**Is Baptism a Work of Salvation?**

I have repeatedly gotten questions at my web site asking about where baptism fits into Christianity. These questions usually come from people who have been influenced by the prevailing theological and doctrinal landscape within evangelical Christianity—primarily from reformed theology and Calvinism. The premise of these questions involves two aspects. First, can any action on the part of a human being be part of or required for salvation? The second underlying question, is how can baptism, which is presumed to be a work of man, be required for salvation. For example, just this week I got a question, “How can baptism be a saving act?” The concern of the one asking the question is that if baptism is something we do, and given that salvation is by grace and faith alone, how can it be required for salvation? This is not intended to be a comprehensive answer to this important question, but simply as an initial response, with the hope that those who read this article will be motivated to investigate the theological, doctrinal and biblical issues around this very important question.

Question: How Can Baptism be a saving act? (Note: this was part of a longer question, as will be seen below)

Response:

If God tells us in the Bible that we are saved when we are baptized (as I will show below), then it is true.   If the theology you were raised with makes that conclusion impossible, then this means that the theology you were taught is not correct. All Bible-believing Christians agree that we are not saved by works because the Bible says that we are not saved by works. Ephesians 2:10-11 teaches this, as do many other scriptures.  No act or set of acts of a human being can earn salvation.   We are saved by the grace of God, through the blood of Jesus and through our faith in that saving act (Romans 3:21-25).  That is the end of the story and there is no question about this.

The question is not whether we can be saved by our own works.  The question is what is required of us so that we can receive this freely given salvation.   Jesus was asked what works are required in order for us to be saved (John 6:28-29).  He did not say what many evangelicals and others influenced by Reformed theology would say, which is that no work is needed in order for us to be saved—we are saved by “faith alone”.  Jesus said that the "work of God is to believe."  To believe in God is a "work" according to Jesus.  It is a thing we do in order to be saved. It is not that God does not ask us to do anything to be saved, but that no work on our part can save us.  It is God who does the saving, through the blood of Jesus.  Let me say it again.  The fact that God asks us to do something in order to be saved (in this case, to believe in him) does not mean we are saved by works.  Our belief does not save us.  Neither does our baptism save us.  It is the grace of God through the blood of Jesus that saves us.  According to the Bible, our baptism is simply when he does the saving.

As already stated, we are not saved by works, but this does not mean that salvation comes with absolutely “no strings attached.” God has offered salvation, but obviously not all have received this salvation. God has told us that in order to receive this salvation we must believe, repent and be baptized. If we choose not to believe or to repent, then we will not receive the gift. It is not that the gift is not totally free. God does not force us to be saved. If I offer to give you $10,000, but you must come to accept the gift offered, you are not by taking the money offered earning the money.

How can we know that baptism is the point in time when we are saved (and therefore, without it we are not saved)? The answer is that this is, unambiguously what the Bible teaches. In Galatians 3:27, for example, we are told that “all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.” We were at one time outside of Christ, but we are now in Christ, and in baptism is when we came into Christ, as is taught here in Galatians, and also in Romans 6:3, where it tells us that we were baptized into Christ. There is no other command anywhere in the New Testament which connects anything other than baptism to our coming “into Christ.” I could go on at great length about this, but will leave at that for now.

You noted in the previous article that I said that baptism, unlike belief, is not something we do.  This is true.  It is something done to us.  It is something done to us by a person in the physical sense, obviously, but in a baptism it is not a person who does something.  It is God who does something.  Like it is clearly stated in Acts 2:38, when we are baptized we are forgiven of our sins and we receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.  Nothing could be more plain than this, despite the fact that so many churches teach something very different which is never mentioned in the scripture (that we are saved by/when saying a prayer or asking Jesus into our hearts--this is not found in the scripture anywhere).  You seem concerned that if we are saved at the time we are baptized (which is the clear teaching of scripture) then this means that something someone else does is saving us.  First of all, I am sure that we can all agree that nothing another human does can save us.  In baptism it is God working, not us and certainly not someone else.  I suppose God could have asked us to use a machine to do baptisms, but that would be pretty silly, and it would also be hard to do.  In fact, in Colossians 2:11-12 we are told that it is God's power working when we are baptized, and that power is energized by our faith.  The Bible puts no emphasis on the one doing the baptizing.

What I am saying is that, in my opinion, God chose a passive act (us being baptized by someone else rather than by ourselves) as a means to remind ourselves that it is nothing we do that saves us.  Even the grammar used supports the fact that baptism is not a work of man. We are told to “be baptized.” Grammatically, the passive voice is used. Baptism is something done to us. For your information, the Jews had many baptisms, but Jewish baptism involved a person baptizing themselves.  I have witnessed this at the Jordan River myself two years ago. Many Jews came there for baptism, but I was shocked to realize that Jewish baptism involves people baptizing themselves.  The Christian church changed this to a passive act, so that from the ministry of John onwards baptism is became something done to us, not something we do.  I appreciate God's wisdom in this. Here is the bottom line, even if we could show that God does not require any “work” on our part for salvation, which I have already shown, it is crystal clear that biblically, baptism is NOT a work done by man. Rather it is a work done by God.

You ask: "*Wouldn't the fact that a man can refuse to be baptized imply that it isn't something done purely TO him?"*Let me respectfully submit that this does not make any sense.  If I refuse to let someone do something to me, this does not mean that they were not purely doing it to me.  If I refuse to let someone punch me, that does not mean that the punch was not purely done to me.  This is not logical.  I think that Calvinist teaching has your head tied up in a bit of a knot.  I submit that, rather than being controlled by the "faith alone" doctrine of Luther and Calvin, you simply ask what the Bible teaches.  It teaches that we are saved when we are baptized.  It is not complicated. No work can save us.  That is plain, but God does require that we repent and believe in him, which is something we "do", without which we will not be saved.  After repenting, then God asks us to submit to being baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins.  This is Bible, plain and simple.

Jesus' death was enough for all to be saved, yet clearly not all are saved.  We must respond to the gospel to be saved.  The fact that we must respond does not mean that the death of Jesus is not enough.  It was more than enough.  Yet, we must put our faith in that death.  We must decide in our minds and hearts to accept that death and even to be motivated to repent of our sins because of that death.  Yes, that death is sufficient to save us and it is also sufficient motivation for us to repent of our sins.

As to making effort to change, Paul is not embarrassed to say that he made all kinds of effort to change and to help others to change (Colossians 1:29).  In Hebrews 4:11 we are admonished to make every effort to enter heaven.  It is not our effort that saves us and neither is it our effort that keeps us saved, but God commands, nevertheless, that we make effort to be faithful and to strive for holiness.  This is biblical.  Nowhere in the Bible does it say that "the only effort we should make is to surrender to him."  In fact, nowhere does it say anything like this.  Paul said that he beat his body in order not to be disqualified for the prize, which is heaven.  He said this in 1 Corinthians 9:27.  If I can say this humbly and respectfully, I am afraid that you were raised with some theology which is making it hard for you to understand some rather plain passages of scripture about our work and our effort.  These things do not save us, obviously, but the Bible talks about them a lot, nevertheless.  Without effort we will not stay saved.  This is what the Bible teaches.  This message is written all across the book of Hebrews.  We must live by faith in order to make it (Hebrews 6:11-12).

Let me close with a suggestion, which is to consider reading a wonderful book titled "Life in the Son."  It is by Robert Shank.  He is a former Calvinist who was raised with a theology similar to what it appears you were raised with.  He can relate to the kinds of quandaries you are finding. I believe he can do a better job than I of helping you to rethink some of your presuppositions.  I hope this helps.  There is also the book by F. Lagard Smith titled Troubling Questions for Calvinists which you might find useful.

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