Baptism in Scripture

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We in the body of Christ have an unfortunate skill for picking sides and dividing ourselves over meaningless points of doctrine. One that has been particularly divisive in the last century is baptism. You'll find segments of the church in separate corners of the ring ready to duke it out over what they believe.

In one corner you have those who see baptism as purely a ceremonial act of obedience to Christ. In the opposite corner you have the system of thought making it an absolute necessity for salvation. As is normally the case with divisive and polarized beliefs, the truth is usually somewhere in the middle.

We find the word baptize or baptism around eighty times in the New Testament. The Greek word (βάπτισμα), or baptisma (G908, represents the Strongs Concordance number), is translated baptism in Scripture. It comes from the Greek word (βάπτισμα), baptizo (G907), and is translated baptize or baptized. Its root word is (βάπτισμα) bapto (G911), which means to dip or immerse as in the process of dyeing cloth.

If you order a French Dip sandwich with au-jus, you are baptizing (βάπτισμα, bapto, G911) that sandwich when you dip it into the sauce. As a matter of fact, the same word is used when Jesus "dipped" the morsel of bread before handing it to His betrayer in John 13:26.

Even though the root word means to dip or cover wholly with a fluid, baptism is used in a much broader sense in Scripture. Take for instance the words of Jesus when He was contemplating the cross:

"But I have a baptism (G908) *to undergo, and how distressed I am until it is accomplished"* (Luke 12:50).

This was long after His baptism in water by John at the Jordan River in Luke 3:21. He did not intend to be water baptized again, but likened immersion in the burden of the cross to baptism. One who is fully devoted to a process can be said to be baptized in it.

Often baptism means identification with something or someone. For instance, Paul states that the Hebrews were baptized into Moses (and the cloud and the sea) (1Cor. 10:2). Were they somehow immersed into Moses' body? Absolutely not. However, they were spiritually immersed into the Law of Moses. Also, the cloud of God's glory surrounded them on multiple occasions and they passed through the Red Sea in a symbolic transition to a new life.

An even better example is that of a cucumber immersed in hot vinegar and spices. The fluid and spices permeate the cucumber and permanently transform it into something completely different. That's a good example of what we see in Romans 6:3-4. The waters of baptism are

not the transforming agent, for they have no such power. Such a spiritual transformation requires immersion by a spiritual force or agent.

Or do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus have been baptized into His death? Therefore we have been buried with Him through baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we too may walk in the newness of life. (Romans 6:3-4)

Before we talk about this verse, let's add 1Cor. 12:13 to the mix:

For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free, we were all made to drink of one Spirit. (1Cor. 12:13)

Here's what we can determine from the baptism written about in these verses: 1) There is a baptism that is accomplished by the Spirit of God. Water is not even mentioned. 2) That baptism by the Spirit places us into Christ Jesus. 3) That baptism by the Spirit also immerses us into His death and is undoubtedly connected to Gal. 2:20 and Romans 6:6. 4) That baptism also identifies us with the resurrected life of Jesus and allows us to walk in it. 5) This baptism is most definitely NOT done by immersion in water.

Many will say that is exactly what happens during water baptism, but I would disagree. Being placed into the body of Christ (into Christ) is a work of the Spirit of God initiated by faith and cannot be accomplished by the work of a man's hands in the waters of physical baptism.

If we are baptized into Christ only when we are baptized in water, we are taking a work of the Spirit of God and making it dependent upon the efforts of men. It subjects the transformation done by the Spirit of God to an effort/work of man instead of a simple act of faith; not to mention that it limits the work of the Spirit to when man decides to do the baptism. Baptism cannot be the trigger that initiates or completes salvation, faith is.

In other words, if the transformation that crucifies the old nature (Rom. 6:6), makes us a new creation (2Cor. 5:17), and raises us up in the newness of life (Rom. 6:4) as a born again believer (John 3:3) happens in the waters of baptism, what are we to make of the vast number of Scriptures that tell us it is by faith?

"…if you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved." (Romans 10:9-10)

"For by grace you have been saved through faith; and this is not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not a result of works so that no one may boast." (Ephesians 2:8-9)

Those Scriptures and many more make no mention of a requirement of baptism for salvation. If it were an essential requirement, how could God have possibly left that out of so many Scriptures?

What do we do with the thief on the cross next to Jesus who was promised a place in Paradise for his simple expression of faith in Jesus as the Christ—*"Jesus, remember me when You come into Your kingdom"* (Luke 23:42)? He was never baptized in water. The only requirement he fulfilled was to believe.

In addition, what do we make of all the effort Paul put into proving that the righteousness that comes at salvation (2Cor. 5:17, 21) is by faith and not works (Romans 3:21-4:24). If salvation is somehow imparted during the act of water baptism, why would Paul claim that he baptized only a few of the Corinthians? If baptism is an absolute spiritual necessity for salvation, why would Paul make the statement, *"For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel…"* (1Cor. 1:17)? If baptism is essential for salvation, it makes little sense for Paul to preach the gospel and bring his listeners to the point of salvation then abandon them to someone else to finish the job.

Those who would disagree are quick to quote Scriptures like Acts 2:38, Acts 22:16, and 1Peter 3:21, so let's look at them.

"Peter said to them, 'Repent, and each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.'" (Acts 2:38)

First, no reputable theologian takes one Scripture and makes that his doctrine while ignoring the contradictions it presents for the rest of Scripture. In other words, to find the meaning of a Scripture it must be interpreted free of contradiction and in harmony with the entire body of God's written word.

Peter is not giving us a formula for salvation. If he were, shouldn't there be something there about confession and faith? Peter only mentions two actions here, repent and be baptized. The word repent (G3340) means to think differently. It does not mean to believe or express faith in Jesus. Repentance is the recognition that you are wrong and to change your mind. It is absurd to assume repentance, along with baptism, effects forgiveness without faith.

The real issue here is whether the act of water baptism initiates the forgiveness of sins. It does not, but that is not what Peter is trying to convey. The forgiveness received at salvation is by faith in the blood of Jesus and has zero to do with water baptism (Eph. 1:7, 2:1-9).

What Peter knew at that moment was to say what they had been doing for the last three years with Jesus and from John the Baptist before that. Those who repented (recognized their sin—thought differently) were baptized as a public demonstration of that change. Jesus nor John the Baptist ever said anything about a transformation taking place in the water of baptism. The baptism was a public affirmation of a decision (an expression of faith) that had previously taken place.

What John did say about Jesus was that He would baptize in the Holy Spirit (John 1:33). That is particularly interesting because man baptizes in water (Matt. 28:19), the Holy Spirit baptizes into Christ (1Cor. 12:13), and Jesus baptizes into the Holy Spirit (John 1:33).

But what about Acts 22:16?

"Now why do you delay? Get up and be baptized, and wash away your sins by calling on His name." (Acts 22:16)

Paul was recounting his own salvation experience and what Ananias told him to do. How ridiculous to attach washing away your sins with only being baptized. No one has ever preached that you should "get up" and your sins will be washed away. Yet, in that instruction there is equal weight on both "get up" and "be baptized."

What we should be seeing in this Scripture is the other two actions found in the last phrase—"wash" and "calling." Calling upon the name of the Lord in faith will wash away your sins!

"Corresponding to that, baptism now saves you—not the removal of dirt from the flesh, but an appeal to God for a good conscience—through the resurrection of Jesus Christ…" (1Pet. 3:21)

Some are quick to say, "See, baptism saves you!" However, Peter immediately makes the statement, *"not the removal of dirt from the flesh."* That pretty much takes water baptism off the table for this verse. Peter differentiates between water baptism and what the Holy Spirit does when someone expresses faith in Jesus—baptizing them into Christ (1Cor. 12:13).

This is supported by Hebrews 9:14:

"how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without blemish to God, cleanse your conscience from dead works to serve the living God?" (Heb. 9:14)

It is through the blood of Jesus that we receive redemption, the forgiveness of our sins (Eph. 1:7) and a cleansing of our conscience, not through baptism in water.

Even if someone put their faith in Jesus while they were under the water being baptized, it still would not be the act of water baptism that saved them, placed them into Christ, forgave their sins, and cleansed their conscience.

Another aspect of baptism that is often argued is whether it should be done in the name of Jesus or the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Acts 2:38, 8:16, 10:48, and 19:5 all refer to being baptized in the name of Jesus, while only Matthew 28:19 has the instruction to be baptized in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Such a simple difference can only be important to the legalistic and those who deem baptism to be an essential requirement of salvation.

I can hear Jesus' words to Phillip, *"Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me?"* (John 14:10). My takeaway is that it matters not whether you baptize in the name of Jesus Christ or the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. They are One. Either way, you are being obedient to Scripture.

In conclusion, it really is simple. Water baptism is an outward, physical, public, symbolic declaration to the world of what took place the instant one puts their faith in Jesus for redemption. The moment someone believes, the Holy Spirit baptizes them into Christ Jesus (1Cor. 12:13, Rom. 6:3) and seals them in Him by His unlimited power (Eph. 1:13). The act of water baptism is a demonstration of what took place the moment you believed as well as a profession to the world of your faith in Jesus Christ as Lord.