



New Testament Salvation

In the context of Scripture, salvation means deliverance from all the power and effects of sin, and it has past, present, and future aspects.

Salvation by grace through faith

A person can do nothing to save himself. No amount of good works or adherence to law can save him. "For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: not of works, lest any man should boast" (Ephesians 2:8-9). Salvation is a free gift from God, which man cannot merit, earn, or deserve. The atoning work of Jesus Christ has made this free gift of salvation available, and the only way to receive it is to believe in Jesus and in the sufficiency of His sacrifice (Romans 3:24-28; 4:22-25).

Saving faith

To believe on Jesus includes believing His Word, and truly believing His Word includes obedience. Faith is more than mental assent, intellectual acceptance, or verbal profession; it includes trust, reliance, commitment, appropriation, and application. We cannot separate saving faith from obedience (Acts 6:7; Romans 1:5; 2:6-10; 10:16; 16:26; Hebrews 11:6-8). Obedience to God's Word is absolutely necessary to salvation (Matthew 7:21-27; John 14:15, 23; Romans 6:17; 15:18; II Thessalonians 1:7-10; Hebrews 5:9; I Peter 1:21-23; 4:17; I John 2:3-5; 5:1-3). Faith is alive only through response and action (James 2:14-26). It is possible to have an initial degree of faith in Christ and still not be saved if there is not complete acceptance, commitment, and obedience (Matthew 7:21-23; John 2:23-25; 12:42-43; Acts 8:12-23; James 2:19).

Faith is the means of appropriating God's grace. It is the means by which people yield to God, obey His Word, and allow Him to perform His saving work in them. Saving faith, then, is (1) acceptance of the gospel of Jesus Christ as the sole means of salvation and (2) obedience to that gospel (application or appropriation of that gospel).

The gospel and the New Birth

The gospel of Jesus Christ is His death, burial, and resurrection for our salvation (I Corinthians 15:1-4). A person responds to the gospel, or applies the gospel to his life, by repentance from sin (death to sin), water baptism by immersion in the name of Jesus Christ (burial with Christ), and receiving the Holy Spirit (new life in Christ) (Acts 2:1-4, 38; Romans 6:1-7; 7:6; 8:2). Jesus said, "Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God" (John 3:5).

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When someone believes on Jesus Christ and obeys Acts 2:38, he experiences the birth of water and the Spirit. He is “born again,” actually becoming a new creation (John 3:3, 7; II Corinthians 5:17). At repentance and water baptism, he buries the old sinful lifestyle, the record of past sins, and the death penalty for sin. When he receives the Holy Spirit he begins to live a new, godly life. On the Day of Pentecost, the birthday of the New Testament church, the apostle Peter preached the first gospel sermon to the crowds who had gathered to observe the newly Spirit-filled believers as they spoke in tongues and worshiped God. Convicted of their sins by his simple yet powerful message, the audience cried out, “Men and brethren, what shall we do?” (Acts 2:37). Peter gave a precise, complete, and unequivocal answer: “Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost” (Acts 2:38).

Those saved in the Gospels were saved under the Old Covenant while they awaited the New. The New Covenant did not come into effect until after Christ’s ascension (Luke 7:28; 24:47-49; John 7:39; 16:7; Acts 1:4-8; Hebrews 9:14-17). Thus Acts 2:38 is the comprehensive answer to an inquiry about New Testament conversion, expressing in a nutshell the proper response to the gospel. Not only did the Jews on Pentecost receive the Acts 2:38 experience, but so did the Samaritans, the apostle Paul, the Gentiles, and the disciples of John at Ephesus (Acts 8:12-17; 9:17-18 with 22:16; 10:44-48; 19:1-6).

In short, the New Testament message of salvation is repentance from sin, water baptism in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and receiving the Holy Spirit with the initial sign of speaking in tongues.

Repentance

Repentance is a turn from sin to God (Acts 26:18-20). It has three necessary aspects: an intellectual change (change of views), an emotional change (change of feelings), and a volitional change (voluntary change of purpose). It includes recognition of sin (Mark 2:17), confession of sin to God (Proverbs 28:13; I John 1:9), contrition or godly sorrow for sin (Psalm 51:17; II Corinthians 7:10), and a decision to forsake sin (Proverbs 28:13; Luke 3:7-8). With repentance comes the willingness to make restitution for past sins as much as possible (Matthew 5:23-24; Luke 19:8). Repentance is the first response of faith to the call of God (Mark 1:15). It is absolutely necessary to salvation (Luke 13:3, 5; Acts 17:30; II Peter 3:9). Without repentance baptism is not effective, and without repentance a person cannot receive the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:38; 3:19).

At repentance, a person begins to let God work in his life. He decides to turn away from sin and allows God to turn him. As part of the turn from sin, God enables him to break away from sinful habits and desires. As part of the turn to God, repentance prepares the way for him to have a personal relationship with God, qualifying him for baptism of water and Spirit.

The work of forgiveness and remission comes through repentance and water baptism (Acts 2:38). Repentance deals with a person’s sinful lifestyle, and baptism deals with the record and consequences of sin.

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Water baptism

Water baptism is part of salvation (I Peter 3:21). It expresses faith in God by obedience to His Word (Mark 16:16; Acts 2:41). The scriptural mode of baptism is immersion in water, and only this method retains the biblical symbolism of baptism as a burial (Matthew 3:16; Acts 8:36-39; Romans 6:4). Faith in Christ and repentance from sin are necessary to its validity; thus infant baptism is not proper (Matthew 3:6-11; Acts 2:38; 8:37).

The biblical significance of water baptism is as follows: (1) God remits sins at water baptism (Acts 2:38; 22:16). God erases the record of sin and cancels its penalty. He washes away sins, burying them forever. (2) Baptism is part of the new birth (John 3:5; Titus 3:5). (3) Baptism identifies a person with Jesus' burial (Romans 6:4; Colossians 2:12). It indicates he died to sin by repentance and is burying his past sins, the dominion of sin, and the sinful lifestyle. (4) Water baptism is part of the one baptism of water and Spirit that places believers into Christ (Romans 6:3-4; Galatians 3:27; Ephesians 4:5). It identifies them personally with Jesus and is part of the entrance into His family. (5) Baptism is part of spiritual circumcision (Colossians 2:11-13). The Bible teaches that baptism should be administered in the name of Jesus Christ. This means invoking the name of Jesus orally (Acts 22:16; James 2:7) and rebaptizing those who have been baptized some other way (Acts 19:1-5). The name of Jesus in the baptismal formula expresses faith in His true identity, atoning work, and saving power and authority.

The name of Jesus is the only saving name, the name by which to receive remission of sins, the highest name, and the name in which Christians are to say and do all things (Acts 4:12; 10:43; Philippians 2:9-11; Colossians 3:17). Thus using Jesus' name is the proper way to fulfill all the purposes for baptism. The Bible records five historical accounts of baptism in the New Testament church that describe a name or formula. In each case the name is Jesus (Acts 2:38; 8:16; 10:48; 19:5; 22:16). The epistles also allude to the Jesus Name formula (Romans 6:3-4; I Corinthians 1:13; 6:11; Galatians 3:27; Colossians 2:12). Even Matthew 28:19 refers to this formula, for it describes a singular name that represents all the redemptive manifestations of the Godhead, and that name is Jesus (Zechariah 14:9; Matthew 1:21; John 5:43; 14:26; Revelation 22:3-4). Moreover, Jesus is the name described in the other Great Commission accounts (Mark 16:17; Luke 24:47).

The baptism of the Holy Spirit

The baptism with, by, in or of the Holy Ghost (Holy Spirit) is part of New Testament salvation (John 3:5; Romans 8:1-16; I Corinthians 12:13; Ephesians 1:13-14; Titus 3:5). The phrase describes how the believer is immersed in and filled with God's Spirit. In Acts the terms "baptized, filled, received, fell on, came upon, and poured out the gift on" all describe this experience (Acts 1:4-5; 2:4; 10:44-47; 11:15-17; 19:1-6). It is promised to all who believe on Jesus and obey His Word (John 7:38-39; Acts 5:32; 11:15-17; 19:2; Galatians 3:14; Ephesians 1:13).

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The Bible records five historical accounts of receiving the Holy Spirit in the New Testament church: the Jews, the Samaritans, the Gentiles, the apostle Paul, and the disciples of John at Ephesus. This record establishes that the baptism of the Spirit is indeed for everyone (Luke 11:13; Acts 2:39) and is accompanied by the initial sign of tongues (Mark 16:17). Speaking in tongues means speaking supernaturally, as the Spirit gives utterance, in a language the speaker has never learned (Acts 2:1-11). Three of the accounts explicitly describe speaking in tongues as the initial evidence of receiving the Spirit. On the Day of Pentecost, a sound of wind signified the coming of the Spirit and tongue-like flames signaled the availability to each person, but speaking in tongues “as the Spirit gave them utterance” was the initial sign of each individual filling (Acts 2:1-4). Tongues convinced skeptical, astonished Jews that the Gentiles had just received the Holy Ghost; tongues alone sufficiently identified this as the Pentecostal experience (Acts 10:44-47; 11:15-17). The Ephesian disciples also spoke in tongues as the first sign of receiving the Spirit (Acts 19:6).

Tongues are implicit in the other two accounts. An unnamed miraculous sign indicated the exact moment the Samaritans received the Spirit; its prior absence denoted they did not already have the Spirit despite joy, belief, and baptism, and it was so spectacular that Simon the Magician coveted the power to bestow the Spirit with this sign (Acts 8:5-19). Acts 9:17 mentions Paul’s experience without description, but I Corinthians 14:18 says he spoke in tongues often.

The baptism of the Holy Spirit is the normal, basic New Testament experience with God, the birth of the Spirit. The Spirit is the rest, guide to all truth, adopter, intercessor, seal, earnest of the inheritance, and sanctifier (Isaiah 28:11-12; John 16:13; Romans 8:15, 26; Ephesians 1:13-14; I Peter 1:2). Someone can receive the Spirit by repenting, having faith in God, and asking God for His gift. When a person receives the Holy Spirit, he receives power to overcome sin and live a holy life (Acts 1:8; Romans 8:4, 13). If he lets the Spirit continually fill (control and guide) him, he will bear the fruit of the Spirit and become Christ-like (Galatians 5:22-23).

Conclusion

There should be no rejection of those who have not received the New Testament experience, but they should be encouraged to receive everything God has for them. There are many sincere, and even repentant, people like Apollos and the disciples of John at Ephesus who need to be led to further truth so that they can have an apostolic new birth.

A person’s experience and doctrine should conform to the complete biblical, apostolic pattern; those who seek God without fulfilling this pattern will answer to God. A person’s responsibility is clear: he must act on the truth. In summary, (1) the Bible is the sole authority for salvation; (2) the basis of salvation is Christ’s death, burial, and resurrection; (3) salvation comes only by grace through faith in Jesus Christ; and (4) the application of grace and the expression of faith come as a person obeys Acts 2:38, thereby receiving the new birth of John 3:3-5.

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