

Baptism and Grace

Does the Necessity of Baptism Negate Grace?

Introduction

In our study of salvation, we have learned about the definition, foundation, and method of justification. Now, we'll look at the timing of justification, or precisely when the sinner becomes justified. As previously highlighted, this event occurs during baptism, involving water immersion. In this lesson, we'll delve deeper into this New Testament teaching.

The Meaning and Purpose of Baptism

Twelve texts⁶⁰ in the New Testament explain the meaning and purpose of baptism. Due to space and time, we will examine one: Colossians 2.11-13:

You were also circumcised in him with a circumcision not done with hands, by putting off the body of flesh, in the circumcision of Christ, when you were buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the working of God, who raised him from the dead. And when you were dead in trespasses and in the uncircumcision of your flesh, he made you alive with him and forgave us all our trespasses.

Here, Paul is referencing initial salvation. Verse 13 presents the results of baptism. One is **regenerated** (made alive with him) and **justified** (forgiven of all our trespasses). Verse 12 is similar to Paul's teaching in Romans 6.3-6. In baptism, our old self is buried in water in order to die with Christ, where we are subsequently raised to eternal life. We go down in the water in absolute trust that the same power that raised Jesus from the dead will also bring our dead souls into new life.

Verse 12 is significant as it shows us *when* God's saving power is applied. Regeneration occurs *in* baptism, not before or after. There should be no way to misunderstand Paul's teaching here. As we come out of the water, we are being raised *with him*.

Notice how this verse connects faith *and* baptism to salvation without any conflict whatsoever. Faith is *how* we participate in Christ's burial and resurrection; baptism is the *time* or *occasion*. Our burial and resurrection occur through faith *in baptism*. In baptism a person's faith is directed *in the working of God*, not the act itself. The act itself doesn't save. God saves. The fact that God raised Jesus from the dead serves as the solid foundation for our faith in trusting He will keep his promise to raise us from spiritual death at the moment of our baptism.

What God Does in Baptism

- God *acquires and accepts us* as His property. We are baptized *into the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit*. This phrase is saying that baptism establishes our ownership by God.
- God gives us *salvation*, Mark 16.16.
- God provides us with the *forgiveness of sins* and the *gift of the Holy Spirit*, Acts 2.38.

- God *washes away our sins*, Acts 22.16.
- God puts our old person to death, buries it, and raises us from the dead, Romans 6.3-5.
- God adds us to Christ's body, Galatians 3.27.
- God brings us into union with Christ and clothes us *with Christ*, Galatians 3.27.
- God *buries us* and *resurrects us*, Colossians 2.12.
- God *saves us*, 1 Peter 3.21.
- Through our *washing*, God *justifies* and *sanctifies us*, 1 Corinthians 6.11.
- We are regenerated and renewed by the Spirit in baptism, Titus 3.5.
- God *sanctifies* and *cleanses us* in baptism, Ephesians 5.26.
- God causes us to be *born again*, John 3.3,5.

The biblical practices associated with baptism all point to salvation, a gift from God that cannot be attained by mere human effort. Baptism is consistently identified as a representation of divine work. It is not a mere symbolic ritual or demonstration of faith. Scripture nowhere teaches or implies that baptism is a personal expression, testimony, pledge, announcement, confirmation, or demonstration of faith. When Paul writes that we are his workmanship, created in Christ in Ephesians 2.10, he is likely referring to God's transformative work in an individual during baptism.

What contribution does the person being baptized make during baptism?

Many evangelicals today deny the necessity of baptism, claiming it is a work and to insist on it being a requirement for salvation makes grace void. This view comes from reformationist Ulrich Zwingli and today the vast majority of the American religious landscape accepts this view without question and vigorously resists any teaching that believes otherwise.

There are several problems with this view. Consider how:

Scripture depicts our participation in baptism as a passive action – we are “baptized,” we do not baptize ourself. The baptized person relies on the baptizer, doing nothing but submitting to the process and momentarily holding their breath. Questions about who ‘did’ the baptism often reveal that an individual's role is perceived and accepted as being passive in baptism. When we have someone baptize us, we are signifying God's internal work of salvation.

Nevertheless, in baptism we do make two significant spiritual contributions. First, we pray and seek God to bring His salvation promises to pass. This implies Ananias's exhortation to Saul in Acts 22:16, in which Saul to pray and plead with God for salvation before baptism. This real *sinner's prayer* seeks a clear conscience and salvation. The second thing a person does at baptism is to *believe*, as demonstrated in Colossians 2.12. After prayer, the individual, under the hands of the baptizer, enters the baptismal waters in faith, trusting that God will fulfill His promises of salvation. To claim that these two acts contradict grace would indeed be bold.

Therefore, the baptizer conducts the outward process during baptism, but God performs all the activities related to salvation. The belief that baptism somehow generates salvation, as critics suggest, is

inaccurate. The only contributions the person being baptized makes are praying and believing, which doesn't defy the concept of grace.

Baptism is a divine act. This serves as a potent counter to the faith-only viewpoint and demonstrates that baptism for salvation doesn't contradict the notion of grace.

Baptism: A Work of Law or Obedience to the Gospel?

Defining Works

When evangelicals argue against the necessity of baptism, they typically are interpreting "works" as human accomplishments or actions, excluding baptism as a salvation event. This interpretation leans heavily on Paul's writings, which we have previously observed in how he distinguishes between faith and works and attributes salvation with faith, not by works to a law code. In determining the conditions for salvation most begin with Paul's distinction between faith and works, and with his exclusion of works from the salvation process as something that would be contrary to grace, Ephesians 2.8-9. Then they assume that Paul is using the term "works" in the general sense of "something we do." Next, they assume that baptism is a work because it is "something we do". Finally they conclude that baptism cannot be a salvation event; to say that it is, is a denial of grace.⁶¹

Does this mean there is nothing for a person to do in order to gain salvation? In a previous lesson we have already discussed our need to respond to the gospel's conditions of salvation. Relating to God as redeemer and responding to His terms of grace is far different from relying on ourselves and our personal deeds to merit salvation.

What About John 6.26-29?

Jesus answered, "Truly I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw the signs, but because you ate the loaves and were filled. Don't work for the food that perishes but for the food that lasts for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you, because God the Father has set his seal of approval on him." "What can we do to perform the works of God?" they asked. Jesus replied, "This is the work of God—that you believe in the one he has sent."

Here, Jesus categorizes faith as work, something you do. How can we reconcile Paul and Jesus' contrasting uses of the term "works"?

Paul distinguished between two categories of "works" or obedience.

GOD AS CREATOR GIVES—	GOD AS REDEEMER GIVES—
Law imperatives, which are commandments to be obeyed by god's creatures.	Gospel imperatives, i.e., instructions to sinners on how to receive salvation.
The creature's response to law commandments is called—	The sinner's response to gospel instructions is called—
Works of law.	Obedience to the faith/gospel.

The first category references obedience to laws. For example, in Romans and Galatians, Paul speaks of work done in response to one's law code. These "works" are actions or responses to God's laws, which faith opposes and salvation by grace rejects.

The second category of actions is "obedience to the gospel," which is harmonious with salvation by grace. The conjoining of obedience and gospel presents an entirely different discourse that starkly contrasts with "works of law." Obedience to the Gospel encapsulates faith in Christ, repentance of sin, confession of Christ as Lord, and baptism for sins' remission. According to the New Testament, these actions embody the primary elements of obedience to the gospel. Obedience to the Gospel is accepting God's gracious offer, while obedience to the law signifies human accomplishment or merit. Hence, by defining "works" as efforts regarding fulfilling the law and not obedience to the gospel, Paul asserts that "works of the law" oppose faith and salvation by grace.

So, Paul's and Jesus' teachings converge, distinguishing between obedience to the gospel and obedience to the law. It's not faith versus works but faith versus "works of the law." Ultimately, faith and obedience to the gospel are intrinsically related: faith is a component of obedience to the gospel.

Given this, the argument that baptism contradicts the essence of salvation by grace is moot. Obedience to the gospel, including baptism, doesn't contradict grace; instead, *it conveys acceptance of grace*. In contrast, "works of the law" stand opposite grace, suggesting an erroneous view of self-salvation through law fulfillment.

Responses to Gospel Imperatives

Understanding the different perspectives between obedience to the law and obedience to the gospel is essential in reconciling the viewpoints of Paul and Jesus and interpreting the Christian doctrine of salvation. Actions like faith, repentance, and confession must take place in order to obey to the gospel. They are responses to gospel imperatives, distinct from works of the law.

Belief

Belief is a command directed to the lost. A positive response to the command to believe is an act of obedience, constituting the sinner's "first act of obedience." One does this in obedience to the gospel, differentiating it from a "work of law."

Repentance

Repentance is another imperative addressed to sinners for salvation. Scriptural references, including Matthew 3.2, 4.17, Acts 2.38, 3.19, 17.30, and Revelation 2.16, demonstrate that repentance falls within the same category of works, described as "something we do" as faith. Both are identified as acts of obedience to the gospel, distinct from obedience to law commands.

Confession

The imperative of confessing Jesus as Lord is seen in Romans 10.9-10. This action, while being a work, is posited as compatible with grace, echoing the argument that external works in the realm of obedience to

the gospel do not align with the concept of works of the law. Even though confession is an external work, it parallels faith and remains consistent with salvation by grace.

Baptism

Baptism does not function as a work of law. Paul consistently refers to baptism in terms of salvation, distinct from works of the law. Instead, it is considered a component of obedience to the gospel or faith that leads to salvation. In the entire New Testament, baptism is never presented as an imperative for Christians or those already saved. Instead, it is consistently portrayed as an action undertaken by sinners to attain salvation, as exemplified in verses like Acts 2.38 and 22.16. Baptism is not the initial act of obedience for a Christian but rather the concluding act of obedience to the gospel performed by a converting sinner.

Remember, there are two distinct kinds of works – those associated with obedience to the gospel and those categorized as works of law. When we see the different faith-only theories of salvation that isolate faith and place other acts of obedience, such as baptism, in the category of works, they are seen for what they are – not in agreement with Scripture. Obedience to the gospel is one's obedient response to the gospel commands addressed to human beings as sinners by God in His role as Redeemer, and such obedience is necessary for salvation.

What's in This for Us?

Justification Occurs in Baptism: This sheds light on the significance of this event for the Christian. It is the specific moment when God's saving power is applied.

God's Actions in Baptism: Recognizing what God accomplishes during baptism, such as acquiring us as His property, providing salvation, forgiveness of sins, and regeneration, helps us appreciate the richness of this divine act. It emphasizes the depth of God's involvement in giving us salvation.

Baptism as a Divine Act: Emphasizing that baptism is a divine act counters common misconceptions that it is merely a symbolic ritual or human work. Baptism as a powerful expression of God's transformative work in individuals, reinforcing the idea that salvation is a gift from God.

Distinguishing Faith and Works: Clarifying the distinction between faith and works, especially in the context of baptism, helps modern reconcile modern conflicts in biblical teachings. Faith and obedience to the gospel are inseparably intertwined.

Obedience to the Gospel: Highlighting the concept of obedience to the gospel, including acts like belief, repentance, confession, and baptism, reinforces the idea that these actions are responses to God's gracious offer rather than self-merited works.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the timing of justification, God's actions during baptism, and the distinction between faith and works contribute to a comprehensive understanding of a person's baptism. Emphasizing baptism as a divine act counters misconceptions, presenting it as an expression of God's transformative work.

The reconciliation of Paul's and Jesus' teachings, distinguishing obedience to the gospel from works of the law, helps answer the argument that insisting on the necessity of baptism cancel's grace. Recognizing obedience to the gospel as essential for salvation encourages believers to view their spiritual life as a response to God's gracious commands rather than a pursuit of self-merited works.

In essence, this study reaffirms how faith and obedience intersect harmoniously. We need to reflect on the significance of our baptism, acknowledging it not only as a personal milestone but as a amazing encounter with God's saving power. Truly our salvation is a divine gift to which our response is marked by faith, obedience, and a deep understanding of God's grace.

For Class Interaction and Discussion

Lesson Outline:

1. Introduction

- Brief overview of the study of salvation, emphasizing justification.
- Introduction to the timing of justification, focusing on baptism.

2. The Meaning and Purpose of Baptism

- Exploration of Colossians 2.11-13 and its significance in understanding baptism.
- Examination of the connection between faith and baptism in the New Testament.

3. What God Does in Baptism

- Listing and discussing various actions of God during baptism using relevant scripture references.

4. Baptism: A Work of Law or Obedience to the Gospel?

- Definition of works in the context of Paul's writings.
- Comparison of obedience to the law and obedience to the gospel.
- Discussion on the role of baptism in salvation.

5. Responses to Gospel Imperatives

- Understanding belief, repentance, confession, and baptism as responses to gospel imperatives.
- Clarifying the distinction between works of the law and obedience to the gospel.

Thought Questions for Discussion:

1. How does understanding the timing of justification impact your view of baptism?
2. In what ways does Colossians 2.11-13 deepen your understanding of baptism's purpose?
3. How do the actions of God in baptism, as listed in the lesson, shape your perception of this sacrament?
4. What are your thoughts on the distinction between faith and works in the context of baptism?
5. How does the concept of obedience to the gospel align with your understanding of salvation?

6. Do you agree with the notion that baptism is a divine act? Why or why not?

7. How can the reconciliation of Paul's and Jesus' teachings help resolve potential conflicts about salvation?

8. What role do belief, repentance, confession, and baptism play as responses to gospel imperatives?

9. How does the lesson's clarification on works of the law versus obedience to the gospel impact your perspective on salvation?

10. Reflect on your own baptism or the baptisms you have witnessed. How does this study influence your interpretation of those experiences?

Group Activities:

1. **Scripture Exploration:** Assign each group a scripture reference related to baptism and have them present its significance to the rest of the class.

Final Encouraging Word:

As we conclude this lesson on baptism and its role in salvation, remember that our spiritual life is a response to God's grace. Baptism, as a divine act, marks a profound encounter with God's saving power. Faith, obedience, and God's grace intertwine in our spiritual journey. Allow this deepen your appreciation for the transformative work of God in your life. Keep walking in faith and responding to God's call for faithfulness with the assurance that salvation is a divine gift awaiting our heartfelt response.

⁶⁰ Matthew 28.19-20; Mark 16.16; Acts 2.38; 22.16; 1 Corinthians 12.13; Galatians 3.27; Colossians 2.12; 1 Peter 3.21; Romans 6.3-4; John 3.5; Ephesians 5.26; and Titus 3.5.

⁶¹ Cottrell, *What the Bible Says About Grace*, p. 263.