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AN INTERPRETATION OF ROMANS 6:3-4

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BY

DANIEL L. ARTER

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Introduction

The primary thrust of argument in Romans 6 is that those who claim to be genuine believers in Jesus Christ ought not continue to live in their sin, but rather, they ought to eschew or reject their former sinful desires because they have been baptized into Christ Jesus. (Rom 6:1-14). Romans 6:3-4, which is the focus of this essay, is a statement in the midst of Paul's argument concerning the change within a believer's relationship with sin, which motivates their rejection of their sinful desires. And Paul makes it abundantly clear in this text that the primary motivation to reject their sinful desires is their baptism into Jesus Christ.¹ Despite the primary point of Romans 6 not being baptism, there is significant truth concerning baptism that can and should be learned from the text. Because of the nature of the text and its position within Paul's writing to the Romans, what it teaches about baptism is important and worth exploring in greater detail. It is the assertion of this essay that Romans 6:3-4's use of baptism in conjunction with Jesus Christ's death, burial, and resurrection is not just symbolic, but rather, it is a representative action of the spiritual reality that has taken place in the life of the baptized believer, which also unites the one being baptized into Jesus Christ's death, burial, and resurrection. To prove this assertion, this essay will analyze the text of Romans 6:3-4. It will analyze the text including its grammar usage, historical-cultural context, and any literary or lexical issues that are pertinent in the text. The essay will then give a brief survey of various historical interpretations of Romans 6:3-4 throughout church history before concluding with the essay's author's interpretation of the text of Romans 6:3-4.

¹ Guy Prentiss Waters, *A Biblical-Theological Introduction to the New Testament: The Gospel Realized*, ed. Michael J. Kruger (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016), 187.

Analysis of Romans 6:3-4

Grammatical Analysis

In Romans 6:3-4 the author utilizes both rhetorical questioning as well as vivid imagery to make his argument. The rhetorical question is found in v. 3, “do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?”² The implication in the wording of the text is that Paul assumes that the readers already know some of the truth stated in vv. 3-4; and really, that they already know some of the truths given through the end of the pericope.³ What Paul is stating in Romans 6 is not new knowledge, but a reminder of what they ought to already know. Verse 3’s rhetorical question finds its reason in v. 4 as noted by the “therefore.”⁴ Thus, the concept is that they should already know the meaning of their baptism and how it both symbolizes certain realities in their spiritual life as well as how it represents their union with Jesus Christ.⁵

In Romans 6:3-4, Paul utilizes the imagery of baptism to show how the individual is united to Jesus Christ in His death, burial, and resurrection.⁶ It is this union with Christ that provides Paul’s overarching argument that they should no longer live in the sin that they have now died to (Rom 6:1-2).⁷ It is important to realize that Paul does not view baptism as a purely

² Unless otherwise specified, all Bible references in this paper are to the English Standard Version (ESV) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016).

³ C.E.B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, International Critical Commentary (New York, NY: T&T Clark International, 2004), 1:301.

⁴ Richard N. Longenecker, *The Epistle to the Romans: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary, ed. I. Howard Marshall and Donald A. Hagner (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2016), 607.

⁵ Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans*, 2nd ed., Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, ed. Robert W. Yarbrough and Joshua W. Jipp (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic: A Division of Baker Publishing Group, 2018), 309-310.

⁶ Ibid.

symbolic event, but rather, he argues that baptism is the means through which a believer is united with Jesus Christ.⁸ This idea of a genuine union with Jesus Christ is then expounded through the rest of the pericope (Rom 6:5-14), which again, emphasizes that baptism is more than just a symbolic event, rather that baptism is an event in which the believer shares in Jesus Christ's death, burial, and resurrection.⁹

In conjunction with the idea of baptism, Paul uses the concepts of death, burial, and resurrection to explain the believer's new position in life through Jesus Christ.¹⁰ The imagery shown in water baptism by immersion physically represents the believer's spiritual death to sin and newness of life (Rom 6:4-10).¹¹ This means that the physical action of baptism has a visual component that represents the person's death to sin—the submersion under water, and their newness of life—the pulling of the person above the water; and this physical action reveals a spiritual reality in the life of the genuinely converted.

Historical-Cultural Analysis

Romans is a letter authored by the Apostle Paul (Rom 1:1) and despite the previous denial of Pauline authorship concerning Romans, most scholars today do not dispute Paul's authorship of Romans.¹² In fact, D.A. Carson and Douglas Moo argue that there are no

⁷ Charles Hodge, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids, MI: Louis Kregel, 1882), 301.

⁸ Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1996), 362-363.

⁹ Barclay Moon Newman and Eugene Albert Nida, *A Handbook on Paul's Letter to the Romans*, UBS Handbook Series (New York, NY: United Bible Societies, 1973), 113.

¹⁰ James D. G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (New York, NY: T&T Clark, 2003), 447-448.

¹¹ G.R. Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament* (1962; repr. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1994), 139.

significant claims to the denial of Pauline authorship today.¹³ This is bolstered in early church history, in that the Apostolic Fathers utilized the letter and frequently cited it as Paul's letter to the Romans without doubt.¹⁴ However, there is a question concerning how much of Romans was dictated to Paul's amanuensis, Tertius (Rom 16:22) versus how much freedom Tertius had in writing the letter.¹⁵ While there is no way for modern readers to know for sure, there is consensus that the majority of Romans was dictated based on Paul's other writings and the shared style and semantic range.¹⁶ The fact that Romans appears to be mostly dictated adds importance to the letter itself. The Apostle Paul thought that the letter to the Romans was vitally important, which is why he dictated the letter to Tertius in a clear and methodical way.¹⁷

Romans 1:7 clearly states that the letter was written "to all those in Rome who are loved by God and called to be saints," which provides both the letter's destination and audience. Paul's letter is written to the Roman church, which had a mixed population of Gentiles and Jewish believers.¹⁸ Some scholars argue for a mostly Gentile composition of believers based on the expulsion of Jewish people from Rome in 49AD, written about in Acts 18:2, but the church's overall composition is unclear.¹⁹ At times Paul appears to speak directly to the Jewish believers

¹² Charles D. Myers Jr., "Romans, Epistle to the," *The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1992), 5:816.

¹³ D.A. Carson and Douglas J. Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 2nd ed., (1992; repr. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005), 393.

¹⁴ Cranfield, 2.

¹⁵ Schreiner, 2-3.

¹⁶ Robert H. Mounce, *Romans*, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1995), 22.

¹⁷ Schreiner, 2-3.

¹⁸ Donald Guthrie, "Romans, Epistle to The," *New Bible Dictionary*, 3rd ed. (1997 repr. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2007) 1024.

¹⁹ James D.G. Dunn, "Romans, Letters to The," *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, ed. Gerald F. Hawthorne, Ralph P. Martin, and Daniel G. Reid (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993) 839.

(Rom 2:17; 3:9; 7:1), but in other instances, he speaks directly to the Gentile believers (Rom 1:13; 11:13).²⁰ It is assumed that Paul did not plant the church in Rome,²¹ which then informs the motivation behind the letter to the Romans—to provide a fully worked-out statement of the faith and a comprehensive apology for the Gospel.²²

The dating of Romans is approximately 55AD.²³ At the time of authorship, Paul is traveling to Jerusalem (Rom 15:25) during a time in which he felt as if his missionary work in the east had been completed (Rom 15:19-23).²⁴ Some argue that the provenance of the letter is Corinth, which is based on the greeting sent by Gaius through Paul's writing of Romans 16:23.²⁵ Paul stayed with Gaius during one of his missionary journeys. It is the dating of Romans that provides the context for the mostly Gentile audience of the church in Rome because of the expulsion of the Jewish believers in Acts 18:2.

Literary Analysis

As an epistle, Romans has interpretational difficulties associated with its genre. All New Testament letters are occasional, which means that the modern interpreter needs to understand the occasion for the letter to the Romans before deriving their own application.²⁶ In the case of

²⁰ Walter A. Elwell and Barry J. Beitzel, "Romans, Letter to The," *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1988) 2:1863-1864.

²¹ Mounce, 24.

²² Dunn, *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, 840-841.

²³ Leon Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 1988), 6.

²⁴ Cranfield, 12.

²⁵ Colin G. Kruse, *Paul's Letter to the Romans*, ed. D.A. Carson, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company 2012), 12.

²⁶ J. Scott Duvall and J. Daniel Hays, *Grasping God's Word: A Hands-On Approach to Reading, Interpreting, and Applying the Bible*, 4th ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2020), 260.

Romans, there is a debate concerning the occasion of the letter over what reason has primacy.²⁷ Dunn argues that the letter to the Romans has a missionary focus, apologetics focus, and a pastoral focus.²⁸ Some commentators argue that the primary focus of Paul's letter was mission—he was preparing to travel west.²⁹ Morris mentions that some argue that Romans serves a primarily didactic purpose in that it simply lays out a comprehensive statement of faith for believers.³⁰ Schreiner makes a compelling case that the primary focus on Romans is three-fold. In his explanation for the purpose of Romans, he explains that Romans was written to unify the church, to bring the Gospel to Spain, and ultimately, to bring glory to God.³¹ Considering all that Romans includes and states about itself, it seems most probable that Paul was writing a compendium of Christian belief to lay the foundation for future missionary journeys from Rome to Spain.

If Paul is writing Romans primarily to prepare a foundation, then it makes sense that he would argue against a potential misunderstanding concerning grace in Romans 6:1-14. In its context, Paul is laying out the teaching that all are unrighteous sinners (Rom 1:18-32), that God is righteous in judgment (Rom 2:1-11), that ethnicity does not provide favor (Rom 3:9-20), and that salvation is purely through faith alone (Rom 3:21-5:21). It is in this context that Paul then appeals to their death in sin and newness of life as reason to not continue in sin (Rom 6:1-14), which is seen in and through their baptism (Rom 6:3-4). The foundational element in Romans 6

²⁷ James D.G. Dunn, *Romans 1-8*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas, TX: Word, Incorporated, 1988), 38a:IV.

²⁸ Dunn, *Romans 1-8*, liv-lviii.

²⁹ Cranfield, 22; Mounce, 26-27; Morris, 17-18.

³⁰ Morris, 8.

³¹ Schreiner, 22-26.

is tied to the overarching theme of the letter, which is the Gospel itself.³² Paul's primary thrust of argumentation in Romans 6 is that those who have been genuinely saved through faith in Jesus Christ ought to stop living in their sin because they have been united to Jesus Christ and His death, burial, and resurrection through their baptism. The overarching idea is that through baptism, believers are dead to their sins and alive in Jesus Christ.³³

There is one textual issue found in Romans 6:3-4 and it concerns οὗν in v. 4. *The Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* states that there is an omission of οὗν in the Peshitta Syriac version and other witnesses, while the Old Latin versions, as well as the early church father, Origen replace οὗν with γάρ.³⁴ Ultimately, the difference between οὗν, which is translated as *therefore* and γάρ, which can be translated as *for* is near inconsequential and would not affect the actual meaning of the text. Regardless, both the United Bible Societies and Longenecker argue that the manuscript evidence strongly supports οὗν, which would then tie vv. 3 and 4 together in a more apparent way.³⁵ This connection between the two verses gives the explanation as to the meaning of and purpose for baptism. Through baptism, the believer is united or connected to Jesus Christ.

Lexical Analysis

In this text, there are three words that are translated in different ways that changes the meaning of the passage. In all three cases, the change is not significant enough to necessarily be

³² Moo, 29.

³³ Mounce, 149.

³⁴ Bruce Manning Metzger, United Bible Societies, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament, Second Edition a Companion Volume to the United Bible Societies' Greek New Testament (4th Rev. Ed.)* (New York, NY: United Bible Societies, 1994), 453.

³⁵ Longenecker, 607.

doctrinally detrimental—none of the differences significantly influences any particular doctrine of great importance in Christianity. The first word is *baptizo*, which is translated as baptized in every translation except for the New Living Translation (NLT), which renders *baptizo* in different ways. The NLT renders *baptizo* as “or have you forgotten that when we were *joined* with Christ Jesus in *baptism*, we *joined* him in his death?”³⁶ The issue really is that *baptize* is a transliteration of *baptism* and in this instance, though the NLT is correct in its meaning, Paul does seem to be utilizing the word for a reason beyond just meaning. Paul is utilizing the imagery of a shared baptism with Christ to argue for union with Him and His death, burial, and resurrection (Rom 6:5-11). By choosing not to utilize the transliterated *baptize*, the NLT diminishes the imagery that Paul uses; and ultimately, the imagery helps to deliver the point that Paul is making—the believer has been united to Jesus Christ, His death, burial, and resurrection through the physical ritual of Christian baptism through immersion in water.

The next word in question is *dia*, which can be translated as *through*, *because of*, or *by*. In the case of Romans 6:3-4, it is translated as *by* (ESV, KJV, NLT, CSB) and *through* (NASB, NIV, LSB). Though the difference is slight, it does change the meaning of the text. If Christ was raised *by* the glory of the Father, this implies that God’s glory is the means through which Jesus was raised. If Christ was raised *through* the glory of the Father, this implies that the resurrection was done by way of God’s glory. Again, a slight difference, but it is the difference between God’s glory being the power for the resurrection and God’s glory being the way through which the resurrection was accomplished. Judging by the surrounding context and Scripture’s use of God’s glory throughout the Bible, it does make sense for God’s glory to be the power for the resurrection itself.

³⁶ Romans 6:3-4, New Living Translation (NLT) (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2015).

The last word in question is *doxa*, which is translated as *glory* in every translation except for the NLT, which translates v. 4, “And just as Christ was raised from the dead by the *glorious power* of the Father, now we also may live new lives.” The difference in translation changes whether it is God’s glory that raised Christ and now enables believers to live new lives, or if it is God’s glorious power that raised Christ and now enables believers to live new lives. The difference concerns whether God’s glory is the object or if God’s power is the object that both raised Jesus Christ and enables believers to live new lives. In the case of Romans 6:3-4, *glorious power* does not have a witness to prove its translation, whereas *glory* is clearly seen in the Greek New Testament and utilized in various other translations.

Historical Interpretations of Romans 6:3-4

The Early Church fathers interpreted Romans 6:3-4 to mean Christian baptism in water, which symbolized the believer’s death to sin and newness of life. Origen states that Paul’s argument is that if we have died to our sin then we must be buried with Christ in baptism, but if we have not died to sin, then we cannot be buried with Christ.³⁷ This concept is repeated by Ambrosiaster with the addition that baptism is a death to sin in which the body remains, but our minds are renewed.³⁸ Pelagius also mentions that the purpose of baptism is a public statement or declaration of putting off the old self and walking in newness of life.³⁹ What the early church wrote concerning Romans 6:3-4 and baptism shows an understanding of baptism that is both symbolic of a spiritual reality and a real uniting of the individual to Jesus Christ—despite the

³⁷ Origen. *Commentarii in Epistulam Ad Romanos*. Edited by T. Heither. (New York, NY: Herder, 1990–1995) 3:136.

³⁸ Ambrosiaster, *Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum*. (Vienna: Tempsky, 1866), 81.1:191.

³⁹ Pelagius, *Pelagius’s Commentary on St. Paul’s Epistle to the Romans*, ed. Theodore De Bruyn (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 96-97.

early church's misunderstanding of the overall purpose of baptism in conjunction with justification.⁴⁰

Throughout church history, the interpretation of Romans 6:3-4 has grown but did not necessarily change. In the posthumous works of Ralph Wardlaw, we see a similar symbolic understanding concerning death, burial, and resurrection and the death to sin and newness of life. The same argument against a person's decision to continue in sin even after baptism is present in Wardlaw's writing as well with the understanding that if a person is genuinely saved and their baptism truly represented their death to sin and newness of life, they would be against continuing in sin.⁴¹ Calvin emphasizes this point in his commentary by clearly stating that "[Jesus Christ] rightly makes a transition from a fellowship in death to a fellowship in life" and by mentioning that those who "have been baptized into Christ, have put on Christ" and have thus been united together.⁴²

The modern church's understanding of Romans 6:3-4 is found primarily in commentaries from recent scholarship. An important idea concerning interpreting this passage in modern scholarship is the symbolic nature of the act itself,⁴³ which shows the spiritual reality of the person's death to sin and newness of life.⁴⁴ In the overarching context of the passage, Paul's argument is that those who have genuinely been united in Jesus Christ's death, burial, and

⁴⁰ Joel R. Beeke and Paul M. Smalley, *Reformed Systematic Theology, Volume 3: Spirit and Salvation*, (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2021), 541.

⁴¹ Ralph Wardlaw, *Lectures on the Epistle to the Romans*, ed. J.S. Wardlaw (Edinburgh: Fullarton & Co., 1861), 56.

⁴² John Calvin and John Owen, *Commentary on the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Romans* (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2010), 220-221.

⁴³ Mounce, 149.

⁴⁴ Dunn, *Romans 1-8*, 307.

resurrection through their baptism are no longer under the controlling power of sin in their life because their sin has been put to death. This means that if they continue in unrepentant sin, they must not actually believe in Jesus Christ, despite making the claim to believe through the ritual of baptism in water by immersion.⁴⁵

Overall, what a brief survey of church history concerning the interpretation of Romans 6:3-4 shows is that many scholars have understood Romans 6:3-4 to be speaking of baptism as more than just a physical, ritualistic event. Baptism is not a purely symbolic ritual, but rather one that brings the believer into union with Jesus Christ and signifies the believer's own death to sin and newness of life in Jesus Christ.

Author's Interpretation of Romans 6:3-4

Ultimately, a fully comprehensive interpretation of Romans 6:3-4 must take into consideration all that could be said about the text itself in its own context. Romans 6:3-4 is in a passage of Scripture in which Paul is concerned about a misunderstanding concerning the grace given to believers and the Mosaic Law. It is apparent that there are some within the church at Rome who would take advantage of the concept of grace to continue to live in their sins (Rom 6:1) and that this desire to take advantage of grace is built not only on their misunderstanding of the Mosaic Law (Rom 5:12-21), but also their misunderstanding of grace itself and the purpose and meaning of their baptism.⁴⁶ What Paul emphasizes in Romans 6:3-4 is that their baptism

⁴⁵ Schreiner, 307.

⁴⁶ Gregory Goswell, "The Bookends of the Pauline Corpus," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 65, no. 1 (March 2022): 119.

symbolized a moment in their life in which they claimed to have been radically transformed by the Gospel through Jesus Christ.⁴⁷

Paul's overarching argument is that through their baptism, they not only physically represented their death to sin and newness of life in Jesus Christ, but rather, they are also united in Jesus Christ through their baptism (Rom 6:5). And it is this union with Jesus Christ which enables and then compels them to live separated from their former sins while following Him (Rom 6:12-14). Paul's argument is that their baptism in Jesus Christ represents a complete, fundamental, and radical change in who they are and how they ought to live their new lives.

What Romans 6:3-4 teaches concerning baptism itself is that baptism is more than just a symbolic event. Rather it is the very moment in which their union with Jesus Christ is made manifest in their Christian life. This idea is solidified when one understands that the purpose of baptism is for the new believer to make a public declaration of their faith, which saves them (1 Pet 3:21). In addition, the very imagery of death, burial, and resurrection in conjunction with the Bible's use of baptism gives an idea of the proper mode of baptism.⁴⁸ The death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ being symbolized by baptism does not make sense if the mode of baptism is anything other than that of immersion. The modes of sprinkling or pouring do not carry the same visual meaning or weight as literally dunking or dipping a person under water does.⁴⁹ In addition, Romans 6:3-4 carries an innate statement concerning who may be baptized in

⁴⁷ Thomas R. Schreiner, "Baptism in the Epistles: An Initiation Rite for Believers," *Believer's Baptism: Sign of the New Covenant in Christ*, ed. Thomas R. Schreiner and Shawn D. Wright, (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2006), 74-79.

⁴⁸ Everett Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church: History, Theology, and Liturgy in the First Five Centuries*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2009), 157-158.

⁴⁹ Chad Van Dixhoorn, "The London Baptist Confession," *Creeds, Confessions, & Catechisms: A Reader's Edition*, (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2022), 284.

that it clearly connects baptism with a new believer's salvation from sin and newness of life. This is clearly something that an infant could not express or articulate prior to being baptized and would therefore preclude them from being baptized because they cannot articulate genuine belief.

All of these ideas are expressed elsewhere in Paul's writings as well as in other passages of Scripture. Being baptized into Jesus Christ is mentioned in Galatians 3:26-27 and Colossians 2:11-13. The ideas of baptism and Jesus Christ's death, burial, and resurrection being connected is also found in Colossians 2:11-13 and being clothed with Jesus Christ is found in Galatians 3:26-27. It is clear, even in these few examples that the concept of Jesus Christ's death, burial, and resurrection being tied to the concept of Christian baptism by immersion is prevalent not only in the teachings of Paul, but in the First Century church. This is evidenced in Romans 6:3 when Paul specifically asks, "*do you not know* that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?" (emphasis added). The inference is that they ought to already know what he is about to say, which means someone had to have taught them the significance of Christian baptism by immersion and its connection to Jesus Christ's death, burial, and resurrection before Paul could actually remind them of this truth.

Conclusion

In the context of Romans 6:3-4, Paul makes a profound case for believers to stop living in sin even though grace is available for them, and he makes this appeal based on their baptism and what their baptism means. Ultimately, what Paul argues is that their baptism signifies a change in their relationship not just with God, but also with sin and thus, they ought to reject their sin and live as Christians ought to live—in newness of life. This essay proved that baptism is not just a symbolic, ritualistic event that Christians partake in shortly after their initial conversion. Rather,

baptism is the event through which a spiritual reality within the believer is signified physically and their union with Jesus Christ and His death, burial, and resurrection is made apparent. This essay analyzed the grammar, historical-cultural context, and literary, and lexical issues pertaining to the text to prove this point before giving a brief survey of how this passage has been interpreted throughout church history to prove and validate the interpretation of Romans 6:3-4 by the author; and has provided a comprehensive and biblically faithful understanding of the text.

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