

Chapter 5

SALVATION

This is the most important chapter of the whole book. This is the one that makes all the others worthwhile. Because if you fail to come into a saving relationship with Christ, everything else in this book, while perhaps interesting on some level, may end up being a waste of time. When we admonished you to put on your own oxygen mask first in the last chapter, this is what we were talking about. Take as much time as you need to settle these matters in your heart.

Satan's primary objective is to keep us ignorant of God's Word. If he cannot keep us ignorant of it altogether, his next strategy is to distort our understanding of God's Word. This is precisely how the serpent—Satan—worked against Eve in the Garden of Eden. His first words to her were, "Did God really say, 'You must not eat from any tree in the garden?'" (Gen. 3:1). When Eve's answer demonstrated that she was both *aware* of God's Word and clearly *understood* it, Satan's next strategy was to distort her understanding of God's clear command. He substituted his own word, flatly contradicting what the Lord had said. "'You will *not* surely die,' the serpent said to the woman. 'For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.'" (Gen. 3:4–5). The serpent's strategy was successful—his clever substitution caused Eve to shift her attention *and obedience* away from what God had clearly said. And the rest is history.

Pseudo-Christian cults operate the same way. They distort or obscure God's Word—the Bible—and the person and work of Jesus Christ. Consequently, they obscure the true gospel. And you can't give the proper response if the message is fuzzy. "If the trumpet does not sound a clear call, who will get ready for battle?" (1 Cor. 14:8). This is what makes cults so very dangerous—they give people false assurance and false hope. Cult members put faith in a distorted gospel, "which is really no gospel at all" (Gal. 1:7); they place their confidence in lies that cannot save. Theologian and author F. F. Bruce puts it this way.

People are frequently immunized against a disease by being inoculated with a mild form of it, or with a related but milder disease. And in the spiritual realm experience suggests that it is possible to be "immunized" against

Christianity by being inoculated with something which, for the time being, looks so like the real thing that it is generally mistaken for it.¹

Most people who leave pseudo-Christian cults admit that they only came to understand the gospel after leaving the cult. It is therefore vitally important that you come to understand how your cult got it wrong, by carefully examining how its teachings differ from the genuine gospel of the Bible. Otherwise, you run the risk of having been “immunized” against the real gospel message.

The Problem: We Are All Undone Before God

In the Garden of Eden, Adam was immortal, walked and talked with God directly and had unlimited access to the Tree of Life. That all changed when he and Eve ate from another tree, the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil—the one thing God had commanded them not to do. By eating from this tree in disobedience to God, he brought sin and death into the world—not only for himself, but also for all of us who would follow. “Sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all men, because all sinned” (Rom. 5:12). All of creation was brought under this corruption of death along with Adam. All of humanity, each of us, was brought under this curse of death because of Adam’s disobedience. When we come into the world, each of us partakes of Adam’s sinful and fallen nature and is destined for death and separation from God, just as he was. “For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23). We just can’t help it—since Eden, it’s our nature to sin. If you think you can somehow escape this problem, you’re wrong.

The LORD looked down from heaven upon the children of men, to see if there were any that did understand, and seek God. They are all gone aside, they are all together become filthy: there is none that doeth good, no, not one. (Ps. 14:2–3 KJV)

All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags. (Isa. 64:6)

Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me. (Ps. 51:5)

This sobering realization that we are personally undone before God *is the beginning of our salvation.*

¹ Bruce, *Epistle to the Hebrews*, p. 144.

The Solution: The Infinite Righteousness of God's Own Son

When Adam fell, he created an immense—a truly *infinite*—problem that no mortal man could ever be capable of correcting. It would require an infinite solution. And so God Himself provided the solution: the infinite righteousness of His own Son, Jesus Christ.

He was pierced for our transgressions,
 he was crushed for our iniquities;
 the punishment that brought us peace was upon him,
 and by his wounds we are healed.
 We all, like sheep, have gone astray,
 each of us has turned to his own way;
 and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all. (Isaiah 53:5–6)

Only this infinite atonement made by God's righteous and eternal Son could fully satisfy His justice, and thereby bridge the gap between fallen and mortal man and the infinite and holy God. So when we picture Jesus on the cross, suffering unspeakable torment and pain, we should understand that it is *our* personal sin that placed Him there—yours and mine—not the vague and impersonal sin of the world at large, or the sin of some church. Jesus “suffered death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone” (Heb. 2:9). In reality, we were the ones destined to die the kind of death Jesus experienced. The bullet was headed straight for us, but Jesus jumped in front of us and took the hit instead, so we wouldn't have suffer the fury of God's wrath.

This transaction is often referred to as “the Divine Exchange.” Jesus takes our sins away from us, and gives us His righteousness in return. “God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that *in him* we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Cor. 5:21).

You Must Be Born Again

You may recall Jesus' encounter with Nicodemus, recorded in John 3. Nicodemus was a leading Pharisee who was intrigued by what he'd heard about Jesus, and came to see Him privately at night, not wanting to be seen by others. Confessing his confusion, Nicodemus said to Jesus, “Rabbi, we know 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” (v. 2).

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 cannot 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.’” (John 3:3–7)

In 1 Cor. 2:14 the apostle Paul explains quite explicitly the kind of spiritual blindness demonstrated by Nicodemus. “The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned.” Jesus told Nicodemus that only those who have been born again could see the kingdom of God and enter into it. It’s pretty important, then, to be straight on what being born again is, and what it is not.

As it took our mother to give us birth into this physical world, so it takes the Holy Spirit to give us birth into the kingdom of God. We don’t initiate this action, but we do respond to it. “No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him” (John 6:44). This is important for us to understand. God initiates this new birth by bringing into our hearts an accurate knowledge of our standing before Him and of the price He paid for us through the death of His Son, Jesus. This action on God’s part is met in us by a penetrating awareness of our completely bankrupt condition before Him, a deep conviction of our sin. At this moment we realize that we have nothing at all to offer *Him* but that it is He alone who offers *us* that which is of matchless and eternal worth. Our new birth becomes complete when we throw ourselves on His mercy, asking His forgiveness.

Just as the father raced out to welcome home his prodigal son in Luke 15:20, God comes to us by His Spirit in the midst of our confession. As we join with that prodigal son by saying, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son,” our Father is filled with compassion, throws His arms around us and celebrates our homecoming. Our new birth is complete. We are part of the family of God, we have entered His kingdom, just as Jesus told Nicodemus.

The LORD is nigh unto them that are of a broken heart; and saveth such as be of a contrite spirit. (Ps. 34:18 KJV)

He who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces, but he on whom it falls will be crushed. (Matt. 21:44)

When we believe in Christ, He frees us from our sin, and His Spirit fills us with a newfound joy and hope. He leaves His Spirit in us to continually remind us of our place in His family. “The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God’s children” (Rom. 8:16). The Holy Spirit is our friend and abiding comforter, God’s own deposit in us guaranteeing His complete presence with us in the life to come. “Having believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God’s possession—to the praise of his glory” (Eph. 1:13–14).

To those of you reading this who have experienced this saving relationship with God, you know what I am talking about. To those of you who have yet to experience it, you will now know what is happening when you do experience it. And I pray you do. But don't settle for anything less.

Stillborn?

It is important to understand that you are not born again until the entire process is completed in you. It is important for you to know that you can abort the process part way through. Let's look again carefully at what is involved in the new birth.

1. **Understanding God's Provision for Your Salvation.** "The holy Scriptures ... are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus" (2 Tim. 3:15). The Bible says that you are unacceptable to God because of your sin—the same way I, and all people, are unacceptable because of our sins. But God has made provision for your sin—the sacrifice of His Son, Jesus Christ. (Remember, this is where cults get it wrong, they distort and thereby minimize the real message of the Bible and the perfect and completed work of Jesus.)
But many people *know* a lot about the Bible, doctrine, the gospel and the role of Jesus. They can be both knowledgeable and articulate about spiritual matters. I have heard it said that such people are only twelve inches away from salvation. The knowledge they have in their heads never drops the twelve inches into their hearts to do them any good. These are precisely the kind of people the apostle James was talking about when he said, "Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like a man who looks at his face in a mirror and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like" (James 1:23–24). Knowledge of the gospel alone will not save you.
2. **Profound Awareness and Conviction of Our Sin.** After we become aware of the gospel, we may feel sorrow for our sin. But sorrow alone will not save us any more than knowledge alone will save us. "*Godly* sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but *worldly* sorrow brings death" (2 Cor. 7:10). We may feel just terrible about our sins, but never fully accept God's provision for them.
3. **Repentance and Forgiveness.** This is the last step in your new birth. If understanding the gospel has brought about Godly sorrow in you, that sorrow will lead you to repentance, whereby you accept God's free gift of salvation through the death and resurrection of His Son, Jesus Christ. Once you do that, God treats your sins as if they don't exist anymore. They have been completely annihilated—forever.

“Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool” (Isa. 1:18). And as Jesus told the woman caught in adultery, “Go, and sin no more” (John 8:11). Repentance is a two-step process. The first step is confessing your sins. The second step is forsaking them.

In your particular situation, you should also ask forgiveness for having been a part of a pseudo-Christian cult. You believed wrong things about God, and most likely taught these wrong things to others. You were deceived, and very likely you deceived others. This is sin. It may have been *unintentional* sin, but it is still sin. Ask God to forgive you for it, and He will. And then be sure to forgive yourself as well. I heard a preacher once say that after you come to faith in Christ, “the only ones who remember your sins are *you*, your *friends* and the *Devil*.” God has forgotten them. You should, too.

A Portrait of Salvation from China

The church in America has a lot to learn from our persecuted brethren around the world, who often pay a severe price for their faith. Wong Ming Dao (Wang Ming-Tao) served twenty-three years in Communist Chinese prisons because of his Christian faith. He is considered by many to be the spiritual father of the Chinese church. But as a young believer, Wong was a bit arrogant. I thought it might be helpful to share with you Wong’s own encounter with God’s holiness, and his response.

Up until that night [Wong] had considered himself superior to other believers, whether leaders, elders or pastors. His ideas seemed far beyond those of the people he observed around him.

“But that evening,” he reported years later, “when I knelt by my bed to confess my sins, everything was changed. Everybody faded out and I was left alone with God. I became conscious of the depravity within me...In the presence of God I feared and trembled. The more I prayed, the more conscious I became of my unworthiness. I was unclean, vicious and hateful.

“I uttered no sound as I knelt by my bed, but I was humbled to the dust...I realized that were it not for the blood of Christ I would have no hope whatever of entering the presence of God.

“I dedicated myself anew to Him. I was willing to obey Him fully. I was ready to serve Him faithfully all my life. And from that day on my life was gradually, but wonderfully changed!”²

What Being Born Again Is *Not*

The scriptural born again experience we have been describing is supremely a matter of the heart. It is a very private matter, between just you

² Brother David, *Walking the Hard Road*, pp. 27–28.

and God. It is a matter of your spirit responding directly to the Spirit of God working in you. Trust me, when it happens, you will be the first one to know. Don't let others attempt to evaluate your salvation by applying some litmus test they have developed. You will know for yourself.

And, contrary to the opinion of some, it can even be an entirely unspoken exchange. This was certainly true with Wang Ming-Tao whom we looked at above. Another example is the woman who washed Jesus' feet, in Luke 7:36–50. *Please note that this woman says not one word*, and yet Jesus says to her, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace."

Our human tendency is to try to put God "in a box," by saying that He *always* works this way, and *never* works that way. We try to regulate His behavior to match our own understanding and expectation. We want to feel that we have mastered God, that we have Him all figured out. And we don't want any surprises; we want His work to be uniform and predictable. This attitude is spiritually immature, but widespread. Don't fall for it. God works with each one of us in the most unpredictable ways. Just read the New Testament carefully.

Because salvation is accomplished in your heart, it should never be confused with the performance of external actions. Salvation may be *accompanied* or *followed* by your external actions, but it is neither initiated nor accomplished externally. Some confusion can occur when you are unduly influenced by others or by your emotions alone. Here are three examples of external actions that can *potentially* be confused with salvation: (1) responding to an altar call, (2) following someone else's lead in reciting a "sinner's prayer," (3) agreeing to be baptized. We will talk more about baptism in the following section.

Many people receive salvation through responding to an altar call, especially after a compelling proclamation of the gospel. Often, they will then follow the lead of a prayer counselor in reciting a sinner's prayer. This is wonderful, as long as it is truly the Lord working in your heart bringing you to repentance. But some people participate in these actions primarily because of someone else's urging or expectation, perhaps in combination with their own emotional state. While true salvation will certainly evoke deep emotions, it is much more than just an emotional experience. It is possible that tears alone may be only "worldly sorrow," not the "Godly sorrow [that] brings repentance that leads to salvation" (2 Cor. 7:10). So make sure that what you are doing outwardly lines up with what is truly happening in your heart by the Holy Spirit. Remember, when the Lord brings you to Himself through the Holy Spirit, you will be the first to know.

Baptism

As we discussed above, baptism is an action that can be mistaken for being born again. It is helpful at this point, then, to understand what baptism is and what it isn't.

What Baptism Is. Baptism is the believers' public testimony to the church and to the world that they have (1) put faith in Jesus Christ as their Savior, (2) repented of their sins by confessing them to God and forsaking them and (3) committed themselves to follow Jesus as their Lord the rest of their days. Baptism is the believers' public statement and testimony to this act of salvation having already taken place in their lives, *but it is not the act of salvation itself—it does not save anyone to be baptized.*

Paul explains the symbolism of baptism this way.

Don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.

If we have been united with him like this in his death, we will certainly also be united with him in his resurrection. For we know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin—because anyone who has died has been freed from sin.

Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him...In the same way, count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus. (Romans 6:3–8, 11)

What Baptism Isn't. The belief that baptism is the act of salvation itself is called baptismal regeneration. The high churches all teach and practice this doctrine. This includes the Roman Catholic, the various Orthodox churches, the Church of England and the Episcopal and Lutheran churches. They teach that even infants are saved when baptized under their authority. But I believe that this is bad theology and not supported in Scripture.

Ephesians 2:8–9 was the rallying cry of the Reformation, "It is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast." In addition to being a testimony, baptism is also a *work*. But Scripture says we are saved by God's *grace*, through our exercise of *faith*. Since this faith is obviously expressed prior to baptism (how could it be any other way?), then our salvation obviously precedes baptism as well, since faith and salvation are inseparably connected in the same event. Baptism is our *public announcement* of our faith and salvation. Jesus told one of the thieves who was crucified with Him, "I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise" (Luke 23:43). This thief was certainly not baptized. Yet he was saved by the grace of God based

on the faith he had just expressed in Jesus, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom” (v. 42).³

Should I Be Re-Baptized? From its very earliest days, baptism was the most prominent initiatory rite into the community of the saints—the Christian church. And the same thing remains true today. Once you leave a pseudo-Christian cult and are sure you have responded to the truth of the gospel in faith, then you should make arrangements to be baptized. You have come to faith in Christ, you have been born again, and you should now publicly provide the scripturally prescribed testimony of that fact in obedience to Christ.

But what if you were already baptized in your old church? Should you be baptized again? This is a common question from people who leave pseudo-Christian cults. I suggest you consider being re-baptized, for these reasons.

- Pseudo-Christian cults neither understand nor teach the actual gospel of Jesus Christ. Indeed, most former members say they never understood the gospel until they left. This alone is certainly reason enough to be re-baptized. Your first baptism was a requirement to join a false church. This second baptism is to publicly demonstrate your acceptance of new life in Christ, and to proclaim your commitment to follow Him alone.
- When you joined your former cult, you subordinated yourself to its authority structure. These authorities told you that you could only relate to God by following them and their teaching, since no other way was acceptable to God. And you believed it—you were deceived. This, in fact, was sin. While you did this in ignorance, it was still sin and needs to be repented of. God knows we did this in ignorance and is quick to forgive us when we ask Him. We then celebrate this forgiveness and make a fresh start in Christ. Baptism is the scripturally prescribed sign of this fresh start in Christ and commitment to Him alone.

³ For a more thorough discussion of baptism, see Unger, *Unger's Bible Dictionary*, pp. 122–124 and Cross, *Dictionary*, pp. 126–128.