

Why Stress Baptism?

Whenever someone comes to faith in Jesus and is ready to begin his or her life of faith and discipleship, they rightly ask, “OK, so what must I do?” That is a logical question, and all believers in Christ would agree that something must be “done.” Many people would encourage the new believer to repeat the “Sinner’s Prayer.” That prayer might go something like—

Father, I am sorry for my sins and want to turn away from my sinful life. I believe that your son Jesus died for my sins and was raised from the dead. I want Jesus to be the Lord of my life.

There are many different versions of this Sinner’s Prayer, and there is one very good reason for that—it’s not in the Bible. Oh, the sentiments of repentance and commitment are of course very Biblical, but no one in the Bible is ever told to pray the Sinner’s Prayer. The Bible assures us that we are saved “*by grace through faith... not of works so that no one can boast*” (Eph 2:8-9). Nothing we do can add to the work of God in salvation, but then praying the sinner’s prayer is doing something. Repeating this prayer is outward action. Demanding that penitent believers in Jesus repeat the Sinner’s Prayer in order to be saved would mean that salvation is by faith alone plus prayer. To suggest that there is something that we do to receive the grace of God does not mean that we earn our salvation.

Believers in the New Testament are told to do something to express their penitent faith, but it is not to say the Sinner’s Prayer. They are rather told to be baptized. If we must do something in order to express saving faith, why not do what it is that the Bible says to do? That Bible response is baptism. It is not a work that earns salvation; it is rather the response of faith that relies on God. Notice several reasons why this response of baptism should be stressed.

Baptism Was Commanded in the Great Commission

Just before Jesus ascended back to the Father to heaven, He left behind marching orders with his apostles to take the gospel all over the world. They are commanded to “*make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit*” (Matt 28:19). There were many important things that Jesus did not mention in His Great Commission.

- The apostles were not told to build great churches.
- They were not told to come up with ways to care for the poor.
- They aren’t instructed to conduct worship services or establish Sunday Schools.

He does tell them, “*Teach them to obey everything I have commanded*” (28:20), and surely covers a great many things! But there are many things that are important to our faith and service that are not specifically mentioned in the great commission.

But Jesus does specifically tell the apostles to baptize those who believe. Of all the things that are not mentioned, surely this emphasizes the thing that is—baptism. In fact, in Mark’s version of the Great Commission, Jesus connects baptism to salvation, “*Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned*” (Mark 16:16). Yes, it is indeed true that He doesn’t say that all those unbaptized will be lost, and that is a fact we must respect. But then, Jesus isn’t telling people how they can reject the gospel; He is telling them how to be teach people so that they may be saved. And He specifically mentions baptism. The commission that is our foundation for evangelism stresses baptism.

All Examples of Conversion in Acts Mention Baptism

If Jesus told the apostles to go into the world and baptize believers, then we would expect them to go out and do exactly that. Acts is the record of the apostles going into all the world preaching the gospel. Jesus told them to go into Judea, Samaria and all parts of the world (Acts 1:8), and Acts tells of Peter (working in Judea), Philip (working in Samaria) and Paul (going into all the world). Acts tells story after story of people putting their faith in Jesus as their Savior. Sometimes there are huge crowds and many being converted (Acts 2); other times a single family is being taught privately at home (the jailer in Acts 16). And sometimes there is only the teacher (Philip) and a seeker (Eunuch) (Acts 8),

Jesus specifically told the apostles to baptize those who believe. And all the conversion stories in Acts end with baptism... always. Every one. Whether there is a large crowd responding or a single person coming to faith, every believer is immersed based on their own active faith in Jesus—

- The first gospel sermon ended, “*Repent and be baptized.*” (2:28)
- The story of the Ethiopian ends, “*and Philip baptized him.*” (8:31)
- Paul’s own conversion story, “*He got up and was baptized.*” (9:18)
- The story of the Jailer, “*he and all his family were baptized.*” (16:33)

The Acts’ record is absolutely consistent; baptism is always mentioned. In some of these cases, baptism cannot be connected with a public confession before a “church.” The Ethiopian Eunuch was absolutely alone when he was baptized. The Philippian jailer was locked up with just his family in his own house in the middle of the night when he was baptized.

In every cause, people were baptized in the book of Acts when they came to accept Christ and their Lord and Savior. People in Acts don’t eat or sleep between the time they come to faith in Christ and the time when they are baptized. Put the first two points together, and the case for baptism seems pretty strong. Jesus told the apostles to teach and baptize those who believe. And in Acts, the apostles went out and started teaching and baptizing people!

Theological Reflections on Baptism

Baptism is never argued to lost people in the Bible. Sure, lost people are taught, but that teaching always focuses on Christ Himself. Peter and Paul’s sermons in Acts put the emphasis on the cross and empty tomb. There are no sermons on baptism or complex arguments for it; people simply believe and their baptism naturally follows. The texts that explore the theological significance of baptism were written to people who were already baptized. These theological reflections on the meaning of baptism stress its importance. Notice some examples.

First, Paul argues in Romans 6 about relationship of grace to holiness. Paul here anticipates an objection by some to his teaching on grace who say, “*Why not keep sinning so grace can increase?*” (6:1). Paul replies that we have died to sin and therefore can’t continue to live in it (6:2). And his proof is found in baptism (Rom. 6:3-4)

³ *Or don’t you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?* 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 (Romans 6:3-4)*

Just as Jesus died and was raised to life, so in baptism, we die to sin and are raised in righteousness. This ties baptism to both the cross and the commitment to holiness. Paul's point here about holy living emphasizes the place of baptism.

Second, Paul's point in Galatians 3 is one of equality in Christ (Gal. 3:26-28). In a first century world torn apart by racial/ethnic distinctions (sound familiar), Paul proclaimed a gospel where everyone was level at the foot of the cross. He says—

²⁶ You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, ²⁷ for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. ²⁸ There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

Paul's main point here isn't baptism; he is arguing against Jewish racism. There are no distinctions between people—social, ethnic or gender. His point is that baptism has brought us into the same relationship with Christ. His proof for equality in Christ and against racism is the rite of baptism.

Third, Paul's point in Colossians 2 is the all-sufficiency of Christ. The church in Colossae struggled with Gnostic-like false doctrine which perhaps was a blend of Judaism, Eastern religions and Greek philosophy. This eclectic brew was added to simple Christian faith, but Paul argues that they did not need the addition. He points to all-sufficiency of Christ. In Christ is fullness of God (2:9) and in Him we put off sin (2:11). And baptism was the commitment they made to Him and only Him

having been buried with him in baptism and raised with him through your faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead. (2:12)

They trusted in Christ alone when they were baptized in him. Again, this reflection on baptism's meaning shows its central place in New Testament thinking.

Fourth, Peter's point in 1 Peter 3 is about faithful living during times of difficulty and persecution. Peter's audience was suffering the stern opposition from a world that did not accept their faith or their God. He tells them that they shouldn't fear (3:14) but rather be ready to give answer when asked about their hope (3:15). But that will mean that they must sometimes suffer for doing the right thing (3:17). But then that is the example of the cross (3:18). Peter next mentions the story of Noah where only a few are saved apart from world (3:20) and sees in Noah a picture of baptism (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 good conscience toward God. It saves you by the resurrection of Jesus Christ,

Baptism is said to save us here, but Peter is clear that baptism saves through the power of the resurrection. Baptism points to the cleansing of our conscience as we are raised together with Christ. Once again, this theological reflection points us back to the importance of baptism.

All of this begins to have a cumulative effect as we consider baptism. Jesus told the apostles to baptize disciples in the Great Commission. In the book of Acts, they did just that—they preached the gospel and baptized everyone who believed it. In the epistles, the apostles reflect on the theological implications of baptism.

In addition, there are other allusions to the importance of baptism in the words of New Testament writers—

- Ephesians 5:25- “the washing with water through the word”
- Titus 3:5- “the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit”
- Hebrews 10:22- “having our bodies washed with pure water”
- 1 Corinthians 6:11- “But you were washed, you were sanctified”

So it seems that we are on rather firm biblical ground when stress place of baptism. So we would says to those who would believe on Christ and trust Him for their salvation, “Yes, say the sinners prayer, but then be baptized to receive Christ.

Conclusion

The New Testament presents baptism as the response of faith in the accepting God’s grace in salvation. Peter offers a baptism “*for the remission of sins*” to believers on Pentecost (Acts 2:38). And we offer believers today the same response of faith. If you have never been baptized based upon your faith in Christ, then we offer that to you. I think we are on firm Biblical ground when we offer it.

But what of people who are not baptized? Many Christians have never been challenged with the importance baptism? Does that mean they are not really Christians? All salvation issues are God’s alone; all we can do is struggle to understand what the Bible says. But the real question here often is, “What if someone is baptized to obey God but doesn’t understand that baptism is “*for the remission of sins.*” Actually the Bible suggests several different reasons for believers to be baptized. All of these are important, but often (always) the person being baptized does not fully understand all of these reasons equally. And they may stress one reason over the rest. Notice just some of the reasons for baptism given in the New Testament—

- To fulfill all righteousness (Matt 3:15)
- To have a good conscience (1 Peter 3:21)
- To commit to a life of discipleship (Matt 28:19)
- To receive the gift of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:38)
- To have sins washed away (Acts 22:16)
- To become part of the Body (2 Cor 12:12-13)
- To put on Christ as a garment (Gal 3:27)
- To be saved or made whole (Mk 16:16)

God is not limited by our understandings of baptism. All of these reasons are valid; one baptized for any of these Bible reasons is Biblically baptized. One may be baptized simply because one wishes to obey Jesus (“*fulfill all righteousness*”) without fully understanding the import of “*for the remission of sins*” or to “*receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.*” As we study and grow in Christ, we will add to our understandings of baptism just as we learn more about any Bible doctrine.

Paul’s argument in Galatians 3:26 is that baptism unifies believers. It would be ironic for people to use this doctrine as a way to divide true Christians from false ones. But faithfulness dictates that we preach and practice His word as best we can, and that is what we seek to do. For that reason we stress baptism. Thank you for taking the time to read this, and please contact me with any further questions you may have.