

Baptism: Is it Necessary for Salvation?

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Many scholars have debated this subject for ages. The debate continues today, at least among some. Others refuse to argue the point any longer, either because they consider the subject settled or, perhaps, they believe that their opponents have closed their minds. I do not expect to write an essay so convincing as to end all controversy over this subject. However, I shall attempt to clarify some of the objections to baptism for salvation.

Must one be a Greek scholar to understand what the Bible says about baptism? No. Although a working knowledge of the Greek could enhance one's Bible study, surely all must agree that understanding the Bible does not require it. By reading what reputable Greek scholars have said, and comparing a variety of translations of the Bible, one gains confidence in his ability to ascertain the meaning and intent of God's will for man. Jesus proclaimed man's ability to know the truth (John 8:31,32). By the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, Paul emphatically declared that God wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth (1 Timothy 2:3,4). The same Holy Spirit guided Peter to record that God has given us all things that pertain to life and godliness (2 Peter 1:3). Does this mean that one can answer any Bible question if he studies long enough? No, not unless one accepts the answer, "I do not know." Although God has revealed (given) to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, He has not revealed all things, (Deuteronomy 29:29).

Does baptism pertain to life and godliness? If it does, then God has given us the truth about baptism, and we can know it. In this article, I do not attempt to answer every argument made in opposition to baptism. I set forth Scriptures that relate to it and mention briefly the arguments made against them. In the latter part of this article, I shall attempt to address the underlying motivation for this opposition.

Mark 16:16 "He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned."

The oppositions to this passage are: Verses 9-20 are not in some manuscripts, and therefore, should be rejected; and that the Lord said that failing to believe would condemn one, not failing to be baptized.

The validity of the passage I cannot address, however, the truth about baptism does not depend on this one passage. The other objection is invalid for the following reasons:

1. Although unmentioned by Jesus in this verse, He definitely taught that eternal condemnation would come upon all who fail to obey other commands. For example: Failing to repent will condemn one (Luke 13:3); failing to confess the Lord before men will condemn one (Matthew 10:33); failing to forgive others will condemn one (Matthew 18:21-35), etc.

2. The conjunction “and” unites “believes” and “is baptized,” making them of equal value. Whatever “believes” is for, “is baptized” is also for. If belief is necessary to salvation, so is baptism. If baptism is not necessary for salvation, then neither is belief. Jesus placed both before salvation. Man has sought to change the order of the Lord’s statement in every conceivable way. The Catholics say that one (an infant) is saved at the point of baptism, and later should believe. Most Protestants say that one is saved at the point of belief, and later should be baptized. Both of these doctrines negate what the Lord said: “He who believes and is baptized shall be saved.”

3. The Scriptures teach that one cannot be baptized unless he first believes. In the case of the Ethiopian’s conversion in Acts 8:35-38, Philip preached Jesus to him. Along the way, they came to some water, and the Ethiopian asked what could hinder him from being baptized. Philip gave only one prerequisite, “If you believe with all your heart, you may.”

If one must believe with all his heart, to qualify for baptism, then the Lord said all He needed to say: “He who does not believe will be condemned.” He did not need to say, “And He who is not baptized will be condemned, too.” If one does not believe, he cannot be baptized!

Acts 2:38 “Then Peter said to them, “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.”

Those who oppose baptism for salvation must challenge this verse of Scripture as well. The following quotation states the most prevalent argument against the verse.

“For” (as used in Acts 2:38 “for the forgiveness...”) could have two meanings. If you saw a poster saying “Jesse James wanted for robbery”, “for” could mean Jesse is wanted so he can commit a robbery, or is wanted because he has committed a robbery. The later sense is the correct one. So too in this passage, the word “for” signifies an action in the past. Otherwise, it would violate the entire tenor of the NT teaching on salvation by grace and not by works. Enhanced Strong’s Lexicon, (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc.) 1995.

A. T. Robertson, in his exalted work, “Word Pictures in the New Testament,” reinforced the confidence of those who oppose baptism for salvation. Concerning the same preposition “for” (eis), in the phrase “for the remission of sins,” of Acts 2:38, He states:

“In themselves the words can express aim or purpose for that use of eis does exist as in 1 Corinthians 2:7...But then another usage exists which is just as good Greek as the use of eis for aim or purpose.” “...It is seen again in Matt. 12:41 about the preaching of Jonah...They repented because of (or at) the preaching of Jonah...One will decide the use here according as he believes that baptism is essential to the remission of sins or not. My view is decidedly against the idea that Peter, Paul, or any one in the New Testament taught baptism as essential to the remission of sins or the means of securing such remission.” (WORD PICTURES IN THE NEW TESTAMENT, A. T. Robertson, Vol. 3, p. 35,36).

The purpose for presenting these two quotations is twofold: I want to make evident the arguments made against baptism for salvation; and to show the motivation for those arguments.

The obvious question is does “for the remission of sins” mean “because of,” or “in order to”? Reading the passage in context, giving a natural flow to the text, and without preconceived ideas, I cannot imagine anyone concluding that Peter meant “because of.” However, since my imagination is not an acceptable authority in settling biblical issues, please consider the following reasons to accept Peter’s statement in the natural sense, “for the purpose of the remission of sins.”

1. The Bible does not say, “because of the remission of sins.” Where is the reputable translation of the Bible that does? (Please do not refer me to some dreamer’s paraphrase!) The scholars who have translated the Bible have not translated this phrase in Acts 2:38 as “because of the remission of sins.” I have several translations, in English and in Spanish, and have read several others, but I have never found one that said, “because of the remission of sins.” Why not? If, as some “scholars” would like for us to believe, it is “just as good Greek,” then why have Bible translators not translated it that way?

2. The passage that A. T. Robertson gave as an example of “eis” meaning “because of,” does not contain a phrase parallel to “for the remission of sins.” This invalidates his premise and thwarts his conclusion. No one can successfully deny that “eis” can, and does have different meanings, depending on the context and the grammatical construction of the prepositional phrase in which it is used. Could he not find a phrase, parallel in construction, for his comparison? There is an exact parallel phrase in Matthew 26:28. This example is the same both in English and Greek.

Matthew 26:28 “For this is My blood of the new covenant, which is shed for many for the remission of sins.”

If one insists that “for” (eis), in the phrase “for the remission of sins” in Acts 2:38 means “because of,” then reason and consistency demand him to do so in Matthew 26:28, too. If one interprets “for” (eis) in Matthew 26:28 as “aim, or purpose,” then reason and consistency demand him to interpret it the same way in Acts 2:38.

1 Peter 3:21 “There is also 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,”

This passage clearly states that baptism (not water) saves us. To maintain one’s objection to baptism for salvation, one must deal with this passage, too.

The only argument that I have heard, concerning this passage, is: “Peter states that baptism is not for ‘the removal of the filth of the flesh,’ which refers to the ‘works of the flesh,’ (Galatians 5:19-21) or sins. Therefore, baptism is not for the removal (remission) of sins.”

The verse states that baptism now saves us. The “removal of the filth of the flesh” refers to the “removal of dirt from the body,” as the New International Version translates it.

“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,”

Peter explains that baptism cleanses us spiritually (our soul — 1 Peter 1:22), not physically (our body — 1 Peter 3:21). Having one’s sins forgiven gives one a “good conscience toward God.”

What is the motive behind the denial of baptism for salvation?

As one examines the simple statements found in these verses of Scripture and the arguments made against them, one cannot but wonder why. What does anyone have to gain by denying what the Scriptures so clearly teach? By studying with several of those who oppose baptism for salvation, I believe I have found the main roots to their opposition.

1. They are motivated by the supposition that the biblical doctrine of salvation by faith means salvation by faith only.

At first glance, these two doctrines may appear to be the same. However, the Scriptures teach the first one, but they do not the other one. Those who believe in salvation by faith only cannot accept anything else as necessary for salvation, because that would constitute a contradiction. The conflict, however, is really not between baptism and faith, but rather, between faith and faith only. Please consider the following:

Ephesians 2:8-9 “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast.”

- If grace is necessary for salvation, then how can one say it is by Faith only?

Luke 13:3 “I tell you, no; but unless you repent you will all likewise perish.”

- If Repentance is necessary for salvation, then how can one say it is by faith only?

Romans 10:9-10 “That if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes unto righteousness, and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation.”

- If Confession of the Lord (our faith in Him as the Son of God) is necessary for salvation, how can one say it is by faith only?

Mark 16:16 “He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned.”

- If Baptism is necessary for salvation, then how can it be by faith only?

I think this helps get to the real issue. If one accepts that grace, repentance, and confession are necessary for salvation by faith, then why not baptism? Does faith only mean, salvation by faith and everything else the Bible says, except baptism?

2. They are motivated by their failure to understand and appreciate the different types of works taught in the Bible, (works of the law, works of righteousness, meritorious works, works of obedience, and passive obedience).

Failing to distinguish among these types of works mentioned in the Bible pits Paul against James and creates a contradiction (James 2:24; Ephesians 2:8,9). The quotation from the Enhanced Strong's Lexicon illustrates this problem. "Otherwise, it would violate the entire tenor of the NT teaching on salvation by grace and not by works."

Once one distinguishes among these types of works, the contradiction disappears. Consider the different ways the Holy Spirit used the word "works":

- Paul wrote of the "works of the law," (Romans 3:27,28; Galatians 2:15,16), which can not save (justify) today.
- Paul also wrote of "works of righteousness" which God, not man does (Titus 3:5).
- Paul also wrote of "meritorious works," (Ephesians 2:8,9) of which one might boast. Such works do not save anyone, either.
- However, Paul and James (and others, as well) also wrote of "obedient works," (James 2:14-26; Galatians 5:6).

Paul and James were not teaching opposing doctrines. By the grace of God, Jesus died for us, (Romans 5:6-8). However, Jesus became "the author of eternal salvation to all who obey Him" (Hebrews 5:9).

The fact that God requires obedience neither tarnishes nor diminishes the importance of faith. An obedient faith is necessary.

3. Considering baptism a work motivates them to attack the verses that teach baptism for salvation.

Those who oppose baptism for salvation clearly indicate that they believe baptism is a work. The quotation from the Enhanced Strong's Lexicon proves this point. It said, "Otherwise, it would violate the entire tenor of the NT teaching on salvation by grace and not by works."

Is baptism a work? If it is, which type of work is it?

- It is not one of the "works of the law," for baptism in the name of Jesus Christ was unknown to the law.
- It is not a meritorious work, of which one could boast in his salvation. The verb "be baptized" is passive voice, "indicating that the sentence's subject is passive and receives

the action of the verb” (BRITANNICA BOOK OF ENGLISH USAGE, p. 170). One does not baptize himself. Of what could he boast? He has not done anything. He received baptism.

- Paul plainly states that it is a “work of righteousness,” but that is not a work that man does (Titus 3:5). God works righteousness. He imputes it to us when our sins are forgiven (Romans 4:5-8). He “operates/works” in baptism, when He takes away our sins and raises us to “walk in newness of life” (Colossians 2:12, Romans 6:4). “Operation” (KJV) or “working” (NKJV) comes from the Greek word “energeia” (Strong’s number 1753), and is defined as:

“1) working, efficiency

1a) in the NT used only of superhuman power, whether of God or of the Devil.”

Considering this, baptism is not even a work of obedience, unless referring to the one doing the baptizing (Matthew 28:19). Being baptized is “passive obedience” to a command of God. Is it possible to “obey” a command, without doing anything? Certainly it is. If a parent tells his child to “be quiet, don’t move, don’t do anything,” if that child obeys, what does he do?

One can obey without “working.” When God told Israel to “Be still and know that I am God” could they obey? When they obeyed, what type of work were they doing? Obedience does not necessarily involve working or doing something. Sometimes it means to “submit” to something, or to “receive” something. In the case of the command to “be baptized,” it means to submit to “being baptized,” or to “receiving baptism.” In Acts 8, when the eunuch was baptized, who was “doing” something? The Bible says that Philip baptized him. The eunuch received baptism, or submitted to being baptized. He was passive, (receiving the action) not active (doing the action). That is “passive obedience.” The fear that baptism for salvation contradicts salvation by grace and faith, apart from works is baseless, illogical and unscriptural.

4. They are motivated by a heartfelt need to defend their doctrine, apparently at any cost.

What compels someone to twist and distort the Scriptures as the opponents of baptism for salvation do? They interpret all Scripture according to their erroneous, preconceived ideas about faith and works. As A. T. Robertson admitted, in the quotation, “One will decide the use here according as he believes that baptism is essential to the remission of sins or not. My view is decidedly against the idea that Peter, Paul, or any one in the New Testament taught baptism as essential to the remission of sins or the means of securing such remission.”

They feel justified, even compelled, to interpret all Scripture, twisting when necessary, to avoid the obvious contradictions and problems their position causes. This converts simple verses into controversial and difficult ones. The Scriptures warn us of this dangerous practice.

2 Peter 3:16 “As also in all his epistles, speaking in them of these things, in which are some things hard to understand, which untaught and unstable [people] twist to their own destruction, as [they do] also the rest of the Scriptures.”

2 Thessalonians 2:10-12 “And with all unrighteous deception among those who perish, because they did not receive the love of the truth, that they might be saved. And for this reason God will send them strong delusion, that they should believe the lie, that they all may be condemned who did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness.”

Conclusion:

I realize that this study could offend and inflame some of its readers. However, I hope you will not allow that to happen. I send it forth with love: love for God, love for the Truth, and love for those who hold to the positions described herein. My plea is that you will receive this with the same noble and fair-minded attitude that characterized the Bereans in Paul’s day.

Acts 17:11 “These were more fair-minded than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness, and searched the Scriptures daily [to find out] whether these things were so.”