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WHY BAPTISM IS NECESSARY

A step-by-step scriptural and logical case with seven major objections answered

Built to argue from the text itself, not from inherited systems.

Important note: no document can force agreement from a person who is committed to a prior doctrine. But a fair reading of the New Testament leaves very little room to call baptism optional for an accountable believer. When someone rejects the straightforward force of these passages, the issue is usually not lack of evidence but interpretive bias; a theological system has already been chosen, and the text is then made to fit it. We ask that you take the time to read this document carefully, and with an open heart and mind.

- This paper starts with the positive case before answering objections.
- It uses plain reasoning, common-life examples, and direct engagement with the main passages.

1. The controlling question

The issue is not whether baptism is powerful apart from Christ, faith, or grace. No faithful Christian believes that. The real issue is this: When the New Testament tells sinners how to come to Christ, does it treat baptism as part of that obedient response, or as a disposable symbol that may be ignored with no spiritual consequence?

That question matters because many objections against baptism do not arise from the conversion texts themselves. They arise from a prior framework (usually a form of 'faith only' theology) and then the plain wording of the baptism passages is pushed, softened, redefined, or treated as exceptional.

A plain-life analogy

If a doctor tells a dying man, 'Trust me, take this medicine, and live,' no honest listener says the medicine is a meaningless symbol because the doctor is the real healer. The medicine does not compete with the doctor. It is the appointed means by which the doctor's help is received. In the same way, baptism does not compete with grace. It is part of the response God appointed.

2. The positive case for why baptism is necessary

A. Jesus included baptism in the discipleship command

Matthew 28:19-20 places baptism inside the Great Commission. Jesus did not say, 'Make disciples and later, if you wish, add a symbol.' He said to make disciples by going, teaching, and baptizing. That means baptism belongs to the conversion process described by the Lord Himself.

Mark 16:16 is even more direct in sense: the one who believes and is baptized will be saved. People often point out that the second half of the verse only mentions belief and never mentions baptism. True enough. But that does not erase baptism; it simply shows unbelief alone is enough to condemn. The sentence still joins belief and baptism on the salvation side of the statement.

Another simple analogy

If a sign says, "He who buys a ticket and gets on the plane will arrive in Atlanta," the sign does not also need to say, "He who does not buy a ticket and does not get on the plane will not arrive in Atlanta." Why not? Because if a person never buys the ticket in the first place, getting on the plane is already off the table. The first condition has already failed, so the second one does not even come into play.

That is the point in Mark 16:16. Jesus said, "He who has believed and has been baptized shall be saved; but he who has disbelieved shall be condemned." He did not need to add, "and is not baptized," because if a person does not believe, baptism is not even a real issue yet. Belief must come first. So the second half does not make baptism optional. It simply focuses on the first failed condition that already keeps the person from salvation.

B. The apostles told sinners to be baptized, not merely saved people to testify

In Acts 2, convicted sinners ask what to do. Peter does not answer with a bare inward experience. He tells them to repent and be baptized for the forgiveness of sins. In Acts 8, the eunuch hears Jesus preached and immediately asks to be baptized. In Acts 16, the jailer asks what he must do to be saved, and before the night is over he and his household are baptized. In Acts 22:16, Saul is told to arise, be baptized, and wash away his sins. The repeated pattern is impossible to miss unless one already feels pressure to explain it away.

Notice the timing. Baptism is never treated as a low-priority extra for months later after salvation is already settled. It is urgent, immediate, and attached to the sinner's response to the gospel.

C. The New Testament connects baptism with forgiveness, cleansing, and union with Christ

Acts 2:38 connects baptism with forgiveness of sins. Acts 22:16 connects it with washing away sins. Romans 6:3-4 and Colossians 2:12 place baptism at the point where the believer is buried and raised with Christ. Galatians 3:26-27 moves from sons of God by faith to being clothed with Christ in baptism. First Peter 3:21 says baptism now saves you, not because water is magic, but because it is the appeal or pledge of a good conscience through the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Taken together, these passages do not sound like the language of a mere post-salvation symbol. They sound like the language of entry, cleansing, union, and saved response.

D. If baptism were optional, the New Testament repeatedly speaks in a strangely misleading way

Suppose baptism were only a public picture of salvation already received before it. Then the apostles repeatedly chose the wrong way to speak. They linked baptism with forgiveness, washing, union with Christ, putting on Christ, entrance into the body, and salvation itself. At some point the simpler explanation wins: they spoke that way because baptism really is part of the God-given response by which the sinner comes to Christ.

The plain-reading test

A simple question helps cut through the fog: What would a neutral reader conclude if he read these passages without already belonging to a system that says baptism must be optional?

Passage	What the text says	What must be done to avoid its force
Matthew 28:19-20	Jesus includes baptism inside disciple-making.	Treat baptism as secondary or detachable from making disciples.
Mark 16:16	Belief and baptism are joined in the promise of salvation.	Explain why one condition may be ignored while still claiming the verse supports your view.
Acts 2:38	Repent and be baptized for forgiveness of sins.	Change the natural force of the command so baptism points backward, not forward.
Acts 22:16	Be baptized and wash away your sins.	Say washing away sins means something other than what the sentence says.
Romans 6:3-4	Baptism is where one is buried and raised with Christ.	Move union with Christ to a different moment not stated in the passage.
1 Peter 3:21	Baptism now saves you.	Treat a direct statement as though it really means baptism does not save you.

3. Seven major objections answered

1. 'The thief on the cross was saved without baptism, so baptism is not necessary.'

The thief is usually the first argument people reach for because it feels simple and emotionally powerful. But when you slow down and actually examine it, it does not carry the weight people put on it.

Start with the obvious questions. What was the thief's name? What was his occupation before the cross? Was he a Jew or a Gentile? What exactly had he stolen? How much exposure had he had to John the Baptist, Jesus, or their preaching? The honest answer is that we do not know. Scripture simply does not tell us much of that background.

That matters because some people speak as though it is certain that the thief had never been baptized. But that is not something the text says. In Luke 23 the man speaks about Jesus' kingdom, and some translations render his

appeal as 'Lord' while the NASB reads 'Jesus.' Either way, he shows unusual awareness and faith for a dying man. Could he have known more than the text states? Yes. Can someone prove from the passage that he definitely had not been baptized? No. Saying so with certainty is incorrect at best and, when used as a confident theological weapon, intellectually dishonest at worst.

Step-by-step reasoning

- The argument assumes facts not in evidence. It treats speculation as proof.
- At the very least, the anti-baptism argument is trying to make you rest your soul on a maybe. Even if someone insisted it is a fifty-fifty possibility, why would any sober person stake salvation on a coin-flip argument when clear conversion passages are available?
- But the deeper answer is that the question still would not settle the issue even if one granted the assumption. The thief lived and died before the New Covenant was in force in its post-cross, post-resurrection form.
- Hebrews 9:16-17 explains that a testament takes effect at death. Before the testator dies, the testament is not yet in force in that covenantal sense.
- Jesus, while still on earth, had direct authority to forgive sins personally as He pleased. He exercised that authority in multiple cases during His earthly ministry.
- You see that clearly in the account of the paralytic in Mark 2:1-12 and Luke 5:17-26. Jesus tells the man his sins are forgiven, and the scribes react in shock because they understand the claim. Jesus then proves that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins. That shows Christ's personal authority while present on earth; it does not erase the covenant terms He later announced for the world after His death and resurrection.
- After His death, burial, and resurrection, the standing terms announced to the world include baptism in His name for the forgiveness of sins.

Example

If I want to hand you 100 dollars while I am alive, I can simply hand it to you because I am right there. But if I die and want you to receive 100 dollars after I am gone, then it must come through my will and testament. My personal presence and my enacted testament are not the same situation. In the same way, Jesus could personally pardon during His earthly ministry, but after His death the terms of His covenant are what govern everyone else.

Example

If a king personally waves one traveler through the gate before the official entry rules are posted, that does not mean the posted entry rules for everyone else no longer matter.

So the thief argument fails two ways. First, it rests on speculation, because people do not actually know enough about the thief to make him a clean anti-baptism case. Second, even if someone insists on the unprovable assumption, the thief still stands before the cross and before the New Covenant terms were formally in force. Doctrine for sinners today must therefore be built from the standing teaching given after Jesus' death and resurrection, not from a singular case dragged out of a different covenant setting.

2. 'We are saved by faith alone, so baptism cannot be necessary.'

This objection sounds strong only if the phrase 'faith alone' is assumed ahead of time. The problem is that the conversion texts do not speak that way. They do not set faith against baptism. They join faith, repentance, confession, and baptism as elements of one obedient response to Christ.

James 2 directly rejects the phrase 'faith alone' as a sufficient formula. Even where Paul stresses justification by faith apart from works of law, he is not arguing against obedient response to the gospel. He is arguing against earning salvation through human merit, especially law-keeping as a ground of boasting.

Step-by-step reasoning

- Faith is essential. Without faith, baptism is meaningless.
- But it does not follow that faith is the only commanded response.
- The same Lord who called for faith also called for baptism.
- Therefore, to oppose baptism to faith is to oppose two things God joined together.

Example people immediately understand

If a man says, 'I trust my wife, so I did not bother to say vows at the wedding,' he has not honored trust - he has refused the appointed response that gives shape to trust. Biblical faith is not bare mental agreement. It obeys.

When someone insists that faith excludes baptism, he is usually not reading the baptism passages first and then drawing his conclusion. He is importing a system into the passages. That is interpretive bias, even if he does not realize it.

3. 'Baptism is a work, and we are not saved by works.'

This argument confuses two very different categories. Scripture condemns works by which man boasts, earns, or establishes his own righteousness. Baptism is not that kind of work. Baptism is submission to God's command.

In Colossians 2:12 the working that matters is God's working, not man's. The believer is buried and raised with Christ through faith in the working of God. Baptism is not the sinner presenting merit to God; it is the sinner yielding himself to what God has said.

Step-by-step reasoning

- A drowning man does not boast that he saved himself because he grabbed the rope thrown to him. The rope did not originate with him, and grabbing it did not earn rescue. It was still a necessary response to the rescuer's provision.
- Naaman still had to wash in the Jordan. The power was in God's promise, not in the water itself.
- The blind man in John 9 still had to go wash in Siloam. Washing did not earn sight; it received what the Lord promised.
- In the same way, baptism does not earn grace. It is the obedient appeal to God for what only He can give.

Example

If a governor says, 'Sign this pardon and walk free,' signing the paper does not earn freedom. It is simply the required response to the mercy already offered. Refusing to sign while claiming to believe in the pardon would be absurd.

So yes, baptism is something a person does in the most basic sense that he physically undergoes it. But no, it is not a meritorious work in the Pauline sense used to exclude boasting. Calling every act of obedience a forbidden work would also destroy repentance, confession, and prayer.

4. 'Baptism is only an outward sign of an inward salvation already received.'

Baptism certainly has symbolic meaning. It pictures burial, resurrection, cleansing, and transfer into Christ. But symbolic meaning does not make it empty or optional. The Lord's Supper is symbolic and still mandatory in its proper place. A wedding ring is symbolic, but the vows are not therefore meaningless. Symbols can be appointed means, not mere decorations.

The deeper problem is that the actual baptism passages use stronger language than this objection allows. Scripture does not merely say baptism pictures forgiveness. It connects baptism with forgiveness, washing, union with Christ, and salvation itself.

Step-by-step reasoning

- A sign may point to a reality.
- But if God appoints the sign as part of the transition into that reality, then the sign is not optional.
- The question is not whether baptism symbolizes. The question is whether the New Testament treats it as merely symbolic. It does not.

Example

Crossing a property line can be symbolic - but it is also the actual point at which you are either inside or outside. Baptism is not bare theater. In the New Testament it functions like a crossing point.

To reduce baptism to a post-salvation testimony, a person must flatten or relocate the force of passages like Acts 2:38, Acts 22:16, Romans 6:3-4, Galatians 3:27, and First Peter 3:21. Again, the pressure is coming from doctrine brought to the text, not from the text itself.

5. 'Acts 2:38 means "because of" forgiveness already received, not in order to receive forgiveness.'

This is a technical argument built around the phrase often translated 'for the forgiveness of sins.' It is usually brought in to escape the natural reading of the verse. But the wider sentence and the overall pattern of Acts push strongly the other way.

Peter is answering the question, 'What shall we do?' His answer gives responsive commands directed toward the problem that convicted them. He is not saying, 'Because your sins were already forgiven, now perform a symbol.' He is telling cut-to-the-heart sinners how to respond to the gospel.

Step-by-step reasoning

- The question in the context is prospective: what should guilty people do now?
- Peter gives imperative commands, not a historical explanation of what had already happened invisibly before those commands.
- Acts 22:16 independently confirms the same direction by linking baptism with washing away sins.
- The repeated pattern in Acts strengthens the ordinary reading rather than weakening it.

Example

If a firefighter says, 'Get out of the house for your safety,' nobody naturally hears, 'because you were already safe.' The command aims toward the stated result.

Could someone force an unusual reading onto the preposition? Scholars can debate possibilities in the abstract. But interpretation is not done in a vacuum. Context, parallel passages, and conversion patterns all lean the same direction. The ordinary reading is still the best reading.

6. 'First Corinthians 1:17 proves baptism is not part of the gospel.'

Paul says Christ did not send him to baptize but to preach the gospel. Some take this to mean baptism is unrelated to salvation. But Paul's real point is very different. He is correcting factional pride at Corinth. People were boasting in who baptized them, as if the baptizer rather than Christ mattered.

If baptism were spiritually meaningless, Paul's argument would collapse. The Corinthians were baptized; the issue was not whether baptism mattered, but whether attachment to a particular baptizer should become a basis for boasting and division. Paul says no.

Step-by-step reasoning

- Preaching the gospel and baptizing are distinguishable tasks.
- Distinguishable tasks are not contradictory tasks.
- A surgeon may say, 'I was sent to diagnose, not to run intake.' That does not mean intake is unnecessary.
- Paul's focus is role priority and anti-sectarian correction, not denial of baptism's place in conversion.

Example

A builder may say, 'I was hired to design the house, not to pour the concrete.' That statement distinguishes functions. It does not mean the foundation is optional.

So First Corinthians 1:17 cannot be used honestly to erase the many passages that explicitly connect baptism with the sinner's response to the gospel.

7. 'Cornelius received the Holy Spirit before baptism, so baptism cannot be necessary.'

Cornelius is a real case and must be handled carefully. But the conclusion often drawn from it is too fast. The outpouring on Cornelius served a visible, historical purpose: it proved to Jewish believers that Gentiles were accepted by God and could receive the gospel. Peter later appeals to that event precisely as a sign to astonished Jewish Christians.

Yet what happened next matters just as much: Peter still commanded Cornelius and his household to be baptized. If Spirit outpouring made baptism unnecessary, Peter badly missed the point of his own sermon and of the event itself. Instead, he treated baptism as still required.

Step-by-step reasoning

- Cornelius is not a case where Peter says, 'You have the Spirit, so skip baptism.'
- It is a case where God used an extraordinary sign to open the door to Gentiles, and Peter still commanded baptism afterward.
- Extraordinary signs in redemptive history do not cancel ordinary commands.

Example

If a judge makes a public announcement to prove a new group is legally welcome in the courthouse, that public announcement does not eliminate the normal paperwork still required once they enter.

So Cornelius does not weaken the necessity of baptism. He actually strengthens it, because even in an exceptional moment marked by miraculous confirmation, baptism was still commanded.

A closing note about deathbed cases and hard hypotheticals

Sometimes, after the scriptural case becomes difficult to answer, the discussion shifts to a heartbreaking scenario: 'What about a person on his deathbed who cannot be baptized?' That question matters pastorally, because real suffering is involved. But it is still not the question that establishes doctrine. It is an emotional-pressure argument, not a controlling interpretive argument. We are not given authority to rewrite what God said because a hypothetical case feels hard to us.

The key issue is this: we do not get to decide who is in heaven and who is not. God is Judge, not us. Abraham's question still stands in principle: 'Shall not the Judge of all the earth deal justly?' God will do what is right. But our job is different. Our job is to teach and obey what He actually revealed, not soften commands because we are imagining edge cases, because we want a different outcome for ourselves, or because we are trying to comfort ourselves about someone who has already passed.

If a man asks, 'But what about the person who wanted to obey and physically could not?' the honest answer is: that case is in God's hands. We can trust God's justice, mercy, and perfect knowledge. What we cannot do is turn an exceptional hypothetical into a new rule that empties plain passages of their meaning. People do this in other areas all the time. They take a hard case and then use the hard case to redefine the rule itself. But a difficult case does not cancel a standing command.

Step-by-step reasoning

- The Bible tells us what to preach, what to command, and what sinners are told to do.
- The Bible does not tell us to build doctrine on extreme hypotheticals.
- Therefore, we must not take an emotional case and use it to overturn direct teaching.
- If God chooses to show mercy in a case beyond our knowledge, that is His right. But it is not our right to announce exceptions He did not reveal.
- The safe path is always to submit to the plain teaching now, while there is time, rather than search for imagined loopholes later.

So the deathbed question should not be ignored, but neither should it be allowed to control the doctrine. We do not twist Scripture, redefine obedience, or weaken baptism because of emotionally loaded hypotheticals. We leave the secret things with God, and we cling to the things He has made known.

4. Where disagreement usually comes from

At this point the pattern is fairly obvious. To deny baptism's necessity, a person usually must do one or more of the following:

- Treat direct commands to sinners as though they are optional descriptions.
- Recast forward-looking statements as backward-looking symbols.
- Build doctrine from rare exceptions instead of from standing apostolic teaching.
- Use Paul against Peter, or one text against another, instead of reading them together.
- Redefine 'not of works' so broadly that all obedience becomes suspect.
- Let a favored theological slogan control the reading of plain passages.

That does not mean every person who disagrees is dishonest. Many are sincere. But sincerity does not remove bias. The real test is whether one is willing to let repeated, straightforward texts say what they say even when they cut across a cherished tradition.

A final honesty test

Ask this question: if these very same verses were being used to support something your tradition already loved, would you suddenly become this eager to make them figurative, exceptional, or secondary? If not, the problem is probably not the text. It is the pressure of prior commitments.

5. Conclusion

The New Testament does not present baptism as a humanly invented ceremony added onto salvation after the fact. It presents baptism as part of the sinner's obedient response to the gospel, commanded by Christ, preached by the apostles, joined with forgiveness and cleansing, and connected with union in Christ's death and resurrection.

A person is not saved by water separated from Christ, faith, repentance, confession, and grace. But neither is a person saved by a faith that refuses the response Christ and His apostles repeatedly commanded. Grace does not eliminate God-appointed means. It establishes them.

So the issue is not whether baptism replaces faith. It does not. The issue is whether a believer has the right to call optional what the Lord treated as commanded, urgent, and saving in its relation to His work. We would say the New Testament answer is no.

Recommended passages to read in full in the NASB

- Matthew 28:18-20; Mark 16:15-16; Acts 2:36-41; Acts 8:35-39; Acts 9:17-18; Acts 10:44-48; Acts 11:14-18; Acts 16:29-34; Acts 22:12-16; Mark 2:1-12; Luke 5:17-26; Hebrews 9:16-17; Romans 6:1-6; First Corinthians 12:12-13; Galatians 3:26-27; Colossians 2:11-13; First Peter 3:18-21; James 2:14-26

Have more questions?

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