

## THE TRUTH ABOUT BAPTISM

The following announcement appeared in a denominational bulletin: *"This afternoon there will be a meeting in the north and south ends of the church building. Babies will be baptized at both ends."*

While amusing, there's more wrong with the above statement than mere grammar alone. Are babies really fit subjects for baptism? Just who is eligible to be baptized according to the Bible? What is baptism? Is it necessary for salvation? I believe a detailed study of baptism in the Bible will answer these and many more questions.

### BAPTISM DEFINED

First of all, a definition of baptism is in order. The word "baptize" in most of the Bible translations we have today is actually a transliterated word (where English letter equivalents are substituted for the Greek letters in the original word). Instead of translating the meaning of the word into the English equivalent, the Greek word in the original text is just changed into an English word.

The Greek word translated "baptize" is the word "baptizo". "Baptizo" is defined in Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon as, "1) to dip, to immerse, submerge (of vessels sunk); 2) to cleanse by dipping or submerging, to wash, to make clean with water; 3) to overwhelm." Vine's Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words defines "baptisma" (translated "baptism") as "consisting of the process of immersion, submersion, and emergence."

As can clearly be seen, the New Testament writers intended to indicate that baptism is an immersion. The mistranslation of using the transliterated word began with the King James translators because the church of England (who sponsored the translation) did not want the word "immersion" used for baptism. The only Bible translation that I know of that correctly translates the Greek words we call "baptism" is McCord's New Testament Translation of the Everlasting Gospel. For example in Mark 16:16

McCord's translates, "He who believes and is immersed shall be saved..."

Baptism does not always mean "dunking in water", but it does always mean "immersion." An example would be in Matt. 20:23 where Jesus asks James and John, "Are you able to drink the cup that I am about to drink, and be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?" What is Jesus referring to here when He mentions His baptism? Not His water baptism. Rather Jesus is giving a picture of the agony that He is about to endure. H. Leo Boles in his commentary on Matthew has stated concerning this, "Incidentally we see what is meant by baptism; it is not a mere sprinkling of suffering, but an overwhelming of suffering in death."

But suffice it to say, most times that baptism is mentioned in the New Testament, immersion in water is meant. Yet one must still examine the context of the passage to see what is truly being discussed.

## **FAITH, BAPTISM, OR BOTH?**

Many today argue that there are far more verses in the Bible that speak only of faith and belief than there are those which emphasize baptism as connected with salvation.

While this is true, an understanding of what true faith consists of will not negate but enforce the necessity of baptism (and by the way, the New Testament mentions baptism over 100 times--it is not an insignificant matter in and of itself).

The words "believe" and "faith" are often used in the New Testament as a synecdoche (where a part is given for the whole). An example of a synecdoche we use today is "start the car." What is meant by that is "open the car door, get the keys out, get in the car, insert the key into the ignition, turn the key while putting gentle pressure on the gas pedal, etc." When we read verses in the New Testament that state that "faith" or "belief" is all we need for salvation, what is meant is what true faith and belief entails (doing all of God's will). This includes belief (John 3:16), repentance (Luke 13:3), confession (Rom. 10:10), baptism (Mark 16:16), and living obediently (Matt. 7:21). All are necessary for salvation.

The thought that belief is all that is necessary for salvation because it is mentioned more often than any other aspect of faith is an erroneous one. Notice all of the things that the Bible says saves:

- The Word of God saves (Jas. 1:21)
- The Gospel saves (Rom. 1:16)
- The blood of Christ saves (Heb. 9:14)
- The death of Christ saves (Rom. 5:10)
- Heeding the doctrine of God saves (I Tim. 4:16)
- Belief saves (John 3:16)
- Repentance saves (Luke 13:3)
- Confession saves (Rom. 10:10)
- Baptism saves (Mark 16:16)
- Works save (Jas. 2:24)
- The mercy of God saves (Titus 3:4-5)

There must be the proper combination of all of the above for salvation to occur.

The problem with faith is that people want to associate belief (and belief only) with it. In actuality, belief is only a part of true faith. There's much more to true faith than just simply believing. James 2:19 reminds us, "You believe that there is one God. You do well. Even the demons believe--and tremble." Surely no one thinks that Satan's agents are going to heaven--yet they believe in Jesus. To demonstrate that true faith involves much more than just believing, please note the following chart that shows the gifts of faith and the gifts of baptism:

<b>GIFT</b>	<b>FAITH</b>	<b>BAPTISM</b>
<b>Forgiveness</b>	<b>Acts 10:43</b>	<b>Acts 2:38</b>
<b>Cleansing</b>	<b>Heb. 10:22</b>	<b>Acts 22:16</b>
<b>Justification</b>	<b>Rom. 5:1</b>	<b>I Cor. 6:11</b>
<b>Union With Christ</b>	<b>Eph. 3:14-17</b>	<b>Gal. 3:27</b>
<b>Alliance with death and resurrection of Christ</b>	<b>Col. 2:12</b>	<b>Rom. 6:3-4</b>
<b>Sonship</b>	<b>Gal. 3:26</b>	<b>Gal. 3:26-29</b>
<b>Gift of the Spirit</b>	<b>Gal. 3:14</b>	<b>Acts 2:38</b>
<b>Eternal Life</b>	<b>John 3:16</b>	<b>John 3:5</b>
<b>Salvation</b>	<b>Acts 16:31</b>	<b>Mark 16:16</b>

Many may ask, "Why such emphasis on baptism?" Well, partly because so many people spend so much time vehemently denying its importance. But my answer to the question is "Because baptism is important to God." By looking at the previous chart it easily can be noticed that faith and baptism are so intertwined that exactly the same gifts are accorded to both. Baptism, like faith, occupies a prominent place in the New Testament because baptism is a vital part of our faith.

## **FOLLOW THE EXAMPLE OF JESUS**

Another concern of some is the fact that Jesus never personally baptized anyone and that if baptism were essential to salvation that Christ himself would have made a point about it many times."

We need to remember that Jesus lived His entire earthly life under the Old Law. Thus, baptism for salvation was not yet necessary. But we can still see Jesus in His life and ministry establishing baptism as a prerequisite to salvation.

Jesus, even though He was without sin (Heb. 4:15), was still baptized by John the baptist (Matt. 3:13-17). John's baptism was a baptism of repentance (Matt. 3:11). Having never sinned, Jesus thus had nothing to repent of. Why was Jesus baptized? Matt. 3:15 says that it was "to fulfill all righteousness." Jesus was baptized because it was God's will for Him to do so. And since I Pet. 2:21 mentions that Christ left us an example, that we should follow in His steps, it makes sense that He was baptized to "set the precedent" for all who would be in His kingdom.

Admittedly Christ did not baptize anyone, but He had people baptized under His authority. John 4:1-2 has recorded, "Therefore, when the Lord knew that the Pharisees had heard that Jesus made and baptized more disciples than John (though He Himself did not baptize, but His disciples)..." Baptism was apparently important enough for Jesus to instruct His followers to do it.

I have a volume in my library titled, All the Teachings of Jesus. In it is no listing concerning baptism. Where did everybody get the idea that Jesus

didn't teach anything on baptism? Not from the Bible. As the commercial declares, "It's in there!"

When Nicodemus came to Jesus one night asking Him about salvation, Jesus answered in John 3:5, "Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God." Most Bible scholars agree that Jesus is referencing baptism here. And if so (and I believe so), then Jesus is teaching of the necessity of baptism for salvation.

Now it is important to remember that Jesus lived under the Old Testament laws, but He was teaching His apostles concerning the New Law to come. In His final instructions to them Jesus tells them, "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you..." (Matt. 28:19-20).

Baptism is the method that Jesus prescribed for making disciples.

### **WHAT ABOUT I COR. 1:17?**

Some argue that I Cor. 1:17 gives basis to dilute the necessity of baptism. There Paul recorded, "For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel..."

Was Paul saying that baptism was not important? Certainly not! Let's look at the context of the matter. First of all, Paul had baptized some in Corinth (I Cor. 1:14,16). Secondly, all of the Christians in Corinth had been baptized (Acts 18:8, I Cor. 1:13, inference). He was just glad that he had not baptized any more than he had because apparently cliques were beginning to form in the church based upon who baptized whom (I Cor. 1:12). This was wrong and Paul knew it.

Paul was sent to evangelize (I Cor. 1:17). Others could do the baptizing as well; but none could do the evangelizing as well as Paul. In so many other places Paul emphasizes the necessity of baptism (Rom. 6:3-6, I Cor. 12:13, I Cor. 15:1-4, Gal. 3:27, Eph. 4:5, Col. 2:12).

## **WHAT DOES BAPTISM DO?**

Baptism is important because of what it does. Please note the following concerning what baptism does:

- Baptism destroys the old man (Rom. 6:3-4)
- Baptism creates a new man (Rom. 6:3-4)
- Baptism washes away sin (Acts 22:16)
- Baptism puts all into one body (I Cor. 12:13)
- Baptism puts one into Christ (II Cor. 5:17)
- Baptism allows one to be added to the church (Acts 2:40-47)
- Baptism saves (I Pet. 3:21)

As can clearly be seen, baptism creates a permanent change. This can be well illustrated by something that the Greek poet Nicandor recorded in about 200 B.C. He recorded a recipe for pickles, but what is interesting is that in his recipe, he includes the word "baptizo" in an interesting way. In his recipe he has recorded that the vegetable should be baptized (baptizo) into the vinegar solution; the vegetable was to be completely immersed. Also notice what the result of immersing the vegetable in the vinegar did-- it produced a permanent change! And so does baptism.

Baptism is necessary for salvation. The Standard Manual for Baptist Churches states concerning church membership, "It is most likely that in the Apostolic Age, when there was but 'one Lord, one faith, and one baptism,' and no differing denominations existed, the baptism of a convert by that very act constituted him a member of the church, and at once endowed with all the rights and privileges of full fellowship. In that sense, 'baptism was the door of the church.' Now it is different."

Who made it different? God sure didn't. What arrogance for man to think that he can change the requirements of God!

## **IS BAPTISM A WORK?**

If indeed baptism is necessary for salvation, then many feel this makes baptism a work, and that would be tantamount to saying that a work is needed to complete Christ's sacrifice on the cross.

I wish I had a dime for every time I heard a denominationalist declare, "Baptism is a work and you can't earn salvation, thus baptism isn't necessary for salvation."

Baptism isn't a work--it is a condition to be met. Let me illustrate. Suppose you give me a \$100 gift on my birthday. Have I earned it? Of course not. Why did I get it? Because I met a certain condition necessary for receiving the gift (it was my birthday). Likewise, baptism is not a work. But the gift of salvation is not given until all the conditions have been met (baptism being one of them).

Many turn to Eph. 2:8-9 to show that baptism is not necessary for salvation, that it is a gift based solely upon one condition (faith). The text reads, "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." Well, that seems pretty straight forward, doesn't it? Let's compare that passage with one almost exactly like it that Paul wrote to the Christians at Colosse. This will let us know exactly what Paul meant by "by grace you have been saved."

EPHESIANS 2:5-9  
dead in trespasses (v.5)  
alive together with Christ (v.5)  
raised up...with Christ (v.6)  
you have been saved (v.8)  
saved through faith (v.8)  
not of works (v.9)

COLOSSIANS 2:11-13  
dead in trespasses (v.13)  
made alive together with Him (v.13)  
raised with Him (v.12)  
have forgiven your trespasses (v.13)  
raised through faith (v.12)  
made without hands (v.11)

Note the perfect correlation between the two passages. This indicates that Paul was writing about the same event--a past event. Now note the equivalent in Colossians with "by grace you have been saved in Ephesians.

EPHESIANS 2:5-9  
by grace you have been saved (v8)

COLOSSIANS 2:11-13  
buried with Him in baptism (v.12)

After harmonizing these two passages can there be any doubt that baptism is a condition that must be met to receive salvation?

Not that anyone could earn salvation, but notice in Heb. 11 (that great

chapter on faith) what the individuals did to be deemed faithful. "By faith Abel offered..." (v.4). "By faith Noah...prepared..." (v.7). "By faith Abraham obeyed..." (v.8). "By faith Abraham...offered..." (v.17). "By faith Moses...forsook...kept..." (v.24-28). Faith is an action word--it always demands certain things to be done.

I've heard baptism referred to as "water salvation" by many. They argue that how can baptism save if it is the blood of Christ that actually washes away our sins. Let me ask you this--what saved Noah? We could argue that faith saved Noah, and it did (Heb. 11:4). We can argue that the ark saved Noah, and it did (Gen. 6). We can also argue that water saved Noah, and it did (I Pet. 3:20-21). But, in reality it was God who saved Noah. His faith, the ark, and the water were simply the means that God used to save him.

In the same way, baptism is the course God has chosen for us to be cleansed by the blood of Jesus. When we submit to the will of God by being baptized into the death of Jesus Christ, God saves us by washing us clean with the blood of His Son.

What would have happened if Noah would have refused to build the ark--would he have been saved? Of course not. What would happen if one refuses to be baptized? Will he be saved?

Now, don't misunderstand me, we can't earn salvation, but we can do the part that God has demanded us to do. We can meet the conditions that God has established. We can "work out our own salvation with fear and trembling" (Phil. 2:12).

## **AS GOD DESIRES OR AS MAN DESIRES?**

Many realize the importance of baptism, but claim that baptism is sprinkling or pouring and that it can be administered to infants as well as adults.

In answering this, let me first state that God desires all to be saved (II Pet. 3:9), but that He will not break any of the rules that He has established to save any. If man wants to be saved, it is up to him to conform to God's

will.

A proper baptism as God designed it is immersion in water for the remission of sins. Of that there can be no doubt. But what of the argument that if a person is sprinkled as baptism it is acceptable to God if his heart is right? No matter how sincere, if the procedure is wrong, God will not accept it. I take as an example the two priests Nadab and Abihu (Lev. 10:1-2). They were priests of the Old Testament order. God desired a certain fire to be used. In their sincerity, they offered a fire that was unacceptable to God. They died as a result.

Some doubt the sincerity of the Nadab and Abihu, but no one can doubt the sincerity of Uzzah when he reached out his hand to steady the Ark of the Covenant as it was on its way back to Jerusalem (I Sam. 6:6-7). God zapped him. Why? All he wanted to do was protect the Ark of God. How sincere. But his sincerity did not supersede the command of God never to touch the Ark (Num. 4:15). In like manner many folks sincerely are sprinkled or poured upon as baptism, but their sincerity does not supersede the command of God to be immersed.

God demands that we know His will and follow His will. Ignorance of God's laws is no excuse. Peter told some Jews in Acts 3:17 that he knew that they crucified Jesus in ignorance. And yet they still stood in the wrong, because in v. 19 he tells them that they needed to repent of their sins. In Eph. 4:17 we can read of certain Gentiles who were ignorant of the will of God and Paul mentions their lives as ones of futility. Finally, concerning sincere ignorance, note Lev. 2:13 which states, "Now if the whole congregation sins unintentionally...and have done something against the commandments of the Lord which should not be done, they are guilty."

In Matt. 7:21-23 Jesus says, "Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven. Many will say to Me in that day, 'Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?' And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!'" The point here is we can't do things for the Lord our way. It must be done His way. I fear many

on that Day of Judgment will say "Lord, Lord, were we not sincerely baptized by sprinkling in Your name?" What do you think His response will be? Maybe He will say, "Well, I really wanted you to be immersed, but I guess that's close enough." Or will He say, "Depart from Me, you did not do the will of my Father in Heaven"? Given the context of Matt. 7:21-23, it's clear to see it will be the latter.

Remember Naaman the commander of the Syrian army? He had leprosy and went to Elisha to seek a cure (II Kings 5:1-19). He was told to go and dip in the Jordan seven times. Upon hearing this he was indignant. Were not the rivers in his home land good enough? Men cannot receive the grace of God as long as they follow their own reasoning. As long as Naaman rejected the test of faith that God had given him, he remained a leper. But, when he followed God's instructions, he became clean. In reading the text, notice that Naaman did not claim that he had healed himself by his works--he gave God the glory. He realized that only God could cure the leprosy--but it was based on his obedience to God.

In Acts 19, we have some individuals who were baptized with John's baptism (I'm sure quite sincerely). But at the death of Christ, John's baptism was no longer valid. Even though they were baptized for the right reason, they had the wrong type of baptism (John's instead of in the name of Jesus). When they understood this, they were baptized correctly. Even though sprinkling may be done in ignorance and/or in sincerity, it is the wrong type of baptism and will not be accepted by God.

**"WELL, THE THIEF ON THE CROSS WASN'T BAPTIZED!"**

Let's now turn our attention to the thief-on-the-cross issue. Yes, I agree that the thief on the cross was saved--but I also believe that this does not have anything to do with our salvation today.

While upon the earth Jesus had the power to forgive sins (Mark 2:10) on any terms He chose, or without any terms being given. This would include the thief upon the cross. But when He died upon the cross, a change was made. "And for this reason He is the Mediator of the new covenant, by means of death, for the redemption of the transgressions under the first

covenant, that those who are called may receive the promise of the eternal inheritance. For where there is a testament, there must also of necessity be the death of the testator. For a testament is in force after men are dead, since it has no power at all while the testator lives" (Heb. 9:15-17).

What is the point of that passage? Just this: before His death, the will of Jesus Christ was not in effect; after His death, our eternal inheritance is based on that will.

After His death and resurrection, Jesus told the apostles, "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature. He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned" (Mark 16:15-16). They preached just that: "Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins" (Acts 2:38). When the Samaritans believed, "both men and women were baptized" (Acts 8:12). Ananias told a penitent Saul, "Arise and be baptized, and wash away your sins" (Acts 22:16).

In fact, if you will read throughout the "book of conversions" (Acts), you will not find one person appealing to the thief on the cross to get out of doing what the Lord said. When one rejects baptism, it is only because he rejects the word of Christ. The Lord made it a vital part of His will.

To end, please study carefully the following chart on the conversions found in the book of Acts and note the plan of salvation that each of them followed. Note specifically the common thread between them all (baptism).

## EXAMPLES OF CONVERSIONS FROM ACTS

PREACHING	BELIEVED	REPENTED	CONFESSED	BAPTIZED	SAVED
Rom. 10:14	Rom.10:17	Luke 13:3	Rom. 10:10	Gal. 3:27	2Tim2:10
<b>Pentecost</b> (Acts 2:37-47)	v. 41	v. 37-38		v. 38-41	v. 38-47
<b>Samaria</b> (Acts 8:5-13)	v. 12			v. 12-13	

<b>Eunuch</b> (Acts 8:27-39)	v.36-37	v.37	v.38	v.39
<b>Saul,</b> (Acts 9:17 Acts 22:1-16)			9:18	22:16
<b>Cornelius</b> (Acts 10:34-48)	v.43		v.48	v.43
<b>The Jailer</b> (Acts 16:25-34)	v.31	v.30,33	v.33	v.31,34
<b>Lydia</b> (Acts 16:13-15)	v.14		v.15	
<b>Corinthians</b> (Acts 18:7-8)	v.8		v.8	
<b>Ephesians</b> Acts 19:1-5	v.4		v.5	

**Copyright 1996 by Edd Sterchi \* Permission to copy is hereby granted**

**Scriptures are quoted from The New King James Version, Copyright 1983,  
Thomas Nelson, Inc. (unless otherwise noted).**