

# An Explanation of the Focus of My Writings

© December 20, 2002 by Bernie L. Gillespie All Rights Reserved.

But sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts, always being ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you, yet with gentleness and reverence; (1 Peter 3: 15 NAS)

Much of my earliest writing is focused on my former understanding of water baptism, which is the current view held by the UPCI and many Oneness Pentecostal churches. I receive many questions in other areas of concern about the UPCI teaching. Some question my approach to challenging the UPCI distinctives. For example, some ask why I have not addressed the UPCI views on the Godhead, Holiness, and organizational authoritarianism, et. al. The reason is that I believe that the *most urgent issue is salvation*. It is the subject of atonement, the work of Christ for our forgiveness, which holds first place in my thoughts. That does not mean that the other topics are not vital and significant. It only means that I have chosen to start where I believe the Gospel is the most immediately violated. I believe that it is in water baptism that the errors of the UPCI teaching about atonement, salvation and justification can be the most easily identified and hopefully understood. Please let me explain.

## **UPCI Water Baptism & Justification**

*I do not believe that most in the UPCI will ever understand the biblical meaning of justification by faith as long as they are convinced that water baptism is the means of sin's remission.* This is a cardinal doctrine for the UPCI and I know that, in their eyes, I tread on sacred ground. But the truth of God's Word demands that we inspect even the most sacred of doctrines. It is no different for us to examine the UPCI view of baptismal remission than it is for those in the UPCI to regularly discredit those who preach salvation by faith. Each believes the issue of truth and salvation is at stake. They are. It is the UPCI understanding of

### **Explanation of the Focus of My Writings**

© December 20, 2002 by Bernie L. Gillespie All Rights Reserved.

baptismal remission - the remission of sins by the act of baptism - that obscures the biblical teaching of justification by faith from their theology.

The UPCI view of water baptism is much like the Roman Catholic view of the Mass and Rome's corresponding position on justification. In their teaching on baptism and the Mass, Rome obscures the literal remission which occurs at the Cross with the *ceremonial or figurative portrayal* of remission in the Lord's Supper and water baptism. As long as Rome teaches that the Mass is a fresh sacrifice of Christ for the forgiveness of our sins, it will continue to miss the importance of the once-for-all-time, objective sacrifice of Jesus outside of the believer. Jesus said, "It is finished." Christ's work does not need to be finished by either water baptism or the Mass. Nevertheless, the doctrine of the Mass works to keep Roman Catholics from a proper biblical framework for understanding the true nature of justification. The same happens with the UPCI and their view of water baptism.

### **How We Think About What We Believe**

For the UPCI, the view of water baptism in the name of Jesus<sup>1</sup> stands against the biblical view of justification. It under cuts the finished work of Jesus Christ for our salvation. I acknowledge that nearly all UPCI members would challenge my statement, because they would say they believe in the finished work of Christ and believe that salvation is through Christ alone. A number of their teachers would say that *they* teach the biblical view of justification. I must say, in fairness, that belief in the

---

<sup>1</sup>My quarrel is not with water baptism (immersion), nor is it with the use of the name of Jesus in baptism. Nor do I say that water baptism is optional. It is an obligation for all who believe in Christ alone. All believers are commanded to be baptized. It is the specific meaning that water baptism has in the Oneness scheme - that their view is the only one and that all others are not saved who don't follow it - that I question.

### Explanation of the Focus of My Writings

© December 20, 2002 by Bernie L. Gillespie All Rights Reserved.

finished work of Christ<sup>2</sup> is the explicit teaching of those in the UPCI. I would qualify that they believe it on one level and not on another. The issue goes much deeper than statements of faith. It goes to the level of *how people think about what they believe*.

*How people in the UPCI think about water baptism shapes how they think about all other biblical teaching.* My main point is that their way of understanding water baptism creates a “cast of mind” or interpretive viewpoint that obstructs or impedes their ability to grasp and appreciate the significance of the biblical teaching of justification. To say it more concisely: *Their thinking about water baptism blinds them to the meaning of justification.*

Some of my friends and relatives say, “Why make a big deal over justification? Why the complicated theology? The Bible says be baptized in Jesus’ name for the remission of sins. That’s all that I need to know.” That may be the sentiment of some who read this article. We need to recognize that the Bible says much more about the remission of sins than one finds in Acts 2:38. There are many other verses that tell us the remission of sins is accomplished at the Cross and we must receive it by faith in Christ. A great many Christians do not read Acts 2:38 the way the UPCI does. No biblical commentators (outside of Oneness circles) throughout Church history interpret Acts 2:38 as do Oneness Pentecostals. It isn’t as simple as “The Bible says.” We can believe what the Bible says is true. But, we need to then understand what it *means*. One can believe the Bible without understanding it properly.

---

<sup>2</sup>Oneness Pentecostals descend from the branch of Pentecostalism known as “finished work.” These were Pentecostals lead by William H. Durham out of “entire sanctification,” Holiness Pentecostalism through his teaching on the finished work of Christ. While the Oneness Pentecostal are in the lineage of “finished work” Pentecostalism, they do not believe and teach the finished work of Christ as Durham taught it. They have redefined it to conform to their theology.

### Explanation of the Focus of My Writings

© December 20, 2002 by Bernie L. Gillespie All Rights Reserved.

## Everyone Interprets the Bible

Those in the UPCI often fail to miss the extremely important reality that they *interpret* the Bible just as much as any other Christian group. Many take the position that they are just taking the Bible literally or by what it plainly states. They completely ignore the fact that they read the Bible in a specific way and that way of reading the Bible is an interpretive “screen” through which they filter the words of the Bible. They do not merely “take it literally.” They interpret it. Following the truth of Scripture involves more than “The Bible said it, I believe it.” It also involves “I believe this is what the Bible is saying.” Those who miss this distinction are regularly ignorant of their own presumptions and tend to be arrogant about their own limited (and often erroneous) understanding.<sup>3</sup>

A perfect example of what I mean is the disparity between the UPCI belief in the finished work of Christ and their view of water baptism. William H. Durham, who was the seminal advocate for the finished work of Christ in the early Pentecostal movement, wrote that:

The doctrine of the Finished Work, brings us back to the simple plan of salvation. Christ died for us. He became a substitute for every one of us; for He tasted death for every man. Here is a truth so simple and yet so great that it is wonderful. We are not saved simply because we are forgiven our sins. We are saved through identification with our Savior Substitute, Jesus Christ. We are given life because He died for us and rose again. But some one may ask. “How do we become identified with our Substitute?” We answer, “By faith alone.”<sup>4</sup>

The UPCI fails to understand the “finished work” teaching which is their heritage. This very significant forefather of their faith taught them

---

<sup>3</sup>For more on this link to <http://www.inchristalone.org/HowWeRead.htm>

<sup>4</sup>William H. Durham, *Pentecostal Testimony*, Vol. II., No. II, [May?], 1912, p. 2., Courtesy Flower Pentecostal Heritage Center.

### **Explanation of the Focus of My Writings**

© December 20, 2002 by Bernie L. Gillespie All Rights Reserved.

that salvation come by faith alone. They have reinterpreted his teaching to mean something other than what he intended. I believe David Bernard has misinterpreted what Durham taught.<sup>5</sup>

If Jesus' death on the Cross *was* the finished work, then why do we need a practice, rite, or action which we must do in order to make Christ's sacrifice personally effective or complete? The Bible teaches that we are to believe on the one and only sacrifice of the Cross and look no where else for forgiveness. But, in the UPCI thinking one must look not only to Calvary but to their baptism for their remission. In fact, for the UPCI, looking to Calvary will not remit your sins, only being baptized will.

### **Faith in Jesus Shifted to Baptism**

Every single time a person is taught to look to water baptism for forgiveness, their eyes and faith are taken off Christ, even if it is just a small amount. In that event, *the Cross of Christ is lessened and something is taken away from the Gospel that is essential*. I am not talking about a little matter here. This is very serious. Whenever we teach anything which takes away from direct faith in the work of Christ on the Cross, we have made it less than God intends. Just as the Roman Catholic Mass takes away from the finished work of Christ, so does the UPCI practice of water baptism. It is ironic that Rome, *and the UPCI* believe they are taking a stronger stand for truth by what they teach. Nevertheless, it is the very opposite that results. Notice how many in the UPCI do not even have a clue about the biblical doctrine of justification. Over and over I talk with people from the UPCI who, not only don't know what justification is, but don't have the faintest idea of why I would even be interested in it. This testifies to what happens to the doctrine of

---

<sup>5</sup>David K. Bernard, *A History of Christian Doctrine: The Twentieth Century A. D. 1900-200*, (Hazelwood: Word Aflame Press, 1999), pp. 43-58.

### **Explanation of the Focus of My Writings**

© December 20, 2002 by Bernie L. Gillespie All Rights Reserved.

justification when believers' eyes are detracted, by something so godly as baptism, from full attention to the Cross.

I believe that making water baptism for the forgiveness of sins, although it is done in sincerity and with the utmost respect and love for God, is a violation of the Gospel of Christ. It diminishes the meaning, power and truth of what Jesus did when he died for our salvation. *I say this with profound care and deep sense of gravity.* One should not take the matter of water of baptism casually. How we understand and practice water baptism is very serious. Most Oneness preachers are very adamant about their view on water baptism. They say, "This is our message. This is our day. We need to tell the world about this message." They say that it is a truth that they will never back away from and that they will declare it as long as they live. I admire their dedication and commitment. They believe in truth and that is so rare today, even among Christians! I desire to take nothing away from their passion and zeal. But I must respond to that passion and say that we who believe it should be just as firm, passionate and unwavering about the Gospel and the meaning of justification by faith.

It is the Cross of Jesus which is our message and not a specific form of baptism. We are to fight, campaign for and defend the truth of justification by faith – the forgiveness of sins through faith in Christ. This is the Gospel. And to be faithful to that Gospel we must reject any other doctrine or teaching which diminishes it, even if it is one taught by those we love, admire and who worship our Lord.

### **Water Baptism is a Serious Matter**

I know some who have left Oneness churches who now have a cavalier attitude about baptism, saying that, since it is not for salvation, it does not make a difference how you are baptized. I would strongly disagree. You are expressing your faith when you are baptized – even

### Explanation of the Focus of My Writings

© December 20, 2002 by Bernie L. Gillespie All Rights Reserved.

when you do not know why you are being baptized. If you are baptized believing that your sins are remitted by the act of baptism and not by the finished work of Christ on the Cross, you are making a serious doctrinal statement. Water baptism *in order to obtain forgiveness* is a violation of the Gospel itself. Do not believe it is a casual matter that makes little difference. The UPCI is right about the fact that water baptism is a most serious thing. It is. However, it is all-important for the opposite reason that they teach. It is *not because one will miss salvation* because their sins are not remitted through baptism. It is because *they may miss salvation by looking to baptism for forgiveness, rather than only to the work of the Cross*. Water baptism should never undercut the sufficiency and finality of the Cross. On this point we cannot move.

The current and future generations of the UPCI will always resist and denounce the biblical view of justification. One of the main reasons is that biblical justification does not allow for baptismal regeneration. But, the UPCI hangs its entire identity on that teaching. The new understanding of the name of Jesus that was developed in the thinking and ministry of Frank J. Ewart<sup>6</sup> (c. 1913) and later by G. T. Haywood (1915) possessed a certain logic. What began as a discovery of water baptism in the name of Jesus only (rather than the Trinity), became a discovery of "Jesus" as the true, saving name of God. They said, if the name of God is Jesus, and salvation comes through Jesus name, then water baptism must be saving because salvation is only through Jesus name (Acts 4:12). The logic continues: since Acts 2:38 mentions remission in conjunction with

---

<sup>6</sup>I believe it was Frank J. Ewart who first formulated the fundamental Oneness Pentecostal distinctives of Jesus as the true "Name of God," baptism in the name of Jesus only for the remission of sins, and the Oneness of God theology. I am working on a book that will show that Ewart was primarily inspired to these teachings by the writings of William Phillips Hall who proposed them prior to Ewart.

### **Explanation of the Focus of My Writings**

© December 20, 2002 by Bernie L. Gillespie All Rights Reserved.

baptism, then it appeared to early Oneness believers that water baptism must be for the forgiveness of sins.<sup>7</sup>

Not much later, the discovery of Jesus' name baptism for the remission of sins moved to a discovery that Jesus was the only Person in the Godhead. This led an entire movement of Pentecostals into an anti-trinitarian theology. Much more, this led a whole movement into a depreciation and eventual neglect of the doctrine of justification by faith. The trajectory away from justification by faith began with the emphasis on water baptism as the means for remitting sin. Today, this doctrine is totally effaced among Oneness members, save for misguided attempts to redefine it as obedience to Acts 2:38.

It is their unique view of water baptism that most informs the theology of Oneness Pentecostals. It is their view of water baptism that most influences how they understand or don't understand justification by faith. That is why I have written so much on both subjects. I intend to address in future writings a number of other subjects, such as the UPCI teaching of the Nature of God, Holiness, and Spirit-baptism. All of these beliefs are rooted in the touchstone issue of water baptism, and how this issue shapes their view of the nature of the atonement and justification.

It is not our desire to simply attack what others believe. It is far more important than that. To challenge a movement's thinking about salvation and present penetrating questions about their fundamental convictions is an immense task. It is so difficult and demanding that it would be much easier to let it go and move on with the understanding God has given me. But I care. I have friends and loved ones in the UPCI. I care about those who were just as I once was (not that I am a better person now than they are). Every single person in the UPCI is important. Written

---

<sup>7</sup>This was the basis for the "New Issue" controversy that hit the Assemblies of God in 1915-16.

### **Explanation of the Focus of My Writings**

© December 20, 2002 by Bernie L. Gillespie All Rights Reserved.

words could not express the feelings I have about that. Their salvation means the utmost to God. And I believe that so many of them love God and are just as devoted to truth as anyone. But, *zeal is not the Gospel!*

Brethren, my heart's desire and prayer to God for Israel is, that they might be saved. For I bear them record that they have a zeal of God, but not according to knowledge. For they being ignorant of God's righteousness, and going about to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted themselves unto the righteousness of God. For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to every one that believeth. (Romans 10:1-4 KJV).

We must have the Gospel right! This is all that ultimately matters. That is why it is our whole-hearted commitment to speak out wherever and whenever the meaning and power of the Gospel of Christ is wrongly defined, subverted or depreciated, even if it is among our friends and loved-ones. This is the reason for the focus of my writing.