

the man, unto whom God imputeth righteousness *without works*” (Rom 4:5,6). Faith and works here are mutually exclusive.

When the “Judaisers” at Galatia taught justification by “*faith plus circumcision*,” Paul condemned them as “false brethren,” teaching “another gospel,” that is, a false gospel, and uttered the strongest of curses upon them:

I marvel that ye are so soon removed from him that called you into the grace of Christ unto another gospel: which is not another; but there be some that trouble you, and would pervert the gospel of Christ. But though we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel unto you than that which we have preached unto you, let him be accursed (Gal 1:6-9).

Strong words indeed! A divine curse was pronounced upon these false teachers. Why such severity? because the issues at stake in the purity of the gospel have to do with the glory of God and the eternal destinies of men. If that gospel is in any way distorted or perverted, it results in souls being eternally damned and it robs God of his glory.

Who were these people that Paul denounced so strongly? And what was the essence of their “gospel” that made it a distortion of the true gospel? They taught that a person must believe in Jesus, but *in addition* they taught that he also had to be circumcised—“Behold, I Paul say unto you, that *if ye be circumcised, Christ shall profit you nothing*” (5:2). To add “works” to “faith” in any measure (be it baptism, Sabbath-keeping, circumcision, or whatever), according to the Bible, is to believe in “salvation by works” and to place oneself under a curse. The “gospel” of these false teachers is essentially identical with the “gospel” of THE CHURCH OF CHRIST.

These Judaisers taught that you not only had to believe in Jesus for salvation, but that you had to be *circumcised* as well. THE CHURCH OF CHRIST teaches that you not only have to believe in Jesus for salvation, but that you have to be *baptized* as well. You must *add* something that you *do* to what Christ has *done*. Paul denounces this in no uncertain terms because it’s adding human merit to the merit of Christ. It’s faith in Christ *plus* human works. Paul says this is perverting the gospel of the grace of God. Consequently a divine curse, an anathema, was called down upon these Judaisers and their “gospel.” By contrast, the true gospel is the gospel of the *grace* of God, whereby a man is justified before God and accepted by him solely on the merits of the life and death of Jesus Christ alone, apart from any human works of merit.

Paul sets forth the truth of the gospel in Galatians 2:11-16. What is this truth? It is the good news that sinners, guilty and under the judgment of God, may be pardoned and accepted by his grace alone, his free and unmerited favor, on the basis of the death of Christ, and not for any works or merits of their own. The Judaisers, however, were totally perverting this teaching of grace by adding something man could do.

They were teaching **Jesus plus circumcision**, not Jesus alone. THE CHURCH OF CHRIST teaches **Jesus plus baptism**, not Jesus alone. The Judaisers could not accept the principle

of “faith alone.” They insisted that we contribute something to our salvation as necessary for our acceptance with God.

## THE GOSPEL OF THE JUDAISERS FAITH IN CHRIST PLUS CIRCUMCISION = SALVATION

## THE GOSPEL OF THE CHURCH OF CHRIST FAITH IN CHRIST PLUS BAPTISM = SALVATION

Both of these are *false gospels* that are denounced by the Word of God! Both of them come from *false teachers* who present a totally different “gospel” than that which God has given—a “gospel” that perverts the teaching of *grace* by adding something that we can do. And any person who believes either of these false gospels is believing a lie, brings down a curse upon himself, and will thus eternally perish. Paul couldn’t have spoken any plainer in Galatians 5:2—“If ye be circumcised [the way they’re telling you to be circumcised], **Christ shall profit you nothing!**”—“If ye be baptized [the way they’re telling you to be baptized], **Christ shall profit you nothing!**”

Someone says, “*Yes, but Paul was speaking here only of the works of the Mosaic law, not works of obedience to Christ. It’s true that we can’t be justified by faith plus keeping the law of Moses, but we can be justified by faith plus obedience to the commands of Christ.*” Nothing could be further from the truth! When Paul set out to contrast “salvation by faith” with “salvation by works,” he was not for one moment limiting himself to the works of the law of Moses. He often singled out the law because it was the particular “religious hang-up” of the people of his day. But when Paul says that justification is by faith and that “works” can have no part in it, he is speaking of *all human activity or goodness whatsoever*.

Consider, for example, Romans 9:11, “For the children being not yet born, neither having *done any good or evil*, that the purpose of God according to election might stand, *not of works*, but of him that calleth.” What does Paul mean by the term “works”? doing “any good or evil.” Or again, God “hath saved us, and called us with an holy calling, *not according to our works*, but according to his own purpose and grace” (2 Tim 1:9). Here “works” are contrasted with God’s own “purpose and grace.” What are “works” then? Not the deeds of the law of Moses only, but *anything whatsoever from the realm of human activity and initiative*. Even truly righteous deeds are ruled out. “Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy he saved us” (Titus 3:5). It’s obvious that Paul intended his words to mean any and all religious ceremonies or commandments that men might set forth alongside of faith as a “condition” of justification, not just the ones that happened to be a problem in his own day.

Someone else may say, “*But James teaches that faith without works is dead*” (James 2:14-26). Very true! But we need to understand that Paul is dealing with the *nature of justification* and James is dealing with the *nature of faith*. James is telling professing Christians, who show no evidence in their lives of

a likeness to Christ, to show him their faith (James 2:18). But faith cannot be seen; thus the best way for us to prove our faith is to be “doers of the word, and not hearers only” (James 1:22). Those who do the word of God will live a righteous life in loving obedience to God (Matt 7:2; 1 John 2:17). In other words, their “faith will work by love” (Gal 5:6). That’s why James said: “I will shew thee my faith by my works” (James 2:18).

*Faith alone* justifies, but the faith that justifies *is never alone!* It’s always accompanied by good works and seen by a righteous life of godliness and holiness. James is concerned for professing believers who are not truly saved; they’re not justified. They have faith, but their faith is “dead.” It’s useless, idle and unfruitful (James 2:17,20). Only that faith that bears fruit is alive and genuine. Jesus taught that a tree is known by its fruit (Matt 7:16-20). Just as works do not produce justification, the fruit does not bring the tree into existence. The fruit only reveals what type of tree it is and whether it’s alive or dead.

When James says that Abraham was “justified by works when he offered up Isaac” (2:21), he doesn’t mean that Abraham’s sins were not forgiven until that time. Abraham was justified some 35 years before! (see Rom 4:9-11). James is simply saying that justifying faith always manifests itself through works. Our *persons* are justified before *God* by faith; our *faith* is justified before *men* by works. “He that saith, I know him, and keepeth not his commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him” (1 John 2:4). The true believer will desire to obey Christ’s commands, including the command to be baptized. But good works are the *outcome* (Eph 2:10), not the *cause* (Eph 2:8,9), of salvation in Christ.

Someone may say again, “*But even if you say that men are saved by ‘faith alone,’ still ‘believing’ itself is just another type of ‘work’—something men do in obedience to Christ which obtains the favor of God.*” Absolutely not! When God pronounces sinners to be “just” in his sight, he’s looking to the blood and merits of Christ, not the faith of man! The gospel is not a “**new law**,” a series of steps “**1, 2, 3, 4**” that men confidently obey in order to “get saved.” On the contrary, the very idea of “believing in Christ” involves giving up entirely on all of our own “doing” and ability. Justifying faith, in its very essence, is reliance upon another. It’s the attitude of one who has given up all hope of anything virtuous he can ever do, including his own “believing,” “repenting,” or “obeying.”

Our Lord gives a fine illustration of this in John’s gospel when he explains saving faith in terms of the serpent in the wilderness (Num 21:4-9). Just as the serpent was lifted up by Moses that men might *look upon it* and be saved, so Jesus would be lifted up on the cross that whosoever *believes* (“looks”) upon him might have eternal life. How were men saved in relation to the serpent? by “looking plus works”? by “looking plus baptism”? by “looking plus obedience”? No! **by “looking” alone!** “When he looketh upon it, he shall live” (Num 21:8). And since faith is the gaze of the soul upon Christ, it is impossible to exercise biblical faith and at the same time be looking to ourselves and our obedience. Those who put

confidence in anything but Christ, whether it’s their “faith,” “repentance,” or “obedient baptism,” are still trusting in their works and must surely perish.

The usual method of those who believe in “baptismal forgiveness” is to ignore the great doctrinal section of Scripture where the way of justification is dealt with specifically and in depth (for example: Rom 1:16–4:25; Gal 2:11–3:29) and turn to the book of Acts, where the history of various conversions is set forth. Because the baptism of new converts is specifically mentioned in most cases, it’s not difficult to come up with an impressive list of New Testament conversions, all containing the word “baptism.” (This is precisely the same method used by those who desire to prove that “tongues” are the “one true evidence” of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit.)

This issue is a serious one. If baptism is essential for salvation, then to reject that gospel is to be damned. But if salvation is through faith in Christ alone, then to add baptism as a “condition” for salvation is to reject the true gospel and thus be eternally lost. When Paul reminded the Corinthians of the essential ingredients of the gospel which he preached and by which they had been saved, he made no mention of baptism (1 Cor 15:1-4). In fact, he distinguished between the gospel and baptism: “Christ sent me not to baptize, but to preach the gospel” (1 Cor 1:17). He hadn’t baptized most of the Corinthians, couldn’t remember whom he had baptized, and was thankful that it had been very few (1 Cor 1:14-16)—a strange attitude if baptism is essential to salvation! Yet without baptizing them, Paul declared that he was their father in the faith: “In Christ Jesus I have begotten you through the gospel” (1 Cor 4:15).

Christ did say, “He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved” (Mark 16:16). All who believe the gospel are saved, so of course all who believe and are baptized are saved; but that does not say that baptism saves or that it’s essential for salvation. Scores of verses declare, with no mention of baptism, that salvation comes by *believing the gospel*: “It pleased God... to save them that *believe*” (1 Cor 1:21; John 3:16,18,36; 5:24; Acts 10:43; 13:38,39; 16:31; Rom 1:16; 3:28; 4:24; 5:1; Eph 2:8,9; etc.).

Many verses declare that whosoever does not believe is lost, but *not one verse* declares that whosoever is not baptized is lost. Surely the Bible would make it clear that believing in Christ without being baptized cannot save if that were the case, yet it never says so! Jesus told people that their “sins are forgiven” without ever saying a word about baptism (Luke 5:20; 7:48). These situations would have been the perfect opportunity for Jesus to have insisted on baptism before pronouncing forgiveness. Instead he says, “Thy faith hath saved thee; go in peace” (Luke 7:50). It is important to realize here that the practice of baptism had already been confirmed by Jesus himself (John 3:22; 4:1,2); and that it was not something invented on the day of Pentecost. The publican in the temple cried, “God be merciful to me a sinner” (Luke 18:13,14), and Christ declared him “justified” without baptism. And the thief on the cross would have been in a most wretched condition if he could not have been saved without baptism (Luke 23:42,43). But he was saved!

## BAPTISM OR CHRIST?

Recently a friend of mine became a Christian. Now, I do not mean that he simply “made a decision” or “had an emotional experience.” No, this was a miracle! After years of wandering in spiritual darkness, caring nothing about the things of God, he was wonderfully apprehended by the risen Christ and transformed by power from on high. He became “a new creature,” “old things had passed away and all things had become new” (2 Cor 5:17). The things he once loved, he now hated; the things he once hated, he now loved. Christ and his word became precious to him, and he could say with the man in John 9, “One thing I know, that whereas I was blind, now I see” (v25). With this new love for God came a desire and power to break with sin that he had never known before.

How amazing then, in light of all this, that my friend was later told by a member of THE CHURCH OF CHRIST that he could not possibly be a Christian! No, he was in fact “dead in sins” and still under the wrath of God! And the reason?—**he had not yet been baptized!** “According to the Bible,” he was told, “a man’s sins are not washed away unless and until he is baptized.” It matters not what evidences there are of the indwelling presence of God in the soul; this is all labeled false and deceptive because the new believer has not yet had his body physically dipped in water!

Now the fact that such things as these are being taught would not be so important if it were simply a matter of being a slightly different angle on Christ’s truth. But that’s not the case. What we have here is not the true gospel viewed from a different standpoint; it’s an entirely different “gospel” altogether—a **false gospel**. Here are two entirely different messages, which lead souls to two entirely different destinations.

THE CHURCH OF CHRIST teaches **baptismal forgiveness** (or **baptismal regeneration**). Why is their “gospel” a **false** gospel? The Bible teaches **justification by faith alone**, and is thus a proclamation of “**salvation by faith**.” THE CHURCH OF CHRIST teaches **justification by faith plus obedience**, and is thus a proclamation of “**salvation by works**.” Now they will immediately insist that this is not so—that their message is not “salvation by works”; but the Bible teaches that it certainly is.

Justification is **by faith alone**; it is specifically said to be **without works** (see John 6:47; Acts 13:39; 16:31; Rom 3:21,22; 9:30-33; 10:1-13; Gal 2:16; 3:1-14; Phil 3:8,9; 1 Peter 2:6-8; 1 John 5:1, etc.). In fact, faith must be alone, or it’s not “faith” in the biblical sense of the word. The very idea of **believing** in Christ means that we trust him as the One who finished the **work** of salvation, so there’s nothing left for us to do—“To him that **worketh not**, but believeth on him that justifieth the ungodly, his faith is counted for righteousness. Even as David also describeth the blessedness of

Romans 6:4 states, “We are buried with Christ by baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised up from the dead... even so we also should walk in newness of life.” Paul is not speaking of water baptism, but of the spiritual reality it symbolizes, for he says that through baptism “our old man [sinful nature] is crucified with Christ, that the body of sin might be destroyed.” As a consequence, he urges believers to “reckon” themselves “to be dead indeed unto sin...let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body” (vv 6-13).

Paul uses similar language concerning himself when he says, “I am crucified with Christ” (Gal 2:20). He is obviously speaking of that same **spiritual** “baptism” by which we have been placed in Christ and have thus passed with him through death into resurrection life. If we were **literally** dead to sin, then we wouldn’t need to “reckon” it true or live the new life by faith; we would automatically never sin again. That a Christian may sin shows that water baptism doesn’t effect a literal crucifixion with Christ. It portrays a spiritual baptism into Christ which the believer must live by faith.

In that context, then, we can understand Peter’s declaration: “The like **figure** whereunto even baptism doth also now save us...by the resurrection of Jesus Christ” (1 Peter 3:21). He is no more saying that the physical act of baptism **literally** saves than Paul is saying that it **literally** makes us dead to sin. The few difficult isolated verses such as these cannot contradict the overwhelming number of other Scriptures which are crystal clear. Water baptism, says Peter, is a “**figure**” or symbolization of a spiritual baptism into Christ effected by the Holy Spirit and which is settled forever in heaven, but which must be lived out by faith while we are here upon earth.

Significantly, though Paul baptized a few, Christ never baptized anyone (John 4:2)—very odd if baptism saves. The Savior of the world must have deliberately avoided baptizing to make it clear that baptism has no part in salvation. Yes, Christ said we must be “born [again] of water and of the Spirit” to be saved (John 3:5), but it is unwarranted to assume that “water” here means baptism. To do so would contradict the wealth of Scripture we have seen which proves salvation is not by baptism. Jesus was speaking to Nicodemus, a rabbi to whom “water” would not mean baptism (which was unknown in Jewish law) but the ceremonial cleansing of someone who had been defiled (Exod 30; 40; Lev 13; 15; etc.). And that’s what Jesus meant. His death would make it possible to “sanctify and cleanse [his church] with the washing of water by **the word**” of the gospel (Eph 5:25-27). He said, “Now ye are clean through **the word** which I have spoken unto you” (John 15:3). Like Jesus, Paul put “water” and “the Spirit” together, referring to the “washing of regeneration” and linking it with the “renewing of the Holy Ghost” (Titus 3:5). We are born again by the Holy Spirit and by **the word** or gospel of God, which is sometimes called “water” because of its cleansing power. We are “born again...by **the word** of God” (1 Peter 1:23).

It was obviously this figure of Old Testament ceremonial cleansing which Peter communicated to the Jews on Pente-

cost: “Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins” (Acts 2:38). It is clear from the many other Scriptures we’ve given that Peter wasn’t saying that baptism saves, but that it offered a ceremonial cleansing uniquely applicable to his Jewish hearers.

Notice also that the phrase, “baptized...**for** the remission of sins,” again has to do with what baptism signifies, and not what it actually does. Compare Matthew 3:11, “I indeed baptize you with water **unto** repentance.” The same Greek word “**eis**” (“for” or “unto”) appears in both of these passages. Baptism in the name of Christ “**for**” the remission of sins no more means that baptism effects forgiveness than that John’s baptism in water “**unto**” repentance caused those who were baptized to repent. They were already repentant “confessing their sins” (v6). John’s baptism signified repentance on the part of those baptized. Even so with those at Pentecost, the forgiveness of their sins through faith in Christ was that which their baptism signified.

There’s something else, too, in Peter’s words, “Repent, and be baptized.” He was addressing scoffers and persecutors of the church. He is telling them in no uncertain terms that if they want to get right with God, they must come out and identify themselves officially, by baptism, with this despised group of Christ’s followers. Baptism was the mark of the validity of one’s profession of faith and the badge of becoming a Christian. To be baptized was to be identified with this hated Jesus Christ before the fanatical Jews of Jerusalem. Baptism many times cost family and friends and endangered one’s life, as it still does in Israel and Muslim countries. Those who are afraid to take this public stand in such cultures are even today considered not to be true believers. Thus for a Jew to be publicly baptized at that time in that culture was, in a sense, to “wash away his sins” (Acts 22:16), as Ananias told Saul.

Consider again Mark 16:16: “He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned.” Baptism is mentioned here in the same breath with believing because baptism is integrally involved in what it means to become a disciple of Christ. There were many in Jesus’ day who were only willing to “believe” on him secretly, because of the fear of men (John 12:42,43; 2:23-25). It was the costly and humbling act of baptism, however, that was often the acid test of whether their “faith” was true saving faith, or mere mental assent, such as James warned against (James 2:14-26). Baptism is a public confession of faith in Jesus Christ. Many people are willing to say they believe in Jesus, yet they refuse to publicly identify themselves as one of his own. “He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved.” Notice the contrasting parallel, “He that believeth not shall be damned.” Christ does not say, “He that is not baptized shall be damned.” Why? because baptism is not the central issue in salvation—**faith is**.

Look carefully at the conversion of Paul (Acts 9,22,26) and what Ananias said, “Arise, and be baptized, and wash away thy sins, calling on the name of the Lord” (Acts 22:16). There are those who insist on a **literal** interpretation of this phrase:

“Wash away thy sins.” They assert that baptism doesn’t merely symbolize the washing away of sins by the blood of Christ, but that the waters of baptism actually wash away those sins. As with Cornelius, though, Paul was **already** a child of God having received the fullness of the Spirit **before** he was baptized (Acts 9:17). “Wash away thy sins” is symbolic language, not to be taken literally any more than the words: “This is my body” (Matt 26:26); “I am the door” (John 10:9); “I am the vine, ye are the branches” (John 15:5).

“The gospel of Christ...is the power of God unto salvation to everyone **that believeth**” (Rom 1:16). That gospel as Paul preached it required faith in Christ’s blood poured out in death for our sins on the cross and said nothing about baptism. To preach baptismal forgiveness is to preach a false gospel that cannot save, which is why Paul cursed those who did so (Gal 1:6-9). The difference between faith in Christ **alone** and faith in Christ **plus baptism** has eternal consequences.

The whole position of baptismal forgiveness involves a mistaken concept of the **nature of salvation in Christ**. Salvation as set forth in the Bible is a gloriously reasonable thing. That is, it makes sense. Union with Christ takes place in the **spiritual** realm, through a **spiritual** revelation of Christ to the heart, and can be known by the **spiritual** graces that are evident in the life of a true believer. Those who believe in baptismal forgiveness, though, must insist that a person who has not yet been **physically** dipped in water is not a Christian, no matter how strong the evidences are that God has taken up residence in the person’s life.

This is an irrational, superstitious, legalistic, and sacramental view of salvation. It is **irrational** in that it makes no moral sense whatsoever. It is **superstitious** in that it causes men to believe that somehow a physical action is necessary for spiritual union with Christ. It is **legalistic** in that it teaches men to obey a commandment in order to get peace with God. It is **sacramental** in that it gives a semimagical quality to the ceremony of baptism.

How is it with your soul? Is your faith in a Person or in a thing? No matter how you may say that you do not believe in “salvation by works,” do you still maintain that men must **do something** besides trusting Christ in order to be saved? One need not be around THE CHURCH OF CHRIST very long in order to discover that their message is not “**Christ, Christ, Christ**,” but “**Baptism, Baptism, Baptism**.” Is that your message? Or do you glory in Christ alone? Has God opened your eyes to the wonderful message of salvation through Christ’s blood and righteousness? If so, will you now renounce your faith in your baptism for the hellish thing that it is and cast your all upon the Savior? Come to him just as you are, not bringing any “good works” or supposed “obedience” with you, but relying upon **Jesus alone** for your salvation. □