

Is Baptism Necessary
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An actual e-mail exchange of ideas:

Dear Pastor,

I have been doing a Bible study on baptism. I, myself, have not been baptized as an adult and was preparing to do this (by you, of course) but I wanted to understand the point of it before I did, lest it be a meaningless act. I'll spare you the details of my study but, in general, John the Baptist, Jesus, and others all drew a sharp distinction between water baptism and baptism of the Holy Spirit and fire. Apparently one receives the Holy Spirit upon acceptance of Christ, though it is unclear whether it requires the laying on of hands, etc. It would seem that at one point Jesus himself did not conduct water baptism while at other points he did. The disciples are never revealed to have been water baptized though John the B must have baptized at least some of them while they were yet his disciples. Baptism of the Holy Spirit seems to be a result of acceptance of Christ and NOT a second step. Thus if we accept Christ as our savior, we receive the baptism of the Holy Spirit as a result and it would seem that nothing more is needed for our salvation. Paul seems to stand for the idea that no works can bring about your salvation because the crucifixion was sufficient and thus it would seem that water baptism is just a public declaration of commitment to accept Jesus as Savior but not essential to salvation. I consulted a book authored by Billy Graham who says he is convinced that baptism is not necessary. Then I came across John 3:5 and Acts 2:38 (KJV). While Acts 2:38 makes water baptism the instruction of Peter, John 3:5 is where Jesus expostulates with emphasis ("verily, verily I say unto you") to Nicodemus that both water and spirit baptisms are EACH utterly indispensable for salvation. I am uncomfortable with an understanding of the legalistic ritualistic nature of water baptism being indispensable for salvation, yet that is what Christ says. I was baptized as an infant as was my wife. I have never had a "confirmation" but my wife, who was raised Catholic, was "confirmed". From my study, I have concluded that being baptized as an infant is meaningless and a confirmation is not a baptism. So I think we both need to be baptized. My wife insists I'm drawing too many conclusions from John 3:5 and asked that I email you. I know you are busy but your opinion would be valued as a modern day Berean.

Awaiting your reply,

John

Dear John,

Thank you for your note. I fully agree with your understanding of the timing of "spirit" baptism as coincident with conversion. I might clarify your wording somewhat by saying that the baptism of the Spirit is the act of the Spirit whereby he joins us/immerses us in/unites us to Christ. I also concur with you that water baptism is not a "work" that is required of us to become a Christian. Water baptism is however commanded of us by our Lord and practiced by the church since its inception. Water baptism is not only a witness to what the Spirit has wrought inwardly but is also a means that God uses (as he uses other means such as worship, prayer, reading of the word, etc) to minister his grace to our lives as believers. These "means" do not save us but they are used by God to minister to us. Likewise, God blesses obedience in baptism.

The passage in Acts 2 has been used by some to indicate that water baptism is an act essential to the process of BECOMING a Christian. While I believe that baptism is a believer's obedient response to Jesus, too many other verses would contradict the idea that water baptism is essential to BECOMING a Christian. Maybe one way of saying it is that water baptism is an "essential" obedient response of one who IS a Christian. It was inconceivable that a NT believer would not be baptized - but that doesn't say that the baptism was essential to BECOMING a Christian.

As to John 3:5, the controversy over what that verse means is unending. Let me say that explaining the word "water" as a reference to water baptism is NOT a given. No less a NT scholar than Don Carson (probably the leading NT scholar in the English language today) sees it as a reference to cleansing, thus "water" (cleansing) and "spirit" (as God's nature) refer to two dimensions of salvation - we are cleansed from sin and given God's nature. I recommend his lengthy discussion of this and alternate views on pages of 191-196 of his commentary on John (available from me if you wish).

Based on the difficulty of having certainty of what Jesus meant in John 3:5 it seems unwise to base our theology of baptism on it. It seems wiser to use less controversial passages as our basis. Having said all of the above, I still concur that infant baptism, which has no direct and only inferential evidence in the NT, is not the baptism, which the apostles practiced. I know of no one who would suggest that confirmation is any kind of equivalent of baptism. Because the word "baptism" speaks of an immersion and because I believe the NT teaches and illustrates a post-conversion public demonstration of commitment to Christ through baptism, I recommend, though do not demand, that believers be baptized by immersion following their conversion to Christ. I hope this has been helpful

Warmly,

Pastor