

Is water baptism essential for salvation?

No.

There are many denominations that teach you that water baptism is essential for salvation. As a result, they baptize babies (Catholics, Methodists, Episcopalians, etc.) or they make water baptism a condition for salvation when you are older (Church of Christ, Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormons, etc.). Of course, they use the scriptures to prove their doctrine. Almost all heresies are proved by the Bible.

The key verse for this doctrine, called "baptismal regeneration," is Acts 2:38. Acts 2:38 is the baptism preached by Peter to the Jews who were responsible for Jesus' crucifixion. Up until Peter pointed out to them that the resurrected Jesus was the same one that they had crucified, they weren't concerned about having killed him.

But since Jesus was going to make his foes his footstool, these guys were in serious trouble (Acts 2:35-36). And when they found out, they asked, "What shall we do?" They did not ask what to do to be saved. They wanted to know what to do about their hearts being pricked over crucifying a now risen Savior!!

First, they had to repent of what they had done.

Second, they had to be baptized in the name of Jesus, for Jesus had already forgiven them of this sin (Lk. 23:34). This is what "for the remission of sins" is about ("for" meaning "because of," like jump "for" joy; not "for" meaning "in order to get").

Third, following their baptism, they received the gift of the Holy Ghost.

Now if this were the way for everyone to get saved, we would certainly find evidence of it in other places in the Bible. Alas, this is the only place where we find anything like "baptismal regeneration." In fact, we find something totally opposite in Acts 10, where the first gentile converts were.

In Acts 10:44, the Holy Ghost fell on them and then they were baptized in water. They did not have to be baptized in water like Acts 2:38 to get the Holy Ghost. Peter even said that God gave these gentiles "the like gift as he did unto us," (Acts 11:17). And the whole episode reminded Peter that there is a very distinct difference between water baptism and baptism with the Holy Ghost (Acts 11:16). Water baptism can't save but Spirit baptism does (1 Cor 12:13, see weekly question, "What is the one baptism of Eph. 4:5?").

Well, let's move on to another one of their "proof" texts. How about Mark 16:16, where they only quote half of the verse? They are quick to quote "He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved." But they are ready to run to another verse the moment you point out that they have left off the last half of the verse. The last half of Mark 16:16 says, "but he that believeth not shall be damned."

The condition for salvation is not water baptism, then, but rather belief. If you don't believe, you will be damned (Jn. 3:18, 36). If you do believe, you are already saved (Jn. 3:18, 36). And those who are saved are commanded to be baptized in water after they get saved, like Acts 10:48 and Acts 8:36-38. Belief first, then water baptism.

Another favorite with those who teach that you must be baptized in water to be saved is 1 Pet. 3:21. They like to chop off parts of this verse, as well. They quote, "baptism doth also now save us." Well, there's a lot more in this verse than that!! For one thing the first part of the verse says, "The like FIGURE whereunto even baptism..." Peter tells you it's a FIGURE.

Furthermore, according to the context, the ones who went under (Noah's flood, v. 20) all drowned and perished. The ones who floated are the ones who were saved. So, if you followed their reasoning, the proper method of baptism would be to float around in the baptistery for a while, a long while!!

Water baptism can't put away the filth of the flesh, according to 1 Pet. 3:21. The only thing, in the context, that can put that away and save us is "the resurrection of Jesus Christ." Bingo (oops, sorry), brother, that's precisely what Paul said in 1 Cor. 15:13-29. So, water baptism is the "answer of a good conscience toward God," once you are saved.

Ready for another one? Okay, let's go to Jn. 3:5-6. Here they say that to be born of water is water baptism. But that's not what Jesus said. Jesus said, right in the context, that to be "born of water," (v.5) is to be "born of the flesh," (v.6). He interpreted this for you. So, when a woman prepares to deliver a baby, her "baptism" breaks, right? Of course not! Her "water" breaks. Do you get it? The flesh birth is a water birth.

One more time, let's go to Rom. 6:3-6. Rom. 6:3-6 is a description of the baptism with the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 12:13). This is the process whereby the Holy Spirit so literally makes you a part of the body of Christ (Eph. 5:30-32) that you are actually "baptized into HIS death." You are "buried WITH him." And you "shall be also in the likeness of HIS resurrection."

The baptism of Rom. 6:3-6 is something that no baptistery in the world can do for you. That is something that only the Holy Spirit can do for you, "for BY ONE SPIRIT are we all baptized into one body." You might be interested to know that not only does the word water not appear in Rom. 6, it does not appear anywhere in the entire Book of Romans. So, why would anyone think they could find "water" baptism in there? They could only if they were desperately looking to prove a heresy!!