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## “Baptism” in First Peter 3:21: A Study in Sacramental Theology

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Baptism, which corresponds to this, now saves you, not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ. (1 Peter 3:21)

It has been aptly observed that the history of theology consists of a flight from one error or extreme to another. The evangelical movement’s approach to the sacraments in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries is a classic example of this phenomenon. Reacting against Roman Catholic sacerdotalism and influenced by revivalism, twentieth-century evangelicalism looked upon the sacraments with suspicion at best and loathing at worst. Many evangelicals considered it a great heresy to suggest that God conferred any grace via the sacraments: they were human acts of memorial and nothing more.

Isaac Newton taught us that every action has an equal and opposite reaction. The reaction to anti-sacramentalism is occurring now, especially among younger believers who were spiritually impoverished in churches

devoid of mystery and transcendence. This is a significant impulse in the current flight of some evangelicals to the sacramental world of Roman Catholicism. A number of books chronicle this movement, including one titled *Born Fundamentalist, Born Again Roman Catholic*. In the first chapter, the author recounts the impeccable dispensationalist credentials of his father, a Bible-church pastor, along with expressions of admiration for his dad's inspiring faith and godliness. One might expect such a son to enroll in Dallas Theological Seminary, which his father was attending at the time of his birth. Chapter 2 explains why he did not, recounting the quest that led to Rome. The chapter is titled "The Real Presence," and it outlines a fundamentalist's child's quest for mystery and sacramental grace. From the perspective of Reformed theology, this journey from anti-sacramental Dallas to sacerdotal Rome presents a classic instance of the tendency to flee one extreme into the arms of another.

This phenomenon provides at least some of the background for the renewed interest in sacramental grace among many Reformed Christians. Reacting strongly against anti-sacramentalism, many Reformed Christians are rethinking and re-emphasizing the sacraments. This renewed interest has raised important questions of late and sparked new controversies. Among the questions are "What kind of grace is conveyed via the sacraments? In what manner is sacramental grace conveyed? How do the sacraments function as 'signs' and 'seals' of the covenant of grace? More generally, what is the proper role of the sacraments in our theology of salvation?" Historically, the Reformed community stands between evangelical anti-sacramentalism and Romish sacerdotalism. But recent experience suggests that our ability to answer questions like those above will determine whether Reformed churches offer a biblical solution to this timely concern or whether Reformed churches are torn asunder by the competing sacramental poles.

### **"BAPTISM NOW SAVES"**

The question of sacramental grace pertains to both baptism and the Lord's Supper, but because the former serves as our rite of initiation, questions regarding baptism are particularly urgent. A favorite passage of those promoting high views of baptism is 1 Peter 3:21. Having compared out salvation to that experienced by Noah through the flood, the apostle states, "Baptism, which corresponds to this, now saves you, not as a removal of

dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ."

I would like to consider this passage as an inroad to the recent discussion of sacramental grace. Peter has exhorted Christians to suffer well, giving a witness in suffering like that of our Lord and rejoicing in our hope of resurrection. When Jesus was put to death, his good behavior put his tormentors to shame. Relying on God the Father, he was "put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit" (1 Peter 3:18). After this, our Lord "went and proclaimed to the spirits in prison" (3:19), a statement I will leave unexplored in this study. It is certain, however, that Peter turns to the example of Noah in the flood because this is an earlier example of a righteous person being reviled by the world, but saved through judgment into a new life. It is evidently Peter's statement that Noah was thus "brought safely through water" (3:20) that brings baptism into his mind. The apostle states that baptism "corresponds to this"—that is, Noah's deliverance through the flood, as well as Christ's deliverance through the cross. Peter's teaching that "baptism . . . now saves you" challenges us to incorporate a fully biblical doctrine of the sacrament to which he refers.

The first point to consider, and one that bears directly on today's debate, is the relationship of the sign of baptism to the reality it signifies. In brief, in referring to baptism, does the apostle make a simple reference to the sacramental rite of baptism as something that saves us? Or, does he employ the sign as a way of referring to the thing signified, namely, the deliverance of those who humbly rely on God through death and resurrection?

This verse is of central importance to our sacramental debates today, because it is the best passage to provide a rule by which we will normally consider similar references to baptism in the New Testament. When we read Peter's use of *baptisma*, should we understand the rite itself as the primary reference? Or are there occasions when biblical writers use the sign as shorthand for the thing signified? Many who espouse a renewed emphasis on the sacraments consider that whenever the New Testament uses the noun *baptisma* or the verb *baptizo*, the primary reference is to the rite of baptism. Peter Leithart, for instance, argues that the rite of infant baptism involves God's public declaration of the child's justification. To support this position, Leithart refers to Romans 6:1–11 and 1 Corinthians 12:12–13, both among the numerous instances where the apostle Paul uses *baptizo* in the context of his description of salvation, references which Leithart understands as

designating the rite of baptism as the vehicle by which salvation is conferred.<sup>1</sup> The question at hand, illustrated by Leithart's interpretation, is this: when Peter or Paul employs the words *baptisma* or *baptizo* in their discussion of salvation, is it always or even normally the case that they are directing us to the sign or to the thing signified?

First Peter 3:21 is an important verse in treating this subject, for it provides a clear statement regarding baptism and salvation, one to which high sacramentalists have regularly referred to prove their view of baptism as the vehicle of salvation. "Does not Peter plainly state that 'baptism now saves?'" they argue. But what really is the apostle's thinking? Does he posit that having a minister pour water over your head while repeating the baptismal formula accomplishes salvation? Or is Peter employing the sacramental act of baptism as shorthand for the whole drama of redemption, the latter of which should occupy our foremost attention?

John Calvin, whom no one can accuse of a low sacramentology, takes the latter view, namely, that the apostles employed *baptizo* in order to refer to the thing signified rather than to the sign itself. First, Calvin makes the kind of statement that sacerdotalists love to cite: "Noah was saved by water, in a figure of baptism." But he goes to specify his meaning: "As Noah obtained life through death, when he was buried in the ark just as if in a grave, and among the total ruin of the world he was preserved together with his small family, so today the death which is set forth in baptism is to us an entrance into life, and no salvation can be hoped for, unless we be separated from the world."<sup>2</sup> In other words, Calvin argues that Peter speaks of the sign of baptism in order to refer us to the salvation in Christ that separates us from the world through death.

We need not rely on Calvin, however, for Peter himself provides a definitive caveat regarding his use of *baptisma*. Having written that "baptism . . . now saves," the apostle provides a qualification that limits our understanding of his reference to "baptism."

1. Peter J. Leithart, "Baptism and Justification," on-line at <http://www.leithart.com/archives/001238.php>. Here, as in other writings, Leithart and others who argue for baptismal regeneration, baptismal justification, and so on simply assume that the New Testament use of *baptizo* and *baptisma* refers primarily to the rite—that is, to the sign and not the thing signified.

2. John Calvin, *The Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Hebrews; The First and Second Epistles of St. Peter*, ed. David W. Torrance and Thomas F. Torrance, trans. William B. Johnston, Calvin's New Testament Commentaries 12 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 295.

First, Peter tells us what he does not mean: “Not as a removal of dirt from the body.” It is hard to see how one might deny that Peter is referring to the outward act of washing with water, and, hence, to the rite of baptism itself. As Karen Jobes warns us, Peter means that “water baptism is not a ‘ticket to heaven’ that exempts them from subsequent issues of morality.”<sup>3</sup> Peter Davids adds, “While baptism does consist in a washing in water, it is not this outward washing . . . that is salvific. The water does not have a magical quality; neither does the outward ritual.”<sup>4</sup> This answers an important question: Are there instances when the New Testament speaks of baptism but does not want us to focus on the external rite itself? Not only does 1 Peter 3:21 show that there is at least one instance, so that we may rightly ask this question about other verses, but this is the occasion when an apostle most directly addresses this concern. Peter is quick to say, “No, not the rite itself!” If anything, this should constitute a rule and not an exception regarding the New Testament use of *baptisma* and *baptizo* in the context of teaching on salvation. Indeed, the concern that many pastors and scholars share today about an excessive reliance on sacramental grace seems validated by the apostle’s own concern. Why else is Peter so quick to point us away from the outward act? Alexander Nisbet states the concern eloquently:

There is no small hazard of people’s placing too much in the external and outward part of the ordinances, as if that of itself were of some efficacy for salvation; against which the ministers of Christ have no less need to guard in their doctrine, than against peoples’ undervaluing of the ordinances: for after that the Apostle has asserted baptism to be the means of our salvation answerable to the Ark, lest any might persuade themselves of salvation because they had received the external baptism, he adds as a guard, not the putting away of the filth of the flesh.<sup>5</sup>

This consideration explains the consternation of many today when neo-sacerdotalists trumpet Peter’s statement, “baptism . . . now saves,” as grounds for excessive teaching regarding the sacraments.

3. Karen Jobes, *1 Peter* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), 255.

4. Peter H. Davids, *The First Epistle of Peter* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 144.

5. Alexander Nisbet, *1 & 2 Peter* (1658; repr., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1982), 149–50.

Secondly, we should ask what Peter does mean by writing that “baptism . . . now saves.” He is not, he insists, referring to “a removal of dirt from the body,” so what does Peter mean?

As Peter proceeds, he qualifies “baptism” positively: “but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ” (3:21). This expression also raises questions. There are two main options for Peter’s meaning, both of which may be right. First, ancient baptismal rites involved the taking of pledges (the word “appeal” in the English Standard Version often being rendered as “pledge” in other translations). Davids explains, “Baptism is a response to God in answer to questions placed by the baptizer (e.g., ‘Do you commit yourself to follow Christ?’).”<sup>6</sup> Secondly, Peter refers here to salvific blessings that flow from faith in Christ. When we pledge ourselves to Jesus, receiving his saving work in faith, we are delivered from judgment and death and inwardly renewed with a good conscience, just as Noah was saved from the flood through faith. Baptism signifies and seals the reality of believers coming “to God to give them a good conscience and cleanse them from the guilt of sin.”<sup>7</sup>

Peter’s key statement is the one that comes last in verse 21: “through the resurrection of Jesus Christ.” The apostle’s careful construction links Christ’s resurrection not to our baptism but to the water that saved Noah. Noah was “brought safely *through water*,” and we are delivered “*through the resurrection* of Jesus Christ.” As Noah’s flood meant life to him and death to his tormentors, so does Christ’s resurrection deliver us from the wicked world into eternal life. Christ’s resurrection serves as a synecdoche for his entire redemptive achievement in the covenant of grace—death, resurrection, and ascension. As baptism draws our attention to water, it signifies the resurrection as that through which the believer is saved.

#### REGENERATION OR SANCTIFICATION?

These considerations give us a biblical entry into many questions today regarding sacramental grace. Are the sacraments for regeneration or sanctification? The question itself needs some elaboration. Another way to state this is to ask, “For what purpose did Christ institute the sacraments? Did he give us baptism to *effect* our salvation in Christ or to *signify* and *seal*

6. Davids, *The First Epistle of Peter*, 145.

7. Jobes, *1 Peter*, 255.

our redemption in Christ? Does God communicate his grace to us in the sacraments so as to *cause* our salvation or rather does sacramental grace *strengthen* us *in* our salvation?”

The very language of 1 Peter 3:21 introduces us to a terminological difficulty. Peter says, “baptism . . . now saves.” But, in *ordo salutis* terms, what does he mean by “saves”? Should we think of regeneration or justification or sanctification? Salvation is a broad term into which these may all fit. But are they all appropriate when relating the sacraments to salvation? The same situation occurs in the Westminster Standards, where the Larger Catechism says, “The sacraments become effectual means of salvation” (WLC 161).

This situation has occasioned considerable debate. In the 2003 colloquium between advocates and critics of the “Auburn Avenue Theology,” or “Federal Vision,” I had the task of responding to Douglas Wilson’s paper on the sacraments. Citing the above statement in the Larger Catechism, Wilson agreed that baptism does not “automatically or inexorably” save. But he did insist that the Confession’s language requires its subscribers to assert that in the case of those who are saved—that is, the elect—baptism is the effectual means of their salvation. In doing so, he appealed to 1 Peter 3:21, a proof text to Larger Catechism 161, noting the language “baptism . . . now saves” without Peter’s obvious caveat. Using the example of a man who was baptized as a child and then came to saving faith later in life, Wilson argued that we must understand that his infant baptism was the cause of his later salvation. Wilson explains, “He got saved because the grace of his baptism was finally kicking in.”<sup>8</sup>

In response to Wilson, I noted my concern that Peter’s and the Confession’s general term “saves” or “salvation” was being appropriated without discrimination. Let me quote from my paper:

Wilson contends that we should assert that the sacraments convey saving grace. That is an unfortunate designation, lacking the specificity our debate requires. We use the term salvation for all the benefits conveyed to believers in Christ. Salvation includes justification and sanctification. So we may all agree that saving grace is involved, without getting to the point. The issue at hand is whether or not the sacraments convey a grace

8. Douglas Wilson, “Sacramental Efficacy in the Westminster Standards,” in E. Calvin Beisner, ed., *The Auburn Avenue Theology: Pros and Cons* (Ft. Lauderdale, FL: Knox Theological Seminary, 2004), lines 107–242.

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that initiates salvation, that is, one that involves initial regeneration or otherwise creates a saving relationship with God that did not exist prior to the grace conveyed by the sacrament.<sup>9</sup>

We both will agree that baptism conveys grace to believer. But the question at hand concerns the effect of the grace conveyed through baptism. More succinctly, does baptismal grace “kick in” prior to belief, so that “baptism . . . now saves” in the sense of bringing the sinner from death into life, or does baptismal grace “kick in” in response to faith, so that it strengthens the faith by which alone the sinner comes to eternal life?

So far as the Westminster Standards are concerned, the answer is that while in some places the broad term “salvation” may suggest an unqualified endorsement of “saving grace” in the sacraments, the Standards elsewhere place clear limits on the nature of this efficacious grace. The clearest instance is in the Confession’s treatment of saving faith. Here, primacy is given to the instrumentality of God’s Word over that of the sacraments in conveying “the grace of faith”:

The grace of faith, whereby the elect are enabled to believe to the saving of their souls, is the work of the Spirit of Christ in their hearts, and is ordinarily wrought by the ministry of the Word, by which also, and by the administration of the sacraments, and prayer, it is increased and strengthened. (14.1)

This paragraph states the case for sanctifying grace only via the sacraments. Faith is “ordinarily wrought by the ministry of the Word.” But such faith is then “increased and strengthened” by the Word, the administration of the sacraments, and prayer. In other words, the faith that saves results from the Spirit’s work of applying God’s Word to our hearts. This paragraph elegantly sums up many statements in the Westminster Standards that insist “that the sacraments convey only what may be called *sanctificational* grace, or . . . *edifying* grace.”<sup>10</sup> Michael Horton explains, “Through them, God strengthens the faith that he creates through the

9. Richard D. Phillips, “Response to ‘Sacramental Efficacy in the Westminster Standards,’” in E. Calvin Beisner, ed., *The Auburn Avenue Theology: Pros and Cons* (Ft. Lauderdale, FL: Knox Theological Seminary, 2004), lines 88–95.

10. *Ibid.*, lines 98–99.



preaching of the gospel.”<sup>11</sup> Therefore, just as Peter’s caveat should shape our understanding of baptismal teaching throughout the New Testament—referring “not as the removal of dirt from the body, but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ”—so also the clear teaching of the Westminster Confession in 14.1 ought to shape our reading of “baptism” and “salvation” throughout the Standards.

Moreover, the unbiased reader of the New Testament is bound to draw the same conclusion as that of the Westminster Confession. Over and again, we are taught that salvation comes through believing the Bible’s testimony concerning Jesus Christ. John writes, “to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God” (John 1:12). Paul answered the Philippian jailor’s question by saying, “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved” (Acts 16:31). Peter himself assigns the beginning of salvation life by writing, “You have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God” (1 Peter 1:23). This is not to denigrate sacramental grace, thus falling into the error so common in recent evangelicalism. It is true that God provides saving grace through baptism: the increase and strengthening of faith that pertains to sanctification. But to fail to make this distinction is no less an error than to emphasize Peter’s teaching that “baptism . . . now saves,” without including his urgent caveat that directs us away from an unbalanced emphasis on ritual religion.

#### SIGNS AND SEALS OF THE COVENANT OF GRACE

In the context of this specific debate, the distinction between *regenerating* or *sanctifying* grace is a serviceable one, the point being that sacramental grace does not *cause* or *initiate* our salvation, but rather strengthens that faith through which we are saved. But these terms suffer from imprecision when we turn from the theological questions to the biblical data. The terms *regeneration*, *justification*, and *sanctification* belong to the *ordo salutis*: the description of the way salvation comes to us in Christ. More accurately, though, the sacraments relate to the *historia salutis*—not to what God does

11. Michael S. Horton, *Covenant and Eschatology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002), 270.

in us, but God did in his redemptive-historical work through Jesus Christ.<sup>12</sup> We see this clearly in 1 Peter 3:21, where Peter relates baptism to salvation not in terms of either our *regeneration* or *sanctification*, but in terms of Christ's *resurrection*. Biblically, the manner in which sacraments convey God's grace is as *signs* and *seals* of God's redemptive work for us in the covenant of grace.

This is, in fact, the Westminster Confession's primary description of the sacraments: "Sacraments are holy signs and seals of the covenant of grace, immediately instituted by God, to represent Christ, and His benefits; and to confirm our interest in Him" (27.1). This is precisely how we see baptism functioning in 1 Peter 3:21. Baptism is a sign—that is, it points to something—and that something is salvation through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This is why Noah's story serves Peter's purpose so well. The way that Noah was saved—passing through judgment by entering the death of the ark's dark interior and emerging into new life through the flood waters—is a reminder of how we are saved in Christ. Peter says, "Baptism . . . corresponds to this." Baptism signifies now the same thing that Noah's salvation signified then: "For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit" (1 Peter 3:18). Moreover, baptism is a seal. It is not just a sign that is posted somewhere "out there" but is applied personally to us by God's appointed ministry. As we pledge ourselves to him in faith, seeking cleansing from sin and a renewing of our conscience, baptism seals to us God's promise of salvation through Jesus Christ.

There is much confusion today regarding the word "seal." Sacerdotalists use it in almost a mystical sense, as if God's saving grace were being infused into us or impressed upon our souls the way wax paper is melted onto a leaf in a child's school project. But, instead, the Bible speaks of sacraments as a seal in the way Peter does: as a pledge certifying the receipt of saving blessings. Michael Horton explains that the sacraments serve as means of grace "not in terms of the analogy of infusion, but in terms of the analogy of declaration."<sup>13</sup> The apostle Paul gives this same understanding of sacramental grace: as a sign and seal of what we take possession of by faith alone. Writing of Abraham and the sacrament of the old covenant, Paul says, "He

12. I am indebted to Michael Horton for this observation, in a personal critique of the Auburn Avenue Theology debate.

13. Horton, *Covenant and Eschatology*, 270.

received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith” (Rom. 4:11).

It is in these terms that we must understand God’s effectual grace for us in the sacraments: as *signs* and *seals*. We do not receive the saving benefits of the covenant of grace by baptism, but rather through faith alone as it believes the Word of God concerning Jesus Christ. So what role does the sacrament play? The Westminster Larger Catechism explains, “A sacrament is a holy ordinance instituted by Christ in his church, to signify, seal, and exhibit unto those that are within the covenant of grace, the benefits of his mediation” (WLC 162). In other words, the benefits of Christ’s mediation are received through faith alone, but then these benefits are signified, sealed, and exhibited to us in the sacraments. To some, this may seem to be no grace at all, or very little at most. They may think, “We don’t get anything from the sacraments; we are only shown what we already have.” That is the memorialist position that has so impoverished evangelical religion. Such a view can only happen in a culture that knows nothing of the Bible’s covenant theology. If you understand that we are saved through faith into an unbreakable covenant bond, then you will think differently. It is possible to recognize baptism as a dramatic representation of the gospel, but still to think that it matters little whether you get wet or stay dry in the pews. But when you realize that baptism is not only a sign, but also a seal by which God covenantally pledges all that he has promised through the mediation of Christ, then you will assault the chancel so that it may be applied by God’s minister personally to you. Then, recognizing the privileges that confer to your children through your covenant headship, you will bring your children with you, just as the Philippian jailer did after he was justified through faith alone and then received the covenant seal of baptism.

In his sermons on Ephesians, John Calvin offers an illustration that helpfully relates saving faith and God’s sovereign election. He notes that we are saved because of God’s sovereign decree in election. But then he observes that we know that this is true of us personally through our faith in Christ. Calvin writes, “God has his eternal counsel, and he always reserves to himself the chief and original record of which he gives us a copy by faith.”<sup>14</sup> So our possession of saving faith serves as the certificate given to us by God of our sovereign election. But if you have ever traveled abroad, you know that

14. John Calvin, *Sermons on Ephesians* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1973), 47.

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a passport is made official by the seal stamped upon it. It may be genuine without it, but this cannot be objectively attested. The same may be said of the sealing grace of the sacraments, received through saving faith in Christ. It means everything for us to have saving faith, for which the Bible itself provides tests of genuineness. Ultimately, it is through the validity of our faith that we gain assurance that we possess an unbreakable bond to Christ and his benefits. But when it comes to the increase and strengthening of our faith, and our precious assurance of God's mercy and love, we are further blessed by the seal of baptism, administered to those either raised in or received into the covenant community of the Church of Jesus Christ. The same may be said of the Lord's Supper and its sealing grace. It is one thing to consider yourself a believer, and it is another to be admitted to Christ's covenant meal to be assured of your participation in his body and blood and to be fed by the grace of his Holy Spirit.

What does this have to say about the idea of baptismal regeneration? Certainly the above considerations must cause us to reject the idea that those who are spiritually dead enter into spiritual life through the bare ritual of baptism. But it is interesting to note that the term "regeneration" admits of both an initiatory meaning and an on-going meaning. We were made alive in our conversion and believers continue to be made more and more alive to God throughout our Christian experience. This is why Calvin favored the term *vivification*, since it combines the once-for-all new birth and its never-ending progress in our lives that we refer to as sanctification. The fruit of God's life-giving Spirit is always life and holiness through faith in Christ, and as faith is increased and strengthened by the Word, the sacraments, and prayer, this work is mightily advanced. In this latter sense, that of the increase of faith and spiritual life, we may rightly relate regeneration to the grace of the sacraments. As the administration of baptism and the Lord's Supper signifies and seals the benefits of Christ's saving work to the believer's soul, existing faith is increased and strengthened with untold blessings in our lives.

### **HAVEN'T YOU BEEN BAPTIZED?**

In conclusion, let us return to Peter's exhortation so that we do not fail to appropriate his purpose in saying that "baptism . . . now saves." It is important that we avoid sacerdotal errors that threaten us with a reli-

ance on external rites, so that our sacramentology finds itself in accord with the Scriptures. But Peter's concern was not merely, or even primarily, related to doctrinal apprehension. Peter did not bring up baptism in hopes that his readers would be saved that way, since he addresses them as those already saved. Nor did he intend merely that his reference to baptism and the salvation it signifies and seals should warm our hearts with assurance of salvation. Peter brought up the topic as a battle cry for our conflict with both the world and the sinful tendencies within our own hearts. In fact, Peter's reference to baptism serves as a motivation within the long section that runs from 2:13 to 4:19 in which the apostle exhorts Christians to live joyfully under affliction in submissive reliance on God.

"Haven't you been baptized?" Peter asks. By this, he means, "Haven't you pledged yourself to Jesus Christ, entering into his deliverance from this wicked world through death and into resurrection life?" If so, he argues, let us not merely be saved with Christ from this world, but let us also live like Christ in this world. The center of his appeal is found in 2:21–25:

For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps. He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly. He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed. For you were straying like sheep, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.

How does this apply to us? Peter calls us to live in submission to Christ in whatever place we are found and in whatever role God has assigned us for the display of his glory. Are you under civil authority? Regardless of what the emperor does, he says, "Be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution . . . that by doing good you should put to silence the ignorance of foolish people" (2:13–15). Are you an employee? "Be subject to your masters with all respect, not only to the good and gentle but also to the unjust. . . . If when you do good and suffer for it you endure, this is a gracious thing in the sight of God" (2:18–20). Are you a wife? "Be subject to your own husbands, so that even if some do not obey the word, they may be won without a word by the conduct of their wives" (3:1). Are you a church member? "Have unity of mind, sympathy, brotherly love, a tender

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heart, and a humble mind. . . . Bless, for to this you were called, that you may obtain a blessing” (3:8–9). Are you living in the midst of dark and unbelieving world? Then, “In your hearts regard Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you” (3:15).

Thus we see the meaning of Peter’s teaching as it relates to baptism. The grace of Christ is to characterize our lives—not merely in some ideal world but in *this* world. We are to pattern ourselves on Christ in a world like Noah’s world—a dark world under judgment and imminent destruction. How? Why? Because God has provided an ark for you, the cross of Jesus Christ. The cross means death to this present world, on which the floods once roared and on which the fires soon will burn. But as the ark floated above those judging waters, carrying Noah and his family into a bright, new world, the cross of Christ will bear you to the empty tomb and into the resurrection light of the new creation. Thus, he concludes:

Baptism, which corresponds to this, now saves you, not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers having been subjected to him. Since therefore Christ suffered in the flesh, arm yourselves with the same way of thinking, for whoever has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin. . . . The end of all things is at hand; therefore be self-controlled and sober-minded for the sake of your prayers. Above all, keep loving one another earnestly, since love covers a multitude of sins. Show hospitality to one another without grumbling. As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God’s varied grace: whoever speaks, as one who speaks oracles of God; whoever serves, as one who serves by the strength that God supplies—in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ. To him belong glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen. (1 Peter 3:21–4:11)