

IS WATER BAPTISM Necessary?

Is baptism required for salvation? Or is it just a meaningful, but nonessential, ceremony? Here's what the Bible says.

On the Day of Pentecost, the "birthday" of the New Testament church, the inspired apostle Peter said, "Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2:38).

Did Peter mean that repentant believers should be baptized *for* the remission of sins, or *because of* the remission of sins? Many evangelicals opt for the latter, claiming that the Greek word translated "for" can suggest "because of," or "with a view of." This way of reading the verse allows for the commonly held belief that salvation is complete and final at the moment a person "accepts Jesus," and that baptism is merely an external sign of the salvation that has already been fully and finally accomplished.

Some groups teach that baptism is in some sense "necessary," while others, such as Quakers and Salvation Army, do not practice baptism at all. Most fundamentalists practice some form of baptism but claim that it should not be looked upon as a requirement for salvation.

Well-known evangelical Hal Lindsey writes, "If we add baptism as a condition of being saved, then it becomes a work and an act of human merit which nullifies pure grace that says that nothing is needed from man, but faith" (*The Liberation of Planet Earth*, p. 140). Lindsey further argues that "any ritual, be it circumcision, Communion, or baptism, added to faith as a condition of salvation becomes a work of human merit, and that's incompatible with grace" (*ibid.*, p. 141).

Lindsey describes baptism as a "meaningful" and "necessary symbol," but argues that "it must be seen as a *result* of salvation, not a *cause* of it, or even a partial cause of it" (*ibid.*, p. 140).

Lindsey is only partly right. Baptism, as an initiation rite, is not a cause or partial cause of justification; rather, it is the normative *occasion* of justification. It is not a meritorious work added to

faith; it is an *expression* of faith. It is a requirement because Jesus *commands* it. Anything Jesus commands is required. And anyone who thinks he can be saved by the blood of Jesus while refusing to obey His commandments is deceiving himself (see 1 John 2:4).

Now, look again at Acts 2:38: "Then Peter said unto them, Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit."

Those who claim that Peter meant that repentant believers should be baptized "in view of" (or because of) the salvation they have already received have adopted a strained interpretation. It is true that the word rendered "for" in the KJV has several nuances of meaning, but there can be no doubt as to how the word is used in Acts 2:38. Peter insisted that one should repent and be baptized with a view *toward* salvation.

Salvation consists of more than forgiveness of past sins. It also involves receiving the Holy Spirit. Acts 2:38 clearly shows that reception of the Holy Spirit comes *after* repentance, baptism, and the remission of sins: "and ye *shall* [after baptism] receive the gift of the Holy Spirit."

Peter's "formula" agrees perfectly with Christ's words as recorded in Mark 16:15-16: "And He said unto them, Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature. He that believeth and is baptized *shall be* saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned." Note that baptism precedes salvation.

We find the same sequence—repentance, baptism, remission of sins, reception of the Holy Spirit—in the conversion of the apostle Paul.

After being stricken with blindness on the road to Damascus, Saul (later named Paul) was three days without sight and without food or drink. God sent a disciple named Ananias to Saul.

"And Ananias went his way, and entered into the

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house; and putting his hands on him said, Brother Saul, the Lord, even Jesus, that appeared unto thee in the way as thou camest, hath sent me, that thou mightest receive thy sight, and be filled with the Holy Spirit" (Acts 9:17).

Notice that Paul, though he had spent *three days* fasting and, in blindness, thinking about the things Christ had said to him on the road to Damascus and of how wrong he had been for persecuting the Church of God, he had not as yet received the Holy Spirit.

Once the apostle had received his sight, Ananias said to him, "And now why tarriest thou? arise, and be baptized, and wash away thy sins, calling on the name of the Lord" (Acts 22:16).

Does "wash away thy sins" suggest nothing more than "forget your sins, for God has forgotten them"? Is baptism nothing more than a psychological booster intended to help the believer realize his sins have been washed away? Or is baptism an actual means through which the grace of God is administered?

Peter saw the Genesis account of the Flood, wherein "eight souls were saved by water," as the "like figure whereunto even baptism doth also now save us (not the putting away of the filth [dirt] of the flesh, but the answer of [*i.e.*, an appeal for] a good conscience toward God,) by the resurrection of Jesus Christ" (1 Peter 3:20–21).

Peter did not mean that the baptismal water itself is the source of salvation; he meant that the gift of remission of sins is granted to the repentant sinner *through* the ceremony of water baptism—that baptism is the *occasion*, not the *cause*, of justification. True, God can grant remission of sins and full justification without the use of baptism, but this and other passages reveal that baptism is the general means through which grace (in this case, remission of sins) is administered to the sinner who has repented and turned to God through faith in the redemptive work of Jesus Christ.

Those who claim that baptism is nothing more than "a meaningful ceremony" seem to minimize the necessity of man's cooperation in salvation. Some evangelicals admit that repentance of sin is a necessary response of faith, but stop short of saying that baptism is also a required response of faith.

Often they cite examples of cases where baptism is impossible—the "thief on the cross," for in-

stance—but they fail to realize that the exceptional cases do not establish the standard for everyone who seeks salvation. Christians should not be surprised to find that various practices and ceremonies (called "sacraments" by some) serve as means through which God's graces (benefits, both physical and spiritual) are administered. Healing, for instance, is granted through the ceremony of "anointing with oil" (James 5:14). Like anointing, the "laying on of hands" is a divinely-approved ceremony through which certain gifts are granted (1 Timothy 4:14; 2 Timothy 1:6; Acts 19:6). What reason is there for assuming that baptism is not the means through which a very real spiritual gift is imparted to the repentant believer?

Those who say that the teaching of baptism as a requirement for salvation is a doctrine of "salvation by works" simply miss the point. Saying that baptism is a "work" God does not require is like saying that honoring your parents (Ephesians 6:2), forgiving trespassers (Matthew 7:14), and loving your neighbor (Matthew 22:39) are nonessential "works" the person seeking salvation need not perform. None of these commanded actions and behaviors *cause* salvation, but they are all required for the person seeking salvation.

Consider these important facts: (1) Jesus Christ was baptized, not because He needed it, but "to fulfill all righteousness" (Matthew 3:13–15). (2) He commanded His disciples to baptize repentant believers (Matthew 28:19). (3) His disciples obeyed; thousands were baptized. With these facts in full view, does it not seem strange that some would reduce baptism to a "meaningful but nonessential ceremony"?

If you have come to an understanding of God's standards of conduct and behavior; if you have come to repentance, desiring to obey God from the heart; and if you have accepted Jesus Christ as Lord and as Savior, looking to His redemptive work as the only means whereby you may be saved, then you most certainly *should* be baptized. It is essential.

(If you would like further information on what God requires of us, please write for your free copies of *Ten Fact You Should Know About Repentance* and *True Discipleship: What It Means To Follow Jesus*. Also, if you would like to talk to a minister about baptism, let us know, and we will check to see if a minister is available in your area.)

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