

## Did Paul Think Baptism Was Essential?

There is no question that the necessity of baptism for one's salvation is one of the most divisive issues among those who claim to be Christians. How one is saved is serious business, and it is no wonder that the different views on the relationship between baptism and salvation are tests of fellowship among almost \*any\* group that claims to take the Bible seriously. Paul himself listed "one baptism" among the seven things that unite Christians together (Eph 4:4-6). The Scripture does not see one's immersion into Christ as an "*I'm okay, you're okay*" issue.

I want to examine an objection that sometimes gets made to the essentiality of baptism. One of the most common lines of argument against the necessity of baptism for salvation is one that attempts to pit Paul's teaching on justification by faith with all of the other biblical data. If one reads Paul's writings, one comes across statements like this:

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

*"For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from the works of the Law"* (Rom 3:28).

*"Nevertheless knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the Law but through faith in Christ Jesus, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, so that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the Law; since by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified"* (Gal 2:16).

More examples could be provided, but these are some of the stronger proof texts. The argument, it goes, is that Paul claimed Christians were justified by faith and not by works. Baptism is (supposedly) a work. Therefore, baptism cannot save. (Of course, this ignores the fact that faith is called a "work" at least once in Scripture (John 6:29), while baptism is never called a work! But I'll leave that for another time.) Furthermore, it is claimed that since Paul opposed "adding" requirements to the gospel (like circumcision), he must have opposed the necessity of baptism. He once claimed that "*if you receive circumcision, Christ will be of no benefit to you*" (Gal 5:2). Was Paul against baptism as well?

This argument, of course, is highly presumptuous about speaking for Paul. If baptism was so heavily practiced in the first century (as the evidence overwhelmingly suggests), one would suppose Paul would make a stronger or more forceful argument about the non-necessity of baptism somewhere in his writings! Yet not once does Paul ever make the leap from "we are justified by faith" to "baptism isn't necessary." This is a leap of merely "human" logic made long after the fact, and one that is flatly contradicted by the plain statements of the apostle himself. Consider this:

*"For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's descendants, heirs according to the promise."* (Gal 3:26-29)

Now here is an amazing thing: people claim that Paul would have opposed baptism's necessity, and yet Paul himself claims the opposite! In this text in Galatians, faith and baptism are actually seen as virtual equivalents of each other! One becomes a son of God through faith. One is immersed into Christ and then clothed with Christ. This language of "clothing" taps into the Roman image of a son reaching manhood and being given a special robe to designate him as an heir. But the "clothing" in Christ we receive is given to us in baptism. This is what makes us sons. This is what makes us heirs.

If Paul wanted to treat baptism like circumcision and claim it was an addition to the gospel, why does he speak as if it were part of the gospel in Gal 3:27? Why does he so integrally tie it to the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ in Rom 6:3-7? Why speak as if being immersed in the name of Christ was the equivalent of Christ

being crucified for someone (1 Cor 1:13)? Why does he speak of us being immersed into one body by one Spirit in 1 Cor 12:13? Why does Paul himself testify of his conversion that baptism washed away his sins (Acts 22:16)? Why does he classify the “washing of regeneration” as something that is decidedly *not* a work we do, but rather a work done by the Spirit (Tit 3:5)? etc. etc. If someone believes that Paul opposed the practice of baptism, they did not reach this conclusion from a careful reading of Paul. Unless Paul just liked to flatly contradict himself multiple times in a single letter, one is forced to the conclusion that Paul sees baptism as an integral part of the “faith” that the gospel demands.

To summarize: In Paul’s writings, we have multiple instances of testimony that baptism is actually part of the gospel. It is the apostolically prescribed response to God’s rule. The message that Jesus Christ died and rose from the dead must be subsequently answered by our faith in dying and rising with him. One cannot separate the baptism described in Scriptures from saving faith any more than one can separate the cross and the empty tomb from God’s faithfulness.

I hope that this article will be a helpful resource to anyone discussing the subject of biblical baptism.