

Question #4: What is the importance of baptism?

There are several different baptisms cited in the New Testament (NT). Hebrews 6:1-2 lists the elementary teachings, which every NT Bible teacher must know and be able to effectively teach. The third elementary teaching listed is “*instruction about baptisms*” (KJV). Actually, there are 7 distinct baptisms found in the NT text: including the baptism of John, water baptism in the name of Jesus Christ, baptism with the Holy Spirit, baptism into Moses, the baptism of suffering, and baptism for the dead. Bill Compton has put together an excellent overview of these baptisms in a study booklet entitled “Foundations: The Elementary Teachings of the Christ.”

From my studies, I conclude the “*one baptism*” of Ephesians 4:5 to be water baptism in the name of Jesus Christ. This baptism was first commanded by Peter on the day of Pentecost according to Acts 2:38. If the question “What is the importance of baptism?” regards this specific baptism, then I would have to answer: “Because it is absolutely necessary for salvation according to the NT Scriptures!” For time’s sake, let’s look at the 3 most clear and precise statements which define New Testament (NT) water baptism as essential to salvation.

The first Scripture is 1 Peter 3:21, which states: “*Corresponding to that, baptism now saves you—not the removal of dirt from the flesh, but an appeal for a good conscience—through the resurrection of Jesus Christ.*” The prepositional phrase “*corresponding to that*” refers back to verse 20, which describes Noah and his family being “*brought safely through the water.*” So, the baptism of 1 Peter 3:21 must be water baptism.

In context, Peter had been given “*the keys of the kingdom of heaven*” (Matthew 16:19) from Jesus when he wrote 1 Peter. Note the kernel sentence here is: “BAPTISM NOW SAVES YOU.” Grammatically speaking; baptism is the subject, the action verb “saves,” and the direct object which receives the action of salvation is “you”! Many English translations cloud this fact with various words and wording in the rest of the verse. But anyone who can accurately diagram a sentence will agree that the primary message found in 1 Peter 3:21 is “*baptism saves.*”

The second Scripture is Jesus’ statement in Mark 16:16, right before He ascended into heaven. Here Jesus declares plainly: “*He who has believed and has been baptized shall be saved.*” The object of the belief here has to do with the gospel, as stated previously by Jesus in verse 15. Obeying the gospel starts with baptism—as we unite with the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus. Romans 6:3-4 clearly states this truth as follows: “*Or do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ have been baptized into His death? Therefore we have been buried with Him through baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life.*”

Many today have tried to discount the meaning of this Romans 6 passage. Often people are taught that the words here are “only symbolic” or baptism here

is only “an outward sign of an inward grace.” True, the burial accomplished at baptism is symbolic and constitutes an outward or physical action. But this does not negate the truth presented in this Scripture passage! The fact remains that here is where a person is “*baptized into His [Christ’s] death*”, “*buried with Him*”, raised “*as Christ was raised from the dead*”, and given the potential to “*walk in newness of life*.” These promises are literally true in the spiritual realm, and are inseparably tied to baptism. In the NT Scriptures, no other act of faith and obedience gives these stated results.

But regarding Mark 16:16 specifically; salvation comes after, and as a result of, baptism—not before! Jesus did **not** say, as many modern-day evangelicals preach, “He who has believed and has been saved shall be baptized.” **Neither** did Jesus ever state “He that is baptized and saved shall later believe,” as many old-line denominations have practiced for centuries with their baptism of infants and follow-up training structures after these babies come of age! No, Jesus very concisely states: “*He who has believed and has been baptized shall be saved*” (Mark 16:16).

Acts 2:38 constitutes another Scripture which reveals the importance of NT water baptism. On the day of Pentecost, Peter preached the first gospel message, following Jesus’ death, burial, resurrection, appearance, and ascension into heaven. Many who heard the message “*were pierced to the heart and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, ‘Brethren, what shall we do?’*” Peter then answered and commanded them to “*Repent, and each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit*” (Acts 2:37-38).

In this Scripture passage faith, as well as obedience, is emphasized. The little word “for” is so important! The Greek word “eis” is translated into the English word “for” and literally means “with a view toward.” In other words, as one enters into the waters of baptism he is instructed to have “a view toward” the forgiveness of sin and receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit. These things, of course, cannot be seen physically, so they must be viewed by faith. The NT Scriptures define faith as “*the conviction of things not seen*” (Hebrews 11:1), which “*comes from hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ*” (Romans 10:17). One cannot physically see the forgiveness of sin take place, nor detect any physical manifestation in the water such as it becoming discolored or the temperature rising. The gift of the Holy Spirit sent from Heaven does not descend in the likeness of a dove today, as modeled by Jesus when He was baptized. Instead these promises must be received on the basis of one’s faith at baptism.

One’s obedience in repentance and baptism must be coupled with the Biblical faith that God will forgive our sins and give us the Holy Spirit at baptism by the authority (name) of Jesus! Without this faith, all we do is get wet! When people are immersed in water as an act of obedience without the faith, then baptism becomes a work. And works cannot save us! That is why the book of Romans begins (1:5) and ends (16:26) with the phrase “*the obedience of faith*.” “*Without faith it is impossible to please God*” (Hebrews 11:6) and access His promises. Water baptism in the name of Jesus, coupled with the belief that Christ

will wash away one's sins in the water and give the indwelling gift of the Holy Spirit as one comes up out of the water, constitutes the time and place when a repentant person initially receives salvation under the terms of the New Testament.

True NT water baptism is important because this is where our salvation in Christ begins. From this point, if one submits to this baptism exactly as prescribed by Jesus and the NT Scriptures, a person is connected to Jesus by His blood and empowered to overcome by the Holy Spirit. This baptism is to be the starting point of salvation and ministry by God's design.

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