

Mod 9 — IS BAPTISM A WORK?

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Many in the Christian world will vehemently reject just about everything I said in the previous lesson (part 8, “Saved by Grace, Saved in Baptism”). This is because they view baptism as a work, and believe that this automatically prevents baptism from having anything to do with salvation, since salvation is by grace. In this lesson I will show why this is false thinking.

Historically, for its first 1,500 years Christendom was nearly unanimous in its belief that water baptism is the moment of time when God initially bestows saving grace upon the sinner. This includes Martin Luther, who forcefully taught this view. He said, for example, that one is baptized so that he “may receive in the water the promised salvation” (“The Large Catechism,” IV.36). Luther saw no conflict between baptism for salvation and salvation by grace.

The Copernican Revolution regarding the meaning of baptism came with the Swiss Reformer, Huldreich Zwingli. In the years 1523-1525 Zwingli completely reworked the doctrine of baptism. He repudiated any connection between baptism and salvation, and invented a totally new approach to it. In essence, he declared that baptism is the exact NT equivalent to OT circumcision, and is thus just a sign of an already-existing membership in God’s covenant people. Zwingli of course knew this was a new view. He declared that “everyone before me has been wrong about baptism.” Most Protestants have adopted this new view; many have done so without being aware of its relatively recent origin.

Those Protestants today who reject baptism as a salvation event follow Zwingli on this: they believe that such a view contradicts salvation by grace. The argument is this: Premise 1: We are saved by grace through faith, NOT by works (Eph. 2:8-9). Premise 2: Baptism is a work. Conclusion: Therefore baptism can have no connection with salvation. Those who follow this argument rightly want to be true to the grace concept of salvation, but they have become *Zwinglianized*, i.e., deceived into thinking that embracing grace somehow requires giving up baptism as a salvation event.

How may we respond to this approach? Can we show that baptism as a salvation event is consistent with salvation by grace? YES! ABSOLUTELY! The question, then, is HOW can these two be reconciled? I will explain this in two steps, one following Luther and one following Paul!

I. LUTHER: BAPTISM IS A WORK, BUT IT IS NOT OUR WORK. IT IS GOD’S WORK.

This approach says that the controversial element in the Zwinglian revision is its second premise: “Baptism is a work.” Luther’s Zwinglian opponents challenged his adherence to the 1500-year consensus on baptism on this grounds. How can you say works are of no use for salvation, they asked him, and then say that baptism is for salvation? Is baptism itself not a work? What about faith? Here is Luther’s stated answer to this challenge (“Large Catechism,” IV.35): “To this you may answer: Yes, it is true that our works are of no use for salvation. Baptism, however is not

our work but God's God's works are . . . necessary for salvation, and they do not exclude but rather demand faith.”

I have often used Luther's excellent and Biblical reasoning on this issue. The fact is that every NT reference to baptism's meaning depicts it as accomplishing something that only God can perform (e.g., forgiveness, regeneration, baptism in the Spirit, resurrection from spiritual death). The only one really *working* in baptism is God; we come to it simply with “faith in the working of God” (Col. 2:12). The one being baptized is passive, allowing something to be done TO himself or herself.

In the new Zwinglian view of baptism, God himself is doing NOTHING; the only significant work being done therein is by the one being baptized, for whom baptism is his or her response, commitment, expression, testimony, pledge, announcement, confirmation, or demonstration—all HUMAN works. In Scripture, though, NONE of these things is ever connected with baptism. The only things the baptized person is doing in baptism is believing (Col. 2:12) and praying (Acts 22:16; 1 Pet. 3:21)—both of which are indisputably consistent with grace. (The translation “pledge” in 1 Pet. 3:21 is wrong.)

But is not baptism really a “work” in the simple sense of “something we do”? Would this not make it a work in the sense of Eph. 2:9, which excludes works from the way of salvation? The answer is NO, this is a faulty approach to the works issue. To see why this is so, we must make sure we are DEFINING the term “works” in the proper Pauline sense.

II. PAUL: BAPTISM IS *OBEDIENCE TO THE GOSPEL*, NOT A *WORK OF LAW*.

I have concluded that the main reason people think baptism for salvation and salvation by grace are contradictory is that they are using the wrong definition of “works” as used in Eph. 2:8-9 and elsewhere in Paul's writings. It is uncritically assumed that a “work” is simply “something WE do,” especially as opposed to something GOD does.

The fact is that “works” CAN be defined and used this way, as *Jesus himself uses “works” language in John 6:26-29*. But I have concluded on good evidence that this CANNOT be the sense of “works” as Paul uses the term, because this would put him in contradiction with Jesus in John 6:26-29. In this text Jesus uses “works” in the generic sense of “something we do,” and he applies this terminology to FAITH ITSELF. Thus FAITH is a work in the sense of “something we do.” But here is the kicker: Paul makes a clear distinction between faith and works (Rom. 3:27-28; 4:4-5; Eph. 2:8-9). This forces us to conclude that Paul must be using the term “works” in a different sense. It cannot mean simply “something we do.” For Paul, it must mean something more specific.

So what exactly DOES Paul mean when he uses the term “works”? Paul himself answer this question when he uses the more complete expression, “works of law” (as in Rom. 3:20, 28; Gal. 2:16; 3:2, 5, 10). When you examine his “works” language closely in context, you will see that he always means “works of law,” even when he says just “works” and does not add “of law.”

So what are “works of law” in Paul’s vocabulary? (Note that there are no articles in any of Paul’s uses of the phrase.) One thing he *cannot* mean is just the “Law of Moses,” because in the Romans context he is including the Gentiles and Abraham in the discussion. The bottom line is this: for Paul, a “work” or “work of law” is ANY deed (external or internal, sinful or righteous) done in response to the law code that God as Creator has bound upon us as creatures. (Romans 3:28 through 4:8 shows that even sins belong in this definition.) Positively (as *good* works), works of law are just our acts of everyday obedience to God’s teaching on how to live a holy life. They are acts of obedience to our law code. They are “living the Christian life.”

Now here is a crucial point: in Paul’s vocabulary, not all obedience to God is obedience to one’s law code; not all “things we do” are the creature’s response to God as Creator and his LAW commands. For Paul, some “things we do” are the sinner’s response to God our Savior’s GOSPEL commands, i.e., instructions to sinners on how to be saved. These are NOT “works of law,” but are “obedience to the gospel.” This latter is the expression Paul uses in Romans 10:16 (properly translated) and in 2 Thess. 1:8. When Paul is excluding “works” from the way of salvation, he is excluding “works of law,” not “obedience to the gospel.” The latter is fully consistent with grace.

What are the gospel commands directed toward sinners by God in his role as Savior, instructing sinners on how to receive salvation? (Whatever these are, they are NOT WORKS in Paul’s sense of the term!) Here I would list the first four fingers of the venerable “five-finger exercise”: faith, repentance, confession, and baptism. I would NOT include “living the Christian life,” which counts instead as works of law.

Baptism thus is NOT a work, in Paul’s sense and use of that term. He does NOT have baptism in mind when he writes Ephesians 2:8-9. Yes, baptism is “something we do” (just as faith is), but it is not something we do in response to a law command. “Be baptized” is a grace command, a gospel command. As an act of obedience to the gospel, baptism is just as consistent with grace as is faith.

Based on this Biblical analysis, it no longer makes any sense whatsoever to reject the Biblical view of baptism as a salvation event because of some alleged but unfounded contradiction with grace.

“Men and brethren, what shall we do?” We shall fully embrace both salvation by grace AND salvation in baptism, a la Luther and especially Paul. Also, we shall henceforth be honest and rational in our exegesis of NT teaching concerning baptism. Finally, we shall speak the truth in love regarding this subject of baptism. When we preach, teach, and write about baptism, we must be more concerned about what GOD thinks of our presentations than about what men think. “Let God be true though every one were a liar” (Rom. 3:4, ESV). Let God’s WORD be true, though every one were a liar. Let our PREACHING of God’s Word be true, though everyone else were a liar.