

Baptism and Justification by Faith

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Introduction

The Purpose of My Writings

I make no claim to be an infallible interpreter of the Bible. I do not consider my interpretations to be equal with the word of God. That being said, I welcome disagreements. At the same time, I have put a lot of effort into my studies, so I will do my best to defend what I have written until I feel satisfied that what you find to be incorrect has been proven wrong. I have changed my mind hundreds of times, but I only change my mind when I find it to be the course that is more in line with objective truth.

So, why do I write? I write to teach you how to read the Bible more accurately. I do this knowing full well that I will change some nuance of what I believe in the future, so my writings are an invitation to grow with me regardless of where you are at on your journey in Christ. Like you, I am not content with the traditions that have been handed down to us from our fathers. And, like you, I want to do my best to interpret scripture considering the original audience. I have so much respect for your willingness to grow, your honesty, and your love for God, and I know that you will extend the same type of respect and patience towards me as you read my writings on this controversial subject.

At the end of the day, however, I hope that we can remain united on our common faith in God and our love for our neighbors. May God continue to so richly bless us all.

Presuppositions

A presupposition is something that one assumes is true before beginning an argument or line of reason. So, I must freely admit what presuppositions I hold so that we can be on common ground before we proceed. First, by baptism, I mean the immersion/ submersion in water of one who has reached the age of accountability.¹ This is done in response to the preaching of the gospel of Christ. I do not believe that water baptism in the New Testament can be fulfilled by sprinkling, pouring, or any other form of interaction with the water besides immersion.

My conclusion

I want to state my conclusion at the very beginning of the paper. I do this knowing full well that many will stop reading here. Those who do so must not be the caliber of person I spoke of in the first section, and that is okay. If someone came to read this paper just to have their beliefs confirmed, I understand. For those who wish to read the entire thing, however, here is my view:

Righteousness is imputed to an individual because of their faith before they are baptized in water.

¹ By “age of accountability” I mean someone who is around twenty years old who was raised in or around the covenant community. I do not believe that those who have inadequately been exposed to Jesus will be judged based upon their reception of the gospel. Instead, I believe they will be judged upon the basis of their love for their neighbor as it was in the Old Testament. If God was gracious enough to extend mercy to those who did not have the Law under the old age, how much more merciful will he be to those in “the age to come?” See my article for more information: <https://labornotinvain.com/2020/12/06/the-age-of-accountability/>

What I am NOT Saying

Baptism doesn't save.

Baptism isn't important.

Baptism isn't commanded.

Obedience isn't necessary.

Baptism shouldn't be practiced today.

What I AM Saying

If an individual were to die before being baptized, they are saved.

People baptized to "obey Jesus" do not have to be rebaptized.

One is obedient from the point of justification, not to justification.

Individuals should still be baptized today.

What I Ask of You

While the above two sections may seem contradictory to some, please refrain from telling me how wrong I am until you read the paper. I **understand that from some standpoints, the above seems to contradict**. I know this because I taught from that standpoint for years. I have made people cry by convincing them that their baptism was no good. So, before you freak out, just wait until the paper is completely published. This is section one of seven.

Abraham: Justified by Faith

Romans 4 and Abraham

Let's start this section with a ton of verses from Romans 4! I'll include light commentary after each passage.

Romans 4:1-4

What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh, has found? For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. For what does the Scripture say? "ABRAHAM BELIEVED GOD, AND IT WAS CREDITED TO HIM AS RIGHTEOUSNESS." Now to the one who works, his wage is not credited as a favor, but as what is due. (Romans 4:1-4)

Abraham was justified by faith so that he would have nothing to boast about. In other words. God wanted it to be clear that Abraham's justification came totally from Him and not from anything that Abraham did. Now, it is obvious that Abraham did do something. He left his home, his family, and everything he knew to travel to a land which he did not know. Biblical faith is trust in God. His trust was seen in his willingness to leave behind all he knew. This is the same with the gospel. The gospel calls us to leave behind all that we know and to give up on all our usual programs of happiness so that we can put our total faith in God. It was upon the basis of this faith that Abraham was justified. God did not give him what he was due; the promises He made to Abraham were based upon the righteousness of God.

Romans 4:9-12

Is this blessing then on the circumcised, or on the uncircumcised also? For we say, "FAITH WAS CREDITED TO ABRAHAM AS RIGHTEOUSNESS." How then was it credited? While he

was circumcised, or uncircumcised? Not while circumcised, but while uncircumcised; and he received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had while uncircumcised, so that he might be the father of all who believe without being circumcised, that righteousness might be credited to them, and the father of circumcision to those who not only are of the circumcision, but who also follow in the steps of the faith of our father Abraham which he had while uncircumcised. (Romans 4:9–12)

In the book of Romans, Paul is dealing with a contention between the Jewish and Gentile communities within the church. As any scholar would point out, not that I am a scholar by any definition of the word, the historical setting of Paul's letter to the Roman church is a command that Claudius had given concerning the Jews in Rome. He expelled them from Rome until his death. Upon his death, Nero allowed the Jews to return to Rome. This caused a problem within the church because up until that point, the congregations were mainly made up of Gentiles if not totally. The Jewish brethren, which had been keeping the law up until this point (Acts 21:20), were not comfortable with the liberty that the Gentile brethren had in Christ. So, this led to some demanding that others be circumcised, keep some dietary restrictions, or even observe the festal calendar of Leviticus 23 (Romans 14).

In response to these arguments, Paul had to write a lot about circumcision as he does in this section. His main point is that the circumcision of Abraham was a seal of the righteousness that was imputed because of his faith. He was justified prior to his circumcision so that he may be the father of all regardless of their practice of circumcision.

Romans 4:16-17

For this reason it is by faith, in order that it may be in accordance with grace, so that the promise will be guaranteed to all the descendants, not only to those who are of the Law, but also to those who are of the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all, (as it is written, "A FATHER OF MANY NATIONS HAVE I MADE YOU") in the presence of Him whom he believed, even God, who gives life to the dead and calls into being that which does not exist. (Romans 4:16–17)

This passage reveals that the problem the Jewish brethren had with the Gentiles wasn't just circumcision; they really wanted to bring them under the entire Law (Galatians 5:3). So, Paul affirmed over and over that it was their faith that united them, not their obedience to the Law. Speaking of imputed righteousness, he says that God calls into being that which does not exist. In other words, God calls a person righteous (obedient) before they are obedient. God looks at the heart, as we will notice in a later part.

Abraham was Counted Righteous Before He Was Circumcised

It is necessary that this point to put into perspective Abraham's imputed righteousness by looking at a timeline of Abraham's life. Abraham was seventy-five years old when he left Haran (Genesis 12:4). Abraham married Hagar ten years after arriving in Canaan (Genesis 16:3). When Ishmael was born, he was eighty-six (Genesis 16:16). Abraham was ninety-nine when he was circumcised (Genesis 17:24). He was one hundred years old when Isaac was born (Genesis 21:5).

From the above, we can see that Abraham's faith was counted as righteousness at seventy-five years of age. He was circumcised twenty-four years later, and he offered up Isaac five years, at the least,

after that. We don't know exactly when Isaac was offered up, but it was after Ishmael and Hagar were kicked out of the house (Genesis 21:9-21). The main point is that it was years after Abraham's faith was counted as righteousness that he was circumcised, and it was several years after that before the saying was "fulfilled" in the binding of Isaac (James 2:23). Romans 4 and James 2 are reconciled when one sees that Romans 4 is about the initial point of justification whereas James 2 is about obedience in response to one's faith. Or, you could say, Romans 4 is about conversion while James 2 is about remaining faithful.

Reconciling James 2 and Romans 4 (3/7)

Unproductive Ways to Study the Bible

In my experience, people typically respond to James 2 with Romans 4 and vice-versa. This is irresponsible and is one of the reasons why people rarely make progress when studying the Bible with others. If someone presents a passage in a study, it isn't wrong to introduce another passage to help one make their point, but the focus of the one responding should be to properly interpret passages that they've been given first. For example, when studying prophecy, if I point out a passage that says the coming of the Lord was at hand in the first century, deal with that first before skipping and jumping to questions about the nature of fulfillment. That latter discussion is necessary, but only after the initial point are dealt with. If the conversation goes as follows, something is wrong, and the discussion will ultimately be unfruitful unless the fruit one is looking for is to feel intellectually superior and right in their own mind.

"Romans 4 says that someone is justified by faith apart from works."

"Well, James 2 says that faith without works is dead."

Do you see how little this solves? If we are going to be fair to one another, we must deal with the context of the original passages and not use one text to bash another text. Now, this action is permissible when discussing biblical contradictions, but between two people who do not believe the Bible contradicts in any meaningful way, it is only fair to honestly consider the passages introduced by the other.

A Brief Commentary on James 2:14-26

Background of James

James was written to Jewish Christians who were scattered abroad (James 1:1). One reason this is evident, besides James' salutation, is found in James 2:1-13. Within this passage, James appeals to the Law to justify his condemnation of their actions towards the poor. Let's notice a tiny section of this larger pericope:

If, however, you are fulfilling the royal law according to the Scripture, "YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF," you are doing well. But if you show partiality, you are committing sin and **are convicted by the law as transgressors**. For whoever keeps **the whole law** and yet stumbles in one point, **he has become guilty of all**. For He who said, "DO NOT COMMIT ADULTERY," also said, "DO NOT COMMIT MURDER." Now if you do not commit adultery, but do commit murder, **you have become a transgressor of the law**. (James 2:8-11).

The reason why James can use the Law in reprimanding the Jewish Christians is because they continued to keep the Law until the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70. For example, in the book of Acts, James had a conversation with Paul, and, as an elder at the Jerusalem church who was inspired by the Holy Spirit, he said this,

You see, brother, **how many thousands there are among the Jews of those who have believed, and they are all zealous for the Law;** and they have been told about you, **that you are teaching all the Jews who are among the Gentiles to forsake Moses,** telling them not to **circumcise their children** nor to **walk according to the customs.** What, then, is to be done? They will certainly hear that you have come. **Therefore** do this that we tell you. We have four men who are under a vow; take them and purify yourself along with them, and pay their expenses so that they may shave their heads; and **all will know that there is nothing to the things which they have been told about you, but that you yourself also walk orderly, keeping the Law.** Acts 21:20–24

Paul went on to do just what a Holy Spirit-Guided elder told him to do (Acts 15:19, 22, 25; 20:28; Ephesians 4:11-13). He followed this experience up by saying that he lived in good conscience to that day (Acts 23:1). Surely his conscience would have been offended if he believed that one shouldn't be zealous for the Law after the cross, right? But he said that it wasn't, so we must take him at his word. What Paul was against was binding the Law on the Gentiles. In terms of the Jews, however, he understood that "Whoever then annuls one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever keeps and teaches them, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 5:19).

In conclusion, James was writing to Jewish Christians who were keeping the Law. He was writing to them, in part, because they had failed in their obligation to care for the poor. It is within this context that we must read the following section.

James 2:14-17

What use is it, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but he has no works? Can that faith save him? If a brother or sister is without clothing and in need of daily food, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace, be warmed and be filled," and yet you do not give them what is necessary for their body, what use is that? Even so faith, if it has no works, is dead, being by itself. (James 2:14–17)

James' main point here is that they had made a commitment to put their faith in Christ. While righteousness was counted towards their account at the point of faith, they had yet to act upon it. He compared this to telling someone that they should be warmed and filled without doing a thing to help them. If I make a claim to follow Jesus but do not act on it, then my faith is dead. Again, James is not talking about the point of conversion. He is writing to people who needed to understand that action was required on their part following their conversion.

James 2:18-20

But someone may well say, "You have faith and I have works; show me your faith without the works, and I will show you my faith by my works." You believe that God is one. You

do well; the demons also believe, and shudder. But are you willing to recognize, you foolish fellow, that faith without works is useless? (James 2:18–20)

Faith must be coupled with action. Anyone can make a claim to have faith, but it is the actions that come from faith (obedience of faith) that prove that our faith is real. I can say that I have taken up my cross to follow Jesus, but if I run the second I am called to climb onto the cross beside Him, then I must not have actually trusted in Him to begin with.

James 2:21-26

Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up Isaac his son on the altar? You see that faith was working with his works, and as a result of the works, faith was perfected; and the Scripture was fulfilled which says, “AND ABRAHAM BELIEVED GOD, AND IT WAS RECKONED TO HIM AS RIGHTEOUSNESS,” and he was called the friend of God. You see that a man is justified by works and not by faith alone. In the same way, was not Rahab the harlot also justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out by another way? For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so also faith without works is dead. James 2:21–26

Was Abraham justified before he offered up Isaac or when he offered up Isaac? The answer is yes. God calls into being that which does not exist. Both passages are true. Imputed righteousness is real, but it is “satisfied” or “fulfilled” when we allow Christ to work through us (Galatians 2:20). As we will see in the coming sections, justification and salvation are processes and not just one-time events. Hopefully that section clears up some of the confusion on this subject as well.

Conclusion

The bottom line is that works are necessary. Faith without works is dead. At the same time, God calls into being that which does not exist. In other words, He credits righteousness to our account prior to our obedience. When one puts their trust in Christ, they are considered righteous by God, but that does not mean they are free to live their life in whatever way they would like. Following in Jesus’ footsteps is the natural next step to those who put their entire trust in God.

Romans 4 and James 2 do not contradict one another. Romans 4 is speaking of the initial point of justification while James 2 was writing to people who were already believers in Christ that had failed to put their faith into action. Their faith was in danger of being dead because of their lack of works. Of course, in the context of the passage, their works had to do with loving their neighbor and not showing partiality to the rich. Their works had nothing to do with “steps of salvation.”

Circumcision and Baptism

In the New Testament, baptism is related closely to circumcision. Paul explains this in 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.

In the Old Testament circumcision was performed on the eighth day after the birth of a boy. One could be tempted from this connection to suggest that baptism should be performed on infants within the Christian community. There are, however, three notable exceptions to this pattern: 1) Abraham, 2) Ishmael, and 3) the second generation of wandering Israelites. It is the first and third exceptions that I am most interested in. Let's begin with the latter. This account is found in Joshua 5:1-9.

Now it came about when all the kings of the Amorites who were beyond the Jordan to the west, and all the kings of the Canaanites who were by the sea, heard how the LORD had dried up the waters of the Jordan before the sons of Israel until they had crossed, that their hearts melted, and there was no spirit in them any longer because of the sons of Israel. At that time the LORD said to Joshua, "Make for yourself flint knives and circumcise again the sons of Israel the second time." So Joshua made himself flint knives and circumcised the sons of Israel at Gibeath-haaraloth. This is the reason why Joshua circumcised them: all the people who came out of Egypt who were males, all the men of war, died in the wilderness along the way after they came out of Egypt. For all the people who came out were circumcised, but all the people who were born in the wilderness along the way as they came out of Egypt had not been circumcised. For the sons of Israel walked forty years in the wilderness, until all the nation, that is, the men of war who came out of Egypt, perished because they did not listen to the voice of the LORD, to whom the LORD had sworn that He would not let them see the land which the LORD had sworn to their fathers to give us, a land flowing with milk and honey. Their children whom He raised up in their place, Joshua circumcised; for they were uncircumcised, because they had not circumcised them along the way. Now when they had finished circumcising all the nation, they remained in their places in the camp until they were healed. Then the LORD said to Joshua, "Today I have rolled away the reproach of Egypt from you." So the name of that place is called Gilgal to this day.

There are several points that need to be mentioned from the above passage: 1) they passed over the Jordan on dry land as they did the Red Sea, 2) those born in the wilderness were not circumcised on the eighth day, and 3) after the circumcision was completed, the Lord said, "Today I have rolled away the reproach of Egypt from you."

There are various ways to understand this last statement. David Howard, in the New American Commentary, takes the position that the reproach of Egypt was their mocking of Israel as the nation wandered aimlessly for forty years:

Egypt's "reproach" would have been occasioned by the Egyptians' observing that Israel was wandering aimlessly in the wilderness for forty years, concluding that Israel's God had abandoned it and heaping scorn on Israel because of this. This is precisely what Moses

predicted Egypt would do in the event that God punished his people because of their sins (Exod 32:12; Num 14:13–16; Deut 9:28).²

H.D.M. Spence, however, takes an alternative approach and considers the interpretation of scholars like Howard to be less clear and not satisfying all the requirements of the passage:

But Knobel supposes (3) that it was their down-trodden miserable condition in Egypt, a condition which was only partially ameliorated during their wanderings in the wilderness, in the course of which, accustomed to a settled existence, they must have had much to endure. “With the arrival in Canaan,” he adds, “all this came to an end. All those who had deserved punishment were dead, all the uncircumcised were circumcised, reproach and misery were put aside, and Israel, as the worthy community of God, entered on a new life.”³

I tend to agree with this latter approach taken by Spence and Knobel. While their baptism into Moses in the cloud and in the sea was a step towards freedom, it wasn’t until their entrance into the promised land that the promise made to them through Moses had been fulfilled. There are some interesting inferences one could make concerning this act of circumcision and the continued practice of baptism today, but that is beyond the scope of this paper because one of the presuppositions I am holding is that baptism is practiced today as stated in the introduction.

So, this circumcision exception does not exactly line up with how we practice baptism today because it has more to do with perfection than it does the original moment of justification. Therefore, we must turn our sights to the first example given above: Abraham.

As stated in the second section of this paper, Abraham was justified by faith long before he was circumcised. Here is my summary of Abraham’s life from the previous articles:

It is necessary that this point to put into perspective Abraham’s imputed righteousness by looking at a timeline of Abraham’s life. Abraham was seventy-five years old when he left Haran (Genesis 12:4). Abraham married Hagar ten years after arriving in Canaan (Genesis 16:3). When Ishmael was born, he was eighty-six (Genesis 16:16). Abraham was ninety-nine when he was circumcised (Genesis 17:24). He was one hundred years old when Isaac was born (Genesis 21:5).

We do not see an example of someone in the New Testament waiting twenty-four or so years to be baptized. In fact, it is something done quickly in the Book of Acts. But, because of the age of the ones who submitted to baptism and Paul’s usage of Abraham’s circumcision to make a point about the way justification occurs in the New Testament, it seems appropriate to make the connection between the original circumcision of Abraham and baptism in the New Covenant. Notice again Paul’s words:

² Howard, David M., Jr. Joshua. Vol. 5. Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1998. Print. The New American Commentary.

³ Spence-Jones, H. D. M., ed. Joshua. London; New York: Funk & Wagnalls Company, 1909. Print. The Pulpit Commentary.

Is this blessing then on the circumcised, or on the uncircumcised also? For we say, "FAITH WAS CREDITED TO ABRAHAM AS RIGHTEOUSNESS." How then was it credited? While he was circumcised, or uncircumcised? **Not while circumcised, but while uncircumcised; and he received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had while uncircumcised,** so that he might be the father of all who believe without being circumcised, that righteousness might be credited to them, and the father of circumcision to those who not only are of the circumcision, but who also follow in the steps of the faith of our father Abraham which he had while uncircumcised. (Romans 4:9–12)

Baptism, like circumcision is a sign. It is a seal of the righteousness of the faith which one has prior to their baptism. Righteousness is imputed based on one's faith. God, as Paul said in Romans 4, calls into being that which is not. When one is baptized, like when Abraham was circumcised or when he offered Isaac, then the saying "it was credited to him as righteousness" is fulfilled. Tomorrow, we will look at a specific example of this.

Cornelius

The conversion of Cornelius and his household was one of the most controversial and debated conversion accounts in the first century. While most of the church rejoiced at the first intentional effort to take the gospel to the Gentiles, there was a faction that wanted them to undergo circumcision and keep the Law (Acts 15:5). The apostles and the Holy-Spirit appointed elders came together to consider the matter. After a lot of debate, Peter stood up and gave his account of his interaction with Cornelius:

Brethren, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles would **hear the word of the gospel and believe.** And **God, who knows the heart, testified to them giving them the Holy Spirit,** just as He also did to us; and He made no distinction between us and them, **cleansing their hearts by faith.** Now therefore why do you put God to the test by placing upon the neck of the disciples a yoke which neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear? But we believe that **we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, in the same way as they also are.** (Acts 15:7-11)

Peter mentions faith twice. He mentions grace once. He even talks about the baptism of the Holy Spirit. Peter does not mention water baptism. This passage specifically says that their hearts were cleansed by faith and that God, who knows the heart, sent the Holy Spirit to testify of their faith and equality with believers like Peter. This is not the only time that Peter recounts his tale. After the gospel was received by the Gentiles, Peter went back and reported his experience.

...And he reported to us how he had seen the angel standing in his house, and saying, 'Send to Joppa and have Simon, who is also called Peter, brought here; and **he will speak words to you by which you will be saved,** you and all your household.' And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as He did upon us at the beginning. And I remembered the word of the Lord, how He used to say, 'John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.' Therefore if God gave to them the same gift as He gave to us also **after believing in the Lord Jesus Christ,** who was I that I could stand in God's way? (Acts 11:13-17)

Why is it that Peter doesn't mention water baptism again? Why does no one inquire about their baptism? The only response they give is, "Well then, God has granted to the Gentiles also the repentance that leads to life" (Acts 11:18). Preachers today typically mention how many baptisms they had in such and such area first, but a casual reading of Peter's two accounts places no emphasis on their water baptism. Let's go back to the original sermon that Peter preached. Perhaps there is something in the sermon that will cue us into this mystery. After all, Peter, quoting Cornelius, said that he was supposed to speak words "by which you will be saved." So, there must be something in Peter's sermon about baptism.

Opening his mouth, Peter said: "I most certainly understand now that God is not one to show partiality, but in every nation the man who fears Him and does what is right is welcome to Him... We are witnesses of all the things He did both in the land of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They also put Him to death by hanging Him on a cross. God raised Him up on the third... And He ordered us to preach to the people, and solemnly to testify that this is the One who has been appointed by God as Judge of the living and the dead. Of Him all the prophets bear witness that **through His name everyone who believes in Him receives forgiveness of sins.**" **While Peter was still speaking these words**, the Holy Spirit fell upon all those who were listening to the message. All the circumcised believers who came with Peter were amazed, because the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out on the Gentiles also. **For they were hearing them speaking with tongues and exalting God.** Then Peter answered, "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 10:34-48)

The Holy Spirit fell on those that heard the message. This is because, as we have seen, their hearts had been cleansed by faith. God knew they had believed Peter's message, so He baptized them in the Spirit as a sign to Peter and those that were with him that the Gentiles had believed just like the apostles did. Peter ended his sermon in an interesting way: "Everyone who believes in Him receives forgiveness of sins." This is what was said of Abraham in Romans 4 as was discussed yesterday. It is at the point of faith that righteousness is imputed. Baptism is a sign or seal of the righteousness that one had at the time of their initial trust in Jesus. It was only after their belief, reception of the Holy Spirit, and their worship of God that they were commanded to be baptized. Since baptism was commanded, it would have been wrong for them to postpone or to deny their baptism just as it would have been wrong for Abraham to deny his need to be circumcised. (Acts 10:34-48; cf. Luke 7:30)

Notice that I said Cornelius and his household worshiped God. Think about that for a moment. If Cornelius and his household were wretched sinners at this point because they had not been baptized after hearing the gospel preached, why did they worship the One who they do not yet truly know? Was their worship in Spirit and in Truth? Or were they worshipping in vain? Does the reception of their worship not speak to the fact that they were already justified? After all, the "words by which they must be saved" contained nothing about baptism. If Peter's statement about belief and remission of sins was a synecdoche that Luke employed to shorten Peter's speech, and Peter had already mentioned baptism to them, then they shouldn't have worshiped until after their baptism if the traditional view of baptism

is to be upheld. Now, baptism was necessary, but the initial point of justification took place when they believed in Jesus.

This account of the conversion of Cornelius is a perfect demonstration of Romans 4. All these debates about people dying on the way to the baptistry or whatever come from a misunderstanding, not of baptism, but of the nature of God. As Peter said, God looks at the heart. This is not something that was just true for Peter, but it has always been true about God.

Now it was in the heart of my father David to build a house for the name of the LORD, the God of Israel. But the LORD said to my father David, **'Because it was in your heart to build a house for My name, you did well that it was in your heart.** Nevertheless you shall not build the house, but your son who will be born to you, he will build the house for My name.' (1 Kings 8:17–19).

When David purposed in his heart to build a temple to God, God looked at his heart and said that he had done well before he had even actually done anything.

You have heard that it was said, 'YOU SHALL NOT COMMIT ADULTERY'; but I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust for her has already committed adultery with her **in his heart.** (Matthew 5:27–28)

If God credits wickedness towards the account of the one who dwells on evil things, how much more will God count righteousness towards the account of the one who puts their faith in Him?

For a multitude of the people, even many from Ephraim and Manasseh, Issachar and Zebulun, **had not purified themselves,** yet they ate the Passover **otherwise than prescribed.** For Hezekiah prayed for them, saying, **"May the good LORD pardon everyone who prepares his heart to seek God, the LORD God of his fathers, though not according to the purification rules of the sanctuary."** So **the LORD heard Hezekiah and healed the people.** (2 Chronicles 30:18–20)

Some may find it odd that God operates outside of His laws at times, but this is called grace. Grace is when God breaks His own rules.

These passages teach us, in conjunction with the account of Cornelius' conversion, that God first looks at the heart. Baptism is commanded, but justification first is pronounced at the point of faith. In the next section, we will take a look at 1 Peter 3:21 and ask what salvation is.

1 Peter 3:21

Corresponding to that, **baptism now saves you**—not the removal of dirt from the flesh, but an appeal to God for a good conscience—through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, (1 Peter 3:21).

So, if baptism saves, is it true that one is not saved until they are baptized? Read these verses and notice the qualifications and the tenses.

You will be hated by all because of My name, but it is **the one who has endured to the end who will be saved.** (Matthew 10:22)

They said, “**Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved,** you and your household.” (Acts 16:31)

Much more then, having now been justified by His blood, **we shall be saved** from the wrath of God through Him. (Romans 5:9)

that **if you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved;** (Romans 10:9)

For the word of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but **to us who are being saved** it is the power of God. (1 Corinthians 1:18)

even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ (**by grace you have been saved**), (Ephesians 2:5)

who has saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works, but according to His own purpose and grace which was granted us in Christ Jesus from all eternity, (2 Timothy 1:9)

He saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit, (Titus 3:5)

Therefore, putting aside all filthiness and all that remains of wickedness, in humility receive the word implanted, **which is able to save your souls.** (James 1:21)

Is salvation something one receives only after they “endure to the end?” Or are they saved before then? Is one saved when they believed? Is salvation future? Is one saved before they confess that Jesus is Lord, after, or is that not even enough? Are Christians already saved, will be saved, or being saved? Are believers already saved or simply able to be saved? But there’s more.

And Jesus said to him, “**Today salvation has come** to this house, because he, too, is a son of Abraham.” (Luke 19:9)

Do this, knowing the time, that it is already the hour for you to awaken from sleep; for now **salvation is nearer to us than when we believed.** (Romans 13:11)

So then, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, **work out your salvation** with fear and trembling; (Philippians 2:12)

But since we are of the day, let us be sober, having put on the breastplate of faith and love, and as a helmet, **the hope of salvation.** (1 Thessalonians 5:8)

For this reason I endure all things for the sake of **those who are chosen, so that they also may obtain the salvation** which is in Christ Jesus and with it eternal glory. (2 Timothy 2:10)

so Christ also, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, **will appear a second time for salvation** without reference to sin, to those who eagerly await Him. (Hebrews 9:28)

who are protected by the power of God through faith **for a salvation ready to be revealed** in the last time. (1 Peter 1:5)

like newborn babies, long for the pure milk of the word, so that by it **you may grow in respect to salvation**, (1 Peter 2:2)

Then I heard a loud voice in heaven, saying, "**Now the salvation**, and the power, and the kingdom of our God and the authority of His Christ **have come**, for the accuser of our brethren has been thrown down, he who accuses them before our God day and night. (Revelation 12:10)

Has salvation come for some who believe but not for others? Is salvation near or already here? How exactly does one work out their salvation? Aren't those people already baptized? If baptism/ faith/ repentance/ whatever saves, then why is salvation a hope? Some who are chosen/ elect aren't saved yet? What is that about? Does salvation happen at belief, baptism, or the second coming? Is salvation something one grows in respect towards? It's not a one-time event?

What is the solution to all this? Well, some people throw their hands up into the air and say "already-but-not-yet" to answer this question. That really doesn't mean anything to a lot of people though. Some may even look at it as Schrödinger's salvation instead of Schrödinger's cat. The best way I can explain it, however, is by looking at a statement of Jesus found in Matthew 6 and Matthew 16, "Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven." Or another way I sometimes explain this is with the phrase "perception versus reality" or "subjective versus objective reality." What may be objectively true, such as when one is in Christ, they have all spiritual blessings, may not be subjectively true. That is, one may not always be aware of the blessings they have. So, in that sense, salvation for each person is past, present, ongoing, and future because as you grow, you learn more about the deliverance you've been given.

Is one saved at the point of baptism? Is one only saved once they work out their salvation? Is one saved at the point of faith? Paul said, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household. (Acts 16:31). Is that just as true as the passages about baptism, growing, the second appearing, the last time, the coming of the kingdom, etc.? Yes. Because salvation isn't binary. It is an ongoing process unique to the individual in that we all learn and grow at different rates.

So, to throw out 1 Peter 3:21 and say, "It is baptism that saves" really doesn't do much. Because of course it does. And, of course, one is saved at the point of faith. And, of course, one isn't through being saved at baptism. It is an ongoing process that one grows up into as they discover who the Divine really is. Salvation isn't binary (in/ out). Salvation is more like out > in > more in > more in > and on and on.

Baptized into Christ

This is part 7 of my series on baptism. I know I didn't answer all of the questions and arguments about this subject, so feel free to ask whatever, and I'll do my best to answer. Thanks for reading! Let's start today's section with an argument I've used hundreds of times.

All spiritual blessings are in Christ (Ephesians 1:3). This means that if someone is outside of Christ, he has no spiritual blessings. One gets from being outside of the body of Christ to being inside the body of Christ through baptism:

Or do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus have been baptized into His death? (Romans 6:3)

For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. (Galatians 3:27)

I can't tell you how many circles I have drawn making this very point. Preachers typically draw a circle with the expression "in Christ" in the middle. Then, a stick figure is drawn outside of the circle. An arrow takes the stick figure from being outside the circle to inside the circle, and one or both above passages are placed over the arc of the arrow. That illustration has a lot of mileage in the Church of Christ. Let's take a moment to examine the words more closely: *ἐβαπτίσθημεν εἰς Χριστὸν Ἰησοῦν* (baptized into Christ Jesus) and *εἰς Χριστὸν ἐβαπτίσθητε* (into Christ you were baptized). The word translated "into" in both passages is the word *εἰς* (*eis*).

Another baptism passage that uses this word *eis* is Acts 2:38: Peter said to them, "Repent, and each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for [*eis*] the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2:38). It has been pointed out on several occasions that this is the same way the expression "for the forgiveness of sins" is used in Matthew 26:28. The expression "the forgiveness of sins" is also used in Acts 10:43 but notice what this passage says: "Of Him all the prophets bear witness that through His name everyone who believes in [*eis*] Him receives forgiveness of sins" (Acts 10:43). Can one believe "*εἰς Χριστὸν Ἰησοῦν*?" It seems like that's the case in this and many other passages (Matthew 18:6; John 1:12; John 2:11; John 3:16 to name a few).

One of the most interesting passages that uses *eis* is Romans 10:8-10:

But what does it say? "THE WORD IS NEAR YOU, IN YOUR MOUTH AND IN YOUR HEART" — that is, the word of faith which we are preaching, that if you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved; for with the heart a person believes, resulting [*eis*] in righteousness, and with the mouth he confesses, resulting [*eis*] in salvation.

If one believes in their heart and confesses the name of Jesus, then they are saved. Belief results in imputed righteousness (see the previous comments on Abraham), and one confesses into salvation. Since righteousness and salvation only exist "in Christ," then one believes and confesses into Christ. This may seem confusing to some, but as I noticed in the last section, salvation is not binary.

So, what does Paul mean when he speaks of people being baptized into Christ? 1 Corinthians 10 gives us the historical background to this phrase: "For I do not want you to be unaware, brethren, that

our fathers were all under the cloud and all passed through the sea; and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea” (1 Corinthians 10:1–2). Now, were they children of Abraham prior to their baptism? Hadn’t God presented His love towards them, and vice-versa, in all the events leading up to this from hearing their cry to the Passover meal? What changed about their relationship with Moses when they marched across the Red Sea? This act of total trust in Moses and God was a picture of their faith in action. Once they crossed the sea, there was no turning back. They showed Egypt, Moses, and the world that they were fully committed to following God and Moses wherever he may lead. Baptism is the same for us.

We put our faith in Jesus, confess His name, but baptism is when we demonstrate our faith in an action that serves as a picture of our death, burial, and resurrection with Christ. Now, going back to Moses, notice that despite the Egyptian armies dying in the water, there was still a future point wherein their reproach would be taken away (Joshua 5:9). Again, salvation isn’t binary. We are always being saved, and we are always growing up in the knowledge of our blessings because of Christ.

In conclusion, righteousness is counted to the account of the believer. They are justified by faith like Abraham, and, like Abraham’s circumcision, baptism is a sign of seal of the righteousness they had by faith. This is seen in the conversion of Cornelius and also in the fact that salvation is not simply and either/or, binary issue. This does not mean that baptism isn’t “necessary” or “needed,” but it does seek to place the emphasis of our conversion on the initial point of faith. If someone dies on the way to the baptistery, God looks at their heart. If someone is baptized simply to obey Jesus but doesn’t understand all of what baptism is, then they don’t need to be rebaptized.⁴

⁴ See Dr. Dallas Burdette’s essay on rebaptism in the Stone-Campbell Movement - <https://labornotinvain.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/PAGE-18-Chapter-9-Rebaptism-in-the-Stone-Campbell-Movement-JC-4-28-08.pdf>