

Basic Bible Doctrine Study Series – Session 2

Believer's Baptism

As indicated by the name, a primary Baptist distinction is our practice of believer's baptism and our rejection of infant baptism. Baptists usually use the term "ordinance" rather than "sacrament" when referring to baptism and the Lord's Supper or Communion (which we will address later in our studies).

As we enter this session on baptism, please remember the Bible study tips we discussed in session 1...

- There will always be portions of Scripture we won't be able to understand or interpret.
- The Bible will speak to us based on our Spiritual maturity level.
- The Bible doesn't need our help to be understood. Never add to or take away from what the Bible clearly states.
- What the Bible states simply and clearly can NEVER be contradicted by what may appear complicated and unclear.
- When the Bible uses words such as all, everyone, no one, etc.; there is no need for interpretation...they mean exactly what they say.

What Is Baptism?

Simply stated, baptism is an outward expression of the inward change that has taken place in a Christian. Baptists consider Believer's Baptism to be an ordinance (sacrament, ritual or practice) for believers only, by immersion only and as an extremely important but still symbolic act. Baptism symbolizes first and foremost the death, burial and resurrection of Christ to pay for our sins. Then second, it represents that a person through faith in Christ has passed from eternal death to eternal life.

Romans 6:3-5 "Don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly also be united with him in a resurrection like his."

Think of baptism in the same way you think of the rainbow. God put the rainbow in the sky as a sign of the covenant He had already made with Noah. Scripture instructs us to get baptized as a sign of the covenant that He has already made with us concerning our salvation.

Baptism gives testimony to salvation already received and is an act of obedience to Jesus Christ. Only the total immersion of a person in water adequately symbolizes the death, burial and resurrection of Christ and the Christian. The act of baptism gives opportunity for the person who is being baptized to testify publicly that they have trusted Jesus as Lord and Savior and experienced forgiveness of sins.

Because the Bible indicates that all believers in Christ are priests (1 Peter 2:5; Revelation 5:10), there is really no need for a priest or pastor to administer baptism. Although normally the pastor of a church baptizes, any member designated by the church could scripturally do so.

Why Not Baptize Infants?

The answer to this question within the specific conversation of baptism is actually pretty straight forward and simple. We choose not to practice infant baptism because according to scripture, baptism is a requirement for Christians and represents the change that Christ has made in us. Infants do not have the ability to make a public profession of faith and so baptism is unnecessary until the child becomes a Christian.

Most denominations that practice infant baptism do so because they believe that baptism is a requirement for salvation...and that leads us to the last section of our study.

Is Baptism Necessary for Salvation?

One of the most nagging questions among Christians is whether or not baptism is necessary for salvation. The simple answer is, "No...water baptism is not necessary for salvation." But many will point out verses like Mark 16:16, Acts 2:38, Romans 6:4 and 1 Peter 3:21 and teach that Scripture points to baptism as a requirement for salvation. We are not going to ignore these verses at all in our study. In fact, we will discuss them a bit later. For now, let's look at scripture and the reason why we believe baptism is not necessary for salvation.

The main reason is because the Bible clearly teaches that we are saved by grace through our faith. Remember Ephesians 2:8-9 from our last session, "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— not by works, so that no one can boast." If the Bible is correct, then we are saved by faith when we admit, believe and confess...not when we get baptized.

Remember that baptism is a symbol...extremely important in the life of a Christian...but still a symbol. In essence it is a religious rite if you will, that one person performs on another. Salvation is a work and a change that God performs on us...not another human being. Never forget that the Bible clearly teaches that we are saved by our faith alone and anything else we do...including baptism...will not help.

Romans 1:16 "For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes..."

Romans 5:1 "Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ."

Romans 10:9-10 "If you declare with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you profess your faith and are saved."

None of these verses which tell us what saves us includes any mention of baptism.

So what about those verses that seem to indicate that baptism is part of salvation? Let's take a look at some of these passages and see if we can draw some conclusion as to their true meaning. As we will see with most of these verses, the misunderstanding comes by pulling passages out of their context and by not comparing them to other like scriptures.

1. Mark 16:16 "Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned."

Let's take a look at Mark 16 not only within its context but within history. It is extremely important to understand that verses 9-20 are not even in the best New Testament manuscripts. Most good Bible translations will mention this fact, whether they actually contain these final verses or not. The technical details are not something that we will fully cover here, but a few quick thoughts. The content of the longer ending seems to be a collection of bits and pieces from the resurrection narratives of Matthew and Luke.

Given that most Bible scholars believe that Mark was written before the other two gospels, then it does seem to be a later addition. And the various manuscripts have a number of differing arrangements of these verses. Most good critical commentaries discuss the various bits of textual evidence and agree that Mark should have ended at chapter 16 verse 8.

We could end our discussion on verse 16 here. But let's look at the passage anyway, and see how it lines up (or doesn't) with the teaching of baptism as a requirement for salvation.

This takes place after the resurrection of Jesus. He appeared to Mary who went and "told those who had been with him and who were mourning and weeping" but "they did not believe it." Jesus later appears to the eleven and "rebuked them for their lack of faith and their stubborn refusal to believe those who had seen him after he had risen." Jesus then gives them their mission to "preach the gospel to all creation" and tells them that "whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned." Notice first of all that Jesus doesn't say, "Whoever does not believe and is not baptized will be condemned." It never says that anywhere in Scripture and this is an important distinction to make if someone wants to say that Jesus is giving the criteria for salvation. There are several possible explanations why baptism is included but one of the best is given by Matthew Henry in his commentary where he essentially equates baptism to the public confession that Paul describes in Romans 10:9.

"Now go and tell them, that if they believe the gospel, and give up themselves to be Christ's disciples; if they renounce the devil, the world, and the flesh, and be devoted to Christ as their prophet, priest, and king, and to God in Christ as their God in covenant, and evidence by their constant adherence to this covenant their sincerity herein, they shall be saved from the guilt and power of sin, it shall not rule them, it shall not ruin them. He that is a true Christian, shall be saved through Christ. Baptism was appointed to be the inaugurating rite, by which those that embraced Christ owned him; but it is here put rather for the thing signified than for the

sign, for Simon Magus believed and was baptized, yet was not saved, Acts. 8:13. Believing with the heart, and confessing with the mouth the Lord Jesus (Rom. 10:9), seems to be much the same with this here.” **Matthew Henry’s Commentary on Mark 16**

2. Acts 2:38 “Peter replied, “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.”

This verse is often used to say that baptism is part of salvation, but we know from other scriptures that it is not, lest there be a contradiction. What is going on here is simply that repentance and forgiveness of sins are connected. It is like Peter was essentially saying, “All of you repent, each of you get baptized, and all of you will receive forgiveness.” In this context, only the regenerated, repentant (saved) person is to be baptized. Baptism is the manifestation of salvation and the sign of a changed heart. That’s why the Bible says, “repent and be baptized.”

Also, please notice that there is no mention of faith in Acts 2:38. If this verse is a description of what is necessary for salvation, then why is faith not mentioned? Simply saying it is implied isn’t good enough. Remember from our last session...if the Bible doesn’t say it then we can’t put it there. Peter is not teaching a formula for salvation, he’s teaching a formula for obedience.

3. Romans 6:4 “We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.”

Because Christians are so closely united to Christ it is said that the symbol of baptism is our death, burial and resurrection. Obviously we did not physically die so it seems clear that Paul is using figurative language here. The figure of baptism represents the reality of Christ's death, burial and resurrection. It is also a covenant sign for us. This covenant sign of baptism represents that covenant between God and the Christian where we receive the grace of God through the person of Christ by means of his sacrifice.

4. 1 Peter 3:21 “And this water symbolizes baptism that now saves you also—not the removal of dirt from the body but the pledge of a clear conscience toward God. It saves you by the resurrection of Jesus Christ.”

Those who believe that baptism is required for salvation are quick to use this verse as a “proof text,” because it says baptism saves you. Was Peter really saying that the act of being water baptized is what saves us? If he were, he would be contradicting many other passages of Scripture that clearly show people being saved prior to being baptized or without being baptized at all like the thief on the cross (Luke 23:39-43).

Thankfully, we don't have to guess at what Peter means in this verse because he clarifies it for us with the phrase "not the removal of dirt from the body, but the pledge of a clear conscience toward God." It is true that Peter is connecting baptism with salvation but it is not the act of being baptized that he is referring to. Being immersed in water does nothing to wash away sin. Peter is referring to what baptism represents, which is what saves us. In other words, Peter is simply connecting baptism with belief. It is not the getting wet part that saves but the "pledge of a clear conscience toward God" which is testified to by baptism that saves us. The appeal to God always comes first. First there is belief and repentance, then we are baptized to publicly identify ourselves with Christ.

Closing Remarks

Part of the confusion around Believer's Baptism comes from the fact that in many ways today the purpose of baptism as a public declaration of one's faith in Christ and identification with Him has been replaced by "making a decision for Christ" or "praying a sinner's prayer."

It is unfortunate that to many Christians, Baptism has been relegated to something that is done later if at all. Yet to Mark, Luke, Paul, Peter or any of the first-century Christians, the idea that a person would confess Christ as Savior and not be baptized as soon as possible would have been unheard of. So it is not surprising that these Bible authors would include baptism with salvation. Yet they all make it clear that it is not the ritual of baptism that saves but the fact that we are united with Christ in His resurrection through faith.

True Believer's Baptism is the one that is preceded by saving faith in Christ that justifies the unrighteous, undeserving sinner. Baptism is the outward sign of what God has done inside "by the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit" (Titus 3:5).

Baptism is not necessary for salvation but scripture teaches that everyone should be baptized after becoming a Christian so we can clearly say that baptism is necessary for obedience to God.