A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics)
Lesson 10.3 – The Doctrine of Baptism

Baptism as a Work of God, Not as a Work of Man

One of the reasons many Protestants do not believe that baptism conveys the forgiveness of sins is that they think of baptism as a work of man. They say that we are saved by faith in Christ, not by works, and, therefore, we cannot be saved by baptism. If baptism were a work of man, they would be correct. It is certainly true that we are saved by faith in Christ, not by works. But baptism is not a work of man; it is a work of God. Submitting to baptism is not a matter of obedience to God's law. Baptism itself is the Gospel – the forgiveness of sins extended to sinners because of Christ's atoning death on the cross. Baptism is a work of God in which God, in His grace, gives the forgiveness of sins through the Word of Gospel connected to the earthly element of water.

The apostle Paul specifically tells us in his letter to Titus that baptism is a work of God, not a work of man: **"For we ourselves were also once foolish, disobedient, deceived, serving various lusts and pleasures, living in malice and envy, hateful and hating one another. But when the kindness and <u>the love of God our Savior toward man</u> appeared, <u>not by works</u> of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy <u>He saved us</u>, through the washing of regeneration and renewing <u>of the Holy Spirit</u>, whom <u>He poured out</u> abundantly through Jesus Christ our Savior, that having been justified <u>by His grace</u> we should become heirs according to the hope of eternal life"** (Titus 3:3-7). Notice how the underlined phrases in the above passage emphasize that baptism is a work of God's grace. The Holy Spirit is at work in baptism to do that work that God wants Him to do.

Nevertheless, baptism should not be considered an automatic ticket to heaven, as though all baptized persons will attain eternal life because of their baptism. Baptism, just like the Gospel Word, is an act or promise of God that we need to receive through faith (trust) in God's promise. God gives forgiveness of sins in baptism and the only way to receive this gift of God is by faith (or trust) in it. For this reason, the author of the letter to the Hebrews warns: **"Beware, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief in departing from the living God"** (Hebrews 3:12). God promises and gives forgiveness, but in our sinful condition we have the power to reject God's gift of forgiveness in unbelief. In the same letter to the Hebrews we read: **"For indeed the gospel was preached to us as well as to them; but the word which they heard did not profit them, not being mixed with faith in those who heard it"** (Hebrews 4:2). For this very reason Jesus did not say: "He who is baptized shall be saved", but He said: **"He who <u>believes</u> and is baptized will be saved; but he who <u>does not believe</u> will be condemned"** (Mark 16:16).

The Roman Catholic Church incorrectly teaches that baptism is effective even without faith. They use the Latin expression *"ex opere operato"*, which means "from the work performed". By this, they mean that baptism always accomplishes what God wants it to accomplish simply because the external act was performed. Nevertheless, in their view baptism gives only forgiveness of past sins and gives no assurance of forgiveness for sins committed after baptism.

The Holy Spirit conveys not only total forgiveness of sins through baptism, but also the power to fight against sin and win, for baptism is the Holy Spirit's washing of regeneration and renewal (Titus 3:5). The apostle Paul wrote to the Christians in Rome: **"Do you not know that as many of us as were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death? Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so**

we also should walk <u>in newness of life</u>" (Romans 6:3-4). In baptism, Paul says, **"our old man was crucified with Him, that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should <u>no longer</u> be <u>slaves of sin</u>. For he who has died has been freed from sin... Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body, that you should obey it in its lusts"** (Romans 6:6-12). This is why the world-renowned hymn "Rock of Ages" includes this prayer: "Let the water and the blood From Thy riven side which flowed Be of sin <u>the double cure</u>, Cleanse me from <u>its guilt and power</u>" *(The Lutheran Hymnal*, #376:1). God through baptism gives us the double cure of sin: forgiveness of the guilt of sin and also the power to fight and win against sin.

Questions

1. Why do most Protestants think that baptism cannot give the forgiveness of sin?
2. Why is it important to understand that baptism is a work of God, not of man?
3. How does Paul stress that baptism as a work of God in Titus 3?
4. Why is it wrong to teach that baptism is an automatic ticket to heaven?
5. What is the role of faith in baptism?
6. What else does God give us in baptism, besides the forgiveness of sin?
7. How can we lose the blessings God gives us through baptism?