

Role of Baptism in Christian Faith

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Introduction

Christianity sets itself apart in the sense it does not rely on birthright for membership into the church. Even individuals born into Christian families are not automatically considered Christians or integrated into the church. Someone is added to the church only if they make a conscious choice to be Christian.

Acts 2:47 captures this essence: *"And the Lord added to them day by day those that were saved"* highlights the divine initiative in expanding the church. The Lord brings individuals to salvation and consequently adds them into the community of believers.

Similarly, Acts 2:41 recounts that those who embraced the message of salvation were baptized and became part of the community of believers.

Examining these verses, the message is clear: The Lord adds people to the church as and when they are saved, and then they become Christians.

In the following sections, we will delve into the significance, meaning, and role of baptism in this process of the Lord adding the saved to the church.

Debates have risen regarding the necessity of baptism for salvation, with varying perspectives on its importance. We will explore these viewpoints in the light of biblical teachings to gain a comprehensive understanding of baptism's place in the Christian faith.

Meaning

Baptism is a sacred ceremony where individuals publicly acknowledge their sinful nature, confess their wrongdoings, genuinely repent of their sins and undergo immersion in water. This process of immersion in water is a symbolic reenactment of Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection.

After baptism, there might be no outward physical change, but inwardly, significant events take place, encompassing the forgiveness of sins and the reception of the Holy Spirit as divine gifts. This deed also signifies the transition from the old self to a renewed and transformed life in Christ.

Baptism stands as an integral part of God's plan to make us holy, aligning us with the mirror image of Christ. This practice was followed and taught by our Lord Jesus and the New Testament Church. This Baptism is not to be mistaken for a deed we do to earn

our salvation, but it is a response to God's command, which in turn results in the forgiveness of sin.

It also serves as an anchor point, a reference we can look back to, recalling the precise moment of our physical confession and action, especially if doubts of salvation begin to seep in.

Thief on the cross

The thief, whose sins Jesus forgave on the cross is frequently used to argue against the essential role of baptism in salvation. However, it's important to recognize that drawing conclusions from the thief's situation can be misleading.

The thief lived and died before the establishment of the New Covenant and the new testament church, and therefore, he was not obligated to undergo baptism for his salvation. The practice of baptism gained significance only after Jesus instituted the New Covenant, and subsequently, instances of salvation became explicitly linked with baptism.

Also, in this scenario, Jesus was alive and possessed the authority to forgive sins directly, as demonstrated in other instances such as the forgiving sins of the paralyzed man. The unique circumstance of Jesus' direct forgiveness is to be understood, considering that His resurrection marked a pivotal transition from the Old Covenant to the New Covenant.

It's crucial to understand that if Jesus were present today on earth, similar to the days of the Old Covenant, and He verbally forgave someone's sin, baptism might not be deemed necessary. However, given the current absence of such direct interactions with Jesus, the situation of the thief on the cross does not serve as conclusive evidence that baptism is not required for salvation.

Moreover, assuming that the thief had not been baptized earlier is speculative. He could or couldn't have been baptized, The biblical account does not explicitly provide details about the thief's life and beliefs before his crucifixion. The absence of such information leaves room for uncertainty, and any assertions about the thief's potential baptism remain speculative.

Understanding the role of baptism in salvation requires considering the entirety of biblical teachings, including the direct commands of Jesus and the practices established by the early church. While the example of the thief on the cross provides a unique context, it should not be isolated as evidence against the importance of baptism.

Instead, a comprehensive examination of Jesus' commands, the actions of the early church, and the overall biblical narrative is necessary to form a balanced and accurate understanding of the significance of baptism in the Christian faith.

Calling on the name of the Lord

Few often quote Romans 10:13-15, preaching that only calling on the name of the Lord is sufficient for salvation, and hence, that baptism is not required *"For whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved."*

But, it's important to understand the meaning of "calling on the name" here. Acts 22:16 provides more context: *"And now what are you waiting for? Get up, be baptized and wash your sins away, calling on his name."* Here, we see a direct correlation between baptism and calling on the name of the Lord. Baptism is presented as an essential component of genuinely calling upon the Lord, and hence, simply invoking the name of the Lord is insufficient for salvation.

Few argue that Baptism is only for public declaration, The example of the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8:26-39 challenges this idea. The eunuch was baptized privately by Philip, without any other witnesses present. This suggests that baptism is not primarily about making a public statement of faith, but rather about a personal commitment to follow Jesus Christ.

Others point out Acts 10:43, and say that belief is enough, *"everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name,"* This verse certainly emphasizes the crucial role of belief in Jesus for the forgiveness of sins, but it does not exclude other elements of Christian practice, including baptism.

Is baptism a work?

The process of salvation involves a transformation within the heart, leading to the public act of baptism, and subsequently resulting in a life marked by good works and obedience to God's teachings. Baptism, in this context, serves as a public declaration of a transformed life and faith, reinforcing the idea that it is a response to God's grace and not a means of earning salvation through works.

Luke 3:12 solidifies this idea: individuals approach John the Baptist to seek baptism and then inquire about what actions to take. This sequence aligns with the understanding that baptism is a response to a changed heart and a marker of repentance, not a good work to earn salvation.

Some believe that salvation is achievable solely through faith, viewing baptism as a human endeavor. Ephesians 2:8-9 is often cited to support this stance, underscoring that salvation is a gift from God acquired through faith and is not a result of personal deeds. This perspective centers on the idea that salvation is a divine gift, not something earned through individual actions.

However, it's vital to understand the specific meaning of "works" in this context. Paul is referring to adherence to the Mosaic Law and related practices, not all actions in general. Baptism, seen by many as an act of faith and obedience, doesn't align with the type of "work" Paul is addressing here.

Some also misinterpret baptism as a human effort in the journey to salvation, arguing that true salvation is granted through repentance or privately praying the sinner's prayer. However, this argument falls short upon closer examination. Even the act of praying the sinner's prayer or reflecting on this covenant in one's thoughts is technically a form of work. Consequently, it's logically impossible to enter the covenant without some form of action or work.

Romans 1:5 emphasizes that through Christ, we have received grace and apostleship to call all people, including the Gentiles, to obey in faith for the glory of His name. This signifies that faith, in its essence, produces obedience. In the context of Christian beliefs, one significant act of obedience that stems from faith is baptism. Baptism is a demonstration of obedience to the command of Christ, as he instructed his followers to be baptized as a public declaration of their faith.

Galatians 5:6 emphasizes that, in Christ, religious practices like circumcision are not what truly matters; instead, faith that manifests through love is of paramount importance. This aligns with the principle that faith should manifest in actions. James 2:17 reinforces this, stating that faith devoid of actions is lifeless. Thus, authentic faith necessitates tangible expressions, a sentiment mirrored in the act of baptism.

While baptism is technically a "work," its purpose isn't an attempt to earn salvation. Rather, it signifies a response of faith—a showcase of our inner transformation as we rely on God's grace and dedicate our lives to Him. Baptism serves as a symbol of this transformation, highlighting our surrender to God and our belonging to His covenant..

Is baptism necessary for salvation?

In examining the question of whether baptism is necessary for salvation, biblical passages offer profound insights into the role of this sacrament in the life of a believer.

One of the key passages to consider is 1 Peter 3:21, where Peter writes, *"The like figure whereunto even baptism does also now save us (not the putting away of the filth of the flesh, but the answer of a good conscience toward God,) by the resurrection of Jesus Christ."* This verse suggests that baptism, like the ark that saved Noah and his family from the flood, is a means of salvation. However, it is important to note that Peter clarifies that baptism does not save us by the physical act of being immersed in water, but rather by the inner transformation that occurs when we have a good conscience toward God.

Also, in Acts 2:38, Peter's words emphasize the necessity of baptism, not merely for repentance but for the forgiveness of sins and receiving the Holy Spirit, implying its critical role in the salvation process. *"Repent and be baptized every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ, for the forgiveness of sins, and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit."*

In John 3:5, Jesus explicitly states the importance of being born of water and the Spirit for entering the kingdom of God - "Jesus answered, *"Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God"*". This declaration emphasizes the essential role of baptism in the spiritual rebirth required for salvation, linking it intimately with the believer's journey towards church and eternal life.

Mark 16:16 further emphasizes the connection between belief, baptism, and salvation. Jesus says - *"Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned."* While belief is foundational, Jesus makes it clear that baptism is a crucial step toward salvation. The correlation between non-belief and condemnation highlights the significance of both belief and baptism in the salvation process.

In conclusion, biblical passages consistently affirm the integral role of baptism in the journey of salvation. Baptism is not a separate or secondary aspect of faith; rather, it is intricately woven into the fabric of repentance, forgiveness, and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. It symbolizes a commitment to Christ and serves as a transformative step on the path to eternal life.

Baptism is a means of uniting with Christ

Baptism serves as a profound means of adopting Christ's identity, Galatians 3:27 highlights this deep union, *"for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ"*

Moreover, Romans 6:3-4 illustrates that through baptism, individuals are buried with Christ into death and raised to walk in the newness of life, reflecting Christ's resurrection. *"We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in the newness of life."*

This states that Baptism symbolizes a burial of the old self and a resurrection into a new life, mirroring Christ's resurrection. It becomes a tangible expression of embracing Christ's identity, encountering the forgiveness of sins, and affirming a commitment to live according to His teachings and resurrection.

Yes, Baptism isn't merely a ritual; it is an act of faith, an embodiment of dying to sin and rising in Christ's righteousness. Hence, it is the act of embracing Christ's identity and experiencing the forgiveness of sins, affirming our commitment to walk in the light of His teachings and resurrection. Given this perspective, one might ponder their unity with Christ if they have not undergone baptism.

Baptism is a need

Baptism is a symbol of divine guidance provided by God. The Pharisees, by rejecting both their belief in John and his baptism, directly opposed God's guidance, making it evident that their refusal to be baptized equated to rejecting God's divine plan. This is underscored in Luke 7:30, which states, *"But since the Pharisees and experts in the law had not been baptized by him, they rejected the plan of God for themselves"*

Matthew 3:7 further demonstrates this need for baptism. John rebukes Pharisees and Sadducees as they approach him for baptism, he addresses them as a deceitful generation, questioning what motivated them to seek refuge from the wrath to come. The Pharisees sought baptism, and it becomes apparent that John's statement connected their act of baptism with a desire to escape future divine wrath.

Furthermore, in Matthew 3:14, John the Baptist clearly affirmed, *"I need to be baptized by you."* In this statement, he wasn't simply showing respect or feigning humility; rather, his words held genuine sincerity and profound significance. It surpassed a casual wish or personal desire. John the Baptist acknowledged that baptism was more than

something he desires for personal satisfaction,— a compelling need for his spiritual journey.

John the Baptist vs Jesus' Baptism

We see two types of baptisms in the new testament, John's and Jesus'.

Baptism of John the Baptist was a precursor, preparing individuals for the transformative baptism that Jesus later introduced. It laid the groundwork for repentance and acknowledgment of the coming Messiah, but the complete Christian baptism encompasses immersion or dedication in the name of Jesus Christ.

While both forms of baptism were profoundly significant, the baptism administered by Jesus and practiced in the early Christian church carried additional dimensions tied to Jesus' teachings, His sacrificial death, and the empowering presence of the Holy Spirit.

The practice of baptism within Jesus' ministry and the early Christian church bore both similarities and distinctions compared to John the Baptist's baptism.

Similarities:

Repentance and Forgiveness of Sins: Both John's baptism and the Christian baptism emphasized repentance and the forgiveness of sins. John's baptism was a call to repent (Matthew 3:11), and Christian baptism was strongly associated with repentance and conversion (Acts 2:38).

Distinct Differences:

- In the Name of Jesus: Following Jesus' resurrection and ascension, Christian baptism was typically administered in the name of Jesus Christ or using the triune formula (Father, Son, Holy Spirit), following Jesus' instruction (Matthew 28:19). In contrast, John's baptism only symbolizes repentance (Matthew 3:11).
- Baptism of the Holy Spirit: The baptism introduced by Jesus and practiced by the early church was deeply connected to the baptism of the Holy Spirit. Believers sought not only water baptism but also to be filled with the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:38).
- Connection to Jesus' Death and Resurrection: Baptism in the name of Jesus symbolized being united with Christ in His death, burial, and resurrection (Romans 6:3-4). This element was not emphasized in John's baptism.

In the New Testament, we witness instances where individuals, already baptized by John, recognized the need for another baptism in the name of Jesus:

- Acts 18:25: Apollos, fervent in spirit, knew only the baptism of John, signifying that his understanding was foundational and not complete.
- Acts 19:3-5: When Paul encountered certain disciples who had received John's baptism, he explained that John's baptism was a call to believe in the One who would come after him, that is, Christ Jesus. Upon understanding this, they were then baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus.

This demonstrates a vital distinction between John's baptism, which prepared the way, and Jesus' baptism, which signifies identification with the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The latter encompasses a deeper understanding of the redemptive work of Christ and a personal commitment to follow Him.

Thus, for Christians, baptism in the name of Jesus is required, signifying an immersion into a new life founded on faith in Christ and a commitment to follow His teachings and example.

Water baptism vs Baptism of the Holy Spirit:

Baptism with Water:

Baptism with water serves as a symbolic and ceremonial act signifying purification, repentance, and commitment to a renewed life in Christ. John the Baptist initiated this practice as a symbolic gesture of repentance for the remission of sins, laying the foundation for the transformative baptism that Jesus later introduced

- Matthew 3:11: John administers water baptism as a symbol of repentance.
- Acts 18:25: Apollos demonstrates familiarity with John's baptism, emphasizing the early form of water baptism.
- Acts 19:3-5: Paul highlights the distinction between John's baptism (with water) and baptism in the name of the Lord Jesus (baptism with the Holy Spirit).

Baptism with the Holy Spirit:

Baptism with the Holy Spirit represents a profound spiritual encounter wherein believers are filled with the Holy Spirit, bringing empowerment and a heightened communion with God. This experience, promised by Jesus, marks a transformative and empowering aspect of the Christian journey.

The baptism administered to Christians today is Jesus' baptism, where we are baptized in water baptism, but immediately after water baptism, we receive the gift of Holy Spirit, which is called as baptism of Holy Spirit - John 3:5, Acts 2:38

Gift of Holy Spirit is the Baptism of Holy Spirit

In the Old Testament, instances are documented where individuals were filled with the Holy Spirit for specific tasks irrespective of their former beliefs. For example, during the construction of the tabernacle and the creation of priestly garments, skilled individuals were filled with the Spirit of God (Exodus 31:2-5).

However, in the New Testament, believers generally receive the Holy Spirit immediately after baptism. Although there are instances that may seem to deviate from this pattern, a closer examination reveals that they are not exceptions.

Firstly, it is crucial to establish that the Holy Spirit indeed dwells in each believer. Romans 8:9 emphasizes this by stating, *"You, however, are not in the realm of the flesh but are in the realm of the Spirit if indeed the Spirit of God lives in you. And if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, they do not belong to Christ."*

Acts 5:32 further asserts that the Holy Spirit is given to those who obey God. *"If anyone should belong to Christ, they need to have the Spirit of Christ (Holy Spirit) in them."* The next logical question would be, when would someone receive? John 7:39 answers this, stating, *"By this, he meant the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were later to receive. Up to that time the Spirit had not been given, since Jesus had not yet been glorified."* This verse clearly states that the Spirit would be given to believers after the resurrection. Hence the disciples received the Holy Spirit as tongues of fire after the resurrection because Jesus was not yet glorified when they were baptized.

1 Corinthians 12:13 highlights, *"For we were all baptized by one Spirit so as to form one body—whether Jews or Gentiles, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to"*

drink." This verse emphasizes that all believers, regardless of their background, are baptized into one body by the same Spirit and, therefore, share in the same Spirit. In other words, it asserts that we are given the Holy Spirit at the time of baptism.

Ephesians 1:13-14 states, *"...When you 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."* Although belief is not explicitly exclusive of baptism, it strengthens the correlation between belief and the reception of the Holy Spirit at baptism, as emphasized in 1 Corinthians 12:13.

See Acts 2:38-39 - *"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. The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call.'"*

Acts 10:44-48 - *"While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message. The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on Gentiles. For they heard them speaking in tongues and praising God. Then Peter said, 'Surely no one can stand in the way of their being baptized with water. They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have.' So he ordered that they be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ."*

These verses collectively establish that believers receive the Holy Spirit at the time of baptism. As already stated, there are instances that may initially appear as exceptions to this rule, a closer examination reveals that each of them has a reasonable explanation.

Name of father, son, holy spirit

While few verses say that baptism is to be performed in the name of Jesus, they are merely implying that the baptism there is of Jesus' and not of John's.

Ex: Acts 8:16 *"For as yet he was fallen upon none of them: only they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus"*

Acts 10: 47-48 *“And he commanded them to be baptized in the name of the Lord. Then prayed they him to tarry certain days”*

But, the Baptism of the New Testament should be administered in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy spirit. Matt 28:19 - *Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost*

Correct method

Having understood the necessity of baptism for salvation, it is also crucial to consider the correct method of baptism.

The word "baptism" itself, derived from the Greek word 'báptisma', which literally means "immersion".

In every case of baptism for the forgiveness of sins found in the bible, the individual enters the water, is immersed, and then raised again, mimicking the act of death, burial and resurrection of Jesus and symbolizing their participation in it. This understanding is supported by passages such as Colossians 2:12, which speaks of being *"buried with him in baptism"* and raised through faith in God's power, and Romans 6:5, which emphasizes the union with Christ's death and resurrection.

It is important to note that immersion is the right and biblical way of administering baptism, while alternative methods like sprinkling or pouring are Unbiblical and are not what was asked or done by Jesus or any of the apostles.

Conclusion:

Throughout the New Testament, baptism is consistently emphasized and portrayed as essential for salvation. The biblical passages we've explored affirm its significance in adopting Christ's identity, symbolizing a burial of the old self, and affirming a commitment to walk in the light of His teachings and resurrection.

Merciful Judgment: Concerning our loved ones or ancestors who may not have undergone baptism due to a lack of awareness, and are not with us today, we can find assurance in God's mercy. His mercy ensures a fair judgment, considering the knowledge and understanding of each individual. Everyone will be judged based on what they know and understand. Now that we comprehend the importance of baptism, it is crucial not to delay in embracing it.

Jesus was responsible for baptisms: Jesus oversaw the practice of baptism during His ministry, even though it was His disciples who physically performed the baptisms. John 4:1-2, affirm that while Jesus Himself did not personally conduct the baptisms, Baptism remained an essential aspect of Jesus' ministry and the spread of His teachings.

Paul was responsible for baptisms: Paul also engaged in baptizing individuals as part of his ministry. 1 Corinthians 1:13-17, reflects Paul addressing the Corinthians and emphasizing that the focus should be on the message of Christ rather than who performed their baptism. He was thankful that he hadn't personally baptized many in Corinth to avoid any perception of elevating himself. His main purpose was to preach the gospel, and while he did baptize, he stressed the primacy of the gospel message in the Christian faith.

Jesus was baptized and set an example for us!: Jesus' act of being baptized serves as a powerful example and comes with a direct command. Also, If we picture ourselves present at His resurrection, receiving His specific instruction to go forth, make disciples, and baptize them just as He did with His disciples (Matthew 28:18-20), it becomes clear that we would unquestioningly follow His guidance. Therefore, why should our current situation be any exception?