

IS WATER BAPTISM NECESSARY FOR SALVATION?

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For almost fifty years, I have been engaged in evangelism. Soon after I trusted Christ, at age 18, I began to tell people the wonderful news that simple faith in Jesus Christ is all one needs to obtain the gift of eternal life. From the beginning of my evangelistic experience, I encountered people who insisted that baptism is also necessary for salvation. Is water baptism necessary in order to get to heaven? A large portion of Christendom says that the answer to that question is, "Yes." How do we who believe that salvation is by faith alone in Christ alone answer them? What follows are approaches I have used over the years to address this question.

SALVATION IS AT THE POINT OF FAITH

The New Testament teaches that justification takes place *at the point of faith*. At the point of faith, a person is said to be saved (Acts 16:31), given eternal life (Jn. 3:16), becomes a child of God (Gal. 3:26, Jn. 1:12), passes from death to life (Jn. 5:24), is justified (Rom. 3:28, 5:1), receives the righteousness of Christ (Rom. 4:35, Phil. 3:9), is forgiven (Acts 10:43, Lk. 7:48-50), etc. A person who believes that baptism is necessary for salvation (baptismal regeneration) will agree that a person must have faith, but they want to add that *after faith* it is necessary to be baptized to be saved. The Scripture, however, does not teach that one must *believe*, be *baptized*, and *behave* a certain way to be justified. It teaches that a person is saved *at the point of faith*.

Suppose a fellow we will call "Sincere Sam" went forward during the invitation at a church. Once at the front he was told he should believe in Christ and be baptized. For the sake of our illustration, let us assume that Sincere Sam genuinely trusted Christ. Then, he was ushered into a room so that he could change into baptismal clothes and be baptized, but before he could get to the baptismal water, he died of a sudden heart attack. Would he go to heaven? To be logically consistent, a baptismal regenerationist [one who says you *have* to be baptized with water to be saved] should say, "No!" (Some try to wiggle out of this dilemma by suggesting that God gave Sincere Sam credit for at least wanting to be baptized.) Yet, according to the New Testament the answer is, "Yes!" The Lord saves people *at the point of faith*, not at the point they encounter baptismal water.

In my experience, using the phrase *at the point of faith* has been very helpful in clearly communicating to people what the New Testament teaches about the place of faith in salvation. As overused and worn out as the simple illustration of Sincere Sam is, I have found it helpful in clarifying this issue with the average person.

BAPTISM IS NOT PART OF THE GOSPEL

Another approach I have used with success is to point out that baptism is not part of the gospel. In 1 Corinthians, Paul said, *'for Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel'* (1 Cor. 1:17). Clearly, if Paul was sent to preach the gospel and was

not sent to baptize, then the gospel and baptism are two different things. 1 Corinthians 15, the only passage in the New Testament to give a formal definition of the gospel, confirms that baptism is not part of the gospel. According to Paul's definition in 1 Corinthians 15:3-4, the gospel is the good news of the death and resurrection of Christ. Baptism is never mentioned!

It is the gospel that is the power of God unto salvation (Romans 1:16). Since a person is saved by the gospel (Rom. 1:16), which does not include baptism (1 Cor. 1:17, 15:3-4), then a person can be saved without being baptized. All that is necessary is for a person to hear the gospel and trust Jesus Christ for eternal life.

SPIRITUAL BAPTISM PLACES BELIEVERS INTO CHRIST

Individuals who are steeped in the doctrine of baptismal regeneration will bring up specific verses to prove that water baptism is necessary for salvation. Some of the verses they use are not referring to water baptism at all. In order to think through this subject, one of the first things a diligent student of the Bible must do is to distinguish between water baptism and spiritual baptism.

Obviously, there is more than one kind of baptism in the New Testament. Hebrews 6:2 speaks of the "doctrine of baptisms" (plural). In fact, there is more than one kind of water baptism. Most would agree that the baptism of Christ was somehow different from all other water baptisms. The baptism of John was different from the baptism of believers. At least Paul thought so. In Acts 19, he told disciples of John the Baptist, whom John had baptized, that they should believe on Christ and when they did Paul baptized them in the name of the Lord Jesus (Acts 19: 1-5).

Furthermore, not only are there several water baptisms, there is a baptism that does not include water. John the Baptist said that God sent him to baptize with water and that Jesus would baptize with the Holy Spirit (Jn. 1:33). As compared to water baptism, this could be called a dry baptism; it does not include water.

1 Corinthians 12:13 states "*for by one spirit we were all baptized into one body.*" This *spiritual* baptism takes place *at the point of faith*, not at the point of water baptism. When Peter told those assembled in Cornelius' household "*whoever believes in Him will receive remission of sins*" (Acts 10:43), the Holy Spirit fell on all who heard Peter's message (Acts 10:44). Later, Peter calls the falling of the Holy Spirit on these people the baptism of the Holy Spirit (Acts 11:15-16). In other words, they received the baptism of the Holy Spirit at the point of faith before they were baptized. In Acts 10, it was after they had heard the message and received the Holy Spirit that they were baptized in water (Acts 10:48).

There is simply no doubt that there is something called spiritual baptism in the New Testament and as Acts 10 demonstrates it takes place at the point of faith. Many verses in the New Testament used by some to prove that water baptism is necessary for salvation are not talking about water baptism at all. They are talking about spiritual baptism.

The baptism in Romans 6 is spiritual baptism. When Paul speaks about being "*baptized into Christ Jesus*" (Rom. 6:3), he speaks about spiritual baptism. 1 Corinthians 12:13 explains that it is spiritual baptism that puts us into Christ, not water baptism. Acts 10:43-48 compared with Acts 11:15-16 demonstrates that spiritual baptism is at the point of faith and not at the point of water baptism.

The baptism in Galatians 3 is spiritual baptism. When in Galatians 3:27 Paul speaks again of being “baptized into Christ,” he must be talking about spiritual baptism. In fact, just before this he said, “*you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus*” (Gal. 3:26). The point of the book of Galatians is that all a person needs is Christ, not a ceremony such as circumcision. He needs the righteousness of Christ, not rites and rituals. For someone to use this book, of all books, to say that one must have a rite like baptism to be saved is to miss the whole point of what Paul teaches in this book.

The baptism in Ephesians 4 is spiritual baptism. In Ephesians 4:5, Paul refers to “*one baptism*.” It was at Ephesus that Paul demonstrated by his practice that there were two water baptisms (Acts 19:1-5). Therefore, the only thing that would have made sense to the Ephesians is that the one baptism to which he refers in Ephesians 4 is spiritual baptism.

The baptism in Colossians 2:12 is spiritual baptism. Paul, the author of Colossians, explains “*buried with Him in baptism*” (Col. 2:12) by what he wrote in 1 Corinthians 12:13. As we have seen, it is spiritual baptism that places us in Christ and spiritual baptism takes place at the moment of faith in Christ. The point of the book of Colossians is that all we need is Christ (Col. 2:10). We do not need anything else. We especially do not need rites, rituals, and regulations (Col. 2:16, 20).

PROBLEM PASSAGES

Beyond the verses just mentioned, there are certain passages the baptismal regenerationist uses repeatedly to try to prove that baptism is necessary for salvation. Although the New Testament is clear and consistent that salvation is by faith alone in Christ alone, there are verses that sound as if baptism is necessary for salvation. In that sense, these passages could be called “problem passages.”

Mark 16:15-16 Before He ascended Jesus told the disciples, “Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature. He who believes and is baptized will be saved; and he who does not believe will be condemned” (Mk. 16:15-16). Does not this passage teach that water baptism is necessary for salvation?

The answer is, “No,” which several observations demonstrate. In the first place, belief, not baptism, is the critical issue in this passage. The passage says that if you do not believe you will be condemned; it does not say if you do not believe and are not baptized you will be condemned. Obviously, then, the issue is faith.

Perhaps more importantly, it should be pointed out that this passage does not say, “be baptized *to be* saved,” nor does it say, “if you are not baptized you cannot be saved.” Neither does it discuss believing and not being baptized. Therefore, one cannot say that this passage demands baptism for salvation. In other words, given the two items of belief and baptism there are only four possibilities:

Believe and be baptized	Salvation
Believe and not be baptized	Not discussed
Not believe and be baptized	Implied, but not discussed
Not believe and not be baptized	Condemnation

Since this passage does not discuss the possibility of believing and not being baptized, it cannot be said that this passage teaches that baptism is necessary for salvation. To say the passage teaches that one must be baptized to be saved is to add to the passage. The apostle John gave a stern warning against doing such a thing (Rev. 22:18).

What is the explanation of the statement, "*He who is saved and is baptized will be saved?*" The point, as Matthew 28:19 confirms, is that baptism is a part of the great commission. As has been pointed out, Mark 16:16 does not say "be baptized *in order to be saved*"; it says "he who believes and is baptized." It is like saying he who gets on a bus and sits down will go to New York. That does not mean that one must sit down in order to get to New York. Technically, all that is necessary to get to New York is to get on the bus. Likewise, as we have seen, the critical issue in Mark 16 is faith. All a person has to do to get to heaven is trust Christ. This means one may believe, be baptized, and get to heaven, or one may believe and not be baptized and still get to heaven. What this passage definitely does not teach is that one *must* be baptized to receive God's forgiveness.

John 3:5 In John 3, Jesus said, "*Unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the Kingdom of God*" (Jn. 3:5). Does that not mean one must be baptized to be born again?

John 3:5 does not teach Baptismal Regeneration. In fact, it is not even referring to baptism! In John 3, Jesus makes the statement that, "*Unless one is born again he cannot see the Kingdom of God*" (Jn. 3:3). In response, Nicodemus asks, "*How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?*" (Jn. 3:4). Jesus' answer is, "*Unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the Kingdom of God*" (Jn. 3:5). In the context of this conversation, it is more natural to understand Jesus' use of the word "water" as a reference to physical birth rather than baptism. As every mother knows, all children are literally born "out of water."

Therefore, when Nicodemus asked, "*Can a man be born a second time from his mother's womb?*" Jesus, in essence, concedes that a man has to be born of water, that is, physically. Yet, He goes on to insist that the second birth is spiritual in nature. Thus, John 3 does not teach that water baptism is necessary for salvation. It teaches that physical birth is. In other words, people must be born before they can be born again. John 3:6 confirms this view, saying, "*that which is born of flesh is flesh and that which is born of Spirit is spirit.*" That says it all.

Acts 2:38 On the day of Pentecost the apostle Peter said "repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2:38). Does not this mean baptism is necessary for the remission of sins?

In both Greek and English the word "for" can mean either, "in order to get," or "because of." Those who teach that baptism is necessary for salvation interpret the word "for" in Acts 2:38 to mean, "in order to get." Another possibility is that the word "for" in Acts 2:38 means, "because of." If that is the case, Peter simply says that they should be baptized, because their sins have been forgiven.

The question is, "Which interpretation of the word "for" in Acts 2:38 is correct?" Nothing in the context settles the issue. All must go to other passages to validate their

position. Ideally, it would be nice if we could go to another passage, *spoken* by Peter and *recorded* by Luke.

Such a passage exists. In Acts 10, while preaching in the house of Cornelius, Peter said, “*to Him all the prophets witness that, through His name, whoever believes in Him will receive the remission of sins*” (Acts 10:43). Clearly, Peter said and Luke recorded that faith is the key to receiving the remission of sins. In this passage, it is evident that Peter did not preach that baptism was necessary for the remission of sins. In fact, after the people who heard him believed in Christ in the middle of his message, Peter said “*can anyone forbid water that these should not be baptized who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have*” (Acts 10:47)? Unmistakably these people believed, were saved, and received the Holy Spirit before they were baptized.

Based on the data from Acts 10, it is safe to say that on the day of Pentecost, Peter did not mean one had to be baptized *in order to* receive the remission of sins. As Acts 10 demonstrates, Peter preached the remission of sins by faith and he practiced baptism after salvation.

Acts 22:16 In Acts 22 Paul said, “*Arise and be baptized. and wash away your sins, calling on the name of the Lord*” (Acts 22:16). Does this verse not say that being baptized washes away one’s sins?

Again, a careful examination of the verse indicates that the answer must be in the negative. In the first place, the word “and” between “arise” and “be baptized” is not in the Greek text. In the next place, in the Greek text, this sentence consists of two clauses each consisting of a command and a participle: 1) arising, be baptized, 2) be washed, having called.

The two verbs (*arising* and *having called*) are aorist participles, meaning that the action of the participle comes before the action of the command. In other words, when we take into consideration the construction of the Greek text and the meaning of the participles, an accurate interpretation would be that *arising* comes before baptism and *calling* comes before washing. A proper translation would be, “now that you have called on the Lord and had your sins washed away, arise and be baptized.” The chronological order of the various elements is as follows: calling, washing, arising, and baptizing. This verse does not teach that baptism is necessary for the forgiveness of sins.

Titus 3:5 Paul told Titus that God “*saved us, through the washing of regeneration and the renewing of the Holy Spirit*” (Titus 3:5). Does not this refer to baptism and indicate that it is a washing away of sin?

The answer is again, “No.” The phrase, “*the washing of regeneration*” has been greatly misunderstood and debated. Some render “*labor*” “*washing*” and understand it as a baptismal pool. In this view, washing (that is, *labor*) is not the act of washing, but the place of washing and, therefore, this verse would support baptismal regeneration. However, the word “*washing*” in classical Greek and in the singular in the New Testament (as here) means “*washing*,” that is, the act of washing.

“*Regeneration*” is a compound Greek word made up of “*new*” and “*birth*.” Thus, the washing of regeneration is the act of cleansing sin that takes place at the new birth. God saved us by the Holy Spirit cleansing us at regeneration. God does this through the Word, not through water (cf. Eph. 5:26, Jas. 1:18, 1 Pet. 1:23). As a person hears the word of truth, the Gospel, and believes, the Holy Spirit imparts new life and cleanses that individual from sin.

God also saves us by the renewing of the Holy Spirit. The nature of the Greek construction makes two different renderings possible. Either regeneration is further defined as the renewing of the Holy Spirit, or Paul describes two operations: regeneration and renewal. In support of the second alternative is the fact that the word “renew” only occurs twice in the New Testament, here and in Romans 12:2 where it clearly refers to what takes place after regeneration and not at regeneration.

1 Peter 3:21 1 Peter 3:21 says, “There is an antitype which now saves us—baptism (not the removal of the filth of the flesh, but the answer of a good conscience toward God), through the resurrection of Jesus Christ.” There are two possible interpretations of the word “baptism” in this verse. The first, which virtually all commentators take, is that baptism here is a reference to water baptism. A serious problem with that view is that this verse refers to the fact that Noah and his family were “saved through water” (1 Pet. 3:20), but the water did not save Noah or his family; the ark did. The second possibility is that this is a reference to spiritual baptism that places believers into Christ (cf. 1 Cor. 12:13).

The word translated “*antitype*” can either mean, “type” (that is, *the copy*) or “antitype” (that is, *the original*). Frankly, the term is ambiguous. First Peter 3:21 could be translated, “to this there is an antitype that also now saves us, namely baptism,” or “a type of that which now saves us, namely baptism.” Either way the idea is that present day baptism corresponds to what has gone before in the situation of Noah. “Antitype” is probably the preferable translation. In other words, this verse is saying baptism is the spiritual reality that was foreshadowed in Noah’s day. In the Old Testament, the sacrifices were a “type,” a foreshadowing; they did not save. The death of Christ is the “antitype,” the original, that is, the sacrifice that saves.

Peter adds two appositional clauses that further define and describe the nature of this baptism. First, it is not the removal of the filth of the flesh. This baptism is not a physical bath. Second, it is the answer of a good conscience toward God. The word “answer” has been interpreted to mean, “a question, request, appeal, or pledge.” Most understand this as either a question asked by a new convert, or a pledge made by a new Christian at baptism. Yet, this statement is in contrast (cf. “but”) to outward cleansing, which seems to indicate that “*answer*” means something like “the realization of” a good conscience. There is some evidence that this word means “divine response” to an inquiry. Could it be that the answer to a good conscience is the work of the Spirit through baptism that makes a good conscience a reality? Furthermore, baptism is the response of a good conscience toward God through Christ’s resurrection. In other words, this is all possible because Christ rose from the dead.

The interpretation taken here is that baptism in 1 Peter 3:21 is a dry, spiritual baptism like Romans 6:3-4; Galatians 3:27; Ephesians 4:5, and Colossians 2:12. Yet, even if the baptism in 1 Peter 3:21 is water baptism, the passage is still not saying that water baptism is necessary for salvation. It can be argued that baptism in this passage is called a figure, or picture (remember, “*antitype*” can mean “type,” that is, a copy, or today we would say “symbol”), and that the phrase, “*the filth of the flesh*” refers to “sin” as it does in 2 Corinthians 7:1. Furthermore, baptism is the answer of a good conscience. Salvation is by blood (Heb. 9:14), resurrection (1 Pet. 3:21), and faith (Eph. 2:8). A good conscience answers with baptism. Thus, even if the passage is talking about water baptism, it can be forcefully argued that Peter does not say that water baptism itself saves; rather he teaches that water baptism is a picture of salvation.

Conclusion The New Testament teaches that salvation is at the point of faith and that baptism is not part of the gospel. Passages used to teach that water baptism is necessary for salvation do not even talk about water baptism! Many of these passages instead speak of spiritual baptism. No passage in the New Testament says water baptism is essential to get to heaven. Therefore, baptism is not necessary for salvation.