

IS BAPTISM A WORK?

QUESTION: Why do so many followers of Jesus Christ deny the clear teaching of Scripture, that Christian baptism is the time when God bestows salvation upon sinners?

ANSWER: [I have written and published my answer to this question many times, but I am happy to do so again. Actually, after sixty-plus years of studying Bible doctrine, I consider what follows here to be my most significant insight.]

This is a good question. To be fair, we need to recognize that many if not most people who have worn the name “Christian” down through Christian history have correctly understood this teaching of the New Testament. The Biblical writings themselves clearly specify that baptism is a salvation event. In my book, *Baptism: A Biblical Study* (College Press: 1989; 2nd ed., 2006), I explain twelve New Testament texts that connect baptism with saving works of God. In case you are wondering what they are, here is the list: Matthew 28:19-20; Mark 16:15-16; John 3:3-5; Acts 2:38-39; Acts 22:16; Romans 6:3-4; 1 Corinthians 12:13; Galatians 3:26-27; Ephesians 5:25-27; Colossians 2:11-13; Titus 3:5; 1 Peter 3:21.

Once the New Testament books were written, for almost the next 1,500 years most of those in Christendom agreed that baptism is when the sinner becomes saved. This included the early Church fathers; the Roman Catholic church of the Middle Ages; and the first main Protestant reformer, Martin Luther (1483-1546). Luther began his reforming work in Germany in the years just prior to 1520. In the Christian world today, Bible-believing Catholics and Lutherans still believe and teach this.

The landslide away from this view in the Protestant world began with the second main Protestant reformer, Huldreich Zwingli (1484-1531), who began his reforming work in Switzerland in the years just after 1520. In 1523 he repudiated the Biblical view of baptism, declaring that all the teachers before him “have been in error from the time of the apostles.” He asserted that baptism is neither the cause nor the occasion of salvation. (For details, see my Chapter Two, “Baptism According to the Reformed Tradition,” pp. 39-81 in *Baptism and the Remission of Sins*, edited by David Fletcher and currently published by Hester Publications in Henderson, TN.)

In the centuries after Zwingli, almost all Protestants have adopted his main thesis, i.e., that salvation is given to the sinner at the moment he or she begins to believe in Jesus; their later baptism in water is just a subsequent sign that he or she has already been saved (other details vary from group to group).

The main reason for separating baptism from the salvation event usually comes down to this argument, i.e.:

Premise One: Salvation is by grace through faith, **not by works** (Ephesians 2:8-9).

Premise Two: **Baptism is a work.**

Conclusion: Therefore, baptism cannot have anything to do with receiving salvation.

Other reasons have been added to the mix, but I believe this one is the most convincing in the minds of most Zwingli-followers.

Ask the Professor Dr. Jack Cottrell



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What this means for us, then, is that if we can show this argument is false, i.e., that it is faulty reasoning, we will have removed the main barrier to the correct understanding of baptism for most Zwinglians. I believe that we can do this very thing. The reasoning is false.

The blatant error in this contemporary Zwinglian argument is the second premise, the assertion that “baptism is a work” (as the term “work” is used in Ephesians 2:8-9). The reason why this is an error is that most Zwinglians assume that “works” (as Paul uses the word in Ephesians 2:9, for example) means simply, “something or anything we do,” rather than something God does. This assumption, however, is wrong—and this is the crucial point.

Martin Luther himself challenged this Zwinglian assumption and attempted to refute Zwingli’s newly-created view of baptism by asserting that baptism is indeed not man’s work, but God’s work! (See Luther’s discussion of this in his “Large Catechism,” IV:35, found in *The Book of Concord*, tr. T. Tappert [Fortress Press, 1959], p. 441. I explain this further in Chapter One of the Fletcher book mentioned above, pp. 31-34.)

Luther’s point is valid, but it is not the whole story; and it does not in the end refute the Zwinglian premise. This is the case because there is a sense in which baptism is “our” work, i.e., in the sense that in our baptism we are using our free will to choose to submit to the act. Thus, I believe something more is needed in order to refute the Zwinglian heresy.

The key is to focus on the meaning of the term “works” as used by the Apostle Paul in his letters. The common assumption is that he means simply “something we do.” This is indeed one way the term can be understood, as is the case with Jesus Himself in His discussion of faith in John 6:25-34. The issue being discussed there is worded in a question to Jesus thus in verse 28: “What shall we do, so that we may **work** [Greek, *ergazomai*] the **works** [ergon] of God?” In the discussion Jesus uses both of these common terms for the verb “to work” and the noun “work” (vv. 27, 29). He specifically says that faith itself is a work (ergon) in verse 29: “This is the work (ergon) of God, that you **believe** in Him whom He has sent.” Here, “the work of God” means “the work that God wants you to do” (see vv. 27-28).

Thus, even if we stopped our refutation of Zwinglianism at this point, we will have shown that a “work” simply in the sense of “something we do” is not contrary to salvation by grace, since faith itself is a work in this sense, and is necessary for salvation—by Jesus’s own testimony!

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Ask the Professor (cont.)

But this is not even the main point! The main point is that when we go on to examine the writings of the Apostle Paul, we will find that he (under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit) has determined to use the term *ergon*—"work"—in a different sense! He does not use it in the generic sense of "something we do," but gives it a more limited or more narrow sense. How has Paul decided to use the term? He uses it in the specific sense of "works of law" (Romans 3:20,28; Galatians 2:16 (twice); Galatians 3:2,5,10).

In these verses from Romans and Galatians, contrary to most translations, Paul uses no definite articles ("the works" or "the law") before these nouns. He literally and simply says, "works of law" (also contrary to the earlier NIV's "observing the Law"). Contrary to the common assumption, Paul's use of the term "law" (*nomos*) in this context is NOT limited to the Law of Moses, or to any particular law code; it refers to ALL the law codes and law commands that the Creator God has addressed to His creatures. His point is clear: no sinner can be saved—can cancel out his sins—by how well he obeys whatever law code he happens to be living under! (See Romans 3:20.)

Here is a crucial point: in these specific texts, Paul specifically adds "of law" to the term "works," to show that he is talking only about human deeds done particularly in response to God's law commands. But there are times when he says just "works," and does not add "of law" (e.g., Romans 4:2,6; 11:6; Ephesians 2:9). Is this something different? NO! Even when Paul does not add "of law," this is still how he is using the term "works" when he is writing about salvation. This can be seen especially by comparing Romans 3:20,28 ("works of law") with Romans 4:2,6 ("works")—where it is obvious that Paul is talking about the same thing.

But where does this leave baptism? Here is the "clincher" to the refutation of Zwinglianism: Paul says that some "things we do" cannot bring salvation, not just because they are "things we do," but because they are "things we do in response to God's law commands," i.e., "works of law," or just "works," as Paul uses the


term. This is because salvation is by grace, and works (i.e., "works of law") and grace simply do not mix (Romans 11:6; Ephesians 2:8-9). But wait a minute! It is clear from Paul's writings that (as he sees it) some "things we do"—"works" in the generic sense—ARE connected with receiving salvation and are actually necessary for it. I.e., "works" simply as "things we do" (in the sense Jesus was using the term in John 6), must be divided into TWO categories in Paul's writings: first, "things we do" that are not connected with salvation, i.e., "works" (or more specifically, "works of law"); and second, "things we do" that are connected with salvation, i.e., obedience to gospel commands!

We draw this conclusion especially from two passages in Paul's writings. In Romans 10:16, he says that the reason so many Jews are lost is that "they have not all obeyed the gospel" (literal translation, as in the ESV). Then in 2 Thessalonians 1:8 he says that "those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus" will be lost. This shows that we err when we limit the gospel simply to "gospel facts" about the saving works of Jesus Christ. Obedience to the gospel means that there are also gospel commands! What are they? These are the "things we do" that are necessary for receiving saving grace.

Thus "obeying the gospel" is "something we do," but it is NOT "works" in the sense that Paul uses this term! It is not works in the sense of Romans 3:28, nor in the sense of Ephesians 2:8-9! Pauline "works" cannot save, but obedience to the gospel can and does save by grace!

What are the gospel commands, obedience to which is necessary for salvation? Here we simply must look for the Biblical teaching that specifically connects obedient human acts with the receiving of salvation (i.e., justification as the forgiveness of sins, and regeneration by the gift of the indwelling Holy Spirit). Furthermore, when we study the twelve New Testament texts that talk about the meaning of baptism (see above), we must conclude that baptism is the climactic act of obedience to the gospel, following the three that precede it thus:

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- **FAITH:** believing with the mind that certain things about Jesus and salvation are true, and believing in (or on) Jesus as an act of will by submitting to Him as Lord and Savior.
- **REPENTANCE:** changing our mind and attitude toward sin, specifically coming to hate the sin that exists in our own lives and committing ourselves to get rid of it.
- **CONFESSION:** audibly admitting before witnesses that we do indeed believe the gospel truths about Jesus Christ and have surrendered ourselves to Him.
- **BAPTISM:** being immersed into a state of union with Christ, at which moment we receive forgiveness of sins through the blood of Christ and regeneration of our spirits through the gift of the indwelling Holy Spirit.

These are the gospel commands, and obedience to them is NOT “works” or “works of law” (as Paul uses the term). I.e., they are not deeds we do in response to law commands, applied to us by God as our Creator; our obedience to them is what God as our Redeemer has specified to be the conditions we can meet in order to receive His gift of saving grace. This is the grace system, not the law system (Romans 6:14).

This is in perfect harmony with Ephesians 2:8-9 – “By grace you have been saved,” through obedience to the gospel commands, especially the command to believe in Jesus as the one specific means of receiving salvation, in connection with the other grace conditions. This is by no means salvation through works of law, i.e., how well you have obeyed your law commandments; the only way you could be that good is to never sin! So, don’t go around claiming that you are “good enough” to be saved; nobody is that good! It’s all by grace! By the way (Ephesians 2:10), you are still obligated to do “works of law”—in the sense of good works (obedience to your law code); and the grace by which God has saved you has given you the spiritual power to do that very thing! You are not saved BY such works, but you are saved FOR them! (RH)

ROCK LAKE OLD FASHIONED FAMILY CAMP MEETING

***Vestaburg, MI**— Next May, Rock Lake Christian Assembly will be hosting the first ever “Rock Lake Old Fashioned Family Camp Meeting” on the campgrounds.

The dates are: Thursday, May 14th @ 7:00 PM, Friday, May 15th @ 9:30 AM, and Saturday, May 16th @ 9:30 AM.

Meals will be offered by the camp staff for a reasonable fee.

The theme is: “Our 20-20 Vision for the Future of the Church.” Confirmed preachers are Linwood Smith, John Mitchell, Steve Dobyns, Derek Baker, Andy Bratton, Matt Schantz, and Tim St. Louis. Music will be provided by “The Easton Express” and Tom Taylor.

Camper spots are available with hook-up or there are modern sleeping quarters for men and women and children. For more information, please contact Terry Strickler at (517) 282-9653.

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