

The question of harmonizing one passage with other biblical passages on a similar subject bears further comment. This is not an exercise in counting votes, and letting the majority vote win, for, if all Scripture is God's word, then all Scripture is correct. So, all Scripture on a given topic must be allowed to contribute to an overall understanding of that topic; however, the obscure passage should always yield to the clear passage. For instance, it is a clear and oft repeated doctrine that salvation is by faith alone (e.g., Eph 2:8–9) and yet Acts 22:16 seems to teach salvation through baptism. How can these two verses be harmonized? The answer is found in Mark 1:8 and I Cor 12:13, for we find that Jesus' ministry was to inaugurate baptism in the Holy Spirit, and that all Christians have been baptized in Him. This tells us that the New Testament speaks of two baptisms: water baptism, and baptism in the Holy Spirit. The significant baptism is that in the Holy Spirit, for it is His regenerating work which saves; water baptism is symbolic baptism, a symbol of the spiritual event which has already happened. So, if one understands the baptism of Acts 22:16 as an exhortation to Paul to accept Jesus' salvation there is no tension, but perfect harmony. Salvation is by faith alone, faith is man's side of the transaction, and baptism in the Holy Spirit (regeneration) is God's side.¹

We now wish to discuss a question directly related to the institution of baptism, namely, whether baptism is *necessary*. Because, as we have already seen, Jesus Christ himself is the content and the veracity of the sacraments, there is good reason to ask about the urgency and the necessity of the use of the sacraments.

In this connection we find repeatedly in Reformed theology the statement that the sacraments are not necessary for the obtaining of salvation. This is not said about the sacraments *in general*, but with respect to *salvation*. The intention of the Reformers is clear: they wished to deny the Roman Catholic doctrine that the sacraments are necessary because they infuse supernatural grace. Reformed theology opposed this view by stating that the divine promise comes already in the Word and can be accepted in faith. What the Reformers presupposed, then, was their own view of the relation between Word and sacrament.

Everything depends, of course, upon the meaning of "necessity." Concretely, it is easy to see how a Church that believes the sacraments to be "unnecessary" may lose its appreciation of them and may even neglect them. It is therefore good to reflect on the necessity of the sacraments in the light of their divine institution and on their great significance because of the institution. Clearly, in the light of their divine institution by Christ, one will not easily speak of the sacraments' non-necessity. Granted that sacramentalism is an error, we should not allow polemical interests to threaten our vision of the whole truth. And we can escape that danger by speaking without hesitation of the necessity of the sacraments in the light of their institution by Christ. Even in those churches where the non-necessity of the sacraments for salvation is emphasized, men continue to speak of the command of God and of our calling to use the sacraments. Furthermore, neglect of the sacraments led to the use of the term "disobedience," which presupposes a certain necessity of the sacraments. Only if we honor their institution by Christ fully, can we speak polemically of the non-necessity of the sacraments.

The danger of devaluation is not imaginary, since believers always run the danger of stressing what is immediately "necessary" for their salvation; and if they are told that the sacraments are not necessary for salvation, they might easily conclude that they are relatively unimportant. We must therefore be careful. On the one hand, we must maintain the polemic

¹ Mills, M. S. (1997). *A firm foundation for your faith: a discussion on the Bible*. Dallas: 3E Ministries.

against Rome; but on the other hand we must speak emphatically of the necessity of the sacraments in the light of the institution by God.

That institution was, after all, not a work of divine arbitrariness, but an occurrence significant for God's guidance of his Church. When we consider that the sacraments are pledges of God's grace and signs of his promise, we shall be able to speak all the more seriously of the necessity of the sacraments, for this necessity is directly connected with our weakness, smallness of faith, and unbelief, the very reasons for which God has ordained the sacraments. The thesis of the non-necessity of the sacraments can be correctly posed only in an antithetical context, and only if it is followed immediately by a no less positive posing of the necessity of the sacrament. Only then shall we have honored the institution of the sacraments.

It has been said that not the absence of the sacrament, but contempt for the sacrament, makes one guilty in the eyes of God. That means on the one hand that God's grace can be infused in the individual who for some reason is deprived of baptism, while on the other hand there can be a disdain of the sacrament in the light of its institution by divine command. While Rome inconsistently makes exceptions which cannot be reconciled easily with the above-mentioned theory of infusion of grace, Reformed theology has emphatically maintained this distinction, not because "necessity knows no law," but in the light of the nature of the sacraments in distinction from the Word of promise. In this connection, reference has often been made to Mark 16:16, "He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that disbelieveth shall be condemned." It is pointed out that the two parts of the sentence are not quite parallel, since belief is connected with baptism while the warning of destruction involves only unbelievers.

Although we cannot discuss here the critical issues pertaining to Mark 16:16, it is clear at any rate that this text cannot be appealed to by those who think baptism to be relatively unimportant. The warning is against unbelief, and the promise of salvation is given to those who believe *and* receive baptism. Here we have further insight into what is meant by the nonnecessity and the necessity of baptism.

In this light we can, without exaggeration, agree with Marcel's expression "the necessity of baptism" and with his dictum: "baptism is a duty." Baptism is not left up to the whim of the believers, who then determine whether they need this condescending act of God's strengthening and sealing. On the contrary, when God institutes the sacrament for the strengthening of faith he thus ends all dispute. The question whether this sacrament is necessary is illegitimate in the eyes of Christian faith. The only proper question is that uttered by the eunuch: "What doth hinder me to be baptized?" (Acts 8:36). This is no negative approach to "unimportant" baptism, but an eager seeking of the sign of God through which one can travel his way with gladness.

In the textually disputed verse (8:37) that follows, Philip replies, "If thou believest with all thy heart, thou mayest." This does not warrant the conclusion that the ancient Christian Church left baptism to arbitrary decision. Rather, it points to the fact that no obstacle prevented executing the unbreakable and meaningful connection between believing and being baptized.

Because of this connection by virtue of God's command, one can and must speak of the necessity of baptism. The desire for God's sign is not dependent on the state of one's belief, whereby the believer himself determines whether he needs strengthening of faith through the sacrament. The seeking of the sign corresponds to the granting of the pledge of God's goodness in the struggle with man's heart. One can ask for a sign out of unbelief, as the Pharisees did who wanted to try Jesus, but one can also desire the sign in order to honor in it God's institution and to rest in God's salvation. To be sure, we shall have to maintain our protest against every evaluation of baptism that pushes the Word of promise to the

background; but those who see baptism in its institution and in its connection with the progress of the life of faith, will have to speak emphatically of the necessity of baptism. Thereby they will be in complete agreement with the practice of the Church, which warns against the disdain of the sacrament. The non-necessity of the sacrament in polemics has nothing to do with the superfluosity of the sacrament, which either practically or theoretically always turns out to depend upon a form of spiritualism. To say that baptism is more or less superfluous is to reveal one's failure to appreciate the richness of God's institution.

The basic issue concerning the doctrine and practice of baptism is not simply whether one acknowledges that baptism has been instituted by Christ, but whether one wishes to continue speaking with joy and gladness of the necessity of the sacraments. This is the real touchstone. The Reformed opposition to sacramentalism expressed in its speaking of the non-necessity of the sacrament, evinces not a *lesser* appreciation of the sacrament but a *different* appreciation. When we stress the connection between faith and sacrament, and the related concept of *usus sacramenti*, we base our view on God's goodness. It is faith, desiring the sacraments and making use of them, that will speak of the necessity of the sacraments. The man of faith does not attempt to be wiser than God, who cannot be separated from his mercy and who in mercy has granted the sacrament to weak, sinful man. Only thus will the institution of the sacrament be honored and the way of faith traveled gladly, also because of the sign.²

² Berkouwer, G. C. (1969). *The Sacraments* (pp. 106–109). Grand Rapids, MN: Eerdmans.