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## THE GOSPEL AND WATER BAPTISM: A STUDY OF ACTS 22:16

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### Prologue

To best introduce the study of Acts 22:16, let me relate the following story.

When I was in the Churches of Christ, I was told—and through experience was tempted to believe—that “evangelical Christians” would deny the necessity of baptism for salvation, even when they could not explain those passages which teach it; that the average Baptist or Bible Church preacher could not “get around” the obvious and natural meaning of such passages as Acts 2:38, Acts 22:16, and 1 Pet 3:21. They were, I was told, like the Jews in the first century, in that even with a plain message of Scripture before them, they would deliberately shut their eyes to the truth and refuse to believe it and be saved.

Do you believe this was unfair?

With that as a background, let me share with you one of the most amazing confessions I have ever heard.

One day I was sitting in the office of a president of a Baptist college. The man had an earned Ph.D. in theology and is someone for whom I have a deep respect. No doubt he made this confession to me because he did not perceive me as an “enemy” from the Churches of Christ.

He told me that he had publicly debated with Churches of Christ preachers. He respected their general “fundamentalism,” but in matters of salvation he abhorred their theology. He believed and defended the doctrine of justification by grace through faith alone. However, he was not totally satisfied with his own interpretation of Acts 22:16 and 1 Pet 3:21. Acts 2:38, another Churches of Christ fortress, he could easily handle. However, Acts 22:16 was “very difficult” and 1 Pet 3:21 was,

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quoting Winston Churchill, a “mystery wrapped in a riddle and shrouded in an enigma.”

This confession still shocks me—especially coming as it did from a man of great learning and deep piety.

Was it confirmation of what I had always been told? Was this respected president a perfect example of someone holding to a doctrine in spite of the clear teaching of the Word of God? Was the Churches of Christ position the correct one after all?

It is because of such experiences that this article is written. Therefore, in order to present what I believe to be an adequate and satisfying interpretation of Acts 22:16, this article will state and evaluate the various exegetical options of this verse as found within the commentary tradition. It should be pointed out, however, that the commentary tradition, unlike its treatment of Acts 2:38, is not very extensive on Acts 22:16. There are, no doubt, many reasons for this. For one, it is a difficult text (commentators are notorious for commenting on the obvious and saying little on those passages where the problems exist!). Another reason is because this is the second of three times in Acts where Paul’s conversion experience is related, and most of the material—except this verse, which does not occur in the other accounts!—is treated elsewhere in the commentaries.

The context of Acts 22:16 finds Paul relating his testimony. He was going to Damascus to persecute believers when the Lord appeared to him. Blinded by the light, he was led into town to wait for someone to come to him. In Acts 22:16 Paul relates what Ananias, a believer commissioned by the Lord to go to Paul, said. It reads:

“And now why are you [Paul] waiting? Arise and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on the name of the Lord.”<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>The Scripture is quoted from *The New King James Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1982). *The Greek New Testament According to the Majority Text* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2nd edition, 1985) has *to onoma tou Kyriou* (the name of the Lord), while the text of the *United Bible Societies*, 3rd edition (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1986) has *to onoma autou* (His name). The difference between these two is slight and does not appear to affect the meaning of the passage. It is also of some interest to note that the structure of the verse in Greek suggests a chiasm:

[Gk.]	[Eng.]
A Anastas	A Rising
B baptisai	B be baptized
B kai apolousai tas hamartias sou	B and wash away your sins
A epikalesamenos to onoma tou Kyriou.	A calling on the name of the Lord

Thus, the two participles are parallel to each other and the two imperatives are parallel to each other. In this analysis it would be difficult to separate the idea of baptism from a washing away of sins.

## I. The Sacramentarian View

### Definition

The Sacramentarian view of this passage is quite straightforward: one washes away his sins *at the time of* (not necessarily *by*) his water baptism. Baptism, the biblically demanded act designed to manifest true faith, is *necessary* for the forgiveness of sins. Paul was not saved (i.e., regenerated) on the Damascus Road, but later in the city when Ananias had ministered to him.

### Defenders

This view, while held by others, is best defended by apologists of the Churches of Christ.<sup>2</sup>

### Defense

The defense of this position, like the sacramentarian defense of Acts 2:38, rests upon a straightforward, *prima facie* reading of the text. A few quotations from Churches of Christ commentators present this view with pointed force.

J. W. McGarvey, in an extended treatment of the conversion of Paul, makes this defense:

Such is the baleful influence of this gross departure from the word of God, that men who are under its influence are constantly denouncing as *heretics* those who venture to follow the example of Ananias. He finds the man to whom he is sent, praying to the Lord Jesus; but, instead of commanding him to pray on, and praying with him, he says to him, “Why do you tarry? Arise, and be immersed, and wash away your sins, calling on the name of the Lord” . . .

It is high time that people were won back from such delusions, and made to feel the necessity of following the word of God. Ananias was guided by the apostolic commission. Seeing there were three conditions of pardon, faith, repentance, and immersion, and that Saul had already complied with the first two, he does not tantalize him by telling him to believe or urging him to repent, but commands him to do the one thing which he had not yet done, “Arise, and be immersed.” He instantly obeyed; and then, for the first time since he saw the vision by the way, he was sufficiently composed to take food and drink . . .

<sup>2</sup>For further information about those holding this view please see the author’s previous article “The Gospel and Water Baptism: A Study in Acts 2:38,” *JOTGES* 3 (Spring 1990): 27-52.

Like the eunuch, it was *after* he came up out of the water that he rejoiced.

His composure and peace of mind, after being immersed, was the proper result of intelligent obedience in that institution. If he had not already learned its design, by what he knew of apostolic preaching, the words of Ananias conveyed it without ambiguity. To a sinner mourning over his guilt, seeking pardon, and knowing that the Lord alone could forgive sins, the command to be immersed and wash away his sins could convey the one idea, that upon the washing of water over the body in immersion, the Lord would remove his sins by forgiving them. That such was the idea intended in the metaphorical expression, "wash away," would need no argument, if it had not suited the theories of modern sectaries to call it in question. It is a common assumption that Saul's sins had been *really* forgiven before his immersion, and Ananias required him only to *formally* wash them away. But this is a mere combination of words to hide the absence of an idea. How can a man *formally* do a thing which has been *really* done, unless it be by going through a *form* which is empty and deceptive? If Saul's sins were already washed away, then he *did not* wash them away in immersion, and the language of Ananias was deceptive. But it is an indisputable fact, that at the time Ananias gave him this command he was still unhappy, and, therefore, unforgiven. Immediately after he was immersed, he was happy; and the change took place in the meantime, which connects it with his immersion. In precise accordance, therefore, with the commission, his sins were forgiven when he was immersed.<sup>3</sup> (Emphasis is McGarvey's.)

Alexander Campbell (1788-1866) was not only one of the prime movers behind the "Restoration Movement" which produced both the Churches of Christ and the Disciples of Christ, but a genius by almost any standard.<sup>4</sup> Campbell, in his classic work *Christian Baptism*,

<sup>3</sup> J. W. McGarvey, *New Commentary on Acts of the Apostles* (Cincinnati: The Standard Publishing Co, 1892), 122-23.

<sup>4</sup> For more information about Alexander Campbell, please see my former article previously mentioned. Campbell is a fascinating person and I wholeheartedly recommend the reading of his life story. Everett Ferguson, Professor of Church History at Abilene Christian University (with an earned Ph.D. from Harvard) commented in an article about Campbell in *The Restoration Principle being the Abilene Christian College Annual Bible Lectures, 1962* (Abilene, TX: Abilene Christian College Student Exchange, 1962), 315-28, that the "Restoration Movement" failed to have leaders of Campbell's mental caliber in later generations. This downward trend, I hasten to add, has been more than arrested. Not only have people of the academic standing of Ferguson strengthened the Churches of Christ (cf. the recently published *Encyclopedia of Early Christianity* [New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1990] which he edited), but the popular appeal is strengthened with such books as *The Applause of Heaven*, by Max Lucado, a Churches of Christ preacher in San Antonio, Texas. Not only is Lucado's book published by the solidly

observes that the phrase "wash away your sins" is:

A most unguarded and unjustified form of address, under the sanction of a divine mission, if baptism had not for its design the formal and definite remission of sin, according to the Pentecostian address.<sup>5</sup>

Also, in his Greek commentary on the Book of Acts, Campbell writes:

*Kai apolousai tas hamartias sou, and wash away your sins.* This clause states a result of the immersion, in language derived from the nature of the ordinance. It answers to *eis aphasin hamartiōn*, in ch. 2:38. Immersion is represented as having this importance of efficacy because it is the sign of the repentance and faith which are the conditions of salvation. *Epikalesamenos to onoma autou* supplies, essentially, the place of *epi tō onomati Iēsou Christou*, in 2:38.

Prof. Hackett [and here Campbell is quoting from H. H. Hackett, an outstanding Baptist scholar who wrote a commentary on the Greek text of Acts] sustains the com. ver. of this verse. His words are: "This clause states a result of baptism in language derived from the nature of that ordinance. It answers to *eis aphasin hamartiōn*, in Acts 2:38, i.e., submit to the rite in order to be forgiven. In both passages baptism is represented as having this importance or efficacy, because it is the sign of the repentance and faith, which are the conditions of this salvation." See Hackett, 22:10.<sup>6</sup>

Regarding the phrase "calling on the name of the Lord," this view would understand it to mean "to obey God by being baptized." James D. Bales, a Professor of Christian Doctrine at Harding University (a Churches of Christ school) writes on the occurrence of this same phrase in Acts 2:21. Much of what he says about Acts 2:21 fits his interpretation of this phrase in 22:16:

A Christian, in invoking Christ, may call by praying. Stephen did so . . . The Christians were known as those "who call upon thy name" (Acts 9:14; 1 Cor. 1:2).

How do we know that Acts 2:21 does not mean that the alien sinner must pray through for salvation? The people there assembled did not understand it to mean that, nor did Peter explain it to mean that one

evangelical Multnomah Press, but recently Dallas Theological Seminary sent a copy of his book to those who contributed to the Seminary—a Seminary in which Lucado himself could not enroll since he disagrees with the Seminary's Doctrinal Statement in matters pertaining to salvation and eschatology. In all fairness to both Multnomah Press and Dallas Seminary, it should be stated that while the book jacket declares Lucado's denominational standing there is probably nothing in his well-written book which is unorthodox.

<sup>5</sup> Alexander Campbell, *Christian Baptism* (Nashville: Gospel Advocate Co., 1951), 207.

<sup>6</sup> Alexander Campbell, *Acts of the Apostles* (Austin, TX: Firm Foundation, 1964), 149.

must pray through. The passage does not say so. When they asked what they must do (Acts 2:37) it indicated that they did not understand Acts 2:21 to mean that they could be saved through praying through at a mourner's bench. When Peter told them what to do he did not say "You already know what to do, for I have already told you you can be saved by calling upon the name of the Lord" (Acts 2:21). He had to explain to them what it meant to call on the Lord. Instead of repeating verse 21, Peter told them to repent and be baptized in order to be forgiven. This makes it evident that calling on the name of the Lord meant to appeal to God, to depend on God, by submitting to His way of salvation. To call on the name of the Lord was equal to obeying the gospel . . . 2:21 is more general, while 2:38 is more specific as to what one must do in calling on the name of the Lord—for calling on His name was necessary to salvation. The alien sinner invokes the aid of Christ. Verse 38 explains how the calling is done.<sup>7</sup>

Thus, the Sacramentarian View, and many in the Churches of Christ, would argue that one is *not* saved by, or at the moment of, faith and praying the sinner's prayer. "Calling on the name of the Lord" was something done in baptism. Acts 22:16 and Acts 2:38 are interrelated.

The Churches of Christ emphasis upon the necessity for water baptism should not be understood to mean that the death of Christ was unimportant or unnecessary. George W. DeHoff tries to establish a relationship between Acts 22:16 and Rev 1:5 ("To Him who loved us and washed us from our sins in His own blood"). DeHoff writes:

All people who believe the Bible must believe that our sins are washed away by the blood of the Lord Jesus Christ. His blood was shed for the remission of sins (Matthew 26:28). We have redemption through the blood of Christ (Ephesians 1:7). There is no remission apart from the shedding of blood (Hebrews 9:22) . . . This raises the question "how are we washed in the blood of Christ?" To answer this question we need to find out what people did in the New Testament times in order to be washed in His blood. Saul of Tarsus was told to "Arise and be baptized and wash away thy sins, calling upon the name of the Lord" (Acts 22:16). From this verse we conclude that the sins of an alien sinner are washed away when he is baptized. One could not believe the Bible without believing this truth. This verse does not teach that water washes away sins. It merely says that sins are washed away when the person is baptized. It does not say what washes these sins away. It merely tells us when these sins are washed away—when we are baptized.

<sup>7</sup>James D. Bales, *The Hub of the Bible* (Rosemead, CA: Old Paths Book Club, 1960), 78, 88.

"Unto him that loved us and washed us from our sins in his own blood" (Revelation 1:5). This verse answers for us the question of what washes away these sins—the blood of Christ. It does not state when the blood of Christ washes away sins. This is answered for us in Acts 22:16—our sins are washed away when we are scripturally baptized. Revelation 1:5 tells us what washes away our sins and Acts 22:16 tells us when.<sup>8</sup>

Thus, the forgiveness of sins, according to DeHoff, is the result of both the human and the divine. God washes away sins by the blood of Christ (the divine work) when one is water baptized (the human work).

### Defense

There are several strengths to this position.

First, its proponents accept a natural and straightforward reading of the passage. Here it may be difficult to fault them. This reading of the text is strengthened by their equally natural reading of Acts 2:38 and 1 Pet 3:21, passages which place baptism in a close relationship with forgiveness of sins and salvation.

Secondly, this position is probably correct in assuming that, in spite of the Damascus Road experience, Saul had yet to call upon the Lord and wash away his sins.

Thirdly, this position is also correct to see "calling on the name of the Lord" as something done at baptism. In this there is some agreement among evangelical scholars. For example F. F. Bruce interprets the act of "calling on the name of the Lord" as "being baptized 'in the name' (or 'with the name') of Jesus in the sense of 2:38; 10:48."<sup>9</sup> George Raymond Beasley-Murray, a Baptist, in his *magnum opus*, *Baptism in the New Testament*, writes:

The name of the Lord Jesus is *confessed* by the baptismal candidate and is *invoked* by him. Just as baptism is an occasion of confessing faith in Christ and is itself confession, so it is the occasion of prayer by the baptizand and is itself an act of prayer. . . . He that in baptism "calls on the name of the Lord" (Acts 22:16) undergoes baptism in a prayerful spirit; it becomes the supreme occasion and even vehicle of his yielding to the Lord Christ. Here is an aspect of baptism to which justice has not been done in the Church since its early days; baptism as a means

<sup>8</sup>George W. DeHoff, "The Washing Away of Sins," *Firm Foundation* (June 19, 1984): 10.

<sup>9</sup>F. F. Bruce, *The Book of Acts*, revised edition (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1988), 418.

of prayer for acceptance with God and for full salvation from God, an "instrument of surrender" of a man formerly at enmity with God but who has learned of the great Reconciliation, lays down his arms in total capitulation and enters into peace.<sup>10</sup> (Emphasis is Beasley-Murray's.)

Rudolf Stier, a commentator of a former generation, stated: "All three expressions, baptism, washing away, calling, denote one and together the same thing."<sup>11</sup>

### Deficiencies

This position, however, also has some serious weaknesses.

First, this position teaches a regeneration by faith and works. This is a contradiction to the Gospel of John, which proclaims faith as the sole prerequisite to receiving eternal life. Ephesians 2:8-9 also prohibits a salvation of faith *and* works. Therefore, while this position does have strong grammatical support for its interpretation of 22:16, it has weak theological support.

Secondly, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that Paul was regenerated on the Damascus Road. Stanley Toussaint presents several factors which suggest that Paul was regenerated there:

(1) The Gospel was presented to him directly by Christ (Gal. 1:11-12), not later by Ananias. (2) Already (Acts 22:10) Paul said he had submitted in faith to Christ. (3) Paul was filled with the Spirit *before* his baptism with water (9:17-18).<sup>12</sup>

Given the unusual circumstances of the Damascus Road experience, it is difficult to reject the idea that Paul did believe then, and, therefore, did receive eternal life (as per the Gospel of John). While Toussaint holds that Paul was filled with the Spirit before he was baptized with water, one should note that 9:17-18 does not explicitly say so. It could be that, like the crowd at Pentecost, Saul did not receive the Holy Spirit until he was baptized. An instance like this should not be considered unlikely, given the transition between the two dispensations in the beginning of Acts and the case of OT saints who were also regenerated without possessing the Holy Spirit (cf. John 7:37-39). Thus, Saul's reception of

<sup>10</sup>G. R. Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1962), 101-102.

<sup>11</sup>Rudolf Stier, *The Words of the Apostles* (Reprint [Minneapolis: Klock and Klock Christian Publishers Inc., 1981]), 380.

<sup>12</sup>Stanley D. Toussaint, "Acts," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, NT Edition, ed. by John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1983), 418.

the Spirit and the forgiveness of his sins would occur at his baptism and in accordance with Acts 2:38, even though he was regenerated on the Damascus Road.

Thirdly, this position fails to notice the unique setting of Acts 22:16. Luke records the conversion account of Saul three times in Acts (Acts 9, 22, 26). However, only once did Luke relate Ananias's demand for baptism with the washing away of sins. It is significant that the single occurrence was before a *Jewish* crowd in the Temple area in Jerusalem. Accordingly, the same general audience which heard Acts 2:38 also heard Acts 22:16. This writer failed to find a single defender of this view who produced a passage in Acts which addresses Gentiles with a demand to be baptized with the specific purpose of receiving the forgiveness of sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit. The Gentile Cornelius, in Acts 10, is promised the forgiveness of sins upon *believing*, and receives the Holy Spirit *before* he was baptized. There is nothing in Acts to contradict this as a pattern for Gentiles.<sup>13</sup> Neither Acts 2:38 nor 22:16 is binding today. They are unique to the first century Palestinian. Only in this way can we take 2:38 and 22:16 at face value and yet avoid contradicting the Gospel of justification by grace through faith alone.

## II. The Grammatical View

### Definition

A second option for Acts 22:16 may be called "The Grammatical View." This view holds that Ananias's command to Saul to wash away his sins is not grammatically related to the command to be baptized. Thus the actual washing away of Saul's sins came the moment he called in faith upon the Lord's name. This position sees baptism as a symbolic act, which depicts the cleansing. The calling upon the name, not the baptism, effected the washing away of Saul's sins.

<sup>13</sup>At first glance the case of the Ephesian believers in Acts 19:1-7 appears to be a problem. However, considering the following, it appears to fit the distinction between Palestinians and Gentiles quite well: (1) Paul assumes that, being far from Palestine in the Gentile metropolis of Ephesus, these disciples would fit the pattern of Cornelius; i.e., they should have received regeneration, the forgiveness of sins, and the gift of the Holy Spirit at the moment of faith. (2) The fact that they did not know anything about the Spirit causes Paul to probe more deeply, only to learn that these disciples had been exposed to the ministry of John the Baptist and thus come under the conditions of Acts 2:38. (3) Upon baptizing them again, Paul lays his hands upon them and they receive the Holy Spirit. (4) The Jewishness of this group is not lost on Luke, who points out that there were in all about twelve men, a number significant for Israel. This is not a contradiction of Paul's terms for salvation to the Gentiles.

## Defenders

This view is held by such Bible scholars as James D. G. Dunn, Fritz Rienecker, and Stanley D. Toussaint.<sup>14</sup>

## Defense

The argument that one is saved by “calling on the name of the Lord” rather than by water baptism is based primarily upon a grammatical argument—that the usual usage of an aorist participle indicates action preceding that of the main verb.<sup>15</sup> In this case, the aorist participle “calling” (*epikalesamenos*) would be translated “having called upon the name of the Lord, wash away your sins.” Thus, one’s sins are washed away, not by water baptism, but by the act of calling on the name of the Lord, an act usually interpreted to mean the believing or praying of the sinner for salvation. Dunn presents his evidence for this position with close attention to the grammar:

The *epikalesamenos to onoma autou* goes principally with the *apolousai tas hamartias sou*, as the balance of the sentence also suggests—*anastas . . . baptisai, apolousai, epikalesamenos*. Acts 22:16 shows that *baptizein* and *apolouein* are not synonyms. Nor is there any requirement in the text itself to take the two actions described by these verbs as causally related = be baptized and (in and by that action) have your sins washed away. They are coordinate actions, related through

<sup>14</sup>James D. G. Dunn, *Baptism in the Holy Spirit* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1970), 97-98; Fritz Rienecker, *A Linguistic Key to the Greek New Testament*, 2 volumes (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1976), 1:324; see Toussaint, “Acts,” 418.

In studying the various translations of Acts 22:16, I was surprised to find William Barclay rearranging the wording of the passage so that a grammatical interpretation was impossible: “And now, why delay? Up! Call on his name, be baptized, and wash away your sins!” William Barclay, *The New Testament: A New Translation*, volume one (New York: Collins, 1968), 244.

<sup>15</sup>See Toussaint “Acts,” 418. Eugene Van Ness Goetchius (*The Language of the New Testament* [New York: Charles Scribner’s Son, 1965], 188-90) points out that there are three usages of the aorist participle. It may refer to (1) action antecedent to that of the main verb; (2) action simultaneous to the main verb; and (3) action subsequent to that of the main verb. The position is, therefore, based upon a valid option. One question which has been asked concerns how this participle is related to the two main verbs. In *A Translator’s Handbook on the Acts of the Apostles* (New York: United Bible Society, 1972), Barclay M. Newman and Eugene A. Nida write of Acts 22:16: “The participle *by calling on his name* is an aorist participle and must be taken as action prior to the main verb or verbs with which it is connected. In the present context it is difficult to know if this participle is connected with both verbs, *be baptized* and *have your sins washed away*, or only with the latter of the two. Most translations are about as ambiguous as the Greek here” (425-26).

the *epikalesamenos ktl* [etc.]. In fact, we have once again the three elements of conversion-initiation—water-baptism, the Spirit’s cleansing, and the individual’s appeal of faith.<sup>16</sup>

## Deficiencies

A number of remarks may be made about Dunn’s defense. First, his statement that *baptizein* and *apolouein* are not causally related may be debated. It appears natural, when dealing with two imperatives, to take the second one as subordinate to the first. For example, Nathanael responds to Philip’s prejudice with “Come and see” (John 1:46). Likewise, *apolousai* is subordinate to *baptisai*, and not independent.

Secondly, it would be natural to see a relationship between “be baptized” and “wash away” in that both imply the use of water. Moreover, baptism, as a cleansing act, does have some historical support. Averbek observes:

Jdt [Judith] 12:7 and Sir [Sirach, i.e. Ecclesiasticus] 31 (34):25 are interesting in that *baptizō* is used in reference to cleansing from leitical impurity. . . . Therefore, though *baptizō* is not used in the canonical OT for cleansing from leitical impurity, it seems clear from these two texts that such was not the case later on. The association of this verb with this type of impurity may well have made itself felt in certain passages in the NT (for example, Acts 22:16).

The story of Naaman in 2 Kings 5 is well-known. V 14 reads: “So he went down and *dipped* (*ebaptisato*) himself seven times in the Jordan, according to the word of the man of God; and his flesh was restored like the flesh of a little child, and he was clean. . . .” The implications of this text for the issue of mode are obvious. However, there is another important point here. The verb *tāhēr*, “to be clean,” is regularly used to describe leitical purity and purification (see Lev. 14:20 and many other examples there and elsewhere). In fact, there is no instance where the Qal stem of this verb is used in the sense of physical cleanliness. Thus, it seems that its use in 2 Kgs. 5:14 must indicate some kind of socio-religious purity. Again, the significance of such an observation can only be appreciated when the NT text is approached with this in mind.<sup>17</sup>

One should note that “ritual cleansing” may not be identical with “symbolic cleansing.” The priests did not wash because they were clean, but became clean because of the washing (Lev 8:6; 16:4; etc., see also Ezek

<sup>16</sup>See Dunn, *Baptism in the Holy Spirit*, 98.

<sup>17</sup>Richard E. Averbek, “The Focus of Baptism in the New Testament,” *Grace Theological Journal* (Fall 1981): 271-72. The Greek and Hebrew words have been transliterated. Ed.

36:25). The same could be true of Saul. His sins were washed away (i.e., he was cleansed) at his water baptism. In light of Averbek's statement, it is also possible to understand the purpose of Saul's baptism to be for fellowship with God rather than for salvation (cf. John 13:10; 1 John 1:9).

Thirdly, Dunn's interpretation leaves the command for baptism unexplained. By separating the two imperatives *baptisai* and *apolousai*, Saul is told to be baptized, but he is not told why. It would seem natural to understand "washing" as the reason for and significance of the demand for water baptism.

Fourthly, Toussaint, taking a slightly different approach to 22:16 than does Dunn, sees Saul as coming to salvation on the Damascus Road (where he calls on the name of the Lord), while his baptism symbolically shows that his sins had been washed away.<sup>18</sup> However, the text does not indicate that baptism is a "symbol." Evangelical scholar G. R. Beasley-Murray declares:

In the light of this apostolic teaching, modern confessional watchwords about baptism like "declarative," "symbolic," "self-operative," etc., are inadequate. In Acts and the epistles baptism appears as a divine-human event, even as the "turning" to God, with which it is invariably associated, is a divine-human event.<sup>19</sup>

The "Grammatical View" is theologically correct in separating baptism from regeneration. However, it is weak in its treatment of the text of Acts 22:16. The "washing away" of sins cannot be separated from water baptism.

### III. The Ultra-Dispensational View

#### Definition

The ultra-dispensational view understands Acts 22:16 as having no relationship or bearing whatever on today's practices of water baptism. The Church was not even in existence at the start of the Book of Acts and did not come into existence until, *at least*, the conversion of Cornelius in Acts 10 (an event that occurred after the conversion of Saul).

<sup>18</sup> See Toussaint, "Acts," 418.

<sup>19</sup> G. R. Beasley-Murray, "Baptizō," *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, ed. by Colin Brown (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1971), 1:148.

#### Defenders

This view has been defended by men like Charles F. Baker, E. W. Bullinger, A. E. Knoch, and Charles Welch.<sup>20</sup>

#### Defense

Regarding Acts 22:16, the ultra-dispensationalists are usually silent or repeat their comments on Acts 2:38. Charles F. Baker writes:

As soon as Ananias had laid his hands on Saul, scales or incrustations fell from his eyes and he received his sight. Saul was then baptized. Although Saul's conversion was not the result of human preaching, but of divine intervention, it is evident that he was saved under the prevailing Kingdom program of baptism for the remission of sins. Ananias told him, "Arise, and be baptized, and wash away thy sins, calling on the name of the Lord" (Acts 22:16). He told Saul what he would have told any other Jew. Baptism under the Kingdom gospel was a washing or cleansing ceremony, the same as the many baptisms of the Old Testament (Heb 9:10). But we never read of Paul telling his Gentile converts to be baptized in order to wash away their sins, even while he was practicing baptism during the Transition period. Baptism was not a part of his commission (1 Cor. 1:17). After the Transition, Paul recognized only one baptism, that done by the Spirit (Eph. 4:5; 1 Cor. 12:13).<sup>21</sup>

#### Deficiencies

As attractive as this view may at first appear to some, it requires two different ways for regeneration—one for the Jew and another for the Gentile. The Gospel of John and Paul in Romans 4 show that regeneration and justification always occurred at the moment of faith. The "ultra-dispensational" view also believes that the Church, which is the body of Christ, is not found in Acts. Arguments against this position were stated in my previous article on Acts 2:38 and are clearly articulated

<sup>20</sup> Charles F. Baker, *Understanding the Books of Acts* (Grand Rapids: Grace Bible College Publications, 1981); E. W. Bullinger, *How to Enjoy the Bible* (London: The Lamp Press, n.d.); A. E. Knoch, *On Baptism* (Los Angeles: Concordant Publishing Concern, n.d.); and *Concordant Commentary on the New Testament* (Saugus, CA: Concordant Publishing Concern, 1968); Charles H. Welch, *An Alphabetical Analysis* (Surrey, England: Berean Publications Trust, 1955), 1:102-109.

<sup>21</sup> Charles F. Baker, *Understanding the Book of Acts*, (Grand Rapids: Grace Bible College Publications, 1981), 53. Baker is a graduate of Dallas Seminary, class of 1933. He was deeply influenced by Dr. Lewis Sperry Chafer, although he went further than Chafer on this issue.

in Charles C. Ryrie's excellent book on the subject, *Dispensationalism Today*.<sup>22</sup>

The "ultra-dispensational" view, therefore, is not without serious theological problems.

#### IV. The Transitional View

##### Definition

Those who hold this view believe that the Church, the Body of Christ, was established on the day of Pentecost (unlike the ultra-dispensational view) and that regeneration occurs at the moment of faith (as per the Gospel of John). However, for certain Palestinian Jews, exposed to the ministry of John the Baptist and also having an extra degree of guilt for actually consenting to the murder of our Lord, the extra measure of public identification with the Lord in water baptism was the condition upon which they received the forgiveness of sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit.

##### Defenders

This view has been espoused by S. Craig Glickman and Zane C. Hodges.<sup>23</sup>

##### Defense

Although not widely known, this interpretation offers some interesting insights concerning our passage.

First, this view understands Saul's experience to have some parallel to the experience of the Pentecostal audience of Acts 2. Both were regenerated by faith alone before they were baptized. The Pentecostal audience indicated their faith by their question in 2:37 ("What shall we do?"),<sup>24</sup> and Saul believed on the Damascus Road. However, both were,

<sup>22</sup> Charles Caldwell Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today*, (Chicago: Moody Press, 1965). This is a classic and a must for those who are dispensational. I encourage everyone to read it.

<sup>23</sup> Steven Craig Glickman, unpublished class notes in 903 Soteriology and Evangelism (Dallas Theological Seminary, Fall, 1982); Zane C. Hodges, *The Gospel Under Siege* (Dallas: Redención Viva, 1981); and unpublished class notes for "Acts of the Apostles," NT 227 (Dallas Theological Seminary, Fall, 1984).

<sup>24</sup> In my previous article, on Acts 2:38, I commented that one of the criticisms directed at the Transitional View is the assumption that the question of 2:37 indicates that faith was already present in some of Peter's audience. Since writing that article I found these words from the pen of, in my opinion, the prince of all theologians. Commenting on Rom 10:17 ("So then faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God"), Dr. Lewis

in spite of their faith and regeneration, unforgiven! For this reason they both needed to be water baptized. Hodges comments:

Paul, of course, had come to faith on the Damascus road and had then and there received the gift of life that is promised to faith (John 3:16 and many others). But forgiveness—i.e., the cleansing which makes intimate relations with God a moral possibility—was withheld from him until he was baptized. This is as clear as it could be from this verse, taken at face value. Moreover, it is precisely in line with the natural interpretation of Acts 2:38. From which it is necessary to conclude that those partaking of Jerusalem's and the nation's guilt in the rejection of Christ could not enter into an acceptable communion with the One they had rejected, until they acknowledged Him in the act of baptism.<sup>25</sup>

Secondly, this view sees the act of "calling on the name of the Lord" as a post-regeneration experience. This is based on Rom 10:13-15 which indicates that the act of calling on the name of the Lord occurs *after* faith. If the order of the events in Romans 10 is reversed into chronological order this becomes evident:

- (1) Sending of the preacher (v 15b)
- (2) Preaching (v 15a)
- (3) Hearing (v 14b)
- (4) Believing (v 14a)
- (5) Calling on the name of the Lord (v 13).<sup>26</sup>

Accordingly, to "call on the name of the Lord" is not the same as believing or praying for salvation, but it is something done after regenerating faith. The act of "calling on the name of the Lord" has an interesting history and, according to Hodges, is something characteristic of believers:

Paul before Festus "appealed to Caesar" (Acts 25: 11). The verb is the same as here, *epikaleomai*. (The underlying Hebrew verb *qā'ā* also had a courtroom usage, cf. Isa. 59:4 and see *BDB*, 895.) Paul thus "called

Sperry Chafer writes: "As certainly as this is true, it is the preacher's part to expect that souls will be saved *while* he is preaching, rather than after he has concluded his message and given the unsaved something to do that they may be saved. There is a public testimony on the part of those who are saved; but this should not be confused with the simple requirement that the lost may be saved by personal faith in Christ as Savior." (*Systematic Theology*, [Dallas: Dallas Theological Seminary, 1948], 3:224). (The emphasis is Chafer's.)

<sup>25</sup> Hodges, "Acts," 141.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

upon" Caesar. This was a privilege granted to citizens of Rome, but not to mere provincials. Christians became known as those who "called upon" the name of the Lord Jesus Christ (cf. Acts 9:14, 21; 1 Cor. 1:2). Christians recognized a higher authority than Caesar and a greater throne than his. They were citizens of a heavenly city; and just as the Roman citizen appealed over the head of subordinate judges, so Christians appealed over the head of every earthly judge to the Judge of all. Their Lord and Savior sat on the right hand of the majesty on high. (Likewise, we, in time of need, can appeal above earthly justice, or above the circumstances of life; we call on the name of the Lord.) Stephen (Acts 7:59) is the first illustration of this privilege. Condemned and executed by a court of earth, he appealed for acceptance in the presence of a higher Judge. . . Thus, "calling on the name of the Lord" is viewed in the relevant passages in Acts as a characteristic activity of believers, perhaps beginning at baptism (cf. 22:16). It is people who do this that will be "saved" from the impending catastrophes.<sup>27</sup>

Therefore, to call upon the name of the Lord may be a prayer which one makes after regeneration or even at the time of one's baptism. To call on the name of the Lord is not the act that makes one born again. Faith, not calling, is needed for regeneration.

Thirdly, this view understands 22:16 in light of 2:38. As stated earlier in this article, the conversion of Saul is recorded by Luke on three occasions (Acts 9, 22, and 26). However, only once, in 22:16, do we learn of the command to be baptized and wash away sins. It is perhaps due to Luke's artistry as a writer that he waited until this context to include that command in the narrative. If Acts 2:38 has special relevance to those in Palestine, then it is not surprising that such terms are not mentioned on any of Paul's missionary journeys. In fact, no Gentile is ever explicitly told to be baptized for the remission of sins.<sup>28</sup> However, when Paul is back in Jerusalem, addressing the same general crowd who received the Pentecostal commands of 2:38, he repeats the same terms. This fits the pattern of the Transitional View that Palestinians shared in a special guilt for having crucified their Messiah and needed to change their behavior (i.e., repent and be baptized) in order to receive both the forgiveness of

their sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit.<sup>29</sup> Thus, 22:16 is consistent with the Palestinian context of Acts 2:38, but not with the Gentile requirement of faith (Acts 10:43; 16:31).

### Deficiencies

Since this view has not had a wide reading, its deficiencies are not found in the commentary tradition (but then again, *nothing much* is listed in the commentary tradition on this thorny passage!) Some will object to this view that it should at least be viewed with suspicion, and others will posit that it should be rejected entirely because it is "new." However, as we have attempted to demonstrate in this article, to reject this view leaves us with an old, unsolved problem. *Any* solution to this verse is going to be new because the old views do not answer this particular problem.

However, the strengths of this position which particularly appeal to me, coming as I do from a Churches of Christ background, are considerable. Like the Sacramentarian View, this view lets the grammar of the verse stand at face value. However, unlike the Sacramentarian View, this view avoids the serious objection that such a reading of the text makes regeneration a matter of faith plus works. By noting that forgiveness of sins is not necessarily a synonym for regeneration or justification, this interpretation is able to maintain consistency with the Gospel of John, Romans 4, and Eph 2:1-10.

Also, this position has additional strength in that it attempts to treat these passages in light of the structure and transitional nature of the entire Book of Acts, with special attention to where these commands are made. In this it shows a consistency in both theological and literary structure.

I have found in fundamentalism/evangelicalism a kind of patchwork consistency in answers treating Acts 2:38, 22:16, and 1 Pet 3:21. One verse is handled one way, a second verse is handled a different way, and a third verse is handled in yet another way. But there is no "lining up the ducks in a row." In baseball language, I feel that for the most part we in evangelicalism, knowing that we cannot hit a home run—i.e., handle clearly and cleanly the subject of salvation and water baptism as found

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 10-11.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 58. Hodges notes: "At Caesarea, the Holy Spirit is bestowed on believing Gentiles, not yet baptized. Cf. 10:44-48. No Gentile exceptions are noted by Luke in the remainder of Acts, so that in Cornelius Luke no doubt sees normative Gentile experience."

<sup>29</sup> The Churches of Christ assume that Acts 2:38 is *normative* for the entire book of Acts. This misses the transitional nature of Acts. Acts 2 is the pattern for Palestinians to receive the gifts of forgiveness and the Holy Spirit. Cornelius (Acts 10) is the pattern for the Gentiles and those living outside the land of Palestine and never exposed to the ministries of John the Baptist and the Lord Jesus. For the case of the Ephesian disciples of John, see fn. 13.

in these verses—are content merely to hit foul balls until the conversation moves to a subject we can really talk about! This was frustrating to me as I was sincerely seeking the truth when in the Churches of Christ; it is still frustrating to me after having left. Furthermore, we shouldn't expect people who hold the Churches of Christ view to switch very readily to our view of salvation by grace through faith alone when they can handle these passages in a consistent, straightforward manner, while our interpretations often are in such a state of disarray!

In short, this view has all of the strengths of the Sacramentarian View, yet avoids its weaknesses.

## V. Conclusion

In this article we have briefly examined Acts 22:16. While little has been written on this passage within the commentary tradition, it has been possible to examine four basic views.

First, the *Sacramentarian View* was examined. It has some grammatical strength, but a critical theological weakness.

Secondly, the *Grammatical View* was examined. It suffers because it takes the grammar of 22:16 a bit “woodenly,” and misunderstands the nature of “calling on the name of the Lord.” However, it does attempt to maintain justification by faith.

Thirdly, we examined the *Ultra-Dispensational View*. It has grammatical strength, but a theological weakness, leaving itself open to the charge of teaching two ways of salvation—faith alone for the Gentiles, but faith plus water baptism for the Jews.

Lastly, we examined the position held by this writer, the *Transitional View*. It attempts to take the grammar at face value and maintain justification by faith by recognizing three things:

- (1) That the forgiveness of sins is not in all circumstances a synonym for justification or regeneration.
- (2) That calling on the name of the Lord is something a believer, already regenerated, does.
- (3) That Acts 2:38 and 22:16 are of one cloth, each reflecting a unique situation which is not duplicated today and which does not affect the message which *Paul himself* preached to the Gentiles: that justification is by grace alone through faith alone.