

## Does Baptism Save?

One of the primary issues facing the church today concerns the crucial subject of salvation. After nearly two thousand years of church history, exactly how one gets saved continues to plague the church. But more specific to the topic of this pamphlet is the question, “Is water baptism necessary for salvation?” This text addresses the foundational error of the requirement of water baptism for salvation, a position taken by sacrament-oriented churches.

To begin with, we must deal with the root problem that causes such misunderstanding and plagues those who believe in “baptismal regeneration” (regeneration/salvation by water immersion). The basic error comes from an insufficient understanding of sin. Many believe that by a human activity such as baptism, some can bring about their own salvation. As we shall see, this is a rejection of God’s Word in regard to the consequences of sin. The Bible teaches that sin enslaves, debilitates, and brings total spiritual death to every human being. In other words, man cannot on his own free will do anything to awaken himself out of spiritual death.

Men do not like to believe that they are totally dependent upon God’s grace for salvation. They are insulted to think that they are incapable of saving themselves outside of God’s gracious drawing (John 6:44). Paul described the lost man’s condition with graphic language depicting death. “As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins” (Eph. 2:1). Paul stated that this death has debilitating effects on man’s ability to even desire salvation (Rom. 3:11; 4:17-19).

It is simply a dead man trying to resurrect himself. The position claiming that baptism saves ignores the most basic teachings of Scripture regarding man’s inability. In taking such a position, the baptismal regenerationists not only claim man capable of things he is not, but they reduce God’s grace to a mere aid. They make the death of Christ a theory that is dependent upon man’s act of obedience, rather than the finished and effective work that the Bible teaches it to be (Heb. 10:10-14). Paul, who spent the early part of his life trying to earn his way into heaven speaks very clearly in Philippians 3:1-4 that any human ritual cannot earn one’s way into heaven.

Is baptism identified in the Old Testament?

The background of baptism can be traced to the Old Testament times. In the first book of the Bible, eight people were saved from the great flood of God’s judgment. Some would use these passages to prove that water saved Noah and his family. However, the Old Testament should always be interpreted in light of the New Testament. Look at 1 Peter 3:20-21 to help understand the Old Testament passages referring to Noah and his family.

1 Peter 3:20-21 20who once were disobedient, when the patience of God kept waiting in the days of Noah, during the construction of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were brought safely through the water. 21And corresponding to that, baptism now saves you—not the removal of dirt from the flesh, but an appeal to God for a good conscience—through the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Some specifics of grammar help to interpret this passage. The relative pronoun “that” refers back to

the word “water” in verse 20. The words “corresponding to” are a translation of the word antitupos meaning “a thing resembling another, or a thing formed after the pattern of another.” So the proper understanding of this passage reveals that water baptism is a type or a pattern of salvation. Water baptism is a ceremony that symbolizes the reality of salvation just like sacrifices in the Old Testament were ceremonies symbolized the sacrifice of the Lord Jesus on the cross (1 Pet. 1:18-19).

The apostle Peter points out that the water of the flood “symbolizes baptism that now saves you,” and makes it clear that the water used in baptism does not provide the MEANS of our salvation. Rather, God’s grace through faith in Jesus Christ alone saves us (Eph. 2:8-9). Therefore, it is important that “saved through” does not mean “saved by means of,” just as Noah and his family were not saved by the water of the flood but were preserved in the midst of that water.

The idea of washing as an external symbol for internal cleansing is found in various passages in the Old Testament (Is. 1:16; Ezek. 36:25; Ps. 51:2).

Does Acts 2:38 teach us to be baptized for the forgiveness of sins?

It is clear that the New Testament teaches that we are saved by faith alone apart from human works. In Rom. 4:4-5 Paul tells us “but the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly.” However, those who teach that baptism saves distort such passages as Acts 2:38 to defend their deadly doctrine. Just as the Law of God was misused by the Pharisees and the Judaizers, and became a works oriented system, so baptism has been misused by modern proponents of baptismal regeneration.

Acts 2:38-39 38And Peter said to them, “Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. 39For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself.”

The above verses are often the most quoted in the baptism debate. The debate can be satisfied with the correct understanding of the word “for” in verse 38. What does the word “for” mean? Consider the following phrase “Jesse James is wanted for murder.” The word “for” can be used in two ways. It can mean that Jesse James is wanted as a RESULT of having already committed a murder or that he is wanted for the PURPOSE of committing murder. In other words, it can be used to imply something that has already been accomplished (past tense) or for something that needs to be accomplished (future tense). So the following two interpretations are possible.

38 And Peter said to them, “Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ as a RESULT of the forgiveness of your sins.

38 And Peter said to them, “Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ FOR THE PURPOSE OF the forgiveness of your sins.

The way it should be interpreted in Acts 2:38 is seen in Matt. 12:41 regarding the preaching of Jo-

nah.

Matthew 12:41 41“The men of Nineveh shall stand up with this generation at the judgment, and shall condemn it because they repented at the preaching of Jonah; and behold, something greater than Jonah is here.

The men of Nineveh repented as a RESULT of the preaching of Jonah not in order that the preaching might take place.

The reason for this interpretation is made more plausible by Peter’s words in Acts 2:40-41. Peter states, “Be saved from this perverse generation! So then, those who had received his word were baptized.” Peter clarifies the proper order in that they received the word first; then, they were baptized.

The book of Acts itself proves that baptism is the sign of conversion--not the means of conversion. Acts 10:47 for example, describes believers who were indwelt by the Holy Spirit and, therefore, saved, (Romans 8:9) prior to water baptism.

In Acts 10:34-43 the Apostle Peter tells Cornelius and his household how to be saved. In his message Peter never even hinted that water baptism was essential, or was in any way a part of the salvation message. In verse 43 Peter states that all the Old Testament Prophets gave witness, that through His (Christ’s) name, “Whosoever believes in Him shall receive remission of sins.” Therefore, Peter says all that is required for salvation is faith in the finished work of Christ on the cross. It is clear in Acts 10:47 that Cornelius and those who heard, and believed the Word were saved before being baptized with water. Peter states in verse 47, “Surely no one can refuse the water for these to be baptized who have received (past tense) the Holy Spirit just as we did, can he?”

The Bible as a whole clearly testifies that we are saved by faith and not by works (Eph. 2:8-9). Paul writing to the Romans states that he is not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for salvation for everyone who believes and that our righteous standing before God is “by faith from first to last” (Romans 1:16, 17). When the jailer asked Paul “What must I do to be saved?” Paul responded, “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved” (Acts 16:30-31). The absolute proof text that water baptism is not a part of the gospel is found in 1 Cor. 1:17 where Paul says “Christ sent me not to baptize but to preach the gospel.” If water baptism is essential for salvation, the apostle Paul had only part of the gospel. In 1 Cor. 15:1-4 Paul gives them the gospel by which they were saved, which is the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ, and states this is according to Scripture. In Gal. 2:1-9 Paul states that when James, Peter, and John, the leaders at Jerusalem, heard the gospel he was preaching, they added nothing to what he was preaching. Finally, the book of 1 John was written that we might know that we have eternal life (1 Jn. 5:13). However, a careful reading will prove that baptism is never even mentioned--a treacherous admission if water baptism saves.

Not only do some cult-like organizations mistakenly make baptism a necessary means of salvation, some teach that one must be baptized by the “true church” in order to be saved. One such church

insists that those who were baptized in other denominations are not truly saved. The pentecostal movement includes other groups that teach that unless you are baptized using the correct formula which they proclaim, you are not truly saved. In their case the magic formula is “in the name of Jesus.” In their theology those who are baptized in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are not truly born again.

It is instructive to note that the thief on the cross provides another example that we are saved by faith alone and not by baptism. When the thief placed his faith in Christ on the cross, Jesus said to him. “Today you will be with me in paradise” (Luke 23:43). The cleansing power of Christ’s blood to which baptism points, was sufficient to assure him of his entrance into a community of believers in eternity. Those who believe in baptismal regeneration argue that the thief on the cross was still under the Old Covenant and therefore did not need to be baptized. If this was the case, Christ’s words in John 5:24, “Whoever hears my word and believes on Him who sent me has eternal life” would have had no meaning prior to His death and resurrection as well. The promise that God will save those who trust in Christ is a universal principle of both the Old and New Testaments. The book of Titus provides additional evidence against baptism and other works being a condition for salvation. Paul makes it clear that salvation is not the result of righteous things we have done, but rather because of His mercy (Titus 3:5). The washing of rebirth is the cleansing by the Holy Spirit with the blood of Jesus Christ that “washes” away our sins (1 Pet. 1:18-19; 1 Jn. 1:7; Rev. 1:5).

Finally, Christ’s words in two passages clearly demonstrate that belief and not baptism is the condition for salvation. In John 3:16-18 Jesus says if one believes he shall not perish. If he does not believe he is already judged because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God. Clearly the reason for eternal damnation is not baptism, but not believing. Also in Mark 16:16, Christ says, “Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned.” Again it is clear from the first part of his statement that baptism should follow belief. We must admit that baptism is important and should follow once we have believed. In fact it is commanded. It is equally clear from the second part of the passage, however, that belief alone, not baptism, is required for salvation. Christ did not say, “Whoever does not believe and is not baptized will be condemned.” Rather Christ makes unbelief (with or without baptism) the only condition for condemnation.

What about infant Baptism?

There are no examples in the Bible to support infant baptism. On the contrary, where the Bible does speak clearly concerning baptism it emphasizes the faith of those who are baptized. Take for example the account in Acts 16 of Lydia’s household (vs.14- 15) and the household of the Philippian jailer (v. 31-34) being baptized. This does not suggest that either household had infants who were baptized. This would be reading into the white space and should be considered adding to Scripture (Rev. 22:18-19). In verse 32 it says “They spoke the word of the Lord to him together with all who were in his household.” This implies that whoever was included were old enough to understand the gospel message. Verse 34 also says they “rejoiced greatly, having believed in God.” This clearly implies that both households believed the gospel and all those who believed were baptized (v. 34). Therefore, baptism represents the believers’ saving union with Christ in His death, burial, and

resurrection.

The mode of baptism in the Bible and in the early Church was immersion. There is no example in Scripture of a believer being sprinkled, or of having water poured on them to signify they had believed and received Christ.

In conclusion, water baptism is not essential for salvation. It is by God's grace alone through faith alone, in Christ alone, apart from works.