

The Truth about Baptism and Justification by Grace through Faith

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Does the necessity of New Testament Christian baptism contradict Paul's teaching on justification by faith (Romans 3:28; Galatians 2:16) and by grace through faith (Ephesians 2:8-9)? Is baptism a work, or is preaching and teaching that baptism is required for conversion to Christianity legalistic or teaching salvation by works?

I do not think that it is "legalistic" to require baptism for salvation as it is a clear requirement for salvation throughout the New Testament. Paul himself never excludes baptism in his discourses concerning salvation by grace through faith apart from the works of the law. Baptism is not included in his line of reasoning when he refers to "the works of the law," in Romans 3:28 and Galatians 2:16. Baptism is not a moral requirement by which one can attempt to earn justification and boast of their own righteousness. Rather, Paul often reminds his readers of their baptisms, arguing that baptism is the point at which they have passed from death to life in Christ Jesus, thereby dying to sin and the law and receiving a new birth of water and Spirit into Jesus Christ.

None the points that follow negate or contradict Paul's teaching that salvation (justification) comes only by God's grace and that it is received by our faith. Rather, Paul uses the arguments in points 3 and 4 below to demonstrate that his readers have been born again into a new life in Christ and have thereby died to sin and to the works of the law (see below for references). Therefore, Paul's argument that no man can earn God's justification stands although baptism is retained as the point at which a person meets God, receives His forgiveness, and enters the new life in Christ. God's grace through Christ appeared because all have sinned (Romans 3:22-24). God has chosen the terms on which mankind can receive His grace which is only received through faith. The terms He has chosen are repentance and water baptism in the name of Jesus Christ, and He has chosen to consummate that salvation by giving us of His Spirit.

1. In the New Testament baptism is synonymous with conversion. Compare Acts 2:38 (the first "call to salvation" following the first "gospel sermon") with Acts 3:19-20 (the second).
2. At Paul's conversion to Christianity he was told to "be baptized and wash away your sins" (Acts 22:16) and to "be filled with the Holy Spirit" (Acts 9:17).
3. In Romans 6, Paul depicts baptism as his readers' entry into Christ by means of participating in His death and resurrection, thereby entering a "newness of life" (Romans 6:3-4). It is on this basis that Paul argues that his Roman readers have "died" to and "been freed from sin" (see Romans 6:6-7, 11).
4. In Galatians Paul says the same thing, in essence, that we are "baptized into Christ" and have thereby "put on Christ" (Galatians 3:27). Then he proceeds to use his readers' experience of putting on Christ through baptism as the foundation of his argument that (a.) there is no distinction between Jew and Gentile, slave and free, etc., (b.) those who are Christ's are heirs according to the promise of Abraham, and (c.) that we become "sons (and daughters) of God through faith in Christ Jesus" (26) by "putting on" (27) "the Spirit of His Son into your hearts, crying out, 'Abba Father!'" (Galatians 4:6). Each of these three arguments above (a-c) are Paul's supporting arguments for his main argument in this passage that "you are all sons of God *through faith* in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:26, emphasis added), and according to Paul this "adoption as sons" (Galatians 4:5) occurred by when his readers "put on Christ" at their baptisms (3:27). Please see the entire passage (Galatians 3:26-4:7).

5. Jesus commanded the making of disciples by baptism in the Great Commission (Matthew 28:19-20; Mark 16:15-18). In Luke's account of the Commission, baptism is synonymous with "remission of sins... in His name" (Luke 24:47, compare with Acts 2:38 and the Great Commission passages in Matthew and Mark). In John's more intimate account of Jesus' commission, the command to baptize disciples and remit their sins is stated as, "If you (the disciples) forgive the sins of any they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any they are retained" (John 20:23). Please see the four accounts of the Great Commission of our Lord (Matthew 28:19-20; Mark 16:15-18; Luke 24:46-49; John 20:21-23) and compare them with the above mentioned salvation/conversion occurrences in Acts.
6. Jesus, prior to His crucifixion, foretells of a new birth by "water and the Spirit" which will become the only entry way into God's kingdom (John 3:3-5). Please compare this with the four accounts of the Great Commission which He gave to his disciples just prior to His ascension and with the salvation/conversion occurrences in the book of Acts. Then compare the "water and Spirit" theme of John 3:5 with Paul's thoughts in Romans 6 and Galatians 3:26-4:7. Then keep an eye out for the "water and Spirit" theme when you read each of the other NT epistles. You may be surprised what you find!

If you have made it this far in my remarks concerning Christian baptism, I would like to invite you to check out my online study on Biblical Baptism as well as a list of New Testament scriptures about baptism at www.ntboc.com/baptism.html. Thank you for your attention. Please feel free to contact me via email (wordwarrior007@hotmail.com) if you have any questions or wish to discuss this further.