

Burying “Live” Folks

I’m always in favor of New Testament baptism, which means: the **right precept** (or *teaching*, one can’t be taught ‘wrong’ and baptized ‘right,’ Titus 3:5); the **right person** (a *penitent believer*, Acts 2:37-38); the **right procedure** (*immersion* in water, Colossians 2:12); and the **right purpose** (to “wash away sins,” Acts 22:16). But, I am against baptism when/if the candidate says he was saved at the point of faith, and then wants to be baptized because “It’s the ‘right’ thing to do.” In this scenario, it is absolutely the ‘wrong’ thing to do, but perhaps not for the reason(s) you suspect...

In regard to salvation, the New Testament uses the term “dead” in at least a couple of ways. For instance, Ephesians 2:1-2 says, “*you were **dead in trespasses and sins**, in which you formerly walked...*”. But, Romans 6:2-7 also describes becoming “**dead to sin**” that we might “walk in newness of life” by being united with Christ “*in the likeness of His resurrection.*” Obviously, there is a huge difference between being dead “*in*” sin, and being dead “*to*” sin! The first implies slavery *through* sin, and yields spiritual condemnation; while the second intimates emancipation *from* sin, and results in spiritual salvation. Let’s look a little further into this second scenario of becoming “*dead to sin*” from Romans 6.

There are some important aspects of becoming “*dead to sin*” and “*alive to Christ*” that we need to consider relative to baptism. In v.2, the divine record says that those “*who died to sin*” shouldn’t “*still live in it.*” This means that the “*saved*” person must “*crucify his old self*” and no longer be a “*slave to sin,*” cf. vv.6-11. Baptism is linked to this process in vv.3-4. How so?

Romans 6:3 says that baptism is the means by which we contact Christ’s death, “*Or do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus have been baptized into **His death.***” Why is this crucial? Christ’s blood was shed in His death, and we need to contact the blood of Christ for salvation, Ephesians 1:7. Baptism, then, puts us in contact with the redeeming power of Christ’s shed blood by which we are saved.

Romans 6:4 adds that we are “*buried with Him through baptism into death....*” There are two important points I’d like to make from this. The first one is obvious: baptism is a burial. We are *immersed in water* as Jesus was *immersed in the earth*. No one is “buried” by sprinkling or pouring a little dirt on them and calling it a “burial.” Jesus was “in” the earth, and to be scripturally baptized after this figure, one must be “in” (covered by) water.

The second point from Romans 6:4 may not be so obvious, but is nonetheless critical to our proper understanding: baptism is “*into death*”. Notice that Jesus’ death, mentioned in v.3, is not specified in v.4. This is because baptism includes both our access to *Jesus’ death* (and therefore, His *blood*), as well as being the mechanism that marks the “end” of our life of sin and slavery to it. In other words, we not only “put to death” our “old man of sin,” we “bury” him because he’s dead to us, cf. v.11!

Now think this through carefully: **If** we become spiritually “alive” (saved) at the point of faith, and thus prior to baptism, we should never be baptized. Why? Because you don’t bury “live” folks- you bury “dead” folks! And as my old preacher-friend, Brother Floyd Offing, once said on this point, “It’s against the law to bury ‘live’ folks just about everywhere!” (He had a remarkable way with words!) Baptism is a “burial,” and you just don’t bury people that are “alive”- either physically or spiritually. You bury the “dead”- physically, but also spiritually. The physically dead are buried to await the great and final resurrection, cf. 1Corinthians 15:12-58. The spiritually dead (to sin) are buried “*in order that as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life,*” Romans 6:4b.

The New Testament indeed teaches that we “*saved by faith,*” Ephesians 2:8-9. It nowhere teaches that we are saved “by faith alone.” In fact, the only text in which the words “faith” and “alone” appear together is in James 2:24, “*You see that a man is justified by works, and **not by faith alone.***” I want everyone to be baptized- but based on the scriptural teaching, in the scriptural way, and for the scriptural reasons. (Philip C. Strong; Southport Church of Christ; 7202 Madison Ave, Indianapolis, IN 46227; online at southportcofc.org; email to mrpcstrong@hotmail.com)