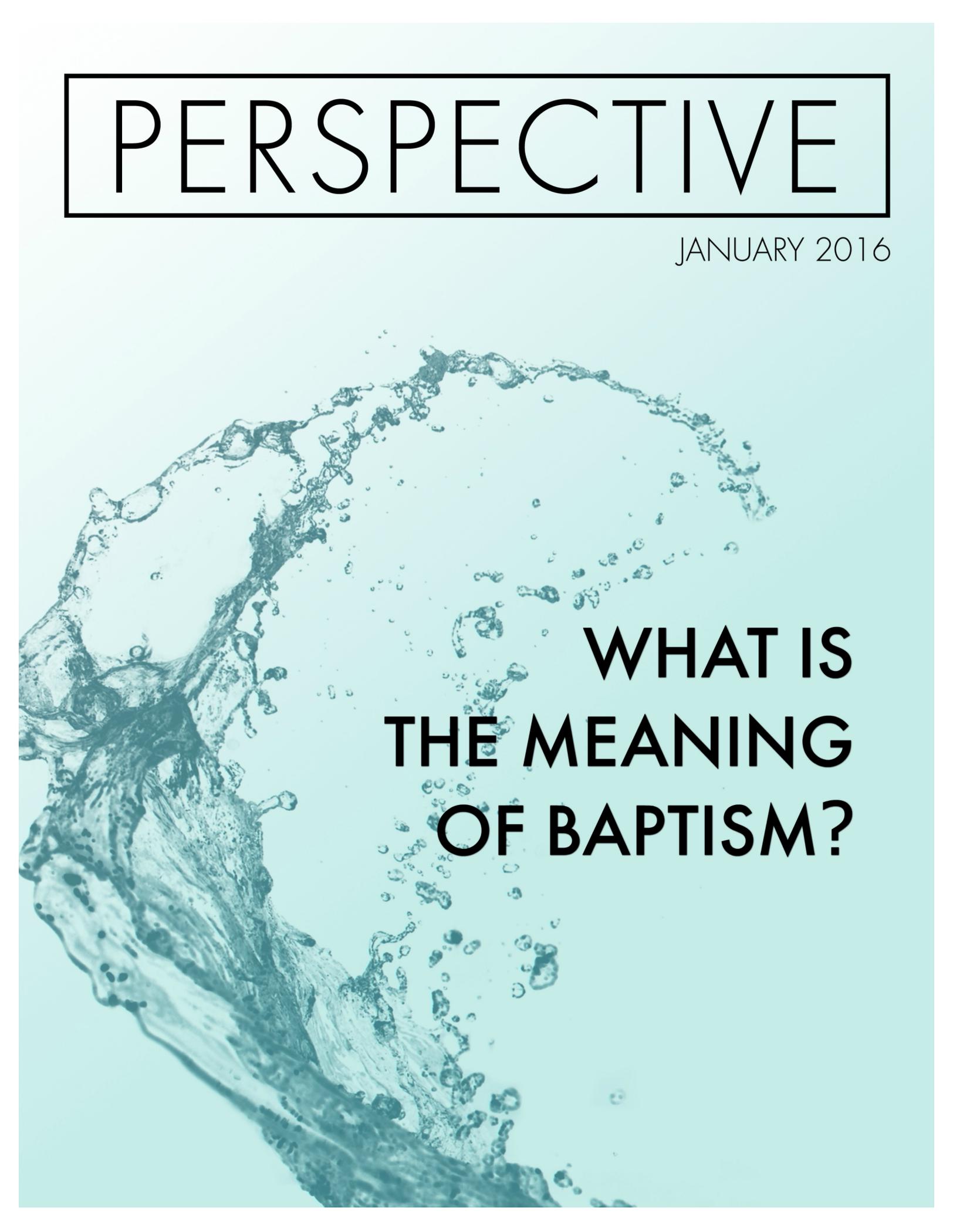


PERSPECTIVE

JANUARY 2016



**WHAT IS
THE MEANING
OF BAPTISM?**

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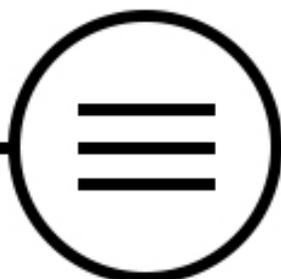
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What is the Meaning of Baptism?

The article is adapted from a sermon originally preached on November 1, 2015. You can find the audio at www.mvbchurch.org.

THE PROBLEM WITH LABELS

Not many church plants use the name “Baptist” these days. Denominational labels are unfashionable. My guess is if our church had been planted in 2015 and not 1959, we would have simply called it, Mount Vernon Church. Why is this the case?

There are a number of reasons modern church planters might be slow to identify their work with a specific denomination? Many churches today are more seeker-sensitive than they were a generation ago. They are eager to reach the “unchurched,” and they know denominational labels can seem petty. Many churches rightly want to be gospel-centered and wonder why something as unimportant as baptism should get so much attention. Churches have a good desire to minimize division; they want to show Christian unity. Denominational labels communicate disunity. Other churches simply want to avoid unnecessary baggage. The word “Baptist” can be a Rorschach Test—you read your own experience into it. For some, Baptist means conservative. For others, liberal. For others, fire and brimstone. What you think when you hear the word “Baptist” may say more about your history than the word itself.

There’s another problem with labels. The way they are used today, labels often tell you nothing about what’s most important—a church’s view on the gospel. Just because a church calls itself Baptist does not mean it’s a Bible-believing church. In that sense, Mount Vernon Baptist has more in common with an evangelical Presbyterian church than a mainline Baptist church. A mainline Baptist church rejects Scripture as the inerrant, inspired, and authoritative Word of God. It denies Jesus is the only way to heaven. We shouldn’t have anything to do with a Baptist Church like that. In fact, Mount Vernon Baptist in Sandy Springs has more in common with a faithful, evangelical Presbyterian church than a theologically liberal Baptist church. A lot of bad theology can hide behind historic labels.

LABELS CAN BE HELPFUL

Before we throw away denominational labels completely, consider that labels can be helpful. For example, to label ourselves Protestant is to say we are not Roman Catholic. We don’t believe our works contribute to our justification. We do believe we are saved by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. To label ourselves Evangelical is to say we are not mainline: We don’t believe Jesus is one of many paths to heaven. We do believe the Bible is the inspired, inerrant, authoritative Word of God. To label ourselves Baptist is to say we don’t believe in infant baptism. We do believe baptism and membership is for those who have repented of their sins and placed their faith in Jesus Christ.

A church’s view on baptism is not the most important thing about it. It is secondary to it’s understanding of Scripture and the gospel, for example. But just because something is secondary does not mean it is unimportant. Whether you decide to be part of a church whose name indicates it’s view on baptism really isn’t the issue. At stake is whether you care about how God designed the church to operate. How are we supposed to recognize somebody’s new birth? What do we do when somebody becomes a Christian? What, exactly, does baptism signify? Christians care about these questions because they are questions the Bible addressed. They may not be the most important questions in the Bible, but they are questions that matter.

Our position about baptism is obvious from our name, Mount Vernon *Baptist* Church. It’s not crucial that we call ourselves Baptist. There is nothing in the Bible that says our view of baptism should be embedded in the name of our church. However, the theology behind our name matters. As Christians who care about the Bible and about God’s plan for the local church we ought to pay careful attention to the meaning of baptism.

A HISTORICAL REVIEW

Many people find the topic of baptism interesting because it’s so divisive. Churches split over this issue. Disagreements over baptism have a long history.

It’s widely agreed there is no record of infant baptism until the late second century. This doesn’t prove the first churches weren’t baptizing babies, but they weren’t writing about it.¹ Infant baptism gained traction from the third through fifth centuries, though it wasn’t a universal practice. Some of the church fathers made arguments for infant baptism that evangelical Presbyterians would reject today. For example, Augustine argued baptism

washed away original sin from a baby's heart.ⁱⁱ Many think infant baptism became popular in the early church because of the high rate of child mortality. If some argued baptism could wash away the sin we are born with, and if a large number of children died before reaching adulthood, it would make sense to baptize a child as soon as possible. Nonetheless, many Christians in this era disagreed and archeological excavations have uncovered baptismal pools, proving adult baptism remained a common practice.

For many years Baptists in America were a small and persecuted sect. Critics equated believer's baptism to anarchy. Since Emperor Constantine in the fourth century, most Christians saw the church and state as one—two sides of the same coin. In countries where the church and state were united, to be a citizen was to be baptized—this is why life was so hard for Jews and Muslims. Baptists did not agree with a union of church and state. They objected to a state-established religion. They wanted the freedom to identify themselves as

When a Christian is baptized, he's putting a stake in the ground and saying, "I worship Christ alone!" I remember starting each school day with the Pledge of Allegiance. This ceremony was a public symbol of our devotion to our country. Baptism is a one-time, public symbol of our devotion to our Lord, Jesus Christ. We repent of all past allegiances, and we pledge ourselves to him.

However, in the sixth century a Roman emperor actually made infant baptism the law of the land, and by the sixteenth century the practice was universal. By the day of the great church reformer, Martin Luther, the Roman Catholic Church taught baptism conveys God's grace all by itself—no faith required.ⁱⁱⁱ Luther disagreed, but not completely. He argued against Rome that faith must precede baptism. However, Luther supported infant baptism, strangely insisting that God gave infants faith.^{iv}

We should be thankful for the sixteenth-century Reformation when Christians recovered the glorious gospel of God's sovereign grace. But the Reformation did not end here. As Christians studied the Bible for themselves, many rediscovered the doctrine of believer's baptism—the idea that baptism is only for those who make a personal profession of faith.

In seventeenth-century England a Baptist movement began and Baptist churches were planted. These Baptists were Separatists—they wanted freedom to "separate" from the Church of England. All Baptists were Separatists, but not all Separatists were Baptists. Presbyterians and Congregationalists, for example, were Separatists too. The American pilgrims were also Separatists. They wanted freedom from the Church of England so they planted their own state church in America. Under the guidelines of this new community, every child was baptized into the church. Baptists like Roger Williams, founder of the first Baptist church in Providence, Rhode Island, objected.

Christians, through baptism, upon their profession of faith and not before. Baptists argued baptism and church membership are personal decisions. Henry Dunster, the first president of what is now Harvard University, held the Baptist view. He was forced to resign his presidency in 1655. He got off light; it wasn't uncommon for Baptists to be fined, whipped, and even drowned.^v

But the Reformation continued, and over time many people throughout the world studied the Bible and came to share these Baptist convictions. What led them to take this stance? They saw in the Bible the true meaning of baptism.

BAPTISM IS A PRECIOUS SYMBOL

What is the meaning of baptism? In a nutshell, baptism is a precious symbol of a divine work in a believer's heart. But what do Baptists mean when they say Baptism is a symbol? I'll focus on four things: First, baptism symbolizes a new Lord, a new life, a new identity, and a new family. By the way, if you take these symbols in reverse order they form a helpful acronym: F.I.L.L., as in, "*Fill* the baptismal pool!"

First, baptism symbolizes a new Lord.

When a Christian is baptized, he's putting a stake in the ground and saying, "I worship Christ alone!" I remember starting each school day with the Pledge of Allegiance. This ceremony was a public symbol of our devotion to our country. Baptism is a one-time, public symbol of our devotion to our Lord, Jesus Christ. We repent of all past allegiances, and we pledge ourselves to him.

We see this all over the Bible, but one of the earliest examples is from Acts chapter 2. Peter is speaking to a crowd of Jews. He has carefully explained the gospel. He told the crowd about Jesus and his death and resurrection. He explained that this Jesus is the one King David prophesied about in the Old Testament. Peter preaches of Jesus as a Savior crucified for the sins of his people. The Spirit of God moved powerfully through Peter's preaching. Luke records the response of Peter's audience in Acts 2:37, "Now when they heard this they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, 'Brothers, what shall we do?'" This gathering of people heard the gospel, believed the gospel, and wondered what to do next. Peter's answer is in verse 38, "And Peter said to them, 'Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.'"

Peter did not teach them that baptism brings forgiveness—if that were the case the thief on the cross had no hope. Peter is presenting baptism as a symbol of repentance and faith. Clearly Peter's audience had put their faith in Christ. Why would they wonder what to do next if they hadn't believed what Peter said about Jesus is true. Peter's response is clear. They need to turn away from their sins and they need to mark their newfound faith with the act of baptism. In the early church, all those who repented of their sins and put their faith in Christ were baptized. Repentance, faith, and baptism went together. They were so closely tied together that to tell someone to be baptized was simply another way of saying, "Make a public declaration of your repentance and faith."

In Joshua 24 we read of all Israel gathering to remember what the LORD had done for them. He redeemed them from slavery in Egypt and brought them into the Promised Land. God's actions demanded a public response, and so Joshua told the people to take a stand. "Choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your fathers served in the region beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you dwell. But as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD" (24:15). In the act of baptism, a Christian is declaring, "I choose to serve the Lord Jesus Christ."

Baptism is a very public symbol, a sign that you've denied all other gods. They no longer have a claim on your life. When we were dead in our sins and transgressions we worshipped false gods. We idolized things like wealth, fame, security, and sex. Through baptism we said to each

of them: "You are no longer my Lord. You have no mastery over me. I have a new king. I am being baptized in his name." Which is why baptism is a symbol of a new Lord.

Second, baptism symbolizes a new life.

For us to truly declare Jesus is now Lord, God must first do something inside us. He has to change our heart. He has to give us new life. When a Christian is baptized he's not only saying he has a new king, he's saying that king has already been at work by changing his heart. In baptism we have evidence of the fulfillment of God's promise through the prophet Ezekiel. Long ago Ezekiel prophesied a day when hard-hearted sinners would be filled with the Holy Spirit and born again.

I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh (Eze 36:24-25).

Through the gospel, God does heart surgery. He takes out hearts of stone and replaces them with hearts of flesh—believing hearts; hearts sensitive to the Lord and eager to do his will. In other words, the gospel changes us. It's why the author of Hebrews, unpacking the gospel, could write in Hebrews 10:22, "let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water." In this verse the heart change wrought by the gospel is linked to the act of baptism. Heart words mingle with water words because baptism is a symbol of a new life.

This is why baptism is often called an outward sign of an inward work. Having our bodies washed with pure water is simply a picture of receiving a new heart, a true heart. The apostle Paul also links new life words with water words, "you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God" (1 Cor 6:11).

Ezekiel, the author of Hebrews, and Paul each write about the Christian being cleansed, or sprinkled, or washed. Why all this watery language? Is it because we need to get wet to be saved? No. It's because in baptism we are declaring to the world we have been saved; we've been cleansed and forgiven. We are saying, "Look at what God did to me. Look at what he did in me. God saved me."

Peter, the one who preached, “Repent and be baptized,” jumps on the watery-words bandwagon. In 1 Peter 3:21, he wrote, “Baptism, which corresponds to this, now saves you, not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ.” We stumble on this verse because Peter says, “Baptism saves you.” But if baptism stands for repentance and faith, then this makes perfect sense. In the early church, every Christian was baptized. Repentance, faith, and baptism all occurred so close together that the apostles used the words interchangeably.^{vi} It’s not that baptism brings new life, as Peter goes on to clarify. Baptism in a physical sense is just the “removal of dirt from the body.” But it symbolizes God’s work on the believer’s heart.

On July 16, 2015, Mount Vernon celebrated with me and my family the adoption of our daughter, Tori. The community gathered. You brought flowers, snacks, and candy. There were pictures and hugs and laughter and tears. We gathered to celebrate a girl who received a new life. The party didn’t do anything—it had no magical power to add Tori to the Menikoffs! But if you saw that celebration you’d have known her life would never be the same.

When you are baptized, you’re telling everyone, “My life will never be the same. Something amazing has happened. My sins have been taken away! I’ve been given a new life.” Baptism is a symbol, a one-time celebration of the new life we have in Christ.

Third, baptism symbolizes a new identity.

Let’s admit that baptism by immersion can be a clunky event in our twenty-first century world. I put on a white, oversized robe with giant sleeves that make me feel like I’m playing an angel in an underwater Christmas play. And apparently the way I actually baptize a Christian is subpar. I’m told the way I hold out my hand in front of a person’s face that makes it look like I’m trying to drown him! Clearly I’ve got to improve my method.

Nonetheless, there is a reason we go to the work of baptizing the way we do, of having someone immersed under water. It’s not simply because the Greek word for “to baptize” literally means “to immerse.” No, there’s more to it than that. It’s because the act of baptism is a visible sign of a brand new identity. It’s a picture of union with Christ. This warrants careful explanation.

One of the most important texts on baptism is found in Romans 6. In Romans 4 and 5 Paul teaches we are saved by grace through faith. We are justified—declared righteous in the eyes of God—because of Jesus’ work on the cross and not because of our work. Paul knows some people will be asking the question, “If my sin is a reason for God’s grace, can’t I sin more so that we can see more of God’s grace? Of course not. Paul put it this way in Romans 6:2-5:

By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it? Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.

This passage shows that baptism is a symbol of union with Christ. We have been so united to Christ he is our new identity. Going under water is a picture of death—you were buried with Christ; you died to your former way of living, and your sins died with you. Coming up out of the water is a picture of resurrection life—you were raised from the dead and fully empowered to live a life pleasing to God—to “walk in newness of life.” The same idea is captured in Galatians 2:20, “I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me.”^{vii}

Twenty years ago my wife and I married in the town of Beaverton, Oregon. Clouds covered the sun on this typical day in the Northwest as Deana’s sister, Karen sang, “How Beautiful” while my uncle played guitar. Our flower girl, who is now a mom herself, was too scared to walk down the aisle alone. Pastor George married us, and when we put rings on each other’s fingers, this is what we said, “With this ring I thee wed, and with all my worldly goods I thee endow.” I didn’t have many worldly goods to give Deana, but what I had belonged to her because in marriage we became one. My stuff ... her stuff. Her stuff ... my stuff. My future ... her future. Her future ... my future. We stopped simply being merely Aaron and Deana and we became The Menikoffs.

Baptism is a picture of our miraculous union with Christ. Through his death and resurrection, something amazing happened: Jesus got my sin, I got his

righteousness; Jesus got my shame, I got his glory; Jesus got the wrath I deserved, I got the favor he deserved. I ceased being merely Aaron and I became “Christian.”

Union with Christ means I’m wealthy. I’m complete. I’m secure. I don’t need to worry about my past or my future. I don’t need to prove myself to anyone, I don’t need to obey my flesh, and I don’t need to pretend to be someone I’m not. I’ve been crucified with Christ. I’ve been raised with him. He abides in me, I in him. He’s my rest. Baptism pictures all of this. Baptism is a symbol of a new identity.

Fourth, baptism symbolizes a new family.

One of my favorite passages in the Gospels is found in Mark 10. Jesus teaches that to gain him, you have to give up the world. For the Rich Young Ruler of Mark 10 that meant giving up wealth. This gets back to the first thing I said about baptism, it symbolizes a new Lord. You can’t have two masters. We all leave something behind when we gain Christ. But what I find so amazing is that Jesus tells us we gain more than him. Look carefully at Mark 10:29,

Truly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands, for my sake and for the gospel, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this time, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands.

In the age to come we will enjoy eternal life. Today, we enjoy a new family. No matter what you leave behind, God won’t leave you alone. Baptism is a symbol, a sign that God has given you a family of faith. When Paul wrote to the church in Ephesus, he told them that in baptism they had been brought together as one family. They needed, therefore, to live as a family by loving and serving one another faithfully:

I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call—one Lord, one faith, one baptism (Eph 4:1-5).

In baptism you are showing the world not only that God has given you a family, but that you are part of that

family. And though in one sense the family of God is universal—all Christians throughout all time and in all places—the family of God is also local. Each congregation is a family of faith and your baptism is the visible marker of entrance into this family. I love how Timothy George, Dean of Beeson Divinity School, put it when he wrote that baptism is not a sign of “the priesthood of ‘the believer,’ a lonely, isolated seeker of truth, but rather a band of faithful believers united in a common confession as a local, visible... gathering of saints.”^{viii}

One of the most beautiful moments in our life together is when a brother or sister stands before the congregation and professes faith in a new Lord; explains how God has granted new life; and rejoices in a new identity. And then we get to welcome this brother or sister to be a part of a new family. This is what Christians have been doing for centuries.

Imagine you were on the island of Crete in the first century. Paul worked hard planting churches here. He left Titus to finish the work he started. Many people came to saving faith in Christ, the rich and the poor. Let’s say that there was a slave girl in Crete called Lucilla.

Lucilla works hard every day, carrying water to the home, cooking the meals, watching the kids. One day while walking to the well she meets a group of women talking about Jesus. She’d heard people discussing this Jew before, but she didn’t know him. So she asked them to tell her about Jesus. They did, but she still wanted to know more. So they invited her to their church gathering. On Sunday evening, late, after all the work was done. Lucilla showed up, dressed in rags, and listened as an elder talked about the miracles of Jesus, his bloody death, his amazing resurrection, forgiveness from sin, and the power of the Holy Spirit to help us lead a new life.

Lucilla’s heart sung for joy when she heard these words. She’d been thinking about Jesus ever since that day at the well. But it finally clicked. She wanted to follow Jesus, but she wasn’t sure what her next step should be. So she went to the elder afterward and said, “I want that, what must I do?”

With tears in his eyes, so thankful for this evidence of the Holy Spirit, the elder replied, “Repent and believe the gospel.” She quickly responded, “I’ve done that, I believe!” Then this pastor said, “It’s time to tell the world, it’s time to be baptized.” The next Sunday evening

Lucilla and the church gathered by the river, and in the name of Jesus Christ, Lucilla received baptism. The small congregation shouted for joy, and one of the women came up to her and said, “Lucilla—out there you may be a slave, but with us, you are a sister.” That’s why I say baptism is a symbol of a new family.

A FINAL WORD

What is the meaning of baptism? The answer is F.I.L.L. Baptism is a symbol of a new family, a new identify, a new life, and a new lord. So where does that leave you?

If you aren’t a believer in Jesus Christ, put your faith in him. He died on the cross and rose from the dead to atone for the sins of everyone who would trust him. Baptism doesn’t save us—Christ saves us. If you want this salvation, repent and believe the Good News.

If you are a believer in Jesus Christ, but you’ve never been baptized as a believer, I urge you to be baptized. Christian, why haven’t you been baptized? Maybe it’s because you grew up in a household that practiced infant baptism. I’ve tried not to pick a fight here, but I hope you see that if what I’m teaching about baptism is true, then it makes no sense to baptize someone who can’t yet profess faith in Christ. If there is no faith, there can be no baptism. This is why if you been baptized as an infant, you’ve not actually been baptized.

But maybe that’s not the issue. Maybe you are just too shy or timid to be baptized. You need to hear that baptism is not a suggestion; it is a command. Biblically speaking, it is the first step of obedience in the Christian’s life. Be baptized. Think back to our marching orders, “Make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Matt 18:19).

To the baptized believer: remember your baptism. On that day you put a stake in the ground and declared yourself the follower of a new Lord, the recipient of a new life, the owner of a new identity, and the member of a new family. Remember your baptism, and give thanks to the God who saves.

~Aaron Menikoff

ⁱⁱ Shawn Wright, “Baptism in History, Theology, and the Church” in *Baptist Foundations*, Mark Dever & Jonathan Leeman, eds., 110.

ⁱⁱⁱ Mark Dever, *The Church*, 105-06.

^{iv} Wright, “Baptism in History,” 111.

^v Anthony L. Chute, Nathan A. Finn, Michael A. G. Haykin, *The Baptist Story: From English Sect to Global Movement*, 34.

^{vi} For a detailed explanation read Robert H. Stein, “Baptism and Becoming a Christian in the New Testament,” found at <http://www.sbts.edu/resources/journal-of-theology/sbjt-21-spring-1998/baptism-and-becoming-a-christian-in-the-new-testament/>.

^{vii} See also Galatians 3:27 and Colossians 2:11-12

^{viii} Timothy George, *Commentary on Galatians*, 276.

ⁱ Everett Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church: History, Theology, and Liturgy in the First Five Centuries*, 856.

Whiter Than Snow: Meditations on Sin and Mercy

Written by Paul David Tripp

Bookstall Price \$12



In *Whiter Than Snow*, Paul David Tripp provides short but thoughtful meditations working through Psalm 51. Using the Psalm where King David repents of the sins he committed against Bathsheba, her husband, and God, Tripp provides weekly readings that will leave the reader spending an entire year meditating on God's amazing mercy toward broken sinners.

Tripp's writing style is engaging. He often uses poetry and adds select quotes to help his readers key into the main idea for the devotional. Each

entry ends with two thought provoking questions to challenge us to further reflection and growth.

I could not recommend this book more highly. The meditations are brief but powerful. They cut to my heart, helping me find my hidden sin. The beauty of this book is that Tripp isn't satisfied helping us diagnosis our sinful condition. He leads us to a deeper love and appreciation for God's amazing mercy found in Christ. Tripp does an excellent job balancing two truths:

- 1) We must see our sin clearly;
- 2) We must rest in Christ's work fully.

Spending 10 minutes a week for an entire year meditating on these truths will surely be balm to the soul and bear fruit in the believer's life. This is a small investment that will certainly result in great gain.

– RECOMMENDED BY DEANA MENIKOFF

Excerpts from the Book

1

"Psalm 51 is about how God meets us in our moments of deepest failure and transforms us by his grace. It is about how broken sinners can be brutally honest with God and yet stand before him without fear. All of the themes of sin, grace, and redemption are compacted into this powerful little psalm."

–Preface: Once a Week with Mercy, p. 12-13

2

"I can't escape the reality of my biggest problem—me! So I appeal to the one thing in my life that's sure and will never fail. I appeal to the one thing that guaranteed not only my acceptance with God, but the hope of new beginnings and fresh starts. I appeal on the basis of the greatest gift I ever have or ever will be given. I leave the courtroom of my own defense, I come out of hiding, and I admit who I am. But I'm not afraid, because I've been personally and eternally blessed. Because of what Jesus did, God looks on me with mercy."

–Mercy Me: Psalm 51 and Everyday Life, p. 22

3

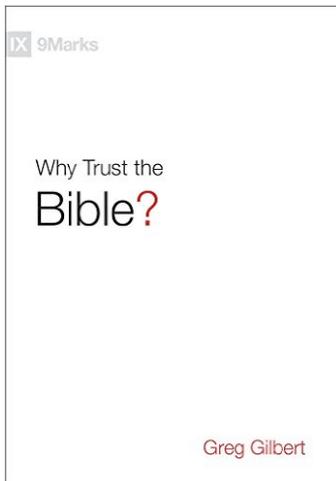
"You see, we all have a perverse capacity to be comfortable with what God says is wrong. So God blesses us with violent, uncomfortable grace. Yes, he really does love us enough to crush us, so that we would feel the pain of our sin and run to him for forgiveness and deliverance."

–Violent Grace, p. 34

Why Trust the Bible?

Written by Greg Gilbert

Bookstall Price \$11



In referring to his death and resurrection, Jesus told the Jews, “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up” (Jn. 2:18). Neither they nor his disciples believed him. It actually wasn’t until after his resurrection did his disciples believe: “When therefore he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this, and they believed the Scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken” (Jn. 2:22).

Why did the disciples believe what Jesus said? Why do we believe the Scriptures (Old and New Testaments) to be the trustworthy, authoritative Word of God? Because Jesus rose from the dead!

But how do we know he rose from the dead? Historically speaking, how can we have confidence that the Bible’s account of Jesus’ life and the apostles’ teaching is reliable and trustworthy? That’s the question Greg Gilbert answers in *Why Trust the Bible?*

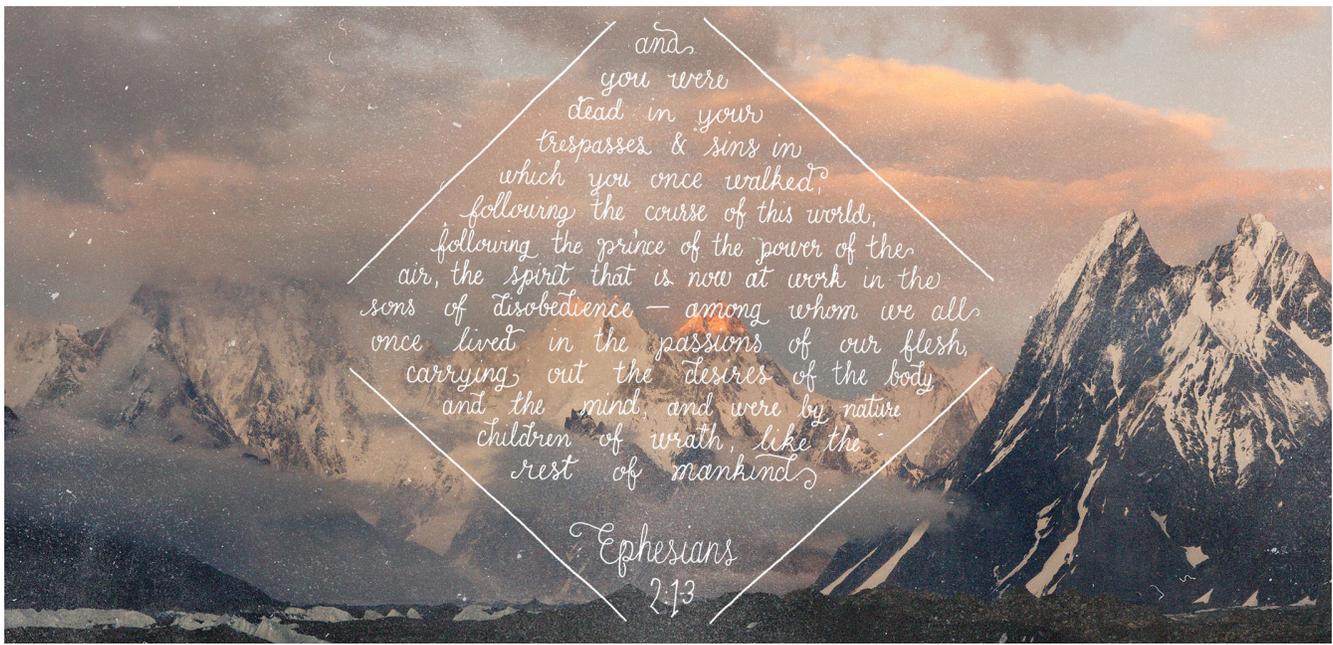
There are a number of reasons I recommend this book. First and foremost, Gilbert has provided one of the most helpful synopses to one of the more complicated studies: Scripture’s reliability. The average Christian doesn’t know what questions to ask to discern the Bible’s trustworthiness, much less how to answer them. Test yourself: what are the “tests” the earliest Christians used to discern whether or not a letter should be considered part of the authoritative word of God (68-72)? Is that even the right question to ask? There is no other single volume book that addresses the issues on this topic as clearly as *Why Trust the Bible?*

Second, Gilbert’s gifted writing style makes this introduction to a complicated topic uniquely accessible for laymen and non-Christians. This is the book to give to your skeptical nephew or grandchild. This is the book to start your study of Scripture’s canonization. (The bibliography provides ample additional and more detailed material to read.) You will not get lost in some esoteric debate about variations of early manuscripts and their transmission. If you have read *What is the Gospel?* or *Who is Jesus?*, you will know of Gilbert’s writing style that takes complicated and, at times, grand ideas and makes them plain and memorable through his simple explanations and creative illustrations.

Third, Gilbert is an exemplary apologist on the Bible’s reliability. For example, from an apologetic perspective, what vernacular should be used when talking about how we “know” the Bible to be historically reliable? Historically speaking, what kind of certainty do we hope to have from our historical study of the gospels? Gilbert helpfully says that we should not be seeking “mathematical certainty” (for such certainty is impossible with history) but “historical confidence” (23). This is apologetic reasoning and categorical thinking that Christians need, and Gilbert helpfully provides it throughout the book.

Why Trust the Bible? will be my new go-to introduction on Scripture’s reliability, and I encourage you to make it yours.

– RECOMMENDED BY BRAD THAYER



And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience—among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind.

— Ephesians 2:1-3

As 2016 begins, we want to start memorizing a bedrock passage for the Christian life from letter of Ephesians. In Ephesians 2:1-10, we are reminded of God’s amazing free gift of salvation—“For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God” (v.8). But before we get to that good news, we must remember the bad news of everyone’s universal experience in rebellion against God.

Paul describes, in no unclear terms, how corrupt and sinful we were before coming to Christ. Spiritually speaking, we were “dead” unable to give ourselves life with God. Yet, we were considered “walking” dead as we lived guided by the world and by Satan, who are both hostile to God. We were not alone, but shared in the company of other dead sinners that walked in “disobedience.” Being with such company, we lived for sinful “passions” of the “flesh” in both our “body and mind.” All of this clearly did not make us children of

God “by nature” but “children of wrath.” We were born under the divine curse of our Creator God because of our sinful nature.

Christian, we need this reminder of who we were so the grace of God is magnified in our lives. You are now, literally, a living testimony that people change at the core of their being by God’s grace through the Holy Spirit’s transforming power. Here is a truism: dead is dead. Period! And dead people do not bring themselves back to life. Only God gives life.

Brother or sister, I know the struggle with sin is still great. I know it will not end this side of heaven. It’s discouraging to know that at times you give in too easily. It can be disheartening knowing that other times you put up no fight against Satan’s temptation and your fleshly desires. It may even be shocking to think about what your life was once like. But we also know this—you are not what you once were. You are no longer “dead” but alive in Christ!

— BRAD THAYER

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