



## STATEMENT DB045

### BAPTISM AND SALVATION

Is baptism necessary for salvation? There are a variety of viewpoints on this question. At one extreme, some in the Church of Christ movement teach that a person must be immersed after hearing a "gospel preacher," repenting, and believing in Christ, and must consider their baptism essential for salvation, before they can be truly saved. This amounts very nearly to saying that one must be baptized under the auspices of a Church of Christ in order to be saved. Less extreme is the position of the Roman Catholic church, according to which baptism is basically essential for salvation, though exceptional circumstances are allowed and the baptism administered by other churches is considered valid as far as the person's salvation is concerned.

The Protestant churches which practice infant baptism (notably Anglicans and Lutherans) generally regard baptism as a part of the salvation process, but not necessarily an indispensable part. Most other Protestant churches regard baptism as a command which all new Christians are expected to obey, and without which full membership in the church is denied, but not as an absolute requirement for salvation. And a very few churches (notably the Friends, or Quakers) do not even practice the ordinance of baptism, on the premise that water baptism was for the Jews and that it is baptism in the Spirit that "counts."

The biblical teaching on this subject would seem to indicate that the extreme positions of baptism as absolutely essential to salvation (as taught by some in the Church of Christ) and as an outmoded ritual that need not be practiced at all (as taught by the Friends) are aberrations that should be rejected as unbiblical and divisive (though many in both those churches may be acknowledged as genuine Christians).

To begin with, the Bible is very clear in its teachings that all Christians are expected to be baptized in water. Jesus told His disciples that they were to baptize new disciples of all nations, not just Jews (Matt. 28:19), and since it is Christ alone who baptizes men in the Spirit (Mark 1:8), the baptism administered by the disciples must be in water. This means that to dispense with water baptism is to disobey Christ.

On the other hand, the New Testament makes it equally clear that men can become saved as Christians prior to receiving water baptism. Cornelius's family received the Holy Spirit and was manifesting the gifts of the Spirit after hearing the gospel but before being baptized (Acts 10:44-48). This observation must be balanced, however, by the fact that baptism was not an "optional extra" for Cornelius's family; it was a command (10:48) that they were expected to obey. However, it was not obedience to this command that saved them, but their believing in Christ (10:43). Baptism is the expected initial outward response to the gospel, but it is not a part of the gospel itself (1 Cor. 1:17).

There are a number of prooftexts which are often cited to prove that the Bible makes baptism mandatory for salvation. Some of the most common such prooftexts are Acts 2:38, Acts 22:16, Mark 16:16, John 3:5, Romans 6:4, and 1 Peter 3:21. A careful examination of each of these texts in context will show that none of them prove that baptism is necessarily prerequisite for salvation, though they do prove that baptism was an assumed initiatory response to the gospel of salvation.

In other words, these texts prove only that baptism is regularly associated with conversion and salvation, rather than absolutely required for salvation. A helpful analogy is the marriage ceremony as the initiatory rite of commitment to marriage. It is an expected precursor to married life, and is even required by law (in most countries), but the state often recognizes marriages as valid without the benefit of a ceremony (as in common-law marriages), and thus the ceremony is not absolutely necessary for the marriage to be valid.

Thus, when we say that baptism is not essential for salvation, we do not mean that it may be dispensed with or that God does not expect new converts to be baptized. He does. We may go even further and say that if a person claims to be a Christian, understands that the Lord Jesus Christ commanded every Christian to be baptized, and yet refuses to submit to baptism, it may very well be (though we cannot say absolutely in every case) that his profession of faith is a sham and that he is not truly saved. (Returning to our illustration, under normal circumstances for a person to say they wish to be married but to refuse to be wed in a legal ceremony indicates insincerity on that person's part.)

We therefore urge all unbaptized believers to repent of their disobedience in this matter and to be baptized immediately. Since baptism is the first act of obedience which Christ expects of every believer, no one who has not been baptized may be considered a fully-functioning member in good standing of the church, and we would say should not be invited to participate in communion or allowed to hold any office or teaching position within the church. On the other hand, we refuse to condemn all those who for various reasons have failed to be baptized, and we certainly disagree most strongly with those who assert that only those who have been baptized according to their doctrinal understanding of baptism are genuinely saved.

In sum, baptism is necessary in that Christ commands it, and all genuine Christians who understand this fact must either be baptized or be considered to be in a state of disobedience and rebellion against Christ. But baptism is not prerequisite to being born again or forgiven of one's sins, and it is possible, however irregular, for persons who have not been baptized to be saved nevertheless through faith in Jesus Christ.

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