



Water Baptism ~ Meaning, Mode and History

by

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The Meaning of ‘Baptism’:

The word ‘baptism’ is the Greek noun ‘*baptisma*’ which was left untranslated and simply transliterated into English. Translators did not translate the associated Greek words because there were arguably no English words to properly describe the meaning of ‘*bapto*’ - ‘to dip’. Hence ‘Baptism’ is the same word as the original Greek ‘*baptisma*’.

The verb ‘*baptizo*’ indicates the act of baptism. It literally means to *dip*, to *submerge*. In Luke 16:24 the rich man asked that Lazarus ‘*dip*’ (‘*bapto*’) his finger in water and cool his tongue. ‘Baptize’ is a dyer’s word, and signifies to *dip* so as to colour. The Greeks used it to describe the dyeing of a garment, or the drawing of water by submerging a cup into a bowl. The noun suffix ‘*ma*’ (in ‘*baptisma*’) indicates the result of the act of dipping and ‘*baptismós*’ with the suffix ‘*os*’ indicates the completed act of the dipping. (‘*Baptisma*’, the ordinance, must not be confused with ‘*baptismós*’ which can be used for ceremonial or general ‘washings’ and is used only in Mk.7:4,8; Heb.6:2; 9:10).

‘Mechanically’, the word ‘baptism’ refers to the placing of a person or thing into a new environment. The problem with the modern understanding of Baptism is that ‘water baptism’ often seems to come to mind first, yet the word ‘baptism’ in scripture is mentioned in *many varied contexts*. Although there is only ‘*one baptism*’ (Eph.4:5) that puts one into the body of Christ (1Cor.12:13), there are in fact many types of ‘baptisms’. There is *water baptism* (Matt.3:7,11; John.1:26); *Baptism with the Spirit* (Matt.3:11); *Baptism into death* (Rom.6:4; Matt.20:22,23; Lk.12:50; Col.2:12) which is equated by many to be the same as the ‘*baptism into Christ*’ (Gal.3:27); and there is the ‘*baptism of John*’ (Matt.21:25; Mk.11:30; Lk.7:29; 20:4; Acts 1:22; 18:25) which is equated with the ‘*baptism of repentance*’ (Acts 19:3,4; Mk.1:4; Lk.3:3; Acts 13:24).

Water Baptism begins with John’s baptism (Lk.7:29) in, or with, water (Matt. 3:7; 21:25; Mark 1:4; 11:30; Luke 3:3; 7:29; 20:4; Acts 1:22; 10:37; 13:24; 18:25; 19:3,4). In all these instances, this baptism is called the ‘baptism of John’ or the ‘baptism of repentance’. This was a distinct baptism associated with John, the forerunner of Jesus Christ, (Acts 19:4). It should not be taken as the same as the baptism of Jesus or the baptism in the name of Jesus (Acts 19:5) or in the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, (Matt.28:19). It is said in Acts 18:25 that Apollos knew ‘*only the baptism of John*’. When the believers at Ephesus, including Apollos, were found to have been baptized only unto John’s baptism (Acts 19:3), they were not told by Paul that such was sufficient. It was then that they were truly baptized into the body of Christ, (1Cor.12:13).

The important spiritual meaning of baptism is that of *identification with a person* in what the name of that person stands for. In 1Corinthians 10:2 those who came out of Egypt are said to have been ‘*baptized unto Moses*’ which means they were *identified with the character and the purpose of Moses*.

The baptism in the name of the Lord Jesus in the case of the believing disciples of John in Acts 19:5 is said to be synonymous with the baptism in the 'name' (singular) of the Trinity (plural) in Matthew 28:19, Mark 16:16 and Acts 2:38. This baptism is unto the remission of sins because of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross of Calvary.

When the Lord Jesus sought to be baptized by John the Baptist, it is said it was a baptism to fulfil the requirements of the law; but also it was to *identify with* the claims of John - that he was surely the forerunner of the Messiah. John's baptism was to cease while the baptism in the name of Christ or of the Trinity was to continue (Matt.28:19; Mk.16:14). This meaning of '*identification*' interestingly is proved when the apostle Paul eventually abstained from baptising to avoid *identifying* disciples with himself in a Corinthian church already racked with 'party politics'. (Although Paul *did* baptise some initially (1Cor.1:14-17), his mission was more towards preaching the Gospel and making disciples of the Gentiles).

'Baptismal Regeneration':

Before we look further at the meaning, mode and history of water baptism, the teaching of 'Baptismal Regeneration' needs to be affirmed or denied since it teaches salvation is by the act of Baptism. Some argue that the early church believed that the waters of Baptism was the element or means of salvation. Quotes by some Church Fathers in early centuries, arguably taken out of context, may appear to give this notion.

Certainly in later centuries this teaching became more evident. Tertullian (3rd century) described Baptism: '*When the soul comes to faith, and becomes transformed through regeneration by water and power from above, it discovers, after the veil of the old corruption is taken away, its whole light. It is received into the fellowship of the Holy Spirit; and the soul, which unites itself to the Holy Spirit, is followed by the body*'.

Although he mentions 'faith' *and* 'water' here, some think he leans towards a magical operation of the baptismal waters. Yet in the early church the condition of repentance and faith was still universally required.

Scripture, rather than the church fathers, must be our first priority in establishing doctrine. It is also evident that the church apostasised from the faith of sound doctrine within, or soon after, the first few centuries, and many scholars view the writings of the Church Fathers with *decreasing* value each century after the apostles.

The baptism instituted by the Lord Jesus is spoken of in Romans 6:4 which illustrates and *demonstrates* the *inner* work of salvation. A person is buried and raised with Christ, not because of the physical act of baptism, but because of the *identification with* the death and resurrection of Christ through faith, (Rom.5:1; 6:7).

A person does not die unto sin because he is baptized in water; but *before* he is baptized in Rom.6:3-8 he is said to have already died unto sin: '**How shall we, that are dead to sin, live any longer therein**', (Rom.6:2). The '*dead*' is the verb '*apethanomen*', aorist indicative (a definite point in time in the past). Dying to sin is not through an outward physical act such as baptism, but by being justified by God through belief in the sacrifice of His only Son, Jesus. Romans 6:7 says: '**For he that is dead is freed from sin**'. The word '*freed*' here is '*dikaoo*' - the same word as 'to justify'. If that justification is the result of both faith in Jesus Christ *and the act of water baptism*, then Romans 5:1 cannot be true: '**Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ**'.

The submerging or dipping into the water is symbolic of our *already* having died and being buried unto sin, and our rising up from the water is symbolic of the new life, the life of the resurrection that Jesus Christ gives. Romans 6:4 says '**Therefore we are buried with him by baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised up from the dead...**'. This verse in itself does not explicitly refer to water Baptism but nevertheless water baptism is an outward sign that such a '*baptism into death*' has occurred. Colossians 2:12 says: '**Buried with him in baptism, wherein also you are risen with him through the faith of the operation of God, who has raised him from the dead**'. The Pauline representations of Baptism is naturally consonant with water baptism. But the phrase '**through the faith of the operation [energy] of God**' shows that all this work is done through Jesus Christ and not by any act of water baptism.

The repentant thief on the cross received this *same life* of God in spite of the fact *he was never baptised in water*. In Acts 2 the disciples received the same life of the Holy Spirit *without Christian water Baptism*. In Acts 10:47 Peter says '**Can any man forbid water, that these should not be baptized, which have received the Holy Ghost as well as we**'. Who can claim that these people were not here saved *before* they were water baptised?

Some use 1 Peter 3:21,22 to teach a sacramental baptism for salvation. The scripture here has Christ preaching to the *'spirits in prison... Which sometime were disobedient, when once the longsuffering of God waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was a preparing, wherein few, that is, eight souls were saved by water. The like figure whereunto even baptism does also now save us (not the putting away of the filth of the flesh, but the answer of a good conscience toward God,) by the resurrection of Jesus Christ'*.

Only eight people were saved through the ark and 'by water'. But it was not actually the physical water that saved them, but rather the ark! The water here was the medium to save the righteous *but also to damn the wicked!* The word '**by**' is actually the Greek '*dia*' (literally '*through*'), not '*en*' ('with'). '*Dia*' has a wide connotation and includes the circumstances of an occasion. The word rendered '*like figure*' is '*antupon*' meaning 'counterpart', 'likeness' or 'corresponding to'. Peter says: as the waters of the flood removed the wicked from the righteous, so the waters of baptism remove the filth of the old man (i.e, sin) from him. The flood is a *picture* of what takes place in baptism. Peter is careful to qualify his words to avoid being misunderstood. He explains that baptism is *not* the '*washing away of the sins of the flesh*'. That is, baptism is not simply a physical ceremony that gets rid of sin but a repentance towards God and faith in Christ; and it is rather '*the answer [pledge] of a good conscience toward God*'. Peter is saying that baptism is the response of the soul to God and a sign and seal of salvation. Finally, Peter adds that salvation is '*by (through) the resurrection of Jesus Christ*'. This is the ground of salvation. Water is a cleansing *element* that we use in bathing and since baptism indicates outwardly the inward cleansing of the human heart, God designated it as the element of baptism. The Lord Jesus was baptized by John the Baptist in the waters of the Jordan River (Matt.3:13; Mk.1:9). The element of physical baptism was and is water, as it was in the case of the baptism of John the Baptist.

Scriptures that are *not* for 'water baptism':

John 3:3-6: *'...Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God. Nicodemus said unto him, How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter the second time into his mother's womb, and be born? Jesus answered, Verily, verily, I say unto you, Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit'*

The mention of water here has given some the idea that the Lord Jesus was speaking of water baptism. However, in the author's view, the water here arguably refers to the *waters of childbirth* as is shown by the play on words between the *physical* ('flesh') and the *spiritual* ('spirit'). The '**of water**' is literally the Greek '*out of water*'. (The same preposition '*ek*' is used in Matthew 19:12: '*from (ek) the womb of a mother*').

Even Nicodemus in his lack of knowledge understood the birth out of water to be *physical* birth, for he said, '**How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter the second time into his mother's womb and be born?**' Jesus went on to confirm that the 'out of the water' birth is the *physical* birth, for '**that which is born of the flesh is flesh**' (vs.6).

In this passage it is clear that the *Spirit* is contrasted with the *physical* birth 'out of' water in the mother's womb. One birth is '**earthly**' as explained in vs.12: '**If I have told you earthly things, and you believe not**'.

The KJV translation with its formal equivalency has 'of water and of the spirit' with the second '*of*' in italics since it does not occur in the Greek. The first 'of' belongs to *both* 'water' and 'Spirit'. This shows that *no one can be born out of the Holy Spirit who has not first been born out of water*. Salvation is only for those who have a spirit *in a human body*. It is not for angels or spirit beings.

Ephesians 5:26; Titus 3:5:

'That he might sanctify and cleanse it [the church] with the washing of water by the word', (Eph.5:26).

'Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy he saved us, by the washing of regeneration, and renewing of the Holy Ghost', (Tit.3:5).

One word which could be misunderstood here as referring to water baptism is '*washing*' ('*loutrón*') - literally 'to bath'. In the Ephesians passage the context is about *the church* which is already made up of saved individuals. The 'cleansing' has already been done by Christ and the means or the element for this is not physical water but '**by the word**'. Nowhere in scripture does any physical water cleanse us from sin, but rather the blood of Jesus Christ cleanses us from all sin, (Heb.9:22; 1Jn.1:7,9). Not one passage in the entire New Testament states that we are justified, saved or cleansed through the physical act of water baptism.

Similarly, in Titus 3:5 Paul is not speaking of a bath or physical washing that brings new birth (regeneration) to the heart of man, but a washing of ‘*regeneration*’ and a consequent ‘*renewing of the Holy Ghost*’. The ‘*renewing*’ means to make something new, but that new nature can only be born ‘from above’. The phrase ‘born again’ literally is ‘*born from above*’! Verse 6 of Titus goes on to explain that this regeneration is accomplished through Jesus Christ as Saviour.

Hebrews 6:2; 9:10:

Of the doctrine of baptisms, [‘baptismos’] and of laying on of hands, and of resurrection of the dead, and of eternal judgment’ (6:2); ‘*Which stood only in meats and drinks, and divers washings, [‘baptismos’] and carnal ordinances, imposed on them ‘until the time of reformation [New Testament]’*’ (9:10).

Much of the book of Hebrews is specifically to the Jewish Christians and is full of quotes found in the Old Testament. The ‘*doctrines of baptisms*’ here does not refer to Christian water baptism but refers to the ceremonial washings *from the Old Testament*. Immersions of the body in water, sprinklings and washings were frequent religious rites for the Jews in the Old and New Testaments. The ‘*laying on of hands*’ refers to Leviticus 4:24: ‘*And he shall lay his hand upon the head of the goat, and kill it in the place where they kill the burnt offering before the Lord: it is a sin offering*’ - identifying the sins of a sacrificer with the sacrifice by imputation. The ‘*resurrection of the dead*’ was an important doctrine to the Pharisees and Sadducees who had ongoing arguments about such. The whole thrust and context of Hebrews 5 and 6 is the exhortation for the *Hebrew* Christians to *not go back* to the old but ‘*go on unto perfection; not laying again the foundation of repentance from dead works, and of faith toward God...*’, (Heb.6:1).

Many wrongly confuse the ‘washings’ in these above Hebrews Scriptures with New Testament water Baptism.

Mode of Baptism:

Although it is the consensus of this author that too much is sometimes made of the *method* or ‘mode of Baptism’, the mode in dipping or immersing is the act of putting something down into the liquid. ‘*Bapto*’ mechanically means to place something *into* a liquid. The failure to see the immersion in this is partly because some confuse the washings in Hebrews (‘*baptismos*’) with the other Greek words for Baptism. Others also then confuse immersion

with sprinkling. But ‘sprinkling’ has an entirely different Greek word ‘*rhantizo*’, which is found in Hebrews 9:13,19,21 and it refers to the sprinkling of *blood* in sacrifice. Sprinkling therefore has nothing to do with New Testament water baptism but only with ceremonial Old Testament type washings.

Some further use Mark 7:3,4 in an attempt to have ‘baptism’ mean a washing, pouring or sprinkling. ***‘For the Pharisees, and all the Jews, except they wash [‘nipto’] their hands often, eat not, holding the tradition of the elders. And when they come from the market, except they wash, [‘baptizo’] they eat not. And many other things there be, which they have received to hold, as the washing [‘baptismos’] of cups, and pots, brazen vessels, and of tables’.***

The context here should be clear. Washing of body parts was either by ‘*nipto*’ (wash) or ‘*baptizo*’ (dip into). In verse 3 it is to wash; in verse 4 it is to dip into, under, or immerse in collected water. Some say that because ‘*baptismos*’ is used for ‘washings’ in Mark 7 that it could not be referring to immersion. Yet the washing or cleaning of vessels in the temple was normally done by *immersing* them in water.

The argument that the baptism here is not an immersion also falls down with historical and archaeological study of the ritual bath (the ‘*miqveh*’) which shows that it was an immersion in a bath, which later fell into misuse after the destruction of Jerusalem. By Torah law an impure person or object had to be immersed in naturally flowing water. It had to contain at least 87 gallons or sufficient to cover the body. In the latter half of the 20th Century

Archaeological evidence of such pools showed their substantial size. In recent times an Israeli archaeologists discovered the remains of the oldest Jewish synagogue ever uncovered in the holy lands dating back to 75-50BC. The synagogue included a courtyard with a ‘ritual bath’.

Evidence of the earliest Christian church also show that they had sizeable baths. They were big enough for people to be totally immersed, unlike today’s miniature ‘fonts’ by comparison. (Separate ‘chapels’ for baptism, or ‘baptisteries’, first occur in the fourth century).

Although Paul uses the terms ‘death, burial and resurrection’ to describe baptism which would arguably add to the concept of immersion, (Rom.6:3-5; Col.2:12; 1Pet.3:19-21), any evidence of immersion *in scripture*, is more specifically restricted to the following passages:

Matt.3:16 ‘And Jesus, when he was baptized, went up straightway out of the water...’

Mk.1:10 *'And straightway coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens opened...'*

Jn.3:23 *'And John also was baptizing in Aenon near to Salim, because there was much water there':*

Acts 8:39 *'And when they were come up out of the water...'*

Some believe that the 'coming up out of water' in these verses could well be after the people have been *standing* in water but not necessarily immersed. They believe that it was physically impossible for John to have immersed all the multitudes.

The author, after much research into the arguments for and against immersion, believes the weight of historical and archaeological evidence for immersion arguably outweighs that of affusion (pouring or sprinkling), particularly in the early centuries, where the general practice appears to strongly favour immersion. However, the author's view is also that there is arguably too much attention paid at times to the absolute *necessity* of immersion. This is particularly so when one considers that the early 'Didache' church documents (second century) *permits affusion* (pouring or sprinkling) as an *alternate* mode of baptism: *'Baptize into the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost in living (running) water. But if thou hast not living water, baptize into other water; and if thou canst not in cold, then in warm. But if thou hast neither, pour water upon the head thrice, into the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost'*.

Later Cyprian (3rd century) wrote in defence of affusion, arguing that the mode of application of water was a matter of minor importance, provided that *faith* was present in the recipient. However, with this mode of affusion, the necessary 'faith' soon fell by the wayside. During the Great Reformation, although the Reformers brought many doctrines back to the Word of God, they left many areas of Baptism in teaching and practise untouched. The great Swiss Reformer, Zwingli, confessed: *'Nothing grieves me more than that at the present I have to baptise children for I know it ought not to be done...If however I were to terminate the practice then I fear that I would lose my prebend [salary]'*. On another occasion he stated: *'I leave baptism untouched, I call it neither right nor wrong; if we were to baptise as Christ instituted it then we would not baptise any person until he has reached the years of discretion; for I find it nowhere written that infant baptism is to be practised'*. Yet Zwingli also added *'However one must practice infant baptism so as not to offend our fellow man...But on account of the possibilities of offence, I omit preaching this, it is better not to preach it*

until the world is ready to take it' (*The Reformers and Their Stepchildren*, P.190-220). Later when challenged, Zwingli would be somewhat embarrassed by these remarks.

Martin Luther was likewise embarrassed with 'christening' of children but he too did not break with it completely: '*There is not sufficient evidence from Scripture that one might justify the introduction of infant baptism at the time of the early Christians after the Apostolic period...But so much is evident, that no one may venture with a good conscience to reject or abandon infant baptism, which has for so long a time been practised*' (*The Reformers and Their Stepchildren* P.200-220). Some say this appears to violate Luther's own view of 'Sola Scriptura'. This shows the dilemma faced at times by the Reformers when attacking so many unscriptural traditions of the Roman religion and on so many fronts at once - arguably at times they compromised on one front to secure another reform on another front.

The Anabaptists, however, in the Sixteenth Century raised their voices against Infant Baptism and argued strongly for 'believers baptism', but the Catholics, Lutherans, and the Reformed in general, drowned out their voices and even had them killed in some instances. The Anabaptists ('re-baptisers') were vocal against the developed ecclesiastical traditions of Baptism, especially the rite of 'christening' of babies, which they believe came from a mixing of the Church and State rooted in a 4th century Constantine secularisation of the church. Eventually, the Anabaptist constant opposition to the Reformers made them to be considered enemies of the Reformation itself. Many of the Reformers were ruthless in their castigation of the Anabaptists and some were even put to death.

Infant Baptism:

The first possible explicit mention of infant Baptism is to Irenaeus (AD 185) who says '*all who through Christ are born again to God, infants and children and boys and youths and old men*' (Adv. Haer., 2,22,4 [2,33,2]). The '*born again*' here is considered by some commentators to be a technical phrase for baptism as attested to in other parts of Irenaeus's writings. However, others believe it is doubtful that the writer is referring to any general practise of *infant* baptism here at all.

Later, Tertullian (3rd century) opposed infant Baptism, probably because some controversy concerning the practise had arisen by then.

Augustine (born 354 AD) is considered to have been one of the later Church Fathers who provided the theology that led to infant Baptism and even Baptismal Regeneration being more widespread. However, the

general practise of Infant Baptism is not seen until AD 370 because of the teaching of ‘Baptismal Regeneration’, (baptised to be saved), as well as a high infant mortality rate. Thus increasingly, it was felt necessary to baptise children at any age. This became compulsory in the Roman Empire in AD 416. The Roman Catholic religion and some other churches continue this practice today.

The majority of Bible scholars are agreed that in the apostolic age Baptism was generally administered to *believers* only. There is simply no clear record of a practise of infant Baptism within the first few centuries. There are many studies that attest to this. H.F. Stander and J.P. Louw, who were professors in the University of Pretoria, South Africa, wrote a work ‘*Baptism in the Early Church*’. (Louw is also the joint producer of a Greek Lexicon). Chapter by chapter they quote one early father after another. They evaluate the quotations in the context of the writers entire writings. They demonstrate that the arguments from the church fathers that are used to defend infant baptism very often are misconstrued or taken out of context. For example, after quoting Irenaeus in two passages that have been alleged to ‘suggest’ infant baptism, the authors write: ‘*No comment is required to show that such passages can in no way, by whatever stretch of one’s imagination, be used as reference to substantiate any point of view on baptism in the early church*’. They also question Tertullian’s quoting *against* infant Baptism because Tertullian’s mention of ‘children’s’ baptism might or might not have included infants in his mind: ‘*This passage from Tertullian is indeed the earliest reference to children being baptised...The passage from Tertullian does not speak of infant baptism as it is understood today; it merely refers to a practice among some Christians (of which Tertullian disapproves) to baptise people at a very early stage...*’ Stander and Louw concluded: ‘*...both the Greek and Latin terms translated ‘little children’ or ‘infants’ are not confined to babies. The Greek term includes teenagers; the Latin term is not confined to infants or babies but speak of ‘relatively small children’...one should never think of the early church as a unity having a specific codified dogma. This can best be seen in the development of infant baptism which was already advocated and practised in North Africa in the third century while the same occurred much later, during the later part of the fourth century, in Europe and Asia*’.

Many paedobaptists (‘*paedo*’ - ‘infant’) honestly admit that there is a problem in defining the age of ‘children’ in early centuries and that it most likely did not include babies. Even Roman Catholic paedobaptist scholars,

(e.g. Raymond Brown) admit that although children may have been baptised in later centuries it is unlikely they included babies.

In 2004, Joshua Press issued a work entitled '*Baptism: Three Aspects - Archaeological, Historical, Biblically*' by F.M. Buhler. In detail Buhler discusses the differences between the Baptist and paedobaptist positions. He too in all three aspects of the title of the book favours 'believers Baptism' over infant Baptism. But the interesting feature of this book is the author's involvement in archaeological digs that have uncovered the 'baptisteries' used by the church in the early centuries. He shows colour photos tracing the change from believers immersion to infancy immersion and to infant affusion by the *progressively smaller sizes* of the baptisteries from 'pools' to 'fonts'. It seems the baptism of children had its origin in North Africa, the country of Tertullian and Cyprian, in the third and fourth centuries, and in Spain during the sixth century.

The Bible clearly states that the water has no significance without a sincere belief in God. In the Book of Acts, the eunuch said to Philip, '***See, here is water. What hinders me from being baptised***'. Philip made it clear to the eunuch the message of the Gospel, and that he must believe first and then be baptised, (Acts 8:35-37, see also Acts 2:41).

Some people use what some scholars refer to as 'Replacement Theology' or 'Covenant Theology' to support infant baptism. They teach the commonwealth of Israel was the 'church' (Acts 7:38; Rom. 9:4) under the Mosaic dispensation and the New Testament church is one with that of the Old Testament. Circumcision was the sign and seal of their membership. Under the Old Testament parents acted for their children and represented them, (Gen.9:9; 17:10; Ex.24:7,8; Dt.29:9-13). When parents entered into covenant with God, they 'brought their children with them'. As circumcision was in the Old Testament so Baptism is in the New.

This is arguably debatable typological exegesis. *Logically* such a case could be made for infant Baptism but *Biblically* there is a *silence* textually.

There are other problems also: Circumcision was only for males. Christian Baptism is for all believers. It must also be remembered that John the Baptist's baptism marked a decisive break from Judaism because he emphasised personal repentance and forgiveness in the same way that the later Christian baptism did. Thus it was hardly suitable for infants? If baptism was given to infants as circumcision was, then why did not John the Baptist follow suit? Again, no mention is ever made of such for children.

But more importantly, where is the ‘believing’ and ‘repentance’ possible in infants? Such a baptism is also not mentioned either at the council in Jerusalem (Acts 15) or in Paul’s controversies with the Galatian church.

Circumcision in the Old Testament certainly was the sign and seal of Jewish membership. It was a sign that they were sons of Israel - but that in no way ensured their entry into the ‘church’ - the ‘elect’. The sons of Eli were circumcised - yet that wasn’t enough to save them? Judas was circumcised but never saved. Circumcision was not a sign of salvation but a sign that they were a member of God’s chosen earthly nation.

Many who advocate such an infant baptism do rightly teach that this cannot mean that these children get to be saved. They hold that it is a sign and pledge, *assuming* the child will be saved. In this idea it is very similar to a ‘dedication’ as seen in many churches, the only difference being the use of water.

Historically, when infant baptism began to occur it was not justified by a such ‘covenant theology’. As a Christian, we surely come under a new covenant. The old covenant was written on stone, the new covenant was written on the heart (Heb.8:10). Baptism is God’s seal on a person who has already become a Christian and has come into God’s family *through faith*.

In a leap of human logic some people use such verses as Mark 10:13-16 implying that it somehow refers to infants being baptised: ‘***...But when Jesus saw it, he was much displeased, and said unto them, Suffer the little children to come unto me, and forbid them not: for of such is the kingdom of God***’. This passage nowhere refers to baptism.

Some use the ‘household baptisms’ idea. There are four references: Cornelius (Acts 10), Lydia (Acts 16), the Philippian jailor (Acts 16) and Stephanas (1Cor.1). The *presumption* here is that there were infants in these houses and that each household must have meant *every* individual in the household without exception. Yet none of the references say that infants were in these houses or that the salvation included every individual there.

I Corinthians 7:14 has children of a mixed marriage are said to be ‘sanctified’. Again, baptism is nowhere mentioned and the context is rather concerning a special favour being shown to children of a mixed marriage which would normally have been ‘illegitimate’ in the Old Testament; but here in the New are set apart by special favour so the marriage relationship can continue in holiness. It is the ‘holiness’ of the union that the passage labours, not any baptism for the children.

Every such New Testament text cited to support infant baptism appears empty and shows *a predisposition to impose the practice upon the text*.

But perhaps more importantly, infant Baptism too often creates a false understanding of salvation. The Anglican Prayer Book's declaration after baptism reads: '*Seeing now this child is regenerate*' and the statement in the Catechism reads: '*in my baptism I was made a member of Christ, the child of God, and an inheritor of the kingdom of heaven*'. Although many would see this as a promise for the future if laid hold of by faith, it nevertheless is presumptuous and arguably runs against the *faith* and *repentance* required for New Testament salvation.

Conclusion:

We are commanded to teach, disciple and to baptise believers (Matt.28:19; Mk.16:14). Baptism literally means to dip, immerse under. The spiritual understanding is one of *identification* with a person and what they stand for. Water baptism is but one type of the one baptism that places us into the body of Christ, (1Cor.12:13; Eph.4:5).

Baptism is administered to people who have faith in the Lord Jesus Christ and His substitutionary work on the cross of Calvary in dying for their sin. The water has no significance without this faith. Biblically there is sufficient evidence that the mode of baptism was by immersion. Historically and archaeologically it is evident that immersion was the general rule in the early church. However, an emphasis on the mode too often detracts from the meaning and the teaching of baptism as a figure of the death, burial and resurrection of Christ, (Rom.6; Col.2).

Infant baptism is a developed tradition over many centuries and apart from the disputed typology of circumcision it arguably suffers the silence of scripture; and has arguably led to misunderstandings of the doctrine of salvation.

Water Baptism is an outward witness to our *identification with* the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus our Lord and saviour.

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About the author

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