

A Letter and My Reply

Dear Mr. Witherington:

"Since you include baptism in salvation, do you consider it a work of righteousness?"
(Name Withheld)

Reply:

Dear (Name Withheld):

Thank you for your e-mail. You began your letter by saying, "since you include baptism in salvation," and I must reply by stating that this statement is incorrect! It is not **I** that "include baptism in salvation." It was **Jesus Christ** Who included "baptism in salvation." Jesus said, "*He who believes and is baptized shall be saved...*," Mark 16:16. Please look at that verse closely. Jesus mentioned a "He" who "shall be saved." Now **who** did Jesus say is the "he" that "shall be saved?" If you fill in the blank between "He" and "shall be saved," you will notice that it is the "He" "who believes and is baptized." We should take Jesus' word for it. When I quote Mark 16:16, I am simply quoting what **Jesus** said — not something I originated!

With reference to baptism, you asked "do you consider it a work of righteousness?" The expression, "*a work of righteousness*," is taken from Titus 3:5. So let us look at that verse more closely. Herein the inspired apostle said: "*Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy He saved us, through the washing of regeneration and the renewing of the Holy Spirit.*"

First, before looking at that verse, we point out that in its **context** we have a before and after picture of salvation. Hence, in verse three he said "*for we ourselves were also once foolish, disobedient, deceived, serving various lusts and pleasures, living in malice and envy, hateful and hating one another.*" Clearly, that is not a complimentary description of what we "were" prior to being saved. However, verse four begins with "but" — "**but** when the kindness and love of God our Savior toward man appeared." Thank God for His "*kindness and love!*" This brings us to verse five, and in the middle of this verse we have the words "*he saved us!*" This is a great contrast!

Yes, "*He saved us!*" First, however, he approached it negatively; "*He saved us,*" but it was "**not** by works of righteousness which we have done." Then the writer said it was "*according to His mercy.*" "Mercy" is from *eleos* (Greek), which defined as "the outward manifestation of pity; it assumes need on the part of him who receives it, and resources adequate to meet the need on the part of him who shows it," **Expository Dictionary of Biblical Words**, by W.E. Vine. Inasmuch as we have "*all sinned*," Rom. 3:23, we all need mercy. And God being "*rich in mercy*," Eph. 2:4, has "resources adequate to meet" that need! But please look further: "*He saved us,*" but "**through**" what? It was "**through**" (a) the "*washing of regeneration,*" and (b) "*renewing of the Holy Spirit, whom He poured out on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Savior,*" v. 6). Now look at verse seven: "*That having been justified by his grace we should become heirs according to the hope of eternal life.*" As we ponder these verses together, we note the ones whom "**He saved**" (v. 5) are the ones who have been "**justified by His grace**" (v.

7), and these are the ones who have “*become heirs according to the hope of eternal life.*” Hence, those who have experienced “*the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit*” are the ones whom “*He saved*” (v. 5), the ones who have been “*justified by His grace*” and have “*become heirs,*” and thus possess “*the hope of eternal life,*” v. 7.

But let us look at verse five more closely and compare it with other scriptures. “*He saved us*” (we didn’t save ourselves!). “*He saved us through*”: (a) “*The washing of regeneration,*” and (b) the “*renewing of the Holy spirit.*” “*Regeneration*” is from *palingenesia* (Greek), which is a combination of two words: (*palin*, meaning **again**, and *genesis*, meaning **birth**). Thus “*the washing of regeneration*” involves a “*washing*” which is essential to being born again. This reminds us of John 3:5 wherein Jesus said “*most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.*” In this verse Jesus presented the plan of salvation under the figure of a birth, a new birth, a birth including both “*water*” and “*the Holy Spirit*.” But please note the comparison: Titus 3:5 ties together the “*washing of regeneration*” and the “*renewing of the Holy Spirit,*” and John 3:5 ties together being “*born of water,*” and being born “*of the Holy Spirit.*” Being regenerated (Titus 3:5) equals being “*born again*” (John 3:3,5). On the day of Pentecost, the day when the Lord’s church came into being, “*cut to the heart*” believers cried out, saying, “*men and brethren, what shall we do,*” (Acts 2:37), meaning “*what shall we do*” to be forgiven of our terrible sins, including that of crucifying the Son of God! Peter replied, saying “**Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.**” Again, please observe: this verse includes a washing, which takes place in baptism, cf. Acts 22:16, and “*the Holy Spirit.*” Hence, all three of these verses: John 3:5; Titus 3:5, and Acts 2:38 are parallel verses, as it relates to that which is involved in our salvation.

Now, if we compare these verses with Col. 2:12-13 we note another parallel. Herein, to the saints at Colosse, the apostle Paul said: “*Buried with Him in baptism, in which you also were raised with Him through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead. And you, being dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He has made alive together with Him, having forgiven you all trespasses.*” Let us now look at these verses more closely: These saints had been “*forgiven*” of “*all trespasses*.” It occurred **when** they were “*buried with Him in baptism,*” at which time they were “*made alive*.” In being thus baptized they were exercising “**faith in the working of God!**” Please note that ones who are scripturally baptized are thereby exercising “*faith in the working of God*” — not in **their** own works! And not faith in water! But “*faith in the working of God!*” God is the One against Whom we have all sinned. And God is thus the One Who determines at what point an alien sinner is forgiven. It is God Who forgives sin, and it is God who makes one who is “*dead*” in sins alive in Christ. Hence, those who are scripturally baptized rise thus from the watery grave of baptism to “*walk in newness of life,*” Romans 6:4.

You seem to believe baptism is a work of man, a work of human righteousness, and in that you could not be more wrong! For that matter, faith itself is a work, for Jesus said “*this is the work of God, that you believe in Him whom He sent,*” John 6:29. Yes, we must exercise faith, but in so doing we have not earned salvation. Apart from God’s grace, no one could be saved. However, salvation by grace is conditioned upon one’s obedience to Jesus Christ,” Heb. 5:9, which includes **baptism** in the name of Jesus Christ “*for the remission of sins,*” Acts 2:38.

In conclusion, we stress that, based upon Titus 3:5, we are not saved by our own righteousness, but by the “*mercy*” of God, which is experienced in “*the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit.*” These are the ones “*justified by His grace,*” and who thus become “*heirs of eternal life,*” v. 7. Friend, let us not allow the doctrines of men to obscure the

plain truth of the gospel of Christ!
Yours in the interest of truth and righteousness,
Bobby Witherington