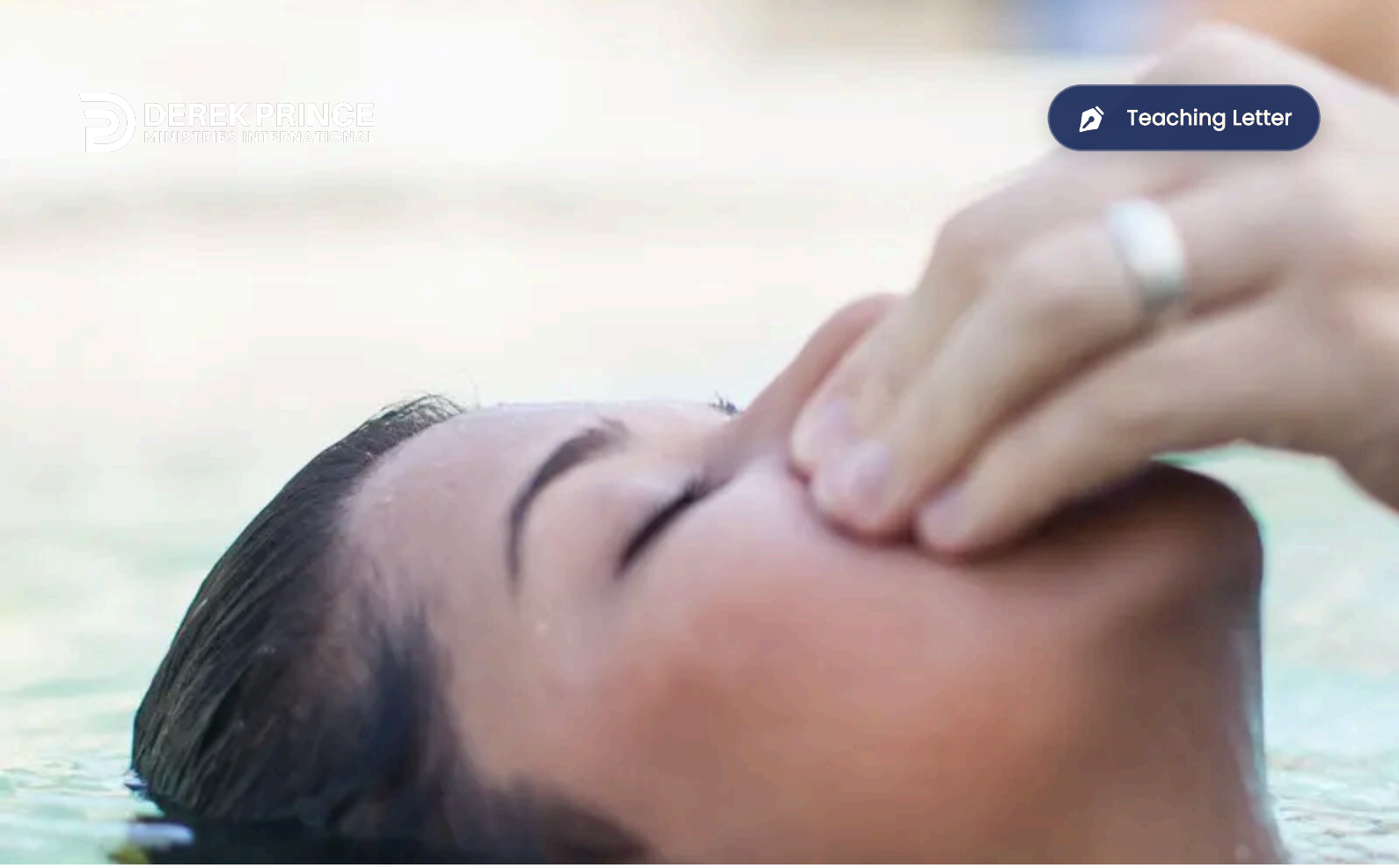

Burying the Old Nature



Teaching Letter
By Derek Prince

At the close of Peter's sermon on the Day of Pentecost, those who heard (who were convicted, but still unconverted) asked, "Men and brethren, what shall we do?" (Acts 2:37). To this question, Peter—as the spokesman of God and of the Church—gave a clear and immediate answer: 'Repent ... be baptized ... and receive the Holy Spirit'. This is God's complete provision for every sinner who desires to be reconciled with Him. It consists of three distinct but related experiences: repentance, baptism, receiving the Holy Spirit. This provision of God has never changed. It is still the same today.

Central to this provision of God is the instruction of water baptism. In the entire New Testament, baptism is always directly associated with salvation. The early church knew nothing of a salvation that was not followed by baptism. From Pentecost on, every convert was baptized upon conversion—usually the same day. Baptism was included in the Church's presentation of Jesus Christ. Philip went down to Samaria and "preached Christ" to the people there. As a result, those who believed were baptized (Acts 8:12). Later, meeting the eunuch on the road to Gaza, Philip ...preached Jesus to him." As a result, the eunuch took the first opportunity to be baptized (Acts 8:38). It is clear therefore that baptism was an integral part of the message of Jesus Christ as presented by the New Testament Church. For this reason it is obviously important that the Church should continue to present a clear and positive message of baptism.

Questions Arise

Throughout history, the majority of different Christian groups have based their teaching concerning baptism on the commission of Jesus, to baptize "in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Matthew 28:19). However, at various times this basis has been questioned. In its place, some incorrect teaching concerning baptism has been presented, of which the main points are as follows:

1. Since Pentecost, the practice of the early Church was to baptize only in the name of Jesus Christ.
2. The formula of baptism in Matthew 28:19 is not confirmed by any other New Testament text, and therefore it should be rejected as spurious, lacking authenticity and invalid.

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3. Believers who have been baptized "in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" should be re-baptized "in the name of Jesus Christ."
4. Baptism in the New Testament corresponds to circumcision in the Old Testament. Therefore believers who have not been baptized in a valid way are spiritually uncircumcised.

This inaccurate teaching needs to be addressed not merely because of what it has to say concerning baptism, but more so because of some of the unscriptural arguments used to support it. The nature of these arguments is that they affect both one's understanding of baptism and the basic principles which confirm the validity of New Testament texts and general teaching. For this reason, I have set out some implications of this teaching, with a brief analysis of each. In each case the implication of this incorrect teaching is printed in ***bold italics***. My analysis of it follows in normal type.

The Name of Jesus

It's implied that a person who is baptized "in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" is not baptized in the name of Jesus. In order to qualify for baptism as a Christian believer, a person must already have acknowledged that Jesus Christ is the Son of God (Matthew 16:16–18; John 20:31; 1 John 4:15, 5:5). For such a person, the word "Son," when spelled with a capital "S" and preceded by the definite article "the," denotes solely and exclusively Jesus Christ. Where both the person baptizing and the person being baptized have already made this acknowledgment, a baptism in the name of "the Son" is by that very fact a baptism in the name of Jesus Christ.

It's implied that Jesus is a name, but that Father and Spirit are not names, but titles. It is true that in English we can make a distinction between a proper name, such as William or George, and a title, such as king or president. However, the writers of the New Testament did not make this distinction in the original Greek in relation to the word Father as applied to God. There are many passages in the New Testament where the word "name" is used directly with the word Father. For instance, Jesus said, "And now, O Father, ... I have manifested Your name to the men whom You have given Me" (John 17:5–6).

It's implied that where the Scripture speaks of persons being baptized in the name of Jesus, those persons were baptized in the name of Jesus only, and that no other names or words were added. This is an assumption which can't be proved from Scripture. In the various passages that speak of persons being baptized in the name of Jesus, no word such as "only" is attached.

This may be illustrated from other passages of the New Testament. Mark says that "a man with an unclean spirit" met Jesus (Mark 5:1–2). Matthew says "there met Him two demon possessed men" (Matthew 8:28). Mark and Matthew are describing the same incident. Mark says there was "a man." Matthew says there were "two men." Yet there is no discrepancy. Actually, there were two men, but Mark mentioned only one of them. There would be a discrepancy if Mark had said there was "only one man." But he did not say that. From the fact that Mark says "a man," it might be assumed that there was only one man. But such an assumption would be incorrect.

Likewise, the fact that Scripture speaks of persons being baptized in the name of Jesus doesn't by itself justify the assumption that these people were baptized in the name of Jesus only. Without evidence to the contrary, it leaves open the possibility that other words/phrases were added.

Baptism Formula

It's implied that there is no other passage in the New Testament that confirms the use of the baptismal formula recorded in Matthew 28:19. But this is by no means certain. We have the record of an encounter between Paul and some disciples at Ephesus. Apparently Paul at first assumed these people were Christians (disciples of Christ). But after talking with them, he discovered that they were only disciples of John the Baptist (Acts 19:1–5). They had not been baptized with Christian baptism, but only with the baptism of John the Baptist. The two basic requirements for John's baptism were repentance and confession of sins, and it was not administered in any name (Mark 1:4–5).

Paul began by asking these Christians: "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?" To this they replied: "We have not so much as heard whether there is a Holy Spirit." Paul in turn asked them: "Into what then were you baptized?" It is natural to ask: Why did Paul associate the form of baptism with hearing about the Holy Spirit? Our reasonable explanation is that Christian baptism, as Paul knew it, was "in" or more literally, "into" the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Therefore, if these people had received Christian baptism, they must necessarily have heard of the Holy Spirit at the time of their baptism. Understood in this way, Acts 19:2–3 confirms Matthew 28:19.

The only other grounds put forward for rejecting the accepted text of Matthew 28:19 are based on internal,

doctrinal arguments. These are subjective, not objective. In the light of what I have said above, I do not feel these doctrinal arguments carry any weight. If we would accept arguments of this kind for questioning the validity of Matthew 28:19, then there would be no definable limit to the number of other passages in the New Testament which could equally well be called into question.

In the end, the text would no longer be the authority of doctrine, but doctrine would become the authority of the text. Obviously this would be an inversion of such grave and far-reaching significance that no sincere Christian could afford to remain unconcerned.

It is implied that, apart from Matthew 28:19, in all other passages of the New Testament one other single, unvarying phrase is used in connection with baptism. This is not correct. Actually various different phrases are used. In Acts 2:38 the phrase is "in the name of Jesus Christ." The Greek preposition here translated "in" is not the same as that used in Matthew 28:19 and Acts 19:5. Its normal meaning is "upon." The phrase "upon the name of Jesus Christ" has been interpreted as meaning "upon the authority of Jesus Christ." More probably it means "upon the confession of Jesus Christ"—that is, "upon the confession that Jesus is the Christ [the Messiah]."

This would agree with the statement made just previously by Peter in Acts 2:36: "Let all the house of Israel know assuredly that God has made this same Jesus, whom you have crucified, both Lord and Christ [Messiah]." Thus this phrase in Acts 2:38 states the basic requirement for receiving Christian baptism—that is, the acknowledgement that Jesus is the Christ (the Messiah). This requirement remains unchanged whatever verbal formula may be used.

My personal conviction is that the New Testament Christians would never have allowed the use of one particular formula of baptism to become an issue of paramount importance. They were more concerned with vital personal experience than with a verbal formula. When rigid insistence upon one particular formula becomes a major issue, the true life and liberty of the Holy Spirit are already ebbing out of the Church.

Scriptural Confirmation

It is implied that a passage of Scripture does not provide a valid basis for doctrine unless there is at least one other passage of Scripture that says the same thing. If we press this theory to its logical conclusion, it's the same as saying: "We can't be sure that God means what He says unless He says it at least twice." Obviously, no reverent Christian could accept such a conclusion.

This theory about the need for at least two passages of Scripture is based on the teaching that "by the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established" (Deuteronomy 19:15, Matthew 18:17). However, this principle is applied to the procedure by which the validity of human testimony can be established in judicial inquiries or cases of conflict between different human parties. It cannot correctly be applied to words that proceed directly from God Himself.

If we were to apply this principle strictly to Scripture, then it would not be enough to find two different passages of Scripture in support of each statement. We should have to find two different writers in support of each statement. No matter how many times one writer may say the same thing, he still remains only one witness.

This theory, applied to Scripture, is contradicted by Scripture itself. Paul says: "All Scripture ... is profitable for doctrine" (2 Timothy 3:16). He does not qualify this in any way. He doesn't say: "All Scripture is profitable for doctrine, provided that it's confirmed by another Scripture." If Scripture is "the Word of God," as Jesus says in John 10:35, that alone sufficiently establishes its validity. "God ... cannot lie" (Titus 1:2). "Every word of God is pure" (Proverbs 30:5). "Thy word is truth" (John 17:17).

There are many important statements or records that occur only once in Scripture. The high priestly prayer of Jesus is recorded only in John 17. The statement that where two or three are gathered in His name, Jesus is in the midst, is only in Matthew 18:20. The fact that, as Christians, we are seated with Christ in heavenly places is only in Ephesians 2:6. The fact that believers will be caught up to meet the Lord in the air at His coming is only in 1 Thessalonians 4:17. That's just a few of many examples.

However, there's one important principle that we must acknowledge. Where any subject is referred to in more than one passage of Scripture, any teaching on that subject, to command our acceptance, must agree with all the passages of Scripture that refer to it. This applies to the teaching of the New Testament concerning baptism. To command our complete acceptance, any teaching concerning baptism must agree with all the passages of Scripture that refer to this subject, including Matthew 28:19.

Spiritually Uncircumcised

It is implied that baptism in the new covenant corresponds to circumcision in the old covenant, and therefore that a

Christian who has not been baptized with the correct formula has not been "circumcised." Romans 6:4 and Colossians 2:12 explicitly state that baptism corresponds to burial. "We were buried with Him [Christ] through baptism." Before a burial can be held, there must be a dead body. In baptism, this dead body is the old man, the body of sin, the flesh. "Our old man was crucified with Him" (Romans 6:6). "If Christ be in you, the body is dead because of sin" (Romans 8:10). "Those who are Christ's have crucified the flesh" (Galatians 5:24). In this context, phrases such as the body or the flesh don't denote the literal physical body, but rather the carnal, rebellious nature received by inheritance from Adam. When Christ is received by faith as Saviour and Lord, this old nature "dies." Then it is buried by the act of baptism.

One point is clear. We do not bury a person in order to make him dead. A person must already be dead before we have any right to bury him. Likewise, the death of the old nature must already have taken place through faith in Christ before we can bury the old nature by baptism. Baptism does not make the old nature dead. It is the outward evidence that the death of the old nature has already taken place. A person who seeks to bring about the death of the old nature by the act of baptism is following a course that is both illogical and unscriptural, and it will not produce the desired result.

Paul makes this order very clear. First of all, he says that as Christians we are "circumcised with the circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the sins of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ" (Colossians 2:11–12). Then later he says we are "buried with Him in baptism." This is the logical order, which cannot be reversed. We must first put off the body of the sins of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ. After that, we must "bury by baptism" this "body" that has already been "put off." The circumcision is the "putting off of the body." The baptism is the "burial of the body" thus "put off." Thus circumcision is not baptism. Circumcision is putting off; baptism is burying.

Paul describes the true "circumcision" of the new covenant. He says: "We are the circumcision, who worship God in the Spirit, rejoice in Christ Jesus, and have no confidence in the flesh" (Philippians 3:3). There is no reference here to baptism at all. On the other hand, the phrase to have "no confidence in the flesh" corresponds to the phrase about "putting off the body ... of the flesh" (Colossians 2:11). Circumcision is the renunciation of all confidence in "the flesh," thus "putting off the flesh." Baptism is the burial of "the flesh" after it has been "put off." These two things are closely related, but they are not identical.

Has Your Old Nature Been Buried?

Teachings like this on baptism often raise questions. One is this: If after baptism a Christian does not experience the results in his life that the Scripture indicates should follow, does that prove that his baptism was invalid?

Not necessarily. This may be illustrated by comparison with the baptism in the Holy Spirit. A person may receive a genuine, scriptural experience of the baptism in the Holy Spirit, and yet many of the results that should follow this may be lacking afterwards in that person's life. The remedy for this isn't to be re-baptized in the Spirit. The remedy is to meet God's requirements such as repentance, commitment, prayer, study of Scripture, which will make the initial baptism in the Spirit more effective.

The same principle can be applied to water baptism. Water baptism sometimes fails to produce its proper effect because the person baptized is negligent in other aspects of Christian duty. For them, to be "re-baptized" could be an easy way out of facing up to failures in other areas. I've met people who have been baptized several times, and who could easily be persuaded to try it again. This reduces water baptism to the level of a kind of religious vaccination. If it doesn't take the first time, they repeat it until it does. And even if it takes, after some years the effects may wear off and the person will have to be re-vaccinated (re-baptized). Clearly this isn't a scriptural picture of baptism.

To every believer who may be troubled about the validity of their baptism, I would present these simple, basic questions: Were you ever really buried? Was there ever really a clear-cut break with the past—its guilt, its bondage, its rebellion, its false traditions, its evil associations? Were these things so plunged out of sight that they no longer can trouble you? Was this followed in turn by a resurrection—a rising up to walk by faith and by the power of the Holy Spirit in newness of life?

If the answer to these questions is yes, then you have been buried. Thereafter it would be foolish and unscriptural to dig all this up again from its grave, merely for the sake of burying it the second time with a new formula.

On the other hand, if the answer to the above questions is not a clear yes, then you were never buried. Seek the Lord earnestly and ask Him to show you what to do. It may well be that He will require you to be buried. If so, remember this. You will not be re-baptized. You will be truly baptized for the first time.

Where there has been no burial and no resurrection, there has been no baptism.

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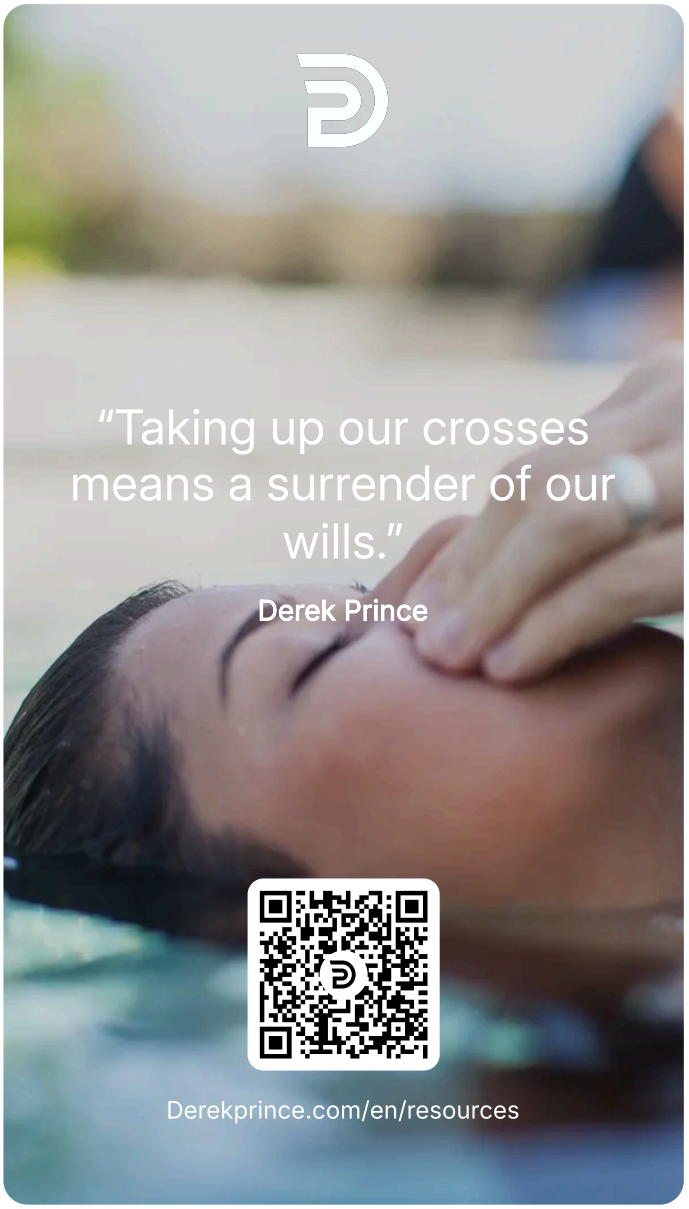

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