

Baptism for the Remission of Sins:
The New Testament and Nicene Creed on Salvation
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In the Nicene Creed, a document dating back to 325 A.D. and affirmed by all major Christian denominations, we find the phrase:

“We acknowledge one baptism for the remission of sins”

What is this one baptism? Is the creed teaching that water baptism *is* salvation? Where did this phrase come from? Christianity is a faith that is rooted in historical events and documents, and the answers to these questions are significant for our understanding of the nature of God and salvation. Before we begin, a few introductory points are to be made.

First, a detailed description of New Testament thought concerning baptism is beyond the scope of this article. As we will soon see, because of how dependent the writers of the Creed were on the text of the New Testament, your interpretation of baptism in the New Testament will heavily determine your interpretation of “one baptism for the remission of sins” in the Creed. Instead I hope to show that the New Testament and the Creed are in unison in their affirmation that salvation is through Jesus Christ alone.

Also, regardless of your belief concerning baptism, both the New Testament and the Creed emphasize the significance of those who are in union with Christ displaying that union through water baptism.

Background on the Creed

For much of the first 300 years of the Church, there was open and legal persecution of Christians in the Roman empire. While Christianity spread quickly during the first few centuries, the persecution prevented the open meeting of Church leaders. By the beginning of the 4th century several differing doctrines concerning the Deity of Jesus of Nazareth rose in popularity. At the height of the persecution of the Christian Church, Constantine became emperor of Rome and issued the Edict of Milan, which protected Christians from persecution, allowed public religious gatherings and in some cases, ordered the return of stolen property.

In 325 A.D. the first world-wide council of Christian Bishops met to discuss, among other things, an orthodox view on the Divinity of Jesus. During the Council of Nicea, the first version of the Nicene Creed was drafted and approved. In 381 A.D. at the First Council of Constantinople, the original creed was affirmed and amended to address lingering issues relating to the person of Jesus. Also added to the Creed was the phrase:

“We believe In one holy catholic and apostolic Church; we acknowledge one baptism for the remission of sins; we look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come. Amen.”

So what does “one baptism for the remission of sins” really mean? Was it the belief of the writers of the Creed that this “one baptism” saves you? Where did the writers of the Creed look for salvation? To answer these questions, we need to look at what both the Creed and the New Testament say about salvation.

The Creed and the New Testament on Salvation

According to the Nicene Creed, the following are “for our salvation:”¹

1. [Jesus] came down from heaven (John 6:33, 35)
2. [Jesus] was incarnate by the Holy Spirit through the Virgin Mary (Luke 1:35)
3. [Jesus] was made man (John 1:14)
4. [Jesus] was crucified for us under Pontius Pilate (Mark 15:25, 1 Corinthians 15:3)
5. [Jesus] suffered (Mark 8:31)
6. [Jesus] was buried (Luke 23:52, 1 Corinthians 15:4)
7. [Jesus] rose again (Luke 24:1, 1 Corinthians 15:4)
8. [Jesus] ascended into heaven (Luke 24:51, Acts 1:10)
9. [Jesus] sits at the right hand of the Father (Mark 16:19, Acts 7:55)

Without a doubt, the writers of the Creed looked to Jesus alone for their salvation. Their reliance on the New Testament for this knowledge is unquestionable. In fact, their reliance on the New Testament for the language of “one baptism for the remission of sins” is also clear.

Peter’s first recorded sermon found in Acts 2:38 is one of the many² references to baptism and the remission or forgiveness of sins in the New Testament. To say that there is a clear, universally accepted interpretation of this text and others would be quite misleading. To a great extent, how you view baptism as taught in the New Testament determines how you view the Creed’s “one baptism for the remission of sins.” The above nine statements on what was done “for us” and “for our salvation” must not be ignored when deciding what to do with the phrase “one baptism for the remission of sins.”

So the writers of the Creed were fully committed to Christ as the only basis for salvation. But they also considered baptism essential enough to include it in one of Christianity’s first major creeds.

Significance of Baptism

For those who believe in regenerative baptism, the significance of the act of baptism is clear. But for those who view baptism as strictly symbolic there can be a tendency to diminish the significance of the act of water baptism. Two remarks regarding this mindset and on this topic are in order.

¹ Scripture references added. Countless other passages could have replaced these.

² Acts 22:16, Mark 16:16

First, baptism is a symbol or sign of a greater reality, namely salvation itself. There is a much closer link between the symbol (baptism) and the reality (salvation) than is often apparent. This reality is not unique to baptism. Here we turn to what Tyson Guthrie wrote on the topic (see Nicene Creed in 24 Days):

“Sometimes the things that are only part of an event are used to describe that event. A wise poet once wrote, "If you liked it then you should have put a ring on it." This phrase only works because everyone knows what Beyoncé means when she says "put a ring on it." We all know what she means because the symbol of a ring is so closely connected to marriage that you can call getting married "putting a ring on it." This is why the Nicene Creed can call coming to faith "baptism." When Peter holds an evangelistic meeting in Acts 2, and people want to respond in faith, Peter does not say "come forward and one of our leaders will pray with you." He says, "repent and be baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins."(Acts 2:38) When Paul wants to remind the Roman church what happened to them when they believed, he says "don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus..."(Rom. 6:3) No one assumes that putting a ring on your left hand makes you married, and we must be careful not to think that getting dunked in water makes you a Christian. We must also be careful not to ignore this biblical command and symbol simply because many people have placed too much value in it.”

Second, while there are isolated examples of salvation without baptism (think the thief on the cross in Luke 23:43), overwhelmingly those who come to faith in Christ throughout the New Testament and early Christianity show it through water baptism. Where there is a tendency to diminish the act of baptism because of the way some have abused or misrepresented it, some serious reflection on this reality is needed.

Concluding Thoughts

There is much more to baptism than is presented here. In fact, the phrase “one baptism” possibly has even more implications and controversy than does “for the remission of sins.” If one result of this article is planting in you the desire to further study the reality of baptism I will be thrilled. While there is plenty more to say regarding baptism, my hope is that through this article you would gain an appreciation for the intentional study of the historical aspect of Christianity and seek to further understand God and His plan to redeem mankind through Jesus Christ.

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Additional Resources for Further Study:

1. Ferguson, Everett. *Baptism in the early church: history, theology, and liturgy in the first five centuries*. Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2008.
2. D.F. Wright, “The Meaning and Reference of "One Baptism for the Remission of Sins" in the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed,” Papers Presented to the Tenth International Conference on Patristic Studies Held in Oxford 19 (1987).