

Common Objections Raised Against the Biblical Doctrine of Baptism

By those who deny baptism is essential for salvation

J. Scott Sheridan

There are many people, mostly from the denominational realm, that object to the doctrine of the necessity of baptism for a person's salvation. The doctrine is so clearly taught in Scripture that, as my old professor used to say, "You need professional help to miss it." Of course, regrettably, there is a lot of that kind of help out there in the religious world.

The rejection of the doctrine of baptism stems mainly from the teachings of John Calvin, not Scripture. Calvin taught that God has absolute total control over the universe and predestined everything before creation. Every single thing that takes place He predestined to occur: all wars, all friendships, all stubbed toes, and every sin. He created man totally depraved. So much so that nothing he can do is good. Man cannot even want to do good on his own. Now pay attention here. Since this is so (according to Calvin), if a man is to follow God, God must miraculously regenerate him and make him something new. Man, since he is so evil, cannot choose God on his own. Instead, God must, by an unconditional election, choose who is to be one of the saved and who is not. Nothing the man did played any role in God's decision. Since nothing man did had anything to do with his salvation, then there is certainly nothing he can do to lose his salvation, hence Calvin's doctrine of "eternal security," aka, "once saved, always saved." (For more detail on Calvinism, see my study entitled, "Theological Gardening: The Problem with TULIPs").

Another problem that some have in dealing with the Biblical view of baptism is that they do not understand the difference between Old and New Covenants. The people that lived during the life of Jesus and before all lived under a covenant that was replaced with the New Covenant of grace through Jesus Christ. People of the Old Covenant, looked ahead, by faith, to what Jesus would do on the cross. The sacrifices and ceremonies they performed were nothing but a "type" or "foreshadowing" of what Jesus would do in His sacrifice (Heb. 10:1-18).

With these considerations in mind, let's now deal with the objections that some have against the Biblical doctrine of baptism.

The Thief on the Cross was never baptized: This is one of the most often heard objections. The thief lived under the Old Covenant. The terms of the New Covenant were not given until Peter preached his sermon on the Day of Pentecost (see Acts 2:38). Jesus had the authority (and still does) to forgive anyone He desires. He did so during His life on earth: Mt. 9:2; Mk. 2:5-11; Lk. 7:47. But when the Church was established the New Covenant was ushered in. It is the terms of the New Covenant we must meet in order to have salvation. The thief lived under the Old.

You are saved by Faith Alone: This is an interesting objection. Technically it is correct. But what most people mean when they say it is that there is nothing we must do to attain salvation except acknowledge a belief in Jesus. The Biblical position is that faith involves, belief, repentance, confession, baptism and living as a new person in Christ. It is much more than a simple acknowledgement of Jesus. The only place in the entire Bible where the words "faith" and "alone" appear together is in James 2:24, which says, "You see that a man is justified by works and not by faith alone." James was trying to teach that faith involves more than simple acceptance of Who Jesus is. It involves our entire life and work. James even points out "the demons also believe, and shudder." (James 2:19).

The concept of “faith alone” comes from Calvin. If a person believes in Jesus, then God must have chosen him to be one of the saved, else the person could not believe.

The objection that goes hand in hand with this one is the next.

Baptism is a Work: By this, those who reject the Biblical doctrine of baptism, make the accusation that if we teach a person must DO something to have salvation, we are teaching salvation by works instead of salvation by grace. What they fail to see is that everything a person must do is a work of some sort. We must believe. That is a work. We must confess Christ as Lord. That is a work. We must repent. That is a work. And yes, we must be baptized. That is a work. But none of these works allow us to earn our salvation. They are works in order to meet the conditions God has made for salvation. And besides, it’s not the person being baptized that is doing the work. Look at Colossians 2:9-12, “For in Him all the fullness of Deity dwells in bodily form, and in Him you have been made complete, and He is the head over all rule and authority; and in Him you were also circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, in the removal of the body of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ; having been buried with Him in baptism, in which you were also raised up with Him through faith in the **working of God**, who raised Him from the dead.”

God is the One Who works in baptism. An old illustration of this is to suppose a banker calls “Joe” and says there is a check on his desk for a million dollars from Bill Gates. If he gets to the bank before five, it’s his. Joe has never worked for Bill nor ever met him. But all Joe has to do is meet the conditions: get there before five and endorse the check. Did Joe earn the check simply for going to pick it up? Of course not.

God has placed conditions that we must meet in order to obtain salvation. This, by no stretch of the imagination, means that a person earns it. We are saved by the grace of God, through faith.

Once again, this objection comes mainly as a result of the influence of Calvin. In Calvinism there is nothing to do to obtain salvation, for God must choose a person to be one of the saved BEFORE he can believe. Calvinism twists countless Scriptures to try and make it work. The Bible says that faith comes from hearing the Word of Christ (Romans 10:17). Calvinism says that faith comes because God forces you to have it. Jesus said, “Believe and be baptized and you shall be saved” (Mk 16:16). Calvinism says, “You are saved therefore you will believe and should be baptized.”

Jesus spiritually baptizes: There are people who will object to “water” baptism but agree that baptism is necessary for salvation, but, here’s the catch: Jesus spiritually baptizes people the moment they believe, therefore it has nothing to do with water. There are several ways of dealing with this objection. The simplest thing to do is to go to Acts chapter 10. Here we have the household of Cornelius being baptized by the Holy Spirit. This is truly what anyone would call being spiritually baptized. But notice what Peter says after witnessing this spiritual baptism: “Surely no one can refuse the water for these to be baptized who have received the Holy Spirit just as we did, can he?” And he ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they asked him to stay on for a few days.” (Acts 10:47, 48). Here is an example of spiritual baptism and Peter still ordered them to be baptized in water. Why? It is because they had not met the terms of the New Covenant yet.

There are several ways to baptize: There are three baptisms in the New Testament: John’s baptism, Holy Spirit baptism, and baptism for the forgiveness of sins. Yet Ephesians 4:5 says there is only one baptism. That would indicate that two of these three baptisms are not valid. John’s baptism is mentioned in Acts 19. Paul met 12 men from Ephesus. He thought they were Christians and wanted to bestow on them the miraculous gifts of the Holy Spirit, so he asked them, “Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?” They had not even heard of the Holy Spirit. Paul asked, “Into what then were you baptized?” Notice he did not ask if they *had been* baptized. It was assumed by Paul that had been. But they were ignorant of the Holy Spirit, which according to Acts 2:38, they should have already known about Him. And they said, “Into John's baptism.” Verses 4 & 5 tell us why John’s baptism is not valid: “Paul said, ‘John baptized with the baptism of repentance, telling the people

to believe in Him who was coming after him, that is, in Jesus.’ When they heard this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus.”

The baptism of the Holy Spirit, as far as Scripture is concerned, only happened twice. The baptism of the Holy Spirit was an event in which the Holy Spirit came on someone. Not into, but upon. In Acts 2 the Holy Spirit fell on the Apostles and ten years later He fell on the household of Cornelius. We know that this baptism was not a common event because when Peter went back to Jerusalem to tell Church there about what happened, notice what he said, “And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as He did upon us at the beginning.” (Acts 11:15). Notice “at the beginning” meaning the Day of Pentecost. This was not an everyday occurrence.

What’s left is baptism, in water, for the forgiveness of sin. In the book of Acts, there is not a single conversion account that does not include baptism. In Acts 8 all it says is that “Philip preached Jesus” to the Ethiopian Eunuch. But then the Eunuch said, “Look! Water! What prevents me from being baptized?” (Verse 36). It’s obvious to anyone without preconceived notions (or professional help) that preaching Jesus includes being baptized in water. Romans 6 teaches us that at baptism we are “buried” into Christ’s death. This is the “one baptism” Paul is referring to in Ephesians 4:5.

According to Acts 2:38, baptism does two things. It brings about forgiveness of sin. It also gives the one being baptized the gift of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit takes up residence in the life of the believer.

We see in the Old Testament that before the High Priest could enter into the Holy of Holies and stand before the presence of God’s Spirit that rested upon the ark of the covenant, he had to offer a sacrifice, be cleansed, and put on the priestly garments (Lev. 16). Sin had to be removed completely in order to stand before God. In the New Covenant Jesus is our sacrifice. When a believer is baptized, his sins are cleansed and washed away (“Now why do you delay? Get up and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on His name.” Acts 22:16). At baptism we put on our garments (“For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.” (Gal. 3:27). And at baptism we receive the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit. Sin must be removed before we can be in the presence of God. Without baptism there cannot be an indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit.

Mark 16:16: “He who has believed and has been baptized shall be saved; but he who has disbelieved shall be condemned.” The use of this verse to object to the Biblical doctrine of baptism goes like this: Since Jesus did not say “he who has disbelieved **and not been baptized** shall be condemned” it is obvious that belief is what saves and baptism is not needed. This is truly grasping at straws.

Consider this: If Johnny applies and pays the registration fees he will attend Bible College; but if he does not apply he will have to stay at home. Does the failure to mention the registration fees make them any less apart of applying for college? No. But if you don’t apply, the fees are not needed. If a person believes and is baptized he shall be saved. But if he does not believe, failure to mention baptism does not mean it is not needed.

This objection, as with most listed here, is a desperate attempt to try and get around the clear meaning of Scripture.

Water Regeneration: We who hold to the Biblical doctrine of Baptism have often been accused of being water regenerationists, i.e., that somehow the water makes us a new creature. Those usually making that accusation themselves believe in Calvin’s miraculous regeneration, which is like King Kong telling Godzilla he’s ugly. But the fact is, they are either mistaken or else deliberately misrepresenting the position.

What if Abraham, when God called him out of Ur, had believed God but didn’t go? Would Abraham have been the great model of faith? No. What if Joshua had been given the plan to march around Jericho and he told God, “I believe it will work,” but didn’t carry out the plan? They probably would have been defeated. What these

men did was just as important as what they believed. Their obedience to God was as much a part of their faith as was their acknowledgement of God.

Abraham was never righteous enough for God on his own. The Bible says “Abraham believed God and it was reckoned to him as righteousness” (Romans 4:3). God chose to view Abraham as being righteous. Why? Because of his faith - His true obedient faith.

Baptism is a part of our faith. Baptism without faith is a dunking. Faith without baptism is empty. The water does not regenerate. God makes us new. Romans 6:4, “Therefore we have been buried with Him through baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life.” Christians have a new life because God has reckoned us that way. He has chosen to view the Christian as a new creation, without sin - because of our faith, which includes baptism.

Think about all that takes place at baptism: Salvation (Mk 16:16); New birth (Jn. 3:5); forgiveness of sin and the gift of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:38); washing away of sin (Acts 22:16); burial into Christ’s death (Rom 6:3); clothed with Christ (Gal. 3:37); Spiritual circumcision (Col. 2:11), et al.

If baptism is the point in time that sins are forgiven, which the Scriptures teach is so; and if baptism is the place in which we enter into a covenant relationship with Jesus, then it would make sense that the devil would do whatever he could to get people and religious groups to belittle baptism’s importance. It would make sense that he would not care if people came close as long as they stayed away from the Biblical doctrine of baptism. If I had died before saying, “I do” at my wedding, I would not have been married – even if we were in the Church building and *Here Comes the Bride* was in the midst of playing. In another context Jesus said, “Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven will enter. Many will say to Me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?’ And then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; DEPART FROM ME, YOU WHO PRACTICE LAWLESSNESS.’”

Close doesn’t count.