

Is Water Baptism Necessary for Salvation?

A Response to the Teaching of the International Churches of Christ

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What must a person do in order to be saved? This is an essential question. The *International Churches of Christ*¹ (ICOC) aggressively teach that unless a person places his faith in Christ, and is baptized at the moment of faith for the forgiveness of sins, he can not be saved. In this paper I will argue this position represents a misreading of Scripture and that the Bible does not teach that water baptism is a necessary condition for salvation.

I will begin by outlining four arguments that are commonly presented in order to show that baptism is a necessary condition for salvation.² In an attempt to fairly represent the viewpoint of ICOC on baptism and salvation I will present their arguments as they might without any critical evaluation. I will respond to these arguments in the second section of the paper. The purpose of this paper is simply to answer one question: *Is water baptism a necessary condition for salvation?*³

ARGUMENTS IN SUPPORT OF THE ALLEGED NECESSITY OF WATER BAPTISM FOR SALVATION *(As Presented by Representatives of the ICOC)*

First, ICOC representatives will insist the consistent pattern recorded in the book of Acts was the following: Unbelievers heard the gospel and those who responded positively were immediately baptized. For example, Peter told a group of people who responded to his sermon (Acts 2:38), “Repent, and let each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.”⁴ Acts 2:41 records that “those who had received his word were baptized.”

Another example of this pattern may be seen in Acts 8:12. “But when they believed Philip preaching the good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were being baptized, men and

¹The International Churches of Christ (ICOC), also known as the “Boston Movement,” was founded by Kip McKean in 1979. Then, of course, it was not an international movement but simply the “Boston Church of Christ.” As of September 1999, the ICOC claims it has established 372 churches in 158 nations, with a weekly Sunday attendance of nearly 200,000. The ICOC believes that virtually all other churches have become apostate because they have departed from the teachings of the Bible in favor of tradition. The ICOC views itself as the “restored” and true church. Some allege that the ICOC is a “cult.” The frequency of this charge may be reflected in the fact that the ICOC directly responds to this allegation on their official web site. The ICOC (under a variety of names) has been repeatedly banned from numerous university campuses because of its aggressive tactics. It is important to distinguish the ICOC from the mainline “Churches of Christ.” One should never assume that any church with the name “Church of Christ” reflects the ICOC’s views. Nevertheless, it is important to note that some churches within the “Churches of Christ” hold a view of baptism similar to the ICOC—even through they might reject many of the ICOC’s methods.

²The material I will present in the first section comes from several sources: the official web site of the ICOC (www.icoc.org); *The Disciples Handbook* (Discipleship Publications Intl.: Woburn, M.A., 1997) published by the ICOC; the “First Principles” Bible study written by Kip McKean, the founder of the ICOC; and my personal experience from conversations with members of the ICOC. To date I have been unable to find any works by the ICOC members which discuss the relationship of baptism and salvation on an academic level. (This may reflect their commitment to the “Bible only” and suspicion of “creeds” which they believe lead to doctrinal impurity.) Obviously there are other theological traditions which argue for the necessity of water baptism for salvation, but my concern is to respond to formulations of this teaching by the ICOC.

³The are, of course, several are other important questions about baptism (adults verses infants, immersion verses sprinkling, etc.) that are outside the scope of this essay.

⁴Unless otherwise indicated, all biblical quotations will be taken from the *New American Standard Bible*.

women alike.” Later in Acts 8 Philip preached the gospel to an Ethiopian eunuch. In response to the gospel message the eunuch said (v.36b), “Look! Water! What prevents me from being baptized?” Acts 10 records Peter’s first evangelistic encounter with Gentiles. After sharing the gospel message with a Gentile named Cornelius and seeing him receive the Holy Spirit, Peter said (v.47), “Surely no one can refuse the water for these to be baptized who have received the Holy Spirit just as we did, can he?”

Paul’s ministry practice also reflects this pattern. His first convert in Europe was a woman from Philippi named Lydia. Acts 16:14b records her conversion. “. . . the Lord opened her heart to respond to the things spoken by Paul.” Verse fifteen records that she was “immediately baptized.” The same was true for the Philippian jailer (Acts 16:30-33). He was “immediately was baptized, he and all his household.” Other examples include Acts 19:3-5 and Acts 22:16. Thus one writer claims, “No one is counted a Christian in the book of Acts until he is baptized.”⁵

Second, the Apostles included the necessity of water baptism in their gospel presentations making it a *necessary condition* for salvation. ICOC representatives will argue that people were not baptized because they were *already* Christians but in order to *become* Christians. As evidence for this claim they will point to Peter’s first evangelistic message (Acts 2:38) in which he says, “Repent and let each one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus for the forgiveness of your sins.” Peter, they claim, did not exhort his audience to receive baptism *because* they were already Christians, but urged them to be baptized *so that their sins might be forgiven* (i.e., so that they could become Christians). Thus Peter made water baptism necessary for salvation. Other examples of the inclusion of the water baptism in gospel presentations include Acts 10:48; 19:1-7; and 22:16.

Third, Jesus himself made water baptism a necessary condition for salvation. In his commission to his disciples in Mark 16:15-16 Jesus said, “Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation. He who has believed *and has been baptized* shall be saved.” (emphasis mine) Here Jesus himself said that one must be baptized in order to be saved. Jesus didn’t say that belief by itself results in salvation but that faith, accompanied by baptism, brings salvation. Furthermore, Jesus also alluded to the need for baptism in John 3:5 in his evangelistic message to Nicodemus. “Truly, truly I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God.” ICOC representatives maintain that the phrase “of water” refers to water baptism and making baptism a condition for being born again.⁶

Finally, the Bible describes baptism as conferring the benefits of salvation (Acts 22:16; Rom 6:3-5; I Cor. 12:13; Col 2:12-13; Gal 3:26-27; I Pet. 3:21). According to one ICOC representative

Likewise, the NT defines the purpose of baptism very plainly. Baptism is for the forgiveness of sins (Acts 2:38; 22:16), the point at which one is born again (John 3:3-5), the means of entering Christ where salvation is (Galatians 3:27; 2 Timothy 2:10), and the act which places us into one body which God promised to save (1 Corinthians 12:13; Ephesians 4:4; 5:23).⁷

⁵Herbert Mjorud, *What’s Baptism All About?* (Creation House: Carol Stream, 1978), 24. As far as I know Mjorud, a Church of Christ minister, is not part of the ICOC. Nevertheless his views regarding the necessity of baptism for salvation are almost identical to those of the ICOC.

⁶On the official ICOC web site (www.icoc.org) one finds the following statement, “Although many religious groups and theologians try to explain away being ‘born of water’ as something other than water baptism, those conclusions do not stand the test of biblical scholarship.” This writer goes on to quote an eighteenth century British scholar who claims that all the early church fathers understood this passage as a reference to water baptism. Parenthetically, this appeal to the “test of biblical scholarship” is curious in light the claim three lines earlier that, “It doesn’t matter what any church or any person says. What matters is what the Bible says.” What is problematic is not their claim to believe in the “Bible,” but their apparent unwillingness (or inability?) to acknowledge that there is a particular interpretive framework they hold that shapes their reading of the Biblical text.

⁷Gordon Ferguson, *Prepared to Answer: Confronting Religious Doctrines with Biblical Teaching* (Woburn: Discipleship Pub. Intl., 1995), 109.

In summary, the International Churches of Christ claim that both apostles and Jesus taught that water baptism is a *necessary condition* for salvation.⁸ Before I respond to these claims I will present three preliminary arguments that provide an essential context for evaluating the relationship between water baptism and salvation.

ARGUMENTS IN SUPPORT OF FAITH ALONE, APART FROM WATER BAPTISM, AS A NECESSARY AND SUFFICIENT CONDITION FOR SALVATION

Three Preliminary Points

First, we must clarify the question at hand. The question is not, “Does authentic faith, when accompanied by water baptism, result in salvation?” On this question both sides agree. Nor is the question, “Is baptism necessary?” It is a command of Jesus (Matt 28:18-20), so obviously the answer is affirmative. Rather, the question is the following: *Is water baptism a necessary condition for salvation such that apart from water baptism a person cannot be saved?*⁹ To put the question another way, “Is faith a sufficient condition for salvation, or must it also be accompanied by water baptism?” The ICOC takes the position that because faith *must* be accompanied by water baptism, faith is a *necessary* but not *sufficient* condition for salvation.¹⁰

Second, it is important to note that the Greek word *baptizo* (translated “to baptize”) is used in a variety of ways in the New Testament. *Baptizo* means to “dip, immerse, or wash”¹¹ and is used of Jewish ritual washings (Mark 7:4), the baptizing done by John the Baptist (Mat. 3:6-17), and Christian baptism (Matt. 28:18-20; Acts 2:38,41). In addition, *baptizo* also has a number of figurative uses. In Luke 12:50 Jesus says, “but I have a baptism to be baptized with” referring to the suffering he would experience. In Matt. 3:11 John contrasts his (water) baptism with the “baptism by fire” that would be inaugurated by Jesus. According to Acts 1:5 and 2:1-13 this promised “baptism” took place on the day of Pentecost when the Holy Spirit was given. These examples are sufficient to remind us of the flexibility of baptismal language. The fact that the Greek verb *baptizo* has a wide variety of meanings is an essential starting point in our discussion. Its meaning must be determined by the context in which it occurs. One cannot assume that every use of the verb *baptizo* is a reference to water baptism.

⁸In the “First Principles” Bible study Kip McKean, founder of the ICOC, outlines five conditions for salvation: (1) hearing the gospel [Rom. 10:17]; (2) believing the gospel [Heb 11:6]; (3) repenting of sin [Luke 13:3]; (4) confession [Rom. 10:9; I Tim. 6:12] and finally (5) being baptized in water for the forgiveness of sins [Acts 2:38; I Pet. 3:21]. While our discussion is confined to the ICOC’s claim that water baptism is necessary for salvation, there are other theological problems with the ICOC’s understanding of the gospel (including their view of human depravity, original sin, the nature of grace and perseverance) as well as their doctrine of God. While these issues fall outside the scope of this essay it is worth noting that they reflect a particular theological framework through which the ICOC reads and interprets Scripture. It is somewhat disingenuous for the ICOC to claim that they believe “only in the Bible” as if this somehow entails the notion that they have no theological system which informs their reading of Scripture.

⁹It is also worth noting that according to the ICOC baptism results in salvation only when it is done explicitly for the forgiveness of sins. Thus a person who has placed their faith in Christ and then is later baptized (as an expression of that faith) is not saved from the ICOC’s perspective. Kip McKean, founder of the ICOC, claims that the issue is not being baptized in an ICOC church *per se* but being baptized for the *right purpose* (the forgiveness of sins). Since it is only in their churches that baptism is administered at the right time for the right purpose, it follows that it is only in their churches that one can be truly saved. A person who has not been baptized for the right purpose (forgiveness of sins) cannot be saved. When McKean started the Boston movement in 1979 most of the individuals who joined him were re-baptized.

¹⁰Logicians use the terms necessary and sufficient to describe conditions that must exist for a given event to occur. A necessary condition is a circumstance that must exist for an event to occur. For example, having gas in one’s car is a necessary condition for the car to run. However, gas in the tank is not a sufficient condition. The battery must be hooked up and charged, the wiring must be properly connected, the ignition must be on, etc. A sufficient condition is a circumstance in whose presence a given event must occur. In this essay I am arguing that faith—properly understood—is not only a necessary condition for salvation, but also a *sufficient* condition for salvation from the human side.

¹¹Walter Bauer, *A Greek English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 2d ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 131-32. (cited hereafter as BAGD)

Third, to determine whether water baptism is necessary condition for salvation *one must study salvation—not baptism*. This is a key methodological mistake made by the ICOC. To see why this is the case imagine that someone wanted to study what the Bible teaches regarding the necessity of good works for salvation. Imagine they began by studying all the passages in the Bible on good works. First, they turn to Luke 18:18-23. A rich young ruler asks Jesus, “Good teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?” to which Jesus replies “You know the commandments.” Jesus then lists five of the Ten Commandments and tells the ruler to sell all his possessions. Imagine if they next read James 2:14, “What use is it, my brethren, if a man says he has faith, but he has not works? Can that faith save him?” In v. 24 James continues, “You see that a man is justified by works, and not by faith alone.” It does not require a stretch of the imagination to envision a person concluding, on the basis of these two passages, that the Bible teaches that good works are a necessary condition for salvation. However, from the rest of Scripture—particularly Rom. 1-3; Gal 3:1-4:7; Eph 2:8,9; John 3:16-20—we know that people are *not* saved by on the basis of faith *plus works*.¹²

The ICOC makes a methodological mistake similar to the example I outlined above. They attempt to answer the question, “How is a person saved?” primarily by studying passages on baptism. However, to answer this question we need to study passages on salvation—not water baptism. Before we can answer the question, “Is water baptism a necessary condition for salvation?” we must first consider a more general question: “What must a person do in order to be saved?” When we do this, we immediately observe that, in contrast with a handful of passages (e.g. Acts 2:38; Mark 16:15-16; I Pet. 3:21) that relate baptism—in some sense—to salvation, there are hundreds of verses on salvation that contain no reference to water baptism. It will be helpful to briefly examine this biblical evidence before we consider the ICOC’s claims.

Faith Alone as a Sufficient Condition for Salvation

The overwhelming testimony of Scripture is that faith *alone* is both the necessary and sufficient condition for salvation from the human side.¹³ This can be seen clearly through a study of the following word-groups: believe (*pisteuo*), faith/belief (*pistis*), and save (*sozo*). The Greek verb *pisteuo*, generally translated “believe,” occurs 248 times in the New Testament and can mean *believe, trust or entrust*. *Pisteuo*, for example, occurs almost 100 times in the gospel of John. This is not surprising in light of John’s purpose. “But these things have been written that you may believe (*pisteuo*) that Jesus is the Christ . . . and that believing (*pisteuo*) you may have life in his name.” (John 20:31) In John 1:12 John writes that all “who believe (*pisteuo*) in His name” become children of God. John 3:16 records, “whoever believes (*pisteuo*) in Him shall not perish but have eternal life.” See also John 3:18 and 7:38-39. The

¹²This, of course, does prompt the question of how we are to understand James 2:14-26 which seems to contradict what Paul says in Rom. 3. Although this is a complicated topic a couple points can be made. Probably the most important thing to keep in mind is what James is responding to. He is not attempting to counter false teachers who suggest that Gentile Christians must receive circumcision in order to be saved (i.e. Galatians). Rather, his concern is with the nature of authentic faith. He addresses the question of individuals who claim to have “faith” but possess absolutely no evidence in their life. Thus he focuses on two kinds of faith—one that saves and one that does not. His point is the *true* faith expresses itself in good works. For a helpful discussion of James 2 in relation to Romans 4 see Douglas J. Moo, *The Letter of James*, Pillar New Testament Commentary Series (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 118-144.

¹³Logicians use the terms *necessary* and *sufficient* to describe conditions that must exist for a given event to occur. A necessary condition is a circumstance that must exist for an event to occur. For example, having gas in one’s car is a necessary condition for it to run. However, gas in the tank is not a sufficient condition for the car to run. The battery must be hooked and be charged, the wiring must be functioning, the ignition must be on, etc. . . . A sufficient condition is a circumstance in whose presence a given event *must* occur.

pattern from John's gospel is that faith is the necessary and sufficient condition for salvation.¹⁴

In Peter's second sermon (Acts 10:43) he says, "everyone who believes (*pisteuo*) in Him receives forgiveness of sins." Speaking to the Philippian jailer (Acts 16) Paul says, "Believe (*pisteuo*) in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved" (Acts 16:31). In Rom. 1:16 Paul claims that the gospel is the power of God to salvation to all who believe (*pisteuo*). In Rom. 3:21-26 Paul describes how God has made it possible for an unrighteous sinner to stand in his holy presence. He claims that God "justifies" sinners (v.22). "This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe (*pisteuo*)." (Rom. 3:22, NIV) In Rom. 4:1-12 Paul argues that Abraham was saved, not because he was circumcised, but because he believed (*pisteuo*) God. In Rom. 10:9 Paul states, "if you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe (*pisteuo*) in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you shall be saved." In Eph. 1:13 Paul writes, "after listening to the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation - having also believed (*pisteuo*), you were sealed in Him . . ."

A similar pattern can be seen with the noun *pistis* (generally translated "faith") which occurs 244 times in the New Testament. *Pistis* may denote faithfulness, trust, faith, or refer to a body of beliefs ("the faith"). The following passages use *pistis* in the sense of faith or belief in reference to salvation: Rom 5:1,2; Gal 2:16; 3:2,5,6; Eph 2:8,9. It is noteworthy that none of these passages link baptism to salvation.

Finally, the same pattern can be seen with the Greek verb *sozo* (generally translated "save"). It occurs 111 times in the New Testament. None of the following passages link water baptism to salvation: John 3:17; 10:9; Acts 2:21; 4:12; 11:14; 15:1,11; 16:30; I Cor 1:18,21; 15:5. The only passage in which the verb *sozo* is linked to salvation is I Pet. 3:21 and it will be dealt with shortly. What we see from a brief study of the word groups believe (verb- *pisteuo*), faith (noun - *pistis*), and save (verb - *sozo*) is that faith alone¹⁵ is the necessary and sufficient condition for salvation. With these points in mind I will now respond to the ICOC's specific arguments.

ICOC Claim #1: In the first century baptism occurred at the moment of faith (conversion).

The historical data, particularly in the book of Acts, do suggest that baptism and conversion generally occurred at the same time. On this point the ICOC has made an accurate observation.¹⁶ However, from the historical fact that baptism and conversion coincided one cannot legitimately infer the necessity of water baptism for salvation. An ICOC representative might concede this point but argue that the Apostles also included the necessity of baptism in their gospel message. This argument will be considered next.

ICOC Claim #2: The Apostles included the necessity of water baptism in their gospel presentations making baptism necessary for salvation.

While the apostles sometimes included the requirement of water baptism in their gospel presentations they did not teach that baptism was a necessary condition for salvation. In Acts 2:38 Peter says, "Repent and let each one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus for the forgiveness of your sins . . ." Two points

¹⁴Given the fact that John's explicit purpose is to lead people to faith in Christ so that they "may have life in his name" (John 20:31), it seems significant that John says nothing about the role of baptism in salvation (with the possible exception of John 3:5, which is at best unclear).

¹⁵By "faith alone" I do not mean mere intellectual assent. Saving faith includes not only intellectual "belief" but also represents a fundamental change of direction (repentance) that affects the whole person.

¹⁶There are some exceptions to this. One notable example is Cornelius (Acts 10). Another example may include the "120" to whom Luke refers in Acts 1. It is unlikely this group experienced Christian baptism.

can be made about this passage. First, Peter's statement was in response to a general question by his listeners (v.37b), "what shall we do?" Peter said, "repent and be baptized." Peter was simply fulfilling what Jesus had commanded him to do in Matt. 28:18-20 ("make disciples . . . baptizing them").

Second, just because Peter links water baptism to the forgiveness of sins in his message it does not follow that baptism is a condition for salvation.¹⁷ Although Peter's command to repent and be baptized is clear, the logical connection to the forgiveness of sins is somewhat unclear. The following illustration may help show why this might be the case. Imagine that if at the end of an evangelistic sermon I said, "Repent and come to the front of the church so that you may have eternal life." I may, or may not, believe that coming forward is a necessary condition for salvation. However, if I taught elsewhere that faith alone was sufficient one *would not be justified* in concluding that I believed that coming forward was necessary for salvation.¹⁸

In contrast to this one statement by Peter are many other examples in the Scriptures where forgiveness of sins is linked to faith/repentance alone. Consider Peter's second sermon in Acts 3:19. He says, "Repent and return, that your sins may be wiped away" (no mention of baptism). While preaching to Cornelius in Acts 10:43 Peter said, "Of Him all the prophets bear witness that through his Name everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins." Again, no mention of baptism. The example of Cornelius is significant because Cornelius was clearly a Christian (i.e. he had received the Spirit) *before* he was baptized. Peter responds (v.47), "Surely no one can refuse the water for these to be baptized who have received the Holy Spirit just as we did, can he?" Here we have clear evidence of a genuine believer who had not yet been baptized.

One final example is the Philippian jailer who asks (Acts 16:30) an important question to Paul and Silas: "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" In response (v.31) Paul and Silas simply say, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you shall be saved. . ." Paul and Silas include no reference to water baptism in their gospel presentation. Of course, after the jailer responded, Paul did baptize him.

Thus, the more consistent pattern therefore seems to be this: Unbelievers heard the gospel and responded. Then they are immediately baptized (immersed) in water at moment of faith.¹⁹ Thus, while the preaching of the apostles does demonstrate the necessity of baptism, it does not necessarily demonstrate the necessity of baptism *for salvation*.²⁰ Furthermore, Paul seems to distinguish the preaching of the gospel from baptism when he says, "For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel" (I Cor. 1:17).

¹⁷The Greek preposition *eis* translated "for" in Acts 2:38 by NASB has a broad range of meaning which can include purpose ("in order that") or result ("with the result") BAGD, 228-32.

¹⁸ It is quite likely that someone who came to my church for the first time might be confused by this practice. They might mistakenly conclude by watching this process that coming forward is necessary to become a Christian. I believe this is similar to the problem we have when we look at Acts and see that baptism took place for many at the moment of faith. Of course the comparison between "coming forward" and be baptized must not be pressed too far. In one sense "coming forward" and baptism are quite different. See the next note below.

¹⁹In the first-century church baptism seems to have been the (exclusive?) means through which or context in which saving faith was expressed. My hypothesis is that what "praying to receive Christ" is among some Evangelicals, water baptism was to the early church. Many evangelicals focus on prayer as a means of expressing saving faith. It appears that baptism functioned in a similar way in the early centuries of the church. It was *the* initiatory rite that marked one's entry into the church (both visible and invisible). According to the church historian Everett Ferguson, "Baptism was the decisive act of conversion for one who accepted the Christian gospel. It marked the break with the past and the initiation into the church of Christ." Everett Ferguson, *Early Christians Speak* (Austin: Sweet Pub., 1971), 37. A helpful discussion of the practice and meaning of the baptism in the New Testament church can be found in G. R. Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962).

²⁰This does not mean that everyone who became a Christian in the New Testament was baptized at the moment of faith. Consider the thief on the cross (Luke 23:39-43). He said to Jesus, "remember me when You come in Your kingdom!" In response Jesus didn't say, "Get baptized!" but rather (v.43), "Truly I say to you, today you shall be with me in Paradise."

ICOC Claim #3: Jesus made water baptism a necessary condition for salvation.

The claim that Jesus made water baptism a necessary condition for salvation is also dubious. Although it is possible to read an allusion to water baptism in John 3:5, this passage is at best unclear.²¹ Jesus' statement in Mark 16:16a, however, seems much clearer. "He who has believed and has been baptized shall be saved."²² Does this prove that Jesus believed water baptism was a necessary condition for salvation? The position of the ICOC regarding this passage can be stated via the following syllogism:

Premise #1: Anyone who believes in Jesus and is baptized will be saved (Mark 16:16a)
Premise #2: Although Joe believes in Jesus, he has not been baptized.
Conclusion: Therefore, Joe cannot not be saved.

This argument, however, is invalid.²³ The problem with the form of this argument can be shown by considering a different example.

Premise #1: Everyone who is enrolled at Northwestern and lives in a dorm is a college student.
Premise #2: Although Joe is enrolled at Northwestern, he does not live in a dorm.
Conclusion: Joe is not a college student.

Obviously this conclusion is false. Joe may be a Northwestern student who lives in an apartment off campus. This logical fallacy is often referred to as the "fallacy of negative inference." The ICOC commits this fallacy by arguing that passages like Mark 16:16 teach that one must be baptized to be saved. All this passage says is that baptism plus faith results in salvation. This passage says nothing about a person who places their faith in Christ but has not been baptized. Thus, the claim that Jesus made baptism necessary for salvation can not be supported by this passage. To prove that water baptism is necessary for salvation an ICOC representative must produce a verse like Mark 16:16b ("he who disbelieves is condemned") that states that without water baptism one can not be saved.²⁴ Furthermore,

²¹Jesus seems to be focusing on the nature of the new birth—not its agency. In John 3:3 Jesus tells Nicodemus, "no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is *born again*." Then Jesus tells him (3:5) that "no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is *born of water and the spirit*." These two phrases parallel one another. Water and spirit is a fuller description of being born again. It is possible that Jesus has in mind Ezek 36:26-27 which refers to eschatological blessings involving cleansing and renewal. For a discussion of the meaning of "water and spirit" see Linda Belleville, "Born of Water and Spirit: John 3:5," *Trinity Journal* 1 NS (1980): 125-41; Zane C. Hodges, "Water and Spirit-John 3:5," *Bib Sac* 135 (July-Sept 1978): 206-20; G. R. Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962), 226-232, 298-301.

²²A different kind of argument could be made against this statement. Some of the oldest and most reliable Greek manuscripts do not contain vv. 9-20. It has been argued that this longer ending of Mark was added later. If these verses were not part of Mark's original gospel then there would be no need to discuss these verses. My point, however, is that even if these verses are authentic, they do not teach the necessity of baptism for salvation.

²³Validity in an argument has nothing to do with the truth or falsity of premises but rather with the *form* of the argument. Thus the following argument is valid (in form) even though its conclusion is untrue.

Premise #1: If the sun shines then there are green men on the moon.
Premise #2: The sun is shining.
Conclusion: There are green men on the moon.

If an argument is valid, it means that, if the premises of the argument are true, then conclusion will be true as well. If the argument form is invalid, however, the conclusion does not follow—even if the premises are true.

²⁴In response to this argument an ICOC representative might present the following syllogism to prove this argument doesn't work.

Premise #1: All who have faith in Christ will be saved.
Premise #2: Joe does not have faith in Christ.
Conclusion: Joe will not be saved.

An ICOC representative might point out that although this is an invalid argument form (committing the fallacy of negative inference) the conclusion is still true (i.e. Joe is not saved if he does not believe). In response I would point to Mark 16:16b ("but he who disbelieves will be condemned."). The text provides us an additional premise. Consider instead the following argument.

Premise #1: He who believes will be saved (Mark 16:16a)
Premise #2: He who does not believe will not be saved (Mark 16:16b.)

we must consider Jesus' words to the thief on the cross (who probably was not taken off the cross and baptized before he died), "truly I say to you, today you shall be with me in paradise."²⁵

ICOC Claim #4: Water baptism confers the benefits of salvation.

So far we have considered passages from Acts and the gospels, however the most convincing support for the ICOC's teaching on necessity of baptism for salvation is found in several key passages in the epistles of Paul (Rom. 6:3-4; Gal. 3:27; I Cor. 10:13; Col. 2:11-12; II Cor. 6:11; Titus 3:5-7) and Peter's first epistle (I Pet. 3:21) that describe baptism as conferring the benefits of salvation. Two of the most important passages are Rom 6:1-4 and I Peter 3:21.

What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace might increase? May it never be! How shall we who died to sin still live in it? Or do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus have been baptized into His death? Therefore we have been buried with Him through baptism into death, in order that as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. (Rom. 6:1-4)

And corresponding to that, baptism now saves you—not the removal of dirt from the flesh, but an appeal to God for a good conscience—through the resurrection of Jesus Christ. (1 Peter 3:21)

Each of these passage will be discussed individually.

Rom. 6:1-4

How are we to understand the close link between baptism and salvation in these verses? Before answering this question we must make three observations. First, we must note the context of these verses. Paul is responding to an objection against his doctrine of justification by faith not writing a treatise on baptism. The objection to which Paul responds is the following: "If we are under grace, why not sin all we want?" Paul's answer is the believers has died to sin and therefore, sin is no longer her master. To highlight the believer's break with her old way of life Paul refers to her baptism (Rom. 6:3). "Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus have been baptized into his death" Paul seems to be saying, "Wait a minute; you don't understand. When you placed your faith in Christ you were joined to Christ. Just as he died and was raised to new life, so also were you This means sin can no longer be your master." Second, we should not attempt to explain away Paul's references to baptism by suggesting that he is referring to something other than water baptism (such as, "spirit baptism"). It seems quite likely that Paul has water baptism in view. Third, there is no question that baptism and salvation are closely linked in these verses. The tightest link is found in 6:4 where Paul says that we were "buried with him *through* baptism." This language seems to suggest that baptism effected our burial with Christ.

These three points bring more sharply into focus the following question, "Does Rom. 6:1-4 teach that

Premise #3:	Joe does not believe.
Conclusion:	Joe will not be saved.

The conclusion follows from the second premise. In a similarly way, therefore, for water baptism to be a necessary condition for salvation the ICOC must produce a passage that explicitly states (like premise #2) that a person who believes and is not baptized can not be saved. No such passages can be found.

²⁵Returning to my example of a Northwestern student, neither being enrolled at Northwestern nor living in a dorm are necessary conditions for being a college student. This raises a question: What is the necessary and sufficient condition for being a college student. Consider this argument:

Premise #1:	If one is enrolled at a university, then one is a college student.
Premise #2:	Joe is enrolled at Northwestern University.
Conclusion:	Joe is a college student.

Being enrolled at a university is therefore both a necessary and sufficient condition for being a college student. I would argue in a similar way that faith is both a necessary and sufficient condition for salvation.

baptism somehow mediates our salvation?” There are two considerations that suggest the answer to this question is no. The first has to do with what Paul says about the centrality of faith and the second with the historical context in which baptism was practiced. In Rom. 3:21-5:21 Paul makes it clear that our salvation (primarily with reference to “justification”) was effected by *faith alone*. This is especially clear in his treatment of Abraham in Rom. 4:1-25. He insists that Abraham was justified by God *before* he was circumcised (Rom. 4:10).²⁶ In light of what Paul says about the centrality of faith in Romans it is unlikely he believed that baptism effected salvation.²⁷

Why then does Paul claim that baptism mediates our “burial with Christ?” The historical practice of baptism may help shed some light on this. From our survey of Acts we saw that individuals were baptized at the time of faith (in contrast to many protestant Evangelical churches today in which baptism is subsequent to faith). In such a context Paul uses “baptism” as a kind of short-hand for conversion.²⁸ Understood this way Paul’s reference to baptism implicitly includes repentance and faith.

In Rom. 6:1-4 Paul points these believers back to their baptism (when they presumably placed their faith in Christ). In effect he is saying, “Don’t you know that when you were baptized (i.e., placed your faith in Christ) you were participating in the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ? You can no longer live in sin because you have died with Christ and risen to new life.” On this reading of Rom. 6:1-4 baptism is not a condition for salvation but a short-hand for conversion.

I Peter 3:21

This verse (and its surrounding context) has perplexed many scholars. On one hand, Peter clearly has water baptism in view and suggests that, in some way, that it “saves.” On the other hand, he denies that “the removal of dirt” (referring to water baptism) saves. Several points can be made about this passage. First, our interpretation of this passage must be governed by its context. Peter’s letter focuses on the suffering of believers. In 3:17 Peter discusses the reality of suffering for doing good. In this situation believers are to follow Christ’s example (I Pet. 2:21). Peter points to Christ as one who suffered (I Pet. 3:18) and was exalted (I Pet. 3:22). Peter wants to offer his readers hope in the midst of their situation.

Second, our interpretation of this passage must be governed by the parallel between Noah’s experience and the experience of believers in baptism. Noah was saved by an ark through water. This water represented God’s judgment upon wickedness. Peter suggests that this deliverance of Noah through the waters of God’s judgment symbolizes Christian baptism. From Rom. 6 we know that baptism involves a participation with Christ in his death and resurrection. On our behalf, Christ experienced God’s judgment in his death and burial. Yet, he was also raised. Peter saw an important parallel to baptism. Water baptism pictures our joining with Christ in passing through God’s judgment to new life. We may safely pass through God’s judgment (just as Noah did) because we are joined to Christ and he was raised from

²⁶Thus, while circumcision may have been an outward expression (or sign) of faith Paul carefully distinguishes it from faith. A similar distinction can be made between baptism and faith. In response ICOC representatives might insist that baptism is not a “work” but is included in the content of “faith alone.” That entirely misses the point of Paul’s emphasis on the temporal distinction between the point when Abraham expresses faith in God (i.e., Gen. 15:6) and his submission to circumcision (Gen. 17:23-27).

²⁷For a detailed discussion of this passage see Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 359-66.

²⁸“How, then, can we preserve the cruciality of faith at the same time as we do justice to the mediatorial role of baptism in this text? Here the suggestion of J. Dunn is helpful. He points out that the early church conceived of faith, the gift of the Spirit, and water baptism as components of one unified experience, which he calls ‘conversion-initiation.’ Just as faith is always assumed to lead to baptism, so baptism always assumes faith for its validity. In vv. 3-4, then, we can assume that baptism stands for the whole conversion experience, presupposing faith and the gift of the Spirit. What, we might ask, of the Christian who has not been baptized? While Paul never dealt with this question—and his first reaction would undoubtedly have been ‘Why hasn’t he been baptized?’—we must assume from the fact that faith is emblazoned in every chapter of Romans while baptism is mentioned in only two verses that genuine faith, even if it has not been ‘sealed’ with baptism, is sufficient for salvation.” Moo, *Romans*, 366.

the dead.

Finally, our interpretation of this passage must be governed by Peter's contrast. He carefully points out that we are not saved by an outward ceremony ("removal of dirt from the body") but a response to God from the heart ("an appeal to God"). When we consider that in the first century individuals became Christians when they were baptized (i.e., it was at that time they expressed saving faith) Peter's statement makes more sense. We are saved, Peter claims, "through the resurrection of Christ" when we make an "appeal to God."²⁹ As N.T. scholar I. Howard Marshall points out,

What Peter is talking about is the occasion when a person comes to water-baptism seeking salvation through faith in Jesus Christ. 'Baptism saves you' is simply a shorthand way of saying, 'God saves you in and through the act of baptism, which is the outward expression of the twin facts that he regenerates you by his Spirit on the basis of the atonement wrought by Christ and that you come committing yourself in faith and repentance to Christ as your Savior.'³⁰

Thus, what kind of baptism saves? The baptism that involves being joined to Christ, passing through the waters of God's judgment, and being raised to new life.

A Similar Error Rejected by the Early Church

Making baptism a condition for salvation is similar to the error of some early Jewish-Christian believers who insisted that *only by submitting to circumcision* could Gentile believers become "sons of Abraham" and recipients of God's promises to him. Paul vigorously refutes this position in his letter to the churches in Galatia (see especially Gal 2:16-4:6). He insists that it is on the basis of *faith alone* that Gentile believers become sons of God and recipients of His promises. In the course of refuting his opponents claims for the necessity of circumcision, Paul points out that Abraham, the father of all Jews, was declared righteous by God on the basis of faith (Gal. 3:6) apart from circumcision.³¹ There is no question that Paul viewed circumcision as unnecessary for salvation (which he frames in terms of "sonship").³²

For the sake of argument let us grant the ICOC's claim that baptism is necessary for salvation. If this is true, why doesn't Paul save himself a lot of time when writing to the churches in Galatia by saying, "Look, Christian baptism replaces circumcision. Since you've already been baptized you don't need to be

²⁹I Peter 3:21 presents a number of exegetical challenges. For a helpful discussion of this passage consult the following commentaries: Wayne Grudem, *The First Epistle of Peter*, Tyndale New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988); I. Howard Marshall, *I Peter* (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity, 1991); J. R. Michaels, *I Peter*, Word Biblical Commentary, (Waco: Word, 1988).

³⁰Marshall, *I Peter*, 130-31.

³¹In Romans Paul points out quite clearly that Abraham's faith preceded his circumcision. He makes this point quite clearly in Romans 4 when he says, "We have been saying that Abraham's faith was credited to him as righteousness. Under what circumstances was it credited? Was it after he was circumcised, or before? It was not after, but before! And he received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised. So then, he is the father of all who believe but have not been circumcised, in order that righteousness might be credited to them. And he is also the father of the circumcised who not only are circumcised but who also walk in the footsteps of the faith that our father Abraham had before he was circumcised." (Rom 4:9b-12, NIV)

³²It is not entirely clear whether Paul's opponents were urging the necessity of circumcision as a condition for salvation or as necessary step in *Christian* obedience. Nevertheless, Paul seems to have seen this teaching on the necessity of circumcision as a challenge to the very essence of the gospel (Gal. 1:6-9). For Paul this dispute raised the question regarding means through which men and women became "sons" of God. Paul argues that "sonship" is made possible through the work of Christ which we receive by faith. The definitive mark of "sonship" is possession of the Spirit. Furthermore, Paul assumes that circumcision is necessary neither for salvation nor as a step in Christian obedience.

circumcised.” If Paul viewed baptism a condition for salvation as the ICOC does this is precisely the kind of argument we would expect him to make. Yet he does not, which is significant. Commenting on Paul’s single reference to baptism in Gal. 3:27 New Testament scholar Richard Longenecker notes,

Paul is not simply replacing one external rite (circumcision) by another external rite (baptism). If that were so, i.e., if he viewed baptism as a supplement to faith in much the same way that the Judaizers viewed circumcision as a supplement to faith, he could have simply settled the dispute at Galatia by saying that Christian baptism now replaced Jewish circumcision. He would certainly have saved himself a great deal of argument. But Paul saw baptism in no such light.³³

For Paul the *visible sign* of “sonship” was not baptism but possession of the Spirit.³⁴ It is the Galatians’ possession of the Spirit (Gal. 3:2-5; 4:4-6) that constitutes proof that they are “sons of God” *apart from circumcision*. ICOC representatives make an error similar to these early Jewish-Christian believers when they insist that baptism is necessary for salvation.³⁵

CONCLUSION

I have examined four arguments commonly put forth by the ICOC in order to demonstrate the necessity of water baptism for salvation and shown them to be false. The consistent witness of Scripture is that faith in Lord Jesus Christ *alone* is the necessary and sufficient condition for salvation. It is unfortunate that ICOC representatives often rob genuine believers of an assurance of their salvation.

As I pointed out earlier, my dispute with the ICOC is not over the *necessity of baptism* but rather over the necessity of baptism *for salvation*. The fact that baptism is not a necessary condition for salvation does not detract from its importance. Obviously the ICOC does not want to see baptism ignored as unimportant. This is a laudable desire. However, it is not necessary to make baptism a condition for salvation in order for it to remain important. Jesus commanded it (Matt. 28:19-20). Is that not adequate?

³³Longenecker continues, “Rather, while faith and baptism are part and parcel of becoming a Christian, they are always to be distinguished. Each has its own function, with baptism never to be viewed as having *ex opere operato* efficacy or as being a supplement to faith.” Richard N. Longenecker, *Galatians*, WBC (Word: Dallas, 1990), 156.

³⁴Paul’s reference to baptism in Gal. 3:27 seems to fit the historical pattern to which reference was made earlier in which baptism was a context in which saving faith was expressed. The important thing to note in Galatians, however, is that it is possession of the Spirit that constitutes the definitive mark of “sonship”. (e.g., salvation)—not baptism. In fact, Paul’s arguments against the Jewish-Christian missionaries depends on the assumption that the Spirit is the definitive mark of sonship.

³⁵It is clear from other passages (e.g., Eph 1:13-14) that the Spirit is received on the basis of faith.