

The book cover features a background of a blue sky with light clouds at the top, transitioning into a dark blue area with a wavy, water-like texture. The title is prominently displayed in the upper half.

***BAPTISMAL
REGENERATION***
EXAMINED

by Dr Jeffrey Khoo

The doctrine of baptismal regeneration teaches that baptism is essential for salvation. Those who teach this doctrine say that faith in Christ is not enough, one must go through the rite of water baptism if one is to receive salvation. Thus, their salvation formula is: Faith plus baptism equals salvation.

The question we want to ask ourselves is: "Does the Bible teach this?" This tract seeks to answer this question. Is baptismal regeneration tenable on the basis of principles of Bible interpretation, theology and context?

Principles of Bible Interpretation

Fallacious doctrines stem from equally fallacious interpretation. The Bible means what it says and says what it means. It is, therefore, imperative that we rightly divide the Word of truth (2 Tim 2:15). If we do not interpret Scripture accurately, we may fall into the danger of adding to or subtracting from God's Word.

The sixty-six books of the Bible, both the Old Testament as well as the New Testament, are the inspired, infallible, inerrant and authoritative Word of God. The Old Testament and the New Testament are an organic unity. They are inseparable. They belong together. They are intrinsically connected. This fact is succinctly expressed by these two couplets: "The Old

is by the New explained, the New is in the Old contained,” and “The New is in the Old concealed, the Old is by the New revealed.” Jesus Himself regarded the Old Testament as the Word of God (Matt 5:17-18). He explained the things concerning Himself to the Emmaus disciples from the Old Testament (Lk 24:27). It is, therefore, crucial to realize that if any doctrine is to be formulated, it must find basis not only in the New Testament but also in the Old. Sadly, those who teach baptismal regeneration fail to apply this. Most of the arguments offered are taken from so called “proof texts” from the Gospels and Acts. Some of these verses are Mark 16:16, Acts 2:38 and Acts 22:16. These verses seem to support the idea that water baptism is essential for salvation. However, in biblical interpretation, formulation of any doctrine must find basis not just in the Gospels and Acts, which are historical books but also in the Epistles, which are essentially doctrinal in nature, and in the Old Testament.

The Gospels and Acts, being historical in nature, primarily record for us what Jesus and the Apostles did and taught. Declarative statements are usually given without explanation or exposition. The Epistles are the books which deal with doctrine. The Epistles articulate what Jesus declared, and explain the significance of the Old Testament concerning Christ. Those who teach

baptismal regeneration have failed to recognize the need to reconcile their doctrine with the Epistles, particularly Romans and Galatians. In the process of presenting their doctrine of baptismal regeneration, they have interpreted the verses out of context.

Another important principle in biblical interpretation is that Scripture must not be made to clash with Scripture. The Bible does not contradict itself. In Romans, Paul in no uncertain terms emphasized the fact that salvation is by grace through faith. "For therein is the righteousness of God revealed from faith to faith: as it is written, The just shall live by faith" (Rom 1:17). If we say that water baptism is essential for salvation, why then did not Paul mention baptism as a requirement? Paul should have said, "The just shall live by faith and through baptism." But nowhere in the entire book of Romans did Paul elevate the rite of water baptism to the level of the faith we must have in Christ in order to be saved. In Ephesians 2:8-9, Paul makes it very clear, "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."

Then, how about James 2:20 which states that "faith without works is dead"? The proponents of baptismal regeneration say that "works" here include water baptism. Now, it is vital to interpret

the Bible in its proper context. A knowledge of the historical context would play an important role in helping us to interpret the Epistle of James. The historical context can be seen in chapter 1:26 - 2:13 and 4:1-11. James was addressing a people who called themselves Christian but showed no repentance in their lives. The argument that water baptism is essential for salvation cannot be argued from here because baptism is not even mentioned in James. We, therefore, cannot equate “works” with “baptism”. If we do, we will make James say what he did not say.

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It is equally important to note the authorial intent of James. James was rebuking sin. He was not giving a discourse on the importance of baptism for salvation. What James was trying to drive at was that if a person says he has faith, his life must manifest the marks of grace. True faith will result in a changed life shown by good works but good works are not the means whereby a man obtains salvation.

The proponents of baptismal regeneration have started on a wrong premise for interpreting the Bible. They have failed to allow Scripture to speak for itself. Rather, they have read into Scripture and

thereby teach a doctrine which is contrary to the historic Christian faith.

Theological Grounds

The doctrine of baptismal regeneration is an attack on the very heart of the gospel and the work of Christ. To say that baptism is essential for salvation is equivalent to saying that Christ's death on the cross was not sufficient to save sinners because anyone who wants to be saved must, on his part, go through the waters of baptism. Paul calls this "another gospel" (Gal 1:8-9). Paul warned, "But though we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel unto you than that which we have preached unto you, let him be accursed." It is, therefore, of utmost importance that we understand the doctrine of salvation.

In Galatians, Paul warned the Christians against a group of false teachers called Judaizers who taught that in order to be saved, one must not only believe in Christ, one must also be circumcized. Paul called these people "false brethren".

In Romans, Paul contended with the Judaizers very fiercely. Paul argued very strongly that salvation is not by works but solely by grace through faith. In chapter 4, Paul answered the question, "Was Abraham justified by faith or works?" Paul pointed out that "Abraham believed God, and it was counted unto him for

righteousness” (Rom 4:3; Gal 3:6). Paul further argued that salvation did not come because Abraham was circumcised. Abraham was saved “Not in circumcision, but in uncircumcision. And he received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had yet being uncircumcised: that he might be the father of all them that believe, though they be not circumcised, that righteousness might be imputed unto them also; and the father of circumcision to them who are not of the circumcision only, but who also walk in the steps of that faith of our father Abraham, which he had being yet uncircumcised” (Rom 4:10-12). Abraham was, thus, saved before circumcision! It is important to know that the New Testament sacrament of water baptism is identified with the Old Testament rite of circumcision (Col 2:11-12). Abraham was justified by faith alone. It is the same for New Testament believers — “sola fide”. Faith is the only requirement for salvation.

What then is water baptism all about? According to the Westminster Shorter Catechism question ninety-four: “What is Baptism?” The answer is “Baptism is a Sacrament, wherein the washing with water, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost doth signify and seal our engrafting into Christ, and partaking of the benefits of the covenant of grace, and our engagement to be the Lord’s.” Baptism

cannot save. It is a sign and a seal (Gen 17:11; cf Rom 4:11). They signify and visibly represent the things that should have already taken place in the heart, namely, faith, conversion, forgiveness of sin, communion with Christ, etc. The sacrament of water baptism is a means of grace. It serves to help sinful people understand in pictorial form the spiritual truths concerning salvation. Baptism is, thus, “an outward sign of an inward grace.” That is why Paul said, “But he is a Jew, which is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the spirit, and not in the letter” (Rom 2:29; Deut 10:16). Paul saw baptism as an expression of faith in Christ. To the Corinthians, he said, “Christ sent me not to baptize, but to preach the gospel” (1 Cor 1:17). If the gospel and baptism are both essential for salvation, then Paul should have said, “Christ sent me both to preach and to baptize.” It is important to see the sacrament of water baptism in the correct theological perspective.

Spurgeon said, “If my garment of salvation requires only a stitch from me, I am lost!” Baptismal regeneration is such a stitch.

The doctrine of baptismal regeneration apparently suggests that a person has the ability to decide whether he wants to be saved or not. An explanation concerning the doctrine of man and of sin is needed here.

Man has no ability whatsoever to save himself from sin. After the Fall, man became totally depraved. The heart of man is completely corrupted by sin (Jer 17:9). Man is dead in sin (Eph 2:1). Man is not able to respond to spiritual things (1 Cor 2:13-14). Given the choice, man will choose to reject Christ rather than believe in Him. "As it is written, there is none righteous, no, not one; there is none that understandeth, there is none that seeketh after God" (Rom 3:10-11). How then can man be saved? It is only by the grace of God. God, before the foundation of the world, chose some to be saved (Eph 1:3-11). He made salvation possible by sending His only begotten Son, Jesus Christ, to die for sinners (Jn 3:16; Rom 5:8). Knowing that we cannot and will not come to Him by ourselves, He draws us to Himself (Jn 6:37, 44). Even the very faith to believe was given to us by God. And having saved us, He continues saving us to the very end (Rom 8:28-39). This is a wonderful truth. It not only comforts our hearts, it also gives all the glory to God. Salvation is by grace from beginning to end and not by works. Charles H. Spurgeon, "the prince of preachers," said, "If my garment of salvation requires only a stitch from me, I am lost!" Baptismal regeneration is such a stitch.

Contextual Grounds

In order that the arguments for baptismal regeneration be valid, they must of necessity find consistency in the Bible where every person saved were saved after they were baptized. However, this is not the case. Baptism is not mentioned in Acts 4:4; 9:35; 11:21; 13:12, 48; 14:1; 17:4, 12, 34 when the people, after hearing the gospel, believed and were saved. Although, it is not stated that they were baptized, we are not saying that no baptism occurred. The point Luke was trying to drive at was that salvation came by way of faith alone — they “believed”.

Consider the example of Cornelius in Acts 10:44-48. Peter was directed of the Lord to preach the gospel to Cornelius, a centurion. Acts 10:44 tells us that “While Peter yet spake these words, the Holy Ghost fell on all them who heard the word.” Note that the Holy Spirit indwelt Cornelius and his household before baptism (Acts 10:47-48). Rom 8:9 says, “Now if any man have not the Spirit of Christ, he is none of his.” Are those who teach that water baptism is essential for salvation saying that Cornelius was not saved before he was baptized? The fact that Cornelius received salvation before baptism is confirmed by Peter’s report to the Jerusalem Council in Acts 11:15-17. Peter reported that Cornelius received the baptism of the Holy Spirit just as the Apostles had received

theirs at Pentecost. This was the basis on which Peter concluded that salvation was also given to the Gentiles. Therefore, the baptism of the Holy Spirit, and not water baptism, causes regeneration.

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Consider Acts 19:1-6. In this incident, we find a group of John's disciples. They were baptized with water by John but did that baptism save them? The answer is obviously in the negative. Paul had to instruct them concerning the way to salvation which is in Christ alone. That is why Paul had to ask this searching question: "Have ye received the Holy Ghost since ye believed?" This verse and the subsequent verses tell us that Paul's concern was not whether they had already been baptized with water but whether they had received the baptism of the Holy Spirit. Regeneration is associated with Holy Spirit baptism, not water baptism. The physical act of water baptism does not and cannot save.

In the process of arguing against the doctrine of baptismal regeneration, we are not saying that the ordinance of water baptism is not important. Indeed, baptism is commanded of the Lord. However, it must be stated categorically that

baptism is necessary unto obedience but not necessary unto salvation.

Dear reader, do you belong to a church which teaches that water baptism is necessary for salvation? Please understand that the Lord Jesus Christ and the Apostles did not teach this. The Apostle Paul made it very clear: "The just shall live by faith" (Rom 1:17). "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" (Eph 2:8-9). If you do belong to such a church, the Bible commands separation and withdrawal from false churches (2 Cor 6:14-18; 1 Tim 6:3-5; 2 Tim 2:16-21; Eph 5:11). Do you love the Lord? Jesus said, "If a man love me, he will keep my words: and my Father will love him, and we will come unto him, and make our abode with him" (Jn 14:23).

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