

IS BAPTISM BY IMMERSION ESSENTIAL TO SALVATION?

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It seems like every time there is a Bible study, sooner or later the issue of baptism comes up. There are always several different "opinions." These discussions often cause someone to get mad which ends up in some kind of division within the Bible study group. (I hate when this happens.) This became such a problem for me that I tried to avoid discussing baptism because I saw the issue as divisive. No matter how hard I try to avoid argumentative discussions, it still keeps coming up.

The Bible is God's Word and although it is subject to interpretation, it is not a matter of opinion. The author, God, had one meaning when it was given to the writer. Therefore, we must try to understand just what God intended. This does become personal. Each individual has the responsibility to diligently try to understand the meaning of all scripture, and it must be understood in relation to other scriptures. Scripture cannot contradict itself and the Bible, unlike other books, can be interpreted by itself.

I personally have a firm conviction that baptism by immersion is essential to salvation. Even so, when I am asked what about so and so (my aunt Ida, for example), she was a good woman and when she died I believe she went to heaven, but she was never immersed. Whether she enters heaven or not is of course God's decision. I am glad God is a just God and I can trust Him to make the right decision about who goes to heaven and who doesn't. Even so, from what I read in His Word I personally feel obligated to teach baptism is essential to salvation. Eve thought it was okay to take a bite out of an apple and look what happened!

For my own satisfaction I have decided to set down on paper why I am so convinced this is what God wants me to teach. I have done this in hopes I can give this information to anyone who wants it, and even though they may not agree, at least it keeps me from getting into an argument that leads to someone getting mad and causing division among others who are involved.

In Matthew 18:3-4 Jesus teaches us we must humble ourselves and become like little children to enter into the Kingdom of God. It is a humbling experience to stand in the baptistry as people watch you when you are baptized. The experience is to cause us to become like little children "born anew" into the Kingdom of God as a new babe being brought into the world. Pride prevents some people from doing this. Jesus implied the same thing when he told Nicodemus "you must be born again" in John 3.

Even though Jesus gave man insight into the plan of salvation, Christians, for the most part, agree the full plan of salvation was revealed in the writings of Luke to Theophilus, called Acts or The Acts of The Apostles. God's had a plan for salvation, a plan for man to live with God forever, from the beginning of time. The plan came about because of Jesus' life, death, burial resurrection, and ascension, but was not in effect until after His resurrection.

One must believe in the resurrection to have eternal life; one must also believe that Jesus is the Christ, or the prophesied Messiah of the Old Testament; to gain eternal life, one must have faith He has the power to give eternal life. I cannot accept the teaching that the thief on the cross going to heaven is an example of baptism not being necessary; this was a miracle of God performed by Jesus while He was still alive, since the full plan of salvation was not yet set in place until after

the resurrection. I wouldn't want to have to hang on a cross to go with Jesus into heaven; I believe He has provided another way for me.

One significant revelation of the plan of salvation where baptism is introduced, begins with John the "Baptist" so called because it was said of him (Matthew 3:2), "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near"; and then in verse 6, "Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River." John was to be the forerunner of Jesus, the one to "Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him."(3)

Baptism is introduced as a way of forgiveness of sin right at the beginning of Jesus' ministry. Then Jesus himself was baptized, not because He was a sinner, but "to fulfill all righteousness." I think this still applies for us today; we are baptized to fulfill all righteousness. Why would God go to all the trouble of introducing us to baptism through John the Baptist if it were not to be an essential part of the plan of salvation?

To me it also seems obvious the mode of baptism was immersion, because it took place in the Jordan river. (John 3:23) Acts 7 backs that up as Philip and the Eunuch went down into the water and came up out of the water.

John's baptism was for the forgiveness of sin, but the baptism of Jesus was for forgiveness of sin and to receive the Holy Spirit. Paul said, "John's baptism was a baptism of repentance. He told the people to believe in the one coming after him, that is, in Jesus. On hearing this, they were baptized into the name of the Jesus." (Acts 19:4-5; cf Acts 2:38)

In reading the Gospel of John, chapter 3, I find Jesus giving information about the plan of salvation to a Pharisee. Jesus said, "You must be born again" (to Nicodemus) and followed up by saying, "I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit." Even though some do not, I accept this passage as referring to water baptism.

In studying the history of the Jewish faith, (Edersheim's, "The Life And Times Of Jesus The Messiah," for example) I found the term "born again" or "born anew" was familiar to Jewish scholars, because when proselytes (so called Gentile converts to Judaism) became followers of the Jewish faith, they were baptized and asked to promise to keep the Law and make sacrifices as God commanded. The rabbi's were familiar with this according to Edersheim, as it was recorded in the Talmud, the oral law later written down. Nicodemus would have been familiar with these writings.

It was said of the proselytes that they were "born anew", cleansed of their sin, after they were baptized, put on new clothes symbolic of becoming cleansed of their sin and expected to live according God's Law, now having the opportunity for eternal life. Indication is that Jesus in John 3 was telling Nicodemus he needed to be proselytized into the kingdom of God, by being born again as the proselytes were. At first he would have rejected this idea because he was under the Law; being born a Jew, he considered himself being born into the Kingdom of God by natural birthright, as the passage implies. More than likely he would have understood what Jesus meant after Jesus died and was raised back to life and heard Peter's sermon, especially Acts 2:38. That is when a new covenant was set in motion, and if Nicodemus heard Peter preach he may have been one of the 4000 baptized.

Jesus has revealed much about the plan of salvation and how it was to take place after His death,

burial and resurrection. Why would Jesus say, **“Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them** in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to obey **everything** I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, **to the very end of the age,**” if baptism was not essential to salvation?

Then Luke records in Acts chapter 2 Peter’s sermon and when they who were present heard the message they were pierced to the heart because they felt responsible for the death of Jesus (see also Matthew 27:25), the Messiah. Some place emphasis on speaking in tongues as the way of salvation, however, we should place emphasis on the speaking in many different languages as God’s way of being sure everyone understood the message. What was the main point of the message? Acts 2:38 seems to be the main point of the message.

They then asked "What must we do?" 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," (Acts 2:37-39) which is a promise of God (39). This is where the emphasis should be, on what Peter said they must do (repent and be baptized), not on how the message was given.

Jesus’ baptism was not just for the forgiveness of sin but for the forgiveness of sin **and** to receive the Holy Spirit. Paul teaches in his letter to the Romans, “. . .And if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Christ." (Romans 8:9)

Paul also paints a beautiful picture of what takes place at baptism in Romans 6:2-11, "Or 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."

I believe a miracle takes place in baptism, this death, burial and resurrection of the sinner, a miracle between the person and God, and at this time God gives the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit when one is "born again" with a guarantee of the promise of eternal life. Paul said, "And you also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation. Having believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession – to the praise of his glory." (Ephesians 1:13-14) I must also say here I do not accept "Once in grace, always in grace." The Holy Spirit will not forsake us but we can forsake the Holy Spirit by our own free will, denying Jesus as the source of our eternal salvation, based on the teachings in Hebrews, especially Chapter 3.

Some take passages like Ephesians 1 and say this happens when you "believe," but Paul taught that salvation was all-inclusive of baptism, what I like to call a package deal, "belief" being used by Paul as a word where a part stands for the whole. The Greek word translated "believe" means to place total confidence in; we do that when we are baptized. Paul confirms this, "having been buried with him in baptism and raised with him through your faith in the power of God, who raised him (Jesus) from the dead." (Colossians 2:12) Paul teaches in Romans 8:16, "The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children," and I believe that Spirit of life is given at baptism (Acts 2:38).

In all the conversion experiences in Acts, those who believe are baptized, and there is no evidence anything has changed from Acts 2:38 until now.

There is some controversy about the passage in Mark 16:16, but I believe this can be considered as the words of Jesus to us, "whoever believes and is baptized will be saved..."

Call me legalistic if you like, but personally I can't believe that anyone will be deprived of eternal life for being immersed into Christ, but believe the possibility does exist they will miss out on eternal life if they are not. Why take a chance? Since the scriptures call for baptism, then why not "be obedient to God rather than men."