

Entrust Church History Baptism, the Gospel, & the Early Church 3/3/22

Introduction:

- Water baptism is an ordinance of the church, instituted by Jesus, in which believers publicly identify themselves with their Lord and Savior.
- It pictures one's death to sin and new life in Christ, and signifies the reality that, through faith in Christ, they have been born again (regenerated), forgiven from sin, united to Christ, and sealed by the Holy Spirit who indwells them.
- Water baptism also signifies their incorporation into Christ's body, the church.
- Water baptism is a physical sign that symbolizes a spiritual reality. Thus, water baptism does not result in regeneration or forgiveness or new life in Christ. Rather, it reflects those realities, and makes a public declaration of them.
- It must be stressed that the New Testament does not teach that water baptism carries with it any saving power. It is an ordinance; an external symbol that represents an inward, saving reality.
- Salvation is by faith alone in Christ alone, not the act of water baptism. The mercy of God in salvation is granted to the sinner by faith in the person and finished work of Christ alone, not by the ordinance of baptism:

Jesus spoke of the tax collector as justified apart from baptism:

Luke 18:13-14 "But the tax collector, standing some distance away, was even unwilling to lift up his eyes to heaven, but was beating his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me, the sinner!' ¹⁴ "I tell you, this man went to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted."

Jesus said that the thief would be in heaven that very day, despite not having been baptized:

Luke 23:42-43 And he was saying, "Jesus, remember me when You come in Your kingdom!" ⁴³ And He said to him, "Truly I say to you, today you shall be with Me in Paradise."

Peter clarifies that water baptism does not save:

1 Peter 3:21-22 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, ²² who is at the right hand of God, having gone into heaven, after angels and authorities and powers had been subjected to Him.

- Taken together with other passages which explicitly teach that salvation is by faith alone in Christ alone, we understand that the NT teaches that water baptism is not efficacious in salvation (e.g. Rom 3:21-28, Gal 2:16, Eph 2:8-9, Titus 3:5).
- Nevertheless, baptism is an ordinance commanded for Christians following one's salvation (Matt 28:19, Acts 2:38).

I. In what way did the early church practice baptism?

- Justin Martyr (ca. 100-165) ¹
 - He claims that his practice of baptism came from the apostles, thus was already traditional at the time.
 - Baptism was for those who were regenerate and had repented of their sins (*1 Apology 61.10*).
 - Baptism was reserved for those persuaded about Christian teaching, had placed their trust in it, and promised to live the Christian life (*61.2*).
 - This promise included a rejection of idols (*49.5*) and a change in one's moral life (*14.2-4*).
 - A time of instruction preceded the candidate's baptism.
 - On the day of baptism, the individual was taken to a water source. The baptism was performed in the name of the Father, Son, and Spirit.
 - The individual was baptized by immersion.
 - The implications of Justin's account are that individuals of cognitive, responsible age were those baptized.

¹ Ferguson, 238ff.

- Since baptism was for: (1) the regenerate, (2) those who needed to have a viable Christian testimony, (3) those who had to profess faith and give consent to the faith, it raises the question whether infant baptism was practiced. This is an argument for silence, however.

- Ignatius²
 - Baptism and the Lord's Supper were to be performed by the "bishop" or "by whomever he permits" (*Smyrnaeans 8.1*).

 - He opposed assemblies not under the supervision of the bishop as it would provide opportunities for false teachings that would harm God's people.

- Shepherd of Hermas³
 - Written mid-second century

 - Baptism was associated with hearing the word of the Lord, believing in Christ, and repentance of sin.

 - The mode of baptism was to be immersion.

- When did infant baptism arise?
 - For a biblical analysis of infant baptism, see Entrust, *Systematic Theology, Ecclesiology: Baptism & Communion*.

 - There is general agreement that there is no firm evidence for infant baptism before the latter part of the second century.⁴

 - Paedobaptism was not practiced in the church until the third and fourth centuries.⁵

 - There was a slow extension of baptizing babies as a precautionary measure.

² Ferguson, 209ff.

³ Ferguson, 220.

⁴ Ferguson, 856.

⁵ Nate Busenitz, *Historical Theology I*, "Water Baptism, Salvation by Faith Alone, and the Church Fathers," p. 196. Cf. Everett Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009). Also, Hendrick Stander and Johannes Louw, *Baptism in the Early Church* (Evangelical Press, 2004).

- Paedobaptism began to be generally accepted, but questions continued to be raised about its appropriateness into the fifth century.
- However, it became common practice in the fifth and sixth centuries.⁶
- Why did infant baptism arise?⁷
 - As we will observe in section II below, some church fathers were confused about the efficacy of baptism. Namely, some held to a form of baptismal regeneration.
 - Consequent of that confusion, there arose a growing concern for the eternal well-being of babies who died during infancy, but had not been baptized.
 - Therefore, the most plausible explanation for the origin of infant baptism is found in the emergency baptism of sick children expected to die soon so that they would be assured of entrance into the kingdom of heaven.
- What was the mode of baptism?⁸
 - The Christian literary sources, backed by secular word usage and Jewish religious immersions, give an overwhelming support for full immersion as the normal action.
 - Exceptions were made for individuals who were confined to bed due to illness, or when a sufficient water source was unavailable.

II. What did the church fathers teach about the efficacy of water baptism?

- Early in church history, Christians began to equate the physical sign with the spiritual reality. Consequently, they taught that the external act of water baptism effects regeneration, forgiveness, and the reception of the Holy Spirit.
- Since regeneration and forgiveness are necessary for salvation, some church fathers likewise taught that water baptism is necessary for salvation.

⁶ Ferguson, 857.

⁷ Ibid., 856.

⁸ Ibid., 857.

- The confusion of the physical sign with the spiritual reality led to theological problems.
 - The first was the development of infant baptism.
 - Due to a high infant mortality rate, Christian parents were worried that if their young children died without baptism they would not go to heaven.
 - This “emergency practice” likely started in the third century and became a mainstream practice of the church by the fourth and fifth centuries.
 - Another theological problem was the delay of water baptism by adults who, believing that baptism forgave all previous sins, wanted to wait until the end of their lives to be baptized.
 - This resulted in a high number of “death bed” baptisms in the fourth and fifth centuries – eventually leading to the development of the Roman Catholic practice of last rites.
- Despite insistence on water baptism as necessary for salvation, some church fathers also taught that salvation is by grace alone through faith alone.
- Thus, there was an inconsistency with the understanding of baptism and soteriology.

A. The Didache (the earliest patristic document, ca. late first century)

This is the earliest Christian document outside of the NT.

It does not speak of baptism in terms of baptismal regeneration.

- Though the Didache does not teach baptismal regeneration, it does indicate that the non-baptized were not permitted to participate in the Lord’s Supper.

The Didache: After the foregoing instructions, baptize in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, in living [running] water. If you have no living water, then baptize in other water, and if you are not able in cold, then in warm. If you have neither, pour water three times on the head, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Before baptism, let the one baptizing and the one to be baptized fast, as also any others who are able. Command the one who is to be baptized to fast beforehand for one or two days.⁹

The Didache: No one is to eat or drink of your eucharist except those who have been baptized into the name of the Lord.¹⁰

- B. From the second century on, some patristic writers equated water baptism with regeneration (the “new birth”). The primary verse used to support this connection was John 3:5.

Justin Martyr (d. 165): As many as are persuaded and believe that what we [Christians] teach and say is true, and undertake to be able to live accordingly, and instructed to pray and to entreat God with fasting, for the remission of their sins that are past, we pray and fast with them. Then they are brought by us where there is water and are regenerated in the same manner in which we were ourselves regenerated. For, in the name of God, the Father . . . and of our Savior Jesus Christ, and of the Holy Spirit [Matt. 28:19], they then receive the washing with water. For Christ also said, “Unless you are born again, you shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven.”¹¹

NOTE: Justin seems to indicate that the remission of sins took place before baptism. Later church fathers seem to view baptism as being concurrent with the remission of sins.

Irenaeus (d. c. 202): “And dipped himself,” says [the Scripture], “seven times in Jordan.” It was not for nothing that Naaman of old, when suffering from leprosy, was purified upon his being baptized, but it served as an indication to us. For as we are lepers in sin, we are made clean, by means of the sacred water and the invocation of the Lord, from our old transgressions; being spiritually regenerated as new-born babes, even as the Lord has declared: “Except a man be born again through water and the Spirit, he shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven.”¹²

Cyprian (c. 200–258): [I]t behooves those to be baptized . . . so that they are prepared, in the lawful and true and only baptism of the holy Church, by divine regeneration, for the kingdom of God . . . because it is written

⁹ *Didache*, 7.1–4.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 9.5.

¹¹ Justin Martyr, *First Apology*, 61.

¹² Irenaeus, *Fragment*, 34.

“Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God.”¹³

Ambrose (333-397): You have read, therefore, that the three witnesses in Baptism are one: water, blood and the Spirit [1 John 5:8]: and if you withdraw any one of these, the sacrament of Baptism is not valid. For what is the water without the cross of Christ? A common element with no sacramental effect. Nor on the other hand is there any mystery of regeneration without water: for “unless a man be born again of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.”¹⁴

III. How does the patristic emphasis on baptism compare with the church fathers understanding of salvation by faith alone?

- A. As a parallel to the first point noted above, the earliest church documents teach salvation by faith apart from works. (This is, in fact, a consistent emphasis throughout all of the church fathers [see below].)

Clement of Rome (d. c. 100): And we [Christians], too, being called by His will in Christ Jesus, are not justified by ourselves, nor by our own wisdom, or understanding, or godliness, or works which we have wrought in holiness of heart; but by that faith through which, from the beginning, Almighty God has justified all men; to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen.¹⁵

Polycarp (c. 69-160): Even without seeing him, you believe in him with an inexpressible and glorious joy that many long to experience. For you know that you have been saved by a gracious gift – not from works but by the will of God through Jesus Christ.¹⁶

- B. The church fathers acknowledge times when regeneration occurred by faith and *preceded* baptism.

Cyril of Jerusalem: The water cleanses the body, and the Spirit seals the soul, that we may draw near to god, “having our heart sprinkled” by the Spirit “and our body washed with pure water.” . . . Neither does he who is baptized with water, but not found worthy of the Spirit, receive the grace in perfection; nor if a person is virtuous in his deeds, but receives not the

¹³ Cyprian, *Epistles*, 72 [73]: 21.

¹⁴ Ambrose, *On the Mysteries* 4.20.

¹⁵ Clement of Rome, *First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 32.4.

¹⁶ Polycarp, *Epistle to the Philippians* 1.2-3; trans. by Bart D. Ehrman, *The Apostolic Fathers*, Loeb, 333-335. Cf. Polycarp, *Epistle to the Ephesians*, 12.

seal by water, shall he enter into the kingdom of heaven. A bold saying, but not mine, for it is Jesus who has declared it, and here is the proof of the statement from holy Scripture. Cornelius was a just man who was honored with a vision of angels and had set up his prayers and alms deeds as a good memorial before God in heaven. Peter came, and the Spirit was poured out on them that believed, and they spoke with other tongues and prophesied. And after the grace of the Spirit the Scripture says that Peter commanded them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ in order that, the soul having been born again by faith, the body also might by the water partake of the grace.¹⁷

C. The church fathers associate the forgiveness of sins with faith alone.

John Chrysostom (again) [regarding Luke 18:9-14]: Would you know how good our Master is? The Publican went up full of ten thousand wickednesses, and saying only, "Be merciful unto me," went down justified. (Luke 18:13, 14.) Yea, God says by the prophet, "Because of sin for some little season I grieved him, and I saw that he was grieved and went sorrowful, and I healed his ways" (Isaiah 57:17, 18). What is there equal to this lovingkindness? On condition of his "being but sorrowful," so he speaks, "I forgave him his sins."¹⁸

Ambrosiaster: It is determined by God that whoever believes in Christ shall be saved and have forgiveness of sins, not through works but through faith alone, without merit.¹⁹

D. The church fathers associate the giving of the Holy Spirit with faith alone.

Ambrose: Ye behold the mysteries, ye behold the grace of Christ, and the grace of the Holy Spirit, which is conferred in some sort fortuitously; forasmuch as everyone is not justified by the Lord by reason of his works, but by reason of his faith.²⁰

John Chrysostom: It would not be right that the grace of the Spirit should come to one who was graceless or full of offense. We are blessed first by the taking away of the curse. Then, justified by faith, we receive the grace of the Holy Spirit. So the cross has dissolved the curse, faith has brought

¹⁷ Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catechetical Lectures*, 3.4. ACCS, Acts, 141. [NN] Cf. Origen, *Romans* 5.7.3.

¹⁸ John Chrysostom, Homily 8, *1 Corinthians*, 1 Corinthians 3:1-3.

¹⁹ Ambrosiaster, Commentary on 1 Corinthians 1.4; cited from Joel C. Elowsky, *We Believe in the Holy Spirit*, 97.

²⁰ Ambrose, *An Exhortation to Virginity*; cited from George Finch, *A Sketch of the Romish Controversy*, 220.

righteousness, and by God's own righteousness the grace of the Spirit has been given.²¹

Jerome: You have received by faith alone the Holy Spirit who is not received except by the righteous. ... Abraham believed and it was credited to him as righteousness. Likewise also for you faith alone suffices as righteousness.²²

E. The church fathers taught that faith alone is necessary for salvation.

Orige: [Regarding the Thief on the Cross]: Who has been justified by faith alone without works of the law? Thus in my opinion that thief [who] was crucified with Christ should suffice for a suitable example. He called out to him from the cross, "Lord Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom!" In the Gospels, nothing else is recorded about his good works, but for the sake of this faith alone Jesus said to him, "Truly I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise.²³

John Chrysostom (on Gal. 3:8): And this he removes, with great skill and prudence, turning their argument against themselves, and showing that those who relinquish the Law are not only not cursed, but blessed; and they who keep it, not only not blessed but cursed. They said that he who kept not the Law was cursed, but he proves that he who kept it was cursed, and he who kept it not, blessed. Again, they said that he who adhered to faith alone was cursed, but he shows that he who adhered to faith alone, is blessed. And how does he prove all this? for it is no common thing which we have promised; wherefore it is necessary to give close attention to what follows. He had already shown this, by referring to the words spoken to the Patriarch, 'In thee shall all nations be blessed,' (Genesis 12:4.) at a time, that is, when Faith existed, not the Law.²⁴

John Chrysostom [regarding Luke 18:9-14]: Would you know how good our Master is? The Publican went up full of ten thousand wickednesses, and saying only, "Be merciful unto me," went down justified. (Luke 18:13, 14.) Yea, God says by the prophet, "Because of sin for some little season I grieved him, and I saw that he was grieved and went sorrowful, and I

²¹ John Chrysostom, *Homily on Galatians*, 3.14. NPNF 1 13:27. ACCS, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, 40-41.

²² Jerome, *Commentary on the Pauline Epistles*, Galatians 3.6; Cited from Joel C. Elowsky, *We Believe in the Holy Spirit*, 98.

²³ Origen, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* 3.9.3; Cited from Joel C. Elowsky, *We Believe in the Holy Spirit*, 99.

²⁴ John Chrysostom, *Commentary on Galatians*, 3:8.

healed his ways” (Isaiah 57:17, 18). What is there equal to this lovingkindness? On condition of his “being but sorrowful,” so he speaks, “I forgave him his sins.”²⁵

John Chrysosto (on Rom. 5:2): If then He hath brought us near to Himself, when we were far off, much more will He keep us now that we are near. And let me beg you to consider how he everywhere sets down these two points; His part, and our part. On His part, however, there be things varied and numerous and diverse. For He died for us, and farther reconciled us, and brought us to Himself, and gave us grace unspeakable. But we brought faith only as our contribution.²⁶

John Chrysostom (on 1 Tim. 1:15–16): For as people, on receiving some great good, ask themselves if it is not a dream, as not believing it; so it is with respect to the gifts of God. What then was it that was thought incredible? That those who were enemies and sinners, justified by neither the law nor works, should immediately through faith alone be advanced to the highest favor. On this head [topic] accordingly Paul has discoursed at length in his Epistle to the Romans, and here again at length. “This is a faithful saying,” he says, “and worthy of all acceptation, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.” As the Jews were chiefly attracted by this, he persuades them not to listen to the law, since they could not attain salvation by it without faith. Against this he contends, for it seemed to them incredible that a person who had misspent all his former life in vain and wicked actions should afterwards be saved by his faith alone. On this account he says, “It is a saying to be believed.”²⁷

John Chrysostom: In order to stop anyone from asking: *How can we be saved without contributing anything at all to our salvation?* Paul shows that in fact we do contribute a great deal toward it – we supply our faith!²⁸

Yet, Chrysostom elsewhere notes that:

John Chrysostom (on Ephesians 2:8): Even faith, [Paul] says, is not from us. For if the Lord had not come, if he had not called us, how should we have been able to believe? “For how,” [Paul] says, “shall they believe if

²⁵ John Chrysostom, Homily 8, *1 Corinthians*, 1 Corinthians 3:1–3.

²⁶ Chrysostom, *Homilies on Romans*, Homily 9 (Rom. 5:2).

²⁷ John Chrysostom, *Homilies on 1 Timothy 1:15–16*; cited from Joel C. Elowsky, *We Believe in the Holy Spirit*, 98.

²⁸ John Chrysostom, *Homily on Romans*, 7. NPNF 1 11:377. ACCS, Romans, 100.

they have not heard?" (Rom. 10:14). So even the act of faith is not self-initiated. It is, he says, "the gift of God" (Eph. 2:8c).²⁹

Jerome: God proposed to save by faith alone those whom he foreknew would believe.³⁰

Ambrosiaster: They are justified freely because, while doing nothing or providing any repayment, they are justified by faith alone as a gift of God.³¹

Theodoret of Cyr: The righteousness of God is not revealed to everyone but only to those with the eyes of faith. For the holy apostle teaches us that God foresaw this for us from the beginning and predicted it through the prophets, and even before the prophets, had it hidden in his secret will. Paul quoted Habakkuk for the benefit of the Jews, because he wanted to teach them not to cling to the provisions of the law but to follow the prophets. For many centuries before they had predicted that one day there would be salvation by faith alone.³²

F. Though sinners are commanded to believe, faith itself is a gift from God.

John Chrysostom (on Ephesians 2:8): Even faith, [Paul] says, is not from us. For if the Lord had not come, if he had not called us, how should we have been able to believe? "For how," [Paul] says, "shall they believe if they have not heard?" (Rom. 10:14). So even the act of faith is not self-initiated. It is, he says, "the gift of God" (Eph. 2:8c).³³

Jerome: Paul says this in case the secret thought should steal upon us that "if we are not saved by our own works, at least we are saved by our own faith, and so in a way our salvation is of ourselves. " Thus he added the statement that faith too is not in our own will but in God's gift.³⁴

²⁹ John Chrysostom, *Homily on Ephesians 2:8*; IOEP 2:160; ACCS NT 8:134; cited from Thomas Oden, *The Justification Reader*, 44.

³⁰ Jerome, *Commentary on the Pauline Epistles*, Romans 8.28–29; Joel C. Elowsky, *We Believe in the Holy Spirit*, 98.

³¹ Ambrosiaster, *Commentary on Romans 3.24*; cited from Joel C. Elowsky, *We Believe in the Holy Spirit*, 98.

³² Theodoret of Cyr, *Interpretation of the Letter to the Romans*. PG 82, col. 57-60. ACCS, Romans, 31.

³³ John Chrysostom, *Homily on Ephesians 2:8*; IOEP 2:160; ACCS NT 8:134; cited from Thomas Oden, *The Justification Reader*, 44.

³⁴ Jerome, *Epistle to the Ephesians*, 1.2.8–9. ACCS, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, 133.

G. The church fathers insisted that saving faith corresponded to the doctrinal truth handed down by the apostles. Thus, the faith of heretics was invalid and impotent to save.

IV. How can the church father’s insistence on the necessity of water baptism for salvation be harmonized with their simultaneous emphasis on the fact that salvation is by faith alone?

Nick Needham: This strongly attested strand on initial justification by faith, even faith alone, must, however, be coordinated with the patristic teaching that forgiveness is mediated through baptism. . . . There seems to be no necessary friction between these two ideas (justification by faith and by baptism).³⁵

In answering that question, some should be noted:

A. In places, the church fathers seem to emphasize the *absolute necessity* of water baptism for salvation. Yet, in other places, they note exceptions. In other words, the church fathers recognized that there were times when people were saved *even though they did not experience water baptism*.

(These exceptions demonstrate their prioritization of faith over baptism. Obviously, no one could be saved without faith. Yet it was possible, as these exceptions demonstrate, to be saved without being baptized.)

1. Believers who were martyred before being baptized.

Tertullian [says of the martyr that he] settles every debt of sin by the compensation of his own blood; for all sins are forgiven by such a deed as this.³⁶

Origen: Inasmuch as the one who endures [martyrdom] receives forgiveness of sins, it is a baptism. For if baptism promises forgiveness of sins, even as we have received forgiveness with reference to the baptism in water and Spirit, and if the one who endured the baptism of martyrdom receives forgiveness of sins, martyrdom would with good reason be called a baptism.³⁷

Origen: Let us be mindful of our sins, because there is no forgiveness of sins without receiving baptism, and that according to the laws of the gospel it is impossible to be baptized again with water and the Spirit for forgiveness of sins, and that a baptism of martyrdom has been given us. Martyrdom is

³⁵ Nicholas Needham, “Justification in the Early Church Fathers,” 42.

³⁶ Tertullian, *Apology* 50.15. Tertullian calls baptism “another baptism” in *Modesty* 22.4.

³⁷ Origen, *Commentary on Matthew* 16.6.

named a baptism, as is evident from [Mark 10:38 and Luke 12:50]. Consider the baptism of martyrdom, that even the Savior's [martyrdom] brought purification to the world, martyrdom becomes a healing of the many who are being purified.³⁸

Cyprian: [Baptismal candidates who are martyred] are not in fact deprived of the sacrament of baptism, inasmuch as they are baptized with the greatest and most glorious baptism of all, that of blood. . . . [T]hose baptized in their own blood and sanctified with a martyr's suffering are made perfect and obtain the grace that God has promised.³⁹

Basil of Caesarea: There have been some who in their championship of true religion have undergone death for Christ's sake, not in mere similitude [baptism], but in actual fact, and so have needed none of the outward signs of water for their salvation, because they were baptized in their own blood. Thus I write not to disparage the baptism by water, but to overthrow the arguments of those who exalt themselves against the Spirit.⁴⁰

Cyril of Jerusalem: If any man does not receive Baptism, he does not have salvation. The only exception is the martyrs, who, even without water, will receive the kingdom...for the Savior calls martyrdom a Baptism (cf. Mark 10:38) ...Bearing your sins, you go down into the water; but the calling down of grace seals your soul and does not permit that you afterwards be swallowed up by the fearsome dragon. You go down dead in your sins, and come up made alive in righteousness.⁴¹

2. Baptismal candidates who died before being baptized.

Ambrose of Milan: But I hear that you grieve because he [Emperor Valentinian] did not receive the sacrament of baptism. Tell me: What else is in your power other than the desire, the request? But he even had this desire for a long time, that, when he should come into Italy, he would be initiated, and recently he signified his desire to be baptized by me, and for this reason above all others he thought that I ought to be summoned. Has he not, then, the grace which he desired; has he not the grace which he requested? And because he asked, he received, and therefore it is said: 'By whatsoever death the just man shall be overtaken, his soul shall be at rest' (Wis. 4:7).

³⁸ Origen, *Exhortation to Martyrdom*, 30.

³⁹ Cyprian, *Letters* 73 (72).21.1-2.

⁴⁰ Basil, *Holy Spirit*, 15.36.

⁴¹ Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catechetical Lectures* 3.10,12.

Grant, therefore, O holy Father, to Thy servant the gift which Moses received, because he saw in spirit; the gift which David merited, because he knew from revelation. Grant, I pray, to Thy servant Valentinian the gift which he longed for, the gift which he requested while in health, vigor, and security. If, stricken with sickness, he had deferred it, he would not be entirely without Thy mercy who has been cheated by the swiftness of time, not by his own wish. Grant, therefore, to Thy servant the gift of Thy grace which he never rejected ... He who had Thy Spirit, how has he not received Thy grace?

Or if the fact disturbs you that the mysteries have not been solemnly celebrated, then you should realize that not even martyrs are crowned if they are catechumens, for they are not crowned if they are not initiated. But if they are washed in their own blood, his piety and his desire have washed him, also.⁴²

Everett Ferguson: Ambrose as a pastor was perhaps the first to set forth the possibility of salvation through a baptism of desire.⁴³

3. True believers who desired water baptism but were unable to be baptized for some legitimate reason.

Augustine: That the place of baptism is sometimes supplied by martyrdom is supported by an argument by no means trivial, which the blessed Cyprian adduces from the thief, to whom, though he was not baptized, it was yet said, "Today shall you be with me in Paradise." (Luke 23:43) On considering which, again and again, I find that not only martyrdom for the sake of Christ may supply what was wanting of baptism, but also faith and conversion of heart, if recourse may not be had to the celebration of the mystery of baptism for want of time. For neither was that thief crucified for the name of Christ, but as the reward of his own deeds; nor did he suffer because he believed, but he believed while suffering. It was shown, therefore, in the case of that thief, how great is the power, even without the visible sacrament of baptism, of what the apostle says, "With the heart man believes unto righteousness, and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation." (Romans 10:10) But the want is supplied invisibly only when the administration of baptism is prevented, not by contempt for religion, but by the necessity of the moment. For much more in the case of Cornelius and his friends, than in the case of that robber, might it seem superfluous that they should also be baptized with water, seeing that in them the gift of the Holy Spirit, which, according to the

⁴² Roy J. Deferrari, translator. "Consolation on the Death of Emperor Valerian." Funeral Orations by Saint Gregory Nazianzen and Saint Ambrose. The Fathers of the Church: A New Translation. New York: Fathers of the Church, 1953. 261-299, at 287-289. Retrieved from the Internet Archive, 23 September 2013.

⁴³ Everett Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church*, 646.

testimony of holy Scripture, was received by other men only after baptism, had made itself manifest by every unmistakable sign appropriate to those times when they spoke with tongues. Yet they were baptized, and for this action we have the authority of an apostle as the warrant. So far ought all of us to be from being induced by any imperfection in the inner man, if it so happen that before baptism a person has advanced, through the workings of a pious heart, to spiritual understanding, to despise a sacrament which is applied to the body by the hands of the minister, but which is God's own means for working spiritually a man's dedication to Himself.⁴⁴

Augustine: For whatever unbaptized persons die confessing Christ, this confession is of the same efficacy for the remission of sins as if they were washed in the sacred font of baptism. For He who said, "Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God," made also an exception in their favor, in that other sentence where He no less absolutely said, "Whosoever shall confess me before men, him will I confess also before my Father which is in heaven;" and in another place, "Whosoever will lose his life for my sake, shall find it."⁴⁵

Augustine: Those who, though they have not received the washing of regeneration, die for the confession of Christ – it avails them just as much for the forgiveness of their sins as if they had been washed in the sacred font of Baptism. For He that said, "If anyone is not reborn of water and the Spirit, he will not enter the kingdom of heaven," made an exception for them in that other statement in which He says no less generally, "Whoever confesses Me before men, I too will confess him before My Father, who is in heaven" [Matt 10:32].⁴⁶

Based on the writings of Ambrose and Augustine, later church leaders like Thomas Aquinas asserted that a genuine desire for baptism is all that is necessary for salvation.

- B. The church fathers also viewed preaching the gospel as more important than performing baptisms. This too evidences the priority that they gave to faith.

John Chrysostom: The greatness of baptism does not lie in the baptizer but in the one whose name is invoked in the baptism. Furthermore, although baptism is important and even necessary in order to obtain the kingdom, still

⁴⁴ Augustine, *On Baptism*, 4.22.

⁴⁵ Augustine, *Handbook of Faith, Hope, & Love*, 7.

⁴⁶ Augustine, *City of God*, 13.7.

it is much less than preaching the gospel. A person of no singular excellence can baptize, but only the truly gifted can preach the gospel.⁴⁷

Ambrosiaster: Because it is a greater thing to preach the gospel than to baptize, Paul says that he was sent to do the former, not the latter. Not everyone who baptizes is competent to preach the gospel, for the words used a baptism are an established formula.⁴⁸

- C. Though keeping them distinct, the church fathers saw baptism as directly connected to faith.

Everett Ferguson: [commenting on the writings of Cyril of Jerusalem] Faith was presupposed, but Cyril often makes mention of it. For instance, in the *Procatechesis*, sins are blotted out “by believing” (8). In his first lecture Cyril calls on his hearers to prepare “through faith for the new birth” and to get the “earnest of the Holy Spirit [2 Cor. 1:22] through faith” so as to be able to enter “the eternal habitations [Luke 16:9]” (*Cat.* 1.2), and declares that the “communion of the Holy Spirit is given in proportion to each person’s faith” (1.5). Faith is the ground of forgiveness of sins (2.6; 17.37), makes children of God (7.13), gives regeneration (ἀναγεννηθείσης—3.4), and saves (5.10 and 13.31 on the thief on the cross). The lecture devoted to baptism (*Cat.* 3) mentions “election according to faith” (*Cat.* 3.1), the soul “cleansed by sincere faith for reception of the Holy Spirit” (3.2), and “drawing near in faith that you may be made faithful” (3.15).⁴⁹

Cyril of Alexandria: “From the days of John, the kingdom of heaven is preached, and everyone takes it by force.” The kingdom of heaven here means justification by faith, the washing away of sin by holy baptism, and sanctification by the Spirit. It also means worshiping in the Spirit, the service that is superior to shadows and types, the honor of the adoption of children, and the hope of the glory about to be given to the saints.⁵⁰

- D. Thus, they could speak of baptism as the “seal” of faith.

Everett Ferguson: “Seal” was the commonest baptismal designation in the second century. Some texts show the seal clearly as a mark of ownership and protection. For Christian usage in relation to baptism there are two lines of

⁴⁷ John Chrysostom, *Homilies on the Epistles of Paul to the Corinthians* 3.6. NPNF 1 12:12; ACCS, 1-2 Corinthians, 11.

⁴⁸ Ambrosiaster, *Commentary on Paul’s Epistles*. CSEL 81.12. ACCS, 1 – 2 Corinthians, 12.

⁴⁹ Everett Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church*, 475.

⁵⁰ Cyril of Alexandria, *Commentary on Luke*, Homily 110. Luke, ACCS, 258.

thought – an eschatological and a juristic. There is a close relation of seal and name in the second and third centuries so that “seal” and “baptismal formula” are close together. Indeed “seal” is no separate baptismal rite but an interpretation of the baptismal bath.⁵¹

Basil of Caesarea: Faith and baptism are two kindred and inseparable ways of salvation: faith is perfected through baptism, baptism is established through faith, and both are completed by the same names. For as we *believe* in the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, so we are also *baptized* in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit; first comes the confession, introducing us to salvation, and baptism follows, setting the seal upon our assent.⁵²

Nick Needham: Basil’s approach effectively makes initial justification itself a twofold process: faith introduces us to salvation, and baptism perfects the introduction. Basil’s use of “seal” imagery may indicate that he regarded baptism as the public and official declaration of a justification that until then has been private and unofficial.⁵³

While the Old Testament Israelites had circumcision as a seal, Christians were given baptism as a seal.

John Chrysostom: The Jews had circumcision for a seal, but we the earnest of the Spirit.⁵⁴

John Chrysostom: No longer, says St. Paul, is circumcision accomplished by the knife, but in Christ himself, for the hand does not perform the circumcision as in the old law, but the Spirit circumcises not a part but the whole person. There was a body there, and there is a body here; but that body was circumcised in the flesh, this body in the Spirit. . . . When and where? In baptism.⁵⁵

- E. Water baptism was seen not as a human work, but as a gracious work of God. Thus, its necessity was not viewed (by the church fathers) as being in conflict with their emphasis on salvation by faith alone.

⁵¹ Everett Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church*, 8.

⁵² Basil of Caesarea, *On the Holy Spirit*, 12.28.

⁵³ Nick Needham, “Justification in the Early Church Fathers,” 42.

⁵⁴ John Chrysostom, *Homilies on 2 Corinthians* 3.7 on 2 Cor. 1:21–22. Cited from Everett Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church*, 560.

⁵⁵ John Chrysostom, *Homilies on Colossians* 6.2 on Col. 2:11. Cited from Everett Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church*, 560.

Cyprian: Believe and live, and do ye who persecute us in time rejoice with us for eternity. When you have once departed thither, there is no longer any place for repentance, and no possibility of making satisfaction. Here life is either lost or saved; here eternal safety is provided for by the worship of God and the fruits of faith. Nor let anyone be restrained either by his sins or by his years from coming to obtain salvation. To him who still remains in this world no repentance is too late. The approach to God's mercy is open, and the access is easy to those who seek and apprehend the truth. Do you entreat for your sins, although it be in the very end of life, and at the setting of the sun of time; and implore God, who is the one and true God, in confession and faith of acknowledgment of Him, and pardon is granted to the man who confesses, and saving mercy is given from the divine goodness to the believer, and a passage is opened to immortality even in death itself. This grace Christ bestows; this gift of His mercy He confers upon us, by overcoming death in the trophy of the cross, by redeeming the believer with the price of His blood, by reconciling man to God the Father, by quickening our mortal nature with a heavenly regeneration.⁵⁶

Ambrose: Therefore let no one boast of his works, because no one can be justified by his works; but he who is just receives it as a gift, because he is justified by the washing of regeneration. It is faith, therefore, which delivers us by the blood of Christ, because blessed is he whose sins are forgiven, and to whom pardon is granted.⁵⁷

Ambrosiaster (fourth century): All thanksgiving for our salvation is to be given only to God. He extends his mercy to us so as to recall us to life precisely while we are straying, without looking for the right road. And thus we are not to glory in ourselves but in God, who has regenerated us by a heavenly birth through faith in Christ.⁵⁸

John Chrysostom (again) (on Titus 3:4-6): Strange! How were we drowned in wickedness, so that we could not be purified, but needed a new birth? For this is implied by "Regeneration." For as when a house is in a ruinous state no one places props under it, nor makes any addition to the old building, but pulls it down to its foundations, and rebuilds it anew; so in our case, God has not repaired us, but has made us anew. For this is "the renewing of the Holy Ghost." He has made us new men. How? "By His Spirit"; and to show this

⁵⁶ Cyprian, *Treatise 5*, An Address to Demetrianus, 25.

⁵⁷ Ambrose, *Letters* 73.11; cited from G. Finch, *A Sketch of the Romish Controversy*, 220. Cf. Anderson, Murphy, and Burgess, *Justification by Faith*, 127. See also John Chrysostom, *Homilies on Ephesians* 11, on Eph. 4:7.

⁵⁸ Ambrosiaster, Epistle to the Ephesians, ACCS NT 8:134; cited from Thomas Oden, *The Justification Reader*, 47.

further, he adds, “Which He shed on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Savior.” Thus we need the Spirit abundantly. “That being justified by His grace” – again by grace and not by debt – “we may be made heirs according to the hope of eternal life.” At the same time there is an incitement to humility, and a hope for the future. For if when we were so abandoned, as to require to be born again, to be saved by grace, to have no good in us, if then He saved us, much more will He save us in the world to come.⁵⁹

Note: The church fathers understood that the regenerating agent in baptism was the Holy Spirit and not the water itself. Thus, while they insisted on the necessity of water baptism, they did not view the water as having any magical or transforming power in itself. It was the Spirit who accomplished spiritual realities through baptism.

Nick Needham: Cyril and other fathers insisted that it was not the *water* of baptism that bestowed these spiritual benefits, but the Holy Spirit, Who worked inwardly in the soul at the same time that the water outwardly washed the body.⁶⁰

Basil of Caesarea: If there is any grace in the water, it is not of the nature of the water, but of the presence of the Spirit.⁶¹

- F. At the same time, water baptism was viewed as an initial fruit of repentance. Thus, it brought assurance of salvation (by confirming the believer’s profession of faith). Conversely, those who were unwilling to be baptized called into question the genuineness of their profession of faith.

Regarding the assurance that comes through baptism:

John Chrysostom: “Attend to this, you who come to baptism at the close of life, for we indeed pray that after baptism you may have also this deportment, but you are seeking and doing your utmost to depart without it. For, what though you be justified: yet is it of faith only. But we pray that thou should have as well the confidence that comes of good works.”⁶²

*Chrysostom, along with others like the Cappadocian Fathers, strongly discouraged waiting until one’s deathbed to be baptized. Doing so provided no assurance of salvation.*⁶³

⁵⁹ John Chrysostom, *Homilies on Titus*, 5. Regarding Titus 3:4–6.

⁶⁰ N. R. Needham, *2000 Years of Christ’s Power*, Part 1, 183.

⁶¹ Basil, *On the Spirit*, 15.35 in *NPNF*, 8:22. Cited from Allison, *Historical Theology*, 615.

⁶² John Chrysostom, *On the Second Epistle of St. Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*, Homily 2.8.

⁶³ Cf. Everett Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church*, 617–626.

In the book of Acts, all the believers were baptized. Thus, someone who was not willing to be baptized called into question the legitimacy of their profession of faith.

Tertullian: For the law of baptizing has been imposed and the formula prescribed: “Go,” he says, “teach the nations, baptizing them into the name of the Father and of the Son and God of the Holy Spirit.” The comparison with this law of that definition, “Unless one has been reborn of water and Spirit, he shall not enter into the kingdom of the heavens,” has tied faith to the necessity of baptism. Accordingly, all thereafter who became believers used to be baptized.⁶⁴

John Chrysostom (on Acts 2:38): “What shall we do?” They did what must be done, but we do the opposite. They [those converted on the Day of Pentecost] condemned themselves and despaired of their salvation. This is what made them such as they were. They knew what a gift they had received. But how will you become like them, when you do everything in an opposite spirit? As soon as they heard, they were baptized. They did not speak these cold words that we do now, or did they contrive delays, even though they heard all the requirements. For they did not hesitate when they were commanded to “save yourselves from this generation” but welcomed it. They showed their welcome through action and proved through deeds what sort of people they were.⁶⁵

- G. There are times when the church fathers appear to be inconsistent regarding the relationship of salvation to water baptism. For example, most of the church fathers insist that Christians are saved in the same way as Abraham – by faith alone. Yet some of the fathers, like Tertullian, articulate a key distinction: Abraham did not have to be baptized, but Christians do.

Tertullian: In days gone by, there was salvation by means of bare faith, before the passion and resurrection of the Lord. But now that faith has been enlarged and has become a faith that believes in his nativity, passion, and resurrection, there has been an amplification added to the sacrament, that is, the sealing act of baptism; the clothing, in some sense, of the faith which before was bare, and which cannot exist now without its proper law. For the law of baptism has been imposed.⁶⁶

⁶⁴ Tertullian, *On Baptism* 13. ANF 3:676; ACCS, John 1–10, 112.

⁶⁵ John Chrysostom, *Homilies on the Acts of the Apostles* 7. NPNF 1 11:48–49. ACCS, Acts, 36.

⁶⁶ Tertullian, *On Baptism*, 13. ANF 3:676. Cited from Allison, *Historical Theology*, 614.

IV. Summary and Conclusion

A. The Church Fathers

Some church fathers insisted on the need for water baptism because they linked the physical act with a number of vital spiritual realities – including regeneration, the forgiveness of sins, and the reception of the Holy Spirit. Based on their understanding of John 3:5, some regarded water baptism as necessary for salvation.

At the same time, some also stated that believers were saved by faith alone – and that the forgiveness of sins and reception of the Holy Spirit also came by faith alone. In part, this may be because they viewed baptism as the *sealing* of faith. Thus, they viewed it as an extension of faith. It was considered a gift of God’s grace and not a self-righteous work.

On the one hand, they recognized that it was possible, in certain cases, to be saved by faith alone without receiving water baptism. On the other hand, they seriously questioned the spiritual condition of anyone not willing to be baptized.

B. Evangelical Protestants

- Though some Protestants have maintained a belief in baptismal regeneration,⁶⁷ most evangelicals view water baptism as a symbol of spiritual realities having previously occurred in the regenerate individual by the grace of God. They contend that regeneration, the forgiveness of sins, and the reception of the Holy Spirit occur at the oment of conversion (which is by grace through faith alone). Those realities are later signified, and publicly professed, in the waters of baptism.
- Thus, water baptism does not result in regeneration, forgiveness, and Spirit-indwelling. Rather, it reflects those spiritual realties which have already occurred.

J. I. Packer: Christian baptism . . . is a sign from God that signifies inward cleansing and remission of sins (Acts 22:16; 1 Cor 6:11; Eph 5:25–27), Spirit-wrought regeneration and new life (Titus 3:5), and the abiding presence of the Holy Spirit as God’s seal testifying and guaranteeing that one will be kept safe in Christ forever (1 Cor 12:13; Eph 1:13–14). Baptism carries these meanings because first and fundamentally it signifies union

⁶⁷ For a critique of Luther’s baptismal regeneration see, Patrick Ramsey, “Sola Fide Compromised? Martin Luther and the Doctrine of Baptism.” *Themelios* 34, no. 2 (July 2009), http://thegospelcoalition.org/themelios/article/sola_fide_compromised_martin_luther_and_the_doctrine_of_baptism. Some have suggested that certain writers of the Westminster Confession also held to baptismal regeneration: <http://www.trinity-pres.net/essays/ht-burges-baptism.pdf>.

with Christ in his death, burial, and resurrection (Rom 6:3–7; Col 2:11–12); and this union with Christ is the source of every element in our salvation (1 John 5:11–12). Receiving the sign in faith assures the persons baptized that God’s gift of new life in Christ is freely given to them.⁶⁸

Bruce Ware: One area where most credobaptists and most paedobaptists agree is this: baptism is the sign and seal of the new covenant, inaugurated by Christ’s death and resurrection, signifying the promise for the one baptized that sins are forgiven, that new life in Christ is received, and that God gives the person a new heart and the indwelling Holy Spirit, by faith.⁶⁹

- Evangelicals similarly view water baptism as a mandatory fruit of repentance (because it was commanded by Christ). Though salvation is by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone, every believer must be baptized.
- The notion of a non-baptized Christian is foreign to the New Testament. Those who are unwilling to obey the Lord in this matter call into question the authenticity of their profession of faith.

C. Final Thoughts

1. On the one hand, the church fathers conflated the external *symbol* of water baptism with the internal *reality* of Spirit baptism. This confusion led to them doctrinally inconsistency with teachings regarding justification by faith alone. Moreover, the result led to some aberrant practices in church history – including infant baptism and the development of last rites.
2. Thus, evangelicals are right to be critical of the church fathers in this area. Insofar as the teachings of the church fathers do not align with Scripture, they ought to be rejected and discarded (cf. 1 Thess. 5:20–22). Our practice of baptism must conform to Scripture, and not to church tradition.
3. Nonetheless, the fact that the church fathers took baptism seriously is a helpful counterbalance to some in contemporary evangelical culture who treat it with a casual indifference. As noted above, any professing Christian who is unwilling to be baptized calls into question the sincerity of that profession.

⁶⁸ J. I. Packer, *Concise Theology* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1993), 212.

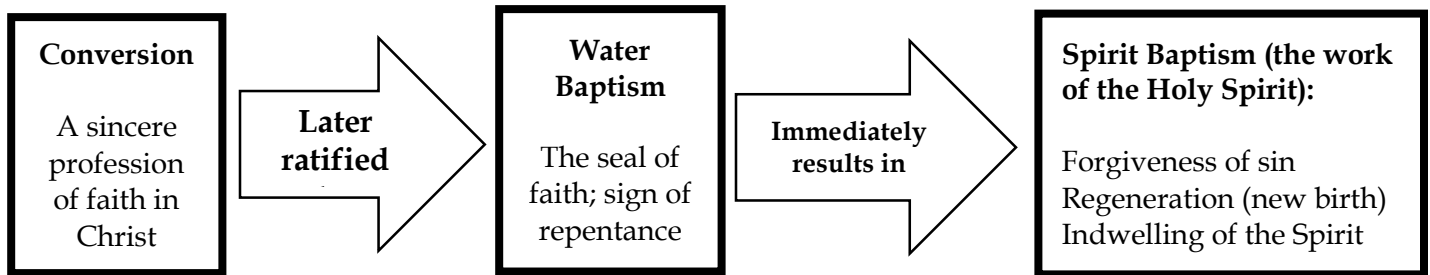
⁶⁹ Bruce Ware, “Believer’s Baptism View,” in *Baptism: Three Views*, ed. David F. Wright (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009), 41.

Comparison Chart

Patristic View:

Spirit baptism takes place after conversion (in, or immediately following, the act of water baptism) and results in the forgiveness of sin, regeneration (new birth), and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit.

The transforming power of regeneration does not lie in the water of baptism but in the working of the Holy Spirit. While the spiritual reality (of Spirit baptism) was seen as inseparable from the physical act (of water baptism), the church fathers did note several exceptions (see above).

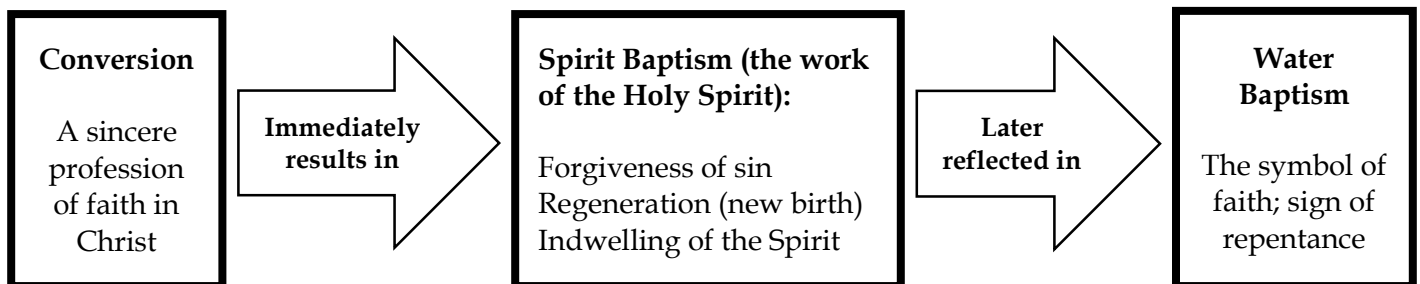


Note: As infant baptism replaced believer's baptism (in the 4th and 5th centuries), conversion (a sincere profession of faith in Christ) was seen as taking place subsequent to baptism.

Evangelical (Baptistic) View:

Spirit baptism takes place at conversion (being later symbolized by water baptism) and results in the forgiveness of sin, regeneration (new birth), and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit.

Note: True faith is a repentant faith, and baptism is an initial sign (or fruit) of repentance.



Scripture gives examples when salvation from sin and the indwelling ministry of the Spirit (Luke 18:9–14; 23:40–43; Acts 9:17–18; 10:43–48; 16:31–34; cf. 1 Cor. 1:14–17) occurred either *without* water baptism or *prior* to it. Such passages support the evangelical view.

Biblical Evaluation:

**“Does Mark 16:16 teach that baptism is necessary for salvation?”
S. Michael Houdman**

Does Mark 16:16 teach that baptism is necessary for salvation? No, it does not. It clearly establishes that belief is required for salvation, but it does not prove or disprove the idea of baptism being a requirement. How can we know, then, if one must be baptized in order to be saved? We must look to the full counsel of God’s Word. Here is a summary of the evidence:

1— The Bible is clear that we are saved by faith alone. Abraham was saved by faith, and we are saved by faith (Romans 4:1–25; Galatians 3:6–22).

2— Throughout the Bible, in every dispensation, people have been saved without being baptized. Every believer in the Old Testament (e.g., Abraham, Jacob, David, Solomon) was saved but not baptized. The thief on the cross was saved but not baptized. Cornelius was saved before he was baptized (Acts 10:44–46).

3— Baptism is a testimony of our faith and a public declaration that we believe in Jesus Christ. The Scriptures tell us that we have eternal life the moment we believe (John 5:24), and belief always comes before being baptized. Baptism does not save us any more than walking an aisle or saying a prayer saves us. We are saved when we believe.

4— The Bible never says that if one is not baptized then he is not saved.

5— If baptism were required for salvation, then no one could be saved without another party being present. Someone must be there to baptize a person before he can be saved. This effectively limits who can be saved and when he can be saved. The consequences of this doctrine, when carried to a logical conclusion, are devastating. For example, a soldier who believes on the battlefield but is killed before he can be baptized would go to hell.

6— Throughout the Bible we see that at the point of faith a believer possesses all the promises and blessings of salvation (John 1:12; 3:16; 5:24; 6:47; 20:31; Acts 10:43; 13:39; 16:31). When one believes, he has eternal life, does not come under judgment, and has passed from death into life (John 5:24) — all before he or she is baptized.

Online Source: <http://www.gotquestions.org/baptism-Mark-16-16.html> #ixzz32HTvYY8f