

Regarding Salvation, Baptism, Sin, and I Corinthians 8
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A friend called me to ask about salvation, baptism, sin, and I Corinthians 8. After our conversation on the phone, I sat down and wrote him the following email:

The Bible is clear that both salvation and baptism are one time experiences (cf. John 3:1ff, Acts 2:38ff.), that baptism is not part of the gospel and does not wash away any sin(s) (cf. I Corinthians 1:14ff., Ephesians 2:8-9), that salvation does not result in sinless perfection (cf. I John 1 and 2, Romans 7), that baptism is for believers only, not unbelievers or infants (cf. Matthew 28:19-20, Acts 2:38-42, Matthew 3), that baptism is always and only by immersion, not by sprinkling or pouring (cf. Matthew 3, John 1:31, Acts 8:36-40), that baptism is a symbol or picture of the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ, just like the Lord's table, and that it is of no salvific value (cf. Romans 6, Colossians 2), and that baptism is a church ordinance and can only be properly administered by a local, NT church (cf. John 1, Matthew 28, Acts 1-2), and that God commands all people to obey the Gospel and be baptized upon their profession of faith (Mark 16), and that when a believer obeys the command to be water immersed he provides for himself a good conscience (cf. I Peter 3).

As I have termed it, baptism may be understood in three CMs:

Christ has mandated that believers be baptized (Matthew 28:19-20)

The cross is mirrored when we are baptized (John 1:31)

Churches add members when believers are baptized (Acts 2:41)

In teaching a 10am theology class in the Bronx for nearly 15 years, the number one question by frequency that I have gotten from students and class attendees concerns some form of "what about the believer who sins?"

The Bible makes it clear that 1) all have sinned, 2) God commands not to sin, 3) salvation does not result in sinless living, 4) Christians should strive not to sin

I have sought to illustrate it this way - if a 100 year old man trusted Christ as his savior when he was 10 and was baptized when he was 10, we can certainly suspect that by numbers / mathematics, he has committed many more sins as a baptized believer over 90 years then he ever did as an unbaptized unbeliever for 10 years. And none of that anecdote alters any of the above 4 points in the previous paragraph.

Re: I Corinthians 8, the context of that passage is that Paul was writing a corrective letter to a church that he planted in Acts 18 in a city that was known for pagan idolatry, and it was customary to eat meat that had been offered (think 'dedicated') to false gods. The question was coming up was this - is it sin for a Christian to continue in that practice? Paul was not just picking some random action, like the smelling of flowers etc, but a real life situation, like say if those flowers were grown for the glory of Ashtaroth or Marduk. Paul's answer in I Corinthians, which is previewed in Acts 10 and 15, and echoed in Romans 14 and Galatians, is that the

Christian has liberty in Christ, but that he must be careful not to make his brother stumble. This stumbling would happen when for instance Christian A has no problem eating food from The Ashtaroth Diner, but Christian B does have a problem with it, and Christian A invites Christian B to meet him there for lunch. When I was in a classroom years ago, there was another student who held the view that caffeine was sinful because it was a drug, and so I did not bring a can of Coke or a coffee to the class to put it in his face once I realized his position.

I believe that the Bible does not say the words “thou shalt not eat exactly this and thou shalt eat exactly that” because these are matters of Christian liberty, love, and discernment. As I have said to our congregation, some of you have no problem having a glass of wine with dinner or a beer at the Yankee game, but for others of you it would cause you to stumble and perhaps backslide into your old life. Paul was so intent on not causing his brother to stumble that he said, “Wherefore, if meat make my brother to offend, I will eat no flesh while the world standeth, lest I make my brother to offend” (I Corinthians 8:13). A lot of this relates to the bigger issue that we are living under grace and not under the law of the Old Testament. But as Paul is quick to point out in Romans 6, “shall we continue in sin that grace may abound? God forbid. How shall we, that are dead to sin, live any longer therein? Know ye not, that so many of us as were baptized in Jesus Christ, were baptized into his death? Therefore we are buried with him by baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life.”

So once again we come back to believer’s baptism. Paul makes the point that our water immersion is in reference to Christ (“into Christ”), and that it pictures his death (“baptized into his death”), and that it also signifies that we have died to our old life and that we have a new life in Christ (“we also should walk in newness of life”). The new walk is the essence of being a Christian. It is not a perfect walk from our standpoint, but we are justified fully through the blood of Christ (Romans 5:8-9), and we are to walk in His word and to be good stewards of the new life God has given to us (Cf. I Corinthians 3-4). Our new life in Christ will have an impact upon both our thoughts and actions re: everything, even what we eat and how we eat it.