

Rethinking Water Baptism

by Frank Viola

When a person decided to follow Jesus Christ in the first century, they joined the insurgence. And their first step was to be baptized in water. Today, however, we have lost the radical meaning of water baptism, along with its power.

In this chapter, I seek to recover both.

The Unchanging Word of God

Before the Lord Jesus ascended into heaven, He told His disciples,

Go therefore and MAKE DISCIPLES of all nations, BAPTIZING THEM in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you.
(Matthew 28:19,20, emphasis added)

He that BELIEVES and is BAPTIZED SHALL BE SAVED; but he that believes not shall be damned. (Mark 16:16, emphasis added)

Now look at these other texts:

Peter replied, “REPENT AND BE BAPTIZED, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ FOR THE FORGIVENESS OF YOUR SINS.” (Acts 2:38, emphasis added)

And with many other words did he [Peter] testify and exhort, saying, SAVE YOURSELVES from this corrupt generation. Then they that gladly received his word were BAPTIZED. (Acts 2:40–41, emphasis added)

And now what are you waiting for? Get up, BE BAPTIZED AND WASH AWAY YOUR SINS, calling on his name. (Acts 22:16, emphasis added)

This water symbolizes BAPTISM THAT NOW SAVES YOU also. (1 Peter 3: 21, emphasis added)

These passages have led some Christian denominations to teach baptismal regeneration. Other denominations have essentially buried these texts, choosing to ignore them rather than engage them at all.

I don’t subscribe to baptismal regeneration. But because I believe the Bible to be God’s inspired Word, fully reliable and fully authoritative, I don’t think we can rightfully ignore these texts either.

To my mind, the solution is in understanding two things: (1) how the word “saved” is used throughout the New Testament, and (2) the relationship between faith and confession.

The Meaning of Salvation

According to the Bible, salvation does not exclusively deal with the question of heaven and hell. Salvation is connected with something far more than just our eternal destiny.

God has provided all things through His Son to deliver us from every effect of the fall.

Because we stand condemned, God justifies us. Because we are born into this world spiritually dead, He regenerates us. Because we have broken His Law, He forgives us. And because we have a sin nature, He sanctifies us.

But what does God deliver us from in salvation?

The answer: *this present world system*.

Because we are all born as servants to the world system, which is corrupt, God saves us. In a general sense, salvation includes every aspect of our deliverance from sin.

In *Jesus: A Theography*, I put it this way:

In Scripture, the word salvation means “deliverance” and includes three tenses: we were saved (justification = salvation from the penalty of sin); we are being saved (sanctification = salvation from the power of sin); and we will be saved (glorification = salvation from the presence of sin). Salvation, then, is Jesus Christ: Christ as our righteousness (past); Christ as our sanctification (present); Christ as our hope of glory (future). The latter will occur when Jesus “will appear a second time.”¹

In its strictest sense, salvation refers to our deliverance from the present world system.

The World System

The Bible uses the phrase “the world” in three different ways. In some places, it refers to the earth. In other places, it refers to the people who inhabit the earth. In still other places, it refers to the system that stands in opposition to God.

Take a look:

Love not THE WORLD, neither the things that are in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in them. For all that is in THE WORLD, the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, is not of the Father, but is of the world. And THE WORLD PASSES AWAY, and the lust within it: but he that does the will of God abides forever. (1 John 2:15–17)

In times past you walked according to THE COURSE OF THIS WORLD, according to the prince of the power of the air [Satan], the spirit that now works in the children of disobedience. (Ephesians 2:2)

¹ Leonard Sweet and Frank Viola, *Jesus: A Theography* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2012), 294

In whom the god OF THIS WORLD [Satan] has blinded the minds of them who believe not.
(2 Corinthians. 4:4)

Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after the orphans and widows in their distress and to KEEP ONESELF FROM BEING POLLUTED BY THE WORLD.
(James 1:27)

There are three evil forces that stand in opposition to the three Persons of the triune God. Satan stands against Jesus as Lord, the flesh wars against the Holy Spirit as Enabler, and the world system opposes God as Creator.

The world system is the enticing network that controls this present age. When the first humans fell in the garden, they unwittingly submitted to Satan's rule. As a result, Satan seized authority over the earth and set in place a cosmic pattern of civilization called "the world."

The world system is a direct challenge to God as Father, Sustainer, and Creator.

The world system includes all the things of this life that are opposed to God's ways, whether they be in entertainment, music, art, fashion, philosophy, politics, education, religion, etc.

According to Jesus and Paul, Satan is the mind behind the system. Thus the Bible says that "the whole world is under the control of the evil one" (1 John 5:19).

By birth, we belong to the world system. And our fallen nature is naturally drawn to it. For this reason, John tells us that the things of the world appeal to the lust of our flesh, the lust of our eyes (materialism), and our pride.

When we come to Christ, however, we enter a new domain where Jesus is in control. In Christ, we are separated from the old order of things and we come into a new realm (Col. 1:13).

Salvation, then, is the exodus from the dominion of darkness (the world system). It is the departure from Satan's domain into Christ's domain. As followers of Jesus, we live *in* the world, but we are no longer *from* or *of* the world (John 17:15–16). This is why Paul could say that "our citizenship is in the heavenlies" and Peter could say that we are "strangers and pilgrims" in this world.

To be saved, then, means more than going to heaven when you die, though it does include eternal life. But eternal life is the life of the age to come. And its experienced now as well as in the future.

Salvation specifically refers to a transference from one realm into another, from one sphere into another, from one authority to another, right here, right now.

So to be saved means to come out of the present world system—which is controlled by God's enemy—and come into Christ's in-breaking rule over the world.

Saved Through Baptism

How do we become separated from the world system, which is under divine judgment? According to the New Testament, it is through repentance, faith, and water baptism:

He that BELIEVES AND IS BAPTIZED SHALL BE SAVED. (Mark 16:16, emphasis added)

Peter replied, “REPENT AND BE BAPTIZED, every one of you . . .” (Acts 2:38, emphasis added)

And with many other words did he [Peter] testify and exhort, saying, “SAVE YOURSELVES from this corrupt generation.” Then they that gladly received his word were BAPTIZED. (Acts 2:40–41, emphasis added)

Who gave Himself for our sins to SAVE US FROM THE PRESENT WICKED WORLD according to the will of our God and Father. Galatians 1:4, emphasis added)

In the Old Testament, we have two examples that represent the meaning and significance of water baptism. They are. . .

(1) Noah’s Ark and the Flood

God waited patiently in the days of Noah while the ark was being built. In it only a few people, eight in all, were SAVED THROUGH WATER, and this water symbolizes BAPTISM, THAT NOW SAVES YOU ALSO—not the removal of dirt from the body, but the pledge [testimony] of a good conscience toward God. IT SAVES YOU by the resurrection of Jesus Christ. (1 Peter 3:20–21, emphasis added)

And spared not the old world, but SAVED NOAH the eighth person, a preacher of righteousness, bringing in the flood upon THE WORLD OF THE UNGODLY. (2 Peter 2:5, emphasis added)

In Noah’s day, everything became corrupt. People departed from God and the world grew wicked beyond recovery.

God had no alternative but to judge it.

Accordingly, God commanded Noah to build an ark to shelter all who sought deliverance from the coming deluge.

Rain filled the earth, destroying the old corrupt world. But Noah and those in the ark moved safely above the waters.

As Noah’s family found refuge in the ark, they escaped the old world, now buried under the waters of judgment. When the waters receded, Noah found himself in a new creation.

According to Peter, this story depicts our salvation from the world system through baptism.

Salvation is God’s exit from a doomed system led by Satan. Christ is the ark in which we find our deliverance. And it is through the water that we bury our old life that was attached to the old world.

Peter goes on to say that baptism is a pledge—a testimony—of a good conscience before God.

Through baptism, we testify to women, men, angels, demons, and to God that we have died to the old creation and that we are part of the new creation. Our attachments to the world have been severed. Our allegiance is now with the kingdom of God.

Baptism, then, is a clear declaration of where we now stand. Through it, we make a public confession that we have surrendered our lives to Christ, that the old life we once lived is finished and buried, and we are a new creature in Jesus.

Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new. (2 Corinthians 5:17)

(2) Israel's Exodus through the Red Sea

They [the Israelites] were all baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea. (1 Corinthians 10:2)

Egypt represents the world system headed up by Satan, who is typified by Pharaoh, king of Egypt. Moses represents Christ, our Savior from the bondage of sin.

How did Moses deliver Israel from their slavery? Through the opening of the Red Sea.

In the book of Exodus, we are told that Moses led Israel through the Red Sea, which God opened for them, causing them to leave the old land.

When the Egyptians followed Israel in an attempt to seize them, God sent the waters back over the Egyptians, burying them in the sea. Through the Red Sea, Israel severed their connection with the old system that held them in perpetual bondage.

Israel no longer had any allegiance to Pharaoh; his hold on them was broken from that moment forward. And so it is with us. By baptism into Christ, we sever our connection with the old system that once held us in bondage.

The Initial Confession

Faith is not complete without confession (Rom. 10:9–10; 2 Cor. 4:13; Heb. 10:23).

According to the New Testament, water baptism is the initial confession that a person makes once she or he has come to Christ. It is the first step in becoming a disciple of Jesus.

While the first act before God is to repent and believe, the first act before humans and angels is to be baptized.

Through baptism, we express that we belong to Christ and are no longer part of the world system. This is why in the book of Acts, the apostles sometimes exhort, “Repent and believe,” while other times they exhort, “Repent and be baptized.”

Saving faith and baptism are intimately connected. So much so that they are used interchangeably in the New Testament.

Baptism is the way the early Christians initially confessed their faith in Christ.

For this reason, the New Testament plainly shows that when people believed the gospel, they were immediately baptized:

Then they that gladly RECEIVED HIS WORD WERE BAPTIZED. (Acts 2:41, emphasis added)

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. (Acts 8:12, emphasis added)

And they SPOKE THE WORD OF THE LORD together with all who were in the house. And he took them that very hour of the night and washed their wounds and IMMEDIATELY HE WAS BAPTIZED, he and all his household. (Acts 16:32–33, emphasis added)

Then Philip began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus. As they traveled along the road, they came to some water and the eunuch said, “LOOK, HERE IS WATER. WHY SHOULDN’T I BE BAPTIZED?” And he gave orders to stop the chariot. Then both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water and PHILIP BAPTIZED HIM. (Acts 8:35–37, emphasis added)

(Notice that the eunuch asked to be baptized after Philip explained the Isaiah passage to him.

This indicates that Philip included baptism in his conversation with the eunuch.)

One of those listening was a woman named Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth from the city of Thyatira, who was a worshiper of God. The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul’s message. When she and the members of her household WERE BAPTIZED, she invited us to her home. “If you consider me a believer in the Lord,” she said, “come and stay at my house.” And she persuaded us. (Acts 16:14–15, emphasis added)

Baptism Is Burial

If you were baptized in the first century, you were signing your death warrant. You were renouncing everything for another kingdom. You were paying your allegiance to another king, Jesus of Nazareth, rather than to Caesar.

The one who was baptized was buried. Yet they rose again from the dead as a new creation. The baptized person had become a citizen of the true Israel, the new nation called ekklesia. And its headquarters was in the heavenly realm.

That’s how the early Christians understood baptism. It was an ending. A burial. And when you came up out of that water, you understood that your past was gone, forgiven, and you were now part of a new nation, a new people, a new kingdom.

Properly understood, baptism is a funeral service.

Romans 6:4–6 says,

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. For if we have become united with Him in the likeness of his death, certainly we shall be also in the likeness of His resurrection: Knowing this, that **OUR OLD MAN [our old self] WAS CRUCIFIED WITH HIM**, that the body of sin might be unemployed, that we should no longer serve sin. (emphasis added)

But those who are buried in Christ rise from the dead. Baptism, then, has two sides. It is both a release as well as an entry. On the one side, we are baptized into Christ's death.

When we go down under the water, we testify to the fact that the old person we used to be and the old world that we used to serve is being buried. We are plunged beneath the water and the "old Adam" is drowned. But we come up out of the water in Christ and begin a new life.

In baptism, we affirm that we have become a new person with a new nature, born into a new humanity which belongs to a new creation where Jesus of Nazareth is Lord.

Baptism shows to the visible and invisible world that a person has joined the insurgence of God's endless kingdom.

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