New Testament Baptism…
Is Baptism a Formula of Words?
Class 10
Scott Taft and Pat Swafford

We have discussed in our previous lessons the many facets of New Testament baptism, and it is a subject that is so important to us as Christians, because it is in the waters of baptism that we are put into the Lord Jesus Christ (**Romans 6:3&4**, **Galatians 3:26&27**)… and thus become part of the assembly of the saved. We become members of His body, and have salvation through Him, and we are put into Him… in baptism. That is where our walk with Him begins and no place else.

Baptism is a subject that is important to the world at large as well, because if people are to have any hope on the Judgment Day… it will only be through and in Christ (**John 14:6** and **Romans 8:1**)… and it will be their submitting to the command of baptism that puts them there. For everyone it is essential to be baptized in order to be saved in the Great Day of Judgment.

We have also discussed the monumental errors that exist around the subject of baptism and its purpose in the religious world. Today we want to address the question: "Is baptism just a formula of words?" That is a good question and we will endeavor this morning to show that, no, it is not… and to believe so is not scriptural.

In the Lord's church, when someone is being baptized, you will always hear words like these surrounding the act being spoken especially right before the candidate goes under the water, "I now baptize you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of your sins", or "I baptize you in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit for the remission of your sins". I have even heard added to the end of both of these variants "and to receive the gift of the Holy Spirit"… I have even heard "I baptize you into the possession of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit for the washing away of your sins…" You will always hear some combination or some variation on all of these phrases before the subject of the baptism goes under the water. These words are descriptive scripturally of what is occurring, and are pulled from **Matthew 28:19**, **Acts 2:38**, **Acts 22:16**. Those are some of the verses that give us the command to be baptized in the most direct fashion, they tell us what it is for, and what the most direct benefits are… you come in to the possession of the Deity or the Godhead (as you are baptized into their names), your sins are remitted (or washed away), and you receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

To make the initial point of this lesson… the words themselves are not commanded anywhere in the scriptures. There is no prescribed phrase, that we are to use when baptizing someone, mentioned anywhere in the scriptures… it is just not there. My personal opinion is that this is most likely this is due to the fact that it is not the man doing the baptizing that is projecting any power in that situation… it is God. If a phrase had been given for us to speak during the act of baptism, man by now would have probably found some way to pervert that into showing his own power, by possessing the right words and holding it over someone. There is no formula of words prescribed for

baptism and there is no power in the words spoken during a baptism. The words that are usually spoken are not an incantation or a voodoo spell that absolutely must be repeated correctly in order for the baptism to be successful. Knowing how mankind slides back towards paganistic rituals so easily, it is my humble opinion that the Lord Jesus made it that way on purpose.

We have an example given to us of this happening in such a way as to demonstrate my point. There was a strong church established in Ephesus, however Ephesus was the seat of one of the ancient world's great pagan religions… the cult of Diana, or Artemis as the Greeks called her. The apostle Paul had to call the Ephesians to account, in a direct way about sliding back into paganistic rituals in his letter to them. We see this done in **Ephesians 1:21** when he mentions that Jesus' name is, "**far above… every name that is named**" both now and forever. No one living at that time in Ephesus could have missed what he was making reference to in this verse, because around that time there was a pagan ritual known then as "naming the names"… it was the act of calling upon pagan gods in a precise way in order to evoke their blessings. In this ritual, you had to say the name of each god precisely and in specific order, or the evocation was not successful and you had to start over again. Paul was letting the Ephesians know, with the whole text of **Ephesians 1** that "naming the names" was useless, that God is all powerful and that Jesus Christ is Lord… and no one else.

From this, and other examples throughout the scriptures, we learn that man can exercise no power of his own in any given situation, other than to teach others the gospel… we cannot affect salvation for anyone including ourselves apart from God. Now that does not mean that we have not been given something to do… we are charged with hearing the word in such a way as to have to have faith Christ, and then we must be obedient to the faith (see text of **Acts 6:7** and **Galatians 3:26**; in **Galatians 3:26** note the correction needed by adding the word "**the**" in front of the word "**faith**" per the Greek N.T. text)… But it is God that does the rest… we have no power in and of ourselves. Remember that baptism is where man's faith and obedience meet the grace of God… to affect salvation. As men, we could speak volumes of words for infinite eons of time and still not be saved apart for the grace of God.

Let me make on more point along these lines that may not be readily apparent to all, however it is equally as true… anyone who believes that baptism is simply "an outward expression of your inward faith", as many in the denominational world do, really are subscribing to the fallacious line of thought that we just discussed, whether they acknowledge it or not. Baptism is not about men's words… it is not just an "outward expression of faith"… it is about God's power… it is where we meet God's power to save us… it is where we meet the blood of Jesus Christ that cleanses us from our sins (**Acts 22:16, Revelation 1:5** and **Matthew 26:28**). When we relegate baptism to a ritual of human words, or to just "an outward expression of faith", we take the power of God out of the act, and we do exactly what Paul corrected the Ephesians for… we become guilty of trying to save ourselves, in ways other than those prescribed for us in the word of God which is sinful.

The power of baptism is not of man, it is of God… and as such it is not a physical thing… it is spiritual, for God is Spirit (**John 4:24**). It is a spiritual cleansing… there are no words and no washing of any substance on earth that can cleanse your spirit of sin. **1 Peter 3:21** tells us this, when the apostle says in his letter that "**baptism**" as an anti-type to the flood "**now saves us**" but that it is "**not the removal of the filth of the flesh**, **but the answer of a good conscience towards God**". It is not a physical cleansing… it is a spiritual act in which one is put into Christ's death, contacting His Blood and being cleansed by it from sin, and then is raised by the power of His resurrection to walk in newness of life (**Romans 6:3&4**). Your spirit is made clean before God as a result of obedience to the ordinance and you are made alive in Christ.

The whole act of baptism is given to us by God as a result of our need to be washed from our sins by something that does not exist in this world… the precious blood of Jesus Christ… which He specifically came to offer for us as an atoning sacrifice. We access the atoning sacrifice of Christ's blood by faith in Him… in His death, and in His resurrection when we obey the command… therefore as Peter says it is "**the answer of a good conscience towards God**"… it is our inquiry of God, our plea for Him to save us.

Furthermore, baptism is an act through which an individual seeks to manifest or show forth a good conscience to God, as Peter has stated in **1 Peter 3:21**. When one obeys the command to be baptized they do so following the promptings of their conscience. One's conscience, when it acknowledging the truth about sin in relation to self, becomes quite sensitive to one's station before God, especially if that person is still in their sins… obedience to the command of baptism is the response that shows a desire to do exactly as the Lord has commanded, and in showing this obedience, the power of God to save is exerted towards that person because of the death and resurrection of Christ. It all really boils down to this: baptism now saves us because God says it does… and do we need another reason?

Seeing all this, we need to realize that the power of baptism has nothing to do with the words spoken by the person doing the immersing… it has to do with the power of God being exerted towards us in the most loving way… it has to do with saving our spirits from spiritual death and making us alive again.

However let me now say this: the words spoken around the act of baptism serve a good purpose for us… even though there is no power in them per se. They remind us, and all the witnesses of a new birth in Christ, of what is going on right then… a washing away of sins is being effected for someone; title for or possession of a soul is being passed from sin and death to God the Father, Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit in order for that soul to have eternal life in Christ; the gift of the Holy Spirit is being given so that He can dwell within the subject of the baptism, and God is adding the immersed person to the body of Christ, which is the church of the living God. As frail human beings, we need to be constantly reminded of these things and the words spoken at a baptism serve to do just that… by doing this… and in serving this purpose they become important.

There are some words associated with the act of baptism however which are essential to the act being properly administered… those words are the words of the "**good**

confession" as it is called in the Scriptures. When have an example of the "**good confession**" given to us in clear association with the act of baptism in **Acts 8:36-38**. This is passage describes the baptism of the Ethiopian Eunuch by Phillip and it details his making of the "**good confession**" that "**Jesus Christ is the Son of God**" before his baptism. Now knowing that God does nothing without a purpose, we can properly deduce from this example that it is essential for one to make this confession publicly in order for one's baptism to be effective. It is absolutely essential; in fact that we confess the name of Christ publicly and state that we know Him to be the Son of God before we are baptized… for without this fact, baptism has no meaning at all. Baptism is effective for us with regards to salvation only because of the fact that **THE SON OF GOD** came to the earth to die for us. It is effective for us because He shed His blood for us providing payment for our sins through His death, and it is effective for us because He was raised from the dead by the power of God. Without confessing Christ no baptism matters a whit. One has to acknowledge first who Christ **IS**; only then can one be scripturally immersed into Christ.

By the way, the "**good confession**" is the only set of words we have recorded in the Scriptures that have been verbalized in association with baptism. If God made the effort to give us this clear example, then we must make sure that we follow it. Here are some other scriptural examples of the "good confession"…**1 Timothy 6:12, John 18:36&37, Philippians 2:9-11, Romans 10:9, 14:10&11, 1 John 4:15, Matthew 10:32&33.**

To bring the lesson to a close, baptism is an act which takes place physically but has spiritual actions associated with it that only God can put into motion. Man's spoken words, or any given formula of spoken words in existence, mean nothing that is effective for us with regards to our salvation. Baptism is the act of our acknowledging the Deity of Christ, of what He did on the cross to save us, and it is an acknowledgement of His Lordship over us. By being baptized, we are bowing down before Christ the Lord. By being baptized, we are acknowledging God's and power for salvation… not ours, and we are calling upon the name of the Lord to save us (**Acts 2:21, Acts 22:16, and Acts 4:12**). In point of fact, our "**calling upon the name of the Lord**" is performed through our baptism. Baptism is actually that calling… it is that inquiry or request for salvation before the Master… it is that plea of "Lord save me!" This is not done through prayer as many in the denominational world believe… it is done through the act baptism.

And when we ask for salvation, through our submission to Him in baptism, when we call upon Holy His name… He provides it abundantly.