

WHAT IS BAPTISM?

CROSSING THE LINE

Baptism is part of our faith response to what God already has done for us. Jesus taught that baptism is closely linked with the forgiveness of sins and personal salvation. Jesus did it. Jesus commanded it. Every conversion story in Acts includes baptism. Moreover, Peter and Paul, in their individual letters, link baptism to forgiveness of sins and salvation. Baptism is the way we participate in the death of Jesus so we can participate in his coming resurrection.

I. DEFINITION OF THE WORD “BAPTISM”

“Baptism” is a transliteration of the Greek word "*baptizo*", which means to immerse. This term was often used to describe "dyeing" that included immersing a cloth in liquid in order to cleanse it first and then adding a substance to dye it. In the process of “dyeing”, the cloth "absorbs and takes on" the color of the dye. To baptize a person into Christ is to immerse them in water in order to absorb and take on the qualities of Jesus (see Romans 13:14 and Galatians 3:27).

II. HISTORY OF THE PRACTICE OF BAPTISM

Baptism is rooted in three Jewish ritual customs:

- A. PURIFICATION CUSTOM - Jewish Law prescribed many instances in which ritual, purification baths were required. Ritual baths also indicated the completion of a personal vow (e.g., Nazarite vow in Acts 21). This practice was very common during the time of Christ, particularly among a sect of Judaism called the Essenes.
- B. COMMITMENT CUSTOM - Ritual immersion was a way to indicate formal acceptance of a specific rabbi as teacher by his student. By the act of baptism, the student committed himself to be a student under the authority of the rabbi.
- C. INITIATION CUSTOM - Women converts to Judaism went through baptism that was treated as the equivalent to male circumcision. The proselytizing ceremony for women utilized an initiation bath called “miqvot.” Essenes also used baptism to initiate converts into their community.

III. NEW TESTAMENT AND BAPTISM

- A. JOHN’S BAPTISM - John's baptism is a transition between Jewish and Christian practices. It is important to examine it in light of the problem in Acts 26:26-27 where Apollos knew only John’s baptism and needed to be instructed in the baptism of Jesus. Those who were baptized by John, or by his disciples, were baptized into the teaching of John. The message of John was, “Repent, for the kingdom of God is at hand.” Baptism publicly confirmed their recognition and acceptance of John as their Rabbi, and their public commitment to work for the kingdom of God.
- B. BAPTISM AND JESUS
 1. *Jesus was baptized & commanded his disciples to baptize others* - (see Matthew 3:16-17) "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" - Matthew 28:19.
 2. *Jesus taught baptism & salvation.* See Mark 16:16 where Jesus says – "Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, whoever does not believe will be condemned".
 3. *Consequences of baptism of Jesus* - According to Peter at Pentecost, the baptism of Jesus included the following promises (Acts 2:38):
 - a) Your sins are forgiven through the blood of Christ.
 - b) Christ will send the Holy Spirit to guide, comfort and support you.

C. BAPTISM AND THE PRACTICE OF THE EARLY CHURCH

In the following passages in Acts, baptism was part of the conversion process.

1. *The first sermon and first Jewish converts (at Pentecost) – Acts 2:38.*

When the Jewish audience inquired “what shall we do?”. Peter said all need to be baptized to receive forgiveness of sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit. This is a command and promise through the ages for everyone.

2. *Conversion of the first non-Jews – Samaritans (and Simon)- Acts 8:12-13*

3. *Conversion of the first non-Judean; the African Eunuch – Acts 8:35-8.*

4. *Conversion of the first Gentile – Cornelius – – Acts 10:48.*

5. *Conversion of a woman of influence in her community - Acts 16:14-15.*

6. *Conversion of member of the penal system – Acts 16:33*

7. *The first conversion of a synagogue ruler – – Acts 18:8*

8. *Correcting a teaching about “John’s” baptism- Acts 18:24- 26.*

Apollos, because he only knew the "baptism of John", had to be instructed by Aquilla & Priscilla. Many in Ephesus were "re-baptized" because they, like Apollos, knew only the baptism of John. Clearly Christian baptism is so important that it needed to be understood that John’s baptism, though appropriate at the time of John, was no longer adequate (see Acts 18:24-26 and Acts 19:1-5).

9. *Conversion of Paul, the major writer of the New Testament - Acts 22:16*

What is noteworthy about Paul’s baptism is that it was so important that Paul did it before eating despite the fact that he had gone 3 days without food or water. When Paul tells the story in Acts 22, he says that baptism washes away sins. See *Acts 22:16* “Get up, be baptized and wash your sins away, calling on his name.”

C. BAPTISM AND NEW TESTAMENT WRITERS

1. *Peter.* Peter compared baptism to the salvation Noah received from the flood. It is not the water per se, but the volitional intent that links water baptism to salvation.

I Peter 3:18-22- "In it only a few people, eight in all, were saved through water, and this water symbolizes baptism that now saves you also-- not the removal of dirt from the body but the pledge of a good conscience toward God. It saves you by the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who has gone into heaven and is at God's right hand--with angels, authorities and powers in submission to him."

Peter says baptism by itself might clean the dirt off of your body. However, the blood of Christ washes away sins when baptism is accompanied with the “pledge of a good conscience toward God,” that is, a repentant commitment that signifies that you are ready to be forgiven, and you are ready to commit your life to Christ, and thereby ready to be accepted as a child of God.

2. *Paul-* Paul describes Israel’s escape from Egypt through the Red Sea (1Corinthians 10:1-11) as being a baptism. It was part of their break from the world of sin (Egypt), crossing over into a life sustained by relationship with God. In Romans 6:3-5 Paul depicts Christian baptism as our “crossing over” from our lifestyle of sin into new life in Christ. Just as the Israelites had to leave Egypt and their old way of life and old desires, Christians must leave behind the desires of the flesh and acquire a life of spiritual priorities.

Romans 6:4-5 - "We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life. If we have been united with him like this in his death, we will certainly also be united with him in his resurrection."

Paul describes the "burial" in water as participation in the death of Christ. Paul wanted us to understand that in baptism a person dies to his old self and the selfish ways in which he once walked. This death to old self (and to sin) is followed by a resurrection into the new life of a Christian. By being united in Christ in "death", we will be assured that we will be also resurrected with him to live in heaven.

Conclusion

Baptism is a response to what God has already done for us by his grace. Clearly baptism without faith is just getting wet, but faith without baptism was unheard of in the New Testament Church. In baptism we experience the grace of God in the presence of Christ as we are being remade by the Holy Spirit. (Our faith response continues throughout the rest of our earthly life as we try to love God and our neighbor.) Through baptism, in the presence of witnesses, we participate in the gospel in a physical, social and spiritual way.

IV. QUESTIONS

A. ISN'T BAPTISM A WORK?

It is important to understand what is meant by “work”. In the New Testament “works” refer to human activity. It is referenced in both positive and negative applications, and the motives determine the moral quality of the “work”. Paul tells us in Ephesians 2:8-9 that we are saved by grace through faith, not of our own effort, not of “works” lest anyone should boast. This is the glorious truth that salvation is a gift from God and cannot be “earned or deserved” due to human activity. In this sense, baptism is not a work, and to be baptized thinking it will, in some way, “achieve” salvation is a grievous error. Baptism is part of how we take hold of the free gift, much as a person extends their hand to receive a gift being offered. The extension of the hand doesn’t “earn” the gift, but simply takes hold of it—a response to the offer.

Baptism is a “work” in the sense of being a human activity carried out as an expression of faith. Any response of faith can be categorized as human activity and called a “work”, including a prayer to receive Christ. This kind of work is motivated by faith and gives expression to faith—as the Biblical writer put it: “I will show you my faith by what I do.... Faith without works is dead” (see James 2:14-26). The “works” in view here are not carried out in order to earn favor with God—they are visible expressions of dependent trust in God. Baptism is just that—an active response to God’s gracious free gift of life in Christ.

B. CAN A PERSON BE SAVED WITHOUT BAPTISM?

The Bible clearly demonstrates the need for a faith response to the gospel message. That faith response includes the following: faith expressed through verbal confession; faith expressed through repentance; faith expressed through baptism; and faith expressed through lifestyle surrender to Christ. All aspects of faith expression are required by biblical mandate. Some say saving occurs in the head after reciting a prayer. This private, interior experience of "asking Jesus into your heart" never is mentioned in the New Testament. However, each person is responsible to God for the understanding he/she has attained which, of course, depends on the background of an individual. Once an individual understands the required faith expression, that individual is accountable for expressing it. All areas of faith response are required for church membership.

It is worth noting that Paul assumes in Galatians 3:26-29 that all Christians were baptized. He does not include a category of disciples who were saved yet not baptized. Finally, Paul states that we are children of God "through faith in Jesus, FOR as many of us as have been baptized into Christ." The FOR indicates when and how the faith was demonstrated. Faith was demonstrated by baptism.

God can save whomever he desires, and we should praise God when he is merciful to anyone without opportunity to know the Gospel sufficiently to seek baptism. Certainly, the followers of God in the Old Testament were not baptized; however, the blood of Christ ultimately saved them (by covering sins backward in time just as his blood continues to cover sins today and, in the future). The thief hanging on the cross next to Jesus repented, was not baptized yet Jesus promised to meet him in Paradise. But remember that the New Covenant was not in place until later (at Pentecost).

If, at the time of judgment, God decides to grant salvation to the non-baptized, then we should praise God for his mercy. But as a practical matter for those God seekers at Creekside, it is clear that the Biblical examples require baptism be presented as part of the faith response to the gospel. The Creekside Elders find no Biblical reason to eliminate this vital teaching from our presentation and instruction when responding to those seeking to know God in Jesus Christ.

C. ISN'T BELIEF ALONE ENOUGH?

Since not every “salvation related” passage includes baptism, some argue that “belief alone” will save you. For example, the following scriptures in Acts do not mention baptism:

Acts 2:47 - Lord added daily to those who were being saved.

Acts 3:19 - Repent so your sins will be wiped out.

Acts 4:4 - Many who heard the message believed and the number grew to 5000.

Acts 6:7 - A large number of priests became obedient to the faith.

Acts 9:42 - Many people believed in the Lord

Acts 11:21 - A great number of people believed and turned to the Lord

Acts 11:24 - A great number of people were brought to the Lord

Acts 13:48 - All who were appointed to eternal life believed.

Acts 17:4 - Some were persuaded and joined Paul & Silas

Acts 17:35 - A few became followers of Paul and believed.

None of these passages specifically state that “belief alone” is enough to attain salvation. Many of these verses are general statements about the growth of the early church. "The Lord added daily to those who were being saved" (Acts 2:47) and "Many believed in the Lord" (Acts 9:42) suggest that Luke was simply demonstrating that the movement was growing.

Only in three verses (Acts 4:4, 11:21, and 13:48), could it be argued that “belief alone” is sufficient for salvation. However, in those three passages it appears that Luke uses the term "believed" in a way like we might say "became a Christian" today. Thus, they could be translated as: " Many who heard the message became Christians and the number grew to 5000" (Acts 4:4); "A great number of people became Christians and turned to the Lord" (Acts 11:21); "All who were appointed to eternal life became Christians" (Acts 13:48).

The other seven verses are general statements that imply baptism. For example, Acts 3:19 uses the word "repent" without specifically mentioning belief or baptism. Acts 6:7 just says "obedient to the faith" which would include baptism as well as belief. The phrase “turning to the Lord” in Acts 11:21 could include baptism. No one should interpret “saving faith” (Acts 17:4 and 17:35) as what occurs when the candidate joined up with Paul (rather than Jesus). Instead, we imply that it means to follow Jesus as Paul did. Paul believed and was baptized.

The descriptions are general because Luke was not giving a conversion story as detailed previously. In fact, none of these ten passages mention a convert by name. The only possible exception to this pattern is found in Acts 13 in the story of Sergius Paulus, the governor of Cyprus. In Acts 13:12, Luke states that Sergius does believe, but he does not mention baptism (or salvation). Scholars are divided as to whether Luke is stating that the governor believed in Christ as the Messiah or merely that he believed that God's power was superior to that of Elymas, the sorcerer (see FF Bruce's Commentary on Acts).

All of the specific passages in the New Testament command and/or imply that baptism was a key part of the faith response to the Gospel message. Given the lack of specific detail in each of the above passages in Acts, it forces us to conclude that when conversion was completed in New Testament times, baptism always was part of the faith response leading to salvation.