mystery or sacrament along the lines of the dominant theological tradition. According to the New Testament, man's cleansing and renewal take place in the history of Jesus Christ which culminates in his death, and they are mediated through the work of the Holy Spirit. The New Testament

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<sup>1</sup> Barth was a Swiss (Calvinist) theologian whose ideas strongly influenced Emil Brunner and the "decision theology" of such American preachers as Billy Graham.

<sup>2</sup> *The Doctrine of Reconciliation (Fragment)*, completed just prior to his death in December 1968.

does not refer to any additional or accompanying history or mediation of salvation. It mentions no duplicate of this one divine act and word.

(Barth 128)

Barth's high regard for Christ's work in the above quote is admirable, but his complete disregard and dismissal of infant baptism flies in the face of Scripture. "It is hard to see," he quips, "where there is any place even for the idea of infant baptism, let alone any permission or command to administer it" (184). But what effect does baptism have? For Barth, baptism does not regenerate. It is merely a form of prayer. But in citing passages to defend this (amazing) statement, he refers to 1 Peter 3:21: "Baptism... doth save you." And in doing so he stands on his head, drawing from this verse that "baptism is a prayer" and "baptism (= prayer) *justifies [God] unequivocally*" (210-211, emphasis added). If Barth had lived longer, how could he possibly have defended this ridiculous exegesis?

Catholicism teaches that baptism gives forgiveness of sins -- but only original sin and sins committed prior to the baptism itself (Geisler and MacKenzie 86). In Roman Catholic writings, few passages are cited to support this claim so it is difficult to refute them except by stating everything Scripture says about sin and grace. One might hold up entire epistles such as Galatians and Romans against this teaching. The resulting doubt is something Catholics hold up without apology. The Council of Trent brashly trumpets doubt itself to be "a part of true piety, that a Christian remain in doubt whether or not he has obtained the grace of God, unless he had received a special revelation from God" (Session VI, canons 9 & 13).<sup>3</sup> This Roman "Doctrine of Doubt" denies the effects of baptism (in all people, not only infants), rips the grace out of the gospel and leaves only the framework of the law which can only drive a "good" Catholic to despair. What would John 1:16 say if such a theology were true? "Of his emptiness we have all received, even doubt upon doubt!"

Another group which denies any soteriological effects in baptism is the Presbyterian church. An official statement of August 16, 1928:

We hold that just as by birth a child becomes a citizen of a particular family, and just as by birth a child becomes a member of a particular state, so by birth a child of believers becomes a member of the church of Jesus Christ. When therefore, we baptize a child, we do it not to make it a member of a church, but as a formal

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<sup>3</sup> Quoted in *Christian Dogmatics* by F. Pieper, Vol. III p. 117.

recognition of its birthright membership, so that the question that confronts such a child when it comes to years of discretion is not whether it will join, but whether it will leave the church of Christ.<sup>4</sup>

Modern Baptists hold much the same view. They insist upon the form of baptism<sup>5</sup> but, like all Protestant bodies, deny its effects. Indeed, after the Reformation, the only church body which maintained that baptism forgives all our sins (actual and original) is the Lutherans. One of the results of the Protestant Reformation is an almost fanatical rejection of all things Catholic. The Roman Catholic mysticism (perhaps best seen in their doctrine of transubstantiation in the Lord's Supper) caused Reformed bodies to reject any saving effects of baptism.

## II. *What does the Bible say?*

### A. 1 Peter 3:21

Barth (211) claims that 1 Peter 3:21 indicates that Baptism must equal prayer. What does the passage actually say in context? Following his overall theme of Hope in Christ, the apostle has talked about our living hope in Christ's resurrection (1:3-12), the hope-produced holiness of living which we have (1:13-2:10) and our hope-produced submission to one another (2:11-3:12). Now Peter reaches the climax of his message and the center of his thought: We have hope in the midst of suffering for Christ (3:13-4:19).<sup>6</sup>

#### 1 Peter 3:21

~~οὗ τῆς ὕδατος~~ αὐτὴ ὑπὸν νῦν σωθεὶς βαπτισμα, οὐ γὰρ κοῦ ἀποθέσις  
~~τοῦ σώματος~~ ἀλλὰ συνειδήσεως ἀγαθῆς ἐπιρρωθήμα εἰς θεόν, δι' ὅ  
~~ἀναστάσεως Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ~~

*And this water (the flood) 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... (NIV).*

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in Dogmatics Notes Vol. II by Prof. John P. Meyer. Printed by WLS Seminary Mimeographing Committee 1941-1942, reprinted 1979, revised 1985.

<sup>5</sup> The Baptists are sometimes referred to as "spiritual descendants of the Anabaptists." It may be worth noting that the Anabaptists themselves did not (at least in the beginning) insist upon the form of baptism; they merely insisted on "believer's Baptism." Cf. articles on Baptist Bodies and Mennonite Bodies in *Lutheran Cyclopaedia* (p. 87 and p. 668), St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1954.

<sup>6</sup> Outline taken in part from WLS Isogogics notes by Prof. David Valleskey (1996).

There is no question about the meaning of **ἀντίτυπον** (antitype). The great flood was a shadow of baptism, since both involve water and saving. The water in each case saves. Noah and seven others were saved by the flood; we are saved by means of our baptism. Baptism (**baptisma**) is here explained in three ways. 1) It is not (**ou**) merely the scrubbing off of dirt, 2) it is the pledge of a good conscience toward God, and 3) it saves us by the means of (**dia**/ + genitive) Christ's resurrection. This last statement hinges on the phrase **ἡμᾶς ἵνα σωθῆται**. In his *Linguistic Key to the Greek New Testament*, Fritz Reinecker goes far out of his way to make it clear that this verse does not mean what it says, namely, that Baptism saves. However, the single, simple sense of the words in the Greek are clear. The floodwaters were the means by which eight people were saved in Noah's day. That water was a shadow or figure of the greater, spiritual truth which came later: baptism. Baptism's water is the means by which we are spiritually saved. Peter uses simple, clear words, and he means what he says: *Baptism saves you*.

#### B. Titus 3:5b

**ἡμᾶς ἵνα σωθῆται** **διὰ τὸ ἰουάνη** **καὶ τὸ ἀκαθάρτων**  
**πνεύματος ἁγίου.**

*He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit.*

(NIV).

Titus 3 is of course the *locus classicus* which Luther used in his *Small Catechism*. In this passage, Paul tells us that through baptism we receive a rebirth and renewal. What does the Greek add to our understanding? **ἡμᾶς ἵνα σωθῆται** is aorist, reminding us that when the Bible says God *saved* us it is talking about a fact. This actually happened in the historic context of that day when Pontius Pilate washed his hands (cleansing himself from responsibility) and handed Jesus over to be crucified. The phrase **διὰ τὸ ἰουάνη** expresses means. But where in 1 Peter, **διὰ**/with the genitive expresses how baptism saves (by means of the work of Christ), here it points directly to baptism as a means *by which we are saved*. The paired expression **ἰουάνη καὶ ἀκαθάρτων** is a doublet as a unit. This is a "rebirth-and-renewal-washing."<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Not germane to the topic of the effects of baptism but vitally important in the first half of this Titus passage (3:5a) is the emphatic **ἡμᾶς ἵνα σωθῆται** following **ἐπὶ ἡμῶν**. It is not (**αὐτὰ**) our doing at all which effects the change in baptism, but the Holy Spirit working in the sacrament.

### **C. Other Passages**

Scripture has much more to say about what baptism gives. The passages might be grouped according to the specific effect they mention. Passages which tell us that the Holy Spirit comes to people (adults or infants) in baptism include John 3:3-5, "he is born of water and the Spirit," and Acts 2:38,39, "Repent and be baptized... and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit."

Passages which indicate that a new (sanctified) life for a person, adult or infant, is a result of baptism include 1 Corinthians 6:11, "But you were washed, you were sanctified..." and Ephesians 5:25,26, "...Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word..." Romans 6:4 also tells us "we were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead... we too may live a new life."

Passages which clearly state that through (by means of) baptism, we receive the forgiveness of sins, include Matthew 28:19, "Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing..." (the participle is circumstantial expressing means); Acts 2:38, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins" and Acts 22:16, "And now what are you waiting for? Get up, be baptized and wash your sins away, calling on his name."

A passage which points to baptism as a means of our justification (this is intimately connected with the preceding point) is Galatians 3:26,27, "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." Ephesians 5:25,26 (quoted above) could equally be used here.

### **III. *What is the difference?***

What's the difference? Do some passages in Scripture conflict with others? No. In fact, as was noted with Barth (page 2 above), the same passages are used to defend and at the same time (attempt to) refute the Scriptural Lutheran doctrine of the effects of baptism.

Part of the reason for this difference is a different method of exegesis based on a different type of hermeneutics. The principals of Biblical interpretation championed by Luther during the Reformation and

held by orthodox Lutheran theologians ever since are incompatible with Roman Catholic hermeneutics (at that time allegorizing) and with Reformed hermeneutics (pietistic, rational, existential, demythologizing, gospel-reductionism, divine-human mystery, and so forth). Scriptural hermeneutics employ these principals:

1. Bible interpretation is to be done on the basis of the original languages (Greek, Hebrew and Aramaic) rather than on the basis of the Latin Vulgate.<sup>8</sup>
2. The interpreter should know the historical background of the books of the Bible rather than create his own allegorical settings<sup>9</sup>.
3. The interpreter must accept the unity of the entire Bible rather than allegorize<sup>10</sup> individual passages according to his own fanciful imagination.
4. The interpreter must begin with Christ<sup>11</sup> as the center of Scripture in his interpretation of any part of the Bible.
5. Scripture must be interpreted by Scripture rather than be subject to any standard of doctrine (tradition) established by the leaders of the church.<sup>12</sup>

Reformed hermeneutics depend on reason and an anti-Roman predisposition. Roman Catholic hermeneutics are subject to reason, tradition, Papal decree, and sometimes it seems (in America), whim. When one allows anything other than Scripture to speak, one obscures, detracts from, defames and even destroys God's Holy Word. The Bible is clear about the need for baptism (Psalm 51:5). The Bible is clear about the efficacy of baptism (1 Peter 3:21). The Bible is clear about what baptism gives, whether to child or adult, infant or ancient (Acts 22:16 *wash your sins away*).

How can there be differences in interpretation? The devil delights when men think they are doing God's will when in fact they are not (Genesis 3:4,5). He uses any and every means to pervert God's word (Luke 4) and will stop at nothing to further his own cause ("Skin for skin!" Job 2:4). It delights him no end to see the Reformed turn baptism upside down into a bickered-over regulation which has no benefit rather than a beautiful expression of God's gracious love.

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<sup>8</sup> Or another version such as the King James

<sup>9</sup> Or invent mythological original texts such as the Jesus Seminar does

<sup>10</sup> Or discard

<sup>11</sup> Not a "Christ-event"

<sup>12</sup> Principals cited are summarized in *Biblical Interpretation: The Only Right Way* by David Kuske, Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1995.

## V. Conclusion

How do errors about Baptism (or any other doctrine) happen? Certainly some of the trouble lies in faulty exegesis, and part of that is due to bad hermeneutics. But does poor Greek account for everything? Baier does not think so.

Certainly the man who does not take a close look at the words themselves, but gives himself up to his own previously formed opinion and twists the words of Scripture to fit these prejudices will also be able to err when he seeks to study the clear passages and their true meaning.<sup>13</sup>

The Bible is clear about what an infant -- or anyone else -- receives in baptism. Because the Bible describes these things in various places, it is fitting to use a concise summary such as Luther's *Small Catechism* to bring all that the Bible says into one brief statement: "It works forgiveness of sins, delivers from death and the devil, and gives eternal salvation to all who believe this, as the words and promise of God declare."<sup>14</sup>

Why does the world reject this? As was noted above, among the Protestants there has been a general thrust toward rejecting "all things Catholic." The devil has used this to great advantage, corrupting generations of Christians into despising this wonderful, effective and simple gift of God. About this, Luther said:

It is so transcendent, that if timid nature could realize it, it might well doubt whether it could be true. For consider, if there were somewhere a physician who understood the art of saving men from dying, or, even though they died, of restoring them speedily to life, so that they would thereafter live forever, how the world would pour in money like snow and rain, so that because of the throng of the rich no one could

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<sup>13</sup> *Nempe qui non ad verba ipsa attendit, sed praejudiciis suis indulget et verba scripturae ed ea detorquet, etiam in locis perspicuis ec sense genuino investigando errare potest.* Quoted in Dogmatics Notes Vol. II by Prof. John P. Meyer. Page 32. Printed by WLS Seminary Mimeographing Committee 1941-1942, reprinted 1979, revised 1985.

<sup>14</sup> Quoted from *Concordia Triglotta* p. 551 (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1921). It also should be pointed out that Luther intended for each head of the family (*hausvater*) to "teach it in a simple way to his household." Fathers do well when they take these words to heart and do all that is in their power to raise their children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord.

find access! But here in baptism there is brought free to everyone's door such a treasure and medicine as utterly destroys death and preserves all men alive.<sup>15</sup>

But does God *have* to work through means such as baptism to produce these things? It must be pointed out that God does not only work the forgiveness of sins, deliverance from death and the devil, and create faith in the heart by means of baptism, but also with the Lord's Supper. He grants forgiveness of sins through confession and absolution. The word itself is living and active and effective (Isaiah 55:11). Indeed, as Luther says:

God could save the human race by his omnipotence, without Christ, without baptism, without the word of the gospel; he could have inwardly illuminated hearts through the Holy Ghost and could have forgiven sins without the ministry of the Word and ministers. But he did not want to do so.<sup>16</sup>

Why does Jonathan love his savior? It is not merely because he wants to please his parents. There are many things we wish he would do which he nevertheless does not do. He is, after all, a sinful creature who needs a savior. Is it because he is an exceptionally bright child and memorizes things he hears his parents say and hears his father in particular say at the dinner table, at the cribside, or from the pulpit? Mere memorization does not create faith. Faith is only created by the Means of Grace, the gospel in word and sacrament. In whatever capacity he apprehends these things, Jonathan apprehends them through his **organon I hptikoh**, that faith he received two years ago, at his baptism.

*Our children Jesus calls  
To his most dear embrace  
He holds them in his mighty arms  
Through their baptismal grace*

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid. (Large Catechism) p. 743.

<sup>16</sup> *Lectures on Genesis*, St. L. Ed. vol. 2, p. 1828.

*"Let them approach," he cries,  
"Nor scorn their humble claim,  
The heirs of heav'n are such as these;  
For such as these I came."*

*With joy we bring them, Lord,  
Devoting them to you,  
And pray, "As you show love to us,  
So love our children, too."*

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