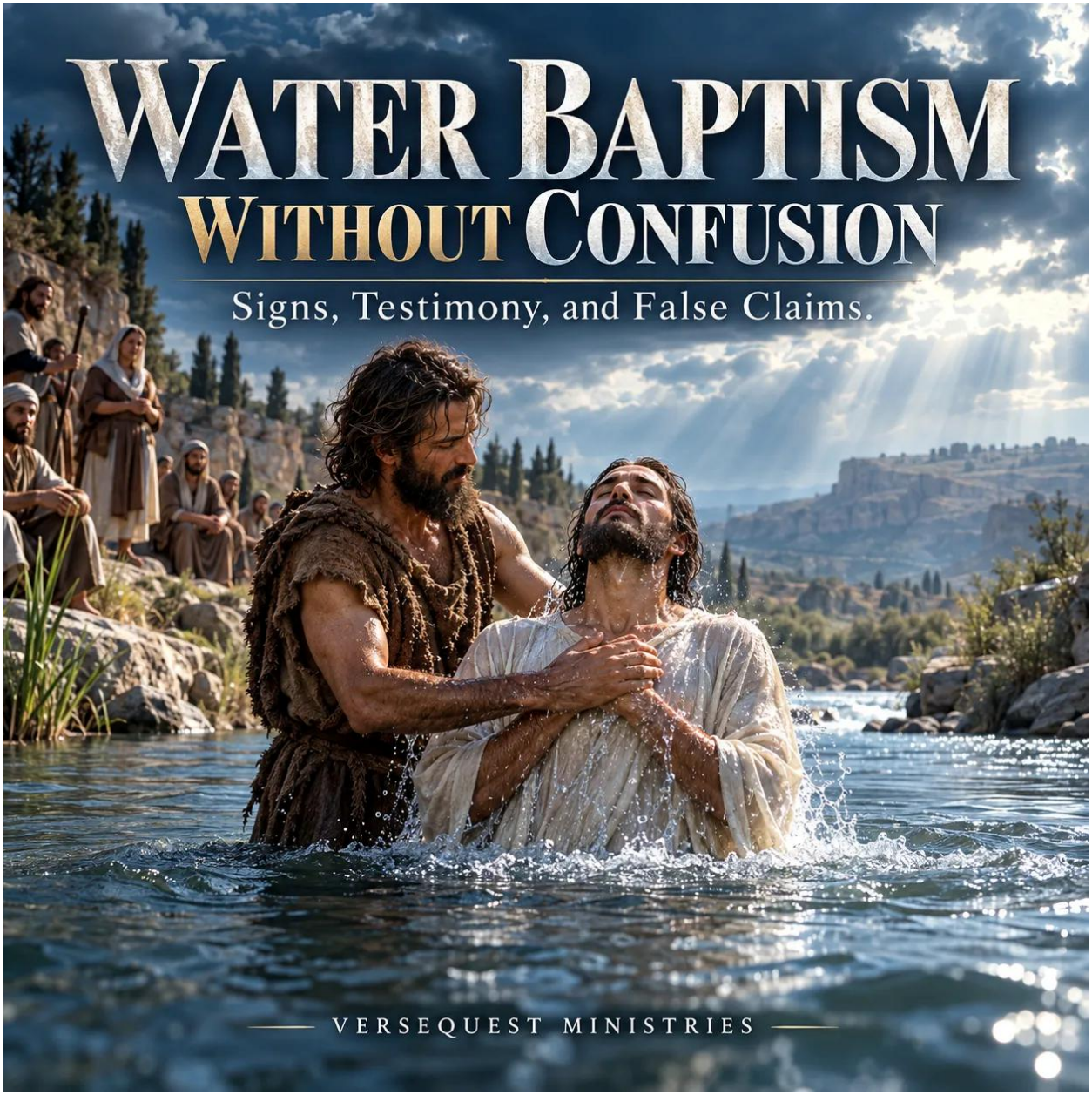
Water Baptism Without Confusion

Signs, Testimony, and False Claims

Series 1-10

By Paul Tackett

VerseQuest Ministries




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Water Baptism Without Confusion

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This book has been prepared for personal Bible study, Christian instruction, doctrinal understanding, and the edification of believers. Its purpose is to encourage careful examination of the Scriptures, rightly dividing the word of truth according to 2 Timothy 2:15, and to distinguish biblical water baptism from the saving work of Jesus Christ and the baptism accomplished by the Holy Ghost.

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Standing for the King James Bible, sound doctrine, and the rightly divided word of truth.

“Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth.”

— 2 Timothy 2:15, KJV

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VerseQuest Ministries — King James Bible Study Series

Water Baptism Without Confusion

Signs, Testimony, and False Claims

There are few subjects in the Bible that have been dragged through more denominational mud, drowned beneath more religious traditions, and twisted into more salvation formulas than water baptism. For centuries, men have argued over how much water to use, who has the authority to administer it, what words must be pronounced, when it should take place, and whether a sinner can possibly get into heaven without first getting into a baptistry. Some have turned water into a sacrament that supposedly regenerates the soul. Others have made it a religious membership ceremony. Still others have become so disgusted with baptismal regeneration that they act as though water baptism itself were some embarrassing relic that ought to be hauled out behind the church and buried. Meanwhile, the King James Bible sits there saying exactly what God intended it to say, waiting for somebody to quit defending a denomination long enough to read the Book. **The trouble with water baptism is not that God made the subject confusing. The trouble is that religious men keep pouring every baptism in Scripture into the same bucket and then wondering why the doctrine comes out muddy.**

Before anybody starts arguing about the water, he ought to answer a few questions that the average religious salesman would rather leave alone. Who is being baptized? Who is administering the baptism? What message has been preached? Who is being addressed? What has God already revealed at that particular point in biblical history? What is the baptism supposed to accomplish, demonstrate, or anticipate? Those questions are not theological gymnastics invented to escape a difficult passage. They are the ordinary requirements of believing the Bible in its proper setting. Second Timothy 2:15 commands, “Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth.” That command applies to baptism as surely as it applies to prophecy, salvation, Israel, the Church, or any other subject. A man who cannot distinguish John's ministry in the Jordan from the baptism of the Holy Ghost in First Corinthians 12 has no business announcing that he has solved the entire subject. **Right division does not weaken Scripture. It prevents men from making one passage testify against another simply because they refuse to recognize the difference between the witnesses.**

Consider John the Baptist. He appeared in the wilderness of Judaea preaching, “Repent ye: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Matthew 3:2). Mark 1:4 declares that he preached “the baptism of repentance for the remission of sins.” Those are the words God wrote, and they deserve something better than being erased by a preacher frightened of his own doctrinal conclusions. But John was not preaching the finished death, burial, and

resurrection of Jesus Christ according to First Corinthians 15:1–4. The cross had not yet occurred. The resurrection had not yet taken place. The full Pauline revelation concerning the Church had not yet been delivered. John was a prophet sent to Israel, preparing the way for her Messiah and calling a rebellious nation to repentance. His baptism came from heaven, as Matthew 21:25 makes clear, but divine authorization for a particular historical commission does not mean every later baptism must serve the identical purpose. **John was announcing the arrival of the King, not establishing a denominational franchise beside the Jordan River. His water belonged to a divine commission, and that commission must remain where God placed it.**

Then Jesus Christ Himself entered the Jordan, and suddenly the theory that every water baptism accomplishes precisely the same thing runs straight into the sinless Son of God. Matthew 3:14 records John's protest: “I have need to be baptized of thee, and comest thou to me?” The Lord answered, “Suffer it to be so now: for thus it becometh us to fulfil all righteousness.” Jesus Christ did not enter the water because He needed forgiveness. He had never committed a sin. He did not need righteousness supplied through a ceremony. He was righteous before John ever laid eyes upon Him. His baptism fulfilled the Father's appointed purpose and formed part of His manifestation to Israel. John 1:31 identifies that purpose plainly: “but that he should be made manifest to Israel, therefore am I come baptizing with water.” The Spirit descended, the Father spoke, and the Son was publicly identified. **The Jordan did not make Jesus Christ the Son of God. Heaven declared Him to be the Son of God. If the water could not improve the righteousness of the sinless Saviour, somebody had better be careful about claiming that water possesses the power to manufacture righteousness in a guilty sinner.**

The difficulty increases when we arrive at Pentecost. Acts 2:38 declares, “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.” There is the verse that has launched a thousand arguments and furnished enough denominational ammunition to keep religious disputants occupied until the Second Advent. But before lifting it out of the chapter and turning it into a universal salvation formula, somebody ought to read Peter's sermon. He addresses the men of Judaea, the men of Israel, and finally “all the house of Israel.” He confronts the nation concerning the crucified and risen Messiah. The hearers ask, “Men and brethren, what shall we do?” and Peter answers within that historical setting. The verse is Scripture, every word of it, and it must not be explained away. But Acts does not stop at chapter 2. In Acts 8, Samaritans receive baptism before the Holy Ghost falls upon them through the subsequent ministry of Peter and John. In Acts 10, believing Gentiles receive the Holy Ghost before water baptism. **When the same inspired book records different historical sequences, the answer is not to accuse God of confusion. The answer is to stop**

treating the book of Acts like a religious assembly line where every convert must pass through the machinery in precisely the same order.

And what about Simon the sorcerer? Acts 8:13 declares that Simon believed and was baptized. Yet only a short time afterward, Peter rebuked him for attempting to purchase the power associated with the Holy Ghost. “Thy heart is not right in the sight of God,” Peter declared, adding that Simon was “in the gall of bitterness, and in the bond of iniquity.” Whatever conclusion a man reaches concerning Simon's final spiritual condition, one fact cannot be disputed: undergoing water baptism did not prevent his wicked heart from being exposed. First Samuel 16:7 still declares that man looks upon the outward appearance, but the Lord looks upon the heart. Religious ceremonies cannot substitute for the inward work of God. The preacher may hear a profession, observe a baptism, and record a name in the church register, but he cannot see into a man's heart with the omniscience of heaven. **A baptismal certificate can prove that somebody went into the water. It cannot prove that the person possesses saving faith in Jesus Christ. There is a considerable difference between having a wet body and having a redeemed soul.**

Now turn to the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8 and watch how Scripture handles the matter when a man hears Jesus Christ preached from Isaiah 53. Philip explains the suffering Servant, proclaims the Saviour, and answers the traveler's questions. When they come to a certain water, the Ethiopian asks what hinders him from being baptized. Philip replies, “If thou believest with all thine heart, thou mayest.” The man answers, “I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.” Only then does the chariot stop, and both men go down into the water. That order is worth remembering. The word was preached, Christ was revealed, faith was confessed, and baptism followed. Philip did not tell the Ethiopian to trust the water. He did not announce that the ceremony would manufacture faith or that a river possessed the power to accomplish what the suffering Servant of Isaiah 53 came to accomplish. He preached Jesus. **The Ethiopian needed to understand the Lamb before entering the water. The preacher's first responsibility was to make Christ known, not to get another body into the baptistry.**

But the account of Cornelius in Acts 10 puts the finishing blow to the notion that water baptism must always precede the reception of the Holy Ghost. Peter enters a Gentile household and preaches Jesus Christ, declaring that through His name whoever believes in Him shall receive remission of sins. Then Acts 10:44 says, “While Peter yet spake these words, the Holy Ghost fell on all them which heard the word.” Peter had not administered water baptism. Nobody had completed a ceremonial requirement. The Holy Ghost fell while the gospel was being preached. Only afterward did Peter ask, “Can any man forbid water, that these should not be baptized, which have received the Holy Ghost as well as

we?" There is the inspired sequence, and no religious tradition possesses the authority to reverse it. Acts 15:9 subsequently records Peter declaring that God purified Gentile hearts by faith, while verse 11 establishes salvation through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ. **When God gives the Holy Ghost before the water, it takes a remarkable amount of denominational determination to insist that the water must come first. Heaven had already settled the matter while religion was still looking for the baptismal towels.**

Then comes the apostle Paul, the man particularly commissioned to preach among the Gentiles, and he makes a statement that ought to shake the foundations of every water-salvation system ever constructed. First Corinthians 1:17 declares, "For Christ sent me not to baptize, but to preach the gospel." Paul did baptize certain converts, and the Bible records their names. He never condemned biblical baptism as an illegitimate practice. But he plainly distinguished administering the ordinance from preaching the gospel. In First Corinthians 15:1–4, he identifies that gospel as the death of Christ for our sins, His burial, and His resurrection on the third day according to the Scriptures. In Romans 3–5, he establishes justification by faith. In Ephesians 2:8–9, salvation is declared to be by grace through faith, not of works. The distinction could scarcely be more important. **If baptismal water were an indispensable ingredient in the gospel, Paul made a remarkably strange declaration when he distinguished baptism from the very commission Christ gave him. The gospel is not Jesus Christ plus a ceremony. It is the finished work of Jesus Christ, received through faith.**

Of course, this subject cannot be settled by quoting only the easy passages. Mark 16:16 says, "He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved." Acts 22:16 tells Saul to arise, be baptized, and wash away his sins while calling upon the name of the Lord. First Peter 3:21 says, "The like figure whereunto even baptism doth also now save us." Those passages belong in the Bible, and nobody has the authority to make them disappear because they interrupt a comfortable doctrinal explanation. But Mark 16 must be read with the accompanying apostolic signs and its express condemnation of unbelief. Acts 22 must be read alongside Paul's encounter with the risen Christ and his later teaching concerning justification. First Peter 3 must be read with Noah, the ark, the figure, the resurrection of Christ, and Peter's own qualification: "not the putting away of the filth of the flesh, but the answer of a good conscience toward God." John 3 must likewise be examined without automatically turning "born of water" into a later church ordinance. **Difficult verses are not enemies of sound doctrine. They are enemies of lazy doctrine. The Bible can withstand examination far better than the religious systems that claim to defend it.**

At the heart of the entire discussion stands a baptism no human minister can administer. First Corinthians 12:13 declares, "For by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body." That

is the Holy Ghost placing the believer into the spiritual body of Jesus Christ. Romans 6 speaks of being baptized into Christ's death and buried with Him. Colossians 2:12 connects burial and resurrection with “the faith of the operation of God.” Ephesians 4:5 declares “One Lord, one faith, one baptism,” within the context of the spiritual unity of Christ's body. These passages describe a divine operation that cannot be performed with human hands. A preacher can immerse somebody beneath the surface of a river, but he cannot unite that soul to the crucified and risen Saviour. He can raise a candidate out of a baptistry, but he cannot spiritually raise a dead sinner into newness of life. **The water may portray burial with Christ, but only the Holy Ghost can place a believer into Christ. Confuse the outward picture with the inward operation, and you have handed the preacher a power that belongs to God alone.**

None of this means water baptism should be despised. That is the other ditch, and plenty of people who have escaped the first one have managed to drive straight into it. Water baptism has a legitimate place in the Christian's obedience and public testimony. The risen Lord commanded baptism, the apostles practiced it, and believers in Acts received it after responding to the preaching of Jesus Christ. Immersion provides a fitting outward picture of burial and resurrection. A believer who has trusted the Saviour has every reason to identify openly with Him rather than treating His commands as optional decorations. But obedience does not become the purchase price of redemption. We are not baptized to make Calvary sufficient. We are baptized as a testimony concerning the One whose sacrifice is already sufficient. Nor should a religious organization claim that an infant incapable of exercising personal faith has been regenerated because somebody performed a ceremony over him. The biblical pattern of hearing, believing, and being baptized must not be replaced with inherited ritual. **The believer does not enter the water to buy salvation. He enters it to testify concerning the Saviour who purchased him with His blood.**

That is why this ten-part study matters. The subject is larger than winning an argument with somebody who believes baptism washes away sins. It concerns the authority of Scripture, the sufficiency of Christ, the distinction between Israel and the Church, the unfolding revelation in Acts, the difference between an outward ordinance and the operation of the Holy Ghost, and the danger of making human religious activity a competitor against divine grace. A man can be completely sincere about baptism and completely wrong about what baptism accomplishes. He can defend a familiar tradition for fifty years without ever asking whether the verses he quotes belong to the commission he claims they establish. Worse still, he can preach water so persistently that the sinner hears more about the ceremony than about the blood of Jesus Christ. Romans 5:1 declares, “Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.” First John 1:7 declares that

“the blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth us from all sin.” Those are not minor doctrinal details. They are the foundation upon which the sinner's hope must rest. **Water can wash dirt from a man's body, but it cannot wash guilt from God's record. That requires the blood of Jesus Christ.**

Throughout these studies, the objective will be to believe every passage, preserve every necessary distinction, and put water baptism exactly where God placed it. We will follow John into the Jordan, examine Christ's sinless submission, hear Peter at Pentecost, watch Simon's wickedness exposed, travel with the Ethiopian through the desert, enter Cornelius's house, examine Paul's commission, confront the difficult salvation passages, and distinguish the spiritual baptism of the believer from the outward testimony of immersion. Nothing needs to be erased, and no difficult verse needs to be buried beneath a mountain of denominational excuses. We are not interested in protecting a religious institution from the Bible. We are interested in protecting the doctrine of salvation from religious inventions that rob Jesus Christ of the glory belonging to His finished work. **A doctrine that cannot survive the whole King James Bible does not deserve to survive. And a ceremony that requires Christ's sacrifice to be treated as insufficient has ceased to be a testimony and become an insult to the Redeemer.**

The final question is not whether a sinner has found enough water, located the right minister, repeated the proper words, or secured a certificate bearing the signature of a religious official. The question is whether he has believed on the Lord Jesus Christ, who died for his sins, was buried, and rose again. The saved believer should obey the Lord and testify openly concerning Him, but he must never confuse that testimony with the redemption it announces. The preacher is not the mediator. The baptistry is not Calvary. The ordinance is not the gospel. The Holy Ghost is not controlled by a ceremony, and the blood of Jesus Christ does not need assistance from a tank of water. There is a place for baptism, a place for public confession, and a place for Christian obedience, but the saving glory belongs entirely to the Lord. **When a man trusts the water to save him, he has mistaken the sign for the Saviour. When a man despises biblical baptism, he has mistaken grace for permission to disregard obedience. But when a man believes the gospel, understands his standing in Christ, and follows the Lord in water baptism, the picture finally serves its rightful purpose. Let the water testify, let the Scriptures speak, and let Jesus Christ receive every ounce of the glory.**

1 of 10 — Water Baptism Without Confusion — Before There Was a Church, There Was a Prophet in the Jordan

Key Passage — Mark 1:4: “John did baptize in the wilderness, and preach the baptism of repentance for the remission of sins.”

Before anybody starts dragging a New Testament Baptist church into the Jordan River, somebody ought to open his King James Bible and find out what John the Baptist was doing there in the first place. That ought not require a theological doctorate, a denominational headquarters, or a committee of religious professionals armed with certificates and a nervous disposition. It requires reading the passage and believing what God wrote. John was not standing in the wilderness preaching the completed death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ according to 1 Corinthians 15:1–4. He was not establishing a local church under the doctrinal instructions later revealed through the apostle Paul. He was a prophet sent to Israel, preaching repentance, announcing the approach of the kingdom of heaven, and preparing the way for the public manifestation of Israel's promised Messiah. Before there was a fully revealed New Testament Church, there was a prophet standing beside the Jordan, announcing that the King was coming. Confuse those two settings, and you will spend the rest of your Bible-reading life trying to make the water explain what the Scriptures have already distinguished.

Mark 1:4 gives the inspired description without consulting anybody's religious preferences: “John did baptize in the wilderness, and preach the baptism of repentance for the remission of sins.” There it is. The Bible does not call it the baptism of church membership, the baptism of denominational identification, or the baptism of a saved Gentile publicly testifying to his identification with the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Those questions belong to other settings and must be examined in their proper places. John preached the baptism of repentance for the remission of sins. The words stand exactly where God put them, and no honest Bible believer ought to be afraid of them. The question is not whether John meant what he preached. The question is who received that preaching, under what divine commission, at what point in God's unfolding revelation, and for what immediate purpose. A man who answers those questions before constructing his doctrine has a considerable advantage over the fellow who finds water in a verse and immediately starts building a denominational swimming pool around it.

The confusion surrounding water baptism begins when men treat every baptism in Scripture as though God administered one identical ceremony, under one identical commission, to one identical group of people, for one identical purpose. That assumption collapses as soon as the Bible is permitted to speak for itself. John's baptism, Christ's baptism, the baptisms recorded throughout Acts, and the Spirit's baptism of the believer

into the body of Christ must be examined according to their actual wording and historical setting. Second Timothy 2:15 commands the workman to be “rightly dividing the word of truth,” and that command is not an invitation to chop the Bible into convenient pieces. It is an instruction to recognize the distinctions God Himself placed in His revelation. The issue is not whether water baptism is biblical. It certainly is. The issue is whether a person understands what God was doing when He commanded it. The first requirement for sound doctrine is not a wet candidate but an open Bible.

1. A Voice in the Wilderness, Not a Religious Franchise on the Jordan

John the Baptist did not appear out of nowhere with a homemade religious movement and a talent for gathering crowds. His ministry had been announced in Scripture long before his birth. Isaiah 40:3 declares, “The voice of him that crieth in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.” Mark begins his Gospel by identifying John with that prophetic preparation, and Malachi 3:1 supplies another announcement: “Behold, I will send my messenger, and he shall prepare the way before me.” The prophet was therefore fulfilling a specific divine assignment concerning the coming of the Lord. Luke 1:76 had already declared concerning John, “And thou, child, shalt be called the prophet of the Highest: for thou shalt go before the face of the Lord to prepare his ways.” His birth, ministry, location, and message belonged to a prophetic program concerning Israel and her Messiah. John was not improvising a ministry. God had written his job description centuries before he arrived.

Luke 1:16–17 says that John would turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God and go before Him “in the spirit and power of Elias.” Notice the audience. The passage does not say that John would gather converted Gentiles into the spiritual body of Christ under the later revelation given to Paul. It identifies the children of Israel and connects John's ministry with the prophetic expectation associated with Elias. Matthew 3:4 describes his clothing of camel's hair, his leathern girdle, and his diet of locusts and wild honey. That was hardly the uniform of a polished religious executive seeking public approval. He did not arrive with stained-glass windows, a fundraising department, and a complimentary banquet for the local religious dignitaries. He arrived preaching repentance. His authority was not drawn from the Sanhedrin, and his message was not arranged to keep the religious establishment comfortable. The wilderness preacher was preparing a nation for the appearance of its King, and spiritual preparation was more important than religious decoration.

The authority of John's baptism becomes unmistakable in Matthew 21:25, where Jesus Christ asks the religious leaders, “The baptism of John, whence was it? from heaven, or of men?” That question destroys the notion that John's baptism was merely a human religious

custom. The rulers knew the answer carried consequences, because acknowledging its heavenly authority would expose their unbelief. They finally answered, “We cannot tell,” which was a convenient confession of ignorance from men who claimed to be qualified to instruct everybody else. Christ was not asking because He lacked information. He was exposing their refusal to receive the truth. John's baptism came under divine authorization, but divine authorization for one particular commission does not automatically make every detail of that commission a permanent ordinance operating identically in every subsequent dispensation. Moses received his commandments from God, but that does not place a Christian under every ceremonial requirement of Sinai. Likewise, John's baptism was from heaven, yet it must still be understood according to the purpose for which heaven sent it.

2. The Kingdom Was at Hand, and Israel Was the Nation Being Addressed

Matthew 3:1–2 records the substance of John's public announcement: “In those days came John the Baptist, preaching in the wilderness of Judaea, And saying, Repent ye: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” Those words identify both his geographical setting and the immediate character of his message. He was preaching in Judaea, announcing the approach of the kingdom of heaven, and calling Israel to repentance. The kingdom was not presented as a religious improvement society organized around John's personal reputation. It was connected with the promised King whose coming had occupied the writings of Moses, the Psalms, and the prophets. The Lord had promised David a throne and a kingdom in 2 Samuel 7:12–16. Isaiah 9:6–7 spoke of the government resting upon the shoulder of the promised Son and of His reign upon the throne of David. John's declaration therefore belonged to an identifiable prophetic expectation. The nation was being confronted with the approach of its rightful King. When the King approaches, repentance is not an optional decoration for the religiously ambitious.

Matthew 4:17 records that Jesus Christ Himself began to preach, “Repent: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” Matthew 10:5–7 then records Christ's instructions when He sent forth the twelve apostles, commanding them not to go into the way of the Gentiles or enter a city of the Samaritans, but rather to go “to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” Their announced message was likewise, “The kingdom of heaven is at hand.” That is a remarkable restriction for anybody insisting that John's ministry and the later worldwide Gentile mission operated under precisely the same immediate instructions. Scripture itself identifies differences in audience, commission, and the revelation being proclaimed. The promises concerning Israel's kingdom cannot simply be transferred wholesale to the Church because somebody discovers a convenient similarity between two passages. A promise addressed to Israel does not become a promise addressed to the Church merely because a preacher changes the name on the envelope. God knew whom He was

addressing when He delivered the message, and the reader has no authority to revise the address.

The gospel preached by Paul in 1 Corinthians 15:1–4 announces that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, was buried, and rose again the third day according to the Scriptures. Those completed historical events form the foundation of the saving gospel proclaimed to sinners today. John the Baptist stood before the crucifixion and resurrection had taken place. He certainly bore witness to Christ, and his testimony concerning the Lamb of God was profound, but he was not preaching those completed events as Paul later proclaimed them. John 20:9 tells us that even after Christ's resurrection, the disciples had not yet understood the Scripture that He must rise again from the dead. It is therefore foolish to force the completed Pauline gospel backward into every earlier announcement of the kingdom. God's revelation unfolds according to His own order. The prophetic promises are true, the kingdom announcement was true, and the gospel of grace is true. Truth does not become contradictory because God revealed further truth afterward. The confusion begins when a man demands that every preacher in the Bible possess the same information regardless of when he lived.

3. Repentance, Confession, and Remission: What the Water Was Actually Connected With

Mark 1:4–5 declares that John preached “the baptism of repentance for the remission of sins” and that the people were baptized in the river Jordan, “confessing their sins.” Matthew 3:6 gives the same essential picture: “And were baptized of him in Jordan, confessing their sins.” The order and accompanying activity deserve attention. These were people confronted with a call to repentance, openly confessing their sins, and submitting to a baptism connected with that repentance. The account does not describe a crowd receiving a magical spiritual transformation because their bodies happened to make contact with water. Neither does the passage permit us to dismiss the words “for the remission of sins” as though they were an embarrassing printing error. John's baptism belonged to the divinely appointed ministry of preparing Israel for her Messiah. It was a serious public response to a serious prophetic message. Water was involved, confession was involved, and repentance was expressly proclaimed. A Bible believer ought to recognize all three without pretending they are interchangeable.

Luke 3:7–14 demonstrates that John's preaching reached considerably deeper than getting people into the Jordan. When the multitudes came forth to be baptized, he demanded, “Bring forth therefore fruits worthy of repentance.” The people asked what they should do, and John instructed those with two coats to share with those who had none. Publicans were told to exact no more than appointed, and soldiers were warned against violence,

false accusations, and discontentment with their wages. That is not a religious salesman offering forgiveness in exchange for a collection of good deeds. It is a prophet exposing the conduct that contradicted the repentance his hearers professed. A man could confess wrongdoing at the river and return to the same crooked business dealings afterward, but his conduct would expose the emptiness of his profession. Genuine repentance was not intended to be a brief emotional interruption between two appointments with sin. The prophet demanded fruit because a mouth full of religious language does not prove that the heart has received the warning.

The expression “for the remission of sins” must therefore be handled within John's historical ministry rather than made to carry every later doctrinal conclusion a church might wish to attach to it. Luke 3:3 uses the same description, and Luke 1:77 had already connected John's preparatory ministry with giving knowledge of salvation to God's people “by the remission of their sins.” The words matter. John was proclaiming repentance in connection with forgiveness while preparing Israel for the coming Redeemer. Yet the passage does not establish that river water possesses an independent power to cleanse a soul. Hebrews 9:22 declares that “without shedding of blood is no remission,” and the ultimate ground of forgiveness rests in the redemptive work of Jesus Christ. The Jordan was not a replacement for Calvary before Calvary occurred. Nor should we pretend John's message was simply an identical advance recording of every detail later revealed to the Church. The same God who appointed John's baptism later revealed more concerning Christ's finished work. The water served its appointed purpose; it was never qualified to become the Saviour.

4. A Generation of Vipers Arrives for a Religious Bath

Matthew 3:7 records John's reception of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism: “O generation of vipers, who hath warned you to flee from the wrath to come?” There is enough preaching in that sentence to disturb a hundred respectable religious gatherings. John did not flatter the distinguished visitors, congratulate them for their impressive theological credentials, or ask whether they would like reserved seating beside the river. He identified the spiritual danger behind their outward respectability. The Pharisees and Sadducees differed in important beliefs, as Acts 23:8 later explains, but both groups could stand under the same prophetic rebuke. Their religious standing did not excuse unbelief, and their public reputation did not make repentance unnecessary. The scene exposes a recurring disease in organized religion: men become so impressed with their own religious position that they begin mistaking their position for righteousness. A robe, a title, and a carefully practiced religious expression cannot conceal a poisonous

heart from the God who searches it. John was not interested in polishing the snakes. He demanded repentance.

Matthew 3:9 drives the accusation directly into Israel's dependence upon ancestry: “And think not to say within yourselves, We have Abraham to our father.” John continues by declaring that God is able to raise up children unto Abraham from the stones. Their physical descent was real, and Scripture does not deny Israel's national identity or the promises made to Abraham. But possessing a covenantal heritage did not automatically excuse individual unbelief. Romans 9:6 later makes a related distinction when Paul declares, “For they are not all Israel, which are of Israel.” The Pharisees could trace their family history, preserve their religious traditions, and claim the honor associated with Abraham, but none of those things entitled them to despise God's messenger. John was confronting their assumption that inherited privilege made repentance unnecessary. An ancient family tree is a poor substitute for present obedience. A man may have Abraham somewhere in his ancestry and still have the devil governing his conduct. God does not weigh a man's genealogy in place of the truth of His word.

Matthew 3:10 continues with the axe laid unto the root of the trees, warning that every tree failing to bring forth good fruit is hewn down and cast into the fire. Notice that John is not conducting a pleasant ceremony for people who wish to acquire an attractive religious memory. He is preaching impending judgment. The imagery is direct, severe, and intentionally disturbing. The axe is not hanging on the wall as a decorative reminder of former revivals. It is laid at the root. The failure to produce fruit exposes the seriousness of the spiritual condition being confronted. This does not authorize us to turn John's kingdom preaching into a modern doctrine teaching that a saved member of Christ's body maintains justification by accumulating sufficient religious works. Ephesians 2:8–9 plainly establishes salvation by grace through faith, not of works. But neither should the believer under grace dismiss John's warning as meaningless simply because its immediate doctrinal setting concerns Israel. God still hates hypocrisy, still exposes religious pretense, and still refuses to be deceived by outward performance. The water did not make those vipers harmless.

5. Water, the Holy Ghost, and Fire: Three Realities the Bible Refuses to Confuse

Matthew 3:11 contains a distinction that ought to settle a considerable amount of confusion before it begins. John declares, “I indeed baptize you with water unto repentance: but he that cometh after me is mightier than I, whose shoes I am not worthy to bear: he shall baptize you with the Holy Ghost, and with fire.” Here is a preacher speaking about his own baptism with water and another who would accomplish something beyond John's personal power. John knew the difference between what he administered and what

Christ would administer. Water belonged to John's ministry; baptism with the Holy Ghost belonged to the superior authority of the coming Messiah. John did not claim the power to place anybody into the Holy Ghost, nor did he suggest that his personal administration of water made him equal to Christ. The difference is not merely ceremonial. It concerns the administrator, the element, and the divine purpose. A human preacher can put a body beneath water, but he cannot command the Holy Ghost as though the Spirit of God were an employee working in the church basement.

Acts 1:4–5 preserves the distinction after Christ's resurrection. The Lord tells His apostles to wait for the promise of the Father, declaring, “For John truly baptized with water; but ye shall be baptized with the Holy Ghost not many days hence.” Notice that the risen Christ Himself distinguishes the baptisms. The promised fulfillment unfolds in Acts 2, and Peter later recalls the same words when explaining the Holy Ghost falling upon Gentiles in Acts 11:15–17. The distinction becomes especially important when considering Paul's statement in 1 Corinthians 12:13: “For by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body.” That spiritual operation must not be confused with a man administering water. John's promise of the coming Spirit baptism belongs to the revelation of Christ's superior work, while Paul's later epistle reveals the believer's incorporation into the one body. Those passages must be compared, not carelessly blended until every mention of baptism means the same thing. If the Lord distinguishes John's water from His own promised baptism with the Holy Ghost, no church has authority to erase the distinction because it complicates a denominational chart.

The additional expression “and with fire” is frequently subjected to an astonishing amount of imaginative preaching. Some would have everybody believe that John was promising a desirable religious experience of spiritual flames, excitement, and personal empowerment. Unfortunately for that interpretation, the immediate context contains something considerably less pleasant. Matthew 3:10 warns of the unfruitful tree being cast into the fire, and Matthew 3:12 says Christ will gather His wheat into the garner but “will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.” The imagery surrounding the statement identifies fire with judgment. John is announcing a Messiah who will distinguish between the genuine and the worthless, gathering what belongs to Him and judging what does not. The language ought not be confused with the visible cloven tongues like as of fire in Acts 2:3, as though every occurrence of fire must describe one identical operation. John did not announce merely a religious experience to be enjoyed. He announced a King whose coming would expose and judge. The same Christ who gives the Holy Ghost possesses authority to execute judgment, and no amount of excited religious shouting will transform unquenchable fire into a spiritual amusement park.

6. Behold the Lamb: John's Ministry Was Designed to Point Away from John

John 1:29 records one of the greatest declarations ever made by a man standing beside a river: “Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world.” Here the prophet's testimony reaches beyond the immediate act of water baptism and directs attention to the person of Jesus Christ. John does not declare, “Behold the water of God.” He does not advertise his personal ministry as the final answer to the sinner's need. He identifies the Lamb. The language carries the weight of biblical sacrifice, bringing to mind the Passover lamb of Exodus 12 and the suffering Servant described in Isaiah 53. Sin required more than an impressive religious procedure. It required a sacrifice acceptable to God. John was not preaching the completed resurrection message later proclaimed by Paul, but his testimony unmistakably identified Jesus Christ as the One through whom sin would be taken away. The prophet understood that somebody greater had arrived. The water could prepare the people according to John's commission, but the Lamb alone could accomplish the redemption to which God's sacrificial revelation pointed.

John 1:31 explains the purpose of John's baptizing in a sentence that deserves permanent residence in the mind of every serious Bible student: “but that he should be made manifest to Israel, therefore am I come baptizing with water.” That is remarkably plain. John specifically connects his water baptism with the manifestation of Christ to Israel. The audience is identified, the purpose is stated, and the prophet's testimony supplies the interpretation. John then describes seeing the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove and abiding upon Jesus Christ. According to John 1:33, the One who sent him to baptize with water had given him the identifying sign concerning Him who would baptize with the Holy Ghost. John concludes in verse 34, “And I saw, and bare record that this is the Son of God.” The scene is not a demonstration of water transforming Jesus Christ into the Son of God. He was already the Son. It is the divinely appointed public identification of the Messiah. A sign that identifies the Saviour must not be promoted above the Saviour it identifies.

John 3:28–30 gives the proper conclusion of the Baptist's ministry. He declares, “I am not the Christ, but that I am sent before him,” and then compares himself to the friend of the bridegroom who rejoices at the bridegroom's voice. His final statement is one of the finest expressions of ministerial humility in Scripture: “He must increase, but I must decrease.” That is precisely what John's baptism was never intended to prevent. His ministry had a purpose, a place, and a divinely appointed relationship to the coming Christ. It was not designed to make John the permanent center of religious attention or elevate his administration of water above the Messiah Himself. John could rejoice because the One he had announced was now present. Religious pride has a peculiar talent for taking something

God appointed as a pointer and constructing an entire monument around the pointing finger. But John refused that nonsense. The faithful messenger did not demand a throne beside the King. He recognized that the King had arrived, and the honor belonged to Him.

7. Acts 19: When Yesterday's Baptism Cannot Replace Today's Revelation

Acts 19:1–5 provides a decisive historical comparison for understanding the difference between John's preparatory ministry and the preaching of Jesus Christ after His death and resurrection. Paul arrives at Ephesus and encounters certain disciples. He asks whether they have received the Holy Ghost since they believed, and their answer reveals a serious deficiency in their understanding. Paul then asks, “Unto what then were ye baptized?” They reply, “Unto John's baptism.” That answer identifies the religious instruction under which they had been operating. They knew a baptism associated with John's ministry, but they lacked the fuller understanding Paul was about to give them. This encounter takes place long after the Jordan ministry began and after the events of Calvary, the resurrection, and Pentecost. The historical setting is therefore fundamentally different. A man cannot simply assume that possession of an earlier religious experience supplies everything God has subsequently revealed. Yesterday's light was genuine light, but that does not justify closing the shutters when God gives more. The problem was not that John's commission had been fraudulent. The problem was that Christ had come and accomplished what John's ministry anticipated.

Acts 19:4 records Paul's explanation: “John verily baptized with the baptism of repentance, saying unto the people, that they should believe on him which should come after him, that is, on Christ Jesus.” There is Paul's inspired interpretation of John's baptism. He does not identify it as the completed gospel of 1 Corinthians 15:1–4. He describes it as the baptism of repentance and emphasizes John's instruction to believe on the One who would come afterward. The direction was forward, toward Christ. Acts 19:5 then states, “When they heard this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus.” Verse 6 records Paul laying hands upon them and the Holy Ghost coming upon them, accompanied by tongues and prophecy. These details belong to the actual historical account and must not be silently removed. Neither should every feature of this transitional encounter be turned into a mandatory sequence for every Christian in the present Church Age. Acts records God's unfolding dealings as the testimony concerning Jesus Christ moves outward through Israel, Samaria, and the Gentile world. The events are inspired history, not permission to erase differences between the people and circumstances involved.

The larger doctrinal lesson becomes even clearer when Acts 19 is compared with Acts 10 and 1 Corinthians 1:17. In Cornelius's household, the Holy Ghost fell upon the hearers before water baptism was administered. Paul, meanwhile, later distinguished his principal

commission to preach the gospel from the administration of water baptism, declaring, “For Christ sent me not to baptize, but to preach the gospel.” Those facts cannot be reconciled with the notion that every baptism in Acts follows one unchanging mechanical formula necessary to obtain salvation. John pointed men toward the coming Christ. Peter preached Christ to Israel and later witnessed the Holy Ghost fall upon believing Gentiles. Paul preached the gospel of God's grace and explained the believer's spiritual position in the body of Christ. The Scriptures reveal genuine distinctions, not competing Saviours. God has never needed a second Christ, a second Calvary, or an improved Redeemer. The dispensational student is not changing salvation's author; he is refusing to falsify the order in which God revealed His dealings with men. Water baptism becomes confusing only when religious tradition begins treating historical distinctions as inconveniences.

Conclusion — Let the Prophet Stand Where God Put Him

John the Baptist was a prophet sent from God, a voice crying in the wilderness, a messenger preparing the way of the Lord, and a witness commissioned to identify Israel's Messiah. His baptism came from heaven, his preaching demanded repentance, and his ministry belonged to the prophetic announcement that the kingdom of heaven was at hand. He baptized in the Jordan while people confessed their sins, confronted religious hypocrites who trusted their ancestry, warned of coming judgment, and distinguished his baptism with water from the superior baptism Christ would administer with the Holy Ghost. Every one of those facts must remain in its proper place. John was not a fraud, and his baptism was not meaningless. But neither was he a Pauline apostle preaching the completed gospel of grace to the spiritual body of Christ. Those distinctions are not invented to escape difficult verses. They emerge from the words of Scripture itself. A man who cannot distinguish a prophet preparing Israel for her Messiah from an apostle preaching the finished work of the risen Christ has not solved the problem of baptism. He has barely located the river.

There is an equally serious danger in using these distinctions as an excuse to despise water baptism altogether. The fact that John's baptism differs in purpose and historical setting from the baptism of believers under later New Testament instruction does not render all water baptism useless. Neither does the spiritual baptism accomplished by the Holy Ghost give a preacher permission to treat every outward ordinance with contempt. The Lord's commands must be understood according to their actual setting, not accepted or discarded according to convenience. For salvation in the present Church Age, Ephesians 2:8–9 declares, “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.” The sinner's hope rests in Jesus Christ, not in the availability of a baptistry, the efficiency of a minister, or the completion of

a religious ceremony. The thief on the cross received Christ's promise of paradise without being baptized, while Simon the sorcerer underwent baptism and afterward received Peter's terrible rebuke concerning his heart. Water can contact the flesh, but only God can deal with the sinner's soul.

The starting point for understanding water baptism is therefore not an argument over how much water ought to be used or which church possesses the oldest religious tradition. It is the authority of the words God actually wrote. John stood where God sent him, preached what God commanded him, baptized those who responded to his message, and pointed beyond himself to Jesus Christ. His ministry was never intended to become a theological dumping ground into which every baptismal passage could be thrown without examination. Second Timothy 2:15 still commands the believer to study and rightly divide the word of truth. That means respecting Israel's prophetic setting, recognizing the revelation given to the Church, distinguishing water from the operation of the Holy Ghost, and refusing to make a religious ceremony accomplish what belongs to the Redeemer. John was the voice, not the Word. He was the messenger, not the Messiah. He administered the water, but he pointed to the Lamb. The Jordan had its prophet, Israel had its warning, and the world was about to behold its Saviour. Never become so fascinated with the water that you lose sight of the Lamb standing beside it.

2 of 10 — Water Baptism Without Confusion — The Sinless Son in a Sinner's River: Why Jesus Christ Went Under the Water

Key Passage — Matthew 3:13–15: "Then cometh Jesus from Galilee to Jordan unto John, to be baptized of him. But John forbad him, saying, I have need to be baptized of thee, and comest thou to me? And Jesus answering said unto him, Suffer it to be so now: for thus it becometh us to fulfil all righteousness. Then he suffered him."

There is something remarkable about watching the sinless Son of God walk into a river filled with people confessing their sins. Matthew 3:13 says, "Then cometh Jesus from Galilee to Jordan unto John, to be baptized of him." That is not a sentence to rush past while preparing another argument about church ordinances. The One who had never committed a sin approached the prophet who had been preaching repentance to sinners. The One who required no forgiveness submitted Himself to a baptism associated with the remission of sins. The One whom heaven would publicly identify as the beloved Son stepped into the same river where guilty men had been acknowledging their transgressions. If every water baptism in the Bible accomplishes precisely the same thing, somebody has a considerable

problem explaining this one. Jesus Christ did not go into the Jordan to become righteous. He was righteous before He arrived. He did not go there to receive forgiveness. He had never needed it. The problem is not with the Lord's baptism. The problem is with religious explanations that cannot distinguish a sinless Saviour from the sinners He came to save.

John understood that something extraordinary was taking place. Matthew 3:14 records his objection: “I have need to be baptized of thee, and comest thou to me?” Notice that John did not congratulate himself on the remarkable privilege of introducing Jesus Christ to a religious ceremony. He recognized the apparent reversal of their proper positions. John was the servant; Christ was the Lord. John preached repentance; Christ possessed no sin requiring repentance. John administered water; Christ would baptize with the Holy Ghost. Yet the greater submitted Himself to the administration of the lesser, and John could not understand why. The answer came directly from Jesus Christ: “Suffer it to be so now: for thus it becometh us to fulfil all righteousness.” That statement must govern the entire interpretation. Christ was not seeking righteousness He lacked. He was fulfilling righteousness through obedience to His Father's appointed purpose. There is a difference between needing cleansing and fulfilling a divine commission, and a man who cannot recognize that difference will eventually make the Saviour as guilty as the people standing beside Him.

The baptism of Jesus Christ exposes the danger of allowing a religious system to dictate what every verse must mean before the Bible has been permitted to explain itself. John was preaching the baptism of repentance for the remission of sins, according to Mark 1:4. Jesus Christ submitted to John's baptism, according to Matthew 3:13–17. Yet Hebrews 4:15 declares that Christ was “in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin.” Therefore, the particular significance of His baptism cannot be reduced to the repentance and confession required of guilty Israelites. The same outward administration can involve different circumstances and purposes without creating a contradiction in Scripture. The sinner approached the Jordan needing to repent; the Saviour approached it determined to obey. The sinner acknowledged guilt; the Saviour fulfilled righteousness. The sinner needed the coming Lamb; the Lamb Himself was standing in the water. Before building a doctrine of salvation around a river, make certain you have identified who went into it and why.

1. The Prophet Preached Repentance, but the Man Approaching Him Had No Sin

Matthew 3:1–2 identifies John's message: “Repent ye: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” Verse 6 records that the people “were baptized of him in Jordan, confessing their sins.” This was a prophetic ministry directed toward Israel in preparation for the manifestation of her Messiah. The people were not being assembled into the spiritual body of Christ under the completed Pauline revelation of Ephesians 2 and 1 Corinthians 12. They

were hearing a divinely commissioned prophet announce the approaching kingdom and demand repentance. John confronted the Pharisees and Sadducees, warned of judgment, and insisted upon fruits worthy of repentance. His ministry belonged to a particular historical setting, and the words of Scripture establish that setting plainly. But when Jesus Christ arrives in verse 13, the reader encounters the one Man in that entire scene who had nothing to confess. A repentant sinner and a sinless Redeemer are not identical candidates merely because both stand beside the same water.

First Peter 2:22 says concerning Christ, “Who did no sin, neither was guile found in his mouth.” Second Corinthians 5:21 declares that God “made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him.” First John 3:5 adds, “And ye know that he was manifested to take away our sins; and in him is no sin.” Three inspired witnesses establish His absolute sinlessness, and none of them leaves room for the theory that Jesus entered the Jordan carrying personal guilt. He was not gradually becoming holy through religious experiences. He was not working His way toward divine acceptance through ceremonial obedience. His righteousness was not under construction, waiting for John to finish the plumbing. The Lord Jesus Christ was holy before His baptism, holy during His baptism, and holy when He came up out of the water. The ceremony did not correct a defect in Him because there was no defect to correct.

John's objection becomes perfectly understandable when the distinction is recognized. Matthew 3:14 does not describe a prophet questioning the identity of an ordinary penitent. It describes the servant recognizing the superior standing of the One approaching him. John had already declared in Matthew 3:11 that the coming Messiah was mightier than himself, adding, “whose shoes I am not worthy to bear.” That is hardly the language of a man who considered himself spiritually qualified to improve the character of Jesus Christ. John knew that his water baptism could never make the Lord more righteous than He already was. The contrast is deliberate: the inferior is commanded to administer an ordinance to the superior, not because the superior requires correction, but because God has appointed an event that must take place. Men frequently become so occupied with the outward act that they forget the identity of the One receiving it. The Jordan could surround the body of Jesus Christ, but it could not contribute one drop of righteousness to His person.

2. “Suffer It to Be So Now”: A Divine Purpose, Not a Religious Emergency

Matthew 3:15 begins with the words, “Suffer it to be so now.” That little word “now” deserves more attention than it commonly receives. Jesus Christ was addressing John at a particular moment in the unfolding of God's revelation. John's ministry was operating under a genuine commission from heaven, and Christ had come to submit to the Father's

appointed purpose. The Lord was not establishing a universal law requiring every person to undergo John's precise baptism in order to possess eternal life. He was explaining why John should permit this particular act at that particular time. The command concerned the immediate situation before them. John had objected because he recognized Christ's superiority; Christ answered by revealing that submission was appropriate to the fulfillment of righteousness. When the Lord commands obedience, the servant's responsibility is not to improve the instructions with religious reasoning. John's objection was understandable, but Christ's answer was final. A servant may recognize his unworthiness without refusing the work his Master has appointed.

The statement “for thus it becometh us to fulfil all righteousness” includes both Christ and John in the accomplishment of the appointed act. John had been sent to baptize with water, as John 1:33 establishes, and Jesus Christ had come to fulfill His Father's will. The prophet's obedience and the Messiah's submission met in the same event. John was not being commanded to manufacture righteousness inside Christ. He was being instructed to perform the duty God had assigned him. Christ was not lowering the standard of righteousness by entering the Jordan; He was demonstrating His perfect conformity to the Father's will. The expression does not require inventing an unrecorded sin, an imaginary deficiency, or some secret transaction whereby river water transferred holiness to the Saviour. Scripture supplies the explanation: righteousness was being fulfilled through obedience. Religious speculation is often most impressive where the Bible has already spoken plainly. The Lord gave John a sufficient answer in one sentence, and no collection of elaborate theories can improve it.

Philippians 2:7–8 declares that Jesus Christ “took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men,” and that He “humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross.” His baptism belongs within that larger pattern of voluntary submission to the Father's will. The eternal Son did not cease to be God when He took upon Himself the form of a servant, and His submission to John's administration did not make John greater than Christ. Galatians 4:4 identifies the historical setting of His earthly coming: “God sent forth his Son, made of a woman, made under the law.” The Lord entered Israel's world under the law and carried out the work appointed Him without violating righteousness. His obedience at the Jordan anticipated the flawless obedience that would characterize His entire earthly ministry. Humility is not inferiority, and submission is not evidence of sin. The King could kneel without surrendering His crown, and the sinless Son could enter the water without acquiring the guilt of those who stood beside Him.

3. Fulfilling All Righteousness Does Not Mean Washing Away Imaginary Sin

Matthew 5:17 records the Lord's declaration, “Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfil.” That statement provides the broader scriptural framework for understanding His obedience at the Jordan. Jesus Christ came as Israel's Messiah, under the historical conditions established by God's dealings with that nation, and He fulfilled the Father's will without failure. Where Israel had repeatedly disobeyed, Christ obeyed. Where sinful men had violated God's commandments, Christ remained without sin. Yet the Bible does not say that His baptism was a ceremony required to remove His guilt, nor does it identify the Jordan as the place where His substitutionary sacrifice was accomplished. The fulfillment of righteousness includes obedience to God's purpose; it does not authorize a preacher to invent a sacramental cleansing of the sinless Son. The difference ought to be obvious. Unfortunately, religious tradition has a remarkable ability to complicate the simplest distinction once somebody has built an institution upon ignoring it.

Consider the danger of insisting that water baptism itself produces the inward righteousness required for salvation. If that were the necessary explanation of every baptism, what exactly did John's water accomplish for Jesus Christ? Did it remove a sin He never committed? Did it impart a holiness He already possessed? Did it reconcile Him to a Father with whom He had never been estranged? Every proposed answer runs into the plain testimony of Scripture concerning His person. John 8:29 records Christ saying, “I do always those things that please him.” That statement leaves no room for a period of spiritual deficiency before His baptism. The Father's pleasure was not purchased through a few moments beneath the Jordan. Jesus Christ possessed perfect righteousness throughout His earthly life. A doctrine that requires the Saviour to be spiritually improved by water is not an exaltation of baptism. It is an attack upon the sufficiency of the Saviour. When the explanation makes the spotless Lamb look like a guilty sheep, the explanation needs correcting.

The distinction between Christ's obedience and the believer's justification must also be preserved. Romans 3:24 declares that sinners are “justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.” Romans 5:19 identifies the righteousness of Christ's obedience as fundamental to the standing of those made righteous through Him. The believer today does not receive justification by repeating every outward act performed during Christ's earthly ministry. Nobody is saved by spending forty days fasting in the wilderness, walking upon the Sea of Galilee, or undergoing the precise historical baptism administered to Israel by John. Christ's life manifested the righteousness of the One who would offer Himself as the perfect sacrifice, and His completed redemptive work supplies the ground of our salvation. The sinner must believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, not attempt to reproduce the Messiah's entire earthly itinerary. Christ's baptism belonged to His

obedience; the Christian's justification rests upon His finished work. Confusing those truths turns the gospel into a collection of ceremonies and leaves the sinner trusting his performance instead of the Redeemer.

4. The Messiah Was Made Manifest to Israel, Not Manufactured in the Jordan

John 1:31 gives an inspired explanation of extraordinary importance: “but that he should be made manifest to Israel, therefore am I come baptizing with water.” John identifies a principal purpose of his water baptism in direct connection with the public manifestation of Jesus Christ to Israel. That is not a conclusion imported from somebody's denominational manual. It is the Baptist's own statement under inspiration. His ministry prepared Israel for the appearance of the Messiah and supplied the setting for the divinely appointed testimony identifying Him. The wording does not say that Jesus became the Messiah when the water touched Him. It says He would be made manifest to Israel. Manifestation reveals what is already true; it does not create the truth being revealed. When the sun rises over the horizon, the sunrise does not manufacture the sun. It makes visible what already exists. Likewise, John's baptism did not manufacture the Son of God. It served the appointed revelation of the One who had already come into the world.

John 1:32–33 records the testimony concerning the identifying sign: “I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it abode upon him.” John then explains that the One who sent him to baptize had declared, “Upon whom thou shalt see the Spirit descending, and remaining on him, the same is he which baptizeth with the Holy Ghost.” The distinction is unmistakable. John was the authorized administrator of water baptism, but Christ was the One who would baptize with the Holy Ghost. The heavenly sign publicly identified the Messiah according to the Father's prior instruction to John. The prophet could recognize that Jesus Christ was greater than himself, as Matthew 3 demonstrates, while still awaiting the divinely appointed confirmation of His messianic identity. John 1:34 gives his resulting testimony: “And I saw, and bare record that this is the Son of God.” The significance of the event rests upon divine identification, not the imagined spiritual effectiveness of river water upon Christ. Heaven supplied the witness; John delivered the testimony.

John 1:29 adds the great declaration that gives the entire scene its redemptive direction: “Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world.” Notice where John directs attention. Not toward his personal importance, not toward the water he administers, and not toward the religious experience people might later claim to have received. He points to the Lamb. The language reaches into the sacrificial testimony of the Old Testament, where blood was shed and innocent victims stood in connection with the guilt of sinners. Exodus 12 presents the Passover lamb, while Isaiah 53:7 describes the

suffering Servant as “a lamb to the slaughter.” John's declaration identifies Christ as the One who would deal with sin in a manner no Jordan River could accomplish. The river had been associated with confession and repentance; the Lamb would accomplish redemption. Anybody who finishes reading John's testimony more impressed with the baptistry than with Jesus Christ has managed to admire the signpost while missing the destination. The greatest thing John ever did was point beyond himself.

5. The Opened Heaven, the Descending Spirit, and the Father's Voice

Matthew 3:16–17 records what happened immediately after Christ's baptism: “And Jesus, when he was baptized, went up straightway out of the water: and, lo, the heavens were opened unto him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove, and lighting upon him: And lo a voice from heaven, saying, This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.” Here the reader encounters a remarkable testimony involving the Son, the Spirit of God, and the Father's voice. Jesus Christ stands in the water, the Spirit descends like a dove, and the Father speaks from heaven. The passage does not present three separate gods, nor does it reduce the persons to one individual changing disguises between appearances. The Son is not speaking from heaven while pretending to stand in the river. The Spirit is not merely another name for the water. The Father speaks concerning His beloved Son. The biblical testimony must be allowed to retain the distinctions it actually records. The river reveals more than a religious ceremony; it becomes the setting of heavenly testimony concerning the person of Jesus Christ.

Mark 1:9–11 confirms the event, identifying Jesus as coming “from Nazareth of Galilee” and recording the Father's declaration, “Thou art my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.” Luke 3:21–22 adds that Jesus was praying when heaven was opened and that “the Holy Ghost descended in a bodily shape like a dove upon him.” These accounts complement one another without requiring the invention of contradictory ceremonies. Matthew emphasizes the public declaration, Mark records the personal address to the Son, and Luke supplies the additional detail concerning His prayer. The descent of the Spirit is not evidence that Jesus Christ had previously been a spiritually empty sinner waiting for a divine refill. Luke 1:35 had already connected His miraculous conception with the Holy Ghost, and John 3:34 later declares that God gives not the Spirit by measure unto Him. The baptism marks a publicly witnessed manifestation and identification, not the beginning of Christ's divine identity. A man who teaches that Jesus became God's Son at the Jordan has mistaken an announcement for an adoption.

The Father's words are particularly devastating to the idea that Christ entered the water needing moral correction. “This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.” The Father did not announce that the water had finally made Jesus acceptable. He declared His

pleasure in the Son. The words identify the person, not a ceremony that supposedly repaired Him. Isaiah 42:1 had already spoken prophetically of the Lord's servant, declaring, “mine elect, in whom my soul delighteth; I have put my spirit upon him.” The testimony at the Jordan stands in meaningful relationship to that prophetic expectation. The Messiah is publicly identified, the Spirit descends, and heaven gives its approval. There is no confession of sin by Jesus Christ, no plea for forgiveness, and no indication that His relationship with the Father required restoration. The silence is just as instructive as the recorded words. Sinners confess; the Son obeys. Sinners seek mercy; the Father announces His delight in Christ. The water did not secure heaven's approval. Heaven's approval identified the One who had entered the water.

6. The Baptism of John Came from Heaven, but It Was Not the Church's Entire Commission

Matthew 21:23–27 returns to John's baptism during a confrontation between Jesus Christ and the religious authorities. The chief priests and elders demand to know by what authority Christ performs His works. He responds with a question concerning John: “The baptism of John, whence was it? from heaven, or of men?” That question is important because it establishes the divine authority behind John's ministry. His baptism was not a self-appointed ceremony invented to attract attention in the wilderness. God had sent him. The religious leaders recognized the difficulty of answering honestly, reasoning that if they acknowledged its heavenly origin, Christ would ask why they had not believed John. If they denied it, they feared the people, who regarded John as a prophet. Their eventual answer was, “We cannot tell.” That was not intellectual brilliance. It was unbelief looking for a safe place to hide. They wanted authority explained while refusing the testimony God had already supplied.

The authority of John's baptism, however, must not be confused with the assumption that every subsequent baptism throughout Scripture operates under an identical commission. John was sent to prepare Israel for Christ's manifestation. Matthew 10:5–7 later records Christ restricting the twelve during a particular mission to “the lost sheep of the house of Israel,” while Matthew 28:19 commands the risen Lord's disciples to teach all nations and baptize them. Those are different instructions delivered under different historical circumstances. The difference is not that God changed His mind or that John's work became fraudulent. The difference is that God's revelation and commissioned activity progressed toward the accomplished redemption and worldwide proclamation of Jesus Christ. A servant cannot take an instruction addressed to one person at one historical moment and automatically make every detail binding upon everybody forever. Noah was commanded to build an ark, but nobody proves his obedience to God today by opening a

shipyard. Divine authority establishes the truth of a command; right division identifies its appointed application.

John 3:22 records that Jesus and His disciples came into Judaea, where He tarried with them and baptized. Yet John 4:1–2 supplies an important clarification: “Jesus made and baptized more disciples than John, (Though Jesus himself baptized not, but his disciples,).” The outward baptism was administered by His disciples during His earthly ministry. This distinction prevents another convenient but unsupported assumption: that every person baptized during Christ's ministry was personally immersed by Jesus Himself. Scripture explicitly says otherwise. John 3:25 also records a question concerning purifying arising among John's disciples, showing that baptism already occupied a significant place in the religious circumstances of that period. When John's disciples complained that others were going to Jesus, John replied in verse 30, “He must increase, but I must decrease.” His answer reveals the proper relationship between the ministries. John's task was to prepare the way and bear witness; Christ was the One to whom the preparation pointed. The servant was not offended when attention turned toward the Master. A signpost that becomes jealous of the destination has forgotten why it was erected.

7. Another Baptism Awaited Christ, and That One Was Not in the Jordan

Luke 12:50 records a statement that destroys the assumption that every use of the word “baptism” must describe someone entering literal water. Jesus Christ declares, “But I have a baptism to be baptized with; and how am I straitened till it be accomplished!” He had already been baptized by John. Therefore, the baptism described here cannot simply be the completed event at the Jordan. Christ speaks of something still awaiting accomplishment. Mark 10:38–39 likewise records His question to James and John concerning drinking His cup and being baptized with the baptism He would undergo. The immediate context concerns their ambitions for positions of honor and His approaching suffering. The language points toward the overwhelming ordeal associated with His rejection and death, not another ordinary administration of river water. Scripture itself uses baptism in more than one sense, and no amount of denominational insistence can force every occurrence into a single definition. If a man reads water into every baptismal passage, he will eventually find himself trying to baptize the cross in a river.

The distinction becomes even more serious when the sacrifice of Christ is considered. At the Jordan, Jesus Christ submitted to John's baptism in fulfillment of righteousness and in connection with His manifestation to Israel. At Calvary, the sinless One offered Himself for sinners. First Peter 3:18 declares, “For Christ also hath once suffered for sins, the just for the unjust, that he might bring us to God.” Romans 5:8 declares, “But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.” The blood of Christ,

not Jordan water, is the ground of the sinner's cleansing. First John 1:7 states that “the blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth us from all sin.” These are not interchangeable events accomplishing identical purposes. Christ's baptism in the Jordan did not pay the penalty for sin, and His death upon the cross was not merely an enlarged version of John's ceremony. The river displayed His submission to the Father's appointed will; the cross accomplished the sacrifice through which redemption is provided.

The gospel proclaimed to sinners today rests upon the completed death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. First Corinthians 15:3–4 declares “that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures; And that he was buried, and that he rose again the third day according to the scriptures.” That is the message Paul delivered and the foundation of the believer's salvation. Ephesians 2:8–9 establishes salvation by grace through faith, “Not of works, lest any man should boast.” The sinner is not instructed to repeat Christ's baptism in order to supply some missing portion of His righteousness. He is called to believe on the Lord Jesus Christ. Water baptism has its proper place in the biblical testimony of believers, and that place deserves careful examination rather than careless dismissal. But the outward ordinance must never be promoted into a competing Redeemer. The man who trusts a ceremony to accomplish what only Christ's finished work can accomplish has confused the testimony with the transaction. The water can picture what God has done; it cannot negotiate salvation on God's behalf.

Conclusion — The Water Received Him, but Heaven Declared Who He Was

The baptism of Jesus Christ was not the washing of a sinner but the obedience of the sinless Son to His Father's appointed purpose. John stood in the Jordan under divine commission, preaching repentance and preparing Israel for the manifestation of her Messiah. Christ approached him without personal sin, without any need for forgiveness, and without any deficiency in His righteousness. John's protest recognized the apparent reversal of their positions, but Christ's answer established the necessity of fulfilling righteousness through obedience. When the Lord submitted to baptism, He did not become holy; He demonstrated the perfect submission of the One who already was holy. The Spirit descended, the Father spoke, and the Son was publicly identified according to the divine testimony. John 1:31 explains the purpose of his ministry in unmistakable language: that Christ “should be made manifest to Israel.” The event was never designed to establish water as the source of the Saviour's righteousness. It identified the righteous Saviour to the nation that had been warned to prepare for His coming.

That truth strikes directly at every attempt to make baptismal water the automatic source of spiritual life. If water baptism necessarily removes sin from everyone receiving it, the sinless Christ becomes an impossible problem for that interpretation. If water necessarily

creates righteousness, the perfectly righteous Son becomes an even greater difficulty. Scripture offers a better answer because Scripture recognizes distinct purposes and settings. John's baptism was divinely authorized, Christ's submission fulfilled righteousness, and the heavenly testimony identified Israel's Messiah. Later, the Lord spoke of another baptism awaiting Him, pointing toward the suffering He would endure. The completed gospel then proclaimed the death, burial, and resurrection through which sinners are saved. These truths belong together in God's revelation, but they are not identical acts. Rightly dividing the word of truth does not diminish the authority of any passage. It protects the meaning of each passage against religious confusion. A doctrine that survives only by ignoring the differences God recorded is not a biblical doctrine worth defending.

The final lesson reaches beyond the Jordan and strikes at the heart of man's persistent desire to substitute religious activity for the righteousness of Jesus Christ. The Saviour did not need the water to cleanse Him, and the sinner must not imagine that water can accomplish what the Saviour came to accomplish. John was obedient to his commission; Christ was obedient to His Father; heaven testified to the Son; and the Scriptures preserved the entire event so that nobody would mistake the messenger for the Messiah or the ordinance for redemption. There is a place for water baptism, but it must remain in the place God assigned it. The river cannot improve the righteousness of Jesus Christ, and it cannot replace His blood as the sinner's only hope. The Jordan was a stage upon which heaven identified the Son of God, not a religious factory manufacturing Him. John had the water, but Christ possessed the righteousness. John could administer the ordinance, but Christ alone could fulfill the Father's will without sin. The sinless Son went beneath the water without a stain to wash away, and He came up without a righteousness to gain. The Jordan received His body, the heavens declared His identity, and the Father announced His pleasure. If that river could not make Jesus Christ any more righteous, it has no business being preached as a substitute for the righteousness only Jesus Christ can give.

3 of 10 — Water Baptism Without Confusion — Repent, Be Baptized, and Read the Address on the Envelope: Acts 2:38 Under Examination

Key Passage — Acts 2:38: “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.”

There are few verses in the King James Bible that have been dragged through more denominational arguments, twisted into more religious formulas, or separated from their surroundings more frequently than Acts 2:38. Peter says, “Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins,” and before the preacher has finished reading the sentence, somebody is already filling the baptistry and announcing that nobody can get to heaven without going through his particular brand of water. Another fellow, equally determined to defend his system, starts rearranging Peter's words until the verse no longer sounds anything like what God wrote. One man makes the water do the saving, while the other acts as though Peter accidentally mentioned it. Both ought to put down their denominational instruction manuals and read the chapter. The Holy Ghost did not inspire Acts 2:38 so religious men could spend the next two thousand years correcting it. **The first rule of understanding a Bible verse is to find out who received it before deciding who must obey it.**

Acts 2:38 was not spoken in a vacuum. It was delivered in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost, following the resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ, before a Jewish audience confronted with the guilt of rejecting and crucifying its promised Messiah. Peter did not begin his sermon by announcing a modern church membership program or distributing a universal set of baptismal instructions for every future dispensation. He addressed the men of Judaea, the men of Israel, and finally “all the house of Israel.” He identified Jesus of Nazareth as the One approved of God, accused his hearers of responsibility concerning His crucifixion, proclaimed His resurrection, and announced that God had made Him both Lord and Christ. When the hearers were pricked in their hearts, they asked, “Men and brethren, what shall we do?” Peter's answer belongs to that question, that audience, and that historical moment. Remove those facts, and the verse becomes a loose piece of ammunition for whatever religious battle somebody happens to be fighting. **A verse does not become more biblical because a preacher tears the address off the envelope.**

The difficulty is not that Acts 2:38 contradicts salvation by grace through faith. The difficulty is that many readers demand that Peter's Pentecostal message and Paul's later doctrinal explanation of the gospel be treated as though they were delivered under identical circumstances with every detail already revealed. The book of Acts records a genuine historical progression from Jerusalem outward into the Gentile world. It records Jewish believers, Samaritan converts, Gentile households, apostolic signs, transitional circumstances, and developing revelation concerning the Church. Not every event occurs in precisely the same order, and God did not record those differences merely to provide material for theological arguments. Second Timothy 2:15 commands the workman to be “rightly dividing the word of truth.” That means believing Acts 2:38 exactly as written while

refusing to make it contradict Acts 10, Acts 15, Romans 4, Ephesians 2, or 1 Corinthians 15. The Bible does not need a religious mechanic to repair its transmission. It needs a reader honest enough to distinguish the roads.

1. Pentecost Was an Appointed Jewish Feast Before It Became a Church Argument

Acts 2:1 begins, “And when the day of Pentecost was fully come, they were all with one accord in one place.” That opening statement immediately places the events within Israel's religious calendar. Pentecost was not invented by the apostles as a convenient occasion for launching a new religious organization. Its background appears in Leviticus 23:15–21, where Israel was instructed concerning the feast associated with the counting of fifty days. Deuteronomy 16:9–12 likewise connects the feast of weeks with Israel's covenantal worship. The location is Jerusalem, and the assembled hearers are identified in Acts 2:5 as “Jews, devout men, out of every nation under heaven.” Their geographical diversity does not erase their identification as Jews. A Jew visiting Jerusalem from another country did not become a Gentile merely because he arrived with foreign currency and a different accent. God chose an appointed feast, in Israel's appointed city, before an audience connected with Israel's historic worship. That ought to influence the interpretation before anybody starts preaching a universal baptismal formula.

Acts 2:2–4 describes the sound from heaven as of a rushing mighty wind, the appearance of cloven tongues like as of fire, and the filling of the disciples with the Holy Ghost. They began speaking with other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance. The surrounding verses identify these tongues as languages recognized by the visiting multitude. Acts 2:8 asks, “And how hear we every man in our own tongue, wherein we were born?” The passage then names various regions represented among the hearers. This was an unmistakable supernatural sign accompanying the arrival of the promised Holy Ghost. It was not a church entertainment program designed to impress visitors with unusual noises. First Corinthians 1:22 later declares, “For the Jews require a sign, and the Greeks seek after wisdom.” Pentecost unfolded in a setting where signs carried particular significance in God's dealings with Israel. Before anybody establishes a permanent religious system from one feature of the event, he ought to remember that the same chapter contains a rushing heavenly sound, divided tongues, and miraculous languages. Selective literalism is a poor foundation for doctrine.

Peter interprets the event by appealing to Joel. Acts 2:16 declares, “But this is that which was spoken by the prophet Joel.” He then quotes the prophecy concerning the outpouring of God's Spirit, visions, dreams, wonders in heaven, signs in the earth, and the great and notable day of the Lord. The prophetic background is Israel's Scriptures, not a Gentile religious handbook. Joel 2 concerns God's dealings with His people and looks toward

events of tremendous prophetic importance. The manifestation at Pentecost demonstrated that the promised Spirit was being poured out, but the passage does not establish that every accompanying prophecy concerning blood, fire, darkness, and the day of the Lord had already reached its final fulfillment. Peter was announcing the significance of what God was doing, not declaring the completion of every future prophetic event. Acts 2:21 also states that "whosoever shall call on the name of the Lord shall be saved." That word "whosoever" must be retained alongside the unmistakably Jewish setting. **Right division recognizes the address without pretending God's promise of salvation stops at the city limits of Jerusalem.**

2. Peter Was Confronting the Nation That Had Rejected Its Messiah

Acts 2:22 opens Peter's direct accusation: "Ye men of Israel, hear these words." There is the address, printed plainly enough for a child to read without assistance from a denominational committee. Peter identifies "Jesus of Nazareth, a man approved of God among you by miracles and wonders and signs," and reminds his hearers that these mighty works had been performed in their midst. His argument begins with the identity and public ministry of the Messiah they had rejected. He is not addressing an assembly of Gentile converts already instructed in the completed Pauline gospel. He is speaking to Israel concerning Israel's Messiah, drawing upon events witnessed within the nation. Acts 2:23 then declares that Christ was delivered by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God, while accusing his hearers of having taken Him and, by wicked hands, crucified and slain Him. Divine foreknowledge did not excuse human wickedness. God accomplished His redemptive purpose without transforming the crucifixion into an innocent religious misunderstanding.

Peter proceeds to proclaim that God raised Jesus Christ from the dead, because it was not possible that He should be held by death. He appeals to Psalm 16:8–11, explaining that David spoke prophetically concerning the resurrection of Christ. Acts 2:31 declares that David, "seeing this before spake of the resurrection of Christ, that his soul was not left in hell, neither his flesh did see corruption." Peter then appeals to Psalm 110:1 concerning the Lord seated at God's right hand. These Old Testament references matter because Peter is proving his case from Israel's own Scriptures. The crucified Jesus was not an unsuccessful claimant whose enemies had finally disposed of Him. He was the risen and exalted Messiah. The resurrection overturned the verdict of the men who had condemned Him, and the Scriptures testified that God had accomplished His purpose. A dead religious founder can leave behind instructions, followers, and an impressive memorial. The risen Son of God leaves an empty tomb and a nation responsible for what it did with its King.

Acts 2:36 delivers the crushing conclusion: “Therefore let all the house of Israel know assuredly, that God hath made that same Jesus, whom ye have crucified, both Lord and Christ.” Notice the words “all the house of Israel.” Peter is confronting the nation corporately concerning its treatment of Jesus Christ. That does not mean every individual standing there personally drove a nail into His hands, nor does it erase the universal guilt of sinners before God. It means Peter's accusation has a definite national setting. The One Israel rejected was the One God exalted. The One treated as a blasphemer was the promised Messiah. When Acts 2:37 says the hearers were “pricked in their heart,” the reason is hardly mysterious. Their Scriptures had testified against their unbelief, and their rejected Messiah was alive. **Peter was not offering a religious improvement course to people who needed better habits. He was confronting a guilty nation with a living King it had crucified.**

3. “Men and Brethren, What Shall We Do?” — The Question That Governed the Answer

Acts 2:37 records the response: “Now when they heard this, they were pricked in their heart, and said unto Peter and to the rest of the apostles, Men and brethren, what shall we do?” The question follows Peter's declaration that God had exalted the very Jesus whom the nation had rejected. These hearers are not casually asking which church offers the shortest baptismal service. They have been confronted with the truth concerning the crucified and risen Messiah. Their conviction is tied directly to the message they have just heard. The question therefore cannot be separated from the accusation that produced it. Bible interpretation requires more than locating a familiar expression and immediately connecting it to another passage containing similar words. Context establishes meaning. When a man walks into a courtroom after hearing the evidence against him and asks what he should do, his question is not identical to the inquiry of a stranger asking directions to the courthouse.

Compare Acts 16:30, where the Philippian jailer asks Paul and Silas, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?” Their reply is unmistakable: “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved, and thy house.” The distinction between the two historical circumstances matters. At Pentecost, Peter has confronted Israel with the crucifixion and resurrection of its Messiah. At Philippi, Paul and Silas answer a jailer's direct inquiry concerning salvation. Acts 16:32 records that they subsequently spoke the word of the Lord to him and his household, and verse 33 records their baptism. The jailer was not told that his salvation depended upon first completing a religious ceremony. Yet it would also be dishonest to erase baptism from the account merely because it followed faith. Both passages must stand as written. A workman who rightly divides Scripture does not need to make Peter

deny his command or Paul add words he never spoke. He needs to recognize the circumstances under which each man answered.

The differences between these accounts do not establish competing Saviours or suggest that water baptism once possessed independent power to purchase forgiveness. The authority of salvation belongs to Jesus Christ in every setting. Acts 4:12 declares, “Neither is there salvation in any other.” But a common Saviour does not require every historical command, audience, and accompanying sign to be identical. The revelation of God's purpose unfolds through the book of Acts, and the apostolic witnesses are addressing people in distinct circumstances. Peter's Pentecostal hearers were being summoned to acknowledge the Christ whom their nation had rejected. Paul's Philippian jailer was directed to believe on the Lord Jesus Christ. In both accounts, the preaching of Christ stands at the center. **When two questions arise from different circumstances, a preacher ought to read both answers before pretending one of them was never given.** The Bible deserves better than having its verses rearranged like furniture to accommodate somebody's inherited religious tradition.

4. Repent, Be Baptized, and Receive the Holy Ghost: Every Word Must Stay Where God Put It

Now consider Acts 2:38 itself: “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.” There is no need to apologize for the wording, alter the sentence, or pretend Peter merely recommended an optional public ceremony unrelated to his answer. He commanded repentance and baptism, connected his words with remission of sins, and promised the gift of the Holy Ghost. That is what the verse says. The first obligation of a Bible believer is to acknowledge the language before attempting to explain its doctrinal place. Some religious systems make this passage the controlling formula for every sinner in every age. Others become so alarmed by the wording that they practically require Peter to borrow Paul's pen and rewrite the sermon. Neither approach respects the inspired record. **The King James Bible does not need a theological eraser in the hands of a nervous defender. It needs a reader willing to believe the sentence and examine its setting.**

The expression “for the remission of sins” must not be treated as an embarrassing phrase that can be made harmless by a clever grammatical maneuver. Luke 3:3 describes John's earlier ministry as “the baptism of repentance for the remission of sins.” Luke 24:47 records the risen Christ declaring that “repentance and remission of sins should be preached in his name among all nations, beginning at Jerusalem.” Acts 2 takes place at that beginning in Jerusalem, where Peter confronts Israel concerning the crucified and risen Messiah. The connection between repentance, remission, and the proclamation of Christ

is therefore rooted in the actual biblical record. But acknowledging that connection does not prove that physical water possesses the power to regenerate a soul. Acts 10:43 will later declare that whoever believes in Christ receives remission of sins through His name, before Peter commands water baptism. The proper explanation must account for both passages. A doctrine that needs Acts 10 silenced to make Acts 2 function is already missing part of the evidence.

The promise concerning the Holy Ghost also requires careful attention. Peter declares, “and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost.” At Pentecost the Spirit had already been poured out upon the assembled disciples, and the miraculous signs had drawn the attention of the multitude. Peter's command and promise therefore occurred during an extraordinary moment in the unfolding of God's dealings with Israel. But Acts later records circumstances that do not follow an identical outward sequence. In Acts 8, the Samaritans had been baptized before Peter and John came and laid hands upon them, after which they received the Holy Ghost. In Acts 10, the Holy Ghost fell upon Gentile believers while Peter was still speaking, before water baptism was administered. These differences are not printing errors awaiting denominational correction. They are inspired historical facts. Whoever builds an unchangeable salvation mechanism out of the sequence in Acts 2 must explain why God did not follow that same sequence in Acts 10. **When the Holy Ghost arrives before the baptistry, the baptistry has lost its claim to controlling the Holy Ghost.**

5. Three Thousand Were Added, but the Water Did Not Become Another Saviour

Acts 2:38 commands baptism “in the name of Jesus Christ.” That detail is especially significant in a sermon directed toward those who had rejected Him. The One condemned and crucified was now proclaimed as Lord and Christ, and those responding were commanded to identify themselves openly with His name. This was no trivial matter in Jerusalem. Public acknowledgment of Jesus Christ separated a person from the unbelieving rejection of the Messiah. The emphasis was not upon the personal importance of Peter as the administrator or upon some mysterious power hidden in a particular verbal formula. The authority belonged to Jesus Christ. Matthew 28:19 records the risen Lord's commission concerning baptism “in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.” These passages should not be converted into rival magical expressions, as though salvation depended upon a preacher pronouncing precisely the correct collection of syllables. Christ is the authority behind the command. The name of Jesus was not a religious password. It identified the Messiah whom God had exalted.

Acts 2:39 continues, “For the promise is unto you, and to your children, and to all that are afar off, even as many as the Lord our God shall call.” The immediate audience remains the

Jews gathered at Pentecost, but the promise is not restricted by Peter's words to that crowd alone. He speaks of their children and those afar off, and the final qualification concerns as many as the Lord shall call. This language must be respected without importing every subsequent doctrinal development into Peter's present understanding. The book of Acts will record Peter requiring further divine instruction before entering the Gentile household of Cornelius. That fact demonstrates the historical development of his understanding concerning Gentile inclusion. Neither should the phrase about children be twisted into a command to baptize infants who have not believed. Acts 2:41 identifies those who received the word and were baptized. God did not authorize the reader to manufacture a doctrine out of the children mentioned in a promise while ignoring the response required in the surrounding passage.

Acts 2:40 records Peter's further exhortation: “Save yourselves from this untoward generation.” That expression belongs to the national circumstances already established by his sermon. He has accused Israel of rejecting the Messiah, and he now calls his hearers to separate themselves from the unbelieving generation under that condemnation. Verse 41 then declares, “Then they that gladly received his word were baptized: and the same day there were added unto them about three thousand souls.” Notice that the inspired record identifies the people who gladly received the word. Their baptism followed their reception of Peter's testimony. The text does not say that three thousand unwilling unbelievers were mechanically regenerated because sufficient water was available. Verse 42 describes their continuing in the apostles' doctrine, fellowship, breaking of bread, and prayers. Their response was not exhausted by a moment in the water. **A crowded baptistry may impress a congregation, but the New Testament places equal importance upon the word received and the doctrine followed afterward.** Three thousand were added, and the risen Christ remained the center of the testimony.

6. Peter's Next Sermon Still Addressed Israel, but It Did Not Repeat the Same Baptismal Formula

Acts 3 supplies an important comparison because Peter again addresses a Jewish audience after a miraculous event in Jerusalem. Following the healing of the lame man, Peter declares in Acts 3:12, “Ye men of Israel, why marvel ye at this?” He then identifies the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as the One who had glorified His Son Jesus. The covenantal setting could hardly be clearer. Peter charges his hearers with denying the Holy One and the Just and killing “the Prince of life, whom God hath raised from the dead.” Once again, the central accusation concerns Israel's rejection of its Messiah. Acts 3:17 adds that Peter knows they acted through ignorance, as did their rulers, while verse 18 declares that God fulfilled what He had previously shown through the prophets concerning Christ's

suffering. Peter is not delivering a disconnected religious speech. He is continuing the apostolic witness to Israel concerning the crucified and risen Jesus. The miracle supplies the occasion, but the Messiah supplies the message.

Now consider Acts 3:19: “Repent ye therefore, and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out, when the times of refreshing shall come from the presence of the Lord.” Peter continues by speaking of God sending Jesus Christ and of the times of restitution of all things spoken by the prophets. These statements have profound connections with Israel's prophetic expectations and the return of Christ. They must not be flattened into a generic description of every believer's present experience. But notice something else: Peter commands repentance and conversion, speaks of sins being blotted out, and does not repeat the command to be baptized found in Acts 2:38. That omission does not make baptism unbiblical, nor does it invalidate his earlier instructions. It does demonstrate the folly of turning one Pentecostal sentence into a mechanical formula without considering Peter's subsequent preaching. If every sermon must contain identical words in identical order to announce forgiveness properly, somebody ought to inform the apostle that his second recorded sermon requires substantial denominational editing.

Acts 3:22–26 strengthens the national setting by referring to Moses' prophecy concerning the Prophet whom God would raise up and warning that every soul refusing to hear Him would be destroyed from among the people. Peter reminds his hearers that they are “the children of the prophets, and of the covenant which God made with our fathers.” He quotes the promise to Abraham concerning blessing all the kindreds of the earth and declares that God sent His risen Son “unto you first.” There is both Israel's priority in the historical proclamation and the wider purpose of blessing reaching beyond Israel. Neither truth cancels the other. Romans 1:16 later preserves the expression “to the Jew first, and also to the Greek.” God's promises to Israel remain identifiable, and the gospel's proclamation to Gentiles does not require stealing Israel's national identity. The apostle's sermons belong to an unfolding historical record. **The fellow who cannot distinguish an Israelite hearing about the restitution of all things from a Gentile hearing Paul's gospel will soon have Abraham's covenant, the Church, and the baptistry tangled together like fishing lines in a boat without a captain.**

7. Cornelius, the Jerusalem Council, and Paul's Gospel Settle the Saving Question

Acts 10 brings Peter into the household of Cornelius, a Gentile centurion, following divine instruction that corrects Peter's reluctance concerning association with Gentiles. Peter finally declares, “Of a truth I perceive that God is no respecter of persons.” His sermon identifies Jesus Christ as Lord of all, proclaims His death and resurrection, and announces in Acts 10:43, “that through his name whosoever believeth in him shall receive remission of

sins." Those words are decisive. Peter is speaking of remission of sins, just as he had at Pentecost, but here he explicitly identifies believing in Christ as the means through which remission is received. Acts 10:44 then records that "While Peter yet spake these words, the Holy Ghost fell on all them which heard the word." The event occurs before anybody is baptized in water. The Jewish believers accompanying Peter are astonished that the gift of the Holy Ghost has been poured out upon the Gentiles. Evidently, God did not consult the committee responsible for maintaining an identical ceremonial sequence in every chapter.

Peter's response in Acts 10:47 is equally unmistakable: "Can any man forbid water, that these should not be baptized, which have received the Holy Ghost as well as we?" He then commands them to be baptized. The order is not subject to reasonable dispute. They heard the gospel, the Holy Ghost fell upon them, and water baptism followed. Acts 11:15–17 records Peter defending these events before the brethren at Jerusalem. He recalls the Lord's words distinguishing John's baptism with water from baptism with the Holy Ghost and acknowledges that God gave the Gentiles the same gift. Peter does not apologize for God acting before the water was administered. He recognizes God's work. Therefore, water baptism cannot be established as an indispensable prerequisite for receiving the Holy Ghost in every case. The Holy Ghost had already arrived, and Peter himself recognized that fact as the reason water should not be forbidden. **When God has already given the Holy Ghost to the believer, the religious salesman is going to have a difficult time convincing Scripture that the believer remains spiritually dead until the salesman finishes the ceremony.**

Acts 15 supplies the inspired doctrinal judgment. Peter recalls that God chose for the Gentiles to hear the word of the gospel and believe. Acts 15:8–9 declares that God gave them the Holy Ghost, "and put no difference between us and them, purifying their hearts by faith." Peter then warns against placing a yoke upon the Gentile disciples and concludes in verse 11, "But we believe that through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ we shall be saved, even as they." That is not a proclamation of salvation by ceremonial performance. It is salvation through grace, with hearts purified by faith. Paul's later declaration in 1 Corinthians 15:1–4 identifies the saving gospel: Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, was buried, and rose again the third day. First Corinthians 1:17 adds, "For Christ sent me not to baptize, but to preach the gospel." Paul did baptize believers, as the surrounding verses acknowledge, but he distinguished that administration from his commission to preach the gospel. A man may obey Christ in water baptism, but he cannot purchase salvation through it. **The gospel is not Christ plus a ceremony. It is Christ crucified, buried, risen, and received by faith.**

Conclusion — Believe Every Word, but Read the Whole Chapter

Acts 2:38 must remain exactly where God placed it, with every word intact and every historical circumstance recognized. Peter commanded repentance and baptism in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins and promised the gift of the Holy Ghost. He delivered that command to Jews gathered in Jerusalem on Pentecost after confronting the house of Israel concerning the crucifixion and resurrection of its Messiah. His sermon drew upon Israel's prophets, interpreted the extraordinary manifestations of the Holy Ghost, and called his hearers to respond to the Christ their nation had rejected. Approximately three thousand gladly received his word and were baptized. Nothing about rightly dividing the passage requires denying those facts. But neither does believing those facts authorize a preacher to ignore Acts 3, Acts 10, Acts 15, or the doctrinal explanation of salvation in Paul's epistles. The Lord did not inspire one chapter so that the rest of the New Testament could be treated as an inconvenience. **A sound doctrine must survive the entire Bible, not merely the verse printed across the front of somebody's baptismal certificate.**

The believer living under the present dispensation of grace must understand that salvation rests upon the finished work of Jesus Christ, received through faith, apart from works. Ephesians 2:8–9 declares that salvation is “by grace” and “through faith,” concluding, “Not of works, lest any man should boast.” Romans 4:5 speaks of the one who “worketh not, but believeth on him that justifieth the ungodly.” Ephesians 1:13 identifies those who heard the word of truth, the gospel of salvation, and believed as being sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise. Water baptism remains a biblical act of obedience and testimony, but its proper value is destroyed when men promote it into an additional saving requirement. A saved man should not despise the Lord's ordinances, and an unsaved man should not trust those ordinances to accomplish what only the Lord can accomplish. The Church does not possess a second Calvary conveniently located beneath the baptistry steps. The blood of Jesus Christ accomplished redemption; the water cannot improve upon His sacrifice.

The tragedy surrounding Acts 2:38 is not that the verse is difficult to locate or impossible to read. It is that men arrive determined to defend a religious conclusion before they have finished considering the evidence. One camp makes Peter's Pentecostal command the permanent machinery of regeneration. Another becomes so determined to resist that error that it treats Peter's inspired words like an embarrassing relative who must be kept out of public view. Both approaches dishonor Scripture. Peter preached what God directed him to preach. The Holy Ghost recorded what God intended to preserve. The book of Acts reveals the historical progression of the gospel from Jerusalem toward the Gentile world, while the later doctrinal instructions establish salvation through the grace of Jesus Christ. No verse needs to be removed, rewritten, or smothered beneath tradition. Second Timothy 2:15 still commands the workman to rightly divide the word of truth. **Read the address before applying the command. Read the context before building the doctrine. Read the whole**

Bible before declaring the argument settled. Water baptism has its place, repentance has its place, and the Holy Ghost performs His divine work; but the sinner's salvation rests upon the Lord Jesus Christ. The baptistry may hold enough water to immerse a thousand people, but it will never contain enough righteousness to save one sinner apart from Him.

4 of 10 — Water Baptism Without Confusion — Simon Went Down a Sorcerer and Came Up with a Bitter Heart

Key Passage — Acts 8:20–23: "But Peter said unto him, Thy money perish with thee, because thou hast thought that the gift of God may be purchased with money. Thou hast neither part nor lot in this matter: for thy heart is not right in the sight of God. Repent therefore of this thy wickedness, and pray God, if perhaps the thought of thine heart may be forgiven thee. For I perceive that thou art in the gall of bitterness, and in the bond of iniquity."

If water baptism possesses some automatic power to regenerate the sinner, Simon the sorcerer presents a rather inconvenient exhibit for the religious salesman. Acts 8:13 declares, "Then Simon himself believed also: and when he was baptized, he continued with Philip, and wondered, beholding the miracles and signs which were done." There is the profession of belief, the administration of water baptism, and the man's continued association with the preacher. By ordinary outward measurements, Simon appeared to have completed the religious requirements. He had heard the message, submitted to baptism, and remained among those witnessing God's work. But a few verses later, Peter confronted him with words severe enough to remove the varnish from the finest religious certificate: "Thy heart is not right in the sight of God." The fellow who had gone into the water under Philip's ministry was now being rebuked for attempting to purchase spiritual power. **The water had touched his body, but it had not purchased authority over his heart.**

The account becomes even more instructive when we examine what Simon had been doing before Philip arrived. Acts 8:9 describes him as a man who "beforetime in the same city used sorcery, and bewitched the people of Samaria, giving out that himself was some great one." He had built his public reputation upon astonishing people and presenting himself as a figure of extraordinary importance. The inhabitants of Samaria had been impressed by his practices long enough to associate him with the great power of God. Then Philip arrived preaching Jesus Christ, performing genuine miracles through divine power, and announcing

a message that directed attention away from human greatness toward the Lord. Simon entered this new religious environment, believed according to the inspired record, and received water baptism. Yet when he witnessed the Holy Ghost being given through the laying on of the apostles' hands, something deeply wrong surfaced in his thinking. He offered money to obtain that power. The old appetite for personal greatness had found a new religious opportunity.

This passage must be handled with enough honesty to preserve everything Scripture says and enough restraint to avoid announcing things Scripture does not settle. Acts 8:13 says Simon believed, and no reader has permission simply to erase those words. Peter's rebuke also says his heart was not right before God, and nobody has permission to erase that verdict either. The account exposes a man whose outward baptism did not prevent a wicked proposal, whose understanding of spiritual power was seriously corrupted, and whose heart required repentance. Whether Simon's profession represented genuine saving faith or an outward response that never reached the heart is a question demanding careful examination rather than a hasty declaration about his eternal destination. The central lesson does not depend upon inventing an answer. **A baptized man stood before an apostle with a heart under divine condemnation concerning his conduct. If that does not demonstrate the difference between an outward ordinance and inward spiritual reality, somebody has been reading the baptistry instead of the Bible.**

1. The Gospel Entered Samaria While Persecution Scattered the Church

Acts 8 begins in the shadow of Stephen's murder. Acts 7 closes with his testimony against Israel's unbelief and his death at the hands of an enraged multitude. Acts 8:1 then declares that Saul was consenting unto his death and that a great persecution arose against the church at Jerusalem. The believers were scattered throughout the regions of Judaea and Samaria, while the apostles remained at Jerusalem. This historical setting matters because the movement into Samaria did not begin as a convenient expansion project planned by a comfortable religious organization. Persecution drove believers outward, and those scattered believers carried the word of God with them. Acts 8:4 declares, “Therefore they that were scattered abroad went every where preaching the word.” The enemies of the gospel intended to crush the testimony, but their violence helped distribute the witnesses. **The devil tried to scatter the fire by kicking the coals, and the coals landed in places he had not intended to burn.**

Philip was among those who carried the message beyond Jerusalem. Acts 8:5 says, “Then Philip went down to the city of Samaria, and preached Christ unto them.” This was Philip the evangelist, identified later in Acts 21:8 as one of the seven, not a reference to the apostle Philip. His ministry included the preaching of Christ, miraculous signs, the casting

out of unclean spirits, and the healing of those suffering from palsies and lameness. Acts 8:8 records that “there was great joy in that city.” The miracles were not presented as entertainment, nor did Philip advertise himself as the indispensable source of divine power. Acts 8:6 says the people gave heed to the things Philip spoke, “hearing and seeing the miracles which he did.” The signs accompanied the preached word and drew attention to the truth being proclaimed. The central figure was Jesus Christ, not Philip. That distinction becomes especially important when Simon enters the narrative, because Simon's previous reputation had depended upon persuading people to admire him.

Samaria also occupied a significant place in the unfolding commission of Acts 1:8, where the risen Lord declared that His witnesses would testify in Jerusalem, Judaea, Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth. The Samaritans were not simply another Jewish congregation across town, nor should their reception of the word be confused with the later Gentile household of Cornelius. John 4:9 records the historical division between Jews and Samaritans, while John 4:22 preserves Christ's statement that salvation is of the Jews. The gospel's movement into Samaria therefore carried important significance in overcoming a longstanding separation. This was a developing historical period in which God was making known the risen Christ beyond Jerusalem while preserving the authority of the apostolic witness. Philip did not preach another Saviour for Samaritans. He preached Christ. But the circumstances surrounding the Samaritans' reception of the Holy Ghost would differ from those later recorded among Gentiles. That difference belongs to inspired history and must not be concealed.

2. Simon Had Spent Years Making Himself Look Like Somebody Great

Acts 8:9 introduces Simon with an unmistakable description of his earlier activities: he “used sorcery, and bewitched the people of Samaria, giving out that himself was some great one.” The expression “giving out” exposes his self-promotion. Simon was not merely a misunderstood village entertainer who performed harmless tricks for children. The Bible identifies his practices as sorcery and describes their effect upon the population. He had impressed people with extraordinary manifestations and cultivated a reputation for personal greatness. Acts 8:10 declares that the people regarded him with unusual reverence, saying, “This man is the great power of God.” Notice the terrible confusion. People attributed divine greatness to a man whose practices Scripture identifies with sorcery. Human amazement had become their measuring stick for spiritual authority. That remains one of religion's most dangerous mistakes. **A crowd can be astonished by something without understanding where its power comes from, and applause has never been a reliable test of divine approval.**

Acts 8:11 explains why Simon's influence had become so established: “And to him they had regard, because that of long time he had bewitched them with sorceries.” This was not an influence acquired during a brief afternoon demonstration. His reputation had developed over time, and the population had learned to associate remarkable manifestations with his personal importance. That background helps explain why the miracles accompanying Philip's preaching were particularly significant. The people were accustomed to being impressed by Simon, but Philip was proclaiming somebody greater than any local wonder-worker. His message concerned Jesus Christ, not the elevation of a human personality. The distinction between divine testimony and religious spectacle becomes sharp. Signs recorded under God's authority were not invitations to turn Christianity into another marketplace of supernatural entertainment. Simon's previous world revolved around extraordinary power and public attention. Philip's preaching confronted that world with the authority of the risen Lord. The question was no longer whether Simon could astonish Samaria, but whether Samaria would receive Christ.

There is a warning here that reaches well beyond ancient sorcery. A person may become fascinated with extraordinary experiences while remaining poorly instructed concerning the truth those experiences are supposed to serve. The same danger appears wherever religious leaders cultivate personal importance through claims of supernatural influence, secret spiritual privileges, or powers unavailable to ordinary believers unless somebody pays the admission price. Scripture does not condemn God's genuine miracles; Acts 8 plainly records them. It condemns the corruption that turns spiritual things into instruments of human exaltation. Simon's history explains the temptation without excusing his later wickedness. He had spent years being regarded as somebody great, and suddenly the preaching of Christ was drawing attention away from him. The Bible does not reveal every thought passing through his mind, but it reveals enough of his conduct to expose the danger. **When a man has built his identity upon being admired for power, he may be tempted to admire God's power for what it can do for his identity.**

3. They Believed Philip's Preaching, and Simon Was Baptized Among Them

Acts 8:12 marks the decisive change in Samaria: “But when they believed Philip preaching the things concerning the kingdom of God, and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women.” This verse deserves careful attention because it records the response of the people to the preached message. Philip proclaimed the things concerning the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, and the Samaritans believed. Their baptism followed in the historical account. The passage does not describe Philip forcing unwilling people into the water or administering a ceremony to manufacture belief inside them. They heard the message, received it, and were baptized. Neither should

their baptism be dismissed as worthless merely because the later narrative exposes Simon's wicked conduct. The fact that one baptized individual committed a serious sin does not invalidate the obedience of everybody else. The ordinance has its proper place, but it cannot be promoted into a guarantee that every participant possesses a right heart before God.

Verse 13 deliberately includes Simon in the response: “Then Simon himself believed also: and when he was baptized, he continued with Philip, and wondered, beholding the miracles and signs which were done.” The wording is important. Luke does not merely report that Simon watched the believers from a distance. He says Simon believed also, was baptized, and continued with Philip. A responsible interpreter must begin there. But the verse also records what particularly captured Simon's attention: the miracles and signs. He wondered as he beheld them. That observation becomes significant when his later offer of money exposes his desire for the power associated with the apostles' ministry. The text establishes both his stated belief and his fascination with the signs; it does not explicitly tell us everything about the depth or character of his faith. We must not use later wickedness to pretend the earlier statement was never written, nor use the earlier statement to excuse the wickedness that follows. **The Bible gives us both pieces of evidence, and honest preaching has no right to throw either one away.**

The immediate contrast also warns against treating baptism as an automatic certificate of inward spiritual perfection. Simon underwent the same outward ordinance recorded among the Samaritan believers, yet subsequent events exposed a serious problem in his heart. First Samuel 16:7 provides the governing principle: “for man looketh on the outward appearance, but the LORD looketh on the heart.” Philip could preach the gospel, observe professions, administer baptism, and continue teaching those who responded. He could not exercise God's perfect knowledge of every human heart. That is not a defect in Philip's ministry; it is a limitation belonging to every human minister. A church may examine testimony, require a credible profession of faith, and administer baptism according to Scripture, but it cannot see the inward man with the omniscience of God. Religious records document outward events. They do not possess the authority to pronounce every secret thought righteous. **A baptismal register can tell you who went into the water. It cannot tell you everything God saw when the person came out.**

4. Peter and John Arrived, and the Holy Ghost Had Not Yet Fallen

Acts 8:14 introduces another important development: “Now when the apostles which were at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God, they sent unto them Peter and John.” The apostles were not traveling to Samaria because Philip had preached a false Christ or because his baptism had been performed without sufficient religious ceremony.

Scripture states that Samaria had received the word of God. The Jerusalem apostles sent Peter and John, who prayed for the Samaritan believers that they might receive the Holy Ghost. Acts 8:16 gives the extraordinary explanation: “For as yet he was fallen upon none of them: only they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus.” Here are people who had received the word and undergone water baptism, yet the Holy Ghost had not fallen upon them in the manner recorded afterward. Anybody insisting that water baptism mechanically produces every spiritual result at the instant it is administered has encountered a serious difficulty. God recorded the distinction because the distinction matters.

Acts 8:17 continues, “Then laid they their hands on them, and they received the Holy Ghost.” The order is explicit: reception of the word, water baptism, the arrival of Peter and John, apostolic prayer and laying on of hands, and the reception of the Holy Ghost. This sequence differs from Acts 2, where Peter commanded repentance and baptism and promised the gift of the Holy Ghost. It also differs from Acts 10, where the Holy Ghost fell upon believing Gentiles before water baptism was administered. These are not three contradictory accounts. They are three historical accounts involving different circumstances during the unfolding ministry recorded in Acts. The Samaritan event also publicly connected their reception of the Holy Ghost with the recognized apostolic witness from Jerusalem. The long division between Jews and Samaritans was not an occasion for creating a rival spiritual kingdom. Christ was gathering believers under His authority. **God did not establish separate Christian franchises for Jerusalem and Samaria, each selling its own authorized version of the Holy Ghost.**

The appearance of John carries a remarkable historical contrast. Luke 9:54 records James and John asking whether they should command fire to come down from heaven and consume a Samaritan village that refused to receive Jesus Christ. The Lord rebuked them. Now Acts 8 records John traveling into Samaria with Peter, praying for people who had received Christ, and participating in the ministry through which they received the Holy Ghost. That is a striking change in the visible circumstances of his service. The former desire to call down destructive fire has given way to participation in the spread of Christ's testimony among Samaritans. But the account does not establish that every Christian throughout the Church Age must wait for an apostle to lay hands upon him before receiving the Spirit. Ephesians 1:13 later connects sealing with the Holy Spirit to hearing and believing the gospel. Acts records the remarkable historical developments surrounding the gospel's expansion; Paul's epistles provide doctrinal instruction concerning the believer's position in Christ. Confuse those purposes, and the exceptional becomes a compulsory ceremony.

5. Simon Tried to Purchase What God Gives Freely

Acts 8:18 identifies the moment when Simon's corrupted thinking became unmistakable: “And when Simon saw that through laying on of the apostles' hands the Holy Ghost was given, he offered them money.” The verse does not merely say that Simon desired spiritual growth or wished to understand the apostles' teaching. He observed the visible association between the laying on of their hands and the reception of the Holy Ghost, then offered money. His request in verse 19 was even more revealing: “Give me also this power, that on whomsoever I lay hands, he may receive the Holy Ghost.” Simon wanted the ability associated with the apostles' ministry. He was not asking Peter to explain the Scriptures or teach him how to pray. He wanted power that he could exercise upon others. The former sorcerer had recognized extraordinary spiritual authority, but his response revealed a dangerous misunderstanding of its source and nature. **He had left behind a reputation built upon sorcery, yet he approached apostolic authority as though the Holy Ghost operated a commercial licensing department.**

Peter's response was immediate and severe: “Thy money perish with thee, because thou hast thought that the gift of God may be purchased with money” (Acts 8:20). There is no ambiguity concerning the wickedness being condemned. Simon regarded a divine gift as something obtainable through financial exchange. The Holy Ghost is not merchandise, and apostolic authority was not available for purchase. Peter did not negotiate a price, suggest a larger donation, or promise that Simon could participate after completing a special fundraising commitment. He condemned the proposal. This rebuke exposes the corruption of any religious enterprise that treats spiritual power as a commodity controlled by men. God may provide for His servants through the willing support of believers, as Scripture plainly teaches, but financial support is not the purchase price of divine authority. Money can pay for a building, support a minister, or purchase ordinary materials. It cannot purchase the Holy Ghost. **A man may buy a pulpit, a microphone, and a thousand printed certificates, but he cannot buy one ounce of authority over the Spirit of God.**

The same principle rebukes modern religious merchandising without requiring us to pretend every ministry receiving financial support is corrupt. First Corinthians 9:14 states that the Lord ordained that those who preach the gospel should live of the gospel. That is biblical support for ministry, not permission to sell supernatural power. The distinction is enormous. A preacher receiving legitimate support for labor in the word is not doing what Simon attempted. A religious operator promising special anointing, guaranteed miracles, or extraordinary access to God in exchange for designated payments is approaching Simon's error with modern equipment. The problem is not the existence of money but the wicked idea that God's gift can be controlled through money. Simon's proposal transformed

spiritual authority into a purchasable advantage. Peter's rebuke restored the proper distinction between divine grace and human commerce. The Holy Ghost is God, not inventory. The ministry belongs to Christ, not the highest bidder. **Whenever a man puts a price tag on God's power, he has already announced that he understands money better than he understands God.**

6. Peter's Verdict Exposed the Heart, but Scripture Does Not Record Simon's Final Destination

Acts 8:21 continues Peter's rebuke: “Thou hast neither part nor lot in this matter: for thy heart is not right in the sight of God.” The immediate subject is Simon's attempted purchase of the authority associated with administering the gift of the Holy Ghost through the laying on of apostolic hands. Peter denies him any share in that matter and identifies the condition of his heart as the reason. It would be careless to take the phrase “neither part nor lot in this matter” and automatically expand it into an explicit declaration concerning Simon's eternal destination without considering the immediate context. But it would be equally careless to weaken Peter's verdict into a mild correction of an innocent misunderstanding. His heart was not right before God. That is an inspired judgment concerning a serious spiritual condition. The apostle did not say Simon merely needed to improve his technique. **The problem was not that Simon had offered too little money. The problem was that his heart had produced the offer.**

Peter then commands, “Repent therefore of this thy wickedness, and pray God, if perhaps the thought of thine heart may be forgiven thee” (Acts 8:22). Notice where the rebuke is directed. Peter identifies wickedness, calls for repentance, and directs Simon toward God for forgiveness. He does not order another baptism as the necessary cure for the condition he has exposed. He does not suggest that Simon needs a second administration of water performed by someone with greater apostolic credentials. The problem requires repentance and forgiveness from God. Verse 23 intensifies the diagnosis: “For I perceive that thou art in the gall of bitterness, and in the bond of iniquity.” Those are not decorative expressions chosen to make an ordinary disagreement sound impressive. They describe a deeply corrupt spiritual condition. Whatever conclusions are reached concerning Simon's earlier profession, this much is beyond dispute: the administration of water had not prevented him from arriving at this wicked proposal. The outward ordinance could not substitute for the inward dealings of God.

Acts 8:24 records Simon's response: “Pray ye to the Lord for me, that none of these things which ye have spoken come upon me.” That answer reveals fear concerning Peter's warning, but the passage does not record a detailed confession establishing the final condition of Simon's soul. He asks the apostles to pray, yet Scripture does not explicitly

state whether he personally fulfilled Peter's command to repent and pray to God. Neither does it follow him through the remainder of his life and pronounce his eternal destiny. A faithful reader should stop where the inspired account stops. Acts 8:25 returns to Peter and John testifying, preaching the word of the Lord, and evangelizing Samaritan villages as they traveled toward Jerusalem. Simon disappears from the account. His spiritual condition at the moment of Peter's rebuke was grave; his final destination is not disclosed. There is no need to pretend otherwise. **The Bible gives enough information to condemn Simon's wickedness without giving any preacher permission to appoint himself the recording angel of Simon's eternity.**

7. The Lord Looks on the Heart, and the Gospel Saves Through Faith

First Samuel 16:7 establishes a principle that reaches directly into the account of Simon: “for man looketh on the outward appearance, but the LORD looketh on the heart.” When Samuel examined the sons of Jesse, outward appearance was an insufficient measure of God's choice. The Lord saw what human observation could not determine. That principle remains true when examining religious profession. Men can hear a confession of faith, witness baptism, observe attendance, and recognize outward participation in a congregation. They cannot directly inspect the hidden condition of another person's heart. This limitation should produce biblical discernment, not permanent suspicion toward everybody who professes Christ. Scripture commands the Church to receive and instruct believers while also warning against hypocrisy and false profession. Simon's account demonstrates that religious association cannot replace spiritual reality. It does not authorize a preacher to declare every struggling believer unconverted. **The heart is not an open ledger lying upon the church secretary's desk, and nobody receives omniscience when he receives a ministerial title.**

Romans 10:9–10 identifies the saving importance of genuine faith: “That if thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved. For with the heart man believeth unto righteousness; and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation.” Paul's instruction directs attention to the Lord Jesus Christ and the reality of faith in the heart. Romans 10:13 adds, “For whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.” The gospel does not present baptismal water as a substitute for believing in Christ. First Corinthians 15:1–4 identifies the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ as the substance of the saving message. Ephesians 2:8–9 establishes salvation by grace through faith, not of works. A person may perform an outward religious act while remaining spiritually confused, hypocritical, or unbelieving. Conversely, a genuine believer may commit serious sin

requiring repentance and correction without thereby disproving the sufficiency of Christ's saving work. Simon's conduct must be judged without confusing these distinct issues.

Acts 10:44–48 provides the decisive comparison concerning water and the reception of the Holy Ghost. While Peter was preaching Christ to Cornelius's household, the Holy Ghost fell upon those hearing the word. Only afterward did Peter ask, “Can any man forbid water, that these should not be baptized, which have received the Holy Ghost as well as we?” Those Gentiles received the Holy Ghost before water baptism. In Samaria, the believers were baptized before the Holy Ghost fell upon them through the ministry of Peter and John. Acts records both arrangements, and both must remain intact. The historical differences expose the folly of treating baptismal water as a machine that automatically produces the same spiritual result under every circumstance. In the present Church Age, the believer is saved by grace through faith and sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise, according to Ephesians 1:13. Water baptism has an important place as an act of obedience and public testimony, but it must not be confused with the divine operation of salvation. **A preacher may lower a believer into the water, but only God can place a believer into Christ.**

Conclusion — The Water Was Real, but So Was the Wickedness

Simon the sorcerer stands as a solemn warning against confusing religious participation with an inward condition acceptable to God. He had astonished Samaria through sorcery, received public admiration, heard Philip preach Jesus Christ, believed according to the biblical record, and submitted to water baptism. He continued with Philip and witnessed the signs accompanying the ministry. But when Peter and John arrived and the Holy Ghost was given through their laying on of hands, Simon attempted to purchase the power he had observed. Peter's rebuke revealed the seriousness of that proposal and identified a heart that was not right before God. The point is not that baptism was fraudulent or that Philip had committed an error by administering it. The point is that baptism could not guarantee the condition of Simon's heart. The outward act had occurred, but a wicked desire still required confrontation. **Simon had enough religion to enter the water, enough interest to follow the preacher, and enough corruption to attempt purchasing what belonged to God alone.**

The account also forbids careless conclusions in the opposite direction. Because Peter condemned Simon's heart, some readers immediately announce that his profession had never contained genuine faith. Others insist that the statement “Simon himself believed also” settles every question and leaves no possibility that his profession was defective. The wiser course is to believe everything Scripture records and refuse to invent the information it withholds. Peter rebuked wickedness, demanded repentance, and directed Simon toward God for forgiveness. The passage does not settle his final eternal condition. But the

broader doctrinal lesson is plain: water baptism is not an automatic cure for an unrighteous heart, and spiritual power cannot be purchased with money. Genuine salvation rests upon Jesus Christ, and the believer's conduct remains subject to the searching authority of God's word. Religious ordinances must be honored without being promoted into supernatural machinery. **The blood of Christ saves; the Spirit of God performs His divine work; the word of God exposes the heart; and water baptism must never be advertised as a substitute for any of them.**

The final picture is not of a preacher discovering that water baptism is useless. It is of Scripture demonstrating that an outward ordinance cannot accomplish every spiritual result religious men may claim for it. Philip faithfully preached Christ. The Samaritans received the word. The apostles ministered under God's authority. The Holy Ghost was given. Simon committed a serious wickedness and received a devastating rebuke. Every part of that account belongs in its proper place. There is no contradiction requiring repair, no reason to despise baptism, and no authority to turn the ceremony into another Saviour. First Samuel 16:7 still declares that the Lord looks upon the heart, and Romans 10:10 still declares that with the heart man believes unto righteousness. Those truths cannot be displaced by outward religious performance. **Simon went down into the water under a preacher's ministry, but the water could not hide what God saw in his heart. He could stand among the baptized, follow the evangelist, and witness extraordinary signs, yet still require a sharp rebuke for wickedness. A certificate may record that a man was baptized, but it cannot certify that his heart is right with God. The Jordan cannot become Calvary, the baptistry cannot replace the blood, and no amount of water can purchase what God gives through Jesus Christ.**

5 of 10 — Water Baptism Without Confusion — Faith Before the Fountain: The Ethiopian Eunuch and the Question the Water Could Not Answer

Key Passage — Acts 8:36–37: “And as they went on their way, they came unto a certain water: and the eunuch said, See, here is water; what doth hinder me to be baptized? And Philip said, If thou believest with all thine heart, thou mayest. And he answered and said, I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.”

There is a question sitting beside a desert road in Acts 8 that has caused more trouble for baptismal regeneration than a hundred theological arguments delivered from polished pulpits. An Ethiopian official has been reading the prophet Isaiah, a Spirit-directed preacher has explained the Scriptures, and Jesus Christ has been proclaimed. Suddenly,

the traveler sees water and asks, “See, here is water; what doth hinder me to be baptized?” Now, if water baptism were the instrument that manufactured saving faith, this would have been the perfect opportunity for Philip to explain the necessity of getting wet before believing. Instead, Philip gives an answer that leaves the religious machinery standing idle: “If thou believest with all thine heart, thou mayest.” There is the condition, stated plainly enough to trouble anybody determined to put the ceremony ahead of the Saviour. Philip did not ask whether the man could pay the minister, join the denomination, or complete a religious probation. He asked for faith in Jesus Christ. **The water was available, but the heart had to answer first.**

The circumstances make the account even more remarkable. Philip had been preaching successfully in Samaria, where multitudes received the message concerning Jesus Christ, miracles accompanied his ministry, and great joy filled the city. Yet God directed him away from that public work and sent him toward a deserted road leading from Jerusalem to Gaza. There he encountered one traveler returning toward Ethiopia, reading a passage of Scripture he did not understand. The Lord arranged the meeting, the preacher explained the passage, and the traveler heard concerning Jesus Christ. There was no elaborate religious institution supervising the conversation, no congregation gathered to applaud the decision, and no committee waiting beside the road to certify the candidate's qualifications. There was a Bible, a preacher, a searching man, and a Saviour worthy of belief. The account demonstrates something modern religion frequently forgets: God's interest in an individual soul is not measured by the size of the audience watching the preacher.

The doctrinal importance extends beyond the order of baptism. Acts 8 records events during the historical expansion of the gospel beyond Jerusalem, and those circumstances must be respected rather than forced into a modern church setting without examination. Philip's encounter follows the Samaritan revival and precedes Peter's ministry in the Gentile household of Cornelius. The book is moving through significant developments in God's dealings with Jews, Samaritans, and Gentiles. Yet the Ethiopian account presents a distinction that stands plainly within its own words: the man hears Christ preached, confesses faith in Him, and then receives water baptism. The passage does not portray the water producing the faith that qualified him to enter it. Nor does it suggest that baptism should be despised because salvation rests upon Christ. Both truths must remain intact. **The Bible does not require us to choose between believing the gospel and obeying the Lord. It requires us to put each in its proper place.**

1. God Sent Philip Away from the Crowd to Meet One Man in the Desert

Acts 8:26 records the divine direction: “And the angel of the Lord spake unto Philip, saying, Arise, and go toward the south unto the way that goeth down from Jerusalem unto Gaza, which is desert.” That command comes immediately after the account of Philip's fruitful ministry in Samaria. Human reasoning might have encouraged him to remain where the crowds were gathering and the work appeared successful. But the Lord's servant was not commissioned to follow popularity. He was commanded to obey. Philip did not demand an explanation concerning attendance figures, future opportunities, or the apparent inconvenience of exchanging a crowded city for a lonely road. Verse 27 begins with the simple statement, “And he arose and went.” There is more genuine obedience in those five words than in a truckload of religious speeches delivered by men who refuse to move until somebody guarantees the results. **God does not need the servant to understand every mile of the journey before obeying the first command.**

The timing was remarkable. Philip was directed toward a particular road, and there he encountered a man traveling home after worshiping in Jerusalem. Nothing in the account indicates that Philip knew beforehand whom he would meet or what passage the traveler would be reading. The angel supplied the direction, and Philip followed it. Acts 8:29 then records the Spirit saying, “Go near, and join thyself to this chariot.” Notice the distinction between the initial instruction and the subsequent direction. Philip was first told where to go, and then he was told whom to approach. The servant obeyed the light already given before receiving the next instruction. That does not authorize modern believers to invent private revelations whenever ordinary biblical obedience becomes inconvenient. It establishes what Scripture actually records concerning this divinely directed apostolic-era encounter. The Lord was arranging a meeting through which His word would reach a particular individual. Heaven had business on that desert road, and Philip was sent to conduct it.

The traveler was no ordinary passenger. Acts 8:27 identifies him as “a man of Ethiopia, an eunuch of great authority under Candace queen of the Ethiopians, who had the charge of all her treasure.” This man held considerable governmental responsibility. He managed royal wealth and possessed the means to travel a considerable distance. Yet his political position had not supplied the understanding he needed concerning God's word. He had gone to Jerusalem to worship and was returning home while reading Isaiah. Scripture does not specify every detail of his religious background, and it is unnecessary to invent them. What matters is that a man of influence was seeking understanding from the Scriptures. His treasury could contain earthly riches, but it could not explain the suffering Servant of Isaiah 53. **A man may manage the wealth of a kingdom and still need somebody to show him the riches of Christ. Gold can purchase transportation, but it cannot purchase revelation from God.**

2. The Man Was Reading Isaiah, but He Needed to Know Whom Isaiah Described

Acts 8:28 places the Ethiopian in his chariot, reading "Esaias the prophet." Philip approaches and asks in verse 30, "Understandest thou what thou readest?" That is one of the finest questions a preacher can ask. Philip did not begin by boasting about his miracles in Samaria or describing the remarkable circumstances that brought him to the road. He directed attention to the man's understanding of Scripture. The Ethiopian answered, "How can I, except some man should guide me?" He then invited Philip to sit with him. There is humility in that response. A government official entrusted with considerable authority was willing to acknowledge that he did not understand the passage before him. He did not pretend that official position supplied biblical knowledge. Many people with far less authority have displayed considerably more pride. **A man who admits he needs instruction is already better prepared to learn than the religious expert who thinks his ignorance becomes wisdom when spoken confidently.**

The passage being read appears in Acts 8:32–33 and corresponds to Isaiah 53:7–8. It describes One led as a sheep to the slaughter, silent before His persecutors, humiliated, deprived of judgment, and taken from the earth. Isaiah 53 belongs to the prophetic testimony concerning the suffering Servant whose sacrifice is connected with the sins of others. Isaiah 53:5 declares, "But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed." Verse 6 adds that "the LORD hath laid on him the iniquity of us all." These are not descriptions of a sinner undergoing punishment for his own crimes. They concern the suffering of One bearing the iniquities of others. The passage points beyond the ordinary suffering of a righteous man to the redemptive work of the promised Messiah. The Ethiopian was reading the words, but he needed to understand the person to whom they pointed.

Acts 8:34 records his precise question: "I pray thee, of whom speaketh the prophet this? of himself, or of some other man?" That question goes straight to the center of biblical interpretation. Who is the subject of the passage? The Ethiopian did not ask Philip to produce an inspirational thought, invent a symbolic meaning, or turn the prophecy into a collection of encouraging statements about personal adversity. He wanted to know whom Isaiah was describing. That distinction is essential. Isaiah 53 cannot be properly understood by removing the suffering Servant and replacing Him with whatever religious experience interests the reader. The passage has an identifiable subject, and Philip was about to reveal Him. A preacher who cannot identify the person at the center of a passage has no business constructing elaborate applications around it. **Before asking what the**

Bible means to you, find out what God actually said and whom He was talking about. A mistaken subject can ruin an otherwise impressive sermon.

3. Philip Preached Jesus, Not a Ceremony Looking for a Candidate

Acts 8:35 gives one of the clearest descriptions of faithful biblical preaching in the entire book: “Then Philip opened his mouth, and began at the same scripture, and preached unto him Jesus.” Notice the order. Philip began with the passage the man was reading, explained its connection with Jesus Christ, and proclaimed the Saviour. He did not need to manufacture a sermon from disconnected religious opinions because the Scripture itself testified concerning Christ. Isaiah 53 supplied the prophetic foundation, and the completed events concerning Jesus provided the fulfillment. The One wounded for transgressions, bruised for iniquities, and led as a lamb to the slaughter was not an unidentified religious martyr. The prophetic testimony reached its answer in Jesus Christ. Philip's preaching was centered upon a person, not a procedure. **The preacher's assignment was not to make the Ethiopian admire Philip's abilities. It was to make him understand the Saviour Isaiah had been describing.**

The historical setting also matters. Unlike John the Baptist standing beside the Jordan before Calvary, Philip was preaching after the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The events anticipated by Isaiah had occurred. First Corinthians 15:3–4 later states the saving gospel plainly: “Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures; And that he was buried, and that he rose again the third day according to the scriptures.” Isaiah 53 provides powerful prophetic testimony concerning the suffering and death of Christ, while the New Testament proclaims His resurrection and completed redemptive work. Acts 8 does not reproduce every sentence Philip spoke, and nobody has authority to invent a complete transcript of the conversation. But the inspired summary is sufficient: he preached Jesus. The passage supplies the subject of his preaching and records the Ethiopian's resulting confession. The man's attention was directed toward the Son of God, not toward a ceremony as the source of salvation.

Romans 10:17 declares, “So then faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God.” That principle is illustrated beautifully in the Ethiopian's encounter. He was reading Scripture, received instruction concerning its meaning, and heard Jesus Christ proclaimed. His confession followed the preached word. Compare that with Simon earlier in Acts 8, who was baptized but later attempted to purchase the power associated with the Holy Ghost. Simon's conduct exposed the danger of spiritual fascination without a right understanding of God's gifts. The Ethiopian's account places the emphasis upon receiving the testimony concerning Christ. He does not ask for supernatural authority, attempt to purchase extraordinary power, or seek a public reputation as a religious wonder-worker. He

asks about baptism after hearing Jesus preached. The contrast is instructive without requiring us to pronounce everything about either man's eternal condition. **The gospel is not an exhibition designed to astonish spectators. It is God's testimony concerning His Son, demanding a response of faith.**

4. “What Doth Hinder Me?” — The Question That Exposed the Proper Order

Acts 8:36 brings the traveler and preacher to a decisive moment: “And as they went on their way, they came unto a certain water: and the eunuch said, See, here is water; what doth hinder me to be baptized?” The water appears after Philip has preached Jesus. The Ethiopian sees it and asks what prevents him from receiving baptism. His question assumes that baptism is a meaningful response to the message he has heard. Philip does not rebuke him for requesting it, nor does he dismiss the ordinance as worthless. Yet the account also does not present the water as the instrument through which the man must first obtain faith. The instruction concerning Christ precedes the request. The Ethiopian has heard the word and now wishes to respond publicly. **The water was not searching for a sinner to save. A man who had heard about the Saviour was asking whether he could enter it.**

Philip's answer in Acts 8:37 establishes the condition: “If thou believest with all thine heart, thou mayest.” Those words deserve to be read without apology, rearrangement, or denominational assistance. Philip did not answer, “If thou enterest the water, thou mayest afterwards believe.” He did not make the ceremony the producer of the faith required for salvation. He made belief the condition governing the administration of baptism. The expression “with all thine heart” concerns the sincerity and reality of faith, not the accomplishment of sinless perfection before baptism. Nobody becomes worthy of Christ through the intensity of his own religious performance. The object of faith is the Saviour, and genuine belief receives the testimony God has given concerning Him. Philip's answer also demonstrates that not every person requesting baptism should automatically receive it without regard to faith. **A preacher who refuses to ask whether a candidate believes has neglected the very question Philip considered important enough to ask beside the road.**

The Ethiopian responds, “I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.” That confession identifies both the person and the substance of his faith. He does not confess confidence in the Jordan River, the authority of Philip's hands, or the spiritual effectiveness of a ceremony not yet administered. He confesses Jesus Christ as the Son of God. John 20:31 later explains the purpose of the written testimony concerning Christ: “that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing ye might have life through his name.” The object of saving faith is not religious water but the living Lord.

Romans 10:9–10 likewise connects salvation with confessing the Lord Jesus and believing in the heart that God raised Him from the dead. These passages must be respected in their proper doctrinal settings, but the central distinction remains unmistakable. **The Ethiopian's mouth confessed Christ before his body entered the water. The ordinance followed the confession; it did not manufacture the Son of God in his heart.**

5. They Went Down Into the Water, but the Water Was Not the Redeemer

Acts 8:38 records the administration of baptism: "And he commanded the chariot to stand still: and they went down both into the water, both Philip and the eunuch; and he baptized him." The details are deliberately practical. The chariot stopped, the men went down into the water, and Philip baptized the Ethiopian. Verse 39 continues, "And when they were come up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord caught away Philip." The language provides strong support for baptism involving immersion. Both men entered the water, the baptism occurred there, and both emerged from it. The description fits naturally with placing a person beneath the water rather than merely applying a few drops while standing at a distance. Yet the words also require precision: both men went into the water, although only the Ethiopian was baptized. Entering the water was part of the circumstances; the baptism was the act Philip administered to the candidate.

The significance of immersion becomes clearer when compared with Romans 6:3–4, where Paul speaks of believers baptized into Jesus Christ and into His death, declaring, "Therefore we are buried with him by baptism into death." The language of burial and resurrection supplies the spiritual reality to which Christian immersion appropriately bears witness. Colossians 2:12 similarly speaks of being "Buried with him in baptism" and being risen with Him "through the faith of the operation of God." These passages primarily concern the believer's identification with Christ through God's divine work, not the claim that literal water possesses independent power to unite a sinner to the Redeemer. Nevertheless, immersion provides a fitting outward picture of burial and rising. The distinction must remain clear. A physical picture can testify to a spiritual reality without causing that reality to exist. **A graveyard photograph does not bury a man, and a baptismal picture does not accomplish the divine operation it represents.**

The Ethiopian's baptism also warns against turning obedience into a second gospel. Philip administered the ordinance after hearing the man's confession of faith, and Scripture records the act without presenting it as an alternative sacrifice for sin. Hebrews 9:22 declares that "without shedding of blood is no remission." First John 1:7 states that "the blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth us from all sin." Those statements identify the redemptive foundation of forgiveness. Water may wash the body, and baptism may provide a public testimony concerning Christ, but the ceremony cannot improve upon the sacrifice

of the Lamb of God. Nor does recognizing that distinction provide an excuse for despising baptism. The Ethiopian did not argue that obedience was unnecessary because he had already believed. He requested baptism and received it. **Faith does not need water to make Christ sufficient, but genuine faith has no reason to despise what the Lord has commanded. The ordinance has dignity when it remains a servant of the truth.**

6. The Preacher Disappeared, but the Ethiopian Went Home Rejoicing

Acts 8:39 records a remarkable conclusion to the encounter: “the Spirit of the Lord caught away Philip, that the eunuch saw him no more: and he went on his way rejoicing.” Philip's sudden departure was an extraordinary divine act, not an ordinary traveling arrangement available to every preacher who wishes to avoid a difficult congregation. The event demonstrates the Lord's authority over His servant and the completion of Philip's immediate assignment. Yet the Ethiopian's response is particularly important. He went on his way rejoicing even though Philip was no longer present. The man who had helped him understand the Scriptures had disappeared, but the Christ he had learned about remained. His joy was not dependent upon permanent access to the preacher. **A faithful minister points people toward a Saviour who remains when the minister is gone. If the congregation cannot function without worshiping the preacher's personality, somebody has confused the messenger with the Master.**

The rejoicing follows a clear progression: the Ethiopian read Scripture, received instruction, heard Jesus preached, confessed faith, and was baptized. Scripture does not tell us every thought he experienced or reproduce every word of his subsequent testimony. We should not invent an emotional account more detailed than the inspired record. But the statement that he went on his way rejoicing is enough to demonstrate the character of his departure. He was not traveling home under the burden of uncertainty concerning whether Philip possessed sufficient ecclesiastical credentials to make the ceremony effective. Nor was he commanded to remain permanently beside the road waiting for additional religious authorization. The encounter had accomplished its recorded purpose. The man now knew whom Isaiah described, had confessed Jesus Christ as the Son of God, and had obeyed through baptism. **The joy followed the revelation of the Saviour. The river supplied the setting for obedience, but the Son of God supplied the reason for rejoicing.**

Acts 8:40 then tells us that Philip was found at Azotus and continued preaching in the cities until he came to Caesarea. The servant's ministry did not end when the Ethiopian departed. Philip continued proclaiming the gospel wherever the Lord placed him. This is consistent with the pattern already established in Samaria and on the desert road: the preacher's task was to make Christ known. He was not building a personal kingdom around extraordinary experiences, nor was he collecting religious trophies to display before an admiring

audience. The inspired account follows Philip from public revival to personal instruction and onward into further evangelistic labor. There is a practical rebuke here for anybody who measures ministry solely by visible numbers. One soul receiving biblical instruction matters to God, even when no crowd gathers to witness the encounter. **A preacher who is faithful with one traveler beside a deserted road has not abandoned the ministry. He has demonstrated that the ministry belongs to Christ rather than the crowd.**

7. Acts 8, Acts 16, and Romans 10 Put Faith Where It Belongs

The Ethiopian's experience must be compared with other passages without forcing every historical circumstance into one mechanical arrangement. Acts 2:38 records Peter commanding Jews at Pentecost to repent and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins. Acts 8 records Samaritans receiving baptism before the Holy Ghost fell upon them through the subsequent ministry of Peter and John. Later in the same chapter, the Ethiopian hears Jesus preached, confesses faith, and receives baptism. Acts 10 records the Holy Ghost falling upon Cornelius's household before Peter commands water baptism. Those differences are written in the same inspired book. They are not mistakes requiring correction. The historical progression from Jerusalem through Samaria toward the Gentile world must be recognized. **When one passage records water before the reception of the Holy Ghost and another records the Holy Ghost before water, the religious mechanic who insists that God always follows his preferred sequence ought to put down his wrench and read both chapters.**

Acts 16:25–34 supplies a particularly useful comparison. After the earthquake in the Philippian prison, the jailer asks Paul and Silas, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?” They answer, “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved, and thy house.” Verse 32 explains that they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house. Verse 33 records that he and his household were baptized, and verse 34 describes his rejoicing, “believing in God with all his house.” The order of the account is instructive. The gospel is proclaimed, faith is emphasized, and baptism follows. The mention of the household does not establish that unbelieving infants were baptized by proxy, nor does it mean the jailer's personal belief automatically saved his relatives without their hearing the word. The word was preached to those in the house. The pattern agrees with the Ethiopian's confession: faith in Christ stands before the outward ordinance.

Romans 10:9–17 gives the doctrinal explanation. A sinner confesses the Lord Jesus and believes in the heart that God raised Him from the dead. “For with the heart man believeth unto righteousness; and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation.” Verse 13 declares, “For whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.” Paul then explains the necessity of preaching and hearing, concluding that faith comes by hearing

the word of God. The Ethiopian's encounter supplies a vivid historical illustration of that principle. Philip preached Christ from Scripture, and the man responded with faith. First Corinthians 1:17 further distinguishes Paul's commission to preach the gospel from the administration of baptism. Ephesians 2:8–9 establishes salvation by grace through faith, not works. These passages do not render water baptism worthless. They prevent it from being installed as an additional Redeemer. **The gospel directs sinners to believe on Christ. Baptism directs attention toward the Christ believed upon. Confuse those functions, and the testimony becomes a counterfeit transaction.**

Conclusion — The Water Was Waiting, but the Word Came First

The Ethiopian eunuch's account presents a powerful example of divine direction, biblical instruction, personal faith, and obedient baptism. God sent Philip away from the multitude in Samaria and brought him to a traveler reading Isaiah 53. Philip asked whether the man understood what he was reading, and the Ethiopian acknowledged his need for instruction. The prophet's words concerning the suffering Servant became the starting point for preaching Jesus Christ. Only after that proclamation did the traveler ask about baptism. Philip answered by requiring belief with all the heart, and the man confessed Jesus Christ as the Son of God. The chariot stopped, both men entered the water, and Philip baptized him. The Ethiopian then continued his journey rejoicing. The inspired order is not complicated. **The Scripture was opened, the Saviour was preached, the heart believed, the mouth confessed, and the body entered the water. Religious tradition may prefer another arrangement, but it did not write the chapter.**

The lesson must not be distorted in either direction. Water baptism is not a religious invention to be discarded because salvation is by grace, and it is not a saving sacrament to be trusted because Scripture records believers receiving it. The Ethiopian's request demonstrates the importance of obedience, while Philip's answer demonstrates the priority of faith. Immersion appropriately portrays burial and rising, but the physical act cannot perform the spiritual work of placing a sinner into Jesus Christ. The Lord's ordinances are valuable precisely because they belong to Him and testify to His truth. Their value is corrupted when religious institutions claim for them the power that belongs to the Saviour. A baptismal certificate can record an outward act, but it cannot substitute for believing the gospel. The preacher may administer water, but he cannot manufacture saving faith inside another person's heart. **The church does not save sinners by processing them through a religious ceremony. The Lord Jesus Christ saves those who believe on Him.**

The final verdict stands beside that desert road in the words of Acts 8:37: “If thou believest with all thine heart, thou mayest.” Philip did not tell the Ethiopian to trust the water, and the

Ethiopian did not confess faith in the man administering it. He confessed Jesus Christ as the Son of God. That confession preceded his baptism, and his rejoicing followed the encounter. The same distinction must govern our understanding of water baptism today. Believe the Scriptures, preach the Saviour, require a credible profession of faith, and administer the ordinance without pretending it possesses the power of redemption. The blood of Christ accomplishes what water never could, and the Spirit of God performs what no human minister can produce. There is no need to diminish baptism in order to exalt salvation by grace, because baptism occupies its rightful position when Christ receives the glory. **The Ethiopian found water beside the road, but he found the answer to Isaiah in Jesus Christ. The water could receive his body, but it could not answer the question that mattered most. Philip answered that question with the word of God, and the man answered Philip with faith. Never put the fountain ahead of the Saviour. The water was ready, but the heart had to believe.**

6 of 10 — Water Baptism Without Confusion — The Holy Ghost Arrived Before the Baptistry: Cornelius Ruins the Water-Salvation Formula

Key Passage — Acts 10:47: "Can any man forbid water, that these should not be baptized, which have received the Holy Ghost as well as we?"

There is a remarkable problem waiting for every preacher who insists that nobody can receive the Holy Ghost until somebody has lowered him into a tank of water. The problem has a name, a household, and an entire chapter of inspired Scripture standing behind it. His name was Cornelius, he was a Gentile centurion, and Acts 10 records the Holy Ghost falling upon his household before anybody administered water baptism. Acts 10:44 declares, "While Peter yet spake these words, the Holy Ghost fell on all them which heard the word." Three verses later, Peter asks whether anybody can forbid water to people who have already received the Holy Ghost. That order is not complicated. The preaching came first, the Holy Ghost came next, and the water followed afterward. Somebody may dislike that arrangement because it knocks a hole through his denominational machinery, but the Holy Ghost apparently did not consult the baptismal committee before descending upon those Gentiles. **When God gives a man the Holy Ghost before the preacher gets him wet, the preacher has no business declaring that God forgot how salvation works.**

Acts 10 stands at a decisive point in the unfolding history of the early Church. The gospel had been preached in Jerusalem, had moved into Samaria, and was now being carried into a Gentile household under circumstances that would force even Peter to confront

assumptions inherited from Israel's longstanding separation from the nations. This was not merely another conversion account placed in Acts to provide variety. It was a divinely arranged demonstration that believing Gentiles were being received by God without first becoming Jews or passing through the ceremonial requirements associated with Israel's national covenant. Peter needed preparation, Cornelius needed the gospel, and the Jewish believers accompanying Peter needed to witness what God was accomplishing. The Lord arranged all three. The chapter therefore becomes indispensable to understanding the relationship between faith, remission of sins, the gift of the Holy Ghost, and water baptism. **God was opening a door to the Gentiles, and religious tradition was standing beside the doorway wondering who had authorized the hinges.**

The account must also be compared with Acts 2 and Acts 8 without attempting to make every event occur in precisely the same order. At Pentecost, Peter commanded Jews to repent and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins and promised the gift of the Holy Ghost. In Samaria, people believed Philip's preaching and were baptized, yet the Holy Ghost had not fallen upon them until Peter and John arrived. In Cornelius's house, the Holy Ghost fell while Peter was still preaching, before water baptism took place. Those are three inspired accounts, not three defective reports requiring denominational repairs. The book of Acts records significant historical developments as the testimony of Jesus Christ moves outward, and those developments must be understood in light of the doctrinal revelation that follows. **The Lord never instructed Bible believers to flatten Acts into a single ceremonial formula and then accuse the Scriptures of inconsistency whenever God refuses to follow their arrangement.**

1. Cornelius Was a Devout Gentile, but His Good Works Were Not the Gospel

Acts 10:1 introduces Cornelius as “a centurion of the band called the Italian band.” He was a Roman military officer living in Caesarea, not an Israelite standing under the national covenant God made with Abraham's physical descendants. Verse 2 describes him as “A devout man, and one that feared God with all his house, which gave much alms to the people, and prayed to God alway.” That is an impressive testimony concerning his conduct. Cornelius feared God, prayed regularly, showed generosity, and exercised spiritual influence within his household. Yet the chapter does not present his respectable behavior as a substitute for receiving the gospel of Jesus Christ. He was a man whom God was preparing to hear the message of salvation. The distinction matters because religious people have a habit of examining outward respectability and announcing that somebody must already possess everything necessary for eternal life. **Cornelius had enough good conduct to embarrass many church members, but respectable conduct could not replace the message of the crucified and risen Saviour.**

Acts 10:3–4 records an angel appearing to Cornelius in a vision and declaring, “Thy prayers and thine alms are come up for a memorial before God.” Those words establish that God had taken notice of Cornelius's prayers and generosity. They do not declare that almsgiving had purchased forgiveness or that repeated prayers had earned the righteousness required for salvation. The angel's next instruction makes the distinction plain. Cornelius was told to send men to Joppa and call for Simon Peter, who was lodging with Simon a tanner. Acts 11:14 later supplies the significance of Peter's coming: “Who shall tell thee words, whereby thou and all thy house shall be saved.” Cornelius needed words concerning salvation, not merely congratulations for his charitable activities. His prayers were noticed, but the gospel still had to be proclaimed. **A man may have a generous hand, a disciplined life, and an impressive reputation, yet remain desperately dependent upon the finished work of Jesus Christ. God does not accept charitable receipts as payment for sin.**

There is another important detail in the instructions given to Cornelius. The angel did not personally deliver the entire saving message and eliminate the need for a human witness. He directed Cornelius to summon Peter, whom the Lord had commissioned to bear testimony concerning Jesus Christ. The gospel was to be heard, understood, and believed. Romans 10:17 later declares, “So then faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God.” Cornelius obeyed the heavenly instruction, called two household servants and a devout soldier, explained the circumstances, and sent them to Joppa. He was not told to construct a baptistry or arrange a ceremonial cleansing before Peter arrived. The immediate assignment was to send for a preacher who would declare the word of God. That should not be overlooked. **Heaven arranged for Cornelius to hear the gospel before anybody mentioned the administration of water. When God wanted this Gentile household instructed concerning salvation, He sent for a man with a message, not a bucket with a blessing.**

2. Peter's Rooftop Vision Exposed the Barrier Between Jew and Gentile

While Cornelius's messengers approached Joppa, Peter went upon the housetop to pray. Acts 10:10 records that he became hungry and fell into a trance. He saw heaven opened and a vessel descending like a great sheet containing various fourfooted beasts, wild beasts, creeping things, and fowls of the air. A voice commanded, “Rise, Peter; kill, and eat.” Peter protested in verse 14: “Not so, Lord; for I have never eaten any thing that is common or unclean.” His objection reflected the distinction between clean and unclean animals established under the law given to Israel. Leviticus 11 had not been a collection of optional dietary suggestions for Israelites who happened to enjoy religious regulations. Those distinctions belonged to God's covenantal dealings with the nation. Peter's reluctance therefore arose from an actual historical background. The Lord was about to

teach him something that would affect far more than his next meal. **Peter had spent his life learning what Israel was forbidden to eat, and now heaven was teaching him whom he must not refuse to hear.**

Acts 10:15 records the answer: “What God hath cleansed, that call not thou common.” The event occurred three times, emphasizing that Peter was receiving a deliberate divine instruction rather than experiencing an ordinary passing thought. But the vision must be interpreted by the explanation Scripture subsequently provides. When Peter enters Cornelius's household, he declares in Acts 10:28, “God hath shewed me that I should not call any man common or unclean.” That is the application Peter himself identifies. The Lord was correcting his understanding concerning association with Gentiles whom God was preparing to receive. The passage has implications concerning the ceremonial distinctions associated with Israel's law, but its immediate function in the narrative is to bring Peter into a Gentile home without resisting God's purpose. A vision containing animals was used to teach him about people. **The fellow who spends the entire chapter debating the menu while ignoring Cornelius has managed to study the sheet and overlook the reason heaven lowered it.**

Acts 10:19–20 records the Spirit instructing Peter to go with the messengers, “doubting nothing: for I have sent them.” Peter obeyed, and six brethren accompanied him, as Acts 11:12 later establishes. These Jewish witnesses would become important when the events were questioned in Jerusalem. Peter did not enter Gentile territory as a religious adventurer acting without divine direction. The Lord was deliberately arranging an encounter that would demonstrate His acceptance of believing Gentiles. Ephesians 2:11–16 later explains the breaking down of the middle wall of partition through the work of Jesus Christ, but that fuller doctrinal revelation should not be forced backward into Peter's knowledge before the events unfolded. Acts records his gradual understanding of what God was accomplishing. The historical distinction between Israel and the nations was real, but it did not mean Gentiles were beyond the reach of God's grace. **God had never promised that Peter's inherited expectations would possess veto power over the gospel.**

3. Peter Entered the Gentile House and Preached Jesus Christ

Acts 10:24–26 records Peter arriving at Caesarea, where Cornelius had gathered his relatives and close friends. When Cornelius met him, he fell at Peter's feet and worshipped him. Peter immediately corrected the action: “Stand up; I myself also am a man.” That statement deserves permanent attention wherever religious leaders receive honors belonging to God. Peter was an apostle of Jesus Christ, but apostolic authority did not transform him into an object of worship. He refused the exaltation and entered the house to deliver God's message. Cornelius then explained the angelic instruction and declared that

they were assembled before God to hear everything commanded Peter by the Lord. Here was a remarkable audience: Gentiles waiting for the word of God, with the apostle who had been prepared by heaven standing before them. **Peter did not arrive to collect worship, sell religious privileges, or establish himself as a miniature deity. He arrived to preach Christ.**

Acts 10:34–35 opens Peter's address: “Of a truth I perceive that God is no respecter of persons: But in every nation he that feareth him, and worketh righteousness, is accepted with him.” These words must be read alongside the rest of Peter's sermon rather than converted into a separate gospel of salvation by human performance. Peter is recognizing that Gentile nationality does not automatically exclude a person from God's gracious dealings. He is not announcing that charitable conduct has replaced the necessity of believing Jesus Christ. That interpretation would collide with his explicit declaration in Acts 10:43 concerning remission of sins through faith and his later statement in Acts 15:9 that God purified Gentile hearts by faith. Cornelius's religious seriousness had brought him to a point where he was prepared to hear the truth, but his good works were not the Redeemer. **God is no respecter of persons, but that does not mean He has become a respecter of good deeds offered as a substitute for His Son.**

Peter then proclaims the historical testimony concerning Jesus Christ. Acts 10:36 identifies the message sent to the children of Israel, “preaching peace by Jesus Christ: (he is Lord of all:).” Peter rehearses Christ's ministry, His anointing with the Holy Ghost and power, His miracles, His death upon a tree, and His resurrection on the third day. Acts 10:40 declares, “Him God raised up the third day, and shewed him openly.” Peter emphasizes that the apostles were witnesses chosen by God and that Christ had commanded them to testify concerning His authority as Judge of the living and the dead. This was not a sermon about Cornelius's financial generosity or Peter's remarkable rooftop experience. Those circumstances brought the meeting together, but the saving message concerned Jesus Christ. The Gentiles needed to know who He was, what He had accomplished, and what God promised through Him. **A preacher may have an extraordinary story explaining how he reached the audience, but the audience still needs the ordinary, indispensable gospel concerning Jesus Christ.**

4. The Holy Ghost Interrupted the Sermon Before Anybody Touched the Water

Acts 10:43 contains the declaration that immediately precedes the descent of the Holy Ghost: “To him give all the prophets witness, that through his name whosoever believeth in him shall receive remission of sins.” Read that sentence carefully. Peter identifies the testimony of the prophets, the authority of Christ's name, the universal invitation expressed by “whosoever,” the condition of believing in Him, and the promise of remission of sins. He

does not state that forgiveness must wait until the Gentiles have completed water baptism. He proclaims remission through believing in Jesus Christ. This is particularly significant because the speaker is Peter himself, the same apostle who preached Acts 2:38 at Pentecost. The inspired record preserves both statements. Peter's words in Cornelius's house demonstrate what God was making clear concerning the reception of believing Gentiles. **The gospel did not arrive in Caesarea carrying a revised Saviour. It arrived proclaiming the same crucified and risen Lord with the promise of forgiveness through faith in His name.**

Acts 10:44 immediately follows: “While Peter yet spake these words, the Holy Ghost fell on all them which heard the word.” That is the decisive historical fact. Peter was still preaching when the Holy Ghost fell. The passage records no water baptism before this event, no apostolic hands being laid upon the Gentiles to secure the gift, and no ceremonial procedure performed to make them eligible. They were hearing the word concerning Jesus Christ when God acted. Acts 10:45 states that the believing Jews who accompanied Peter were astonished because the gift of the Holy Ghost was poured out upon the Gentiles also. Their astonishment demonstrates the importance of what had occurred. Gentiles had received the same divine gift associated with the Jewish believers. **The Holy Ghost did not wait in the hallway while Peter inspected baptismal certificates. He fell upon those who heard the gospel, and the religious expectations of the witnesses had to catch up with what God had already done.**

Acts 10:46 explains that the witnesses heard the Gentiles speaking with tongues and magnifying God. The signs made the reception of the Holy Ghost recognizable to the Jewish believers accompanying Peter. Peter then asked in verse 47, “Can any man forbid water, that these should not be baptized, which have received the Holy Ghost as well as we?” The wording settles the sequence beyond reasonable dispute. These people had received the Holy Ghost before Peter raised the question of water baptism. Verse 48 then declares, “And he commanded them to be baptized in the name of the Lord.” Peter did not abandon baptism or treat it as worthless. He commanded it after God had already given the Holy Ghost. That is the proper distinction. Water baptism remained an act of obedience, but it could not be the indispensable cause of receiving the Spirit in this case. **You cannot honestly preach that water must precede the Holy Ghost while standing in a chapter where the Holy Ghost arrived first.**

5. Peter Had to Defend God's Work Before the Brethren in Jerusalem

Acts 11 opens with the apostles and brethren in Judaea hearing that the Gentiles had received the word of God. When Peter returned to Jerusalem, those of the circumcision contended with him, saying, “Thou wentest in to men uncircumcised, and didst eat with

them." Their complaint concerned his association with uncircumcised Gentiles. It reveals how strongly the historical separation between Jews and Gentiles influenced their thinking. Peter did not answer by announcing that their concerns were too old-fashioned for a modern religious movement. He rehearsed the events in order, beginning with the vision at Joppa, the descending vessel, the heavenly instruction, and the arrival of Cornelius's messengers. He then explained how the Spirit directed him to accompany them. Scripture records the facts so the reader can understand why this encounter carried such importance. **When God is establishing a doctrinal distinction, He supplies evidence. The apostles were not asked to accept Peter's private excitement as a substitute for what God had actually done.**

Acts 11:13–14 records Peter explaining that Cornelius had been instructed to summon him, "Who shall tell thee words, whereby thou and all thy house shall be saved." There is the saving significance of the meeting. Cornelius needed the message of Jesus Christ, and his household needed to hear it. The angelic appearance had not replaced the gospel, nor had Cornelius's alms purchased salvation. Peter then declares in verse 15, "And as I began to speak, the Holy Ghost fell on them, as on us at the beginning." Notice his comparison with Pentecost. Peter recognizes that the Gentiles received the same divine gift as the Jewish believers. The circumstances differ, but the source is the same Lord. The Holy Ghost was not an inferior gift provided to Gentiles after they had passed a probationary period. **God did not create a first-class Spirit for Jerusalem and a second-class Spirit for Caesarea. The difference existed in human expectations, not in the sufficiency of God's gift.**

Peter's recollection becomes even more decisive in Acts 11:16: "Then remembered I the word of the Lord, how that he said, John indeed baptized with water; but ye shall be baptized with the Holy Ghost." The distinction between water and Spirit baptism came directly from Jesus Christ. Peter understood that what had occurred in Cornelius's house fulfilled the Lord's promise concerning the Holy Ghost. He continued in verse 17 by asking, "Forasmuch then as God gave them the like gift as he did unto us, who believed on the Lord Jesus Christ; what was I, that I could withstand God?" The question leaves little room for religious arrogance. Peter recognized that God had acted, and his duty was to acknowledge it. Acts 11:18 records the brethren glorifying God and declaring, "Then hath God also to the Gentiles granted repentance unto life." They accepted the evidence of God's gracious work. **The apostles did not authorize the Holy Ghost to enter Cornelius's house. They recognized that God had already done so.**

6. The Jerusalem Council Declared That God Purified Their Hearts by Faith

Acts 15 brings the significance of Cornelius's conversion into an even sharper doctrinal focus. Certain men were teaching that Gentile believers could not be saved unless they

were circumcised after the manner of Moses. Acts 15:1 records their claim plainly: “Except ye be circumcised after the manner of Moses, ye cannot be saved.” The controversy concerned whether Gentiles had to submit to requirements associated with Israel's law in order to obtain salvation. The discussion was not originally a dispute over baptismal water, but the inspired answer establishes principles directly relevant to the question of what saves a sinner. After much disputing, Peter stood and reminded the assembly that God had chosen him to proclaim the gospel to Gentiles. Acts 15:7 declares that “the Gentiles by my mouth should hear the word of the gospel, and believe.” Notice what Peter identifies: the gospel being heard and believed. **When legalism demanded another requirement for salvation, Peter pointed backward to what God had already demonstrated in Cornelius's house.**

Acts 15:8–9 supplies the divine explanation: “And God, which knoweth the hearts, bare them witness, giving them the Holy Ghost, even as he did unto us; And put no difference between us and them, purifying their hearts by faith.” That is an extraordinary doctrinal statement. God knows the hearts, God bore witness, God gave the Holy Ghost, and God purified their hearts by faith. The apostle does not say that their hearts were purified by circumcision, ceremonial performance, or the mechanical administration of water. He says “by faith.” This does not erase the reality of baptism, which Peter had commanded in Acts 10. It establishes the distinction between God's inward saving work and the outward obedience that followed. The Lord knew the Gentiles' hearts before Peter commanded water baptism, and He had already given them the Holy Ghost. **A preacher may inspect the outside of a man, but God knows the heart. When God declares that He purified the heart by faith, the preacher had better not insert a religious ceremony where the Holy Ghost wrote faith.**

Peter continues in Acts 15:10 by warning against placing a yoke upon the disciples that neither the fathers nor the apostles had been able to bear. Then comes the magnificent declaration of verse 11: “But we believe that through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ we shall be saved, even as they.” The order of Peter's wording deserves attention. He does not merely say that Gentiles may be saved the same way Jews are saved. He says that the Jewish believers will be saved through the grace of Jesus Christ even as the Gentiles. The basis is grace, not lawkeeping or inherited religious privilege. Romans 5:1 later declares, “Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.” Ephesians 2:8–9 identifies salvation as God's gift through faith, not of works. Peter's testimony and Paul's doctrinal explanation agree concerning the saving sufficiency of Christ. **When the apostles settled the matter, the answer was not grace assisted by religious machinery. It was salvation through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ.**

7. Acts Records the Transition, but Paul's Epistles Establish the Church's Doctrinal Standing

The sequence of baptisms and the reception of the Holy Ghost throughout Acts must be studied in the historical setting God provided. Acts 2 concerns Jews at Pentecost being confronted with their rejection of Israel's Messiah. Peter commanded repentance and baptism and promised the gift of the Holy Ghost. Acts 8 records Samaritans receiving Philip's preaching and being baptized before the Holy Ghost fell upon them through the laying on of the apostles' hands. Acts 10 records Gentiles receiving the Holy Ghost before water baptism. These differences are neither accidental nor invitations to invent competing Saviours. They belong to the unfolding testimony of Jesus Christ during a period when God was demonstrating the gospel's movement beyond Jerusalem and the inclusion of Gentiles. Second Timothy 2:15 commands the believer to be "rightly dividing the word of truth." That requires recognizing historical distinctions without denying the divine authority of any passage. **Acts is inspired history, not a box of disconnected religious instructions from which every denomination may select its favorite sequence.**

Ephesians 1:12–14 provides clear doctrinal instruction concerning believers in the present Church Age. Verse 13 declares, "In whom ye also trusted, after that ye heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation: in whom also after that ye believed, ye were sealed with that holy Spirit of promise." The passage identifies the hearing of the gospel, faith in Christ, and sealing with the Holy Spirit. Verse 14 calls the Spirit "the earnest of our inheritance until the redemption of the purchased possession." That is far more than a temporary religious sensation. The believer is sealed by the Holy Spirit in connection with faith in the saving gospel. Ephesians does not instruct the Christian to wait until a minister completes water baptism before God can seal him. Nor does it require a repetition of the extraordinary signs accompanying the Gentiles' reception of the Spirit in Acts 10. **The believer's security rests upon God's saving work, not the minister's ability to reproduce every historical circumstance recorded during the apostolic period.**

The gospel itself is identified in 1 Corinthians 15:1–4: Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, was buried, and rose again the third day according to the Scriptures. That message directs sinners to the finished work of Jesus Christ. First Corinthians 1:17 further records Paul declaring, "For Christ sent me not to baptize, but to preach the gospel." Paul certainly baptized certain believers, as the surrounding verses acknowledge, but he distinguished that activity from his principal commission to preach the saving message. Water baptism has its place as an ordinance of obedience and testimony; it does not possess the authority to add another requirement to the finished work of Christ. Romans 5:1 declares justification by faith, while Ephesians 1:13 identifies the Spirit's sealing of the

believer. These statements explain the Church's doctrinal standing without requiring the historical differences in Acts to be denied. **The gospel is not Christ plus enough water to satisfy a religious institution. The gospel is the crucified and risen Saviour, received through faith, with salvation secured by the work of God.**

Conclusion — God Finished the Spiritual Work Before Peter Commanded the Water

Cornelius's household provides one of the clearest demonstrations in Scripture that the reception of the Holy Ghost cannot be made universally dependent upon prior water baptism. The centurion feared God, prayed, gave alms, and received divine instruction to summon Peter. The apostle was prepared through a vision and commanded to accompany the messengers without doubting. When Peter entered the Gentile household, he preached the life, death, resurrection, and authority of Jesus Christ. He declared that whoever believed in Him would receive remission of sins through His name. While Peter was still speaking, the Holy Ghost fell upon those hearing the word. The Jewish witnesses recognized the divine gift, and only afterward did Peter command water baptism. Every part of that sequence belongs to the inspired record. **The Holy Ghost did not descend because the water had been administered. Peter commanded the water because the Holy Ghost had already descended.**

The account does not teach that water baptism should be abandoned, nor does it diminish the importance of obedience to the Lord. Peter commanded the Gentile believers to be baptized, and the Scripture records that command without apology. But the passage destroys the claim that the outward ordinance must create the inward reality or that God cannot save and seal a believing sinner until a human minister performs the ceremony. Acts 11 records Peter explaining the event through Christ's distinction between John's baptism with water and baptism with the Holy Ghost. Acts 15 records his further explanation that God purified Gentile hearts by faith and made no distinction concerning salvation through grace. The doctrinal testimony is unmistakable. A sinner is saved through Jesus Christ, not through an independent power supposedly residing in water. **The ceremony may testify to what God has accomplished, but it cannot take credit for accomplishing what God plainly did before the ceremony began.**

There is no need to rearrange Acts 10, weaken Acts 2, explain away Acts 8, or rewrite Paul's epistles to understand water baptism correctly. Believe every passage, identify its audience, recognize its historical setting, and preserve the distinctions God recorded. Cornelius's household received the word of the gospel, the Holy Ghost fell upon the hearers, and Peter commanded baptism afterward. The Jerusalem council subsequently affirmed that God purified their hearts by faith and that salvation comes through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ. That settles the question of whether water is the indispensable

instrument through which every sinner must receive spiritual life. It is not. The blood of Jesus Christ provides redemption, the gospel announces His finished work, faith receives the promise, and the Holy Spirit seals the believer. Water baptism remains a meaningful ordinance, but it must never be promoted into a rival Redeemer. **Cornelius did not climb out of the baptistry to discover whether God might finally accept him. God had already given him the Holy Ghost before Peter asked about the water. When heaven has settled the matter, the church has no authority to reopen the case. The baptistry can receive a believer's body, but it cannot improve upon the saving work of Jesus Christ.**

7 of 10 — Water Baptism Without Confusion — Paul Was Sent to Preach, Not Operate a Baptistry: The Commission That Separates the Gospel from the Water

Key Passage — 1 Corinthians 1:17: "For Christ sent me not to baptize, but to preach the gospel: not with wisdom of words, lest the cross of Christ should be made of none effect."

There is a verse sitting in the first chapter of First Corinthians that ought to put a serious dent in every religious system teaching that water baptism is an indispensable ingredient in the gospel of salvation. The apostle Paul declares, "For Christ sent me not to baptize, but to preach the gospel." That is not an obscure statement buried beneath a complicated prophecy or hidden in a passage requiring twenty pages of denominational explanation. It is a plain declaration from the apostle whom Jesus Christ specifically commissioned to preach among the Gentiles. Paul distinguishes baptism from the gospel he was sent to proclaim. Yet religious men have spent centuries insisting that the very ordinance Paul distinguished from his principal commission must be included as an essential requirement for salvation. Something is wrong with that picture. If water baptism is necessary to complete the gospel, Paul made a remarkably strange announcement concerning his assignment. **The apostle did not say Christ sent him to preach half a gospel while somebody else supplied the saving water. He said Christ sent him to preach the gospel.**

The difficulty becomes even greater when the context is examined. Paul was writing to the Corinthian church because believers had divided themselves into factions around prominent Christian leaders. Some claimed allegiance to Paul, others to Apollos, others to Cephas, and others declared themselves of Christ. Instead of congratulating these believers for their impressive religious loyalties, Paul rebuked their divisions and asked three devastating questions: "Is Christ divided? was Paul crucified for you? or were ye baptized in the name of Paul?" The questions strike directly at the foundation of salvation

and Christian identity. Paul had not died for their sins. He was not their Redeemer. His name possessed no saving authority. Even the fact that he had personally baptized certain individuals gave them no legitimate reason to exalt him above Christ. **The man who administers the ordinance is not the One who purchased redemption. Confuse those two individuals, and you have promoted the servant into the Saviour's office without obtaining heaven's permission.**

This passage must be handled without dishonesty in either direction. Paul did baptize believers, and the Bible identifies some of them by name. Anybody claiming that Paul never practiced water baptism has not finished reading the chapter. But Paul also made a distinction between administering baptism and preaching the gospel, and anybody claiming that distinction means nothing has not believed what he read. The objective is not to diminish an ordinance Christ authorized or to manufacture a contradiction between Paul and the other apostles. It is to establish the proper relationship between the saving message and the outward act that accompanies Christian testimony. The book of Acts records historical developments involving Jews, Samaritans, and Gentiles, while Paul's epistles establish the doctrinal standing of believers under grace. Those distinctions matter. **Water baptism has a biblical place, but when somebody makes it the power of God unto salvation, he has taken an ordinance out of its appointed place and installed it where only Jesus Christ belongs.**

1. The Lord Commissioned Paul Before Any Preacher Put Him in Water

Acts 9 introduces Saul of Tarsus as a determined enemy of the followers of Jesus Christ. He was breathing out threatenings and slaughter against the disciples of the Lord and had obtained authority to pursue believers as far as Damascus. This was not a spiritually indifferent man casually considering a new religious preference. Saul believed he was defending the honor of Israel's God while persecuting the very people who belonged to Israel's Messiah. Acts 9:3–4 records the heavenly light and the voice asking, “Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me?” His question in verse 5 receives the answer, “I am Jesus whom thou persecutest.” The risen Christ confronted Saul personally, establishing that the One he opposed was alive and glorified. No water baptism produced that revelation. No minister arranged an appointment with the resurrected Saviour. **Saul was traveling to Damascus carrying religious authority against Christians, and he encountered the Lord who possessed authority over heaven and earth.**

Acts 9:15 records the Lord's declaration to Ananias concerning Saul: “Go thy way: for he is a chosen vessel unto me, to bear my name before the Gentiles, and kings, and the children of Israel.” There is the commission, and its wording deserves careful attention. Paul was appointed to carry Christ's name before Gentiles, kings, and Israelites. His assignment was

not merely an extension of his previous zeal for Jewish religious tradition. The risen Christ had chosen him for a work that would become central to the revelation of God's dealings with the Gentiles. Galatians 1:15–16 later confirms that God had called him by His grace "to reveal his Son in me, that I might preach him among the heathen." The order is significant. Christ appointed the messenger and established his commission. Paul did not obtain apostolic authority by completing a religious ceremony, purchasing recognition from Jerusalem, or graduating from a denominational institution. **The Lord called the man, and the man was responsible to obey the Lord. Heaven did not require a religious headquarters to authorize its own apostle.**

Acts 9:17–18 records Ananias entering the house, laying hands upon Saul, and speaking of the Lord Jesus who had appeared to him. Saul received his sight, was filled with the Holy Ghost, and afterward arose and was baptized. The baptism was real, and no honest reader should attempt to remove it. Acts 22:16 later records Ananias saying, "Arise, and be baptized, and wash away thy sins, calling on the name of the Lord." Those words deserve examination in their own setting and must not be erased merely because they challenge somebody's preferred explanation. But neither do they cancel Paul's later declarations concerning justification by faith and the distinction between baptism and his gospel commission. Saul's conversion involved the direct intervention of the risen Christ, and his baptism formed part of his response. **The ceremony did not create the Lord who confronted him, manufacture the commission he received, or replace the grace that called him. Paul's authority came from Christ before anybody could boast of having baptized an apostle.**

2. The Corinthians Were Dividing Christ's Church into Religious Camps

First Corinthians 1:10 opens Paul's rebuke with an appeal "that ye all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you." He wanted believers joined together in the same mind and judgment rather than competing over human leaders. Verse 11 reveals that those of Chloe's household had reported contentions among them. The problem was not a shortage of impressive Christian personalities. The problem was that the Corinthians were elevating those personalities into rival centers of loyalty. Verse 12 records the factions: "I am of Paul; and I of Apollos; and I of Cephas; and I of Christ." Men who should have been united under the Lord were identifying themselves according to their preferred servants. The same disease flourishes wherever Christians become more interested in the reputation of a preacher, movement, or denomination than in the truth of Scripture. **A congregation can possess excellent teachers and still become carnal enough to turn those teachers into competing religious trademarks.**

Paul's response in 1 Corinthians 1:13 exposes the foolishness immediately: “Is Christ divided? was Paul crucified for you? or were ye baptized in the name of Paul?” Each question cuts into the Corinthians' misplaced allegiance. Christ is not divided into competing portions distributed among religious celebrities. Paul did not die upon the cross for their sins. Neither did his name become the authority under which their baptism acquired meaning. Notice how the apostle places the crucifixion of Christ beside the question of baptismal identity. The One crucified for sinners is the One to whom the honor belongs. The minister who administers an ordinance cannot claim the saving achievement of the Redeemer. That is precisely why boasting in human religious leadership is so absurd. **A preacher may stand beside the water, but he did not hang upon Calvary's cross. If the man with the towel begins receiving the glory belonging to the Man with the nail prints, the church has lost its doctrinal bearings.**

First Corinthians 3:5–7 continues the correction by asking, “Who then is Paul, and who is Apollos, but ministers by whom ye believed, even as the Lord gave to every man?” Paul planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the increase. The watering in that illustration describes ministerial labor contributing to spiritual growth; it is not a declaration that Apollos personally baptized everybody Paul converted. The larger point concerns God's work through His servants. Human ministers possess real responsibilities, but divine power belongs to God. Paul concludes, “So then neither is he that planteth any thing, neither he that watereth; but God that giveth the increase.” Religious pride becomes ridiculous when measured against that statement. The Corinthian factions were boasting in men whom God had merely appointed to serve. **When the servant becomes the attraction, the congregation may still look religious, but somebody has turned the Master's house into a monument honoring the hired help.**

3. Paul Did Baptize Believers, and That Makes His Statement Even Stronger

First Corinthians 1:14 declares, “I thank God that I baptized none of you, but Crispus and Gaius.” Verse 16 adds, “And I baptized also the household of Stephanas: besides, I know not whether I baptized any other.” These admissions destroy the claim that Paul rejected water baptism altogether. He personally baptized certain believers, and he named them. The Bible does not portray him as hostile toward an ordinance practiced among Christian converts. But his gratitude that he had baptized relatively few Corinthians requires an explanation. If baptism itself were indispensable to salvation, why would the apostle thank God that he had personally administered it to so few? The immediate context supplies the answer. He was concerned that nobody should claim to have been baptized in his name and use his personal involvement as the foundation of religious superiority. **Paul was not**

ashamed of baptism. He was determined that nobody would confuse the baptizer with the Redeemer.

Acts 18:8 supplies the historical setting of Paul's Corinthian ministry: “And Crispus, the chief ruler of the synagogue, believed on the Lord with all his house; and many of the Corinthians hearing believed, and were baptized.” Notice the sequence recorded in the passage. The Corinthians heard, believed, and were baptized. Crispus himself is identified as a believer in the Lord, and the wider account describes many Corinthians responding to the preaching. Paul remained in Corinth, teaching the word of God among them, according to Acts 18:11. His ministry was not a campaign to gather impressive baptismal statistics while neglecting the Scriptures. He preached Christ, saw people believe, and established them in the word. The baptisms recorded were genuine, but they followed the reception of the message. **The Corinthians were not told to believe in Paul's hands, Paul's reputation, or Paul's water. They were brought to faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.**

The household of Stephanas deserves particular attention because some use household baptisms to invent things the text never states. First Corinthians 16:15 identifies that household as “the firstfruits of Achaia” and says they had addicted themselves to the ministry of the saints. Scripture presents a household associated with Christian service, not an argument that unconscious infants were regenerated by water without personal faith. Neither should we assume that Paul administered every baptism mentioned in Acts 18. First Corinthians 1 identifies those he remembered personally baptizing, while Acts records many Corinthians being baptized without naming every administrator. The distinction is simple and sufficient. Paul practiced baptism while refusing to make his own participation central to the gospel. **A religious certificate may identify which minister performed the ordinance, but the name worth remembering is the name of the Saviour. Heaven keeps no separate category of superior Christians who happened to be baptized by a famous preacher.**

4. Christ Sent Paul to Preach the Gospel, Not Add Water to Its Saving Power

Now return to 1 Corinthians 1:17 and read the verse without rushing to protect an inherited conclusion: “For Christ sent me not to baptize, but to preach the gospel.” The statement identifies the primary character of Paul's apostolic commission. It does not mean Paul was forbidden to baptize, because he has just acknowledged baptizing certain believers. It means the administration of water baptism was distinct from the proclamation of the gospel for which Christ particularly sent him. That distinction is essential. A man can preach the saving gospel without personally administering baptism to everybody who believes. Paul's own ministry establishes that fact. If the ceremony were an indispensable component of the message that saves, separating the commission to preach from the

activity of baptizing would become exceedingly difficult to explain. **The apostle did not despise the ordinance; he refused to make the ordinance the substance of the gospel. There is a world of difference between obeying an ordinance and asking an ordinance to become a Redeemer.**

Paul continues, “not with wisdom of words, lest the cross of Christ should be made of none effect.” His concern was that human eloquence and religious boasting might obscure the saving power of Christ's crucifixion. Verse 18 declares, “For the preaching of the cross is to them that perish foolishness; but unto us which are saved it is the power of God.” Notice where the power is located. Paul does not direct the Corinthians toward the religious prominence of the administrator or the physical properties of baptismal water. He directs them toward the cross of Christ. First Corinthians 1:23 likewise declares, “But we preach Christ crucified.” This message humbles human pride because salvation rests upon what Jesus Christ accomplished, not upon man's ability to construct an impressive religious performance. **The cross does not need water to supply a missing ingredient. It needs preachers who will stop hiding its sufficiency behind their ceremonies.**

First Corinthians 15:1–4 identifies the gospel with unmistakable precision. Paul declares the message he preached, which the Corinthians received and wherein they stood. Its substance is “that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures; And that he was buried, and that he rose again the third day according to the scriptures.” There is the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Paul identifies these accomplished events as the foundation of the gospel. He does not add that Christ's work remains powerless until a sinner undergoes water baptism. The gospel concerns what Christ did, not what a preacher subsequently does to the believer. First Corinthians 15:2 also warns against believing in vain, preserving the necessity of genuine faith in the apostolic message. **If a man inserts water baptism as an additional saving ingredient, he has not improved Paul's gospel. He has added something Paul deliberately distinguished from the commission to preach it.**

5. Paul Received His Gospel by Revelation, Not by Borrowing a Religious Tradition

Galatians 1:11–12 declares, “But I certify you, brethren, that the gospel which was preached of me is not after man. For I neither received it of man, neither was I taught it, but by the revelation of Jesus Christ.” Paul was not merely repeating religious instruction obtained from prominent leaders in Jerusalem. His commission and the revelation entrusted to him came from the risen Lord. Galatians 1:15–17 explains that after God revealed His Son in him, Paul did not immediately confer with flesh and blood or go to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before him. This does not mean he possessed no fellowship with other apostles or preached a competing Redeemer. It establishes the

divine origin of his apostolic authority and message. **Paul did not receive a secondhand gospel from a religious committee. The risen Christ appointed the messenger and supplied the revelation.**

Galatians 2:7–9 further distinguishes the apostleship of the circumcision from the ministry committed to Paul among the uncircumcision. Peter's principal ministry concerned the circumcision, while Paul was especially commissioned toward the Gentiles. That difference must not be twisted into a theory of two Saviours or two contradictory ways of obtaining redemption. Jesus Christ remains the only Saviour, and His completed sacrifice provides the ground of salvation. But distinct commissions and historical responsibilities are plainly recorded. Israel's national prophetic program, the announcement of the kingdom, and the later revelation concerning the Church cannot all be thrown into one doctrinal bucket merely because religious tradition finds distinctions inconvenient. Romans 11:13 records Paul declaring, “For I speak to you Gentiles, inasmuch as I am the apostle of the Gentiles, I magnify mine office.” **Right division does not divide Christ against Himself. It prevents men from confusing the assignments Christ gave His servants.**

The seriousness of Paul's gospel becomes unmistakable in Galatians 1:8–9, where he warns against another gospel and pronounces a curse upon those preaching a contrary message. This was not a mild disagreement concerning secondary customs. The Galatian churches were being troubled by efforts to place believers under requirements associated with the law as conditions of justification. Galatians 2:16 declares that a man is not justified by the works of the law but by the faith of Jesus Christ. Galatians 5:4 warns concerning those seeking justification by law. The principle strikes directly at every attempt to attach a human religious performance to Christ's finished work as an indispensable saving requirement. Baptism is not circumcision, and the two should not be carelessly treated as identical ordinances. Nevertheless, the same doctrinal danger appears whenever man's obedience is elevated into part of the purchase price of redemption. **Grace does not become more biblical when a preacher attaches a ceremonial invoice to it. Salvation is God's gift, not a transaction completed at the church's payment counter.**

6. Acts 19 Proves That John's Baptism and Paul's Ministry Cannot Be Flattened Together

Acts 19:1–7 records Paul encountering certain disciples at Ephesus who possessed knowledge associated with John's baptism. Paul asked whether they had received the Holy Ghost since they believed, and their answer revealed that they lacked instruction concerning the Holy Ghost. He then asked, “Unto what then were ye baptized?” They

replied, “Unto John's baptism.” That response identifies the historical ministry with which they were acquainted. John had preached repentance and prepared Israel for the manifestation of Jesus Christ, but the death, burial, and resurrection of the Lord had now occurred. These men needed to hear concerning the One toward whom John's ministry had pointed. Their earlier baptism could not substitute for the fuller testimony concerning Jesus Christ. **A man who possesses yesterday's announcement must not refuse today's fulfillment. John pointed toward the coming Messiah; Paul proclaimed the Christ who had come, died, and risen again.**

Acts 19:4 gives Paul's explanation: “John verily baptized with the baptism of repentance, saying unto the people, that they should believe on him which should come after him, that is, on Christ Jesus.” That verse is particularly valuable because Paul himself identifies the character of John's baptism. He does not call it the completed Pauline gospel or pretend that every baptism administered in Scripture occurred under one identical commission. He explains John's message as repentance accompanied by instruction to believe on the coming Christ. Verse 5 records the response: “When they heard this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus.” Paul then laid hands upon them, and the Holy Ghost came upon them, with tongues and prophecy accompanying the event. This historical sequence must be preserved without turning every unusual feature into a permanent requirement for believers today. **The Bible records what happened, but inspired history must not be converted into a religious assembly line that every Christian must mechanically reproduce.**

The surrounding context reinforces the significance of progressive instruction. Acts 18:24–28 introduces Apollos, an eloquent man mighty in the Scriptures, who knew only the baptism of John. Aquila and Priscilla took him and expounded unto him the way of God more perfectly. His sincerity and knowledge did not eliminate the need for fuller biblical understanding. Likewise, the disciples encountered in Acts 19 needed instruction concerning Christ beyond what they had received under John's baptism. These accounts reveal the importance of understanding where a person stands in the unfolding revelation of Scripture. John's ministry was divinely authorized, but it was preparatory. Paul's gospel proclaimed the finished work of the risen Saviour and the divine revelation concerning believers under grace. **A signpost is useful while directing travelers toward the destination, but once the destination has been reached, the signpost must not be promoted into the destination itself.**

7. The Gospel Saves, the Spirit Places the Believer into Christ, and Water Bears Testimony

The historical sequences recorded in Acts make the doctrinal distinction unavoidable. Acts 2 records Peter commanding Jews at Pentecost to repent and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins. Acts 8 records Samaritans receiving baptism before the Holy Ghost fell upon them through the subsequent ministry of Peter and John. Acts 10 records the Holy Ghost falling upon believing Gentiles while Peter was still preaching, before they were baptized in water. These are inspired accounts involving different historical circumstances during the outward movement of the gospel. No honest interpreter has permission to erase one account because another fits his preferred denominational arrangement. Acts 15:9 later explains that God purified Gentile hearts by faith, while verse 11 declares salvation through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ. **The Spirit did not forget the rules in Cornelius's house. The religious systems insisting upon an identical outward sequence are the ones failing to read the record.**

First Corinthians 12:13 identifies a baptism no human minister can administer: “For by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body, whether we be Jews or Gentiles, whether we be bond or free; and have been all made to drink into one Spirit.” This is God's spiritual work placing believers into the body of Christ. Romans 6:3–4 speaks of being baptized into Jesus Christ and into His death, buried with Him, and raised to walk in newness of life. Colossians 2:12 connects burial and rising with Christ to “the faith of the operation of God.” These passages must not automatically be reduced to literal water because they contain the word baptism. Water can provide an outward picture of burial and resurrection, but the Holy Ghost accomplishes what no earthly minister can perform. **A preacher may immerse a believer beneath the surface of a river, but he cannot place that believer into the spiritual body of Jesus Christ. That operation belongs to God.**

Ephesians 1:13 establishes the believer's sealing with the Holy Spirit after hearing and believing the gospel of salvation. Ephesians 2:8–9 declares salvation by grace through faith, “Not of works, lest any man should boast.” Romans 4:5 speaks of the man who “worketh not, but believeth on him that justifieth the ungodly.” These passages do not render water baptism meaningless; they establish the foundation upon which Christian obedience stands. Baptism remains a legitimate outward testimony, but it must never be permitted to compete with the finished work of Christ. A believer ought not despise the ordinance simply because others have abused it, nor should a preacher threaten the believing sinner with condemnation for lacking a ceremony Paul distinguished from his gospel commission. The proper order honors both salvation and obedience. **The gospel gives the sinner Christ. The Spirit places the believer into Christ. Water baptism publicly testifies concerning Christ. Confuse those three truths, and the ordinance becomes a counterfeit Saviour wearing a religious uniform.**

Conclusion — The Apostle Preached Christ, and the Water Stayed in Its Proper Place

Paul's testimony establishes an unmistakable distinction between the saving gospel and the administration of water baptism. The risen Christ commissioned him to bear His name before Gentiles, kings, and Israelites. His conversion came through direct confrontation with Jesus Christ, and his baptism followed within the circumstances recorded in Acts 9. He preached among the Corinthians, where many heard, believed, and were baptized. He personally baptized Crispus, Gaius, and the household of Stephanas, while refusing to allow those acts to become grounds for personal boasting or denominational division. His concern was not that baptism had no legitimate place, but that believers were exalting human ministers above the Redeemer. First Corinthians 1:17 therefore stands exactly as written: Christ sent Paul to preach the gospel, not to make administering baptism the substance of his commission. **The minister was important as a servant, the ordinance was important as an ordinance, but neither possessed the saving authority of the Lord Jesus Christ.**

The gospel Paul preached is identified in First Corinthians 15:1–4 as the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ according to the Scriptures. That message announces the finished work through which sinners are saved. Galatians establishes that Paul's gospel came by revelation from Jesus Christ and that justification cannot be obtained through the works of the law. Romans declares justification by faith. Ephesians establishes salvation by grace and the sealing of believers with the Holy Spirit. These passages agree concerning the sufficiency of Christ. Water baptism cannot be smuggled into the gospel as an additional saving ingredient without diminishing the distinction Paul himself made. The same apostle who administered baptism also thanked God that he had personally baptized relatively few Corinthians because he refused to make his name the center of their religious identity. **A preacher who makes the baptistry indispensable to obtaining eternal life must eventually explain why the apostle of the Gentiles distinguished baptism from the gospel he was sent to preach.**

The final issue is not whether the Church should practice biblical water baptism. It should. The issue is whether the Church possesses authority to turn an ordinance of testimony into a requirement that supposedly completes the saving work of Jesus Christ. It does not. The death of Christ satisfied the demands of divine righteousness, His resurrection declared His victory, and the gospel announces that saving work to sinners. The believer receives salvation through faith, and the Holy Ghost performs the divine operation no minister can imitate. Water baptism occupies its proper place when it bears testimony to Christ without pretending to accomplish redemption. Second Timothy 2:15 still commands the believer to rightly divide the word of truth, and this subject demonstrates why that command matters.

John's preparatory baptism, the events at Pentecost, the Samaritan experience, Cornelius's reception of the Holy Ghost, and Paul's distinctive commission must all remain where God placed them. **Paul was sent to preach Christ, not operate a spiritual washing machine. The baptistry has its place, but Calvary has no replacement. The water may receive the believer's body, but the blood of Jesus Christ is what redeems the sinner. When the preacher begins adding water to the gospel as an ingredient necessary for salvation, he is no longer merely explaining the ordinance. He is tampering with the sufficiency of the cross.**

8 of 10 — Water Baptism Without Confusion — The Verses They Throw at You: Mark 16, Acts 22, and the Baptism That Saves in First Peter

Key Passage — 1 Peter 3:21: "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:"

There comes a point in studying water baptism when the easy answers disappear, the favorite denominational slogans run out of ammunition, and a man must decide whether he believes the entire King James Bible or merely the verses that fit comfortably inside his religious system. Mark 16:16 declares, "He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved." Acts 22:16 tells Saul to "arise, and be baptized, and wash away thy sins, calling on the name of the Lord." First Peter 3:21 goes even further, declaring, "The like figure whereunto even baptism doth also now save us." There they stand, three passages that have furnished religious arguments for generations. One preacher waves them around like a collection of winning lottery tickets, convinced that he has finally proved water baptism necessary for salvation. Another becomes so nervous that he begins explaining what the verses cannot possibly mean before admitting what they actually say. Neither approach will do. **A Bible believer does not need to hide difficult verses in the basement. He needs to bring them into the light and let the whole Bible speak.**

The central problem is not that Scripture contradicts itself. The problem is that men regularly remove a statement from its historical setting, ignore the surrounding verses, overlook the audience, and then demand that every other passage submit to their preferred interpretation. Mark 16 belongs to the risen Lord's instructions to His disciples, accompanied by extraordinary signs. Acts 22 records Paul's personal testimony concerning his conversion and the words spoken to him by Ananias. First Peter 3 reaches backward to Noah, the flood, the ark, and the resurrection of Jesus Christ. John 3 records a conversation

with Nicodemus before Calvary, while Romans 3 explains justification through faith apart from the deeds of the law. These passages do not occupy identical circumstances, and the word *baptism* must not automatically be reduced to one identical operation every time it appears. **The same Bible that commands us to believe every word also commands us to rightly divide those words. Confusing the instructions is not faithfulness; it is carelessness dressed in religious confidence.**

Second Timothy 2:15 commands the workman to study, rightly dividing the word of truth. That requirement becomes especially important when examining passages religious men use to make water an indispensable instrument of salvation. The objective is not to weaken Mark 16, erase Acts 22, or explain First Peter 3 until Peter would scarcely recognize his own statement. It is to establish what each passage says, what the surrounding context supplies, and how the inspired testimony fits together. We must neither deny that baptism appears in connection with salvation nor permit an outward ordinance to overthrow the completed redemptive work of Jesus Christ. The cross must remain sufficient, faith must remain faith, and the historical distinctions in Acts must remain where God placed them. **A doctrine that can survive only by removing troublesome verses is a bad doctrine. A doctrine that survives only by ignoring the rest of Scripture is no better. The truth of God requires neither dishonest defense nor religious camouflage.**

1. Mark 16: The Verse About Baptism Comes with Signs Attached

Mark 16:15–16 records the risen Lord commissioning His disciples: “Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature. He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned.” There is the statement, and every word belongs in the Bible. Christ connects believing and baptism with salvation in the first clause, while identifying unbelief as the ground of condemnation in the second. The verse must not be shortened merely because its wording troubles a preferred doctrinal explanation. Yet the distinction between the clauses deserves attention. Christ does not conclude, “He that is not baptized shall be damned.” He explicitly identifies the one who believes not. That observation alone does not authorize us to remove baptism from the first clause, but it demonstrates the importance of faith in the passage. The question must then be examined in connection with the entire commission, the accompanying signs, and the further revelation concerning salvation. **A man cannot settle an entire doctrine by reading half a sentence and throwing the surrounding paragraph overboard.**

Mark 16:17–18 continues with statements that rarely receive equal attention from those insisting that verse 16 establishes their permanent baptismal formula. Christ declares, “And these signs shall follow them that believe,” and identifies casting out devils, speaking with new tongues, taking up serpents, surviving deadly drink, and laying hands upon the

sick so that they recover. Those statements stand in the same commission. They are not imaginary decorations somebody inserted to entertain future readers. Verse 20 explains that the disciples went forth preaching everywhere, "the Lord working with them, and confirming the word with signs following." The signs had a confirming function in the apostolic proclamation. Therefore, the interpreter must account for the whole passage rather than isolating baptism while treating the surrounding supernatural manifestations as irrelevant. **It is remarkable how quickly some religious systems can make the water permanently necessary while quietly retiring the serpents, the deadly drink, and the miraculous signs to a distant corner of church history.**

The historical circumstances are important. Mark 16 records the risen Lord addressing His disciples during the period preceding the full development of the apostolic ministry recorded in Acts. The commission concerns worldwide proclamation, and its fulfillment unfolds through extraordinary events accompanying the initial spread of the gospel. Hebrews 2:3–4 speaks of the salvation first spoken by the Lord and confirmed by those who heard Him, "God also bearing them witness, both with signs and wonders, and with divers miracles, and gifts of the Holy Ghost." The supernatural confirmations were genuine, but their presence in that historical setting does not establish that every believer throughout the Church Age must reproduce each sign to demonstrate salvation. Likewise, Mark 16:16 cannot be interpreted in isolation from Acts 10, where the Holy Ghost falls upon believing Gentiles before water baptism. **The Lord did not give the Church permission to build permanent doctrine by selecting one feature of an apostolic commission while refusing to examine the others.**

2. Acts 22: Saul Met the Living Christ Before Ananias Mentioned Water

Acts 22:16 presents another difficult statement: "And now why tarriest thou? arise, and be baptized, and wash away thy sins, calling on the name of the Lord." These words were spoken by Ananias to Saul following his encounter with the risen Jesus Christ. The baptismal-regeneration argument usually proceeds as though Saul had been wandering around spiritually untouched by the Lord until Ananias finally arrived with the necessary ceremony. But that is not how the account begins. Acts 9 records Saul traveling toward Damascus as a persecutor when heavenly light surrounded him and Jesus Christ confronted him personally. Saul asked, "Who art thou, Lord?" and received the answer, "I am Jesus whom thou persecutest." The Lord then directed his next steps. Acts 22:14–15 records Ananias explaining that God had chosen Saul to know His will, see the Just One, hear His voice, and become His witness. **The risen Christ had already arrested the persecutor, revealed Himself, and appointed His servant before Ananias began discussing baptism.**

The original account in Acts 9:17–18 supplies details that must be compared with Paul's later testimony. Ananias entered the house, laid his hands upon Saul, and spoke of the Lord Jesus who had appeared to him. He said that Saul would receive his sight and be filled with the Holy Ghost. The record then describes his sight being restored and states, “and he arose, and was baptized.” The sequence does not present baptism as the means by which Saul first encountered Christ or received his apostolic commission. Acts 22:16 still deserves its full force, particularly the command to wash away sins while calling upon the name of the Lord. But Scripture does not identify physical water as an independent cleansing agent possessing power apart from Christ. Romans 10:13 later declares, “For whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.” The appeal to the Lord is no insignificant appendage to Ananias's words. **Saul was not instructed to put his confidence in Ananias's hands or the properties of water. The name upon which he was commanded to call belonged to Jesus Christ.**

Paul's later doctrinal teaching makes the saving issue unmistakable. Romans 3:24 declares that sinners are “justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.” Romans 4:5 speaks of the man who “worketh not, but believeth on him that justifieth the ungodly.” Galatians 2:16 insists that justification is not by the works of the law but by the faith of Jesus Christ. Furthermore, First Corinthians 1:17 records Paul distinguishing his commission to preach the gospel from the administration of water baptism. These passages do not permit us to erase Acts 22:16, but they prevent us from turning it into a declaration that literal water possesses saving power. Saul's baptism belonged to his response to the Lord he had encountered, while the cleansing of sin ultimately depends upon the Redeemer. **The man who later wrote that Christ sent him to preach the gospel rather than baptize ought to be allowed to explain his own understanding of salvation.**

3. First Peter 3: Noah, the Ark, and the Baptism That Saves

First Peter 3:18 establishes the foundation before baptism is mentioned: “For Christ also hath once suffered for sins, the just for the unjust, that he might bring us to God.” That statement identifies the saving work of Jesus Christ, His sinlessness, His substitutionary suffering, and the purpose of bringing sinners to God. Peter then refers to the days of Noah, when the longsuffering of God waited during the preparation of the ark. Verse 20 states that eight souls “were saved by water.” Those words must not be denied. Yet the historical account in Genesis 6–8 explains how the deliverance occurred. The floodwaters destroyed the ungodly world, while Noah and his household were preserved within the ark God had instructed him to build. The water was not a magical cleansing substance producing righteousness inside Noah. It was the overwhelming judgment through which the ark carried its occupants safely. **The same flood that buried the unbelieving world lifted the**

ark containing those whom God preserved. Noah survived the water because God provided the ark, not because the flood possessed an appetite for saving sinners.

Now examine First Peter 3:21 carefully: “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.” Peter identifies baptism in connection with a figure drawn from Noah's deliverance. But he immediately qualifies the statement. He does not describe salvation as the removal of ordinary dirt from the body. He says, “not the putting away of the filth of the flesh.” He then identifies “the answer of a good conscience toward God” and declares that the saving significance rests “by the resurrection of Jesus Christ.” These qualifications are not optional decorations. They belong to Peter's explanation of how baptism relates to salvation. The saving reality cannot be reduced to physical washing. **If a preacher quotes “baptism doth also now save us” but refuses to continue through Peter's own explanation, he has not established Peter's doctrine. He has interrupted Peter before the apostle finished his sentence.**

The distinction between the figure and the saving reality is essential. Noah's ark was a real vessel, the flood was a real judgment, and the deliverance was real. Peter uses that historical event to illuminate salvation connected with Christ's resurrection. Water baptism provides an outward testimony of the believer's identification with the Lord, but the resurrection of Jesus Christ supplies the victorious foundation upon which salvation rests. Peter's emphasis upon a good conscience toward God directs attention beyond the mere washing of the body. First Peter 1:3 had already declared that God has begotten believers again unto a lively hope “by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.” The same resurrection stands at the center of chapter 3. The apostle does not invite sinners to exchange the risen Saviour for a ceremony. **The ark was not saved by pretending the floodwaters were harmless, and the sinner is not saved by pretending baptismal water can do what only the crucified and risen Christ accomplishes.**

4. John 3: Nicodemus Was Told to Be Born Again, Not Sent Shopping for a Baptistry

John 3 records a nighttime conversation between Jesus Christ and Nicodemus, a Pharisee and ruler of the Jews. Christ declares in verse 3, “Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.” Nicodemus misunderstands the statement and asks whether an old man can enter his mother's womb a second time. Christ then answers in verse 5, “Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God.” The expression “born of water” has supplied another favorite argument for baptismal regeneration. But before announcing that Jesus was commanding Nicodemus to receive Christian water baptism, somebody ought to remember when this conversation occurred. Christ had not yet gone to Calvary, the resurrection had not yet taken place, and Paul's later

doctrinal revelation concerning the Church had not been delivered. Nicodemus was an Israelite religious teacher confronting the necessity of a birth that human ancestry could not provide. **He needed life from above, not another certificate proving that he belonged to an impressive religious family.**

John 3:6 supplies the immediate contrast: "That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit." Nicodemus had been thinking about natural birth, and Christ distinguished fleshly generation from spiritual regeneration. Verse 7 continues, "Marvel not that I said unto thee, Ye must be born again." The discussion concerns the necessity of receiving life from God, not the ability of an earthly minister to manufacture that life through an outward ordinance. The water language also deserves comparison with Ezekiel 36:25–27, where God promises cleansing, a new heart, and His Spirit in connection with Israel's future restoration. Christ asks Nicodemus in John 3:10, "Art thou a master of Israel, and knowest not these things?" The Old Testament background matters. Yet whichever aspect of the water language is emphasized, the passage does not explicitly say that baptismal water produces regeneration. **Nicodemus had a natural birth, an impressive religious position, and considerable biblical learning, but none of those things could replace the new birth accomplished by God.**

John 3:14–16 moves the discussion directly toward the saving significance of Jesus Christ. The Lord compares His coming lifting up with Moses lifting the serpent in the wilderness and declares, "That whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life." Verse 16 continues with the promise that whoever believes in the only begotten Son should not perish but have everlasting life. The emphasis is unmistakable. Eternal life is connected with believing in Jesus Christ. The new birth is not presented as a religious procedure controlled by human hands, and Christ does not conclude by directing Nicodemus to an authorized minister for the completion of regeneration. Titus 3:5 later identifies salvation with "the washing of regeneration, and renewing of the Holy Ghost," not with human works of righteousness. **The Lord did not tell Nicodemus that he needed a second natural birth or a more impressive religious ceremony. He told him that he needed a birth only God could give.**

5. Acts 2:38 Must Be Compared with the Gentiles Who Received the Holy Ghost Before Water

Acts 2:38 declares, "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." Peter spoke those words at Pentecost to Jews gathered in Jerusalem after confronting Israel concerning the crucifixion of its Messiah. Acts 2:22 addresses "Ye men of Israel," and verse 36 declares, "Therefore let all the house of Israel know assuredly." The audience and historical setting

are plainly identified. Peter was preaching to a nation responsible for rejecting the One God had raised and exalted. The passage must not be rewritten, but neither may its national setting be discarded. The book of Acts records important developments as the gospel moves from Jerusalem into Samaria and the Gentile world. **A preacher who removes the address from Acts 2 and announces that every later conversion must reproduce the same outward sequence has mistaken historical progression for a permanent religious assembly line.**

Acts 8 records Samaritans believing Philip's preaching and receiving water baptism before Peter and John arrived and the Holy Ghost fell upon them through the laying on of apostolic hands. Acts 10 records a different sequence among Gentiles. Peter entered Cornelius's household and preached Jesus Christ, declaring in Acts 10:43 that "through his name whosoever believeth in him shall receive remission of sins." Verse 44 immediately records the Holy Ghost falling upon those hearing the word. Only afterward did Peter ask, "Can any man forbid water, that these should not be baptized, which have received the Holy Ghost as well as we?" These passages cannot be forced into one identical order without contradicting the historical record. **The Holy Ghost arrived before the baptistry in Cornelius's house, and God did not apologize for violating a ceremony-first formula. The formula is the problem, not the inspired account.**

Acts 15 provides Peter's own explanation of the Gentile event. He declares that God chose for Gentiles to hear the gospel and believe, then states in verses 8–9 that God gave them the Holy Ghost and purified their hearts by faith. Verse 11 concludes, "But we believe that through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ we shall be saved, even as they." There is the apostolic conclusion after considering God's dealings with the Gentiles. Salvation rests upon the grace of Jesus Christ, and God purified their hearts by faith. The apostle did not claim that the Gentiles remained spiritually dead until he completed water baptism. He recognized that God had already received them. The historical differences in Acts therefore must be respected alongside the clear doctrinal explanation given by the apostles themselves. **When Peter declares that God purified Gentile hearts by faith, nobody has authority to revise the statement into purification by faith plus a religious ceremony.**

6. The Thief, Simon, and the Danger of Building Doctrine on a Convenient Exception

Luke 23:39–43 records the believing malefactor crucified beside Jesus Christ. He acknowledged his own guilt, recognized Christ's innocence, and appealed to the Lord: "Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom." Christ answered, "Verily I say unto thee, To day shalt thou be with me in paradise." No baptismal ceremony appears between the man's confession and the Saviour's promise. The account therefore demonstrates that Christ possessed authority to promise paradise without requiring the

condemned man to descend from his cross and undergo water baptism. But proper interpretation must also recognize the historical circumstances. The event occurred before Christ's resurrection and before the completed Church Age revelation concerning salvation was delivered through Paul. The thief should not be used as an excuse to ignore every baptismal command in the New Testament. **He was saved by the authority of Jesus Christ, not by an ordinance, but his circumstances must not be turned into a shortcut around studying the rest of Scripture.**

Simon the sorcerer provides a different warning. Acts 8:13 declares that Simon believed and was baptized, yet Peter later rebuked him for attempting to purchase the power associated with giving the Holy Ghost. Acts 8:21 states, “Thy heart is not right in the sight of God,” and verse 23 identifies him as being in the gall of bitterness and bond of iniquity. Scripture does not disclose his final eternal destination, and that silence must be respected. Nevertheless, the outward ceremony had not prevented a serious spiritual corruption from being exposed. Simon's case demonstrates that water baptism cannot guarantee the condition of a man's heart. A person may undergo the ceremony, associate with believers, and still require searching correction from God's word. **The thief had no opportunity for a baptismal service, while Simon received baptism and afterward faced an apostolic rebuke. Neither account permits water to replace the saving authority of Christ or the searching knowledge of God.**

The two accounts also warn against opposite mistakes. The thief's salvation does not make obedience worthless, and Simon's wickedness does not make every baptized believer a hypocrite. Scripture does not give us permission to construct universal doctrine from isolated details while ignoring the passages that establish salvation by grace through faith. First Samuel 16:7 declares that man looks upon the outward appearance, but the Lord looks upon the heart. Romans 10:9–10 identifies believing in the heart and confessing the Lord Jesus as central to salvation. Water baptism can bear witness to a profession of faith, but it cannot give a human minister perfect knowledge of another person's inward standing before God. Likewise, the absence of baptism does not deprive Jesus Christ of His authority to save. **The Lord knows the heart without consulting the church register. A preacher may count baptisms, but he cannot count regenerated souls merely by examining who came out of the water.**

7. Romans 3 and Titus 3 Establish What Saves the Sinner Under Grace

Romans 3:21–22 declares that the righteousness of God apart from the law is manifested, “Even the righteousness of God which is by faith of Jesus Christ unto all and upon all them that believe.” Verse 24 identifies sinners as “Being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.” Verse 28 concludes, “Therefore we conclude that a man

is justified by faith without the deeds of the law." These are not obscure statements requiring ceremonial additions before they become effective. Paul identifies the source, ground, and reception of justification. The righteousness comes from God, redemption is accomplished in Jesus Christ, and justification is received through faith. The sinner contributes no religious payment sufficient to purchase divine acceptance. **God does not offer justification freely and then send the sinner an invoice for the missing ceremonial portion. Grace that must be purchased through human performance has already ceased to be grace.**

Titus 3:4–7 provides another decisive explanation. Paul declares that God's kindness and love toward man appeared, "Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy he saved us, by the washing of regeneration, and renewing of the Holy Ghost." The washing described here must not automatically be reduced to literal baptismal water simply because the passage uses the word *washing*. Paul identifies regeneration and the renewing work of the Holy Ghost. The source of salvation is God's mercy, not human righteousness. Verse 6 declares that the Holy Ghost was shed abundantly through Jesus Christ our Saviour, while verse 7 explains that believers are justified by His grace and made heirs according to the hope of eternal life. The passage supplies its own doctrinal emphasis. **When God says He saved us through mercy and regeneration, the church has no right to replace the Holy Ghost with a minister operating a tank of water.**

Ephesians 2:8–9 declares salvation by grace through faith, "Not of works, lest any man should boast." Ephesians 1:13 states that believers heard the word of truth, the gospel of their salvation, believed, and were sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise. First Corinthians 12:13 identifies the spiritual baptism by which believers are placed into one body through the Spirit. These passages establish the divine operation that no human administrator can accomplish. Water baptism remains a legitimate ordinance, but the spiritual union of the believer with Jesus Christ cannot be manufactured by human hands. The outward picture must not be confused with the inward reality, and the testimony must not be promoted above the One to whom it points. **A preacher can put a believer beneath water, but he cannot put a sinner into Christ. That requires the operation of God. The gospel saves through the finished work of the Redeemer, not through the religious skill of the administrator.**

Conclusion — Difficult Verses Are Not Enemies of Sound Doctrine

Mark 16:16, Acts 22:16, First Peter 3:21, John 3:5, and Acts 2:38 belong in the Bible exactly as God placed them. They must not be erased, shortened, or treated as embarrassing interruptions to a preferred doctrinal system. Mark 16 must be examined with its

accompanying signs and its explicit condemnation of unbelief. Acts 22 must be read alongside Paul's encounter with the risen Christ and his later declarations concerning justification. First Peter 3 must retain Noah, the ark, the figure, the good conscience, and the resurrection of Jesus Christ. John 3 must be understood in the conversation with Nicodemus concerning the new birth, while Acts 2 must retain its Pentecostal setting and its direct address to Israel. **Every one of these passages contributes to biblical understanding when left in its proper place. The confusion begins when religious tradition removes the setting and demands that one isolated expression govern the entire doctrine of salvation.**

There is no contradiction between honoring baptism and insisting that Jesus Christ alone saves the sinner. The ordinance has divine authority, but it does not possess independent redemptive power. The believer should obey the Lord without imagining that obedience purchases the righteousness supplied through His finished work. The sinner must look to Christ rather than water, to the blood rather than the ceremony, and to the Holy Ghost rather than the human administrator. Romans 5:1 declares, “Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.” That peace is not manufactured by a religious institution and delivered through the plumbing beneath its baptistry. It comes through Jesus Christ. First John 1:7 states that His blood cleanses from all sin. **Water may wash the flesh, and baptism may testify concerning salvation, but the righteousness of God cannot be drawn from a faucet. It comes through the Lord Jesus Christ.**

The final verdict is not reached by ignoring difficult Bible verses but by believing all of them and allowing Scripture to establish its own distinctions. The historical commission in Mark, Saul's conversion in Acts, Noah's deliverance in First Peter, Nicodemus's conversation in John, and Paul's exposition of justification must each be understood according to the words God supplied. Second Timothy 2:15 remains the governing command: rightly divide the word of truth. A preacher who truly believes the King James Bible should have no fear of Mark 16:16 or First Peter 3:21, because the same Bible explains the saving work of Jesus Christ with equal authority. **The strongest doctrine is not the one that survives by concealing its difficult verses. It is the one that can open every passage and leave every word standing. The cross of Christ needs no ceremonial assistant, the blood needs no watery improvement, and the Holy Ghost needs no permission from a religious institution to regenerate a believing sinner. The baptistry has its place, but Calvary has the victory. Never confuse the testimony with the transaction, the figure with the fulfillment, or the water with the Saviour.**

9 of 10 — Water Baptism Without Confusion — A Baptism No Preacher Can Perform: Buried with Christ Without a Drop of Water

Key Passage — 1 Corinthians 12:13: "For by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body, whether we be Jews or Gentiles, whether we be bond or free; and have been all made to drink into one Spirit."

There is a baptism in the New Testament that no preacher can administer, no baptistry can contain, no religious denomination can control, and no amount of water on earth can accomplish. First Corinthians 12:13 declares, "For by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body." That is not a minister standing waist-deep in a river, lowering a candidate beneath the surface, and raising him again while the congregation watches. That is the Holy Ghost performing a divine operation whereby a believing sinner is placed into the spiritual body of Jesus Christ. The difference is not a technicality reserved for men who enjoy arguing over theological vocabulary. It is the difference between what God accomplishes in salvation and what a man can perform through an outward ordinance. One involves the supernatural work of the Spirit; the other involves the physical administration of water. **A preacher can put a man into a river, but he cannot put that man into Jesus Christ. The baptistry belongs to the church's administration; the body of Christ belongs to God's operation.**

The confusion begins when somebody encounters the word *baptism* and immediately assumes that physical water must be present, regardless of the surrounding words. Romans 6 speaks of being baptized into Christ's death. Galatians 3 speaks of being baptized into Christ and putting on Christ. Colossians 2 connects burial with Christ to the operation of God. First Corinthians 12 identifies the Holy Ghost placing believers into one body. Yet religious tradition regularly marches into these passages carrying a bucket, apparently convinced that the word cannot function unless somebody gets wet. Scripture itself refuses that assumption. John the Baptist distinguished his water baptism from the baptism Christ would administer with the Holy Ghost. Jesus Christ repeated that distinction after His resurrection. Paul subsequently revealed the believer's spiritual identification with Christ in language no earthly administrator could fulfill. **The Bible does not require every baptism to contain water any more than every sword in Scripture must be made of steel. Hebrews 4:12 calls the word of God a sword, and nobody needs a blacksmith to understand it.**

The doctrine is foundational because it concerns the believer's actual standing before God. When a sinner trusts Jesus Christ under the present dispensation of grace, salvation involves far more than joining a religious organization, adopting Christian habits, or making an outward profession. The believer receives a new standing in Christ, becomes part of His spiritual body, and is sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise. That standing is not produced

by human hands. Water baptism may bear public testimony to the believer's identification with the crucified and risen Lord, but the testimony must never be confused with the divine reality it represents. Second Timothy 2:15 commands the workman to be “rightly dividing the word of truth.” That means identifying the administrator, the element, the person receiving baptism, and the purpose described in each passage. **The question is not merely whether somebody has been baptized. The question is whether he has been placed into Christ by God or merely placed beneath water by a man.**

1. John Had Water, but Christ Promised a Baptism Beyond John's Power

Matthew 3:11 establishes the distinction before the public ministry of Jesus Christ had reached its fulfillment. John the Baptist declared, “I indeed baptize you with water unto repentance: but he that cometh after me is mightier than I, whose shoes I am not worthy to bear: he shall baptize you with the Holy Ghost, and with fire.” Notice the contrast between the two administrators and their respective works. John administered baptism with water under a prophetic commission directed toward Israel. The coming Christ would baptize with the Holy Ghost and with fire. John never pretended that his personal ministry possessed the power Christ would exercise. He recognized his own position as a servant preparing the way for Israel's Messiah. The water was real, the commission was divine, and the repentance he preached was serious. But none of those facts transformed John into the administrator of spiritual union with Jesus Christ. **John could immerse a body in the Jordan, but he could not immerse a soul into the living Messiah.**

The additional reference to fire must also remain in its context. Matthew 3:10 warns of unfruitful trees being cast into the fire, while verse 12 describes the coming Messiah gathering His wheat and burning the chaff with unquenchable fire. That is judgment language, not permission to manufacture a doctrine that every believer must experience some dramatic religious sensation described as being baptized with fire. John announced both the blessing associated with the Holy Ghost and the judgment associated with the coming King. The expressions must be interpreted according to Scripture rather than popular religious excitement. Furthermore, John's ministry preceded the completed revelation concerning the spiritual body of Christ. He was preparing Israel to receive her Messiah, not teaching the full Pauline doctrine of believers baptized by the Spirit into one body. **A prophet preparing the nation for its King should not be forced to deliver every doctrinal detail later committed to the apostle of the Gentiles. God reveals truth according to His purpose, not according to a preacher's impatience.**

Acts 1:4–5 records the risen Lord repeating the distinction after His resurrection: “For John truly baptized with water; but ye shall be baptized with the Holy Ghost not many days hence.” Christ Himself separated John's outward baptism from the promised work of the

Holy Ghost. The apostles were instructed to wait for the promise of the Father, and the events of Acts 2 record the extraordinary outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost. Peter later remembered the same words when explaining the reception of the Holy Ghost by Gentiles in Acts 11:15–17. The Lord's promise therefore reaches into the unfolding history of Acts, where God demonstrates His gracious dealings beyond Israel. Paul's later explanation in First Corinthians 12 identifies the Spirit's work of incorporating believers into Christ's body. These passages belong together without requiring every historical circumstance to be identical. **When Jesus Christ distinguishes water from the Holy Ghost, the safest course is to believe Him. The church has no authority to erase a distinction established by the Head of the Church.**

2. First Corinthians 12:13 Identifies the Spirit, the Body, and the Divine Operation

First Corinthians 12:12 introduces Paul's illustration: “For as the body is one, and hath many members, and all the members of that one body, being many, are one body: so also is Christ.” Paul is explaining spiritual unity amid the diversity of gifts and responsibilities among believers. The Corinthian church had experienced divisions, pride, and confusion concerning spiritual manifestations. Some members considered themselves more important because of particular gifts, while others failed to understand their place within the body. Paul's answer was not to establish a new religious hierarchy based upon which minister had baptized whom. He directed attention toward the body of Christ and the divine work creating its unity. The members are many, but the body is one. Their unity is not manufactured by denominational paperwork or maintained by belonging to a particular religious organization. **A church may possess an impressive membership directory, but the Holy Ghost is not restricted to the names printed between its covers.**

First Corinthians 12:13 then supplies the means of incorporation: “For by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body, whether we be Jews or Gentiles, whether we be bond or free.” The administrator and result deserve careful attention. The Holy Ghost performs the spiritual work, and believers are baptized into one body. The passage does not say they are baptized into a local church building, a denominational association, or the personal ministry of a particular preacher. It identifies the body of Christ. The expression “whether we be Jews or Gentiles” also demonstrates the spiritual unity of believers whose natural and historical backgrounds differ. Jewish believers do not receive one spiritual body while Gentiles receive an inferior arrangement. The Spirit places them into the same body. This is not replacement theology, because Israel's national covenants and prophetic promises remain distinguishable from the Church's spiritual standing. **Unity in Christ does not require pretending Israel never existed. It requires believing that saved Jews and Gentiles belong to one spiritual body under one Head.**

Paul continues in First Corinthians 12:14–27 by explaining that the body contains many members with different functions. The foot cannot declare itself excluded because it is not the hand, and the ear cannot deny its place because it is not the eye. God has set the members in the body as it pleased Him. Verse 27 concludes, “Now ye are the body of Christ, and members in particular.” That is the significance of Spirit baptism. The believer receives a real position within Christ's spiritual body, not merely permission to attend religious services. Human administrators cannot create this union. A preacher may receive members into a local congregation according to biblical order, but he cannot manufacture their membership in the spiritual body of Christ. **A local church can vote a person into its membership, and it can discipline a disorderly member out of its fellowship, but no congregational vote can place a soul into Christ. That requires the Holy Ghost, not a show of hands.**

3. Romans 6 Describes Baptism into Christ's Death, Not a Ceremony That Produces Salvation

Romans 6 begins with a question arising from Paul's teaching concerning grace: “What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin, that grace may abound?” His answer in verse 2 is immediate: “God forbid. How shall we, that are dead to sin, live any longer therein?” The subject is the believer's relationship to sin in light of his standing in Jesus Christ. Paul had already established justification by faith in Romans 3–5. Romans 5:1 declares, “Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.” Having established that foundation, Paul now explains why grace does not provide an excuse for continuing in sin. He is not introducing water baptism as an additional requirement that must be completed before justification becomes effective. He is explaining the consequences of the believer's identification with Christ. **A man who uses grace as permission to wallow in sin has misunderstood grace; a man who uses Romans 6 to put justification back under ceremonial performance has misunderstood the chapter.**

Romans 6:3 declares, “Know ye not, that so many of us as were baptized into Jesus Christ were baptized into his death?” Notice the destination. Paul does not say baptized into the Jordan River or baptized into a particular congregation. He says baptized into Jesus Christ and into His death. Verse 4 continues, “Therefore we are buried with him by baptism into death.” The language concerns participation in Christ's death and burial through spiritual identification. A human minister may lower somebody beneath water as an outward picture, but he cannot transport that individual backward in history and literally place him inside the tomb of Jesus Christ. Neither can the physical ceremony crucify the old man. The operation belongs to God, who identifies the believer with the finished work of His Son. **The preacher may provide a picture of burial, but God provides the believer's actual**

standing in the crucified and risen Christ. Confusing the picture with the transaction is theological forgery.

Romans 6:4 continues with the purpose of walking "in newness of life," while verse 5 speaks of being planted together in the likeness of Christ's death and resurrection. Verse 6 declares, "Knowing this, that our old man is crucified with him, that the body of sin might be destroyed, that henceforth we should not serve sin." This is not merely an illustration designed to make a baptismal service more impressive. Paul is teaching the believer to reckon upon a spiritual reality established through identification with Christ. Verse 11 commands, "Likewise reckon ye also yourselves to be dead indeed unto sin, but alive unto God through Jesus Christ our Lord." That standing produces an obligation to live accordingly. Grace does not encourage sin; it establishes a new relationship to sin. **The believer is not told to return to the baptistry every time temptation appears. He is told to reckon himself dead to sin and alive unto God. The answer to a sinful life is not another bath but obedience grounded in the finished work of Christ.**

4. Colossians 2 Identifies the Baptism as the Operation of God

Colossians 2:9–10 establishes the sufficiency of Jesus Christ before mentioning baptism: "For in him dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily. And ye are complete in him, which is the head of all principality and power." Those words ought to settle the question of whether the believer requires an additional religious operation performed by human hands to become complete before God. The passage says the believer is complete in Christ. Paul then speaks of a circumcision "made without hands," describing the putting off of the body of the sins of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ. This is spiritual language concerning God's work, not a requirement that Gentile believers submit to Israel's physical covenantal circumcision. The immediate context therefore establishes a divine operation beyond human administration. **When Scripture says the believer is complete in Christ, the religious salesman has no authority to announce that the package remains incomplete until somebody purchases his ceremonial accessories.**

Colossians 2:12 continues, "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." Notice the connection between burial, resurrection, faith, and God's operation. The verse does not identify a preacher administering water as the cause of spiritual resurrection. It connects the believer's rising with Christ to faith in the operation of God. The same Lord who raised Jesus Christ from the dead performs the work whereby the believer is identified with Him. This fits precisely with Romans 6 and First Corinthians 12. The baptism described concerns spiritual union with Christ, while physical water baptism can provide an appropriate outward testimony concerning that reality. The distinction is not an attempt to escape the

plain language. It is demanded by the context. **Human hands can perform a ceremony, but the operation of God cannot be reduced to the movement of a minister's arms. The power that raised Christ from the dead does not flow through the church's plumbing.**

Colossians 2:13 brings the doctrine to its saving consequence: “And you, being dead in your sins and the uncircumcision of your flesh, hath he quickened together with him, having forgiven you all trespasses.” Who performs the action? God quickens the believer together with Christ and forgives all trespasses. Verse 14 then describes the handwriting of ordinances being blotted out and nailed to Christ's cross. The saving work is inseparably connected with the crucified and risen Lord. Paul does not direct believers toward an earthly ceremony as the instrument that accomplishes these divine acts. The passage moves from completeness in Christ to spiritual circumcision, burial and resurrection with Him, forgiveness, and the victory accomplished through the cross. **A man who is complete in Christ does not need a religious institution to add the missing piece. A man whom God has quickened together with Christ does not need water to manufacture the life he already possesses. The ceremony may declare the truth, but only God can perform it.**

5. Galatians 3: Baptized into Christ Means More Than Getting Wet

Galatians 3:26 declares, “For ye are all the children of God by faith in Christ Jesus.” That is the statement immediately preceding Paul's reference to baptism, and it establishes the basis of the believer's relationship with God. The Galatian churches were being troubled by teaching that threatened the sufficiency of faith and sought to bring believers under requirements associated with the law. Paul had already declared in Galatians 2:16 that a man is not justified by the works of the law but by the faith of Jesus Christ. Galatians 3:24 identifies the law as a schoolmaster bringing men unto Christ, “that we might be justified by faith.” The progression is plain. Faith in Jesus Christ establishes the believer's standing as a child of God. The apostle is not preparing to contradict that foundation by slipping water baptism into the next verse as an independent requirement for obtaining sonship. **Paul did not spend an entire argument demolishing justification by religious works merely to rebuild the same structure with a baptistry on the front porch.**

Galatians 3:27 continues, “For as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ.” The language deserves careful examination. Paul identifies baptism into Christ and the believer's having put on Christ. The statement concerns identification with the Saviour, not merely identification with a religious organization. Water baptism can visibly testify to that identification, but a physical ceremony cannot accomplish the spiritual reality of putting on Christ. Romans 13:14 commands believers to “put ye on the Lord Jesus Christ,” addressing the practical conduct appropriate to their standing. Galatians 3:27

concerns the believer's relationship to Christ established through God's work. The distinction between position and practice must be preserved. The Christian possesses a standing in Christ and is commanded to walk accordingly. **A man may put on a white baptismal robe and emerge from the water wearing the same robe, but no amount of religious clothing can produce the spiritual reality of being clothed with Christ. God supplies that identification.**

Galatians 3:28 declares, “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus.” Paul is describing the spiritual unity of believers in Christ, not announcing that every distinction of nationality, historical covenant, or human responsibility has vanished from Scripture. Israel remains identifiable in Romans 9–11, and the New Testament continues addressing husbands, wives, servants, and masters according to their responsibilities. But those distinctions do not establish separate classes of spiritual access within Christ's body. The Jew and Gentile receive the same standing in Him through faith. The believer's union with Christ transcends the human classifications that ordinarily divide mankind. **The Holy Ghost does not maintain separate departments for Jewish Christians, Gentile Christians, wealthy Christians, and poor Christians, each requiring a different baptismal formula. There is one body, one Lord, and one divine operation placing believers into Christ.**

6. Ephesians 4 Declares One Baptism, and the Context Identifies the Unity That Matters

Ephesians 4:4–6 contains a magnificent declaration of spiritual unity: “There is one body, and one Spirit, even as ye are called in one hope of your calling; One Lord, one faith, one baptism, One God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all.” Notice the company in which the expression “one baptism” appears. Paul is discussing one body, one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, and one God. The subject is the divine unity belonging to believers, not a catalog of religious ceremonies administered by human ministers. First Corinthians 12:13 has already explained that by one Spirit believers are baptized into one body. That passage supplies the key to understanding the spiritual unity described in Ephesians. The baptism that establishes membership in Christ's one spiritual body is not dependent upon the denomination, reputation, or physical ability of an earthly administrator. **One baptism into Christ's body is considerably more important than a hundred religious organizations arguing over which one owns the most impressive baptistry.**

Some readers immediately object that water baptism still appears in the New Testament, and therefore Ephesians 4:5 must refer exclusively to water. But that conclusion ignores the purpose of Paul's statement. The “one baptism” belongs to his description of the spiritual

unity of the Church, and First Corinthians 12:13 expressly connects that unity with the Spirit's work. This does not require pretending that Paul never baptized believers or that the outward ordinance suddenly became illegitimate. First Corinthians 1:14–17 records Paul acknowledging certain baptisms while distinguishing his commission to preach the gospel from the administration of water. The two realities are not competing divine baptisms establishing two separate spiritual bodies. One is the divine operation uniting believers to Christ; the other is an outward act bearing testimony to Him. **The picture does not become the substance merely because somebody frames it beautifully. Water may testify to spiritual union, but it cannot perform the union it portrays.**

Ephesians 1:13 further identifies the believer's reception of the Holy Spirit: “In whom ye also trusted, after that ye heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation: in whom also after that ye believed, ye were sealed with that holy Spirit of promise.” Verse 14 calls the Spirit the earnest of our inheritance until the redemption of the purchased possession. The connection is hearing the gospel, believing in Christ, and receiving the Spirit's seal. Ephesians 2:8–9 then declares salvation by grace through faith, not of works. This is the doctrinal standing of the believer under the present dispensation of grace. The Spirit's sealing is not something a minister can manufacture or revoke through ceremonial administration. Ephesians 4:30 commands believers not to grieve the Holy Spirit, “whereby ye are sealed unto the day of redemption.” **A human preacher can administer water for a few moments, but God seals the believer unto the day of redemption. The difference between those two operations is the difference between a temporary outward act and an eternal divine promise.**

7. Water Can Picture the Burial, but Only God Can Place the Believer into Christ

The distinction between Spirit baptism and water baptism does not require despising the outward ordinance. Acts 8:36–39 records the Ethiopian eunuch hearing Jesus Christ preached, confessing faith in Him, and receiving baptism through Philip's ministry. The account describes both men going down into the water and coming up out of it. That action provides a fitting outward picture of burial and rising again. The believer publicly identifies with the crucified and risen Lord, acknowledging the Saviour upon whom he has believed. Yet the Ethiopian's confession came before the water, and Philip did not claim to possess the power to place him spiritually into Christ. The ordinance was meaningful because it testified to the Lord. **A picture is not worthless because it cannot perform the event it portrays. But the moment somebody claims the picture accomplishes the reality, he has exchanged biblical testimony for religious superstition.**

Acts 10 supplies a decisive historical comparison. While Peter preached Jesus Christ to Cornelius's household, the Holy Ghost fell upon those hearing the word before water

baptism was administered. Peter then asked, “Can any man forbid water, that these should not be baptized, which have received the Holy Ghost as well as we?” The Gentiles had received the Spirit before the outward ordinance occurred. Acts 15:9 later explains that God purified their hearts by faith. Meanwhile, Simon the sorcerer in Acts 8 underwent water baptism but afterward received Peter's severe rebuke because his heart was not right before God. These accounts expose the folly of assigning automatic saving power to literal water. First Peter 3:21 also qualifies its declaration concerning baptism with the words “not the putting away of the filth of the flesh,” directing attention to a good conscience toward God and the resurrection of Jesus Christ. **The water cannot guarantee the heart, purchase the Spirit, or improve the resurrection.**

The practical conclusion concerns both salvation and obedience. Romans 10:9–10 identifies believing in the heart and confessing the Lord Jesus as central to salvation. First Corinthians 15:1–4 identifies the gospel as Christ's death for our sins, His burial, and His resurrection. A sinner is saved through the finished work of Jesus Christ, received by faith, and placed into His spiritual body through the operation of the Holy Ghost. Water baptism follows as an outward testimony and should not be neglected merely because religious institutions have abused its meaning. But neither should a preacher threaten a believer with condemnation because a ceremony has not yet been performed. The spiritual reality does not depend upon a tank being filled, a minister being available, or a church service being scheduled. **The gospel can reach a sinner where no baptistry exists, because the Holy Ghost is not confined to the church basement. The Saviour saves; the Spirit unites; the water testifies. Keep those truths in their proper places.**

Conclusion — The Baptism That Matters Most Cannot Be Performed by Human Hands

The teaching of First Corinthians 12:13 is clear: by one Spirit believers are baptized into one body. That spiritual operation places the redeemed sinner into the body of Jesus Christ, establishing a union no human minister could manufacture. John's baptism with water was divinely appointed for its historical purpose, but John himself pointed beyond his ministry to the One who would baptize with the Holy Ghost. The risen Christ repeated that distinction, Acts records the unfolding work of the Spirit, and Paul's epistles explain the believer's position in Christ. Romans 6 identifies the believer with Christ's death and resurrection. Colossians 2 connects that identification with the operation of God. Galatians 3 declares that believers are children of God by faith and have put on Christ. Ephesians 4 identifies the unity of one body, one Spirit, and one baptism. **These passages describe more than getting wet. They reveal what God accomplishes when He makes a believing sinner part of Jesus Christ.**

That standing carries tremendous responsibility. Romans 6 does not present spiritual identification with Christ as an excuse for careless living. It declares that the old man is crucified with Him and commands believers to reckon themselves dead unto sin and alive unto God. The Christian who has been placed into Christ should not live as though he still belongs to the old master. His members are to be yielded as instruments of righteousness unto God. The same grace that saves apart from works teaches believers to deny ungodliness and worldly lusts, according to Titus 2:11–12. The doctrine of Spirit baptism is therefore not an abstract religious curiosity. It establishes the believer's spiritual standing and provides the foundation for practical obedience. **A man who claims to be buried with Christ while insisting upon living comfortably in the graveyard of his former sins has failed to reckon upon what God says happened to him. Grace is not permission to serve the corpse.**

The final verdict ought to settle the confusion surrounding the relationship between water baptism and the baptism performed by the Holy Ghost. Water baptism is a biblical ordinance, and its administration may provide a solemn public testimony concerning the believer's identification with Christ. But the outward ceremony cannot accomplish the divine operation described in First Corinthians 12:13. No preacher possesses the power to baptize a sinner into the spiritual body of Jesus Christ. No river contains the righteousness of God. No ceremonial formula can reproduce the work of the Holy Ghost. Salvation rests upon the crucified and risen Saviour, and the believer's position in Christ is established by God. **A preacher can lower your body beneath the water, but he cannot bury your old man with Christ. He can raise you from the baptistry, but he cannot raise you into newness of life. He can pronounce the ordinance, but he cannot perform the operation of God. The water may testify that you belong to Christ, but only the Holy Ghost can place you into Christ. The greatest baptism a saved sinner ever receives requires no river, no tank, no religious official, and not one drop of water. It requires God, and God alone.**

10 of 10 — Water Baptism Without Confusion — The Water Cannot Save You, but It Can Testify: Buried with Christ Before a Watching World

Key Passage — Matthew 28:19–20: “Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world. Amen.”

There is something terribly wrong with a religious system that takes an ordinance designed to testify concerning Jesus Christ and turns it into a competitor against the very Saviour it was supposed to honor. Water baptism has been preached as a condition for obtaining salvation, administered to infants incapable of making a personal profession of faith, transformed into a supposed instrument of regeneration, and defended with verses pulled out of their historical settings like loose boards from a collapsing barn. On the other side stands another crowd, so determined to expose baptismal regeneration that it begins treating water baptism as though the Lord never commanded it at all. One crowd makes the water do what only the blood can accomplish; the other acts as though obedience becomes unnecessary once grace has been properly explained. Both have wandered away from the simplicity of Scripture. **The baptistry is not Calvary, but neither is it a meaningless bathtub. God appointed water baptism for a purpose, and that purpose deserves to be understood without allowing religious tradition to steal the glory belonging to Jesus Christ.**

Matthew 28:19–20 records the risen Lord instructing His disciples to teach all nations, baptize them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost, and teach them to observe His commandments. The command comes from the One who declared in verse 18, “All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth.” That authority settles whether baptism belongs within the biblical testimony of Christ's disciples. It does. Yet the same Lord who commanded baptism accomplished redemption through His death and resurrection, not through the administration of water. The problem begins when men confuse the saving work of Christ with the obedient response of those who believe in Him. A ceremony can publicly identify a believer with the Saviour, but it cannot manufacture the spiritual union that only God can establish. **Water baptism is a testimony concerning salvation, not a second method of obtaining it. The picture is valuable because of the reality it portrays, but the moment somebody starts worshiping the picture, he has forgotten the One whose likeness it bears.**

The biblical evidence must be brought together without confusing the historical commissions or pretending every occurrence of baptism refers to the same operation. John baptized Israel with the baptism of repentance while preparing the nation for its Messiah. Jesus Christ submitted to baptism to fulfill righteousness, though He possessed no sin requiring cleansing. Peter addressed Israel at Pentecost, while the events in Samaria and Cornelius's household revealed important developments in the reception of the Holy Ghost. Paul distinguished his commission to preach the gospel from administering water baptism and explained the spiritual baptism placing believers into Christ's body. These distinctions do not make water baptism worthless. They establish its proper position. The believer today is saved through faith in the finished work of Jesus Christ and has every

reason to identify openly with the Lord who redeemed him. **Rightly dividing the word of truth does not eliminate obedience. It prevents obedience from being promoted into the purchase price of salvation.**

1. The Risen Christ Commanded Baptism, but He Never Made the Water a Redeemer

Matthew 28:18 establishes the authority behind the commission: “All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth.” Jesus Christ was not speaking as a defeated religious teacher whose followers needed an impressive ceremony to preserve His fading influence. He had risen from the dead, defeated the grave, and stood before His disciples with authority over heaven and earth. His command to teach all nations and baptize them therefore rests upon the authority of the risen Lord Himself. The ordinance is not an invention of later religious organizations, nor does its proper practice depend upon the approval of some denominational headquarters. Christ authorized the work. But divine authority for baptism does not automatically mean baptism possesses independent power to regenerate the sinner. The same Lord who commanded His disciples to baptize had already declared in John 19:30, “It is finished.” **The work of redemption was completed at Calvary. The commission to baptize did not reopen the account and announce that the Saviour had forgotten to pay the final installment.**

The wording of Matthew 28:19–20 deserves careful attention. Christ commands His disciples to “teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost,” followed by further instruction concerning observing His commandments. The proclamation of divine truth, the administration of baptism, and the continuing instruction of disciples all belong within the commission. The command does not present baptism as a substitute for preaching or make the administration of water the entire purpose of Christian ministry. Nor should the wording be distorted into the claim that merely performing the ceremony automatically produces a faithful disciple. Christ intended His followers to be instructed in His truth and taught to obey Him. **A church can fill a baptistry every Sunday and still starve its congregation of Scripture. If the water is plentiful but the preaching is missing, somebody has remembered the ceremony and forgotten the commission.** The Lord commanded disciples to be taught, not merely counted.

The historical setting must also be recognized. Matthew 10:5–7 had earlier recorded Christ restricting the twelve to the lost sheep of the house of Israel, while Matthew 28 presents the risen Lord's commission extending to all nations. These are distinguishable instructions given at different stages of Christ's ministry. The later revelation committed to Paul establishes the Church's doctrinal standing under grace, including salvation through faith apart from works. Nevertheless, Christ's authority and the apostolic practice establish that

water baptism possesses a legitimate place in Christian obedience. Acts records believers being baptized after the resurrection, and Paul himself administered baptism to certain converts. The proper conclusion is neither to discard the ordinance nor to install it as an additional Saviour. **Christ has the authority to command an outward testimony without making that testimony the source of eternal life. A soldier may wear his commander's insignia, but the insignia did not enlist him, train him, or appoint the commander.**

2. Down Into the Water and Up Again: Why Immersion Fits the Biblical Testimony

Acts 8:35–39 provides one of the clearest historical pictures of water baptism. Philip encounters the Ethiopian eunuch reading Isaiah 53, begins at that Scripture, and preaches Jesus Christ. When they come to a certain water, the eunuch asks, “See, here is water; what doth hinder me to be baptized?” Philip answers, “If thou believest with all thine heart, thou mayest.” The Ethiopian then confesses, “I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.” Only afterward does the chariot stop and the baptism take place. Verse 38 declares that “they went down both into the water, both Philip and the eunuch; and he baptized him.” Verse 39 records their coming up out of the water. The order is unmistakable: Scripture was explained, Christ was preached, faith was confessed, and baptism followed. **Philip did not tell the eunuch that water would produce the faith he lacked. He required faith before administering the water.**

The description of going down into the water and coming up out of it agrees naturally with baptism by immersion. Both Philip and the Ethiopian entered the water, though only the Ethiopian received baptism. That distinction matters because merely stepping into water does not itself establish exactly what happened during the administration. Nevertheless, the complete biblical picture strongly supports immersion when Acts 8 is compared with Romans 6:4 and Colossians 2:12, where burial and rising with Christ are central to the language of baptism. John 3:23 also records John baptizing in Aenon near Salim “because there was much water there.” These passages fit an ordinance involving substantial water and the symbolism of burial and resurrection. **If the appointed picture is burial, immersion supplies a fitting representation. A man does not ordinarily bury a corpse by sprinkling a little dirt upon its forehead and announcing that the funeral is complete.**

The outward action must not be confused with the inward reality. Romans 6 concerns the believer's spiritual identification with Jesus Christ, while water baptism provides an appropriate visible testimony of that identification. The believer goes beneath the water in a representation of burial and rises again in a picture of resurrection life. The ordinance does not physically transport him into Christ's historical tomb or perform the spiritual work by which the Holy Ghost places him into Christ's body. First Corinthians 12:13 identifies that

divine operation. Water baptism serves as a testimony pointing toward the reality God accomplishes. The distinction protects both salvation and the meaning of immersion. **A picture becomes more valuable when it accurately represents the truth, not when somebody pretends the picture created the truth. The water can portray burial with Christ, but only God can accomplish the union that makes the testimony meaningful.**

3. Buried with Christ: The Spiritual Reality Must Come Before the Outward Picture

Romans 6:3–4 declares, “Know ye not, that so many of us as were baptized into Jesus Christ were baptized into his death? Therefore we are buried with him by baptism into death.” Paul is addressing believers whose justification by faith has already been established in Romans 3–5. Romans 5:1 declares, “Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.” Romans 6 then confronts the wicked suggestion that grace provides permission to continue in sin. Paul answers, “God forbid,” and explains the believer's identification with Christ's death and resurrection. The passage concerns the spiritual reality of being united with the crucified Saviour, not a theory that an earthly ceremony manufactures justification. **The apostle did not establish salvation by faith in one chapter merely to announce salvation by water in the next. The doctrine develops from justification into the consequences of union with Christ.**

Romans 6:4 continues, “that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life.” Here the spiritual truth becomes a direct command concerning Christian conduct. The believer's identification with Christ is not a decorative doctrine intended for occasional religious discussion. It establishes an obligation to live differently. Verse 6 declares that “our old man is crucified with him,” while verse 11 commands believers to reckon themselves dead unto sin and alive unto God. That is the practical significance behind the testimony baptism portrays. A person publicly identifying with Christ's death and resurrection should not deliberately continue living as though sin remains his rightful master. **A man who has publicly testified that the old life belongs in the grave ought not spend the following week digging it up and inviting it back into the house.**

Colossians 2:12 connects burial with Christ to being risen with Him “through the faith of the operation of God, who hath raised him from the dead.” The expression “operation of God” identifies the power accomplishing the spiritual reality. Verse 13 declares that God has quickened believers together with Christ, “having forgiven you all trespasses.” These are divine actions. No minister can forgive every trespass by lowering somebody into water, and no church ceremony can spiritually resurrect a sinner through physical movement. Yet the believer's water baptism can solemnly portray the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ and his identification with Him. The picture is not meaningless because it cannot

accomplish the miracle. It is meaningful precisely because it points toward the miracle God accomplished. **The grave could not hold Jesus Christ, the water cannot manufacture His resurrection, and the preacher cannot repeat the operation of God. He can testify to the finished work, and that is honor enough for any servant.**

4. The Book of Acts Shows Believers Being Baptized, Not Water Manufacturing Believers

Acts 10 provides a decisive example of baptism following the reception of the Holy Ghost. Peter preached Jesus Christ to Cornelius and his Gentile household, declaring in verse 43 that "through his name whosoever believeth in him shall receive remission of sins." While Peter was still speaking, the Holy Ghost fell upon those hearing the word. Only afterward did he ask, "Can any man forbid water, that these should not be baptized, which have received the Holy Ghost as well as we?" Verse 48 records his command that they be baptized. The historical order is beyond dispute. These Gentiles received the Spirit before water baptism occurred. Peter did not consider that a reason to disregard baptism, but neither did he pretend their reception of the Holy Ghost remained incomplete until the ceremony was administered. **God had already given the gift, and Peter commanded the testimony afterward. The church cannot make the gift wait for a ceremony when the Scripture records God giving it first.**

Acts 16:25–34 supplies another instructive account. The Philippian jailer asks Paul and Silas, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" Their answer is plain: "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved, and thy house." Verse 32 records that they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house. Verse 33 records the baptism of the jailer and his household, while verse 34 describes rejoicing and believing in God with all his house. The order places the proclamation of God's word and the response of faith before baptism. The household setting does not authorize an invented account of unconscious infants being regenerated through a ceremony. Scripture records the word being spoken to the household and describes the household's belief. **The jailer did not ask where to purchase salvation, and Paul did not hand him a baptismal schedule as the answer. He told him to believe on the Lord Jesus Christ.**

Other passages in Acts reinforce the distinction without requiring every historical detail to follow one identical sequence. Acts 2 concerns Peter addressing Israel at Pentecost, while Acts 8 records Samaritan believers receiving baptism before the subsequent apostolic ministry associated with their reception of the Holy Ghost. Acts 19 records men acquainted with John's baptism receiving further instruction concerning Jesus Christ. The book describes genuine developments as the gospel moves from Jerusalem into the Gentile world. These accounts must not be flattened into a single ceremonial formula that

ignores differences of audience, commission, and historical setting. First Corinthians 1:17 later records Paul declaring that Christ sent him to preach the gospel rather than make administering baptism his principal commission. **The apostles did not preach a Saviour who needed water to complete His sacrifice. They preached the risen Christ and administered baptism according to the circumstances of their ministry. The ordinance followed divine authority; it did not replace divine power.**

5. Personal Faith Cannot Be Borrowed, Inherited, or Supplied by Infant Baptism

Acts 8:37 records Philip's requirement concerning the Ethiopian eunuch: “If thou believest with all thine heart, thou mayest.” The response was a personal confession of faith in Jesus Christ as the Son of God. This establishes a powerful biblical pattern for the administration of baptism. The person receiving the ordinance had heard the message, understood the identity of Christ, and confessed belief in Him. Baptism was not presented as a substitute for personal faith or a ceremony performed upon somebody incapable of understanding the gospel. The same general pattern appears among the Corinthians in Acts 18:8, where many heard, believed, and were baptized. **A preacher cannot believe on behalf of another soul, and a parent cannot transfer saving faith to a child through a religious ceremony. Faith is not a family heirloom passed from generation to generation along with the silverware.**

Infant baptism presents a serious problem when measured against the explicit examples of believers confessing faith before baptism. The New Testament records household baptisms, but it does not explicitly identify an unconscious infant being baptized as an act of personal faith. Neither does it teach that baptism performed during infancy automatically produces regeneration or guarantees eternal life. Some attempt to connect infant baptism with circumcision under Israel's covenant, but Colossians 2:11 speaks of a circumcision “made without hands,” and the believer's position in Christ must not be confused with Israel's physical covenantal sign. Matthew 19:14 records Jesus blessing little children and saying, “Suffer little children, and forbid them not, to come unto me.” The passage does not record Him baptizing those children. **Loving children, teaching them Scripture, and bringing them before the Lord are biblical duties. Pretending an infant has personally confessed a gospel he cannot yet understand is another matter entirely.**

This distinction does not justify contempt toward children or toward people raised in religious traditions teaching infant baptism. The issue is not whether sincere parents desired God's blessing upon their children. The issue is whether the ordinance was administered according to the pattern Scripture provides. A person baptized as an infant should not be taught that a ceremony performed without his understanding substitutes for

personal faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. When he believes the gospel, he has every reason to receive baptism as his own conscious testimony. Nor does the absence of an infant ceremony place a child beyond God's mercy. Salvation belongs to Christ, not to the religious accomplishments of parents or ministers. **A Christian home should teach children to believe the Scriptures, not teach them that a ceremony completed before they could speak has already settled every question concerning their eternal standing. The Lord wants truth in the inward parts, not confidence in borrowed religion.**

6. Obedience Is Not the Purchase Price of Salvation, but Grace Is No Excuse for Disobedience

Ephesians 2:8–9 declares, “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.” Romans 4:5 identifies the one who “worketh not, but believeth on him that justifieth the ungodly.” Those statements establish the foundation of salvation under grace. A sinner cannot purchase justification through baptism, religious service, moral improvement, church attendance, or any other human performance. The saving work belongs to Jesus Christ, whose blood provides redemption. First Corinthians 15:1–4 identifies the gospel as Christ's death for our sins, His burial, and His resurrection. Nothing can be added to that finished sacrifice to make it more sufficient. **The blood of Jesus Christ does not require assistance from the water department. Calvary was not a down payment awaiting completion in a church baptistry.**

Yet the doctrine of salvation by grace does not provide an excuse for disregarding the Lord's commandments. Ephesians 2:10 follows the declaration of salvation apart from works by identifying believers as created in Christ Jesus unto good works. Titus 2:11–12 likewise teaches that the grace bringing salvation instructs believers to deny ungodliness and worldly lusts and to live soberly, righteously, and godly. Obedience belongs to the Christian life, but it proceeds from salvation rather than purchasing salvation. Water baptism should therefore be understood as an appropriate act of Christian obedience and testimony, not an installment paid toward eternal life. **Grace does not turn obedience into a dirty word. It removes obedience from the cashier's counter and places it in the hands of a grateful servant. The Christian does not obey to purchase the Saviour; he obeys because the Saviour has redeemed him.**

Consider the opposite extremes. One religious system threatens believers with eternal condemnation unless water baptism has been administered according to its preferred formula. Another treats baptism as an unnecessary inconvenience simply because salvation is not obtained through ceremonies. Both misunderstand the relationship

between faith and obedience. The thief on the cross received Christ's promise of paradise without water baptism, demonstrating the Saviour's authority to save; yet his exceptional circumstances before Christ's resurrection should not be made the governing pattern for every subsequent Christian duty. Likewise, Paul's declaration in First Corinthians 1:17 distinguishes preaching the gospel from administering baptism without denying that Paul baptized certain believers. The biblical position preserves both truths. **The absence of water does not make Christ powerless to save, and the sufficiency of Christ does not make His commandments worthless. A believer should not trust the ordinance for redemption or despise the ordinance because redemption is free.**

7. A Public Testimony Must Point to Christ and Produce a Serious Walk

Water baptism provides a visible confession of identification with the Lord Jesus Christ. The believer's immersion appropriately portrays burial with Christ, while rising from the water pictures resurrection life. The ordinance declares something about the Saviour's death and resurrection and the believer's relationship to Him. It is not a public exhibition of personal goodness or an opportunity for the minister to demonstrate his religious importance. First Corinthians 1:13 records Paul asking, “Is Christ divided? was Paul crucified for you? or were ye baptized in the name of Paul?” Those questions expose the danger of turning baptism into a badge of loyalty to a human leader. The ordinance belongs to Christ's authority, not the reputation of the administrator. **The preacher who stands beside the baptistry should understand that he is pointing toward a crucified and risen Saviour, not presiding over his own coronation. The water is not there to make the minister famous.**

Baptism also bears a responsibility concerning the believer's subsequent conduct. Acts 2:41–42 records believers receiving the word, being baptized, and continuing steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine, fellowship, breaking of bread, and prayers. Their spiritual lives were not reduced to a single ceremony. They continued under instruction and participated in the fellowship of believers. Likewise, Romans 6:4 connects identification with Christ's burial and resurrection to walking in newness of life. A public testimony that Christ has redeemed the believer should be followed by a life increasingly governed by the word of God. This does not mean baptism produces sinless perfection or that every baptized Christian will always behave faithfully. It means the ordinance points toward a Lord whose grace calls His people to holiness. **A man who announces before witnesses that he belongs to Christ ought not spend the following week behaving as though the devil still holds the title deed.**

First Peter 3:21 provides a final safeguard against ceremonial superstition: “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." Peter connects baptism with Noah's deliverance and explicitly qualifies his statement by distinguishing the removal of bodily filth from the answer of a good conscience toward God. The saving significance rests upon Jesus Christ and His resurrection, not upon the mechanical cleansing of the flesh. A ceremony cannot conceal unbelief, cancel deliberate wickedness, or substitute for genuine faith. Simon the sorcerer was baptized in Acts 8 and afterward received Peter's devastating rebuke concerning his heart. The lesson remains. **A baptismal certificate may record that water touched the body, but it cannot certify that the heart is right with God. The outward testimony is worthy of respect only when it remains subject to the inward truth it professes.**

Conclusion — Let the Water Testify Without Stealing the Glory

Water baptism belongs in its proper biblical place as an outward act of obedience and testimony concerning Jesus Christ. The risen Lord commanded baptism within the commission He gave His disciples. Acts records believers receiving it after hearing and responding to the proclamation of Christ. The Ethiopian confessed faith before Philip baptized him. The Philippian jailer heard the gospel and believed before receiving baptism. Cornelius and his household received the Holy Ghost before Peter commanded water baptism. Paul personally baptized certain believers while distinguishing that ministry from his primary commission to preach the gospel. Romans 6 and Colossians 2 explain the spiritual identification with Christ that immersion appropriately portrays, while First Corinthians 12:13 identifies the Holy Ghost as the One who places believers into Christ's spiritual body. These passages establish the distinction without diminishing the ordinance. **Water baptism is not a worthless ceremony, but neither is it an additional Calvary. It is a testimony concerning the Redeemer, not a competitor for His office.**

The Church must therefore refuse both religious errors. Baptismal regeneration makes the outward act accomplish what Scripture assigns to the saving work of Jesus Christ and the operation of the Holy Ghost. Contempt for baptism dismisses an ordinance the Lord authorized and the apostles practiced. The truth stands between those errors without borrowing its authority from either. Salvation is by grace through faith, grounded entirely in Christ's finished death, burial, and resurrection. Water baptism follows as a fitting public identification with the Saviour and His accomplished redemption. The Christian should neither boast of baptism as though it purchased righteousness nor neglect it as though the Lord's instructions deserve no consideration. The minister should preach Christ clearly, examine the profession of faith, administer the ordinance faithfully, and continue instructing believers in sound doctrine. **The water must remain a servant of the gospel.**

The moment it becomes another gospel, the servant has climbed into the Master's chair and begun issuing orders in a house he does not own.

The entire issue finally comes down to whether we will allow the King James Bible to establish the distinction between what God accomplishes and what His servants administer. John prepared Israel for its Messiah. Jesus Christ fulfilled righteousness without needing cleansing. Peter preached to Israel and witnessed the Holy Ghost fall upon believing Gentiles before water baptism. Paul proclaimed salvation through the finished work of Christ and identified Spirit baptism as the divine operation placing believers into one body. None of those truths contradicts the proper practice of Christian water baptism. They protect it from corruption. A believer who has trusted the Lord Jesus Christ has every reason to testify openly concerning the One who died for his sins, was buried, and rose again. But that testimony must never be confused with the sacrifice that purchased his redemption. **The preacher is not the mediator, the baptistry is not Calvary, and the water is not the blood. Let the believer go down into the water as a testimony of burial with Christ and rise again as a picture of newness of life, but never allow the picture to claim the power of the reality. The water can wash the body, the ceremony can confess the Saviour, and the congregation can witness the testimony. But only Jesus Christ can save the sinner. The water cannot save you, but it can testify—and when it testifies properly, every drop points away from itself and toward the Lamb of God.**

Water Baptism Without Confusion

Signs, Testimony, and False Claims

Series Conclusion — When the Water Settles, the Word of God Still Stands

After ten studies examining water baptism from the Jordan River to the Pauline epistles, one truth ought to be established beyond reasonable argument: **the Bible is not confused about baptism, but religious men have certainly made a remarkable career out of confusing everybody else.** We have followed John the Baptist through the wilderness, watched the sinless Son of God submit to baptism, listened to Peter confront Israel at Pentecost, examined Simon's troubled heart, traveled beside the Ethiopian eunuch, entered the Gentile household of Cornelius, and considered Paul's commission to preach the gospel. We have faced the difficult passages without pretending they were never written, distinguished the baptism of the Holy Ghost from the administration of water, and established the proper place of baptism in the believer's public testimony. The result is not some complicated new doctrine requiring a denominational headquarters to interpret it. It

is the plain testimony of Scripture when every passage is permitted to speak within its own historical and doctrinal setting. The problem was never a shortage of verses. The problem was that men kept collecting verses about baptism without bothering to discover whether God was addressing Israel, the Church, a sinner needing salvation, or a believer already standing in Christ. **When the water settles and the religious arguments stop splashing, the word of God remains exactly where it stood before the controversy began.**

The first lesson is that not every baptism recorded in Scripture was administered under the same commission or for the same immediate purpose. John the Baptist was a prophet sent to Israel, preaching repentance and announcing that the kingdom of heaven was at hand. Mark 1:4 describes his ministry as "the baptism of repentance for the remission of sins." Those words are Scripture, and no Bible believer should be afraid to read them. But John was not preaching the completed death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ as later revealed in First Corinthians 15:1–4. He was preparing Israel for her promised Messiah. His ministry belonged to the prophetic program concerning the nation, and John 1:31 expressly connects his baptism with Christ being made manifest to Israel. Jesus Christ Himself then submitted to that baptism, not because He possessed sin requiring forgiveness, but because it became Him to fulfill all righteousness. The same river received confessing sinners and the sinless Saviour, but the spiritual circumstances were not identical. **A man who cannot distinguish the repentance of a guilty Israelite from the obedience of the spotless Lamb has no business announcing that every baptism in Scripture must accomplish precisely the same thing.** The water was the same, but the purpose was not.

The second lesson is that the book of Acts must be believed as inspired history rather than treated as a religious instruction sheet in which every event follows an identical mechanical sequence. Peter's command in Acts 2:38 was delivered to Jews gathered at Pentecost after confronting the house of Israel concerning the crucified and risen Messiah. The Samaritans in Acts 8 received baptism before the Holy Ghost fell upon them through the subsequent ministry of Peter and John. The Ethiopian eunuch heard Jesus preached, confessed his faith, and then received baptism. Cornelius and his Gentile household received the Holy Ghost while Peter was still preaching, before anybody administered water. Acts 19 records men acquainted with John's baptism who needed further instruction concerning Jesus Christ. These distinctions are not contradictions, and they are not embarrassing mistakes requiring correction by religious professionals. They are part of the historical progression God chose to record. **The Holy Ghost did not become confused between Acts 2 and Acts 10. The confusion belongs to the preacher who insists that God must follow his denominational formula even when the inspired record demonstrates otherwise.** Rightly dividing the word of truth is not an optional luxury. It is the difference between biblical doctrine and religious guesswork.

Consider what we learned from Simon the sorcerer. Acts 8:13 declares that Simon believed and was baptized, yet Peter subsequently rebuked him for attempting to purchase spiritual power. “Thy heart is not right in the sight of God,” the apostle declared. Scripture does not reveal every detail of Simon's final spiritual condition, and there is no need to appoint ourselves judges of matters God has not disclosed. But the passage establishes something nobody can honestly dispute: the outward administration of water did not guarantee that Simon's heart was right before God. First Samuel 16:7 still declares, “for man looketh on the outward appearance, but the LORD looketh on the heart.” A minister can hear a profession, administer an ordinance, and record the event in the church's membership register. He cannot inspect the secret chambers of the human heart with the knowledge of Almighty God. A congregation may witness a baptism, but it cannot witness regeneration with physical eyes. **A baptismal certificate can tell you when a man went beneath the water. It cannot tell you whether his confidence rests in the blood of Jesus Christ. The church secretary may possess a record of the ceremony, but the Lord possesses the record of the soul.**

Then there was the Ethiopian eunuch, traveling through the desert with Isaiah 53 open before him. Philip did not begin by selling the man a religious ceremony or asking whether he had selected a denomination. He began at the Scripture and preached Jesus. When the Ethiopian saw water and asked what hindered him from being baptized, Philip answered, “If thou believest with all thine heart, thou mayest.” The man confessed, “I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.” Only then did the chariot stop and the baptism take place. That account establishes a beautiful relationship between the gospel, personal faith, and outward obedience. The man heard the word, believed upon Christ, and submitted to baptism. He did not enter the water hoping that Philip might manufacture saving faith through a religious performance. Neither did he despise baptism because he had already believed. Both errors are corrected by the same passage. **The Ethiopian was not saved by having the right preacher standing beside the right amount of water. The great discovery on that desert road was not the location of a fountain but the identity of the suffering Servant. He found the Saviour in the Scriptures before he found the water beside the road.**

And if any doubt remains concerning whether the Holy Ghost can be received before water baptism, Cornelius ought to settle it. Peter preached Jesus Christ to that Gentile household, declaring in Acts 10:43 that “through his name whosoever believeth in him shall receive remission of sins.” While he was still speaking, the Holy Ghost fell upon those who heard the word. Only afterward did Peter ask whether anybody could forbid water to those who had already received the Holy Ghost. When Peter later explained the event at Jerusalem, he remembered Christ's distinction between John's baptism with water and

baptism with the Holy Ghost. At the Jerusalem council in Acts 15, he declared that God purified Gentile hearts by faith and concluded, “But we believe that through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ we shall be saved, even as they.” That is the apostle's own doctrinal explanation. The water followed God's saving work; it did not cause the Holy Ghost to arrive. **A preacher who continues insisting that the Spirit cannot be received before baptism must eventually decide whether he believes his religious system or the tenth chapter of Acts. God has already provided the evidence, and heaven is not waiting for the denomination to approve the verdict.**

Paul's ministry drives the distinction home with apostolic authority. First Corinthians 1:17 declares, “For Christ sent me not to baptize, but to preach the gospel.” Paul did baptize certain believers, and the Scriptures name some of them. He was not opposed to water baptism, nor did he regard obedience to Christ as meaningless. But he distinguished administering the ordinance from his principal commission to preach the saving gospel. First Corinthians 15:3–4 identifies that gospel as Christ dying for our sins according to the Scriptures, being buried, and rising again the third day according to the Scriptures. Romans 4:5 speaks of the man who “worketh not, but believeth on him that justifieth the ungodly.” Ephesians 2:8–9 establishes salvation by grace through faith, not of works. That testimony leaves no legitimate place for water baptism as an additional payment toward redemption. **If Christ died for our sins, was buried, rose again, and offers salvation through faith, what unfinished portion of that redemptive work is supposedly waiting at the bottom of a church baptistry?** A ceremony may bear testimony to the gospel, but it cannot become an additional ingredient without changing the message being proclaimed.

We have also confronted the passages that religious men frequently throw across the table whenever salvation by grace is preached. Mark 16:16 connects believing and baptism with salvation, but the surrounding commission includes apostolic signs, and the verse expressly identifies unbelief in its statement of condemnation. Acts 22:16 records Ananias commanding Saul to arise, be baptized, and wash away his sins while calling upon the name of the Lord, but the words must be examined alongside Saul's encounter with the risen Christ and Paul's later teaching concerning justification. First Peter 3:21 declares that baptism saves, yet Peter immediately qualifies his statement with “not the putting away of the filth of the flesh,” directing attention to a good conscience toward God and the resurrection of Jesus Christ. John 3 speaks of being born of water and of the Spirit within Christ's conversation with Nicodemus, a teacher of Israel who needed to understand the necessity of the new birth. These passages must be believed, not erased. But they must also be interpreted according to their actual words and settings. **A preacher who quotes half a verse and refuses to read the other half has not defeated false doctrine. He has**

merely demonstrated that his argument requires the apostle to stop speaking before the explanation becomes inconvenient.

One of the greatest discoveries in the entire subject is that Scripture identifies a baptism no earthly minister can perform. First Corinthians 12:13 declares, “For by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body.” The Holy Ghost places the believer into the spiritual body of Jesus Christ. Romans 6 explains the believer's identification with Christ's death and resurrection, while Colossians 2:12 connects burial and rising with Him to “the faith of the operation of God.” Ephesians 4:5 declares “One Lord, one faith, one baptism” within the setting of the spiritual unity of the Church. These are not instructions for a minister to operate a tank of water. They describe realities belonging to God's saving work. A preacher can lower a person's body beneath the surface of a river, but he cannot crucify the old man, bury him with Christ, raise him into spiritual life, or place him into the body of the risen Saviour. **Human hands administer the outward ordinance; the Holy Ghost accomplishes the inward union. The church may arrange a baptismal service, but it cannot schedule the supernatural operation of God according to the availability of its building.**

Now, none of this gives a Christian permission to become careless or contemptuous concerning water baptism. That would simply exchange one doctrinal error for another. The risen Lord commanded baptism, and His apostles practiced it. The Ethiopian received it after professing faith. The believers in Cornelius's household received it after the Holy Ghost had fallen upon them. The Philippian jailer and his household received baptism in connection with their response to the preached word. Immersion provides a fitting public picture of burial and resurrection, declaring the believer's identification with the Lord Jesus Christ. The ordinance is meaningful because of the Saviour it honors, not because water possesses some mysterious power to create righteousness. A Christian should be willing to identify openly with the Lord who redeemed him, without imagining that his obedience contributes another drop of merit to the blood of Calvary. **Grace does not make obedience unnecessary. It makes obedience the response of a redeemed servant instead of the desperate payment of a condemned sinner.** The believer does not enter the water to persuade God to save him. He enters it because he belongs to the Saviour who already accomplished redemption.

The matter of infant baptism also requires a firm biblical distinction. Scripture records believers hearing the gospel, responding in faith, and receiving baptism. The Ethiopian was asked whether he believed with all his heart. The Corinthians heard, believed, and were baptized. The Philippian jailer heard the word of the Lord, and his household's response is described in connection with belief. No passage explicitly identifies an unconscious infant making a personal profession of faith in Jesus Christ before baptism. A child cannot inherit

saving faith through ancestry, and no parental decision can regenerate a soul by arranging a religious ceremony. Parents should teach their children the Scriptures, pray for them, and bring them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord. But baptism must not be transformed into a substitute for the personal faith Scripture requires. **A family may pass down its name, possessions, customs, and religious traditions, but it cannot pass down regeneration through a certificate. Nobody enters the body of Christ because a relative signed the proper church paperwork before he could speak.** Salvation belongs to the Lord, and each sinner must personally receive the testimony concerning His Son.

The practical importance of this doctrine reaches far beyond arguments about water. A person may spend years trusting his baptism because somebody assured him that the ceremony settled his eternal destiny. Another may believe that membership in a particular denomination guarantees access to heaven. Still another may possess an impressive history of religious service while never having understood the gospel of Jesus Christ. All three need to hear what Scripture says concerning salvation. Romans 5:1 declares, “Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.” Ephesians 1:13 connects the believer's sealing with the Holy Spirit to hearing and believing the gospel of salvation. First John 1:7 declares that “the blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth us from all sin.” That is where the sinner's confidence must rest. Not upon the minister's reputation, the age at which a ceremony was performed, the amount of water used, or the words printed on a certificate. **If your assurance of heaven disappears when the baptismal certificate disappears, your confidence has been resting upon the wrong document. The record that matters is the finished work of Jesus Christ and the promise of God to those who believe on Him.**

The saved believer, meanwhile, must understand that identification with Christ carries an obligation to live accordingly. Romans 6 does not stop with burial and resurrection language. It commands Christians to reckon themselves dead unto sin and alive unto God through Jesus Christ our Lord. The same chapter commands believers not to let sin reign in their mortal bodies. Water baptism may publicly portray the believer's identification with Christ, but a faithful Christian life must demonstrate that the truth has consequences beyond the ceremony. A person who professes to belong to the crucified and risen Saviour ought not deliberately live as though sin remains his rightful master. That does not mean baptism produces sinless perfection or that obedience maintains justification. It means the grace that saves also establishes a responsibility to walk in newness of life. Titus 2:11–12 declares that the grace of God teaches believers to deny ungodliness and worldly lusts and live soberly, righteously, and godly. **There is little value in making a magnificent public picture of burial with Christ if a man intends to spend the following week**

entertaining the old man he claims was buried. The baptismal service may be over, but the responsibility to walk with the Lord has only begun.

We should also recognize what the entire controversy reveals about the danger of religious tradition. Men become attached to the ceremonies through which they were raised, the explanations they heard from respected ministers, and the denominational identity they inherited. Then, when Scripture challenges the system, they often defend the system before examining the Scripture. The Pharisees demonstrated the danger when Jesus Christ rebuked them in Mark 7:13 for "Making the word of God of none effect through your tradition." That warning has lost none of its force. A tradition does not become biblical because it is old, popular, emotionally meaningful, or practiced by sincere people. Neither does a doctrine become false merely because it contradicts something a respected religious institution has taught for generations. The standard is the word of God. **A thousand years of religious repetition cannot transform a human invention into an inspired command. Tradition may possess a long memory, but it has no authority to correct the mouth of Almighty God.** When the Book speaks, the controversy must be settled by the Book.

And that brings us to the responsibility of every preacher who handles this subject. Do not use baptism to frighten believers into doubting the sufficiency of Christ's blood. Do not use grace to excuse contempt for an ordinance the Lord authorized. Do not pull Acts 2:38 out of its Jewish Pentecostal setting, ignore the Holy Ghost falling before baptism in Acts 10, or reduce First Corinthians 12:13 to a religious ceremony administered by human hands. Do not pretend Paul's declaration concerning his commission means nothing, and do not treat every occurrence of baptism as literal water merely because that interpretation serves a denominational argument. Open the Scriptures, identify the speaker and audience, examine the historical circumstances, and allow the Holy Ghost's words to establish the doctrine. Second Timothy 2:15 remains the governing command. **The minister who rightly divides Scripture has nothing to fear from the difficult passages. The minister who refuses to rightly divide Scripture will eventually find himself arguing against another verse in the very Bible he claims to defend.** Our responsibility is not to protect religious systems from embarrassment. It is to declare the whole counsel of God without corrupting His word.

So where does this leave the person who has never trusted Jesus Christ? Not standing in line for a ceremony as though water could somehow persuade God to overlook his sins. It leaves him facing the gospel itself. First Corinthians 15:3–4 declares that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, was buried, and rose again the third day according to the Scriptures. Romans 10:9 declares that if a sinner confesses with his mouth the Lord Jesus

and believes in his heart that God raised Him from the dead, he shall be saved. Ephesians 2:8–9 identifies salvation as God's gift through faith, not of works. That is the message a lost sinner needs. Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ. Trust His finished work. Rest upon His blood and resurrection rather than upon any religious performance of your own. Once saved, understand the proper place of water baptism as an act of obedience and a visible confession of identification with the Saviour. **Do not bring God a wet body and ask Him to accept it as payment for a guilty soul. Come to Jesus Christ by faith, because the Lamb of God accomplished what no river on earth could ever accomplish.**

The concluding verdict of these ten studies is therefore both simple and unshakable. John had his baptism, Israel had its prophetic calling, Christ fulfilled righteousness, Peter preached to the nation, the Samaritans received the word, Cornelius received the Holy Ghost before water, and Paul proclaimed the finished gospel of salvation by grace through faith. The believer is spiritually placed into Christ's body through the operation of the Holy Ghost, and water baptism remains an outward testimony worthy of obedience without becoming a means of purchasing redemption. Every passage has its setting, every command has its audience, and every doctrine must remain subject to the written word of God. Nothing needs to be erased, and nothing needs to be added to the finished work of Jesus Christ. **The water cannot forgive sin, the preacher cannot regenerate a soul, the church cannot manufacture righteousness, and the baptistry cannot improve upon Calvary. But the water can testify. It can point toward the death, burial, and resurrection of the Saviour. It can publicly declare that a believer belongs to the Lord who redeemed him. Let it perform that honorable work without demanding that it accomplish what only God can do. The blood saves, the Spirit unites, the believer obeys, and the water testifies. When those truths remain in their proper places, baptism is no longer a battlefield of religious confusion. It becomes a witness to the glory of Jesus Christ—and the glory belongs to Him alone.**



WATER BAPTISM WITHOUT CONFUSION

The Water Cannot Save You, but It Can Testify: Buried With Christ Before a Watching World

1 THE TRUE COMMISSION
CHRIST'S COMMAND TO HIS DISCIPLES



"Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world. Amen."
Matthew 28:19–20

- Given to His disciples, not the unsaved world
- Teaching, baptism, and instruction go together
- Identifies public discipleship under Christ's authority
- Water baptism is part of Christian testimony, not evangelism

2 BAPTISM AFTER FAITH
THE BIBLICAL EXAMPLES IN ACTS



"And Philip said, If thou believest with all thine heart, thou mayest. And he answered and said, I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God."
Acts 8:37

"And they went down both into the water, both Philip and the eunuch; and he baptized him. And when they were come up out of the water.."
Acts 8:38–39

- Personal faith always precedes baptism
- The eunuch believed, then was baptized
- Going down into and coming up out of the water
- A clear, visible testimony of new allegiance

3 THE GENTILES RECEIVE THE SAME TESTIMONY
ACTS 10 AND THE HOUSE OF CORNELIUS



"Can any man forbid water, that these should not be baptized, which have received the Holy Ghost as well as we?"
Acts 10:47

"And he commanded them to be baptized in the name of the Lord."
Acts 10:48

- The Holy Ghost was given first
- Water baptism followed as commanded
- Gentiles received the same testimony
- Salvation is by grace through faith, not water

4 THE JAILER AT PHILIPPI
FAITH, SALVATION, AND BAPTISM



"And he said, Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved, and thy house."
Acts 16:31

"And he was baptized, he and all his, straightway."
Acts 16:33

- Faith brings salvation
- Baptism follows as an act of obedience
- The same pattern for the jailer and his household
- A public confession of what God had done

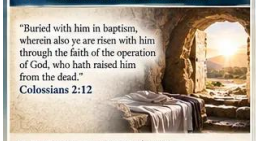
5 WHAT BAPTISM SIGNIFIES
A PICTURE OF DEATH, BURIAL, AND RESURRECTION



"Know ye not, that so many of us as were baptized into Jesus Christ were baptized into his death? Therefore we are buried with him by baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life."
Romans 6:3–4

- Going down: identifies with His death
- Being buried: testifies to His burial
- Coming up: declares His resurrection
- A picture that speaks to the heart and the world

6 BURIED WITH HIM IN BAPTISM
SPIRITUALLY UNITED WITH CHRIST



"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."
Colossians 2:12

- Baptism pictures a spiritual reality
- The believer is unioned with Christ
- It testifies to what God has already done
- The water does not unite you to Christ—faith does

7 THE BAPTISM OF THE HOLY GHOST IS DIFFERENT
SPIRITUAL BAPTISM PLACES YOU IN CHRIST



"For by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body, whether we be Jews or Gentiles, whether we be bond or free; frou have been all made to drink into one Spirit."
1 Corinthians 12:13

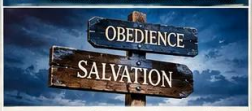
- Accomplished by the Holy Ghost, not water
- Places the believer into the body of Christ
- This happens at the moment of salvation
- Do not confuse spiritual baptism with water baptism

8 INFANT BAPTISM CAUSES
BIBLICAL AND PRACTICAL PROBLEMS



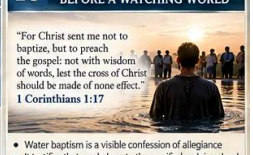
- The Bible shows baptism following personal faith
- Infants cannot believe, repent, or confess Christ
- Infant baptism treats a testimony as a supposed **saving act**
- It replaces personal faith with religious tradition
- It blurs the difference between Israel, the Church, and individual responsibility

9 OBEDIENCE IS NOT SALVATION
DISTINGUISH THE MEANS FROM THE MESSAGE



- Baptism is an act of obedience, not the purchase of salvation
- The water is not the Redeemer
- The preacher is not the mediator
- The baptistry is not Calvary
- Good works and ordinances cannot save a sinner
- Only the blood of Jesus Christ cleanses from sin

10 A PUBLIC CONFESSION
BEFORE A WATCHING WORLD



"For Christ sent me not to baptize, but to preach the gospel: not with wisdom of words, lest the cross of Christ should be made of none effect."
1 Corinthians 1:17

- Water baptism is a visible confession of allegiance
- It testifies that you belong to the crucified and risen Lord
- It is a witness to family, friends, and the world
- It points others to the gospel of Christ



THE BOTTOM LINE

- Water baptism does not save you.
- Water baptism is not an empty tradition.
- It was commanded by Christ for His disciples.
- It always follows personal faith.
- It pictures the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.
- It testifies to your spiritual union with Him.
- Infant baptism is not a biblical act of personal belief.
- Obedience is not the means of salvation.
- The ordinance must not be despised or misused.
- Water can wash dirt from the flesh, but only the blood of Jesus Christ can cleanse the sinner from sin.

The water is not the Redeemer.
The preacher is not the mediator.
The baptistry is not Calvary.
The ordinance points to the One who died, was buried, and rose again.

VERSEQUEST MINISTRIES