

Is Baptism an Outward Expression of an Inward Faith?

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Many Christians have heard the phrase, "Baptism is an outward expression of an inward faith." It is meant to explain that a person is saved the moment he believes, and that baptism afterward simply pictures, for others to see, what has already taken place inside the heart.

The phrase sounds reasonable. It is spoken often enough that few people stop to ask where it comes from. But familiarity is not the same as truth, and a saying repeated for years can still be tested by a single question: does the Bible actually teach it?

Jesus warned against confusing human tradition with divine command. "In vain they worship Me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men" (Matthew 15:9). He also said that His words, not the traditions surrounding them, will judge us in the end: "The word that I have spoken will judge him in the last day" (John 12:48). If that is true, then what matters is not how comfortable a phrase feels, but what God has actually said. So let us set the familiar saying aside for a moment and simply read.

When Jesus commissioned His apostles, He placed baptism at the threshold of discipleship, not somewhere down the road from it. "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Matthew 28:19). Mark records the same commission with a sentence that is hard to soften: "He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned" (Mark 16:16).

Read that sentence carefully. Jesus did not say the believer is saved and then baptized as proof of it. He joined belief and baptism together, both preceding the word "saved." Whatever baptism is, Jesus did not describe it as something that happens after salvation to announce it publicly.

The pattern holds on the day the church began. Peter stood before the crowd at Pentecost and preached that the Jesus they had crucified was now both Lord and Christ (Acts 2:36). The response was immediate and inward: "Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart" (Acts 2:37). Conviction had already taken hold. If there was ever a moment for Peter to assure the crowd that their inward faith had already saved them, this was it.

He said nothing of the kind. When they asked what they should do, Peter answered, "Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins" (Acts 2:38). Those who received his word gladly were baptized (Acts 2:41). Peter did not call believing sinners to a symbol. He called them to an act tied directly to the forgiveness of their sins.

Saul of Tarsus removes any doubt that sincerity alone was the issue. After the risen Christ confronted him on the road to Damascus, Saul spent three days blind, neither eating nor drinking, given entirely to prayer (Acts 9:9, 11). No one reading that account would question the sincerity of his faith. Yet when Ananias arrived, he did not tell Saul that his sins were already forgiven. He said, "And now why are you waiting? Arise and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on the name of the Lord" (Acts 22:16).

If Saul's sins had already been washed away by faith alone, Ananias chose strange words to describe what remained. "Wash away your sins" is not the language of celebration after the fact. It is an instruction still to be carried out.

Paul later explains why baptism carries this weight. In Romans 6 he writes, "Do you not know that as many of us as were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death? Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death" (Romans 6:3-4). Notice the preposition. Paul does not say believers are baptized after entering Christ. He says they are baptized into Christ. Baptism is not a picture painted after the union with Christ has already occurred; it is where Paul locates that union.

None of this suggests that water itself holds any power to save. Scripture never grants water such a quality. The power belongs to God alone, made available only through the death, burial, and resurrection of His Son. That is exactly why baptism matters. It is not a work offered to God in exchange for salvation, but the point at which a sinner, trusting entirely in what God has done, submits to what God has commanded. Paul makes the direction of that trust explicit in Colossians 2:12, describing believers as "buried with Him in baptism, in which you also were raised with Him through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead." The faith is not in the act of being baptized. It is in the God who works through it.

Galatians states the same truth from another angle. "For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ" (Galatians 3:26-27). Faith and baptism are not rivals competing for credit. Scripture holds them together, and baptism is where Paul says the believer puts on Christ, not merely where he announces that he already has.

Peter adds one more line that deserves to be read without softening. Reflecting on Noah and the flood, he writes that baptism "now saves us... not the removal of the filth of the flesh, but the answer of a good conscience toward God, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ" (1 Peter 3:21). Peter is careful to explain what he does not mean. He is not describing dirt washed from skin. He is describing an appeal made to God on the basis of the resurrection. But he does not shrink from the word "saves." Perhaps we should not shrink from it either.

Taken together, these passages describe baptism as tied to salvation (Mark 16:16), to the remission of sins (Acts 2:38), to the washing away of sins (Acts 22:16), to entering Christ (Romans 6:3, Galatians 3:27), to union with His death and burial (Romans 6:3-4), and to an appeal to God through the resurrection (1 Peter 3:21). That is a great deal of Scripture pointing in the same direction.

It can be easy to hold onto a phrase simply because we have heard it since childhood, without asking whether it still matches what the text actually says. That is not a failure of sincerity. It is simply what happens when tradition goes unexamined for too long. The answer is not to defend the phrase more firmly, but to return to the page with open hands.

The question worth asking is not what we were taught, or what our fellowship has always said. The question is what God has said. If Scripture described baptism as nothing more than a public demonstration of a salvation already received, we should say exactly that and nothing more. But since the Bible describes baptism as the place where a sinner is united with Christ, forgiven, and raised to new life, then our language should be shaped by the text rather than the text bent to fit our language.

Jesus said, "If you love Me, keep My commandments" (John 14:15). Faith that truly trusts Him does not look for reasons to set His commands aside. It listens, and it obeys. When someone asks why baptism matters, we do not need a clever explanation of our own. We only need to open the Scriptures and let Jesus, Peter, and Paul say what they have already said so plainly.