

The Washing of Rebirth

By Richie Temple
Cary, North Carolina

The purpose of being born of God is to become a child in God's family and an heir of God's glorious kingdom to come. This subject is one of the most important and, unfortunately, controversial topics in all of Bible scholarship. It is important because of its life changing and practical effects on the life of a person who is born of God by virtue of accepting Jesus Christ as his risen Lord (I John 5:1-12). However, it is also controversial because of disagreement over whether this new birth occurs *by means of* water baptism or simply *by means of* faith in Christ - irrespective of water baptism. This article will support the latter view in the firm belief that God is not bound by ritual of any kind; instead, he looks on the heart and gives his Spirit in direct response to faith (e.g. Acts 15:7-9). Though water baptism can be highly significant and very meaningful in many of its forms, we believe that it is only *symbolic* of the much greater spiritual reality that occurs at *the* moment that a person initially chooses to believe in and confess our risen Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

There are only a couple of verses that speak *directly* to this subject and we will let the scholars speak for themselves:

John 3:1-8:

Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a member of the Jewish ruling council. He came to Jesus at night and said, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him."

In reply Jesus declared, "I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again."

"How can a man be born when he is old?" Nicodemus asked. "Surely he can not enter a second time into his mother's womb to be born!"

Jesus answered, "I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. You should not be surprised at my saying, 'You must be born again.' The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit." (NIV).

James Dunn, the highly respected NT scholar who is Professor of Divinity at the University of Durham, England, has done a close study of these verses in his book *Baptism in the Holy Spirit* (Westminster Press). I quote from his chapter "The Spirit and Baptism in John's Gospel" (pp. 183-194):

Does John give us to understand that the Spirit is mediated through the sacrament of baptism? One automatically thinks of 3:5, and the affirmative answer really stands or falls with this passage. The chief arguments for seeing a baptismal reference in 3:5 are as follows:

- a. The sacramentalism of John: together with 6:15-58, 3:5 is regarded as the most explicit of the sacramental references.
- b. In view of the almost thematic repetition of 'water' in the early chapters of John, it is often said that 3:5 is the Evangelist's [the apostle John's] description of Christian baptism in contrast to John's [the Baptist's] ...
- c. The reason most frequently given is that the Christian reader of 3:5 could not fail to think of the rite of initiation [baptism] into the Church.

After exploring the background of the symbolic usage of the words "water", "bread", "flesh", etc. - especially showing how "water" is used symbolically for "Spirit" in other places in other chapters of John (eg. Chs. 4, 7, and 9) - Dunn makes the following comments about the

so-called sacramental understanding of John 3:5 in relation to water baptism and the new birth:

In the light of these facts we must re-assess the three arguments used to support the view that 3:5 is baptismal reference.

a. 'The sacramentalism of John' is a misnomer. John is not really interested in the sacraments in his Gospel. This does not mean that he is anti-sacramentalist; but it certainly excludes the view that much of his symbolism was directed towards the sacraments. We may say that his symbolism points to and portrays the same basic facts of the eternal life won and bestowed by Jesus which the sacraments point to and portray. But that is quite different from saying that his symbols portray the sacraments themselves and indicate that the eternal life is received through the sacraments. This we cannot say. What our survey has shown is that John's symbolism always centres on Jesus, and on, Jesus as the mediator of eschatological salvation – that is to say, on Jesus in his salvation-effecting action at the climax of his ministry in his glorification and exaltation, above all in his giving of the Spirit; for it is through the Spirit that eternal life is bestowed on his followers ... This greatly lessens the probability of a sacramental reference in 3:5, and any suggestion that water-baptism is the channel through which the life-giving Spirit is mediated is almost totally excluded.

b. The argument drawn from the context of the Nicodemus episode is greatly weakened. In the immediate context, water stands on the far side of the contrast between the old and the new dispensations – as that which the gift of the Spirit is contrasted. But the water reference in 3:5 is of a different order: in 3:5 water is a co-ordinate, not contrasted, with the Spirit. It is more likely therefore to belong to that other set of water references which symbolize something other than water. Moreover, in the parallel episode in ch. 4 we have an example of that other Johannine use of water – as a symbol of the life-giving operation of the Spirit (4:14). If there is any significance in the fact that these

water references, together with 7:38, are the only one which appear on the lips of Jesus, and that on each occasion there is a triple link between water, Spirit and life, it would suggest that the water of 3:5 likewise symbolizes the life-giving operation of the Spirit.

c. The argument that no Christian reader could fail to see Christian baptism, though powerful, must give precedence to the argument drawn from John's theology. Besides assuming that we know when the Gospel was written, and the sacramental understanding of the readers to whom it was addressed, it assumes also that it was John's intention to fit his writing into the context of that understanding and not to challenge or alter it in any radical way. But the gospel itself hardly gives these assumptions credibility. On the contrary, John seems to be challenging any sacramentalism which he assumes on the part of his readers.

We must bear in mind that Jesus expected that Nicodemus should be able understand what he was talking about based on the Hebrew Scriptures. This rules out Christian water-baptism and points rather to water as a symbol of the life-giving power of God through the Spirit, as the Old Testament often portrays it. Summing up his arguments, Dunn concludes that the phrase in 3:5 "born of water and the Spirit"

"... is a hendiadys, and the single preposition governing both words indicates ... a single concept – water-and-Spirit. This implies either that Christian conversion-initiation is a (theological) unity of which both water-baptism and Spirit-baptism are integral parts (in which case the verse does not tell us how they are related), or that the water is a symbol of the life-giving power of the Spirit as in 4:14 and 7:38. The latter is perhaps more likely in view of the fact that the OT finds water a fitting symbol of God's activity in quickening men to life (e.g. Isa. 55:1-3; Jer. 2:13; 17:13; Zech. 14:8; Ezek. 47:9), and one not infrequently linked in Jewish thought with the eschatological re-creation and renewal

effected by the gift of the Spirit (Isa. 32:15-17; 44:3-5; Ezek. 36:25-27; 39:29; Joel 2:28). It should not go unnoticed that the closest parallels to the water and Spirit correlation of John 3:5 are to be found in Ezekial 36:25-27 and I QS 4:20-22 [in the Dead Sea Scrolls]. The further we set John's Gospel into the context of Palestinian Judaism, as expressed particularly in the Qumran sect, the more weight will we have to give to this use of 'water' *with* 'Spirit' to symbolize renewal by the Spirit. Nor should we forget that John's baptism seems to have been for the Baptist himself a symbol of the eschatological purging effected through the Spirit. As it is the Spirit-of-truth which makes spiritual worship possible (4:23f.), so it is the water-of-the-Spirit which effects birth from above.

The next verses are Titus 3:5-7:

But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that, having been justified by his grace, we become heirs having the hope of eternal life (Titus 3:4-7).

In his book, *God's Empowering Presence* (pp. 857-858) Gordon Fee, Professor of New

Testament at Regent College in Vancouver, B.C., Canada, explains the importance of the role of the Spirit in these passages about "washing" and "rebirth":

The metaphor "washing" as a work of the Spirit first occurs in I Cor. 6:11 ... This metaphor occurs again, along with the metaphors of "rebirth" and "renewal" in Titus 3:5 ... The final genitive "of the Spirit" is the key to the whole. Salvation is not appropriated through baptism – that is foreign to Paul – but through the work of the Spirit, which in this case is imaged as a "new birth" or a "renewal" in the new believer's life.

The two words "new birth" and "renewal" are as close as one comes to the concept of "regeneration" by the Spirit in the Pauline Corpus. But if this metaphor is itself infrequent, the idea behind it is thoroughly Pauline, namely, at the beginning of one's life in Christ one has been given life by the Spirit himself. In Paul's view, the "washing" is that "of the Spirit" which includes rebirth and renewal. By the Spirit, God not only cleanses people from past sins, but also transforms them into his people, "reborn" and "renewed" so as to reflect God's likeness in their lives.

[For more information on this subject I recommend a detailed study of the two books quoted above and the articles "Baptism" and "Spirit, Holy Spirit" in New Bible Dictionary]