

Churches of Christ

What is the “proper purpose” for baptism?

by James Bjornstad

I. Historical and Theological Background

A. Their founders:

Thomas and Alexander Campbell—Former Presbyterian ministers—who were heavily influenced by the free churches. They began forming congregations in America in 1806. In 1813, they and their followers united with Red Stone Baptist Association. This fellowship was dissolved in 1830.

Walter Scott—Joined the Campbells in the mid 1920s. He is considered to be the first person since the early church to administer baptism for the “proper purpose” (i.e. the remission of sins). The “ancient gospel” had been restored on November 18, 1827. This movement referred to itself as the “Restoration Movement”.

Barton W. Stone joined the Campbells in 1832. Common names for the group of churches associated with them were the Christian Church and Disciples of Christ. The use of instrumental music in worship came under attack in 1851. In 1906, a separate yearbook of non-instrumental congregations was published. These congregations became the Churches of Christ.

B. Their theological distinctives:

Ecclesiologically, Churches of Christ believe in: a.) The independence of the local church; b.) The Scriptures as the only authority; c.) A conference of churches for fellowship and edification only.

Soteriologically, Churches of Christ deny justification by faith in Christ alone: a.) Faith is not counted for righteousness and sins are not remitted until one obeys Christ in baptism; b.) The gospel involves a five-fold requirement: hear, believe, repent, confess, and baptize.

II. The Major Distinctive—What Constitutes Salvation?

A. What does the Bible Teach Regarding Salvation?: Faith is both **necessary** and **sufficient**.

What is *necessary* for salvation? (“Without _____, a person cannot be saved.”) Faith, believing, trusting in Jesus Christ (see, for example, John 3:18; 8:24; Hebrews 4:2; 11:6).

What is *sufficient* for salvation? (“If a person has _____, he/she will have eternal life.”) Faith, believing, trusting in Jesus Christ (see, for example, John 3:16-18; 5:24; 6:40, 47; 20:30-31; Acts 10:43; 16:31; Romans 1:16-17; 1 John 5:1, 13).

B. What does the Church of Christ Teach Regarding Salvation? : Faith is **necessary** but **not** sufficient. Baptism is also necessary.

C. Major passages used to support their contention that baptism is necessary for salvation are as follows:

1. Mark 16:16

Church of Christ teaching: Believing + baptism = Salvation.

Biblical response: (1) A textual problem exists—Verses 9-20 are not contained in the earliest manuscripts of the New Testament. (2) Granting that this passage is a legitimate text, the key relationship to understand is between believing and being baptized. Logically, there are four possibilities regarding salvation:

- a. Believing and baptized, which is affirmed in Verse 16a
- b. Believing and not baptized.
- c. Not believing but baptized, which is rejected in Verse 16b.
- d. Not believing and not baptized, which is also rejected in Verse 16b.

(3) From (b) above, it is clear that Mark 16:16 does not speak to the issue of salvation for unbaptized believers.

2. John 3:5

Church of Christ teaching: “Born of water” = Baptism

Biblical response: (1) Word study approach— “Born of water” could refer to John’s baptism (John 1:26); the Holy Spirit (John 7:38-39); the washing of the Word (John 15:3); the washing of regeneration (Titus 3:5); or perhaps a meaning found only in this passage, as in: (2) Structural approach— “Born of water” (V5) = “born of flesh” (V6) as “born of . . . the Spirit” (V5) = “born of the Spirit” (V6). If so, then “born of water” is a metaphor for physical or natural birth in this passage, and not a reference to water baptism.

3. Acts 2:38

Church of Christ teaching: “Be baptized . . . for the remission of your sins.” Baptism is required for the forgiveness of sins.

Biblical response: (1) Consider the structure of this passage: “You (plural) repent and be baptized each one of you (third person singular) in the name of Jesus Christ for [the] remission [of the] sins of you (plural).” If one considers the plurals used, remission of sins is the result of repentance and not baptism. (2) Consider the preposition “for” (“*eis*”): Is it causative (“in order to attain”) or resultant (“because of”—as in Matthew 12:41)? While the Church of Christ accepts the former as *the* interpretation, other passages in Acts support the latter (e.g. Acts 3:19, where the forgiveness of sins is the result of repentance, and Acts 10:45-48, where baptism follows salvation and the forgiveness of sins).

4. Acts 22:16

Church of Christ teaching: “Be baptized and wash away your sins,” i.e. the removal of sin is the result of being baptized.

Biblical response: (1) The aorist imperatives are in the middle voice here, and may best be rendered as “Get yourself baptized, and get your sins washed away.” (2.) The aorist participle “calling on His name” is either simultaneous with the aorist imperatives or immediately precedes them, making it, not baptism, the basis for “sins washed away.” (3.) For substantiation of this conclusion, see Acts 2:20 and Romans 10:13 as to how one’s

sins are washed away.

5. 1 Peter 3:21

Church of Christ teaching: “Baptism does . . . now save us,” or “baptism . . . save[s] us.”

Biblical response: (1) “*Antitupos*”— A correspondence or likeness; (2) Persons in the ark [Flood/water] corresponds to “Good conscience toward God” [Baptism/water] (3.) Baptism is used metaphorically to symbolize a clear conscience before God. It is not the physical act of baptism, but the good conscience which baptism signifies that saves.

Whether the Churches of Christ use the texts above or any other text in the Bible, the fact will remain that no text or group of texts will establish their claim that baptism is necessary for salvation.

III. Summary

Baptism is commanded by our Lord (Matthew 28:19), and disobedience to this command is sin. Regardless of the importance of baptism, the Scriptures do not teach that it is necessary for salvation. By adding this requirement, Churches of Christ are guilty of preaching “another gospel.”

Does this mean that members of the Churches of Christ are “accursed” (Galatians 1:8-9)? No. Those who, though they now believe otherwise, began by believing that they were saved entirely by grace through faith remain saved. They are simply in error. Those who have always believed that baptism is necessary for salvation have missed the gospel and are depending on their own works of righteousness to be saved.

IV. Selected Bibliography

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