

SHORT STUDY ON BECOMING A CHRISTIAN

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I. How does one become a Christian?

A. One must believe that God exists (Heb. 11:6).

B. One must recognize one's separation from God because of sin.

1. All mentally capable people have sinned, have disobeyed God (1 Ki. 8:46; Rom. 3:23).¹ This is undeniable when one understands that sinful behavior includes such things as anger, hatred, greed, evil thoughts, lying, deceit, lusting, crude joking, sexual immorality, obscenity, drunkenness, theft, coveting, envy, pride, selfish ambition, jealousy, conceit, slander, and gossip (Mk. 7:20-23; Rom. 1:28-32; Gal. 5:19-21).²

2. God is absolutely holy (Lev. 19:2; Rev. 4:8),³ one in whom there is no darkness at all (1 Jn. 1:5), and therefore sinning separates the sinner from God (Isa. 59:2; Eph. 2:1-2; Col. 2:13).⁴ If that separation is not healed prior to physical death by receiving God's forgiveness, it becomes fixed for eternity (Mat. 25:32-34, 41, 46; Heb. 9:27). This is the eternal death, eternal separation from God, that is the just punishment for rebellion against the Almighty (Rom. 1:32, 5:12, 6:23; Jas. 1:15).

3. Because sinning puts one under that death sentence, sinners are like sick people in need of healing from a deadly condition. That is why Jesus, when criticized by some Pharisees for fraternizing with sinners, told them, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I came not to call the righteous, but sinners" (Mk. 2:17; see also, Lk. 5:31-32).

C. One must believe certain truths God has revealed about his remedy for "the sin problem," truths that are the substance of the gospel.

1. God the Father sent God the Son from heaven (Jn. 1:1-2, 14-18; Phil. 2:5-7)⁵ to become the God-man Jesus (Mat. 1:18-25, Rom. 9:5; Col. 1:19, 2:9)⁶ and be crucified as an atoning sacrifice for humanity's sins (Mat. 1:21, 20:28; Acts 2:22-23).⁷

¹ See also, 2 Chron. 6:36; Ps. 130:3; Prov. 20:9; Rom. 3:9-10, 5:12; 1 Jn. 1:8-10.

² See also, Mat. 5:22, 5:28, 5:44-45; 1 Cor. 5:11, 6:9-10; 2 Cor. 12:20; Eph. 4:31, 5:3-4; Phil. 2:3; Col. 3:8-9; Jas. 3:14-16.

³ See also, Ex. 15:11; Lev. 11:44-45, 20:26, 21:8; 1 Sam. 2:2; Ps. 99:3, 5, 9; Isa. 6:3, 57:15; 1 Pet. 1:15-16; Rev. 15:4.

⁴ See also, Deut. 31:17-18; Ps. 34:16; Prov. 15:29; Jer. 5:24-25; Mic. 3:4; Hab. 1:13.

⁵ See also, Mat. 1:18-25, 26:27-28; Lk. 1:30-35; Jn. 6:57, 7:16, 28-29, 33, 8:16, 18, 26, 29, 42, 9:4, 11:42, 12:44-45, 49, 13:20, 14:24, 15:21, 16:5, 17:8, 18, 17:21, 23, 25, 20:21; Rom. 8:3; Gal. 4:4.

⁶ See also, Lk. 1:30-35; Jn. 1:18, 20:28; Phil. 2:5-7; Tit. 2:13; Heb. 1:3-9.

⁷ See also, Mat. 16:21, 26:27-28; Jn. 1:29; Acts 8:32-35; Phil. 2:5-8; 1 Tim. 1:15; Heb. 2:9, 2:14-15.

2. Jesus died for our sins (Isa. 53:5-6; 1 Cor. 15:3; 1 Pet. 2:24),⁸ was buried (Mat. 27:59-60; 1 Cor. 15:4),⁹ and was raised from the dead by God (Mat. 28:1-20; Acts 2:22-24, 13:27-37).¹⁰

3. Jesus ascended back to heaven (Lk. 24:50-51; Acts 1:1-2, 9-11)¹¹ and is Lord of all (Acts 2:32-36; Eph. 1:20-22; Phil. 2:8-11).¹²

D. One must repent, meaning one must commit to live in accordance with the truths of the gospel.

1. Mere mental assent to the truths of the gospel, an intellectual belief that does not include a commitment to live according to those truths, is insufficient for salvation. That is what Scripture calls a "dead faith," in contrast to a living, saving faith (Jas. 2:14-26). A belief that is not reflected in one's life is mere lip service and receives no saving mercy (Mat. 7:21-22; Lk. 6:46-49; Jn. 3:36).¹³

2. Faith in the fuller sense, saving faith, involves a commitment of the will, a turning from a life of rebellion or indifference to a life of submission to Jesus Christ (Mat. 10:37-39; Lk. 9:23-26, 14:25-33; Jn. 3:36).¹⁴ The Bible calls this "repentance" and makes clear there is no salvation without it (Lk. 24:45-47; Acts 2:37-38; Heb. 6:1).¹⁵

E. One must submit to Christian baptism.

1. The final step in becoming a Christian is to express one's penitent faith by submission to Christian baptism. Before his ascension to heaven, Jesus charged his disciples in Mat. 28:19-20 to go and make disciples by means of baptizing and teaching. They were commanded to administer the rite of baptism as part of a person's becoming a disciple, and we see them doing that throughout the NT. The baptism they were to administer was a baptism "into" (*eis*) the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. As Murray Harris explains, "the person being baptized is viewed as passing into the secure possession and 'dedicated protection' (BDAG 713b) of the triune God."¹⁶ It is a moment of spiritual transition.

⁸ See also, Jn. 10:15; Acts 20:28, Rom. 3:21-25a, 4:25, 5:6; 2 Cor. 5:14-15, 21; Gal. 1:3-4, 3:13; Eph. 1:7, 2:13, 5:2; Col. 1:13-14, 19-20; 1 Thess. 5:9-10; 1 Tim. 2:5-6; Tit. 2:13-14; Heb. 9:11-14, 9:27-28, 10:29; 1 Pet. 1:17-19, 3:18; 1 Jn. 1:7, 2:2, 3:5; Rev. 1:5, 5:6-10, 12:11.

⁹ See also, Mat. 12:40; Mk. 15:46; Lk. 23:53; Jn. 19:41-42.

¹⁰ See also, Mat. 16:21, 17:9, 22-23, 20:18-19, 26:31-32; Mk. 14:28, 16:1-6; Lk. 9:22, 24:1-53; Jn. 2:22, 20:1-29; 21:1-14; Acts 2:30-32, 3:14-15, 3:26, 4:10, 5:30, 10:39-41; Rom. 4:24-25, 6:4, 9, 7:4, 8:11, 34, 10:9; 1 Cor. 6:14, 15:4, 12-20; 2 Cor. 4:14-15; Gal. 1:1; Eph. 1:20; Col. 2:12; 1 Thess. 1:10; 1 Pet. 1:20-21; Rev. 1:17-18.

¹¹ See also, Mk. 16:19 [textual issue]; Acts 7:56; Rom. 8:34; Phil 3:20; Col. 3:1; 1 Thess. 1:9-10; 1 Tim. 3:16; Heb. 12:2.

¹² See also, Acts 5:31, 10:36; Rom. 10:9; 1 Cor. 15:27; Col. 2:9-10; Heb. 1:3, 2:9; 1 Pet. 3:21-22; Rev. 1:5, 17:14, 19:16.

¹³ See also, Mat. 12:50; Lk. 11:27-28; Tit. 1:16; Jas. 1:22; 1 Jn. 1:5-7, 2:2-4.

¹⁴ See also, Mat. 16:24; Mk. 8:34; Lk. 5:31-32.

¹⁵ See also, Lk. 13:2-5, 15:7, 10; Acts 3:17-19, 5:31, 11:18, 17:30-31, 20:18-21, 26:19-20; Jas. 4:8-10; 2 Pet. 3:9.

¹⁶ Murray J. Harris, *Prepositions and Theology in the Greek New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 229.

2. So it is not surprising to see in the NT that a penitent believer's sins normally¹⁷ are not forgiven until he or she is baptized. Acts 2:36-41 is quite clear. Peter told those who were convicted of their sin ("cut to the heart") that to be forgiven they needed to repent and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ (note especially vv. 38 and 40). He then declared that this promise was programmatic; it was for all people for all time.

3. Paul's conversion reported in Acts 9:1-19, 22:2-16, and 26:12-18 is instructive.

a. An extremely bright light from heaven surrounds Paul, and in response, he falls to the ground. A voice speaks to him in Aramaic, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads." Paul asks the one speaking who he is and is told, "I am Jesus of Nazareth whom you are persecuting."

b. Paul asks what he should do, and Jesus tells him to go into Damascus where he will be told all that he must do. Blinded by the light, he is led into Damascus by the hand and spends three days fasting and praying to God. God gives him a vision that Ananias will come to him.

c. Ananias comes to him and tells him that God has chosen him to be a witness to the world for Jesus Christ. Paul is clearly ready to accept that assignment, he is ready to serve the Lord Jesus. And yet, according to 22:16, his sins have not yet been forgiven. In other words, he is not yet a Christian despite his penitent faith. After telling him God's assignment, Ananias says to Paul in 22:16, "And now what are you waiting for? Get up, be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on his name."

4. Sins are not forgiven until baptism because that is the means God has established for us to "get into" Christ, to appropriate the benefit of his death in our place (Rom. 6:1-4; Gal. 3:26-27; Col. 2:9-12). Salvation is by grace, through faith, in or at the time of baptism.

5. Because baptism is the means God has established for us to call out to him for forgiveness, the means he has established for us to "get into" Christ, it is not surprising that Jesus and Peter say that baptism is part of receiving salvation (Jn. 3:3-5; 1 Pet. 3:18-21).

II. Brief elaboration on baptism¹⁸

A. Baptism is an *immersion* in water to which a *penitent believer* submits because of his faith in Jesus Christ as he is revealed in the gospel. The fact it is an immersion is evident from several lines of evidence.

¹⁷ God has not specified that he will never, under any circumstance, make an exception, so I accept that he may do so in extraordinary situations (e.g., a person who dies on the way to be baptized). I also believe that God altered the normal relationship of baptism and forgiveness at Cornelius's house in Acts 10 to make a salvation-historical point (see "[Cornelius and Rebaptism](#)").

¹⁸ For a fuller discussion, see "[Some Thoughts on Baptism](#)."

1. The Greek word translated (or, more accurately, transliterated) "to baptize" literally means "to immerse," that is, to put completely under the water.¹⁹ So the command to be baptized was a command to submit to a rite involving an immersion in water.

2. Acts 8:36-39 makes clear that Philip and the eunuch *went down into the water* and then came *up out of the water*. As Wayne Grudem remarks, "Apparently neither of them thought that sprinkling or pouring a handful of water from the container of drinking water that would have been carried in the chariot was enough to constitute baptism."²⁰

3. John 3:23 points out that John was baptizing at Aenon near Salim "*because* there was much water there." It is hard to make sense of this comment if baptism could be administered by sprinkling or pouring.

4. Paul says that in baptism we are both *buried* with Christ and *raised* with him (Rom. 6:3-4; Col. 2:12). The old man that is under judgment goes down into the watery grave, and the new man that is justified before God rises from it. This imagery is difficult to apply to anything other than immersion.

B. Since baptism is an expression of saving faith, it cannot be administered scripturally to infants. Everett Ferguson writes:

The theology of baptism presented in the New Testament would seem to rule out infant baptism, in spite of its long history in Catholic and Protestant churches. Against the practice are the following facts: (1) There is no mention of the baptism of infants in the New Testament. (2) Every account of baptism in the New Testament shows it to be a response by believers (cf. Acts 18:8 as representative). (3) The evidence of church history places the beginning of infant baptism at the end of the second century.²¹

C. Confession of one's belief in the truth of the gospel, typically summarized by the confession "Jesus is Lord" (Rom. 10:9), is part of baptism. This is indicated by several lines of evidence.

1. Peter calls on his hearers in Acts 2:38 to be baptized "in the name of Jesus Christ." As Craig Keener states:

"In the name of Jesus Christ" distinguishes this sort of baptism, requiring faith in Christ, from other ancient baptisms; this phrase simply means that the person being baptized confesses Christ. (. . . it does not denote a formula said over the

¹⁹ See, e.g., Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed., rev. Frederick W. Danker, William F. Arndt, and F. Wilbur Gingrich (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 164.

²⁰ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 968.

²¹ Everett Ferguson, *The Church of Christ: A Biblical Ecclesiology for Today* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 195-196.

person being baptized, but rather indicates the confession of faith of the person receiving baptism; see 2:21 [with 2:38-41] and 22:16).²²

2. G. R. Beasley-Murray writes: "It is universally acknowledged that 'Jesus is Lord' is the primitive confession of faith in Christ that was made at baptism."²³ That does not mean a person must use those exact words; it means he or she must confess that truth. David Wenham states: "Baptism involved believing in the heart and confessing with the lips ('Jesus is Lord') and going down into the water (Rom. 10:10)."²⁴ It is this *baptismal confession* to which Paul links salvation in Rom. 10:9, 13.

3. Confession as part of baptism fits with the reference to Timothy having made the "good confession" in association with his calling to eternal life (1 Tim. 6:12-13 with Mat. 27:11 and Lk. 23:3). As Donald Guthrie observes: "The *good confession* is taken by most commentators to refer to Timothy's baptism, . . ."²⁵ William Mounce writes:

The verse shows that the call to eternal life occurred at the same time as Timothy's confession. A commission/ordination can hardly be termed a call to eternal life, but the conversion/baptism experience is precisely that: God's call on Timothy's life and Timothy's accompanying confession at his baptism. This is the decisive argument.²⁶

4. Likewise, Eph. 5:26 ("through the washing in water with a word") is most likely a reference to the confession of the baptized person.²⁷ And though Acts 8:37 probably is not part of the original text, it provides early corroboration of the practice of baptismal confession.

²² Craig Keener states in *The IVP Background Bible Commentary New Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 329.

²³ G. R. Beasley-Murray, *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 61.

²⁴ David Wenham, "Paradigms and Possibilities in the Study of John's Gospel" in John Lierman, ed., *Challenging Perspectives on the Gospel of John* (Tubingen, Germany: Mohr Siebeck, 2006), 9.

²⁵ Donald Guthrie, *The Pastoral Epistles*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 127.

²⁶ William Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, Word Biblical Commentary (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2000), 356.

²⁷ See, e.g., F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians to Philemon and to the Ephesians*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 388; G. R. Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962), 101, 361.