

Question #5: “Can you prove baptism isn’t a work?”

Not to appear cute, but it all depends on the person I’m studying with. Many baptisms, and I would dare say almost all denominational baptisms, are taught and obeyed as a work. When Biblical faith is missing from any act, even an act of obedience to biblical commands, that act can become a dead work. Such “work” cannot save anyone. Faith is what saves us. Such is certainly the case with baptism.

New Testament (NT) water baptism must have the commanded Biblical faith in order to save. Romans 10:17 says: “*Faith comes from hearing and hearing by the word of Christ.*” Hebrews 11:1 indicates this faith regards things that “*are not seen*” physically. The Bible tells us of things our physical senses cannot discern, but are apprehended by a person’s faith. The Scriptures charge us to “*look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal*” (II Corinthians 4:18). These eternal things, which have to do with faith, are even more important than anything we see or even do! Therefore the phrase “*the obedience of faith*” found in Romans 1:5 and 16:26 becomes of paramount importance to the discussion of baptism.

The clearest Scripture for me regarding NT water baptism not being a work of man is Colossians 2:12. The NASB states it this way: “*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.*” Here God is doing the work! If true NT baptism is a work, it is God doing the work. Our part in baptism is specified as faith. The faith we have is in God’s work—His work in raising us up from the dead, as He did in raising Christ physically from the tomb! What a statement! At true Biblical baptism—we have the faith, God does the work. His work includes forgiving our sins and putting the Holy Spirit inside of us. This of course is dependent on our faith—the faith that He will forgive our sins in the water, and give us the Holy Spirit as we come out of the water. I love this verse because it is so simple and clear!

The second Scripture I would share on “proving” baptism is an act of faith, rather than a work of man, comes in Galatians 3:26-27. Here being an adopted son of God depends on and comes “*through faith in Christ Jesus*” (v.26). The next verse then connects this faith with baptism: “*For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ*” (v.27).

Personally, I see a connection here between faith to become a son of God and baptism clothing us with Christ. I have a best friend from the 5th grade who went to a Baptist Seminary and he can’t see the connection—we still go round and round on this one! But to me these two verses show that baptism is part of the faith that saves, rather than being a work of man.

Titus 3:5 clarifies the fact that works do not save us, but our faithful obedience certainly will! This verse states: *“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.”* Note that not even *“deeds we have done in righteousness”* will save us. Instead, we are saved *“according to His mercy.”* His mercy would include what Jesus has done by going to the cross in our place!

But the verse doesn't end there! The little word “by” connects to the ingredients designed by God to save us. The first listed is *“the washing of regeneration.”* What is the washing of regeneration, and when does it occur? These are pivotal questions. So far I've never heard a Biblically reasonable answer other than water baptism coupled with the prescribed NT faith (to obtain the forgiveness of sins and receive the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit).

The second listed ingredient for salvation in Titus 3:5 has to do with *“renewing by the Holy Spirit.”* Consistently the NT Scriptures reveal the fact that the Holy Spirit is initially received at NT water baptism, as first modeled by Jesus when He was baptized by John. But note that renewal by the Holy Spirit requires our participation, and is not forced upon us by the Holy Spirit acting alone.

Two Scriptures clearly relate to the fact that this renewal by the power of the Holy Spirit requires an individual's active participation. Romans 8:13-14 show this in speaking to those who have already become Christians: *“if you are living according to the flesh, you must die; but if **by** the Spirit **you** are putting to death the deeds of the body, you will live. For all those who are being led by the Spirit of God, these are the sons of God.”* Note the little word “by” here again—God's salvation requires our active participation in faith and obedience for His power to yield salvation for the individual.

The second Scripture that shows our participation in this renewal, as facilitated by the Holy Spirit, comes in Romans 12:2. We are to *“be transformed by the renewing of your mind....”* Of course this transformation, or “metamorphosis” in the Greek, comes about through the power and design of the indwelling Holy Spirit. II Cor. 3:18 also clearly shows the Holy Spirit's work and participation in the transformation process. But Romans 12:2 is a command to the Christian! So the renewal of the Holy Spirit depends very much on our being led by Him—our decision, our faith, our trust, and our obedience.

So it all depends on a person's position. If a person understands baptism to be a work and goes into the water as such, getting wet is all that happens. But if a person understands baptism as an obedient act of faith, and he believes that God will forgive his sins in the water and give him the Holy Spirit as he comes up out of the water—many Scriptures make it clear that **this** baptism will save him.

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