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Is Baptism Necessary to be Saved?

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My goal in this article is to examine the Scriptures to come to a conclusion on this question. There are many points upon which people agree in terms of salvation. For example, I do not know anyone who would disagree with the following:

- One must be presented with the word of God in order to be saved because the gospel is God's power to salvation (Rom. 1:16). "*Without faith it is impossible to please God*" (Heb. 11:6). Faith is produced by hearing God's word (Rom. 10:17).
- One must believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God in order to be saved (Jn. 8:24). However, "*the devils believe and tremble*" (Jas. 2:19). The one and only time the phrase *faith only* is used in the Bible is in James 2:24 and it reads, *You see then that a man is justified by works, and not by faith only*. There were some who believed in Jesus, but out of fear of social consequences, they would not confess Christ (Jn. 12:42-43).
- One must repent of sin in order to be saved from sin (Lk. 13:3, 5; Acts 17:30-31). Repentance is defined for us by Jesus in Matthew 21:28-32. It is a change of mind that leads to a change of action.
- One must confess faith in Christ in order to be saved (Matt. 10:32-33; Rom. 10:9-10).

"The point of disagreement in the discussion of salvation is always baptism."

I have never found one person who would disagree with any of the above points. However, can any of the above be done independently in order to attain salvation? In other words, can a person be saved without faith? Can a person be saved without confession? Can a person be saved without repentance? Those who are in any way familiar with the Bible will answer, *NO!* All of the above "steps" are involved in the process of a person becoming a child of God. The point of disagreement in the discussion of salvation is always baptism. So then, the question becomes, "Must a person be baptized in order to be saved?" Does the Bible teach this to be the case? Consider the following verses:

Great Commission and Baptism

Matthew 28:18-20. In sending His apostles out on the Great Commission, Jesus included the baptism of those who were being taught. Both the teaching and

the baptizing are directly connected with the authority of Christ as stated in verse 18 – "*All authority is given to Me in heaven and on earth.*" Also, the individuals being baptized were baptized "*into the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.*" When a person is baptized, then, they are brought into a relationship with each member of the Godhead.

Mark 16:15-16. This is Mark's account of the Great Commission and he records that the gospel was to be preached to all men. The statement of verse 16 is in terms of a promise, not a command, "*He who believes and is baptized shall be saved...*" The term *and* is a conjunction in the Greek language (*kai*) and it joins two terms together. The phrase in the original language literally reads, *The believing one and the baptized one will be saved*. Jesus connects both faith and baptism with salvation.

Book of Acts and Baptism

Acts 2:38. Peter and the other apostles were preaching in Jerusalem on the first Pentecost after the resurrection of Christ. They informed the Jews that Jesus was proven to be the Son of God by His miracles (Acts 2:22-24) and yet was rejected and crucified by

the very people He came to save (Acts 2:36). In response to this message, about 3,000 Jews were cut to the heart and asked what they needed to do (Acts 2:37). Peter's commands are found in verse 38, "*Repent and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins...*" As discussed above, no one disagrees that repentance is absolutely necessary in order for one to be saved from sin. However, Peter connects repentance with baptism and states that they are "*for the remission of sins.*" Jesus stated that He shed His blood for many "*for the remission of sins*" (Matt. 26:28). If Peter, an inspired apostle, connected repentance with baptism in order to have the remission of sins, who are we to separate them? This is exactly what Jesus instructed the apostles to teach when He gave them the Great Commission.

Acts 8:1-13. The gospel went to Samaria because of persecution. We are told that Philip did this and that when he was there he "*preached Christ to them*" (Acts 8:5) and performed many miracles. We are also told that the people believed Philip as he preached (v. 12) and the recorded results are, "*both men and women*

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were baptized” (Acts 8:12).

Acts 8:26-40. The gospel went to an Ethiopian through Philip. This Ethiopian eunuch was reading from the Old Testament (Isa. 53) and had a question that someone needed to answer for him. All that we are told about what was said to him is, “Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning at this Scripture, preached Jesus to him” (Acts 8:35). We are not told anything concerning the contents of his preaching, but we are told the immediate results of what was said, “Now as they went down the road they came to same water...and he baptized him” (Acts 8:36-38). There was obvious belief on part of the eunuch as well as a confession of faith (v. 37). Included in this process was baptism. There must then be a connection to a person being saved (Mk. 16:16) and being baptized.

Acts 10:1-11:18. The gospel went to the Gentiles through Peter. Cornelius was a good, godly man (Acts 10:1-2), but the Bible says he needed to find Peter because “He will tell you what you must do” (Acts 10:6). This was a person who was ready “to hear all things commanded by God” (Acts 10:33). Verses 34-48 record what was said and what was commanded to be done....Baptism (Acts 10:47-48). If it is not necessary to salvation then why was it commanded by an apostle?

Acts 16:11-15. The gospel went to Philippi through Paul and Silas. Lydia was a worshiper of God (v. 14), had her heart opened by what she heard (v. 14), and was baptized (v. 15).

Acts 16:25-34. The Philippian Jailor was baptized. He heard the gospel (v. 32), repented (seen by washing their stripes), and was baptized immediately (v. 33).

Acts 18:1-8. The gospel went to Corinth. They heard, believed, and were baptized (v. 8).

Acts 19:1-7. The gospel went to Ephesus. There were certain *disciples* who were only familiar with John’s baptism. John the Baptizer pointed people to the Christ and told them to believe on Jesus, not himself. The result of hearing this: “When they heard this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus” (Acts 19:5).

New Testament Epistles and Baptism

Romans 6:1-4. The Romans had died to sin (Rom. 6:1-2). In this text, baptism is paralleled with the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ. The importance of baptism is evident in the terminology. They had been “baptized into Christ Jesus” (v. 3). Baptism is a burial (v. 4) and then a person is raised to walk in newness of life. Newness of life does not come before one’s death to sin and burial in water,

but after.

Galatians 3:26-27. Writing to Christians Paul stated that they “are children of God by faith in Christ Jesus”. How Paul? “For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ.” Paul stated that a person “puts on Christ” in the act of baptism. Can a person be saved without “putting on Christ?” Also, Paul wrote that salvation is “in Christ Jesus” (2 Tim. 2:10). That is, salvation is in a certain place, i.e. Christ. How does one get into Christ? Through baptism according to Paul in Galatians 3.

Colossians 2:12. One of the false accusations made against the churches of Christ is that they teach a “works based salvation.” It is claimed that telling someone that they need to be baptized in order to be saved, we are teaching that salvation is to be earned by works. Nothing could be further from the truth! In fact, Colossians 2:12 plainly states that ones faith is in the “operation (working) of God.” To do what God commands is not working to earn salvation!

1 Peter 3:20-21. Noah was saved by water. Eight souls were saved when they got in the boat and floated on the water. In that sense Peter states that they were saved by water. So what? “There is also now an antitype which now saves us – baptism...” So was Peter wrong when he said that baptism now saves us? This was the exact same message he preached in Acts 2 to the Jews and Acts 10 to the Gentiles.

One thing that has always puzzled me is the fact that there is so much confusion and disagreement on baptism and its purpose. The Bible is very clear. You cannot argue with the word of God and win. There is either a direct link with baptism and salvation or there is not. Many religious bodies teach that one can be saved at the point of faith and be baptized at some point later. Some churches will even have a “Baptismal Sunday” which is completely foreign to Scripture. My question is this: Where in the Bible is that either taught or practiced? If I were to begin teaching that repentance is not necessary for salvation I would be considered a false teacher. If I were to begin teaching that confession is not necessary for salvation I would be called a heretic. Why is it, then, that so many people feel that they can exclude baptism from the plan of salvation and believe that it doesn’t matter to God? The necessity of baptism for salvation is not a “church of Christ teaching.” Remember the words of Jesus, “If you love me, keep my commandments” (John 14:15). I will finish this article with a very simple question: Is it possible to please God and obtain salvation offered through Christ if I do not do all that He commands?

In his February 12, 2009 debate with Kyle Butt, Dan Barker alleged that he “knows” the God of the Bible cannot exist because “there are mutually incompatible properties/characteristics of the God that’s in this book [the Bible—EL] that rule out the possibility of His existence.” Seven minutes and 54 seconds into his first speech, Barker cited James 1:13 and Genesis 22:1 as proof that the God of the Bible cannot exist. Since James 1:13 says: “Let no man say when he is tempted, I am tempted of God: for God cannot be tempted with evil, neither tempteth he any man” (KJV), and Genesis 22:1 affirms that “God did tempt Abraham” (KJV) to sacrifice his son, Barker asserted that God is like a married bachelor or a square circle—He cannot logically exist.

If Genesis 22:1 actually taught that God really tempted Abraham to commit evil and sin, then the God of the Bible might be a “square circle,” i.e., a logical contradiction. But, the fact of the matter is, God did not **tempt** Abraham to commit evil. Barker formulated his argument based upon the King James Version and only **one** meaning of the Hebrew word (*nissâ*) found in Genesis 22:1. Although the word can mean “to tempt,” the first two meanings that Brown, Driver, and Briggs give for *nissâ* in their *Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* is “to test, to try” (1993). Likewise, the *Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament* (1997) defines the word simply “to test” (Jenni and Westermann, 1997, 2:741-742). The *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* agrees that *nissâ* is best translated, whether in secular or theological contexts, as “testing” (Botterweck, et al., 1998, 9:443-455). For this reason, virtually all major translations in recent times, including the NKJV, NASB, ESV, NIV, and RSV, translate Genesis 22:1 using the term “tested,” not tempted.

When David put on the armor of King Saul prior to battling Goliath, the shepherd realized: “I cannot walk with these, for I have not **tested** (*nissâ*) them” (1 Sam. 17:39, emp. added). Obviously, this testing had nothing to do with David “tempting” his armor; he simply had not tested or tried on Saul’s armor previously. God led Israel during 40 years of desert wanderings “to humble...and **test**” them (Deut. 8:2, emp. added), not to tempt them to sin. Notice also the contrast in Exodus 20:20 between (1) God testing man and (2) trying to cause man to sin. After giving Israel the Ten Commandments, Moses said: “Do not fear; for God has come to **test** (*nissâ*) **you**, and that His fear may be before you, **so that you may not sin**” (Ex. 20:20, emp. added). If one were to use Barker’s reasoning that *nissâ* must

mean “to tempt,” regardless of the context, then he would have to interpret Exodus 20:20 to mean that God tempted Israel to sin, so that they will not sin.

When a person interprets the Bible, or any other book, without recognizing that words have a variety of meanings and can be used in various senses, a rational interpretation is impossible. Many alleged Bible contradictions, including several of those that Dan Barker mentioned in the *Butt/Barker Debate*, are easily explained simply by acknowledging that words are used in a variety of ways. Is a word to be taken literally or figuratively? Must the term in one place mean the exact same thing when in another context, or may it have different meanings? If English-speaking Americans can intelligibly converse about **running** to the store in the 21st century by **driving** a car, or if we can easily communicate about **parking** on **driveways**, and **driving** on **parkways**, why do some people have such a difficult time understanding the various ways in which words were used in Bible times? Could it be that some Bible critics like Barker are simply predisposed to interpret Scripture unfairly? The evidence reveals that is exactly what is happening.

Rather than contradicting James 1:13, Genesis 22:1 actually corresponds perfectly with what James wrote near the beginning of his epistle: “My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various **trials**, knowing that **the testing of your faith produces patience**. But let patience have its perfect work, **that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing**” (1:2-4, emp. added). By instructing Abraham to sacrifice his promised son (Heb. 11:17), God gave Abraham another opportunity to prove his loyalty to Him, while Abraham simultaneously used this trial to continue developing a more complete, mature faith.

References

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Unique features of the Church of Christ

- We use the Bible only (2 Pet. 1:3). We have no creed book, convention, or central headquarters.
- Our name is after the One who died to establish His church (Rom. 16:16).
- The church of Christ began in Jerusalem (Isa. 2:2-3; Acts 2:1-4).
- Jesus promised to establish His church (Matt. 16:18).
- That church was purchased with Jesus' blood (Acts 20:28).
- The church is married to Christ (Rom. 7:4).
- It was established in the first century (Acts 2:41, 47).
- Jesus is the one and only Head of the One Body (Eph. 1:22-23; 4:4; 5:23).
- You can only be added to the church by God Himself (Acts 2:41, 47).

What about being saved?

- All people are saved by grace, though faith (Eph. 2:8-9).
- No one is saved by faith alone (Jas. 2:14-26).
- No one is saved by grace alone (Matt. 7:21).
- Jesus said that belief plus baptism will produce salvation (Mk. 16:16). That is a promise, not a command.
- The Bible teaches that repentance plus baptism produces remission of sins (Acts 2:37-38).
- Belief, confession, and baptism is seen in the account of the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:37-38).
- The Corinthians heard, believed, and were baptized (Acts 18:8).
- Christ is "put on" in baptism (Gal. 3:26-27).
- The apostle Peter said that "baptism does save us" (1 Pet. 3:21).

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