

Baptism, Infants and Salvation

"Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age." **Matthew 28:19-20**

Some Christians claim that according to the Bible, we do not need to be baptized in order to be saved, *Editor's note:* i.e. enter eternal life with our Saviour. They claim that accepting Jesus Christ as personal Lord and Savior is enough (sufficient) for our personal salvation. Even some consider the Church a cult for teaching on the necessity of baptism for salvation. On a similar issue, some object to infant baptism, claiming it to be invalid since an infant is too young to willfully accept Jesus.

To address these issues on baptism, we need to begin with the words of Jesus recorded in the Gospels. First in John's Gospel, Jesus said:

"Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit (i.e. baptized), he cannot enter the kingdom of God." **[John 3:5; RSV]**

In Mark's Gospel just before Christ ascended into heaven, He told His disciples:

"He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned." **[Mark 16:16]**

At the end of Matthew's Gospel, Christ commanded the Apostles to baptize all people *"in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit."* **[Matt. 28:19]** This command from Jesus would be a waste of time if we were saved by merely accepting or trusting in Him. *Editor's note:* It is precisely to affirm the belief in the Holy Trinity that the Orthodox Church submerges thrice during Holy Baptism.

In the second chapter of **Acts**, the Apostles were filled with the Holy Spirit. St. Peter stood up and addressed the crowd. After telling them that God made Jesus, whom they crucified, both Lord and Messiah, they were shaken and asked *"what shall we do?"* St. Peter answered:

"Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is to you and to your children and to all that are far off, every one whom the Lord our God calls to Him." **[Acts 2:38-39]**

It is interesting to note that baptism and repentance are both connected to the forgiveness of personal sins - a key step towards salvation. Also noteworthy, this promise includes children; no age requirements are stated. The only requirement stated is *"every one whom the Lord our God calls to Him"* and not whoever is old enough to accept Jesus. Later St. Peter also wrote:

...in the days of Noah,...eight persons were saved through water. Baptism, which corresponds to this, now saves you, not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a clear conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ,... **[1 Peter 3:20-21]**

Editor's note: This imagery of death and Resurrection associated with Holy Baptism teaches us that in plunging into the waters, the "old man" dies and is renounced; and when we arise from the water, we are Resurrected in our Saviour – we arise in Christ. This is supported in the sacred Scripture:

"for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ." Gal. 3:27

"And when you were baptized, it was the same as being buried with Christ. Then you were raised to life because you had faith in the power of God, who raised Christ from death." Colossians 2:12

This Bible passage explicitly states that baptism *"now saves you."*

St. Paul also taught on the importance of baptism for salvation. In **Acts 16:25-34**, the jailer of Paul and Silas asked, *"Men, what must I do to be saved?"* **[Acts 16:30]**. Paul and Silas verbally replied:

"Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household." [Acts 16:31]

However, almost immediately during the midnight hour, Paul and Silas continued their answer not by words but by action:

...and he (the jailer) was baptized at once, with all his family. [Acts 16:33]

Now these baptisms were performed with a sense of urgency. If baptism were not necessary for salvation, then why did St. Paul baptize the jailer and his family almost immediately during the midnight hour? Since baptism is a one-time event for a person, it was more expedient for St. Paul to simply baptize the whole family than to tell the jailer that baptism is necessary for salvation.

This particular passage leads into the second issue: infant baptism. Even though the Bible does not directly address the issue of infant baptism, it does record the baptisms of three different families. As quoted above all of the jailer's family were baptized (**Acts 16:33**). Also the family of Lydia (**Acts 16:15**) and the family of Stephanas (**1 Cor 1:16**) were baptized. Typically a family includes children. These three passages infer infant baptism, even though they may not explicitly indicate the baptism of children. There are no indications that only adults were involved. Now it is possible that a family may be childless; however, the chance that these three families had at least one young child is greater than the chance that all three had no children. A Christian, who objects to infant baptism, must interpret these three Bible passages with the assumption that each family had no young children.

Some may object to infant baptism since they claim that a person receiving it should be able to believe or have faith in Christ. Supposedly infants and young children cannot believe in Christ. Christ actually makes reference to little children who believe:

...but whoever causes one of these little ones who believes in me to sin... [Matt 18:6]

Elsewhere Jesus said:

"Let the children come to me, and do not hinder them; for to such belongs the kingdom of God. Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it. [Luke 18:16-17; also see Matt 11:25]

According to Jesus little children not only can believe but can have a faith superior to adults. Finally heaven may belong to children but we can still hinder their encounter with Jesus.

It should be stressed that nowhere in the Bible does it condemn infant baptism.

Editor's note: "Jesus said, 'Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these.'" Matthew 19:14. Elsewhere Christ clearly says that baptism is necessary for salvation. "He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved" Mark 16:16).

Likewise nowhere in the Bible does it explicitly state that only adult baptisms are valid. St. Paul in **Col. 2:11-12** actually compares baptism to circumcision - an important religious ceremony for infant boys. (Jewish circumcision is anatomically inappropriate for girls.) St. Irenaeus in 190 A.D. acknowledged infant baptism in his book, **Against Heresies (II 22:4)**. The custom of infant baptism dates back to the time of the Apostles as witnessed by Origen in the third century in his Homily to the Romans, "*the Church received from the apostles the tradition of baptizing infants too.*"

St. Cyprian of Carthage in the third century and St. John Chrysostom in the fourth century encouraged infant baptism. It should be noted that during the third century, Christians were still dying for the faith and did not tolerate any novel teachings. Finally some may still object since the Bible does not record an actual infant baptism. However it should be remembered that St. John admitted to the fact that not everything Jesus or the Apostles did or taught were written down in the Bible (**John 20:30; 21:25; 2 John 12; 3 John 13-14**).

*Editor's note: It must also be stated that the Church existed **BEFORE** the Bible was fully compiled. This occurred late in the 4th century.*

Now what happens to infants who die unbaptized? The answer to this question has not been revealed by God; however, we can be confident in God's justice and mercy that they are not condemned to hell.

Editor's note: The Orthodox Church does not have any adherence to the doctrine of Limbo.

It must be rightfully understood that we are saved by grace - a free gift from God due to Christ's death on the cross (**Acts 15:11; Eph 2:8**). We are not merely saved by accepting Jesus as our personal Lord and Savior (**Matt 7:21-23**). Our faith in Christ, our acceptance of Jesus as Lord and Savior, our good works and our repentance of personal sins are the fruits of actual grace - God working through us but respecting our free will (**Phil 2:12-13; John 15:5; 2 Cor 6:1**). Through baptism we are born again by receiving sanctifying grace. Whether we are baptized as adults or our parents baptized us as infants, salvation is still a free gift - an inheritance (**1 Cor 6:9-10**). Whether adults or infants, we cannot accept Christ or even salvation without God's grace. However as adults we can freely reject God's grace and salvation through sin. Baptism does not earn or guarantee our salvation. Even though eternal life in Christ Jesus (salvation) is a free gift, we can still perish, falling away from the perfect image through serious, willful sin (**Rom 6:23; Heb 10:26-27; 1 John 5:16-17; Gal 5:19-21; 1 Cor 6:9-10**).

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