

A Brief Historical Perspective of the Rebaptism Controversy

- Introduction:
1. For nearly two centuries, brethren have discussed and debated the question, "How much does one have to understand at the time of his baptism in order for his baptism to be scriptural?"
 2. This has been a problematic question in times past as well as today.
 3. The focal point of this controversy centers on the phrase "**for the remission of sins**".
 - a. Must one understand at the time of his baptism that baptism is "for the remission of sins"?
 4. Obviously, not all brethren have seen nor do they see eye to eye on the above question, thus the controversy.
 5. The remainder of this outline will present a brief historical perspective of the rebaptism controversy.

I. WHAT THE ISSUES IN THIS CONTROVERSY ARE NOT

- A. A better understanding of this controversy, if not a resolution of it, has been hindered by brethren muddying the waters by introducing false issues into the controversy.
 1. Rebuttals have been offered against arguments that have not even been made.
 2. Illegitimate positions (straw men) have been attributed to individuals, then handily taken apart piece by piece.
- B. The real issues in this controversy are not:
 1. Whether there are Christians in some denominations.
 - a. Gary Workman, in reference to Rubel Shelly stated the following, "This brother scolds his fellow preachers for not acknowledging that anyone who has properly responded to the gospel has indeed become a Christian, even though he may be in some denominational entanglement or in error on some other doctrinal matters. But who among us would deny this?"¹
 - b. I do not know of anyone who would deny that:
 1. A person could become a Christian and then apostatize by joining himself to a denomination.
 2. Or a person could learn of the plan of salvation, do exactly what the Bible says to do, yet through confusion associates with a denomination for a while.
 2. Whether one must obey the gospel in a building that is marked "Church of Christ" or whether the one doing the baptizing is himself faithful to God.
 - a. However, Joe Beam stated, "We base our fellowship with other Christians on who baptized them and where they were

¹Gary Workman, "The Restorer", June 1983, p. 2.

- baptized. Exactly!"²
- b. This is just simply a false charge.
 - c. Thomas Warren stated, "We are not saying that in order for one to be saved he must be baptized in a building owned by the church of Christ...We are not saying that in order for an alien sinner to be baptized in the name of Christ he must be immersed by someone who is a member of the church of Christ. What is crucial is what is true of the person who is being baptized - he must be a penitent believer in Jesus Christ..."³
3. Whether one of the restoration leaders taught or did not teach a certain thing.
- a. It seems to me that some of the restoration leaders have become a source of authority and a badge of respectability for some today.
 - b. Randy Mayeux said, "But if you ask me what happens to the person who loves their God, and loves Jesus Christ, and hasn't seen it that way (referring to the essentiality of baptism S.H.) I defer to the view of Alexander Campbell in the Lunenburg letter."⁴
 - c. Bert Thompson stated, "While I would not for a moment understate, underrate, or underestimate the tremendous good done throughout the Restoration period by such men as Alexander Campbell, Barton W. Stone, Walter Scott, 'Raccoon' John Smith, and others...the fact that they did a thing does not, in and of itself, mean that the thing is proper and good. Nor does the fact that they did not do a thing, in and of itself, mean that we should not do it."⁵
- C. The real issue is what one must understand in order to become a Christian.
- 1. Is the baptism of one effectual who has been baptized upon the confession that God for Christ's sake has pardoned his sins?
 - 2. Or, must one understand the relationship of baptism to salvation in order for it to be effectual?

II. ALEXANDER CAMPBELL AND THE DESIGN OF BAPTISM

- A. As one examines Campbell's position regarding the design of baptism, he will note a clear evolution in his thinking.
- B. Campbell, in his debate with William Maccalla in 1823 stated the following in regard to the design of baptism, "The water of baptism, then, formally washes away our sins. Paul's sins were really pardoned when he believed,

²Joe Beam, Excerpt of a sermon preached at the Highland/Carriage Hills Church of Christ, Montgomery, Alabama, 1983.

³Thomas B. Warren, "The Spiritual Sword", January, 1984, p. 9.

⁴Randy Mayeux, excerpt from a sermon entitled "Diversity" delivered in Lubbock, Texas, October 19, 1989.

⁵Bert Thompson, "Non-Denominational Christianity: Is Unity Possible?", 1984, p. 12.

yet he had no solemn pledge of that fact, no formal acquittal, no formal purgation of his sins, until he washed them away in the water of baptism. To every believer, therefore, baptism is a formal and personal remission, or purgation of sins."⁶

1. From the above quote, one can see that Campbell held that salvation occurs in two senses.
 - a. A "real" sense at the point of faith.
 - b. A "formal" sense at the point of baptism.
 - c. Paul's sins were really pardoned when he believed, but only formally pardoned when he was baptized.
2. This distinction should serve as a hermeneutical tool in interpreting the writings of Campbell during this period of time.
3. This position is much like the position of the Baptists today, "Baptism is an outward sign of an inward grace."

C. However, Campbell's view of the design of baptism did not remain static.

D. By 1828, Campbell had this to say regarding the design of baptism, "We connect faith with immersion as essential to forgiveness - and therefore, as was said of old, 'According to thy faith, so be it unto thee,' so say we of immersion. He that goeth down into the water to put on Christ, in the faith that the blood of Jesus cleanses from all sin, and that he has appointed immersion as the medium, and the act of ours, through and in which he actually and formally remits our sins, has, when immersed, the actual remission of his sins."⁷

1. Campbell has changed his position that baptism is simply the point of "formal" remission of sins to the belief that baptism not only is the point of "formal" remission, but also the point of "actual" or "real" remission of sins.
2. In the Maccalla debate of 1823, remission of sins was received only formally in the act of baptism, and really received at the point of faith. However, by 1828, Campbell states that remission of sins occurs both really and formally through the act of baptism.

E. In spite of Campbell's "mature" view of baptism, he granted those who were ignorant of this institution concession by saying, "There is no occasion, then, for making immersion, on a profession of the faith, absolutely essential to a Christian - though it may be greatly essential to his sanctification and comfort. My right hand and my right eye are greatly essential to my usefulness and happiness, but not to my life; and as I could not be a perfect man without them, so I cannot be a perfect Christian without a right understanding and a cordial reception of immersion in its true and scriptural meaning and design. But he that thence infers that none are Christians but the immersed, as greatly errs as he who affirms that none are alive but those of clear and full vision."⁸

1. It should be noted that the above concession was granted only to those who were unwittingly and unwillingly ignorant of the command and design of baptism.

⁶The Campbell - Maccalla Debate, 1823, p. 116.

⁷Alexander Campbell, "The Christian Baptist", Vol. 5, 1828, p. 222.

⁸Alexander Campbell, "Millennial Harbinger", Vol. 8, 1837, p. 414.

2. Campbell later stated that this position should give no comfort to those who are willfully ignorant and disobedient.⁹

III. THE REBAPTISM CONTROVERSY BETWEEN ALEXANDER CAMPBELL AND JOHN THOMAS

- A. John Thomas was a young man who came to the United States from England in 1832.
- B. Thomas came in contact with Walter Scott who baptized him for the remission of his sins later in that same year.
- C. By 1834, Thomas had begun publishing the "Apostolic Advocate" in which he carried an article entitled "The Cry Of 'Anabaptism'".¹⁰
 1. In this article, Thomas stated that scriptural baptism demanded a knowledge of its design i.e. remission of sins.
 2. When knowledge of this action was absent, the act itself was meaningless.
- D. Thomas' teaching on this matter soon turned to practice when three of the deacons where he preached were rebaptized and resigned from their duties due to becoming a "babe in Christ".¹¹
- E. When word of this reached the ears of Campbell, he compared Thomas' actions to the Jews who bound the Gentiles saying, "except you be circumcised, according to the manner of Moses, you cannot be saved."¹²
- F. This then, was the beginning of an ongoing disagreement between Campbell and Thomas which continued through 1835 and 1836.
- G. Throughout their discussion, Campbell wrote condescendingly of Thomas' youth, which Thomas thought was intended to weaken his arguments in the mind of his readers.
- H. Campbell wrote of Thomas, "He is but a stripling in the kingdom - a bold and courageous champion; but like other young converts, of a noble ambition, he aspires to outstrip himself and his years."¹³
- I. However, it appears to be Thomas' own speculative teachings as well as his own dogmatism that weakened his position in the mind of his readers.
 1. Thomas taught that not only the one being immersed but the immerser must also understand that baptism is for the remission of sins in order for it to be effectual.¹⁴
 2. Thomas also taught that there would be three classes of people

⁹Alexander Campbell, "Millennial Harbinger", Vol. 8, 1837, p. 507.

¹⁰John Thomas, "Apostolic Advocate", Vol. 1, October 1834, pp. 121-129.

¹¹Minutes of Meetings of the Sycamore Church in Richmond, Virginia 1832-1851.

¹²Alexander Campbell, "Millennial Harbinger", Vol. 6, September 1835, pp. 417-420.

¹³Alexander Campbell, "Millennial Harbinger", Vol. 7, February 1836, pp. 58-59.

¹⁴Roderick Chestnut, "John Thomas And The Rebaptism Controversy (1835-1836)", Baptism And The Remission Of Sins, (College Press), 1990, pp. 203-204.

at the judgment.¹⁵

- a. Those who have obeyed God and who will receive immortality.
 - b. Those who have disobeyed God and will suffer eternal extinction, not conscious torment.
 - c. Those who were ignorant of the Gospel and will sleep forever in a state of unconscious rest.
- J. Campbell's position on rebaptism was as follows, "Rebaptism is wholly out of the Record, and is only an inference drawn from our own conclusions on the present state of Christianity and the inadequate conception of many professors on the import of the Christian institution."¹⁶
- K. In fact, Campbell accused Thomas of only complicating matters by his dogmatism concerning "remission of sins" by saying, "Formerly the Baptists demanded no one to affirm that he believed his sins were forgiven through the blood of Jesus, before immersion. But now, out of opposition to the words, 'Be baptized for the remission of sins,' some, from envy, are required to declare their assurance of remission before baptism."¹⁷
- L. While Thomas' influence soon waned, his position on rebaptism did not die, but was soon to be championed again some fifty years later by the "*Firm Foundation*".

III. THE REBAPTISM CONTROVERSY: THE FIRM FOUNDATION AND THE GOSPEL ADVOCATE

- A. About fifty years after the Thomas-Campbell controversy (1884), the rebaptism issue reemerged in the pages of the "*Firm Foundation*" and the "*Gospel Advocate*".
- B. The resurrection of this controversy was largely due to the success that the restoration movement was having among the denominations.
1. What should be done with those who come from denominations and who seek to be united to those of the restoration movement?
 2. Should they be rebaptized with a proper understanding of baptism's relationship to their salvation?
 3. Or should they be accepted upon their renunciation of previous error (Shaking in the Baptists)?
- C. David Lipscomb, along with the "*Gospel Advocate*" were opponents to rebaptism.
- D. Over the next forty years, David Lipscomb wrote page after page expressing his convictions on the rebaptism controversy, which could be summed up in the following quote, "The first prime design of baptism is to honor God by submitting to his appointments. The remission of sins is one of the fruits that flow from a submission to God in baptism. There are many other fruits. We have never found where it was required that a man should understand all the fruits flowing from an act of obedience in order to render it valid. If so, we fear we have never obeyed acceptably a single command. A man who

¹⁵John Thomas, "Apostolic Advocate" Vol. 2, March 1836, pp. 241-246 & Vol. 2, April 1836, pp. 285-296.

¹⁶Alexander Campbell, "Millennial Harbinger", Vol. 6, August 1835, p. 419.

¹⁷Alexander Campbell, "Millennial Harbinger", Vol. 6, November 1835, pp. 566-567.

believes in Christ, repents of his sins, and is baptized in order to honor God, by obeying his commands, we would certainly say was baptized with a valid, susceptible baptism, even though he did not know at what point of his obedience God would bestow his blessing."¹⁸

- E. Illustrating his position, Lipscomb related the following account, "Years ago in Kentucky I was preaching and an intelligent man made the confession; he had been raised under strong prejudices in favor of Baptist teaching. After much hearing and comparing of teaching, he became satisfied he ought to obey the Lord. As I took his confession, a Baptist preacher who was present asked the privilege of a question. 'Do you believe God for Christ's sake has pardoned your sins?' He responded, 'I believe he has...' It was hard to give up the old idea that in believing he received forgiveness. But he wished to obey God and honor him in all his appointments, and I baptized him."¹⁹
- F. However, Austin McGary, founder and editor of the "*Firm Foundation*" was strongly opposed to the view of Lipscomb and the "*Gospel Advocate*".
 - 1. In fact, one of the foremost reasons for founding the "*Firm Foundation*" was to provide a stronger means to express his views on rebaptism.
- G. McGary advanced several arguments in favor of rebaptism of those from the denominations.
 - 1. McGary accused some brethren of "Campbellism" for accepting positions of Campbell without providing a "Thus saith the Lord".
 - 2. McGary argued that the unscriptural confession made by Baptists prior to their baptism was proof that they had not been baptized properly.
 - 3. McGary argued that the design of baptism was "for the remission of sins" and that design must be understood for the baptism to be effectual.
 - 4. Finally, McGary insisted upon the authority for baptizing persons who did not know why they were being baptized.
- H. Even after Lipscomb and McGary laid down their pens, their respective papers continued the controversy.
- I. In 1901, J.D. Tant (*Firm Foundation*) and James A. Harding (*Gospel Advocate*) conducted a debate on the rebaptism controversy which was carried in their respective papers.
- J. As late as 1927, F.B. Srygley accosted J.D. Tant, due to an article he wrote concerning the rebaptism controversy, by saying, "One who would refuse to fellowship a man who had been baptized to honor and obey God, though he may have been mistaken as to when God pardoned him, needs baptism worse than the one he has thus refused."²⁰
- K. In spite of the long, and sometimes heated exchanges between the "*Firm Foundation*" and the "*Gospel Advocate*" over the rebaptism controversy, it now appears that the position of McGary and the "*Firm Foundation*" seems to have prevailed.
 - 1. In 1985, J. M. Powell wrote an historical review of the "*Gospel*

¹⁸David Lipscomb, "Gospel Advocate", May 13, 1869, p. 447.

¹⁹David Lipscomb, "Gospel Advocate", April 23, 1883, p. 1.

²⁰F.B. Srygley, "Gospel Advocate", December 1, 1927.

- Advocate*" position on the rebaptism controversy.²¹
2. However, far more articles have been published in the "*Gospel Advocate*" in recent times advocating the necessity of understanding the design of baptism, without any challenge or opposition.
 3. This could be due to:
 - a. A change of position.
 - b. Or an "irenic" spirit that avoids controversy.

V. THE REBAPTISM CONTROVERSY IN RECENT TIMES

- A. Today, the rebaptism controversy continues to be discussed without much hope of resolution in sight.
- B. In recent issues of the "*Firm Foundation*" an ongoing discussion is taking place between Buster Dobbs and Jimmy Allen over the rebaptism controversy.
- C. Further signs of this controversy are seen in the O.B.S. by Ivan Stewart.
 1. O.B.S. contains a section entitled "Looking Back", which is to be filled out before the topic of baptism is discussed.
 2. A couple of the questions in this section are, "For what purpose were you baptized?" and "Were you saved before or after your baptism?"
 3. This information is to be obtained before a discussion of baptism, to secure evidence for the need of rebaptism.
- D. The following are several more recent quotes concerning the rebaptism controversy.
- E. Joe Beam stated, "I'm submitting to you, my brothers and sisters, and I hope you'll prayerfully consider it, that any individual who's been baptized 'in the name of the Lord Jesus,' based on his faith, is a child of God. What I'm saying is there's a lot of people in this religious world who've submitted to baptism in the name of the Lord Jesus based on their faith who accomplished remission of sins whether they realized it or not. That there was a 'misunderstanding' as to whether they were saved before or afterwards does not negate or invalidate the whole process."²²
 1. In regard to the above thinking, Guy N. Woods stated, "Baptism, to a penitent believer, stands in relation to salvation as a condition precedent. (Mark 16:15,16.) Every reference to it in the New Testament either asserts or implies this connection. It must follow, therefore, that any action which denies this relationship invalidates the act. Invalidation of any act of God is not obedience - it is disobedience."²³
- F. In opposition to rebaptism, Cecil Hook stated this, "In her eighties, Grannie is ordered by her doctor to take several kinds of medication. She gets confused about the purpose of the various pills. She may think the pill given to relieve her dizziness is the one to ease her arthritis. Will her confusion and misunderstanding make the pill ineffective in relieving her dizziness?"

²¹J.M. Powell, "*Gospel Advocate*", September 19, 1985, p. 564.

²²Joe Beam, an excerpt from a sermon preached at the Highland/Carriage Hills Church of Christ in Montgomery, Alabama, 1983.

²³Guy N. Woods, "*Gospel Advocate*", August 16, 1984, p. 482.

She follows the orders of the doctor who understands. She has only to obey him. So when a penitent believer obeys his or her Lord, though that person may be confused as to when the Lord fulfills His promise, it will not cause the Lord to withhold the promised results. The faith is in Christ, not baptism. We may, and do, misunderstand many things relating to our obedience in all areas but we are obeying Him who understands. We have only to obey sincerely."²⁴

1. However, would such thinking work with the Lord's Supper as well (I Corinthians 11:24-29)?
2. In reference to the above argument, Bert Thompson wrote, "Must one understand the design and purpose of baptism in order for t h a t baptism to be valid? Indeed one must! Stop and consider, seriously, the importance God places on mental attitude, foundational knowledge, proper understanding, and correct spirit in biblical matters dealing with worship to God, prayer, giving, and so many other matters, and then translate this to baptism. For example, Jesus Himself said, 'Take heed that ye do not your righteousness before men, to be seen of them: else ye have no reward with your Father who is in heaven' (Matthew 6:1). Now, consider the Pharisees, whom Jesus used as an example. They prayed, fasted, and gave alms, 'to be seen of men'. The purpose for which they did the thing was not correct; hence God did not accept their acts! Consider the New Testament commands regarding giving. Paul made it clear that 'each man' was to 'do according as he hath purposed in his heart, not grudgingly, or of necessity, for God loveth a cheerful giver' (II Corinthians 9:7). The purpose, understanding, and attitude were all important."²⁵
3. Furthermore, brother Woods stated, "There are three things basic to obedience, any one of which omitted, renders invalid the rest. (1) We must do what the Lord said do; (2) we must do what the Lord said do, in the way the Lord said do it; (3) we must do what the Lord said do, in the way the Lord said do it, for the reason or reasons the Lord said do it. To illustrate: (a) Were the Lord to command us to go south, and we go north, we have disobeyed him; (b) were the Lord to bid us to go south to work in the fields, and we go south, but work in a factory, we have disobeyed him; (c) were the Lord to tell us to go south to work in the fields, to earn money to buy a house in which to live, and we go south and work in the fields to purchase an automobile, we have disobeyed him. It should never be forgotten that obedience requires us to do what the Lord said, in the way the Lord said do it, and for the reason or reasons that the Lord said do it."²⁶
4. If it is true that one must obey the "what" as well as the "how" when the Lord specifies, then why is it not also true that one must obey the "why" as well when the Lord specifies?

G. To further the discussion, Rubel Shelly added, "I don't think one has to

²⁴Cecil Hook, "Free In Christ", p. 77.

²⁵Bert Thompson, "Non-Denominational Christianity: Is Unity Possible?", 1984, p. 17.

²⁶Guy N. Woods, "Gospel Advocate", August 16, 1984, p. 482.

understand 'for the remission of sins' in order to be baptized scripturally, for I do not think there is ONE right reason for being baptized. I would say that one must be baptized for a right reason in order for his baptism to be acceptable - to obey God, to wash away sins, etc. (This means that I don't think that one receiving baptism 'to join the Baptist Church,' for example, has been scripturally baptized.) So long as one is baptized for a right reason, however, and is not consciously rejecting other clear teachings of the Word on that subject (e.g. denying Acts 3:38, as one might well do if under a Baptist evangelist) his baptism seems to me to be proper."²⁷

1. Brother Shelly seems to be confused at this point for he also stated, "'For the remission of sins' is a purpose assigned to baptism in the New Testament. Believers do not obey purposes; we obey commands."²⁸
2. Now which is it? If one does not have to be baptized "for the remission of sins" because it is a "purpose", and believers "do not obey purposes," then why would one have to be baptized "for a right reason"?
3. Furthermore, in regard to the purpose(s) of baptism, Alan Highers had the following to say, "One is baptized to be saved (Mark 16:16), to get into Christ (Galatians 3:27), to obey God (Acts 10:48), to wash away sins (Acts 22:16), to be added to the body (I Corinthians 12:13), to identify with the death of Christ (Romans 6:3-4), and to obtain the remission of sins (Acts 2:38), but it is erroneous to assume that these are different or even competing designs for baptism. To be saved is to receive salvation (remission) from past sins; to get into Christ is to enter a relationship in which salvation is to be found; to obey God is to do what God requires; to wash away sins is to be forgiven; to be added to the body is to be saved; to identify with the death of Christ is to contact his saving blood, and all of these are synonymous with obtaining the remission of sins!...all of these scriptural expressions are simply different statements of the same design."²⁹

G. The inconsistency of one brother on this rebaptism issue is seen from the following quote, "A preacher who was known to accept individuals on their denominational baptism was asked: 'If a man came to you seeking baptism, and confessing that God for Christ's sake had pardoned his sins, would you baptize him?' He replied, 'No, I would not.' He was then asked: 'Suppose he went down the street and persuaded the denominational preacher to baptize him upon that confession, and two weeks later he presented himself to you for membership. Would you accept his baptism?' He answered, 'Yes, I would because God saved him two weeks before, even though he did not know he was lost.' This places some brethren in a precarious position. They would not baptize one upon an unscriptural confession or upon the absence of a scriptural confession. But they will accept one who has

²⁷Rubel Shelly, an excerpt from a letter written to Wayne Jackson, July 18, 1983.

²⁸Rubel Shelly, "I Just Want To Be A Christian", p. 143.

²⁹Alan Highers, "Gospel Advocate", March 21, 1985, p. 177.

received such baptism by a denominational preacher."³⁰

VI. QUESTIONS THAT ARE PERTINENT TO A RESOLUTION OF THIS CONTROVERSY

- A. Does baptism have one singular primary purpose (i.e. salvation or the remission of sins)?
- B. Are there many purposes of baptism, only one of which is the remission of sins?
- C. If there are many purposes of baptism, would understanding none, one, or all of them be sufficient to make the baptism effectual?
- D. Is it true that we must obey the "what", "how", and "why" of a command when God specifies them to us?

- Conclusion:
- 1. I do not see in the near future a resolution of this old controversy.
 - 2. However, I believe that G.C. Brewer made some rather wise statements that should be given attention.
 - a. Brewer stated, "from the mere statement that a man was baptized by a denomination we cannot say whether he was or was not baptized scripturally."³¹
 - b. Brewer further stated that if a person baptized in a denomination insisted that "he knew and understood the New Testament teaching at the time he was baptized, and that he obeyed the teaching of the New Testament and not the teaching of the denomination, thus there would be nothing left to do but to accept the person's baptism."³² "The whole point, then, turns upon the individual's attitude - his motive, his faith, his repentance, his obedience."³³
 - 3. In light of the above statements with which I agree, I'm not so sure that it is possible to settle this matter by debate, but rather by deciding each case on its own merits.

³⁰Alan Highers, "Scriptural Baptism", (Denton Lectures, 1984), pp. 536-537.

³¹G. C. Brewer, "Contending For The Faith", 1941, p. 166.

³²Ibid., p. 167.

³³Ibid.