



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 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 the forerunner of the Messiah. John's baptism was to cease while the baptism in the *name of* Christ or the Trinity was to continue (Matt.28:19; Mk.16:14). This meaning of *'identification'* 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'. (Paul *did* baptise some initially - 1Cor.1:14-17, but his mission was more towards preaching the Gospel and making disciples of the Gentiles).

This important teaching of *identification* has today been largely minimised or lost amidst arguments concerning *who* should be baptised (infants or believers), or the *mode* of baptism (immersion or effusion - pouring, sprinkling).

‘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 some taken out of context, may appear to give this notion.

Certainly in later centuries this teaching may appear to become 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 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. Thus, although in this article we do cite history and quotes from the Church Fathers, these should be taken with much caution in comparison to what the scriptures actually teach.

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 outward 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 as in Romans 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 would speak against that: *'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 saved *before* they were water baptised?

Some use 1 Peter 3:21,22 to teach a 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’.

Here Jesus preached the Gospel by the Holy Spirit to the ‘*spirits in prison*’. He did this at the time of the flood, as Jesus was not yet incarnated. Most believe the prison here is Hades, the abode of the dead. These spirits in prison had not obeyed and had rejected the Gospel given to them. They were then judged by water. Only eight souls were saved by God’s grace through faith. The promise was salvation in the ark of God. It was the ark that saved them, not the water. If the water saves on its own then it also damns, as it did drown the entire human race apart from the eight saved.

Peter is here drawing a correspondence between Noah and baptism, the ark and water. The word rendered ‘*like figure*’ is ‘*antupon*’ meaning ‘counterpart’, ‘likeness’ or ‘corresponding to’. The water is the ‘antitype’ because it is something physical as opposed to the spiritual. In a physical sense water cleans the ‘*filth of the flesh*’, but not in a spiritual sense does it free from guilt and give a ‘*good (clean) conscience*’ towards God. The latter is surely the language of repentance.

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 spiritual - ‘*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 physical 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 passage cannot be arguing for baptism for salvation, for Christ here is proclaiming to *spirits* in Hades. If baptism is for salvation here then that would mean a ‘second chance’ is offered to people who formerly ‘*were disobedient*’, which the scriptures contradict in many places.

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 more 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', because the phrase 'born again' (*'genao anothén'*) 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 arguably 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).

It is difficult to attribute the ‘washings’ in these above Hebrews Scriptures with New Testament water Baptism.

The Mode of Baptism

The Case For Immersion

Although it is the consensus of this author that too much is sometimes made of the *method* or ‘mode’ of Baptism, the mode has at times taken precedence in debates concerning water Baptism. Nevertheless we in this article here present the cases for or against immersion and effusion (pouring) as well as believers or infant baptism.

‘*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.

The argument for immersion is also said to be bolstered by historical and archaeological study of the ritual bath (the ‘*miqveh*’) which shows it was an immersion in a bath (later this 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 75-50 BC. The synagogue included a courtyard with a ‘ritual bath’.

Evidence of the earliest Christian church show that they had sizeable baths. They were big enough for people to be totally immersed, unlike today's miniature 'fonts' by comparison. However, it appears that separate 'chapels' for baptism, or 'baptisteries', first occur about the fourth century. (Those who argue for pouring in baptism and infant baptism often quote from the third or fourth century onwards to show a prevalence of such).

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 which immersionists see as pointing to full immersion:

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...'*

However, some do 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 add that it was physically impossible for John to have immersed all the multitudes.

The Case For Effusion (Pouring or Sprinkling)

Some scriptures from the Old Testament are used to show that when the word for baptism is used that *it cannot always refer to full immersion*. For example, the Septuagint (Greek translation of Old Testament) for Leviticus 14:6 is used where arguably the word 'dip' ('bapto') would not refer to immersion. However, the context is concerning the purification of a leper involving the dipping (Septuagint 'bapto') in the blood of a bird.

Some use Mark 7:3,4 to have 'baptism' to 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 washing of body parts here was either by '*nipto*' (to wash) or '*baptizo*' (to 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 of '*cups, and pots, brazen vessels, and of tables*'. That argument may well be valid, considering some of the temple furniture could not have been immersed. However, others believe that the washing or cleaning of many vessels in the temple was normally done by immersing them in water.

Other New Testament scriptures are also used to show that '*hapto*' does not always mean immersion (eg. Jn.13:26). Likewise, the 'baptism with the Spirit' (eg. Jn.1:33) is also used to show a lack of immersion as is 1Corinthians 10:1-3. However, the latter examples are highly figurative, rather than pertaining to actual water baptism. Nevertheless, it does have to be admitted that not all cases of the word '*hapto*' show a dipping with a literal full immersion.

Another argument against immersion and used for sprinkling or pouring is the baptising of 3,000 souls in Acts 2:38-2. Some argue that it would have been impossible to find enough water in Jerusalem as in creeks or lakes, to baptise 3,000 people '*the same day*' (vs.41).

A similar argument for effusion is the baptism of the apostle Paul in Acts 9:17,18; 22:16 when he '*immediately arose and was baptised*' in a house.

Further, there are quotes from church Fathers and images of early churches from the 4th century onwards that appear to have churches generally with fountains for pouring or sprinkling. Cyprian in the 3rd century wrote in defence of effusion, arguing that the mode of application of water was a matter of minor importance, provided that *faith* was present in the recipient.

The author would submit that there is arguably too much attention given at times to the absolute *necessity* of the mode of water baptism. This is particularly so when one considers that the early ‘Didache’ church documents (second century) which *permits effusion* (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*’.

Again, the important point often missed in the mode of water baptism is the *identification* with the name of God in the Trinity of the father the Son and the Holy Spirit.

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, likely 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 two centuries. However, there are quotes used for infant baptism after the 3rd century.

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 so the argument is that it most likely did not include babies. Even Roman Catholic paedobaptist scholars, (eg. 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 effusion 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).

However, some use what some scholars refer to as 'Covenant Theology' to support infant baptism. They teach 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*. Certainly there is a link seen by many in Colossians chapter 2 - '*In whom also you are circumcised with the circumcision made without hands, in putting off the body of the sins of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ: 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*' (vs.11,12).

Circumcision in the Old Testament certainly was the sign and seal of Jewish membership. It was a sign that they were sons of Israel. Many who advocate such an infant baptism do rightly teach that this cannot

mean that these children are saved. They hold that it is a sign and pledge, *assuming* the child will be saved. Some see this idea as similar to a ‘dedication’ of the child to God as seen in many churches, the only difference being the use of water.

Historically, it is argued that when infant baptism began to occur it was not justified by 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*.

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 was baptised without exception.

I Corinthians 7:14 is also used as an example of infant baptism where children of a mixed marriage are said to be ‘sanctified’. 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 Testament are set apart by special favour so the marriage relationship can continue in holiness. Arguably, it is the ‘holiness’ of the union that the passage labours, not any baptism for the children.

But perhaps more importantly, infant Baptism in some denominations 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*’.

However, other denominations that favour infant baptism would see their baptism as a promise for the future only if laid hold of by faith at a later date. This raises another issue that could well be remembered by those who would oppose infant baptism, especially baptism with covenantal theology. Today ‘believers baptism’ has been arguably abused in that *so many are baptised and yet fall away*. This is largely because so many have not understood the Gospel, or it simply has not

been preached, or the baptism came after a false gospel. This fall away rate today is very high, yet many will think they are 'saved' because they have made a 'decision' and been 'baptised'. The effect of so many false conversions with their baptisms is to reduce the meaning of, or the importance of baptism as a command. Believers baptism arguably today needs to be recovered with a recovery of the true Gospel connected to it. It is this author's view and from pastoral experience that believer's baptism today needs to be administered with more teaching, caution and testing of the believers faith.

Finally, it could be argued that during the Great Reformation, although the Reformers brought many doctrines back to the Word of God, they left many areas such as Baptism relatively 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).

The Anabaptists 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. 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 and 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 Anabaptists were even put to death.

Conclusion

In this article we have attempted to describe water baptism as it is believed today in its various forms and modes. Although the author is more in favour of believer's baptism, it is important to understand the theology of other forms and modes of baptism which at least some base their views on a covenantal understanding with a connection between the Old and New Testaments. Apart from the false 'baptismal regeneration' teaching, it is the author's view that the differences of how baptism theologies are derived should not sharply divide Christians, when the Gospel of salvation is the same.

We are commanded to teach, disciple and to baptise believers (Matt.28:19; Mk.16:14). The spiritual understanding is one of *identification* with a person and what they stand for. Water Baptism is an outward witness to our *identification with* the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus our Lord and saviour.

Water baptism is but one type of the one baptism that places us into the body of Christ (1Cor.12:13; Eph.4:5).

Notes

About the author

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