

# Addressing Common Objections

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## Objections Addressed

- “The Thief on the Cross Wasn’t Baptized”
  - “I Was Sincere—Doesn’t That Count?”
  - “I Prayed the Sinner’s Prayer—Isn’t That Enough?”
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  - “Who Are You to Judge?”
  - “People in the Bible Waited to Be Baptized”
  - “The Baptisms in the NT Are Spiritual, Not Water Baptism”
  - “Baptism Is a Work, and We’re Saved by Grace”
  - “Jesus’ Reference to Belief as a Work in John 6:29 Isn’t Really a Work”
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This appendix provides complete treatments of the most common objections to the biblical teaching on baptism. Chapter 15 introduces each objection briefly; here you'll find the full biblical, historical, and logical arguments. Each entry is designed to stand alone, so you can read the objections most relevant to your situation without reading all of them. Where helpful, entries reference other appendices (particularly Appendix A: Law Commands vs. Gospel Commands, and Appendix B: Unified Gospel Response Summary) for supporting framework concepts.

An interactive AI chat-bot at [eternalstakes.com](http://eternalstakes.com) can help you explore these and other objections further, finding answers grounded in this book's arguments.

## **“The Thief on the Cross Wasn't Baptized”**

This might be the most common objection of all. Jesus told a dying criminal, “Today you will be with me in paradise” (Luke 23:43). No baptism. Doesn't this prove baptism isn't necessary?

### **Why This Seems Compelling**

The thief's salvation appears to contradict the pattern taught throughout this book. In particular, he wasn't baptized. He didn't confess Jesus as Lord publicly. He simply asked, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom” (Luke 23:42), and Jesus promised him paradise. If the thief could be saved without baptism, why can't we?

### **The Critical Distinction: Before vs. After the Cross**

What is often overlooked is that the thief died under the old covenant, before the concept of Christian baptism even existed. Romans 6 tells us that baptism unites us with Christ's death and resurrection. But when the thief died, Christ hadn't yet died and risen! How could the thief be baptized into events that hadn't happened yet? The theological impossibility is obvious. Christian baptism, burial, and resurrection with Christ requires Christ to have already died and risen.

### **Jesus' Earthly Authority**

During His earthly ministry, Jesus had direct authority to forgive sins. He told the paralytic, “Your sins are forgiven” (Luke 5:20). He told the woman caught in adultery, “Neither do I condemn you; go, and from now on sin no more” (John 8:11). He told the woman who washed His feet with her tears, “Your sins are forgiven. ... Your faith has saved you; go in peace” (Luke 7:48, 50).

The thief received this same direct forgiveness from Jesus. He revealed His authority to do so when healing the paralytic: “But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins” (Luke 5:24). That's not the pattern for us. We don't have Jesus physically present to speak absolution over us.

## **After the Resurrection, Everything Changes**

After the resurrection, the pattern changes completely. Jesus commands baptism (Matthew 28:19). Peter commands it (Acts 2:38). Every detailed conversion in Acts includes it. (See Appendix C for the complete list of conversions in Acts.)

The thief directly received an exception granted under Christ's earthly authority. That's not the pattern for those living after the resurrection when Jesus explicitly commanded baptism.

## **The Pattern vs. The Exception**

Using the thief to avoid baptism would be like citing Elijah to avoid death. Yes, Elijah went to Heaven without dying (2 Kings 2:11), but that doesn't mean death is optional for the rest of us. Elijah's unique situation doesn't establish the pattern for everyone else.

The same principle applies here. The thief's unique situation, dying beside Jesus before the new covenant was inaugurated, doesn't establish the pattern for us. The pattern comes from what Jesus commanded after His resurrection and what the apostles consistently practiced.

## **The Bottom Line**

The thief is not your situation. You live after Christ's death and resurrection. You have access to baptism that unites you with those events. You have clear apostolic commands about how to respond to the gospel. The thief shows us that Jesus had authority to forgive sins directly during His earthly ministry. It doesn't show us that baptism is optional after the resurrection when Jesus explicitly commanded it.

Jesus' command stands: "Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved" (Mark 16:16). The apostolic pattern throughout Acts is consistent. The thief doesn't change what Jesus commanded for those living after the resurrection.

## **"I Was Sincere—Doesn't That Count?"**

When people realize their conversion didn't match Scripture's pattern, sincerity becomes the immediate defense: "But God knows my heart. I was doing what I was taught. My intentions were good."

## **Why This Seems Compelling**

Sincerity feels like it should matter. If our hearts were right, if we genuinely believed we were obeying God, shouldn't that count for something? God knows we weren't rebelling; we were simply doing what our church taught us.

## **What Scripture Shows About Sincerity Without Obedience**

Uzzah's intentions were good too. When the oxen stumbled and the Ark of the Covenant started to fall, he reached out instinctively to protect it. Who could fault him for that? Yet God struck him dead on the spot (2 Samuel 6:6-7). The ark had specific instructions for how it was to be handled, and Uzzah's sincere concern didn't override those instructions.

Aaron's sons Nadab and Abihu were priests serving in the tabernacle when they offered incense to the Lord. They weren't rebelling, they were worshiping. But the fire they used was "unauthorized fire before the LORD, which he had not commanded them" (Leviticus 10:1). Fire came out from the Lord and consumed them both. Sincere worship offered on unauthorized terms cost them their lives.

Saul of Tarsus was as sincere as anyone in Scripture. He genuinely believed he was serving God when he dragged believers from their homes and voted for their deaths. He later described himself as "a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless" (Philippians 3:5-6). No one could question his sincerity. God did not accept it as a substitute for the commanded gospel response. In fact, He struck him with blindness. In the end, he still had to be baptized, washing away his sins, calling on the name of the Lord (Acts 22:16).

God knew Uzzah's intentions were good. He struck him down anyway. He knew Nadab and Abihu were worshiping. He consumed them anyway. Knowing their hearts did not change His response. He had given instructions. The instructions were not followed. That was enough.

These aren't isolated incidents. They reveal something fundamental about how God views sincerity divorced from obedience. Sincere feelings don't excuse a departure from clear instructions.

## **Jesus' Own Words**

Jesus addressed this directly. To people who called Him "Lord, Lord," He asked pointedly: "Why do you call me 'Lord, Lord,' and not do what I tell you?" (Luke 6:46). They were sincere enough to use the right title. But sincerity without obedience meant nothing.

His warning in Matthew 7 goes further. Many will come to Him on judgment day appealing to their sincerity: "Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?" These people weren't faking it. They genuinely believed they were serving Christ. They were doing many religious works in His name.

Jesus' response? "I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness" (Matthew 7:22-23).

Workers of lawlessness. Despite their sincerity. Despite using His name. Despite their mighty works. Lost—because they didn't do the Father's will.

## **The Gospel Isn't Negotiable**

The gospel isn't a suggestion we can modify according to our preferences or traditions while our hearts remain sincere. God prescribes how to respond: believe, repent, confess, be baptized. These aren't options from which we choose based on what feels right. They're the divinely appointed means of receiving grace.

If your response to the gospel was sincere but incomplete, appealing to your sincerity won't complete it. Sincerity is not the test Scripture applies. The Pharisees were sincere. Saul of Tarsus was sincere when he persecuted the church. The Judaizers were sincere. Scripture treats sincerity in error differently from response to truth. Appendix G develops the full framework for how Scripture handles each case—including what role access to corrective teaching plays in a person's accountability.

## **"I Prayed the Sinner's Prayer—Isn't That Enough?"**

Millions of people can pinpoint the exact moment they became Christians: the moment when they prayed to receive Christ. They remember the words: "Dear Lord Jesus, I know I'm a sinner. I believe you died for my sins. Please come into my heart," and the assurance that followed from others: "If you prayed that prayer sincerely, you're saved."

## **Why This Seems Compelling**

The Sinner's Prayer feels biblical. It involves confession, belief, and calling on Jesus. Countless people have genuine faith experiences connected to praying this prayer. Churches and evangelistic organizations have used it effectively to help people articulate their faith. How could something so widespread and sincere be unbiblical?

## **The Pattern in Acts**

The consistent pattern in Acts is belief, repentance, confession, and baptism. Not once does Scripture record anyone being saved by praying a prayer. When people asked "What shall we do?" they were told to repent and be baptized (Acts 2:38), not to pray a prayer.

The sinner's prayer, despite its prominence today, was unknown for eighteen centuries of Christian history. It emerged gradually through American revivalism: Charles Finney's "anxious bench," D.L. Moody's "inquiry rooms," Billy Sunday's "sawdust trail," Billy Graham's "receive Christ as your personal Savior," Campus Crusade's "Four Spiritual Laws." What began as an evangelistic tool became, in widespread practice, a replacement for the biblical pattern.<sup>1</sup>

## **What About Romans 10:13?**

The appeal to Romans 10:13, “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved,” doesn’t support the sinner’s prayer as typically practiced. Calling on the Lord’s name happens in connection with baptism, where you confess Jesus as Lord and, through that baptismal act, appeal to God for salvation (see Chapter 5). When Ananias told Paul to “be baptized and wash away your sins, calling on his name” (Acts 22:16), the calling and the baptizing happened together.

## **The Concern About Works**

The concern about works-righteousness is legitimate. Appendix A demonstrates the complete distinction between Law Commands (which attempt to earn salvation) and Gospel Commands (which receive grace on God’s appointed terms). Baptism is a Gospel Command.

## **The Gap Between Theology and Practice**

Many evangelical scholars, such as MacArthur, Sproul, Piper, and Packer, recognize that genuine faith includes submission to Christ and produces obedience. Their statements of faith explicitly reject “mere mental assent” as saving faith. But the gap between official theology and evangelistic practice has created generations of people assured of salvation based on a prayer, with no understanding that Scripture connects salvation to baptism.

## **What If This Describes You?**

If you prayed to receive Christ but were never baptized, or if you were baptized but treated it as symbolic follow-up to a prayer that supposedly already saved you, ask yourself: “Have I fully responded to the gospel as Scripture presents it?”

The prayer may have been sincere, reflecting genuine heart stirrings. But if it replaced baptism rather than leading to it, it replaced the biblical pattern with something Scripture doesn’t prescribe. Complete your obedience. Be baptized as Scripture describes, not as an additional step after you’re already saved, but as the moment when you call on the Lord’s name for salvation.

Appendix G develops the full framework for those who received the gospel partially or through an inherited pattern that omitted what Scripture commands.

## **Notes**

- Paul H. Chitwood, *The Sinner’s Prayer: An Historical and Theological Analysis* (PhD diss., The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2001), accessed December 31, 2025, [https://repository.sbts.edu/bitstream/handle/10392/4153/Chitwood-PhD-Sinner sPrayer.pdf](https://repository.sbts.edu/bitstream/handle/10392/4153/Chitwood-PhD-Sinner%20Prayer.pdf)

## **“The Church Wasn’t Really United on Baptism’s Saving Meaning”**

Some readers will argue that claiming historical unity, that “from the earliest writings everyone teaches baptism saves,” overstates the record. They may point to regional differences, later theological refinements, or the influence of figures such as Augustine to argue that the church was never fully uniform in its understanding.

### **The Scope and Period Under Discussion**

The charge misunderstands both the scope of the claim and the period under discussion. This book deliberately grounds its historical evidence in the apostolic and sub-apostolic generations: writers who either (1) knew the apostles personally, (2) were taught by their direct disciples, or (3) wrote within roughly the first 200 years of the gospel’s proclamation. These witnesses: Clement of Rome, Ignatius, Polycarp, the Didache, Barnabas, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, and others, represent Christianity while the memory of the apostles was still living and before the church’s theology became layered with later philosophical constructs. (See Appendix D for the complete list of early church witnesses and their teachings.)

Within this earliest circle, the testimony is astonishingly consistent. Every surviving orthodox source ties baptism to remission of sins, new birth, and incorporation into Christ. None presents an alternative model of salvation apart from baptism. Variations exist in language and imagery: “grace”, “illumination,” “washing,” “regeneration,” “the bath of rebirth,” “the seal,” but not in doctrine. What modern critics call “regional differences” are linguistic color, not theological division.

### **Genuine Departures Came From Recognized Heretics**

When genuine departures did arise, they came from movements already judged outside the apostolic faith: Gnostic and Manichaean sects that denied the goodness of creation and rejected physical sacraments altogether. Their existence proves not diversity within orthodoxy but the church’s resolve to defend it.

### **The Pattern Holds Century After Century**

Now, if we keep walking forward, the pattern holds century after century. (See Appendix E for the visual chain of baptismal witness from the apostles through the centuries.)

### **First and Second Centuries:**

New Testament writers and the earliest extra-biblical voices (Didache, Ignatius, Shepherd of Hermas, Justin Martyr) all speak of baptism as washing, new birth, forgiveness, and entrance into life in Christ. None treat it as a mere symbol for people already saved.

### **Third Century:**

Writers like Tertullian, Cyprian, Hippolytus, and others describe baptism as the moment when sins are washed away and the Spirit is given. Debates about timing (such as infant baptism) assume, rather than question, baptism's saving significance.

### **Fourth and Fifth Centuries:**

From East and West—Athanasius, Basil, Chrysostom, Ambrose, Augustine—baptism is still preached as the point where God grants forgiveness and unites believers with Christ's death and resurrection. Disagreements arise over how grace works, but not over whether God works in baptism to save.

### **Sixth through Fifteenth Centuries:**

As Christianity spreads and liturgies develop, language and ceremony grow more elaborate, yet the core conviction remains unchanged. In both Greek East and Latin West, baptism is still treated as the God-given means of remission and new birth.

The mode of baptism varied across traditions. The Eastern Orthodox, Ethiopian, Coptic, and Armenian churches preserved immersion throughout. The Western church shifted toward sprinkling. But every tradition agreed: baptism is where God saves. The consensus on regeneration survived every disagreement about mode.

### **The Break in the Sixteenth Century**

Only in the 1520s does a new view emerge. Huldrych Zwingli begins teaching that baptism is merely symbolic, a public sign of an already-accomplished salvation. That idea, soon echoed in Tyndale and parts of later Protestantism, was a sharp break from what the church had consistently believed and practiced from the beginning.

### **Later Theological Development vs. Foundation**

Later writers did introduce additional categories and speculations. By the fourth and fifth centuries, Augustine and others were using concepts (original guilt, predestination schemes, sacramental mechanisms) that went beyond what the earliest witnesses had said. The purpose here is not to vilify them but to mark a historical boundary: the further one moves from the apostolic age, the more theology becomes explanation layered over foundation. The foundation that baptism is where God applies salvation, however, remains intact.

### **The Historical Record Is Clear**

The argument, then, is not that every Christian everywhere used identical vocabulary, but that the entire orthodox church for its first generations, and the mainstream church for many centuries afterward, linked baptism inseparably with forgiveness and new life. A purely symbolic view of baptism does not appear in any major teacher until the sixteenth century, when Zwingli introduced it. The historical

record is not ambiguous: the gospel preached by the earliest Christians, and proclaimed throughout the church for centuries, was a gospel to be obeyed in baptism, not merely acknowledged by belief.

## **“John’s Gospel Says ‘Whoever Believes’ Has Eternal Life”**

John’s Gospel uses the language of believing more than any other New Testament book, and readers often assume these statements teach that belief alone saves. Verses such as John 3:16, 3:36, 5:24, and 6:47 are read as if they exclude repentance, confession, and baptism. But this misunderstanding arises from assuming that “believe” in John means intellectual agreement. John never uses the word that way. He writes in categories of allegiance, loyalty, and abiding trust. That “belief” language aligns precisely with what this book calls Trusting Belief, the complete entrusting of oneself to Christ.

Trusting belief is never static in Scripture. It is not a thought that sits idle. It is the heart depending on Christ, and such reliance immediately begins to express itself. It repents. It seeks confession. It finds its completion in the new birth Jesus describes. If that movement does not occur, the belief John has in view is absent. The New Testament assumes this without needing to restate it every time the word “believe” appears.

This becomes clear in the opening chapters of John. Jesus tells Nicodemus that no one enters the kingdom unless he is “born of water and the Spirit” (John 3:5). Eleven verses later He promises eternal life to “whoever believes” (John 3:16). John does not perceive tension between these statements because he does not separate trusting allegiance from obedient response. The inward beginning and the outward completion belong together in the life of faith. John does not restate every component each time he mentions belief because the analytic nature of true belief already includes the movement toward completion.

John sharpens this unity when he writes, “Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life” (John 3:36). Believing and obeying are not two separate options. They describe the same response from two angles. Belief that refuses obedience is not belief in John’s sense. Likewise, obedience that does not rise from trust is not the obedience John describes. John’s Gospel is filled with this expectation: abiding in Jesus’ Word (8:31), following Him even when costly (12:24–26), keeping His commandments as the expression of love (14:15, 21, 23–24). In John’s theology, belief and obedience flow into one another.

This explains why the earliest Christians, those closest to the apostles, read John the way this book presents him. They saw no contradiction between John 3:16 and John 3:5. Belief was the inward yielding of the heart that moved toward baptism; baptism was the outward moment of new birth that fulfilled its inward yielding. No early Christian writer separated the two. Their understanding fits the unified response found throughout Scripture.

Some argue that John's purpose statement in John 20:31, "that you may believe ... and have life in his name," excludes baptism because baptism is not mentioned. But this is a fallacy of silence. John does not mention repentance or confession there either, yet no one imagines he intended to dismiss them. John 20:31 identifies the purpose of the Gospel narrative, not the complete shape of the saving response. John 3:5 and the conversion accounts in Acts supply the rest. John's message works in harmony with them, not in competition.

Thus, when John says, "whoever believes," he is summoning the entrusting allegiance that presses forward. Saving Belief is simply Trusting Belief carried through to its completion in repentance, confession, and baptism. John describes the beginning of the response, confident that genuine belief presses forward unless resisted or choked before it bears fruit. Read this way, John stands in full unity with the rest of the New Testament. His Gospel is not an exception to the pattern; it is one of its clearest witnesses.

## **"Romans 4:5—'Does Not Work But Believes'"**

This is one of the strongest Reformed proof texts: "To the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness" (Romans 4:5).

Some argue: Paul explicitly contrasts working with believing. If baptism were part of saving faith, Paul would be contradicting himself by commanding baptism elsewhere.

### **What Paul Is Actually Contrasting**

This argument rests on a *false dilemma*. It reduces Paul's contrast to two options: do nothing or earn wages. But Paul himself affirms a third: obey in trust. He is not contrasting "doing anything" with "doing nothing." He is contrasting two systems: the wage-system versus the promise-system.

Look at verse 4: "Now to the one who works, his wages are not counted as a gift but as his due." The problem with "works" isn't that they involve action—it's that they operate on earning and deserving. "I worked, therefore you owe me wages."

This is the "law of works" Paul identified in Romans 3:27. It's the attempt to obligate God through law-keeping, to earn salvation as wages rather than receive it as grace. (See Appendix A for the complete distinction between Law Commands and Gospel Commands.)

### **Faith Operates Differently**

But faith operates differently. Verse 16: "That is why it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace." Faith receives the promise. Faith trusts what God offers. Faith doesn't earn; it accepts.

Baptism operates under this same principle. When you're baptized, you're not working to earn wages from God. You're not saying "I did this, now you owe me." You're submitting to God's prescribed means of receiving what He offers. You're trusting God's promise that in baptism He saves, forgives, regenerates.

## **How Abraham's Faith Worked**

This is exactly what Colossians 2:12 says: "buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God." In baptism, your faith isn't looking to your performance—it's trusting God's power to raise the dead.

Romans 4:5 excludes wage-earning. It doesn't exclude faith's obedient response to God's commands. Abraham's faith (the very example Paul uses) involved obeying God's commands: leaving Ur, offering Isaac, obeying throughout his life. That faith saved—not because obedience earned wages, but because faith received what God promised by responding to His Word.

The distinction isn't action versus non-action. It's earning versus receiving. Baptism is receiving, not earning.

## **But Wasn't Abraham Justified BEFORE Circumcision?**

Some extend the Romans 4:5 argument by pointing to Romans 4:9–12, where Paul emphasizes Abraham was justified before circumcision. They argue: "If the covenant sign came after justification in the Old Covenant, baptism (the New Covenant sign) must also come after salvation."

This argument assumes baptism parallels circumcision as covenant entry signs. But that assumption contradicts Scripture's teaching about how the two covenants operate.

See the full treatment in this appendix under "*Baptism replaces circumcision, so we baptize infants*". The short answer: circumcision brought you into an ethnic covenant based on physical descent. Baptism brings you into a spiritual covenant based on personal faith and rebirth (John 3:5–6). They don't function the same way.

Paul's argument in Romans 4 addresses whether Gentiles must become Jewish proselytes to be saved—whether ethnic identity determines salvation. His answer: No, because Abraham was justified before receiving the ethnic covenant sign.

That's a completely different question from: "What role does baptism play in how faith receives salvation?" Paul isn't addressing baptism's role in Romans 4 because baptism doesn't function like circumcision. Using Romans 4 against baptism's necessity requires first proving that baptism = circumcision—which contradicts what Scripture teaches about the fundamental differences between the covenants.

## **“What About Galatians 3:2—Paul Only Mentions Faith, Not Baptism?”**

“Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law or by hearing with faith?” (Galatians 3:2).

Some argue: Paul presents two options—works of law OR hearing with faith. If baptism were necessary for receiving the Spirit, Paul would have mentioned it. But he gives a simple either/or: works versus faith. No baptism.

### **Paul Uses Synecdoche**

This objection only works if you assume Paul must mention every element of the gospel response every time he references salvation. But that’s not how Scripture works. Paul uses “hearing with faith” as synecdoche, a part representing the whole. (See the “John’s Gospel” entry in this appendix for a fuller explanation of synecdoche.)

How do we know? Because in this very same letter, Paul explicitly connects baptism to being in Christ: “For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ” (Galatians 3:27).

Paul doesn’t contradict himself within the same epistle. When he says “hearing with faith” brought the Spirit, he’s using shorthand for the complete faith response that includes baptism. This is the same literary pattern we see throughout Scripture—sometimes one element represents the whole response.

### **Paul Is Contrasting Systems, Not Listing Requirements**

Does Galatians 3:2 mention repentance? No. Does that mean repentance isn’t necessary? Of course not. Does it mention confession? No. Does that mean confession isn’t part of the response? No.

Paul is contrasting two systems: law-works versus faith-response. He’s not providing an exhaustive checklist of every element in the faith response. He’s contrasting the fundamental approaches to receiving the Spirit.

The Galatians received the Spirit by faith—and that faith, as Paul makes clear in 3:27, includes baptism into Christ. Paul’s shorthand doesn’t exclude baptism any more than it excludes repentance or confession.

## **“Cornelius Received the Spirit Before Baptism”**

This passage deserves careful attention because it’s often used to prove the Spirit—and therefore salvation—comes apart from baptism.

Yes, in Acts 10, the Holy Spirit fell on Cornelius’ household while Peter was still preaching, before they were baptized. But we need to understand what this was and

what it wasn't.

## **What It Wasn't**

This wasn't the normal indwelling of the Spirit that Christians receive. This wasn't when Cornelius' sins were forgiven or when he was added to the church. This wasn't the "one baptism" of Ephesians 4:5.

## **What It Was**

This was a miraculous sign gift, an outpouring of the Spirit for one specific purpose—to prove to the Jewish believers that Gentiles could be saved.

Peter himself tells us how extraordinary this event was. When reporting back to Jerusalem, he says: "As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell on them just as on us at the beginning" (Acts 11:15).

"At the beginning." Peter reaches back to Pentecost—about 10 years earlier. In an entire decade of preaching the gospel and baptizing thousands of converts, Peter can point to only ONE other time the Spirit fell this way: Pentecost itself, another miraculous sign event.

## **Between Pentecost and Cornelius: The Normal Pattern**

Between Pentecost (proving the gospel to Jews) and Cornelius (proving salvation for Gentiles)—10 years and thousands of converts—this didn't happen. They followed the normal pattern Peter announced at Pentecost: "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2:38). (See Appendix C for all conversion accounts in Acts.)

## **Peter Still Commanded Water Baptism**

Even after this miraculous Spirit-manifestation, Peter immediately commanded water baptism. "Can anyone withhold water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?" And he "commanded them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ" (Acts 10:47-48).

Why command water baptism if the Spirit falling had already saved them? Because it hadn't. The miraculous sign proved they COULD be saved—it was God's unmistakable declaration that "Gentiles are included!" But they still needed baptism to actually have their sins forgiven, to be united with Christ's death and resurrection, to be added to the body.

## **Questions This Raises for the Objection**

Using Cornelius to argue against baptism's necessity requires explaining:

- Why Peter still commanded baptism immediately after
- Why this only happened twice in 30+ years of church history
- Why Peter had to reach back a decade to find any comparison
- Why every other conversion in Acts follows the baptism-for-forgiveness pattern
- Why the “one baptism” of Ephesians 4:5 is water baptism, not this rare sign

The exceptions were miraculous signs for specific purposes. They weren't the pattern. They were the proof that the pattern applies to everyone—Jew and Gentile alike.

## **“Ephesians 2:8-9 Excludes All Works—including Baptism”**

“For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.” (Ephesians 2:8-9)

The standard objection runs: Paul says “not a result of works” without qualification. If baptism involves human action, and Paul excludes all works, then baptism must be excluded.

### **The Problem With This Interpretation**

But if Paul meant absolutely all human action is excluded, then faith itself would be excluded—since believing is something we do (John 6:29). But Paul explicitly says we're saved “through faith.” Note, the same theologians then insist that this Scripture doesn't mean what it says either, defining “internal works of the mind” as exempt from being a work, even though that is exactly what Jesus called it.

### **What Paul Means by “Works”**

The solution is understanding what Paul means by “works.” He's not excluding all human response. He's excluding works that earn, merit, or deserve—works that give grounds for boasting.

Paul's reason? “So that no one may boast.” What kind of works does Paul exclude? Works that would give us something to boast about. Works that would let us claim we earned or deserved salvation.

But the Gospel Commands don't create boasting. When you respond to God's prescribed means of receiving salvation, you're not boasting. You're submitting. You're not earning. You're accepting. You're not working for wages. You're receiving a gift by the method the Giver prescribed.

### **The Gift Analogy**

If someone gives you a wrapped gift and says “open it,” does opening the gift mean you earned it? Does following the instruction to receive make it not a gift? Of course not. You’re simply receiving what’s offered in the way it’s offered.

Paul is excluding the “law of works”—the system where you try to earn salvation through law-keeping (Romans 3:27). He’s not excluding the “law of faith”, the system where you receive salvation by responding to God’s Gospel Commands.

Clement of Alexandria called baptism “grace”—one of its proper names (see Chapter 14). The grace-versus-baptism framing that drives this objection did not exist for those who learned their faith from the apostles’ own students.

## **Why Baptism Doesn’t Create Boasting**

In the same letter Paul says: “one Lord, one faith, one baptism” (Ephesians 4:5). Baptism isn’t opposed to the one faith; it’s part of how the one faith expresses itself. It’s part of the one way God has prescribed for receiving the one salvation.

Ephesians 2:8–9 excludes boasting. It excludes earning. It excludes merit-based righteousness. It doesn’t exclude faith’s obedient response to the gospel. That’s what grace teaches us to do.

## **“Mark 16:16 Isn’t in the Earliest Manuscripts”**

Two of the oldest hand-copied Greek Bibles we have, both from the 300s AD, end Mark’s Gospel at verse 8. They skip the rest, including verse 16. Modern Bibles often add a footnote about this. From that footnote, some conclude that verses 9 through 20 were added later and cannot be trusted.

The evidence tells another story.

We have no copy of Mark’s ending—with verses 9–20 or without them—from before the 300s. The earliest pieces of Mark we have are tiny scraps from earlier chapters. None of them include the ending. When those two manuscripts from the 300s show up, they are the first surviving copies of Mark’s ending we have. They are not older proof against newer copies. They are just the earliest *surviving* copies, and they leave the ending off.

What we do have from earlier is the testimony of Christian leaders who already had these verses.

Irenaeus, writing around AD 180, quotes Mark 16:19 and says it is from Mark’s Gospel. He was taught by Polycarp, who was taught by the Apostle John. Two generations after the apostles, these verses were already Scripture in his hands. Around AD 170, a Christian named Tatian wove the four Gospels together into one continuous story, and his version was used by churches across Syria. It includes the material from Mark 16:9–20. The earliest Latin translations include these verses. The earliest Syriac translations include them. Long before those two manuscripts from

the 300s were copied, these verses were already being read, taught, and treated as Mark's Gospel across the Roman Empire, in different languages, by Christians whose teachers had learned from the apostles' own students.

The verses also fit the rest of the New Testament. Mark 16:16 does not introduce a strange doctrine. It says in one sentence what the rest of the New Testament says throughout: those who believe the gospel and are baptized enter Christ's saving work; those who reject the gospel stand condemned. Peter preached the same thing at Pentecost. The pattern runs through Acts. So even setting Mark 16:16 aside, the argument stands on Acts 2:38, Romans 6, Galatians 3:27, and 1 Peter 3:21.

The church has used these verses for fifteen hundred years. Augustine read them. Ambrose read them. Chrysostom read them. Even Jerome, who knew about manuscripts that left them off, kept them in.

Mark 16:16 has been known, quoted, preached, and received as Scripture since the earliest days of the church. Anyone who points to it today is standing where the church has stood since the apostles' own students taught the next generation.

## **“Mark 16:16 Only Condemns Unbelief—That Proves Baptism Is Optional”**

Jesus says: “Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned” (Mark 16:16).

Some argue: “Jesus only mentions unbelief in the second part, not lack of baptism. So baptism must be optional.”

### **What Jesus Says About Condemnation**

The second clause names unbelief as the foundational rejection: “whoever does not believe will be condemned.” A person who refuses to believe will never get to baptism. Unbelief stops the response before it starts. There is no reason for Jesus to mention baptism in the condemnation clause because an unbeliever was never going to be baptized anyway. The fact that Jesus only names unbelief in the condemnation tells us what stops someone from being saved. It does not tell us what is or isn't required for salvation. For that, we look at the salvation clause—where Jesus included baptism.

Some argue that if baptism were truly necessary, Jesus would have said “whoever is not baptized will be condemned.” But that would create logical problems. If Jesus had said “whoever doesn't believe and isn't baptized will be condemned,” that would actually weaken the requirement—it would mean you could be saved with either belief alone or baptism alone, as long as you didn't lack both. That is not what Jesus teaches. By identifying unbelief alone as condemning, Jesus identifies the most fundamental problem—the rejection that prevents any gospel response from beginning.

## **What Jesus Says About Salvation**

What saves is named in the salvation clause itself, in Jesus' own words: "Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved." Jesus chose to include baptism in His own description of who is saved. He could have said "whoever believes" and said no more. He did not. He joined belief and baptism together as the response that saves. Removing baptism from that description requires editing Jesus' words and reading His sentence as if half of it were not there.

Jesus is not describing two separate requirements added together. He is describing one complete response—saving faith believes and is baptized. That is what the obedience of faith looks like.

## **The Objection Fails Its Own Test**

The objection's underlying principle—that items joined to belief by "and" in a salvation clause may or may not be essential—fails the moment it is applied evenly.

Suppose Jesus had said, "Whoever believes and repents will be saved." No reader would treat repentance as non-essential. Scripture places repentance inside the saving moment in Acts 2:38 and Acts 17:30.

Suppose Jesus had said, "Whoever believes and confesses Me before men will be saved." No reader would treat confession as non-essential. Romans 10:9-10 places confession at the moment of salvation.

Yet what Jesus actually said is "whoever believes and is baptized will be saved"—and for baptism Scripture supplies the same kind of testimony: Acts 2:38, Acts 22:16, Romans 6:3-4, Galatians 3:27, Titus 3:5, and 1 Peter 3:21. The grammatical structure the objector honors for repentance and confession is the same one he refuses to honor for baptism, even though Scripture supports the placement in the same way. The principle does not survive being applied evenly.

## **A Note on Textual Questions**

Mark 16:9-20 does not appear in our earliest manuscripts, and many scholars question whether Mark originally wrote these verses. If you have textual concerns about this passage, that is legitimate—refer to the previous objection in this Appendix for why it is still trustworthy.

But even setting Mark 16:16 aside on text-critical grounds, the argument does not depend on it. We still have Peter's command in Acts 2:38, Paul's teaching in Romans 6:3-4 and Galatians 3:27, Peter's statement in 1 Peter 3:21, Ananias' instruction in Acts 22:16, and the consistent pattern throughout Acts (see Appendix C).

## **Belief and Baptism**

Belief opens the response. Baptism completes it. Salvation is what God grants when the whole response is given.

## **“Peter Says Baptism Is Just a Symbol, Like Noah’s Ark”**

Peter says the opposite. He says it saves you and even tells us how:

“Baptism, which corresponds to this, now saves you, not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ” (1 Peter 3:21).

### **Peter’s Explicit Statement**

Peter explicitly says “baptism now saves you ... through the resurrection of Jesus Christ.” He doesn’t call it a symbol. He says it saves—not by washing dirt from your body, but as an appeal to God through Christ’s resurrection.

Peter’s logic is covenantal and judicial. Sin creates real guilt before God, and guilt produces a condemning conscience. A conscience can only be made good if sin is dealt with, judgment is satisfied, and God grants clearance. Baptism is the moment when the believer calls on God, submits to His appointed act, and appeals for conscience-clearing mercy through union with Christ’s death and resurrection. The conscience is not cleansed by water, but by divine verdict.

### **The Source of Confusion**

The confusion arises from misreading the typological relationship Peter establishes. Peter calls baptism the antitype—not a symbol pointing to something else, but the fulfillment of what the flood foreshadowed. The type was the shadow; the antitype is the reality. The flood carried Noah’s family through judgment waters to safety; baptism carries believers through judgment to salvation by uniting them with Christ’s death and resurrection. The grammatical structure of the Greek, confirmed by many scholarly commentaries, supports this reading.

Peter’s own words leave no room for symbolism. If he wanted to call baptism merely symbolic, he chose the worst possible words: “baptism now saves you.”

### **How Early Christians Understood This**

The earliest Christians never interpreted 1 Peter 3:21 as merely symbolic. The Shepherd of Hermas, writing around AD 140, uses the same salvation-through-water imagery: “They had need to come up through the water, so that they might be made alive; for they could not otherwise enter into the kingdom of God, except by putting away the mortality of their former life ... The seal, therefore, is the water. They go down into the water dead [in sin], and come out of it alive.”

When Hermas calls the water the seal, he’s expressing what the broader early church consistently understood: the water and the Spirit are inseparable, and baptism is where the Spirit-sealing happens. This is the same reality Paul describes when he says believers are “sealed with the promised Holy Spirit” (Ephesians

1:13)—the Spirit received at the moment of baptism. Hermas isn't claiming the water does what the Spirit does. He's saying you can't separate them. The water is where death to sin occurs and new life begins, because the Spirit is given there.

No early Christian writer treats this as symbolic participation in a reality that has already occurred. The pattern is consistent: you go down into the water, and you come up alive.

## **“In Acts 2:38, ‘For’ Really Means ‘Because Of’”**

This interpretation requires Acts 2:38 to mean the opposite of its natural reading. Peter plainly commanded: “Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins.”

Some claim “for” (Greek: *eis*) means “because of”—that you're baptized because you're already forgiven. However, three lines of evidence suggest a different understanding.

### **The Translators Reject It**

First, the translators reject that translation. Among major English translations, the overwhelming majority render *eis* as ‘for’ in the forward-looking sense. The KJV, NKJV, ESV, NIV, NASB, CSB, NRSV, and others all translate it this way. This unanimity exists because while *eis* can mean “because of” in some textual contexts, the Greek doesn't support that reading here.

### **The Context of the Jews at Pentecost**

Second, the context destroys the claim. These Jews were cut to the heart with guilt. They asked, “Brothers, what shall we do?” (Acts 2:37). This was not a question about something already accomplished. It was a plea to know how their guilt could be removed. They were asking what they needed to do to be saved.

To suggest Peter replied, “Be baptized because you're already forgiven” makes no sense. It doesn't answer their question. The natural reading is: “Here is what you must do to remove your guilt: repent and be baptized!”

### **The Same Greek Construction Elsewhere**

Third, the same Greek construction *eis* appears elsewhere in ways that expose this error. When John the Baptist says, “I baptize you with water *eis* repentance” (Matthew 3:11), does that mean “because you've already repented”? Of course not. John's baptism was designed to bring about repentance in Israel; it pointed forward to the goal, not backward to an accomplished fact.

When Paul writes, “We were all baptized *eis* one body” (1 Corinthians 12:13), does that mean “because we're already in the body”? No. Baptism is what brings us into

the body. The same verse says we “were all given the one Spirit to drink”—the Spirit’s work brings us into the body; baptism doesn’t just reference being there already.

The Greek phrase is “*eis aphasin hamartiōn*,” meaning into or for forgiveness. It points forward to what you’ll receive, not backward to what you already have. The identical grammatical construction (also with a salvation context) appears in Matthew 26:28, where Jesus says His blood is “poured out for many *eis* forgiveness of sins.” Nobody can reasonably argue that means “because sins were already forgiven.” His blood was poured out toward forgiveness—to accomplish it, not to celebrate it. If *eis* means “for the purpose of” when Jesus shed His blood, it means “for the purpose of” when Peter commanded baptism. You cannot have it both ways.

## **Telling Translation Unanimity**

The grammar is clear. The context is clear. The parallel passages are clear. Translators across every theological tradition agree, including those who hold to faith-alone theology. Yet proponents of this interpretation ignore what even translators from their own tradition acknowledge.

This interpretation illustrates how strongly theological commitments can influence our understanding of Scripture. When translators from every tradition render *eis* as “for” or “unto” in this passage, we should ask whether our interpretation aligns with the plain meaning of the text or whether we’re requiring it to fit our theology.

## **“Paul Said Christ Didn’t Send Him to Baptize”**

Paul wrote to the Corinthians: “Christ did not send me to baptize but to preach the gospel” (1 Corinthians 1:17). But read the context. Paul’s point is that he has an Apostolic mission from Jesus Christ to preach, not to personally perform every baptism. Others could handle the baptizing that resulted from his preaching.

## **The Corinthian Factions**

The Corinthians were dividing into factions: “I follow Paul,” “I follow Apollos,” “I follow Cephas.” Paul was thankful he hadn’t personally baptized many of them, so they couldn’t claim to be “Paul’s disciples” based on who immersed them. He’s not dismissing baptism’s importance—he’s avoiding personality cults. Here Paul is using *meiosis*, a way of speaking that temporarily downplays something to highlight a more urgent point.

## **Clear Interprets Ambiguous**

A fundamental rule of biblical interpretation is that clear passages illuminate ambiguous ones, never the reverse. Paul’s doctrinal statements about baptism are unambiguous:

- “All of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death” (Romans 6:3)
- “As many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ” (Galatians 3:27)
- “Buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him” (Colossians 2:12)
- “One Lord, one faith, one baptism” (Ephesians 4:5)

These are clear, carefully crafted doctrinal teachings about baptism’s essential role in salvation. They appear in letters written to establish theology and practice for the churches.

In contrast, 1 Corinthians 1:17 appears in a specific pastoral situation:

- Addressing church division and factions (vv. 10–13)
- Explaining why Paul didn’t personally baptize many (to avoid “I was baptized by Paul” boasting)
- Using rhetorical emphasis to highlight his apostolic calling
- Embedded in a correction, not establishing doctrine

When an ambiguous statement in a pastoral context appears to contradict clear doctrinal teaching, sound hermeneutics requires interpreting the ambiguous in light of the clear. To do otherwise—to use 1 Corinthians 1:17 to override Romans 6, Galatians 3, and Colossians 2—is to:

- Make Paul contradict himself
- Violate basic interpretive principles
- Elevate pastoral rhetoric above doctrinal clarity

If 1 Corinthians 1:17 means baptism isn’t important or isn’t part of the gospel, then Paul contradicts his own theology in Romans 6. But if we understand it in context, (prioritizing his divinely appointed mission of preaching, avoiding personality cults, and as rhetorical understatement), there’s no contradiction—Paul can emphasize his preaching mission without diminishing baptism’s theological importance.

Clear interprets ambiguous. Always.

## “Elevating Early Church Writings to the Level of Scripture”

A common objection: “You’re appealing to church tradition instead of Scripture. The Reformers taught us *sola scriptura*: Scripture alone, not tradition.”

### The Claim Is Misunderstood

The claim isn’t to trust the church fathers instead of Scripture. The claim is that they help us understand what Scripture meant to those who learned from the apostles.

That’s a profound difference.

Chapter 12 examined this question in detail when looking at the example of the Epistle of Barnabas. That text, revered highly enough to be included in Codex Sinaiticus alongside the canonical books, teaches the necessity of baptism explicitly. But so do the canonical Scriptures: Acts 2:38, Romans 6:3-4, 1 Peter 3:21, Colossians 2:12. The teaching is identical whether you read only the canonical books or other respected early texts like Barnabas.

## **The Consistent Early Witness**

The appeal to Apostolic and Sub-Apostolic church fathers isn’t tradition trumping Scripture. It’s recognizing that those closest to the apostles—who learned from them, who heard them explain their own writings—understood Scripture correctly. And they universally understood it to teach that baptism is where God saves.

(See Appendix D for the complete record of early church teachings on baptism, and Appendix E for the chain of witness from the apostles through their direct disciples.)

## **“Baptism Replaces Circumcision, So We Baptize Infants”**

This is the most sophisticated theological defense of infant baptism, rooted in Reformed covenant theology. The argument goes: circumcision was the sign of the Old Covenant given to Abraham’s children. Baptism is the New Covenant sign parallel to circumcision. Just as covenant children received the sign in infancy under the Old Covenant, so covenant children should receive baptism in infancy under the New Covenant.

Advocates of this position point to Colossians 2:11-12: “In him you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands ... having been buried with him in baptism.” They see this as Paul explicitly connecting baptism to circumcision as the New Covenant replacement.

This position is built on careful theological reflection, not casual tradition. These are thoughtful believers trying to understand covenant continuity. But despite its sophistication, Scripture points in a different direction.

## **The Two Covenants Operate Differently**

Yes, both circumcision and baptism are covenant signs. But the differences between the two covenants are far more significant than their similarities.

Circumcision was given to an ethnic covenant community. Physical descent from Abraham made you part of the covenant people. God told Abraham, “I will establish my covenant between me and you and your offspring after you throughout their generations” (Genesis 17:7). Being born into Abraham’s family brought you into

covenant relationship.

Baptism brings people into a spiritual covenant community. The New Covenant isn't based on physical descent but on spiritual rebirth. Jesus told Nicodemus, "Unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit" (John 3:5-6). Physical birth doesn't bring you into the New Covenant: spiritual birth does.

## **John the Baptist's Explicit Teaching**

John the Baptist made this explicit when religious leaders came based on their Abrahamic descent: "Do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father,' for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham" (Matthew 3:9). Physical lineage no longer determines covenant membership.

## **Paul's Teaching on This**

Paul reinforces this: "For not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel, and not all are children of Abraham because they are his offspring. ... It is not the children of the flesh who are the children of God, but the children of the promise are counted as offspring" (Romans 9:6-8). Under the New Covenant, physical birth into a Christian family doesn't automatically make someone a Christian. The New Covenant requires personal faith response, not family lineage.

## **Colossians 2:11-12 Requires Faith**

Let's look carefully at what Paul actually says: "In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead."

First, this "circumcision" is "made without hands." It is spiritual, not physical. It is "putting off the body of flesh," dealing with the sin nature, not performing a ritual on an infant.

The phrase "through faith" in verse 12 shows the Colossians were raised with Christ in baptism "through faith in the powerful working of God." Infants cannot exercise faith. If baptism requires faith (and Paul explicitly says it does) then infant baptism becomes difficult to reconcile with the very passage used to defend it.

Paul isn't saying baptism works the same way circumcision did. He's contrasting the Old Covenant's external, physical mark with the New Covenant's internal, spiritual transformation that occurs in baptism when faith responds to God's working.

## **Every Baptism in Acts Requires Personal Faith**

The strongest biblical evidence comes from examining the consistent pattern throughout Acts. Not one example shows someone being baptized without trusting belief. (See Appendix C for the complete list.)

If infant baptism were the New Covenant pattern paralleling infant circumcision, wouldn't Luke show us at least one clear example? Instead, every single detailed account requires personal faith before baptism.

## **Acts 2:38-39 and the Promise to Children**

Defenders of infant baptism often point to Peter's words: "For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off" (Acts 2:39). They argue this shows covenant children should receive the covenant sign.

But look at the full context. Peter says, "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself" (Acts 2:38-39).

The promise is available to children—absolutely. The condition: "for everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself." And how does someone respond to that call? By repenting and being baptized (verse 38). Peter isn't saying children automatically receive the promise. He's saying the promise is available to them when they respond in faith and repentance.

If "your children" meant infants should be baptized, what about "all who are far off"? That phrase refers to Jews located outside Jerusalem (and ultimately Gentiles). Should they be baptized apart from calling and response? Clearly not. The same principle applies to children. The promise is available when they are called and respond.

## **The New Covenant Operates Differently**

The strongest biblical evidence for this view comes from Scripture's description of the New Covenant itself. Under the Old Covenant, children were included based on physical descent. Under the New Covenant, Jeremiah prophesied a fundamental change:

"Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will make a new covenant ... I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, 'Know the LORD,' for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest" (Jeremiah 31:31-34).

Under the New Covenant, everyone in the covenant personally knows the Lord. You're not born into it; you enter it by knowing God personally. This is why Jesus said you must be "born again" (John 3:3), not just born.

Hebrews confirms this difference: “In speaking of a new covenant, he makes the first one obsolete” (Hebrews 8:13). The writer isn’t saying the covenants work the same way. He’s saying the old pattern is obsolete, replaced by something new that operates on different principles.

## **What About Covenant Children?**

Of course, God cares about children. Of course, Christian parents should raise children in the faith, pray for them, teach them Scripture, and bring them to worship. The children of believers are set apart by their parents’ faith (1 Corinthians 7:14), and God delights in using believing parents to draw children to Himself. But that’s different from baptizing them as infants.

Your children aren’t automatically Christians because you’re Christian. They can become Christians the same way available to you: by personally trusting Christ, repenting of sin, confessing Him, and being baptized.

## **The Pattern Is Clear**

The New Covenant pattern is clear: personal faith, personal repentance, personal confession, personal baptism. Not because we earn salvation, but because God wants us personally engaged in the relationship. This doesn’t exclude children from God’s love; it invites them to respond personally to the God who calls them.

Raise your children in the faith. Pray for them. Teach them. And when they are able to believe and make Jesus Lord—baptize them.

## **“Acts 16:31—The Jailer’s Belief Saves His Whole Household”**

Some argue that Acts 16:31 teaches derivative salvation, that the jailer’s faith covered his entire household. They point to Paul’s words: “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household” (Acts 16:31). Then, verse 34 says “he rejoiced along with his entire household that he had believed in God,” seeming to credit everything to the jailer’s belief alone.

If this were true, it would undermine the entire pattern about personal faith response established throughout Scripture and this book. So we need to look carefully at what the text actually says.

## **The Greek Structure of Acts 16:31**

“Πίστευσον ἐπὶ τὸν κύριον Ἰησοῦν καὶ σωθήσῃ σὺ καὶ ὁ οἶκός σου”

Literally: “Believe on the Lord Jesus and you (singular) will be saved, you and your household.”

The verb “believe” (πίστευσον) is singular imperative—directed specifically at the jailer. But here’s the critical question: Does the salvation promise extend to the household because of his belief, or does it extend to them on the same condition: that they also believe?

## **What Luke’s Narrative Shows**

**If the jailer’s belief saved his household, Luke would have no reason to tell us anything more about the household than that the jailer believed. Instead, Luke records three additional details. Paul “spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house” (v. 32). The whole household “was baptized at once, he and all his family” (v. 33). And in verse 34, the rejoicing follows the believing. A household saved by the jailer’s belief would not need the word preached to each member, would not need each member baptized, and would not have its rejoicing tied to its own believing. Luke’s narrative shows individual response across the household, not a covenant head’s response standing in for everyone else.**

## **What the Grammar Actually Shows**

**The Greek sentence allows three readings, and they cannot be settled by grammar alone.**

**The first reading would treat the promise as distributive: each household member is saved on the same condition the jailer is, by personally believing.**

**The second reading would treat the jailer as a covenant head whose belief brings his household into salvation with him.**

**The third reading would treat the verse as a general offer of salvation to the whole household, without specifying how each member receives it.**

**All three are grammatically possible. The Greek does not force one over the others.**

**What settles the question is verses 32 through 34. Paul preached to everyone in the house. Everyone was baptized. The rejoicing followed believing. Luke recorded individual response across the household, not a covenant head’s faith extending automatically to the others.**

**Acts 2:39 follows the same pattern: “The promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off.” The promise reaches all these groups. The qualifying clause “everyone whom the Lord our God calls” applies the condition to each of them. The promise is wide; the response is personal.**

**Paul is giving the jailer good news. The salvation available to him through faith is available to his whole household on the same terms. Believe, and you will be saved. And your household can be saved the same way when they believe too.**

## What About Verse 34?

“He rejoiced along with his entire household that he had believed in God” (Acts 16:34).

Some see this as crediting everything to the jailer’s belief. But the verse together describes the jailer’s joy at his conversion and his household’s response, not claiming that his belief covered them. The Greek participle (πεπιστευκῶς τῷ θεῷ) could have a broader reference that includes the household’s belief, but even if it emphasizes the jailer’s belief, it describes the occasion of joy, not the mechanism of salvation.

More importantly, they were all baptized (v. 33). If the jailer’s faith alone saved them, why baptize everyone? Because each person needed to respond personally through baptism.

## If Households Respond Together, Faith Doesn’t Transfer

The text treats households as units that respond together, not as groups where one person’s faith transfers to others. **Reading the household promise as if it automatically applies to each member commits what logicians call the fallacy of division—assuming that what is true of a group must also be true of each member individually.** That’s why Paul preached to everyone (v. 32), and why everyone was baptized (v. 33). Each member heard the gospel and responded.

No other conversion account in Acts suggests one person’s faith covers another’s salvation. The consistent pattern is personal hearing, personal belief, personal baptism. (See Appendix C.)

- Acts 2:41: “Those who received his word were baptized”
- Acts 8:12: “When they believed ... they were baptized, both men and women”
- Acts 18:8: “Many of the Corinthians hearing Paul believed and were baptized”

The Philippian jailer’s household follows the same pattern. They heard (v. 32), believed (implied in their baptism), and were baptized (v. 33).

## The Pattern Remains Consistent

Reformed theology’s reading of this passage requires imposing a theological system (covenant headship transferring faith) onto the text. But the natural reading fits perfectly with everything else in Acts: God’s promise extends to entire households, but each person must respond personally through faith expressed in baptism.

The jailer couldn’t believe for his household any more than Peter’s Pentecost audience could believe for their children (Acts 2:39). The promise is for all, but reception requires individual response.

## **“Children, the Mentally Incapable, and the Unreached”**

The objection often comes in the form of a heartfelt question. It is one of the few objections raised not out of resistance to Scripture but from an instinctive desire to uphold God’s fairness. The mental picture is easy to imagine: a child too young to understand, an adult trapped in permanent cognitive limitation, or a person somewhere in the world who lived and died without encountering the message of Christ. Would God condemn someone for failing to respond to commands they never had the ability to comprehend?

This concern resonates because Scripture repeatedly describes God as righteous, impartial, and entirely just. Abraham could confidently appeal to Him as the Judge who will always “do what is just” (Genesis 18:25). Paul affirms that God’s judgment is according to truth and without partiality (Romans 2:2, 11). When people ask about these categories, they are not trying to escape obedience—they are trying to reconcile the character of the God who commands it.

### **Children and the Mentally Incapable**

The gospel commands assume a person who can understand and respond. Infants, young children, and those with permanent cognitive limitations cannot.

Scripture gives us clarity here. Jesus states the principle directly: “If you were blind, you would have no guilt” (John 9:41). Genuine incapacity removes guilt. In Nehemiah, the Law is read to “all who could understand,” a distinction that locates accountability at the point of comprehension (Nehemiah 8:2–3). When God barred the exodus generation from the promised land, He explicitly exempted their children on the grounds that they had “no knowledge of good or evil” (Deuteronomy 1:39). Scripture consistently ties moral accountability to the capacity to understand. Genuine incapacity removes guilt. The same principle applies to those with lifelong cognitive limitations: they are not morally rejecting God, because they have no ability to grasp what He requires.

This is not a loophole. It is a boundary condition. Everything the gospel commands—trusting belief, repentance, confession, baptism—requires a person who can engage with divine revelation through the mind, the heart, and the will. Where that capacity does not exist, the commands do not apply. The framework in Appendix G begins from this same premise.

### **The Unreached**

The unreached present a different question. Children and the mentally incapable lack the capacity to understand. The unreached lack the opportunity to hear. Scripture treats these as related but not identical.

Paul expresses a key principle when he writes, “Where there is no law, there is no transgression” (Romans 4:15). A person cannot violate a command that was never

given to them. The gospel commands—trusting belief, repentance, confession, and baptism—must be proclaimed before they can be obeyed. When God has not brought that proclamation to a person, His justice does not condemn them for failing to obey what they never received.

At the same time, Scripture does not present the unreached as innocent. Romans 1:19–20 makes clear that creation itself reveals enough about God to leave all people without excuse for failing to seek Him. Romans 2:14–15 shows that conscience functions as an internal witness, so that even those without the written Law know something of God’s moral expectations. The unreached are not in a neutral position. They stand under the same fallen condition as all of humanity.

## **The Seeking Mandate**

What the unreached are accountable for is whether they sought the God their conscience and the world around them bear witness to. Hebrews 11:6 makes seeking a requirement: “Whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him.” Acts 17:26–27 frames seeking as the purpose for which God arranged human existence—that people “should seek God, in the hope that they might feel their way toward him and find him.” The mandate runs throughout Scripture. Seeking is required, and those who do not seek have failed the obligation that comes before every gospel command.

The person who never heard of Jesus is still accountable to seek the God their conscience and the created world bear witness to. The pre-Christ Israelite was also accountable—not for the apostolic gospel they could not have known, but for the Mosaic covenant and the prophetic witness they did receive. The principle is the same in every case: a person is accountable for the revelation God gave them, and not for revelation God did not give them.

## **What Scripture Does Not Fully Reveal**

What Scripture does not tell us is precisely how God judges every person who responded rightly to the light of creation and conscience but never encountered the gospel of Christ. The Bible does not present an alternative plan of salvation operating alongside the gospel. It does not declare a verdict on every such case. It tells us that God’s judgment always corresponds to the light a person actually received (Romans 2:6, 12), and that the Judge of all the earth will do what is right. We do not know what each person did with the revelation they received, and we do not need to know—God does. Scripture gives us enough to trust His judgment and enough to know that no one is condemned for failing to obey what was never made known to them.

## **What This Does Not Cover**

The unreached category is narrower than it first appears. It does not extend to the person who has a Bible in their own language and corrective teaching within reach. It does not cover the person who heard the apostolic gospel and disagreed. It does

not cover the person who intended to respond and never did. Each of those cases involves revelation received, and Scripture treats them under the heading of accountability for what was known, not ignorance of what was not.

## **Our Responsibility**

In the end, the matter rests on one distinction. Those who cannot understand are not condemned. Those who never heard the gospel are not judged for rejecting what they never received—though they, like all people, are accountable for how they responded to what God did reveal to them. And those who do hear the message are fully accountable for their response. Scripture gives us enough light to trust God completely and enough truth to obey Him fully.

Appendix G develops the full framework—including the seeking mandate, the levels of revelation each person may have received, and how Scripture treats each case.

## **“Foxhole and Deathbed Conversions”**

This is an emotionally charged question: can someone turn sincerely to Christ moments before death—with no opportunity for baptism—and still be saved?

### **First, Examine the Assumptions**

The question usually imagines a person who lived in rebellion for decades and gives a sincere response in their final breath. Before addressing the exceptional case, consider the common one. Scripture warns against presuming on grace (Romans 2:4). A person gripped by fear of judgment may want escape without wanting the Lord. Simply wanting to avoid Hell is not the trusting allegiance Scripture describes as saving belief.

Jesus addressed this directly. Many will come to Him on judgment day saying, “Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?” His answer: “I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness” (Matthew 7:22-23). These people were not faking it. They genuinely believed they were serving Christ. Their sincerity did not substitute for doing the Father’s will.

More to the point, obeying the gospel requires more than baptism. The deeper problem in most deathbed scenarios is the absence of trust in Jesus Christ, not the absence of water. A person who never entrusted themselves to Christ was not on the path to salvation regardless of whether baptism was available.

### **The “No Opportunity” Assumption**

Is the assumption that there was “no opportunity for baptism” accurate? Those at life’s end have usually had thousands of waking hours in which to respond to Christ. Every hour lived was an opportunity. God’s invitation echoed persistently—through

Scripture, through the testimony of believers, through the conviction of the Spirit: “All day long I have held out my hands to a disobedient and contrary people” (Romans 10:21).

Scripture urges, “Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts” (Hebrews 3:15). The person who deferred for decades and now faces death did not lack opportunity. They had time they chose not to use. That is not prevention. That is procrastination, and Scripture treats the two differently.

## **The Genuine Case Is Narrower Than It Appears**

Strip away the common scenario and the genuine case is rare. It is the person who was actively moving toward the apostolic response when something outside them ended the pursuit. Death intervening, sudden incapacity, physical restraint, catastrophic isolation, no water available—these are real interruptions, not delays. The person was not refusing. They were not putting it off. Their heart had engaged the response when something beyond their control stopped it.

This is a different case from the procrastinator, and it deserves to be treated as one. The person who delayed and ran out of time did not have external forces prohibiting action. The person who was moving toward obedience and was stopped from outside did. The categories carry different weight, and collapsing them together is neither fair to the interrupted nor honest about the procrastinator.

## **What Scripture Says and Does Not Say**

Scripture does not declare a verdict on the externally prevented case. But it gives us reason to distinguish it from refusal. The person was doing what Hebrews 11:6 requires—seeking God. They were moving toward what Acts 2:38 commands. Their pursuit was real, even though it was incomplete.

Scripture says God rewards those who seek Him (Hebrews 11:6). Abraham’s confidence is ours: “Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?” (Genesis 18:25). We trust His judgment with hope—not because Scripture tells us the externally prevented person is saved, but because Scripture tells us the Judge knows the difference between a heart that was moving toward Him and a heart that was not.

## **The Way Forward**

What Scripture never does is treat baptism as optional. The pattern in Acts is urgent obedience—three thousand baptized that day (Acts 2:41), the Ethiopian eunuch baptized immediately upon seeing water (Acts 8:36), the Philippian jailer baptized the same hour of the night (Acts 16:33), Paul was told “Why do you wait?” (Acts 22:16). No multi-week classes, no ceremonial scheduling. Every convert responded without delay.

Foundational doctrine is built on what God has clearly revealed, not on hypothetical scenarios designed to soften what He has commanded. If you are reading this and are able to respond, the biblical pattern is clear: do not wait. Respond to His grace not from fear of death but from love for the risen Lord.

Appendix G develops the full framework for externally prevented cases and distinguishes them from procrastination, disagreement, and refusal.

## **“My Grandmother Who Was Never Baptized”**

This is one of the most challenging questions Christians face. Not because Scripture is unclear, but because our hearts ache with compassion. Nearly all of us have loved ones—a grandmother, perhaps—who died without responding to the gospel through biblical repentance, confession, and baptism. She may have loved Jesus deeply, attended church faithfully, and lived a life of kindness. Now you wonder: what does that mean for her eternity?

### **Emotions Matter, But Scripture Matters More**

Emotions matter. Family, love, and loss matter. The best way to honor our loved ones is to take God’s Word seriously, even when it presses against our grief.

### **The Narrow Road Applies to Everyone**

Jesus says plainly that the road is narrow and few find it (Matthew 7:13-14). This truth applies to every person in every generation—to me, to you, and yes, even to our grandmothers. It would be dishonest to set it aside because the person in question is someone we love.

### **The Subtle Inconsistency**

A subtle inconsistency sometimes emerges: when defending “faith alone,” we rightly insist that good works of law cannot save. Yet when faced with baptism’s necessity, we sometimes appeal to moral character: “But Grandma was such a good person!” Ironically, this inadvertently makes human performance, rather than grace received through faith, the ground of salvation.

### **Scripture’s Universal Standard**

Scripture does not offer exceptions based on morality or sincerity. “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23). Paul’s argument in Romans 3 addresses every person: moral or immoral, religious or secular. All fall short—not merely failing to meet a moral standard, but failing to give God the honor and submission His authority deserves.

The core issue is not whether someone meant well but whether they submitted to God’s revealed way of receiving grace. A faithful heart that stops short of the full

gospel response has not yet completed what Scripture consistently presents as saving belief.

## **But Accountability Depends on What She Was Told**

The question of what your grandmother is accountable for depends on what revelation she received and what access she had to corrective teaching. Scripture draws this distinction, and so must we.

If she lived in an era or situation where the apostolic pattern was obscured—where no Bible was available in her language, where no dissenting voice could reach her, where the only teaching she received came from a tradition that had departed from the apostolic response—she is in a kind of “times of ignorance” with respect to that pattern. Acts 17:30 acknowledges that ignorance has been a real factor in God’s dealings with humanity. The medieval Christian is the standing example. God knows how to judge such cases, and the Judge of all the earth will do what is right (Genesis 18:25).

If she lived in a time and place where Scripture was available and corrective teaching was within reach, her position is different. The “times of ignorance” framing does not extend to the person who has a Bible in hand. Scripture commands every hearer to test what they were taught (1 Thessalonians 5:21; 1 John 4:1). The Bereans are Luke’s example of what testing looks like—they examined the Scriptures daily to see if what Paul taught was true (Acts 17:11). The testing mandate reaches every hearer. It makes no exception for the hearer who trusts their teacher.

This is the hardest part of the answer. Some hearers have been so shaped by their prior teaching that the apostolic pattern does not register even when they read the texts themselves. They open Acts 2:38 and read straight through it. The framework they were given acts as a filter on the plain reading. This is real and common. But it is not a capacity problem. Testing means examining not only the texts but the framework through which they are read. The failure to test the framework itself does not exempt the person from the response that testing was meant to reveal.

## **Only God Knows**

No one can render a verdict on another person’s eternal destiny. Only God knows every heart, every opportunity, every response. He judges with perfect knowledge of every degree of revelation each person received. He alone knows what each person was given and what they did with it. That is the reason no teacher can stand in for Him.

## **Our Responsibility**

But our responsibility is not to construct exemptions for the past. It is to obey in the present. The ultimate question is not what your grandmother did with the truth she received, but what you will do with the truth now set before you. If you love her, honor her memory by living in obedience to God—even if her understanding differed

from your own. That is not betrayal; it is love, faithfulness, and gospel response. “Blessed are those who hear the word of God and keep it” (Luke 11:28).

Appendix G develops the full framework for how Scripture handles each case—including the seeking mandate, the levels of revelation, and the distinction between those who lacked access to the apostolic teaching and those who had it.

## **“Who Are You to Judge?”**

You are right to say that judgment belongs to God. I am not judging anyone. I am reporting what God has already spoken. Jesus said, “The one who rejects me and does not receive my words has a judge; the word that I have spoken will judge him on the last day” (John 12:48).

### **Scripture Has Already Pronounced the Verdict**

When Jesus commands baptism and people refuse, the issue isn’t between them and any human teacher but between them and Christ. The verdict isn’t mine to render. It was rendered when Jesus said, “Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved” (Mark 16:16), and when Peter commanded, “Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins” (Acts 2:38). Teaching what those passages say is not judging. Refusing to teach them would be.

### **A Doctor Analogy**

Saying “don’t judge” to avoid biblical teaching is like saying “don’t judge” to a doctor who reads your test results and tells you what they show. The results might be uncomfortable, but ignoring them doesn’t change what was recorded. The doctor isn’t creating the diagnosis—he’s reading what is already there. Silence would be the cruelest response he could give.

### **The Role of Teaching**

The role of teaching isn’t to pronounce judgment but to explain what God’s Word clearly says, trusting that each person will respond to Him, not to the messenger. No one who teaches these passages is claiming authority over another person’s soul. They are pointing to the One who holds that authority and asking you to listen to Him.

Appendix G develops the full distinction between proclamation and judgment, and explains why teaching what Scripture says about salvation is not the same as rendering a verdict on any individual.

## **“People in the Bible Waited to Be Baptized”**

They didn’t. Look at the pattern in Appendix C, or consider these examples:

- Acts 2:41 - 3,000 baptized “that day”
- Acts 8:36 - Ethiopian eunuch baptized immediately upon seeing water
- Acts 16:33 - Philippian jailer baptized “the same hour of the night”
- Acts 22:16 - Paul told, “Why do you wait?”

In every case, baptism followed belief without hesitation. Any delay was logistical (e.g., finding water), not theological. There were no multi-week classes, no “Baptism Sundays,” no ceremonial scheduling. The urgency wasn’t driven by fear tactics, but by the recognition that baptism was the God-ordained moment of response to the gospel.

## **Modern Practice vs. Biblical Pattern**

Today’s common practice of postponing baptism for days, weeks, or even months is completely foreign to the New Testament. This is not a call to pressure anyone into a decision they are not ready to make, but it is a call to recover the urgency Scripture attaches to baptism. When someone is ready to respond in faith, the biblical pattern is clear: don’t wait.

## **“The Baptisms in the NT Are Spiritual, Not Water Baptism”**

Some argue that New Testament baptism references are spiritual rather than physical. The claim goes like this: “When Paul says ‘one baptism’ in Ephesians 4:5, he means Spirit baptism. When Romans 6 talks about being baptized into Christ’s death, that’s spiritual, not water.”

Scripture’s language and context indicate otherwise.

### **Physical Language**

Look at the language Scripture uses for baptism. The word *baptize* means to immerse, plunge, dip, or submerge. It’s what happened to ships that sank. It’s what happened to cloth being dyed. It’s inherently a physical word describing a physical action.

When Philip baptized the Ethiopian eunuch, Scripture says, “And they both went down into the water, Philip and the eunuch, and he baptized him. And when they came up out of the water ...” (Acts 8:38-39). You cannot go “down into” and “come up out of” a spiritual baptism.

John the Baptist chose the Jordan River and Aenon “because water was plentiful there” (John 3:23). Spiritual baptism would not need plentiful water.

## **The Household Baptisms Prove Water**

Look at the household baptisms in Acts. When the Philippian jailer was baptized with his household “at the same hour of the night” (Acts 16:33), the text says nothing about the Holy Spirit falling on them. But Paul had to take them somewhere to baptize them, presumably to water.

When Lydia and her household were baptized by the riverside (Acts 16:13–15), the text says nothing about the Spirit falling. But they were by a river, where there was water.

## **Romans 6 Requires Water Baptism**

A favorite passage for “spiritual baptism only” advocates is Romans 6:3–4: “Do you not know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death ...”

But Paul is writing to the church in Rome, reminding them of their water baptism. He asks, “Do you not know?” referring to something they had already experienced. When had the Roman Christians been baptized? At their conversion, in water, just like every other convert in Acts. (See Appendix C.)

The burial imagery only makes sense with water baptism. Going underwater is like being buried; coming up is like resurrection. There’s no such physical parallel with Spirit baptism. The Spirit falls on you from above; He doesn’t bury you and raise you.

## **Colossians 2:12 Explicitly Mentions Faith During Baptism**

“Having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead.”

You exercise faith during baptism. This describes something you participate in consciously, actively trusting God while it happens. That is water baptism, a conscious act of faith. Spirit baptism in the NT happens *to* people, often unexpectedly (Acts 2, 10), not something they *initiate* through active faith.

## **1 Corinthians 1 Makes No Sense Without Water**

When Paul says, “I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius ... I also baptized the household of Stephanas” (1 Corinthians 1:14–16), he had no control who received the indwelling Holy Spirit.

Paul could only be talking about water baptism, something he physically administered to some people but not others. You can’t personally administer Spirit baptism to someone—only God does that.

## **The “One Baptism” of Ephesians 4:5**

When Paul writes “one Lord, one faith, one baptism,” which baptism is he talking about? Let’s use Scripture to interpret Scripture.

In Matthew 28:19, Jesus commanded water baptism. In Acts 2:38, Peter commanded water baptism. Throughout Acts, every convert received water baptism. In Romans 6, Paul refers to the Roman Christians' baptism. In Galatians 3:27, baptism is how we "put on Christ." In Colossians 2:12, baptism involves our active faith. In 1 Peter 3:21, Peter explicitly says "baptism now saves you."

The "one baptism" is the water baptism commanded by Christ, preached by the apostles, and practiced by the church. To make it purely spiritual baptism is to say Christ commanded something no one needs to do.

## **Spirit Baptism Was Never Commanded**

Spirit baptism is never commanded in Scripture. Jesus promised it (Acts 1:5), but never commanded anyone to receive it. Why? Because it's something God does TO you, not something you do in obedience.

But water baptism is commanded: "Be baptized every one of you" (Acts 2:38) "Rise and be baptized" (Acts 22:16) "He commanded them to be baptized" (Acts 10:48) You can't command someone to receive the Spirit—that's God's sovereign work. But you can command someone to be baptized in water. That's an obedient response to the gospel.

## **The Two Work Together**

Spirit baptism exists, but not as a replacement for water baptism. At conversion, God does give His Spirit. But this happens IN water baptism, not instead of it. Titus 3:5 brings them together: "He saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit."

The washing (water baptism) and the renewal (Spirit's work) happen together. That is why Peter could promise both in Acts 2:38: "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit."

## **When This Interpretation Emerged**

The "spiritual baptism only" interpretation developed recently. It is largely a product of the 19th and 20th centuries, developing primarily within independent Baptist and fundamentalist circles as a way to reconcile two convictions: that nothing we do can contribute to salvation, and that Scripture repeatedly connects baptism to salvation. By reinterpreting baptism passages as purely spiritual, this view attempts to hold both. It cannot be sustained by careful examination of Scripture.

## **Why This View Creates Problems**

This interpretation faces several challenges. It makes Jesus' command to baptize meaningless and the apostles' practice pointless. It turns clear biblical narratives

into confusing allegories. No one in church history taught this until the 1800s, and it requires ignoring the plain, physical language Scripture uses.

## **“Baptism Is a Work, and We’re Saved by Grace”**

Baptism isn’t a work of law-keeping but a response of faith. In baptism, God works, not us. (See Chapter 10 for a complete discussion on baptism, works, and grace. Refer to Appendix A for the complete distinction between Law Commands and Gospel Commands.)

### **God Works in Baptism**

- Colossians 2:12 - We’re raised “through faith in the powerful working of God”
- Titus 3:5 - “He saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit”

Calling baptism a “work” is like calling birth a “work” the baby performs. We don’t baptize ourselves—we submit to God’s working. That’s not earning salvation; it’s receiving it.

## **“Jesus’ Reference to Belief as a Work in John 6:29 Isn’t Really a Work”**

When presented with John 6:29—“This is the work of God, that you believe in Him whom He has sent”—some acknowledge Jesus’ language but argue it doesn’t undermine the faith/works distinction. Their reasoning runs as follows: belief is a mental act, not a physical one, and that categorical difference is what separates faith from works like baptism. Faith is passive receiving—the empty hand that accepts God’s gift. It requires no physical effort, contributes nothing meritorious, and therefore doesn’t violate grace even though Jesus used the word “work.”

According to this view, Jesus wasn’t speaking with technical precision. He was merely adopting the crowd’s works-oriented vocabulary to subvert their framework. They asked about “works” (plural); He redirected them to one thing: belief. The word “work” was theirs, not His considered theological category.

John Calvin articulated the classic version of this argument in his *Commentary on the Gospel According to John*, trans. William Pringle (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1847), on John 6:29:

It is plain enough that Christ does not speak with strict accuracy, when he calls faith a work. ... Now faith brings nothing to God, but, on the contrary, places man before God as empty and poor, that he may be filled with Christ and with his grace. It is, therefore, if we may be allowed the expression, a passive work, to which no reward can be paid.

His argument depends on distinguishing between active doing and passive receiving—between physical works and mental states. This distinction becomes the theological framework that exempts belief from the category of works while leaving physical actions like baptism exposed to the charge of works-righteousness.

## **Why This Seems Compelling**

Calvin’s argument appeals to accommodation—a concept he himself developed extensively—in which God “stoops” to human language without intending doctrinal precision. The interpretation also aligns with a deeply held Protestant instinct: protecting grace from any hint of human contribution. If faith is purely receptive—if it truly “brings nothing to God”—then it differs categorically from actions like baptism that require physical effort.

The mental/physical distinction feels intuitive. We naturally perceive a difference between thinking something and doing something. If belief is merely an internal disposition, it seems qualitatively different from walking into a baptistery. This intuition makes the objection feel reasonable, even obvious.

## **Jesus Does Not Deflect the Question**

This interpretation might seem plausible if Jesus had sidestepped the crowd’s vocabulary. He did not. They asked a direct question: “What must we do, to be doing the works of God?” (John 6:28). Jesus answered it directly: “This is the work of God, that you believe in Him whom He has sent” (John 6:29). He did not correct their use of “work.” He did not say “you are asking the wrong question.” If calling belief a work was imprecise, Jesus chose that imprecision in response to a question that demanded precision—what must we *do*? At some point, we must accept that Jesus meant what He said.

## **Scripture Explicitly Labels Mental States as Works**

The objection depends on distinguishing between physical actions and mental states—claiming the latter are not truly “works” in any meaningful sense. But Scripture does not support this distinction.

Paul explicitly categorizes mental and emotional states as works. In Galatians 5:19–21, his list of “works of the flesh” (*erga tēs sarkos*) includes hatred, jealousy, selfish ambition, and envy—all internal attitudes, all explicitly labeled *erga*. If jealousy is a work of the flesh, the mental/physical distinction is dead on arrival. Paul draws no line between inner disposition and outer action; both are works.

Romans 2:15 reinforces this directly. Paul writes that Gentiles “show the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness, and between themselves their thoughts accusing or else excusing them.” Here *ergon* appears explicitly, and thoughts perform it. Mental activity is categorized as work by the same apostle who wrote Romans and Galatians.

## **Mental Actions Are Commanded as Obedience**

If mental actions are not works, they should not be subject to command—yet Scripture commands mental activity throughout. We are told to set our minds on things above (Colossians 3:2), to meditate on what is true and noble (Philippians 4:8), to bring every thought into captivity to Christ (2 Corinthians 10:5), and to be transformed by renewing our minds (Romans 12:2). Each command requires obedience, and obedience to a command is, by definition, a work.

## **The Unbelief Test**

The logical inconsistency becomes most apparent when we consider unbelief. If belief is merely passive receiving and therefore not a work, then unbelief equally is not a work. Yet Scripture consistently treats unbelief as culpable disobedience deserving judgment (John 3:18; Hebrews 3:18-19). One cannot have it both ways: if unbelief is a culpable act of disobedience, then belief must equally be an act of obedience.

## **The Arbitrary Line Extends Further**

The *special pleading* extends beyond belief. Those who make this argument typically assert that salvation requires intellectual belief, repentance, and confession—yet they isolate baptism as a “work” that cannot be required. This distinction cannot withstand scrutiny.

Repentance involves deciding, turning, and doing; John the Baptist demanded concrete behavioral change as evidence of it (Luke 3:8-14). By any coherent definition, repentance is a work of the will.

Confession is equally physical: Romans 10:9-10 places confessing “with your mouth” alongside believing “in your heart,” both declared necessary for salvation. If moving your lips to confess is not a disqualifying work, neither is moving your body into water. By what principle is verbal confession grace, but physical baptism works-righteousness?

## **The Bottom Line**

Calvin’s claim that Jesus “does not speak with strict accuracy” when calling belief a work reveals the heart of the problem. Rather than accepting Christ’s words at face value, his theological system requires reinterpreting them. Rather than letting Paul’s “work of faith” stand as written, it must be explained away. This is the same Calvin who championed the perspicuity of Scripture—the principle that God’s Word speaks clearly enough for ordinary believers to understand. Here he argues that Christ did not speak with strict accuracy.

Jesus had no difficulty calling belief “the work of God.” Paul had no difficulty commending the Thessalonians for their “work of faith.” Jesus and Paul both called belief a work—but the theology behind this objection cannot accommodate their

words.

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This appendix is reproduced from *Eternal Stakes: The Response Grace Demands* by Joe Tenga.

For the full argument, including Chapter 15, see the book.

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### **CHANGE LOG**

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