

A Review

By Larry Murdock

Scott Lamascus interviewed Max Lucado and ran the interview in the July 2002 issue of the *Christian Chronicle*. The interviewer correctly recognized that Lucado's view of baptism is different than most members of the church of Christ. Hopefully, all Bible students view baptism the same way as the Holy Spirit. To do this, we must describe and explain baptism in the Holy Spirit's own words. Remarks we would make about baptism should be in harmony with the Spirit's viewpoint. How does brother Lucado's view of baptism compare or contrast with the Holy Spirit's view?

* *"In baptism the believer is identified with the righteous life of Jesus - buried with him, risen with him. Baptism is sacred"* (Max Lucado, *Christian Chronicle* July 2002, p. 20).

This writer has trouble understanding the independent clause of the first sentence: "in baptism the believer is identified with the righteous life of Jesus." A passage that communicates that idea does not come to mind. Brother Lucado may be interpreting the clause in Romans 6:3, which says that Christians have been "baptized into Jesus Christ." The dependent clauses ("buried with him, risen with him") are taken from Romans 6:4, but brother Lucado's quotation did not start soon enough because the end of verse three says, "all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his *death*" - not his righteous life. Before Jesus was buried he died a saving death, and before his death he had lived righteously; but the repentant, confessing believer is baptized into that saving death. We do not inherit Jesus' righteousness (that is, his intrinsic goodness), nor are we baptized into his righteous life. Someone may object, "So what?" At this juncture, the point is this: how can anyone expect to understand the Spirit's view of baptism if he does not understand and use the words that the Spirit uses to describe it? The statement of Lucado comes dangerously close, if it does not in fact assert, the false teaching of imputed righteousness.

* *"I strongly resist any effort to trust the act of baptism to save"* (Lucado, p. 20).

The Holy Spirit gives no one a reason to believe in baptismal regeneration, that baptism, as an action within itself, has some kind of magical, regenerating power. The Holy Spirit teaches, however, that there is a "washing of regeneration" with which a "renewed" person is washed and by which that person is saved (Titus 3:5). The person who has been renewed by the Holy Spirit's teaching trusts the Savior, what he did, and among other things what he said about baptism. However, having a renewed understanding of Jesus and trusting him as the Savior, does not necessarily mean we will receive his salvation! If faith were the only qualification for receiving salvation then some of the chief Jewish rulers who believed on him would have also been commended, even though they loved the praise of men more than the praise of God and would not confess him (John 12:42-43). The Savior, following his passion and prior to his ascension, issued the command to

"go preach the gospel to every creature, he that believes and is baptized shall be saved" (Mark 16:15-16). In some sense baptism has a part in Jesus saving us. Peter wrote, "Baptism does also now save us" (1 Pet. 3:21). Peter held the view that in some sense baptism saves, and that its role had something to do with a clear conscience. Whatever Peter believed by what he wrote, we should also learn, believe, and teach. We should resist any effort to trust any other man's interpretation. I trust the act of baptism because Jesus commanded it, the apostles interpreted and applied it, and the Spirit had it written into the New Testament. Baptism alone, of course, saves no one, but baptism preceded by faith, repentance, and confession washes away sins (Acts 22:16)

* *"The work of salvation was finished when Christ said it was, on the cross"* (Lucado).

What did Jesus mean when he said, "It is finished"? On the cross Christ was now "baptized" with the baptism he had sweated over (Matt. 20:22); he had been forsaken by God (Matt. 27:46); he had borne the sins of mankind (Isa. 53:11-12); he had justified God for forgiving sinners in the past and extending forgiveness to those who would receive it in

the future (Rom. 3:25-26); his blood had been poured out (Mark 14:24); his hour had come (John 17:1); the Son of Man had gone as it was written of him (Mark 14:21); the Son of Man had been delivered into the hands of men who had done what they chose (Luke 9:44); he drank the cup (John 18:11); the will of God had been accomplished (Luke 22:42); the plan of redemption was paid for (Acts 20:28); it was finished. .

However, in 53 days, the Holy Spirit's work of convicting people of sin would begin (John 16:8). The Holy Spirit's work was not finished. Thus, the "work of salvation" was not yet preached, and repentant believers were yet to receive this great salvation. The truth of God's remedy for sin must now be preached, beginning at Jerusalem on Pentecost and spreading to the "uttermost parts of the earth" (Acts 1:8). On that day when Jesus died on the cross, men and women were yet to be begotten of the Spirit, born again of water and spirit, washed and renewed (James 1:18; John 3:5; Titus 3:5-6) in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit (Matt. 28:19-20). As of this writing, the work of the Spirit is still ongoing. There are still those who have not received the gift of salvation, Christ's finished work.

* *"Baptism, nor any other work, adds to his [Jesus] completed services"* (Lucado).

Brother Lucado implies that some members of the church believe baptism "adds to" Jesus' work; baptism does not add to Christ's work, baptism receives Christ's work. Baptism, always a "passive plunge into water," is never called a "work" in the New Testament; to call it that is a fundamental mistake. Baptism (the washing) is not a "work of righteousness which we have done" (Titus 3:5). However, the false idea that baptism is a "work" appeals to those who teach that "faith alone" saves the sinner prior to baptism. In fact they must insist on this unscriptural explanation of baptism to maintain their "faith

only" doctrine. The "faith alone" position, like any false teaching, does not allow room for the harmony of all the data that bears on the subject. Therefore, plain statements about baptism must either be ignored or twisted into illogical ideas that are unnatural and forced in the context. The Holy Spirit's teaching on baptism suffers from this pressure at the hands of an unscriptural interpretation of "faith."

Baptism is not a "work." Is it not contradictory to call "a passive plunge" a work?

What then is baptism and how does it fit into God's plan for redemption? To state the obvious, we would know nothing of baptism if it were not for the Spirit's teaching; therefore baptism is what the Spirit says it is, and baptism plays the part that the Spirit says it plays. The Holy Spirit's revealed teaching is meant "to open their eyes, so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins" (Acts 26:18). The Spirit's teaching enables the hearers to "open their eyes" and "receive" the forgiveness of sins! Baptism is the culminating act of an individual's faith. Baptism receives the forgiveness that Christ's blood brings. It is the act that verifies (to the owner of an unclean conscience) the date and time of the believer's reception of God's forgiveness.

The Spirit begets with his seed, the holy and eternal Word of God (1 Peter 1:23-25; James 1:18). Baptism is the water in John 3:5. It is the "washing of regeneration" that follows the "renewal" of the heart by the begetting power of the Spirit (Titus 3:5).

** "With the exception of the thief on the cross, Scripture provides us no example of an unbaptized heaven-bound soul. The thief, however, is a wonderful exception. His conversion forces us to trust the work of Christ and not the work of baptism" (Lucado).*

Lucado does not know that the thief was "unbaptized." We do know that John baptized a lot of people from "all the country of Judea and all Jerusalem" (Mark 1:5). And we also know that Jesus' disciples baptized more people than did John. Lucado knows, however, that the thief was unbaptized with the baptism commanded in Christ's great commission. Therefore, Lucado must also confess that the thief could not yet have been baptized into Christ's death, buried with him, nor raised up with him (Rom. 6:3-4), for Christ was still on the cross.

Could the thief trust the "finished work" of Christ? Jesus had not yet said, "It is finished." The thief was not subject to the commands of the Great Commission because that commission had not yet been issued; it was yet 53 days in the future. (Picky? Truth always passes the "pickiness" test.) Jesus died for the sins of the thief exactly the same way he died for the sins of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Those three men were truly "unbaptized heaven-bound souls." God had overlooked the sins of the faithful of the Old Testament era in forbearance and in anticipation of the "finished work of Christ" (Rom. 3:25). Jesus for

gave the sins of the thief exactly how he had forgiven the sins of others during his ministry, that is, in anticipation of God being justified for forgiveness of sins (past and future) by his Son's death on the cross. The thief is not an exception! If the thief was unbaptized, he was unbaptized like Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob who will be sitting in the kingdom of heaven when we arrive (Matt. 8:11). Will moderns be able to use the thief or Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as excuses for not being baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins? (Acts 2:38). Saul of Tarsus could not use this excuse; he had to submit to the command of Christ in the great commission.

After seeing and hearing Jesus, Saul of Tarsus had been praying continuously for three days when finally the preacher Ananias stood before him (Acts 9:9, 11). Jesus had already died for Saul's sins; that job was finished. But when Ananias came to him, Saul had not yet received that forgiveness for which Christ died. Sitting in the house on the street called "Straight," Saul must have by now believed that the One he had seen and the One he had been persecuting, Jesus of Nazareth, was Christ the Lord. Saul had not yet called upon the name of the Lord, though praying for three days; he had not yet been baptized into Christ's death. He must have gladly received the message as welcome news when Ananias said, "And now why do you wait, arise, and be baptized and wash away your sins, calling on the name of the Lord" (Acts 22:16). Saul immediately arose and was baptized into Christ (Gal. 3:27); he had his sins washed away while calling on the name of the Lord. The metaphor of the "wash" is an appropriate one for immersion in water. Peter reminds us that it is not the putting away of the filth of the flesh (1 Pet. 3:21). When Saul arose from the watery grave he was raised to a newness of life, which he himself later described (Rom. 6:4). By faith Saul had become a child of God (Gal. 3:26-27); he had become the recipient of the beneficent "operation of God" (Col. 2:12).

The preceding paragraphs attempt to compare and contrast the Holy Spirit's view of baptism with brother Lucado's view, as expressed in the interview printed in the Christian Chronicle last July. Since brother Lucado does not use the Spirit's words to explain or describe the act of baptism, his teaching, consequently, does not reflect the Spirit's teaching on the subject'