

IS WATER BAPTISM NECESSARY FOR SALVATION?

to answer this question...

I. We need to discern what is included in the gospel message

Notice there is only one passage in the New Testament which gives a formal definition of the gospel (I Cor. 15:1-4) It states that Christ died for our sins, was buried, and rose again according to the Scriptures.

This message alone is stated to be the power of God unto salvation (Rom. 1:16), and the Scriptures attest to the fact when people hear this message and believe it, they are saved (Rom. 10:9,10; I Cor. 1:18; Eph. 1:13; Col. 1:4-6).

When the apostle Paul was dealing with the problem of "preacher religion" in the Corinthian Church he declared, "for Christ sent me not to baptize but to preach the gospel..." (I Cor. 1:17). His reason for making such a statement is because it is the gospel message that is important because it is the means alone by which people are saved (I Cor. 1:21).

It should be noted that baptism is not mentioned in the gospel message and is not a part of the gospel. It follows then if a person can be saved by believing the gospel message which does not include baptism, then a person can be saved without being baptized.

II. We need to determine when salvation occurs

People who believe that baptism is necessary for salvation will agree that faith in Christ is required but they believe "after" faith in Christ, one must be baptized in order to be saved.

Does the Bible teach that one must believe, be baptized, and behave a certain way to be justified or declared righteous before God? No, the Bible teaches that a person is saved at the moment he believes in Christ or at the point of faith. A person is justified solely by faith apart from anything else. At the point of faith or at the time he believes a person is justified (Rom. 3:28; 5:1), given eternal life (Jn. 3:16) is born into God's family (Gal. 3:26; Jn. 1:12), passes from death unto life (Jn. 5:24), is forgiven (Acts 10:43; Lk. 7:48-50), receives the righteousness of Christ (Rom. 4:35; Phil. 3:9), and is said to be saved (Acts 10:31).

The Scriptures make it clear that salvation is based solely on faith in the Lord Jesus Christ (Jn. 1:12; 3:15-18; 3:36; Eph. 2:8,9; II Tim. 1:12; I Jn. 5:10,11,13). Salvation then comes about at the point of faith and not at some subsequent time "after" believing in Christ. Water baptism is therefore not a condition to be met in order to be saved.

One evangelist has used an illustration involving a man called "Sincere Sam". Suppose this man responded during an invitation in a church service. When he went forward he was told to believe in Christ and to be baptized for salvation. Let's assume that "Sincere Sam" put his faith in Christ and was genuinely saved. Sam was then ushered into a room so he could change his clothes and be baptized, but before he could get into the baptistry he died of a sudden heart

attack. Would he go to heaven since he was not baptized? Those who believe that baptism is necessary for salvation would have to say "no." But according to the Scriptures the answer is "yes." Why? Because a person is saved at the point of faith and not when he enters a baptismal pool.

III. We need to distinguish between water baptism and spiritual baptism

It should be noted that there is more than one kind of baptism mentioned in the New Testament. Many verses used by some to prove that water baptism is necessary for salvation are not referring to water baptism at all.

Many passages refer to a spiritual baptism whereby the Holy Spirit places the believer into the body of Christ and it occurs at the point of faith (I Cor. 12:13). When this operation takes place a believer is then declared to be "in Christ."

A comparison of Acts 10:43-48 with Acts 11:15,16 reveals that spiritual baptism is at the point of faith and not when one is baptized in water. When Peter told those assembled in Cornelius' that "whosoever believeth in Him shall receive remission of sins" (Acts 10:43) we see that the Holy Spirit fell on those who heard or believed the message (Acts 10:44). Peter later identified this falling of the Holy Spirit upon them as the baptism of the Holy Spirit (Acts 11:15,16).

Notice it was after they were baptized by the Holy Spirit and placed "in Christ" that they were baptized in water (Acts 10:48).

Spiritual baptism is what the apostle Paul is referring to in Rom. 6:3; I Cor. 12:13; Gal. 3:27; and Eph. 4:5. These passages deal with the work of the Holy Spirit at the point of faith.

If spiritual baptism places the believer "in Christ," then what does water baptism do? What water baptism does is illustrated in the account of Acts 19:1-5 when those who had received John's baptism were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. Water baptism identifies the recipient with a person and the message he is declaring.

These disciples were Old Testament saints who had received John's baptism. When they were told of Christ they identified with Him by receiving water baptism. But it wasn't water baptism that saved them, they were already saved. They were not a part of the Church and not "in Christ" however until they were baptized by the Holy Spirit (Acts 19:6).

IV. We need to deal with certain Scriptures which are misinterpreted or misapplied

Before dealing with Scriptures which are often misinterpreted or misapplied there is a basic rule of hermeneutics which should be understood. Different passages must be interpreted in harmony with what clear passages reveal on a certain subject. That means if a passage seems to have two possible interpretations the Bible student must select the interpretation which is in harmony with the rest of the Scriptures. To isolate a Scripture and interpret it apart from the rest of Biblical revelation results in unsound interpretation.

It can be seen that those who argue that water baptism is necessary for salvation do not follow this basic rule of hermeneutics. Instead they isolate certain Scriptures and interpret them so as to support their belief regarding water baptism when such an interpretation runs contrary to numerous other Scriptures.

Note the Scriptures which are most often used to support the belief that water baptism is necessary for salvation:

Mark 15:15,16

These Scriptures comprise the great commission which is given in Mark's gospel. Mark is here confirming what is also stated in Matthew's account that baptism is a part of the great commission which the Church is to carry out. The passage says if one doesn't believe he will be condemned, but it does not say if one doesn't believe and is not baptized he will be condemned.

The critical issue in Mark 16:15,16 is faith not baptism. All a person has to do to get to heaven is to believe in Christ. This passage teaches then that a person may believe, be baptized and get to heaven. It also teaches a person can believe and not be baptized and still get to heaven.

John 3:5

When Jesus said, "except a man be born of water and of the Spirit he cannot enter into the Kingdom of God" did He mean that water baptism is necessary for entrance into the Kingdom?

It is clear from the context here that the use of the word "water" is a reference to physical birth and not to baptism. Jesus used it in reply to Nicodemus' question. He said a man must be born of water that is to have a physical birth since children are born "out of water."

John 3:5 does not teach that water baptism is necessary for salvation but it does teach that physical birth is. In other words a person must be born physically before he can be born again spiritually. John 3:5 makes no reference to baptism whatsoever.

Acts 2:38

On the surface it may appear as one reads this verse that it is saying that baptism is necessary for the remission of sins. Those who teach that baptism is necessary for salvation interpret the word "for" to mean "in order to get." But the Greek word "for" (eis) has two distinct meanings. One means a "purpose" and the other means a "result."

To state the meaning as a purpose one may say he is going to the store "for" a loaf of bread.

To state the meaning as a result one may say he is going to jail for a loaf of bread (meaning as a result of stealing it).

The meaning of the word "for" (eis) in Acts 2:38 is that of result and not of purpose and it is better translated "because of" or "on account of."

The same word with the same meaning (that of result) is also used in Rom. 4:25. Christ wasn't raised "for" (meaning for the purpose of acquiring) our justification, He was raised "for" (meaning as a result of having acquired) our justification. Justification is based on the finished work of Christ on the cross not on His resurrection.

It should also be noted that Peter's instructions were for all of them to repent (plural) and for each one of them (singular) to be baptized. In other words each one of them who followed his instructions and repented of rejecting Christ and then received Him was to be baptized. This was the order that was followed according to Acts 2:41 - "then they that gladly received his word were baptized..."

It is quite evident that faith is the key to receiving the remission of sins when one looks at Acts 10:43. Peter said, "...whosoever believeth in Him shall receive remission of sins." In Acts 10:43-47 we note those who believed Peter's message were saved and received the Holy Spirit before they were ever baptized. This passage contradicts an interpretation of Acts 2:38 which would propagate that water baptism is necessary for the remission of sins. Peter preached the remission of sins by faith and he practiced water baptism after salvation not as a means to acquire salvation.

Acts 22:16

It would appear that this verse is also teaching that baptism washes away one's sins. But a careful examination of the Greek text dispels this idea. In the first place the word "and" between "arise and be baptized" is not in the Greek text. Secondly, this sentence is made up of two imperatives or commands translated "be baptized" and "wash." The order of the two aorist participles translated "arising" and "calling" should also be noted. The "arising" comes before baptism and "calling" comes before washing. A literal rendering would be - "Having arisen, be baptized and have your sins washed having called on the name of the Lord." This order follows Paul's example in Acts 9:6,18.

Titus 3:5

Some mistakenly take "the washing of regeneration" to mean the washing of baptism. The word "regeneration" is a compound Greek word made up of "new" and "birth." The washing of regeneration is the cleansing of sin which takes place at the new birth. From several Scriptures it is evident that God does this act of washing with the Word and not with water (Eph. 5:26; Jas. 1:18; I Pet. 1:23).

I Peter 3:20,21

A cursory reading of these verses seems to say that water baptism is a means of salvation. But verse 20 in the Greek text says that the eight souls were saved "through" water and not "by" water. It wasn't the water that saved Noah and his family it was the Ark.

Notice in verse 21 Peter says that baptism is a like figure or an antitype of what the water was in Noah's day.

Baptism then is a picture of destruction and judgment through which those who are in Christ are delivered. Peter goes on to describe that baptism is not putting away the filth of the flesh or sins but it is the answer of a good conscience toward God. In other word a person's conscience will be clear when he trusts the Lord as his Saviour and follows His command to be baptized.

From what the Scriptures teach we may arrive at several conclusions. First of all, baptism is not a part of the gospel and it is the gospel that saves. Secondly, no passage in the New Testament teaches that water baptism is essential for salvation. It must be concluded also that a person is saved at the point of faith or at the time he believes the gospel. For these reasons it must be seen that water baptism is not necessary for salvation.