

# A Response to John MacArthur on Baptism

By Steve Kissell

In response to the question: “Is baptism necessary for salvation?” John MacArthur argues, “No.” (His entire response can be found at <http://www.gty.org:80/IssuesandAnswers/archive/baptism.htm>) The following is a response to his arguments. Several of the passages of Scripture that He discussed will be considered, in no particular order.

## Point 1:

MacArthur states: “Mark 16:16, a verse often quoted to prove baptism is necessary for salvation, is actually a proof of the opposite. Notice that the basis for condemnation in that verse is not the failure to be baptized, but only the failure to believe.”

With all due respect, MacArthur must have flunked Logic 101. When more than one necessary condition is attached to a result, the failure to meet *either* condition nullifies the result. Consider these illustrations:

- “He who buys a lottery ticket, **AND** whose numbers are picked, will win the prize. He who doesn’t buy the lottery ticket will not win.” To paraphrase MacArthur, “Notice that the basis for not winning is not the failure to own a ticket, but only the failure to have the correct numbers.” Using MacArthur’s logic, I win the lottery simply by buying the lottery ticket, even without the correct numbers. Isn’t it clear, even without stating it, that having the correct numbers is unimportant if one doesn’t own the ticket (or vice versa)? Isn’t it clear that both things are necessary in order to win?
- “If you wake up on time, and are at work by 8 AM, you may keep your job. If you don’t wake up on time, you will be fired.” Obviously, if I don’t wake up till noon, I won’t be at work by 8. It isn’t necessary to state that.

Or, what if I wake up in plenty of time but go fishing instead of to work? Could I say to my boss: “You didn’t say I would be fired if I didn’t get to work by 8AM; you only said I would be fired if I didn’t wake up on time.” This is the kind of silly “logic” that Mr. MacArthur is presenting.

In both of these cases (and many more; we could think up these kind of examples all day long), it takes only one of the stated conditions to be unmet to nullify the result. Likewise, if one doesn’t believe in Jesus, he probably won’t bother to be baptized. It isn’t necessary to state that the failure to be baptized will result in condemnation, and it takes tortured logic to claim that it needs to be stated.

Actually Jesus is, in essence, giving two sets of instructions here. To be condemned all you have to do is disbelieve. However, if you want to be saved: “He who believes and is baptized will be saved.” To use a familiar illustration: if you don’t want to win the lottery, all you have to do is

fail to buy a ticket. On the other hand, in order to win, you must buy the ticket **AND** have the right numbers.

Consider this also: Which of the following statements is true?

- “He who believes and **IS NOT BAPTIZED** will be saved.”—John MacArthur’s position (Think about it. Although he didn’t state it just this way, this really is his position).

**OR**

- “He who believes and **IS BAPTIZED** will be saved.”—the words of Jesus.

One of these statements is true; the other is false. The only difference between these two statements is the word “**NOT**.” Similarly, in the Garden of Eden, God said to Adam and Eve, “you will surely die,” if they ate the forbidden fruit (Gen. 2:17). Satan, on the other hand, said to them, “You will **not** surely die” (Gen. 3:4). The insertion of the little word “**NOT**” turned God’s truth into the devil’s lie. The same is true of the words of Jesus.

Jesus is the Savior. He gets to say how we are saved. And although there is more to salvation than what is contained in this one verse, isn’t it more than a little arrogant to take His words, “He who believes and **IS** baptized will be saved” and twist that into a position that says “He who believes and **IS NOT** baptized will be saved”?

## **Point 2:**

MacArthur states: “Salvation is by divine grace through faith alone (Romans 3:23, 24, 25, 26, 28, 30, 4:5; Galatians 2:16, Ephesians 2: 8-9, Philippians 3:9, etc.).”

The problem with all of the passages he cites is that not one of them (nor any other biblical statement) say that salvation is through (or by) “faith alone.” In fact, the Bible clearly and explicitly states just the opposite. Notice these statements from James chapter 2:

- “**Thus also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.**”—vs. 17.  
What is the difference between “faith alone” and “faith by itself”? There is no difference! Faith “alone” is therefore “dead.” What good is a dead faith? No good! I am amazed that so many people base their eternal welfare on a system of dead faith.
- “**But do you want to know, O foolish man, that faith without works is dead?**” –vs. 20.  
Faith alone, since it is dead, is of no value at all.
- “**You see then that a man is justified by works, and not by faith only.**”—vs. 24.  
Did you notice the “**not by faith only**”? This is the only place in the entire Bible in which the words “faith” and “only” (or “alone”) are joined together. And here we are told that we are **NOT** justified by “faith only.”

I've seen attempts to avoid the plain meaning of these verses by claiming that "justified" here refers to justification in the eyes of men, not justification in the eyes of God. This is grasping at straws. James had just illustrated justification by works by saying: "Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered Isaac his son on the altar?" (vs. 21). No other men were present when Abraham offered Isaac.

Paul argued in Romans 3: 28, "Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith apart from the deeds of the law." James and Paul do not contradict each other. Paul is talking about those who would attempt to be justified by keeping the works of the Law of Moses (or any other law). This is not possible. James, on the other hand is talking about obedient works of faith. Clearly Paul and James spoke of two different kinds of works, one of them justifies, and the other one doesn't.

Yes, salvation is by faith. But to claim, as MacArthur does, that salvation is by faith only is to distort the truth. In fact, the Scriptures teach that many things contribute to our salvation. Notice that our own obedience contributes to our salvation:

- **Acts 5:32**— "And we are His witnesses to these things, and so also is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who **obey Him.**"
- **2 Thessalonians 1: 7-8**—"...and to give you who are troubled rest with us when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with His mighty angels, in flaming fire taking vengeance on those who do not know God, and on those who do not **obey the gospel** of our Lord Jesus Christ."
- **Hebrews 5:9**— And having been perfected, He became the author of eternal salvation to **all who obey Him,...**"
- **1 Peter 4: 17**—"For the time has come for judgment to begin at the house of God; and if it begins with us first, what will be the end of those who do not **obey the gospel** of God?"

These passages and others teach us that there is a gospel to be obeyed in order to receive the benefits of salvation. Tragically, there are many who believe in Jesus, and even call on Him as their Lord, but fail to obey Him and His word. Consider these statements of Jesus:

- **Matthew 7:21-23 21** "Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven. Many will say to Me in that day, 'Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?' And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!'"
- **Luke 6:46**— "But why do you call Me 'Lord, Lord,' and do not do the things which I say?"

Obviously, those who call on Jesus as their Lord do so because of their faith in Him. But faith alone is inadequate. Please read the following passages:

- **John 1: 12**  
Receiving Jesus by faith does not automatically make one a child of God; it provides “the right to become children of God.” The text doesn’t say that faith gives me the *right to be* a child of God; it says that faith gives me the *right to become* a child of God. This is a crucial distinction. To say that I have the “right to become” a child of God necessarily means that I have yet to become one. Acquiring a marriage license does not make one a married man, it merely grants the legal right to become a married man.
- **John 12: 42-43**  
Even though these Jewish leaders believed in Jesus, their faith did not save them (see Mt. 10:32-33 and Luke 13:3). If their faith in Jesus didn’t save them, why should we accept that faith alone saves?
- **James 2: 17-26**  
As we’ve already noted, the only passage in the Bible in which the words “faith” and “only” are found together explicitly tell us that “faith only” is dead.

It is certainly true that we are saved by faith. But nowhere do the Scriptures teach that we are saved by faith *only*. To insist that we are saved by faith only is to distort the truth.

We also firmly believe that salvation is by grace. It is a gift from God. There isn’t anything we can do to earn our salvation. But like many gifts, it has conditions. No one can seriously deny that salvation by grace is conditional; after all, isn’t faith a condition? The real issue then is, what are the conditions? MacArthur, and others say, “faith only.” Jesus said no such thing. In fact, Jesus said:

- “I tell you, no; but unless you repent you will all likewise perish.” –Luke 13:3
- “He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned.” –Mk. 16:16
- “Therefore whoever confesses Me before men, him I will also confess before My Father who is in heaven. But whoever denies Me before men, him I will also deny before My Father who is in heaven.” –Mt. 10:32-33

Does it look like faith, repentance, confession of Jesus, and baptism are conditions of salvation? It does to me. Who gave us the right to say that faith is necessary but repentance or baptism is not?

### **Point 3:**

John MacArthur states: “If baptism were necessary for salvation, we would expect to find it stressed whenever the gospel is presented in Scripture. That is not the case, however.” He then gives the example of Peter failing to mention baptism in his sermon of Acts ch. 3.

This is an argument based upon what “we would expect.” Is what “we would expect” really a sound basis for determining the truth? We notice that the very first time Peter presented the message of the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ (Acts 2), he made no mention of the importance of faith. Even when his audience asked him, “What shall we do?” (Acts 2:37), Peter never mentioned faith. He mentioned baptism for the remission of sins, and he mentioned repentance (Acts 2:38), but he never mentioned faith. If we were inclined to determine the truth of a matter on the basis of what “we would expect,” we might conclude that faith is really not that important. Obviously, this is an invalid argument.

If we were in the expecting business, we might expect that baptism might play a recurring role in examples of conversion we find in the book of Acts. Lo and behold, in every single example we have of individuals being converted to Christ, following His death, they were immediately baptized.

#### **Point 4:**

MacArthur cites Paul’s statement in 1Cor. 1:17, as evidence that baptism is not necessary for salvation. His argument is this: “If baptism were part of the gospel itself, what good would it have done Paul to preach the gospel, but not baptize?”

First, the suggestion that baptism is not “part of the gospel” is ridiculous. How can it not be “part of the gospel” when Jesus said:

- “Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, **baptizing** them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.” Matt. 28:19-20
- “Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature. He who believes and is **baptized** will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned.” Mark 16:15-16.
- Also, consider the case of Philip and the Ethiopian treasurer (Acts 8:26-39). We are told that Philip got into the chariot with the Ethiopian, and “preached Jesus to him” (vs. 35). In the very next verse, we are told that they encountered water and that the Ethiopian asked “See, here is water. What hinders me from being baptized?”

Although we are not told all of what Philip said to the Ethiopian when he “preached Jesus to him,” it **MUST HAVE INCLUDED WATER BAPTISM**. One cannot “preach Jesus” and leave out water baptism. Why did Phillip tell the Ethiopian about water baptism? Because Jesus had said: “Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature. He who believes and is baptized will be saved.” When Jesus was “preached” to the Ethiopian, he fervently wanted to be baptized at the first opportunity. Why the rush? Perhaps he understood something that Mr. MacArthur does not.

Second, MacArthur, in his comments 1 Cor. 1: 17 conveniently ignores the context. Paul is condemning the divisions in the Corinthian church which were based upon favorite preachers. He asked, “Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?” (vs. 13). Then he says, “I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius, lest anyone should say that I had baptized in my own name.”

It would be a serious mistake to conclude, as MacArthur does, that Jesus did not intend for Paul to baptize. It’s clear that the word baptize is sometimes used in two different senses:

- 1) In the primary sense of actually and personally immersing a person in water;
- 2) and the secondary sense of teaching and overseeing others to do the actual baptizing.

Jesus is said to have baptized many, but not personally; His disciples did the actual baptizing. (Jn. 4:1-2). Paul baptized in both senses. He taught many people to be baptized (Acts 16:13-15, 31-34, 18:8, 19:1-6) and baptized some of them personally, including Crispus, Gaius, and the household of Stephanas (1Cor. 1: 14-15). The point Paul is making to the Corinthians is that given their tendency to divide over preachers, he’s glad he didn’t personally baptize many of them “lest anyone should say that I had baptized in my own name.” His concern is that those who he might have baptized would become a cult of Paul.

When Paul said that Jesus didn’t send him to baptize, he clearly meant that Jesus didn’t require that Paul personally immerse each convert. Paul was employing a style of speech that was common in that day. For example, Jesus said (Jn. 6:27), “Do not labor for the food which perishes but for the food which endures to everlasting life.” Jesus did not literally mean that we should not work for our food. He was simply emphasizing the importance of spiritual food over physical food. Paul used this same style of speaking in 1 Cor. 1:17 when he said “Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel.” He wasn’t saying that he wasn’t authorized to personally baptize, but that his role as an apostle to preach the gospel was more important!

If that’s not what Paul meant, we have all sorts of problems:

- If Jesus did not send Paul to baptize (in any sense), why did he baptize Crispus, Gaius and the household of Stephanas? Did he sin in doing something that Jesus did not intend for him to do?
- If Jesus did not send Paul to baptize (in any sense), why did He send all the other apostles to baptize (Matt. 28:18-20; Mk. 16: 15-16)?

Third, a careful look at Paul’s words in this passage indicates the necessity of baptism. Carefully consider Paul’s reasoning:

He asks: “Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?” (1 Cor. 1:13). This is a rhetorical question used to help his readers understand that they should not consider themselves “of Paul” (or any other man). Paul is saying that for one to call himself “of Paul,” two things needed to have happened:

1. Paul would have to have been crucified for the person.
2. One would have to have been baptized in the name of Paul.

Since Paul had not been crucified and no one had been baptized in the name of Paul, no one could legitimately claim that they were “of Paul.” Now, if those two things are necessary to be “of Paul,” why wouldn’t the same things be necessary to be “of Christ”? In other words, to be “of Christ”—

1. Christ would have to die for the person (which He did)
2. The person would have to be baptized in the name of Christ!

Those who find comfort in this passage for the notion that baptism is unnecessary, have not (or will not) carefully consider what it actually says.

### **Point 5:**

MacArthur states: “Perhaps the most convincing refutation of the view that baptism is necessary for salvation are those who were saved apart from baptism. We have no record of the apostles’ being baptized, yet Jesus pronounced them clean of their sins...” He goes on to cite the examples of the penitent woman, the paralytic man, and the publican who “experienced forgiveness of sins apart from baptism.”

If this really is “the most convincing refutation of the view that baptism is necessary for salvation,” then MacArthur is on awfully thin ice. There are several problems with his argument:

- 1) First, the argument itself, in terms of its logic, is woefully flawed. It is an argument based upon: “We have no record.” This is much like the “we would expect” argument discussed earlier. The only thing “We have no record” proves is that we have no record, nothing more.
- 2) Second, he merely assumes what he claims to prove, namely, that the apostles and others were “saved apart from baptism.” Why would anyone assume that the apostles had not been baptized?
  - Jesus Himself was baptized. Isn’t it just possible that His disciples would follow His example? Isn’t that what disciples do?
  - We are told (Mark 1: 4-5) that “all the land of Judea, and those from Jerusalem, went out to him and were all baptized by him [John] in the Jordan River...” Even if we accept that “all the land of Judea and those from Jerusalem” may not include every single individual, isn’t it just possible the disciples of Jesus were among those baptized?
  - Especially when we consider that Jesus baptized more disciples than John (Jn. 4:1-2). This passage tells us that Jesus baptized, but then clarifies by saying that it was Jesus’ disciples that did the actual baptizing. Isn’t it just possible that since Jesus Himself was baptized and that He baptized more disciples than John, that the apostles were among the many disciples that Jesus baptized?

- 3) As for the other examples MacArthur cites of “those who were saved apart from baptism,” it is certainly true that we have no record of them being baptized. However, two things should be said:
- Just as in the case of Jesus’ apostles, he is assuming that these others were not baptized. Given that “all the land of Judea, and those from Jerusalem” were baptized, MacArthur’s assumption is flimsy at best.
  - All of these people, including Jesus Himself, lived and died under the Old Covenant. The New Covenant (or testament) was not in force until the “death of the testator” (See Heb. 9:15-17). While on earth Jesus, being God, could forgive whomever He chose on whatever basis He chose. But after His death, He left these instructions: “He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned” (Mk16:16).

- 4) In the case of Cornelius (Acts 10), MacArthur again assumes what he cannot prove — that Cornelius and his household were saved prior to their baptism. It is true that they received the Holy Spirit in some sense. However, there is no reason to believe that the Holy Spirit’s intervention in this case was evidence that Cornelius had been saved. Consider the following:

- Early in the chapter an angel comes to Cornelius and instructs him to send for Peter who will “tell you what you must do” (10:6). Later, Peter would relate that the angel told Cornelius that Peter would “tell you words by which you and all your household will be saved” (Acts 11:14). This is an important point: Cornelius would not be saved until he had heard words telling him what to do! What did Peter tell him to do? The only thing we know he told him to do was “to be baptized in the name of the Lord” (10: 48).
- Peter said: “And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them...” (Acts 11: 15). **“Just as”** Peter **“began to speak”** to Cornelius about Jesus, the Holy Spirit “fell upon” him. Why did the Holy Spirit “fall on” Cornelius? MacArthur assumes that it was because of Cornelius’ faith in Jesus, and then expects us all to take his assumption as proof.

But did Cornelius even believe in Jesus at that point? One wonders how he could have had a meaningful faith, having just begun to hear of Jesus. And had Peter yet told Cornelius the “words by which you and all your household will be saved”? Evidently not, because Peter hadn’t yet got to the part about what they “must do.” That came later. And so, we are left with the question: Was Cornelius and his household save before hearing “words by which you and all your household will be saved;” or after?

- The purpose of the Holy Spirit’s role in this incident is quite different than “the gift of the Holy Spirit.” I say that for two reasons:
  - 1) The “gift of the Holy Spirit” is given to all those who will “repent and be baptized” (Acts 2: 38). The Holy Spirit is given by God “to those who obey Him” (Acts 5: 32). Cornelius and his household had not yet obeyed. They had not yet even been told what they “must do” (10:6). They had not yet heard “words by which you and all your household will be saved.” They had not

been baptized, nor is there any evidence of their faith or repentance. Remember, Peter had only begun to speak to them of Jesus.

- 2) Rather than merely assume a purpose for the Holy Spirit's intervention in this case (as MacArthur does) I suggest that we accept the purpose given to it by Peter—to demonstrate to Jewish Christians, including himself, that God's gift of eternal life through Jesus was also extended to the Gentiles. This is clear from Peter's reaction to the incident. Notice:
  - “And those of the circumcision who believed were astonished, as many as came with Peter, because the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out on the Gentiles also. For they heard them speak with tongues and magnify God. Then Peter answered, ‘Can anyone forbid water, that these should not be baptized who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?’” (Acts 10: 45-47). Peter and his party of Jewish believers took this Divine demonstration as proof that “water” baptism should not be forbidden to the Gentiles (By the way, doesn't that suggest the importance of water baptism?).
  - When Peter got back to Jerusalem, news of this incident had preceded him. The Jewish Christian wanted an explanation of why Peter had gone to the Gentiles. He told them: “If therefore God gave them the same gift as He gave us when we believed on the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could withstand God?” (Acts 11:17). Again, Peter takes the Holy Spirit's intervention in this case as proof of God's inclusion of the Gentiles. For us to take it as proof of something else, such as faith only salvation, is to read something into the text.
  - The Holy Spirit had “fallen upon” Cornelius and his household in the same manner that He had fallen upon the apostles in Acts 2:1-4—in a miraculous demonstration of power. These are the only two recorded cases of the Holy Spirit “falling upon” someone. The “gift of the Holy Spirit,” provided to all obedient believers, is something quite different.

## Point 6:

Next, Mr. MacArthur deals with Acts 2: 38. He concedes that “Peter appears to link forgiveness of sins to baptism.”

Acts 2: 38 says: “Then Peter said to them, ‘Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.’” This verse is a classic example of a statement that is so plain and simple one needs assistance to misunderstand it. MacArthur steps up to provide that assistance.

- 1) He claims that “it is possible to translate the Greek preposition *eis* ‘because of,’ or ‘on the basis of,’ instead of ‘for.’” What he is saying is that when Peter said that his listeners should be baptized “for” (*eis*) the forgiveness of their sins, what he may have meant was that they should be baptized “because” their sins were already forgiven. This is a widely held view. The problem is, it's wrong!

- If they had already been forgiven, why did they still not have the gift of the Holy Spirit? Nothing is more obvious than that at the time Peter uttered this statement, they had not yet received the gift of the Holy Spirit. Well, why not, if their sins were already forgiven?
  - If “because of” the remission of sins” is what Peter really said, wouldn’t we expect at least one reputable version of the New Testament to translate it that way. Try to find one that does. Or try to find a Greek scholar who will say that “because” of is a better translation of *eis* than “for” or “unto.”
  - In Acts 2:38, we have not just the preposition *eis*, but the entire prepositional phrase *eis aphesin harmartion*, which is translated “for the remission of sins.” Fortunately, the Holy Spirit has provided the means to clearly understand this phrase by placing it in another passage in which its meaning is unquestionable. In Matthew 26:28, Jesus made the statement, “For this is My blood of the new testament, which is shed for many **for the remission of sins.**” This is the exact same prepositional phrase that is used in Acts 2:38. The question for us is, Was the Lord’s blood shed “for,” that is, “for the purpose of” the remission of sins, or was it shed because the remission of sins had already occurred? Obviously the former. The phrase has the same meaning in Acts 2:38.
- 2) Then MacArthur says: “It is also possible to take the clause ‘and let each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ’ as parenthetical.” He further states: “Forgiveness of sins is thus connected with repentance, not baptism...” His point is that repentance is said here to be “for the forgiveness of sins” rather than baptism. Several problems with this:
- The most obvious problem is that this “possible” interpretation is completely at odds with his previously mentioned “plausible” interpretation of the same verse. He seems willing to accept any interpretation, no matter how contradictory, as long as he doesn’t have to accept the passage’s clear meaning.
  - MacArthur’s “possible” interpretation here is simply wrong. I am not a Greek scholar but I know that the scholarship is virtually unanimous in its view that “for the remission of sins” is properly connected to repentance **and** baptism. One example summarizes the position of a multitude of scholars. Thayer, perhaps the premier Greek lexicographer of modern times, has written: “I accept the rendering of the Revised Version ‘unto the remission of your sins.’ The ‘*eis*’ expressing the end aimed at and secured by ‘repentance’ and ‘baptism’ just previously enjoined.”—*Handbook on Baptism*, pg. 356.
  - MacArthur seems to be saying that repentance, but not baptism, is necessary to be saved. He had already said regarding Peter’s sermon in Acts 3 that “Peter makes no reference to baptism, but links forgiveness of sin to repentance (Acts 3: 19).” But I thought he had said salvation was by faith only. Salvation can’t be by faith only if repentance is required.  
Peter’s command to repent and be baptized (Acts 2:38) was in response to a specific question. Peter had just told his audience that Jesus was God’s Son and that they were culpable in His murder. Three thousand of them believed Peter and asked “What shall we do?” (2:37). Peter didn’t tell them to believe in Jesus, because their question

revealed that they already did. If Peter had shared MacArthur's "faith only" position, he could have simply told them: "You don't need to do anything. You are already saved by your faith." But he didn't; he told them to repent and be baptized.

- What for? For the forgiveness of their sins, and to receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. If they had been saved by their faith only, they would have already received the Holy Spirit. Without the Holy Spirit we do not belong to God (Rom. 8:1-16; Eph. 1:13-14).

## Point 7:

MacArthur states: "Water baptism does not seem to be what Peter has in view in 1 Peter 3:21." I would suggest that it would "not seem" to him to be water baptism only because it says that baptism "saves us." If we've already decided that water baptism and salvation have no connection, then we must take the water out of this baptism. However, if we come to the verse open to whatever it might say, there is every reason to think that Peter had water baptism in view.

- 1) Peter says that the baptism that now "saves us" is the "antitype" of ("corresponding to" – NASV) the water of Noah's flood. The water of Noah's flood is a type of, or corresponds to, the water of baptism. The link between the flood of Noah and baptism is water. Just as the floodwater washed away the corruption of the world of Noah's day, baptism washes away our sins.
- 2) MacArthur claims this is Holy Spirit baptism and says: "Peter is not talking about immersion in water, as the phrase 'not the removal of dirt from the flesh' indicates." He has this 180 degrees wrong! He is implying (although it probably didn't occur to him) that water baptism **IS** "the removal of dirt from the flesh." It is not. But it superficially resembles taking a bath because both involve getting wet. The spiritual "baptism" of which MacArthur speaks in no way resembles taking a bath. Peter is reminding his readers that their immersion in water was not to cleanse the body but to cleanse the soul. Peter is clearly speaking of water baptism.
- 3) At some point, MacArthur is going to have to deal with Eph. 4: 4-6 which tells us that there is only "one baptism." Just as there is only one Lord, and one body, and one faith, one Spirit, and one Father, **THERE IS ONLY ONE BAPTISM!** Yes, the Bible speaks of several baptisms. There had been John's baptism, there had been Jesus' pre-death baptism, there had been mention of baptism of fire, baptism of the Holy Spirit, baptism into Moses, and baptism of suffering. Some of these were some literal type of baptism; others were figures of speech. But by the time Paul wrote Eph. 4: 4-6, **THERE WAS ONE BAPTISM!** What was it? Water baptism for the forgiveness of sins.

I don't want, here, to go into a long discussion of Holy Spirit baptism. We'll save that for another time. But suffice it to say that Holy Spirit baptism was never something anyone was commanded to do, as water baptism was. Holy Spirit baptism was a promise, something Jesus would do. It had a specific purpose, fulfilled in the first century. It was never intended to be repeated over and over again. But water baptism was. Read through the book of Acts and notice how many thousands of people are said to have been baptized in water. If the "one baptism" Paul

spoke of is Holy Spirit baptism, then water baptism is obsolete. Does MacArthur still baptize people in water? I would bet he does. But if there is only one valid baptism to which all believers are subject today, which is it?

Obviously, water baptism alone doesn't save. Baptism without faith is no more useful than faith without baptism. There is nothing magic about the water. This really isn't that complicated but the story of Naaman the leper might help (2 Kings 5). Naaman was a Syrian army officer with leprosy. He learned that Elisha, a prophet of God, might be able to cure him so he sent for Elisha. Elisha told him to dip in the Jordan River seven times and he would be healed. Naaman didn't understand how dipping in the muddy waters of the Jordan River was going to help him; in his pride, he refused. But his servants reminded him that if Elisha had required some great thing of him, he would have done it. Naaman came to his senses, went and dipped in the Jordan seven times and was healed. This illustrates at least three points:

- 1) Although Naaman's healing was by grace (a gift from God), it came with conditions. He had to do something to acquire it. Gifts are usually conditional.
- 2) There was nothing magical about the water of the Jordan River. Dipping in it seven times was merely the point at which Naaman had obeyed God and God delivered on His promise.
- 3) All the faith in the world would not have healed Naaman if he had failed to obey.

Likewise, the waters of baptism have no special power. Baptism is simply the point at which God forgives a penitent believer.

## Point 8

MacArthur says: "I do not believe water baptism is in view in Romans 6 or Galatians 3." He doesn't explain why, but the reason is obvious. If they were to speak of water baptism, his case would be shot. Therefore, they must not.

Except that, they do. One of the foundational principles of biblical interpretation is that a word, or words, should be understood in their literal sense unless there is some compelling reason not to. Both of these passages (Romans 6:4 and Gal. 3:27) speak of immersion (baptizo). There is no compelling reason to understand them other than literally.

Romans 6:5 speaks of baptism as being "in the likeness of His death," and "in the likeness of His resurrection." Going down into the water ("buried with Him through baptism") and then coming back out of the water (to "walk in newness of life") fits that picture perfectly. It's hard to see how some spiritual "baptism," involving no action on the part of the believer qualifies as being "in the likeness" of a burial and resurrection.

It's interesting that many people who deny the necessity of baptism see the baptism of Romans 6 as water baptism but insist that it is merely a symbol, both of the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ, and also of the death of the old person and his new life in Christ. Those who take this view do not consider a person to be a fit candidate for baptism until they have already been saved. If that were true, the symbolism breaks down. This "burial" of baptism would be reserved

for only those who are already “alive.” Why would we symbolically “bury” a live person? It is true that baptism is a symbol, but it is not merely a symbol. It is actually the point at which the spiritually dead person is buried and then resurrected in a new birth.

Given that Galatians 3:27 is the only passage that explicitly tells us how we get “into Christ,” and it tell us that we are “baptized into Christ,” it’s no surprise that MacArthur doesn’t believe it speaks of water baptism. But there is no contextual reason to deny it. There is no compelling reason not to understand baptism here as anything but literal, actual baptism. That is unless one approaches the verse already having decided that it must not be.

And keep in mind: Paul, who wrote Galatians also insisted that there is only ONE BAPTISM (Eph. 4:5). That same Paul went out and demonstrated what that one baptism was by immersing thousands of people (some of them personally).

## Point 9

MacArthur: “In Acts 22:16, Paul recounts the words of Ananias to him following his experience on the Damascus road. ‘Arise, and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on His name.’ It is best to connect the phrase ‘wash away your sins’ with ‘calling on His name.’”

Why is that best? If that was what the Holy Spirit had intended, Ananias would have said something like “Wash away your sins by calling on his name. And then arise and be baptized.” This is obviously not the meaning of Ananias’ statement; it is a contrived and tortured interpretation. I guess we should be grateful that MacArthur didn’t claim the baptism here is Holy Spirit baptism (Some do. If it were Holy Spirit baptism, why would Paul need to arise? Why would Ananias be needed?). Besides, I thought salvation was by faith only; do we also have to call on Jesus’ name?

Isn’t it much more likely that “Arise, and be baptized, and wash away your sins..” means exactly that? And isn’t it a much more natural reading of the statement to understand that arising and being baptized is *how* one calls on His name? A mere verbal calling on Jesus name, even in faith, doesn’t get the job done (read Matt. 7:21-23 and Luke 6:46 again). Faithfully obeying God does.

Also consider this: Three days before Ananias had said this to Paul, Jesus had confronted him on the Road to Damascus (Acts 22: 6-16; Acts 9:1-18). Paul was going to Damascus to persecute Christians. He despised Jesus and His followers. After Jesus identified Himself, Paul asked, “What shall I do, Lord?” Paul, knowing he was talking to Jesus, the One whom only moments ago he had despised, now called Him “Lord.” Isn’t it clear that this was the point at which Paul’s heart was turned from an enemy of Jesus into a believer? Isn’t it clear that Paul’s faith prompted him to obey Jesus’ instructions to “Arise and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do”? (Acts 9:6).

And didn’t Paul spend three days praying about it? If salvation can be had by faith alone (or by praying the “sinner’s prayer”), then why wasn’t Paul saved three days earlier on the road to Damascus? Or why wasn’t Paul saved after three days of praying. Why did Paul need for

someone to come and tell him “what [he] must do”? Why did Paul still have sins to wash away after three days of faith and prayer?

Paul needed to have his sins washed away because he was lost. He was lost because Jesus had said, “He that believes and is baptized shall be saved” and Paul had not been baptized. He corrected that when Ananias told him to “Arise and be baptized and wash away your sins, calling on the name of the Lord.”

## Point 10

Very near the end of MacArthur’s treatise on baptism he says: “Baptism is certainly important, and required of every believer. However, the New Testament does not teach that baptism is necessary for salvation”

Required but not necessary? Baptism is “required of every believer” but not necessary? What does “require” mean and who requires it? Jesus? Who else would have the right? The church? Does the church have the right to “require” something that Jesus doesn’t? And even though Jesus requires baptism, it isn’t necessary? I thought “required” meant necessary. I thought “required” meant that I have to do it. Isn’t that what the IRS means by “required”? That’s what my dictionary says it means. And I want to know what happens if the requirement to be baptized isn’t met. Can I refuse and still be saved?

This is especially interesting in the light of the fact that Mr. MacArthur, not only believes in faith only salvation, he also believes that once a person has been saved, he cannot, under any circumstances, lose his salvation (<http://www.gty.org:80/IssuesandAnswers/archive/redeemed.htm>). If I’m not mistaken, this would mean that a person would be irrevocably saved at the moment he believes in Jesus, but could then thumb his nose at the “requirement” to be baptized, and that’s okay as far as his salvation is concerned. Does that sound right? Does that sound like the Jewish leaders who believed in Jesus but refused to confess Him because they loved the praise of men more than the praise of God? Sounds sort of like that to me.

**Conclusion:** MacArthur and many others have been caught up in a position that is only about 500 years old. The understanding that immersion in water is the point at which God forgives sin and bestows salvation was the nearly unanimous view in Christendom for nearly fifteen centuries. It was the consensus of the early church fathers. It was the view of Catholic theology for hundreds of years, and was even the view of Martin Luther. Although the “faith only” position now seems to be the prevalent position, it is difficult (if not impossible) to find anyone who believed it before Huldreich Zwingli in the 1520’s. Others, most notably Calvin, followed his lead until this position had spread through most of Protestantism. Consider the following quotes from early church writings:

- “We descend into the water full of sins and uncleanness”— (*Epistle of Barnabas* 11:1,8,11)

- “...there is no other repentance except that one when we descended into the water and received the forgiveness of our former sins”— (*Shepherd of Hermas*, Mandate IV. iii.1)
- “For at that time they obtain for themselves the washing in water in the name of God the Master of all and Father, and of our Savior Jesus Christ, and of the Holy Spirit. For Christ also said, ‘Unless you are regenerated, you cannot enter the kingdom of heaven.’”— (Justin Martyr, *Apology* I, 61)
- “It is the washing through which we are cleansed of our sins... We who have repented of our sins, renounced our faults, and are purified by baptism.”— (Clement Of Alexandria, *Instructor* I. vi. 32:1)
- “Baptism itself is a corporal act by which we are plunged into the water, while its effect is spiritual, in that we are freed from our sins.” (Tertullian, *Baptism* 7:2)
- “As we are lepers in sin, we are made clean from our old transgressions by means of the sacred water and the invocation of the Lord. We are thus spiritually regenerated as newborn infants, even as the Lord has declared: ‘Except a man be born again through water and the Spirit, he shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven.’”— (Irenaeus, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 1, pg. 574)
- “[When] they receive also the baptism of the Church . . . then finally can they be fully sanctified and be the sons of God . . . since it is written, ‘Except a man be born again of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God.’”— (Cyprian, *Letters* 71[72]:1)

Of these references, and many others, church historian Everett Ferguson concludes: “The reader may notice the following items in the texts: baptism was customarily an immersion in water; it was administered to believing penitents; and it was understood as bringing forgiveness of sins... Only a few Gnostics on the remote fringes of Christianity denied water baptism or its necessity for the remission of sins.”— (Ferguson, *Early Christians Speak*, p. 36)

Martin Luther wrote in his commentary on Gal. 3:27:

“This is diligently to be noted, because of the fond and fantastical spirits, who go about to deface the majesty of baptism, and speak wickedly of it. Paul, contrariwise, commendeth it, and setteth it forth with honorable titles, calling it, ‘the washing of regeneration, and renewing of the Holy Ghost.’ And here also he saith, that ‘all ye that are baptized into Christ, have put on Christ.’ Wherefore baptism is a thing of great force and efficacy.”— (Commentary On Galatians, Kregel Publications, p. 222)

Of course, what these men believed is not nearly as important as what the Bible teaches. That alone should be our guide in seeking eternal life in Jesus Christ.