

Faith Is Action

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BELIEVE & BE BAPTIZED**



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“In those days came John the Baptist, preaching in the wilderness of Judea, and saying, Repent: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand. For this is he that was spoken of by the prophet Isaiah, saying, The voice of one crying in the wilderness, Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.... Then went out to him Jerusalem, and all Judea, and all the region round about Jordan, and were baptized of him in Jordan, confessing their sins” (Matthew 3:1-6).

Water baptism did not originate with John. A Jewish ritual observed since the time of Moses, it was *a sign* that the one being baptized was joining himself to a particular faith. Paul told us in 1Corinthians 10:1-2 that the children of Israel in the wilderness were *baptized into Moses* in the *cloud* that followed them by day, and when they passed through the *Red Sea*. This represented leaving the old life of Egypt’s bondage behind to walk in the new life God ordained through His lawgiver.

When a person converted to Judaism, and this is still true today, he was baptized as well as circumcised for males. He was then deemed to be an Israelite in all respects, and one ancient Rabbi said, “One who

has become a proselyte (to Judaism) is like a child newly born.” This lends understanding to the conversation Jesus had with Nicodemus when He told him that *he must be born again to enter into the kingdom of God*. To this Nicodemus responded: “How can a man be born again when he is old? Can he enter in the second time in his mother’s womb and be born?” (John 3:1-7). From a Jewish perspective, he was saying, “How can I convert to Judaism if I’m already a Jew?” Jesus explained to him that He was not speaking of a natural birth, but of a spiritual birth. Nicodemus could not rely on his Jewishness to save him. Nor can any religion.

When John burst on the scene—“*a man sent from God*”—his message was “*Repent! Who has warned you to flee the wrath to come? Bring forth fruits worthy of repentance*” (walk the talk). “*Say not within yourselves, We have Abraham as our father...*” (Don’t think your Jewishness can save you!) His message hit hard. People began asking: “*What shall we do?*” Even publicans! Even Roman soldiers! (Lk.3:7-14).

John baptized them saying, “*I baptize you unto repentance, but*

there is one coming, who is mightier than I—He will baptize you with the Holy Ghost and with fire” (Mt.3:11). They, of course, were not born again, but were confessing their sins and their faith in the coming Messiah. It was *a sign* of their conversion. By being baptized by John, they were preparing the way of the Lord, whom John said would come. Sure enough, one day as John was baptizing in Jordan, he saw Jesus coming to him, and he declared before all: *“Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world”* (Jn.1:29).

Jesus had come to be baptized of John. At first John did not want to baptize Him, feeling unworthy, and protesting that *Jesus should baptize him*. Jesus persuaded John to baptize him *“for it becomes us to fulfill all righteousness”* (Mt.3:13-15). Obviously, Jesus did not need to be baptized unto repentance, so what was the purpose? It was *a sign—a signal* to His Jewish brethren that the way of the Lord was manifested. When He came up out of the water, the Spirit of God in the bodily shape like a dove rested on Him, and the voice of God spoke out of Heaven: *“This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased”* (vv.16-17). This is the perfect picture of Christian baptism: A sign to the world that this one is identifying himself as a child of God and follower of Christ.

Jesus’ ministry then exploded in signs and wonders. Many who had followed John were now going after Jesus, believing on Him as their Mes-

siah, to the point that John’s close disciples were discouraged and lamented to John how many were leaving him to follow Jesus. To this John responded: *“He must increase—I must decrease!”* (Jn.3:30). John had fulfilled his ministry in preparing the way for Jesus. Soon John would be cast into prison for calling out Herod and Herodias, his adulterous sister-in-law, whom he had married. Ultimately, Herodias got her revenge when she had John’s head served on a dinner plate (Mt.14:1-12).

Jesus’ ministry was on fire, and for the next 3+ years, He fulfilled His Messiahship: *“How God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Ghost and with fire, who went about doing good, and healing all that were oppressed of the devil, because God was with him”* (Acts 10:38). John stated that in His ministry, Jesus never baptized anyone in water (Jn.4:2).

The Great Commission

In His final post-resurrection appearance, Jesus issued the Great Commission to His followers to take His Gospel to all the world: *“Go ye therefore and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost”* (Mt.28:19).

*“Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature. He that **believes** and is baptized shall be saved; but he that **believes not** shall be damned”* (Mk.16:15-16).

Notice He did *not* say: *“He who believes not—and is not baptized—*

shall be damned”—because *only believers* were baptized. The emphasis is on *believing*—not on being baptized. The point is: *Only believers are candidates for baptism.*

Ten days later, on the day of Pentecost, Apostle Peter’s groundbreaking message was akin to John’s: *“Repent! And be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost”* (Acts 2:38).

The order was: *Believe—repent—then be baptized.* This pattern follows throughout the entire Book of Acts.

Philip the evangelist was directed by the Holy Spirit to travel from Jerusalem to Gaza, which was desert, and he obeyed, going on what could have seemed like a profitless journey. But it was a set-up from the Lord, so that he would meet up with an Ethiopian eunuch and treasurer of the great Queen Candace. At the very moment Phillip came upon him, this man was reading from the scroll of *Isaiah 53*. Prompted again by the Holy Spirit, Philip asked him if he understood what he was reading, which of course, he did not. This opened the door for Philip to join him and preach the Gospel to him as they traveled onward in the man’s chariot. As holy serendipity would have it, at the perfect time in his sermon, they came upon water, and the eunuch asked Philip, *“Is there anything that hinders me from being baptized?”*

Philip replied: *“If you believe with all your heart, you may.”* The eunuch answered: *“I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.”* Then Philip baptized him, and the man went on his way rejoicing (Acts 8:26-40). Only when he had firmly stated *his belief in Jesus Christ* was he ready to be baptized. *Baptism is conditional upon belief in Jesus Christ for salvation.*

Probably the greatest conversion in the New Testament is that of Apostle Paul (aka Saul) who had been the greatest persecutor of the church, which persecution he carried out with great fervor and anti-Christian zeal. He later described himself as *“the chief of sinners.”* But when Jesus Christ met him on the road to Damascus, where he was headed to arrest more Christians, he was struck blind by a blazing light which also plunged him into brutal conviction for the ugly darkness of his soul. Just as in the case of Jewish brethren before, Saul cried out, *“Lord, what will you have me to do?”*

Jesus spoke from Heaven and told him where to go and wait in the city until someone came to pray for him to receive his sight. For three days Saul ate and drank nothing, as the realization of his great harm to the followers of Jesus, whom he then believed to be the Son of God, bore down on his conscience. No doubt, his stellar training in the Scriptures was preaching to his heart as his spiritual eyes were opened to truth after truth that Jesus is the Jewish Messi-

ah.

When Ananias arrived three days later, he laid hands on Saul and prayed that he might receive his sight and be filled with the Holy Ghost, at which time scales fell from his eyes and he received his sight. *“Immediately he arose and was baptized”* (Acts 9:9-18). Saul not only believed upon Jesus Christ and received forgiveness of his bloody sins, but he also received the Baptism of the Holy Spirit *before he was baptized in water*. There are countless cases where people have been filled with the baptism of the Holy Ghost with the evidence of speaking in tongues upon salvation. Again, we understand *belief precedes baptism*.

Open the Door to the Gentiles!

Up to this time, the infant church was made up of mostly Jewish believers in Jesus the Messiah, but the Lord had told them to go into all the world and teach *all nations*, and they had not implemented this Gospel commission. One day, as Apostle Peter sat in meditation upon the rooftop waiting for his lunch to be prepared, he received an open vision, which interpretation was a clear mandate to take the Gospel to the Gentiles (Acts 10:9-16). As he pondered this, several men arrived at his house. They had been sent by Cornelius, a Roman centurion, to request that he return with them to Caesarea. He had also received a heavenly visitation and was instructed to send for Peter who would tell him what to do.

Because of the unique vision he had, in obedience to God, Peter went and preached the Gospel of Christ to Cornelius and his family and friends.

While Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell upon them as they heard the word, and they begin to speak with tongues and magnify God. It astonished the Jewish believers that the Gentiles had received the Holy Spirit baptism too. Then Peter declared: *“Can anyone forbid these water baptism who have received the Holy Ghost just as we have?”* He then commanded them to be baptized (Acts 10:17-48). These new converts to Christ received salvation and the Baptism of the Spirit *before they were baptized in water!* Peter’s intent was clear: *They are as saved as we are, and Spirit-filled—what’s stopping them from being baptized in water?* The pattern is constant:

Whoever believes—and only those who believe on Jesus Christ—can be baptized.

It was important that all new believers be baptized, and in every case, when the Gospel was preached and believed, baptism of the believers followed: A Gentile woman named Lydia heard Paul preach on the riverbank of her hometown of Thyatira, *“whose heart the Lord opened as she heard what Paul said.”* First God opened *the door* to the Gentiles; then He opened *their hearts*. She and her household believed and were baptized (Acts 16:14-15).

Afterward, Paul and Silas were thrown in jail at Philippi for preach-

ing the Gospel and casting a demon out of a girl. But at midnight as they sang praises to God, there was a great earthquake, and the prison was opened, and their shackles fell off. When the jailer saw these things, he was ready to commit suicide, thinking that the prisoners would escape and he would be held responsible. But Paul and Silas assured him that would not happen, and he said, “*Sirs, what must I do to be saved?*”

They said: “*Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved.*” Then they preached the Gospel to him and to all his house, and that same night they were all baptized (Acts 16: 25-34). Paul stipulated that in order to be saved, *you must believe on the Lord—you must believe He is Messiah*. Only then are you a candidate for water baptism.

Their next road trip was to Corinth where Crispus, the chief ruler of the synagogue, *believed the Lord with all of his house*, and many Corinthians hearing the Gospel *also believed* and were baptized (Acts 18:8). Soon after, Paul visited twelve disciples in Ephesus and asked them:

“*Have you received the Holy Ghost since ye believed?*”

They said, “*We have not so much as heard whether there be any Holy Ghost.*”

This proves Paul and the apostles had been baptizing new converts according to Matthew 28:19: “*In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.*” If they had been baptized in this way, they would

have heard of the Holy Ghost. Paul asked them, “*Unto what then were you baptized?*”

They said, “*Unto John’s baptism.*” Before the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus, “*John baptized with the baptism of repentance, saying that they should believe on him who would come after him, Jesus Christ*” (Matt. 3:11, Mk. 1:4 & 8). When they heard this, they believed and were baptized, and when Paul laid hands on them, they received the Holy Ghost and spoke with tongues (Acts 19:1-6).

Baptism Parallels Circumcision

Covenants require a sign. Because they are God’s covenant people, Paul said, “*The Jews require a sign*” (1Cor.1:22). From His first covenant with mankind, God sealed it with a sign: When He made a covenant with Noah and his sons, He sealed it with *a rainbow* as a token—sign that He would never destroy the Earth again with water (Gen.9:13). Throughout the Bible, God witnessed His Word and covenants with signs. When the Angel told the shepherds in the field that the Savior was born in Bethlehem, he said, “*And this shall be a sign unto you; you shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger*” (Lk.2:12).

When God cut His covenant with Abraham, He gave him *the sign of circumcision*. No matter where a Jewish male is on the face of the earth, he bears in his body this sign of the Abrahamic covenant.

Paul had much to say about water baptism, and he likened it unto the sign of circumcision: *“In whom also you are circumcised with the circumcision made without hands, in putting off the body of the sins of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ: Buried with him in baptism, wherein also you are risen with him through the faith of the operation of God, who has raised him from the dead.”* (Col.2:11-12).

It is clear that *baptism* in the New Testament *is equal to circumcision* in the Old Testament. This being the case, we must ask the question: *Was Abraham saved—justified—declared righteous before he was circumcised or after?* And the answer is **before**: *“And he believed in the Lord, and he (God) counted it to him for righteousness”* (Gen.15:6). It was years later when God commanded Abraham to be circumcised with all the males of his house as *a sign of the covenant* God was making with him and his seed after him (Gen.17).

“Blessed is the man to whom the Lord will not impute sin. Cometh this blessedness then upon the circumcision only, or upon the uncircumcision also? For we say that faith was reckoned to Abraham for righteousness. How was it then reckoned? When he was in circumcision or in uncircumcision? Not in circumcision, but in uncircumcision.

*“And he received **the sign of circumcision**, a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had yet being uncircumcised: that he might*

be the father of all them that believe, though they be not circumcised; that righteousness might be imputed unto them also.... who also walk in the steps of that faith of our father Abraham, which he had being yet uncircumcised ” (Rom.4:8-11).

Don't let all this verbiage confuse you. If you simply go back and read these verses and exchange *baptism* for *circumcision*, you will understand the point: Just as circumcision was a “seal of righteousness,” so is baptism. And just as our father Abraham was justified by his faith *before he was circumcised*—so are we justified by our faith in Jesus *before we are baptized!*

Moreover, just as circumcision represented “*putting off the deeds of the flesh*”—so does baptism. They are both outward signs of an inward work:

“The like figure whereunto even baptism does also now save us (not the putting away of the filth of the flesh, but the answer of a good conscience toward God), by the resurrection of Jesus Christ” (1Peter 3:21). Peter is abundantly clear: Water baptism cannot wash away the sins of the flesh, but it is the right response to testify of our right relationship with God, because our conscience has been purged by the blood of Christ: *“How much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without spot to God, purge your conscience from dead works to serve the living God”* (Heb.9:14).

Water baptism depicts the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ: *“Know you not that so many of us as were baptized into Jesus Christ, were baptized into his death? Therefore, we are buried with him by baptism into death that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we should also walk in newness of life. Knowing this, that our old man is crucified with him.”* (Rom.6:3-4).

Only the dead are buried—not the living. Jesus had to die before He could be buried, and He had to be buried before He could be raised. And so it is with us: We must be dead to sin before we are buried in baptism. Paul said, *“I am crucified with Christ”* (Gal.2:20). We are buried with Him in baptism, and are raised up with Him to walk in our new life in Christ. *“For if we have been planted together in the likeness of his death, we shall be also in the likeness of his resurrection”* (v.5). This is what water baptism signifies. It is the outward sign of the inward work of salvation of the new covenant, and unlike circumcision, it is not confined to males. In Christ *“there is neither male nor female: for you are all one in Christ Jesus”* (Gal.3:28).

Baptism Does Not Save

If water baptism were the means of salvation, why didn't Jesus and Paul baptize? Jesus did not baptize anyone. The disciples did (John 4:2), and yet no details of their baptizing is

recorded in the Gospels. In all the accounts where Jesus forgave sins, He never commanded anyone to be baptized. For example:

The woman at the well and the people of Samaria (John 4); the cripple at the pool of Bethesda He healed and told him to go and sin no more (Jn.5:14); to the woman caught in adultery Jesus said, *“Neither do I condemn you. Go your way and sin no more”* (Jn.8:11). Jesus told the paralyzed man let down through the roof, *“Thy sins are forgiven”* (Lk.5:20); to the sinful woman who washed His feet in the house of Simon, He said, *“Your sins are forgiven; your faith has saved you; go in peace”* (Lk.7:48-50); to Zaccheus the publican Jesus declared, *“Today salvation is come to this house”* (Lk.19:9). In none of these cases did He say a word about being baptized.

Paul testified that he baptized only a few: *“I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius... And I also baptized the household of Stephanas. I know not whether I baptized any other.... For Christ sent me **not to baptize**, but to preach the gospel: not with wisdom of words, lest the cross of Christ should be made of none effect...”* (1Cor.1:14, 16-17).

Clearly, baptism is not as important as preaching the Gospel, because baptism does not save: *“For the preaching of the cross is to them that perish foolishness; but unto us which are saved it is the power of God—For it pleased God by the foolishness*

of preaching to save them that believe (vv.18, 21).

It pleased God by preaching—not baptizing—to save. Preaching the cross of Christ is the Gospel. The preaching of the cross is the power and wisdom and means by which God has chosen to save. This should be the bulk of preaching: Believing the Gospel saves. *Believing precedes baptizing and not vice versa.*

There is only one baptism that saves, and that is to be baptized into the body of Christ through the new birth: *“For by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Gentiles.... Now ye are the body of Christ and members in particular”* (1Cor.12:13, 27).

New believers should be baptized as a sign to the world of their new identity in Jesus Christ. *“If any man be in Christ, he is a new creature; behold, all things are passed away, and all things are become new”* (2Cor.5:17). Water baptism without the new birth means going down a dry sinner and coming up a wet one.