

The Doctrine of Baptism



*Then Peter said unto them, Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost.
- Acts 2:38*

The First Act of Obedience

An Intense Debate

There are many denominations that believe baptism is absolutely necessary for salvation. In other words, individuals who repent of their sin and trust in the Savior are not



saved, or in-dwelt with the Holy Spirit, until the moment they are submerged in the baptismal waters.

This debate is a very old one, however, the consistent New Testament teaching is that Christian baptism is commanded as a sign of one's union with Christ. It is the first act of obedience commanded by Christ and the Apostles.

Having said that, we must reiterate that although baptism is not a requirement for salvation, it is commanded and very necessary in the life of the believer.

There are also debates about who should be baptized and the

method by which people should be baptized. All these



questions are sufficiently resolved in the biblical texts.

"A man who knows that he is saved by believing in Christ does not, when he is baptized, lift his baptism into a saving ordinance. In fact, he is the very best protester against that mistake, because he holds that he has no right to be baptized until he is saved." ~ Charles Spurgeon

The Method of Baptism

The practice of baptism in the New Testament was only carried out in one way: the person being baptized was immersed or put completely under the water and then brought back up again. Baptism by immersion is therefore the “mode” of baptism or the way in which baptism was carried out in the New Testament

The Greek word *baptizo* means “to plunge, dip, immerse” something in water. Also, the sense “immerse” is required in several New Testament passages. Mark 1:5 says, people were baptized by John “in the river Jordan.” Mark also tells us that when Jesus had been baptized “he came up out of the water” (Mark 1:10).

Some people advocate “sprinkling” instead of immersion, however John 3:23 says that John the Baptist “was baptizing in Aenon near to Salim, because there was much water there.” One wouldn’t need much water to “sprinkle.”



'baptizo'
to immerse,
submerge;
to become
overwhelmed

Understanding that the Scriptural meaning and method of Baptism is immersion, we must also understand that baptism is an outward sign of an inward reality. With this in mind, we must agree that there may be some instances where baptism by immersion is impossible and it should not be used to hinder a person’s reception of salvation.

In Scripture, we see a thief on the cross who repents and trusts in Christ. Jesus tells him that he will be with Christ in paradise, although there is no way the thief will have the opportunity to be baptized. There have also been instances in ministry where someone receives Christ on their deathbed, or they receive Christ as an invalid or a paraplegic, making baptism by immersion difficult or impossible. In my personal ministry, I have led some teenagers to faith in Christ and had their parents patently refuse to allow their baptism. In such instances, I can only respect the parent’s wishes and be sure they understand that faith in Christ alone is their salvation.



Part of Salvation?

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 (John 3:16), becomes a child of God (Galatians 3:26; John 1:12), passes from death to life (John 5:24), is justified (Romans 3:28; 5:1), receives the righteousness of Christ (Romans 4:3–5; Philippians 3:9), is forgiven (Acts 10:43; Luke 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*.



What Does the Bible Say?



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 Corinthians 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 systematized 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 (Romans 1:16), which does not include baptism (1 Corinthians 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.

That being said, we must agree that Baptism is an essential act of obedience. Yet, we can add nothing to the grace of God in salvation.

Problem Passages

Mark 16:15-16 - “And he said unto them, Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature. He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned.”

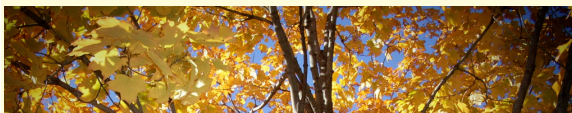


Answer: The critical issue in this passage is belief. The passage says that if you do not believe you will be condemned; it does not say if you do not believe and are not baptized you will be condemned. Obviously, then, the issue is faith.

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. The pertinent thing to remember is that, in the first century, Baptism was generally done at the time faith is professed. Because of this, Baptism is often associated with faith. Notice that the only stipulation which brings damnation in this verse is not believing.

This is simply Mark's parallel account of The Great Commission. Matt. 28:19 confirms that Baptism is part of Christ's Great Commission.

Acts 2:38



Acts 2:38

Then Peter said unto them, Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost.



In both Greek and English the word “for” can mean either “in order to get,” or it can mean “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, then

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. Everyone must go to other passages to validate their positions. 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 give all the prophets witness, that through his name whosoever believeth in him shall receive 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 any man forbid water, that these should not be baptized, which have received the Holy Ghost as well as we?*” (Acts 10:47)?

The question is: Can a person be saved without receiving the Holy Spirit?



“And now why tarriest thou? arise, and be baptized, and wash away thy sins, calling on the name of the Lord.”

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, then, 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.

"Baptism now saves you... "

1 Peter 3:21

“The like figure whereunto even baptism doth also now save us (not the putting away of the filth of the flesh, but the answer of a good conscience toward God,) by the resurrection of Jesus Christ:”

The context of this verse is Noah’s flood and the comparison between salvation there and salvation through Christ. We may think baptism in itself saves if we only look at the words “...baptism doth also now save us...”

However, Peter defines exactly what he means in two ways.

1. Baptism is the “like figure” of that salvation which saves us in the same way that Noah was saved in the ark.
2. Just in case you might be tempted to think that the actual event of baptism is our salvation, Peter explains that it is not the washing of filth from the body. Baptism is the **answer** of an (already) good conscience before the Lord.

It is the symbol of our salvation and the first response of obedience to our good conscience.

