

Water Baptism and Salvation

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My Spiritual Journey of Baptism:

I grew up not going to church and not believing in God. At fourteen years old I began to attend a Christian youth group when I heard that there were cute girls and sports there- I had one agenda, but God had a different agenda for me at that youth group! After hearing God's word for 3 months, I came to believe that Jesus was who He said He was and the Holy Spirit broke through to my hard heart, convicting me that I was a rebel against God and needed His forgiveness. One to two years later is when I think I truly came to a place of brokenness over sin and repentance. That repentance bore fruit- for the first time I hungered to consume God's word for myself and to go to church (not just youth group) for the first time. The Holy Spirit led me into many changes in my life as I grew in my relationship with Christ and forsook the love of the world and of the flesh. Several months later at a camp in Michigan I was baptized in the river- it was a wonderful time to share with others the reality of the salvation that was in me and that had already born fruit, as I shared with the other teens there my faith in Christ and my desire to publicly state it. I shared my testimony with the group and was plunged into the water and brought out. That moment was such a powerful reminder of all the work that Jesus Christ had done and was continuing to do in my life- the old man was dead, as I identified with Christ, going into the water, and the new man was risen to new life just as Jesus Christ was risen from the dead. With great joy I gasped that first breath after being dunked and praised Jesus for all that He'd done for me. I can firmly state from personal testimony the power of the Holy Spirit in my life prior to water baptism, as evidence that I had already been born again- spiritually baptized.

The Steps of Baptism

What steps do we go through to receive salvation and eternal life? What baptisms if any take place after we have received salvation?

Step 1: Before we become believers, we hear and begin to understand the word of God (*Romans 10:17, James 1:17, 1 Peter 1:23*). The Holy Spirit begins to tug at our hearts.

Step 2: There comes a point when the word of God convicts us of our sin and our need of salvation. We repent, believe in Jesus Christ for our salvation, and receive the Holy Spirit into our hearts. He is now in us. This is accomplished only by God's grace through our faith. This is called "Baptism in the Spirit" and is distinct from other baptisms mentioned below, though other baptisms may occur immediately following or in conjunction with Baptism in the Spirit.

There are other baptisms taught in scripture:

- 1) Water baptism: Water baptism is a command of scripture. It is a symbolic act to demonstrate externally to the world our faith in Christ's saving work on the cross on our behalf and our commitment to live for Jesus Christ as our Lord. It illustrates visually what has already taken place internally in our hearts: that we have died to sin and have been raised to newness of life through our rebirth, our baptism in the Spirit (*Romans 6:1-11*). It is a visual reminder to us that we have daily victory over sin (sanctification) and is

a testimony to the world of their need for salvation and a witness to the church that we are members of it. Water baptism does not save us; it is a very important commandment and a work to be sought after because of our desire to be obedient to the Lord Jesus Christ in all things. Water baptism cannot be done until after one has placed their faith in Jesus Christ.

- 2) Other baptisms mentioned in scripture are baptism with (para) the Spirit and baptism with fire, which speak of the power and working of the Holy Spirit in a believer- these don't pertain to salvation and won't be addressed here.

The Holy Spirit in Us- Proof of Our Salvation

How do we know we have eternal life? How do we know we belong to Jesus Christ, that we are Christians? We know it because we have the Holy Spirit in us, "You are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you. Now if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he is not His...But if the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, He who raised Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through His Spirit who dwells in you." (*Romans 8:9,11 cf. 1 Corinthians 2:12, 6:19-20*) "By this we know that He abides in us, by the Spirit whom He has given us...By this we know that we abide in Him, and He in us, because He has given us of His Spirit...whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in Him, and He in God." (*1 John 3:24, 4:13,15*) Notice in these passages that we know Christ is in us because the Spirit is in us, and we know the Spirit is in us because we have in all honesty and sincerity confessed that Jesus is the Son of God. There is no water baptism in this equation, only faith.

The Holy Spirit *in* Us- the Guarantee of Eternal Life

How does baptism in the Spirit relate to our guarantee of eternal life? "Now He who has prepared us for this very thing is God, who has also given us the Spirit as a guarantee." (*2 Corinthians 5:5*) When we have been baptized in the Spirit, we have a guarantee of eternal life. How do we know we have the guarantee? Because the Holy Spirit is living in us. Is this guarantee truly a guarantee? "He who establishes us with you in Christ and has anointed us is God, who also has sealed us and given us the Spirit in our hearts as a guarantee." (*2 Corinthians 1:21-22, cf. Ephesians 1:13, 4:30*) The word "seal" gives us a greater understanding of just what this guarantee means. Sealing was frequently used to close a deal and make it permanent. Sealing was put on Christ's tomb to verify that it wouldn't get broken into. Sealing is something that God does as a response to our faith, not something that we earn or can contribute to (such as by being water baptized). We are sealed when we are baptized in the Holy Spirit, as long as we continue in the faith (*Colossians 1:23*). We can't even take away the seal by our sinful works. Once the seal is there, it cannot be removed. It is a permanent protection and assurance, a guarantee of salvation. God is the One who puts the seal of the Holy Spirit on us when we are baptized in the Holy Spirit. He gives the seal and it is permanent until the day of redemption. The sealing indicates our security, safety and ownership by God. It is also a symbol that the transaction is finished- no further conditions need be met- praise the Lord for this assurance we have! Because of this assurance we can now press on to all the fullness of the work that the Holy Spirit will lead us into with total freedom and no fear of condemnation (*Romans 8:1-2*)

The Gospel of Our Salvation: What is It?

The word “gospel” is found in the Bible 96 times! Just what is the core message of the gospel according to the Bible? Is water baptism part of the core message of the gospel? In all 96 occurrences of the word “gospel,” water baptism is not mentioned once. Paul wrote, “I declare to you the gospel which I preached to you, which also you received and in which you stand, by which also you are saved, if you hold fast that word which I preached to you-unless you believed in vain. For I delivered to you first of all [of utmost importance] that which I also received: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures.” (*1 Corinthians 15:1-3, cf. Romans 1:1-2*) Paul made clear baptism wasn’t the core of the gospel, but rather faith in the finished work of Jesus Christ, something we “receive,” not something we do. “For Christ did not send me to baptize [here referring to water baptism], but to preach the gospel.” (*1 Corinthians 1:17a*)

In Romans and Galatians Paul stated the gospel that was even presented to Abraham and David “And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel to Abraham beforehand, saying, ‘In you all the nations shall be blessed.’” (*Galatians 3:8, Romans 4:1-10*) Paul reminded us here that the gospel was promised beforehand in the Old Testament- as one reviews the prophecies of the Old Testament, water baptism isn’t mentioned- it is not a part of the core of the gospel! The core gospel Abraham believed is faith in God’s Messiah who would bless all nations. Abraham believed God, and God credited it to him as righteousness. Abraham looked forward to the promise of the cross, and we look back to the finished work that Jesus did on the cross, and by faith alone in that finished work of Christ we are saved. Paul stated, “So, as much as is in me, I am ready to preach the gospel to you who are in Rome also. For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes, for the Jew first and also for the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, ‘The just shall live by faith.’” (*Romans 1:16-17*) Here Paul defines the core gospel: salvation through faith in Jesus Christ, the One who died, was buried and rose again. This is what is of first importance. Yes, all other teachings of the Word of God are important, but the gospel that saves us is this simple message of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ. In Ephesians, baptism in the Spirit is tied into the gospel, “In Him you also trusted, after you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation; in whom also, having believed, you were sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise.” (*Ephesians 1:13*) This passage shows when we received the gospel- when we believed. At that moment God sealed our salvation- the evidence being the Holy Spirit coming into us. In 115 passages in the New Testament, salvation is by believing and in another 35 passages, salvation is by faith, another word for believing. If salvation required faith plus baptism or faith plus works or faith plus anything else, the writers of scripture would have made sure to include such additions in these 150 passages. This is the glorious message of the gospel from cover to cover. (*See also John 3:36, 5:24, 6:29, 20:31, Mark 8:35, Acts 8:25, 40, 15:7, 16:31, 20:24, Romans 3:22, 4:5, 24, 5:1, 10:4, 16:25, 2 Corinthians 4:3-4, Galatians 3:22, Revelation 14:6*)

Circumcision and the Gospel

Several times Paul wrote with very strong words condemning those who would force Gentiles to be circumcised in order to be saved. Why was Paul so adamant about this? “I marvel that you are turning away so soon from Him who called you in the grace [undeserved favor or gift which we simply receive] of Christ, to a different gospel, which is not another; but there are some who trouble you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ. But even if we, or an angel from heaven,

preach any other gospel to you than what we have preached to you, let him be accursed.” (*Galatians 1:6-9*) Paul went up with Titus to Jerusalem and, “not even Titus who was with me, being a Greek, was compelled to be circumcised. And this occurred because of false brethren secretly brought in (who came in by stealth to spy out our liberty which we have in Christ Jesus, that they might bring us into bondage), to whom we did not yield submission even for an hour, that the truth of the gospel might continue with you.” (*Galatians 2:3-5*) There were Jews eager to force circumcision on the Gentiles as a requirement for salvation, yet Paul vehemently opposed it. Why was he so forceful about it? Paul wrote in Romans what circumcision was all about, “For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh; but he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the Spirit, not in the letter.” (*Romans 2:25-29, cf. Galatians 5:1-6, Philippians 3:2-9*) Paul’s repeated message about circumcision in Romans, Galatians and Philippians is that it does not save us, but faith alone in the work of Jesus Christ on the cross saves us. Our salvation could never be obtained by obedience to any rituals, but only by faith in the One who canceled the debt for us. Just as we are circumcised in our hearts if we believe in Christ, so also we are baptized in our hearts if we believe in Christ. It is the inner reality that counts, not what is on the outside. Circumcision is a physical symbol of an inner reality of faith in God. Water baptism is a physical symbol of the inner reality of what has already happened in our hearts. Paul writes comparing circumcision and baptism, “In Him you were also circumcised with the circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the sins of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, buried with Him in baptism, in which you also were raised with Him through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead...” (*Colossians 2:11ff*)

“For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ.” (*Galatians 3:26-27*) This passage is referring to baptism in the Spirit, not water baptism, for it is received by faith in Christ Jesus. “There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all.” (*Ephesians 4:4-6, cf. 1 Corinthians 12:13*) What baptism is being discussed in these passages? It must be baptism in the Spirit, for there are not two bodies, one that believes and hasn’t been water baptized, and those who believe and have been water baptized, but there is ONE body- the body of Christ-believers that have been baptized in the Spirit through faith in Jesus Christ. Notice how all the words relate to baptism in the Spirit, not physical baptism. We are a spiritual body, the church. There is one Spirit, the Holy Spirit, who is spiritual, not physical. There is one hope, and that hope is not physical, but spiritual, one Lord, who is spiritual, one faith, which is spiritual, one God and Father, who is spiritual. The baptism is also a spiritual baptism, not a physical one by water.

Some would say that baptism is not a work since others baptize you. Likewise, I would think it rare indeed for one to get circumcised by himself- others do that as well! Both baptism and circumcision are a work- they are a choice of obeying God by doing something.

What About Baptism in the Book of Acts?

Now that we have a solid background in understanding salvation is by faith alone, we should be able to go back to all the passages in the book of Acts and confirm that this is indeed so- that indeed water baptism is not required for salvation.

A sequence of events occurred in Acts chapter 10:

- 1) Cornelius, a Gentile, had a vision, which told him to send for Peter, and he did so.
- 2) Peter went to Cornelius' house and preached the gospel.
- 3) “While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit fell upon all those who heard the word. And those of the circumcision who believed were astonished, as many as came with Peter, because the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out on the Gentiles also. For they heard them speak with tongues and magnify God.” (*Acts 10:44-46*)
- 4) They were then baptized with water, “[Peter] commanded them to be baptized...” (*Acts 10:48*) Thus we see in this passage that the baptism in the Holy Spirit (for salvation) was received by the believers before they were baptized with water. They spoke in tongues before getting water baptized! The Holy Spirit cannot inhabit an unsaved person! Thus here is a firm example showing that water baptism is not required for salvation or eternal life or for the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Peter later explained to the other apostles back in Jerusalem what happened to Cornelius and the other Gentiles who received the gift of the Holy Spirit:

“As I began to speak [not after they were water baptized, but before], the Holy Spirit fell upon them, as upon us at the beginning. Then I remembered the word of the Lord, how He said, ‘John indeed baptized with water, **but** you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit.’ If therefore God gave them the same gift as He gave us **when** we believed on the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could withstand God?” (*Acts 11:15-17*)

Several things can be noted from this passage regarding baptism:

- 1) Peter reaffirms that indeed the Holy Spirit fell upon the Gentile believers while Peter was speaking to them, not later at water baptism.
- 2) Peter contrasted water baptism with the baptism with the Holy Spirit.
- 3) Peter affirmed that this was just the way it was with all of the apostles
- 4) Peter recognized that the Gentile believers as well as the apostles had received the gift of the Holy Spirit as a gift- that there was absolutely nothing they could do to merit it, such as being water baptized, they simply needed to believe

What About Acts 2:38-41?

One favorite passage that many use to insist that we must be water baptized to be saved is *Acts 2:38-41*. “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... Then those who gladly received his word were baptized...’ (*Acts 2:38, 41*) Some claim from this passage that one must be baptized with water baptism and then speak in tongues to be saved. Note that in this passage again it is a gift that they are receiving, not a work that they have to do. Here in Acts 2 they were baptized in the Holy Spirit when they repented and believed in the message, “received his word,” and then were water baptized as an outward expression of the inner reality that had already taken place in their hearts. They were being obedient to God’s commands through Peter to go ahead and demonstrate their faith through the public ceremony of baptism. A key word to understand in this passage is “for.” One may argue that “baptized...for the remission of sins,” means that water baptism is necessary for remission of sins. However, the

word “for” is the Greek word “eis”, which can mean, “with a view to,” “because of,” or “as a result of.” Thus, in this instance, to be consistent with all other passages we’ve already looked at that say we are saved, not by water baptism, but by faith, we must interpret the word “eis” to mean this: “Be baptized...because of the remission of sins” or “Be baptized...as a result of the remission of sins.” This makes sense. Because we’ve received forgiveness of sins, we should then be water baptized in obedience to the commands of Christ.

Notice in *Acts 2* that once again we see the Holy Spirit poured out to those who at the instant of salvation, before being water baptized.

What about Mark 16:15?

“And He said to them, ‘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.’”

Note that “he who does not believe will be condemned”. It doesn’t say, “He who does not believe and isn’t baptized will be condemned”. Nowhere in scripture is condemnation attached to not being baptized, but rather for not believing. It can be concluded that “and is baptized” is to be attached to “He who believes”- baptism is the natural next step for one to take who has believed. It is not attached as a condition of salvation, for that would contradict everything else we’ve understood to this point.

In addition, a doctrine cannot be formed on a passage (*Mark 16:9-20*) that was not in the early manuscripts for the first 200 plus years- there is much clear evidence that Mark didn’t write *Mark 16:9-20*, but it was added on later. These verses should be interpreted based on the understanding of the rest of scripture and no doctrine should stand alone based on these verses.

What about 1 Peter 3:21?

“...Christ also suffered once for sins, the just for the unjust, that He might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive by the Spirit, by whom also He went and preached to the spirits in prison, who formerly were disobedient, when once the Divine longsuffering waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was being prepared, in which a few, that is, eight souls, were saved through water. There is also an antitype which no 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...”

John MacArthur, in his study Bible, notes on this passage, “An anti-type is an earthly expression of a spiritual reality. It indicates a symbol, picture, or pattern of some spiritual truth. Peter is teaching that the fact that 8 people were in an ark and went through the whole judgment, and yet were unharmed, is analogous to the Christian’s experience in salvation by being in Christ, the ark of one’s salvation. ‘*baptism...through the resurrection of Jesus Christ*’ Peter is not at all referring to water baptism here, but rather a figurative immersion into union with Christ as an ark of safety from the judgment of God. The resurrection of Christ demonstrates God’s acceptance of Christ’s substitutionary death for the sins of those who believe (*Acts 2:30-31, Rom 1:4*). Judgment fell on Christ just as the judgment of the flood waters fell on the ark. The believer who is in Christ is thus in the ark of safety that will sail over the waters of judgment into eternal glory (*cf. Rom 6:1-4*) ‘*not the removal of the filth of the flesh*’ To be sure he is not misunderstood, Peter clearly says he is not speaking of water baptism. In Noah’s flood, they

were kept out of the water while those who went into the water were destroyed. Being in the ark and thus saved from God's judgment on the world prefigures being in Christ and thus saved from eternal damnation. *'the answer of a good conscience toward God.'* The word for 'answer' has the idea of a pledge, agreeing to certain conditions of a covenant (the New Covenant) with God. What saves a person plagued by sin and a guilty conscience is not some external rite, but the agreement with God to get in the ark of safety, the Lord Jesus, by faith in His death and resurrection (*cf. Rom 10:9-10, Heb 9:14, 10:22*)"

The Conclusion of Water Baptism

What a blessing water baptism is for everyone who participates in it- for the person doing the baptizing, the person being baptized, the believers who are identifying with the person being baptized (and being reminded of their own salvation and their commitment to this new believer as part of the body of Christ) and any unbelievers who observe the baptism, who are soberly reminded that if they don't identify with Christ, they will experience a horrendous baptism of judgment in the lake of fire. At times water baptism hasn't been stressed enough- a person who isn't willing to publicly identify with Christ in water baptism after supposedly coming to faith in Christ has some serious issues that must be addressed in his/her life. Jesus stated plainly that we're to be public about our faith, and if we're ashamed of Him, He will be ashamed of us on Judgment Day. At times water baptism has been overstressed as well- that somehow it is a ritual that is required for our salvation. We must do our best to avoid both of these extremes and encourage those who say they want to get saved to make haste to show the world that they are serious about their faith by demonstrating it publicly with baptism.