

AMRIDGE UNIVERSITY

BAPTISM AND SALVATION: AN INTERPRETIVE ANALYSIS OF 1<sup>ST</sup> PETER 3:20-21

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## INTRODUCTION

When contemplating the questions that have beset mankind for ages, one question comes overwhelmingly to the surface as the most important question of all time; “What must I do to be saved?” In his book “Systematic Theology,” the late Dr. Rex Turner correctly affirms, “The eternal destiny of every responsible soul depends on the correct answer and/or compliance to this momentous question.”<sup>1</sup> This monumental question regarding the destination of the souls of mankind was asked no less than three distinct times in the Book of Acts.<sup>2</sup>

But what is the answer? How can mortal man possibly determine, with absolute certainty, the response, to this all important question? Many have turned to famous preachers, pastors, and members of the “religious elite,” for the answer. If one were to ask the late John Calvin, he would say that a person has absolutely nothing to do with his own salvation, for man is predestined for either heaven or hell (T.U.L.I.P. Principle).<sup>3</sup> If one were to consult the Catholic Church teachings regarding salvation, one would find that, to obtain and retain salvation, one must be sprinkled as an infant and confess to a human priest throughout life.

Some have suggested alternative requirements for salvation such as; quote the Scriptures, go to church, believe in Jesus and God and call Him Lord. However, if that is all that is necessary for one to be saved and go to heaven, then Satan is both saved and going to heaven because the Bible records that Satan and his angels, did and do those very things.<sup>4</sup>

Others contend for the Protestant Sinners Prayer of Faith, created by the West Minster Assembly in their 7 year conference from 1643-1649, approximately 1,550 years after the

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<sup>1</sup> Turner, Rex, *Systematic Theology: Another book on the Fundamentals of the Faith* (Pensacola: Firm Foundation Publishing House, 1989), 253.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 253.

<sup>3</sup> Bailey, Ben, *A Study of Denominations and Their Doctrines* (© 2007 by Ben Bailey), 41-42.

<sup>4</sup> Gen. 3:1-5, Matt. 4:1-6, Jam. 2:19, Matt. 8:28-29, Acts 19:13-17, 20:29 (English Standard Version)

completion of the revelation (the Bible) and the death of the last Apostle. Former church of Christ preacher Max Lucado is one example.<sup>5</sup> To entrust one's eternal soul, which God both created and sustains, to a man-made doctrine is more dangerous than letting a two-year-old drive a car down the interstate. It is safe to say that a person will receive as many different answers to the question, "What must I do to be saved," as "religious authorities" one consults. The question that must be asked is whether or not man is willing to trust their eternal souls to the answers of fallible, uninspired, men, who could not even save their own.

When attempting to answer such a question regarding the eternal soul of man, it only makes sense to ask the one who created the soul of man; God.<sup>6</sup> When considering the destiny of the eternal soul, what better source could man consult than the eternal, infallible Word of God? With regard to the question, "What must I do," Kyle and Stan Butt wrote, "Who has more right to answer that question?...Your grandmother, your friend at school or the Holy Spirit inspired apostle Peter? We need to listen to Peter."<sup>7</sup>

We know that "all Scripture is given by inspiration of God,"<sup>8</sup> and that God has given us "all that pertains to life and Godliness,"<sup>9</sup> through His Word. We also know from 2 Peter 1:20-21, that nothing appearing in the written Word of God is of human origin; rather it is from God. Within the pages of the Holy Scripture, mankind can seek and find the answers to the most important questions of our existence including the most important question, "What must I do to be saved?" Therefore, let us now consider the salvation of man in light of Holy Scripture, to determine the answer to the question, "What must I do to be saved?"

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<sup>5</sup> Parker, Scott, *Max Lucado: No Brother of Mine* (<http://bywhatauthority.com/nobrotherofmine.pdf>), Accessed February 3, 2010.

<sup>6</sup> Genesis 2:7 (ESV)

<sup>7</sup> Butt, Kyle and Stan Jr., *Waves of Change* (Montgomery: Peaceful House Publishing, 2005), 33-34.

<sup>8</sup> 2 Tim. 3:16-17 (New King James Version)

<sup>9</sup> 2 Pet. 1:3 (NKJV)

Our passage under consideration is 1<sup>st</sup> Peter 3:18-22 (specifically verses 20-21) which says,

“For Christ also suffered once for sins, the just for the unjust, that He might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive by the Spirit, by whom also He went and preached to the spirits in prison, who formerly were disobedient, when once the Divine longsuffering waited in the days of Noah, while *the* ark was being prepared, in which a few, that is, eight souls, were saved through water. There is also an antitype which now saves us--baptism (not the removal of the filth of the flesh, but the answer of a good conscience toward God), through the resurrection of Jesus Christ...”<sup>10</sup>

#### BACKGROUND

In examining the background of our passage we understand that these words were penned by the inspired Simon Peter; apostle, friend and co-worker of Jesus Christ; brother of Andrew; and partner of James and John.<sup>11</sup> Peter, the apostle to the Jews, writing in approximately AD 63, writes to the “pilgrims of the Dispersion...” When considering the audience to whom Peter is writing, three views present themselves. The first view is that Peter is writing primarily to Jewish Christians, and secondarily to Gentile Christians, who are dispersed throughout the earthly provinces he mentions in the epistle.<sup>12</sup> This belief is based upon the wording of verse 1, “...pilgrims of the Dispersion.” This word translated pilgrim is a compound word made up of the Greek words para-“beside;” eip-“upon;” and deemos-“a strange people.” Thus this word denotes those who “dwell alongside those of a strange land.”

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<sup>10</sup> (NKJV)

<sup>11</sup> Woods, Guy N., *A Commentary of the New Testament Epistles of Peter, John and Jude* (Nashville, Gospel Advocate Company, 1983), 11-12.

<sup>12</sup> Henry, Matthew, *Concise*, (Electronic text and markup copyright 1995 by Epiphany Software).

The word Dispersion is a word most commonly used to refer to the dispersion of the Jews after the Babylonian Captivity and is taken from the Greek word diaspora-“dispersion.” The only other two places in the New Testament this word is used, John 7:35 and James 1:1, use it to refer to the Jewish peoples that were in exile in primarily Gentile cities.<sup>13</sup>

The second is that Peter is writing only to spiritual pilgrims to include both Jews and Gentiles and only uses the word Dispersion in the figurative sense that Christians are dispersed throughout the world in light of 1<sup>st</sup> Peter 2:11.<sup>14</sup> This argument is based on the fact the word Dispersion in 1:1 cannot refer to the Jewish Dispersion because in 2:11 the usage would have to change to include the Gentiles as well.

The third is that parts of both of these views are correct. While Peter’s immediate audience might have been to a specific, literal people (like Paul writing to the saints in Galatia), his message that Christians (the elect in verse 1) are sojourners and strangers in this land (or world) in 2:11, is universal in application; thus the words sojourners and pilgrims changes from the literal usage in 1:1 to the figurative usage in 2:11. This type of change is common. Dungan said, “There is a very grave error among an untaught class of exegetes in compelling every word that has, at any time, been used figuratively, to always represent the same thought as in that passage.”<sup>15</sup>

Based on the usage, Peter does immediately write to Jewish converts, but applies his writings to all Christians, for all time, thus changing his usage of the words “pilgrims and sojourners” from the literal to the figurative. This third view, in the opinion of this writer, agrees

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<sup>13</sup> Woods, Guy N., *A Commentary of the New Testament Epistles of Peter, John and Jude* (Nashville, Gospel Advocate Company, 1983), 20.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.* 20-21.

<sup>15</sup> Dungan, D., R., *Hermeneutics* (Delight: Gospel Light Publishing Co), 216.

most with common sense. There is no contradiction between 1:1 and 2:11 in fact, these verses harmonize beautifully.

The overall theme of the epistle is, “Hope in the midst of suffering.” The word “suffer” or “sufferings” occurs 15 times in the book. The purpose for the writing of the epistle is stated by Peter in chapter 5:12 and contains 3 components.

1. To exhort.
2. To testify in regards to God’s grace.
3. To encourage them to stand steadfastly in that grace.<sup>16</sup>

#### PASSAGE ANALYSIS

We begin our analysis of chapter 3 beginning in verse 18 with Peter, continuing his discourse about suffering for righteousness sake here he turns to the greatest example of such actions; Jesus Christ and His suffering and death on the Cross.

Verse 18 begins the passage in question by explaining that Christ also suffered for righteousness sake, by dying for us. This is reminiscent of Hebrews 9:24-28 which says,

“For Christ has not entered the holy places made with hands, *which are* copies of the true, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God for us; not that He should offer Himself often, as the high priest enters the Most Holy Place every year with blood of another-- He then would have had to suffer often since the foundation of the world; but now, once at the end of the ages, He has appeared to put away sin by the

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<sup>16</sup> Ritchie, Lonnie, *A Laymen’s Simple Commentary on the New Testament, Vol.4* (San Ramon: Falcon Books, 2007), 266.

sacrifice of Himself. And as it is appointed for men to die once, but after this the judgment, so Christ was offered once to bear the sins of many.”<sup>17</sup>

The word “once,” is critical to both passages. Christ, as the perfect sacrificial Lamb of God, was not offered repeatedly as the sacrifices of the Old Testament were.<sup>18</sup> Christ endured the most painful suffering imaginable, to provide salvation for all mankind, through His obedient death on the Cross. That one act was sufficient to save all men for all time, if they obey His death, burial and resurrection. The righteous Christ died on behalf of unrighteous humanity and therefore suffered so that we might have hope of eternal life. Even as Christ was crucified and His fleshly body destroyed, not even death could destroy His spirit. So too is it for children of God. Death will take our earthly bodies, but our souls will live on. Christ died to give our souls the opportunity to spend eternity with Him forever.

1<sup>st</sup> Peter chapter 3 verses 18 and 22 form, what Lonnie Ritchie calls, a parenthesis. If one would read verse 18 and then immediately read verse 22, they would form a complete thought.

<sup>18</sup>“For Christ also suffered once for sins, the just for the unjust, that He might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive by the Spirit... <sup>22</sup> who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, angels and authorities and powers having been made subject to Him.”

Ritchie suggests that in light of the parenthesis, verses 19-21 are the explanatory verses of an aside that Peter mentions as part of the discourse.<sup>19</sup> One might say that verses 19-21 are the pie filling in between the top and bottom crust of 18 and 22 and provide us with additional insight into the mind of God regarding man’s salvation.

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<sup>17</sup> NKJV

<sup>18</sup> Hebrews 10:1-4

<sup>19</sup> Ritchie, Lonnie, *A Laymen’s Simple Commentary on the New Testament, Vol.4* (San Ramon: Falcon Books, 2007), 304.



Verses 19 and 20 say that He (Christ) went (in the spirit) and preached to the spirits in prison. There is much debate over this verse as to what exactly is meant. Some, who interpret the passage in a literal sense, claim that Christ, in spiritual form, preached the Gospel to those who had formerly died as unbelievers (now dead in prison) to give them a second chance to obey the Gospel. While the passage does make reference to those who are 1) in the spirit and 2) in a spiritual place of incarceration (See also – 2<sup>nd</sup> Peter 2:4, Jude 1:6), it does not mean that Jesus gave the dead the opportunity to obey the Gospel. If it did, God’s Word would contradict itself since 2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians 6:2 and Hebrews 3:15, 9:27 tell us that man cannot obey after he has died. Dungan, in total agreement with the Scripture in Romans 10:35; wrote that interpreting a passage in such a manner as to contradict other passages of Scripture is not a sound method of interpretation.<sup>20</sup>

The fact is that Christ did in fact preach in the spirit, but the preaching took place in the past tense, not the present tense. (i.e. the spirits were not in prison at the time of the preaching.) Rather Christ preached, through the person of Noah, to Noah’s contemporaries who, having died in disobedience, are now disembodied spirits and are in prison.<sup>21</sup> This figurative approach makes more sense in light of the fact that if taken literally; then Christ went and preached only to the disembodied spirits who were living in the flesh during the time Noah built the ark; and God is a respecter of persons which the Bible claims He is not.<sup>22</sup> This would also make Luke 16:19-31 wrong, for if one who is dead and either in Paradise or Torment can cross the gulf, then Moses lied and the Holy Spirit, perpetuated it. Furthermore, the text says that this took place, “...while the Divine longsuffering waited...” This is a reference to God allowing Noah’s disobedient

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<sup>20</sup> Dungan, D., R., *Hermeneutics* (Delight: Gospel Light Publishing Co), 54.

<sup>21</sup> Woods, Guy, N., *A Commentary on the New Testament Epistles, Vol. VII* (Nashville: Gospel Advocate Company, 1983), 101.

<sup>22</sup> Acts 10:34 (NKJV)

contemporizes time to repent, causing Noah to preach for 120 years, as he built the ark, before Divine justice came, not to the three days Jesus was in the tomb.

The latter half of verse 20 makes reference to the eight souls that were saved through water and brings us solidly into our discussion of water, salvation and this passage. The water of the flood did many things, but among them, it separated the righteous from the unrighteous and saved those who would obey the command of God to get in the ark. The water saved Noah and his family from the vile world in which they lived. The physical water washed away the filth of sin and evil that permeated earth, thus causing God to destroy the world to begin with.<sup>23</sup>

Just as the flood waters saved Noah and his family, baptism saves us. Guy N. Woods stated, “The salvation of Noah and those with him is thus made a type of the deliverance which the sinner receives in passing through the waters of baptism. The likeness obtains in the following manner:

1. The water of the flood bore up the ark and delivered its occupants from the destruction of the antediluvian world.
2. The water separated the saved from the lost who were drowned in them.
3. The flood destroyed the evils of the old world and enabled Noah and his family to emerge into a new existence.

In like fashion baptism:

1. Is the final condition in a damnation of the lost.
2. Baptism designates the line of demarcation between the saved and the lost.

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<sup>23</sup> Genesis 6:5-8 (NKJV)

3. In baptism the “old man of sin” is buried and from the watery grave one comes forth to “walk in newness of life.”<sup>24</sup>

Also, baptism in water is an antitype of the water of the flood. In verse 21, Peter refers to the similitude that exists between baptism and the flood waters and lets us know where and how the salvation of a soul is accomplished.<sup>25</sup>

We must understand that, besides it being the authorized element, the water has no spiritually cleansing powers. The water of baptism is a parallel to the water of the flood, but in both cases the water is not what accomplished the saving. Noah and his family **obeyed the word of the Lord** to build, equip and enter the ark and thus, **through their obedience**, escaped the destruction of the sinful world when the flood water separated the righteous (Noah and his family) from the unrighteous (the world). So too, when a person hears the word of the Lord, believes it and **chooses to obey it**, they obtain salvation **through their obedience** and are separated from their sin through the waters of Christian baptism. Peter states that baptism is, “...the interrogation of a good conscience toward God, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ.” The physical water has no spiritual healing properties, but is the means by which God exercises His forgiveness, when we obey His Word.

The word interrogation is the Greek word “eperotema” and refers to a question or an inquiry.<sup>26</sup> When one wholly submits one’s self to God’s will and obeyed the Gospel through baptism, one demonstrates to God that one is totally willing to do things His way. Baptism has nothing to do with the removal of physical filth from the flesh, but with the removal of spiritual

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<sup>24</sup> Woods, Guy, N., *A Commentary on the New Testament Epistles, Vol. VII* (Nashville: Gospel Advocate Company, 1983), 102-103.

<sup>25</sup> Ritchie, Lonnie, *A Laymen’s Simple Commentary on the New Testament, Vol. 4* (San Ramon: Falcon Books, 2007), 306.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.* 307

filth from the soul. It is the appeal of a sincere heart to God, that takes place when one is baptized, that asks God to take away the spiritual filth of sin and make one whole according to the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Paul said in 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 15:13-19, “But if there is no resurrection of the dead, neither hath Christ been raised: and if Christ hath not been raised, then is our preaching vain, your faith also is vain. Yea, we are found false witnesses of God; because we witnessed of God that he raised up Christ: whom he raised not up, if so be that the dead are not raised. For if the dead are not raised, neither hath Christ been raised: and if Christ hath not been raised, your faith is vain; ye are yet in your sins. Then they also that are fallen asleep in Christ have perished. If we have only hoped in Christ in this life, we are of all men most pitiable.”<sup>27</sup>

It is only through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, that any person, has hope of eternal life. It is only through baptism that one receives the forgiveness of sin. And while this premise is clearly taught in the New Testament, especially here in 1<sup>st</sup> Peter 3:18-21, many still do not believe or accept it. The beautiful thing about Scripture is that while this passage contains everything we need to know about the method by which we are saved, the rest of Biblical teaching with regard to baptism and salvation, agree with 1<sup>st</sup> Peter 3:18-21.

### BAPTISM: THE COMMAND

The first time the Bible records man asking the question, “What must we do [to be saved]” is in Acts 2:37. Peter, having already received the miraculous indwelling of the Holy Spirit, “lifted up his voice”<sup>28</sup> and preached to those assembled, what most refer to as the first gospel sermon. Not only did Peter remind them of their history as God’s people, but brought to

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<sup>27</sup> American Standard Version

<sup>28</sup> Acts 2:14 (ESV)

their remembrance the events of the crucifixion which took place little over a month previous. According to Ritchie, “Peter’s sermon accomplished its purpose to convict the hearers of sin...and prompted them to want to know how to obtain forgiveness of their sins,”<sup>29</sup> leading them to ask the question, “What must we do?”

Peter’s response was simple; “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.”<sup>30</sup> This statement was not merely the whimsical ideology of a person put on the spot. His response was the fulfillment of Matthew 16:19, and was guided by the Holy Spirit, who inspired the Apostles to speak<sup>31</sup> on the Day of Pentecost. Jesus had said that Peter would possess the keys to the kingdom (which is the church – see Matthew 16:18-19) and here in Acts 2, Peter uses the keys to open up the kingdom of God on earth, for the first time. Thus Jesus command, through Peter, was for a person to repent and be baptized, in order to receive the forgiveness of sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit. Leroy Brownlow wrote that baptism, “...is a command to be obeyed in becoming a Christian.”<sup>32</sup>

The claim made by detractors today, is that baptism was not commanded as the means to be saved, it was commanded as a way to signify one was already saved; thus denying the essentiality of baptism for salvation. Wayne Jackson has rightly said, “The two commands, “repent” and “be baptized,” are joined by the conjunction “and.” It follows that if repentance is essential to salvation, so also is baptism. On the other hand, if baptism may be dismissed,

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<sup>29</sup> Ritchie, Lonnie, *A Laymen’s Simple Commentary on the New Testament* (San Ramon: Falcon Books, 2007), 359.

<sup>30</sup> Acts 2:38 (ESV)

<sup>31</sup> Acts 2:1-14 (American Standard Version)

<sup>32</sup> Brownlow, Leroy, *Why I am a member of the Church of Christ* (Fort Worth, Brownlow Publishing Company, 1945), 142.

repentance may be as well.”<sup>33</sup> Many have harkened to these detractors and dismissed the essentiality of baptism as essential to salvation.

When it comes to the command to “repent and be baptized” in Acts 2:38, we must ask one critical question; “What part did baptism play in the conversions of the book of Acts and does it still play that part today?” Let us examine two stark examples in the book of Acts in which men were saved to answer the first part of our question.

### BAPTISM: THE EXAMPLES

If one examines the conversion of the Ethiopian Eunuch in Acts 8:26-39, one will find several points to consider. The first point is that the Eunuch was reading the Scriptures. He was not an ignorant man and even though he did not understand what he was reading he still had an interest in God’s Word. The second point is that he was curious to know more. The third point is that Phillip “preached unto him Jesus,”<sup>34</sup> not baptism. The final point is that the Eunuch, not Phillip, initiated the request for baptism. It is not a coincidence that Phillip simply preached Jesus to him and the Eunuch insisted on being baptized as a response to the Word that was preached. Though the Eunuch was reading the Bible, curious to know more and Phillip preached to him, the Eunuch was still not saved until he went down into the water and was baptized. Only then did he come up out of the water rejoicing. In this instance, the implication is clear that baptism was required to obey the Word Phillip preached.

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<sup>33</sup>Jackson, Wayne. “Acts 2:38-Not So Tough.” The Christian Courier, June 7, 1999.  
<http://www.thechristiancourier.com/> \_\_\_\_\_ - (Accessed October 26, 2009).

<sup>34</sup> Acts 8:35 (ASV)

If one considers the conversion of Saul of Tarsus in Acts 9:1-19, one will see the essentiality of baptism for salvation. Saul was a Jew, a Pharisee and a religious zealot.<sup>35</sup> On his journey to Jerusalem to arrest Christians and put them in prison, Saul encountered Jesus Christ in a miraculous way. Christ spoke to Saul and told him to go into the city of Damascus and there he would be told what he must do. Several elements must be noticed; first Saul called Jesus Lord (addressing a superior even though he didn't know it was Christ)<sup>36</sup> in verse 5; second he was both fasting and praying.<sup>37</sup> But Saul was still not saved. Only after Ananias commanded him to, "...arise, and be baptized, and wash away thy sins, calling on the name of the Lord,"<sup>38</sup> did Saul obey the command and have his sins washed away in the waters of Christian baptism. Only then was he saved. In both of these examples, baptism was the turning point at which one went from a pagan lost in sin, to a child of God who had been "transferred into the kingdom."<sup>39</sup>

#### BAPTISM: THE NECESSITY

Despite the command of our Lord for the necessity of baptism for salvation, despite the recorded examples of conversion in God's Word, and despite the simplicity contained in the statement, "repent and be baptized...for the forgiveness of your sins..." many in our modern world refuse to acknowledge the essentiality of baptism for salvation. They refuse to acknowledge it even though the totality of Scripture agrees with and supports it.<sup>40</sup>

Some maintain that the command no longer applies or that we have found a new hermeneutic. When discussing the timelessness of the command issued by Peter in Acts 2:38,

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<sup>35</sup> Phil 3:5, Acts 26:5, Acts 24:16 (ASV)

<sup>36</sup> Turner, Rex. *Systematic Theology: Another book on the Fundamentals of the Faith* (Pensacola: Firm Foundation Publishing House, 1989), 255.

<sup>37</sup> Acts 9:9,11 (ASV)

<sup>38</sup> Acts 22:16 (ASV)

<sup>39</sup> Col. 1:13 (ESV)

<sup>40</sup> Rom. 6:1-4, Acts 22:16, 1 Pet. 3:21, Gal. 3:26-27 (ASV/ESV)

Lonnie Ritchie would state, “If we today would make the same inquiry, we should look no further than Peter’s words spoken here to find our answer.”<sup>41</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Baptism plays the same role in conversion today as it did in the first century. It is no more or less important today than it was then. If one wants to make a New Testament Christian in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, one must do so, as the Apostles and preachers of the first century did; by following the command of Christ, through the Apostle Peter. We must answer mankind’s question in the 21 Century as Peter did in the first century. Peter stated in 1<sup>st</sup> Peter 3:21, “There is also an antitype which now saves us--baptism (not the removal of the filth of the flesh, but the answer of a good conscience toward God), through the resurrection of Jesus Christ.” That same antitype, which saved so many in the records of Acts, that Peter and the other inspired Apostles taught as essential in the first century, is still just as critical and just as saving in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century as it was in the 1<sup>st</sup> Century. Baptism, “which doth now save us,” is essential to salvation. The choice is yours. What will you choose?

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<sup>41</sup> Ritchie, Lonnie, *A Laymen’s Simple Commentary on the New Testament* (San Ramon: Falcon Books, 2007), 359.



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