

I'm studying the book of Ezra-Nehemiah right now. One of the challenges the returned community faced over time is referred to as "syncretism." Instead of being distinct from the people around them and instead of showing them the Lord, they were trying to serve the Lord while at the same time becoming one with the peoples and religions around them - just like before. Our postmodern world continues to tell us that truth is indefinite, flexible, and often unimportant. Knowledge of truth really can make us arrogant (cf. 1 Corinthians 8:1), but truth still matters. I'm concerned that we are in serious danger of becoming like the culture and religions around us.

As I talk to people and listen to others preach, I am seeing trends of more evangelical Christians speak in a more healthy way about faith and baptism. That's exciting. However, the predominate teaching by evangelicals continues to be that we come into a relationship with God through Jesus through a prayer of faith asking Jesus to come into our hearts, and that baptism has nothing to do with God's saving of us. What does God's word teach?

Two Examples

- **Acts 2:38.** This is Peter's response to the crowd when they want to know what they should do since they crucified the Lord Jesus. His answer: repent and be baptized for the forgiveness of sins and to receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. Notice **Acts 2:41**. Those who received his message - three thousand - were baptized that same day.
- **Acts 22:6-16.** Paul received a special revelation from the Lord and waited three days fasting (9:9). Then Ananias healed Paul of his blindness. Yet, Ananias still told Paul to arise, be baptized and wash away his sins, calling on the name of the Lord. If baptism has no place in our actual salvation, why did Peter command it? And why did Ananias tell someone who had seen and believed in the Lord to have his sins washed away in baptism?

Why? What Is Baptism, Really?

- **Romans 6:1-4.** Christ died, was buried, and God raised him. We can join his story too when we are baptized. In faith and baptism, we have a spiritual resurrection of our own. One day we will have a bodily resurrection. According to Paul, this all happens at baptism. *But we aren't simply making Jesus' story our own.*
- **1 Peter 3:18-22.** When we are saved by washing in baptism, we are saved through water just like Noah. The water isn't special. The power in baptism is in this: we are appealing to God - who raised Jesus - to give us a good conscience.
- **1 Corinthians 10:1-5.** When we are baptized we are participating in a **type** of the experience Israel participated in when they went through the Red Sea. So, we see that God has often saved by faith and by water in the past. Through faith and baptism, God is fulfilling a key biblical storyline in us.

What about Salvation by Grace through Faith?

- **Ephesians 2:8-10.** We are saved by grace *through faith*. This is not a result of our own works, so that no one can boast. God saves us for his glory because of his kindness, not by our works for our glory. Works should result from real faith and salvation.
- The Catholic Church is foolish to sprinkles babies and declare them saved by this work. Babies have no faith at that time. This is contradictory to the salvation by grace through faith that Jesus and the apostles taught by the Spirit. By showing you these passages, I am in no way arguing for Catholicism's approach to faith or baptism.
- Furthermore, I have both seen and heard of many family members in our own tradition pressure their children and grandchildren to be baptized without patiently teaching them over time from home of the faith in God they need to have. I'm not advocating for that either by showing you these passages.
- These approaches to baptism miss the point. The Bible is not teaching that God was required to save Noah and Israel because of all their good deeds. With respect to Israel, we know their deeds were not that great. As **Hebrews 11:7** and **11:29**, God rescued them by their *faith*. But notice that Noah built the ark and got in it. Notice how Israel left Egypt and crossed the Red Sea. This all happened by God's power and grace, but Noah had to build and get in the boat and Israel had to cross the sea and receive salvation *by faith*. This is not a result of works, but a result of God's power and grace.
- **Colossians 2:11-14.** We were dead in sin, but we were buried and raised with Christ. We were uncircumcised, but our baptism is described as the circumcision of Christ. Like Romans 6, we are buried and raised with Christ. But notice *why* baptism is effective for us: through our faith in the powerful working of God. Baptism is us putting faith in God's ability to raise us. It is not us doing a good work. It is not us earning God's salvation. It is us submitting in faith to Christ's "surgery" - circumcision.

Clarifications

- *This is not to say that God could never choose to save someone for whom baptism is not possible (i.e., the thief on the cross in Luke 23:39-43; though, keep in mind that baptism did not yet carry the imagery nor power of Christ's resurrection (cf. Romans 6) nor the gift of the Holy Spirit (cf. Acts 2:38-39;)).
- **Notice **Romans 10:5-13**. This is not a rejection of Paul's teaching that those who confess with the mouth, believe in their heart, call in the name of the Lord, etc. will be saved. This is meant to be a harmonizing of these texts which speak of our salvation by faith and confession and baptism. Note in **Acts 22:17** how Paul is commanded to be baptized and call on the name of the Lord in the same breath. It might be said that when proper faith and baptism come together, it is seen by God as our call - our plea - to the Lord to rescue us by his power and mercy. We must remember: one single text is not typically meant to describe every aspect of what someone does or believes to be saved nor of what one experiences when one is saved. If that were the case, then James' discussion of salvation by faith and works and Peter's description of our salvation by

baptism in 1 Peter 3:21 are problems. We must not pick and choose favorite scriptures and twist them to our own destruction, but consider all the counsel of God.

Does This Really Matter?

- **Ephesians 4:1-6.** It is clear from verses 1-3 that we need to be gentle and patient with one another. We need to act in this way because we will have disagreements and difficulties among each other. Romans 14 speaks of how we will have differences with in our strong opinions, but we must not let those things divide us. However, Ephesians 4:4-6 shows us that there are a number of realities, beliefs, and experiences that unite all children of God on the same foundation. We are part of one body. We all have the same Spirit. The list continues. If someone proclaims a different Lord other than Jesus, are we united on the same foundation? Certainly not. If someone believes in the same Lord, but is has not been baptized, are we united on the same foundation? If someone proclaims that, contrary to Scripture, baptism plays no part in our salvation or our uniting with Christ, are we united on the same foundation? Based on this text, it seems not. This text teaches that all God's children share in each of these realities, beliefs, and experiences. It does not seem to be fair to the text of the Bible to elevate some of these "ones" above others as we consider the importance of this matter.
- **2 Corinthians 11:1-4.** The Corinthians were a really accepting church. Unfortunately, they were too accepting. Paul rebukes them in 1 Corinthians 5 for accepting a brother who was living in sexual immorality. Here he rebukes them for accepting teachers who spoke of a different Lord, spirit, and gospel. Based on Ephesians 4, I imagine Paul could have similarly rebuked them if they had accepted a different baptism.
- Now, a personal story to illustrate the danger of separating faith and baptism. I remember studying in the Gospel of Mark with a Chinese woman very regularly from December, 2016 to January, 2017. She seemed close to faith, but not there yet. She returned to China at the end of January and we continued correspondence occasionally. In one correspondence that summer, she referred to herself as a Christian. I was shocked and encouraged. I setup a video meeting with her to ask her about this. I had assumed she had recently decided to put her faith in Jesus for salvation and to be baptized, as I had previously taught her. She told me that she had actually decided to become a Christian at the beginning of the new year in January. She was at a church service and a leader there encouraged her to pray and "ask Jesus into her heart." Baptism wasn't even suggested. I showed her the passages in the Bible regarding baptism - how it images our death, burial, and resurrection with Jesus into a new life. "The old you will be dead. By faith and the regeneration of the Spirit, a new person will come up." I thought she would be eager to be baptized since she had already made a commitment to the Lord back in January. Her reply? "I will need to think about this. Baptism sounds like a big commitment to make. It is very serious." Do you see the problem? Her prayer to accept Jesus into her heart wasn't even spoken of in the Bible, and it certainly did not convey the seriousness of mind she needed to have proper faith. I'm not saying that baptism cannot be misconstrued either. I have seen similar blunders in my tradition: over-emphasizing baptism and de-emphasizing faith. Both are equally troubling. Let us emphasize both and not leave off either in our teaching or reception of salvation.

Conclusion

- Notice Paul's description of our lost condition, salvation, and resulting works as described in **Titus 3:3-8**.
- If I were to choose one text to try to represent most of what we are doing and most of what God is doing to us in our salvation, it would probably be this text. Paul talks about God's mercy that saves us, not our works. He speaks of our washing of regeneration (baptism) and our renewal by the Holy Spirit. He speaks of us as those who have believed in God. These things are all part of the same story of God's merciful salvation in us. Why should we lessen the significance of any one of these aspects of God's saving of us?
- I hope we see God's careful planning here. What he tells us to do and what he blesses us with is not random. Isn't it awesome how carefully he has considered our situation and how carefully he has weaved our stories into the history of the world? How awesome is it how - in a sense - God has given us experiences that correspond to the experiences of Noah, Abraham, and all Israel?! But he has given us even more in Jesus Christ. When Jesus was exalted, all believers were given the opportunity to share in the presence of the Holy Spirit. Each of us who have believed and been baptized have been blessed with God's active, life-giving presence inside us. People don't have to go to Jerusalem to know God. We are being transformed into mobile temples so that God's name and glory can go to Houston, Texas, and the ends of the earth. Let's take part in God's plan for us and for the world.